

‘Sussex Downs’

The physiognomy of Chalk Downs¹ offers a unique contrast to that of all other geological protuberances on the surface of the earth. Its peculiar distinction consists in a susceptibility to atmospheric conditions, a susceptibility so fine that the passage of a cloud across the sun or the rising of a mist out of a valley has the power to change its entire aspect. This impressionableness has its origin in what is deemed by some barbarousness and want of beauty. What beauty they possess is indeed of a Classical rather than a Romantic order. Like the sculptured limbs of a Greek God carved upon the pediment of southern temples, they lie naked to the influences of wind and sun, taking their virtue, not from mystery or excess of colour, but from the simplicity of heroic form. The absence on the Downs of subordinate and secondary attractions has also another effect. Walking on the smooth surface of their summit and keeping the focus of one’s gaze contiguous with its onward progress, there is forcibly borne in upon the walker what might be called the astronomical circumference of the Earth. Undistracted by any



noticeable traits on this bare rolling expanse of grass the mind is at liberty to contemplate the Earth in its relation to Space. The fact, for instance, that the world is round is brought home here with peculiar force. All the more abstract qualities of matter, lifted out of the crowd of secondary attributes that usually confuse and obscure them, become objects of contemplation in

themselves. With or without a definite consciousness of the fact, the man who travels along the Downs experiences a continual sense of pleasure from the contrast between Solidity and Vacuity—the flowing contours of the rising ground before him, the bold line of some parallel ridge to left or right, banked against uninterrupted spaces of clear sky, satisfy in the simplest yet completest manner the desire of the human mind to enjoy in close contiguity the Finite and the Infinite. Moreover, this nakedness of the elements gives the substance of the Downs a freshness and lightness which can be found nowhere else. Their

¹ This text is part of JCP’s unpublished ‘Work without a Name’ held in the National Library of Wales, MS 23672 E. Kieran McCann had chosen to read it during a walk, at the 2006 Powys Conference, and most generously assisted me in reproducing it here and providing the photographs.

greyish-green grass and white chalk consistency seem to contain within them pale relics and shadowy reminiscences of some pristine state, when, as yet unconsolidated and impalpable, they hung suspended in the celestial spaces. Their appearance as seen from the valley confirms this impression of elemental primitiveness. What do the Downs resemble more from a distance than a great petrified wave? It is as though in remote volcanic ages, pushed upward by earthquakes and fiery winds, some prehistoric lifting of the sea had actually stiffened them into chalk and flint.

The curious receptivity to every influence of the sky above them, produced in these austere hills by a negation of the common qualities of beauty, has another effect, in the opinion of some, less fortunate. Wearing on the summit of their ridges no rocks, no foliage, no luxurious details of form and colour to distract the eye, every object which does appear there takes to itself a prominence and value quite out of proportion to what it would bear in any other place. When the object invading this region is of a kind that the imagination can worthily appropriate to itself, such as a shepherd, a flock of sheep, a group of children, a solitary labourer, a lonely horseman, the mind derives much satisfaction from the additional dignity which these creatures win; but when, as often happens, (propinquity to the human race being a characteristic of these hills), on the occasion of some public festival or popular holiday, the individual is absorbed in the Mass and Humanity in the Crowd, it is extraordinary to note how every pathetic vulgarity of gesture, every foolish tawdriness of dress, are by this pitiless receptivity, this terrible nakedness, intensified from a casual exhibition of the Commonplace to a Pantomimic Apotheosis of the Inane. Nor is it less curious to observe how, after such human gatherings, what remains behind of broken glass, greasy paper, torn ribbons, tags of nondescript linen, dubious evacuations, disused tins, empty match-boxes and all the unspeakable refuse of a Race-course or a Gala-day, acquires by the barrenness of the grass and the full sunshine poured down upon it an idealised importance that comes near to convert the Repulsive into the Disgusting. So much for extraneous objects.

But this capacity for throwing into relief whatever breaks this surface gives to the Downs an opportunity of offering from their own resources many a strange contrast of the upper and under aspects of Nature. A frequent sight to be met with, for instance, on these smooth slopes, as the traveller glances casually about him, is that of some grey bone of bird or beast, smooth and glossy from long exposure to the weather, but sinister enough and suggestive still of mortality's reversion, lying gently upon a purple bed of thyme, or of a harebell, fresh in all the dewy freedom of its careless beauty, nodding its graceful head over the fly-blown relics of a hawk, a rabbit or a mole.

The particular District of the South Downs which borders upon the English Channel near the well-known watering-place of Greyhelmstone² is made up of two master ridges running parallel to each other at a distance of about three miles. The space between these two main ridges consists of a series of smaller hills separated from each other by deep and narrow valleys — these ridges are sprinkled with gorse and bracken; the valleys between them lined with thorn bushes and elder. Nowhere in England does the sun lavish his beams with more liberality of warmth than in these valleys. The broken-edged path that runs down the centre of each seems as if heated by subterranean fires. Rabbits bask and play

² Brighton

there all year round and birds sing there with an equable mellowness of contentment hardly broken even by frost or snow. Nevertheless, so freakish are the ways of Nature, the final effect of these curious valleys upon an observing traveller is rather weird than cheerful. Shepherds who bring their flocks here to feed on the green grass meet often with vipers. Hawks hover continually



overhead, and poisonous fungi of plague-stricken and malignant aspect leer up at the wayfarer with blood-shot eye. Nor are all the valleys alike. In the middle of some stand groups of colossal beech trees and if the ridges of the Downs are shamelessly bare to the eye of Heaven, here, underneath these heavy branches at the roots of trunks that the fresh green of the Spring itself only serves to make more ominously sombre, one might imagine diabolic rites performed—nameless crimes committed.

The incestuous brother and sister in Ford's play³ might have chosen such a place as this as a rendezvous for their fatal loves. Other valleys again, possessing nothing else to break the smooth slope of the grass, have paths running along the bottom of their bed, which also in their measure partake of the Weird. For these paths composed of grass of a lighter colour than the rest seem to have been formed neither by man or beast. They have no cart-ruts; they have no sign of a sheep track; they suggest submerged water courses; but no one sees or hears any sign of water. The smooth valleys containing these mysterious paths are deeper and narrower than the others; so deep in fact as to remain for the larger part of the day in profound shadow; and for a traveller penetrating suddenly into the recesses of one of these after the departure of the sun, there is something so desolate, so solitary, so aboriginal about the misty hollows around him, that when he encounters, stark and gaunt, some prehistoric thorn tree, bereft of its foliage, stretching its arms, white and phantom-like across the way, he is inclined to fall upon his knees and worship with fear and terror and submission, the Demon of the Downs.

One misty afternoon in early Spring a man clumsy in movement, timid in demeanour and strange rather than attractive in general appearance, was walking along a lonely path which crossed vertically the summit of the main ridge of the Downs. He followed a rough path which lay between two ruts of well-worn chalk and as he walked he struck with the end of his stick the rut on his right hand. Men when they are alone in such a place win a dignity from the mere fact that they are the only representatives of their species there. The whole tragic fate of humanity, its obscure glories and magnificent failures, its ecstasies and agonies, are focussed and embodied in the one solitary human being. The powerlessness of such a one in the face of the elemental activities heightens rather than diminishes this effect. The man was ascending a hill the crest of which entirely

³ John Ford (c.1586-1639), *T'is Pity She's a Whore* (c. 1628).

concealed from him the immense landscape of Downs and Sea. He was passing one of those half-cultivated patches in the midst of the hills where Nature as she is in herself and Nature as she is when ploughed and sown interpenetrate and blend with one another. Here is waged a perpetual war between man and the earth. To and fro with various fortune the contest sways. Sometimes land is taken into cultivation that formerly was barren, sometimes land becomes barren that formerly was cultivated and there seems likely to be no end to the struggle. There is something elemental in this war between Mind and Matter; and if for Caliban under the harrowing and stinging of Prospero's spirits a certain pity rises, it seems as though the rough Earth shrieks and groans with almost human trouble under the rending of her flesh by the pitiless plough.

(...)

Having reached the summit of the next grassy ridge, the wanderer paused to envisage the expanse of landscape stretched around him. His scope of vision from this point of vantage was immense. Turning his head he could see in the direction from which he had come the sweeping line of the main ridge of the Downs. Two particular elevations rose prominently there. Godbarrow Beacon⁴ and Mount Simon,⁵ the space between them being about a quarter of a mile. In front of him extended a vast tract of wild country swelling into rolling hills covered with gorse and hollowing into cup-like depressions full of thorn-bushes. This tract sloping down by degrees from where he stood into a valley threaded by a railway and a road, rose on the other side to a great wall of Downs upon whose Cyclopean shoulders the sky rested and beyond which a fanciful imagination might have figured the precipitous descent and perilous brink of the world's edge. This great wall was broken by two large gaps, through which the sea was visible, that to the right being partially obscured by the roofs and chimneys of Greyhelmstone, that to the left being dotted with the ships of Ousemouth⁶. The bare Downs upon which he stood stretched far away to the East of him but on the Western Horizon appeared heavy forests, woody uplands and the faint silvery line of a tidal river.

(...)

Yet the hill was only the centre of a district crowded with similar hills, each lying calm and monumental while over them all the winds gathered, rolled, and sank, like waves over submerged islands.

(...)

Certain moments of time carry with them their peculiar hieroglyphics, individual oracles, mystical scrolls, symbolic pictures, for the reading of the wise, and become, in spite of their fluid character and in spite of the fact that their very existence depends upon a delusion, memorable and in a sense complete. Time indeed advances in successive waves and each wave, foaming, culminating and receding, offers (but who can receive its offer?) a unique and individual vision of the World Soul.



(‘Work without a Name’, MS 23672 E)

⁴ Here it seems to be Blackcap, which is about half a mile west of Mount Harry

⁵ In fact it is Mount Harry (639ft.).

⁶ Newhaven.



Photographing John Cowper's Downs

Kieran McCann writes “The pictures were all taken just over the ridge from the path up from Court House, by the way, and the features shown are the very ones that Powys is describing later on in the piece: the hills in the background of some of the photos are the ‘Cyclopean shoulders’, and the ‘tract sloping down by degrees’ is shown [in others] as is the wild country with gorse-covered depressions, rabbits basking etc... For example, 118 [the photograph above] shows the view JCP describes with Godbarrow Beacon (Blackcap) on the left and Mount Simon (Harry) on the right, but it's not easy to see that these are two peaks on a ridge.”

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Kieran McCann écrit “Toutes les photos ont d’ailleurs été prises juste au-delà de la crête sur le chemin qui monte depuis Court House, et ce que l’on y voit est précisément ce que Powys décrit plus loin dans le texte: les collines à l’arrière-plan de certaines photos, ce sont les ‘épaules cyclopéennes’ et ‘l’étendue, descendant par degrés’ se voit [sur d’autres], comme la lande sauvage avec ses creux couverts d’ajoncs, les lapins se prélassant au soleil etc... Ainsi, 118 [la photo ci-dessus] montre la vue que JCP décrit, avec Godbarrow Beacon (Blackcap) à gauche et Mont Simon (Mount Harry) à droite, mais il n’est pas facile de voir que ce sont deux sommets sur une crête.”