

Three Personal Readings of *Maiden Castle*

JOHN COWPER POWYS's *Maiden Castle* is a somewhat puzzling book. It obviously fits into his literary career as the last of the great Wessex novel/romances, but literary assessments of it often tend to seem reluctant, even grudging, and hedged in with reservations. In my own view, an explanation for this state of affairs may be found in the fact that the book is particularly sensitive to the interests and preoccupations of its readers at the time they approach it. (This is, of course, a significant factor in the reading of *any* novel, but, as I hope to show, it seems especially important in this case.) I no longer recall the number of times I have read it, but I can isolate three very different readings, scattered over several decades, that resulted from three very different assumptions concerning what the book appears to be about. I intend to offer, then, a decidedly personal analysis of my responses to the book, but one which, I hope, may throw more light upon its peculiar qualities.

Maiden Castle may well have been the first JCP novel I ever read—at the very least, second after *Wolf Solent*—probably in the 1960s. I was immediately attracted by the title. I had visited the great Iron-Age encampment in the mid-1950s when on holiday with my parents at Lyme Regis. We made a day-trip to Dorchester, which impressed me as a historically interesting town, and also walked out to Maiden Castle itself. At that time I was not only already fascinated with British prehistory but also an enthusiastic reader of the novels of Thomas Hardy. This combination meant that, when I first encountered the book, it proved irresistible.



Maiden Castle – the Iron-Age earthworks

I read it, then, with a moderate interest in the plot (in particular, the wife-buying and the resonances it set up with the wife-selling in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*) but primarily for its local atmosphere and the magical mystique that envelops the earthwork. I remember being surprised, some years later, when I

first read Wilson Knight's *Saturnian Quest*, at his claim that “we are little aware of Dorchester as a town.”¹ For me, on the contrary, JCP's descriptions conjured up



38 High East Street Dorchester:
where JCP & TT's flat was in 1934

vividly my own impressions (at that time, of course, the town was much closer in atmosphere to Hardy's Casterbridge and JCP's Dorchester than is its much-changed state in the twenty-first century). Moreover, I found the confrontation between Dud No-man and Urien Quirm on the ramparts (with the confirmation of their close relationship) and the scene with the bonfire and the dewpond unforgettable. Mine was, to be sure, a 'Romantic' reading, but not at all contrary to JCP's own interests and intentions. He himself records being “*thrilled*” by the earthwork.²

Further study and experience in teaching Victorian and modern fiction led to a very different reading by the 1970s. I was then far more conscious of the complexities and techniques of novel-writing, and must have decided, on the basis of the first chapter, that it was a book planned along the same lines as *Wolf Solent*, with the action consistently presented through the deliberately limited viewpoint of the main character. As a result, I was somewhat startled, even shocked, by the discovery that, at the end of the seventh chapter, this technique is suddenly abandoned. The viewpoint is no longer exclusively Dud's, and there are numerous passages, notably between the ex-circus-girl Wizzie Ravelston and the painter Thuella Wye, when Dud is absent. I had been instructed soundly in Jamesian attitudes to fiction, and came to the conclusion that, after a promising beginning, *Maiden Castle* slumped into the status of one of those fictions that James famously described as “loose and baggy monsters”!

Time went by, and the publication of Ian Hughes's admirable edition of the uncut text of the book (1990) naturally led to further reassessment. My most recent reading of the novel took place about a year ago, by which time I had devoted more time and energy to JCP's other writings, and was far more familiar with the relation of *Maiden Castle* to the rest of his work. Because of the already-mentioned apparent similarity of the book to *Wolf Solent*, I had previously assumed that Dud No-man (despite his name!) was to be regarded as the traditional 'hero' of the novel. On my last reading, I became more aware of Wizzie's response to the events, and more conscious of Dud's selfishnesses and absurdities. As a result, the ending of the book with the understanding between Wizzie and Thuella, their flight to America, and the collapse of Dud's personal and literary concerns, seemed appropriate and even satisfying. By the same token, however, this new structural concern meant that the Maiden Castle scenes and atmosphere became less prominent and therefore less striking.

Whether my latest reading was superior in appreciation and understanding to the earlier ones is, of course, arguable. In defence of the first reading I can

¹ G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest*, Methuen, 1964, p.51.

² *Petrushka and the Dancer*, ed. Morine Krissdóttir, Carcanet, 1995, p.175.

point to the title, which indisputably directs attention to the earthwork, its excavation, and the antiquities found on the site. By the same token (though I was probably unaware of it at the time), his previous work of fiction had been *Weymouth Sands*, so it would not be unreasonable to suppose that the title-locality represented a central element. Yet the structure of the two novels is totally different. The list of “Leading Characters” in *Weymouth Sands* contains twenty-three names, almost exactly double the equivalent number in *Maiden Castle* (the list of which, perhaps significantly, was omitted in the Hughes edition). Moreover, the fortunes of the characters are far more integrated in the later novel. In *Weymouth Sands*, the Loders, Captain Poxwell, Sylvanus Cobbold, Marret Jones, Peg Frampton, Larry Zed and Gipsy May, not to mention Tissty and Tossty, are only occasionally linked with the plot involving the more central figures. Even if Dud No-man is less central than Wolf Solent in their respective novels, he holds centre-stage for the first half of the book; as a result, we are far more conscious of him within the action than we are of Magnus Muir, Richard Gaul, Jerry and Lucinda Cobbold, or even Adam Skald and Perdita Wane in *Weymouth Sands*. (The original English title, *Jobber Skald*, employed to avoid any chance of libel action, is far less suitable for the novel than *Dud No-man* would have been if similar objections had been made to the Dorchester associations of the book.)

In other words, JCP is himself responsible for the confusion in providing a title and an initial technique that discourage a clear focus on the relationship between Dud and Wizzie—*Dud and Wizzie* would, indeed, be a better title in many respects, though one cannot imagine his publishers’ sales-departments approving it if it had been suggested! He may, however, have had no very clear idea at the time he began writing of what would ultimately become his main concern. It is interesting to note that he found the opening particularly difficult, and abandoned his earlier attempts. According to Hughes, he “made at least five separate starts on the novel.”³

I suspect that, perhaps after he had embarked upon the writing, JCP decided, in creating No-man, to examine, probingly, certain aspects of his own character—but only *certain* aspects, as I hope to show. In so doing, he took a process developed throughout his life, in such characters as James Andersen in *Wood and Stone*, Adrian Sorio in *Rodmoor*, Rook Ashover in *Ducdame*, and of course Wolf Solent, where he would base his creations on selected aspects of himself. But here he ventures even further than he had dared before (with, perhaps, the exception of his self-portrait in *Autobiography*). He now writes openly about many of his personal idiosyncrasies, and especially with his unusual relationships with the various women in his life. We know that his companion, Phyllis Playter, whom he rightly respected as a frank and shrewd critic of his work, complained about the presentation of the relationship between Dud and Wizzie, which she undoubtedly saw as close to that between JCP and herself. As he noted in his diary for July 1935, in the middle of writing the novel,

the T.T. [Phyllis] was very upset by my Chapter V [“The ScummyPond”] because she felt that I had fallen into a Cynical vein over the relations between *Man & Woman* ... “Is *this*” she said “the result of our 15 years life together?”

But he continues:

³ “Introduction” to *Maiden Castle*,” University of Wales Press, 1990, p.xviii.

As I left out my mother from my *Autobiography* so in dealing with *Noman & his girl* I dodged & avoided any introduction of the precious and indescribable pleasures of every sort that I myself have got from living with the T.T. Instead of this I just exploited, yes *exploited!* for my story many of the most superficial weaknesses of the feminine—of the ‘eternal feminine’—in the T.T. as opposed to the philosophical & Sensual Selfishness of a man like myself & yet really *not* like myself!⁴

This seems to me a remarkably honest and perceptive analysis on JCP’s part—as well as on Phyllis’s. Indeed, it appears that, in attempting to meet Phyllis’s criticisms while revising, he decided half-way through to “make Wizzie my mouthpiece ... in order that Dud-Dud’s attitude to women shall no longer dominate the book.”⁵ As a result, he may well have altered the structural balance and cohesion of the novel, and so led to the difficulties in interpretation that I have been discussing.

The remark that Dud is “a man like myself, & yet really *not* like myself” is especially shrewd. It deserves emphasis, in particular because this is a subject in which Morine Krissdóttir, in the course of some interesting and useful comments in her assessment of the novel in *Descents of Memory*, in my opinion goes seriously astray. She insists that “the main character is so patently the author and so much of *Maiden Castle* is an echo of events taking place in Powys’s own life at this time.”⁶ And again, “it is clear that he put many of Phyllis’s activities, moods, and ideas into Wizzie,” which she considers “a kind of double malice.”⁷ But this reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the way novelists work. There are certainly aspects of Phyllis used for the character of Wizzie, and JCP obviously draws on his own experience for some of Dud’s story, but this does not mean that all of the circus-girl’s characteristics can be legitimately transferred back to Phyllis, or that all of Dud’s actions and attitudes reflect JCP’s. While basing details of the pair on himself and Phyllis, JCP then transforms them imaginatively, places them in different situations, and, I am convinced, exaggerates many of their personal traits in the interests of his story. Neither Phyllis nor Krissdóttir were sufficiently expert literary critics to recognize the place where straightforward realism develops into full fictional creation.

Maiden Castle is certainly not a fully achieved novel. It was written at a time of violent domestic dislocation and transition. JCP had just left North America after making it his base for well over twenty years, was attempting to reconnect with his English roots, and, even more remarkably, was in the process of making a new home in North Wales, in an unfamiliar landscape and among a very different people. Small wonder that certain tensions and uncertainties are visible in the text. Yet, for all its imperfections, it is the work of a literary master. Without glossing over its faults, we should make sure that we do not neglect, or fail to recognize, the many fascinations that it has to offer.

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⁴ *Petrushka*, p.192.

⁵ Hitherto unpublished diary entry quoted in Morine Krissdóttir, *Descents of Memory*, Overlook Duckworth, 2007, p.321.

⁶ *Descents of Memory*, p.320.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.321.