



Title	JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S A NEW ENGLAND FANTASY (1924)
Author(s)	Robinson, LeRoy
Citation	経営と経済, 58(2-3), pp.105-116; 1979
Issue Date	1979-03-01
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10069/28058
Right	

This document is downloaded at: 2019-06-16T09:37:53Z

JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S *A NEW
ENGLAND FANTASY* (1924)

Le Roy Robinson

In an earlier issue of *Keiei to keizai* (March 1978) I published the first lengthy summary of John Howard Lawson's unpublished play *Nirvana* produced in New York in 1926. In this issue I am publishing, also for the first time, a summary¹⁾ of an earlier unpublished (and unproduced) play by Lawson, written in Pittsburgh²⁾ between March 25 and April 20, 1924, *A New England Fantasy*. "Descended from an earlier play, *The Mad Moon*, a ... comedy about a poet who prefers madness to Puritanism" / Lawson writes / *A New England Fantasy* is the first draft of *Nirvana*.

Most historians of American drama will probably agree with Lawson's comment that *A New England Fantasy*, written after *Processional* (written in the early 20s but not produced until 1925), shows why it was "impossible" for him to continue with the technique of *Processional* or with its "mystique of violence and revolt." Lawson says: "I had gone beyond /*Processional*/, into an uncharted area, guided by the knowledge available to me, in terms of my class and

-
- 1) In John Howard Lawson's unfinished and unpublished autobiography "A Calendar of Commitment" parts of which his daughter Susan Amanda Lawson has kindly permitted me to read. This summary is based on Lawson's and, though edited, closely follows his own language.
 - 2) Lawson went to Pittsburgh (actually staying in Liberty, five miles east) to see "industrial America" or, as he puts it, "at least the surface of it." He "wanted to understand industrial power, and get the smell and feel of it." Why *A New England Fantasy* does not deal with industrial America, Lawson explains: "... my generation's revolt against big business was also a rebellion against Puritanism. The problems of sexual conduct and moral responsibility which weighed so heavily on me were associated in my mind with the New England conscience."

time. If I could not unlock the gates of the universe, I did in a small way break the bondage of time, foreseeing the forms and existentialist dilemmas of the sixties."

*

A *New England Fantasy's* title page says: "The action commences in Haverstock, Massachusetts, and then goes into infinity."

The first scene shows the exterior of an old colonial house,³⁾ lights in windows, an effect of falling snow produced by moving lights - - a setting described as "frankly artificial" like a Christmas Card.⁴⁾

Enter two "Soft Shoe Tramps,"⁵⁾ dancing and singing to musical accompaniment: "My feet got the blues... My feet ache, fit to break... If it ain't rain it's snow... Don't I know!... If it ain't snow, it's rain... Hunger an' pain..."⁶⁾

A "Radio Dove" appears on the roof of the old colonial house. The Radio Dove appears in a spotlight, a life-sized figure wearing a bird-mask and bird costume.⁷⁾ The Radio Dove, spreading its wings, sings a zany song popular in 1924: "When it's night-time in Italy, it's Wednesday over here."⁸⁾

The Soft Shoe Tramps, frightened by this apparition, say: "A Christmas owl... A radio humming-bird... A radio humming owl-dove." Then, numb and frozen, they sink into the ground.

- 3) In *Gentlewoman* (1934) the design of the library of the heroine's house is "early American" -- a "fine old Colonial mirror," a "long heavy table of Colonial design" -- "every item of decoration has been chosen to fulfill the Colonial pattern perfectly."
- 4) This "frankly artificial" Christmas Card-like effect seems related to the similar effect in *Processional* of vaudeville stereotypes.
- 5) It is of historical interest that the most famous play of the existentialist absurd *Waiting for Godot* has as main characters two tramps also based upon musical comedy caricatures.
- 6) In *The International* (1928) Lawson uses a similar "blues" line from time to time.
- 7) In *Roger Bloomer* (1923) Roger's nightmare includes figures dressed like birds.
- 8) In *Standards* (1916) Lawson uses a popular song of the day; in *Processional* pop song, folk song and jazz; in *Thunder Morning* (1953) folk song and jazz.

The song and spotlight fade. Everything is quiet. The snow continues falling. There is the sound of an automobile. Headlights sweep across the scene and are turned off.

Enter Nathaniel Weed and his son Doctor Alonzo Weed. They find the freezing tramps and carry them into the house.⁹⁾ The front of the house pulls back from each side, exposing the living room, where we meet the Weed family. Nathaniel Weed is an aristocratic New Englander. His wife is a kindly, intelligent woman. Their invited guests for the Christmas holiday are Mrs. Weed's spinster sister Aunt Bertha with miserable eyes in a lined ascetic face, and their young, naive and lovely niece Priscilla Emerson.

Everyone agrees that they must extend charity to the tramps, especially on Christmas Eve.¹⁰⁾ They take the tramps to an upstairs bedroom.

During the scene in the living room the Radio Dove can occasionally be seen and heard, singing in a light that plays on the roof-tree of the house. The people in the living room are unaware of the Radio Dove. In the living room there is a primitive radio set built by Dr. Alonzo Weed. The radio set occasionally speaks in counterpoint to the crazy singing of the Radio Dove on the roof-tree.

Nathaniel Weed says new inventions like the radio bring people closer together. Mrs. Weed says: "A more valuable invention would be one to keep people apart. I don't see much use in electric waves between me and total strangers... Steam and steel and electricity binding us together in one vibrating prayer." Priscilla, thoughtfully, says: "An electric prayer!"¹¹⁾

Dr. Alonzo Weed receives a telephone call and leaves to answer an emergency. Then the Weeds' younger son Tommy unexpectedly

-
- 9) In *Standards* the dramatist and the lawyer encounter a poor girl shivering on their doorstep and take her inside.
- 10) In *Parlor Magic* (1963) Jed Merton is said to write a novel entitled *Christmas Eve*.
- 11) In "A Calendar of Commitment" Lawson says that this passage "illustrates the rather stilted mysticism, the obscure questioning, that becomes more distracted as the play proceeds."

arrives. He introduces the woman with him as his wife Janet. Janet's intensity and her desire for emotional fulfillment have brought her to a moral crisis.¹²⁾

Tommy and Priscilla are alone together. They have been in love since childhood. Priscilla was shocked by Tommy's announcement of his marriage. Now Tommy says he has lied - - they are not married, but Janet is pregnant with his child.¹³⁾ Tommy does not want to marry Janet, but he feels he should.¹⁴⁾

Dr. Alonzo Weed returns with the news that a young farm girl has been found in the snow raped and murdered.¹⁵⁾ The Weeds suspect the two Soft Shoe Tramps asleep upstairs. Tommy makes a philosophical defense of the tramps, talking about the universality of guilt.¹⁶⁾

The conversation continues, much of it literary, concerning science and the soul. Dr. Alonzo Weed, who is a bit stuffy about science, says: "The discovery of the electron proved the atom can be broken up into seven hundred parts." Tommy asks: "What about the Satyricon? The little positive and negative and negative bugs of sin in all of us."

-
- 12) In *Parlor Magic* Bettina Merton is intense in her desire for emotional fulfillment.
- 13) Lawson uses the theme of the unmarried mother in *Standards*, *Roger Bloomer* (only alluded to), *Processional*, *Nirvana*, *Gentlewoman* and *Parlor Magic*.
- 14) In *Nirvana* Tommy Weed becomes Bill Weed. In "A Calendar of Commitment" Lawson says the "core of the action" in both plays is this character's inability to decide between two women, his "emotional confusion" or "lack of emotion," his "sense of guilt and futility."
- 15) In "A Calendar of Commitment" Lawson says: "The most curious thing about *A New England Fantasy* is that the death of the unknown girl is never solved, or even referred to again. It is the symbolic sacrifice of a virgin, an echo of the Danse Sacral in *Le Sacre du Printemps*." In *Roger Bloomer's* nightmare scene this symbolic sacrifice is enacted, as it is in *Nirvana*.
- 16) In "A Calendar of Commitment" Lawson says: "The role of the two tramps and their possible guilt cannot be defined. They are symbols of ordinary humanity, like the classless wanderers in John Dos Passos' novels, but more abstractly considered. They are everybody and nobody, guilty and innocent."

Tommy and Priscilla admit they still love each other. But they are guilty toward Janet and her unborn child.¹⁷⁾

The action is triggered into another dimension. Tommy and Priscilla find themselves out of this world. On one side is the past. On the other side is the future. Priscilla asks: "But the center?" Tommy answers: "That's everything and nothing, that's Nirvana."

Tommy and Priscilla enter a sacred wood. But even in this occult region, their love cannot protect them from the responsibilities of the human situation. Janet follows them. Janet speaks of the child she will bear. Tommy says he has forgotten. Janet says: "That's the only reason he's attractive, because he forgets everything."¹⁸⁾

The Radio Dove turns into a dancing girl, in white, performing before a red plush curtain. Her dance is interrupted by a raucous medley of radio voices. One voice reports stock market results: "Pig iron in St. Louis was dull as usual... As for U. S. Steel..." One voice, saccharine and false, says: "So Br'er Rabbit said to the big fat racoon, you slob. I'm sorry, children, but he called him a slob."

Then a fire-breathing dragon threatens Tommy. Priscilla says: "Tell it words." Tommy shouts: "Psychoanalysis... extrovert... introvert... bisexual."¹⁹⁾

-
- 17) In "A Calendar of Commitment" Lawson says: "Their guilt toward Janet and her unborn child is as damning and as uncertain, as impossible to judge or condemn, as the ambiguous murder charge against the two tramps."
- 18) In "A Calendar of Commitment" Lawson says: "This is the style of comic banter, with overtones of suffering and furious questioning of all moral values, that is maintained not only in dialogue but in a succession of vaudeville episodes." (This is also the style of *Nirvana*.) A sentence which Lawson pencilled out of "A Calendar of Commitment" continues: "The dialectic of infinity and absurdity is maintained by treating the stage as a comic charade in which people are tragically aware of their own unreality."
- 19) In *Roger Bloomer* Eugene Popper, shown unfavorably, says, similarly: "Psychology, Suppression, Inhibitions, Complexes—Ah, well, what difference does it all make?"

These words appease the dragon, who raises its head from its neck - - revealing one of the two Soft Shoe Tramps as a benign Santa Claus.

The Radio Dove now appears as the Holy Ghost.

Tommy: I want to see God.

Dove: He only sees the pure in heart²⁰⁾ by special appointment.

Tommy: If he cares anything about art, he'll see me.

A little later - -

Dove: I am the image of your crime.

Tommy: I haven't committed any crime.

Dove: You live and breathe and you don't call it a crime?

Tommy: What's wrong with me?

Dove: You can't tell the real from the unreal. That's your crime.

As the real and the unreal become hopelessly confused, Aunt Bertha, whose religious faith as a Christian Scientist falters, cries: "I've lost my identity." Dr. Alonzo Weed says: "We've all lost our identity." He turns to his brother Tommy as if he were a total stranger: "Who are you? Of what nation? Of what family? What's the language that comes out of your mouth?" Tommy, half-pleased with himself, vaguely answers: "The words come neatly, pressed and folded as from a laundry."

Priscilla Emerson has a mysterious fall from some height. The two Soft Shoe Tramps carry her in, "dissheveled, limp, her clothes torn." To Tommy, Priscilla says: "We went over the past trying to find something to believe... but there wasn't anything." Tommy says: "But I'm holding you." Priscilla says: "You're only a shadow, bloodless arms pressing my heart. I can see through you." There

20) Lawson's *The Pure in Heart*, written about 1928, was produced in 1934.

is a sound like a musical chord breaking.²¹⁾

The two Soft Shoe Tramps now enter, this time dressed in clerical black, wearing gold-rimmed spectacles, their black coats tapering into wings at the back. Again the tramps do a soft-shoe dance, Tommy between them, the words like vaudeville patter:

Tommy: Where am I?
 First Tramp: Nowhere.
 Tommy: What are we going to do about it?
 Second Tramp: Nothing.
 Tommy: I represent the culminaion of thousands of
 years of human tragedy.
 Second Tramp: What?
 Tommy: My race struggling up from the jellyfish.
 Second Tramp: Your race has been supremely ridiculous,
 and besides there isn't any past.
 Priscilla: We're in a vacuum.
 First Tramp: An air-pocket!

Tommy looks out at the audience.

Tommy: And those faces?
 Priscilla: Ask *them* for help, pray to *them*.
 Tommy: I refuse to be a lump of dust drawn into a
 vacuum.
 Second Tramp: Go on and refuse.
 Tommy: I'm an artist. I'm a poet. I can create by
 my will forever.
 Priscilla: Tommy, how can you be so fatuous?
 Tommy: There's nothing left to me but myself, and

21) Lawson says, in parenthesis, "as in *The Cherry Orchard*."

Forty years later Lawson again refers to this "breaking chord" as a new note in dramatic art. "In spirit and technique, Chekhov represents a transition from the enclosed world of the 19th century bourgeoisie to the changing world of the 20th century. He poses problems of form which underlie the whole course of dramatic art in the 20th century "and which account for its uneven and contradictory development." *Film: The Creative Process* (1964), pp. 351-352.

I must stand here suffering alone.

Priscilla: You're not alone. You're suffering in front of everyone. If you can suffer, you must suffer alone. Why should I be sorry for you? Haven't you taken me through Hell just to satisfy your curiosity?

Tommy: That's because I'm a superior human being.

Second Tramp: Has he ever been alone?

First Tramp: He only loves himself.

Second Tramp: What does he do alone?

First Tramp: Masturbate, I suppose.

Tommy sinks to his knees making convulsive movements.

First Tramp: Love thyself. Know thyself.

Second Tramp: Masturbate!

Tommy's convulsive movements become wilder.²²⁾

First Tramp: Paralytic.

Second Tramp: Insomniac.

First Tramp: Paranoiac.

(Having sunk to this /Lawson writes/ the poet's agony must turn to religion. Yet the religious need is treated ambivalently, the myth is grotesque because it no longer inspires faith.)

The two Soft Shoe Tramps are suspended by their necks from two bare trees twisted into the form of a cross, and there is a third tree between the two. The tramps, hanging against the sky, exchange tall stories: "I slid into a hotel on my face... You say this was on the Swanee River? No, Sir, on the beach at Waikiki... So there was my wife I hadn't seen for twenty-five years, with our little baby in her arms..."

The Radio Dove appears: "God moves in a mysterious way, hence his deserved popularity." The tramps ask her who the third

22) In the 1920s this scene could not have been enacted on Broadway, nor could the word "masturbate" have been spoken.

tree is for. "For a man," she says, "whose sin is worthy of the highest place."

Tommy and Priscilla enter. Tommy appeals to the Radio Dove: "Radiant spirit, guide us now." The Radio Dove says the central tree is for Tommy - - "To be hanged on a centrally located tree, twelve times higher than the Woolworth Building, is physically unpleasant, but God loves that sort of thing."

First Tramp: "Blood o' Christ, they're gonna string up the artist."

As the mock-crucifixion is about to take place, the stage goes black. Priscilla and Tommy are alone in "pure space." They are riding on a musical comedy star of glittering tinsel. Tommy says: "Ever since I was a little boy, I've wanted to write some great book... the Second Coming of Christ in a shape like Charlie Chaplin-- and he came down a long street stumbling on that flexible cane, and a million people cried Hosannah!"²³⁾

Tommy tells Priscilla they are safe at last, free of the world-- "Winging somewhere between the moon and the Western Star."

But they cannot escape from the only reality they can be sure of - - the theatre, the stage on which they are performing. The two Soft Shoe Tramps, dressed as circus acrobats, appear on trapezes in spotlights, singing their senseless patter. The Radio Dove is heard singing off-stage. When Tommy says, "There's that damn dove," she appears on a trapeze, dressed in musical comedy pink, with a basket of roses.

As *A New England Fantasy* ends, the Radio Dove swings out over the audience, scattering upon them her artificial roses.

23) At this point, Lawson signals the following footnote: "In the 1940's Chaplin created a story for a film he intended to do with Igor Stravinsky. The scene is a decadent night club, the spectators represent greed and hypocrisy and ruthlessness, and the floor show is the passion play; while the crucifixion of the savior is going on, groups at each table watch it indifferently, some ordering meals, others talking business..." Lawson indicates the source in Chaplin's autobiography.

A Biographical Afterword

In "A Calendar of Commitment" John Howard Lawson includes a chapter entitled "The Metaphysical Phase" in which he describes his activities and feelings after his return to the United States from Europe late in August 1923: "A door closed behind me on Europe, and another door opened on the universe."

What Lawson calls the "abandonment of Europe" was a "blow" to the American intellectual - "he lost a civilization."

The fact that he never had it, that his concept of European culture was incomplete or illusory, did not make the loss any less poignant. It was something to cling to. The American might feel, as I did, that he must identify himself with his own country, but the failure to do so gave him a feeling of loss and "absurdity," of being alone in a fathomless universe.

"Alienation is a relative term," Lawson continues. "However deep the sense of alienation may be, it is a response to an environment." On his return to New York he discovered that the production of *Roger Bloomer* earlier in 1923 had given him "status." He had attained the position of a "minor celebrity." He himself underwent a "social metamorphosis."

The change contributed to my growing consciousness of my identity as a middle class intellectual. The development of my self, all that had happened to me from the day of my birth, was circumscribed by my place in this general classification. Within these limits, I could rise or fall, and *must* rise or fall, because getting ahead was the first commandment of my class.

Lawson admits that bourgeois life, particularly the life of the rich, repelled him and that yet he knew no way out of it. And he wondered whether he wanted to find a way out of it. "As a bourgeois intellectual, I was seeking recognition in bourgeois society. This knowledge was not a backward step, It was a first move toward discovery what it means to be a rebel. I saw no road to rebellion:

even to start on such a road required decisions, psychological as well as social, which I could not make."

As he realized the "impossibility" of his situation in the early 1920's, he became rather pessimistic. For his pessimism he sought "deeper philosophic justification." He looked toward science. "...the air was full of reports of discoveries which established the principle of indeterminacy." Lawson's knowledge of science was "meager," and he attributes his misunderstanding of what he thought he knew to the lack of common ground on which the artist and the scientist could meet.²⁴⁾

What he calls "foggy notions" of science began to pervade his writing and his work became "at least verbally, *radioactive*, studded with references to the fourth dimension, the curvature of space and electro-magnetic energy." He was pessimistic, but - -

This use or misuse of a scientific vocabulary arose from my unwillingness to be engulfed in a negative view of the human condition. If life on earth made little sense, there was the hope that it might make sense in a larger context, and the mind's ability to probe the mysteries of space and time promised strange discoveries, and showed that man's desire to know the unknown survived even the death of God.

Lawson was alert to the "possibility that some mystic truth would be unveiled."²⁵⁾ At Muriel Draper's salon, he was attracted and amused²⁶⁾ by George Gurjief. Gurjief "talked eloquently, and with an easy contempt for his listeners, about the mystic fourth dimension of sensory experience from which he was able to receive 'vibrations'."

-
- 24) The hero of *Parlor Magic*, Lawson's last produced play, is a physicist.
- 25) As a young boy Lawson had read Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, Besant's *The Ancient Wisdom*, and other works of mysticism.
- 26) "It was plain enough that Gurjief was trying to make a good thing out of his New York contacts, but he might have unveiled hidden truths, even though he used his knowledge for his own advantage."

Gurjjeff's theories appealed to Lawson's taste for metaphysics.²⁷⁾ "I agreed with Gurjjeff that contemporary man was less than half-alive because he had reduced his soul to a 'clock-work mechanism'. I liked the idea that our three-dimensional world was only a cross section of an unseen four-dimensional universe."

Gurjjeff was "partly responsible" for Lawson's decision to write a play about a "psychic fourth dimension." "It would be the most personal statement I had ever attempted," Lawson says, "and the most desperate. It would acknowledge the 'absurdity' of my situation... I wanted to escape the world, from reality."

John Howard Lawson tried to find infinity in Pittsburgh.²⁸⁾

27) In a college essay on Cubism (May 1913) Lawson wrote: "Let us look forward to that distant day when all art shall have further elevated to the mystic realm of the Fourth Dimension." When he was rather young Lawson read Charles H. Hinton's *What Is the Fourth Dimension?* (1883).

28) "Infinity in Pittsburgh" is the title of the chapter in "A Calendar of Commitment" in which Lawson describes *A New England Fantasy*.