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John Cowper Powys: the Autobiography and the Man

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JOHN COWPER POWYS

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THE COURIER

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John Cowper Powys: the Autobiography and the Man

by Walter Eden

John Cowper Powys (1872-1963), underrated and neglected during his lifetime, is now increasingly recognized as an English author of genius. Before his death, at ninety, he received but a single token of official recognition, a medal awarded him, ironically, not from his native England, but from the city of Hamburg, Germany, where he had lectured. Even on Powys's ninetieth birthday, friends had difficulty getting time on the B.B.C. to commemorate his achievement. He had written over forty volumes, including poetry, philosophical writings, an autobiography, and the long prose romances for which he is most famous.

Today, he has become an important subject of critical and scholarly attention. Many of his works have been reissued, a Powys newsletter is available, and dissertations, essays, and books are devoted to him. Still, one suspects that outside the ranks of specialists in twentieth-century British literature, Powys remains little known. This is particularly unfortunate because he hoped that his work would speak, not to academic specialists, but to a broad general audience.

As Powys's reputation continues to grow, literary scholars will become increasingly aware of the collection of Powysiana in the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections at Syracuse University. It is one of the most important in the United States. At the time of writing, the English firm, Village Press Limited., is preparing a publication on Powys containing extensive materials from the Arents collection.

The collection consists of six archival boxes and a package of family photos. The boxes contain correspondence, notebooks, and unpublished fragments of essays, novels, plays, poems, and prefaces, in addition to newspaper clippings and pamphlets concerning Powys and his family.¹ Students of his *Autobiography* will be particularly interested in Powys's references in several letters to its composition, several pages of the holograph, and a new indexed edition (1967) of the *Autobiography* containing a note on its composition by R.L. Blackmore and an introduction by J.B. Priestly.

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¹Gift of Powys's sister, Marian Powys Grey, 1964. Purchases 1962-1973.

An overview of Powys's life and career will serve as a useful background to an examination of the *Autobiography*, which is among his best two or three books but still his most neglected work. Powys was the eldest in a family of eleven children, most of whom were active in the arts. Two of Powys's brothers, Llewelyn Powys (1884-1939) and Theodore Francis Powys (1875-1953), have also gained critical recognition as important authors.

Long before the beginning of his literary career at the age of forty-three with the publication of *Wood and Stone* (1915), Powys had gained a reputation (and a living) as a public lecturer. As part of the University Extension Program representing Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of London he lectured on historical and literary topics throughout England for about ten years, giving occasional lectures on the continent. In 1904 or 1905², he accepted a one season lecture tour in the United States that eventually evolved into a twenty-five year career. From 1930 to 1934, he lived in retirement on a farm he named Phudd Bottom, near Hillsdale, in Columbia County, New York, about a hundred miles north of New York City. Powys considered these four years the most important period of self-realization in his life. The people and countryside of Upstate New York always remained dear to him, and some still recall the great impression Powys made in 1929 when he lectured in Crouse College at Syracuse University.³

Prompted by the degree of self-fulfillment and self-understanding he had achieved during his career in the United States, he wrote his *Autobiography* during his final nine months in the United States. It frequently wins high critical praise such as J.B. Priestly's statement that it "is in fact one of the greatest autobiographies in the English language. Even if Powys had never written any novels . . . this one book alone would have proved him to be a writer of genius."⁴ Yet, it has been examined chiefly as a source of biographical data and not as a work of literature. And although some consider it a classic of English literature, one seldom hears of it being taught, even in courses on twentieth-century English literature.

An appreciation of the *Autobiography* as literature requires attention to it in its totality: that is, as a work that gives literary continuity to the multitudinous and disparate experiences that make up a life. The greatness of autobiographies — such as those by St. Augustine, Rousseau, Goethe, Franklin, and Wordsworth — depends upon the author's success in uniting the written word and the recollected experience into a self-revealing design.

Several of Powys's comments in the *Autobiography* can serve as guidelines for a reading of it. He says that a central "electric current" in his

²Although Powys does not recall the exact date, the year would be 1904 or 1905.

³See, for example, Russell Speirs "A Man From the West Country," *Philobiblon*, 8 (Winter, 1966), p. 19.

⁴J. B. Priestly, Introduction to the *Autobiography* of J. C. Powys (New York: Colgate University Press, 1967 ed.), pp. x-xi.

life was the search for his “inmost self” and the development of that self (p. 594).⁵ The purpose of the *Autobiography* is to trace that quest for self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. But despite Powys’s clarity of purpose, he recognized the immensity of his task. He refers to the “difficulty of tracing the spiral curve of the hidden continuity” (p. 347). His problem as an autobiographer was, not chronicling life details about which readers might be curious, but discovering a pattern of events in his life that would suggest the vital creative force he posited at the center of his being. His solution to this problem of literary self-analysis is contained in his assertion that the “only interest in events . . . is a symbolic one” (p. 43).

Powys’s point was simply that the autobiographer must choose carefully from the myriad events of a life those details that best suggest the development of his inner being. The autobiographer is engaged in the artistic process of not only selecting but also placing and emphasizing his materials so as to develop their relative importance in his narrative. Thus, events in Powys’s life covering a short span of time may receive extended treatment in the *Autobiography*, while others of longer duration in his life may receive summary presentation in the life-story. Various literary devices Powys used in the *Autobiography* to gain emphasis are less obvious and require more explanation.

Attention to several of these techniques is particularly helpful in tracing and examining the “curve of identity” Powys sought to present. For example, his descriptions and dramatizations of certain events in his life underscore his sense of them as turning points in his development. Such key incidents occurred in Powys’s childhood, youth, middle age, and maturity.

Also revealing is Powys’s presentation of certain persons as types representative of values by which he examines the meaning of his experiences. Two in particular are central in the *Autobiography*. Powys’s descriptions of his father make of him above all else an exemplification of the imaginative approach to life. The opposite or non-imaginative view of life Powys locates in a type he refers to as “the professor.” The “professor” was Powys’s name for those — especially the more pedantic scholars, psychiatrists, and scientists — who believe that their analyses and categories represent truths that should regulate the lives of others.

Another important device in the *Autobiography* is the self-image. Self-images serve Powys as metaphors by which he can suggest his self-understanding at various “epochs” of his life. For instance, his reference to himself at one point as an Antaeus suggests the strength he derived from nature. Elsewhere, his reference to himself as a Tartar evokes a sense of the malice he felt for academicians who attempted to dismiss him as a “charlatan.” Approximately a dozen such metaphors are crucial in understanding how Powys believed others saw him and how he viewed himself.

⁵Page references are to John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934).

The unifying theme in Powys's *Autobiography* is the shaping force of his imagination in the development of his identity. He considered his reason, will, and imagination all important forces in his life, but of the three, imagination is his dominant theme. His personal narrative is primarily the story of his struggle first, to preserve the integrity of his imaginative life, and second, to allow his imagination to direct and mold his life. Tracing the theme of imagination in the *Autobiography* is another essential way for the reader to uncover the implicit design in Powys's life.

Childhood: the Years of Free Imagination

The first two chapters of the *Autobiography* deal with Powys's life before he went to boarding school at the age of ten. The earliest years of childhood, Powys believed, constitute the period of greatest freedom in most lives and, consequently, the period in which the imagination is most alive. While acknowledging that children are for the most part powerless to rebel against rules that constrain them, he points out that, in general, they need not meet the demands that society makes on adults. Being relatively free from social conventions and social institutions, children are able to live more fully in the inner world of their imaginations, a dimension of existence which most forfeit as they grow older.

Where children have the grand advantage over grown up people is in their freedom from the weight of authority and tradition. They are forced to behave properly at meals and lessons and never to make themselves a nuisance; but in their play-time, which is of course the bulk of their time the majority of children, even *only* children, are left to invent their own "games" as they are called. Now this use of the word "games" for the great purposes of children's life is extremely misleading. . . . The passionately intense *inner life* of children, that imaginative existence which is to them the whole purpose and vital interest of their days *is not a game*. . . . The great point is that the most thrilling moments of happiness with a child are *secret and magical* and come from *a level of reality* which is completely different from the level of reality of grown up people. . . . Children's "games" . . . are the child's inmost reality! (p. 25-26)

To retain the intense imaginative existence that he associated with childhood became the major goal of Powys's life; the resulting conflict with the demands of society issued in the gradual emergence and strengthening of his inmost being.

Powys's childhood responses to the world suggest the magical powers he attributed to the imagination. Various objects exuded an aura of mystery and filled the boy with the awe and wonder that make of childhood such a valued state of being for all romantics. A wooden ax his father makes suggests the "glamor of fairy story enchantment. . ." (p. 3). A striking edition of a book evokes a transcendent joy:

It was as though in . . . this enormous book, so large, and at the same time *so thin and frail* . . . I touched some incredible secret of happiness; some of the sort of happiness that Elementals know, or Beings who are exempt from the infirmities of human flesh. (p. 25)

From the child's perspective the very soles of his father's boots are charged with the magic and mystery of his father's being.

The greatness of my father as a personality was first manifested to me not as a priest, . . . but as the possessor of boots *with enormously thick soles*. If I could capture now the real significance of the soles of my father's boots I should be master of one of the great clues to the secret of the cosmos. . . . These great boot-soles . . . must . . . have become significant to me, in that mysterious way in which all through my life certain inanimate objects have become significant, by gathering into themselves that element in life that might be called *inscrutable ecstasy*. (p. 4-5)

A wooden ax, a book, boot soles: such were the earliest magical talismans of a reality composed of enchantment, mystery, and joy – states of being that Powys cherished as a child, guarded as a school boy, and cultivated as an adult. And as the child explores the world, he discovers in other commonplace objects such as crystals on a beach, colored gravel in the road, or a fallen willow, more transporting and blissful charms. Because the imagination's power to transform the external world into intense inner experience makes of it a magical agent, the boy soon becomes "a young neophyte in magic" (p. 61). This commitment marks the first stage of what Powys refers to as his "Magical Quest" (p. 61).

Most importantly, Powys believed that through the agency of the imagination he could achieve self-transformations. He might project himself as a minnow to vicariously experience underwater marvels (p. 62) or enjoy a "metempsychosis" (p. 20) as a locomotive engine. Throughout the *Autobiography* he refers to experiences that represented "transformations," "metempsychoses," and "metamorphoses." Two of his childhood transformations in particular suggest the range of identities his imagination made available to him. While turning the handle of a music box and trying to cast a magic spell, he experiences himself "*being* for the nonce a supernatural agent," a "butterfly-winged Ariel" (p. 62). At other times he becomes something closer to a Caliban ruling as "despotic Head" (p. 62) over children

who have joined a make-believe army of his creation. While as yet powerless in the world of adults, Powys, the child, was discovering the potency of his imagination in influencing the behavior of others and, thus, in exerting some real control over reality. It was the first of many such discoveries.

But it was in his introduction to literature that the boy discovered the greatest range of the imagination's power. In his father's reading aloud to the children Powys gained his first "impression of the enchantment" and "the magic of literature" (p. 23). Stories and poems extended the child's inner world so that it included distant places and epochs. For Powys, literature was valuable first and foremost as an instrument for discovering sensations and feelings, including those with mystical overtones.

The subject of one poem his father read also drew forth Powys's sympathetic imagination. The youth is quick to identify with its subject of exiled highlanders, because of his already growing sense of himself as an outsider. (The reference to exiles so early in the *Autobiography* anticipates his future sense of himself as an exile, first at school and then in England itself.)

Finally, Powys depicts imaginative literature's power to extend and deepen experience as a source of intuitive knowledge. From a fairy tale his father tells the children, the boy receives his first hint of the forces that will cause him to feel like a misfit and outsider.

All I can remember now of this never-completed tale was that its villain, the devil of the piece, was always a scientific pedant, called by the narrator "the Professor," whose sinister activities required all the arts of both Giant and Fairy to circumvent and neutralize. (p. 4)

The "Professor" to which Powys's father refers represents, as remarked earlier, the very type of the pedant Powys will encounter throughout his lifetime: the scientific "experts" who claim possession of "truth" about life, the vivisectionists, against whom Powys will rail, and the conservative professors, who will label him "charlatan," and whom Powys will delight in admonishing.

These were for Powys the arch representatives of evil and stupidity in the world. He believed that scientific "experts" foolishly would displace mystery and wonder from the center of human experience with materialistic descriptions of life and nature having no significance beyond measurement and classification. Vivisectionists, regardless of their justifications, lacked sympathetic imagination, Powys thought, or else they would feel the pain they inflicted and desist. The professors crying "charlatanism" Powys saw as pedantic snobs behaving like cultural priests guarding sacrosanct literary relics from supposed debasement in the hands of the uninitiated.

Before the age of ten, Powys encountered the embodiment of "the Professor" on at least two occasions. These events reveal early instances of

the anxiety and anti-social behavior that would become so prominent in Powys's later life. During a picnic Powys innocently throws a branch into a nearby lake. A meddling adult chastises the boy for disturbing the lake and declares that as punishment the police will come to take him away. During subsequent days and nights the impressionable child envisions the police arriving for him; and because he cannot rid himself of his fear, it takes root and becomes a part of him.

And such is, as always, the nature of Fear – that Proteus of a million masks – that not a word durst Johnny breathe of all this to a living mortal. Does any “immortal” ear ever listen to the heart’s cry, to the wordless heart’s-pulse cry, of the human soul cherishing in its bosom a Fear it must not reveal? (p. 12)

(Thus “Johnny” and many other “Johnnies” begin a lifetime struggle with guilt and the fear of eventual retribution.) Powys prepared many masks during his life to deal with or escape from fear. Indeed, to the protean element in his own nature he attributed his success in dealing with the anxieties of life.

A second traumatic experience of Powys's childhood also stemmed from an adult's lack of sympathetic imagination. During a garden party one guest suggests that the children should form a group to help him gather specimens for his herbarium. To little Johnny Powys, who already reveres nature, such an activity is a desecration. But lacking the courage to openly rebel, he can only make his “lugubrious way through . . . feathery growths, too cowardly to leave [his] companions in a desperate retreat, but resolute not to pick a single grass blade in the interests of Science” (pp. 21-22). Powys characterizes the villain of this episode as “some brisk, fantastical Pedant – an embodiment no doubt of all the qualities of my father's detested ‘Professor’ ”(p. 21).

Such were the experiences that intensified the child's growing sense of himself as an outsider. Looking back across a span of approximately fifty years, Powys describes himself as having been an “Ishmael.” But even being an outcast was an advantage: feeling himself estranged from society, the child was free to make the decision that gave his life its direction: “. . . I can well recall waking up one morning in my room looking out on the South Walk and thinking to myself that I must and would bring into my real life those fancies about being a magician . . . which were forever hovering in my brain” (p. 69).

As the first major event to shape Powys's life was his belief in the magic of the imagination, so the second was his decision to impose upon the world his self-ideal as a “magician.” To be a “magician” meant to Powys to live by and for the imagination. The pursuit of this goal, apparent already in childhood, gradually became the unifying force in Powys's sometimes chaotic life. What had begun as a child's “magic quest” for experience broadened into a “boyish pilgrimage” (p. 65) of self-identity. Powys's metaphors of quest

and pilgrimage make clear his conception of his life as a hazardous and quasi-religious journey.

And always in his mind's eye to guide him in his quest for self-discovery was the figure of his father, a representative of those values which alone could counteract the power and cruelty of the insensitive and unimaginative.

Whenever Science entered the field of his amateur natural history my father retreated into volcanic depths of contempt. The truth was, his interest in Nature was part of his passionate -- but totally subjective -- romance of life. Never have I known, and never shall know, a man with a more childlike sense of the incredible romance of his own existence upon earth. . . . Every person of his life, every place he had ever lived in, took on for him the importance of something tremendous and mythological! His pride and his egoism in this ultimate matter were absolute. He had only to link up any human being, and place, with the experience of his own life, and that person and that place assumed a curious fairy-like quality, *beyond normal reality*. (p. 15)

It should also be noted that although Powys's father represented an ideal, he was also a powerful personality against which Powys would rebel. The conflicts between them, which Powys does not detail, may be inferred by contrasting their personalities. It would not be amiss to identify Powys's father with the "Giant Grumble" of the fairy tale he perennially told the children and to view Powys as the "Fairy Sprightly" of his father's fable: "My father was an inarticulate man. I am an only too voluble one. My father was a man of rock. I am a worshipper of the wind." (p. 594).

The ten years before boarding school were the period in which Powys's imagination enjoyed its greatest freedom of growth and his imaginative life gained its impetus and direction. These years offered an often idyllic existence, and Powys's beloved Derbyshire countryside became a pastoral setting for the young neophyte in magic. At the same time, unimaginative and insensitive adults interfered with the child's relationship to nature and introduced the curse of fear into his life. Powys's first ten years ended with his pursuing his ideal identity as a magician while at the same time becoming a social outsider.

The School Years: the Individual and Society

Worse than the intrusions of the unthinking and pedantic into little Johnny Powys's arcadia was his ejection from it. Whereas the years at home were, at least in some respects, an idyll, his entrance into the prep school at the age of ten began a period that frequently seemed a bondage. At school, the adolescent encountered the all but overwhelming power a social institu-

tion can exert on a life. Powys characterizes the year preceding boarding school as his “last year of real liberty” (p. 61) until he went to Cambridge ten years later.

The prep school represented one of the most formidable challenges to his freedom that Powys would ever encounter. There he had to struggle desperately to preserve his inner imaginative life because, Powys points out, it is not the university, but the prep school that with its “stamp of . . . character” (p. 116) forms the values and shapes the personality of Englishmen in Powys’s class. The regimentation of boarding school life was particularly difficult, and the adolescent soon discovered the sad truth that “it is not easy to be a Magician at school” (p. 92).

In a system that bestowed great value on athletic ability, Powys, because of his clumsiness and nearly total ineptness at sports, became almost instantly an outsider. In addition, idiosyncracies, such as gnawing at his food, and affectations, such as carrying an umbrella in all weather, stamped him firmly as an eccentric and a misfit. In sum, he seemed generally unattractive and frequently ludicrous. A figure of ridicule, he became a favorite target of bullies. The punishment they inflicted and the fear their presence engendered constituted the principal source of agony in Powys’s life at school.

Two events above all others during the school years indicate the direction of Powys’s development. Both dramatize major crises in his life. Taken together, they display Powys’s most successful responses to the antagonisms he suffered at school.

The first incident presents what appeared to be an insoluble dilemma. A group of boys orders Powys to attack a school bully. Should he fail to comply, he will be beaten for disobedience; if he obeys, he will be beaten by the bully. His predicament is clear to him: “To obey was hell. To disobey was hell” (p. 115). His response to the situation startles the other boys and apparently comes to him spontaneously from inner depths of his being. As the pressure of his predicament intensifies he suddenly launches into an inspired performance: behaving as if he has gone mad, he recites from memory, with appropriate gestures and writhings, one of his most macabre poems.

Considering his growing reputation as an eccentric, his behavior is readily credited as genuine. He is separated from the others for several days, and when he returns to the dormitory, the moment of crisis has passed. He had successfully navigated the Scylla and Charybdis of bullying by the individual or bullying by the group.

Powys’s success in resolving the issue with his schoolmates marks a crucial stage in his understanding of himself as well as his understanding of social forces. In response to external pressures the boy has begun to unearth the “born actor,” the “‘metamorphosist’ ” (p. 40) within himself. He has discovered, moreover, the extent to which his imagination can operate in a crisis to alter the way others will see him, thereby affecting the manner in

which they will deal with him. Increasingly, he will use his histrionic talents to deal with the threatening forces – such as school bullying – that society allows to exist in its institutions and thereby implicitly sanctions.

For example, as an adult, one of his chief means of handling the politically, socially, and economically powerful and threatening was to act the crazy man, the “ninny,” “zaney,” “loon,” and “fool.” In the role of buffoon he could threaten the pomposity of the self-satisfied, and at the same time shield his inner self. Moreover, Powys came to believe that the foolish element in him was fundamental and, hence, more authentic than the conventional masks required by daily social intercourse. Playing the madman and fool became not only a means of self-protection, but a method of acting out and thereby strengthening dimensions in his personality that others feared in themselves and hid. Powys makes clear that his acting was not mere pretense, but part of the creative process of self-realization.

I am a born actor; but my “acting” takes place in a dimension of life beyond the level of the theatrical, a dimension of life where even to half-believe, or, if you will to half *make* believe, is to share in the creative secrets of that eternal blower of magic bubbles, Nature herself. (p. 388)

The second life-crisis of Powys’s youth occurs shortly before his graduation from the upper prep, “the Big School,” and his subsequent departure for Cambridge. One day a group of taunting boys storms his room menacingly, and Powys becomes paralyzed with fear. He fails to show even a sign of defending himself, and as a result, his self-esteem – what Powys would refer to as his “life-illusion”—is seriously threatened. “My inability to come off without shame from a crisis that only needed a little natural spirit . . . upset me as I had never been upset before” (p. 140).

One realizes the immensity of the experience for Powys when considering his lifelong belief that “a person’s life-illusion ought to be as sacred as his skin” (p. 390). Nothing less than his very sense of self-worth is at stake, and so he seeks desperately for a way to redeem himself in his own eyes. Again, his resolution of a personal crisis is radical and dramatic.

After much vexation of spirit and troubled thought, the schoolboy realizes that nothing short of a confrontation with his entire class will enable him to reestablish his self-esteem. He gains permission from a sympathetic authority to address, unannounced, the entire assemblage at dinner. The general surprise at this unprecedented act gains him the attention he needs, and shortly after he rises to speak, the hubbub of astonished students fades into silence. An initial awkwardness soon gives way to an increasingly powerful eloquence. More surprising than his audacity or his eloquence is his message: he confirms each idiosyncrasy for which he has been cited and admits to each bit of obnoxious behavior for which he has been criticized and derided. The boldness of his act elicits the other boys’ applause, and the self-understanding reflected in his speech wins their respect. In the act of

asserting himself Powys discovered the weapon with which he would be able not only to defend himself in the future, but also to attack his enemies. "I was unable to use my Derbyshire fists, why should I not use my Welsh tongue?" (p. 141). The rhetorical brilliance he demonstrated on this occasion suggests the talent that, combined with his mimetic ability, would win him renown as a lecturer. As Powys declares, this experience provided the catalyst for finding his "voice." Again, crisis brought further self-discovery and greater self-acceptance. He had been able to "redeem [him]self, with [his] tongue!" (p. 141).

Particularly important here is the realization that Powys's "confession" of his faults was not an apology for his behavior but, rather, an insistence that he be accepted as he is. His defense was a form of self-justification. "Confession" in modern autobiography suggests not apology for error, but assertion of what one considers fundamental and essential in oneself. "'Confession' is personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self."⁶ Such is the significance of Powys's declaration that he "stripped [him]self naked before them" (p. 142). The purpose of his speech was not to solicit forgiveness, but to demonstrate a sincerity that would win acceptance for him on his own terms. Confession considered as self-affirmation was fundamental in Powys's scheme of values and can be seen as the controlling intention of the *Autobiography*. Just as Powys "confessed" himself to his schoolmates through his speech, he confesses himself to society at large through his *Autobiography*—again, not to apologize for his behavior but to gain acceptance on his own terms.

Powys's education owed less to his formal studies at the prep than to the strategies he learned there for survival in what for him was the incommensurable and often abrasive social system of the English public school. The completely powerless child could only sulk and inwardly rebel when dissatisfied. The grammar school boy learned to escape his persecutors through pretense. The young man of nineteen discovered that self-preservation depends on confrontation as well as evasion. Insistence on one's *amour propre* is necessary to psychic survival and hence fundamental if the vital forces in his nature were to create the pattern of selfhood he would implant upon the world.

At school Powys felt himself a "pariah, an Untouchable" (p. 85). The metaphor makes clear his understanding of how most saw him during these years and the unhappiness he suffered as a consequence. At the same time, his own self-image as "the much enduring Ulysses," (p. 86) bespeaks his contrasting ideal for himself as one who will endure by using craft, cunning, and dissemblings. The Odysseus myth became Powys's model for his sacred journey of self-discovery and his heroic quest for cultural integration on his own terms. For Powys, life was both pilgrimage and Odyssey.

⁶Francis R. Hart, "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography," *New Literary History*, 1 (1970), p. 491.

A Ninny? of course! the whole convoluted
~~apparatus of my~~ ~~being~~ ~~all~~
 the "swinged horror of my
 folded tail"

~~A Ninny? of course~~

Why, the

~~apparatus of my sub-human~~ ~~swamp-dragon~~ ~~prehistoric~~ ~~nature~~
~~arises in~~ ~~protest to~~
~~depend my ninny-hood~~

and "swindges the scaly Horror of its foulded tail"!

~~And~~ ~~the mad saint in~~
 me too ~~creating in~~ ~~tin~~ ~~tin~~ ~~tin~~

A Romanticist at Cambridge

The important part of education for Powys was learning how to adapt to life without simply conforming to society's prescribed modes of behavior. Cambridge as well as the prep school taught him this lesson. He describes some of his teachers at the prep school and at Cambridge who showed him kindness and influenced him intellectually, but the most important part of his school experience continued to be finding ways to preserve and to live for his inner imaginative life.

Aside from the craft and audacity Powys developed in dealing with others, he discovered in nature a source of sustenance and renewal. At the prep on Sunday afternoon, he and his brother Littleton had taken long hikes in the countryside immersing themselves in their freedom from the world of the prep school. Of these walks Powys declares: "Yes, there is no doubt that my happiest times and most characteristic times too,—I mean when I was most my real self—as far as my time at school was concerned, were when I was walking with Littleton all these miles and miles round Sherborne" (p. 123). At Cambridge, nature became increasingly important in Powys's life, for there he enjoyed a degree of freedom that allowed him to develop fully his love of the countryside.

Life at Cambridge was something of a haven for Powys, coming as it did, between the trauma of the prep school years and a difficult emotional period ahead. Cambridge was more tolerant of the eccentric, having educated so many of them. Moreover, when upper classmen descended upon Powys in his rooms, he dissuaded them from future forays by brandishing a pistol before them. For the most part, he led a quiet uneventful life at Cambridge following the rules and doing the work necessary for obtaining his degree in history.

The countryside of Cambridgeshire became a greater force in his development than professors or studies. On his walks Powys felt himself capable of "pouring forth [his] whole soul . . . into such inanimate or such lowly animate things as [he] could encounter along the most desolate country road" (p. 185). And until such moments of self-expansion were available to him, he developed "a most formidable mental power of hiding up [his] real identity . . ." (p. 185). In the countryside Powys gained sanctuary from the demands of society, and in nature he achieved the sensations, and moods that produced in him an expanded sense of self. He sums up the distinction between his formal study and what he gained from nature: ". . . I shall carry with me to the end what I learned from Cambridgeshire while I was at Cambridge" (p. 185).

A clue to Powys's understanding of himself at Cambridge and shortly thereafter is his reference to himself as "acting the part of a guileless Wilhelm Meister . . ." (p. 418). This allusion to Goethe's famous fictional character is significant because it further suggests the ideal of education as the individual's total cultural development, not just his formal training.

The years at Cambridge completed the formal stage of Powys's education and inaugurated an even more intensely self-conscious and determined cultivation of his romantic sensibility. During the ensuing years, trips to Italy and Germany became most important as opportunities for Powys to exercise his romantic search in art and nature for ever new sensations.

In Italy, Powys responded most fully to paintings of picturesque old landscapes. Although these works were seldom among the masterpieces, and in some instances clearly second-rate, he was thrilled to discover in them scenes of "humanized Nature" (p. 277) that touched the "secret depths of [his] being . . ." (p. 277). He knew that his readers would consider him unsophisticated, even philistine in his response to art; but he cogently observes, in recalling Goethe, that art appreciation is most genuine when the works are appropriated by one's "authentic inner life" (p. 377). He was as intent upon freeing himself from the cultural oughts and shoulds of aesthetic dogmatists as a heretic is in disputing religious dogma. Indeed, Powys presents himself as a cultural dissenter from the aesthetic pieties of the cognoscenti. Even more exciting and captivating than Italy's art treasures were its ancient scenes, suggested to him by worn marble steps, and its unfamiliar landscapes, which touched new depths of emotional response in him.

Germany was even more important to Powys than Italy and all its art. Its castles, ruins, and forests most completely fulfilled his yearning for the distant and mysterious and picturesque. His realization of how important these travels in Italy and Germany were to his development led to this self-assessment: "magician as I conceived myself to be, indurated romanticist as I have proved first and last. . . ." (p. 40).

Teacher and Lecturer: an Identity Crisis

From his mid-twenties to his mid-thirties Powys earned his living, first, as a teacher, and, eventually, as a lecturer in a "University Extension" program. He published two books of undistinguished verse and made several unsuccessful attempts at writing novels. He married and had a son. And although he considered himself misanthropic, he enjoyed close friendships with his brothers and several others during this "epoch" of his life.

Such general observations suggest a life not greatly different from that of many other young men of Powys's class and education. But it is with such generalities that similarities end.

Powys details very little of his married life or of his teaching career in the *Autobiography*. Such lack of information, however, is not a limitation, but, on the contrary, a gain. Powys was better able to unify his life story around his theme of self-identity by omitting incidents of domestic life, which many autobiographers chronicle rather perfunctorily, because he simply did not consider his life as classroom teacher, husband, and father, of

crucial importance in his self-development. Most significant is his suggestion that his social role as “Mr. Powys” hindered his development. He states: “I had found it a little difficult to hit upon my appropriate Mask wherein to trick out my Protean life-illusion while I lived at Burpham. I was, in every sense of that word, too *exposed* there. . . . I found it difficult to be anything but the rather absurd, rather suspicious, extremely good-natured *Mr. Powys* ” (p. 418).

Along with the question of self-realization, a crucial issue for Powys during these years was his struggle with his long-standing manias and compulsions. It was the period in which he came “nearest to insanity” (p. 199). His neurotic behavior became so marked that the “crafty neurotic John” who had emerged from “helpless neurotic Johnny” (p. 35-36) now had to direct his energies of will and imagination to retaining his sanity. He declares: “Just as I saved myself from my worst suffering at Sherborne by pretending to be mad, it is possible to save yourself, *the other way round*, by pretending to be sane!” (p. 237).

Powys’s dominant compulsion was what he refers to as his “eye-lust” (p. 223), i.e., his voyeurism. He spent a lifetime searching the pages of magazines, the beaches of Brighton, the stages of vaudeville halls, and, ultimately, the burlesque houses of America satisfying the compulsion that threatened to rule him completely during these years. Even during visits of beloved friends, Powys would slip away to Brighton Beach in quest of his “ideal sylph,” his “nymphet.” He sought an idealized feminine form that would be neither expressly feminine nor masculine, a form that he glimpses but once, in a Brighton pantomime.

The escapades that delighted Powys most involved sentimental relationships with prostitutes in which he could act out the roles of favorite literary characters. With one young woman, for example, he played the part of Yorick, the central character in Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*. He would continue to depend upon external models to direct his imaginative life until he began writing his novels, when he was forty years old.

My whole life can be divided in two halves; the first up to the time I was forty; and the second *after* the time I was forty. During the first half I struggled desperately to evoke and to arrange my feelings according to what I admired in my favourite books; but during the second half I struggled to find out what my real feelings were and to refine upon them and to balance them and to harmonise them, according to no one’s method but my own. (p. 369)

Powys’s need to pursue his ideal of the feminine came into such conflict with the realities of womanhood that he developed a number of debilitating phobias. The thought of reproduction made him physically sick. The fact that his dog was a bitch became overwhelmingly upsetting. He dared

not look at his silverware at dinner for fear of observing that a utensil was pointing at his breast, a word which took on distressingly feminine associations for him.

Powys's references to his erotic proclivities and neuroses are not included in the *Autobiography* to satisfy the curious, but to contribute important material for his theme of self-identity. His descriptions of his relationships never slip into the grossness he detested in erotic matters. Instead, inclusion of this material establishes his emotional and sexual identity, and represents a further insistence that he be accepted as he reveals himself to be.

Powys's ability to direct a great deal of his energy to activities unrelated, or at least less directly related, to his compulsions brought him a crucial degree of balance during his late twenties and early thirties. A number of recollections from this period concern activities that diverted him from voyeurism. For example, recalling his first position as a teacher in a girls' school, Powys declares that he did not give lessons so much as deliver lectures. Because a lecture was a dramatic event for Powys, the classroom became, in effect, his first stage. It offered an opportunity to exercise his histrionic nature, and indirectly served as an apprenticeship for the lecture hall.

Another humorous but nonetheless important occupation was his search for pictures of literary men with which he could line his walls. Thus he managed to establish an "exciting role as kindred spirit" (p. 212) to the literary men he most admired. It is worth noting Powys's ability to look at his activities with a critical eye and a wry smile: "'Great Men' took the place in my disordered mind that they take in those ridiculous little children's books, written by old-fashioned ladies, and entitled 'Boyhood of Great Men'" (p. 212).

Among the most encouraging events during these early years before Powys became a novelist was his success in getting his first book of poetry published. Although he recognized that his verse was derivative of the English Romantics he loved and was lacking any hint of important poetic talent, its publication helped him in two equally important ways. First, it offered him some sense of fulfillment: to a degree he had become the magician that he had set out to be. Poetry represented a form of magic to Powys because it could transform the chaos of life into imaginatively ordered experience. Second, his poetry gained him recognition and encouragement from Hardy and Yeats, whom he greatly admired.

W.B. Yeats, in response to a poem dedicated to him, sent Powys a note attesting to his success in being "still in the stage of 'free imagination' before 'the mill of character' ground [him] down to a particular shape" (p. 206). Thus, although Powys recognized that poetry was not his *métier*, he also realized from Yeats's note that he had succeeded in preserving the integrity of his imaginative life.

Thomas Hardy, in response to a poem dedicated to him, invited Powys to tea and accepted a return invitation. Again, Powys found encouragement in the fact that a great literary figure was responsive to his work. (This exchange of visits is the single friendship with a renowned English writer that Powys mentions in the *Autobiography*.) The acquaintanceship was significant also because Hardy was one of only a few individuals in whom Powys observed a sensitivity to nature that matched his father's. The encouragement from both Yeats and Hardy buttressed Powys's belief in his genius—whatever form it might take. And faith in himself became increasingly important as the years passed and he neared middle age with nothing of importance published.

Despite these occasional periods of encouragement, Powys gradually came to feel his situation in England to be nearly unbearable. The limitations of English village life, and the gray industrial towns he stayed in night after night during the cycle of his lecture tours became increasingly depressing. On these tours he resided in the homes of local families, but having little in common with them, he often ended his evenings walking through desolate streets. The hours before lecturing he almost always spent roaming the countryside. (Powys devoted little formal preparation to his lectures; he simply read voraciously and trusted that his topic would come to him as lecture time drew near. He is known to have never used a note, and when he "lectured" he seemed transformed into the figure he was presenting.)

Finally, the gray towns, the barbs of academic critics, and the apparent lack of any direction in his life became a problem of crisis proportion. Powys suffered from what today is called "an identity crisis." He seriously considered retreating to Wales, the place of his ancestors, whom he envisioned as chieftains and bards. There at least he would be close, he believed, to the sources of his romantic nature. Ultimately, however, he journeyed, not to a retreat in Wales, but to a new beginning in America.

When Powys sailed from Liverpool in 1904 or 1905 for a lecture tour in America, he had no hint that he had embarked on a career that would last twenty-five years, punctuated only by semi-annual visits to England. He could scarcely have guessed that the United States would offer the solution to the problem of giving his life purpose and direction. From home and school to rounds of lectures throughout England and some lecture engagements in Germany the arc of Powys's life journey widened to the United States. The "boyish pilgrimage" gradually became a "pilgrimage of dithyrambic culture," Powys's description for his highly dramatic interpretations on the lecture platform of the lives and works of great writers.

Lecturer in America: A Cultural Identity

In America his cultural "pilgrimage" found its culmination. Powys's journeys continued to expand until in 1930 at retirement he had come to know all but two states. Whichever state he visited over the years, he never

failed to explore the surrounding countryside and to extend his knowledge of the nation's people. Most importantly, he discovered a social role as a lecturer in America, and ultimately he found a degree of self-understanding that he believed impossible for him to have achieved in Europe.

To appreciate the full significance of the United States' influence on Powys's development it will be helpful first to observe how fully he responded to both the negative qualities and the positive qualities he found in American life. His love of America takes on more meaning existing as it did despite his strong criticisms of life in America. Some consider his views on the United States among the most cogent coming from a foreign observer in the twentieth century.

Particularly horrifying for Powys were the lynchings in the South. He was himself frightened by what he considered the too quick readiness of American police to use their nightsticks, although he was never actually the victim of one. America's worship of youth he saw as something approaching a national neurosis. Particularly sad, he thought, were the very limited forms of friendship among American men. They seemed to Powys unable to share much more than talk about trivialities or their work. He concluded that they were either unaware of or embarrassed by the imaginative and sensitive in their beings. The lesson of their lives was "a certain lonely and rather desperate stoicism . . ." (p. 453). He concurred with Henry James that America's women were more interesting than her men.

Powys reserved his greatest criticism for what he calls "*the American Horror*" (p. 527). Although "the horror" contains intangible elements and some virtually undefinable qualities, Powys finds some concrete examples of it and supplies a remarkable evocation of its presence.

It is, mark you, a thing of opposite extremes. *Litter*—litter for its own sake—plays a large part in it; but so also does a certain terrifying kind of soulless cleanliness! I think inanity, futility, and a certain ghastly 'gimcracksim,' are elements in it too. I think what is so especially shocking about it is that it is so palpable and yet so phantasmal. . . . It has a wraith-like quality, it has a death-like quality, it has about it some queer ultimate desolation of emptiness, but with all this, and here lies the paradox of its shuddering horribleness, it is brand-new, spic-and-span, and strident. . . . Add to it the most vividly realised spiritual desolation of T.S. Eliot's "Wasteland" and then add to *that* the tough, callous and brutal *veneer*, shiny surface over stale perspiration, of a rich "Summer Resort," and you will get *some* idea of the atmosphere I am trying to indicate, wherein all that is standardised and dispiriting groans with a rocker, flaps with an awning, sways with rust-dusty evergreens, and gapes with a million empty garages! But, even then, you will not get all that this atmosphere means. For none of these desolations, as I pile up

their physical unpleasantness, can convey a tithe of the mysterious *meaninglessness*, the absence of all that in human life is reassuring, satisfying, symbolic, that this thing presents. (p. 528)

In sum, Powys saw a spiritual sterility of horrific dimension issuing from the most uniform and depersonalised modes of existence in American life.

Against such acute criticism, Powys's affection for America takes on special meaning. Most importantly, he found in the United States a generosity of spirit that others have also remarked. America offered Powys a lack of "humbug" and a freedom from class consciousness and convention unavailable to him in England. Above all, this new found freedom prompted him to goad his English intellectual friends with his obviously sincere declaration that he loved America (p. 462).

Powys's discovery of this freedom makes of his trip to America the central turning point in his life. As he became increasingly liberated from English class consciousness he uncovered in America new opportunities for self-discovery and self-development. "Indeed, I soon began to perceive, as I went about America . . . what tendencies in my nature were likely to be dominant, when once I was released from the traditions and conventions of my native land!" (p. 425). The American lecture platform afforded him his greatest freedom of expression and self-revelation.

I am not indulging in any spasm of vanity nor am I deluded by any fixed idea of conceit, when I say that there has never been before and never will be again any self-revelation as passionate and dramatic as my lectures up and down America. . . . I gave vent to my feelings, all my prejudices, all my instincts, intuitions, clairvoyances, adorations and loathings. (p. 476)

The lecture platform offered Powys the opportunity to transcend the conventions of social propriety demanded in daily life. On the platform he openly chastised those whom he suspected of feeling superior to the poor and lowly. "The truth is that the lecture platform to me was always a return to my real essential self after tiresome practical debouchings and after hypocritical encounters with acquaintances and friends" (p. 481). Moreover, mastering the "Art of Dithyrambic Analysis" allowed him nearly endless self-transformations: "As I have already hinted, the protean fluidity of my nature is such that I could give myself up so completely to the author I was analyzing that I *became that author*" (p. 481). Ironically, then, Powys could give greatest expression to the well-spring of his identity in his most public role. He is an exemplification of Oscar Wilde's belief that if you give a person a mask, he will tell you the truth about himself. Proving himself a "metamorphosist" also suggested that he had become the magician he set out to be.

Most important was his discovery of an audience to which he could relate his being, for in that relation he gained a meaningful social role, a form of social integration he had not previously known.

I began to grow aware as I went about this continent that I was really performing a definite role in America, a role where I had no rival. I mean I was attracting to myself like a magnet all the neurotic unhappy ones, all the *misfits*, in the whole country. I became the acknowledged enemy, and I hope I shall always remain so, of all the well-constituted and successful, as these opposed themselves to the failures and the abjects and the ill-adjusted. (p. 456)

Powys offered to all these other Ishmaels and Pariahs the teaching that had contributed most to his own preservation: “Im Ganzen, Guten, Schönen resolut zu leben!” (p. 457). He knew that his “Goethean message,” “Resolve to live in the Whole, in the Good, and in the Beautiful!” (p. 457) would seem superficially idealistic, and hence, false to twentieth-century intellectuals, but he believed his message vital *because* of life’s cruelties, man’s inhumaneness, and the suffering visited, above all, on the poor and politically weak.

Powys knew Goethe’s work and life well and the “message” was not a call to some easy hedonistic idealism but an admonishment to affirm the good and the beautiful in the face of evil and ugliness; that is, to create their presence through affirming a belief in them as values. Furthermore, he could offer his message in good faith, without self-deceit, because he himself practiced the discipline of will and imagination necessary to live an existence that includes with joy and ecstasy the pain of sorrow, grief, and failure. “The character I admire is a character that is a rod of iron to itself and a well-spring of tenderness and pity for others . . .” (p. 344). To live fully, which includes living in the good and beautiful, Powys saw not as an evasion of life but as an act of disciplined dedication to life, vitally important because of “this whole modern tendency to disparage the will and the imagination in favor of *letting yourself go*” (p. 252).

Despite Powys’s affinity with outsiders, it would be a distortion to create the impression that only sensitive misfits attended his lectures or that only anonymous outcasts were his companions. The rich and powerful also came to hear him in spite of his criticisms of them. Among his friends he counted important figures in American cultural life such as Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, and Will Durant. And he was able to match his intellect with some of the most formidable. Against Bertrand Russell he narrowly lost a public debate in which he took the “pro” argument on the value of marriage, the audience’s vote being 1,010 to 990 in favor of Russell.

Powys counted Dreiser a particularly close friend. He describes Dreiser as an all but implacable mountain before his enemies while describing himself, by contrast, as a pillow of feathers that allows an enemy’s blows to pass

through and then reconstitutes itself relatively uninjured. Because Powys knew that he was extremely sensitive, he cultivated a strength and resiliency that enabled him to receive attack with a minimum of injury. His recounting of an anecdote depicting Dreiser and himself hand-wrestling around the room with neither able to bring the other to his knees, implies the view that both men, as different as they were, embodied vital forms of power.

But more than to any economic, social, or cultural group or class Powys's *Autobiography* speaks to the individual who feels estranged and dwarfed in the modern world.

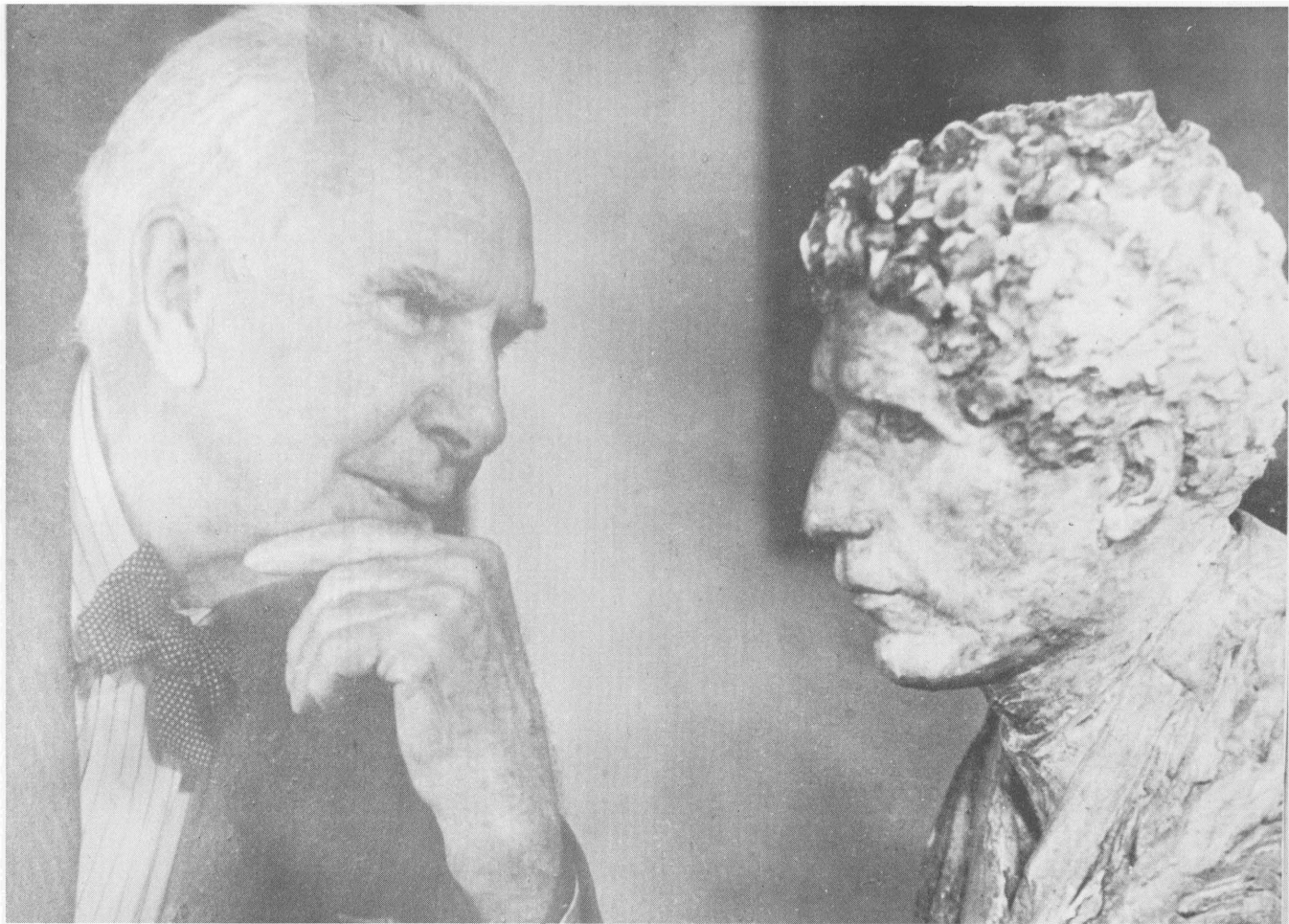
Suppose machinery *does* extend its sway, suppose science in the hands of minority-dictators *does* more and more dominate us, suppose the great battle of the future, with its own particular "good and evil," comes to be the struggle of the individual to be himself . . . what we shall have to do will only be what the saints, lovers, artists, mystics have always done, namely *sink into ourselves and into Nature* and find our pleasure in the most simple, stripped, austere and meagre sensations. (p. 568)

Powys's personal blending of stoic acceptance with an active cultivation of fundamental human pleasures will not satisfy all his readers as a response to the problem, but it does suggest the individual's need to create personal values in a materialistic and cynical age.

In the United States Powys fulfilled his grandest self-ideal. Having gone to America and not to Wales did not deter his desire to identify himself with the bards and heroes whom he considered his ancestors. On the contrary, it allowed him to fulfill it; he conceived himself a "Taliessin," (p. 402) a modern representative of the medieval Welsh bard, speaking in an oracular capacity to Americans. The "heroes" he sings of, first in his lectures and later in his books, are the sensitive and oppressed who endure nonetheless, and to whom he also delivers his messages of hope. His social role included being the defender of the "lost misfits" (p. 461) and "champion of the immoral against the moral, of the religious against the conventional, of the poetical against the worldly, of happiness against success . . ." (p. 457). Having had the opportunity to find himself undoubtedly prompted his declaration that he "owed more in the matter of his inmost spiritual growth, to America, than to all the Cathedrals and all the Castles, and all the writers too—except Homer and Dostoevsky—of the historic Old World" (p. 461).

Upstate New York: Self-Realization

Upon retiring from the lecture stage in approximately 1930, Powys bought land in Upstate New York, where he spent four years of his retirement before returning to England. During the lecture years he had lived in New York City's Greenwich Village, where his eccentric manner and dress were not so unusual. (He did, however, encounter the hoots of toughs, directed at



THEODORE DREISER WITH A BUST OF POWYS
*Photograph from the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections,
Syracuse University*

his figure clad in assorted costumes such as long cape and sneakers.) But never having settled in rural America, he feared that police, public officials of some sort, or his Hillsdale neighbors might interfere with the solitude he sought. He found, however, that no intolerance was shown him whatsoever, and with scarcely a glance from his neighbors, he roamed the countryside freely enjoying the rolling hills, which reminded him of Derbyshire. The individualism and independence of his farmer neighbors increased his admiration for America.

In America, Powys had established his cultural identity; but in Upstate New York, he gained a fuller self-realization.

It is certainly true that I have never, no! not since those years when I was eight and nine at Dorchester, realised to the full limit my identity, my native peculiarities, my cherished manias, my sweet superstitions. Yes, I have had in "up-state" New York, what is seldom allowed to mortal man upon this earth—I have had the full unhindered swing of my personality. (p. 573)

.....
Here in "up-state" New York I feel I can say, even as the Lord of Hosts said to his questioner, "I am *that* I am." Yes, I certainly have realised my identity in these New York hills. (p. 574)

For Powys, self-fulfillment was first and foremost a question of independence. He considered independence a relative matter, believing that the freer one is from reliance on social roles for one's sense of self, the freer one is to develop a self.

In retirement, Powys gained freedom from the demands even of a public identity. He strove to strip himself of the pride of being known as "Mr. Powys the Writer," or "Mr. Powys the Lecturer," considering it a weakness to derive one's sense of selfhood from the privileges or adulation accorded a public personality (p. 568). Instead, he would be simply "Loony John" (p. 567) enjoying his private country retreat where he prayed to a variety of personal deities and continued to write his novels.

Powys's summary of his life journey to self-understanding, "tracing the spiral curve" of self-development, recalls the objective of the *Autobiography*. In his penultimate paragraph he declares:

Now when from this resting-place, this ledge, this slab of stone, in the wavering Indian trail of my migrations and reversions, I look back at the path behind me and the path before me it seems as if it had taken me half a century merely to learn with what weapons, and with what surrender of weapons, *I am to begin to live my life*. (p. 594)

Powys's sense of renewal signals not the closing of a circle, but the rising curve of a spiral. A brief review of the turning points in Powys's life and the

self-images he employs in the *Autobiography* substantiates his view of his life as a spiral.

Taken together, the turning points display how the curve of Powys's development turns back upon itself but at new levels of self-realization. As a child he decided to dedicate himself to the cultivation of his imagination. At school he discovered how his mimetic and rhetorical gifts could aid him in preserving his self-esteem and in imposing his personality on the world. As a middle-aged man he discovered a cultural role in America as lecturer and writer, which allowed him to integrate his life with society on his own terms. In retirement he rediscovered his fundamental child self and established his mature self-understanding. Recalling his school days and trying to discern how the child he was had evolved into the man he is, Powys declares: "And yet I feel myself the same person! I *am* the same person" (p. 94). His reclamation of the childhood state of free imagination was not a retreat to childhood but a preparation for beginning life again.

In opposition to the self-images as Ishmael, Pariah, Charlatan, and Zaney with which others identified him, Powys pitted his internal self-idealizations as Magician, Pilgrim, Ulysses, Taleissin, "loony John." Each is a metaphor for a different stage in the spiral of his development, a development requiring the imaginative power to cast himself in these roles and the disciplined will to learn from and live by them. Together, they form the "poetic mythology" (p. 490) by which he saw himself as having been transformed and born again.

And in endowing this personal poetic mythology with literary form, Powys created a work of art. He succeeded, through his use of literary techniques, in weaving the experiences of a lifetime into the pattern of self-discovery which he discerned at the center of his existence. The events of his life have been *re-collected* and transformed into the fable of identity which we know as John Cowper Powys's *Autobiography*.