

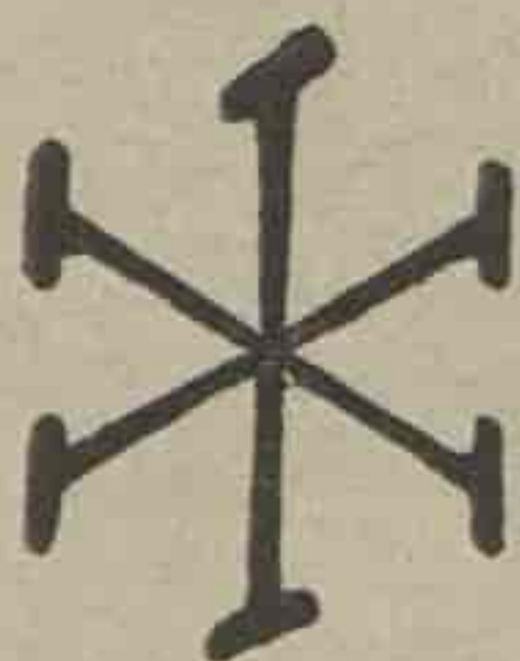
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THE
NEW MYTHOLOGY
OF
JOHN COWPER POWYS

THIRTEENTH
FOUNDATION LECTURE

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THE NEW MYTHOLOGY
OF
JOHN COWPER POWYS

THIS LECTURE is not concerned with literary criticism. Much has been said about Powys' place among the writers of our time, but this is not my present subject. I intend to take a totally different view of his writings.

Those of you who have read any of his works or have read about his life and writings in the many books and articles that have been published will know that he takes a very special and unique view of man's life.

Throughout his long working life, from his early poems published in 1896 to his last book which appeared in 1960 when he was 87, it is possible to trace the development of this Powys philosophy. His view of the individual and of the meaning and purpose of man's life is significant in relation to a particular current of thought through the 19th and 20th centuries. This current has been far too little recognised and appreciated but will undoubtedly be seen as increasingly relevant for the future.

With a background through his father, who was a parson, of the usual Victorian family life, with a conventional education at Sherborne and Cambridge, he nevertheless became a most original thinker with most distinctive ideas. As a lecturer for many years on literature he not only became acquainted with the world's great writers but took their works deeply into his experience. This formed an important and essential ground for the development of his *own* life and work.

John Cowper Powys was a great writer. And most certainly a very original one. In thought he was like an eagle winging high into the heavens and taking those who could follow him into strange and wonderful realms. I hope that I may catch for your benefit some of the gleam and glitter from his wings.

I shall begin with an incident from a novel published in 1932, *A Glastonbury Romance*. It is evident that in this novel Powys wished to present some of his fundamental ideas and I am going to use one small event among many to illustrate the way that Powys can clothe his thought in imagery and symbolism. He chose for this novel a spot in England soaked in mythology, superstition and legend. Glastonbury is not only the ancient seat of Christianity since the time that Joseph of Arimathea is reputed to have brought the Holy Grail to England, but it is also a centre of the stories which surround the half-historic, half-legendary King Arthur of the Round Table.

The incident I take from the novel is about a young man called Sam Dekker. He was the son of a Glastonbury parson and also an ardent naturalist. At the time of the event that I am going to tell you about he had been going through a very difficult period. He was caught in a painful dilemma to which he could not find a solution. Thinking it was his Christian duty to care for the poor and outcasts he had given up his own life of happiness and gone to live alone in the town, devoting himself to their welfare. In the misery of his doubt and indecision he went for a walk by the river Brue. It was night time and as he walked by the river's edge he was aware of two emotions within him: one a profound and overwhelming sense of his own suffering, and the other, welling up in him, thrilling spasms of a quivering happiness. This joy seemed to be caused by the most unlikely objects as he found himself glancing casually at them. In this experience of containing within himself both these warring emotions at the same time, it seemed to him as if the flood of joy was overcoming and consuming the great banks of pain.

He continued to be acutely conscious of all that was around him. He felt himself to be an entity among all the rest as he was carried along on the 'night journey of the voyaging planet'.¹ He heard the river water as it gurgled and sucked near him, he heard a late

water bird flapping its way home, and the smell of tar reached his nostrils from the old barge tied up to an ancient post which he found he was grasping with his hands.

It seemed to him now 'that the soul of the inanimate, the indwelling breath of life in all these ancient lifeless things'² was moving towards him.

What was the secret of matter itself? Sam now imagined that this soul had a definite shape, and into his mind came the words 'Ichthus, the World-Fish'.³ Solid matter seemed to become 'porous' to him and the mystery of matter lay in this watery life essence. What happened now was that in the depth of Sam's being he felt as if he heard all the cries of pain which at that moment were rising up all over the world. Powys writes 'There must be a limit to pity or the stream of life would stop . . . and "Ichthus, the World-Fish" would float dead upon its back'.⁴ 'Life should strangle pity lest pity should strangle life in the ultimate contest'.⁵

The conclusion that Powys draws out of this strange scene which ends with Sam's vision of the lost Grail with Ichthus, the World-Fish, within it is 'that the first motive of every living creature must be to realise his own identity and to fight the cruelty of life'.⁶ 'Is there' he asks, 'a fish of healing, one chance against all chances, at the bottom of the World-Tank? Is cruelty always triumphant, or is there a hope beyond hope, a something somewhere, able to break in from outside and smash to atoms this torturing chain of Cause and Effect?'⁷

Powys has answered this great question himself.

In this lecture, from the abundance of his ideas I am able only to choose a few. I am not going to refer on every occasion to the particular book from which I am quoting, but these quotations come chiefly from: *Visions and Revisions*, published in 1915, *The Meaning of Culture* 1929, *In Defence of Sensuality* 1930, *The Philosophy of Solitude* 1933, and *In Spite Of* 1953. I am going to quote liberally from Powys and also to use his actual words in much of my own comment on his thoughts.

The word myth is usually equated with fantasy. The essence of a myth is taken to be that it is not actually true but a convenient way for our childlike ancestors to express ideas which they were

not yet capable of formulating or understanding with their intellects. We are apt to think that we have grown up beyond the need for myths. Nowadays, as Robert Graves points out, the English word myth has taken the meaning of 'incredible'—that which is beyond belief. But many people have recently taken mythology more seriously. Robert Graves says 'Myths are seldom simple and never irresponsible',⁸ and C. G. Jung maintained that myths usually contain meanings that we either fear to or cannot convey conceptually.

In the title of this lecture I have used the word 'mythology' to mean not that which is untrue or childish, but that which we see intuitively and are unable to express in idea. Our inability to do so may be because there are truths beyond intellectual comprehension. There is the whole realm of mystery. Man's reaction to mystery, to the beginning of life, to death, to his destiny, to the earth's future, was usually one of fear and superstition. Because he could not know and because he found it hard to suspend judgment on these things which were beyond his comprehension he usually attributed them to supernatural causes. Even the most rational of persons, and sometimes particularly they, find themselves involved in superstition. But Powys is not superstitious, because he makes no artificial effort to be rational. He does indeed consider the control of thought to be most important and thinks Man would be in a sorry plight were he dependant for his knowledge on the 'wayward unaccountable chances of mystical illumination'.⁹ But he fully accepts the irrationality in the universe, and since we must in our thinking cope with this he suggests that we make the poetical our substitute for superstition and the supernatural. He uses imagination as a human faculty with the same conscious deliberateness as the rationalists use their reason.

It is Powys's powerful use of the imagination and his sense of poetry to which I refer in the title. It is not only that he invented a particular new mythology, though his whole notion of the creation of self is such a mythology, but that he used mythology in a new way. With his strong imaginative powers he adapted and used already existent myths for his own purposes—as in the story I have just recounted of Sam—and gave them his own particular imaginative twist; sometimes, too, he related ideas around a par-

ticular observation in a wholly new and striking way. Nor was Powys any more deceived by the superstition of matter and the so-called real objective world than he was by superstitions about the supernatural, or naïve ideas about God. Nevertheless, he lived more firmly in the physical world than many so-called realists and more easily in the imaginative world than many of those who talk about the human spirit. The physical world was not for him the abstraction that it is for the philosophers or scientists but something which he perceived with his actual senses. Similarly the imaginative world was not a remote speculative realm but one which was real in so far as he experienced it in his own consciousness.

The particular current of thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to which I referred earlier, has as its starting point the refusal to accept as a basis for thinking about life any speculative abstractions which cannot enter into Man's actual experience. It includes such men as Stirner, Nietzsche and Weininger, the great psycho-analysts and some of the best of modern scientists. The groundwork for this view was achieved by Immanuel Kant when he dethroned the naïve conception of God, and of an outer world which could exist outside experience or an ego which could exist other than as the 'subject' of experience. From this, Hegel came to the notion that Man's experience is the world's own experience of itself or that, as Mitrinović put it, 'our kingdom is the world-organ of truth-knowing.' And Powys was expressing the same thought when he called the self 'the only kind of sensitive plate by which the whole universe can record its impressions of itself'.¹⁰

Those of you who are acquainted with earlier New Atlantis Foundation lectures may recognise in such thinking that whole approach which we have called the Third Revelation. For those who do not know Mitrinović's notion of the Three Revelations or the Triune Revelation, I will digress for a moment and try to summarise it very briefly. It is that there are three fundamental ways of viewing the world and life, each radically different from the other two. Each has been predominant at a different period of history, so that there appears to be a succession in which the first was superseded by the second and the second by the third. Nevertheless in some way or other all these three attitudes or approaches

have existed in human thought from early times and all three are equally valid now.

The attitude of the First Revelation is common to most of the pre-Christian religions. It is that the world is an organic Unity which is in continuous development, in which there are not only beings inferior to man, but whole hierarchies of beings superior to him. Such a view is a-centric. There are gods, but no single God, except the Absolute Whole.

The second Revelation is radically opposed to this. It is that there is a centre to the universe, which is the supreme meaning, and a hierarchy of values which all receive their validity from this centre. Christianity is the central expression of this Revelation. It affirms that the spirit of the Whole incarnated in a Man, who was thus both Man and God. Man is central in the Universe and of the whole race of mankind One Man is the centre. All values derive from the Person of Jesus Christ. The individual human being has indeed a meaning in himself, but he has this only in relation to the centre; as St. Paul said, 'Not I, but Christ in me'.

The essence of the Third Revelation is that there are many centres, each being of ultimate value in itself. The individual human being has his value in himself and does not recognise any moral or spiritual authority imposed on him from outside himself. He himself is the sole arbiter of what he accepts or does not accept; he is the one who values and decides.

Just as Christianity appeared to its believers to have superseded the pre-Christian religions, which they regarded as pagan, so to many exponents of the Third Revelation it appears to have superseded Christianity—and indeed all religions. But the imagery of the circle which I have used illustrates that no *one* of these Three Revelations should be considered as the ultimate truth, but that all three together with all their mutual contradictions make up one Triune Revelation. For the circle is not only a circumference but also and necessarily a centre and a radius. Each is a radically different approach to the notion of a circle, but all three are equally valid and necessary.

The circumference typifies the First Revelation, since it is the boundary within which the whole is contained. The Second Revelation corresponds to the centre. But we are now concerned

with the Third Revelation, that is with the indefinitely large number of points between the circumference and the centre, all of them being on some radius and each being the potential centre of another circle. Thus the starting point of the Third Revelation, as it is also for Powys, is with the individual human being alone. 'We have decided,' he says, 'to have absolute faith in nothing save in the "self" or consciousness of self within us.'¹¹

And so in the Glastonbury Romance he denied the existence of an Ultimate Mystery as some final absolute unchanging principle in the universe. 'The mystery of mysteries,' he affirms, 'is Personality, a living Person, and there is *that* in Personality which is indetermined, unaccountable, changing at every second . . . Apart from Personality, apart from Personal Will, there is no such "ultimate" as Matter, there is no such Ultimate as Spirit. Beyond Life and beyond Death there is Personality.'¹²

Powys is not speaking of personality in the abstract. He is referring neither to some hidden essence within ourselves, nor to the outer mask which we present to other people, but to our own inner selves as we experience ourselves. This self Powys does not take as something given, something which is there apart from any effort we may make. He is not saying that we have an immortal soul which is an objective fact as some would like to regard it. On the contrary he says we must continuously face the probability of a total annihilation of 'the self we have hitherto known as ourself' and 'learnt to think of as I'.¹³ He has no sentimentality and no illusion about this self, to which he constantly refers as the 'I am I' within us. This phrase is significant because he is not calling it the 'ego' or the 'self' as if it were a 'thing'. The reality of the self is in our awareness of it. There is no 'I' apart from the affirmation 'I am I'.

Thus we have to take part in creating ourselves and he believes that this creation of an original and unique self is the true art of life which can be practised by anyone, however simple. But it does not happen by accident. It must be persevered with. 'Thought,' he says, 'creates a thought-body of its own . . . which although it is linked in space and time with the material body feels itself to be different, feels itself to be inviolate.'¹⁴ What we steadily, consciously, habitually think we are, that we tend to become.'¹⁵



This creation of a single self he sees as consisting of two elements. The innermost 'I am I' within us, which he describes as a 'clear-cut, hard, resistant nucleus of consciousness' like a 'round polished, inviolable crystal',¹⁶ and a wide circumference of memories gathered round this inviolable crystal or pebble. But lest you should think that Powys is being carried away by his own imagery he adds: 'This image-making in my imagination only means that in my own experience I am aware of a central core of inviolability. It does not mean that I am under any illusion that my ego, however selfish, actually resembles a hard, round pebble-stone'.¹⁷

The lonely self, Powys thinks, should build his own philosophy of life detaching himself from all philosophical systems or scientific theories. He need not reject any of these and can always use any part of them that suits him but he should not be committed to any of them. For he sees that the theories of scientists are so quickly superseded and that the systems of philosophers give little help in actual living of life. And he believes that philosophy should above all be the love of wisdom in the actual living of life.

This life wisdom Powys found in the works of the great 'imaginative, humorous, poetical masters'¹⁸ of literature such as Homer, Dostoievsky, Walt Whitman, Rabelais and Goethe. For they deal with matters which directly concern the human soul, things 'that have, for centuries upon centuries . . . been associated with human pleasures, human sorrows, and the great recurrent dramatic moments of our lives'.¹⁹

Powys wrote about these and many other great writers in *Visions and Revisions* and *The Pleasures of Literature*, in which his critique is not the dry intellectual literary criticism so often found, but he conveys to his reader his own glowing enthusiasm and devotion as well as his own particular discrimination.

In the preface to the original edition of *Visions and Revisions*, published in 1915, he expresses the point of view of his criticism thus: 'Let it be quite plainly understood. It is impossible to respond to a great genius halfway. It is a case of all or nothing. If you lack the courage, or the variability, to go all the way with very different masters, and to let your constructive consistency take care of itself, you may become, perhaps, an admirable moralist; you will never be a clairvoyant critic'.²⁰

Because Powys does not regard the human soul as an existent entity beyond our own experience, which has somehow or other been landed on us by God without any willing on our part, but believes that we ourselves take a part in creating it, he is not scornful, like so many shallow scientists, of such practices as 'wishful thinking'. He is well aware as were the wise men of all ages, that the only means of getting what you want is by intensely imagining it. And he is not upset like so many pedestrian realists at the notion that each of us has a life illusion nor does he think it is something we should get rid of. By life-illusion he means 'that secret dramatic way of regarding himself which makes a man feel to himself a remarkable, singular, unusual, exciting individual'.²¹ 'Everyone,' he says, 'has a life-illusion' and 'it is not wholly untrue.'²² 'But it is not a shadow of your objective self:—that dressed-up popinjay or scarecrow that your neighbours catch sight of before you open your mouth—it is the shadow of your subjective self.'²³

After this it will not surprise us to find Powys rejecting the notion that certain virtuous practical activities are the main purpose of conscious life. In a poem published in 1899 he writes: 'Better to grow like grass than to pretend . . . That action is man's proper sphere and end'.²⁴ 'There is only one purpose of all conscious life,' he affirms, 'and that is to grow calmly, steadily more conscious! It is in loneliness alone that the human soul can achieve this inner growth'.²⁵

Powys believes that the strongest force in the world today is imagination, and he goes so far as to affirm that the reality of natural life consists wholly and entirely of imagination. 'For us,' he says, 'imagination is reality, and reality is imagination. And we hold that everybody, every man, woman, and child, of every section of the community, possesses this reality-creating god-like gift.'²⁶ 'We have the power of recreating the universe from the depth of ourselves. In so doing we share the creative force that started the whole process!'²⁷

It may seem at this stage that Powys is letting his own imagination run away with him, but remember! he is talking about the inner conscious life of the individual; he is not claiming creative

powers for the imaginative self which defy the laws of nature. On the contrary, he affirms that though the power of man's will is almost unlimited in its control over the motions of his own mind, it is limited in its control over outward events. In his own writings, Powys was indeed much more richly imaginative than most writers, and he could afford to be so without the risk of flying off into wild fantasies because his descriptions were always based on the most careful observations of the sensible world around him, and equally careful observation of the workings of the human soul. In the story to which I referred earlier, Powys shows Sam Dekker's mind filled with notions taken from different mythologies which have come down to him from the unconscious of generations of the human race, but he also shows how these notions were suggested to him by the actual circumstances of his life at that time and by his intense perception of the natural life around him as he went on his walk.

Another good example from *A Glastonbury Romance* of Powys' powers of observation comes when he refers to what he says one of his characters would simply have called 'the smell of autumn.' But this Powys says 'was really composed of the dying of many large sycamore leaves, the emanations from certain rain-sodden, yellow toadstools, the faint fragrance of bowed-down ferns, the wholesome but very musky scent of herb Robert growing amid faded tangled masses of dog's mercury and enchanter's nightshade . . . a few dark green shiny leaves of heart's tongue ferns hanging over a muddy ledge . . . and near them the smooth roots of a beech tree covered with black oozy moisture,'²⁸ and having pools of green black rain-water cupped within the folds that were nearest the trunk.

Powys is scornful of those nature lovers, who admire its beauty and go to the country for their recreation only. 'No,' he says, 'a real Nature lover does not think primarily about the beauty of Nature; he thinks about her life.'²⁹ And for him there is 'an indescribable blending of his being, with the plough-land or meadow-land over which he walks.'³⁰ He speaks, in *The Meaning of Culture*, of the superficial aspects of nature as being her reality. The 'magic of the universe,' he says, 'always emanates from the surface and always returns to the surface. It is the breath, the

bloom, the fragrance, the flickering expression on the surface of life itself.'³¹

About the power behind nature and the whole Universe Powys does not speculate as though he had any illusions that he could get to the truth of the matter, and he has no use for beliefs about the unknown, urging us to be sceptical about all human hypotheses. Sometimes he refers to It as the First Cause, sometimes he refers to God or the gods, elsewhere he declaims violently at the notion of a universe and affirms that there is as much evidence for our world being a multiverse as a universe, because our actual experience is of many forces in conflict with one another rather than of a single harmonious whole, and of change rather than permanence. The important thing is not what It ultimately and 'really' is, but how we experience It and the attitude we take to It.

Powys sees us individuals as half a part of nature and half beyond nature. The nature part he calls 'ichthyosaurus' and the part beyond he calls 'half-god.' And as selves with inner freedom he calls us egos. In this ichthyosaurus part of our ego he imagines that we can reach down or back into the memories of the earth itself. That we are formed physically from the same chemical elements makes this possible. The moisture of the earth is our moisture, the cells of our body the same earth cells, our frame is composed of the same animal muscle and bone as all warm-blooded mammals; even the plants and minerals are somehow, somewhere in us and part of our ancestry.

Powys also has a premonition of a future state 'when men shall have become as gods.'³² He seems to be echoing Nietzsche when he refers to levels of consciousness that belong to the future and the surpassing of the human animal and the change of humanity into something different from humanity. 'In every human being,' he writes, 'who dares to indulge himself in the fathomless loneliness that is the birthright of us all, there are both these elements of feeling—those that are superhuman and those that are sub-human. Man is a link in a long spiral ascent, not a finality.'³³

How do such ichthyosaurus half-god egos regard the First Cause? Partly with fear and loathing and anger for all the cruelty and suffering there is in the world, in nature and in our own experience; partly with gratitude because without the First Cause



we would not be here to enjoy life as we do. But above all our attitude should be one of heroic defiance. We are all alone facing the 'not-self' with an abysmal gulf between us. The First Cause is all-powerful, but we, though transitory, are self-conscious, and thus more significant.

The mediation of religion he rejects except as a conscious deliberate mythology. We may indeed use it for our own personal satisfaction but not to believe in it. But we may, he says, use in our anger 'The sublime help of the daring Christ-mythology, that supreme act of autosalvation of the troubled human race, which condones the cruelty of existence in a much subtler way. For what, when one puts it in plain terms, is the concept behind the Incarnation? Nothing less than man's determination to reconcile himself to this original sin, or blunder, of the First Cause, by which so much cruelty entered the world, by this Great Spirit's own terrific suffering.'³⁴

Thus we may indeed bless or curse the First Cause or feel anger or gratitude towards it, but the last thing for us to do is to worship it or to think we owe it reverence. God is not dead, but we have stopped being superstitious about him, realising that *we* are the God-makers and that 'out of the human heart sprang all the gods and all the paradises as well as all the devils and all the hells, and back into the human heart, when their loan of time and their lease of space is exhausted, they will return!'³⁵

Nor is Powys going to give up the tyranny of religious superstition to fall for the theories of scientists or the dictatorship of specialists for 'after all,' he says, 'we are men, and life for us is the same as it is for these specialising know-alls.'³⁶ And the 'mystery of "life" doesn't depend on theology at all, or upon science at all or upon art at all.'³⁷ He is not going to allow himself to get unduly worried about the purpose of life in general. What he wants is a purpose in our own secret, private, individual life. And his ultimate expression of that purpose is to 'enjoy'. We should force ourselves to enjoy life, 'not to love, not to hate, not to understand, not to worship, not to interpret, not to explain, simply and solely to enjoy.'³⁸ This, according to Powys, is the secret of secrets.

In his earlier writings he spoke about happiness as the meaning and purpose of life, but in his book *In Spite Of*, towards the very

end of his life, he wrote 'It is because, in our determination not to be fooled by words and their cunning tricks, we have taken the word "happiness" by surprise and exposed its little games and know now that it comes and goes at its own airy and unpredictable will, and has nothing in it or about it, or over it, or under it on which you can depend, that we have engraved on our philosophic headstone, not happiness but enjoyment.'³⁹ For 'it is imperative,' he says, 'that our feeling about life should be in our own hands.'⁴⁰ And even if science could prove conclusively that every single event or situation in our lives was occasioned by fate and was thus totally outside our control, there would still remain our attitude to these events or situations.

This is the secret of Powys's word 'enjoyment'. It is not equivalent to 'pleasure'. To force yourself to enjoy does not mean to run after pleasurable sensations, because we cannot always be sure of getting them, and if we get them we may lose them again equally quickly through circumstances beyond our control. To 'enjoy' in Powys's sense is not a passive experience but an extremely demanding activity. It demands considerable self-discipline and imagination. Powys says it is possible for everyone, even the simplest and least clever person. And that is true, because self-discipline and imagination are possible for everyone.

To enjoy means in Powys's own words 'to approach, to grasp, to seize upon, to embrace something or other',⁴¹ but that something need not be pleasant, it may indeed be very unpleasant. Nevertheless one can enjoy it. 'A convert to the "Philosophy of In Spite" can,' he says, 'enjoy the process of doing a thing that in itself, in its essence, he doesn't like at all.'⁴² And the same applies to any experience or situation or event with which he may be faced. He will deliberately and consciously set about to enjoy it.

How do we learn this art of enjoyment?

First we have to clear our selves out of the way. And what, you may ask, does he mean by this since it is exactly our 'selves' which we are supposed to be creating? Most teachers tell us to integrate ourselves or to realise ourselves or to develop our personality, our uniqueness or some other faculty, but Powys is concerned with none of these. How to lose ourselves is what Powys is concerned with, but not in worship of God, or love of others or good works

or in the pursuit of truth. No! in an exquisite enjoyment of life. How to enjoy our existence in spite of our selves!

Powys is as hard to grasp with the intellect as that other great exponent of the Third Revelation who wrote about a hundred years before him, namely Max Stirner. And there are many similarities in what they are saying. Both are agreed that the purpose of life is to enjoy, and both are agreed that we have in order to enjoy life to clear out of the way any thing that might become so fixed in us as to deceive us into thinking that it is a part of ourselves. Both Stirner and Powys advise us to travel light, to strip our ego of all its trappings. For Stirner to enjoy means to use up, to consume, *not* to save and possess. 'Enjoyment of life,' he says, 'is using life up like a candle which one can only use in burning.'

What then have we to get out of the way so that we may enjoy? Basically four kinds of things: That dependence on comparing ourselves with others which we may call Pride; that dependence on certain ideas or ideals or objects of reverence and worship, which we may call Belief; that dependence on possessions or familiar circumstances which we may call Security; and allowing our lives to be conditioned by what we think we ought to think, feel and do, which we may call Morality. These cannot be wholly separated from one another because, for instance, much of our morality is really related to what others think of us and may thus be brought under the heading of pride; and much of our security is not material or even emotional, but mental security in having certain fixed ideas and beliefs which we take as a protection against the uncertainties of our actual life experience.

The greatest hindrance of all to our selfhood, Powys finds in pride or conceit, which is usually the result of comparing ourselves with other people and hoping to find ourselves cleverer or better or more spiritual than they. For it is only when we can escape from comparing ourselves with others or depending on the opinion held of us by others that we are really free to enjoy the actual experience of the moment 'unbothered' as he says 'by the "hell" of other people's admiration, suspicion, envy, contempt, attraction, repulsion.'⁴³ And to achieve this enjoyment Powys considers it necessary to annihilate, together with pride and conceit, all that

the self 'has gathered together from outside by means of which it has quickened itself in its grandiose culture.'⁴⁴

The ability to achieve this Powys calls the 'art of humility.' But he is not thinking of humility either as a virtue or in the sense in which it is so often used, as self-abasement. Powys is not interested in virtue and he certainly does not want to abase the self. The 'art of humility' is the art of shedding all that makes us think about ourselves and prevents us from experiencing and enjoying the present moment. And he considers that sensation is one of the best cures for pride. So too is our ability to laugh at ourselves and to see ourselves as ridiculous without feeling put down by it.

But what about other people? Are they merely to be considered as a hindrance to our self-enjoyment? Do we not owe any duty to society? Powys will have none of it and refuses to compromise. After affirming that to be a true philosopher implies selfishness, he cries as though in exasperation 'What the devil would you have a *self* be but selfish?'⁴⁵ Above all he rejects the notion that we ought to love other people. He abhors all this holy talk about the sacredness of love. All that we owe to others is to treat them according to the Kantian maxim as 'selves' equally with ourselves, that is, according to Powys with 'natural ordinary human kindness and natural ordinary human goodness.'⁴⁶ 'The truth is,' he says, 'that we would be much kinder to people on ordinary occasions and much more stoical and cheerful in our dealings with people, if we boldly and honestly defended to ourselves in our secret soul this absolute necessity of hardening our hearts.'⁴⁷ He is speaking, not to the indifferent, for these need no admonishment to harden their hearts, but to those who are likely to be 'carried away' by their pity. In the *Meaning of Culture* he issues a warning: 'It does remain . . . one of the saddest of human spectacles when natures, obviously predestined to delicate and exquisite appreciation of the imaginative life, are betrayed, year after year, by their unselfish warmth of heart, into frittering away the unreturning hours listening to the egocentric confessions of others, in giving to others their nervous sympathy, their emotional energy, their very life force.'⁴⁸

I have already said enough about Powys's scepticism for you

to see that he refused to make belief or mere opinions, the basis for a life philosophy. Thus the individual is denied the spurious security which such beliefs, whether orthodox or heretical, ideal or materialist, would provide. In fact Powys recognises that most of the security with which we like to surround ourselves is basically false since we cannot ultimately depend on anything but our inner consciousness. To those who find it difficult to bear the problems of insecurity in life his advice is: 'In the destructive element immerse', let them imagine the worst possible things happening to them. For he says, 'when you imagine the worst, you create a world that is hostile to you; but when you force yourself to enjoy . . . defying it, you have got things pretty well under control. The truth is if you don't enjoy fighting, you've got to learn to enjoy fighting; for whatever else it is, and whatever else it isn't, life is a battle from first to last.'⁴⁹ In any case since our imagination has for the most part created the world in which we live we are always able, if events break it up, to set about creating another and in the end we have to accept the likelihood of ultimate annihilation.

But what then when one has abandoned all these props? What has this reduced ego got left? 'Absolutely nothing except the undiluted power of observing, recording, and remembering the impressions presented to it.'⁵⁰ 'Our ego,' says Powys, 'is an indiscriminate cosmos-enjoyer. It embraces and ravishes and savours any sort of universe. In the matter of universes it doesn't pick and choose or bother whether the shapes and colours it beholds are what our experts call 'objective', or 'subjective', 'absolute' or 'relative'. It's enough for our humiliated self, for our purged, winnowed, stripped, and *reduced-to-pure-perception self*, if it can embrace, swallow and enjoy.'⁵⁰

It does not matter whether our sensations are pleasant or unpleasant ones, we should, Powys says, be able to enjoy even the dread of horrible insecurity as we would enjoy a cup of tea, or a glass of beer! But of course the greatest enjoyment is in the sensation of the world around us in our daily life, and particularly the world of nature. Such an enjoyment enabled Sam Dekker in the story I told in the beginning, to transcend his sufferings and to realise that joy is a deeper experience than pain.

The great significance of Powys is that he actually did what he said. He was not preaching. Not only is the result of it there to be read in the many books he wrote, but he was true to it in his own personal life. Powys did not conceive it his duty to 'make the world a better place' but to enrich the living of individual human beings. The chief problem which the world is facing today is not only poverty in the material sense but poverty of spirit. At a time when mankind is more and more obsessed with the outer material world to the detriment of the inner human world and in which man's inner experience is becoming frozen by intellectual abstraction and shallow catchwords, Powys gave freely of the wealth that welled out of his imagination.

There has been some controversy as to which of the three most famous Powys brothers, Theodore, Llewellyn or John, was the greatest.

We have these words from Llewellyn:—

'It is John alone of all of us who can be likened to the forked lightning, he alone has undisputed access to those deep, cool wells where the gods themselves let down their buckets.'⁵²

1.	Glastonbury Romance (Bodley Head 1933)	p. 980
2.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	978
3.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	979
4.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	980
5.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	983
6.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	980
7.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	983
8.	Robert Graves: Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology	Introduction
9.	Philosophy of Solitude (Jonathan Cape 1933)	p. III
10.	In Spite of (Macdonald 1953)	79
11.	In Spite of	693
12.	Glastonbury Romance	693
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18.	In Spite of	10
19.	Visions and Revisions (William Rider 1915)	Preface p. 15
20.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	Preface p. 15
21.	Philosophy of Solitude	p. 82
22.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	82
23.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	83
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25.	Defence of Sensuality (Victor Gollanz 1930)	119
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30.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	180
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32.	Defence of Sensuality	69
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34.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	24
35.	In Spite of	205
36.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	4
37.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	12
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46.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	245
47.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	220
48.	The Meaning of Culture	156
49.	In Spite of	211
50.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	78
51.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	78
52.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	79
53.	The Powys Brothers, R. C. Churchill	16



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