

Inspiration Beyond Words : The Powys-Duncan Affair (part I)

DID JOHN COWPER POWYS the British lecturer in the US and aspiring writer, really have an affair in America with Isadora Duncan, the world-famed barefoot dancer from California? Or was it a friendship between two creative artists, something on the order of his life-long relationship with Theodore Dreiser?

Having done a bit of research on these questions, I am inclined to conclude that John and Isadora did have a passionate fling of sorts — not a love affair exactly nor even a friendship in the ordinary sense, but rather an intense, if brief, *affaire d'esprit*. In the following gallop through the ups and downs, ecstatic elations, and tragi-comic setbacks of that relationship, I hope to show that the dancer whom John Cowper once called his “noble and only true love”¹ played a starring role in what I call his “alivenment,” that period beginning with the end of the Great War, when he began to come alive as the cosmically-charged “literary volcano,” the delightfully Protean personality, and the foxy philosopher of happiness that many of us have come to love.

The first tantalizing clues that Ms. Duncan did play a critical part in John’s life appear in an oft-quoted letter written November 18, 1917, wherein he ‘spills the beans,’ as it were, on the whole Powys-Duncan affair to his brother Llewelyn (Lulu). John is proud to announce that he and Isadora “harmonised at once.” He goes on to say that

She has been one of the most thrilling sensations – but that is a wretched word to express it – of my whole existence.

That indescribable thrill occurred a month earlier (the afternoon of October 17, 1917, to be precise), when Isadora paid a visit to the ailing John Cowper in his little flat in Greenwich Village, New York, and danced, as he put it, “for me alone.” And when she performed for him, John recalled,

It was as though Demeter herself, the *mater dolorosa* of the ancient earth, rose and danced.

What did he mean? Perhaps those words are the poetic hyperbole of a man who, as he told Lulu, was “really flattered” by Isadora’s friendship. But as I have pondered those sentences over the years, my intuition keeps telling me that John had at least a whisper of something deeper and more “spiritual” in mind. For instance, the “thrilling sensation” he speaks of recalls those joyful, psycho-sensual “moments of illumination” that he would advocate and illustrate throughout most of his subsequent essays and novels. And when he neatly associates Isadora with two great mothers of the ancient earth, Demeter and Mary, I am reminded of that archaic mother of earth mothers, the goddess Cybele, who plays such a dramatic and redeeming role in the novel he wrote in America some thirteen years later, *A Glastonbury Romance*.

With those inklings in mind I began researching all the rest of John’s affair with the dancer. What I found and what I didn’t find is surprising. First off, I found no clear evidence that he ever saw Isadora dance in a theater and no sign that he and Isadora could truly have harmonized any time other than October 17, 1917.

¹ *Letters of John Cowper Powys to His Brother Llewelyn*, ed. Malcolm Elwin, Vol. I, Village Press, 1975, April 1918.

The first time John mentioned Isadora in any of his writings occurs in a letter to his dear Frances Gregg, dated April 18, 1913. Writing from Paris, John told her that he could have seen “Isadora Duncan & her pupils in Gluck’s *Iphigenia*” the evening before. But instead, he conveyed his agent Arnold Shaw to the Folies Bergère.²

In a way, it was a shame John missed that performance. “I remember that evening so well,” Isadora recalled in her autobiography

for I danced as never before. I was no longer a woman, but a flame of joy – a fire – the sparks that rose, the smoke whirling from the hearts of the public... and as I danced, it seemed to me that something sang within my heart “Life and Love – the Highest Ecstasy – and all are mine to give – are mine to give those who need them.”³

That is an apt summary of all that Isadora ever wanted to convey to audiences in her lithe, scantily-clothed, free-form performances. It is unlikely, however, that John Cowper was yet ready to fully appreciate her “flame of joy” or her “Highest Ecstasy.” In those days, as readers of his *Autobiography* will know, he was more inclined to find his jaw-dropping ecstasies while observing the divine limbs of young sylph-like girls in American burlesque halls.

The Powys-Duncan affair didn’t get started at all until early 1915, when, out of the blue, as John was proud to tell Lulu, Isadora sent him “so many roses that they filled my little flat.”⁴ Apparently, she sent the flowers after reading his first book, *Visions and Revisions*. Published in February of 1915, it is a collection of essays based on John’s spellbinding lectures on the masters of great literature, including many of Isadora’s favorite writers, notably Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe, and especially Walt Whitman and Nietzsche. Moreover, from the very first lines of *Visions*, Isadora must have been charmed by John’s insistence that the purpose of his essays was not to weigh and judge the value of great literature, but to show readers how to imbibe and enjoy it “with Protean receptivity” — to give themselves up, “absolutely and completely, to the visions and temperaments of these great artists.”⁵ That was precisely how Isadora wanted her audiences to enjoy her own great art of the dance.

In other words, she must have found a kindred spirit in the author of *Visions and Revisions*. There is no sign, however, that John ever responded to her bravissimo of roses. She was dancing in New York at the time, and residing in her studio, the ‘Dionysion’ on 23rd Street, just eleven blocks north of his apartment. But John admitted to Lulu that he was then “too nervous to go and see her.” Even so, Isadora reached out a second time. In the spring of 1915, she invited him to one of her performances at the Century Theater on the Upper West Side. But again, he was either too nervous or too busy to go and see her (as we know from a contrite letter of apology he sent to Isadora after sailing to England for the summer⁶).

² *The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Frances Gregg*; Cecil Woolf, 1994, ed. Oliver Marlow Wilkinson, ed

³ Isadora Duncan, *My Life*; Boni and Liveright, 1927, p.270

⁴ *Letters to Llewelyn*, Nov. 18, 1917

⁵ *Visions & Revisions*, G. Arnold Shaw, 1915, pp.10-11

⁶ Irma Duncan Collection of Isadora Duncan Materials, Folders 109-111, New York Public Library. The letter (out of three) referred to here begins, “Dear Miss Duncan,” and ends, “Yes, don’t forget my name altogether & think of me always as your sincere admirer – J.C.Powys”

It is also true, as John wrote to his sister Katie (albeit a dozen years later), that he once met Isadora in his sister Marian's lace shop in Washington Square, a few blocks south of his flat.⁷ That how-do-you-do, probably during the fall of 1916, was no doubt brief, however. And there is no indication of any subsequent rendezvous.

Then there is John's panegyric poem, "To Isadora Duncan," probably composed in the spring or summer of 1917. "With the gesture of a god, / You gave me back my youth," he tells her in the first lines, as though he had a premonition of their close encounter a few months later.⁸ Isadora did dance a season at the Metropolitan Opera earlier that year, but John was away on a long lecture tour at the time. Most likely, he wrote the poem based on news reports and hearsay from his friends in the Village, probably in defense of Isadora after an article⁹ by Margaret Anderson, editor of *The Little Review*. She found Isadora's art completely useless and out of touch with the times. John thought otherwise. There is no evidence that Isadora ever read the poem.

It is easy to see that John had virtually no idea of what he was in for when Isadora paid her visit on October 17, 1917. We only know that date because he wrote one of his long letters to Lulu that morning. There, wedged in among vivid updates on his current hopes and hardships, we find this sentence: "This afternoon Isadora the dancer is coming in to tea which will be exciting."¹⁰ Just exciting? Her visit was much more than that.

Let us set the scene. John Cowper's flat was in the "old Church House" of the First Presbyterian Church of New York. It had "only two little rooms," he recalled, "each of them so much taller than they were wide."¹¹ And it had at least one window overlooking the church gardens, with Fifth Avenue some 30 yards in the distance.

As it happened, the weather was fair in New York that day. But John was in no condition to enjoy it. He had been confined to his apartment since late September, recovering from a serious gastroenterostomy operation that had literally rearranged his guts. On top of that, now age forty-five, he was in the midst of his Powysian version of an artistic midlife crisis, his "dark and horizonless epoch,"¹² as he called it. Among troubles too numerous to catalogue here, he was worried about the war, and felt guilty being out of it. He was painfully in love with Frances Gregg, but couldn't see enough of her (mainly because she was married to one of his best friends, Louis Wilkinson). Though John had published seven books in America so far, he was not satisfied with any of them and his stressful cross-country lecture tours were getting in the way of his writing. "Oh my friend and old companion," he wrote to Lulu in January, "how I hate America and all this lecturing!... I wish a tidal wave wd. drown the whole country and all its hundred millions."¹³

⁷ Letter to Philippa Powys (Katie), June 29, 1928. Text kindly forwarded to me by Chris Thomas, Hon Secretary of The Powys Society.

⁸ *Mandragora: Poems*, G. Arnold Shaw, 1917, p.71

⁹ See Margaret C. Anderson, 'Isadora Duncan's Misfortune', *The Little Review*, April 1917, pp.5-7

¹⁰ *Letters to Llewelyn*, Oct. 17, 1917

¹¹ *Autobiography*, Picador edition, 1982, p.593

¹² *Letters to Llewelyn*, Jan. 12, 1916

¹³ *Ibid.*, Jan. 20, 1917

Isadora, too, was in a somewhat depressive mood around this time. Now forty years old, she had had a tough time of it in New York. Earlier that year and back in 1915 her aim was to establish a school of the dance for children and a “temple of art” for adults, two projects that could, she envisioned, “make America dance.” Unfortunately, she couldn't get the support she needed from rich American patrons (whom she famously labeled as “criminally unintelligent”). And in March, her millionaire lover Paris Singer had withdrawn his financial support entirely, leaving her broke and angry. After selling her ermine coat and jewels, Isadora and her young protégées (the “Isadorables”) did spend a pleasant summer at a beach house on Long Island. But now she faced “two distracted months,” with no money and no bookings before she was scheduled to leave New York in mid-November for a solo dance tour in California.¹⁴

We don't know why Isadora came to visit John Cowper that mid-October afternoon. She left no record of the event. Perhaps she had heard of his operation and came both to console and to commiserate with a soul-mate. Or perhaps — thinking Powysianly now — she was answering the call of one of those inner voices that both she and John were prone to hear.

One can imagine John's surprise, when Isadora actually arrived at his door, probably around three o'clock in the afternoon. He rose from his sickbed to greet the dancer who was then widely known as “the most influential and most notorious” woman in the world.¹⁵ That surprise must have been intensified as she presented John with a single red rose in his honor.

There was also a magnetic aura about Isadora's personality. The New York socialite and patron of the arts Mabel Dodge felt it, for instance, in the early winter of 1915, when Isadora paid a visit to her apartment in the Village. When she entered, Dodge recalled in her memoirs, “the room grew different”:

There was something frightening about her actual presence in a place; the vibrations became loosened up, broader and more incalculable ... anything could happen.¹⁶

So, what did happen? No doubt, these two had plenty to talk about over tea — the war, their respective woes and plans, the great masters of literature, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*¹⁷ (a copy of which Isadora had brought with her), the Russian Revolution, uncultured America, his books, her philosophy of the dance, and so on. I strongly suggest, however, that what Isadora really had to say that afternoon was beyond words.

She always danced barefoot, of course, and in a filmy tunic, so as to allow spontaneous movement of her whole body. As she readied herself in that coziest of little theaters, she would have changed or adjusted her clothing accordingly. And then? Well, John would have been witness to something that few others ever saw. As Peter Kurth mentions, one of her “Isadorables” recalled how Isadora prepared for each dance “like a ritual ... she would go into herself, growing from minute to minute in power, so that she appeared terrifying to her pupils and the stage hands.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Peter Kurth, *Isadora: A Sensational Life*, Little, Brown and Co., 2001, pp.359-69.

¹⁵ Robert Gottlieb, “‘Isadora’: Making Sense of Genius and an Icon,” *New York Times*, Dec 30, 2001, p.BR11

¹⁶ Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Intimate Memories*, Vol. 3, Harcourt Brace and Co., p.322.

¹⁷ Available as e.g. *The Birth of Tragedy*, tr. D. Smith, Oxford University Press, 2000

¹⁸ Peter Kurth, *op. cit.*, p.280.

That ritual, it is important to note, was key to Isadora’s revolutionary art, the power by which she had skyrocketed to world-wide fame during the first decades of the twentieth century. Her first step, as she later described it, was to “stand quite still ... as if in a trance” so as to find what she called the “central spring of all movement,” her inner “source of spiritual expression.” Simultaneously, she would concentrate all her force on that “one Center,” until her very soul would flow into her body, “filling it with vibrating light — the central force reflecting the spirit’s vision.”¹⁹

When she finally danced, there is no doubt that John would have witnessed both Isadora’s ecstatic method and her divine purpose — in action, full-force, up close, and personal. John recalled that she danced the Marseillaise for him that afternoon.²⁰ It was the dance she had performed earlier that year at the Metropolitan. Coinciding with the downbeat mood they shared and their mutual disgust with the ongoing war in Europe, it began with tragedy. “She seemed France herself, beaten to her knees, humbled, prostrate...” wrote a critic²¹ for the *New York Tribune*. But then, the reviewer emphasized, she rose “proudly and gloriously to a triumph at the end.” And by the way, as a grand finale, Isadora always finished that number by baring her left breast, in a pose recalling Delacroix’s “Liberty Leading the People.”

John was certainly in need of a high redemptive note just then. If she showed him anything like the “Highest Ecstasy” that she communicated to her Parisian audiences back in 1913, one can imagine that all the symptoms of his horizonless crisis would have been forgotten for the nonce. And in their place? — Who can say? If he did feel something more than a “thrilling sensation” that afternoon, he was certainly not the first.

After the Yiddish actor Jacob Adler saw Isadora dance at her studio in New York, probably in early 1915, he wrote that he had been overcome:

I suddenly saw something very beautiful, and I found myself weeping. Something happened to me that will change my whole life. There was an exultation and inspiration in her. All seemed to be inspired with the spirit of Miss Duncan. I had what seemed to me was a peep into a new paradise, and then I felt that everything that I had to this time seen — I had not seen; and everything that I had to this time heard — I had not heard. It was a new world.²²



Isadora by A. Walkowitz, c 1915
from Wikimedia Commons

¹⁹ *My Life*, p.75.

²⁰ Letter to Philippa Powys (Katie), June 29, 1928.

²¹ Frederick W. Crone, “Does the Spirit of France Mean Anything to America?” *New York Tribune*, Mar 4, 1917, p.D2.

²² Quoted in ‘Isadora Duncan’s Art,’ *The Literary Digest*, May 1, 1915, p.1018

John didn't begin to describe his own experience with Isadora until more than a month later, in two letters written shortly after she had boarded a train headed for San Francisco. One is that letter to Lulu discussed above. The other is the long neglected, yet far more revealing, letter below addressed to the dancer herself, never previously published in full.

always with a secret of courage and of some wonderful, terrible kind of ecstasy that is able to defy everything and springs from the very depths. This is your genius and there is none like you in this -

With many it is only art; but with you, as with all the great ones that I love, it is something more, and art breaks down. It is strange - ~~the~~

"the fear of life" from which I suffer is now ~~resisted~~ ^{resisted} by the thought of you - A certain kind of loneliness I have ^{ended} ^{your secret} ^{my dear} ^{J.C.P.}

12 W 12 St
New York City.

Isadora, I cannot tell you how poor & sterile New York seems to me now I have lost the knowledge that you are here. It is a wretched irony to me that now I am better able to move about without so

much nervousness & discomfort, I have no way of seeing you -

I am still seized at moments with that sort of "whoreson lethargy" & weariness, w^h they say (in their cheerful way) is "the shock of the operation" - but it seems to me much more like a weakness & cowardice of my inmost soul than anything merely "nervous". It seems like an insane terror of having to undertake the struggle of life again. In the effort not to yield to this weakness I keep making use of your friendship; I keep an almost fierce hold upon your hand. I seem to see you

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With many it is only art; but with you, as with the great ones that I love, it is something more, and art breaks down. It is strange. The “fear of life” from which I suffer is now resisted by the thought of you. A certain kind of loneliness has ended.

*Your servant my dear—
JCP*

Letter JCP to Isadora, November 1917
Irma Duncan Collection of Isadora Duncan Materials, Folders 109-111
New York Public Library

Writing from his flat on 12th Street, although the shock of his operation had subsided, he complains that he is still seized by a “whoreson lethargy,” his new name for the same old “horizonless epoch,” which he now sees as a “weakness & cowardice of my inmost soul.”

At the same time, and now for the first time, John recognizes something about Isadora that is missing in him, something that might help to strengthen his soul and alleviate his crisis.

He admires (perhaps envies) what he calls her “wonderful, terrible kind of ecstasy that is able to defy everything and springs from the very depths.” “With many,” he adds, “it is only art; but with you, as with all the great ones that I love, it is something more, and art breaks down.”

In an effort not to yield to his weakness, John tells Isadora how he makes use of her friendship. Then he ends: ‘A certain kind of loneliness has ended.’

Sadly, that salutary effect did not last long. In John’s next letter to Lulu, we find him in his sister Marian’s apartment on New Year’s Eve complaining again about his whoreson lethargy. A few days later, sitting in the very spot where Isadora showed him her kind of ecstasy, John seems to have reached the end of his tether. “Day after day,” he wrote to his brother,

I spend many hours seated in the window of 12 Street – with 5th Ave. outside – falling into this state of curious coma. It is like an immense overpowering laziness, sapping all energy, and leaving me inert, helpless, lethargic, exhausted.²³

So began a long series of ups and downs in John’s life over the next three years, as he tried to fathom the secret power that Isadora had shown him, and as he sought to absorb and use that power in his own art and life. It didn’t help that he was off again in early 1918 on another cross-country lecture tour. On a bright

²³ *Letters to Llewelyn*, Jan 8, 1918.

note, John still hoped that he might meet Isadora in California. But he was in for another surprise.

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Inspiration Beyond Words: The Powys-Duncan Affair (part II)

BACK IN NOVEMBER, as a sign that Isadora for her part was also inspired by her tea date with John, she sent him two telegrams from San Francisco, both conveying her “infinite love.” “Feeling terribly lonely and forlorn,” she wrote in her first love-cable, adding that she sought his “spirit of courage” for her first performance. “Your soul danced with mine today and gave me wings,” she wrote in the second cable. And in an apparent reference to plans they may have made in October, she added bluntly, “Remember, I am waiting for you here do not disappoint me.”²⁴



The Geary Theater where Isadora danced for the last time
in San Francisco
from Wikimedia Commons

For one reason or another, John never responded to Isadora’s come-hither reminder. Nor did he receive any further word from her—which is not surprising. She was involved in two other love affairs at the time. And after her plans for an extended tour fell flat, she left California in early January, off to other bookings and other affairs in Europe before the end of World War I. From Isadora’s point of view, the Powys-Duncan affair was over.

For John, it was just getting serious. He would never meet or correspond with Isadora again. But his thoughts of her remained, like a providential *eidolon* in his mind. So when he finally reached California in April of 1918, it came as a shock—a wake-up call, actually—when he discovered that “Isadora my noble and only true love has gone to France.”²⁵ That she had returned to Europe in the midst

²⁴ *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, selected by Nicholas and Adelaide Ross, edited by Arthur Uphill, London, Bertram Rota, 1971, p.25 and pp.59-60.

²⁵ Quotes in this paragraph are all from *Letters to Llewelyn*, April 1918.

of the war intensified the shame he felt for “sneaking behind.” Thus chastened by her courage, John immediately resolved to follow Isadora’s example. “Up! old Ulysses,” he wrote, speaking to himself in a letter to Lulu, “Mount the pinnacle—hoist the sail—and Eastward Ho!”

The following month, that call to action took on a broader sense of urgency. From Denver 21 May, he wrote to Lulu that he felt “an inner Daimon, like the demon of Socrates, which seems leading me on by driving me slowly and surely forward to some new and drastic change in my days.”²⁶ In a portentous postscript to the same letter, he made a firm resolution to “write and write” in a “new and more formidable style.” Nor did he forget to cite the source of his renewed vigor: “I have the inspiration and the love of the noble Isadora still with me.”

It is striking how quickly John took action on these resolutions. In June, he sailed to England, where he served, in his way, by giving patriotic lectures for the Bureau of War Aims. In August, he returned to New York, ready to write.

With thoughts of Isadora’s artistic courage still with him, it is no coincidence, I think, that his next book, *The Complex Vision*, took his writing in an entirely new direction. First, he returned to the novel he had been contemplating over the past two years and never really started. It may have been his first shot at *After My Fashion*²⁷, the novel he would write the following year. But after writing a hundred pages, he found it “valueless” and launched instead into a “year’s serious work”²⁸ on a complete rethinking of his view of life and the universe in what would be the first and by far the longest, most academic book of philosophy he ever wrote.

Nor is it a coincidence that the book is based on a new way of philosophizing that incorporates the “wonderful, terrible kind of ecstasy”²⁹ that Isadora had shown him a year earlier. “The philosophy of the complex vision,” John explains, is not a philosophy of pure reason. Nor is it satisfied with the normal vision of the human soul. Rather, it is based on an abnormal vision and it takes “the point of view that the secret of the universe is only revealed to man in rare moments of ecstasy.”³⁰

As we have seen, it was Isadora’s main purpose to inspire such a heightened moment in her audiences. And when Jacob Adler³¹ saw Isadora dance for the first time, he immediately felt a life-changing exaltation that showed him a “new world.” John, it seems, didn’t quite grasp the importance of Isadora’s “Highest Ecstasy” until he began writing a book about it. Now, he names that momentary illumination “‘an eternal vision’ wherein what is mortal in us merges itself with what is immortal.”³²

To prepare the way to such a visionary instant, Isadora, as we’ve also seen, sank deeply into her soul, her “source of spiritual vision.” Then, in a kind of ritual, she would focus all her energy on that power within her. Similarly, in *The Complex Vision* John advises us readers to envision all the manifold energies of our souls as “flickering flames that only now and then combine into a sharp

²⁶ Quotes in this paragraph are all from the May 21, 1918 letter in *Letters to Llewelyn*.

²⁷ Richard P. Graves, *The Brothers Powys*, Scribner, 1983, p.131.

²⁸ *Letters to Llewelyn*, Sep 16, 1919

²⁹ See above p.7, letter to Isadora.

³⁰ *The Complex Vision*, Dodd, Mead and Co., 1920, pp.340-41.

³¹ See p.5 above.

³² *The Complex Vision*, p.xi

point.”³³ To prepare our way for a moment of illumination, we must gather those conflicting energies to “one balanced point of rhythmic harmony,” using “a ‘creative effort’ similar to that which all artists are compelled to make.”³⁴

One wonders whether John Cowper actually performed that creative ritual as he wrote. Only as comedy can we imagine him attempting to dance like Isadora in order to rouse his visionary mojo. But in his telling letter³⁵ to her, John likened Isadora’s powers to those of all the great ones he loved. At the same time, he must have recognized something in her art akin to the mysterious something that ignited the “spiritual dynamite”³⁶ in his own charismatic lectures. If so, it was probably the first time he found himself on the receiving end of a dazzling performance yet more powerful than his. In that light, we can see that Isadora’s main inspiration for John was not in the realm of ideas. Rather, it was her awe-inspiring performance that reminded him of what he already knew from the great masters and encouraged him to apply what he called his dithyrambic analytic style of lecturing to his writing.

Thus, in *The Complex Vision*, we find John Cowper in his true element. It was there that he began to articulate a philosophy that would enrich his writings for the rest of his life. There, for the first time, we find him insisting that the individual human personality, the “I am I,” should be “the center of gravity in our interpretation of life.” For the first time, too, we find him articulating his audacious version of panpsychism, according to which everything in the world is alive, and the universe is nothing but “an immense congeries of bodies, moved and sustained by an immense congeries of souls,” each surrounded by unfathomable spiritual depths.³⁷

Among a welter of hints and ideas too numerous to mention here, it is also in *The Complex Vision* that John first begins to articulate what he would later call his “art of happiness.” Here it is likely that Isadora did influence his philosophy. Remembering her salvific effect on him, John may have realized that just one eternal vision evoked by her kind of ecstasy could be, in itself, the key to “the art of life.” In one passage, for instance, perhaps he did have thoughts of Isadora:

The art of life according to the revelation of the complex vision, consists in giving to the transitory the form of the eternal. It is the art of creating a rhythm, a music, a harmony, so passionate and yet so calm, that the mere fact of having once or twice attained it is sufficient ‘to redeem all sorrows.’³⁸

In his Prologue, John tells us that the “the main purpose of the book” was to reveal “the only escape from all the pain and misery of life which is worthy of the soul of man.” He adds that it is

not so much an escape from life as a transfiguring of the nature of life by means of a newly born attitude toward it. This attitude toward life, of which I have tried to catch at least the general outlines, is the attitude which the soul struggles to maintain by gathering together all its diffused memories of those rare moments when it entered into the eternal vision.³⁹

³³ *The Complex Vision*, p.65.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiv

³⁵ See above p.7, transcript of the letter to Isadora.

³⁶ *Autobiography*, p.504.

³⁷ *The Complex Vision*, p.366.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.95.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.xviii

Unfortunately, that still-sketchy advice had no effect for John in the fall of 1919. Shortly after he finished *The Complex Vision* in mid September his “bleak and wretched hours” returned again, full-steam. In early November, he wrote to Lulu “I am weak, I am cowardly, I am nothing but a wandering imagination ... here am I aged 47 and I haven’t really found my role in writing ... I’m too light—an owl’s feather, a night-jar’s feather. I don’t weigh enough mentally speaking.”⁴⁰ And he told Lulu a month later “Certainly the art of life requires infinite skill and as you know I am not by any means possessed of infinite skill.”⁴¹

Here’s what happened this time. In June, Frances Gregg came to live with him in Sausalito, California. Briefly, it was a dream come true. But they argued constantly and passionately that summer—about his personality, his writings, and probably his big book of philosophy. By October, Frances had had enough. She left Sausalito and returned to her husband Louis Wilkinson in England, leaving John with “bitterness and strange mixed feelings.”⁴² Woe was John, again.

Obviously, his new philosophy, wonderful in theory and on paper, did not stand up to the challenges of his real-life situation. “I already react from this damned philosophy of mine,” he wrote to his brother in the same November letter, calling the book a “Mother Goose tale” and “a mythological tour-de-force.” Now, as John would put it in his novel *Wolf Solent*, it would seem that his “mythology is dead.” But not so fast. As happened when he lost Isadora in 1918, losing Frances in 1919 served as another wake-up call, and a stimulus to find an art of life powerful enough and practical enough to work in real life.

John’s next book, *After My Fashion*, can be read in many ways. I would like to suggest here that he wrote the novel as a kind of self therapy. In twenty two chapters he relives and, most importantly, re-imagines his recent efforts to find a way out of his crisis. And in that re-imagining, I further suggest, he does find a new transfiguring attitude toward life that will end his immediate crisis and serve him well in years to come.

In the book, John puts his Powys-hero, Richard Storm, through all the psychic humiliation that he suffered in his own crisis, and then some. At the same time, he cleverly introduces a single character, Elise Angel, who represents both of his true loves. When Elise dances, as she does more than once, she is Isadora Duncan. That gives John the narrator an opportunity to refresh and reabsorb his memories of that surprisingly powerful experience when she danced like Demeter for him. When Elise and Richard meet as lovers, she is Frances Gregg, thus giving John an opportunity to relive and reassess their quarrels in Sausalito.

The story begins at the point in real life where in John’s crisis he discovers Isadora has gone to France. In the novel, however, he adds an interesting twist, as though he wanted to explore a path not taken. Richard Storm had spent two decades in Paris, where he worked as a critic of French poetry, served during the war in a minor way, and had a long and tumultuous affair with Elise Angel. Like John, Richard had “drastically changed,”⁴³ the war and Elise, says the narrator, “had pulled him up by the very roots out of his old pastures.”

Now, after the war, Storm left Paris in a hurry, with a deep desire to write

⁴⁰ *Letters to Llewelyn*, Nov 1, 1919

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Dec 4, 1919

⁴² *Ibid.*, Nov 1, 1919.

⁴³ Quotes in this and the following paragraph are from *After My Fashion*, Picador, 1980, pp.9-10.

something that could make a “really adequate contribution to the bitter-sweet cup of the world’s hard-wrung wisdom.” And like John again, he couldn’t quite say what he was after. But he felt an “unexpected stirring in his soul” that was “strong enough to break up and shatter to bits his contentment with his previous existence.”

With that calling in mind, John sends his hero back for the first time in twenty years to his boyhood home in the village of Littlegate, in Sussex, England. That portion of the book is interesting in its own right, a fine portrayal of country life in a part of southern England that Powys knew so well. And it does contain many passages and situations that relate to his new philosophy. But Richard Storm makes little progress there. If anything, he falls deeper into his crisis.

He does experience two epiphanies in Littlegate church. In the first, using John’s contemplative ritual from *The Complex Vision*, he becomes aware of “deeper, older, more earth-rooted things” and feels a deep craving to express his new mystical faith in a poem that he and others “might hold to and live by.”⁴⁴ That spiritual purpose falls by the wayside, however, when Storm has his second epiphany while attending Mass in the same church and quickly realizes that the “one flawless work of art”⁴⁵ of that ancient Christian ritual is more universal and far more powerful than his litany of the earth-soul could ever be.

Storm’s purpose is further hampered by what the narrator calls “the whole business of love between human beings.”⁴⁶ After two decades in Paris, adjustment to life in rural England is difficult. Meanwhile, he falls in love with and marries the vicar’s daughter, Nelly (a character based in part on John’s wife Margaret). That, in turn, places him in two troublesome love triangles: one between Nelly, Richard, and Nelly’s former fiancé, Robert; another between Richard, Nelly, and Elise, who continues to send love letters to Richard from Paris.

Storm doesn’t begin to learn a viable art of life until he and Nelly follow Robert to New York City. Here, his problems only multiply. Nelly discovers she is pregnant. Richard’s publisher goes bankrupt. Unknown in New York, he can only find what he sees as a menial job. Away from Nature, Richard feels the clamor of the city enter his soul like an iron wedge. And so on. Woe is Richard.

Now, however, viewing the situation as narrator, John sees the hidden value of his hero’s travails. With a sly reference to his own gastroenterostomy, he calls Storm’s cumulative woes “a process of spiritual surgery, painful but liberating.”⁴⁷ At or near the end of his rope in New York City, Richard is all the more receptive to a revitalizing treat the author has in store for him—his third eternal vision.

What follows, I suggest, is a late but loving and lavish reenactment⁴⁸, albeit in a different setting, of what happened—or, more precisely, what John now realizes he ought to have felt—when Isadora Duncan rose and danced for him on the 17th of October, 1917.

“One day about the middle of October,” he writes at the opening of his climactic Chapter 14, Richard Storm, feeling “sick of his work and weary of himself,” left his office in midtown Manhattan searching for some café where he could eat and read in quiet. Walking up Sixth Avenue, dodging trucks and

⁴⁴ This and the preceding quote are from *After My Fashion*, p.16.

⁴⁵ *After My Fashion*, p.112.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.172.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.178-185.

automobiles as he crosses each street and feeling “hunted by iron dogs whose jaws were worked by machinery,” Richard happens upon a vaudeville theater where, to his great surprise, “ELISE ANGEL IN HER FAMOUS ATTIC DANCE” is featured on the afternoon program.

Suddenly, John’s hero comes alive. “All his dizziness disappeared in a moment and the iron wedge that had worked itself into his brain during these miserable weeks seemed pulled out by invisible hands and flung under the wheels of the crowded street.” He quickly bought a ticket and sat in the second row, “with a smile of a drunken man entering paradise.”

When she finally came on stage, Elise danced what the narrator calls “her dance of the Eternal Vision.” John writes “Once more, as if all between this moment and when he had last seen her were a dark and troubled dream, she lifted for him the veil of Isis. In the power of her austere and olympian art, all the superficial impressions that had dominated him through that long summer dissolved like a cloud of vapour.”

“This,” declares the narrator, “was what he had been aiming at in his own blundering way; this was what he was born to understand!” And the ecstatic scene goes on over several pages, as though John Cowper himself is entering the eternal vision and inviting the reader to join him. “Her physical beauty was the mere mask of the terrible power within her. Her spirit seemed to tear and rend at her beauty and mould it with a recreating fire into a sorrow, into a pity, into a passion, that flew quivering and exultant over all the years of man’s tragic wayfaring.”

When the curtain fell, Storm “felt like a man to whom has been manifested at last the hidden god of a lifetime of hopeless prayers.” And that vision clearly gave him a new, transfiguring attitude toward life. “New York had left his soul naked, helpless, flayed and bleeding,” John writes. But with “divine gestures that seemed to arise out of some tremendous unseen victory over all that was in the path of the spirit, Elise Angel clothed that wounded soul of his with the garments of new flesh and blood.”

Later, on his way home to Nelly, Storm sees New York City with “completely different an eye.” As he walks down Seventh Avenue, John turns Storm into an early twentieth century version of Walt Whitman in his ‘Mannahatta.’ Now, in place of automatons with iron jaws, he sees a “reckless, gay, aggressive crowd ... an immense outpouring of youthful energy, an unconquerable vitality, a ferocious joyousness and daring.”

Whew! After three years of trying to fathom the ‘something else’ that powered Isadora’s art, it seems that John finally got it.

But his hero had more to learn before he found an art of life that could flourish in the “very depths of actual experience.”⁴⁹ Richard quickly resumes his affair with Elise. And when Nelly finds out, she has sharp words for him. Meanwhile, Elise turns into Frances Gregg. When she and Richard meet at her apartment and on a trip to Atlantic City, John the narrator is writing what amounts to a vivid replay of his quarrels with Frances the previous summer. Elise delivers stern critiques about Richard’s selfish character⁵⁰ and his all-too English nature poetry⁵¹: “You’re afraid of love. You hate love. You’re scared of losing something

⁴⁹ *The Complex Vision*, p.104.

⁵⁰ *After My Fashion*, p.216.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.250.

of your precious personality” she says. “You talk of bringing your philosophy into your poetry.... your poetry is a fraud.” And then she adds “Don’t you understand that art is a thing connected with character?” And so on.



Irma, Isadora and Sergei Yesenin, 1922
(Irma was Isadora’s adopted daughter)
from Wikimedia Commons

Then, suddenly, Richard Storm is in for another shock. In short order, he loses both his wife and his mistress. When Nelly finds out about his trip to Atlantic City with Elise, she sails back to England with Robert. Meanwhile, in Atlantic City, Elise is irresistibly attracted to a Russian Marxist and goes back to New York with him. That leaves Richard with the Russian’s girlfriend, Catharine. Both are devastated. And surprisingly, back in Richard’s apartment, where they discuss their respective losses, it is Catharine (a character based on John’s Village “butterfly,” Helen Wylde⁵²) whose naive comments finally prompt him to “make that time a genuine effort to break the crust of egoism which imprisoned his soul.”⁵³

These events lead Richard to a soul-searching analysis of his character, his æsthetic detachment from life, and his “moral evasion.” On one hand, John Cowper’s most recent biographer, Morine Krissdóttir, is probably right when she says that John, by way of his hero, had “finally learned the true nature of malice, and of its effect on self and others.”⁵⁴ But again, this wasn’t the end of Storm’s spiritual purpose or John’s art of life. In effect, the whole episode serves as another strong dose of spiritual surgery, preparing Richard for his fourth eternal vision.

What follows is a completely imagined dramatization of one of Isadora

⁵² *Letters to Llewelyn*, 17 October 1917, p.237.

⁵³ *After My Fashion*, p.261.

⁵⁴ Morine Krissdóttir, *Descents of Memory*, Overlook Duckworth, 2007, p.165.

Duncan's performances at The Century Theater, the one John missed in the Spring of 1915. John, by the way, may have heard about Isadora's ambitious season at The Century from the likes of Theodore Dreiser, who was then a member of the Committee for the Furtherance of Isadora Duncan's Work in America.⁵⁵

It happened that Elise's affair with the Russian was brief. Now, still worried about Richard's state of mind, she saved seats for both him and Catharine at her Christmas Eve concert at the Stuyvesant Theater. Compared with his self-centered epiphany at the vaudeville hall, here John introduces his hero to a more outflowing, shared ecstasy with universal appeal, something like a modern, non-denominational version of the Mass he had attended in Littlegate church.

As they took their seats amid a "holiday-thrilled Bohemian audience,"⁵⁶ Richard and Catharine were excited and carefree. And when Elise danced her first dance she lifted them "into a region where personal and possessive instincts had no place." As her performance continued, Richard saw that "everyone in the theater experienced the sensation of taking an actual part in some passionate ritual, some ritual that was itself a very dithyramb of exultant protest against all that was base, gross, possessive and reactionary amid the forces of the world." And he became more vividly conscious than ever before "that art is not something separate from life."

At this point, John slips in his highest praise yet for Isadora Duncan. In that letter to Lulu back in November 1917, when he revealed his affair with her, he wrote that she was "as fine a genius" as Sarah Bernhardt or Eleonora Duse. Here, as Richard's "ivory goddess" brought her dance to a grand finale, he "thought in his heart" that her performance was more than the work of either of those great women: "*This is on a level with Milton or Nietzsche!*" he realized.

Then, by the grace of Elise Angel, Richard Storm's fourth moment of vision rises to its highest, life-redeeming level yet. As he and Catharine rode home on the 7th Avenue subway line, John's hero remained "excited to such a pitch" that he "mentally gathered up into one swift vision all the persons and events of his life's drama." Without judging, he saw all of it, the whole drama of his midlife crisis, everything, in a new transfiguring light—

... these persons and these events, all beautiful, all mysterious, all full of the magic of that Nameless One who, whether he were born child of Semele or child of Mary, had the power to turn the sordid tricks of chance into the music of an exultant rhythm...

Storm over? Not quite yet. John still has a final test in mind for his hero. Toward the end of *After My Fashion*, Elise gives Richard a thousand dollars, so he can return to his wife. Back in Littlegate, Nelly rejects him when he insists on what is nowadays called an 'open marriage.' In a delirious state of mind, Richard goes for an aimless walk in the countryside, gets caught in a thunderstorm, and attempts to rescue a luckless sheep that had fallen into a dew pond. While performing that selfless act Storm experiences his fifth moment of eternity, as he envisions Elise Angel "dancing on the edge of a great grey sea swept by hurricanes of rain..."⁵⁷ While he is carrying the sheep to shelter, something seems

⁵⁵ Peter Kurth, op. cit., p.331.

⁵⁶ This quote and those below relative to this performance are from *After My Fashion*, pp.270-72.

⁵⁷ Quotes in this paragraph are from *After My Fashion*, pp.284-287.

to snap in his heart. He falls and loses consciousness. Robert then arrives with a message that Nelly loves him after all. And thus he dies with a “look of unutterable happiness spread across his face”. Richard Storm’s last moment, writes the narrator, was the one “most unalloyed by critical self-consciousness” in all his experience.

What are we to make of Storm’s end? In one sense, of course, it’s a tragedy. In another sense, his newly born attitude has passed the supreme test of life. After all, he died happy, in eternity. In still another sense, I suggest that Storm’s passing represents the end of John’s old self and the beginning—dare we say the “resurrection”—of a new John Cowper who has discovered and internalized a viable new art of life.

Looking back over the ups and downs of the Powys-Duncan affair, I think we can conclude that Isadora’s surprising visit in mid October 1917 was, though he didn’t realise it at the time, a life-changing event. Witnessing her personality and her powerful art in action awakened him and directed his attention to what he already knew. So inspired, he wrote *The Complex Vision* to understand the soulful kind of ecstasy she had shown him and to apply it to a new philosophy of life. When that didn’t work for him, he wrote *After My Fashion*, in large part, to relive and reabsorb the powerful life-affirming effect of Isadora’s single visit, and in part to reassess the practical life-lessons he ought to have learned from Frances, young Helen Wilde, and perhaps his wife Margaret—all in a context of reliving and revaluing his “spiritual surgery” in America.

And it worked. Using his letters to Lulu as a barometer of John’s ability to deal with life, it is clear that his crisis ended in 1920. Even as he was writing *After My Fashion*, there is nothing in those letters like his earlier complaints about whoreson lethargies, curious comas, or wretched hours.

John had more work to do, of course. He wouldn’t really begin to come alive as writer until he met his third “true love,” Phyllis Playter, the young American woman who would become his life-long, life-stabilizing muse. Frances, too, would play her part, as she and John continued their lively correspondence.

Nor would John find his true voice as the mystical, analytical, comically self-effacing philosopher-novelist we know until he began using the two books he wrote in 1919 and 1920 as models for his subsequent works. He never wrote another book like *The Complex Vision*. Instead, from his first *Art of Happiness* (1923) right through to *In Spite of: A Philosophy for Everyman* (1953), he wrote a dozen books of practical philosophy, all of them filled with inspirational advice aimed at helping both his readers and himself to practice his still-developing (always unsystematic) art of life.

After My Fashion was not published in John Cowper’s lifetime. He submitted the book to a publisher, but when it was rejected he kept the manuscript as a kind of personal *roman à clef*. Nevertheless, it is no coincidence, I think, that his first great novel, *Wolf Solent* (1929), tells a similar tale of the eponymous Powys-hero who has his share of illuminating moments and eventually finds a viable new attitude toward life. Nor is it a coincidence that John’s most popular book of philosophy was written simultaneously with *Wolf Solent*. *The Meaning of Culture* (1929), particularly its chapters on self-culture, can be read as a guide to that novel, and vice versa.

My dearest Powysians, if you are still skeptical that John Cowper’s single rendezvous with Isadora Duncan could have inspired such a far-reaching change

in his life, I can only point to two comments he made about her, long after the Powys-Duncan affair had ended. Do you remember?—Isadora is one of only a few women mentioned in John’s lengthy *Autobiography* (1934). There, he includes her in a group of seven American geniuses, the others being Whitman, Melville, Masters, Dreiser, Vachel Lindsay, and Edna Millay.⁵⁸ More to the point, among the great Americans he counted as friends, it was Theodore Dreiser and Edgar Lee Masters, says John, who recognized the value of his Druidic, Taliessin-like spirit. He quickly adds, however, that

Isadora Duncan too “got my number”; even as I most assuredly got hers!⁵⁹

Finally, in 1943, while John and Phyllis were searching through the attic of their house in Corwen, Wales, they discovered the love cables Isadora had sent him a quarter of a century earlier. John called them “sacred telegrams.”⁶⁰

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More on Isadora Duncan and Powys:

— Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (Revised and Updated), Introduction by Joan Acocella, Liveright, 2013.

— *Isadora Speaks*, ed. F. Rosemont, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1994.

— Jacobs, Laura, ‘To the Great God Pan’, *LRB*, Vol. 35 no. 20, 24 October 2013.

— Lock, Charles J.S., (1982). *Development of style in the writings of John Cowper Powys, 1915-1929*. DPhil. University of Oxford.

⁵⁸ *Autobiography*, p.594.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.528.

⁶⁰ *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, p.29 and pp.59-60.