

## Loony John's Alivenment — Patchin Place, 1923

If each new day, as our human life unfolds itself like the pages of an illuminated fairy-book, is not a caravanserai of marvels, a ship of treasure, an island of enchantment, with its own sun and moon and high particular stars, what, in heaven's name, is the value of being alive at all?

*The Art of Happiness* (1923) p.60

THE SUMMER OF 1923 was an unexpectedly happy time and, as things turned out, a fortuitous turning point in the life and career of that endearingly loony, perpetually protean, protopostmodern spiritual anarchist—our dithyrambic magician of the ever-flowing word, the great British novelist John Cowper Powys.

Two years earlier, 18 March 1921, while lecturing in Joplin, Missouri, USA, Mr. Powys had met his true love, Phyllis Playter, a slim, sensitive, sylph-like young woman, born into a wealthy family in Kansas. Phyllis would play as important a role in John's creative life as that Renaissance beauty Laura de Noves had played in the life of the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca. When John spotted his Laura, however, it was love-at-first-sight on both sides, a mutual psycho-sensual attraction between two poetic spirits. And whereas Petrarch's love for Laura was never requited, Phyllis would remain with John until he died, at the age of ninety-two, in 1963. She would be the love of his life, his soul-mate, his companion in solitude, his sylph, his muse, and, we must admit, his housekeeper, life-keeper, and literary consort.

John Cowper always viewed his luck in finding Phyllis as a gift and a blessing



Patchin Place – *courtesy David Stimpson*

from the Gods of Chance. The same gods would be doubly, if not triply, kind to him in 1923. That spring, while John was on a long lecture tour in California, his younger brother Llewelyn wrote to say that a portion of his apartment at 4 Patchin Place, in New York City, would be available for the summer. “Lulu, do you really mean,” John wrote<sup>1</sup> back 14 May, “that Phyllis and I may for a little while, whilst we look round and rest, live in that upper chamber of yours?... It gives me everything to look forward to—and, if it happens, this summer will be one of the very happiest I have ever known —perhaps the happiest of all.”

<sup>1</sup> *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, Vol. II, 1925-1939, Village Press, 1975.

And it did happen. On the first of July, John and Phyllis would move, together for the first time, into that upper chamber. It was a small flat, just one room, with an alcove and a fireplace, and a toilet two flights downstairs. But its particular setting was what mattered to John. Patchin Place, was, and still is, a quiet close in the heart of New York's Greenwich Village. Located off 10th Street, a few steps from Sixth Avenue, it is a cul-de-sac no more than 100 yards long, shaded by ailanthus trees and lined with modest row houses erected in the mid-19th century. Today, Patchin Place is populated mainly by psychotherapists, but in John Cowper's day it was more of a literary enclave. During the Roaring Twenties, Theodore Dreiser lived there, as did E.E. Cummings, along with John's brother Llewelyn (who was also a noted writer) and his brother's lover, Alyse Gregory, who would serve mid-decade as editor of 'The Dial', then an important outlet for modernist literature.

What John wanted that summer was something he had sought for years without success: a tranquil refuge, as it were, "far from the madding crowd." After nearly two decades of 'paper chase' lecturing all across America, much of the time on long lonely train rides, jumping from hotel to hotel, never living in one place for long, Patchin Place would be what he called his "noble Alsatia"<sup>2</sup> refuge for the hunted. Now age 50, it would be John's first true writer's retreat and his first stable address in America. It would be a place to be alone with his girl and close (for a time) to his brother Lulu. And it would be a safe-house, of sorts, in the middle of New York City, hidden away from the superficial fuss and bluster of urban America.

But there was something else that helped to boost John's spirits that year, something that could not rightly be construed as any sort of gift from the gods. It had more to do with, shall we say, an upbeat development in his philosophy of life, and a brightening of what he would call his "life-illusion."

In a letter to Lulu, written 23 January 1923, in Hollywood, California, John cheerfully announced his latest writing project:

I'm writing a new book, semi-philosophical, semi-essayish, a kind of an advocacy of the sort of attitude of mind and imagination that appeals to me—a kind of breviary of furtive fantastic self-culture... a sort of Epistle of the Holy Apostle John to the youth, to the lads and lasses of his generation.

Lulu must have been surprised by the sudden note of confidence and optimism in this rather odd proclamation. Anyone who has read his letters to Lulu will know that they serve as a finely adjusted barometer of John's state of mind. Over the past several years, those letters had been peppered with expressions of loneliness and self-doubt, disgust with the business of lecturing, and hatred of America. On November 7, 1922, only two months earlier, for instance, he had this to say about California, where he had been living for several months, lecturing, writing two (unsuccessful) plays, and a book on the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis (*Psychoanalysis and Morality*):

I hate this damned place, for I so long for the country—for real trees, for real falling leaves, for real mud, for real grass. Invented! All California is invented, I say invented! I took the car to the Beach—it was more

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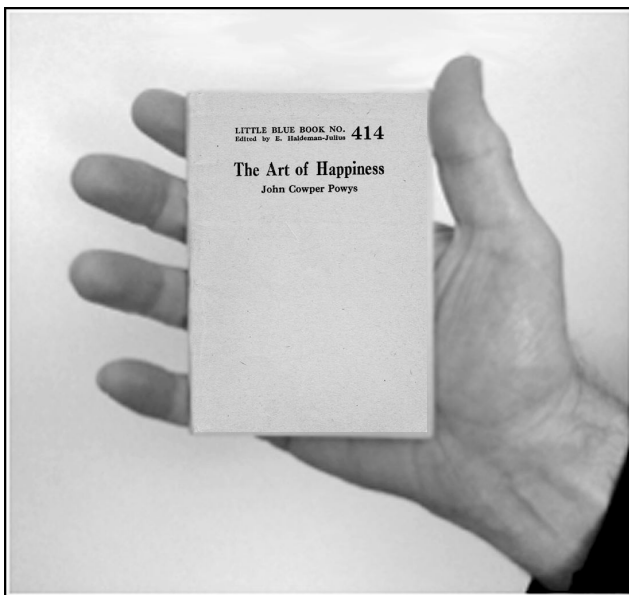
<sup>2</sup> *The Meaning of Culture*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1929, p.213. 'Alsatia' was the name formerly given to the Whitefriars district in London, England, which was a sanctuary for debtors and lawbreakers.

awful than words can say! I thought can this be sand and are those real waves, made of salt-water older than cities, and is that red thing actually the setting sun?

Apparently, his mood could change dramatically when writing something close to his heart, and in synch with his deepest life-illusion. It is clear, too, that he got a kick out of redeploing some of the same malicious energy apparent in the above quote to fire his “fantastic” philosophy. In February of 1923, still lecturing in California, he wrote to say that he was “going on slowly” and “quietly”—i.e., happily—with his book on “self-culture,” which he now described gleefully as “a sort of Art of living for the abnormal, or the philosophy of the neurotic, or a defence of scepticism.”

He finished the book before he and Phyllis moved to Patchin Place, and it was published in September under the title, *The Art of Happiness*. Compared with most of the long and delightfully meandering works John would produce over the next forty years, it was a decidedly diminutive volume. The paper-bound book (if we can call it a book) is No. 414 in the series of “Little Blue Books” published in the 1920s and ‘30s by Haldeman-Julius, out of Joplin, Missouri.

At little more than 3 inches wide by 5 inches tall, with only 62 pages, it is



much smaller than any modern paperback. My own copy fits easily into the watch pocket of my suit-jacket and weighs no more than a humming bird. In the slightest wind, it could as easily fly from the palm of your hand. The book is often confused with another, longer work bearing exactly the same title, but published in 1935 in a conventional hard-bound format by Simon & Schuster. John’s first *Art of Happiness* is now, like many of his writings, very difficult to find, whereas his second is even available for \$9.95 on Kindle. So it is easy to see why the first *Art of Happiness* is rarely mentioned by

literary critics or biographers and often left out of lists of his works.

Nevertheless, I would offer, dear readers of *la lettre powysienne*, that this minuscule volume marks an important watershed in John Cowper’s career. Here, for the first time, we hear him expounding his personal philosophy of happiness, not as a wannabe philosopher writing for other philosophers (as he did four years earlier in *The Complex Vision*), but more as the spellbinding lecturer that he had become over the previous three decades, inspiring, energizing, and mystifying (albeit sometimes boring) his audiences in England, continental Europe, and all across the United States.

Here in the little watch-pocket edition of *The Art of Happiness* he introduces the concept of ‘life-illusion,’ also for the first time. He offers the good news for depressed weaklings like himself that happiness is in essence an attitude of mind and soul, that the secret of happiness lies in those “thrilling and magical” moments of illumination, that sensitive souls oppressed by the pressures of modern life are actually in a far better position to experience such

luminescent moments for themselves, than are strong and competent natures, whose vision is too easily blinded by the dogmatism of religion, science, and even the arts. And here for the first time, too, John offers a few of those various “tricks and wiles and devices” that anyone can use to practice the art of happiness—including such “magic formulae” as deep skepticism, forgetting, running away, sinking into one’s soul, gathering one’s psychic energy to enjoy the little things of life, and other practical do-it-yourself hints—that would continuously reappear in varying forms throughout both his later essays on self-culture and his works of fiction.

I’m suggesting, in other words, that beginning with this first little *Art of Happiness*, John sensed that he had literally discovered, through his own personal experience, the ‘open secret’ of happiness. I would suggest further that he wrote the book—and seven others like it over the next twelve years—not only to generate much-needed cash. Rather, the very act of writing the book was a joy for him. The words came as freely and easily as they did when he lectured, and the process helped him to articulate and reinforce the life-giving value of his discovery. The book was a kind of pep-talk, certainly for himself, but also for other bedraggled souls like him—notably Phyllis, his soul mate, and “certain types” for whom he had “always found” that his lectures on the art of self-culture supplied a “quiet surprise.”<sup>3</sup>

Looking back a decade later, John confessed in his ground-breaking *Autobiography* that his life—as a writer and as a person—did not really begin until the age of fifty. It is no coincidence, I think, that he was precisely fifty years old in the summer of 1923. Indeed, it is quite obvious, as most students of John Cowper’s life in America have pointed out, that he did not come alive as a writer until the nineteen-twenties, culminating with the publication, just before the great Stock Market Crash of 1929, of *Wolf Solent* and *The Meaning of Culture*. The money he earned from those best-sellers enabled him to give up lecturing for good and to move with Phyllis to a quiet house on thirty acres of land in upstate New York, thus finally to fulfill his dream—the dream, perhaps, of every wordsmith before and after him: the dream of ‘living by the pen.’

From that point on he was, as it were, on a literary roll. So much so that the collected works of John Cowper Powys (were they collected) would fill more volumes—with novels, short stories, poetry, plays, letters, diaries, philosophical tracts, and practical self-help essays—than those of any other writer in the twentieth century. And the fact remains that the greatest, most dazzling portion of that oeuvre was penned after that summer of 1923, after he found his ‘Laura’ (Phyllis), his first quiet writer’s retreat (at 4 Patchin Place), and the philosophy of life that he first articulated in the little book that he called his “philosophy of ‘illuminated moments.’”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The three quotations are from John’s 18 May 1928 letter to Lulu.

<sup>4</sup> Haldeman-Julius pocket edition of *The Art of Happiness* - No.414, 1923, p.17.