

John Cowper Powys's Introduction to *From the Ground Up. Collected Papers of A.R. Powys, Architect, Writer, and Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings 1882-1936* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1937)

Introduction

The essays from my brother's hand in this admirable selection from his occasional writings are certainly most happily chosen as far as the essential thing is concerned, the revelation of the true nature and character of the man. And in the words 'From the Ground Up' the character is justly summarized.

In the case of so many artists and writers there appear gaps and spaces, and often quite disturbing 'lacunae,' between the work and the man. The extreme reverse of this occurred always in my brother's case; for it was a passionate matter of conscience with him, as well as an irresistible congenital impulse, not to deviate the breadth of an eyelash from the inspiration, the purpose, the opinion, the method which had come into being as the expression of his whole nature.

It was this almost ferocious integrity that gave to his opinions, however lightly expressed, a burden of authority that his interlocutors would have often found crushing if it had not been for a quite startling wave of disarming self-depreciation that reached them from A.R.P.'s deepest soul even at the moment when he was 'confounding the politics' and 'frustrating the knavish tricks' of their less integral and more wayward arguments.

And it was this profound self-depreciation, mingled with the sort of pride that is driven in the necessity of conflict to put its back to the ultimate wall, that made his opinions – and make them still – so formidable.

A.R.P. was totally unable to 'show off.' Into the most negligible and trivial aspects – as others might regard them – of the aesthetic problem he would throw his whole self, often in a manner that was disconcerting.

On the other hand – and he lived both in his private and public life in an atmosphere charged with aesthetic controversy – I have never known any mortal person who could keep his temper as he did in the heat of these ticklish debates. The truth is, he loved argument. He loved it much as did the Platonic Socrates; and I suspect for the same reason. It enabled him to settle *down* and to settle *in* and to settle *back*, until it was not so much A.R.P. arguing 'from the ground up,' as *the Ground itself* huskily defending a champion who, austerer than the rest of us in his respect for his subject, had argued barefoot.

A peculiar pride and a peculiar humility were most subtly fused together in his emotion as an artist, and in his temper as a critic of art. In the presence of the materials of his art, in contact with the textures of wood and stone and brick and cement and lead and steel, he lost his identity as a particular person and became All Men, All Men in contact with the work of All Men's hands!

Nothing my brother hated more than what might be called the 'artistic.' This distaste he assuredly inherited from our father whose *bête noir* in life was anything affected, or, as we say, 'put on'; and the whole secret of A.R.P.'s architectural doctrine, or, as he would probably have preferred me to put it, *method*, was to deduce what we call 'beauty' from the line of least resistance in practical common sense.

There was something classic in his personal appearance, suggestive, though he would scold me for introducing such a fancy, of a far-drawn mixture of Roman blood in the parental Welsh strain, and I can well recall when I was with him in Rome how thrilled he was, beyond anything else in the surviving Imperial masonry, as by the Roman use of concrete.

Any skilful alliance between architecture and engineering stirred a deep interest in him, and his constant desire to allow beauty to emerge inevitably from an economic use of practical materials, rather than to be superimposed as an artistic afterthought, dominated both his own work and his criticism of the work of others. Dogmatic though his opinions often sounded – earning him the name among ourselves as 'Brother Positive' – their actual drift was not so much in the direction of startling individualistic achievement as of

anonymous creation, springing like the spirit that built the Gothic cathedrals, from a spontaneous movement 'in widest commonalty spread.'

Far more nervously organized than in his pride and humility he allowed to appear, his habitual gesture of self-defensive toughness, the brave front he assumed to cope with the world, overlaid a psychological sensitivity that must often have been outraged beyond what any of us guessed; and, both as a soldier in the war and as a 'shock' fighter for the Society he served, he must have often lived, as we way, on his 'nerves' when he was apparently drawing upon unbounded resources of physical vitality.

This inner sensitivity, concealed beneath his blunt and rugged exterior, must have got deep comfort and support – like Antaeus touching the earth – from his power of sinking his individuality in the anonymous creative urge of his race; and it was in this way that, when driven back to the bed-rock of their origin, what looked like obstinate personal opinions became the 'securus judicate orbis terrarum' of something more in fallible than any private judgment.

He was essentially a craftsman. In all his instincts it was the handling of the 'given' materials – materials 'given' by the particular conditions of 'the work in progress' and their exigencies in economy and convenience – that dominated the nature of the structure, and made way for the spontaneous evocation of the special kind of 'beauty' which springs from an organic adaptation of means to ends.

An artist in the most necessary of all arts – the art of housing humanity and its gods – he found himself handicapped by the grand necessity from which other artists are comparatively, though of course not entirely free, the necessity of 'orders' to fill, and of place, time, money, opportunity to fill them.

In this aspect of his work, wherein an architect, so much more than a painter or a writer – though, heaven knows, none of us can boast complete immunity – is dependent on sympathetic patrons, my brother lacked the worldly push and the social plausibility to climb with deft assurance ambition's ladder.

Here – and especially in the realm that interested him most, namely, the building of convenient modern houses with cheap materials – his vast stores of original energy and practical knowledge were allowed to lie unused.

But the inspired power of self-effacement that existed behind his formidable dogmatism found a truly predestined scope in his work for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

The 'beauty' that he was always fighting for, the 'beauty' that arises inevitably *from the ground up* where designer, builder and craftsman are honestly working within the limits of economic necessity, the 'beauty' that is not only local, racial, indigenous, but is adaptable to the newest modern uses of iron and concrete and to the providing of inexpensive homes for the people of this land, was the same 'beauty' – so much more than the artistic experiments of individual genius – that the old churches, houses and bridges of England had supplied to our fathers.

It is T.S. Eliot, I think, who suggests somewhere very truly that in the matter of poetry you have to consider the continuity of the past with the present and with what they both carry forward into the future; and it seems to me that what my brother saw more clearly than many artists is that it is a petty and ignoble fastidiousness to be prepared to sacrifice the new life-necessities of vast numbers of our fellow-countrymen for the sake of expensive quietness and the exclusive charm of the picturesque.

But the bulk of the old buildings he fought to save from the ruin decreed to them by stupidity and rapacity were buildings that had been as obedient to the natural economies of materials and the communal necessities of our people as the most unpicturesquely convenient houses of our own day.

Just as he arrived at the solid and compact integrity of his personal character by the habitual suppression of an almost morbidly nervous sensibility, so he arrived at this massive and resolute sublimation of what one might call the 'arts and crafts' element in him, into an attitude that was contemptuous of the merely

'artistic' and passionately sympathetic towards the hugest and most utilitarian alliances between architecture and engineering.

'The great question,' my brother says in his *The English House*, 'what kind of house will man build for himself in the near future – may well, and perhaps wisely, be answered in the following way. In towns, where there is danger of fire, it seems that the permanent materials will be used. Houses will be built in the style that will result from the use of ferro-concrete when many are built together at one time. Where they are single buildings erected at the cost of the owner, they will for many years continue to follow on old-established lines, with slated roofs, walls of brick, with casement or sash windows. In the country, unless the house is at the order of a rich man who can afford to live in and pay rent for a house built of monumental materials, man will demand houses of the semi-temporary type, cheaply framed and made water-resisting with the products of factory mass-production. Up till now architects have scorned to give time to an examination of these houses except to ban them. It may be that before long a missionary of this manner of building will arise and gain a following among the younger architects. It certainly appears that this type of house deserves the careful study of a man such as Philip Webb. Englishmen live in them, and for some time, at least, will continue to live in them. How is it, then, that no English architect, with a right appreciation of the energy and invention of the past, has yet appeared to give to his brothers and sisters homes of this type that will not shame the land of his birth nor the long tradition of common sense and beauty on which was based that pleasant building – the English house?'

It was in 1929 that my brother asked that question; a question to which had he lived, and had he been given an opportunity, his own work would have been the answer. His plans are here. As he so well says, the hour has come when really great architects 'with a right appreciation of the invention and energy of the past' should turn their genius away from the 'monumental' work that necessitates wealthy individual patrons, and concentrate it on giving to the 'mass-production' houses of low rent that 'beauty' of well-designed economized materials which has a sounder basis – because of its more pressing necessity – than any expensive aesthetic experiment.

In other words, my brother saw a time coming when what in my youth used to be designated 'Jerry-built houses' will be given, *in spite of their cheap materials*, the 'beauty' that naturally must follow any wisely considered satisfaction of a universal human need.

His work for the protection of old buildings – and how well I remember the tone in which I heard him say once, 'Anything can be mended; anything can be saved!' – brought him into 'bare-faced' touch, so to speak, with every kind of material, so that it was out of a born craftsman's mania for natural materials *for their own sake* that he evolved his reasoned acceptance of the manufactured materials of modern economic building.

With many architects their art is something detached from their individual character – a 'profession,' in fact, rather than an art; but with A.R.P. the art of architecture was only the outward expression in one set of materials of a habitual handling of every smallest detail of his personal life in the spirit of an assured craftsman. We used to laugh at him for the weightily banked-up *convictions* – for they were always more than fluctuating opinions – which he held with such dogmatic positivity on the tiniest of domestic and personal matters and the ways of doing or not doing things. Nothing in his life was at random. Nothing was wanton or wilful. Nothing was left to the whim of the moment. In dress, in ablution, in food, in drink, in the minutest arrangements of his time, of the objects round him, of his rooms, of his garden, of his household utensils, in lighting a fire, in opening a bottle, in whittling a stick, in driving a nail, in hanging a picture, in washing a dish, in chopping a log, in cutting a loaf, he would always follow a carefully considered method of his own, for which when challenged – and you may be sure that in our lively and critical family he was challenged at every turn – he would bring forth a most confounding and irrefutable weight of elaborate justification.

And yet even in the heat of such self-championings – and it was almost always his opponent and not he who lost his temper – he would often display a depth of interior humility that was at once disarming and disconcerting. Indeed, if I am not greatly mistaken, his concealed self-depreciation was as much an integral part of his nature as his emphatic positivity.

He would frequently express a cautious, moderate, unexaggerated view with such a weight of volcanic authority that this harmless well-balanced conclusion bowled you out with the shock of a pistol-shot.

The bulk of his life's work lies where he would have had it lie, in the silent and unapplauding masonry and timber of the irreplaceable buildings he saved from ruin; and we who miss him most feel that in a sense beyond what is possible for those whose days have divorced them from the things that outlive us, his spirit has obtained a congenial perpetuity, as it rises 'from the ground up,' imperishable and positive still, out of the substance of all it rescued from dissolution.

J.C.P.

November 1937.