Worlds John Cournos Has Known

His Autobiography Moves From the Sidewalks of Philadelphia to the Salons of London, With Contrasting Adventures in Russia

John Cournos.
From a Drawing by Marcia Satterthwaite.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY. By John Cournos. 344 pp. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. $3.75.

By JANE SPENCE SOUTHRON

JOHN COURNOS'S autobiography is an achievement of which he may well be proud. It is distinguished by integrity, by outstanding individualism and by a prose style that is invariably lucid and adequate and that, at times, achieves sparse, driving beauty. This is particularly noticeable where the narrative is informed with passion, as in the episode which Mr. Cournos used, fancifully, in his novel "The Mask" but which he gives us here in actuality—the story of a small boy's heroic fight to win out against a blizzard, culminating in his being carried, sick and in pain, by a sister hardly bigger, along the frozen Philadelphia streets to the Children's Hospital. And he can convey horror without stressing his subject, as in those night-long skirmishes with swarms of bats in the Summer cottage where he was visiting Dorothy, the girl who kept him dangling after her so many years, too scared to share his poverty.

To appreciate fully what this must mean one has to remember the little chap of 10 who, shot headlong from country life in Russia into a Philadelphia slum and guyed by street hooligans because of his Russian clothes, had not a word of English to retort with. Nor was it plain sailing at school. There was little money and the mother and her young family depended largely on the efforts of the children. The stepfather, a dreaming inventor, had stayed behind in Russia and, when he did come, was worse than useless as a provider. The little girls made artificial flowers. The boy, up often as early as 2, sold papers. His mother, in earlier, more prosperous days, had intended him to be a doctor—the tradition of medicine was in her family—but Yantchik, as they called him, had other ideas. He was an artist born; later when he made himself a chance, he was to drink deep of beauty in both music and painting but it was always words that lured him on from strenuous effort to strenuous effort, "trying," as he puts it, "to forge a craft out of a language to which I was alien."

He gives just and generous acknowledgment of the help afforded him by newspaper men of The Philadelphia Record, where he started as office boy after two tortured years in a factory: but the youngster who shyly handed in "an expression of opinion * * * something to do with Cuba and the American jingoes" and got it set up among the editorials was, evidently, of the kind that attracts timely assistance.

To describe the book as unique is not to exaggerate. As the Odyssey of the Cournos family it is chockful of experiences that beggar fiction. As the story of a budding journalist who went from America to London in 1912 and left it, finally, only in 1930 it gives us an intimate picture of the various art movements which have affected the mental equilibrium of Europe during that time; and, one may add, a spicy album of verbal portraiture. It is also a treasure house of human oddities, some of whom make single appearances, like the "frowsy, middle-aged contributor to the Sunday magazine" who constructed "a marvelous literary masterpiece" made up of paid-for advertisements. Among those met with more frequently the stepfather from whom Mr. Cournos took his name is a character as fantastic as any to be found in fiction; but he was only too hopelessly true. His inventions, which had a way of vanishing in disastrous fires; the book he was always going to write and never started; his dreamy acceptance of fate which made life so hard for anybody about him; his astonishing resilience and a certain indeterminate charm which would seem to have accounted for the family's continued complaisance set him apart from ordinary people.

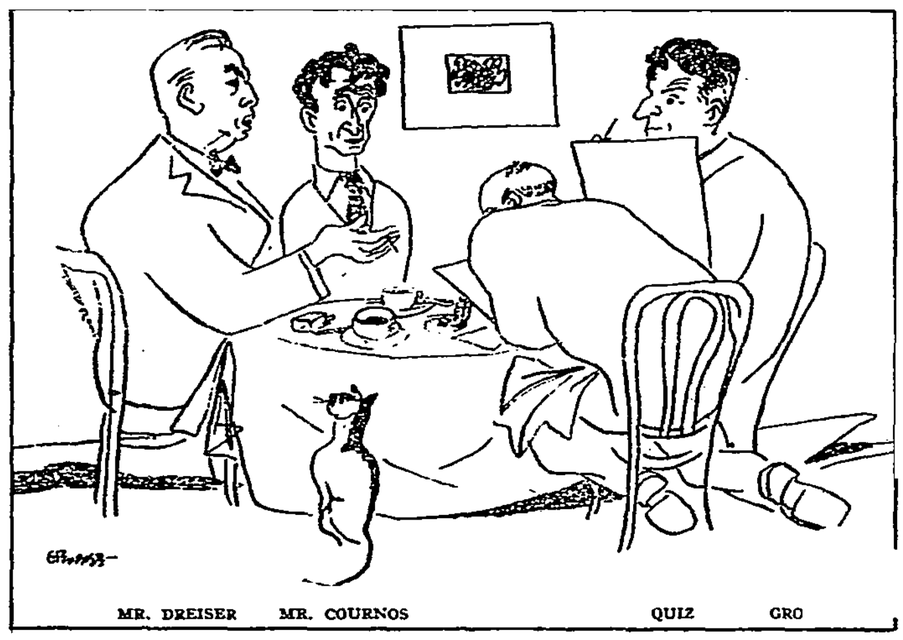
Over and above all this, however, and woven inextricably into the fabric of the work, is Mr. Cournos's philosophy of life; which many will think the most interesting feature of the autobiography. Mr. Cournos is no armchair philosopher. He has lived every opinion which he so vehemently holds. In the first ten years of an exceptionally impressionable boyhood he knew pre-revolution Russia. He was in Russia working for the Allies when the revolution started, and, in one of the most realistic passages of the autobiography, he relives his trying journey afterward to Murmansk, 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle. He has known the slums of Philadelphia and the seedy side of London. He has known, too, life in much pleasanter settings. He has been close to many of the really great—the thinkers and the creators of beauty of his time.

He has been in love, not once but many times; romantically in love, rushing off from London to America on borrowed money and a fool's errand. Twelve years have gone by since those days. Had the book been written before, it would, he says, have been different, "less tolerant, more malicious." There is no slightest trace of either malice or intolerance in it as it stands. And, in spite of its main subject, the "corridors of struggle"—to use his own phrase—through which he has had to work his way, it is a singularly happy, high-hearted book whose writer is exceedingly prone to laugh at himself.

It must be conceded, then, that Mr. Cournos has an indisputable right—an earned right—to express not only his convictions as to life itself but his opinions on life as lived by his contemporaries.

His earliest and most passionate hatred was directed against cruelty. In Liverpool, on the way to America, young Cournos sampled the instruments of medieval torture in St. George's Hall. "Hitler's Axe," he says, "will doubtless some day lie in a museum" and be shuddered at and execrated by other small boys. In America the child's innate individualism rebelled from the first against standardization, but unconsciously. Later, when he was pitchforked into a factory, the struggle became a conscious one; that was to be lifelong. A battle against the machine.

He is equally opposed, he tells us, to communism and capitalism, since both are rooted in machine worship. He bitterly resents a social order that is "productive of poverty, of slums, of spiritual sloth" but communism, today "engaged in making men better by decree," does not appeal to him as the solution. "The cry for social justice," he says, "has in no sense changed since Isaiah's day, and the ethic of 'The Sermon on the Mount' has not been improved upon." The rejection of "a spiritual fulcrum for moving the world" puts communism completely out of court. For capitalism he has this good word. It "at least allows me (in this very instance) to express my views."



The Only Thing on Which They Agreed.

"So much writing, writing, that gets nowhere," mourned Mr. Dreiser.
"Such a number of books, about nothing at all," added Mr. Cournos sadly.

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