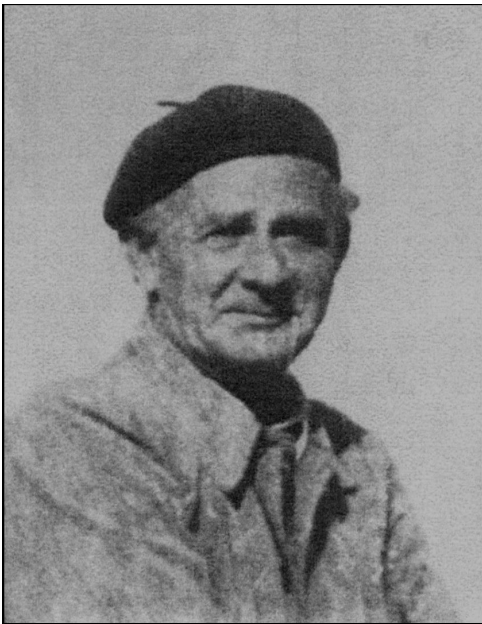


## Béla Hamvas (1897-1968) A Hungarian Admirer

ONE OF THE GREATEST metaphysical thinkers of the 20th century was Béla Hamvas, a Hungarian writer whose wide range of interests included literature, cultural history, history of science, psychology, philosophy and Eastern Asian languages. He was a non-conformist, whose aesthetic views were attacked by György Lukács<sup>1</sup>, resulting in the banning of his works from publication after 1947. From 1948 he lost his job and was forced to work on building sites and as an unskilled labourer in factories. Most of his writings were only published posthumously, after the early 1980s.



Béla Hamvas  
courtesy Maria Marghescu

Béla Hamvas had the greatest admiration for John Cowper Powys, whom he often quotes in his works. In 1946 and 1947 there was an exchange of correspondence between the two men and although Béla Hamvas's letters to John seem to be lost, John Cowper's answers were published in *The Powys Journal* III, 1993, with a moving postface by Katalin Kemény, Hamvas's wife, whose annotated translation of Rabelais into Hungarian is still a reference today.

In April 2007, a Conference was held at Balatonfüred in Hungary, on *Karneval* (1948-1951), Hamvas's major work. About forty people came to Balatonfüred, a charming city on Lake Balaton. They came from Hungary but also from France, Germany, Roumania, Serbia and Slovenia. The greatest part of the conference was dedicated to the as yet partial translation into German of *Karneval*. This complex novel of exceptional length (3 volumes), a 'human comedy' spanning continents and ages, which was published in Hungary in 1985, has so far only been translated in full into Serbian. Béla Hamvas is now recognised as a major writer in Hungary but is still more or less unknown outside his own country. His *Philosophy of Wine* and a short essay, *Trees*<sup>2</sup>, have both been translated into English together with various other essays.

JCP's famous *One Hundred Best Books* (1922) may have served as a model to Hamvas for *A száz könyv* (One Hundred Books), which contains a list of one hundred writers or works which should be read by every cultured reader.

<sup>1</sup> Lukacs, György, 1885-1971, Hungarian Marxist philosopher, writer and literary critic who influenced the mainstream of European Communist thought and formulated a Marxist system of aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup> Editio M Publishing House, Kucsera Ferenc Utea 1, 2000 Szentendre, Hungary

Hamvas selects almost the same writers as JCP: Homer, Euripides, Horace, Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, as well as the greatest English writers from Shakespeare to Sterne, Wordsworth and Keats. There are however some noticeable differences: Rousseau, not Voltaire, Dostoïevsky but also Gogol, Goethe's *Faust*, but Hölderlin too. In Hamvas's book, written more recently than Powys's, one also finds Joyce and, of course, Powys himself as number 100. Hamvas has added to his list ancient texts from India (the *Upanishads*), Tibet, China, as well as the Aramaic *Zohar*, Pascal, Thomas à Kempis, Master Eckhart or Jakob Böhme. He also mentions the *Mabinogion*, which in 1922 was not a preoccupation for Powys. But in Hamvas's "Puppet-Show" neither Walter Pater, Conrad, Henry James nor Thomas Hardy are to be found. Below is section n° 100 which Hamvas devoted to Powys:

### 100. Powys

Most writers, poets and artists play on a single instrument, even the richest, such as Dante or Shakespeare. There are only very few works that use four or five voices simultaneously. But John Cowper Powys in his works scores for a symphonic orchestra and this dizzy symphonic polyphony has at first a crushing effect; then, after a while it begins to play a refreshing role in one's life; and finally it becomes life's prime necessity. No matter whether you read the great *Wolf Solent* or the even greater *Glastonbury Romance*, or any of the essays such as *In Defence of Sensuality* or *The Art of Happiness* or the *Pleasures of Literature*: in all these works you will find a resounding and sonorous and clamouring stream of words. It was the sea that taught Powys how to write. And it is the whole, the complete, the total and universal man that speaks through him, and in his works you will find all the attributes and aptitudes and qualities and parts and capabilities and failures and errors and crimes of mankind, and you will find there all its spirits and ghosts and ancestors and descents and angels and demons and devils.<sup>3</sup>

Béla Hamvas sent Powys his book together with his own translation of the above extract. On 11 March 1947 John Cowper Powys replied:

O how deeply I was honoured and gratified by all you said for me in your 100 Books. I was so pleased. It was excellent of you my dear Béla Hamvas, to send that *good translation* with the beautifully printed original.

I am so proud to possess this little volume! Aye! it gives me such deep satisfaction to be a living character in your beautifully presented Puppet-Show of a whole Planet's writery!

And O my friend how wonderfully you have handled our coarse-grained heavy-hitting frost-bitten sea-sandy and sea-shoal rocky tongue! in this discourse of yours on the *Golden Age* and *the Apocalypse*. I *have put this precious document away among life-kept treasures* & shall keep it safe till I die.<sup>4</sup>

J. Peltier

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<sup>3</sup> Béla Hamvas: *A száz könyv* ('One Hundred Books'), Medio Kiado, Budapest, 2000 (this extract tr. Zoltan Danyi. Our thanks to Antal Dúl and Medio Kiado for permission to publish this translation).

<sup>4</sup> *Powys Journal* III, 1993, p.163