

A Hungarian writer's point of view¹ on *Wolf Solent*

JOHN COWPER POWYS should not be confused with Theodore Francis Powys, the author of *Black Bryony* and *Innocent Birds*. However, there is no possible confusion. Theodore Francis is an embittered misanthrope. John Cowper has already gone beyond that stage. He can already see that misanthropy is worthless and useless. So he becomes an introvert. He ceases to take any interest in the world, just in himself. After all, his novel is an almost personal diary, an account of his intimate souvenirs. Exact, detailed, frank, honest and disillusioned. Such are the confessions of a man who so earnestly loves himself that he can bear no suspicion whatever of narcosis, superficiality, obscurantism or confusion. A clear situation is what he wants. And for that, the first step is not misanthropy, but maybe just its opposite. He wants to nip every lie in its bud. "That a man deludes someone – says Nietzsche – is relatively a rare case in comparison with how he deludes himself." Powys knows that. But more: he lives in permanent, obstinate, painful, frightful combat with man's own lies, putting "all the energy he has" into it.

John Cowper Powys writes in English, but his language is English only in the strictest sense of the word. Should a man read him in German translation, Powys would probably be taken for a Europeanized Russian. He was compared with Dostoievsky, but as much as there is Dostoievsky in him, there are also Goethe, Tolstoy, Hamsun, Strindberg, Ibsen, Zola. His language is the typical language of the 20th century's "Weltliteratur". The same goes with his psychology. His hero, Wolf Solent, lives in England. But he could live in Switzerland, or Italy, or China, or Chile as well, and the personages could speak Hungarian, Greek or Norwegian instead of English. The plot of the novel does not depend on time. And what his characters say and go through even less. He has arbitrarily chosen his tradition from the five thousand years old literature of mankind. The whole spirit of "the habitual working of his metabolism" belongs to "Weltliteratur".

Powys, a European type. In the 15th century he carved sculptures, in the 16th

¹ Wolf Solent, *a novel by John Cowper Powys*, Béla Hamvas, in *Nyugat* 10, 1931. *Nyugat* ("West") was an influential Hungarian literary magazine, launched in 1908 and reflecting diverse modern tendencies. It played an important part in the literary movement bearing the same name, until the eve of World War II.

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he was a protestant, in the 17th he became a counter-reformist, in the 18th he “enlightened himself”², in the 19th he discovered Machinery and was a Socialist. To require of him to denounce his past? Why, he can be only what he was and what he will be. A European.

His collection of essays *The Meaning of Culture* was published in 1929 by Norton in New York, in the same series as the works of Watson, Dewey and Russell. From the scientific point of view, his work is unimportant. It is indeed inconceivable that he came to be included among these apostles of behaviourism and pragmatism. His objective results are nil, and his definitions are naive from a theoretical point of view; finally, he doesn't try to systemize them at all. The book is a personal summation. The sum of the notes of an artist of astoundingly wide reading. The chapters are arbitrary. Everywhere he talks of literature, whether the theme be philosophy, religion or painting. He asks himself towards which religion he would lean: the Evangelical (Dostoievsky) or the Natural (Walter Pater) Religion. But this dilemma is resolved in a higher artistic unity: to neither and to both. “Prepared for either event”. Nor are the systems of philosophy something to which the reader should attach himself unreservedly. Philosophies are windows. Plato is green, Hegel yellow, Nietzsche scarlet – through these windows everything looks green, yellow or scarlet. Besides, “philosophy can do much in the interest of personal culture, but nothing in the interest of happiness”.

He is many-faceted and very modern. He knows every little street of literature. He takes in all of modern life. Montaigne blended with Tolstoy. Don Quixote who stays at home. At the same time Keats and Whitman. He absorbed and elaborated the epic of Gilgamesh, as well as Proust. He has read *Arabian Nights*, Eckermann, Bruno, Plotinus, Vauvenargues, Conrad, Valéry, Kant, Jerome, Hölderlin, Dante, Barrès, Keyserling, Santayana, Tagore, Unamuno and Krishnamurti. He touches on questions of economy, psychology, sociology, technology, history, pedagogy. He made his own the whole of culture. There also we find “Weltliteratur”.

Novel's content: Wolf Solent comes from London to the provinces to help a whimsical eccentric called Urquhart in his literary affairs. He falls in love with two women, one of whom is a sparkling beauty, a charming wild flower – that's Gerda, whose particular talent is that she speaks the language of birds to perfection: she sings like a nightingale, whistles like a thrush, chirps like a skylark; the second is deep-hearted, educated, vigorous Christie, who under the title of “Anatomy of Melancholy” is writing a feminine philosophy. To one he is attached with love, to the other with “passionate friendship”. Gerda signifies life, blood, love, reality, Christie signifies intellect, culture, spirit. Wolf Solent is thrown amidst two women, amidst two possibilities of life. Had he two souls, with one he would love Gerda, he would become a gardener and would weed a garden bed of strawberries on a glistening summer morning, while with his other soul he would love Christie and would build a system of philosophy that would be like Westminster Abbey. But he has just one soul, and he can only totter from one to the other.

² A typical Hamvas expression, not even usually belonging to Hungarian.

He struggles, he suffers. He struggles a lot and suffers a lot. He loves – they hate. He gives himself up – they refuse him. He retires – they won't let him go. He craves for peace – they disturb him. If he bursts into flames, they cool him down; if he cools himself down, they inflame him. On one side Gerda, nature, soul, citadel, bird-song – on the other Christie, superior detachment, sober peace, wisdom. He wants to be consumed in the feverish fire of life, but at the same time to be “as God on the seventh day”.

There's only one solution for this – Shakespeare's “Ripeness is all”. That is what *Wolf Solent* chooses. He ripens.

Novel's first sentence: “From Waterloo Station to the small country town of Ramsgard in Dorset is a journey of not more than three or four hours, but having by good luck found a compartment to himself, *Wolf Solent* was able to indulge in such an orgy of concentrated thought, that these three or four hours lengthened themselves out into something beyond all human measurement”.

Already on the first page, already in the first sentence, life is of such a dimension, that you are instantly bewitched by its atmosphere. Language seems a living substance, the words seem to move and have a life of their own. Something radiates from them. Life, tension. This concentrated thinking, capable of extending the moments in an interval of time that surpasses “all human measurement”, creates an intensive, penetrating, tormenting absorption, which does not let you go until the very last full stop. It is really an orgy of thought. The flood of sentiments, remembrances, thoughts, images. Something between description and analysis, both of them and more than both taken together. Apparently objective, but in truth suggestive and subjective. The atmosphere of interior storm. Life at a temperature much higher than normal existence. The depths of intimacy are such that the only reason why they don't stupefy is that there is no time to catch your breath — immediately another one appears, and so on indefinitely. Some parts, particularly the dialogues between *Wolf* and *Christie*, seem to be written by a fever-sick person. This category Goethe calls “demoniac”. The novel is an unfathomable torrent of demoniac “destiny-loaded” moments.

Ortega in his brilliant study writes that the modern novel has three phases, Dostoevsky, Proust and Joyce. Through these three phases, the fable, the structure, the uniform style, gradually became superfluous. Old proportions disintegrated, and everything that was still a requirement fifty years ago disappeared. Henceforth the only task of the novel is — creative psychology. The attitude that characters in a novel should be psychological props of the work came to an end. For “there was no life in the novel anymore, just the relation deduced from life”. Modern novel creates new life. Who fits in this lineage, where three giants are showing the way, is up to date, modern, progressive, deep-rooted, true. Who can't produce creative psychology is irrevocably obsolete, works in vain, is inopportune, superfluous and deprived of significance.

Among the few who are modern, up to date, true, progressive, we find John Cowper Powys. *Wolf Solent* is, in Ortega's sense, creative psychology. It aims at a

new possibility of life. Still only a possibility. But already – a possibility. What it gives surpasses by far what still until recently was bearing the name of novel. Not at all a distraction. It torments, disturbs, incommodes, incenses, enchants, dejects, provokes. But it forces the reader to live. At least while he is reading *Wolf Solent*. And after he has read it, he won't remember it as a novel, but as an intensive period of his life, maybe as a living person, or a journey, or a profound conversation, but never as a book, and always as real life.

Béla Hamvas (tr. Marko Gregoric³)

Béla Hamvas (1897-1968), a brief biography

Hungarian writer of note, he was born in Eperjes into the family of an evangelical pastor. The family moved to Pozsony (Bratislava), where he graduated. He was a volunteer during the Great War and was wounded twice on the front-line in Ukraine. As his father refused to take the oath of allegiance to Slovakia in 1919, the family was expelled from Pozsony and moved to Budapest, where Béla entered Péter Pázmány University. After working as a journalist, he accepted in 1927 a position at the Main Library of Budapest and married Katalin Kemény in 1937. He published numerous essays, dealing with literary, aesthetic, philosophical, sociological, and psychological issues, as well as translations. He was called up three times for military service in WW II. When in 1945 a bomb hit the Hamvas apartment, his home, library and manuscripts were destroyed.

In 1948 he was placed on the B-list by the communist regime (i.e. barred from publishing) and forced into retirement. Thereafter he was first a farm worker in Szentendre, then an unskilled worker in a power plant, while completing his other works. He died of brain hæmorrhage in 1968.

During his lifetime, he was in relation with René Guénon the French writer, Lajos Szabó the philosopher, and Tibor Szemzo, a musician. He wrote to John Cowper Powys in 1946 and 1947, and John Cowper's letters in reply were published in the 1993 *Powys Journal*. In an important Postscript to these Six Letters, his wife, Katalin Kemény, herself a distinguished scholar⁴, explains that the correspondence between the two men ceased in the autumn of 1947 when the Iron Curtain fell, thus cutting Hungary off from Western Europe.

Katalin Kemény recalls the fact that in his *Introduction to the New English Novel*, Béla Hamvas had dedicated a whole chapter to John Cowper Powys, discussing *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance* in detail, and writing that "J.C. Powys fulfils all the promises that have been made by the English novel." *Wolf Solent* was translated into Hungarian by one of Hamvas's friends on his initiative.

³ Marko Gregoric is a young poet and translator who lives in Zagreb. He has the greatest admiration for J.C. Powys and has translated *Psychoanalysis & Morality* into Serbo-Croatian under the title *Psihoanaliza I Moralnost*, Naklada Jesenski i Turk, Zagreb, 2001.

⁴ According to Marko Gregoric, Katalin Kemény's excellent and copiously annotated translation of the works of Rabelais (1936), is still considered to be the best.