Two Multiverses, "One Dizzy Symphonic Polyphony" – Béla Hamvas and John Cowper Powys*

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A magnificent conjunction indeed! Two of the greatest visionaries of the 20th century, two free spirits. One was persecuted, both are largely ignored in their respective countries to this day. The very last section in Béla Hamvas's *A száz könyv*, ('A Hundred Books'), was devoted to John Cowper Powys, whose works he described with a musical metaphor which I have borrowed for the title of my talk, and which surprisingly the Russian writer Mikhail Bakhtin was to use too:

> 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. (Hamvas, *A száz könyv*, 59, tr. Zoltán Danyi)

My point of departure is based on 'The Six Letters' that, as we shall see, Powys wrote to Hamvas, (an 'exchange' of which unfortunately the Hamvas letters are missing). They were published in 1993 in *The Powys Journal*, the Powys Society's annual publication, and triggered my curiosity. I wondered about this Hungarian writer of whom until then I had never heard, but who had so obviously delighted Powys. I was struck by the unquestionable enthusiasm and pleasure, obvious in Powys's very first reply, dated December 5, 1946:

> What you tell me about that work of yours entitled "Scientia Sacra" is of the greatest interest to me – in fact everything in this letter – which

* This is a revised version of the paper presented as a lecture at the Hamvas-Powys Symposium and it was dedicated to commemorate the intellectual relationship of the two writers, thinkers. The symposium was organised by the Departments of English Studies and Philosophy, Eszterházy Károly College, in Eger on 5 November 2008 to celebrate the double anniversary: the 45th anniversary of John Cowper Powys's death and 40th anniversary of Béla Hamvas's death.

> is a magical letter in its power of calling spirits from "the vasty deep" for it is full of all sorts of mysterious vistas *intimated & indicated*, as it were, *between the lines* rather than verbally elaborated or logically rounded off, & I can see your way of plunging into *media res* is like my own! (Powys, "Six Letters", 157-58)

Several times in the course of this correspondence which lasted only from December 1946 to October 1947, Powys mentions their "mental kinship", evoking "kindred spirits", "telepathic friendship" and "affinity of mind", certainly based on discussions about different subjects important to both, and the exchange of books. It is quite probable that the correspondence between them would have developed into a fascinating exchange, had it not been brutally stopped in Autumn 1947, at which date Hamvas could no longer have foreign correspondents.

Béla Hamvas is one of the first among the world-wide intelligentsia to have recognised Powys's genius. In the thirties already, Powysian leitmotives had struck a cord with his sensitivity and he had praised Powys's books in his book entitled *Introduction to the New English Novel*. The first letter he wrote to Powys in 1946 was motivated by his wish to translate the 'Introduction' preceding the volume of essays Powys had written. *The Pleasures of Literature* (1938) contains twenty lengthy essays on writers who were of paramount importance to Powys. It included, among others: the Bible, Homer, Dostoievsky, Rabelais, Dickens, Greek Tragedy, Saint Paul, Dante, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, Cervantes, Nietzsche, and Goethe. All these can also be found in 'A Hundred Books' by Hamvas. I will read you a short extract of the long Introduction to *The Pleasures of Literature*, because it shows, I think, why Hamvas would have been so interested in it:

> Magicians have never been able to control their angels or their demons until they discovered their names. The origin of all literature lies here. A word is a magic incantation by which the self exercises power – first over itself and then over other selves and then, for all we know, over the powers of nature. (...) Though books, as Milton says, may be the embalming of mighty spirits, they are also the resurrection of rebellious, reactionary, fantastical and wicked spirits! In books dwell all the demons and all the angels of the human mind. It is for this reason that a book-shop – especially a second-hand bookshop – is an arsenal of explosives, an armoury of revolutions, an opium-den of reactions. (Powys, *The Pleasures of Literature*, 1–2)

The two writers had in common a prodigious knowledge of all the great literature of the past, as well as an impressive body of works of their own. Both

were immersed in a quest for the return of 'The Golden Age', a spiritual quest for which they probed many philosophical systems. Neither ever craved celebrity, but lived a life of toil and hardship in difficult circumstances. However, they kept faith in their magical way of life. What probably ultimately saved their sanity was that they were both endowed with a great sense of humour.

There exist of course differences between Béla Hamvas and John Cowper Powys. Among his multiple works Hamvas had written novels, in particular *Karneval*, a major novel by all accounts, but I have the impression (and I beg to be forgiven if I am wrong) he was more than anything else a philosopher, a great thinker and essayist, who integrated Asiatic and Western traditions. Zoltán Danyi says in his Preface to the English translation of *Fák* (Trees): "… [Hamvas is] one of the few who can mould the essay form into an organic fusion of philosophy and of poetry of the highest order" (Hamvas, *Trees*, 11).

Hamvas also concentrated on art and music, both supreme concerns of his, whereas Powys wrote only one very philosophical and theoretical tract, *The Complex Vision*. He was more interested in writing practical essays for the common man, such as *Philosophy of Solitude* or *The Meaning of Culture*. He also wrote poems, monographies on Dostoievsky, Rabelais, Keats, James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson, as well as three volumes of literary criticism. But I would say that his particular genius lay in the writing of voluminous novels: he was above all a novelist.

Their social circumstances were also very different. Powys was born in 1872, one year after Marcel Proust, ten years before Virginia Woolf. He came from an upper middle-class family and, on his mother's side, could claim the famous poets, John Donne and William Cowper among his ancestors. While in Cambridge he decided he would not follow in his father's steps to become a clergyman, and became instead an itinerant lecturer for the two great English Universities, in a program mainly aimed at the average intelligent public, and thus despised by professional academics. For these lectures on various literary subjects, particularly on individual authors and poets, he soon developed a unique style based above all on imagination and inspiration, rather than on carefully prepared notes. In 1910 he left Great Britain and settled in the United States where he met with great success as a lecturer. He met a great variety of people: Charlie Chaplin, Emma Goldman, Paul Robeson, the dancer Isadora Duncan, Theodore Dreiser who became a close friend. But also humble folk: the black porters on the trains, the farmer next door or the poor immigrants who came to his lectures to improve their education.

He defined himself as "much more an actor than a thinker" and indeed he was an extraordinary orator. One of his friends, Maurice Browne, who was an important theatre manager in the United States, and knew him well, later remembered:

> When he spoke on a subject near his heart, he inspired his hearers. Once I heard him talk on Hardy for over two hours to an audience of over two thousand in a huge auditorium in the heart of Chicago's slums; throughout these one hundred and thirty odd minutes there was not a sound from his listeners save an occasional roar of applause or laughter; and when he had finished speaking we rose like one person to our feet, demanding more. The man was a great actor. (Browne 109)

At the end of the twenties he suddenly took the momentous decision to quit the "lecture circus" as he called it, and to live by his pen only. It was a courageous move for he was then fifty-seven and was heading for great poverty. That decade saw the publication of such major works as Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner came out in 1929 as did *Wolf Solent*, Powys's first noteworthy novel, to be followed by fifteen bulky novels, equally striking. It was thanked to Béla Hamvas's intervention that the original and unforgettable novel *Wolf Solent* was translated into Hungarian by a friend of his. The novel is centered on the eponym character, Wolf, who lives by what he calls his 'life-illusion'[1] or his 'mythology', a complex apprehension of the world through his sensations, what he felt was a certain power of projecting his soul into nature. By accepting a position as secretary to a Dorset squire, and becoming involved with other people's lives, and with two very different girls, one of whom he marries, he puts into jeopardy his sensations dearest to him. In the course of events, he will suffer a hard lesson, through an ordeal which will put in peril his 'mythology, to the point of becoming tempted by suicide, for he feels unable to cope with the world and the evil he discovers.

Another major book was his *Autobiography*, written at the age of sixty, which he defines as "the history of the 'de-classing' of a bourgeois-born-personality" (Powys, *Autobiography*, 626). It is a vastly entertaining work, in which in a digressive way he conveyed the intricacies of his character, and made a disarming display of his most obscure thoughts. Recently A.N. Wilson, a renowned English writer, has defined it as "one of the great books of the 20th century" (Wilson). Henry Miller who attended Powys's lectures in New York in the twenties wrote later in *The Books in My Life*:

> His words, even today, have the power of bewitching me. At this very moment I am deep in Autobiography, a most nourishing, stimulating book of 652 close-packed pages. It is the sort of biography I revel in, being utterly frank, truthful, sincere, and containing a superabundant

[1] A phrase which Powys probably borrowed from Ibsen, and which signifies the central idea which a human being must have of himself, if his life is to have meaning.

> wealth of trivia (most illuminating!) as well as the major events, or turning points, in one's life. (...) His book is full of life-wisdom, revealed not so much through big incidents as little ones. (135-36)

Powys returned to Britain in 1934 and settled in Corwen, a village in North Wales. Wales was after all the mythic Celtic land of his ancestors, and it was to give him the inspiration for his historical novel, *Owen Glendower* and above all *Porius*, which is perhaps the greatest of his 'romances', as he preferred to call them. In March 11, 1947 he mentions to Hamvas he was working on it:

> I am fascinated to see how near & close our minds and thoughts & ideas & inspirations are – for in the book a very long historic novel or really only *semi-demi*-historic! on Corwen in 499 AD I bring in *Merlin* under one of his Welsh names as "*Myrddin-Wyllt*" and I make him think of himself as an undying titan-god as none other than *Cronos* or *Saturn* himself and as struggling still to bring back the *Golden Age*! (Powys, "Six Letters", 163–64)

At the time Béla Hamvas was himself deeply engaged in his own polyphonic *Karnevál*.

The world as seen by Powys is his own. It was painfully won out of his battles with his own complex, protean personality, and its varied layers of manias, fears, frustrations, strange obsessions, his challenge to fate and to the Deity he named "the First Cause". Powys is not a 'literary' author, he is not concerned with formal perfection. He was a writer by inner necessity and therefore never attached much importance to his style, which can sometimes be extravagant, he never considered himself an "artist". Throughout his novels, the oblique effects of the action count more than the action itself. Great importance is given to mental states, to thoughts going on inside the minds of the characters, more than to their actions. He is intent on recording everything related to each of them, their sensations, their habits, their obsessions, even some irrelevant thought, such as we all sometimes have. The reader is never sure how the characters are going to evolve.

Powys had a rare openness of mind and showed far more advanced ideas than D.H. Lawrence, to take a famous example, in matters of sexuality. He describes its shades and complexities, its ambiguities. Except for sadism which Powys hates and condemns, he included homosexuality, onanism, fetishism and incest in his novels. He wrote that "no religion that doesn't deal with sex-longing in some kind of way is much use to us" (Powys, *Psychology and Morality*, 21-24).

On the philosophical level, Hamvas was influenced by Karl Jaspers first, and later by René Guénon, whom he closely followed in his elucidation and

clarification of ancient religious traditions. He was also deeply involved in esoterism, and an adept of alchemy. As for Powys, I would say that at bottom he was a practical philosopher, not a theoretician. He had had the classical education given to students of great English universities at the time and had read intensely. His own source of inspiration was based above all on a deep knowledge of pre-Socratic philosophers. He had mastered the main trends of Western philosophy, admiring Spinoza, and to a lesser degree Kant and Hegel, for he was far more interested in metaphysics than in ethics. He also often referred to Tao:

> There is too much expression. On all sides we are aware of too many things – and nearly all of them moving too fast! All this modern hubbub about self-expression is a sign of the disease. What we want is not more self-expression but less self-expression! The self is most deeply itself – as the Taoists taught – hen it liberates itself from the necessity of all this "expressiveness" and just flows like water, floats like air, melts imperceptibly into the immemorial strata of aeons-old rocks. The hour has come when the human mind should recognize its magic power; its power, not of expression, but of escape; not of self-realization, but of self-transmutation. (Powys, *A Philosophy of Solitude*, 226*)*

and was opposed to the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. Rejecting Nietzsche's theory of the superman, he declared himself the champion of tramps, misfits and the ill-constituted.

Without any doubt, though, it was for William James whom he found "a startling delight", that Powys had the greatest admiration, and his ideas took their origins from James's philosophy, who found the reality of things in the Many rather than in the One. James had concluded *The Varieties of Religious Experience* thus: "The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist..." (James 519). It was from him that Powys acquired the important idea on which he based his own philosophy, that of a Multiverse, writing: "The astronomical world, however illimitable, is only one part and parcel of the Mystery of Life. It is *not* all there is. We are in touch with other dimensions, other levels of life" (Powys, *Autobiography*, 652). Powys's true dimension was that of a preacher, conscious of having a message to deliver, a druid or a shaman close to primitivism. He was in earnest when he declared: "My writings – novels and all – are simply so much propaganda, as effective as I can make it, for my philosophy of life" (Powys, *Autobiography*, 641).

And what is this "philosophy of life"? It is hard to draw any definitions in Powys's case, for with him things are never over-simplified and he could have

exclaimed, after Walt Whitman "Do I contradict myself? Very well then... I contradict myself". What we can affirm though is that his philosophy is not theoretical, but intensely practical. "Powys does not have 'views'" on philosophy, "he has passions", as a contemporary philosopher (and admirer) wrote (Diffey 27). The following statement may be taken as a genuine declaration of Powys's beliefs:

> My own feeling is – it may be a rooted insanity but I do not think so – that the only profoundly philosophical way of taking life is a threefold act of the intellect. First to accept our sense impressions of the world as the world's true reality, against all electronic reduction. Secondly, to accept what we feel of our consciousness and will as our deepest hint as to what causes the nature of this reality to be as it is. Thirdly, to force ourselves to enjoy in a particular way this self-made universe that we are for ever destroying and recreating. (Powys, *Autobiography*, 56)

Powys never owned a car, never had a radio, had never been on a plane. He was suspicious of science, which man has the means to use wrongly. He fought all his life against the practice of vivisection, "a wickedness" which, as he said, "contradicts and cancels the one single advantage that our race has got from what is called evolution, namely the development of *our sense of right and wrong*" (Powys, *Autobiography*, 639). A passionate and clear-sighted ecologist, long before our times, he was deeply conscious that there is a necessary link, a mysterious and compelling harmony to respect between a blade of grass, the humblest insect, man and the cosmos, which entails that we respect life under all its forms.

> A really lonely spirit can gradually come to feel itself just as much a plant, a tree, a sea-gull, a whale, a badger, a woodchuck, a goblin, an elf, a rhinoceros, a demigod, a moss-covered rock, a planetary demiurge, as a man or a woman. Such a spirit can gaze at the great sun, as he shines through the morning mist, and feel itself to be one magnetic Power contemplating another magnetic Power. Such a spirit can stand on the edge of the vast sea and feel within itself a turbulence and a calm that belong to an æon of time far earlier than the first appearance of man upon earth. It is only out of the depths of an absolute loneliness that a man can strip away all the problematical ideals of his race and all the idols of his human ambitions, and look dispassionately about him, saying to himself, "Here am I, an ichthyosaurus-ego, with atavistic reminiscences that go back to the vegetable-world and the rock-world, and with prophetic premonitions

> in me that go forward to the super-men of the future!" (Powys, *In Defence of Sensuality,* 100*)*

For Powys the greatest achievement possible is to feel an "unearthly exultation", an ecstatic state, provoked by a deep and willed mental concentration. In these moments of ecstasy our vision becomes the "eternal vision". He had one rule in his life and never tired of repeating it in his books: "Enjoy, defy, forget!" Powys and Hamvas took up Wordsworth's famous statement: "The pleasure which there is in life itself" (Wordsworth 132).[2]

When discussing religion, Powys declared to Béla Hamvas:

> I shall myself stay & remain an *atheist* but with strong polytheistical, heathen, religious, *not* mystical but rather *magical instincts*!! (...) [I am] a very *un-academic illogical disciple* of the *Pluralism* and the Polytheism of *William James* and I fancy I might say of *Walt Whitman!* (Powys, "Six Letters", 161)

As he became older, he got into the habit of praying to many different gods, to the Earth-Spirit, to the spirits inhabiting woods, trees, rocks. Describing his rituals in *Autobiography*, he writes that he had "a mania for endowing every form of the Inanimate with life, and then worshipping it as some kind of a little god" (Powys, *Autobiography* 629). He held special worship for trees and recommends, when we feel weary, to embrace one with our arms around it, for then: "you can transfer by a touch to its earth-bound trunk all your most neurotic troubles! These troubles of yours the tree accepts, and absorbs them into its own magnetic life; so that henceforth they lose their devilish power of tormenting you" (Powys, *Autobiography* 650).

Béla Hamvas in his beautiful meditation *Fák* expresses the same idea. He wrote of the tree being "less demanding, more satisfying and more enduring", adding: "Of all living creatures the tree is the one whose life path is predicated upon submission to the embrace" (Hamvas, *Trees*, 27).

What makes Hamvas and Powys unique among the writers of the 20th century is their metaphysical vision of the world, and the equal importance given in this vision to all elements, animate and inanimate. For both there were many layers in so-called reality. Above all, they were philosophical anarchists, and had the greatest faith in the power and imagination of the individual. They strived to combine an esoteric way of life with a creative life. And indeed one cannot be separated from the other.

What Henry Miller wrote about Powys can indeed be applied to these two great spirits:

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[2] William Wordsworth, 'Michael' A Pastoral Poem, line 77.

> The book which comes alive is the book which has been penetrated through and through by the devouring heart. (...) To encounter a man whom we can call a living book is to arrive at the very fount of creation. He makes us witness of the consuming fire which rages throughout the universe entire and which gives not warmth alone nor enlightenment, but enduring vision, enduring strength, enduring courage. (139)

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