

Reading Wolf Solent Reading¹

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“My own life on earth has resembled Solent’s in being dominated by Books.”

(Powys, “Preface” 11)

Reading. Reading cheap stories and pornography. Reading the scandalous history of Dorset. Reading the story of the dead father in the landscape of his homeland. Reading the metaphor of the Name of the Father². Reading—and rewriting—classics of the carnivalesque tradition³ in European literature. To a great extent, John Cowper Powys’s *Wolf Solent* is about reading as such and its representation plays the most significant role in the novel because it draws attention to a problematic aspect of narration by highlighting “the division in [Wolf Solent’s] narrative consciousness” (Nordius 6). Though third person narration is used in the novel, the story is told exclusively from one point of view, that of the main character and “[o]utside this consciousness [t]here is no author’s voice with knowledge of objective truth. There is no final authority” (C. A. Coates quoted in Nordius 46). What the reader receives is the story in Wolf Solent’s reading(s) and thus the identity of this first—and ultimate—reader is a major determining factor in producing readings of *Wolf Solent*.

And here a vicious circle is apparently closed: the text is generated by

¹ The present study is a section of a much longer analysis of the carnivalesque in *Wolf Solent*, which contains a separate chapter on the theoretical background of my reading. For this reason this paper contains only references to critical writings, but does not enlarge on their relationship. It is a section of my PhD dissertation and has been completed with the assistance of the Eötvös Scholarship supplemented by a grant from the Hungarian Ministry of Education (OM).

² Cf. Füzesséry Éva, “Lacan és az ‘apa neve,’” *Thalassa* 4 (1993/2): 45–61 and Anthony Wilden, “Lacan and the Discourse of the Other,” Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self — The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 157–312.

³ Cf. Mihail Bahtyin, *François Rabelais művészete, a középkor és a reneszánsz népi kultúrája*, trans. Kőnczöl Csaba (Budapest, Európa Könyvkiadó, 1982) and Бахтин, М. М. *Проблемы поэтики Достоевского. Собрание сочинений*. Vol. 6. (Москва: Русские словари, 2002), 5–300.

the narrative consciousness, but Wolf Solent's identity is generated by the text itself. So much so, that for example Nordius's interpretation of the novel as the expression of Powys's philosophy of solitude in the making (45) shows it as the "plotting out" (in the sense Peter Brooks uses the term⁴) of the central metaphor of the "lone wolf" (46) inherent in the main character's name. Wolf Solent as a subject seems to be unambiguously definable by one metaphor, by his name—which appears as a clearly readable sign. However, the reader might realise that the word "solent", revealing a fundamental feature of both character and text, can actually be read as a play on words, combining sole/solitary and silent. The ambiguity inherent in his name is only one example of the multitude of carnivalesque ambiguities⁵ characteristic of the novel. Through the character of Wolf Solent as the archetypal reader, reading itself is represented in the text as a form of transgression, which, instead of creating coherent and unquestionable ultimate discourses, rather opens up new gaps in the already existing ones by maintaining a constant dialogue⁶ of text and reader. The acceptance of

⁴ Cf. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot — Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England, Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁵ Apart from the works by Bakhtin mentioned above, cf. Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," *Desire in Language — A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1980), 64–91.

⁶ I use the word "dialogue" in the Bakhtinian sense here (cf. М. М. Бахтин, *Проблемы поэтики Достоевского* and Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel"). Cf. К. Томсон, "Диалогическая поэтика Бахтина." trans. from English into Russian А. Махов and Г. Шегалова. *М. М. Бахтин: pro et contra — Личность и творчество М. М. Бахтина в оценке русской и мировой мысли*. Vol. 1, ed., introduction and commentary К. Г. Исупов (Санкт-Петербург, РХГИ, 2001), 312–322. Thomson claims that Bakhtin's notion of the dialogue is a much debated one and his contemporary interpreters often emphasise such aspects of his ideas which are not sufficiently detailed and elaborated to settle the issue. He himself suggests taking it as a "strategy" of polemics which Bakhtin himself usually applied when he, without any intention to nivellate them, let the ideas of his opponents speak for themselves in his writings. Thomson, relying on Ken Hirschkop's opinion, treats this "strategy" as a "kind of populist deconstruction" (313), which clearly relates Bakhtin's critical writings with poststructuralist, rather than structuralist reading strategies. A similarly broad understanding of the term is also reflected by the special edition of the Hungarian journal of literary criticism, *Helikon*, on the dialogue. Cf. *Változatok a dialógusra — Helikon — Irodalomtudományi Szemle XLVII* (2001/1). Peter Brooks in his short study, "The idea of a psychoanalytic literary criticism" [*Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed.

these bitter-sweet qualities of reading with the major ironies making them possible and the solitary celebration of the joys given by the openness of the reading procedure identify it as a “reduced” form of the carnivalesque⁷—probably the only form possible in the 20th century.

The function of reading as a central determiner of Wolf Solent’s identity is established by its metonymical/metaphorical connection with his metaphor for the core of his consciousness, his ‘mythology’. The latter is a concept that conspicuously resists further interpretation in itself, taken out of its context. On the one hand, Wolf “use[s] it entirely in a private sense of his own” (Powys 19). On the other hand, it is most often represented in further images which usually undermine each other. In other words, it is a metaphor leading only to other metaphors, for example his ‘mythology’ as “hushed, expanding leaves”, “secret vegetation—the roots of whose being hid themselves beneath the dark waters of his consciousness” (Powys 20–21). The “roots” evidently lead from the conscious to the unconscious, in Lacanian terms Wolf’s ‘mythology’ covers his ‘true’ identity, it screens “the adulterated chapter” of his history, which can be read most conspicuously in the transference neurosis, in the compulsively repeated symptoms surrounding the gap in the story (*The Language of the Self* 20–24). Wolf introduces his ‘mythology’ in the following manner:

This was a certain trick he had of doing what he called ‘sinking into his soul’. This trick had been a furtive custom with him from very early days. In his childhood *his mother had often rallied him about it* in her light-hearted way, and had applied to these trances, or these fits of absent-mindedness, an amusing but rather *indecent nursery name*. *His father*, on the other hand, *had encouraged him* in these moods, taking them very gravely, and treating him, when under their spell, as if he were a sort of *infant magician*. (Powys 19, italics mine)

The exact circumstances of the generation of his ‘mythology’, as it

Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan (London, Routledge, 1987), 1–18] also connects Bakhtinian dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalysis and his own psychoanalytic literary criticism, more concretely with textual analysis through the application of the Freudian concept of transference situation to literary analysis (11).

⁷ Cf. Bakhtin’s description of the changes of the grotesque, a phenomenon belonging to the core of the carnivalesque. He claims that in the Romantic period the grotesque and thus the carnivalesque became relevant only to the personal sphere of the individual, their universal character gradually diminished and finally disappeared. The original carnivalesque laughter also changed its nature, its regenerative power was brought to the minimum, which resulted in the dominance of its “reduced” forms, humour, irony and sarcasm (Bahtyin 50–51).

suits any screen memory covering a traumatic experience, remain hidden. However, its relationship with early childhood, the antithetical reaction of the two parents, the “indecency” attached to it by the mother and the imaginary power position implied by the “infant magician” practically cry for a psychoanalytic interpretation. In a Freudian-Lacanian context⁸, Wolf Solent’s ‘mythology’ is a classical case of infantile regression to wish fulfilment in daydreaming, instead of the core of his consciousness it is a symptom, a (false) construction⁹ with the function of hiding the seemingly forgotten traumatic knot in the unconscious¹⁰, which must be read and reread to form a more authentic story of Wolf Solent’s identity.

For this reason the readable links which connect the “censored chapter” of the unconscious to this ominous gap give extremely useful help for the analyst. If Wolf Solent’s ‘mythology’ is a case of daydreaming, it is directed at the repetition of an idealistic situation in which the wish fulfilment was granted in his childhood¹¹. For Wolf Solent the perfect situation that is to be repeated is sitting at the bow-window of his grandmother’s house—a re-enactment of the circumstances of finding the word ‘mythology’ for his special habit—thus supplying the first useful links to the “public” and “untouched” chapters of his identity:

It was, however, when staying in his grandmother’s house at Weymouth that the word had come to him which he now always used in his own mind to describe these obsessions. It was the word ‘*mythology*’; and he used it entirely in a private sense of his own. He could remember very well where he first came upon the word. It was in a curious room, called ‘the ante-room’, which was connected by folding-doors with his grandmother’s drawing-room [...] The window of his grandmother’s room opened upon the sea; and Wolf, *carrying the word ‘mythology’ into this bow-window*, allowed it to become his own secret name for his own secret habit. (Powys 19–20, italics mine)

As it turns out, the central element which dominates the scene is the

⁸ Cf. Sigmund Freud, “A költő és a fantáziaműködés,” trans. Szilágyi Lilla, *Művészeti írások, Művei IX*, ed. Erős Ferenc (Budapest, Filum Kiadó, 2001), 115–200, Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self — The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. with notes and commentary Anthony Wilden (Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1981). A critique of the Freudian text relevant here is introduced by Peter Brooks in “The idea of a psychoanalytic literary criticism” and *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford, UK, Cambridge, USA, Blackwell, 1994).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

(bow-)window, an image which returns several times later in the text always associated with the pleasurable place where Wolf Solent likes or would like to be. At the beginning of the story the thirty-five-year-old Solent is shown travelling home to his birthplace in Dorset after a twenty-five-year absence, sitting at the window of an otherwise empty railway compartment, deeply submerged in “an orgy of concentrated thought” (Powys 13), in his personal ‘mythology’ (Powys 19). He characterises his mental state in the following manner:

Outward things [. . .] were to him like faintly-limned images in a mirror, the true reality of which lay all the while in his mind [. . .]

What he experienced now was a vague wonder as to whether the events that awaited him—these new scenes—these unknown people—would be able to do what no outward events had done—break up this *mirror of half-reality* and drop great stones of real reality—drop them and lodge them—hard, brutal, material stones—down there among those dark waters and that mental foliage. (Powys 21, italics mine)

The overall image of Wolf Solent represented here is fundamentally reminiscent of “The Lady of Shallot”. He is locked up in the ivory tower of his own consciousness, intentionally separating and defending himself from outside events, which appear as mere reflections and shadows. As a result, the last twenty-five years of his life have been monotonous and uneventful; “he has lived peacefully under the despotic affection of his mother, with whom, when he was only a child of ten, he had left Dorsetshire, and along with Dorsetshire, all the agitating memories of his dead father” (Powys 14).

The same surface of consciousness also seems to protect him from himself: since all the events of his ‘real’ life take place on a mental plane, in his ‘mythology’, his being locked up in a state of utter passivity in the shell of his consciousness hinders him from any actual action. However, “the condition of narratability [is] to enter a state of deviance and detour (ambition, quest, the pose of a mask) [. . .] before returning to the quiescence of the nonnarratable” (Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* 108). It is exactly Wolf Solent’s ‘mythology’ that makes it impossible for him to become the hero of his own story and thus to have an identity (Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* 33) of his own. His story—the novel—can only start when he is willy-nilly pushed out of this passivity, and ends with shattering his ‘mythology’ as a shelter from “reality”, but his ultimate desire is to return to the ideal situation of sitting at the window and submerging in his ‘mythology’. For example, on returning to Dorset his wish to live in one of the little cottages is embodied in his attempt “to fancy what it would be like to sit in the bow-window of any one of these, drinking tea and eating bread-and-honey,

while the spring afternoon slowly darkened towards twilight" (Powys 66–67). When trying to imagine what it will be like to work for Mr Urquhart, he has a "dream of [a] writing-table by a mullioned window 'blushing with the blood of kings and queens' [which] turns out to be a literal presentiment" (Powys 61). When he feels that Miss Gault's drawing-room has "the Penn House atmosphere" it means that "there was something about this room which made him recall that old bow-window in Brunswick Terrace, Weymouth, where in his childhood he used to indulge in these queer, secretive pleasures" (Powys 132). And finally, when Christie moves to Weymouth, he flatters himself with the idea that their relationship will not end and "[sees] himself as an old grey-headed schoolmaster [...] walking with Christie on one arm and Olwen [...] on the other, past the bow windows of Brunswick Terrace!" (Powys 619).

The second link to the "adulterated chapter" is supplied by the *metonymical* connection of the grandmother's house, and more specifically the bow-window, which is the location of the only pleasant memories of Wolf Solent's childhood, with reading:

He recalled various agitating and shameful scenes between his high-spirited mother and his drifting, unscrupulous father. He summoned up, as opposed to these, his own *delicious memories* of long, *irresponsible holidays*, lovely uninterrupted weeks of *idleness, by the sea at Weymouth, when he read so many thrilling books in the sunlit bow-window at Brunswick Terrace.* (Powys 37, italics mine)

Thus reading in the literal sense of the word and 'sinking into his soul' become *metonymically* connected by being attached to the same location, the bow-window in the house of Wolf's grandmother in Weymouth. The location itself, as a scene of his infantile daydreaming, becomes subject to many-layered interpretation via its connection with the symptom that covers the traumatic event. In classic Freudian analysis houses are symbolic of the body and rooms are especially associated with women (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 471–472). In Wolf's case the female body represented by the house and its rooms is most probably his mother's, substituted with the slightly veiled corresponding element of the grandmother's figure. Thus Wolf's wish to return to his passive and pleasurable stay in Weymouth, where he was "irresponsible", that is, free from any moral obligations to act, becomes an embodiment of the return to the maternal womb in the symbolic sense as a combination of libido and desire for the ideal conditions before birth in the death-wish¹².

¹² Cf. Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology — The Theory of Psychoanalysis* —

The bow-window as an opening might be symbolic of his ambiguous position: he is inside but would like to enjoy the pleasures of being a spectator, or to use a word with even more obvious sexual connotations, a voyeur¹³. Conspicuously, the view of the sea from the window implies a very similar imagery to that of the “dark waters of [Wolf’s] consciousness”, which is more than reminiscent of the imagery of the oceanic¹⁴ feeling related to the Freudian concept of the death wish. This symbolism is deepened by the relationship of the location with Wolf’s ‘mythology’ and reading, which also seem to be *metaphorically* related to each other in their turn by sharing a number of common qualities. They lack any practical value according to the social norms and make Wolf, who indulges in them, an outsider and a transgressor; they yield solitary autoerotic pleasure; and they serve as an escape from the traumatic experience of his parents’ stormy marriage, the “shameful scenes” which might correspond to the “page of shame” (Lacan, *The Language of the Self* 24) that seems to be forgotten but must return, and finally, they become the sublimation of his frustrated (incestuous) sexual desire¹⁵. Thereby, Wolf’s ‘mythology’, as it is also implied by the expression “secret vice” that he uses for it, turns out to be a metaphor for the “short circuit” of incest which closes narratives—and reading—prematurely and finally (Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* 109). It is the de(con)struction of this closed narrative—the story of Wolf Solent as a mythic hero in his own imagination—which he experiences as the tragic death of his ‘mythology’ and the annihilation of his identity. Significantly, the story does not end here.

The third link to the unconscious is a *metaphorical* connection between looking out of the window and reading in the more general sense of the word, established here and developed in the rest of the text. Windows and words, language, seem to function in a very similar way for Wolf Solent, both providing frames that not only limit his vision and thereby slice out a portion of the world that is perceivable, but actually create signs from otherwise meaningless objects by the continuously changing and often

“*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*”, “*The Ego and the Id*” and *Other Works*, *The Pelican Freud Library*, Vol. 11, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Stratchey (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984).

¹³ Cf. the reader as a voyeur in Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 17.

¹⁴ Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. and trans. James Stratchey (New York, London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1989).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

surprising perspective they determine. He verbalises this similarity in the following way:

These glimpses of certain fixed objects, seen daily, yet always differently, through bedroom-windows, scullery-windows, privy windows, had, from his childhood, possessed a curious interest for him. It was as if he got from them a sort of *runic handwriting*, the 'little language' of Chance itself, commenting upon what was, and is, and is to come. (Powys 232, italics mine)

The implication is that windows present writing, a sign that must be read. In this excerpt Wolf Solent associates his vision through the window with textuality in general, and implies that life is practically nothing else but trying to read the cryptogram it presents. In a dialogue with Christie he directly connects the image of the window as a frame with reading and daydreaming:

Philosophy to you, and to me, too, isn't science at all! It's life winnowed and heightened. It's the essence of life caught on the wing. It's life *framed*... framed in room-windows... in carriage-windows... in mirrors... in our 'brown studies', when we look up from absorbing books... in waking dreams... (Powys 91, italics in the original)

In this excerpt "framing" becomes a metaphor for contextualising or conceptualising and thus interpretation, while the means that make it possible are the "window" or "mirror" of a philosophical text—or literary text, for that matter. This "framed life", the narrative, seems actually to take the place of life itself for Wolf Solent, so much so, that he even "frames" the most elemental phenomena of nature into stories that he knows from the literary tradition. Everything is symbolic for him, for example "a great yellowish fragment of sky" becomes a centaur drinking from the fountain of a willow (Powys 151). Thus Wolf definitely seems to embody the neurotic reader—more exactly, the hysteric in the sense Barthes applies the term (63). Since the window as a frame in itself is most conspicuously a hole, Wolf Solent becomes a reader of gaps with all the postmodernist/poststructuralist implications of the word concerning the nature of language and of the human unconscious¹⁶. Looking out of the window—or peeping in through windows, for that matter—becomes a metaphor for reading which highlights

¹⁶ Cf. Jacques Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," *The Structuralists From Marx to Lévy-Strauss*, ed. Richard and Fernande DeGeorge (Garden City, New York, Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), 287–324. Cf. also Joe Boulter, *Postmodern Powys — New Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Kidderminster: Crescent Moon, 2000). He uses "some of the analogies between Powys's themes and

its inherently paradoxical nature, since the window, which is both a border and a frame, simultaneously encloses and opens up space.

Thus the identification of Wolf Solent's 'mythology' as a case of infantile regression to daydreaming in the Freudian paradigm instead of leading to an ultimate closure of the text so characteristic of psychoanalytic literary criticism applied to fictional characters.¹⁷ actually reveals that *Wolf Solent* can as easily be the subject of a "more formalist" psychoanalytic criticism outlined by Peter Brooks¹⁸ It reads the returns of the text itself, in the given case the instances of reading itself, which turn out to be attempts to reconstruct the "false constructions" of the textual conscious for the fundamental gap in the text, Wolf Solent's identity itself as a narrative consciousness, the supposed "master" of the text (Brooks, "The idea of..." 11-12). This is the point where the text recoils on itself: Wolf Solent, in his obsessively repeated attempts to read the missing chapter of his own unconscious, actually acts out the archetypal situation of the reader who both tries to master the text by analysing it and becomes mastered by the text as the analysand (Brooks, "The idea of..." 11-12). These instances reveal reading itself as transgression, a basically carnivalesque element. Just like the screen memory of Wolf's 'mythology', reading is exposed as an autoerotic activity¹⁹ in the scenes of acquiring forbidden knowledge by gaining (perverse) sexual pleasure from reading pornography, of substituting the fulfilment of desire with reading and thereby sublimating it, of Wolf's voyeurism and finally of his Narcissistic obsession with his own images in actual and symbolic windows and mirrors. By the end of the novel Wolf Solent's constant readings and rereadings of himself dissolve the closed narrative of his 'mythology': his mythic image as a fighter in a cosmic battle against evil proves to be incompatible with his other parallel readings of his identity, which turn out to be unavoidably carnivalesque. Of course, only the exchange of one "false construction" with another can take place. However, since it consists in continuous reading, which leaves room for ambiguities and can cope with the constantly shifting nature of signifier with the help of self-ironic laughter, it results in Wolf's symbolic rebirth after the seemingly

techniques and the themes and techniques of postmodernist theorists as the basis for interpretation of some of Powys's novels" to "interpret him in the context of postmodernist theory" and claims that the most important connecting element between postmodernist theorists and Powys is that they "are all, in a loose sense, pluralists" (5).

¹⁷ Cf. Peter Brooks, "The idea of a psychoanalytic literary criticism".

¹⁸ Ibid., cf. Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*.

¹⁹ Cf. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* and Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979).

fatal death of his mythology.²⁰ Consequently, reading, as it is represented in *Wolf Solent*, reveals itself as “truly” carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense of the word.

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²⁰ My reading of *Wolf Solent* thus partly corresponds to the one given by Ian Hughes in his “The Genre of John Cowper Powys’s Major Novels,” [*Rethinking Powys — Critical Essays on John Cowper Powys*, ed. Jeremy Robinson (Kidderminster, Crescent Moon, 1999), 37–48]. While I agree with him that “Powys finally succeeds admirably in his attempt to dramatise the philosophic education of a central figure” (46) in *Wolf Solent*, and reading the novel as a “philosophic romance” (37) elaborating the “philosophy of sensationalism” (40) does not exclude a carnivalesque reading, I still think that it implies a closure and a finite nature that do not characterise the novel.

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