

At Last, John Cowper Powys

From *U vrtovima duha*¹, a book of essays,

IN FRONT OF us is another capital literary work—three volumes of philosophical writings by John Cowper Powys (1872–1963)—*In Spite Of*, *A Philosophy of Solitude* and *The Art of Happiness*.

So far, we must admit, we knew Powys merely from rare references in the works of certain philosophers and scholars. Although some thirty or forty years late, we are now able to get acquainted if not with all of Powys's work (as it consists of more than fifty volumes of novels, poetry, essays, philosophical writings and pamphlets), then at least with these three remarkable books—captivating, profound, necessary and healing, but, unfortunately, with many of his ideas a bit dated, and, given the maelstrom of the current moment, a little *passé*.

It is difficult to judge to what extent the Hippy Movement was brought about by his books, in particular *In Spite Of* and *A Philosophy of Solitude*, and what influence they exerted on the tide of liberation in the West, as Powys (an Englishman) spent thirty years in the States lecturing at less well-known American universities, colleges and informal groups, where he was disseminating his ideas. However, it is obvious that at the time when his books were published, they caused a vital turn in human thought and general approach towards life.

Nowadays, unfortunately, his books represent more an important reading on the history of ideas and to a lesser extent a fascinating discovery of lasting consequence to its readers. Undoubtedly, it is not Powys's fault, but it is simply because of a delayed encounter with this extraordinary author and philosopher.

Critics and academics of our time often compare Powys with Béla Hamvas. Perhaps because the latter late discovered author often quotes Powys in his books. Perhaps because of Hamvas' famous list of a hundred essential books, reminiscent of Powys's own list. Still, regardless of Powys's extraordinary personality, Hamvas remains unique and incomparable, and in our judgment, of more consequence, he is more profound and more original. Only a few writers are able to make such an authoritative statement: "Goethe is a genius, but he is not gifted."

Yet, if we were to choose a library without which we would not enter into any further research, then, certainly it would contain Powys's *The Art of Happiness*, as the chapters addressing old age are revealing and indispensable.

Furthermore, the most impressive feature of his work is his view on science, (and, undoubtedly, Powys and Hamvas share the same view). Writing about Hamvas, we quoted one of his ideas as a cornerstone of his philosophy: "Whoever turns on the outside, will be killed by darkness."² We dare single out one of Powys's thoughts as a symbolic projection of his philosophy: that the triumph of science, like the triumph of the Nazis, will mark the era of the

¹ *U vrtovima duha* ("Gardens of Spirit"), Prosveta, Belgrade, 2002

² According to Ratko Adamovic, Béla Hamvas meant that on the 'outside' there is hatred, tyranny, money, worthless reality, darkness, etc., whereas on the 'inside', in one's inner being, there is spiritual light, enlightenment, spirituality, cognition, etc.

totalitarian anthill and that only elderly people's long experience on the earth stands between us and a biological catastrophe.

In this brief review, there is no space to write about Powys's unique and appealing style, his simple way of communicating ideas, his consistency and total absence of the boring habit of certain lecturers to preach and present themselves as highly scientific by employing complicated and unintelligible analyses. Who and what John Cowper Powys really is, requires and deserves a lengthy record. This text is just a brief, but a strong and loud commendation. And let us conclude this commendation by paraphrasing John Cowper Powys—that youth is too much preoccupied with love, and middle aged people with practical things, to note the terrible dehumanization with which Modern Science, in the hands of fanatical leaders, threatens humankind.

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Ratko Adamovic lives and works in Belgrade. He is a well-known writer in Serbia. Apart from books, novels, etc. he published many reviews, literary criticism, essays and papers on both local and foreign writers, and held several series of lectures on Serbian literature in the United States and in Canada. His works have already been translated in many other languages, but unfortunately not yet in English or French.