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From Remembering the "Name-of-the-Father" to "Forgetting the Unpleasant"

John Cowper Powys's *Wolf Solent*

THE VERY TITLE of John Cowper Powys's first Wessex novel, *Wolf Solent*[1] places the identity of the main character at the focus of attention. However, it is this very identity which is probably the most problematic issue[2] in the novel—more specifically because it also determines the narrative consciousness of the text[3]. One of the most convenient solutions to this problem is given by Janina Nordius, who, by comparing the novel with JCP's ideas as represented in his non-fictional works, basically interprets it as the expression of the writer's philosophy of solitude in the making[4]. For her, Wolf Solent's identity is defined by his ecstatic—and "epiphanic"—moments of solitude[5]. Thereby, she reads the novel as the "plotting out" or unravelling of the central metaphor[6] of the "lone wolf"[7] inherent in the main character's name. That is, in her reading Wolf Solent as a subject seems to be unambiguously definable by one metaphor, by his name—which appears as a clearly readable sign. Even though accepting the clear-cut parallel between JCP's philosophy and *Wolf Solent*, one might also find that Wolf Solent's identity is too versatile to allow a 'simple' translation into the terms of Powysian philosophy. In fact, Wolf Solent's 'investigation' of his own past on his return to the land of his father and the "compulsive repetitions" of the text

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[1] Powys, John Cowper, *Wolf Solent*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964

[2] Jacqueline Peltier in a discussion with John Colomb directs attention to the paradoxical nature of the identity of "Powys heroes": "In him as in his 'heroes' there is an indestructible core, but at the same time he has the faculty of becoming ethereal, fluid, to dissolve himself. He emphasises two apparently contradictory attitudes", 'A Discussion', *la lettre powysienne* 14, automne 2007, p.25

[3] See Coates, C.A. *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*. Macmillan, 1982, p.48

[4] Nordius, Janina.*'I Myself Alone': Solitude and Transcendence in John Cowper Powys.* Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1997, p.45

[5] Ibid., pp.23-26

[6] Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot—Design and Intention in Narrative.* Cambridge, Mass.; London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1984, pp.10-24

[7] Nordius, op.cit., p.38

also easily lend themselves to a Freudian-Lacanian analysis[8]: the novel shows the formation of Wolf Solent as a subject through discovering his own repressed—forgotten—past mostly in the story of his dead father, that is, in a desperate search for the metaphor of the "name-of-the-father"[9]. It is "working through" this experience that makes him able to forget in a different, 'truly' Powysian manner, and to go way beyond repression to acquire psychic balance and formulate his narrative identity in a manner that prefigures much later concepts of the postmodern subject[10].

I will use as the starting point of my analysis the memorable scene at the beginning of the novel in which Mr Malakite, on first seeing Wolf, inquires about the very same thing—about Wolf's identity. After apparently thinking that he has been visited by the ghost of William Solent, dead for 25 years, Mr Malakite turns to Wolf with the following questions:

> 'Who *are* you, young man?' he said sternly. 'Who were your parents?'
>
> Not Dante himself, when in the Inferno he heard a similar question from that proud tomb, could have been more startled than Wolf was at this extraordinary inquiry.
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> 'My name is Wolf Solent, Mr Malakite,' he answered humbly. 'My father's name was William Solent. He was a master at Ramsgard School. My mother lives in London. I am acting now as secretary for Mr Urquhart.'
>
> [...]
>
> 'You must forgive me, sir,' he [Mr Malakite] said, after a pause. 'You must forgive me, Mr Solent. The truth is, your voice, coming suddenly upon me like that, reminded me of things that ought to be—reminded me of— of too many things.'[11]

[8] Though JCP's familiarity with both Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis is a well-known fact (cf. Powys, *Psychoanalysis and Morality* passim; 'A Discussion' pp.19-21), in my reading I will follow by and large Ron Ben-Jacob's method, who approaches *Wolf Solent* as "a happy hunting ground for Jungians" in his study entitled 'Giving *Wolf Solent* a Jungian Twist', *la lettre powysienne* 8, Autumn 2004, pp.36-44. That is, instead of trying to discover direct influences, I would like to point out where the reading of *Wolf Solent* can be enriched by applying the terms of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic literary criticism, most glaringly formulated by Peter Brooks in his *Reading for the Plot*.

[9] Lacan's "'paternal metaphor' […] refers to the prohibition of the father. The father stands for a place and a function which is not reducible to the presence or absence of the real father as such. […] in order to escape the all-powerful, imaginary relationship with the mother, and to enable the constitution of the subject, it is essential to have acquired what [Lacan] calls the 'name-of-the-father'. The father introduces the principle of law, in particular the law of the language system. […] when this law breaks down, then the subject may suffer from psychosis." (Sarup, Madan. *Jacques Lacan*. London: Chancellor Press, 1982, p.122).

[10] On the postmodern subject see Catherine Belsey, 'Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text,' *Feminist Studies—Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis. Bloomington, Ind, Indiana UP, 1986, pp.583-609. As far as postmodernism is concerned, my approach to JCP's fiction is modelled on Joe Boulter's, who introduces his 2000 volume on JCP with the following words: "I […] use some of the analogies between Powys's themes and techniques and the themes and techniques of postmodernist theorists […]. In other words, I do not interpret Powys as a postmodernist, or in a postmodernist way, I interpret him in the context of postmodernist theory." (Boulter, Joe. *Postmodern Powys—New Essays on John Cowper Powys*. Kidderminster: Crescent Moon, 2000, p.5).

[11] Powys, John Cowper. *Wolf Solent*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000, pp.79-80

Short as it is, the excerpt includes many of the problematic issues in connection with Wolf's identity. First of all, he is taken for the ghost of his dead father. Secondly, the narrator by the allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy*[12], in his description of Wolf's surprise, inversely, puts Mr Malakite in the role of a ghost. Both readings gain a fundamental role in the novel, so I would like to analyse them separately.

Being mistaken for his father questions Wolf Solent's separate identity: the implication is that he is the same as his father, only a repetition, non-existent as a separate self, which is as good as being dead. The phenomenon becomes almost symptomatic in the rest of the text: several times he is either mistaken for his father or intentionally assumes his role, practically trying to fill in the empty spaces left behind when he died. He is Mr Urquhart's secretary, just like his father was. Later he becomes a master in Ramsgard School, just as was his father, tries to replace him as the object of Mrs Solent's love and as a protective power taking care of his orphaned step-sister, Mattie. He also marries a woman to whom he is primarily attracted sexually, and (almost) commits adultery with a woman who is not exactly feminine but very intellectual—a situation that repeats his father's entangled relationships with Mrs Solent, Selena Gault and Mrs Smith. By analogy, Wolf also fills in the gaps left by his other predecessor, Mr Redfern: seduces and marries Gerda, the woman he wooed, listens to Jason Otter's poetry, finishes Mr Urquhart's book, and finally meditates on committing suicide. He is called Mr Redfern several times—both intentionally and in slips of the tongue—and even calls himself Redfern Number Two in one of his most desperate moments. Like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, he steps into the shoes of two dead men, in all but the literal sense of the expression.

This mixing up of identities urges Wolf Solent to investigate his predecessors'—his father's and Redfern's—histories as potential narratives of his own, seemingly non-existent, identity. First of all, the scene described above deprives Wolf of his own identity because—playing out a pun on his name—it denies him the position of a speaking subject who has a voice and story of his own. Wolf is mistaken for his father because of his voice, that is, his voice is not his own or he does not have a voice of his own. Both versions leave him figuratively 'mute' or silent. Solent / silent—the word "solent" can be read as a play on words, combining sole / solitary and silent[13]. The latter connotation is extremely significant in the context of the construction of the subject, which, according to Jacques Lacan, takes place at the moment of the entry into the Symbolic, that is, into Language.

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[12] *Inferno*, Canto X

[13] In fact, the pun implied in the name is much more complicated than this, though its effectiveness is largely dependent on successful intercultural transfer. The Solent, usually referred to as a river, is actually a channel between the Isle of Wight and the mainland (many thanks to Donald Wilcox for pointing out this reference) and it implies a fluidity of identity which will be discussed later. Solent also corresponds to the third person plural of a Latin word meaning "to do something as a habit", which lives on in current English in the adjective "insolent", originally meaning "unusual" (many thanks to Tamás Bényei for suggesting this reading). It facilitates an interpretation of Wolf Solent as a modern Everyman. The root of Solent can also be easily associated with the term "solar (hero)" and thus serve as a starting point for a mythic reading of the novel.

> What we teach the subject to recognise as his unconscious is his history—that is to say, we help him to perfect the contemporary historisation of the facts which have already determined a certain number of historical 'turning points' in his existence.[14]

Partly relying on Lacan's ideas, Peter Brooks comments that "[t]he question of identity, […] can be thought only in narrative terms"[15], whereas "it is in essence the desire to be heard, recognised, understood, which, never wholly satisfied or indeed satisfiable, continues to generate the desire to tell, the effort to enunciate a significant version of the life story in order to captivate a possible listener"[16]. If Wolf Solent is silent he does not tell stories, does not use language, ultimately, he does not have an identity. Maybe because he does not have stories of his own to tell—for that, something would have had to happen to him, he should have risen from the death-in-life inherent in his dyadic and absolutely safe union with his mother, which is exactly his aim in returning to Dorset. Or maybe, because the stories that actually contain the necessary deviations from the rules to be narratable at all[17], in short, which contain events, belong to his father—to the realm of the forgotten, the unspeakable, the repressed. This leads to the second major significance of the scene, namely that his dialogue with Mr Malakite urges Wolf to identify himself with a version of his father's story. Mr Malakite's is a leading question: he expects a story of origins as a definition of Wolf's identity. Wolf, in his turn, manages to exceed Mr Malakites expectations: apart from his name and the last sentence, "I am acting now as secretary for Mr Urquhart"[18] there is nothing pertaining to him—he gives his parents' stories, and that in a conspicuously censored form, which indicates repression. His father's last decent position is mentioned, whereas he gives the impression that he and his mother live apart as a norm. The verb of the sentence referring to his current situation is rather tentative—he is only "acting", as if he was already thinking of himself as acting out a role in Mr Redfern's story. Last but not least, the other piece of information about Wolf himself, his name, was of course inherited from his father. As Lacan points out, before the child is born, his name already exists and locates him in the paternal lineage, but he takes this socio-symbolic position only at the moment of discovering and accepting the metaphor of the "name-of-the-father"[19]. At the time of the scene in the bookshop, the reader already realises that the name of the father in Wolf's case is practically an enigma, which poses more problems than it solves concerning Wolf's identity. His paternal legacy consists of nothing but language, contradictory signifiers which, instead of trying to cover up the absence of the father, rather emphasise it: his name (dead men literally tell no tales), an earlier reference to William Solent as a "byword for scandalous depravity"[20], a headstone in the cemetery with the inscription "Mors

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[14] Lacan, Jacques. *The Language of the Self—The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis.* Trans. with notes and commentary A. Wilden. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981, p.23

[15] Brooks, op. cit., p.33

[16] Ibid., p.53

[17] Ibid., p.108

[18] *Wolf Solent,* p.79

[19] Sarup, Madan. *Jacques Lacan*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp.121-3

[20] *Wolf Solent,* p.14

est mihi vita”[21] and his last words reported by Selena Gault: “Christ, I’ve enjoyed my life!”[22]. It is the mystery posed by the name(s) of the father which Wolf Solent is compelled to decipher in the rest of the novel to be able to define himself and lay his father’s ghost to rest in peace.

And Wolf, like a detective, hunts after the hidden pieces of this puzzle aiming to solve the riddles presented by both his father’s and Redfern’s story, which he interprets as his own. However, it takes him practically the whole of the novel to decipher them. Of course, what makes this long procedure possible is a series of misreadings—the scene with Mr Malakite, which is based on a series of misinterpretations, also reveals a basic feature of the novel in that sense. Wolf still experiences the deepest crisis when for a moment he seems to arrive at a final version, at a point where the gap between signifier and signified is closed and no further reading is possible:

> How queer that he had nothing now left to decide! His future was already there, mapped out before him. It was only a matter of following the track. Yes! The track was already there … leading back again! All he had to do was to accept it and follow it from moment to moment, like a moving hand that threw a shadow over an unfolded map!
> […]
> There was no ‘I am I’ to worry about; no Wolf Solent, with a mystical philosophy, to look like a cowardly fool! But whose hand was it that was unrolling the map?[23]

While he has a horrible vision of his future as already written, he is searching “for a crack, a cranny in that thick rotundity. But the thickness was his very self!”[24] It is a moment of closure, which practically corresponds to a condition of symbolic death. Wolf Solent’s narrative becomes similar to the stories of William Solent and James Redfern, which appear relatively narratable from the beginning, since they are finite: both his father and his predecessor are dead. As Peter Brooks claims, relying on Walter Benjamin “‘Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell’ […] because it is at the moment of death that life becomes *transmissible*”[25]. For Wolf experiencing his identity as fixed, his narrative—or rather its potential interpretations—as finished and ultimate equals a sense of actually losing his identity.

This fatal closure and breakdown is the consequence of the apparent malfunction of the metaphor of the “name-of-the-father” in Wolf Solent’s constitution as a speaking subject. It has been demonstrated above that from the first moments of his return to Dorset, Wolf is urged to reconstruct the repressed story of his father, to remember what has been forgotten. Significantly, when he returns to his native county, he first visits Selena Gault, who not only takes him to his father’s grave, but also passes on the deathbed message, the last words mentioned above. And the son makes a solemn oath not to forget[26]. By making his promise in this form, without specifying the object of this not forgetting, Wolf unwittingly includes in the scope of his memories his father’s whole story, all the results of his later investigation. In Lacanian terms, the aim of his return seems to

[21] *Wolf Solent,* p.29
[22] Ibid., p.31
[23] Ibid., p.561
[24] Ibid., same page
[25] Brooks, op. cit., p.28
[26] *Wolf Solent,* p.30

be a quest for the metaphor of the "name-of-the-father", to serve as the place where he could fly from his mother[27]. As Wolf is aware: "He had come to Dorset … he knew it well enough now … to escape from her, to mix with the spirit of his father in his own land"[28]. However, the quest at this point seems to be futile, because it leads to a paradox. According to Lacan, "It is in the name of the father that we must recognise the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law"[29]. However, the story of the father, inseparably intertwined with Redfern's, his double, once deciphered, turns out to be nothing else but breaking the law. Its reading involves adultery, homosexual desires, suicidal drives and, via the connection with Mr Malakite, incest itself—the most fundamental transgression the "name-of-the-father" as law is supposed to protect from, the transgression Wolf is actually trying to escape from. This is the repressed story which Wolf Solent finds himself inclined to repeat compulsively by his return and after his return—but also the story through which he plots out and interprets the initial metaphors for the name of the father. No wonder that this reading of the metaphor is coupled with a sense of complete disintegration of the self and a reunion with the mother:

> He had no longer any definite personality, no longer any banked-up integral self. Submission to Urquhart had killed more than self-respect. He could never have gone over to his mother like this if his 'mythology' had survived. He could feel now that greedy kiss of hers upon his lips![30]

It is at this point that I would like to return to the significance of my second reading of the scene in Mr Malakite's bookshop. As I have mentioned, by an allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, it places Mr Malakite in a ghost's role, while Wolf, like Dante, is reminded and must remember, as Harald Weinrich points out, to be able to tell the story of the dead and save them from oblivion, a second and ultimate death[31]. If Mr Malakite is a ghost, he is of course William Solent's spectre—one of his surviving doubles in the novel. As such, however, he transmits a message absolutely contrary to Wolf's ideas about his father expressed in his promise not to forget. This is clearly shown by the fact that although Mr Malakite declares that he and William Solent "were intimate friends" and the latter was "a very remarkable man"[32], that is, someone people do not easily forget, Mr Malakite is trying to do just that. As a result of the first shock, he produces a sentence with a conspicuous gap: "The truth is, your voice, coming suddenly upon me like that, reminded me of things that ought to be—reminded me of too many things"[33]. The missing word is obviously "forgotten", and by eliminating it Mr Malakite even tries to forget forgetting, erase the trace of erasure. It is a sign of absence, which only opens up an endless number of potential signifieds. One of them must be William Solent—functioning himself probably only as another signifier for stories that must be forgotten, in Mr Malakite's case, stories of incest. Rewriting one of the most fundamental

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[27] Sarup, op. cit., p.122

[28] *Wolf Solent*, p.543

[29] Lacan, op. cit. p.41

[30] *Wolf Solent*, p.543

[31] Weinrich, Harald. *Léthé—A felejtés muvészete és kritikaja.* Trans. Martonffy Marcell, Budapest: Atlantisz Könyvkiado, 2002, pp.49-66

[32] *Wolf Solent*, p.80

[33] Ibid., same page

intertexts of the novel, *Hamlet*, Mr Malakite is the ghost of a dead father whose message is the Nietzschean imperative to forget, and not to remember.

It is this rewriting of the father's message which makes it possible to resolve the destructive closure caused by the paradoxical functioning of the "name-of-the-father", by its elevation of the breaking of the law to the rank of law itself. This resolution, however, can take place only after the painful procedure of remembering and "working through" towards the end of the novel, through a re-definition of forgetting in Mr Malakite's deathbed scene. This time it is Mr Malakite's turn to act out someone else's role—to re-enact the deathbed scene of the father that Wolf could not witness and to transmit the second half of the message, without which the first half "Christ, I've enjoyed my life" leads to a closure, a dead-end, a short-circuit that makes interpretation, story-telling (and life) impossible, as I have pointed out above. The clue he gives is one single word, "Forget!"[34] Again, without an object, it seems to refer rather to the general ability of forgetting, just like Wolf's promise at the beginning of the novel. At first sight it might look like another dead-end: trying to dump the traumatic moment into the unconscious without coping with it, without reading it and making it into a meaningful story. This idea takes the reader back to the beginning of the novel, as if the text was running the same circles again and again, without any progress: Wolf seemed to be quite good enough at repression before returning to Dorset, he managed to forget—if he ever knew it—the "name-of-the-father" for 25 years. What forced him to return was his "malice-dance" which he describes the following way:

> He was telling his pupils quite quietly about Dean Swift; and all of a sudden some mental screen or lid or dam in his own mind completely collapsed and he found himself pouring forth a torrent of wild, indecent invectives upon every aspect of modern civilization. [35]

The result of his practice seems to be nothing short of a breakdown, the repressed returns in a rather aggressive way. Is this the same forgetting that is demanded by Mr Malakite? Because then it leads nowhere. There is a crucial difference here, however: this time forgetting is suggested after the analytic procedure of "working through" which is carried out by the subsequent repetitions and returns of the text, to use the analogy applied by Peter Brooks[36]. It is nothing else but the forgetting of a fixed meaning, a forgetting, which, on the one hand, reveals the true nature of the sign and the Symbolic, on the other hand "also uncloses, suggesting that novels, like analyses, may in essence be interminable"[37]. Without this forgetting, without the opening up of a gap, the scene of "transcendental solitude"[38] at the end of the novel would be impossible—but this forgetting also undermines the status of any interpretation as univocal and final.

In conclusion I would like to point out that "the division in the narrative consciousness itself which is apparent in [...] *Wolf Solent*"[39] makes locating Wolf Solent as a subject an issue of outstanding importance. The text seems to suggest

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[34] *Wolf Solent,* p.595
[35] Ibid., p.14
[36] Brooks, op. cit., p.140
[37] Ibid., p.212
[38] Nordius, op. cit., p.41
[39] Ibid., p.6

that Wolf's identity, playing out actually another metaphor inherent in his name, is constantly in flight, on the flow, which is made possible by the nature of the linguistic sign itself and of the Symbolic order, i.e. language, in which the subject is located. His quest for his identity is, in a sense, a representation of the construction of the speaking subject through a discovery of the "paternal metaphor" carried out in the course of "compulsive repetitions" to "work through" the traumatic experiences caused by both the loss and the memory of the father. This reading, while it probably complements rather than contradicts Janina Nordius's interpretation through the intertextual complex of JCP's philosophy of solitude, attempts to open up the rather too definitive closure that in my opinion her reading leads to, and points toward a much more playful—and probably ironical—approach to the text of the novel.

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