



Wolf Solent

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When it was first published in 1929, John Cowper Powys's rapturous novel of eros and ideas was compared with works by Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, and D.H. Lawrence. Since then it has won the admiration of writers from Henry Miller to Iris Murdoch. *Wolf Solent* remains wholly unrivaled in its deft and risky balance of mysticism and social comedy, ecstatic contemplation of nature and unblinking observation of human folly and desire.

Forsaking London for Ramsgard, a village in Dorsetshire, Wolf Solent discovers a world of pagan splendor and medieval insularity, riddled by ancient scandals and resentments. And there this poetic young man meets two women—the sensuous beauty Gerda and the ethereal gamine Christie—who will become the sharers of his body and soul. Audacious, extravagant, and gloriously strange, *Wolf Solent* is a twentieth-century masterpiece.

Wolf Solent Details

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Author : John Cowper Powys

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From Reader Review Wolf Solent for online ebook

Joe says

My first Powys book and a real shock it was. He goes into tremendous depth about the characters thoughts and feelings that I was reminded of Proust. He finds significance in the apparently trivial and transmits his fascination with the universe, nature, people and just about everything else. The plot, such as it is, is the story of a young man, Wolf Solent, returning to his roots in Dorset after ten years in London, but it is about all the major themes: life and death, good and evil, reality and appearance, and so on and so on. A longish book first published in 1929, it is one of my favourites, and I am forever grateful to my friend Michael for introducing me to Powys.

Gregg Bell says

Wolf Solent is absolutely fantastical. The protagonist would never claim to be, but he is a mystic. (In other words, John Cowper Powys is a mystic too.) If you're spiritual at all, you'll be fascinated by Powys' descriptions of mystical states and situations, and his descriptions in general. This is a deeper book, though. Beach reading it's not, but if you want something meaty I heartily recommend it.

Eddie Watkins says

I've heard Powys compared to Dostoevsky, but I don't see it, even though Dostoevsky was one of Powys' favorite authors and inspirations (he even wrote a book-length study of him). I think he's more like a cosmic Hardy as filtered through proto-Jungian spectacles, with a side of fish.

I suppose the Dostoevsky parallels could stem from their mutual concerns for "soul" issues and for marginal obsessive characters, but Powys expresses himself much more through landscape and the natural world while Dostoevsky is much more purely human-based, expressing himself mainly through dialogue and the verbal ticks and body twitches of his characters.

This will probably go down as Powys' masterpiece, and is usually the first book of his that people read, and it is a great book and a great place to start, but his other novels are great too.

He was a powerful influence on Henry Miller, who actually attended some of his lectures (Powys worked as a touring lecturer on things philosophic and literary) in New York.

Laura J. W. says

Powys is one of the greatest novelists that not everybody knows about — I always make an effort to press him upon receptive readers — I'm a believer, a bookish zealot — I'm always more than happy to spread the word of literary awesomeness, I do realize that not every reader is going to dig Powys. Books by Powys have a knack to haunt a reader long after they're done. His writing is magical, beautiful, rhapsodic, breathtaking,

meandering, timeless — very dense classic prose. He's in the company of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Proust, Hardy, D. H. Lawrence — Powys (dubbed by some as the Anti-Hemingway — which I find funny, I love "Papa" too — he is his own writing beast, Powys is another unique species of writer.) He's a writer's writer. With the generous spirit of Shakespearean shrewdness, he evokes an aged skepticism of everything, and yet a youthful gullibility about everything — it's all very enchanting and lovely, and far too good to miss. In this contemporary world of instant gratification, it would be far too easy to neglect this master storyteller, and it would be a shame to forget him.

One of the things that makes a Powys novel like *Wolf Solent* special is how he lays down a historical foundation that is based on legends. In all legends, there's a grain of truth — the old hills and dells, moors and coastlines of Wales and England (in particular) have a history and mythology that have deep roots in the lives of the people who live within the covers of his books. The people — they are many and varied, the beautiful and ugly of humanity are all well represented. Pagans and Christians — philosophy and superstition overlap and separate — mingling and repelling — they co-exist with a feigned ignorance or have the willingness to overlook "*the matter*" out of politeness, and more times than not, they are blatant with their venom — gossiping the next chance meeting with an ear waiting to listen — creating their own legends from the bits of truth of what was muddied by their own perceptions. There's an intensity of life that is palatable; life is complicated, yet it's simple. The density of the writing is so absorbing, that's what makes it so dang fascinating — he creates a sense of place and time, textured and sensual—decadent (in the best sense of the term.) The thing I love so much about his writing is that I have to be on my toes through all of it — my brain is slowly dining on every word, savoring every last bit to the end. I found it hard to put the book down some nights — and I was haunted by it until I picked it up again.

Wolf walks a lot (like the character *Porius* in another Powys novel of that name) — here, there, and everywhere — if I were his wife, Gerda, I would've slapped him silly for his random acts of disappearing — "*Where the Hell have you been Mr. Solent? I gave you up as dead in a ditch somewhere along the road — get in here, sit, and have your tea.*" (As it is long before the convenience of cell phones, give the nearest lad a ha'penny and have him run a message home at least! Ah, but he doesn't think of doing that until near the end of the book.) I can't blame Gerda at all for feeling as she did, a young wife finding herself married to this peculiar, distracted, but mostly harmless fool. He mentally wandered in a self-absorbed state, what he called "*sinking into his soul*", also known as his "*mythology*" a secret name for his secret habit of daydreaming — it is a carryover from childhood that appalled his mother, but his father encouraged. Daydreams are a beautiful thing to have access to — they feed the creative mind all sorts of goodies, but it can be detrimental for an adult to go about in a fantasy world. Absentmindedness is quaint to a point, after a while, people can become annoyed when your distracted manner is no longer entertaining as you are causing inconvenience — one day you have your head in the clouds, the next day it changes to having your head firmly stuck up your ass (there's a time and place for everything, you see.) Wolf's walking seems directionless, yet he follows his nose like a canine; examining his internal world and then becoming suddenly enamored by the world outside of himself — the verdant curve of a hill, the muddy stillness of a pond, the blue of the sky, and the golden meadow brimming with buttercups; body and soul, dreams and realities, within and without, life and death, good and evil — his thoughts often veering over the edge into the supernatural. The dead and buried (in particular, his father and the young Redfern) live on in memories and imaginings — laughing at the arrogance of the living.

Truth be told, the fool needed to grow up and get ahold of himself. Don't get me wrong, I liked Wolf and his '*mythology*', he cracked me up quite often—from the beginning, he got sacked from his teaching job in London for his "*malice-dance*" in which he just went off on an inappropriate verbal jaunt that had nothing to do with teaching History to the boys in his charge...

"He was telling his pupils 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.” p.2

This is the prevailing attitude throughout the book — he has something eating at him.

“He felt as though, with aeroplanes spying down upon every retreat like ubiquitous vultures, with the lanes invaded by iron-clad motors like colossal beetles, with no sea, no lake, no river, free from throbbing, thudding engines, the one thing most precious of all in the world was being steadily assassinated.” P.3

I agreed with him on most things, yet there were times I found his obsessive waffling over the flirtatious and sexy Gerda and the solemn and thoughtful Christie to be comical, bordering on absurd — he wanted his cake and eat it until it made him sick. The reality of Wolf’s life is invading and destroying his ‘*mythology*’ — the being in a rut, teaching history to boys at the school for thirty years just irks him to no end — he longs to have financial independence to allow him to live comfortably and to have freedom. I certainly didn’t want to see him lose that lovely imaginativeness that was natural — instinctive, nigh innocent (yet not entirely), but it was clear that his behavior was becoming a concern by those who knew him. It isn’t every day that your father-in-law (a monument maker) indicates his concern by saying:

“Tis no comfort,” he remarked, “though I be the man I be for cossetting they jealous dead, to think that ‘in a time and half a time,’ as Scripture says, I’ll be chipping “Rest in the Lord” on me wone son-in-law’s moniment. But since us be talking snug and quiet, mister, on this sorrowful theme”—Mr. Torp’s voice assumed his undertaker’s tone, which long usage had rendered totally different from his normal one—“twould be a mighty help, mister, to I, for a day to come, if ye’d gie us a tip as to what word — out of Book or out of plain speech — ye’d like best for I to put above ‘ee?” p. 466

As he moped around on his many walks, at times considering that maybe he should drown himself in Lenty Pond as alluded by those who believed it to be his destiny, (I seriously felt concerned that he would!) I wished I could’ve advised him — *“You should write a book of your own — you really need to.”* If anything could possibly reset and settle his mind, it would be that — writing clears the decks of a busy mind that wanders. Writing is one of our most intimate acts of creativity, it can center one and it can unravel one — one can be rattled to the core by the act of writing, sometimes there’s nothing more startling than to write down the thoughts that haunt you to the point of something comparable to madness. Eventually, it does work out those bothersome bugs and gives focus. Then it’s nigh terrifying to share one’s own words on paper with anyone else because they are so personal — private. For example, when Wolf reads Christie’s writing that she had hidden away, she was pissed when she found out — his reading it ruined it for her, she wasn’t ready to have anyone read her thoughts. The eccentric poet, Jason Otter, shared his poetry with Wolf on many occasions, but when Wolf suggests that he should send them to London to be published, Jason became angry—feeling certain that the Londoners would laugh at his poetry. Anyway, I can only hope that Wolf came to writing later in life beyond the last page — that’s another thing that I love about this book, there is a sense that life goes on after the book ends. His walk through the meadow of buttercups was the most sublime event — he had changed, *“grown up”* in a manner of speaking — he may have lost his “*mythology*”, but he gained a new sight and insight. Once again, he reveled in taking notice of the smallest things such as the beauty of a snail as it went creeping along from a dock-leaf to the boards of the pigsty shed. Accepting the reality — *“I am I”* — *“Forget and enjoy”* — *“Endure or escape”* — it was his body that saved him — for this, his spirit is grateful.

I simply adored this book and could easily read it again—I have a few bits here from some of the many dog-eared pages, and then I’m done with my wordy testimony...

“Millions of miles of blue sky; and beyond that, millions of miles of sky that could scarcely be called blue or any other colour—pure unalloyed emptiness, stretching outwards from where he sat—with his stick and coat opposite him—to no conceivable boundary or end!” p. 10

“Every time the hedge grew low, as they jogged along, every time a gate or a gap interrupted its green undulating rampart, he caught a glimpse of that great valley, gathering the twilight about it as a dying god might gather to his heart the cold, wet ashes of his last holocaust.” P. 25

“Nature was always prolific of signs and omens to his mind; and it had become a custom with him to keep a region of his intelligence alert and passive for a thousand whispers, hints, obscure intimations that came to him in this way. Why was it that a deep, obstinate resistance somewhere in his consciousness opposed itself to such a solution?” p 274

Brent says

The description of natural phenomena, etc. can be quite transporting at times, but the lack of anyone's inner existence other than that of the main character, combined with the endless concatenation of 'mythology'- 'walking stick'- 'Lenty Pond'- 'Gerda'- 'Christie'- 'Mother'- repeat, left this reader feeling unmoved by the sheer lack of emotional momentum. The only interior monologue in the novel is that of Wolf Solent, and he chews the same cud over and over. This Dorset stuff isn't for me-- take me back to dear old Wessex.

Wolf Somnolent.

Odile says

Powys is a personal favourite. I discovered him via a friend and have continued liking him ever since. This is XIXth-XXth century fiction, at the time of epic story-reading. Powys is about impossibilities and the gentleness of things. I even find blundering humour revealed in his search for grand sentience. Powys is a redeemer of lost and cast-away feelings. Not a real philosopher but a priest in his own creed.

Sean says

And, though it was into the night that she now poured those liquid notes, the tone of their drawn-out music was a tone full of the peculiar feeling of one hour above all the hours of night and day. It was the tone of the hour just before dawn, the tone of that life which is not sound, but only withheld breath, the breath of cold buds not yet green, of earth-bound bulbs not yet loosed from their sheaths, the tone of the flight of swallows across chilly seas as yet far off from the warm, pebbled beaches towards which they are steering their way.

Wolf Solent is a man in his mid-thirties who has left London after losing his job as a teacher, and subsequently accepted a new temporary position as secretary to a squire in the Dorset countryside of England. His work will involve the writing of a book of local history based on the squire's research. Upon his

arrival, Solent immediately becomes embroiled in the small town societal drama of the region, in part due to both his familial connections to the area and the murky circumstances surrounding the fate of his predecessor. As in any small towns, there are dark secrets buried beneath the surface and Solent is intent on dredging these up, no matter how sordid their nature. He also wastes no time in pursuing a young woman (or two), which leads to the staging of his own personal drama. When his mother arrives on the scene, all the major parts of this convoluted play have been cast.

Solent is a self-absorbed character, as is the protagonist of *Weymouth Sands*, the other novel of Powys that I've read. This self-absorption can run deep to the point of tedium, although it is also what provides an otherwise pointless story with its structure. Solent relies heavily on what he terms his 'mythology' or 'life-illusion', which is both a driving force behind his decision-making and an important source of solace in times of stress. It's also linked to his dualistic view of life. In his present circumstances Solent finds his 'mythology' to be threatened on multiple fronts (of his own making, I might add). The novel rotates on the axis of this 'mythology': what it means to him, how he uses it, its interplay with his dualistic thinking, and whether he will be able to preserve it and hence, his personal integrity. And it is how Solent ultimately chooses to respond to the common injustices he suffers, as well as the mental process of deciding on these choices, that contribute to the uniqueness of the story.

The power of nature to absolve and redeem the human soul is another running theme throughout the book. Solent attributes a metaphysical quality to elements of the natural world and it is to these elements that he turns most often to quiet his mind. He is forever searching for new paths to take through the fields that will permit him to avoid walking through town. Without his walks through the countryside, he would be lost:

'Walking is my cure,' he thought, 'As long as I can walk I can get my soul into shape! It must have been an instinct of self-preservation that has always driven me to walk!'

Where Powys excels most is in his character development and his description of the natural world. His prose is both poetic and precise. Even the most fleeting minor characters spring from the pages of the book. The robustness of all of the characters fill in for the general aimlessness of the plot. And for readers who love nature, there is much to appreciate in Powys' obvious zeal for all of Earth's nonhuman life. In fact, it was Solent's irreducibly effusive passion for the natural world that allowed me to look past some of his more irksome qualities.

It's difficult for me to rate this novel, as I often have trouble rating longer works. It's closer to a 4 than a 3, although I considered not rating it all. Overall I found it to be a worthwhile read, but there were significant parts of it that irritated me. Reading Powys requires a level of fortitude that I don't always find myself capable of maintaining. It's not that I routinely balk at this depth of interiority in fictional characters (e.g., Woolf's *The Waves* will always remain one of my favorite novels), but it's the nature of Powys' characters' inner dialogue that grows intolerable at times. As an example, Solent's persistent agony over his attraction to two very different young women (each of which fulfills at least one, but not all, of his desires in a partner) bored me almost to the point of giving up the novel. This type of banal domestic drama that Powys sometimes traffics in is certainly his weakest point for me. However, as I hope I've made clear, there are other qualities of the book that offer compensation. And, for what it's worth, I would recommend this one first over *Weymouth Sands* for those readers unfamiliar with Powys.

'Do you ever feel,' he said, 'as if one part of your soul belonged to a world altogether different from this world—as if it were completely disillusioned about all the things that people make such a fuss over and yet were involved in something that was very important?'

She looked straight into his face. 'I wouldn't put it like that,' she said. 'But I've always known

what it was like to accept an enormous emptiness round me, echoing and echoing, and I sitting there in the middle, like a paper doll reflected in hundreds of mirrors.'

William says

This book is, no doubt, what people mean when they use the term 'idiosyncratic.' And its author was nothing if not a genuine eccentric, of the kind that Edith Sitwell would have been thrilled to catalogue.

Wolf Solent, upper-middle class son of a downwardly mobile family, returns from London to his childhood home in Dorsetshire. The move, prompted by a rather public meltdown ('malice dance') in which Wolf harangues the 'monstrous Apparition of Modern Invention' to a group of bemused students, is a recurrent theme of the book, and the one I find most personally sympathetic. Wolf terms it 'fetish-worship', and we get a glimpse of this halfway through the book when he happens to glimpse a little old lady through her window at night, reading a book by candlelight: 'as long as old women like that read books by candlelight there'll be some romance left!' Powys has the self-awareness to find himself amusing, and in the same page writes: 'here I am, with a tipsy priest on my arm, thinking of nothing but defending I don't know what against motor-cars and aeroplanes!' Note the exclamation points. The book is full of them. Every internal discovery, every odd observation about the outside world: everything is of obscure but vital importance.

Yet frequently the most congenial of paths is disrupted by a sudden fork, and one's feeling of sympathy or understanding is thrown off by confusion. Supposedly Powys never re-read (although he does refer to Wolf revising his book for Mr Uquhart), and there are some real clunkers. The wrapt poeticism, the elongated descriptions of countryside and buildings, blending always into the metaphysical, often get tangled in rhetorical abstractions, to the point that its difficult to know what, if anything, Powys is saying. And Wolf is so often experience these philosophical moments that I wasn't sure what was mere reiteration of a previous idea, and what was a new development. The beginning of the story, promising a gothic twist on Hardy's Return of the Native with a cast of mysterious grotesques, ultimately meanders. Almost literally - I think the majority of the external action is comprised of Wolf walking from one village to another.

For all that I enjoyed it: it's head-shakingly odd, often beautiful and totally unique within the Western Canon. A sustained, emphatic whisper of a book.

Milton says

Some powerful druidic shit but a bit diarrheic

Eldonfoil TH*E Whatever Champion says

Alright I'm not quite done with this, but I think that's not going to matter. Circumstances have drawn out the reading for longer than it deserved.

This book is a real mess.

And a most lovely one.

I even enjoy imagining the many perplexed, modern psyches wandering through it---I mean readers, not the story's characters.

Jonathan says

"It seemed as though all the religions in the world were nothing but so many creaking and splashing barges, whereon the souls of men ferried themselves over those lakes of primal silence, disturbing the swaying water-plants that grew there and driving away shy water fowl."

Second reading of this. First was long ago and it did not go well. This second time through follows a reading of pretty much all of the rest of his work. It went much better.

This is his best known book, and the most commonly read. For what it is worth (not much) I think both A Glastonbury Romance and Porius are "masterpieces", while this is just damn good.

A little taste as follows:

Wolf, speaking to his father's skull in the ground beneath him, argues *"There is no reality but what the mind fashions out of itself. There is nothing but a mirror opposite a mirror, and a round crystal opposite a round crystal, and a sky in water opposite water in a sky"*

The response is:

"Ho! Ho! You worm of my folly,' laughed the hollow skull. 'I am alive still, though I am dead; and you are dead, though you're alive. For life is beyond your mirrors and your waters. It's at the bottom of your pond; it's in the body of your sun; it's in the dust of your star spaces; it's in the eyes of weasels and the noses of rats and the pricks of nettles and the tongues of vipers and the spawn of frogs and the slime of snails. Life is in me still, you worm of my folly, and girls' flesh is sweet for ever; and honey is sticky and tears are salt, and yellow-hammers' eggs have mischievous crooked scrawls!"

And later

"My 'I am I' is no hard, small crystal inside me, but a cloudy, a vapour, a mist, a smoke hovering round my skull, hovering around my spine, my arms, my legs. That's what I am, a vegetable animal wrapped in a mental cloud, and with the will-power to project this cloud into the consciousness of others."

or

"It always gave Wolf a peculiar thrill thus to tighten his grip upon his stick, thus to wrap himself more closely in his faded overcoat. Objects of this kind played a queer part in his secret life-illusion. His stick was like a plough-handle, a ship's runner, a gun, a spade, a sword. His threadbare overcoat was like a medieval jerkin, like a monk's habit, like a classic toga! It gave him a primeval delight merely to move one foot in front of the other, merely to prod the ground with his stick, merely to feel the flapping of his coat about his knees, when this mood predominated. It always associated itself with his consciousness of the historic continuity---so incredibly charged with marvels of dreamy fancy---of human beings moving to and

fro across the earth. It associated itself, too, with his deep, obstinate quarrel with modern inventions, with modern machinery...."

Whether or not JCP will work for you will depend in part on how much you can stomach this sort of thing.

Richard says

A great masterpiece of psychological fiction, uniquely Powys' style but clearly influenced by Hardy, Dostoevsky and Poe. This book is so rich with allusion to nature, literature and art it's like immersing yourself in a great bath, or perhaps lying in a field in Dorset grasping great clods of earth. The main character of Wolf Solent is a tormented figure in a world of complex but believable characters. Primarily torn between his beautiful wife Gerda and his soulmate Christie, the book follows the consciousness of Wolf more than a real plot. While written in the third person, the entire book is through Wolf's consciousness so it is more like a first person narrative. There are entire chapters containing nothing more than what is going on in his complex but always interesting mind.

The book also shows a tremendous leap in quality from his earlier novels on the editing side, perhaps because Phyllis Plater was involved with his writing for the first time. Many of the types of cringeworthy sentences or paragraphs found in his earlier work are gone.

On a personal note, this was the book that got me started on JC Powys as I felt a strong affinity, however uncomfortable, with Wolf. This is my third read yet the first time I was able to go through it and not be overwhelmed. What stood out in this read was how sharply "normal" the other characters were compared to the "crazy" Wolf. Plus I went through methodically checking the references, mostly to Shakespeare, but also Dante, Rabelais, Wordsworth and others, which really added to my understanding and enjoyment.

Recommended to all, even if its difficulty is very high.

David says

I enjoyed this book so much I've read it twice already in the couple/few years I've been familiar with it. Set in a rural English village, where not all traces of Paganism have vanished, the main character finds himself involved with a number of odd people and strange goings on, including two women; one who is the epitome of physical attraction, the other mentally and spiritually stimulating and the frustration that neither can apparently be both. The language in the book is amazing, having been compared to Shakespeare and Tolstoy in the sense of pure poetic beauty, and there are many strange currents running through this story, many of which you seem to sense or feel, rather than comprehend on any conscious level. Almost mystical in its transcendent power, and hard to describe. I believe I have read somewhere that Powy's had published several books that were received well enough, but that he had had some mystical epiphany himself around middle age and started producing works of much higher artistic accomplishment. This may be one of those books that you have to stick with a little, but once Wolf is in the village and things get going it seems to get a hold of you with (to me) endlessly fascinating storylines.

Micha says

What I am about to say about this mammoth of a book is inevitably going to sound like "one prolonged windy bellow, covering the impervious grazing of a complacent ox!" For such is the nature of this book: unshakably calm, massive, and, may I say, cosmic.

This is an interesting word to use, considering the earthiness, which suffuses most of the book. "Wolf Solent" is a book of endless walks through the pleasant and placid English countryside, with its high hedges and shallow ponds, and of cups of tea. It is a slow-paced melodrama without the drama. What is left then? A fairly simple story of a floundering and blundering 36-year-old returning to the place of his birth, seeking to get back in touch with his long-dead father. This pursuit is postponed most of the book, however, as he swiftly falls in love with not one, but two women, at the same time, one barely a woman. What ensues is a delicate exploration of human relations, both on a sensual and on a spiritual level. John Cowper Powys astonishes with his adroitness in these matters.

So far, I have hardly justified my use of the fanciful analogy above, the one with the cosmic ox. The reason for this is because I have only described the machinations of the novel and not the perspective, the vista but not the onlooker. With this, I have done Powys an injustice, for Wolf Solent, whose deliciously confused consciousness we inhabit as readers, must be one of the most unique protagonists in all of literature (and I have met quite a few, from the puerile Oskar Matzerath to the ribald Leopold Bloom).

Wolf is a strange one. While he indulges, no, luxuriates, in reality, treating the women around him abysmally, he is, at the same time, oddly removed from it. The comings and goings of humans are of no concern of his, being always aware of the airy heights of the sky, which give way to primordial darkness, above his head, and the soil and worms and core of the earth beneath his feet. There is a certain depth behind everything, even behind a pigsty, which is where the novel ends. In observing the infinitesimal in nature, he witnesses the cosmic forces of good and evil in the universe, which constantly struggle for superiority. He calls this sensation his "mythology."

As you can imagine, Wolf's stream of consciousness is interesting, to say the least. But how in the world should this alien mind be able to describe something as ordinary as a tea party? An aborigine might as well attempt to describe a New York skyscraper to his fellow tribespeople. The scene around the fire would be bizarre and confused. So is "Wolf Solent." This, however, is the beauty of the book, what makes it so very captivating; Powys' practical prank of placing someone like Wolf in the serene rolling hills of Somerset, England. Powys was a truly masterful writer to be able to pull this off, not only just, but wholly, brilliantly, believably, rendering "Wolf Solent" one of the best novels I've come upon in a long time.

Stephen P says

i believe originally he was a poet. this book is lyrical without drawing attention to its lyricism while winding out an enjoyable tale. this is a read made for a quiet night, to slowly become lost in a well told story without modernism and post modern adornments and strategies. i recommend it to others, and to myself as a reminder to reread.

Mariel says

'It's absurd to talk of souls being inside things! They're *always* on the outside! They're the glamour of things... the magic... the bloom... the breath. They're the *intention* of things!'

Sadness sweeter than happiness... Wolf Solent is my sentient book. Philosophy with a blindfolded hand over the heart and sole mate floating in the brain jell-O ooze.

Wolf has a secret life, a reason to abide himself. He calls it 'mythology', an open envisioned as hard crystals in his gut, appearing in mind as a path, recognized in edges. There's a time he goes into a nighttime church and the smell of the mildew is a second darkness within the darkness. This is after he can no longer be made so happy by his mysterious world. If there were a secret door and he leaned on the wall and went somewhere else this way that's how I would think his eyes must look when he does it. After he has "lost it" this stuff like the "second darkness" was still killing me. Metaphors for the moon, similes for the dirt, poetry for nighttime, dreams for the day, a thesaurus rex to eat the mountains AND the mole-hills. I could live on leaves turning over to Wolf's interior where the rabbits would flee. I could live forever on when someone is dead to him, tombstoned hardness, and a moment later (if that) he robs his grave for their lives again within his eye. And it is all true. Selena Gault, the ugly face who sends her spirit into the slaughter-house fear with her beloved animals. She could never dance on graves but she would curse a committee of avian flesh to goosebump. Maybe the animals still feel alone but Wolf threads between them. I loved this alive like this, and when his cruelty to revenge his own miserly future visions on an innocent student transforms into the boy haunting his mirror visits with goodness. I don't care what he says, Wolf cannot help himself, dead 'mythology' or no. I think it was Christie Malakite who criticized him for this very trait I ached for (Wolf's mind is a two-way mirror reflecting inwards and they will all beat on it), but I also think she wouldn't be able to help her smile if she saw it. My mythology is my belief in this in others. I had this feeling when reading Wolf Solent that made me as happy as the sky made ecstatic Wolf. The blue scene is another dimension, a as long as it lasts proof (this book is magic. I saw it too). I could sense outside of Wolf's world where it would lap if someone else's mind was a beach. Before he knows it I suspect and it was this unfolding of their connected lives (maybe in my mythology their lives are origami paper folding into shapes of herons, rocks, bookshops), the blood under the skin, that made me feel alive. I think of a heart from the sad face to float on Wolf's pond like an avenging ghost on his peace of mind. To his father's grave turning pick me and his mother's knowing glint in her eye going do you really know anything? To the suicidal Redfern he replaces as secretary (the pin fall inside Wolf when the does anyone have a right to be happy Jason speaks spells of ghosts and questions and pity for Redfern. When he is afraid he is next, when the mind-building digs graves. Wolf's mind is more haunted than the oldest battlements) to pen the bawdy gloatings of the egging squire Mr. Urquhart... The good and evil, the breath he takes from their folding symbols, to lean on, the belief. His secret world cannot survive without them and he cannot see it, he believes (and this breaks my heart) if he cannot build up as a shark has to swim his "life-illusion". And I know exactly how he feels. The underneath the scars of his landscape that made him glory, or that sent him robbed. I lived in the undertow. The scars in the faces that drowned his dreams, the world turned upside down and smiles. Oh, man.

Comparisons to other authors and books are made a lot. My book jacket is full of Proust and Tolstoy and Hardy. Eddie Watkins' 'cosmic Thomas Hardy' was downright inspired. I had had in mind if Julien Gracq didn't make me feel buried alive. When the luminous skin holds whispers and secrets the kind the male observer doesn't want to know what he hopes for because that might be the same as losing interest once he's

banged her. It's the kind of outside beauty that I cannot imagine because it has never moved me. I want to die a bit after reading so much about the enlightened skin. I want to take a mallet to their face, or my own, and then maybe a flight will be possible. John Cowper Powys would never do that to me. The loveliest Gerda he had ever seen, the ground beneath his feet he will think, the stone-cutter's daughter, or a little girl wanting to make up a nice house. They say her passivity launches war ships and she is not worried about. I don't know what she was thinking but I cannot stop thinking about when she tells Wolf not to hurry home. She is happiest sitting in the window, waiting for his return. The blackbird whistle she does, an unhappiness sweeter than happiness, is her own mythology. A magic of her own. If a haunted forest, beauty suggestive of forgotten dreams is unseen does that mean it never happened. A bird call unanswered. Did it have to be heard by Wolf, her beauty seen, to have been there. I had this feeling that Gerda would have dreamed somewhere else in her otherly song without him to hear as long as she believed that there had been other birds. All of the times Gerda does her blackbird song made me go oh god oh god oh god in a nameless appeal to something. I couldn't breathe. Wolf's mother tells him he never understood that everyone is lonely. I understand that and I don't always remember it when I feel alone. This blackbird whistle (and more from this book I can write about. If we could sit together and talk in fragments and silences)... This book... It's more than understanding that people are lonely. It's coming up to where it ends and almost touching. It was perfect. I could see the Gerda from before he ever met her, the little girl pushing the water-rats to watch them swim, life or death tears in childhood games. I think I loved it best of all that Wolf kept looking back to his life before he was in it. I wanted to shake him a bit that he saw his own shadow too much on the spirit surface of everyone. It was also heartbreaking because it would have happened that life is crushingly hardly to keep alive whatever it is you have to do to keep going. And absolutely everyone in Wolf Solent has that and I loved sensing what it was in them so much. So much. I think I loved doing that more than anything. It was like not feeling alone.

When Wolf is giving up the moment for a hope, off with his head, his true-love Christie exists for me. It isn't lost on me that she exists for me not unlike how Wolf does it. He will love how she sticks her head out of the window when her speech works out like your hands cannot type as fast as your thoughts. Your mind is Road Runner and your body is Wile Coyote. Or the other way around. Someone is betraying. And he wants to hug her or she wants to hug herself. But I see another Christie, and I think it is before she can see it. Before he can see his two steps back and one step forward life of the love affair only sighed. When she still believes her father and her sister had a tragic love affair, pines for their daughter Olwen who lives in the same town. I could hear another heartbeat, the quickened one on the stair on the way to her room, and the pace to little Olwen. Everyone is alone, and all for his own white beard. It was the space between them, of time to wonder about the missing sister and what more she could have had to life, that stopped my mental hand outside of good or evil. The outside time where the circles kept it going made that for me. When Wolf is making himself too tired to die, the feather Dumbo needed to fly disappearing from his horizon, I could still believe it. I know how he feels because I still get these "trips" in my mind too. You still have it, you know you do. But there's believing you cost Gerda her blackbird song from having to live with you. The mind tricks one has to play on oneself. It's awful. I hate it. Somewhere there's a weight and it is too... to fly. You can't do it everyday and when you can't do it... But oh god oh god oh god was what it looked like when it was happening so much *more* than my thing there (where is Christie's window to stick my head out of). You didn't sell your soul. I know he didn't sell his soul. Somehow the flying still feels like you are risking going over where the dark land meets the dark sea and you won't be able to know which is landing. I can't seem to write outside of the loss.... The leaves floating on the mythological pond turned over and sunk to the bottom. He lies there, ghostly and underwater, doesn't know he can breathe.

'I've learnt one thing to-night,' he thought, as he crossed the room and felt about in the darkness for the handle of the door. 'I've learnt that one can't always get help by sinking into one's own soul. It's sometimes necessary to escape from oneself altogether.'

That's Wolf Solent for me. I don't know how he did the oh god oh god oh god but it was floating from Wolf's

head to the pond to the walls of the bookshop to laughing nightmare faces to keep him up at night to the sweet body to keep him up at night to what everyone else always wanted. Philosophy for how to keep your eyes open and the spirit to hold and oh god the no name for it but the blackbird call. I felt like I could hear it, so long as it lasted.

P.s. I should probably mention that *Wolf Solent* is really just freaking enjoyable to read. I was *happy*. I just don't feel as happy when I try to talk about it because I don't ever know how to go *Marieling* anymore. But I did, I did, I did.

Jim Leckband says

Abandon all hope of liking this book if you are bored by Terrence Malick's movies or Gustav Mahler's symphonies. However if you dig incredibly atmospheric, earthy, psychological/mythical prose where nothing much happens besides endless cups of tea and much, much, much internal dithering by Wolf Solent then this book could be your ... um ... cup of tea.

I would gather Powys is a "writer's writer". Individual sentences and paragraphs are luscious without being overwritten. He is the anti-Hemingway in just about every sense. I did enjoy the first part of the book much more than the middle parts when I did kinda lose my patience and nerve when I saw I still had hundreds of pages left and still not much was happening.

Jimmy says

I remember talking to a friend a few years ago about how everyone we knew seemed to have a 'personal philosophy' or 'central idea' to them. It's not anything formal or even remotely conscious, but it guides them in everything they do. One would need to know someone pretty well to figure out what their personal philosophy was. We had a good time putting into words what exactly all our friend's philosophies were (and some we weren't sure about). It wasn't easy, but once we hit upon the central theme for a person, a light came on and we were like 'AHA! Everything makes sense now!'-- which doesn't mean we had this person completely figured out, as people are more complicated than that. But it's more like the other way around: we had to already have figured certain things out, and spent a certain amount of time both good and bad with them, before we could come up with even a general idea of what their 'philosophy' was. That is why we limited our little game to only our closest friends.

Then a few weeks ago, while reading Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, I came upon a quote about this very same idea... and now in this book *Wolf Solent* again it resurfaces; this idea is the central driving force for the novel. In here, it is called alternately a 'mythology' and a 'dominant life-illusion'. I like the latter more. When I read that term I was like 'philosophy' is completely wrong, of course 'dominant life-illusion' was the term we were looking for! I understood exactly what Powys was talking about before he even had to explain it. For it is in fact an illusion placed on top of reality, a personal interpretation, a personalization of reality that makes it bearable. To our main character Wolf Solent, that life-illusion is even stronger than for most, as it is a conscious thing for him, one that he goes back to for life energy, as a respite and refuge, and perhaps the term 'mythology' works better for his particular case of illusion.

The curious thing about this life-illusion is that it goes both ways. One somehow unconsciously adopts an

illusion through which to see the world, through one's own metaphors/ideas/images. But the flip side of that is that the illusion is a way of seeing oneself inside of that world as well. The lies one tends to tell oneself to smooth over the wrinkles. It is a world-illusion but also a self-illusion. It is a propping up of oneself in order to go on, and this is both a necessary and a dangerous thing, because eventually illusions shatter. Reality does not bend to fit our view of it.

I feel like I am not doing a good job of reviewing this book, but simply reacting to it. But that is perhaps my book-illusion, that necessary fiction built up in my head as I read, which is a reflection of my own experiences. I found myself quite critical of Wolf. Wolf is a bit self-righteous and it's nice to see him realize that about himself around the 'Wine' chapter. When he says he will have to let go of his self-illusion, what he means is that he cannot see himself as above everyone else anymore, as somehow more moral, because he has taken Urquhart's money and is about to rendezvous with Christie while her father is at Weymouth. These events have taken away his mythology which is a good and bad thing, in my mind, as I think it will mean he can finally be part of the community instead of set apart. For his illusion is also a crutch that distances him from people, that shields himself from the grit and the dirt. And without that letting down of the shield, is there any hope for true intimacy, true knowing?

I find his judgements of people a little unfair... even Weavil--though crude and weak and probably despicable, is not evil (rhyme unintended (at least not by me, but maybe by Powys? (or maybe weasel was the intention))), at least no more than anyone else... there's nothing inherently wrong with lust, it's natural within certain parameters, and these parameters are set by people/community... yet Wolf's parameters are set in his own head and too unyielding. In this he has a lot in common with Christie who also seems to set parameters in her head (though we all do). He's also not able to convince me fully of Urquhart's evil... what has he ever done, other than give off a generally negative vibe... of course there is the thing with Redfern, which he could have been involved in, but we don't know any of the details of that yet, it's all rumors.

It's like Wolf's immediate prejudice against Jason's idol (Mukalog)... what's the harm of Jason having that idol if he believes in it? Isn't that the only thing that Jason held dear other than his poetry? Even if it was sad, it's a physical form of his illusion, perhaps. Wolf has made up his mind that the idol is evil, and takes steps to destroy it, when in fact it's just a piece of sculpted stone.

And yet Wolf is no more holy than anyone else. He's a hypocrite. Going off with Christie is not innocent just because he doesn't sleep with her, ask any woman if this is any more acceptable than full out cheating. These are HIS parameters, and yet if someone else had more strict parameters, then they may see Wolf as an evil man, even WITH his mythology intact.

I wrote most of the above paragraphs in a mad rush while still in the middle of the book... but then I get to the part of the book where his mother scolds him, and I feel like she says it much better than I did (or can) in the paragraphs above:

"Can't you accept once for all that we all *have to be bad* sometimes... just as we all *have to be good* sometimes? Where you make your mistake, Wolf"--here her voice became gentler and her eyes strangely illuminated--"is in not recognizing the loneliness of everyone. We *have* to do outrageous things sometimes, just because we are lonely! It was in a mood like yours when you came in just now that God created the world. What could have been more outrageous than to set such a thing as *this* in motion? But we're in it now; and we've got to move as it moves. ... Every movement we make must be bad or good ... and we've *got* to make movements! We make bad movements anyhow ... all of us .. outrageous ones ... like the creation of the world! Isn't it better, then, to make them with our eyes open ... to make them honestly, without any

fuss ... than just to be pushed, while we turn our heads round and pretend to be looking the other way? That's what you do, Wolf. *You look the other way!* You do that when your feet take you to the Malakite shop. you're doing that now, when you carry this naughty book back to that old rogue. Why do you always try and make out that your motives are good, Wolf? They're often abominable! Just as mine are. There's only one thing required of us in this world, and that's not to be a burden ... not to hang round people's necks!" p. 721

But the only reason I am so harsh on Wolf is because I identify with him. I see myself being equally unfair to people, and I also feel like my illusion is harmful at times (as well as helpful at times), and so I take out my frustrations on Wolf. I get angry at him for holding onto his mythology so uncompromisingly, when the things that will break them are so innocent... writing a book that he doesn't completely believe in for someone he thinks is potentially evil, and making love with Christie, whom he already considers as his true love in his head. I say throw those stale self-ideas away and live the way you want to live! His mythology is holding him back, while not truly making him any better than anyone else, any holier or less culpable! Is it any better to remain in a slowly deteriorating relationship with Gerda when you are essentially cheating on her, than to get a divorce and pursue the one you love in the open, come what may? I know what I'm saying is not always realistic to the practical world of the novel, but these are my gut reactions.

Perhaps Wolf's gravest sin is not his mythology--whether he keeps it or not--but his wavering indecision. If he were stronger and more decisive about absolutely not 'selling-out' no matter what, he would not suffer so much, and he would have a certain comfort in his modest life, and a certain happiness in his identity. Nor would he hurt those around him as much. He would be self-righteous but not hypocritically so. On the other hand, if he completely disregarded his mythology and followed his gut, then he would've found a different happiness, and his decisiveness in the matter would cut all ties with his mythology so that he would not feel conflicted about it. It is in that middle region of indecision where all human suffering radiates. And I find myself in that same position often. Not only with his mythology but in many things. Indecision between Christie and Gerda. Between 'good' and 'evil'. Between his mother and his father. Even indecision about what to do once he was inside Christie's bedroom.

This wavering is his ultimate downfall. And because I could see so much of myself in Wolf, I felt for him also when he fell. And boy did he fall. He not only lost his mythology, but also his identity with it as well. The days seem interminable and unbearable. Everything is bleached and meaningless. There was no filter. And there was no illusion about one-self. The disappointment with yourself follows you everywhere. And the feeling that everybody can see that in you, that you have let that compromise who you were. I felt that very deeply. And the way everyone just went about their business, some better than others, and that there was no outward signs of this loss of mythology, no funeral, no grave or gravestone or skull staring up from the weeds. That this was his alone and that he never shared it with anyone, even Christie, but that it is a personal loss that he must bear without aid. The thought that 'other people cannot possibly understand' which stops one from making personal connections when they could have been made, but only at the right time and the right place. And the way he let that slip away, let that opportunity for genuine connection be destroyed.

I don't think it's unfair to say that the novel itself was a bit of a mess--but probably in a good or okay way, overall. It advanced like an old car, lurching forward, then sputtering out. Then going fine for a few miles. Finally about half-way in, it gets really good and picks up speed. But even in that first half there were brilliant moments. And in the last half, there were clunky moments. It was just so uneven, though.

For instance, the scene-building was pretty good, and you get to know all the characters a little bit and

plotlines start getting interesting. A certain pace is set. Then suddenly in the chapter 'Christie', he jumps ahead several months, all the just-budding plotlines have been mostly resolved... he's married now, his mother is settled in, etc. basically all momentum is lost, and we were just a third of the way into the book! So Powys has to start almost from scratch building up new momentum. It's almost like he said "well I'm tired of those concerns now, so I'm just going to jump ahead and start talking about what I'm really interested in," but then if that's the case, why didn't he start the book off there? I'm making it sound worse than it is, because truly I didn't care that much, and I think his new concerns were much more interesting anyway, and it didn't make the book any less good, but it definitely was a "hmm, interesting choice..." moment, for me.

I am not sure I get all the characters. Some of them make sense to me but others don't. And some of them make sense to me to a certain point, then they do something seemingly out of character, or out of nowhere, so that I suspect the author's hand had been stirring in it. Overall I enjoyed the passages inside of Wolf's head more than the ones where he's interacting with people. And the ones where he's only interacting with one person for a long time are also enjoyable.

The writing itself was unique and interesting. What's the opposite of personification? Is it animalification? Because that's what Powys loves to do. Except not just animals, but animal-vegetable-mineral, basically naturification. Even the characters' names: Wolf, Weavil, Redfern, Otter, bring up the ideas of animals and plants, or the spirits of them. Most of his metaphors have to do with nature in an all encompassing way. You get the sense that that's how Powys sees the world, his *own* life-illusion, maybe (which obviously shares some similarities with Wolf's, but I would say some differences also). So that it's not an affectation but seemed to come from a genuine source, that he sees everything as part of the natural world, but bubbling up into the human (and yes that is an artificial demarcation anyway), so that when he writes about the self it is like a bundle of nervous energy that twitches this way and that and is connected to a long lineage of instincts, memories, base-desires, and mysterious magnetisms that build up into something more--as if from the elemental to the transcendent there is a direct connection? (In the end, without his mythology, that umbilical cord is slashed for Wolf, so that it becomes only earthly sensation without higher meaning.) When it works, these passages are wonderful and transition beautifully from the outer to inner worlds and back. When it doesn't work, it's feels gaudy, corny, and awkward. But it works enough that you want to overlook the times where it doesn't.

This was a very odd book. And a very special book. I was sometimes frustrated but never bored. And I loved it, but I wanted to love it more. And that I related to it, sometimes painfully. I will definitely read more John Cowper Powys.

PS - please also go read Mariel's and Eddie's reviews.

James says

Wolf Solent was published in 1929, when Powys was 57 and still making a part-time living from his mobile lecture show. An unsparingly analytical, intensely poetic character-study of the kind that became his specialty, it was his debut as a mature novelist. Here are all the elements of standard Powysian psychodrama: a conflict between brothers; the hypnotic eroticism of girls; depraved elders; and the remains of innocence. Wolf Solent is no nostalgic pastoral. Powys, who eulogized the beauties of Nature, never balked at revealing its horrors. His work is full of implications of violence. To him it was a mistake not to see what he, in a somewhat Zen manner, called "the necessity of opposition": Good and Evil; Male and Female; Life and Death; Appearance and Reality. All these, he says,

"have to be joined together, have to be forced into one another, have to be proved dependent upon each other, while all solid entities have to dissolve, if they are to outlast their momentary appearance, into atmosphere."

The novel, on the surface, is a fairly straightforward story of a native son's return, along the lines of Hardy's *Return of the Native*. Wolf, the eponymous hero, an extremely sensitive soul, returns to his hometown on England's South Coast after suffering a mental breakdown in London. But instead of recovering his innocence at home, he loses it completely. He is coming to a presumably serene writing assignment for the local squire, to escape the intensity of the city, to understand his past, and to somehow vindicate his tightly wound mother. Nothing goes to plan. He becomes entangled in various affairs, romantic and professional, and uncovers horrible truths about some old friends and neighbors. A battle between his father's *joie de vivre* and his mother's nervousness rages in his head. He becomes sympathetic to his father's mistress, becomes attracted to his half-sister. The job he's come for is not at all what he's expected. In fact, nothing in this town provides relief from intensity.

In the end he returns, disillusioned, to the anonymity of London. You can't go home again sums up the novel in a nutshell; but a nutshell is far too small for Powys. It is what throbs beneath the surface of this novel, from the hero who is alive to every blade of grass and housefly to the world around him. There are many contemplative walks through the English countryside where he plays out every reading of his life in order to make some sense of it. His reverence and concern for the natural world is laudable and, admittedly, hard-going in places. Powys hated most things modern – such as, say, technology and capitalism – so he lingers where others might move along. This is in the heart of the story and all of Powys's novels.

The critic George Steiner once claimed that Powys was the only twentieth-century English writer on a par with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Margaret Drabble, the distinguished English novelist, believes, "we need to pay attention to this man." The fantasy world of his novels, she says, is "densely peopled, thickly forested, mountainous, erudite, strangely self-sufficient. This country is less visited than Tolkien's, but it is as compelling, and it has more air."

Rachel says

My favorite book.
