

### Extract from **Rufianes**<sup>1</sup>

(...) En esas concepciones basó Cowper Powys su visión de las realidades contemporáneas. Afirmó en el ensayo ‘El arte de olvidar lo insoportable’: “Existen en el mundo las posibilidades del horror más atroz”, hay “una reserva de pura abominación que literalmente es ilimitada”, “las diversas situaciones de espanto y de dolor (son) tan pavorosas...”. Tampoco se engañaba sobre su origen: “La repugnancia de nuestro sistema industrial—anotó en su ensayo sobre Oscar Wilde—es con mucho más ofensiva a la pasión natural por la luz y el aire y el recreo y la libertad en el corazón del hombre que cualquier arcaico despotismo o tiranía esclavizante”. Se refería a “lo que se llama ‘trabajar para vivir’... lo que la grosera inteligencia de nuestra turba comercial llama ‘la honorabilidad del trabajo’... El trabajador muestra muy claramente que considera degradante su labor, una carga, una interrupción de la vida, un mal necesario”. Agregó: “Vivimos en una era donde el mundo, por primera vez en su historia, está literalmente bajo el dominio de la más estúpida, la más embotada, la menos inteligente y la menos admirable de todas las clases de la comunidad”. Se refería a “los *rufianes* comerciales”. En la Argentina, y no sólo, se aplicaría a “los rufianes financieros”. Y no sólo.

### **Ruffians**

TIME HAS passed and almost nobody is still quite sure that John Cowper Powys (1872-1963) was, is, a great writer. His name is not listed in the esteemed Merriam-Webster *Encyclopedia of Literature*. His works are not among the lists of the ‘hundred best novels of literary history’, neither do they achieve the lesser glory of pocket editions. They have not been translated into Spanish, with the exception of six short essays recently published in Mexico by the Psychoanalytical Review *Me cayo el veinte*. Their absence defines so to speak the man whom George Steiner considers a model writer, having accumulated a whole *opus* in distinct genres—poetry, theatre, novels, essays—which “once completed, manifests itself as a sum, the totality being greater and more coherent than each of the parts that compose it”. It is composed of more than 70 titles.

It is indeed a curious situation. Whereas Joyce’s writing moves slowly into the Monuments category, that of Powys gains in vigour: critics either shred it to pieces or praise it to the skies, they believe in it or, on the contrary, lose confidence but return to it later, and even his compatriot D.H. Lawrence—so much alive too—did not suffer from a similar constantly shifting itinerary in the reader’s taste. It was only when he was 57 with the publication of his splendid novel *Wolf Solent* (1929) that Powys consolidated his reputation in the United States and in Great Britain. Before that, he was known above all as an erudite lecturer, with a sharp clear mind. He had come to live in America where he

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from the article published in *Página 12*, Buenos Aires, August 2001. Full article translated from the Spanish and published with the kind permission of Juan Gelman.

toured the country, giving lectures to earn his living. The last lecture tour took place in 1930, it was lengthy and he very often suffered from dyspepsia. “Once on this accursed tour my stomach was so upset that I dreamt of nothing else but going to look for places where I could ‘shit’ in peace”<sup>2</sup>. He feels that he has become an “old lonely deep *animal*, (...) or some savage constipated panther like my father when my mother was dying; & he cried out ‘Can’t I even have my breakfast in Peace?’”<sup>3</sup>

His *Diaries*, which Powys wrote from 1929 to 1939 offer a perfect portrait of this difficult author, whom Steiner considered the master of a certain world which “has to be reconquered, reunderstood almost from the start”<sup>4</sup>. He wrote them with the same effortlessness as when he set up his characters in his tales, and these jottings are marked by that very peculiar feeling of intangible nearness to the reader which characterises his novels. In these he describes a central obsession which he used to call “life illusion” and sometimes “a philosophy of life” or “the will of the world” or “answer to the world”. The word “illusion” in that case seems to express at the same time the absurd and the necessity to be oneself, and also the conscience that “the true essence of life is not a fact at all, far less a fixed reality. It is a point of view, an attitude, a mood, an atmosphere, a mental and emotional process”<sup>5</sup>. In these pages Powys does not hide his sexual fantasies and his egoism, his illnesses and his chamanistic rites, which he explores as though they belonged to someone else.

Powys’ so-called pantheism and his ability to abolish all frontiers between exterior and interior worlds are manifest for instance in the eight extraordinary pages which he entitled ‘The wind that waves the grasses’. “It is a strange thing, he writes, how hard it is to interpret that sigh (...) of the wind that waves the grasses! The senses of something that has traveled over long roads to reach us and then with nothing but that obscure momentary signal must needs away again over roads still longer—”<sup>6</sup>. “The wind that waves the grasses comes and goes at its own will. Some are born to receive its intimation, some to refuse it. For such as are born to receive it there is a strange detachment from mortal consolations; yet are they not, these worshippers of the wind, altogether unhappy; but the word than can describe their recompense has not yet been uttered by the lips of man.”<sup>7</sup> Wolf Solent, the protagonist of the eponymous novel, watches how the roots of a tree hide in silence in the dark waters of a river, and this fact does not arouse in him a pæan to Nature, but the intense and sudden sensation of “life illusion”.

Powys has based on these concepts his vision of contemporary realities. In the essay ‘The Art of Forgetting the Unpleasant’, he states : “the possibilities of atrocious horror exist in the world”<sup>8</sup>, there is “a supply of pure abomination in

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<sup>2</sup> *The Diary of JCP*, 1930, reproduced in *Petrushka and the Dancer*, Carcanet Press, p.33

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> George Steiner, ‘The Difficulties of Reading John Cowper Powys’, *The Powys Review* 1, Belinda Humfrey Ed., Spring 1977, p.8

<sup>5</sup> *The Art of Forgetting the Unpleasant* (Little Blue Books, 1923), The Powys Society, 2006, p.22

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22

the world that literally has no limit”<sup>9</sup>, “various situations of terror and pain [are] so ghastly...”<sup>10</sup>. He was not mistaken either in their origin: “The hideousness of our industrial system” he wrote in his essay on Oscar Wilde, “is far more offensive than any ancient despotism or slave-owning tyranny to the natural passion for light and air and leisure and freedom in the heart of man”<sup>11</sup>. He alluded to “‘what is called working for a living’ (...) what the gross intelligence of our commercial mob calls ‘the honourableness of work’ (...) The labourer shows quite clearly that he regards his labour as a degradation, a burden, an interruption to life, a necessary evil.”<sup>12</sup> And he added: “We are living in an age where the world for the first time in its history is literally under the rule of the stupidest, the dullest, least intelligent and least admirable of all the classes in the community”<sup>13</sup>. He was alluding to “commercial *ruffians*”. In Argentina, but not only there, it would apply to “financial *ruffians*”. But not only there.

### Juan Gelman

The renowned poet Juan Gelman, was born in Buenos Aires in 1930, of Russian parents. In 1976, during the military dictatorship in Argentina, his family was murdered, he was forced into exile and now lives in Mexico. He has published several books of poetry and his work has been translated into fourteen languages. In 2000 Juan Gelman was given the Juan Rulfo prize, one of the most prestigious in Latin America. Works published in English: *Unthinkable Tenderness: Selected Poems*, ed. & tr. Joan Lindgren, University of California Press, 1997. “A gem even in translation.”

*¿tratos de amor hay en la sombra?/¿ya volveré a  
peinarte el dulce pelo/espesura donde mi mano  
queda?/¿pensativa en tu aroma?/¿gracia  
cuajada en lenta parecida?/¿me quisiste  
imposiblemente?/*

*Carta a mi madre (Lettre à ma mère)*, J.Gelman, Myriam Solal Editeur, p.30

<sup>9</sup> *The Art of Forgetting the Unpleasant*, p.22

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23

<sup>11</sup> *Suspended Judgments*, ‘Oscar Wilde’, American Library Service, New York, 1923, p.411

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.411-2

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.413