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John Cowper Powys & E.L. Grant Watson

ANYONE attempting to research the life of John Cowper Powys faces the immediate, and sometimes seemingly endless, difficulty of locating the sources. The profusion and enormity of his literary works, spanning more than 60 years, and the extraordinary number of his correspondents throughout his long life, have resulted in the gradual and widespread dispersal of his manuscripts. I can think offhand of nearly a dozen university and museum archives in the U.K. holding original Powys materials, and more than twice that number throughout the United States, and there must be many more materials, particularly letters, still in private ownership. It is not unlikely that there are other letters scattered throughout Europe and elsewhere. What a find, for example, assuming it still exists, his correspondence with Max Brod would be!

Recently I found — though I cannot say whether this is an original discovery— that there are Powys materials in Australia too, namely two letters from John Cowper to Elliot Lovegood Grant Watson, whose major archive is at the National Library of Australia in Canberra. They are interesting more for what they suggest than reveal, but are nonetheless proof that Powys was at some point in contact — alas, it seems all too briefly — with a writer and thinker every bit as extraordinary as himself.

E.L. Grant Watson was born in Staines, Middlesex, in 1885 and was brought up under the influence of his Darwin-adoring mother, who determined he should become a zoologist. He studied Natural Sciences at Cambridge under Adam Sedgwick, whose admonition to “stick to facts, not theories” became a governing theme in his life, and graduated with First Class Honours in 1909. The following year he joined an anthropological expedition to Australia, a chance invitation that changed his life. He fell in love with the Australian bush and the culture of its Aboriginal inhabitants, with its emphasis on myth and animism, and although he returned for good to England in 1914, he subsequently wrote six “Australian” novels (just as Powys wrote about Wessex from upstate New York), among them *Where Bonds Are Loosed* (1914), *The Desert Horizon* (1923), *Daimon* (1925) and *The Nun and the Bandit* (1935). Grant Watson wrote another half dozen novels, but if he is remembered at all as a novelist today, it is in Australia, where his work occasionally receives critical attention.

During the 1930s and 1940s Grant Watson produced the numerous works of natural history that established his reputation as an eloquent and inspiringly inquisitive guide to the wonders of the natural world. These included *The Common Earth* (1932), *Enigmas of Natural History* (1936), *Walking with Fancy* (1943) and *Profitable Wonders* (1949). He also wrote two volumes of autobiography — *But to What Purpose* (1946) and *Journey Under the Southern*

Stars (1968) — and three important scientific-philosophical works — *Nature Abounding* (1941), *Man and His Universe* (1942) and *The Mystery of Physical Life* (1964), which highlight the insufficiency of Darwinian explanations of complex adaptations. It is obviously impossible to convey the full flavour or profundity of Grant Watson's writings in a brief space, but they combine the scrutiny of the professional scientist with the insight of the poet, the scepticism of the agnostic with the faith of the mystic. He has been called "a 20th century polymath and renaissance man", likened both to D.H. Lawrence and Arthur Koestler in the depth and scope of his writing.

The two letters are dated July 27, 1930 and October 14, 1930, both written from Phudd Bottom. Powys begins the first in a familiar tone by describing the Hillsdale area where he lives and wondering whether it was around here that Melville lived at some point. He then says how thrilled he was by Grant Watson's essay and that he "got a lot out of it" that he had missed in "the book". Given the mention of Melville, the essay in question is probably the one that Grant Watson wrote on *Moby Dick*, originally published in *The London Mercury* (for which both Llewelyn Powys and Albert Reginald Powys wrote) in 1920, and the book Melville's masterpiece. Powys says he only read the novel for the first time in this year, 1930, a fact that helps explain Melville's absence from his first three collections of literary appreciations — *Visions and Revisions* (1915), *One Hundred Best Books* (1915), and *Suspended Judgments* (1916) — and his inclusion in his next, *The Pleasures of Literature* (1938). Powys says the book had made a "terrible impression" on his mind, but that, having read Grant Watson's essay, he realises he had missed half the symbolism in it. He then says, "I feel sure that one day we should meet" — an unusual thing to say if this is the first letter he is writing to Grant Watson. Clearly he has already received one from him, for he then says:

"No, I have nothing in me of Jason, tho' I understand him by the magnetic intuition of opposites, but I am much *simpler* in some things... in sensations & in 'mythology' too — than Wolf; whereas I've got deep Christian tendencies (both good and bad) from wh. Wolf was free... & compared with Wolf in *these* I am more subtle"

— and proceeds to discuss his similarities to and differences from Wolf himself. It seems likely, therefore, that Grant Watson had read *Wolf Solent* and initiated a correspondence with its author, later enclosing a copy of his essay in response to Powys's mentioning that he was reading *Moby Dick*. That Grant Watson had been greatly impressed by *Wolf Solent* is evident in the second letter, which Powys begins by expressing his pleasure that Grant Watson has recently been in Montacute. He then expresses his pride at what Grant Watson has said of his novel and his hope that he will be equally pleased with the "more ambitious" romance he is now working on, which has Glastonbury as its background. He ends by agreeing with whatever it was that Grant Watson had said about Jacob

Wassermann's novel *The Goose-Man*, which Powys admits to having found a struggle to read, "lover though I be of long books".

By 1930 Grant Watson had published 10 books, most of them novels, but there is no evidence that I know of to suggest that Powys had read any of them. Nor do I know of any evidence to suggest that they finally met, or continued to correspond, when Powys returned to Britain. This is a great pity and a great loss, for in many ways these two men were kindred spirits. Powys would certainly have been fascinated by Grant Watson's eloquent essays on the wonders of animal and insect life, and the larger implications so beautifully suggested in such essays as "The Mystery of Instinct" and "The Enigma of Physical Death". Grant Watson bridged the divide between science and art, as several writers have done since (Primo Levi springs to mind), and lived comfortably in the single world of truth he saw in both, invoking Keats and Whitman, Nietzsche and Berdyaev, even Vachel Lindsay, where their own visions provided a key to the larger picture. And that larger picture is one which Powys would have recognised; indeed, which he inhabited.



One example must suffice, rich in resonances for readers of Powys's works. It is from an essay called "Some Patterns of Adaptation":

Invisible forces activate the visible phenomena of living things; Nature expresses invisible values in visible terms. To try to explain phenomena in terms of their appearance can never be satisfactory. More terms have to be put into our ideas before we can come near to any comprehension of facts. If we make the assumption that there is an invisible yet objective environment, conditioning the objects that our senses perceive, we can find many facts to support it. It has been called the spiritual world; its

boundaries are undefined, and we know, as yet, little about it. We can discern only that the apparent evolution of forms can well be seen as a gradual incarnation. Extra senses may be necessary to gather extra knowledge; and who can say that they may not come into existence? Blake suggested that we should learn to look *through*, not only *with* our eyes. By this he meant that we gain what Goethe called ‘exact imaginative fantasy’: the power to apprehend the noumenal that lies behind the phenomenal.¹

That last expression could justly be taken as a predominant theme, if not the defining purpose, of John Cowper Powys’s fiction. We do not know if Grant Watson read *A Glastonbury Romance* or what he thought of it, but he would certainly have understood Johnny Geard’s exposition to the people of Glastonbury on how the souls of insects, “though perishable in relation to the visible, are imperishable in relation to the invisible”.

Grant Watson died in 1970 and is buried at Steep in Hampshire. Although several of his works were reissued during his lifetime, most of them, like Powys’s, are now out of print and can only be acquired through second-hand book dealers. Two more recent paperback editions of his essays, however, are more widely available: *Descent of Spirit* (1990) and *The Mystery of Physical Life* (1992). Grant Watson has yet to receive the revivalist attention Powys has finally achieved, but he is a writer who certainly deserves it. Among his numerous friends and correspondents were Edward Thomas, Norman Douglas, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, W.H. Hudson, Havelock Ellis, Owen Barfield, Kathleen Raine and, in particular, Carl Jung. To that illustrious list we can add John Cowper Powys. I like to believe that somewhere there survive more letters between these two remarkable men which would give a fuller background to their tantalizingly brief point of contact, and I would welcome any clues which other Powys readers could provide.

Anthony Head

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¹ *Descent of Spirit*, ed. Dorothy Green (Primavera Press, Sydney, 1990), p. 72