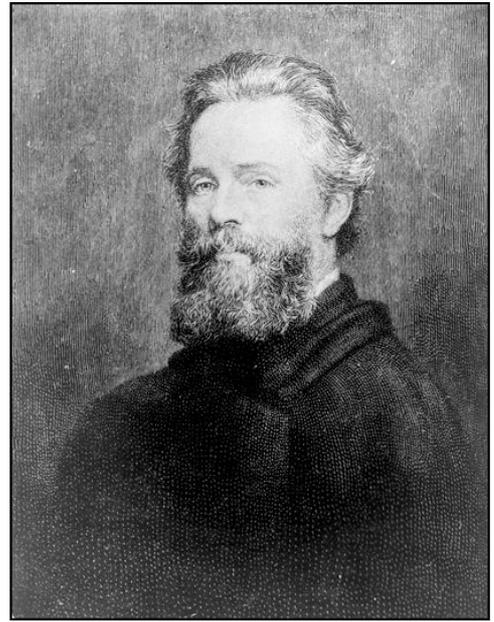


## John Cowper Powys, Melville & Murray

In an article on John Cowper Powys's brief correspondence with the naturalist and novelist E. L. Grant Watson in *la lettre powysienne* n°3 (2002), I mentioned that in his first letter to him, dated 27 July 1930, Powys refers to a book by Melville that he is reading and to an essay on Melville that Grant Watson had written. I suggested the essay was the one on *Moby Dick* that had appeared in *The London Mercury* in 1920, and that this was the novel Powys was reading. But it was suggested to me in subsequent correspondence with Dr. Nicole B. Barenbaum, of the Department of Psychology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, that the article Powys was referring to was one titled 'Melville's *Pierre*', which appeared in the *New England Quarterly* in April 1930.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, Grant Watson discusses the symbolic meanings of the novel, which he considered Melville's greatest work. Powys had briefly mentioned it in an earlier diary entry—"I am reading *Pierre* by Melville and am enchanted by it.... I derive a real inspiration from it for my own work." (5 April 1930)—and it would indeed make more sense of his comments in that letter to Grant Watson that he was thrilled by the essay and had "got a lot out of it" that he had missed in "the book", and also that the novel had made a "terrible impression" on his mind but that, having read Grant Watson's essay, he realised he had missed half the symbolism of it.



Herman Melville

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Dr. Barenbaum had been working on the eminent Harvard psychologist Henry Murray,<sup>2</sup> who was himself a Melville scholar, and had found this essay by Grant Watson cited in Murray's Introduction to the 1949 edition of *Pierre*.

Murray himself, it transpires, was also an admirer of Powys and corresponded with him, though probably only briefly. And we know that these two men did at least meet. According to Forrest Robinson's biography,<sup>3</sup> Murray was a particular enthusiast of both *Wolf Solent* and *The Meaning of Culture* and met Powys on several occasions. Indeed, it was most likely Murray who gave Powys the copy of *Pierre* he was reading in 1930.

Robinson touches only fleetingly on Murray's connection with Powys, which would suggest their acquaintance and correspondence was not very extensive or significant (and there are no references to Murray that I can recall in any of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. Barenbaum for bringing this essay, of which I was previously unaware, to my attention.

<sup>2</sup> Henry A. Murray (1893-1988) was the founder of the Psychoanalytic Society of Boston. He developed a test called TAT (Thematic Aperception Test) which he describes in his *Explorations in Personality* (1938) and which is still much used nowadays by psychologists. He went to see Jung and was influenced by him. [Ed.]

<sup>3</sup> *Love's Story Told: A Life of Henry A. Murray*, F. G. Robinson, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992. Harvard holds a rich archive on H. A. Murray.

Powys's published letters). But what he says is of some interest if only for suggesting how Powys's works—then as now—polarized responses. As his main source, Robinson draws on recollections by the social historian Lewis Mumford,<sup>4</sup> a friend of Murray, whose negative view of Powys he clearly shares:

Lewis Mumford complained that Harry had poor taste in literature. "He didn't like Hemingway or Faulkner at all" but was swept away with the lesser genius of Thomas Wolfe and John Cowper Powys. Mumford quite rightly observed that his friend was most interested in a writer's "general theme for life" and often "overlooked the fact that the books were overwritten and overdramatized." Harry gravitated rather uncritically to fiction that confirmed his own view of reality—by most standards an overwrought and overdramatic view, it must be conceded. It is also true that he had none of the professional critic's interest in concealing the 'subjective' side of his pleasure in art. He liked Melville because he found himself in Melville. He liked O'Neill and Wolfe for the same reason. He was in this, as he was—by his own admission—in so much else, a narcissist. He wrote endlessly to his friends about Powys' *Wolf Solent* (1929), an interminable meditative romance tracing the development of the title character through intricate, closely scrutinized internal changes. It is preeminently the novel of the self, complete with earth and spirit figures competing for the hero's soul, mother fixations, incest, and long intervals of introspection, all carried forward in a tide of myths, symbols, visions, and assaults on Christian morality reminiscent of Jung. It was uncanny the way the book mirrored Harry back to himself. He went out of his way to meet Powys in New York and made a point of sending him a copy of *Pierre*.

In another passage Robinson is a little more specific about Mumford's view:

Mumford could not conceal his dislike for *Wolf Solent*; he found it puffed up with false wickedness. "The whole category of evil is non-existent to me," Harry replied. As to the fakery, he argued—no more persuasively—that it "was intended by Powys, and unconsciously intended (so as to produce the necessary dramatic tension for himself) by *Wolf Solent*." He held on to the novel, as to a part of himself, against all criticism.

That criticism apparently came even from Murray's father, as Robinson hammers his point home in an endnote:

Henry Sr. [Murray's father] was no keener on the book. "Powys is very poetical," he wrote, "but indulges in a good deal of slimy talk—'dung' and such like, which seems to me unnecessary, & almost as if he liked filth. Hardy is much to be preferred in my humble opinion."

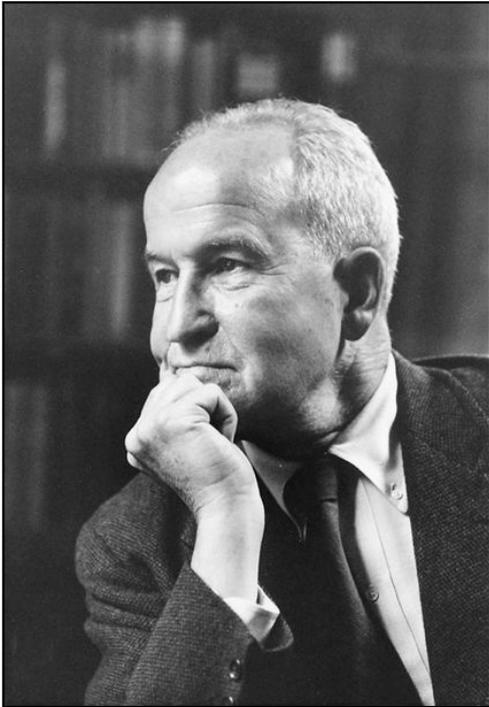
Llewelyn Powys once told his friend Van Wyck Brooks, "I saw a picture of Lewis Mumford in the papers and he scared me, he looked so authoritative."<sup>5</sup> Mumford was indeed a prominent figure in his time, but immunity or antipathy to the delights and profundities of a work like *Wolf Solent* must also say something about the notion of 'authority'. As a psychologist, perhaps Murray was better equipped than the technological historian to understand Powys, and Mumford is

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) was an American historian of technology and science. He became interested in cities and urban architecture. He was also a writer and noted literary critic. [Ed.]

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Van Wyck Brooks of 10 May 1938, in *The Letters of Llewelyn Powys*, ed. Louis Wilkinson (London, The Bodley Head, 1943).

unlikely to have taken to any other of Powys's works, assuming he even tried them (though it is interesting to note that Mumford had himself published a book on Melville – *Herman Melville: A Study of His Life and Vision*—in 1929, the same year that *Wolf Solent* and *The Meaning of Culture* appeared and excited such admiration in Murray).



Henry A. Murray (1962)  
Harvard University Archives, call # HUP  
Murray, Henry A. (3)

In Murray's papers at Harvard there is a letter from Powys dated 10 March 1930, apparently a response to one he had received from Murray, possibly his first. Powys was giving a lecture in Boston the following Sunday, and suggested Murray come and introduce himself afterward. That they did meet at this time is confirmed by Powys in a glorious diary entry for 16 March 1930, that very Sunday, when he did indeed go to Boston: "Then went to the Ford Hall lecture where I discoursed on Polytheism,<sup>6</sup> then went to Creighton's room in Pemberton Street, hard by where was Catherine and Mr. Murry (sic) who talked of Mr. Urquhart. He has a big forehead not unlike that gentleman. Here too was Conrad Aitken,<sup>7</sup> very friendly. I talked too freely, made them laugh but at me rather than with me. The Rev. Stratton took me to the station. I was teased and taunted in my mind at having made a fool of myself, showing-off like that—and talking too much besides—they all laughed as if I were an ass."<sup>8</sup>

It may have been on this occasion that Murray recommended *Pierre* to him, possibly sending him a copy shortly afterwards or even giving him one in person, for just over a week later Powys records in his diary, in his amusingly unrevealing fashion, a visit from Murray to Patchin Place: "It is snowing and very cold. This is

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<sup>6</sup> The archives of the Ford Hall Forum ([www.fordhallforum.org](http://www.fordhallforum.org)) list many of the speakers and their topics over the past 100 years, and include references to two lectures by Powys—30 March 1913 on 'The Social Message of Modern English', and 29 March 1914 on 'The Economic Aspects of Woman Suffrage'. This lecture on 'Polytheism' of 16 March 1930 is not listed, and it may be that Powys gave other talks at the hall. The website says: "The Forum began in 1908 as a series of Sunday evening public meetings held at Ford Hall on Beacon Hill by George W. Coleman, a prominent Boston businessman. Coleman's unique format, which provided equal time to speakers' remarks then questions from the audience, gave any interested citizen the opportunity to debate issues with some of the most influential figures of the day. According to Coleman's vision, the lecture series would enable the "full, free, and open discussion of all vital questions affecting human welfare." Other notable speakers among Powys's contemporaries included Lincoln Steffens, Kier Hardie, Will Durant, Clarence Darrow, John Dewey, Julian Huxley, Bertrand Russell, Theodore Dreiser, Stefan Zweig and Thomas Mann.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad Aiken (1889-1973), American writer and poet. He studied at Harvard at the same time as T.S. Eliot. He received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1930. Was to exert a great influence on Malcolm Lowry. [Ed.]

<sup>8</sup> All diary references are to *The Diary of John Cowper Powys, 1930*, ed. Frederick Davies (Greymitre Books, 1987).

the blizzard from the Middle West. Mr. Murry came to tea; he praised *Wolf Solent* extravagantly. He has a huge forehead. He stammers. He teaches psychology at Harvard. He was nice.” (27 March 1930)

In another letter to Murray in the Harvard archives, dated merely August 11 but surely also this same year, Powys refers to Murray as his friend and thanks him for some books, mentioning *Pierre* especially and saying how interesting and absorbing he had found it.

This then is surely confirmation that the book Powys had referred to in his first letter to Grant Watson as having made such a “terrible impression” on his mind was *Pierre* and not *Moby Dick*. Any novel with a thematic undercurrent of incest would certainly have had its appeal for the author of *Wolf Solent*. Powys was now writing *A Glastonbury Romance*, but whether and how the inspiration he drew from *Pierre* is reflected in his own masterpiece is a subject for further investigation. It is notable, though, that when he came to write his own essay on Melville a few years later, published in *The Pleasures of Literature* (1938), Powys barely touched on *Pierre*, focusing almost exclusively on *Moby Dick*, the work *he* considered Melville’s greatest.

#### Anthony Head

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