

‘Some mystical affinity’: E.L. Grant Watson and the Australian Desert

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Interesting parallels exist between the intellectual careers of Elliot Lovegood Grant Watson and Charles Darwin. Both were brought up in a form of faith (in Darwin's case, Christianity; in Watson's case, Darwinism, of which both his parents were fanatical devotees); both, after completing a Cambridge degree, set off on a scientific voyage to the other side of the world where they found their faith challenged by experiences that were not explicable in terms of their former ideological framework. Both spent the rest of their lives trying to construct a new system that would make sense of their experiences. Darwin lost his unquestioning faith in Christianity, and constructed evolutionary theory; Watson lost his faith in Darwinism and constructed a form of Jungian biology searching for pattern rather than chance.¹ For Darwin, the glitch in the system was his observations on the Galapagos; for Watson it was his experience in the Western Australian desert.

Watson came to Australia in 1910–11² as a member of a scientific expedition led by Alfred Radclyffe-Brown to study Aboriginal anthropology. Arriving in Australia six months before the delayed expedition finally set off, he decided to earn some money by collecting beetles in the desert east of the Kalgoorlie goldfields. During this time he apparently underwent a profound psychological crisis that led him to a radical questioning of his Eurocentric assumptions. The lasting effect on him was a problematising of the imperial focus of the Centre, and the development of what he was later to call the ‘philosophy of the fringe’, the notion that ‘in the centres of civilisation life was withering away’. ‘Human life’, he came to believe, ‘was centripetal, having its sources at the circumference, and that it drove inward towards congestion and death’ (*But to What Purpose* 252). Robert Dixon has traced this fear, emanating from Darwinism, in many of the nineteenth-century ripping yarns of Empire, but Watson dealt with it very differently.

At the time of Watson's visit the Western desert still ranked as the most remote margin of civilisation, and Aboriginal culture, with its emphasis on myth, magic and ritual, as the ultimate primitivism. Yet, for Watson Aboriginal culture appeared in context not only appropriate to its milieu but more persuasive than the European materialism and scientific reductionism in which he had been trained.

J.J. Healy points out that Watson came to Australia a prime candidate for such soul-searching: ‘a mind filled with Nietzsche, Ibsen, Meredith and Conrad; tangled in the pessimism and scepticism of late-Victorian England’.³ In particular, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) was a potent influence on Watson.⁴ In much of his fiction there appears to be an almost conscious self-modelling on Marlow. But Watson could never fully exorcise his demon. Like the Ancient Mariner he was compelled to keep telling his story and progressively equipping himself to do so. As well as his training in biology and anthropology, his reading of literature, and the prior experience of travel in the Middle East, he underwent Jungian psychoanalysis and studied comparative religion. He continued to re-write his Western Australian experience for more than

half a century, at first in novels and later in two non-fictional accounts *But to What Purpose* (1946) and *Journey Under the Southern Stars* (1968). In these latter, Watson interpreted his impressions in terms of the psychological and anthropological theories current between the 1920s and 1940s, identifying Aboriginal culture as the subversive force impacting on the European mind. But in the six Australian novels⁵ published two decades earlier (between 1914 and 1935) the desert itself is the principle that tests, unhinges or transforms his characters. Through the novels, Watson affirms views about European settlement that would now be considered postcolonial, while upholding an estimate of women that remains distinctly pre-feminist. Like Tertius Lydgate he had his intellectual 'spots of commonness'.

Watson's desert novels, with their simple plots and few characters, document as relentlessly as a Greek tragedy the elemental struggle between the rival powers of Western civilisation and Nature (epitomised in the desert) for possession of the European mind. Two of the novels, *Desert Horizon* and its sequel *Daimon* closely plot Watson's own inner struggle to come to terms with the desert as a metaphysical experience. The two central characters, Martin O'Brian (who came to the desert as a child of eight and identifies wholly with it) and his English wife Maggie (who arrived in Australia as a young woman and has never capitulated to its allure) enact in their relationship the inner turmoil of Watson's alternating fascination and revulsion with the land. On the one hand Watson is tempted to abdicate from what he sees as a flawed and exhausted European civilisation, to immerse himself like Martin in the spirit of the desert as a window on eternity; but, like Maggie, he cannot really relinquish his European heritage, and it is significant that, apart from one very brief visit in 1911, he did not return to Australia. In this sense Maggie is the more accurate representation of his 'real' position and the unsympathetic presentation of her as frivolous and indifferent to Martin's feelings is arguably self-flagellation on Watson's part.⁶

As in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus and the Desert Fathers, the desert functions in all Watson's novels except *Where Bonds are Loosed*, as the place for meditation and spiritual growth. Consequently, the characters' response to the desert provides an index of their spiritual development. Viewed diversely as beautiful, monotonous, innocent, menacing, faithful, uncaring, numinous, amoral, it retains its unique integrity as a complex of all these attributes held in balance, offering metaphysical enlightenment for those able to accept its rich diversity.

What I have found most interesting is the way Watson reinterprets in quasi-romantic and spiritual terms the experiences common to most desert travellers, often arriving at a completely opposite estimate. I want, here, to consider eight of these foci.

1. One of the most immediate impressions of the desert is its immensity, which emphasises the smallness of human life and its concerns—what is termed, in *Daimon*, 'the contracting circle of human life' (*Daimon* 273).⁷ For Watson, this immensity is not the featureless void that terrified many of the explorers, and many others since; it has components, texture, contrasts. Martin tells Maggie: 'It isn't what you see, but what you feel: the little noises and silences, the feeling of bigness ...' (*The Desert Horizon* 249)⁸, and the novels repeatedly emphasise the details of variation.

2. Another inescapable desert attribute is the notion of emptiness, space, void, monotony, generally perceived as negative, composed of overlapping absences. But for Watson, void is essentially positive, teaching a valuable lesson about material possessions. When, as children, Martin and his sister Mary discuss why 'white people always

stay in one place and [do] not go trekking like black-fellows', Mary astutely decides, 'I suppose it's because they've got more things' (*The Desert Horizon* 17). Only when Martin, and ultimately Maggie, discard all their possessions do they find enlightenment. *Daimon* ends with Martin preparing for death by divesting himself of all possessions:

he carefully and deliberately took off his clothes. He was possessed with one last desire: to be free of all encumbrances; then with long strides, swinging his arms about him, he strode eastwards toward the heart of the desert, singing to himself. (*Daimon* 331)

3. Perhaps the most interesting quality described by Watson is the sense of the numinous he associates with the desert, a testament to a reality beyond the material. His character Martin dimly understands it in Platonic terms as 'the land of his dreams, that symbol of a noumenon life, more real than material things, which are but shadows of the beyond' (*Daimon* 282-3). Watson insists that animals sense this numinous presence, too. 'The horses lifted their heads and with ears forward gazed intently ... it seemed that they saw, moving in that desert emptiness, things that the eyes of the humans could not see.' Martin tells Maggie 'they see things we don't see, but there's nothing to hurt or be afraid of' (22, 29).

During his time near Kalgoorlie, Watson himself recorded similar experiences of 'something, sensed but unseen, behind phenomena', the coalescence of the infinite and the minute, when 'the veil of time seemed drawn aside, and eternity gazed in the sun's glare or in the cracking of a seed-pod' (*But to What Purpose* 63). If this lack of control over the universe worried him too much, he would return to camp 'and be righted in my own esteem; and the next day perhaps, or some days later the bush would speak to me again: 'Fear me. Do not hate me. Do not worship me. Do not resist me, nor presume to look for too long. Look aside, and, if you can, accept me' (100, 101).

4. One powerful image Watson uses for the numinous is the mirage. This is described by virtually every traveller in the desert, but others record it as either an interesting scientific phenomenon to be explained, or as a malevolent trick, the Fata Morgana that mocks their thirst with illusory visions of water; for Martin the fantastic shapes, at first frightening, become an epiphanic assurance of a transcendent world, an expanded range of possibilities beyond the mundane. He loses his fear of the irrational and the paranormal.

As they watch, the waves seem to rise higher, and glassy layers, which look like water, appear one after the other, rising up into the sky. The mirage flows out before them and behind, clipping them in a horse-shoe and on all sides the false water rises and ebbs. The surface is twisted and torn by faint, hot gusts of wind into wisps of shining vapour, which are in shape like the bodies of fantastic creatures, which run over the vibrating sheen of water beneath. And now in recurring lines, beyond the horizon, there appear images of the desert, trees and low scrub, salt-bush, and here and there cattle, large beyond all natural proportion. As the children watch, the forms alter their shape, they merge into and replace one another. The sea of shimmering vapor rises higher ...

As Martin watches, his fear slowly leaves him ... To his boy's heart comes the first knowledge of illusion ... He tastes an unexpected freedom; the world is changed into unsubstantial air and vapour. (*The Desert Horizon* 53-4)

5. Watson's characterisation of the desert also involves a Romantic fusion of opposites. While the particular set of binaries focused upon varies in the different novels, his

heroic characters discover the point of synthesis and achieve wholeness. The opposition may focus on spiritual purity of the desert set against the material complexities of civilisation. The desert may appear at one time as beautiful, young, nurturing, good and virginal, and at another monotonous, ancient, cruel, amoral and barren. But there is no suggestion that either cluster of characteristics should be privileged; rather the desert transcends all moral judgements, all attempts at categorisation.

In *The Nun and the Bandit*, the contraries confronted in the desert are good and evil. The epigraph, Watson's favourite Nietzschean maxim ('The Daimon and the Fringe Dweller' 292), '*Aus deinem Giften brauest du dir deinem Balsam*' ('Out of your poison you brew your healing') heralds a resolution of the opposition epitomised in the title and amplified in the Yin-Yang symbol printed on the title page. This is a story of evil transmitted across generations but finally neutralised when Lucy, a young novice, abducted to the desert by the brutalised Michael Shanley and forced into sexual acquiescence to release a kidnapped child, reacts with love, not hatred. From the depths of this poison comes the healing: 'What her mind had half accepted, to be violated in coldness and hate, her heart, which was still, in spite of everything, beating with such fierceness, would never sanction' (*The Nun and the Bandit* 270-1). Only in the ambience of the desert, Watson implies, could the spiritual power to accomplish such a resolution of opposites occur. Watson later affirmed this in Jungian terms:

I believe, with Dr. Jung, that it is impossible and undesirable to separate the good from the evil. Only by becoming familiar with the Shadow side of our natures, will we be able to know how to deal with the evil in the world. (*But to What Purpose* 211)

In similar vein, Maggie reflects:

The desert was *beyond* good and evil, something aloof and opposed altogether to human love and sympathy ... But human sapience, it was a small, uncertain thing; there was something more august, never, perhaps, to be known, save when great pain or joy tuned the senses to the limit of their endurance. There was something, going beyond space and time, eternal; making a unity of good and evil, a unity in duality; making of things finite the symbols of infinity. (*Daimon* 257)

6. For Watson the desert also assumed the multi-skilled role that Wordsworth ascribed to Nature: mother, nurse, teacher, sister/lover, enduring comfort, etc. In *The Desert Horizon* and *Daimon* Martin's spiritual development is plotted in terms of his perceptions of the desert. As a young child, his 'boy's eyes looked out over the desert and saw the beauty of its eternal youthfulness, the beauty of its abiding age ... they saw as yet no menace in that soft, honey-sweet smile' (*The Desert Horizon* 30-1). When their mother dies while the father is way shearing, he and Mary push the heavy pram containing their younger brothers and some tinned food across the miles of desert dunes. This is a rite of passage, his initiation test in both physical and attitudinal terms. The desert remains beautiful and young but epitomises a Darwinian amorality: 'Fresh and very young, this desert region was not yet aware of the advent of mankind upon the earth ... what had it to do with these children who crawled over its surface; what concern had it with their courage or their despair?' (47) However, having survived this nightmare trek, Martin has no fear, but rather a Wordsworthian confidence in the desert as nurturer, teacher, as enduring power:

He had been threatened by that impersonal, remorseless power, but he bore no grudge. He loved the desert, he did not fear it. It had been his nurse, his second mother, his most intimate friend. (116)

His first brief experience of sexual love with Nance is instantly interpreted in terms of the qualities he associates with the desert: 'Through her he translated all his imaginings. She was become the symbol of the desert, summing up in herself all its beauty, its tenderness, its sadness. In her arms he found its eternal youth and its undying age' (*The Desert Horizon* 166) When Nance leaves him he reflects, 'He was alone, his friends had left him. The desert only remained faithful ...' (149).

7. In keeping with this spiritual communion, Martin's physical form takes on aspects of the landscape. Maggie notes his 'tanned and weather-moulded face ... the power in the eyes ... In the blue-grey of their glance, so akin to the colour of the distant horizon, was a quality of mild contemplation' (*Daimon* 112). Like Wordsworth's leech-gatherer Martin eventually becomes almost indistinguishable from his environment. 'A dust-stained fragment of a man he looked: hardly a man: a piece of earth detached from it and imbued with movement ...' (316).

8. Apart from its role as the arena for personal turmoil, the desert also functions, particularly in *Desert Horizon*, as the locus for a reenactment in miniature of the colonial history of Australia. The extended conflict between the imperial Centre and the margin is ironically recast, with the centre of the continent as the ultimate margin. Representative characters voice the views of successive waves of immigrants, endeavouring to retain their European values. Martin's father, the new British settler, forbids his children to mix with the Aborigines whom he sees as mere animals, though significantly they survive much better on the barren land than he, with his entrenched European notions of farming practice, can do. Mackay, the settler for whom Martin later works, voices the views of progressive Anglo-Australians at the time Watson visited. Bent on dominating the land through clearing, fencing and artesian irrigation to produce wheat and encourage settlement, Mackay is obsessed with recreating a British farm on an immense scale, seeing this process in Darwinian terms—as struggle against Nature for survival. For Mackay the land is the enemy and must be broken; indeed he voices a version of manifest destiny in claiming it is God's will that this should be so.

'Why think of it, this country could grow wheat ... It wants clearing and ploughing, that's all, and reservoirs to store the water.' He looked away at the mulga-bushes and the red dust. 'In my mind's eye I can see it all yellow with harvest. There could grow enough wheat on this western borderland to feed a continent ... Progress, development, to let a thousand men live where one man could live with difficulty before. That's a great idea, don't you think? ... One can't stand still or mark time. No history stands still; it's taking things from nature, cultivation, progress, or else being broken. Why should men live here if it wasn't for that? We don't live just for ourselves. We put our mark on things and they are changed ... That's what you've come here for: breaking the land, bringing it under to man ... It will break you, young fellow, or you'll break it. One or the other ... we are in the hands of God, and come because we are pushed by the will of mankind, by the will of God to conquer the barren places of the earth.' (*The Desert Horizon* 168–71).

In a particularly radical statement for its time (1923), Martin affirms: '[t]he idea of changing the character of the land seemed ... grotesque ... [the bush] was unchangeable, eternally the same, safe from his touch ... "I've come here because I want to be here," he said simply' (*The Desert Horizon* 169, 171).

Watson continued to recast his desert crisis in fiction until finally, in his two autobiographical works, he consigned it to the category of animism and Aboriginal magic where anthropology and psychology provided an established terminology with a level of contemporary scientific credibility. In so doing, however, he sacrificed the complexity and paradoxical elements that, if we accept the novels as representing his more immediate response, were the most significant aspects of his experience.

Notes

- 1 The majority of the natural history essays in *The Mystery of Physical Life* (1964) and those reprinted in *Descent of Spirit* reiterate the theme of pattern and purpose in Nature.
- 2 Grant Watson had also visited Tasmania with his mother in 1887, at the age of two.
- 3 J.J. Healy, 'Grant Watson and the Aborigine: A Tragic Voice in an Age of Optimism', *Australian Literary Studies* 7:1 (May 1975), 27.
- 4 It is not surprising that he sent his first novel *Where Bonds are Loosed*, described by Daisy Bates as having 'a background of horror and heartbreak and unutterable woe' (Daisy Bates. *The Passing of the Aborigines*. New York: Praeger, 1967, p. 104) to Conrad for suggestions, and perhaps equally unsurprising that Conrad read it seven times and made thirty-one pages of notes on it. E.L. Grant Watson, *But to What Purpose* (London: Cresset Press, 1946), pp. 148-51.
- 5 *Where Bonds are Loosed* (1914), *The Mainland* (1917), *The Desert Horizon* (1923), *Daimon* (1925), *The Partners* under the pseudonym John Lovegood (1933), and *The Nun and the Bandit* (1935).
- 6 The character of Jefferies in the short story 'Out There' can also be read as Watson's justification for leaving the country: to stay is to risk 'going native' and becoming irrevocably degraded.
- 7 The American edition of *Daimon* was published under the title *The Contracting Circle*.
- 8 The immensity is compounded by increased awareness of the stars. Appearing so much brighter away from cloud or the light pollution of cities, the stars form an integral part of the desert experience and again a character's response to them is an index of his (and it is always his) harmony with the desert. In *The Desert Horizon*, as Martin 'lay looking up at the stars, he was slowly soothed, and it seemed as if some mild influence from the sky descended, lapping his body in rest so that he slept' (73). Throughout his life this benign influence remains: 'Here was an ever-present consolation. He had but to lie down upon the ground and look up at the sky, and in answer to that simple invocation, calm, the sweet calm and rhythm of nature, would wipe away all the troubles and disharmonies of the individual man' (*Daimon* 236-7). Significantly, Maggie, who hates the desert, finds no such consolation. She merely resents the fact that Martin lies there looking at the sky. p. 109). Maggie, on the other hand, shrinks 'from that unhuman part of being, which, like the stars, was a symbol of infinitude', and Lucy, awaiting her fate at the hands of Michael Shanley, is confused by these immense distances where previously the stars had 'been for her the symbol of prayer'.

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