

AN ODD KIND OF NOVEL

I can't help thinking that, if any other country had in its recent literary history a writer as distinctive and original as T.F.Powys, they would make more of him. They would keep all his books in print, write about him, teach him and do everything possible to keep him at the forefront of their literary tradition, for the general reader, for scholars and for other writers. Instead, he is known only for *Mr Weston's Good Wine* and regarded as a bit of an oddity.

The three short stories that make up the collection (long out of print) called *The Left Leg*, which was published in 1923, illustrate both why I consider him to be a great and unjustly neglected writer and why he has been neglected.

The first story, *The Left Leg*, takes its title from an old rhyme:

*There I met an old man
Who would not say his prayers;
I took him by the left leg,
And threw him down the stairs.*

The story is set, as all of T.F.Powys's stories are, in a fictional English village. In this case it is called Madder. The names T.F.Powys gives to people and places are chosen with as much care as, for example, the words made up by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll for their nonsense poems, or the names Jonathan Swift invented for people and places in *Gulliver's Travels*. The inhabitants of Madder include Uncle Jar, Farmer Mew, Mrs Patch, Mrs Cuddy, Shepherd Squibb, Mother Button and the more conventionally named John Soper and James Gillett.

Like Brobdingnag and Lilliput, brillig and pobble, they work by sound and association, similar enough to real words to be credible, different enough to take on a life of their own in the reader's imagination. Madder is both a colour (rose madder) and an adjective meaning 'more mad'. It is also perfectly credible as the name of a West Country village.

And when we are told that it was old Mr Jar 'who, coming down one day from the hills, and meeting Shepherd Squibb, had given the name "God's Madder" to the village' in order to distinguish it from Great and Little Madder, we know we are onto something. T.F.Powys always brings God in sooner or later and here he is on the first page as the owner of a village whose name means either a colour favoured by painters or 'more mad' (which might mean 'less sane' or 'more angry').

On the next page, we learn that 'Mother Button had a son named Tom who was mad, and Mad Button used to say that Uncle Jar kept tame stars in his hut'. Mr Jar lives in a hut which 'was a wonder in itself' and 'by the proper laws of gravity should have fallen fifty years ago'.

Old Jar has left the village before the story begins, but 'the people still thought about him'. What they remember is 'his tall, spare and commanding figure, his ragged clothes, and above all his great beard'. They also remember 'that good luck had always come to those to whom old Jar was related, and that even to those who gave him a meal good fortune would be sure to follow'. Now that he has gone 'God's Madder was left to its own desires'.

T.F.Powys always brings desires in sooner or later too. He is like William Blake in rejecting the post-Reformation idea of a God who doesn't want people to enjoy themselves, 'Nobodaddy' as Blake called him. In his stories there is always at least one young woman who, just by being beautiful, not by any deliberate act on her part, awakens desires in men

about which there is very little they can do, either to satisfy or to suppress. Pursuit of maidens and attempted rapes are as common in the stories of T.F.Powys as they are in classical legend. *Hester Dominy*, the second story, is dedicated to David Garnett, whose *Lady Into Fox* is the equivalent of *Mr Weston's Good Wine* in being the only thing he is remembered for. (He wrote *Aspects of Love* too, but everyone thinks that was by Andrew Lloyd Webber.) The setting and the characters of this story are more realistic. Eveleigh, the dull town where Hester lives with her mother, is a perfectly ordinary, dull town. Apart from Dominy, with its church Latin associations, the townspeople have perfectly ordinary names (Mr Parady, Mr Dine, Mr Haysom), perfectly ordinary occupations (a shop-keeper, a tailor, a minister) and perfectly ordinary lives.

Enmore, on the other hand, the village to which two of the Eveleigh characters escape, is more like Madder. There we meet Mr Matterface the innkeeper, Mr Poose the shepherd, Mr Warry the dairyman, Mr Chipp the rabbit-catcher and Mr Pike the road-mender. There Hester Dominy, who is young and beautiful and taught at the Sunday School in Eveleigh, goes to teach the infants at the village school. There too goes Antony Dine, who is old and weary, to escape from his mother and the tedium of his daily life (as many fictional characters did in those days, from Mole to Mr Lewisham) and do nothing but live on his savings.

In *Hester Dominy*, T.F.Powys meets not only David Garnett but, in a way, Anton Chekhov. There is nothing Chekhovian about the way the story is told, but much in the working out of the story, in which real life never lives up to expectations and people never tell the truth, either to themselves or each other. Hester Dominy is the hopeless, unwitting object of several men's desires. Some of them pursue her in reality, some in imagination, some fail to recognise their desire for what it is.

'He had wished her to go,' Hester reflects, thinking of Antony Dine at the end of the story, after his death, 'he had told her to go. He had sent her out into the sunlight. But was there any sunlight? Surely not.'

It is a strange, bleak ending to a strange, bleak story.

The third story is called *Abraham Men*, an old term for men who counterfeit madness, like Edgar in *King Lear* calling himself 'Poor Tom'. The village of Little Dodder is the most T.F.Powys-y of T.F.Powys's fictional villages. The villagers are all mad, Abraham Men to the man and woman.

"Do you know, John Dunell, that they stones bain't real stones?" says George Pring at the beginning of Chapter 1. 'Large rooks flew by over the road very slowly as though they had overheard George Pring say something and wondered what he meant by it.'

The animals are like people in this story and the people like animals. 'The rooks flew away to Angel Hill and settled around the one dead tree. They wished, no doubt, by their gestures, to communicate a fine piece of wisdom to one another, for they settled in circles round the tree and nodded their heads as though they were talking in parables.' After George Pring and John Dunell have discussed the matter for some time, John Dunell settles it once and for all. "'Stones be stones," he said. The imagination of George Pring had settled again into the mud of the road.'

It is the story of Luke Bird, a respectable accountant who 'gave up his post at Milverton in order to preach the Word' and goes to preach it at Little Dodder, where he meets George Pring, John Dunell, Mrs Topp, Squire Kennard, Mr Mowland, Mary Bugg, Dark Eliza, Betsy

Pring, Susan Dunell, Tom Candy, Mrs Candy, Miller Tuck, Old William Mellor, Job Tory, Alfred Dreamer, Gertie Loverley, Mary Soul, Maud Whiffer, Mr Cobb the policeman and, above all, eighteen year old Rose Pring who, apart from her immediate attractions, will inherit £100 when she is twenty-one.

‘Rose lay back in the hedge and sighed, her breathing showed her sex. She tightened herself on purpose and then let her breath go. Her bosoms became little soft mounds in the grass. She kicked out a foot and looked up at the hedge. As she looked her eyes became a violet colour. Rose smiled.’

George Pring is her foster-father and as unsure of her reality as he is of the stones’. ‘George Pring moved his hand towards the girl’s foot until he touched it. The fact that the girl’s foot was real did not appear to convince him about the case in hand. Mr Pring wished for further proof; he moved his stained, twisted fingers all over the girl’s body, feeling her in different places. Rose laughed.’

Abraham Men, which was dedicated to the sculptor, Stephen Tomlin, has a much happier ending than *Hester Dominy*, when Luke leaves Little Dodder ‘as one leaves an old furniture-shop where the teapots talk too much and the gilt chairs tell stories of forlorn and forgotten days.’ There is a moment, just before the ending, of almost post-modern irony on the part of the author, when Luke, walking out of the village, ‘fancied that he had been reading a chapter in an odd kind of novel where a man steps into a picture and meets figures in grey clothes moving about amid green grass shining in the sun. And in the picture the hills grew into gentle shapes like the breasts of women.’

An odd kind of novel by an odd kind of writer, too odd for us.

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