

Theodore Powys's Gods and Demons

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By

Zouheir Jamoussi

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This book is dedicated to the memory of

Professor Jean-Jacques Mayoux

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BB: Black Bryony*
F: Fables
FA: Father Adam (a novella)
GEAT: God's Eyes A-Twinkle (an anthology)
IB: Innocent Birds
IOG: An Interpretation of Genesis
KIC: Kindness in a Corner
LL: The Left Leg (three novellas)
MB: The Market Bell
MC: Mock's Curse (collected short stories)
MG: Mockery Gap
MO: Mark Only
MTG: Mr Tasker's Gods
MWGW: Mr Weston's Good Wine
SEW: Selected Early Works of T. F. Powys
SOH: Soliloquies of a Hermit
SPS: The Sixpenny Strumpet (four novellas)
UNC: Unclay
- LOF: Lord of the Flies*
PP: The Pilgrim's Progress
SL: The Scarlet Letter
WIL: Women in Love

INTRODUCTION

The present book is based on the unpublished French thesis, *L'Allégorie et la réalité dans l'oeuvre de T. F. Powys* which I defended in June 1971 at the Sorbonne in Paris. The members of the doctoral panel had at the time recommended publishing it, but this was never done. Returning to it some forty years later, I realized that the main points developed in the thesis had stood the test of time and might now still serve as the groundwork for a useful book with a fairly original and, in some important ways, unprecedented approach to Theodore Powys's work.

As can well be imagined, before submitting a book proposal to any publisher over forty years later, the original thesis needed to be seriously updated in the light of the substantial amount of Powys's works posthumously published since the early seventies, most of which we owe to the Brynmill Press and Ian Robinson, and of all the relevant critical and biographical material published during that long period. On the whole, Powys's posthumously published works and the critiques produced over the last four decades have provided opportunities for expanding and enriching the original thesis without, however, posing a challenge to its main claims and conclusions. Moreover, the inclusion of Powys's posthumously published works and of the greater part of the critical material on the author produced since the 1970s makes the present book a fairly up-to-date and comprehensive approach to Theodore Powys's oeuvre.

The Brynmill Press has published the novella *Father Adam* (1990), *The Market Bell*, a novel (1991), *Mock's Curse*, a collection of nineteen short stories (1995), *The Sixpenny Strumpet*, including four novellas¹ (1997), and *Selected Early Works of T. F. Powys* (2003), two volumes of various works, edited by Elaine Mencher, the most significant parts of which belong to a period of time stretching from 1902 to 1916. This selection includes plays, poems, autobiographical pieces, allegories, and Bible-related as well as Bunyan-related works, along with references to recent philosophical currents.

The Powys Review, The Powys Journal, The Powys Society Newsletter,

¹ This collection consists of the three novellas published in 1932 as *The Two Thieves*, with the addition of one novella, *The Sixpenny Strumpet*.

and *Powys Notes* have provided a substantial amount of relevant critical material. Works of significant biographical interest include Richard Perceval Graves's book *The Brothers Powys* (1983 and 1984), focusing on the relationships between the three literary brothers, John Cowper, Theodore Francis and Llewellyn, Theodora Gay Scutt's *Cuckoo in the Powys Nest* (2000), recording, in particular, daily life and intra-family relationships during the later Mappowder period (1940-53), and J. Lawrence Mitchell's *T. F. Powys: Aspects of a Life* (2003), the last two of which we also owe to the Brynmill Press.

Among Powys's posthumously published works *Selected Early Works of T. F. Powys* (2003) has been undoubtedly a very important addition. It includes a variety of works from Powys's early writing period, for the most part new to me. Elaine Mencher's introduction has been a very helpful guide through that heterogeneous collection of early writings. Throughout the present book references to *Selected Early Works* will be frequently made for the purpose of explaining the origins of or illustrating such or such a theme or aspect of Powys's work.

Powys's literary career, for its most significant part, may be divided into three distinct phases: the first, which runs from the very first years of the twentieth century to the middle of World War I, shows a writer trying his hand at various literary genres, obviously still in search of a mode of literary expression suited to his turn of mind. The second stage, extending roughly from the middle of the war to 1921, marks a clear shift towards fiction writing, with still some hesitation between, on the one hand, realism and contemporaneity and allegory and timelessness on the other. The works published during this second period mark a clear progress from the heterogeneity of the earlier writing period. Moreover, within this new context, which may be broadly categorised as fictional, Powys shows a clear tendency to move away from realism and reality and closer to allegory. A steady evolution in that regard can be made out from *Mr Tasker's Gods* (written in 1915-16 and published in 1925) to *The Two Thieves* (1932).

The next eleven years or so (1921-32) constitute a decisive third phase, by far the most prolific and also the most consistent period. Indeed, to the 1920s and early 1930s we owe six novellas, *The Left Leg*, *Abraham Men*, *In Good Earth*, *God*, *The Two Thieves* and *The Sixpenny Strumpet*, seven novels, *Mark Only*, *Mockery Gap*, *Innocent Birds*, *The Market Bell*, *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, *Kindness in a Corner* and *Unclay*, in addition to the fables and most of the short stories.

The title of the French thesis out of which the present book has grown contains two key words, "allégorie" and "réalité", the two focal points of

the thesis. The book has not shifted its focus away from the dialectical relationship between allegory and reality. However, a closer reading of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* allowed me a deeper insight into Powys's allegorical representation and the relationship between the real and the imaginary. In fact, one of the main points developed in the present book is Powys's so far unsuspected or overlooked indebtedness to Hawthorne, particularly with regard to the structure of his allegories. While Bunyan's influence on Powys has always been recognised and rightly emphasised by critics, Hawthorne's has never received the attention it deserves.²

"Withdrawal" is a key word in any approach to Theodore Powys's life and work, withdrawal from society and from the literary world. The first chapter of the present book attempts to describe and explain the reasons for Powys's withdrawal. This chapter, in part biographical, looks back on aspects of Powys's childhood, adolescence and early adulthood in order to show that the tendency to withdraw from society and the contemporary world of letters can be traced back to very early periods of his life.

Of the three better known literary Powys brothers, John Cowper, Llewellyn and Theodore, the latter was the least mobile and the least public. He was a recluse, or, perhaps, posed as one, while his brothers travelled a great deal abroad. Unlike them, he did not go to university, and his early attempt to launch into a farming career at Sweffling was unsuccessful. This early phase of his life may help explain his tendency to withdraw from society. The first chapter will also focus on Powys's relation with God, a permanent, if peculiar, concern throughout his life and work.

About the religion of the three best known Powys brothers, Richard Graves writes: "John, Theodore and Llewellyn – polytheist, heretic, and atheist – were the sons of a sturdy, conventional Victorian parson, the Reverend Charles Powys."³ All three brothers were not only disinclined to follow their father's clerical career, but questioned the very foundations of traditional Christianity, each one of them in his own distinctive way. Perhaps Theodore had the least clear-cut religious stand: he never quite broke with God, but remained ever critical of Him. One thing is certain, however: he never outgrew the influence exerted on his mind by the Bible.

² In his book on Powys, Harry Coombes shows some awareness of similarities between Powys and Hawthorne: "Living quiet and outwardly uneventful lives and having little contact with the literary world, both are allegorists, but with a strong infusion of local colour and feeling and a certain everyday robustness." Harry Coombes, *T. F. Powys* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), 163).

³ Richard Perceval Graves, *The Brothers Powys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984; first published in 1983 by Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1.

Judith Stinton writes: “Descended from five generations of clergymen, three on his father’s side and two on his mother’s, Theodore had been brought up on the Bible and was an intensely religious child.”⁴

In the second chapter the main concern is to show that Powys had not yet severed his links with realism and reality. That chapter deals with Powys’s early hesitation between realism and allegory. Two early novels, *Mr Tasker’s Gods* and *Black Bryony*, are the main focus there. *Hester Dominy*, though published with two other novellas, *The Left Leg* and *Abraham Men*, under the title of *The Left Leg* (1923), was written three years before them and is, in fact, closer in spirit and method to *Mr Tasker’s Gods* and *Black Bryony*, and has been associated with these as one further illustration of the author’s attempt to write like the realistic novelists of his time.

Chapter Three attempts to show that, by 1921, the year of composition of *The Left Leg*, the severance with realism and the contemporary world was nearly complete. This was for Powys the time to recreate a world of his own, in isolation, a world adapted to his new literary orientation. His withdrawal from contemporary society and the literary world, which started early in his career, is confirmed and amplified by his final rejection, not only of realism but, in a sense, of reality itself. Powys, as we shall see, had the will, the intellectual power, and the perseverance to create, set the limits of and enclose a world, not only for his characters, but for himself to live in. This chapter, therefore, concerns an important phase in his career: a double process of gradual withdrawal and of reconstruction of a world entirely his own, isolated from contemporary life – including literary life – past-oriented, drawing on the Bible and on seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings. Great care has been taken to show by what process and with what materials Powys made up his world and how he completed his isolation. The novella *The Left Leg* (written in 1921, published in 1923) marks the first major turning point in Powys’s literary work, because it was the first story written after the great mutation described in this third chapter. Here villagers and supernatural characters cohabit within the limits of a microcosm carefully enclosed by the surrounding hills.

Chapter Four, the longest, is devoted to Powys’s central theme of allegorical visitors. The structural change from the posthumously published play *Blind Bartimaeus* (written in 1920, and published in Vol. xvi of *The Powys Journal*, 2006) to the first allegorical novel *Mark Only* (written in 1922), which grew out of that play, marks another crucial

⁴ Judith Stinton, *Chaldon Herring: The Powys Circle in a Dorset Village* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1988), 28.

development with regard to the structure of all the novels, except for *Kindness in a Corner* (1930), and of some of the novellas from *Mark Only* on. The introduction of a visiting supernatural character sets a new pattern for the novels and the novellas that followed all the way to *The Two Thieves* (1932). Four novels, *Mark Only*, *Mockery Gap*, *Innocent Birds*, and the posthumously published *The Market Bell* (written around 1924 and published in 1991), have in common a visiting supernatural character combined with the lost, or lost and regained, Eden theme, with the novel *The Market Bell* fitting perfectly into the series that begins with *Mark Only*. The theme of the visitor will continue to serve as a basis for the structures of *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, *Unclay* and *The Two Thieves* with the coming to earth respectively of God, Death and the Devil.

Another aspect which has been almost totally overlooked or neglected by critics is animal representation and symbolism, as a continued, evolving reality of Powys's fictional world, organically linked to theme and action almost everywhere. Chapter Five of the present book is wholly devoted to that aspect of Powys's work. This is, indeed, one of the boldest, strangest and most powerful ventures of Powys as an imaginative writer. The main task in the fifth chapter will consist in showing, with deliberate emphasis, the overwhelming presence of animal representation in the whole work. Indeed, we shall endeavour to show that Chapters Four (visitors) and Five (animal representation) are devoted to the most substantial and original, but also the most generally neglected, aspects of Powys's work.

Though references to the fables and short stories are many throughout the present book, Chapter Six is wholly devoted to them as distinct and important parts of Powys's work. Lastly, Chapters Seven and Eight are to be considered as closely linked to each other. While Chapter Seven deals in a more or less recapitulative way with what Powys calls the "realities of life", namely love, death and evil, Chapter Eight is devoted to the aptitude to perceive "reality" and "truth", the absence of which is deplored by Powys as mankind's most serious failing. This leads inevitably to an examination of the shortcomings of the author himself in terms of perception and approach to reality.

Another aspect of Powys's achievement as a writer will be the focus of this study: the novels have been sometimes reproached with being loosely structured, when it is easy to show that they were meticulously put together. In fact, one basic idea developed in my original thesis was that the novels and novellas are carefully structured works, with a clear evolution from realistic to growingly allegorical writing. This aspect of the thesis has been clarified and consolidated in the light of the readings of

materials published in the past forty-four years or so. The book attempts to further substantiate my opinion that Powys was, beyond a doubt, a meticulous craftsman. As in the early thesis, though with additional argument and emphasis, my concern will be to show how careful Powys was with both texture and structure. My motivation has been the need to counter the impression that he handled these elements loosely.

Powys took his writing very seriously and probably sought the constant, unflagging complicity of the reader, expecting the latter to be on the watch and to respond correctly to his intricate stories and complex symbolism. Accordingly, some aspects of the author's work will receive more attention than they have been given by most critics. Many so far unsuspected qualities in Powys's literary approach will be brought to light and may, despite some obvious failings, yield greater interest and pleasure than has generally been acknowledged.

CHAPTER ONE

LIFELONG WITHDRAWAL

“THE HERMIT”: PLAYING HIDE-AND-SEEK WITH GOD

It is quite significant that Powys's first important published book should have been entitled *Soliloquies of a Hermit* (1916). The word “hermit” suggests withdrawal from communication with the outside world, usually for the purpose of engaging in religious meditation, in a solitary quest for God. Here are some passages from that book (with italics added) relating to the suggested religious purpose behind withdrawal: “And I think I can also understand the idea of *a monk in a cell*, or *the hermit in a wood*; for these allow the moods freely to pass through them, in order that they may catch God in His own thought”¹; “I know the pride of *a saint when he shuts himself up away from the world*” (*SOH*, 73); “The proper place for *a priest is in a cave*, a narrow cave where he lies with his back against a sharp rock.” (*SOH*, 8)

“A monk in a cell,” “the hermit in a wood,” “a saint when he shuts himself up away from the world,” and “a priest [...] in a cave,” have in common the religious purpose behind the various forms of withdrawal. Like all those religious figures, Powys chose seclusion, presumably in order to indulge in religious meditation. In his case, however, the quest for God may have proved at times too formidable and perilous an undertaking; it may have aggravated the sense of isolation and psychological confinement: “To give too good heed to God's moods often gets a man shut up inside prison walls.” (*SOH*, 35) Discouragement sometimes may have been the outcome; he writes:

No doubt one day we shall find all mystic writers leaving their pens and their burrowings into the unutterable mystery of God's being, and instead busy themselves all day long peacefully planting cabbages. (*SOH*, 54)

Indeed, Powys, as a “mystic writer”, must have often found consolation and relief in “cabbage planting” in his Beth Car half-acre garden at East Chaldon.

¹ T. F. Powys, *Soliloquies of a Hermit* (Kilmersdon: The Powys Press, 1993), 12-3. All subsequent references to this book will be to this edition.

In fact, rather than the quest for God alone, Powys's withdrawal can also be explained by his unremitting fear of God and the desperate attempt to flee from Him: "I have tried to hide amongst grassy hills; but the moods of God have hunted me out," he writes in *Soliloquies*. (*SOH*, 8) "How did fear get in?" Powys asks in his *Journal* (1910-13). "And it is terrible to think that we cannot get away. Alive or dead we must be forever in life, we cannot get out of God's way."² In an early novella *Under the Bondage of Fear* (written in 1904 and published in 2003), Powys writes: "The word of the priest was, that the wrath of God would fall upon anyone whose mind inquired too far into His mysteries, and the priest said that to look deeply into nature, was to lift up the garment of God." (*SEW*, 46) And on the same page, "Jake wondered whether God could find him if he were buried deep under the great hills."

This genuine fear is confessed in the quasi-autobiographical context of *Soliloquies of a Hermit* and the early, mostly autobiographical work, *Under the Bondage of Fear*, in which fear is embodied in a character precisely named "Fear" who comes and settles in the Stole Valley, presumably a precursor of Powys's later supernatural visitors. Richard Ward writes: "This terrible God, this pagan and uncivilised and Judaic God, stalks through the pages of Theodore Powys's books as he stalks through the heart of their writer."³

There is, no doubt, something of Powys's childhood fear of God represented in some of his writings. In the novella *God*, Powys dwells on the feelings of a child towards God: Johnnie Chew, who is used to playing games of hide-and-seek with Miss Brown, wants to establish the same kind of playful relationship with God: "To see Him would be to get rid of the fear of Him, for one is never afraid of anything one knows all about."⁴ Fear is at the heart of the game of hide-and-seek played by Johnny and, indirectly, by his author.

The father's following reply to his son's question about God in that novella is not meant to be reassuring: "'He is great and mighty,' his father had once said in reply to a question of Johnnie's, 'and the fear of Him is ever in my heart.'" (*SPS*, 105) Playing the game, with God as his opponent, may show the Almighty to be more human, more like a normal playmate, as the following passages show: "And to see Him, too, so harmless, after thinking of Him as a horned dragon, a water-cart squirting

² T. F. Powys, *Selected Early Works of T. F. Powys* (Denton Harleston: The Brynmill Press, 2003), 227.

³ Richard Heron Ward, *The Powys Brothers* (London: John Lane, 1935), 87.

⁴ T. F. Powys, *God, The Sixpenny Strumpet* (Denton: The Brynmill Press, 1997), 111. All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition.

fire, an owl that clawed at your hair! What happiness for Johnny!” (*SPS*, 113); “As Johnnie was quite sure that God was hiding from him, he thought the best thing to do in the circumstances was to hide from God. This, of course, he did in self-defence, for no child who knows how to play ‘I spy’ likes to be found first.” (*SPS* 104)

In this regard *The Market Bell*, a novel written sometime between *Mockery Gap* (1923) and *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* (1927), around 1924, and published posthumously (1991), is the nearest representation of that almost paralysing fear of God. John Lark, “a simple God-fearing madman,”⁵ in whose portrait Powys may have sought to represent his own childhood fears, hides from the Almighty in a hollow tree in the wood. Mr Tapper, who “wished to get the boy out of his hiding ways,” not unreasonably, asks: “What be the use of hiding from Him in hollow tree?” (*MB*, 168) An explanation is offered in the book of how John Lark came to be haunted by the fear of God:

He had caught all the fearful tales of God’s judgement that Mr Bromby preached in the Church first and later at the classes. [...] His thoughts were alive, and were so ready to receive, that the fear of God as explained by Mr Bromby broke in upon him with a loud rush.

He became melancholy, sought the darkness rather than the light, and though he still retained his love for Miss Nancy, he ever abode under the cloud of God and lived in his fear. (*MB*, 174)

The Bromby type of priest is already prefigured in various early pieces. The very early allegorical novella, *Under the Bondage of Fear* (1904), emphasises the pernicious influence of the priest in that regard:

But no happy thoughts of racing beside the yellow sheep dog upon the hills came to Jake as he sat under the eye of the priest, whose harsh words pierced the tender boy as poisoned serpents.

Full of dread and of terror of doom, were the words that fell upon the child, deep and dark sins were heaped on high before him, sins that were not known to him, but bearing names whose very sound awakened his fear, making him believe that he was defiled by them. So sorely was the child pierced by the words of the priest, and so fearful was he of the judgement to come that he dared not ask the help of any, lest they should say to him, “There is no hope.” (*SEW*, 37-8)

Here is another passage from “This is Thyself” (1915-16) concerning the same type of priest:

⁵ T. F. Powys, *The Market Bell* (The Stonehouse Bishopstone: The Brynmill Press, 1991), 218. All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition.

He had a God-like way of dealing with young people that sent them home in tears, he deflowered their souls because he was not allowed to deflower their bodies [...] A kind of abandonment to fear, a heavy red light hung over the great heavy church, and the children were thrust in for this man to maul and pull at their souls. One afternoon his almost crazed voice told us how Jesus loved children, but Hell, he shouted, to the children who did not love him. The little ones around me wept, the girls sobbed quite loud, the boys whimpered. (SEW, 331-32)

In his *Journal* Powys writes: “When we cease to fear for ourselves / Then we live.” (SEW, 236) And on the same page: “If man could cease to Fear/ What Joy would come.” Further on in this work he writes: “If I could only look and live in the wonder that is true – only fear is always at my heels taking the colour from the hills and the joy from the Lark’s song.” (SEW, 244) In “Theodore Powys’s God” W. J. Keith writes: “Fear, indeed, is a constant in Theodore’s own conception of God that also loomed large in his everyday life.”⁶

POWYS’S WITHDRAWAL INTO HIMSELF

Without having to venture too far onto risky psychological ground, one may observe a fairly obvious and marked tendency in Powys, from his early childhood, to shun the company of others, and not merely for religious purposes. That is amply attested by the autobiographical revelations to be found in *Soliloquies* or other earlier, partly autobiographical pieces, his correspondence, and the comments of people who knew him as a child and as a young man, in addition to the recurrent, almost obsessive features in various characters throughout his work.

The tendency to seek solitude and isolation may, indeed, be traced back in time to Powys’s early relationship with his own family in Dorchester, where his father, the Reverend Charles Francis Powys, was the vicar for several years. As Michel Pouillard states, Theodore, only aged seven or eight, usually secured a personal retreat amidst the bushes and small trees of the vicarage garden which he called “Bushes’ Home”. He secured the same kind of retreat under the same name when the family moved to Montacute in 1885.⁷ Powys himself states in “This is Thyself” (1915-16):

⁶ W. J. Keith, “Theodore Powys’s God,” *La Lettre powysienne*, no. 23 (printemps 2012): 3.

⁷ Michel Pouillard, *T. F. Powys (1875-1953), La Solitude, Le Doute, L’Art* (Lille: Université de Lille III, 1981), 44.

As a child I longed to be alone. I collected a few boards and leaning them up against a wall I made a hut. I lay under them and felt free and when it rained I was glad for I did not get wet. But in my hut I was not quite safe, I could be seen from the windows crawling in, so I made myself a den amongst some bushes and there I lay and dug up a kind of root out of the mould [...] In the bushes I sometimes thought of girls as a male creature would think of his females. (SEW, 329-30)

Theodore reserved the “Bushes’ Home” for his long solitary retreats and meditation. This early hiding place Richard Graves refers to as “a kind of infantile Beth-Car”⁸, the name of the house where Powys was to settle at East Chaldon for over thirty years before he moved to Mappowder in 1940. In “Bushes’ Home” Theodore could keep his distance from daily family life, and his isolation could last for hours. One of the reasons why he did that was young Theodore’s feeling that home was not always a hospitable, friendly environment. Richard Graves indicates that Theodore aged eight and a half “attracted bullying in the family because he was so unlike everybody else, with his own ideas about what to do and where to go.”⁹

In *Under the Bondage of Fear* (1904) that habit of withdrawal, though in a different form, is described in some detail:

To this shed Jake often went and climbing up into the old wagon would remain there for many hours. It had come into his mind to go to this place, because there was no place for him elsewhere, for if he remained in the house his father would chide him for being idle, and if he went out into the field the workmen would laugh at him because of his timidity and weakness. So he was driven away from his home and forced to hide in the shed during most of the day. (SEW, 45)

In his *Journal* Powys presents hiding as a reflex response to fear: “I am always shaking under some fear or other, I cannot live upright, I must ever creep and hide.” (SEW, 200)

Louis Wilkinson, who was Theodore Powys’s schoolmate and his junior by six years, recalls the following early impressions of his long-time friend: “In his younger days Theodore was not a talker; he was often silent, often melancholy in his silences. He was not happy.”¹⁰ He further describes him as “the most gentle and courteous and, in a sense, timid of

⁸ Graves, *The Brothers Powys*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰ Louis Wilkinson, “Some Memories of T. F. Powys,” *Theodore, Essays on T. F. Powys* (Aylesford: Saint Albert’s Press, 1964), 11.

men.”¹¹ On the same page he adds: “I remember his gravity, his slow movements, and his low-toned voice.”¹² A few pages further on he states that “Theodore was a man of acutely, even tragically sensitive nerves.”¹³ His elder brother John Cowper Powys refers to “his peculiarly self-centred and sensitive nature.”¹⁴ Interestingly, Theodore’s character in the short story “When Thou Wast Naked” universalises self-centredness: “for every man is the centre of the universe.”¹⁵

Referring to his retreat at East Chaldon as a young adult, from 1904 on, Powys writes in “This is Thyself”: “I want to know how I have reached this silence, this quiet haven that I longed for as a child, and could not find.” (*SEW*, 325) East Chaldon, therefore, marks the attainment of a long-pursued goal, the final fulfilment of an aspiration for a retreat that continued from childhood to early adulthood. Powys had previously sought and enjoyed the isolation from the world and the quiet of the village of Studland, not far from Bournemouth (1901-04), which was soon to be invaded by holidaymakers.

Powys’s early adulthood was marked by his failure to conform to the family norms. He may, indeed, have judged himself to be unfit for social life. Unlike his brothers, he did not go to university, and was more of a self-educated young man. His unsuccessful farming experience at Sweffling, Suffolk, in East Anglia (1895-1901), was his last attempt to do something for himself in terms of a professional career.¹⁶ In “This is Thyself”, a largely autobiographical work, Powys looks back on the farm experience as a negative phase of his younger days: “It was well for me that my farm failed, for I might have quite lost my soul in the desire to gain.” (*SEW*, 355) On the same page he writes: “I was glad, I longed to be delivered from menservants and ploughs and oxen.”

What he saw as a poor educational training, aggravated by his unsuccessful professional experiment on the Sweffling farm, may have left him with a tenacious sense of social failure. He probably saw and was

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ John Cowper Powys, “T. F. Powys,” in *Theodore*, 2.

¹⁵ T. F. Powys, “When Thou Wast Naked,” *God’s Eyes A-Twinkle, An Anthology of the Stories of T. F. Powys* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), 105. All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition.

¹⁶ In “Charlie” (1913) Powys writes: “He could not pass his exams as a boy and therefore was thrown away among the boors and the serfs when he was a man. His father was Rector of the very parish where the son now lived. And though the father had a good fortune, his children were so many that each received only a little.” (*SEW*, 280)

made to see himself as the black sheep of the family fold, and his negative perception of himself was to stay with him for a long time. Some early characters such as Henry Turnbull and Henry Neville of *Mr Tasker's Gods* or Mark Andrews of *Mark Only*, as well as the much earlier Jake in *Under the Bondage of Fear*, were no doubt meant to partially represent those early personal experiences.

Some significant features of his characters may also provide clues towards understanding why he chose to withdraw into himself, even in his East Chaldon retreat, for his house Beth Car at East Chaldon was isolated from the village itself. The daily human environment, even reduced to a minimum, may yet have been perceived as potentially hostile. In "Cottage Shadows" (1913-16), in which Francis Wingrave's "exodus into the country," a journey towards the village, away from Portstown, a kind of City of Destruction, is an aspiration for the kind of seclusion observed in Powys's personal experience. "Inside the cottage all was cool and dark. Verily a spot where a man might find a hiding place from the world [...] a cottage to creep into out of the way of the beasts, out of the way of mankind." (*SEW*, 415)

At the same time Powys's isolation may have induced prying, if not aggression. Or was it on his part a paranoid attitude to people in general? His withdrawal provoked, he thought, hostile reactions from the small community around him. And this is amply reflected in some of his stories. In "Jeremy Tickle" Jeremy "was looked upon as a kind of sorcerer because of his lonely life."¹⁷ In another short story, "The Key of the Field", Squire Jar's habit of never being out except to walk upon Madder Hill, which may have been meant to represent Theodore Powys's own habit, usually aroused suspicion: "He never looks after his own affairs, he is always enjoying himself in his own garden, and there bain't no trusting a man who do sit brooding at home." (*GEAT*, 55)

There are some indications that Powys may have suffered from a form of persecution complex softened only by his somewhat protective irony and sense of humour. In *Unclay* he writes: "A man is often hated without knowing why. As one begets a child, so one begets an enemy – unknowingly. The more harmless and docile a nature may be, the more easy to dislike."¹⁸ Louis Wilkinson does mention Theodore's "self-protective impulse in alliance with his natural nervous timidities."¹⁹ In *Mark Only*, "the children used to throw mud at him [Mark] because he had

¹⁷ T. F. Powys, "Jeremy Tickle," *The Powys Journal* xviii, (2008): 111.

¹⁸ T. F. Powys, *Unclay* (The Sheeplands, Sherborne: The Sundial Press, 2011), 67.

¹⁹ Louis Wilkinson, "Some Memories of T. F. Powys", *Theodore*, 12-13.

been baptized with ‘Only’ for a name.”²⁰ In *The Market Bell*, “Mr Pardy, who being a nervous kind of man believed that evil beings were everywhere.” (*MB*, 26) About Powys’s *Fables* (1929)²¹ Ward writes: “Here is only another attempt at escape from the eternal persecution [...] driving Theodore Powys further and further from reality’s hardships into an unreal world of animated things that cannot hurt him.”²²

The tendency to hide from others is common to many of Powys’s characters, and recourse to the mask not uncommon in his work. A beard, for instance, is a means of camouflage, particularly in *Black Bryony*. Matthew Hurd admits the following about his relationship with Mary Crowle: “He had only watched her movements with interest from behind the shelter of his rough beard”²³; “He had grown a beard at Romantown on purpose to avoid her, and had come to Norbury to be out of her way.” (*BB*, 149) Francis, Theodore Powys’s younger son, recalls how his father was arrested while he was swimming one day at the beginning of WWI: “My father was pulled from the water at the bayonet’s point and marched to the guardroom, stark naked as he was, with water dripping from his beard. (All men with beards were spies).”²⁴

Hiding, therefore, is a reaction to a world perceived as hostile, as the following passage from *Soliloquies of a Hermit* shows: “My first impression of Mr Thomas [supposedly Powys himself] was a curious feeling that he was hiding something; or that he was the guardian of a treasure of which he was not allowed to speak. And he seemed to fear me.” (*SOH*, 60)

Powys seemed to enjoy cultivating an air of mystery and observing the bafflement of inquisitive passers-by with secret enjoyment. He explains: “No one ever likes to be understood; perhaps that is why there is a jeering twinkle in the eyes of those that look at me as I cut my grass.” (*SOH*, 35) There is indeed an almost masochistic pleasure in being misunderstood and undervalued. Such a trait may be observed in characters like Henry Turnbull (*MTG*), Mark Only and others.

There is, of course, a significant dose of pride in Powys’s withdrawal. His pride may have been, unlike his fears and doubts, founded on a keen

²⁰ T. F. Powys, *Mark Only* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 33-4. All subsequent references to this novel will be to this edition.

²¹ T. F. Powys, *Fables* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929). All subsequent references to this book will be to this edition.

²² Ward, *The Powys Brothers*, 38.

²³ T. F. Powys, *Black Bryony* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1923), 146. All subsequent references to this book will be to this edition.

²⁴ Graves, *The Brothers Powys*, 99.

sense of his own worth as a writer. How else could he have continued to write profusely despite the rather cold response of publishers and readers, and with far less recognition than he had expected? Wounded pride may have resulted from his disappointment. Again, some passages from *Soliloquies of a Hermit* as well as from other works may be quoted by way of illustration of what he refers to as pride: "In writing my confessions I began to take notice of my pride [...] .And I see quite well that there is no getting to the bottom of the pride of a man [...] We cannot get away from our pride, do what we will." (*SOH*, 73) On the same page Powys writes: "We cannot take cover from our pride, do what we will. And my pride is quite a plain thing to see even in these pages. I show it on purpose; I am proud; I like to be proud; I intend to be proud." And there is the following statement in *The Market Bell*: "Whoever understands the distance to which pride can go, can readily enough see that pride has its disadvantages." (*MB*, 225) One may also quote this other relevant sentence: "The fear of looking a fool has cost the world more good lives than it wots of." (*SOH*, 73)

One complication of the paranoid element in Powys's apparent psychological make-up, it seems, is the emphasis he lays in his writings on hatred, violence, cruelty and sadism. In this regard, he was closer to his eldest brother John Cowper than to any other member of the family. Graves compares the two brothers:

John had enjoyed sadistic thoughts, and Theodore found that the contemplation of acts of violence gave him a strange satisfaction. Both brothers suffered from long periods of depression, and to counter the unsatisfactory nature of their existence, they had begun to impose their own view of reality upon the world about them. While John's view was to some extent derived from ancient nature-mythologies, Theodore was more disturbingly original. Louis [Wilkinson] felt that he inhabited a world "set at a constant remove from reality."²⁵

REJECTION OF AND WITHDRAWAL FROM THE MODERN WORLD

According to John Williams, Powys's "intention is to throw modernity aside."²⁶ The following passage from John Cowper Powys's *Wolf Solent* may very well apply to Theodore himself: "Here in these West-Country

²⁵ Graves, *The Brothers Powys*, 50.

²⁶ John Williams, "T. F. Powys: A Strengthening Antidote," *The Powys Journal* vi, (1996): 218.

places he was, at any rate, spared the atrocity of feeling the pinch of life's dilemma against a background of monstrous modern inventions."²⁷

In Theodore Powys's *The Market Bell* an author has to put up with a "stinking" world:

It is THE CUSTOM in these merry days, that are perhaps a little too highly scented for a modest author, who would be well advised to hold his nose while passing through them, to praise the loudest and most clamorous examples of mankind. (*MB*, 195)

In *The Market Bell* again the double reflection, first of Grace Ellis's face blemished and disfigured by small-pox in the mirror, and second the reflection of the world in that face, is suggestive of the state of contemporary England as Powys saw it: "In her own face she had begun to read the story of a sadly stricken and marred world." (*MB*, 288)

While only faint echoes of 20th century tumult can be heard, what Powys liked in the isolated corner of England where he settled was its almost timeless quality. In the novel *The Market Bell* the description of Mr Crocker's cottage reflects its owner's peculiar state of mind:

In order to hide itself the better, and to get away from the naughty world and to save itself from damnation, Mr Crocker's cottage had got itself entirely covered with ivy, so that hardly any light came into the room where Mr Crocker usually sat and which was called the Office. (*MB*, 177)

Theodore Powys's withdrawal from contemporary life, which we have attempted to approach in its various causes and manifestations, naturally included his withdrawal from contemporary intellectual life. J. R. Williams refers to Powys as an author "who in so many ways seemed intent on writing himself out of the literary mainstream of the day."²⁸ According to Kenneth Hopkins, "Anyone with T. F. Powys's books before him will see their strangeness in the context of twentieth century letters."²⁹ As early as *Soliloquies of a Hermit*, Powys seems to reject or at least question the literary tastes of his time: "There is something in the spirit of these modern days that makes me feel I am wasting my time when I am reading." (*SOH*, 26) And in *Mr Tasker's Gods* itself, he appears to be definitely past-oriented and to agree with his character Henry Neville

²⁷ John Cowper Powys, *Wolf Solent* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1964), 375-76.

²⁸ J. R. Williams, "T. F. Powys's Child-Men in a Landscape of Redemption," *The Powys Journal* xv, (2005): 87.

²⁹ Kenneth Hopkins, "The Second Brother," *Theodore*, 28.

when he says that “he knew what he liked in a book: and that was the kind of deep note that Bunyan calls the ground of music, the bass note, that modern culture with its particular conceit always scoffs at.”³⁰ “Modern culture” associated with “conceit” corresponds to what Harry Coombes calls “intellectuality of the arid kind [...] and the follies of our times.”³¹ In his introduction to the Sundial Press edition of *Unclay* John Gray writes: “Powys’s vision is deeply at odds with contemporary sensibility.”³²

Powys kept his distance from the contemporary intellectual circles with which he had no real affinity. He wrote in almost total geographical and intellectual isolation from the present. In a passage quoted by Graves, Sylvia Townsend Warner uses this apt metaphor to describe Powys’s perseverance as a solitary writer: “Books grew like stalactites and stalagmites. He deposited them secretly, methodically – a process taking place in a cave.”³³ In *Unclay* the divorce between the author and the contemporary intellectual world is presented as complete and final: “If he be a writer, he will stare gloomily into a book-shop, and curse all authorship.” (*UNC*, 113)

Withdrawal was not for T. F. Powys an end in itself; it was a means to an end. As we have stated above, his purpose was to settle down in a world of his own making, a “neutral territory” adapted to his own peculiar turn of mind and artistic purposes.

³⁰ T. F. Powys, *Mr Tasker’s Gods* (London: Chatto & Windus, The Phoenix Library, 1929), 37. All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition.

³¹ Coombes, *T. F. Powys*, 164.

³² John Gray, Introduction to *Unclay* (Sherborne: the Sundial Press, 2011), i.

³³ Graves, *The Brothers Powys*, 171.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY NOVELS: BETWEEN REALISM AND ALLEGORY

From the groping early literary experimentation phase during which he tried his hand at poetry, drama, autobiography, criticism, philosophy and Bible-related pieces collected in *Selected Early Works*, Powys moved on to a clear focus on fiction. In his early attempts to write like a realistic novelist of his time, especially in *Mr Tasker's Gods* and *Black Bryony*, Powys had not yet made up his mind as to what literary direction he was to follow, thus revealing his simultaneous, yet practically irreconcilable, commitment to ancient and modern standards in literature. Indeed, these two early novels bear the imprint of the contrasting literary influences of authors such as Bunyan and Hawthorne on the one hand, and Hardy and Lawrence on the other, to name only the most prominent ones among them. Somewhat paradoxically, much of the interest and originality of these early ventures lies precisely in the literary indecision that marks these novels. Moreover, the main features of the whole work in gestation were for the most part distinctly prefigured in the early novels, as well as in other smaller pieces.

MR TASKER'S GODS

Coming in order of composition after *An Interpretation of Genesis* (published in 1908) and *Soliloquies of a Hermit* (published in 1916 in its earlier American edition under the title of *The Soliloquy of a Hermit*), *Mr Tasker's Gods* (written in 1916-17 and published only in 1925) was Powys's first venture into novel-writing. It is, at least on two accounts, a unique and most important first novel. Indeed, it shows the author, early in his novel-writing career, hesitating between realism and symbolism, with an earnest attempt to reconcile the two, namely a modern straightforward approach to contemporary life and a metaphorical representation of timeless realities. In that respect, Powys's first novel is of exceptional interest. The other reason for focusing on this book is that the most essential features of his future writings are in embryo here. On that double