

‘The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock’

-A Few Ideas-

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What follows is an informal note of some thoughts on TFP’s Fable, ‘The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock’. My hope is that they might help to stimulate discussion (not lay down the law!). My inclusion at the end of some additional reading should be considered in the same light!

When I reread ‘The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock’¹ (and it was many years since I’d last read it), what struck me first was that it was a refreshingly straightforward experience, not least because I wasn’t dragged yet again by TFP into the conundrum of who, what, when, and where was ‘God’.

Incidentally, I tend to think that whatever any of us make of that issue, the last word on it should rest with JCP. In 1955 he wrote to Louis Wilkinson of his brother: ‘It was only God ... *Why?* Because all his ideas were so original, all drawn from himself & his peculiarities, that in his originality he felt very lonely and so he took God or projected God out of himself and made God his *other self*, and, as God was made out of himself, God’s character and God’s peculiarities were Theodore’s. God in fact was another Theodore ... It was Theodore and God.’ It might be worth bearing this passage in mind when it comes to a discussion of this Fable’s moral. From the letter, by the way, it is clear that Phyllis had had a significant input into the content of what John wrote (I can imagine him reading it back to her).

I thought that ‘The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock’ possessed an easily deduced moral relating to the human condition and personal relationships.

A child, early in its life, develops a perverse and persistent notion regarding the nature of relationship between animate and inanimate objects, a notion she soon learns not to discuss when in company, because it upsets her parents so much. Given the opportunity once her parents have died, however, her obsession becomes the governing principle of her life. By this time, as an adult able to live independently from the world around her, she is revealed to the reader as a woman irretrievably eccentric to the point of hallucinatory madness. She is most certainly not one of TFP’s wise simpletons (Mr. Solly of *Innocent Birds*, Mr. Cobby and Betty Lark of *The Market Bell*, Nancy Gipps of *Mr. Weston*). Unlike all those characters, Hester Gibbs embodies a profound unnaturalness, a denial of everything that is most natural in the world around her; nothing could be more different in the way her mind works than the God-bothering habits of a Solly or a Luke Bird. Hester’s obsession carries her to a point beyond even the life-

¹ I’m using the Chatto & Windus 1929 edition of *Fables*. The page numbers are the same in the 1993 Hieroglyph edition.

denying negativity of the notorious Miss Pettifer, who is the subject of one of Hester's comments in this Fable, and whose perverted religious faith is taken to task in *Innocent Birds* and elsewhere.

We are taken to the barren world of Hester's cottage, where sterile relationships have been imposed on its contents: the piano and a stick of sealing wax, the family Bible and a pink dress, a footstool and a pair of old spectacles. It seems to me appropriate that the item of household furniture she has missed in her crazy scheme of marrying things off is her clock. Unlike the footstool or the sealing wax, or for that matter the piano, the clock possesses an independent movement (let's not push this too far, I appreciate that it has to be wound up ...), and as its hands move they denote the passing of time. The clock belongs in the real world (given half a chance), not in the isolated, sterile surroundings of Hester's mind. The clock – we learn eventually – also speaks, uttering the wholly appropriate word, `Cuckoo` (I'm guessing Hester doesn't play the piano, by the way): Cuckoo indeed!

The mating of the seaweed with the clock comes as Hester's final, demented act of folly, the outcome of which is destined eventually to be a reaffirmation of the natural order. The voice which Hester takes to be the voice of the abandoned seaweed, lamenting the fickleness of its lover, the sea, is nothing of the sort; it is the voice of Hester's own diseased mind. The tide which has gone out, will in its own good time (Hester doesn't `do` time), come back in. Nature will take its course, and it will not – never can be – reordered or dictated to by Hester or anyone else. It is madness on the part of any human being to imagine that they possess the authority to impose an alternative order. Not that we all don't try on occasion, the creation of `Summer time` and `Winter time` being the obvious example – how often do you hear people say that `changing the clocks` gives us `more daylight`? Does it really? Well done us! We may of course say that this is an example of trying to work with nature; the fact is that in poor Hester's case, she has become totally oblivious to nature.

Locked in the isolated world of her little cottage with only herself and her possessions for company, we might reflect that Hester's madness is far from being a bizarre Powysian flight of fancy, it replicates all too precisely our own condition, locked inside a society that has evolved a misplaced idea of its power to control an environment we have lost all meaningful contact with. We are in effect doing to our environment exactly what the seaweed says the clock must not do to the tide when it returns, cry `Cuckoo` at it.

Hester's cottage is broken into by a burglar. Thus the real world impinges on her unhealthy solitude, as it also does for the clock when it is dumped on the beach with the seaweed and exposed to the rhythms and equally the uncertainties of nature's variable moods. `He always welcomes a new acquaintance with frothy kisses,` says the weed to the clock:

... and he has so many young mermaids to play with that I am sure he cannot find fault with my having gone to you. All you have to do is only to tick and never to call `Cuckoo`.

The clock becomes a hapless victim of Hester's blind obsession, the point residing not so much in what she does do with her bizarre couplings and her refusal to find a mate for herself, but in what she fails to do, recognise the true and arbitrary nature of the world in which she lives. There is an intriguing sentence/paragraph towards the end of the story:

The night was clear and frosty, the tide was out, and the full moon shone in the sky, giving to all things a strange, cold look of unreality.²

I believe that this `strange, cold look of unreality` comes about because it is the polar opposite of the enclosed, unreal, world of Hester's mind, encapsulated in her cottage: "I would rather have Hester's tea-caddy, the wife of the door handle, as a neighbour", said the clock', as he hears the tide coming in. In the final paragraph, the `strange` and `unreal` world that Hester has attempted to suppress asserts itself, and rightly, as the real world; it is `strange` now and `unreal` only because we have not encountered it before in this story. The `natural` reasserts itself; the seaweed returns to its natural element, while the sea carries on doing what it naturally does, its `fierce roar of triumph` has nothing to do with the clock's presence, it has everything to do with what it is to be a wave in the sea.

We, who are waves, know you, who are men, only as another sea, within which every living creature is a little wave that rises for a moment and then breaks and dies. Our great joy comes when we break, yours when you are born, for you have not yet reached that sublime relationship with God which gives the greatest happiness to destruction.

In `John Parry and the Waves` John, unlike the unfortunate clock, has the advantage of a seminar with the sea. A wave does not `die` in the way John understands the word, it becomes `one with the vast waters of all the oceans ...`.³ I recommend a reading of `John Parry and the Waves` alongside `The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock` as a useful exercise for this session, particularly with respect to what the sea has to say towards the end of the Fable.

Back with `The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock`, the seaweed tells her increasingly nervous husband, `The moon is hid behind dark clouds, and the winds are rising that will drive my husband here the quicker and make him more boisterous`:

... the first wave of the incoming tide swept over the pair. The seaweed became moist and glad, she left the clock and swam lightly away. The next wave came, and with a fierce roar of triumph dashed the poor clock against a stone, so that he was broken to pieces.

² p.58.

³ pp. 89-90.

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All TFP's writings abound in literary references, and `The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock` is no exception. I thought that I'd finish with a section on this because the sources – as often woven into the fabric of his own prose as they are overt references – can offer clues as to how TFP himself is thinking about the meanings that lie behind his plots and the characters in the stories. It also give me an excuse to compile a little anthology of some of my favourite poems! You may find that some of this material helps in thinking about this Fable, or you may not ...

Three general observations first. We know that TFP had read Samuel Johnson, what or how much I don't know except that a reference in `The Ass and the Rabbit` indicates that he also knew Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. It has struck me that Hester's situation in her cottage is to an interesting degree comparable with that of the astronomer in Johnson's novel *Rasselas* (1759). The astronomer has spent his life isolated in his observatory watching the moon and stars wheel round above him. By the time *Rasselas* meets him he is convinced of his personal responsibility not only for their movement, but also for the winds and the tides; he has therefore come to believe that he is answerable for all the natural disasters that take place around the globe. *Rasselas* and his friends discover a man who, as we say, needs to get out more! The moral: solitude is OK as far as it goes, but too much of it leads to madness.

The second applies to a poem by William Blake that may lie outside his frequently read and quoted poetry, but may well have been known to TFP. Even if he was not aware of *Thel* (1789-90), its theme coincides with the preoccupations of much Romantic Period writing that he certainly was familiar with, that of giving oneself completely and unreservedly to living life to the full. *Thel* is a virgin terrified of life; she is led into a world where everything gives itself to the spirit of its existence which, in a distinctly Powysian fashion, inevitably involves also its annihilation. Every part of creation urges *Thel* to make the decision to live. The cloud says (recalling, perhaps, the words of the sea in *Mr. Pardy*):

... fearest thou because I vanish and am seen no more,
Nothing remains? O maid, I tell thee, when I pass away
It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and raptures holy ...

But *Thel* cannot bring herself to make the transition, and in this she resembles the solitary Hester.

The third applies to the change of title of *Fables* to *No Painted Plumage*. In the 1993 Hieroglyph edition of *Fables*, Frank Kibblewhite referred to this as a `curious` choice of title. The first thing to say is that it confirms that Thomas Gray was included – not surprisingly – in TFP's reading. I'll leave you to assess the appropriateness of the new title for yourselves from a reading of the verse from which it comes. This is Gray's *Ode on the Spring* (with my italics):

Methinks I hear in accents low
 The sportive kind reply:
 Poor moralist! and what art thou?
 A solitary fly!
 Thy joys no glittering females meets,
 No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
No painted plumage to display:
 On hasty wings thy youth is flown;
 Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone –
 We frolic, while 'tis May.

`Poor moralist` indeed!

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I want to turn now to a passage that comes early on in `The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock`, and look for the clues it gives us as to which of the Romantic Period poets seem to be particularly in TFP's mind as he writes this particular story. It begins with the fifth paragraph (the italics are once again mine):

In her early life, though they loved her so much, Hester often had the ill-luck to astonish and even to shock her parents. For she would sometimes, when very young, *wander far afield, even going as far as the wild and desolate heath*, upon which – for Hester was usually seen going that way – *her father and mother would seek her sorrowing*.

If at first they did not find her they would ask the neighbours to seek her too, telling them tearfully that all Hester had said when she went out of the little cottage gate, *closing it carefully behind her*, was that she was invited to a wedding. *Often they sought her until the evening of a long summer day, and at last they would find her kneeling under a yellow broom bush in the loneliest part of the moor and trying to bring about a proper passion between a viper and a little blue butterfly that she held near to the snake to make it the more amorous.*⁴

The first, second and the fourth italicised passages suggests to me a familiarity with Blake's `The Little Girl Found` from *Songs of Innocence*. The link here in TFP's mind, I think, (conscious or not)

⁴ p.44

is with Hester's parents rather than with Hester herself. The child, Lyca, unlike Thel, is not afraid to go out into the world; here it is the parents who are tied to a limited understanding of life:

All the night in woe
Lyca's parents go
Over valleys deep,
While the deserts weep.

Tired and woe-begone,
Hoarse with making moan,
Arm in arm seven days
They traced the desert ways.

Seven nights they sleep
Among shadows deep,
And dream they see their child
Starved in the desert wild.

Pale through pathless ways
The fancied image strays –
Famished, weeping, weak,
With hollow piteous shriek.

Rising from unrest
The trembling woman pressed,
With feet of weary woe;
She could no further go.

In his arms he bore
Her armed with sorrow sore –
Till before their way
A couching lion lay.

Turning back was vain;
Soon his heavy mane
Bore them to the ground;
Then he stalked around,

Smelling to his prey.
 But their fears allay,
 When he licks their hands,
 And silent by them stands.

They look upon his eyes
 Filled with deep surprise,
 And wondering behold,
 A spirit armed in gold;

On his head a crown,
 On his shoulders down
 Flowed his golden hair –
 Gone was all their care.

‘Follow me,’ he said,
 ‘Weep not for the maid;
 In my palace deep,
 Lyca lies asleep.’

Then they followed
 Where the vision led,
 And saw their sleeping child
 Among tigers wild.

To this day they dwell
 In a lonely dell,
 Nor fear the wolvish howl,
 Nor the lion’s growl.

Lost children also feature in Wordsworth’s poetry, and Wordsworthian references crop up everywhere in TFP’s work. In ‘Lucy Gray’, from *Lyrical Ballads*, the story of the lost child sought by anxious parents does not have a happy ending. The world of nature in which the story takes place has a distinctly Theodorian malevolence:

Oft I had heard of Lucy Gray,
 And when I crossed the Wild,
 I chanced to see at break of day

The solitary Child.

No Mate, no comrade Lucy knew;
 She dwelt on a wild Moor,
 The sweetest Thing that ever grew
 Beside a human door!

You yet may spy the Fawn at play,
 The Hare upon the Green;
 But the sweet face of Lucy Gray
 Will never more be seen.

‘Tonight will be a stormy night,
 You to the Town must go,
 And take a lantern, Child, to light
 Your mother through the snow.’

‘That, Father! will I gladly do;
 ‘Tis scarcely afternoon –
 The Minster-clock has just struck two,
 And yonder is the Moon.’

At this the Father raised his hook
 And snapped a faggot-band;
 He plied his work, and Lucy took
 The lantern in her hand.

Not blither is the mountain roe,
 With many a wanton stroke
 Her feet disperse the powd’ry snow
 That rises up like smoke.

The storm came on before its time,
 She wander’d up and down,
 And many a hill did Lucy climb
 But never reach’d the Town.

The wretched Parents all that night

Went shouting far and wide;
But there was neither sound nor sight
To serve them for a guide.

At day-break on a hill they stood
That overlook'd the Moor;
And thence they saw the bridge of Wood
A furlong from their door.

And now they homeward turn'd, and cry'd
`In Heaven we all shall meet!`
When in the snow the Mother spied
The print of Lucy's feet.

Then downward from the steep hill's edge
They track'd the footmarks small;
And through the broken hawthorn-hedge,
And by the long stone wall;

And then an open field they cross'd,
The marks were still the same;
They track'd them on, nor ever lost,
And to the bridge they came.

They follow'd from the snowy bank
The footmarks, one by one,
Into the middle of the plank,
And further there were none.

Yet some maintain that to this day
She is a living Child,
That you may see sweet Lucy Gray
Upon the lonesome Wild.

O'er rough and smooth she trips along,
And never looks behind;
And sings a solitary song
That whistles in the wind.

There is obviously no direct matching to be done between Blake's *Thel* and *Lyca*, and Wordsworth's *Lucy Gray* and TFP's *Hester Gibbs*; but I believe that TFP's evident familiarity with both Blake's visionary world and Wordsworth's pedestrian world of nature played a significant part in constructing the ambience of the world of his fiction. It is a world of visionary wonder reflecting a constant interplay between destructively violent forces and innocent beauty.

Finally I turn to the third italicised section of the above passage from *'The Seaweed and the Cuckoo Clock'*. This relates to a poem by Wordsworth which explores precisely the juxtaposition between life and death, between sorrow and joy, and I'm not suggesting for a moment that TFP was necessarily even aware of a memory of Wordsworth's poem *'The Childless Father'* (though he certainly will have read it), when he describes Hester, as she leaves the house, going *'out of the little cottage gate, closing it carefully behind her ...'*. *'The Childless Father'* begins:

Up, Timothy, up with your Staff and away!
Not a soul in the village this morning will stay;
The Hare has just started from Hamilton's grounds,
And Skiddaw is glad with the cry of the hounds.

Wordsworth juxtaposes the wild energy of the hunt with the grief of the old huntsman who 'just six months before' has buried his last child. The poem as a whole might be set in the vicinity of *Madder*, where death and the energetic 'noise and the fray' of rural life go hand in hand; the lines at the end of the fourth verse offer a tangible confirmation of this. The poem continues (the italics are mine):

Of coats and of jackets grey, scarlet, and green,
On the slopes of the pastures all colours were seen,
With their comely blue aprons and caps white as snow,
The girls on the hills made a holiday show.

The bason of box-wood, just six months before,
Had stood on the table at Timothy's door,
A Coffin through Timothy's threshold had pass'd,
One Child did it bear and that Child was his last.

Now fast up the dell came the noise and the fray,
The horse and the horn, and the hark! hark away!
*Old Timothy took up his Staff, and he shut
With a leisurely motion the door of his hut.*

Perhaps to himself at that moment he said,
 `The key I must take, for my Ellen is dead`
 But of this in my ears not a word did he speak,
 And he went to the chase with a tear on his cheek.

Wordsworth has tended to be anthologised over the years as a poet who celebrates the wholesome beauties of nature; it has always been appreciated that there is a great deal more to his verse than just this. Why Wordsworth in particular should have appealed to TFP might be gauged from the attraction he also had for his brother John. This is John, writing to his sister Philippa in 1935, where surely we recognise the bleak landscape of TFP's Dorset, inhabited by the strange – yet disturbingly familiar – anxious, pompous, eccentric, saintly, demonic characters that move through it:

I find I can learn from Wordsworth to draw in on myself like a animal with its back to the rain and I can learn from him an obstinate enduring patience that holds its peace and just waits like Kent in the Stocks in Lear till the Wheel Turns and I can learn from him to think of being a skeleton going about or standing still like a Caddis-worm at the bottom or a half dead tree twisted one way always the same way and `never explaining and never complaining` as Disraeli said.

And I can learn from him not to require beauty or lovers or passion or glory – but I can learn from him to be like that old Leech-gatherer bent double & `moving altogether if he moved at all` and get a slow stoical old-animal-like pleasure just from life in its barest bleakest shape and from bread and tea and a flame against knees & hands!