From Romance to Duty: Thomas Woolner and My Beautiful Lady

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Thomas Woolner was an original member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the first edition of The Germ in January 1850 opened with two of his poems, ‘My Beautiful Lady’ and ‘Of My Lady in Death’, with an engraving for them by Holman Hunt facing the first page. From these, and two other poems written, according to Woolner, at ‘about the same time’, ‘Dawn’ and ‘My Lady’s Glory’, Woolner went on to construct the long poem with the title My Beautiful Lady, published in 1863; second and third editions appeared in 1864 and 1866 respectively.1 The long poem appeared, price 3d, in Cassell’s National Library, edited by Professor Henry Morley, in 1887, with a Note by Woolner, and the additional poem of 1866, ‘Nelly Dale’. Morley thanks Woolner in his Introduction for having given up ‘part of his exclusive right to his own work’ to offer it to the series (as did Patmore with The Angel in the House), and refers to Woolner as ‘a man of genius who has written to lift the hearts and minds of men by adding one more true book to the treasures of the land’.2 Thus by 1887 the poem was evidently known to and respected by those like Morley who saw literature as having a valuable moral and educational function.3

In 1852, David Masson remarked of the Pre-Raphaelites that in their work they ‘superinduced upon that tendency to the simple and unadorned in thought which would have arisen spontaneously out of their zeal for real truth, a kind of derivative, or artificial simplicity, consisting of a relish for medievalism’.4 Masson quotes as his ‘specimens’ of Pre-Raphaelite literary style two stanzas of ‘My Beautiful Lady’ — which he describes as ‘a really beautiful poem of some length’5 — together with two paragraphs of ‘Hand and Soul’ and the opening stanza of ‘The Blessed Damozel’. And Woolner’s two poems deserve to be in this company. But, as we have seen, he decided at some point, probably in 1857,6 to use these poems as part of a longer composition, and so created a work that has something in common with other composite Victorian poems like In Memoriam, Maud, and The Angel in the House. In doing so, he considerably revised the earlier poems, regularising the mode and making more use of capitalisation.7 The emphasis of the present essay is, however, on the poem in its later version. Looking at the evolution of the latter reveals very clearly a development of outlook — or, more grandly, of ideology — that is characteristic of its period, in which youthful romanticism can be seen giving way to the ‘mature’ values of Victorianism centred on ideals of work and duty.

‘My Lady in Death’, II ‘Day Dream’, and III ‘My Lady’s Voice from Heaven’. Part the Third has two sections, I ‘Years After’ and II ‘Work’. Woolner shows considerable skill in his formal control, using blank verse for the longer narrative sections and various stanza forms elsewhere, varying in both line-length and rhyme scheme.

The narrative is an extension of the one implicit in the two Germ poems: ‘My Beautiful Lady’, a celebratory lyric in the chivalric mode, culminating in the poet’s confession of love and the responsive embrace of the Lady (who remains elevatedly unnamed); and ‘My Lady in Death’, an expression of the poet’s desolation at her death. The extended poem incorporates these two lyrics into a larger elegiac scheme, which culminates in the poet’s acceptance of the tragic event within a framework of Christian belief. That belief is given a particularly Victorian inflection, as will be seen when we reach the conclusion of the poem.

First, however, we will look in more detail at the whole work. In its longer form it begins with a sombre and somewhat puzzling Introduction in blank verse. This begins by considering a group of human beings in whom ‘there lies a sorrow too profound/To find a voice’, deeply affected by a ‘vital grief’ and so deprived of the normal joys of human life. The poet is unable to explain the sources of this ‘mourningfulness profound’, any more than he can explain violence in nature or other forms of human suffering: ‘our lives are mysteries’, and undeserved suffering is endemic. In this context:

Then we may well call happy one whose grief,
Mixed up with sacred memories of the past,
Can tell to others how the tempest rose,
That struck and left him lonely in the world;
And who, narrating, feels his sorrow soothed,
By that respect which love and sorrow claim.

Here we seem to have a justification of the forthcoming poem in terms suggestive of Wordsworth’s ‘Margaret’ and Tennyson’s In Memoriam. The section concludes by calling for ‘a bridle’ to be placed upon ‘Restless speech/And thought’ so that hasty judgment does not see ‘The first presentment as the rounded truth’ – again, a suggestion for reading the poem itself. This caution is necessary, we are told, because ‘rapid thoughts, and freak/Of skimming word’ often cause serious problems of all kinds:

Then, howsoever by our needs impelled,
Let us resolve to move in gentleness...

The reader is asked not be judgmental, and to respect the ‘lowly ones’ as well as ‘the great’, since the former are as capable of integrity as the latter. As an introduction, the section would seem to be asking the reader for a Wordworthian seriousness in approaching the story that is to follow.

Part the First relates the story of the poet’s love from its inception to its expected close, with the Lady on her death-bed. ‘Love’, in blank verse, celebrates in general terms the divine power of Love, ‘gladdening mortal life’ from childhood through youth and maturity to old age, all from a male perspective, culminating in the
‘wrinkled patriarch’ awaiting the death that will bring the fulfilment of ‘immortal Love’. But it ends more personally, with the narrator-poet’s memory of his own vanished love. This is followed by the highly romantic ‘My Beautiful Lady’, the tone of which is well represented by this stanza, distantly derived from Pope’s ‘where’er you walk’ in the ‘Summer’ Pastoral:

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Fresh beauties, howso’er she moves, are stirred:
   As the sunned bosom of a humming bird
       At each pant lifts some fiery hue,
       Fierce gold, bewildering green or blue;
   The same, yet ever new.
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Nature joins in the praise of the Lady, and as the lovers wander in a copse, attended by a robin, goldfinches and thrushes, the poet declares his love, and the Lady apparently accepts him: ‘She bowed her head/To mine in silence, and my tears had fled’. The next, bracketed, line casts a dark shadow: ‘(Just then we heard a tolling bell)’. But the section ends with a sense of what has happened as ‘a holy charm’. The next three sections move from ‘Dawn’ through ‘Noon’ to ‘Night’, all in tones of pastoral happiness and enchantment; if ‘Night’ opens ominously with references to ‘in original and growing crime’, these are dismissed in the poet’s experience of the world, which is of a ‘complete Arcadian pastoral’, culminating in a vision, reminiscent of Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’ in its suggestion of voyeurism, of the Lady asleep, folding ‘Contentment babelike to her breast’. The positive note continues in the rhyming triplets of ‘Wild Rose’ and in ‘My Lady’s Glory’, where she is endowed with transcendental power:

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Deep in this truth I root my trust;
      And know the dear One’s praise,
      Her mutely gracious ways,
When all her loveliness is dust
      And mosses raise her name,
      Will bless our world the same.
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Perhaps this constitutes a potential defence against the darkening mood of the poem. ‘Her Shadow’ sees the poet fearful of the future, but comforted by the Lady, who ‘clasped my hand and talked’ – the last detail humanising the relationship, as the couple move happily onward together to stand by a sundial. Although the poet’s ‘soul was soothed’, the emphasis on the sundial and the poet’s wish for ‘Titian’s glorious power’ to ‘check the march of time’ cannot but draw the reader’s attention to the transience of things human. In ‘Her Garden’ a violent wind from ‘the blighting East’ has flattened the bed of lilies, which the Lady – of and for whom the lilies are evidently symbolic – calls ‘Radiant spirits robed in white’. Only one flower survives, of which the Lady breathes in the scent:

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I see her now, pale beauty, as she bending stands,
      The wind-torn blossom resting in her hands!
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As she looks at the devastated garden, the poet realises that ‘stress of blighting weather/Had made her lilies and My Lady droop together’. The long section ‘Tolling...
Bell' tells of the illness of the Lady, of the lovers' kisses and tears – 'Love-flower that bursts in kisses and sweet tears' – and of the Lady's religious acceptance of her fate and advice to the poet:

'We are the Lord's, not ours, His angels sing;
So you, mine own, bow meekly to your King,
And striving hard and long His grace will bring:
   His voice shall through the battle cry
   When the strife is raging high.'

But the poet cannot achieve serenity at this stage; his 'lost soul' can only descend to a mysterious 'deep hell/Of night', from which a 'gigantic bell' summons him back to the dying Lady, who is still able to assert her faith:

'I, toiling at the task assigned to me,
   Am surrounding from my labour suddenly:
The King recalls his handmaiden; and she
   Submissively herself anoints,
   Going whither He appoints.'

The poet, however, feels only 'misery', 'despair' and 'immeasurable woe'; even resentment about what is happening to him. But 'a sobbing moan' brings him back to the bedside and to humbler thoughts, and they are able to read together – of Prospero, Count Gismond and the Lady of Shalott. The Lady blesses the poet; he leaves her to go into the garden, and then makes his unhappy way homeward in the darkness, eventually falling asleep, 'sore oppressed'. In the brief 'Will-o'-the-Wisp' an unidentified voice promises the Lady's rapid recovery, and reproaches the poet for his 'cloudy brow'. This contrasts effectively with the realism of 'Given Over', where the poet is awaiting the Lady's imminent death, himself, in an important distinction, not 'calm' but 'numb' – 'Our island Gorgon's face had changed me into stone'. 'Storm' closes the Book, with nature threatening, but the poet attentive only to the 'lonely bed' as he awaits 'The silent voice of doom, the stroke of death'.

What we might regard as the central event of the poem, the death, is not directly described here; it is implied, as in The Germ, by the title of the section which opens Part the Second, 'My Lady in Death'. By now life is 'No more than stories in a printed book', while the poet disconsolately recalls her every feature, beside her grave. He questions the justice of what has happened as 'Alone she moulders into common dust', and recalls all the sights she once beheld and can no longer see. His memories are conventionally pastoral and romantic, culminating in a remembered passionate embrace and talk of marriage: 'Exultingly we were/By solemn rite each other's own'. But now the poet feels that it was 'an idle boast to say/"Our souls are as the same"', because 'Her spirit went, and mine did not obey'. He re-enacts the painful events leading up to the death, and his own desolation, concluding in despair as the sun's 'glare' turns cruel:

And never more its rays
   Will satisfy my gaze:
No more; no more; O, never any more.
‘Day Dream’, in blank verse, begins by evoking a mother-and-child scene, and wonders about the mother’s thoughts for the future of her son, which take on a subdued imperial mode:

Or seest thou him still greater grown in might,
And stout of action marching on to reach
That changeful coloured flag, whose waving crests
The glittering heights of fame, for which men pant;
Unmindful there what tempests rage and sweep...

But the dream fades, and the poet is left in ‘crushing wretchedness’. Nevertheless, he still believes in Love, and calls on the Lady to give him at least ‘one beaming look/To ease a lonely heart that beats in pain’. At the end he sinks down by his empty grate, ‘to rest/To sleep, not dream – and if I could to die?’

However, it is the function of elegy to show the possibility of acceptance if not of consolation, and the poem moves on to the hoped-for revelation in the long stanzaic section ‘My Lady’s Voice from Heaven’. As the poet sits at night by the tomb, a violent wind arises, and a moonbeam suddenly illuminates the Lady’s name. He finds himself able to relax, and to weep, he becomes aware of the ‘beat of rapid wings’, and then:

Mine eyes I dared not try to raise;
My Lady’s beamed on me
In fixed serenity of gaze,
And were what old sunshiny days
In childhood used to be.

The poet has a momentary vision of the cosmos, not unworthy to be placed beside that given to Tennyson when he encounters the spirit of Hallam in sonnet XC of *In Memoriam*:

A gasping lapse, and I was whirled
Round the faint void of space;
In dizzy circles hugely hurled
I saw the constellated world
With every orb embrace,

To one stupendous vortex-light,
Spinning a fiery rain,
Then fail, struck out by sudden night;
When swung adown in headlong might,
Earth’s touch shook through my brain.

Now he hears the Lady’s wordless but meaningful song, and tries to put it into human speech. In fourteen stanzas, the Lady first reproaches the poet for having ignored God to ‘rage at fate’ and dwell on death, so showing his superficiality:

‘For with thy Lily’s worldly dress
Thou didst thine eyesight fill;
And scorn to know its loveliness
Were but an empty boast unless
Made living by His will.'

She has now been permitted to come and warn him of his ‘sin’. He must now ‘turn to Him’, find solace in the love of God, and fight against evil in the world. Thus he will finally be welcomed into heaven by Love, in an ironic Christian re-writing of ‘The Blessed Damozel’:

‘And love will lead her sacrifice
To where a shining row
Stand beckoning to the heights of bliss;
And she will clasp his hands and kiss
Welcome upon his brow.’

As in *In Memoriam*, the poet now finds himself back in the real world as dawn breaks, and the new day finds him ‘elated/With hope and settled plan’. Having accepted the Christian message as mediated to him by the spirit of the Lady, he has become, in the section’s last line, ‘A sober-minded man’. This is a significantly Victorian adjective to describe the mature attitude the poet can now carry with him into the world from which his self-centred grief had previously separated him.

Part the Third provides the rather sketchy evidence of the poet’s subsequent activities. There are only two sections, both in blank verse. The first, ‘Years After’, is the longest section of the poem – thirty seven pages in the Cassell edition. It offers a retrospect, from ten years later, on the relationship and events already described. The tone is acceptant, calm. A Pre-Raphaelite detail shows that on the gravestone ‘A spray of centripetal ivy creeps/From death to birth, and reaches to her name’. The poet recalls the pastoral past – ‘Dallying I loitered in the golden time’ – and his period of despair, and then the salvific vision of the Lady given to him by God. Standing again by the tomb, he is – in a variant on the sentiment of *The Ancient Mariner* – ‘more wise and not so sad’. He gives a fuller account than before of the Lady’s family and childhood in ‘that stately country home’ with its kindly steward attending on the child: ‘And to her winsome ways he would forego/His pompous surveillance of wine and plate’. It is a feudal idyll played out among ‘honeyed murmuring limes, and under elms’ – there is a charming account of the steward and child feeding the ducks. The girl is loved by her ‘kind mother’ and ‘great father’, and had told the poet of these domestic matters. The mother’s story does show elements of unhappiness; she had once loved a young man who failed her, and her later marriage to an older man is attributed partly to ‘lethargy’ and ‘partly sense/Of duty in forgetfulness of grief’. However, she has become ‘a tender and obedient wife’ to a powerful husband – ‘a man of thews and goodly frame/Made swart in battle’. He had served in India, but returned on his father’s death to take over the estate and ‘reign among the country gentlemen/Who duly came with pride to own him chief’. This patriarchal figure is described admiringly; he is well read as well as practical, interested in science, history, archaeology, poetry. But he had not liked Carlyle, whom the poet had defended at his table (the ladies taking no part in the conversation):
‘Sound or unsound, his word is daylight truth,
That breeding heroes once was England’s boast,
And now we brag of making millionaires.’

The social criticism here is like that of Tennyson’s protagonist in *Maud*. However, the father argues back, ridiculing the ‘Young bubble-dreamer’ for his ignorance of the real world, and defending the economic system and the effects of the desire for wealth:

‘But greed alone brings each result to grow
And spread its uses through the mass. Beside
Where honour, reason, or instinctive life,
Quite fails, there gold will prick the sluggard loon.
It wakes the drowsy loungers of the East,
Who lolls in sunshine idle as a gourd,
To toil like Irish hodmen.’

Clearly, his dislike of Carlyle does not preclude a Carlylean emphasis on the moral value of work, though here allied with praise of the capitalist system that Carlyle thought so wasteful. The father ends his attack on the poet’s romantic idealism with a neat reminder that it is his wealth that guarantees his daughter’s comforts. The Lady’s life is again recalled, in its domestic and family moments, and a vivid account given of works of art seen together at a neighbouring mansion. Then the poet recalls the devastating effects of the Lady’s death on her parents: the mother dies, the father comes to loathe the house, and returns to ‘Eastern climes’ where he dies fighting to uphild ‘The majesty of England’s worth and name’. Service of the Empire provides a fitting way of sublimating private grief.

Since that time the poet has apparently worked constantly and hard (though we are not told at what), sustained by the moral insight that man is ‘mean’ indeed if he selfishly used ‘The produce of his fellows’ energies/And gave back nothing’. This leads to an account of the history of ‘This Island race’, from the ‘simple savagery’ of the ancient Britons through the Romans, Angles, Vikings, Normans, Plantagenets, Tudors, Stuarts, and Puritans, to the Glorious Revolution and beyond:

Then through the Guelphic line; our race now grows
To that great power that is to sway the world.

Then follows a striking passage on the present state of England, showing strongly the influence of Carlyle’s authoritarianism, though mixing in more humane ideas and in the end giving the benefit of the doubt to the humane attitude. The movement of history has been:

Down from those human shambles, wolf-belapt,
To when, in pardonably grand excess
Of pity, through our people’s will was bought
Free indolence for Isles of Western slaves;
And now, when thousands blandly would deny
The proven murderer his rope, the thief

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Due chastisement; and when a General
May blunder troops to death, yea, and receive
His Senate's vote of thanks and all made smooth;
And when, as much from universal trust
In other states' goodwill as from the pinch
Of blinking parsimony, we our fleets
Let rot, and regiments shrink to skeletons.
From these fell rights to such urbanity
The march indeed is long; tho' kindly freaks
May sometimes clamour Justice from her throne;
Yet gentleness is still a noble gain,
And we will trust such freaks are nobly meant.

This is followed by a tribute to those who have contributed to England's success — soldiers, thinkers, priests, chroniclers, 'dames who made their homes a paradise,/And kept their husbands great' — but ends with a melancholy Tennysonian line about these generations having 'passed into the gloom that swallows all'. The poet then asserts his sense of responsibility to 'our proud Island Home' and his determination to work for its good. He has been helped in his endeavours by memories of his 'lost adored One'. Then follows an attractive passage about rural life, complete with mower, kine, milking-maid, ploughman, lark and lover, which throws into effective relief the poet's life in London, and also the realisation of how from his grievous loss he has come to develop a widening 'sympathy/For struggling souls'. As the day dawns beside the tomb, the poet compares himself to a sailor returning home after a journey, and celebrates the power he has derived in the most difficult times from his memories of the Lady. The section ends in affirmation:

And now, whatever come
Of wrong and bitterness to break my strength;
Whatever darkness may be mine to know;
A ray has pierced me from the highest heaven —
I have believed in worth; and do believe.

The contrast with the ending of 'My Lady in Death' could not be sharper.

The final section, 'Work', shows the continuing strength of Carlyle's influence. It opens in an idyllic rural landscape, but the appeal of these scenes is asserted to be far less than 'our impulsive answer to the call/Of Duty'. The moral idea celebrated in Wordsworth's 'Ode to Duty' is presented as an energising and inspiring power. The imagery is of heroism in battle, in pioneering endeavour, and also in ethical idealism: 'such souls sublime/Will never want for blessed joy in work,/Working for Duty which can never die'. Although men 'may seem playthings of ironic fate' — as Hardy felt so strongly — 'there is hope for all' in Woolner's moral universe, in following the path of Duty, 'man's prerogative'. Duty is represented as egalitarian:

Hers is a broad estate open to poor
And rich alike: here rudest peasant may
Move as their equal with baronial lords,
And those who serve be great as those who rule...
Duty becomes an exacting female deity, but she can give a dazzling spiritual reward: 'glory born of Duty is a crown/Of light'. The end of the poem is triumphant:

And each behold his labours glorified,
   Alike the toiler at the desk, a king
Upon his throne, or builder of a bridge:
The desk in lustre shines a kingly throne,
The throne diffuses radiance like a sun,
The bridge spans death – a pathway to the stars.

This has something of the operatic grandeur of the ending of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. It is striking that the Christian God, so prominent earlier in the poem, has now become subsumed into the Victorian ideal of Duty.

Thus by the end of this interesting poem Woolner has made his way, as a number of his contemporaries also did, from the romantic mode of Pre-Raphaelitism to an ideological position dear to Victorian hearts which reconciled idealism and society in the name of Duty. We may think in this context of Millais as President of the Royal Academy, of Burne-Jones's knighthood, of Woolner himself, described by Morley in his Introduction as 'a Royal Academician, and one of the foremost sculptors of our day. A colossal statue by him in bronze of Captain Cook was designed for a site overlooking Sydney Harbour.'8 Morris might have seemed to be following a similar path when the demandingness of *The Defence of Guenevere* gave way to the widely enjoyed *Earthly Paradise*. But Morris had proper and serious reservations about Carlyle, and his conception of Duty was to lead him away from the applause of society into the suspected world of early Socialism.

NOTES

2 ibid., p. 6.
3 In the Introduction, Morley refers to letters appreciative of the Library received from 'remote readers in lonely settlements, from the far West, from sheep-farms in Australia, from farthest India, from places to which these little volumes make their way as pioneers; being almost the first real books that have there been seen', ibid., p. 7.
5 ibid., p. 81.
6 Woolner's 'Note' (p. 192) refers to writing 'the other poems' between 1857 and 1861.
A comparison between the versions of the two opening stanzas shows Woolner aiming for a more sophisticated literary effect in his revisions (*The Germ* text on the left, revised on the right). This is his consistent endeavour:

I LOVE my lady; she is very fair;  
Her brow is white, and bound by simple hair;  
    Her spirit sit aloof, and high,  
    Altho' it looks thro' her soft eye  
    Sweetly and tenderly.  

I LOVE My Lady; she is very fair;  
Her brow is wan, and bound by simple hair;  
    Her spirit sits aloof, and high,  
    But glances from her tender eye  
    In sweetness droopingly.

As a young forest, when the wind drives thro'  
My life is stirred when she breaks on my view;  
    Altho' her beauty has such power,  
    Her soul is like the simple flower  
    Trembling beneath a shower.  

As a young forest, while the wind drives through,  
My life is stirred when she breaks on my view;  
    Her beauty grants my will no choice  
    But silent awe, till she rejoice  
    My longing with her voice.