

Gordon Bottomley & Paul Nash: Pre-Raphaelite Heirs?

Arnold Wilson

It might be an exaggeration to say that Gordon Bottomley (1874–1948) is now well nigh forgotten and his one-act plays never performed, but his correspondence with the artist Paul Nash (1889–1946) reveals a fascinating developing friendship, with, initially, Bottomley as Nash's mentor, encouraging and guiding him. There was also, to some extent, a professional collaboration, since Nash both drew stage sets for Bottomley's plays, and also delighted in constructing scale models for the settings.

In a lecture on 'Poetry and the Contemporary Theatre', first delivered by Bottomley at the Aberdeen Branch of the English Association in 1931, he remarked:

There has been a steady development of the visual aspects of drama, furthered by the recognition of marvellous possibilities in electric lighting, and complicated by the incursion into the theatre of a new race of pictorial artists who aspired to paint with lights and build up shapes and human bodies instead of with brushes and pigments.¹

For our immediate purpose, though, Gordon Bottomley considered that with the Pre-Raphaelites, 'The national genius flashed out fierce and clear . . . supremely in Millais'.² He continued in the same letter to Nash, written on 12 December 1919, 'And now it seems to me that you and your companions are finding again the English secret, the English soul that the Pre-Raphaelites found and lost'.³ Bottomley was more knowledgeable and appreciative of the Pre-Raphaelites than any other literary figure of his day, but unfortunately, never, as far as I am aware, wrote about them except in his revealing letters to Nash.

Paul Nash first corresponded with Bottomley as a result of the latter seeing drawings by the artist illustrating his one-act play 'The Crier by Night' (1910). The small quarto had been borrowed by Nash from a neighbour and was eventually returned to Bottomley who was impressed by the drawings but annoyed about the bad state of his ill-treated quarto. Bottomley remarked: 'William Morris's famous capacity for producing and annexing dirt can never have produced anything so grubby'.⁴ However, he wrote to the artist praising the drawings. At the time he was thirty-six and the artist nearly twenty-one. Except for one long gap they corresponded frequently until Nash's death in 1946.

Both had been inspired early in their lives by Rossetti. Bottomley was nineteen when he saw a reproduction of Rossetti's 'Blessed Damozel'. He said he was 'guided and fostered'⁵ by Rossetti and also read at home works by Morris, Swinburne and Pater. For Nash, when he entered the Slade School in 1910,



CRIER BY NIGHT, 1912

Rossetti was his inspiration. It is therefore no surprise that the female figure in the drawing of 'The Crier by Night' resembles a Rossetti drawing of Lizzie Siddal. At this stage in Nash's career he wished almost to be another Rossetti, although in later years he began, as he said, to stretch his 'cramped limbs' and look for the 'green spaces' and adopted a very different style.⁶ He said in *Outline*, his autobiography, that the 'illustrations of poetic episodes in romances no longer absorbed my invention'.⁷

As he lost his enthusiasm in Rossetti, Nature inspired him to stretch his 'cramped limbs'. Initially, he was influenced by Blake, the poem 'To my friend Butts' (1800) arresting him, especially the lines:

Over sea, over land,
My eyes did expand
Into regions of air,
Away from all care,
Into regions of fire . . .⁸

Later his work included formal, even abstract, elements. Bottomley wanted to encourage him to continue in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition because he felt that 'triangles and general aerial geometry that are popular just now will look sick in twenty years, as the Art Nouveau of 1897'.⁹

Bottomley's verse plays were also, in a way, cramping for his limbs since the declamatory style was more akin to classical drama. He wrote:

The people in an actualistic drawing-room play must be kept in changing movement by a producer to hold the audience's attention; but Phèdre and her sisters are often still, still in order that they shall not distract their listeners from the action of the play – which they are *uttering*.¹⁰

He chose a recondite genre for his creative work. The demand for one-act plays was inevitably limited with W. B. Yeats as a rare precursor and fellow-protagonist. It is believed that Bottomley's life-time of poor health confined him to writing shorter works. He certainly felt that his ill-health restricted his creativity. However, the writings of someone like Marcel Proust would tend to disprove this. Bottomley's first success was 'King Lear's Wife', published in *Georgian Poetry* (1913–15). William Morris's translation of the Icelandic sagas are echoed in another of his works, 'The Riding to Lithend', which is the finest of his early plays. Lines such as: 'It is so mighty and beautiful and blithe/To watch a man dying – to hover and watch',¹¹ have an echo in Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*. Another play, 'Culbin Sands', performed in 1931 by the London Verse Speaking Choir, depicts another scene of desolation and dreariness with unbroken solitude.

Bottomley rescued some twenty photographs of Jane Morris. He had first seen them hanging on the staircase of May Morris's house in Hammersmith and suggested that they should be conserved. He later came across them mounted, but in a frameless state, in the attics at Kelmscott Manor. He was given permission to remove the pictures from their mounts and rephotograph them. It turned out that the original negatives were in the possession of William Rossetti's daughter in

Rome. Bottomley related this discovery to Nash in a letter he wrote in 1941. In the same letter he praised the work of the Pre-Raphaelites.

In 1899, Percy Bate wrote:

The term Pre-Raphaelite . . . has been employed to describe pictures painted with unsparing effort after truth in every way . . . and it has been used to characterise every picture which showed in conception or in feeling that the painter had been influenced by the late work of Dante Rossetti, or of his pupil, Edward Burne-Jones, and the word has so far passed into the language with this double meaning that it would be vain to attempt to prevent its use in the twofold way. The only thing to be done is to accept it frankly.¹²

It is usually agreed that the full short flavour of Pre-Raphaelitism, kindled in 1848, had vanished by 1863, but the pervasiveness of the movement, as described by Percy Bate, lends credence to Gordon Bottomley's view of himself as the last of the Pre-Raphaelites, and in one of his final letters to Nash he also included him, for he stated, 'You for a long time, and Stanley Spencer for a minute, were the only true heirs of the Pre-Raphaelites'.¹³

NOTES

- ¹ *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press 1934), vol. XIX, p. 138. Referred to hereafter as *Essays and Studies*.
- ² Claude Colleer Abbott and Anthony Bertram (eds.), *Poet and Painter. Being the Correspondence between Gordon Bottomley and Paul Nash 1910–1946*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1955). Referred to hereafter as *Poet and Painter*.
- ³ *ibid.*, p. 116.
- ⁴ *ibid.* Quoted in Introduction from a short unpublished autobiography by Gordon Bottomley.
- ⁵ *ibid.* Quoted in Introduction.
- ⁶ Paul Nash (Preface by Herbert Read), *Outline. An Autobiography and Other Writings by Paul Nash*, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd. 1949), p. 79.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 78.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 79.
- ⁹ *Poet and Painter*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- ¹⁰ *Essays and Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
- ¹¹ *The Riding to Lithend*, [Play in one act], (Flansham: Pear Tree Press 1909).
- ¹² Percy Bate, *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters: Their Associates and Successors*, (London: G. Bell & Sons 1899).
- ¹³ *Poet and Painter*, *op. cit.*, p. 265.