

## COVENTRY PATMORE'S FINE LINE

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*Musings from the editor's desk.*

Seamus Heaney has been among my favourite poets since my student days when I came across his second book, *Door into the Dark*, in a used-book shop a few years after its first publication. The sounds of his words were quite enough for me, since, like most of what I was reading at 19, I scarcely knew what on earth the words were about. However little I initially understood his poems, Heaney would become one of those authors whose next book I've looked forward to buying, one of those authors I feel fortunate to be alive when they are writing. It is that joy of witnessing the arrival of what Walter Pater refers to as "works of art [that] impress us as a new presence in the world" (*Appreciations* 80). I think *Field Work* was the book I was enjoying when it dawned on me that I could recite none of Heaney's poems with the ease I can with some of my Pre-Raphaelite favourites ("Of heaven or hell I have no power to sing"; "Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I"; "Do tall white angels gaze and wend Along the banks where lilies bend?" "Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine There fell thy shadow, Cynara"). This charge was not alarming to me, because my love for Heaney lies not in memorable lines but in his singular words, the monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon diction that startles us with the stubby strength of three- and four-letter words that get new meanings with long forgotten sounds: fen and hub; lea, lee, and lug; scop and sett; haw, hoke, and whin. Such arresting words are better read in a favourite book by the fireside than recalled and recited during a walk, as they continue to surprise me and thus renew themselves with each successive reading. It is this promise of delight that urges us to reach again for a treasured book, the delight that led William Morris to simplify the necessities

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of life to two: “a beautiful House ... and a beautiful Book” (*Ideal Book* 1).

Still, my curiosity grew as I pondered my sieve-like mind for Heaney’s lines. I loath T.S. Eliot’s politics, but I love his eye and ear for so many vivid images in such memorable lines. Even when Eliot borrowed, he made the thefts his own, as when he simply added “then” to Morris’s “Let us go, You and I,” from “Sir Peter Harpdon’s End” (668). Some years after Heaney’s *Field Work*, his “Terminus” from *The Haw Lantern* (1987) supplied me with lines that remain with me always, but mainly because they define so well my own nature, providing what I consider a sturdy defence for indecision. One couplet is memorable, the other awkward, as if it is still in need of some second-thought polishing:

Two buckets were easier carried than one.  
I grew up in between....

Is it any wonder when I thought  
I would have second thoughts? (5, 4)

Among other exceptions I’ve noted over the years is a line I read that day in “The Harvest Bow” from the *Field Work* volume: “*The end of art is peace.*” Heaney foregrounds this line typographically, italicizing it as a motto for the plaited straw of corn:

*The end of art is peace*  
Could be the motto of this frail device  
That I have pinned up on our deal dresser. (58)

The traditional country practice of weaving a harvest bow serves here as a folk image for art. A year after the poem appeared in *Field Work*, Heaney published a collection of his essays and reviews, titled *Preoccupations*, a book I did not read until some years later. He chose its epigraph from a Yeats essay, “Samhain: 1905” (collected in *Explorations*), which identifies the source for Heaney’s title. But to my surprise, the epigraph also includes the memorable line from “The Harvest Bow”: “Coventry Patmore has said, ‘The end of art is peace,’ and the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense preoccupation it demands” (qtd in *Preoccupations* 7). So Heaney’s memorable line is a quotation from Coventry Patmore.

By adding the tentative qualifier that the harvest bow “could be” considered as a Patmore motto, Heaney reminds us of the Pre-Raphaelites’ aesthetic principle that we do not look to art, as Pater explains, for the fruit of

experience – not for a moral, a platitude, or a motto – but for the sake of art itself. Whereas Coleridge considered the poetic imagination as creating art that “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” (ch. 14, 2:16), the Pre-Raphaelites resisted reconciling the discordants. The Pre-Raphaelite grotesque – those jarring juxtapositions of incongruities – remains at the heart of their art and leads Patmore to consider peace as the ultimate end of art. Such an end explains why Morris anticipates little need for future artists to work at traditional literature within the ideal society of his *News from Nowhere*. Patmore’s double-edged aphorism thus draws Heaney within our Pre-Raphaelite sphere.

Most students of Victorian literature know Coventry Patmore as the one-dimensional author of *The Angel in the House*, a poem that serves as the touchstone object of scorn for its patriarchal patronizing of women as paragons of meekness and sweetness. Patmore is read with the perverse delight in asserting our superiority over a relic of the Victorian age. But the catch our students miss is that his Victorian contemporaries disliked the poem every bit as much as we do. H.F. Chorley refused to dignify the first volume of the poem with a proper review, mocking it instead with cruel verse:

The gentle reader we apprise That this new ‘Angel in the House’ Contains a tale not very wise About a person and a spouse. The author, gentle as a lamb, Has managed well his rhymes to fit, And, haply, fancies he has writ Another ‘In Memoriam.’ – How his intended gathered flowers, And took her tea and after sung. It is told in style somewhat like ours, For delectation of the young. But, reader, lest you say we quiz The poet’s record of his She, Some little pictures you shall see Not in *our* language but – in *his*. –

While thus I grieved, and kiss’d her glove,  
 My man brought in her note to say,  
 Papa had bid her send his love,  
 And would I dine with them next day?  
 They had learn’d and practised Purcell’s glee,  
 To sing it by to-morrow night.  
 The Postscript was: Her sisters and she  
 Inclosed some violets, blue and white....

There are no tears for you to shed Unless they may be tears of mirth. – From ball to bed, from field to farm, The tale flows nicely purling on. – With much conceit there is no harm, In the love-legend here begun. – The rest will come another day If public sympathy allows; – And this is all we have to say, About ‘The Angel in the House.’ (76)

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Such was the tone and tenor of the critical reception for Patmore in 1855!

Though the poem did gradually grow popular with the general public, first in the United States and later in Britain, it was not as popular in the nineteenth century as the verses of Edgar Guest and Rod McKuen were in the twentieth century. When I first prowled used-book shops as a teenager I soon trained my eye to skip over the shelves of those Guest and McKuen books that were as common as stacks of *National Geographic*. We do not see our Modernist colleagues reading less Auden and more Guest for a better take on the 'thirties poets: "He started to sing as he tackled the thing / That couldn't be done, and he did it" (Guest 7-8). Nor do postmodernists turn to McKuen as a representative of the 1960s, re-framing the decade with the popular schmaltz of things like Bobby Goldsboro's "Honey": "See the tree, how big it's grown...."

We Victorianists could better spend our time reading Patmore's "The Woodman's Daughter," a ballad loved by Dante Rossetti and Thomas Woolner, and chosen by John Everett Millais as a subject for an early oil painting, *The Woodman's Daughter* (1850-51). Holman Hunt remembers Rossetti reciting the poem and Woolner regretting "that it could no longer be obtained at the publishers, whereupon the reciter advised him to write to the author direct, and this led to the making of a valuable new friend for us all, and on an introduction to the most important literary circle existing" (1:196). Patmore did indeed have connections. As a librarian at the British Museum, he helped Richard Monckton Milnes with the first biography of Keats by transcribing Keats's manuscripts. He did research on Arthurian mythology for Tennyson's early work on the *Idylls of the King*. And it was Patmore who persuaded Ruskin to defend the Pre-Raphaelite artists from the onslaught in the press.

Still, it is *The Angel in the House* that Patmore is now remembered for. The brief Prologue to the first edition (1854) actually begins quite well, with a mock epic-like irreverence, as the conventional invocation to the muses is replaced by a husband's conversation with his wife about what sort of poem he hopes to write:

"Mine is no winged horse to gain  
The region of the spheral chime:  
He does but drag a rumbling wain,  
Cheer'd by the silver bells of rhyme:  
And if, at fame's bewitching note,  
My homely Pegasus pricks an ear,  
The world's cart-collar hugs his throat,

And he's too wise to kick or rear."  
Thus ever answer'd Vaughan his wife.... (3)

Ambitious for him to win fame, Honoria asks if he will write

"The Life  
Of Arthur, or Jerusalem's Fall?"  
"Neither: your gentle self, my wife,  
Yourself, and love that's all in all,"

is his reply (5). After some arguing about those intentions, the two come to an agreement:

'Twas fix'd, with much on both sides said,  
The song should have no incidents,  
They are so dull, and pall, twice read:  
Its scope should be the heart's events. (7)

The dramatic exchange between two apparently well-matched equals is a strong start that promises a spirited wit, and the focus on the "heart's events" without "incidents" is a wise reminder that there are no banalities in the romantic routine of daily events when our life is wondrously transformed by the bliss of love.

But the promise is not sustained, as it is precisely such banalities that led his contemporaries like George Meredith to condemn its "dogtrot domesticities" (*Letters* 9) and Arthur Symonds its "dinner-table domesticities" (903). When the young Vaughan wishes to marry Honoria we hear nothing of his proposal because Patmore focuses on Vaughan's meeting with her father. Vaughan and the Dean discuss finances over wine – "she'd have / Only three thousand pounds as yet: / More bye and bye" – while "she makes tea on the Lawn / These fine warm afternoons" (90-91; 92). Granting his assent, the Dean offers another glass of wine to celebrate the engagement, but Vaughan prefers the pot of tea. Meredith wrote the opposite sort of poem: *Modern Love* transforms the pathetic trivialities of a couple pretending to be asleep beside each other into unbearably tragic tensions. Students are quick to claim Patmore is typically Victorian and Meredith is somehow un-Victorian.

The poem continues to plummet with a mess of contradictions. The patronizing observation that "Her privilege, not impotence, / Exempts her from the works of man" is followed by such exceptions as the warrior Jeanne d'Arc, the biblical judge Deborah, and the tender but powerful queens who solidified a nation and an empire, Elizabeth and Victoria (72-73). The

exceptions, alas, do not prove the rule: "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure" (125). The male poet acknowledges this devotion "with rhapsodies of perfect words / Ruled by returning kiss of rhymes" (28). The "perfect" poem takes priority over all else and enables him to improve his woman thrice-fold. First, as her laureate, he will teach men how noble they must be to their lovely mates and will thereby inspire women to desire to be more desirable (30). And like the conventional male sonneteer who celebrates the power of art to immortalize his beloved, Patmore hopes his "happy skill [will] disclose / New fairness in her fair heart," "as geranium, pink, or rose / Is thrice times better through power of art" (30).

*The Angel in the House* exemplifies Patmore's two pet theories. The first is a division he worked out in his literary criticism as a method for evaluating art based on his belief that our personalities have varying measures of feminine and masculine elements: "Poetry, in common with, but above all the arts, is the mind of *man*, the rational soul, using the feminine or sensitive soul, as its accidental or complementary means of expression" (*Principle in Art* 24). He considers Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, and Dante Rossetti as more feminine than masculine because they stress beauty and sweetness over intellect and passion (*Principle in Art* 77-78). Francis Thompson is considered too masculine (*Courage in Politics* 159), but Alice Meynell achieves just the right balance in her "marriage of masculine force of insight with feminine grace and tact of expression" (*Principle in Art* 151).

His second theory is explained in a complicated treatise on prosody, "A Prefatory Study of English Metrical Law." It is a subject Patmore and Hopkins discussed over the years, both agreeing that the number of syllables is irrelevant to metre; but whereas Patmore explains that metrical beat or "ictus" must be governed by time, Hopkins, with equal eccentricity, explains that it must be governed by strength. Patmore considers that "the musical and metrical expression of emotion is an instinct, and not an artifice," supporting his point with an apt illustration: "The ticking of a clock is truly monotonous; but when we listen to it, we hear, or rather seem to hear, two, or even four, distinct tones, upon the imaginary distinction of which, and the equally imaginary emphasis of one or two, depends what we call its rhythm" (*Amelia, etc.* 13; 27-28). What complicates Patmore's metrical theory is his insistence that silent pauses are as necessary and as numerous as the beats of stressed syllables. I am baffled by his unusual manner of scanning lines, but I interpret his notion of "catalexis," the silent pauses, as follows: though "boat" and "moan" are monosyllabic words, "boat" provides a single beat in a line, whereas "moan" may have what Patmore considers a silent pause extending within it as a second beat. He and Tennyson enjoyed long walks together, and

I can imagine Tennyson's famous remark about his understanding "the quantity of every word in the English language except perhaps 'scissors'" arising from a conversation during one of those walks with Patmore (qtd in Tennyson 611). I should add that A.E. Housman believed not only that Patmore's "essay on English metre is the best thing ever written on the subject," but that "nobody admires his best poetry enough" (qtd in Housman 183).

We should heed Housman and search for Patmore's best poetry. For me, it is the pre-Pre-Raphaelite ballad, "The Woodsman's Daughter," and not the ambitious Eros and Psych odes about the passionate marriage of God and the soul, but three simpler odes from *The Unknown Eros*: the seasonal, seaside odes to the innocence of erotic summer love in "Wind and Wave," to the serenity of spiritual love achieved in "Winter," and to the spring renewal of love arising from a young woman's empathy at the grave of the speaker's first betrothed in "Amelia."

What drew Yeats and Heaney to Patmore – Yeats, as well as Heaney, not once but twice to Patmore – was not the poetry but his prose. After quoting Patmore in the "Samhain: 1905" essay, Yeats then borrows a variant of the line for a poem: "Delight in Art whose end is peace" ("The Wealthy Man who Promised a Second Subscription," 26). I believe neither phrase is an accurate quotation. Not finding the source for Yeats's and Heaney's exact wording of Patmore's aphorism, I believe Yeats's two different versions suggest that both are paraphrases of the essential idea Patmore expressed in various ways in his essay "Peace in Life and Art":

Peace ... was regarded as the ideal expression of life in painting, sculpture, poetry, and architecture.... Peace..., which all great art aspires to express.... This peace, which is the common character of all true art.... The greatest art, in which all things are "ordered sweetly" by essential peace. ("Peace" 92; 93; 93-94; 95)<sup>1</sup>

The context of the Patmore allusion in Yeats's poem identifies peace as a refuge from turbulence, as Yeats refers to the building of the San Marco Library "Whence turbulent Italy should draw / Delight in Art whose end is peace" (25-26). But Patmore clarifies his meaning of peace by explaining in Thomistic terms that it is not a "mere absence of disturbance" ("Peace" 92). Instead, peace is the visionary region of an ordered life wherein "smiles and tears" are not polarities to be reconciled but are irrelevancies to transcend (92). The ordered life is the realm of art wherein peace is "identical with perfect joy..., and is also identical with purity" (95). The sphere of this

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ordered life is as sensual as it is spiritual, and thus consistent with Patmore's theory of mixing the masculine and feminine elements of our bodies and souls: "Bright with the spirit shines the sense, / As with the sun a fleecy cloud" (94; qtd from his *Angel in the House*). Identifying peace, joy, and purity as the identical elements of art, Patmore reveals himself as not only an influential friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, but a colleague and supporter of the Pre-Raphaelite movement who occasionally argued well for its aesthetic principles concerning the self-reflexive autonomy of art. Rarely achieving heights in his own poetry – "I am / As one that knows a tune but cannot sing" (*Rod* 204) – he took pride in his memorable aphorisms: "Would you possess what is, and shun what seems? / Believe and cling to nothing but your dreams" (37); "A song / Loud with the truth which cannot be expressed" (203); "Delight is pleasanter than pleasure; peace more delightful than delight. 'Seek peace and ensue it'" (35). After gathering and burning as many copies of his own books of poems as he could find, he published these aphorisms as his final book, *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower*. For Patmore, the shorter, the better, as if to say of his own work that the end of art is not the multi-volumed *Angel in the House* but the peace of the perfect line: "The song that *is* the thing it says" (217).

### Note

1. Here is one of the extended passages on peace from his essay:

Peace, as it was held to be the last effect and reward of a faithful life, was regarded as the ideal expression of life in painting, sculpture, poetry, and architecture; and accordingly the tranquil sphere of all the greatest of great art is scarcely troubled by a tear or a smile. This peace is no negative quality. It does not consist in the mere absence of disturbance by pain or pleasure. It is the peace of which St. Thomas says "perfect joy and peace are identical," and is the atmosphere of a region in which smiles and tears are alike impertinences. In such art the expression of pain and pleasure is never an end, as it almost always is with us moderns, but a means of glorifying that peace which is capable of supporting either without perturbation. "Peace," says again the great writer above quoted, "is the tranquillity of order, and has its seat in the will." A word about this living order, which all great art aspires to express. ("Peace" 92-93)

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