

Reconsideration of the Plot and the Double Ending in *The Well-Beloved*

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One of the recent psychological approaches to *The Well-Beloved* is Rosemary Sumner's study.¹ Sumner tries to clarify the mystery of the Well-Beloved in terms of Jungian psychology, regarding the Well-Beloved as nothing less than anima, which includes both good and evil elements. She points out that such ambivalence in the Well-Beloved threads through this novel. I have no objection whatever to the perspicacity of her theory, but it leaves the impression that she has only made use of Hardy's *Well-Beloved* in order to prove the appropriateness of Jungian psychology. The plotmaking problems, as well as the double ending structure of this novel, are hardly discussed.

On the other hand, John Fowles' "Hardy and the Hag,"² another psychological approach to this novel, is an article full of suggestions toward working out the plotmaking problem. According to his argument, it is "the mother-ideal of unconscious memory" that Pierston, or Hardy himself pursues "in woman after woman."³ Contrarily, what frustrates this dream is the father—"the Oedipal father," who is "the intruder in the primal unity."⁴ Fowles thus points out those two contradictory forces inherent in *The Well-Beloved* which operate to develop the plot. The uniqueness of Fowles' opinion lies in the fact that he is able to detect the narrative impulse that drives the plot of *The Well-Beloved*. In spite of it all, Fowles puts so much emphasis on the interrelationship between Pierston's life and Hardy's that he tends to analyze Hardy himself rather than his work. It seems to me that Fowles refuses to regard the work as independent of its author.

In this paper, independently of Thomas Hardy's private life, the plotmaking energy of this novel will be discussed from the points of view of the psychological relationship between Jocelyn Pierston and the spirit of the Well-Beloved—"the mother-ideal." For this purpose, it will be pointed out that the double ending of this novel, however different each ending might appear to be, springs from Pierston's same psychological phenomenon.

I

As Rosemary Sumner says, the Well-Beloved haunting Pierston is clearly his anima, i.e., "his own femininity," or "the woman in a man"⁵ The anima is often projected on an actual woman. It usually appears in two distinct forms of the archetype—goddesses and witches. In Sumner's opinion, both the good and the evil phases pertaining to Pierston's Well-Beloved correspond with the very nature of anima, whose symbolic forms are the various women among whom Pierston migrates.⁶ So far, Sumner's explanation has been quite satisfactory, but she doesn't account for his migration itself. She doesn't even ask herself why Pierston continually seeks after the ideal woman, and yet can never reach consummation, why some unknown element always prevents him from winning her. In this novel, I think, one force eternally tries to approach the goal, while the other always checks the attainment. Whenever Pierston is about to touch what seems to be the symbol of the ideal, it flies away instantly and leaves nothing but "a nest from which the bird has flown" — "the sign of an absence" behind it. J. H. Miller takes notice of this fact, and asserts that Pierston's contact with his ideal woman is a kind of incest, and therefore a taboo. "The strange bar," Miller says, "keeps him from union with any of the Avices."⁷

It is John Fowles who has developed the theory of "incest." In Fowles' opinion, as mentioned above, the unity of Pierston with the Well-Beloved is associated with the "primal unity," the unity of the son with his mother.⁸ I could perceive Pierston's wish for this "primal unity" when he tries "liquid death," in the 1892 version, after having had the third Avice run away with Mr. Leverre. His plunging into "the Race" all alone in his boat to commit suicide implies his unconscious wish for the return to the liquid of Avice's (the mother's) womb⁹—the wish for the consummation of his longstanding love for the Well-Beloved by breaking the taboo. And yet, this wish is never fulfilled:

It was ended by a sudden crash, which threw him against some hard body, striking his head. He was fully prepared for a liquid death, but a death by concussion was so entirely unanticipated that the shock made him cry out in a fierce resentment at the interruption to his design. (245)

Pierston, who has had a concussion, is rescued by the local lightship men, and nursed by Marcia, his once Well-Beloved and now a hag. Far from being the Well-Beloved, she prevents Pierston from uniting with the ideal. This prevention also takes effect in the final version of 1897. In this revised version, his serious illness caused by the third Avice's runaway is soothed by aged Marcia, who separates Pierston from the Well-Beloved once and for all by marrying him. Both endings, therefore, work against Pierston's unity with the Well-Beloved. They hold his "incest" in check. In this novel, the two contradictory forces create a kind of tension which produces eternally a series of the Well-Beloved's symbols, one force trying to unite Pierston with the Well-Beloved, the other destroying this unity. In other words, this tension works as the symbolizing power, i. e. , the power of creating art, which is also the plotmaking energy of this novel. In the final version of 1897, Pierston seals the spring of this creative energy, and lives out his days in peace. On the other hand, in the 1892 version, as a consequence of this repressed creative energy, he bursts into a ghastly laughter of despair. Thus, so far as the aftermath is concerned, each ending is apparently of a different kind. In Miller's opinion, however, the double ending has an "alternative" conclusion without any "determined end" because the Well-Beloved itself is an absolutely unattainable goal.¹⁰ In the following discussion, I'd like to investigate Pierston's psychological motivation which has produced such "alternative" endings.

II

If the "narrative impulse" of this novel is represented in the close relationship between the erotic and the creative,¹¹ the ending of the 1897 version is the deliberate suppression of this impulse and the sealing up of its outlet. Since the symbolic function is an innate ability of the human being who is an *animal symbolicum*,¹² there is no suppressing this function by any means. Even if it appears to be completely suppressed, it goes underground and persistently controls us. This symbolic function—the "narrative impulse" of *The Well-Beloved* is always sustained by the taboo on the incestuous unity of Pierston and the Well-Beloved. Pierston *continuously* finds a series of the symbolic Well-Beloved in various women without involving himself with any of them. Consequently, the taboo guarantees *continuity* with which he creates plastic arts as well as the symbols of the Well-Beloved. No wonder

the taboo drives the third Avice to elope with Leverre and to leave Pierston forever. For, in due course, it is to revitalize his impulse to produce another symbol of the Well-Beloved. As his "liquid death" miscarries, so will his deliberate suppression of the symbolic Well-Beloved and the symbolizing function itself. Both failures are due to the very nature of the taboo. His macabre laughter in the first version surely anticipates his failure in suppressing the symbolic Well-Beloved in the final version. For this laughter is presumably caused by the sharp contrast between the aged Marcia who happens to nurse him after his abortive attempt at the "liquid death" and a certain symbol of the Well-Beloved already revived in his mind. However hard he or Marcia may try to repress this recurrence of the symbols and its creative energy, they persist in existing in his mind, always creating an irrecoverable gap between the real and the ideal. Therefore, we might perceive something unnatural in the ending of the second version, especially in the following passage:

'... the Freyjas, the Nymphs and Fauns, Eves, Avices, and other innumerable Well-Beloveds—I want to see them never any more!... "Instead of sweet smell there shall be stink, and there shall be burning instead of beauty," said the prophet.'

...He saw no more to move him, he declared, in the time-defying presentations of Perugino, Titian, Sebastiano, and other statuesque creators than in the work of the pavement artist they had passed on their way. 'It is strange!' said she (Marcia). 'I don't regret it. That fever has killed a faculty which has, after all, brought me my greatest sorrows, if a few little pleasures....' (202)

A queer contrast between the symbolizing motivation and the force of repressing it can be found in these words. The quantity of symbols and arts crossing his mind becomes all the greater for being repressed. "A faculty" which "that fever has killed" is of course the symbolizing power, or the artistic creativity. But I wonder if such a power can ever be extinguished by a mere fever of a disease. Consider, for example, the concluding passage:

His business was, among kindred undertakings which followed the extinction of the Well-Beloved and other ideals, to advance a scheme for the closing of the old natural fountains in the Street of Wells, because of their possible

contamination,... He was also engaged in acquiring some old moss-grown, mullioned Elizabethan cottages, for the purpose of pulling them down because they were damp;...(205—06)

This “natural fountain ” was once referred to as “an ever-bubbling spring of emotion” which “Jocelyn threw into plastic creations” (66—67), and the “Elizabethan cottage” was where the Well-Beloved (the second Avice) once lived (118). Even if Pierston closes the natural fountains, the subterranean water will bubble and continuously call upon Pierston to create artistic forms. Even if he demolishes Elizabethan cottages and builds new ones, the Well-Beloved, as a *genius loci*, will not be so easily exorcised but will soon make Pierston find other suitable symbols in some women or another. As long as he fails to be united with the Well-Beloved, he will be forced to be concerned with the endless chain of its symbols or artistic forms even though he strongly tries to repress his bubbling emotion. Therefore, he couldn't possibly have acquired such composure as shown in the ending of the revised version.

III

The “natural fountain” is, as aforesaid, “an ever-bubbling spring of emotion” which he “threw into plastic creations.” In the midst of his “ever-bubbling spring of emotion” lies the spirit of the Isle of Slingers, i. e., the *genius loci*, which, as the Well-Beloved, is symbolized by various women, making Pierston produce many kinds of plastic arts. He suddenly knows the spirit by intuition when he watches the stone of his native rock being unshipped from the coasting-craft: “He would pass inside the great gates of these landing-places on the right or left bank, contemplate the white cubes and oblongs, imbibe their associations, call up the *genius loci* whence they came, and almost forget that he was in London” (97). Three consecutive generations of Avice, as well as his plastic arts, are produced where the *genius loci* is crystalized in a concatenation of symbols, which is, in its turn, perpetrated by some external force that dissociates Pierston from the Well-Beloved whenever he touches her. Such a situation is repeatedly described in this novel. In the following two passages, Pierston explains to his friend Somers the general feature of the Well-Beloved:

'Each shape, or embodiment, has been a temporary residence only, which she has entered, lived in awhile, and made her exit from, leaving the substance, so far as I have been concerned, *a corpse*, worse luck!' (54; italics mine)

'To see the creature who has hitherto been perfect, divine, lose under your very gaze the divinity which has informed her, grow commonplace, turn from flame to *ashes*, from a radiant vitality to *a relic*, is anything but a pleasure for any man, and has been nothing less than a racking spectacle to my sight. *Each mournful emptied shape* stands ever after like *the nest of some beautiful bird from which the inhabitant has departed and left it to fill with snow*. I have been absolutely miserable when I have looked in a face for her I used to see there, and could see her there no more.' (58; italics mine)

In Marcia Bencomb's case, for example, although he was engaged to her, the marriage was postponed due to her father's objection to the marriage and other reasons, so that the Well-Beloved leaves Marcia once and for all, whose soul and body Pierston has so passionately desired. As for Mrs Nichola Pine-Avon, Pierston is fascinated with her, while her arrogance makes him feel uncertain whether the Well-Beloved has ever resided within her. When he gives up the second Avice, it is not so much because she has a husband, but because her essence has already flown away. This fact is inferred when he makes a statue of Avice out of clay: "How futilely he had laboured to express the character of that face in clay, and, while catching it in substance, had yet lost something that was essential!" (130) Furthermore, after twenty years, when he is captivated at first glance by the third Avice, her mother the second Avice has become the "empty shrine" of the Well-Beloved (153). For Pierston, she's already his "old friend—no more" (155). The third Avice, too, finally leaves Pierston by eloping with Marcia's son Leverre, but actually it is Pierston himself who wishes her to marry Leverre. In the far-off days of his youth, he has refused to accept the first Avice's innocent affection for him. It is his turn to be refused: "'Desert you I won't,' said Jocelyn. 'It is too much like the original case. But I must let her desert me!'" (172) In the original case, when he feels that the first Avice also follows the native custom of premarital sex, he doubts the existence of the Well-Beloved within her:

... Jocelyn was disappointed, and a little vexed, that such an unforeseen reason should have deprived him of her company. How the old ideas survived under the new education! (41)

It is at this moment that the Well-Beloved flies away. It then goes over to Marcia Bencomb. But, in fact, the Well-Beloved does not settle in Marcia but in her very attire. The Well-Beloved is already dissociated from her, which is proven by the fact that he is lost in a fetish reverie as he dries her wet clothes by the fire and watches the moisture evaporate (48).

As we have seen, his contact with each symbol of the Well-Beloved is always deferred one after another by dint of some interceptive power, which is not the influence of his environment, so much as something inherent in his temperament. This power can also be sensed in Hardy's famous soliloquy: "Love lives on propinquity, but dies of contact."¹³ As has been discussed before, J. H. Miller understands this interceptive power to be a taboo on incest. Jacques Lacan, on the other hand, calls it "*Nom-du-Père*," or the "Name-of-the-Father." According to Lacan, the father absolutely prohibits the child's incestuous desire for its mother, thus initiating the child into the primary law. By the "father" Lacan means not only the real father of a given individual but the symbolic father. Similarly, the "mother" is one of the symbolic objects of a sexual or incestuous desire, while the "child" is one of the symbolic subjects. Since the "father" always estranges the subjects from its desired object, there is constructed in the mind of the subject an endless chain of symbols which always signify the desired objects.¹⁴ In this signifying chain, Lacan observes, while one symbol (signifier) is being displaced by another, the very desire of the subject temporarily vanishes. Lacan names this psychological fact *l'aphanisis*,¹⁵ of which the feeling is well described by Pierston, when the Well-Beloved leaves a woman he desires, as "a corpse," "ashes," "a relic," "each mournful emptied shape," "the nest of some beautiful bird from which the inhabitant has departed and left it to fill with snow," and the like. For Pierston, an endless chain of symbols with the *aphanisis* lying between is "worse luck" (54), "a racking spectacle" (58), and "the curse" (202). In the conclusion of the final version, his strong wish to be liberated from this chain is suggested in the words he utters when he encounters aged Marcia: "Yes. Thank Heaven I am old at last. The curse is removed" (202). In fact, however, the curse cannot be removed. As stated before, the signifying chain still prolongs itself in

his subconscious, no matter how hard he tries to repress it.

IV

As long as the two contradictory elements within Pierston's mind—the incestuous desire and the "father's law"—are well balanced, he makes good progress with his artistic activity and gains a reputation as an eminent sculptor. But this "father's law" gradually declines as the story draws near to an end. Pierston's unceasing creation of plastic arts, together with his perpetual symbolization of the Well-Beloved in various women, depends upon the function of this law. The Well-Beloved's sudden flight from Marcia is partly affected by Pierston's father, for Pierston's father is an arch rival of Marcia's father in trade. Pierston's artistic creativity is enhanced in keeping with the flight of the Well-Beloved. But this creativity begins to decline with his father's death. His "artistic emotions" are "abruptly suspended" (72) and he falls into artistic crisis.¹⁶ His father, whose job is a quarrier, gives him not only financial aid but also raw material for his art. This has formed the basis of Pierston's constant production of plastic arts. The "father's law," both spiritually and physically, binds Pierston. Since his father's death, Pierston's artistic creativity has waned and has become limited only to the symbolization of the Well-Beloved, until aged Pierston finds himself bored with even this continuous production. He tries to rid his mind thoroughly of this symbolic chain. And yet, his father's effect is not so weakened as to exempt him from producing the symbolic chain. Not only sexual desire, but the "father's law" is deep-rooted in his unconscious and is never extinct.

The two endings of this novel, however different their appearances, share the same psychological inclination¹⁷ that attempts to repress the symbolic chain when Pierston feels it unendurable. However, now that this chain still flows in his subconscious, any ending seems to be unnatural and coercive. This is tantamount to saying that we cannot easily put an end to the development of the plot of this novel. For the plot itself is constructed by the interaction between Pierston's desire and his father's law. Since it is inconceivable that both these elements, however reduced they might be, can be completely extinguished, this novel would not end as long as Pierston exists. Any ending, therefore, could not but be provisional from the psychological point of view.

NOTES

1. Rosemary Sumner, *Thomas Hardy: Psychological Novelist* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981) 32–45.
2. John Fowles, “Hardy and the Hag”, *Thomas Hardy: After Fifty Years*, ed. Lance St. John Butler (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978) 28–42.
3. Peter J. Casagrande, “‘The Immortal Puzzle’: Hardy and John Fowles,” in *Hardy’s Influence on the Modern Novel* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987) 158.
4. Fowles 37.
5. Sumner 39.
6. Sumner 35–37.
7. J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982) 159.
8. Fowles 37.
9. Close relationship between the sea and the womb is pointed out by J. H. Miller and Anne Alexander, who both refer to the passage describing the second Avicé in travail: “The sea moaned—more than moaned—among the boulders below the ruins, a throe of its tide being timed to regular intervals. These sounds were accompanied by an equally periodic moan from the interior of the cottage chamber; so that the articulate heave of water and the articulate heave of life seemed but differing utterances of the selfsame troubled Being—which in one sense they were.” See Miller 165; Anne Alexander, *Thomas Hardy: The ‘Dream-Country’ of His Fiction* (London: Vision, 1987) 90; Thomas Hardy, *The Well-Beloved: A Sketch of a Temperament* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978) 141. All subsequent page references to this novel are from this edition.
10. Miller 156.
11. J. B. Bullen, *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Work of Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 229.
12. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1972) 26.
13. Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840–1928* (London: Macmillan, 1982) 220.

14. Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 117.
15. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XI: Les Quatre Concepts Fondamentaux de la Psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) 199.
16. Anne Alexander 84–85.
17. To this psychological phenomenon Jacques Lacan refers as *le refoulement* (*la Verdrängung*) in *Le Séminaire Livre III: Les Psychoses* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), and explicates thus: “La Verdrängung, le refoulement...c’est ce qui se passe quand ça ne colle pas au niveau d’une chaîne symbolique. Chaque chaîne symbolique à quoi nous sommes liés comporte une cohérence interne, qui fait que nous sommes forcés à tel moment de rendre, ce que nous avons reçu à tel autre. Or, il arrive que nous ne puissions rendre sur tous les plans à la fois, et qu’en d’autres termes, la loi nous soit intolérable.... Alors, nous refoulons, de nos actes, de nos discours, de notre comportement. Mais la chaîne n’en continue pas moins à courir dans les dessous, à exprimer ses exigences, à faire valoir sa créance, et ce, par l’intermédiaire du symptôme névrotique” (97; italics mine).