Riding Together: William Morris and Robert Browning

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In May 1856 Morris's second published poem appeared in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine; it was called 'Riding Together'. In March Morris had reviewed in the same magazine Browning's Men and Women, which contains a poem called 'The Last Ride Together'. The remarkable similarity of these two titles invites comparison of the poems they designate; and the relationship between the work and poetic theory of Browning and the practice of Morris may help to place Morris more precisely in the literary context of his time than has seemed appropriate to those who view him as interested only in medieval models.\(^1\)

It is well known that Morris admired Browning. Indeed the review he contributed to the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine was one of the few favourable notices Men and Women earned. So in what ways are Morris's and Browning's poems related? At a first glance they may seem to have little in common except the title. Browning's is a poem about the end of an affair; the narrator has been rejected by his lover but finds some sort of consolation in a final ride with her and in a fantasy of an eternal union between them which the riding figures. Morris's, as might be expected, has a medieval setting; those who ride together here are knights on a crusade. The narrator tells of the death of his companion in battle against the heathen and his own capture and imprisonment. There are points of contact, however, and these points often relate precisely to those aspects of Browning's work which Morris in his review singled out for praise. Firstly, the poems are formally similar in that they are both narrated by characters who are not the poet. Morris in his review congratulated the older poet on his ability to bring to life people from the past:

> What a joy it is to have these men brought up before us, made alive again, though they have passed away from the earth so long ago; made alive ... and shown to us as they really were.\(^2\)

It was Browning's habit to eschew personal or confessional verse in favour of dramatic presentation of the thoughts and actions of a character; and Morris's early poems exhibit similar qualities of impersonality. Except perhaps for 'Summer Dawn', the poems in The Defence of Guenevere (1858) are all narrative or dramatic - occasionally, indeed, like some of Browning's, they are expressed as scenes from a play, complete with stage directions, and even where the narrative element is latent there is always a perceptible distancing of narrator from poet. And this concentration on dramatic or narrative poetry places Morris in relationship with those poets of the Victorian period who revised the Romantic conception of the nature of the poet vis-à-vis the poem. Browning's own articulation of the difference between himself and his Romantic predecessors comes in his 'Essay on Shelley' (1852). Here he makes an
important distinction between what he calls 'subjective' and 'objective' poets.

'Subjective' poets are those who look for inspiration primarily into their own souls, privileging the experience of the poet-as-seer, as the prophet who reveals truth by the interaction of the poetic mind with nature. As a post-Romantic, however, Browning is aware of another way of defining the poet’s role. The poet may be not seer but maker, one whose skill is in the reproduction of those things which are external to the self and in the ability to make others see this external world more clearly. This ‘objective’ poet will write about the “doings of men” and, crucially, he will ensure that his poetry is “projected from himself and distinct.” Browning’s own practice is described in this analysis. Morris does not use Browning’s terms and it is impossible to say whether or not he had read the ‘Essay on Shelley’, but the language in which he discusses *Men and Women* makes it clear that he has understood the basis of Browning’s aesthetic. He writes always of the characters revealed by the poems, stressing their complexity and the potentially ambiguous response demanded for them from the reader. Of one specific group of poems he states: “they are all more concerned with action than thought, and are wholly dramatical.” In putting his work in relation to Browning’s, then, Morris was defining his own poetic role and declaring himself an ‘objective’ poet.

There are clear resemblances, too, between the specific actions and dramatic situations favoured by these two ‘objective’ poets. Both the ‘Riding Together’ poems describe responses to failure. In both poems there exists a desire on the part of the protagonist to achieve a goal – the lover’s consummation of his passion, the knight’s defeat of the pagans – which serves as the initial impetus for the action. But neither poem ends with a resolution of the initial situation. The potential narrative pattern of desire, struggle and achievement is subverted as, in each case, the ending which would provide formal and emotional closure is denied. This refusal to complete the dramatic action with the resolution the reader expects is a motif present in other poems by Browning and is characteristic of the *Guenevere* poems. ‘The Statue and the Bust’ turns on the possibility of an elopement which never happens; ‘Childe Roland’, a poem which particularly appealed to Morris, follows the protagonist to the moment of fulfilment of his quest and then abandons him to a fate the reader can only imagine. Similarly Morris concentrates on the failure of his knights and heroes – Sir Peter Harpdon, Robert in ‘The Haystack in the Floods’, the knight in ‘The Eve of Crecy’ who will probably die the next day. Browning suggests in *Men and Women* that the condition of failure is integral to human experience; his poems are full of compromisers, those who have to make the best of limited abilities or constricting conditions, those who achieve a partial success at the cost of integrity, idealism or even (like the Grammarian) a fully lived existence. His vision is defined in the ending of ‘Two in the Campagna’:

Only I discern –
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn.

The agonised recognition of the gap between human desire and its necessarily partial fulfilment is also central to Morris’s poetic vision, not only in his early poetry but throughout the sequence of poems which makes up *The Earthly Paradise*.

The quotation from ‘Two in the Campagna’ indicates one of the main sources of
Browning’s belief in the inevitability of human failure. Although desire is infinite, the desiring consciousness is constrained by time and mortality. Time is a concept obsessively explored by Browning in *Men and Women*. Love poems like ‘Love Among the Ruins’ and ‘By the Fire-Side’ examine the relationship between passion and encroaching time; ‘Old Pictures in Florence’, ‘A Toccata of Galuppi’s’ and ‘Popularity’ debate the potential of art to defeat time. But if time is the enemy because of its uncontrollable process, there is also articulated in these poems a terror of fixity and stasis. The lovers in ‘The Statue and the Bust’ are condemned (in one of the few examples of an authorial voice encroaching on the dramatic form of the *Men and Women* poems) for allowing themselves to retain desire without action, even though the potential action in this poem is the committing of a crime. The effect of this willingness to settle for intention is imaged in the poem by the artistic representations of the lovers: the duke’s statue and the lady’s bust perpetuate the moment of desire but also fix it in eternal potentiality which can never be translated into achievement. Browning’s celebration of energy, in, say, ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’, works always as a contrast to the fear of imprisonment: Lippi is admirable because he climbs out of windows.

To turn to Morris is to discover a similar terror of fixity. A large number of the *Guenevere* poems contain images of prison or enclosure: literal entrapment in ‘In Prison’ and ‘A Good Knight in Prison’, emotional imprisonment explored through imagery of enchantment in ‘Spell-Bound’ and ‘The Blue Closet’, the apparently benevolent enclosure of ‘Golden Wings’ which becomes fatally constricting when invaded by desire. In ‘Riding Together’ Morris characteristically presents a progression from movement (associated with desire) to stasis (failure). The riding of the knights images their hopeful progress towards achievement and is connected with the freedom of the wind. But the wind is in their faces; and when the energy of the riders confronts the barrier of the pagan knights it is transformed into the stasis of death (the narrator is bound beside the corpse of his friend) and an imprisonment which can have no foreseeable end except death. The protagonist, then, moves in the course of the poem from an involvement in process to a seclusion from process which negates nature (he “[takes] no heed of any weather”) and traps him in a limbo where time is suspended. Browning’s ‘The Last Ride Together’ is built according to a similar but reversed pattern. The protagonist begins in suspension, “with life or death in the balance”; his riding releases him into process, where the wind signifies movement beyond “past hopes” towards some new potential. Yet the riding is also a suspension of time; once the ride has begun each stanza ends with a present-tense affirmation of the actual moment of experience. And at the end of the poem these two temporal states, progress and suspension, are fused into a stasis which is not death-dealing but life-giving: “the instant made eternity.”

Browning’s poetry regularly suggests that there exist moments of intense experience which have the capacity to reconcile infinite desire and finite human existence. Many poems explore what happens if the ‘good minute’ goes unperceived; sometimes they show a life given focus and meaning by the successful seizing of the good minute (‘By the Fire-Side’). Morris, on the other hand, stresses the illusory nature of any apparent suspension of the temporal process; not until the romances of his late years could he imaginatively enter into states of timeless perfection without irony or terror. His ‘Riding Together’, then, offers a critique of Browning’s affirmation that human experience may sometimes approximate to eternity. For Morris timelessness is cognate with death.
In the context of their meditations on time, Browning’s poems also address the possibility that time’s depredations may be counteracted by art. The power of art to give unchanging form to changing human experience was a subject he had examined in earlier work, notably in ‘My Last Duchess’, and he returns to it in *Men and Women*, particularly with a series of poems on the role of the artist. In ‘The Last Ride Together’ poets, sculptors and musicians are questioned as to their ability to represent or evaluate experience. In each case their attempts are negated by reality. While Morris’s ‘Riding Together’ contains no reference to art, the role of the artist is a topic of some importance in his early poetry and in the prose romances printed in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. Like Browning he wonders whether art must inevitably distort the experience it aims to preserve. This is expressed in ‘Concerning Geoffry Teste Noire’, where the narrator tries to give imaginative flesh to literal dry bones and ensures the commemoration of his fantasy through the fashioning of a carved tomb which may equally well perpetuate a lie as enshrine the truth. Yet both Morris and Browning did suggest that art could represent reality in a way that was not an evasion of the truth of temporal experience. ‘The Last Ride Together’ is itself an image of the kind of art which does not impose false limitations. The narrator feels that his ride exists beyond time, that it transports him into eternity. And this belief is reflected in the poem’s present-tense evocation of the event and in its refusal to inflict narrative closure. So, too, the abandonment of Childe Roland before the end of his quest may be a reflection of the inevitable failure of human wishes, but it may also be read as a refusal to close and thus objectify the narrative. Roland left eternally at the moment before consummation of desire is an image of an art which fuses process and stasis. And what of Morris? In the poem most obviously influenced by Browning, the title poem of *The Defence of Guenevere*, he demonstrates the power of art — of Guenevere’s reordering of the events of her life to create a ‘defence’ — both to suspend time and actively to contribute to a sequence of events in time. Guenevere’s speech is a way of delaying her execution; while she speaks, the narrative line of the story in which she is taking part is held in stasis. Her invention is itself partly a narrative, but crucially involves an appeal to the instant in which she is speaking, in which the narrative of past events and the present experience are superimposed:

> Held out my long hand up against the blue,
> And, looking on the tenderly darken’d fingers,
> Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,
>
> There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers...”

This rhetorical strategy is entirely successful, for the time gained by the speaking of the defence allows Launcelot to reach her before the burning. Thus the halting of the narrative creates the opportunity for the larger narrative — the story of Launcelot and Guenevere — to continue in the way anticipated by the reader but not by the characters. In this poem, then, art which may very well be a distortion of the truth (Guenevere is after all pulling out all the stops to create a defence) is nevertheless potent and necessary, at the same time stasis and process.

It did not come naturally or easily to Morris to discuss in abstract terms the theoretical bases of his literary work. He is notorious for claiming that poetry was easy to write, that if a man couldn’t compose epic poetry while working at a tapestry
he would never be any good at either. He claimed to see poetry as analogous to handicraft, a matter of skill and practice but not requiring any specially intellectual concentration. Yet this is not to say that he did not take his poetry seriously, nor that he did not recognise the particular areas of thematic and formal concern in which his personal exploration was conducted. An examination of the relationship of his work to that of an established poet, a relationship to which he himself drew attention, demonstrates how these concerns are closely connected to mid-Victorian poetic practice (not only Browning’s but, for example, Tennyson’s too). Morris may have claimed to hate his own time, but he was by no means so remote from it as he sometimes asserted.

NOTES

1 Philip Henderson, in his biography of Morris, suggests that ‘Riding Together’ was one of Morris’s earliest poems, written in 1854 and altered slightly for its publication in The Defence of Guenevere (William Morris: his Life, Work and Friends (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1973), p.37). It was initially called, he claims, ‘The Midnight Tilt’. If Henderson is right the alterations must have been more than slight, for there is no midnight tilt at all in ‘Riding Together’: there is a battle which takes place in bright sunshine. And the supposed alterations must have been carried out not for the Guenevere volume but for the initial publication in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. In any case my argument remains unaffected, for the change of title alone would be enough to indicate the value of a comparison with Browning; I do not need to claim that the poem was actually written after Morris read Men and Women. But I wonder whether Henderson has confused this poem with ‘Winter Weather’, published in the Magazine but not in Guenevere, which does contain a midnight tilt?


4 ibid., I, p. 1001.


6 Browning, I, p. 730.

7 Collected Works, I, p. 136.

8 Browning, I, p. 608.

9 ibid., I, p. 609.

10 ibid., I, p. 611.

11 Collected Works, I, p. 5.