The Well-Beloved (1897): Galatea's Revenge

The Well-Beloved, published in 1897, was Thomas Hardy’s prose swansong. As J. Hillis-Miller has indicated in his introduction to the novel, the 1892 serial version, which appeared in The Illustrated London News under the title The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved, and the 1897 book version bracket Jude the Obscure (1895). Both Hillis-Miller and Patricia Ingham suggest that Hardy’s radical revision of the serial version for book publication is sufficient to allow The Well-Beloved to stand in its own right as Hardy’s final novel (Ingham 1989: 96).

The Well-Beloved is a fascinating and critically undervalued novel. It is Hardy’s most self-conscious text in which the problematic issue of the embodiment of the self is reviewed in personal, as well as in aesthetic and political, terms. Throughout his novel-writing career Hardy was fascinated by the question of how to represent women’s attempts to represent themselves ‘authentically’ at a time when conceptions of the feminine self valorized by the Victorian social structure were undergoing a process of gradual, but inevitable revision and deconstruction. In Darwinian terms, Hardy’s female characters are caught in the hiatus between the extinction of traditional female modes of being and the evolution of more modern forms better adapted to the changing social, economic and political environment in which they were situated. In post-structuralist terms this is translated into the ‘laodiceanism’ of resistant subjectivity – the struggle to hypostasize the self in forms that were antagonistic to the prevailing norms of femininity.

Hardy’s novels register that the posing of the ‘Woman Question’, which gained momentum in England from the 1860s onwards, was predicated upon the conviction of the mystery or ‘Otherness’ of women, which it was possible for man to investigate and solve at the level of language using the incontrovertible tools of scientific investigation. Although the media of the day may not openly have discussed the ‘Man Question’, because of the rigid demarcation of
gender boundaries it was implied by the debate about women. Victorian masculine subjectivity was dependent on the isolation of an object – something that defined it through opposition, as Ruskin had so unctuously demonstrated in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). In order to fix masculine subjectivity it was necessary to do the same for women and to do so meant driving out of hiding the less desirable traits which seemed to threaten an organised polity and locating them in women. It is significant that the rigorous investigation and sexual policing of women gained in intensity as women themselves achieved greater degrees of social, economic and legal freedom. What is important here is that the scientist, the sociologist or even the sexologist was not uncovering the hitherto hidden mystery of woman but creating a category ‘Woman’ and inciting those whose subjectivity was defined by this category to confess its ‘truth’ in order to achieve emplacement in a patriarchal social order.

By the 1890s the ceaseless posing of the ‘Woman Question’ and the responses it elicited had given rise to, among other things, a ‘New Woman’ – a new feminine subject position which threatened to dissolve the hitherto rigidly demarcated gender boundaries and to undo the work of centuries of natural selection. The ‘New Woman’ was not content with being the repository of those aspects the bourgeois male rigorously sought to expel from the masculine subject, but instead she fought to colonise the more valued and valorised attributes as well. As such, she constituted a direct threat to the Victorian teleology of progress. The Victorians were both fascinated and repelled by Darwin’s revelation that Evolution had been motivated by chance or accident and that there was no Divine guarantee that the process would not be reversed one day. Max Nordau’s essay *Degeneration* (1893) contributed to the ‘fin du globe­ism’ of the 1890s by claiming that the ‘New Woman’ and her masculine counterpart the effeminate man were evidence that the human species was reverting to its bisexual hermaphroditic origins and sinking back into degeneracy. For many the ‘New Woman’ was directly responsible for the ‘effeminization’ of men in that her refusal to remain the ‘mirror’ of masculine selfhood – his reflected ‘other’ – undermined the stable masculine ego and threatened to return to it that which it had struggled to repress – in particular those powerful, primitive erotic forces that threatened his project of self-mastery. In any case the changing shape of womanhood constituted a direct threat to civilized society for many late Victorians, including Hardy himself, who viewed the rising feminist movement