



ROBERT BRIDGES : VICTORIAN SINGER OF LOVE AND JOY

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ABSTRACT

The period in great Britain from 1837 to 1901 is ruled by Queen Victoria (1819-1901). Generally this period is associated with economic growth and prosperity, industrialization, rise of middle class and with no major war in Britain. In the contemporary literary world, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Swinburne, Hopkins were great poets. Though Robert Bridges (1844-1930) was a Poet laureate of Britain from 1913 to 1930 but he was labeled only as an experimenter and master of prosody, had he not published his masterpiece 'Testament of Beauty' and his Shorter lyrics, which established him as a poet. Shorter poems got popularity because here the Victorian reader finds some fresh themes, which otherwise he was missing in the poetry of great Victorian poets. Shorter poems were Bridges' successful attempt to give his readers a chance to look again towards nature, joy and love with a fresh vision.

Keywords: Victorian period, Hopkins and Bridges, Shorter poems Testament of beauty, love and joy.

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Robert Seymour Bridges (1844-1930) was a Victorian Poet, critic and a trained physician. He was also a poet laureate of Britain from 1913 to 1930. It is Bridges who introduced Gerard Manly Hopkins in the literary world, who is now considered a superior poet. His literary friendship with Hopkins is well known in literature. Bridges is more remembered as an experimenter in verse and his technical mastery over prosody. Bridges as a poet came in limelight with the publication of his long poem, The Testament of Beauty and Shorter Poems in two volumes in 1890. He also wrote verse plays including Prometheus the forger (1883) Demeter: A Mask, Eros and Psyche (1885), Achilles in Scyros (1890), The Return of Ulysses (1890) etc. with a limited success.

In this paper an attempt has been made to show Bridges' position as poet of love and joy, to prove it, examples have been taken from his Shorter Poems.

There are several lyrics in the shorter poem in which Bridges has dealt with love. Bridges' love lyrics present his different moods of love. Bridges has covered almost all the aspects of love, i.e. Platonic love, spiritual love, wedded love, parting in love etc. These poems bring about a fusion between the pleasant and the unpleasant experiences of life. But the dominant mood in Bridges' love poetry is that of joy and happiness. Brett Young, a critic of Robert Bridges, however, remarked, 'It is almost as though the poet's haughty disdain of emotion made him

choose this means for the suppression of feelings to tempestuous to be trusted to a freer form.¹

Bridges' love poems are characterized by flexibility and stability. They give expression to the delightful sentimental human emotions. They are natural, subtle and delicate expression of love. Sometimes, he deals with Platonic aspect of love, which reminds us of Donne's divine poetry. More importantly these lyrics tell us the poet's ability to perceive joy that is spread on the earth. Let us discuss some poems which are unique in treatment of love.

There is no nobler song of parting than the magnificent: 'O thou unfaithful, still "dearest". We get the impression from our reading of the text that beloved, for the time being, has forgotten his lover and, at present, is not with his partner but the lover has not left hope. He is optimistic about love. The beloved was the source of joy in his life; and that joy has gone off from him. He says:-

But day by day my joy hath feebler being,
The fading picture tires my painful seeing,
And farey fancy leaves her habitation
To desolation.

But parting in love too is an experience for him and it had left him two things to do:

Of two things open left for lovers parted
It was thine to scorn the past go light hearted.

The last line of the poem explains the theme of the poem and also shows the poet's outlook of life. He finally concludes, that joy and happiness are permanent in life and sorrow is just the passing phase. The poet seeks joy even in his mood of despair. So in this poem and else where in his poetry joy is more dominant than sorrow. Joy in life is the most recurring image that comes in different forms and shapes throughout his shorter poems.

'Love on my heart from heaven fell'⁴ celebrate contentment in love. It is Bridges' exalted attempt to justify love as a source of comfort and smugness life and it is the perential source of joy and pleasure. Love is God's gift to man. In this poem lover is satisfied and blessed one. It is his wish to live with his love throughout his life because:

Without him noughtsoever is,
Nor was before, nor e'er shallbe :
Nor any other joy than his
Wish I for mine to comfort me.⁵

This poem reflects a sweet and lofty expression of love. The tenderness and softness that gives ease to the lover is presented through beautiful nature imagery. For example the poet's love was as soft as the "dew on flowers of spring. It was as sweet as the :

Hidden drops that swell
Their honey-throated chaling.⁶

The lyric is marked with grace, softness, cheerfulness and blessing which God has been showering on the lover.

The next love lyric 'Since thou, O fondest and truest' treats love as a religion. Love is a religion because it is a source of joy, life force for the poet. He loves his beloved with his whole heart and not only this:

Thou wert my hand in the making
The sense and soul of my pleasure⁷

The beloved has made his life meaningful and successful. In the end of the poem he wishes :

The God I have ne'er repaid thee
In heaven I pray be recorded,
And all thy love rewarded
By God, thy master that made thee⁸

'When my love was away'⁹ again reflects parting in love. Without her the lover is all alone in the world :

And I alone, alone:
It seemed in my misery
In all the world was none
Ever so lone as I.¹⁰

In her absence he could not remain happy because he was thinking all the time only about his love. He was like a man whose most precious thing had been lost. Crying and weeping to enlighten the heart in trouble, but here is a different case. It was not only one-sided love in this case. The passion and the longing to see the lover is also there in the beloved's heart with the same intensity :

O now thou art come, she cried,
'Tis fled: but I thought today
I never could here abide

If thou wert longer away.¹¹
My spirit kisseth thine, the beautiful lyric in book four, is celebration of the spiritual love. The passion which the poet describes is not merely earthly but spiritual sentiment that his beloved becomes an unearthly creature and with her he goes beyond the limit. The intensity of love transcends earthly passion and it is transformed into a spiritual experience :

In the life-kindling fold
Of God's breath, where on high,
In furthest space untold
Like a lost world I lie¹²

In the last two stanzas of the poem the image of the 'unclouded sun' has been used effectively :

Like what the shepherd sees
On late mid-winter daws,
When thro' the branches trees
O'er the white-frosted lawns,

The huge unclouded sun
Surprising the world whist,
Is all uprisen thereon,
Golden with meeting mist.¹³

About this poem Brett Yong has said that there is 'no sublimation of spiritual love so lofty "My spirit kisseth thine" with the amazing simile at the end, which takes its place alone among the loveliest of the Idylls'¹⁴

In I found today out walking a doleful state of the poet's heart and mind has been expressed. The theme, as the poem suggests is the poet's passionate love for his beloved; but he could not embrace her since she is far away from him. The beloved is beyond the sea. Since she is not with the poet, the beauty of the natural object and have lost their attraction. Even the delicate and beautiful flower do not attract him. He thinks that there is something hidden behind the bushes which may injure him. The image of the 'Snake' and 'bramble' symbolically express the poet's state of mind and his restless condition in the absence of the beloved. With the help of the snake image the poet wants to show that he is not at ease with himself and he is troubled because he has been separated from his beloved. The beauty of the lyric lies in the final revelation of what the snake symbolized for the poet :

There was no snake uncurling,
And no thorn wounded me;
It was my heart checked me, sighing
She is beyond the sea¹⁵

Thus, in the last stanza of the poem, the poet makes it quite clear that the reason of his uneasiness is his separation from his beloved which is symbolized by the snake image. The poem suggests that it is our perception of looking at things which makes things beautiful or ugly.. There was no snake or bramble, but was the poet's deceptive because he was sad at that time.

I praise the tender flower. Man can live happily if he is in harmony with the nature, This is perhaps the theme of the poem 'I praise the tender flower' The poet was sad, his heart was doleful on a winter day. The two natural agencies provide relief and make him happy; and gay. First, it was the flower that bloomed on a mournful day. The day is called mournful because of winter but blooming has made the poet happy. In this stanza the poet submit that nature can exercise a soothing effect on man, providing man identifies himself with nature willingly. In the poem nature extends its support to the melancholic heart. The second agency which was a source of delight for him was a maid who here appears to be a part of nature. Her song imparted a sense of self-confidence and made him happy :

I praise the gentle maid
Whose happy voice and smile
To confidence betrayed
My doleful heart a-while :
And gave my spirit deploing
Fresh wings for soaring.¹⁶

The image of the maid is not used merely to decorate the poem but it also function to convey the meaning in the poem. The song of the maid was so beautiful that it gave fresh happy wings to the sad heart.

My bed and pillow are cold is simply a love lyric justifying the poet's intense love for his beloved. The poem is written in the absence of the beloved. In the poem comes out an image of a doleful youth lover. The word 'Youth' has been used intentionally here because in his love more physical passion are involved

than the spiritual. We find such a hint in the first line of the lyric 'My bed and pillow are cold'. Without her he is like a dead man.

A positive aspect of love is expressed in this poem. There are in the shorter poem lyrics which also express negative and sad side of love, but the recurrent image in all the love lyric is that of a young carefree lover who is far away from the ugly and suffocating atmosphere of the Victorian England.

There are other lyrics in the shorter poem which celebrate the domestic and wedded love, such as, 'So sweet love seemed that April Morn, (Bk. V, 5), 'I love my lady's eyes' (Bk. III, 16), 'Thou didst delight my eyes' (Bk. III, 12) 'Will love again awake' (Bk. II, 1), 'I made another song' (Bk. I' 13), 'Something when my lady sits by me' (Bk. I, 10), 'I will not let thee go' (Bk. I, 7). These lyrics show love as a powerful, noble and joy giving force and to quote Bridges own line 'To love is wise (Bk. V, 3)

Brett Young's commentary about Bridges' love poetry is significant. He says :

It is this mingling of flexibility with strength, of sanity with sweetness and of lofty idealism with naturalness of expression, which makes the love poetry of the shorter poems unique of its kind¹⁷. In the same book on Bridges, he further says that (in his poem) the platonic candor remains, but the mode ceased wholly to be conventional : the conceits are gone; the decoration is no longer there for decoration's sake; and to these there is added a virility which was never there before.¹⁸

To conclude, we can say that Shorter Poems of Robert Bridges reflects poet's optimism, joy and happiness in life. The shorter lyrics dealing with the theme of love also prove that the Victorian man is deprived of love and happiness and for this man has to blame himself for his sorrow because of lack of wisdom.

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