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The Well-Beloved

with

The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved (1892)

THOMAS HARDY



ILL-BELOVED
A Sketch of a Temperament
WITH
THE PURSUIT OF
THE WELL-BELOVED
A Sketch of a Temperament

Thomas Hardy

With an Introduction and Notes by
DR JANE THOMAS

One shape of many names¹

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

General Adviser
KEITH CARABINE
Rutherford College
University of Kent at Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

The Well-Beloved is important to the understanding and appreciation of Thomas Hardy's fiction because it marks the end of his engagement with the novel form. After its publication in 1897 Hardy reinvented himself as a writer, producing a three-volume verse drama – *The Dynasts* (1903–8) – a fourth volume of short stories and, more importantly, eight volumes of poetry, much of which is regarded as amongst the finest of the twentieth century. This second stage of his writing career lasted a further thirty years. His last volume of poems *Winter Words* was published a few months after his death in 1928. By Hardy's standards, and by the standards of the day, *The Well-Beloved* seems a brief and rather slight affair but this novel is a precise distillation of the themes and ideas that had preoccupied him throughout a successful novel-writing career lasting over a quarter of a century. In this sense, *The Well-Beloved* is both a valediction and a catharsis.

The Well-Beloved is also Hardy's most self-conscious novel because it is about the artistic temperament and the process of artistic creation.¹ It is an artefact on the theme of art – in particular the relationship of art to life. As such it takes its place among other 'Aesthetic' texts of the period such as Oscar Wilde's essay 'The Decay of Lying' (1891) and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); Henry James's short story 'The Real Thing' (1894); and George Du Maurier's novel *Trilby* (1894). At the same time, like so many of Hardy's previous novels, *The Well-Beloved* is about women and their attempts to live their lives in relation to and often in resistance to men and their appropriating gaze. It should also be read alongside the new feminist fiction of the 1890s which might include the 'New Woman' novels of Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Beth Book* (1897); Méné Muriel Dowie's *Gallia* (1895); the short stories of George Egerton, *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894); and Hardy's own 'New Woman' novel *Jude the Obscure* (1895/6).

Hardy's male characters rarely see women as individuals in their own right but as the embodiment of some elusive, indefinable aspect of their own selves. They frequently separate the women they love from their physical reality and elevate them into something ideal to be aspired to. In Hardy's first published novel *Desperate Remedies* (1871), Edward Springrove is searching for 'the indefinable helpmate to the remoter sides of himself'. As he grows older and his ideal fails to manifest herself, he concludes that:

... the ideas, or rather emotions, which possessed him on the subject, were probably too unreal ever to be found embodied in the flesh of a woman. Thereupon he developed a plan of satisfying his dreams by wandering away to the heroines of poetical imagination, and took no further thought on the earthly realisation of his formless desire. [DR, p. 207]²

Henry Knight in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) is unable to reconcile the physical, fallible Elfride with his ideal of innocence and purity in a woman. In this respect he is a prototype of Angel Clare in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Tess herself is doubly appropriated, firstly by Alec D'Urberville who regards her as the personification of sexual

1 See: Davidson; Hillis Miller; Ingham; Thomas; Ward. For full details of these and other references turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

2 Abbreviated forms of the titles of Hardy's novels (except for *The Well-Beloved*) refer to the New Wessex Edition, General Editor P. N. Furbank, published in fourteen volumes by Macmillan, London 1974–5.

temptation and secondly by Angel who sees her not as a milkmaid but as:

... a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them.³ 'Call me Tess,' she would say askance; and he did. [TD'U, p. 170]

In *Jude the Obscure* (1896), Jude idealises Sue from the very beginning of their relationship. He regards her as 'more or less an ideal character, about whose form he began to weave curious and fantastic day-dreams' (JO, p. 108). Later she becomes 'a kindly star, an elevating power' and finally 'almost a divinity' (JO, p. 165). Eventually she becomes the embodiment of all his aspirations, of everything he regards as elevated and noble, rather than a complex, sensitive woman deeply troubled by her own struggles to live, love and work.

The Well-Beloved takes the idea of men's idealisation of women, and their desire to reproduce them as objects of the masculine imagination, and concentrates it into a tightly organised, almost schematic fictional discourse on the gender implications of the relationship between artist and muse. All of Hardy's appropriatory male characters are implicated in this probing analysis of the masculine artistic temperament for, as Jocelyn Pierston's painter friend Alfred Somers reassures him: 'You are like other men, only rather worse' (W-B, p. 31).⁴

The Well-Beloved is also Hardy's retrospective glance at his own artistic career. He devoted over a quarter of a century to the delineation of women in language, and *The Well-Beloved* reflects upon this process. In its examination of Jocelyn Pierston's elusive quest for the physical embodiment of his feminine ideal, it casts a critical eye back over its own author's gallery of female icons and as such is a fitting conclusion to the career of a novelist for whom women were a persistent source of inspiration and fantasy in both his life and his art.

The publication history of *The Well-Beloved* demonstrates how intimately it is connected to Hardy's more famous 'last' novels *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896). In September

3 Artemis is the Greek goddess of chastity and hunting; Demeter is the goddess of vegetation, fruit and cereal.

4 References to *The Well-Beloved* are taken from this Wordsworth Classics Edition.

1889, Hardy sent off about half of his new novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, for serial publication by the newspaper syndicate Tillotson and Son, but the first proofs were declined by the firm's head reader on the grounds of sexual explicitness. Hardy refused to make the suggested changes and offered to cancel the contract agreeing to substitute a more suitable replacement at a later date. *Tess* was subsequently rejected by several editors and Hardy finally decided to submit a bowdlerised version of the novel to the *Graphic*, who accepted it for serialisation, beginning in July 1891. The novel was restored to its original form and published, complete with the contentious subtitle *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*, in November of the same year. By the end of 1891 Hardy had also begun serious work on *Jude the Obscure*. Anxious to fulfil his commitment to Tillotsons he may have remembered an idea for a 'fine novel or poem' he had noted in February 1889: 'The story of a face which goes through three generations or more . . . The differences in personality to be ignored', and decided to experiment with it.⁵ He began the novel at the end of 1891 and finished it early the following year. It was published in twelve weekly parts from October to December 1892 in the *Illustrated London News* with the heading *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved: A Sketch of a Temperament*.

In the meantime reviews of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* were beginning to appear. Mowbray Morris, writing in the *Quarterly Review*, April 1892, described the novel as:

. . . an extremely disagreeable story [told] in an extremely disagreeable manner, which is not rendered less so by his affectation of expounding a great moral law, or by the ridiculous character of some of the scenes into which this affectation plunges the reader.

He added that there was no comparison between great tragedy and 'this clumsy sordid tale of boorish brutality and lust'.⁶ *Tess* had already been bowdlerised in deference to the moral scruples of the periodical editor and restoring it to its original form had caused its author some considerable irritation. After reading this and other unfavourable reviews of the novel, Hardy retorted, 'Well, if this sort of thing continues no more novel-writing for me. A man must be a fool to deliberately stand to be shot at' (*Life*, p. 259).

5 Millgate, M. (ed.), *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy by Thomas Hardy*, London 1984, p. 226: henceforth (*Life*)

6 Cox, R. G. (ed.), *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage*, London 1970, p. 219

However it was the critical reaction to *Jude the Obscure*, serialised in 1894-5 and first published in novel form in 1895, that Hardy felt most personally. The *Pall Mall Gazette* reviewed it under the heading 'Jude the Obscene' and the *London World* referred to its author as 'Hardy the Degenerate'. Even his friend Edmund Gosse found the novel 'gloomy . . . and grimy'. The novelist and critic Margaret Oliphant, with whom Hardy was personally acquainted, saw *Jude* as a wholesale attack on the institution of marriage, and Bishop William Walsham How of Wakefield sent Hardy a packet of ashes, having apparently burnt the novel in disgust. In addition to announcing his action in a letter to the *Yorkshire Post*, Bishop How also petitioned for its withdrawal from W. H. Smith's influential lending library, unbeknown to Hardy. Miss Jeannette Gilder of the *New York World* declared that on finishing the book she 'opened her windows and let in the fresh air' (*Life*, p. 296).

In the (auto)biography ghost-written by his second wife Florence, Hardy claimed that his decision to abandon novel-writing in favour of poetry was influenced by the reactions of malicious and misinformed critics of his novels (see *Life*, p. 305). In fact, *Tess* and *Jude* were critical and commercial triumphs and although Hardy was inordinately sensitive to adverse criticism he was far too sensible to turn his back on a lucrative and successful career in a fit of pique. After the publication of *Tess*, the Hardys were wealthy enough to rent a whole house in London, bringing their own servants up from Dorchester, and 'the author of *Tess*' was lionised at some of the most select social gatherings. In truth, Hardy had been seriously considering 'resuming "the viewless wings of poesy"' as early as 1890, and feeling quite cheered by the prospect (*Life*, p. 241).

Hardy was an architect by profession but began writing poetry in the late 1850s. In 1870 he abandoned architecture having felt for some time that he would rather earn his living as a poet. However, in the mid-nineteenth century poetry provided a limited and erratic income for a new writer and he turned his talents to the more lucrative art of writing novels. By the time *Jude the Obscure* was published Hardy felt sufficiently established to return to poetry for the sheer pleasure of it. At the same time, his relationship with novel-writing, and the Realist novel in particular, was never a happy one. His numerous comments on the art of writing extended works of prose fiction are centred on the difference between accurate reportage and 'artful' representation (see Orel). He felt strongly that the artist (in this case the writer) should be a painter rather than a mere documenter of reality. His role was to use his skills in

selection and combination to reveal new insights into life rather than simply to describe it, for experience – however minutely detailed – was neither objective nor universal. In August 1890, he wrote:

Art is a disproportioning of – (i.e. distorting, throwing out of proportion) – of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed but would more probably be overlooked. Hence realism is not art. [*Life*, p. 239]

Many of Hardy's contemporary critics regarded this 'disproportioning of realities' as a major flaw in his writing and evidence of his lack of skill. They criticised his novels for stylistic clumsiness and an over-reliance on melodramatic improbabilities. His view of existence was interpreted as overtly pessimistic and antagonistic to conventional providential religious teaching. Others had problems with what they saw as the immorality of his novels, objecting to his frank treatment of sexual and marital issues. A number of contemporary reviewers took strong exception to Hardy's insistent but, in their view, misguided didacticism. He consistently denied that his novels had a purpose. A novel, he declared, 'is an impression, not an argument'. However, after the publication of *Jude* in 1896 he was speculating whether poetry might not be a more amenable vehicle for his ideas:

Poetry. Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallised opinion – hard as a rock – which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. [*Life*, p.302]

However, the ideas and emotional power of his novels were as important to Hardy as their verisimilitude. In the General Preface to the Wessex Edition of 1912, he retrospectively arranged his novels under three categories. The first group – 'Novels of Character and Environment' – included *Tess*, *Jude*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Woodlanders*. These are characterised, in Hardy's words, by 'a verisimilitude in general treatment and detail'. The second group – 'Romances and Fantasies' – including *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *The Trumpet Major*, *Two on a Tower* and *The Well-Beloved*, he felt spoke for itself. The remaining novels: *Desperate Remedies*, *The Hand of Ethelberta* and *A Laodicean*, were categorised under 'Novels of Ingenuity' in that they show:

a not infrequent disregard of the probable in the chain of events, and depend for their interest mainly on the incidents themselves. They might also be characterised as 'Experiments', and were written for the nonce simply; though despite the artificiality of their fable some of their scenes are not without fidelity to life.⁷

The Well-Beloved could easily have been included in this third category because, in addition to being a romance and a fantasy, it is his most experimental novel. Apart from *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *The Trumpet Major* (1880), it is much shorter than his previous novels. It is highly stylised, and divided into three parts whose headings: 'A Young Man of Twenty', 'A Young Man of Forty' and 'A Young Man of Sixty', draw attention to its schematic, artful nature. These headings also set up an interesting comparison between Pierston, whose sensual impulses are imprisoned in an ageing body, and his 'well-beloved' whose elusive form moves from one corporeal shell to another leaving behind a mere relic. The story of a man who falls in love with grandmother, mother and daughter from the same family establishes a distinct, if barely credible, pattern that is reinforced by the rhythmical re-enactments of the plot and the repetition of the name 'Avice', and 'Pierston' which is shared by Jocelyn the sculptor and Isaac the brawny quarryman, although as Jocelyn reminds us this is not unusual 'in a place where there are only half a dozen surnames' (*W-B*, p. 99). The central action of the novel is concentrated on the tiny, rocky Isle of Slingers – joined to the rest of Wessex by a restless neck of pebbles but separate enough to be the home of 'a curious and well-nigh distinct people, cherishing strange beliefs and singular customs' (Preface, p. 3). This gives it a slight air of detachment from the rest of Hardy's oeuvre – as if the inducement to provide a serial for Tillotsons at relatively short notice had freed him from the necessity of conforming to the constraints of Realist credibility.

Finally, Hardy claimed that the interest of the novel 'is of an ideal or subjective nature, and frankly imaginative, verisimilitude in the sequence of events [having] been subordinated to the said aim' (Preface, p. 4). In this respect it fits his criterion for Art, more obviously perhaps than any of his other novels demonstrating that 'disproportioning of realities' that led, in his view, to a translation rather than a transcription of perceived reality. The skilful manipulation of characters and events into a shape or pattern was

Hardy's way of 'intensify[ing] the expression of things . . . so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible'. He felt that poetry was better able to do this than prose and claimed that he had endeavoured to keep his own narratives 'as near to poetry in their subject as the conditions would allow, and had often regretted that those conditions would not let him keep them nearer still' (*Life*, p. 309). *The Well-Beloved* is Hardy's final battle with the intransigent Victorian realist novel before abandoning it altogether to concentrate almost entirely on a more congenial genre. It is significant that he wrote a poem on the theme of 'a face which goes through three generations or more' also called 'The Well-Beloved'. In it a man is seduced away from his lover, whom he regards as 'the God-created norm/ Of perfect womankind', by a wraith in her form who tells him:

'. . . Thou hast transferred
 To her dull form awhile
 My beauty, fame, and deed, and word,
 My gestures and my smile.

 O fatuous man, this truth infer,
 Brides are not what they seem;
 Thou lovest what thou dreamest her;
 I am thy very dream!'⁸

The ancient Isle of Slingers, which provides the setting for *The Well-Beloved*, is based on the Isle of Portland – a small limestone peninsula off the coast of Dorset. Hardy was intrigued by the geography, geology and history of Portland and regarded it as the perfect retreat for artists and poets 'in search of inspiration' (Preface, p. 3). The Isle of Slingers, with its 'haunted atmosphere of Roman Venus about and around the site of her perished temple there' is a sort of Wessex Cyprus for the sculptor Jocelyn Pierston who bears more than a passing resemblance to the figure of Pygmalion from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Repelled by the Propoetides – the female inhabitants of Cyprus whom Venus has transformed into prostitutes for daring to challenge her divinity, Pygmalion carves a lifelike ivory statue of a beautiful woman 'lovelier than woman born' with which he falls in love. Moved by frustrated desire he prays to Venus to send him a wife just like his ivory girl. Venus answers his prayer by bringing the statue to life, Pygmalion marries her and she bears him a child, Paphos.

8 Hardy, T., 'The Well-Beloved', in *Poems of the Past and Present*, 1901, and in Gibson, J. (ed.), *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, London 1976, p. 96

The 'Pygmalion' myth was deeply significant for Victorian artists and writers because it embodied the central concerns of the Platonism that lay at the heart of the aesthetic debates of the second half of the nineteenth century. In his Preface to the novel Hardy informs the reader that Pierston is a native of natives on the Isle of Slingers

... whom some may choose to call a fantast ... but whom others may see only as one that gave objective continuity and a name to a delicate dream which in a vaguer form is more or less common to all men, and is by no means new to Platonic philosophers.

[*W-B*, p. 3]

As M. H. Abrams explains, the doctrine of Platonism states that all beauty in the material world, including the aesthetic object or work of art, is an emanation from an Absolute or Ideal form of Beauty from which the human soul is permanently exiled. The Platonic lover is drawn by the physical beauty of the beloved person but recognises that this is merely the outer manifestation of the deeper, spiritual beauty that radiates out from the Divine Ideal which should form the true object of reverence and desire.⁹ 'Pygmalion' is a myth of transformation, a representation of the seamless metamorphosis of the Ideal into material form. In this respect it is an inspiration for all artists and for lovers driven by the desire to achieve this impossible consummation. One of the main problems with the myth, however, is its definitive gendering of the relationship between artist and muse and artist and artwork, male subject and female object. As an archetype it reinforces and naturalises the unequal distribution of power implicit in the gender relations of the second half of the nineteenth century – a period that witnessed the rise of the feminist movement and in particular the campaign for women's suffrage.

Hardy viewed Victorian feminism with fascination and wary approval seeing it as a liberation for men as well as for women. In a letter to Clement Shorter, he suggests:

As soon as the women have the vote & can take care of themselves men will be able to strike out honestly right & left in a way they cannot do while women are their dependants, without showing unchivalrous meanness. The result will be that all superstitious institutions will be knocked down or rationalised – theologies, marriage, wealth-worship, labour-worship, hypocritical optimism and so on.

[*Letters*, IV: 21]

9 M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Sixth Edition, Harcourt Brace, Texas 1981, p. 157

However, he was also aware that, inspired by feminism, women might become dissatisfied with their role as man's muse and demand a more active part in the social process. It is this awareness that accounts for the strange mixture of sympathy and criticism in the narrator's attitude to Jocelyn Pierston as his muses gradually move from the passive objects of his fancy to active, manipulative and determined women in their own right and leave him bereft of inspiration and desire – quite literally emasculated. Hardy's last word on the independent woman lies not in his agonised portrayal of the 'New Woman' in Sue Bridehead but in Marcia Bencombe, Nichola Pine-Avon and more especially the third Avice Caro.

Pierston is a man in retreat from the 'new' and all its manifestations in the bourgeois urban society of London. His birthplace, the Isle of Slingers, is deeply romanticised by its creator and becomes a signifier of an essential permanence, stability and immutability in a restless, changing world. Its people have lived there for centuries, virtually untouched by modern life. It is where Pierston the man comes to touch base, and where Pierston the artist and estranged intellect seeks the 'real'. Where the stonemasons, like Pierston's father, create the material environment, the artist puts stone to a purely aesthetic use in an attempt to reveal the underlying essence that the island signifies. He chooses to represent his unattainable Ideal in the form of the female body, but though his 'Aphrodites', 'Astartes', 'Freyjas', 'Junos', 'Lilliths', 'Minervas' and 'Psyches' are popular with the general public, they fail to 'come alive', aesthetically speaking, for their creator.

Pierston's artistic frustrations are a metaphor for the frustration in his erotic life. Just as he seeks to shape his aesthetic ideal in stone so he turns to an indigenous artisan family – the Caros – to provide him with an embodiment of his 'well-beloved' – that 'migratory, elusive idealisation he called his Love, who, ever since his boyhood, had flitted from human shell to human shell an indefinite number of times' (*W-B*, p. 10). However Avice Caro is, at first, as much a disappointment to him as his statues because Pierston's awareness of her sexuality arrests him at the level of the physical and prevents him from achieving a 'true' consummation with the spiritual beauty that she represents. Avice becomes 'the earthly realisation of his formless desire' only after death has rendered her physically inaccessible. The impossibility of consummating this desire, signified by his fantasy of her body laid out 'under the young pale moon', ensures its constancy and leads him back to his native isle to commune with the timeless essence of his dead fiancée. His retreat to the Platonic 'Real'

necessitates the rejection of the material 'reality', of the sexually experienced Mrs Pine-Avon who had briefly succeeded Marcia Bencomb as a transient manifestation of the 'Well-Beloved'. He claims that in his infatuation for Avice 'flesh was absent altogether; it was love rarefied and refined to its highest attar' (*W-B*, p. 57). By comparison with the spiritualised dead woman, the living one grows proportionately more fleshly: 'she seemed to grow material, a superficies of flesh and bone merely, a person of lines and surfaces; she was a language in living cipher – no more' (*W-B*, p. 55).

Pierston attempts to embody Avice's spirit in her daughter Ann. He imprisons her in his gaze – spying on her through her cottage window – and even succeeds in renaming her Avice against her will. He justifies his obsession with this young washerwoman by concluding that while the Caro family might not provide him with an exact manifestation of his well-beloved – that 'individual nature which would exactly, ideally supplement his own imperfect one and round with it the perfect whole' they possessed the 'materials for her making': 'It was as if the Caros had found the clay but not the potter' (*W-B*, p. 76). The name Caro is significant. The fact that it is one of only half a dozen surnames on the island makes it generic. At the same time it suggests the contradictory nature of this particular aesthetic conception of the feminine. *Caro* is Latin for flesh and also suggests the Latin *carus*, 'dear' or 'beloved', and *caritas* with its specifically spiritual connotation.

Pierston takes Anne to London to educate her and shape her into an appropriately wifely form, but he is unaware that the tables have been subtly turned and that he has been the object of her desire:

'... I get tired of my lovers as soon as I get to know them well. What I see in one young man for a while soon leaves him and goes into another yonder, and I follow, and then what I admire fades out of him and springs up somewhere else; and so I follow on, and never fix to one. I have loved *fifteen* a'ready! Yes, fifteen, I am almost ashamed to say,' she repeated, laughing. 'I can't help it, sir, I assure you. Of course it is really, to *me*, the same one all through, only I can't catch him! ...'

Pierston ... suddenly thought of its bearing upon himself, and said, with a sinking heart, 'Am I – one of them?'

She pondered critically.

'You was; for a week; when I first saw you.'

'Only a week?'

'About that.'

[*W-B*, p. 78]

She has also irrefutably asserted her physical being – and to some extent her sexual independence – by marrying, and becoming pregnant by, her cousin Isaac. At this point Pierston loses control of the plot as Ann shapes the final stage of his career. In seeking to achieve the improved opportunities for her daughter that she herself rejected, Ann engineers the elderly sculptor's return to the Isle of Slingers and contrives his enslavement to the third edition of his 'Well-Beloved'. However the beautiful, educated and disconcertingly modern Avice the Third refuses to play Galatea to his creaky Pygmalion and slips out from under his very nose to elope with a man who regards her as his equal rather than his muse. The third Avice's daring bid for independence deals a fatal blow to the old order resulting in the death of her mother and of Pierston's former self. His subsequent physical and mental breakdown represents a crisis in masculinity whereby the feminine object no longer guarantees the subjectivity of the masculine viewer. In the new era it is Pierston who lacks substance as his desire for the 'Ideal' is transmuted into a desire to fade from existence. The fever brought on by the 'new woman's' abandonment of the 'old man' also results in the loss of his visionary and artistic powers and his eventual marriage to the equally creaky Marcia whose 'parchment-covered skull' is brought to life not by the goddess Venus but by make-up and a wig.

The Well-Beloved subverts the myth of Pygmalion by asserting Galatea's right to a fully independent existence. As Pierston sits by the body of Avice's mother – the second incarnation of his 'Well-Beloved' – and ponders the elopement of the third he has a vision of all the previous manifestations of his ideal beloved:

Many of them he had idealised in bust and in figure from time to time, but it was not as such that he remembered and reanimated them now; rather was it in all their natural circumstances, weaknesses and stains. And then as he came to himself their voices grew fainter; they had all gone off on their different careers, and he was left here alone. [W-B, p. 147]

Although *The Well-Beloved* was published in 1897, and engages with many of the concerns of the *fin de siècle*, it is set more than forty years earlier, around 1850. This places its action at the height of the influential Pre-Raphaelite movement in art. The principle Pre-Raphaelite painters were Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Millais, Holman Hunt, and Edward Burne-Jones whom Hardy met in June 1884. Burne-Jones painted two suites of paintings based on scenes from the myth of Pygmalion inspired by William Morris's poem

'Pygmalion and the Image'. Burne-Jones's paintings formed part of his second exhibition at the newly refurbished Grosvenor Street Gallery in 1879. One of the movement's leading sculptors was Thomas Woolner (1825-92), who was also a poet and established friendships with literary figures such as Alfred Tennyson, Coventry Patmore and, in 1880, Thomas Hardy.

In 1856 Woolner exhibited a half-size, plaster statuette of a woman, semi-naked and in the act of placing a star-flower in her hair. He called the statuette 'Love'. It was first shown at the Royal Academy and a marble version was exhibited at the 1862 London International Exhibition where it was well reviewed. Dante Gabriel Rossetti drew attention to the way in which Woolner had chosen to represent love by the figure of a woman rather than the more familiar image of Cupid. It is a good example of the symbolism of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in which mysterious and elusive states of mind or feeling were given concrete embodiment. Here the abstract idea of love is represented by 'a young girl over whose mind the first thought of love has come like a blush, the clear light of morning, or like the first faint tint of colour in the petals of a rose' (*The Crayon*, 1862).¹⁰

Hardy claimed that his arrival in London on 17 April 1862, from the Dorchester offices of the architect John Hicks, was timed to coincide with the opening of the London International Exhibiton (*Life*, p. 40). He describes visiting the exhibition 'for an hour in the evening two or three times a week'. He almost certainly saw Woolner's statuette there and it may have provided the inspiration for 'the migratory, elusive idealisation [Pierston] called his Love' (*W-B*, p. 10). Later Hardy claimed that the plot of *The Well-Beloved* was suggested to him 'by the remark of a sculptor that he had often pursued a beautiful ear, nose, chin, &c, about London in omnibuses & on foot'.¹¹ The narrator of *The Well-Beloved* describes Pierston's 'professional beauty-chases' in a similar way:

The study of beauty was his only joy for years onward. In the streets he would observe a face, or a fraction of a face, which seemed to express to a hair's-breadth in mutable flesh what he was at that moment wishing to express in durable shape. He would

10 See Read, B. and Barnes, J. (eds), *Pre-Raphaelite Sculpture: Nature and Imagination in British Sculpture 1848-1914*, London 1991, p. 149.

11 Thomas Hardy to Florence Henniker, 3 June [July] 1897, in Purdy, R. L. and Millgate, M. (eds), *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, Vol. 2 (1893-1901), p. 169

dodge and follow the owner like a detective: in omnibus, in cab, in steamboat, through crowds, into shops, churches, theatres, public-houses and slums – mostly, when at close quarters, to be disappointed for his pains. [*W-B*, p. 38]

Hardy met and corresponded with Woolner on a number of occasions and gave him a copy of his novel *The Return of the Native*. In return Woolner presented Hardy's first wife Emma with a landscape by Richard Parkes Bonington. He may also have seen Woolner's last work – 'The Housemaid' – finished in plaster just a few weeks before the sculptor's death in 1892. It was cast in bronze and exhibited at the Royal Academy a year later where Hardy probably saw it at an 'Academy Private View' on 28 April. 'The Housemaid' is another 'Ideal' statue, in which the theme of work is embodied in the life-sized heroic form of a servant girl washing a doorstep, and it is reminiscent of the way Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Rossetti and William Morris took working-class women as their muses. Woolner's death in 1892 may have provided Hardy with the inspiration for his own sculptor hero whose ideas on beauty and women are distinctly Pre-Raphaelite but are refracted through the perceptions of a narrator with an informed consciousness of the implications of *fin-de-siècle* feminism on masculine ideals.

The critical reception of *The Well-Beloved* seems to have confirmed Hardy in his decision to abandon the novel for poetry. The London *World* criticised the novel for its 'sex' mania and concluded: 'Mr Hardy has once more afforded a dismayed and disgusted public the depressing spectacle of genius on the down grade.'¹² Hardy was moved to comment in a letter of thanks to the poet A. G. Swinburne for his supportive comments on his 'fantastic little tale': 'I have been much surprised, and even grieved, by a ferocious review attributing an immoral quality to the tale. The writer's meaning is beyond me' (*Life*, p. 305). Hardy is being disingenuous here for, with the best will in the world, the critics who objected to the 'moral irregularities' in *Tess* and *Jude* were hardly likely to look more favourably upon a novel that refers openly to pre-marital intercourse, with marriage conditional upon pregnancy: 'prov[ing] each other by island custom' (*W-B*, p. 99); the elopement and consummation of their relationship by two comparative strangers who part having 'discovered that nothing was likely to happen as a consequence' (*W-B*, p. 37); and three incidents of cohabitation.

12 Millgate, M. *Thomas Hardy: A Biography*, Oxford 1982, p. 382