The Golden Arrow: Mary Webb's "Apocalypse of Love"

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The dynamic verve with which Mary Webb composed, and which pervades even the faultiest of her novels, has generally obscured the structural devices by which they were organized. Especially is this true of The Golden Arrow, which has been regarded too long as merely another pledge of what Mrs. Webb was to achieve in her more masterful Precious Bane. Despite its diffuseness in a few individual episodes, its less engaging style, and its less profound grasp of motivation, The Golden Arrow demonstrates a happier grasp of overall organization than the few critics sympathetic to Mrs. Webb have so far remarked.

This overall organization is achieved through an allusive montage—in an idiom and "philosophy" peculiar to Mrs. Webb—of the Christian Apocalypse. John Arden's resemblance to John of Patmos and the consequent effect of his resemblance on the novel's setting and episodes have not been studied sufficiently. Character, setting, and incident in The Golden Arrow manifest, in a generally consonant fashion, Mrs. Webb's "apocalypse of love." Her "apocalypse" is a blend of Christian and pantheistic elements, and is to be envisioned in this world. We can understand it best through a close analysis of character, setting, and incident combined.

John Arden's visionary character is first hinted in the descriptions of his environment. His stone cottage, for instance, stands "in the midst of the hill plateau, higher than the streams began, shelterless to the four winds" (p. 13). To the cold and uninhabitable north towers the Devil's Chair, representing to all who do not comprehend this world through love, "unalterable evil:

The scattered rocks, the ragged hollybrakes on the lower slopes were like small carved lions beside the black marble steps of a stupendous throne. It remained inviolable, taciturn, evil. It glowered darkly on the dawn; it came through the snow like jagged bones through flesh. . . . For miles around, in the plains, the valleys, the mountain dwellings it was feared. Storms broke round it suddenly out of a clear sky; it seemed as if it created storm. No one cared to cross the range near it after dark—when the black grouse laughed sardonically and the cry of a passing curlew shivered like broken glass. The sheep. . . would. . .cluster suddenly and stampede for no reason, if they had grazed too near it in the night. So the throne stood—black, massive, untenanted, yet with a well-worn air. (p. 31)

To the warmer and auspicious south, however, the Flockmaster's signpost stands humbly in isolation:
At times the sheep crowded round it with stampings and jostlings of woolly shoulders; the ponies rubbed against it; cuckoos in the wild game of mating would alight on it with an excited gobble and flash away again. Legend said that somewhere here, long since, the cuckoos met in circle before uttering a note in any field or coppy, to allot the beats for the season. (p. 30)

The signpost looks always, "with its outspread arms against the dim reaches of heather, like a crucifix" (p. 51). Between the Devil's Chair and the signpost, to the west and east John Arden witnesses the constant struggle between good and evil, between war and peace: "Out of the east, from beyond the signpost, came day like an iridescent dove. Out of the west came storm like a hawk" (p. 114).

But, to John Arden, the dove and the hawk are one, so to speak. In church his hymn-book opens automatically to "The King of Love my Shepherd is," in which he reads "with a viviness denied to the lettered those illumined pastures and unwrinkled waters where, simple and wise, the central figure of the Fourth Gospel presided" (p. 26); on business at the office of the county weekly, he is "dreamy from his favourite passage in Revelation" (p. 273). His more practically-minded wife, Patty, describes him as one "as can't see a thing nearer than the colour on the farthest-off hills, and that's not real" (p. 29). John sees beyond the "real." When Stephen Southernwood, the young minister, proposes, for no noble purpose, to take John's daughter Deborah picnicking by the Devil's Chair, the old visionary does not treat the proposal as a trifle but silently and fearlessly reckons its hidden meaning (p. 104). When Stephen further proposes his illicit union with Deborah, John acquiesces, knowing Stephen better than Stephen knows himself and "gazing away through the window to the far distance beyond it, into things that are not of this world" (p. 117). His acquiescence here and later as he observes his son's wife, Lily, kissing another man is motivated by his conviction in a "Divinity who stood aside from the world's madness not from indifference, but for some great end" (p. 138). John neither condemns nor denies; believing solely in affirmation through love, he owns no orthodox moral code: "Those that dwell in the lands of suns do not need fires" (p. 146). Through love, the hawk and the dove are one.

To John, love is an arrow, golden but keen:

it was said that if two as were walking out found the arrow they'd cling to it fast though it met wound them sore. And it was said there'd be a charm on 'em, and sorrow, and a vast of joy. And nought could part 'em, neither in the flower of life nor in the brown winrow. And the tale goes that once long ago two found it in the sally-thickets down yonder. And they came through Steps singing, and with such a scent of apple-blow about 'em as never was--though apple-blow time was a full month off; and such a power of honeybees about 'em as
John's vision is thus the "apocalypse of love," a blend of stress and peace, a blend of sorrow and joy—to be illustrated now by two narratives paralleling and contrasting those qualities; that is, the less successful love story of John's son Joe and Lily Huntbatch, and the more successful love story of his daughter Deborah and Stephen Southernwood. The experiences of these four youths reflect the experiences John must have undergone in his own youth, and from which issues his present knowledge that love is a wedding of generosity and penury.

The wedding of generosity and penury is first illustrated in the relationship of Joe Arden and Lily Huntbatch. Joe has inherited the innate generosity of his father and the stolid practicality of Patty, his mother. Lacking, however, the exquisite sensitivity which attends his father's generosity, Joe's share from his mother looms larger. Capable as he is of sacrifice, he is as hard as the horse-shoes on the handkerchief he continually brandishes. His response to the sufferings of others is thus a mixture of superb generosity and superb stolidity. He would willingly take on the birthpains of his wife Lily, and demonstrates his sincerity by burning his own hand with a hot poker (p. 205). At the same time, however, to Lily's expressed fear of pain, and to every complaint expressed against the order of the universe, he can only retort: "It inna my fault the way the world's made" (p. 204). Only to a degree, then, does he experience the sharpness of the golden arrow, for his iron constitution rebuffs its keenest impression. His father's full vision will not be accorded him in the same measure.

Symbolic of this rebuff is Joe's obtuseness to the scent of the honeysuckle which always surrounds him and which Mrs. Webb consistently associates with his and Lily's union. "Pain," Mrs. Webb asserts, "is the honeysuckle round the door" (p. 71), and there are beds of that flower about the door of Joe's cottage. Undismayed, however, Joe buys his wedding furniture in his "best cap with a piece of honeysuckle stuck In at the side" (p. 68). And on his wedding night, returning to a house where the fire has been extinguished long ago and where a bat flits in the upstairs chambers, returning with a wife whose hair is shorn and who would prefer a "brother-and-sister" relationship with him—he generously but stolidly spends his wedding night sitting awake at his bride's side, the "honeysuckle scent surging" in at the lattice, his arm [growing] stiffer" (p.88). Surrounded by reminders of pain, he remains oblivious to them. He will never be broken, but then he will never be whole; the full vision of love's apocalypse will not be his.

It is further indicative of Joe's mixed generosity and stolidity that he should pick the lovely but completely selfish Lily for his wife and be completely satisfied with her. Lily has inherited the penury, the cruelty and self-concern of her father, old Eli Huntbatch, who is the antithesis of John Arden, as mocking of love as John is respectful of it, as cruel to humans and animals as John is kind to them.
Stifled by her father's narrow interpretation of Old Testament morality, Lily hungers for compensatory pleasure and admiration; she will rot, therefore, ruin her figure bearing children. Once, on her passionless breast there flamed an enormous passion flower, "which spread its mystic tracery of purple rings, green and gold flames... until it withered and she threw it on the manure heap" (p. 26). Her hat adorned with poppies and corn, the poppies droop somnolently over her golden hair, and the corn is half-ripe. Later, on the occasion when she pins in her dress the honeysuckle always associated with Joe, her motive is to entice the buyers at market, with whom she enjoys a brief flirtation. On almost every occasion she wears a green blouse and with it a green locket (p. 162). On two counts green is correctly her color, for it is symbolic of the short-lived spring gaiety which Lily continually manufactures and then stifles, and it is also symbolic of the intense envy she bears Deborah Arden and Stephen Southernwood. When Stephen promises to make Deborah a necklace, he says "all the fellows will be jealous, and Lily will be green with envy" (p. 175). In the union of Lily and Joe, then, generosity and penury, selfless and selfish love couple.

A similar coupling is manifest initially in the union of Deborah and Stephen, the figures of the second and central love story; they, however, will seek and find the golden arrow, and so effect the reconciliation between stress and peace. They will experience what old John Arden intuitively envisions. They can be broken and made whole through love.

Just as Lily resembles her father Eli, so Deborah resembles her father John; as a result, Deborah is physically and emotionally Lily's opposite. Dark-haired, darker in skin tone, vibrant earth tones are her colors. When she dons "an old-fashioned purple delaine sprinkled with small poppies" (p. 22), she has no need, as Lily did, of additional gaudy trim; Deborah was transformed from a peasant girl into an arresting woman. The deep colour threw up into her grey eyes shifting violet lights, gave her transparent skin an ethereal look, burnished her hair. Dark colours were to her what rainy weather is to the hills, bringing out the latent magic and vitality. This morning her dress might have been cut from the hills, their colours were so alike. (pp. 22-23)

A rosy red, symbolizing natural vitality, is consistently associated with Deborah. This association is initiated at the Fair when Stephen has frightened Deborah on the merry-go-round and returns apologetically, his hands full of crimson roses which he flings into her lap (p. 99). When Stephen decorates the cottage in which Deborah and he will live, he paints over the lower windows and the door "a broad red band" (p. 126). When Deborah first suspects Stephen's hidden grief, she is described as searching "in the recesses of her being" and finding "intuition there like a rosy flower" (p. 168). Later, Stephen presents Deborah with a gift:
He felt in an inner pocket and pulled out a long chain of scarlet beads.

"Rose berries! And on a string and all!"

He put it over her head. She laughed with pleasure. The berry-colour was repeated in fainter tints in her cheeks; her eyes shone. The long necklace hung down over her dress like rosary. (p. 170)

John Arden remarks on that necklace: "Those little...berries of Deb's are so mortal uncanny, with the life in them and a rose-tree in every one..." (p. 219) Like Joe's honeysuckle, like Lily's green blouse, Deborah's rose bears a double significance: having presented his gift, Stephen stoops for a kiss and presses the necklace against Deborah's throat: "Deborah shivered suddenly. "There's a thorn in your necklace, Stephen!" (p. 171) In contrast to her brother Joe, Deborah perceives the pain. The references to Deborah's rose continue: the charm which for so long prevents Stephen from surrendering to despair is a certain picture of Deborah in her symbolic colours: "All day long with the picture of the red-curtained kitchen with the round table set for tea, the steamy kettle, and Deborah--neat and bright in her new berry-coloured dress--making tea, were to his mind what the Sacrament is to a Christian." (pp. 173-74) On St. Thomas' Day, when Stephen abandons Deborah, the very dawn dies before it flowers, "like a mildewed rose." (p. 244)

Deborah inherits her father's intuition: she too sees instinctively into the interior of life. The morning after she has surrendered to Stephen's ardor, her mother says ironically: "It's time you was serious like Joe's Lily, and saw as there's only three things as matters to a good 'ooman--the bride-bed, the child-bed, and the death-bed." (p. 115) Deborah walks silently about her room:

She was one of the women who see on to the end of things, to whom the commonplace is transparent as glass--revealing the interior of life. She saw with a vividness that would have surprised her mother, the philosophy of her last sentence. On her pillow she saw the shifting shadows of the future; round her little bed she heard the years rustle like falling leaves. It was no longer a mere part of her furniture; it was an apocalypse of love. The night just gone had set about it an immortal radiance for her. She shut her eyes and saw a day to come when a pillow should be pressed by a small head beside hers. She saw further--saw her own face quiet in the hard pillow of death.

"I be ready, Stephen," she whispered; "ready for all. I'll go with you gladsome in wet weather or in shiny; and lie quiet in the daisies knowing we loved true." (p. 115)

Willing to face stress as well as peace, she will cling to the arrow her father described, welcoming "sorrow, and a vast of joy," refusing separation from Stephen both "In the flower of life [and] the brown winrow" (p. 83). And that, of course, is the "apocalypse of love."
Deborah will need all the strength of her intuition, for Stephen Southernwood, the young preacher, is initially an unhappy mixture: on the surface he manifests all the traits associated with Lily; only in the recesses of his personality lie those traits which John Arden and Deborah believe potentially admirable. Like Lily, Stephen has been stifled by the codes of others; hence his vacillation and his ignorance of himself; hence his first sermon, on death, "full of the eloquent comfort of one who has never seen the blank wall that rises between the last tremor and the eternal stillness on the beloved's face" (p. 27).

It is not surprising that he leaves the ministry to become a foreman in a mine, nor is it surprising that on merely hearing that "Mr. Prior's sending fifty shorthorns to America" (p. 219) he should seize immediately upon this venture as a release from the responsibility of Deborah and his present unromantic job—should seize upon this venture as a release for his selfish yearnings for the exotic. After all, his unruffled hair is "as gold as Lily's" (p. 26); and his excited blue eyes, his resilient musculature are "ludicrously unsuited to his black clothes" (p. 27). Like Lily, who can not totally give of herself, Stephen desires Deborah and seduces her, but will not commit himself to the restrictive bonds of legal marriage. Like Lily, she dons his lover's emblem at the same time that he betrays her: on the night he learns of Mr. Prior's American adventure, he descends the Ardens' staircase "in John's best coat and a scarlet handkerchief tied round his neck" (p. 214). Mrs. Arden points the symbol. "That bit of red," she says, "just sets you off" (p. 214). Stephen would appreciate, to be sure, the symbolic import of Mrs. Arden's compliment; Deborah's love for him is, indeed, the distinguished thing; but, distinguished or not, the emblem is, we can not forget, "tied" about his neck, like a halter.

Naturally, therefore, Stephen leads Deborah away from the southern white cross to the Fair below, and their path narrows: "The hills closed in round them; the far prospect was gone, then the near view, then the ramparts in front; finally nothing remained but their own narrow way." (p. 83) And naturally Stephen should choose for his and Deborah's home a cottage in the west facing north toward the Devil's Chair (pp. 119, 126).

We recall John Arden's acquiescence to Deborah's living with Stephen in a common-law union. That acquiescence does not issue, however, from apathy. For twenty-three years John has trimmed a lantern in the dark hall by Deborah's room to prevent her stumbling; and although she must stumble now, her path is the pursuit of the golden arrow. And although Stephen's mind is "at present a confused mass of other people's principles, non-principles, creeds, negations" (p. 105); although Stephen will eventually abandon Deborah—John Arden sees Stephen's potential nobility, his inevitable return. Even in his worst moment of despair Stephen dimly perceives what John and Deborah know intuitively: "The whole countryside was acquiring in his eyes something portentous, apocalyptic." (p. 174) Even when Stephen
perceives that medieval devils have been supplanted by the contemporary fear of emptiness and that modern life resembles "a hum of insects round carrion" (p. 183), he vaguely suspects that his present experience corresponds to John's in the past:

Everyone at tea, all the world of men outside seemed inchoate, purposeless, like the swarming, slimy minute life in stagnant water. He felt sick.

"Stephen, lad," said John, his voice which was quietude, "you met drink a sup of tea, and you'll feel better." He leaned across the table amid a buzz of talk. "And, lad," he said, "there's an answer to every question, and at last the light shines."

Stephen was startled. How did John know? Ah, well—what matter? He and John and the rest were nothing—a few midges, humming for a day. It did not matter what they thought or were. Yet John's words, his look, remained at the back of Stephen's mind, and he wondered idly now and then whether John had had any experience to warrant them or whether it was the usual kind of cant. (p. 184)

Although Mrs. Webb never explicitly says so, we may believe the former of Stephen's alternatives the more valid; for on the day of his return, Deborah sits once again beneath the southern signpost, and looking north toward the Devil's Chair, contemplates what John already knows and what Stephen has learned in his wanderings:

It seemed to her that there was no hostility now between the two ranges, between the towering throne and the small, white cross. Always before, she had superstitiously regarded the Chair as wholly evil, the Flockmaster's signpost as wholly good. Now she saw good and evil mingled and felt a slumbering terror in the protecting cross, a hidden beneficence in the inimical stronghold across the valley. Beyond both, behind light and shadow, under pain and joy she felt a presence—too intangible for materialization into words, too mighty to be expressed by any name of man's. (p. 279)

That vision of mingled stress and peace, accomplished through pursuit of the arrow of love, was, initially, John Arden's. That Deborah and Stephen have witnessed the "apocalypse of love" is affirmed in the novel's closing passage. In response to Mrs. Arden's desire to kindle a fire and relight the lamp that night for Deborah and her newly-returned lover, John Arden's final words manifest the revelation toward which character, setting, and incident have tended from the novel's beginning:

"There's no need, mother. D'you mind the tale of them that found the Golden Arrow, and went with apple-blow scent round 'em, and a mort 'o bees, and warmship, and wanted nought of any man? There's no need of fire or can'le for them, my dear, for they'm got their light—the kindly light—and the thorn's white over." (p. 288)
NOTES


3 See Gertrud Schneider, Die Verwendung und Bedeutung der Folk-Lore in den Romane von Mary Webb (Goettingen: University of Goettingen, 1934), pp. 62-64.

IMAGERY OF A PASSAGE TO INDIA: A FURTHER NOTE

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The present note is a follow-up on George H. Thomson's suggestive note on the snake imagery in A Passage to India [ELT, IX: 2 (1966), 108-10]. Thomson refers to the polarity between the cave and the temple and the arch and the echo as forming the main symbolic pivots of the novel and regards the snake imagery as of secondary importance. My purpose is to show that this imagery can also be related to the major polarities if studied in juxtaposition to the imagery of birds, insects and animals.

In his descriptions of the Indian landscape Forster makes frequent references to birds, snakes, insects and animals. For instance when Mrs. Moore is hanging her cloak and uttering endearments to the wasp (p. 38),1 we have a mention of birds, insects, bats and jackals whose presence increases the forebodings of doom already lurking on the horizon. In chapter 10 (p. 119) the slimy squirrel hanging opposite Aziz's bungalow "twitching a mangy tail" accentuates the destructive symbolism of the sun.2 In the same chapter we see brown birds looking out for insects—a grim portent of the events to follow later in the novel. In imagery like this Forster presents a forceful and concrete picture of the human condition following the destruction of order. It is in the repeated mention of birds and snakes that a symbolic tension is built which, when interpreted in terms of Indian mythology, represents a larger tension between the earth and the sky, the fierce sun energy and the fertilizing power of the earth. In Indian mythology snakes are associated with the earth. They are among the Yakshas (genii) representing the forces of the soil.3 The bird (eagle in particular) is associated with the sun force. Although Forster does not mention the eagle his reference to kites makes them sufficiently plausible embodiments of the sun energy.

In the bridge party chapter we find the attempts of people at communication mocked by kites and vultures lurking in the distance. But