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Robert Bridges and Modern Love

In the Introduction to the *Faber Book of Love Poems* (1973) Geoffrey Grigson laments that "our own time, for various reasons, is stingy with love poems or poems about love, stingy in fact with the cadences of poetry."¹ The connection between cadences and love, he goes on to explain, is the need of the poet to solace himself, "in the chaos of being in love, by firmly enclosing as much of it as he can in measure." And he quotes Donne: "For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse" ("The Triple Fool"). The connection is even broader than Grigson allows. Love is that poetic subject most demanding of formal flexibility; not the deceptive flexibility of open or non-existent form that so cherishes incoherence and therefore selfishness, but the true flexibility of a controlled and moderating measure that is able to define and hence allow for variety, extension, and deviation, while communicating the full consciousness and understanding of them. The loosening and abandonment of form in the early decades of this century was not so much rebellion against authority as part of the general suspicion of possibility, of creative communal order, therefore of claims of physical and spiritual union, of fullness and fulfillment in human love. In stressing the failures, discouragements, isolations of "modern" desire, the "modern" poets questioned the very capacity for that highest form of human sympathy and most complex form of self-sacrifice. As James McFarlane says in "The Mind of Modernism," because of the fusing of the mechanistic and the intuitive, the growth of faith in positivistic science *and* its opposite (occultism and anarchism), and the acceptance of Nietzsche and promotion of a climate of shrillness, frustration, and irreverence, "the custody of life's integrities began to pass from society to the individual."² Where concern is with the individual (and the stress is on his alienation), with the eccentric, with the vanity of endeavour, then the mixture of impersonality and generalizing power necessary to

express otherness *and* indeed the very knowledge of the other (the foundation of mature love) is consequently undervalued, and the stinginess Grigson speaks of is almost inevitable.

It might appear odd to bring into a discussion of modern love Robert Bridges, the old laureate who is for so many the arch-Victorian. But I wish to add my voice to those of Albert Guerard and Donald Stanford, in arguing for the relevance to our and indeed any century of this in fact most independent, unrepresentative, and much underrated poet. So independent of literary fashions was he that he was not given a chance to influence many younger and later poets. But criticism should not suffer: at his best in his shorter, and often lyric, love poems, he can provide us with a standard, a model of poetic possibilities in an age that has had difficulties expressing a full experience and understanding of love.

Bridges did have a broader view. In sonnet 35 of *The Growth of Love* sequence, written at different times from the 1870s to 1898, he presents in solid and clear generalities the ideal of a teleological love:

All earthly beauty hath one cause and proof,
 To lead the pilgrim soul to beauty above:
 Yet lieth the greater bliss so far aloof,
 That few there be are wean'd from earthly love.
 Joy's ladder it is, reaching from home to home,
 The best of all the work that all was good;
 Whereof 'twas writ the angels aye upclomb,
 Down sped, and at the top the Lord God stood.³

(ll. 1-8)

But he was no Romantic idealist (despite his "embarrassing enthusiasm for Shelley,"⁴ occasional imitations of whose diction seriously damage Bridges's work); the difficulty of attaining this ideal is stressed in the much more personal sestet:

But I my time abuse, my eyes by day
 Center'd on thee, by night my heart on fire—
 Letting my number'd moments run away—
 Nor e'en 'twixt night and day to heaven aspire:
 So true it is that what the eye seeth not
 But slow is loved, and loved is soon forgot.

(ll. 9-14)

Bridges confronts and acknowledges and even laments the failure, but he remains calm; there are no histrionics. His sadness is all the more sincere and convincing because it remains when soberness returns, that is, when he speaks these lines. The only deviations from the steady

iambic norm are the mildly emphatic trochees opening lines 10 and 11 and the unusually slow anapests closing lines 12 and 13. The return to generalized statement in the couplet further defuses any potential for an emotional display of disillusionment.

How different this is from the following “sonnet” from George Meredith’s 1862 sequence *Modern Love*, which has invited comparisons with Bridges’s sequence:

XXIX

Am I failing? For no longer can I cast
 A glory round about this head of gold.
 Glory she wears, but springing from the mould;
 Not like the consecration of the Past!
 Is my soul beggared? Something more than earth
 I cry for still: I cannot be at peace
 In having Love upon a mortal lease.
 I cannot take the woman at her worth!
 Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed
 Our human nakedness, and could endow
 With spiritual splendour a white brow
 That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed?
 A kiss is but a kiss now! And no wave
 Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.
 But, as you will! we’ll sit contentedly,
 And eat our pot of honey on the grave.⁵

Exclamations and questions, enjambments and broken lines, all intensify the tone here as Meredith indulges *his* (or his persona’s) disappointment: there are seven “I” ’s in the poem—only one in Bridges’s. And the indulgence takes the added, pseudo-sophisticated step of half mocking itself with melodramatic diction and posturing, especially in the fourth quatrain. He is lamenting the loss of what is now recognized as only a defensive illusion in the past (“That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed”), so we cannot even credit the proffered emotion. As I have said, there is reason to regret the influence of Shelley on Bridges, but we can be thankful for Bridges’s native reticence and prudence when we see the extent of Shelley’s influence on other Victorians.

Bridges was not incapable of fevered passion, of course, but he rarely gives us those uncomfortable moments directly in his poems; he more characteristically comments on them, trying to understand them before he speaks to the reader, thereby and with other safeguards trying to reestablish repose. In sonnet 37 he recalls headlong rushes on horseback towards goals which nearness proves illusory, so he stands

as one who sees the source
 Of strong illusion, shaming thought to force
 From off his mind the soil of passion’s gust.

Meredith would stop with the revelation of the vision as an illusion and milk the emotional possibilities of that. Bridges not only shames his thought but can find a social recovery: "with slacken'd speed" he gives "good heed" to "kind salutation" and can ride on "And seek what cheer the village inn provides" (ll. 9, 11, 14).

Not only does he go beyond the mere imitation of immediate emotional experience, but he offers that ability itself as proof of his devotion. Arthur Symons complained in 1901 that Bridges "has put into his poetry the peace and not the energies of life, the wisdom and not the fever of love."⁶ My first response would be that since most of us know the fever and very few attain the wisdom, we should be grateful for that much. But the matter is more complicated, for the control which makes possible the understanding is itself part of his service to the beloved. "Behold me, now," he says at the end of the first sonnet in *The Growth of Love*, "Master of the art which for thy sake I serve." His art is not for his or for art's but for her sake. It is no compliment to her if he has no mastery, that is, no comprehension of the meaning of his love. His love is all the more substantial and constant for surviving the understanding. And he can make great poetry of calm assurance:

And when we sit alone, and as I please
I taste thy love's full smile, and can enstate
The pleasure of my kingly heart at ease,
My thought swims like a ship, that with the weight
Of her rich burden sleeps on the infinite seas
Becalm'd, and cannot stir her golden freight.

(sonnet 5, ll. 9-14)

The heart is best, after all, he says in sonnet 11, "when most/'Tis sober, simple, true, and fancy-free" (ll. 13-14). And it needs company. Love is at the top of the list of crew members of the ship of life, in sonnet 15, which very cleverly develops the conceit; the keel is health, "whereto the ribs of mirth are wed," and the rest of the company includes diligence, wit, justice, courage, temperance, "And at her helm the master reason sit[s]" (ll. 2, 14).

If moderation deepens Bridges's love, excess cheapens that of Meredith's protagonist. He has so isolated his passion ("self-caged Passion" he calls it) that, in turning to "other joys of life" in IV, he finds nothing can satisfy: "high Philosophy" is "cold as a mountain" and more foe than friend. His closing generalization is so clichéd and wrong that it seems more an excuse than a regret:

Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,
And the great price we pay for it full worth:

We have it only when we are half earth.
Little avails that coinage to the old!

(ll. 11-14)

He echoes that almost comfortable despair in XIX:

If any state be enviable on earth,
'Tis yon born idiot's, who, as days go by,
Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,
In a queer sort of meditative mirth.

(ll. 13-16)

This has its roots in Romantic philosophy, but also looks forward to both the overstatements of Yeats and the shallow cynicism of so many modernist writers.

It is not surprising that for Meredith's speaker love is only "a thing of moods" (X), and at best a "crowning sun" whose light distracts us momentarily from recognizing the "shadow of the tomb" (XXX). His "crime," as he calls it in that former poem, was to hope for constancy, for "loyal Life" in "Love's deep woods." We should learn from nature, he says in XIII (reversing a Wordsworthian lesson) not to pledge ourselves to anything ("I play for Seasons; not Eternities!" he has Nature declare). Bridges, on the other hand, in contemplating betrayal in love, won't descend to a display of personal grief. Instead he turns a somewhat exaggerated compliment into a moral caution: a rhetorical move reminiscent of Wyatt and Gascoigne. Her encouragement has bred his constancy, which in turn obliges hers. This could have been written any time since the early sixteenth century, its plainness testifying to its universality:

...since I am sworn thy slave, and in the bond
Is writ my promise of eternity;
Since to such high hope thou'st encouraged me,
That if thou look but from me I despond;

Since thou'rt my all in all, O think of this:
Think of the dedication of my youth:
Think of my loyalty, my joy, my bliss:
Think of my sorrow, my despair and ruth,
My sheer annihilation if I miss:
Think—if thou shouldst be false—think of thy truth.

(sonnet 54, ll. 5-14)

Meredith's discussion stays at the level of frustrated sexual impulse ("a thing of moods"), but Bridges means to stretch the continuum. At the end of his life, in *The Testament of Beauty* (1929), he went so far as to separate the bond of marriage from "mere impulse of sex," however

strong that is ("from animal mating/ to the vision of Dante"). If breeding ceased, he speculates, men and women would continue to mate:

Happiness, which all seek, is not composable
of any summation of particular pleasures;
the happiness in marriage dependeth for-sure
not on the animal functions, but on qualities
of spirit and mind that are correlated therewith.

(III, 850-54)

So Bridges is not simply a Victorian optimist blinded to the darker realities uncovered by the more "modern" and fatalistic Meredith. "I see no sin," the protagonist says late in Meredith's sequence,

In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.

(XLIII, ll. 14-16)

Bridges would answer that allowing the passions to "spin the plot" is itself the sin. A betrayal from within is just as blameworthy as one from without. And most importantly, it can be remedied. But it means daring to love, which is to be vulnerable. The alternative to a breakable heart is an impenetrable, irredeemable one. C. S. Lewis has said, "The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation."⁷ One doesn't have to be a Christian, or even religious, to understand that damnation as most pertinently a neglect of the need to fulfill one's being. For all his later joyous acceptance of the idea of evolution of life as a process of becoming, for all the so-called personalism and "psychological insight"⁸ of *Modern Love*, Meredith displays there little understanding of personal responsibility. F. R. Leavis's summary judgment is perhaps only slightly overstated: "*Modern Love* seems to me the flashy product of unusual but vulgar cleverness working upon cheap emotion: it could serve later poets if at all, only as a warning."⁹ Unfortunately it didn't. Bridges's significantly titled *Growth of Love*, not perhaps as narratively dynamic as Meredith's sequence, devoid as it is of a dramatized passion and despair, investigates possibilities beyond the commoner pleasures and pains of love. Not all of the sonnets are successful, only a handful are first rate, but in their lucidity and depth of statement they are unlike any in that century.

Bridges's poems after *The Growth of Love* continue to assert his belief in the worth of moral effort, his trust in life's chances. Not always to my liking, the emphasis often is on a Platonized Beauty, but it is on

significant occasions also on human love. But effort, he never denies, is necessary, even if it is solely intellectual. His was, of course, a fortunate life, almost aristocratic, and this is part of the reason why less privileged twentieth-century poets found it easy to ignore his example. Only a few of his poems evidence a pressure of personal, deeply felt experience behind his usually generalized concerns with life's struggle.

I laugh to have learned
That joy cannot come
Unless it be earned;

For a happier lot
Than God giveth me
It never hath been
Nor ever shall be.

(“Fortunatus Nimium,” ll. 22-28)

That is from a collection published in 1920. In a poem published thirty years earlier, in *Shorter Poems* (1890), he details his “happier lot” as a ready access to both a simple, unambitious rural life *and* the urban pleasures of good company, music, literature, and philosophy. But the peace of mind he enjoys is “hard-won”: “health our toil rewards,/ And strength is labour’s prize.” And the threats to his gratitude (in 1890) are still the fashionable ones:

But think not I can stain
My heaven with discontent;
Nor wallow with that sad,
Backsliding herd, who cry
That Truth must make man bad,
And pleasure is a lie.

(“Spring: Ode II,” ll. 35-40)

Because there are no poeticized autobiographical crises, no dazzling mannerisms, no challenging flights into darkness, because there is “a deliberate reticence, a sedulous restraint, a hatred of revelations,”¹⁰ a cheerfulness and discretion, a conscious intention, an “equable and steady poetic flight,”¹¹ we must not, as have so many¹², conclude with Yeats that his magnificently crafted poems are empty¹³—Yeats, after all, couldn’t appreciate Hardy either. (Bridges, we might note, was very impatient with Yeats’s irrational occultism.¹⁴) A literary culture dominated by the assumptions of nominalism will have difficulty recognizing, much less accepting, the substance and import of Bridges’s moral and philosophical generalities, but they are there nonetheless. In fact, the trust and the effort to maintain that trust that his best poems plead for couldn’t be more relevant, more central, more rife

with potential significance.

The effort is against many things. It is against complacency and the temptation to escape: in "Nightingales" (one of his most successful experiments in accentual verse) a Keatsian poet longs to "wander" amongst the beautiful mountains, fruitful valleys, and starry woods where the nightingales must have learned their song. The birds' response is that great art originates in a longing that contradicts Keats's desire for flight from human suffering:

Nay, barren are those mountains and spent the streams:
 Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,
 A throe of the heart,
 Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,
 No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,
 For all our art.

(ll. 7-12)

The effort is against melancholy, not just the sadness that usually accompanies the frustration of such flight, but also the dejection that comes from more mature motives: "love dishonoured," "friendship slighted," memory of "loving hearts, that gone before/ Call their old comrade to the grave" ("Dejection," ll. 7-12). One is reminded of Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears," but Bridges's poem goes on, as Tennyson's does not:

O soul, be patient: thou shalt find
 A little matter mend all this;
 Some strain of music to thy mind,
 Some praise for skill not spent amiss.

Again shall pleasure overflow
 Thy cup with sweetness, thou shalt taste
 Nothing but sweetness, and shalt grow
 Half sad for sweetness run to waste.

O happy life! I hear thee sing,
 O rare delight of mortal stuff!
 I praise my days for all they bring,
 Yet are they only not enough.

(ll. 13-24)

The emphatic repetition of "sweetness" (that emotional workhorse of nineteenth-century verse) points ironically to a deficiency in his facile removal from dejection, so quietly but so poignantly emphasized by that "only" of the last line. He is disillusioned at the end, but the dealing with the problem is assured, there is progress, not from pessimism to optimism, but from immaturity to maturity. How unlike those

Romantic poets who so often, not seeing the chance of a complete salvation, fall back upon their initial melancholy, falling upon the self-created thorns of an adolescent vision of life ("Here, where men sit and hear each other groan"), bleeding poetical blood in public in a woefully unplatonic present. Bridges's view isn't a dialectical opposite of a Romantic one, but rather simply a broader, more inclusive, more mature, more effortful one.

Less personally intense perhaps but as important for others is the effort against the tyranny of either instinct or analytical reason. "To Robert Burns: An Epistle on Instinct" repudiates Rousseauistic primitivism. Man must choose his "pleasurable ways" carefully in order "to find/ Severe perfection" (ll. 29-30); true pleasure attends moral good; pleasure, therefore, is "not well-being's end,/ But its fruition" (ll. 35-36), a very Aristotelian point. Reason tames our instincts. But we must grant, he goes on, that we owe a great deal to the instincts as they function in primitive man:

Want of analysis
Saved them from doubts that wreck the Will
With pale paralysis.

(ll. 82-84)

Then the argument moves back to Aristotle, bringing instinct and reason together in the larger net, or "lodgement":

Tho' Science hide beneath her feet
The point where moral reasonings meet,
The vicious circle is complete;
There is no lodgement
Save Aristotle's own retreat,
The just man's judgement.

(ll. 91-96)

A more chilling exposition of the predicament, of the ever-present attacks on Reason (philosophical, not scientific), is "Low Barometer."
A house is flailed by gale winds,

...Air has loosed
Its guardian grasp on blood and brain,
...
And Reason kens he herits in
A haunted house. Tenants unknown
Assert their squalid lease of sin
With earlier title than his own.

(ll. 5-6, 9-12)

A hundred-year-old way of thinking out these matters is powerfully subverted in this poem, to no small extent by the tone of qualified respect for and subdued horror of these uncivilizing and subconscious forces.

While an uncivilized past may threaten, a nearer civilized past that is forever lost has more ambiguous claims on him, as for instance in this poem:

GHOSTS

Mazing around my mind like moths at a shaded candle.
 In my heart like lost bats in a cave fluttering,
 Mock ye the charm whereby I thought reverently to lay you,
 When to the wall I nail'd your reticent effigys?

Life's chances are severely circumscribed by cultural and historical changes to which even the retiring bard of Boar's Hill is acutely sensitive. Although not a love poem in the strictest sense, "Elegy: The Summer House on the Mound" powerfully expresses a love for a past childhood, home, and an heroic age no longer possible in an industrialized and mechanized empire. The lament is made subtly in contrasting descriptions of the great wooden sailing ships of old and the new steam dreadnoughts. First the older vision:

That sea is ever bright and blue, the sky
 Serene and blue, and ever white ships lie
 High on the horizon steadfast in full sail,
 Or nearer in the roads pass within hail,
 Of naked brigs and barques that windbound ride
 At their taut cables heading to the tide.

(ll. 31-36)

The repeated "ever" suggests the temporal depth of this direct ("naked") confrontation of "steadfast" human effort with the "serene" forces of sea and wind, and the firm and grave movement of the iambic rhythm across the restraining couplets (especially in the enjambments of the first two lines and the move from the end of the second line to the trochee that fronts the third, and the near pyrrhic to spondee opening of the last line slowing the rhythm in mid-line, then easefully dropping off in the last four syllables) emphasizes the tenuous, but achieved, and respectful mastery of those forces. But this was all before "our iron age" and "the engines of a mightier Mars"

Clipp'd their wide wings, and dock'd their soaring spars.
 The gale that in their tackle sang, the wave
 That neath their gilded galleries dasht so brave
 Lost then their merriment, nor look to play
 With the heavy-hearted monsters of to-day.

(ll. 68-72)

The respect is replaced by brutal (potentially guilty) assertions of control (the wind need no longer cooperate). As a child he watched from the Kent shore Napier's fleet sailing past on its way to the Baltic:

...round Saint Margaret's cliff mysteriously,
 Those murderous queens walking in Sabbath sleep
 Glided in line upon the windless deep:
 For in those days was first seen low and black
 Beside the full-rigg'd mast the strange smoke-stack,
 And neath their stern revolv'd the twisted fan.

(ll. 76-81)

"Black" replacing "white," "twisted" replacing "taut": in this context Bridges strives to maintain human dignity with love.

At other times, he even wonders (with Hardy) how responsive Nature is. Just seven poems after the "Elegy" in *New Poems* one finds "The Sea Keeps Not the Sabbath," in which the "loving fancy" of two lovers suits but ill the "sadness of the clouded sky, / The bitter wind, the gloomy roar" (ll. 7-8). There is little evidence of a providential God in a "nature that doth half consent / That man should guess her dreary scheme," man being "so fugitive a part / Of what so slowly must expire" (ll. 15-16, 21-22). On the other hand, the poem concludes, nature, in addition to "mocking alike hope and despair," can "mock our praise" by enchanting us on "her brighter days," days "fit for the gaiety of Mozart" (ll. 25-27, 31). Nature finally defies our human conclusions, and therefore, in providing little comfort for the lover, necessitates resilience. This poem, written before "The Sea Keeps Not the Sabbath," closes Book III of *Shorter Poems* and is one of Bridges's most moving poetic meditations, and brings us squarely back to our theme of love:

The evening darkens over
 After a day so bright
 The windcapt waves discover
 That wild will be the night.
 There's sound of distant thunder.

The latest sea-birds hover
 Along the cliff's sheer height;
 As in the memory wander
 Last flutterings of delight,
 White wings lost on the white.

There's not a ship in sight;
 And as the sun goes under
 Thick clouds conspire to cover
 The moon that should rise yonder.
 Thou art alone, fond lover.

So the effort is against an indifferent nature as well as the allure of escape, melancholy, an isolated instinct, scientific reason, the survival of a dehumanizing past, and an uncivilizing present. But the struggle bears fruit; despite all, he is able to believe in a god of love. The final achievement is summarized in "The Affliction of Richard." It is a hard-won choice. He is fully aware that he may not attain the ideal at which he aims: "Though I must fear to lose" (l. 5)—"must" in an unemphatic position quietly insisting on the consequences of his own imperfection. He has had to overcome the loss of an original and perhaps too easy faith:

Though thou, I know not why,
Didst kill my childish trust,
That breach with toil did I
Repair, because I must.

(ll. 9-12)

That second much more emphatic "must" enacts the strength and willed determination necessary to reestablish his trust on maturer grounds. And then there were the attacks of "frighting schemes,/ With which the fiends of Hell/ Blaspheme thee" (ll. 13-15), variously interpretable as Victorian science, or the Old Testament conception of God and damnation,¹⁵ or, as I prefer to believe, any allegedly inclusive system of thought which frightens away our hope (including notions of a merciless deity and of a purposeless universe). The poem began with the rather bitter and certainly ironic question "How can I love too much?" (l. 4) and ends this way:

What am I that complain?
The love, from which began
My question sad and vain,
Justifies thee to man.

(ll. 21-24)

This could be from a wise and disillusioned Adam directed at Milton's God.

We come then to "Eros," written in 1899, almost a decade after the publication of "The Affliction of Richard," but in many ways a companion piece. If the earlier poem contemplates the hazards of a strictly Christian faith, this one questions the sufficiency of a conception of strictly physical love. The actual title is the Greek "ΕΡΩΣ": this is, as Donald Stanford says, no mischievous Roman god, but a powerful and proud "king of joy." The poem, through its tetrameter couplets and expressive rhyme ("words that earn their emphasis," says Robert Beum¹⁶), is a controlled investigation of the quality of that power:

Why hast thou nothing in thy face?
 Thou idol of the human race,
 Thou tyrant of the human heart,
 The flower of lovely youth that art;
 Yea, and that standest in thy youth
 An image of eternal Truth,
 With thy exuberant flesh so fair,
 That only Pheidias might compare,
 Ere from his chaste marmoreal form
 Time had decayed the colours warm;
 Like to his gods in thy proud dress,
 Thy starry sheen of nakedness.

(ll. 1-12)

The poem opens with a question that seems itself to grow out of the answer to a prior inquiry as the poet gazes into the face, of what is probably a statue of Eros, searching for a meaning. The tone then is one of critical disappointment just as the expected awe is declining. It grows into defiance in the next two lines: we expect more of our gods. This can only be a false god, an impostor, yet, despite the absence of divine depth, able to attract the passionate devotion of the whole "human race," so powerful in its ability to deceive. But we expect more of ourselves as well. Willingly to idolize that which rules absolutely, unrestrained by law, over the "human heart" (the repeated "human" insisting upon the generality of the statement—this is no mere personal lament or confession) is a sin against being itself. Before the sentence ends, however, and as the series of appositional phrases seem to continue (each emphatically contained within its own line), the poet abruptly qualifies his criticism, suggesting the possible benefit of Eros's pervasive influence over us. I say that the appositional phrases *seem* to continue: it is not until the end of line four that we realize that "flower" is not in direct series with "idol" and "tyrant," but rather the object of a restrictive clause modifying the compound subject "idol" and "tyrant" (thou idol and tyrant that art the flower and that standest...). What may at first appear to be an unnecessary inversion, then, in line four, is there to give us the full force of an abrupt change of tone ("idol" to "tyrant" to "flower" in exactly the same place in each of these consecutive lines), in order to account partially at least for the almost inevitably enslaving attraction, without denying the proper, more complex, modifications. That is, Eros is not sometimes idol, sometimes tyrant, and sometimes flower of youth; he is primarily the idol and tyrant who is also the image in this awesomely base form of an eternal truth. Robert Beum makes the point succinctly:

The point of view is far from anything like a barren Puritanism. After all, Eros is a "king of joy", even "An image of eternal Truth" (a phrase delicately ironic but also literal). In sensuous beauty are the beginnings of heavenly beauty, and Bridges's own worship was a worship of Beauty—though as a means to the highest evolution of mind and soul, not as an end in itself. This contemplation of physical beauty gives rise to an awareness of the existence—and, vaguely, intimations of the quality—of heavenly beauty. (175)

The highest does not stand without the lowest. I would simply emphasize that Bridges is careful to give (however subtly) grammatical precedence to the unregenerate ("shameless," he says later) victimizer. The charitable manner that Beum and later Stanford detect in the poem is there, but it is secondary to the firm moral criticism of isolated physicality. In following the ephemeral "flower" with "youth," and then repeating that word in the next line, Bridges reinforces the grammatical point.

We are still only half way through the sentence. Line 7 sums up, in "exuberant flesh," the dual attitude, the first word giving, the second taking away. This prepares for the reference to Pheidias, perhaps the greatest ancient sculptor, who could capture god-like beauty and power in "marmoreal" forms, but such forms are finally and only polished surfaces and lifeless bulk, imitations (as Eros is only an imitation) of true divinities.¹⁷ But there is also a submerged dissimilarity between this statue of Eros and those of Pheidias (no Pheidian Eros is known) brought to the surface by the opposition of "chaste" in line 9 and "nakedness" in line 12. Pheidias's statues are usually draped, with "proud dress," and, most significantly, have good reason to be proud (his most famous statues are, of course, the Athena in the Parthenon and the Zeus made for the temple at Olympia). Eros's nakedness is his badge of singular power, he wears it proudly; but again, to emphasize his lack of mind (all too present if we recall Athena), Bridges describes the "starry sheen" of his naked body, a lustrous *surface* only, and reminds us in line 10 of Time's inevitable effects on even marble bodies. The implicit warning is to the human worshippers of this god of sensuous experience.

The second stanza begins by answering the question that opened the first stanza, summing up thereby the full implications of the intervening lines:

Surely thy body is thy mind,
 For in thy face is nought to find,
 Only the soft unchristen'd smile,
 That shadows neither love nor guile,

But shameless will and power immense,
 In secret sensuous innocence.
 (ll. 13-18)

His thoughtlessness means of course that he has neither the wits to beguile others nor the sympathetic knowledge to love another. The pre-Christian and unsanctified smile, then, is without consciousness of guilt; it reveals simply a raw will and power. The "sensuous innocence" is "secret" perhaps because it is a pure state, which man cannot know. But man, who can will his own incompleteness, can be evil if he makes of Eros an idol and tyrant.¹⁸

The final stanza develops the notion of Eros as essential, as innocent, inquiring after whatever thought such a body-mind can have:

O king of joy, what is thy thought?
 I dream thou knowest it is nought,
 And wouldst in darkness come, but thou
 Makest the light where'er thou go.
 Ah yet no victim of thy grace,
 None who e'er long'd for thy embrace,
 Hath cared to look upon thy face.

(ll. 19-25)

Bridges speculates on what it is to be powerful and conscious of one's own mindlessness: one consequence is a certain shyness before one's devotees. Bridges thereby meshes myth and common reality: sexual activity tends to intensify at night (perhaps because of a latent sense of shame in the participants themselves). The paradox of darkness and light calls to mind the fallen Prince of Light in the dark flames of Milton's Hell. And Satan did provide Adam and Eve with the "light" of forbidden knowledge. Eros is not in any significant sense a Satanic figure, but he does provide the context for the evil of others. He can only make the light for others, he does not bring it for them: Bridges's meaning seems to be (and here I disagree somewhat with Beum who says light becomes in the stanza "a metaphor of sense experience") that those whom Eros visits often feel or want to believe that sexual passion is a good in itself—the light is their delusion of the adequacy of physical love. Like Eros himself, the light is false. They become victims (there is no equivocation in these final lines) of their desire; that is the only blessing ("grace" must be a pun) conferred on them. And, like the partially conscious Eros, they know there is nothing in his face; they agree to remain in joy in darkness. While not a love poem in the conventional sense of one of the many forms of declaration of love from one to another, it is nonetheless Bridges's greatest poem about

love, and, I believe, one of the greatest in our language. The insights are not original, but they have never been so succinctly, honestly, and powerfully expressed. It is the poem we should have in mind as we read love poems.

That Bridges could be playful with this subject is evident in a poem like "Rondeau" (from Book I of *Shorter Poems*). Cupid replaces his Greek original here. There's that wonderful descriptive line telling us that after dipping his "shafts" in "juice of plants that no bee sips," he goes out hunting, "Hanging his quiver at his hips" (ll. 2, 5). The rest of this short poem centers on a witty turn. If a maiden but

Suck from the wound the blood that drips,
And drink the poison from the wound,

(ll. 11-12)

a remedy is found that strips the shafts of "their deadly terror"—only the terror, not the consequences of the poison. But that is hardly a characteristic Bridges love poem. With the effort behind him, the battle engaged and won, or at least the dangers fully and deeply acknowledged, he is capable, like few others of the age that ushered in our cynical self-conscious one, of light and joyous love poems. Commentators frequently see similarities with Elizabethan lyricists, especially Shakespeare, Campion, and the song writers. There is that most delicate "My Spirit Kisseth Thine," which appears to blur the transition from love of woman to love of God:

My spirit kisseth thine,
My spirit embraceth thee:
I feel thy being twine
Her graces over me.

(ll. 1-4)

Rarely distant from his expressions of love (physical and spiritual) are reminders of the superiority of mature over youthful love. "Let truth be told," he says in "So Sweet Love Seemed," "love will change in growing old." In the end we will quite forget "the pleasure that was all in all."

His little spring, that sweet we found,
So deep in summer floods is drowned,
I wonder, bathed in joy complete,
How love so young could be so sweet.

(ll. 13-16)

The maturity of his view also encompasses gratitude:

Since now I see in the measure
 Of all my giving and taking,
 Thou wert my hand in the making
 The sense and soul of my pleasure;

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

(“Since Thou, O Fondest and Truest”, ll. 9-16)

It is (again) an Aristotelean, not just a Christian, point: loving is more of the essence of friendship than being loved (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 8). And mutual loving is the reward:

When my love was away,
 Full three days were not sped,
 I caught my fancy astray
 Thinking if she were dead.

(“When My Love Was Away,” ll. 1-4)

But Bridges can go further than Wordsworth, further than his own feelings. The lover rides quickly to her, and she is also tearful. The poem ends with her words:

O now thou art come, she cried,
 'Tis fled: but I thought to-day
 I never could here abide,
 If thou wert longer away.

(ll. 17-20)

A line near the end of “La Gloire de Voltaire” says it simply and profoundly: “But man’s true praise, the poet’s praise, is love.”

Of all the major poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Bridges is probably the one least read and valued today. The causes are not difficult to detect: his reputation, false but persistent, as an unadventurous classicist, and the preference of our century for personal dramatics and cryptic or exotic intellectualisms in its poetry. But the poems I have discussed here, especially “Eros,” “The Affliction of Richard,” “Elegy: Summer House on the Mound,” “The Evening Darkens Over,” “Low Barometer,” and “So Sweet Love Seemed that April Morn” rank with the best poems of that period. That is not a new claim, nor does my list significantly differ from that of the few readers who have studied and written about his work, but the claim is one whose frequency has dropped off markedly since the 1920s. It is our shame and our poetry’s loss. We miss part of our own possibilities when we ignore a great artist. More specifically, and this has been my

emphasis here, the poems dealing with the efforts and satisfactions of mature love make a particularly strong case for Bridges's modernity, for his recuperative value late in our century, a century with an impoverished tradition of love poetry.

NOTES

1. *The Faber of Love Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 14.
2. "The Mind of Modernism," in *Modernism*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 71-82.
3. All citations from Bridges's poems are from *Bridges: Poetical Works*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford U.P., 1971).
4. Donald Stanford, *In the Classic Mode: the Achievement of Robert Bridges* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1978), 10. See especially sonnet 4 for more obvious proof of that enthusiasm.
5. All citations from Meredith's poems are from *The Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (New York: Random House, 1968).
6. Quoted by John Sparrow, ed., *Robert Bridges: Poetry and Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), xxxii.
7. *The Four Loves* (London: Fontana, 1963 [1st publ. 1960]), 111-112.
8. Edward Thompson, *Robert Bridges 1844-1930* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1944), 26.
9. *New Bearings in English Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963 [1st publ. 1932]), 25.
10. Walter de la Mare, quoted by Sparrow, xxxviii.
11. Coventry Patmore, quoted by Sparrow, xxiv.
12. For instance, V. de S. Pinto in *Crisis in English Poetry 1880-1940* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967), 72; and David Perkins in *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890's to Pound, Eliot, & Yeats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1976), 172.
13. W. B. Yeats, *Selected Criticism*, ed. Norman Jeffares (London: Pan, 1964), 221.
14. Stanford, 10.
15. Stanford, 36; Albert Guerard, Jr., *Robert Bridges: A Study of Traditionalism in Poetry* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965 [1st publ. 1942]), 73.
16. "Profundity Revisited: Bridges and His Critics," *Dalhousie Review*, 44 (Summer, 1964), 178.
17. I am tempted also to suggest (but I realize it is a bit far-fetched) that the allusion may also carry the reference to the famous fall of Pheidias, the charges of embezzlement and impiety brought against him by the enemies of his patron, Pericles. The last charge is especially relevant to Bridges's portrayal of Eros. Pheidias was supposed to have introduced into his depiction of the battle of the Amazons, on the shield of Athena, his own likeness and that of Pericles. Likewise mankind exalts physical love into an idol, or gives undue reverence to a minor god. One might counter that the charge of fraud is not relevant, since in line 16 we are told that Eros is without guile, but the worshipper—Bridges's real target throughout the poem—can be said to be a self-deceiver, appropriating his own body, that which is only entrusted to his care, to his own pleasurable use.
18. Beum, 176.