

Literary Dimensions of *Robert Elsmere*: Idea, Character, and Form

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Two recent studies of the Victorian religious upheaval have drawn considerable attention to *Robert Elsmere*—published in 1888 by Mary Augusta Ward, the niece of Matthew Arnold and granddaughter of Rugby's Thomas Arnold. Neither of them, however, fully treats the issue of closure and ideological crisis in the novel. In *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* Robert Lee Wolff rightly recognizes that Mrs. Ward's book, with its emphasis on philanthropy as a cure for the unbelief caused by biblical criticism and skepticism toward Christian evidences, was, far more than frequently discussed texts like George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, "the great classic novel of Victorian doubt."¹ And in *Victorian Heretic: Mrs. Humphry Ward's Robert Elsmere*, William S. Peterson has definitively established the chronology of the book as May, 1882, to May, 1886.²

What remains to be analyzed is the problem of the relationship between the ideological tension and the lack of closure in the novel, for there is a very definite correlation between ideology and form which becomes more evident when we explore the way in which Mrs. Ward illustrates the relationship between biblical criticism, religion, and science, and the way in which the novel comes to a close. On the one hand, Peterson suggests that *Robert Elsmere* was intended to attain a certain literary stature.³ However, Wolff dismisses the whole issue by stating that "the novel . . . has high literary merit . . . [but in] the end, literary merit is and will remain a matter of taste."⁴

As useful as these additions to Victorian scholarship have proved to be, they do not exhaust the interacting of the artistic and ideological factors in the production of Mrs. Ward's novel. Reiterating what U. C. Knoepfelmacher said more than ten years ago, both Peterson and Wolff maintain that *Robert Elsmere* is best analyzed as a work of historical fiction.⁵ Consequently, the relationship between the ideological and aesthetic strata of *Robert Elsmere* has been both misjudged and misrepresented. A reconsideration of the book will reveal that the ideological endorsement of science has rich artistic consequences.

Robert Elsmere is a *roman à thèse* confronting head-on a mid- to late-nineteenth century development seen most frequently among the intellectual elite of England and discussed in literature from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" to Edmund

¹Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p. 454.

²William S. Peterson, *Victorian Heretic: Mrs. Humphry Ward's Robert Elsmere* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1976), p. 231.

³Peterson, p. 121.

⁴Wolff, p. 458.

⁵U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater, and Samuel Butler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 4.

Gosse's *Father and Son*. Mary Ward's hero is a minister whose very being finds expression in faith, for the concern for religious truth remains after formal ties with the Church are broken. The intellect transforms Elsmere's belief, yet as the author states, "after the crash, *faith* emerged as strong as ever, only craving and eager to make a fresh peace, a fresh compact with the reason."⁶ And it is this very statement which must be analyzed in its relation to the book's ending.

As a cultural document, this weighty text may be perceived as a highly successful rendering of Mrs. Humphry Ward's conclusion that it is impossible to embrace the insights and method of biblical criticism while engaging in the act of unquestioning religious faith.⁷ The formal choice of the open ending mirrors an ideological *aporia* in Victorian society, while suggesting that one's loyalty should favor inquiry over a religious leader. And the technique of the novel, as Mark Schorer has said, must be seen as the author's "means . . . of discovering, exploring, developing . . . [her] subject, conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it."⁸ *Robert Elsmere* should then be viewed as an unusually subtle work of fiction whose form reflects its author's commitment not so much to create *homo religiosus*, as to join faith and reason and thereby foster critical inquiry.

Before discussing the impact of science upon form, it is well to be clear about what Mrs. Ward understood by science. Previous analyses have failed to focus squarely upon the tension in the novel, which is caused by the interplay of rationalism and anti-intellectualism. That is, Mrs. Ward suggests that critical inquiry or the spirit of science is causing cultural upheaval. Interestingly, this interpretation had been articulated in a letter by T. H. Huxley to Charles Kingsley, which suggested that religion could be saved "from the rise of science by combining it with the spirit of science."⁹

In its fullest sense, Victorian science, from Mrs. Ward's perspective, is understood as an attitude of mind or critical methodology applied specifically to historical or biblical criticism and, ultimately, to faith. What the author imposes upon her hero is an Arnoldian solution, a stance halfway between orthodoxy, which she finds unreasonable, and rationalism, which appears potentially destructive to her. In particular, Elsmere, a projection of Mrs. Ward, comes to think more deeply than he did in his days at Oxford, when he first endorses science for its rational method rather than its addition to knowledge. Consequently, the impact of the critical spirit in the novel is seen in the traditional Victorian conflict between head and heart. And Mary Ward reveals her bias toward the progressive scientific mind as opposed to a prescientific spirit.

By considering the method of science rather than scientific advance as both a constructive and destructive force in matters of religion, one comes to understand that the ideas are reflected in the form, and that *Robert Elsmere* makes a cultural statement. After all, Mrs. Ward herself observed in her introduction to the Westmoreland Edition that in terms of "the main Darwinian battle . . . it was in literature, history, and theology that evolutionary conceptions were most

⁶Mrs. Humphry Ward, *Robert Elsmere*, 1st ed. (London: Smith, Elder, 1888), III, 39.

⁷W. E. Gladstone affirmed that the book "represents a battle between intellect and emotion. Of right, intellect wins; and, having won, enlists emotion in its service." Rt. Hon. William E. Gladstone, "Robert Elsmere and the Battle of Belief," *Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Leonard Scott Publishing Company, 1888), p. 3.

⁸Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," *The Hudson Review*, 1, No. 1 (Spring 1948), 67.

⁹Knoepfmacher, p. 28.

visibly and dramatically at work."¹⁰ The rise of science, Mrs. Ward thus recognized, was accompanied by a critical spirit which some reflective Victorians, like herself, welcome in their attempt to find answers to their questions about faith.

In this regard, *Robert Elsmere* is best understood as an instance of the way in which the scientific spirit (not science) in the guise of biblical criticism was shaking the foundations of the intellectual elite in nineteenth-century England. And it exemplifies in its very form the author's continued concern over the impact of this development. Moreover, perceiving this overall feature of the novel enables the reader to grasp the significance of the ending. In *The Genesis of Secrecy* Frank Kermode has said just this, for "without some foreunderstanding of the whole we can make no sense of the part . . ."¹¹

But the great church historian Owen Chadwick neglects the aesthetic factor, then asserts that the author's crisis of faith—and by implication Elsmere's—is unrelated to science: "Notice that science had nothing to do with it."¹² Likewise, Robert Lee Wolff says that science is unimportant in Elsmere's life.¹³ Emphasizing the confessional element of the novel, William S. Peterson appears to be more concerned with content than method.¹⁴ And U.C. Knoepfelmacher refers to Mrs. Ward's support of the "scientific" spirit but his argument, too, does not unfold and demonstrate this idea.¹⁵ The following analysis discloses the formal and ideational dimensions of the open ending as a single aesthetic unity.

An examination of the relationship of poetic texture to the problem of the invasion of the spirit of science reveals the rich implications of the problem of closure in *Robert Elsmere*. For here an aesthetic phenomenon directly reflects a cultural issue. In other words, open form was brought about by a nagging cultural question that could not be answered. This open form is evident in the way in which Mrs. Ward's novel, in a spirit of ideological compromise, has Robert's "quiet evolution of character through circumstance"¹⁶ culminate in the determination to reconceptualize the Christ. The ending is rendered highly problematic by virtue of its openness on both aesthetic and ideological grounds, in that shortly after the climax, the hero dies. Kermode might well be thinking of an ending such as this when he asks readers to observe "the absence of some usual satisfactions, the disappointment of conventional expectations . . . [which] connote the existence of other satisfactions, inaccessible to those who see without perceiving and hear without understanding."¹⁷ He also suggests that by coming to terms with a specific dimension of a work, we may then grasp the significance of the whole of the text. Precisely for this reason the end of *Robert Elsmere* merits analysis in terms of an openness that is embodied both ideologically and formally.

¹⁰Mrs. Humphry Ward, *The Writings of Mrs. Humphry Ward: Robert Elsmere* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), I, xxii.

¹¹Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 5.

¹²Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972), II, 141.

¹³Wolff, p. 459.

¹⁴Peterson, see pp. 15-16.

¹⁵Knoepfelmacher, p. 8.

¹⁶Janet Penrose Trevelyan, *The Life of Mrs. Humphry Ward* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1923), p. 55.

¹⁷Kermode, p. 7.

The ending is indeed problematic, because Elsmere has found a comfortable religious stance, but Mrs. Ward has him die just after his religious views are translated into action. Is the author suggesting that his spiritual quest has ended and he therefore must die? If this is the case, why does she use "the well-tried and still popular mid-Victorian recipe, rich and varied in its scenes and characters, streaked with judicious laughter and . . . tears"¹⁸ and then jolt the reader by presenting a short, innovative (for 1888) open ending? In other words, what is the rationale behind the decision to use a conventional fictional mode to express one's views on Anglican church history and the choice of what might appear to be an inappropriate conclusion?

From a different perspective, it may be argued that the ending of *Robert Elsmere* is unsuited to the book as reflecting the author's inability to maintain a balance between the intellectual and the poetic. Then Mrs. Ward could be faulted for a failure of imagination in resorting to the death of her hero. Moreover, she could be criticized for attracting those interested in the Victorian ferment without presenting an analysis of its significance. In this regard, Mrs. Ward could then be accused of lacking the imaginative resources to portray the intellectual and emotional opportunities available to her character.

But the answer to these possible charges Mary Ward herself provided in a remark about her *roman à clef* showing "a certain representative and pioneering force."¹⁹ This seemingly casual statement actually is the key to her narrative technique. For when one asks what *Robert Elsmere* represents, and in what way is it pioneering, an analysis that is both aesthetic and ideational becomes necessary. From this standpoint, the book is on the frontier of the Victorian religious and scientific debate. Thus, a superficial analysis might suggest that the inability to solve the problem is an artistic failure. The analysis here suggests, on the contrary, that the absence of closure is both ideologically necessary and aesthetically inevitable.

Although in most novels the death of the hero is ordinarily a sign of closure, in *Robert Elsmere* Mrs. Ward uses this narrative device for precisely the opposite purpose. Its function is to reveal the fact that the focus is upon critical inquiry (the scientific spirit), not the specific character who manifests it and who represents a particular religious position. Preparing us for this development, the author remarks in an early Westmoreland scene that the hero's hair has been cut short because of a fever. From the outset, then, Robert is a Samson sapped of his physical strength. The author thus communicates less interest in *him*, than in what he finally discloses aesthetically and ideologically. From this perspective, the religious crisis may be perceived at once as a beginning and an ending. It, too, is a form of fever, a *delirium tremens* among the intellectual elite marking the transition from one ideological stance to another. Such illness is evident in other semi-autobiographical novels, including Samuel Butler's *Ernest Pontifex, or The Way of All Flesh*, begun about 1872, and William Hale White's *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*, completed just seven years before the publication of *Robert Elsmere*.

Like a sacred text, then, Mrs. Ward's novel comes to be seen as having secrets, in Kermode's sense, lending themselves to interpretation by "those who seek spiritual senses behind the carnal."²⁰ That is, one has at the end of the book

¹⁸Enid Huws Jones, *Mrs. Humphry Ward* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 81.

¹⁹Mrs. Humphry Ward, *A Writer's Recollections*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1918) II, p. 99.

²⁰Kermode, p. 20.

an acute lack of a sense of closure on both the aesthetic and ideological level. For the attention has been upon the minister whose life is influenced by a number of characters, but then he is abandoned. And this idea of closure which is not a closure has been beautifully suggested by J. Hillis Miller in his perceptive theoretical discussion of novelistic ending: "This ending must . . . simultaneously be thought of as a tying up, a neat knotting leaving no loose threads hanging out, no characters unaccounted for, and at the same time as an untying, as the combing out of the tangled narrative threads so that they may be clearly seen, shining side by side, all mystery or complexity revealed."²¹ Applying this method to *Robert Elsmere*, one may interpret the formal embodiment of Mrs. Ward's view of the impossibility of unifying the older and newer religious position with which Elsmere comes into contact. Moreover, the novelist's indication that the focus is less upon human life than the life of ideas viewed scientifically is disclosed.

The key here is Mary Ward's evident indifference to Elsmere's death. The author wants the reader to turn away from the character and become immersed in the scientific spirit. As Kermode has indicated in *The Sense of an Ending*, "Men, like poets . . . die in mediis rebus."²² And Hugh Flaxman's question about the longevity of the sect bears this out, as does Catherine's attendance at two kinds of church services. Through Elsmere's openness to religious inquiry fostered by the critical spirit, Mrs. Ward seeks to advance religion beyond the death of any religious hero. The scientific spirit therefore necessitates openness in an aesthetic sense. The narrative is seen here as operating on levels of proclamation and silence. Thus, the lack of closure suggests the openness brought about in response to the spirit of science itself, and the importance of critical thinking over physical existence. This orientation releases Mrs. Ward herself, along with the reader who stands on the inside, from the burden of reflecting upon Elsmere as a representative human being when the main concern is how he utilizes scientific inquiry. In addition, it spares the author's characterization from the possibility of becoming rigid in terms of its perspective of scientific thinking. Thus, Elsmere is left standing in direct contrast with the other characters whose positions are absolutely fixed. And the reader is asked to look beyond him to what the novel has really been communicating.

The validity of arguing that the spirit of science has transformed what would normally be closure into non-closure is reinforced by the lines on the last page of the novel. After three long volumes, Mary Ward uses just a few lines plus a slightly modified stanza from Arthur Clough to state that the New Brotherhood of Christ, Robert's religious sect of working class laborers who endorse faith over creed, is flourishing and will continue to flourish. These closing statements are not truly a closure, but only a perfunctory gesture. Indeed, with them the author dispenses with the whole apparatus of closure. And there is a good reason for this. If the reader's focus were more on character than idea, this would most certainly be a flaw. But Mrs. Ward does this to suggest that her spotlight is primarily upon idea, not character. That is, she is more interested in the continuation of the idea than her hero. In short, as fiction mirrors history, the lack of closure in *Robert Elsmere* reflects what Miller is referring to in another context when he says that "the whole drama is ending and beginning at once, a beginning/ending which . . . [pre-supposes] something outside of itself, something anterior or ulterior."²³

²¹J. Hillis Miller, "The Problematic of Ending in Narrative," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33, 1 (June 1978), 5.

²²Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 7.

²³Miller, p. 4.

The ending, then, comes as a double surprise. For in a seemingly simple narrative structure, it may be seen as operating on two levels. First, it is harmonious with the text which has prepared the reader for the death of the hero. This closure which is no closure is as distressing and perplexing as the issue under discussion and thereby engages the reader's sympathy for the author's intellectual stance and compassion toward the culture's upheaval. The technique also affirms Mary Ward's advocacy of openness, so that the ideological stance becomes manifest in the ending.

Then, more subtly, the ending evolves into a masterly critique of culture. This second, less expected development relates to Mrs. Ward's understanding of the evolutionary quality of novel writing and novel reading. Believing and showing, as a contemporary critic remarked, "that the present grows out of the past,"²⁴ the author is demonstrating that the scientific spirit must be nurtured, but that it must not be allowed to overtake narrative responses to culture, or culture itself. That is, a novel, particularly when it examines religion, must not be reduced to analysis: it needs to retain its aesthetic qualities and not become obsessed with scientific inquiry or the scientific spirit. Fiction, in the words of Leslie Fiedler, existing in a culturally ambiguous situation, "serves as the scriptures of an underground religion."²⁵ In this regard, Elsmere's death, which occurs when the hero seems to be at his zenith, becomes a celebration of the essential mystery of human culture²⁶ and the manifestation of it through the imagination.

²⁴J. Wedgewood, "Fiction and Faith," *The Contemporary Review*, 62 (August 1892), 219.

²⁵Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End* (New York: Stein and Day, 1964), p. 174.

²⁶This perspective was suggested by a reading of Vernon Lee, a Victorian critic. See Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 106.