Most Beautiful Maynard

There is an old photograph that hangs in my parents' house of my paternal grandmother, Naomi Bentwich, surrounded by her sisters and brothers, taken in 1913. Eleven children and their proud parents, poised in and around the porticoed entrance to their St John’s Wood home. Naomi looks young for her age, twenty two but still chubby and with a lively, knowing expression, as if she'd just seen something that had amused her. She wasn't a beauty like her sisters Lilian or Nita, nor was she musically talented, like Margery or Thelma. She was known in the family as a witty observer of others, and a natural among children. Years later, she would be described by one of her sisters as a 'prodigal child', and I like to think that something of that waywardness lives in the frankness of her gaze to camera.

When I knew her, Naomi was in her eighties and nineties, extremely deaf and, by my reckoning at the time, too old to talk to. She would try to comb my hair. Her cutlery was never quite clean. She looked ancient. I didn't know then that I was one of her 'ups' in her see-sawing moods, or that she had, as a younger woman, experienced enough heartache to make my own teenage hang-ups seem trivial.

It has only been recently - as a result of reading her diaries, letters and unpublished memoir - that I have become acquainted with her extraordinary story, and in particular, with the passionate, near life long relationship she believed she held with the economist John Maynard Keynes.

Naomi's love of Keynes was no infatuation; rather it lasted a lifetime, and it was born out of a deep idealism. She wrote that she began to 'hero-worship' Keynes even before meeting him, while typing up the manuscript of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* at the Cambridge University Typewriting Office. Naomi had been a pacifist and member of the No Conscription Fellowship during the war, and could 'barely contain' her 'excitement and enthusiasm' as she read Keynes' 'thrilling' indictment of the Allies' punitive reparations policy towards Germany. She plucked up the courage to write to him offering her services as a secretary, and Keynes, overloaded with work, offered her a job.

When Naomi received the offer she was on a restorative hike in the Swiss Alps, recovering from the unravelling of her relationship and annulled engagement to her tutor in logic, William Ernest Johnson. It was a source of continual frustration to Johnson that at the age of 56,

he – Sidgwick Lecturer in Moral Science and Fellow of King's College Cambridge - had published nothing more distinguished than a primer in trigonometry. Naomi had proposed to him that they collaborate over the publication of his logic lectures, and volunteered herself as typist, co-editor, emotional prop and general gadfly, goading him into action over a period of years (in tandem with a fitful, 'passionately cerebral', love affair). 'What greater blessing in life', she wrote, 'other than to be in constant touch with his great mind, lifted high above the nagging pain of the war, living in the light of understanding'. In 1921, the first of three volumes of *Logic* was published to critical acclaim, leading to Johnson being elected as a fellow to the British Academy in 1923. Naomi had helped 'Johnnie' to transform his fortunes in the autumn of his career, even as their relationship crumbled, and he would remain her loyal confidante until his death in 1931. The preface to the first volume carries a heart-felt acknowledgement: 'I have to express my great obligations to my former pupil, Miss Naomi Bentwich, without whose encouragement and valuable assistance in the composition and arrangement of the work, it would not have been produced in its present form'.

When Naomi took up her position as Keynes' secretary in the autumn of 1920, she initially found his 'brusque' manner and habit of finishing

off her sentences disconcerting, and a contrast to Johnson's self-deprecating, rambling style. It wasn't long though before Naomi sensed a change in the temperature of their relations. Ordinary transactions became supercharged with erotic potential. A sheaf of papers passed from his hands to hers carried, she wrote, an 'electric thrill'. The touch of his fingers was like 'cool silk'. On another occasion Keynes 'stopped dead' in the middle of his dictation, apparently unable to recall the name of the Albanian finance minister. There were telling incidents involving fumbled door latches, charged looks and broken pencil nibs. Nothing was said but everything was implicit. Stealing glances at her employer in his King's College rooms, she couldn't imagine a more beautiful man: 'His long, exquisitely graceful lines, so that his body curved into a big query; his face pale and nervous; his eyelashes long and black half-obscuring liquid beaming eyes'.

Naomi became convinced that Keynes had fallen precipitously in love with her, and this belief filled her with dread. The littleness of her, the greatness of him! 'I felt suddenly afraid of him', she wrote in her diary. 'He's much too brilliant for me,' Yet, almost immediately, another sentiment reared up: Keynes was arrogant, overweening. He probably viewed her as 'a pure, violet-like thing suddenly fallen across his path'; someone to be dallied with, but not a serious proposition. He had

never given her a chance to reveal her own thoughts or accomplishments. He was toying with her, wondering whether to stoop to her level, preoccupied by what his snooty friends might think. Using the romantic novels of George Meredith as a guide, Naomi arrived at an understanding of the psychology of her suitor: 'the pristine male, if resisted in his suing, concludes that he is scorned, and is infuriated'. Her diary entries from this time lurch wildly in tone, from rhapsodic imaginings of their future life together to denunciations of his treachery. She fantasises too about turning the tables on the great one: 'HE rejected by his little Jewish secretary whom he has deigned to favour with his love!'

Struggling to regain her equilibrium, Naomi took the measure of the task ahead: 'I am going to concentrate on making Keynes a better man: it is a more difficult task than getting Johnson to write the Logic, and it needs absolutely different talents – subtlety, humour, tact, brilliance – all sorts of qualities I haven't got…but I shall never despair of myself so long as I can see clearly what ought to be done'.

After weeks of ragged nights and nerves, she picked up a pen on 29 April 1921 and wrote him a letter.

My most dear Keynes,

Because the new pain you have inflicted on me today seems to me unnecessary, inasmuch as it is due to a misinterpretation of my conduct, I am sending you something I wrote in agony to you one of the many sleepless nights when you were away.

I do understand you – I'm quite sure I do. You see, I must not be broken by your passion, because it would only mean misery to us both later on; for I am simply not the kind of person you thought I was when you tried to win me that way. But neither am I the intriguing thing I think you thought me this evening. I have been playing your game simply for your sake, because I have for you the kind of love that sees the loved one's faults, and wants to cure them. There is a strength in goodness that there is in nothing else in the universe; and with that strength added to all the power of good that you have in you, you would be the veritable King of Kings I love to think you.Your great fault is your egoism. It makes you unwilling to take any risks, and that is a great practical weakness: it has put you in my power twice, for instance, in this silly game of intrigue that we've been playing together. But worse than that, it makes you terribly cruel sometimes: to protect yourself, or to get what you want, you allow yourself to do ignoble things, which I know you

> condemn in an hour of cool judgement. It seems to me, if I can make you love me in a self-forgetful way, it would be a way of giving you the strength you need. That's all I am trying to do.

Keynes invited Naomi over for a chat. 'Oh Miss Bentwich', he joshed gently, 'that letter, how could you!' Of course she couldn't go on working for him, but she might as well finish typing up the Decennial Index to the *Economic Journal*. Naomi interpreted this rebuff as a positive. She had seen what was in Keynes' eyes when he turned her away – 'that mysterious exchange of looks' - and she refused to take his words at face value. Did he, she asked him after this encounter, mean what he said? 'Of course', Keynes snapped back, unaccustomed to having his powers of expression challenged. 'Of course I meant literally and exactly what I wrote to you on April 30th and told you shortly afterwards; I beg that you will not delude yourself about it'.

By the summer of 1921, Naomi had finished work on the *Economic Journal*. She was thirty, out of a job, and no longer in the orbit of the man she loved. It was to be a summer of signs and wonders. A glance at Keynes' window at Kings confirmed Naomi's suspicions. It was open, not closed – a sure indicator that he had her on his mind. She returned to her rooms at 33 Owlstone Road, elated by his signal. Not

long after this fresh evidence of Keynes' love, she made a startling new discovery. Keynes had written an article on European reconstruction for the *Manchester Guardian*, and there, between the lines, was a secret message to her. The article, 'The Threat to Civilisation', developed the theme Keynes had expounded in his *Consequences of the Peace*:

> The nations blundered into a great war. That might be excusable. Once in the war they could not stop till one side was thoroughly beaten. That is easily understood. It is the peace which cannot be forgiven; and if the peace itself could be forgiven to the passions of the time, the frustration of the efforts to undo its wrongs is deliberate and persistent. We are forced to recognise a deep-seated disharmony in our civilisation, something wrong within the nations which comes out in their dealings with one another.

Naomi pencilled her annotations in the margin of the article: 'The peace – my effort to undo its wrongs. His frustration of my effort. His attempt to undo its wrongs'. She had cracked his 'magical method' of communicating with her, and their separation was no longer a bar. The article wasn't an isolated incident either. 'I see myself all interwoven in

your work', she wrote excitedly to him.

So began a period of fastidious album keeping that would last for six years. As if pressing flowers, Naomi would gather together Keynes' articles and preserve them in small leather bound albums. After cutting and pasting the columns, she would write letters in response, and copy and paste her handwritten letters alongside Keynes' printed words. In this way, in her mind, she maintained a correspondence. Over the years she would detect Keynes' numinous presence throughout the *Manchester Guardian*, and the albums contain unsigned columns and leaders on such subjects as cricket, wild flowers and the weather.

Naomi Hilda Bentwich was born in 1891, the seventh of eleven children. She was raised in a strenuously cultivated, orthodox Jewish family in St John's Wood, not far from Lords. Music and Religion were the twin muses ruling the household, and every child was taught at least one musical instrument and how to read the Torah in Hebrew. Herbert, Naomi's father, was, according to his son Norman, 'the visible representative of God in the house'. Fiercely resistant to the threat of assimilation, he had founded the Hampstead Synagogue in 1892 to counter what he viewed as the 'increasing Anglican propriety' of his

local synagogue in West Hampstead, only to find himself bereft of a pew after one too many disputes over the service.

When Naomi and her siblings were young, Herbert found a channel for his spiritual malcontent in Zionism, and devoted himself to the task of realising Herzl's mantra – 'if you will it, it is no dream'. Palestine became the lodestar of the family as Herbert assumed an ever growing number of responsibilities and leading roles within the movement. 'Give us our share of God's earth', he wrote in the journal *Nineteenth Century*, 'His open sky and free air, and we will resume our ancient nobility, and place in the van of the East a community which shall be a sign and example to those of the West'. Herbert's brand of Zionism was an idiosyncratic mix of romantic nationalism, religious zeal and personal bombast. He alienated many, but within the family, at least for a while, he ruled supreme**.** Naomi's brother Norman wrote: 'From the time my Father fired our youthful imaginations with the idea of Palestine, there was no tranquillity in our minds. Not mild contentment with a happy lot, getting the best of both worlds, was the ideal; but something more heroic, involving sacrifice of an easy life, but kindling ardour in the soul'**.**

Eight of Naomi's sisters and brothers would emigrate from leafy NW6 to Palestine during the rule of the British Mandate, lured by the idea of the Promised Land. But Naomi set her sights instead on Cambridge, and it was there, in defiance of her father and his Zionist aspirations, that her own 'kindling ardour' burst into flame.

In the autumn of 1921, as Keynes pursued his future wife, Lydia Lopokova, from the stalls of London's Alhambra Theatre where she was starring in Diaghilev's production of *The Sleeping Princess*, Naomi took to her digs and wrote an ardent ethical credo, *An Imperative of Conduct,* which ran to 40 pages of typescript. Then she sent it to Keynes with the inscription: 'Here most beautiful Maynard is my soul'. Two weeks later, Naomi received Keynes' eagerly awaited response: 'Thank you for letting me see the enclosed'.

Over the next six years, Naomi's delusion would gather force and momentum, until she was sent, in 1927, by her father, with her sister Margery as a companion, to Arosa, a small village high in the Swiss Alps, which boasted among its chalets a world-class TB sanatorium. The doctors, used to administering treatments for TB, confiscated Naomi's pens and strictly forbade her to read the newspapers. After six months, she was pronounced cured.

Shortly after her convalescence, early in the new year of 1928, Naomi bumped into Jonas Birnberg on the Strand. Jonas was a fellow Jew and Conscientious Objector from her days at Cambridge who had once dared to propose to Naomi and been rebuffed. Perhaps as a Yiddish-speaking boy from Whitechapel, his credentials were not quite suitable. The ten intervening years had given Jonas confidence, however, and he was determined not to miss his chance this time. Naomi was moved by the gentle way he took her arm and shepherded her across the busy road, and after a second proposal, she accepted. Marriage and, soon after, motherhood, suited Naomi, anchoring her in a world without Keynes, and the next chapter of her life was perhaps the happiest of all, free as it seemed to be, of any obsessive thoughts. In 1936, by now a mother of two young boys, she realised her ambition to teach, and founded *Carmelcourt School*, a vegetarian primary school, in her childhood holiday home in Birchington, on the North Kent coast. Alumni from the school recall Naomi as an eccentric but inspiring teacher, taking Eurythmics classes barefoot in the garden, or reading to the children, under an apple tree, passages from *Mein Kampf* 'to better understand the enemy'. Buoyed by sea air and the rewards of motherhood and teaching, Naomi seemed untroubled by Keynes' celebrity. There is no reason to suppose, given the calm

tenor of her life, that the news of his early death on 21 April 1946, would have caused her any great upset. It had been over twenty years, after all, since she had last seen him, and indeed, for a while, the news failed to rouse her.

Listening to the wireless one morning in 1948, Naomi heard that a biography was being written about Keynes, and for a second time in her life, the symptoms of her former illness overwhelmed her. She wrote to Keynes' biographer, Roy Harrod, that she felt 'stirred' to her 'depths'. In addition, she became convinced that she had something important to contribute to the world. Her episode with Keynes had revealed to her an alternative model of relationships which she believed could save humanity from further war. Resisting what she took to have been Keynes' sexual advances all those years ago hadn't just been the behaviour of an affronted young woman, but an anti-war protest, a stand against male-perpetrated aggression. For Naomi now felt sure that she had located the root cause of conflict – unchecked libido: 'What I want to shout from the housetops', she wrote in a letter to the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, 'is that only the creative will is good; that the will-to-power is evil, rooted in lust, and that it is the duty of women (particularly because it is in their power) to check and

sublimate it. But no one hears my call. Meantime we live 'on the brink' of catastrophe'.

It was imperative to capture her thoughts while in the grip of such clarity. Clearing her diary of all commitments, Naomi settled in her study at Carmelcourt 'quite alone', and gave vent to an 'inexorable urge' to write, completing her autobiography, a *Human Testament*, and a personal credo, *Lucifer by Starlight,* in a few breathless weeks. In all, over 1000 pages of typescript.

In 1950 Naomi was nearly sixty and her sons were on the threshold of adulthood. It was then that Jonas, who had been in the dark about the extent of Naomi's fixation with Keynes, stumbled on her diaries. He wrote her a letter that no longer survives, but Naomi's written response is still among her papers. She quotes from Jonas' rueful starting point: 'I lived in a land of wishful thinking and unrealised dreams'. Then she sets him to task for deigning to suggest that she might have deceived him over the nature of her love.

> As to Keynes; I think I told you that we had loved one another in a way; but you thought it and still think it an illusion. I knew that you were mistaken then, as you are now. Anyone who had

> intimately known and struggled with such a man would have deep scars – I told you about that, did I not? But that isn't incompatible with loving you deeply dear Boy. I could and shall if you will believe what I say, and try and change your values. I think they are changing; and I do love you much more now than I ever have done.

Harrod's biography was published in 1951, and Naomi read it with mounting excitement, for it contained what she took to be the 'missing piece of the jigsaw' to her Keynesian puzzle. Harrod revealed that Keynes had instructed his executors to publish his last book, *Two Memoirs,* posthumously, and Naomi, electrified by this enigmatic fact, had devoured the text searching for clues to Keynes' unusual instruction. 'I am quite sure', she wrote to Bertrand Russell later, 'that "the mental and spiritual adventure" which he mentions in his Melchior memoir refers indirectly to our relationship'. The second memoir, *My Early Beliefs*, was even more 'interwoven' with personal significance, and the text of Naomi's copy is liberally underlined in her forthright hand. Keynes had written this piece as a gentle disavowal of the creed he and his fellow Apostles had reverenced in youth. His depiction of himself and his group as 'immoralists', inspired by G E Moore's *Principia Ethica* to repudiate 'customary morals, conventions and

traditional wisdom', amounted to what Naomi took to be a 'graceful apology from beyond the grave' for acting in such an immoral way towards her. She had given her life-blood to redeem Keynes of his flaws of pride and vanity, and now, through his posthumous instruction, he was making it up to her by acknowledging her loving influence. 'He wanted to let me know', she wrote, 'that he confessed at the end, and that I had not failed as hopelessly as I believed'.

Naomi sent her autobiography and the first five chapters of *Lucifer By Starlight* to an august group of recipients that included Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, G E Moore, Roy Harrod, E M Forster, and two of the more distinguished publishing houses.

Bertrand Russell wasted few words in his response and suggested Naomi consult the services of 'a mental person, preferably a psychiatrist'. Her octagenarian former tutor in moral philosophy, G E Moore, politely turned down a request for a face to face meeting but penned a clause by clause refutation of her claims that ran to several pages. E M Forster returned the manuscript 'apparently untouched' minus Naomi's covering letter, and with no further comment, and both publishers apologised that they could not imagine a market for her manuscript but wished Naomi better luck with another publishing

house. Kindest of all was Aldous Huxley, writing in meditative mode from his home in Los Angeles:

> In this strange world and among its unutterably queer inhabitants, everything, literally everything, is possible. But some things are antecedently improbable. From my own experience and observation, and from the little I knew of Maynard, I should say that the actions you attribute to him and the interpretation you put on certain passages in his writings are antecedently very improbable.

In old age the heat of Naomi's feelings for Keynes cooled, but her attempts to make sense of her experience continued as long as she lived. Naomi was eighty five when she invited Robert Skidelsky, researching his own biography of Keynes, to tea at her house in Blackheath in south east London. By now her thoughts on the matter had undergone further change and taken on an overtly religious cast. Her wrestling with the soul of Keynes recalled, she told Skidelsky, the story of Jacob's struggle with the angel, in which 'his active immorality suddenly caused my Jewish conscience to burst into flame'. When Skidelsky cautiously ventured his own interpretation – could it have been a bodged flirtation? - Naomi was quick to take offence at his

'facile dismissal'. Nonetheless she gave him her memoir and continued to correspond with him intermittently until her death in 1988, aged ninety seven. The first volume of Skidelsky's definitive work came out in 1992 and featured Naomi in a cameo role memorable enough to inspire a Californian indie band to write a song about her in 2007. It's an agreeable, acoustic number, not dissimilar in feel to Simon and Garfunkel's *Mrs Robinson*, but the refrain denies Naomi her dream: 'though you wonder on, Miss Bentwich….I never loved you at all'.

There is, undeniably, a toe-curling aspect to Naomi's claims to Keynes' heart. My father Ben - Naomi's oldest son – was never aware of the extent of his mother's obsession, and while fascinated by her story, finds it hard to read her writing without squirming. But to dismiss Naomi as deluded, as Bertrand Russell did to her immense displeasure, only tells half the story. She was mad about Keynes. But she was at the same time, sane enough to get on with the practical realities of her life: managing a school, bringing up her children, and making the best of her marriage. 'I am a fact which contradicts!', Naomi asserted in 1916, musing on her ambivalent feelings towards her tutor in logic, W E Johnson. As Skidelsky wrote in his response to reading her memoir: 'I suppose Freud would have had a field day, but so what?'