The Figure of Lazarus in Tennyson and Browning

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THE figure of Lazarus makes several interesting appearances in the poetry of Tennyson and Browning: not only as a symbol of the possibility of life after death, but also as a metaphor for the inspired artist who has entered a world beyond that of common experience. He appears overtly in 'In Memoriam' and in 'Karshish'; he is alluded to in 'Andrea del Sarto'; and he also appears, or is implied, in 'Abt Vogler'.[1]

The raising of Lazarus, which prefigures Christ's own resurrection, is narrated only by St John (ch. 11), to whose gospel Browning often alludes (e.g. in 'Fra Lippo Lippi', in 'A Death in the Desert', and at the end of 'Bishop Blougram's Apology'). Both Browning and Tennyson emphasize the most striking feature of the narrative, that Lazarus says nothing concerning his four days out of this life; he just returns to society. He is not only a symbol of God's power made manifest through Christ (John tells us that the Jews sought to put him to death as a dangerous proof of that power) but is also the 'missing link' between this world and the next.

The central moment in St John's narrative comes when Christ says: 'I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.' It is to this great central statement that we must relate Tennyson's use of the Lazarus story in 'In Memoriam'. The poem is a search for a renewal of faith in

[1] The figure of Lazarus will be most familiar to the modern reader from Eliot's 'Prufrock'. I think it likely that he took this, as he took so much else, from his reading of the Victorian poets. The full extent of their influence on him is still, perhaps, not sufficiently a matter of common critical ground. To take a single example, 'Maud', II, ii, contains not only the well-known lines 'And I loathe the squares and streets / And the faces that one meets', echoed in 'Prufrock', but also the line 'Mix not memory with doubt', echoed at the opening of *The Waste Land*.

immortality, that is, in man's power to evolve spiritually both phylogenically and ontogenically. Hallam himself, like Lazarus and Christ, dies and is reborn (Christ himself is significantly referred to in LXXXIV as 'He that died in Holy Land'). The poem speculates about the possibility of communication between Hallam in his 'second state sublime' and the poet left on earth 'evermore a life behind'.

In XIV the poet says he would not think it strange if Hallam were to step alive off the ship which brought his corpse back to England:

> And if along with these should come
> The man I held as half-divine . . .
> And I perceived no touch of change,
> No hint of death in all his frame,
> But found him all in all the same,
> I should not feel it to be strange.

Having thus strikingly expressed his feeling that Hallam has survived death by associating him with Lazarus, Tennyson later introduces Lazarus openly into the poem (XXXI, XXXII),[1] versifying St John's narrative down to the supper-party described at the beginning of ch. 12, at which both Christ and Lazarus were present, and at which Mary anointed Christ's feet:

> her ardent gaze
> Roves from the living brother's face
> And rests upon the Life indeed.

For Tennyson, as for Browning, the Lazarus story was a powerful image or touchstone of their vision of man's spiritual evolution after death, of which Lazarus was vouchsafed a kind of advance preview. This preview serves as a convenient metaphor for the dead Hallam's insight (which he cannot communicate to the living, though the living may guess at it, as they may guess at the experience of Lazarus) into the world beyond death, where he receives

> All knowledge that the sons of flesh
> Shall gather in the cycled times.

[1] Bradley does not connect these two parts of the poem, nor does he offer any commentary on XIV.

Lazarus thus becomes a metaphor for the artist's own visionary glimpse of, or awareness of, an unverifiable reality which transcends our present limited experience. The expression of this vision is, for Browning and Tennyson, the most difficult, and also the most important, task of the creative artist.

In 'Andrea del Sarto' Browning reverts to one of his chief obsessions: the gap between transcendental insight and actual achievement, between the artist's vision and his power to communicate it. Andrea says that the greatest artists have had this vision despite the inadequacy of their executive skill. His own art is technically faultless, but spiritually dead; like Fra Lippo Lippi he 'cannot paint the soul'. He has prostituted his Muse — symbolized in the poem by Lucrezia, his unfaithful wife, who 'sits' for him as his model of the Virgin Mary. He has made an existential choice: to compromise for the sake of immediate profit. In sacrificing the future for the present, he sacrifices immortality (since this depends on faith in the future) and is judged accordingly. He is the antithesis of the Grammarian, who believes that 'man has forever' and can therefore 'trust death' as Andrea cannot: see the end of the poem, where Andrea says of the visionary artists that even in heaven 'still they overcome'. Having chosen to compromise, he has chosen for ever. Discussing the superior spirituality of those artists who have not 'sold out', Andrea says:

> There burns a truer light of God in them,
> In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
> Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
> This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
> Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
> Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
> Enter and take their place there, sure enough,
> Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
> My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.

The reference here is clearly to Lazarus, the 'type' of all who 'come back and cannot tell the world', yet whose continued presence in the world is itself a kind of proof of immortality. Andrea's allusion to Lazarus is immediately, and interestingly, followed by an echo of Claudius's words in *Hamlet*, III.iii: 'My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.' Raphael is a Lazarus-figure, Andrea and Claudius are the antithesis of Lazarus: trapped,

by their own choice, in their sins, their limitations, in the here and now. 'Andrea del Sarto' demands, ironically, both sympathy for, and judgement on, the artist who fails to look beyond this world. The irony of Andrea's worldly success lies precisely in the fact that the world does not judge the artist, or any man, by what he tries to do, only by what he succeeds in doing:

> The world which credits what is done
> Is cold to all that might have been.
>
> (*In Memoriam,* LXXV)

In contrast to 'Andrea', 'Abt Vogler' is the triumphant record of visionary insight momentarily vouchsafed to the creative artist: a preview of the future, or of heaven, in which the dead and the unborn live in the palace of art. By making this artist a composer improvising on a musical instrument Browning emphasizes the transitoriness of the moment of vision (the relevant romantic prototype here is of course 'Kubla Khan'). Vogler has 'been there' and 'come back'; because the improvisation is not recorded it may seem to be lost. Yet just as the raising of Lazarus proved God's power, however incomprehensibly (however little Lazarus was able to communicate as to the why and wherefore), so the structure of sounds 'raised' by Vogler (the verb is actually used) is a kind of proof of the existence of another world. The point of the poem lies in the argument that the power of art cannot be explained in mundane language:

> ye have heard and seen:
> consider, and bow the head!

Much of the poem carries in its language characteristic nineteenth-century references to man's possible spiritual evolution as 'proved' by 'triumphant art':

> What never had been, was now; what was, as it
> shall be anon.

The probability that Browning had the story of Lazarus at the back of his mind when writing this poem is suggested also by the reference in stanza VI to:

> the wonderful dead who have passed through the
> body and gone,
> But were back once more to breathe in an old
> world worth their new.

Vogler sees behind the 'miracle' of visionary art that same divine power which raised Lazarus:

> But here is the finger of God, a flash of the
> will that can,
> Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo,
> they are!

In *In Memoriam*, LXXXV, Tennyson writes of Hallam that 'God's finger touched him'.

In describing the divine inspiration of the artist Browning writes of it as a matter of faith, not reason, of direct contact with God:

> But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;
> The rest may reason and welcome; 'tis we
> musicians know.

Lazarus did not have to reason God's power: he knew.

The famous last stanza of 'Abt Vogler', 'Well, it is earth with me', also gains in power and suggestiveness if it is read in terms of Lazarus's return to the 'C major of this life' after his vision of whatever lies beyond our present evolutionary state. In addition, several of the phrases used by Browning in 'Abt Vogler' and 'Andrea del Sarto' are echoed also in 'Karshish', the poem in which he deals overtly with the story of Lazarus, as it was supposed to have been learned by a sceptical Arab physician who visited Palestine shortly after the miracle occurred. In his 'epistle' to his colleague Abib (and to the reader) Karshish says that Lazarus 'knows God's secret': the phrase recalls Abt Vogler's claim that 'God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear'. Lazarus has glimpsed that towards which the world has yet to evolve: 'His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.' The statement is that of Andrea in reverse: 'My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.' Lazarus, in Karshish's account, remains conscious of heaven while living on earth. He seems like other men outwardly, he gets through daily life, but he is also different. We are told that he will wait 'patient to the last': compare 'Abt Vogler': 'I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.' Like the artist, he has a double focus: he knows the law of this earthly life, and also the law of the spiritual life, that state which he, and evolving man, 'must not enter yet'. These 'laws' are again referred to in 'Abt Vogler'; behind them is the creative power of

God, of which the artist's insights are a paradigm. The famous closing lines of 'Karshish' are a rapturous affirmation (like the 'prophetic' conclusion of the earlier *Saul*) by one who, like Mary in 'In Memoriam', has moved his gaze from Lazarus and rested it in awed speculation upon 'the Life indeed':

> The very God! Think, Abib, dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too . . .

For Browning, I suggest, as for Tennyson, the story of Lazarus offered in metaphor the 'evidence' they sought so long and anxiously throughout their speculative poetry, the 'missing link' in the chain of man's spiritual development towards God, between the 'broken arc' of this life and the 'perfect round' of the next: a metaphor, finally, for the artist as visionary.[1]

[1] This comment on the use of the Lazarus story by Tennyson and Browning must, of course, be taken into the context of these poets' larger preoccupations with the role of the artist in society and the search for an evolutionary faith. I have discussed some of these larger issues in *Tennyson's In Memoriam*, 1964, and in an essay on 'The Uses of Personae' printed in *Browning's Mind and Art* (ed. Clarence Tracy), 1968.