



The Browning Society AGM Lecture 2017

Apostolic Ambiguity: John the Divine in Browning

So ... John the Apostle, also known as John the Divine and widely presumed to be the disciple whom Jesus loved, hence the way Browning styles him – John the Beloved. And beloved, I daresay, not only by his master Jesus but also by Browning himself. This apostle is by far the one most frequently mentioned in his work. In the poem we are going to deal with – *Sordello* – he is referred to three times: first time briefly in relation to Dante whose poetry is compared to ‘the majestic mass Leavened as the sea whose fire was mixed with glass In John’s transcendent vision’ i.e. Revelation 15:2. He reappears then in Book the Second where we have ‘John’s cloud-girt angel, this foot on the land, That on the sea, with open in his hand A bitter-sweetling book’ (Rev. 10). Finally, the passage which will be our focus today comes at the end of Book the Third.

Without even looking into a Browning concordance, I can recollect another passing reference to the evangelist – that is at the very end of *Bishop Blougram’s Apology* whose silent interlocutor, Mr Gigadibs, is influenced by the conversation with the bishop in a slightly unexpected way and decides to emigrate to Australia, where ‘I hope’ says Browning

By this time he has tested his first plough
And studied his last chapter of St. John.

Then, of course, we have a whole poem of considerable length dedicated to John the Apostle – *A Death in the Desert*. We leave it aside for a while to come back to it later and discuss it in some detail.

The only other occasion I can remember that Browning mentions St John is *The Ring and the Book*, in one of the lawyers’ monologues, I think it is the second one, where we are offered a nice story of supposedly Jewish origin about John the Beloved and St Peter being fooled by Judas. I was too lazy to locate the exact place where that story is told because I thought that for the purpose of today’s presentation it would just suffice to note that Browning’s treatment of the apostle’s personality is ambiguous, to say the least.

I am not sure whether I have given you a full list of St John references and I would be grateful to anyone who could bring to my knowledge any other ones that I omitted here. But that could be done after I have finished talking. Even with an incomplete list the number of such references by far outstrips those to any other evangelist or apostle.

It would be appropriate, therefore, to ask ourselves, Why St John? Why not indeed St Paul, considering Browning’s consistently protestant upbringing and persuasion which lasted, with some brief interruption, for the most of his life? The answer is obvious, to my mind. John is the most literary among the apostolic flock, for him the Word comes first (whatever the specific meaning of ‘logos’ in the Greek original, it has been customary to interpret it as ‘word’ since at least the time of St Jerome who translates John 1:1 as ‘In principio erat verbum’). It is also St John who is more than any other evangelist preoccupied with the problem of the divine word being misapprehended and misunderstood when he says, for example, in Chapter 1 Verse 10 of his Gospel, ‘He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not’. For Browning who too often encountered misapprehension and lack of understanding on the part of his audience that could sound both as a consolation and encouragement not to give up trying to get across.

There is also much more poetry in all St John's writing, at least in his gospel. His smooth flowing lines stand in marked contrast to rough diction of St Paul's who never really cared for rhetoric and stylistic beauties. In this perspective, St John definitely stands a better chance to command the respect of any modern poet, including Browning.

This is more or less obvious. What may look not so obvious is not the respect but the opposite of it – the disrespect with which Browning often treats the venerable apostle. Perhaps 'disrespect' is not the right word – what I mean to say is that now and again when Browning brings St John onto the stage he often has no scruples to place him in an embarrassing situation. That we have such a situation in the passage from *Sordello* will be soon evident once we turn to reading it. Right now, however, I would like to say a few words on *A Death in the Desert*.

Most of my audience do know that this is a poem written in the person of John the Apostle himself. More specifically, it purports to be his deathbed speech where he delivers his final message to his followers. Nothing disrespectful or funny at first sight. However, the situation becomes more problematic when we discover that a significant part of that speech deals not with the 1st century matters but with things contemporary to Browning, namely the multiple attacks on the divine nature of Christ and doubt cast of his very historical existence – views expressed by higher critics and philosophers like Ludwig Feuerbach and Herbert Spencer. Browning makes St John boldly face their accusations and attempt to fight them back on their own ground – a battle he is highly unlikely to win. For example, St John 'predicts' the allegation that his gospel story relies too much on miracles – a phenomenon not readily available to a modern man. The apostle, of course, does his best to defend his 1st century perspective, saying something to the effect that at the time of writing his gospel miracles seemed to him to be the most appropriate device to convert people, even though he knew from the start that miracles did not consist the basis of any religion.

It seems doubtful that the historical St John could really think so but this is not the case I am trying to make. My question is, Why create this embarrassment for the apostle in the first place, why pit him against all the heavy weight of human knowledge and scepticism accumulated over the following nineteen centuries, which the evangelist was by no means in a position to anticipate? Why place him in a back-to-the-future situation? To attempt an answer to this question, let's take a closer look at John the Apostle to see what kind of person he is.

The first thing that may strike us is that his persona persistently tends to multiply. It has been suggested since ancient times that he is not one man but three, the reason being that the gospel, the epistles and the Book of Revelation do not seem to have been written by the same author – they are too different in the ideas they propound and the styles used to express those ideas. Browning was, of course, aware of that and even though he thinks that St John is one person after all, he makes him account for his own triplication in a *Death in the Desert*. His argument is that he simply felt different at different stages of his life and his views changed accordingly. However, a person who is prone to change his stance and style so drastically cannot help arousing some suspicion.

A closer look at the personality of John the Apostle will reveal that the above noted multiplicity is in fact one of his essential features of which the evidence can be uncovered both from his own gospel as well as the Gospel according to St Mark. For it is from the latter that we accidentally know John the Divine actually has ... a twin.

We know it from Mark 3:17 which says that Jesus gave a nickname to James the son of Zebedee and John his brother. And that nickname is 'Boanerges' which means 'sons of thunder'. I won't go into details to save time. Those who are interested in this specific subject can consult the charming book written more than a century ago by Rendel Harris which bears the same title – *Boanerges*. The book is entirely dedicated to the topic of heavenly twins in various mythologies and religions. It treats St James and St John as part of the ancient Dioscuric tradition which underlies an impressive number of sacred personalities and cults worldwide.

The book is full of striking thoughts and observations but I would like to retell only two of them which, in my opinion, have a direct bearing upon the subject of my conversation. The first thing to note about numerous Dioscuric figures among various nations is the fact that while they may be twins in the sense that they came from the same womb at approximately the same time, they are far from being identical in their character and, indeed, sometimes even in their parentage. A good example would be the original Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, of which the first was supposed to be divine, as a son of Zeus, while the second one, son of Tyndareus, was mortal. Very often they exist as a pair of opposites, manifesting the antinomy and good and evil, light and darkness, heat and cold etc. in conflict with each other, or pursuing opposite goals. We can recollect in this juncture the story of Romulus killing Remus, or the disparate twins in the Book of Genesis, Esau and Jacob. Can it be, by any chance then, that St John's famous cognomen, the Divine, refers not only to his theological achievements but also has a literal meaning, implying that he is the immortal one out of the illustrious couple?

The second observation by Rendel Harris which I find quite relevant for my discussion is that the Gospel of St John is like no other gospel (with the exception of the precious 'Boanegres' term preserved to us by St Mark) is rife with implicit (or sometimes even explicit) references to the idea of twin and twinship. Did you know, for example, that Jesus himself, according to this gospel, is also likely to have a twin? It is the only apostle in the Gospel who is never mentioned by name but is referred to by his nickname only – Thomas, for 'Thomas' means simply 'twin' in Aramaic. Moreover, it seems that he is not just the Lord's twin but his dark shadow, who promotes not faith but doubt and refuses at first to believe the good news of salvation.

Or, if you don't find the Tomas hypothesis convincing, how about another possible Jesus' twin – the Holy Ghost or Paraclete who is supposed to come around once Jesus is gone. Does't it not look similar to the arrangement for Castor and Pollux who can no longer be simultaneously present in this world but who take turns at departing and doing their diurnal service in the underworld?

So far, I have been retelling Rendel Harris, but now I want to share my own observation. I think that John the Apostle probably has a twin not only in the Gospel but also among Browning's poems. The poem I have in mind is unique in the sense that it is the only dramatic monologue that is not actually spoken by its title character. That character's name is also 'John' but in relation to John the Beloved he can be regarded as his perfect opposite. I mean 'The Heretic's Tragedy'. Not only is its protagonist called 'John the Mocker' in contrast to 'John the Divine'; not only is he diametrically opposed to St John the promoter of logos, i.e. speech, by being completely deprived of the ability of any expression –

John of the Temple, whose fame so bragged,
Is burning alive in Paris square!
How can he curse, if his mouth is gagged?
Or wriggle his neck, with a collar there?
Or heave his chest, which a band goes round?
Or threat with his fist, since his arms are spliced?
Or kick with his feet, now his legs are bound?

- the poem is also full of statements that tend to emphasise the dual nature of the universe, and attempts to abandon the idea of a single God in favour of a pair of contrasted twins, both endowed with absolute power and manifesting almost a Manichean dichotomy in the world:

See him no other than as he is!
Give both the infinitudes their due--
Infinite mercy, but, I wis,
As infinite a justice too
.....
What maketh heaven, That maketh hell.

And finally, the striking image of the rose of Sharon, a traditional symbol of divine grace, also gets split into its light and dark manifestations:

Alack, there be roses and roses, John!
Some, honied of taste like your leman's tongue:
Some, bitter; for why? (roast gaily on!)
Their tree struck root in devil's-dung.

I hope I have managed to convince at least some of my listeners that the image of John the Apostle must be far from unambiguous and that the mockery to which Browning occasionally subjects him may look partially justified due to a high probability that this benevolent figure may conceal an evil twin somewhere in its shade.

This is certainly the case in the passage from *Sordello* I am finally turning to. This is where St John beholds his evil twin whom he fails to recognise. The incident occurs at the very end of Book 3 and is immediately preceded by an exhortation for the reader:

....nor misconceive my portraiture
Nor undervalue its adornments quaint !
What seems a fiend perchance may prove a saint :
Ponder a story ancient pens transmit,
Then say if you condemn me or acquit.

The story thus has a personal implication – Browning anticipates that his readers can misconstrue his writing in a sense opposite to what has been intended by the author, just as St John fails to recognise himself in the picture and takes it for an image of the devil. This is what lies on surface. On a deeper metaphysical level, however, I believe this passage conceals Browning's own very specific literary preoccupation as a future author of dramatic monologues, some of which had already been written by that time and many more, no doubt, were being written or conceived by him. The preoccupation, I say, mostly of the following nature: Would the actual person portrayed in a dramatic monologue recognise himself in Browning's portrayal? Would it not, like St John, mistake it for someone different or even something completely opposite. That would be, at least, my own preoccupation, if I were writing poetry similar to that of Browning. Browning seems to have less scruples in resurrecting important figures of the past, still the passage we are going to read probably testifies that he gave that problem a thought or two at the early stages of his poetic career. Which proves that, at least at that stage, he possessed a sufficient degree of self-irony and self-criticism.

John the Beloved, banished Antioch
For Patmos, bade collectively his flock
Farewell but set apart the closing eve
To comfort some his exile most would grieve
He knew : a touching spectacle, that house
In motion to receive him ! Xanthus' spouse
You missed, made panther's meat a month since; but
Xanthus himself (for 'twas his nephew shut
'Twixt boards and sawn asunder) Polycarp,
Soft Charicle next year no wheel could warp
To swear by Caesar's fortune, with the rest
Were ranged ; thro' whom the grey disciple prest
Busily blessing right and left, just stopt
To pat one infant's curls the hangman cropt
Soon after, reached the portal; on its hinge
The door turns and he enters — what deep twinge

Ruins the smiling mouth, those wide eyes fix
Whereon ? How like some spectral candlestick's
Branch the disciple's arms! Dead swooned he, woke
Anon, heaved sigh, made shift to gasp heart-broke
Get thee behind me Satan! have I toiled
To no more purpose ? is the gospel foiled
Here too, and o'er my son's, my Xanthus' hearth,
Pourtrayed with sooty garb and features swarth —
Ah Xanthus, am I to thy roof beguiled
To see the — the — the Devil domiciled?
Whereto sobbed Xanthus, Father, 'tis yourself
Installed, a limning which our utmost pelf
"Went to procure against to-morrow's loss,
And that's no two-prong but a pastoral cross
You're painted with! The puckered brows unfold —
And you shall hear Sordello's story told.

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