The Lover and The Bard in "Abt Vogler"

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Whenever I read "Abt Vogler" in *Dramatis Personae* (1864) with close attention, there is one phrase which seems to me so difficult to comprehend or interpret; that is the phrase: "the lover and the bard"(79) in the tenth stanza.[1] As is well known, this poem is the soliloquy of Abbé Georg Joseph Vogler (1749-1814), the German organist and musician, who invented a compact organ called orchestrion and exhibited a great talent in improvisation. After he expemporized upon his orchestrion, he is now absorbed in meditation on his music, which makes him very inspired and talkative. Although here the features of music is depicted in comparison with the other sister arts, poetry and painting, the subject of the poem is, at least ostensibly, music throughout the poem. It seems quite interesting, then, that the phrase: "the lover and the bard" is put in the poem whose speaker emphasizes the predominance of poetry over the other sister arts. In this paper, therefore, I wish to explicate the significance of the insertion of this phrase and interpret this poem from a new perspective. First of all, I need to quote the whole tenth stanza to survey the context of the phrase:

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
  Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
  When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
  The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
  Enough that He heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by. (73-80)

Here Vogler as a representative of "the melodist" is speaking of the eternity of his will, hope, and dream of good, as well as of the music which he played on the orchestrion, but why do we find the phrase: "the lover and the bard" in this context, and who are the lover and the bard? Is the lover different from the bard? We can naturally relate the bard to Browning himself as a poet, but who is the lover, then? Now with a view to clarify these points, I make an assumption that the lover also refers to Browning as the husband of the late Elizabeth Barrett, and I regard "Abt Vogler" as the poem written as a dedication to Elizabeth in heaven. Although this poem as a whole is considered a less disguised poem among Browning's other poems, the dramatic disguise is in this context totally broken and the real face of Browning is clearly seen through.

Before I discuss how my assumption can be applied to this poem, it is necessary to

know the definite time of the composition of the poem. I then consult William DeVane's *A Browning Handbook* as a starting point:

> There is nothing to set precisely the date of the composition of *Abt Vogler*, though we know that Browning sought consolation in music upon his return to England after his wife's death in 1861. The spiritual fervor of the poem, and its profound seriousness and beauty, leads one think that it was written after Mrs. Browning's death.[2]

I agree with DeVane that this poem was written after his wife's death and at this time music brought a great consolation on the sad and lonely mind of Browning. As Mrs. Orr notes that music now grew "into a passion, some of the indulgence of which he derived, as he always declared, some of the most beneficent influences of his life. It would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that he attended every important concert of the season."[3] In fact, music was the most excellent medicine to cure the heart of the "deeply bereaved poet."[4]

However, what is more important in the poem is how Browning can get consolation from music? Here Browning wishes to leave the desolate earth, expressed musically as the "C Major of this life" (96) and catch "the good minute" ("Two in the Campagna," 50) when the past, the present, and even the future are mingled, and allured by the musical creation, both the dead and the unborn come down to the earth to gather together.

> Nay more; for there wanted not who walked in the glare and glow,
> Presences plain in the place; or, fresh from the Protoplast,
> Furnished for ages to come, when a kindlier wind should blow,
> Lured now to begin and live, in a house to their liking at last;
> Or else 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:
> What never had been, was now; what was, as it shall be anon;
> And what is, — shall I say, matched both? for I was made perfect too. (33-40)

Through this artistic creation, the bar between the earth and heaven are broken and the illuminated palace of the music at last reaches "the meteor-moons, balls of blaze"(31) in heaven. That moment is not the ordinary moment we experience in the linear time, but a very special eternal moment, *kairos* in which the "eternity affirms the conception of an hour"(76). As Browning expresses in "By the Fire Side," which most critics regard as the poem about Browning's personal history in spite of some fictionalization, it is indeed analogous to the "moment, one and infinite."(181) The middle-aged speaker of the poem remembers the moment when he and his wife Leonor, apparently Elizabeth, attained the perfect understanding of each other at the "ruined chapel" in "the Alpine gorge"(31-32). Finally, they came to realize that "a bar was broken between / Life and life: we [they] were mixed at last / In spite of the mortal screen" (233-35). I think that in "Abt Vogler" Browning wishes to resume the experience of such communion of his soul with that of his wife. Also, in "Prospice" written in the fall after the death of Elizabeth, Browning

expresses his desire to overcome every threat of death and see his wife again in the new world:

For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest! (21-28)

Moreover, it is significant that such good moments are often related to the star:

Oh moment, one and infinite!
The water slips o'er stock and stone;
The West is tender, hardly bright:
How grey at once is the evening grown—
One star, its chrysolite! ("By the Fire-Side," 181-85)

In "Abt Vogler" too, it is said that "out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star" (52). In this line the star also represents totally different dimentional moment and sphere of the eternity, through which Vogler's mind is made perfect and can fly high beyond the field of the earth. In such a moment of the eternal present, Vogler can experience the encounter with the dead as well as the unborn and get a conviction that what was once is never be lost. Among such the dead, I think, the spirit of Browning's late Elizabeth comes down to the earth to celebrate the excellencies of Vogler's inspired musical creation and at the same time of Browning's poem about the music. In the dedicatory lines to the late Elizabeth in the first book of *The Ring and the Book* (1868), though she is depicted as "half-angel, half-bird"(1391), she was human enough to "drop down,/ To toil for man, to suffer or to die" (1399-400) in order to help the earth. For Browning, Elizabeth in heaven is the existence analogous to the Muse and gives him some divine knowledge and poetical inspiration. Interestingly enough, about such his wife's spiritual guidance, Browning foretells in "By the Fire-Side":

Oh I must feel your brain prompt mine,
Your heart anticipate my heart,
You must be just before, in fine,
See and make me see, for your part,
New depths of the divine! (136-40)

Thus, in "Abt Vogler" the music is the means with which he can enter into the heavenly

new world where he can experience the eternal moment and spiritually communicate with his dead wife.

However, this moment cannot continue so long on the earth; the palace of the music is destined to fade away immediately after Vogler plays it:

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;
Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come too slow;
For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that he feared,
That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was to go. (57-60)

Indeed, since it is the matter of truism that the music is the thing which once it is performed, will instantly disappear never to return, nobody cares about it. But it does not follow that the music ceases to exist any more; instead, it is totally stored in heaven. This reminds us of the four lines in Shelley's "Hellas":

Life may change, but it may fly not;
Hope may vanish, but can die not;
Truth be veiled, but still it burneth;
Love repulsed, — but it returneth.[5] (34-37)

It is true that the sound of music ostensibly vanishes, but Vogler does not lose his conviction that what was once will continue to live. The key words which explain such a conviction is the expression that the "houses made not with hands" (66) which refers to the spiritual body that the dead are supposed to wear in heaven. As it is said in 2 Corinthians 5:1:"For we know that if our earthly house of this tabanacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," here the houses does not mean the general idea of heaven but the spiritual body of man itself. In this context, says Paul, the human body, which is compared to the earthly tabanacle, is so easy to be injured and fated to die away, but if we are enclothed with the heavenly house which God "the ineffable Name"(65) created, that is, the spiritual body, we can attain an eternal life.

It is interesting that in "By The Fire Side," there is also the similar expression:

Think, when our one soul understands
The great Word which makes all things new,
When earth breaks up and heaven expands,
How will the change strike me and you
In the house not made with hands? (131-135)

Here Browning foresees the future state of their souls in the apocalyptic new world, for he is convinced that even if their bodies collapse out, their souls will be renewed forever, because human souls belong to God who never suffers any change. As Vogler is sure of the

eternity of the music, Browning believes firmly in the eternity of man's soul. Therefore, when Vogler declares that even if another good thing appears, he clings "To the same, same self, same love, same God: ay, what was, shall be"(64), it can be interpreted as the reflection of Browning's belief that his wife Elizabeth was never dead, rather triumphed over death and even now is continuing to live in heaven.

In the above-quoted tenth stanza, Browning with such conviction makes Vogler state that every high ideal, heroic deed, and passion which are impossible to take any shape on the earth and disappear in the sky are "music send up to God by the lover and the bard; / Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by" (79-80). Here the music is identified with Elizabeth's soul which is separated by death from her lover, Browning the poet. However, her soul only returned to God and was upheld by God; therefore, Browning are rejoiced with the anticipation of the future reunion with her soul.

For Browning who has such hope and conviction, death is not the end of life, but the starting point of the hereafter. Although the separation by death is indeed sad and discouraging thing, it is only the tentative bridge between this world and the next world. Then, when Vogler says: "Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?"(83), the pause can be considered to mean the separation of her soul from Browning as well as the suspension of the sound of music. Even if such pause (separation) pushes in his life, that is rather a hopeful gate to the more wonderful encounter with Elizabeth in heaven. Indeed, as Vogler goes on, "Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear," and "Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe: / But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear; The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know"(85-88). Only a few musicians, among whom naturally Browning himself as a mystic is included, are given the profound knowledge of human life and divine providence.[6] Since Browning as well as Vogler is now bestowed with this knowledge, he at last attains the peace of mind and turns back to the earth where he must confront the difficulties of his solitary life:

> Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign:
> I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce. (89-90)

Finally, from the heights of the musical creation, Vogler descends down to the resting place: "The C Major of this life" and says, "so, now I will try to sleep" (96). In the same way, Browning is now ready to accept his wife's absence patiently and proudly, with the hope that "On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round" (72).

In conclusion, it is possible to say that "Abt Vogler" is in a sense Browning's dedicatory poem to the late Elizabeth in heaven, which is closely related to his semi-autobiographical poem "By the Fire-Side." From such a point of view, the meaning of the phrase:"the lover and the bard" is easily and fully comprehended and such a reading sheds new light upon this relatively neglected part of "Abt Vogler."

Notes

1. All quotations from Browning's poetry is based on John Pettigrew ed., *Robert Browning: The Poems, Volume 1 & 2* (Penguin Books, 1981) and Richard D. Altick ed., *Robert Browning: The Ring and the Book* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1971).

2. William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955) 290.

3. Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, revised and in part rewritten by F. G. Kenyon (London: Smith, Elder, 1908) 290.

4. William Irvine and Park Honan, *The Book, the Ring, and the Poet: A biography of Robert Browning* (London: The Bodley Head, 1975) 399. Here Irvine discusses the background of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" which is also considered to be written after the death of his wife Elizabeth as follows: "'Rabbi Ben Ezra' was completed in the bleak year of 1862 when a deeply bereaved poet needed to affirm anything, let alone old age with its personally haunting prospect of uncongenial solitude and artistic decline."

5. This quotation from Shelley's poetry is based on Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers ed., *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 1977). Ian Jack states that "As the speaker [of "Abt Vogler"] philosophizes in the last stanzas we are reminded of Shelley's particular blend of Platonism: ...." in his *Browning's Major Poetry* (Oxford: Clarenton P, 1973) 260.

6. As to this point, Browning also expresses in *Parleying with Certain People of Importance in Their Day*: "With Charles Avison" thus:

> There is no truer truth obtainable
> By Man than comes of music. . . . (138-39)

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