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BISHOP, A.

1974

"Art in obedience to laws": Form and Meaning in Browning's "Abt Vogler"

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Abstract. In "Abt Vogler" (1864), Browning does not assert the superiority of music to all other forms of art. Rather, in order to secure the poem's central statement that all art is of divine origin, he endorses within the poem his protagonist's belief that the creation of music reveals God's inspiration more directly than the composition of poetry, which obeys laws created by God but comprehensible by man. To achieve his purpose, Browning appears to have employed, for the creation of "Abt Vogler," a system of laws derived from Pythagorean and medieval number symbolism, as was appropriate to the poem's musical, philosophical, and religious concerns. Thus, the stanza form of "Abt Vogler" seems to have been dictated by number symbolism; and the poem's thought demonstrably evolves in accordance with each stanza's numerological significance. The result is a fine matching of form and meaning through which "Abt Vogler" comes to embody a paradox central to its meaning: quintessentially "art in obedience to laws," it simultaneously achieves the freedom and immediacy of "all triumphant art."

SELECTED BY its creator in 1885 as representative of his highest achievement in lyrical poetry of moderate length,¹ "Abt Vogler" has since become "generally accepted as one of Browning's finest poems,"² receiving "the suffrage of the English-speaking world."³ Yet close critical analysis of the poem has been comparatively rare—perhaps in part because its

¹See *Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise*, ed. Thurman L. Hood (London, 1933), p. 235.

²C. Willard Smith, *Browning's Star Imagery: The Study of a Detail in Poetic Design* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1941), p. 182.

³William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1955), p. 292.

meaning has seemed so clear, its form so simple and obvious. The neglect is unfortunate, first, because the meaning of "Abt Vogler" has been widely misconstrued and, second, because its formal achievement has not been fully recognized. "Abt Vogler" has been praised but not appreciated.

C. Willard Smith has paraphrased what he considers to be the poem's theme in these words: "It aims to persuade the reader that music is superior to all other forms of artistic expression. Painting and poetry, great as they may be, are 'but art in obedience to laws,' while music transcends the laws of art to become one with the laws of God" (Smith, p. 182). Several critics have echoed this interpretation—ignoring, among other factors, that "Abt Vogler" is cast as a dramatic monologue and thus its statements are (at least in the first instance) the speaker's. Even so, Vogler at no point elevates music above poetry and painting as *art* (if he had, his close association of music and architecture would have been confused if not self-contradictory). Rather, as Vogler meditates on the *processes* of artistic creation, he concludes that the impenetrable mystery and beauty of musical composition (its "process so wonder-worth") is a more direct revelation of God's beneficent power ("But here is the finger of God") than the composition of poetry, which obeys laws God-ordained but accessible to human comprehension (so that we can "know why the forms are fair" in poetry). Music, then, provides the natural paradigm of art's divine inspiration—not in a superiority of kind, but in the nature of its creation. The poem accepts this premise in order to secure Vogler's central statement (central in fact as well as metaphor, we should note) as its theme: that all art is inspired by God and so manifests His pervasive redemptive goodness: "It is all triumphant art," for God is the creator of aesthetic laws, and so of poetry no less than music.

Perceiving this fundamental argument of "Abt Vogler" provides one with a key to an understanding of its formal qualities and of their role in the total work. Clearly the presentation of the protagonist and his situation—the dedicated and inventive Abbé, solitary, rapt, extemporizing at his orchestration—in itself finely fulfills the process of musical composition that he describes. But if the poem as a whole is forcefully to endorse Vogler's central statement—and so to move it beyond the dramatic monologue's limitation to the speaker's point-of-view—it must embody the truth that God is "existent behind all laws": for Vogler's description of music's indescribable process is here rendered (in a double paradox) through poetry, an art that he claims to be "in obedience to laws." In other words, the poem as a whole can convincingly embrace and expand Vogler's crucial statement of faith only by evolving into "triumphant art" through a willed and perceptible submission of the poet's art to a system of laws. And this "Abt Vogler" accomplishes.

The system of laws that Browning posited for the creation of his poem was apparently eclectic in origin, but completely appropriate to its theme.

Moreover, once penetrated by the reader, it identifies itself as the source of a formal pattern remarkable for its potent combination of beauty, order and flexibility—in fact, as the source of an aesthetic achievement that superbly promotes the poem's argument. Although Smith found that "Abt Vogler's" "several structural phenomena are difficult to specify," his impressions of the poem's form are most perceptive: "Its logical divisions merge with an imagistic pattern equally important to the turn of the argument, and, while the poem rises with the cumulative insistence of the formal fugue, the impression of the freedom of improvisation remains" (Smith, p. 183). Freedom within bonds: a paradox completely and significantly at home in the poem's endeavor, and in its interfused modes of religious, aesthetic, and philosophical thought.

These three modes of thought are the progenitors and preservers of number symbolism. Browning—who was extremely well-read in Greek philosophy, the Kabbalah, Dante, in medieval and Renaissance literature generally and numerous aesthetic writings, as well as being himself a devotee of music, painting, and architecture—was undoubtedly familiar with more than one tradition of number symbolism. There is no evidence, as far as we know, of his drawing on this knowledge for other poems. But "Abt Vogler," in its theme and its modes of thought, made number symbolism an obvious, perhaps an inescapable, formal agent. Moreover, it is possible that Browning may have been influenced in his use of number symbolism by his reading around the time he was engaged with this poem (between his wife's death in 1861 and the poem's publication in 1864). It seems likely, for instance, that, in considering the subject of "Abt Vogler," Browning reread an eighteenth-century work in the theory of music—Charles Avison's *Essay on Musical Expression*—which he possessed in two editions.⁴ One of several indications supporting this supposition is a notable correspondence between the line "Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized?" and Avison's assertion that "Discords are necessary to relieve the Ear, which is otherwise immediately satiated with a continued, and unvaried Strain of Harmony."⁵ If Browning did reread Avison, he might well have pondered that author's chief analogy between music and painting (for, like Browning, Avison frequently compares music with painting and poetry): "They are both founded in Geometry, and have Proportion for their Subject" (Avison, p. 21). This statement alone could have turned Browning's mind in the direction of Pythagorean number symbolism. Then there is the possible influence of the greatest medieval number-symbolist, Dante: we know that in or soon after

⁴ See *Browning Collections Catalogue: Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge* (London, May, 1913), p. 71, Nos. 360, 361.

⁵ Charles Avison, *An Essay on Musical Expression* (London, 1753), p. 23.

1859, Browning was given a copy of *The New Life (Vita Nuova)* by the translator, C. E. Norton,⁶ who, in essays appended to his translation, drew attention to the numerologically based symmetry of *Vita Nuova*, and to Dante's use of "the mystical properties of numbers."⁷

But the evidence for the number symbolism of "Abt Vogler" is internal rather than external. In the course of a detailed critical analysis of the poem, we hope to demonstrate, first, the existence of a system of laws based on number symbolism, and, second, its potency in molding the poem as a whole into an expression of the belief that poetry—Browning's art as against Vogler's—is no less profound an effect of divine inspiration than music; that "the finger of God," if not directly apprehensible in the actual creation of poetry, is nevertheless patently "existent behind all laws," shaping and guiding all creation towards unity and ultimate fulfillment in the perfection of heaven.

The number symbolism of "Abt Vogler" seems composed of two strands: the musical and the religious-philosophical. But these intertwine naturally, since both spring essentially from the Pythagorean tradition. It is impossible, of course, to discern the actual sources of Browning's own system; and indeed this is so partly because, as the poem reveals this system to us, it becomes clear that the poet has closely followed the general lines of the Pythagorean tradition, with its developments in the work of Dante and other medieval writers. Thus, although several numerological studies were consulted in the preparation of this paper, it includes no attribution of meaning that cannot be easily validated by consulting the authoritative *Medieval Number Symbolism* by Vincent F. Hopper.

It seems very likely that the "Abt Vogler" stanza-form was created with careful attention to number symbolism. Especially in the context of a poem about music, its eight lines immediately suggest the musical octave, 80 signifying completion, perfection, unity, as each stanza runs through all the notes of the diatonic scale and comes to rest on the tonic. One might also assume, more hesitantly, a similar meaning for the unvarying hexameters: 6 is the first perfect number in Pythagorean thought, being the sum of its divisors 1, 2, and 3. Perhaps, also, the four rhymes of each stanza make their contribution, pointing to the Pythagorean tetrad, which symbolizes the universe. Each stanza, then, would appear appropriately to epitomize the related qualities of completion, perfection, and unity for which all art strives and which God's beneficence bestows; and thus to underline formally the poem's theme.

⁶See *Sotheby's Catalogue*, p. 90, No. 603.

⁷*The New Life of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Charles Elliot Norton (Boston, 1867), p. 107.

More important, and more securely demonstrable, is the progressive number symbolism which orders the poem's thought and shapes its form stanza by stanza. To evaluate its role and importance, this must be followed as it unfolds in the course of the poem.

The basic signification of the number 1 is unity: it subsumes all other numbers, being the first principle from which all the other numbers flow; and in the religious context it represents God, the creator of all things. Thus the first line of the first stanza in "Abt Vogler" asserts a unity miraculously created out of diversity—the musician's "structure brave," built of "manifold music." The whole of the first stanza then proceeds to expand this idea: Vogler's metaphorical building is compared with King Solomon's palace, created at the sound of "the ineffable Name" by a swarm of frenzied, diverse creatures. The reference to God's name is obviously in accord with the numerical prescription, and helps to establish a union of the poem's three creators: Vogler and Solomon are both artists, and both can create only through the miraculous power of the Supreme Creator.

But, as the first lines of the second stanza regretfully admit, the musician's "beautiful building" must rapidly unravel into time. The number 2 represents corruption, transitoriness, diversity: introducing evil in its flight from the Creator's unity, duality implies the imperfections of sinful human experience. In this stanza Browning consequently stresses duality and diversity ("Ah! one and all, how they helped, would dispart now and now combine"), and in basing Vogler's building on the floor of hell combines a reference to duality (hell and earth) with a recognition of the inevitable involvement of evil in any earthly creation. Yet the evil is seen as contributing mystically to the ultimate triumph of good; just as medieval numerologists, like Dante, found a benevolent quality for 2 in its linking of the holy numbers 1 and 3. (Through this adaptation they were able to discountenance any attribution of evil to Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity.)

Centered on a vision of the New Jerusalem, the third stanza completes the poem's essential triads and brings its first movement to a close. The imperfect earth and hell of the first two stanzas now yearn upwards towards the perfection of heaven; the evanescence of Vogler's "beautiful building" and Solomon's pleasure-palace foreshadow the immutable glory of the New Jerusalem with its "rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass," whose earthly reflection is the dome of St. Peter's splendidly illuminated on a feast-night. Vogler's creation unites with this vision of aesthetic and heavenly perfection: just as the number 3, holy, perfect, and joyous, unites the triad of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost into a mystical Unity more perfect than unity itself. Perhaps Browning also had in mind Dante's association of 3 with Beatrice, the miraculous earthly symbol of perfection. As the stanza consummates coalescing unions of the three-in-one—earth, hell, heaven;

Vogler's musical structure, Solomon's palace, God's New Jerusalem; present, past, future; music, architecture, religion—the poem surges upward to reach “the pinnacled glory.”

But not yet. For the vision of unity is itself limited, an inadequate earthly attempt to house the immeasurable glory; and as its fourth stanza begins, the poem expands in a new direction. The first three stanzas have been drawn together in the frenetic activity of the myriad minions serving the aesthetic desires of Vogler and Solomon under the sway of God; running the gamut of all living creatures—angels, demons; “man, brute, reptile, fly”—they have scurried about the earth, plunged down to hell, marched up to heaven. Now the fervent effort of the artistic will reaches its climax and ceases, but the act of creation continues as Nature responds prodigally, pouring down her marvels of beauty to extend the process of creation through their shining benediction—“novel splendours,” stars, “meteor-moons, balls of blaze.” All this is in accord with the signification of the number 4, which is the “Fountain of Nature”: it stands for the cosmos, implying the four elements of which all matter is composed.

Again completion seems to have been attained, but just as the beginning of the fourth stanza has asserted that the diatonic scale of creation was “not half” completed, so the fifth stanza expands the creative act yet further. Now all creatures of the past and the future flow into the present to contribute their power. Time is obliterated, temporarily; all is concentrated within the timeless moment—as holy and circular as the number 5, the quintessence—drawing together all things in a mystic ring, static yet ever-moving. “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.”

And this does mark the climax of the act of creation. During the sixth and seventh stanzas there is a gradual contraction as time reasserts itself and the music moves onward towards silence. 6 is the number of earthly perfection, which has now been reached, so that the artist is free to meditate on the experience while it continues under its own momentum. As the poem pivots on its axis, the awareness of earthly perfection modulates into a grateful acknowledgement of art's power as an expression of God's glory.

The seventh stanza brings us to the edge of silence. In the diatonic scale, the seventh note is the final one. Browning seems to be drawing attention to this significance of 7 in Vogler's statement that “each tone of our scale in itself is nought.” But 7 is also the number of humanity; composed of 3 and 4, which stand for the spiritual and the material respectively, it expresses the union of man's double nature. Both contributory numbers are indicated as Vogler meditates on God's goodness in giving music to man through a

spiritual infusion of the earthly: “And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man, / That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.”

The end of the aesthetic process is acknowledged as the eighth stanza begins: “Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared.” The octave is a conclusion, with its return to the tonic (“Never to be again”); but it is simultaneously a new beginning, the start of another scale (“But many more of the kind / As good, nay, better perchance . . . what was, shall be”). Moreover, 8 is the number of baptism, symbolizing salvation, regeneration, a return to original unity with God. Browning surely had this in mind as Vogler avers that he “must be saved because I cling with my mind / To the same, same self, same love, same God.”

And so Vogler prays, calling on the Ineffable Name as had Solomon, filling the ninth stanza with his optimistic faith in the benevolent power of his unchanging God and in the complete triumph of good in heaven: “On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round.” 9 is a circular and angelic number, associated with the unity and perfection of God (and, for Dante, with Beatrice) through its intimate mathematical relationship with 3.

10 is, in the pure Pythagorean tradition, the most perfect of all numbers, implying the completeness of multiplicity returning to unity. So the tenth stanza develops Vogler's belief in the ultimate redemption of all man's best impulses. But there is in this stanza a repetitiveness not characteristic of the poem, which maintains a strong forward movement even through its meditative passages. Why does the tenth stanza simply fill out an assertion already forcefully made in the second part of the preceding stanza? Perhaps Browning intended a noticeable slackening, which can certainly be justified on purely structural grounds—a pause prolonged in order to make the final cadence more satisfying. But there may be another reason, in the close association of the numbers 9 and 10 in medieval symbolism, which retained the Pythagorean meaning of perfection for 10 but, for religious reasons, insisted that 9 connoted perfection with equal force.

The significance of 11 in medieval symbolism is very clear: sin, with the consequences of sin. This the eleventh stanza vividly fulfills in the litany of failure, withering and agonizing, discords, sorrow, doubt, suffering, woe. But, as in the second stanza, though more explicitly, evil is recognized as a necessary stage in the triumphant progress of good. As the discord but sweetens the beautiful effects of harmony, so evil is ultimately in the service of good.

As “Abt Vogler” moves towards its conclusion in the twelfth stanza, Browning again points to an important musical significance. Feeling for the

common chord of C Major (which clearly represents the return to mundane experience), Vogler's fingers slide "by semitones." While the diatonic scale consists of seven notes, the chromatic scale—which is the entire range of sounds encompassed by each octave—consists of twelve. So, in a final symbolic assertion of unity achieved out of diversity, the poem rehearses its exploration of the entire range of experience, for a moment recalling the sharp ecstasy of creation ("I blunt it into a ninth") and then comes consolingly to rest in "the C Major of this life." In medieval symbolism, 12 is a sacred number: it signifies universality, being associated with Christ, the Apostles and the Church; and it signifies completion, being associated with the zodiac and the months of the year. Thus, the resolution of "Abt Vogler" in twelve stanzas radiates a sense of completion, perfection, unity, that consummates the poem's celebration of its theme and convincingly endorses the quiet, profoundly optimistic close.

"Abt Vogler" is a poem of exquisite craftsmanship. Its assured movement and finely sustained tone of calm ecstasy indicate that Browning, in submitting his art to a system of laws, did not sacrifice his poetic freedom. Drawn from an eclectic number-symbolism entirely appropriate to the poem's thematic concerns, these laws provided a formal agent that ordered and shaped, but did not constrict, the evolution of "Abt Vogler." The result is a joyful marriage of form and meaning. "Abt Vogler" is "art in obedience to laws": "Abt Vogler" is "all triumphant art."