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## PROFUNDITY REVISITED: BRIDGES AND HIS CRITICS

"THE FACT IS that Bridges' poetry is a curious combination of consummate style, pure formal beauty, and a complete lack of profundity of thought".<sup>1</sup> This scarcely intelligible comment from one of the Kunitz and Haycraft dictionaries is representative of the kind of sentiment one is likely to hear whenever Bridges' name crops up. We make legends about the authors we never read, as well as about those we do. The Bridges legend is two stories. In one of them he is a late-Victorian flowers poet, one of the mob of laureates who write with ease lyrically descriptive verse, a Palgrave darling goldenly diffuse; in the other he is a leisured classicist who cares more for metres than for flowers, an unfeeling prosodist, indeed a tinkerer as mechanical as Poe but lacking even Poe's boldness and atmosphere. The two stories merge without ever cancelling each other out. Here is a writer—Tory, laureate, pastoral, austere but not sensationally austere—best left to legend and the literary dictionary and Ciardi's parodies.

It is true enough that for the modernist sensibility—which is to say, for nearly all sophisticated readers today—an appreciation of Bridges (as of Wordsworth or Coventry Patmore) entails a psychological and intellectual metamorphosis of such grand proportions as to resemble a religious conversion. But perhaps no great harm would ensue.

A logical first step towards such an adventurous increase in catholicity is perhaps to concede that Bridges is not, after all, completely unprofound, even in his short poems (about *The Testament of Beauty* and the keen and massively informed essays there can be no question). Modern taste in poetry is infected with nothing so much as with mere depth-hunting; and modern taste defines depth in its own way. Thus, experience of anxiety and ambivalence is deep; experience of delicacy, tenderness, or serenity is not. In any case, profundity is impossible except in the presence of conspicuous intellectualism (leading to an allusive, elusive, elliptical idiom) or of vast vistas of social, historical, or topographical consciousness and the

attendant agonies and ecstasies. But the nature of things does not change. Profundity may, but need not and often does not, exist in a context of great issues or panoramas, or of ratiocinative complexity, which is apparently what Kunitz and Haycraft mean when they attach that connotatively damning prepositional phrase: "*profundity of thought.*" The simplest things—a change of season, a London snow, a garden, a loving compliment—are profoundly important because they are essential to life or to a thoroughly civilized life, or because they involve us in long reverberating delight and sorrow. The rendering of the qualities of thought and feeling they evoke in a human sensibility in such a way as to make an experience realizable in the imagination is in itself no unprofound achievement. A poem is not an idea, although it may make use of an idea; its proper challenge is aesthetic, not forensic; it is an experience, not a nut to crack in order to tear out the meat. Dialectic, the free debate of ideas in the pursuit of truth and the satisfaction of our curiosity and our need for intellectual stimulation, is one thing; poetry, like music and painting and the dance, exists to satisfy other needs and interests. Homer "roared in the pines"—but in precise hexameters. The art-for-art's-sake people are wrong in a better way than the hyper-cerebral people who in their insatiable historicism and ideation, in their mania for "forces", "currents", "movements", and "directions", have been anathematized by the Muse—usually without their knowing it, since a good number of them teach literature at the universities, usually with great assurance. In the eyes of the rhythmless and phone-deaf idea-monger, it is not only Bridges but almost the whole tradition of the world's poetry that must seem a "magnificent emptiness."

All of us want profundity in verse; profundity "of thought"—in the narrow but now fashionable sense of intellectuality of reference, or of explicit conceptual complexity—is a matter of taste, a possible but not an essential ingredient of poetic excellence. "The Canonization" is more intellectual but no more profound than "Fortunatus Nimium":

To dream as I may  
 And awake when I will  
 With the song of the birds  
 And the sun on the hill.

Or death—were it death—  
 To what should I awake  
 Who loved in my home  
 All life for its sake?

If we continue to hold intellectuality an important criterion, the least we can do is to see to it that Bridges' space in the anthologies grows; if erudition, critical intelligence, or intrinsic merit, rather than historical importance, were made a primary standard, both he and Coventry Patmore would run to longer selections than Tennyson. Any number of pieces from the *Collected Poems* will serve to demonstrate the absurdity of the legend. Let us take "Eros", a poem Bridges wrote in 1899; it has not been thoroughly looked into elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> and is not well known, though it is one of the great short poems in our language and is fairly well anthologized. Here is the poem:

Why hast thou nothing in thy face?  
 Thou idol of the human race,  
 Thou tyrant of the human heart,  
 The flower of lovely youth that art;  
 Yea, and that standest in thy youth  
 An image of eternal Truth,  
 With thy exuberant flesh so fair  
 That only Pheidias might compare,  
 Ere from his chaste marmoreal form  
 Time had decayed the colours warm;  
 Like to his gods in thy proud dress,  
 Thy starry sheen of nakedness.

Surely thy body is thy mind,  
 For in thy face is nought to find,  
 Only thy soft unchristen'd smile,  
 That shadows neither love nor guile,  
 But shameless will and power immense,  
 In secret sensuous innocence.

O king of joy, what is thy thought?  
 I dream thou knowest it is nought,  
 And wouldst in darkness come, but thou  
 Makest the light where'er thou go.  
 Ah yet no victim of thy grace,  
 None who e'er long'd for thy embrace,  
 Hath cared to look upon thy face.

Guérard's statement that the theme is "the insufficiency of the Greek ideal of love"<sup>3</sup> will not quite serve: it is a bit too narrow. There were a number of Greek ideals of love, and as many Eroses to represent them. The restriction of Eros to symbolize only physical and romantic passion is a modern revision; and Bridges was no dilettante classicist. The Eros here is undoubtedly a god of sensuous experience generally, as well as of sexual passion in particular. Nothing in the poem itself seems to limit us to sex; and the fact that Bridges' attitude is so inclusive, embracing the ambivalence of our relationship with the god, leads one to feel that the god himself may well be meant to symbolize a similarly wide range of experience. He is both "tyrant" and "idol": idol, because we deify sensuous and sexual experience; tyrant, because of the god's stranglehold—because in our more animal preoccupations we have to sacrifice rationality and spirituality, and, paradoxically, we are always rebelling (more or less unsuccessfully) against that sacrifice. The real theme of the poem is much like that of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium": the inadequacy of merely sensual music for the needs and complexities of a rich and mature personality. To have civilization, reason and restraint must prevail. Agape and Apollo, as well as Aphrodite and Eros, are worthy of our devotions. Bridges' criticism is from the point of view of the Aristotelian mean and of Apollonian and Christian love. The criticism from the Mean is the more distinct: the superiority of Christian to pagan love is strongly intimated only in the phrase "unchristened smile." "Unchristened" here, by the way, is the perfect word: it emphasizes both the antiquity and the innocence of Eros.

Part of the poem's charm is that Bridges' critique is put in the most charitable manner compatible with a firm moral attitude. The point of view is far from anything like a barren Puritanism. After all, Eros is a "king of joy", even "An image of eternal Truth" (a phrase delicately ironic but also literal). In sensuous beauty are the beginnings of heavenly beauty, and Bridges' own worship was a worship of Beauty—though as a means to the highest evolution of mind and soul, not as an end in itself. The contemplation of physical beauty gives rise to an awareness of the existence—and, vaguely, intimations of the quality—of heavenly beauty. This is the aesthetic of Bridges' epic:

Beauty is the highest of all those occult influences,  
the quality of appearances that thru' the sense  
wakeneth spiritual emotion in the mind of man . . .

But think not Aphrodite therefore disesteem'd  
 for rout of her worshippers, nor sensuous Beauty  
 torn from her royal throne, who is herself mother  
 of heavenly Love . . . .

Here is a Platonism in which physical beauty and profane love are by no means denigrated. But, for that matter, even the most elementary and nontranscendent sensuous experience is in itself far from evil: evil, in the form of imbalance or incompleteness, comes about only when we make of Eros an idol and a tyrant. Bridges' attitude is simply the traditional wisdom: Eros is both king of joy and tyrant; he is essential, and yet he has to be kept in his place.

Several of the poem's lines are appropriately difficult: I say appropriately, because the poem's difficulty, and in places almost orphic quality, is beautifully consonant with both the complexity of attitude and the dark god's patronage of "secret sensuous innocence." The memorable first line of the second stanza, "Surely thy body is thy mind", is an instance of successful ambiguity: Eros is mindless, and is as preoccupied with his body as Narcissus was with his. The opening lines of the third stanza are perhaps the most difficult, and yet once again much of their power depends on their density, and the power continues the presence of the god's power:

O king of joy, what is thy thought?  
 I dream thou knowest it is nought,  
 And wouldst in darkness come, but thou  
 Makest the light where'er thou go.

If the god has any thought at all, it is only a certain minimal apprehension of his own mindlessness, and this leads him to wish to appear to his devotees only in darkness, that is, in the absence of reflection, where he can best work his "shameless will." And yet he makes "the light" wherever he goes: sensuous and sexual experience are inevitable, and (if controlled) good in themselves, and are good in that they lead to a higher good; this is one of the few instances in English poetry in which light, traditionally an image of mind, spirit, truth, or divinity, becomes a metaphor of sense experience. Still, sensuality palls: excess, and time, bring reaction. One hears that other music, looks for those "Monuments of unageing intellect." Bridges' indictment reaches its climax at the point of greatest rhetorical prominence, at the very end of the poem:

Ah yet no victim of thy grace,  
 None who e'er long'd for thy embrace,  
 Hath cared to look upon thy face.

Part of the poem's effectiveness lies in a feature so obvious that one forgets to credit it: personification has never been more successful; and the continual direct address makes it even more dramatic. Certainly one feels that the poem arose from some large encounter, that Bridges has seen a statue or painting of an Eros, and has fallen into reverie and cast it in the strong form of address. As is the case with nearly all his work, we know nothing of the circumstances of his conception and composition of the piece. From the mention of Pheidias in

With thy exuberant flesh so fair,  
That ony Pheidias might compare,

one might assume that Bridges has in mind an Eros of that sculptor. But no Pheidian Eros is known. These lines only express Bridges' notion that a consummate articulation of the god would require the greatest of plastic artists. One thing is certain: the Eros is not the mere Cupid the god became in much Hellenistic and Roman art. If Bridges was struck by a particular Eros, it must have been the massive Eros Centrocelle or the Eros Borghese. Those are the only ones extant that have the lofty beauty and the physical dimensions to have served as models for such language as "power immense" and "king of joy."

Here is no meretricious metric. The octosyllabic couplet is perfectly suited to the matter. Its simplicity, together with the regularity of the metre, is felt as an embodiment of the moral control that informs the poem at every point. The lines are of uniform length: there is no rapturous lyricism or other kinetic quality that might call for the expansions and contractions of varying lengths of line. The rhymes are strong: weaker ones, or the dying fall of feminine rhyme, would be at odds with the rational and masculine attitude. Yet though the poem is not metrically ambitious, there is one really splendid felicity of rhythm; it is a commonly encountered license, but works here with uncommon force. In the seventh line, "With thy exuberant flesh so fair," the Latin word introduces an extra syllable into the pattern. A very light syllable, it is meant to be elided (but not ignored or unnaturally slurred); it creates a moment of unexpected and delightful freedom. It is an instance of the thing to be found so often in Bridges, and indeed in traditional English verse generally, a tiny metrical variation creating an effect of great beauty. The extra syllable breaks and yet preserves the iambic meter, and because it is such a slight syllable, we race over it, and the speed thereby gained heightens the effect of freedom still more, an effect that matches the sense of the word "exuberant" and makes it evocative. The word refers, of course, to the god's joy and pride in his flesh, but thanks to the buoyant effect which the word creates in the metre, it also

suggests the physical fact of Eros's wings. We get, out of this modest rhythmic freedom, not only an aesthetic quality in the medium which corresponds to the idea being expressed and which makes that idea vivid, but also, the connotation of a visual image.

The rhyme words themselves have that inevitability which every English poet strives for. Bridges' rhymes not infrequently, it seems to me, do little more than add a melodic, but sometimes trivial, ornamentation to his poems. Here, however, they are words that earn their emphasis. The very first couplet juxtaposes two thematic words. Even the phrase "that art" in the second couplet justifies its archaism and quasi-redundancy. Its intrinsic dignity and the emphasis it gives to the conception of "all lovely youth" are indispensable; and the phrase continues the universality of "human race" and "human heart" in the preceding lines. In the sixth couplet the rhyme is again strikingly active:

Like to his gods in thy proud dress,  
Thy starry sheen of nakedness.

The metaphor of nakedness as dress is fresh and apt; it makes us feel the god's pride in his nudity, as one feels pride in a fine cloth. The first couplet of the final stanza has a tension which is derived from the powerful opposition of the rhyme words:

O king of joy, what is thy thought?  
I dream thou knowest it is nought.

By the time we reach this couplet, we have become so thoroughly impressed with the god's mindlessness that we could expect no other rhyme than the one we find.

But the triumph of the rhyme is at the end. The poem closes with a triplet instead of the expected couplet; the rhyme is the same as the poem's opening rhyme, and the final image is the same as the image of the first line—the face of the god. The surprise of a triplet emphasizes the emptiness of the face, "the animality of love which it is sometimes difficult for the idealist to accept", as Rosenthal and Smith put it. And of course the structure of the poem has now come full cycle.

And yet we will not see that "Eros" is no more profound than "Fortunatus Nimium" or "Nightingales." One almost thinks that civilization will have taken some new turn or be about to take it before we will again distinguish profundity from the critical intelligence or from what is simply, as in Donne or Hopkins or Eliot, a stylistic novelty, a sportive idiom. Spenser's epic and Shakespeare's seventy-

third sonnet and Wordsworth's most famous sonnet to sleep are profound without being ingenious or richly textured. Bridges' mode is that sort of mode. Donne and Hopkins often seem deeper than they are, simply because the textures of their poems are difficult and announce their difficulty proudly. Once one has solved their diction, syntax, allusion, and conceit, the substance—the poetic wisdom—turns out to be at about the same level as that of a good many other poems—by Spenser or Wordsworth or Bridges, whose quieter surfaces deceive us.

## NOTES

1. *Twentieth-Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, ed. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1942).
2. The most perceptive and most detailed commentary on the poem is that by M. L. Rosenthal and A. J. M. Smith in *Exploring Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 183-184. Yvor Winters, however, Bridges' lonely champion among major modern critics, was the first to call attention to the poem's excellence (*In Defense of Reason*, 1937).
3. Albert Joseph Guérard, *Robert Bridges: A Study of Traditionalism in Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942).