Browning's 'Pied Piper of Hamelin': Two Levels of Meaning

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SOME poems escape critical attention on account of their very popularity. At best they get some perfunctory laudatory mention; at worst popular acclaim is held against them as a kind of aesthetic stigma. This seems to be true of Browning's 'Pied Piper'. Though a favourite of English school-children for generations, nobody seems to have written about it in any detail, since Bagehot discussed it in his famous essay.[1] Such critical neglect would be justified, if it was just the odd occasional poem that happened to strike the fancy of a large audience. I should like to suggest, however, that there is far more to it than that. The subtelty of the poem would seem to entitle it to equal rank with far more 'serious' productions of Browning's muse.

Browning wrote the poem in May 1842 for the ten-year-old son of a friend of his, the great actor Macready. The boy, who had a gift for drawing, was to beguile the time by illustrating it, while he was confined to his room with a cold. In 1849 the poem was included in the collection *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, more or less as a makeshift solution, to complete the requisite number of pages, and since 1863 it has been part of the *Dramatic Romances*. The tale of the rat-catcher was to be found in various collections of historical and demonological anecdotes and curiosities from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as had formed Browning's favourite reading from early on in his father's library. The controversial question as to which version of the story Browning used seems to be of secondary importance compared with the fact that Browning completely changed the

[1] W. Bagehot, 'Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry', *The Collected Works*, ed. N. St John-Stevas, 1965, II, 361 sqq.

tone in which all these literary sources present it. A short excerpt from the version which in its details most closely corresponds to the poem will suffice to prove this:

And now hath one digression drawne on another, for being by reason of speaking of these Saxons of Transilvania, put in mind of a most true and marvelous strange accident that hapned in *Saxony* not many ages past, I cannot omit for the strangenesse thereof briefely here by the way to set it down . . . The occasion now why this matter came into my remembrance in speaking of *Transilvania*, was, that some do report that there are divers found among the Saxons in *Transilvania* that have like surnames unto divers of the Burgers of *Hamel,* and will thereby seeme to inferre, that this Jugler or pide Piper, might by negromancy have transported them thither, but this carrieth little appearance of truth;. . .[1]

A learned antiquarian — Scott's Dr Dryasdust in fact — allowing himself a few remarks in connexion with Transylvania, reports the story with scholarly gravity, weighing the pros and cons of tradition, in order to offer it to similarly minded readers as a remarkable explanation for contemporary customs in a town in Lower Saxony and for the appearance of Hamelin surnames among the Transylvanians. By contrast, Browning tells the story to a child, in a form suited to the child's understanding, as he indicates by the subtitle 'A Child's Story'. For such stories there are certain generally accepted rules, which all who know how to engage the attention of children follow consciously or unconsciously. The child has a spontaneous feeling for visual and acoustic effects, which often disappears in the later stages of his development. He thinks in terms of concrete facts, whereas the capacity for abstract thought is the result of education. In his moral standards he is quite rigorous, unprepared for those compromises which mature experience generally brings us to accept. Stories for children consequently must aim at pictorial and musical effects, must represent the general in the particular and correspond to that moral law according to which the good are rewarded and the bad punished. It is hardly necessary to point to particular instances in the poem to prove that Browning meets all these requirements. Even by its occasion the poem was designed to afford scope for the young illustrator. It can be

[1] For the problem of the sources and bibliographical information see D. C. DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, New York, 1955, p. 129 sq., which quotes R. Verstegen, *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities*, 1628, pp. 85–7.

divided into a sequence of pictures. Psychological processes are translated into facial expressions and gestures. The poem's most conspicuous feature is certainly its music, in accordance with the fact that the hero is a piper who performs his feats by the miraculous qualities of his piping. Model examples in this respect are stanzas vii and xii, describing the exodus of the rats and of the children in onomatopoeic contrast. The events can easily be grasped by the young listener, as they take place within the narrow framework of the society of a small town, and they exemplify the moral duty of keeping one's promise. It is not to be wondered at that Browning was singularly successful with his poem at a children's party, which was distinguished in addition by Hans Christian Andersen reading his story about the ugly duckling.[1] He has hit that childlike tone which was properly discovered only by the writers and artists of the nineteenth century.

The tone of the poem, however, cannot be explained only in terms of the poet trying to descend to the level of his young friend. If, for instance, we compare its language with that of, say, Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland*, which first appeared in 1862, we are struck by greater differences than can be accounted for by the intervening twenty years, the individual deviations of the respective authors from the stylistic norm or the differences between poetry and prose. While Carroll adapts himself to the linguistic habits of a well-bred little girl from the educated classes, Browning uses popular and by no means educated elements in his vocabulary and syntax. In talking to a child, he assumes the tone of the street-ballad singer — a parallel to the Grimm brothers introducing the traditional folk-tales into the nurseries of the middle-classes. It is a practical application of the theory that the naivety of the child corresponds to the thoughts and feelings of the people at an earlier stage of its cultural development. But the somewhat disreputable art of the ballad-singer did not yet quite belong to the past, as is proved by Silas Wegg in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, a novel describing the contemporary scene.[2] Typical features of the street-ballad, for which

[1] W. H. Griffin and H. C. Minchin, *The Life of Robert Browning*, 1911, p. 220.
[2] For form and history of the broadside ballad see V. de Sola Pinto and A. E. Rodway, *The Common Muse*, 1957.

incidentally the term 'ditty' in stanza I is quite appropriate, are a presentation as sensationally dramatic as possible, a plain homely moral at the end, rhetorical addresses to the audience, popular syntax, traditional expressions, a metre of three or four stressed and an unspecified number of unstressed syllables, the involuntarily comic effects of stressing unstressed syllables, and imperfect rhymes. This catalogue agrees with the rules for story-telling to children, transcending it, however, in a few essential points. In 'The Pied Piper' the dramatic effect is achieved by concentrating the story in five acts, with the scenery changing every time: the procession of the people to the town-hall; the sitting of the council and the appearance of the piper; the exodus of the rats and the jubilation of the people; the claiming of the promise and the breach of it; the exodus of the children and the despair of the citizens. The rhythm of the drama consists in a change between tension and relaxation. The frequent use of direct speech enhances the impression of dramatic immediacy. The speed of presentation, also dramatic in its effect, accords with the character of the action, which seems to be rushing along throughout, from the opening ultimatum to the sudden appearance and reappearance of the piper. Rhetorical ballad clichés are such phrases as 'what schould hap . . . but', 'you should have heard', 'did I say all?', 'quoth one', 'when, lo . . .'. The syntax receives its popular stamp by a frequent use of inversion: 'To blow his pipe his lips he wrinkled', 'And ere three shrill notes the pipe uttered', etc. Traditional epithets are 'deep and wide' (of the River Weser), 'mighty (consternation)', 'wondrous (fat)'.

It is the prosody of the poem that raises doubts as to the genuine character of the ballad-singer — doubts, which are unquestionably intended. On the one hand there are excruciatingly wrong stresses, specially demanded by accents, rhymes of every possible kind of imperfection, combined in a climax of prosodic offences at the end. On the other hand there are stanzas of a musical perfection within reach only of a real poet. As a result there is an effect of incongruity between the poet and his role. The poet, it seems, is simultaneously thinking of the child who is to take him for what he pretends to be, and of the adults who are not to be deceived by his imposture, but to admire him as the actor behind his mask. To produce the awareness of the difference

between the poet and his role, exaggeration is an absolute necessity. This is shown by other successful poems of the same kind such as Cowper's famous ballad 'John Gilpin'; even more by failures like Wordsworth's 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' from *Lyrical Ballads*, which hits the naive tone of the street-ballad so exactly that it is no longer taken for a parody and embarrasses the educated reader, who cannot respond to it in the only appropriate way, i.e. with naive acceptance. It is now possible to see how far 'The Pied Piper' corresponds to Browning's definition of his poetry as 'always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine'.[1] The poem's effect consists in the tension between the role of the ballad-singer and the poet who is displaying his artistic skill in it.[2] The grown-up who is telling a story to a child is looking, as it were, over his own shoulder or, to put it differently, conscious of the presence of other grown-ups. Browning was thus quite justified in publishing it in a collection for adult readers.

Since the tone of the poem is directed at two different age-groups, it seems reasonable to assume that the same may be true of its meaning. Looked at superficially as a story for children, it deals with an event equally removed in space and time. Its relationship to the present is that of 'once upon a time', and it has the irresistible charm of a fairy-tale fantasy. If one looks at it more closely, it does not seem so very far away from the situation of England in 1842. As early as 1864 Walter Bagehot formulated the theme of the poem as 'the bourgeois nature in difficulties'.[3] The bourgeois, portrayed in all his obese complacency, is confronted by a peril threatening his household goods. In his world, where the law of contract has absolute validity, privilege can only be obtained by service. If the people insist on the stipulations of the contract, this is only the Carlylean extension of the utilitarian principle of 'No work no recompense' from the lower to the upper classes.[4] At the time the poem was written Browning, it

[1] R. Browning, *Poetical Works*, Oxford, 1967, p. lx, 'Author's Preface to Edition of 1868'.

[2] For the most recent discussion of the problem of the dramatic monologue see K. E. Faas, 'Dramatischer Monolog und dramatischmonologische Versdichtung', *Anglia*, 87, 1969, pp. 338–66.

[3] W. Bagehot, op. cit., p. 353.

[4] T. Carlyle, 'Chartism', *English and Other Critical Essays*, Everyman's Library ed., 1964, p. 177.

will be remembered, was particularly close to Carlyle. It is hardly fanciful to see parallels between the situation of Hamelin in the fourteenth century and that of mid-nineteenth-century England. The procession of the people to the town hall is the realization of a nightmare of the middle-classes in the 'hungry forties', when the 'revolution that never happened' seemed a frightening possibility. That rats should be the problem which the ruling class cannot cope with has also a twofold effect. For the child the rats for all their brazen impudence seem funny little animals, a cheerful tribe of parasitic gourmands, with whose visions of a land of plenty one can sympathize. For the grown-ups there may have been rather different associations. The inability of the government to tackle the social consequences of industrialization became particularly glaring in the endemic diseases, produced by insufficient sanitation in the living quarters of the industrial workers. It was the outbreak of cholera that made hygiene for the first time accepted as a public responsibility. Contagion, to which even the rich are not immune, is used by Dickens as a symbol for the community of rich and poor within the nation. In the year in which the poem was written Chadwick produced his famous report on *The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Classes*, which with some delay was followed by legislative action. Even in 1872 Disraeli's paternalist programme of social reform was still described disparagingly by his liberal opponents as a 'policy of sewage'.

If we proceed to the piper, there are certainly traits that he has in common with the piper of the nursery rhyme, in which every stanza describes an incident like the following:

> He met old Dame Trot with a basket of eggs,
> He used his pipe and she used her legs;
> She danced about till the eggs were all broke,
> She began for to fret, but he laughed at the joke.
> Over the hills and a great way off,
> The wind shall blow my top-knot off.[1]

The Hamelin piper's art, too, has magic power, with the important difference that he does not use it to play irresponsible pranks, but to free society from the pests from which it is suffer-

[1] 'Tom, the Playful Piper', *The Puffin Book of Nursery Rhymes*, ed. I and P. Opie, 1963, p. 169.

ing. And there are still further peculiarities. The piper is altogether different from everyone else, entering society without any familiar antecedents. His skin is dark, his eyes are unusually penetrating, his clothes motley and unfashionable, and he does not seem bound by the limitations of space and time. Thus he resembles in many ways the Victorian stereotype of the artist, possessed of magic qualities, gipsy-like, outside society, visionary and Carlylean hero, capable of solving the problems of the times. In the present context it is relevant that according to the aesthetic theory of the time the poet's affinities were all with the musicians, as musical effects beyond the reach of prose were regarded as the essence of poetic art. Only when the piper is taken as the representative of the artist generally, including the poet, does the irony of the last stanza fully emerge. Browning gives a new twist to the Victorian commonplace of the artist as social outsider. He shows how society exploits his position outside it by breaking the contract which inside it is sacred. The artist's services are not remunerated. Again the political context of the year 1842 is very illuminating and may indeed provide a clue to the inspiration of the poem. In 1842 the Literary Copyright Act was passed at long last, ably advocated by Macaulay. It provided an extension of the previous 28 years from the date of publication to 42 years, with other safeguards for the rights of authors. In the course of the agitation for a new law Carlyle had submitted the following petition to the House of Commons:

> That your petitioner has written certain books, being incited thereto by certain innocent and laudable considerations; . . . that this labour has found hitherto, in money or money's worth, small recompense or none: that he is by no means sure of its ever finding recompense: but thinks that, if so, it will be at a distant time, when he, the labourer, will probably no longer be in need of money, and those dear to him will still be in need of it; . . . (may the House forbid) extraneous persons, entirely unconcerned in this adventure of his, to steal from him his small winnings, for a space of sixty years at the shortest. After sixty years, unless your Honourable House provide otherwise, they may begin to steal.[1]

Modern critics of bourgeois society have made its dealings with artists a touchstone of its morality. T. W. Adorno, for instance, following Ernest Newman, has tried to clear Wagner from the

[1] G. O. Trevelyan, *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*, 1900, p. 434.

charge of defrauding his creditors by pointing to the equally unscrupulous practice of opera-houses producing his works without letting him share in the profits.[1] The behaviour of bourgeois society towards the artist shows that its moral code is not of absolute, but merely of relative validity. It is binding only where reciprocity is guaranteed, where 'honesty is the best policy'. If it is true that Browning had certain reservations about the poem, he may have felt that the revenge of the piper could be regarded as the wishful thinking of a neglected poet.

We can conclude, then, that there are two levels of meaning in 'The Pied Piper'. It is addressed at the same time to children and to grown-ups. It is among those Victorian poems that transpose contemporary problems into the past and present them from the point of view of a fictional character, to ensure discussion on neutral ground, without the poet committing himself or hurting the feelings of his audience. The existence of these two levels of meaning distinguishes 'The Pied Piper' from such poems as Barham's *Ingoldsby Legends*, which it apparently resembles.[2] It is true that the *Ingoldsby Legends* also present medieval or pseudo-medieval stories in a tone of assumed naivety. But the naivety is so grossly exaggerated that even a child might notice it. The *Legends* illustrate the darkness of the dark ages, an impassable gulf gaping between them and the enlightened present. Their effect is due to the flattering feeling of intellectual and cultural superiority which they suggest to the modern reader. They combine the grotesque thrill of the gothic ballad in the style of 'Monk' Lewis with the flippant cynicism of Byron's comic epic. Browning's poetry, however, even when it is comical, is pervaded by the high seriousness of the Victorians. Human life consists in constant effort to reach the unattainable. In the nineteenth century there is no cause for complacency. To look into the mirror of the past does not serve to assure oneself of one's superiority, but to realize one's own imperfections. Browning's poetry is grotesque, as Bagehot was the first to observe, in that it conjures up the perfect by presenting the imperfect.

[1] T. W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie*, Hamburg, Rowohlts deutsche Enzyklopädie, 1968, p. 68.

[2] G. Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, 1910, III, 229: 'The popular "Pied Piper" could not help coming after Praed and Barham.'