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ROBERT BROWNING’S CLEON: A NATURAL MAN

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Robert Browning’s epigraph for “Cleon” is taken from the Book of Acts: “For in Him we live, and Move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (17:28). Here is a suggested alternative: “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him” (1 Cor. 2:14).

The phrase natural man appears once in the poem. Cleon uses it to refer to man’s having once lived what he calls “The animal life,”¹ an unselfconscious, primitive stage of development wherein he was much happier than he is now. Man would have been better off, Cleon writes to his benefactor Protus, if he had never evolved

[...]Beyond the natural man, the better beast,
Using his senses, not the sense of sense.’
In man there’s failure, only since he left
The lower and inconscious forms of life. (223-226)

What Cleon does not realize, however, is that he is himself a natural man—not in the sense that he uses the phrase but in the sense that it is used in the verse cited above from First Corinthians. Because there are essentially two natural-man traditions in Western culture, Robert Browning was able to use this fact to define more clearly the clash of Christian and pagan cultures, to establish more precisely the limitations of Cleon’s character, and to develop the irony in the poem more fully.

Any Christian of Browning’s day would have known the Apostle’s distinction between the natural and the spiritual. In England, especially, the phrase natural man itself would have been familiar, due to the pervasive influence of the language of the King James Bible. The other type of natural man—or rather cluster of types, since a number of variations have developed over the centuries—is the natural man opposed, not to the spiritual man, but to the civilized man. The roots of this type are as old as Western culture itself. Leo Strauss has written that nature is primarily “a term of distinction.”² As a result, writers have used the natural man polemically to define, chastise, or frighten the so-called civilized man. The Roman Stoics used the concept, as did Montaigne in the sixteenth century; and it was widely in use in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The variety of
ROBERT BROWNING'S CLEON

natural men that developed is astonishing. The natural man could be a childlike innocent or an evil savage; he could be bloodthirsty or stoical and noble; he could be a creature governed by reason or one guided by pure instinct. What generally determined his essential characteristics was why his creator chose to bring him before his readers. If the writer championed his culture's status quo, then the natural man would be some sort of wild, naked savage, the embodiment of anarchy. If the writer attacked the corruptions of European civilization, then the natural man would be someone who either possessed values superior to those of civilized men or the values of civilization itself in a purer, more primitive form. One need only consider the contrasting types of natural men associated with the names of Hobbes and Rousseau, and consider their aims in writing, to get a sense of the variety and vitality of the concept of the uncivilized natural man.

Cleon's natural man is of this second type. He is basically an animal, lacking true human self-consciousness and intellect. Like so many of his fellow natural types, he has an advantage over such civilized men as Cleon. Without the "sense of sense," he does not bear the burden of consciousness and thus the knowledge that "Most progress is most failure" (272). For life, Cleon has learned, is "inadequate to joy, / As the soul sees joy" (249-250). And yet Cleon would not be a natural man in this sense. His pride keeps him from that, even though the slave girl Protus has sent him has cast her eyes on a well-muscled oarsman she has seen rather than the aging but cultivated Greek intellectual.

Since "Cleon" is a dramatic poem and its speaker is a pagan, one would not, of course, expect Browning to have his character use the phrase natural man in St. Paul's sense. Still, there are a number of reasons to assume that the poet may well have intended for his readers to think of the Apostle's concept of the unspiritual man when reading the poem, and to appreciate the irony of Cleon's differing use of the phrase.

To begin with, as noted earlier, the Pauline concept of the natural man was a cultural commonplace in English life. Browning could expect that any Christian, even any literate Englishman, would think of it when he encountered the phrase. Second, it is not likely that Browning used the phrase natural man without giving thought to its range of meanings. In fact, he does employ it elsewhere in his poetry with a different meaning than he has Cleon use. For example, in The Ring and the Book the Pope uses the phrase in the Pauline sense when he chides members of the clergy in his day who have "Slunk into corners" despite having all the benefits Christianity has to offer.
Against the protests he imagines them making about their lives of service to the Church, he balances Caponsacchi's defiance of prudence and convention in his attempt to rescue Pompilia. The Pope believes the young priest's action "can cap and cover straight" (10.1580) anything done by these other clerics, even though Caponsicchi's deed was only "Done at an instinct of the natural man" (10.1582).

Within the poem itself is further evidence that Browning wants the reader to regard Cleon as a Pauline natural man. For example, the setting in the early Christian era as well as the subject—the impact of Christianity on late Greek civilization—suggests such an interpretation of Cleon's spiritual condition. The poem's two references to St. Paul—the epigraph and Cleon's response to Protus' query about "Paulus" in the conclusion also help to strengthen such a reading. In the passage in Acts Paul is addressing skeptical Greeks in Athens. Cleon is clearly one of their number in his philosophical outlook.4 The second reference to Paul is much more significant. Cleon's claim in the final line of the poem that Paulus' teachings "could be held by no sane man" (353) is surely an intentional echo of Paul's claim that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him." Ignoring what he knew to be the paltry wisdom of "a mere barbarian Jew" (343), Cleon had not even bothered to investigate Paulus' teachings himself when some of the Apostle's followers visited his island.

Another detail in the poem that marks Cleon as an unspiritual natural man is his claim that he has "written three books on the soul, / Proving absurd all written hitherto, / And putting us to ignorance again" (57-59). At this point in the poem he takes pride in his intellectual abilities as a skeptic; but as the poem progresses, his sense of the futility of life becomes overpowering and reveals the true character of the Pauline natural man.

In his study of the early years of the Christian church, Rudolph Bultmann describes the natural man's condition in the world as one of "impotence and fear."5 This is a rather accurate description of the state in which Cleon finds himself.6 His impotence appears in his claim that "there's failure, only since [man] left / The lower and inconscious forms of life." For with consciousness comes the knowledge "That there's a world of capability / For joy, spread round about us, meant for us, / Inviting us" (239-241); but, unfortunately,

We struggle, fain to enlarge
Our bounded physical recipiency,
Increase our power, supply fresh oil to life,
Robert Browning's Cleon

Repair the waste of age and sickness: no,
It skills not! life's inadequate to joy,
As soul sees joy, tempting life to take. (245-250)

Thus, Cleon acknowledges, "I get to sing of love, when grown too grey
/ For being loved" (297-298). The young "she-slave" may hear his
song, but "she turns to that young man," the oarsman, with "muscles
all a-ripple on his back" (298-299).

The fear of the Pauline natural man appears in Cleon's reply to
Protus' suggestion that Cleon's creative achievements will give him
immortality:

Thou diest while I survive?
Say rather that my fate is deadlier still,
In this, that every day my sense of joy
Grows more acute, my soul (intensified
By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;
While every day my hairs fall more and more,
My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase—
The horror quickening still from year to year,
The consummation coming past escape
When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy—
When all my works wherein I prove my worth,
Being present still to mock me in men's mouths,
Alive still, in the praise of such as thou,
I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,
The man who loved his life so ever-much,
Sleep in my urn. (308-323)

Cleon's fear of death is so great that "I dare at times imagine to my
need / Some future state revealed to us by Zeus, / Unlimited in
capability / For joy, as this is in desire for joy" (324-327).
Unfortunately, "Zeus has not revealed it; and alas, / He must have done
so, were it possible" (334-335).

As the passages cited make clear, Cleon's soul is actually only the
animating principle of the body that may have a "sense of joy," and that
may increase in "power and insight," but that will not survive death.
Cleon is thus an epicurean, both in the emphasis on joy and in his
denial, no matter how reluctant it may be, of the possibility of an
afterlife. In short, he has not received "the things of the Spirit of God,"
even though he desires them and can make them the subjects of his art.
He mentions a work he wrote once:

Long since, I imaged, wrote the fiction out,
George F. Horneker

That he [Zeus] or other god descended here
And, once for all, showed simultaneously
What, in its nature, never can be shown,
Piecelmeal or in succession;—showed, I say,
The worth both absolute and relative
Of all his children from the birth of time,
His instruments for all appointed work. (115-122)

This "fiction," as Cleon calls it, is the poem’s most explicit connection
to the epigraph from Acts; but to him it is nothing more than a self-
born mocker of man’s enterprise.

Thus, it is not the appearance in the poem of the phrase natural
man alone that suggests we regard Cleon as a Pauline natural man. The
setting, the direct references to Paul, and the other elements discussed,
especially Cleon’s character, lead in that direction. When the poem is
read with this possibility in mind, it reinforces and clarifies the effect
Browning wishes the poem to make. Of all the difficulties that his
poetry presents to the reader, "What is often most difficult to determine
is Browning’s attitude toward his subject and the attitude he wishes his
reader to adopt toward it." Recognizing that two concepts of the
natural man are operative within the poem makes this difficulty easier
to overcome.

For example, it enables the reader to understand more fully the
poem’s historical setting: the appearance in the first century A.D. of
Christianity’s spiritual solution to the decadence of late classical
thought. The poem reveals the difficulty of accepting what the heart
desires but what the head and cultural prejudice soundly reject. Cleon,
as a Pauline natural man, does not understand "the things of the Spirit
of God."

The two concepts also enable the reader to recognize the most
important limitation in Cleon’s character: his inability to act in
response to his inmost desires. As one scholar has written about Cleon
and Karshish, the Arab physician, "only when they ramble in
imagination beyond the domain of strict reason do they begin to think
imperially. At other times they are no more capable of comprehending
the mysteries of religion than is a creature living in two dimensions of
understanding a third."8

Finally, Browning’s employment of two natural man concepts in
the poem contributes significantly to its ironic effect. Cleon, for all
his intellectual and artistic achievements, possessed of all the material
things his culture and Protus have to offer, and with a smug sense of
superiority over his brutish ancestors and any “barbarian Jew” that
might cross his path, is still from a spiritual point of view a “poor, bare, forked animal”—a natural man.

NOTES


2 Natural Right and History (Chicago, 1953), p. 82.


4 W. David Shaw writes: “As a philosopher who has proved ‘absurd all written hitherto’ upon the soul, Cleon represents just those elements of Greek rationalism which thwart the development of his religious nature”: The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning (Ithaca, 1971), p. 519.


6 Roma A. King, Jr., says of Cleon: “Having failed in mind and body, he needs a new set of values. In spite of his self-knowledge, however, he lacks the power to act. He cannot, on the one hand, because of psychological and cultural barriers, and, on the other, because of intellectual and moral limitations”: Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston, 1957), p. 194.


8 Shaw 164.