RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND MORALITY IN THE POEMS OF ROBERT BROWNING

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ABSTRACT

Just as Browning's professional life centered around this crucial publication, so, too did his personal life center around a crucial relationship. Following the appearance of her celebrated first collection, Browning had begun corresponding with the poet Elizabeth Barrett, a semi-invalid who lived in the home of her extremely protective father. Not long after their first face-to- face meeting, the two poets married in secret and fled to Italy, where they lived until Elizabeth's death in 1861. During this time critics considered Elizabeth much the finer poet, and scholars even proposed her as a candidate for poet laureate when William Wordsworth died (Alfred Tennyson received the honor instead). Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work still receives much scholarly attention, Robert Browning's subtle, detail-oriented poems have proven attractive to modern critics, and he has now replaced his wife as the Browning of favor.

INTRODUCTION

Browning is often known by some of his short poems, such as *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, *How they brought the good News to Aix*, *Evelyn Hope*, *The Pied Piper of Hammelin*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*, *A Death in the Desert*. Initially, Browning was not regarded as a great poet, since his subjects were often recondite and lay beyond the ken and sympathy of the great bulk of readers; and owing, partly to the subtle links connecting the ideas and partly to his often extremely condensed and rugged expression, the treatment of them was often difficult and obscure. The keynote of his teaching is a wise and noble optimism.

Browning's fame today rests mainly on his dramatic monologues, in which the words not only convey setting and action but also reveal the speaker's character. Unlike a soliloquy, the meaning in a Browning dramatic monologue is not what the speaker directly reveals but what he inadvertently "gives away" about himself in the process of rationalizing past actions, or "special-pleading" his case to a silent auditor in the poem. Rather than thinking out loud, the character composes a self-defense which the reader, as "juror," is challenged to see through. Browning chooses some of the most debased, extreme and even criminally psychotic characters, no doubt

for the challenge of building a sympathetic case for a character who doesn't deserve one and to cause the reader to squirm at the temptation to acquit a character who may be a homicidal psychopath. One of his more sensational dramatic monologues is *Porphyries'*.

Yet it is by carefully reading the far more sophisticated and cultivated rhetoric of the aristocratic and civilized Duke of *My Last Duchess*, perhaps the most frequently cited example of the poet's dramatic monologue form, that the attentive reader discovers the most horrific example of a mind totally mad despite its eloquence in expressing itself. The duchess, we learn, was murdered not because of infidelity, not because of a lack of gratitude for her position, and not, finally, because of the simple pleasures she took in common everyday occurrences. She is reduced to an *objet d'art* in the Duke's collection of paintings and statues because the Duke equates his instructing her to behave like a duchess with "stooping," an action of which his megalomaniac pride is incapable. In other monologues, such as *Far*, Browning takes an ostensibly unsavory or immoral character and challenges us to discover the goodness, or life-affirming qualities, that often put the speaker's contemporaneous judges to shame. In *The Ring and the Book* Browning writes an epic-length poem in which he justifies the ways of God to humanity through twelve extended blank verse monologues spoken by the principals in a trial about a murder. These monologues greatly influenced many later poets, including T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, high modernists, the latter singling out in his *Cantos* Browning's convoluted psychological poem *Bordello* about a frustrated 13-century troubadour, as the poem he must work to distance himself from. These concerns reflected Victorian society in the late 19th century.

But he remains too much the prophet-poet and descendant of Percy Shelley to settle for the conceits, puns, and verbal play of the Metaphysical of the seventeenth century. His is a modern sensibility, all too aware of the arguments against the vulnerable position of one of his simple characters, who recites: "God's in His Heaven; All's right with the world." Browning endorses such a position because he sees an immanent deity that, far from remaining in a transcendent heaven, is indivisible from temporal process, assuring that in the fullness of theological time there is ample cause for celebrating life.

THE PURPOSE OF ART

Browning wrote many poems about artists and poets, including such dramatic monologues as "Pictor Ignotus" (1855) and "Fra Lippo Lippi." Frequently, Browning would begin by thinking about an artist, an artwork, or a type of art that he admired or disliked. Then he would speculate on the character or artistic philosophy that would lead to such a success or failure. His dramatic monologues about artists attempt to capture some of this philosophizing because his characters speculate on the purposes of art. For instance, the speaker of "Fra Lippo Lippi" proposes that art heightens our powers of observation and helps us notice things about our own lives. According to some of these characters and poems, painting idealizes the beauty found in the real world,

such as the radiance of a beloved's smile. Sculpture and architecture can memorialize famous or important people, as in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" (1845) and "The Statue and the Bust" (1855). But art also helps its creators to make a living, and it thus has a purpose as pecuniary as creative, an idea explored in "Andrea del Sarto."

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND MORALITY

Throughout his work, Browning tried to answer questions about an artist's responsibilities and to describe the relationship between art and morality. He questioned whether artists had an obligation to be moral and whether artists should pass judgment on their characters and creations. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Browning populated his poems with evil people, who commit crimes and sins ranging from hatred to murder. The dramatic monologue format allowed Browning to maintain a great distance between himself and his creations: by channeling the voice of a character, Browning could explore evil without actually being evil himself. His characters served aspersonae that let him adopt different traits and tell stories about horrible situations. In "My Last Duchess," the speaker gets away with his wife's murder since neither his audience (in the poem) nor his creator judges or criticizes him. Instead, the responsibility of judging the character's morality is left to readers, who find the duke of Ferrara a vicious, repugnant person even as he takes us on a tour of his art gallery.

MOTIVES

Medieval and Renaissance European Settings

Browning set many of his poems in medieval and Renaissance Europe, most often in Italy. He drew on his extensive knowledge of art, architecture, and history to fictionalize actual events, including a seventeenth-century murder in The Ring and the Book, and to channel the voices of actual historical figures, including a biblical scholar in medieval Spain in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" (1864) and the Renaissance painter in the eponymous "Andrea del Sarto." The remoteness of the time period and location allowed Browning to critique and explore contemporary issues without fear of alienating his readers. Directly invoking contemporary issues might seem didactic and moralizing in a way that poems set in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries would not. For instance, the speaker of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" is an Italian bishop during the late Renaissance. Through the speaker's pompous, vain musings about monuments, Browning indirectly criticizes organized religion, including the Church of England, which was in a state of disarray at the time of the poem's composition in the mid-nineteenth century.

Psychological Portraits

Dramatic monologues feature a solitary speaker addressing at least one silent, usually unnamed person, and they provide interesting snapshots of the speakers and their personalities. Unlike soliloquies, in dramatic monologues the characters are always speaking directly to listeners. Browning's characters are usually crafty, intelligent, argumentative, and capable of lying. Indeed, they often leave out more of a story than they actually tell. In order to fully understand the speakers and their psychologies, readers must carefully pay attention to word choice, to logical progression, and to the use of figures of speech, including any metaphors or analogies. For instance, the speaker of "My Last Duchess" essentially confesses to murdering his wife, even though he never expresses his guilt outright. Similarly, the speaker of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" inadvertently betrays his madness by confusing Latin prayers and by expressing his hate for a fellow friar with such vituperation and passion. Rather than state the speaker's madness, Browning conveys it through both what the speaker says and how the speaker speaks.

REVIEW OF STUDIES

Browning wrote many poems about artists and poets, including such dramatic monologues as "Pictor Ignotus" (1855) and "Fra Lippo Lippi." Frequently, Browning would begin by thinking about an artist, an artwork, or a type of art that he admired or disliked. Then he would speculate on the character or artistic philosophy that would lead to such a success or failure. His dramatic monologues about artists attempt to capture some of this philosophizing because his characters speculate on the purposes of art. For instance, the speaker of "Fra Lippo Lippi" proposes that art heightens our powers of observation and helps us notice things about our own lives. According to some of these characters and poems, painting idealizes the beauty found in the real world, such as the radiance of a beloved's smile. Sculpture and architecture can memorialize famous or important people, as in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" (1845) and "The Statue and the Bust" (1855). But art also helps its creators to make a living, and it thus has a purpose as pecuniary as creative, an idea explored in "Andrea del Sarto."

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Unlike other Victorian poets, Browning filled his poetry with images of ugliness, violence, and the bizarre. His contemporaries, such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, in contrast, mined the natural world for lovely images of beauty. Browning's use of the grotesque links him to novelist Charles Dickens, who filled his fiction with people from all strata of society, including the aristocracy and the very poor. Like Dickens, Browning created characters who were capable of great evil. The early poem "Porphyria's Lover" (1836) begins with the lover describing the arrival of Porphyria, then it quickly descends into a depiction of her murder at his hands. To make the image even more grotesque, the speaker strangles Porphyria with her own blond hair. Although "Fra Lippo Lippi" takes place during the Renaissance in Florence, at the height of its wealth and power, Browning sets the poem in a back alley beside a brothel, not in a palace or a garden. Browning was instrumental in helping readers and writers understand that poetry as an art form could handle subjects both lofty, such as religious splendor and idealized passion, and base, such as murder, hatred, and madness, subjects that had previously only been explored in novels.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Browning's most important poetic message regards the new conditions of urban living. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the once-rural British population had become centered in large cities, thanks to the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. With so many people living in such close quarters, poverty, violence, and sex became part of everyday life. People felt fewer restrictions on their behavior, no longer facing the fear of non-acceptance that they had faced in smaller communities; people could act in total anonymity, without any monitoring by acquaintances or small-town busybodies. However, while the absence of family and community ties meant new-found personal independence, it also meant the loss of a social safety net. Thus for many city-dwellers, a sense of freedom mixed with a sense of insecurity. The mid-nineteenth century also saw the rapid growth of newspapers, which functioned not as the current-events journals of today but as scandal sheets, filled with stories of violence and carnality. Hurrying pedestrians, bustling shops, and brand-new goods filled the streets, and individuals had to take in millions of separate perceptions a minute. The resulting overstimulation led, according to many theorists, to a sort of numbness. Many writers now felt that in order to provoke an emotional reaction they had to compete with the turmoils and excitements of everyday life, had to shock their audience in ever more novel and sensational ways. Thus violence became a sort of aesthetic choice for many writers, among them Robert Browning. In many of his poems, violence, along with sex, becomes the symbol of the modern urban-dwelling condition. Many of Browning's

more disturbing poems, including "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess," reflect this notion.

This apparent moral decay of Victorian society, coupled with an ebbing of interest in religion, led to a morally conservative backlash. So-called Victorian prudery arose as an attempt to rein in something that was seen as out- of-control, an attempt to bring things back to the way they once were. Thus everything came under moral scrutiny, even art and literature. Many of Browning's poems, which often feature painters and other artists, try to work out the proper relationship between art and morality: Should art have a moral message? Can art be immoral? Are aesthetics and ethics inherently contradictory aims? These are all questions with which Browning's poetry struggles. The new findings of science, most notably evolution, posed further challenges to traditional religious ideas, suggesting that empiricism—the careful recording of observable details—could serve as a more relevant basis for human endeavor, whether intellectual or artistic.

In exploring these issues of art and modernity, Browning uses the dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue, to paraphrase M.H. Abrams, is a poem with a speaker who is clearly separate from the poet, who speaks to an implied audience that, while silent, remains clearly present in the scene. (This implied audience distinguishes the dramatic monologue from the soliloquy—a form also used by Browning—in which the speaker does not address any specific listener, rather musing aloud to him or herself). The purpose of the monologue (and the soliloquy) is not so much to make a statement about its declared subject matter, but to develop the character of the speaker. For Browning, the genre provides a sort of play-space and an alternative persona with which he can explore sometimes controversial ideas. He often further distances himself by employing historical characters, particularly from the Italian Renaissance. During the Renaissance in Italy art assumed a new humanism and began to separate from religion; concentrations of social power reached an extreme. Thus this temporal setting gives Browning a good analogue for exploring issues of art and morality and for looking at the ways in which social power could be used (and misused: the Victorian period saw many moral pundits assume positions of social importance). Additionally, the monologue form allows Browning to explore forms of consciousness and self-representation. This aspect of the monologue underwent further development in the hands of some of Browning's successors, among them Alfred Tennyson and T.S. Eliot.

Browning devotes much attention not only to creating a strong sense of character, but also to developing a high level of historic specificity and general detail. These concerns reflected Victorian society's new emphasis on empiricism, and pointed the way towards the kind of intellectual verse that was to be written by the poets of high Modernism, like Eliot and Ezra Pound. In its scholarly detail and its connection to the past Browning's work also implicitly considers the relationship of modern poets to a greater literary tradition. At least two of Browning's finest dramatic monologues take their inspiration from moments in Shakespeare's plays, and other poems consider the matter of one's posterity and potential immortality as an

artist. Because society had been changing so rapidly, Browning and his contemporaries could not be certain that the works of canonical artists like Shakespeare and Michelangelo would continue to have relevance in the emerging new world. Thus these writers worried over their own legacy as well. However, Browning's poetry has lasted—perhaps precisely because of its very topical nature: its active engagement with the debates of its times, and the intelligent strategies with which it handles such era-specific material.

CONCLUSION

"Porphyria's Lover," which first appeared in 1836, is one of the earliest and most shocking of Browning's dramatic monologues. The speaker lives in a cottage in the countryside. His lover, a blooming young woman named Porphyria, comes in out of a storm and proceeds to make a fire and bring cheer to the cottage. She embraces the speaker, offering him her bare shoulder. He tells us that he does not speak to her. Instead, he says, she begins to tell him how she has momentarily overcome societal strictures to be with him. He realizes that she "worship[s]" him at this instant. Realizing that she will eventually give in to society's pressures, and wanting to preserve the moment, he wraps her hair around her neck and strangles her. He then toys with her corpse, opening the eyes and propping the body up against his side. He sits with her body this way the entire night, the speaker remarking that God has not yet moved to punish him.

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1 SparkNotes Editors. "SparkNote on Robert Browning's Poetry." SparkNotes LLC. 2002. http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/browning/ (accessed November 16, 2011).