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Developing Poetry in the Victorian Era: Robert Browning

The British Victorian Era represents the drastic changes which occurred in England in the 19th century. All facets of people's lives were impacted by a swift overarching transformation of society brought on by the country's role as the greatest of the world's empires. It is unsurprising then that poetry—an art which in many ways is a reflection of the people and events of a particular time—took new directions and explored different forms. Successors to celebrated English poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron were to be found in the likes of Lord Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. One of the most regarded of the Victorian Era is Robert Browning, a strongly unique and experimental poet who appropriated the dramatic monologue to present many of his unconventional stories and ideas. One of his most fascinating signatures appears through a striking ability to manifest and translate into words disturbing thoughts culled from the undercurrents of a character's psyche, which are then used to broach challenging subjects with the reader.

In Robert Browning's poem "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", the first line thrusts the reader into the thoughts of a fierce character: "*Gr-r-r—there go, my heart's abhorrence!*" (1326). A pensive growl emitted from a nameless, shadowy person is encountered in the place of a traditional introduction. The character is then described through a stream of steeled malicious musings which are focused upon one Brother Lawrence. This name subtly reveals that the character holds a charge in a house of worship, a detail which casts him in a very distinctive

light. The magnitude of his horrible thoughts is represented by a desire to sabotage Brother Lawrence's impending admission into heaven:

There's a great text in Galatians,
 Once you trip on it, entails
 Twenty-nine distinct damnations,
 One sure, if another fails:
 If I trip him just a-dying,
 Sure of heaven as sure can be,
 Spin him round and send him flying
 Off to hell, a Manichee? (1328)

Published in 1842, this poem channels many dark thoughts which belong to a person who is expected to possess a heightened moral ability and greater understanding of rightness.

In one of the poet's earliest works, "Porphyria's Lover", released in 1836, a man broods quietly in his abode. As the weather outside worsens a woman named Porphyria enters. She stirs the fire to warm the cottage and advances toward him to provide comfort. Qualities to their relationship are communicated mostly through the man's thoughts, but also through their physical interactions. It is revealed that he does not have the degree of control over Porphyria which he intends, and considers how she might "give herself to [him] for ever" (1325). The boundaries of the relationship suddenly change when he discovers that "she was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good" (1326). His response is reflexively violent: he strangles Porphyria with her own hair: "A thing to do, and all her hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around" (1326). Power and vulnerability are communicated through a gesture which occurs at two points within the poem: in the beginning Porphyria bears the weight

of the man by placing his cheek upon her bare shoulder and then, after she has become extinguished, the man places the weight of her “drooping” head upon his own. The reader is left considering the reasons for the terrible end that came to this woman.

The subject of a morally corrupt clergyman is revisited in “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church”. Released in 1845, this poem communicates the thoughts of a Bishop whose life is about to expire. The closer he comes to death the greater are his needs to have an expensively ornamented and magnificent final resting place. Qualities of his conduct are revealed as his mental abilities diminish, suggesting that he increasingly elaborates on his many transgressions as he becomes more ill. These details are delivered through an agitated blending of private and communicated thoughts. He charges his illegitimate sons with the task of ensuring the greatness of his interment: “Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black— / ‘Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else / Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath?” (1333). Meanwhile there are constant mentions of “Old Gandolf”, another clergyman whose tomb must be made to appear bland and unimpressive in comparison to his own. As in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”, many truths are revealed through the holy man’s thoughts, which provide frightening contradictions to the expected character.

Released in 1842, the poem “My Last Duchess” presents a Duke who is showing to his guest a portrait of his deceased wife. He is strangely intent upon telling of her objectionable qualities: “She had / A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed” (1329). The Duke then elucidates the extent of his suffered indignation by her when “She thanked men,—good! But thanked / Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody’s gift” (1329). Like the main character in “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church”, the Duke’s intentions are communicated

through a dual conversation—one with his guest and another with himself—which rapidly establishes many qualities to his character. The identity of the guest is finally discovered to be the envoy of a Count and that they are conducting negotiations for his second marriage:

The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. (1329)

Browning modeled the speaker on Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, who married and then suspectedly poisoned Lucrezia de Medici. Seven years later he remarried the daughter of Ferdinand I, Count of Tyrol (1328). When comparing the Duke's treatment of his deceased wife to the events of "Porphyria's Lover", a new consideration must be made that Browning implemented her death as a trope to introduce ideas regarding the contemporary role of women in society.

Unlike other successful poets of the Romantic Era, Robert Browning's work did not become popular until much later in his life. His uncustomary approach to writing resulted in works that were wholly different from that which poetry circles were then accustomed to reading. Browning's career began as early as 1833 yet he would not achieve success until the release of his novel *The Ring and the Book* in 1868. While his previous efforts went mostly unreceived upon their releases, his sudden breakthrough created a tremendous surge of interest and allowed many readers to discover his past works for the first time. Within only a few years, Browning came to be recognized as one of the era's leading poets (1324). His monologues,

presented as dramatic utterances by a speaker with a clear communicative intention, represent some of his finest and most famous work (Martens).

Works Cited

- Martens, Britta. "'Hardly Shall I Tell My Joys and Sorrows': Robert Browning's Engagement With Elizabeth Barret Browning's Poetics." *Victorian Poetry* 43.1 (2005): 75-97.