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A Historical and Critical Study of Browning's Asolando Volume

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Paulina Estella Buhl entitled "A Historical and Critical Study of Browning's Asolando Volume." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Kenneth L. Knickerbocker, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Alwin Thaler, Bain T. Stewart, Reinhold Nordsieck, LeRoy Graf

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March 2, 1961

To the Graduate Council:

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A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY OF BROWNING'S *ASOLANDO* VOLUME

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Graduate Council of

The University of Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Paulina Estella Buhl

March 1961

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INTRODUCTION

Because Browning's late work has often been considered inferior to his early work and because his fame suffered a decline soon after his death, there has been no thorough study of *Asolando Fancies and Facts*, his final volume. A close reading of these poems shows that this neglect is unjustifiable, for the collection contains some of Browning's best work after *The Ring and the Book* and reveals significant facts about his poetic development, coming as it does at the very end of his life. Therefore it is the purpose of this study to examine the volume as completely as possible, considering its composition and critical reception, analyzing each of the individual poems, and then relating the poems to the whole of Browning's work. In so doing, the study will show that *Asolando* is a carefully prepared volume with each poem related to a central theme, which is set forth in the subtitle, *Fancies and Facts*. The study will also show that although Browning's thought is more or less consistent throughout his work, the tone and techniques of this volume are much closer to those employed in the poems of his middle years, which are universally regarded as the high points of his poetic production, than they are to those used in the volumes immediately preceding *Asolando*.

For purposes of convenience, the poems have been divided into three groups--philosophical poems, love poems, and narrative poems--following DeVane's classification.

CHAPTER I

THE COMPOSITION AND CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ASOLANDO

Browning's poems, with a few exceptions such as The Ring and the Book, seldom give many indications of the conditions under which they were composed. Asolando, however, because of the personal tone of some of the lyrics and because of the references to Asolo, does not follow the rule. Yet in spite of this fact, no thorough study of the composition has been made, although Mrs. Bronson did note interesting points about the composition of a few of the poems in her general discussion of Browning's last visit to Asolo.[1] It is therefore necessary and desirable to examine the background of the collection before looking at any of the individual poems.

Although Asolando reveals a distinctive tone of its own, it also displays many of the characteristics found in the entire body of Browning's poetry. Two of these characteristics influenced the composition of his final volume. One of these was Browning's buoyant vitality, which remained with him almost to the end and was clearly revealed in his poetry, and the other was his great and constant love for Italy. To many students of Browning it seems quite appropriate that his last volume should have been published on the day of his death and that it should have been prepared in Italy and should have a strong Italian tone.

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[1]Katherine C. DeKay Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," The Century Magazine, NS XXXVII (April, 1900), 923, 929-30.

About his continued vigor and strength many comments were made by those who were with him during the last months of his life. For example, in the summer of 1889 Kingsland told of a visit he had recently had with the poet and said Browning "still bears his weight of years with a rejuvenescence that is delightful to behold. There is something truly inspiring about the hearty ring of his voice and the gladness of his laugh."[2] A month later Kingsland continued in the same vein: "Mr. Browning, at seventy-seven years of age, is, to all appearance, hale and hearty, and in full possession of intellectual strength and power."[3] Just two months before his death, according to Mrs. Bronson, the poet was not only looking forward to purchasing a house in Asolo but was planning how he and she could signal each other by means of colored flags. It was true, she added, that occasionally he would comment that he might not live long to enjoy the house but that his son could always use it; such graveness, however, was always momentary, and he would declare he was good for another ten years.[4]

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[2]William G. Kingsland, "Our London Letter," dated July 12, 1889, Poet-Lore, I (August, 1889), 390.

[3]Kingsland, "Our London Letter," dated August 6, 1889, Poet-Lore, I (September, 1889), 441.

[4]Bronson, p. 925. See also Hiram Corson, "Recollections of Robert Browning," Nation, L (January 9, 1890), 28-9; "Some Browning Reminiscences," Bookman (London), I (January, 1892), 135-6; W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning With Notices of His Writings, His Family, & His Friends (New York, 1910), p. 282.

Not only did Browning retain his vigor and youthful air, but he also kept many of the enthusiasms of his youth. Italy as a whole he always loved, but in his final volume he chose to memorialize the hill town of Asolo, one of the first towns he visited on his first trip to Italy in 1838.[5] He had come to Asolo because Dante had aroused his interest in Sordello,[6] but during the four days he spent wandering over the countryside, he became fascinated not only with landmarks such as Romano, the ancestral home of the Ezzelini family, but also with the picturesqueness of the walled town and the beauty of the surrounding country. (Asolo affords good views of the Alps on the north and of Venice, which lies some thirty miles southeast across the Revisian Plain.[7]) The town's significance for students of both literature and history was also important for him. He visited the castle which in the fifteenth century had been the site of the court of Catherine Cornaro, the Queen of Cyprus, often called the "Sovereign lady of Asolo."[8] When political pressures, following the death of her husband and son, had forced Catherine to surrender the throne of Cyprus to Venice and to submit to exile, she had been given the town of Asolo and the castle outside its walls.[9] Browning knew and often told the story of

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[5]Griffin and Minchin, p. 94.

[6]Ibid., p. 95.

[7]Linda Villari, "Asolo and its Neighbourhood," Murray's Magazine, X (September, 1891), 449.

[8]Ibid., p. 452.

[9]Doros Alastos, Cyprus in History--A Survey of 5,000 Years (London, 1955), p. 210-9; George Hill, A History of Cyprus (Cambridge, 1948), III, 632-747.

Catherine,[10] who is, of course, Kate the Queen in Pippa Passes. To many the story of the exiled queen must have seemed a tragic one, but Browning, perhaps judging by his own deep love for the town, thought Catherine had been fortunate. During his last visit to Asolo he was wont to say to Mrs. Bronson:

> People always speak of Caterina [sic] with compassion because she lost Cyprus; but surely this is a better place, far more beautiful than the distant island where she was a stranger. I am sure the happiest years of her life were those when she was Queen of Asolo.[11]

Most records seem to prove that Catherine's life in Asolo was indeed idyllic. The best picture of the life at her court is given in a work by her young kinsman Pietro Bembo, who visited her in 1495 when she was celebrating the marriage of Fiammetta, her favorite lady-in-waiting.[12] Bembo's Gli Asolani, a trilogy of discourses on love, describes the beautiful gardens of the Asolan castle and the music, feasting, and brilliant entertainments with which Catherine and her court passed the time. Browning was well acquainted with Bembo. Not

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[10]Letter to Mrs. Skirrow, October 15, 1889, in William Clyde DeVane and Kenneth Leslie Knickerbocker, eds., New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven, 1950), p. 383-4; "Dedication" to Asolando, in Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, eds., The Complete Works of Robert Browning. From the Author's Revised Text (New York, 1898), XII, 196. All of the quotations of Browning's poetry are taken from this edition.

[11]Bronson, p. 922.

[12]Rudolf B. Gottfried, "Introduction," in Pietro Bembo, Gli Asolani (by Master Pietro Bembo in Which Love is the Subject of Discourse), trans. from the Italian by Rudolf B. Gottfried (Bloomington, Indiana, 1954), p. vii.

only did he remember the discourses in his later life (for example, a letter to G. M. Smith dated October 22, 1889, mentioned Gli Asolani by name[13]), but Bembo's masterpiece influenced the composition of Asolando. Browning echoed the setting and subject matter of Gli Asolani in "Which?" one of the love lyrics, and he included an extended reference to Bembo in the "Dedication":

> I unite, you will see, the disconnected poems by a title-name popularly ascribed to the inventiveness of the ancient secretary of Queen Cornaro whose palace-tower still overlooks us: Asolare--"to disport in the open air, amuse one's self at random." The objection that such a word nowhere occurs in the works of the Cardinal is hardly important--Bembo was too thorough a purist to conserve in print a term which in talk he might possibly toy with; . . .

Like Bembo and Queen Catherine, Browning delighted in Asolo, but unfortunately for scholars, he did not make comments about the town in letters written during his early years. In fact, almost all we know about his first impressions comes from references made much later, as for example a letter to Mrs. Bronson dated June 10, 1889, in which he recalled his long walks and said he "carried away a lively recollection of the general beauty."[14] In Sordello, however, there are references to the Asolan hills (I, 259) and to the sun on the castle wall (VI, 857), and the poet calls the town "delicious" (III, 682) and "sparkling" (VI, 854). Even more significant, as Herford has pointed out, is the

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[13]Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning. New Edition. Revised and in Part Rewritten by Frederic G. Kenyon (New York, 1908), p. 391.

[14]Bronson, p. 920; Lilian Whiting, The Brownings. Their Life and Art (Boston, 1911), p. 282.

fact that in Pippa Passes Browning gave to the town such a realistic presentation that it lives as do few of the places he described.[15]

These poetic records are sufficient to show that Asolo became for Browning a place of special meaning. Mrs. Miller called Asolo "the country of his own creative experience"[16] and noted that for many years he dreamed of revisiting it.[17] William Allingham recorded in his diary for April 6, 1876, Browning's comment that he seldom had dreams worth remembering. "Except," the poet went on, "that a few times I have dreamed that I was among the mountains near Asolo (of Pippa Passes), and I said to myself, 'I have often wished to see Asolo a second time, but now here I am and I'll go and do it.'"[18] Mrs. Bronson expanded upon this by telling of two letters written in the summer of 1889 in which the poet told of repeatedly dreaming of Asolo until he had visited it a second time.[19] During his last visit she heard him remark: "I never heard of anyone dreaming even twice on the same subject, yet my Asolo vision came to me many and many a time. Just ask my sister how often I have said to her at breakfast 'I had my old dream

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[15]C. H. Herford, Robert Browning (London, 1905), p. 50.

[16]Betty Miller, Robert Browning. A Portrait (London, 1952), p. 67.

[17]Ibid., p. 272-3.

[18]William Allingham, A Diary, Ed. by H[elen] Allingham and D. Radford (London, 1907), p. 248.

[19]Letters dated June 10, 1889, and July 17, 1889, in Bronson, p. 920; Whiting, p. 282-3.

again about Asolo last night.'"[20]

Mrs. Miller interpreted Browning's long absence from Asolo as an unwillingness to face reality,[21] and the results of his second visit to some extent bear out this judgment. In August of 1878 the poet and his sister returned to Italy for the first time since Mrs. Browning's death. Rome and Florence held too many memories for him to feel he could ever revisit them, but Venice and Asolo attracted him strongly. As Mrs. Orr suggested, he must have been looking not only for beauty but also for "the remembrance of his own actual and poetic youth,"[22] for he found that memory had given to Asolo a glow which in reality it did not possess. Writing years later he commented to Mrs. Bronson of the change: "People told me the number of inhabitants had greatly increased, and things seemed generally more ordinary-life-like. I am happy that you like it so much. When I got my impression Italy was new to me."[23] A letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald written during the second visit is more explicit:

> And from Asolo, at last, dear friend! So can dreams come false. S[arianna] . . . has told you about our journey . . . but she cannot tell you the feelings with which I revisit this--to me--memorable place after above forty years' absence,--such things have begun and ended with me in the interval! It was too strange when we reached the ruined tower on the hilltop yesterday, and I said, "Let me try if the echo still exists which I discovered here," (you can

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[20]Bronson, p. 921.

[21]Miller, p. 272.

[22]Orr, p. 309.

[23]Letter dated June 10, 1889, in Bronson, p. 920; Whiting, p. 282.

> produce it from only one particular spot on the remainder of brickwork--) and thereupon it answered me plainly as ever, after all the silence: for some children from the adjoining podere, happening to be outside, heard my voice and its result--and began trying to perform the feat--calling "Yes, yes"--all in vain: so perhaps, the mighty secret will die with me! We shall probably stay here a day or two longer,--the air is so pure, the country so attractive: . . .[24]

Although Browning and his sister went to Italy almost every summer and autumn after 1878, it was not until 1889, the last year of his life, that they went again to Asolo. On this last visit they were the guests of Mrs. Arthur Bronson, an American to whom they had been introduced in Venice in 1880 by Mrs. William Wetmore Story.[25] Mrs. Bronson, who published a detailed account of Browning's activities during his annual visits to Venice,[26] conducted for some years a literary salon at Casa Alvisi, her home on the Grand Canal; there she welcomed such artists and writers as Ruskin, Whistler, Lowell, Story, James, Clemens, Howells, and Browning. Although she was interested in civic and charity affairs and entered extensively into the life of Venice,[27] Mrs. Bronson seems to have found her chief joy in gathering literary giants around her, and of all she attracted, Browning was

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[24]Letter dated September 28, 1878, in Orr, p. 309.

[25]Orr, p. 313.

[26]Katherine C. DeKay Bronson, "Browning in Venice," The Century Magazine, NS XLI (February, 1902), 572-84.

[27]R., "The Author of the Browning Articles. Katherine Coleman DeKay Bronson," The Century Magazine, NS XLI (February, 1902), 638.

clearly her especial favorite. The feeling evidently was mutual, for Browning wrote her many letters containing expressions of deep affection.[28] His descriptions of Asolo and his associations with it influenced Mrs. Bronson to visit the town and to purchase La Mura, a house built in the old wall; in letters to Pen[29] and George Moulton-Barrett, his brother-in-law,[30] Browning declared that he influenced Mrs. Bronson to take this step and that she was most pleased with the town. Probably another reason for her purchase of the house was the hope that the poet might gain pleasure from visiting her there. This he did both in anticipation and actuality. On July 17, 1889, he wrote her:

> I shall delight in fancying your life at Asolo, my very own of all Italian towns; your house built into the wall, and the neighboring castle ruins, and the wonderful outlook; on a clear day you can see much further than Venice. I mentioned some of the dear spots pointed out to my faith as ruins, while what wants no faith at all,--the green hills surrounding you, Posagno close by,--how you will enjoy it! And do go there and get all the good out of the beautiful place I used to dream about so often in old days, till at last I saw it again, and the dreams stopped,--to begin, again, I trust, with a figure there never associated with Asolo before. Shall I ever see you there in no dream? I cannot say; I feel inclined to leave England this next autumn that is so soon to overtake us. . . .[31]

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[28]Letters to Mrs. Bronson, quoted in Orr, p. 243, 257-8; these are only a few of the many available examples.

[29]Letter dated June 19, 1889, in DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 381.

[30]Letter dated October 22, 1889, in Paul Landis, ed., Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett (Urbana, Illinois, 1958), p. 329; Orr, p. 395.

[31]Whiting, p. 283.

A few weeks later he wrote to a Mrs. Howe (possibly the wife of William Henry Howe, the landscape painter[32]) whom he had evidently met through Mrs. Bronson: "Your letter came with a word or two added to the else bare address,--and the magic word on the stamp 'Asolo.' I may--it is possible--go there and have the delight of finding myself near the beloved woman whom we both know so well."[33] A week later more definite plans were included in a letter to Pen when the poet wrote of the projected visit: ". . . the best way would be to go to Asolo, my old attraction--now immensely increased by the prospective company of Mrs. Bronson."[34]

Browning and his sister left London in August and traveled over the Alps to Asolo, arriving at the beginning of September.[35] Although they occupied rooms in a house across from Mrs. Bronson's, many of their waking hours were spent at her home. From her account of Browning's activities we learn that during his visit he followed his customary pattern of life which included long walks and drives. He also continued to take great and constant pleasure in the beauty of the landscape and especially of the sunsets seen from the loggia at La Mura; indeed, if it appeared that they would be too late returning from a

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[32]DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 382, Fn.

[33]Letter dated August 8, 1889, in DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 383.

[34]Letter dated August 16, 1889, in Thurman L. Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning. Collected by Thomas J. Wise. Edited with an Introduction and Notes (New Haven, 1933), p. 316.

[35]Miller, p. 276.

drive, he would ask that the horses be whipped up.[36] An additional delight was finding the James Wetmore Story family in Asolo at the time of his visit.[37] Although he was working on his poetry in the afternoons, he found time for attending the productions of a company of traveling actors, for playing the spinet, and for reading aloud, seldom from his own works but from those of his favorite writers.[38]

Browning did not write many letters while he was in Asolo, but the few that exist show the keen pleasure he experienced during his visit, in spite of the frequent bad weather. To Mrs. Charles Skirrow he wrote:

> We have been here some six weeks and, except that the weather was not exempt from the universal plague of rain, nothing could surpass the beauty of what fine days were really conceded us. As for the place itself, it remains what I first conceived it to be--the most beautiful spot I ever was privileged to see. It is seldom that one's impressions of half-a-century ago, are confirmed by present experience but so it is: and Pen who visited us here the other day, and is a thoroughly "travelled" fellow declared himself altogether fascinated by its romantic character and general loveliness. Then--such a view over the whole Lombard plain,--not a site in view, or <u>approximate</u> view at least, without its story. Autumn is now painting all the abundance of verdure,--figs, pomegrantes, ches[t]nuts, and vines, and I don't know/ what else,--all in a wonderful confusion,--and how glowing with all the colours of the rainbow. Some weeks back, the little town was glorified by the visit of a decent theatrical troop who played in a theatre <u>in</u>side the old palace of Queen Caterine Cornaro--utilized also as a prison in which I am informed are at present full five if not six

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[36]Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," p. 924.

[37]Griffin and Minchin, p. 282.

[38]Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," p. 929-30.

> malefactors guilty of stealing grapes and the like enormities. Well, the troop played for a fortnight together exceedingly well-- . . .[39]

A letter to his son emphasized the same theme of his renewed delight in his dream-town and made mention of his desire to purchase a house in Asolo to be used by himself and Sarianna for a part of each year.

> My own desire to get the house is rather increased than abated by my greater experience of the country: you may take my word for it, you have not half seen the capabilities of enjoyment in the place. Every fresh drive we take shows us new beauty: the day we took you to Bassano we returned by a new route, close under the mountains comparatively, with Romano to our right, and we all agreed it exceeded in interest what we had hitherto seen: and since then it has been the same with other unexplored roads--the only drawback is the persistent bad weather--[40]

Still in the same vein, he wrote to G. M. Smith: "And I do assure you that, after some experience of beautiful sights in Italy and elsewhere I know of nothing comparable to the view from the queen's tower and palace, still perfect in every respect."[41] On the same day he said in a letter to George Moulton-Barrett, his brother-in-law: "But the immense charm of the surrounding country is indescribable--I have never seen its like--the Alps on one side, the Asolan mountains all around, --and opposite, the vast Lombard plain, --with indications

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[39]Letter dated October 15, 1889, in DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 383-4.

[40]Letter dated October 21, 1889, in Hood, p. 320.

[41]Letter dated October 22, 1889, in Orr, p. 391.

of Venice, Padua, and the other cities, visible to a good eye on a clear day."[42]

While he was enjoying all the delights that Asolo had to offer, Browning still found time to put together his last volume, and when he finished, he appropriately dedicated it to his hostess. This could not have been too much of a surprise to Mrs. Bronson, for Browning had obviously discussed with her for some time his intention of dedicating a book to her: in June of 1889 he wrote her that the book "that was to associate your name with mine"[43] was still unprinted because his publishers feared that an announcement of it would prevent a wide sale of his new edition (the six-volume Riverside Edition[44]), and some weeks later he indicated clearly that it was not finished, for in writing of the plans for his visit he said: "I shall bring your book full of verses for a final overhauling on the spot where, when I first saw it, inspiration seemed to steam up from the very ground."[45] The intended title, A New Series of Jocoseria, was changed to Asolando, undoubedly because of the joy he found in his surroundings while he was giving the book its final touches.[46] With satisfaction he wrote to Mrs. Skirrow on October 15, 1889, that the manuscript had been dispatched that very

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[42]Letter dated October 22, 1889, in Landis, p. 329; Orr, p. 395.

[43]Whiting, p. 283.

[44]Leslie Nathan Broughton, Clark Sutherland Northup, and Robert Pearsall, Robert Browning: A Bibliography, 1830-1950 (Ithaca, New York, 1953), p. 36.

[45]Whiting, p. 286.

[46]Miller, p. 279.

morning and that of the collection's thirty poems, some were written during his stay, all of them revised and copied.[47]

Most scholars agree with DeVane that the Asolando poems, with the exception of "The Cardinal and the Dog," were written during the last three years of the poet's life.[48] The few who argue for earlier composition dates for several of the selections do so because they feel that some of the love lyrics are too buoyant in tone to have been written by a man over seventy.[49] Of the men who wrote their recollections of the elderly Browning, however, only Conway thought the poet had any premonition that Asolando would be his last volume, and Conway based his opinion less on memory than on the tone of the "Epilogue," which he described as "brave as well as pathetic."[50] Hiram Corson, who saw Browning within weeks of his death, declared, on the other hand, that it was perfectly obvious that the poet looked forward to "many more years of productive work."[51] An anonymous writer in the London Bookman likewise emphasized that the poet gave the clear impression that he did not consider his work to be over and noted that

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[47]DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 384.

[48]William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, Second Edition (New York, 1955), p. 525.

[49]Stopford A. Brooke, The Poetry of Robert Browning (New York, 1902), pp. 245-6; Louis Wann, "Browning's Theory of Love," Personalist, VI (January, 1925), 28.

[50]Moncure D. Conway, "Recollections of Robert Browning," Nation, L (January 9, 1890), 27.

[51]Corson, p. 28.

he himself was surprised at Browning's vitality.[52] Then, too, there is internal evidence to prove that in Asolo he composed the "Prologue," some of the love lyrics, probably the "Epilogue," and, of course, the dedication to Mrs. Bronson, which is not only a charming tribute and a necessary explanation of the title, but also gives an insight into Browning's spirits and mood at the time. Considering all these factors and having little concrete proof to the contrary, it seems most likely that the volume was largely the production of his last years.

Evidently the publishers had been expecting the new work for some time before the manuscript arrived, but they obviously were confused about its nature: in his letter to Mrs. Skirrow Browning also commented that an advertisement had given the impression that he was working on a single long poem which was already in press; both of these inaccuracies were hard for him to understand.[53] Therefore it must have been a relief for him to be able to write then that on October 21, 1889, he had received a letter telling of the manuscript's safe arrival.[54]

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[52]"Some Browning Reminiscences," p. 136.

[53]DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 384. In an advertisement for September 21, 1889, Smith, Elder and Company had announced that a new poem by Browning would soon be out; a notice on October 26, 1889, changed this to "new poems" and dropped the "in press" phrase. The title Asolando was first announced in an advertisement in the Athenaeum on November 30, 1889. DeVane and Knickerbocker, p. 384, Fn.

[54]Letter dated October 21, 1889, in Hood, p. 320-1.

On November 1, 1889, Browning and his sister moved to Venice for a visit with Pen and his bride, the American Fannie Coddington.[55] Evelyn Barclay, who was also visiting the younger Brownings, recorded in her diary that the poet frequently talked with pleasure of his stay in Asolo and the house he was trying to buy there.[56] Hiram Corson had similar recollections when he thought back over his last visit with the poet.[57] He also remembered Browning's telling him he was spending several hours a day correcting proof for Asolando.[58] Armstrong has written that Browning had a premonition that he was reading his obituary as he read the Asolando proof,[59] but there seems to be no real indication of this in the accounts of those who were with him in Venice at the time.

Although the manuscript shows that Browning inserted and crossed out very few words, there are some two hundred and ninety differences between the manuscript and the first edition. Most of these, however, are so minor that a thorough analysis shows little of significance. About half involve changes in punctuation, seemingly in an attempt to clarify obscure passages. Approximately a fourth involve actual word

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[55]Griffin and Minchin, p. 282.

[56]Evelyn Barclay, Diary of Miss Evelyn Barclay (Mrs. G. D. Giles) Who was staying at the Palazzo Rezzonico at the time of Browning's illness and death. Presented to Dr. A. J. Armstrong by Mrs. G. D. Giles, Baylor University Bulletin, XXXV (December, 1932), 1.

[57]Corson, p. 28.

[58]Ibid.

[59]A. J. Armstrong, Browning's Testament of Hope, Baylor University Bulletin, XXXVIII (December, 1935), 23.

changes, most of them relatively unimportant. The most interesting change occurs in "Development," l. 85: the manuscript reads, "No dream's worth waking someone says"--the first edition substitutes "Browning says." The other changes, which are generally corrections of careless errors, are in capitalization, spelling, and hyphenation.

Browning's daughter-in-law recorded two times at which the poet read aloud to her from the proofsheets of Asolando. Writing many years later of the first occasion, she said: "One evening before dinner he read from the 'Asolando,' and I remember how delightfully he read 'The Pope and the Net'; and with the greatest emotion, often with the tears rolling down his cheeks, from that dramatic 'Imperante Augusto Natus est--, '--he telling me the story before hand."[60] The other time, on the next to the last Sunday of his life, he read, she continued, "Reverie" and the "Epilogue"; on finishing the latter, he remarked thoughtfully that perhaps he should suppress it because of its conceited tone, but then he declared he could not do so because its statement was true.[61] Evelyn Barclay also recorded two readings from the proofsheets--one of these was to his family on the fourteenth of November and may be the first occasion mentioned by Fannie Browning.[62] The other was at the Curtises five days later. At this time he read for nearly two hours, making comments as he went along. He began with

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[60]Fannie Coddington Barrett Browning, Some Memories of Robert Browning (Boston, 1928), p. 22.

[61]Ibid., p. 22-4.

[62]Barclay, p. 2.

the short poems at the first of the book because he said he had been accused of being obscure and then moved on to the more thought-provoking ones.[63]

During the month of November the poet felt well and boasted of his physical well-being; a doctor whom Browning invited to feel his pulse realized, however, that his heart was in danger. At the end of November a cold developed into bronchitis, and he agreed to see a doctor. Although the bronchial trouble was soon cured, it was clearly evident to those around him that his strength was failing.[64] When the first copies of Asolando arrived, they were not shown to him for fear that he might be unduly excited, but on the eleventh of December the doctor permitted him to see them; he was able to untie the package himself and commented on the pretty color of the binding.[65] He showed a copy to the doctor, saying, "That's a little of the work I've done in my lifetime!"[66] He then gave his daughter-in-law the first copy (which is now in the Wellesley Library) and said, "Under any other circumstances I should have given it to Mrs. Bronson, but now I want to give it to you."[67] Although he was sinking rapidly, the next day he was able to answer "Very gratifying" when Pen read him the telegram from England announcing that the first edition had been exhausted.[68] Death came about ten o'clock in the evening on December 12, 1889. In a letter

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[63] Ibid., p. 2-4.

[64] Griffin and Minchin, p. 282.

[65] Barclay, p. 5.

[66] Fannie Browning, p. 30.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., p. 31.

to Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore Pen wrote that his father "died without pain or suffering, just weakness and weariness."[69]

Venice gave him a funeral with honors before his body was returned to England for burial in Westminster Abbey[70] and placed a tablet on the Palazzo Rezzonico where he died.[71] Asolo, however, did even more. A tablet marked the house where he stayed during his last visit and composed Asolando,[72] and shortly after his death many items, especially pictures, were placed in the Asolo Museum, along with relics of Queen Catherine and Canova, the sculptor.[73] In 1890 the rooms he occupied could be inspected, and the landlady, who would not part with her Browning relics for any sum of money, declared that many elderly English ladies came to Asolo just to have the opportunity of sleeping in Browning's bed![74] But by 1925 the situation had changed, and Sarah Redington found that the townspeople remembered the son rather than the father.[75] This fact is not surprising, for Pen was able to buy the property which red tape had prevented his father from

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[69]Clara Bloomfield-Moore, "Robert Browning," Lippincott's Magazine, XLV (May, 1890), 690.

[70]Griffin and Minchin, p. 282-3.

[71]William Lyon Phelps, Robert Browning, New Edition (Indianapolis, 1932), p. 520.

[72]Sarah Redington, "Our Asolo," Scribner's Magazine, LXXVII (March, 1925), 282.

[73]Villari, p. 453.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Redington, p. 281-2.

purchasing and made it his final home. He died there in 1912, just after the centenary of his father's birth, and was buried in the town cemetery. The house was sold the next year by order of the administrator of his estate.[76] Pen also memorialized his father's love for Asolo in other ways: one commentator reported in 1892 that Pen had brought a young girl from Asolo to entertain his Venetian guests by singing,[77] and he bought the silk mill made famous by Pippa Passes, made it a charity school, and filled it with girls of Pippa's age.[78] Undoubtedly his father would have been pleased.

Browning had intended for the manuscript of Asolando to be given to Balliol College Library and placed with the manuscripts of all his works composed after The Ring and the Book. Whether planning to carry out his father's wishes, as Frederic G. Kenyon believed,[79] or not, Browning's son kept the manuscript, and after his death it was sold in May, 1913, for 999 pounds by the firm of Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge.[80] Since it could not go to Balliol, Kenyon, and possibly other

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[76]Miller, p. 282.

[77]Harold Spender, "The Browning Palace at Venice," Bookman (London), II (June, 1892), 82.

[78]Phelps, p. 520.

[79]Frederic G. Kenyon, "Of the Browning Manuscripts," Cornhill Magazine, Third Series, XXXV (August, 1913), 167.

[80]Southeby, Wilkinson & Hodge, The Browning Collection. Catalogue of Oil Paintings, Drawings & Prints; Autograph Letters and Manuscripts; Books; Statuary, Furniture, Tapestries, and Works of Art; The Property of R. W. Barrett Browning, Esq. (Deceased) (London, 1913), p. 44.

devotees, was glad that rumor had it that the manuscript would go to America, where the poet was greatly admired.[81] Rumor was correct for once, and the manuscript did become the possession of an American collector. Later it was acquired by J. P. Morgan, who added it in 1924 to New York's Morgan Library,[82] where it has remained until the present.

Criticism of specific poems will be examined in later chapters, but the general critical reception of the volume should be considered here. The public response presented a marked contrast to the reception of some of Browning's earlier volumes. Asolando became a best seller almost immediately, both because the Browning Societies had increased the poet's fame to the point that any book of his was automatically bought and because the coincidence of the author's death occurring on the day of publication created an added interest in the volume. The entire first printing was sold out the first day,[83] the news of this arriving in Venice in time to cheer the dying poet. On December 22, 1889, the New York Times noted that the price of all first editions of Browning's poetry had increased greatly and that "fancy prices" were being asked for copies of Asolando.[84] Advertisements describing it as "bound in China silk" and "The Very Thing for a

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[81]Kenyon, p. 167.

[82]DeVane, p. 525.

[83]Ibid., p. 527.

[84]"Robert Browning," The Critic, NS XII (December 28, 1889), 330.

Christmas Present" appeared in various periodicals such as The Critic.[85] In England the book ran through seven printings in some two months, and one report said that a month after the first edition was released with a list price of five shillings, a copy of that edition was advertised by a bookseller for twenty-two shillings, sixpence.[86] The record in America was almost as good. By December, 1890, a total of 7,196 copies had been printed in eight impressions.[87] In 1895 Asolando was incorporated into the Cambridge Edition, a complete one-volume edition of Browning's poetry,[88] and has been a part of all later complete editions, with some poems, such as "Summum Bonum" and the "Epilogue," appearing in almost all volumes of selections.

The critical reception of Asolando was slight but generally favorable. Browning's death, as has already been mentioned, called forth many articles, but aside from quoting all or a part of the "Epilogue" as a fitting epitaph,[89] these articles ordinarily gave scant attention to Asolando. The same was true of some of the so-called reviews; for example, the review in Murray's Magazine for

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[85]The Critic, NS XII (December 21, 1889), iii.

[86]W. F. Prideaux, "Browning's 'Asolando,'" Notes and Queries, Seventh Series, IX (May 3, 1890), 345.

[87]Louise Greer, Browning and America (Chapel Hill, 1952), p. 243.

[88]Broughton, Northup, and Pearsall, p. 38.

[89]Orion, "Review of Asolando," Scots Magazine, NS V (January, 1890), 136; Heloise Edwina Hersey, "Browning in America," New England Magazine, NS I (January, 1890), 545.

February, 1890, examined Browning's work as a whole and mentioned Asolando only in passing.[90]

Those articles which did discuss the volume were usually highly colored by the fact of the poet's death. Only the writer in the Saturday Review for December 21, 1889, asserted that he would attempt a review uninfluenced by the death.[91] Some, like S. G. G., as the Leisure Hour critic signed himself, simply mentioned the striking coincidence of the almost simultaneous death and publication.[92] Frequent emphasis was placed on the fact that Browning's vigor had been such that his followers were unprepared for his death: the Boston Literary World declared that the more one examined Browning's most recent portrait (there was not one in Asolando), the more difficult it was to believe that he was dead, and stated that readers could only rejoice that the poet was taken in "the ripeness of his genius."[93]

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[90]"Review of Asolando," Murray's Magazine, VII (February, 1890), 284; also "Robert Browning," Atlantic Monthly, LXV (February, 1890), 243-8.

[91]"Two Books of Poems," Saturday Review, December 21, 1889, p. 711.

[92]S. G. G., "Browning and Tennyson: Their Latest Poems," Leisure Hour, XXXIX (February, 1890), 231; "Review of Asolando," Harper's Magazine, LXXX (April, 1890), 807; "Browning's Last Work," The New York Herald, reprinted in Book News, VIII (January, 1890), 184.

[93]"Robert Browning," Literary World (Boston), XX (December 21, 1889), 480. Similar ideas were expressed in "Demeter: and Asolando," London Quarterly Review, LXXIV (April, 1890), 87; William Lyon Phelps, "Mr. Browning's Last Words," New Englander and Yale Review, NS XVI (March, 1890), 240; Orion, p. 131.

A remark such as this was too lacking in sentimentality, however, to be typical. The following example will illustrate the usual impassioned tenor of the observations: the reviewer for The Critic wrote:

> By a strange coincidence the sad intelligence of Robert Browning's death comes to us on the very day that his latest collection of poems is published, and the pleasure we have in reading the lines in "Asolando" is marred by the melancholy thought that the hand that penned them, and so many more lines dear to us, now lies cold and quiet forevermore. The fields wherein he has sown the seeds of his genius are grown full of rare and strange flowers of poesy, some of which we have analyzed and some of which have baffled our more serious attempts at analyzing; but the blossoms, the buds, the flowers and fruits of wisdom and thoughtfulness which we have gathered there are now doubly dear, since we know that the last seed is sprouted and the last bud burst into bloom.[94]

Most of the reviews were rather general, but usually the writers would deal with one or two individual poems. Also some paused to dwell on details such as the title; several commented on it, simply explaining its significance or approving the choice--the writer in Blackwoods, for example, found the conceit upon which it was built "pretty," as he likewise did the dedication to Mrs. Bronson;[95] on the other hand, the reviewer for the London Daily News considered the title a pun which was far-fetched and inappropriate because the content was not generally related to Asolo and because none of the poems presented,

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[94]"Browning's Last Book," The Critic, NS XII (December 21, 1889), 307.

[95]"Browning and Tennyson," Blackwoods, CXLVII (January, 1890), 133.

in his opinion, a sunshiny rural landscape such as was suggested by the title.[96]

Nevertheless, most reviews dealt only with general themes. The youthful spirit of many of the poems was a frequent topic. Symons called this "the youngest of Browning's books."[97] The feeling of many was summed up in the statement in the Pall Mall Gazette that his "eye [was] not dimmed, his intellect not clouded"[98] and in the comment in Nation that he appeared in full vigor at the last.[99]

Because Asolando in its characteristics and stylistic devices is a typical Browning volume, the criticism often sounds like that written about earlier productions. Indeed, the similarities of style and subject matter were frequently discussed by the reviewers. Many pointed out that this book followed directly in the line of the poet's development. Phelps thought Asolando presented the same themes and good points as well as the "familiar harshness and obscurity" which had characterized earlier works and said the poems could have been identified as

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[96]"Review of Asolando," London Daily News, reproduced in Neuphilologisches Centralblatt, IV (February, 1890), 55. A less strenuous objection appeared in Edmund Mercer, "A Poet's Parting Gift," Papers of the Manchester Literary Club, XVI (April, 1890), 122.

[97]Arthur Symons, "Review of Asolando," Academy, XXXVII (January 11, 1890), 19.

[98]"Robert Browning," Pall Mall Gazette, December 13, 1889, reproduced in Pall Mall Budget, December 19, 1889, p. 1623.

[99]"Two Farewell Volumes of Song," Nation, L (May 29, 1890), 437. Similar comments were made in "Browning and Tennyson," p. 137; "Two Books of Poems," p. 712; "Review of Asolando," Athenaeum, January 18, 1890, p. 75; "Robert Browning," Church Quarterly Review, XXX (July, 1890), 328.

Browning's even if his name had not appeared on the title page.[100] This line of criticism might well be summed up by a statement in the Atlantic Monthly to the effect that the poet's primitive energy was unabated and his original forces not transformed.[101]

In contrast, some critics felt Asolando revealed not only no falling off of powers, but instead displayed an intensifying of them. Remarking that in his later years Browning's philosophical probings had tended to become somewhat tedious, Woodberry found the lyrics in Asolando a refreshing change and felt that some of them were "only less good than the best of his middle years."[102] The critic writing for Saturday Review believed this volume showed a reversion to the best characteristics of Browning's work. For nearly a generation, the reviewer continued, the poet had not given so many indications of his real poetic skill.[103] Nor was his breadth of interest narrowed, according to Phelps, for the thirty poems ran the "gamut of human passions."[104]

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[100]Phelps, Robert Browning, p. 241. See also "Review of Asolando," Athenaeum, p. 75; "Review of Asolando," Harper's Magazine, p. 807; Orion, p. 133; "Demeter: and Asolando," p. 94.

[101]"Robert Browning," Atlantic Monthly, p. 244.

[102]George Edward Woodberry, "Robert Browning," Nation, XLIX (December 19, 1889), 493. See also Helen A. Clarke, "Review of Asolando," Poet-Lore, II (February, 1890), 94-5.

[103]"Two Books of Poems," p. 712.

[104]Phelps, Robert Browning, p. 242.

Although Browning's death made most critics deal with him gently, some adverse comments slipped out. Miss Hersey, who did not mention Asolando specifically but proved she knew of it by quoting the "Epilogue," said that in the last ten years of his life Browning wrote nothing which would appeal to those who were not already disciples.[105] Payne, writing for the Dial, prophesied with amazing astuteness that Browning's "shapeless and enigmatic" work would live as long as the Browning Societies continued to exist, but that after their disappearance the general reader would discard all but Men and Women plus some of the dramatic scenes, lyrics, and idyls.[106] He did not believe the poems of Asolando would be among the immortal ones.[107] Likewise, Stoddard, who felt that Browning had failed more markedly during the last twenty years of his life than had any other poet of equal rank, did not think Asolando should be spared from the general condemnation.[108]

Just as there was disagreement about the merits of the volume, so was there disagreement about the purpose Browning had in mind. The usual view was that expressed by the critic in the Pall Mall Budget: Browning attempted to give the reader a good example of every form

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[105]Hersey, p. 543.

[106]William Morton Payne, "Recent Books of Poetry," Dial, X (February, 1890), 279.

[107]Ibid., p. 280.

[108]R. H. Stoddard, "Robert Browning," The Critic, NS XII (December 21, 1889), 316.

of poetry in which he excelled and to sum up all of his earlier teachings.[109] Woodberry had a somewhat similar idea, but he did feel that in his later years Browning tended more and more to the atypical or grotesque and hence became less valuable as a philosophical instructor.[110] In spite of this judgment on Woodberry's part, most readers looked for instruction in these final poems. The themes which they discovered were not new ones, and their acknowledgment of this fact strengthened their position in placing Asolando in the direct line of Browning's development.[111]

Even though the themes were the same, it was noticed that they were touched more lightly and treated less for their own sakes than in preceding volumes.[112] The themes of perfectibility, the nature of truth, the supreme importance of love, the sacredness of the individual, the optimism with which life should be considered were all related to the general theme announced by the subtitle; the relationship of fact and fancy was, according to the commentator in the Pall Mall Budget, considered in a characteristically encyclopedic fashion.[113] The critic continued by saying that the unifying theme was the

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[109]"Browning's Last Poems," Pall Mall Budget, December 19, 1889, p. 1625.

[110]Woodberry, p. 493.

[111]"Review of Asolando," London Daily News, p. 55; "Review of Asolando," Athenaeum, p. 77.

[112]"Browning's Last Poems, p. 1624.

[113]Ibid., p. 1625.

conviction that fact may be as attractive as fancy, "an idea which will be found by the careful reader wrought into the texture of many apparently disconnected pages."[114]

The mood of the poems also brought forth some comment. Several critics felt the title set the mood quite successfully. The reviewer for the London Quarterly Review was pleased to find no gloom in Asolando, a book which showed "a strong and joyous spirit disporting itself under open sky, amid the glow of a cloudless eventide--well aware that night is coming, but so confident of a sunrise that shall follow, brighter even than this sunset, that it can spare time to smile or wander over the fair things, the quaint things, the grim things of the passing hour--furtive as they are and must be."[115] The critic for Blackwoods, however, commented that although in the book Browning seemed generally to be asolando, enjoying his rhyming, this verse was not the poetry of youth, for underneath were deep thoughts, perhaps some too deep for the casual reader.[116] Certainly to be found along with the lightness was what the commentator in Book News called "evidences . . . of the mental unrest and half querulous, half speculative spiritual outreachings which have so long made his works such a fascinating study to his admirers."[117]

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[114] Ibid.

[115] "Demeter: and Asolando," p. 91.

[116] "Browning and Tennyson," p. 134.

[117] "Browning's Last Work," p. 184.

Many of the critics considered, at least briefly, the stylistic values of the poems. Because lyrical poems hold a predominant position, a few reviewers agreed with the commentator in the Pall Mall Budget, who thought Asolando was the most musical of all the books produced after The Ring and the Book,[118] but even this writer continued by saying that not all the verse in Asolando could be termed limpid, for to the last Browning kept his conviction that ruggedness of thought was best expressed by ruggedness of phrasing.[119] The author of the review in Boston's Literary World said that just as the volume was representative of Browning's strong points, so it was representative of all his stylistic weaknesses,[120] and Payne spoke of Browning's "always rugged and generally uncouth discourse."[121] Perhaps the article in the London Quarterly Review offered the best summation of the stylistic comments: "To say that some of the poems are stiff reading, and some of the verses too rugged in their strength, that the priceless gems of thought they enclose are too roughly set, is to say only that the book is by Browning."[122]

Miss Greer felt that these reviews, which dealt "in a rather routine manner with hackneyed ideas," did not contribute greatly to the

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[118]"Browning's Last Poems," p. 1624.

[119]Ibid., p. 1625.

[120]"Review of Asolando," Literary World (Boston), XXI (January 4, 1890), 3.

[121]Payne, p. 279.

[122]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 91.

critical scholarship on Browning.[123] After examining the articles, most students would agree with her evaluation.

After the first flurry of reviews, Asolando received only cursory notice from the critics. For example, in a centennial discussion of Browning in 1912, the Atheneaum practically ignored Asolando, pausing only long enough to mention its consistently optimistic tone.[124] When comments were made, they generally repeated earlier judgments and therefore contributed very little to Browning criticism.[125] One somewhat unexpected remark was made by Compton-Rickett, who felt that the poet's "Swan Song" had been overpraised: although he thought some of the poems were charming, he believed people were enthusiastic about the volume simply because it was more pleasing than the "harsh cacophony" which had gone before.[126] As time passed and Browning's reputation as a thinker and philosopher declined, the contrast between the philosophical tone of most of Browning's late works and the lighter, more lyrical tone of Asolando was sometimes noticed.[127] More frequently,

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[123]Greer, p. 214.

[124]"Robert Browning," Athenaeum, May 4, 1912, p. 492.

[125]For example, Henry S. Pancoast, "Old Age and Poets," Poet-Lore, III (February, 1891), 57-68; C. S., "'Between the Brenta and the Piave,'" The Spectator, CXX (January 12, 1918), 35.

[126]Arthur Compton-Rickett, "Introduction," Robert Browning: Humanist. A Selection from Browning's Poetry, with an Introduction and Bibliographical Note (New York, 1925), p. 37.

[127]Henry Charles Duffin, Amphibian. A Reconsideration of Browning (Fair Lawn, New Jersey, 1956), p. 288; Elisabeth Luther Cary, Browning. Poet and Man. A Survey (New York, 1899), p. 224; Osbert Burdett, The Brownings (Boston, 1929), p. 324.

however, critics simply condemned the poems of Browning's last years. King declared that although Browning wrote some good poems in his old age, his powers markedly declined after The Ring and the Book,[128] and while Cary felt Asolando was superior to the works immediately preceding it, he did not think the poet returned to the "abundant felicity" of his middle years.[129]

Evaluations dealing with the whole of Browning's poetic production or with some specific phase of his poetry seldom devoted much attention to Asolando. Mrs. Orr merely commented that she would assign two of the poems to an earlier period of his life, but that for the most part the book was written during Browning's last years and therefore contained the poet's farewell words.[130] Herford said although the volume revealed Browning's "flagging poetic power," undimmed were "his inner witness, and those subtle filaments of mysterious affinity which, for Browning, bound the love of God for man to the love of man for woman."[131] With a few exceptions, he continued, Asolando was a mere miscellany put together because the poet realized the end was near.[132] Like others,[133] Nettleship mentioned the book

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[128]Roma A. King, Jr., The Bow & The Lyre (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1957), p. 7.

[129]Cary, p. 224.

[130]Orr, p. 406.

[131]Herford, p. 232-3.

[132]Ibid., p. 233.

[133]Frank Walters, Studies of Robert Browning's Poems (London, 1893), p. 24; Brooke, p. 16, 92; G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning (London, 1936), p. 42.

only in passing.[134]

The student who examines the critical material which appeared after the first reviews will reach the same conclusion that Greer did after studying early comments:[135] there has been little serious, valid criticism of Asolando. Probably because of the circumstances of its publication, it has been too infrequently considered on its own merits and far too often simply regarded as a prophetic pronouncement from a dying philosopher. The beauty of the love lyrics and the youthful spirit in many of the poems were noted while some pointed out the difference between the last volume and those immediately preceding it. For the most part, however, the sentimental and general nature of the reviews prevents their making any noteworthy contributions to Browning scholarship while later references are repetitious or too brief to be of any real value.

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[134]John T. Nettleship, Robert Browning. Essays and Thoughts (New York, 1895).

[135]See above, p. 27.

CHAPTER II

THE PHILOSOPHICAL POEMS

No complete or even reasonably detailed analyses of the Asolando poems have appeared. Before any valid judgments can be made concerning the significance of this volume, thorough analyses are necessary. The next three chapters of this study will provide such examinations: for each poem will be given a resumé of the criticism the poem has received, a detailed paraphrase, an interpretation, a discussion of the sources, a study of the correlation of this poem and the other poems in the Browning canon, an analysis of the imagery and diction, and a consideration of the form. Of the three groups of poems, the philosophical poems will be considered first because they have always been more emphasized than have the love lyrics and the narrative poems.

In discussing the poetry which Browning composed after The Ring and the Book, most critics have stressed the fact that he tended to deal in didacticism and philosophical speculation and have therefore considered the later poetry inferior. Many of the readers of his day, however, followed the lead of members of the Browning Societies, who in their excessive admiration for anything he might produce had become convinced that their idol was the most profound thinker of the nineteenth century.[1] The coinciding of the publication of Asolando and

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[1]"Robert Browning," Literary World (Boston), XX (December 21, 1889), 480.

Browning's death only intensified his contemporary fame as a philosopher, as Dr. Boyd Litzinger's thorough study shows.[2] Typical of this type of critical reception is a comment by the critic for the New York Herald: in these poems "ardent Browningites will find . . . food for reflection as portraying the philosophical working of their adored master's mind, his hope or questions of the future and his theories concerning human life and human Nature."[3] The famous "Epilogue" was immediately accepted as the poet's final message and guide for his disciples and as such became the expected ending for any discussion of Browning.[4] Nevertheless, in spite of the attention given them at first, the philosophical poems were generally ignored after the emotional period was over and people began to question the depth of Browning's thinking.[5]

"PROLOGUE"

Criticism

Strange though it may seem, the "Prologue" to Asolando has seldom been noticed by critics of the volume. Almost nothing has been said about its poetic qualities, although the commentator in the

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[2]Boyd Anthony Litzinger, Jr., "Robert Browning's Reputation as a Thinker, 1889-1955" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Tennessee, 1956).

[3]"Browning's Last Work," New York Herald, reprinted in Book News, VIII (January, 1890), 185.

[4]Litzinger, p. 313.

[5]Ibid., p. 318-20.

London Quarterly Review spoke of its "rich and rough obscurity" and declared it was composed of "gold ore only half-fashioned into serviceable shape."[6] The tone has also been mentioned occasionally--Russell described it as a poem of "aged sadness"[7]--but generally these comments have been concerned with the tone only because of its function in setting the mood of the volume as a whole[8] or because of its significance in showing the state of Browning's mind in his last years.[9] Many readers, however, may feel the poem has been unjustly slighted because it is more than a mere introduction or a psychological examination of the elderly poet. The "Prologue" is a moving poem whose theme is set forth by means of effectively chosen words and well-developed imagery.

Paraphrase

The poet begins by saying that he is saddened in his old age because he no longer sees life clothed in the beautiful glow which had been created by his youthful enthusiasm and optimism. Now life appears "as in itself it really is." Next he asks which way is better: truth's clarity or falsehood's fancy. Before answering, he illustrates his changed view by telling of the difference he finds in Asolo now

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[6]"Demeter: and Asolando," London Quarterly Review, LXXIV (April, 1890), 89.

[7]Frances Theresa Russell, "The Pessimism of Robert Browning," Sewanee Review, XXXII (January, 1924), 71.

[8]S. G. G., "Browning and Tennyson: Their Latest Poems," Leisure Hour, XXXIX (February, 1890), 231.

[9]"Browning's Last Work," p. 184.

that he is old: when he first visited the little Italian hill town in 1838, it was so beautiful that he was awed just as Moses was by the Burning Bush; at the present the village is still lovely, but the glorious beauty that inspired the fearful wonder is gone. As he ponders this knowledge, a voice speaks, revealing that his later view is the preferable one and that from this revelation he should learn to be awed only by God, not by His works, which are really on an equal level with man.

Interpretation

A reader coming to the "Prologue" for the first time may possibly be momentarily surprised at the difference in the attitude to age presented at the beginning of this poem and that found in the more famous "Epilogue" or in such a well-known work as "Rabbi Ben Ezra,"[10] but it seems appropriate to some that Browning's final volume begins with a poem which rather distinctly indicates his age. The belief that the glory, the romance, the fancy depart from the world as the poet matures certainly is not original with Browning--Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and "Intimations Ode" immediately come to mind: indeed, one writer called the "Prologue" a "new and daring and certainly a valuable reading" of the "Intimations Ode" and thought Browning's solution was

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[10]Daniel G. Brinton, "Suggestions for Browning Study," Poet-Lore, VIII (January, 1896), 52; Henry Charles Duffin, Amphibian. A Reconsideration of Browning (Fair Lawn, New Jersey, 1956), p. 240; Dallas Kenmare, Browning and Modern Thought (London, 1939), p. 33.

no less noble "in its way" than Wordsworth's.[11] It is important, however, to note that Browning, even though he had had periods of gloom and rather pathetic doubt in his later years (La Saisiaz and Fifine, for example), did not stress this idea until a few months before his death, although he had always had a bent toward the realistic view of life. And, unlike Wordsworth and many other poets, he did not stop with despair but quickly permitted himself to be consoled by the revelation that facts are more to be desired than fancies.

Source

As Browning was to do so frequently in Asolando, he took the idea for the "Prologue" from his own experiences. Being in Asolo no doubt made him think of the differences in his reactions to the town in his youth and in his old age. From this he naturally moved to a consideration of age and of ultimate reality. The optimistic ending was probably influenced by the fact that in spite of the disappointment he had experienced at the time of his second visit[12] and his first reaction on his last visit, at the end of his life he still found Asolo beautiful and could say to Mrs. Bronson: "I was right to fall in love with this place fifty years ago, was I not? We outlive some places, people, and things that charmed us in our youth, but the

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[11]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 91.

[12]See Letters quoted in Chapter I, p.7.

loveliness of this is no disappointment; it is even more beautiful to me now than then."[13]

Correlation with Other Poems

The conviction that fact is superior to fancy, which shows the poem's relevance to the volume's subtitle Fancies and Facts, occurs persistently throughout the book and is responsible for the fact that even though the poet seems at first to be struggling to make the best of old age,[14] the tone is not really a pessimistic one. Closely related to this, of course, is the difference shown in the poem between appearance and reality, a theme which seems to have become increasingly fascinating to the poet as he grew older. Although it had been a motif in Browning's poetry from the beginning, underlying, for example, the famous dramatic monologues in Men and Women, it became prominent in Pacchiarotto and Jocoseria by serving as the major theme for several of the poems in each collection.[15] It also appeared as leading idea in some of the longer poems: it is important in Easter-Day and The Ring and the Book and basic in Fifine. Its treatment in Asolando does not differ markedly from what it had received before, but it is more

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[13]Katherine C. DeKay Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," The Century Magazine, NS XXXVII (April, 1900), 922.

[14]Stopford A. Brooke, The Poetry of Robert Browning (New York, 1902), p. 111.

[15]For example, "Solomon and Balkis," "Ixion," "Adam, Lilith and Eve," "Appearance," "A Forgiveness."

consistently emphasized than it is in the other collections of short poems.

Browning usually stressed the idea of instinctive knowledge, but occasionally, as here, he pictured man receiving direct revelation: visual revelations occur in both Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, and in "The Eagle" (Ferishtah's Fancies) verbal revelation is given in a dream.

The emphasis which is placed here on nature and its effect upon the poet may seem unusual since Browning has generally been considered a poet of the human soul rather than a poet of nature. (Browning himself made this distinction.[16]) Yet it is true that from Pauline and Paracelsus to Asolando he frequently made use of nature, though often it merely served as background for more important elements, usually human experiences. It may be said, however, that Browning was not inclined to describe with his particular kind of minute detail even the scenes he knew and loved--the special themes of his poetry absorbed him almost completely--and the tendency became more pronounced as he grew older.[17] But there are, of course, exceptions to this generalization, and the "Prologue" is one of the most important. Of special significance here is the conclusion that man, if he is to understand

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[16]W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning With Notices of His Writings, His Family, & His Friends (New York, 1910), p. 39; this point is also emphasized in the "Epilogue" to Pacchiarotto, ll. 153-60.

[17]James Fotheringham, Studies in the Mind and Art of Robert Browning, Third Edition (London, 1898), p. 543.

properly the world around him, must turn from the adoring of nature *per se* to the worship of God who created nature and transcends His creation. Nor does man comprehend God *through* nature--he learns about God through his own instincts (for example, *La Saisiaz*, l. 150) and through direct revelation, as the poet does here. This refusal to use nature as a symbol for God probably results from his great belief in man's individuality and God's personality.[18] Also Browning, though he knew mystic theory, by temperament, was not a mystic, and the whole theory of pantheism was distasteful to him.[19] Perhaps there is a close analogy with the words of the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* when he was speaking of Capponsacchi:

> Thou at first prompting of what I call God,
> And fools call Nature, . . . (X, 1068-9)

Imagery and Diction

Two very vivid images are set forth in the "Prologue." The first is that of optic glasses which have lenses of various colors, representing the fancies or appearances of life, or of clear glass, representing the truth or reality of life. Before leaving this image, it is interesting to note that for his descriptions Browning chose colors with an aura of richness and intensity about them--"ruby, emerald, chrysopras" (l. 13). Such words had occasionally appeared in

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[18]"Robert Browning," *Quarterly Review*, CLXX (April, 1890), 486.

[19]William O. Raymond, *The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning* (Toronto, 1950), p. 121.

the early poetry, had been used more frequently in the later poems, but were not emphasized in Asolando.[20] Here, however, he went back to them because their vividness helps intensify the contrast between colored and clear glass. And although it is not stressed in the "Prologue," the rainbow figure, which occurs many times in Browning's poetry, is briefly mentioned and tied in with the stressed idea.

The Burning Bush, the second of the major themes, is Biblical in source (Exodus 3:1-5), which is appropriate in view of the poem's conclusion. As Browning came to Asolo in his youth he felt the same type of awe that Moses must have felt when he approached the Bush. His impulse was to kneel and be silent, and he could not help but believe that the intensity of beauty which actually inspired a kind of terror had created a sort of barrier so that there could be no communion between himself and the Asolan countryside. The feeling is somewhat akin, perhaps, to his reactions, as they are recorded in "Reverie," to the manifestations of Power which are present in the world and which hide the evidences of Love.

Both of these images are closely tied in with the small amount of narrative that the poem affords and with the themes of appearance versus reality, fancies versus facts, intuition versus revelation, and

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[20]The word ruby appears twice before The Ring and the Book, seven times after The Ring and the Book, and once in Asolando; emerald appears twice before The Ring and the Book, once afterwards, and once in Asolando; chrysopras appears once after The Ring and the Book and once in Asolando; a similar word, amethyst, appears once before The Ring and the Book, once afterwards, and does not appear in Asolando.

the created versus God. Likewise the minor images not already mentioned are closely related so that the poem creates a unified impression. For example, fancy is described in terms of haziness and dazed eyes, while truth blazes forth. The "purged ear" (l. 41) and the unwinking eye (l. 40) are also evidences that reality is more to be desired than are figments of the imagination.

The imagery, which is used to illustrate the theme and to intensify the mood, is primarily visual, though touch is suggested by the phrase "Palpably fire-clothed" (l. 25) and motion by "Italia's rare/ O'er-running beauty" (ll. 33-4), one's "shrinking from nature" (l. 44), and fancy's being "straight unlinked" (l. 38) from fact.

Some of the other phraseology is fitly chosen. Twice Browning used the word naked to describe the world and life as they really are before the imagination begins to clothe them, and the bluntness of this word is enough to emphasize the contrast between appearance and reality; the contrast is further developed in the fourth stanza by the description of the result of examining an object through an optic glass with a clear lens:

> You found its inmost self appear
> Through outer seeming--truth ablaze,
> Not falsehood's fancy-haze? (ll. 18-20)

Most of the words are chosen to create a calm mood, which is the characteristic one for the book. For example, lambent not only has the meaning of softly playing over a surface, but the word has a soft, quiet sound. There are a few uncommon words--uncinct, chrysopras, lambent (the third one being among the most important elements in

setting the mood)[21]--but there are none of the peculiar twists and puzzling structures which had given Browning the reputation of being obscure.

Form

Just as the imagery and diction contribute to the unity and mood of the poem, so the form shows careful planning. This is a poem of musing, and the iambic rhythm permits the thoughts to flow in smooth and natural speech patterns. The overall effect is somewhat like that created by the stream-of-consciousness writers. Some of the thought units are short and abrupt--some are relatively extended. This effect is achieved within the limits of the five-line stanzas by having some of the lines internally broken, some end-stopped, and some run-on. These same techniques are used for the stanzas also. The rhyme scheme (ababb for the first four stanzas and ababa for the last five) tends to unify the stanzas and to set each one off as a more or less independent entity, but the run-on sentences counteract this in places, and the combination of long and short units persists.

The use of a trimeter in the last line of the stanza rather than the tetrameter of the first four lines emphasizes the finality of the end-stopped stanzas, but it is more important as a means of placing

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[21]These words appear in other Browning poems: uncinct in "Pan and Luna," l. 28; chrysopras in Fifine at the Fair, l. 931; and lambent in Luria, V, 221, Fifine, l. 891, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, II, 743, "Numpholeptos," l. 76, and "The Two Poets of Croisic," l. 539.

emphasis on those ideas given in the shorter lines. Many of the key ideas are found in the trimeter lines: the relationship of falsehood and fancy (l. 15), the awe inspired by the beauty of Asolo (l. 30), the mature realization of reality (l. 35), and the revelation that nature is transcended by God (l. 45). All of these elements of form are worked together subtly, thus convincing the reader of the poem's organic unity.

"IMPERANTE AUGUSTO NATUS EST--"

Criticism

"Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" has been singled out for high praise more consistently than have any of the other philosophical poems with the exception of the "Epilogue." In fact, the reviewer in Blackwoods considered it the most important poem in the volume.[22] The vividness of the Roman scene attracted Nitchie.[23] Likewise S. G. G., the critic for Leisure Hour, declared, "It is all very real, and most powerfully drawn,"[24] while Phelps said the story was "told with all Browning's power of laying bare the secrets of the human breast."[25] The nobility of the blank verse was noted by the critic for the London

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[22]"Browning and Tennyson," Blackwoods, CXLVII (January, 1890), 135.

[23]Elizabeth Nitchie, "Browning's Use of the Classics," Classical Weekly, XIV (January 31, 1921), 109.

[24]S. G. G., p. 234.

[25]William Lyon Phelps, "Mr. Browning's Last Words," New Englander and Yale Review, NS XVI (March, 1890), 242.

Quarterly Review, who went on to say that this was a poem as "perfect in manner as in matter; hardly the Laureate himself could have shaped it more clearly or led it so naturally to its surprising conclusion."[26] Perhaps the clearness of the language was the thing which caused the commentator in The Critic to include "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" in a list of the Asolando poems which "do not tangle up our minds."[27] Probably, however, the highest praise was Symons' statement that "such a poem . . . (strong, impressive, effective as it is) cannot but challenge comparison with what is incomparable--the dramatic monologues of 'Men and Women.'"[28]

Paraphrase

The high praise given "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" is not out of place, for the narrative is uncomplicated and impressive. While waiting at the public bath, the speaker tells his friend Publius about an experience which has filled him with terror. The previous day, in the same vestibule where they are waiting for the water to reach its proper temperature, Lucius Varius Rufus, a poet whom the speaker rates above Horace and Virgil (ll. 72-3), read a panegyric on Emperor Augustus in which he called for the King of the Gods to step down in

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[26]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 94.

[27]"Browning's Last Book," The Critic, NS XII (December 21, 1889), 307.

[28]Arthur Symons, "Review of Asolando," Academy, XXXVII (January 11, 1890), 19.

favor of this new divinity. The effusive language and the emotional response of the listeners were too much for the speaker, who paid his fee and left in hopes that the fresh air might help to settle his thoughts. As he strolled, he pondered the power of this man Caesar and puzzled as to where he might go to escape the evidences of his authority. On every side were temples, official buildings, theaters that Caesar had had constructed for the people--yes, the poet was right in declaring Caesar above human power. How had he obtained such a position? Partly by the favor of Fate perhaps, but also by his own deeds. Since his had been known as a reign of peace, his military conquests might be disregarded, but his peaceful triumphs were almost unbelievable in number and magnificence: his public offices; his establishment of more than thirty new colonies; his virtual rebuilding of Rome itself; his success in making Rome the center of the universe. No wonder it seemed impossible to think him a mere mortal. Having reached this conclusion, the speaker again started meditating about the reasons a man born like other men could achieve such mastery over them. And, his thoughts rambled on, if Caesar appeared so awesome to him, a man who himself had rank and position, how must he appear to the great masses in their poverty and insignificance, to the beggar on the steps of the temple as he crouched under the golden statue of Jupiter? To such a one as that, the speaker suddenly realized with amazement, he himself might be thought to be an important official, why even perhaps the City-Praetor! With this in mind he became generous and in handing a coin to a beggar, accidentally knocked away the disguising hat and cloak. Only one

glimpse did he catch of the face, but one was enough to let him know it could be none other than Augustus himself who took the coin. With a start, the speaker recalled a rumor, which had circulated in whispers but had scarcely been believed and quickly hushed, that to prevent the envy of Fate, which is whimsical at best, the Emperor once a year disguised himself and for an entire day sat begging. The contrast between the fulsome praises being heaped upon him at that very moment by the crowds at the baths and the position the Emperor had assumed was frightening; as he thought of this, the speaker remembered that the same attendant who held with one hand the crown over the conqueror's head motioned with the other to the instruments of punishment dragged behind the chariot--the crown could quickly and easily be superseded by the cross. Being a typical Roman, the speaker possessed a fear of Nemesis and began to wonder if there were any security in the world. Even on Mount Olympus, according to popular legends, one leader of the gods had been overthrown by another. Perhaps even Jove himself might suffer such a fate: there was supposedly an ancient Sibyl who had prophesied that such a mighty one would be born during Augustus' rule. Was it possible that this could be more than an old wives' tale? But here the speaker ends abruptly as he discovers the time for bathing has come.

Interpretation

On first reading, this poem seems to be more of a narrative than anything else, but it has been included with the philosophical poems because the story is used to present some of the ideas which Browning

thought extremely important. He was interested in probing, as DeVane has stressed,[29] the state of the Roman world two years before the birth of Christ, but it would seem that there is more to the poem than this. For example, the idea of the head versus the heart, of logically proven versus intuitive knowledge is basic to the poem. The incident aroused thoughts within the speaker which would, if heeded, prepare him to accept a few years later the preaching of the Christian missionaries, but the mind rejects such instincts, and the speaker, like Karshish, having gained an emotional release by relating his experience, feels he must be sophisticated again, must shrug off his speculations as mere old wives' tales, must become absorbed in the minutiae of daily life. Browning may also be attempting to show how one small incident may be a means of revealing great truth to man if he will observe and be taught. Without a belief in a stable god or hierarchy of gods, the speaker finds nothing stable in life. Since Browning put the emphasis on divine revelation in the "Prologue" to this volume, perhaps he is attempting to prove that instability is the result of a lack of secure faith, a faith based on instinct and revelation rather than on intellectual reasoning.

The narrative also illustrates the common humanity which no one can ignore and the fact that all life is a mixture of good and evil; the ability to recognize this fact is the ability to understand reality.

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[29]William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, Second Edition (New York, 1955), p. 545.

Even Augustus, whose exalted position should protect him from even having to consider the unpleasant aspects of life, has to humble himself once yearly to avoid worse visitations of fate. In fact, the implication is that evil is more to be expected than good. This problem of the relative strength of good and evil is one which Browning frequently posed, and in "Reverie" it will be given fuller treatment.

"Imperante Augusto Natus Est--," like the other poems in Asolando, emphasizes the contrast between appearance and reality, fancy and fact. One of the most interesting applications is the reader's awareness that Caesar's power appeared to be extremely great, and yet after his death it quickly became only a memory while Christ's power, which seemed too negligible to mention, continued to grow after His death and is still strong centuries later.

Source

As was almost universally true when Browning was dealing with historical figures or events, he found it necessary to use source material extensively in the composition of "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--." Although his main source was obviously Suetonius, as will soon be evident, there are some other possible sources, with most of which Browning was almost certainly familiar. For example, it was not unknown for the Caesars to disguise themselves for various reasons and mingle with their subjects. Tacitus, in his Annals, declared that Nero would frequently dress as a slave and with a single companion would roam the streets, irritating by many methods the people, who only

learned gradually that their depredator was the Caesar.[30] Both Suetonius[31] and the historian Orosius[32] mentioned the fact that Augustus did not want the title lord to be applied to him, seemingly because he was afraid he would arouse the jealousy of the gods. This point the seventeenth-century English preacher and theological writer Jeremy Taylor (Browning referred to him in Christmas-Eve, l. 1275) took and elaborated upon: he admitted that Augustus' reason might have been a shrewd political one, for he might have thought such an act would give the people some hope that their liberties would be restored and thus would allow the Emperor to tighten his control on the government. Nevertheless, Taylor continued, the Christians were prone to believe that Augustus so acted because he knew a sibylline prophecy that during his reign would be born a Hebrew child to whom all the world would give adoration.[33] This, of course, is the prophecy referred to in the closing lines of the poem. Taylor also noted that an oracle consulted by Augustus refused to answer his questions but volunteered the information that a Jewish child would be his lord and enemy.[34]

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[30]Tacitus, The Annals, trans. from the Latin by John Jackson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1937), IV, 41.

[31]Suetonius, The Lives of the Twelve Caesars, trans. from the Latin by Joseph Gavorse (New York, 1931), p. 86.

[32]Paulus Orosius, Seven Books of History Against the Pagans. The Apology of Paulus Orosius, trans. from the Latin by Irving Woodworth Raymond (New York, 1936), p. 316.

[33]Jeremy Taylor, The Life of Our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor, D. D., revised and corrected by the Rev. Charles Page Eden (London, 1847), p. 82.

[34]Ibid.

Whether or not Browning used as source material the writings just discussed, there can be little doubt that he relied heavily on Suetonius' The Lives of the Twelve Caesars. For example, the description of Augustus tallies almost exactly with that in Suetonius: the bright, clear eyes, the curly, nearly golden hair, the sharp nose, the eyebrows that met over the nose.[35] The historian also mentioned his habit of wearing a broad-brimmed hat[36] such as Browning described. The acts of Augustus, to give further proof, correspond almost word for word:

> The city, which was not built in a manner suitable to the grandeur of the Empire, and was liable to inundations as well as to fires, was so improved and beautified under his administration that he boasted, not without reason, that he had found it built of brick and left it in marble. . . .
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> He built many public works, in particular the following: his Forum with the temple of Mars the Avenger, the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, and the fane of Jupiter the Thunderer on the Capitol.[37]

In addition, Suetonius recorded the rebuilding of the Flaminian Way,[38] the sponsoring of many games,[39] and the personal establishment of some twenty-eight colonies in Italy.[40] He even mentioned the key situation, Augustus' begging of alms once a year, the cause being a dream he had once had; this incident Suetonius used as evidence that Augustus

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[35]Suetonius, p. 100-1.

[36]Ibid., p. 102.

[37]Ibid., p. 70.

[38]Ibid., p. 71.

[39]Ibid., p. 80-1.

[40]Ibid., p. 83.

believed in the efficacy of dreams.[41] Last of all, Suetonius mentioned that when Augustus destroyed all works of Latin and Greek prophecy, he spared some of the Sibylline books,[42] but since he included no discussion of the content of these prophecies, Browning must have used other sources for these parts of the poem.

The Sibylline prophecies of Christ's birth are most frequently thought of in connection with the "Fourth Eclogue" (often called the "Messianic Eclogue") of Virgil. That Virgil was the inspired prophet of the gentiles or that he had followed the guidance of the Sibyl who was divinely inspired was devoutly believed until comparatively recent times (both Alexander Pope and Dr. Samuel Johnson accepted this view).[43] Although it was discounted by contemporaries such as St. Jerome, the origin of this belief seems to have been an address by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.[44] From then on, art and legend coupled Virgil and the Sibyl;[45] for example, both appeared in the mystery plays about the Nativity which were presented at Limoges[46] and Rheims.[47] At other times the Sibyl appeared alone as a representative of the gentile prophets.[48]

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[41] Ibid., p. 106-7

[42] Ibid., p. 72.

[43] R. S. Conway, Virgil's Messianic Eclogue. Its Meaning, Occasion & Sources. Three Studies by Joseph B. Mayor, W. Warde Fowler, R. S. Conway (London, 1907), p. 28.

[44] Domenico Comparetti, Vergil in the Middle Ages, trans. from the Italian by E. F. M. Benecke (Leipsiz, 1929), p. 100-1.

[45] Ibid., p. 309.

[46] Ibid., p. 310.

[47] Ibid., p. 311.

[48] Ibid., p. 312.

Modern scholarship seems to have determined that although Virgil was celebrating the birth of a specific Roman infant, possibly the son of the consul Pollio, and not of a Jewish messiah, he did take many of his ideas and much of his imagery from Sibylline writings now lost, from Hesiod, from the Orphic poets, perhaps even from some of the Hebrew prophets.[49] The Sibylline writings can be considered a fairly definite source because Virgil alluded to the Sibyl (l. 6). Legend has it that the Sibyl lived at Cumae and that one of her works told of four ages of man.[50] To the Roman mind the reference to Cumae would suggest the Libri Fatales, also called simply the Sibylline Books, which legend purported to have been purchased by Tarquin and carefully preserved until fire destroyed them in 83 B. C.[51] These books, which were generally considered to provide counsel rather than to foretell the future, were consulted in times of crisis.[52] Although Livy made many references to them, little of their actual content was known because they could be read only by the quindecimviri, the official interpreters.[53] Following the destruction of the first books by fire, other Sibylline writings were collected and stored in the temple under as watchful guard as the older works had been.[54]

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[49]Conway, p. 53.

[50]Ibid., p. 16.

[51]Joseph B. Mayor, Virgil's Messianic Eclogue. Its Meaning, Occasion & Sources. Three Studies by Joseph B. Mayor, W. Warde Fowler, R. S. Conway (London, 1907), p. 90-1.

[52]Ibid., p. 91.

[53]Ibid., p. 92.

[54]Ibid., p. 99-100.

Browning may very well have made the speaker refer to the legend that Augustus spoke to the Sibyl concerning the honors heaped upon him by the Senate. The Sibyl supposedly answered that the king who would reign forever would come from heaven. Thereupon Augustus saw a vision of Virgin and Child, fell down and worshipped them, and then declared his vision to the Senate. Later, according to the story, on the spot of the vision was built the church S. Maria in Ara Coeli. This legend flourished in the eighth century in Byzantine works and then found its way into such Western books as The Golden Legend and Gesta Romanorum.[55]

Correlation with Other Poems

As has been noted by various commentators, there is a tie between this poem, "Cleon," and "An Epistle." All three suggest the impact of Christianity on the pagan world. In each one Browning seemed to be trying to probe the type of mind that attempts to reject something for which his spirit longs because he finds that his intellect cannot fully accept its implications. This rejection of the dictates of the heart because the head cannot be satisfied shows Browning's preoccupation with this problem. As in "Development" and "Flute-Music," this poem shows that truth may often be the revelation of the instinctive faculty. Therefore this poem stands in the line of all those which stress intuitive wisdom.[56]

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[55]Comparetti, p. 313.

[56]Browning had been aware of the conflict between the heart and the head from the time he was very young. In the late 1830's Eliza

The necessity of recognizing the mixture of good and evil which is inherent in life had always been a part of Browning's thinking, for his poems of special pleading prove the combination of both elements in human nature. Later in Ferishtah's Fancies this idea became a major theme and was discussed from various points of view, the whole idea being summarized in "A Bean-Stripe; Also Apple-Eating."[57]

In more minor ways "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" resembles other Browning poems. The attitude toward Fate (ll. 131-5) reminds the reader of Caliban's reflections upon Setebos; the basic attitude is the same--only the degree of sophistication with which the thoughts are expressed is different. Also the habit of a ruler wearing a disguise and mingling with his subjects receives another treatment in Asolando, for in "The Bean-Feast" the Pope does the same thing.

Imagery and Diction

The entire poem is constructed on a series of contrasts, some major, some minor. At the very beginning, the speaker contrasts the calmness of the vestibule in which he and his companion sit, virtually

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Flower is supposed to have said: "If he had not got the habit of talking of head and heart as two independent existences, one would say he was born without a heart." (Miller, p. 44.) This statement was made while Miss Flower was trying to convince Browning of the validity of certain Christian doctrines which he was attempting to disprove by logic. Some of the other poems which show the superiority of the heart over the head are Paracelsus, Sordello, Christmas-Eve, Easter-Day, La Saisiaz, "Ivan Ivanovitch," "The Family," "A Pillar at Sebzevar"; readers may include the portion on the "Great Perhaps" in "Bishop Blougram."

[57]This theme also appears in "Pisgah-Sights I," "Ixion," "Melon-Seller," and "Reverie."

alone, with the confusion which was there the day before when Varius read his masterpiece (ll. 5-10). Next comes the contrast between the reactions of the speaker and the rest of the mob (ll. 17-23). Had he not reacted differently, the thought-provoking, awe-inspiring experience might have been missed. As he walked he became conscious of the difference between the Rome Augustus found and the one he would leave behind him (ll. 32-42, 56-60); this is not one of the major contrasts, but it does help build up the theme of Caesar's power in such a way that the climactic contrast is more effective. Another very minor one is the distinction made between Virgil and Horace on the one hand and Varius on the other (ll. 70-3). For the modern reader this adds a touch of irony, but it also builds up the realism of the setting, for contemporaries seldom judge authors correctly (possibly Browning was thinking of his own late acceptance). Moving on, the reader comes to some of the key contrasts, for the speaker (in lines that are strongly reminiscent of Cassius' remarks in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar [I, ii, 93-157]) compares his station in life with that of Augustus; thinking of the difference between them though both are only men (ll. 78-83), he suddenly realizes how much greater this difference must appear to a man of the masses, say to the beggar on the steps of Jupiter's temple, who has no position, no wealth, no rank (ll. 84-105). Why to such a nobody, the speaker, who at least is somebody, might appear to be one of Rome's highest officials (ll. 107-111). The thought inspires him to generosity, and then he discovers that the man he thought to be earth's lowest is in reality its highest--this is the

contrast that makes the point. Why has Caesar stooped to such a thing? Because there is a tremendous contrast between the praise heaped on him by the world and the awareness within himself that fortune may change without warning. The speaker then recalls the symbols used in the procession of conquerors: the crown is there but the cross is also--this man could find himself in the position of the speaker in Browning's "The Patriot." The parallels and contrasts between Christ and Augustus are certain to exist in the minds of readers: both are kings who submit to a state of poverty (one because the suffering on the Cross is the way to a Crown; the other because he fears that the crown may be followed by a cross). Browning surely intended for the reader to catch the irony here. And finally the speaker ponders the contrasts revealed in history: not only do rulers fall, but even the gods do not reign forever if one may believe legends and prophecies. Appearance and reality--nowhere is this theme more forcefully illustrated than in "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--."

Much of the imagery is the imagery of movement, frequently sharp, jerky, sudden movement: terror has <u>struck</u> him (l. 1), the speaker's thoughts <u>kick</u> <u>up</u> dust (l. 27), Caesar <u>arrests</u> the turn of Fortune's wheel (l. 43), Caesar's deeds flash in his mind "As stars which <u>storm</u> the sky. . . " (l. 47), the speaker in considering Caesar's dominion has tried "to <u>scale</u> its height and <u>sound</u>/ Its depth" (ll. 28-9). These rather violent images help to convey the state of agitation in which the speaker finds himself.

Because the poem is partially built on a contrast of the various states of life to which men are called, it is not surprising that there is height imagery. The figure of scaling heights and sounding depths has already been mentioned, but it is only one of many examples. Early in the poem the speaker envisions the world lying prone "As--poet-propped, in brave hexameters--/ Their subject triumphed up from man to God" (ll. 29-30). Then as he thinks of Caesar's loftiness, the atmosphere becomes too rarefied, and he has to sink back to the base of life. Then there is the beggar crouched low in the mud and the golden statue of Jupiter shining on the top of the temple. Likewise height is suggested in the images of peace crowning Augustus' deeds in war and of his "glory topping all" (l. 51). These arise quite naturally from the subject matter, and they serve to intensify the contrasts.

Nature contributes some of the most important imagery of the poem. Especially prominent is the animal imagery. The identifying of the poets with a company of swans (l. 71) is rather conventional, but more effective are the application of the term <u>swarm</u> with its connotations (l. 91) to the Roman masses and the description of fortune as a <u>petted</u> <u>lioness</u> who may wilfully strike down the very person who the day before was permitted to pat her neck (ll. 132-5). The use of altitude and stars is also a part of the nature imagery, but both serve other functions, and more prominent ones as well.

Touch images are not too prevalent in "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--," but one should notice the description of the tiger's "claw-tips velvet sheathed" (l. 135). The sheathing of something sharp is similar

to an image used in "Dubiety," and in both places it symbolizes the need of softening or covering over reality (the ash trees in "Flute-Music" serve the same purpose).

Although many unfamiliar terms are used for the sake of realism, they do not obscure the meaning. One may not know that a quartrans equals half a cent or a quarteras a fourth of an as, which was less than a cent, but the context makes it perfectly clear that these were Roman monetary units. Likewise the reader may not be able to give a precise definition of a strigil, a metal instrument similar to a curry-comb which was used at the baths for scraping the body, but he is not unduly disturbed by the fact that in the last line such an item is requested. The same is true of the historical and mythological references--for those who recognize them there is an added pleasure, no doubt, but for those who do not, the significance of the poem is unimpaired. Yet if the reader realizes that "Little Flaccus" (l. 11) was Horace, the famous poet, and Maecenas (l. 15), the "'off-shoot of Etruscan kings'" (l. 14), was his patron, a member of one of Rome's most noble families, and a kind of unofficial prime minister for Augustus, the scene takes on for him an added life. And likewise, if the reader pursues the subject and finds that Lucius Varius Rufus did indeed live, was the author of epics, tragedies, and a panegyric on Augustus, all of which have been lost,[58] was a friend of Horace and

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[58]Michael Grant, Roman Literature (Cambridge, 1954), p. 292.

Virgil,[59] and helped, as one of Virgil's literary executors, to edit the Aeneid,[60] his admiration for the poet's use of his immense learning increases.

Form

In many ways this monologue resembles those of Browning's middle years, for there is a tightness of structure not always found in his later work (DeVane likened the condensation of this poem to that of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb."[61]) The setting is meticulously drawn, the length is brief enough to be an actual conversation, thus making the time element realistic, the listener is referred to frequently enough to make him seem an actuality, and there are plenty of concrete details, such as the directions to the bath slave, to help the reader obtain a firm footing.

Like so much of Browning's blank verse, "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" shows the effect of the requirements for the dramatic monologue. The meter is rough and strains against the metrical pattern in order to present dramatically effective speech.[62] Nowhere in Asolando did Browning have better success in making the form and the subject matter into a harmonious whole.

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[59] Ibid., p. 237.

[60] Ibid., p. 199.

[61] DeVane, p. 547.

[62] Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, The Versification of Robert Browning (Columbus, Ohio, 1928), p. 115.

"DEVELOPMENT"

Criticism

"Development" has been one of the more frequently mentioned poems in Asolando because of continued interest in Browning's relationship with the Greek writers[63] and because of the delightful insight the poem affords into Browning's relationship with his father.[64] Since such interests rather than an evaluation of the work's poetic qualities have generally dominated the comments, the criticism has usually been similar to the following: the critic in the Literary World said that "a significant parable is afforded by the poet's charming reminiscence of his early readings in Homes,"[65] and in Leisure Hour the reviewer commented that he found "Development" "intensely interesting" and that it "may be taken either as an autobiographic reminiscence, or as a widely profound poetic essay on Education."[66]

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[63]W. L. Thompson, "Greek Wisdom and Browning," Classical Journal, XLV (February, 1950), 246-8; T. C. Snow, "Browning as a Classical Scholar," Classical Review, IV (February, 1890), 61; Edmund D. Cressman, "The Classical Poems of Robert Browning," Classical Journal, XXIII (December, 1927), 198-207; Nitchie, p. 105; Kenneth L. Knickerbocker, "Greek Wisdom and Browning: A Reply," Classical Journal, XLV (May, 1950), 393-4; W. C. Lawton, "The Classical Element in Browning's Poetry," American Journal of Philology, XVII (April-June, 1896), 197-216.

[64]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 93; "Browning's Last Pomes," Pall Mall Budget, December 19, 1889, p. 1625.

[65]"Review of Asolando," Literary World (Boston), XXI (January 4, 1890), 3.

[66]S. G. G., p. 234.

Paraphrase

The term parable very correctly describes the narrative method used by Browning in "Development," for his idea concerning the discovery of truth is set forth by means of an example from life (a method the poet used with less elaboration in some of the Asolando love poems, such as "Humility" and "A Pearl, a Girl.") When the poet was only five, he asked his father what he was reading, and instead of brushing him off, as the average father might have done, his father told him the story of Troy, using as characters familiar things such as family pets and servants and the boy himself. A few years later when he discovered the boy and his playmates dramatizing the story, the father took the teaching process a step further by giving his son Alexander Pope's translation of The Iliad, and afterwards gradually led him to the study of the original. Therefore at the age of twelve the boy considered himself an authority on Homer and believed steadfastly that the Homeric legends represented actual facts. Later, however, his calm was broken when he learned that German scholarship had proved that there probably was no Homer and certainly no city of Troy. When he had matured more, his mind accepted the evidence of scholarship, but in his heart he could not help clinging to early beliefs in the "'Blind old man,/ Sweetest of Singers'" (ll. 33-4) and in sorrow asked himself why the critics had to come and spoil his dream.

Interpretation

The interpretation of the parable is clearly related to the theme of Asolando, for here Browning is again probing the nature of

truth and the illusory nature of so much of the world man sees. Although Snow felt that Browning was concerned primarily here with the religious education of man,[67] the point is pertinent to truth of all kinds. If it is true, as the poet almost facetiously reminds the reader he has said before, that "No dream's worth waking,"[68] then it obviously is better for him to learn the truth about his early idols, even though it is painful, but he feels his father was right in his educational methods. It would have been impossible to give him the full truth when he was a mere child, and to have told him nothing and thereby have left him in ignorance would have been cruel. This point he illustrates by the fact that Aristotle in The Nicomachean Ethics would teach the same principles of high living, but a boy of five could not even take proper care of the book, much less comprehend its meaning. Therefore fancy can often be the best of teachers, and this is one of the few poems in which Browning does not dogmatically declare that facts are always superior to fancies. Although he does not dwell on it, Browning touches here on the head-versus-the-heart theme and places himself, as usual, on the side of the heart, or intuitive knowledge.

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[67]Snow, p. 61.

[68]The actual words do not appear, but close paraphrases are often found, such as the allegory of the sea voyage in "Bishop Blougram," (ll. 247, 262); also in "Bishop Blougram" is found the phrase, "for no cloud's worth a face," (l. 873), which bears a resemblance in phraseology.

Source

Disciples of Browning have been charmed by the picture of the ideal relationship between the poet and his father and have recalled that the elder Browning was a real scholar whose interest in the classics and curious, antiquarian lore persisted until the end of his life[69] and was transmitted to his son from the days of his early childhood if this poem is admissible as proof. The poem has biographical interest, however, not only on the subject of his father but also concerning Browning's literary tastes when he was an old man. Many years before in "By the Fireside" (ll. 1-12) he had said that as an old man he would read Greek. That the prediction came true is shown not only by "Development," but also by Mrs. Bronson's account of the poet's last days in Asolo. She wrote that he read the Greek plays from small editions and spoke of the delight which he gained from such reading and of the desire which the plays aroused in him to write a tragedy which would be better than anything he had previously done.[70]

"Development" is filled with scholarly allusions. Some are to well-known literary works such as the references to Aristotle's Ethics and to incidents in The Iliad: for example, line 100 refers to the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, the son of Peleus, in which Achilles accuses the Greek general of breaking his word (Book I), and

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[69]Griffin and Minchin, p. 7-25; Browning's sister noted that "Development" gives correctly the spirit of the elder Browning's teaching of his son, but that the incident itself was fictional. Ibid., p. 25.

[70]Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," p. 930.

line 101 mentions the intense but tender love of Hector and Andromache (Book VI). Others refer to less famous works traditionally ascribed to Homer: the "Hymns," which are now considered the work of several early authors; "Battle of the Frogs and Mice," a mock epic generally attributed to Homer; "Margites," a humorous poem which was considered to be Homer's until the time of Aristotle and which opened with the words, "There came to Colophon an old man, a divine singer, servant of the Muses and Apollo" (there are slight parallels here with Browning's phrasing in ll. 33-4).[71] The other references are to various renowned Homeric scholars: Heine, or Heyne, (l. 46) who prepared a standard Greek text of Homer's works; Philip Kant Buttman (l. 43) and Friedrich Augustus Wolf (l. 64), eighteenth-century German philologists who claimed that the Homeric poems could not be the work of a single author, but were late compilations of a number of hymns which had been handed down by word of mouth for centuries. (This thesis was profoundly shocking to many besides the young poet, and the reactions could well be compared with that caused by theories of Higher Criticism.) Buttman was also the author of a famous Greek grammar, and it is in this context that Browning mentioned him.

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[71]Edward Berdoe, The Browning Cyclopaedia. A Guide to the Study of the Works of Robert Browning. With Copious Explanatory Notes and References on All Difficult Passages, Second Edition (London, 1897), p. 134.

Correlation with Other Poems

The gradual acquiring of truth, which is one of the main themes of "Development," was not a new theory of Browning's. In The Ring and the Book he demonstrated that frequently truth is so many faceted that it cannot be acquired from a single source. There and also in "Transcendentalism" he proclaimed that the function of poets and poetry was to synthesize facts and set forth the truth in such a way that it may be more easily learned. It is interesting to note that in "Transcendentalism" Browning used an almost parallel situation to show the way imaginative writing or poetry may be a surer guide to truth than is strictly factual prose. This idea, known in theology as progressive revelation, Browning had examined in "A Death in the Desert," where he had shown his faith in man's growing ability to comprehend by stating his belief that miracles ceased when man's faith was strong enough not to need them. Likewise, in Christmas-Eve the fanciful or fictional trappings of the Roman High Mass are not condemned because they are leading men in the right direction. The gradual revelations of truth and God are the chief reasons that the speaker in Easter-Day finds how "very hard it is to be/ A Christian" (ll. 1-2). Flew commented that this method of approaching truth reminds one of the tradition of a philosopher who said, "If I held all truth in my right hand, I would let forth only a ray at a time lest I should blind the world," and of Christ's words to His disciples, "I have yet many things

to say to you, but ye cannot bear them now."[72]

In this connection the poem may be compared, also, with "Flute-Music," in which the poet acknowledges that fancies are often more pleasant than facts and sometimes more valid. In regard to the fact that the soul often prefers the fictions which one may find difficult to prove as actual facts, the reader may remember that in Christmas-Eve Browning rejected the teachings of the lecturer on Higher Criticism in favor of the dissenter chapel where the non-intellectual worshippers accepted unquestioningly the Gospel stories whose literal interpretations scholars had proved to be very doubtful.

Imagery and Diction

Because "Development" for the most part is straightforward narrative, there are not many figures of speech. To show the ways in which classical writings have led him to a knowledge of ethics, he illustrates by means of several similes drawn from Homer's stories, and there is some alliteration, though not so much, relatively, as in "Summum Bonum" and others of the love poems. But even though the poem does not use a great deal of imagery, two of the few employed have appeared elsewhere in Asolando. In speaking of his father's educational methods, Browning says the full flare of knowledge was not turned on his weak eyes. The use of fire to symbolize truth was introduced in the "Prologue," where the image was more fully developed than it is

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[72]Josiah Flew, Studies in Browning, Third Edition (London, 1923), p. 163.

here. The other pictures the fancy as a "guardian sheath" (l. 77) which protects fact until it is strong enough to stand alone; one immediately thinks of the use of a sheath as a protective device in "Dubiety." Also under imagery should be considered the contrast between the careless way a young schoolboy would treat a copy of Aristotle's Ethics and the respectful way a mature man would handle the book; this contrast was used to prove that hard facts belong to adults and not to children.

Form

The form of "Development," like that of "Imperante Augusto Natus Est—," is blank verse and shares the metrical characteristics found in that poem. Again Browning has been flexible enough in his use of the form to give a naturalness to the conversational tone.

"REPHAN"

Criticism

Reviewers and scholarly writers have not generally spent much time on "Rephan," and when they have paused to consider it, their praise has usually not been extremely enthusiastic. Indeed, the comments which have been made normally ignore the form and poetic qualities of the work (Smith does mention that six instances of the star image are to be found in it, but he does not discuss them[73]) and

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[73]C. Willard Smith, Browning's Star-Imagery. The Study of a Detail in Poetic Design (Princeton, New Jersey, 1941), p. 230.

deal either with the source or with the philosophy. For example, the critic in the Literary World commented that in "Rephan" Browning "magnificently announces his faith in labor and progress."[74] In a similar vein an author in the New York Herald said "Rephan" would be carefully studied by Browning's disciples because it "shows his spirit as unsatisfied and ceaselessly struggling for light as most of his earlier and longer poems."[75]

Paraphrase

The poem can be considered a dramatic monologue, for the man who has come to earth from Rephan speaks to the people of earth. Before he relates his previous experiences, as he has obviously been begged to do, he sets the tone and the scene by bidding gather around him the men who are filled with despair, sorrow, age, pain, weariness, and all the other burdens which are the inescapable lot of men. When he attempts to describe the star or planet from which he has come, he encounters difficulties because its perfections are almost incomprehensible to ordinary human beings. Since Rephan is a land of perfection, there are no contrasts there, no changes, no preferences, even no variations in the weather! Indeed, to mention that there is neither better nor worse, the speaker must turn to the language of this world because his native language has no terms to suggest such comparisons. He illustrates the

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[74]"Review of Asolando," Literary World, p. 3.

[75]"Browning's Last Work," p. 186.

contrasts by comparing the fate of roses on Rephan and on earth. On earth the bud may wither or it may attain perfection; even if it does mature perfectly, extra petals may come forth and mar its beauty. This can never happen on Rephan where each rose bursts forth "full-orbed" (l. 48). Such inevitable results bring about a lack of fellowship because everything is perfect and complete in itself--it feels no need for help and companionship from others nor is there any need to offer these qualities to others. It would seem that in a world thus constituted there could be no unrest, no desire, but only bliss and contentment. Nevertheless, in some way that he cannot determine, a seed of discontent was planted in the speaker's mind. Gradually he found that the perfection irked rather than pleased him, and he began to desire a life of struggle and variety, even though pain and uncertainty would have to be a part of it. How long this state continued he could not tell, but finally his yearnings were made known to the high power of the universe, and a voice spoke to him:

> "So wouldst thou strive, not rest?
> Burn and not smoulder, win by worth,
> Not rest content with a wealth that's dearth?
> Thou art past Rephan, thy place be Earth!"
> (ll. 105-8)

Interpretation

To the ideas set forth in "Rephan" Phelps applied the term "pleasant teaching."[76] Certainly the teachings are ones which were

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[76]William Lyon Phelps, Robert Browning, New Edition (Indianapolis, 1932), p. 363.

consistently found in Browning's poetry. Here he contrasted two views of reality--the view that it is timeless and the view that it is an "endless series in time."[77] Browning's own thinking was not necessarily that of the speaker, for he was following the suggestions in his source. Indeed, it cannot even be proved that the speaker prefers to view reality as a series of existences, for the highest power in the universe is represented as being apart from both the changeless apathy of Rephan and the changing challenges of the imperfect earth.[78] In connection with the two views of reality, the point should be noticed that Rephan's lack of change does not indicate true perfection. The speaker says Rephan numbers among its people both "The wise and the foolish, right and wrong" (l. 78), these being merged into a neutral Best. This statement seems inconsistent with the glowing account given earlier of the people as "royalty born with crown on brow" (l. 27) and the planet as having a perfection which earthly minds cannot conceive. This difficulty can only be resolved when one remembers that to Browning an existence without struggle could not be perfection. Passion rather than passivity appealed to him just as it does to the speaker (l. 81), and in the last stanzas he tells why this is so. It is real joy which one experiences after he has overcome the obstacles set in his way or when he has suffered in order to bring happiness to someone he loves. This

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[77]F. R. G. Duckworth, Browning. Background and Conflict (New York, 1932), p. 161.

[78]Ibid.

apparent contradiction indicates rather clearly that Browning did not write his poems with a philosopher's logic.[79]

In addition to the one just discussed, many other familiar ideas are to be found in "Rephan." There is his theory that morality cannot exist without freedom of choice. There is also his persistent delight in declaring that struggle is a necessary and good part of life, of the heavenly life as well as the earthly, a point emphasized here, for he clearly intimates that the next life will be like that on earth and not that on Rephan.[80] The idea that struggle brings about the fellowship among human beings is not one of the poet's common themes, and it is barely mentioned here. Finally the use of a supernatural voice sets forth again his belief that instinctive or revealed knowledge was superior to purely intellectual knowledge.

Source

Although Browning used more source material than do most poets, he seldom thought it necessary to mention this fact or to identify his sources. One of the few exceptions occurred when he appended a footnote to "Rephan" in which he said the action was "Suggested by a very early recollection of a prose story by the noble woman and imaginative

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[79]Gross Alexander, "Fundamental Religious Principles in Browning's Poetry," Methodist Quarterly Review, XXXIII (July, 1907), 568.

[80]Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Browning's Heaven," Review of Religion, XIV (November, 1949), 33.

writer, Jane Taylor, of Norwich."[81] The "of Norwich" was an obvious slip, which was immediately noticed, for in the Athenaeum for January 11, 1890, was published a letter from a Josiah Gilbert stating that the well-known Taylor family of Norwich did not include a girl named Jane and that the story must be "How it Strikes a Stranger," written by Jane Taylor of Ongar and included in Contributions of Q. Q., a collection of her works.[82] The next week this mistake was acknowledged in the Athenaeum and readers were assured that this error would be corrected in subsequent editions of Asolando.[83] The Porter and Clarke Edition (1898) may be taken as an example to show that this correction was made by means of a footnote.[84] That Browning knew the works of Miss Taylor seems certain. Gilbert pointed out that some of the poet's early friends were admirers of this author of children's religious works.[85] Further proof is given by Miss Taylor's nephew, Isaac Taylor, who wrote to Notes and Queries that he felt almost certain his aunt's story was the source of Browning's poem, for Browning had been enthusiastic about her work. He continued: "He [Browning] once told me that

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[81]Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, eds., The Complete Works of Robert Browning. From the Author's Revised Text (New York, 1898), XII, 256.

[82]Josiah Gilbert, "Note on Rephan," Athenaeum, January 11, 1890, p. 51.

[83]W. F. Prideaux, "Browning's 'Asolando,'" Notes and Queries, Seventh Series, IX (May 3, 1890), 345.

[84]Porter and Clarke, XII, 256.

[85]Gilbert, p. 51.

in his opinion some of her pieces . . . as specimens of English prose were unsurpassed in their own line by anything in our language."[86] Today Jane Taylor (1783-1824) is best remembered for her "Twinkle, twinkle, little Star," but in her own day such works as Hymns for Infant Minds (written with her sister Ann) and Essays in Rhyme on Morals and Manners were quite popular. Sir Walter Scott placed her "'among the first women of her time.'"[87] The story, which the London Quarterly Review called "the fanciful, deep-thoughted original"[88] of "Rephan," tries to portray the way a rational being would react if he were suddenly confronted with the knowledge of death and immortality. In the story a stranger appears who reveals that he has previously lived on another planet. As he learns about life on earth, the priests teach him about death, heaven, and hell. He, seeing that he can secure heaven by performing certain specified acts, feels that death is a blessing and that he is fortunate to live on a planet where death is possible, which it evidently was not where he lived before. Thereafter all his life is geared to the thought of death.[89]

The part of this story which appealed most to Browning and served as the germ of "Rephan" was the portion in which the stranger

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[86]Isaac Taylor, "Browning's 'Asolando,'" Notes and Queries, Seventh Series, IX (May 31, 1890), 434.

[87]George Willis Cooke, A Guide-Book to the Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning (Boston, 1891), p. 444.

[88]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 93.

[89]Jane Taylor, "How It Strikes a Stranger," condensed and quoted in Cooke, p. 444-6.

looks at a beautiful evening star and tells those around him that he had previously lived on that "tranquil" planet. In the last part of Taylor's story, however, the stranger bears a closer resemblance to Lazarus in "An Epistle" than he does to the speaker in "Rephan."[90] Also Taylor's story does not mention the name Rephan; for this Browning used a Biblical phrase taken from Stephen's apology, the speech he made just before his martyrdom. St. Stephen quoted from the prophet Amos saying, "'Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of the god Rephan, figures which ye made to worship them.'" (Acts 7:43). This quotation comes from the Revised Version rather than from the King James, which has "Remphan." The source passage in Amos (5:26) has "Chiun" in both the King James and the Revised Versions, but in the Septuagint the term is "Raiphan."[91] As was often the case with him, Browning adapted his borrowing. Probably he was attracted to the phrase "The star of your god Rephan" by its connotations of mystery and haziness and by its musical tones. Browning made Rephan the name of the star rather than of a divinity, although the reader cannot be certain of this unless he reads the poem carefully.[92] Here capitalization helps, for the poet evidently intended the capital G to show that God

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[90]Minnie Gresham Machen, The Bible in Browning With Particular Reference to the Ring and the Book (New York, 1903), p. 10.

[91]Ibid., p. 9-10.

[92]Three lines prove that Rephan is the star: "The prison-gate of Rephan my Star?" (l. 63); "No mimic of Star Rephan!" (l. 76); and "Thou art past Rephan, thy place be Earth!" (l. 108).

applied to the one true God; also he used the pronoun my rather than the your of the King James or the the of the Revised Version.[93]

Phelps pointed out that "Rephan" is similar in many respects to Ludwig Fulda's Schlaraffenland, a play published in 1899. There a poor boy falls asleep and dreams of a land where his every need or desire is immediately fulfilled; for a time he is overcome with delight, but soon he becomes bored because of the absence of struggle and the lack of challenge. The dream takes on the quality of a nightmare; the boy awakes screaming and immediately is filled with gratitude that he is back in his original state.[94] Because Fulda's play was composed after "Rephan," Browning obviously could not have been influenced by it, but both writers may have been aware of earlier versions. The thirteenth-century "The Land of Cockayne" depicts a land graced with every material perfection (the geese flying overhead are even precooked) which is described in an attempt to satirize the unlawful wealth of the Cistercian monks, and in the eighteenth century Goldsmith's "Asem, the Man-Hater" tells of a man who had suffered terribly from the ingratitude of the multitudes he had helped but who discovered, on visiting a supernatural world, that a land without vice is also a land without virtue and begged to return to the earthly life of struggle.

Correlation with Other Poems

The necessity for struggle was an important theme for Browning and was emphasized in many of his famous poems, including especially

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[93]Machen, p. 10.

[94]Phelps, p. 363.

"Andrea del Sarto," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," and the "Epilogue" to Asolando. As it is in "Rephan," in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" struggle is cited as the means by which the soul grows (ll. 693-8). The theme of appearance versus reality also serves to link this poem with the main stream of Browning's poetry and particularly with those in Asolando. Another important idea of Browning's was the superiority of instinctive and revealed knowledge, and "Rephan" is an example of it, even though it is a relatively minor theme here and is not fully developed as it is in "Reverie." Other minor themes are the necessity of pain if sympathy is to exist, which had been more fully set forth in "Mihrab Shah"; the inability to understand the soul of man if one cannot understand the body, which had been discussed in the "Prologue" to Dramatic Idyls, Second Series; and the great pleasure that comes from sacrificing for one's beloved, which had appeared in such poems as "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli," "One Way of Love," and "One Word More."

Imagery and Diction

As might be expected, "Rephan" is full of motor images; they are used to show both the nature of earth and of Rephan when the speaker points out the absence of motion on the stagnant planet. On Rephan nothing begins, changes, extends; there is no advance nor retreat; tranquility lulls, and all stagnate; the speaker longed for something that "lashes inertion till throes convulse/ Soul's quietude into discontent" (ll. 66-7); he longed to be shocked, startled, to suffer, to "wring knowledge from ignorance" (l. 95); he wanted apathy changed

to "strife, bright, brisk" (l. 72); in fact, the whole test of whether the speaker belonged on earth or Rephan was whether or not he preferred to strive rather than to rest (l. 105).

"Rephan" has as much or more imagery than most of the Asolando poems. Images of struggle, for example, are found from beginning to end. Two other images are worked out in some detail. As the narrator begins to describe the wonders of Rephan, he sets the scene by using the image of a ship: "Let drift the helm,/ Let drive the sail, dare unconfined/ Embark for the vastitude, O Mind/ Of an absolute bliss!" (ll. 18-21). The second concerns a rose and a comparison of the way it would develop on earth and on Rephan; this image illustrates very vividly the contrasting types of life. Tied in with the image of the rose to expand the picture farther are other images taken from nature--usually these are visual, but some are kinesthetic also: for example, the lines: "Earth's rose is a bud that's checked or grows/ As beams may encourage or blasts oppose: . . ." (ll. 46-7). The same sort of combination is found in the description of the way a completed rose can be ruined by new petals which come out and spoil the perfection. Carrying this farther, the poet uses one of his most beautiful images when he says that the extra petals which come out make it anew until the "flower that slept woke a star instead" (l. 75). Akin to these nature images is the fire image in the last stanza, in which visual and tactual suggestions are joined to contrast the difference between living and existing. The image of the prison gate of Rephan is used appropriately in view of the speaker's great desire to escape.

Alliteration, which occurs in approximately a fourth of the lines and is the most frequently employed poetic device, is generally used to intensify the pictures built up by the imagery. Although many hyphenated words appear, the language is familiar and easily understood; this permits the reader to focus his attention on the story and the descriptions.

Form

The division of "Rephan" into tercets rhyming aaa does not seem particularly effective. This form is used two other times in Asolando--"White Witchcraft" and "The Pope and the Net"--but, possibly because they are briefer, the rhyme scheme does not seem so pronounced; here the reader becomes acutely aware of the rhymes, and the poem thus has a choppy effect. Even when the sentences carry the thoughts from one stanza to another, the rhyme makes the stanza breaks very obvious. The rhythm (a combination of iambics and anapestics) flows smoothly within the line units, but the rhyme keeps it from giving the impression of easy conversation; perhaps, however, the unnatural sound could be justified on the basis that the speaker is a newcomer to earth and is speaking of an unusual subject.

"REVERIE"

Criticism

Since at the time of publication "Reverie" and the "Epilogue" to Asolando were usually considered the last pronouncements of the greatest

thinker and philosopher of the age, there were many comments on these poems, but as has been seen before in this chapter, the tendency was to regard the poems as philosophical sermons rather than as works of art. For example, the critic in the New York Herald declared "Reverie" to be the nearest Browning ever came to prophesying the future.[95] Even when there was an attempt to deal aesthetically with the poem, the prevalent concern with the thought could not be escaped. Two examples will make this clear. The first is from Symons' review in Academy in which he wrote: "In the 'Reverie' and elsewhere the teachings of a lifetime are enforced with a final emphasis, there is the same delight as ever in the beauty and strangeness of life, . . ."[96] The second occurred in Clarke's review in which she said that "Reverie" was "one of the most exquisite poems of its kind in the English language. It represents the highest pinnacle of thought to which Browning has attained, being only a summary of his philosophy of life as brought out in the tone of the whole body of his poetry, but soaring still higher."[97] Phelps was able to come a little nearer to a poetic evaluation when he said "Reverie" was "one of the most beautiful in the book, illustrating the poet's spiritual clairvoyance."[98] About the obscurity of the poem there has

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[95]"Browning's Last Work," p. 185.

[96]Symons, p. 19.

[97]Helen A. Clarke, "Review of Asolando," Poet-Lore, II (February, 1890), 98.

[98]Phelps, "Mr. Browning's Last Words," p. 242.

been some disagreement on the part of the critics. The reviewer in the London Quarterly Review felt that there was obscurity but that it was the deep thought and not the ruggedness of language which was responsible; he went on to say that once the ideas were mastered, the poem was full of delights because "so contagious are the splendid courage and confidence of the writer."[99] The commentator in The Critic included it in a list of poems which do not confuse the readers,[100] but Stevenson pronounced it a "very abstruse poem."[101] Most readers would be likely to agree with Stevenson because the line of reasoning is often obscured by the frequent use of dashes and parenthetical elements and because of the semi stream-of-consciousness technique which lets the content ramble from one point to another without clear transition.

Paraphrase

The mood of the poem is set in part by the title, which suggests a vagueness, a thoughtful but unsystematic approach to ideas.[102] The tone is further emphasized by the opening stanza which states the poet's belief that at some time Power will come "full in play" (l. 5). In the next two stanzas he muses about the location of the event--will it be in

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[99]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 92.

[100]"Browning's Last Book," p. 307.

[101]Lionel Stevenson, Darwin Among the Poets (Chicago, 1932), p. 179.

[102]Lino Pellegrini, Studi Sulla Poesia di Roberto Browning. La Filosofia. La Psicologia. L'Arte (Naples, 1912), p. 117.

this life or in the next? Regardless, however, of where this transformation takes place, a time will come when Power will be supreme. The last lines in the fourth stanza suggest that then even the poet will be forced to acknowledge the supremacy of Power, although thus far he has refused to admit that Power is the ruling force in the universe. When this time comes, the fifth stanza continues, he shall understand the laws of the world and shall find that the universal laws are only extensions or expansions of what he had earlier observed in his own life. As Tennyson said in "Flower in the Crannied Wall," all of life can be observed in a single, small part, which will explain the whole universe once it is comprehended. It is natural, the poet goes on to say in the eighth stanza, that in learning one should proceed from what is close at hand to what is distant. Having made this point, he begins an examination of his own life. The soul is superior to the body, he states in stanza nine, because it is immortal while the body is mortal. The next three stanzas show the poet pausing to survey the knowledge which his mind has acquired and to determine what conclusions may be drawn from his observations. He finds only a few points which he can state unquestioningly. One is that there is a definite cause-and-effect relationship in the world, and the other is that Power does as it will. This being so, he says in the thirteenth stanza, his mind's praise goes beyond the individual laws of the universe to the ruler of the universe. His mind acknowledges the might of Power, but his heart does not respond. (The reaction here is somewhat akin to the one related in the "Prologue" because the young poet felt awe rather than

love in the presence of Asolo's overwhelming beauty.) The other reason that the heart does not respond is that evil seems to be more potent than good. Yet the poet realizes that what is good in the world is really good, and he therefore decides that evil is merely a cloud which shadows the sun of good and not an orb in itself. But he cannot accept this without some mental struggle, a point which should be noted by those who mock Browning as a completely unquestioning optimist. In the world, he declares in the sixteenth through the nineteenth stanzas, there is no question about the existence of Power--it is--while Good seems always to be struggling simply to exist. Since this is so, does Love, the force behind Good, deserve the same kind of praise given to Power? Power is equal to any situation, but Good is always baffled. Therefore man instinctively bows to Power. To Good he says that if Power would enlarge the scope of Good, make the two equal, then the heart would give equal praise to both. Until this is done, he will continue to have doubts. The next two stanzas show Power dominating everything from the stars in their majesty to the humblest insect. If the poet asks questions about the earth, the twenty-second and twenty-third stanzas note, he is told to stay in ignorance; but if he pleads the need of the world, the answer quickly comes: the solution to all problems lies within the realm of Power. Power, the next two stanzas declare, could end all evil, could strengthen Good, could bring about, in a word, an ideal state. Power has been proven; on it "let . . . devolve/ Good's right to co-equal reign!" (ll. 124-5). Power which is able to do this exists, the poet goes on to say in the twenty-sixth and

twenty-seventh stanzas, but its might is past man's comprehending; in fact, his mind shrinks back from the search. If only Power, while above the comprehension of man, would simply speak the charm and end all that is harmful! But the next three stanzas reveal that although to man's mind it would seem so easy for Love to appear equal to Power, to appear with the concealing veils all stripped away in a kind of mystical experience, this is not to be. In his own life the poet finds Power clearly manifest, but he stops to turn to the record of the world in order to see if it corresponds. One can guess the meaning of the opening words of Genesis, "'In a beginning God/ Made heaven and earth'" (ll. 156-7),[103] words which give an interpretation of all that is to follow. The thirty-second stanza stresses God's revelation, for at the time of creation Knowledge flashed forth, moving from heaven to earth, and man knew things as doubt was banished. The next two stanzas show how man recognized Power through Knowledge and gave it respect and praise. What was true in the world, the poet realizes in the thirty-fifth stanza, has also been true in his own life. In his life he has seen Power and Love striving with each other and has been only too aware that Evil was far more prevalent than Good. What, he asks himself in the thirty-sixth stanza, has been the effect of this? The result is

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[103]Although Browning used quotation marks, he has paraphrased slightly. This may or may not have been intentional: the substitution of made for created and the omission of two articles were possibly done to make the quotation fit the meter; and the change from the beginning to a beginning could have been used to indicate that this was simply one in a series of creations, but probably it was merely a misquotation.

his faith that someday the situation will be different. Faith is necessary if man is to bear the burden of his knowledge of Power, which he may try without success to withstand. It is impossible, the poet goes on to say, to ignore this knowledge. The thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth stanzas effectively illustrate this with the figure of the potter and the clay, for just as the clay is helpless in the hands of the potter, so is the mind helpless before the onrush of Knowledge; but since man, the product of the potter, is so near perfection, the poet wonders if it might not be possible for him to rise from the uncertainty of earth to the certainty of heaven. If this is possible, then the purpose of life, according to the forty-first and forty-second stanzas, is to endeavor and not to rest, to fight, to pass from earth to the perfection of Heaven where Power and Love are one and the same, where those who have struggled to rise above the flesh and to grasp the spirit will be transformed. The last two stanzas set forth the poet's steadfast belief that this will be the final result. When the full revelation of the unity of Power and Love will come he does not know, but it will come, either here or "worlds away."

Interpretation

Some of Browning's favorite topics for speculation appear in "Reverie," as might be expected. Some are touched upon rather lightly; an example of this is Browning's theory of gradual development toward the knowledge of truth. "Development" illustrates this point more fully, but here in "Reverie" the poet points out that one must proceed

from what he knows to what he wants to learn, from the clod to the star. As the "Prologue" had shown, however, some knowledge and understanding cannot be acquired in this way but must come through revelation; in "Reverie" the poet decides this is the way the knowledge of Power was first given to the world. In his Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher,[104] Jones argues that during his life Browning came to have more and more distrust of knowledge gained through the processes of man's thought. "Reverie" gives strong support to this thesis and is an important illustration since it was written so late in the poet's life. Here the emphasis on instinctive knowledge is a by-product of his presentation of the world as an organic unit. Man can read aright the message of the world if he can read aright the meaning of his own life.[105] It is true that no two souls will interpret God's truth in exactly the same way, but since man can never know intimately the workings of another's soul and mind, he must pursue the only path open to him.[106] The necessity of learning about the soul through the body was not an unusual idea for Browning because he always stressed the close tie between the two. The interesting thing here is that they are

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[104]Henry Jones, Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher (London, 1912).

[105]Browning is close to Tennyson here, as has already been noted. Other instances in which the poet looked at the world from the point of view of the individual are Easter-Day, ll. 662-5; "Camel Driver," ll. 64-9; La Saisiaz, ll. 282-296.

[106]Edward Berdoe, Browning and the Christian Faith (London, 1896), p. 131.

not presented as being equal as they had been in earlier poems such as "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Rabbi Ben Ezra"; instead they are unequal twins because the speculative tone of the poem requires that more emphasis be placed on the immortal half of life (ll. 42-5).

The other philosophic themes dealt with in "Reverie" may all be gathered under the heading of Love versus Power. In Pauline Browning had proclaimed his faith in "God and truth/ And love" (ll. 1020-1), and in Paracelsus, his first acknowledged poem, he began to probe the nature of love in a way which would lead him finally to "Reverie."[107] (Indeed, in their introduction to the twelfth volume of Browning's collected works, Porter and Clarke wrote: "It seems in this 'Reverie' as if Paracelsus had at last emerged from the dark tremendous sea of cloud, coming forth with strengthened faith."[108] It is true that in Paracelsus the struggle is between the claims of the intellect and of the emotions, a slightly less fundamental dichotomy,[109] but Browning frequently linked the power seen through observation of the universe with knowledge and did seek a divine revelation of "the moral qualities of God in love."[110] This problem was not completely resolved in Paracelsus[111] and appeared again and again in the poet's work.[112]

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[107]Griffin and Minchin, p. 70.

[108]Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, "Introduction," The Complete Works of Robert Browning. From the Author's Revised Text (New York, 1898), XII, xxv.

[109]Duffin, p. 226 [110]Raymond, p. 159 [111]Ibid.

[112]For example, "Rabbi Ben Ezra," Christmas-Eve, Easter-Day, La Saisiaz.

Generally in his poetry the heart wins out over the head, but here toward the end of his life Browning proclaimed that Power and Love, the Head and the Heart, are one and the same; thus the supreme force in the universe is worthy of the praise of both the heart and the head: and when this unity is recognized, there will be no problems about the nature of the world as it is seen.[113] Love gave to Browning, as Reason did to Hegel, an explanation for all phenomena, material and human.[114] As Margaret Sherwood summed it up: from his experience Browning reached the conclusion that "creative love at the heart of the individual is the supreme power in human life; creative love at the heart of God is the supreme secret of the universe."[115]

Source

"Reverie," being a summary of much of Browning's thinking, does not have a specific source. It is probable that its composition was influenced indirectly by the poet's reading throughout his life, especially by his study of the Scriptures and religious works.

Correlation with Other Poems

As has already been noted, the extreme optimism of "Reverie" places it in the main stream of Browning's poetry. The fact that the

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[113]Clarke, "Review of Asolando," p. 100.

[114]Jones, p. 30.

[115]Margaret Sherwood, Undercurrents of Influence in English Romantic Poetry (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1934), p. 307.

poet was aware of the inequality in the manifestations of Power and Love should be considered, however, by those who consider him as merely an unthinking optimist.[116] This should not be especially surprising, because although in Browning's early poems he and all his characters are optimistic and firm in their belief that behind all the shadows may be found a God of love and mercy, a God of the heart and not of the head alone,[117] after The Ring and the Book the poet's confidence was not so strong. The philosophy of accepting life as a mixture of evil and good is stated precisely in Ferishtah's Fancies in such poems as "The Melon-Seller," which declares that evil is always with us but that it should not destroy our faith in the good, which is also present, and "A Bean-Stripe; Also, Apple-Eating," which takes this dualistic nature of life as its major theme. In La Saisiaz unexpected personal grief made the poet ponder anew the whole problem of God, the world, and man. At the end of that debate within himself he came out with a belief in God and in man's soul and a conviction that if these two things could be accepted, then there must be some explanation for the evil which is evident in the world. In the "Parleying with Francis Furini" he attempted to relate his optimistic theory of progress to the supposedly pessimistic teachings of the evolutionists. Then finally in "Reverie," in what Stevenson called "difficult symbolism,"[118] he affirmed his

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[116]Duffin, p. 240.

[117]Frank C. Lockwood, Modern Poets and Christian Teaching. Robert Browning (New York, 1906), p. 60.

[118]Stevenson, p. 179.

belief that in spite of the doubts which crowded his mind, man's awareness of love proved its existence in God's plan and that evil existed to help man grow. The hope of La Saisiaz became assurance in "Reverie."[119]

Imagery and Diction

In his study of the star image in Browning's poetry, Smith pointed out that just as the theme repeats those appearing in earlier poems, so the

> imagistic echoes in Reverie are no less interesting, for here are the "shy buds"/ and the "chains" of Pauline, the "veil" between man and reality, "wearing its thickness thin," of A Death in the Desert, the "flames" and "orbs" of Sordello, the "book," "scroll," or "record" of man's life of The Last Ride Together, the "clods" of Saul and Rabbi Ben Ezra, the "potter's clay," the "potter's act," the "potter's shape" of Rabbi Ben Ezra, the "barriers (or prison) of flesh" of Paracelsus, besides the familiar images of the star.[120]

The six instances of the star image are distributed throughout the poem and serve various purposes: to illustrate heavenly Knowledge (l. 13); to show how Knowledge moves from the earthly to the divine (l. 38); to represent the teaching methods of God's power (l. 96); to warn against man's misconstruing God's power (l. 118); to set forth God's power in all things, both great and small, in heaven and earth (l. 127); and to indicate the bounds of Knowledge (l. 158).[121] These star images

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[119]Ethel Naish, Browning and Dogma. Seven Lectures on Browning's Attitude Towards Dogmatic Religion (London, 1906), p. 203.

[120]Smith, p. 230-1.

[121]Ibid., p. 231.

illustrate clearly Browning's skill in fitting the image to the subject matter.

Besides the star images, a large portion of the other imagery finds its source in nature, for practically every stanza has at least one nature image. Especially effective are the pictures, which open and close the poem, of the dawning of the day when the mysteries of life will be manifested; also memorable are the movement from humble clods to the stars (l. 38) to show that man must understand earthly things before he can understand the heavenly and the contrasting movement from the stars to the clods (l. 158) to show the process of revelation, and the view of the soul of man spurning the realm of the worms so that he may reach the realm of the spirit (l. 210).

The other major source for the imagery is the Bible. The figure of the potter and his clay (ll. 187-195), which comes from the writings of the prophet Isaiah, also appears in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and "In a Balcony." The reference to rent veils (l. 22) possibly refers to the tearing of the Temple veil at the time of the Crucifixion (though similar images are often found in writings on mysticism) while the phrase "To leaven the lump" (l. 182) has definite Scriptural overtones.

Although motion is implied in the last two passages mentioned, most of the preceding imagery is visual, as are other major figures, such as the picture of life, both the world's and man's, as a book (ll. 28-35) and the comparison of man's life and the world's in terms of a macrocosm and a microcosm, which runs throughout the poem, much as it does in La Saisiaz. These images are not original ones any more

than the portraying of earth as a mother (l. 105) is original, but Browning generally used them in such a way that one is more aware of their fitness than of their triteness. Many of the figures, like the potter image already discussed, are ones that Browning had used in other poems, such as the image of purging the dross from gold, which immediately brings to mind the key figures in The Ring and the Book.

The poem is constructed on a series of contrasts, much like those in "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--." The most obvious, of course, is the one between Power and Love, but there are others including man versus the world, revelation versus reason, good versus evil, the imperfect life here versus a perfect one elsewhere. Much of the effectiveness of the poem is a result of these contrasts, which often make the ideas presented seem paradoxical and therefore more vivid. The use of repetition of phraseology emphasizes the points the poet wished to stress and heightens the reflective, meditative atmosphere of the poem.

Form

The form of "Reverie" is very similar to that of the "Prologue" to Asolando, and it produces many of the same effects. The lines here are all trimeters, and their shortness gives the impression that the poet is reasoning out his position as he goes along. The effect might be choppy if it were not for the run-on lines, which occur at fairly regular intervals (there is one or more in almost every stanza). As in the "Prologue," the rhyme scheme (ababa) seems to make the stanzas stand as separate units, but the sentences sometimes flow from one

stanza to another and thus aid in building up a combination of long and short thought units, which fits very logically into the musing, reflective tone of the entire poem. The rhythm, like that of so many of the Asolando poems, is a combination of iambic and anapestic feet; this makes for easily moving lines and contributes to unhurried, leisurely pace of the elderly poet's meditation.

"EPILOGUE"

Criticism

If many of the poems in Asolando received little or no individual attention from the critics, the opposite is true for the "Epilogue." Almost every reviewer quoted it, and many commented on it because it was felt that here Browning had written his own epitaph.[122] Since Browning was considered by many as the "greatest genius" of the Victorian era,[123] some of these reviewers were primarily interested in the courage and optimism proclaimed by the "Epilogue." The commentator in Leisure Hour, who compared the last volumes of Tennyson and Browning, felt the "Epilogue" was not so "touchingly personal" as "Crossing the Bar," but he found a kindred longing and confidence in the two.[124] Likewise the critic in the London Quarterly Review saw in the two an "unlikeness in manner and mood; a deep oneness in teaching."[125] Other

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[122]Litzinger, p. 313.

[123]Clarke, p. 100.

[124]S. G. G., p. 231.

[125]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 87.

commentators were much more enthusiastic. Brooke indulged in poetic exaggeration by saying: "His last poem was like the last look of the Phoenix to the sun before the sunlight lights the odorous pyre from which the new-created Bird will spring."[126] Symons was not so lyrical, but his reaction was almost as emotional:

> The "Epilogue" is a clear, brave looking-forward to death, as to an event now close at hand, and imagined as actually accomplished. It breaks through for once, as if at last the occasion demanded it, a reticence never thus broken through before, claiming, with a supreme self-confidence, calmly, as an acknowledged right, the "Well done" of the faithful servant at the end of the long day's labour.[127]

Harrington was a bit more temperate and thus was a better representative of the general attitude when he wrote: "The poem is quite beyond praise. It has too much reality in it to be subject to treatment as literature. It provokes the finest admiration for the man who wrote it."[128] Similar to this are statements such as "impassioned utterances,"[129] "grand, noble, trumpet-like words,"[130] and "as notable if not as inexplicable as Shelley's seeming prophecy of his coming death in the latter part of 'Adonais.'"[131] While most of the critics were

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[126]Brooke, p. 442. [127]Symons, p. 19.

[128]Vernon C. Harrington, Browning Studies (Boston, 1925), p. 113.

[129]"Browning's Last Work," p. 184.

[130]Orion, "Review of Asolando," Scots Magazine, NS V (January, 1890), 136.

[131]Henry S. Pancoast, "Old Age and Poets," Poet-Lore, III (February, 1891), 65.

concerned with the "message" of the "Epilogue," a few examined its aesthetic qualities. The New York Herald said it was more in his "so-called crytographic style" than other poems in the book,[132] and the London Quarterly Review spoke of the "quaint, irregular stanzas of Browning," which were "rough and broken and scornful of grace in their headlong rush like a torrent shattering itself on stones."[133] Even though Grierson and Smith, like Brooke,[134] felt that Browning's poetic powers declined after The Ring and the Book, they believed the "Epilogue" was worthy of the poet's prime.[135] Even Duffin, who also thought the poet's later works were inferior, praised the "Epilogue":

> Finally, after acres of narrative and didactic, Browning finished up with a lyric in his most personal style. The Epilogue lacks the rhythmic urge of Tennyson, but it has a sombre music which effectively conveys the earnest feeling and thought. The heavy, deliberate march of the long lines, varied with quicker-moving shorter ones, and the very exceptional austerity of the rhyme scheme--these elements of prosody are forged into a poetic tool which admirably suited the ageing poet's hand, and enabled him to carve his last utterance clearly on the rock of time: a brilliant statement of one of the poet's ideals, made with such power that a certain uncouth lyric grace possesses the poem.[136]

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[132]"Browning's Last Work," p. 186.

[133]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 87.

[134]Brooke, p. 438.

[135]Herbert J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry (London, 1947), p. 419.

[136]Duffin, p. 81-2.

Paraphrase

In the "Epilogue" the poet asks his loved ones if their hearts will be filled with pity when they think about him after his death. If so, their understanding of him is imperfect, in spite of the deep love which they may have for him. He has not been one who mixed with the weaklings of the earth; instead he has been one who has fought the battle of life bravely and has never lost his trust that good will be the final outcome; he "Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,/ Sleep to wake" (ll. 14-5). No, he wants them to think of him in the midst of the day's activities, not in the death-like quiet of night; he wants them to cheer him on, always bidding him to continue to fight, to live in the next life as courageously and triumphantly as he has lived in this.

Interpretation

Although some of the other Asolando poems have been criticized as being obscure, more seems to have been written about the difficulties in the "Epilogue." Here, as usual, the punctuation seems to be one of the main reasons for confusion, but not the only one. Burdett felt the first two stanzas would make a good parsing exercise for schoolboys. He suggested that these stanzas are "the most familiar example from Browning of the inconvenience of a language with no genders, no inflections, few tenses and the fewest rules."[137] Yet he

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[137]Osbert Burdett, The Brownings (Boston, 1929), p. 326.

admitted that once one has read the poem aloud and grasped the sense, it is both clear and musical. To illustrate the confusion, the first line of the second stanza, "Oh to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken," probably refers to those to whom he is speaking. It could refer, however, to the poet, and if so, it may be compared with a prose statement in a letter to Isabella Blagden in which the poet acknowledged that he made errors in judgment concerning his relationships with his wife, but that he never failed in love to her by saying: "All I can be sure of was my entire love--by the light of, & for the sake of which, now, I dare hope that all my follies, mistaken procedures & inconsequentia[l]-ities are understood and forgiven; it was so with me then--I could have loved so, without erring so: . . ."[138] The portion causing the most discussion, however, has been the last lines of the second stanza, "Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivel--/ Being--who?" An article in Notes and Queries asked how this line could fail to contradict what had gone before.[139] Three answers appeared. St. Swithin wrote that the poet was confessing that "he drivelled like the aimless, helpless, and hopeless, and was, all the while, he cannot, or will not, at once say who." The reader then only learns the speaker's identity in the third stanza.[140] Another reply was perhaps slightly more

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[138]Edward C. McAller, ed., Dearest Isa. Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Austin, Texas, 1951), p. 158-9.

[139]L. K., "A Line of Browning," Notes and Queries, Ninth Series, IX (January 18, 1902), 47.

[140]St. Swithin, "A Line of Browning," Notes and Queries, Ninth Series, IX (March 1, 1902), 173.

satisfactory; after commenting that lack of mental discipline on Browning's part and erratic punctuation were the reasons so much of Browning's poetry was misunderstood, Eames proceeded to revise the punctuation of the lines, rendering them thus: "Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless did I drivel?--/ Being who?" When punctuated in this manner, Eames said, the meaning is that the poet did drivel with the aimless, helpless, hopeless, even though he thought he was a man such as the one presented in the third stanza.[141] Few readers are willing to accept Eames' interpretation. Ormond gave the most satisfactory explanation. He acknowledged that Browning's punctuation was confusing for the casual reader, but he insisted that the poet checked it carefully. Browning, he continued, like earlier writers, punctuated for rhetoric as well as for grammar. The dash he used to join rather than to separate ideas; keeping this in mind and remembering that the line is governed by the question mark at the end, one can see the line means that considering who the poet is, could he possibly have drivelled?[142] The controversy will likely continue always, for Lucas used the "Epilogue" to prove that Browning loved crudeness for its own sake[143] while Duffin found in the "rough-hewn form" a kind of "noble strength."[144]

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[141]J. B. Eames, "A Line of Browning," Notes and Queries, Ninth Series, IX (March 1, 1902), 173.

[142]T. S. Omond, "A Line of Browning," Notes and Queries, Ninth Series, IX (April 5, 1902), 276.

[143]F. L. Lucas, Ten Victorian Poets (Cambridge, 1940), p. 36.

[144]Duffin, p. 260.

The facts-versus-fancies theme serves as one of the main themes of the "Epilogue." The contrast, in this instance, is between the untruthful misconceptions or fancies which many hold about death and the condition of the souls of the dead and the facts as the poet has discovered them and followed them in the conduct of his life. Perhaps this dogmatic assertion that his views were the factual ones was one of the points Browning had in mind when he admitted to his daughter-in-law that some readers might consider the "Epilogue" in poor taste because of its boasting. Readers will have to accept, however, his judgment that the poem should appear, regardless, because it presented in the author's own opinion a clear and truthful appraisal of his life and views. The theme of facts versus fancies, appearance versus reality, was also emphasized in the third stanza, in which it is shown that apparent failures are really fancies or appearances while the facts are quite different: the sky does not remain cloudy; the sleeper will awake; those who seem to fail will win after all.

Source

The "Epilogue" clearly arose from Browning's own thoughts as he looked back over the life which he had lived. Although there is no indication of the date of publication, DeVane was obviously correct in saying the poem must have been composed late and seemed to be intended as a final pronouncement of the poet's faith and optimism.[145]

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[145]DeVane, p. 552.

Correlation with Other Poems

In spite of the fact that it is considerably shorter than "Reverie," the "Epilogue" actually offers almost as complete a summary of the poet's theories of life. Berdoe claimed that all of Browning could be found in it.[146] This might be true if Browning were merely a facile optimist, for the poem is as explicit a declaration of optimism as he ever made, but some would look at other late poems and accept Berdoe's conclusion only with some reservations. It is true, nevertheless, that in most respects it is characteristic. From Paracelsus on, Browning treated a great number of characters who through what may appear to be external failure have risen to greater heights than they could otherwise have reached.[147] Along with this, the "Epilogue" reiterates the theme of the nobility of struggle; this is an idea which Browning had used many times before, notably in The Ring and the Book and in "Prospice," the second considered by Cohen to be a more nearly perfect statement of the thesis set forth in the "Epilogue."[148] Optimism, of course, goes along with an acceptance of things as they are, but in Browning this is reconciled to his belief in struggle by saying that the effort might have little effect on the eternal workings of the universe, but it would be extremely beneficial to the one who

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[146]Berdoe, Browning Cyclopaedia, p. 153.

[147]Emily Hickey, "Browning on Failure," in William Knight, ed., The Robert Browning Centenary Celebration at Westminster Abbey, May 7th, 1912 (London, 1912), p. 20.

[148]J. M. Cohen, Robert Browning (London, 1952), p. 172.

struggled. This compromise is not altered in the "Epilogue,"[149] Considering himself a part of this struggle, both in this world and in the next, Browning can look forward to the future with confidence.[150] To a belief in a continuation of life he always held firm, as even a cursory survey of his poems will prove. Alexander Small reported that late in life Browning said to a friend, "Never say of me that I am dead."[151] Fairchild thought the "Epilogue" sounded a note of tragedy rather than triumph because he interpreted the poem as meaning that others, rather than Browning, were to "greet the unseen with a cheer" (l. 17),[152] but this seems to be an obvious misreading of the text; Harrington undoubtedly was correct in saying that the "unseen" (l. 17) is the poet after death: the pronoun <u>him</u> (l. 18) refers to the unseen.[153] Most readers, along with Small, consider this one of Browning's most

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[149]Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Browning's 'Whatever Is, Is Right,'" <u>College English</u>, XII (April, 1951), 382.

[150]Fairchild noted that Browning's wishes for the next life as pictured here are in contrast with the theories he proclaimed in "Speculative" and "Prospice," where he seemed to indicate that he hoped in the next life struggle would cease and he would be rewarded by a peaceful reunion with Elizabeth (this seems a fair reading of "Prospice," but I question his interpretation of "Speculative"--see Chapter IV); Fairchild continued by saying that the view in the "Epilogue" is influenced by the fact that Browning became more of an energy lover as he grew older and therefore had to give to Heaven the characteristic he most admired on earth. Fairchild, "Browning's Heaven," p. 37.

[151]Alexander Small, "The Swan-Songs of the Poets," <u>Gentleman's Magazine</u>, CCLXXIII (December, 1892), 256.

[152]Fairchild, "Browning's Heaven," p. 37.

[153]Harrington, p. 113.

vigorous expressions of his "consciousness of a great mission . . . a sublime faith in the continuance of the soul's existence."[154]

Just as the "message" is characteristic, so the tone, too, is typical. Jones found the "triumphant tone" of Browning's religious optimism in all his work from Pauline on,[155] and Naish felt the final poem summed up and further strengthened the faith expressed in La Saisiaz.[156] Only Mrs. Orr found it hard to relate "the Epilogue to a coherent mood of any period of its author's life."[157] In addition, Burdett was correct in saying that Browning imparted his characteristic themes more effectively in shorter lyrics such as the "Epilogue."[158] It has already been shown that the poem has had great popularity. Additional proof is indicated by Violet Brooke-Hunt's report of the enthusiastic reaction of soldiers in South Africa when it was read to them, many of them wanting copies.[159]

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[154]Small, p. 256.

[155]Jones, p. 59.

[156]Naish, p. 203-5.

[157]Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning, New Edition Revised and in Part Rewritten by Frederic G. Kenyon (New York, 1908), p. 406. Mrs. Orr's comment is difficult to understand unless she meant that Browning was never entirely confident in his optimism and never completely without doubts over long periods of time; this was true during his later life as La Saisiaz, Fifine, Ferishtah's Fancies and some of the shorter poems will readily show. Nevertheless, Browning returned again and again to his faith and hope, and his doubts were usually short-lived.

[158]Burdett, p. 239.

[159]Violet Brooke-Hunt, "Wanted--A Soldier's Book of Verse," Spectator, LXXXIX (October 25, 1902), 607.

Imagery and Diction

The presentation and imagery of the "Epilogue" are based upon a series of contrasts, a favorite device in the philosophical poems. In the second stanza Browning vividly and directly contrasts his character with those of the slothful, the mawkish, the unmanly, the aimless, the hopeless, the helpless. In the third stanza he contrasts his action with other possible types of action as well as contrasting, as has already been mentioned, the differences in appearance and reality. Another set of contrasts is seen when the first and fourth stanzas are juxtaposed. The poet uses the nighttime with its concomitant characteristics of sleep and silence to represent those who dream, those who are filled with fancies, those who fail to understand life; in contrast to this scene, he paints one of a busy, bustling noontide when men are struggling and living, and this he uses to represent those who govern their lives by actualities, he himself being the foremost representative of this type.

Other than the series of contrasts, Browning does not use a great deal of imagery in the "Epilogue," and what there is is primarily visual: this is particularly true in the third and fourth stanzas. For example, there are the pictures of the stalwart soldier marching into battle (l. 11) and of the crowd of laborers bustling to do their work (l. 16). It should be noted, however, that these are not drawn in a clear-cut and precise fashion, but merely suggested. The image in the first stanza in which the poet is described as lying low in a way which would imply to fools that he was imprisoned by death is of the same type.

The other kind of image used with relative frequency is a motion image. Again, these images are used most effectively in stanzas three and four. In the third stanza there is turning, marching, falling, fighting, even waking; in the fourth there is striving, thriving, and fighting once more. Images of sound also occur, but not very often. In the second stanza Browning declares that he has refused to drivel, that is, to prattle foolish nonsense; in the fourth, bustle may be considered an auricular as well as a visual image, and the unseen is to be greeted "with a cheer" (l. 17).

Form

The form of the "Epilogue" has given students some difficulty. The meter is generally considered trochaic, but as in "Love Among the Ruins," the first syllables in the long lines are seldom stressed; Hatcher therefore felt the meter was more satisfactory when thought of in units of four syllables.[160] The varying line lengths give an impression of movement and activity, which is intensified by the "intermittent rhyme,"[161] the four five-line stanzas rhyming abcdb.[162] The irregularity of the rhythm and the vigor of the movement effectively aid the poet in his effort to make readers think about the ideas he is

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[160] Hatcher, p. 183.

[161] Ibid., p. 184.

[162] Duffin, p. 258. Duffin thought the double endings of the other three lines give the impression that there is more rhyming than there actually is.

setting before them and to impress them with the strength to be found in the courageous acceptance of his views.

CHAPTER III

THE LOVE POEMS

Although Browning is usually thought of as a dramatic poet rather than as a lyricist, his subject matter was very frequently concerned with love, and surprisingly often the form was that of a lyric. Not only did he often deal with situations involving love, but he kept persistently to his early assertions about the unquestionable value of love. Some critics, however, have felt that in spite of the persistence with which he returned to this theme, Browning was not really successful when he wrote about love. Brinton claimed that he lost power because he seldom wrote of his own experience[1] (a criticism which is hardly valid, as will soon be apparent, for many of the love poems in Asolando) and felt that his intellectual approach to emotion was the reason for "a note of coldness that jars."[2] Brinton was forced to admit, however, that there were "detached passages of concentrated passion" which could not be surpassed.[3] Santayana, on the other hand, condemned Browning because he did not mix sufficient reason with his passion to refine it and declared that he therefore was incapable of understanding the idealization of

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[1]Daniel G. Brinton, "Facettes of Love: From Browning. Introductory Address Delivered at the Opening of the Browning Society of the New Century Club of Philadelphia, November 12, 1888," Poet-Lore, I (January, 1889), 14-5.

[2]Ibid., p. 14.

[3]Ibid.

love.[4] A few commentators, such as Cohen, did not object to his approach to love but believed, contrary to the general trend of Browning criticism, that Browning was not at his best when working with short poems.[5] Most of these would, nevertheless, agree with Reeves that there were some exceptions: "His short lyrics are not his best work, but some of them, such as Meeting at Night and Misconceptions, are memorable. So too are some of the brief utterances of tender regret and fleeting passion contained in . . . Asolando."[6] In this connection it might be remembered that when asked whom Browning was like, Rosetti is reported to have said: "Like? Why in his lyrics he is like Shelley, . . ."[7] Paul Elmer More summed up the matter by saying: "At intervals the staccato of his lines, like the drilling of a woodpecker, is interrupted by a burst of pure and liquid music, as if that vigorous and exploring bird were suddenly gifted with the melodious throat of the lark."[8]

In general, the comments about the love lyrics in Asolando were more filled with praise than were the reviews of the volumes which

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[4]George Santayana, "The Poetry of Barbarism," Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (New York, 1957), p. 200.

[5]J. M. Cohen, Robert Browning (London, 1952), p. 4.

[6]James Reeves, "Introduction," Selected Poems of Robert Browning (New York, 1957), p. xxvi.

[7]Oswald Doughty, A Victorian Romantic. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (New Haven, 1949), p. 168.

[8]Paul Elmer More, "Why is Browning Popular?" Shelburne Essays, Third Series (New York, 1907), p. 144.

immediately preceded it. Duffin wrote that most of Browning's poetry written during his last twelve years was pure didacticism with very rare moments of lyricism,[9] and Raymond noted a despondency in the later lyrics, a realization that all could not be permanently good.[10] Such comments have been rare, however; more typical are the following: De Fonblanque thought Asolando contained some of Browning's "most beautiful poetic fancies, notably in the shorter poems, Now, A Pearl; A Girl, and Summum Bonum";[11] the author of an article in the Church Quarterly Review praised the "youthful ardour" found in the love songs.[12] The reviewer in the Boston Literary World wrote: "Never more than in these last illumined moments has Browning emphatically declared the value of love in songs which appeal irresistibly through their note of immortal youthfulness."[13] Similar in tone was a passage in Leisure Hour which said: "Some of his verses have an exquisite glow of passion, as in brief beautiful love poems, which seem to us a far-off response to

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[9]Henry Charles Duffin, Amphibian. A Reconsideration of Browning (Fair Lawn, New Jersey, 1956), p. 57.

[10]William O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning (Toronto, 1950), p. 114-5.

[11]Ethel De Fonblanque, "The Influence of Italy on the Poetry of the Brownings," Fortnightly Review, NS LXXXVI (August 2, 1909), 343.

[12]"Robert Browning," Church Quarterly Review, XXX (July, 1890), 328.

[13]"Review of Asolando," Literary World (Boston), XXI (January 4, 1890), 3.

the 'Sonnets from the Portuguese'; . . ."[14] Browning doubtlessly would have felt that no higher praise could be given to his last efforts.

"DUBIETY"

Criticism

"Dubiety," which opens the series of love lyrics in Asolando, has seldom been singled out for special notice by the critics, who generally have been more impressed by "Summum Bonum" or the other gayer and more showy poems of love. A few commentators, however, have preferred "Dubiety" and "Speculative," which closely resembles it in tone. DeVane found them "more serious and moving,"[15] and Duffin declared that these "exquisite memories" have more soul and substance than do "Now," "Humility," "Poetics," "Summum Bonum," and "A Pearl, a Girl," which for him were merely "exercises in an old mode."[16] It would be hard to agree with the last part of Duffin's statement, but certainly he and a few others were wise to see that these less youthful poems contain intense feeling and real merit.

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[14]S. G. G., "Browning and Tennyson: Their Latest Poems," Leisure Hour, XXXIX (February, 1890), 232.

[15]William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, Second Edition (New York, 1955), p. 526.

[16]Duffin, p. 110.

Paraphrase

The poet wishes to be happy if only for a short time and asks the Autumn weather to help him screen his cares so that he can have enjoyment and comfort. He does not want to sleep, but he would like for anything harsh or disturbing in either his surroundings or his soul to be softened until both are peaceful. When this state is achieved, and he and the world have been lulled into a calm quietness, he remembers a similar experience he had had once before. What produced that? Not dreams nor visions nor musings, but the memory of a woman leaning to kiss his brow. This moment was, he now realizes, a revelation of the highest truth.

Interpretation

The critic for the Literary World commented that in these final poems of Asolando "the poet appears as if, in genial and contented mood, he were resting in the warm light of the sunset of his day."[17] For no other single poem in the volume does this seem more true than for "Dubiety." Perhaps Mrs. Miller was correct in assuming that the mood of the poem was influenced by Mrs. Bronson's careful watching over him.[18] But no matter what the reason, the tone of comfortable contentment is one of the most attractive aspects of the poem. This overall tone also suggests Browning's advanced age just as clearly as do phrases

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[17]"Review of Asolando," Literary World, p. 3.

[18]Betty Miller, Robert Browning. A Portrait (London, 1952), p. 278.

such as "Autumn weather" (l. 2) and "fanciful days of yore" (l. 19). Yet underneath the apparent contentment there is a restlessness, which is suggested by the title. In order to be happy even briefly the speaker has to ask for his cares to be screened; it is interesting, and characteristic, that he does not want the screening to be complete, for, as in "Prospice," he wishes to experience, not to sleep; therefore he wants a cloud merely to dim the brightness of midday, just as a drop of milk will "sully, . . . Noon's water-white" (l. 8). The emphasis on comfort and rest, on being sheltered snugly "In Luxury's sofa lap of leather!" (l. 4) seems to stand in sharp contrast to earlier works in which Browning usually describes action and movement rather than inactivity and often urges people to do rather than simply to think. Even in the final statement of his creed, the "Epilogue" to Asolando, he stresses his pride in going out and being a part of the battle of life, but here he glories in a world that has been "disarmed" (l. 14). If one remembers, however, the implied restlessness and interprets this poem as another instance of the search for the perfect moment, the differences in approach can be reconciled, and in many ways the poem will prove to be characteristic of Browning. The calm and peace of his situation make him--for the speaker here is obviously the poet himself--try to determine when he has previously experienced a moment in which the entire world seemed to be transformed; it is not surprising that an actual memory of an expression of love is the thing he selects in preference to dreams or fancies or musing. Love here is not only best, as it is in "Love Among the Ruins," but it is the only

truth, the ultimate reality. Knowledge of this fact comes to him through the memory of a kiss, which, as it does in "Now" and "Summum Bonum," symbolizes the perfect moment, a favorite motif in Asolando.

Source

"Dubiety," like several of the other love lyrics, is drawn from Browning's own experiences, but with a difference. Readers find significance in realizing that even though in his old age Browning could and did write love songs inspired by those around him, he would still choose as best of all experiences an incident of his married life, which had ended some twenty-eight years before, for assuredly his wife is the woman described. As DeVane has suggested,[19] this memory may be of an occurence Browning described in 1864 in a letter to Julia Wedgewood: in telling of a bout with a sore throat he wrote, "I could not get to sleep for the pain, and my wife took my head in her two little hands, in broad daylight, and I went to sleep at once, and woke better."[20] Whether or not this be the specific incident Browning had in mind, the memory is one of the references to Mrs. Browning that, in the opinion of Burdett, make Asolando a "priceless volume."[21]

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[19]DeVane, p. 529.

[20]Richard Curle, ed., Robert Browning and Julia Wedgewood. A Broken Friendship as Revealed in Their Letters (New York, 1937), p. 87.

[21]Burdett, p. 335.

Correlation with Other Poems

In connection with the personal element of the poem, the reader should compare "Dubiety" with "By the Fireside." In the earlier poem, which was first published in Men and Women, Browning prophesied that when he should be old, he would look back on an instance of complete happiness which he had shared with his wife.

"By the Fireside" and "Dubiety" are also alike in their emphasis on the perfect moment. This idea, always a favorite with Browning, will be considered at greater length in the discussions of following poems, but here it is important to note that although the moment itself may be of brief duration, the person who has the experience may by the recalling of it be made continually happy, an idea strongly reminiscent of Wordsworth's "Daffodils."

In keeping with his custom in Asolando, Browning related "Dubiety" to the subtitle Fancies and Facts. The idea that at some specific point in time a person is able to divide truth from falsehood is not a new one for him, but can be found in "Old Pictures in Florence" and "Cristina." The days of youth were ones of fancy, he declares in "Dubiety," but now he sees clearly: perhaps the wisdom to recognize the kiss as the highest truth could come only with age. Certainly the clearer perception of age, also mentioned in "Pisgah-Sights I," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," and the "Prologue" to Asolando, convinces him that reality is of far greater value than is any product of the imagination.

Imagery and Diction

"Dubiety" is a mood poem as definitely as are any of the poems in this final volume, and Browning has very carefully chosen words which heighten the vapory vagueness that overlies the calmness and peace of the setting. Even the title contributes, for the questioning, searching spirit which it suggests sets the tone for the atmosphere of a poem in which the speaker seeks an explanation for the world around him. Other words which add to the mood are ensconce, suffuse, shade, dim, gauziness, shroud, and muse. For most of these the immediately apparent appeal is to the senses of touch and sight, which is also true of the imagery. In the first stanza there is the description of the comfortable feeling of a deep leather chair, followed in the third stanza by the image of sheathing the sharp dagger of the rough world. The contrast of light and shade is a familiar one in Browning and is often expressed in practically the same phraseology used here,[22] but the implications usually concern the problems of good versus evil.[23] In "Dubiety," however, the image of milk sullying water is used without symbolic purpose and serves merely to make more explicit the picture Browning is creating. The use of whiteness in Browning usually

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[22]Bishop Blougram speculates that creation is intended to shield man's eyes from God's blinding glory: "Our breath, our drop of dew, with shield enough/ Against that sight till we can bear its stress" (ll. 656-7).

[23]For example: "As night needs day, as shine needs shade, so good/ Needs evil: . . ." (Furini, ll. 484-5) and "Unsobered by such sorrows of my kind/ As sully with their shade my life that shines" ("A Bean-Stripe: Also, Apple-Eating," ll. 188-9).

symbolizes truth, and it may be that he intended to imply that the shading of brightness which comes with age can lead one to a clearer realization of truth--surely such a theory is inherent in the poem. On the other hand, clearness may also symbolize truth, as it does in the "Prologue" to Asolando. The noonday of the "Epilogue" also stresses clearness, and the poet wanted this bright time of day, rather than the night, to be symbolic of him in the minds of his followers.

Form

Just as the words in "Dubiety" are reasonably musical and familiar in order to aid in the smooth flow of the poem, so the form is simple and the stylistic devices relatively few. The lines follow speech patterns rather closely. The relative shortness of the tetrameter line fits the musing, speculative tone. The combination of iambic and anapestic feet also helps achieve the effect of natural expression; such a weaving together was so commonly used by Browning that Hatcher devoted a portion of his study of Browning's versification to a consideration of his effective use of this duple-triple rhythm.[24]

Each of the six stanzas presents a definite phase of the poem's idea. The unity of the stanza is emphasized by the rhyme scheme, abab, which serves to tie the lines together; the lack of carry-over rhymes from one stanza to another also emphasizes the stanza division.

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[24]Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, The Versification of Robert Browning (Columbus, Ohio, 1928), p. 115.

"NOW"

Criticism

"Now," the second love poem in Asolando, ushers in a group of five poems which have been perennial favorites of the readers of the collection. At least one critic, Stopford Brooke, found "Now" and the others so spontaneous and fresh that he refused to believe they were not written in Browning's youth; of them he wrote, "They are fully charged with isolated emotion; other thoughts than those of love do not intrude upon them. Moreover, they have a sincere lyric note. It is impossible, unless by a miracle of imagination, that these could have been written when he was about eighty years of age."[25] Most commentators have refused to accept such a belief even though they have marvelled at the youthful vigor of the verse. The critic in Scots Magazine thought no young lover "could feel more than Browning has expressed . . . in the ardour of the last lines of Now."[26] Compton-Rickett, who said it was one of the few Browning poems in which love was treated as sexual passion,[27] called "Now" a "charming little rhapsody on a girl's kiss."[28] The first part of the statement is

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[25]Stopford A. Brooke, The Poetry of Robert Browning (New York, 1902), p. 245-6.

[26]Orion, "Review of Asolando," Scots Magazine, NS V (January, 1890), 133.

[27]Arthur Compton-Rickett, "Introduction," Robert Browning: Humanist. A Selection from Browning's Poetry (New York, 1925), p. 41-2.

[28]Ibid., p. 42.

certainly an exaggeration, for from the time of such early poems as "Meeting at Night" and "Love Among the Ruins" there were indications of sexual passion, and most readers would find it hard to miss the sexual passion in "The Confessional" and "In a Gondola"; the second half of his statement, however, is typical of the criticism the poem has received. Herford's view was basically similar but with some differences:

> Yet Now and Summum Bonum, and A Pearl, a Girl, with all their apparent freshness and spontaneity, are less like rapt utterances of passion than eloquent analyses of it by one who has known it and who still vibrates with the memory. What preoccupies and absorbs him is not the woman, but the wonder of the transformation wrought for him by her word or kiss, the moment made eternal, . . . But some of the greatest love-poetry of the world--from Dante onwards--has reflected an intellect similarly absorbed in articulating a marvellous experience.[29]

Duffin was the only critic who found "Now" lacking in merit; for him, as has already been stated, this was simply an exercise "in an old mode."[30]

Paraphrase

The poet asks of the woman whom he is addressing that she give to him from her life one moment during which they may, as they join in a physical embrace, experience the highest exultation of which human beings are capable. In this moment the souls of the lovers will be suspended, will be completely apart from the world. The core of existence, the meaning of life, the perfection of the soul can be

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[29]C. H. Herford, Robert Browning (London, 1905), p. 232.

[30]Duffin, p. 110.

reached, he states quite clearly, when two people give themselves freely and completely to each other in love. This moment of perfection is the "fact" of the universe, the truth of life shorn of all pretenses or fancies, an idea which relates this poem, like most of the others, to the subtitle of the collection.

Interpretation

"Now," like "Dubiety" and some of the following poems, has as its theme the perfect moment. In fact, Symons said that here

> . . . the passion of the situation leaps like a cry from the heart, and one may say that the poem is, rather than renders, the very fever of the supreme moment--"the moment eternal," . . . Here the whole situation is merged in the single cry--the joy, "unbodied" and "embodied," of any, of every lover.[31]

That such a moment of rapture cannot long endure the poet frankly admits when he speaks of "This tick of our life-time's one moment" (l. 10), but the ecstasy of the experience is so great that the poet would prefer it to a whole lifetime of lukewarm romance, a very typical Browning attitude. There is also a close connection between this poem and the following lyric "Humility" because the poet does not demand all of the woman's life or love--he simply asks her for the perfect moment; in this he immediately reminds the reader of the speakers in "The Last Ride Together" and "The Italian in England."

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[31]Symons, p. 19.

Source

Mrs. Miller has suggested that the "outspoken Now" may be laid to the credit of Clara Jessup Bloomfield-Moore,[32] the American poetess of sorts, who crossed the Atlantic in 1879 to meet Browning and who for the next ten years was to pursue him with such persistence that rumor often had it that the two were on the verge of marriage. In 1884 Browning and his sister visited her at St. Moritz, and when she was forced to return unexpectedly to America, the poet wrote for her the lyric "Not with my Soul, Love--," which was inserted after "Plot Culture" in Ferishtah's Fancies. This lyric, which in Mrs. Miller's opinion has "something of the candour and the passion that, forty-five years ago, had informed the words exchanged between the guilty lovers of Pippa Passes,"[33] contains the perfect-moment theme expressed by means of physical descriptions that are very much like those in "Now," which appears in a manuscript dated 1888.[34] The similarities in theme and descriptions are obviously the basis for Mrs. Miller's statement concerning the inspiration of the later poem. The similarities in phraseology cannot be denied, but Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore evidently was not aware that she served as the inspiration, or she would have claimed credit for it as she did for the "Bad Dreams" series.[35] Therefore Mrs. Miller's theory can be considered as no more than an interesting possibility.

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[32]Miller, p. 277. [33]Ibid., p. 269. [34]DeVane, p. 529.

[35]Comments in Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore's personal copy of Ferishtah's Fancies, quoted in Miller, p. 268.

Correlation with Other Poems

The perfect-moment motif appeared in Browning's poetry as early as "Porphyria's Lover" and is easily recognized as one of his most typical themes.[36] The emphasis on living in and for the present is closely related to "Cristina" and "Youth and Art."[37] Also typical are the descriptions of physical love, for one is quickly reminded of lines in "Women and Roses" and "Meeting at Night"; even more strikingly similar are certain passages of "Love Among the Ruins," although the seventh and eighth lines go even farther in their precise and vivid detail; they appear relatively mild, however, when placed beside some of the descriptions in "The Confessional."[38] Probably Santayana was thinking of "Now" as well as some of the longer poems when he voiced his strong objection to Browning's excessive passion.

Imagery and Diction

Since "Now" is mainly forthright description, there is little that could be considered true imagery. The use of tick for the passage of time is a sound image, however, and suspension a kinesthetic one. These and the prevalence of action words--condense, merged, clutch--

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[36]Other examples are found in "Two in a Campagna," "The Last Ride Together," "The Italian in England," "By the Fireside," "Verse-making was least of my virtues," "Dubiety," and "Summum Bonum."

[37]Edward Berdoe, Browning and the Christian Faith (London, 1896), p. 103.

[38]Other examples are found in "Two in a Campagna," "In Three Days," "Mesmerism," "In a Gondola," and "Humility."

add to the intensity of the feeling and to the impression that the duration of this experience will be brief.

Form

The form of "Now" also contributes to the intensity of the poem, which seems to rush headlong to the climax in the last lines. The lack of any rhyme scheme in the single fourteen-line stanza aids in achieving the rapidity, too, because there is nothing to interrupt the onward movement. The many dashes and the fact that almost every line is broken by punctuation or necessary pauses for breath create a choppy effect, which increases the impression of intensive struggle toward a goal. The lack of uniformity in the meter likewise contributes to the effect because the reader cannot find himself lulled into semiconsciousness by a regular rhythmical pattern.

"HUMILITY"

Criticism

In general, "Humility," the love lyric which stands next in the collection, shares the criticism, both favorable and unfavorable, already cited for "Now." "Humility," however, is not one of those poems which Brooke assigned to Browning's youth, for in his opinion the tone has a ring of age in it.[39] But in spite of the lessened intensity found here, the poem has often been described as having special merit.

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[39]Brooke, p. 245.

Symons called it a "delicious" little poem containing nuances which are "daintily, prettily pathetic."[40] Although Symons's criticism was highly complimentary, the tone does not, on careful reading, seem pathetic, but rather one which is confident and contented because the poet is well assured of the value and power of love.

Paraphrase

"Humility" begins with the charming picture of a girl who goes through gardens, gathering armsful of flowers, and who, because of the abundance of her blossoms, does not feel it necessary to stop and pick up a stray bud or two which she has dropped. In the second stanza the poet urges the girl whom he is addressing to be just as lavish to her lover, to give him all the love he could possibly desire, to make him wealthy--if this has been done and if her love should be so great that some of it were left unused, then the speaker in his poverty and by stealth would be justified in taking a bit for himself and treasuring it, and, in the end, he, too, perhaps could be considered wealthy.

Interpretation

In "Humility" Browning was declaring that to experience the joy of love one does not have to be the sole recipient of it, for even to have a tiny portion is worthwhile. The girl, too, may realize that love can be shared; she leaves the fallen blossoms because she has enough for home--could she not feel she can spare a little love without

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[40]Symons, p. 19.

impoverishing her beloved? Whether or not this is so, the poet indicates that the lover benefits even if his love is not returned. This poem is also related to the subtitle of the volume, for appearances or fancies are often deceiving, and time may prove that the fragment which seemed so small and meager is of great value.

Source

If "Humility" and the love songs following it were inspired, as DeVane has speculated,[41] by Browning's delight in his new daughter-in-law, Fannie Coddington, or by Edith Bronson, the daughter of his hostess at Asolo, whose companionship he enjoyed during his last years,[42] then there is great relevance between the inspiration and the subject matter, for in either case the poet would have no right to expect all the love which the young girl had to offer, but his life could be greatly enriched by being included in her affections.

Correlation with Other Poems

The fact that the speaker in "Humility" would be content with only a small part of the girl's love and attention might seem to emphasize the fact that this is the poem of an old man, but it should be remembered that Browning had stated similar ideas before in such poems as "The Last Ride Together" and "The Lost Mistress," though here the

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[41]DeVane, p. 526.

[42]Katharine DeKay Bronson, "Browning in Venice," The Century Magazine, NS XLI (February, 1902), 577; Miller, p. 274.

application is personal rather than dramatic. Also a favorite theme, which appears again in Asolando in "Bad Dreams I," is the feeling that to be given the opportunity to love is much more important than to be loved; this belief had been expressed earlier in "Cristina," "One Way of Love," and "Evelyn Hope." The descriptions of physical love, such as "give your lover/ Heaps of loving--under, over,/ Whelm him" (ll. 7-9), remind the reader of those in "Now," although these are somewhat milder.

Imagery and Diction

In "Humility" Browning uses the method of painting a picture and then drawing an application from it. The scene he paints is a simple and yet very pleasing one, though the reader may be slightly jarred by the use of the unexpected words stript and spoilt (l. 2). In the second stanza his use of the word stealthy to describe the way he would gather up the bits of cast-off love makes even more emphatic the minuteness of the particles with which the poet could satisfy himself and the fact that the gift was of tremendous importance even though the giver might be unaware that she was bestowing it. Also in the second stanza the expression "heaps of loving" shows that Browning was never far from the colloquial forms of speech, though here the phrase is used with no suggestion of harshness.

Form

Some readers may well wonder why the question mark occurs in the middle of the fourth line of the first stanza and not at the end of the

sixth, where the question proper ends. There seems to be no very good reason for this. True, the last lines do not have such a strong interrogatory force as do the first, but probably this was simply a mistake on Browning's part, which he would have corrected if he had lived to revise the volume. Fortunately, this peculiarity in punctuation does not cause confusion, as some of his other eccentricities have done, and it is usually noticed only by the student, and not by the casual reader.

The trochaic tetrameter lines move smoothly and musically to give a kind of tripping measure to the poem, which fits in well with the lightness and daintiness of the pictures. The couplet form gives unity, but the lines are so seldom end-stopped that there is no feeling of interruption. The division into two stanzas serves to emphasize the shift from the incident described to the application drawn from it.

"POETICS"

Criticism

"Poetics," which follows "Humility" and resembles it in spirit, has attracted no adverse criticism with the exception of Duffin's "exercise" remark. The reviewer for The Critic quoted it and "Summum Bonum" as the best examples of the "beautiful lyrics" to be found in the work,[43] and although it has seldom been noted by critics, the

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[43]"Browning's Last Book," The Critic, NS XII (December 21, 1889), 307.

comments made have consistently echoed this judgment and the pronouncement of Clarke that the poem is a "perfect little gem, in which the thought has Browning's characteristic nobleness."[44]

Paraphrase

Some men believe they are being most complimentary to the women they woo when they describe them as roses or swans or the moon. The poet, however, will use none of these overly familiar, stock phrases. To him it seems only the foolish could be blind enough not to realize that in her human beauty his beloved is far more lovely than any lesser works of nature could possibly be.

Interpretation

As directly as do any of the Asolando poems, "Poetics" illustrates the volume's major theme and the subtitle because in this lyric the real human qualities of his beloved make her of much greater value and attractiveness to him than would the qualities stressed in the fanciful, romantic, poetic terms employed by other men. Even though Browning himself had used the moon as a symbol for Elizabeth Barrett Browning ("yourself my moon of poets!" "One Word More," l. 188),[45]

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[44]Helen A. Clarke, "Review of Asolando," Poet-Lore, II (February, 1890), 95.

[45]Browning also used the moon to refer to his wife in the "Epilogue" to Ferishtah's Fancies and in Bartoli, ll. 279-86; in "Numphaleptos" and "In Three Days" he employed this term as a lover's description, though he was writing dramatically and not personally; in the same way, a woman is described as a swan in "The Worst of It."

he here insists that the moon's glory pales beside that of a woman. Fact is preferable to fancy. Browning always loved humanity with all the imperfections that are a necessary part of it, and this conviction became more pronounced in his later years, being set forth in the "Prologue" to Asolando and appearing again and again throughout the book. Romantic and unrealistic descriptions have become for him "vain words" (l. 4), and only the "foolish" (l. 1) utter them. All in all, the poem stands as a monument to Browning's devotion to humanity, for he closes with the line, "What is she? Her human self,--no lower word will serve." Of this last line the critic in Blackwoods said:

> This is the true last word of genuine poetry; the poet pauses in the midst of all the conceits, and breaks the fantastic procession, and throws away the garlands to recognize true life and love and nature, the modest truth which is above all. It is needful to the very grace of the old pageant that there should be someone standing by to humor and indulge the revellers, yet point the better way. Yet next page he [Browning] is rhyming again, asolando, about pearls and girls and blossoms and sunshine.[46]

Source

"Poetics" is one of the Asolando poems which most likely had no specific source. It may have been the result of some incident during Browning's later life, but there is no proof for this assumption. Parallels with the work of other writers have been drawn, but again there is no proof that Browning was influenced by them. For example,

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[46]"Browning and Tennyson," Blackwoods, CXLVII (January, 1890), 134.

"Poetics" was chosen by Mary W. Abbott to illustrate the similarities to be found in the works of Browning and George Meredith in the emphasis they both place on the superiority of natural beauty.[47] Readers may also think of Shakespeare's sonnet, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," because both poets are pointing out the fallacy of poetic conventions, but Shakespeare chose satirical words which carry the idea to the point of the ridiculous while Browning maintained a more serious tone.

Correlation with Other Poems

In Browning's own poetry it is easy to find poems which are similar to "Poetics." The early "Song," "Nay but you, who do not love her," which first appeared in the 1845 Dramatic Romances, presents the idea that pretty words are not sufficient to express the depth of the lover's admiration of his beloved's beauty. "Too Late" tells of a woman who unwisely deserted one who truly loved her for a poet who babbled foolish words of praise to her, and the lyric "Ask me not one least word of praise!" says love is best shown by actions rather than words which can never express praise adequately. In "A Pretty Woman" the poet compares a jeweller's artistic representation of a rose with an actual one and finds the seemingly valuable ornament of gold and jewels inferior to nature's production, and in the eighth section of "James Lee's Wife" the woman declares that she has learned life's

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[47]Mary Winchester Abbott, Browning and Meredith. Some Points of Similarity (Boston, 1904), p. 16.

lesson when she, in her search for a fitting model for drawing, turns from a plaster cast of a perfect hand to the real hand of a poor peasant girl. Then, finally, from the image of the optic glass in the "Prologue" to Browning's proclamation of the real nature of eternity in the "Epilogue," one can see the idea expressed throughout Asolando, often in a more complex form, but no where more tellingly than here.

Imagery and Diction

The entire structure of "Poetics" is built on similes and metaphors, and yet since they are the ones he is ridiculing, the poet employs them to show their inadequacy. In using these stock phrases, Browning has worked them into the overall pattern in such a way that the reader is convinced of the poet's ability to write conventional, musical verse when he wished. Assonance or alliteration occurs in most of the lines, and often phrases are repeated with just a slight rearrangement of the words to emphasize the idea: for example, "'So say the foolish!' Say the foolish so, Love?" (l. 1). In spite of the repetition the reader does not sense any monotony because of the poet's skillful use of subtle variations.

Form

"Poetics" is one of the few Asolando poems about which questions arose concerning the correctness of the text. In line four of the first edition the words were "Thou art thou" rather than "That art thou."[48]

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[48]C. B. Wright, "Was Browning Wrong?" Poet-Lore, III (February, 1891), 102-3.

Comparison with the manuscript shows that this was a printer's mistake, but it was one which was repeated in the Cambridge Edition of 1895. Helen Clarke lamented the continuance of the error by saying in her review of this new edition: "It is one of those misleading errors that furnished only too welcome grist to the mill of the obscurity hunters; . . ."[49] In future editions the proper form was substituted.

The rhyme scheme (abab) tends to separate the two four-line stanzas of "Poetics," but this break is effective since the poet is making a contrast between what the foolish say (first stanza) and what he says (second stanza). The lines are long (alternating hexameters and heptameters), but each has an internal break, and the short units flow in a smooth and lyrical fashion.[50]

"SUMMUM BONUM"

Criticism

Except for the always anthologized "Epilogue," "Summum Bonum" is undoubtedly the most widely known of the Asolando poems and a favorite of many people who generally insist that Browning is difficult and obscure. It has been singled out for special attention more often than have any of the other poems mentioned in this chapter, and almost always the praise has been high. For example, the reviewer in The

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[49]Helen A. Clarke, "Review of The Cambridge Browning," Poet-Lore, VIII (May, 1896), 271.

[50]Hatcher, p. 158.

Critic called it "exquisite" and commented on the graceful and smooth musical alliterations found in the first three lines.[51] The writer in the Athenaeum chose "Summum Bonum" as one of the best examples of Browning's "lovely sketches of women" with which the volume is richly endowed,[52] and William Lyon Phelps considered it the "most audacious poem of Browning's old age."[53] In an attempt to show that Browning could write poetry for sound as well as sense Clarke mentioned "the musical little lyric 'Summum Bonum,' in which the treatment of the thought, the rhythm, and alliteration are fascinating to the last degree, while the thought itself is quite commonplace."[54] Except for Duffin whose comment has been mentioned already, all have agreed that the poem is uncomplicated and delightful. Not only is it filled with a zest and vigor seldom found in the work of a man over seventy, but the wording has a smoothness and euphony not always present in Browning's poetry. Here there are no peculiar twists and turns of diction, no troublesome punctuation, no unfamiliar words. Browning's characteristic condensation is present, but in this case the result is beautiful and quotable; certainly one of the loveliest lines in the whole of Browning's poetry is "In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine of the sea: . . ." (l. 3).

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[51]"Browning's Last Book," p. 307.

[52]"Review of Asolando," Athenaeum, January 18, 1890, p. 78.

[53]Phelps, p. 166.

[54]Clarke, "Review of Asolando," p. 95.

Paraphrase

The presentation of the idea that there may be a concentration of all values in a single perfect item is first made by means of examples drawn from the physical world:

> All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag
> of one bee;
> All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the
> heart of one gem;
> In the core of one pearl all the shade and the
> shine of the sea. (ll. 1-3)

It is characteristic of Browning that after he has illustrated his idea in the realms of purely physical phenomena, he turns to trust and truth, the finest traits, possibly, of human beings. Also, it is typical of Browning to consider these human qualities as being of far greater worth than any value found in material objects, even such wonders as the bloom of spring, the sparkle of a precious jewel, or the purity of a pearl. As a culmination, the poet comes to the theme of the perfect moment, for all that is highest and best is for him caught up and captured in one glorious moment of exultation--in the kiss of a girl. This is an excellent example, as Harrington has pointed out, of Browning's skillful use of climax.[55]

Interpretation

The question of what constitutes the greatest possible good in the world is one which has been posed since classical times and has been answered in various ways. As Phelps commented, "Omar Khayyam

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[55]Vernon C. Harrington, Browning Studies (Boston, 1925), p. 109.

said it was Wine: John Stuart Mill said it was the greatest happiness of the greatest number: the Westminster Catechism said it was to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Browning says it is the kiss of one girl."[56] For Browning this kiss contained the essence of all experience because to him love, the motivating force of the entire universe, was the central point of his philosophy. Phelps continued by saying love probably meant more to Browning than it did to any other poet. Love, whether manifested in the Incarnation or in the relationship between two obscure and humble lovers, was the supreme fact of the universe. Whenever possible Browning presented the abstract in terms of the concrete; thus the speaker in this "great and daring lyric" found a kiss life's highest good.[57]

In drawing his examples from the physical world, it is fitting that Browning included the pearl, which had often served him as a symbol of perfection. In Paracelsus (I, 831) it is likened to the ultimate in truth and to the perfect life which Paracelsus expects to achieve, and in The Ring and the Book Pompilia, who in the poet's mind was probably nearer to perfection than was any other of his creations, is referred to as a pearl (IX, 1402). This use of one symbol of perfection to prepare the way for another is very effective.

Source

The real inspiration for "Summum Bonum" undoubtedly arose from Browning's own delighted reactions to the young and beautiful girls

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[56]Phelps, p. 166.

[57]Ibid.

he saw around him; that he was attracted by their charms is evident both from the tone of many of the love poems in Asolando and from a statement he made to Furnivall in 1888: in answering a question about the admiration given to him by the women and girls of England, he said, "And as to the girls, God bless them, one would like to throw one's arms round them and kiss them, if one dared."[58]

Nevertheless, in recording his own experience Browning may well have remembered similar expressions he had read--for example, very soon after the publication of Asolando a correspondent to the Academy pointed out similarities in wording and tone between "Summum Bonum" and Ben Jonson's "A Celebration of Charis: in Ten Lyric Pieces. --IV. Her Triumph."[59] A much more thorough study of Browning's indebtedness to Jonson was done in 1921 by Horatio F. Brown. Both writers noted that Jonson used the phrase "the bag of the Bee" (l. 30) and Browning "the bag of one bee" (l. 1) and that the rhythm and tone of the verses of the two show a marked resemblance. Brown summed up the matter by saying:

> It is difficult to deny the affinity between these two very characteristic passages; here is Ben, docking "the smaller parts o' speech," just as Browning does; the reminiscence reaches to the very phraseology--"the bag of the bee." I do not for a moment mean that Browning was deliberately echoing Jonson, but I do suggest that the affinity between

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[58]F. J. Furnivall, "Recollections of Robert Browning," Pall Mall Budget, December 19, 1889, p. 1626.

[59]J. Hoskyns-Abrahall, "Browning's 'Summum Bonum,'" Academy, December 21, 1889, p. 407.

> them is so great that, in reading the passage from Asolando, we inevitably catch the Jonsonian vibration in the air.[60]

Correlation with Other Poems

Browning often employed the kiss as a symbol of the culmination of the perfect moment: some of the most memorable instances are "The Flower's Name," "Meeting at Night," "Love Among the Ruins," "In a Gondola," and in Asolando, "Dubiety" and "Now." The spontaneous delight in love relates this poem to the lyrics surrounding it as does the emphasis on love's being the greatest reality or truth in human existence.

Imagery and Diction

Although very few figures of speech occur in "Summum Bonum," almost every line presents a vivid picture. These descriptions are intensified by the alliteration, and the effectiveness is further enhanced by the way phrases are picked up after their first appearance and woven into succeeding lines much in the method of a fugue. The imagery, which is drawn entirely from nature, is, with one exception, visual, and the descriptions are beautiful in themselves as well as being skillfully used to set forth the theme of the poem.

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[60]Horatio F. Brown, "A Case of Poetical Affiliation: Ben Jonson and Robert Browning," The Spectator, CXXVII (August 6, 1921), 165.

Form

The anapestic rhythm, which is often reinforced by the alliterative phrases,[61] gives the poem a "hurried and breathless" movement.[62] The movement is also speeded up by the lines' constantly diminishing in length: five of the lines are pentameter, two trimeter, and one, the last, dimeter.[63] There is enough rhyme in the single stanza (ababbcac) to give the poem unity without slowing down the rush to the climax.

"A PEARL, A GIRL"

Criticism

"A Pearl, a Girl" has not received so much critical attention as has "Summum Bonum" or "Poetics," but many critics have grouped it with these poems and given to them general praise;[64] this being so, most of the statements quoted for the preceding poems could be applied here also. According to the Athenaeum, "A Pearl, a Girl," like "Summum Bonum," is "rich in Browning's lovely sketches of women."[65] Kunz and Stevenson, who quote the poem in full in their study of pearls,

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[61]Hatcher, p. 163.

[62]Ibid., p. 159.

[63]The use of anapestic pentameter lines is somewhat unusual in Browning's work, "Saul" being his only poem written completely in anapestic pentameter.

[64]Herford, p. 232; Symons, p. 19.

[65]"Review of Asolando," Athenaeum, p. 78.

call it "exquisite,"[66] a favorite descriptive term of those who write about these love poems. Its lyric qualities attracted Sir G. Bentock, who set it to music in the 1920's.[67] And Brooke included it in his list of poems which could not have been written in the poet's old age. He felt that "the strong emotion of earthly love, of the senses as well as of the spirit, for one woman"[68] would clearly relate it to the poems written in Browning's youth, but that the subject matter indicated the period of "By the Fireside" when "one look, one word, opened the infinite world of love to Browning."[69]

Paraphrase

In "A Pearl, a Girl" Browning used the same technique employed in "Humility" and "Summum Bonum," that of presenting an example or examples from the physical world and then drawing parallels in the realm of love. In this instance he used a pearl, a favorite image for him, as has been noted in the discussion of "Summum Bonum,"[70] as the stone which appears ordinary, or perhaps even worthless, but which can by the uttering of the proper magical term give its possessor mastery

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[66]George Frederick Kunz and Charles Hugh Stevenson, The Book of the Pearl. The History, Art, Science and Industry of the Queen of Gems (New York, 1908), p. 303.

[67]Leslie Nathan Broughton, Clark Sutherland Northup, and Robert Pearsall, Robert Browning: A Bibliography, 1830-1950 (Ithaca, New York, 1953), p. 396.

[68]Brooke, p. 247

[69]Ibid.

[70]See above, p. 133.

over the universe. Just as the stone appears to be worthless to the uninitiated eye, so the girl he loves may seem very ordinary to most people--with a word, however, one can awaken such love in her that she, the speaker, and the whole world are transformed, and he becomes the lord of creation.

Interpretation

DeVane has suggested that the ring referred to in the first stanza may be the magic ring of Solomon which Browning had mentioned in "Abt Vogler" (ll. 1-8) and "Solomon and Balkis" (ll. 31-2).[71] Whether the poet intended such a specific reference or was merely remembering this popular device of Oriental storytellers, one of his most characteristic themes, appearance versus reality, is thus introduced into the poem and becomes one of its two governing ideas. The other major theme is the transforming power of love; actually here love seems to serve a twofold purpose--it sees within the beloved qualities hidden from others, and the power of love releases these qualities and gives to life a completely new glory.

Source

Like the other love poems, "A Pearl, a Girl" probably arose from Browning's own experience, either from his pleasure at the company of Edith Bronson and Fannie Browning or from a remembered incident. The magic pearl is easily recognized as a common type of folk tale,

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[71]DeVane, p. 530-1.

being akin to the Aladdin's Lamp plot. Although Kunz and Stevenson say the poet had a specific and well-known Oriental fable in mind,[72] they do not further identify it, and my efforts to locate it have been unsuccessful. It is possible that Browning had heard or read such a tale in his childhood, or he may have remembered stories of other magic objects and in his old age wrongly imagined that it was a pearl which had been thus used.

Correlation with Other Poems

The transforming power of love, which is such an important motif in "A Pearl, a Girl," had been presented in several Browning poems, including "The Statue and the Bust," "The Flower's Name," and "Cristina." Very similar themes are found in "Natural Magic," in which the poet shows the power of one personality over another, and in "Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli," in which the woman tells how love can give her power to do many things which she would have been too timid to attempt without it. Not only does love transform, but it enables the poet to see within the beloved qualities which were hidden to all other persons, an idea earlier set forth in "One Word More," in which the speaker declares that his moon-goddess has a side which may be seen by him alone, and even more strikingly in his favorite little poem "My Star." The belief that love is the world's strongest creative force, which is emphasized here, also appears in "One Word More," where, to

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[72]Kunz and Stevenson, p. 303.

DeVane's way of thinking, it receives "its most notable expression."[73]

The difference between the unpretentious appearance of both the pearl and the girl and the unlimited powers which they actually possess demonstrates clearly the relationship of "A Pearl, a Girl" to the other Asolando poems and to the subtitle. Among the other Browning poems which illustrate this theme, "Appearances" in Pacchiarotto seems particularly close, for there the poet also stresses the importance of internals rather than externals.

Imagery and Diction

The imagery in "A Pearl, a Girl" is slight. The ring appeals to the eye as does the suggestion of fire blazing forth from a gem or from ice (although the simile "as fire from ice" (l. 4) is certainly not original with Browning, it is used aptly). The second stanza also has a fire image, for the poet feels he is "wrapt in blaze" (l. 11), a figure appealing to both the sense of sight and the sense of touch. The lack of elaborate imagery or detailed descriptions keeps clear and vivid the pictures of the ring and the girl, and the simplicity gives an added charm to this presentation of the volume's theme.

Form

The parallel structure upon which "A Pearl, a Girl" is built is strengthened by the repetition of phrases, as well as the alliteration, assonance, and contrast between the authorities cited in the two stanzas.

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[73]DeVane, p. 531.

The contrast between stanzas is also intensified by the lack of carry-over rhymes. The relative brevity of the tetrameter lines and the speech-like quality of the meter, which is basically iambic but contains many variations, create an easy and musical effect.

"SPECULATIVE"

Criticism

"Speculative" has generally received the same type of praise given to "Dubiety" since the two resemble each other in tone more than they do the other lyrics surrounding them.[74] Symons thought "Speculative" "hauntingly" expressed instinctive and universal longings,[75] and DeVane spoke of the poignancy of its personal expression.[76] Both Symons[77] and Duffin[78] wrote of its intense feeling, which is responsible for the lyric beauty, especially in the second stanza.

Paraphrase

In "Speculative" the elderly poet muses on the desires which others have for new life in Heaven, and then, thinking back over his own life, realizes that he could and would ask nothing more than to be permitted to relive what he had already experienced--the painful parts as well as the pleasant. He sets forth effectively the various

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Symons, p. 19.

[76] DeVane, p. 531.

[77] Symons, p. 19.

[78] Duffin, p. 110.

changes which many expect to find in the new life--new minds with which to reinterpret life and to correct men's philosophies; a new form of Nature in which sunshine banishes all gloom; a new art free from all restrictions and materialism, which undoubtedly would have thrilled the speaker in "Pictor Ignotus" and Fra Lippo Lippi. Nevertheless, Browning does not want these new things, tempting as they seem. Perhaps he is afraid that in a life made new he would not meet the beloved of old as he had dreamed of doing years before in "Prospice"; the last line makes perfectly clear that the height of his desire is simply to "meet nor part again." Here his passion rises to its highest point in what Brooke called a "momentary fire of desire."[79] "Momentariness," he continued, "is the essence of the poem."[80]

Interpretation

Together with "Reverie" and the "Epilogue" to Asolando, "Speculative" forms a part of a long series of poems in which Browning meditated upon the afterlife and attempted to draw conclusions concerning its nature. In some of the earlier poems he pictured the life to come as one which would provide new opportunities: surely Andrea del Sarto, Pompilia and Caponsacchi, and the speaker in "Evelyn Hope" expect such to be the case. One quickly notices, however, that these persons do not expect these activities of Heaven to be different in

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[79]Brooke, p. 248.

[80]Ibid.

kind from those on earth.[81] For Browning, Heaven (and he did not and probably could not consider the afterlife except in terms of Heaven) did not carry with it the connotation of stagnant perfection--his poetry almost always suggests growth and development: the fighter will "Fight on, fare ever/ There as here!" ("Epilogue," ll. 19-20); however those struggles, while not differing in their nature, will not be the same as the ones experienced on earth. But in "Speculative" the poet wishes he could simply repeat what has gone before.

According to Harrington, "The poem focuses in one point of light several of the fundamental thoughts which we see so often in Browning's writing."[82] Duffin took the same view, saying that here one "feels the poet thinking, brooding, speaking out of the depths. He is alone with his soul, and two of his life-long beliefs emerge in these ten brief lines--that the after-life is a continuation of this life, and that death will mean reunion with Elizabeth."[83] The poem does not actually mention his wife, it is true, but the poet obviously expects reunion with someone, and Elizabeth would seem the most likely person. The main point which would seem to disprove this is the fact that he says he would be willing to assume the pain of the previous life, but this would not have to be pain in his relationship with the one whom he is addressing--it may simply be the pain from which no human life is

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[81]Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Browning's Heaven," Review of Religion, XIV (November, 1949), 32.

[82]Harrington, p. 109

[83]Duffin, p. 110.

completely free. The emphasis on love giving to man his highest pleasure is typical of Browning, and the major theme of facts versus fancies appears here too, for the reality of the old life and the simple hope of meeting again his beloved with the promise that there should be no more parting are the facts he desires; for him these have greater value than do the extreme possibilities, marvelous as some of them seem to be, which other men's fancies prompt them to envision and pray for.

Source

Although "Speculative" is not dated in the manuscript, its calm and reflective tone lead one to feel with DeVane that it was written during the last months of Browning's life, probably at Asolo.[84] Thus its source, like that of many of these late poems, comes from the poet's own thinking and experience.

Correlation with Other Poems

As has already been mentioned, "Speculative" may be considered with those poems in which Browning meditated upon the life after this. But the tone here is different--this is really more a poem of memory than a poem of prophesy. "Prospice" is closer to it in mood than are the other poems with this theme ("Evelyn Hope," "Cristina," "The Lost Leader," "Andrea del Sarto," "Reverie," and the "Epilogue" to Asolando), but the later poem is less intense than the earlier passionate outburst. There is also a similarity in wording with the last part of Easter-Day

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[84]DeVane, p. 531.

(ll. 722-8), but there the repetition of this life would be one of the punishments of Hell. The emphasis on the power of live and the superiority of facts over fancies show that in spite of a difference in mood, "Speculative" is closely related to the other poems in this chapter.

Imagery and Diction

While it is not so prominent as in "Summum Bonum" and "A Pearl, a Girl," some alliteration is found in "Speculative"; it is almost the only poetic device used in the poem. Enmesh is a suggestive word, though not an unusual one. There is not much imagery, but the figure of the leaven (l. 3) helps make vivid the description of the next life and introduces a scriptural note, which is appropriate in view of the subject matter. Light clearing the gloom (l. 4) and Art which is no longer confined but may soar freely, also help paint the picture of the glories of the afterlife as they are usually imagined.

Form

"Speculative" is not one of Browning's difficult poems, although the use of the dash is somewhat confusing. Harrington felt different punctuation might make some of the lines easier for the reader, but he admitted that one could not miss their meaning as they stand.[85]

Iambic tetrameter came to be a favorite form for the elderly poet, and it appears in "Speculative" as it does in many of the other love lyrics in Asolando. As it does for the others, the rhythm adds a

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[85]Harrington, p. 109.

musical tone to the subject matter in "Speculative," but here the total effect is dreamlike rather than lilting. The rhyme scheme (ababb) serves to unify the lines within the stanzas and to create a break between the stanzas. This is effective since the poet is contrasting, as he did in "Humility" and "A Pearl, a Girl," the position taken by others and the one assumed by himself.

"WHITE WITCHCRAFT"

Criticism

"White Witchcraft" has been almost universally neglected by the critics. This may be due to the legendary lore and the unfamiliar allusions which it contains, though students generally have been attracted to poems which offer the opportunity for explanation or annotation. In spite of the critical neglect, the poem is not without a kind of charm.

Paraphrase

"White Witchcraft" is a more playful poem than those which precede it, but it ends on a note similar to theirs and to that of "Bad Dreams I," which immediately follows it: here again the poet proclaims the eternal nature of true love, for in this poem man's love is able to survive humiliation. In a moment of fancy the speaker has posed the question of what animal each should be if by magic such transformations could take place. He decides upon a fox for the girl because of her shyness and then discovers that she would make him a loathsome toad.

This fate he accepts without murmur (how typical of Browning's lovers); in affectionate teasing he calls his beloved Canidia, the name of Horace's sorceress, and suggests that when she has gotton over her first repulsion to his loathsomeness, she may discover something gratifying, for whether or not the legendary pearl, a symbol of beauty and material value, is hidden in his forehead, love for her still shines in his eyes. What greater proof of his devotion could she desire.

Interpretation

The theme of this poem is very similar to that in "Bad Dreams I" because it shows that love can overcome all types of setbacks, including cruel and unfair treatment. The love which can survive being turned into something ugly just to please a whim of the beloved is one of the deep realities of life and stands in sharp contrast to the shallow emotion which depends on appearances. Obviously, in this poem, fact is far superior to fancy.

Source

The inspiration for "White Witchcraft" was probably the delight in the young and beautiful girls whom he saw and his neverfailing conviction in the power of love, but the poet very skillfully used source material in presenting his theme. For example, he turned to white or good magic, which is in keeping with the subject of love and with the fancifulness of the tone. While most people think only of black or evil magic, Browning was thoroughly enough versed in medieval lore to be well aware of both kinds. With his background of knowledge he

probably would have accepted C. Grant Loomis' definition of magic:

> Magic is a practice which seeks to turn events or to control nature in an unnatural and unexpected fashion. Magic suggests aid from sources lying in the unseen and the unknown. . . . Magic is an impartial power which looks two ways. Magic is neither good nor evil in itself, for of itself it has no will.[86]

The belief in white or good magic, Loomis goes on to say, has been very prevalent in Christianity, being well established by the end of the sixth century, with most of the source material deriving from biographies of the saints of the first fifteen centuries of the Christian faith.[87]

The use of animals shows Browning's lifelong love of such creatures. In her biography Mrs. Orr mentioned a toad that lived in his family's garden at Hatcham: "He [Browning] visited it daily, where it burrowed under a white rose tree, announcing himself by a pinch of gravel dropped into its hole; and the creature would crawl forth, allow its head to be gently tickled, and reward the act with that loving glance of the soft full eyes that Mr. Browning has recalled in one of the poems of Asolando."[88] Then, as Elisabeth Luther Cary has pointed out, from Pauline and Paracelsus on through his entire body of work the poet gave such careful and minute descriptions of various animals that

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[86]C. Grant Loomis, White Magic. An Introduction to the Folklore of Christian Legend (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1948), p. 3.

[87]Ibid., p. 7.

[88]Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning. New Edition. Revised and in Part Rewritten by Frederic G. Kenyon (New York, 1908), p. 74.

one cannot doubt his acquaintance with those usually ignored; she went on to say that one could easily show

> his native and abiding love for delving into the lives commonly considered beneath a poet's notice. The unappreciated, the unbeloved, the unpopular, never ceased to appeal to him whether he found it in the human soul or in the unpleasant coat of a caterpillar. Other poets might write of larks and nightingales and he also would write of them, but not to the exclusion of snails and lob-worms. His point of view seems consistently to have been what is worthy of creation is worthy of our interest.[89]

Mrs. Orr further suggested that Browning was inspired to write this poem after a friend had written in 1888 about the large number of toads to be found in the Channel Islands. More likely he was moved to write by a young fox kept by his innkeeper in the Dolomite Alps. Browning found it "the most engaging of little vixens" and rejoiced when it escaped.[90] It could not have been better immortalized than by his description, "Shy wild sweet stealer of the grapes" (l. 3). Chesterton also mentioned the fox and noted that in his old age Browning fell "back on very ultimate simplicities, chiefly a mere staring at nature."[91]

Browning used more allusions in "White Witchcraft" than he did in the other love poems. The phrase "play Jove" (l. 2) would undoubtedly make most readers recall the various animal forms assumed by Jove during his many amorous exploits, and the memorable and euphonious description

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[89]Elisabeth Luther Cary, "Browning and the Animal Kingdom," The Critic, XLIII (August, 1903), 165.

[90]Orr, p. 383.

[91]G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning (London, 1936), p. 130-1.

of the fox would probably bring to mind Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes or the verse of Scripture: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes" (Song of Solomon 2:15). The superstitious belief that a toad carried a precious and magical jewel in his head was a widespread one which Browning could have learned from many sources and most probably did know from As You Like It:

> Sweet are the uses of adversitie
> Which like the toad, ugly and venimous,
> Weares yet a precious Jewell in his head: . . .
> (II, i, 14-6)

Pliny in his Natural History ascribed supernatural powers to the bone in a toad's head but did not mention a jewel. Sixteenth-century writers were more specific and often gave descriptions such as this one in Edward Fenton's Secrete Wonders of Nature, 1569: "'That there is founde in the heades of old and great toades, a stone which they call Borax or Stelon: it is most commonly found in the head of a hee toad, of power to repulse poysons, and that it is a most sovereign medicine for the stone.'"[92] The allusions to Canidia find their source in Epodes V and XVII of Horace. In the Fifth Epode Canidia is described as a sorceress, a very horrible sight with her snaky locks,[93] uncut

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[92]Horace Howard Furness, Ed., A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare (Philadelphia, 1892), VIII, 66. Among hundreds of other such references in Renaissance works attention might be called to several of a literary nature: Beaumont and Fletcher's Monsieur Thomas (III, i, 292); Jonson's Volpone (II, iii, 12); and Lyly's Euphues.

[93]Horace, The Odes and Epodes, trans. from the Latin by C. E. Bennett (London, 1952), p. 375.

nails, and "malignant tooth."[94] In attempting to work a transformation on a young boy,[95] she mixes a witch's brew of "eggs and feathers of a night-roving screech-owl smeared with the blood of a hideous toad."[96] In the Seventeenth Epode is recounted one of Canidia's successful transformations in which a man is made both old and hideous.[97]

Correlation with Other Poems

Since "White Witchcraft" stresses the contrast between appearance and reality, it bears a resemblance to all the Asolando poems, but it is most closely related to those which emphasize that true love can overcome all the obstacles which a fanciful mind would think would destroy it: low position in society in "Which?" rejection in "Bad Dreams I," suspicions in "Bad Dreams II," scorn in "Bad Dreams IV," death in "Speculation" and "Dubiety." Also the conviction that loving is more important than being loved is presented as in "Evelyn Hope," "The Lost Mistress," "The Last Ride Together," and "Cristina."

Imagery and Diction

Browning did not use elaborate figures of speech in "White Witchcraft," but he did build up clear pictures of the two animals. The effectiveness and beauty of the description of the fox have already been noted, and in the case of the toad, he made his picture more powerful by substituting for a depiction of the toad's appearance a

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[94] Ibid., p. 377.

[95] Ibid., p. 375, 377, 379.

[96] Ibid., p. 375.

[97] Ibid., p. 409, 411.

description of people's reactions to him: "So, all men shrink and shun me!" (l. 5). In addition to these two images, the poet skillfully used several short phrases to set the tone: for example, "play Jove" (l. 2) gives a somewhat facetious air to the entire poem; the repetition of the word loathsome (ll. 4 and 7) gives emphasis to the contrast between the beauty of the fox and the ugliness of the toad; and the line "There may or may not lurk a pearl beneath his puckered brow: . . ." (l. 8) not only gives the only concrete detail about the toad's appearance, but the word lurk adds an almost sinister note to the description even though there is within the phrase the suggestion of hidden beauty and value.

Form

Although "White Witchcraft" is written in iambic heptameter tercets, the lines have internal breaks, and the effect is one of alternating tetrameters and trimeters, or ballad measure.[98] The ballad-like rhythm is appropriate, for the narration here is more important than it often is in the love poems. The absence of detailed description and lack of background for the incident also make the ballad form a fitting one.

"BAD DREAMS"

The group of poems entitled "Bad Dreams I-IV" should be considered together even though the four differ in form and may not have

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[98]Hatcher, p. 112-3.

been written at the same time: Mrs. Orr believed two or three were composed in London during the winter of 1888 and then the group completed sometime later;[99] this cannot be proved, however, for there are no internal indications of time of composition, and the poems are not dated in the manuscript. Two different approaches may be taken to the group as a whole: the four poems may be considered as a unit representing the crisis which develops in the relationship between a man and his wife, or they may be regarded as four completely separate poems grouped together simply because they tell of bad dreams. The first view has been more frequently held by commentators. For example, DeVane thought the poems similar in technique to "James Lee's Wife," except for the fact that both sides are presented here. This two-sided development also sets "Bad Dreams" apart from "A Lover's Quarrel." The closest parallels are with Meredith's Modern Love, for that sequence also develops the conflict arising between a couple, but Meredith gives the subject a much fuller treatment.[100] Although DeVane's views are the more generally accepted ones, they make it necessary to read interpretations into some of the poems, especially the third. Therefore it seems quite possible that Browning was following the same pattern he had used in Dramatic Lyrics when he had grouped "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola" under the title "Madhouse Cells."[101]

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[99] Orr, p. 379.

[100] DeVane, p. 532. See also Berdoe, Browning Cyclopaedia, p. 53-4 and Porter and Clarke, "Introduction," p. xxiv.

[101] See also "Nationality in Drinks" and "Garden Fancies."

Although it is only vaguely intimated in a statement by Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore to the effect that no one could understand "Bad Dreams" so well as she,[102] these poems, like some of the other Asolando love lyrics, may have arisen from Browning's own emotional experiences in his later years. Perhaps he was referring to the summer of 1884 when he and his sister visited Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore at St. Moritz.[103] As has already been noted, the abrupt and unfortunate (from her point of view, at least) return of the hostess to America may have called forth "Now." If the poet did refer to this holiday, one can guess that it was not a completely happy one for him.

Most critics have considered only one or two of the four poems, and therefore very little has been said about the series as a whole. Helen Clarke did remark about the striking and original qualities of the brilliant light which the poems cast on the lives of the dreamers[104] and after venturing some interpretations of the third one, which seemed to her the most troublesome, cautioned against reading too much into the works, which probably should be regarded as "mere fancies."[105] The commentator in Blackwoods was somewhat more enthusiastic when he said the group was "a series of weird imaginations in which the torture of an uncanny vision and the confusion it brings, are powerfully set forth."[106]

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[102]Miller, p. 268. [103]Griffin and Minchin, p. 267.

[104]Clarke, "Review of Asolando," p. 96-7.

[105]Ibid., p. 97.

[106]"Browning and Tennyson," p. 134.

"BAD DREAMS I"

Criticism

If the poems as a unit have not been frequently noticed, the same cannot be said for the first of the series. Phelps thought it the best of the four,[107] and the reviewer in The Critic used it as an example of the merits of the volume and attributed to it a "definite charm."[108] The highest praise came from the critic in the Athenaeum, who declared:

> And if this book shows any abatement of Browning's best qualities we fail to perceive it. At no period of his life did he write a lyric more full than . . . "Bad Dreams I" of the power of rendering passion by suggestion, which is one of the special characteristics of his method: . . . For concision as well as for suppressed emotion this is as good as anything by Heine, though, of course, in Heine the form would have been faultless. It is in brief snatches like this that Browning is always at his best. No poet that ever lived surpassed him in producing such dramatic flashes as "Meeting at Night" and "Parting at Morning."[109]

Paraphrase

If the poems are thought of as a unit, the speaker in the first one is probably the woman, although this guess is hazarded simply because assuming this would give balance to the grouping and not because there is any internal evidence to prove it; indeed, the phrase, "your charm of face" (l. 2), might seem to indicate the opposite. In

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[107] Phelps, p. 166.

[108] "Browning's Last Book," p. 307.

[109] "Review of Asolando," Athenaeum, p. 77.

any case, it is not necessary to identify without question the speaker in order to understand the poem. With the greatest simplicity the speaker tells of a dream. As he slept, he thought he saw the face of his beloved, which no longer shone with its accustomed brightness and trust. Fearfully he asked if all traces of their former affectionate relationship were destroyed. On being told that they were, he awakened and discovered that he felt a twofold relief--the first was the natural one of waking, but the second was his unexpected realization that he still loved, that his feelings were not changed by the revelation.

Interpretation

Browning believed that love is the greatest force in the world and that there is little, if anything, which can destroy genuine love. In his review Symons noted the poet's repeated emphasis in Asolando on the enduring qualities of love.[110] Added to this belief in the unchanging nature of love is the poet's conviction that if one has love for another, he is blessed, even if his love is not returned.

Source

Unless the poem is a result of Browning's relationship with Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore, there is no specific source known. It could have been suggested by an incident in his life, or he may have simply wished to present a favorite idea in still another setting.

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[110]Symons, p. 19.

Correlation with Other Poems

Asolando has several examples of love's overcoming obstacles: "Speculative" and "Dubiety" show it enduring after separation and death; "Humility" presents it as being willing to share the beloved with a more favored rival; "White Witchcraft" illustrates that it is stronger than ridicule and humiliation; and "Bad Dreams I" adds heartbreak to the list.

Browning often stated his conviction that loving is more important than being loved: "Evelyn Hope," "Cristina," "The Lost Mistress," and "White Witchcraft" are only a few examples, but there is no work in which he made this point more clearly and tellingly than he did here.

Imagery and Diction

"Bad Dreams I" differs from the others in that it lacks the distortions which are characteristic of a dream and especially of that nightmarish atmosphere which pervades the second and third. Instead, the first one is written in clear, simple language, with no imagery and almost no description, except from the suggestive phrase "your charm of face" (l. 2). This simplicity and the brevity combine effectively to give the theme a forceful presentation.

Form

Like the language, the form of "Bad Dreams I" is simple and clear. The iambic tetrameter lines are regular and musical and the rhyme scheme (abab) pleasant without becoming noticeable enough to detract from the straightforward movement of the content.

"BAD DREAMS II"

Criticism

"Bad Dreams II" has never received the enthusiastic praise given to I. Helen Clarke spoke of the "enticing weirdness" of both II and IV and saw in II the "same sort of sulphurous glow as 'Childe Roland.'"[111] On the other hand, the writer in The Critic chose it to show the failings of Asolando, stating that the last stanza especially was "difficult."[112]

Paraphrase

This poem, which unquestionably describes a man's dream, begins with the speaker's amazement at finding the woman unchanged beside him. In his dream, which he then relates to her, with absolute disregard of her protests of astonishment, he wandered into a vast hall whose size indicates a dreamlike exaggeration. Also different from everyday life was the fact that the guests at this ball hated each other ("Man's sneer met woman's curse" --l. 20) and the dancing, which they were obviously being forced to do. As the gloom grew deeper and deeper, the dreamer attempted to leave the room and found himself in what appeared to be a chapel, though the dreamer could not recognize the symbols used in the decorations nor the vestments of the priest--unless he represented, as the dreamer strongly suspected, a giaour, a Turkish

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[111]Clarke, "Review of Asolando," p. 96.

[112]"Browning's Last Book," p. 308.

term of scorn used for the non-Moslem or unbeliever, which by extended meaning could be applied to a worshipper of the Devil. As if all this were not horrible enough, the dreamer suddenly saw the woman to whom he is speaking, and who is probably his wife, come and kneel before the priest. Here there could be a connection with the previous poem because even though the man's waking mind is filled with suspicions about the faithfulness of his wife and with the conviction that she has lost the love and respect which she once had for him, he is still strong enough in his love for her to refuse to repeat what happened after she came before the priest. Having outlined the events which took place in his dream, he admits that this was only a dream, but as though he were a true Freudian psychologist, he explains why the subconscious is a more dependable guide than the conscious. The poem ends dramatically when the wife tries to allay his suspicions by telling of a ridiculous dream she has just had, thus proving that no faith is to be placed in dreams. She says she dreamed of taking a literature examination and of doing beautifully until she was asked to identify an epigram and she gave a nonsensical answer--Hannah More.

Interpretation

If the "Bad Dreams" poems are a unity, this second poem would suggest that the man in the first poem may have had justifiable reasons for losing his trust in his wife. If, on the other hand, the poems are not part of a connected group, this may be considered as a depiction of the terrible suspicion about his wife's fidelity which a dream is able

to arouse. Yet with all the doubts which his reason cannot argue away, his love still continues: he will not put into words the horrible deeds he saw her performing in his dream.

"Bad Dreams II" is a typical Asolando poem in that it is related to the appearance-versus-reality theme. The man is frightfully aware that he must separate fact from fancy, but he does not know which is which. Ordinarily one associates dreams with fancies, but the speaker suspects his subconscious may have revealed to him what his conscious mind would not accept. The inability of the speaker to distinguish between appearance and reality adds to the frustrating horror of the poem.

The woman makes a valiant attempt to prove that his suspicions are groundless by showing that dreams are not to be trusted. This she attempts to do by a reference to her own completely inconsequential dream. Although the biographers of Hannah More (1745-1833) point out that she was a writer of drama, light verse, a novel (Coelebs in Search of a Wife), and works on theology,[113] it is more probable that Browning remembered her for her religious tracts and hymns. Two examples should serve to prove why the mention of Hannah More would bring a serious examination to a ridiculous conclusion. In an attempt to refute the dangerous doctrine of Voltaire's Candide,[114] she included

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[113]Mary Alden Hopkins, Hannah More and Her Circle (New York, 1947), p. vii.

[114]Hannah More, The Works of Hannah More (London, 1836), I, 147.

in her Stories for Persons of the Middle Ranks a story called "'Tis All for the Best." The heroine, Mrs. Simpson, has been reduced from a genteel state to living in an almshouse, yet she can accept with cheerfulness all her misfortunes as being God's will. This attitude she discusses at great length with Mrs. Betty, an ex-lady's maid who resents misfortune. In attempting to make her point, Mrs. Simpson declares that a broken leg suffered by her husband was a blessing because it turned his thoughts to God and that his death was not to be regretted because during his life her thoughts had been on him rather than upon God. Mrs. Betty is finally convinced when this determined optimist continues to preach this doctrine as her own death overtakes her.[115] In a less pretentious volume entitled Tales for the Common People "Tawny Rachel; or the Fortune-Teller with some Account of Dreams, Omens, and Conjurers" tells how silly, superstitious people are cheated and warns the readers to put their trust in God rather than in men.[116] Even the epigrammatic statements in "Moriana"[117] have an ultra-pious, didactic tone which does not fit into the framework of Browning's poems. Browning's contemporaries no doubt immediately sensed the ridiculous implication which he intended.

Source

Like "Bad Dreams I," this poem could be an outgrowth of Browning's relationship with Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore, or it could have had

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[115] Ibid., p. 147-165.

[116] Ibid., II, 208-220.

[117] Ibid., VI, 361-400.

no source other than the poet's neverfailing interest in the workings of the human mind.

Correlation with Other Poems

Although the contrast between facts and fancies relates "Bad Dreams II" to the other Asolando poems, there are few other parallels to be found in Browning's poetry. The weirdness of the scene is very like the grotesqueness of "Childe Roland," as Helen Clarke pointed out in her review,[118] and in "The Lovers' Quarrel" a hasty word estranges a pair while here the poet suggests that the dream will bring about the same result.

Imagery and Diction

The style of "Bad Dreams II" is diametrically opposed to that of the first one of the series. This one has elements of horror and grotesqueness as well as the exaggeration which is typical of nightmares. The descriptions of the "livid Maze" (l. 32), the chapel, the unidentifiable priest, and the throng who dance from the kind of compulsion rather than from any sense of pleasure bring to mind some points of similarity with Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" and Tennyson's "The Vision of Sin." In order to build up the atmosphere for this dream Browning not only chose his words with great care, but he used appropriate comparisons. The dancers are an army of haters, or galley slaves being forced to exercise in order to work the stiffness out of

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[118]Clarke, "Review of Asolando," p. 96.

their limbs; the second figure introduces and reenforces the feeling that their recreation, like their labor, is a despised chore from which they cannot escape. Having presented the nightmare with all its intense horror, Browning forcefully shows its effect on the dreamer by saying that although he cannot prove the revelations of the dream to be true, to his mind her whiteness has become tinged by doubt and suspicion, a phrase similar to the milk figure in "Dubiety."

Form

The trimeter lines, almost all end-stopped and many having internal breaks, tend to convey the agitated mood of the speaker, who is impatiently fumbling to describe what he has seen and to express his fears without actually accusing his listener. The speech-like rhythm, a combination of iambic and anapestics, and the frequent rhyme (ababb) intensify this impression, which is quite in keeping with the subject matter, for the confused distress of the speaker and the horribleness of the setting would make a calm, peaceful rhythm most unsuitable.

"BAD DREAMS III"

Criticism

The third of the "Bad Dreams" series has received little notice from critics and students, which is unfortunate because in some ways it is one of the most interesting, particularly in the contrast it builds up between Nature and Art, or Nature and Civilization.

Paraphrase

The dreamer first views a prehistoric forest inhabited only by some extinct type of brute creature. Like the great hall of the second dream, the vastness of this forest, which symbolizes Nature, shows the exaggeration of dreams. The dreamer's soul is filled with trembling at the thought of exploring the "space/ Immeasurable" (ll. 4-5). Next in his vision he sees a perfect city symbolizing the perfection of Art or Civilization. The city, interestingly, is without life. Possibly it is because he is fearful of destroying the perfection that the dreamer warns his soul against staying and letting life begin in the city; on the other hand, he may be afraid that any life which began would be destroyed. Although the first two contrasting scenes are exaggerated and unrealistic, the dreamer does not feel horror until the third scene, in which the forest and the city have come together and are in the process of destroying each other. The scene is described so powerfully that the reader can momentarily agree, to some extent, with the speaker who finds the mixture accursed.

Interpretation

"Bad Dreams III" can be interpreted in two ways. If it is considered to be related to the other poems in the group, then the clue to the meaning would seem to lie in the different ways by which the man and the woman approach love. The speaker feels he acts in a way which is as free and open as are the processes of Nature and fears the woman uses contrived means, represented by the artificialities of Art. From

the previous poem it is apparent that the man feels the woman is bringing pretense into their relationship, and this dream only heightens his suspicions. He does not claim that his approach to life and love is superior to hers--he simply states that the two approaches cannot both be present in the same relationship if it is to be a happy one.

If, on the other hand, the poem is taken by itself, it has nothing whatsoever to do with love and merely portrays a nightmare in which the dreamer views the hellish outcome of a struggle between nature and the works of civilization. Unless constant precautions are taken, nature will destroy the works of man. This would seem to suggest that of these two forces nature is the more powerful. Men, in their conceit, might judge the opposite to be true, but this is only their mistaken fancy. Thus Browning presents still another discussion of the distinction between appearance and reality.

The fact that the city, the symbol of perfection, is without life is perhaps intended to express again Browning's belief that life cannot exist once a state of perfection is reached. Nature may well be the more powerful force because it has not reached a state of perfection.

Source

Unless "Bad Dreams III" was a result of Browning's relationship with Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore, it has no known source. Of course, on his many visits to Italy the poet frequently saw ruins of some of the most magnificent structures ever built by man, and the condition of these

buildings after nature had been at work could have been his inspiration.

Correlation with Other Poems

As students of Browning read "Bad Dreams III," they will be reminded of the destruction of the temples described in Fifine at the Fair (Section CX) and the conflict between Nature and Art found in Easter-Day (Section XXV). Less exact but still important is the similarity to the other Asolando pieces resulting from the appearance-versus-reality theme. More precise is the resemblance to the other "Bad Dreams" poems, especially the second, caused by the nightmarish atmosphere, which is also a little like that of "Childe Roland."

Imagery and Diction

In "Bad Dreams III" Browning used some very effective descriptive phrases: the "tangled twine" of the gigantic trees (l. 10); "Proud solitary traverser" for the soul (l. 21); and the oaks each of which "Held on his horns some spoil he broke/ By surreptitiously beneath/ Upthrusting" (ll. 29-31). There are few figures of speech, but each of the three scenes is vividly drawn and stands in clear contrast to the others. Since the entire point of the poem lies in these contrasts, the detailed descriptions are responsible for its success.

Form

The form, like the imagery, is used to point up the three scenes described and to set them in contrast to each other. The stanza division itself does much of this of course, but the lack of carry-over

rhymes also helps. The tetrameter lines are relatively brief, but so few are end-stopped that the reader has the impression of each stanza's standing as a unified and single thought unit; the smoothness and rapidity of the iambic meter likewise add to the effect of totality which each stanza gives.

"BAD DREAMS IV"

Criticism

"Bad Dreams IV," like III, has not generally been discussed by the critics, but Helen Clarke grouped it with II as having an "enticing weirdness,"[119] and Symons commented "how fine, how impressive, in its dream-distorted picture of a man's remorse for the love he has despised or neglected till death, coming in, makes love and repentance alike too late."[120]

Paraphrase

The speaker imagines that she is lying in her grave, a setting reminiscent of some of Emily Dickinson's poems, and that time and the weather are gradually obscuring the words on her tombstone. When her lover comes to view her grave, she remembers not a relationship filled with joy and pleasure, but one involving a constant struggle to reach the standard of perfection he desired. Because of her past experiences,

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[119]Clarke, "Review of Asolando," p. 96.

[120]Symons, p. 19.

the woman expects that he comes still in a fault-finding mood. But no, he is weeping, wanting her back just as she was, including all of her imperfections; perhaps he, like Browning himself and Hawthorne, has come to realize that the perfect cannot long survive in this world. Using the imagery of a tournament, he begs her to place her foot upon his head, thus becoming the ruling, dominant one. This change in his attitude completely mystifies her until she glances at the date on the stone and discovers that he is remembering it was his scorn which killed her.

Interpretation

The last "Bad Dreams" poem belongs to a woman, and if the four poems are considered as a unit, it gives a prophecy of the possible outcome of the struggle between the couple. Some, however, do not want to assume this too quickly; the notes in the Porter and Clarke edition say: "The reader is likely to be glad to remember that this is a shrewd dream, and to hope that by means of it some happier fate befell this pair than their companions of Meredith's 'Modern Love.'"[121] One may speculate about the relationship of the man's scorn to the doubts and suspicions aroused by his two dreams, but it must be remembered that each poem is merely a dream, even though taken together they may reveal the tension and emotional strife between the two.

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[121]Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, Eds., The Complete Works of Robert Browning. From the Author's Revised Text (New York, 1898), XII, 366.

Whether the poem is part of a series or simply a nightmare, it is clear that the man had been unrealistic in the demands he had placed upon his wife and had therefore lost her. If he had realized that the idea of attaining or obtaining perfection in this life is a fanciful illusion, he might have been able to keep reality, which in this case was a wife who loved him devotedly in spite of the burdens placed upon her by her constant and unsuccessful struggle to please him.

Source

There seems to be no specific source for the last of the "Bad Dreams" poems. Browning could have written it to round out the series, or it may have been suggested to him by his meditation on the facts-versus-fancies theme.

Correlation with Other Poems

"Bad Dreams IV" resembles other Browning poems both in its subject matter and its technique. The setting is like that in "Earth's Immortalities" and "St. Martin's Summer," for there too appear graves which are being ruined by the passage of time. The restrained intensity with which the speaker relates the details of her attempt to please the man and the quiet resignation with which she accepts her failure remind the reader of the final picture of James Lee's Wife, which is shown in "On Deck." Finally the surprise ending as well as the subject matter is reminiscent of "A Forgiveness" and "My Last Duchess." With regard to the theme, the revelation that a woman, even with her imperfections, is far better than the unobtainable and fanciful

ideal relates "Bad Dreams IV" to "Poetics." Indeed, the emphasis on the superiority of reality makes this poem a fitting one for inclusion under the subtitle Fancies and Facts.

Imagery and Diction

"Bad Dreams IV" is built around a number of effective images. The description of the overgrown grave sets the scene and the tone for the entire poem. The picture of the lover prying into the speaker with his "critic eyes" (l. 20) regardless of her extreme efforts to please him makes his weeping a powerful turn because of its unexpectedness. Then his wish to make her the ruler, to let her show her power by placing her foot on his head--the traditional symbol of victory in the medieval tournament--impresses the reader with the completeness of his change of heart. To make clear the reason for this change, the original grave scene is repeated, preparing the way for the final surprising twist of the plot. These images contribute to the vividness of the poem, as does the colloquial tone: the description of prying eyes and the lover's comment that he would not care "a feather-fluff" (l. 32) if he could have her back emphasize the contrast in his moods, but the most effective use is at the very end--the jolt of the word blab adds intensity to the surprise ending.

Form

The iambic tetrameter lines are divided into five-line stanzas rhyming ababb, the same pattern used in II, but here the length of line is increased by one foot, the slower effect fitting in well with

the graveyard scene. The run-on lines give an impression of normal speech, which is quite appropriate when used in combination with the colloquial language.

"INAPPREHENSIVENESS"

Criticism

Although it is more a narrative than a lyric, "Inapprehensiveness" is definitely one of the Asolando love poems. Perhaps because its content is more personal and its application less universal, little has been written about it. Symons, however, thought it was one of the volume's best poems[122] and said it

> condenses a whole tragedy into its thirty-two lines, in the succinct, suggestive manner of such poems as My Last Duchess. Only Heine, Browning, and George Meredith in Modern Love, each in his entirely different way, have succeeded in dealing, in a tone of what I may call sympathetic irony, with the unheroic complications of modern life; so full of poetic matter really, but of matter so difficult to handle. The poem is a mere incident, such as happens every day: we are permitted to overhear a scrap of trivial conversation, but this triviality does but deepen the effect of what we surmise, a dark obstruction, underneath the "babbling runnel" of light talk.[123]

Paraphrase

As a couple stand side by side looking at the turret of Queen Catherine's castle in Asolo, the woman begins to discuss whether or not she can see movement of the plant life which has taken root in the

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[122] Symons, p. 19.

[123] Ibid.

ruined walls,[124] wishes she had field glasses so that she could determine whether or not her imagination is tricking her, and tries to remember what writer, possibly Ruskin, had noted such a phenomenon. As she carries on her monologue, the man stops following her train of thought and begins to ponder his feelings for her. In spite of his age there lies within him a dormant passion, a feeling of love which would spring forth, which in "a rush of life would startling wreak/ Revenge on your inapprehensive stare" (ll. 24-5) if she would give the slightest indication that his advances would be welcome. But, probably preferring to keep their relationship on the basis of friendship alone, she will not do so and continues to ignore his longing as she sends "Look onward after look from eyes distent/ With longing to reach Heaven's gate left ajar--" (ll. 16-7). No, the man, who is clearly the poet himself, realizes his emotion will have to remain in a state of quietude, a state described in words very like those used in "Reverie," "that's an universe in germ" (l. 28). The fancies of what might be the result if she would but permit him to express his feelings must be exchanged for the facts of existence which he sees around him. Because of this, he forces himself to abandon his own thoughts and to make some sort of appropriate answer to her question.

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[124]This phenomenon is mentioned in Sordello: "the sun's/ On the square castle's inner-court's low wall/ Like the chine of some extinct animal/ Half turned to earth and flowers; . . ." (VI, 856-9); also in a letter to Smith written in October, 1889, Browning commented "I find the Turret rather the worse for weeding-- . . ." (quoted in Orr, p. 389).

Interpretation

The appearance-and-reality theme becomes prominent again in this poem, for here is a great discrepancy between the poet's instincts and actions. The emotion expressed here is not the gay and intense one of "Summum Bonum" and "Now"; rather the tone is that of the "Prologue," a more sober and reflective one which contains an awareness of the marvelous possibilities of life but is dominated by the knowledge that one must accept life without any romantic or poetic coloring. The mood of "Inapprehensiveness," which should be compared with that of "Sonnet: Eyes calm beside thee (Lady, couldst thou know)," is clearly expressed; perhaps the only surprising element is the vehemence which Browning suggests his love would have if it could be released; a parallel is found in the situation and wording of "Time's Revenges." The earlier poem "Two in the Campagna" had also shown two people who could not come together on a common plane, but here there is a resignation which cuts down the sense of tragedy. As in "Humility," the poet here intimates that he is happy to accept a crumb, to have the woman's companionship if he cannot have her love. And surely this poem would underline again his frequently stated belief that the one who loves receives a blessing even when his love is not returned.

Vernon Lee, to whom the poet refers in the last line, was the pen name of Violet Paget (1856-1935), an essayist and novelist. Like Browning she was attracted to Italy, the Renaissance, and art, and her essays usually dealt with these subjects. The poet respected her and tried to win her good opinion, but in two letters to her, written on

May 13, 1886,[125] and January 31, 1887,[126] his phrasing indicates that her letters to him show her to be standoffish and unbending. In these last lines of "Inapprehensiveness" he again tried to pay her a compliment, this time attributing to her the quality of apprehensiveness. As pointed out in the notes in New Letters of Robert Browning, the lines probably refer to her novel Baldwin in which the main character inhabits and takes into his heart a small Italian town in much the same way Browning did Asolo. Also Baldwin, the chief character and representative of Miss Paget, prefers and is able to distinguish the real from the imaginary.[127]

Source

Both DeVane[128] and Mrs. Miller[129] felt certain that Browning was relating a specific event which took place during his last visit to Asolo. There seems to be no external evidence for this, but if he were not describing an actual occurrence, he was at least expressing his reaction to his hostess, Mrs. Bronson. Indeed, the phrase "from eyes distent" (l. 16) may be a rather precise description, for the Michael Fields are supposed to have observed that Mrs. Bronson had the eyes of a "hydrocephalic baby."[130]

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[125]William Clyde DeVane and Kenneth Leslie Knickerbocker, Eds., New Letters of Robert Browning. Edited with Introduction and Notes (New Haven, 1950), p. 327-8.

[126]Ibid., p. 340-1.

[127]Ibid., p. 327.

[128]DeVane, p. 534.

[129]Miller, p. 277.

[130]Ibid., p. 273.

Correlation with Other Poems

The theme of rejected love appears often in Browning's poetry. The closest correspondence, as has already been mentioned, is with "Sonnet: Eyes calm beside thee (Lady, couldst thou know)," but the reader should also remember "Cristina," "The Lost Mistress," "The Last Ride Together," "Time's Revenges," and "Numpholeptos." Another idea which can be found in other Browning poems is the ease with which love can be released: a word is sufficient in "My Star" and "A Pearl, a Girl"; in "Cristina" the similarity to "Inapprehensiveness" is even more marked because in both a glance is all that is necessary. And lastly, "Inapprehensiveness" shares with all the Asolando pieces the theme of facts versus fancies.

Imagery and Diction

"Inapprehensiveness" has some vivid description in the first portion as the woman describes the castle ruins at Asolo, but there is no real imagery. This changes, however, when the poet thinks of his love for his companion. He imagines its waking first as the gentle and gradual budding of a flower, and then as he becomes more agitated, he pictures his love as a rushing, mighty force wreaking revenge on her unresponsive soul. The rapidity with which he moves from one to the other makes quite clear the intensity of the emotions he keeps so well hidden. The further description of his passion as "an universe in germ" (l. 28) makes the reader even more conscious of the potentialities of his love, which is a "'dormant passion needing but a look/

To burst into immense life'" (l. 29-30). The use of motion images makes this portion of the poem stand in direct contrast to the quiet and calm portions in which the woman sets the tone.

Form

"Inapprehensiveness" is written in couplets, primarily open ones, which keep the narrative moving without pause or hesitation. The measure is basically iambic pentameter, and as is generally true of Browning's iambic pentameter couplets, these have remarkable regularity,[131] thus giving the poem a smoothness comparable to that found in some of the shorter lyrics.

"WHICH?"

Criticism

"Which?" the poem that concludes the group of love lyrics appearing in the first part of Asolando, has not been widely noticed by the critics, and the comments which have appeared have not agreed about the poem's merits. Cary called it one of the "slighter poems" in Asolando,[132] but the critic for the Saturday Review thought it "more thoroughly in the old style" than were many of the pieces.[133]

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[131]Hatcher, p. 142.

[132]Elisabeth Luther Cary, Browning. Poet and Man. A Survey (New York, 1899), p. 116.

[133]"Two Books of Poems," Saturday Review, December 21, 1889, p. 712.

Also the review in the Literary World spoke of the "singularly vivid picture" it presented,[134] and Symons declared it an "electric little poem . . . a study of love's casuistries, reminding one slightly of the finest of all Browning's studies in that kind--'Adam, Lilith, and Eve.'"[135]

Paraphrase

In "Which?" Browning wrote with simplicity and power, though perhaps not with the smoothness and beauty of some of the fresh, spontaneous lyrics which precede it. Also "Which?" differs from these lyrics in that it is given a dramatic setting--a medieval French court of love. The narrative follows the conventions for such a court: there is for debate the problem of who is best able to judge the depth of love's devotion; there is the abbé who is to serve as moderator and to decide who is "Boy-Cupid's exemplary catcher and cager" (l. 5); there are the three court ladies--a duchess, a marquise, and a comtesse--to be the participants. The duchess, who speaks first, wishes her love to give his first loyalty to God and to his king; his devotion to her must be strong also, but she expects, and is content, to hold the place of third importance in his affections. The marquise, on the other hand, is more interested in action than she is in mere piety and patriotism. Her lover must be a courageous knight who is

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[134]"Review of Asolando," Literary World, p. 3.

[135]Symons, p. 19.

willing to fight battles and show "wounds, each wide mouth to my mercy appealing" (l. 18); and these deeds of bravery, it is interesting to note, are not necessarily to be performed because there is some noble cause to be undertaken, but simply to satisfy her whim. The comtesse, in contrast to the other two, asks that her lover have but one trait, love for her--in fact, he may be a "wretch/ Mere losel in body and soul,/ Thrice accurst!" (ll. 19-21) so long as he places her before all others in his affections, makes her his "sole savior, love's ultimate goal" (l. 22). That the world may despise him matters not to this woman who feels that love can be worthy of the name only when it is single-hearted. The idea that love does not always have to idealize and look up to the beloved but may sometimes take the position of the higher one who reaches down to lift up reminds us of the conclusion reached by Jules after he has discovered that Phene is not the near-goddess he had thought. Although the abbé hesitates to make a final pronouncement, it is obvious that he, as Browning's spokesman, strongly feels the prize belongs to the third speaker. To ask only love, with no other gifts, is to look at the matter with clarity and wisdom, to see the heart of the matter and not to rely on fancies.

Interpretation

In "Which?" Browning seems to be attempting an analysis of the true nature of love. For love to be on the highest plane, it must be completely selfless. The duchess and the marquise are like the girl in "Rosny" in that they want honor and glory as well or more than love.

Also Browning says if one has love which is single-hearted, this will overcome any other deficiency he might have. This theory is closely allied to Browning's belief in the transforming power of love, and while one usually feels himself very humble in the presence of the beloved, the love which is great enough to stoop down and raise up the beloved is just as commendable. Thus love which disregards everything except its object is the love God would choose because it is most like His own.

Source

The scene of "Which?" is painted realistically, even down to the detail of having the sophisticated abbé take a pinch of snuff before he gives his verdict. In spite of the fact that it belongs to a different day and country, it has parallels with the discussions of love described in Gli Asolandi, and perhaps the situation was suggested to Browning by the castle remains at Asolo.

Correlation with Other Poems

The theme of love as the highest virtue which any person can possess and as the supreme value in the world is so prevalent in Browning's writings that it is hard to know which poems to choose as examples. The choice of love over power and wealth occurs in "Love Among the Ruins," and the idea that responding to love is better than abiding by senseless conventions appears in "The Statue and the Bust" and "Respectability." The preference for love rather than position or daring deeds and for love directed to one object alone would fit in naturally with such ideas. The transforming power of love was another

favorite theme which was discussed in the analysis of "A Pearl, a Girl." The outpouring of love for one who is beneath the lover in station and who is in need is similar, as has already been mentioned, to the Jules-Phene episode in Pippa Passes and brings to the reader's mind Saul's magnificent vision of God bending down to lift up the weakness of humanity. The ability to understand these truths about love is the ability to divide fact from fancies, and thus once again an individual poem fits perfectly into the plan of the volume as a whole.

Imagery and Diction

The little imagery contained in "Which?" draws its inspiration from the days of chivalry. The marquise wants a noble knight who is willing to suffer for her in battle ("Rosny" contains parallels to this) and thinks of his gaping "wounds, each wide mouth to my mercy appealing" (l. 18); this imagery is visual as is the full cup which symbolizes for the duchess the perfections of the man who could be worthy of her love. The wishes of the three ladies are made more vivid for the reader by the use of these images.

The language, like the imagery, is uncomplicated, but the words of the speakers are chosen to fit the situation described by each and the various personalities of the speakers; for example, the comtesse does not hesitate to use plain words, which are in keeping with her unromantic and realistic view of the world and love, and the abbé delicately avoids a direct statement which might offend one of the three noble ladies.

Form

The stanza divisions serve to separate very definitely the parts of the poem: the introduction, the speeches of the three contestants, and the pronouncements of the judge. These breaks are also intensified by the couplets at the end of each stanza. Nevertheless the poem moves so rapidly that the reader is carried along to the conclusion without any real pauses and is much more conscious of the poem as a whole than he is of the divisions.

The form of the poem is in keeping with the setting and subject matter--all have an artificial and somewhat stilted tone. The short lines (the first three of each stanza are trimeter and the last three tetrameter) give the poem a rapid, almost abrupt, movement, which is intensified by the fact that almost every line has an internal break. The large number of anapestics mixed in with the basic iambic pattern also gives speed, which in turn gives the poem much of its effectiveness.

CHAPTER IV

THE NARRATIVE POEMS

Although some of the individual narrative poems in Asolando have received high praise from many writers, little has been said about this group as a whole. This is probably true because these poems are not markedly different in tone, form, and subject matter from the narrative poems composed throughout Browning's career. Since their spirit is not so unusual for an old man as is that of the love lyrics, and since they cannot be interpreted as being farewell pronouncements as could the philosophical poems, they have often been passed over completely. There have been, however, some exceptions. Duffin rejoiced that after all the comparatively poor narratives written during the poet's later years, it was possible to find a narrative like "Beatrice Signorini," which he considered "admirably told . . . in a manner not very much below the best of the earlier periods."[1] Mercer commented that some of the dramatic poems showed "The alleged ruggedness and obscurity" which had caused so much discussion of earlier volumes.[2] The critic for Blackwoods spoke of these poems' being in a characteristic vein,[3] and S. G. G., writing in Leisure Hour, used the

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[1]Henry Charles Duffin, Amphibian. A Reconsideration of Browning (Fair Lawn, New Jersey, 1956), p. 182.

[2]Edmund Mercer, "A Poet's Parting Gift," Papers of the Manchester Literary Club, XVI (April, 1890), 124.

[3]"Browning and Tennyson," Blackwoods, CXLVII (January, 1890), 133.

narrative poems as examples to prove that all the Asolando pieces were not "abstrusely speculative."[4]

"ROSNY"

Criticism

Perhaps because there is seemingly more obscurity in "Rosny" than in any of the other Asolando narratives, it has generally been ignored by commentators. In passing, the reviewer in The Critic called it a "beautiful lyric,"[5] and Helen Clarke mentioned that the obscurity found in the poem results from its being first and foremost a dramatic lyric.[6] On the other hand, the commentator in the Saturday Review felt the obscurity (for him this is real obscurity and "quite different from the false obscurity assigned by the unintelligent to Mr. Browning's work") comes because "its main purport is not sufficiently disengaged."[7] The spiritedness of the ballad form attracted the critic for the Pall Mall Budget, who said "Rosny" and "Muckle-Mouthed Meg" recalled "on a smaller scale the verve and go of his most popular pieces."[8] But the

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[4]S. G. G., "Browning and Tennyson: Their Latest Poems," Leisure Hour, XXXIX (February, 1890), 233.

[5]"Browning's Last Book," The Critic, NS XII (December 21, 1889), 307.

[6]Helen A. Clarke, "Review of Asolando," Poet-Lore, II (February, 1890), 95.

[7]"Two Books of Poems," Saturday Review, December 21, 1889, p. 712.

[8]"Browning's Last Poems," Pall Mall Budget, December 19, 1889, p. 1625.

highest praise came from Mrs. Orr, who said that of all the poems in the final volume this one "perhaps most displays his old subtle dramatic power."[9]

Paraphrase

A girl ponders, either to herself or a listener, depending upon one's interpretation, the fate of her lover Rosny, who has gone "galloping into the war" (l. 1). At first she is impressed by the glamorous aspects of the fighting and pictures him being a magnificent hero who is wounded but only enough to leave a scar which will not disfigure but will serve as a symbol of his deeds. When he returns victorious, he will tell her that his love for her was so great that he could not keep himself from heroic actions and has returned unharmed to claim her reward. But then it occurs to her that certain people, possibly her envious companions, might feel that the man who survived a great battle had been a coward and had not acquitted himself with honor. Since this might be so, she changes her vision and sees Rosny dead in the midst of those he has slain and hears those who view his body comment on the love which was so great that it drove him to his death. This, her heart tells her, is the better solution.

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[9]Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning, New Edition. Revised and in Part Rewritten by Frederic G. Kenyon (New York, 1908), p. 379.

Interpretation

Although the author of a review in The Critic chose "Rosny" as one of the Asolando poems which do not confuse the reader's mind,[10] there can easily be differences of interpretation. In the first place, interpretating "Rosny" is complicated by the refrain, "Clara, Clara." As he often did, Browning may have intended to aid the reader by the use of the parentheses, but the lack of consistency in their use adds another confusing element. The reader simply has to decide for himself whether Clara is a sympathetic listener, which would make this--at least to a certain degree--a dramatic monologue, or whether in thought the speaker addresses a rival or merely calls herself by name. DeVane[11] and others[12] accept the last interpretation, which seems the most probable since many people debate thus with themselves when they are faced with serious problems. Actually the basic points of the poem are not affected by either interpretation.

In the second place, there is confusion about the author's intention. DeVane[13] and Symons[14] have emphasized that the poet is

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[10]"Browning's Last Book," p. 307.

[11]William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, Second Edition (New York, 1955), p. 529.

[12]Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, Eds., The Complete Works of Robert Browning from the Author's Revised Text (New York, 1898), XII, 363.

[13]DeVane, p. 529.

[14]Arthur Symons, "Review of Asolando," Academy, XXXVII (January 11, 1890), 19.

presenting here the old conflict between love and honor, and in one sense this is true. It seems, however, that there is a departure from the usual presentation, for the thing which motivates the girl's preference for having her lover killed in battle rather than returning to her unscathed is her fear of the scorn of her acquaintances. Browning was fond of themes dealing with action and with love which knows no limits, and therefore he would undoubtedly commend Rosny if his love were to excite him to such heights of bravery that he could not possibly escape death. On the other hand, the poet, as was shown by "Which?"[15] had little patience with those who put anything above love, for those who counseled deference to public opinion. It seems possible that the tone intended here is an ironical one. If the poem is taken in this sense, there is a very definite tie-in with the general theme of the volume. The girl's notion is a romantic, fanciful, untrue one and is not the attitude which would be adopted if the facts of the matter were examined realistically. In the last stanza the speaker refers to death as a sleep, and with one interpretation at least this would add to the ironical tone; for Browning, as exhibited in the "Epilogue" and other poems, death was not a state without activity, but rather simply an introduction to new and perhaps more challenging activity. Symons found this poem representative of Browning's lifelong teaching because it shows one who does not give up the struggle until death.[16] It would,

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[15]See Chapter III, p. 180.

[16]Symons, p. 19.

however, seem more characteristic because the dramatic form permits the girl unconsciously to reveal her character, which is shallow and dominated by self interest, ambition, and pride. Rosny's love may be worthy of hers, but hers is too selfish to be worthy of his.

Source

The title of this poem indicates that Browning had an actual historical person, and possibly an actual incident, in mind. The name Rosny was the one generally used by Maximilian de Béthune, Duke of Sully (1560-1641); the name was taken from the small French town of his birth. Rosny, who gave his skills in both military affairs and diplomacy freely to the Huguenots during the French religious wars (he declared that he was influential in turning Henry of Navarre to Catholicism[17]) received, according to his record in his memoirs, many wounds while fighting under Henry of Navarre at the Battle of Ivry, 1590:

> At the first onset, my horse, wounded in the nostrils, and again in the neck, where the saddle did not reach, sunk under a third wound which carried off two feet of his hide, and a piece of flesh off the calf of my leg. I received another would in my hand. A pistol shot gave me a third more considerable; the ball entered my hip, and came out near my belly. I should certainly have been killed, if my equery had not flown to my assistance with another horse, upon which I mounted, though with great difficulty. . . .
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> At a second charge this horse was likewise slain, and in the same moment I received a pistol-shot in the thigh, and

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[17]Maximilian de Béthune, Memoirs of the Duke of Sully, Prime Minister of Henry the Great: with the Trial of Francis Ravaillac, for the Murder of Henry the Great, New Edition (Edinburgh, 1819), I, 339.

> a cut with a sword on the head. I fell to the earth, and with my senses lost all the remaining part of the action. . . .[18]

This may have been the incident Browning had in mind, although the Duke certainly did not die; the next day he set out for Rosny to recover from his wounds[19] and on the road met Henry of Navarre, who embraced him and praised him highly for his courageous deeds during the battle.[20] There is no Clara mentioned in this account or elsewhere in the Memoirs, as DeVane noted,[21] but it is interesting to read that in 1592 Rosny snatched enough time from fighting to marry for a second time, the bride being Rachel de Cochefilet, the widow of Francis Hurant, Lord of Châteaupers and Marais.[22] Thus the poem is a good example of the way Browning adapted his source material. And although "Rosny" was written before most of the other poems in the volume (Mrs. Orr placed it in December, 1857,[23] but Miss Whiting dated it early in 1888,[24] neither giving a reason for the date), it shows that Browning retained his interest in historical events and personages until he was very old.

Correlation with Other Poems

The speaker's views of life and love reveal a conflict between appearance and reality, and this theme serves to relate "Rosny" to the

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[18] Ibid., p. 226.

[19] Ibid., 232.

[20] Ibid., p. 234.

[21] DeVane, p. 529.

[22] De Béthune, I, 321.

[23] Orr, p. 379.

[24] Lilian Whiting, The Brownings. Their Life and Art (Boston, 1911), p. 267.

other Asolando poems. There are, however, few points of similarity to the whole of Browning's work. The poet often exhorted lovers to carry their devotion to extremes, even to death if need be, but in no work did he urge, or even suggest, that one use another person to obtain his own selfish ends.

Imagery and Diction

Because of the poem's relative brevity and its narrative nature, there is not a great deal of imagery to be found in it. Other than the frequent and rather vivid pictures of battle scenes, the only well-developed image is that of a race, in which love is depicted as the goal; the winner is shown kneeling before the girl who serves as queen of the race to receive the reward from her hand. The figure is further elaborated upon when she feels that some people might sneer if her favorite comes through the ordeal unscathed and therefore decides that death is the proper guerdon of love. This image, similar to one developed in "Which?" helps unify the poem and aids in the revealing of the true character of the girl.

Form

The poem has the internal characteristics of a ballad--emphasis on the narrative, with little description or imagery, the use of a refrain--but the actual poetic form is not exact. Other than the two short refrain lines, the rhyme scheme is aabac. The reader, however, is hardly aware of the rhyme, for the rhythm carries him along rapidly. The first line pictures Rosny "galloping into the war," and the reader

then realizes that an impression of a horse galloping is conveyed by the rhythm, as it is in Browning's other riding poems, "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" and "Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr." The meter is a combination of iambic, trochaic, and anapestic feet; actually it is better to think of it in terms of the number of stressed syllables per line--the regular lines have four and the refrain lines two. Almost every line begins with an accented syllable, and this helps to intensify the prominent rhythm, which makes such a definite contribution to the mood of the poem.

"THE CARDINAL AND THE DOG"

Criticism

Since those commentators who did mention "The Cardinal and the Dog" were primarily interested in its date, its source, or its religious impact, little was said about its poetic qualities. The critic for the London Quarterly Review said he could not imagine what "odd fancy freak" could have made Browning write it,[25] and the reviewer for Leisure Hour spoke of its effect of "weird horror,"[26] but these were the only ones to pause long enough to consider its effectiveness as a work of art.

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[25]"Demeter: and Asolando," London Quarterly Review, LXXIV (April, 1890), 94.

[26]S. G. G., p. 233.

Paraphrase

Retelling a story which he had read, the narrator relates an incident in the life of Crescenzio, a Cardinal who attended the Council of Trent as the Pope's legate or personal representative. As he was writing reports to the Pope on the night of March 25, 1522,[27] he rose to refresh himself and saw a horrible dog--huge, black, with ears that almost reached the ground and flaming eyes--a truly terrifying sight! The monster leaped directly toward Crescenzio and then lay down under the very table where he had been working. Yet, strange as it seems, when the servants came in response to his anguished cries, they could not see the beast, even though they stared directly at the spot indicated by the frantic Legate. So great was the shock of this experience that Crescenzio soon became ill and died. Even on his deathbed he pleaded with his attendants to drive away the dog that jumped upon his bed. The poem ends with a prayer that Protestants be kept safe from such harm--the narrator realizes, however, that he cannot bring himself to wish ill to the Catholics or anyone else.

Interpretation

The black dog has been a symbol of impending death throughout the centuries. In his book Myths and Myth-Makers John Fiske said the

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[27]It is interesting to note that the correct date for the Council of Trent, 1552, is given in the 1842 version while in Asolando it is mistakenly given as 1522. If Browning had lived, he probably would have corrected this careless slip. DeVane, p. 535.

origin of this superstition was to be found in the belief that the wind god was a dog and that the sound of the wind was caused by his sweeping through the world, gathering up the souls of those appointed to die.[28] Interestingly, Fiske also thought the Pied Piper tale had its origin in legends about the wind god, thus uniting from one point of view two poems which Browning composed at the same time,[29] for Browning wrote Dr. F. J. Furnivall on October 1, 1881, in response to a query about "The Pied Piper," that both it and "The Cardinal and the Dog" were written for the eldest child of William Macready, the actor; the child, who was very fond of drawing, was ill in 1842 and wanted suggestions for illustration.[30] He later wrote the poet that he liked the story about Crescenzio and hoped the poet would approve of the drawing of it which he had made.[31] Such circumstances of composition would seem to indicate that the poet intended to convey no message, but many readers try to find more in the poem than a simple narrative, often considering it to be a fable as did Sells.[32] Some have used it to show Browning's

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[28]John Fiske, Myth and Myth-Makers: Old Tales and Superstitions Interpreted by Comparative Mythology (Boston, 1873), p. 35.

[29]Ibid., p. 31-2.

[30]Thurman L. Hood, Ed., Letters of Robert Browning. Collected by Thomas J. Wise. Edited with an Introduction and Notes (New Haven, 1933), p. 197.

[31]C. Elkin Mathews, "Browning's 'Pied Piper,'" Times Literary Supplement, September 15, 1921, p. 596.

[32]Arthur Lytton Sells, Animal Poetry in French and English Literature and the Greek Tradition (Bloomington, Indiana, 1955), p. 234.

anti-Catholic tendencies.[33] There is the implication that Protestants are not so superstitious as are Roman Catholics, and Crescenzio was traditionally hated by Protestants because at the Council of Trent he was the leader of the uncompromising Romanist faction. (An account of this incident in Moreri's Dictionnaire Historique attributed the legend to fabrications of the Legate's enemies, "ill-meaning people, who lacked respect for the Council [of Trent]."[34]) On the other hand, the last line makes clear that Browning was not hostile to non-Protestants, certainly not to the point of wishing them ill fortune.

Although "The Cardinal and the Dog" was written many years before the other poems in this final collection and may have been used simply as a "filler" for Asolando, the poet probably decided to include it because it too has something to say on the facts-versus-fancies theme in its depiction of the horrible state in which a man finds himself when his mind is controlled by fancies rather than facts.

Source

In October, 1881, Browning wrote to Furnivall: "If you cared to have the Legend of the Legate I am sure you are welcome to it, when I can transcribe it from the page of the old book it remains upon, unprinted hitherto."[35] The old book was Nathaniel Wanley's Wonders of

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[33]"Browning's Last Poems," p. 1625; Duffin, p. 199.

[34]Moreri, Dictionnaire Historique, trans. and quoted in George Willis Cooke, A Guide-Book to the Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning (Boston, 1891), p. 441-2.

[35]Hood, p. 197.

the Little World, a book which had often served him as a source: "The Pied Piper"; the preface to Pauline (an extract in Latin from the works of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, the sixteenth-century German occult philosopher); Paracelsus; "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis" ("Garden Fancies II"); the reference to Johannes Teutonicus in "Transcendentalism"; the incident in which Pope Stephen had his predecessor's fingers cut off and fed to the fish, which is retold in the Pope's monologue in The Ring and the Book; "Pambo"--all these were suggested to Browning by his youthful reading of Wanley's collection of curious facts and legends.[36] The poet has the narrator say he is simply repeating the words of his source, and in this case Browning did follow his source very exactly, making no additions of his own.[37] A fascimile copy of a version of this poem in the handwriting of the poet's father appeared in the London Bookman for May, 1912.[38] It is basically the same as the Asolando poem and evidently was the first version. In revising the text, Browning not only changed words to improve the smoothness of the rhythm, but he cut down the number of lines by combining the twenty-six short lines into thirteen long ones. He also added two lines: the fifth in which he made it clear that he was merely quoting his source

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[36]W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning With Notices of His Writings, His Family, & His Friends (New York, 1910), p. 21-3.

[37]Nathaniel Wanley, Wonders of the Little World: or a General History of Man. In Six Books (London, 1788), p. 651.

[38]In 1921 the original copy of this version was in the possession of C. Elkin Mathews, according to his letter to the Times Literary Supplement, September 15, 1921, p. 596.

and the last in which he summed up the story by attempting to draw a conclusion from it.

Correlation with Other Poems

"The Cardinal and the Dog" immediately invited comparison with the many other poems in which Browning depicted the clergy of the Roman Church, especially those in which the priests are unworthy of their office in one way or another: the speaker in "Soliloque of the Spanish Cloister" because of his pride and hatred; the priest in "The Confessional" because he betrayed the trust of the penitent and broke the seal of the confessional; Fra Lippo Lippi because he broke his vow of chastity, but even more clearly the fathers who administered it to him when he was still too young to understand its meaning; the bishop in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" because of his pride, greed, and lust; the confessor in "A Forgiveness" because he had seduced one of his flock; and the subject of "The Pope and the Net" because he had used deceit in obtaining Christendom's highest office. In "The Cardinal and the Dog," however, the evilness of Crescenzio is not mentioned directly but only implied. The toleration for Catholics is similar to that expressed in Christmas-Eve. And the terror caused when imagination overrides reason clearly relates this poem, as has already been stated, to the other works in Asolando.

Imagery and Diction

There is very little imagery or description in "The Cardinal and the Dog," and what there is is taken almost exactly from Wanley,

Browning's source. The vivid picture of the dog is used effectively, however, even if it was not original with the poet, as is the blackness, which, of course, is traditionally symbolic of death. If the depiction of the dog had not been clearly drawn, the events of the plot, particularly Crescenzio's terror and death, would not have been sufficiently motivated.

Form

As in "White Witchcraft" and "The Pope and the Net," the heptameter lines break into a pattern of alternating tetrameters and trimeters (it seems that in the original version the lines were thus written), and as in the two other poems, this ballad measure is appropriate because the story has the brevity and strong narrative emphasis which are characteristic of a ballad. The rhymes of the couplets[39] are not obvious enough to be distracting both because of the internal breaks and because most of the couplets are open. The rhythm is generally iambic with some variations so that the reader does not find the speech patterns forced or obvious. All these factors unite to give the poem organic unity and to make its effect a forceful one.

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[39]The uneven line, the fifth, rhymes with the couplet immediately preceding it.

"THE POPE AND THE NET"

Criticism

Although there has been great interest, as will be seen later, in the sources of "The Pope and the Net," there has not been much criticism concerning the poetic merits of the work. The little that has appeared, however, has been enthusiastically favorable. The critic for Leisure Hour spoke of its "scathing satire,"[40] the commentator in the London Quarterly Review praised its "kindly humor" and "quiet satire,"[41] and Symons mentioned the "frank relish" with which Browning told his tale and commended the "pungent simplicity" which he found to be characteristic of Asolando as a whole, but most clearly exemplified in this anecdote.[42] DeVane felt that in comparison with "The Cardinal and the Dog," "The Pope and the Net" has "greater point and maturity."[43] The reviewer for Scots Magazine had only praise for the poem: "And how like him [Browning] and how dear to his heart and ours is The Pope and the Net--what picture, what point, and parable there is in it--how true to human nature is the story it tells: . . ."[44] Even higher praise appeared in Blackwoods where the commentator singled out for special mention "The shrewd and witty old Pope of the Net" as being "worthy to

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[40]S. G. G., p. 233.

[41]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 94.

[42]Symons, p. 19.

[43]DeVane, p. 536.

[44]Orion, "Review of Asolando," Scots Magazine, NS V (January, 1890), 134.

rank with the best of those incisive and clear-cut men and women who are perhaps, on the whole, Mr. Browning's most perfect gift to us."[45]

Paraphrase

The speaker, a Cardinal, relates an incident about a newly elected Pope. The new pontiff began life as the son of a lowly fisherman, but because of his intellectual gifts, he was able to enter the Church and to make rapid progress until he became a Cardinal. His ability and piety were such that no one really protested against his high position, though some did make slighting or facetious remarks about his humble origins. Instead of becoming angry, however, the Cardinal agreed, with great humility, that his had indeed been a remarkable rise and that he should not forget this. In order to help himself retain his humility, he placed on his palace wall his father's fishnet instead of a coat of arms. This gesture quieted all doubters, and he was unanimously elected Pope when the next vacancy occurred. It would be hard to imagine the astonishment of the Cardinals when they came to make their obeisances and discovered the net had disappeared. After they had muttered to themselves a while, the speaker became bold and asked: "Why, Father, is the net removed?" The answer came quickly: "Son, it hath caught the fish."

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[45]"Browning and Tennyson," p. 134.

Interpretation

As Symons has pointed out, Browning did not try to pull a moral out of this tale.[46] Instead, he was simply illustrating the discrepancy between what a man may seem to be and what he really is and developing a character that interested him. Here Browning was dealing, according to Phelps, with the "same sly cunning" which he had pictured in other Romish characters, especially in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church,"[47] although Duffin surely went too far in using this poem as proof that the poet was strongly anti-Catholic.[48] Both good and bad churchmen appear in Browning's poetry (the Pope in The Ring and the Book is an example of a highly admirable clergyman while Ogniben, the Papal legate in A Soul's Tragedy, is scheming and full of self-interest), and the following poem, "The Bean-Feast" pictures a Roman prelate with great sympathy.

Source

The Roman Catholic Church provided Browning with one of his most fruitful sources of subject matter, as Phelps has noted.[49] In this case, the poet did not use any precise source for his story although he was undoubtedly influenced by the description of the character of Pope Sixtus V as it was recorded in Gregorio Leti's Vita di Papa Sisto V.

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[46]Symons, p. 19.

[47]William Lyon Phelps, "Mr. Browning's Last Words," New Englander and Yale Review, NS XVI (March, 1890), 242.

[48]Duffin, p. 199

[49]Phelps, p. 242.

Authorities generally agree that Sixtus was the son of poor parents, but usually say his father was a farmer rather than a fisherman. Leti elaborated upon his lowly origins by including a tale of Sixtus representing himself as being very humble and very frail in health until his election to the papacy, at which time he threw away his staff and revealed himself in a remarkably excellent state of health. To a Cardinal who seemed surprised at the change in his appearance, he said that he found the Pontificate a potent elixir of youth.[50] Another of Leti's anecdotes has Sixtus telling a Cardinal who was amazed at his renewed vigor that while he was searching for the keys of Paradise, it was necessary for him to stoop a bit, but when they had been found, he had to stand tall because he had reached the world's highest position.[51] Modern authorities do not admit that pretense was used in Sixtus' attempt to gain the throne, but say his renewed vigor was the result of his being released from the exile imposed upon him by his predecessor, Pope Gregory XIII.[52] Although Leti's unreliability as a historian has been noted by several writers,[53] the parallels in tone would suggest

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[50]Gregorio Leti, The Life of Pope Sixtus the Fifth, trans. from the Italian by Ellis Farneworth (London, 1754), p. 150, quoted in DeVane, p. 536.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ludwig von Pastor, The History of the Popes From the Close of the Middle Ages. Drawn from the Secret Archives of the Vatican and Other Original Sources, trans. from the German by Ralph Francis Kerr (London, 1932), XXI, 46.

[53]Thomas Delta, "Browning's 'Pope and the Net,'" Academy, L (October 31, 1896), 330; DeVane, p. 536.

Browning's dependence on him.

Since the specific incident used in the poem does not appear in any history of the Papacy and seems to have been an invention of the poet's, some questions have arisen concerning the Pope intended. Garnett admitted that Berdoe was probably correct in describing the story as a product of Browning's imagination,[54] but he thought Sixtus IV was a more likely subject because he was reputed to have been a fisherman's son; at any rate, although he did not explain why, Garnett was convinced the poet could not have intended to use Sixtus V.[55] Berdoe replied that Garnett was obviously mistaken since the character of Sixtus V corresponded more exactly to that of Browning's Pope.[56] He was ready to admit, however, the possibility of the poet's having used poetic licence to combine the characters of two Popes as he had done earlier in The Ring and the Book.[57] Another possibility was suggested by Mary Augusta Scott, who noted a parallel between "The Pope and the Net" and the hundred and forty-ninth novella of Franco Sacchetti: in this tale an abbot of Toulouse ate only small fish as an act of

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[54]Edward Berdoe, The Browning Cyclopaedia. A Guide to the Study of the Works of Robert Browning. With Copious Explanatory Notes and References on all Difficult Passages, Second Edition (London, 1897), p. 357.

[55]R. Garnett, "Two Slips of Browning's," Academy, L (October 10, 1896), 265.

[56]Edward Berdoe, "Browning's 'Pope and the Net,'" Academy, L (October 17, 1896), 285.

[57]Ibid.

humility, but on being elevated to the position of Archbishop of Paris, he told his steward to bring him a large fish since the small had been used only as bait to help in his fishing for large ones.[58]

Correlation with Other Poems

Since few specific themes are set forth in "The Pope and the Net," it is comparable to Browning's other works mainly in technique alone. The surprise ending had been effectively employed in "A Forgiveness" and "Bad Dreams IV," and the gradual revelation of human character was one of the poet's most frequently used devices. The appearance-versus-reality theme is implied here, though it is not stressed, and this poem is thus tied into the general plan of the volume and bears a rather close resemblance to the earlier "Gold Hair."

Imagery and Diction

Being a brief and straightforward narrative, there is little imagery. Smith mentioned in passing the star image in the twenty-first line, which compares the fishnet to the star of the Pope's character or soul; the star is eclipsed when the net is removed. He found the star an appropriate image because it suggests high position and religious power.[59] The use of spice to represent pride might have two connotations: the incense used by high church officials or a disagreeable

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[58]Mary Augusta Scott, "Browning's 'Pope and the Net,'" Academy, L (November 7, 1896), 352.

[59]C. Willard Smith, Browning's Star-Imagery. The Study of a Detail in Poetic Design (Princeton, New Jersey, 1941), p. 230.

odor caused by the tainting substance of pride. The fishnet is used, of course, as a symbol, which is appropriate because it suggests that the Pope is a "fisher of men," but which gains in power because it is a contrast to the usual symbols of the Pope, the sword and keys. These images and the exactness of some of the words (smirks to show the condescension of the higher born to their brother Cardinal, cavil to show the pettiness of the arguments about his origins) give added depth to the story and make it possible for so much to be revealed in so few lines.

Form

When Hatcher analyzed this poem, he found that the heptameter lines, like those in "White Witchcraft," give the impression of dividing into alternating tetrameters and trimeters, or ballad measure.[60] This is appropriate since the narrative element is strongly emphasized. The rhymes of the tercets, however, are prominent and sometimes break the flow of the run-on lines, but this is not noticeable enough to detract from the effective presentation of the Pope's character.

"THE BEAN-FEAST"

Criticism

All of the criticism given to "The Bean-Feast" has been favorable. Its "pleasing rhythm and theme" were commended by the New York

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[60]Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, The Versification of Robert Browning (Columbus, Ohio, 1928), p. 113.

Herald,[61] and in Leisure Hour the commentator spoke of its "charming simplicity and profound meaning."[62] The critic in the Pall Mall Budget noted that if any of the modern Popes ever read English poetry, they might find in "The Bean-Feast" fresh inspiration for "socializing" their rules.[63] More specific praise came from the reviewer in Blackwoods, who spoke of the poem's being treated with "that magnifying and heroic simplicity of tenderness and comprehension which is the most luminous and delightful of mediums."[64] This reviewer also believed this poem and "The Pope and the Net" were worthy of comparison with the poems in Men and Women.[65]

Paraphrase

Pope Sixtus V was a man who was able to choose the proper thing to do, to do it, and to give thanks when it was accomplished. Yet to the narrator's mind, the thing for which he was most thankful might well have been a meal of beans. One day when the Pope was wandering in disguise through the poorer sections of Rome to find the evils which needed his attention, he happened upon a hovel which was perhaps the most vile in the entire city. Although his instinct might have repelled him, the

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[61] "Browning's Last Work," New York Herald, reprinted in Book News, VIII (January, 1890), 185.

[62] S. G. G., p. 233.

[63] "Browning's Last Poems," p. 1625.

[64] "Browning and Tennyson," p. 134.

[65] Ibid.

Pope nevertheless went forward to learn how his lowliest subjects fared. He found them happily munching on a meal of beans. The Pope, saying he was an inspector for the Holy Father, told them to continue their meal but when they had breath enough, to tell him what complaints they had. Even though this was said with gentleness and a smile, fear fell upon them, and they could make no answer. Seeing this, the Pope revealed himself and then with the greatest tact asked to be allowed to share their meal of beans. Sitting on the doorstep, he ate the entire plateful with pleasure and then gave fervent thanks to God for the fact that in spite of all the honors and responsibilities given to him, he could still enjoy the simple things of life.

Interpretation

"The Bean-Feast" is primarily narrative, but while it does not actively teach a moral, it is a poem appropriate for Asolando because it fits in with the general theme. Many people might think the pomp, adoration, and reverence accorded to a Pope would be the things for which the Holy Father would be most grateful, but this is not so--much more significant for those who understand the facts is his continued capacity for the enjoyment of humble pleasures. The tangible realities are again shown to be preferable.

Source

There can be no disagreement about the Pope Browning had in mind as his source for this poem since in the first line he named his character Sixtus V. Though there is no exact incident recorded by history

which serves as a basis for this tale, it is in keeping with the character of this Pope who was extremely interested in reforming the bad conditions, especially the misery of the poor, which had arisen during the reign of his predecessor, Gregory XIII. In order to do this, Leti relates, he used many spies, which made him feared by the people, even though the information obtained was used for their benefit.[66] This would explain the consternation of the family described in the poem when they learn the stranger is an investigator for the Pope. Leti also included an incident in which Sixtus V stopped by a monastery and joined the lay brother who acted as porter in his humble meal. In response to the astonishment of his companions he announced that two years would undoubtedly be added to his life because he had been able to eat with appetite and without fear. He then thanked God for allowing him to partake of one happy and peaceful meal.[67] In spite of the basic similarities in this story and Browning's poem, one can reaily see the improvements Browning made. The element of disguise adds suspense, and the setting and the surprise of the people heighten the effect of the Pope's act. Having been a Franciscan, it would not be very unusual for him to assume again briefly the manner of life of his order--to mix with the humblest of his subjects was another matter.

Correlation with Other Poems

Even though the main characters assumed lowly disguises for slightly different reasons, the reader is at once reminded of the

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[66]DeVane, p. 537.

[67]*Ibid*.

similarity in the basic plots of "The Bean-Feast" and "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--." The latter carries much deeper implications, but the similarity is still there. Those who resent Browning's frequent unflattering portrayals of the members of the Catholic hierarchy should see from this poem that he did occasionally show the other side of the coin; "The Bean-Feast" is therefore comparable to the depiction of the Pope in The Ring and the Book. The fact that Sixtus V finds God interested in man's bodily comfort as well as the strength of his mind reminds the reader of Fra Lippo Lippi's argument concerning the beauty and goodness of the flesh and of Ferishtah's parable about the unwiseness and wrongness of severe mortification of the flesh which is given in "Two Camels." And last of all "The Bean-Feast" shares with all the poems in Asolando the theme of facts versus fancies. The closest parallels are found in "Development" and "Flute-Music" because here too the narrator is led to the true view of the matter by his fancy.

Imagery and Diction

As is generally true in the narrative works, imagery plays a less important role in "The Bean-Feast" than it does in the more lyrical poems. For the most part, this story is told without extended imagery, but some brief visual images do appear. For example, to intensify the reader's awareness of the miserable state of the hovel, the poet described it as being within the "city's entrail dark" (l. 7); this image carries with it suggestions of unpleasantness and uncleanliness and prepares the way for the view of the "hovel, vilest structure in

Rome the ruinous: . . ." (l. 10). As is fitting, the Pope, who as Christ's Vicar should be regarded as the chief pastor of the Church, speaks of the people as sheep and singles out as the spokesman the father, whom he addresses as "bell-wether of the flock" (l. 23). Also to show the contrast between his supposed state and his own attitude towards it, he mentions that while kings and queens kneel before him and feel themselves honored if they are allowed to pick up the crumbs from his table,[68] he is satisfied with the simplest of pleasures, and indeed is more grateful for them than for the reverence given to him. The blessing of God is seen then, not in the glory and pomp, but in His tender and understanding care of His children.

Form

Since the narrative is the important element in "The Bean-Feast," the form is worked out in such a way that the reader's attention is never distracted from the story. By making most of his couplets open ones, the rhymes are not unduly emphasized. The hexameter lines are long, but the internal punctuation breaks them into speech-like units. The meter, too, aids in the natural movement of the lines--the iambic

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[68]This image could have been suggested to Browning by the discussion between Christ and the Syrophenician woman: "But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs./ And she answered and said unto him, Yea, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs" (Mark 7: 27-8). Another possible source could be the phraseology of the Anglican Communion Service, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under thy table."

feet have enough variations to prevent any feeling of force or strain. The reader's impression is one of unity and ease.

"MUCKLE-MOUTH MEG"

Criticism

Perhaps because the critics have considered the subject matter and its treatment a little too frivolous for the elderly poet, they have mentioned "Muckle-Mouth Meg" very infrequently. Those who have discussed it have generally indicated, however, their enthusiastic approval and enjoyment: for example, the reviewer for Leisure Hour called it "richly humorous";[69] the article in the Literary World spoke of its "brave lilt";[70] and the commentator in the London Quarterly Review praised its "refreshing gaiety, touched with mischief."[71] Phelps considered the title one of the "singular" ones appearing throughout Browning's works, but he thought the poem itself was one of the "most pleasing" in the volume.[72] Pearson, in a discussion of the kiss in literature, noted the kiss at the climax of the poem and said of the work as a whole: "He [Browning] can rollick, too, without becoming

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[69]S. G. G., p. 233.

[70]"Review of Asolando," Literary World, XXI (January 4, 1890), 3.

[71]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 94.

[72]Phelps, p. 242.

clownish, a somewhat rare art. 'Muckle-Mouth Meg' tries him rather severely, but he comes out, on the whole, successful."[73]

Paraphrase

This Scottish tale is told in the style of a frolicking ballad. A young lord, who had been trespassing, probably as part of a raiding party, was seized and sentenced to hang. His physical attractiveness is such, however, that the wife of his captor begs for his life if he will marry their muckle-mouthed (large-mouthed) daughter. The young man laughingly refuses and is placed in solitary confinement for a week to think the matter over; his seclusion is broken only by the daily visit of a beautiful girl who brings food and twits him on his stubbornness. Persisting until the end, he declares when he again faces his captor that he prefers death to a marriage with a monstrosity. The beautiful girl then asks if he would rather marry her, and when he enthusiastically says yes, reveals that she is the misnamed Muckle-mouth Meg. This surprising turn of events so excites the young man that he kisses her, saying that thus

> "Will I widen thee out till thou turnest
> From Margaret Minnikin-mou', by God's grace,
> To Muckle-mouth Meg in good earnest!"
> (ll. 38-40)

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[73]Norman Pearson, "The Kiss Poetical," Fortnightly Review, NS LXXVI (August 1, 1904), 296.

Interpretation

While "Muckle-Mouth Meg" clearly illustrates that appearances are deceiving, to try to formulate other interpretations would be straining a point. The poet was obviously writing the poem for the fun of retelling a tale which had amused him.

Source

This story had appeared in two written versions. The first was Sir Walter Scott's Tales of a Grandfather, which was probably Browning's source,[74] although Evelyn Barclay recorded in her diary that the poet told her he considered it a legend rather than an account of an historical event and said he had heard it from Benjamin Jowett, a Cambridge don who was a close friend and to whom it had been told by Lady Stewart.[75] Scott did not consider the incident as mere legend, and since the story concerns one of his ancestors, whom he did not name in the text, perhaps his judgment should be accepted. Unlike Browning, he fitted the story into a context of Border feuding and raiding and named the capturing lord, Sir Gideon Murray of Elibank. The basic plot is the same, but in Scott's version the wife begs mercy for the boy partly because she fears his death would heighten the intensity of the feuding and partly

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[74]DeVane, p. 539.

[75]Evelyn Barclay, Diary of Miss Evelyn Barclay (Mrs. G. D. Giles) Who was staying at the Palazzo Rezzonico at the time of Browning's illness and death. Presented to Dr. A. J. Armstrong by Mrs. G. D. Giles, Baylor University Bulletin, XXV (December, 1932), 2.

because her daughter, who is both ugly and dowerless, may have no other chance of marriage. The lad holds out for a time, but at last consents, which makes him a less attractive hero than Browning's youth, who is seemingly undaunted by death. Scott's young man does not suffer in the end, however, for Meg makes him a very good wife. Nevertheless, his descendants for some generations are marked by unusually large mouths.[76] The other printed version was a poetical one, "The Fray of Elibank," by James Hogg, who called himself the Ettrick Shepherd. In a headnote the author states that the material is historical,[77] and in both the text and notes gives the names of the main characters, including that of the hero, William Scott of Harden. Although much like Scott's and Browning's accounts, there are some differences. Hogg gives much background of feuds and raids, plus many details of the young man's capture. He also tells of three ugly daughters, the worst of whom is selected as the boy's bride; not only does she have a large mouth, but she also is extremely thin and has a very long nose. In this version the captive is shown all three and told he must decide immediately between Meg and death. He defiantly chooses death, but as the preparations for the execution are made, he loses his courage and asks for three days in which to consider. When a stay of execution is denied him, he reverses his decision and takes Meg in spite of her faults. Hogg makes him the

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[76]Sir Walter Scott, Tales of a Grandfather II in The Miscellaneous Works (Edinburgh, 1861), XXIII, 278-9.

[77]James Hogg, The Poetical Works of the Ettrick Shepherd (Glasgow, 1840), II, 215.

victim of much teasing from his father-in-law, who is wont to declare that his mouth has grown as large as his bride's. Nevertheless, the couple have a happy life in spite of such teasing and in spite of the large mouths of their descendants.[78]

By comparing these earlier versions with Browning's poem one can quickly see the changes and improvements he made. To make the story conform with ballad tradition, he focused on the main incident by giving little background and not even naming any of the characters except the girl. By not giving any description of Meg except her name, he keeps the reader in suspense and provides for the surprise ending, which is the most effective part of the story. Also his young lord is a more gallant figure because he does not abandon his resolve because he is a coward, but because he realizes he has been fooled--the girl is a beauty, not a monstrosity. Also Browning's poem has a gay ring which is missing in the other two accounts, Hogg's particularly being heavy-handed.

Correlation with Other Poems

From the time of such early works as "Incident of the French Camp" Browning was fond of writing narrative poems with the same brevity and focus found in "Muckle-Mouth Meg." In his middle years he turned more in the direction of longer pieces which revealed human character, but in Dramatic Idyls and Jocoseria he returned to the simple narrative

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[78]Ibid., p. 215-224.

form. True, few of these poems have the gaiety of tone and lightness of touch found in this late work, but there are exceptions in "Ned Bratts," "Doctor --," and "Solomon and Balkis." In Asolando "The Pope and the Net," "The Cardinal and the Dog," and "Rosny" are the closest parallels since all of them have ballad characteristics. The surprise ending is a part of many of these short narratives, such as "Gold Hair" and "The Pope and the Net." Finally the emphasis on the falseness of appearance relates "Muckle-Mouth Meg" to the rest of Asolando.

Imagery and Diction

There is little description or imagery used in "Muckle-Mouth Meg" since it is primarily a narrative in which straightforwardness makes a definite contribution to the rapidity of movement, which in turn is responsible for much of the poem's effectiveness. This lack of ornamental language is, of course, characteristic of the traditional ballad. What imagery and description there is comes mainly from nature. To point out to the youth the pleasantness of the world which he will forsake if he persists in his foolish obstinancy the charming lassie informs him, "Sky's blue and turf's grassy: . . ." (l. 28). Animal images also occur occasionally as when the Laird's wife declares that even the boy who speaks as fearlessly as a lion will squeak with fear after a week of solitary confinement in the dungeon. The musical quality of the lassie's voice is described in terms of a lark's chirping. The most memorable imagery, however, is found in the pictures that the name Muckle-mouth Meg arouses in the young man's imagination.

"Frog-jaws" seems to him an appropriate way of describing the enormity and repulsiveness of her mouth, and he proclaims his defiance with the question: "too eerie/ The mouth that can swallow a bubbly-jock's egg:/ Shall I let it munch mine?" (ll. 30-2). The second quotation shows that the poem contains some of the grotesqueness of which Browning was capable, but here it is included because it adds to the humor. The large number of Scottish words[79] makes difficulties for the student attempting a thorough analysis, but the story carries the casual reader along so smoothly that he is hardly aware of their existence.

Form

The anapestic measure is particularly appropriate for "Muckle-Mouth Meg" where the reader wants, as Hatcher has commented, "all the speed and go possible, for the mind is centered on the rush of events."[80] The alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines and the abab rhyme scheme are suitable, too, for this is a ballad if Browning ever wrote one. The effectiveness of the story is greatly enhanced by its being treated in this manner.

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[79]For example: muckle, meaning large; minnikin, meaning small; laird, meaning the master of a landed estate; parritch, meaning oatmeal porridge; callant, meaning a boy or a lad; chiel, meaning fellow or man, usually a young one.

[80]Hatcher, p. 160.

"ARCADES AMBO"

Criticism

"Arcades Ambo" has received less praise probably than has any poem in Asolando. Most writers have ignored it completely, and those who have deigned to notice it have condemned it. Helen Clarke coupled it with "The Lady and the Painter" and pronounced these the weakest poems in the book.[81] Phelps went even further by saying that the subject matter was hardly appropriate for poetic treatment and that the poem was one of many examples contained in Asolando of "the wretched concentration of statement" which gives the "reader so many cruel shocks."[82] He continued his condemnation by commenting that "Arcades Ambo" represented Browning in his "most perverse mood."[83] Although this judgment is perhaps too harsh, certainly "Arcades Ambo" is inferior to the other poems in Asolando.

Paraphrase

"Arcades Ambo," which is in dialogue form, poses the question of whether or not a man who flees in battle is more cowardly than the one who sanctions vivisection so that he may be spared a pain in his toe. Although both deserve condemnation, the tone seems to imply that some excuse may be found for the man who shuns fighting in a moment of panic but none for the one who permits innocent animals to suffer in his place.

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[81] Clarke, p. 95.

[82] Phelps, p. 242.

[83] Ibid., p. 243.

Interpretation

The title, which may be translated "Arcadians both," is a phrase taken from Virgil's seventh pastoral and is generally used ironically, as it is here, of persons who are equally despicable.[84] Browning loved animals, as his biography definitely proves. In his early youth he followed the example of Shelley and was a vegetarian for a time. As early in his poetical career as Paracelsus he showed that lower animals and man stand in a close relationship with each other[85] and implied that one should not be exploited by the other. Also, in "Tray," which appeared in the first series of Dramatic Idyls, 1879, he included an attack on vivisection along with his attack on materialism.[86] Browning's consistent sympathy for the anti-vivisection movement was not, as Berdoe pointed out in his "Browning and Vivisection," merely the result of his fondness for pets or of his kindness of heart but was a logical outcome of his philosophical and ethical system: love, the principal force in his religious thinking, was exemplified in service to God's creation, including not only man, but all living things.[87] Men who in their self-centeredness could think vivisection justified are deluded and governed by fancies rather than facts.

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[84]The term also appears in "Pambo," l. 50.

[85]D. G. Brinton, "Suggestions for Browning Study," Poet-Lore VIII (January, 1896), 51.

[86]C. R. Tracy, "The Source and Meaning of Browning's 'Tray,'" PMLA, LV (June, 1940), 615-7.

[87]Edward Berdoe, Browning's Message to His Time (London, 1890), p. 177.

Source

DeVane has suggested that "Arcades Ambo" may have been written on August 27, 1889,[88] at the same time the poet wrote to Berdoe: "I shall be delighted if the association of my name with those of the patrons of the proposed scheme an for [sic] Anti-Vivisectionist Hospital be of the least service in so holy a cause."[89] Somewhat earlier Browning had written to Miss Frances Power Cobbe, "I would rather submit to the worst of deaths, so far as pain goes, than have a single dog or cat tortured on the pretense of sparing me a twinge or two."[90] And to the end of his life the poet was vice president of the Victoria Street Society for Protection of Animals.[91] Therefore it is obvious that he found his inspiration in his deep concern for the anti-vivisectionist movement.

Correlation with Other Poems

Although Browning's love for animals appeared in many of his works, the two poems most closely related to "Arcades Ambo" are "Tray" and "The Lady and the Painter," both of which protest against cruelty to animals and the conceit of man that lets him think all the world was created to please his whims. This conceited and mistaken fancy presents the main Asolando theme and is the means of uniting "Arcades Ambo" and the other poems in Browning's final volume.

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[88]DeVane, p. 539.

[89]Berdoe, Browning's Message to His Time, p. 176.

[90]Ibid., p. 174.

[91]Ibid., p. 173.

Imagery and Diction

"Arcades Ambo" has no imagery unless the brief description of the battlefield could be classified as such. The only stylistic qualities are the roughness and abruptness of some phrases, such as "saves my toe from shoots" (l. 14); such language is appropriate considering Browning's characterization of the speakers.

Form

Since "Arcades Ambo" and "The Lady and the Painter" share the same theme, it is perhaps fitting that they have the same form. Both are presented as dialogues, although here the dialogue is little more than one speech followed by another. The rhyme scheme (ababccc--in reality a quatrain followed by a tercet) and the measure (iambic tetrameter) are also the same for both poems. The short lines and the many internal breaks add to the roughness caused by some of the word choices--undoubtedly the poet thought men of his calibre could not be expected to have smooth, refined speech patterns.

"THE LADY AND THE PAINTER"

Criticism

"The Lady and the Painter" has received almost no critical attention. As has already been mentioned, Helen Clarke considered it one of the two weakest poems in the volume.[92] Words of praise are completely lacking.

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[92]Clarke, p. 95.

Paraphrase

Like "Arcades Ambo," "The Lady and the Painter" is in dialogue form. The lady protests, with typical Victorian English prudishness, against the painter's use of nude models. He, in turn, objects to her adorning herself with wild bird feathers. To his way of thinking, the needless slaughter of God's creatures is a much more serious crime than his use of nude models because he gazes at this magnificent creation of God with reverent awe. The lady, completely unable to understand such a point of view, is convinced he is jesting.

Interpretation

"The Lady and the Painter" shows Browning's attitude toward the nude in art. His concern about the controversy was not entirely disinterested. His son had been harshly censured for painting feminine nudes by John Callcot Horsely, treasurer of the Royal Academy from 1882-97.[93] The painting to which Horsely and his followers especially referred was one entitled "Joan of Arc and the Kingfisher," in which Joan is preparing to bathe.[94] Browning took this criticism personally and in his "Parleying with Francis Furini" presented a vigorous argument for the painting of nudes and attacked Horsely under the guise of Baldinucci, seventeenth-century historian of Italian art, whose work Browning relied upon along with Vasari's as source material for most of

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[93]William Clyde DeVane, Browning's Parleyings. The Autobiography of a Mind (New Haven, 1927), p. 181.

[94]Ibid., p. 182-3.

his poems on Italian art.[95] It is true that Baldinucci was narrow-minded and did object strenuously to Furini's nudes, but DeVane has proven very convincingly that Browning's ire was really aimed at Pen's critics.[96] By 1889, however, Pen's pictures were being accepted, and the public had lost interest in the debate over what constituted proper art, which had been argued so hotly in the London Times during 1885.[97] Therefore, in comparison with "Francis Furini," the reference to Baldinucci in "Beatrice Signorini" is very mild, and the discussion of the question in "The Lady and the Painter" seems colorless and academic. Thus Browning's emphasis here is directed by his feelings about the cruelty of those who insist on fashions which demand the slaughtering of innocent creatures. The theme of consideration for animals makes this poem a fitting companion for "Arcades Ambo," and here too, it is man's vanity and pride in his own position which prevents his perceiving the truth about life.

Source

"The Lady and the Painter" is one of the few Asolando poems about which there is information concerning the composition. Mrs. Bronson related that one day during his last visit to Asolo, Browning was unusually quiet as they returned from their daily drive. After a time he broke the silence to say he had composed a poem since they had

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[95] Ibid., p. 170-8.

[96] Ibid., p. 179-84.

[97] Ibid., p. 183-4.

started the return trip. Although he refused to tell the subject, he did yield to their pleadings enough to add that he had received his inspiration from the birds singing in the trees; this had made him think how he hated to see women wear birds' wings on their hats.[98] Mrs. Bronson also recalled that at another time he picked up a grey turkey feather which he had found on the ground and commented that he did not mind women using such feathers, which were really pretty enough, on their bonnets.[99] Therefore the poem arose from his own experience although he undoubtedly thought of Baldinucci and his earlier controversy with Pen's critics.

Correlation with Other Poems

Arguments in favor of painting from the nude can be found in several of Browning's works: in both "Fra Lippo Lippi" and Christmas-Eve he discusses the beauty and worth of the human body, and the second contains one of the poet's best defenses of the nude, even though religion and not art is the subject of the poem. "The Parleying with Francis Furini" states his most explicit discussion of the subject, which is mentioned again in "Beatrice Signorini."[100] The kindness-to-animals motif occurs in "Tray" and "Arcades Ambo," and the emphasis on

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[98]Katherine C. DeKay Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," The Century Magazine, NS XXXVII (April, 1900), 923.

[99]Ibid., p. 926.

[100]Pearl Hogrefe, Browning and Italian Art and Artists. Bulletin of the University of Kansas Humanistic Studies, I (May 15, 1914), 20.

the necessity of viewing life in its true perspective unites it with the other Asolando poems.

Imagery and Diction

Except when the painter is describing the feathers used in the woman's dress--he says they cling "Half-savage-like" around her hat (l. 10) and refers to her clothes as her "spoils" (l. 19)--there is no figurative language. By using these two instances of figurative speech, however, Browning emphasized the horror such slaughter arouses in the painter and his contempt for those who countenance it.

The language is aptly chosen to characterize the two speakers. The woman's words have a tone of condescension: for example, her reference to the "wretched shillings" for which the models pose (l. 5), her "Oh, I trust!" when he asks if he may speak plainly (l. 16), and her laughing "That you jest!" when he has presented his intensely sincere arguments. The painter's words, like the images which he uses, show his strong repulsion at the murder of God's "best/ Of harmless things" (ll. 26-7).

Form

Although "The Lady and the Painter" has the same basic form as "Arcades Ambo,"[101] there are some differences. For one thing, this poem is more a true dialogue, for there is an exchange of ideas and speeches. There is less roughness here, but this results from the word

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[101]See p. 220.

choices and not from the rhythm or rhyme.

"PONTE DELL' ANGELO, VENICE"

Criticism

The evaluations of "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice" have been fairly uniform. Grotesque is the usual descriptive term,[102] and S. G. G. wrote in Leisure Hour of the poem's "grim drawn-out humour."[103] The skill with which this grotesqueness was set forth caused some difference of opinion: Symons believed it was too "loosely 'hitched' into rhyme" to be one of the best specimens of this type of writing[104] while the critic for the London Quarterly Review wondered what "odd fancy freak" could have made the poet write it.[105] On the other hand, an article in the Literary World declared it was "related with the quaint circumstance which decorates, and the originality and passion which revive the old stories rewritten by Browning's pen."[106] The reviewer for The Critic said it would not confuse the mind, and in this case his opinion does not seem debatable.[107] (It should be noted that even though those

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[102]"Review of Asolando," Literary World, p. 3; Arthur Synons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, New Edition (London, 1916), p. 234.

[103]S. G. G., p. 233.

[104]Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, p. 234.

[105]"Demeter: and Asolando," p. 94.

[106]"Review of Asolando," Literary World, p. 3.

[107]"Browning's Last Book," p. 307.

critics who criticized the poem did not call it obscure, Miss Barclay included in her diary an account of Browning's reading it to a group none of whom could understand its meaning.[108] At any rate, an author in the Pall Mall Budget felt the lawyers would have no difficulties in discovering the poet's attitudes toward them and the philosophy that the law can turn wrong to right.[109])

Paraphrase

The plot of this poem follows the basic pattern of many medieval legends concerning the power of the Virgin Mary to protect those who pray to her. While he and his companions are being rowed through one of Venice's canals, the narrator asks the gondolier to stop so that he can point out one of the city's landmarks, the Bridge of the Angel, and tell the story back of its name. A house nearby displays on its facade an angel whose wings drape two shields; the speaker says legend has it that great evil would come to the inhabitants if the angel were ever to depart. Long ago the house had belonged to a lawyer who ranked among the most skillful of his profession but who was so avaricious that he charged exorbitant fees. When complaints were lodged, his answer was that he did not seek the clients, but the clients him, and therefore he continued his cruelty against the poor with a quiet conscience. The rascal's only redeeming feature was his unfailing adherence to his

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[108]Barclay, p. 3.

[109]"Browning's Last Poems," p. 1625.

prayers, for never did he sleep without at least a brief prayer for protection to the Virgin. One day after an especially good week's haul, the lawyer decided the best way to quiet a widow who kept wailing for redress would be to have a holy man to dinner, and he selected Matteo da Bascio, the head of the Capuchins (one of the most austere of the monastic orders) as the man in all Venice best suited for the task. Having welcomed his guest, the lawyer excused himself in order to see how the meal was progressing, but not before he had informed his terrified guest that his servant was a trained ape, one of the most capable servants to be found. As soon as the lawyer had left, the holy monk began to search for the beast which he was sure was a devil in disguise. Finding the ape hidden under the bed, he bade him come out and was about to adjure him when the monster revealed that though he was Satan himself, he was present as a representative of God to bring to fitting punishment this man who had so openly flounted Christ's commandments to be charitable and to love one's fellowmen. If this were so, the mond demanded, why had he been so long in accomplishing his mission? The delay had come, Satan declared, because he could not bring harm to those who faithfully invoke the Virgin; some day, however, the lawyer was certain to forget, and then he could be snatched away. The saint then bade the ape depart, saying he would finish the task by much more efficacious means. This the monster was willing to do, but he had been ordered not to leave the house of the lawyer unharmed. Therefore, at the holy man's suggestion, he hurled himself through the wall "Wide bat-wings, spread arms and legs, tail out astream" (l. 127)

and was gone. After giving thanks for the demon's departure, the saint went down to dinner and found the host wondering why he could not locate the serving ape. Soon, however, the lawyer had something more important to worry about, for he discovered a freshly laundered napkin was dripping blood as the monk twisted it. This miraculous and frightening phenomenon was granted to show him the extent of his wickedness, for the blood, so the monk informed him, represented the blood of those whom he had fleeced. One miracle was sufficient, for the lawyer immediately repented and promised to make full restitution. Then the true nature of his ape was revealed to him, and the monk showed him the gap in the wall through which the monster had fled. The lawyer now began to fear that the demon and some of his companions might return through the gap. In order to prevent such a disaster, the saint suggested that a statue of an angel be made to fill up the space and to give protection to the house. All was done, the speaker tells his friends, and the incident was recorded in Zaccaria Boverio's annals of the Capuchin order. There is given the accounts of two witnesses and surely the testimony of three men can be accepted. The moral is that tradition which often preserved truth until the day of recorded history should not be sneered at. Having told his tale, the speaker commands the rowing to begin again so that he and his friends may continue their journey.

Interpretation

It would seem that Browning wrote this poem primarily because the story interested him, and possibly because it gave him an opportunity to

take a sly dig or two at lawyers, of whom the poet, as the portraits of the advocates in The Ring and the Book clearly show, was not overly fond. Nevertheless, this poem, like the others in Asolando, is related to the facts-versus-fancy theme. Here the lawyer has many fancies--about his position in the world, about the requirements placed upon him, about the nature of his servant--but until the miracle revealed to him the falsity of these, he knew only one fact--the efficacy of prayers to the Virgin. On the other hand, the Capuchin's eyes are open, and he is always aware of the facts. And by having the narrator point out that "wise tradition" (l. 189) may often be a conveyor of truth, the poet is saying truth may be revealed in many ways.

Source

Like "The Lady and the Painter," "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice" is one of the few poems in Asolando about whose composition there is specific information. Mrs. Bronson wrote that on his next to the last visit to Venice Browning discovered Tassíni's Curiosita Veneziane, which records many legends as well as actual historical facts about Venetian landmarks, and was fascinated enough with the volume to write after his return to London, "Tassini tempts me to dip into him when I pass the bookcase."[110] So intrigued was he with the lawyer's story that he looked it up in Boverio's book on the Capuchins and on his 1888 visit to Venice asked to be taken to view the house of the legend. When

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[110]Katherine C. DeKay Bronson, "Browning in Venice," The Century Magazine, NS XLI (February, 1902), 579.

the poet and Mrs. Bronson arrived at the bridge, he asked the gondolier to stop and listened with delight as the man related the story with which he had been familiar since childhood. When he had finished, the poet asked him if he thought it were true and was amused when the naive gondolier replied that it had to be true because it had been printed.[111]

The plot of the poem follows very exactly that given by Tassini, who acknowledged that most of his account was taken directly from the earlier version of Father Boverio.[112] Since Browning was not merely transposing prose into verse, there are naturally a few minor differences, such as having the abbot wring a napkin rather than a corner of the tablecloth, but in general Browning neither added nor subtracted.

Correlation with Other Poems

Although it may seem grotesque to modern readers, the appearance of spirits, both good and bad, in human or animal forms was a popular device in medieval tales. (For example, in Chaucer's "Friar's Tale," the assuming of an ape's form is specifically mentioned.) And in "Doctor--," which appeared in Dramatic Idyls, Second Series, and which is supposedly the retelling of an old Jewish tale, Satan, who has been on earth in human form, makes his escape by plunging through the ceiling (ll. 240-1). The discrepancy between appearance and reality links this

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[111] Ibid.

[112] Tassini, Curiosita Veneziane, 1863, trans. and quoted in DeVane, Handbook, p. 541-2; I have not been able to obtain the originals of this book nor of Boverio's Annales . . . ordinio minorium S. Francisci qui Capucini nuncipantur, 1632-9.

poem to the others in Asolando, but the closest parallel is found in "Development," for in both the poet shows how legendary tales may give one clear and truthful insights into human nature.

Imagery and Diction

The imagery of this poem has two main sources, religion and the animal kingdom, both of which rise naturally from the subject matter. In this case, the religious imagery comes largely from the Bible and is implied rather than stated precisely. For example, the lawyer says he wants the Capuchin to come to dine in order to give his house an air of sanctity and thereby perhaps rid himself of the widow who is bothering him with her pleas for redress (ll. 45-7); the allusion here, of course, is to Christ's parable of the widow who compelled the judge to grant her request, not because he felt sympathy for her, but because he was worn down by her incessant begging (Luke 18: 1-8). Similarly the lawyer's fear that the devil might return through the breach in the stonework which he had made when he escaped reminds readers of Christ's story of the man out of whom a devil was cast: when no good spirit came in to take his place, the demon and many companions returned to the dwelling which was so neatly swept and garnished (Matthew 12: 43-4). Less exact is the allusion in the line, "Blood--blood from a napery snow not more clean" (l. 143), which could have been intended as a reverse of the well-known passage, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as wool" (Isaiah 1: 18). Also slightly altered is the reference to the easy yoke of the Church (l. 29),

which sounds very like Christ's statement, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11: 30). Not all of the religious imagery is biblical, however; some of it arises from the popular traditions of medieval Christianity. For example, there are the picture of Satan forging fetters at his subterranean smithy (l. 166-7), the scene in which the fiends shovel fresh coals on the fires of torment (l. 96), and the saint's nose which "Scents brimstone though incense be burned for a lure" (l. 89), showing the supernatural ability of the religious to detect the presence of evil.

The animal imagery does not center so completely as might be expected around the Ape; instead most of it is used to characterize the lawyer, who is pictured as picking his victims "bare/ To the bone" (ll. 17-8) in the manner of a scavenger beast or bird, who growls at his clients (l. 19), and who fleeces his "clients who sheep-like, arrived to be shorn" (l. 146). In order to prove the authenticity of his tale, the speaker points out that his source was not indited by an ass (l. 33) but was written by a person of intelligence. The other animal images, however, do apply to the ape. The monk declares that "No bull that gores,/ No bear that hugs" (ll. 76-7) could be more horrible than the ape who "squattedst at watch/ For a spring on thy victim: . . . (ll. 100-1).

Other images are conventional, such as the picture of a match between good and evil (l. 97), and the lawyer's being protected by the Virgin as though he were clothed in a coat of mail (l. 104), which will become loose and permit the devil to ply his claws if once the

wearer neglects his daily prayer to Mary. His devotion to the Madonna also serves as the only indication that in him "gold lurked beneath/ Alloy of the rankest brass" (ll. 35-6), which is reminiscent of one of the chief images in The Ring and the Book. The imagery throughout, regardless of source, is visual and is used to add vividness to the scene and to characterize the leading figures.

The language of the poem has more of a colloquial flavor than is usual in the Asolando poems. Expressions such as "He toils and he moils" (l. 64), "live in clover" (l. 64), "or I'm a Turk" (l. 65), "guzzles and guttles" (l. 72), "by hook or by crook" (l. 185) give the conversation a natural tone and help keep up the pace of the poem. Other than a few legal terms, such as "advice ad rem" (to the point), the language is clear and simple, and even the unfamiliar terms are easily deduced from context. Thus the reader has nothing to distract his attention from the movement of the story.

Form

The rhythm (Hatcher's duple-triple measure, in this case a combination of iambic and anapestic feet) is an easy one which does not attract notice to itself. The same is true of the rhyme scheme (abcabc); the rhymes are frequent enough to be pleasant without being distracting. Therefore the narrative, which is the important element, receives the emphasis necessary for its effective rendering.

"BEATRICE SIGNORINI"

Criticism

There has been some difference of opinion concerning "Beatrice Signorini." Almost every reviewer who commented on specific poems mentioned it, but some simply dismissed it as "interesting."[113] Clarke did add that its dramatic presentation had a "true Browning ring to it."[114] Symons grouped it with Browning's studies of lovers' casuistries, remarked on the gusto with which the tale was related, but then declared it was little more than a "pretty incident," which was what the poet himself had called it.[115] On the other hand, the reviewer in The Critic noted its clarity of narration,[116] and the commentator in the Literary World called it "graceful" and spoke of its quaintness and the "originality and passion" by means of which Browning had given new life to the old Italian story.[117] More enthusiastic was Duffin's choice of it as one of the two good narratives in the volume and his use of it to show the contrast with most of the narratives written after The Ring and the Book, which he found comparatively poor.[118] The

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[113]Clarke, p. 97; "Review of Asolando," London Daily News, reproduced in Neuphilologisches Centralblatt, IV (February, 1890), 55.

[114]Clarke, p. 97.

[115]Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, p. 234.

[116]"Browning's Last Book," p. 307.

[117]"Review of Asolando," Literary World, p. 3.

[118]Duffin, p. 182.

critic for Blackwoods went even further and used it as an example to prove that Browning had not "lost his cunning in that peculiar field of impassioned poetical narrative which he has made peculiarly his own."[119] This critic also ranked "Beatrice Signorini" as second in importance in Asolando.[120] And, of course, it is well to remember that the poet himself considered it the best of the thirty.[121]

Paraphrase

"Beatrice Signorini" relates a tale told of an Italian painter Francesco Romanelli, a citizen of Viterbo and a pupil of Pietro Berretini, who was called Cortona. Some critics considered Romanelli his teacher's superior or at least his equal, but the point worth discussing is not his fame, but this incident in his life. Francesco went to Rome to paint and met there a woman, Antemisia Gentileschi, who also painted. Her work, however, had a power and depth of passion and a maturity of execution which his had not yet attained. ("Desire," her masterpiece had been condemned by those who, like Baldinucci, were stupidly puritanical.) Having seen her, Francesco was filled with an overpowering desire to make her his, but this was impossible because he could only come close to her in the realm of art. Nevertheless he dreamed of approaching her through art and winning her through the enchantment of an unexpected kiss. They were both artists, but she was

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[119]"Browning and Tennyson," p. 134.

[120]Ibid.

[121]Barclay, p. 2.

more--she was a woman, and the problem was to win her soul. In his conceit he assumed he was the better painter, but he doubted that this independent woman would be willing to submit on this basis, for she did not understand the relative positions of man and woman as did his good wife at home; Beatrice Signorini knew man, the superior creature, had to be permitted to roam more freely than she--he had been wise in his choice. But he did not know the spell by which Artemisia might be won. She refused to try to understand his life and held herself aloof. He did remember that once when he was praising some of the perfect points in her painting, he had an impulse to admit her supremacy and "crouch under proudly, lord turned slave" (l. 86) so that she would not demean herself by loving him. But although his instinct told him such love would be true love, he could not accept it, for such a giving of himself would be more than he had the courage to give. It would be going against the order of the universe, for everywhere he looked he saw man as superior. His good Beatrice understood the order of the world and therefore made no objection to anything he wished to do. But how different was Artemisia. He recalled the one time he had ventured to make a suggestion about her drawing. How angry and scornful had been her reaction. When his work became the subject of discussion, what a contrast there was between the reactions of Artemisia and Beatrice; he knew the great artists might find fault with some of his techniques, and yet if his work had been placed beside that of the greatest masters, Beatrice would have judged his the best.

Since Beatrice fitted into his patterns of thought and conduct better, he decided to return to his wife, who would welcome him back even if she learned of his affection for Artemisia. Being the simple soul that she was, a few kisses and smiles would make up for any tears she might shed. When his plans were revealed to Artemisia, she agreed on their wisdom and asked if she might give him a gift. Since painting flowers was her hobby, she gave him a canvas on which she had painted a border of flowers. The empty spot he was to fill with the portrait of whomever he loved best. He had to choose. The situation was similar to the choice of a favorite flower. Yet it would be doubly hard to choose a favorite flower from the ones she had painted, for they were so perfectly blended in the border that it was practically impossible to separate them. It was much like an old tale of a prince who wanted to see his kingdom for the first time. When his desire was known, fifty of the most beautiful girls in the country banded together to form one giant beast of burden to bear him on his journey. So the flowers formed a perfect frame to surround a lovely picture. Was it really his privilege to fill it? When she insisted that it was and that in this way their art could be wedded even though they were not fated to any other kind of marriage, he seized his brushes and bade her stand and be painted. Inspired by the situation, he worked with an intensity he had never known before. Once he had finished, he defied anyone to divorce their art.

Soon they parted, and he returned to home and wife. When the first raptures of reunion were over, he displayed to Beatrice the

various gifts his art had won them. As he watched her inspect the jewels, an impulse urged him to show her the painting. He could imagine the scornful anger with which Artemisia would act in such circumstances, but with Beatrice it would be merely an interesting pastime. Reasoning thusly, he decided to indulge his whim. He told her a prize even greater than the valuable jewels existed, although she might be too childish to appreciate it. Displaying the picture, he asked if she had ever seen a more beautiful face. With great deliberation and skill she criticized the depiction of the various flowers; then in a sudden reversal of mood, she cried that they must not be contaminated by the portrait they surrounded and began furiously slashing the picture with her spilla (a large, decorative pin worn to keep the hair in place). She wielded her weapon until the portrait was completely destroyed, and then waited quietly to see what punishment would befall her. To her amazement, her husband burst forth in joyous laughter and declared she would always be the one most cherished by him. He told her she might do as she wished with the picture. This discovery of the passion of which she was capable revived his love for Beatrice to such an extent that he never again faltered in his devotion to her.

About his reputation in his later life there has been some dispute: he was perhaps too highly praised during his lifetime, which brought about a sharp reversal of opinion after his death. That he was just above average may be the most exact evaluation. At any rate, modern critics seldom give him a second thought. The thing most worthy

of note, the narrator concludes, is "The pretty incident I put in rhyme" (l. 352).

Interpretation

"Beatrice Signorini," according to Mercer,[122] is analogous to "Andrea del Sarto." His meaning seems to be that both are art poems in which certain of Browning's theories of art are set forth. On the surface this is true, but there are basic differences. While Browning does digress here to discuss his attitude toward the nude in art and to mention the doctrine of the imperfect (which may be the point Mercer intended to emphasize), his main purpose seems to be the narrative itself. Technical aspects of art are used to set the scene, but they do not comprise a profound examination of artistic principles nor are they employed in a symbolic fashion. Browning probably did not even intend this poem to be considered as the statement of a doctrine about love; some interesting points are included, it is true, but the "moral" seems simply to be that emotion and passion are necessary if love is to have any force.

Since Asolando consistently sets forth its principal theme, it is not surprising that it appears prominently in "Beatrice Signorini," the longest poem in the volume. Francesco misjudges many things: his conceit makes him presume to be superior as a man and a painter; he makes mistakes about the way Artemisia will react to criticism of her

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[122]Mercer, p. 124.

work or to suggestion that he might find other women attractive; his greatest misconception, however, concerns the character of his wife. When his fanciful notions lead him to push his wife to the breaking point, the revelation of her real nature is a wonderful surprise and brings him a happiness he had not thought possible.

Source

The source material for "Beatrice Signorini" came from Delle Notizie De' Professori del Disegno da Cimabue in Qua by Baldinucci, the historian whose prudish attitude Browning comdemns in the poem. In spite of the help the poet received from him in writing his poems on Italian art (he acknowledged his indebtedness in a letter to Edward Dowden in 1866[123]), he lost no opportunity to display his contempt for Baldinucci: in "Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial" he condemned the Italian's narrow-minded hatred of Jews while Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day shows his scorn for the historian's artistic theories. Nevertheless, he was willing to use information supplied by Baldinucci when it would aid him, and in this case he followed his source almost implicitly,[124] though he combined information from two accounts: the one of Artemisia Gentileschi,[125]

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[123]Hood, p. 104.

[124]DeVane, Browning's Parleyings, p. 178. Although Mrs. Orr thought the poem was written in December, 1887 (p. 379), the manuscript has a cancelled date which looks like April 23, 1889; but in either case Browning would have been in London where Baldinucci's work was easily accessible.

[125]Filippo Baldinucci, Notizie de' Professori del Disegno (Florence, 1767-74), XII, 3-13.

which provided the main incident, and that of Francesco Romanelli,[126] which he used for background material. Also the poet changed a few points: he omitted the high praise Baldinucci gave to Francesco because he refrained from "obscene" painting;[127] he made Artemisia's passion the painting of flowers rather than fruit,[128] and he presented Francesco as being infatuated with Artemisia even though Baldinucci spoke only of their having an innocent friendship.[129] Finally in Baldinucci's account Beatrice destroyed the portrait when she was alone and after days of listening to her husband praise Artemisia;[130] Browning's version definitely has more dramatic appeal because of the rapidity of the action and because of the stronger emotions of Francesco.

Correlation with Other Poems

Whiting included "Beatrice Signorini" in a list of poems which set forth the "sub-self" theory. The term is somewhat ambiguous, but it seems to mean a sort of instinctive reasoning. Miss Whiting felt this theory had its highest expression in Paracelsus and also appeared in Sordello (especially the fifth book), "A Death in the Desert," Fifine, "The Parleying with Christopher Smart," and was extensively developed in The Ring and the Book.[131]

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[126] Ibid., XVIII, 204-30.

[127] Ibid., p. 228.

[128] Ibid., XII, 11.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid., p. 13.

[131] Whiting, p. 237.

The poem is, as the Pall Mall Budget pointed out, "a notable addition" to the long list of Browning's "painter-poems,"[132] and as in "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Pictor Ignotus," the poet was concerned with the personality of the artist rather than with the art itself. "Beatrice Signorini" is also related to many of these same poems by being written about Italians. Since an Italian setting is found in many of the Asolando poems, this poem is a fitting one for the final volume for two reasons: its scene and its presentation of the appearance-versus-reality theme.

Imagery and Diction

Since it is such a long and detailed story, the reader is not surprised to find a great deal of imagery in "Beatrice Signorini." The sources are generally nature--flowers (ll. 26-7, 170-181, 292-302), birds (ll. 62-3), astrology (ll. 30, 325-6), serpents (l. 306)--and the relative positions of human beings in the world--royalty over the common people (ll. 186-203), the lord over the slave (ll. 80-4), man over woman in the same way the macrocosm is greater than the microcosm (ll. 93-5).

The imagery, which is entirely visual, is primarily used to characterize the three participants. For example, several images are employed to show the difference in Artemisia's and Francesco's artistic development--when they meet, her blossom is full blown while his is

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[132]"Browning's Last Poems," p. 1625.

just beginning to open (l. 26-7); he is only "half-ripe" (l. 28) while she is fully matured; her sphere is "ampler" than his (l. 48). Color imagery is also used quite effectively, even though it is traditional, to contrast Artemisia and Beatrice: Artemisia, the fanciful, complex, tempting one, is dark and in anger her eyes flash "black fire," (l. 110), but Beatrice, who is supposedly the simple wife, the "placid-perfect" one (l. 247), is blonde (l. 308) with blue eyes (l. 146); from the wreath of flowers Artemisia, selecting a characteristic flower for each, chooses the modest, gentle violet for Beatrice (l. 226) and the more exotic rose for herself (l. 224).

In addition to making clear-cut the personalities of the characters, the imagery occasionally serves to illustrate Francesco's arguments, as when he suggests that he, the lover, might become the slave rather than the master (ll. 80-4) and when he discusses the different position of men and women by saying a man, like the lordly eagle, must be free to range where he wishes but a woman, the bird's nesting mate, must be content to stay at home (l. 62-4).

Form

"Beatrice Signorini" is written in iambic pentameter couplets, which are characterized by their open form and their comparative regularity.[133] This is an effective form for a narrative poem because the reader finds himself thinking in terms of paragraphs, not lines,[134]

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[133]Hatcher, p. 142.

[134]*Ibid.*, p. 141.

and his attention is focused on what is said rather than on the way in which it is said.

"FLUTE-MUSIC, WITH AN ACCOMPANIMENT"

Criticism

Of the narrative poems, "Flute-Music, With an Accompaniment" has received as little criticism as any except "Arcades Ambo" and "The Lady and the Painter." Commentators who have spoken of it have generally used it as a point of departure for a discussion of Browning's technical knowledge of music or of his ability to choose subject matter which would permit him to set forth his guiding principles.[135] A few critics, however, have paid some attention to its poetic qualities. In Leisure Hour, S. G. G. spoke of the light touch in "Flute-Music,"[136] and the reviewer for the Pall Mall Budget said parts of the poem should "suffice for those who are under the delusion that Mr. Browning cannot pipe as prettily as the rest when the spirit moves."[137] The Saturday Review critic admitted it was "undeniably pretty," but he felt it was a misjudgment to praise it as an example of "how smooth and liquid Mr. Browning can be."[138] The commentator in the Athenaeum's review

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[135]Clement Antrobus Harris, "Browning as the Poet of Music. I," Athenaeum, May 4, 1912, p. 509-10.

[136]S. G. G., p. 233.

[137]"Browning's Last Poems," p. 1625.

[138]"Two Books of Poems," p. 712.

felt even more strongly and deplored the irregularities and strained points in the rhyme, tartly adding that the poet's ear had not improved with age and that his position among England's poets would undoubtedly have been higher if he had written only in blank verse.[139]

Paraphrase

Although it has been variously interpreted, the title is usually taken to mean that the words of the poem serve as an accompaniment for the flautist's music. The words compose a dialogue between a man and a woman, who are lovers, it seems, since their conversation turns to love in the last stanzas. The man is surprised and pleased when he hears flute music drifting in from the house next door, and not only comments on the beauty of the performance but finds in the music deep messages for the soul; if the two could see the player, he speculates, they might possibly learn more about the real meaning of passion than has ever before been revealed. Since this is impossible, his mind interprets the music he hears, finding in it not only Love, but Assurance, Contentment, Hope, and Joy. But he has mused long enough, and the girl breaks the spell by telling him the facts: the neighbor is a conscientious bookkeeper who has taught himself to play the flute during his lunch hour. Although he has struggled long and valiantly, he still plays poorly, and for the girl it is sheer torture to listen to him. The man has not been subjected to it very often and therefore

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[139]"Review of Asolando," Athenaeum, p. 77.

cannot judge correctly. The man does not dispute her evaluation, but he reprimands her for destroying his illusions: he had felt the musician was putting on a magnificent performance just to inspire him, the listener; instead it is mere "practice pother" (l. 111) which means nothing at all. The girl attempts to explain his mistake by saying that it is easy to misinterpret until one has heard the pieces repeated again and again. The man turns the conversation from the music itself to expressions of love and wonders whether she is suggesting they do not really mean exactly what they say. If so, he prefers a little fancy and imagination in life and love. The ash grove between the houses, like the imagination, tends to soften the harshness of reality, and he is inclined to think the view of life thus presented is as valid as a coldly factual one. He only wishes she would finish lecturing and let him continue to dream about love.

Interpretation

Since Browning wrote few poems which are purely descriptive, it is not surprising that he uses the musical setting to illustrate his observance of life. Harris, who felt the meaning of "Flute-Music" was less profound and therefore easier to comprehend than that of most of Browning's poems, thought the poet was trying to prove by a "musical illustration that beauty lies in the eye--in this case, the ear--of the beholder."[140] The basic meaning, however, seems to go beyond this and

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[140]Harris, p. 510.

to be more clearly related to the subtitle of the volume. Here a direct contrast is made between fact and fancy, and contrary to his usual practice the poet has chosen fancy, which links the poem to "Development": moreover, here fancy is not merely a teacher, but the imagination presents a view of life which seems as real as that presented by facts. Can it not be possible that its view is as valid as that of facts? The poet comes to the conclusion that this is possible, and he therefore chooses the view of fancy, which he finds more congenial. Since Browning generally considered fact superior to fancy, "Flute-Music" indicates that he was trying to examine the question of fancy versus fact from every possible angle.

Source

The use of a musical setting occurs only this one time in Asolando, but poems with musical references or themes were prominent in his earlier poetry. Nor was Browning using music only as the average poet would. He was well versed in music and could use the technicalities to prove his knowledge. Of this knowledge he was extremely proud: a Mrs. Ireland recalled his telling her, "I was studying the grammar of music when most children are learning the multiplication table, and I know what I am talking about when I speak of music."[141] Likewise in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett he wrote "I know, I have always been jealous of my

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[141]Record of a conversation with Mrs. Ireland, Manchester Examiner and Times, December 18, 1889, quoted in Griffin and Minchin, p. 16.

own musical faculty (I can write music)."[142] Many other evidences of his interest in music are revealed by any reliable biographer: his contemplating the composition of an opera while he was still in his teens; his setting to music songs of Donne, Hood, and Peacock; his great concern about his son's musical education. It is not therefore surprising that throughout his poetry he accorded music the first place as a means of expressing passion.[143] Thus the inspiration for "Flute-Music" very likely came from this love of music and from the poet's meditation on the powers of fancy.

Correlation with Other Poems

Browning used musical settings to illustrate his theories about life in minor poems such as "Youth and Art" and in three of his great music poems: "A Toccata at Galuppi's," "Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha," and "Abt Vogler." Indeed, the last three represent three specific attitudes to music and life: the first, an aesthetic appreciation without spiritual implications; the second, an intellectual view; and the last, a spiritual, intuitive view.[144] It is interesting that just as at the end of "Abt Vogler" the poet probes the question of good and evil, here he probes the nature of beauty and reality. The conclusions

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[142]R. B. Browning, Ed., The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett. 1845-1846. With Portraits and Facsimiles (New York, 1899), I, 98.

[143]DeVane, Browning's Parleyings, p. 265.

[144]A. Goodrich-Freer, "Robert Browning the Musician," Nineteenth Century, XLIX (April, 1901), 655-7.

are similar, for in both Browning gives his approval to the revelations of the inner voice, the soul. Although "Flute-Music" is related to all the Asolando poems because of the discussion of the fancy, its theme is closest to that of "Development" and "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice," both of which emphasize the teaching function of fancy.

Imagery and Diction

Since it is a poem whose theme is drawn from music, one would expect "Flute-Music" to have many references to music and many musical terms. In his article, "Browning as the Poet of Music," Harris used "Flute-Music" to show Browning's technical insight.[145] The significant point, however, is not that the poet could use terms such as legato (with sustained tone) and staccato (with detached tone), but that he would weave them into his plot so that they become a part of the organic whole; the terms just mentioned prove the flautist to be an imperfect artist, for he plays staccato rather than legato as the music directs. The same is true of caldamente (with warmth): the description of the player's caldamente giving a sensation of icy horribleness to the girl, intensifies the sarcasm which she is trying to impart. As in "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" and other poems in this volume, the reader can follow the basic idea without knowing the full implication of these terms, but he misses many of the undertones the poet was attempting to suggest.[146] And Browning did not confine

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[145]Harris, p. 510.

[146]Ibid.

his musical allusions to technical terms: to show the musician may have been playing for him, the speaker says the flautist may have thought of him as Juliet when he was piping Gounod: one of the most famous operas of Charles Gounod (1818-1895) is Romeo and Juliet. Perhaps more puzzling to the reader is the reference to "an air of Tulou" (l. 73), but it proves that as in most areas of learning Browning's knowledge was not superficial. Jean Lousi Tulou (1786-1865) was a French flautist (thought the world's greatest by his contemporaries), instrument maker, and composer; among his compositions were concertos, a few duets and trios for the flute, fantasies on operatic melodies, and innumerable airs with variations--Browning again was quite precise in using his material.

The allusions to music are not the only ones, though they are the most numerous. When the man is explaining the way water is used to freshen dusty flowers and fruit, he says the ash trees play the part of Aquarius, the sign of the Zodiac which is represented by a water carrier. Also he refers to African natives by having the woman say the flautist's playing irritates her "Till as lief I'd hear some Zulu's/ Bone-piped bag, breath-distent,/ Madden native dances" (ll. 75-7). Reminiscent of "Which?" is the reference to the God of Love, which appears when the man describes the player as having been educated in "Cupid's College" (l. 20). Thus the allusions are varied, even though there are not very many of them.

The imagery is primarily visual, in spite of the fact that this is a musical poem. Not that phrases such as "Bullfinch-bubblings"

(l. 3) and "Owl's fresh hooting" (l. 119) do not appear, but often even the sound of the music is described in visual terms. For example, the fluting which the listener finds so enchanting before the girl enlightens him is described in the opening stanza by a series of rounded images:

> Fine-pearled notes that surely
> Gather, dewdrop-fashion,
> Deep-down in some heart which purely
> Secrets globuled passion--. . .
> (ll. 5-8)

The use of the pearl here not only indicates roundness of form, but as it does elsewhere in Asolando, it carries the connotation of having the highest value. The dewdrop also conveys suggestions of freshness, beauty, and purity. In other figures sight and hearing are both involved. For example, the piping Zulu already mentioned evokes visual and auricular impressions as do the ash tops curtaining the player (l. 11) and softening the reality, serving as a modifying force. The use of a concealing, shielding, softening agent reminds the reader immediately of the screening image in "Dubiety." Most of the others are strictly visual, such as fancy spinning (l. 49), those of struggle and force (ll. 37-9), and the picture of the sky, which may one day be blue and the next completely blank (ll. 35-6). As is readily apparent, after music, nature is the source for most of the imagery. In addition to the many nature images already cited, there is the long one in which is shown how weary, dusty, droopy plants can be restored to beauty and freshness by just a little water. All of these images are used to illustrate the varying points of view held by the two speakers and

indirectly to characterize the two, though this is certainly secondary to the presentation of the theme.

The diction is simple and offers no problems. Alliteration is used, as it often is in this last book of Browning's, to emphasize the imagery, and in describing the messages which the listener thinks he hears in the music, personification is employed extensively, relatively more often than in the other Asolando poems. Careful analysis shows that in "Flute-Music" every element was chosen to develop the theme vividly and forcefully.

Form

Unlike "Arcades Ambo," this is a dialogue in which there is an exchange of ideas; but the speeches, especially the man's, are rather long, and therefore the result is a little more stilted than in "The Lady and the Painter." The trochaic measure, which has a less natural sound than does iambic, may contribute to the stilted air. The many short lines (nine of the twelve in each stanza are trimeter, the other three tetrameter) also intensify this effect.

CHAPTER V

THE POSITION OF ASOLANDO IN BROWNING'S POETIC DEVELOPMENT

As has been emphasized already in this thesis, the Asolando volume has been neglected. For this reason few scholars have attempted to relate it to the whole of Browning's work. The purpose therefore of this chapter will be to examine thoroughly the various relationships which these poems have to earlier works and to try to show the position which the final poems occupy in Browning's poetic development. This examination will consider the sources, the themes, the forms, the imagery, and the diction.

To facilitate this discussion, Browning's poetic career will be divided into three periods: early, up to his marriage and the beginning of his residence in Italy; middle, from the publication of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850) to the appearance of The Ring and the Book (1868-9); and later, the period following 1869. It is generally agreed that the poet's best works were written during the middle period with The Ring and the Book and Men and Women being the high points; the usual judgment could be expressed in terms of Symons' evaluation of Men and Women:

> I do not say that the poet has not touched higher heights since, or perhaps before; but that he has never since or before maintained himself so long on so high a height, never exhibited the rounded perfection, the imagination, thought, passion, melody, variety, all fused in one, never produced a

> single work or group at once so great and so various, admits, I think, of little doubt.[1]

It is the contention of this thesis that Asolando resembles more closely the poetry produced during Browning's middle period than it does that of his last period.

SOURCES

Personal Experience

Many people who have read only the usually anthologized dramatic monologues are completely unprepared for Asolando, in which at least half of the poems are based on the poet's personal experience. Those who are more thoroughly cognizant of the entire Browning canon realize that surprisingly often the poet drew his material from his own life. Since his first poem, the anonymously published Pauline, was heartily condemned by John Stuart Mill for its morbid self-consciousness, the poet did try thereafter generally to present his ideas dramatically, but in later works such as Ferishtah's Fancies and The Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day the disguise behind which he hid was very thin. Even though this was true, even in the early years Browning wrote in his own voice more frequently than might be expected. Some of these personal expressions were among his most popular poems--for example, "By the Fireside" and "One Word More."

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[1]Arthur Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning (London, 1916), p. 104.

Of the sixteen Asolando poems inspired by the poet's personal experiences, roughly a third are frankly autobiographical--the "Prologue," in which he describes his reactions to Italy and especially to Asolo; "Dubiety," in which he relates an incident in his married life; "Development," in which his father's teaching methods are examined; "Speculative" and "Reverie," in which he muses about this life and the next and gives his philosophical reflections on God and the world and man; "Inapprehensiveness," in which he states his feelings for Mrs. Bronson; and finally the "Epilogue," in which he sets forth in what is perhaps its most effective presentation his confident faith in the ultimate goodness of the universe. As far as numbers go, a much smaller percentage of his other poems are openly autobiographical, but it is worth noticing that among them are four works of considerable magnitude (Pauline, Christmas-Eve, Easter-Day, and La Saisiaz). All of these show his struggles to develop an adequate religious faith, which clearly relates them to "Reverie," the longest of the personal poems in Asolando. In shorter poems he writes to or of his friends[2] and relatives[3] and his wife.[4] Asolando poems include memories but in

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[2]Domett in "Waring" and "The Guardian Angel," Geraldine Bates in "A Pretty Woman," Mrs. Coventry Patmore in "A Face."

[3]"May and Death" celebrates the death of his cousin, James Silverthorne.

[4]In addition to the scenes of their married life in "By the Fireside" and "One Word More," there is the famous "Prospice" written shortly after her death, plus "O Lyric Love" from The Ring and the Book, "Never the Time and the Place," and other short poems in which he discusses his memory of her.

only one, "Inapprehensiveness," does he openly discuss his relationship to someone other than his wife.

The larger number of the personal poems in Asolando find their origin, or at least a part of their inspiration, in experiences or emotions of the poet, but are written in a dramatic or semi-dramatic fashion. The spontaneous and beautiful love poems--"Humility," "Poetics," "Summum Bonum," "A Pearl, a Girl"--seem to arise from Browning's delighted reaction to the charms of Edith Bronson or his daughter-in-law or both; "Now" and the four "Bad Dreams" poems have been attributed, rightly or wrongly, to Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore. This tendency to write about himself or his interests in dramatic form is evident in many of Browning's poems. For example, the necessity for Elizabeth Barrett to escape the virtual imprisonment imposed by her father is woven into "The Flight of the Duchess" and his rescue of her was doubtlessly in his mind as he wrote of the flight of Caponsacchi and Pompilia in The Ring and the Book. According to some interpretations, the married life of the Brownings is reflected in such poems as "In Three Days," "In a Year," "Life in a Love," and "Love in a Life."[5] Certainly some of the later poems seem to express Browning's attempt to rationalize his proposal to Lady Ashburton and the humiliation and

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[5]Others for which such personal interpretations have been suggested are: "A Lovers' Quarrel," "Two in the Campagna," "Mr. Sludge the Medium"; it is interesting to note that these deal with misunderstanding between lovers on points on which the Brownings were known to disagree, or in the case of the third example, the discussion of such a subject.

regret which resulted from her refusal: Fifine at the Fair, "St. Martin's Summer," "Numpholeptos," and "Parleying with Bartoli" probably reflect this episode. Experiences with other friends are also found in poems written prior to Asolando: for example, "Now with my soul, Love," which Mrs. Bloomfield-Moore claimed for herself.

It can be seen that in the treatment of personal themes in Asolando Browning was following rather exactly the techniques he had used earlier. Also, although there were a few kinds of personal sources not employed in Asolando,[6] most of the types of experiences set down in his poetry were used consistently. The fact that half of the Asolando poems were the result of the poet's own experiences does show, however, his tendency to use personal themes more and more as he grew older.

Italy

Since Asolando was compiled in Italy, it is not surprising that approximately a fourth of the poems have Italian sources. Browning had been inspired by Italy ever since his first visit, and this love is reflected in several lengthy works (Sordello, Pippa Passes, The Ring and the Book) and many short ones, including some of his most famous monologues ("The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "My Last Duchess," "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Andrea del Sarto"). Thus we can see the poet throughout his career finding in Italy a valuable source for settings and plots.

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[6]The recounting of a dream in "Women and Roses," his attacks on his critics in "Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper, and his personal views on poetry and poets in "At the Mermaid," "Shop," "House," and "Touch Him Ne'er So Lightly."

As he did in all of his Italian poems, Browning made use of Italy in three ways in Asolando. First and most frequently he used historical characters: among these are Augustus in "Imperante Augusto Natus est--," the artists in "Beatrice Signorini," and the ecclesiastical figures in "The Cardinal and the Dog" and "The Bean-Feast." History provided the sources for over half of the Italian poems in Asolando, and the same percentage holds for earlier poems. The arts especially had served him well--from literature, Sordello; from music, Galuppi; from the arts, Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea del Sarto, Guercino (the painter of "The Guardian Angel"), the various painters mentioned in "Old Pictures in Florence." In addition to less well-known poems dealing with historical characters,[7] Browning's masterpiece, The Ring and the Book, is based on actual records of a Roman murder case.

Not only did Italy supply the poet with historical material, but it also gave him legendary tales. "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice" is the most prominent example in Asolando, but "The Pope and the Net," while actually an original tale, is based on ecclesiastical legends. In earlier works Browning did not make much use of Italian legends, though "The Statue and the Bust" immediately comes to mind.

The third way in which Browning used Italy was to provide a setting for his original plots. "Inapprehensiveness" does this most

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[7]Other examples of poems using Italian personages are "Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper," "Cenciaja," "Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial," "Pietro of Abano," "Parleying with Francis Furini."

clearly, for the details of the Asolan countryside are used as a framework through which he can reveal his emotions for Mrs. Bronson. Also in the "Prologue" he explains his view of life in terms of his reactions to Asolo. This method of using Italy was a familiar one for Browning. Had he not done the same thing in Pippa Passes more than forty-five years before? Luria, A Soul's Tragedy, and shorter poems--"Serenade at the Villa," "In a Gondola," "Up at a Villa--Down in the City," "Two in the Campagna"--all show the way in which Browning's imagination was fired by the Italian scene. Certainly, his fascination with the beauty of the Italian scenery and the intensity of Italian life, of which he wrote in "De Gustibus" when he was young, remained with him until the end of his life.

Again it can be seen that in Asolando Browning was drawing upon source material which had long appealed to him and that he treated this material in much the same way throughout his many years as a poet. On this count, at least, Asolando stands firmly in the line of Browning's development. Also, since it is true that his early and middle poems have a stronger Italian flavor than do the later ones, the reverting to earlier methods is again illustrated.

Religion

Most students of Browning's poetry have emphasized the importance of religion in the shaping of the poet's thought and the frequency with which it appeared as a prevailing theme. Some have made religion the primary and, indeed, the only source, as did H. B. Charlton, who

considered that all Browning's poems depicted men who were attempting by one means or another to satisfy their longings for God.[8] It might be expected then that in this final volume religion would be practically the sole topic. This is not the case, and a reader's first impression might well be that religion played a very minor role in the book, one which was definitely subordinate to love in importance. On a second reading, however, he would be more likely to see that religion was a frequently used theme, though obviously not the only one.

In the first place, four of the poems have Roman Catholic priests as key characters. Indeed, in three of these ("The Cardinal and the Dog," "The Pope and the Net," and "The Bean-Feast") a priest is the only character of importance, and "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice" would lose its point without the good Capuchin Father. Such presentations of real or imaginary priests occur in earlier poems, some of them Browning's finest and best known--Pippa Passes, "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," the popes in "The Boy and the Angel" and The Ring and the Book. Perhaps in earlier works these figures occurred in longer and more spectacular poems, but here the method of presentation is much the same: in Asolando, as in other poems, some of the priests are depicted as hypocrites and sly schemers while others have truly saintly natures. Although many of the pictures are extreme, Browning's over-all view is realistic rather than prejudiced.

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[8]H. B. Charlton, "Browning as Poet of Religion," Bulletin of The John Rylands Library, XXVII (June, 1943), 271.

Another facet of religious material which Browning touched upon several times was the impact of the birth of Christ on His contemporaries. "Imperante Augusto Natus est--" follows in the tradition of "An Epistle" and "Cleon." This was not a topic upon which a great number of poems could be based, but its hold upon Browning's interest was a long one, for the earlier poems first appeared in Men and Women, some thirty-four years before Asolando.

Finally, Browning turned to speculation about the nature of life, both here and hereafter, in the "Prologue" and the "Epilogue" and about the nature of God in "Reverie." Although the poet was not a theologian, he was always interested in a non-technical probing of the nature of God. The means by which God is revealed to man, the way that man can best please God, and whether in God's nature Love or Power is predominant were the questions which most frequently concerned him. The information came from the Scriptures[9] and readings in religious writings, but primarily from his own speculations. "Reverie," which deals entirely with the attempt to understand God's nature, has much of the same questioning tone found in the speculative portions of Pauline. Browning's use of

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[9]The Bible is one of the major sources for "Rephan" and in several others suggests important images, such as the potter figure in "Reverie" (this was a favorite image which Browning had very effectively employed in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," though Phelps [William Lyon Phelps, Robert Browning (Indianapolis, 1932), p. 342] believed that there the poet did not draw his inspiration from Scripture but from what he considered FitzGerald's misuse of the image in The Rubaiyat). At any rate, Browning's poems are filled with Biblical allusions, but his subjects were seldom solely Biblical, "Saul," of course, being a major exception.

and approach to religious themes can be judged to be relatively constant throughout his career.

History and Legend

Browning inherited from his father a tremendous interest in history, especially in the obscure byways of history. This preoccupation with the little-known details of Italian history was largely responsible for the difficulty of Sordello, and historical minutiae remained a part of Browning to the end of his life, though never again would it make one of his works nearly incomprehensible. Closely related to his use of recorded history was his reliance on legendary material. Of course, some of the legends are clearly fanciful, but in the case of others there is a mixture of authenticated facts and legends--for example, the characters may be historical and the incident legendary.

Browning made use of historical and legendary sources in a number of ways. Sometimes, as in "Beatrice Signorini," he followed his source with great faithfulness. Whether Baldinucci, whom he used here, and Vasari, his other chief source of information for the lives of Italian painters, were reliable historians has often been questioned. Nevertheless, they claimed to be writing history, and Browning, seemingly, accepted their records as such, though adding the magic ingredient of fancy or the imagination, which he found absolutely necessary, as he said in The Ring and the Book, to make truth malleable. Actually in his artists' lives there is not very much fancy added. Although these poems are not numerous, the greatest ("Fra Lippo Lippi," "Andrea del

Sarto," "Old Pictures in Florence") were written during his middle years; thus "Beatrice Signorini" indicates a return to a type of subject and source which the poet had used most extensively in an earlier period.

There is a rather thin line drawn between the method just described and the next one in which the tales about historical figures were found in the poet's sources but probably belonged to the realm of legend rather than fact. How much, for example, of the incident recorded in Scott and Browning's other sources for "Muckle-Mouth Meg" really happened is hard to tell: perhaps none of it--probably just enough of it to catch the imaginations of various storytellers who elaborated on it until it obtained the dimensions which Browning gave it. So, too, might be the case for "The Bean-Feast"; Leti's Lives of the Popes was supposedly factual, but many legends were included. Down through the years one of the poet's favorite sources was Nathaniel Wanley's History of the Little World,[10] which is an excellent example of a mixture of history and legend. Generally, Browning used legendary sources with more originality and imagination than he did his historical ones.

A method more frequently used by Browning was the taking of a historical character as a starting point and from there evolving an imaginary event. For example, in Asolando "Rosny" portrays a French

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[10] Wanley not only gave Browning the material for Asolando's "The Cardinal and the Dog," but also provided him with background for "The Pied Piper," Paracelsus (along with other more factual sources), "Transcendentalism," "Pietro of Abano," "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," "Pambo."

warrior about whom a great many facts are known, but nowhere is recorded information which relates or even gives any background for the incident the poet describes. The same is true, with a slight difference, for "Imperante Augusto Natus est--": here the historical events are portrayed with great faithfulness and serve as a backdrop for an entirely imaginary scene. This mixing of fact and imagination was a favorite device of Browning's and is found in many of his best poems, with the two elements occurring in a variety of proportions. Paracelsus is the earliest example, and Sordello, Stafford, and King Victor and King Charles followed soon after. Many of the shorter poems are similarly constructed, as for example: "Incident of the French Camp," which uses Napoleon in much the same way Rosny is used, "A Toccata at Galuppi," "Clive," "Cristina and Monaldeschi," "Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli," "Henre Riel," The Ring and the Book, and The Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day. Thus this method was one employed consistently by Browning and certainly was not one whose use was confined to the early and middle periods, though it was more prominent then.

At times Browning relied on legends which he evidently had heard or read many years before but which he did not consult specifically for the composition of an individual poem. Such would seem to be the case with the legend referred to in "A Pearl, a Girl." Some of the poems based on rabbinical lore ("Doctor ------," "Solomon and Balkis," "Jochanan Hakkadosh," "Adam, Lilith, and Eve") and some of the eastern tales ("Muleykeh," Ferishtah's Fancies) were probably of this type.

In his last years it was characteristic for the poet to introduce material which he remembered from his earlier reading.

Literature

Literary sources played an important part in Browning's composition, and the sources were as varied as the poet's tastes were catholic. From "Development" we discover that the poet read the Greek classics at a relatively early age and showed consistent interest in them throughout his life.[11] Other than in the translations of Greek plays, in his work as a whole Browning made two hundred and thirty-three references to twenty-one Greek sources and two hundred and forty-two references to twenty-two Latin sources; in Asolando he made five references to three

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[11]This persistent interest in things Greek should not be taken as proof that Browning was temperamentally at one with the Greeks. (T. C. Snow, "Browning as a Classical Scholar," Classical Review, IV [1890], 58; W. C. Lawton, "The Classical Element in Browning's Poetry," American Journal of Philology, XVII [April-June, 1896], 199-200; Edmund D. Cressman, "The Classical Poems of Robert Browning," Classical Journal, XXIII [December, 1927], 207.) DeVane sums up the reasons for this precaution by saying:

"His imagination was utterly un-Hellenic. He was, as Arnold said, absorbed in multitudinousness, and the breathless energy that he brought to bear upon everything fits strangely upon the still, static reverence for the eternal and unchanging law which was the spirit of Greek literature. Upon other English poets, Shelley, Arnold, Tennyson, and Even Keats, the Greek spirit worked for order, simplicity, unity of effect. But Browning's heart was in the present, in the spectacle of contemporary humanity, in concrete and vivid actualities, in the scrutiny of human motives, in the development of a soul from weakness to strength. He brought realistic detail into the antique world, along with the most anachronistic ideas and interpretations. This urgency and multitudiousness were more than Greek myth and story could bear, with the possible exception of those of Euripides." (William C. DeVane, "Browning and the Spirit of Greece," Nineteenth-Century Studies. Collected and Edited by Herbert Davis, William C. DeVane, and R. C. Bald, [Ithaca, New York, 1940], p. 182-3.)

Greek sources and seventeen references to five Roman sources. During Browning's early period he made fewer references to classical sources than he did in the middle and late period, but then the body of material is less extensive. In the early period the references were almost equally divided between Greek and Latin authors and sources. In the middle period the number of Greek and Roman authors referred to is approximately equal, but the references to Latin works are almost twice as numerous as are those to Greek works. In the last period, with the exception of Asolando, the order is reversed, and there are twice as many references to Greek writers and twice as many allusions to Greek literature (the three translations come in this last period, also).[12] Browning prophesied truly when he wrote in "By the Fireside" that as an old man he would read Greek. On the basis of this analysis,[13] it can be seen that in the matter of classical sources Asolando follows more closely the pattern of the middle period than it does that of the late one.

Other than the classical sources there are not very many literary sources for the Asolando poems, and most of those are English: the writings of Jane Taylor, Sir Walter Scott, Hannah More, Vernon Lee,

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[12]

	Greek		Roman	
Period	Authors	Works	Authors	Works
Early	10	31	10	33
Middle	17	71	18	128
Late	17	83	8	32

[13]Thurman Hood, "Browning's Ancient Classical Sources," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, XXXIII (1922), 78-180.

Jeremy Taylor, and Ben Jonson, whose poem may be a parallel rather than a source. Except for Jane Taylor, whose work suggested the title for "How It Strikes a Contemporary," these writers did not influence earlier poems. The habit of referring to English writers or of taking from them suggestions for poems, however, was not a new one for the elderly Browning. Since he was not a slavish imitator (except in the case of Shelley and that only for a brief period when he was very young), Browning frequently used literary sources but generally these sources served only a minor function in the poem as a whole, almost always being subordinate to the original portions of the work. In his writings prior to Asolando the poet made occasional references to literatures other than the classical and the English, but this tendency is reflected only rarely in the final volume.[14]

Browning seems to have used his literary sources, classical as well as English, in two distinct ways: sometimes the sources suggested beginning points for poems; at other times the poet used a single idea gleaned from a specific work. The first is more readily seen and for this reason is often thought to be the more important. For example, Jane Taylor's story, "How It Strikes a Stranger," suggested the situation in "Rephan." Instances of this use of sources for earlier poems are too numerous to mention, but some of the most obvious are the

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[14]The only instances are the possible influence of Gli Asolani on "Which?" the discussion of German scholarship on Homer in "Development," and the suggested but minor parallel for "The Pope and the Net" in Sacchetti's hundred and forty-ninth novella.

germ for "Childe Roland," which was provided by King Lear, and the figure of Caliban, which was suggested by The Tempest; the same procedure, with a slight difference, is found in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," which may be a reply to FitzGerald's The Rubaiyat. The second method may be illustrated by the passing reference in "Imperante Augusto Natus est--" to a theory of Jeremy Taylor's. The poet did this so continuously, and often without any mention of the author's name, that it would be superfluous to attempt to cite examples.

Conclusion

Although it is dangerous to generalize on the basis of such a superficial examination, the study of the sources for Asolando indicates that the elderly poet did not turn to new and untried areas to supply him with inspiration or facts. Most of the sources were ones he had used consistently, but occasionally, as with his preference for Roman rather than Greek sources, he tended in Asolando to imitate the habits of his middle period. The thing which most distinctly stands in opposition to the practices of his middle years is the frequency with which he draws his material from his own life.

SUBJECTS AND THEMES

Because Asolando is a collection of poems which deal with many different subjects even though there is a unifying theme, this volume would seem to be fairly representative of Browning's interests in his later years and therefore a good starting place for an examination of

the continuity of his subjects throughout his poetic career. When one remembers the whole of Browning's work, it is quite apparent, of course, that many subjects which had intrigued him at various times[15] could not be covered in a mere thirty poems, but Asolando is more comprehensive than one might suspect.

Miscellaneous Subjects

In a collection of poems about a variety of subjects, it is to be expected that some of them will not fit into general classifications, and so it is in Asolando. Most of these miscellaneous topics, however, had occurred earlier in Browning's writing. For example, his horror at the practice of vivisection, shown in Asolando by "Arcades Ambo," and at the needless slaughtering of animals, shown by "The Painter and the Lady," was also presented in "Tray" (1879). These themes appeared late in the poet's career (although his intense love of animals was constantly revealed through his detailed and sympathetic pictures of them in many of his works) because the use of vivisection did not become an issue until the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The evil of improper treatment of animals is a minor theme, both in Asolando and in Browning's work as a whole, but the sincerity of his views is clearly obvious to those who read these three poems. In much the same way Browning's ideas concerning painting from the nude are expressed in "The

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[15]For example, studies of madness ("Madhouse Cells"), English history ("Cavalier Tunes"), English politics ("Why I am a Liberal"), Italian politics (Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, "Italian in England"), spiritualism ("Mr. Sludge the Medium").

Lady and the Painter" and mentioned in passing in "Beatrice Signorini." This theme had interested the poet much more intensely at an earlier time, for in 1886 when he was writing the "Parleying with Francis Furini," he was enraged by the aspersions cast at his son's paintings of nudes, but since that conflict had been concluded before 1889, the Asolando references are relatively mild. Theories about painting had appeared in the works of the poet's middle years, especially in "Fra Lippo Lippi," but the specific question of the morality of nudes was one which he considered primarily in his later years, again probably because external forces had not forced it upon him before.

If the two subjects just mentioned were prominent only in Browning's later poetry, this is not true of the subject of "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--." In his middle years the poet was extremely interested in the reactions of contemporaries to the life and teachings of Christ. Two of the finest poems in Men and Women (1855), "An Epistle of Karshish" and "Cleon," presented this subject. Even though Browning wrote many poems with religious themes in the years following 1855, it was not until Asolando that he dealt again with this precise subject. These poems, though few in number, are rated among his best (to the minds of most critics "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" is the most praiseworthy piece in the final volume). Another subject which had appeared in earlier productions is the presentation of nightmarish visions. This theme is a part of all the "Bad Dreams" poems, but especially of the third: although all have been classified as love poems, it is possible to consider the subject matter of the third

without any considerations other than the horror inspired by a terrible dream. The closest resemblance is found in "Childe Roland" (1855).[16]

The only theme found in Asolando which belongs distinctively to the last volume is the problem of age. The greater perception which comes with age, an idea suggested in "Dubiety" and "Speculative," had been fervently proclaimed in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" (1864) and touched on in shorter poems such as "Pisgah Sights I" (1875) and "Ivan Ivanovitch" (1879), but only in the "Prologue" to Asolando did Browning allow himself to admit that the glory had departed from the world. This new pessimistic theme does not prevail even in this single poem, and the conclusion that the realistic view of life is preferable reminds us of the philosophic acceptance of the mixture of good and evil set forth in "Pisgah Sights I" and "A Bean-Stripe: Also Apple-Eating," but it is interesting to see a new note in the final volume, even though it is a very fleeting one.

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[16] In a discussion of the poetry of Tennyson and Browning, Heath-Stubbs wrote: "In the poetry of Browning . . . the element of the Horrible persists, though it peeps out obscenely, and for brief moments only, from amid . . . his tortuous thickets of half-digested thought. . . . He was capable, in Childe Roland, of a pure exercise in the Horrible. It is to be noted that, for all its masterly handling of atmosphere, the emphasis/ in this poem is not on moral evil, but on sheer physical pain and beastliness: . . .

"So also in The Heretic's Tragedy, despite its profounder subject. But usually the horror is felt only as a momentary shudder--arising, for instance, from such an image as the 'lump of lapis lazuli. . . . Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape' of The Bishop Orders His Tomb--such images have nothing to do with the intellectual creed of courage and optimism which was the outward face Browning turned to the world." (John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain. A Study of the Later Fortunes of Romanticism in English Poetry From George Darley to W. B. Yeats [London, 1950], p. 59-60.)

Narratives

Of the thirty poems in Asolando there are nine in which the narrative element predominates. All of these narratives set forth the general theme of the volume, and four ("Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice," "Beatrice Signorini," "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--," and "Rephan") illustrate other themes also; the story-telling motive behind them is so strong, however, that they deserve some consideration simply as narratives. "Muckle-Mouth Meg," "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice," and "The Cardinal and the Dog" are the three in which the movement of the narrative overshadows everything else. Disregarding the dramas, the works of Browning's early and middle periods frequently contained such poems.[17] In other poems the narrative element is used as a means of revealing character: in Asolando "Rosny," "The Pope and the Net," "The Bean-Feast," and "Beatrice Signorini" are the leading examples of this technique. Again, this was a type of poem in which Browning excelled and which he emphasized in his early and middle years.[18] In attempting to show that Browning's final poems are more closely akin

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[17]For example, "How They Brought the Good News," "The Laboratory," "The Confessional," "Incident of the French Camp," "The Patriot," "The Boy and the Angel," "The Glove," "The Pied Piper," "Holy Cross Day," "Childe Roland" (according to Browning, although such an interpretation was never accepted by members of the Browning Society), "The Flight of the Duchess," "Artemis Prologizes," The Inn Album, and most of the poems in Dramatic Idyls and Jocoseria.

[18]"Johannes Agricola in Meditation," "The Statue and the Bust," "Porphyria's Lover," "In a Balcony," "Saul," "Count Gismond," "In a Gondola"; also the monologues of Men and Women and Dramatis Personae contain important narrative passages, as do The Ring and the Book and many of the dramas.

to those of the earlier and middle years rather than to those of the later ones, it is interesting and significant to notice that after the second series of Dramatic Idyls (1880) the poet rejected the predominantly narrative poem in favor of those discussing philosophy and only returned to the narrative in his last years.

Love

Half of the Asolando poems have love as a major theme. That Browning should be so concerned with love is not surprising to anyone with a good general knowledge of his works. Of the poems in Dramatic Lyrics (1842), Dramatic Romances (1845), Men and Women (1855) and Dramatis Personae (1864) the same percentage would be found. When one adds to this list the plays such as Pippa Passes, A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, Columbe's Birthday, The Return of the Druses, and the longer poems such as Pauline, Paracelsus, and The Ring and the Book, in all of which love plays an important, though not necessarily the major, role, he realizes that prior to The Ring and the Book, Browning was almost preoccupied with love. Some love poems are found after The Ring and the Book, but Browning's tendency was to deal more with the nature of men than with love between a man and a woman. It is significant then to discover that the percentage of love poems in Asolando is comparable not to those in the volumes immediately preceding it but to those of a much earlier date.

As was true of any subject which interested him, Browning here and throughout his career treated love in an encyclopaedic fashion. Of

the various aspects of love which the poet stressed in these late poems, almost all had been emphasized earlier. Browning was always interested in probing the nature of love. In Asolando he gives a series of examples of the various obstacles which love can meet and overcome: the commonplace ("A Pearl, a Girl"), ridicule ("White Witchcraft"), lack of response ("Inapprehensiveness"), heartbreak ("Bad Dreams I"), suspicion of unfaithfulness ("Bad Dreams II"), death ("Dubiety," "Speculative," "Bad Dreams IV"), the necessity of sharing the beloved with another ("Humility," "Now"). Similar incidents were related in earlier poems: love overcomes separation ("Cristina," "In Three Days"), death ("Evelyn Hope," "Any Wife to Any Husband"--the wife feels that she would remain faithful even though she doubts that her husband will), rejection ("The Last Ride Together," "Love in a Life," "Life in a Love," "James Lee's Wife," "The Lost Mistress"), unfaithfulness ("Andrea del Sarto," "The Worst of It"), unfair demands ("A Woman's Last Word"), misunderstanding ("A Lovers' Quarrel"), the beloved's indifference or her lack of knowledge of her lover ("Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli," "Serenade at the Villa"). Not only did the poet consider love capable of overcoming hardships, but he felt that love was the means of bringing about the moment of highest exaultation of which the human being was capable, the "perfect moment." The theme of the perfect moment, which is depicted vividly in "Now" and "Summum Bonum," had appeared many times in Browning's poems, especially in "Meeting at Night," "Love Among the Ruins," "Porphyria's Lover" (though here it is somewhat distorted by being seen through the eyes of a madman), and "The Italian

in England." The fact that the love shared by a man and a woman is powerful enough to create such a moment is the poet's final proof of the strength and value of love.

So valuable did Browning find the process of loving that he believed the one who loved benefited even when his love was not returned. "Bad Dreams I," "Humility," and "Inapprehensiveness" emphasize this theme, which frequently appears in the poems of Browning's middle period: for example, "Cristina," "Evelyn Hope," "Love in a Life," "Life in a Love," and the poems in which Browning's noble rejected lovers are presented--"The Last Ride Together," "The Lost Mistress," "One Way of Love." Here again Browning remains in the tradition of earlier works.

Sometimes Browning's love poems seem to contradict themselves, for in "Which?" and "Rosny" he declares that those who are willing to place a higher value on any quality other than love are not persons deserving love, and yet in "Humility" and "Now" the poet says he can ask only a portion of the girl's love and that he is blessed if she will share a small part with him. Certainly Browning had often been scornful of those who permitted hesitancy, fear of scandal, or the judgments of others to keep them from following the directions indicated by their hearts: "The Statue and the Bust" immediately comes to mind, but other instances are found in "Dîs Aliter Visum," "Too Late," "Youth and Art," and "Respectability." On the other hand, the idea of sharing love is implied in "Italian in England" and the perfect-moment poems. It does seem to be more stressed in Asolando, however,

possibly because the aged poet could not expect any young girl to return his love single-heartedly. Closely related to this is another favorite topic, which appears in Asolando almost as often as it does in earlier works, the picture of the unsuccessful lover. In the "Bad Dreams" series the lovers are frustrated by various means, but in "Inapprehensiveness" the woman refuses to allow the poet even to bring his feelings to the surface. Although the elderly Browning does not, understandably, present so gallant and dashing a figure as do the younger rejected lovers, the representation of him reveals a close kinship to them. Thus it can be seen that there are only two real differences between the Asolando love poems and those which had been written earlier: there is a larger percentage (approximately 50 per cent) of poems written in a personal rather than a dramatic fashion and a larger number written to persons other than his wife.[19] The love poems, perhaps, more than those in any other group illustrate the poet's consistency in choice of subject and his tendency in this last volume to follow rather closely the pattern used during his middle years.

The Nature of the World

It is not surprising that after nearly twenty years (the period following The Ring and the Book) of probing the nature of the world, Browning should return to this theme in several of his last poems. Although little of what he said was new, many of the points which he

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[19]See above, p. 256.

had emphasized earlier were just touched upon lightly in Asolando. For example, the poet had laid at various times great stress on the glory of the created world, even though he was never primarily a nature poet. In the words of Fra Lippo Lippi, he believed

> This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good: . . .
> (ll. 313-4)

In Asolando little is actually said about this theme except in the "Prologue" where the beauty of the world in general and of Asolo in particular is described as being so overpowering that during the poet's youth it was able to blind his eyes to the glory of the power behind the universe. In "The Lady and the Painter" the theme is mentioned again as the painter asserts his conviction that man should not destroy God's creation, especially the living portions of it, merely to satisfy his own selfish whims, and in "Inapprehensiveness" the beauty of the Asolan scenery serves as a background.

Browning was likewise consistent in his theories concerning the necessity of action in human life and the desirability of struggle. To be sure, in "Dubiety" he seems to advocate peaceful leisure, but a closer reading indicates that this is merely a temporary state which will lead to the perfect moment. In "Rephan" it is struggle and growth which give to life upon this earth its distinctive and desirable quality, and the poet considered the glory of constant striving to be important enough to be included in the "Epilogue," his final affirmation of faith. As was pointed out in the discussion of the love poems, Browning thought a person who permitted himself to be held back from something he wanted,

usually happiness in love, was to be condemned and certainly deserved the unhappiness which he received. In realms other than love, he also saw a need for action, for seizing all opportunities to move forward without becoming satisfied with any level of perfection. Andrea del Sarto discovers that his ability to draw without error or effort keeps his pictures from having any spark of life. "Rabbi Ben Ezra," in which the tone anticipates the one found in some of the Asolando poems, shows that progress is never made by "satisfied" men and indicates that a man is not judged by what he actually accomplishes but by the goals which he strives to reach. "Abt Vogler" suggests that the glimpses of perfection on earth, though they do not last, encourage the human struggler by suggesting the glory which will be his in the next world.

According to a widely held but misinformed view, Browning was completely unaware of the presence of evil in the world. Anyone holding such an opinion would be profoundly shocked if he read many of his later poems, including "Reverie" in Asolando. To be sure, there are several other poems in Asolando which show the poet's recognition of evil (the speaker in "Rephan" chooses earth in spite of the fact that evil is mixed with good, and evil, selfish characters are portrayed in the lawyer in "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice," the pope in "The Pope and the Net," and the cardinal in "The Cardinal and the Dog"), but it is in "Reverie" that good and evil are shown in conflict with each other. The presentation of evil in the world occurred frequently in Browning's early and middle poems, particularly in the depiction of his many wicked characters, and in The Ring and the Book the conflict

between good and evil is dramatically set forth, but it is in the poetry of the later period, especially in Fifine at the Fair, La Saisiaz, and Ferishtah's Fancies, that he pondered upon this problem at greatest length. In "A Bean-Stripe: Also Apple-Eating"[20] he reached the conclusion that good and evil are inextricably mixed in this world, but throughout Ferishtah's Fancies and in Asolando he keeps his optimistic belief that someday this will change and good will become the most powerful force in the world. In the end then, as in the beginning, of his poetic career, Browning's optimism was not blind: he was well aware that on earth perfection was not to be found while evil deeds and evil people were everywhere in evidence. But always he believed that behind the evil there is a benevolent God who will ultimately bring good out of evil.

The Nature of Truth

The attempt to discover the nature of truth is the most prevalent theme in Asolando, and many facets of the question are discussed. Among these is the method by which one perceives truth. In the "Prologue" truth is given to man by direct revelation, as was done earlier in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, but this means is not stressed, in Asolando or elsewhere. Much more frequently Browning pictures man as leaning instinctively toward truth, which could, of course, be interpreted as one kind of revelation. The head versus the heart theme is one which has been a favorite with many authors, Browning included.

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[20]Also in "Pisgah Sights I."

In his early works, such as Paracelsus, Browning gave equal prominence to the two, but as he grew older, the poet came to distrust the intellect more and more and to emphasize instinct as the more dependable guide.[21] In several of the Ferishtah's Fancies poems (especially "The Family" and "Shah Abbas") instinct is ranked above the intellect. In Asolando reason is definitely placed below instinct: "Reverie" shows that the mind can take man just so far, and in "Which?" the woman who makes the best choice is guided by instinct. Likewise in "Flute-Music, with an Accompaniment" the speaker finds his instinctive interpretation of the sounds a more delightful and a more perceptive one than the realistic version given by his companion.

Also discussed is growth in the perception of truth, which the poet believed could often be gradual. This conviction is applied to religion in "A Death in the Desert" and lies behind the doctrine of the imperfect and the belief that age is preferable to youth, which is stated in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and "Pisgah Sights I." The keener awareness of truth which comes with age is suggested in "Dubiety" and fully set forth in "Development."

The nature of truth is discussed most specifically, however, in the attempt to show the proper relationship between facts and fancies. This prevailing theme, which is announced by the subtitle, is, as has already been mentioned, the unifying motif. Every poem in some way is

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[21]The best discussion of the change and development in Browning's theory is found in Henry Jones, Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher (London, 1912).

related to this theme, and also the subject is approached from almost every possible angle. Although in no other single volume did the poet give such an encyclopaedic analysis of the theme, it was not a new one for him. As early as Pippa Passes he had pointed out the frequent discrepancies between fancy and fact and had concretely illustrated the wide breach between the two in such poems as "How It Strikes a Contemporary" and "Gold Hair." The Ring and the Book declares through the ring symbolism that one often needs fancy to aid in the presentation of truth, an idea which is not abandoned in Asolando, for both "Development" and "Flute-Music, with An Accompaniment" present fancy as a stepping stone to truth. Nevertheless, as Browning became older, he was inclined to place far greater emphasis on the value of facts until in the "Prologue" to Asolando he chose reality as preferable, even though disillusionment was inherent in the rejection of fancy's view.

Conclusion

As was true for the examination of the sources, a study of the themes and subjects used in Asolando yields a two-fold result. Browning's subjects were not new ones, and some of them reflected attitudes toward which he had been working for some years. On the other hand, he was prone to go back to subjects he had emphasized much earlier and reintroduce them.

FORM

In Asolando Browning used several verse forms and a great number of rhyme schemes. It would seem rather pointless to list each form and trace all earlier examples. It is significant, however, to examine the general characteristics of his metrics and the types of poems which he included in Asolando. It is also important to note the way the form is used to increase the effectiveness of a poem.

Metrics

In his thorough study of Browning's versification,[22] Hatcher proves that the poet was adept in the use of a tremendous variety of poetic forms, which he frequently modified to fit his needs.[23] In spite of the freedoms which the poet took with established forms, Hatcher thinks that to the careful student it

> . . . should be clear . . . that Browning not only had an ear, but a very unusual one for a poet. It leapt lightly over combinations of sounds which gave pause to less agressive ears, and took delight in lines which must be subdued and conquered by a strong subjective feeling for pattern. This fact is the key to many of the peculiarities and much of the individuality of Browning's verse.[24]

Asolando shows that the poet retained his metrical skill to the end of his life.

Blank verse, which had served him well in the famous monologues and The Ring and the Book, appears only twice in the final volume,

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[22]Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, The Versification of Robert Browning (Columbus, Ohio, 1928).

[23]Ibid., p. 7.

[24]Ibid., p. 30.

primarily because the poems for the most part are lyrical rather than dramatic. "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" and "Development," two of the best poems, indicate, however, that the poet's technique had not varied: throughout his career Browning's blank verse was shaped by the demands of the dramatic monologue and by his own peculiarities of speech.[25]

As is true for the great body of English poetry, iambic is the most commonly used poetic foot in Asolando, often appearing in the love lyrics in tetrameter lines. Such a combination, which for example gives "Speculative" and "Bad Dreams I and IV" a limpid naturalness, appears in a number of earlier poems, including "Porphyria's Lover," "Two in the Campagna," and "In Three Days." Longer iambic lines were also used in Asolando, particularly in the narratives ("Beatrice Signorini" and "The Bean-Feast") and in the philosophical poems ("Prologue"). Closely related is the ballad-like measure occurring in the iambic heptameter lines of "The Pope and the Net," "The Bean-Feast," "The Cardinal and the Dog" and "White Witchcraft." Although they do not follow precisely the pattern of alternating tetrameters and trimeters, the use of the caesura definitely suggests it.[26]

Browning was never one to restrict himself to a single metrical form, and it is therefore not surprising to find him writing in both

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[25] Ibid., p. 40.

[26] Content and method of presentation in "Muckle-Mouth Meg" and "Rosny" bear a close resemblance to ballad techniques, but in "Muckle-Mouth Meg" the form is anapestic, and in "Rosny" a combination of iambic, trochaic, and anapestic feet is found.

trochees and anapests in the last volume. Trochaic feet are found in "Flute-Music, With an Accompaniment," "Humility," and "Poetics" (in the last two, the opening line is iambic, but the rest trochaic). Although never so popular a form as iambic, trochaic measure had been employed in some of the better-known works of earlier periods: "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," "A Serenade at the Villa," and "One Word More." Generally the poet's trochaic lines have a smooth, musical tone in spite of the fact that normal speech patterns do not easily conform to the demands of this measure. Anapestic lines occur even less frequently in Asolando, for only "Summum Bonum" and "Muckle-Mouth Meg" are written consistently in this meter. Three-syllable measures make for more rapid movement than do two-syllable ones because of the larger number of unstressed syllables and the shorter time value given to the individual syllable, and it is for this reason that Browning used anapestic measure in Asolando. Even though the poet could create a calm and deliberate tone with anapests ("In a Balcony," for instance), he primarily used this measure in poems in which he emphasized the speed of the action: "The Glove," "How They Brought the Good News," "The Laboratory," and parts of "The Flight of the Duchess."[27]

Five Asolando poems ("Dubiety," "Bad Dreams II," "Which?" "Rephan," and "Reverie") are written in what Hatcher has called duple-triple measure. This form, which appears in some fifty Browning poems, is a combination of two-syllable and three-syllable feet, iambic and

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[27]Hatcher, p. 159-60.

anapestic being the two most frequently combined.[28] Although it occurs throughout the poet's career, duple-triple measure is most prominently found in his middle period where it appears in such important works as "Old Pictures in Florence," "Evelyn Hope," "My Star," and "Up at a Villa--Down in the City."

Going a step farther, in the "Epilogue" to Asolando Browning wrote in quadruple or dipodic measure. Describing this form, Hatcher commented:

> Verse in four-four time or quadruple rhythm has as a norm a measure of four syllables. It differs from ordinary iambic or trochaic rhythm in that it is felt in time units of four syllables instead of two because the third syllable of each measure carries a stress distinctly lighter than the first. The heavy stresses falling upon the first, fifth, ninth (etc.) syllables establish the four syllable time grouping. . . . Once the movement is established, it moves with an irresistible swing; and the expectancy it incites in aggressive ears is strong enough to subordinate any conflicting prose rhythm of the phrases.[29]

The broad sweeping rhythm of this measure often helps convey a conversational tone, which may be one reason that it appealed to the poet. With some variations, it had been employed in ten earlier works including "A Toccato of Galuppi's," "Love Among the Ruins," "Through the Metidja to Abd-El-Kadr," "Herve Riel," La Saisiaz, and the "Epilogue" to Fifine. Although it was never one of Browning's more common forms, it does occur in works whose dates of composition span the poet's middle and later periods.

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[28] Ibid., p. 169.

[29] Ibid., p. 181.

Occasionally Browning composed a poem for which it is impossible to isolate any basic metrical pattern. "Now" is an excellent example. Its fourteen lines would seem to indicate that it is a sonnet, but it has neither the meter nor the rhyme scheme of a conventional sonnet.[30] It is not surprising that a poet who took as many liberties with metrical form as did Browning would sometimes find himself writing free verse, whether he intended to or not.

This brief survey of the metrics of the Asolando poems reveals that Browning relied upon the measures which he had used before, often from the earliest years of his poetic career. Except for the decreasing emphasis upon blank verse, little of significance is pointed up, and even here the prevalence of other forms may be explained in terms of the number of short love poems in the last volume.

Stanza Forms

In Asolando Browning used a variety of stanza forms, relying on no one alone. The couplet form was one of the more common, appearing in a sixth of the poems. In two instances, "Inapprehensiveness" and "Beatrice Signorini," he chose pentameter couplets. Although he generally employed the open form (the eight lines of "Fame" being the only exception), the poet seemed to find couplets somewhat confining:

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[30]Of the nine sonnets Browning wrote, several were unconventional in form; a good example is "Eyes calm beside thee (Lady, couldst thou know!)." It is interesting to note that the poet generally suppressed his sonnets, perhaps because he realized he was not at his best when he was forced to conform to rigid limits such as those demanded by the traditional. (Ibid., p. 132-3).

Sordello and the Parleyings both employ pentameter couplets, it is true, but all the other examples are relatively brief. Browning's works in this form are surprisingly regular, but in a poem such as "My Last Duchess" the rhymes are so subtle that the casual reader might think he was reading blank verse. The pentameter couplets in Asolando offer no exceptions to the poet's usual methods.[31] Two other examples of couplets occur in "The Cardinal and the Dog" and "The Bean-Feast" (the seven-line epilogue of "The Bean-Feast" follows the rhyme royal stanza except for the trimeter in the last line[32]). Actually, as was noted earlier,[33] the pronounced caesuras in these heptameter lines suggest the tetrameter-trimeter movement of the ballad and keep the reader from being really aware of the couplet form; the reader of "Martin Relph" has a similar reaction. In the final example, the tetrameter couplets in "Humility" are arranged in six-line stanzas because the poet wished to emphasize a break in the subject matter; this, too, draws the reader's attention away from the couplet form.

The tercet, rhyming aaa, has been a favorite with many poets. Browning experimented with it nine times, including three in Asolando: "The Pope and the Net," "White Witchcraft," and "Rephan." Interestingly enough, most of the other examples come from his later period.[34] The poet gave variety to his use of the tercet by using different line lengths: for example, tetrameters in "Rephan," four-measure dipodic

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[31] Ibid., p. 141-5.

[32] Ibid., p. 126.

[33] See above, p. 283.

[34] Hatcher, p. 111-3.

lines in "A Toccata of Galuppi's," hexameters in "Up at a Villa--Down in the City" and "Echetlos," heptameters in "White Witchcraft," "The Pope and the Net," and the epilogues to "The Melon-Seller" and "Shah Abbas," and octameters in the epilogue to "The Family." He also showed his skill by usually having the thought flow from one stanza to the next although the form would seem to make the stanza division very pronounced.

Although Browning frequently wrote in quatrains, he did not let this form predominate in his poetry as some poets have. Certainly it is not the prevailing stanza in Asolando, appearing in only four poems (five if one includes "The Bean-Feast" in which the couplets are divided into quatrains in printing). The quatrain with alternating rhymes is the usual form: not only is it represented in "Dubiety," "Poetics," "Bad Dreams I," and "Muckle-Mouth Meg," but in twenty-one earlier poems, most of them relatively brief works such as "The Lost Mistress," "House," "Youth and Art," "Memorabilia," "A Light Woman," "Donald," and "Magical Nature." The examples span the entire period of Browning's poetic career.[35]

Browning differed from most English poets in his preference for the five-line stanza, which occurs six times in Asolando ("Rosny" is included, for it is basically a quintain with the two short refrain lines simply added) and twenty-four times in previous volumes. The possibilities for endless variation which are inherent in the form are probably the reason he found it so congenial. One of his favorite rhyme

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[35] Ibid., p. 114-9.

schemes was ababb, which appears in iambic tetrameter in "Bad Dreams IV" and "Speculative" as well as in the earlier "Shop." The same rhyme scheme is found in approximately half the stanzas of the "Prologue" to Asolando, though there the fifth line is a trimeter, and in "Bad Dreams II," which is written in duple-triple trimeters. A similar rhyme pattern, ababa, occurs in the other stanzas of the "Prologue" (iambic tetrameters and timeters) and in "Reverie" (duple-triple trimeters). This rhyme scheme appears with varying measures in such earlier poems as "Two in the Campagna," "Popularity," "Gold Hair," "A Serenade at the Villa," and "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha." A variation which does not occur elsewhere is found in "Rosny," where the rhyme scheme is aabab plus two short refrain lines.[36]

Contrary to the practice of most poets, Browning employed the six-line stanza less frequently than he did the five-line stanza. He wrote twenty-two poems in this form, including three in Asolando. In earlier works the stanza was most often used with tetrameter lines rhyming ababcc or with tetrameter couplets; the first does not appear in the last volume, but "Humility" illustrates the second. The other two Asolando representatives, "Which?" and "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice," are in highly individualized forms.

All of the other stanza forms found in Asolando display wide variations and have few connections with those used in other Browning poems. Three are written in seven-line stanzas, but although the poet

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[36]Ibid., p. 119-23.

used this form in five other works, there is no set rhyme scheme for this stanza. "A Pearl, a Girl" is really two sestains (ababcc) with refrain line x, while "Arcades Ambo" and "The Lady and the Painter" use combinations of a quatrain and a tercet (ababccc). "Summum Bonum" is an eight-line stanza. The poet employed such stanzas in twenty-seven poems, but only three of these ("Deaf and Dumb," "Eurydice to Orpheus," and "Summum Bonum") are composed of a single stanza, and none of the three has the same rhyme scheme. For Browning's poems written in stanzas of more than nine lines there is no one established pattern.[37] Three Asolando poems fall into this category. Two have twelve lines ("Bad Dreams III," rhyming ababccddefef, and "Flute-Music, With an Accompaniment," rhyming ababcdcdefef), and "Now" is composed of fourteen lines although it does not follow the traditional sonnet pattern.

As was true for the discussion of the metrics of the Asolando pieces, the study of the stanza forms reveals little of significance. Browning used most of his forms throughout his poetic career, and even when the final poems have stanzas slightly different from any which have appeared before, this too is in keeping with the poet's lifelong tendency to experiment.

Poetic Genres

In addition to an examination of the actual metrics and stanza forms used by Browning in Asolando, it is important to look at the

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[37] Ibid., p. 130.

poetic genres which he employed, remembering that some of the poems are composites or could be classified under more than one heading. If the average person were asked to name genres used by Browning, he would in all probability name first the dramatic monologue, and rightly so, for approximately nine-tenths of the poet's works have this form,[38] and most of his best poems are included. Groom has said, with good reason, that Browning's "early work may be regarded as a progress towards, and his later work as a decline from the art of the dramatic monologue as he practices it in his best years. . . ."[39] It is somewhat surprising then to find so few examples of the monologue in Asolando. Fletcher included the "Bad Dreams" poems, "Inapprehensiveness," and "Development" as typical,[40] but these lack, in varying degrees, a clearly defined listener and/or a revelation of the character of the speaker; the same is even more true for "Beatrice Signorini" and "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice." "Rephan" comes a little closer, but it too falls short of the usual requirements, for the listeners are shadowy and the atmosphere undramatic. Only "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" truly deserves the title, but it should be remembered that this poem is usually considered the finest in the volume.

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[38]S. S. Curry, Browning and the Dramatic Monologue. Nature and Interpretation of an Overlooked Form of Literature (Boston, 1905), p. 121.

[39]Bernard Groom, The Diction of Poetry From Spenser to Bridges (Toronto, 1955), p. 227.

[40]R. H. Fletcher, "Browning's Dramatic Monologues," Modern Language Notes, XXIII (April, 1908), 109.

The fact that Browning did not include many examples of the dramatic monologue is one indication that Asolando is a product of his old age, for after The Ring and the Book he wrote fewer and fewer monologues, and those which he did attempt tended to follow the pattern of unrealistic length found in such poems as "Bishop Blougram's Apology" rather than that of realistic terseness found in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" or "Fra Lippo Lippi"; likewise the later monologues often seem to be simply masks behind which the poet could hide and present his own views.[41] "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--," however, is an exception to the pattern on the later monologues and has the compression and realistic force of the best poems written in this form. King has said that the effectiveness of Browning's monologues is the result of his successful and complete fusion of content and form. "The poet," he continued, "uses matter and structure with singleness of purpose to express a comprehensive mode of seeing; he succeeds in reconciling opposing forces so as to create unity, intensity, and vividness."[42] This he did to perfection in "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--." Why he was able in this case to curb his rambling tendency is hard to say, but it helps support the contention that in Asolando Browning often reverted to the style and techniques of his middle period.

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[41]C. N. Wenger, "The Masquerade in Browning's Dramatic Monologues," College English, III (December, 1941), 228.

[42]Roma A. King, Jr., The Bow & the Lyre (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1957), p. 149.

After The Ring and the Book, as most students will quickly observe, the poet indulged generally in philosophical probing rather than in song--he himself was guilty of the very same literary offense he had warned against years before in "Transcendentalism." Since this was true, it is natural to expect to find representatives of this type of meditative poem in the last volume. The "Prologue," although it contains a definite narrative portion, would come under this heading, and the content of the "Epilogue" would seem to place it in this category, even though the vigor and terseness with which it is set forth put it in direct opposition to the usual leisurely pace of such poems. "Development" (which some consider a monologue, as has already been noted, but which does not have a clearly delineated listener) and "Reverie" (the longest poem in the volume) are the best examples of this kind of poetry. The form of many of these later poems, including "Reverie," is a forerunner of the stream of consciousness technique which came into prominence a little later. In a rather thorough examination of Browning's endeavors in this field, Holmes called the poet a "semantic stutterer," by which he meant that when the poet attempted to write as a prophet or a metaphysician, he lost power because he "confused the levels of abstractions and dealt with the thing-word relationship intentionally rather than extensionally";[43] he could not directly link words back through impressions to truths or facts.[44]

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[43]Stewart W. Holmes, "Browning: Semantic Stutterer," PMLA, LX (March, 1945), 231.

[44]Ibid., p. 247.

For "Reverie" this evaluation would be a just one, but "Development," the "Prologue," and the "Epilogue" are certainly clear to the average reader. It might be possible to say that most of the philosophical poems in Asolando do not resemble most of the poems of this type written during the later period.

The casual reader of Browning is inclined to remember the poet's lyrics only after he has recalled the other poetic forms, primarily the monologue, in which he wrote. And yet Browning composed many lyrics: both the dramatic lyric, which according to Duffin almost became his private property,[45] and the love lyric, which plays an extremely important role in Asolando, are found among his poems. It is interesting that the lyric, very often considered the province of young men only, appealed to the elderly Browning and that to the end of his life he continued to write lyrics characterized by spontaneity and beauty.[46] About Browning's lyrical gifts there has been considerable discussion: for example, Cohen felt Browning strained himself to write lyrics because this was a form which should be used by all poets[47] while Woodberry thought his lyrical gift was great enough to rank him just below the very finest.[48]

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[45]Henry Charles Duffin, Amphibian. A Reconsideration of Browning (Fair Lawn, New Jersey, 1956), p. 71.

[46]Herbert J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith, A Critical Handbook of English Poetry (London, 1947), p. 411.

[47]J. M. Cohen, Robert Browning (London, 1952), p. 89.

[48]George Edward Woodberry, "Robert Browning," Atlantic Monthly, LXV (February, 1890), 247.

An exceedingly large proportion (approximately a fourth) of the Asolando poems are lyrical in form, but this should not be too surprising, for although in the last period Browning turned to longer and more philosophical forms, it must be remembered that a lyric was attached to each section of Ferishtah's Fancies. These lyrics may not have the verve and spontaneity of the Asolando ones, but they are acceptable examples of the lyric form. The lyric was never the major form employed by Browning, and yet it appeared consistently in every period of his work. This fact could perhaps be taken as proof that his lyrical gift was a genuine one.

One of the minor genres appearing in Asolando is the dialogue, which occurs three times--"Arcades Ambo," "The Lady and the Painter," and "Flute-Music, With an Accompaniment." The only other significant appearance of this form is in the latter half of La Saisiaz. The poet was certainly not at his best when using the dialogue: "Arcades Ambo" and "The Lady and the Painter" are generally considered the weakest pieces in Asolando while "Flute-Music, With an Accompaniment," though it has not received critical condemnation, has not been praised. Thus it seems that in spite of the fact that Browning employed the dialogue to set forth ideas to which he heartily subscribed, the form itself did not particularly inspire him.

Browning's use of the narrative was discussed in the examination of the themes of his poetry.[49] As was pointed out there, in his later

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[49]See above, p. 272-3.

years the poet tended more strongly to the meditative or philosophical poem than he did to the narrative treated merely for its own sake, which is not to say that Browning did not produce some good and genuine narratives in his last period. In 1885 he himself chose "A Foregiveness" in Pacchiarotto as "the narrative poem of moderate length by which he would wish to be represented."[50] Duffin thought this was his "last narrative poem showing genius. . . ,"[51] but this judgment would ignore the compression and effective build-up of a narrative such as "The Pope and the Net." It is true, of course, that "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice" and "Beatrice Signorini" move at a more leisurely pace than do some of the earlier narratives, but these are typical of the narratives of the later years, including those in Dramatic Idyls.

The genres found in Asolando are ones with which Browning had had long experience. Although the infrequent use of the dramatic monologue clearly marks this volume as an example of the poet's later work, the predominant role played by the lyric and the way in which he approached the different genres indicate that in these last poems the poet was close to the practices of his middle period.

IMAGERY

Because Browning did not use imagery as mere decoration or simply for the sake of prettiness, some casual readers have thought that imagery does not exist in his poetry. This is very wrong. Imagery is

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[50] Duffin, p. 173.

[51] Ibid.

an important aspect of his expression, but it always appears as a part of the total expression and not for its own sake.[52] Therefore a discussion of his poetry would not be complete without an examination of the imagery.

As was true with the form, it would be unnecessary and beyond the scope of this study to trace each image which occurs in Asolando.[53] Therefore this discussion will be concerned only with the amount of imagery to be found, its types and its sources.

Amount of Imagery

Several of the Asolando poems have no imagery ("Arcades Ambo" and "Bad Dreams I") or so little that its effect is negligible ("The Lady and the Painter"). Indeed, many of the love lyrics have surprisingly little although the longer poems ("Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" and "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice," for example) have extensive and impressive imagery. All in all, in Asolando there is probably less imagery than is usual in a Browning volume, but this is perhaps due to the extreme brevity of many of the poems.

Types of Imagery

As is normally true, the visual image has greater prominence in Asolando than does any other type. Browning's fondness for documentation,

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[52]King, p. 143.

[53]The tracing of a significant image can be a most effective method of studying Browning's development; the best example of this type of treatment is C. Willard Smith, Browning's Star-Imagery. The Study of a Detail in Poetic Design (Princeton, New Jersey, 1941).

for exactness in the description of details,[54] is reflected in the visual images; the poet's ability to paint vivid word pictures appears in every Asolando poem which has any imagery at all, sometimes portraying a single form, such as the rose image in "Rephan," an entire scene, such as the contrasting forest and city in "Bad Dreams III," or a significant phenomenon in the physical world, such as the description in "Dubiety" of the effect of dropping a single drop of milk into a container of water. His color images, ranging from the rainbow figure in the "Prologue" to the luridness of the scene in "Bad Dreams II," should also be noted; the wealth and power of Browning's use of color was one of the points most strongly emphasized in Raymond's analysis of the energy revealed by the poet's imagery.[55] This emphasis on the effectiveness and prominence of Browning's visual imagery is found in all studies of his imagery, and in this respect Asolando seems to be firmly in the tradition of earlier works.

There are very few sound images in Asolando, which is somewhat surprising since one of the poems deals with music. Even in "Flute-Music, With an Accompaniment," however, most of the images are visual,[56]

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[54]Cohen, p. 121.

[55]William O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning (Toronto, 1950), p. 12.

[56]For example:

> Fine-pearled notes that surely
> Gather, dewdrop-fashion,
> Deep-down in some heart which purely
> Secretes globuled passion--
> (ll. 5-8)

and sound images in the other poems are almost nonexistent ("This tick of our life-time's one moment. . . ," l. 10 of "Now," is an exception). Although Browning could be very exact in describing sounds,[57] this type of imagery is certainly not the kind which he emphasized. Here, again, Asolando reveals no deviation from his customary usage.

In thinking about imagery, many people consider only images of sight and hearing, completely ignoring those of touch, and yet tactual imagery can often be used very effectively. Bonnell stated that Browning was particularly skillful in his use of touch images and illustrated his thesis quite convincingly by the use of many quotations, most of them drawn from the poet's early and middle works.[58] None of Bonnell's examples came from the Asolando poems, which is to be expected because the few that are found are not especially vivid. In "Dubiety" there is the description of "luxury's sofa-lap of leather!" (l. 4), and visual and tactual images are combined in the third stanza:

> Let gauziness shade, not shroud,--adjust,
> Dim and not deaden,--somehow sheathe
> Aught sharp in the rough world's busy thrust,
> If it reach me through dreaming's vapor-wreath.
> (ll. 9-12)

The speaker in "A Pearl, a Girl" finds himself "wrapt in Blaze" (l. 11),

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[57]Many comments have been made about the exactness of the description of the thrush's song in "Home-Thoughts from Abroad":

> That's the wise thrush: he sings each song twice over,
> Lest you should think he never could recapture
> The first fine careless rapture!
> (ll. 14-6)

[58]John Kester Bonnell, "Touch Images in the Poetry of Robert Browning," PMLA, XXXVII (September, 1922), 574-98.

and suggestions of physical contact help build up the description of the perfect moment in "Now." Nevertheless, tactual imagery does not play an important role in Asolando, which indicates one way in which the final volume does not resemble those of the middle period.

Another type of imagery frequently and effectively used by the poet is motion imagery.[59] In Asolando it is particularly striking in "Rephan," the "Epilogue," and "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--." These examples are closely related to instances found throughout his work, especially in the early and middle period, for the memorable motion images are found there. The Asolando poems offer some motion images worthy to be included in Phelps' discussion of this aspect of the poet's technique:

> Browning is one of our greatest poets of motion--whether it be the glide of a gondola, the swift running of the marathon professional Pheidippides, the steady advance of the galleys over the sea in Paracelsus, the sharp staccato strokes of the horse's hoofs through the Metidja, or the swinging stride of the students as they carry the dead grammarian up the mountain. Not only do the words themselves express the sound of movement; but the thought, in all these great poems of motion, travels steadily and naturally with the advance. It is interesting to compare a madly-rushing poem like Ghent to Aix with the absolute calm of Andrea del Sarto. It gives one an appreciation of Browning's purely technical skill.[60]

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[59]Martha Hale Shackford, "Browning Selected Four Poems," Talks on Ten Poets: Wordsworth to Moody (New York, 1958), p. 108.

[60]William Lyon Phelps, Robert Browning, New Edition (Indianapolis, 1932), p. 190.

Sources of the Imagery

Browning drew the imagery in Asolando from a surprisingly limited number of sources. The vast majority of his images come from nature; some of these--the rainbow, the pearl, the rose--he had employed consistently from the time of his early composition, though not always with the same symbolic significance. In spite of the fact that Browning was never primarily a nature poet, he found a fruitful source of imagery in his physical surroundings, and the predominance of nature imagery in the last volume is not atypical.

The Bible, as might be expected, served as a source for much of the imagery in the philosophical poems, especially the "Prologue" and "Reverie." "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice," because of its subject matter, also has a number of Biblical images. Like the natural world, the Bible was definitely not a new source book for the poet. The potter figure, which occurs in "Reverie," is an example of a Biblical image which he used effectively and frequently. Although images based on the Scriptures are not very common in Browning's early poems, they abound in those composed during his middle and later years.

The other images are drawn from a number of different sources--folklore in "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice," music in "Flute-Music, With an Accompaniment," art in "Beatrice Signorini," chivalry in "Rosny" and "Bad Dreams IV"--and indicate the wide range of the poet's interests. All of these sources had provided him with images for his earlier writings; none of them is a major source, but they do help illustrate the consistency of his methods: as a young writer he

refused to limit himself to a few set images, and as he matured, he did not change.

Conclusion

A much more detailed study would be necessary to show more than a few general facts about Browning's imagery. In types and sources of imagery Asolando does not differ from earlier works, though at times it may seem closer to the volumes coming from the middle period than it does to those immediately preceding it. On the other hand, the limited amount of imagery may indicate that it was written by a poet who had gotten in the habit of trying to make readers think instead of see.

DICTION

The diction of Browning's poems shows remarkable consistency from Pauline to Asolando. His conversational tone, which according to Woodard "gave his poetry a flexibility and a range which had long been missing from English poetry,"[61] appeared early in his career, and almost from the beginning he had the ability to choose the appropriate word, especially in the dramatic monologues, where he was extremely successful in adapting his vocabulary to fit his subject. Batho and Dobree have commented that his genius lay in his conversational tone and in "his manner with its plunging, ploughing, energetic phrasing, his violent

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[61]Charles R. Woodard, "Browning and Three Modern Poets: Pound, Yeats, and Eliot" (Ph.D. thesis, The University of Tennessee, 1953), p. 27.

prosody. . . ."[62] These qualities remained with him until the end. Yet, although his style did not change radically, there were minor variations. As early as 1843 Browning himself wrote to Domett that in his youth he had concentrated much more on the musical qualities of his verse than he did in his mature work.[63] Also as he grew older, he came to disregard more and more the usual rules for poetic composition. Symons felt that because of this, the later poems are not so artistically perfect as are the earlier ones.[64] Asolando frequently reveals this disregard, but it does not deserve such a general condemnation. It has rough spots, to be sure, but the love lyrics and the dramatic monologue share the strong points of his early poetry. In the final volume, as in his masterpieces of the middle period, the tempo is one of rapidity that sometimes becomes abruptness, and the music of his verse is uneven,[65] but these qualities effectively convey the impression of his characteristic energy and mark the lines as definitely his.

CONCLUSION

Duffin divided Browning's life into seven periods, the last of which he called the "agreeable last chapter";[66] this last division he

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[62]Edith C. Batho and Bonamy Dobree, The Victorians and After, 1830-1914 (London, 1950), p. 48.

[63]Frederic George Kenyon, ed., Robert Browning and Alfred Domett (London, 1906), p. 96.

[64]Symons, p. 13-4.

[65]Raymond, p. 11.

[66]Duffin, p. 288.

felt was markedly different from the period of sermonizing which preceded it. An extensive study of Asolando bears out this judgment. In some ways Browning was the most consistent of poets, especially in his basic philosophy of life. Symons summed it up well by saying: "The manner has varied not a little, the comparative worth of individual poems is widely different, but from the first word to the last the attitude is the same, the outlook on life the same, the conception of God and man, of the world and nature, always the same."[67] The poet was also consistent in his love of experimentation; thus he never settled down with a pet form and spent the rest of his life adapting it. The last volume proves this by the number of different genres and themes treated. Little that is really new is introduced in Asolando, but in this "agreeable last chapter" Browning generally avoided the pitfalls of dullness and obscurity into which he sometimes fell after The Ring and the Book and returns to the techniques which made the masterpieces of his middle period so popular and so delightful. The poetic merit of many of the individual poems and the skill with which the poet unified them into a volume effectively setting forth a single theme make Asolando worthy of serious consideration by Browning scholars.

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[67]Symons, p. 2.

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