

**ROBERT BROWNING : POEMS OF FAILURE  
&  
THE VISION OF EVIL**

**DR.RITU PANDEY**

---

## ROBERT BROWNING : POEMS OF FAILURE AND THE VISION OF EVIL

Browning began his career as a subjective poet. He was influenced by the subjectivism of Shelley, but after he wrote *Pauline*, he suffered feelings of intense guilt, at having presented himself so openly before the public. He could not bear his readers looking too deeply into his personality. He felt that "the unique ideal would be ... a poet who combined both subjective and objective genius....' If the two faculties were to be combined in the same poet, then the poet would be in the unique position of being able to 'speak out', and achieve Shelleyan abatements of Universal significance, while remaining also in successive poems, the objective poet. This may well have been Browning's ambition, but it remains true that he finds complete expression only when he also achieves complete anonymity...."<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that the best works of Browning are those in which the poet is most heavily disguised, for whereas the subjective poet is basically a lyric poet, whose imaginative flights are sustained by the intensity of his personal vision, the objective poet is basically a detached observer of life in all its complexity of forms. He regards himself as a craftsman, aware of his individual talent, but conscious always of the tradition and of his responsibility to his medium. Browning strove to reach a unity of vision and

---

<sup>1</sup> "Robert Browning and the Dramatic Monologue: The Impersonal Art" A.R. Jones. pg. 311.

salvage some of the faith that was slowly slipping away from the Victorian world. In order to express his ideas he chose a suitable medium the dramatic lyrics. These were narrative poems dealing with incidents of some importance and interest. Yet Browning could not gain satisfaction and tried to perfect his art by adopting the method of mask or "dramatic monologue". The latter was more complex in nature — here incidents described have shifted from the periphery of the mind (external significance) to enter the world of the inner regions of consciousness (internal significance). *W.B. Yeats* commented on the importance to the poet of creating masks when he stated that " ... all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self;. We put on a grotesque or solemn painted face to hide us from the terrors of judgment..., one loses the infinite pain of self-realization"<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, dramatic monologue brings out the presentation of a situation more accurately and graphically because it is three dimensional, whereas the narrative poem is two dimensional. In this, Browning established a new relationship between (the) reader and the subject, "the subject... (is) judged by the reader particularly when the reader subject reveals his weaknesses so blatantly. Browning compels his readers to strike a moral attitude in

---

<sup>2</sup> "Robert Browning and the Dramatic Monologue: The Impersonal Art" A.R. Jones. pg. 327.

so far as they are being asked to judge..."<sup>3</sup> His works can be broadly divided into two categories those poems that deal with 'life affirmation', and those that deal with the reverse, namely 'life-negation'.

Browning used a wide variety of ideas and forms. Nor did he ignore the shabbier and meaner aspects of nature. He believed that ruggedness is as essential a work of art, as gloominess or extravagance. The fantastic, lopsided and nonsensical are conceived to be the work of man, but this instinct of caricature comes from Nature, which is all full of queer creatures as is the 'sketchbook of Callot'. The supreme use of the grotesque is seen in "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis", "Holy-Cross Day", and "A Toccato at Galuppi's". Here he makes the world stand on its head. Browning never ceased from his fierce hunt for poetic novelty, that is, he never became a conservative. His poems of life-affirmation sing the song of refusal.

The Vision of Evil : Despite his affirmation in the goodness of mankind, and faith in the Divinity of God, Browning was aware of the vision of evil. Flesh and soul, youth and old-age, are dichotomies, and unless these conflicting forces can be resolved, self-awareness is impossible. In this context, we can make a study of "Rabbi Ben Ezra". Browning was not bound by any dogma his \_\_\_ Pop is as free as the Rabbi, but he does deal with the evil

---

<sup>3</sup> "Robert Browning and the Dramatic Monologue : The Impersonal Art", A.R. Jones. pg. 328.

predominant in man. These imperfections are but natural and Browning's deep understanding of human frailty and failure prevent him from being unduly harsh and critical. The human follies provoke his amusement, but does not embitter him. The greatest truths can be found side by side, the knaves and rogues of Browning' have a uniform tendency to theism \_\_\_\_\_ degraded, mean and unsuccessful they may be, yet they claim an awful "alliance with divinity".

However, as we go through the major works of Browning, we realise that this desire (of the poet) to achieve wholeness did not meet with success initially. The personal cravings of Browning are revealed in his monologue "*Andrea del Sarto*". Ironically, the subtitle of this poem is "The Faultless Painter". The irony lies in that fact that although the speaker is a successful painter and craftsman in the eyes of the world, he knows that he has actually failed. According to Andrea, perfection lies in the aspiration, and not in the ultimate achievement. To quote his words:

"A man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a Heaven for?"

Directly after saying this, Andrea adds:

"..... all his silver grey  
Placid and perfect with my art, the worse."

Commenting on the fore mentioned monologue, George Santayana writes that "no one who has not known the ashen coldness of despair, could write such a poem. He finds a

parallel between Browning, the Victorian Poet, and the protagonist painter. Like Andrea, Browning achieved a totality in poetry, \_\_\_ in the sphere of art, but he failed to reach it in his personal life. Thus arose the sense of unfulfilment and regret. Santayana says: "Our poets are things of shreds and patches; they give us episodes and studies, a sketch of this curiosity, a glimpse of that romance, they have no totality of vision, no grasp of the whole reality, and consequently no capacity for a same and steady idealization."<sup>4</sup>

By contrast to the other poems, *Andrea del Sarto* is a study of failure. Sombre as the poem is, it is not a tragedy, and it would be untrue to say that the protagonist comes to self-realization and self-knowledge as the monologue progresses.... Andrea is one of the most passive of Browning's speakers, and throughout we notice the simplicity of diction and the occurrence of an unusual number of monosyllabic lines. We can compare and contrast *Andrea del Sarto* with yet another monologue of Browning, titled "Fra Lippo Lippi". Whereas *Fra lippo* ends with the dawn breaking, *Andrea* is a twilight piece. The tone of "Andrea del Sarto" is correspondingly muted. The source is Vasari's 'Life of Andrea del Sarto'. Obligated to chose perfection of the life or of the work, Andrea has chosen the latter, only to realize that his life is deeply unhappy while his work is too perfect, \_\_\_\_\_ cripplingly perfect. Painter like,

---

<sup>4</sup> "The Barbaric Genius" George Santayana.

Browning's creation (the protagonist Andrea) lives in the eye, and it is the beauty of Lucrezia's body that holds him prisoner. Browning brings out clearly the timidity which Vasari' stressed as the central weakness in the character of Andrea. Like Hamlet, his fault is indecision and it is this part of the general moral weakness which makes him a failure. The words of Andrea could well be the echo of the poet's own yearning,

"There burns a truer light of God in them,  
In their vexed, beating, stuffed and stopped-up-  
brain,  
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt  
This low-pulse forthright craftsman's hand of  
mine.  
Their works drop groundwards, but themselves  
I know.  
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me  
Enter and take their place there sure enough,  
Though they come back and cannot tell the  
world.  
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here."  
(Lines 81-90)

The struggle between flesh and soul, appears in all its intensity in "Fra Lippo Lippi". The Friar has been commissioned by a certain wealthy nobleman to paint pictures of saints. As he has been three weeks shut in his rooms, busy with his work, the lute-strings and songs of some passing girls lure him out. Brother Lippo had renounced the world when he had taken the oath, at the age of ten. But to him, life is beautiful with all it has to offer, and consequently he does not hesitate to renounce his priestly

ordains for the satisfaction of mind, just as he had not hesitated to renounce the world for satisfaction of hunger. In this dramatic monologue, Browning has given a vivid pen-portrait of a friar, who can be identified with an exponent of the Renaissance Superbia. Considered from another viewpoint, Lippo appears to be a synonymous character of Browning himself, since he voices the opinions and aspirations of the latter. Whatever interpretation is given to the aforesaid monologue, nothing can detract from its delightful zest for life, and for all things living. Lippo is comparable to a high priest of Nature, and he worships all the objects that are animate \_\_\_\_\_ even the most trivial "thing" in existence. The slightest sight or sound of nature causes him to vibrate with joy, and ecstatically sing the praise of the Maker.

The chief characteristic of the monologue that strikes us again and again is the deep love and respect the speaker has for all things living. Nothing is mean or lowly in the gamut of the universe \_\_\_\_\_ the emotion that fills his heart while looking out upon the starry night is in no way different from the sense of fulfilment he gets when he meets the night-revellers and comes "up with the fun." Fra Lippo sings the song of life, yet the sublimity does not become an obsession, or an emotion of frozen purity. For him life is as full of variety as of colour, and gratification of the senses is as essential as that of the soul. The tone of the poem is a quaint, bantering one. Fra Lippo is not serious overtly men

he is giving the guards an explanation of his action. Yet we feel this superficial frivolity hides and deeper emotion, made richer by Lippo's early experiences. As a boy, Lippo experienced the pangs of hunger \_\_\_\_\_ and strangely enough he joined the Church to satisfy this physical need. Having roamed about the streets with an empty stomach, young Lippo has realised the cost of life, and also the innate beauty and variety it holds. His words are therefore, not idle philosophical statements, Fra Lippo has lived a life, in the sense that he has experienced pain and pleasure and his senses have become sharpened and more responsive. Therefore, when he speaks of the difference between flesh and soul (life vs church) and also of the affinity between the two, he knows what he is talking about.

Browning presents his characters with devastating frankness, and the priest's admission could well be considered a blasphemy by the church authorities, yet he is not out to impress the officer by uttering untruths. Browning believed that the ultimate good matters \_\_\_\_\_ not the means employed to attain that "good". To assuage his physical want, Lippo once renounced the world of material pleasure, now he is as eager to renounce the world of the cloister to satisfy the senses. For him, life is a brief interlude, and a fulfilment of this life depends on how intensely a person has lived it. Lippo is a disciple of life and a believer of his own actions. The quaint strains of songs that occurs and recurs as the narrative proceeds, helps to lighten the atmosphere and

introduce a note of irrepressible buoyancy that the cold and pallid walls of the cloister has failed to subjugate. Thus, although Fra Lippo Lippi has failed in the eyes of his church brothers, he has understood the meaning of life.

The principle source is Vasari's "Life of Fra Lippo Lippi". Lippo has no inhibitions, and "flesh" is one of the key words in his monologue. His passion for female beauty is only one manifestation of the fascinated delight that he takes in the human scene". .... "Fra Lippo is a vivacious man with an imagination that is by no means confined to the world of the senses. The effect of the (animal) images he uses are by no means to make him appear a mere 'beast', but rather to emphasize his delight in the natural world, with which he has a deep instinctive sympathy."<sup>5</sup>

Painting, after religion, and history, is the great theme and subject matter of Browning's poetry. In *Fra Lippo Lippi*, he fused painting, history and religion. Fra Lippo's robust and vital individuality chafes against a variety of circumstances \_\_\_\_ by which he is caught: a childhood of poverty, the hypocritical asceticism of the Church, a sterile and stylized tradition in painting, the burgher patronage of the Medici. But the licentious painter - monk's energy and humanity, like that of the Renaissance in which he lives, are finally irrepressible.

---

<sup>5</sup> "Browning's Major Poetry": Ian Jack. Ch. xii.

Many of Browning's monologues are exercises in self-justification, \_\_\_\_\_ not Browning justifying himself, but his characters justifying to their listeners a certain course of action, a set of beliefs, even their entire life." Fra Lippo has moved a long way from merely excusing himself for his midnight escapades among the ladies: his anger and frustration, warmed by the memories of his childhood and his life in the Carmine cloister, force him to articulate what he himself is, his love of the physical world, the nature and function of his realistic art. His sexuality is not just a lovable weakness in a licentious monk, but his itself a profoundly religious attitude towards the beauty of God's world:"<sup>6</sup>

". . . . you've seen the world  
The beauty and the wonder and the power,  
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and  
and shades.  
Changes and surprises, \_\_\_ and God made all!"

*De Vane* rightly emphasizes the relationship of Fra Lippo to his creator Browning. He (Browning) "could not have chosen a better poem with which to challenge the orthodox conception of poetry in mid-nineteenth century, or one that better expresses the new elements in poetry that Browning was to introduce. Browning found in the Renaissance painter a very sympathetic character, like himself highly individualistic, suffering from the tyranny of artistic convention, and like himself energetic and instinct with

---

<sup>6</sup> "Robert Browning: Routledge Author Guides"

seemingly well thought out aesthetic and religious opinions which claimed Browning's own."<sup>7</sup>

A subtle difference and at the same time, a similarity can be traced between Andrea and the painter monk, Fra Lippo. The latter is full of life, boisterous energy and is totally amoral. There is an excess of movement and colour that forms a panoramic background against which, Fra Lippo's thoughts are presented. Andrea, on the contrary, is resigned, languid, immobile \_\_\_\_ apathetic. This is conveyed brilliantly to the readers by the slow-moving verse of his monologue. Lippi is free and unconventional; Andrea spends his lonely hours, by the window, and watches his wife going out to join her lover in the street. "The one painter is sociable and Chaucerian: the other is solitary. The one painter talks of what he will do, scurrying off at the end after promising to paint a fine new picture; the other talks of what he has done, and even more of what he might have done \_\_\_\_\_ or might he?"<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the ranging amorousness of Lippi leaves him free, luxuriousness had reduced Andrea to the condition of a slave. The very 'perfection' of his art *is a sign of his limitations*, and of his ultimate failure. One is reminded of two passages in Ruskin. The first occurs in *Modern Painters*; here he states that "in order to receive a sensation of power, we must see it in operation. It's victory, therefore, must not be achieved, but achieving, and therefore, imperfect. "The

---

<sup>7</sup> "A Browning Handbook" \_\_\_\_ Clyde De Vane. Pg. 219.

<sup>8</sup> "The Men and Women Poems" - Ian Jack, Ch. XII.

second theory is presented in *The Stones of Venice*. Here Huskia claims that two "great truths... belonging to the whole race" are "the confession of Imperfection, and the confession of Desire of Chance."

"The contrast between the two painters is drawn at a point beyond the common places of conventional morality: it might be argued that Andrea is faithful to an undeserving wife, while Lippi is clearly incapable of fidelity to any woman. It is much more important that Fra Lippo is faithful to the requirements of his art, while Andrea is not. The parable of the talents, which was never far from Browning's mind, is highly relevant to the two poems."<sup>9</sup>

"The Bishop Orders his Tomb" is a vibrant monologue by a Bishop, who, having seemingly renounced 'worldly pleasure', is still an epicurean at heart. To interpret this monologue as a satire is to be blind to the subtlety of the poem. Browning was always interested in the vision of life that presented itself to a dying man: 'Sordelle', 'Prospice', 'Paracelsus'. Yet our expectation of a religious homily is mocked by every line of the Bishop's monologue, as his mind drifts from his nephews around him, to the mistress who had been their mother \_\_\_\_ and to 'Old Gandolf', whose jealousy had added piquancy to the Bishop's delight at possessing so beautiful a mistress. The revelation of the immorality and hypocrisy should shock the reader, but the objective method of dealing with the subject \_\_\_\_ lessens the shock. We are persuaded to

---

<sup>9</sup> "The Men and Women Poems" - Ian Jack, Ch. XII.

study the situation from the bishop's point of view. According to Browning, all truth is a matter of perspective, and it (truth) is related to event in the same way as point of view is related to landscape.

Instead of caring for the salvation of his soul, the bishop is concerned only with the destination of his body. 'His greatest fear has nothing to do with the judgment to come; it is simply the nightmare thought that the ingratitude of his illegitimate sons may lead them to economize in the construction of his tomb. As he conjures them to obey his wishes. . . . he does not rely on their sense of filial duty but solely on their expectation of material and fleshly rewards.'<sup>10</sup> Ruskin wrote in *Modern Painters* "I know no other piece of modern English, press or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit, its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art; of luxury, and of good Latin."<sup>11</sup>

On the death-bed of St. Praxed's Bishop, sensuality, greed, vanity spite and the whole gamut of human frailties balance the humanity of man against the responsibility and pretensions of priestly office. Browning's language was never so colourful than in the speech he gives the bishop on his death-bed; never did a character enjoy life in all its aspects with such intensity and pagan sensuality. The Bishop's enjoyment of life does not exclude anything. We

---

<sup>10</sup> 'Browning's Major Poetry: 'Ian Jack. Ch. XII, Pgs. 195-201.

<sup>11</sup> 'Modern Painters' Ruskin. Vol. IV, Ch. XX.

find that the christen and pagan; divine and human; physical and intellectual beauty, are all fused in the intensity of the bishop's sensual imagination. Browning has presented before his readers the picture of a great humanist, a man both cultivated and culpable who, however, is inadequate as a bishop \_\_\_\_ but nevertheless luxuriates in the wonders, beauties and frailties of life. "The whole poem is riddled with contradictions and ironies, from the prefunctory blessings he bestows on his sons at the end. Two codes of conduct and morality could hardly have been more violently juxtaposed pg. 325-326. The Bishop, however, is quite without any sense of the contradictions and conflicts that are embodied in his monologue. Indeed, he is peculiarly single-minded in his pursuit of the good things of life, material, intellectual and spiritual. The conflict arises from the incongruity that so clearly exists between the man and his office."<sup>12</sup>

According to *A.R. Jones*, the bishop is a product of the humanist tradition. Classically educated, he is a discriminating admirer of the arts and of beauty wherever found \_\_\_\_ in the world of nature, or in the nature of women, in the play of sunlight, or in the smell of incense. To the very end he continues to live in the world of the *senses*: 'so fair she was!' to quote Jones: "There is no doubt that by any reasonable standards of Christian morality the Bishop is a sinful man who betrayed his office and his church. There is, equally, no doubt that he justified his life by the sheer quality

---

<sup>12</sup> 'Robert Browning and the Dramatic Monologue' *A.R. Jones*. Ch. XI, Pgs. 325 & 326.

of his humanity, the pleasure he took in the experience of life itself. In fact he has lived as if his life were a work of art, created by himself, an artist of life whose art lie the paintings of Fra Lippo is beyond the reach of morality."<sup>13</sup>

'*The Last Ride Together*' is one of the finest of Browning's dramatic monologues. In this poem, failure is glorified till the barb of pain gradually ceases to hurt. The speaker, rejected by the mistress, forgets his temporary sorrow in the contemplation of the happiness which awaits him in after life, when he hopes to be re-united with his beloved. This dauntless faith prevents the speaker' tone from becoming agitated. The lover emphasizes success in the eye of God is preferable and superior to worldly success \_\_\_\_ and the reader feels that his (speaker) belief is shared by Browning. Unrequited love ceases to be painful, as the speaker realises:

"... Still one must lead some life beyond,  
— Have a bliss to die with, dim - descried ..."

and again:

"Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best?  
Now Heaven and she are beyond this ride".

*The Last Ride Together* is one of Browning's supreme poems of *failure*. Here aspiration is not turned into achievement, but is forever frozen and intensified. Thus, 'The Last Ride Together' could be called an exceptional poem \_\_\_\_ that of success. According to *Ian Jack*:

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pg. 326, Ch. XI.

"This is the utterance of a man who is in a sense obsessed by love, but this time the speaker might be described as a triumphant obsessive. The theme is Browning's favourite \_\_\_ that of striving the speaker has done all that he could, and the fact that he has not been successful is of less importance."<sup>14</sup>

The protagonist says in the monologue:

"Fail I alone in words and deeds?  
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?"

The more fact of striving denotes a kind of success that makes life meaningful. The theme is different from the conventional lover's complaint. The poem is therefore, not one of failure but the reverse. Riding was often an important imaginative stimulus to Browning, and here it becomes a powerful imaginative symbol. It is implied that "among man's deepest wishes is that love might be enough \_\_\_ all sufficient and lasting: 'that such raptures are self-sufficient and enduring', as Browning phrased it."<sup>15</sup>

In yet another monologue of Browning, '*Abt Vogler*' the musician believes that the duty of mankind lies in composing beautiful hymns in praise of God. The artist might not be successful in the eyes of his worldly listener, but he has his reward:

"The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard.

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Browning's Major Poetry' Ian Jack. Pg. 161. Ch. XI.

<sup>15</sup> "A Reader's Guide To Robert Browning." Norton. B. Crowell. Pg. 189.

The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,  
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;  
Enough that he heard it once; we shall hear it by and by."

Abt Vogler is conscious of the vision of evil, but believes implicitly that eventually good shall triumph. This faith makes him retain his equilibrium, and prevents a sense of insecurity. Truth is related to event as point of view is related to landscape. It is thus possible to arrive at a unity or totality of vision by confronting truth in all its aspects, be they ugly or beautiful.

Thus:

"There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;  
The evil is null, is naught, is silence implying sound  
What was good, shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;  
On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round."

(Lines 69 -72)

Before concluding, it would be worthwhile to discuss two monologues — noted for their vibrant quality, and the underlying vision of evil: they are 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', and 'Caliban Upon Setebes'. No other poem has been interpreted so variously as 'Child Roland . . .' Little is known about the origin of the poem. It is uncertain whether it was written in 1852, or during the following year. Browning's own statements are "it came to me as a kind of dream." He told Mrs. Orr - "my own marsh was made out of

my head, \_\_\_ with some recollection of a strange solitary little tower I have come upon more than once in Massacarrara, in the midst of low hills."<sup>16</sup>

It is obvious that a number of visual details came together in his mind as he composed the poem, and *De Vane* is probably right in suggesting that the chapters in '*The Art of Painting*' by Gerard de Lairese describing beauty and ugliness in landscape also influenced its composition. Yet the important question still remains: What did Browning make of his materials, and what does the poem mean? It is clear that the poem has a much greater psychological depth than the stories that helped to inspire it. In this monologue, the prisoners are all adventurers, yet they are not prisoners physically, \_\_\_ but have failed in a deeper, spiritual sense. The landscape in the other narratives are brief, uninteresting and entirely subservient to narrative and character, but here it has a psychological significance — 'the landscape is everything'.

One can agree with De Vane in stating that the landscape in the poem is not an external thing merely. As we read the poem the terrifying and dreary territory that the Childe describes becomes slowly and gradually a *landscape of the mind*, as we move across (with the protagonist) the starved plain, with its sinister weeds, eerie atmosphere, old and macabre horse — in the last stages of starvation. He moves on, but he is always on feet. Childe Roland is a pilgrim,

---

<sup>16</sup> 'Robert Browning : New Letter' Pg. 172-173.

making his wary way along with no support except a stick or a sword to defend himself with. Images of waste, desolation and torture abound in the monologue. The word 'tophet's tool 'could well be a synonym for hell — Tophet was "a place or object in the valley of Hinnom, . . . where human sacrifices were burned by idolatrous Israelites in the worship of Moloch. "Browning portrays the Childe not as a figure of despair, but a figure of valour. He is able to preserve his equilibrium even in the face of despair and horrible sights. There is a neglected social dimension in the symbolism. *D.V. Erdman* believes: that it should be read as "Browning's Industrial Nightmare"; *J. Kirkman* thinks it is an allegory of dying, or an archetype of rebirth— the later opinion is also shared by *C.R. Woodward*.

There is a passage in '*The Ancient Mariner*' by D.W. Harding which has an obvious relevance to Browning's poem: "The human experience around which Coleridge centers the poem is surely the depression and the sense of isolation and unworthiness which the Mariner describes in Part IV. The suffering he describes is of a kind which is perhaps not found except in slightly pathological conditions, . . . . He feels isolated . . . . At the same time he is not just physically isolated but is socially abandoned. . . . All that is left, and especially, centrally, oneself, is disgustingly worthless. . . . With the sense of worthlessness there is also

guilt. And enveloping the whole experience is the sense of sapped energy, oppressive weariness. . . ."17

A usual feature of such states of pathological misery is their apparent carelessness. The depression cannot be rationally explained; the conviction of guilt and worthlessness is out of "proportion to any ordinary offence actually committed."<18

But the difference between the two poems (The Ancient Mariner vs Childe Roland) are at least as interesting as the similarities. Unlike the Mariner's, the Childe's nightmare journey is a journey by land, Browning was not fascinated by the sea . . . and the Childe is a more active and striving figure than the Mariner. While it is clear that he is confronting a tremendous challenge, and that he refuses to give up, it is uncertain whether he feels guilty. Near the end, indeed, he certainly feels guilty, and blames himself for his unsuccess—he realizes that he has failed to recognize the ultimate test, for which he has been preparing all his life:

. . . Dunce,  
Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,  
After a life spent training for the sight."

Our interpretation of the last line depends on our interpretation of the poem as a whole, or — to put the matter more accurately — our interpretation of the last line *grows out of* our interpretation of the poem as a whole. A

---

<sup>17</sup> D.W. Harding.

<sup>18</sup> *Scrutiny*, 9 (March 1941).

number of critics have taken the final lines as a *record of failure*.

- (i) R.J. Gratz - finds a connection with Bunyan, and states that the Childe finds himself 'at last surrounded by the ugly heights of Doubting Castle, one more victim of Giant Despair.'
- (ii) Betty Miller - Tells us that the vision which inspired the poem revealed to Browning 'in a landscape fully as ominous as that of Dante's *Inferne*. . . the the retribution appropriate to his own sin' — the failure to deliver the message to mankind.
- (iii) Mrs. Melchiori - considers that "Childe Roland's' turning off towards the dark tower is a form of suicide" resulting from despair occasioned by "the reversal and everturing of all the values which Browning accepted and in which he believed. Thus the poem is the triumph of evil and despair."<sup>19</sup>

The striking similarities between 'Childe Roland' and 'Prospice' has been pointed out by several critics. We recall that the seeker in Prospice is so far from committing

---

<sup>19</sup> "Browning's Major Poetry; The Dramatic Romances of 1855", Ch. XI, Pg. 181.

suicide that he wishes to approach 'the post of the fee' without fear and in full consciousness. The Childe, too, is successful, even if death is the condition of his success. The important question is— "What happens to the Childe after he blows the horn?" That is left to the imagination of the readers. Commenting on the concluding lines of the monologue, *Ian Jack* says: "That we do not know, and this is (no doubt) the point at which the dreamer awakes. Yet, whatever is about to happen, by blowing the horn the dreamer triumphs. Whether we are to suppose that he defeats the giant. . . or is killed by him, it is hard to believe that he is *other than successful*, even if death is the condition of his success."<sup>20</sup>

When, near the end of his life, Browning was asked whether he accepted one particular allegorical interpretation, he replied: "Oh, no, not at all. Understand, I don't repudiate it either. I only mean I was conscious of no allegorical intention in writing it. . . . (It) came to me as a kind of dream. . . . I did not know then what I meant beyond that, and I'm sure I don't know now. But I am very fond of it."<sup>21</sup>

To conclude, Childe Roland's dreamlike logic, like Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", can accommodate a bewildering array of images drawn from Browning's reading — from *Jack and the Beanstalk* to Dante; from the allegory of Spenser to

---

<sup>20</sup> "Browning's Major Poetry; The Dramatic Romances of 1855", Ch. XI, Pg. 183.

<sup>21</sup> "The Browning's" — Lilian Whiting. Pg. 261.

the brutal industrial landscape lying behind Elizabeth's "The Cry Of the Children."

In religious poetry, particularly the poems of 1855's Browning allays fear and anxiety about the loss of a loving God by humorous realism and skilful casuistry. . . . Childe Roland shares a terrible against with contemporary documents like: Kierkegaard's "Fear & Trembling" and Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus."

"Childe Roland is Browning's contribution to an evolving portrait of a spiritual wasteland which found expression in Tennyson's "The Holy Grail" (1869), in Thomson's "The City of Dreadful Night" (1874), in Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" (1900) and which culminated in Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922).<sup>22</sup>

The final monologue which I intend to discuss is '*Caliban Upon Setebos*', subtitled 'Natural Theology in the Island'. This is an argument in a dramatic framework. It illustrates Browning's flair for the grotesque. . . . What makes '*Caliban. . .*' unique is the imaginative power which renders it truly dramatic. *Theodore Parker*, the American Unitarian said: 'A man rude in spirit must have a rude conception of God. He thinks the deity like himself. If a buffalo had a religion, his conception of deity would be probably a buffalo, fairer limbed, stronger and swifter than himself, grazing in the fairest meadow of heaven.'

---

<sup>22</sup> "Browning : Routledge Author Guides" Roy. E. Gridley, Ch. IV, Pg. 89.

Caliban's reasoning follows the same lines. He believes that Setebos, whom he conceives after his own image, lives in the moon being the creator of all sublunary things. He further believes that Setebes is morally in different, like Hardy's President of the Immortals. Browning deftly portrays the mind of Caliban, semi—human, semi—beast. Since envy is one of Caliban's ruling features, he consequently attributes to Setabes an envious temperament. Despite his distorted sensibility, Caliban made a deep appeal to Browning's imagination, and the poet took great care to depict his character perfectly. The vitality of the poem is due to the fact that the figure of Caliban made a deep impression on Browning, who was obsessed with the theme of 'vision of evil'. He has also acknowledged to Elizabeth Barrett his curious interest in insects and other creeping things. Keats could identify himself with lowly and apparently ugly creatures. A beautiful description is found in his poem 'Sibrandus Schfnaburgensis'. Browning presents Caliban as a comic creature, but he is not grotesque. As the monologue continues, we find that gradually Caliban develops from 'a mouthpiece of his creator' to an individual personality. Browning is here using his dramatic genius, to the best of his ability. He is giving rein to his delight in the grotesque, for a definite purpose. "He is satirizing on any purely natural theology, by giving us the reflections on the nature of God of a creature much inferior to man, yet supposedly man, yet supposedly man's ancestor.'<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> "Browning's Major Poetry— Dramatis Persone", Ian Jack, Ch. XIII.

Thus we see, that through his life, Browning continued in his search for originality — both an subject matter, and also in the technique he adopted while writing his dramatic monologues. He was concerned in Men, not in mankind. His abiding faith in the essential goodness of man, and his saving grace of optimism, gave rise to the fore mentioned poems. Dishonest, morbid, evil his protagonists may be, but they all have a logical excuse to offer. Life is a mixture of good and evil — and Browning believed each is essential to the other. His vision of evil, is therefore, actually his ability to perceive life as a whole — he is the eighteenth century realist.

\*\*\*