


5-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Howard, Tony Jack (1991) "Browning's "Confessions": A Curious Monologue," *Forces*: Vol. 1991 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol1991/iss1/19>

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The three essentials of a dramatic monologue are character, auditor, and situation; a character speaks to an auditor (who does not speak, but whose presence we easily infer by the speaker's actions) within a specific situation. Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" represents an apt, although worn example—"apt" because one can scarcely utter "dramatic monologue" without "My Last Duchess" leaping into mind, and "worn" for much the same reason. Remember?

The character speaking is the Duke; the auditor is an ambassador who is negotiating marriage plans; and the situation is an unveiling of a portrait of the Duke's former wife. "My Last Duchess" is a fine poem; along with "The Bishop Orders his Tomb," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea Del Sarto," it will forever remain linked to a poetic form given its fullest expression by Browning.

But what about Brownings's "Confessions"? In substance, clearly a dramatic monologue, but in appearance it is nothing like his other works in that genre. It is a curious poem, and one which deserves microscopic attention.

Browning's "Confessions": A Curious Dramatic Monologue

by Tony Jack Howard

I

What is he buzzing in my ears?
"Now that I come to die,
Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"
Ah, reverend sir, not I!

Character, auditor, and situation present themselves in this first stanza, along with the alternating tetrameter/trimeter lines rhyming abab which comprise the musical score of the poem. The character who speaks the words of the poem is a dying man; the auditor is a priest, and the situation is that of a final confession at the man's death-bed. This first stanza sets the tone of the poem also; the speaker does not "view the world as a vale of tears," but as something altogether positive—an attitude the priest does not expect.

II

What I viewed there once, what I view again
Where the physic bottles stand
On the table's edge—is a suburb lane.
With a wall to my bedside hand.

Here, the speaker introduces the reverie which dominates the poem. "There" refers to "world" in the first stanza. The "physic bottles" become part of a landscape the speaker creates in the process of remembering/relating why his world will not be recalled as a "vale of tears." The bottles of medicine should remind him that he is a sick man who is about to die; instead, they become transfigured into the architecture of a pleasant memory. Something concrete and perceptual triggers something concrete and imaginal.

III

That lane sloped, much as the bottles do,
From a house you could descry
O'er the garden-wall: is the curtain blue
Or green to a healthy eye?

The speaker oscillates between the actual setting of his sick-room and the remembered landscape: as the physic bottles slope, so does the remembered lane. The speaker returns for a moment to ask whether the curtain is actually blue or green, but this perceptual question becomes irrelevant as the speaker immerses himself fully into his reverie.

IV

To mine, it serves for the old June weather
Blue above lane and wall
And that farthest bottle labeled "Ether"
Is the house o'ertopping all.

"Mine" refers to the speaker's unhealthy eye which sees a blue curtain which, in turn, "serves" as the blue sky of his remembered experience. The "Ether" bottle becomes the "house o'ertopping all"; ether induces unconsciousness and forgetfulness, yet the speaker remains intent upon remembering this important past experience. Also, ether could offer the cause for the speaker's metaphorical language; that is, the speaker's hallucinatory speech may be the product of his having been etherized.

V

At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,
There watched for me, one June,
A girl: I know, sir, it's improper,
My poor mind's out of tune.

Notice these three important additions: the memory is about a girl; the priest is shocked; and the speaker is well aware of his mental condition. This is a seminal stanza. At a "terrace" (memory) "near the stopper" (real) of the ether bottle (drowns memory/triggers memory) we have a waiting girl (memory). At the confession of "girl," the priest winces or shakes his head or provides some other gesture of reproach, and this action causes the speaker to qualify the admission as an impropriety while claiming "sick-mind's prerogative"—as much as to say, "Sorry to alarm you, old boy, but 'my poor mind's out of tune.'"

VI

Only, there was a way . . . you crept
Close by the side to dodge
Eyes in the house, two eyes except:
They styled their house "The Lodge."

The speaker now resides wholly within his memory as he relates how he would travel furtively to meet his lover. This stanza is the last closed stanza; the remaining three flow into one another as the speaker becomes rapt with his memory, no longer distinctly alternating between actual room and imagined (remembered) landscape. We hasten to some resolution.

VII

What right had a loungee up their lane?
But, by creeping very close,
With the good wall's help,—their eyes might strain
And stretch themselves to Oes,

VIII

Yet never catch her and me together,
As she left the attic, there,
By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether,"
And stole from stair to stair,

IX

And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,
We loved, sir—used to meet:
How sad and bad and mad it was—
But then, how it was sweet!

The speaker makes his confession. He had enjoyed a clandestine affair with a woman. Does the speaker now feel he must repent in sackcloth and ashes, must view that experience as proof that this world is a "vale of tears"? Indeed not. The speaker has been laboring to recreate that memory from the physical apparatus of his death-room in order to affirm the worth of that experience, regardless of conventional Victorian morality. Hence, the priest's words are "buzzing" in the speaker's ear like some obnoxious fly. He does not confess this June affair because he desires absolution but because the memory is "sweet"—a fitter mood for death and a more positive attitude toward the world than the priest's.

What Browning accomplishes in "Confessions" is an affirmation of experience as experience. As a reverie, the poem reveals what it means to re/member; as a love poem, it demonstrates Browning's unconventional belief in the validity of passion; and as a dramatic monologue, it proves that Browning's tightly controlled, rhyming stanzaic verse can function just as effectively as the blank verse of his more well-known examples of that form.

Browning, Robert. *Poems of Robert Browning*. Ed. Donald Smalley. Boston: Houghton, 1956.