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Robert Browning: A Dramatic Monologue Marvel

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ABSTRACT. One of the most effective literary devices within different didactic and aesthetic forms is the dramatic monologue. The dramatic monologue distinguishes the speaker's character from that of the poet's. The double meaning that lies at the heart of the dramatic monologue, conveys the speaker's version or variety of meaning and intentions. The Dramatic monologue has been practiced for a very long time, but it was Robert Browning who invested it with a deeper level of meaning giving it frequency in an attempt to support preexisting aesthetic values in favor of a poem that valued form over content. Although such a dialogue is called dramatic, it is not a theatrical device, proper. The speaker of the poem delivers such comments on the slice of life at disposal that would leave us with a deep emotional experience. By listening to the words pouring out of the speaker's mind, the reader/listener obtains a psychoanalytic view of the speaker. The current article aims to study Robert Browning, the prominent Victorian poet, by putting on the pedestal his essential role in investing the dramatic monologue in English literature with an essential poetic significance and role by reviewing a number of his major poems.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dramatic monologue as launched in English literature during the Victorian period by Robert Browning, is a purposeful poetic means for a specified pragmatic end. Although it is dramatic, but it is not envisioned for the theatre. It is an unnatural conversation that is unbalanced toward the speaker's intentions. The listener is completely the silent interlocutor and is subjugated and mesmerized by the speaker's speech. The speech is powerful and effective, but it is the exposition of the speaker's thought and it acts as the stage to the performance of the speaker's thought and speech. The dramatic monologue has a target at sight, and it influences the audience or readers and affects their attitudes toward the prevalent ideas in the society. The speaker of the poem is some person other than the poet who resides in a society that can be full of prostitution, corruption, and immorality. In order to escape the reality of the moment, they flee to an ideal society. Thus, the degree to which the reviewer would be demoralized is demonstrated by their complaint that he had been unable to discover any dramatic quality whatever in considering more than half of them (Jack, 1987). The society in such poems, is an envisioned society, shown as a model for the ideal society.

The dramatic monologue is a lyric poem in which the speaker addresses a silent listener, revealing themselves in the context of a dramatic situation (Murfin & Supryia, 1998). Moreover, the character is speaking to an identifiable but silent listener at a dramatic moment in the speaker's life. The circumstances surrounding the conversation, one side which we "hear" as the dramatic monologue, are made by clear implication, and an insight into the character of the speaker may result (Holman & Harmon, 1992). The three conditions of a Browning dramatic monologue are: the reader takes the part of the silent listener; the speaker uses a case-making argumentative tone; we complete the dramatic scene from within, by means of inference and imagination (Landow). Langbaum (1987) sees the dramatic monologue as a combination of lyric and dramatic elements that indicate a poetic innovation whose influence could be traced in the work of all the great modernist poets (O'Neill, 1995). Langbaum (1987) argues that we understand the speakers of

dramatic monologues by sympathizing with them and yet remaining aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of understanding.

The pattern for this strategy appears consistently in Browning's monologues as the speaker is set dramatically into a situation which demands an explanation; the explanation is directed at a listener, whom the speaker intends to awaken or influence; the speaker's attitude toward the listener is one of obligation, and in this sense the speaker assumes a mask to affect his listener's opinion. This method is the art of persuasion that tends to direct the listener toward the speaker's point of view. Browning's speakers are closed, cautious, and reflective, measuring their words in terms of their social and dramatic implications. The reader, then, is forced more directly into the dramatic situation because the notion of conflict has grown in subtlety: the auditor remains to be convinced. The dramatic monologue pits a character against a situation, which demands that the character fight for psychological survival. (Garratt, 1973).

2. DISCUSSION

Most of the time, in Browning's poems there is a sole speaker, for instance in "Fra Lippo Lippi", Lippo speaks to watchmen. Browning was interested in the soul of man and was concerned with human problems despite their actions or misdemeanors. His characters are both virtuous and vicious. His poems are full of incidents and shocking events. Bergman (1980) delving into Browning's monologues and the development of the soul, comments on Browning's choice of characters by saying,

Browning's supposedly greater skill at presenting failed artists and corrupt politicians becomes more understandable (and a less a component of his psyche) when we observe that the approved model for the dramatic monologue favors the depiction failure and corruption rather than saint hood and heroism which are less commonly found on the street. (773)

The style of Browning's spiritual improvement is disinherited from all persons and things, with his own discrete and separate charisma. At another point, he is competent of proper intimacy with other persons. At this median point he may begin to perceive his relation to God. In the end, he sees all creatures as originating from God. At the highest of improvement, man perceives that he is not an isolated human being with his own private and typical charisma. Some critics believed the characters in Browning's poems never change. They remain the same from beginning to end. But there is contradiction in "Fra Lippo Lippi", because at the first lines of poem Lippo is a "beast": "I'm a beast I know," (II. 270) and "It's natural a poor monk / Should have his apt word to excuse himself," (III. 341-342) but then he turns into a monk.

"Fra Lippo Lippi" is one of the most popular of Browning's dramatic monologues in blank verse which is written in phrases over the course of four hundred lines. The poem is based on the complicated levels on the aim of religion, art, politics, and the inadequacy of moral figures. The poem is about the philosophy and nature of art. Browning wrote the poem after reading "Fra Lippo Lippi" in Vasari's lives of the artists at the age of Renaissance paintings. Lippi was a monk and the first realist painter in 15th century Florence in the naturalist school. At the time Lippi was painting, art was concerned with religious matters and following the shadowy moral shapes rather than depicting life as it is. The poem satirizes the conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and the Italian Renaissance tradition of art patronage. Browning wrote the poem, when the Victorians were concerned again into the idea that art should have a moral aim. He suggests that humans try to ignore the complexity of their lives. The dilemma in painting the life as it is; thereby, disclosing its complexity through moral principles. In fact, the themes of the poem are ideas about religion, morality, lust, want, the ideal, reality, the function of art and natural beauty. Lippo was a realist painter who tried to show in several places, contemporary scenes and figures the importance of realism. He frequently reveals his love of life and believes art should instigate beauty in the hope of evoking responses from the audience, and exhibits the question of whether art should be realistic and true to life or idealistic and instructive.

The poem begins when the monk explains to the couple of guards who found him itinerant in the street at midnight at an “alley’s end / Where the sportive ladies leave their doors ajar” (I. 5-6) only “three streets off” (I. 16), that he lives with the member of the powerful Medici family “Cosimo of the Medici”. He identifies himself as the famous painter. Then he tells his life story. When he was an orphaned baby, his aunt takes him to a convent. In the convent, the monks asked if he was willing to leave the world and become a monk. Lippo quickly accepted since leaving the world meant a comfortable life with a supply of food in service of monkhood. There was irony when Lippo was brought to the convent. His mouth was full of bread the “good fat father” (I. 92) asked the boy if he would “quit this very miserable world?” (I. 95) from that point he would become an idle boy who would be uninterested in the lessons and studies. Lippo presents an economic man through whom Browning tries to indicate the relation between the house of “Medici” and the inescapable movement toward commercial economy. He connects to religious association for sustenance rather than spiritual nourishment, and for his worldly and economic advantage, he would acquire the “Cosimo di Medici” patronage. Then Lippo understands that his “business”: “is to paint the souls of men.” (II. 184) is possible through combining “souls” to the pursuit of mercantile life and secular world of personal subjects and concrete objects. Folk at church would read as:

From good old gossips waiting to confess, / Their cribs of barrel-droppings candle-ends, / To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot, / Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there, / With the little children round him in a row, / Of admiration, half for his beard and half, / For that white anger of his victim’s on, / Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm, / Signing himself with the other because of Christ, / (Whose sad face on the cross sees only this? / After his passion of a thousand years). (II. 146-157)

Susman illustrates the monk creating “religiously powerful paintings” for the commercial supporter. He says: “The portrait of Lippo shows how the entry or, in Ruskin terms, the unfortunate “fall” of the artist into the sphere of commerce generates a debilitating commoditization of male energy, both artistic and sexual.” (1992: 187). He discussed the poem in the matter of formation of male poetic in Browning’s poem, whom the characters have “creative power with sexual potency”. Lippo illustrate the “successful” artist in creating a realistic religious art of male identity. Susman (1992) believed that Browning is writing not only art history and economic history, but also, as a kind of Victorian Foucault (1973), a history of manhood, of male sexuality. In mid Victorian poetry, when the male characters escape from the surrounded place like the monastery, intimate the moment of “man-making”. Lippo’s flee from the monastery epitomize the male artist rejecting the repression of artistic, commercial, and sexual activity. For having rejected the monastery in his quest to become a mature man, he must escape from the “banking-house” (I. 99). The imprisoned male artist must paint in the monastery saints and virgins. The continued construction of “saints and saints” advise the care about serial re-construction or mechanical reconstruction that, most particularly in Ruskin, is the note in the mid Victorian aesthetic discussion of uncertain artistic labor. Patron reminded Lippi after returning from brothel, he must “Rise up tomorrow and go work, / On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast, / With his great round stone to subdue the flesh.” (II. 72-74) Lippo becomes a new “Master” from the employ of mercantile patron; he is forced to create a product at odds with his manhood.

The female is portrayed as virginal, saintly, in Lippo’s piece de resistance, but is stilled the object of the erotic male desire: “The little Lily thing, / That spoke the good word for me in the nick, / Like the Prior’s niece ... saint Lucy. I would say.” (II. 385- 387)

When Lippo trip to the brothel, Browning intimate that a mercantile structure may bring about the commoditization of male want in both its erotic and artistic revelation. The “quarter-florin” (I. 28), the coin that Lippo show for admiration, symbolizes Pride in his artistic fulfillment, and it also relate money payment for uncreative art with money payment for loveless sexual relations. These trips to enclosed space are as practical for Lippo as for any Victorian businessman. In public, It represent that for the male Victorian the illicit relationship, as Susman alludes “a secret life” is

essential” for the male artist, and for males in general.” (1992: 194). That has marked Lippo as the “successful” artist.

Lippo was tolerated in drawing the individual’s faces. He was expert in drawing the details of different characteristics; gradually the others noticed his talent in drawings and paintings. Instead of studying in the convent, the Prior assigned him to be the convent’s artist. Lippo’s painting was about the real world and the pleasure of life. The lines: “You should not take a fellow eight years old / And make him swear to never kiss the girls.” (II. 225- 226). Emphasis is laid on pleasurable and worldly themes. When the church leaders give him the chance to paint, he is exhilarated: “Thank you! My head being crammed, the walls a blank, / Never was such prompt disemburdening” (II. 143-144). He begins to paint church patrons in a realistic manner. The simple monks are amazed at Lippi’s ability to portray real people through his work. Yet “The Prior and the learned pulled a face / And stopped that in no time” (II. 174-175) were not agree to Lippo’s painting on realistic matters. They believe that the artist should paint:

Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true, / [...] it’s devil’s game! / Your business is not to catch men with show, / With homage to the perishable clay, / But lift them over it, ignore it all, / Make them forget there’s such a thing as flesh, (II. 177- 183)

To sublime the soul and to concentrate on the angelic and blessed images. Just as the art prohibit moral function, so the artist reads religious subjects irreverently. Subsequently, his works do not “instigate to prayer” (316), Lippo reduces religious qualities to commonplaces:

Strikes in the Prior: ‘when your meaning’s plain, / ‘It does not say to folk- remember matins, / ‘Or, mind you fast next Friday! ‘Why, for this, / What need of art at all? A skull and bones, / Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what’s best, / A bell to chime the hour with, does as well. (II. 317- 322)

Lippo altogether negate moral caution; restrict intensity and goodness to self – gratification. Restricting “higher things” to “the same truth” (309), that is, “simple beauty and nought else” (II. 217), he turns even religious art into ethically “careless” (II. 294), improper workmanship. Lippo indicate that “simple beauty” is “about the best thing God invents” (II. 218), which means to paint things not necessarily from a moral perspective. Lippi is intimidated that the church masters do not share his love of physical form. He is a naturalistic artist who wants to honestly exhibit what he sees around the world. For doing his extreme, he holds a mirror up to nature:

A fire way to paint soul, by painting body, / So ill, the eye can’t stop here, must go further, / And can’t fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white, / When what you put for yellow’s simply black, / And any sort of meaning looks intense.

When all beside itself means and looks nought. (II. 199-204). In attempting to paint as if neglecting the body and the real world, Lippi intimate that the painter is proposing only an evasive idea of soul and define his own technique of painting as actually heightening the image of the soul.” Can’t I take breath and try to add life’s flash, / And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?” (II. 213- 214). He is forced to do whatever his masters insist in order to gain food and stay successful instead of remaining hungry. In fact, he pretended to abandon the world to get bread, so he cannot express his view truly.

The existence of “Hulking Tom” in the poem recommend that artists should be breakers in the society and change the world from the cliché’s painting, such as holy subjectivity instead of objective facts. Lippo’s desire is to reach to the essence of his subjectivity to instigate people to pray and accomplish their religious duties. But Lippo wants to indicate that his impulse to paint objectively does not mean the avoiding of subjective Transcendence. In lines:

If you get simple beauty and nought else, / You get about the best thing God invents: / That’s somewhat: and you’ll find the soul you have missed, / Within yourself, when you return him thanks. / “Rub all out!” Well, well, there’s my life, in short, (II. 217-221)

God created everything and by appreciating the God's creation, humans should be thankful to God for having soul within them and the realist painting instigate the attention of human to the beauties of real life and God of Genesis. The master's desire was to paint idealized creation of life, such as depiction of God and saints, creating Eve in the Garden of Eden rather than realist human absurdity.

God's works paint any one, and count it crime, / To let a truth slip. / Don't object, "His works, / Are here already; nature is complete: / Suppose you reproduce her- (which you can't), / There's no advantage! You must bear her, then. (II. 295-299)

For Lippo the spirit and soul has less value than substance and body: "the value and significance of flesh / I cannot unlearn ten minutes afterwards" (II. 268-269). But Fra Lippo's decision to "add the soul" to "flesh" represent the equality both in substance and spirit in the style of Italian painting and on the Browning's view. Lippo mocks the sermons and saints by saying: "The only good of grass is to make chaff." (II. 257), and when he says: "I always see the garden and God there / A making man's wife." (II. 266-267), trying to prove the real statement to the monk. Throughout the poem, Browning lead Fra Lippo Lippi to generate new vision of things. He glares for a moment at "The shape of things, their colors, lights and shades," (II. 284) and when he says: Do you feel thankful, ay or no?" (II. 286) persuade the auditors to manifest a spiritual power that will empower him to "Interpret God to all of you" (II. 311). The poem spread out Lippi's direct debate that realistic art brings the viewer closer to God's creation and, thus, closer to God, but Browning's indirect debate goes beyond in showing that realistic art is didactic as well.

Generally, a poem delivered as though by a single imagined person and the speaker is not to be identified with the poet, but who is dramatized, usually through his or her own words. The tradition of the verse epistle may be seen to have contributed to the development of the dramatic monologue, which found one of its most accomplished exponents in Browning ('My Last Duchess', 1842; 'Caliban upon Setebos', 1864). The form was employed by many 19th and 20th century poets, including Tennyson, Hardy, Kipling, Frost, Pound, and T. S. Eliot, and several Victorian women poets found it a useful vehicle for giving voice to women's concerns and repressions (Drabble, 2000: 299). *Dramatic monologue* refers to a type of poetry. These poems are *dramatic* in the sense that they have a drama quality; that is, the poem is meant to be read to spectators. To say that the poem is a *monologue* means that these are the words of one speaker with no dialogue coming from any other characters. Dramatic monologue' is a generic term whose practical usefulness does not seem to have been impaired by the failure of literary historians and taxonomists to achieve consensus in its definition. (Bristow, 2005: 69)

The poet portrays a mask that is different from his own personality. The subject matter is not so much important in dramatic monologues, but it is the matter of characterization. The character of the speaker and silent interlocutors in the poem are so fundamental. "In dramatic monologues, the speakers turn their designs away from us, directing their insistence to a generally skeptical listener. We hear and observe the speaker not in full face, but at an angle, through a glass darkly, relieved of the full force of his or her obsessed attention. Unlike the epic bard, the speaker is at no great pains to persuade us" (Auerbach, 1984: 166). The characters are in depth of the society and are interfered with the problems of the society. The relationship between characters is often showed as a complete war between the speaker and the listener. Often showed as a master-slave relationship. The listener does not have a voice in the poem and cannot have his/her stage for the demonstration of the thoughts. The condition of the Victorian society is fully depicted in Browning's dramatic monologues, such as the condition of the urban livings, violence and prostitution. "The range is from the jealous brother in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"; the completely worldly and sensuous Bishop in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," begging his illegitimate sons to build him a tomb more elegant than that of his rival, Gandolf, so he can lie in triumphant pride through the ages (after he is dead) and hear the mass, see the bread and wine consecrated, and smell the thick incense smoke, while gloating over his having won the mistress also" (Stagg, 1969: 50).

“The dramatic monologue celebrates self-creation, but it is a self-creation enforced by the power of skepticism over the insecurity of being. Other listeners would probably dictate other poems. In its essence, the dramatic monologue asks of us neither sympathy nor judgment. Rather, it strikes home to us the impurity of our own tale telling, the ways in which our own truth has been adjusted, not to a remote and acquiescent audience, but to our intimates who do not believe us” (Auerbach, 1984: 167). The dramatic monologue seeks the power relationship between art and morality. Victorian society is often criticized of the mere morality corruption and bad condition of the women livings. The poem seeks out the controversial ideas that can be dealt with in the heart of the dramatic monologue. These controversial ideas cannot be dealt in other genres of literature. The character development is an essential stage of the dramatic monologue. Different perspectives on fixed conditions of the Victorian society and it allow the reader to enter the mind of the main character. In literature, according to the reader oriented criticism, there can be different interpretations on a fixed phenomenon. The multiplicity of perspectives is fully shown in the dramatic monologues. Medieval settings are prevalent in Browning’s poetry and it is a better way to deal with the contemporary issues of the society in the poem.

The interpretation of the reader is often hard and judgmental, because you cannot hear the different voices in the heart of the poem. The speakers are not criminals, but they justify their acts, based on their viewpoints on different states of mind. The immoral acts are shown in the course of the dramatic monologue in order to invoke a moral judgment from the reader. The reader is left in the middle of the incidents to judge the characters. “The majority of dramatic monologists are not criminals or charlatans, only searchers after some transformation, whether spiritual, professional, or personal For all their removal from any norm, they collectively present adherence to certain patterns, constituting a confirmation of nonconformists” (Bristow, 2005: 73).

One of the main problems of the Victorian society is the pressure of the male-dominated society upon the women who are held as captives, subjugated objects and consider them as fallen women. Women in these kinds of poems do not have a voice and they are always silent. They are oppressed because of their natural sexuality and prostitution. Women consciousness is depicted as something unnatural and they are considered as the second sex. The idea of seeing a woman as “the other” and pose a master-slave relationship in order to hold the women as second-class citizens of the Victorian society. The male characters are the speakers of the dramatic monologues so the judgment of the readers is depended on the male-oriented society. In “the last duchess”, a powerful poem by Browning, the duke want more control over the duchess that leads to the death of the duchess.

“My Last Duchess,” often considered the outstanding dramatic monologue of the Victorian era, is the tale of a man, the Duke of Ferrara, who is firm that his wife was not suitable to his needs and respect. So he has her murdered. He expected absolute obedience from his Duchess: “...if she let/herself be lessened...” and when he was disappointed, he ordered her death. “I gave commands; /then all smiled stopped together”.

In “the last duchess”, the women is dead, but the portrait of her makes judgments among the people, who “strangers like you that pictured countenance/ the depth and passion of its earnest glance” (7-8). By looking into the painting on the wall, the face of the duchess shows that “‘twas not her husband’s presence only, called that spot of joy into the duchess’ cheek” (13-15), and this showed that the duchess was too simple or even unfaithful to the duke. What is very conspicuous is that the duke is a very powerful performer and this eases the exhibition of his character. The duchess “too soon made glad, too easily impressed; she liked whatever she looked on, and her looks went everywhere” (22-24). The duchess is punished by the domineering duke for her natural sexuality and perhaps the story is not real at all. Perhaps the mind of the duke is where all these occurrences take place. A mind that domineers a male duke to want absolute power over the duchess.

“Porphyria’s Lover” is another example of violence told within dramatic monologue. It tells the tale of a woman, Porphyria, who visits her lover, as she still takes the role of a passive wife, calling to her lover, and, when he does not respond, making herself ready for him: “She put my arm about her waist,/And made her smooth white shoulder bare,/And all her yellow hair

displaced/...Murmuring how she loved me..." but he chooses to murder her: "I found/A thing to do, and all her hair/In one long yellow string I wound/Three times her little throat around/And strangled her." He justifies his murder but explaining to the auditor that she felt no pain "No pain felt she; /I am quite sure she felt no pain" and that she now is happy "Her head, which droops upon it still:/The smiling rosy little head/ so glad it has its utmost will". The art of persuasion of the listener through the mere justification of act is thoroughly conspicuous in the layers of the dramatic monologue.

In "porphyria's lover" the setting is very importantly described between an ancient and modern surrounding. The blurring of the tradition and modern times, that is in accordance with the fast technological improvement in the Victorian era. It seems that the speaker is mad and this madness is within the speaker's rational self-representation. The victim is pressured by the society structures about the sexuality of a woman. She is "too weak, for all her heart's endeavor, to set its struggling passion free from pride, and ties dis sever, and give herself to me forever" (22-25). Like "the last duchess", both speakers in two poems are trying to take control over the women by creating different class structures and divisions around them.

In both "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover," Browning has shown that the male in the relationship has the power to have dominance over his lover. In "My Last Duchess," it appears to be hope, but "Porphyria's Lover" appears to be more in line with saving the moment of dedication. Both the Duke and the lover feel that their analysis on their women is exact, and that they are the ones who should be allowed to determine if the women live or die. "Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" concerned itself with female subjectivity, including and perhaps especially the modes of consciousness of women whom we do not hear speak. The speaker of "Porphyria's Lover" not only draws his name from his intimate relationship to her but also claims that the actions he describes, including that of murdering her, are based on his apprehension of her desires, her "one wish" (Bristow, 2005: 74). The identity of the woman is depended on the male dominant whereas in the consequence the male lover takes his identity in interaction with the female. As it is shown through "porphyria's lover" that the male partner does not have a specific name and derives his identity from the interaction with his female partner.

3. CONCLUSION

The dramatic monologue is a persuasive form of poetry with the ability to be influential for the readers. The dramatic constituents and psychological significance make it a delighting form to be read. Robert Browning has been considered the master of dramatic monologue. "The dramatic monologues of Robert Browning represent the most significant use of the form in post romantic poetry" (Preminger & Brogan 799). Browning's situation in the history of English poetry is incomparable because of the huge number of poems he wrote. It is not for that he has created a circle of distinctive characters, but for the appliance of the dramatic monologue he has exhibited principal truths uniting all men. In three poems analyzed above, the persona Browning created is the main feature to make difference between the speaker in the poem and the poet himself. In My Last Duchess, Browning composed, the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II. In Fra Lippo Lippi the illusion is composed that the reader is reading the monologue told by a fourteenth century monk. In Porphyria's Lover, a distorted lover is connecting about how he murdered his partner. Even though Browning was writing for an English audience, the settings of his most poems are set in Italy; such as, Fra Lippo lippi and My Last Duchess. The first poem, Fra Lippo Lippi, is set in Florence where Browning settled with his wife. In My Last Duchess, the fifth Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II. In Porphyria's Lover the setting is undetermined and could be set anywhere in the world. Another point about these three poems is the silent auditor, which is an important feature in the genre of the dramatic monologue. In My Last Duchess, the silent auditor is present in the model of the envoy. The lines: "Will it please you sit and look at her?" (5) and "Will it please you rise?" (47) are an indication to the reader that the Duke is not talking to himself, but another person is present. In Porphyria's Lover, a dead Porphyria is present during the monologue but he talks about her in third person and does not consider her as an interlocutor. In Lippo Lippi the presence of a silent auditor is

very clear in the poem. In Line 14 where Fra repeats a question the city guards asked him: “Who am I?” Is referring to this auditor.

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