

**‘Speak from every mouth – the speech, a poem’:
Conflicting Voices, Discourses and Identities in the
Poetry of Robert Browning**

PAULA ALEXANDRA V. R. GUIMARÃES¹

paulag@ilch.uminho.pt

It seems very difficult to link autobiography with poetry in Browning’s poetical works because the author constantly and methodically hides behind masks and speakers, expecting his readers to take pleasure in unmasking each. In his epilogue to *Men and Women* (1855), Browning writes: “ ... you saw me gather men and women, / Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy, / Enter each and all, and use their service, / Speak from every mouth, [...]” (129-132). With these multiple characters, no speaker could be abusively identified with the poet, who thus became invisible but free to speak in the first person while using several voices. Through odd rhymes, dislocations of syntax and colloquialisms, Browning creates for each speaker a highly individual linguistic personality. The ‘action’ in his poems is thus verbal and vocal. Some of these voices tell the ‘truth’ when they precisely try to hide it and others hide the truth when they pretend to tell it openly, leaving the reader to decide. As the poet states in *Sordello* (1840), “making speak, myself kept out of view, / The very man as he was wont to do, / And leaving you to say the rest for him.” (I, 15-17); this means that the reader is strongly invited not to trust the speaker and to take his own conclusions from the speaker’s unwonted revelations. The poet never interrupts and judges his speakers but ironically and implicitly invites his readers to do so by obliquely debunking the speeches of his reprehensible speakers. Browning himself staged his aesthetic principle in the dramatic monologue “How it strikes a Contemporary” (1855), in which the artist is described as an observer who needs to put reality to the test, through the drama of conflicting internal voices, and whose reader is a competent one who never takes the text at its face value. In the end, there seems to be a deliberate absence of definitive answers to pressing questions about identity, motive and social context.

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¹ Docente e investigadora no Departamento de Estudos Ingleses e Norte-Americanos da Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal.

[...] though he turned language into ignoble clay, he made from it men and women that live. [...] If Shakespeare could sing with myriad lips, Browning could stammer through a thousand mouths. (Oscar Wilde, 1890)

Robert Browning's most relevant poetic concepts can be found in the psychological assumptions introduced in the three major poems with which he initiated his career in the 1830s: the lyrical "Pauline" (1833), the dramatic "Paracelsus" (1835), and the epical "Sordello" (1840). These texts are thematically connected by a similar *conflict*, psychological and verbal, and each seems to arrive at the same conclusion: that the artist can only achieve full self-realisation by getting into productive communication with the external world.

If in "Pauline" this problem is formulated in terms of a discursive conflict between reason and instinct, in "Paracelsus", the alchemist-speaker eventually turns his mental powers to unscrupulous ends, and linguistically betrays himself to the ways of the world. In turn, the character of Sordello is verbally motivated like the poet himself by two impulses, one more egotistical turning him *inward* towards self-contemplation and artistic endeavour, the other more worldly driving him *outward* to a life of action in society.²

Weeks, months, years went by
And lo, Sordello vanished utterly,
Sundered in twain; each spectral part at strife
With each; one jarred against another life;
The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man –
(*The Poems*, 655-59)

Browning's attempt to present Paracelsus' spiritual biography in dramatic form was a first step towards externalising verbally the author's inner perceptions. He had warned that this work would require the 'co-operating fancy' of the reader if he or she was to grasp the shape and

² The poem, in heroic couplets, is the story of poetic genius surrounded by the grandeur of historical event (early thirteenth-century Italy), an orphan with extraordinary powers as a poet and troubadour, who sacrifices his ideal and his art to fame. See Robert Columbus and Claudette Kemper's study on "Sordello and the Speaker: A Problem in Identity" (1964). In terms of form and language, Robert Browning deliberately sets out to counter all conventions: bewildering syntax, enjambed lines, unexpected rhymes frustrate the reader's expectations and make the poem's meaning obscure.

significance of the whole. However, fearing that his audience would not understand his general purpose and method, the poet decided to use the dedication to the original edition to explain his intention:

[...] it is *an attempt*, [...], *to reverse the method usually adopted by writers whose aim it is to set forth any phenomena of the mind or the passions, by the operation of persons and events; and that, instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress*, [...] (*apud* Kennedy and Hair, 2007: 45-6, our emphasis).

Later on, in the dedication to his play "Strafford" (1837), Browning would significantly describe the drama as "one of *Action in Character*, rather than *Character in Action*" (*apud* Kennedy, 56-7, our emphasis). And, in fact, in all of his subsequent plays the protagonist has to decide between two lines of action: one derived from innate idealism, the other from selfish calculation. The resulting *internal conflict* supplies the 'dramatic' and discursive tension of the piece. Like Sordello himself, other characters die of emotional exhaustion resulting from the verbal confrontation between their material and spiritual interests.³ In later plays, like "Luria," and "A Soul's Tragedy," external action virtually disappears, while the *speeches* of the characters, closely akin to dramatic monologues, expose with increasing clearness that major concern in Browning's thinking – the psychological and verbal *conflict* between a wisdom of the heart and the wisdom of the world.

But the poet's following efforts, in the 1840s, included three additional dramatic experiments of a very different and much more original kind. These were: *Pippa Passes* (1841), *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). In explanation of the general symbolic title, "Bells and Pomegranates", the poet wrote that he meant "to indicate an endeavour towards something like *an alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought*." (*apud* Kennedy, 83, our emphasis).

³ As Stopford Brooke states, "It is during this period of impassioned confusion and struggle towards form, during this carnival of individuality, that Sordello, ..., a modern in the midst of mediaevalism, an exceptional character wholly unfitted for the time, is placed by Browning. And the clash between himself and his age is too much for him. He dies of it; dies of the striving to find an anchorage for life, and of his inability to find it in this chartless sea." (1906: 181).

The discipline and method of playwriting had increased Browning's dramatic sense, but the kinds of dramatic struggle which excited his imagination were now those happening within the minds of individual characters. The poet discovered a perfect medium for presenting his insights in a verbal (dis)guise: the *dramatic lyric* and its more sophisticated variation, the *dramatic monologue*.⁴

Browning's poems, as E D. H. Johnson proposes, may be classified into three groups, conforming to the three aspects under which the poet saw "the drama of solitary souls in their strife with the forces of organized society" (1952: 90-91). One aspect poses the problem of intellectual assent to established institutions and involves a concept of *power*; a second poses the problem of emotional assent to conventional morality and involves a concept of *love*; and a third aspect poses the problem of aesthetic assent to artistic traditions and involves a concept of the *creative impulse*. All three themes occur in *Pippa Passes: A Drama*, which thus marks out the principal issues with which Browning would be concerned.

This transitional lyrical drama is the first long work which allows us to identify the themes and methods which would characterise Browning's more mature style.⁵ It presents a day in the life of an Italian working girl on holiday, who imagines herself experiencing the lives of the four most fortunate people in the town, but being unaware that each of them is in the midst of a terrible crisis. While the poet still uses verbal dialogue, dramatic effect is here mostly achieved through a display of tensions *antecedent* to action. The subject-matter of the four episodes suggests an attempt to fuse the subjective and objective strains of Browning's previous work. A great amount of incident is present *by implication*; yet the emphasis does not fall directly on the actions of the characters, but rather on the *motives* out of which action develops. The psychological analysis of motivation, furthermore, provides Browning with an opportunity to endow the characters with his own highly

⁴ A dramatic monologue is a form of monodrama in which a speaker other than the poet addresses an assumed listener or group of listeners, who may accept or doubt the truth of what the speaker is saying. Robert Langbaum has been one of the first critics to characterise this form, stating that it reveals on the part of the poet both 'sympathy' and 'judgement' towards his speaker, and to distinguish it from the *dramatic lyric* and the *lyrical drama* (1957: 69-103).

⁵ The play is a product of Browning's first visit to Italy in 1838, when he fell in love with Asolo, the ancient hill-town north-west of Venice. It is the most 'operatic' of his works and it may have been conceived as the opera he had planned to write. Though what emerged was a closet-drama, the play has several times been performed. The text of the poem has been much discussed, namely by E. W. Slinn, " 'God a Tame Confederate': The Reader's Dual Vision in *Pippa Passes*" (1976).

individualistic perceptions, while seeming to present them as independent beings fully responsible for their own values and statements.

Pippa's world is linguistically presented by Browning as rendered to the tyranny of church and state, to corrupt officialdom, to envy, malice and wanton cruelty, to adultery, blackmail and murder. 'Pippa's passing' awakens the conscience of individuals enslaved by self-interest, and verbally induces conduct which is contrary to those courses of action, discrediting the materialistic values endorsed by society.⁶ Each of the four situations which Pippa influences by her celebration of intuitive feeling deals with a *discursive conflict* between individuals and some form of authority, whether institutionalised power, conventional morality or artistic formalism.

In the process, Browning had discovered his true vocation or talent, the *dramatic monologue*, and the proper field for such action was *not* the artist's own character. Through his dramatic experiments, Browning had learned to project his insights outward and to give them objective embodiment in imaginary characterisations. Henceforth, he would drop the pretence of external action and confine his attention to the *vocal* portrayal of individuals under the stress of interior psychological conflicts. Apparently so remote from their creator in time, place and circumstance, these figures would become Browning's *agents* for delivering to his age the messages which he had not succeeded to get across in earlier works.

Dramatic Lyrics and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* were followed by two additional collections of short poems: *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864). By motivating the 'actors' in his dramas with his own ideas and impulses, Browning could now *speak out* with greater originality and boldness than would ever have been possible in his own person. Browning's *world*, the prophets and artists, the lovers and doers of great deeds possess a phenomenal capacity for passionate emotion, combined with a childlike reliance on instinct. These qualities inevitably put them in *conflict* with conventionalised modes of social conduct. Whether it be 'Fra

⁶ It is reported that Browning, walking alone in a wood near Dulwich, had "the image flashed upon him of someone walking thus alone through life; one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it; and the image shaped itself into the little silk-winder of Asolo, Felippa or Pippa" (*The Poems*, Notes p. 297, 1069).

Lippo', 'Rabbi Ben Ezra', David in "Saul," the Grammarian, or 'Childe Roland', Browning's heroes are all exceptionally clear-sighted in their confrontation of actuality. They see through the *false shows* at which society connives, preferring to meet life on its own terms rather than to indulge in fanciful self-delusion:

Rescue me thou, *the only real!*
And scare away *this mad ideal*
That came, nor motions to depart!
Thanks! Now, stay *ever* as thou art!
(65-68, our emphasis)

By dramatising individual case histories, Browning stepped before his readers in such a variety of *poetic guises* that it was impossible to identify him with any single role. Through odd rhymes, dislocations of syntax and colloquialisms, Browning creates for each speaker a highly individual *linguistic personality*. The 'action' in his poems is thus verbal and vocal. Some of these voices tell the 'truth' when they precisely try to hide it and others hide the truth when they pretend to tell it openly, leaving the reader to decide.⁷ Furthermore, since he made his 'attacks' piecemeal through anatomising characters, each of whom verbally embodied but a *single aspect* of contemporary thought, he could be sure of enlisting on his side all those who did not share this particular fault. Only when the widely diversified types in Browning's catalogue are grouped according to family resemblance, does one begin to comprehend the scope and consistency of the poet's opposition to existing values, and hence the extent of his alienation from Victorian society.

Superficially dissimilar though they are, "My Last Duchess" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" (1842) present versions of a single *verbal conflict*. Just as the duke in the former is motivated in all he does by punctilious pride of rank, so the hypocritical and worldly friar who soliloquizes in the second poem appeals to the forms of religious observance. And just as the dead duchess, in all her innocent pleasures, unknowingly

⁷ As the poet states in *Sordello* (1840), "making speak, myself kept out of view, / The very man as he was wont to do, / And leaving you to say the rest for him." (I, 15-17); this implies that the reader is strongly invited not to trust the speaker but to take his own conclusions from the speaker's unwonted revelations.

made a mockery of her husband's ceremoniousness, so Brother Lawrence's spontaneous action criticizes religious formalism. In both poems, the central irony grows out of the fact that the *speaker damns himself* in endeavouring to cast discredit on his unsuspecting adversary, being betrayed by his own discourse.⁸ So, in poem after poem representing every kind of career, the protagonist must make his decision between the practical inducements to worldly success and lonely integrity of spirit.⁹

As time passed, Browning became more inclined to put aside the cover of historical remoteness and to address himself to the psychoanalysis of contemporary types. "Bishop Blougram's Apology" (1855) and "Mr. Sludge, the Medium" (1864), for example, bring the charge of *spiritual sterility* directly home to Victorian society. Blougram is a sort of devil's advocate who discursively appropriates typical Browningsque doctrines and converts them to his own ends. In the words of his creator: "He said true things, but called them by wrong names" (996). The whole tenor of the Bishop's plea points to the conclusion that worldly self-interest is identical with spiritual well-being. Thus, he says: "My business is not to *remake* myself,/ But to *make* the absolute best of what God made" (354-5, our emphasis). In "Mr. Sludge, The Medium", the poet allows his protagonist to make out the best possible verbal case for himself until the last extraordinary diatribe which reveals Sludge as the unregenerate charlatan he is:

I tell you, sir, in one sense, I believe
Nothing at all, — that *everybody can*,
Will, and does cheat: but in another sense
I'm ready to believe my very self —
That every cheat's inspired, and every lie
Quick with a germ of truth.¹⁰
(1320-25, our emphasis)

⁸ For Paula Guimarães, "The smoothness and polish of the Duke's discourse contrasts with his perfidious and deranged character: he is quite a performer, using the force of his personality to make horrifying information seem merely colourful"; she corroborates that "He is 'helped' not only by Browning's tactful use of understatement and omission but also by the flowing fluidity of the poet's rhyming couplets and the use of enjambment", techniques that she sees as "a subtle driving force behind the duke's compulsive revelations" (2010:4).

⁹ In "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1854), the speaker's alienated thoughts are saddened precisely because they represent the malice of society against the dedicated ones who step aside from the 'trodden path'.

¹⁰ The model for Sludge was Daniel Dunglas Home (1833-86), the popular American medium who conducted séances in some Italian cities. Attracted to spiritualism, Mrs Browning was initially impressed by him, only to be distressed at her husband's response to Home whom he always regarded as a fraud.

As Charles Perquin states, “Browning’s poetics of the dramatic monologue even rests on the impossibility of truthfulness [...] Browning was not interested in truthfulness but in revelation and many of his numerous speakers paradoxically tell the truth when they try to lie” (2001:9).

Browning, on the other hand, challenges the sexual morality of the Victorians at nearly every discursive point. His interest is in the verbal fulfilment of passion, rather than in the rhetorical preservation of domestic proprieties. In no way are his convictions less conformable to accepted theories than in his refusal to recognise any basis for social inequality between men and women. The Euripides of "The Last Adventure of Balaustion" (1871) is speaking for his creator when he says: "Mere *puppets* once, I now make *womankind*,/ For *thinking, saying, doing*, match the male" (140-141, our emphasis).¹¹ The central problem in Browning's love poetry is invariably one of communication between the sexes. The intangible influences which encourage or destroy intimacy between men and women elicit all his skill in psychological analysis. In a great number of poems, love is destroyed through the man's determination to establish verbally his mental superiority over the woman. This is the theme of “Mesmerism”, for example, as well as of "A Woman's Last Word" (1855) in which the woman soliloquizes:

What so false as truth is,
False to thee?
Where the serpent's tooth is
Shun the tree —
(13-16)

If, for Browning, true love necessitates total disregard of the ways of the world, then it follows that self-interest is love's greatest enemy. A long succession of poems, concerned with individuals for whom *the voice of society* drowns out that of passion, verbally dramatises the poet's sense that

¹¹ Balaustion and her companions sail from Sicily to Syracuse, pursued by pirates and forced to seek refuge in a hostile port. She saves herself and her fellows by reciting to the Syracusans a play by Euripides, a song associated with safety and deliverance from a dangerous situation. Balaustion's is a framing narrative for the Euripidean text.

no worldly gain is ever achieved without spiritual loss. Browning's most provocative examination of failure in love as the penalty for faint-hearted conformity to social conventions occurs in "The Statue and the Bust" (1855). In this poem, the passing of time and the demands of everyday existence dull the lovers' edge of resolve, who verbally delude themselves with the belief that such steadfastness as theirs will eventually be rewarded. When it is too late, they awaken to the realization that they have wasted their lives in make-believe:

And both perceived they had dreamed a dream;
Which hovered as dreams do, still above:
But who can take a dream for a truth?
(153-155)

Just as the religious or political man must take a stand with regard to *institutionalism* and the lover with regard to *conventional morality*, so the artist is threatened by the tyranny of *tradition*.¹² As it impinges on the life of the imagination, traditionalism becomes largely intellectual, regimenting instinct to a lifeless formalism, eventually leading to *art for art's sake*. But whether he inhabit an 'ivory tower' or 'the market place', the artist who subordinates his native talent to traditional modes has, in Browning's opinion, betrayed his birthright. The nameless painter of "Pictor Ignotus" (1845), as we learn from his speech, has sought refuge from the harsh importunities of the world in the recesses of his inner being, as one naturally

... inquisitive, to scan
The *license and the limit, space and bound,*
Allowed to truth made visible in man.
(10-12, our emphasis)

The reasons for the failure of Andrea del Sarto (1853) are at once more complex and more symptomatic of the iconoclastic bias which carries over into Browning's aesthetic thinking. Andrea paints to make money, allowing

¹² Almost invariably, the artists in Browning's poetry are somewhat alien figures, either neglected or misprized by the society in which they live. Those artists whom Browning holds up for admiration are, like his lovers and men of action, nonconformists, rebels and individualists on instinct.

his choice of subjects to be determined by the market. He is verbally identified with the type of material-minded collector that Browning describes in "My Last Duchess". Andrea, like the unknown painter, hypocritically pretends to exist in the realm of his imaginings:

I, painting from myself to myself,
Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame
Or their praise either.
(90-92)

Preferring any compromise to the slightest risk of loss, the painter inadvertently reveals that he has silenced the calling of his spiritual nature. But, as Browning expounds in "Easter-Day" (1850), the artist's unique gifts impose on him the highest responsibility and he tries, as much as possible, to keep his message uncontaminated by the vanity of artifice.

The solitary figure who is verbally alert to every incident in the life around him, present in "How It Strikes a Contemporary" (1855), exemplifies this concept of the artist as an observer who needs to put reality to the test through the drama of conflicting internal voices. Any work of the imagination which fails to assume recognition of the *facts of human experience* is necessarily, for Browning, either false or imperfect. The fullest expression of the poet's aesthetic philosophy is to be found in "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1853), whose protagonist has rejected the institutional repression of the Church and thrown over traditional forms of ecclesiastical art:

This world's no *blot* for us,
Nor *blank*; it means intensely and means good:
To find *its meaning* is my meat and drink.
(313-15, our emphasis)

Browning's masterwork, *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9) draws together the principal strands in its author's critical thinking, by telling the story of a Roman murder trial case and versifying the compelling *vocal arguments* of both law counsel and gossip witness, in twelve different dramatic

monologues.¹³ The work is also a massive reflection on the nature of language itself, its power and weaknesses, its ambiguity and liability to distortion or artful manipulation. Stefan Hawlin states that the interest of Browning's discursive method resides in that "a character's perspective of events, affected by his or her moral formation, is embedded in a particular style of language, but – in turn – the style of language conditions what that character is capable of seeing and perceiving" (2002: 58).

The sophisticated deviousness of Guido Francheschini's argument, which does not derive from mere conformity with the ways of the world but from a coldly deliberate exploit of certain social usages, is made to contrast with Pompilia's intuitive reaction against the prevailing falsity of the social conventions under which she suffers. The anti-social implications become more prominent as the attorneys make a *spoken travesty* of legal procedure, showing that the machinery of social justice is as prejudiced as public opinion, and no more capable of distinguishing between right and wrong. Darkly ironic is also Browning's linguistic portrayal of ecclesiastical administration in its abandonment to material self-interest:

Since all flesh is weak,
Bind weaknesses together, we get strength:
The individual weighed, found wanting, try
Some institution, honest artifice
Whereby the units grow compact and firm!
Each props the other, and so *stand is made*
For our embodied cowards that grow brave.
(2015-21, our emphasis)

With the body of the poem behind, and the varied expostulations of both moral hypocrisy and social vanity eavesdropped by the reader, Browning goes

¹³ It is the seventeenth-century story of an impoverished Italian nobleman who married Pompilia, the young daughter of a bourgeois Roman couple, and who proceeded to make life torturous for his bride through constant harassment and petty cruelties, declaring that she was unfaithful. When she decides to flee to Rome in the company of a young cleric, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, she is chased by her husband and sent to a nunnery for penitent women. Learning of her pregnancy, he gathers four accomplices and murders the girl's parents and herself (with twenty-two stabs). Arrested, the husband is brought before court, tried and found guilty; before being executed, he pleads for his defence by stating that it was his right to kill an adulterous wife for the sake of injured honour. Browning uses twelve different testimonies/perspectives to reflect upon biased and prejudiced judgement and the elusive nature of truth itself.

on in the concluding lines to suggest that the true theme of *The Ring and the Book* is none other than

This lesson, that our human speech is *naught*,
Our human testimony *false*, our fame
And human estimation *words and wind*.
(3021-23, our emphasis)

Further elaborating on the necessity for the artist to probe beneath the surface of outward seeming and *spoken word*, the poet has the protagonist of a much later poem suggest the following: that simply to report what others say or do is not enough – it is by describing what others *think and do while they speak* that the artist can disclose a different meaning:

Along with every act – and *speech is act*-
There go, a multitude impalpable
To ordinary human faculty,
The *thoughts which give the act significance*.
Who is a poet needs must apprehend
Alike *both speech and thoughts* which prompt to speak.
Part these, and thought withdraws to poetry:
Speech is reported in the newspaper.
(“Red Cotton Night-Cap Country”, 137-38, our emphasis)

According to Isobel Armstrong, “Browning’s poetry becomes [...] an analytical process which ceaselessly investigates the *nature of utterance* and its representations and their cultural meaning” (1993: 154). She sees “included in his poems ... an understanding that they are made of *language* and that though they pretend to be speech, they are *writing* – not actually heard, but read” (*Ibidem*, our emphasis). Browning incorporated his reading of the dilemma which tormented the Victorian artist – a split in awareness derived from the unpredictability of both language and contemporary experience – into the character of Euripides, as conceived in *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871), and which may serve as well as our concluding remark on the poet’s aesthetic principle:

His task is to *refine, refine*,
 Divide, distinguish, *subtilize away*
 Whatever seemed a solid planting-place
 For footfall, -- not in that phantasmal sphere
 Proper to poet, but *on vulgar earth*
 Where people used to tread with confidence.
 There's left no longer *one plain positive*
Enunciation incontestable
 Of what is good, right, decent here on earth.
 (320-28, our emphasis)

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