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ROBERT BROWNING'S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES : Masks, Voices and the Art of Confession

If we consider Robert Browning's poetical works, it seems very difficult to link autobiography with poetry, since the author constantly and methodically hid behind masks and speakers. We may even remember what Browning wrote in "One Word More", a poem published as an epilogue in the *Men and Women* collection of 1855:

Love, 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,—the speech, a poem. [ll. 129-132.]

In this poem, Browning exceptionally speaks in his own name, thus neglecting the use of what he himself called his "men and women", i.e. the numerous speakers who constantly enabled the poet to speak without being responsible for what was said in the poems. As Browning himself wrote in "One Word More", "Let me speak this once in my true person" [l. 137].

After the unfortunate publication of *Pauline* in 1833, the poet himself was gradually superseded by his own speakers, which can be illustrated by a phrase to be found at the very beginning of *Sordello*: "Myself kept out of view" [Bk 1, l. 15]. Today's readers of Robert Browning's poetry know that *Pauline* was the poet's first published work, even though it was done anonymously, and that John Stuart Mill's comments on the poem were rather insulting to the author. After the publication of *Pauline* Browning sent twelve copies of it to his friend W. J. Fox, so that the poem could be discovered by other critics and intellectuals. Mill received a copy of *Pauline* and copiously annotated the volume. Although he did not openly dislike Browning's poem, Mill harshly reproached the author with what he abusively considered obsessive autobiographical tendencies. His marginal notes on Browning's poem were to have been converted into an article intended to be published in the *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, but the periodical accepted an article published anonymously by a critic who peremptorily called *Pauline* a "piece of pure bewilderment". Mill's annotated copy of *Pauline* was thus returned to W. J. Fox, who, despite Mill's recommendations, showed the marginal comments to the poet.

Even if Mill's comments were not critical of Browning's poetic talent, there is a sentence that very probably shocked him into hiding behind characters and speakers. Mill's comments on Browning's poetry must not and cannot be overemphasized, since *Pauline* has always been considered Browning's worst commercial failure—the poem indeed failed to sell a copy. That being said, we must bear in mind the almost medical dimension of Mill's judgment, which Browning undoubtedly remembered all his life: "With considerable poetic powers, this writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being [...]". Mill must be granted the fact that there is very little context in the poem; the situation is very misleading and frustrating, since the eponymous addressee should be given pride of place in the poem, which is not the case. The speaker only indulges in self-study and introspection. Although *Pauline* is today almost forgotten, even by those who care about poetry, especially Browning's, we should not forget its almost programmatic nature.

Indeed, Browning's first published long poem already betrays his unparalleled fascination with first-person poetry. As Constance W. Hassett notes in *The Elusive Self in the Poetry of Robert Browning*, *Pauline*'s anonymous speaker speaks "in the confessing vein" [*Paracelsus* III, 664]. This apparently negligible detail characterizes not only the poet's early narratives but also his mature monologues. The "confessing vein" thus seems to be the nodal point of Browning's poetic creations, the common point of almost all his works and his aesthetic signature. As we know, Browning was very much indebted to Shelley, whom he respectfully called "Sun-Treader" in *Pauline*, but it is not easy to realize how much influenced he was by the famous romantic poet. It is nevertheless easier to see that the art and technique of confession were undoubtedly the most reliable indices of his fascination with romanticism in general and romantic confession in particular.

As we saw, John Stuart Mill's criticism of *Pauline* was very humiliating for the poet and the total commercial failure of *Pauline* was even more painful and very probably convinced Browning, who was then in his early twenties, never to write in the same way again. *Paracelsus*, which was then published in 1835 under his name, met with more critical success and represented both a proof of his talent and an ambitious attempt at writing a new kind of poetry, that is dramatic poetry, even though he claimed in the short preface not to understand what dramatic poetry was. In *Paracelsus*, there is not only one speaker but several speakers, which helped Browning not to be reproached with what John Stuart Mill termed "morbid self-consciousness". All the characters in the poem had thus distinguishable names, which definitely put an end to the "confessing vein" of *Pauline*, which itself was indeed a "confusing vein".

With named characters, no speaker could be abusively identified with the poet, who thus became free to speak in the first person while using several voices. Of course, most of the characters in *Paracelsus* only give the cue to the eponymous alchemist and their presence in the poem seems more to be a poetic pretext than a literary necessity.

Thanks to the complete failure of *Pauline* and the very modest success of *Paracelsus*, Browning worked on both a new poetic mode and a new poetic genre, the dramatic monologue. Instead of exposing his soul to his readers and critics, who could be tempted to evaluate his poetry in terms of self-revelation and autobiography, Browning chose to keep writing in the first person, but with characters who were supposed to speak in their own names and about their own selves. These speakers thus became perfect masks for the poet, who systematically borrowed names and voices in order to be apparently 'off-stage'. Each new voice and each fictional speaker were new masks, that is to say the best way to be anonymously saying "I" in the secure comfortable shadow of each purported speaker. Each dramatic monologue could even be considered a small self-sufficient poetic autobiography in itself, which again insists on Browning's interest in the genre and its literary implications. Since the poet did not feel free to write in his own name and about himself, which he obviously did in his first published poem *Pauline*, he logically resorted to other speakers to do just the same, which let him stay in full command of the writing process and allowed him to keep writing first person poetry in the shadow of his speakers.

The amusing side of Browning's dramatic monologues is the fact that he himself put his speakers in the very uncomfortable position he assumed when he wrote *Pauline*, thus expecting his readers to take pleasure in unmasking each speaker. What John Stuart Mill considered the unsaid dimension of *Pauline*, that is to say the "morbid" obsessive self-revelation of the author in the lyrical poem, became the poetic architecture of every dramatic monologue. Browning's "juvenile" autobiography thus seems to be the very model of his most famous and most respected works, although the poet tried to hide and forget his first published work during his entire career. Of course, on reading John Stuart Mill's marginal notes, the poet himself commented on them and tried to throw light on what seemed obscure in *Pauline* and to justify his own position in the poem, since he was accused by the critic to be an omnipotent speaker and a narcissistic bore.

Things get complicated if we realize that *Pauline* gives us a thorough portrait of the artist as a young poet although the author denied being the speaker in his text. Indeed, the poem gives us a very reliable image of both Shelley's influence on the author and the author's mitigated feelings toward

the Romantic poet. Thus, *Pauline* is much more than the versified autobiography of a 21-year-old poet who indulges in ‘soul-baring’ and confession. The speaker is both the author and someone else, and John Stuart Mill appears to have jumped to simplistic conclusions when he naively identified the speaker with the author. Browning’s poetry has always encroached on autobiography without being authentic autobiography. For example, dramatic monologues verge on confession, without being authentic confessions. Each time the same lyrical mode is involved but for different purposes and what Browning preferred by far was the oblique confession of hypocritical speakers who actually betray more than they confess, who incidentally tell the truth when they precisely try to hide it and who hide the truth when they pretend to tell it openly.

Even though we should not overemphasize the importance of Browning’s failure and humiliation with the publication of *Pauline*, we must not underestimate it as a new beginning in the career of a young poet. Indeed, although Browning claimed in the preface of *Paracelsus* he did not exactly know what “dramatic poetry” was, he often used the adjective, alone or in combination, but he always did it with one purpose only—the necessary distinction readers had to make between the speaker and the author. He thus only wanted to make sure that his predicament with *Pauline* would never happen again; in other words, he just never wanted to be unmasked again the way he was with his first published poem. This obsession haunted the poet throughout his life and career. What is more, he even wrote an essay on poetry that was to have been published as an introduction to new letters then purported to be Shelley’s but which were later discovered to be forgeries. It was for Browning the opportunity to write again about the vital distinction, for Browning at least, between “objective poetry” and “subjective poetry”, that is to say between, respectively, dramatic poetry and lyrical poetry.

The essay was written in 1851, eighteen years after the publication of *Pauline*, at a time when Browning’s trauma was still a good reason for the author to hide cautiously behind many characters and speakers. Of course, as the title explicitly shows, the *Introductory Essay* was designed as an introduction to letters by Browning’s formerly idolized “Sun-Treader”, but the essay goes much further insofar as the subtle distinction between “objective poetry” and “subjective poetry” throws light on Browning’s own poetic works and aesthetic views. What seems to be obvious is that Browning’s theories about poetry were based on the subject, that is the speaker. In the same way, Browning manifestly hesitated between several poetic modes and genres, since he tried the lyrical with *Pauline*, the dramatic with *Paracelsus* and the epic with *Sordello* before choosing to mix the lyrical and the dramatic with the use of the dramatic monologue. It is not by chance that Browning’s acknowledged

influences and admired masters were Shakespeare and Shelley, respectively in the “objective” and the “subjective” fields.

It is not by chance either that Browning cautiously hesitated between the famous playwright and the romantic poet; indeed, if we consider Browning's first long poems, we can see that the different modes and genres he amply tried were borrowed from both, and that the poet himself did not have a very precise idea of what and how to write. Of course, he felt attracted to the romantic ideal and confession he so much admired in Shelley. However, at the same time, he very much enjoyed the possibility of letting other people speak in his poetic works, whereas he was still in command of the whole. Once more, we can trust one of Browning's famous—not to say notorious—speakers when he says, as the verbose narrator of *Sordello*, probably Browning's most ill-famed and least-read poem, “[...] 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, ll. 15-17] The phrase “myself kept out of view” does not mean that the speaker, or the poet, is absent, but that he is not visible. To put it in other words, it means that the reader is strongly invited not to trust the speaker. Browning's poetics of the dramatic monologue does not rely on trust but on distrust and self-betrayal.

This is, to my mind, the nodal point of Browning's poetics. Indeed, every dramatic monologue is a small self-sufficient autobiography in itself. The poet is invisible behind his speakers and characters, and he implicitly invites us to try to uncover the person they hide. Browning, as he actually often did in his poetry, staged this aesthetic principle in a dramatic monologue published in 1855 in the *Men and Women* collection. The title of the poem is “How it Strikes a Contemporary” and the speaker of the poem naively describes a profoundly mysterious man who happens to be a poet. The artist is described as an observer and a man who goes beyond what things look like and who needs to put reality to the test:

[...] the ferrel of his stick
Trying the mortar's temper 'tween the chinks
Of some new shop a-building, French and fine. [ll 21-23.]

The image of the poet in “How it strikes a Contemporary” is the image of the competent reader who never takes the text at its face value. Ironically enough, the described poet is himself not unlike the image we may have of John Stuart Mill when we read his marginal comments of *Pauline*. However, long after the disastrous publication of *Pauline* and at a time when Browning had carefully elaborated the poetic medium he is still famous for, that is the dramatic monologue, he felt very much interested in letting his speakers and characters betray themselves to addressees and readers.

It is certainly not by chance either that Browning so often staged artists in his dramatic monologues, since his speakers, whom he called his “Men and Women” in “One Word More”, the last poem in his *Men and Women* collection, can frequently be considered the poet’s doubles. Not only are they actually compatible with each other in spite of their numerous differences, but they also seem to be the necessary parts of a homogeneous picture. The best example of this is probably to be found in “Fra Lippo Lippi” on the one hand and in “Andrea del Sarto” on the other hand—Andrea’s art is both tamed and submissive, just like the painter, whereas Fra Lippo Lippi does not want to obey the rules and abide by the laws of his social status and of his art: “I’m grown a man no doubt, I’ve broken bounds” [l. 223] and “I’m my own master, paint now as I please” [l. 226]. If the autobiography looked like a perilous genre to Browning after the unfortunate publication of *Pauline*, it did not fit either into his conception of poetry. Indeed, Browning’s *Introductory Essay* on spurious letters by Shelley betrays his fascination with both kinds of poetry, the “subjective” and the “objective”, and I think that Browning’s dramatic monologues amply show he never managed to choose between the two modes.

It seems very strange, not to say contradictory, that Browning should have avoided the genre of the confession since it seems to have influenced his entire poetic career. Indeed, the art of confession is very probably his least dubious legacy from the Romantic poets he so much admired. What is more, as we can read in *The Romantic Art of Confession* [3], by Susan M. Levin,

One model for the setting down of confession in a long written narrative was provided the romantics by the *Confessiones* of St. Augustine. While religious confessions before his had been relatively brief, Augustine in A.D. 400 turned the story of his religious life into a lengthy autobiography. The sudden increase in translations of the *Confessiones* during the nineteenth century is only one indication of the romantics’ interest in Augustine. In England, the same translations served from 1670 until 1807; then, seven new translations appeared in the three years from 1807 to 1810.

Browning was probably influenced by Augustine’s traditional model of the confession, even though there was nothing religious in his first literary confession. His very personal touch in *Pauline* was the absence of structured narrative in it, the global structure of the poem being more rambling and digressive than actually organized. Indeed, in the very small autobiographies the dramatic monologues are in themselves, time is not a pre-arranged sequence of carefully chosen events but it is something unpredictable, something like a network of improvised verbal incidents and revelations.

Since autobiography was a very tempting genre for Browning and since the mode of the genre is precisely that of the dramatic monologue, he designed a genre that was suitable for the reprehensible speakers who flourished

in his most famous monologues, the Duke of Ferrara being the most famous of them all. Instead of writing his own versified autobiography, which seemed impossible after John Stuart Mill's criticism of *Pauline*, Browning made his own "men and women" speak for themselves, leaving his readers to say the rest for them, to paraphrase *Sordello's* narrator's famous sentence. Thus, Browning's surrogate speakers were the safety devices he designed to keep writing first-person poetry without being possibly suspected of being the speaker. What is more, truth was far from being Browning's central concern. Browning's poetics of the dramatic monologue seems to be at the antipodes of the basic principles of the confession—in other words, sincerity and spontaneity are systematically feigned by Browning's speakers, as if the author tried to show us that speaking about oneself automatically verges on self-justification.

Browning's poetics of the dramatic monologue even rests on the impossibility of truthfulness and his best monologues are probably those whose speakers are "reprehensible". There is one famous dramatic monologue, entitled "Bishop Blougram's Apology", which obviously sums up the rules of the genre:

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist, demirep
That loves and saves her soul in new French books. [ll. 395 -398.]

Browning was not interested in truthfulness but in revelation and many of his numerous speakers paradoxically tell the truth when they try to lie. Browning did not deny the possibility of telling the truth but his speakers manifestly show that the truth has its own ways and that it is built by both the speaker and the addressee. It does not depend on the speaker alone—if it did, it would become *his* truth only—and the more Browning's speakers lie, the more interesting the monologues become, hence the incredible success of the poet's reprehensible speakers. To that extent, "My Last Duchess" is an exemplary monologue and a model of the genre, in which the Duke, who previously had his wife murdered or taken away from him, is about to meet the young woman he intends to marry, and describes a picture of his 'Last' duchess to an emissary of his new father-in-law.

However, the Duke cannot successfully hide the tragic past he curiously evokes and he cannot hide the violent ending of his marriage either:

[...] Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together.[ll. 43-46.]

In only 56 lines, Browning's "My Last Duchess" manages to summon the Duke's marital life and his pathological jealousy, whereas the Duke thinks he is only talking about the picture Frà Pandolf—an imaginary painter invented by Browning—made of his "Last Duchess". "My Last Duchess", Browning's most famous poem, is a very small autobiography in itself and it fully illustrates the rules of the genre. The funny side of it is that Browning himself was asked one day what had happened to the imaginary Duchess; as the story goes, the poet felt very embarrassed and said that he did not know more than was said in the dramatic monologue. This short anecdote betrays many readers' needs for omniscient narrators who would undoubtedly be able to lift all veils and give one version only of past events. This is precisely what Browning wanted to avoid; as the very principles of the dramatic monologue show, he was interested in portions and glimpses of the truth instead of a global picture of it. This global picture could correspond to what Shelley termed "the white radiance of eternity" in *Adonais* [l. 463], the elegy written after the death of Keats. Browning of course was attracted to this "white radiance", the pure light he identified with Shelley's poetry, but he obviously preferred what he himself called "the jewelled bow" in a poem entitled "Deaf and Dumb", published in 1864 in the *Dramatis Personæ* collection, and which seems to echo Shelley's metaphor in *Adonais*:

Only the prism's obstruction shows aright
The secret of a sunbeam breaks the light
Into the jewelled bow from blankest white,
So may a glory from a defect arise [ll. 1-4].

This is probably the best definition Browning gave of his poetics, since it illustrates both his fascination with Shelley the "seer", or the "Sun-Treader", which leads him to think his own poetry is imperfect, and his interest in portions of the truth instead of the whole truth, hence the "a glory from a defect" image.

As we have seen since the very beginning of this paper, Browning abandoned the idea of autobiographical poetry after the failure of *Pauline* (published in 1833), but he never ceased to write first person poetry, as if he aimed at allowing his men and women to do what he did not feel free to do himself. That being said, he finally preferred monologues to the long lyrical poetry he wrote at the beginning of his career, influenced as he was then by the romantic masters. What is more, he preferred several witnesses to an event or situation to only one speaker, hence the multiplicity of his speakers on the one hand and the final masterpiece entitled *The Ring and the Book* published in 1868-1869 on the other hand. This is the reason why Browning wrote several poems on the same topics, for example madness or painting. "Porphyria's Lover", a

soliloquy first published in *The Monthly Repository* in January 1836 was republished in 1842 with another soliloquy entitled "Johannes Agricola in Meditation", under the telling title "Madhouse Cells". In the same way, "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" give us two very different visions of painting and living.

Insofar as his speakers can never be fully trusted, Browning implicitly shows us that reality is so much more complex than it seems and that truth happens more than it is told. If truthfulness is the very basis of autobiography, then the dramatic monologue has very little in common with autobiography, but both genres rely on the same poetic mode and the truth is part of both. In the dramatic monologue, especially if the speaker is reprehensible, the truth has to be rediscovered in spite of what is told. In autobiography, insofar as it is part of the contract between the author and the reader, the truth is the structuring element and the justification of the whole discourse. Most of the time, the dramatic monologue should be considered an anti-autobiography, Browning being supposedly out of the monologue. In fact, things are more complicated since the competent reader is actually confronted with many authorial intrusions obliquely conveyed by ironical references. Irony thus becomes the only way for the poet to come back into his poem—Browning never interrupts and judges his speakers and characters but ironically and implicitly invites his readers to do so by obliquely debunking the speeches of his reprehensible speakers. Despite his enduring reputation as a staunch optimist and a born moralizer in the nineteenth century, Browning never teaches lessons in his poetry, except perhaps the fact that nobody should take a confession at its face value.