



Volume: 2, Issue: 6, 658-660
June 2015
www.allsubjectjournal.com
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979
Impact Factor: 3.762

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Robert Browning's realism is the treatment of universal human passions: An enquiry into his poetry

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Robert Browning is the major English poet. Browning began his poetic career with a religious temper. He was inquisitive and endowed with a psychological insight. His interest in history and science and his likings for realism urged him to develop a philosophy for himself. Realism is one of the important constituents of Browning's poetry. Walter Begehat remarks, "Browning is a conscious and avowed realist poet, which is evident from his choice of unpleasant subject and representation of ignoble aspects of life" (26).

This paper is an attempt to study the realism in the selected poems of Robert Browning. According to R. H. Samuel, realism in literature is an attitude of the writer. It purports to represent life in all its aspects and as faithfully as possible with reference to Nature, it intends to reproduce her too all her aspects and with photographic accuracy. It rejects the treatment of transcendental and supernatural subject-matter. With regard to style, it rejects the idealising of reality in favour of beauty; it also rejects the representation of reality according to a convention whether classical or romantic. The call of realism is to be objective and realistic as far as possible within the bounds of arts.

As a conscious Literary Movement, Realism developed in Europe after the French Revolution of 1830. As an attitude in literature and arts, it ruled over the whole of Western Europe from 1850 to 1880. In England, the early followers of realism were Robert Browning and Charles Dickens. The latest ones were W.M. Thackeray, George Eliot and Arnold Bennet.

Browning unconsciously came under the influence of realism probably during the years 1832-34, through his wide reading and travels. Although he was a young man of twenty or so, he had deep interest in history and sciences, and his mind looked for evil and abnormality. His first poetical work *Pauline* (1833) was begun under the influence of Shelley and Keats, and finished before the shadow of realism fell on him; and so the poem is marked by 'unclouded idealism and egotism'. Soon Browning realised his mistake that idealism and egotism are enemies to realism. Two year later he brought forward his first realist poem *Paracelsus* (1835). Here he represents spiritual life as realistically as he can. There is objectivity throughout since it is an impersonal poem.

Browning's realism begins with *Paracelsus*. But its growth admits of two phases. The first phase extends from 1834 to 1855 and the second from 1856 to 1889. During the first phase he first tries to represent his realist vision, on the one hand in verse drama and on the other, in dramatic lyrics and dramatic romance. But as a rule he attempts to represent to the inner drama of man in both his plays and poems. By the inner drama we mean the spiritual conflict in a dramatic situation of a character. During this phase, Browning writes nine plays and scores of dramatic lyric. During the second phase of his realism which extends from 1856 to 1889-the year of his death- Browning makes the whole province of human soul a subject of his realist study. For this purpose he gives free vent to his realist imagination. And he makes it wander through time and space in search of various kinds of the human soul. He intends to represent its special spiritual experience as realistically as possible.

Realism teaches that writer should represent things as they really are; even in their most ignoble aspect, it also teaches that a practical view should be taken in human problems. Its third teaching is that human life should be the main subject of treatment in literature. Browning seems to agree with all the above principles. But he has his own belief too, in regard to realism. He seems to believe that human life means the 'inner life of man', for the first-cause of life is the human soul itself. In fact, for him, life means spiritual experience so he has been called a psychological realist. He focuses his poetic mind and art on inner life but here he is not interested in the ordinary in human nature. Nor is he interested in natural blood-relationship or in the quiet uneventful life of man. As a realist poet, he is chiefly interested in a soul caught up in a spiritual

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tumult. The subject of his psychological study and poetic representation is the eventful life of a spiritual soldier. And it does not matter whether such a soldier is cowardly as brave, good as bad. Observes Arthur Symons:

The quiet routine existence of uneventful lives hardly touched him more than the placid quiescence of animal and vegetable, the commonplace of humanity excited in him no mystic rapture And as Browning deals little with the common place in human nature so he passesby, with a light concern, the natural relationship into which men are born... (44).

The next characteristic feature of Browning's realism is a 'surge-ridden psychic sea' almost in every poem. By "psychic sea" we mean the mind's sea as the experience of the soul looked upon as a sea of thoughts and feelings. And by "Surge-ridden" we mean ridden by great waves of thoughts resulting in ardent sighs, desires etc. If we can imagine, we may perceive every poem of Browning as a sea-ridden by a great wave of a universal passion. For example, Paracelsus is a Renaissance scholar. His mind's sea is ridden by a surge for love of knowledge and travel experience. His soul is dominated by an intense desire for joy born of perfection of life. His is "a searching impetuous soul... hungry for joy". But finally he learns "the worth of love in man's estate". In other words, he learns that reconciliation of knowledge leads man to perfection of life.

The third characteristic of Browning's realism is the treatment of universal human passions as they become the main themes in many of his poems. He seems to believe that human passions are more real than external relations and problems born of such relations.

Browning has also represented in his poems the storm of another human passion - anger. In "The Lost Leader", the speaker expresses his anger and displeasure at the seduction of his leader. Critics are of the view that speaker is the poet himself. And he expresses his anger at Wordsworth's acceptance of poet laureateship of England. The poet says that the leader of the progressive poet has left them:

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a ribbon to stick in his coat-
Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
Lost all the others she lets us devote;
They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver,
So much was theirs who so little allowed:
How all our copper had gone for his service! (1-7)

In "The Lost Mistress", the poet represents the passion of grief. The speaker is a lover. But next morning his beloved is going to be somebody else's wife. She has come to meet him at night and he says that their love has come to bites and at last it is a fact, although a bitter one. The sparrows are twittering near her cottage. Their twitter is as it were, their good night wish to their love:

All's over, then: does truth sound bitter
As one at first believes?
Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter
About your cottage eaves! (1-4)

The fourth characteristic of Browning's realism is enquiry into the nature of man in large variety of characters. The men and women of his poetic world are various. There are kings, beggars, clerks, saints, lovers of almost all kinds, great pointers and musicians. There are also priests of several kinds, Jews, gypsies, princesses, street-girls, dancers, house wives, girls full of jealousy, statesman, cavallies, soldiers, tyrants, begets killers and criminals of different shades. We also find ancient sages and modern spiritualists, heretics, scholars, persons of quality and men of low characters. In short his characters are as multiform as society has made them. According to his critics, Browning studied mankind not only in England but also in various parts of Europe during his travels. He watched lover in the Roman Champagne Venetian boats called Gondolas. He watched artists in Italy, he watched the prototypes of his character in the Boulevards of Paris the Pardo of Madrid, the snow-covered forest of Russia beneath the palms of Persia and upon Egyptian sands on the court of Normandy and the salt plains of Brittany. Needless to say, his men and women are of real human nature. They are as varied as life itself. They describe their own experiences as are described by the poet they are soul reflectors as cragsman call them. As a realist, however, conceives humanity, not as an aggregate but as a collection of writs.

The fifth characteristic of his realism is objectivity. Realism regresses writers to be objective with regard to choice and treatment of their subject-matter. In his realism, Browning has obeyed the call of the realist movement with one freedom. After *Pauline* (1833), he composed impersonal poem yet he reserved the right to express his own love for his wife, in personal lyrics. Here too he does not idealize his love for her. He certainly praises her high and low, the most lovers do, yet the love he expresses is genuine and sincere to the last degree. His poems may be called experimental studies in spiritual experience. Observes Compton Rickett:

Whether he deals with love or patriotism as intellectual ambition or artistic passion are religious aspiration it is all brought to... its effect upon characters, its value in the making of the soul... He deals with spiritual experience in two ways as a dramatic apologist and as a dramatic singer... (140)

Realism looks upon Nature as an elemental being having no soul no human attributes. Browning the realist believes in this doctrine of realism to the lost degree. In a passage of *Paracelsus*, he represent the doctrine of soulless Nature of the following effect: Nature has no human attributes she merely seems to us to have such attributes, because man throws back his soul... on all the grades of inferior life which precedes him. So she is unsympathetic to man. She however forms a back ground to human action For example dark atmosphere is fit for dark evil deeds (Paracelsus Ch-IV). So Browning first looks upon her as a background to human action. For example in "Porphyria's Loves" the lover murders his beloved who comes to meet him in the late hours of the night. Browning therefore makes the lover describe the evil aspects of nature:

The rain set early in tonight
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore elm-tops down for spite
And did its worst to vex the lake. (22-25)

Secondly, when he describes a bit of nature scenery, he delineates it with scientific accuracy. Her picture of Italy is full of the very spirit of Indian scenery and have an almost photographic exposition. Consider, for example the evening scene described below:

Here the speaker is Anadrea Del Sarto.
He tells his wife that the dark of the evening has come on
The evening stars has risen and the
Morella Mountain has disappeared in the dark,
See, it is settled dark now there's a star/ morel low's
Gone, the watch-Lights who the wall" (208-09).

Thirdly, Browning the realist takes upon Nature as a store-house of imagery for example Paracelsus is presented with his 'dim struggles for truth', 'like plants in mines which never saw the sun'. The girl in 'The Confessional' describes herself as, "A Girl that laughed in beauty's pride/Like lilies in your world outside" (118-19). A Lover describes his beloved as: "My star that darts as the red & the blue/they it steps like a bird; like a flowers longs furled" (26-27).

To conclude, Browning the realist looks upon nature merely as a background to human action as a thing fit for a bit of scenery and as a store house of imagery. He resorts to realist imagery in his treatment of human passions and description of surroundings; for example in "The Last Ride Together", the happy lover imagines that the Venus as represented by his status of that beautiful goddess is not as beautiful as the peasant Girl, who crosses the stream over there. "Rabbi Ben Ezra" describes the people of animal nature where law aims as lifeless clods of earth, "Law kinds exist without/ finished and finite clock untroubled by a speak" (17-18).

Realism discards conventional style. It recommends such manner of expression as can represent life realistically. Browning therefore cultivated an original style. To keep it near to life he made it conversational. He also marked it with omission of words brevity and inversion. The words employed by him are generally monosyllabic or bi-syllabic. For example, the lover in the following passage says that he prayed his mistress to have at least, the last ride with him. At his request she thought for a moment or two and kept his heart longing in the balance between life and death. Then she agreed to have the last ride with him. The lover expresses his idea as follows:

My mistress bent brow of hers!
Fixed me a breathing while or two with
Lip as death me the balance: right; (12-14)

Here "right" means: "All right I accept your proposal!" Then in the following passage the same Lover asks himself whether he alone has failed in love. He adds that all men try to achieve one goal as another. But how many of them are successful, "Fail I alone, in words and deeds? / Why, all men strive and who succeeds?" (26-27).

Browning, the poet is a realist of the first rank. He is a poet of inner eventful life. In this regard W.T. Young remarks, "He treats of actual passion, and he stays at whatever moment in its course promises to distil its richest significance" (88).

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