



Browning's Poetry : Tete-a-tete with Reality

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly accepted that there is a obvious presence of reality in 'Realism'. Reality is what we observe thoroughly in our surrounding which is actually created by ourselves for dominating others, sometimes for setting popularity and sometimes for our bare necessity. Here in reality, the criteria of necessities is not determined but the time as the reality is universally changeable or mutable, so it depends on how the writer, readers or any individuals or any school take in respect of time. So many writers got the spirit of writing from Browning after World War when a spiritual barrenness was prevailing in that period. It is needless to say that his works are called "The Child of War". When Browning was on the zenith of his literary career, the spreading of British colonization was gradually decreasing. Respectively, in that period, the germination of Democracy and growth of Naturalism (theory of Darwin) had been decreasing the faith on God. In Romantic period, there was a lack of exploring and discovering and in Victorian period. It was replaced by harsh reality. But the readers were not ready to accept that change.

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One of the most important leading and greatest poet in the English literature in the Victorian period is no doubt Robert Browning himself. Robert Browning is by far the greatest and Major English poet who began his poetic carrier with a religious temperament. He had psychological insight into the nature as well as human beings to search for attaining the unattainable. He had great interest in history as well as in science and his likings for realism urged him to develop a philosophy for himself. Realism is one of the most important features 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.”

I have taken 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 propagates to represent the 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 idealism 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.

Realism is a conscious Literary movement. After the French Revolution Realism developed in Europe. It is 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’s ones were W.M. Thackeray, George Eliot and Arnold Bennet.

During the years 1832-1833 Browning unconsciously came under the influence of realism through his wide reading and travels. From his young age he had deep interest in history and sciences,

and his mind blocked 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.

The poem is marked by 'unclouded idealism and egotism'. Browning soon realized he had made a mistake and went against realism and that's why he brought forward his first realist poem *Paracelsus* (1835) which reflects the spiritual life realistically. Though impersonal there is objectivity throughout the poem.

Robert Browning began his poetic career under the influence of Shelley which is noticeable in his poem entitled *Pauline*. However, in course of time, Browning forsook much of the Romantic bias of Shelley and began to take keen interest in men and women surrounding him on all sides, in beautiful and rugged aspects of Nature and in everything that was in accord or discord with palpable and pulsating life. Romantic by temperament, he was a realist in method. He had a few idealistic visions like the romanticists, but those visions were given a practical shape in due course of time. His preoccupations with the realities of life became more and more absorbing, and when someone suggested to him to weave a world of dreamy fancy, he quickly flung back the memorable reply saying, 'Fairy poetry is impossible in the days of steam' "Browning", in the words of Herford, "found his poetry pre-eminently among the pursuits, the interests and problems of civilized men". His is the world of prose illuminated through and through in every canyon and crevice by the keenest and the most exploring of interests. His words are words to be employed for rendering the sense of real life. He had in his service "a vast heterogeneous army of words gathered like a sudden levy, with a sole eye to their effective force, from every corner of civilised life, and wearing the motley of the most prosaic occupation". These words used by the most skillfully in poetry gave the colour and impression of reality. Soft words with vowel sounds were employed by Tennyson, but Browning used quite hard and rugged words to capture the sense of reality in his poetry.

Browning has been considered a realist because of his pre-occupation with unpleasant and grotesque words expressing an unpleasant and grotesque situation. This is the first view about Browning's realism. But this view does not convey to us the whole truth. There is a wider compass that ought to be included in *realism* and it is to this wider view that H. V. Routh draws our attention. Browning's realism aims at '*honesty*' of statement, i.e. representing reality as it is viewed by the poet without melodramatizing it. This, in fact, is the correct view, for realism should not be merely confined to the presentation of grotesque in art but to the faithful depiction of things seen by the eye and heard

by the ear. Realism is the representation of what is real in fact the effort to display the literal reality and unvarnished truth of things treating of character, objects, scene, events, circumstances etc, according to actual truth or appearance or to intrinsic probability, without selection of preference over the ugly of what is beautiful or admirable opposed to idealism or romanticism. In other words, realism means the observation of things as they are, the familiarly with their aspect, physical and intellectual, and the consequent faculty of reproducing them with approximate fidelity.

In human life, Browning represented all sorts of people that came to his view. He treated the lapses without shrinking or shirking. He boldly looked on the darkest and the meanest form of action in the human beings. He realistically laid bare what was sordid, selfish, impure, corrupt and brutish in the life of man. In his poetry of human life Browning had his unerring eye both on the good and evil aspects, and both the aspects were faithfully presented by him.

In his love poems Browning represented his men and women in actual love without casting a halo of romance about them. He discarded the troubadour's devotional approach to his ladies in the style of (he heroes in love in the Middle ages. He realistically portrayed both successful and unsuccessful cases of love. In poems like *In a Gondola* and *Love Among the Ruins* the representation is as realistic of unsuccessful love as that of successful love in the poem entitled *By the Fireside*. The dress of his ladies is realistically described. In *A Lover's Quarrel* we have the real dress of a modern girl :

*'T is a huge fur cloak,
Like a reindeer's yoke.
Falls the lappet along the breast
Sleeves for her arm to rest,
Or to hang as my love likes best*

Browning's method of portraying both Nature and men is highly realistic, and in the modern age Kipling, Masefield, Davies have been inspired by his example in their description of Nature and human life.

Browning's realism begins with his Paracelsus but its growth admits of two phases. The first phase extends from 1834 to 1855 and the Second phase from 1856 to 1889. During the first phase he tries to represent his realist vision, on the one hand in verse drama and on the other hand, in dramatic lyrics and dramatic romance. But as a rule he attempts to represent 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 he gives free vent to his realist imagination. 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 but 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. As a realist poet, he is chiefly interested in a soul caught up in a spiritual tumult. The subject of his psychological study and poetic representation is the eventful life of a spiritual soldier. As Arthur Symonds observes :-

The quiet routine existence of uneventful lives
Hardly touched him more than the placid quiescence
Of animal and vegetables, the commonplace of
Humanity excited in him no mystic rapture And as
Browning deals little with the commonplace in
Human nature so he passes by, with a light concern,
The natural relationship into which men are born. ...

Another important characteristic of Browning's realism is a 'Surge-ridden psychic sea' found almost in every poem. By 'Psychic Sea', we mean the 'mind Sea' as the experience of the soul looked upon as a sea of thoughts and feelings. 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 Sea is ridden by a surge for love of knowledge and great experience. His soul is dominated by an intense

desire for joy born of perfection of life. He is “a searching impetuous soul.....hungry for joy.” But finally he learns that reconciliation of knowledge leads man to perfection of life.

Another important characteristic of Browning’s realism is his treatment of universal human passions which are the main themes in many of his poems and he seems that human passions are more real than external relations and problems. Besides, he has also represented in his poems the storm of another human passion anger. In the “The Lost Leader”, the speaker expresses his anger and displeasure at the seduction of his leader. The poet says :-

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 as theirs who so little allowed;
How all our Copper had gone for his Service!

In “The Lost Mistress”, the speaker 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 we says their love has come to bites and at last it is a fact, although a better one. The sparrows are twittering near her cottage. Their twitter is as 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 laves!

Another characteristic of Browning’s realism is enquiry into the nature of man in large variety of character. The men and women of his poetic world are various. There one Kings, beggars, clerks, saints, lovers of almost all kinds, great painter and musicians. There are also priests of several kinds, Jews, gypsies, princesses, street girls dancers, housewives, girls full of jealousy, statesman, cavalries, 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. According to his critics,
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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 artist in Italy, he watched the prototypes of his character in the Boulevards of Paris the Prado of Madrid, the snow covered forest of Russia beneath the palms of Persia and upon Egyptian sands on the coast of Normandy and the salt plains of Brittany. As a realist, however, conceives humanity, not as an aggregate but as a collection of writs.

Another characteristic of his realism is objectively Realism regresses writers to be objective with regard to choice and treatment of their subject matter.

After Pauline (1833), he composed impersonal poem yet he reserved to 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. Compton Rickett observes :-

Whether he deals with love or patriotism as
Intellectual ambition or artistic passion are religion
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

Realism looks upon Nature as an elemental being having no soul no human attributes. Browning believes his doctrine of realism to the lost degree. In a passage of Paracelsus, he presents 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 throes back his soul ... on all the grades of interior life which precedes him. So she is unsympathetic to man. So she forms a back ground to human action. 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.

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 Light who the wall."

Thirdly, Browning the realist take upon Nature as a store house of imaginary 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." A lover describes his beloved as : "My stars that darts as the red and the blue/they it steps like a bird; like a flowers longs furled."

Realism discards conventional way of life and conventional style. It recommends such many 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 invasion. The words employed by him are generally monosyllabic or bi-syllabic. So the lover expresses his idea as follows :-

My mistress bent brow of less!
Fixed me a breathing while or two with
Lip as death me the balance, right;

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 succeed?"

Browning is no doubt the realist poet who deserves first rank for his realism and 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.”

To conclude, Browning the realist looks upon nature merely as a background to human action as a thing fit for a bit of scenery 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 present girl, who crosses the stream over there “Rabbi Ben Ezra” describes the people of animal nature where law aims lifeless clods of earth”, Law kinds exist without/finished and finite clock untroubled by a speak” Actually Browning was a great visionary of future. It is seen in the poem of Browning namely, “*May and Death*” ----

‘Only, one little right, one plant,
Woods have in May, that starts up green
Save a sole streak which so to speak,
Is spring’s blood, spilt it leaves between.’”

On the other side, Browning’s identity is mostly different in his poem, “*Porphyria’s Lover*”. How can Browning be so cruel to kill his beloved? ---

“...And all night long we have not stirred
And yet God has not said a word!”

What are abandoned and Romantic are sources of his creation, he even finds inspiration from infertile land, baffled leader, corpse, falsehood. He puts stress on ‘time’ and time also made him fruitful

“Others mistrust and say, ‘But time escapes!

“Live now or never!”

Browning is actually the source of inspiration for these people who surrender themselves to depression, sufferings and fate.

The time just after the second world war there was a great disturbance and disorder in whole world as well as in the mind of the people and side by side it had greatly affected the poets of the contemporary world, who are sympathetic. So the impact of the war had greatly changed the definition

of lucidity, simplicity, emotion, sympathy and passion in the mind of the people and also changed the meaning of love. And then to the people love is seriously rare and tried to make an environment to easily get it. Browning saw human lives during war as brave knights. There were no weapons in the war but still the trace of blood and wound. Browning started his poetry with 'Romance' and love prevailed in the society. As a result of his such attempt he did not get secure himself in the mind of the readers of the contemporary world. With the change and passing away of time we find that his poetry has not only change the meaning of life but it has been recorded as a live history. So, without hesitation confessing that Browning is indispensable to know better the modern world. It is also revealed that living is meaningless if there is no mystery birth.

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