

Nature in Robert Browning's Poems

YANG Chunhong^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 19 May 2018; accepted 26 July 2018

Published online 26 August 2018

Abstract

Different from Romantic understanding of nature, in Browning's poems, when nature is mentioned, there are two kinds of depictions. One type is to describe nature itself only, and there is nothing symbolic one can infer from the descriptions of nature or the descriptions have little relationship with its subject, that is, nature for nature's sake. Though some depictions are related to the subject, they present the negative aspects of nature. As illustrated in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came", the natural settings are forlorn and bleak, like in a wasteland.

Key words: Browning; Nature; Nature for Nature's Sake; Wasteland

Yang, C. H. (2018). Nature in Robert Browning's Poems. *Canadian Social Science*, 14(8), 5-7. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/10531>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10531>

INTRODUCTION

During the Romantic Movement nature was regarded as a phenomenon to which one could turn for guidance, spiritual sustenance, and psychic restoration. Nature offered prospects of sublime terror to Wordsworth on occasions, but for the most part its influence on him was wholesome and salutary, and symptomatic of spiritual unity in the universe. Shelley and Coleridge nurtured similar beliefs, yet faced with the sublimity of Mont Blanc Shelley recognized a power far removed from man's consciousness:

Power dwells apart in its tranquility,
Remote, serene, and inaccessible. (ll. pp.134-35)

Nature was also one of the most important themes in Victorian poetry. Henry James recognized the preeminence of the interest in nature as one of the salient features of English culture.

If the history of that movement toward a passionate scrutiny of Nature, which has culminated in England, in our day, with Tennyson and Browning, could be scientifically written, we imagine it would be found to throw a great deal of light on the processes of the human mind. It has at least drawn into its services an incalculable amount of ingenuity, of imagination, of intellectual force. Browning which represent, on this subject, an extraordinary accumulation of sentiment, a perfect entanglement of emotion, which give the key, as it were, to a civilization. (p.316)

But, as Bernard Richards have frequently pointed out in his study, "the Victorians were not able to maintain the confidence and optimism possible for the Romantics. And the destructive force was science and its skeptical and inquiring turn of mind." (p.185) On the one hand, science nurtured a love of nature in some ways as intense as anything that one can recognize in previous centuries, but on the other hand, by stressing the mechanical and chemical aspects of natural processes, it took away the magic and left no room for spiritual direction. Eventually, poets such as Browning lost an all-embracing enthusiasm for nature, especially as an ethical and moral force. It should be remembered that it was in the Victorian age that the famous phrase "the pathetic fallacy" was coined by Ruskin. This paper aims to analyze Browning's treatment of nature. Instead of considering nature as an ordered, purposive, benign, and unified force, indicative of some kind of good and intelligent deity, Browning was not able to maintain this kind of confidence and optimism in nature as his Romantic predecessors.

1. NATURE FOR NATURE'S SAKE

Here, nature for nature's sake means, that in some of Browning's poems concerning nature he depicted nature only for nature itself, nothing symbolic one can infer from them. It is different from the Romantic tradition that nature was always ingrained into the poets' creative intention, i.e., Browning's descriptions of nature sometimes were purposeless.

"The Englishman in Italy" is a sensuous, rich, and to some degree pointless revel in the pleasure of the seashore:

-Our fisher arrive
And pitch down his basket before us,
All trembling alive
With pink and grey jellies, your sea-fruit;
You touch the strange lumps,
And mouths gape there, eyes open, all manner
Of horns and of humps
Which only the fisher looks grave at,
While round him like imps
Cling screaming the children as naked
And brown as his shrimps; (ll. pp.54-64)

In "By the Fire-Side", while recounting his love relationship, the speaker simultaneously remembers the details by the pathway:

By boulder-stones where lichens mock
The marks on a moth, and small ferns fit
Their teeth to the polished block. (ll. pp.48-50)

There are hundreds of examples of this vigorous and lively perception in Browning; very often it threatens to crowd out the ostensible subjects of the poems. The kind of attention to the facts of the visible universe we have been considering produced an interesting result: the relentless and disinterested vision has a tendency to eliminate the distinctions between beauty and ugliness. One is left with bare fact, absolute and significant and demanding attention no matter what one's feelings might be.

In certain passages, as quoted above, Browning seemed to be fascinated by the strangeness and grotesque aspects of nature. And sometimes his nature could not serve his poems. So this group of poems is termed by "nature for nature's sake". However, he surely in some of his poems employed nature to emphasize his purposes. In this kind of poems, nature is not as beautiful or sublime as in Romantic poetry, but only can be identified as a wasteland.

2. NATURE AS A WASTELAND

When Browning tried to endow the nature with human intentions and feelings, he was obsessed with the negative pictures of nature. For instance, the settings in "Porphyria's Lover":

The rain set early in to-night;
The sullen wind was soon awake—
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,

And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened, with heart fit to break, (ll. pp.1-5)

The storm sets in early, it tears down the tree limbs, and its force disturbs the calmness of the lake. The storm here is personified in a way that anticipates the mood of the speaker. The wind, the speaker explains, is "sullen"; it destroys the trees out of "spite", and it deliberately tries to "vex", or anger, the lake. Later in the poem the speaker is sullen and he uses his sullenness to elicit some type of reaction from Porphyria. The mood of the speaker is made clear when he explains that he listens to the storm raging outside "with heart fit to break"—he is suffering greatly over something, and the weather outside mirrors and intensifies his feelings.

A much more bleak and horrifying picture of nature is presented in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came". In the tenth stanza, Roland describes a landscape of "grey plain all around: / Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound" (pp.52-53). This countryside appears as a vast wasteland, a desolate place of deformity and ugliness that offers nothing aesthetically pleasing. Roland adds later that it is lifeless, "bruised as to baulk all hope of greenness" (pp.70-71). As a matter of fact, when a living being does appear, it comes in the shape of a horse, but a horse "stiff blind" and "stupefied" (pp.76-77). And aside from just being barren and grotesque, this awful place Childe Roland has sunk into is also diseased. The narrator uses "leprosy" (p.74) and "boils" (p.153) to describe the grass and soil.

Harold Bloom when interpreting "Childe Roland" used "All Things Deformed and Broken" to title one of his essays. Here, "all things" include not only the natural settings but also other things, for instance, the speakers' psychology, the speaker's quest, etc.

In "Childe Roland", descriptions of bizarre and wasted landscapes tell us more about the mind of Roland himself than they do about the real appearance of the countryside. In another word, the material reality does not just reflect the emotions of the narrator, but is, the internal state of Childe Roland. One must take extreme caution when reading Childe Roland's portrait of the territory, since we do not know how far we can trust our narrator. Though the picture is consistent, if we look below its surface discrepancies appear. The Tower is much nearer and more accessible than Childe Roland has thought; a sinister-looking man, of whom he asked the way, and who, as he believed at first thought, was deceiving him, has really put him on the right track; but the third stanza shows that Roland never believed the cripple was deceiving him, since in it Roland speaks of "that ominous tract which, *all agree*, hides the Dark Tower"; and as he describes the country through which he passes, it becomes clear that half its horrors are created by his own heated imagination.

First of all, he attempts to make this place look evil and threatening—a hard task when the place is virtually devoid of life. The little rivulet in the fourteenth stanza

surprises him “as unexpected as a serpent comes” (p.110). And that same horrifying horse, which seems all too frail to cause any harm, must have come from hell itself, working as it did as the “devil’s stud” (p.78).

Thus, the forlorn landscapes are mostly created by the speaker’s bleak mind. He projects his barren psychology into the natural setting. What really lies beneath the vileness of Roland’s landscape is the disappointment of its narrator. Here this knight has trained all his life to approach the Dark Tower, and now in the last leg of his crusade he wants to do nothing but just finish his task. He does not care whether he succeeds or fails, lives or dies: “neither pride/ Nor hope rekindling at the end desried,/ So much as gladness that some end might be” (pp.17-18). His search has been long and his training arduous, we suppose, but they have cost Roland his happiness. They have broken and embittered him. Now he only seeks to join “The Band,” the knights who have already been dead in their mad quest for the Dark Tower (p.39). Really, entering into their ranks is all Roland hopes to accomplish: “just to fail as they seemed best,/ And all the doubt was now -- should I be fit” (p.42).

Harold Bloom in his *A Map of Misreading* interpreted line 41-42 as Roland had “A desire that one be fit to fail” and “this is a reversal of quest” (p.109). The beginning of the poem shows Roland as a hero who would fulfill his life goal by a quest, but now we know his quest is only a quest for failure. So it is not as J. W. Harper argued that the hero’s journey is to prove “the prize is in the process”(xiii), the function of the quest is only to show Roland is not a “hero”, but a “hero-villain” (Bloom, p. 106) instead. Therefore, the destination of the quest, the Dark Tower itself, is nothing extraordinary, only a “round squat turret, blind as the fool’s heart” (p.182). And the response to the desperate triumph of Roland’s courage is a shattering silence, just as on the side of the tomb.

In brief, in “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” everything is desolate and bleak: the landscape is its representative. While as argued above, the nightmarish setting is created by the speaker himself, that is to say, the speaker himself is in a forlorn state. Roland’s frustration and despair come from his quest since his quest itself is futile and meaningless, even if he fulfilled his quest

he would achieve nothing but failure. In a word, such a deformed and broken scene only exists in a wasteland, where there are wasted land, purposeless actions, and frustrated men. As Roy E. Gridley pointed out, among other critics, “ ‘Childe Roland’ is Browning’s contribution to an evolving portrait of a spiritual wasteland ...which culminated in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*” (p.89).

CONCLUSION

In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth recognized science’s anti-poetic tendencies because the development of science left no room for imagination. Influenced by scientific studies, Browning had not so much enthusiasm as his Romantic predecessors, who viewed nature as a benign, positive force.

In Browning’s poems, when nature is mentioned, there are two kinds of depictions. One type is to describe nature itself only, and there is nothing symbolic one can infer from the descriptions or the descriptions have nothing to do with his subject. Though the other descriptions are related to the subject, they just present the negative aspects of nature. As illustrated in “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”, the natural settings are forlorn and bleak, just like in a wasteland.

REFERENCES

- A Map of Misreading*. (1975). Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Bloom, H. (1979). Browning’s ‘Childe Roland’: All things deformed and broken. In J. F. Loucks (Ed.), *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition*. Chicago: Chicago UP., 1971. later reprinted in *Robert Browning’s Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition* (pp.544-554). . New York: Norton.
- Browning, R. (2007). *Robert Browning’s poetry: A Norton critical edition*. James F. Loucks (Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- James, H. (1957). Review of stopford Brooke’s *Theology in the English poets*. In A. Mordell (Ed.), *Literary reviews and essays by Henry James* (p.316). New Haven, .
- Richards, B. (1988). *English poetry of the Victorian Period 1830-1890*. London: Longman.