

«Browning's Spanish settings and characterization in the dramatic monologue»

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Robert Browning's extensive poetic output includes two clerical poems specifically set by their author in Spain: «Cloister (Spanish)» and «The Confessional (Spain)»¹. The latter, whose textual problems are dealt with by specialists such as De Vane² or Crowell³, is, substantially, a straightforward, furious, protestant diatribe against institutionalized religion (Catholic).

The former appears to be much more interesting. Given my standpoint in this article (which examines not only inherent religious matters but matters of characterization as well) I deem it richer and more balanced than the second, particularly in its relation to the Spanish element⁴.

The poem «Cloister (Spanish)» first appeared in *Dramatic Lyrics (Bells & Pomegranates*, nº 3, 1842) together with another poem («Camp. (French)») under the heading «Camp and Cloister». The poem's final title «Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister» dates from 1849, the year in which Browning's first edition of poems is published⁵. In this edition Browning split up the grouping used in 1842.

The «Soliloquy» appears under the same title in the 2nd edition of Browning's poems⁶ within the series «Garden Fancies», and in the 3rd. of 1868⁷, where the poem becomes independent and gets its permanent place in the section «Dramatic Lyrics»⁸.

The critical reception of *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) appears almost stunning if we compare it with the practically hostile reception given to previous works of Browning

1. R. BROWNING, *The Poems & Plays of Robert Browning*, N. York, Random House Inc., 1961, págs. 13-15; 17-19, hereafter: *Poems*.

2. W. C. VANE, *A Browning Handbook*, N. York, Appleton Century Crofts Inc., 1963 (1935), pág. 171.

3. N. B. CROWELL, *A Reader's Guide to Robert Browning*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, U. of New Mexico Press, 1972, págs. 30; 50-53.

4. *Note*. Browning's poetic interest in Spain and the Spanish element is not limited to the two aforesaid poems. See also: «Cristina» (DE VANE, *op. cit.* pág. 122); «The Flower's Name» and «How it strikes a contemporary», in *Poems*, *op. cit.*

5. *Poems: A New Edition in Two Volumes*, 1849.

6. *The Poetical Works of R. Browning*, 3 vols., 1863.

7. *The Poetical Works of R. Browning*, 6 vols. 1868.

8. See DE VANE, *op. cit.*, págs. 102-04; 112-114; CROWELL, *op. cit.*, págs. 45; 49; 51; 53-54.

such as «Sordello» or «Pippa Passes»⁹. Shortly after its appearance the critic John Forster reviewed it in *The Examiner*. After referring to «Sordello» as «a fine mental exercise», he goes on: «... We are humble enough and modest enough to be more thankful for *Dramatic Lyrics*. The collection ... is welcome for its own sake, and more welcome for its indication of the poet's continued advance in a right direction.... in the simple and manly strain of some of these *D. Lyrics*, we find proof of the firmer march and steadier control. Mr Browning will win his laurel...»¹⁰.

Over the years, other critics have come to agree with Forster. Other voices have joined his in considering that this work constitutes a sustained step «in a right direction» on Browning's part. That step is no other but the putting into practice of his favourite poetic mode: the dramatic monologue (=D. M.)¹¹. Other authors emphasize the developing aspect of the aforementioned poetic form: «... the character-revealing dramatic monologue was developed through numerous experiments ... by 1845...»¹².

What I have said so far is meaningful in relation to the poem under scrutiny; the «Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister» initially in the volume *D. Lyrics*.

First of all, it is worthy of note that Browning kept it unchanged in later editions of his work appearing during the author's lifetime. This fact points at least to a certain satisfaction on Browning's part with regard to the poem.

Secondly, we should consider the «Soliloquy...» (1842) as part of the advanced experimental stage in the poetic form sought by Browning from «Sordello»¹³ onwards, a stage which is considered at its peak around 1844-45.

In this sense, and in spite of the poem's title as a «soliloquy», we can consider it a pure D. M. as does R. Langbaum in one of the best studies on the subject; «... B's «Soliloquy...» is not a soliloquy at all but a D, M...»¹⁴ a point agreed on by other authors¹⁵ to whose voices I also add my own.

The «Soliloquy» contains practically all the defining features of the D. M.¹⁶ with one exception: the physical presence of a silent auditor alongside the speaker, and so it becomes a D. M. «in vacuo».

9. *Ibid.*, págs. 85-87; 95-97.

10. J. FORSTER, *The Examiner*, 26 Nov. 1842, in: B. LITZINGER and D. SMALLEY, (eds.), *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, London, RKP, pág. 82.

11. See De VANE, *op. cit.*, pág. 105; W. O. RAYMOND, «The Infinite Moment», in B. LITZINGER and K. L. KNICKERBOCKER, (eds.), *The Browning Critics*, Lexington, U. of Kentucky Press, 1967; J. BRYSON, *R. Browning*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1963 (1959), pág. 14; CROWELL, *op. cit.*, pág. 12.

12. P. HONAN, *Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique*, New Haven, Yale U. P., 1961, pág. 4. See also: M. MASON, «Browning and the Dramatic Monologue» in J. ARMSTRONG, (ed.), *R. Browning*, London, Bell and Sons, 1974, págs. 239-40.

13. See RAYMOND, *op. cit.*, pág. 238.

14. R. LANGBAUM, *The Poetry of Experience: The D. M. in Modern Literary Tradition*, Harmondsworth, Msx., Penguin U. Books, 1974, pág. 151.

15. B. R. JERMAN, «Browning's Witless Duke» in LITZINGER and KNICKERBOCKER (eds.), *op. cit.*, pág. 335; M. WARD, *R. Browning and his World*, London, Cassell, 1968, pág. 238.

16. See LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, págs. 69-103; 132-54; 178-206; MASON, *op. cit.*, págs. 231-66; A. SINFIELD, *Dramatic Monologue*, London, Methuen, 1977.

But this literary form requires that essential element (auditor) whose function is to make the first-person speaker (unwittingly) reveal to us his true personality. In his «Soliloquy...» Browning makes us perceive this element in the dialogue form which is the essence of the poem and in the use of italics for words and sentences which reproduce ideas and modes of expression which *cannot* be attributed to the speaker.

There is one last point to be brought out concerning the volume *D. Lyrics*: Browning's interest, in this period of his literary career, in = «..... delineating the essential qualities of national types and actions...»¹⁷, Spain being the country chosen for his «Soliloquy».

Given that we know Browning's meticulous care in relation to the «setting» of his monologues («... Every detail of the setting tells...»)¹⁸, I shall now proceed to pose the question of Browning's choice.

W. C. De Vane explains this rather superficially: «... the «Soliloquy» probably owes something to Browning's travels in Italy in the early summer of 1838, when he had ample opportunity to observe monasteries...»¹⁹.

While, in my opinion, it is Charles T. Phipps who gives a subtler and more profound appraisal of the question. After refuting De Vane's argument by mentioning Browning's short stay (barely a month) in Italy (mainly interested in gathering material for his «Sordello») Phipps declares: «... the fact that his cloister is in Spain rather than Italy suggests something more than a simple Italian origin for the poem...»²⁰.

And that «something more» is explained by Phipps in his allusion to Browning's interest in and sympathy with the historical moment of the Spain of his time. The moment of the conquest of power by the liberals who supported the cause of the Regent M^a Cristina, or the period covering the first Carlist War (1832-39). Phipps also perceives Browning's interest in two other poems²¹ chronologically close to the «Soliloquy» and fostered by the wide and favourable coverage the Spanish situation enjoyed in the British press. Here particular approval was given to the anti-clerical facet of Spanish Liberalism. Concerning this, Phipps points out the poem's delicate artistic impartiality which prevents us from concluding that Browning was intrinsically against the monastic institution²².

I basically agree with Phipps, however, I should like to expose a few ideas of my own in relation to our topic.

The Spanish setting of the «Soliloquy» presents us with three aspects: a) the geographic-historical one (Spain); b) the poem's setting proper (Spanish monastery); c) the anthropological one (Spanish characters). These three aspects imply respectively three

17. De VANE, *op. cit.*, pág. 105.

18. BRYSON, *op. cit.*, pág. 20.

19. De VANE, *op. cit.*, pág. 113.

20. Ch. T. PHIPPS, *Browning's Clerical Characters*, Salzburg, Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, U. of Salzburg, 1976, pág. 94.

21. «Cristina» and «The Confessional». See pág. 67 and note 4.

22. PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, págs. 94-95. *Note*. We should remember that the treaty of the Quadruple Alliance, signed by France and England in 1834, contributed decisively to the triumph of the liberal cause in Spain and Portugal. On Browning's particular form of liberalism, see: «Why I am a liberal», *Poems, op. cit.*, pág. 1138.

realms of experience: a) political (pro-liberal); b) religious (catholic); c) idiosyncratic (Spanish character).

Phipps deals with the first of these realms which is the least evident, literally speaking, in the poem, though it is valid for explaining its source. The second would be, in my opinion, only partially explained if we attribute it to Browning's anti-clerical sentiment, since, it is my belief, in order to be able to take a stance in this matter we have to consider briefly Browning's religious thought, and especially, his attitude towards the Catholic faith. As to the third, it would be determined by the above mentioned national and anthropological interest on the part of the author²³.

If we leave out the first aspect (a) because of its plausibility, I consider the second (b) the most important and meaningful in relation to the «Soliloquy». This second aspect is the setting proper of the poem, the latter's intrinsic intellectual framework²⁴ (besides being a determining factor of the third aspect in question (c)²⁵), consequently will be dealt with first.

Robert Browning was born into a religious family (congregationalist)²⁶ and was brought up in this faith²⁷ in an atmosphere «... not ... oppressively pious...» free from any form of dogmatism: «... The.... Congregationalists of the period were more liberal than most Evangelical Anglicans...»²⁸. Browning remained true to this faith all his life²⁹.

In order to show the essential nature of Browning's ties with this faith, the comment made by his future wife (Elizabeth Barrett) is particularly appropriate and it involves the religious attitude of both of them:

«... Elizabeth and Robert assured each other that they both were regular frequenters of «Independent Dissenting Chapels» because of the appeal of «*the simplicity of that praying and speaking without books — and a little too from disliking the theory of state churches...*»³⁰.

That is, both rejected the ritualistic and institutionalized aspects of religion apparent in faiths such as the Anglican or Catholic ones. Browning, as H. N. Fairchild says, was «... a *vital* Christian... NOT a dogmatic one...»³¹.

But, this religious vitalism, that possibility of simple immediacy in divine-human relations, was, in my opinion, subtly perceived by Browning also in the Catholic faith, as is shown by the positive side of Catholicism present in his «Soliloquy», as we shall see.

23. See pág. 69.

24. «... Setting is a major factor in the formulation of subject matter and a direct influence on the expression of theme.» See: R. TAYLOR, *Understanding the Elements of Literature*, London, MacMillan, 1981, pág. 69.

25. «... Setting... is generally thought of as an adjunct to action or character...» *Ibid.*, pág. 70.

26. H. N. FAIRCHILD, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, vol. IV, New York, Columbia U. P., 1957, págs. 139-40.

27. PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 15.

28. FAIRCHILD, *op. cit.*, pág. 139.

29. PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 7.

30. *Ibid.*, pág. 16 *My Italics*.

31. FAIRCHILD, *op. cit.* pág. 141.

Moving on to deal with Browning's specific attitude regarding the Catholic faith, one can clearly perceive within his poetic output the author's interest and knowledge: «..... concerning Catholic matters...», even though Browning: «... was by no means ever in contact with, or in sympathy with any «catholicizing» group...»³².

His earliest contact with Catholicism can be traced back to his years of private study in his father's vast library which contained the Roman Missal of 1761 and an interesting collection of letters in latin by the Renaissance Cardinal Bembo³³.

So, Browning's first contact was rather with the ritualistic and institutionalized side of this religion whose lack of interest for him has already been mentioned.

Neither was the information gathered by Browning from the Congregationalist clergy concerning Catholicism particularly encouraging. One of them, the Rev. Joseph Irons, went as far as to associate, in one of his sermons, the concepts «Roman Catholic» and «midnight assassin» as synonymous³⁴. Though, not all of them expressed themselves in such virulent terms. So, for instance, the Rev. George Clayton (from Browning's chapel in York Street), who was defined by Browning himself as «simple, good and sincere» was much more conciliatory: «... I cannot for a moment doubt that in the Roman Church, however lamentably corrupt and depraved, there exists a portion of the Church of Christ...»³⁵.

Neither have we any record on Browning's part of his trip to a Catholic country, namely Italy, in 1838³⁶.

Finally, in 1843, our author had his first direct contact with a Catholic priest, an Irish Franciscan friar, Fr. Theobald Mathew (1790-1856), then engaged in social welfare in his role as leader of his «Temperance Society»³⁷. Browning attended the meetings organised by this Society and he records the powerful impressions he received in a letter to his friend Alfred Domett: «.... the most notable thing of the year has been, to me, the visit of Fr. Mathew to London — this reverting to me to *the simplest forms of worship* (for the converts are converts to his hand and voice and eye), all these men choosing to become *better* because he ... *bade* them so become; you should have seen, it, as I did.... I stood on the scaffold with him and heard him preach....»³⁸.

Browning's remark turns out to be particularly meaningful if we remember two previous assertions: a) Browning's hostility to the religious-ritualistic aspect and the essential vitalism of his religious attitude; b) the conciliatory stance of Rev. Clayton with regard to Catholicism³⁹.

Browning's words imply his explicit acknowledgement of positive elements (or in harmony with his religious personality) within the Catholic Church. Fr. Mathew — a

32. PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 7.

33. *Ibid.*, págs. 9-10.

34. PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 16, note 29; and WARD, *op. cit.*, pág. 26.

35. PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 17.

36. *Ibid.*, págs. 18-19.

37. PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 23. See also note 49.

38. *Ibid.*, pág. 24.

39. See págs. 70, 71.

member of that faith— was able to convince, to attract vitally, without ritual («... the converts are converts to his hand and voice and eye...»); therefore, we can imagine, for Browning he could be a part of that «... portion of the Church of Christ...», mentioned by one of his spiritual mentors (Clayton).

Browning's relation with Fr. Mathew in 1843, which chronologically follows the composition and publication of the «Soliloquy» helped to corroborate the positive-Catholic traits present in the poem, hence, we can deduce also reasons for the poem's unchanging nature and permanence in following editions of Browning's poetic corpus⁴⁰.

These positive traits, although at first sight less clear than the negative-Catholic ones, are finally more powerful, and, both are embodied in the poem through the characters of the speaker and Brother Lawrence⁴¹.

In 1844, Browning returns to Italy and visits Rome for the first time. His contact with the Catholic world is limited to touring though these travel experiences have been seen as a seminal influence on his later great religious poems⁴².

After their troubled start to married life and fleeing to Italy (1846) the couple visited churches and monasteries towards which Browning felt specially attracted⁴³.

Finally, I should also like to mention the most intimate and long-lasting relationship between our author and a Catholic priest, a jesuit who years later left the Company of Jesus, Fr. Francis Sylvester Mahony («Fr. Prout»). It was through him that Browning increased his knowledge of active Catholicism, though this fact in no way modified substantially his basic attitude concerning the Catholic Church⁴⁴.

What I have said up to now, allows me to isolate two assertions regarding Browning's specific attitude towards Catholicism:

- his hostility towards the ritualistic and institutionalized element of this faith;
- his perception within the Catholic Church, of the vitality which is the basis for his own general religious behaviour.

It is this convergence of values, according to the author's yardstick, negative and positive (respectively), which, in my opinion, gives body, notionally and in terms of characterization, to his «Soliloquy». All these things are most conveniently enhanced by the poem's Spanish setting and the poetic vehicle chosen: the dramatic monologue.

The «Soliloquy» begins to fulfil quite brilliantly two of the essential features of this literary form which will be refined to perfection in Browning's later poems: a) the oblique or indirect representation of the author's ideas from an individual point of view:

40. See pág. 68.

41. *Note.* Hence, my previous allusion to «setting» as a determining factor of «characterization». See pág. 70 & note 25.

42. See PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 22.

43. *Ibid.*, págs. 32-39

44. *Ibid.*, págs. 43-48.

that of the speaker⁴⁵; b) the (unconscious) self-disclosure of the character in charge of the utterance (with everything that entails)⁴⁶.

As to the first mentioned feature (a) the «Soliloquy» shows the indirect exemplifying, the evocation of Browning's dichotomic perception (ritualism /vitalism) of the catholic-religious element materialized in the speaker's own point of view. The latter complies with the requisites of the second isolated feature (b) and gives the D. M. its meaning⁴⁷.

Browning most coherently set his dichotomic view in a Catholic country par excellence —Spain— and embodied via the speaker (as befits the D. M.) the above mentioned duality through the characterization of himself and Br. Lawrence (the target of his wrath) as two antithetic characters, two embodiments of the proverbial Spanish temperamental extremism.

The two friars in the «Soliloquy» symbolize, in my opinion, the already mentioned religious dichotomy. The speaker is the emblem for the ritualistic side (or negative); Br. Lawrence for the vitalistic or positive one⁴⁸. It seems as if Browning wanted to show the potentiality of the Catholic faith for harbouring the best or the worst, in his opinion, of religion. The fact that these two friars are Spanish allows him to make the radical separation between both standpoints even more clearcut⁴⁹.

It is also worthy of note that the «voice» chosen by Browning for his monologue is that of the ritualistic advocate. This turns out to be emblematic both of Browning's consciousness of this tendency as predominant in the Spanish Catholic clergy, and of the author's own hostility towards it. Given the very dynamics of the D. M., the speaker only manages to bring himself down in our eyes, while the vitalistic character is enhanced as the poem develops.

All these aspects are brilliantly and meticulously reflected in the «Soliloquy» by means of the use of the *characterization techniques* specific to the D. M., which most properly combine two essentially opposed possibilities: the dramatic and the lyric⁵⁰.

The lyrical method of characterization is applied by the author exclusively in relation to the speaker, the latter being, therefore, the only character whose inner life we can get to know, the only «... completely concrete character...»⁵¹ in the poem, and, consequently, the one who makes the poem meaningful⁵².

45. See LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, págs. 43-48.

46. *Ibid.*, pág. 153, and HONAN, *op. cit.*, pág. 3.

47. See LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 203.

48. See PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, págs. 96-97.

49. *Note*. For an illustrative reference to bibliographic material on Spain and the Spanish question to which Browning was able to gain access at a time near to that of his «Soliloquy», see PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 95, note 22.

50. *Note*. «... It (=the D. M.) uses the method of drama, where character is manifested through utterance and action and is determined by what Aristotle calls «ethos» or moral bent. But it also uses the method of the lyric, where the manifestation of character is not by Aristotelian standards «characterization» at all, since it is total rather than determinate and therefore self-expressive and self-justifying rather than theological or moral...» See LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 197.

51. *Ibid.*, pág. 199.

52. See note 47.

The other characters in this literary form: «... derive their life from the speaker. They exist as he sees and describes them, so that their existence partakes of the problematical quality of a visual and intellectual construction...»⁵³.

This is what we find in the «Soliloquy», both methods being used to characterize the speaker who, in his turn, is responsible for the characterization of the second character in question (Br. Lawrence). I shall proceed to prove my assertions.

a) *Characterization of the speaker*

a.i. *Dramatic method*

It includes two aspects: the dramatic proper (action) and the verbal, or, the speaker's use of language.

As for the second aspect, the speaker in the «Soliloquy» expresses himself in a familiar register. His language has the immediacy of conversation. To this effect contribute aspects such as: punctuation marks; pauses; syntactic procedures (the sudden contiguity or alternation of clausal and syntagmatic types; incomplete and ungrammatical structures); the presence of exclamations; expletives, and colloquialisms. («... So nice!»; «Strange», st. VI, LL. 2,7); as well as onomatopoeia (unpleasant): the repeated growling which opens and closes the poem («GR-R-R». st. I, IX, LL. 1,8); or the ill-intentioned laughing in stanza III («He-he! There his lily snaps», L. 8).

These aspects tell us about the primary beastly nature of the speaker as well as about his basic malevolence. In this colloquial dialectic, the speaker, occasionally, makes use of overt (and gratuitous) vulgarity: «Damned flower-pots»; «Hell dry you up» (st. I, LL. 2,8); «Touch our chaps» (st. II, L. 6); and even to explicit insult: «Swine's Snout» (st. II, L. 8); «You grovel» (st. VIII, L. 3); «You swine» (st. 9, L.8), which also add to his base temperament and to his indiscriminate hatred towards the target of his invectives.

It is also worthy of note within this register the use of archaisms: «Ere» (st. III, L. 6); «a-dying» (st. VII, L. 5); «Ope» (st. VIII, L. 8), which point to the backward looking quality of his (ritualistic) stance.

On the other hand, this language appears interspersed with jargonistic allusions reminiscent of his monastic profession. These turn out to be degrading in their context, revealing the superficiality inherent in his misunderstanding of ritual. So, in stanza V, I observe a very poor allusion to the mystery of the Cross and to the dogma of the Holy Trinity; and in st. VII, to an exaggerated distortion of St. Paul's text to the Galatians (V.19), where the weaknesses of the flesh are increased from sixteen to twenty-nine («Twenty-nine distinct damnations...», L. 8)⁵⁴. All these things clearly show the lack of thoroughness⁵⁵ and attention paid to fundamental aspects of his religion, which allows us to question his professional capacity and even his religious vocation.

53. LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 199.

54. See PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 98. and note 29.

55. *Note*. In spite of the appearances, which will be considered later on in the section «action».

The poem also contains the speaker's sacrilegious addresses to Satan (st. VIII and IX), as well as an overt use of God's name in vain («... God's blood...» st. I, L. 4), symptomatic of the fact that he has attained a considerable degree of irreverence given his clerical condition.

He also makes use, (both in the colloquial and the professional registers) of some expressions which he tries to pass off as cultured but which, in fact, turn out to be artificially so: «my heart's abhorrence...» (st. I, L. 1); «Arian frustrate» (st. V. L. 7); «Barbary corsair's» (st. IV, L. 7); and of learned words of a similar effect: «sacrificial» (st. III, L. 5); «refection» (st. V. L. 1); «Manichee» (st. VII, L. 8); «scrofulous»; «Belial» (st. VIII, LL. 1 and 4); «indenture» (st. VIII, L. 3); etc. The occurrence of these elements makes us perceive him rather as a person with some education but who has not known how to (or been able to) assimilate, as a somewhat dim-witted person who at the same time pretends to have a culture which, in fact, he lacks, as a character as superficial and pretentious in matters of erudition as we have seen him to be in theological matters.

His speech only improves when he reproduces (or tries to reproduce) his antagonist's words. The fact that these lines appear in italics suggests a change of tone (pejorative) on the part of the speaker, as well as the means used by Browning to make us feel the silent auditor element proper to the D. M.⁵⁶

The speaker attempts such reproduction on two occasions. The first takes place in st. II and with this there is attained that effect so characteristic of the D. M. by which the speaker gets the opposite of what he proposes. Both the pejorative tone and the aim of ridiculing the character mentioned on the speaker's part come into conflict with the content of the lines. The latter tell of Br. Lawrence's positive attributes: affectionate disposition («*Salve tibi*», L. 2); love of nature and of the natural world (LL. 5,6); prudence (L. 3) and an awareness of his scholarly limitations: «... *I doubt: / What's the latin name for «parsley»?!»*⁵⁷.

Consequently, as befits the D. M., the attempt to vilify Br. Lawrence is detrimental to the speaker: with his irate attitude (L. 8) the latter is implicitly admitting his lack of such attributes.

The second of the afore-said occasions becomes, in my opinion, a mere attempt, although no less revealing.

I am speaking of the latin words which distort the «ave Maria» in the last stanza⁵⁸. The words in question: «*Plena gratia / Ave Virgo*» (LL. 7,8) have attracted the attention of Browning's critics. Ch. T. Phipps deals with them on two occasions⁵⁹ and on both he voices P. W. Gainer's exegesis⁶⁰ and forwards his own: «... Either, as Gainer argues, these words signify hate-induced confusion in the speaker's mind... or Browning has simply further

56. See pág. 69.

57. BROWNING, «Soliloquy...» in *Poems*, *op. cit.*, st.II, LL. 6,7, pág. 14.

58. Note. With regard to other words in italics present in the same stanza, see PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, pág. 98; and S. H. AIKEN, «HY, ZY, HINE» and Browning's Medieval Sources for «Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister», *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 17, n° 4, Winter, 1979, págs. 377-83.

59. PHIPPS, *op. cit.*, págs. 98-99; and «Browning's Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister: Lines 71-72», *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 7, n° 2 Summer, 1969, págs. 158-59.

60. P. W. GAINER, «Hy, Zy, Hine», *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 1, 1963, pág. 159.

erred in attempting to represent the opening words of the «Ave Maria», a prayer which he would stereotypically have associated with any Catholic ceremony...»⁶¹.

Accepting both possibilities, I can still suggest several ideas given that neither of the two critics deals specifically with the matter of characterization.

The fact that these words appear in italics allows us to infer them as Br. Lawrence's, the second clerical character in the poem. In addition, it allows us to keep on feeling the pejorative tone inherent in this kind of writing.

The distorted use of these words by the speaker may be due to that «hate-induced confusion» referred to, but, I should like to point out that I once again perceive in them that particular effect of the D. M. concerning characterization: again, form (tone included) ironically opposes content detrimentally to the speaker.

If these words are Br. Lawrence's, per se, they are nothing but prayer words, revealing his choice or habit in his sense; while their distorted articulation by the speaker points in the other direction, i.e., to the latter's seldom communicating with his Creator, or, to his annoyance at prayer time, all of which makes him appear in our eyes not as upright as he ought to be given his clerical condition.

In addition, if the «error» attributed by Phipps to Browning concerning the fact that the *author* confuses the Vespers prayer with the «Angelus»⁶²; from the point of view of characterization we may ask ourselves if such «confusion» is real, or rather if it is something brought in in order to show us the speaker's religious degeneracy, in which case it is the latter (and not the author) who is mistaken.

Finally, I should like to make brief reference to two aspects still concerning characterization through the speaker's use of language.

Lexical repetition is one of the characteristic traits of Browning's poetic language, and, besides: «... an important element in Browning's use of sound to help to depict character...»⁶³.

As it happens, the only meaningful word repeated in the «Soliloquy» is an insult: «*Swine's Snout*» (st. II) and «*You Swine*» (st. IX), a fact that could hardly be more detrimental to the person using this kind of expression, especially, in the case of a monk. To the baseness of the message we must add the cacophony inherent in the first manifestation of the insult (st. II): even its sound is disagreeable, hence the contribution of sound to characterization.

The second aspect has to do with the use of imagery on the speaker's part. In this sense, I should point out the evolutionary nature of Browning's imagery as a means of-character delineation, and how his «Soliloquy» already belongs to a developed phase within the author's poetic output⁶⁴.

61. PHIPPS *op. cit.* (Note 3 pág. 14), págs. 99 and 159 respectively.

62. *Note.* The prayer should have been the «Pater Noster» or first Vespers prayer and not the «Ave Maria». PHIPPS, *op. cit.* págs. 99 and 158 respectively.

63. HONAN, *op. cit.*, pág. 212.

64. See HONAN, *op. cit.*, págs. 167-68.

As such a means Browning's images contribute to the speaker's unwitting characterization proper to the D. M.⁶⁵ and these can be integrated into various semantic fields⁶⁶ often interdependent⁶⁷. These fields can be classified as follows: animal imagery; light and darkness imagery; colour imagery; taste or nutritional images; professional images (conditioned by his religious status): environmental, and false or devoid of contact with reality⁶⁸.

The «Soliloquy» attracts our attention, in the first place, because of its lack of subtlety from the point of view of imagery, given the immediacy of the associations and the bluntness of the vehicles chosen. These aspects reveal the speaker's psychological and intellectual dullness.

Also we have in the poem animal, nutritional, professional and false imagery, in their turn reinforced or complemented with other colour and illness imagery, with the result that all of these images are interdependent and add to the general effect of the speaker's degradation and of his antagonist's (Br. Lawrence) improvement. Of these images, the most interesting are the animal and the false ones.

The vehicles of animal imagery used by the speaker are: a pure metaphor («Swine», st.II, L. 9) and two synecdoches («Snout», st. II; «grovel», st. VIII), all three having Br. Lawrence as tenor, a reference most unfortunate for the former. Given, on the one hand, the basis of image composition (i.e. the perception of *affinities* amongst essentially disparate elements) since, in this case, the speaker proves to be the subjective factor, he only manages to transmit to us the basic *disparity* of the association («swine» Br. Lawrence), a disparity which is widely endorsed at other moments throughout the poem (as we shall see when dealing with the tenor of the comparison).

On the other hand, we should also note Browning's use of animal imagery which is first and foremost intended: «... to expose each character *as he speaks...*»⁶⁹, a fact that makes such imagery backfire on the speaker whose essentially beastly nature I have already mentioned⁷⁰.

This is a convenient point to refer to an interesting contrast present in the «Soliloquy», to the meaningful epithet applied to Br. Lawrence: «*Saint*, forsooth!» (st. IV, L. 1). The fact that the word appears in italics, suggests, as in previous cases, that it is not the speaker's as well as being a pejorative use of it on his part⁷¹. Accordingly, as it is not the speaker who acknowledges the virtue of sanctity in Br. Lawrence, the validity of this judgement is enhanced. This idea is supported by the speaker's ironic remark («forsooth!») and by his use of a false image to defend his point of view, as we shall see.

65. See págs. 69, 72-73.

66. See HONAN, *op. cit.*, pág. 169 ff.

67. *Ibid.*, págs. 188-89.

68. *Ibid.*, pág. 188.

69. HONAN, *op. cit.*, pág. 180. My italics.

70. See pág. 74.

71. See pág. 75.

This technique of radical characterization («Swine — Saint»), with obvious phonological associations, makes me evoke both the Spanish temperamental extremism and that religious dualism, (no less extreme) perceived by Browning in Catholic circles⁷².

With regard to false imagery in the poem, we have, in the first place the one already mentioned, awkwardly used by the speaker to deny the sanctity of the tenor. It appears in st. IV and aims to visualize Br. Lawrence's supposedly lewd temperament. It contains two poor and vulgar similes (ll. 5,7) and only has the effect of our attributing to the speaker such a temperamental trait: his unfortunate choice of this image again emphasizes the predominance of instinct, of animal-like tendencies in his personality.

I have also spoken of awkwardness because the speaker himself manages (unwillingly) to refute his own arguments: «... Can't I see his dead eye glow, / (That is, *if he'd let it show!*...)»⁷³.

The last line points to a basically devout attitude, as if continually looking down, on Br. Lawrence's part. Therefore, hardly could we consider him given to the frivolous and sensual tendencies attributed to him by the speaker.

The second false image appears in st. V and its fallacy is much more serious given that it includes professional aspects of the speaker. It is again a visual image which aims to reveal the speaker's faithfulness to the principles of his religion and Br. Lawrence's unfaithfulness to these principles. In this way, paradoxically, he only manages to give us the opposite effect in addition to the superficiality of the speaker's religious views, through the poorness of the vehicles chosen.

The speaker foolishly believes that he «illustrates» (L. 5) the dogma of the Holy Trinity by drinking his orange juice in three sips (LL. 5,6,7) and he criticises Br. Lawrence because he drinks his in one sip (L. 8). In fact it is the latter who acts more appropriately in this context, in that, by drinking in *one* sip we can infer he is evoking the one true God constituted by the three persons of the aforesaid dogma. Once again the speaker's words backfire on himself.

The remaining imagery in the poem abounds in the above mentioned negative attributes of the speaker and consequently enhances Br. Lawrence's positive ones.

The food imagery is also outstanding due to the simplicity of the vehicles (st. III, VI) and insists on the speaker's essential materialism and intolerance as well as on his falseness and hypocrisy. St. VIII combines illness, colour and touch imagery:

«... Or my scrupulous French novel
On grey paper with blunt type...»⁷⁴.

which again evokes the speaker's morbid nature, his tendency towards lust, a defect which, as we have already seen, he tried to ascribe to Br. Lawrence.

As for the speaker's dramatic characterization⁷⁵, the one through *action*, we can observe in the «Soliloquy» repeated examples of his spontaneous and wilful wickedness as well as of his considerable shortcomings as a religious person.

72. See pág. 72.

73. BROWNING, «Soliloquy...», in *Poems, op. cit.*, st. IV. LL. 6,8, pág. 14. My italics.

74. BROWNING, «Soliloquy...» in *Poems, op. cit.*, St. VIII, LL.1,2. pág. 15.

75. See pág. 74.

This characterization technique is introduced in the second half of the poem: from St. V, to the end (St. IX).

In St. V we see the speaker superficially evoking the mystery of the Cross by merely placing his «Knife and fork» (L. 2) crosswise, a fact that shows his extreme, misunderstood, ritualism.

In st. VI we find him *materially* injuring Br. Lawrence, spoiling the flowers grown by the latter, and stealing his fruit (LL. 5-8). In the following two stanzas (VII and VIII) the speaker concentrates on *spiritually* (and eternally) injuring Br. Lawrence. First of all he plans to lead him to heresy at the moment of his death («...*just a-dying!*...» st. VII, 1.5) and send him to Hell, a situation reminiscent of Elizabethan drama, whilst, paradoxically, he is overtly admitting the certainty of Br. Lawrence's salvation (*Sure of heaven as sure can be*», L.6) a fact that once again tells us, indirectly, of the latter's probity.

Afterwards he tries to make him succumb to the sins of the flesh (to which as we have seen, the speaker himself is evidently prone) by surreptitiously inserting into his basket of fruit a lewd novel (belonging to the speaker...) (st. VIII) in order to have him likewise condemned: «...*Hand and foot in Belial's gripe...*», (L.4). Finally, in st. IX, he is determined to make a pact with the devil in an effort to bring his antagonist to perdition, a purpose that in the end he is averse to carrying out, through fear of personal condemnation, on the one hand, and on the other, because he is not sure that he will achieve his purpose even by this means («...*As he'd miss...*», L.4) which again makes us perceive Br. Lawrence's eminently good qualities.

a.ii. *Lyrical method*

This second characterization technique, typical of the D. M. has to do, as I have said⁷⁶, exclusively with the speaker, about whom we are lead to infer aspects outside the poem itself, which, at the same time, are perceptible only through the poem⁷⁷.

The method has two sides⁷⁸ one self-expressive and another self-justifying⁷⁹. The latter transcends mere occasional ratification of statements and actions in the poem and aims at the essential nature of man (=the speaker) bent on the quest for the justification of his very existence⁸⁰.

The self-expressive side is the one responsible for the verbosity, plot excesses and ingenuities on account of which Browning is often wrongly reproached given their functional nature within the D. M..

These aspects help to accentuate the existing disproportion between motivation and expression in this literary form⁸¹.

76. See pág. 73.

77. See LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 204.

78. See pág. 73, Note 50.

79. «... the speaker does not use his utterance to expound a meaning but to pursue one, a meaning which comes to him with the shock of a revelation... his life's meaning...» LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 185.

80. *Ibid.*, pág. 178.

81. *Ibid.*, pág. 179.

Expression is far more disproportionate than motivation, and the verbosity reveals latent characterizing traits of the speaker's.

The disproportion between motivation and expression is clear in the «Soliloquy»: the harmless view of Br. Lawrence watering his plants unleashes the speaker's diatribe:

« / GR - R - R - there go, my heart's abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God's blood, would not mine kill you!...⁸²

This unbalance reveals the extreme intolerance which is part and parcel of the speaker's personality, as well as some covert envy with regard to Br. Lawrence: the fact that he is happy taking care of his flowers (st. I, LL.5-7) irritates the speaker deeply (L.8).

Also, the lexical excess proper to the speaker in the D. M. is clear from the first stanza. Onomatopoeic sounds (GR — R — R..., L.1); cases of hyperbole («...my heart's abhorrence...», L.1; «... if hate killed men...», L.3; «... God's blood...», L.5); expletives and exclamations («... do ...», L.2; «... what...», L.5; «... Oh! ...», L.6); rhetorical questions (LL. 5,7); even blasphemies («... Damned ...», L.2; «Hell...» L. 8) follow one another within the stanzaic brevity of eight trochaic tetrameters. All this makes me think of an impulsive, vehement nature, little used to ponder upon the content and extent of his utterances. This is corroborated by the subtle propriety in the use of ellipsis in L. 4: («... God's blood, would not mine kill you!..»). The omission of the verb («prevent») in this line, shows my point: the vehemence present in this confusion or expressive disorder, (also evident on the prosodic level); the lack of forethought in the utterance of one, undoubtedly, exaggerated and gratuitous threat.

Such verbosity in the hands of one with an impulsive and unreflecting nature as that of the speaker inevitably leads to expressive gratuitousness. The latter materializes in the often absent and other times scarce propriety of the speaker's arguments, as well as in the superabundance of these in terms of the message he tries to put over. Likewise, this gratuitousness is apparent in the constant recurrence to false and naïve or superficial images⁸³ and fulfils, in the «Soliloquy», the function characteristic of it in the D. M.:

«... The speakers never accomplish anything
by their utterance, and seem to know from
the start that they will not...»⁸⁴.

The poem's ending, which repeats animal noises and insults (st. IX, L. 8), reveals the conscious uselessness of the speaker's effort in a kind of vain protest expressive —once again— of the failure of his intentions.

The second side which offers the lyrical characterization of the speaker in the D. M. —self-justifying— aims to evoke the impervious necessity on the speaker's part to justify his own existential stance i.e., to find a sense to his own existence⁸⁵.

82. BROWNING, «Soliloquy», in *Poems, op. cit.*, st.I, LL. 1-4, pág. 13.

83. See págs. 76-78.

84. LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 179.

85. See pág. 79 note 79..

The speaker is so obsessed by this idea that he loses contact with the reality which determines his elocution, and this appears in the D. M. in: «... the tone of improvisation... the speaker's rapt absorption in what he is saying and his strange lack of connection with the auditor»⁸⁶.

The improvising tone, the use of comments without any previous logical ordering, can be occasionally discerned in the «Soliloquy». This is the case in stanza IV, which, suddenly, interrupts the speaker's reasoning concerning his material and human relations with Br. Lawrence in the refectory; in stanza VI, which no less suddenly cuts short his pseudo-theological reasoning against the latter; or in the second four-line group of the final stanza (IX) which returns to previous allusions in a disorderly fashion.

All this emphasizes the afore mentioned impulsiveness of the speaker's nature and begins to make evident his tendency to drift away from the reality which is the dramatic situation.

This distancing reaches its zenith when, betrayed by his own obsession, the speaker shifts focus from the motivation of the monologue (the speaker's anger at the harmless, religious and vital, attitude of his antagonist) and fixes it on the realms of heresy. In fact it is the realms of theological and religious matters (the basis of his own «raison d'être» as a cleric) that constitute the speaker's latent and essential concern in the poem. He wrongly believes that by exposing Br. Lawrence's apparent iniquity he legitimates or justifies his own position. He is so absorbed in the process that he realizes neither the falseness (st. V) and the gratuitous manipulation of his arguments (st. VII), nor his own incongruence on attempting to expose his antagonist's sinful nature and thereby revealing only his own (st. VIII).

But this misdirected effort eventually turns out to be fruitful since it is responsible for the speaker's reaching that «shock of revelation»⁸⁷ which allows him to recognise the real —and sad— meaning of his life as a cleric. In the poem's last stanza, the speaker confusedly admits his doubts concerning Br. Lawrence's condemnation («... yet leave / Such a flaw in the indenture / As he'd miss.....») ⁸⁸ together with the certainty of his own (condemnation) if he persists in his wicked attitude: «..... Or, there's Satan! —one might venture / Pledge one's soul to him.... / till, past retrieve.....»⁸⁹.

With this there is achieved an important trait of the D. M. as «poetry of experience»⁹⁰. The speaker attains complete awareness of Br. Lawrence's true nature and thereby of his own: his essential inadequacies as a religious man are indirectly proportional to Br. Lawrence's adequacy. But, the latter is merely the second last step. The last step is the speaker's assumption of that for him painful realization⁹¹. This takes place in the «Soliloquy» when, in the last verse, we see the two sides of lyrical characterization con-

86. LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 185.

87. See pág. 79 note 79.

88. BROWNING, «Soliloquy...» in *Poems, op. cit.*, st.IX.LL.2,3,4. pág.15.

89. *Ibid.*, LL. 1,2,4.

90. «... the final perception is a fusion of subject and object, an instant when the speaker sees and understands the object, because, seeing it through his own perspective, he sees and understands himself in it...» See LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 205.

91. *Ibid.*, pág. 206.

verging. The irate «you swine!» (st. IX. L. 8) that concludes the poem, considered from the self-expressive side, can be addressed to Br. Lawrence so revealing the speaker's awareness regarding the uselessness of his difamatory tactics and the hollowness of the diatribe⁹².

The same expression, considered from the self-justifying point of view, can be directed by the speaker to himself so revealing his own existential failure.

Both possibilities lead to the same outcome: the «Soliloquy» essentially comes down in favour of the stance embodied by the vitalistic character as opposed to the ritualistic one, in accordance with Browning's own affinities⁹³.

My own views are intended to illustrate the importance of the lyrical method of characterization in the D. M.: to this the dramatic method is secondary⁹⁴. Both techniques are applied in the «Soliloquy». The dramatic one makes possible the speaker's human and moral characterization and allows us to understand the paradox of the latter's religious and, at the same time, villainous personality. The lyrical one permits his existential delineation which explains the paradox.

The speaker's final realization of his extreme inadequacies as a cleric allows one to understand the other negative traits of his personality.

So, we see that in the «Soliloquy», as befits the D. M., the situation is resolved «... not dramatically but lyrically...»⁹⁵, and that the speaker, often stereotyped by criticism, is neither so simple nor so flat a character as may appear at first sight. This merely increases his responsibility regarding his words and actions, his (negative) vitality.

Once more, as occurs in the D. M., the speaker *is* the poem^{95bis}. The meaning of the «Soliloquy» is NOT the irate testimony of one friar against another but the former's primal nature, his intellectual simplicity, the deficiencies in his religious condition, his latent existential consciousness.

b) *Characterization of Br. Lawrence*

The characterization of the other or other characters appearing in the D. M. takes secondary place from the technical point of view (but not from the functional one) given the weight of the focus on the speaker. As I have said⁹⁶ this task is carried out by the latter and, consequently, our knowledge of the character(s) concerned comes from the speaker's dual, visual and intellectual, perception through which he only succeeds in obtaining the opposite effects to those desired.

Concentrating on Br. Lawrence, the scrutiny of his personality traits (scattered throughout my considerations concerning the speaker's characterization in the «Soliloquy») reveals him to us not only as poles apart from the speaker but as someone far superior to the latter both from the human and religious points of view.

92. See pág. 80.

93. See pág. 72.

94. See LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 178.

95. LANGBAUM, *op. cit.*, pág. 197.

95bis. *Ibidem*.

96. See pág. 73-74.

The speaker's observation of Br. Lawrence's activity shows us how this activity responds perfectly to the requisites of monastic life: the cultivation of the land, whose fruits he shares with his brothers in the faith (st. II; VI; VIII) and prayer⁹⁷.

These aspects which Browning attributes, via the speaker, to his secondary character include connotations which make us evoke the religious —vitalistic dimension which this character embodies as well as the author's own affinities in these matters⁹⁸.

As regards the speaker's intellectual appreciation of his antagonist, this merely enhances the latter's above mentioned superiority. As a human being Br. Lawrence is affectionate and generous (st. II, VI, VIII), intelligent and wise⁹⁹.

As a religious man, I have just mentioned the adequacies of his activity in terms of his condition, whilst I have also referred previously to his unerring propriety in theological matters and to his sharp discernment of the essential over and above the superficial or the purely ritualistic¹⁰⁰.

Br. Lawrence is the human and religious antithesis of the speaker; in the words of N. B. Crowell, he is: «... one of Browning's most engaging, if hastily sketched innocents...»¹⁰¹.

Although, from the technical point of view of characterization, he turns out to be more of a stereotype than the speaker, this is perfectly logical given the rules prevailing for the D. M.. He is an archetype or the Good Man as Browning understood it. However the archetypal facet, or the hastiness of delineation, pointed out by Crowell, is attenuated if we consider Br. Lawrence as the possessor of the attributes contrary to those revealed by the speaker, although he can never attain the degree of delineation provided for the latter given his lack of lyrical characterization.

As an archetype of the Good Man, in the religious sphere, Br. Lawrence embodies the positive Catholic values discerned by the author: an essential christian vitality which is both material and spiritual.

At character level he is poles apart from the speaker, in a no less extreme position (given also his being of Spanish stock) of nobleness and generosity of which —as Browning allows us to infer— we (the Spanish people) are also capable.

97. See págs. 75, 78-80.

98. *Ibid.*, pág. 72.

99. *Ibid.*, pág. 75.

100. *Ibid.*, pág. 78.

101. N. B. CROWELL, *The Triple Soul: Browning's Theory of Knowledge*, U. of New Mexico Press, 1963, pág. 171.