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AN ITALIAN PERSON OF QUALITY INDEED!

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Abstract: Robert Browning's "Up at a Villa—Down in the City" is a dramatic monologue, a fact unnoted by criticism. Browning employs irony throughout that undercuts the stated views of the speaker, who is not a person of quality, as the subtitle has announced. The speaker reveals himself to be a man of little experience in art and literature, of meager taste, poor judgement, and in general dull and inflexible. Browning cleverly sets up the clues whereby the reader can distinguish between what the speaker intends and what the reader understands. The speaker's repudiation of the countryside actually makes clear the virtues of country life, and his praise of city life makes it clear what is undesirable in it. Browning accomplishes this manipulation through imagery, ambiguity in language, and by reference to outside facts.

Keywords: dramatic monologue, Robert Browning, technique in dramatic poetry, unreliable speaker

1. Introduction

William Clyde DeVane identifies the source of Robert Browning's "Up at a Villa – Down in the City" as the poet's and his wife's own experience when they lived in the hills two miles above Siena in the autumn of 1850. From their country villa Browning used to go "down to Siena for newspapers and supplies, and possibly for diversion" (DeVane 1955:215). This back-and-forth movement, in which he noted the contrast of life in the country with life in the city, could very well have given Browning the idea for the poem. But the speaker in the poem is not Robert Browning, who was a keen observer and appreciator of country as well as city life, while, as we shall see, the speaker in the poem is dull and imperceptive. And so when Donald S. Hair remarks that in "Up at a Villa – Down in the City" "the poet is attracted, not to the country but to the city" (Hair 1972:97), he misses an essential feature of the poem – which is that it is a dramatic monologue, as are many of the poems that it shares space with in *Men and Women*.

The silent listener in this dramatic monologue is in fact not silent to the poem's main character. The speaker acknowledges the listener's probing questions and expressions of doubt that urge the speaker to give evidence and to defend his views. The first indication of the presence of the "silent" listener is in line 11, when this character urges the speaker to abandon his vague and less than compelling ecstasies about the city and give some reason for his preference. "Why?" we see that he has asked, from the speaker's repetition of the listener's question. After the speaker, in section 6, complains of a premature summer in the country, the listener reminds him, in the following section, that the same sun shines on the city: "Is it ever hot in the square?" (Dooley et al. 1981:26; all parenthetical line numbers refer to this edition). At one point, after he has complained about the long country winter, the speaker turns to the listener and poses a question that he is prepared to answer: "Is it better in May, I ask you?" (21). That we are frequently reminded that the words are being spoken to an

attentive listener adds a sense of immediacy to the poem, and we observe – at the listener’s urging – that the speaker actually does respond with specific details about life in the city and the country and why he prefers one over the other.

Before anybody in the poem says anything, Browning provides a sub-title that is as effective, by way of irony, as the parenthetical sub-title of “Andrea del Sarto”—“(CALLED ‘THE FAULTLESS PAINTER’)” (Berkey et al. 1996:6-7) – in defining the character of the speaker. The sub-title for “Up at a Villa—Down in the City” is also in parentheses: “(AS DISTINGUISHED BY AN ITALIAN PERSON OF QUALITY).” The ironies of this sub-title become obvious early on, as the drama of the poem unfolds. The apparent sense of “distinguished” is “differentiated,” and the term applies directly to the speaker’s inability to distinguish thoughtfully and perceptively between villa and city. The word “distinguished” does not here denote “eminent,” “famous,” or “renowned” as would naturally describe a personage of quality, for here the word and concept apply neither grammatically nor intrinsically as a modifier of the poem’s speaker. The term “distinguished”, lurking as a possible adjective at the beginning of the phrase, casts an ironic shadow on the “person” at the other end because the term would not apply to him. Further, the word “person” achieves its own ambiguity, supporting the speaker’s eminence and then undermining it. In the first sense, “person” refers to “A man or woman of distinction... a personage” (*OED*, II, 2c). Quickly, an alternative possibility insinuates itself: it is a term “Used contemptuously or slightly of a man” (*OED*, II, 2d). Therefore, we are to suspect that the speaker is not a man of quality, is not discerning, not one who can recognize the true value of what he sees. All this becomes clear as he begins to speak to a man he has met in the city.

Were the speaker a man of real quality, the first words out of his mouth would not be a complaint about his not having enough money: “Had I but plenty of money, money enough and to spare, / The house for me, no doubt, were a house in the city-square; / Ah, such a life, such a life, as one leads at the window there!” (1-3). His heavy-handed repetitions, the filler expression here (“no doubt”) and elsewhere (“I maintain” [6], “Well now” [7], “as a matter of course” [15]) mark the speaker as verbally inelegant. Another indication that the speaker is not a personage of quality is his crude way of referring to his body and its movements. He speaks of scratching his “shag of a bush” to see if his “hair’s turned wool,” an attempt, possibly, to be humorous about the beastly effects of living in the country. Furthermore, when he hears the “*Bang-whang-whang*” of the drum and “*tootle-te-tootle*” of the fife, he cannot keep his “haunches still” (53-54). “Haunches” is a term usually used for the hind quarters of an animal, and the term is an early indicator that the speaker’s quality of speech owes something to his country breeding.

His referring to his own haunches that he cannot keep still on account of the music accords with his argument that life in the country is so degrading that one lives at the level of a “beast” (6). Yet his vision of life in the city is not elevating in any sense. While it is true that he is almost in a rapture of excitement just thinking about sitting and gazing out the window of a city-square house “the whole day long,” and though he imagines that this passive “activity” will make “life... a perfect feast” (4-5), the listener and reader see – and the speaker does not – that gazing at life going by from a window is the existence of an indoor cat. The speaker unintentionally seems to desire the life of a beast.

2. Paucity of Critical Attention

It is surprising to find that so few critics have given attention to “Up at a Villa – Down in the City.” Even in his *Browning and Italy*, Jacob Korg offers only two-and-a-half unilluminating sentences about the poem (Korg 1983:124). In “Browning’s ‘Up at a Villa – Down in the City’ as Satire,” Richard Fleck gestures in a promising direction, but the title

promises more than the essay delivers (Fleck 1969:345-49). Ian Jack, observing that the speaker lacks discrimination, was one of the early insightful observers of the poem (Jack 1973:155-58). More recently, Britta Martins (2007:4-16) has written an informative essay fitting the poem into its cultural context. The most perceptive and detailed commentary on the poem itself, however, is in Michael Bright's *Robert Browning's Rondures Brave*, which sets forth the organizational devices and the effects they create; he emphasizes the ironic and dramatic distance between Browning (as well as the reader) and the poem's speaker. Bright explains,

The essential difference between Browning and his speaker is that Browning always looked at things from two sides, as he does in "Before" and "After," or three, as he does in "A Light Woman," or even more, as in *The Ring and the Book*. The Italian Person of Quality sees only the bad in the villa, the good in the city, distinguishing between these two as the subtitle says, but not distinguishing between the good and bad within each, and thus unable to see the good in the villa, the bad in the city. (Bright 1996:34)

3. Browning's Method of Characterization

Browning devised an effective means of conveying the speaker's low estimate of life at a villa. The speaker's descriptions of the countryside belie his denial of anything attractive there. The brown ploughed fields in the foreground, the "faint grey olive-trees" beyond, and the "hills over-smoked" in the distance (19-20) constitute a picture of the ideal Italian landscape, and that beauty is conveyed to the reader in the speaker's own language, yet he comprehends nothing of that beauty, because his turn of mind will not allow him to see what he sees. In May, the speaker tells his listener, one finds

'Mid the sharp short-emerald wheat, scarce risen three fingers well,
The wild tulip, at end of its tube, blows out its great red bell
Like a thin clear bubble of blood. . . . (23-25)

Martins comments on this "double vision," which she explains as being from an English and an Italian point of view: "thanks to Browning's agency as an English poet who can put the beauty of Italy into verse, the reader can enjoy it, while the speaker who describes it is blind to it." (Martins 2007:10) With such unacknowledged beauty in his memory, then, the Italian speaker can only complain that "All year long at the villa, [there is] nothing to see though you linger" (31). Then, standing in the city square, looking over his shoulder towards his villa in the distance, he notes "yon cypress that points like death's lean lifted forefinger" (32), introducing the unpleasant association of death and thus undermining appreciation of the beautiful landscape.

In commenting on the smells and sounds of a summer at the villa, the speaker cannot help but counter the attractive pictures of the countryside that he has inadvertently offered. This undermining is accomplished through a vocabulary marked by sensory unpleasantness – "stinking" and "shrill." But the beauty and the actual pleasant and lively sounds seem to refute his efforts to deny them:

Some think fireflies pretty, when they mix i' the corn and mingle,
Or thrid the stinking hemp till the stalks of it seem a-tingle.
Late August or early September, the stunning cicala is shrill,
And the bees keep their tiresome whine round the resinous firs on the
hill. (33-36)

Here Browning clearly distinguishes between how we should understand what the speaker actually says and how he means it. The word "stunning" in its earliest sense means

“deafening,” but in the sense current in the mid-nineteenth century it means “splendid,” “delightful.” Browning hints that the speaker is stuck in the old meaning, which prevailed in the seventeenth century, by giving “thread”, a nearby word, an old spelling – “thrid,” which was used in the seventeenth century by Sir William Davenant, for example, in his “Song” (“Thy Tears to Thrid instead of Pearle, / On Bracelets of thy Hair”; Davenant 1673:321). Furthermore, even as the villa-dweller complains of the “tiresome” [*italics mine*] bees, the reader hears the vibrating “ome” combine onomatopoeically with “whine round the resinous firs,” which is as pleasant and engaging a sound as Tennyson’s famous “murmuring of innumerable bees” or Yeats’s “hive for the honeybee” and “live alone in the bee-loud glade” (Tennyson 1969:836; Yeats 1967:44).

When the “Person of Quality” turns his attention to what he loves in the city, the opposite effect often ensues: he praises what the reader finds objectionable. Though the speaker somehow finds pleasure in having his sleep interrupted by the clanging of church bells and though he is thrilled by the noise of the diligence (stage coach) rattling in, the reader remains dubious; and it is quite a mystery how this person manages to discern pleasure in contemplating the travelling doctor’s letting of blood and drawing of teeth. Yet there are true benefits to being in the city as there are to being at a villa. For example, the city offers entertainments: “the Pulcinello-trumpet” announces the start of a puppet show, and a “scene-picture” advertises a “new play” (42, 43). Also, the reader as well as the listener participates in the speaker’s interest in the city’s elaborate parade: “our Lady born smiling and smart / With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords stuck in her heart!”, priests processing two by two, “monks with cowls and sandals”, “penitents dressed in white shirts”, a flag, a cross, “And the Duke’s guard bring[ing] up the rear, for the better prevention of scandals” (51-52, 59-64). The music of drum and fife excite the speaker, body and soul.

In line with his dramatic intent, Browning has arranged details that alert us to the superficiality of the speaker’s enjoyment of the parade, for he cannot discern the political elements in the parade that a thoughtful person might find troubling. The “Duke’s guard” is there to prevent a scandal – that is, any protest against the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Leopold II, who had been deposed in 1849 but quickly restored to power by Austrian forces. In 1850 he dismissed parliament and agreed to Austrian occupation with 10,000 soldiers. And the speaker has remarked several lines earlier on the posted notice that “three liberal thieves were shot” (44). He accepts without question the characterization of patriots who sought the liberation and unification of Italy as common criminals, and it seems not to bother him that these men were executed. He does not take seriously the oppression of the Italian people by a foreign power; we see him diminish the significance of Austrian domination through his reference to “some little new law of the Duke’s!” (46). Browning certainly saw the Duke as a threat to Italy. Although he and Elizabeth had once thought highly of Leopold II, they changed their minds in 1849 when he was forced to leave Florence. After the Austrian victory at Novara and his return with Austrian soldiers, Browning denounced the Grand Duke in some lines that have survived only in a letter from Robert Lytton to John Forster:

The G[rand] Duke wash’d and kiss’d ten poor men’s feet.
You’ll say His Grace is gracious to inferiors:
But even Tuscan toes must taste sweet
To one who kisses Austria’s p[osteriors.] (Meredith 1990-91:3; Crowder 2011:109)

Michael Bright identifies the Church as an institution of religious repression parallel with the Duke’s civil repression. “These two forces of repression” are linked by the arrangement of the elements of the procession in section 10: the penitents march between the priests and monks – who represent “ecclesiastical authority” – and the Duke’s soldiers, who represent “civil authority” (Bright 1996:36-37). The ecclesiastical and civil forces are linked

“through their symbols of flag and cross” (Bright 1996:37) and through the rhyme in the previous stanza of “the Archbishop’s most fatherly of rebukes” and “some little new law of the Duke’s!” (45-46). The speaker’s mollifying phrases “most fatherly” and “little new” direct attention to his determination not to be troubled by any aspect of what he wants just to find pleasure in.

The most egregious example of the speaker’s motive to approve the city over the country is to be found in his acceptance of the outlandish praise in the absurd sonnet written to “the Reverend Don So-and-so” (47) and posted in the city. Two lines from this sonnet verify for the reader that the sonnet is hopeless – yet the speaker does not bat an eye upon reading in this panegyric that the priest being described has equaled “Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarca, Saint Jerome, and Cicero” in his Lenten lectures (48, 50). It is hard to think of what could more clearly confirm the speaker’s dullness than his admiration of this sonnet.

Still, Browning makes sure that we understand that there are in fact aspects of the city that are desirable, and nowhere is this clearer than in the speaker’s description of the fountain in section 7. Upon the listener’s asking if it were “ever hot in the square,” the man from the villa focuses on the fountain in the town square, the implication being that water is cool and will relieve heat:

There’s a fountain to spout and splash!
In the shade it sings and springs; in the shine such foam-bows flash
On the horses with curling fish-tails, that prance and paddle and pash
Round the lady atop in her conch—fifty gazers do not abash,
Though all that she wears is some weeds round her waist in a sort of sash. (26-30)

He is closer to truly appreciating something of value in the city here than he is anywhere else in the poem; his genuine excitement skips on the overflow of alliteration – “spout”, “splash!”, “shade”, “sings”, “springs”, “shine such foam-bows flash”, and “prance and paddle and pash”. His inclination to think that a naked Venus in her shell could embarrass her gazers suggests a man unfamiliar with Italian art in general, however.

The speaker’s general lack of experience is clear from the start – from the very fact that what he thinks is a city is actually a village. In this village, albeit a big village, as Mrs. Orr suggests (Orr 1890:284), all of the action takes place in the square, where the shops are, “with fanciful signs which are painted properly” (16). There is one fountain; an Italian city would have several. The population is insufficient to warrant a doctor in residence, medical services therefore being provided by an itinerant physician.

5. Conclusion

Browning arranges the monologue to reveal the sentiments but also the biases of the speaker, demonstrating in “Up at a Villa – Down in the City” how a man can be blinded to full comprehension by adopting *a priori* notions that impede flexibility of response. The poet has the country man / would-be “city”-dweller speak for himself, revealing his dissatisfactions with country life (but also conveying its attractions and pleasures) and revealing what he finds to praise in “city” life (along with a clear idea of many of its drawbacks that the speaker is unaware of). The one problem with city life that the speaker is fully aware of is the cost of everything there: “it’s dear! fowls, wine, at double the rate,” and he laments the high taxes (55-56). What he does not see is that what he imagines as an exciting life of watching life go by from a window would really be boring; that the village is a hard place to find peace and quiet; that the trivial things that seem so interesting to him on his visit – post-office notices, a panegyric on a priest, a puppet show, and so on – because he is not used to them, would become old hat in short order. He would soon begin to ignore the

fountain, were he to pass it every day. He does not really understand the repression exerted in the village by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and life would soon become too regimented for the speaker. He does not fully take in the beauty of the countryside and the natural sounds that put one in touch with nature, nor does he grasp the essential fact of life in a villa: that it is lonely. One suspects that the real problem with life in the country is that there are no strangers to talk to, as he has done for the one hundred lines of this poem. Therefore, Browning chooses the dramatic monologue as the ideal form to convey the speaker's condition. A dull mind is destined to be bored – whether it looks out upon a village square or upon a beautiful Italian landscape.

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