

Analysing Darker Motives *or* Delving Robert Browning's 'Poetry of Revenge'

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Abstract

Literature generally likes to illustrate the noble passions and not the more evil and ignoble ones, like envy, jealousy, avarice, hatred or revenge. When these are portrayed in the plays of Shakespeare or in a novel such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, they are driven by the emotion that so fiercely and swiftly accumulates around them, they master the body and soul, the intellect and the will, like some furious tyrant, and in their extremes hurry their victim into madness.

Robert Browning (1812-1889) took some of those terrible powers and made them obsessive subjects in his poetry. Short, sharp-outlined sketches of them occur in his dramas and longer poems but also in the smaller compositions. The combination, for example, of envy and hatred resolved in vengeance in *The Laboratory* is too intense for any pity to intrude. But in *A Forgiveness* our natural revolt against the work of hatred is modified into pity even though the 'justice' of revenge is accomplished. Unlike many of his Victorian contemporaries, Browning deliberately populated his poetic creations with evil people – who not only commit crimes and sins, ranging from simple hatred to cold-blooded murder, but who are also crafty, intelligent, argumentative and capable of lying. In this sense, the poems we propose to analyse provide interesting snapshots of his speakers and their often deranged personalities. By channelling the voice of a character, Browning explores evil without actually being evil himself, allowing several forms of consciousness and self-representation to emerge. He thus seems to question the artist's responsibilities (in his creations) and the direct relationship between art and morality, issues that were only developed later in the century.

Key Words: Revenge, forgiveness, poetry, drama, Browning, Brontë, good, evil, adultery, death.

*Good, to forgive;
Best, to forget!
Living, we fret;
Dying, we live.
Fretless and free,
Soul, clap thy pinion!*

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*Earth have dominion,
Body, o'er thee!*
(R. Browning, 1878)

The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum has written wisely and sensitively of the psychological, moral and cultural foundation for revenge:

The primitive sense of the just – [...] – starts from the notion that *a human life is a vulnerable thing, a thing that can be invaded, wounded, violated by another's act in many ways*. For this penetration, the only remedy that seems appropriate is a counter invasion, equally deliberate, equally grave.¹

But in terms of the philosophical debate, and as Nussbaum states in a later work, the pro-compassion person tends to recognize that private revenge can be an especially unsatisfactory, costly way to effect the punishment of offenders, often causing the exchange of damages to perpetuate without limit.²

As both a structural and a thematic centre for literature, especially literary tragedy, revenge has nevertheless much to recommend it.³ For the writer, the revenger's position, necessarily secretive, solitary, and extreme, is conducive to introspection. It encourages meditation on the anomalies of justice, both human and divine, on past time, and on the value of life and human relationships. Besides dramatists, several English novelists and poets have thus recognized the peculiar aesthetic value of the topic of revenge, seeing the manifestations of vengefulness as part of the human potential.

In the oldest epic poem in English, *Beowulf* (eighth century), vengeance is part of the pagan heroic code and is strictly adhered to, despite the fact that it is written by an anonymous Christian author. The poet acknowledges the perspective of the avenger by allowing him to express his motivations, desires, and justifications. Alongside this, however, is the author's own reflection on the repercussions of those actions, the destructiveness of the blood-feud.⁴

The feelings of envy and deep hatred which can ultimately lead to revenge are analysed by William Blake in 'A Poison Tree' (1794), one of his *Songs of Experience*. Here, revenge is no longer part of a heroic code but is seen as a long-protracted and complex feeling that consumes the speaker and is symbolically represented by a growing tree bearing a poisonous 'apple'. The poet describes how instead of making an attempt to solve that wrath by simply telling it, the speaker allows the negative feeling to grow and develop

inside of him.⁵ Sweet revenge is finally fulfilled when the foe comes into the man's 'garden' under the disguise of night and eats the envied fruit, dying on the spot. Blake thus skilfully brings into his poem the central motives associated with the topic of revenge: hatred, premeditation, concealment, envy and gleeful fulfilment.

Another paradigmatic work on the theme of unresolved hate and revenge is Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in which retaliation extends to two generations and two families. Although Heathcliff is undoubtedly the main avenging force in this story of unrequited love, and he gives himself wholeheartedly to acts of sadistic destruction and usurpation, he is not the only one.⁶ At least one of the female victims, in the person of Catherine Linton, is capable of returning the avenging curse of her formidable abuser and usurper, thus disallowing any pardon-like speech:

On only one condition can I hope to forgive him. It is, if I may
take an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, for every wrench of
agony return a wrench, reduce him to my level.⁷

But other writings by Brontë, namely her Gondalian poems and Belgian *devoirs*, contain those elements.⁸

Like his contemporary, Robert Browning (1812-1889) was a poet who saw all life as a conflict, not only between good and evil but also between instinct and intellect, the masculine and the feminine, trying to resolve the artistic dilemma posed by a double awareness of things: moral and aesthetic. Like Brontë, he developed a form of dramatic perception, in which inner and outer consciousness could either split or become fused into unity by a single act of apprehension. What his dialectical poems progressively offer is not so much the throb of passion, but 'the psychoanalytic investigation of motives behind impulses which never themselves get actualized.'⁹ Browning was interested in exposing the devious ways in which our minds work and the complexity of our motives, but he tends 'at one further remove to refuse emotional involvement in the situations he evokes.'¹⁰

Like Emily Brontë, Browning believed that God had created an imperfect world – one of falsehood and violence – as a kind of testing ground for man.¹¹ There are few forms of human character the poet does not study, catching each individual at the supreme moment of his life, and in the hardest stress of circumstance, under which the inmost working of his nature is revealed.¹² In particular, Browning's gallery of villains – murderers, sadistic husbands, mean and petty manipulators – is a surprising and extraordinary one.¹³ Browning is interested in demonstrating the moral-aesthetic dimension of this grotesque and violent world mainly through the dialectics of human

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relationships, in particular those between man and woman, inside and outside the institution of marriage.

We must now follow him into this region, in which he attempts to deal directly with the speculative difficulties that crowd around the conception of evil, or that which lurks within a being's mind waiting to be inadvertently released by speech.¹⁴ Browning's dramatic monologues start suddenly in the midst of things; the reader is plunged abruptly into the midst of a consciousness, voicing its own assumptions and limitations. His monologists go down layer after layer until they reach the truth which is hidden in their hearts.¹⁵

'The Laboratory' (1844), as its subtitle 'Ancien Régime' suggests, takes place in France before the French Revolution and is in many ways a really sinister poem.¹⁶ Browning presents a high society woman around the King's court, who has been betrayed by her husband or lover with another woman and is determined to get her revenge. She secretly visits a chemist who agrees, for a large pay, to make her a deadly poison, with which she will be able to kill her rival. In a mere forty-eight lines, the story develops full of vivid detail and we literally enter into the psychopathic mind of the speaker, witnessing not only her raging jealousy and sense of betrayal but also her utter fascination with the chemist's work in the laboratory (characterized as a 'devil's-smithy'). Masked for both protection and concealment, she is delighted at the idea that the poison could be hidden away in a ring and she wants actually to witness the moment of her rival's death and the way her face contorts in agony:

Not that I bid you spare her the pain;
Let death be felt and the proof remain:
Brand, burn up, bite into its grace –
He is sure to remember her dying face!¹⁷

Although she sounds deranged and seems to have forgotten any moral norms, the reader has to think of the corrupt world of eighteenth-century French aristocracy and that this woman is determined not to be done down. In accordance with the woman's highly excited state of mind, the strong dactylic beat creates a fast intense movement in the verse; in the same way, the poem's combination of envy and hatred resolved on vengeance becomes too intense for any pity to intrude.

Likewise, in "My Last Duchess" (*Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842), the feelings of pity and forgiveness seem inexistent on the part of the avenger: the lack of a final judgment further implying that vice escapes unpunished. The speaker of the poem is a powerful Italian ruler, who the poem suggests

has had his ‘last Duchess’ put to death for her familiar manner with other men, as a matter of masculine pride and honour.¹⁸ But his late wife, though dead, has become a permanent part of his art collection: ‘That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall, / [...] I call/ *That piece* a wonder’.¹⁹ The Duke claims she flirted with everyone (‘her looks went everywhere’) and did not appreciate his ‘gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name.’²⁰ Nevertheless, his words betray the fact that the Duchess’s genuine depth and passion contrast greatly with the Duke’s coldness and artfulness. As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with ever-more chilling certainty that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess’s early demise: when her behaviour escalated, ‘[he] *gave commands*; / Then all smiles stopped together.’²¹ Having made this disclosure, the Duke returns to the business at hand: arranging for another marriage; the moral horror is thus concealed until the last lines when the visitor he is addressing is revealed as the emissary for this new arrangement. The smoothness and polish of the Duke’s discourse contrasts with his perfidious and deranged character. He is ‘helped’ not only by Browning’s tactful use of understatement and omission but also by the flowing fluidity of the poet’s rhyming couplets and the use of enjambment, a subtle driving force behind the duke’s compulsive revelations.

In other poems of the evil passions the relieving element is pity, as in the two compositions entitled ‘Before’ and ‘After’ (*Men and Women*, 1855), in which Browning refers to the moments just before and after a duel.²² The first poem is a statement of one of the ‘seconds’ that the duel is absolutely necessary. The challenger has been deeply wronged and he cannot and will not let forgiveness intermit his vengeance. Although the male reader may identify with that feeling, his Christian or more feminine side seems to say, ‘Forgive, let God do the judgment’. But, in the end, the passion of revenge will have its way and the guilty one falls dead. In the follow-up poem, *After*, the perspective changes because forgiveness begins to seem right and the vengeance-fury wrong; it appears that for Browning the dead man has escaped (to heaven) while the living one cannot escape the wrath of conscience; pity then becomes all that is left for the tragic survivor:

How he lies in his rights of a man!
 Death has done all death can.
 And, absorbed in the new life he leads,
 He recks not, *he heeds*
Nor his wrong nor my vengeance; both strike
 On his senses alike,
 And are lost in the solemn and strange
 Surprise of the change.
 Ha, *what avails death to erase*
*His offence, my disgrace?*²³

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While the first poem seems to state the universal impunity of the moral sin represented by the duel – 'When the sky, which noticed all, *makes no disclosure*, / And the earth keeps up her *terrible composure*',²⁴ the second one questions the effectiveness of the deed for both the subject and his victim.

In *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9) Browning found his theme in the court records of an old criminal trial: the case history of Count Guido Franceschini's murder of his allegedly adulterous wife.²⁵ This is the poet's treatment of the conflict between good and evil in terms of domestic tragedy. For E. D. H. Johnson, 'It not only presents a full-scale vindication of Browning's intuitional psychology, it also embodies the author's moral and aesthetic philosophy.'²⁶ But the interest could be said to reside as much in its villains and half-villains. The conflicting interpretations of the characters directly involved in this seventeenth-century murder drama are skewed by their respective moral formations. 'Half-Rome', or the representative of patriarchy run mad, concludes that Franceschini was within his rights to murder his wife, Pompilia, presumed to have been having an affair. The sentimental would-be feminist voice, representing the 'Other Half-Rome', asserts that the wife was both honest and innocent and that the husband was a murderer. The first speaker clearly aligns himself with the discriminating code of revenge that is fashionable in their social circles:

But she took all her stabbings in the face,
Since punished thus solely for honour's sake,
Honoris causa, that's the proper term.
A delicacy there is, our gallants hold,
When you avenge your honour and only then,
That you disfigure the subject, fray the face,
Not just take life and end, in clownish guise.²⁷

'Half-Rome's phrasing is not only superiorly aloof but also narcissistic and cruel: language acting as an index of character and moral insight. He supports Franceschini's revenge for its control and exactness and is oblivious to the sadism implicit in his own viewpoint. Browning thus portrays Tuscan society as ruthlessly stratified, filled with corrupt aristocrats, where women are traded in marriage.²⁸

The same theme of adultery would emerge in *A Forgiveness* (from *Pacchiarotto*, 1876), a sustained and subtle analysis of contempt, hatred and revenge. Its ambiguous title marks how the feeling of pity accompanied and followed the revenge, even if the justice of the act was finally accomplished

on the woman. The wife of a prominent Spanish statesman, jealous of her husband's dedication to his work, decides to take a lover as a form of retaliation: 'Since my right in you seemed lost, / I stung myself to teach you, to your cost, / What you rejected could be prized ...'²⁹ The unsuspecting husband is unable to carry out his revenge there and then because he only feels a cold contempt for her: 'I have too much despised you to divert / My life from its set course by help or hurt of your all-despicable life.'³⁰ After some years of keeping up appearances, the wife confesses her love for the deceived husband; but the dramatic disclosure of truth causes a sudden change in the husband's attitude, who now becomes obsessed with the idea of killing:

[...] things that rend and rip,
Gash rough, slash smooth, *help hate* so many ways,
Yet ever keep a beauty that betrays
Love still at work with *the artificer*
With his quaint devising [...] ³¹

Now was finally the time, he thinks, to accomplish his just revenge; he is ready to forgive his wife if she dies there and then (a dagger in her heart) and writes his pardon with her own blood.

The identity of the mysterious lover (symbolized by the cloak wrapped about his head) is finally revealed when, in cold-blood, the husband suddenly kills the monk in the confessional. Ironically, this is the same 'Father' to whom he had been 'confessing' the details of his revenge. These moments are thus postponed to the very end, in accordance with the maxim 'revenge is a dish best served cold'. The husband comments that he despises a crime of passion, preferring those avengers that wait for the right moment:

The thing I pity most
In men is – action prompted by surprise
Of anger [...] Once the foe prostrate, [...]
Prompt follows *placability, regret,*
Atonement. Trust me, blood-warmth never yet
Betokened strong will! ³²

This close knowledge of the revenger's mind allows Browning to conclude that man can be good or evil and that it is the liberty of doing evil that gives the 'doing good' a grace. Revenge and forgiveness are thus intimately associated for the poet. It is this apparent mixture of shade and light in life, the conflict of seeming good with seeming evil in the world that makes it a testing ground:

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Type needs antitype:
As night needs day, as shine needs shade, *so good*
Needs evil: how were pity understood
Unless by pain?³³

For Browning, good and evil are relative to each other, and each is known only through its contrary: 'Type needs antitype.' How would forgiveness be understood without the presence of revenge? The extinction of one of the terms would imply the extinction of the other.

Notes

¹ This feature is 'remarkably constant from several ancient cultures to modern institutions;' so that the balance can be truly righted, Nussbaum adds, 'the retribution must be exactly, strictly proportional to the original encroachment.' M Nussbaum, 'Equity and Mercy' in *Sex and Social Justice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1999, pp. 157-58 (my emphasis).

² M Nussbaum, 'Revenge and Mercy' in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 396.

³ The first great tragedies which have survived from ancient Athens and from Elizabethan England – the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – are revenge plays. Both tragedies involve the shameful killing of a great king and the adultery of his consort; both impose upon the son of the dead man a task which either way will cost him dear.

⁴ In the primitive conflict of Beowulf and Grendel, the duty to avenge a slain kinsman is absolute; but even Grendel's mother seems to receive some sympathy for her vengeance-raid and Grendel pity as a disinherited exile.

⁵ 'I was angry with my friend: / I told my wrath, my wrath did end. / I was angry with my foe: / I told it not, my wrath did grow.' William Blake, in M H Abrams (ed), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 1993, p. 40, 1-4 (my emphasis).

⁶ As Hillis Miller has stated, 'both God and man are represented as waiting, with ill-concealed impatience, through the legally required time of mercy and forgiveness, until they can get down to the 'pleasant' business of doing justified violence on one another to the limit of their powers.' *The Disappearance of God*, 1963, p. 189.

⁷ Brontë, op. cit., Volume II, Chapter III, p. 159 (my emphasis).

⁸ The state of existence as a 'fall', which is described in the first chapters of the novel, matches that of Emily's Gondal poems, with their wars and rebellions and sadistic cruelties. Love in the poems and the novel is a form of destruction, the most shocking example of the law of nature which says that every creature must be the relentless instrument of death to the others or himself cease to live.

⁹ E D H Johnson, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry. Sources of the Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning and Arnold*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1952, p. 139.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 140. For example, the skill with which the protagonist in *Fifine at the Fair* (1872) rationalizes his selfish desires, and thereby reduces morality to conform to private convenience, shows how the emotions become the plaything of intellectual casuistry when deprived of any ethical sanction (139-40).

¹¹ Like Brontë, Browning was interested in dramatizing spiritual destinies. But, unlike Brontë, was well aware that he had brought upon himself the hard task of showing that pain, weakness, ignorance, failure, doubt, death, misery, and vice, in all their complex forms, could somehow find their legitimate place in a scheme of love.

¹² Theories of the relation of mind and body, mental health and personality abounded at this time, namely Thomas Brown's *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Mind* (1820). Browning seems to have been aware of the developments of nineteenth-century psychology, namely Alexander Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect*, published in London in 1855, and *Emotions and the Will* (1859), which together could be said to mark the advent of modern psychology.

¹³ Browning appears to have been inspired by the Roman Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca (1st century A.D.), who wrote a set of rhetorical plays based on Euripides' dramas. In particular, the style of his declamatory, moralizing, bombastic narrative accounts, detailing horrible deeds and containing long reflective soliloquies, was recovered to a certain degree by Browning in his own dramatic monologues and soliloquies.

¹⁴ Few disciplines had the ability to convince their followers that unknown existences lurked under familiar shapes like those branches of psychology concerned with obscure cerebral disorders. In 1860, Forbes Winslow assembled his theories on insanity in an eccentric volume, *On the Obscure Diseases of the Brain and Disorders of the Mind*, in which he warned that no individual is exempt from the advance of insanity and irrational behaviour. It is perhaps no coincidence that one of Browning's earliest publications was called precisely *Madhouse Cells* (1836), a title that emphasized the abnormal state of mind of the speaker.

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¹⁵ 'Let any man, however clever and full of subterfuge, speak long enough, Browning believes, and he will *expose his deepest secrets*, allow us access all unwittingly to what is most inexpressible in his life – *the very mark or note of his unique selfhood.*' J H Miller, 'Robert Browning', in *The Disappearance of God. Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1963, p. 127 (my emphasis).

¹⁶ The poet apparently found out that, in the 1670's, a police investigation disclosed that an extraordinary number of women and men attached to King Louis XIV's court had been disposing of rivals and enemies by poisonings and that some of the accused courtiers and poison dealers were punished with death.

¹⁷ R Browning, in Tim Cook (ed), *The Works of Robert Browning*, Wordsworth Editions, Ware, 1994, p. 212, 37-40 (my emphasis).

¹⁸ The poem is based on real incidents in the life of Alfonso II, fifth duke of Ferrara in Italy, whose first wife Lucrezia de Medici, a young woman of fourteen, died in 1561 after only three years of marriage. Following her death, probably of poison, the duke negotiated through an agent to marry a niece of the Count of Tyrol. In the poem, Browning represents the duke as addressing this agent, whose name was Nikolaus Madruz.

¹⁹ Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 318, 1-3 (my emphasis).

²⁰ *ibid*, 33.

²¹ *ibid*, 45-6 (my emphasis). Browning might have meant with "gave commands" that the duchess was either put to death or shut up in a convent for ever. But the latter procedure was common enough at the time and it probably amounted to a similar result.

²² In letters of April 1846 Browning had supported duelling, while his wife, Elizabeth Barrett, had opposed it (in D Karlin, *Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. The Courtship Correspondence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1990, pp. 234-243). The initial opposition to this form of honour settlement and Browning's afterwards move to his wife's views are reflected in "Before" and its companion.

²³ Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 243-44, 3-12 (my emphasis).

²⁴ *ibid*, 15-16 (my emphasis).

²⁵ The middle-aged Guido grows dissatisfied with his young wife, Pompilia, and accuses her of having adulterous relations with a handsome priest who, like St. George, had tried to rescue her from the dragon's den in which her husband confined her. Eventually Guido stabs his wife to death and is himself executed. In a series of twelve books, Browning retells this tale of violence, presenting it from the contrasting points of view of the participants and

spectators. In its experiments with multiple points of view, the work anticipates later novels.

²⁶ Johnson, op. cit., p. 120.

²⁷ Browning, op. cit., p. 627, 26-32. This code claimed that the deceived husband had the right not only to take his wife's life but also to disfigure her.

²⁸ 'The reader is appalled to realize that this world should after all provide so fair a field for the exercise of man's infernal potentialities.' Johnson, op. cit., p. 126.

²⁹ Browning, op. cit., p. 538-543, 73-76.

³⁰ *ibid*, 80-83.

³¹ *ibid*, 90-94 (my emphasis).

³² *ibid*, 121-126 (my emphasis). In the case of Sebald and Ottima in *Pippa Passes* (1841), a collection of sordid tales of adultery, pity also rules in spite of the fact that those two have slaked their hate and murdered Luca, Ottima's husband. Their crime only creeps like a snake, half asleep, about the bottom of their hearts. The outburst of horror and repentance may be the greater in the end as Browning introduces the pity of God.

³³ Browning, from *Francis Furini*, 1881, op. cit., pp. 835-850, 39-42 (my emphasis).

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