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Browning's "Childe Roland" in Light of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*

Tom J. Truss, Jr.

Since the discussions of the Browning Society in the early 1880's, the usual criticism of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" has been from the viewpoint that the poem belongs to the tradition of "quest" literature growing out of the metrical romance; and most attempts to arrive at its meaning, both then and later, have been within terms of the tradition.¹ The approach is not surprising. Readers of the 1870's were having a close look at chivalric searches composed by the laureate. The decade began shortly after the publication of a group of *Idylls*. People were reading of Lancelot's and Galahad's search for Tennyson's symbol for a higher pantheism, the Holy Grail. They were reading of the disillusionment of naive and youthful Pelleas as he sought after Etarre's faithful love. Somewhat closer to the point, they were following the untried Gareth as he subdued a great man-beast, who proved a mere boy in disguise, and thereby won the hand of an erstwhile scornful Lynnette. The source for this *Idyll*, Malory's "Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney,"² has many details which appear in Browning's "Childe Roland."³ Tennyson's idyllic activity extended into the 1880's. In its bibliographical aspect, the laureate divided "Geraint and Enid" into two parts in 1884, and in the following year he issued the last *Idyll* of the series, "Balin and Balan." With so many quests of the laureate in the literary atmosphere, it is no wonder that Nettleship's comment on "Childe Roland" published in 1890 is vaguely applicable to any random grouping of Tennyson's unfallen knights: "The purpose with which that band of knights set out may have been any purpose

you please which had the truth and purity for its objects."⁴ A recent analysis draws inverse conclusions from the same tradition: "Roland's quest has a coherent structure because it repudiates the conventional motives of the search for the Grail."⁵ The point of departure for these approaches is understandable, but by looking for meaning within a broad *genre* rather than within the poet's own imaginative associations, these writers might be misleading.

According to another recent investigation,⁶ the nightmarish tone and imagery of the poem have distinctly Victorian points of reference, and should be associated with the ravages of the Industrial Revolution—child labor, malnutrition, and in general, economic oppression of the working classes and exploitation of natural scenery. In fact, specific notions, imagery, and language of Elizabeth Barrett's "Cry of the Children" are seen again in "Childe Roland." The Dark Tower symbolizes destructiveness and brute force, an idea to be derived from the meaning of the *tower*-image in the poem written on the following day, "Love among the Ruins." The meaning of the tower flashes back over the landscape the Childe has crossed and establishes lust for gold as the source of the waste, lust reaching up to governments themselves. At the time of writing, Browning was in Paris, and was significantly watching the martial pageantry in behalf of Louis Napoleon from his window. This extremely rewarding interpretation gives a great deal of concrete meaning to the poem, but by taking Browning almost at his word ("a kind of dream—I had to write it"), Erdman does not probe far for additional possibilities. I propose, for reasons which shall emerge later, that Roland's quest is related to the poet's search for his art.

Evidence is found in certain details of Browning's personal life. At the time of writing "Childe Roland," a marital difference over divergent political sympathies had cropped up in the lives of the Brownings, and the feeling was no doubt deepened by the precarious imbalance in family ties which the husband and wife had contended with the preceding summer.⁷ In a curious and revealing way, three

poems, written at this time on three successive days,⁸ serve to illustrate in sharp contrasts Browning's attempt to re-define the meaning of love: "Women and Roses," "Childe Roland," and "Love among the Ruins." "Women and Roses" is full of imagery connoting the frustrations of love. In the poem Browning singles out one rose (is it his wife?) whose "term is reached,/Whose leaf hangs loose and bleached;/Bees pass it unimpeached."⁹ Another rose ("women of faded ages") takes precedence, however, over the first; "They circle their rose on my rose tree." In the conclusion Browning tries to resolve the problem. "What shall arrive with the cycle's change?" he asks, and then asserts, "I will make an Eve, be the artist that began her,/Shaped her to his mind." But in the final line, the other women intrude with their rose. One rose was obviously fighting with another in Browning's imagination. When one remembers the domestic tension, the personal meaning underlying the imagery becomes clear.

Fused with this circumstance is another, of an entirely different nature. Browning had resolved to write a poem a day.¹⁰ The desire to be an artist and fashion an Eve, which concluded "Women and Roses," reveals a direction for such a resolution. On the following day, however, Browning fashioned not Eve but Childe Roland. By this time in his life, he had written numerous poems about love, certain ones of them under the inspiration of his own beloved.¹¹ At this moment of marital difference, however, a poem on "Eve" might pose a difficult, frustrating task for him. Furthermore, with the political storms of France raging outside his personal life,¹² a Pippa-esque view of the world was perhaps similarly difficult to establish. The frustrations in one area and the hoplessness of the other were enough to make Browning momentarily unable to write about anything. The poem "Childe Roland" might well contain, then, a dream of an artist in a quandary over his subject.

Additional insights can be gained from a survey of Browning's possible connection with the ideas of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*.¹³ On August 24, 1848, Mrs. Browning wrote from Italy to Miss Mitford

that she and her husband were in the midst of Ruskin's treatise.¹⁴ *Men and Women* (1855), the first collection of Browning's poems published after that date, contains a number of significant works dealing with art and sculpture—"Fra Lippo Lippi," "The Statue and the Bust," "Protus," "Andrea del Sarto."

In Ruskin, Browning found a person whose interests were in many ways similar to his own. In *Modern Painters*, for instance, Browning encountered this description of a portrait: it "may have neglected or misrepresented the features, but may have given the flash of the eyes, and the peculiar radiance of the lip, seen on him only in his hours of highest mental excitement [The painter] gives the stamp of the soul upon the flesh."¹⁵ In opposing his Prior's aesthetics ("Give us no more body than shows soul!"), Fra Lippo Lippi argues with a similar approach:

Now is this sense, I ask?
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, the eye can't stop there,
.
.
.
Take the prettiest face,
.
.
is it so pretty
You can't discover if it means hope, fear,
Sorrow or joy? won't beauty go with these?
Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,
Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
And then add soul and brighten them threefold? (p. 344)

In an attempt to open men's eyes to the world, Ruskin elsewhere discusses the delights of visual perception: "Unless the minds of men are particularly directed to the impressions of sight, objects pass perpetually before the eyes without conveying any impression to the brain at all; and so pass actually unseen, not merely unnoticed."¹⁶ Lippo uses a similar notion in his defense of painting: "we're made so that we love/First when we see them [God's works] painted, things we have passed/Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see" (p. 345).

The conclusion to Volume I of *Modern Painters* might well contain Lippo's ideas: "Let then every picture be painted with earnest intention of impressing on the spectator some elevated emotion, and exhibiting to him some one particular, exalted beauty. Let a real subject be carefully selected, in itself suggestive of, and replete with, this feeling and beauty."¹⁷ If Lippo's statements are close to Browning's viewpoint in regard to art,¹⁸ they are also close to Ruskin's. The sharp contrast between Lippo's brilliant, ebullient monologue and Roland's bleak, grim travelogue certainly points up the different states of mind occasioning the two poems. Acquainted with Ruskin's aesthetics in 1851-1852, Browning wrote "Childe Roland" at a time when he was unable to attain the heights which Ruskin or Lippo would demand.

The poem itself is quite familiar. Having turned from the malicious cripple, Roland started across the countryside. The natural scenery was bleak, was stunted beyond hope. Next he thought of those he had known, Cuthbert and Giles, but he remembered that one had turned coward and the other traitor. He then forded a river full of floating heads, and entered a realm which, suffering from the ravages of the Industrial Revolution, was full of abandoned machinery. Irrelevantly, the bosom friend of Apollyon, a great black bird, signaled the beginning of the end. With the mountains looming around him, the traveler suddenly spied the object of his search, the Dark Tower, "without a counterpart/In the whole world." A glimmer of day flashed and was gone, and noise was heard everywhere. The traveler then saw lost adventurers ranging along the hillside, who composed "a living frame/For one more picture" (pp. 287-289).

There is no reason to assume that the lost adventurers, his peers, are members of the Band which began the search with Roland. Roland, I suggest, typifies an artist who, separated from his contemporaries (Browning had been living away from England for about five years), successively finds nature, humanity, and finally civilization itself quite depressing, and he meets images of past artists

at the Dark Tower. A month before the writing of the poem, Browning finished his essay on Shelley,¹⁹ a major paragraph of which lauded Shelley's "sympathy with the oppressed" (p. 1012).

In a rather peculiar way "Childe Roland" hints at Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which like Roland's trip is "in the similitude of a dream." Pilgrim's quest for the Celestial City is broadly parallel to Roland's search for the Dark Tower, and details in Bunyan's work possibly animate the imagery of Browning's poem. Worldly-Wiseman, for instance, turned the Pilgrim away from the path to Mount Zion in order to find Legality. Pilgrim soon arrived beside a hill which was about to topple over on him, very much like the enclosing mountains in "Childe Roland." In addition, in the Valley of Humiliation, Pilgrim successfully fought against Apollyon. The only instance in which this proper noun appears in Browning's poetry is in "Childe Roland."²⁰ Apollyon's bird brushed against the traveler as he arrived at the locale of the Tower. Roland's trip is curiously suggestive of what Browning would have submitted Bunyan's Pilgrim to. Browning's hero is less introspective, more self-reliant, more adventuresome, nor does he need to be rescued from the toppling hill by an Evangelist. Foundation exists elsewhere for this Bunyan-like aspect of the poem. In 1878 Browning confidently satirized Bunyan in "Ned Bratts." A scoundrel has just been converted by reading about a hero named "Christmas" in a book obviously by Bunyan. He and his wife break in upon a trial and demand that they summarily be hanged for their crimes. If they are not, he cries, Satan will certainly undo their conversion and overcome them before they die. One sees here a deep cleavage between Bunyan's and Browning's views of human nature. In Bunyan's terms, Childe Roland would be a fool for following the advice of Browning's evil-eyed cripple. But through just such a folly, Browning's Roland achieves his goal by reaching the Tower, which in this instance parallels Roland himself, "blind as the fool's heart." The foolish element in the poem is ironic, for Roland is no more foolish than the poet of "How It Strikes a

Contemporary," who merely seems to be so to the casual observer. Furthermore, Roland's victory in reaching the Tower on the signal of Bunyan's embodiment of sin, Apollyon, might be ironically a thinly optimistic response to Bunyan's guilt-ridden Pilgrim.

Pursuing this line of reasoning, one sees in "Childe Roland" a definition of the agony and confusion which a poet endures as he sets out to write a poem. He knows where he wants to go—to the Dark Tower which others have reached but which they cannot lead him to. He must find his own way unaided—by Evangelist or by Shelley, for that matter. This is precisely the same sequence which Browning put David through in "Saul." The psalmist tried to revive the king with various kinds of traditional poetry—lyrics, heroics—before he was able to stir the warrior. Only a truly original approach was successful. "I saw and I spoke," David relates; "I spoke as I saw: I report" (p. 183). The interaction in the poem "Saul" between an artist, his art, and a beholder is summed up probably by Fra Lippo Lippi's rather Ruskinian idea: "God uses us to help each other so,/Lending our minds out." Browning (as Roland) depicts the difficulties involved in lending one's mind out. The artist is driven to produce (in the specific instance of "Childe Roland" by a resolution), but he is surprised by the art object, the Dark Tower, which ultimately appears before him. His "vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,/Heart, or whate'er else," as Andrea del Sarto put it (p. 346), takes him to the end of his journey, the finished poem, which is "without a counterpart/In the whole world." Grotesque like Browning's own poetry, it is a squat round turret. Within these terms then, the tower is an aesthetic embodiment of the raw material that has preceded it. The subject matter for a poem unfolds in the mind of the poet, and "burningly" the poem appears all at once. Furthermore, "blind as the fool's heart," it reflects something of the poet. The inspiration naturally dies, for it has served its purpose. If this interpretation is valid, the riddle of the death of Roland is solved, for the paradox of defeat amidst triumph and triumph amidst

defeat is explained. An inspiration dissipates upon the completion of a poem.

I suggest, then, two broad areas of meaning for "Childe Roland." First, the poem is a disguise. It covers up the struggle that the poet was having in writing a poem when personal and political affairs were running counter to his principles. That Browning would be hesitant to commit himself to the meaning of the dream is obvious enough when one recalls the companion poems "House" and "Shop." If Browning did unlock his heart, he would have tried to hide its contents behind elaborate imagery. He perhaps approved of the glib interpretation, "he that endureth to the end shall be saved,"²¹ to minimize further speculation. By extension, a second meaning emerges. In the richly associative and confluent imagery, one detects an allegory of an artist's struggle with his materials. Browning's poetry belongs to the objective rather than the subjective order, to use the terms he himself employed in his *Essay on Shelley*. In communicating in the former classification, the poet gives such externals as strike a note of sympathy in the mind and heart of his reader. Intellectual aspects must be transformed into creatures of flesh and blood and into real objects. This process proved difficult for Browning as Ben Ezra. In a statement using the ambiguous word *hardly*, which can be defined as "with difficulty," some "thoughts [were] hardly to be packed/Into a narrow act" (p. 385). "Childe Roland" in this interpretation thus depicts the parturition of a poem. The confused poet comprehends his goal only abstractly, he has to traverse an uncharted wilderness to reach it, and he finally stumbles surprised upon it.

FOOTNOTES

¹W. C. DeVane lists many of them in the footnotes of the *Browning Handbook* (New York, 1955), p. 231. Curtis Dahl typifies recent approaches in "The Victorian Wasteland," *College English*, XVI (1955), 341-347, reprinted in *Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, Austin Wright, ed. (New York, 1961), pp. 32-40.

²Harold Littledale, *Essays on Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King* (London, 1912), Chapter VI.

⁸Lionel Stevenson, "The Pertinacious Victorian Poets," in *Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, p. 24. This essay is reprinted, with additions, from the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXI (1952), 232-245.

⁴John T. Netteship, *Robert Browning: Essays and Thoughts* (London), p. 95.

⁵John Lindberg, "Grail-Themes in Browning's 'Childe Roland,'" *Victorian Newsletter*, No. 16 (Fall, 1959), p. 27.

⁶David V. Erdman, "Browning's Industrial Nightmare," *PQ*, XXXVI (1957), 417-435.

⁷Betty Miller, *Robert Browning: A Portrait* (New York, 1953), pp. 164-171, 175.

⁸DeVane, *Handbook*, p. 229.

⁹*Complete Poetical Works* (Cambridge Edition; Boston, 1895), p. 193. All quotations from Browning are from this edition.

¹⁰DeVane, *Handbook*, p. 229.

¹¹See DeVane, *Handbook*, for instance, on "The Flight of the Duchess": "life and literature are indistinguishably mingled here"—p. 175.

¹²Lionel Stevenson makes a point which is quite meaningful to this study. In the use of the Malory source, Browning substituted Roland in the matter of France for Gareth in the matter of Britain—"The Pertinacious Victorian Poets," in *Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, p. 24.

¹³The 3rd edition of Volume I of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* was issued on September 16, 1846, the year of Browning's marriage; see *Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (Library edition; 39 vols.; London, 1903-1912), III, lviii. The 1st edition of Volume II was issued on April 24, 1846 (*Works*, IV, liii). The Cook and Wedderburn edition is cited throughout the paper.

¹⁴*Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by G. F. Kenyon (2 vols.; London, 1897), I, 384. The evidence furnished in this letter is somewhat equivocal: "Robert could agree with him only by snatches." Which snatches she referred to would reveal much. Disagreement with a specific Ruskinian eccentricity may have colored the tone of the statement. Both husband and wife, "standing before a very expressive picture of Domenichino's (the 'David'—at Fano) wondered how he could blaspheme so against a great artist." One is inclined to discount such a clash as a disagreement between devotees over a minor point. Robert "knows a good deal about art," his wife wrote here; Ruskin, unnamed and referred to in the letter merely as an "Oxford student," was a newcomer to the field. Furthermore, Ruskin's statements read in 1848 might by 1851 have taken on a new and deeper perspective for Browning after his rather tense period in England.

¹⁵*Works*, III, 147.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 626-627.

¹⁸Persuasive evidence is in W. C. DeVane, *Browning's Parleyings* (New Haven, 1927), pp. 228-229.

¹⁹Miller, p. 178.

²⁰According to L. N. Broughton and B. F. Stelter, *A Concordance to the Poems of Robert Browning* (New York, 1924), I, 99.

²¹DeVane, *Handbook*, p. 231.