| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Theme of Crisis of Religion in the Poetry of Robert Browning

Milan Damjanoski

Associate Professor in English Literature, Blazhe Koneski Faculty of Philology – Skopje, North Macedonia
Corresponding Author: Milan Damjanoski, **E-mail**: mdamjanoski@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theme of the crisis of religion in the poetry of Robert Browning, a prominent Victorian poet whose works often grapple with the tensions between faith, doubt, and the evolving religious consciousness of his time. In an era marked by scientific advancements, industrialization, and philosophical skepticism, Browning's poetry reflects a deep engagement with the spiritual dilemmas faced by individuals caught between traditional religious beliefs and modern uncertainties. This paper shall throw light on his dialogue with the main social dilemmas of his time through the concepts of the semiosphere by Juri Lotman and the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin. This will be done through close readings of key poems such as "Caliban upon Setebos," "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," and "Death in the Desert." This paper examines Browning's nuanced portrayal of characters who struggle with existential questions about divine justice, the nature of God, and the role of faith in a changing world. By analyzing Browning's dramatic monologue, this study highlights how his poetry encapsulates the Victorian crisis of faith, offering insights into the broader cultural and intellectual currents of his time. Finally, it also provides insights into the relevance of Browning's poetry in today's world of crisis of morality and technological advancement.

1. Introduction

Robert Browning, one of the foremost Victorian poets, is best remembered for his popularisation and perfection of the genre of the dramatic monologue. Still, besides that, he was considered by his contemporaries and his readers to be the moral and spiritual conscience of his time. What made him so was his comprehensive erudition and eloquence, which allowed him to participate in the main identity debates that took place in Victorian society as one of its most prominent thinkers and poets. Those debates were caused by the weakening and contestation of major ideological and social institutions as a result of tectonic changes in science, technology, and economics. The debates that were conducted in all available public and printed media were also, inevitably, conducted through the medium of literature.

The dialogic nature of the dramatic monologue and Browning's extraordinary mimetic ability to imitate and incorporate a variety of voices and discourses allowed him to convey that dialogue in his works. Through his use of the dramatic monologue and the dramatis personae, he developed an impressive literary process and technique to build complex characters through whose narration the complexity of the experience of living in Victorian society could be shown. Furthermore, the dramatic monologue allowed him to represent and contemplate issues that were

multidimensional and socially impactful in a rather short literary format, but also to try and provide answers to his reading public through his poetry.

2. Religion in the Victorian Period

One of the dominant issues of the Victorian period was the challenge science posed to religion and faith, which led to the weakening of their legitimacy and credibility. Religion has been a significant element of British identity since Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church and the establishment of the Church of England. Christianity as a religion and ideology was inextricably linked to all major social institutions (monarchy, legislation, church, education, charities), whereby one of the conditions to participate and advance in the social career was belonging to the official Anglican Church. Even the organization, arrangement, and functioning of personal, intimate, and psychological life were subordinated to the principles, values, and norms of Christianity and its teaching about the afterlife. Its presence in the life of the state, the collective, and the individual was so ubiquitous that it was naturalized and internalized as part of the normal order of the world and things, an indivisible part of the identity of British society. The only thing that prevented it from complete automation was the presence of different interpretations of the official religion in the form of various Protestant sects, as well as Catholicism, which had its own reflections on political, cultural, educational and literary life.

Because of all that, the weakening of the authority of religion as a formational, organizational, and identity-providing ideological system was a great shock for people in the Victorian period. That came as a result of another of the most important aspects of social life in the 18th and 19th centuries, the passion for scientific understanding of the world. Geological research expanded the chronology of the creation of the Earth far beyond the limits of the history described in the Bible, and through philological research, the reliability and historical basis of the biblical texts, which are the basis of Christian teaching and religion itself, was questioned. Suddenly, a new authority and discourse appeared that offered new ontological and epistemological answers but was not yet fully socially accepted, i.e., it had not replaced religious discourse as the bearer and signifier of truth in society. That clash and dialogue that had been going on since the time of the Enlightenment was inevitably going to take place in the field of literature as well. What is important for our analysis is the way Browning engages in that dialogue with contemporary ideas in his attempt to protect and preserve the traditional discourse of Christianity, thereby contributing to maintaining the stability of the identity of British society.

According to Yuri Lotman, "In the general system of culture, texts fulfill, to an extreme extent, two basic functions: adequate transfer of basic meanings and the birth of new meanings" (Kjulavkova, 2003:44). These two functions of texts in culture: the transmission of basic meanings and the birth of new meanings correspond to the establishment of an official cultural social, linguistic, ethical and legal code that determines, regulates and produces the official and sanctioned social identity. That determined and historically confirmed identity over time acquires a fixed form that corresponds to social needs and is transmitted from generation to generation, and through it, the established basic meanings, values, rules, and norms of societies are also transmitted. That process is crucial for the creation and preservation of the general memory of the collective, whether it is a community, a minority, a people or a nation.

The moment that official text ceases to correspond with the actual situation on the ground it will not be able to express and materialize, but also control the new elements, tendencies, and processes in society, then it will come to a crisis and begin to disintegrate. To prevent this process of disintegration and unproductiveness, society activates the second process of texts, which is their function to create new meanings, but always either within the culture itself and its genres and texts or penetrating from outside to insert and integrate into it, simultaneously changing it from the inside, forcing it to adapt to the new situation. New voices can only be materialized, heard, and valued in the already existing discourse, language, and culture. Only after that, depending on the historical moment and the social energy they carry, can they modify, rearrange, or update the already existing culture, assume a position to interpret the culture according to their new values and requirements, and finally structure it in such a way to allow the evolution of a new social identity.

3. The Dialogue between Science and Religion

Browning incorporates new voices within old and traditional texts, and nowhere is this more evident than in his works in which the main theme is the position of the Christian faith in these new social circumstances. The questioning and contestation of Christianity and its basic principles in the 19th century was based on the reading and interpretation of the original Christian texts, especially through the study by German philologists. As a reaction to that process, Browning frames the dialogue between new and traditional ideas within the framework of traditional Christian texts such as the Gospel of John in "Death in the Desert", within the story of Lazarus and Jesus from the New Testament in " An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician ", but also using classic works of literature such as the character of Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to present the dialogue about the theory of evolution in Victorian society. By the very fact that he uses these texts as the basis of the structure of the poems, Browning shows the textual nature of this debate but also confirms the view of texts as one of the most important producers of meanings within a community or collective. These texts are a source but also a carrier of the collective's general memory and an important element in its identity. Because of that, when the meanings and values they carry are weakened or contested, then their legitimacy and the reliability of their semantic potential are subsequently problematized.

4. Death in the Desert

In "Death in the Desert," the two historical periods are juxtaposed: Victorian and early Christian (the time of the creation of the New Testament), but one can also say that it also involves the entire historical period in between during which Christianity developed its teachings, texts, and interpretations. The semiosphere in which the poem originated, in which it was written and existed as a work of art and an interpretive document of its time, consists of the Christian religion and its history, the intertextual hypotext of the New Testament (especially *The Gospel of John*), but also the weakening of religious faith in the 19th century and the dilemmas of Victorian society regarding the strength of its faith.

The complexity of the semiosphere is illustrated and embedded in the form of the poem's dramatic monologue, which is divided and framed into two parts. The first part, i.e., the main text in which the Apostle John speaks, is presented as a parchment kept in a medieval monastery and read by a monk named Cerinthus. The record or, one might even say, the apocryphal gospel was written down by John's disciple, Pamphilax of Antioch, whose voice is the narrator in the main part of the text. Already within the song, we have three distinct voices, but in all this chorus of voices, the voice of Jesus and his messages also appear, and thus, symbolically, the voice of God is embodied in him. At the same time, this wide range of higher-level voices is unified through the voice of Christianity, whose messages are conveyed by all the other speakers and voices in the song. At the end of the poem, another voice emerges from the frame we mentioned, a voice that challenges Cerinthus 's conclusions. Perhaps it is the voice of the poet, and perhaps it is a voice that merely points to the continued reading, interpretation, and questioning of the original Christian message.

The presence of so many voices materializes the palimpsest nature of the dramatic monologue as a genre, a fact that Browning consciously highlights in "Death in the Desert". It is symbolically represented by highlighting the material nature of the parchment as a physical object and recording medium that changes over time through the process of erasing, writing, and rewriting the text, a process well known in history.

> "*Supposed of Pamphylax the Antiochene:*
> *It is a parchment, of my rolls the fifth,*
> *Hath three skins glued together, is all Greek,*
> *And goeth from Epsilon down to Mu:*
> *Lies second in the surnamed Chosen Chest,*
> *Stained and conserved with juice of terebinth,*
> *Covered with cloth of hair, and lettered Xi,*
> *From Xanthus, my wife's uncle, now at peace:*
> *Mu and Epsilon stand for my own name.*

That journey of the texts through history and their material, but also ideological and identity presence and influence in different historical periods, is further embodied in the visions of John, who looks into the future, i.e., Victorian society, and predicts the decline of faith caused by scientific discoveries. Those visions represent an intrusion of the present into the past of the paradigmatic timeline. With this intervention, space, and opportunity for the intrusion of the modern into the language and discourse of the past is opened, both at the level of narration and at the level of topics and language. In them, the previously apparently stable meanings of the texts are actualized and activated, which thus enter into a dialogue with the ideas of the new age. It is further reinforced through the structure and organization of the very form of the monologue, which is actually not so much a monologue as a series of dialogues within Pamphilach's narration but also a dialogue between the previously mentioned two parts of the poem. In this way, Browning creates an atmosphere of polemic and dialogization at all levels of the poem, which provokes a re-semanticization of historical and religious texts and records.

As Inglesfield tells us, "Browning's extremely bold choice of St. John as speaker was doubtless influenced by the fact that the Biblical critic David Friedrich Strauss, as well as several of his Tübingen contemporaries (notably the historical critic Ferdinand Christian Baur), had attempted to disprove the apostolic authorship and authenticity of St. John's Gospel; Ernest Renan, whose Vie de Jésus appeared in June 1863 (Browning read the highly controversial book, with some distaste and bewilderment, in the following November), strongly suggests that the Gospel is a deliberate fraud, though characteristically his position has about it a degree of evasive ambivalence" (Inglesfield, 2003)

One of the main motifs and themes of the song is the death and resurrection, both of Jesus and of St. John, who actually and symbolically rises from the dead to rise again and interpret the Christian faith for new believers and the new age. Through this motif of the resurrection, Browning symbolizes the need and necessity for each historical period to rediscover, interpret, and perceive faith for itself, as well as every important social ideology. In his monologue, John leads an argument and tries to face the dilemmas and challenges of faith in the 19th century, whereby the official version of events in the Christian religion is openly disputed. As an anonymous reviewer in the *Athenaeum magazine states,* Browning, in a "surprising way," brings to our attention the fact that when St. John is speaking, many in the world were wondering if the second resurrection of Jesus would happen, seeing signs of hope all around them; is it possible that today there are just as many people who wonder if Jesus ever existed?" (Litzinger, 2005 :237)

> Since James and Peter had release by death,
> And I am only he, your brother John,
> Who saw and heard, and could remember all.
> Remember all! It is not much to say.
> What if the truth broke on me from above
> As once and oft-times? Such might hap again:
> Doubtlessly He might stand in presence here,
> With head wool-white, eyes flame, and feet like brass,
> The sword and the seven stars, as I have seen—
> I who now shudder only and surmise
> How did your brother bear that sight and live?'

The historical reliability of the Bible was one of the main victims of the philological research of its text, whereby Browning, through John, tries to relativize the necessity of historical reliability and to strengthen the need for a metaphysical and transcendental understanding of its words and messages. Thus, he reluctantly acknowledges and incorporates this new scientific knowledge into the sphere of Christian ideology, but by subordinating it to the act of faith, he tries to preserve the primacy and legitimacy of Christian teaching. It is an act dictated by the demands of his environment and collective, which still needs the semantic and identity underpinning of Christianity in its attempts to preserve the commonality of the different classes and strata in British society. At that time, the weakening of Christianity as an identity link of British society was attempted to be compensated for by forcing the

idea of the British nation and culture according to the ideas of Matthew Arnold, whereby literature gained an even greater social significance. In any case, in this poem, we see how literature as a secondary modeling system and producer of meanings is used to preserve the traditional culture and social system from the tensions and destabilizing influences of new tendencies and ideas.

As Pamphylax reassures us:

> *"For many look again to find that face,*
> *Beloved John's to whom I ministered,*
> *Somewhere in life about the world; they err:*
> *Either mistaking what was darkly spoke*
> *At ending of his book, as he relates,*
> *Or misconceiving somewhat of this speech*
> *Scattered from mouth to mouth, as I suppose.*
> *Believe ye will not see him any more*
> *About the world with his divine regard!*
> *For all was as I say, and now the man*
> *Lies as he lay once, breast to breast with God."*

5. An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician

In "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician " (further in the text: 'The Epistle of Karshish'), Browning tells the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Characteristically, Browning does not refer directly to the New Testament in the poem but does so indirectly in the form of a metafictional letter from an Arab physician of the time. Through this procedure, he positions the event in the given historical period but is freed from the strict textual and semantic limits of the biblical text. The epistolary genre allows the entry of everyday speech genres and topics while being close as a form to its contemporary, which is the first signal for the introduction of the modern into the historical context. The second signal is the introduction of the scientific discourse because Karshish is a physician, and he approaches the world from a scientific perspective; however, much of it is wrapped in the almost alchemical discourse of his profession. He confronts a phenomenon, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, for which his profession can provide an explanation and arguments, but never entirely satisfactory.

> " *'Tis but a case of mania—subinduced*
> *By epilepsy, at the turning-point*
> *Of trance prolonged unduly some three days:*
> *When, by the exhibition of some drug*
> *Or spell, exorcization, stroke of art*
> *Unknown to me and which 'twere well to know,*
> *The evil thing out-breaking all at once*
> *Left the man whole and sound of body indeed,* "

Karshish, unlike the philologists in the 19th century, was given the chance to meet Lazarus face to face and hear his story, which is available to us only through text, which immediately casts doubt on its fictionality. The main theme of the song is the possibility of a divine miracle, an act inexplicable to science, which can only be perceived through faith on an individual level. That faith in the miracle is embodied and given a voice in Lazarus himself, who is the object, but also the subject, of that miracle. That's it a signifier of the given miracle, but also a sign that further actively conveys the memory and meaning of that divine miracle. His presence in the text of the letter leads to restlessness and hesitation in the authoritative scientific discourse of the doctor, which is seen in the interruptions and distortions of thought and syntax:

> " *'Sayeth that such an one was born and lived,*

Taught, healed the sick, broke bread at his own house,
Then died, with Lazarus by, for aught I know,
And yet was . . . what I said nor choose repeat,
And must have so avouched himself, in fact,
In hearing of this very Lazarus
Who saith—but why all this of what he saith?
Why write of trivial matters, things of price
Calling at every moment for remark?"

This juxtaposition of the two discourses, the scientific and the religious, is conducted in an atmosphere where the scientific discourse is the one that is intrusive and dominant, while the religious one is steady, stable, and open to examination but also confident in its knowledge. As Michael Berens states, "the poem centers on Karshish's articulation of the effect this "strange medical experience" has had on him—the effect, as becomes increasingly clearer as the poem develops, of his soul's response to the gospel of Christ witnessed by Lazarus. The poem progresses through a series of stages in which Karshish first conceals, then rationalizes, then translates, and finally discovers the spiritual nature of his experience. While Karshish never wholly abandons his skepticism, in his wonder at the idea of divine love, he reveals the yearning of the human heart for a caring God."

In that way, Browning puts him to a kind of test in relation to the new ideas of his time that want to destabilize and deny him, a test that the readers themselves have to pass within the literary medium. Participating in the interpretive process of the poem, again, is a kind of game through which the reader builds and checks his ethical skills but also establishes his knowledge, in this case, faith, a game through which personal and social identity is strengthened. Although Browning gives the last word to Karshish, that word is a word of wonder framed in a passage outside the official scientific discussion, represented by a letter he writes to his fellow physician. Karshish addresses his fellow traveler, a common man, in a discussion that penetrates everyday discourse, the discourse of humanity where science cannot claim comprehensive authority over knowledge:

" *The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?*
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—
So, through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"
*The madman saith He said so: it is strange.. *"

His narrative voice is penetrated and dominated by the voice of Jesus, the son of God, and thus the voice of God, the ultimate authority on which the Christian religion is based. Although he can only give a diagnosis and call Lazarus a madman, the scientific voice is no longer certain and confident. It is destabilized by the voice of faith reasserting its supremacy over scientific discourse and the necessity to retain its place as one of the essential ideological discourses, and thus an integral element of the identity of British society.

6. Caliban upon Setebos

In " Caliban Upon Setebos ", in a certain way, we have an intersection of some of the more important discourses and themes that appear in Browning's work. Again, as in previous dramatic monologues, the poet raises the topic of man's relationship to God and his attempts to rationally perceive the world through scientific discourse. However, instead of presenting this topic through the nominal perspective of a representative of one of the two discourses, the religious or the scientific, as in the previous poems, he chooses Caliban, the unmanly, monstrous, and illiterate subject of Prospero from Shakespeare's *The Tempest, as the main character and narrator*. Although this seems a somewhat unusual and surprising choice (which is one of the features of Browning that has often been criticized by

his contemporaries), Browning manages to build a complex intertextual network of different texts, discourses, and voices, which corresponds to the controversy and complexity of the debate over the primacy of religion or science in the Victorian period.

First of all, the mere reference to a character from a drama, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, introduces the discourse of the drama and highlights the connection between poetry and drama in the very structure of the dramatic monologue and, thus, the inherent dialogicity of the drama. The poem is in the form of Caliban's monologue, which seems to come from a discarded scene from Shakespeare's play, thus introducing Shakespeare's discourse and the whole multifaceted nature of his work and thought, thus multiplying the poem's semiosphere. It is a follow-up and correspondence to *The Tempest*; its hypertext reveals and develops the hidden potentials in the play itself, which Shakespeare did not develop but which the new age recognizes and gives voice to. With that act, the connection of the two historical periods (Elizabethan and Victorian) and an opportunity to draw a parallel between them as periods of creative fermentation and fruitful debate from which new ideas are born is made. As Bloom points out in his analysis, " Caliban Upon Setebos " reflects the heated intellectual debate that developed after the publication of Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species in 1859." (Bloom, 2009: 73).

The main narrator, Caliban, in Shakespeare's play, is uneducated and speaks a kind of Creole language, but Browning, although he retains that quality, raises his language and intellect to a slightly higher level. Caliban gains the opportunity and capacity to reflect and challenge some of the authoritative discourses that have been imposed on him, those of his mother, Sycorax, and the ruler of the island, Prospero. Browning develops this feature based on his rebellion and challenge to the validity of Prospero's rule in *The Tempest*, thus using the potential hidden in the traditional text and expressing it through Caliban's voice. He, in the moments when he is alone and free to think, meditates according to his limited abilities on the essential ontological question: the origin of man and who is his creator, God or Nature. We have an example of that in the following verses (:

> " *Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match,*
> *But not the stars; the stars came otherwise;*
> *Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that:*
> *Also this isle, what lives and grows thereon,*
> *And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same.* "

The Christian god and religion are represented through the pagan god Setebos, the god of his mother Sycorax, the former ruler of the island. He thinks and imagines Setebos within his limited perspective, finally identifying him with man and considering him to have sprung from man, i.e., by Caliban. Through the character and voice of Caliban, the uncivilized new forces and classes that want to disrupt the old order, religion, and tradition with their new ideas are represented, among which one of the most striking and dangerous is Darwin's theory of evolution, which calls into question the very existence of to God. Browning depicts this audacity and iconoclasm through his primitive expression and monologue.

> " *Oh, He hath made things worthier than Himself,*
> *And envieth that, so helped, such things do more*
> *Than He who made them! What consoles but this?*
> *That they, unless through Him, do nought at all,*
> *And must submit: what other use in things?"*

His thought jumps from argument to argument, which is structurally illustrated by the development of thought in the individual stanzas. On its way, thought takes him from blind obedience to God to challenging his authority, finally leading him to deny his existence. In the words of Caliban they echo the various conflicting arguments and ideas circulating in the 19th century, which the common man has to deal with and perceive. Caliban is a representative of the scientific discourse as well as the common man, but what they have in common is that they both find themselves in the darkness in which they try to find the right path. The traditional faith symbolized in

Setebos can no longer offer certain and reliable answers, and behind it lies and threatens the silent Void from which it arose:

> " *While myself lit a fire, and made a song*
> *And sung it, "What I hate, be consecrate*
> *To celebrate Thee and Thy state, no mate*
> *For Thee; what see for envy in poor me?"*
> *Hoping the while, since evils sometimes mend,*
> *Warts rub away and sores are cured with slime,*
> *That some strange day, will either the Quiet catch*
> *And conquer Setebos, or likelier He*
> *Decrepit may doze, doze, as good as die.*"

By skilfully framing all these discourses within the voice of Caliban, Browning illustrates their ultimate powerlessness and limitation to arrive at the truth and provide the right answers, thereby taking the side of the traditional faith. This is confirmed by the final scene, which is structurally separated from Caliban's main monologue by parentheses, where he abandons the boldness of his speech. The audacity that led him to doubt the existence of God, and thus the legitimacy of religious discourse, is exposed as false at the moment when God's voice appears in the form of thunder and storm to assert its authority. Scientific discourse is not able to provide salvation and comfort in the most difficult moments, especially when you are faced with the incomprehensible cruelty and violence of the world. Browning, through Caliban's failure to truly challenge and subvert dominant organizational and religious discourses, enables the Victorian reader through the reading and interpretation of this poem in a literary field to confront and deal with threatening new social tendencies but also to question and strengthen its traditional social identity reflected through the Christian religion.

7. Conclusion

Robert Browning, through his use of dramatic monologues and masterful revival of historical and literary characters, allowed the debate between the new societal and ideological voices and the traditional cultural and religious discourses. Thus, the analysis of his poems enables us to show the process of the formation of the new Victorian identity, as well as the conflicts and doubts that followed that process. One of the main debates focused on the crisis of religious faith and Christianity as the basis of contemporary identity, which was undermined by advances in science.

It was Browning's lifelong interest and attempts to resolve this great inner but also collective turmoil that inspired him to write some of his greatest poems. Furthermore, he epitomized the doubts and the concerns of the greater middle-class of British society, which was looking for spiritual guidance and assurance that the Church of England was not always able to offer. The ultimate proof of this is the formation of Societies for the reading and study of his poetry in which his views are taken as a kind of philosophy that reflects and protects the values of Victorian times and society. As one critic has pointed out, "To Victorians who felt an inner turmoil caused by changes in their social and intellectual world, Browning's poems satisfied their need for spiritual support."

Though we may sometimes ask ourselves what the lessons of past poets can teach us in these modern times, the example of Robert Browning can provide a blueprint for authors and thinkers in these challenging times that test the moral and spiritual strength of individuals and society as a whole. His engagement with the present through the medium of history and literature proved to be effective and highly productive, while his hybrid literary model of the dramatic monologue allowed for the dialogue between the different ideological and cultural discourses that shaped the identity of the Victorian age. Even though our analysis covered only a small sample of his monologues, we believe that it still allowed us to get a greater insight into this process as it occurred in the Victorian context. Certainly, we plan on continuing our study of the dramatic monologue in the future and its influence on the development of modernistic poetry and modern identity, but for the purposes of this paper. However, this can be a motivation for other scholars to study how other similar hybrid cultural models (theatre, film, and television) are

used to allow for a dialogue between the main ideological discourses of the 21st century, as well as in shaping the modern identity and the spiritual answers to the challenges that the new technological age poses.

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