

Michael Goldman

The Humour in Browning's *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*: a layman's view

I studied *Men and Women* for my Higher School Certificate (that shows my age!) and liking for Browning led to my discovery of *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* some while later. My initial reaction was pleasure in its sardonic humour so, when I began to read critical commentary on Browning, I was surprised to find hardly any recognition of its comic aspects and a rather strait-laced approach to the characters in the poem.

Admittedly the speaker is an unpleasant character but his attitude to the smug Brother Lawrence is surely understandable. It is not hard to imagine the claustrophobic atmosphere of the monastery giving rise to the spiteful attitude of the speaker. Continuous daily contact between the same limited group of people is liable to give rise to personal animosities. Other literary examples that spring to mind are Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Hugh Walpole's *Mr Perrin and Mr Traill*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and various campus novels. Closed communities may produce camaraderie when there is an outside threat, as during a war, but there was no such external unifying factor for a monastery in Spain at the time of the poem: one critic locates the poem at the time of the Inquisition but the reference to the "scrofulous French novel" would seem to indicate a later date, probably some time in the nineteenth century.

As a master of the dramatic monologue Browning was able to empathise with his characters and it is fair to assume that he sees the vices and virtues of both the speaker and Brother Lawrence. Whatever the present status of the Intentionalist Fallacy in the world of literary criticism, it is at least of interest to know the viewpoint of the author even though other opinions are also worthy of discussion. As an unreliable narrator the speaker condemns himself out of his own mouth but it is hard to believe that Browning did not have some sympathy with him. The weight of critical opinion wholeheartedly condemns the speaker but this shows a lack of insight into the claustrophobic situation of the poem.

An extreme instance of antagonism towards the speaker is in an article by James E Anderson entitled Robert Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister": Themes, Voices, and the Words, *Hy, Zy, Hine* (Victorian Poetry, Vol 35 No 3, 1997):

Presumably Browning's stereotype of the Spanish as brutal and devout in equal extremes dictated that his cloister and venomous soliloquist must be "Spanish". But no doubt his two archetypal Spaniards together, *perfect goodness in Brother Lawrence and undiluted evil in the soliloquist*, stand for all of fallen Man. (my italics)

And, earlier in the same article:

The elemental struggle in Milton's Paradise is reduced in Browning's poem to individual human scale.

Thus the soliloquist is a Satan reduced to man-size.

James F Loucks in another article in *Victorian Poetry* (Vol 12 No 2, 1974) refers to “the speaker’s crazed consciousness.” Unbalanced perhaps, but crazed is surely an exaggeration.

Thomas C Kishler in A Note on Browning’s “Soliloquy in the Spanish Cloister” (*Victorian Poetry* Vol 1 No 1, 1963) takes to task the authors of a footnote in *British Literature from Blake to the Present Day* (Boston 1952) for saying that “The speaker is mean and malicious, certainly, but Brother Lawrence was a great big bore.” (So my reading of the poem is not unique.)

To attempt to find some justification, apart perhaps from a submerged and inarticulate recognition of a superior person, for the speaker’s hatred is a futile endeavour. The speaker tells us preciously (sic) little about Brother Lawrence, and nothing he tells us can in any way account for what is in effect the same sort of “motiveless malignity” Coleridge found in *Iago*. Besides, given his character as it is, can we accept the speaker’s evaluations at their face value? The simple, natural goodness of Brother Lawrence effectively contrasts with the speaker’s hypocrisy and pathological involution. Were the speaker to have a valid external cause, no matter how inadequate, for his hatred of Brother Lawrence, the poem would take on a different kind of psychological complexity than it has in its present form. The real cause of his hatred is to be found within the speaker himself. In his egocentric, self-satisfied view of himself, the speaker, despite whatever appeal his diabolical ingenuity may have, provides ample justification for the reader’s viewing him, not Brother Lawrence as the “great big bore” in the poem.

Mr Kishler misunderstands the situation in the poem. The speaker’s malignity is caused by his irritation at - and possibly envy of - Brother Lawrence. The causes of his hatred may be trivial but they are not motiveless.

Jane A McCusker in A Note on the Last Stanza of “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” (*Victorian Poetry* Vol 21 No 4, 1983) after stating that “Most interpretations of the “Soliloquy” present Browning’s monk as nothing more than a vicious petty hypocrite” takes a very serious view of the speaker:

However, a close examination of the final stanza suggests that there is a serious, even tragic, undercurrent to the poem: the monk’s hatred does not threaten Brother Lawrence (he is “Sure of heaven as sure can be”); the threat is to the speaker’s own soul. This danger is conveyed by the religious and monastic associations which gather round the central images and acts of the last verse: the garden, the rose-acacia, and the disrupted prayer to the Virgin.

She makes her case in three pages of ingenious argument and ends with the dramatic statement that “The monk has in effect isolated himself from God *and* from mankind”.

Finally, a somewhat grudging agreement with my point of view from David Sonstroem in his article *Animal and Vegetable in the Spanish Cloister* (*Victorian Poetry* Vol 6 No 1, 1968) which analogises the speaker as animal and Brother Lawrence as vegetable:

I suppose that most of us qualify our approval of Brother Lawrence with a sneaking dislike, and our disapproval of the horrid speaker with a secret sympathy.

Humour is a very personal matter and to attempt to analyse it is to break a butterfly upon a wheel but here are some pointers to the text of the Soliloquy in support of the view of it as an example of black humour.

The language of the first stanza is so extreme that it is hard to take the situation seriously. The contrast between the triviality of the gardening details and the execrations of the speaker is so marked that the literal approach of so many commentators is very surprising.

The scene painted in the second stanza makes one sympathise with the speaker who is bored to distraction by the banal mealtime chatter of Brother Lawrence - and possibly the other monks - about the weather and horticultural trivia.

The tone of the third stanza is highly humorous in the application of the first person plural to Brother Lawrence: the use of 'we' is almost always facetious and condescending when applied to a single person. The speaker's mean-spirited giggle when the lily snaps is a comical end to the stanza.

Most commentators remark on the hypocrisy of the speaker in the fourth stanza, attributing what is obviously his own lustfulness to his hated colleague. Hypocrisy is reprehensible but it also has its comic aspects - as in Moliere's *Tartuffe*, for example, and also here on a smaller scale.

Smugness is a characteristic of Brother Lawrence but in the fifth stanza it applies to the speaker's self-congratulatory references to his own piety in contrast to the apparently more relaxed religious observance of Brother Lawrence.

The tone of the sixth stanza is distinctly comic ("We're to have a feast! so nice!") and the last four lines of the stanza clearly reveal the malicious actions which the speaker obviously enjoys, keeping Brother Lawrence's flowers "close-nipped on the sly!"

The malicious seventh stanza is more serious with its theological references which provide material for much critical comment.

There is yet more malice in the eighth stanza about the speaker's "scrofulous French novel" and also humour in the method of bringing it to the attention of Brother Lawrence in the last line ("Ope a sieve and slip it in't?")

The ninth stanza has been the subject of more exegesis than any other part of the poem because of the mysterious words *Hy*, *Zy*, *Hine* and the liturgical references. Admittedly there is no humour at that point, but another use of the patronising first person plural to mock Brother Lawrence occurs in the sixth line and the extreme language of the last words ("Gr-r-r-r - you swine!") have the same effect as at the beginning of the poem. Many Victorian literary critics were shocked at Browning's use of this kind of language: did they lack a sense of humour?

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Michael Goldman was educated in the 1940s at Manchester Grammar School and later at Wadham College, Oxford where he graduated in PPE. It was at Manchester Grammar School that he acquired his love of the poetry of Robert Browning, as *Men and Women* was one of the set books for Higher School Certificate (equivalent of today's A levels). His career was in advertising, market research and publishing. Latterly he was an independent marketing consultant. He is now retired.