GUIDO'S USE OF METAPHOR IN
BOOK XI OF THE RING AND THE BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

Little has been written directly on the use of metaphor in The Ring and the Book, although there are four critics who do make some attempt to discuss the effects of Browning's extensive use of figurative language. Each of these critics acknowledges his inadequacy in this area and is satisfied with simply asserting a proposition.

Altick and Loucks in their book, Browning's Roman Murder Story[1], admit their differing views on the way metaphor is used in The Ring and the Book, and therefore make their observations individually.

The "first author" suggests that each metaphor is used so extensively and in such contradictory contexts that any metaphor which entered the poem with "generally well-defined connotations" ceases to have any clearly defined meaning by the time it has been used by a number of different monologuists. Thus,"The protean quality of language has been amply demonstrated, but so has the weakness of language as a dependable means of communication. Metaphors, it turns out, are at the mercy of human motives..."[2].

Metaphor, in the view of this author, becomes an inadequate means of communication and an unreliable moral indicator. For example, the Adam and Eve myth is used extensively in the poem, and in normal usage the serpent is accepted as a symbol of evil. However, by the time the poem has ended the serpent has been used to describe Guido, Violante and Pompilia by various speakers. Since this symbol of evil cannot be used to adequately describe both Guido and Pompilia, the symbol or metaphor ceases to have value as a moral indicator.

The implications of this view are complex. If we consider the poem in terms of plot, then metaphor becomes somewhat irrelevant, since it cannot assist us in our attempt to form a judgement of the protagonists. But if we consider the poem in terms of what the author is trying to reveal about the problems of language and communication, then the undermining of the meaning of metaphors becomes crucial. This will be discussed more fully in a later chapter.

The "second author"[3] takes a position which seems to contradict the approach that has just been discussed. His claim is that the metaphors in the poem do, indeed, function as moral indicators. His argument falls into two main areas. Firstly, he establishes "primary figurative roles"[4] for each character and demonstrates that they are fitting. Secondly, he maintains that basic character norms are established very early in the poem, so that we are able to assess the value and accuracy of a metaphor according to the human nature of the speaker. So, knowing that Guido is a liar from the information given us in Book I we do not place any confidence in his descriptions of Pompilia as a "hawk" or a "plague".

There are several problems with this position. The first is that it presupposes a predetermined set of associations connected with each image which exist independently of the poem. This position has been questioned by recent theorists as we shall see shortly. Also, it fails to explain why we react negatively to Guido's veiled allusions to himself as Christ[5] and yet blandly accept Pompilia's association of herself with Mary[6]. Both Pompilia and Guido are claiming association with someone who is mythically considered to be "sinless" and therefore both associations are quite preposterous. The views of this author also assume that the characters in the poem are unquestionably defined as good or as evil from the beginning of the poem, a point which is yet to be established. Even if we could establish such a point, figurative language has essentially been made redundant by this approach, no more than a linguistic flourish to embellish a point already made. The idea of giving primary significance to some images at the expense of others also raises many difficulties since such a selective process may be coloured by the expectations of reader or critic.

Steven Walker[7], on the other hand, sees Browning's use of metaphor as far more functional to the structure and meaning of the poem as a whole. His argument is that the ambiguity generated by the dymanic quality of the metaphors reflects the ambiguity of characterisation and structure in The Ring and the Book:

> [Browning's] imagery's unique strength parallels the
> structural strength of a poetry which characteristically
> juxtaposes conflicting views of reality. Browning

generates much of the vitality of his poetry from the friction of competing images.[8]

Walker's discussion is general, focusing on the poem in its entirety, and he almost ignores the existence of varying speakers. He concentrates instead on the fluid process of the imagery. His discussion of the way images tend to dehumanise or degenerate is compelling, as is his illustration of how some of the imagery undercuts itself, thereby revealing a skillful irony.[9]

Walker, in a sense, extends the observations of the first approach to metaphor which is outlined in Altick and Loucks. He suggests that the fluid, contrasting and conflicting associations of each image illustrate an actuality about the poem and about life in general: the inherent ambiguity and uncertainty generated at all times by varying perspectives. This leads to not non-sense but a relentless irony which resists resolution.

There are, however, some implications of Walker's approach which need to be considered in further detail. In discussing the imagery that applies to Pompilia he observes that even when a negative metaphor is applied to her the reader will "extract positive connotations of defencelessness and innocence"[10] from it. He also notes that Guido and Pompilia share the largest number of metaphors but that each parallel image serves to emphasise the contrast between their two natures. If this is so, if we do apply all the negative connotations of an image to Guido and all the positive ones to Pompilia then we need to discover and assess the grounds on which we do this. It may be that the metaphors are not so integral to the meaning of the poem, but that we already have an established judgement of the protagonists which is independent of figurative language. Consider this further statement:

> ...stray hawks, spiders and virtually any other image with
> a trace of negative connotation, even when explicitly in
> reference to someone else, may gravitate to the hapless
> Guido. [11]

There is no discussion of why this happens. Why should the reader attach all negative images and associations to Guido? There seem to me

to be two possibilities. Either we must accept that the reader makes
his own judgement independent of metaphor, or we must look carefully at
the selection of metaphor by various speakers - that is, we must con-
sider the context in which different metaphors are placed. Our
judgement may be affected not, for example, by what others say about
Guido but by what he says about himself, and by the images he uses to do
so. The function of the various narrators and modes of self-reflection
seem crucial in any analysis of The Ring and the Book. For the major
characters in the poem - Caponsacchi, Pompilia and, in his final mono-
logue, Guido - speak largely in order to come to some understanding of
their lives and personality through metaphoric language.

So it is from Roy Gridley's two articles, "Browning's Pompilia"[12]
and "Browning's Two Guidos"[13] that I wish to launch my discussion.
Gridley's exploration of the way these two characters use metaphor to
describe and discover their past lives as they approach death is
thought-provoking and perceptive. Starting with Pompilia, Gridley dem-
onstrates from the text of the poem how she resisted any attempt to
understand her life because of her belief in her own ignorance and her
desire to forget evil. However, pressed by her confessor she discovers,
or is given, or remembers images on which she can build some conception
of her life. Guido in the same way is striving to discover "something
changeless at the heart of me/ To know me by, some nucleus that's
myself" (XI.11.2392-3). In Gridley's terms Guido discovers the wolf
image through ironically twisting the accepted symbol for the Papacy and
grasps the image in a sudden realisation of his own nature. Armed with
this identity he can then interpret his personality in terms of that
metaphor, his past in terms of its implications and others around him by
their relationship to it. Pompilia is thus described in terms of a
passivity that contrasts with the instinctive life-force of a wolf.
Pompilia similarly, states Gridley, plucks images from her childhood,
from art and from friends to explain her life and in doing so comes to
'realise' her true nature and that of those around her: "...she is
familiar enough with the imagery surrounding Mary to name as well as
recognise herself in that role."[14]

According to Gridley, Pompilia does not simply identify with Mary,
but she recognises her identification with Mary. Having done this she
can then fit others into the myths that she establishes - Guido becomes

Satan, and Caponsacchi, St. Michael[15] - or in the romantic myth which is proposed by Conti, she is the princess and so Guido becomes the dragon and Caponsacchi, St. George[16]. Once she has established her place in a particular myth the other characters fall into place and in this way she comes to understand and recognise her own goodness and Guido's existence as pure hate. This in turn explains for Gridley Guido's behaviour to her, since pure evil can only be repelled by goodness or godliness.

The question which I would ask here is whether it is in fact possible to **discover** the truth about one's self through the expression of metaphor. Does Guido actually discover that he is, in truth, wolf-ish, or does he **create** an identity based on the wolf image? Is it possible that the particular symbols chosen by Pompilia and Guido have no inherent correlation with actuality? And finally, we would have to consider whether there was any inherent meaning in events or in person-alities which could be discovered.

This, of course, is a controversial area, and one which will be considered more fully in the following chapter. I wish first to assess the function of metaphor, considering theories of language and knowledge in their historical context, and then to see how one particular theory of knowledge - that of Nietzche - relates to Guido's second monologue, Book XI of The Ring and the Book. I will consider how Guido uses language, the motivation behind his metaphorical construction, and fin-ally ask how well this construction stands up when faced with annihilation.

Footnotes

[1] Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 266.

[2] Altick and Loucks, p. 266. The specific author is not identified.

[3] Altick and Loucks, p. 267. The author, once again, is not specified.

[4] Altick and Loucks, p. 268.

[5] Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book, 1st Edition, ed. Richard D. Altick (Middlesex Penguin Books: 1971), Book XI, 30-31a, 204-5, 596 and 2304-5. All quotations from The Ring and the Book will be taken from this edition, and where possible line numbers will be given in the text. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from Book XI.

[6] Book VII, 77-81, 1690-93, 1845.

[7] Steven C. Walker, "The Dynamic Imagery of The Ring and the Book," SBHC, 4, i (1976), 7-29.

[8] Walker, p. 10.

[9] Walker, pp. 10-14.

[10] Walker, p. 12.

[11] Walker, p. 13.

[12] Roy Gridley, "Browning's Pompilia," JEGP, LXVII (January 1968), 64-83.

[13] Roy Gridley, "Browning's Two Guidos," UTQ, XXXVI (October 1967), 51-68.

[14] Gridley, "Browning's Pompilia," p. 70. Gridley's emphasis.

[15] Book VII. 1216-19.

[16] Book VII. 1324-5.