

Browning's *The Boy and the Angel*: An Affirmation of Faith in a Double Technical and Temporal Context

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Abstract

Robert Browning's *The Boy and the Angel* is a poem in his early collection *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). The poem is often overlooked in critics' discussions of Browning's religious views or casually charged with combining faith and doubt. It even disappears from recent anthologies despite its significant religious revelations. Critics have fluctuated between faith and doubt in their discussion of Browning's religious stand. The reading in this article aims to retrieve the poem from neglect and to highlight its significance as a statement of faith. The study reveals that the poem makes its religious affirmations through a double narrative line and two time zones. It narrates two versions of the same story and conveys a double-folded religious message. One-fold is humanist, celebrating the ordinary human's act of worship, regardless of time, place, or rank. The second affirms God's presence beyond the earthly timeline. The compound message contradicts the critics who read Browning's poetry as a demonstration of a struggle between faith and doubt. The study concludes that Browning shows no signs of religious doubts in this poem. It is a poem of an unequivocal faith. The reading aligns with critics who discern pure faith in Browning.

Keywords: Robert Browning, angel, atheism, boy, doubt, dramatic monologue, dramatic romances, faith, lyrics, omniscient narration, scepticism

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Introduction

In their response to Robert Browning's poetic oeuvre, critics disagree about his religious stance. Some perceive faith, and others detect a struggle between faith and doubt. This analytical study of a long-neglected Browning poem, *The Boy and the Angel*, finds the poem instrumental in the debate through its strong affirmation of faith. The poem is part of his early collection *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). Critics engage other poems in the collection in discussions of Browning's works, but this piece is often ignored and dropped from recent anthologies. The study employs a formalist reading of the text, focusing on both form and content. It suggests that the poem reveals Browning's faith through a subtle manipulation of narrative technique and the story's timeline. In this sense, it contributes to the religious debate about Browning by highlighting the strong presence of faith at an early stage of his career, which critics deemed highly influenced by the Romantic poet Shelley and his atheistic views.

Literature Review

In Knickerbocker's (1951) introduction to an early selection of Browning's poetry, the poem receives a cursory comment as a reflection of conflict between faith and doubt before it drops from anthologies: "Among the poems in which doubt and faith are discussed . . . The Boy and the Angel, *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha, Bishop Blougram's Apology, Abt Vogler, Rabbi Ben Ezra. . . ." (xviii). Whereas most of the poems listed in Knickerbocker's reference become the focus of critical discussion of the collection, *The Boy and the Angel* is often overlooked. The charge that it is a carrier of faith and doubt is never addressed.

The question of "doubt and faith" in Browning's poetry is not as casual as the reference to *The Boy and the Angel*. It is a subject of lasting debate among critics. Johnson (1952), unlike Knickerbocker, writes positively of "Browning's particular brand of Christianity," in which "the philosophic implications of religion and art" are "so closely allied in his thinking" and the artist perceives "the divine plan" and "must place his genius at God's disposal" (p. 113). Armstrong (1993) perceives a change from an early doubt to faith, emphasizing that in the poems published in 1845 and 1850, "Browning announces a return to a qualified assent to Christian belief" (p. 293). However, Everett (2006) conceives Browning's attitude towards religion as equivocal in his writing. He highlights how, on reading Shelley at a young age, Browning "promptly became . . . an atheist. Although it is pretty clear from his poetry that he did not remain an atheist, whether he ever completely shed his sceptical views is still an open question." Critics' attempts to answer the question continue. Harmoush (2016) quotes Browning saying, "I am not Christian" and at other times, "I do believe in Christianity," and concludes that "Browning remained faithful to his contemporaries . . . to win himself the quality of an honest doubter" (p. 139). More recent critics address the cultural aspects of religion in Browning's writings. Sen (2025) finds that Browning's "poetry engages the great intellectual debates of his century, religion and doubt, science and faith,

morality and relativism, offering readers an enduring meditation on the limits of human knowledge” (p.24). Damjanoski (2024) equally discusses Browning's concern with “the position of the Christian faith” in the “new social circumstances” (p.3). But he also alludes to the personal aspect: “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” (p.9). Critics' interest in the poet's struggle between faith and doubt extends until the present. This study highlights faith in one of Browning's early poems, *The Boy and the Angel*.

Discussion

Contrary to Everett's claim of scepticism, Damjanoski's allusion to “inner . . . turmoil” and Knickerbocker's association of *The Boy and the Angel* with “doubt and faith,” the poem has powerful religious implications that revolve around Theocrite, a young boy who lives in a small village in Italy and praises God, day and night, while working as a craftsman in a small shop. Blaise, a monk who happens to be passing by, overhears him and affirms that he does not “doubt” that the prayers are “heard” because they resemble those of the pope in Rome under Saint Peter's dome on Easter Day (line 11). The compliment awakens ambition in Theocrite to praise God, “the Pope's great way” (line 13). He goes to Rome to fulfil his dream, only to realize that his earlier prayers as a young apprentice are better than his later ones. Theocrite had to go back to his cell to resume the old prayer.

It is, however, interesting that despite the seemingly simple, straightforward story, the poem remains equivocal in its narrative technique and timeline. It presents two versions of Theocrite's story. Armstrong (1993) points out a technical aspect of double poems in Browning's grotesque oeuvre and his dramatic monologues, a strategy that “requires a second reading when these are seen as phenomena for analysis” (p. 295). *The Boy and the Angel* is neither a grotesque poem nor a dramatic monologue, but a narrative poem with some dramatic glimpses into the characters' thoughts. Nevertheless, it employs tactics of doubling that require clarification, and can be helpful in the critical assessment of the poem.

An omniscient narrator is instrumental in delivering the two versions of the story in the poem without explaining their discrepancy. This narrator commits to two types of narrative acts: chronological narration and a dramatic representation of minds. Within the first act of broad chronology, the narrator permits the characters to act, think, and occasionally speak. Tucker (1999) and other critics, like Johnson (1952), are inclined to treat Browning's early poems as dramatic monologues in the process of making. Tucker supports his argument by referencing the poet's “own terms,” of the dramatic monologue as “dramatic lyric” or “dramatic romance” (p. 313). The current poem, although part of the dramatic romances and lyrics and the formative process in Browning's poetic career, is not a dramatic monologue; its real worth lies in its religious revelations.

The First Version of the Story

In the first version of the story of *The Boy and the Angel*, the omniscient voice narrates: “Night passed, day shone, / And Theocrite was gone” (lines 19-20). The implication is that, following Blaise’s compliment, Theocrite travelled the next day to Rome to achieve his dream. He reappears toward the end of the poem as a pope sitting in the retirement room, resting between sermons and looking appreciatively at the east. He seems to have fulfilled his wish of praying as a pope under Saint Peter’s dome on Easter day. Instead of disclosing the efforts that led to fulfillment, the narrator turns his attention to the second character in the story, Gabriel, the archangel, to highlight his response to Theocrite’s departure. He overhears God’s critique of the discontinuity of the prayers and decides to fly down to the empty cell to fill it up with both the daily prayers and the bread-earning activity. He attempts to gratify God by replacing Theocrite on both the religious and the vocational levels, fully convinced that “(He did God’s will; to him, all one / If on earth or in the sun)” (lines 37, 38). No one seems to notice the change. Things would have continued in this manner had it not been for God’s dissatisfaction with the angel’s prayers: “Clearer loves sound other ways: / I miss my little human praise” (lines 43,44). The angel’s prayers lack “doubt” and “fear” that are characteristically human (line 40). Realizing his mistake, Gabriel immediately discards the human guise and flies to Rome to reverse the process. He lands on Peter’s dome at the moment Theocrite was looking at the east. Gabriel scolds Theocrite for his weak prayers and sends him back to his cell to do his due worship as in the old times.

The Second Version of the Story

At the point where a message that favours the ordinary humans’ prayer over that of popes and angels begins to unfold, another version of the story emerges. The omniscient narrator abandons the chronological stance and allows Theocrite a chance to reveal his thoughts. Standing in his holy vestment, facing the east, Theocrite, though not a full-fledged speaker in a dramatic monologue, reflects:

And all his past careers
Came back upon him clear,
Since when, a boy, he plied his trade,
Till on his life the sickness weighed;

And in his cell, when death drew near,
An angel in a dream brought cheer:

And rising from the sickness drear
He grew a priest, and now stood here. (lines 53-60)

Theocrite's train of thought reveals that he did not leave his cell and his village as a young, ambitious boy but rather as an older man approaching death.

Caught between two versions of the same story, one wonders which to believe and which is the real one. Did Theocrite leave as a boy to seek fulfillment of his wish, or did he remain at home to patiently hope while growing old until Gabriel carried him in a dreamlike manner and installed him as a priest and then as a pope in Rome? And, why did the narrator remain silent about Gabriel's contribution in the act of transfer to Rome, and focus instead on Gabriel's flying down to earth to fill the religious and vocational gap left by the boy's departure?

Configuring the Two Versions

Gabriel's version of the events seems to consolidate both Theocrite's on one level and that of the narrator on another. Confessing his involvement in bringing the elderly Theocrite to Rome and setting him up as a Pope, Gabriel concurs with Theocrite: "I bore thee from thy craftsman's cell / And set thee here; I did not well" (lines 63,64). According to both figures, Theocrite did not leave on his own as a boy, but Gabriel transferred him as an older man. They both seem to negate the narrator's version. But when Gabriel decides to send Theocrite back home to his "poor employ," he instructs him to "Resume the craftsman and the boy" (lines 73,74). He seems to send him back in time to his boyhood rather than merely reverse the act and send him as he picked him up, a weak, aging man. To order Theocrite back to boyhood is to support the narrator's version of the story in which the young Theocrite departed the next day following the compliment. In brief, Gabriel's final speech testifies to his active involvement in both versions of the story. He seems to validate one and then the other through his words and actions. Significantly, the narrator concludes the narrative by asserting that "Theocrite grew old at home," not in Rome (line 75). This conclusion ties up with the beginning of the story. Theocrite leaves as a boy and returns to his hometown as such to grow old and ultimately pass away there. The double narrative seems to persist. The questions of why there are two versions of the story and which one is the actual one remain pending.

The Double Time Zone

In a cursory hint at the start of the poem, the narrator refers to two time zones in the universe, a heavenly and an earthly one. The hint opens a possibility of finding an explanation for the double narrative. The reference to time goes: "With God a day endures alway, / A thousand years are but a day" (lines 21-22). Humans can live a whole life crowded with events and changes, but the cumulative outcome of the years is less than one day in heavenly computation. Rather than answering the question of which version of the story to follow, the hint gives rise to another question: which of the two versions is the heavenly computation and which is the earthly one?

The first version of the story that the narrator tells seems to belong to the heavenly time zone in the poem. The omniscient voice tells the story from an elevated perspective, unconcerned with the details of daily life. The voice is broadly interested in Theocrite's departure as a boy, his return as such, and God's responses to his prayers in the two locales. The perspective transcends mundane details and overlooks their mutability. It is as if the events in between have not occurred or do not matter. The narrator overlooks the boy's likely adventures when he left home and Gabriel's possible role in the transfer of the older adult, leaving the reader in the dark regarding the two crucial moves. The time frame remains permanently unchanged in this broad chronological context.

On the other hand, the characters' thoughts and words, as they unfold through the narrator's representation of their minds, reveal more minor details and a narrower timeframe. Theocrite's reflection on his career is part of this limited time zone. His version of the story is a worldly and mutable one. His residence in the cell until he grows old and weak in body is a common aspect of the world of mutability. Within mundane mutability, humans grow old and can become sick, while in cosmic computation, they stay young, untouched by processes.

Configuring the Two Time Zones

Gabriel seems to fluctuate between the two time zones, which validates their co-existence in the story. None of them is expendable to the growing poetic message. On the cosmic level of the broad chronological act of narration and heavenly time zone, Gabriel tries to fill the gap that Theocrite's departure causes and maintain God's praise in the universe, only to realize he cannot echo the human tone in prayers or meet divine expectations. His flying to Rome to rectify the situation brings an acknowledgment of his limitation: "With that weak voice of our disdain, / Take up creation's pausing strain" (lines 71-72). He has underestimated the power of Theocrite's praying voice, imagining himself capable of replacing it, but the boy's prayers proved more powerful. Its tone surpasses that of angels and is strong enough to maintain the spiritual melody of the universe. The context accentuates the humanist religious message.

On arriving at Saint Peter's dome, Gabriel becomes part of the earthly time zone of Theocrite's version of the narrative. In Theocrite's reflection on his career, and Gabriel's acknowledgement of having transferred him to Rome, Gabriel's entanglement in the mundane version of the tale becomes evident. On the failure of the new prayers in the new locale, Gabriel directs Theocrite back to his cell. The return to the cell as a boy disentangles Gabriel from the earthly time zone and takes him back to the heavenly one in submission to large cosmic plans designed to please and honour God. The context celebrates God as the motivating force for the characters' actions. It also indicates that a simple boy's prayer in a humble cell excels that of the pope in Rome. It is perhaps such an indication that made the poem unpopular, causing it to disappear from contemporary anthologies. Nevertheless, it has a positive, non-sectarian side that

hails the simplicity and practicality of religious practices and affirms their availability to ordinary human beings.

A Compound Religious Message

In the poem's manifold doubling of elements, a compound religious message resides. The first is its celebration of the beauty of ordinary humans' simple faith, surpassing that of angels and elite religious figures, and challenging the limited performance and acceptance of worship to certain places and times. Beyond this humanist message, God is a motivating force for action. Moreover, the double time zone seems to celebrate the divine presence of God within a larger cosmic context. The heavenly time zone evokes biblical verses such as, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (Holy Bible, Peter 3:8 / Nelson, 2005). It testifies that Browning, alongside his humanist faith, is equally celebrating the infinite existence of the Lord of the universe. God is not merely a figure in the narrative to assess, encourage, and praise human performance, but an eternal Being that exists beyond human mutability. The Bible describes God's existence as "everlasting to everlasting" (Holy Bible, Psalm 90:2 / Nelson, 2005), signifying His eternal existence in the universe.

This reading of *The Boy and the Angel* as one of Browning's double poems that critics have neglected in their assessment of his works accords with well-established interpretations of Browning's sociopolitical views. For example, Johnson's (1952) reading of the "two concluding episodes" of Browning's *Pippa Passes* perceives a struggle for freedom of some "individuals" who had fallen under "the shadow of institutionalized authority, in the one case governmental repression represented by the Austrian rule in northern Italy, in the other religious formalism represented by the prestige of the Catholic Church" (p. 88). Armstrong's (1993) comments on Victorian poetry, for another example, also highlights Browning's position as one of orientation towards democratic awareness of the "crowd." She writes of "Browning's critique" of social class "oppression" as "more overt" than Tennyson's, especially in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* and in poems like *The Lost Leader* and *The English Man in Italy* (p.158), ignoring *The Boy and the Angel* in this reference to the collection. The poem is not only thought-provoking but also valuable in its subtle critique of religious authoritarianism and in granting the common human worshipper trust in God. It also testifies to a strong faith on Browning's side that challenges the charge of doubt. Such faith is also evident in his recognition of a heavenly time zone beyond the earthly one. Knowing that such views as stated in the Bible have a correspondence in the Qur'an indicates how non-sectarian Browning's religious views are. The text of the Quran says: ". . . but lo! a Day with Allah is as a thousand years of what ye reckon." (The Qur'an, 22:47/ Pickthall, Trans. 1971, p.439). It is identical to the biblical statement. Browning's views fit with other religious contexts. Rather than being described as anti-Catholic, it is more accurate to name him as anti-sectarian.

Conclusion

This study attempted to retrieve a long-neglected Browning poem and analyze it through a formalist lens. The close reading indicates a double play on the narrative technique and the story's timeline, suggesting the presence of a strong, unequivocal faith in the poet, who is often accused of struggling between faith and doubt and of retaining some atheist views even after he affirms his faith. The reading suggests the presence of a compound message of faith in Browning that honors the infinite presence of God in a timeless zone and His appreciative response to simple worshippers free from the limitations of time, place, and rank. The study also frees the poem from earlier charges of a struggle of faith and doubt, suggesting that a likely reason for the poem's unpopularity is its implied anti-Catholic views, but indicates that the attitude seems more non-sectarian.

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