

THE INTERPLAY OF RHYTHM AND IMAGERY IN ROBERT BROWNING'S SAUL

Dorothy M. TAYLOR

Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, *Saul*, portrays David in a moment of intense emotional activity and spiritual development born of his response to the predicament of Saul, his King. The episode is based upon and greatly enlarges the Biblical story in I Samuel 16: 14-23, which tells of David's playing upon his harp and successfully driving out an evil spirit from the troubled king. Aside from some indebtedness to Christopher Smart's *Song to David*, eulogizing David, the poet probably was indebted to Sir Thomas Wyatt for his development of the theme of redemption in his *Seven Penitential Psalms*.¹ The first nine stanzas of *Saul* were published in Number Seven of *Bells and Pomegranates* in 1845, the entire poem not until 1855 in *Men and Women*.

The poem abounds in rich and vivid imagery, the brilliant realization of which is largely due, in my estimation, to the poet's masterly employment of rhythm and other devices of sound structure to heighten their effectiveness.² *Saul* has for its normal rhythm one that leaps smoothly forward as Browning dynamically exploits the rising movement of the anapestic meter. In tune with the healthful strong pulse of athletic youth, the rhythm suggests energetic movement, mental and physical, and easily projects an image of the young David in his controlled excitement and elation. The poet takes liberties with his metrical pattern, introducing accents which help to foreground important images. Vocalization then sharpens for the reader the reception of the images, allowing parallels between sound and sense and kinesthetic rhythm to emerge and merge, giving body to the images.

In the first two stanzas David quotes Abner's eager words of welcome upon his arrival. The movement is rapid and vigorous (not light and tripping, as anapestic movement may be). One source of this sense of vigor may be discovered by a count of the one syllable and longer words. In these two stanzas there are 133 monosyllables in comparison

with only 28 two syllable words, two of which are hyphenated words formed by the joining of monosyllables, *mid-tent's* and *harpstrings*, and there are but four three syllable words. This predominance of monosyllables is a general feature of the poem though somewhat more pronounced here.

The eagerness with which Abner has awaited David and now welcomes him is reflected not only in the semantic significance of his opening words, but also in the explosive style—first an exclamatory sentence of just less than two feet, and next four clauses, set off by commas, each a complete syntactical unit, yet each a single foot in length.

Said Abner, "At last thou art come! Ere I
tell, ere thou speak,
Kiss my cheek, wish me well!"

(stanza I, lines and 2)³

The last two clauses above are in reality amphimacers, and the additional *strong accent in each measure gives emphasis to the strength of Abner's* emotion as he greets one both beloved and of whom much is expected. *Ere* in the two preceding clauses may be given strong accent, making all four clauses amphimacers. "Thou art come!" may be spoken with three strong accents or as an amphimacer. Not until the fourth, fifth and sixth lines does the meter resolve into anapestic.

In line 7 the tense situation is foregrounded by the clipped wording.

For out of the black mid-tent's silence, a space
of three days,
Not a sound hath escaped to thy servants, of
prayer nor of praise.

(stanza I, lines 7 and 8)

This effect is partly dependent upon the impediments introduced in the juxtaposition of the consonants k m, d t, t s in quick sequence in the phrase, *black mid-tent's silence*, partly upon the introduction of the spondee, *mid-tent's*, in a position normally filled by two unaccented syllables, so that there are four strong accents in succession.

David is recounting an experience now recently past. The elevated excitement throughout the poem is that still coursing through him as

he puts the experience into words, reliving it and reflecting upon it. Yet we feel during much of the relation that we are partaking of the initial experience as David recounts the songs he sang in his ardent laboring to awaken Saul to life.

Prior to David's singing for Saul we experience, in stanza three, his recounting of his approach to and entrance into Saul's tent and his first sight of Saul. In this stanza there are a number of contrasts between swift action and dramatic pauses. In the second line the solemnity of David's praying to God before entering Saul's tent is given a measure of reinforcement by the rhythm as the line makes a slow beginning with a spondee, *knelt down*,—a momentary pause.

Then I, as was meet,
Knelt down to the God of my fathers, and rose
on my feet,
And ran o'er the sand burnt to powder.

(stanza III, lines 1-3)

In the third line the amphimacer, *burnt to pow*, with its added accent, focuses our attention on the description of the sand, which David is pictured as being aware of even in his haste.

From the end of line nine to the end of the stanza there is a slowing of the pace of the rhythm, providing the background tone that aids in experiencing David's peering through the blackness and at last desecrating Saul. What are the linguistic elements that serve as impediments to alter the speed? The statement,

"And no voice replied,"

is set off by punctuation, by sense, and by the ending of the previous phrases in an extra unaccented syllable, giving it a falling sound pattern. In addition the two words "And no," present a degree of impediment through the juxtaposition of *nd n*, and in the accenting of *no*. There follow impediments to unretarded vocalization, which parallel impediments to David's effort to make contact with Saul, culminating in the disclosure when a sunbeam clearly reveals the King. This characteristic of the vocalization alone would be without import, but working in harmony with the sense it augments it. In line 10 three words slow the movement, the first two, *saw naught*, both carrying accent and both

containing the same low vowel, and the third, *blackness*, with its multiple consonants. In the next line both *black* and *blackness* occur. The line ends with [two accented syllables, *upright*, and line 12 begins with a spondee, *main prop*, making four accents in succession. Line 13 has two words packed with consonants, *gigantic* and *blackest*. It also begins with an amphimacer in which there is in addition a grammatical inversion giving added emphasis, "*Grew a figure*":

At the first I saw naught but the blackness:
 but soon I descried
 A something more black than the blackness—
 the vast, the upright
 Main prop which sustains the pavilion: and slow
 into sight
 Grew a figure against it, gigantic and blackest
 of all.

(stanza III, lines 10-13)

The stanza's final line has two points at which syntax is at odds with the established rhythm, a comma interrupting the rhythm in each of the second and last feet. Added to this the line ends with a measure that contains no unaccented syllables, bringing the spotlight on Saul.

Then a sunbeam, that burst through the tent—
 roof, showed Saul.

(stanza III, line 14)

Two types of images are fused, visual and kinesthetic (straining to see).

In Stanza IV the description of Saul as seen through David's eyes blends and merges two visual images, the image of Saul in his throes, and that of the king-serpent, which Saul in his agony resembles. Saul, like the king-serpent, is "waiting his change." As for the king-serpent so for Saul too, there must be a transformation. The garment of evil which imprisons Saul's soul must be sluffed off. That deliverance can come to Saul is prefigured in the fact that deliverance in the spring-time is expected for the king-serpent. Saul, like the king-serpent, is "caught in his pangs." The serpent

all heavily hangs,
 Far away from his kind, in the pine, till deliv-
 erance come
 With the spring-time,

(stanza IV, lines 4-6)

We infer, with David, that Saul, too, may have a spring-time. Saul, in his soul's struggle, is also "far away from his kind," far away from his fellow human beings in his distraction, far away from his true nature as he was meant to be.

Attentive reading discovers a number of interesting features in sound pattern and unexpected nuances in rhythm. Tension is suggested by the phrase,

He relaxed not a muscle,

(stanza IV, line 3)

and the tension is mirrored in the vocalization of the retarding consonant sequence, x d n; it is reinforced by the tension between metrical expectation and syntax, when twice in the line (in the third and fourth feet) commas interrupt the measure. This second comma introduces an interesting bit of metrical interplay. As a result of the division in the fourth anapest, the last four syllables of the line, "caught in his pangs," are thrown together to create a foursyllable sequence accented, unaccented, accented overlaying though not erasing the established anapestic rhythm. The new rhythm thus initiated persists in the next line, appearing in the phrase, "waiting his change," becomes inverted to form unaccented, accented, unaccented in the phrase "the king-serpent" and reverts to the first form in "heavily hangs." True the anapestic rhythm can still be marked off in the line, counting an iamb, an anapest, an irregular foot of one unaccented and two accented syllables, followed by two anapests. However, the new rhythm is successfully superimposed upon the old. By the time the reader has reached the last phrase of the line, "the king-serpent all heavily hangs," he has become so sensitized to the new rhythm as to read "all" as an extra syllable, find rhythm and syntax in perfect harmony, and so feel naturally the falling rhythm in "heavily." As a result the falling sound pattern takes over in place of the rising anapestic here, where it fittingly corresponds to the drooping

heaviness of the king-serpent.

He relaxed not a muscle, but hung there as,
 caught in his pangs
 And waiting his change, the king-serpent all
 heavily hangs.

(stanza IV, lines 3 and 4)

Finally, the impression of Saul's suffering is intensified in the second half of the last line,

so agonized Saul, drear
 and stark, blind and dumb.

(stanza IV, line 6)

Here the two amphimacers slow the rhythm because of their extra accents, and because the monosyllables, *stark*, *blind*, *dumb*, with their ending double consonants, assume increased vocal emphasis.

Stanza V contains prosaic explanation, familiar images, reflective thought, and simple emotions—quiet ones, appreciative rather than impulsive. The choppy waves in the rhythm, too, subside. The stanza begins with a clause which could as well be pure prose, narrative prose:

Then I tuned my harp,

(stanza V, line 1)

The syllabic count of the line totals that of five anapests, but the distribution of accents through the first half of the line is that of normal prose, providing a point of relaxation from the tense concentration of the preceding stanzas. In its second half the line moves into a smooth metrical rhythm suitable to the suggestion of affection, and affection David's words impart— for the lilies, for the very strings of the harp, for the sheep and their habitat and feeding places, for the stars and the blue above.

Then I tuned my harp, —took off the lilies we
 twine round its chords
 Lest they snap 'neath the stress of the noontide
 —those sunbeams like swords!

(stanza V, lines 1 and 2)

There is some return to emphasis in the double stresses in the words, *noontide* and *sunbeams*, muted however by the fact that *tide* and *beams*, though not light syllables, are not as strongly accented as *noon* and *sun*, and by the inclusion of so many sibilants in the line. The entire stanza moves on with a minimum of accent and novelty, in quiet contrast to the earlier tense stanzas.

Stanzas VI and VIII gradually increase in variety of tempo and feeling. The sense of one lively tune following another is created, augmented by the continuous use of enjambment in the first four lines, the first clause running on from line one to line two, through the first syllable of the third measure, the second clause running thence through the first syllable of the fourth measure of line four, and the third continuing to the end of line four, so that each slightly exceeds a line in length, and the syntactical pauses break not only the line but the measure. It is as though one song drops off to be at once replaced by another. The first song has been the tune "all our sheep know" in stanza V; these are the next three:

—Then the tune for which quails on the corn-
land will each leave his mate
To fly after the player; then, what makes the
crickets elate
Till for boldness they fight one another; and
then, what has weight
To set the quick jerboa a-musing outside his
sand house—

(stanza VI, lines 1-4)

Use of enjambment gives a similar sense of movement continuous through stanza VII, but the tunes are longer and more sustained, covering several lines. Here the personal involvement is greater, for the songs have changed from those that appeal to the animals to man's songs and ceremonial music. An especially interesting enjambment occurs between lines 1 and 2, where the subject, *hand*, ends one line, and the verb, *grasp*, begins the next, giving a strong emphasis to both subject and verb, provoking a rhythmic sense that evokes a kinesthetic

(stanza IX, line 4)

The sense of refreshing coolness is created in the next phrase by the visual images; it is quickened by the pleasure of relishing the many liquid consonants; and this experience is enhanced by the sense of tactual impact imparted by the words, *shock* and *plunge*, which introduce to our vocalization just enough impediment to simulate that first contact of the body with the water's surface:

the cool silver shock
Of the plunge in a pool's living water,

(stanza IX, lines 4 and 5)

We can appreciate visual imagery here, but if we are feeling the rhythm acutely, the stronger images are of bodily pleasurable sensation, kinesthetic in effect. This is as it should be, for David is trying to enable Saul to recall, not remembered visual images of other men's actions, but the sensations of his own actions in his own past. Meantime, David is feeling such recall of action in himself.

There is an intentioned visual recall image in the subsequent line, where the color is gratifying to the eyes:

the rich dates yellowed over with
gold dust divine,

(stanza IX, line 7)

This is also a taste image, as is

And the locust-flesh steeped in the pitcher, the
full draught of wine,

(stanza IX, line 8)

This second image is stimulated kinesthetically by the way one's mouth savours *full* and sucks in on *draught* in producing the sounds.

Capturing the intended emotional sense of well-being is made easy by the smooth forward rhythm of

How good is man's life, the mere living! how
fit to employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses for-

ever in joy!

(stanza IX, lines 11 and 12)

The rhythm includes emphasis or staccato excitement in line 11 *the mere living!*, followed in line 12 by a smooth rising affirmative surge.

At the end of the stanza David reaches a crescendo in his efforts to awaken Saul's spirit :

High ambition and deeds which surpass it, fame
 crowning them, all
 Brought to blaze on the head of one creature—
 King Saul ! ”

(stanza IX, lines 28 and 29)

Again the semantic meaning is pointed up by the emphatic additional accents on *high*, *fame*, and the less emphatic but still normally strong accents on *brought* and *one*, a total of five extra accents in the two lines.

Stanza IX is a song. In stanza X David sweeps into a relation of the subsequent experience. In his description of Saul's response to the call of his name, David likens Saul to a mountain withstanding the warmth of the Spring until

Spring's arrowy summons
 goes right to the aim,

(stanza X, line 8).

The line gains strength from the added accent on the *spring's*, swiftness and lithe flexibility from the movement in the word *arrowy*, and directness from the five successive monosyllables that end it. The mountain "leaves grasp of the sheet" (of snow), and

Fold on fold all at once it crowds thunderously
 down to his feet,

(stanza X, lines 11 and 12).

Each of the first three measures in the above line has an extra accented syllable, the first two amphimacers building up the impact, which the third carries to a maximum in its altered rhythm of unaccented, accented, accented. The visual image of snow *crowding* down, the onomatopoeic

quality in the word *thunderously*, and the force of the accents combine to produce a stunning audio-visual image.

Saul shudders, and the very air is charged. In the following passage two phrases foregrounded by extra accents, *shudder thrilled* and *air tingled*, each have an onomatopoeic quality, and each sets up a kinesthetic image.

One

long shudder thrilled
 All the tent till the very air tingled, then sank
 and was stilled
 At the King's self left standing before me, released and aware.

(stanza X, lines 19-21)

The alliteration on *t* in *tent*, *till*, *tingled* in line 20 sets up a chord vibrating in the word *tingled*, which repeats not only the *t*, but also the *n* of *tent* and the *l* of *till*.

David struggles in his earnest desire to give new life to Saul and reaches a state of prophetic ecstasy in his discovery of the ultimate of love in God's love. Here again in the poetic utterance rhythm supports feeling with an iteration of accents, and in addition parallels in structure sharpen the foregrounding. "A Face like my face," "a Man like to me," "A Hand like this hand."

Saul,

it shall be
 A Face like my face that receives thee, a Man
 like to me,
 Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: a
 Hand like this hand
 Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!
 See the Christ stand!"

(stanza XVIII, lines 23-26)

The multiplication of accents in line 26, in which measures 1, 3, 4, and 5 are accented on both the second and third syllables. The eighteenth stanza, bearing a wealth of the drama of swift and powerful insight, is

consequently accented repeatedly at normally unaccented points. Metrical rhythm is set up to be broken and replaced by newly generated rhythms supporting sense, as sense masters rhythm and dominates it. Let us consider two more instances :

From thy will stream the worlds, life and na-
 ture,-thy dread Sabaoth :
 I will ?—the more atoms despise me!

(stanza XVIII, lines 5 and 6)

In line 5 every measure receives two accents— in the first measure the accents fall on the second and third syllables, in measure 2 on the first and third, in measure 3 on the first and third, in measure 4 on the second and third, and in measure 5 again on the first and third. In line 6 the first measure is a spondee, the next is accented on the second and third syllables, and this is followed by a normal anapest, after which one accented syllable ends the exclamation. The powerful and the powerless, the infinite and the infinitesimal are in contrast, and the greatness of the contrast demands to be emphasized.

Line 14 has only three unaccented syllables :

Would I suffer for him that I love ? So wouldst
 thou—so wilt thou !

(stanza XVIII, line 14)

The first, fourth and fifth measures each beg for three accents. Strong declaration is demanded by the overwhelming inevitable truth

As seen in the passages quoted above, measures departing from the normal rhythm pattern often occur in clusters that establish a new but temporary pattern which underlines the emotional sense. The poetry throbs with wonder as David, grasping and unfolding the revelation of the ineffable love of God, outpours his tremendous experience.

Stanza XIX, as David recounts the going home and the morning after, opens to us the sense of mystery born in David's heart. The rhythm is more normal, more regularly anapestic, but there are occasional added accents.

And the stars of night beat with emotion and

tingled and shot

Out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge :

(stanza XIX, lines 7 and 8)

Night, *strong*, and *pent* carry accent. The first creates a pause before *beat*, and accent and pause combine to emphasize the vivid kinesthetic image. The second and third also foreground kinesthetic images while emphasizing that the pain is strong and that the knowledge is pent up even though the need is to release it. The figurative language is unusual and complicated. We are prompted to think of the stars as angelic hosts.⁴ We are also aware of transfer. David's heart beats with emotion and holds pent knowledge which, unreleased, creates by its pressure for release strong pain. But only the stars shoot in fire.

Reading on to line 15 we find accents on *held* and *wind* resulting in delicate high lighting in the phrase :

In the shuddering forests held breath ; in the
sudden wind-thrills ;

(stanza XIX, line 15)

The poem closes with an atmosphere of awareness, of responsiveness in nature, and of affirmation. To the sensitively awakened heart of David all nature seems to apprehend what has been disclosed to him.

In this study I have undertaken to examine a sampling of the interesting rhythmic variations that occur in *Saul*. Perhaps they will serve to demonstrate the integral relation of rhythmic pattern and sound structure with semantic meaning and image in creating the total meaning of the poem.

Notes :

1. William Clyde DeVane endorses this opinion, citing J. A. S. Peek, "The Spaping of *Saul*" in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 1945. —William Clyde DeVane, "Robert Browning" in *The Victorian Poets, A Guide to Research*, Edited by Frederic E. Faverty, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1956, p. 82.
2. Critics differ in their opinions of Browning's virtuosity in the handling of rhythm. Though he makes no reference to *Saul*, which is on the whole lyrical rather than colloquial in language, T. R. Barnes refers to Browning's propensity for approximating the rhythm of spoken language as "rarely convincing." T. R. Barnes, *English Verse, Voice and Movement from Whatt to Yeats*. Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 232. On the other hand Park Honan in his book, *Browning's Characters*, devotes two chapters to a study of Browning's language, one on "Diction" and one on "Sound and the Sentence," the latter considering "Rhythm,"

"Alliteration and Rhyme," "Phonetic Quality," "Syntax," and "Punctuation." His attention is given largely to Browning's blank verse and particularly to its qualities in *The Ring and the Book*. In addition to references in the above two chapters, one chapter, "The Arch-Villain" is given to a study of the way in which image and rhythm serve to delineate the character of Guido. Park Honan, *Browning's Characters*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1961. These two quite opposite views are not unique. To me it would seem an incredible loss not to find pleasure in Browning's use of rhythm.

3. The edition used for all quotations from the poem is *The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning, Student's Cambridge Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1895
4. The image brings to mind that of Blake in *The Tiger* from *Songs of Experience* in lines 17 and 18

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,

Quotation from the version of the poem in *English Verse*, Chosen and edited by W. Peacock In five volumes, Oxford University Press, London, 1930 Volume III, page 483

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This essay seeks to analyze variations from the normal anapestic pentameter in which the poem is written, such as the use of amphimacers and spondees, etcetera, together with other characteristics of the sound structure, including the extensive use of monosyllables. The latter are found to contribute to the sense of vigor which pervades the poem. Onomatopoeic effects and kinesthetic imagery are found to result from the matching of rhythm to sense. Thus it becomes apparent that rhythm and sound structure bear an integral relationship to the semantic sense and imagery in creating the total meaning of the poem.

RECEPTION-PRODUCTION CORRESPONDENCE in Japanese Speakers of English

Wesley RICHARD

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent of error correspondence between reception and production of English pronunciation among native speakers of Japanese. Based on two tests, this study of 74 students indicates that errors in reception exceed those of production by an average of twenty percent. Consonants in initial position and front vowels are two specific areas that show a relatively low error frequency. Remedial work centering on guided hearing practice to improve sound distinction ability in specific areas is recommended in light of these results.

Early Democratic Movement and Christianity in Japan — The case of Naohiro SAKAMOTO —

Yasuoki YAMASAKI

- I. Prologue
- II. Biographical History of SAKAMOTO