

II

BROWNING'S ART

DURING the Browning furore people talked most about his philosophy. Here are a few typical titles of books and essays written about him in the 1890's: *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*, *Browning's Message to His Time*, *The Ethics of Browning's Poems*, *Browning and the Christian Faith*, *Browning's Criticism of Life*, *Browning's Philosophy*, *Browning's View of Life*, *Browning as a Teacher of the Nineteenth Century*, *The Religious Teaching of Browning*. The novice would scarcely suspect that the subject of these commentaries was an artist, a poet, maker of rhymes, minister to the aesthetic instinct to which poetry makes its primary appeal.

As we look back on the latter years of the nineteenth century, now incorporated in the historic past, it seems fairly clear why, when Browning at last caught the tardy attention of his generation, people talked more about his thought than his art: first, the art was so novel, unconventional, that it scarcely seemed "art" to people familiar with the mellifluous cadences of Tennyson and Swinburne; secondly, Browning was an optimist in an age which had a strong trend toward pessimism; when *welt-schmerz*, *fin de siècle*, the "residue of hope" phrased a prevailing attitude of mind; when people were reading, more than now, Schopenhauer and Hartmann; when James Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night* was in vogue. Browning was an optimist with the exuberance of Dickens; and a better reasoned basis for optimism than

Dickens offered. People wanted to believe, and here was a stout believer, obviously as well acquainted with agnosticism as the agnostics themselves, yet jubilantly proclaiming his faith in the face of doubt. He helped people to be brave, and that was important. Therefore they hailed him as something of a deliverer, a philosopher and theologian who spoke with vibrant assurance. So he was primarily considered when people were considering him most—shortly after his death.

But in perpetuity he must be assessed as poet. In that office Time must try him, measure his worth and claim to remembrance. He himself has said it:

I stand on my attainment,
This of verse alone.

If posterity shall use him, it will be not because he was original, versatile, profound in his thinking, but chiefly because he had the power to do what artists do—give pleasure. Had he that power? Surely. But he did not always use it patently.

Someone has remarked that the poet in Browning outlived the dramatist in Browning. That is a correct assay of his work taken in chronological order. Re-reading Browning recently I think I have been most impressed by what I am going to talk about least—the conversational nonchalance of much of his later poetry: *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, *The Inn Album*, *The Two Poets of Croisic*, *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance*, *La Saisiaz*, and other later poems. Of course, anyone who has read Browning these many years has always been conscious of this quality in his poetry: it is inherent in Browning from the outset—is the thing that made his poetry difficult to his early contemporaries—his digressions, parentheses, casual allusions to things unexplained. But only after many readings of him have I in

this latest re-reading fully realized how the conversational quality predominates in the latter portion of his work—with the irresponsibility of genial conversation, with the humors and non-sequiturs of conversation.

Much of this latter poetry is as conversational as Cowper's poetry, with, of course, immensely more vigor than the invalid Cowper possessed, and with a mingling of "chattiness" and erudition which makes part of the charm of Dr. Johnson's conversation as recorded by Boswell. Cowper wrote in his poem *Conversation*:

Digression is so much in modern use,
Thought is so rare, and fancy so profuse,
Some never seem so wide of their intent,
As when returning to the theme they meant.

"Thought" is certainly not "rare" in any of Browning's poetry—the rather is thought abundant and penetrating; but "digression" is "much in use." He always has a "theme" in his latter poetry, but he does not shout it and pound it out from a pulpit. He seems rather, like Dr. Johnson, to "fold his legs" and "have his talk out."

Not Cowper himself could have written more "familiar" poetry than did Browning in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* where he chats with one of Thackeray's daughters about things in general and discusses with her whether Normandy should be called the White Cotton Night-Cap Country (Miss Thackeray's appellation), because of its sleepy life and the characteristic headgear of the country, or whether it should be called Red Cotton Night-Cap Country because of a recent tragedy there. To tell the story of that tragedy and to expound its moral (the eternal struggle of flesh with spirit) is Browning's purpose. But he approaches the story and its moral as leisurely as if he had all time and part of eternity in which to say his say.

In *La Saisiaz* (written five years after *Red Cotton Night-*

Cap Country) the poet is meditating on death and immortality (the meditation prompted by the sudden death of a dear friend). He is knocking at the closed door before which Job and Aeschylus and Omar Khayyam, and many a philosophic poet of many ages has waited—the mystery of life and what mortals call death. There is close reasoning in the poem—and, incidentally, an ultimate abandonment of reason and a retreat back into faith for the answer. Had Browning been exclusively a philosopher or a theologian, he could have compressed his inquiry, arguments, intuitions, into half the space of the poem. But being a poet (and a conversational poet in an intimate mood) he allows memory and fancy to range over many details unrelated to the main theme. In leisurely trochaic lines (“lingering trochaics”, Dr. Herford tags them), he recalls: days which he and his friend had spent in the Swiss mountains; their plans for mountain-climbing; their joy in the rivers, vineyards and peaks of Switzerland; their last conversation on French politics; even his cold morning bath and how he had had to pacify a frightened dog when on his way to the mountain pool in which he planned to take his plunge; his last parting with his friend on the stairway landing, when the friend who was found dead next morning, seemed so well, and they bade each other

Good night till tomorrow, friend

and

Sleep you well;

—these and a score of other intimate but unrelated details; details which give the charm to the inquiry into life, death and immortality.

In the whimsical poem, *The Two Poets of Croisic*, he draws a moral on “fame” from the recital of some obscure incidents of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But

while telling the stories of the two poets, he indulges innumerable digressions; and in the irrelevancies are the wit and wisdom of the poem. This poem happens to be written in stanzaic form, each stanza concluding with a couplet; most of the couplets as condensed, sententious and witty as those of Alexander Pope, suggesting that if Browning had confined himself within the "scanty ground" of some rigid verse form, like the couplet or the sonnet, he might have been clearer. But would he have been so charming? Perhaps not. And I am suspecting now that most of us have fixed our attention so much on Browning's extraordinary dramatic power that we have tended to minimize his more personal conversational style.

Browning's poetic art is a rich, varied, stimulating and satisfying art, but it is by no means a "perfect art," if by "perfect" we mean the ruthless deletion of redundancies, the complete subordination of details to design, the symmetrical modulation of the classical architect. His faults are many: some amusing, some irritating, some perverse.

His major defects seem to be classifiable as "obscurities"—the things about which there was so much complaint when people thought they ought to like Browning's poetry—and didn't. There is less muttering about "obscurity" now that the Browning craze is apparently ended and it is understood and accepted that one may candidly admit that he does not care for Browning's poetry, and yet retain his self-respect, continue to be regarded as a good citizen, serious-minded, God-fearing, even intelligent. Liking Browning's poems is now optional, not obligatory. However, it must be added that not to like them (and read them—and the only way to like them is to read them) is to deprive one's self of much joy, the joy of a vigorous polychromatic art, perhaps the most masculine and variegated poetic art that came out of

nineteenth century England; an art sometimes as complex and reticulated as a Gothic cathedral, sometimes as simple and direct as a lyric by Burns, but whether simple or complex, nearly always burly with health, ruddy with the red wine of blood that pulses through well-conditioned veins, always, as Miss Elizabeth Barrett wrote of the early poems of Robert Browning whom she had not then met:

Or from Browning some 'Pomegranite,' which if cut deep down the middle,
Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity.

Now, while Browning's poetry, as a whole, is not as obscure as the complainants once said, and some of it not in the least obscure, it must be admitted that there is sufficient evidence for indictment. Obscurity is offensive because it leaves the reader questioning (as did Douglas Jerrold) whether he or the poet is crazy.

When Browning is obscure, the obscurity is sometimes due to the material of the poem, sometimes to the poetic treatment of the material, sometimes to both. That poem *Sordello* which perplexed people in 1840, and nipped in the bud a springtime promise of popular favor, is the supreme example of the two sources of Browning's obscurity, subject-matter and treatment. First, the poem is about an obscure person, Sordello. Browning had a flare for making obscure historical people relive in his poems; there is a long list of these, too long to be catalogued here. Next difficulty, *Sordello* (forerunner of Dante) was an obscure Italian poet in the age of the quarrels of the Guelphs and Ghibellines. To the ordinary mind the intricacies of Guelph and Ghibelline politics are as confusing as an unabridged railway timetable or a record of genealogies. But Browning's was not an "ordinary mind." His alert and all-curious intellect was as familiar with the affairs of Guelphs and Ghibellines as it was with current party politics in England. He made a journey

to Italy especially to acquaint himself the better with these politico-historical backgrounds. Characteristic, that, of Browning, to prepare for a poem as some prepare to write history or science or philosophy. The purely intellectual element in Browning's poetry deserves a whole chapter. He pays us, the readers, the compliment of assuming that we are equally informed and agile. We are flattered, but embarrassed. He talks of Guelphs and Ghibellines as familiarly as if they lived in our street; of Ecelin and Taurello and the rest as casually as if they were the gentlemen we dined with last evening. He bewilders us because he is too polite to explain his allusions.

To obscurity of subject he adds (not only in *Sordello*, but in many other poems) obscurity of style, growing, largely, out of the paradox that he is both too profuse and too condensed. In condensation his style becomes frequently elliptical: sometimes the subject of a sentence is omitted, sometimes the predicate; sometimes a printer's "dash" marks a leap, like the lightning's, from one thought to another; no connectives expressed, no connectives anywhere except in the reader's consciousness, and sometimes the acrobatic style has left the reader almost unconscious. But Browning is equally obscure because of his digressions. If these were in *Sordello* only we might suppose them evidences of immaturity, inability to fuse his thoughts into a unified whole. But the digressions continue, in most of his longer poems, to the end of his writing-career. They are really the result of his brain processes, super-active, almost abnormally associational. One thing suggests something else, and he follows a chance allusion to its lair, while the story pauses in the telling. Matthew Arnold in his essay on *Translating Homer*, says that Homer "keeps to one thought at a time, and puts that thought forth in its complete natural plainness, instead of being led away

from it by some fancy striking him in connection with it, and being beguiled to wander off with this fancy till his original thought, in its natural reality, knows him no more." Browning was saturated in Greek epic and drama. His father who "was a scholar and knew Greek" used to play out for the child the Homeric Tales (see Browning's poem, *Development*), and later Mr. and Mrs. Robert Browning read, pondered and paraphrased Greek drama. But by instinct and practice Browning belonged to the non-Greek Romantic Movement, with its bent for tangled details, intricate masses of beauty, complexity, as contrasted with Greek simplicity, directness, severe unity.

I spoke of the charm of the desultory method used in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, the impression of rich mentality in easeful operation. To one who relishes the processes of a superior mind the digressions are a joy. But if the story is "the thing" on which an eager reader is all-intent, the digressions beget impatience, for they postpone and interrupt the story. Presumably, the main purpose of *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* is to tell a tale, and the tale gets told in time, a tragical story as is the story related in *The Inn Album*, but if the digressions were omitted from *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* scarcely one-third the space would be necessary for recital. At one point the poet begins to tell the story, writes half a line and then breaks off with

but stay!

Permit me a preliminary word.

As 1030 lines have been written, it would seem that he has had his "preliminary word." He has talked of night-caps and some of the eighteenth century poets who wore them, Pope, Cowper and Voltaire; of the French Revolution, Napoleon's quelling of mobs, and scarlet sins; of many things suggested by "night-caps" and the word "red," and many

things suggested by neither, including dry goods and groceries and a disquisition on fiddles. Nevertheless, at line 1031 he wants a "preliminary word." He gets it by way of a parenthesis, then a parenthesis within the parenthesis, and a third parenthesis within the second, and the reader grows giddy. This continues for ninety-three lines when the poet abruptly pauses and asks

Where is my story?

and the bewildered reader echoes "Where?" but supposes it is now at last about to begin. But no, the poet bids him

Take its moral first.

This is unusual, for the orthodox method is to tell the story before the moral; but Browning is usually unusual. The moral is Don't advise a man to climb a tower if he is likely to fall off. As Miss Hilda Wangel in Ibsen's *Master Builder* is one of the few people on record who gave exactly that advice the moral seems over-cautious. There follow lines—some one hundred and fifty of them—about towers and Bishops, about mountains and the Norsemen's forays, about Rabelais and Voltaire, and finally, toward line 1265 we find that the story has actually begun, but so obliquely that we were scarcely aware it had begun. And not until nearly a hundred lines farther does the narrative grow lucid.

Another source of confusion is Browning's habit of indirect discourse. Without much turning back to foregoing pages it is impossible to know who is talking at a given time in *Sordello*: Sordello or Taurello or Palma or Browning himself. Akin to this is discourse within discourse in many of his monologues. Even the exquisite *Toccata of Galuppi's* is unintelligible until we get clear in our minds which lines are spoken by the organist, which the organist is imagining that Galuppi speaks, and which lines represent the dialogue

of the frivolous masqueraders as imagined by the organist. In *Dis Aliter Visum* a woman is talking to a man about an incident of the past. Presently she passes from her own observations to tell him what he thought on that occasion. We follow the transition by close attention. Then she tells him what he thought she thought; we feel the ground slipping under us. Finally she tells him what he thought she thought he thought. Here we falter and unless we are patient, we, like Dante's Paolo and Francesca,

Within the book read no more that day.

When such preliminary barriers have been surmounted, when Browning's idiosyncrasies are understood (and we don't have to read him long to understand them), the perusal of Browning becomes a rewarding occupation. The difficulties of understanding the machinery of *A Toccata of Galuppi's* are forgotten in the enjoyment of the music and the dramatic skill of that little masterpiece. Only spasmodically does Browning forget that he is a poet. Into the close hard reasoning of *Sordello* (the most difficult of his poems) there break intervals of poignantly beautiful poetry; poetry which he and no other could have written; poetry the more satisfying for the tough kernel of intellectualism within the luscious rind. I recall my first reading of *Sordello*—all the years ago. I was ready to throw the book down and swear it was no poem at all when I came upon the lines which relate how the poet was seeking for a subject when he hit upon this one:

I single out
Sordello, compassed murkily about
With ravages of six long sad hundred years.

Then I knew I had found the poet, not the psychologist merely, nor the antiquarian merely, but the authentic poet who feels and can express the pathos of silent things—death

and the tacit past. And so I read to the end this long, long story of a human soul in the sorrow of conscious failure. And as I read I came to many a golden isle of poetry—passages which I have re-read many times since, though I do not remember that I have ever re-read the whole poem from beginning to end.

Browning's carelessness of public opinion, his obstinate refusal to pander to popular taste, not infrequently resulted in his burying the best of a long poem in the middle of it. His recondite learning sometimes builds a barrier between the reader and the treasure in the form of a difficult instead of an inviting opening of the poem. It is good strategy not to begin at the beginning in a first reading of *The Ring and the Book*, but of its twelve books to read first Book VII, Pompilia; then Book VI, Caponsacchi; then Books V and XI, Guido Franceschini; then Book X, the Pope. As the same story is told nine times over, from nine different points of view, the drift of it can be got from any one of the five books just named. And after one has read the five books he will almost certainly begin at the beginning and read the twelve books—and in doing so he will have read the noblest English poem of modern times. If in nineteenth or twentieth century English poetry there is anything equal to the poignant pathos of Pompilia; the valiant splendor of Caponsacchi; the subtlety of Franceschini; the mellow wisdom of the Pope; the fervid dramatic beauty of the whole, I do not know of its existence.

How comes it that this most dramatic English poet since the Elizabethans did not write successful stage plays? He wrote nine plays, and some of them have been produced on the stage by able actors, but none has had an overwhelming theatrical success. Why not? To say, with misguided idolaters, that he is "too good for the popular stage" is to

talk patent nonsense; is to forget Shakespeare, Sophocles, Molière and Ibsen. None of them was "too good for the stage," and Browning is not better than they. To say that he was too free-handed in his dramatic methods is to ignore facts: for in the first place, *Strafford* is quite conventionally constructed, and in the second place, Browning's methods in some of his plays anticipated the technique of some of the most recent playwrights. Professor Lounsbury criticizes *Pippa Passes* by the standard of traditional drama, because it is a sequence of scenes, instead of a formally constructed five-act play. But Kenneth McGowan would probably commend it for that very reason. Structurally, it anticipates plays like Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* and *Strange Interlude*. For Browning was a forerunner of modernistic drama as well as modernistic verse. We must look deeper than form alone to uncover the *rationale* of the paradox that Browning, who had more dramatic instinct than a score of ordinary playwrights, has had only a limited success on the practical stage.

Two quotations, one from a spectator at an early performance of *Strafford*, one from Browning himself, will assist a little. William Bell Scott, a poet of the time, went to the theatre to applaud, but said: "The speakers had every one of them orations to deliver, and no action of any kind to perform." In a discarded preface to *Paracelsus*, Browning wrote: "Instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress." Both observations hit a salient fact of the Browning plays—they contain little action. But there is little action in most of Ibsen's plays, yet these plays, adequately acted, spell-bind audiences. Where is the difference? It goes back, I think, to Browning's habit-

ual refusal to concede anything, either to reader or audience. Ibsen's *Doll's House* is evidence that a play may have little external action and yet be theatrically successful. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is evidence that moods may be minutely and subtly unfolded, and that the play may yet be theatrically successful. But in each of these plays the audience is kept advised of the general direction of the story and the progress it is making. Browning uses almost no stage technique to keep his audience informed of these essentials. Conversation in his dramas as in his other poems circles about the subject instead of being focussed on it and moving forward.

This is realistic; in solemn crises people often talk irrelevancies. Conversation preceding funeral ceremonies is usually rather than exceptionally more about commonplace things than about death, the deceased and the bereaved. This is not callous; it is merely a human trait, an easement of strain. Soldiers joke with each other in the trenches before going over the top. Condemned men sometimes banter their executioners on the gallows. Statesmen exchange gossip of the capital while assembling to consider a critical national issue. This human trait of talking about trivial things while preparing for momentous things was understood by Shakespeare. But what he does occasionally and briefly, Browning does habitually and at length.

Coleridge said that Shakespeare kept "in the high road of life," meaning that he did not, like some of his contemporaries and successors, wander into prurient bypaths, did not depart from that which the normal run of people call the normal course of life. He depicted tragedy beyond which tragic art has not gone; but precisely the point about his tragic culminations is that they are what ordinary people observe as the ordinary result of behavior departing from the ordinary drift of experience, combined with the equally

obvious aspect of human experience that often innocent people are caught and crushed in the machinery set in motion by the guilty. Even so modern and liberal-minded a commentator as Frank Harris was impressed by Shakespeare's steady standards of good and evil. A vaulting poetic and dramatic genius coalesced with clear perception of the facts of things which we call "healthy-mindedness". The mental health of Shakespeare has been a subject of comment from Goethe to Benedetto Croce. Shakespeare also keeps in the "high road" of dramatic art—sticks to his story. He has his overtones and undermeanings—one of the traits which make continuous study of him fascinating; but an unlettered audience can lose his artistic shadings and follow clearly the progress of the story. Browning, on the other hand, lingers on overtones and undermeanings until the story is virtually lost for the ordinary audience. He hints and alludes when the practical stage is shouting for exposition and demonstration. He keeps his audience guessing, and audiences, as a rule, do not care to guess. Browning was more interested in people than in stories. So was Shakespeare. But Shakespeare had to earn a living from the theatre, and Browning did not. Shakespeare had to make concessions to popular taste and even human stupidity. Browning did not. Almost the only suggestion of irritability in Browning appears in his dealings with actors and producers. After some disastrous experiences with distinguished actors over productions of *Strafford*, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* and *Colombe's Birthday*, Browning decided to write no more for a practical stage—saying there was too much "smutch" and "spangle" in the whole business. Resolution to write no more for the stage did not mean resolution to write no more poetic dramas. He wrote a number of these, until his completed list of plays was nine.

Browning was too dramatic by instinct to refrain from some form or other of dramatic composition. But it was by dramatic analysis rather than by dramatic spectacle. If we were called upon to name Browning's supreme faculty as artist we should not be far astray if we should call it power to analyze character by dramatic method.

After awhile he realized that his best medium was not in dialogue but in monologue—the dramatic monologue, of which he was almost the inventor; a form in which he had experimented in some contributions to a minor popular magazine before he wrote his plays. Quite definitely he returned to this form twenty years later in his volume *Men and Women*. In this form he wrote his masterpiece *The Ring and the Book*—a series of monologues, in which the same story is told and retold by different people from different points of view. The dramatic monologue differs from the soliloquy in that there is supposed to be present a person other than the speaker whose presence prompts quick and abrupt changes in the discourse. By its nature the dramatic monologue satisfied Browning's impatient genius; it dispenses with machinery, entrances and exits, explanations and stage directions. It begins abruptly *in medias res*. It is for us the readers to discover who is talking, to whom he is talking, about what he is talking. The monologue is allusive rather than expository, elusive rather than lucid. Of all the rhetorician's rules, the rule which Browning most ignored was "Be clear". Not to tell something, but to suggest many things fitted Browning's fancy. There is much "between the lines" in a Browning monologue. Above all English poets, he appealed to the imagination of the "creative reader". Emerson said that great literature depends not only upon great writers but also upon great readers. To such Browning will always appeal. Moreover, the method of the dramatic

monologue enabled Browning to indulge his fancy for probing the depths of personality, layer below layer, until there are revealed secrets of personality of which even the person who speaks in a Browning monologue is unaware.

In conclusion, this: scorn of contemporary literature betrays the mood and mind of the musty reactionary, in whom has perished the vitality needful for those continuous re-adaptations which are essential to the individual dwelling in a world of mutabilities. To reject the literature of the past is bourgeois, crass, bumptious provincialism. The present grows, often unawaredly, out of the past. Healthy-mindedness demands hearty, intelligent recognition of the nexus between that which is and that which was. It is profitable now and then to revert to an old master and see how he did what he did—if only to recover zest and freshened receptivities for the new, and a surer means of measuring it.

We return from these pious pilgrimages, not in a mood of contempt for the present or of condescension toward contemporary writers, but better qualified to assess them and somewhat more exacting in our requirements of them. Our perception of artistic values is quickened by re-reading the elders, whose writings have survived shifting tastes and the ravages of time—"time which antiquates antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things," but has "spared" productions of the past. These adventures into the past are like a great experience, and assuredly germane to a liberal education; we think we have learned to recognize sound art when we see it, to reject the meretricious, to do homage to new literature which tastes of immortality. With minds and emotions reattuned to art sufficiently vital to resist destruction by shifting tastes and rigid qualitative analysis, we are not easily imposed upon by the little tricks, the spangles and the gewgaws of little poets; and at the same time we are

better prepared to welcome new true art which is abuilding all about us. Matthew Arnold's dictum stands, the best is none too good for us.

Browning is among the "best". His age is not remote, but chronologically he belongs distinctly to the past. He died more than forty years ago, and in the crowded decades which separate our time from his, civilization has changed countenance, in politics, science, arts, everything.

And yet not "everything", especially not the things about which Browning cared most and wrote most, the life of the individual spirit, the means of keeping it alive, vigorous, equipped. Of these things Browning wrote with an art by no means perfect, but as vitalized as the things of which he wrote. No hugely vital thing is ever perfect (a Browning doctrine, by the way). It seems almost a "law", that the bigger art is, the more numerous its imperfections. Goethe and Shakespeare—how they could sometimes flounder in the mire! And how they could sometimes recover their wings and pierce the blue vault with their inspirations! Not quite on the Olympian summit of Shakespeare and Goethe, yet not so far down the trail either, was Robert Browning, with his prodigious artistic flaws and faults, with his prodigious artistic achievements.