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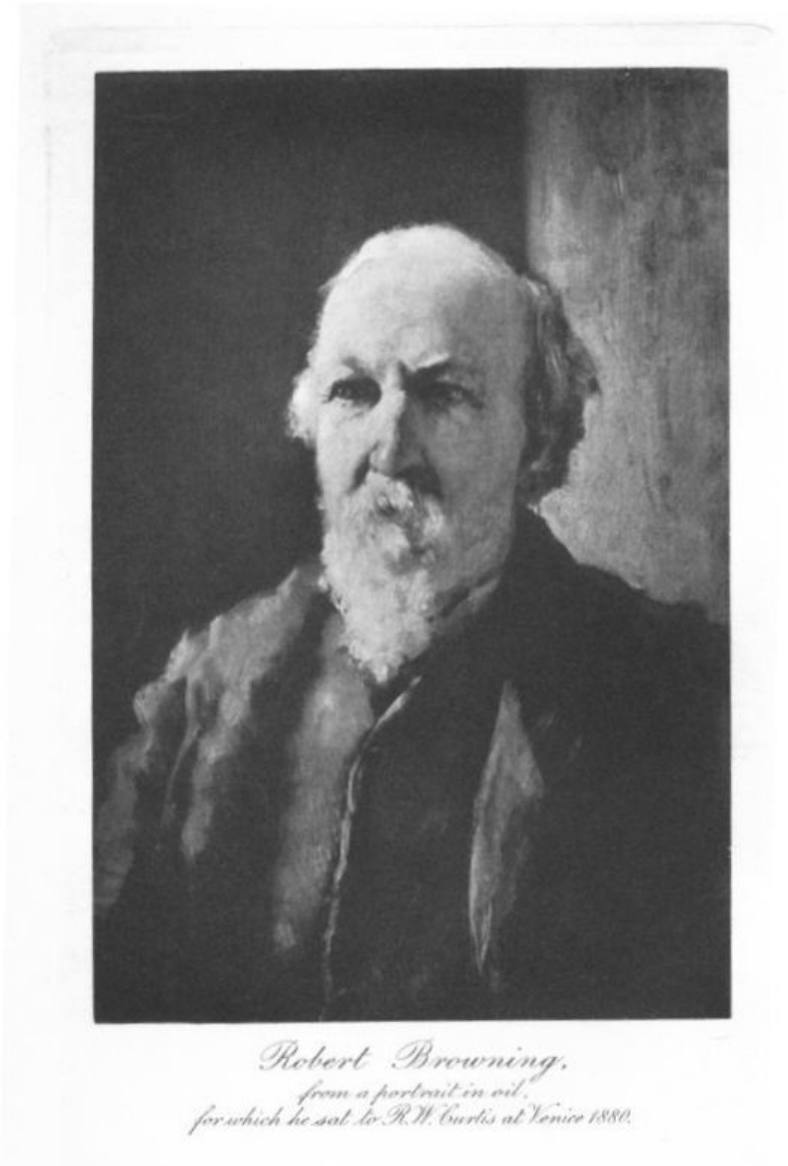
Robert Browning



Robert Browning,
from a portrait in oil,
for which he sat to R.W. Curtis at Venice 1880.

Robert Browning, from a portrait in oil, for which he sat to R.W. Curtis at Venice 1880.

ROBERT BROWNING

BY

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If I, too, should try and speak at times,
Leading your love to where my love, perchance,
Climbed earlier, found a nest before you knew,
Why, bear with the poor climber, for love's sake.

—*Balaustion's Adventure*.>

Editor's Preface

"In the case of those whom the public has learned to honour and admire, there is a *biography of the mind*—the phrase is Mr Gladstone's—that is a matter of deep interest." In a life of Robert Browning it is especially true that the biography we want is of this nature, for its events are to be classed rather among achievements of the human spirit than as objective incidents, and its interest depends only in a secondary sense on circumstance or movement in the public eye. The special function of the present book in the growing library of Browning literature is to give such a biography of Browning's mind, associating his poems with their date and origin, as may throw some light on his inward development. Browning has become to many, in a measure which he could hardly have conceived possible himself, one of the authoritative interpreters of the spiritual factors in human life. His tonic optimism dissipates the grey atmosphere of materialism, which has obscured the sunclad heights of life as effectually as a fog. To see life through Browning's eyes is to see it shot through and through with spiritual issues, with a background of eternal destiny; and to come appreciably nearer than the general consciousness of our time to seeing it steadily and seeing it whole. Those who prize his influence know how to value everything which throws light on the path by which he reached his resolute and confident outlook.

It is almost possible to count on the fingers of one hand the few men who could successfully write a book of this character and scope. The Editor believes that, in the present case, one of the very

few has been found who had the qualifications required. Much of the apparent obscurity of Browning is due to his habit of climbing up a precipice of thought, and then kicking away the ladder by which he climbed. Dr Dowden has with singular success readjusted the steps, so that readers may follow the poet's climb. Those who are not daunted by the Paracelsus and Sordello chapter, where the subject requires some close and patient attention, will find vigorous narrative and pellucid exposition interwoven in such a way as to keep them in intimate and constantly closer touch with the "biography of Browning's mind."

D.M.

Preface

An attempt is made in this volume to tell the story of Browning's life, including, as part of it, a notice of his books, which may be regarded as the chief of "his acts and all that he did." I have tried to keep my reader in constant contact with Browning's mind and art, and thus a sense of the growth and development of his genius ought to form itself before the close.

The materials accessible for a biography, apart from Browning's published writings, are not copious. He destroyed many letters; many, no doubt, are in private hands. For some parts of his life I have been able to add little to what Mrs Orr tells. But since her biography of Browning was published a good deal of interesting matter has appeared. The publication of "The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning" has enabled me to construct a short, close-knit narrative of the incidents that led up to Browning's marriage. From that date until the death of Mrs Browning her "Letters," edited by Mr Kenyon, has been my chief source. My method has not been that of quotation, but the substance of many letters is fused, as far as was possible, into a brief, continuous story. Two privately issued volumes of Browning's letters, edited by Mr T.J. Wise, and Mr Wise's "Browning Bibliography" have been of service to me. Mr Gosse's "Robert Browning, Personalia," Mrs Ritchie's "Tennyson, Ruskin and Browning," the "Life of Tennyson" by his son, Mr Henry James's volumes on W.W. Story, letters of Dante Rossetti, the diary of Mr W.M. Rossetti, with other writings of his, memoirs, reminiscences or autobiographies of Lady Martin, F.T. Palgrave, Jowett, Sir James Paget, Gavan Duffy, Robert Buchanan, Rudolf Lehmann, W.J. Stillman, T.A. Trollope, Miss F.P. Cobbe, Miss Swanwick, and others have been consulted. And several interesting articles in periodicals, in particular Mrs Arthur Bronson's articles "Browning in Venice" and "Browning in Asolo," have contributed to my narrative. For some information about Browning's father and mother, and his connection with York Street Independent Chapel, I am indebted to Mr F. Herbert Stead, Warden of "The Robert Browning Settlement," Walworth. I thank Messrs Smith, Elder and Co., as representing Mr R. Barrett Browning, for permission to make such quotations as I have ventured to make from copyright letters. I thank the general Editor of this series, the Rev. D. Macfadyen, for kind and valuable suggestions.

My study of Browning's poems is chronological. I recognise the disadvantages of this method, but I also perceive certain advantages. Many years ago in "Studies in Literature" I attempted a general view of Browning's work, and wrote, as long ago as 1867, a careful study of *Sordello*. What I now write may suffer as well as gain from a familiarity of so many years with his writings. But to make them visible objects to me I have tried to put his poems outside myself, and approach them with a fresh mind. Whether I have failed or partly succeeded I am unable to determine.

The analysis of *La Saisiaz* appeared—substantially—in the little Magazine of the Home Reading Union, and one or two other short passages are recovered from uncollected articles of mine. I have incorporated in my criticism a short passage from one of my wife's articles on Browning in *The Dark Blue Magazine*, making such modifications as suited my purpose, and she has contributed a passage to the pages which close this volume.

I had the privilege of some personal acquaintance with Browning, and have several cordial letters of his addressed to my wife and to myself. These I have not thought it right to use.

E.D.

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Chapter I

Childhood and Youth

The ancestry of Robert Browning has been traced[1] to an earlier Robert who lived in the service of Sir John Bankes of Corfe Castle, and died in 1746. His eldest son, Thomas, "was granted a lease for three lives of the little inn, in the little hamlet of East Woodyates and parish of Pentridge, nine miles south-west of Salisbury on the road to Exeter." Robert, born in 1749, the son of this Thomas, and grandfather of the poet, became a clerk in the Bank of England, and rose to be principal in the Bank Stock Office. At the age of twenty-nine he married Margaret Tittle, a lady born in the West Indies and possessed of West Indian property. He is described by Mrs Orr as an able, energetic, and worldly man. He lived until his grandson was twenty-one years old. His first wife was the mother of another Robert, the poet's father, born in 1781. When the boy had reached the age of seven he lost his mother, and five years later his father married again. This younger Robert when a youth desired to become an artist, but such a career was denied to him. He longed for a University education, and, through the influence of his stepmother, this also was refused. They shipped the young man to St Kitts, purposing that he should oversee the West Indian estate. There, as Browning on the authority of his mother told Miss Barrett, "he conceived such a hatred to the slave-system ... that he relinquished every prospect, supported himself while there in some other capacity, and came back, while yet a boy, to his father's profound astonishment and rage."[2] At the age of twenty-two he obtained a clerkship in the Bank of England, an employment which, his son says, he always detested. Eight years later he married Sarah Anna, daughter of William Wiedemann, a Dundee shipowner, who was the son of a German merchant of Hamburg. The young man's father, on hearing that his son was a suitor to Miss Wiedemann, had waited benevolently on her uncle "to assure him that his niece would be thrown away on a man so evidently born to be hanged."[3] In 1811 the new-married pair settled in Camberwell, and there in a house in Southampton Street Robert Browning—an only son—was born on May 7, 1812. Two years later (Jan. 7, 1814) his sister, Sarah Anna—an only daughter—known in later years as Sarianna, a form adopted by her father, was born. She survived her brother, dying in Venice on the morning of April 22, 1903.[4]

Robert Browning's father and mother were persons who for their own sakes deserve to be remembered. His father, while efficient in his work in the Bank, was a wide and exact reader of literature, classical as well as modern. We are told by Mrs Orr of his practice of soothing his little boy to sleep "by humming to him an ode of Anacreon," and by Dr Moncure Conway that he was versed in mediaeval legend, and seemed to have known Paracelsus, Faustus, and even Talmudic personages with an intimate familiarity. He wrote verses in excellent couplets of the eighteenth century manner, and strung together fantastic rhymes as a mode of aiding his boy in tasks which tried the memory. He was a dexterous draughtsman, and of his amateur handiwork in portraiture and caricature—sometimes produced, as it were, instinctively, with a result that was unforeseen—much remains to prove his keen eye and his skill with the pencil. Besides the curious books which he eagerly collected, he also gathered together many prints—those of Hogarth especially, and in early states. He had a singular interest, such as may also be seen in the author of *The Ring and the Book*, in investigating and elucidating complex criminal cases.[5] He was a lover of athletic sports and never knew ill-health. For the accumulation of riches he had no talent and no desire, but he had a simple wealth of affection which he bestowed generously on his children and his friends. "My father," wrote Browning, "is tender-hearted to a fault.... To all women and children he is chivalrous." "He had," writes Mr W.J. Stillman, who knew Browning's father in Paris in his elder years, "the perpetual juvenility of a blessed child. If to live in the world as if not of it indicates a saintly nature, then Robert Browning the elder was a saint; a serene, untroubled soul, conscious of no moral or theological problem to disturb his serenity, and as gentle as a gentle woman; a man in whom, it seemed to me, no moral conflict could ever have arisen to cloud his frank acceptance of life, as he found it come to him.... His unworldliness had not a flaw."[6] To Dante Rossetti he appeared, as an old man, "lovable beyond description," with that "submissive yet highly cheerful simplicity of character which often ... appears in the family of a great man, who uses at last what the others have kept for him." He is, Rossetti continues, "a complete oddity—with a real genius for drawing—but caring for nothing in the least except Dutch boors,—fancy, the father of Browning!—and as innocent as a child." Browning himself declared that he had not one artistic taste in common with his father—"in pictures, he goes 'souls away' to Brauwer, Ostade, Teniers ... he would turn from the Sistine Altar-piece to these—in music he desiderates a tune 'that has a story connected with it.'" Yet Browning inherited much from his father, and was ready to acknowledge his gains. In *Development*, one of the poems of his last volume, he recalls his father's sportive way of teaching him at five years old, with the aid of piled-up chairs and tables—the cat for Helen, and Towzer and Tray as the Atreidai,—the story of the siege of Troy, and, later, his urging the boy to read the tale "properly told" in the translation of Homer by his favourite poet, Pope. He lived almost to the close of his eighty-fifth year, and if he was at times bewildered by his son's poetry, he came nearer to it in intelligent sympathy as he grew older, and he had for long the satisfaction of enjoying his son's fame.

The attachment of Robert Browning to his mother—"the true type of a Scottish gentlewoman," said Carlyle—was deep and intimate. For him she was, in his own phrase, "a divine woman"; her death in 1849 was to Browning almost an overwhelming blow. She was of a nature finely and delicately strung. Her nervous temperament seems to have been transmitted—robust as he was in many ways—to her son. The love of music, which her Scottish-German father possessed in a high degree, leaping over a generation, reappeared in Robert Browning. His capacity for intimate friendships with animals—spider and toad and lizard—was surely an inheritance from his mother.

Mr Stillman received from Browning's sister an account of her mother's unusual power over both wild creatures and household pets. "She could lure the butterflies in the garden to her," which reminds us of Browning's whistling for lizards at Asolo. A fierce bull-dog intractable to all others, to her was docile and obedient. In her domestic ways she was gentle yet energetic. Her piety was deep and pure. Her husband had been in his earlier years a member of the Anglican communion; she was brought up in the Scottish kirk. Before her marriage she became a member of the Independent congregation, meeting for worship at York Street, Lock's Fields, Walworth, where now stands the Robert Browning Hall. Her husband attached himself to the same congregation; both were teachers in the Sunday School. Mrs Browning kept, until within a few years of her death, a missionary box for contributions to the London Missionary Society. The conditions of membership implied the acceptance of "those views of doctrinal truth which for the sake of distinction are called Calvinistic." Thus over the poet's childhood and youth a religious influence presided; it was not sacerdotal, nor was it ascetic; the boy was in those early days, as he himself declared, "passionately religious." Their excellent pastor was an entirely "unimaginative preacher of the Georgian era," who held fast by the approved method of "three heads and a conclusion." Browning's indifference to the ministrations of Mr Clayton was not concealed, and on one occasion he received a rebuke in the presence of the congregation. Yet the spirit of religion which surrounded and penetrated him was to remain with him, under all its modifications, to the end. "His face," wrote the Rev. Edward White, "is vividly present to my memory through the sixty years that have intervened. It was the most wonderful face in the whole congregation—pale, somewhat mysterious, and shaded with black, flowing hair, but a face whose expression you remember through a life-time. Scarcely less memorable were the countenances of his father, mother and sister."[7]

Robert Browning, writes Mrs Orr, "was a handsome, vigorous, fearless child, and soon developed an unresting activity and a fiery temper." His energy of mind made him a swift learner. After the elementary lessons in reading had been achieved, he was prepared for the neighbouring school of the Rev. Thomas Ready by Mr Ready's sisters. Having entered this school as a day-boarder, he remained under Mr Ready's care until the year 1826. To facile companionship with his school-fellows Browning was not prone, but he found among them one or two abiding friends. As for the rest, though he was no winner of school prizes, he seems to have acquired a certain intellectual mastery over his comrades; some of them were formed into a dramatic *troupe* for the performance of his boyish plays. Perhaps the better part of his education was that of his hours at home. He read widely in his father's excellent library. The favourite books of his earliest years, Croxall's *Fables* and Quarles's *Emblems*, were succeeded by others which made a substantial contribution to his mind. A list given by Mrs Orr includes Walpole's *Letters*, Junius, Voltaire, and Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. The first book he ever bought with his own money was Macpherson's *Ossian*, and the first composition he committed to paper, written years before his purchase of the volume, was an imitation of Ossian, "whom," says Browning, "I had not read, but conceived, through two or three scraps in other books." His early feeling for art was nourished by visits to the Dulwich Gallery, to which he obtained an entrance when far under the age permitted by the rules; there he would sit for an hour before some chosen picture, and in later years he could recall the "wonderful Rembrandt of Jacob's vision," the Giorgione music-lesson, the "triumphant Murillo pictures," "such a Watteau," and "all the Poussins."[8]

Among modern poets Byron at first with him held the chief place. Boyish verses, written under the Byronic influence, were gathered into a group when the writer was but twelve years old; a title—*Incondita*—was found, and Browning's parents had serious intentions of publishing the manuscript. Happily the manuscript, declined by publishers, was in the end destroyed, and editors have been saved from the necessity of printing or reprinting these crudities of a great poet's childhood. Their only merit, he assured Mr Gosse, lay in "their mellifluous smoothness." It was an event of capital importance in the history of Browning's mind when—probably in his thirteenth year—he lighted, in exploring a book-stall, upon a copy of one of the pirated editions of Shelley's *Queen Mab* and other poems. Through the zeal of his good mother on the boy's behalf the authorised editions were at a later time obtained; and she added to her gift the works, as far as they were then in print, of Keats.[9] If ever there was a period of *Sturm und Drang* in Browning's life, it was during the years in which he caught from Shelley the spirit of the higher revolt. A new faith and unfaith came to him, radiant with colour, luminous with the brightness of dawn, and uttered with a new, keen, penetrating melody. The outward conduct of his life was obedient in all essentials to the good laws of use and wont. He pursued his various studies—literature, languages, music—with energy. He was diligent—during a brief attendance—in Professor Long's Greek class at University College—"a bright, handsome youth," as a classfellow has described him, "with long black hair falling over his shoulders." He sang, he danced, he rode, he boxed, he fenced. But below all these activities a restless inward current ran. For a time he became, as Mrs Orr has put it, "a professing atheist and a practising vegetarian;" and together with the growing-pains of intellectual independence there was present a certain aggressive egoism. He loved his home, yet he chafed against some of its social limitations. Of friendships outside his home we read of that with Alfred Domett, the 'Waring' of his poems, afterwards the poet and the statesman of New Zealand; with Joseph Arnould, afterwards the Indian judge; and with his cousin James Silverthorne, the 'Charles' of Browning's pathetic poem *May and Death*. We hear also of a tender boyish sentiment, settling into friendship, for Miss Eliza Flower, his senior by nine years, for whose musical compositions he had an ardent admiration: "I put it apart from all other English music I know," he wrote as late as 1845, "and fully believe in it as *the* music we all waited for." With her sister Sarah, two years younger than Eliza, best known by her married name Sarah Flower Adams and remembered by her hymn, written in 1840, "Nearer my God to

Thee," he discussed as a boy his religious difficulties, and in proposing his own doubts drew forth her latent scepticism as to the orthodox beliefs. "It was in answering Robert Browning;" she wrote, "that my mind refused to bring forward argument, turned recreant, and sided with the enemy." Something of this period of Browning's *Sturm und Drang* can be divined through the ideas and imagery of *Pauline.*[10]

The finer influence of Shelley upon the genius of Browning in his youth proceeded from something quite other than those doctrinaire abstractions—the formulas of revolution—which Shelley had caught up from Godwin and certain French thinkers of the eighteenth century. Browning's spirit from first to last was one which was constantly reaching upward through the attainments of earth to something that lay beyond them. A climbing spirit, such as his, seemed to perceive in Shelley a spirit that not only climbed but soared. He could in those early days have addressed to Shelley words written later, and suggested, one cannot but believe, by his feeling for his wife:

> You must be just before, in fine,
> See and make me see, for your part,
> New depths of the Divine!

Shelley opened up for his young and enthusiastic follower new vistas leading towards the infinite, towards the unattainable Best. Browning's only piece of prose criticism—apart from scattered comments in his letters—is the essay introductory to that volume of letters erroneously ascribed to Shelley, which was published when Browning was but little under forty years old. It expresses his mature feelings and convictions; and these doubtless contain within them as their germ the experience of his youth.[11] Shelley appears to him as a poet gifted with a fuller perception of nature and man than that of the average mind, and striving to embody the thing he perceives "not so much with reference to the many below, as to the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth—an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul." If Shelley was deficient in some subordinate powers which support and reinforce the purely poetic gifts, he possessed the highest faculty and in this he lived and had his being. "His spirit invariably saw and spoke from the last height to which it had attained." What was "his noblest and predominating characteristic" as a poet? Browning attempts to give it definition: it was "his simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the absolute, and of Beauty and Good in the concrete, while he throws, from his poet's station between both, swifter, subtler, and more numerous films for the connexion of each with each, than have been thrown by any modern artificer of whom I have knowledge." In other words it was Shelley's special function to fling an aerial bridge from reality, as we commonly understand that word, to the higher reality which we name the ideal; to set up an aerial ladder—not less solid because it is aerial—upon the earth, whose top reached to heaven. Such was Browning's conception of Shelley, and it pays little regard either to atheistic theory or vegetarian practice.

A time came when Robert Browning must make choice of a future career. His interests in life were manifold, but in some form or another art was the predominant interest. His father remembered his own early inclinations, and how they had been thwarted; he recognised the rare gifts of his son, and he resolved that he should not be immured in the office of a bank. Should he plead at the bar? Should he paint? Should he be a maker of music, as he at one time desired, and for music he always possessed an exceptional talent? When his father spoke to him, Robert Browning knew that his sister was not dependent on any effort of his to provide the means of living. "He appealed," writes Mr Gosse, "to his father, whether it would not be better for him to see life in the best sense, and cultivate the powers of his mind, than to shackle himself in the very outset of his career by a laborious training, foreign to that aim. ... So great was the confidence of the father in the genius of his son that the former at once acquiesced in the proposal." It was decided that he should take to what an old woman of the lake district, speaking of "Mr Wudsworth," described as "the poetry business." The believing father was even prepared to invest some capital in the concern. At his expense *Paracelsus, Sordello*, and *Bells and Pomegranates* were published.

A poet may make his entrance into literature with small or large inventions, by carving cherry-stones or carving a colossus. Browning, the creator of men and women, the fashioner of minds, would be a sculptor of figures more than life-size rather than an exquisite jeweller; the attempt at a Perseus of this Cellini was to precede his brooches and buttons. He planned, Mr Gosse tells us, "a series of monodramatic epics, narratives of the life of typical souls." In a modification of this vast scheme *Paracelsus*, which includes more speakers than one, and *Sordello*, which is not dramatic in form, find their places. They were preceded by *Pauline*, in the strictest sense a monodrama, a poem not less large in conception than either of the others, though this "fragment of a confession" is wrought out on a more contracted scale.

Pauline, published without the writer's name—his aunt Silverthorne bearing the cost of publication—was issued from the press in January 1833.[12] Browning had not yet completed his twenty-first year. When including it among his poetical works in 1867, he declared that he did so with extreme repugnance and solely with a view to anticipate unauthorised republication of what was no more than a "crude preliminary sketch," entirely lacking in good draughtsmanship and right handling. For the edition of twenty years later, 1888, he revised and corrected *Pauline* without re-handling it to any considerable extent. In truth *Pauline* is a poem from which Browning ought not to have desired to detach his mature self. Rarely does a poem by a writer so young deserve better to be read for its own sake. It is an interesting document in the history of

its author's mind. It gives promises and pledges which were redeemed in full. It shows what dropped away from the poet and what, being an essential part of his equipment, was retained. It exhibits his artistic method in the process of formation. It sets forth certain leading thoughts which are dominant in his later work. The first considerable production of a great writer must always claim attention from the student of his mind and art.

The poem is a study in what Browning in his *Fifine* terms "mental analysis"; it attempts to shadow forth, through the fluctuating moods of the dying man, a series of spiritual states. The psychology is sometimes crude; subtle, but clumsily subtle; it is, however, essentially the writer's own. To construe clearly the states of mind which are adumbrated rather than depicted is difficult, for Browning had not yet learnt to manifest his generalised conceptions through concrete details, to plunge his abstractions in reality. The speaker in the poem tells us that he "rudely shaped his life to his immediate wants"; this is intelligible, yet only vaguely intelligible, for we do not know what were these wants, and we do not see any rude shaping of his life. We are told of "deeds for which remorse were vain"; what were these deeds? did he, like Bunyan, play cat on Sunday, or join the ringers of the church bells? "Instance, instance," we cry impatiently. And so the story remains half a shadow. The poem is dramatic, yet, like so much of Browning's work, it is not pure drama coming from profound sympathy with a spirit other than the writer's own; it is only hybrid drama, in which the *dramatis persona* thinks and moves and acts under the necessity of expounding certain ideas of the poet. Browning's puppets are indeed too often in his earlier poems moved by intellectual wires; the hands are the hands of Luria or Djabal, but the voice is the showman's voice. A certain intemperance in the pursuit of poetic beauty, strange and lovely imagery which obscures rather than interprets, may be regarded as in *Pauline* the fault or the glory of youth; a young heir arrived at his inheritance will scatter gold pieces. The verse has caught something of its affluent flow, its wavelike career, wave advancing upon wave, from Shelley:

> 'Tis he, I ken the manner of his gait;
> He rises on the toe; that spirit of his
> In aspiration lifts him from the earth.

The aspiration in Browning's later verse is a complex of many forces; here it is a simple poetic enthusiasm.

By virtue of its central theme *Pauline* is closely related to the poems which at no great distance followed—*Paracelsus* and *Sordello*. Each is a study of the flaws which bring genius to all but ruin, a study of the erroneous conduct of life by men of extraordinary powers. In each poem the chief personage aspires and fails, yet rises—for Browning was not of the temper to accept ultimate failures, and postulated a heaven to warrant his optimistic creed—rises at the close from failure to a spiritual recovery, which may be regarded as attainment, but an attainment, as far as earth and its uses are concerned, marred and piteous; he recovers in the end his true direction, but recovers it only for service in worlds other than ours which he may hereafter traverse. He has been seduced or conquered by alien forces and through some inward flaw; he has been faithless to his highest faculties; he has not fulfilled his seeming destiny; yet before death and the darkness of death arrive, light has come; he perceives the wanderings of the way, and in one supreme hour or in one shining moment he gives indefeasible pledges of the loyalty which he has forfeited. Shelley in *Alastor*, the influence of which on Browning in writing *Pauline* is evident, had rebuked the idealist within himself, who would live in lofty abstractions to the loss of human sympathy and human love. Browning in *Pauline* also recognises this danger, but he indicates others—the risk of the lower faculties of the mind encroaching upon and even displacing the higher, the risk of the spirit of aggrandisement, even in the world of the imagination, obtaining the mastery over the spirit of surrender to that which is higher than self. It is quite right and needful to speak of the "lesson" of Browning's poem, and the lesson of *Pauline* is designed to inculcate first loyalty to a man's highest power, and secondly a worshipping loyalty and service to that which transcends himself, named by the speaker in *Pauline* by the old and simple name of God.

Was it the problem of his own life—that concerning the conduct of high, intellectual and spiritual powers—which Browning transferred to his art, creating personages other than himself to be exponents of his theme? We cannot tell; but the problem in varied forms persists from poem to poem. The poet imagined as twenty years of age, who makes his fragment of a confession in *Pauline*, is more than a poet; he is rather of the Sordello type than of the type represented in Eglamor and Aprile.[13] Through his imagination he would comprehend and possess all forms of life, of beauty, of joy in nature and in humanity; but he must also feel himself at the centre of these, the lord and master of his own perceptions and creations; and yet, at the same time, this man is made for the worship and service of a power higher than self. How is such a nature as this to attain its true ends? What are its special dangers? If he content himself with the exercise of the subordinate faculties, intellectual dexterity, wit, social charm and mastery, he is lost; if he should place himself at the summit, and cease to worship and to love, he is lost. He cannot alter his own nature; he cannot ever renounce his intense consciousness of self, nor even the claim of self to a certain supremacy as the centre of its own sympathies and imaginings. So much is inevitable, and is right. But if he be true to his calling as poet, he will task his noblest faculty, will live in it, and none the less look upward, in love, in humility, in the spirit of loyal service, in the spirit of glad aspiration, to that Power which leans above him and has set him his earthly task.

Such reduced to a colourless and abstract statement is the theme dealt with in *Pauline*. The young poet, who, through a fading autumn evening, lies upon his death-bed, has been faithless to

his high calling, and yet never wholly faithless. As the pallid light declines, he studies his own soul, he reviews his past, he traces his wanderings from the way, and all has become clear. He has failed for the uses of earth; but he recognises in himself capacities and desires for which no adequate scope could ever have been found in this life; and restored to the spirit of love, of trust, by such love, such trust as he can give Pauline, he cannot deny the witnessing audible within his own heart to a future life which may redeem the balance of his temporal loss. The thought which plays so large a part in Browning's later poetry is already present and potent here.

Two incidents in the history of a soul—studied by the speaker under the wavering lights of his hectic malady and fluctuating moods of passion—are dealt with in a singularly interesting and original way. He describes, with strange and beautiful imagery, the cynical, bitter pleasure—few of us do not know it—which the intellectual faculties sometimes derive from mocking and drawing down to their own level the spiritual powers, the intuitive powers, which are higher than they, higher, yet less capable of justification or verification by the common tests of sense and understanding. The witchcraft of the brain degrades the god in us:

> And then I was a young witch whose blue eyes,
> As she stood naked by the river springs,
> Drew down a god: I watched his radiant form
> Growing less radiant, and it gladdened me.

What he presents with such intensity of imaginative power Browning must have known—even if it were but for moments—by experience. And again, there is impressive truth and originality in the description of the state of the poet's mind which succeeded the wreck of his early faith and early hopes inspired by the voice of Shelley—the revolutionary faith in liberty, equality and human perfectibility. Wordsworth in *The Prelude*—unpublished when Browning wrote *Pauline*—which is also the history of a poet's mind, has described his own experience of the loss of all these shining hopes and lofty abstractions, and the temper of mind which he describes is one of moral chaos and spiritual despair. The poet of *Pauline* turns from political and social abstractions to real life, and the touch of reality awakens him as if from a splendid dream; but his mood is not so sane as that of despair. He falls back, with a certain joy, upon the exercise of his inferior powers; he wakes suddenly and "without heart-wreck ":

> First went my hopes of perfecting mankind,
> Next—faith in them, and then in freedom's self
> And virtue's self, then my own motives, ends,
> And aims and loves, and human love went last.
> I felt this no decay, because new powers
> Rose as old feelings left—wit, mockery,
> Light-heartedness; for I had oft been sad,
> Mistrusting my resolves, but now I cast
> Hope joyously away; I laughed and said
> "No more of this!"

It is difficult to believe that Browning is wholly dramatic here; we seem to discover something of that period of *Sturm und Drang*, when his mood grew restless and aggressive. The homage paid to Shelley, whose higher influence Browning already perceived to be in large measure independent of his creed of revolution, has in it certainly something of the spirit of autobiography. In this enthusiastic admiration for Shelley there is nothing to regret, except the unhappy extravagance of the name "Suntreader," which he invented as a title for the poet of *Alastor* and *Prometheus Unbound.*

The attention of Mr W.J. Fox, a Unitarian minister of note, had been directed to Browning's early unpublished verse by Miss Flower. In the *Monthly Repository* (April 1833) which he then edited, Mr Fox wrote of *Pauline* with admiration, and Browning was duly grateful for this earliest public recognition of his genius as a poet. In the *Athenaeum* Allen Cunningham made an effort to be appreciative and sympathetic. John Stuart Mill desired to be the reviewer of *Pauline* in *Taifs Magazine*; there, however, the poem had been already dismissed with one contemptuous phrase. It found few readers, but the admiration of one of these, who discovered *Pauline* many years later, was a sufficient compensation for the general indifference or neglect. "When Mr Browning was living in Florence, he received a letter from a young painter whose name was quite unknown to him, asking him whether he were the author of a poem called *Pauline*, which was somewhat in his manner, and which the writer had so greatly admired that he had transcribed the whole of it in the British Museum reading-room. The letter was signed D.G. Rossetti, and thus began Mr Browning's acquaintance with this eminent man."[14]

NOTES:

[1]

By Dr Furnivall; see *The Academy*, April 12, 1902.

[2]

"Letters of R.B. and E.B.B.," ii. 477.

[3]

Letter of R.B. to E.B.B.

[4]

Dr Moncure Conway states that Browning told him that the original name of the family was De Buri. According to Mrs Orr, Browning "neither claimed nor disclaimed the more remote genealogical past which had presented itself as a certainty to some older members of his family."

[5]

Quoted by Mr Sharp in his "Life of Browning," p. 21, *n.*, from Mrs Fraser Cockran.

[6]

"Autobiography of a Journalist," i. 277.

[7]

For my quotations and much of the above information I am indebted to Mr F. Herbert Stead, Warden of the Robert Browning Settlement, Walworth. In Robert Browning Hall are preserved the baptismal registers of Robert (June 14th, 1812), and Sarah Anna Browning, with other documents from which I have quoted.

[8]

Letters of R.B. and E.B.B., i. 528, 529; and (for Ossian), ii. 469.

[9]

Browning in a letter to Mr Wise says that this happened "some time before 1830 (or even earlier). The books," he says, "were obtained in the *regular way*, from Hunt and Clarke." Mr Gosse in *Personalia* gives a different account, pp. 23, 24.

[10]

The quotations from letters above are taken from J.C. Hadden's article "Some Friends of Browning" in *Macmillan's Magazine*, Jan. 1898.

[11]

Later in life Browning came to think unfavourably of Shelley as a man and to esteem him less highly as a poet. He wrote in December 1885 to Dr Furnivall: "For myself I painfully contrast my notions of Shelley the *man* and Shelley, well, even the *poet*, with what they were sixty years ago." He declined Dr Furnivall's invitation to him to accept the presidency of "The Shelley Society."

[12]

Even the publishers—Saunders and Otley—did not know the author's name.—"Letters of R.B. and E.B.B.," i. 403.

[13]

"V.A. xx," following the quotation from Cornelius Agrippa means "Vixi annos xx," *i.e.* "the imaginary subject of the poem was of that age."—Browning to Mr T.J. Wise.

[14]

Edmund Gosse: "Robert Browning Personalia," pp. 31, 32. Mr W. M. Rossetti in "D.G. Rossetti, his Family Letters," i. 115, gives the summer of 1850 as the date of his brother's letter; and says, no doubt correctly, that Browning was in Venice at the time. Mr Sharp prints a letter of Browning's on his early acquaintance with Rossetti, and on the incident recorded above. I may here note that "Richmond," appended, with a date, to *Pauline*, was a fancy or a blind; Browning never resided at Richmond.

Chapter II

Paracelsus and Sordello

There is little of incident in Browning's life to be recorded for the period between the publication of *Pauline* and the publication of *Paracelsus*. During the winter of 1833-1834 he spent three months in Russia, "nominally," says Mrs Orr, "in the character of secretary" to the Russian consul-general, Mr Benckhausen. Memories of the endless pine-forests through which he was driven on the way to St Petersburg may have contributed long afterwards to descriptive passages

of *Ivan Ivanovitch.*

In 1842 or 1843 he wrote a drama in five acts to which was given the name "Only a Player-girl"; the manuscript lay for long in his portfolio and never saw the light. "It was Russian," he tells Miss Barrett, "and about a fair on the Neva, and booths and droshkies and fish-pies and so forth, with the Palaces in the background."[15] Late in life, at Venice, Browning became acquainted with an old Russian, Prince Gagarin, with whom he competed successfully for an hour in recalling folk-songs and national airs of Russia caught up during the visit of 1833-34. "His memory," said Gagarin, "is better than my own, on which I have hitherto piqued myself not a little."[16] Perhaps it was his wanderings abroad that made Browning at this time desire further wanderings. He thought of a diplomatic career, and felt some regret when he failed to obtain an appointment for which he had applied in connection with a mission to Persia.

In the winter of 1834 Browning was at work on *Paracelsus*, which, after disappointments with other houses, was accepted, on terms that secured the publisher from risk, by Effingham Wilson, and appeared before midsummer of the following year. The subject had been suggested by Count Amédée de Ripert-Monclar, a young French royalist, engaged in secret service on behalf of the dethroned Bourbons. To him the poem is dedicated. For a befitting treatment of the story of Paracelsus special studies were necessary, and Browning entered into these with zeal, taking in his poem—as he himself believed—only trifling liberties with the matter of history. In solitary midnight walks he meditated his theme and its development. "There was, in particular," Mr Sharp tells us, "a wood near Dulwich, whither he was wont to go." Mr Sharp adds that at this time Browning composed much in the open air, and that "the glow of distant London" at night, with the thought of its multitudinous human life, was an inspiring influence. The sea which spoke to Browning with most expressive utterances was always the sea of humanity.

In its combination of thought with passion, and not less in its expression of a certain premature worldly wisdom, *Paracelsus* is an extraordinary output of mind made by a writer who, when his work was accomplished, had not completed his twenty-third year. The poem is the history of a great spirit, who has sought lofty and unattainable ends, who has fallen upon the way and is bruised and broken, but who rises at the close above his ruined self, and wrings out of defeat a pledge of ultimate victory. In a preface to the first edition, a preface afterwards omitted, Browning claims originality, or at least novelty, for his artistic method; "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, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded." The poem, though dramatic, is not a drama, and canons which are applicable to a piece intended for stage-representation would here—Browning pleads—be rather a hindrance than a help. Perhaps Browning regarded the action which can be exhibited on the stage as something external to the soul, and imagined that the naked spirit can be viewed more intimately than the spirit clothed in deed and in circumstance. If this was so, his conceptions were somewhat crude; with the true dramatic poet action is the hieroglyph of the soul, and many a secret may be revealed in this language, amassing as it does large meanings into one luminous symbol, which cannot be set forth in an elaborate intellectual analysis. We think to probe the depths, and perhaps never get far below the surface. But the flash and outbreak of a fiery spirit, amid a tangle of circumstance, springs to the surface from the very centre, and reveals its inmost energies.

Paracelsus, as presented in the poem, is a man of pre-eminent genius, passionate intellect, and inordinate intellectual ambition. If it is meant that he should be the type of the modern man of science, Browning has missed his mark, for Paracelsus is in fact almost as much the poet as the man of science; but it is true that the cautious habits of the inductive student of nature were rare among the enthusiastic speculators of Renaissance days, and the Italian successor of Paracelsus —Giordano Bruno—was in reality, in large measure, what Browning has here conceived and exhibited. Paracelsus is a great revolutionary spirit in an epoch of intellectual revolution; it is as much his task to destroy as to build up; he has broken with the past, and gazes with wild-eyed hopes into the future, expecting the era of intellectual liberty to dawn suddenly with the year One, and seeing in himself the protagonist of revolution. Such men as Paracelsus, whether their sphere be in the political, the religious, or the intellectual world, are men of faith; a task has been laid on each of them; a summons, a divine mandate, has been heard. But is the summons authentic? is the mandate indeed divine? In the quiet garden at Würzburg, while the autumn sun sinks behind St Saviour's spire, Festus—the faithful Horatio to this Hamlet of science—puts his questions and raises his doubts first as to the end and aim of Paracelsus, his aspiration towards absolute knowledge, and secondly, as to the means proposed for its attainment—means which reject the service of all predecessors in the paths of knowledge; which depart so widely from the methods of his contemporaries; which seek for truth through strange and casual revelations; which leave so much to chance. Very nobly has Browning represented the overmastering force of that faith which genius has in itself, and which indeed is needed to sustain it in the struggle with an incredulous or indifferent world. The end itself is justified by the mandate of God; and as for the means, truth is not to be found only or chiefly by gathering up stray fragments from without; truth lies buried within the soul, as jewels in the mine, and the chances and changes and shocks of life are required to open a passage for the shining forth of this inner light. Festus is overpowered less by reason than by the passion of faith in his younger and greater fellow-student; and the gentle Michal is won from her prophetic fears half by her affectionate loyalty to the man, half by the glow and inspiration of one who seems to be a surer prophet than her mistrusting self. And in truth the summons to Paracelsus is authentic; he is to be a torch-bearer

in the race. His errors are his own, errors of the egoism of genius in an age of intellectual revolution; he casts away the past, and that is not wise, that is not legitimate; he anticipates for himself the full attainment of knowledge, which belongs not to him but to humanity during revolving centuries; and although he sets before himself the service of man as the outcome of all his labours—and this is well—at the same time he detaches himself from his fellow-men, regards them from a regal height, would decline even their tribute of gratitude, and would be the lofty benefactor rather than the loving helpmate of his brethren. Is it meant then that Paracelsus ought to have contented himself with being like his teacher Trithemius and the common masters of the schools? No, for these rested with an easy self-satisfaction in their poor attainments, and he is called upon to press forward, and advance from strength to strength, through attainment or through failure to renewed and unending endeavour. His dissatisfaction, his failure is a better thing than their success and content in that success. But why should he hope in his own person to forestall the slow advance of humanity, and why should the service of the brain be alienated from the service of the heart?

There are many ways in which Browning could have brought Paracelsus to a discovery of his error. He might have learnt from his own experience the aridity of a life which is barren of love. Some moment of supreme pity might have come to him, in which he, the possessor of knowledge, might have longed to offer consolation to some suffering fellow, and have found the helplessness of knowledge to console. Browning's imagination as a romantic poet craved a romantic incident and a romantic *mise-en-scène*. In the house of the Greek conjuror at Constantinople, Paracelsus, now worn by his nine years' wanderings, with all their stress and strain, his hair already streaked with grey, his spirit somewhat embittered by the small success attending a vast effort, his moral nature already somewhat deteriorated and touched with the cynicism of experience and partial failure, shall encounter the strange figure of Aprile, the living wraith of a poet who has also failed, who "would love infinitely and be loved," and who in gazing upon the end has neglected all the means of attainment; and from him, or rather by a reflex ray from this Aprile, his own error shall be flashed on the consciousness of the foiled seeker for knowledge. The invention of Browning is certainly not lacking in the quality of strangeness in beauty; yet some readers will perhaps share the feeling that it strains, without convincing, the imagination. As we read the first speeches addressed by the moon-struck poet to the wandering student of science, and read the moon-struck replies, notwithstanding the singular beauty of certain dramatic and lyrical passages, we are inclined to ask—Is this, indeed, a conjuror's house at Constantinople, or one of Browning's "mad-house cells?" and from what delusions are the harmless, and the apparently dangerous, lunatic suffering? The lover here is typified in the artist; but the artist may be as haughtily isolated from true human love as the man of science, and the fellowship with his kind which Paracelsus needs can be poorly learnt from such a distracted creature as Aprile. It is indeed Aprile's example and the fate which has overtaken him rather than his wild words which startle Paracelsus into a recognition of his own error. But the knowledge that he has left love out of his scheme of life is no guarantee that he will ever acquire the fervour and the infinite patience of love. The whole scene, with its extravagant poetic beauties and high-pitched rhetoric, leaves a painful impression of unreality, not in the shallower but in the deepest sense of that word.

For a poet to depict a poet in poetry is a hazardous experiment; in regarding one's own trade a sense of humour and a little wholesome cynicism are not amiss. These could find no place in Browning's presentation of Aprile, but it is certain that Browning himself was a much more complex person than the dying lover of love who became the instructor of Paracelsus. When the scene shifts from Constantinople to Basil, and the illustrious Professor holds converse with Festus by the blazing logs deep into the night, and at length morning arises "clouded, wintry, desolate and cold," we listen with unflagging attention and entire imaginative conviction; and, when silence ensues, a wonder comes upon us as to where a young man of three-and-twenty acquired this knowledge of the various bitter tastes of life which belong to maturer experience, and how he had mastered such precocious worldly wisdom. Paracelsus,

> The wondrous Paracelsus, life's dispenser,
> Fate's commissary, idol of the schools
> And courts,

chews upon his worldly success and extracts its acrid juices. This is not the romantic melancholy of youth, which dreams of infinite things, but the pain of manhood, which feels the limitations of life, which can laugh at the mockery of attainment, which is sensible of the shame that dwells at the heart of glory, yet which already has begun to hanker after the mean delights of the world, and cannot dispense with the sorry pleasures of self-degradation. The kind, calm Pastor of Einsiedeln sees at first only the splendour that hangs around the name of his early comrade, the hero of his hopes. And Paracelsus for a while would forbear with tender ruth to shatter his friend's illusion, would veil, if that were possible, the canker which has eaten into his own heart. But in the tumult of old glad memories and present griefs, it ceases to be possible; from amid the crew of foolish praisers he must find one friend having the fidelity of genuine insight; he must confess his failure, and once for all correct the prophecy of Michal that success would come and with it wretchedness—

> I have not been successful, and yet am
> Most miserable; 'tis said at last.

A certain manly protectiveness towards Festus and Michal, with their happy Aennchen and Aureole in the quiet home at Einsiedeln, remains to Paracelsus; there is in it now more than a

touch of "the devotion to something afar from the sphere of our sorrow."

When, driven from Basil as a quack amid the hootings of the crowd, Paracelsus once again "aspires"; but it is from a lower level, with energy less certain, and with a more turbid passion. Upon such soiled and draggled wings can he ever soar again? His strength is the strength of fever; his gaiety is wild and bitter; he urges his brain with artificial stimulants. And he, whose need was love, has learnt hatred and scorn. In his earlier quest for truth he had parted with youth and joy; he had grown grey-haired and lean-handed before the time. Now, in his new scheme of life, he will not sever truth from enjoyment; he will snatch at the meanest delights; before death comes, something at least shall thus be gained. And yet he has almost lost the capacity for pleasures apart from those of a wolfish hunger for knowledge; and he despises his baser aims and his extravagant speeches. Could life only be begun anew with temperate hopes and sane aspirings! But he has given his pledges and will abide by them; he must submit to be hunted by the gods to the end. Before he parts from Festus at the Alsatian inn, a softer mood overtakes him. Blinded by his own passion, Paracelsus has had no sense to divine the sorrow of his friend, and Festus has had no heart to obtrude such a sorrow as this. Only at the last moment, and in all gentleness, it must be told—Michal is dead. In Browning's earliest poem Pauline is no more than a name and a shadow. The creator of Ottima and Colombe, of Balaustion and Pompilia had much to tell of womanhood. Michal occupies, as is right, but a small space in the history of Paracelsus, yet her presence in the poem and her silent withdrawal have a poignant influence. We see her as maiden and hear of her as mother, her face still wearing that quiet and peculiar light

> Like the dim circlet floating round a pearl.

And now, as the strong men of Shakespeare's play spoke of the dead Portia in the tent, Paracelsus and Festus talk of the pastor of Einsiedeln's gentle wife. Festus speaks in assured hope, Paracelsus in daring surmise, of a life beyond the grave, and finally with a bitter return upon himself from his sense of her tranquillity in death:

> And Michal sleeps among the roots and dews,
> While I am moved at Basil, and full of schemes
> For Nuremberg, and hoping and despairing,
> As though it mattered how the farce plays out,
> So it be quickly played!

It is the last cry of his distempered egoism before the closing scene.

In the dim and narrow cell of the Hospital of St Sebastian, where he lies dying, Paracelsus at last "attains"—attains something higher than a Professor's chair at Basil, attains a rapture, not to be expressed, in the joy which draws him onward, and a lucid comprehension of the past that lies behind. All night the faithful Festus has watched beside the bed; the mind of the dying man is working as the sea works after a tempest, and strange wrecks of memory float past in troubled visions. In the dawning light the clouds roll away, a great calm comes upon his spirit, and he recognises his friend. It is laid upon him, before he departs, to declare the meaning of his life. This life of his had been no farce or failure; in his degree he has served mankind, and what *is* the service of man but the true praise of God? He perceives now the errors of the way; he had been dazzled by knowledge and the power conferred by knowledge; he had not understood God's plan of gradual evolution through the ages; he had laboured for his race in pride rather than in love; he had been maddened by the intellectual infirmities, the moral imperfections of men, whereas he ought to have recognised even in these the capacities of a creature in progress to a higher development. Now, at length, he can follow in thought the great circle of God's creative energy, ever welling forth from Him in vast undulations, ever tending to return to Him again, which return Godwards is already foretold in the nature of man by august anticipations, by strange gleams of splendour, by cares and fears not bounded by this our earth.

Were *Paracelsus* a poem of late instead of early origin in Browning's poetical career, we should probably have received no such open prophecy as this. The scholar of the Renaissance, half-genius, half-charlatan, would have casuistically defended or apologised for his errors, and through the wreathing mists of sophistry would have shot forth ever and anon some ray of truth.

We receive from *Paracelsus* an impression of the affluence of youth. There is no husbanding of resources, and perhaps too little reserve of power. Where the poet most abandons himself to his ardour of thought and imagination he achieves his highest work. The stress and tension of his enthusiasm are perhaps too continuous, too seldom relieved by spaces of repose. It is all too much of a Mazeppa ride; there are times when we pray for a good quarter of an hour of comfortable dulness, or at least of wholesome bovine placidity. The laws of such a poem are wholly determined from within. The only question we have a right to ask is this—Has the poet adequately dealt with his subject, adequately expressed his idea? The division of the whole into five parts may seem to have some correspondency with the five acts of a tragedy; but here the stage is one of the mind, and the acts are free to contract or to expand themselves as the gale of thought or passion rises or subsides. If a spiritual anemometer were invented it would be found that the wind which drives through the poem maintains often and for long an astonishing pace. The strangely beautiful lyric passages interspersed through the speeches are really of a slower movement than the dramatic body of the poem; they are, by comparison, resting-places. The perfumed closet of the song of Paracelsus in Part IV. is "vowed to quiet" (did Browning ever compose another romanza as lulling as this?), and the Maine glides so gently in the lyric of

Festus (Part V.) that its murmuring serves to bring back sanity to the distracted spirit of the dying Aureole. There are youthful excesses in *Paracelsus*; some vague, rhetorical grandeurs; some self-conscious sublimities which ought to have been oblivious of self; some errors of over-emphasis; some extravagances of imagery and of expression. The wonderful passage which describes "spring-wind, as a dancing psaltress," passing over the earth, is marred by the presence of "young volcanoes"

"cyclops-like
Staring together with their eyes on flame,"

which young volcanoes were surely the offspring of the "young earthquake" of Byron. But these are, as the French phrase has it, defects of the poem's qualities. A few pieces of base metal are flung abroad unawares together with the lavish gold.

A companion poem to *Paracelsus*—so described by Browning to Leigh Hunt—was conceived by the poet soon after the appearance of the volume of 1835. When *Strafford* was published two years later, we learn from a preface, afterwards omitted, that he had been engaged on *Sordello*. Browning desired to complete his studies for this poem of Italy among the scenes which it describes. The manuscript was with him in Italy during his visit of 1838; but the work was not to be hastily completed. *Sordello* was published in 1840, five years after *Paracelsus*. In the chronological order of Browning's poems, by virtue of the date of origin, it lies close to the earlier companion piece; in the logical order it is the completion of a group of poems—*Pauline, Paracelsus, Sordello*—which treat of the perplexities, the trials, the failures, the ultimate recovery of men endowed with extraordinary powers; it is one more study of the conduct of genius amid the dangers and temptations of life. Here we may rightly disregard the order of publication, and postpone the record of external incidents in Browning's poetical development, in order to place *Sordello* in its true position, side by side with *Paracelsus*.

How the subject of *Sordello* was suggested to Browning we do not know; the study of Dante may have led him to a re-creation of the story of Dante's predecessor; after having occupied in imagination the old towns of Germany and Switzerland—Würzburg and Basil, Colmar and Salzburg—he may have longed for the warmth and colour of Italy; after the Renaissance with its revolutionary speculations, he may have wished to trace his way back to the Middle Age, when men lived and moved under the shadow of one or the other of two dominant powers, apparently fixed in everlasting rivalry—the Emperor and the Pope.

"The historical decoration," wrote Browning, in the dedicatory letter of 1863, to his friend Milsand, "was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study." Undoubtedly the history of a soul is central in the poem; but the drawings of Italian landscape, so sure in outline, so vivid in colour; the views of old Italian city life, rich in the tumult of townsfolk, military chieftains, men-at-arms; the pictures of sombre interiors, and southern gardens, the hillside castle amid its vines, the court of love with its contending minstrels, the midnight camp lit by its fires; and, added to these, the Titianesque portraits of portly magnifico and gold-haired maiden, and thought-worn statist make up an environment which has no inconsiderable poetic value of its own, feeding, as it does, the inner eye with various forms and dyes, and leaving the "spirit in sense" more wealthy. With a theme so remote from the common consciousness of his own day, Browning conceived that there would be an advantage in being his own commentator and interpreter, and hence he chose the narrative in preference to the dramatic form; thus, he supposed he could act the showman and stand aside at times, to expound his own intentions. Unhappily, in endeavouring to strengthen and concentrate his style, he lost that sense of the reader's distance from himself which an artist can never without risk forget; in abbreviating his speech his utterance thickened; he created new difficulties by a legerdemain in the construction of sentences; he assumed in his public an alertness of intelligence equal to his own. When it needs a leaping-pole to pass from subject to verb across the chasm of a parenthesis, when a reader swings himself dubiously from relative to some one of three possible antecedents, when he springs at a meaning through the fissure of an undeveloped exclamatory phrase, and when these efforts are demanded again and again, some muscular fatigue naturally ensues. Yet it is true that when once the right connections in these perplexing sentences have been established, the sense is flashed upon the mind with singular vividness; then the difficulty has ceased to exist. And thus, in two successive stages of study, the same reader may justly censure *Sordello* for its obscurity of style, and justly applaud it for a remarkable lucidity in swiftness. Intelligent, however, as Browning was, it implied a curious lack of intelligence to suppose that a poem of many thousand lines written I in shorthand would speedily find decipherers. If we may trust the words of Westland Marston, recorded by Mr W.M. Rossetti in *The Preraphaelite Brotherhood Journal* (26 February 1850), Browning imagined that his shorthand was Roman type of unusual clearness: "Marston says that Browning, before publishing *Sordello*, sent it to him to read, saying that this time I the public should not accuse him at any rate of being unintelligible." What follows in the *Journal* is of interest, but can hardly be taken as true to the letter: "Browning's system of composition is to write down on a slate, in prose, what he wants to say, and then turn it into verse, striving after the greatest amount of condensation possible; thus, if an exclamation will suggest his meaning, he substitutes this for a whole sentence." In climbing an antique tower we may obtain striking flashes of prospect through the slits and eyelet-holes which dimly illuminate the winding stair, but to combine these into an intelligible landscape is not always easy. Browning's errors of style are in part attributable to his unhappy application of a passage in a letter of Caroline Fox which a friend had shown him. She stated that her acquaintance John Sterling had been repelled by the "verbosity"

of *Paracelsus*: "Doth Mr Browning know," she asked, "that Wordsworth will devote a fortnight or more to the discovery of a single word that is the one fit for his sonnet?"[17] Browning was determined to avoid "verbosity"; but the method which seems to have occurred to him was that of omitting many needful though seemingly insignificant words, and jamming together the words that gleam and sparkle; with the result that the mind is at once dazzled and fatigued.

Sordello, the Italian singer of the thirteenth century, is conceived by Browning as of the type which he had already presented in the speaker of *Pauline*, only that here the poet is not infirm in will, and, though loved by Palma, he is hardly a lover. Like the speaker of *Pauline* he is preoccupied with an intense self-consciousness, the centre of his own imaginative creations, and claiming supremacy over these. He craves some means of impressing himself upon the world, some means of deploying the power that lies coiled within him, not through any gross passion for rule but in order that he may thus manifest himself to himself at the full. He is as far as possible removed from that type of the worshipping spirit exhibited in Aprile, and in the poet Eglamor, whom Sordello foils and subdues in the contest of song. The fame as a singer which comes suddenly to him draws Sordello out of his Goito solitude to the worldly society of Mantua, and his experiences of disillusion and half voluntary self-degradation are those which had been faintly shadowed forth in *Pauline*, and exhibited more fully—and yet with a difference—in the Basil experiences of Paracelsus. Like the poet of *Pauline*, after his immersion in worldliness, Sordello again seeks solitude, and recovers a portion of his higher self; but solitude cannot content one who is unable to obtain the self-manifestation which his nature demands without the aid of others who may furnish an external body for the forces that lie suppressed within him. Suddenly and unexpectedly the prospect of a political career opens before him. May it not be that he will thus obtain what he needs, and find in the people the instrument of his own thoughts, his passions, his aspirations, his imaginings, his will? May not the people become the body in which his spirit, with all its forces, shall incarnate itself? Coming into actual acquaintance with the people for the first time, the sight of their multiform miseries, their sorrows, even their baseness lays hold of Sordello; it seems as if it were they who were about to make *him* their instrument, the voice through which their inarticulate griefs should find expression; he is captured by those whom he thought to capture. By all his personal connections he is of the Imperial party—a Ghibellin; but, studying the position of affairs, he becomes convinced that the cause of the Pope is one with the cause of the people. At this moment vast possibilities of political power suddenly widen upon his view; Sordello, the minstrel, a poor archer's son, is discovered to be in truth the only son of the great Ghibellin chieftain, Salinguerra; he is loved by Palma, who, with her youth and beauty, brings him eminent station, authority, and a passion of devoted ambition on his behalf; his father flings upon Sordello's neck the baldric which constitutes him the Emperor's representative in Northern Italy. The heart and brain of Sordello become the field of conflict between fierce, contending forces. All that is egoistic in his nature cries out for a life of pride and power and joy. At best it is but little that he could ever do to serve the suffering multitude. And yet should he falter because he cannot gain for them the results of time? Is it not his part to take the single step in their service, though it can be no more than a step? In the excitement of this supreme hour of inward strife Sordello dies; but he dies a victor; like Paracelsus he also has "attained"; the Imperial baldric is found cast below the dead singer's feet.

This, in brief, is the "history of a soul" which Browning has imagined in his *Sordello*. And the conclusion of the whole matter can be briefly stated: the primary need of such a nature as Sordello's—and we can hardly doubt that Browning would have assigned himself a place in the class to which the poet of his imagination belongs—is that of a Power above himself, which shall deliver him from egoism, and whose loyal service shall concentrate and direct his various faculties, and this a Power not unknown or remote, but one brought near and made manifest; or, in other words, it is the need of that which old religion has set forth as God in Christ. Sordello in his final decision in favour of true service to the people had, like Paracelsus, given his best praise to God, had given his highest pledge of loyalty to whatever is Divine in life. And therefore, though he has failed in all his high designs, his failure is in the end a success. He, like Paracelsus, had read that bitter sentence which declares that "collective man outstrips the individual":—

> "God has conceded two sights to a man—
> One, of men's whole work, time's completed plan,
> The other, of the minute's work, man's first
> Step to the plan's completion."

And the poor minute's work assigned him by the divine law of justice and pity he accepts as his whole life's task. It is true that though he now clearly sees the end, he has not perhaps recognised the means. If Sordello contemplated political action as his mode of effecting that minute's work, he must soon have discovered, were his life prolonged, that not thus can a poet live in his highest faculty, or render his worthiest service. The poet—and speaking in his own person Browning makes confession of his faith—can adequately serve his mistress, "Suffering Humanity," only as a poet. Sordello failed to render into song the highest thoughts and aspirations of Italy; but Dante was to follow and was not to fail. The minstrel's last act—his renunciation of selfish power and pleasure, his devotion to what he held to be the cause of the people, the cause of humanity, was indeed his best piece of poetry; by virtue of that act Sordello was not a beaten man but a conqueror.

These prolonged studies—*Paracelsus, Sordello*, and, on a more contracted scale, *Pauline*—each a study in "the development of a soul," gain and lose through the immaturity of the writer. He had, as yet, brought only certain of his faculties into play, or, at least, he had not as yet connected

with his art certain faculties which become essential characteristics of his later work. There is no humour in these early poems, or (since Naddo and the critic tribe of *Sordello* came to qualify the assertion) but little; there is no wise casuistry, in which falsehood is used as the vehicle of truth; the psychology, however involved it may seem, is really too simple; the central personages are too abstract—knowledge and love and volition do not exhaust the soul; action and thought are not here incorporated one with the other; a deed is not the interpreter of an idea; an idea is first exhibited by the poet and the deed is afterwards set forth as its consequence; the conclusions are too patently didactic or doctrinaire; we suspect that they have been motives determining the action; our scepticism as to the disinterested conduct of the story is aroused by its too plainly deduced moral. We catch the powers at play which ought to be invisible; we fiddle with the works of the clock till it ceases to strike. Yet if only a part of Browning's mind is alive in these early poems, the faculties brought into exercise are the less impeded by one another; the love of beauty is not tripped up by a delight in the grotesque. And there is a certain pleasure in attending to prophecy which has not learnt to hide itself in casuistry. The analysis of a state of mind, pursued in *Sordello* with an effort that is sometimes fatiguing and not always successful, is presently followed by a superb portrait—like that of Salinguerra—painted by the artist, not the analyst, and so admirable is it that in our infirmity we are tempted to believe that the process of flaying and dissection alters the person of a man or woman as Swift has said, considerably for the worse.

NOTES:

[15]

The supposition of Mr Sharp and Mr Gosse that Browning visited Italy after having seen St Petersburg is an error. His first visit to Italy was that of 1838. I may note here that in a letter to E.B.B. (vol. ii. 443) Browning refers to having been in Holland some ten years since; the date of his letter is August 18, 1846.

[16]

Mrs Bronson; Browning in Venice. *Cornhill Magazine*, Feb. 1902. pp. 160, 161.

[17]

Mrs Orr's "Handbook to Browning," pp. 10, 11.

Chapter III

The Maker of Plays

The publication of *Paracelsus* did not gain for Browning a large audience, but it brought him friends and acquaintances who gave his life a delightful expansion in its social relations. John Forster, the critic, biographer and historian, then unknown to him, reviewed the poem in the *Examiner* with full recognition of its power and promise. Browning gratefully commemorated a lifelong friendship with Forster, nearly a score of years later, in the dedication of the 1863 edition of his poetical works. Mrs Orr recites the names of Carlyle, Talfourd, R. Hengist Horne, Leigh Hunt, Procter, Monckton Milnes, Dickens, Wordsworth, Landor, among those of distinguished persons who became known to Browning at this period.[18] His "simple and enthusiastic manner" is referred to by the actor Macready in his diary; "he looks and speaks more like a youthful poet than any man I ever saw." Browning's face was one of rare intelligence and full of changing expression. He was not tall, but in early years he was slight, was graceful in his movements, and held his head high. His dark brown hair hung in wavy masses upon his neck. His voice had in early manhood a quality, afterwards lost, which Mr Sharp describes as "flute-like, clear, sweet and resonant." Slim, dark, and very handsome are the words chosen by Mrs Bridell-Fox to characterise the youthful Browning as he reappeared to her memory; "And—may I hint it?"—she adds, "just a trifle of a dandy, addicted to lemon-coloured kid gloves and such things, quite 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form.' But full of ambition, eager for success, eager for fame, and, what is more, determined to conquer fame and to achieve success." Yet the correct and conventional Browning could also fire up for lawlessness—"frenetic to be free." He was hail-fellow well-met, we are told—but is this part of a Browning legend?—with tramps and gipsies, and he wandered gladly, whether through devout sympathy or curiosity of mood we know not, into Little Bethels and other tents of spiritual Ishmael.

From Camberwell Browning's father moved to a house at Hatcham, transporting thither his long rows of books, together with those many volumes which lay still unwritten in the "celle fantastyk" of his son. "There is a vast view from our greatest hill," wrote Browning; a vast view, though Wordsworth had scorned the Londoner's hill—"Hill? *we* call that, such as that, a *rise*." Here he read and wrote, enjoyed his rides on the good horse "York," and cultivated friendship with a toad in the pleasant garden, for he had a peculiar interest, as his poems show, in creatures that live a shy, mysterious life apart from that of man, and the claim of beauty, as commonly understood, was not needed to win his regard. Browning's eye was an instrument made for exact and minute records of natural phenomena. "I have heard him say," Mr Sharp writes, "that at that time"—

speaking of his earlier years—"his faculty of observation would not have appeared despicable to a Seminole or an Iroquois." Such activity of the visual nerve differs widely from the wise passiveness or brooding power of the Wordsworthian mode of contemplation. Browning's life was never that of a recluse who finds in nature and communion with the anima mundi a counterpoise to the attractions of human society. Society fatigued him, yet he would not abandon its excitements. A mystic—though why it should be so is hard to say—does not ordinarily affect lemon-coloured kid gloves, as did the Browning of Mrs Bridell-Fox's recollection. The mysticism of Browning's temper of mind came not by withdrawal from the throng of positive facts, but by pushing through these to the light beyond them, or by the perception of some spear-like shaft of light piercing the denseness, which was serviceable as the sheathe or foil. And of course it was among men and women that he found suggestions for some of his most original studies.

An introduction to Macready which took place at Mr Fox's house towards the close of November 1835 was fruitful in consequences. A month later Browning was Macready's guest at Elstree, the actor's resting-place in the country. His fellow-traveller, then unknown to him, in the coach from London was John Forster; in Macready's drawing-room the poet and his critic first formed a personal acquaintance. Browning had for long been much interested in the stage, but only as a spectator. His imagination now turned towards dramatic authorship with a view to theatrical performance. A play on a subject from later Roman history, *Narses*, was thought of and was cast aside. The success of Talfourd's *Ion*, after the first performance of which (May 26, 1836) Browning supped in the author's rooms with Macready, Wordsworth, and Landor, probably raised high hopes of a like or a greater success for some future drama of his own. "Write a play, Browning," said Macready, as they left the house, "and keep me from going to America." "Shall it be historical or English?" Browning questioned, as the incident is related by Mrs Orr, "What do you say to a drama on Strafford?" The life of Stafford by his friend Forster, just published, which during an illness of the author had been revised in manuscript by Browning, probably determined the choice of a subject.

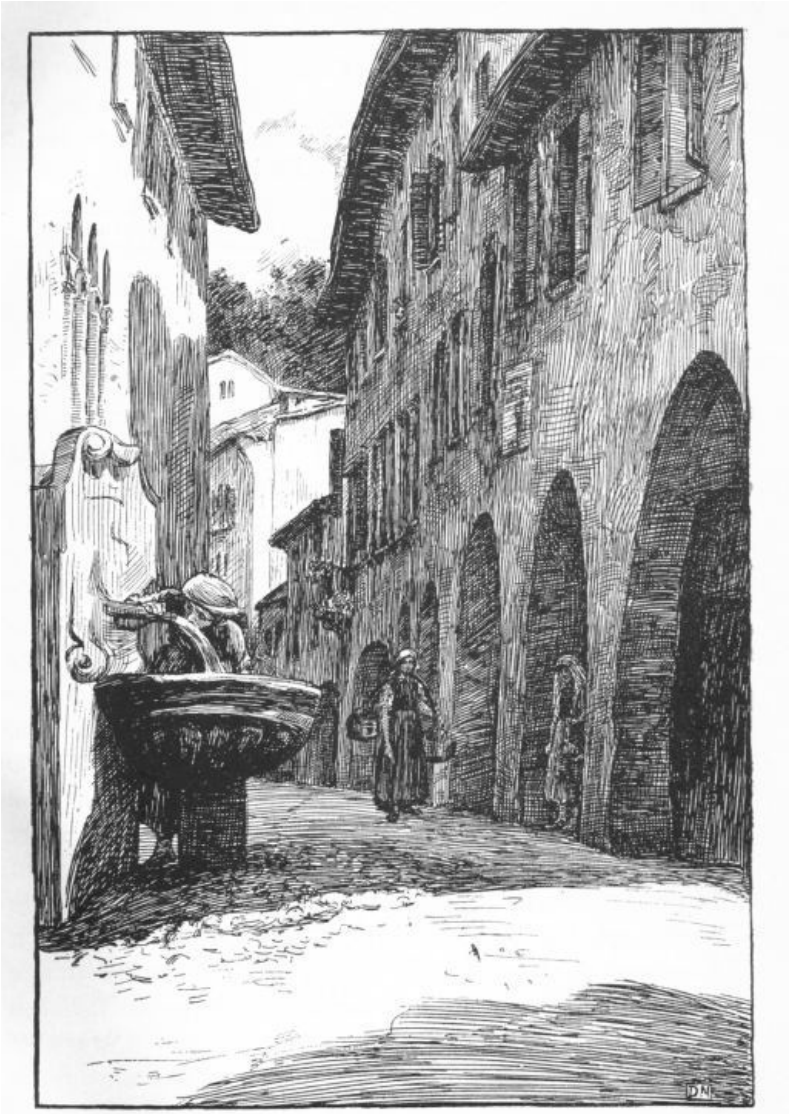
By August the poet had pledged himself to achieve this first dramatic adventure. The play was produced at Covent Garden on May 1st, 1837, by Macready, who himself took the part of Strafford. Helen Faucit, then a novice on the stage, gave an adequate rendering of the difficult part of Lady Carlisle. For the rest, the complexion of the piece, as Browning describes it, after one of the latest rehearsals, was "perfect gallows." Great historical personages were presented by actors who strutted or slouched, who whimpered or drawled. The financial distress at Covent Garden forbade any splendour or even dignity of scenery or of costumes.[19] The text was considerably altered—and not always judiciously—from that of the printed play, which had appeared before its production on the stage. Yet on the first night *Strafford* was not damned, and on the second it was warmly applauded.[20] After the fifth performance the wretched Pym refused to save his mother England even once more, and the play was withdrawn. Browning declared to his friends that never again, as long as he might live, would he write a play. Whining not being to his taste, he averted his eyes and set himself resolutely to work upon *Sordello*.

"I sail this morning for Venice," Browning wrote to a friend on Good Friday, 1838. He voyaged as sole passenger on a merchantman, and soon was on friendliest terms with the rough kindly captain. For the first fortnight the sea was stormy and Browning suffered much; as they passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, Captain Davidson aided him to reach the deck, and a pulsing of home-pride—not home-sickness—gave their origin to the patriotic lines beginning, "Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the north-west died away." Under the bulwark of the *Norham Castle*, off the African coast, when the fancy of a gallop on his Uncle Reuben's horse suddenly presented itself in pleasant contrast with the tedium of the hours on shipboard, he wrote in pencil, on the flyleaf of Bartoli's Simboli, that most spirited of poems which tell of the glory of motion—*How they brought the good news from Ghent to Aix*. The only adventure of the voyage was the discovery of an Algerine pirate ship floating keel uppermost; it righted suddenly under the stress of ropes from the *Norham Castle*, and the ghastly and intolerable dead—Algerines and Spaniards —could not scare the British sailors eager for loot; at last the battered hulk was cast loose, and its blackness was seen reeling slowly off "into the most gorgeous and lavish sunset in the world." Having visited Venice, Vicenza and Padua—cities and mountain solitudes, which gave their warmth and colour to his unfinished poem—Browning returned home by way of Tyrol, the Rhine, Liege and Antwerp. It was his first visit to Italy and was a time of enchantment. Fifty years later he recalled the memories of these early days when his delight had something insubstantial, magical in it, and the vision was half perceived with the eye and half projected from within:—

> How many a year my Asolo,
> Since—one step just from sea to land—
> I found you, loved yet feared you so—
> For natural objects seemed to stand
> Palpably fire-clothed![21]

Of evenings soon after his return to London Mrs Bridell-Fox writes: "He was full of enthusiasm for Venice, that Queen of Cities. He used to illustrate his glowing descriptions of its beauties, the palaces, the sunsets, the moonrises, by a most original kind of etching. Taking up a bit of stray notepaper, he would hold it over a lighted candle, moving the paper about gently till it was cloudily smoked over, and then utilising the darker smears for clouds, shadows, water, or what not, would etch with a dry pen the forms of lights on cloud and palace, on bridge or gondola on the vague and dreamy surface he had produced." The anticipations of genius had already

produced a finer etching than any of these, in those lines of marvellous swiftness and intensity in *Paracelsus*, which describe Constantinople at the hour of sunset.



MAIN STREET OF ASOLO, SHOWING BROWNING'S HOUSE.

From a drawing by Miss D. NOYES.

MAIN STREET OF ASOLO, SHOWING BROWNING'S HOUSE.

From a drawing by **Miss D. NOYES.**

The publication of *Sordello* (1840) did not improve Browning's position with the public. The poem was a challenge to the understanding of an aspirant reader, and the challenge met with no response. An excuse for not reading a poem of five or six thousand lines is grateful to so infirm and shortlived a being as man. And, indeed, a prophet, if prudent, may do well to postpone the privilege of being unintelligible until he has secured a considerable number of disciples of both sexes. The reception of *Sordello* might have disheartened a poet of less vigorous will than Browning; he merely marched breast forward, and let *Sordello* lie inert, until a new generation of readers had arisen. The dramas, *King Victor and King Charles* and *The Return of the Druses* (at first named "Mansoor the Hierophant") now occupied his thoughts. Short lyrical pieces were growing under his hand, and began to form a considerable group. And one fortunate day as he strolled alone in the Dulwich wood—his chosen resort of meditation—"the image flashed upon him of one walking thus alone through life; one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it."[22] In other words Pippa had suddenly passed her poet in the wood.

A cheap mode of issuing his works now in manuscript was suggested to Browning by the publisher Moxon. They might appear in successive pamphlets, each of a single sheet printed in double-column, and the series might be discontinued at any time if the public ceased to care for it. The general title *Bells and Pomegranates* was chosen; "beneath upon the hem of the robe thou shalt make pomegranates of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, round about the hem thereof; and bells of gold between them round about." Browning, as he explained to his readers in the last number, meant to indicate by the title, "Something like an alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought"—such having been, in fact, one of the most familiar of the Rabbinical interpretations designed to expound the symbolism of this priestly decoration prescribed in "Exodus." From 1841 to 1846 the numbers of *Bells and Pomegranates*

successively appeared; with the eighth the series closed. The first number—*Pippa Passes*—was sold for sixpence; when *King Victor and King Charles* was published in the following year (1842), the price was raised to one shilling. The third and the seventh numbers were made up of short pieces—*Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). *The Return of the Druses* and *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*—Numbers 4 and 5—followed each other in the same year 1843. *Colombe's Birthday*—the only number which is known to survive in manuscript—came next in order (1844). The last to appear was that which included *Luna*, Browning's favourite among his dramas, and *A Soul's Tragedy*.[23] His sister, except in the instance of *Colombe*, was Browning's amanuensis. On each title-page he is named Robert Browning "Author of Paracelsus"—the "wholly unintelligible" *Sordello* being passed over. Talfourd, "Barry Cornwall," and John Kenyon (the cousin of Elizabeth Barrett) were honoured with dedications. In these pamphlets of Moxon, Browning's wonderful apples of gold were certainly not presented to the public in pictures or baskets of silver; yet the possessor of the eight parts in their yellow paper wrappers may now be congratulated. Only one of the numbers—*A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*—attained the distinction of a second edition, and this probably because the drama as published was helped to a comparative popularity by its representation on the stage.

This tragedy of young love and death was written hastily—in four or five days—for Macready. Browning while at work on his play, as we learn from a letter of Dante Rossetti to Allingham, was kept indoors by a slight indisposition; his father on going to see him "was each day received boisterously and cheerfully with the words: 'I have done another act, father.'"[24] Forster read the tragedy aloud from the manuscript for Dickens, who wrote of it with unmeasured enthusiasm in a letter, known to Browning only when printed after the lapse of some thirty years: "Browning's play has thrown me into a perfect passion of sorrow.... I know no love like it, no passion like it, no moulding of a splendid thing after its conception like it." Things had gone ill with Macready at Drury Lane, and when the time for *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* drew near it is evident that he feared further losses and would gladly have been released from his promise to produce the play; but Browning failed to divine the true state of affairs. The tragedy was read to the company by a grotesque, wooden-legged and red-nosed prompter, and it was greeted with laughter. To make amends, Macready himself undertook to read it aloud, but he declared himself unable, in the disturbed state of his mind, to appear before the public: his part—that of Lord Tresham—must be taken by Phelps. From certain rehearsals Phelps was unavoidably absent through illness. Macready who read his lines on these occasions, now was caught by the play, and saw possibilities in the part of Tresham which fired his imagination. He chose, almost at the last moment, to displace his younger and less distinguished colleague. Browning, on the other hand, insisted that Phelps, having been assigned the part, should retain it. To baffle Macready in his design of presenting the play to the public in a mutilated form, Browning, aided by his publisher, had the whole printed in four-and-twenty hours.[25] A rupture of the long-standing friendship with Macready followed, nor did author and actor meet again until after the great sorrow of Browning's life. "Mr Macready too"—writes Mrs Orr—"had recently lost his wife, and Mr Browning could only start forward, grasp the hand of his old friend, and in a voice choked with emotion say, 'O Macready!'"

The tragedy was produced at Drury Lane on February nth, 1843, with Phelps, who acted admirably as Tresham, and Helen Faucit as Mildred. Although it had been ill rehearsed and not a shilling had been spent on scenery or dresses, it was received with applause. To a call for the author, Browning, seated in his box, declined to make any response. Thus, not without some soreness of heart, closed his direct connection with the theatre. He heard with pleasure when in Italy that *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* was given by Phelps at Sadler's Wells Theatre in November 1848, and with unquestionable success. A rendering of *Colombe's Birthday* was projected by Charles Kean in 1844, but the long delays, which were inevitable, could not be endured by Browning, who desired to print his play forthwith among the *Bells and Pomegranates*. It was not until nine years later that this play, a veritable "All for love, or the world well lost," was presented at the Haymarket, Helen Faucit appearing as the Duchess. Soon after *Colombe's Birthday* had been published, Browning sailed once more, in the autumn of 1844, for Italy.[26] As he journeyed northwards and homewards, from Naples (where they were performing an opera named *Sordello*) and Rome he sought and obtained at Leghorn an interview with Trelawny, the generous-hearted friend of Shelley, by whose grave he had lately stood.[27]

Browning's work as a playwright, consisting of eight pieces, or nine if we include the later *In a Balcony*, is sufficiently ample to enable us to form a trustworthy estimate of his genius as seen in drama. Dramatic, in the sense that he created and studied minds and hearts other than his own, he pre-eminently was; if he desired to set forth or to vindicate his most intimate ideas or impulses, he effected this indirectly, by detaching them from his own personality and giving them a brain and a heart other than his own in which to live and move and have their being. There is a kind of dramatic art which we may term static, and another kind which we may term dynamic. The former deals especially with characters in position, the latter with characters in movement.[28] Passion and thought may be exhibited and interpreted by dramatic genius of either type; to represent passion and thought and action—action incarnating and developing thought and passion—the dynamic power is required. And by action we are to understand not merely a visible deed, but also a word, a feeling, an idea which has in it a direct operative force. The dramatic genius of Browning was in the main of the static kind; it studies with extraordinary skill and subtlety character in position; it attains only an imperfect or a laboured success with character in movement. The *dramatis personae* are ready at almost every moment, except the culminating

moments of passion, to fall away from action into reflection and self-analysis. The play of mind upon mind he recognises of course as a matter of profound interest and importance; but he catches the energy which spirit transfers to spirit less in the actual moment of transference than after it has arrived. Thought and emotion with him do not circulate freely through a group of persons, receiving some modification from each. He deals most successfully with each individual as a single and separate entity; each maintains his own attitude, and as he is touched by the common influence he proceeds to scrutinise it. Mind in these plays threads its way dexterously in and out of action; it is not itself sufficiently incorporated in action. The progress of the drama is now retarded; and again, as if the author perceived that the story had fallen behind or remained stationary, it is accelerated by sudden jerks. A dialogue of retrospection is a common device at the opening of popular plays, with a view to expound the position of affairs to the audience; but a dramatic writer of genius usually works forward through his dialogue to the end which he has set before him. With Browning for the purpose of mental analysis a dialogue of retrospection may be of higher value than one which leans and presses towards the future. The invisible is for him more important than the visible; and so in truth it may often be; but the highest dramatist will not choose to separate the two. The invisible is best captured and is most securely held in the visible.

As a writer of drama, Browning, who delights to study the noblest attitudes of the soul, and to wring a proud sense of triumph out of apparent failure, finds his proper field in tragedy rather than in comedy. *Colombe's Birthday* has a joyous ending, but the joy is very grave and earnest, and the body of the play is made up of serious pleadings and serious hopes and fears. There is no light-hearted mirth, no real gaiety of temper anywhere in the dramas of Browning. Pippa's gladness in her holiday from the task of silk-winding is touched with pathos in the thought that what is so bright *is* also so brief, and it is encompassed, even within delightful Asolo, by the sins and sorrows of the world. Bluphocks, with his sniggering wit and his jingles of rhyme is a vagabond and a spy, who only covers the shame of his nakedness with these rags of devil-may-care good spirits. The genial cynicism of Ogniben is excellent of its kind, and pleases the palate like an olive amid wines; but this man of universal intellectual sympathies is at heart the satirist of moral illusions, the unmasker of self-deception, who with long experience of human infirmities, has come to chuckle gently over his own skill in dealing with them; and has he not—we may ask—wound around his own spirit some of the incurable illusions of worldly wisdom? No—this is not gaiety; if Browning smiles with his Ogniben, his smile is a comment upon the weakness and the blindness of the self-deceiver.

Browning's tragedies are tragedies without villains. The world is here the villain, which has baits and bribes and snares wherewith to entangle its victims, to lure down their mounting aspirations, to dull their vision for the things far-off and faint; perhaps also to make them prosperous and portly gentlemen, easy-going, and amiably cynical, tolerant of evil, and prudently distrustful of good. Yet truth is truth, and fact is fact; worldly wisdom is genuine wisdom after its kind; we shall be the better instructed if we listen to its sage experience, if we listen, understand, and in all justice, censure. Ogniben can blandly and skilfully conduct a Chiappino to his valley of humiliation—"let him that standeth take heed lest he fall." But what would the wisdom of Ogniben be worth in its pronouncements on a Luria or a Colombe? Perhaps even in such a case not wholly valueless. The self-pleased, keen-sighted Legate might after all have applauded a moral heroism or a high-hearted gallantry which would ill accord with his own ingenious and versatile spirit. Bishop Blougram—sleek, ecclesiastical opportunist—was not insensible to the superior merits of "rough, grand, old Martin Luther."

In Browning's nature a singularly keen, exploring intelligence was united with a rare moral and spiritual ardour, a passion for high ideals. In creating his chief *dramatis persona* he distributes among them what he found within himself, and they fall into two principal groups—characters in which the predominating power is intellect, and characters in which the mastery lies with some lofty emotion. The intellect dealing with things that are real and positive, those persons in whom intelligence is supreme may too easily become the children of this world; in their own sphere they are wiser than the children of light; and they are skilled in a moral casuistry by which they justify to themselves the darkening of the light that is in them. The passionate natures have an intelligence of their own; they follow a gleam which is visible to them if not to others; they discover, or rather they are discovered by, some truth which flashes forth in one inspired moment—the master-moment of a lifetime; they possess the sublime certainty of love, loyalty, devotion; if they err through a heroic folly and draw upon themselves ruin in things temporal, may there not be some atom of divine wisdom at the heart of the folly, which is itself indestructible, and which ensures for them a welfare out of time and space? Prophet and casuist—Browning is both; and to each he will endeavour to be just; but his heart must give a casting vote, and this cannot be in favour of the casuist. Every self-transcending passion has in it a divine promise and pledge; even the passion of the senses if it has hidden within it one spark of self-annihilating love may be the salvation of a soul. It is Ottima, lifted above her own superb voluptuousness, who cries—"Not me—to him, O God, be merciful." The region of untrammelled, unclouded passion, of spiritual intuition, and of those great words from heaven, which pierce "even to the dividing asunder of the joints and marrow," is, for Browning's imagination, the East. The nations of the West—and, before all others, the Italian race—are those of a subtly developed intelligence. The worldly art of a Church-man, ingenuities of theology having aided in refining ingenuities of worldliness, is perhaps the finest exemplar of unalloyed western brain-craft. But Italy is also a land of passion; and therefore at once, for its ardours of the heart—seen not in love alone but in carven capital and on frescoed wall—and for its casuistries of intellect, Browning looks to Italy for the material best fitted to his artistry. Between that group of personages whom we may call his characters of passion and that group made up of his characters of intelligence, lie

certain figures of peculiar interest, by birth and inheritance children of the East, and by culture partakers, in a greater or a less degree, of the characteristics of the West—a Djabal, with his Oriental heart entangled by Prankish tricks of sophistry; a Luria, whose Moorish passion is enthralled by the fascination of Florentine intellect, and who can make a return upon himself with a half-painful western self-consciousness.

Loyalties, devotions, to a person, to a cause, to an ideal, and the sacrifice of individual advantages, worldly prosperity, temporal successes to these—such, stated in a broad and general way, is the theme of special interest to Browning in his dramas. These loyalties may be well and wisely fixed, or they may contain a portion of error and illusion. But in either case they furnish a test of manly and womanly virtue. With a woman the test is often proposed by love—by love as set over against ease, or high station, or the pride of power. Colombe of Ravestein is offered on the one hand the restoration of her forfeited Duchy, the prospective rank of Empress and partnership with a man, who, if he cannot give love, is yet no ignoble wooer, a man of honour, of intellect, and of high ambition; on the other hand pleads the advocate of Cleves, a nameless provincial, past his days of youth, lean and somewhat worn, and burdened with the griefs and wrongs of his townsfolk. Mere largeness in a life is something, is much; but the quality of a life is more. Valence has set the cause of his fellow-citizens above himself; he has made the heart of the Duchess for the first time thrill in sympathy with the life of her people; he has placed his loyalty to her far above his own hopes of happiness; he has urged his rival's claims with unfaltering fidelity. It is not with any backward glances of regret, any half-doubts, prudent reserves, or condescending qualifications that Colombe gives herself to the advocate of the poor. She, in her youth and beauty, has been happy during her year of idlesse as play-Duchess of Juliers; she is happier now as she abandons the court and, sure in her grave choice, turns with a light and joyous laugh to welcome the birthday gift of freedom and of love that has so unexpectedly come to her. Having once made her election, Colombe can throw away the world as gaily as in some girlish frolic she might toss aside a rose.

The loyalty of men, their supreme devotion and their test may, as with women, spring from the passion of love; but other tests than this are often proposed to them. With King Charles of Sardinia it is duty to his people that summons him, from those modest and tranquil ways of life of which he dreamed, to the cares and toils of the crown. He has strength to accept without faltering the burden that is laid upon him. And if he falters at the last, and would resign to his father, who reclaims it, the crown which God alone should have removed, shall we assert confidently that Browning's dramatic instinct has erred? The pity of it—that his great father, daring in battle, profound in policy, should stand before him an outraged, helpless old man, craving with senile greed a gift from his son—the pity of it revives an old weakness, an old instinct of filial submission, in the heart of Charles. He has tasked himself without sparing; he has gained the affections of his subjects; he has conciliated a hostile Europe; is not this enough? Or was it also in the bond that he should tread a miserable father into the dust? The test again of Luigi, in the third part of *Pippa Passes*, is that of one who sees all the oppression of his people, who is enamoured of the antique ideal of liberty, and whose choice lies between a youth of luxurious ease and the virtue of one heroic crime, to be followed by the scaffold-steps, with youth cut short. To him that overcometh and endureth unto the end will God give the morning-star:

> The gift of the morning-star! Have I God's gift
> Of the morning-star?

And Luigi will adventure forth—it may be in a kind of divine folly—as a doomsman commissioned by God to free his Italy. The devotion of Luria to Florence is partly of the imagination, and perhaps it is touched with something of illusion. But the actual Florence, with her astute politicians, her spies who spy upon spies, her incurable distrusts, her sinister fears, her ingrained ingratitude, is clearly exposed to him before the end. Shall he turn the army, which is as much his own as the sword he wields, joined with the forces of Pisa, against the beautiful, faithless city? Or will his passionate loyalty endure the test? Luria withdraws from life, but not until he has made every provision for the victory of Florence over her enemy; nor does he die a defeated man; his moral greatness has subdued all envies and all distrusts; at the close everyone is true to him:

> The only fault's with time;
> All men become good creatures: but so slow.[29]

Once again in Browning's earliest play, the test for the patriot Pym lies in the choice between two loyalties—one to England and to freedom, the other to his early friend and former comrade in politics. His faith in Strafford dies hard; but it dies; he flings forward his hopes for the grand traitor to England beyond the confines of this life, and only the grieved unfaltering justiciary remains. Browning's Pym is a figure neither historically true nor dramatically effective; he is self-conscious and sentimental, a patriot armed in paste-board rhetoric. But the writer, let us remember, was young; this was his first theatrical essay, and he was somewhat showy of fine intentions. The loyalty of Strafford to the King is too fatuous an instinct to gain our complete sympathy. He rides gallantly into the quicksand, knowing it to be such, and the quicksand, as certainly as the worm of Nilus, will do its kind. And yet though this is the vain romance of loyalty, in it, as Browning conceives, lies the test of Strafford. A self-renouncing passion of any kind is not so common that we can afford to look on his king-worship with scorn.

Over against these devotees of the ideal Browning sets his worldlings, ranging from creatures as despicable as the courtiers of Duchess Colombe to such men of power and inexhaustible resource

as the Nuncio who confronts Djabal with his Druses, or the Papal Legate whose easier and half-humorous task is to dismiss to his private affairs at Lugo the four-and-twentieth leader of revolt. To the same breed with the courtiers of Colombe belong old Vane and Savile of the court of Charles. To the same breed with the Nuncio and the Legate, belongs Monsignor, who proves himself more than a match for his hireling, the scoundrel Intendant. In a happy moment Monsignor is startled into indignant wrath; he does not exclaim with the Edmund of Shakespeare's tragedy "Some good I mean to do before I die;" but his "Gag the villain!" is a substantial contribution to the justice of our world. Under the ennobling influence of Charles and his Polyxena, the craft of D'Ormea is uplifted to a level of real dignity; if he cannot quite attain the position of a martyr for the truth, he becomes something better than one who serves God at the devil's bidding. And Braccio, plotter and betrayer, yet always with a certain fidelity towards his mother-city, is won over to the side of simple truth and righteousness by the overmastering power of Luria's magnanimity. So precious, after all—Browning would say—is the mere capacity to recognise facts; if only a little grain of virtue remains in the heart, this faculty of vision may make some sudden discovery which shall prove to a worldling that there exist facts, undeniable and of immense potency, hitherto unknown to his philosophy of chicane. Browning's vote is given, as has been said, and with no uncertain voice, for his devotees of the ideal; but the men of fine worldly brain-craft have a fascination for him as they have for his Eastern Luria. In Djabal, at once enthusiast and impostor, Browning may seem, as often afterwards, to offer an apology for the palterer with truth; but in the interests of truth itself, he desires to study the strange phenomenon of the deceiver who would fain half-deceive himself.

NOTES:

[18]

Dr Moncure Conway in "The Nation" vol. i. (an article written on the occasion of Browning's death) says that he was told by Carlyle of his first meeting with Browning—as Carlyle rode upon Wimbledon Common a "beautiful youth," walking there alone, stopped him and asked for his acquaintance. The incident has a somewhat legendary air.

[19]

Lady Martin (Helen Faucit), however, wrote in 1891 to Mrs Ritchie: "The play was mounted in all matters with great care ... minute attention to accuracy of costume prevailed.... The scenery was alike accurate."

[20]

On which occasion Browning—muffled up in a cloak—was asked by a stranger in the pit whether he was not the author of "Romeo and Juliet" and "Othello." "No, so far as I am aware," replied Browning. Two burlesques of Shakespeare by a Mr Brown or Brownley were in course of performance in London. *Letters of R.B. and E.B.B.*, ii. 132.

[21]

From the Prologue to *Asolando*, Browning's last volume.

[22]

Mrs Orr, "Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning," p. 54 (1st ed.).

[23]

A Soul's Tragedy was written in 1843 or 1844, and revised immediately before publication. See Letters of R.B. and E.B.B., i. 474.

[24]

Letters of D.G. Rossetti to William Allingham, p. 168.

[25]

The above statement is substantially that of Browning; but on certain points his memory misled him. Whoever is interested in the matter should consult Professor Lounsbury's valuable article "A Philistine View of a Browning Play" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1899, where questions are raised and some corrections are ingeniously made.

[26]

An uncle seems to have accompanied him. See *Letters of R.B. and E.B.B.*, i. 57: and (for Shelley's Grave) i. 292; for "Sordello" at Naples, i., 349.

[27]

In later years no friendship existed between the two. We read in Mr. W.M. Rossetti's Diary for 1869, "4th July.... I see Browning dislikes Trelawny quite as much as Trelawny dislikes him (which is not a little.)" *Rossetti Papers*, p. 401.

[28]

See Mr R. Holt Hutton's article on Browning in "Essays Theological and Literary."

[29]

Luria withdraws from life "to prevent the harm Florence will do herself by striking him." *Letters of R.B. and E.B.B.*, i. 427.

Chapter IV

The Maker of Plays—*(Continued)*

The women of the dramas, with one or two exceptions, are composed of fewer elements than the men. A variety of types is presented, but each personality is somewhat constrained and controlled by its idea; the free movement, the iridescence, the variety in oneness, the incalculable multiplicity in unity, of real character are not always present. They admit of definition to a degree which places them at a distance from the inexplicable open secrets of Shakespeare's creation; they lack the simple mysteriousness, the transparent obscurity of nature. With a master-key the chambers of their souls can one after another be unlocked. Ottima is the carnal passion of womanhood, full-blown, dazzling in the effrontery of sin, yet including the possibility, which Browning conceives as existing at the extreme edge of every expansive ardour, of being translated into a higher form of passion which abolishes all thought of self. Anael, of *The Return of the Druses*, is pure and measureless devotion. The cry of "Hakeem!" as she falls, is not an act of faith but of love; it pierces through the shadow of the material falsehood to her one illuminated truth of absolute love, like that other falsehood which sanctifies the dying lips of Desdemona. The sin of Mildred is the very innocence of sin, and does not really alter the simplicity of her character; it is only the girlish rapture of giving, with no limitation, whatever may prove a bounty to him whom she loves:—

> Come what, come will,
> You have been happy.

The remorse of Mildred is the remorse of innocence, the anguish of one wholly unlearned in the dark colours of guilt. This tragedy of Mildred and Mertoun is the *Romeo and Juliet* of Browning's cycle of dramas. But Mildred's cousin Guendolen, by virtue of her swift, womanly penetration and her brave protectiveness of distressed girlhood, is a kinswoman of Beatrice who supported the injured daughter of Leonato in a comedy of Shakespeare which rings with laughter.

Polyxena, the Queen of Sardinia—a daughter not of Italy but of the Rhineland—is, in her degree, an eighteenth century representative of the woman of the ancient Teutonic tribes, grave, resolute, wise, and possessing the authority of wisdom. She, whose heart and brain work bravely together like loyal comrades, is strongly but also simply, conceived as the helpmate, the counsellor, and, in the old sense of the word, the comforter of her husband. Something of almost maternal feeling, as happens at times in real life, mingles with her wifely affection for Charles, who indeed may prove on occasions a fractious son. Like a wise guardian-angel she remembers on these occasions that he is only a man, and that men in their unwisdom may grow impatient of unalleviated guardian-angelhood; he will by and by discover his error, and she can bide her time. Perhaps, like other heroines of Browning, Polyxena is too constantly and uniformly herself; yet, no doubt, it is right that opaline, shifting hues should not disturb our impression of a character whose special virtue is steadfastness. The Queen of the English Charles, who is eager to counsel, and always in her petulance and folly to counsel ill, is slightly sketched; but she may be thanked for one admirable speech—her first—when Strafford, worn and fevered in the royal service, has just arrived from Ireland, and passing out from his interview with the King is encountered by her:—

> Is it over then?
> Why he looks yellower than ever! Well
> At least we shall not hear eternally
> Of service—services: he's paid at least.

The Lady Carlisle of the same play—a creature in the main of Browning's imagination—had the play been Elizabethan or Jacobean would have followed her lord in a page's dress, have lived on half a smile a day, and perhaps have succeeded in dying languishingly and happily upon his sword; she is not quite unreal, nor yet quite real; something much better than a stage property and not wholly a living woman; more of a Beaumont and Fletcher personage of the boards—and as such effective—than a Shakespearian piece of nature. The theatrical limbo to which such almost but not quite embodied shadows ultimately troop, is capacious.

In Browning's dramatic scene of 1853, *In a Balcony*, he created with unqualified success "a very woman" in the enamoured Queen, whose heart at fifty years beats only more wildly and desperately than a girl's.[30] The young lovers, Constance and Norbert, are a highly meritorious pair, who express their passion in excellent and eloquent periods; we have seen their like before,

and since. But the Queen, with her unslaked thirst for the visionary wells under the palm-trees, who finds herself still amid the burning sands, is an original and tragic figure—a royal Mlle. de Lespinasse, and crowned with fiery and immitigable pain. Although she has returned the "glare" of Constance with the glare of "a panther," the Queen is large-hearted. The guards, it is true, arrive as the curtain falls; but those readers who have wasted their tender emotion on a couple of afflicted prisoners or decapitated young persons, whom mother Nature can easily replace, are mistaken. If the Queen does not die that night, she will rise next morning after sleepless hours, haggard, not fifty but eighty years old, and her passion will, heroically slay itself in an act of generosity.[31] Little more, however, than a situation is represented in this dramatic scene. Of Browning's full-length portraits of women in the dramas, the finest piece of work is the portrait of the happiest woman—the play-Duchess of Juliers, no longer Duchess, but ever

> Our lady of dear Ravestein.

Colombe is no incarnated idea but a complete human being, irreducible to a formula, whom we know the better because there is always in her more of exquisite womanhood to be discovered. Even the too fortunate Valence—all readers of his own sex must pronounce him too fortunate—will for ever be finding her anew.

In the development of his dramatic style Browning more and more lost sight of the theatre and its requirements; his stage became more and more a stage of the mind. *Strafford*, his first play, is the work of a novice, who has little of the instinct for theatrical effect, but who sets his brain to invent striking tableaux, to prepare surprises, to exhibit impressive attitudes, to calculate—not always successfully—the angle of a speech, so that it may with due impact reach the pit. The opening scene expounds the situation. In the second Wentworth and Pym confront each other; the King surprises them; Wentworth lets fall the hand of Pym, as the stage tradition requires; as Wentworth withdraws the Queen enters to unmake what he has made, and the scene closes with a tableau expressing the sentimental weakness of Charles:

> Come, dearest!—look, the little fairy, now
> That cannot reach my shoulder! Dearest, come!

And so proceeds the tragedy, with much that ought to be dear to the average actor, which yet is somehow not always even theatrically happy. The pathos of the closing scene where Strafford is discovered in The Tower, sitting with his children, is theatrical pathos of the most correct kind, and each little speech of little William and little Anne is uttered as much for the audience as for their father, implying in every word "See, how we, poor innocents, heighten the pity of it." The hastily written *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* is, perhaps, of Browning's dramas the best fitted for theatrical representation. Yet it is incurably weak in the motives which determine the action; and certain passages are almost ludicrously undramatic. If Romeo before he flung up his ladder of ropes had paused, like Mertoun, to salute his mistress with a tenor morceau from the opera, it is to be feared that runaways' and other eyes would not have winked, and that old Capulet would have come upon the scene in his night-gown, prepared to hasten the catastrophe with a long sword. Yet *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, with its breadth of outline, its striking situations, and its mastery of the elementary passions—love and wrath and pride and pity—gives us assurance that Browning might have taken a place of considerable distinction had he been born in an age of great dramatic poetry. If it is weak in construction so—though in a less degree—are Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*.

In *King Victor and King Charles* Browning adopted, and no doubt deliberately, a plain, unfigured and uncoloured style, as suiting both the characters and the historical subject. The political background of this play and that of *Strafford* hardly entitles either drama to be named political. Browning was a student of history, but it was individuals and not society that interested him. The affairs of England and the affairs of Sardinia serve to throw out the figures of the chief *dramatis personæ*; those affairs are not considered for their own sake. Certain social conditions are studied as they enter into and help to form an individual. The Bishop who orders his tomb at St Praxed's is in part a product of the Italian Renaissance, but the causes are seen only in their effects upon the character of a representative person. If the plain, substantial style of *King Victor and King Charles* is proper to a play with such a hero as Charles and such a heroine as Polyxena, the coloured style, rich in imagery, is no less right in *The Return of the Druses*, where religious and chivalric enthusiasm are blended with the enthusiasm of the passion of love. But already Browning was ceasing to bear in mind the conditions of the stage. Certain pages where Djabal and Khalil, Djabal and Anael, Anael and Loys are the speakers, might be described as dialogues conducted by means of "asides," and even the imagination of a reader resents a construction of scenes which requires these duets of soliloquies, these long sequences of the audible-inaudible. With the "very tragical mirth" of the second part of Chiappino's story of moral and political disaster, the spectators and the stage have wholly disappeared from Browning's theatre; the imaginary dialogue is highly dramatic, in one sense of the word, and is admirable in its kind, but we transport ourselves best to the market-place of Faenza by sitting in an easy chair.

Pippa Passes is singular in its construction; scenes detached, though not wholly disconnected, are strung pendant-wise upon the gold thread, slender but sufficiently strong, of an idea; realism in art, as we now call it, hangs from a fine idealism; this substantial globe of earth with its griefs, its grossnesses, its heroism, swings suspended from the seat of God. The idea which gives unity to the whole is not a mere fantasy. The magic practised by the unconscious Pippa through her songs is of that genuine and beautiful kind which the Renaissance men of science named "Magia

Naturalis." It is no fantasy but a fact that each of us influences the lives of others more or less every day, and at times in a peculiar degree, in ways of which we are not aware. Let this fact be seized with imaginative intensity, and let the imagination render it into a symbol—we catch sight of Pippa with her songs passing down the grass-paths and under the pine-wood of Asolo. Her only service to God on this one holiday of a toilsome year is to be glad. She misconceives everything that concerns "Asolo's Four Happiest Ones"—to her fancy Ottima is blessed with love, Jules is no victim of an envious trick, Luigi's content in his lot is deep and unassailable, and Monsignor is a holy and beloved priest; and, unawares to her, in modes far other than she had imagined, each of her dreams comes true; even Monsignor for one moment rises into the sacred avenger of God. Her own service, though she knows it not, is more than a mere twelve-hours' gladness; she, the little silk-winder, rays forth the influences of a heart that has the potency ascribed to gems of unflawed purity; and such influences—here embodied in the symbol of a song—are among the precious realities of our life. Nowhere in literature has the virtue of mere innocent gladness been more charmingly imagined than in her morning outbreak of expectancy, half animal glee, half spiritual joy; the "whole sunrise, not to be suppressed" is a limitless splendour, but the reflected beam cast up from the splash of her ewer and dancing on her poor ceiling is the same in kind; in the shrub-house up the hill-side are great exotic blooms, but has not Pippa her one martagon lily, over which she queens it? With God all service ranks the same, and she shall serve Him all this long day by gaiety and gratitude.

Pippa Passes is a sequence of dramatic scenes, with lyrics interspersed, and placed in a lyrical setting; the figures dark or bright, of the painting are "ringed by a flowery bowery angel-brood" of song. But before his *Bells and Pomegranates* were brought to a close Browning had discovered in the short monodrama, lyrical or reflective, the most appropriate vehicle for his powers of passion and of thought. Here a single situation sufficed; characters were seen rightly in position; the action of the piece was wholly internal; a passion could be isolated, and could be either traced through its varying moods or seized in its moment of culmination; the casuistry of the brain could be studied apart,—it might have its say uninterrupted, or it might be suddenly encountered and dissipated by some spearlike beam of light from the heart or soul; the traditions of a great literary form were not here a cause of embarrassment; they need not, as in work for the theatre, be laboriously observed or injuriously violated; the poet might assert his independence and be wholly original.

And original, in the best sense of the word—entirely true to his highest self—Browning was in the "Dramatic Lyrics" of 1842, and the "Dramatic Romances and Lyrics" of 1845. His senses were at once singularly keen and energetic, and singularly capacious of delight; his eyes were active instruments of observation, and at the same time were possessed by a kind of rapture in form—and not least in fantastic form—and a rapture still finer in the opulence and variety of colour. In these poems we are caught into what may truly be called an enthusiasm of the senses; and presently we find that the senses, good for their own sakes, are good also as inlets to the spirit. Having returned from his first visit to southern Italy, the sights and sounds, striking upon the retina and the auditory nerve, with the intensity of a new experience, still attack the eye and ear *as* he writes his *Englishman in Italy*, and by virtue of their eager obsession demand and summon forth the appropriate word.[32] The fisherman from Amalfi pitches down his basket before us,

> All trembling alive
> With pink and grey jellies, your sea-fruit,
> —You touch the strange lumps,
> And mouths gape there, eyes open, all manner
> Of horns and of humps.

Or it is the "quick rustle-down of the quail-nets," or the "whistling pelt" of the olives, when Scirocco is loose, that invades our ears. And by and by among the mountains the play of the senses expands, and the soul has its great word to utter:

> God's own profound
> Was above me, and round me the mountains,
> And under, the sea,
> And within me, my heart to bear witness
> hat was and shall be.

Not less vivid is the vision of the light craft with its lateen sail outside Triest, in which Waring—the Flying Englishman—is seen "with great grass hat and kerchief black," looking up for a moment, showing his "kingly throat," till suddenly in the sunset splendour the boat veers weather-ward and goes off, as with a bound, "into the rose and golden half of the sky." And what animal-painter has given more of the leonine wrath in mane and tail and fixed wide eyes than Browning has conveyed into his lion of King Francis with three strokes of the brush? Or it is only a bee upon a sunflower on which the gazer's eye is fixed, and we get the word of Rudel:

> And therefore bask the bees
> On my flower's breast, as on a platform broad.

Or—a grief to booklovers!—the same eye is occupied by all the grotesquerie of insect life in the revel over that unhappy tome lurking in the plum tree's crevice of Browning's *Garden Fancy*, which creeps and crawls with beetle and spider, worm and eft.[33] Or it is night and moonlight by the sandy shore, and for a moment—before love enters—all the mind of the impressionist artist

lives merely in the eye:

> The grey sea and the long black land;
> And the yellow half-moon large and low;
> And the startled little waves that leap
> In fiery ringlets from their sleep
> As I gain the cove with pushing prow.

If Browning did not rejoice in perfect health and animal spirits—and in the letters to Miss Barrett we hear of frequent headaches and find a reference to his pale thin face as seen in a mirror—he had certainly the imagination of perfect vitality and of those "wild joys of living," sung by the young harper David in that poem of *Saul*, which appeared as a fragment in the *Bells and Pomegranates*, and as a whole ten years later, with the awe and rapture of the spirit rising above the rapture of the senses.[34]

Of these poems of 1842 and 1845 one *The Pied Piper*, was written in the spirit of mere play and was included in *Bells and Pomegranates* only to make up a number, for which the printer required more copy. One or two—the flesh and blood incarnations of the wines of France and Hungary, *Claret* and *Tokay*, are no more than clever caprices of the fancy. One, *The Lost Lender*, remotely suggested by the conservatism of Wordsworth's elder days, but possibly deflected by some of the feeling attributed to Pym in relation to Strafford of the drama, and certainly detached from direct personal reference to Wordsworth, expresses Browning's liberal sentiment in politics. One, the stately *Artemis Prologuizes*, is the sole remaining fragment of a classical drama, "Hippolytus and Aricia," composed in 1840, "much against my endeavour," wrote the poet,—a somewhat enigmatical phrase—"while in bed with a fever." A considerable number of the poems may be grouped together as expressions or demonstrations of various passions, central among which is the passion of love. A few, and these conspicuous for their masterly handling of novel themes, treat of art, and the feeling for art as seen in the painter of pictures or in the connoisseur. Nor is the interpretation of religious emotion—though in a phase that may be called abnormal—wholly forgotten.

With every passion that expands the spirit beyond the bounds of self, Browning, as the dramas have made evident to us, is in cordial sympathy. The reckless loyalty, with its animal spirits and its dash of grief, the bitterer because grief must be dismissed, of the *Cavalier Tunes*, is true to England and to the time in its heartiness and gallant bluffness. The leap-up of pride and joy in a boy's heart at the moment of death in his Emperor's cause could hardly be more intensely imagined than it is in the poem of the French camp, and all is made more real and vivid by the presence of that motionless figure, intent on victory and sustaining the weight of imperial anxieties, which yet cannot be quite impassive in presence of a death so devoted. And side by side with this poem of generous enthusiasm is placed the poem of passion reduced to its extreme of meanness, its most contracted form of petty spite and base envy—the *Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister*; a grotesque insect, spitting ineffectual poison, is placed under the magnifying-glass of the comic spirit, and is discovered to be—a brother in religion! A noble hatred, transcending personal considerations, mingles with a noble and solemn love—the passion of country—in the Italian exile's record of his escape from Austrian pursuers; with the clear-obscure of his patriotic melancholy mingles the proud recollection of the Italian woman who was his saviour, over whose conjectured happiness as peasant wife and peasant mother the exile bows with a tender joy. The examples of abnormal passion are two—that of the amorous homicide who would set on one perfect moment the seal of eternity, in *Porphyria's Lover*, and that of the other occupier of the mad-house cells, Johannes Agricola, whose passion of religion is pushed to the extreme of a mystical antinomianism.

Browning's poems of the love of man and woman are seldom a simple lyrical cry, but they are not on this account the less true in their presentment of that curious masquer and disguiser—Love. When love takes possession of a nature which is complex, affluents and tributaries from many and various faculties run into the main stream. With Browning the passion is indeed a regal power, but intellect, imagination, fancy are its office-bearers for a time; then in a moment it resumes all authority into its own hands, resolves of a sudden all that is complex into the singleness of joy or pain, fuses all that is manifold into the unity of its own life and being. His dramatic method requires that each single faculty should be seen in the environment of a character, and that its operations should be clothed more or less in circumstance. And since love has its ingenuities, its fine-spun and far-flung threads of association, its occult symbolisms, Browning knows how to press into the service of the central emotion objects and incidents and imagery which may seem remote or curious or fantastic or trivial or even grotesque. In *Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli* love which cometh by the hearing of the ear (for Rudel is a sun-worshipper who has never seen his sun) is a pure imaginative devotion to the ideal. In *Count Gismond* love is the deliverer; the motive of the poem is essentially that of the Perseus and Andromeda myth refined upon and mediaevalised. In *Cristine* love is the interpreter of life; a moment of high passion explains, and explains away, all else that would obscure the vision of what is best and most real in this our world and in the worlds that are yet unattained. From a few lines written to illustrate a Venetian picture by Maclise *In a Gondola* was evolved. If Browning was not entirely accurate in his topography of Venice, he certainly did not fail in his sense of the depth and opulence of its colour. Here the abandonment to passion is relieved by the quaint ingenuities and fancies of love that seeks a momentary refuge from its own excess, and then returns more eagerly upon itself; and the shadow of death is ever at hand, but like the shadows of a Venetian painter it glows with colour.

The motives of two narrative poems, *The Glove* and *The Flight of the Duchess*, have much in common; they lie in the contrast between the world of convention and the world of reality. In each the insulter of proprieties, the breaker of bounds is a woman; in each the choice lies between a life of pretended love and vain dignities and a life of freedom and true love; and in each case the woman makes her glad escape from what is false to what is true. In restating the incident of the glove Browning brings into play his casuistry, but casuistry is here used to justify a passion which the poet approves, to elucidate, not to obscure, what he represents as the truth of the situation. *The Flight of the Duchess* in part took its rise "from a line, 'Following the Queen of the Gipsies, O!'—the burden of a song, which the poet, when a boy, heard a woman singing on a Guy Fawkes' day." Some two hundred lines were given to Hood for his magazine, at a time when Hood needed help, and death was approaching him. The poem was completed some months later. It is written, like *The Glove*, in verse that runs for swiftness' sake, and that is pleased to show its paces on a road rough with boulder-like rhymes. The little Duchess is a wild bird caged in the strangely twisted wirework of artificial modes and forms. She is a prisoner who is starved for real life, and stifles; the fresh air and the open sky are good, are irresistible—and that is the whole long poem in brief. Such a small prisoner, all life and fire, was before many months actually delivered from her cage in Wimpole Street, and Robert Browning himself, growing in stature amid his incantations, played the part of the gipsy.

Another Duchess, who pined for freedom and never attained it, has her cold obituary notice from her bereaved Duke's lips in the *Dramatic Lyrics* of 1842. *My Last Duchess* was there made a companion poem to *Count Gismond*; they are the pictures of the bond-woman and of the freed-woman in marriage. The Italian Duchess revolts from the law of wifehood no further than a misplaced smile or a faint half-flush, betraying her inward breathings and beamings of the spirit; the noose of the ducal proprieties is around her throat, and when it tightens "then all smiles stopped together." Never was an agony hinted with more gentlemanly reserve. But the poem is remarkable chiefly as gathering up into a typical representative a whole phase of civilisation. The Duke is Italian of Renaissance days; insensible in his egoistic pride to the beautiful humanity alive before him; yet a connoisseur of art to his finger-tips; and after all a Duchess can be replaced, while the bronze of Glaus of Innsbruck—but the glory of his possessions must not be pressed, as though his nine hundred years old name were not enough. The true gift of art—Browning in later poems frequently insists upon this—is not for the connoisseur or collector who rests in a material possession, but for the artist who, in the zeal of creation, presses through his own work to that unattainable beauty, that flying joy which exists beyond his grasp and for ever lures him forward. In *Pictor Ignotus* the earliest study in his lives of the painters was made by the poet. The world is gross, its touch unsanctifies the sanctities of art; yet the brave audacity of genius is able to penetrate this gross world with spiritual fire. Browning's unknown painter is a delicate spirit, who dares not mingle his soul with the gross world; he has failed for lack of a robust faith, a strenuous courage. But his failure is beautiful and pathetic, and for a time at least his Virgin, Babe, and Saint will smile from the cloister wall with their "cold, calm, beautiful regard." And yet to have done otherwise to have been other than this; to have striven like that youth—the Urbinate—men praise so! More remarkable, as the summary of a civilisation, than *My Last Duchess*, is the address of the worldling Bishop, who lies dying, to the "nephews" who are sons of his loins. In its Paganism of Christianity—which lacks all the manly virtue of genuine Paganism—that portion of the artistic Renaissance which leans towards the world and the flesh is concentrated and is given as in quintessential form. The feeble fingers yet cling to the vanities of earth; the speaker babbles not of green fields but of his blue lump of lapis-lazuli; and the last word of all is alive only with senile luxury and the malice of perishing recollection.

NOTES:

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In a Balcony, published in *Men and Women*, 1855, is said to have been written two years previously at the Baths of Lucca.

[31]

I had written the above—and I leave it as I wrote it—before I noticed the following quoted from the letter of a friend by Mrs Arthur Bronson in her article Browning in Venice: "Browning seemed as full of dramatic interest in reading 'In a Balcony' as if he had just written it for our benefit. One who sat near him said that it was a natural sequence that the step of the guard should be heard coming to take Norbert to his doom, as, with a nature like the queen's, who had known only one hour of joy in her sterile life, vengeance swift and terrible would follow on the sudden destruction of her happiness. 'Now I don't quite think that,' answered Browning, as if he were following out the play as a spectator. 'The queen has a large and passionate temperament, which had only once been touched and brought into intense life. She would have died by a knife in her heart. The guard would have come to carry away her dead body.' 'But I imagine that most people interpret it as I do,' was the reply. 'Then,' said Browning, with quick interest, 'don't you think it would be well to put it in the stage directions, and have it seen that they were carrying her across the back of the stage?'"

[32]

Browning's eyes were in a remarkable degree unequal in their power of vision; one was unusually long-sighted; the other, with which he could read the most microscopic print, unusually short-sighted.

[33]

See a very interesting passage on Browning's "odd liking for 'vermin'" in *Letters of R.B. and E.B.B.*. i. 370, 371: "I always liked all those wild creatures God '*sets up for themselves*.'" "It seemed awful to watch that bee—he seemed so *instantly* from the teaching of God."

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Of the first part of *Saul* Mr Kenyon said finely that "it reminded him of Homer's shield of Achilles thrown into lyrical whirl and life" *(Letters R.B. and E.B.B.* i. 326).

Chapter V

Love and Marriage

In 1841, John Kenyon, formerly a school-fellow of Browning's father, now an elderly lover of literature and of literary society, childless, wealthy, generous-hearted, proposed to Browning that he should call upon Elizabeth Barrett, Kenyon's cousin once removed, who was already distinguished as a writer of ardent and original verse. Browning consented, but the poetess "through some blind dislike of seeing strangers"—as she afterwards told a correspondent—declined, alleging, not untruly, as a ground of refusal, that she was then ailing in health.[35] Three years later Kenyon sent his cousin's new volumes of *Poems* as a gift to Sarianna Browning; her brother, lately returned from Italy, read these volumes with delight and admiration, and found on one of the pages a reference in verse to his "Pomegranates" of a kind that could not but give him a vivid moment of pleasure. Might he not relieve his sense of obligation by telling Miss Barrett, in a letter, that he admired her work? Mr Kenyon encouraged the suggestion, and though to love and be silent might on the whole have been more to Browning's liking, he wrote—January 10, 1845—and writing truthfully he wrote enthusiastically.[36] Miss Barrett, never quite recovered from a riding accident in early girlhood, and stricken down for long in both soul and body by the shock of her brother's death by drowning, lay from day to day and month to month, in an upper room of her father's house in Wimpole Street, occupied, upon her sofa, with her books and papers—her Greek dramatists and her Elizabethan poets—shut out from the world, with windows for ever closed, and with only an occasional female visitor, to gossip of the social and literary life of London. Never was a spirit of more vivid fire enclosed within a tomb. The letter from Browning, "the author of *Paracelsus* and King of the mystics," threw her, she says, "into ecstasics." Her reply has a thrill of pleasure running through its graceful half-restraint, and she holds out a hope that when spring shall arrive a meeting in the invalid chamber between her and her new correspondent may be possible.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

From a drawing in chalk by FIELD TALFOURD *in the National Portrait Gallery.*

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.
From a drawing in chalk by* FIELD TALFOURD *in the National Portrait Gallery.

From the first a headlong yet delicate speed was in her pen; from the first there was much to say. "Oh, for a horse with wings!" Mr Browning, who had praised her poems, must tell her their faults. He must himself speak out in noble verse, not merely utter himself through the masks of *dramatis personae*. Can she, as he alleges, really help him by her sympathy, by her counsel? Let him put ceremony aside and treat her *en bon camerade*; he will find her "an honest man on the whole." She intends to set about knowing him as much as possible immediately. What poets have been his literary sponsors? Are not the critics wrong to deny contemporary genius? What poems are those now in his portfolio? Is not Æschylus the divinest of divine Greek spirits? but how inadequately her correspondent has spoken of Dante! Shall they indeed—as he suggests—write something together? And then—is he duly careful of his health, careful against overwork? And is not gladness a duty? to give back to the world the joy that God has given to his poet? Though, indeed, to lean out of the window of this House of Life is for some the required, perhaps the happiest attitude.

And why—replies the second voice—lean out of the window? His own foot is only on the stair. Where are the faults of her poems, of which she had inquired? Yes, he will speak out, and he is now planning such a poem as she demands. But she it is, who has indeed spoken out in her verse? In his portfolio is a drama about a Moor of Othello's country, one Luria, with strange entanglings among his Florentines. See this, and this, how grandly it is said in the Greek of Eschylus! But Dante, all Dante is in his heart and head. And he has seen Tennyson face to face; and he knows and loves Carlyle; and he has visited Sorrento and trod upon Monte Calvano. Oh, the world in this year 1845 must be studied, though solitude is best. He has been "polking" all night, and walked home while the morning thrushes piped; and it is true that his head aches. She shall read and amend his manuscript poems. To hear from her is better than to see anybody else. But when shall he see her too?

So proceed from January to May the letters of Rudel and the still invisible Lady of Wimpole Street. It was happy comradeship on her part, but on his it was already love. His spirit had recognised, had touched, a spirit, which included all that he most needed, and union with which would be the most certain and substantial prize offered by life. There was nothing fatuous in this inward assurance; it was the simplest and most self-evidencing truth. The word "mistrustful"—"do not see me as long as you are mistrustful of"—with its implied appeal to her

generous confidence, precipitated the visit. How could she be mistrustful? Of course he may come: but the wish to do so was unwisely exorbitant. On the afternoon of May 20th, 1845, Browning first set eyes on his future wife, a little figure, which did not rise from the sofa, pale ringleted face, great eager, wistfully pathetic eyes. He believed that she was suffering from some incurable disease of the spine, and that whatever remained to her of life must be spent in this prostrate manner of an invalid.

A movement of what can only be imperfectly described as pity entered into his feeling for her: it was less pity than the joy of believing that he could confer as well as receive. But his first thought on leaving was only the fear that he might have stayed too long or might have spoken too loud. The visit was on Tuesday. On Thursday, Browning wrote the only letter of the correspondence which has been destroyed, one which overflowed with gratitude, and was immediately and rightly interpreted by the receiver as tending towards an offer, implied here, but not expressed, of marriage. It was read in pain and agitation; her heart indeed, but not her will, was shaken; and, after a sleepless night, she wrote words effective to bar—as she believed—all further advance in a direction fatal to his happiness. The intemperate things he had said must be wholly forgotten between them; or else she will not see him again; friends, comrades in the life of the intellect they might continue to be. For once and once only Browning lied to Miss Barrett, and he lied a little awkwardly; his letter was only one of too boisterous gratitude; his punishment—that of one infinitely her inferior—was undeserved; let her return to him the offending letter. Returned accordingly it was, and immediately destroyed by the writer. In happier days, Miss Barrett hoped to recover what then would have been added to a hoard which she treasured; but, Browning could not preserve the words which she had condemned.

Wise guardian-angels smile at each other, gently and graciously, when a lover is commanded to withdraw and to reappear in the character of a friend. An incoming tide may seem for a while to pause; but by and by we look and the rock is covered. Browning very dutifully submitted and became a literary counsellor and comrade. The first stadium in the progress of his fortunes opened in January and closed before the end of May; the second closed at the end of August. To a friend Miss Barrett, assured that he never could be more, might well be generous; visits were permitted, and it was left to Browning to fix the days; the postal shuttle threw swift and swifter threads between New Cross, Hatcham, and 50 Wimpole Street. The verse of Tennyson, the novels of George Sand were discussed; her translations from the Greek were considered; his manuscript poems were left for her corrections; but transcription must not weary him into headaches; she would herself by and by act as an amanuensis. Each of the correspondents could not rest happy until the other had been proved to be in every intellectual and moral quality the superior. Browning's praise could not be withheld; it seemed to his friend—and she wrote always with crystalline sincerity—to be an illusion which humbled her. Glad memories of Italy, sad memories of England and the invalid life were exchanged; there is nothing that she can teach him—she declares—except grief. And yet to him the day of his visit is his light through the dark week. He is like an Eastern Jew who creeps through alleys in the meanest garb, destitute to all wayfarers' eyes, who yet possesses a hidden palace-hall of marble and gold. Even in matters ecclesiastical, the footsteps of the two friends had moved with one consent; each of them preferred a chapel to a church; each was Puritan in a love of simplicity in the things of religion; each disowned the Puritan narrowness, and the grey aridity of certain schools of dissent. On June 14—with the warranty of her published poem which had told of flowers sent in a letter—Browning encloses in his envelope a yellow rose; and again and again summer flowers arrive bringing colour and sweetness into the dim city room. Once Miss Barrett can report that she has been out of doors, and with no fainting-fit, yet unable to venture in the carriage as far as the Park; still her bodily strength is no better than that of a tired bird; she is moreover, years older than her friend (the difference was in fact that between thirty-nine and thirty-three); and the thunder of a July storm has shaken her nerves. There is some thought of her seeking health as far off as Malta or even Alexandria; but her father will jestingly have it that there is nothing wrong with her except "obstinacy and dry toast." Thus cordially, gladly, sadly, and always with quick leapings of the indomitable flame of the spirit, these letters of friend to friend run on during the midsummer days. Browning was willing and happy to wait; a confidence possessed him that in the end he would be known fully and aright.

On August 25th came a great outpouring of feeling from Miss Barrett. She took her friend so far into her confidence as to speak plainly of the household difficulties caused by her father's autocratic temper. The conversation was immediately followed by a letter in which she endeavoured to soften or qualify the impression her words had given, and her heart, now astir and craving sympathy, led her on to write of her most sorrowful and sacred memories—those connected with her brother's death. Browning was deeply moved, most grateful for her trust in him, but she had forbidden him to notice the record of her grief. He longed to return confidence with confidence, to tell what was urgent in his heart. But the bar of three months since had not been removed, and he hesitated to speak. His two days' silence was unintelligible to his friend and caused her inexpressible anxiety. Could any words of hers have displeased him? Or was he seriously unwell? She wrote on August 30th a little letter asking "the alms of just one line" to relieve her fears. When snow-wreaths are loosened, a breath will bring down the avalanche. It was impossible to receive this appeal and not to declare briefly, decisively, his unqualified trust in her, his entire devotion, his assured knowledge of what would constitute his supreme happiness.

Miss Barrett's reply is perfect in its disinterested safe-guarding of his freedom and his future good as she conceived it. She is deeply grateful, but she cannot allow him to empty his water-

gourds into the sand. What could she give that it would not be ungenerous to give? Yet his part has not been altogether the harder of the two. The subject must be left. Such subjects, however, could not be left until the facts were ascertained. Browning would not urge her a step beyond her actual feelings, but he must know whether her refusal was based solely on her view of his supposed interests. And with the true delicacy of frankness she admits that even the sense of her own unworthiness is not the insuperable obstacle. No—but is she not a confirmed invalid? She thought that she had done living when he came and sought her out. If he would be wise, all these thoughts of her must be abandoned. Such an answer brought a great calm to Browning's heart; he did not desire to press her further; let things rest; it is for her to judge; if what she regards as an obstacle should be removed, she will certainly then act in his best interests; to himself this matter of health creates no difficulty; to sit by her for an hour a day, to write out what was in him for the world, and so to save his soul, would be to attain his ideal in life. What woman would not be moved to the inmost depths by such words? She insists that his noble extravagances must in no wise bind him; but all the bitternesses of life have been taken away from her; henceforth she is his for everything except to do him harm; the future rests with God and with him. And amid the letters containing these grave sentences, so full of fate, first appears a reference to the pet name of her childhood—the "Ba" which is all that here serves, like Swift's "little language," to indulge a foolish tenderness; and the translator of *Prometheus* is able to put Greek characters to their most delightful use in her " [Trans: o philtate]ω φιλτατε."

In love-poetry of the Middle Age the allegorical personage named "Danger" plays a considerable part, and it is to be feared that Danger too often signified a husband. In Wimpole Street that alarming personage always meant a father. Edward Moulton Barrett was a man of integrity in business, of fortitude in adversity, of a certain stern piety, and from the superior position of a domestic autocrat he could even indulge himself in occasional fiats of affection. We need not question that there were springs of water in the rock, and in earlier days they had flowed freely. But now if at night he visited his ailing daughter's room for a few minutes and prayed with her and for her, it meant that on such an occasion she was not too criminal to merit the pious intercession. If he called her "puss," it meant that she had not recently been an undutiful child of thirty-nine or forty years old. A circus-trainer probably rewards his educated dogs and horses with like amiable familiarities, and he is probably regarded by his troupe with affection mingled with awe. Mr Barrett had been appointed circus-trainer by the divine authority of parentage. No one visited 50 Wimpole Street, where there were grown-up sons as well as daughters, without special permission from the lord of the castle; he authorised the visits of Mr Browning, the poet, being fondly assured that Mr Browning's intentions were not those of a burglar, or—worse—an amorous knight-errant. If any daughter of his conceived the possibility of transferring her prime love and loyalty from himself to another, she was even as Aholah and Aholibah who doted upon the Assyrians, captains, and rulers clothed most gorgeously, all of them desirable young men. "If a prince of Eldorado" said Elizabeth Barrett to her sister Arabel, "should come with a pedigree of lineal descent from some signory in the moon in one hand, and a ticket of good behaviour from the nearest Independent chapel in the other—" "Why, even then," interrupted Arabel, "it would not *do*" One admirable trait, however, Mr Moulton Barrett did possess—he was nearly always away from home till six o'clock.

The design that Miss Barrett should winter abroad was still under consideration, but the place now fixed upon was Pisa. Suddenly, in mid-September, she finds herself obliged to announce that "it is all over with Pisa." Her father had vetoed the undutiful project, and had ceased to pay her his evening visits; only in his separate and private orisons were all her sins remembered. To admit the fact that he did not love her enough to give her a chance of recovery was bitter, yet it could not be denied. Her life was now a thing of value to herself, for it was precious to another. She beat against the bars of her cage; planned a rebellious flight; made inquiries respecting ships and berths; but she could not travel alone; and she would not subject either of her sisters to the heavy displeasure of the ruler of the house. Robert Browning held strong opinions on the duty of resisting evil, and if evil assume the guise of parental authority it is none the *less*—he believed—to be resisted. To submit to the will of another is often easy; to act on one's own best judgment is hard; our faculties were given us to put to use; to be passively obedient is really to evade probation—so with almost excessive emphasis Browning set forth a cardinal article of his creed; but Elizabeth Barrett was not, like him, "ever a fighter," and, after all, London in 1845 was not bleak and grey as it had been a year previously—"for reasons," to adopt a reiterated word of the correspondence, "for reasons."

On two later occasions Browning sang the same battle-hymn against the enemies of God and with a little too much vehemence—not to say truculence—as is the way with earnest believers. His gentler correspondent could not tolerate the thought of duelling, and she disapproved of punishment by death. Browning argues that for one who values the good opinion of society—not for himself—that good opinion is a possession which may, like other possessions, be defended at the risk of a man's life, and as for capital punishment, is not evil to be suppressed at any price? Is not a miscreant to be expelled out of God's world? The difference of opinion was the first that had arisen between the friends, and Browning's words carried with them a certain sense of pain in the thought that they could in any thing stand apart. Happily the theoretical fire-eater had faith superior to his own arguments;—faith in a woman's insight as finer than his own;—and he is let off with a gratified rebuke for preternatural submissiveness and for arraying her in pontifical garments of authority which hang loose upon so small a figure. The other application of his doctrine of resisting evil was even more trying to her feelings and the preacher was instant certainly out of season. Not the least important personage in the Wimpole Street house was Miss Barrett's devoted companion Flush. Loyal and loving to his mistress Flushie always was; yet to

his lot some canine errors fell; he eyed a visitor's umbrella with suspicion; he resented perhaps the presence of a rival; he did not behave nicely to a poet who had not written verses in his honour; for which he was duly rebuked by his mistress—the punishment was not capital—and was propitiated with bags of cakes by the intruder. When the day for their flight drew near Miss Barrett proposed somewhat timidly that her maid Wilson should accompany her to Italy, but she was gratefully confident that Flush could not be left behind. Just at this anxious moment a dreadful thing befell; a gang of dog-stealers, presided over by the arch-fiend Taylor, bore Flushie away into the horror of some obscure and vulgar London alley. He was a difficult dog to capture and his ransom must be in proportion to his resistance. There was a terrible tradition of a lady who had haggled about the sum demanded and had received her dog's head in a parcel. Miss Barrett was eager to part with her six guineas and rescue her faithful companion from misery. Was this an occasion for preaching from ethical heights the sin of making a composition with evil-doers? Yet Browning, still "a fighter" and armed with desperate logic, must needs declaim vehemently against the iniquity of such a bargain. It is something to rejoice at that he was dexterously worsted in argument, being compelled to admit that if Italian banditti were to carry off his "Ba," he would pay down every farthing he might have in the world to recover her, and this before he entered on that chase of fifty years which was not to terminate until he had shot down with his own hand the receiver of the infamous bribe.

The journey of Miss Barrett to Pisa having been for the present abandoned, friendship, now acknowledged to be more than friendship, resumed its accustomed ways. Visits, it was agreed, were not to be too frequent—three in each fortnight might prudently be ventured; but Wednesday might have to be exchanged for Thursday or Saturday for Monday, if on the first elected day Miss Mitford—dear and generous friend—threatened to come with her talk, talk, talk, or Mrs Jameson with her drawings and art-criticism, or some unknown lion-huntress who had thrown her toils, or kindly Mr Kenyon, who knew of Browning's visits, and who when he called would peer through his all-scrutinising spectacles with an air of excessive penetration or too extreme unconsciousness. And there were times—later on—when an avalanche of aunts and uncles would precipitate itself on Wimpole Street—perspicacious aunts and amiable uncles who were wished as far off as Seringapatam, and who wrung from an impatient niece—to whom indeed they were dear—the cry "The barbarians are upon us." Miss Barrett's sisters, the gentle Henrietta, who preferred a waltz to the best sermon of an Independent minister, and the more serious Arabel, who preferred the sermon of an Independent minister to the best waltz, were informed of the actual state of affairs. They were trustworthy and sympathetic; Henrietta had special reasons of her own for sympathy; Captain Surtees Cook, who afterwards became her husband, might be discussing affairs with her in the drawing-room at the same time that Mr Browning the poet —"the man of the pomegranates" as he was named by Mr Barrett—held converse on literature with Elizabeth in the upper chamber. The household was honeycombed with treasons.

For the humours of superficial situations and passing incidents Miss Barrett had a lively sense, and she found some relief in playing with them; but with a nature essentially truthful like hers the necessity of concealment was a cause of distress. The position was no less painful to Browning, and in the end it became intolerable. Yet while there were obstructions and winding ways in the shallows, in the depths were flawless truth and inviolable love. What sentimental persons fancy and grow effusive over was here the simplest and yet always a miraculous reality —"He of the heavens and earth brought us together so wonderfully, holding two souls in his hand."[37] In the most illuminating words of each correspondent no merely private, or peculiar feeling is expressed; it is the common wave of human passion, the common love of man and woman, that here leaps from the depths to the height, and over which the iris of beauty ever and anon appears with—it is true—an unusual intensity. And so in reading the letters we have no sense of prying into secrets; there are no secrets to be discovered; what is most intimate is most common; only here what is most common rises up to its highest point of attainment. "I never thought of being happy through you or by you or in you even, your good was all my idea of good, and *is*" "Let me be too near to be seen.... Once I used to be more uneasy, and to think that I ought to *make* you see me. But Love is better than sight." "I love your love too much. And *that* is the worst fault, my beloved, I can ever find in my love of *you*." These are sentences that tell of what can be no private possession, being as liberal and free as our light and air. And if the shadow of a cloud appears—appears and passes away—it is a shadow that has floated over many other hearts beside that of the writer: "How dreadfully natural it would be to me, seem to me, if you *did* leave off loving me! How it would be like the sun's setting ... and no more wonder. Only, more darkness." The old exchange of tokens, the old symbolisms—a lock of hair, a ring, a picture, a child's penholder—are good enough for these lovers, as they had been for others before them. What is diffused through many of the letters is gathered up and is delivered from the alloy of superficial circumstance in the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." in reading which we are in the presence of womanhood—womanhood delivered from death by love and from darkness by; light—as much as in that of an individual woman. And the disclosure in poems and in letters being without reserve affects us as no disclosure, but simply as an adequate expression of the truth universal.

One obstacle to the prospective marriage was steadily diminishing in magnitude; Miss Barrett, with a new joy in life, new hopes, new interests, gained in health and strength from month to month. The winter of 1845-46 was unusually mild. In January one day she walked—walked, and was not carried—downstairs to the drawing-room. Spring came early that year; in the first week of February lilacs and hawthorn were in bud, elders in leaf, thrushes and white-throats in full song. In April Miss Barrett gave pledges of her confidence in the future by buying a bonnet; a

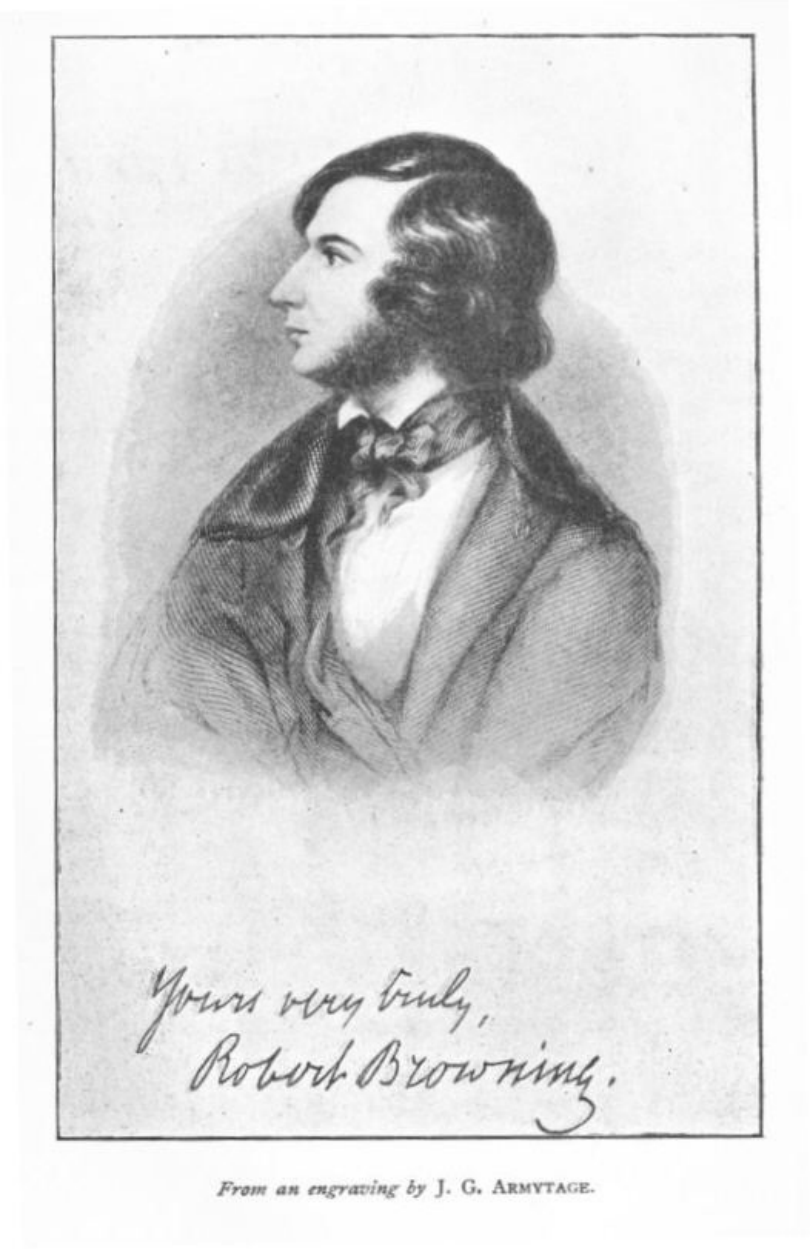
little like a Quaker's, it seemed to her, but the learned pronounced it fashionable. Early in May, that bonnet, with its owner and Arabel and Flush, appeared in Regent's Park, while sunshine was filtering through the leaves. The invalid left her carriage, set foot upon the green grass, reached up and plucked a little laburnum blossom ("for reasons"), saw the "strange people moving about like phantoms of life," and felt that she alone and the idea of one who was absent were real—"and Flush," she adds with a touch of remorse, "and Flush a little too." Many drives and walks followed; at the end of May she feloniously gathered some pansies, the flowers of Paracelsus, and this notwithstanding the protest of Arabel, in the Botanical Gardens, and felt the unspeakable beauty of the common grass. Later in the year wild roses were found at Hampstead; and on a memorable day the invalid—almost perfect in health—was guided by kind and learned Mrs Jameson through the pictures and statues of the poet Rogers's collection. On yet another occasion it was Mr Kenyon who drove her to see the strange new sight of the Great Western train coming in; the spectators procured chairs, but the rush of people and the earth-thunder of the engine almost overcame Miss Barrett's nerves, which on a later trial shrank also from the more harmonious thunder of the organ of the Abbey. Sundays came when she enjoyed the privilege of sitting if not in a pew at least in the secluded vestry of a Chapel, and joining unseen in those simple forms of prayer and praise which she valued most. Altogether something like a miracle in the healing of the sick had been effected.

Money difficulty there was none. Browning, it is true, was not in a position to undertake the expenses of even such a simple household economy as they both desired. He was prepared to seek for any honourable service—diplomatic or other—if that were necessary. But Miss Barrett was resolved against task-work which might divert him from his proper vocation as a poet. And, thanks to the affection of an uncle, she had means—some £400 a year, capable of considerable increase by re-investment of the principal—which were enough for two persons who could be content with plain living in Italy. Browning still urged that he should be the bread-winner; he implored that her money should be made over to her own family, so that no prejudice against his action could be founded on any mercenary feeling; but she remained firm, and would consent only to its transference to her two sisters in the event of his death. And so the matter rested and was dismissed from the thoughts of both the friends.

Having the great patience of love, Browning would not put the least pressure upon Miss Barrett as to the date of their marriage; if waiting long was for her good, then he would wait. But matters seemed tending towards the desired end. In January he begged her to "begin thinking"; before that month had closed it was agreed that they should look forward to the late summer or early autumn as the time of their departure to Italy. Not until March would Miss Barrett permit Browning to fetter his free will by any engagement; then, to satisfy his urgent desire, she declared that she was willing to chain him, rivet him—"Do you feel how the little fine chain twists round and round you? do you hear the stroke of the riveting?" But the links were of a kind to be loosed if need be at a moment's notice. June came, and with it a proposal from a well-intentioned friend, Miss Bayley, to accompany her to Italy, if, by and by, such a change of abode seemed likely to benefit her health. Miss Barrett was prepared to accept the offer if it seemed right to Browning, or was ready, if he thought it expedient, to wait for another year. His voice was given, with such decision as was possible, in favour of their adhering to the plan formed for the end of summer; they both felt the present position hazardous and tormenting; to wear the mask for another year would suffocate them; they were "standing on hot scythes."

Accordingly during the summer weeks there is much poring over guide-books to Italy; much weighing of the merits of this place of residence and of that. Shall it be Sorrento? Shall it be La Cava? or Pisa? or Ravenna? or, for the matter of that, would not Seven Dials be as happy a choice as any, if only they could live and work side by side? There is much balancing of the comparative ease and the comparative cost of routes, the final decision being in favour of reaching Italy by way of France. And as the time draws nearer there is much searching of time-tables, in the art of mastering which Robert Browning seems hardly to have been an expert. May Mr Kenyon be told? Or is it not kinder and wiser to spare him the responsibility of knowing? Mrs Jameson, who had made a friendly proposal similar to that of Miss Bayley,—may she be half-told? Or shall she be invited to join the travellers on their way? What books shall be brought? What baggage? And how may a box and a carpet bag be conveyed out of 50 Wimpole Street with least observation?

It was deeply repugnant to Miss Barrett's feelings to practise reserve on such a matter as this with her father. Her happier companion had informed his father and mother of their plans, and had obtained from the elder Mr Browning a sum of money, asked for as a loan rather than a gift, sufficient to cover the immediate expenses of the journey. Mr Barrett was entitled to all respect, and as for affection he received from his daughter enough to make the appearance of disloyalty to him carry a real pang to her heart. But she believed that she had virtually no choice; her nerves were not of iron; the roaring of the Great Western express she might face but not an angry father. A loud voice, and a violent "scene," such as she had witnessed, until she fainted, when Henrietta was the culprit, would have put an end to the Italian project through mere physical collapse and ruin. Far better therefore to withdraw quietly from the house, and trust to the effect of a subsequent pleading in all earnestness for reconciliation.



From an engraving by J. G. ARMYTAGE.

Yours very truly, Robert Browning. *From an engraving by* J.G. ARMYTAGE.

As summer passed into early autumn the sense of dangers and difficulties accumulating grew acute. "The ground," wrote Browning, "is crumbling from beneath our feet with its chances and opportunities." In one of the early days of August a thunder-storm with torrents of rain detained him for longer than usual at Wimpole Street; the lightning was the lesser terror of the day, for in the evening entered Mr Barrett to his daughter with disagreeable questioning, and presently came the words—accompanied by a gaze of stern displeasure—"It appears that *that man* has spent the whole day with you." The louring cloud passed, but it was felt that visits to be prudent must be rare; for the first time a week went by without a meeting. Early in September George Barrett, a kindly brother distinguished by his constant air of dignity and importance, was commissioned to hire a country house for the family at Dover or Reigate or Tunbridge, while paperers and painters were to busy themselves at Wimpole Street. The moment for immediate action had come; else all chance of Italy might be lost for the year 1846. "We must be married directly," wrote Browning on the morning when this intelligence arrived. Next day a marriage license was procured. On the following morning, Saturday, September 12th, accompanied by her maid Wilson, Miss Barrett, after a sleepless night, left her father's house with feet that trembled; she procured a fly, fortified her shaken nerves with a dose of sal volatile at a chemist's shop, and drove to Marylebone Church, where the marriage service was celebrated in the presence of two witnesses. As she stood and knelt her central feeling was one of measureless trust, a deep rest upon assured foundations; other women who had stood there supported by their nearest kinsfolk —parents or sisters—had one happiness she did not know; she needed it less because she was happier than they.[38] Then husband and wife parted. Mrs Browning drove to the house of her blind friend, Mr Boyd, who had been made aware of the engagement. On his sitting-room sofa she rested and sipped his Cyprus wine; by and by arrived her sisters with grave faces; the carriage was driven to Hampstead Heath for the soothing happiness of the autumnal air and sunshine; after which the three sisters returned to their father's house; the wedding-ring was regretfully taken off; and the prayer arose in Mrs Browning's heart that if sorrow or injury should ever follow upon what had happened that day for either of the two, it might all fall upon her.

Browning did not again visit at 50 Wimpole Street; it was enough to know that his wife was well, and kept all these things gladly, tremblingly, in her heart. For himself he felt that come what might his life had "borne flower and fruit."[39] On the Monday week which succeeded the marriage the Barrett family were to move to the country house that had been taken at Little Bookham. On Saturday afternoon, a week having gone by since the wedding, Mrs Browning and Wilson, left what had been her home. Flush was warned to make no demonstration, and he behaved with admirable discretion. It was "dreadful" to cause pain to her father by a voluntary act; but another feeling sustained her:—"You *only*! As if one said *God only*. And we shall have *Him* beside, I pray of Him." At Hodgson's, the stationer and bookseller's, they found Browning, and a little later husband and wife, with the brave Wilson and the discreet Flush, were speeding from Vauxhall to Southampton, in good time to catch the boat for Havre. A north wind blew them vehemently from the English coast. In the newspaper announcements of the wedding the date was to be omitted, and Browning rejected the suggestion that on this occasion, and with reference to the great event of his life, he should be defined to the public as "the author of *Paracelsus*."

NOTES:

[35]

Letters of E.B.B., i. 288.

[36]

See *Letters of R.B. and E.B.B.*, i. 281.

[37]

E.B.B. to R.B., March 30, 1846.

[38]

E.B.B. to R.B., Sept. 14, 1846.

[39]

R.B. to E.B.B., Sept. 14, 1846.

Chapter VI

Early Years in Italy

The letters from which this story has been drawn have from first to last one burden; in them deep answers to deep; they happily are of a nature to escape far from the pedantries of literary criticism. It cannot be maintained that Browning quite equals his correspondent in the discovery of rare and exquisite thoughts and feelings; or that his felicity in giving them expression is as frequent as hers. Even on matters of literature his comments are less original than hers, less penetrating, less illuminating. Her wit is the swifter and keener. When Browning writes to afford her amusement, he sometimes appears to us, who are not greatly amused, a little awkward and laborious. She flashes forth a metaphor which embodies some mystery of feeling in an image entirely vital; he, with a habit of mind of which he was conscious and which often influences his poetry, fastens intensely on a single point and proceeds to muffle this in circumstance, assured that it will be all the more vividly apparent when the right instant arrives and requires this; but meanwhile some staying-power is demanded from the reader. Neither correspondent has the art of etching a person or a scene in a few decisive lines; the gift of Carlyle, the gift of Carlyle's brilliant wife is not theirs, perhaps because acid is needed to bite an etcher's plate. And, indeed, many of the minor notabilities of 1845, whose names appear in these letters, might hardly have repaid an etcher's intensity of selective vision. Among the groups of spirits who presented themselves to Dante there were some wise enough not to expect that their names should be remembered on earth; such shades may stand in a background. It is, however, strange that Browning who created so many living men and women should in his letters have struck out no swift indelible piece of portraiture; even here his is the inferior touch. And yet throughout the whole correspondence we cannot but be aware that his is the more massive and the more complex nature; his intellect has hardier thews; his passion has an energy which corresponds with its mass; his will sustains his passion and projects it forward. And towards Miss Barrett his strength is seen as gentleness, his energy as an inexhaustible patience of hope.

When Browning and his wife reached Paris, Mrs Browning was worn out by the excitement and fatigue. By a happy accident Mrs Jameson and her niece were at hand, and when the first surprise, with kisses to both fugitives, was over, she persuaded them to rest for a week where they were, promising, if they consented, to be their companion and aider until they arrived at Pisa. Their "imprudence," in her eyes, was "the height of prudence"; "wild poets or not" they were

"wise people." The week at Paris was given up to quietude; once they visited the Louvre, but the hours passed for the most part indoors; it all seemed strange and visionary—"Whether in the body or out of the body," wrote Mrs Browning, "I cannot tell scarcely." From Paris and Orleans they proceeded southwards in weather, which, notwithstanding some rains, was delightful. From Avignon they went on pilgrimage to Petrarch's Vaucluse; Browning bore his wife to a rock in mid stream and seated her there, while Flush scurried after in alarm for his mistress. In the passage from Marseilles to Genoa, Mrs Browning was able to sit on deck; the change of air, although gained at the expense of some weariness, had done her a world of good.

Early in October the journeying closed at Pisa. Rooms were taken for six months in the great Collegio Ferdinando, close to the Duomo and the Leaning Tower, rooms not quite the warmest in aspect. Mrs Jameson pronounced the invalid not improved but transformed. The repose of the city, asleep, as Dickens described it, in the sun and the secluded life—a perpetual *tête-à-tête*, but one so happy—suited both the wedded friends; days of cloudless weather, following a spell of rain, went by in "reading and writing and talking of all things in heaven and earth, and a little besides; and sometimes even laughing as if we had twenty people to laugh with us, or rather *hadn't*." Their sole acquaintance was an Italian Professor of the University; for three months they never looked at a newspaper; then a loophole on the world was opened each evening by the arrival of the Siècle. The lizards were silent friends of one poet, and golden oranges gleamed over the walls to the unaccustomed eyes of the other like sunshine gathered into globes. They wandered through pine-woods and drove until the purple mountains seemed not far off. At the Lanfranchi Palace they thought of Byron, to see a curl of whose hair or a glove from whose hand, Browning declares (so foolish was he and ignorant) he would have gone farther than to see all Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey condensed in Rosicrucian fashion into a vial. In the Campo Santo they listened to a musical mass for the dead. In the Duomo they heard the Friar preach. And early in the morning their dreams were scattered by the harmonious clangour of the church bells. "I never was happy before in my life," wrote Mrs Browning. Her husband relieved her of all housekeeping anxieties. At two o'clock came a light dinner—perhaps thrushes and chianti—from the *trattoria*; at six appeared coffee and milk-rolls; at nine, when the pine-fire blazed, roast chestnuts and grapes. Debts there were none to vex the spirits of these prudent children of genius. If a poet could not pay his butcher's and his baker's bills, Browning's sympathies were all with the baker and the butcher. "He would not sleep," wrote his wife, "if an unpaid bill dragged itself by any chance into another week "; and elsewhere: "Being descended from the blood of all the Puritans, and educated by the strictest of dissenters, he has a sort of horror about the dreadful fact of owing five shillings five days." Perhaps some of this horror arose from the sense of that weight which pecuniary cares hang upon all the more joyous mountings of the mind. One grief and only one was still present; Mr Barrett remained inexorable; his daughter hoped that with time and patience his arms would open to her again. It was a hope never to be fulfilled. In the cordial comradeship of Browning's sister, Sarianna, a new correspondent, there was a measure of compensation.

Already Browning had in view the collected edition of his Poetical Works which did not appear until 1849. The poems were to be made so lucid, "that everyone who understood them hitherto" was to "lose that mark of distinction." *Paracelsus* and *Pippa* were to be revised with special care. The sales reported by Moxon were considered satisfactory; but of course the profits as yet were those of his wife's poems. "She is," he wrote to his publisher, "there as in all else, as high above me as I would have her."

It was at Pisa that the highest evidence of his wife's powers as a poet came as an unexpected and wonderful gift to her husband. In a letter of December 1845—more than a year since—she had confessed that she was idle; and yet "silent" was a better word she thought than "idle." Her apology was that the apostle Paul probably did not work hard at tent-making during the week that followed his hearing of the unspeakable things. At the close of a letter written on July 22, 1846, she wrote: "You shall see some day at Pisa what I will not show you now. Does not Solomon say that 'there is a time to read what is written?' If he doesn't, he ought." The time to read had now come. "One day, early in 1847," as Mr Gosse records what was told to him by Browning, "their breakfast being over, Mrs Browning went upstairs, while her husband stood at the window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of someone behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs Browning who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room." The papers were a transcript of those ardent poems which we know as "Sonnets from the Portuguese." Some copies were printed at Reading in 1847 for private circulation with the title "Sonnets by E.B.B." The later title under which they appeared among Mrs Browning's Poems in the edition of 1850 was of Browning's suggestion. His wife's proposal to name them "Sonnets from the Bosnian" was dismissed with words which allude to a poem of hers, "Catarina to Camoens," that had long been specially dear to him: "Bosnian, no! that means nothing. From the Portuguese: they are Catarina's sonnets!"

Pisa with all its charm lacked movement and animation. It was decided to visit Florence in April, and there enjoy for some days the society of Mrs Jameson before she left Italy. The coupé of the diligence was secured, and on April 20th Mrs Jameson's "wild poets but wise people" arrived at Florence. An excellent apartment was found in the Via delle Belle Donne near the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, and for Browning's special delight a grand piano was hired. When Mrs Browning had sufficiently recovered strength to view the city and its surroundings her pleasure was great: "At Pisa we say, 'How beautiful!' here we say nothing; it is enough if we can breathe." They had

hoped for summer wanderings in Northern Italy; but Florence held them throughout the year except for a few days during which they attempted in vain to find a shelter from the heat among the pines of Vallombrosa. Provided with a letter of recommendation to the abbot they set forth from their rooms at early morning by vettura and from Pelago onwards, while Browning rode, Mrs Browning and Wilson in basket sledges were slowly drawn towards the monastery by white bullocks. A new abbot, a little holy man with a red face, had been recently installed, who announced that in his nostrils "a petticoat stank." Yet in the charity of his heart he extended the three days ordinarily permitted to visitors in the House of Strangers to five; during which period beef and oil, malodorous bread and wine and passages from the "Life of San Gualberto" were vouchsafed to heretics of both sexes; the mountains and the pinewoods in their solemn dialect spoke comfortable words.

"Rolling or sliding down the precipitous path" they returned to Florence in a morning glory, very merry, says Mrs Browning, for disappointed people. Shelter from the glare of August being desirable, a suite of comparatively cool rooms in the Palazzo Guidi were taken; they were furnished in good taste, and opened upon a terrace—"a sort of balcony terrace which ... swims over with moonlight in the evenings." From Casa Guidi windows—and before long Mrs Browning was occupied with the first part of her poem—something of the life of Italy at a moment of peculiar interest could be observed. Europe in the years 1847 and 1848 was like a sea broken by wave after wave of Revolutionary passion. Browning and his wife were ardently liberal in their political feeling; but there were differences in the colours of their respective creeds and sentiments; Mrs Browning gave away her imagination to popular movements; she was also naturally a hero-worshipper; she hoped more enthusiastically than he was wont to do; she was more readily depressed; the word "liberty" for her had an aureole or a nimbus which glorified all its humbler and more prosaic meanings. Browning, although in this year 1847 he made a move towards an appointment as secretary to a mission to the Vatican, at heart cared little for men in groups or societies; he cared greatly for individuals, for the growth of individual character. He had faith in a forward movement of society; but the law of social evolution, as he conceived it, is not in the hands of political leaders or ministers of state. He valued liberty chiefly because each man here on earth is in process of being tested, in process of being formed, and liberty is the condition of a man's true probation and development. Late in life he was asked to give his answer to the question: "Why am I a Liberal?" and he gave it succinctly in a sonnet which he did not reprint in any edition of his Works, although it received otherwise a wide circulation. It may be cited here as a fragment of biography:

> "Why?" Because all I haply can and do,
> All that I am now, all I hope to be,—
> Whence comes it save from fortune setting free
> Body and soul the purpose to pursue,
> God traced for both? If fetters, not a few,
> Of prejudice, convention, fall from me,
> These shall I bid men—each in his degree
> Also God-guided—bear, and gladly too?
>
> But little do or can the best of us:
> That little is achieved through Liberty.
> Who then dares hold—emancipated thus—
> His fellow shall continue bound? Not I
> Who live, love, labour freely, nor discuss
> A brother's right to freedom. That is "Why."[40]

This is an excellent reason for the faith that was in Browning; he holds that individual progress depends on individual freedom, and by that word he understands not only political freedom but also emancipation from intellectual narrowness and the bondage of injurious convention. But Browning in his verse, setting aside the early *Strafford*, nowhere celebrates a popular political movement; he nowhere chaunts a paean, in the manner of Byron or Shelley, in honour of the abstraction "Liberty." Nor does he anywhere study political phenomena or events except as they throw light upon an individual character. Things and persons that gave him offence he could summarily dismiss from his mind—"Thiers is a rascal; I make a point of not reading one word said by M. Thiers"; "Proudhon is a madman; who cares for Proudhon?" "The President's an ass; *he* is not worth thinking of."[41] This may be admirable economy of intellectual force; but it is not the way to understand the course of public events; it does not indicate a political or a historical sense. And, indeed, his writings do not show that Browning possessed a political or a historical sense in any high degree, save as a representative person may be conceived by him as embodying a phase of civilisation. When Mrs Trollope called at Casa Guidi, Browning was only reluctantly present; she had written against liberal institutions and against the poetry of Victor Hugo, and that was enough. Might it not have been more truly liberal to be patient and understand the grounds of her prejudice? "Blessed be the inconsistency of men!" exclaimed Mrs Browning, for whose sake he tolerated the offending authoress until by and by he came to like in her an agreeable woman.

On the anniversary of their wedding day Browning and his wife saw from their window a brilliant procession of grateful and enthusiastic Florentines stream into the *Piazza*. Pitti with banners and *vivas* for the space of three hours and a half It was the time when the Grand Duke was a patriot and Pio Nono was a liberal. The new helmets and epaulettes of the civic guard proclaimed the

glories of genuine freedom. The pleasure of the populace was like that of children, and perhaps it had some serious feeling behind it. The incomparable Grand Duke had granted a liberal constitution, and was led back from the opera to the Pitti by the torchlights of a cheering crowd —"through the dark night a flock of stars seemed sweeping up the piazza." A few months later, and the word of Mrs Browning is "Ah, poor Italy"; the people are attractive, delightful, but they want conscience and self reverence.[42] Browning and she painfully felt that they grew cooler and cooler on the subject of Italian patriotism. A revolution had been promised, but a shower of rain fell and the revolution was postponed. Now it was the Grand Duke *out*, and the bells rang, and a tree of liberty was planted close to the door of Casa Guidi; six weeks later it was the Grand Duke *in*, and the same bells rang, and the tree of liberty was pulled down. The Pope is well-meaning but weak; and before long honorific epithets have to be denied him—he is merely a Pope; his prestige and power over souls is lost. The liberal Grand Duke is transformed into a Duke decorated with Austrian titles. As for France, Mrs Browning had long since learnt from the books she read with so much delight to feel a debt to the country of Balzac and George Sand. She thought that the unrest and the eager hopes of the French Revolution, notwithstanding its errors, indicated at least the conception of a higher ideal than any known to the English people. Browning did not possess an equal confidence in France; he did not accept her view that the French occupation of Rome was capable of justification; nor did he enter into her growing hero-worship—as yet far from its full development—of Louis Napoleon. Her admiration for Balzac he shared, and it is probable that the death of the great novelist moved him to keener regret than did the death, at no considerable distance of time, of Wordsworth. With French communism or socialism neither husband nor wife, however republican in their faith, had sympathy; they held that its tendency is to diminish the influence of the individual, and that in the end the progress of the mass is dependent on the starting forth from the mass and the striding forward of individual minds. They believed as firmly as did Edmund Burke in the importance of what Burke styles a natural aristocracy.

For four years—from 1847 to 1851—Browning never crossed the confines of Italy. No duties summoned him away, and he was happy in his home. "We are as happy," he wrote in December 1847, "as two owls in a hole, two toads under a tree-stump; or any other queer two poking creatures that we let live after the fashion of their black hearts, only Ba is fat and rosy; yes indeed." In spring they drove day by day through the Cascine, passing on the way the carven window of the *Statue and the Bust*, and "the stone called Dante's," whereupon

> He used to bring his quiet chair out, turned
> To Brunelleschi's church.[43]

And after tea there was the bridge of Trinita from which to watch the sunsets turning the Arno to pure gold while the moon and the evening-star hung aloft. It was a life of retirement and of quiet work. Mrs Browning mentions to a friend that for fifteen months she could not make her husband spend a single evening out—"not even to a concert, nor to hear a play of Alfieri's," but what with music and books and writing and talking, she adds, "we scarcely know how the days go, it's such a gallop on the grass." The "writing" included the revision and preparation for the press of Browning's *Poems*, in two volumes, which Chapman & Hall, more liberal than Moxon, had undertaken to publish at their own risk, and which appeared in 1849. Some care and thought were also given by Browning to the alterations of text made in the edition of his wife's Poems of the following year; and for a time his own *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* was an absorbing occupation. As to the "reading," the chief disadvantage of Florence towards the middle of the last century was the difficulty of seeing new books of interest, whether French or English. Yet *Vanity Fair* and *The Princess, Jane Eyre* and *Modern Painters* somehow found their way to Casa Guidi. [44]

Casa Guidi proper, the Casa Guidi which held the books and pictures and furniture and graceful knick-knacks chosen by its occupants, who were lovers of beauty, dates only from 1848. Previously they had been satisfied with a furnished apartment. Not long before the unfurnished rooms were hired, a mistake in choosing rooms which suffered from the absence of sunshine and warmth gave Browning an opportunity of displaying what to his wife's eyes appeared to be unexampled magnanimity. The six months' rent was promptly paid, and chambers on the Pitti "yellow with sunshine from morning to evening" were secured. "Any other man, a little lower than the angels," his wife assured Miss Mitford, "would have stamped and sworn a little for the mere relief of the thing, but as to *his* being angry with *me* for any cause, except not eating enough dinner, the sun would turn the wrong way first." It seemed an excellent piece of economy to take the spacious suite of unfurnished rooms in the Via Maggio, now distinguished by the inscription known to all visitors to Florence, which were to be had for twenty-five guineas a year, and which, when furnished, might be let during any prolonged absence for a considerable sum. The temptation of a ground-floor in the Frescobaldi Palace, and a garden bright with camellias, to which Browning for a time inclined, was rejected. At Casa Guidi the double terrace where orange-trees and camellias also might find a place made amends for the garden with its threatening cloud of mosquitoes, "worse than Austrians"; every need of space and height, of warmth and coolness seemed to be met; and it only remained to expend the welcome proceeds of the sale of books in the recreation of gathering together "rococo chairs, spring sofas, carved bookcases, satin from cardinals' beds and the rest." Before long Browning amused himself in picking up for a few pauls this or that picture, on seeing which an accomplished connoisseur, like Kirkup, would even hazard the name of Cimabue or Ghirlandaio, or if not that of Giotto, then the safer adjective Giottesque.

Although living the life of retirement which his wife's uncertain state of health required, Browning gradually obtained the acquaintance of several interesting persons, of whom Kirkup, who has just been mentioned, was one. "As to Italian society," wrote Mrs Browning, "one may as well take to longing for the evening star, for it seems quite inaccessible." But the name of Elizabeth Barrett, if not yet that of Robert Browning, was a sufficient introduction to cultivated Englishmen and Americans who had made Florence their home. Among the earliest of these acquaintances were the American sculptor Powers, Swedenborgian and spiritualist (a simple and genial man, "with eyes like a wild Indian's, so black and full of light"), and Hillard, the American lawyer, who, in his *Six months in Italy*, described Browning's conversation as "like the poetry of Chaucer," meaning perhaps that it was hearty, fresh, and vigorous, "or like his own poetry simplified and made transparent." "It seems impossible," Hillard goes on, "to think that he can ever grow old." And of Mrs Browning: "I have never seen a human frame which seemed so nearly a transparent veil for a celestial and immortal spirit. She is a soul of fire enclosed in a shell of pearl." A third American friend was one who could bring tidings of Emerson and Hawthorne—Margaret Fuller of "The Dial," now Countess d'Ossoli, "far better than her writings," says Mrs Browning, "... not only exalted but *exaltée* in her opinions, yet calm in manner." Her loss, with that of her husband, on their voyage to America deeply affected Mrs Browning. "Was she happy in anything?" asks her sorrowing friend. The first person seen on Italian soil when Browning and his wife disembarked at Leghorn was the brilliant and erratic Irish priest, "Father Prout" of *Fraser's Magazine*, who befriended them with good spirits and a potion of eggs and port wine when Browning was ill in Florence, and chided Mrs Browning as a "bambina" for her needless fears. Charles Lever "with the sunniest of faces and cordialest of manners"—animal spirits preponderating a little too much over an energetic intellect—called on them at the Baths of Lucca, but the acquaintance did not ripen into friendship. And little Miss Boyle, one of the family of the Earls of Cork, would come at night, at the hour of chestnuts and mulled wine, to sparkle as vivaciously as the pine-log that warmed her feet. These, with the Hoppners, known to Shelley and Byron, a French sculptress of royalist sympathies, Mlle. de Fauveau, much admired by Browning, and one of the grandsons of Goethe, who flits into and out of the scene, were a compensation for the repulsiveness of certain English folk at Florence who gathered together only for the frivolities, and worse than frivolities, of foreign wayfaring.

In March 1849 joy and sorrow met and mingled in the lives of Browning and his wife. On the ninth of that month a son was born at Casa Guidi, who six weeks later was described by his mother as "a lovely, fat, strong child, with double chin and rosy cheeks and a great wide chest." He was baptised, with the simple Lutheran rites, Robert Wiedemann Barrett—the "Wiedemann" in remembrance of the maiden name of Browning's mother. From the first, Browning and his wife, to adopt a phrase from one of her letters, caught up their parental pleasures with a sort of passion.[45] Mrs Browning's letters croon with happiness in the beauty, the strength, the intelligence, the kind-hearted disposition of her boy. And the boy's father, from the days when he would walk up and down the terrace of Casa Guidi with the infant in his arms to the last days of his life, felt to the full the gladness and the repose that came with this strong bondage of his heart. When little Wiedemann could frame imperfect speech upon his lips he transformed that name into "Penini," which abbreviated to "Pen" became serviceable for domesticities. It was a fantastic derivation of Nathaniel Hawthorne which connected Penini with the colossal statue in Florence bearing the name of "Apeninno." Flush for a time grew jealous, and not altogether without cause.

But the joy was pursued and overtaken by sorrow. A few days after the birth of his son came tidings of the death of Browning's mother. He had loved her with a rare degree of passion; the sudden reaction from the happiness of his wife's safety and his son's birth was terrible; it almost seemed a wrong to his grief to admit into his consciousness the new gladness of the time. In this conflict of emotions his spirits and to some extent his health gave way. He could not think of returning to his father's home without extreme pain—"It would break his heart," he said, "to see his mother's roses over the wall, and the place where she used to lay her scissors and gloves." He longed that his father and sister should quit the home of sorrow, and hasten to Florence; but this was not to be. As for England, it could not be thought of as much on his wife's account as his own. Her father held no communication with her; supplicating letters remained unnoticed; her brothers were temporarily estranged. Her sister Henrietta had left her former home; having "insulted" her father by asking his consent to her marriage with Captain Surtees Cook, she had taken the matter into her own hands; the deed was done, and the name of his second undutiful daughter—married to a person of moderate means and odiously "Tractarian views"—was never again to be mentioned in Mr Barrett's presence. England had become for Mrs Browning a place of painful memories, and a centre of present strife which she did not feel herself as yet able to encounter.

The love of wandering, however, when successive summers came, and Florence was ablaze with sunshine, grew irresistible, and drove Browning and his household to seek elsewhere for fresh interests or for coolness and repose. In 1848, beguiled by the guide-book, they visited Fano to find it quivering with heat, "the very air swooning in the sun." Their reward at Fano was that picture by Guercino of the guardian angel teaching a child to pray, the thought of which Browning has translated into song:

> We were at Fano, and three times we went
> To sit and see him in his chapel there,
> And drink his beauty to our soul's content
> —My angel with me too.

Ancona, where the poem was written, if its last line is historically true, followed Fano, among whose brown rocks, "elbowing out the purple tides," and brown houses—"an exfoliation of the rock"—they lived for a week on fish and cold water. The tour included Rimini and Ravenna, with a return to Florence by Forli and a passage through the Apennines. Next year—1849—when Pen was a few months old, the drop of gipsy blood in Browning's veins, to which his wife jestingly refers, tingled but faintly; it was Mrs Browning's part to compel him, for the baby's sake and hers, to seek his own good. They visited Spezzia and glanced at the house of Shelley at Lerici; passed through olive woods and vineyards, and rested in "a sort of eagle's nest" at the highest habitable point of the Baths of Lucca. Here the baby's great cheeks grew rosier; Browning gained in spirits; and his wife was able "to climb the hills and help him to lose himself in the forests." When they wandered at noon except for some bare-footed peasant or some monk with the rope around his waist, it was complete solitude; and on moonlit nights they sat by the waterfalls in an atmosphere that had the lightness of mountain air without its keenness. On one occasion they climbed by dry torrent courses five miles into the mountains, baby and all, on horseback and donkeyback—"such a congregation of mountains; looking alive in the stormy light we saw them by." It was certainly a blessed transformation of the prostrate invalid in the upper room at Wimpole Street. Setting aside his own happiness, Browning could feel with regard to her and his deep desire to serve her, that he had seen of the travail of his soul, and in this matter was satisfied.

The weeks at Siena of the year 1850 were not quite so prosperous. During that summer Mrs Browning had been seriously ill. When sufficiently recovered she was carried by her husband to a villa in the midst of vines and olives, a mile and a half or two miles outside Siena, which commanded a noble prospect of hills and plain. At first she could only remain seated in the easy-chair which he found for her in the city. For a day there was much alarm on behalf of the boy, now able to run about, who lay with heavy head and glassy eyes in a half-stupor; but presently he was astir again, and his "singing voice" was heard in the house and garden. Mrs Browning in the fresh yet warm September air regained her strength. Before returning to Florence, they spent a week in the city to see the churches and the pictures by Sodoma. Even little Wiedemann screamed for church-interiors and developed remarkable imitative pietisms of a theatrical kind. "It was as well," said Browning, "to have the eyeteeth and the Puseyistical crisis over together."

This comment, although no more than a passing word spoken in play, gives a correct indication of Browning's feeling, fully shared in by his wife, towards the religious movement in England which was altering the face of the established Church. "Puseyism" was for them a kind of child's play which unfortunately had religion for its play-ground; they viewed it with a superior smile, in which there was more of pity than of anger. Both of them, though one was a writer for the stage and the other could read *Madame Bovary* without flinching and approved the morals of *La Dame aux Camélias*, had their roots in English Puritanism.[46] And now the time had come when Browning was to embody some of his Puritan thoughts and feelings relating to religion in a highly original poem.

NOTES:

[40]

"Why am I a Liberal?" Edited by Andrew Reid. London, 1885.

[41]

Letters of E.B.B., i. 442.

[42]

To Miss Mitford, August 24, 1848.

[43]

Casa Guidi Windows, i.

[44]

"Jane Eyre" was lent to E.B.B. by Mrs Story.

[45]

To Miss Mitford, Feb. 18, 1850.

[46]

In January 1859, Pen was reading an Italian translation of *Monte Cristo*, and announced, to his father's and mother's amusement, that after Dumas he would proceed to "papa's favourite book, *Madame Bovary*".

Chapter VII

Christmas Eve and Easter Day

Christmas Eve and Easter Day was published by Chapman & Hall in the year 1850. It was reported to the author that within the first fortnight two hundred copies had been sold, with which evidence of moderate popularity he was pleased; but the initial success was not maintained and subsequently the book became, like *Sordello*, a "remainder." As early as 1845, in the opening days of the correspondence with Miss Barrett, when she had called upon her friend to speak as poet in his own person and to speak out, he assured her that whereas hitherto he had only made men and women utter themselves on his behalf and had given the truth not as pure white light but broken into prismatic hues, now he would try to declare directly that which was in him. In place of his men and women he would have her to be a companion in his work, and yet, he adds, "I don't think I shall let *you* hear, after all, the savage things about Popes and imaginative religions that I must say." We can only conjecture as to whether the theme of the poem of 1850 was already in Browning's mind. His wife's influence certainly was not unlikely to incline him towards the choice of a subject which had some immediate relation to contemporary thought. She knew that poetry to be of permanent value must do more than reflect a passing fashion; that in a certain sense it must in its essence be out of time and space, expressing ideas and passions which are parts of our abiding humanity. Yet she recognised an advantage in pressing into what is permanent through the forms which it assumes in the world immediately around the artist. And even in 1845 the design of such a poem as her own *Aurora Leigh* was occupying her thoughts; she speaks of her intention of writing a sort of "novel-poem, running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like, 'where angels fear to tread'; and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly." Browning's poem did not rush into drawing-rooms, but it stepped boldly into churches and conventicles and the lecture-rooms of theological professors.

The spiritual life individual and the spiritual life corporate—these, to state it in a word, are the subjects dealt with in the two connected poems of his new volume; the spiritual life individual is considered in *Easter Day*; the spiritual life corporate in *Christmas Eve.* Browning, with the blood of all the Puritans in him, as his wife expressed it, could not undervalue that strain of piety which had descended from the exiles at Geneva and had run on through the struggles for religious liberty in the nonconformist religious societies of the seventeenth century and the Evangelical revival of times less remote. Looking around him he had seen in his own day the progress of two remarkable movements—one embodying, or professing to embody, the Catholic as opposed to the Puritan conception of religion, the other a free critical movement, tending to the disintegration of the traditional dogma of Christianity, yet seeking to preserve and maintain its ethical and even in part its religious influence. The facts can be put concisely if we say that one and the same epoch produced in England the sermons of Spurgeon, the *Apologia pro vita sua* of Newman, and the *Literature and Dogma* of Matthew Arnold. To discuss these three conceptions of religion adequately in verse would have been impossible even for the argumentative genius of Dryden, and would have converted a work of art into a theological treatise. But three representative scenes might be painted, and some truths of passionate feeling might be flung out by way of commentary. Such was the design of the poet of *Christmas Eve*.

To topple over from the sublime to the ridiculous is not difficult. But the presence of humour might save the sublimities from a fall, and Browning had hitherto in his art made but slight and occasional use of a considerable gift of humour which he possessed. It was humour not of the highest or finest or subtlest kind; it was very far from the humour of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, which felt so profoundly all the incongruities, majestic, pathetic, and laughable, of human nature. But it had a rough vigour of its own; it was united with a capacity for exact and shrewd observation; and if it should ever lead him to play the part of a satirist, the satire must needs be rather that of love than of malice. One who esteemed so highly the work of Balzac and of Flaubert might well be surmised to have something in his composition of what we now call the realist in art; and the work of the realist might serve to sustain and vindicate the idealist's ventures of imaginative faith. The picture of the lath-and-plaster entry of "Mount Zion" and of the pious sheep—duly indignant at the interloper in their midst—who one by one enter the fold, if not worthy of Cervantes or of Shakespeare, is hardly inferior to the descriptive passages of Dickens, and it is touched, in the manner of Dickens, with pity for these rags and tatters of humanity. The night, the black barricade of cloud, the sudden apparition of the moon, the vast double rainbow, and He whose sweepy garment eddies onward, become at once more supernatural and more unquestionably real because sublimity springs out of grotesquerie. Is the vision of the face of Christ an illusion?

> The whole face turned upon me full,
> And I spread myself beneath it,
> As when the bleacher spreads, to seethe it
> In the cleansing sun, his wool,—
> Steeps in the flood of noontide whiteness
> Some defiled, discoloured web—
> So lay I saturate, with brightness.

Is this a phantom or a dream? Well, at least it is certain that the witness has seen with his mortal eyes the fat weary woman, and heard the mighty report of her umbrella, "wry and flapping, a

wreck of whalebones." And the fat woman of Mount Zion Chapel, with Love Lane at the back of it, may help us to credit the awful vision of the Lord.

Thus the poem has the imaginative sensuousness which art demands; it is not an argument but a series of vivid experiences, though what is sensuous is here tasked in the service of what is spiritual, and a commentary is added. The central idea of the whole is that where love is, there is Christ; and the Christ of this poem is certainly no abstraction, no moral ideal, no transcendental conception of absolute charity, but very God and very man, the Christ of Nazareth, who dwelt among men, full of grace and truth. Literary criticism which would interpret Browning's meaning in any other sense may be ingenious, but it is not disinterested, and some side-wind blows it far from the mark.

Love with defective knowledge, he maintains, is of more spiritual worth than knowledge with defective love. Desiring to give salience to this idea, he deprives his little pious conventicle of every virtue except one—"love," and no other word is written on each forehead of the worshippers. Browning, the artist and student of art, was not insensible to the spiritual power of beauty; and beauty is conspicuously absent from the praise and prayer that went up from Mount Zion chapel; its forms of worship are burlesque and uncouth. Browning, the lover of knowledge, was not insensible to the value of intelligence in things of religion; and the congregation of Mount Zion sit on "divinely flustered" under

> the pig-of-lead-like pressure
> Of the preaching man's immense stupidity.

The pastor, whose words so sway his enraptured flock, mangles the Holy Scriptures with a fine irreverence, and pours forth his doctrine with an entirely self-satisfied indifference to reason and common sense. Nor has love accomplished its perfect work, for the interloper who stands at the entry is eyed with inquisitorial glances of pious exclusiveness—how has a Gallio such as he ventured to take his station among the elect? Matthew Arnold, had he visited Mount Zion, might have discoursed with a charmingly insolent urbanity on the genius for ugliness in English dissent, and the supreme need of bringing a current of new ideas to play upon the unintelligent use of its traditional formulae. And Matthew Arnold would have been right. These are the precise subjects of Browning's somewhat rough-and-ready satire. But Browning adds that in Mount Zion, love, at least in its rudiments, is present, and where love is, there is Christ.

Of English nonconformity in its humblest forms Browning can write, as it were, from within; he writes of Roman Catholic forms of worship as one who stands outside; his sympathy with the prostrate multitude in St. Peter's at Rome is of an impersonal kind, founded rather upon the recognition of an objective fact than springing from an instinctive feeling. For a moment he is carried away by the tide of their devout enthusiasms; but he recovers himself to find indeed that love is also here and therefore Christ is present, but the worshippers fallen under "Rome's gross yoke," are very infants in their need of these sacred buffooneries and posturings and petticoatings; infants

> Peevish as ever to be suckled,
> Lulled with the same old baby-prattle
> With intermixture of the rattle.

And this, though the time has come when love would have them no longer infantile, but capable of standing and walking, "not to speak of trying to climb." Such a short and easy method of dealing with Roman Catholic dogma and ritual cannot be commended for its intelligence; it is quite possible to be on the same side as Browning without being as crude as he in misconception. He does not seriously consider the Catholic idea which regards things of sense as made luminous by the spirit of which they are the envoys and the ministers. It is enough for him to declare his own creed which treats any intermediary between the human soul and the Divine as an obstruction or a veil:

> My heart does best to receive in meekness
> That mode of worship, as most to his mind,
> Where earthly aids being left behind,
> His All in All appears serene
> With the thinnest human veil between,
> Letting the mystic lamps, the seven,
> The many motions of his spirit,
> Pass as they list to earth from heaven.

This was the creed of Milton and of Bunyan; and yet with both Milton and Bunyan the imagery of the senses is employed as the means not of concealing but revealing the things of the spirit.

From the lecture-room of Göttingen, with its destructive and reconstructive criticism, Browning is even farther removed than he is from the ritualisms of the Roman basilica. Yet no caricature can be more amiable than his drawing of the learned Professor, so gentle in his aspect, so formidable in his conclusions, who, gazing into the air with a pure abstracted look, proceeds in a grave sweet voice to exhibit and analyse the sources of the myth of Christ. In the Professor's lecture-room Browning finds intellect indeed but only the shadow of love. He argues that if the "myth" of Christ be dissolved, the authority of Christ as a teacher disappears; Christ is even inferior to other moralists by virtue of the fact that He made personal claims which cannot be

sustained. And whatever may be Christ's merit as a teacher of the truth, the motive to action which His life and words supplied must cease to exist if it be shown that the divine sacrifice of God manifest in the flesh is no more than a figment of the devout imagination. At every point the criticism of Browning is as far apart as it is possible to conceive from the criticism set forth in the later writings of Matthew Arnold. The one writer regards the "myth" as no more than the grave-clothes of a risen Christ whose essential virtue lies in his sweet reasonableness and his morality touched with enthusiasm. The other believes that if the wonderful story of love be proved a fable, a profound alteration—and an alteration for the worse—has been made in the religious consciousness of Christendom. And undoubtedly the difference between the supernatural and the natural theories of Christianity is far greater than Arnold represented it to be. But Browning at this date very inadequately conceived the power of Christ as a revealer of the fatherhood of God. In that revelation, whether the Son of God was human or divine, lay a truth of surpassing power, and a motive of action capable of summoning forth the purest and highest energies of the soul. That such is the case has been abundantly evidenced by the facts of history. Browning finds only much learning and the ghost of dead love in the Göttingen lecture-room; and of course it was easy to adapt his Professor's lecture so as to arrive at this conclusion. But the process and the conclusion are alike unjust.

Having traversed the various forms of Christian faith and scepticism, the speaker in *Christmas Eve* declines into a mood of lazy benevolence and mild indifferentism towards each and all of these. Has not Christ been present alike at the holding-forth of the poor dissenting son of thunder, who tore God's word into shreds, at the tinklings and posturings and incense-fumes of Roman pietism, and even at the learned discourse which dissolved the myth of his own life and death? Why, then, over-strenuously take a side? Why not regard all phases of belief or no-belief with equal and serene regard? Such a mood of amiable indifferentism is abhorrent to Browning's feelings. The hem of Christ's robe passes wholly at this point from the hand of the seer of visions in his poem. One best way of worship there needs must be; ours may indeed not be the absolutely best, but it is our part, it is our probation to see that we strive earnestly after what is best; yes, and strive with might and main to confer upon our fellows the gains which we have found. It may be God's part—we trust it is—to bring all wanderers to the one fold at last. As for us, we must seek after Him and find Him in the mode required by our highest thought, our purest passion. Here Browning speaks from his central feeling. Only, we may ask, what if one's truest self lie somewhere hidden amid a thousand hesitating sympathies? And is not the world spacious enough to include a Montaigne as well as a Pascal or a Browning? Assuredly the world without its Montaigne would be a poorer and a less hospitable dwelling-place for the spirits of men.

Mrs Browning complained to her husband of what she terms the asceticism of *Easter Day*, the second part of his volume of 1850; his reply was that it stated "one side of the question." "Don't think," Mrs Browning says, "that he has taken to the cilix—indeed he has not—but it is his way to *see* things as passionately as other people *feel* them." *Easter Day* has nothing to say of religious life in Churches and societies, nothing of the communities of public worship. For the writer of this poem only three things exist—God, the individual soul, and the world regarded as the testing place and training place of the soul. Browning has here a rigour of moral or spiritual earnestness which may be called, by any one who so pleases, Puritan in its kind and its intensity; he feels the need, if we are to attain any approximation to the Christian ideal, of the lit lamp and the girt loin. Two difficulties in the Christian life in particular he chooses to consider—first, the difficulty of faith in the things of the spirit, and especially in what he regards as the essential parts of the Christian story; and secondly, the difficulty of obeying the injunction to renounce the world. That we cannot grow to our highest attainment by the old method enjoined by pagan philosophy—that of living according to nature, he regards as evident, for nature itself is warped and marred; it groans and travails, and from its discords how shall we frame a harmony? It was always his habit of mind, he tells us, from his childhood onwards, to face a danger and confront a doubt, and if there were anywhere a lurking fear, to draw this forth from its hiding-place and examine it in the light, even at the risk of some mortal ill. Therefore he will press for an answer to his present questionings; he will try conclusions to the uttermost.

As to the initial difficulty of faith, Browning with a touch of scorn, assures us that evidences of spiritual realities, evidences of Christianity—as they are styled—external and internal will be readily found by him who desires to find; convincing enough they are for him who wants to be convinced. But in truth faith is a noble venture of the spirit, an aspiring effort towards what is best, even though what is best may never be attained. The mole gropes blindly in unquestionably solid clay; better be like the grasshopper "that spends itself in leaps all day to reach the sun." A grasshopper's leap sunwards—that is what we signify by this word "faith."

But the difficulties of the Christian life only shift their place when faith by whatever means has been won. We are bidden to renounce the world: what does the injunction mean? in what way shall it be obeyed? "Ascetic" Mrs Browning named this poem; and ascetic it is if by that word we understand the counselling and exhorting to a noble exercise and discipline; but Browning even in his poem by no means wears the cilix, and no teaching can be more fatal than his to asceticism in the narrower sense of the word. To renounce the world, if interpreted aright, is to extinguish or suppress no faculty that has been given to man, but rather to put each faculty to its highest uses:

> "Renounce the world!"—Ah, were it done
> By merely cutting one by one
> Your limbs off, with your wise head last,

How easy were it!—how soon past,
If once in the believing mood.

The harder and the higher renunciation is this—to choose the things of the spirit rather than the things of sense, and again in accepting, as means of our earthly discipline and development, the things of sense to press through these to the things of the spirit which lie behind and beyond and above them.

Such, and such alone, is the asceticism to which Browning summons his disciple; it is the asceticism of energy not that of atrophy; it does not starve the senses, but reinforces the spirit; it results not in a cloistered but a militant virtue. A certain self-denial it may demand, but the self-denial becomes the condition of a higher joy. And if life with its trials frays the flesh, what matters it when the light of the spirit shines through with only a fuller potency? In the choice between sense and spirit, or, to put it more generally, in the choice between what is higher and less high, lies the probation of a soul, and also its means of growth. And what is the meaning of this mortal life—this strange phenomenon otherwise so unintelligible—if it be not the moment in which a soul is proved, the period in which a soul is shaped and developed for other lives to come?

To forget that Browning is a preacher may suit a dainty kind of criticism which detaches the idea of beauty from the total of our humanity addressed by the greater artists. But the solemn thoughts that are taken up by beauty in such work, for example, as that of Michael Angelo, are an essential element or an essential condition of its peculiar character as a thing of beauty. And armour, we know, may be as lovely to the mere senses as a flower. Browning's doctrine may sometimes protrude gauntly through his poetry; but at his best—as in *Rabbi ben Ezra* or *Abt Vogler*—the thought of the poem is needful in the dance of lyrical enthusiasm, as the male partner who takes hands with beauty, and to separate them would bring the dance to a sudden close. Both are present in *Easter Day*, and we must watch the movement of the two. In a passage already quoted from *Christmas Eve* the face of Christ is nobly imagined as the sun which bleaches a discoloured web. Here the poet's imagination is as intense in its presentation of Christ the doomsman:

He stood there. Like the smoke
Pillared o'er Sodom, when day broke—
I saw Him. One magnific pall
Mantled in massive fold and fall
His head, and coiled in snaky swathes
About His feet; night's black, that bathes
All else, broke, grizzled with despair,
Against the soul of blackness there.
A gesture told the mood within—
That wrapped right hand which based the chin,—
That intense meditation fixed
On His procedure,—pity mixed
With the fulfilment of decree.
Motionless thus, He spoke to me,
Who fell before His feet, a mass,
No man now.

The picture of the final conflagration of the Judgment Day is perhaps over-laboured, a descriptive *tour de force*, horror piled upon horror with accumulative power,—a picture somewhat too much in the manner of Martin; and the verse does not lend itself to the sustained sublimity of terror. The glow of Milton's hell is intenser, and Milton's majestic instrumentation alone could render the voices of its flames. The real awfulness of Browning's Judgment Day dwells wholly in the inner experiences of a solitary soul. The speaker finds of a sudden that the doom is upon him, and that in the probation of life his choice was earth, not heaven. The sentence pronounced upon him is in accordance with the election of his own will—let earth, with all its beauty of nature, all its gifts of human art, all its successes of the intellect, as he had conceived and chosen them, be his. To his despair, he finds that what he had prized in life, and what is now granted to him cannot bring him happiness or even content. The plenitude of beauty, of which all partial beauty was but a pledge, is forever lost to him. The glory of art, which lay beyond its poor actual attainments, is lost. The joy of knowledge, with all those

grasps of guess
Which pull the more into the less,

is lost. And as to earth's best possession—love—had he ever made a discovery through human love of that which it forthshadows—the love that is perfect and divine? Earth is no longer earth to the doomed man, but the star of the god Rephan of which we read in one of Browning's latest poems; in the horror of its blank and passionless uniformity, untroubled by any spiritual presences, he cowers at the Judge's feet, and prays for darkness, hunger, toil, distress, if only hope be also granted him:

Then did the form expand, expand—
knew Him through the dread disguise
As the whole God within his eyes

Embraced me.

The Doomsman has in a moment become the Saviour. In all this, if Browning has the burden of a prophecy to utter, he utters it, after the manner of earlier prophets, as a vision. His art is sensuous and passionate; his argument is transformed into a series of imaginative experiences.

Mrs. Browning's illness during the summer and early autumn of 1850 left her for a time more shaken in health than she had been since her marriage. But by the spring of the following year she had recovered strength; and designs of travel were formed, which should include Rome, North Italy, Switzerland, the Rhine, Brussels, Paris and London. Almost at the moment of starting for Rome at the end of April, the plans were altered; the season was too far advanced for going south; ways and means must be economised; Rome might be postponed for a future visit; and Venice would make amends for the present sacrifice. And Venice in May and early June did indeed for a time make amends. "I have been between heaven and earth," Mrs. Browning wrote, "since our arrival at Venice." The rich architecture, the colour, the moonlight, the music, the enchanting silence made up a unity of pleasures like nothing that she had previously known. When evening came she and her husband would follow the opera from their box hired for "two shillings and eightpence English," or sit under the moon in the piazza of St Mark sipping coffee and reading the French papers. But as the month went by, Browning lost appetite and lost sleep. The "soothing, lulling, rocking atmosphere" which suited Mrs. Browning made him, after the first excitement of delight, grow nervous and dispirited. They hastened away to Padua, drove to Arqua, "for Petrarch's sake," passed through Brescia in a flood of white moonlight, and having reached Milan climbed—the invalid of Wimpole Street and her husband—to the topmost point of the cathedral. From the Italian lakes they crossed by the St Gothard to Switzerland, and omitting part of their original scheme of wandering, journeyed in twenty-four hours without stopping from Strasburg to Paris.

In Paris they loitered for three weeks. Mrs. Browning during the short visit which followed her marriage had hardly seen the city. Bright shop-windows, before which little Wiedemann would scream with pleasure, restaurants and dinners *à la carte*, full-foliaged trees and gardens in the heart of the town were a not unwelcome exchange for Italian church-interiors and altar-pieces. Even "disreputable prints and fascinating hats and caps" were appreciated as proper to the genius of the place, and the writer of *Casa Guidi Windows* had the happiness of seeing her hero, M. le President, "in a cocked hat, and with a train of cavalry, passing like a rocket along the boulevards to an occasional yell from the Red." By a happy chance they lighted in Paris upon Tennyson, now Poet-laureate, whom Mrs. Browning had hitherto known only through his poems; he was in the friendliest mood, and urged that they should make use of his house and servants during their stay in England, an offer which was not refused, though there was no intention of actually taking advantage of the kindness. As for England, the thought of it, with her father's heart and her father's door closed against her, was bitter as wormwood to Mrs. Browning. "It's only Robert," she wrote, "who is a patriot now, of us two."

English soil as they stepped ashore was a puddle, and English air a fog. London lodgings were taken at 26 Devonshire Street, and, although Mrs. Browning suffered from the climate, they were soon dizzied and dazzled by the whirl of pleasant hospitalities. An evening with Carlyle ("one of the greatest sights in England"), a dinner given by Forster at Thames Ditton, "in sight of the swans," a breakfast with Rogers, daily visits of Barry Cornwall, cordial companionship of Mrs. Jameson, a performance by the Literary Guild actors, a reading of *Hamlet* by Fanny Kemble—with these distractions and such as these the two months flew quickly. It was in some ways a relief when Pen's faithful maid Wilson went for a fortnight to see her kinsfolk, and Mrs. Browning had to take her place and substitute for social racketing domestic cares. The one central sorrow remained and in some respects was intensified. She had written to her father, and Browning himself wrote—"a manly, true, straight-forward letter," she informs a friend, "... everywhere generous and conciliating." A violent and unsparing reply was made, and with it came all the letters that his undutiful daughter had written to Mr. Barrett; not one had been read or opened. He returned them now, because he had not previously known how he could be relieved of the obnoxious documents. "God takes it all into his own hands," wrote Mrs. Browning, "and I wait." Something, however, was gained; her brothers were reconciled; Arabella Barrett was constant in kindness; and Henrietta journeyed from Taunton to London to enjoy a week in her company.

It was at Devonshire Street that Bayard Taylor, the distinguished American poet and critic, made the acquaintance of the Brownings, and the record of his visit gives a picture of Browning at the age of thirty-nine, so clearly and firmly drawn that it ought not to be omitted here: "In a small drawing-room on the first floor I met Browning, who received me with great cordiality. In his lively, cheerful manner, quick voice, and perfect self-possession, he made the impression of an American rather than an Englishman. He was then, I should judge, about thirty-seven years of age, but his dark hair was already streaked with gray about the temples. His complexion was fair, with perhaps the faintest olive tinge, eyes large, clear, and gray, nose strong and well cut, mouth full and rather broad, and chin pointed, though not prominent. His forehead broadened rapidly upwards from the outer angle of the eyes, slightly retreating. The strong individuality which marks his poetry was expressed not only in his face and head, but in his whole demeanour. He was about the medium height, strong in the shoulders, but slender at the waist, and his movements expressed a combination of vigour and elasticity." Mrs Browning with her slight figure, pale face, shaded by chestnut curls, and grave eyes of bluish gray, is also described; and presently entered to the American visitor Pen, a blue-eyed, golden-haired boy, who babbled his little sentences in Italian.

When, towards the close of September, Browning and his wife left London for Paris, Carlyle by his own request was their companion on the journey. Mrs Browning feared that his irritable nerves would suffer from the vivacities of little Pen, but it was not so; he accepted with good humour the fact that the small boy had not yet learned, like his own Teufelsdröckh, the Eternal No: "Why, sir," exclaimed Carlyle, "you have as many aspirations as Napoleon!"[47] At Dieppe, Browning, as Carlyle records, "did everything, fought for us, and we—that is, the woman, the child and I—had only to wait and be silent." At Paris in the midst of "a crowding, jangling, vociferous tumult, the brave Browning fought for us, leaving me to sit beside the woman." An apartment was found on the sunny side of the Avenue des Champs-Elysées, "pretty, cheerful, carpeted rooms," far brighter and better than those of Devonshire Street, and when, to Browning's amusement, his wife had moved every chair and table into the new and absolutely right position, they could rest and be thankful. Carlyle spent several evenings with them, and repaid the assistance which he received in various difficulties from Browning's command of the language, by picturesque conversations in his native speech: "You come to understand perfectly," wrote Mrs Browning, "when you know him, that his bitterness is only melancholy, and his scorn sensibility." A little later Browning's father and sister spent some weeks in Paris. Here, at all events, were perfect relations between the members of a family group; the daughter here was her father's comrade with something even of a maternal instinct; and the grandfather discovered to his great satisfaction that his own talent for drawing had descended to his grandchild.

The time was one when the surface of life in Paris showed an unruffled aspect; but under the surface were heavings of inward agitation. On the morning of December 2nd the great stroke against the Republic was delivered; the *coup d'état* was an accomplished fact. Later in the day Louis Napoleon rode under the windows of the apartment in the Avenue des Champs-Elysées, from the Carrousel to the Arc de l'Étoile. To Mrs Browning it seemed the grandest of spectacles —"he rode there in the name of the people after all." She and her husband had witnessed revolutions in Florence, and political upheavals did not seem so very formidable. On the Thursday of bloodshed in the streets—December 4th—Pen was taken out for his usual walk, though not without certain precautions; as the day advanced the excitement grew tense, and when night fell the distant firing on the boulevards kept Mrs. Browning from her bed till one o'clock. On Saturday they took a carriage and drove to see the field of action; the crowds moved to and fro, discussing the situation, but of real disturbance there was none; next day the theatres had their customary spectators and the Champs-Elysées its promenaders. For the dishonoured "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité," as Mrs. Browning heard it suggested, might now be inscribed "Infanterie, Cavallerie, Artillerie."

Such may have been her husband's opinion, but such was not hers. Her faith in the President had been now and again shaken; her faith in the Emperor became as time went on an enthusiasm of hero-worship. The display of force on December 2nd impressed her imagination; there was a dramatic completeness in the whole performance; Napoleon represented the people; a democrat, she thought, should be logical and thorough; the vote of the millions entirely justified their chief. Browning viewed affairs more critically, more sceptically. "Robert and I," writes his wife jestingly, "have had some domestic *émeutes*, because he hates some imperial names." He detested all Buonapartes, he would say, past, present, and to come,—an outbreak explained by Mrs Browning to her satisfaction, as being only his self-willed way of dismissing a subject with which he refused to occupy his thoughts, a mere escapade of feeling and known to him as such. When all the logic and good sense were on the woman's side, how could she be disturbed by such masculine infirmities? Though only a very little lower than the angels, he was after all that humorous being—a man.

NOTES:

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"Mrs Orr's Life and Letters of R.B.," 173.

Chapter VIII

1851 to 1855

It was during the month of the *coup d'état* that Browning went back in thought to the poet of his youthful love, and wrote that essay which was prefixed to the volume of forged letters published as Shelley's by Moxon in 1852. The essay is interesting as Browning's only considerable piece of prose, and also as an utterance made not through the mask of any *dramatis persona*, but openly and directly from his own lips. Though not without value as a contribution to the study of Shelley's genius, it is perhaps chiefly of importance as an exposition of some of Browning's own views concerning his art. He distinguishes between two kinds or types of poet: the poet who like Shakespeare is primarily the "fashioner" of things independent of his own personality, artistic creations which embody some fact or reality, leaving it to others to interpret, as best they are able, its significance; and secondly the poet who is rather a "seer" than a fashioner, who attempts to exhibit in imaginative form his own conceptions of absolute truth, conceptions far from entire

adequacy, yet struggling towards completeness; the poet who would shadow forth, as he himself apprehends them, *Ideas*, to use the word of Plato, "seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand"—which Ideas he discovers not so often in the external world as in his own soul, this being for him "the nearest reflex of the absolute Mind." What a poet of this second kind produces, as Browning finely states it, will be less a work than an effluence. He is attracted among external phenomena chiefly by those which summon forth his inner light and power, "he selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the working of his brain." To this latter class of poets, although in *The Cenci* and *Julian and Maddalo* he is eminent as a "fashioner," Shelley conspicuously belongs. Mankind cannot wisely dispense with the services of either type of poet; at one time it chiefly needs to have that which is already known interpreted into its highest meanings; and at another, when the virtue of these interpretations has been appropriated and exhausted, it needs a fresh study and exploration of the facts of life and nature—for "the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned." The truest and highest point of view from which to regard the poetry of Shelley is that which shows it as a "sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal."

For Browning the poet of *Prometheus Unbound* was not that beautiful and ineffectual angel of Matthew Arnold's fancy, beating in the void his luminous wings. A great moral purpose looked forth from Shelley's work, as it does, Browning would add, from all lofty works of art. And it may be remarked that the criticism of Browning's own writings which considers not only their artistic methods and artistic success or failure, but also their ethical and spiritual purport, is entirely in accord with his thoughts in this essay. Far from regarding Shelley as unpractical, he notes—and with perfect justice—"the peculiar practicalness" of Shelley's mind, which in his earlier years acted injuriously upon both his conduct and his art. His power to perceive the defects of society was accompanied by as precocious a fertility to contrive remedies; but his crudeness in theorising and his inexperience in practice resulted in not a few youthful errors. Gradually he left behind him "this low practical dexterity"; gradually he learnt that "the best way of removing abuses is to stand fast by truth. Truth is one, as they are manifold; and innumerable negative effects are produced by the upholding of one positive principle." Browning urges that Shelley, before the close, had passed from his doctrinaire atheism to what was virtually a theistic faith. "I shall say what I think," he adds—"had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians.... The preliminary step to following Christ is the leaving the dead to bury their dead." Perhaps this hypothetical anticipation is to be classed with the surmise of Cardinal Wiseman (if Father Prout rightly attributed to that eminent ecclesiastic a review of *Men and Women* in *The Rambler*) that Browning himself would one day be found in the ranks of converts to Catholicism. In each case a wish was father to the thought; Browning recognised the fact that Shelley assigned a place to love, side by side with power, among the forces which determine the life and development of humanity, and with Browning himself "power" was a synonym for the Divine will, and "love" was often an equivalent for God manifest in Jesus Christ. One or two other passages of the essay may be noted as illustrating certain characteristics of the writer's modes of thought and feeling: "Everywhere is apparent Shelley's belief in the existence of Good, to which Evil is an accident"—it is an optimist here, though of a subtler doctrine than Shelley's, who is applauding optimism. "Shelley was tender, though tenderness is not always the characteristic of very sincere natures; he was eminently both tender and sincere." Was Browning consulting his own heart, which was always sincere, and could be tender, but whose tenderness sometimes disappeared in explosions of indignant wrath? The principle, again, by which he determined an artist's rank is in harmony with Browning's general feeling that men are to be judged less by their actual achievements than by the possibilities that lie unfolded within them, and the ends to which they aspire, even though such ends be unattained: "In the hierarchy of creative minds, it is the presence of the highest faculty that gives first rank, in virtue of its kind, not degree; no pretension of a lower nature, whatever the completeness of development or variety of effect, impeding the precedency of the rarer endowment though only in the germ." And, last, of the tardy recognition of Shelley's genius as a poet, Browning wrote in words which though, as he himself says, he had always good praisers, no doubt express a thought that helped to sustain him against the indifference of the public to his poetry: "The misapprehensiveness of his age is exactly what a poet is sent to remedy: and the interval between his operation and the generally perceptible effect of it, is no greater, less indeed than in many other departments of the great human effort. The 'E pur si muove' of the astronomer was as bitter a word as any uttered before or since by a poet over his rejected living work, in that depth of conviction which is so like despair." The volume in which Browning's essay appeared was withdrawn from circulation on the discovery of the fraudulent nature of its contents. He had himself no opportunity of inspecting the forged manuscripts, and no question of authenticity was raised until several copies of the book had passed into circulation.[48]

During the nine months spent in Paris, from September 1851 to June 1852, Browning enlarged the circle of his friends and made some new and interesting acquaintances. Chief among friendships was that with Joseph Milsand of Dijon, whose name is connected with *Sordello* in the edition of Browning's "Poetical Works" of the year 1863. Under the title "La Poésie Anglaise depuis Byron," two articles by Milsand were contributed to the "Revue des Deux Mondes," the first on Tennyson, the second (published 15th August 1851) a little before the poet's arrival in Paris, on Robert Browning. "Of all the poets known to me," wrote his French critic, "he is the most capable of summing up the conceptions of the religion, the ethics, and the theoretic

knowledge of our period in forms which embody the beauty proper to such abstractions." Such criticism by a thoughtful student of our literature could not but prepare the way pleasantly for personal acquaintance. Milsand, we are told by his friend Th. Bentzon (Mme. Blanc), having hesitated as to the propriety of printing a passage in an article as yet unpublished, in which he had spoken of the great sorrow of Mrs Browning's early life—the death of her brother, went straight to Browning, who was then in Paris, and declared that he was ready to cancel what he had written if it would cause her pain. "Only a Frenchman," exclaimed Browning, grasping both hands of his visitor, "would have done this." So began a friendship of an intimate and most helpful kind, which closed only with Milsand's death in 1886. To his memory is dedicated the volume published soon after his death, *Parleyings with certain People of Importance*. "I never knew or shall know his like among men," wrote Browning; and again: "No words can express the love I have for him." And in *Red Cotton Nightcap Country* it is Milsand who is characterised in the lines:

> He knows more and loves better than the world
> That never heard his name and never may, ...
> What hinders that my heart relieve itself,
> O friend! who makest warm my wintry world,
> And wise my heaven, if there we consort too.

In the correction of Browning's proof-sheets, and especially in regulating the punctuation of his poems, Milsand's friendly services were of high value. In 1858 when Browning happened to be at Dijon, and had reason to believe, though in fact erroneously, that his friend was absent in Paris, he went twice "in a passion of friendship," as his wife tells a correspondent, to stand before Maison Milsand, and muse, and bless the threshold.[49]

Browning desired much to know Victor Hugo, but his wish was never gratified. After December 2nd Paris could not contain a spirit so fiery as Hugo's was in hostility to the new régime and its chief representative. Balzac, whom it would have been a happiness even to look at, was dead. Lamartine promised a visit, but for a time his coming was delayed. By a mischance Alfred de Musset failed to appear when Browning, expecting to meet him, was the guest of M. Buloz. But Béranger was to be seen "in his white hat wandering along the asphalte." The blind historian Thierry begged Browning and his wife to call upon him. At the house of Ary Scheffer, the painter, they heard Mme. Viardot sing; and receptions given by Lady Elgin and Mme. Mohl were means of introduction to much that was interesting in the social life of Paris. At the theatre they saw with the deepest excitement "La Dame aux Camélias," which was running its hundred nights. Caricatures in the streets exhibited the occupants of the pit protected by umbrellas from the rain of tears that fell from the boxes. Tears, indeed, ran down Browning's cheeks, though he had believed himself hardened against theatrical pathos. Mrs Browning cried herself ill, and pronounced the play painful but profoundly moral.

Mrs Browning's admiration of the writings of George Sand was so great that it would have been a sore disappointment to her if George Sand were to prove inaccessible. A letter of introduction to her had been obtained from Mazzini. "Ah, I am so vexed about George Sand," Mrs Browning wrote on Christmas Eve; "she came, she has gone, and we haven't met." In February she again was known to be for a few days in Paris; Browning was not eager to push through difficulties on the chance of obtaining an interview, but his wife was all impatience: "' No,' said I, 'you *shan't* be proud, and I *won't* be proud, and we *will* see her. I won't die, if I can help it, without seeing George Sand.'" A gracious reply and an appointment came in response to their joint-petition which accompanied Mazzini's letter. On the appointed Sunday Browning and Mrs Browning—she wearing a respirator and smothered in furs—drove to render their thanks and homage to the most illustrious of Frenchwomen. Mrs Browning with beating heart stooped and kissed her hand. They found in George Sand's face no sweetness, but great moral and intellectual capacities; in manners and conversation she was absolutely simple. Young men formed the company, to whom she addressed counsel and command with the utmost freedom and a conscious authority. Through all her speech a certain undercurrent of scorn, a half-veiled touch of disdain, was perceptible. At their parting she invited the English visitors to come again, kissed Mrs Browning on the lips, and received Browning's kiss upon her hand. The second call upon her was less agreeable. She sat warming her feet in a circle of eight or nine ill-bred men, representatives of "the ragged Red diluted with the lower theatrical." If any other mistress of a house had behaved so unceremoniously, Browning declared that he would have walked out of the room; and Mrs Browning left with the impression—"she does not care for me." They had exerted themselves to please her, but felt that it was in vain; "we couldn't penetrate, couldn't really *touch* her." Once Browning met her near the Tuileries and walked the length of the gardens with her arm upon his. If nothing further was to come of it, at least they had seen a wonderful piece of work, which not to have been blest withal would have discredited their travel. Only to Mrs Browning's mortification the spectacle wanted one detail indispensable to its completeness—the characteristic cigarette was absent: "Ah, but I didn't see her smoke." Life leaves us always something to desire.

Before the close of June 1852 they were again in London, and found comfortable rooms at 58 Welbeck Street. When the turmoil of the first days had subsided, they visited "Kenyon the Magnificent"—so named by Browning—at Wimbledon, at whose table Landor, abounding in life and passionate energy as in earlier days, was loud in his applause of the genius of Louis Napoleon. Mazzini, his "intense eyes full of melancholy illusions," called at their lodgings in company with Mrs Carlyle, who seemed to Mrs Browning not only remarkable for her play of

ideas but attaching through her feelings and her character.[50] Florence Nightingale was also a welcome visitor, and her visit was followed by a gift of flowers. Invitations from country houses came in sheaves, and the thought of green fields is seductive in a London month of July; but to remain in London was to be faithful to Penini—and to the much-travelled Flush. Once the whole household, with Flush included, breathed rural air for two days with friends at Farnham, and Browning had there the pleasure of meeting Charles Kingsley, whose Christian Socialism seemed wild and unpractical enough, but as for the man himself, brave, bold, original, full of a genial kindliness, Mrs Browning assures a correspondent that he could not be other than "good and noble let him say or dream what he will." It is stated by Mr W.M. Rossetti that Browning first became acquainted with his brother Dante Gabriel in the course of this summer. Coventry Patmore gave him the manuscript of his unpublished poems of 1853 to read. And Ruskin was now added to the number of his personal acquaintances. "We went to Denmark Hill yesterday, by agreement," wrote Mrs Browning in September, "to see the Turners—which, by the way, are divine. I like Mr Ruskin much, and so does Robert. Very gentle, yet earnest—refined and truthful." At Lord Stanhope's they were introduced to the latest toy of fashionable occultism, the crystal ball, in which the seer beheld Oremus, the spirit of the sun; the supernatural was qualified for the faithful with luncheon and lobster salad; "I love the marvellous," Mrs Browning frankly declares. And of terrestrial wonders, with heaven lying about them, and also India muslin and Brussels lace, two were seen in the babies of Monckton Milnes and Alfred Tennyson. Pen, because he was "troppo grande," declined to kiss the first of these new-christened wonders, but Pen's father, who went alone to the baptism of Hallam Tennyson, distinguished himself by nursing for some ten minutes and with accomplished dexterity, the future Governor-General of Australia.

Yet with all these distractions, perhaps in part because of them, the visit to England was not one of Browning's happiest times. The autumn weather confined Mrs Browning to her rooms. He was anxious, vexed, and worn.[51] It was a happiness when Welbeck Street was left behind, and they were on the way by Paris to their resting-place at Casa Guidi. From a balcony overlooking one of the Paris boulevards they witnessed, in a blaze of autumnal sunshine, which glorified much military and civic pomp, the reception of the new Emperor. Mrs Browning's handkerchief waved frantically while she prayed that God might bless the people in this the chosen representative of a democracy. What were Browning's thoughts on that memorable Saturday is not recorded, but we may be sure that they were less enthusiastic. Yet he enjoyed the stir and animation of Paris, and after the palpitating life of the boulevards found Florence dull and dead—no change, no variety. The journey by the Mont Cenis route had not been without its trying incidents. At Genoa, during several days he was deeply depressed by the illness of his wife, who lay on the sofa and seemed to waste away. But Casa Guidi was reached at last, where it was more like summer than November; the pleasant nest had its own peculiar welcome for wanderers; again they enjoyed the sunsets over the Arno, and Mrs Browning was able to report herself free from cough and feeling very well and very happy: "You can't think how we have caught up our ancient traditions just where we left them, and relapsed into our former soundless, stirless, hermit life. Robert has not passed an evening from home since we came—just as if we had never known Paris."[52]

The political condition of Italy was, indeed, a grief to both husband and wife. It was a state of utter prostration—on all sides "the unanimity of despair." The Grand Duke, the emancipator, had acquired a respect and affection for the bayonets of Austria. The Pope was "wriggling his venom into the heart of all possibilities of free-thought and action." Browning groaned "How long, O Lord, how long?" His home-thoughts of England in contrast with Italy were those of patriotism and pride. His wife was more detached, more critical towards her native land. The best symptom for Italian freedom was that if Italy had not energy to act, she yet had energy to hate. To be happy now they both must turn to imaginative work, and gain all the gains possible from private friendships. Browning was already occupied with the poems included afterwards in the volumes of *Men and Women*. Mrs Browning was already engaged upon *Aurora Leigh*. "We neither of us show our work to one another," she wrote, "till it is finished. An artist must, I fancy, either find or *make* a solitude to work in, if it is to be good work at all." But as her husband's poems, one by one, were completed, she saw them, and they seemed to her as fine as anything he had done. Away in England *Colombe's Birthday* was given on the stage, with Helen Faucit in the leading part. It was at least an indication that the public had not forgotten that Browning was a poet. Here in Florence, although the hermit life was happy, new friends—the gift of England—added to its happiness. Frederick Tennyson, the Laureate's brother, and himself a true poet in his degree, "a dreamy, shy, speculative man," simple withal and truthful, had married an Italian wife and was settled for a time in Florence. To him Browning became attached with genuine affection. Mrs Browning was a student of the writings of Swedenborg, and she tells much of her new friend in a single Swedenborgian word—"selfhood, the *proprium*, is not in him." Frederick Tennyson, though left in a state of bewilderment by Browning's poetry, found the writer of the poetry "a man of infinite learning, jest and bonhommie, and moreover a sterling heart that reverbs no hollowness."[53] Another intimate who charmed them much was one of the attachés of the English embassy, and a poet of unquestionable faculty, very young, very gentle and refined, delicate and excitable, full of sensibility, "full of all sorts of goodness and nobleness," but somewhat dreamy and unpractical, "visionary enough," writes Mrs Browning, "to suit me," interested moreover in spiritualism, which suited her well, "never," she unwisely prophesied, "to be a great diplomatist." It was hardly, Mr Kenyon, the editor of her letters, observes, a successful horoscope of the destiny of Lord Lytton, the future Ambassador at Paris and Viceroy of India.[54]

Early in 1853 Mrs Browning became much interested in the reports which reached her—many of

these from America—of the "rapping spirits," who in the 'fifties were busy in instructing chairs and tables to walk in the way they should not go. "You know I am rather a visionary," she wrote to Miss Mitford, "and inclined to knock round at all the doors of the present world to try to get out." Her Swedenborgian studies had prepared her to believe that there were communities of life in the visible and the invisible worlds which did not permit of the one being wholly estranged from the other. A clever person who loves the marvellous will soon find by the sheer force of logic that marvels are the most natural things in the world. Should we not credit human testimony? Should we not evict prejudice from our understandings? Should we not investigate alleged facts? Should we not keep an open mind? We cannot but feel a certain sympathy with a woman of ardent nature who fails to observe the bounds of intellectual prudence. Browning himself with all his audacities was pre-eminently prudent. He did not actively enter into politics; he did not dabble in pseudo-science; he was an artist and a thinker; and he made poems, and amused himself with drawing, modelling in clay, and the study of music. Mrs Browning squandered her enthusiasms with less discretion. A good dose of stupidity or an indignant energy of common-sense, impatient of the nonsense of the thing, may be the salvation of the average man. It is often the clever people who would be entirely rational and unprejudiced that best succeed in duping themselves at once by their reason and their folly. A fine old crusted prejudice commonly stands for a thousand acts of judgment amassed into a convenient working result; a single act of an individual understanding, or several of such acts, will seldom contain an equal sum of wisdom. Scientific discovery is not advanced by a multitude of curious and ingenious amateurs in learned folly. Whether the claims of spiritualism are warrantable or fallacious, Mrs Browning, gifted as she was with rare powers of mind, was not qualified to investigate those claims; it was a waste of energy, from which she could not but suffer serious risks and certain loss.

Before she had seen anything for herself she was a believer—a believer, as she describes it, on testimony. The fact of communication with the invisible world appeared to her more important than anything that had been communicated. The spirits themselves "seem abundantly foolish, one must admit." Yet it was clear to her that mankind was being prepared for some great development of truth. She would keep her eyes wide open to facts and her soul lifted up in reverential expectation. By-and-by she felt the dumb wood of the table panting and shivering with human emotion. The dogmatism of Faraday in an inadequate theory was simply unscientific, a piece of intellectual tyranny. The American medium Home, she learnt from her friends, was "turning the world upside down in London with this spiritual influx." Two months later, in July 1855, Mrs Browning and her husband were themselves in London, and witnessed Home's performances during a séance at Ealing. Miss de Gaudrion (afterwards Mrs Merrifield), who was present on that occasion, and who was convinced that the "manifestations" were a fraud, wrote to Mrs Browning for an expression of her opinion. The reply, as might be expected, declared the writer's belief in the genuine character of the phenomena; such manifestations, she admitted, in the undeveloped state of the subject were "apt to be low"; but they were, she was assured, "the beginning of access from a spiritual world, of which we shall presently learn more perhaps." A letter volunteered by Browning accompanied that of his wife. He had, he said, to overcome a real repugnance in recalling the subject; he could hardly understand how another opinion was possible than that "the whole display of 'hands,' 'spirit utterances,' etc., was a cheat and imposture." It was all "melancholy stuff," which a grain of worldly wisdom would dispose of in a minute. "Mr Browning," the letter goes on, "has, however, abundant experience that the best and rarest of natures may begin by the proper mistrust of the more ordinary results of reasoning when employed in such investigations as these, go on to an abnegation of the regular tests of truth and rationality in favour of these particular experiments, and end in a voluntary prostration of the whole intelligence before what is assumed to transcend all intelligence. Once arrived at this point, no trick is too gross—absurdities are referred to 'low spirits,' falsehoods to 'personating spirits'—and the one terribly apparent spirit, the Father of Lies, has it all his own way." These interesting letters were communicated to *The Times* by Mr Merrifield (*Literary Supplement*, Nov. 28, 1902), and they called forth a short additional letter from Mr R. Barrett Browning, the "Penini" of earlier days. He mentions that his father had himself on one occasion detected Home in a vulgar fraud; that Home had called at the house of the Brownings, and was turned out of it. Mr Browning adds: "What, however, I am more desirous of stating is that towards the end of her life my mother's views on 'spiritual manifestations' were much modified. This change was brought about, in great measure, by the discovery that she had been duped by a friend in whom she had blind faith. The pain of the disillusion was great, but her eyes were opened and she saw clearly."[55] It must be added, that letters written by Mrs Browning six months before her death give no indication of this change of feeling, but she admits that "sublime communications" from the other world are "decidedly absent," and that while no truth can be dangerous, unsettled minds may lose their balance, and may do wisely to avoid altogether the subject of spiritualism.

Browning's hostility arose primarily from his conviction that the so-called "manifestations" were, as he says, a cheat and imposture. He had grasped Home's leg under the table while at work in producing "phenomena." He had visited his friend, Seymour Kirkup, had found the old man assisting at the trance of a peasant girl named Mariana; and when Kirkup withdrew for a moment, the entranced Mariana relieved herself from the fatigue of her posturing, at the same time inviting Browning with a wink to be a charitable confederate in the joke by which she profited in admiration and in pelf. Browning, who would have waged immitigable war against the London dog-stealers, and opposed all treaty with such rogues, even at the cost of an unrecovered Flush, could not but oppose the new trade of elaborate deception. But his feeling was intensified by the personal repulsiveness of the professional medium. The vain, sleek, vulgar, emasculated,

neurotic type of creature, who became the petted oracle of the dim-lighted room, was loathsome in his eyes. And his respect for his wife's genius made him feel that there was a certain desecration in the neighbourhood to her of men whom he regarded as verminous impostors. Yet he recognised her right to think for herself, and she, on the other hand, regarded his scepticism as rather his misfortune than his crime.

It was a considerable time after his wife's death that Browning's study of the impostor of the spiritualist circles, "Mr Sludge the Medium," appeared in the *Dramatis Personae* of 1864; the date of its composition is Rome, 1859-60; but the observations which that study sums up were accumulated during earlier years, and if Mr Sludge is not a portrait of Home, that eminent member of the tribe of Sludge no doubt supplied suggestions for the poet's character-study. Browning evidently wrote the poem with a peculiar zest; its intellectual energy never flags; its imaginative grip never slackens. If the Bishop, who orders his tomb at St Praxed's, serves to represent the sensuous glory and the moral void of one phase of the Italian Renaissance, so, and with equal fidelity, does Mr Sludge represent a phase of nineteenth century materialism and moral grossness, which cannot extinguish the cravings of the soul but would vulgarise and degrade them with coarse illusions. Unhappily the later poem differs from the earlier in being uglier in its theme and of inordinate length. Browning, somewhat in the manner of Ben Jonson when he wrote *The Alchemist*, could not be satisfied until he had exhausted the subject to the dregs. The writer's zeal from first to last knows no abatement, but it is not every reader who cares to bend over the dissecting-table, with its sick effluvia, during so prolonged a demonstration.

"Mr Sludge the Medium" is not a mere attack on spiritualism; it is a dramatic scene in the history of a soul; and Browning, with his democratic feeling in things of the mind, held that every soul however mean is worth understanding. If the poem is a satire, it is so only in a way that is inevitable. Browning's desire is to be absolutely just, but sometimes truth itself becomes perforce a satire. He takes an impostor at the moment of extreme disadvantage; the "medium" is caught in the very act of cheating; he will make a clean breast of it; and his confession is made as nearly as possible a vindication. The most contemptible of creatures, in desperate straits, makes excellent play with targe and dagger; the poetry of the piece is to be found in the lithe attitudes, absolutely the best possible under the circumstances, by which he maintains both defence and attack. Half of the long *apologia* is a criticism not of those who feast fools in their folly, but of the fools who require a caterer for the feast; it is a study of the methods by which dupes solicit and educate a knave. The other half is Sludge's plea that, knave though he be, he is not wholly knave; and Browning, while absolutely rejecting the doctrine of so called spiritualism, is prepared to admit that in the composition of a Sludge there enters a certain portion of truth, low in degree, perverted in kind, inoperative to the ends of truth, yet a fragment of that without which life itself were impossible even for the meanest organism in the shape of man.

Cowardly, cunning, insolent, greedy, effeminately sensual, playing upon the vanity of his patrons, playing upon their vulgar sentimentality, playing upon their vulgar pietisms and their vulgar materialism, Sludge after all is less the wronger than the wronged. Who made him what he is? Who, keen and clear-sighted enough in fields which they had not selected as their special parade-ground for self-conceit, trained him on to knavery and self-degradation? Who helped him through his blunders with ingenious excuses—"the manifestations are at first so weak"; or "Sludge is himself disturbed by the strange phenomena"; or "a doubter is in the company, and the spirits have grown confused in their communications"? Who proceeded to exhibit him as a lawful prize and possession, staking their vanity on the success of his imposture? Who awakened in him the artist's joy in rare invention? Who urged him forward from modest to magnificent lies? Who fed and flattered him? What ladies bestowed their soft caresses on Sludge? And now and again in his course of fraud did he not turn a wistful eye towards any reckless tatterdemalion, if only the vagrant lived in freedom and in truth?

> It's too bad, I say,
> Ruining a soul so!

And in the midst of gulls who persistently refuse to be undeceived cheating is so "cruel easy." The difficulty is rather that the cheating, even when acknowledged, should ever be credited for what it is. The medium has confessed! Yes, and to cheat may be part of the medium nature; none the less he has the medium's gift of acting as a conductor between the visible and the invisible worlds. Has he not told secrets of the lives of his wondering clients which could not have been known by natural means? And Sludge chuckles "could not?"—could not be known by him who in his seeming passivity is alive at every nerve with the instinct of the detective, by him whose trade was

> Throwing thus
> His sense out, like an ant-eater's long tongue,
> Soft, innocent, warm, moist, impassible,
> And when 'twas crusted o'er with creatures—slick,
> Their juice enriched his palate. "Could not Sludge!"

Haunters of the séance of every species are his aiders and abettors—the unbeliever, whom believers overwhelm or bribe to acquiescence, the fair votaries who find prurient suggestions characteristic of the genuine medium, the lover of the lie through the natural love of it, the amateur, incapable of a real conviction, who plays safely with superstition, the literary man who

welcomes a new flavour for the narrative or the novel, the philosophic diner-out, who wants the chopping-block of a disputable doctrine on which to try the edge of his faculty. Is it his part, Sludge asks indignantly, to be grateful to the patrons who have corrupted and debased him?

> Gratitude to these?
> The gratitude, forsooth, of a prostitute
> To the greenhorn and the bully.

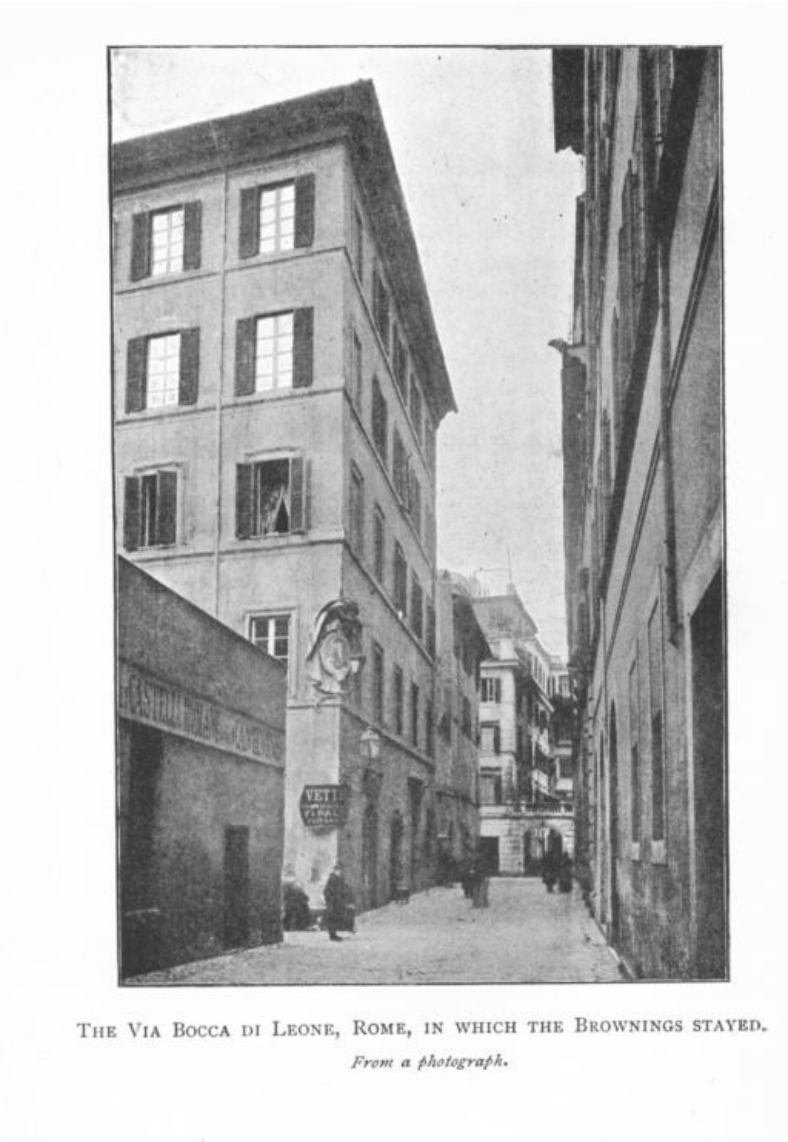
The truculence of Sludge is not without warrant; it is indeed no other than the truculence of Robert Browning, "shaking his mane," as Dante Rossetti described him in his outbreaks against the spiritualists, "with occasional foamings at the mouth."[56]

Where then is the little grain of truth which has vitality amid the putrefaction of Sludge's nature? Liar and cheat as he is, he cannot be sure "but there was something in it, tricks and all." The spiritual world, he feels, is as real as the material world; the supernatural interpenetrates the natural at every point; in little things, as in great things, God is present. Sludge is aware of the invisible powers at every nerve:

> I guess what's going on outside the veil,
> Just as the prisoned crane feels pairing-time
> In the islands where his kind are, so must fall
> To capering by himself some shiny night
> As if your back yard were a plot of spice.

He cheats; yes, but he also apprehends a truth which the world is blind to. Or, after all, is this cheating when every lie is quick with a germ of truth? Is not such lying as this a self-desecration, if you will; but still more a strange, sweet self-sacrifice in the service of truth? At the lowest is it not required by the very conditions of our poor mortal life, which remains so sorry a thing, so imperfect, so unendurable until it is brought into fruitful connection with a future existence? This world of ours is a cruel, blundering, unintelligible world; but let it be pervaded by an influx from the next world, how quickly it rights itself! how intelligible it all grows! And is the faculty of imagination, the faculty which discovers the things of the spirit—put to his own uses by the poet and even the historian—is this a power which cheats its possessor, or cheats those for whose advantage he gives it play?

Browning's design is to exhibit even in this Sludge the rudiments—coarse, perverted, abnormally directed and ineffective for moral good—of that sublime spiritual wisdom, which, turned to its proper ends and aided by the highest intellectual powers, is present—to take a lofty exemplar—in his Pope of *The Ring and the Book*. It is not through spiritualism so-called that Sludge has received his little grain of truth; that has only darkened the glimmer of true light which was in him. Yet liar and cheat and coward, he is saved from a purely phantasmal existence by this fibre of reality which was part of his original structure. The epilogue—Sludge's outbreak against his corrupter and tormentor—stands as evidence of the fact that no purifying, no cleansing, no really illuminating power remains in what is now only a putrescent luminosity within him. His rage is natural and dramatically true; a noble rage would be to his honour. This is a base and poisonous passion with no virtue in it, and the passion, flaring for a moment, sinks idly into as base a fingering of Sludge's disgraceful gains.



THE VIA BOCCA DI LEONE, ROME, IN WHICH THE BROWNINGS STAYED.
From a photograph.

THE VIA BOCCA DI LEONE, ROME, IN WHICH THE BROWNINGS STAYED.

From a photograph.

The summer and early autumn of 1853 were spent by Browning and his wife, as they had spent the same season four years previously, at the Baths of Lucca. Their house among the hills was shut in by a row of plane-trees in which by day the cicale were shrill; at evening fireflies lit up their garden. The green rushing river—"a flashing scimitar that cuts through the mountain"—the chestnut woods, the sheep-walks, "the villages on the peaks of the mountains like wild eagles," renewed their former delights.

On the longer excursions Browning slackened his footsteps to keep pace with his wife's donkey; basins of strawberries and cream refreshed the wanderers after their exertion. "Oh those jagged mountains," exclaims Mrs Browning, "rolled together like pre-Adamite beasts, and setting their teeth against the sky.... You may as well guess at a lion by a lady's lap-dog as at Nature by what you see in England. All honour to England, lanes and meadowland, notwithstanding. To the great trees above all." The sculptor Story and his family, whose acquaintance they had made in Florence before Casa Guidi had become their home, were their neighbours at the Baths, and Robert Lytton was for a time their guest. Browning worked at his *Men and Women*, of which his wife was able to report in the autumn that it was in an advanced state. *In a Balcony* was the most important achievement of the summer. "The scene of the declaration in *By the Fireside*" Mrs Orr informs us, "was laid in a little adjacent mountain-gorge to which Browning walked or rode."

Only a few weeks were given to Florence. In perfect autumnal weather the occupants of Casa Guidi started for Rome. The delightful journey occupied eight days, and on the way the church of Assisi was seen, and the falls of Terni—"that passion of the waters,"—so Mrs Browning describes it, "which makes the human heart seem so still." They entered Rome in a radiant mood.—"Robert and Penini singing." An apartment had been taken for them by their friends the Storys in the Via Bocca di Leone, and all was bright, warm, and full of comfort. Next morning a shadow fell upon their happiness—the Storys' little boy was seized with convulsions; in the evening he was dead. [57] A second child—a girl—was taken ill in the Brownings' house, and could not be moved from where she lay in a room below their apartment. Mrs Browning was in a panic for her own boy, though his apple-red cheeks spoke of health. Rome, for a time, was darkened with grief and anxiety; nor did the city itself impress her as she had expected: "It's a palimpsest Rome," she writes, "a watering-place written over the antique." The chief gains of these Roman months were

those of friendship and pleasant acquaintances added to those already given by Italy. In rooms under those occupied by the Brownings was Page the American artist, who painted in colours then regarded as "Venetian," now almost darkened out of existence, as a gift for Mrs Browning, the portrait of Robert Browning exhibited in the Royal Academy of 1856. Browning himself wrote to Story with enthusiasm of Page's work. "I am much disappointed in it," wrote Dante Rossetti to Allingham, "and shall advise its non-exhibition." A second portrait painted at this time—that by Fisher—is familiar to us through a reproduction in the second volume of *The Letters of Mrs Browning*. A rash act of the morning of the day on which he entered Rome had deplorably altered Browning's appearance. In what his wife calls a fit of suicidal impatience, he perpetrated the high crime and misdemeanour, and appeared before her wholly unworthy of portraiture with clean-shaven cheeks and chin. "I cried when I saw him," she tells his sister, "I was so horror-struck." To mark the sin, his beard, when once again he recovered his good looks, was gray, but Mrs Browning cherished the opinion that the argentine touch, as she terms it, gave "a character of elevation and thought to his whole physiognomy." To complete this history, it may be added that in 1859 the moustache of his later portraits was first doubtfully permitted and was presently approved with decision as picturesque.[58]

Under all disadvantages of appearance Browning made his way triumphantly in the English and American society of Rome. The studios were open to him. In Gibson's he saw the tinted Venus —"rather a grisette than a goddess," pronounced Mrs Browning. Harriet Hosmer, the young American sculptress, working with true independence, high aims and right woman's manliness, was both admired and loved. Thackeray, with his daughters, called at the apartment in the Bocca di Leone, bringing small-talk in "handfuls of glittering dust swept out of salons." Lockhart, snow-white in aspect, snow-cold in manner, gave Browning emphatic commendation, though of a negative kind—"He isn't at all," declared Lockhart, "like a damned literary man." But of many interesting acquaintances perhaps the most highly valued were Fanny Kemble and her sister Adelaide Sartoris—Fanny Kemble magnificent, "with her black hair and radiant smile," her sympathetic voice, "her eyes and eyelids full of utterance"—a very noble creature indeed; Mrs Sartoris, genial and generous, more tolerant than Fanny of Mrs Browning's wayward enthusiasms, eloquent in talk and passionate in song. "The Kembles," writes Mrs Browning, "were our gain in Rome."

Towards the end of May 1854 farewells were said, and the Brownings returned from Rome, to Florence by vettura. They had hoped to visit England, or if this should prove impracticable, to take shelter among the mountains from the summer heat. But needful coin on which they had reckoned did not arrive; and they resolved in prudence to sit still at Florence and eat their bread and macaroni as poor sensible folk should do. And Florence looked more beautiful than ever after Rome; the nightingales sang around the olive-trees and vineyards, not only by starlight and fire-fly-light but in the daytime. "I love the very stones of Florence," exclaims Mrs Browning. Her friend Miss Mitford, now in England, and sadly failing in health, hinted at a loan of money; but the answer was a prompt, "Oh no! My husband has a family likeness to Lucifer in being proud." There followed a tranquil and a happy time, and both *Men and Women* and *Aurora Leigh* maintained in the writers a deep inward excitement of the kind that leaves an enduring result. A little joint publication; *Two Poems by E.B.B. and R.B.*, containing *A Plea for the Ragged Schools of London* and *The Twins*, was sold at Miss Arabella Barrett's Ragged School bazaar in 1854. It is now a waif of literature which collectors prize. There is special significance in the *Date* and *Dabitur*, the twins of Browning's poem, when we bear in mind the occasion with which it was originally connected.

In the early weeks of 1855 Mrs Browning was seriously ill; through feverish nights of coughing, she had in her husband a devoted nurse. His sleepless hours were troubled not only by anxiety on her account but by a passionate interest in the heroisms and miseries, of his fellow countrymen during the Crimean winter: "when he is mild *he* wishes the ministry to be torn to pieces in the streets, limb from limb." Gradually his wife regained health, but she had not long recovered when tidings of the death of Miss Mitford came to sadden her. Not until April did she feel once more a leap into life. Browning was now actively at work in anticipation of printing his new volumes during the approaching visit to England. "He is four hours a day," his wife tells a correspondent, "engaged in dictating to a friend of ours who transcribes for him." And a little later she reports that they will take to England between them some sixteen thousand lines of verse, "eight on one side, eight on the other," her husband's total being already completed, her own still short of the sum by a thousand lines. Allowance, as she pleads, had to be made for time spent in seeing that "Penini's little trousers are creditably frilled and tucked." On the whole, notwithstanding illness and wrath directed against English ministerial blunders, this year of life in Florence had been rich in happiness—a "still dream-life, where if one is over-busy ever, the old tapestries on the walls and the pre-Giotto pictures ... surround us, ready to quiet us again."[59] London lodgings did not look inviting from the distance of Italy; but the summons north was a summons to work, and could not be set aside.

The midsummer of 1855 found Browning and his wife in 13 Dorset Street, London, and Browning's sister was with them. The faithful Wilson, Mrs Browning's maid, had married a Florentine, Ferdinando Romagnoli, and the husband also was now in their service. The weeks until mid-October were occupied with social pleasures and close proof-reading of the sheets of *Men and Women*.[60] Browning took his young friend the artist Leighton to visit Ruskin, and was graciously received. Carlyle was, as formerly, "in great force, particularly in the damnatory clauses." But the weather was drooping, the skies misty, the air oppressive, and Mrs Browning,

apart from these, had special causes of depression. Her married sister Henrietta was away in Taunton, and the cost of travel prevented the sisters from meeting. Arabella Barrett—"my one light in London" is Mrs Browning's word—was too soon obliged to depart to Eastbourne. And the Barrett household was disturbed by the undutifulness of a son who had been guilty of the unpardonable crime of marriage, and in consequence was now exiled from Wimpole Street. In body and soul Mrs Browning felt strong yearnings for the calm of Casa Guidi.

The year 1855 was a fortunate year for English poetry. *Men and Women* was published in the autumn; the beautiful epilogue, addressed to E.B.B., "There they are, my fifty men and women," was written in Dorset Street. Tennyson's *Maud* had preceded Browning's volumes by some months. It bewildered the critics, but his brother poet did justice to Tennyson's passionate sequence of dramatic lyrics. And though London in mid-autumn had emptied itself Tennyson happened for a few days to be in town. Two evenings he gave to the Brownings, "dined with us," writes Mrs Browning, "smoked with us, opened his heart to us (and the second bottle of port), and ended by reading *Maud* through from end to end, and going away at half-past two in the morning." His delightful frankness and simplicity charmed his hostess. "Think of his stopping in *Maud*," she goes on, "every now and then—'There's a wonderful touch! That's very tender! How beautiful that is!' Yes and it *was* wonderful, tender, beautiful, and he read exquisitely in a voice like an organ, rather music than speech."

One of the few persons who were invited to meet Tennyson on this occasion, Mr W.M. Rossetti, is still living, and his record of that memorable evening ought not to be omitted. "The audience was a small one, the privilege accorded to each individual all the higher: Mr and Mrs Browning, Miss Browning, my brother, and myself, and I think there was one more—either Madox Brown or else [Holman] Hunt or Woolner ... Tennyson, seated on a sofa in a characteristic attitude, and holding the volume near his eyes ... read *Maud* right through. My brother made two pen-and-ink sketches of him, and gave one of them to Browning. So far as I remember, the Poet-Laureate neither saw what Dante was doing, nor knew of it afterwards. His deep grand voice, with slightly chaunting intonation, was a noble vehicle for the perusal of mighty verse. On it rolled, sonorous and emotional. Dante Rossetti, according to Mr Hall Caine, spoke of the incident in these terms: 'I once heard Tennyson read *Maud*; and, whilst the fiery passages were delivered with a voice and vehemence which he alone of living men can compass, the softer passages and the songs made the tears course down his cheeks.' ... After Tennyson and *Maud* came Browning and *Fra Lippo Lippi*—read with as much sprightly variation as there was in Tennyson of sustained continuity. Truly a night of the gods, not to be remembered without pride and pang."[61] A quotation from a letter of Dante Rossetti to Allingham gives praise to Mrs Browning of a kind which resembles Lockhart's commendation of her husband: "What a delightful unliterary person Mrs Browning is to meet! During two evenings when Tennyson was at their house in London, Mrs Browning left Tennyson with her husband and William and me (who were the fortunate remnant of the male party) to discuss the universe, and gave all her attention to some certainly not very exciting ladies in the next room."[62] Without detracting from Mrs Browning's "unliterary" merits, one may conjecture that the ladies who proved unexciting to Rossetti were Arabella Barrett and Sarianna Browning.

NOTES:

[48]

Browning's Essay on Shelley was reprinted by Dr Furnivall in "The Browning Society's Papers," 1881-84, Part I.

[49]

Letters of E.B.B. ii. 284. On Milsand, the article "A French friend of Browning," by Th. Bentzon, is valuable and interesting.

[50]

Mrs Orr says that Browning always thought Mrs Carlyle "a hard and unlovable woman"; she adds, "I believe little liking was lost between them." Mrs Ritchie, in her "Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, and Browning" (pp. 250, 251), tells with spirit the story of Browning and Mrs Carlyle's kettle, which, on being told to "put it down," in an absent mood he planted upon her new carpet. "Ye should have been more explicit," said Carlyle to his wife.

[51]

See Letters of E.B.B. ii. 127.

[52]

Letters of E.B.B. ii. 99.

[53]

Letter of F. Tennyson, in Memoir of Alfred Tennyson, by his son, chapter xviii.

[54]

Mr Kenyon's note, vol. ii. 142 of Letters of E.B.B.

[55]

Times Lit. Supplement, Dec. 5, 1902.

[56]

Miss Cobbe's testimony is similar, and Lehmann says that at Home's name Browning would grow pale with passion.

[57]

See "Story and his Friends," by Henry James, 1903, vol. i. pp. 284, 285.

[58]

Letters of E.B.B., ii. 345.

[59]

E.B.B. to Ruskin, *Letters*, ii. 199.

[60]

Which, however, did not prevent certain errors noted in a letter of Browning to Dante Rossetti.

[61]

Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His "Family Letters," i. 190, 191.

[62]

Letters of D.G. Rossetti to William Allingham, 162. See Mrs Browning's letter to Mrs Tennyson in Memoir of Tennyson by his son, I vol. edition, p. 329.

PORTRAIT OF FILIPPO LIPPI.

By himself. A detail from the fresco in the Cathedral at Prato from a photograph by ALINARI.

PORTRAIT OF FILIPPO LIPPI.

***By himself. A detail from the fresco in the Cathedral at Praia from a photograph by* ALINARI.**

Chapter IX

Men and Women

Rossetti expresses his first enthusiasm about *Men and Women* in a word when he calls the poems "my Elixir of Life." To Ruskin these, with other pieces which he now read for the first time, were as he declared in a rebellious mood, a mass of conundrums. "He compelled me," Rossetti adds, "to sit down before him and lay siege for one whole night; the result of which was that he sent me next morning a bulky letter to be forwarded to Browning, in which I trust he told him he was the greatest man since Shakespeare." The poems of the two new volumes were the gradual growth of a considerable number of years; since 1845 their author had published no group of short poems, and now, at the age of forty-three, he had attained the fulness of intellectual and imaginative power, varied experience of life and the artistic culture of Italy. The *Dramatis Personae* of 1864 exhibits no decline from the high level reached in the volumes of 1855; but is there any later volume of miscellaneous poetry by Browning which, taken as a whole, approaches in excellence the collections of 1855 and 1864?

There is no need now to "lay siege" to the poems of *Men and Women*; they have expounded themselves, if ever they needed exposition; and the truth is that they are by no means nut-shells into which mottoes meant for the construing of the intellect have been inserted, but fruits rich in colour and perfume, a feast for the imagination, the passions, the spirit in sense, and also for the

faculty of thought which lives in the heart of these. If a criticism or a doctrine of life lies in them —and that it should do so means that the poet's total mind has been taken up into his art— Browning conveys his doctrine not as such but as an enthusiasm of living; his generalized truth saturates a medium of passion and of beauty. In the Prologue to *Fifine at the Fair* he compares the joy of poetry to a swimmer's joy in the sea: the vigour that such disport in sun and sea communicates is the vigour of joyous play; afterwards, if we please, we can ascertain the constituents of sea-water by a chemical analysis; but the analysis will not convey to us the sensations of the sunshine and the dancing brine. One of the blank-verse pieces of *Men and Women* rebukes a youthful poet of the transcendental school whose ambition is to set forth "stark-naked thought" in poetry. Why take the harp to his breast "only to speak dry words across the strings"? Better hollo abstract ideas through the six-foot Alpine horn of prose. Boys may desire the interpretation into bare ideas of those thronging objects which obsess their senses and their feelings; men need art for the delight of it, and the strength which comes through delight. Better than the meaning of a rose is the rose itself with its spirit enveloped in colour and perfume. And so the poet for men will resemble that old mage John of Halberstadt:

> He with a 'look you!' vents a brace of rhymes,
> And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
> Over us, under, round us every side,
>
> Buries us with a glory, young once more,
> Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.

Browning in *Men and Women* is in truth a John of Halberstadt; he enriches life with colour, warmth, music, romance, not dissociated from thought and intellectual energy, rather possessing and being possessed by these. Not a single poem is "stark-naked thought"; not a single poem is addressed solely to the intellect; even *Bishop Blougram* is rather a presentation of character than a train of argument or a chain of ideas.

In few of these poems does Browning speak in his own person; the verses addressed to his wife, which present her with "his fifty men and women" and tell of mysteries of love that can never be told, the lines, *Memorabilia*, addressed to one who had seen Shelley, and *Old Pictures in Florence*, are perhaps the only exceptions to the dramatic character of the contents of the two volumes. Yet through them all Browning's mind is clearly discernible; and even his central convictions, his working creed of life, can with no sense of uncertainty be gathered from them. To attribute to the writer the opinions and the feelings of his *dramatis personae* would of course be the crudest of mistakes. But when an idea persists through many poems written at various times and seasons, when it appears and reappears under various clothings of circumstance, when it is employed as if it had a crucial value, when it becomes a test or touchstone of character, we cannot doubt that it is an intimate possession of the writer's mind. Such an idea is not a mere playmate but rather a confidant. When, again, after a tangle of casuistic reasoning or an embroilment of contending feelings, some idea suddenly flashes forth, and like a sword sunders truth from falsehood and darkness from light, we may be assured that it has more than a dramatic value. And, once more, if again and again the same idea shows its power over the feelings and inspires elevated lyrical utterance, or if in pieces of casuistical brain-work it enters as a passionate element and domineers by its own authority, if it originates not debate but song or that from which song is made, we know that the writer's heart has embraced it as a truth of the emotions.

Because Browning had his own well-defined view of truth, he could confidently lend his mind away to his fifty or his hundred men and women. They served to give his ideas a concrete body. By sympathy and by intelligence he widened the basis of his own existence. If the poet loses himself to find himself again through sympathy with external nature, how much more and in how many enriching ways through sympathy with humanity! Thus new combinations of thought and feeling are effected. Thus a kind of experiment is made with our own ideas by watching how they behave when brought into connection with these new combinations. Truth is relative, and the best truth of our own is worth testing under various conditions and circumstances. The truth or falsehood which is not our own has a right to say the best for itself that can be said. Let truth and falsehood grapple. Let us hear the counter-truth or the rival falsehood which is the complement or the criticism of our own, and hear it stated with the utmost skill. A Luther would surely be the wiser for an evening spent in company with a Blougram; and Blougram has things to tell us which Luther never knew. But precisely because truth is relative we must finally adhere to our own perceptions; they constitute the light for us; and the justice we would do to others we must also render to ourselves. A wide survey may be made from a fixed centre. "Universal sympathies," Miss Barrett wrote in one of the letters to her future husband, "cannot make a man inconsistent, but on the contrary sublimely consistent. A church tower may stand between the mountains and the sea, looking to either, and stand fast: but the willow tree at the gable-end blown now toward the north and now toward the south, while its natural leaning is due east or west, is different altogether ... *as* different as a willow tree from a church tower."[63]

The fifty poems of *Men and Women*, with a few exceptions, fall into three principal groups—those which interpret various careers or moods or moments of love; those which deal with the fine arts —painting, poetry, music—and with these we may class, as kindred in spirit, that poem which has for its subject the passionate pursuit of knowledge, *A Grammarian's Funeral*; and thirdly, those which are connected with religious thought and feeling, or present scenes from the history of religions. Two poems may be called descriptive; both are Italian; both are founded upon a rivalry

of contrasts, but one, *Up at a Villa—Down in the City*, is made up of humorous observations of Italian city and country life, expressing the mundane tastes and prudent economies of an Italian person of quality; the other, "*De Gustibus—*," which contrasts the happy quietudes of English landscape with the passionate landscape of the South, has romance at the heart of its realism and an ardour of sentiment underlying its pictorial vividness. *The Patriot* is again Italian, suggested perhaps by the swift revolutions and restorations which Browning had witnessed in Florence, and again it uses with striking effect the principle of contrast; the patriot who a year ago had his intoxicating triumph is now on his way to the scaffold. His year's toil for the good of his people has turned into a year's misdeeds, his life is a failure; but Browning characteristically wrings a victory out of defeat; the crowd at the shambles' gate may hoot; it is better so, for now the martyr can throw himself upon God, the Paymaster of all his labourers at the close of day. The most remarkable of these poems, which refuse to take their places in a group, is that forlorn romance of weary and depressed heroism, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came*. It is in the main a fantaisie of description; but involved with the descriptive study is a romantic motive. The external suggestions for the poem were no more than the words from *King Lear* which form the title, a tower seen in the Carrara mountains, a painting seen in Paris, and the figure of a horse in the tapestry of the drawing-room of Casa Guidi.[64] In his own mind Browning may have put the question: Of all the feats of knight-errantry which is the hardest? Not to combat with dragons, or robbers, or salvage men; not to bear down rival champions in a rapture of battle. Not these, but to cling to a purpose amid all that depresses the senses at a time when the heart within us is also failing; to advance where there is nothing to arouse energy by opposition, and everything without and within to sap the very life of the soul. Childe Roland is himself hopeless and almost heartless; the plain to which the leering cripple had pointed and over which he rides is created in the utter indigence of nature—a very nightmare of poverty and mean repulsiveness. And yet he endures the test, and halts only when he faces the Dark Tower and blows the blast upon his horn. Browning was wise to carry his romance no further; the one moment of action is enough; it is the breaking of the spell, the waking from the nightmare, and at that point the long-enduring quester may be left. We are defrauded of nothing by the abrupt conclusion.

In the poems which treat of the love of man and woman Browning regards the union of soul with soul as the capital achievement of life, and also as affording one of its chief tests. When we have formed these into a group we perceive that the group falls in the main into two divisions—poems which tell of attainment, and poems which tell of failure or defeat. Certain persons whose centre is a little hard kernel of egoism may be wholly disqualified for the test created by a generous passion. Browning does not belabour with heavy invective the *Pretty Woman* of his poem, who is born without a heart; she is a flower-like creature and of her kind is perfect; only the flower is to be gazed at, not gathered; or, if it must be gathered, then at last to be thrown away. The chief distinction between the love of man and the love of woman, implied in various poems, is this—the man at his most blissful moment cries "What treasures I have obtained!" the woman cries "What treasures have I to surrender and bestow?" Hence the singleness and finality in the election of passion made by a woman as compared with a man's acquisitiveness of delight. The unequal exchange of a transitory for an enduring surrender of self is the sorrow which pulsates through the lines of *In a Year*, as swift and broken with pauses as the beating of a heart:

> Dear, the pang is brief,
> Do thy part,
> Have thy pleasure! How perplexed
> Grows belief!
> Well, this cold clay clod
> Was man's heart:
> Crumble it and what comes next?
> Is it God?

And with no chilling of love on the man's part, this is the point of central pain, in that poem of exquisite and pathetic distrust at the heart of trust and admiration, *Any Wife to any Husband*; noble and faithful as the husband has been, still he is only a man. But elsewhere Browning does justice to the pure chivalry of a man's devotion. Caponsacchi's joy is the joy of a saviour who himself is saved; the great event of his life by which he is lifted above self is single and ultimate; his soul is delivered from careless egoism once and for ever; the grace of love is here what the theologians called invincible grace, and invincible grace, we know, results in final perseverance. Even here in *Men and Women* two contrasted poems assure us that, while the passion of a man may be no more than *Love in a Life*, it may also be an unweariable *Life in a Love*.

Of the poems of attainment one—*Respectability*—has the spirit of youth and gaiety in it. Here love makes its gallant bid for freedom, fires up for lawlessness, if need be, and at least sets convention at defiance:

> The world's good word!—the Institute!
> Guizot receives Montalembert!
> Eh? Down the court three lampions flare:
> Set forward your best foot!

But, after all, this love may be no more than an adventure of the boulevard and the attic in the manner of Béranger's gay Bohemianism. The distance is wide between such élan of youthful passion and the fidelity which is inevitable, and on which age has set its seal, in that poem of perfect attainment, *By the Fireside*. This is the love which completes the individual life and at the

same time incorporates it with the life of humanity, which unites as one the past and the present, and which, owing no allegiance of a servile kind to time, becomes a pledge for futurity. Browning's personal experience is here taken up into his imagination and transfigured, but its substance remains what it had been in literal fact.

The poems of failure are more numerous, and they range through various degrees and kinds of failure. It is not death which can bring the sense of failure to love. In *Evelyn Hope* all the passion has been on the man's side; all possibilities of love in the virginal heart of the dead girl, all her warmth and sweetness, had been folded in the bud. But death, in the mood of infinite tenderness and unfulfilled aspiration which the poem expresses, seems no bar to some far-off attainment, of which the speaker's passion, breaking through time, is the assurance, an attainment the nature of which he cannot divine but which will surely explain the meaning of things that are now obscure. Perhaps the saddest and the most hopeless kind of failure is that in which, to borrow an image from the old allegory, the arrow of love all but flies to the mark and yet just misses it. This is the subject of a poem equally admirable in its descriptive and its emotional passages, *Two in the Campagna*. The line "One near one is too far," might serve as its motto. Satisfaction is all but reached and never can be reached. Two hearts touch and never can unite. One drop of the salt estranging sea is as unplumbed as the whole ocean. And the only possible end is

> Infinite passion, and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn.[65]

Compared with such a failure as this an offer of love rejected, rejected with decision but not ungenerously, may be accounted a success. There is something tonic to a brave heart in the putting forth of will, even though it encounter an obstacle which cannot be removed. Such is the mood which is presented in *One Way of Love*; the foiled lover has at least made his supreme effort; it has been fruitless, but he thinks with satisfaction that he has played boldly for the prize, and never can he say that it was not worth risking all on the bare chance of success:

> She will not give me heaven? 'Tis well!
> Lose who may—I still can say
> Those who win heaven, blest are they!

So, too, in *The Last Ride together*, the lover is defeated but he is not cast down, and he remains magnanimous throughout the grief of defeat. Who in this our life—he reflects—statesman or soldier, sculptor or poet, attains his complete ideal? He has been granted the grace of one hour by his mistress' side, and he will carry the grateful recollection of this with him into the future as his inalienable and his best possession. With these generous rejections and magnanimous acceptances of failure stands in contrast *A Serenade at the Villa*, where the lover's devotion is met only by obdurate insensibility or, worse, by an irritated sense of the persecution and plague of such love, and where all things seem to conspire to leave his pain mere pain, bitter and unredeemed.

In these examples, though love has been frustrated in its aim, the cause of failure did not lie in any infirmity of the lover's heart or will. But what if the will itself be supine, what if it dallies and delays, consults the convenience of occasions, observes the indications of a shallow prudence, slackens its pace towards the goal, and meanwhile the passion languishes and grows pale from day to day, until the day of love has waned, and the passion dies in a twilight hour through mere inanition? Such a failure as this seems to Browning to mean the perishing of a soul, or of more souls than one. He takes in *The Statue and the Bust* a case where the fulfilment of passion would have been a crime. The lady is a bride of the Riccardi; to win her, now a wedded wife, would be to violate the law of God and man. Nevertheless it is her face which has "filled the empty sheath of a man" with a blade for a knight's adventure—The

> Duke grew straightway brave and wise.

And then follow delays of convenience, excuses, postponements, and the Duke's flood of passion dwindles to a thread, and is lost in the sandy flats of life:

> So weeks grew months, years; gleam by gleam
> The glory dropped from their youth and love,
> And both perceived they had dreamed a dream.

Their end was a crime, but Browning's contention is that a crime may serve for a test as well as a virtue; in that test the Duke and the lady had alike failed through mere languor of soul:

> And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
> Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
> Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.

Had Tennyson treated the same subject he would probably have glorified their action as a victorious obedience to the law of self-reverence and self-control.

The reunion and the severance of lovers are presented in three poems. Winter, chill without but warm within, with its pastimes of passion, the energies of joy breaking forth in play, is contrasted in *A Lovers' Quarrel* with springtime, all gladness without and a strange void and shiver at the heart of things, because alienation has taken the place of camaraderie between the lover and his

mistress. The mass and intensity of colour in the stanza which dashes in a sketch of the Pampas, with its leagues of sunflowers, and a wild horse, "black neck and eyeballs keen" appearing through them, almost afflict the reader's sense of sight. There is a fine irony in the title of the other poem of contention, *A Womans Last Word*: In a quarrel a woman will have the last word, and here it is—the need of quietude for a little while that she may recover from the bewildering stroke of pain, and then entire oblivion of the wrong with unmeasured self-surrender. The poem of union, *Love among the Ruins*, is constructed in a triple contrast; the endless pastures prolonged to the edge of sunset, with their infinity of calm, are contrasted with the vast and magnificent animation of the city which once occupied the plain and the mountain slopes. The lover keeps at arm's-length from his heart and brain what yet fills them all the while; here in this placid pasture-land is one vivid point of intensest life; here where once were the grandeur and tumult of the enormous city is that which in a moment can abolish for the lover all its glories and its shames. His eager anticipation of meeting his beloved, face to face and heart to heart, is not sung, after the manner of Burns, as a jet of unmingled joy; he delays his rapture to make its arrival more entirely rapturous; he uses his imagination to check and to enhance his passion; and the poem, though not a simple cry of the heart, is entirely true as a rendering of emotion which has taken imagination into its service. In like manner *By the Fireside, A Serenade at the Villa*, and *Two in the Campagna*, include certain studies of nature and its moods, sometimes with a curiously minute observation of details; and these serve as the overture to some intense moment of joy or pain, or form the orchestration which sustains or reinforces a human voice.

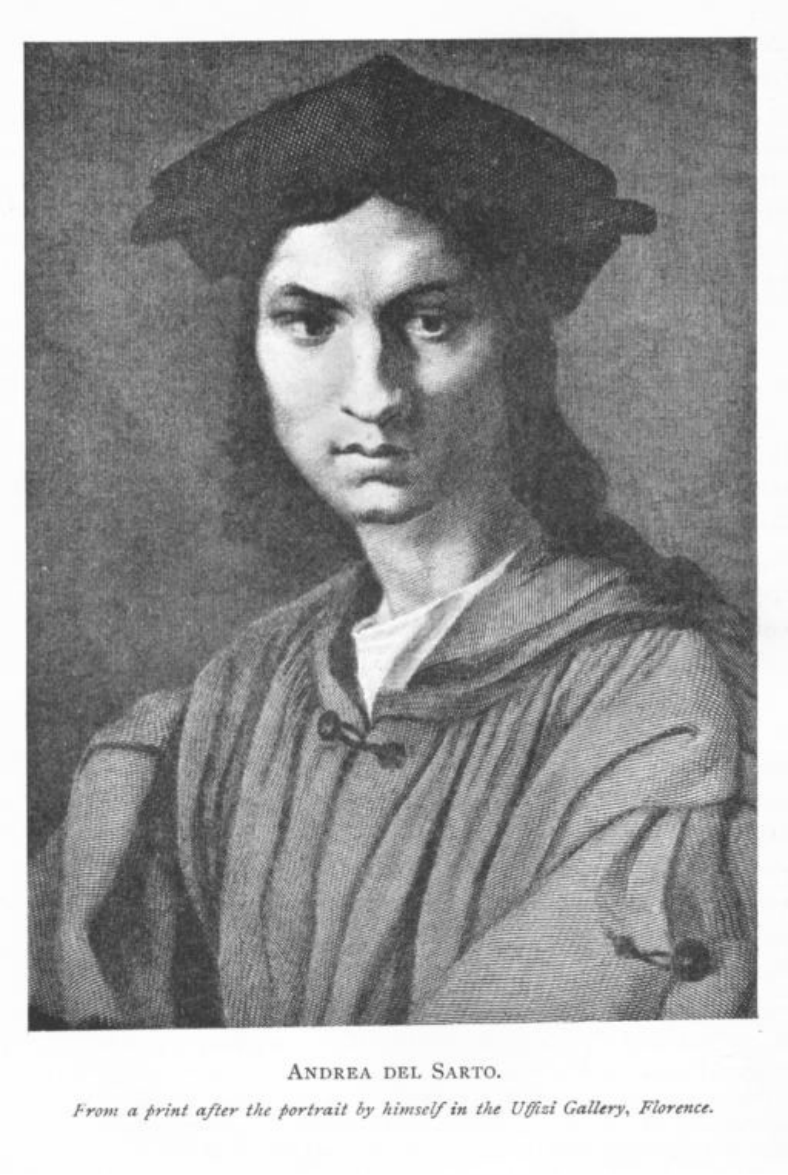
Of the pieces relating to art those connected with the art of poetry are the least valuable. *Transcendentalism* sets forth the old doctrine that poetry must be sensuous and passionate, leaving it to philosophy to deal with the naked abstractions of the intellect. *How it strikes a Contemporary* shows by a humorous example how a poet's character and private life may be misconceived and misrepresented by those among whom he moves. *Popularity* maintains that the poet who is in the highest sense original, an inventor of new things, may be wholly disregarded for long, while his followers and imitators secure both the porridge and the praise; one day God's hand, which holds him, will open and let out all the beauty. The thought is an obvious one enough, but the image of the fisher and the murex, in which the thought is embodied, affords opportunity for stanzas glowing with colour. Two poems, and each of them a remarkable poem, are interpretations of music. One, *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha*, is a singularly successful *tour de force*, if it is no more. Poetry inspired by music is almost invariably the rendering of a sentiment or a mood which the music is supposed to express; but here, in dealing with the fugue of his imaginary German composer, Browning finds his inspiration not in the sentiment but in the structure of the composition; he competes, as it were, in language with the art or science of the contrapuntist, and evolves an idea of his own from its complexity and elaboration. The poem of Italian music, *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, wholly subordinates the science to the sentiment of the piece. It is steeped in the melancholy of pleasure; Venice of the eighteenth century lives before us with its mundane joys, its transitory passions, its voluptuous hours; and in the midst of its warmth and colour a chill creeps upon our senses and we shiver. Browning's artistic self-restraint is admirable; he has his own truth to utter aloud if he should please; but here he will not play the prophet; the life of eighteenth-century Venice is dust and ashes; the poet will say not a word more than the musician has said in his toccata; the ruthlessness of time and death make him a little remorseful; it is enough, and too much, that through this music of the hours of love and pleasure we should hear, as it were, the fall of the clay upon a coffin-lid.

Shelley was more impressed by the sculpture than the paintings of Italy. There are few evidences of the influence of the most ideal of the arts that appeal to the mind through the eye in Browning's poetry; and his sympathies would be more apt to respond to such work as Michael Angelo's, which sends the spectator beyond itself, than to the classical work which has the absoluteness and the calm of attained perfection.[66] The sensuous and the spiritual qualities of colour were vividly felt by him; a yellowing old marble seemed perhaps to impose itself with a cold authority upon the imagination. But the suggestion of two portrait busts of the period of classical decadence, one in marble representing a boy, and the other the powerful head of a man in granite, gave rise to *Protus*, one of the few flawless poems of Browning. His mastery over the rhymed couplet is nowhere seen to greater advantage, unless it be in a few passages of *Sordello*. The poem is, however, more a page from history than a study in the fine arts; and Browning's imagination has made it a page which lives in our memory through a pathos veiled under strong objective touches, never protruding itself sentimentally in quest of tenderness or pity.

"I spent some most delightful time," Rossetti wrote to Allingham shortly after the publication of *Men and Women*, "with Browning at Paris, both in the evenings and at the Louvre, where (and throughout conversation) I found his knowledge of early Italian art beyond that of any one I ever met—*encyclopedically* beyond that of Ruskin himself." The poem *Old Pictures at Florence*, which Rossetti calls "a jolly thing," and which is that and much more, is full of Browning's learned enthusiasm for the early Italian painters, and it gives a reason for the strong attraction which their adventures after new beauty and passion had for him as compared with the faultless achievements of classical sculpture. Greek art, according to Browning, by presenting unattainable ideals of material and mundane perfection, taught men to submit. Early Christian art, even by faultily presenting spiritual ideals, not to be attained on earth but to be pursued through an immortal life, taught men to aspire. The aim of these painters was not to exhibit strength or grace, joy or grief, rage or love in their complete earthly attainment, but rather to

> Make new hopes shine through the flesh they fray,
> New fears aggrandize the rags and tatters:

To bring the invisible full into play!
Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?



ANDREA DEL SARTO.

From a print after the portrait by himself in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

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The prophecy with which the poem concludes, of a great revival of Italian art consequent on the advent of political and intellectual liberty, has not obtained fulfilment in the course of the half century that has elapsed since it was uttered. Browning's doctrine that aspiration towards what is higher is more to be valued in art than the attainment of what is lower is a leading motive in the admirable dramatic monologue placed in the lips of Andrea del Sarto, the faultless painter. His craftsmanship is unerring; whatever he imagines he can achieve; nothing in line or in colour is other than it ought to be; and yet precisely because he has succeeded, his failure is profound and irretrievable:

> Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
> Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-grey
> Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!

He could set right the arm which is wrongly put in Rafael's work that fronts him; but "all the play, the insight and the stretch" of Rafael are lacking in his own faultless lines. He looks back regretfully to his kingly days at Fontainebleau with the royal Francis, when what seemed a veritable fire was in his heart. And he tries to find an excuse for his failure as artist and as man in the coldness of his beautiful Lucrezia—for he who has failed in the higher art has also failed in the higher love—Lucrezia, who values his work only by the coins it brings in, and who needs those coins just now for one whose whistle invites her away. All might be so much better otherwise! Yet otherwise he cannot choose that it should be; his art must remain what it is—not golden but silver-grey; and his Lucrezia may attend to the Cousin's whistle if only she retains the charm, not to be evaded, of her beauty.[67]

Browning does not mean that art in its passionate pursuit of the highest ends should be indifferent to the means, or that things spiritual do not require as adequate a sensuous

embodiment as they are capable of receiving from the painter's brush or the poet's pen. Were art a mere symbol or suggestion, two bits of sticks nailed crosswise might claim to be art as admirable as any. What is the eye for, if not to see with vivid exactness? what is the hand for, if not to fashion things as nature made them? It is through body that we reach after the soul; and the passion for truth and reality is a passion for the invisible which is expressed in and through these. Such is the pleading of Fra Lippo Lippi, the tonsured painter caught out of bounds, in that poem in which the dramatic monologue of Browning attains its perfection of life and energy. Fra Lippo is intoxicated by the mere forms and colours of things, and he is assured that these mean intensely and mean well:

> The beauty and the wonder and the power,
> The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
> Changes, surprises—and God made it all!

These are the gospel to preach which he girds loin and lights the lamp, though he may perforce indulge a patron in shallower pieties of the conventional order, and though it is not all gospel with him, for now and again, when the moon shines and girls go skipping and singing down Florence streets—"Zooks, sir, flesh and blood, that's all I'm made of!" Fra Lippo with his outbreaks of frank sensuality is far nearer to Browning's kingdom of heaven than is the faultless painter; he presses with ardour towards his proper goal in art; he has full faith in the ideal, but with him it is to be sought only through the real; or rather it need not be sought at all, for one who captures any fragment of reality captures also undesignedly and inevitably its divine significance.[68]

The same doctrine which is applied to art in *Old Pictures in Florence*, that high aims, though unattained, are of more worth than a lower achievement, is applied, and with a fine lyrical enthusiasm, to the pursuit of knowledge in *A Grammarian's Funeral*. The time is "shortly after the Revival of Learning in Europe"; the place—

> a tall mountain, citied to the top,
> Crowded with culture!—

is imagined to suit the idea of the poem. The dead scholar, borne to the summit for burial on the shoulders of his disciples, had been possessed by the aspiration of Paracelsus—to know; and, unlike Paracelsus, he had never sought on earth both to know and to enjoy. He has been the saint and the martyr of Renaissance philology. For the genius of such a writer as the author of *Hudibras*, with his positive intellect and dense common sense, there could hardly have been found a fitter object for mockery than this remorseless and indefatigable pedant. Browning, through the singing voices of the dead master's disciples, exalts him to an eminence of honour and splendid fame. To a scholar Greek particles may serve as the fittest test of virtue; this glorious pedant has postponed life and the enjoyments of life to future cycles of existence; here on earth he expends a desperate passion—upon what? Upon the dryasdust intricacies of grammar; and it is not as though he had already attained; he only desperately follows after:

> That low man seeks a little thing to do,
> Sees it and does it:
> This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
> Dies ere he knows it.

But again the grammarian, like the painter, does not strive after a vague, transcendental ideal; he is not as one that beateth the air; his quest for knowledge is definite and positive enough; he throws all care for infinite things, except the infinite of philological accuracy, upon God; and the viaticum of his last moments is one more point of grammar.

Two of the poems of *Men and Women* are pages tragic-grotesque and pathetic-grotesque from the history of religion. In *The Heretic s Tragedy* John, Master of the Temple, burns alive in Paris square for his sins against the faith and Holy Church; the glow of the blazing larch and pine almost reaches the reader of the stanzas; the great petals of this red rose of flame bend towards him; the gust of sulphur offends his nostrils. And the rage of piety is hotter than the fire; it is a mingled passion, compounded of delight in the fierce spectacle, a thrilling ecstacy at the sight of a fellow-creature tortured, the self-complacency of conscious orthodoxy, and the horrible zeal of the Lord's house. Yet though the event is sung by one of the rejoicing orthodox, somehow we are made to feel that when John the apostate, bound in the flames and gagged, prays to Jesus Christ to save him, that prayer may have been answered. This passage from the story of the age of faith was not selected with a view to please the mediaeval revivalists of the nineteenth century, but in truth its chief value is not theological or historical but artistic. *Holy Cross Day*, a second fragment from history, does not fall from the sublime to the ridiculous but rises from the ridiculous to the sublime. The picture of the close-packed Jews tumbling or sidling churchwards to hear the Christian sermon (for He saith "Compel them to come in") and to partake of heavenly grace has in it something of Rembrandt united with something of Callot. Such a crew of devout impostors is at once comic and piteous. But while they are cared for in the merciful bowels of the Church, and groan out the expected compunction, their ancient piety is not extinct; their hearts burn in them with the memory of Jacob's House and of Jerusalem. Christ at least was of their kindred, and if they wronged Him in past time, they will not wrong Him now by naming these who outrage and insult them after His name.

The historical distortions of the religion of Christ do not, however, disturb the faith of Browning in the Christian revelation of Divine love. In *Cleon* he exhibits the failure of Paganism, even in its forms of highest culture, to solve the riddle of life and to answer the requirements of the human spirit. All that regal power liberally and wisely used can confer belongs to Protus in his Tyranny; all that genius, and learning and art can confer is the possession of Cleon; and a profound discouragement has settled down upon the soul of each. The race progresses from point to point; self-consciousness is deepened and quickened as generation succeeds generation; the sympathies of the individual are multiplied and extended. But he that increases knowledge, increases sorrow; most progress is most failure; the soul climbs the heights only to perish there. Every day the sense of joy grows more acute; every day the soul grows more enlarged; and every day the power to put our best attainments to use diminishes. "And how dieth the wise man? As the fool. Therefore I hated life; yea, I hated all my labour that I had taken under the sun." The poem is, indeed, an Ecclesiastes of pagan religion. The assurance of extinction is the worm which gnaws at the heart of the rose:

> It is so horrible
> I dare at times imagine to my need
> Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
> Unlimited in capability
> For joy, as this is in desire for joy.

But this is no better than a dream; Zeus could not but have revealed it, were it possible. Browning does not bring his Cleon, as Pater brings his Marius, into the Christian catacombs, where the image of the Shepherd bearing his lamb might interpret the mystery of death, nor to that house of Cecilia where Marius sees a new joy illuminating every face. Cleon has heard of Paulus and of Christus, but who can suppose that a mere barbarian Jew

> Hath access to a secret shut from us?

The doctrine of Christ, preached on the island by certain slaves, is reported by an intelligent listener to be one which no sane man can accept. And Cleon will not squander the time that might be well employed in studying the proportions of a man or in combining the moods of music —the later hours of a philosopher and a poet—on the futile creed of slaves.

Immortality and Divine love—these were the great words pronounced by Paul and by Christ. *Cleon* is the despairing cry of Pagan culture for the life beyond the grave which would attune to harmony the dissonances of earth, and render intelligible its mournful obscurities. *Saul*, in the completed form of 1855, and *An Epistle of Karshish* are, the one a prophecy, the other a divination, of the mystery of the love of God in the life and death of his Son. The culminating moment in the effort of David by which he rouses to life the sunken soul of the King, the moment towards which all others tend, is that in which he finds in his own nature love as God's ultimate gift, and assured that in this, as in other gifts, the creature cannot surpass the Creator, he breaks forth into a prophecy of God's love made perfect in weakness:

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

What follows in the poem is only the awe, the solemnity of this discovery which has come not through any processes of reasoning but by a passionate interpretation of the enthusiasm of love and self-sacrifice in David's own heart; only this awe, and the seeming extension of his throbbing emotion and pent knowledge over the face of external nature, until night passes and with the dawn earth and heaven resume their wonted ways. The case of Lazarus as studied by Karshish the Arabian physician results not in a rapturous prophecy like that of David, but in a stupendous conjecture of the heart which all the scepticism of the brain of a man of science cannot banish or reduce to insignificance. The unaccountable fascination of this case of mania, subinduced by epilepsy, is not to be resisted; Karshish would write, if he could, of more important matters than the madman of Bethany; he would record his discoveries in scalp-disease, describe the peculiar qualities of Judea's gum-tragacanth, and disclose the secret of those virtues derived from the mottled spiders of the tombs. But the face of Lazarus, patient or joyous, the strange remoteness in his gaze, his singular valuations of objects and events, his great ardour, his great calm, his possession of some secret which gives new meanings to all things, the perfect logic of his irrationality, his unexampled gentleness and love—these are memories which the keen-sighted Arabian physician is unable to put by, so curious, so attaching a potency lies in the person of this man who holds that he was dead and rose again, Karshish has a certain sense of shame that he, a man learned in all the wisdom of his day, should be so deeply moved. And yet how the thought of the secret possessed by this Judean maniac—it is the secret of Jesus—fills and expands the soul!

> The very God! think, Abib: dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too—
> So through the thunder comes a human voice
> Saying "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
> Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
> Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,
> But love I gave thee, with myself to love,

And thou must love me who have died for thee!"

Science has at least something to consider in a thought so strangely potent.

A nineteenth-century sceptic's exposition of his Christian faith is the paradoxical subject of *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, and it is one which admirably suited that side of Browning's genius which leaned towards intellectual casuistry. But the poem is not only skilful casuistry—and casuistry, let it be remembered, is not properly the art of defending falsehood but of determining truth,—it is also a character-study chosen from the age of doubt; a dramatic monologue with an appropriate *mise en scène*; a display of fence and thrust which as a piece of art and wit rewards an intelligent spectator. That Cardinal Wiseman sat for the Bishop's portrait is a matter of little consequence; the merit of the study is independent of any connection with an individual; it answers delightfully the cynical—yet not wholly cynical—question: How, for our gain in both worlds, can we best economise our scepticism and make a little belief go far?[69] The nineteenth century is not precisely the age of the martyrs, or, if we are to find them, we must in general turn to politics and to science; Bishop Blougram does not pique himself on a genius for martyrdom; if he fights with beasts, it is on this occasion with a very small one, a lynx of the literary tribe, and in the arena of his own dining-room over the after-dinner wine. He is pre-eminently a man of his time, when the cross and its doctrine can be comfortably borne; both he and his table-companion, honoured for this one occasion only with the episcopal invitation, appreciate the good things of this world, but the Bishop has a vast advantage over the maker of "lively lightsome articles" for the reviews, and he uses his advantage, it must be confessed, to the full. We are in company with no petty man while we read the poem and hear the great Bishop roll out, with easy affluence, his long crumpled mind. He is delightfully frank and delightfully subtle; concealing himself by self-disclosure; opulent in ideas; shifting the pea of truth dexterously under the three gilded thimbles; blandly condescending and amiably contemptuous; a little feline, for he allows his adversary a moment's freedom to escape and then pounces upon him with the soft-furred claws; assured of his superiority in the game, yet using only half his mind; fencing with one arm pinioned; chess-playing with a rook and pawn given to his antagonist; or shall we say chess-playing blindfold and seeing every piece upon the board? Is *Bishop Blougram's Apology* a poem at all? some literary critics may ask. And the answer is that through it we make acquaintance with one of Browning's most genial inventions—the great Bishop himself, and that if Gigadibs were not present we could never have seen him at the particular angle at which he presents himself in his condescending play with truths and half-truths and quarter-truths, adapted to a smaller mind than his own. The sixteenth century gave us a Montaigne, and the seventeenth century a Pascal. Why should not the nineteenth century of mundane comforts, of doubt troubled by faith, and faith troubled by doubt, produce a new type—serious yet humorous—in an episcopal Pascal-Montaigne?

Browning's moral sympathies, we may rest assured, do not go with one who like Blougram finds satisfaction in things realised on earth; one who declines—at least as he represents himself for the purposes of argument—to press forward to things which he cannot attain but might nobly follow after. But Browning's intellectual interest is great in seeing all that a Blougram can say for himself; and as a destructive piece of criticism directed against the position of a Gigadibs what he says may really be effective. The Bishop frankly admits that the unqualified believer, the enthusiast, is more fortunate than he; he, Sylvester Blougram, is what he is, and all that he can do is to make the most of the nature allotted to him. That there has been a divine revelation he cannot absolutely believe; but neither can he absolutely disbelieve. Unbelief is sterile; belief is fruitful, certainly for this world, probably for the next, and he elects to believe. Having chosen to believe, he cannot be too pronounced and decisive in his faith; he will never attempt to eliminate certain articles of the *credenda*, and so "decrassify" his faith, for to this process, if once begun, there is no end; having donned his uniform, he will wear it, laces and spangles and all. True, he has at times his chill fits of doubt; but is not this the probation of faith? Does not a life evince the ultimate reality that is within us? Are not acts the evidence of a final choice, of a deepest conviction? And has he not given his vote for the Christian religion?

With me faith means perpetual unbelief
Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot,
Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe.

When the time arrives for a beatific vision Blougram will be ready to adapt himself to the new state of things. Is not the best pledge of his capacity for future adaptation to a new environment this—that being in the world he is worldly? We must not lose the training of each successive stage of evolution by for ever projecting ourselves half way into the next. So rolls on the argument to its triumphant conclusion—

Fool or knave?
Why needs a bishop be a fool or knave
When there's a thousand diamond weights between?

Only at the last, were it not that we know that there is a firmer ground for Blougram than this on which he takes his stand in after-dinner controversy, we might be inclined to close the subject by adapting to its uses the title of a pamphlet connected with the Kingsley and Newman debate —"But was not Mr Gigadibs right after all?" Worsted in sword-play he certainly was; but the soul may have its say, and the soul, armed with its instincts of truth, is a formidable challenger.

NOTES:

[63]

Letters of R.B. and E.B.B., i. 388.

[64]

Mrs Orr's Handbook to Browning's Works, 266, note. For the horse, see stanzas xiii. xiv. of the poem.

[65]

This poem is sometimes expounded as a sigh for the infinite, which no human love can satisfy. But the simpler conception of it as expressing a love almost but not altogether complete seems the truer.

[66]

Browning's delight a few years later in modelling in clay was great.

[67]

Mrs Andrew Crosse, in her article, "John Kenyon and his Friends" (*Temple Bar Magazine*, April 1900), writes: "When the Brownings were living in Florence, Kenyon had begged them to procure for him a copy of the portrait in the Pitti of Andrea del Sarto and his wife. Mr Browning was unable to get the copy made with any promise of satisfaction, and so wrote the exquisite poem of Andrea del Sarto—and sent it to Kenyon!"

[68]

The writer of this volume many years ago pointed out to Browning his transposition of the chronological places of Fra Lippo Lippi and Masaccio ("Hulking Tom") in the history of Italian art. Browning vigorously maintained that he was in the right; but recent students do not support his contention. At the same time an error in *Transcendentalism*, where Browning spoke of "Swedish Boehme," was indicated. He acknowledged the error and altered the text to "German Boehme."

[69]

Browning maintained to Gavan Duffy that his treatment of the Cardinal was generous.

Chapter X

Close of Mrs Browning's Life

When *Men and Women* was published in the autumn of 1855 the Brownings were again in Paris. An impulsive friend had taken an apartment for them in the Rue de Grenelle, facing east, and in all that concerned comfort splendidly mendacious. After some weeks of misery and illness Mrs Browning was conveyed to less glittering but more hospitable rooms in the Rue du Colisée by a desperate husband—"That darling Robert carried me into the carriage, swathed past possible breathing, over face and respirator in woollen shawls. No, he wouldn't set me down even to walk up the fiacre steps, but shoved me in upside down in a struggling bundle."[70] Happily the winter was of a miraculous mildness. Mrs Browning worked *Aurora Leigh* in "a sort of *furia*," and Browning set himself to the task—a fruitless one as it proved—of rehandling and revising *Sordello*: "I lately gave time and pains," he afterwards told Milsand in his published dedication of the poem, "to turn my work into what the many might,—instead of what the few must—like: but after all I imagined another thing at first, and therefore leave as I find it"—proud but warrantable words. Some of his leisure was given to vigorous and not unsuccessful efforts in drawing. At the theatre he saw Ristori as Medea and admired her, but with qualifications. At Monckton Milnes's dinner-table he met Mignet and Cavour, and George Sand crowned with an ivy-wreath and "looking like herself." Mrs Browning records with pleasure that her husband's hostility to the French government had waned; at least he admitted that he was sick of the Opposition.

In May 1856 tidings from London of the illness of Kenyon caused him serious anxiety; he would gladly have hastened to attend upon so true and dear a friend, but this Kenyon would not permit. A month later he and Mrs Browning were in occupation of Kenyon's house in Devonshire Place, which he had lent to them for the summer, but the invalid had sought for restoration of his health in the Isle of Wight. On the day that Mr Barrett heard of his daughter's arrival he ordered his family away from London. Mrs Browning once more wrote to him, but the letter received no answer. "Mama," said little Pen earnestly, "if you've been very, very naughty I advise you to go into the room and say,'*Papa, I'll be dood*.'" But the situation, as Mrs Browning sadly confesses, was hopeless. Some companionship with her sister Arabel and her brothers was gained by a swift departure from London in August for Ventnor whither the Wimpole Street household, leaving its master behind, had been banished, and there "a happy sorrowful two weeks" were spent. At

Cowes a grief awaited Browning and his wife, for they found Kenyon kind as ever but grievously broken in health and depressed in spirits. A short visit to Mrs Browning's married sister at Taunton closed the summer and autumn in England. Before the end of October they were on their way to Florence. "The Brownings are long gone back now," wrote Dante Rossetti in December, "and with them one of my delights—an evening resort where I never felt unhappy. How large a part of the real world, I wonder, are those two small people?—taking meanwhile so little room in any railway carriage and hardly needing a double bed at the inn."

The great event of the autumn for the Brownings and for the lovers of English poetry was the publication of *Aurora Leigh*. Its popularity was instantaneous; within a fortnight a second edition was called for; there was no time to alter even a comma. "That golden-hearted Robert," writes Mrs Browning, "is in ecstasies about it—far more than if it all related to a book of his own." The volume was dedicated to John Kenyon; but before the year was at an end Kenyon was dead. Since the birth of their son he had enlarged the somewhat slender incomings of his friends by the annual gift of one hundred pounds, "in order," says the editor of Mrs Browning's Letters, "that they might be more free to follow their art for its own sake only." By his will he placed them for the future above all possibility of straitened means. To Browning he left 6,500 *l*., to Mrs Browning 4,500 *l*. "These," adds Mr F.G. Kenyon, "were the largest legacies in a very generous will—the fitting end to a life passed in acts of generosity and kindness to those in need." The gain to the Brownings was shadowed by a sense of loss. "Christmas came," says Mrs Browning, "like a cloud." For the length of three winter months she did not stir out of doors. Then arrived spring and sunshine, carnival time and universal madness in Florence, with streets "one gigantic pantomime." Penini begged importunately for a domino, and could not be refused; and Penini's father and mother were for once drawn into the vortex of Italian gaiety. When at the great opera ball a little figure in mask and domino was struck on the shoulder with the salutation "Bella mascherina!" it was Mrs Browning who received the stroke, with her husband, also in domino, by her side. The absence of real coarseness in the midst of so much seeming license, and the perfect social equality gave her a gratifying impression of her Florentines.

In April it was summer weather; the drives of former days in the Cascine and to Bellosguardo, where a warm-hearted friend, Miss Isa Blagden, occupied a villa, were resumed. An American authoress of wider fame since her book of 1852 than even the authoress of *Aurora Leigh*, Mrs Beecher Stowe, was in Florence, and somewhat to their surprise she charmed both Browning and his wife by her simplicity and earnestness, her gentle voice and refinement of manner—"never," says Mrs Browning, "did lioness roar more softly." All pointed to renewed happiness; but before April was over pain of a kind that had a peculiar sting left Mrs Browning for a time incapable of any other feeling. Her father was dead, and no word of affection had been uttered at the last; if there was water in the rock it never welled forth. The kindly meant effort of a relative to reopen friendly communications between Mr Barrett and his daughters, not many months previously, had for its only result the declaration that they had disgraced the family.[71] At first Mrs Browning was crushed and could shed no tear; she remained for many days in a state of miserable prostration; it was two months before she could write a letter to anyone outside the circle of her nearest kinsfolk.

Once more the July heat in Florence—"a composition of Gehenna and Paradise"—drove the Brownings to the Baths of Lucca. Miss Blagden followed them, and also young Lytton came, ailing, it was thought, from exposure to the sun. His indisposition soon grew serious and declared itself as a gastric fever. For eight nights Isa Blagden sat by his bedside as nurse; for eight other nights Browning took her place. His own health remained vigorous. Each morning he bathed in a rapid mountain stream; each evening and morning he rode a mountain pony; and in due time he had the happiness of seeing the patient, although still weak and hollow cheeked, convalescent and beginning to think of "poems and apple puddings," as Mrs Browning declares, "in a manner other than celestial." It had been a summer, she said in September, full of blots, vexations, anxieties. Three days after these words were written a new and grave anxiety troubled her and her husband, for their son, who had been looking like a rose—"like a rose possessed by a fairy" is his mother's description—was attacked in the same way as Lytton. "Don't be unhappy for *me*" said Pen; "think it's a poor little boy in the street, and be just only a little sorry, and not unhappy at all." Within less than a fortnight he was well enough to have "agonising visions of beefsteak pies and buttered toast seen in *mirage*"; but his mother mourned for the rosy cheeks and round fat little shoulders, and confessed that she herself was worn out in body and soul.

The winter at Florence was the coldest for many years; the edges of the Arno were frozen; and in the spring of 1858 Mrs Browning felt that her powers of resistance, weakened by a year of troubles and anxieties, had fallen low. Browning himself was in vigorous health. When he called in June on Hawthorne he looked younger and even handsomer than he had looked two years previously, and his gray hairs seemed fewer. "He talked," Hawthorne goes on, "a wonderful quantity in a little time." That evening the Hawthornes spent at Casa Guidi. Mrs Browning is described by the American novelist as if she were one of the singular creatures of his own imagination—no earthly woman but one of the elfin race, yet sweetly disposed towards human beings; a wonder of charm in littleness; with a shrill yet sweet tenuity of voice; "there is not such another figure in the world; and her black ringlets cluster into her neck, and make her face look whiter by their sable perfection." Browning himself was "very efficient in keeping up conversation with everybody, and seemed to be in all parts of the room and in every group at the same moment; a most vivid and quick-thoughted person—logical and common-sensible, as, I presume, poets generally are in their daily talk." "His conversation," says Hawthorne, speaking of a visit to Miss Blagden at Bellosguardo, "has the effervescent aroma which you cannot catch even

if you get the very words that seem to be imbued with it.... His nonsense is of very genuine and excellent quality, the true babble and effervescence of a bright and powerful mind; and he lets it play among his friends with the faith and simplicity of a child."

When summer came it was decided to join Browning's father and sister in Paris, and accompany them to some French seaside resort, where Mrs Browning could have the benefit of a course of warm salt-water baths. To her the sea was a terror, but railway-travelling was repose, and Browning suggested on the way from Marseilles to Paris that they might "ride, ride together, for ever ride" during the remainder of their lives in a first-class carriage with for-ever renewed supplies of French novels and *Galignanis*. They reached Paris on the elder Mr Browning's birthday, and found him radiant at the meeting with his son and grandson, looking, indeed, ten years younger than when they had last seen his face. Paris, Mrs Browning declares, was her "weakness," Italy her "passion"; Florence itself was her "chimney-corner," where she "could sulk and be happy." The life of the brilliant city, which "murmurs so of the fountain of intellectual youth for ever and ever," quickened her heart-beats; its new architectural splendours told of the magnificence in design and in its accomplishment of her hero the Emperor. And here she and her husband met their helpful friend of former days, Father Prout, and they were both grieved and cheered by the sight of Lady Elgin, a paralytic, in her garden-chair, not able to articulate a word, but bright and gracious as ever, "the eloquent soul full and radiant, alive to both worlds." The happiness in presence of such a victory of the spirit was greater than the pain.

Having failed to find agreeable quarters at Etretat, where Browning in a "fine phrenzy" had hired a wholly unsuitable house with a potato-patch for view, and escaped from his bad bargain, a loser of some francs, at his wife's entreaty, they settled for a short time at Havre—"detestable place," Mrs Browning calls it—in a house close to the sea and surrounded by a garden. On a bench by the shore Mrs Browning could sit and win back a little strength in the bright August air. The stay at Havre, depressing to Browning's spirits, was for some eight weeks. In October they were again in Paris, where Mrs Browning's sister, Arabel, was their companion. The year was far advanced and a visit to England was not in contemplation. Towards the middle of the month they were once more in motion, journeying by slow stages to Florence. A day was spent at Chambéry "for the sake of les Charmettes and Rousseau." When Casa Guidi was at length reached, it was only a halting-place on the way to Rome. Winter had suddenly rushed in and buried all Italy in snow; but when they started for Rome in a carriage kindly lent by their American friends, the Eckleys, it was again like summer. The adventures of the way were chiefly of a negative kind—occasioned by precipices over which they were not thrown, and banditti who never came in sight; but in a quarrel between oxen-drivers, one of whom attacked the other with a knife, Browning with characteristic energy dashed between them to the terror of the rest of the party; his garments were the only serious sufferers from his zeal as mediator.

The apartment engaged at Rome was that of the earlier visit of 1853-54, in the Via Bocca di Leone, "rooms swimming all day in sunshine." On Christmas morning Mrs Browning was able to accompany her husband to St Peter's to hear the silver trumpets. But January froze the fountains, and the north wind blew with force. Mrs Browning had just completed a careful revision *of Aurora Leigh*, and now she could rest, enjoy the sunshine streaming through their six windows, or give herself up to the excitement of Italian politics as seen through the newspapers in the opening of a most eventful year. "Robert and I," she wrote on the eve of the declaration of war between Austria and Victor Emmanuel, "have been of one mind lately on these things, which comforts me much." She had also the satisfaction of health enjoyed at least by proxy, for her husband had never been more full of vigour and the spirit of enjoyment. In the freezing days of January he was out of his bed at six o'clock, and away for a brisk morning walk with Mr Eckley. The loaf at breakfast diminished "by Gargantuan slices." Into the social life of Rome he threw himself with ardour. For a fortnight immediately after Christmas he was out every night, sometimes with double and treble engagements. "Dissipations," says Mrs Browning, "decidedly agree with Robert, there's no denying that, though he's horribly hypocritical, and 'prefers an evening with me at home.'" He gathered various coloured fragments of life from the outer world and brought them home to brighten her hours of imprisonment.

When they returned to Florence in May the Grand Duke had withdrawn, the city was occupied by French troops, and there was unusual animation in the streets. Browning shared to some extent in his wife's alienation from the policy of England, and believed, but with less than her enthusiastic confidence, in the good intentions towards Italy of the French Emperor. He subscribed his ten scudi a month to the Italian war-fund, and rewarded Pen for diligence in his lessons with half a paul a day, which the boy might give as his own contribution to the cause of Italian independence. The French and the Italian tricolour flags, displayed by Pen, adorned the terrace. In June the sun beat upon Florence with unusual fierceness, but it was a month of battles, and with bulletins of the war arriving twice a day they could not bear to remove to any quiet retreat at a distance from the centre. It was not curiosity that detained them but the passion for Italy, the joy in generous effort and great deeds. In the rebound, as Mrs Browning expresses it, from high-strung hopes and fears for Italy they found themselves drawn to the theatre, where Salvini gave his wonderful impersonation of Othello and his Hamlet, "very great in both, Robert thought," so commented Mrs Browning, "as well as I."[72] The strain of excitement was indeed excessive for Mrs Browning's failing physical strength; there was in it something almost febrile. Yet the fact is noteworthy that the romantic figures secured much less of her interest than the men of prudent statesmanship. She esteemed Cavour highly; she wholly distrusted Mazzini. She justified Louis Napoleon in concessions which she regarded as an unavoidable part of diplomacy directed to ends which could not be immediately attained.

Garibaldi was a "hero," but somewhat alarming in his heroisms—a "grand child," "not a man of much brain." After the victories of Magenta and Solferino came what seemed to many the great betrayal of Villafranca. For a day the busts and portraits of the French Emperor suddenly disappeared from the shop-windows of Florence, and even Mrs Browning would not let her boy wear his Napoleon medal. But the busts returned to their places, and Mrs Browning's faith in Napoleon sprang up anew; it was not he who was the criminal; the selfish powers of Europe had "forced his hand" and "truncated his great intentions." She rejoiced in the magnificent spectacle of dignity and calm presented by the people of Italy. And yet her fall from the clouds to earth on the announcement of peace with Austria was a shattering experience. Sleep left her, or if she slept her dreams were affected by "inscrutable articles of peace and endless provisional governments." Night after night her husband watched beside her, and in the day he not only gave his boy the accustomed two hours' lesson on the piano, but replaced the boy's mother as teacher of those miscellaneous lessons, which had been her educational province. "Robert has been perfect to me," expressed Mrs Browning's feelings in a word.

Another anxiety gave Browning an opportunity which he turned to account in a way that renders honour and gratitude his due from all lovers of English letters. At a great old age Landor, who resided with his family at Fiesole, still retained his violent and intractable temper; in his home there was much to excite his leonine wrath and sense of intolerable wrong. Three times he had quitted his villa, with vows never to return to it, and three times he had been led back. When for a fourth time—like a feeble yet majestic Lear—one hot summer day, toward noon, he flung himself, or was flung, out of doors with only a few pauls in his pocket, it was to Casa Guidi that he made his way broken-hearted, yet breathing forth wrath.[73] Browning had often said, as his wife tells her sister-in-law, that he owed more as a writer to Landor than to any other contemporary.[74] He resolved to set things right, if possible; and if not, to make the best of a case that could not be entirely amended. A visit to the villa assured him that reconciliation was out of the question. He provided for Landor's immediate wants; communicated with Landor's brothers in England, who were prompt in arranging for a regular allowance to be administered by Browning; became the old man's guide and guardian; soothed his wounded spirit, although, according to Mrs Browning, not often happy when he attempted compliments, with generous words and ready quotations from Landor's own writings; and finally settled him in Florence under the care of Mrs Browning's faithful maid Wilson, who watched over him during the remainder of his life.[75] To his incredulous wife Browning spoke of Landor's sweetness and gentleness, nor was he wrong in ascribing these qualities to the old lion. She admitted that he had generous impulses, but feared that her husband would before long become, like other friends of Landor, the object of some enraged suspicion. "Nothing coheres in him," she writes, "either in his opinions, or, I fear, affections." But Landor, whose courtesy and refinement she acknowledges, had also a heart that was capable of loyal love and gratitude. After the first burst of rage against the Fiesole household had spent itself, he beguiled the time in perpetuating his indignations in an innocent and classical form—that of Latin alcaics directed against one private and one public foe—his wife and the Emperor Louis Napoleon.[76]

Lander's affairs threatened to detain the Brownings in Florence longer than they desired, now that peace had come and it was not indispensable to run out of doors twice a day in order to inspect the bulletins. But after three weeks of very exhausting illness, Mrs Browning needed change of air. As soon as her strength allowed, she was lifted into a carriage and they journeyed, as in the year 1850, to the neighbourhood of Siena. She reached the villa which had been engaged by Story's aid, with the sense of "a peculiar frailty of being." Though confined to the house, the fresher air by day and the night winds gradually revived her strength and spirits. The silence and repose were "heavenly things" to her: the "pretty dimpled ground covered by low vineyards" rested her eyes and her mind; and for excitements, instead of reports of battle-fields there were slow-fading scarlet sunsets over purple hills. A kind Prussian physician, Gresonowsky, who had attended Mrs Browning in Florence, and who entered sympathetically into her political feelings, followed her uninvited to Siena and gave her the benefit of his care, declining all recompense. The good friends from America, the Storys, were not far off, and Landor, after a visit to Story, was placed in occupation of rooms not a stone's-cast from their villa. With Pen it was a time of rejoicing, for his father had bought the boy a Sardinian pony of the colour of his curls, and he was to be seen galloping through the lanes "like Puck," to use Browning's comparison, on a dragon-fly's back.[77]

The gipsy instinct, the desire of wandering, had greatly declined with both husband and wife since the earlier days in Italy. Yet when they returned to Casa Guidi it was only for six weeks. Even at the close of the visit to Siena Mrs Browning had recovered but a slender modicum of strength; she did not dare to enter the cathedral, for there were steps to climb. At Florence she felt her old vitality return and her spirits rose. But the climate of Rome was considered by Dr Gresonowsky more suitable for winter, and towards the close of November they took their departure, flying from the Florentine tramontana. The carriage was furnished with novels of Balzac, and Pen's pony was of the party. The rooms taken in the Via del Tritone were bright and sunny; but a rash visit to the jeweller Castellani, to see and touch the swords presented by Roman citizens to Napoleon III. and Victor Emmanuel, threw back Mrs Browning into all her former troubles of a delicate chest and left her "as weak as a rag." Tidings of the death of Lady Elgin seemed to tell only of a peaceful release from a period of imprisonment in the body, but the loss of Mrs Jameson was a painful blow. Rome at a time of grave political apprehensions was almost empty of foreigners; but among the few Americans who had courage to stay were the sculptor Gibson and Theodore Parker—now near the close of his life—whose *tête-à-têtes* were

eloquent of beliefs and disbeliefs. As the spring advanced the authoress of "The Mill on the Floss" was reported to be now and again visible in Rome, "with her elective affinity," as Mrs Browning puts it, "on the Corso walking, or in the Vatican musing. Always together." A grand-daughter of Lord Byron—"very quiet and very intense"—was among the visitors at the Via del Tritone, and Lady Marion Alford, "very eager about literature and art and Robert," for all which eagernesses Mrs Browning felt bound to care for her. The artists Burne-Jones and Prinsep had made Browning's acquaintance at Siena; Prinsep now introduced him to some of the by-ways of popular life in Rome. Together they witnessed the rivalry of two improvisatori poetic gamecocks, whose efforts were stimulated by the announcement that a great poet from England was present; together they listened to the forbidden Hymn to Garibaldi played in Gigi's *osteria*, witnessed the dignified blindness of the Papal gendarmes to the offence, while Gigi liberally plied them with drink; and together, to relieve the host of all fear of more revolutionary airs, they took carriages with their musicians and drove to see the Coliseum by moonlight.[78]

The project of a joint volume of poems on the Italian question by Browning and his wife, which had made considerable progress towards realisation, had been dropped after Villafranca, when Browning destroyed his poem; but Mrs Browning had advanced alone and was now revising proofs of her slender contribution to the poetry of politics, *Poems before Congress*. She wrote them, she says, simply to deliver her soul—"to get the relief to my conscience and heart, which comes from a pent-up word spoken or a tear shed." She can hardly have anticipated that they would be popular in England; but she was not prepared for one poem which denounced American slavery being misinterpreted into a curse pronounced upon England. "Robert was *furious*" against the offending Review, she says; "I never saw him so enraged about a criticism;" but by-and-by he "didn't care a straw." His wife, on the other hand, was more deeply pained by the blindness and deafness of the British public towards her husband's genius; nobody "except a small knot of pre-Rafaelite men" did him justice; his publisher's returns were a proof of this not to be gainsaid—not one copy of his poems had for six months been sold, while in America he was already a power. For the poetry of political enthusiasm he had certainly no vocation. When Savoy was surrendered to France Mrs Browning suffered some pain lest her Emperor's generosity might seem compromised. Browning admitted that the liberation of Italy was a great action, adding cynically of his future Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, "But he has taken eighteen-pence for it, which is a pity." During the winter he wrote much. "Robert deserves no reproaches," his wife tells her friend Miss Haworth in May, "for he has been writing a good deal this winter—working at a long poem, which I have not seen a line of, and producing short lyrics which I have seen, and may declare worthy of him." Mr F.G. Kenyon conjectures that the long poem is not unlikely to have been *Mr Sludge the Medium*, for Home's performances, as he says, were at this time rampant.[79] As hitherto, both husband and wife showed their poems each to the other only when the poems were complete; thus like a pair of hardy friends they maintained their independence. Even when they read, there was no reading aloud; Mrs Browning was indefatigable in her passion for books; her husband, with muscular energy impatient for action, found it impossible to read for long at a single sitting.

On June 4th 1860 they left Rome, travelling by vettura through Orvieto and Chiusi to their home in Florence.[80] The journey fatigued Mrs Browning, but on arriving they had the happiness of finding Landor well; he looked not less than magnificent, displaying "the most beautiful sea-foam of a beard ... all in a curl and white bubblement of beauty." Wilson had the old man under happy control; only once had he thrown his dinner out of the window; that he should be at odds with all the world was inevitable, and that all the world should be in the wrong was exhilarating and restorative. The plans for the summer were identical with those of the preceding year; the same "great lonely villa" near Siena was occupied again; the same "deep soothing silence" lapped to rest Mrs Browning's spirits; Landor, her "adopted son"—a son of eighty-six years old—was hard by as he had been last summer. The neighbourhood of Miss Blagden was this year an added pleasure. "The little eager lady," as Henry James describes her, "with gentle, gay black eyes," had seen much, read much, written already a little (with more to follow), but better than all else were her generous heart and her helpful hand. The season was one of unusual coolness for Italy. Pen's pony, as before, flashed through the lanes and along the roads. Browning had returned from Rome in robust health, and looking stouter in person than six months previously. Now, while a tenant of the Villa Alberti, he spent his energies in long rides, sometimes rides of three or four continuous hours. On returning from such careers on horseback little inclination, although he had his solitary room in which to work, remained for the pursuit of poetry.

The departure for Rome was early—about September; in the Via Felice rooms were found. A new and great sorrow had fallen upon Mrs Browning—her sister Henrietta, Mrs Surtees Cook, was dead, leaving behind her three young children. Mrs Browning could not shed tears nor speak of her grief: she felt tired and beaten by the pain; and tried to persuade herself that for one who believed the invisible world to be so near, such pain was but a weakness. Her husband was able to do little, but he shared in his degree in the sense of loss, and protected her from the intrusion of untimely visitors. Sir John Bowring was admitted because he presented a letter of introduction and had intimate relations with the French Emperor; his ridicule of the volunteer movement in England, with its cry of "Riflemen, form!" was grateful to Mrs Browning's political feelings. French troops were now in Rome; their purpose was somewhat ambiguous; but Pen had fraternised with the officers on the Pincio, had learnedly discussed Chopin and Stephen Heller with them, had been assured that they did not mean to fight for the Holy Father, and had invited "ever so many of them" to come and see mamma—an invitation which they were too discreet to accept. Mrs Browning's excitement about public affairs had somewhat abated; yet she watched

with deep interest the earlier stages of the great struggle in America; and she did not falter in her hopes for Italy; by intrigues and smuggling the newspapers which she wished to see were obtained through the courteous French generals. But her spirits were languid; "I gather myself up by fits and starts," she confesses, "and then fall back."

Apart from his anxieties for his wife's health and the unfailing pleasure in his boy, whom a French or Italian abbé now instructed, Browning was wholly absorbed in one new interest. He had long been an accomplished musician; in Paris he had devoted himself to drawing; now his passion was for modelling in clay, and the work proceeded under the direction and in the studio of his friend, the sculptor Story. His previous studies in anatomy stood him in good stead; he made remarkable progress, and six hours a day passed as if in an enchantment. He ceased even to read; "nothing but clay does he care for," says Mrs Browning smilingly, "poor lost soul." The union of intellectual energy with physical effort in such work gave him the complete satisfaction for which he craved. His wife "grudged a little," she says, the time stolen from his special art of poetry; but she saw that his health and spirits gained from his happy occupation. Of late, he had laboured irregularly at verse; fits of active effort were followed by long intervals during which production seemed impossible. And some vent was necessary for the force coiled up within him; if this were not to be obtained, he wore himself out with a nervous impatience—"beating his dear head," as Mrs Browning describes it, "against the wall, simply because he sees a fly there, magnified by his own two eyes almost indefinitely into some Saurian monster." Now he was well and even exultant—"nothing ever," he declared, "made him so happy before." Of advancing years —Browning was now nearly forty-nine—the only symptoms were that he had lost his youthful slightness of figure, and that his beard and hair were somewhat blanched by time. "The women," his wife wrote to his sister, "adore him everywhere far too much for decency," and to herself he seemed "infinitely handsomer and more attractive" than when, sixteen years previously, she had first seen him. On the whole therefore she was well pleased with his new passion for clay, and could wish for him loads of the plastic stuff in which to riot. Afterwards, in his days of sorrow in London, when he compared the colour of his life to that of a snow-cloud, it seemed to him as if one minute of these months at Rome would yield him gold enough to make the brightness of a year; he longed for the smell of the wet clay in Story's studio, where the songs of the birds, and the bleat of a goat coming through the little door to the left, were heard.[81]

While hoping and planning for the future, his wife was not unaware of her own decline. "For the first time," she writes about December, "I have had pain in looking into Penini's face lately—which you will understand." And a little earlier: "I wish to live just as long as, and no longer than to grow in the soul." The winter was mild, though snow had fallen once; a spell of colder weather was reserved for the month of May. They thought of meeting Browning's father and sister in some picturesque part of the forest of Fontainebleau, or, if that should prove unsuitable, perhaps at Trouville. Mrs Browning, who had formerly enjoyed the stir of life in Paris, now shrank from its noise and bustle. Her wish would be to creep into a cave for the whole year. At eight o'clock each evening she left her sitting-room and sofa, and was in bed. Yet she trusted that when she could venture again into the open air she would be more capable of enduring the friction of the world. In May she felt stronger, and saw visitors, among whom was Hans Andersen, "very earnest, very simple, very childlike."[82] A little later she was cast down by the death of Cavour—"that great soul which meditated and made Italy"; she could hardly trust herself to utter his name. It was evident to Browning that the journey to France could not be undertaken without serious risk. They had reached Casa Guidi, and there for the present she must take her rest.

The end came swiftly, gently. A bronchial attack, attended with no more than the usual discomfort, found her with diminished power of resistance. Browning had forebodings of evil, though there seemed to be no special cause to warrant his apprehension. On the last evening—June 28, 1861—she herself had no anticipation of what was at hand, and talked of their summer plans. When she slept, her slumber was heavy and disturbed. At four in the morning her husband was alarmed and sent to summon the doctor; but she assured him that his fears were exaggerated. Then inestimable words were spoken which lived forever in his heart. And so "smilingly, happily, with a face like a girl's," resting her head upon her husband's cheek, she passed away.[83]

NOTES:

[70]

Letters of E.B.B. (To Mrs Jameson), ii. 221.

[71]

F.G. Kenyon. *Letters of E.B.B.*, ii. 263.

[72]

"Browning was intimately acquainted," writes Miss Anna Swanwick, "with Salvini." What especially lived in Browning's memory as transcending everything else he had witnessed on the stage was Salvini's impersonation of the blind Oedipus, and in particular one incident: a hand is laid on the blind man's shoulder, which he supposes the hand of one of his sons; he discovers it to be the hand of Antigone; the sudden transition from a look of

fiery hate to one of ineffable tenderness was unsurpassable in its mastery of dramatic expression. (Condensed from "Anna Swanwick, a Memoir and Recollections," 1903, pp. 132, 133.)

[73]

Story says that Landor "was turned out of doors by his wife and children." He had conveyed the villa to his wife. It is Story who compares Landor to King Lear. "Conversations in a Studio," p. 436.

[74]

Letters of E.B.B., ii. 354.

[75]

When Browning at Rome was invited to dine with the Prince of Wales (March 1859) by the desire of Queen Victoria, Mrs Browning told him to "eschew compliments," of his infelicity in uttering which she gives amusing examples. *Letters of E.B.B.*, ii. 309, 310.

[76]

On Browning's action in the affairs of Landor see Forster's *Life of Landor*, and the letters of Browning in vol. ii. of Henry James's *Life of Story* (pp. 6-11).

[77]

See, for this residence at Siena, an interesting letter of Story to C. Eliot Norton in Henry James's *W.W. Story*, vol. ii. pp. 14, 15.

[78]

Condensed from information given by Prinsep to Mrs Orr, *Life and Letters of R.B.*, pp. 234-37.

[79]

Letters of E.B.B., ii. 388, note. Mr Kenyon suggests *A Death in the Desert* as at least possibly meant. *The Ring and the Book* "certainly had not yet been begun."

[80]

Halting at Siena, whence Browning wrote an account of the journey to Story: Henry James's *W.W. Story*, ii. pp. 50-52.

[81]

H. James's *W.W. Story*, vol. ii. pp. 111, 113.

[82]

Henry James tells of a children's party at the Palazzo Barberini, Rome, of several years earlier, when Hans Andersen read "The Ugly Duckling," and Browning, "The Pied Piper"; which led to "a grand march through the spacious Barberini apartment, with Story doing his best on a flute in default of bagpipes." *W.W. Story*, vol. i.p. 286.

[83]

The circumstances of Mrs Browning's death are described as above, but with somewhat fuller detail, in a letter of Browning to Miss Haworth, July 20, 1861, first printed by Mrs Orr. Many details of interest will be found in a long letter of Story, Henry James's *W.W. Story*, vol. ii. pp. 61-68: "She talked with him and jested and gave expression to her love in the tenderest words; then, feeling sleepy, and he supporting her in his arms, she fell into a doze. In a few minutes, suddenly, her head dropped forward. He thought she had fainted, but she had gone for ever." A painful account of the funeral service, "blundered through by a fat English parson," is given by Story.

Chapter XI

London: Dramatis Personae

The grief of the desolate man was an uncontrollable passion; his heart was strong and all its strength entered into its sorrow. Miss Blagden, "perfect in all kindness," took motherly possession of the boy, and persuaded his father to accompany Penini to her villa at Bellosguardo. When all that was needful at Casa Guidi had been done, Browning's first thought was to abandon Italy for many a year, and hasten to London, there to have speech for a day or two at least with

Mrs Browning's sister Arabel. "The cycle is complete," he said, looking round the sitting-room of Casa Guidi. "I want my new life," he wrote, "to resemble the last fifteen years as little as possible." Yet while he stayed in the accustomed rooms he held himself together; "when I was moved," he says, "I began to go to pieces."[84] Yet something remained to sustain him.

To one who has habitually given as well as received much not the least of the pangs of separation arises from the incapacity to render any further direct service. It fortified Browning's heart to know that much could be done, and in ways which his wife would have approved and desired, for her child. And as he himself had been also her care, it was his business now to see that his life fulfilled itself aright. Yet he breaks out in July: "No more 'house-keeping' for me, even with my family. I shall grow still, I hope—but my root is taken, and remains." From the outward paraphernalia of death Browning, as Mrs Orr notices, shrank with aversion; it was partly the instinct by which a man seeks to preserve what is most sacred and most strong in his own feelings from the poor materialisms and the poor sentimentalisms of the grave; partly a belief that any advance of the heart towards what has been lost may be rather hindered than helped by the external circumstance surrounding the forsaken body. Browning took measures that his wife's grave should be duly cared for, given more than common distinction; but Florence became a place from which even for his own sake and the sake of her whose spirit lived within him he must henceforth keep aloof.

The first immediate claim upon Browning was that of duty to his father. On August 1st he left Florence for Paris, accompanied by Isa Blagden, who still watched over him and the boy. Two months were spent with his sister and the old man, still hale and strong of heart, at a place "singularly unspoiled, fresh and picturesque, and lovely to heart's content"—so Browning describes it—St Enogat, near St Malo. The solitary sea, the sands, the rocks, the green country gave him at least a breathing-space. Then he proceeded to London, not without an outbreak of his characteristic energy in over-coming the difficulties—which involved two hours of "weary battling"—of securing a horse-box for Pen's pony. At Amiens Tennyson, with his wife and children, was on the platform. Browning pulled his hat over his face and was unrecognised.[85] In "grim London," as he had called it, though with a quick remorse at recollection of the kindness awaiting him, he had the comfort of daily intercourse with Miss Arabel Barrett.

It was decided that an English education, but not that of a public school, would be best for the boy; the critical time for taking "the English stamp" must not be lost; his father's instruction, aided by that of a tutor, would suffice to prepare him for the University, and he would have the advantage of the motherly care of his mother's favourite sister. Browning distrusted, he says to Story, "ambiguous natures and nationalities." Thus he bound himself to England and to London, while at times he sighed for the beauty of Italian hills and skies. He shrank from society, although before long old friends, and especially Procter, infirm and deaf, were not neglected. He found, or made, business for himself; had "never so much to do or so little pleasure in doing it." The discomfort of London lodgings was before long exchanged for the more congenial surroundings of a house by the water-side in Warwick Crescent, which he occupied until 1887, two years before his death. The furniture and tapestries of Casa Guidi gave it an air of comfort and repose. "It was London," writes Mrs Ritchie, referring to her visits of a later date, "but London touched by some indefinite romance; the canal used to look cool and deep, the green trees used to shade the Crescent.... The house was an ordinary London house, but the carved oak furniture and tapestries gave dignity to the long drawing-rooms, and pictures and books lined the stairs. In the garden at the back dwelt, at the time of which I am writing, two weird gray geese, with quivering silver wings and long throats, who used to come and meet their master hissing and fluttering." In 1866 an owl—for Browning still indulged a fantasy of his own in the choice of pets—was "the light of our house," as a letter describes this bird of darkness, "for his tameness and engaging ways." The bird would kiss its master on the face, tweak his hair, and if one said "Poor old fellow!" in a commiserating voice would assume a sympathetic air of depression.[86] Miss Barrett lived hard by, in Delamere Terrace. With her on Sundays Browning listened at Bedford Chapel to the sermons of a non-conformist preacher, Thomas Jones, to some of which when published in 1884, he prefixed an introduction. "The Welsh poet-preacher" was a man of humble origin possessed of a natural gift of eloquence, which, with his "liberal humanity," drew Browning to become a hearer of his discourses.

He made no haste to give the public a new volume of verse. Mrs Browning had mentioned to a correspondent, not long before her death, that her husband had then a considerable body of lyrical poetry in a state of completion. An invitation to accept the editorship of the *Cornhill Magazine*, on Thackeray's retirement, was after some hesitation declined. He was now partly occupied with preparing for the press whatever writings by his wife seemed suitable for publication. In 1862 he issued with a dedication "to grateful Florence" her *Last Poems*; in 1863, her *Greek Christian Poets*; in 1865 he prepared a volume of Selections from her poems, and had the happiness of knowing that the number of her readers had rather increased than diminished. The efforts of self-constituted biographers to make capital out of the incidents of her life, and to publish such letters of hers as could be laid hands on, moved him to transports of indignation, which break forth in a letter to his friend Miss Blagden with unmeasured violence: what he felt with the "paws" of these blackguards in his "very bowels" God knows; beast and scamp and knave and fool are terms hardly strong enough to relieve his wrath. Such sudden whirls of extreme rage were rare, yet were characteristic of Browning, and were sometimes followed by regret for his own distemperature. In 1862 a gratifying task was laid on him—that of superintending the three volume edition of his Poetical Works which was published in the following year. At the same time

his old friend Forster, with help from Procter, was engaged in preparing the first—and the best—of the several Selections from Browning's poems; it was at once an indication of the growing interest in his writings and an effective means towards extending their influence. He set himself steadily to work out what was in him; he waited no longer upon his casual moods, but girded his loins and kept his lamp constantly lit. His genius, such as it was—this was the field given him to till, and he must see that it bore fruit. "I certainly will do my utmost to make the most of my poor self before I die"—so he wrote in 1865. There were gains in such a resolved method of work; but there were also losses. A man of so active a mind by planting himself before a subject could always find something to say; but it might happen that such sheer brain-work was carried on by plying other faculties than those which give its highest value to poetry.[87]

In the late summer and early autumn of 1862 Browning, in company with his son, was among the Pyrenees at "green pleasant little Cambo, and then at Biarritz crammed," he says, "with gay people of whom I know nothing but their outsides." The sea and sands were more to his liking than the gay people.[88] He had with him one book and no other—a Euripides, in which he read vigorously, and that the readings were fruitful his later poetry of the Greek drama bears witness. At present however his creative work lay in another direction; the whole of "the Roman murder story"—the story of Pompilia and Guido and Caponsacchi—he describes as being pretty well in his head. It needed a long process of evolution before the murder story could uncoil its sinuous lengths in a series of volumes. The visit to Ste-Marie "a wild little place in Brittany" near Pornic, in the summer of 1863—a visit to be repeated in the two summers immediately succeeding—is directly connected with two of the poems of *Dramatis Personae*. The story of *Gold Hair* and the landscape details of *James Lee's Wife* are alike derived from Pornic. The solitude of the little Breton hamlet soothed Browning's spirit. The "good, stupid and dirty" people of the village were seldom visible except on Sunday; there were solitary walks of miles to be had along the coast; fruit and milk, butter and eggs in abundance, and these were Browning's diet. "I feel out of the very earth sometimes," he wrote, "as I sit here at the window.... Such a soft sea, and such a mournful wind!" But the lulling charm of the place which, though so different, brought back the old Siena mood, did not convert him into an idler. The mornings, which began betimes, were given to work; in his way of desperate resolve to be well occupied he informs Miss Blagden (Aug. 18, 1863) that having yesterday written a poem of 120 lines, he means to keep writing whether he likes it or not.[89]

"With the spring of 1863," writes Mr Gosse, "a great change came over Browning's habits. He had refused all invitations into society; but now, of evenings, after he had put his boy to bed, the solitude weighed intolerably upon him. He told the present writer [Mr Gosse] long afterwards, that it suddenly occurred to him on one such spring night in 1863 that this mode of life was morbid and unworthy, and, then and there, he determined to accept for the future every suitable invitation which came to him." "Accordingly," goes on Mr Gosse, "he began to dine out, and in the process of time he grew to be one of the most familiar figures of the age at every dinner-table, concert-hall, and place of refined entertainment in London. This, however, was a slow process." Mrs Ritchie refers to spoken words of Browning which declared that it was "a mere chance whether he should live in the London house that he had taken and join in social life, or go away to some quiet retreat, and be seen no more." It was in a modified form the story of the "fervid youth grown man," in his own "Daniel Bartoli," who in his desolation, after the death of his lady,

> Trembled on the verge
> Of monkhood: trick of cowl and taste of scourge
> He tried: then, kicked not at the pricks perverse,
> But took again, for better or for worse,
> The old way of the world, and, much the same
> Man o' the outside, fairly played life's game.

Probably Browning had come to understand that in his relation to the past he was not more loyal in solitude than he might be in society; it was indeed the manlier loyalty to bear his full part in life. And as to his art, he felt that, with sufficient leisure to encounter the labour he had enjoined upon himself, it mattered little whether the remaining time was spent in a cave or in a court; strength may encounter the seductions either of the hermitage or of the crowd and still be the victor:

> Strength may conclude in Archelaos' court,
> And yet esteem the silken company
> So much sky-scud, sea-froth, earth-thistledown,
> For aught their praise or blame should joy or grieve.
> Strength amid crowds as late in solitude
> May lead the still life, ply the wordless task.[90]

One cannot prescribe a hygiene to poets; the poet of passionate contemplation, such as was Wordsworth, could hardly quicken or develop his peculiar faculty by devotion to the entertainments of successive London seasons. And perhaps it is not certain that the genius of Browning was wholly a gainer by the superficial excitations of the dinner table and the reception room. But the truth is, as Mrs Browning had observed, that his energy was not exhausted by literary work, and that it preyed upon himself if no means of escape were found. If he was not at the piano, or shaping clay, or at the drawing-board, or walking fast and far, inward disturbances were set up which rent and frayed his mind. The pleasures of society both fatigued and rested

Browning; they certainly relieved him from the troubles of super-abundant force.

In 1864 *Dramatis Personae* was published. It might be described as virtually a third volume of *Men and Women*. And yet a certain change of tone is discernible. Italy is no longer the background of the human figures. There is perhaps less opulence of colour; less of the manifold "joys of living." If higher points in the life of the spirit are not touched, the religious feeling has more of inwardness and is more detached from external historical fact than it had ever been before; there is more sense of resistance to and victory over whatever may seem adverse to the life of the soul. In the poems which deal with love the situations and postures of the spirit are less simple and are sometimes even strained; the fantastic and the grotesque occupy a smaller place; a plain dignity, a grave solemnity of style is attained in passages of *A Death in the Desert*, which had hardly been reached before. Yet substantially the volume is a continuation of the poems of 1855; except in one instance, where Tennyson's method in *Maud*, that of a sequence of lyrics, is adopted, the methods are the same; the predominating themes of *Men and Women*, love, art, religion, are the predominating themes of *Dramatis Personae.* A slight metrical complication—the internal rhyme in the second line of each stanza of *Dîs aliter visum* and in the third line of the quatrains of *May and Death*—may be noted as indicating Browning's love of new metrical experiments. In the former of these poems the experiment cannot be called a success; the clash of sounds, "a mass of brass," "walked and talked," and the like, seems too much as if an accident had been converted into a rule.

Mr Sludge, "the Medium" the longest piece in the volume, has been already noticed. The story of the poor girl of Pornic, as Browning in a letter calls her, attracted him partly because it presented a psychological curiosity, partly because he cared to paint her hair in words,—gold in contrast with that pallid face—as much as his friend Rossetti might have wished to display a like splendour with the strokes of his brush:

> Hair such a wonder of flix and floss,
> Freshness and fragrance—floods of it too!
> Gold, did I say? Nay, gold's mere dross.

The story, which might gratify a cynical observer of human nature, is treated by Browning without a touch of cynicism, except that ascribed to the priest—good easy man—who has lost a soul and gained an altar. A saint *manqué*, whose legend is gruesome enough, but more pathetic than gruesome, becomes for the poet an involuntary witness of the Christian faith, and a type of the mystery of moral evil; but the psychological contrasts of the ambiguous creature, saint-sinner, and the visual contrast of

> that face, like a silver wedge
> 'Mid the yellow wealth,

are of more worth than the sermon which the writer preaches in exposition of his tale. Had the form of the poem been Browning's favourite dramatic monologue, we can imagine that an ingenious apologia, convincing at least to Half-Pornic, could have been offered for the perversity of the dying girl's rifting every golden tress with gold.

No poem in the volume of *Dramatis Personae* is connected with pictorial art, unless it be the few lines entitled *A Face*, lines of which Emily Patmore, the poet's wife, was the subject, and written, as Browning seldom wrote, for the mere record of beauty. That "little head of hers" is transferred to Browning's panel in the manner of an early Tuscan piece of ideal loveliness; in purity of outline and of colour the delicate profile, the opening lips, the neck, the chin so naturally ally themselves to painting that nature is best comprehended through its imaginative transference to art. As *Master Hugues* of the earlier collection of poems converts a bewildering technique of music into poetry, and discovers in its intricate construction a certain interposing web spun by the brain between the soul and things divine, so *Abt Vogler* interprets music on the other side—that of immediate inspiration, to which the constructive element—real though slight—is subordinate. In the silence and vacuity which follow the impromptu on his orchestrion, the composer yearns, broods, aspires. Never were a ghostly troop of sounds reanimated and incarnated into industrious life more actually than by Browning's verse. They climb and crowd, they mount and march, and then pass away; but the musician's spirit is borne onward by the wind of his own mood, and it cannot stay its flight until it has found rest in God; all that was actual of harmonious sound has collapsed; but the sense of a mystery of divine suggestion abides in his heart; the partial beauty becomes a pledge of beauty in its plenitude; and then by a gentle return upon himself he resumes the life of every day, sobered, quieted and comforted. The poem touches the borderland where art and religion meet. The *Toccata of Galuppi* left behind as its relics the melancholy of mundane pleasure and a sense of its transitory existence. The extemporising of *Abt Vogler* fills the void which it has opened with the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.

Faith, victor over loss, in *Abt Vogler*, is victor over temporal decay in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. The poem is the song of triumph of devout old age. Neither the shrunken sadness of Matthew Arnold's poem on old age, nor the wise moderation and acquiescence in the economy of force which an admirable poem by Emerson expresses, can be found here; and perhaps some stress and strain may be felt in Browning's effort to maintain his position. It is no "vale of years" of which *Rabbi Ben Ezra* tells; old age is viewed as an apex, a pinnacle, from which in thin translucent air all the efforts and all the errors of the past can be reviewed; the gifts of youth, the gifts of the flesh are not depreciated; but the highest attainment is that of knowledge won by experience—knowledge

which can divide good from evil and what is true from what merely seems, knowledge which can put a just valuation not only on deeds but on every faint desire and unaccomplished purpose, and not only on achievements but failures. Possessed of such knowledge, tried in the probation of life and not found wanting, accepting its own peculiar trials, old age can enter into the rest of a clear and solemn vision, confident of being qualified at last to start forth upon that "adventure brave and new" to which death is a summons, and assured through experience that the power which gives our life its law is equalled by a superintending love. Ardour, and not lethargy, progress and not decline, are here represented as the characteristics of extreme old age. An enthusiasm of effort and of strenuous endurance, an enthusiasm of rest in knowledge, an enthusiasm of self-abandonment to God and the divine purpose make up the poem. At no time did Browning write verse which soars with a more steadfast and impassioned libration of wing. Death in *Rabbi Ben Ezra* is death as a friend. In the lines entitled *Prospice* it is death the adversary that is confronted and conquered; the poem is an act of the faith which comes through love; it is ascribed to no imaginary speaker, and does not, indeed, veil its personal character. No lonely adventure is here to reward the victor over death; the transcendent joy is human love recovered, which being once recovered, let whatever God may please succeed. The verses are a confession which gives the reason of that gallant beating up against the wind, noticeable in many of Browning's later poems. He could not cease from hope; but hope and faith had much to encounter, and sometimes he would reduce the grounds of his hope to the lowest, as if to make sure against illusion and to test the fortitude of hope even at its weakest. The hope of immortality which was his own inevitably extended itself beyond himself, and became an interpreter of the mysteries of our earthly life. In contrast with the ardent ideality of *Rabbi Ben Ezra* may be set the uncompromising realism of *Apparent Failure*, with its poetry of the Paris morgue. The lover of life will scrutinise death at its ugliest and worst, blinking no hideous fact. Yet, even so, the reverence for humanity—

> Poor men, God made, and all for that!—

is not quenched, nor is the hope quenched that

> After Last returns the First,
> Though a wide compass round be fetched,
> That what began best, can't end worst.

The optimism is unreasoned, and rightly so, for the spirit of the poem, with its suggestive title, is not argumentative. The sense of "the pity of it" in one heart, remorse which has somehow come into existence out of the obscure storehouse of nature, or out of God, is the only justification suggested for a hope that nature or God must at the last intend good and not evil to the poor defeated abjects, who most abhorred their lives in Paris yesterday. And the word "Nature" here would be rejected by Browning as less than the truth.

In 1864 under somewhat altered conditions, and from a ground somewhat shifted, Browning in *A Death in the Desert* and the *Epilogue* to "Dramatis Personae" continued his apology for the Christian faith. The apologetics are, however, in the first instance poems, and they remain poems at the last. The imaginary scene of the death of the Evangelist John is rendered with the finest art; its dignity is that of a certain noble bareness; in the dim-lighted grotto are the aged disciple and the little group of witnesses to whom he utters his legacy of words; at the cave's edge is the Bactrian crying from time to time his bird-like cry of assurance:

> Outside was all noon and the burning blue.

The slow return of the dying man to consciousness of his surroundings is as true as if it were studied from a death-bed; his sudden awakening at the words "I am the Resurrection and the Life" arrives not as a dramatic surprise but as the simplest surprise of nature—light breaking forth before sunset. The chief speaker of the poem is chosen because the argument is one concerning faith that comes through love, and St John was the disciple who had learnt love's deepest secrets. The dialectic proceeds along large lines, which have only the subtlety of simplicity. The verse moves gravely, tenderly, often weighted with monosyllables; a pondering, dwelling verse; and great single lines arise so naturally that while they fill the mind with a peculiar power, they are felt to be of one texture with the whole: this, for example,—

> We would not lose
> The last of what might happen on his face;

and this:—

> When there was mid sea and the mighty things;

and this:—

> Lie bare to the universal prick of light;

and these:—

> The Bactrian was but a wild childish man,
> And could not write nor speak, but only loved.

Such lines, however, are made to be read *in situ*.

The faith of these latter days is the same as that of the first century, and is not the same. The story and the teaching of Christ had alike one end—to plant in the human consciousness the assurance of Divine Love, and to make us, in our degree, conscious partakers of that love. Where love is, there is Christ. Our conceptions of God are relative to our own understanding; but God as power, God as a communicating intelligence, God as love—Father, Son and Spirit—is the utmost that we can conceive of things above us. Let us now put that knowledge—imperfect though it may be—to use. Power, intelligence, love—these surround us everywhere; they are not mere projections from our own brain or hand or heart; and by us they are inconceivable otherwise than as personal attributes. The historical story of Christ is not lost, for it has grown into a larger assurance of faith. We are not concerned with the linen clothes and napkins of the empty sepulchre; Christ is arisen. Why revert to discuss miracles? The work of miracles—whatever they may have been—was long ago accomplished. The knowledge of the Divine Love, its appropriation by our own hearts, and the putting forth of that love in our lives—such for us is the Christian faith, such is the work of Christ accomplishing itself in humanity at the present time. And the Christian story is no myth but a reality, not because we can prove true the beliefs of the first century, but because those beliefs contained within them a larger and more enduring belief. The acorn has not perished because it has expanded into an oak.

This, reduced here to the baldest statement, is in substance the dying testimony of Browning's St John. It is thrown into lyrical form as his own testimony in the *Epilogue* to the volume of 1864. The voices of singers, the sound of the trumpets of the Jewish Dedication Day, when the glory of the Lord in His cloud filled His house, have fallen silent. We are told by some that the divine Face, known to early Christian days as love, has withdrawn from earth for ever, and left humanity enthroned as its sole representative:

> Oh, dread succession to a dizzy post,
> Sad sway of sceptre whose mere touch appals.

Browning's reply is that to one whose eyes are rightly informed the whole of nature and of human life shows itself as a perpetual mystery of providential care:

> Why, where's the need of Temple, when the walls
> O' the world are that? What use of swells and falls
> From Levites' choir, Priests' cries, and trumpet calls?
>
> That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
> Or decomposes but to recompose,
> Become my universe that feels and knows.[91]

In the great poem of 1868-69, *The Ring and the Book*, one speaker, the venerable Pope, like St John of *A Death in the Desert*, has almost reached the term of a long life: he is absorbed in the solemn weighing of truth and falsehood, good and evil; his soul, like the soul of the dying Evangelist:

> Lies bare to the universal prick of light.

He, if any of the speakers in that sequence of monologues, expresses Browning's own highest thought. And the Pope's exposition of the Christianity of our modern age is identical with that of John. Man's mind is but "a convex glass" in which is represented all that by us can be conceived of God, "our known unknown." The Pope has heard the Christian story which is abroad in the world; he loves it and finds it credible. God's power—that is clearly discernible in the universe; His intelligence—that is no less evidently present. What of love? The dread machinery of sin and sorrow on this globe of ours seems to negative the idea of divine love. The surmise of immortality may indeed justify the ways of God to man; this "dread machinery" may be needed to evolve man's highest moral qualities. The acknowledgment of God in Christ, the divine self-sacrifice of love, for the Pope, as for St John, solves

> All questions in the earth and out of it.

But whether the truth of the early centuries be an absolute historic fact,

> Or only truth reverberate, changed, made pass
> A spectrum into mind, the narrow eye—
> The same and not the same, else unconceived—

the Pope dare not affirm. Nor does he regard the question as of urgent importance at the present day; the effect of the Christian tale—historic fact, or higher fact expressed in myth—remains:

> So my heart be struck,
> What care I,—by God's gloved hand or the bare?

By some means, means divinely chosen even if but a child's fable-book, we have got our truth, and it suffices for our training here on earth. Let us give over the endless task of unproving and re-proving the already proved; rather let us straightway put our truth to its proper uses.[92]

If the grotesque occupies a comparatively small place in *Dramatis Personae*, the example given is of capital importance in this province of Browning's art. The devil of Notre Dame, looking down

on Paris, is more effectively placed, but is hardly a more impressive invention of Gothic fantasy than Caliban sprawling in the pit's much mire,

> With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin,

while he discourses, with a half-developed consciousness, itself in the mire and scarcely yet pawing to get free, concerning the nature of his Creator. The grotesque here is not merely of the kind that addresses the eye; the poem is an experiment in the grotesque of thought; and yet fantastic as it seems, the whole process of this monstrous Bridgewater treatise is governed by a certain logic. The poem, indeed, is essentially a fragment of Browning's own Christian apologetics; it stands as a burly gate-tower from which boiling pitch can be flung upon the heads of assailants. The poet's intention is not at all to give us a chapter in the origins of religion; nor is Caliban a representative of primitive man. A frequently recurring idea with Browning is that expressed by Pope Innocent in the passage already cited; the external world proves the power of God; it proves His intelligence: but the proof of love is derived exclusively from the love that lives in the heart of man. Are you dissatisfied with such a proof? Well, then, see what a god we can construct out of intelligence and power, with love left out! If this world is not a place of trial and training appointed by love, then it is a scene of capricious cruelty or capricious indifference on the part of our Maker; His providence is a wanton sporting with our weakness and our misery. Why were we brought into being? To amuse His solitary and weary intelligence, and to become the victims or the indulged manifestations of His power. Why is one man selected for extreme agony from which a score of his fellows escape? Because god Setebos resembles Caliban, when through mere caprice he lets twenty crabs march past him unhurt and stones the twenty-first,

> Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.

If any of the phenomena of nature lead us to infer or imagine some law superior to the idle artistry and reckless will of Setebos, that law is surely very far away; it is "the Quiet" of Caliban's theology which takes no heed of human life and has for its outposts the cold unmoving stars.

Except the short piece named *May and Death*, which like Rossetti's poem of the wood-spurge, is founded upon one of those freaks of association that make some trival object the special remembrancer of sorrow, the remaining poems of *Dramatis Personae*, as originally published, are all poems of love. *A Likeness*, skilfully contrived in the indirect directness of its acknowledgment of love, its jealous privacy of passion, and its irresistible delight in the homage rendered by one who is not a lover, is no exception. Not one of these poems tells of the full assurance and abiding happiness of lovers. But the warmth and sweetness of early passion are alive under the most disastrous circumstances in *Confessions*. The apothecary with his bottles provides a chart of the scene of the boy-and-girl adventures; the professional gravities of the parson put an edge on the memory of the dear indiscretions; "summer's distillation," to borrow a word from Shakespeare, makes faint the odour of the bottle labelled "Ether"; the mummy wheat from the coffin of old desire sprouts up and waves its green pennons. *Youth and Art* may be placed beside the earlier *Respectability* as two pages out of the history of the encounters of prudence and passion; youth and maiden alike, boy-sculptor and girl-singer, prefer the prudence of worldly success to the infinite prudence of love; and they have their reward—that success in life which is failure. Like the tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and Thisbe, this is a poem of "very tragical mirth." And no less tragically mirthful is *Dîs Aliter Visum*, a variation on the same or a kindred theme, where our young Bohemian sculptor is replaced by the elderly poet, bent, wigged, and lamed, but sure of the fortieth chair in the Academy, and the lone she-sparrow of the house-top by a young beauty, who adds to her other attractions a vague, uninstructed yearning for culture and entirely substantial possessions in the three-per-cents. But the moral is the same—the folly of being overwise, the wisdom of acting upon the best promptings of the heart. In *Too Late* Browning attempts to render a mood of passionate despair;—love and the hopes of love are defeated by a woman's sentence of rejection, her marriage, and, last, her death; it reads, more than any other poem of the writer, like a leaf torn out of "Wuthering Heights." There is a fixity of grief which is more appalling than this whirlblast; the souls that are wedged in ice occupy a lower circle in the region of sorrow than those which are driven before the gale. *The Worst of it*—another poem of the failures of love—reverses the conventional attitude of the wronged husband; he ought, according to all recognised authorities of drama and novel, rage against his faithless wife, and commiserate his virtuous self; here he endeavours, though vainly, to transfer every stain and shame to himself from her; his anguish is all on her behalf, or if on his own chiefly because he cannot restore her purity or save her from her wrong done against herself. It is a poem of moral stress and strain, imagined with great intensity. Browning in general isolates a single moment or mood of passion, and studies it, with its shifting lights and shadows, as a living microcosm; often it is a moment of crisis, a moment of culmination. For once in *James Lee's Wife* (named in the first edition by a stroke of perversity *James Lee*), he represents in a sequence of lyrics a sequence of moods, and with singular success. The season of the year is autumn, and autumn as felt not among golden wheatfields, but on a barren and rocky sea-coast; the processes of the declining year, from the first touch of change to bareness everywhere, accompany and accord with those of the decline of hope in the wife's heart for any return of her love. Her offence is that she has loved too well; that she has laid upon her husband too great a load of devotion; hostility might be met and vanquished; but how can she deal with a heart which love itself only petrifies? It should be a warning to critics who translate dramatic poems into imaginary biography to find that Browning, who had known so perfect a success in the one love of his life, should constantly present in work of imagination the ill fortunes of love and lovers. Looking a little below the surface we see that he could not write directly, he could not speak effusively, of the joy that he had known. But in all

these poems he thinks of love as a supreme possession in itself and as a revelation of infinite things which lie beyond it; as a test of character, and even as a pledge of perpetual advance in the life of the spirit.

NOTES:

[84]

Letter to Story in Henry James's "W.W. Story," vol. ii. p. 91 and p. 97.

[85]

H. James's "W.W. Story," vol. ii. p. 100.

[86]

"Rossetti Papers," p. 302.

[87]

In 1863 Browning gave time and pains to revising his friend Story's *Roba di Roma*.

[88]

In 1864 Browning again "braved the awful Biarritz" and stayed at Cambo. On this occasion he visted Fontarabia. An interesting letter from Cambo, undated as to time, is printed in Henry James's "W.W. Story," vol. ii. pp. 153-156. The year—1864—may be ascertained by comparing it with a letter addressed to F.T. Palgrave, given in Palgrave's Life, the date of this letter being Oct. 19, 1864. Browning in the letter to Story speaks of "the last two years in the dear rough Ste.-Marie."

[89]

Was the poem *Gold Hair*? If three stanzas were added to the first draft before the poem appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* the number of lines would have been 120. Stanzas 21, 22 and 23 were added in the *Dramatis Personae* version.

[90]

Aristophanes' Apology (spoken of Euripides).

[91]

Compare with *Epilogue: Third Speaker* the lines from *A Death in the Desert*:

> Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death,
> Stay there at gaze, till it dispart, dispread,
> As though a star should open out, all sides,
> Grow the world on you, as it is my world.

[92]

Statements by Mrs Orr with respect to Browning's relations to Christianity will be found on p. 319 and p. 373 of her Life of Browning. She regarded "La Saisiaz" as conclusive proof of his "heterodox attitude." Robert Buchanan, in the Epistle dedicatory to "The Outcast," alleges that he questioned Browning as to whether he were a Christian, and that Browning "thundered No!" The statement embodied in my text above is substantially not mine but Browning's own. See on *Ferishtah's Fancies* in chapter xvi.

Chapter XII

The Ring and the Book

The publication of *Dramatis Personae* marks an advance in Browning's growing popularity; a second edition, in which some improvements were effected, was called for in 1864, the year of its first publication. "All my new cultivators," Browning wrote, "are young men"; many of them belonged to Oxford and Cambridge. But he was resolved to consult his own taste, to take his own way, and let popularity delay or hasten as it would—"pleasing myself," he says, "or aiming at doing so, and thereby, I hope, pleasing God." His life had ordered itself as seemed best to him—a life in London during the months in which the tide flows and sparkles; then summer and autumn quietude in some retreat upon the French coast. The years passed in such a uniformity of work and rest, with enjoyment accompanying each of these, that they may almost be grasped in bundles. In 1865, the holiday was again at Sainte-Marie, and the weather was golden; but he noticed with regret that the old church at Pornic, where the beautiful white girl of his poem had

been buried, was disappearing to give space in front of a new and smart erection of brick and stucco. His Florence, as he learnt, was also altering, and he lamented the change. Every detail of the Italian days lived in his memory; the violets and ground ivy on a certain old wall; the fig tree behind the Siena villa, under which his wife would sit and read, and "poor old Landor's oak." "I never hear of any one going to Florence," he wrote in 1870, "but my heart is twitched." He would like to "glide for a long summer-day through the streets and between the old stone-walls—unseen come and unheard go." But he must guard himself against being overwhelmed by recollection: "Oh, me! to find myself some late sunshiny Sunday afternoon, with my face turned to Florence —'ten minutes to the gate, ten minutes *home*!' I think I should fairly end it all on the spot."[93]

Other changes sadder than the loss of old Norman pillars and ornaments, or new barbarous structures, run up beside Poggio, were happening. In May 1866 Browning's father, kind and cheery old man, was unwell; in June Miss Browning telegraphed for her brother, and he arrived in Paris twenty-four hours before the end. The elder Browning had almost completed his eighty-fifth year. To the last he retained what his son described as "his own strange sweetness of soul." It was the close of a useful, unworldly, unambitious life, full of innocent enjoyment and deep affection. The occasion was not one for intemperate grief, but the sense of loss was great. Miss Browning, whose devotion during many years first to her mother, then to her widowed father, had been entire, now became her brother's constant companion. They rested for the summer at Le Croisic, a little town in Brittany, in a delightfully spacious old house, with the sea to right and left, through whose great rushing waves Browning loved to battle, and, inland, a wild country, picturesque with its flap-hatted, white-clad, baggy-breeched villagers. Their enjoyment was unspoilt even by some weeks of disagreeable weather, and to the same place, which Browning has described in his *Two Poets of Croisic*—

> Croisic, the spit of sandy rock which juts
> Spitefully north,

they returned in the following summer. During this second visit (September 1867) that most spirited ballad of French heroism, *Hervé Riel*, was written, though its publication belongs to four years later.[94]

In June 1868 came grief of a kind that seemed to cut him off from outward communication with a portion of what was most precious in his past life. Arabel Barrett, his wife's only surviving sister, who had supported him in his greatest sorrow, died in Browning's arms. "For many years," we are told by Mr Gosse, "he was careful never to pass her house in Delamere Terrace." Although not prone to superstition, he had noted in July 1863 a dream of Miss Barrett in which she imagined herself asking her dead sister Elizabeth, "When shall I be with you?" and received the answer, "Dearest, in five years." "Only a coincidence," he adds in a letter to Miss Blagden, "but noticeable." That summer, after wanderings in France, Browning and his sister settled at Audierne, on the extreme westerly point of Brittany, "a delightful, quite unspoiled little fishing town," with the ocean in front and green lanes and hills behind. It was in every way an eventful year. In the autumn his new publishers, Smith, Elder & Co., produced the six-volume edition of his Poetical Works, on the title-page of which the author describes himself as "Robert Browning, M.A., Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford." The distinction, partly due to Jowett's influence, had been conferred a year previously. In 1865, Browning, who desired that his son should be educated at Oxford, first became acquainted with Jowett. Acquaintance quickly ripened into friendship, which was not the less genuine or cordial because Jowett had but a qualified esteem for Browning's poems. "Ought one to admire one's friend's poetry?" was a difficult question of casuistry which the Master of Balliol at one time proposed. Much of Browning's work appeared to him to be "extravagant, perverse, topsy-turvy"; "there is no rest in him," Jowett wrote with special reference to the poems "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day," which he regarded as Browning's noblest work. But for the man his admiration was deep-based and substantial. After Browning's first visit to him in June 1865, Jowett wrote that though getting too old to make, as he supposed, new friends, he had—he believed—made one. "It is impossible to speak without enthusiasm of Mr Browning's open, generous nature and his great ability and knowledge. I had no idea that there was a perfectly sensible poet in the world, entirely free from vanity, jealousy, or any other littleness, and thinking no more of himself than any ordinary man. His great energy is very remarkable, and his determination to make the most of the remainder of life. Of personal objects he seems to have none except the education of his son."[95] Browning's visits to Oxford and Cambridge did not cease when he dropped away from the round of visiting at country houses. He writes with frank enjoyment of the almost interminable banquet given at Balliol in the Lent Term, 1877, on the occasion of the opening of the new Hall. Oxford conferred upon him her D.C.L. in 1882, on which occasion a happy undergraduate jester sent fluttering towards the new Doctor's head an appropriate allusion in the form of a red cotton night-cap. The Cambridge LL.D. was conferred in 1879. In 1871 he was elected a Life Governor of the University of London. In 1868 he was invited to stand, with the certainty of election, for the Lord Rectorship of the University of St Andrews, as successor to John Stuart Mill, an honour which he declined.[96] The great event of this year in the history of his authorship was the publication in November and December of the first two volumes of *The Ring and the Book*. The two remaining volumes followed in January and February 1869.

PIAZZA DI SAN LORENZO, FLORENCE, WHERE "THE BOOK" WAS FOUND BY BROWNING.

From a photograph by ALINARI.

PIAZZA DI SAN LORENZO, FLORENCE, WHERE "THE BOOK" WAS FOUND BY BROWNING.

***From a photograph by* ALINARI.**

In June 1860 Browning lighted, among the litter of odds and ends exposed for sale in the Piazza San Lorenzo, Florence, upon the "square old yellow book," part print, part manuscript, which contained the crude fact from which his poem of the Franceschini murder case was developed. The price was a lira, "eightpence English just." As he leaned by the fountain and walked through street and street, he read, and had mastered the contents before his foot was on the threshold of Casa Guidi[97]. That night his brain was a-work; pacing the terrace of Casa Guidi, while from Felice church opposite came

> the clear voice of the cloistered ones,
> Chanting a chant made for mid-summer nights,

he gave himself up to the excitement of re-creating the actors and re-enacting their deeds in his imagination:

> I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,
> Before attempting smithcraft.

According to Mr Rudolf Lehmann, but possibly he has antedated the incident, Browning at once conceived the mode in which the subject could be treated in poetry, and it was precisely the mode which was afterwards adopted: "'When I had read the book,' so Browning told me, 'my plan

was at once settled. I went for a walk, gathered twelve pebbles from the road, and put them at equal distances on the parapet that bordered it. Those represented the twelve chapters into which the poem is divided, and I adhered to that arrangement to the last.'"[98] When in the autumn he journeyed with his wife to Rome, the vellum-bound quarto was with him, but the persons from whom he sought further light about the murder and the trial could give little information or none. Smithcraft did not soon begin. He offered the story, "for prose treatment" to Miss Ogle, so we are informed by Mrs Orr, and, she adds, but with less assurance of statement, offered it "for poetic use to one of his leading contemporaries." We have seen that in a letter of 1862 from Biarritz, Browning speaks of the Roman murder case as being the subject of a new poem already clearly conceived though unwritten. In the last section of *The Ring and the Book*, he refers to having been in close converse with his old quarto of the Piazza San Lorenzo during four years:

> How will it be, my four-years' intimate,
> When thou and I part company anon?

The publication of *Dramatis Personae* in 1864 doubtless enabled Browning to give undivided attention to his vast design. In October of that year he advanced to actual definition of his scheme. When staying in the south of France he visited the mountain gorge which is connected with the adventure of the Roland of romance, and there he planned the whole poem precisely as it was carried out. "He says," Mr W.M. Rossetti enters in his diary after a conversation with Browning (15 March 1868), "he writes day by day on a regular systematic plan—some three hours in the early part of the day; he seldom or never, unless in quite brief poems, feels the inspiring impulse and sets the thing down into words at the same time—often stores up a subject long before he writes it. He has written his forthcoming work all consecutively—not some of the later parts before the earlier."[99]

When Carlyle met Browning after the appearance of *The Ring and the Book*, he desired to be complimentary, but was hardly more felicitous than Browning himself had sometimes been when under a like necessity: "It is a wonderful book," declared Carlyle, "one of the most wonderful poems ever written. I re-read it all through—all made out of an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines, and only wants forgetting."[100] A like remark might have been made respecting the book which, in its method and its range of all English books most resembles Browning's poem, and which may indeed be said to take among prose works of fiction a similar place to that held among poetical creations by Browning's tale of Guido and Pompilia. Richardson's *Clarissa* consists of eight volumes made out of an Old Bailey story, or what might have been such, which one short newspaper paragraph could have dismissed to a happy or sorrowful oblivion. But then we should never have known two of the most impressive figures invented by the imagination of man, Clarissa and her wronger; and had we not heard their story from all the participators and told with Richardson's characteristic interest in the microscopy of the human heart, it could never have possessed our minds with that full sense of its reality which is the experience of every reader. Out of the infinitesimally little emerges what is great; out of the transitory moments rise the forms that endure. It is of little profit to discuss the question whether Richardson could have effected his purpose in four volumes instead of eight, or whether Browning ought to have contented himself with ten thousand lines of verse instead of twenty thousand. No one probably has said of either work that it is too short, and many have uttered the sentence of the critical Polonius—"This is too long." But neither *Clarissa* nor *The Ring and the Book* is one of the Hundred Merry Tales; the purpose of each writer is triumphantly effected; and while we wish that the same effect could have been produced by means less elaborate, it is not safe to assert confidently that this was possible.

It has often been said that the story is told ten times over by almost as many speakers; it would be more correct to say that the story is not told even once. Nine different speakers tell nine different stories, stories of varying incidents about different persons—for the Pompilia of Guido and the Pompilia of Caponsacchi are as remote, each from other, as a marsh-fire from a star, and so with the rest. In the end we are left to invent the story for ourselves—not indeed without sufficient guidance towards the truth of things, since the successive speeches are a discipline in distinguishing the several values of human testimony. We become familiar with idols of the cave, idols of the tribe, idols of the market-place, and shall recognise them if we meet them again. Gossipry on this side is checked and controlled by gossipry on that; and the nicely balanced indifferentism of men emasculate, blank of belief, who play with the realities of life, is set forth with its superior foolishness of wisdom. The advocacy which consists of professional self-display is exhibited genially, humorously, an advocacy horn-eyed to the truth of its own case, to every truth, indeed, save one—that which commends the advocate himself, his ingenious wit, and his flowers of rhetoric. The criminal is allowed his due portion of veracity and his fragment of truth —"What shall a man give for his life?" He has enough truth to enable him to fold a cloud across the light, to wrench away the sign-posts and reverse their pointing hands, to remove the land-marks, to set up false signal fires upon the rocks. And then are heard three successive voices, each of which, and each in a different way, brings to our mind the words, "But there is a spirit in man; and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding." First the voice of the pure passion of manhood, which is naked and unashamed;

> a voice terrible in its sincerity, absolute in its abandonment to truth, prophet-like in its carelessness of personal consequences, its carelessness of all except the deliverance of a message—and yet withal a courtly voice, and, if it please, ironical. It is as if Elihu the son of Barachel stood up and his wrath were kindled: "Behold

my belly is as wine which hath no vent; it is ready to burst like new bottles. I will speak that I may be refreshed." And yet we dare not say that Caponsacchi's truth is the whole truth; he speaks like a man newly converted, still astonished by the supernatural light, and inaccessible to many things visible in the light of common day. Next, a voice from one who is human indeed "to the red-ripe of the heart," but who is already withdrawn from all the turbulence and turbidity of life; the voice of a woman who is still a child; of a mother who is still virginal; of primitive instinct, which comes from God, and spiritual desire kindled by that saintly knighthood that had saved her; a voice from the edge of the world, where the dawn of another world has begun to tremble and grow luminous,—uttering its fragment of the truth. Last, the voice of old age, and authority and matured experience, and divine illumination, old age encompassed by much doubt and weariness and human infirmity, a solemn, pondering voice, which, with God somewhere in the clear-obscure, goes sounding on a dim and perilous way, until in a moment this voice of the anxious explorer for truth changes to the voice of the unalterable justicer, the armed doomsman of righteousness.

Truth absolute is not attained by any one of the speakers; that, Browning would say, is the concern of God. And so, at the close, we are directed to take to heart the lesson

> That our human speech is naught,
> Our human testimony false, our fame
> And human estimation words and wind.

But there are degrees of approximation to truth and of remoteness from it. Truth as apprehended by pure passion, truth as apprehended by simplicity of soul ("And a little child shall lead them"), truth as apprehended by spiritual experience—such respectively make up the substance of the monologues of Caponsacchi, of Pompilia, and of the Pope. For the valuation, however, of this loftier testimony we require a sense of the level ground, even if it be the fen-country. A perception of the heights must be given by exhibiting the plain. If we were carried up in the air and heard these voices how should we know for certain that we had not become inhabitants of some Cloudcuckootown? And the plain is where we ordinarily live and move; it has its rights, and is worth understanding for its own sake. Therefore we shall mix our mind with that of "Half-Rome" and "The Other Half-Rome" before we climb any mounts of transfiguration or enter any city set upon a hill. The "man in the street" is a veritable person, and it is good that we should make his acquaintance; even the man in the *salon* may speak his mind if he will; such shallow excitements, such idle curiosities as theirs will enable us better to appreciate the upheaval to the depths in the heart of Caponsacchi, the quietude, and the rapt joy in quietude, of Pompilia, the profound searchings of spirit that proceed all through the droop of that sombre February day in the closet of the Pope. And, then, at the most tragic moment and when pathos is most poignant, life goes on, and the world is wide, and laughter is not banished from earth. Therefore Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, Procurator of the Poor, shall make his ingenious notes for the defence of Count Guido, and cite his precedents and quote his authorities, and darken counsel with words, all to be by and by ecclesiasticized and regularized and Latinized and Ciceroized, while more than half the good man's mind is occupied with thought of the imminent "lovesome frolic feast" on his boy Cinone's birth-night, which shall bring with it lamb's fry and liver, stung out of its monotony of richness by parsley-sprigs and fennel. Yes, and we shall hear also the other side—how, in a florilegium of Latin, selected to honour aright the Graces and the Muses and the majesty of Law, Johannes-Baptista Bottinius can do justice to his client and to his own genius by showing, with due exordium and argument and peroration, that Pompilia is all that her worst adversaries allege, and yet can be established innocent, or not so very guilty, by her rhetorician's learning and legal deftness in quart and tierce.

The secondary personages in Richardson's "Clarissa" grow somewhat faint in our memories; but the figures of his heroine and of Lovelace remain not only uneffaceable but undimmed by time. Four of the *dramatis personae* of Browning's poem in like manner possess an enduring life, which shows no decline or abatement after the effect of the monologues by the other speakers has been produced and the speakers themselves almost forgotten. Count Guide Franceschini is not a miracle of evil rendered credible, like Shakespeare's Iago, nor a strange enormity of tyrannous hate and lust like the Count Cenci of Shelley. He has no spirit of diabolic revelry in crime; no feeling for its delicate artistry; he is under no spell of fascination derived from its horror. He is clumsy in his fraud and coarse in his violence. Sin may have its strangeness in beauty; but Guido does not gleam with the romance of sin. If Browning once or twice gives his fantasy play, it is in describing the black cave of a palace at Arezzo into which the white Pompilia is borne, the cave and its denizens—the "gaunt gray nightmare" of a mother, mopping and mowing in the dusk, the brothers, "two obscure goblin creatures, fox-faced this, cat-clawed the other," with Guido himself as the main monster. Yet the Count, short of stature, "hook-nosed and yellow in a bush of beard" is not a monster but a man; possessed of intellectual ability and a certain grace of bearing when occasion requires; although wrenched and enfeebled by the torture of the rack he holds his ground, has even a little irony to spare, and makes a skilful defence. Browning does not need a lithe, beautiful, mysterious human panther, and is content with a plain, prosaic, serviceable villain, who would have been disdained by the genius of the dramatist Webster as wanting in romance. But like some of Webster's saturnine, fantastic assistants or tools in crime, Guido has failed in everything, is no longer young, chews upon the bitter root of failure, and is half-poisoned by its acrid juices. He is godless in an age of godless living; cynical in a cynical generation; and ever and anon he betrays the licentious imagination of an age of license. He plays a poor part in the cruel farce of life, and snarls against the world, while clinging desperately to the world and to life. A disinterested loyalty to the powers of evil might display a certain gallantry of its own, but,

though Guido loathes goodness, his devotion to evil has no inverted chivalry in it—there is always a valid reason, a sordid motive for his rage. And in truth he has grounds of complaint, which a wave of generous passion would have swept away, but which, following upon the ill successes of his life, might well make a bad man mad. His wife, palmed off upon the representative of an ancient and noble house, is the child of a nameless father and a common harlot of Rome; she is repelled by his person; and her cold submission to what she has been instructed in by the Archbishop as the duties of a wife is more intolerable than her earlier remoter aversion. He is cheated of the dowry which lured him to marriage. He is pointed at with smiling scorn by the gossips of Arezzo. A gallant of the troop of Satan might have devised and executed some splendid revenge; but Guido is ever among the sutlers and camp-followers of the fiend, who are base before they are bold. When he makes his final pleading for life in the cell of the New Prison by Castle Angelo, the animal cry, like that of a wild cat on whom the teeth of the trap have closed, is rendered shrill by the intensity of imagination with which he pictures to himself the apparatus of the scaffold and the hideous circumstance of his death. His effort, as far as it is rational, is to transfer the guilt of his deeds to anyone or everyone but himself. When all other resources fail he boldly lays the offence upon God, who has made him what he is. It was a fine audacity of Browning in imagining the last desperate shriek of the wretched man, uttered as the black-hatted Brotherhood of Death descend the stairs singing their accursed psalm, to carry the climax of appeal to the powers of charity, "Christ,—Maria,—God," one degree farther, and make the murderer last of all cry upon his victim to be his saviour from the death which he dares to name by the name of his own crime, a name which that crime might seem to have sequestered from all other uses:—

"Pompilia, will you let them murder me?"

Pompilia is conceived by Browning not as a pale, passive victim, but as strong with a vivid, interior life, and not more perfect in patience than in her obedience to the higher law which summons her to resistance to evil and championship of the right. Her purity is not the purity of ice but of fire. When the Pope would find for himself a symbol to body forth her soul, it is not a lily that he thinks of but a rose. Others may yield to the eye of God a "timid leaf" and an "uncertain bud,"

> While—see how this mere chance sown, cleft-nursed seed
> That sprang up by the wayside 'neath the foot
> Of the enemy, this breaks all into blaze,
> Spreads itself, one wide glory of desire
> To incorporate the whole great sun it loves
> From the inch-height whence it looks and longs. My flower,
> My rose, I gather for the breast of God.

As she lies on her pallet, dying "in the good house that helps the poor to die," she is far withdrawn from the things of time; her life, with all its pleasures and its pains, seems strange and far away—

> Looks old, fantastic and impossible:
> I touch a fairy thing that fades and fades.

Two possessions, out of what life has brought, remain with her—the babe, who while yet unborn had converted her from a sufferer to a defender, and the friend who has saved her soul. Even motherhood itself is not the deepest thing in Pompilia's nature. The little Gaetano, whom she had held in her arms for three days, will change; he will grow great, strong, stern, a tall young man, who cannot guess what she was like, who may some day have some hard thought of her. He too withdraws into the dream of earth. She can never lose him, and yet lose him she surely must; all she can do is by dying to give him "out-right to God, without a further care," so to be safe. But one experience of Pompilia's life was quite out of time, and belongs by its mere essence to eternity. Having laid her babe away with God, she must not even "think of him again, for gratitude"; and her last breath shall spend itself in doing service to earth by striving to make men know aright what earth will for a time possess and then, forever, heaven—God's servant, man's friend, the saviour of the weak, the foe of all who are vile—and to the gossips of Arezzo and of Rome the fribble and coxcomb and light-of-love priest, Caponsacchi.

If any point in the whole long poem, *The Ring and the Book*, can be described as central, it must be found in the relations, each to the other, of Caponsacchi and Pompilia. The truth of it, as conceived by Browning, could hardly be told otherwise than in poetry, for it needs the faith that comes through spiritual beauty to render it comprehensible and credible, and such beauty is best expressed by art. It is easy to convince the world of a passion between the sexes which is simply animal; nor is art much needed to help out the proof. Happily the human love, in which body and soul play in varying degrees their parts, and each an honoured part, is in widest commonalty spread. But the love that is wholly spiritual seems to some a supernatural thing, and if it be not discredited as utterly unreal (which at certain periods, if literature be a test, has been the case), it is apt to appear as a thing phantom-like, tenuous, and cold. But, in truth, this reality once experienced makes the other realities appear the shadows, and it is an ardour as passionate as any that is known to man. Its special note is a deliverance from self with a joy in abandonment to some thing other than self, like that which has been often recorded as an experience in religious conversion; when Bunyan, for example, ceased from the efforts to establish his own righteousness and saw that righteousness above him in the eternal heavens, he walked as a man

suddenly illuminated, and could hardly forbear telling his joy to the crows upon the plough-land; and so, in its degree, with the spiritual exaltation produced by the love of man and woman when it touches a certain rare but real altitude. If a poet can succeed in lifting up our hearts so that they may know for actual the truth of these things, he has contributed an important fragment towards an interpretation of human life. And this Browning has assuredly done. The sense of a power outside oneself whose influence invades the just-awakened man, the conviction that the secret of life has been revealed, the lying passive and prone to the influx of the spirit, the illumination, the joy, the assurance that old things have passed away and that all things have become new, the acceptance of a supreme law, the belief in a victory obtained over time and death, the rapture in a heart prepared for all self-sacrifice, entire immolation—these are rendered by Browning with a fidelity which if reached solely by imagination is indeed surprising, for who can discover these mysteries except through a personal experience?[101] If the senses co-operate—as perhaps they do—in such mysteries, they are senses in a state of transfiguration, senses taken up into the spirit—"Whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell." When Caponsacchi bears the body of Pompilia in a swoon to her chamber in the inn at Castelnuovo, it is as if he bore the host. From the first moment when he set eyes upon her in the theatre,

> A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad,

he is delivered from his frivolous self, he is solemnized and awed; the form of his worship is self-sacrifice; his first word to her—"I am yours "—is

> An eternity
> Of speech, to match the immeasurable depth
> O' the soul that then broke silence.

To abstain from ever seeing her again would be joy more than pain if this were duty to her and to God. For him the mere revelation of Pompilia would suffice. His inmost feeling is summed up with perfect adequacy in a word to the Judges: "You know this is not love, Sirs—it is faith."

There is another kind of faith which comes not suddenly through passion but slowly through thought and action and trial, and the long fidelity of a life. It is that of which Milton speaks in the lines:

> Till old experience do attain
> To something of Prophetic strain.

This is the faith of Browning's Pope Innocent, who up to extreme old age has kept open his intelligence both on the earthward and the Godward sides, and who, being wholly delivered from self by that devotion to duty which is the habit of his mind, can apprehend the truth of things and pronounce judgment upon them almost with the certitude of an instrument of the divine righteousness. And yet he is entirely human, God's vicegerent and also an old man, learned in the secrets of the heart, patient in the inquisition of facts, weighing his documents, scrutinising each fragment of evidence, burdened by the sense of responsibility, cheered also by the opportunity of true service, grave but not sad—

> Simple, sagacious, mild yet resolute,
> With prudence, probity and—what beside
> From the other world he feels impress at times;

a "grey ultimate decrepitude," yet visited by the spiritual fire which touches a soul whose robe of flesh is worn thin; not unassailed by doubts as to the justice of his final decision, but assured that his part is confidently to make the best use of the powers with which he has been entrusted; young of heart, if also old, in his rejoicing in goodness and his antipathy to evil.

The Ring and the Book is a great receptacle into which Browning poured, with an affluence that perhaps is excessive, all his powers—his searchings for truth, his passion, his casuistry, his feeling for beauty, his tenderness, his gift of pity, his veiled memories of what was most precious in the past, his hopes for the future, his worldly knowledge, his unworldly aspirations, his humour, such as it was, robust rather than delicate. Could the three monologues which tell how in various ways it strikes a Roman contemporary have been fused into a single dialogue, could the speeches of the two advocates have been briefly set over, one against the other, instead of being drawn out at length, we might still have got the whole of Browning's mind. But we must take things as we find them, and perhaps a skilled writer knows his own business best. Never was Browning's mastery in narrative displayed with such effect as in Caponsacchi's account of the flight to Rome, which is not mere record, but record winged with lyrical enthusiasm. Never was his tenderness so deep or poignant as in his realisation of the motherhood of Pompilia. Never were the gropings of intellect and the intuitions of the spirit shown by him in their weakness and their strength with such a lucid subtlety as in the deliberations and decisions of the Pope. The whole poem which he compares to a ring was the ring of a strong male finger; but the posy of the ring, and the comparison is again his own, tells how it was a gift hammered and filed during the years of smithcraft "in memoriam"; in memory and also with a hope.

The British Public, whom Browning addresses at the close of his poem, and who "liked him not" during so many years, now when he was not far from sixty went over to his side. *The Ring and the Book* almost immediately passed into a second edition. The decade from 1869 onwards is called by Mrs Orr the fullest period in Browning's life. His social occupations and entertainments

both in London and for a time as a visitor at country-houses became more numerous and absorbing, yet he had energy for work as well as for play. During these ten years no fewer than nine new volumes of his poetry appeared. None of them are London poems, and Italy is for the present almost forgotten; it is the scene of only two or three short pieces, which are included in the volume of 1876—*Pacchiarotto and how he worked in distemper; with other Poems*. The other pieces of the decade as regards their origin fall with a single exception into two groups; first those of ancient Greece, suggested by Browning's studies in classical drama; secondly those, which in a greater or less degree, are connected with his summer wanderings in France and Switzerland. The dream-scene of Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau is Leicester Square; but this also is one of the poems of France. *The Inn Album* alone is English in its characters and their surroundings. Such a grouping of the works of the period is of a superficial nature, and it can be readily dismissed. It brings into prominence, however, the fact that Browning, while resolved to work out what was in him, lay open to casual suggestions. He had acquired certain methods which he could apply to almost any topic. He had confidence that any subject on which he concentrated his powers of mind could be compelled to yield material of interest. It cannot be said that he exercised always a wise discretion in the choice of subjects; these ought to have been excellent in themselves; he trusted too much to the successful issue of the play of his own intellect and imagination around and about his subjects. *The Ring and the Book* had given him practice, extending over several years, in handling the large dramatic monologue. Now he was prepared to stretch the dramatic monologue beyond the bounds, and new devices were invented to keep it from stagnating and to carry it forward. Imaginary disputants intervene in the monologue; there are objections, replies, retorts; a second player in the game not being found, the speaker has to play against himself.

In the story of the Roman murder-case fancy was mingled with fact, and truth with falsehood, with a view to making truth in the end the more salient. The poet had used to the full his dramatic right of throwing himself into intellectual sympathy with persons towards whom he stood in moral antagonism or at least experienced an inward sense of alienation. The characteristic of much of his later poetry is that it is for ever tasking falsehood to yield up truth, for ever (to employ imagery of his own) as a swimmer beating the treacherous water with the feet in order that the head may rise higher into the pure air made for the spirit's breathing. Browning's genius united an intellect which delighted in the investigation of complex problems with a spiritual and emotional nature manifesting itself in swift and simple solutions of those problems; it united an analytic or discursive power supplied by the head with an intuitive power springing from the heart. He employed his brain to twist and tangle a Gordian knot in order that in a moment it might be cut with the sword of the spirit. In the earlier poems his spiritual ardours and intuitions were often present throughout, and without latency, without reserve; impassioned truth often flashed upon the reader through no intervening or resisting medium. In *The Ring and the Book*, and in a far greater degree in some subsequent poems, while the supreme authority resides in the spiritual intuitions or the passions of the heart, their instantaneous, decisive work waits until a prolonged casuistry has accomplished its utmost; falsehood seems almost more needful in the process of the poet than truth. And yet it is never actually so. Rather to the poet, as a moral explorer, it appeared a kind of cowardice to seek truth only where it may easily be found; the strenuous hunter will track it through all winding ways of error; it is thrown out as a spot of intense illumination upon a background of darkness; it leaps forth as the flash of the search-light piercing through a mist. The masculine characters in the poems are commonly made the exponents of Browning's intellectual casuistry—a Hohenstiel-Schwangau, an Aristophanes; and they are made to say the best and the most truthful words that can be uttered by such as they are and from such positions as theirs; the female characters, a Balaustion, the Lady of Sorrows in *The Inn Album*, and others are often revealers of sudden truth, which with them is either a divine revelation—the vision seen from a higher and clearer standpoint—or a dictate of pure human passion. Eminent moments in life had an extraordinary interest for Browning—moments when life, caught up out of the habitual ways and the lower levels of prudence, takes its guidance and inspiring motive from an immediate discovery of truth through some noble ardour of the heart. Therefore it did not seem much to him to task his ingenuity through almost all the pages of a laborious book in creating a tangle and embroilment of evil and good, of truth and falsehood, in view of the fact that a shining moment is at last to spring forward and do its work of severing absolutely and finally right from wrong, and shame from a splendour of righteousness. Browning's readers longed at times, and not without cause, for the old directness and the old pervading presence of spiritual and impassioned truth.[102]

NOTES:

[93]

Letter to Miss Blagden, Feb. 24, 1870, given by Mrs Orr, p. 287.

[94]

Vivid descriptions of Le Croisic at an earlier date may be found in one of Balzac's short stories.

[95]

Life of Jowett by Evelyn Abbott and Lewis Campbell, i. 400, 401.

[96]

A repeated invitation in 1877 was also declined. In 1875 Browning was nominated by the Independent Club to the office of Lord Rector of Glasgow University.

[97]

Such a book would naturally attract Browning, who, like his father, had an interest in celebrated criminal cases. In his *Memories* (p. 338), Kegan Paul records his surprise at a dinner-party where the conversation turned on murder, to find Browning acquainted "to the minutest detail" with every *cause célèbre* of that kind within living memory.

[98]

An Artist's Reminiscences, by R. Lehmann (1894), p. 224.

[99]

Rossetti Papers, p. 302.

[100]

So the story was told by Dante Rossetti, as recorded by Mrs Gilchrist; she says that she believed the story was told of himself by Carlyle.

[101]

The passage specially referred to is in Caponsacchi's monologue, II. 936-973, beginning with "Thought? nay, sirs, what shall follow was not thought."

[102]

I have used here some passages already printed in my *Studies in Literature*.

Chapter XIII

Poems on Classical Subjects

During these years, 1869-1878, Browning's outward life maintained its accustomed ways. In the summer of 1869 he wandered with his son and his sister, in company with his friends of Italian days, the Storys, in Scotland, and at Lock Luichart Lodge visited Lady Ashburton.[103] Three summers, those of 1870, 1872 and 1873 were spent at Saint-Aubin, a wild "un-Murrayed" village on the coast of Normandy, where Milsand occupied a little cottage hard by. At night the light-house of Havre shot forth its beam, and it was with "a thrill" that Browning saw far off the spot where he had once sojourned with his wife.[104] "I don't think we were ever quite so thoroughly washed by the sea-air from all quarters as here," he wrote in August 1870. Every morning, as Mme. Blanc (Th. Bentzon) tells us, he might be seen "walking along the sands with the small Greek copy of Homer which was his constant companion. On Sunday he went with the Milsands ... to a service held in the chapel of the Chateau Blagny, at Lion-sur-Mer, for the few Protestants of that region. They were generally accompanied by a young Huguenot peasant, their neighbour, and Browning with the courtesy he showed to every woman, used to take a little bag from the hands of the strong Norman girl, notwithstanding her entreaties." The visit of 1870 was saddened by the knowledge of what France was suffering during the progress of the war. He lingered as long as possible for the sake of comradeship with Milsand, around whose shoulder Browning's arm would often lie as they walked together on the beach.[105] But communication with England became daily more and more difficult. Milsand insisted that his friend should instantly return. It is said by Mme. Blanc that Browning was actually suspected by the peasants of a neighbouring village of being a Prussian spy. Not without difficulty he and his sister reached Honfleur, where an English cattle-boat was found preparing to start at midnight for Southampton.

Two years later Miss Thackeray was also on the coast of Normandy and at no great distance. "It was a fine hot summer," she writes, "with sweetness and completeness everywhere; the cornfields gilt and far-stretching, the waters blue, the skies arching high and clear, and the sunsets succeeding each other in most glorious light and beauty." Some slight misunderstanding on Browning's part, the fruit of mischief-making gossipry, which caused constraint between him and his old friend was cleared away by the good offices of Milsand. While Miss Thackeray sat writing, with shutters closed against the blazing sun, Browning himself "dressed all in white, with a big white umbrella under his arm," arrived to take her hand with all his old cordiality. A meeting of both with the Milsands, then occupying a tiny house in a village on the outer edges of Luc-sur-mer, soon followed, and before the sun had fallen that evening they were in Browning's house upon the cliff at Saint-Aubin. "The sitting-room door opened to the garden and the sea beyond—fresh-swept bare floor, a table, three straw chairs, one book upon the table. Mr Browning told us it was the only book he had with him. The bedrooms were as bare as the sitting-room, but I remember a little dumb piano standing in a corner, on which he used to practise in

the early morning. I heard Mr Browning declare they were perfectly satisfied with their little house; that his brains, squeezed as dry as a sponge, were only ready for fresh air."[106] Perhaps Browning's "only book" of 1872 contained the dramas of Æschylus, for at Fontainebleau where he spent some later weeks of the year these were the special subject of his study. It was at Saint-Aubin in 1872 that he found the materials for his poem of the following year, and to Miss Thackeray's drowsy name for the district,

> Symbolic of the place and people too,

White Cotton Night-Cap Country, the suggestion of Browning's title *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* is due. To her the poem is dedicated.

Browning's interest in those who were rendered homeless and destitute in France during the Prussian invasion was shown in a practical way in the spring of 1871. He had for long been averse to the publication of his poems in magazines and reviews. In 1864 he had gratified his American admirers by allowing *Gold Hair* and *Prospice* to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly* previous to their inclusion in *Dramatis Persona.* A fine sonnet written in 1870, suggested by the tower erected at Clandeboye by Lord Dufferin in memory of his mother, Helen, Countess of Gifford, had been inserted in some undistributed copies of a pamphlet, "Helen's Tower," privately printed twenty years previously; the sonnet was published at the close of 1883 in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, but was not given a place by Browning in the collected editions of his Poetical Works. In general he felt that the miscellaneous contents of a magazine, surrounding a poem, formed hardly an appropriate setting for such verse as his. In February 1871, however, he offered to his friend and, publisher Mr Smith the ballad of *Hervé Riel* for use in the *Cornhill Magazine* of March, venturing for once, as he says, to puff his wares and call the verses good. His purpose was to send something to the distressed people of Paris, and one hundred guineas, the sum liberally fixed by Mr Smith as the price of the poem, were duly forwarded—the gift of the English poet and his Breton hero. The facts of the story had been forgotten and were denied at St Malo; the reports of the French Admiralty were examined and indicated the substantial accuracy of the poem. On one point Browning erred; it was not a day's holiday to be spent with his wife "la Belle Aurore" which the Breton sailor petitioned for as the reward of his service, but a "congé absolu," the holiday of a life-time. In acknowledging his error to Dr Furnivall, and adding an explanation of its cause, he dismissed the subject with the word, "Truth above all things; so treat the matter as you please."[107]

For the purposes of holiday-making the resources of the northern French coast, with which Browning's ballad of the Croisickese pilot is associated, were, says Mrs Orr, becoming exhausted. Yet some rest and refreshment after the heavy tax upon his strength made by a London season with its various claims were essential to his well-being. His passion for music would not permit him during his residence in town to be absent from a single important concert; the extraordinary range of his acquaintance with the works of great and even of obscure composers was attested by Halle. In his sonnet of 1884, inscribed in the Album to Mr Arthur Chappell, *The Founder of the Feast*, a poem not included in any edition of his works, he recalls these evenings of delight:

> Sense has received the utmost Nature grants,
> My cup was filled with rapture to the brim,
> When, night by night—ah, memory, how it haunts!—
> Music was poured by perfect ministrants,
> By Halle, Schumann, Piatti, Joachim.

Long since in Florence he had become acquainted with Miss Egerton-Smith, who loved music like himself, and was now often his companion at public performances in London. She was wealthy, and with too little confidence in her power to win the regard of others, she lived apart from the great world. In 1872 Browning lost the warm-hearted and faithful friend who had given him such prompt, womanly help in his worst days of grief—Miss Blagden. Her place in his memory remained her own. Miss Egerton-Smith might seem to others wanting in strength of feeling and cordiality of manner. Browning knew the sensitiveness of her nature, which responded to the touch of affection, and he could not fail to discover her true self, veiled though it was by a superficial reserve. And as he knew her, so he wrote of her in the opening of his *La Saisiaz*:

> You supposed that few or none had known and loved you in the world:
> May be! flower that's full-blown tempts the butterfly, not flower that's furled.
> But more learned sense unlocked you, loosed the sheath and let expand
> Bud to bell and out-spread flower-shape at the least warm touch of hand
> —Maybe throb of heart, beneath which,—quickening farther than it knew,—
> Treasure oft was disembosomed, scent all strange and unguessed hue.
> Disembosomed, re-embosomed,—must one memory suffice,
> Prove I knew an Alpine rose which all beside named Edelweiss?

Miss Egerton-Smith was the companion and house-mate of Browning and his sister in their various summer wanderings from 1874 to 1877. In the first of these years the three friends occupied a house facing the sea at the village of Mers near Tréport. Browning at this time was much absorbed by his *Aristophanes' Apology*. "Here," writes Mrs Orr, "with uninterrupted quiet, and in a room devoted to his use, Mr Browning would work till the afternoon was advanced, and then set off on a long walk over the cliffs, often in the face of a wind, which, as he wrote of it at the time, he could lean against as if it were a wall." The following summers were spent at Villers

in Normandy (1875), at the Isle of Arran (1876), and in the upland country of the Salève, near Geneva. During the visit to the Salève district, where Browning and his sister with Miss Egerton-Smith occupied a chalet named La Saisiaz, he was, Mrs Orr tells us, "unusually depressed and unusually disposed to regard the absence from home as a banishment." Yet the place seemed lovely to him in its solitude and its beauty; the prospect of Geneva, with lake and plain extended below, varying in appearance with the shifting of clouds, was repose to his sense of sight. He bathed twice each day in the mountain stream—"a marvel of delicate delight framed in with trees." He read and rested; and wrote but little or not at all. Suddenly the repose of La Saisiaz was broken up; the mood of languorous pleasure and drowsy discontent was at an end. While preparing to join her friend on a long-intended mountain climb Miss Egerton-Smith, with no forewarning, died. The shock was for a time overwhelming. When Browning returned to London the poem *La Saisiaz*, the record of his inquisition into the mystery of death, of his inward debate concerning a future life, was written. It was the effort of resilience in his spirit in opposition to that stroke which deprived him of the friend who was so near and dear.

The grouping of the works produced by Browning from the date of the publication of *The Ring and the Book* (1868) to the publication of *La Saisias* (1878), which is founded upon the occasions that suggested them, has only an external and historical interest. The studies in the Greek drama and the creations to which these gave rise extend at intervals over the whole decade. *Balaustion's Adventure* was published in 1871, *Aristophanes' Apology* in 1875, the translation of *The Agamemnon of Æschylus* in 1877. Two of the volumes of this period, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* (1871) and *Fifine at the Fair* (1872) are casuistical monologues, and these, it will be observed, lie side by side in the chronological order. The first of the pair is concerned with public and political life, with the conduct and character of a man engaged in the affairs of state; the second, with a domestic question, the casuistry of wedded fidelity and infidelity, from which the scope of the poem extends itself to a wider survey of human existence and its meanings.[108] Two of the volumes are narrative poems, each tending to a tragic crisis; *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (1873) is a story entangled with questions relating to religion; *The Inn Album* (1875) is a tragedy of the passion of love. The volume of 1876, *Pacchiarotto with other Poems*, is the miscellaneous gathering of lyrical and narrative pieces which had come into being during a period of many years. Finally in *La Saisiaz* Browning, writing in his own person, records the experience of his spirit in confronting the problem of death. But it was part of his creed that the gladness of life may take hands with its grief, that the poet who would live mightily must live joyously; and in the volume which contained his poem of strenuous and virile sorrow he did not refrain from including a second piece, *The two Poets of Croisic*, which has in it much matter of honest mirth, and closes with the declaration that the test of greatness in an artist lies in his power of converting his more than common sufferings into a more than common joy.

Balaustion's Adventure, dedicated to the Countess Cowper by whom the transcript from Euripides was suggested, or, as Browning will have it, prescribed, proved, as the dedication declares, "the most delightful of May-month amusements" in the spring of 1871. It was the happiest of thoughts to give the version of Euripides' play that setting which has for its source a passage at the close of Plutarch's life of Nicias. The favours bestowed by the Syracusans upon Athenian slaves and fugitives who could delight them by reciting or singing the verses of Euripides is not to be marvelled at, says Plutarch, "weying a reporte made of a ship of the city of Caunus, that on a time being chased thether by pyrates, thinking to save themselves within their portes, could not at the first be received, but had repulse: howbeit being demaunded whether they could sing any of Euripides songes, and aunswering that they could, were straight suffered to enter, and come in."[109] From this root blossomed Browning's romance of the Rhodian girl, who saves her country folk and wins a lover and a husband by her delight in the poetry of one who was more highly honoured abroad than in his own Athens. Perhaps Browning felt that an ardent girl would be the best interpreter of the womanly heroism and the pathos of "that strangest, saddest, sweetest song," of Euripides. Of all its author's dramas the Alkestis is the most appropriate to the occasion, for it is the poem of a great deliverance from death, and here in effect it delivers from death, or worse, the fugitives from the pirate-bark, "at destruction's very edge," who are the suppliants to Syracuse. In accepting the task imposed upon him Browning must have felt that no other play of Euripides could so entirely have borne out the justice of the characterisation of the poet by Mrs Browning in the lines which he prefixed to *Balaustions Adventure*:

> Our Euripides the human,
> With his droppings of warm tears.

"If the Alkestis is not the masterpiece of the genius of Euripides," wrote Paul de Saint-Victor, "it is perhaps the masterpiece of his heart."[110]

Balaustion herself, not a rose of "the Rosy Isle" but its wild-pomegranate-flower, since amid the verdure of the tree "you shall find food, drink, odour all at once," is Hellenic in her bright and swift intelligence, her enthusiasm for all noble things of the mind, the grace of every movement of her spirit, her culture and her beauty. The atmosphere of the poem, which encircles the translation, is singularly luminous and animating; the narrative of the adventure is rapid yet always lucid; the verse leaps buoyantly like a wave of the sea. Balaustion tells her tale to the four Greek girls, her companions, amid the free things of nature, the overhanging grape vines, the rippling stream,

> Outsmoothing galingale and watermint,

Its mat-floor,

and in presence of the little temple Baccheion, with its sanctities of religion and of art. By a happy and original device the transcript of the Alkestis is much more than a translation; it is a translation rendered into dramatic action—for we see and hear the performers and they are no longer masked—and this is accompanied with a commentary or an interpretation. Never was a more graceful apology for the function of the critic put forward than that of Balaustion:

'Tis the poet speaks:
But if I, too, should try and speak at times,
Leading your love to where my love, perchance,
Climbed earlier, found a nest before you knew—
Why, bear with the poor climber, for love's sake!

Browning has not often played the part of a critic, and the interpretation of a poet's work by a poet has the double value of throwing light upon the mind of the original writer and the mind of his commentator.

The life of mortals and the life of the immortal gods are brought into a beautiful relation throughout the play. It is pre-eminently human in its grief and in its joy; yet at every point the divine care, the divine help surrounds and supports the children of earth, with their transitory tears and smiles. Apollo has been a herdsman in the service of Admetos; Herakles, most human of demigods, is the king's friend and guest. The interest of the play for Browning lay especially in three things—the pure self-sacrifice of the heroine, devotion embodied in one supreme deed; and no one can heighten the effect with which Euripides has rendered this; secondly, the joyous, beneficent strength of Herakles, and this Browning has felt in a peculiar degree, and by his commentary has placed it in higher relief; and thirdly, the purification and elevation through suffering of the character of Admetos; here it would be rash to assert that Browning has not divined the intention of Euripides, but certainly he has added something of his own. It has been maintained that Browning's interpretation of the spiritual significance of the drama is a beautiful perversion of the purpose of the Greek poet; that Admetos needs no purification; that in accepting his wife's offer to be his substitute in dying, the king was no craven but a king who recognised duty to the state as his highest duty. The general feeling of readers of the play does not fall in with this ingenious plea. Browning, as appears from his imagined recast of the theme, which follows the transcript, had considered and rejected it. If Admetos is to be in some degree justified, it can only be by bearing in mind that the fact by which he shall himself escape from death is of Apollo's institution, and that obedience to the purpose of Apollo rendered self-preservation a kind of virtue. But Admetos makes no such defence of his action when replying to the reproaches of his father, and he anticipates that the verdict of the world will be against him. Browning undoubtedly presses the case against Admetos far more strongly than does Euripides, who seems to hold that a man weak in one respect, weak when brought to face the test of death, may yet be strong in the heroic mastery of grief which is imposed upon him by the duties of hospitality. Readers of the Winter's Tale have sometimes wondered whether there could be much rapture of joy in the heart of the silent Hermione when she received back her unworthy husband. If Admetos remained at the close of the play what he is understood by Browning to have been at its opening, reunion with a self-lover so base could hardly have flushed with gladness the spirit of Alkestis just escaped from the shades.[111] But Alkestis, who had proved her own loyalty by deeds, values deeds more than words. When dying she had put her love into an act, and had refrained from mere words of wifely tenderness; death put an end to her services to her husband; she felt towards him as any wife, if Browning's earlier poem be true, may feel to any husband; but still she could render a service to her children, and she exacts from Admetos the promise that he will never place a stepmother over them. His allegiance to this vow is an act, and it shall be for Alkestis the test of his entire loyalty. And the good Herakles, who enjoys a glorious jest amazingly, and who by that jest can benevolently retort upon Admetos for his concealment of Alkestis' death—for now the position is reversed and the king shall receive her living, and yet believe her dead—Herakles contrives to put Admetos to that precise test which is alone sufficient to assure Alkestis of his fidelity. Words are words; but here is a deed, and Admetos not only adheres to his pledge, but demonstrates to her that for him to violate it is impossible. She may well accept him as at length proved to be her very own.

Browning, who delights to show how good is brought out of evil, or what appears such to mortal eyes, is not content with this. He must trace the whole process of the purification of the soul of Admetos, by sorrow and its cruel yet beneficent reality, and in his commentary he emphasises each point of development in that process. When his wife lies at the point of death the sorrow of Admetos is not insincere, but there was a childishness in it, for he would not confront the fact that the event was of his own election. Presently she has departed, and he begins to taste the truth, to distinguish between a sorrow rehearsed in fancy and endured in fact. In greeting Herakles he rises to a manlier strain, puts tears away, and accepts the realities of life and death; he will not add ill to ill, as the sentimentalist does, but will be just to the rights of earth that remain; he catches some genuine strength from the magnanimous presence of the hero-god. He renders duty to the dead; is quieted; and enters more and more into the sternness of his solitary wayfaring. In dealing with the ignoble wrangle with old Pheres the critic is hard set; but Balaustion, speaking as interpreter for Browning, explains that for a little the king lapses back from the firmer foothold which he had attained. Perhaps it would have been wiser to admit that Euripides has marred his own work by this grim tragic-comic encounter of crabbed age and youth. But it is true that one who has much to give, like Alkestis, gives freely; and one who has

little to give, like Pheres, clutches that little desperately and is starved not only in possessions but in soul. For Browning the significance of the scene lies in the idea, which if not just is ingenious, that the encounter with Pheres has an educational value for Admetos; he detests his father because he sees in him an image of his own egoism, and thus he learns more profoundly to hate his baser self. When the body of Alkestis has been borne away and the king re-enters his desolate halls the full truth breaks in upon him; nothing can be as it has been before—"He stared at the impossible mad life"; he has learnt that life, which yet shall be rightly lived, is a harder thing than death:

> He was beginning to be like his wife.

And those around him felt that having descended in grief so far to the truth of things, he could not but return to the light an altered and a better man. Instructed so deeply in the realities of sorrow, Admetos is at last made worthy to receive the blessed realities of joy with the words,

> When I betray her, though she is no more,
> May I die.

The regeneration of Admetos is accomplished. How much in all this exposition is derived from the play, how much is added to it, may be left for the consideration of the reader who will compare the original with the transcript.

If the character of Admetos is somewhat lowered by Browning beneath the conception of the Greek dramatist, to allow room for its subsequent elevation, the conception of Herakles is certainly heightened. We shall not say that Balaustion is the speaker and that Herakles is somewhat of a woman's hero. Browning himself fully enters into Balaustion's enthusiasm. And the presence of the strong, joyous helper of men is in truth an inspiring one. The great voice that goes before him is itself a *Sursum corda!*—a challenge and a summons to whatever manliness is in us. And the best of it is that sauntering the pavement or crossing the ferry we may happen to encounter this face of Herakles:

> Out of this face emerge banners and horses—O superb! I see what is coming;
> I see the high pioneer-caps—I see the slaves of runners clearing the way,
> I hear victorious drums.
>
> This face is a life-boat.

For Walt Whitman too had seen Brother Jonathan Herakles, and indeed the face of the strong and tender wound-dresser was itself as the face of a calmer Herakles to many about to die. The speeches of the demigod in Browning's transcript require an abundant commentary, but it is the commentary of an irrepressible joy, an outbreak of enthusiasm which will not be controlled. The glorious Gargantuan creature, in the best sense Rabelaisian, is uplifted by Browning into a very saint of joyous effort; no pallid ascetic, indeed, beating his breast with the stone, but a Christian saint of Luther's school, while at the same time a somewhat over-boisterous benevolent Paynim giant:

> Gladness be with thee, Helper of our world!
> I think this is the authentic sign and sea!
> Of Godship, that it ever waxes glad,
> And more glad, until gladness blossoms, bursts
> Into a rage to suffer for mankind,
> And recommence at sorrow.

Something of the Herakles ideal appears again and again in other poems of Browning. His Breton sailor, Hervé Riel, has more than a touch of the Heraclean frankness of gaiety in arduous effort. His Ivàn Ivànovitch wields the axe and abolishes a life with the Heraclean joy in righteousness. And in the last of Browning's poems, not without a pathetically over-boisterous effort and strain, there is the suggestion of an ideal conception of himself as a Herakles-Browning; the old man tries at least to send his great voice before him.

The new Admetos, new Alkestis, imagined by Balaustion at the close of the poem, are wedded lovers who, like the married in Pompilia's dream of heaven, "know themselves into one." For them the severance of death has become an impossible thing; and therefore no place is left for Herakles in this treatment of the story. It expresses Browning's highest conception of the union of soul with soul:

> Therewith her whole soul entered into his,
> He looked the look back, and Alkestis died—

died only to be rejected by Hades, as still living, and with a more potent life, in her husband's heart and will. Yet the mortal cloud is round these mortals still; they cannot see things as the gods see. And, for all their hopes and endeavours, the earth which they would renew and make as heaven, remains the old incredulous, unconverted earth,—"Such is the envy Gods still bear mankind." And in such an earth, if not for them, assuredly for others, Herakles may find great deeds to do.

Balaustion has the unique distinction of being heroine throughout two of Browning's poems; and

of both we may say that the genius of Euripides is the hero. *Aristophanes' Apology* is written from first to last with unflagging energy; the translation of the "Herakles" which it includes is a masculine and masterly effort to transport the whole sense and spirit of the original into English verse, and the rendering of the choral passages into lyric form gives it an advantage over the transcript of the "Alkestis." Perhaps not a little of the self-defence of Aristophanes and his statement of the case against Euripides could have been put as well or better in a critical essay in prose; but the method of Browning enables him to mingle, in a dramatic fashion, truth with sophistry, and to make both serve his purpose of presenting not only the case but the character of the great Greek maker of comedy. Balaustion is no longer the ardent girl of the days of her first adventure; she is a wife, with the dignity, the authority of womanhood and wifehood; she has known the life of Athens with its evil and its good; she has been the favoured friend of Euripides; she is capable of confronting his powerful rival in popular favour, and of awing him into sobriety and becoming manners; with an instinctive avoidance she recoils from whatever is gross or uncomely; yet she can do honour to the true light of intellect and genius even though it shines through earth-born vapours and amid base surroundings.

Athens, "the life and light of the whole world," has sunk under the power of Sparta, and it can be henceforth no home for Balaustion and her Euthukles. The bark that bears them is bounding Rhodesward, and the verse has in it the leap and race of the prow. Balaustion, stricken at heart, yet feels that this tragedy of Athens brings the tragic katharsis; the justice of the gods is visible in it; and above man's wickedness and folly she reaches to "yon blue liberality of heaven." It seems as if the spirit which might have saved Athens is that of the loins girt and the lamp lit which was embodied in the strenuous devotion of Euripides to the highest things; and the spirit which has brought Athens to its ruin is that expressed with a splendid power through the work of Aristophanes. But Aristophanes shall plead for himself and leave nothing unsaid that can serve to vindicate him as a poet and even as a moralist Thus only can truth in the end stand clear, assured of its supremacy over falsehood and over half-truth.

Nothing that Browning has written is more vividly imagined than the encounter of Balaustion with Aristophanes and his crew of revellers on the night when the tidings of the death of Euripides reached Athens; it rouses and controls the feelings with the tumult of life and the sanctity of death, while also imposing itself on the eye as a brilliant and a solemn picture. The revellers scatter before the presence of Balaustion, and she and the great traducer of Euripides stand face to face. Nowhere else has Browning presented this conception of the man of vast disorderly genius, who sees and approves the better way and splendidly follows the worse:

> Such domineering deity
> Hephaistos might have carved to cut the brine
> For his gay brother's prow, imbrue that path
> Which, purpling, recognised the conqueror.

It is as if male force, with the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life behind it, were met and held in check by the finer feminine force resting for its support upon the divine laws. But in truth Aristophanes is half on the side of Balaustion and of Euripides; he must, indeed, make his stand; he is not one to falter or quail; and yet when the sudden cloud falls upon his face he knows that it is his part to make the worse appear the better cause, knowing this all the more because the justice of Balaustion's regard perceives and recognises his higher self. Suddenly the Tuphon, "madding the brine with wrath or monstrous sport," is transformed into something like what the child saw once from the Rhodian sea-coast (the old romantic poet in Browning is here young once more):

> All at once, large-looming from his wave,
> Out leaned, chin hand-propped, pensive on the ledge,
> A sea-worn face, sad as mortality,
> Divine with yearning after fellowship.
> He rose but breast-high. So much god she saw;
> So much she sees now, and does reverence.

But in a moment the sea-god is again the sea-monster, with "tail-splash, frisk of fin"; the majestic Aristophanes relapses into the most wonderful of mockers.

No passage in the poem is quite so impressive as this through its strangeness in beauty. But the entry of Sophocles—"an old pale-swathed majesty,"—at the supper which followed the performance of the play, is another of those passages to find which *in situ* is a sufficient reward for reading many laborious pages that might almost as well have been thrown into an imaginary conversation in prose:

> Then the grey brow sank low, and Sophokles
> Re-swathed him, sweeping doorward: mutely passed
> 'Twixt rows as mute.

The critical study of comedy, its origin, its development, its function, its decline, is written with admirable vigour, but the case of Aristophanes can be read elsewhere. It is interesting, however, to note the argument in support of the thesis that comedy points really to ideals of humanity which are beyond human attainment; that its mockery of man's infirmities implies a conception of our nature which in truth is extra-human; while tragedy on the contrary accepts man as he is, in his veritable weakness and veritable strength, and wrings its pity and its terror out of these. It is

Aristophanes who thus vindicates Euripides before the revellers who have assembled in his own honour, and they accept what seems to them a paradox as his finest stroke of irony. But he has indeed after the solemn withdrawal of Sophocles looked for a moment through life and death, and seen in his hour of highest success his depth of failure. For him, in this testing-time of life, art has been the means of probation; he has squandered the gifts bestowed upon him, which should have been concentrated in the special task to which he was summoned. He should have known—he did in fact know—that the art which "makes grave" is higher than that which "makes grin"; his own peculiar duty was to advance his art one step beyond his predecessors; to create a drama which should bring into harmony the virtue of tragedy and the virtue of comedy; to discover the poetry which

> Makes wise, not grave,—and glad,
> Not grinning: whereby laughter joins with tears.

Instead of making this advance he had retrograded; and it remained for a poet of a far-off future in the far-off Kassiterides—the Tin Isle which has Stratford at its heart—to accomplish the task on which Aristophanes would not adventure. One way a brilliant success was certain for Aristophanes; the other and better way failure was possible; and he declined to make the venture of faith. It is with this sense of self-condemnation upon him that he essays his own defence, and it is against this sense of self-condemnation more than against the genius and the methods of Euripides that he struggles. When towards the close of the poem he takes in hand the psalterion, and chants in splendid strains the story of Thamuris, who aspired and failed, as he himself will never do, the reader is almost won over to his side. Browning, who felt the heights and depths of the lyric genius of Aristophanes, would seem to have resolved that in this song of "Thamuris marching," moving in ecstasy amid the glories of an autumn morning, he would dramatically justify his conception of the poet; and never in his youth did Browning sing with a finer rapture of spirit. But reading what follows, the record of the subjugation of Athens, when the Athenian people accept the ruin of their defences as if it were but a fragment of Aristophanic comedy, we perceive that this song, which breaks off with an uproar of laughter, is the condemnation as well as the glory of the singer.

The translation of *Agamemnon*, the preface to which is dated "October 1st, 1877," was undertaken at the request or command of Carlyle. The argument of the preface fails to justify Browning's method. A translation "literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language" may be highly desirable; it is commonly called a "crib"; and a crib contrived by one who is not only a scholar but a man of genius will now and again yield a word or a phrase of felicitous precision. But that a translation "literal at every cost" should be put into verse is a wrong both to the original and to the poetry of the language to which the original is transferred; it assumes a poetic garb which in assuming it rends to tatters. A translation into verse implies that a certain beauty of form is part of the writer's aim; it implies that a poem is to be reproduced as a poem, and not as that bastard product of learned ill judgment—a glorified crib; and a glorified crib is necessarily a bad crib. Mrs Orr, who tells us that Browning refused to regard even the first of Greek writers as models of literary style, had no doubt that the translation of the *Agamemnon* was partly made for the pleasure of exposing the false claims made on their behalf. Such a supposition does not agree well with Browning's own Preface; but if he had desired to prove that the *Agamemnon* can be so rendered as to be barely readable, he has been singularly successful. From first to last in the genius of Browning there was an element, showing itself from time to time, of strange perversity.

NOTES:

[103]

Was this a "baffled visit," as described by Mr Henry James in his "Life of Story" (ii. 197), when the hostess was absent, and the guests housed in an inn?

[104]

Letter quoted by Mrs Orr, p. 288.

[105]

The attitude is reproduced in a photograph from which a woodcut is given in Mme. Blanc's article "A French Friend of Browning."

[106]

"Records of Tennyson, Ruskin and Browning," by Annie Ritchie, pp. 291, 292.

[107]

"A Bibliography of the Writings of Robert Browning," by T.J. Wise, pp. 157, 158.

[108]

Aristophanes' Apology is connected with these poems by its character as a casuistical self-defence of the chief speaker.

[109]

North's "Plutarch," 1579, p. 599.

[110]

"Les Deux Masques," ii. 281.

[111]

A comment of Paul de Saint-Victor on the silence of the recovered Alkestis deserves to be quoted: "Hercule apprend à Admète qu'il lui est interdit d'entendre sa voix avant qu'elle soit purifiée de sa consécration aux Divinités infernales. J'aime mieux voir dans cette réserve un scrupule religieux du poète laissant à la morte sa dignité d'Ombre. Alceste a été nitiée aux profonds mystères de la mort; elle a vu l'invisible, elle a entendu l'ineffable; toute parole sortie de ses lèvres serait une divulgation sacrilège. Ce silence mystérieux la spiritualise et la rattache par un dernier lien au monde éternel."

Chapter XIV

Problem and Narrative Poems

Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, which appeared in December 1871, four months after the publication of *Balaustions Adventure*, was written by Browning during a visit to friends in Scotland. His interest in modern politics was considerable, but in general it remained remote from his work as a poet. He professed himself a liberal, but he was a liberal who because he was such, claimed the right of independent judgment. He had rejoiced in the enfranchisement of Italy. During the American Civil War he was strongly on the side of the North, as letters to Story, written when his private grief lay heavy upon him, abundantly show. He was at one time a friend of the movement in favour of granting the parliamentary suffrage to women, but late in life his opinion on this question altered. He was as decidedly opposed to the proposals for a separate or subordinate Parliament for Ireland as were his friends Carlyle and Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. After the introduction of the Home Rule Bill he could not bring himself, though requested by a friend, to write words which would have expressed or implied esteem for the statesman who had made that most inopportune experiment in opportunism[112] and whose talents he admired. Yet for a certain kind of opportunism—that which conserves rather than destroys—Browning thought that much might fairly be said. To say this with a special reference to the fallen Emperor of France he wrote his *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*.

Browning's instinctive sympathies are not with the "Saviour of Society," who maintains for temporary reasons a tottering edifice. He naturally applauds the man who builds on sure foundations, or the man who in order to reach those foundations boldly removes the accumulated lumber of the past. But there are times when perhaps the choice lies only between conservation of what is imperfect and the attempt to erect an airy fabric which has no basis upon the solid earth; and Browning on the whole preferred a veritable *civitas hominum*, however remote from the ideal, to a sham *civitas Dei* or a real Cloudcuckootown. "It is true, that what is settled by custom, though it be not good, yet at least it is fit; and those things, which have long gone together, are as it were confederate within themselves; whereas new things piece not so well; but though they help by their utility, yet they trouble by their inconformity." These words, of one whose worldly wisdom was more profoundly studied than ever Browning's was, might stand as a motto for the poem. But the pregnant sentence of Bacon which follows these words should be added—"All this is true if time stood still." Browning's pleading is not a merely ingenious defence of the untenable, either with reference to the general thesis or its application to the French Empire. He did not, like his wife, think of the Emperor as if he were a paladin of modern romance; but he honestly believed that he had for a time done genuine service—though not the highest—to France and to the world. "My opinion of the solid good rendered years ago," he wrote in September 1863 to Story, "is unchanged. The subsequent deference to the clerical party in France and support of brigandage is poor work; but it surely is doing little harm to the general good." And to Miss Blagden after the publication of his poem: "I thought badly of him at the beginning of his career, *et pour cause*; better afterward, on the strength of the promises he made, and gave indications of intending to redeem. I think him very weak in the last miserable year." It seemed to Browning a case in which a veritable *apologia* was admissible in the interests of truth and justice, and by placing this *apologia* in the mouth of the Emperor himself certain sophistries were also legitimate that might help to give the whole the dramatic character which the purposes of poetry, as the exposition of a complex human character, required.

The misfortune was that in making choice of such a subject Browning condemned himself to write with his left hand, to fight with one arm pinioned, to exhibit the case on behalf of the "Saviour of Society" with his brain rather than with brain and heart acting together. He was to demonstrate that in the scale of spiritual colours there is a respectable place for drab. This may be undertaken with skill and vigour, but hardly with enthusiastic pleasure. *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* is an interesting intellectual exercise, and if this constitutes a poem, a poem it is; but the theme is fitter for a prose discussion. Browning's intellectual ability became a snare by which

the poet within him was entrapped. The music that he makes here is the music of Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha:

> So your fugue broadens and thickens,
> Greatens and deepens and lengthens,
> Till one exclaims—"But where's music, the dickens!"

The mysterious Sphinx who expounds his riddle and dissertates on himself in an imaginary Leicester Square says many things that deserve to be considered; but they are addressed to our understanding in the first instance, and only in a secondary and indirect way reach our feelings and our imagination. The interest of the poem is virtually exhausted in a single reading; to a true work of art we return again and again for renewed delight. We return to *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* as to a valuable store-house of arguments or practical considerations in defence of a conservative opportunism; but if we have once appropriated these, we do not need the book. There is a spirit of conservation, like that of Edmund Burke, which has in it a wise enthusiasm, we might almost say a wise mysticism. Browning's Prince is not a conservator possessed by this enthusiasm. Something almost pathetic may be felt in his sense that the work allotted to him is work of mere temporary and transitory utility. He has no high inspirations such as support the men who change the face of the world. The Divine Ruler who has given him his special faculties, who has enjoined upon him his special tasks, holds no further communication with him. But he will do the work of a mere man in a man's strength, such as it is; he cannot make new things; he can use the thing he finds; he can for a term of years "do the best with the least change possible"; he can turn to good account what is already half-made; and so, he believes, he can, in a sense, co-operate with God. So long as he was an irresponsible dreamer, a mere voice in the air, it was permitted him to indulge in glorious dreams, to utter shining words. Now that his feet are on the earth, now that his thoughts convert themselves into deeds, he must accept the limitations of earth. The idealists may put forth this programme and that; his business is not with them but with the present needs of the humble mass of his people—"men that have wives and women that have babes," whose first demand is bread; by intelligence and sympathy he will effect "equal sustainment everywhere" throughout society; and when the man of genius who is to alter the world arises, such a man most of all will approve the work of his predecessor, who left him no mere "shine and shade" on which to operate, but the good hard substance of common human life.

All this is admirably put, and it is interesting to find that Browning, who had rejoiced with Herakles doing great deeds and purging the world of monsters, could also honour a poor provisional Atlas whose task of sustaining a poor imperfect globe upon his shoulders is less brilliant but not perhaps less useful. Nor would it be just to overlook the fact that in three or four pages the poet asserts himself as more than the prudent casuist. The splendid image of society as a temple from which winds the long procession of powers and beauties has in it something of the fine mysticism of Edmund Burke.[113] The record of the Prince's early and irresponsible aspirations for a free Italy—

> Ay, still my fragments wander, music-fraught,
> Sighs of the soul, mine once, mine now, and mine
> For ever!—

with what immediately follows, would have satisfied the ardent spirit of Mrs Browning.[114] And the characterisation of the genius of the French nation, whose lust for war and the glory of war Browning censures as "the dry-rot of the race," rises brilliantly out of its somewhat gray surroundings:—

> The people here,
> Earth presses to her heart, nor owns a pride
> Above her pride i' the race all flame and air
> And aspiration to the boundless Great,
> The incommensurably Beautiful—
> Whose very faulterings groundward come of flight
> Urged by a pinion all too passionate
> For heaven and what it holds of gloom and glow:
> Bravest of thinkers, bravest of the brave
> Doers, exalt in Science, rapturous
> In Art, the—more than all—magnetic race
> To fascinate their fellows, mould mankind.

It is a passage conceived in the same spirit as the great chaunt "O Star of France!" written, at the same date, and with a recognition of both the virtues and the shames of France, by the American poet of Democracy. To these memorable fragments from *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* one other may be added—that towards the close of the poem which applies the tradition of the succession by murder of the priesthood at the shrine of the Clitumnian god to the succession of men of genius in the priesthood of the world—"The new power slays the old, but handsomely."

In *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* there is nothing enigmatical. "It is just what I imagine the man might, if he pleased, say for himself," so Browning wrote to Miss Blagden soon after the publication of the volume. Many persons, however, have supposed that in *Fifine at the Fair* (1872) a riddle rather than a poem was given to the world by the perversity of the writer. When she comes to speak of this work Browning's biographer Mrs Orr is half-apologetic; it is for her "a

piece of perplexing cynicism." The origin of the poem was twofold. The external suggestion came from the fact that during one of his visits to Pornic, Browning had seen the original of his Fifine, and she lived in his memory as a subject of intellectual curiosity and imaginative interest. The internal suggestion, as Mrs Orr hints, lay in a certain mood of resentment against himself arising from the fact that the encroachments of the world seemed to estrange in some degree a part of his complex being from entire fidelity to his own past. The world, in fact, seemed to be playing with Browning the part of a Fifine. If this were so, it would be characteristic of Browning that he should face round upon the world and come to an explanation with his adversary. But this could not in a printed volume be done in his own person; he was not one to take the public into his confidence. The discussion should be removed as far as possible from his own circumstances and even his own feelings. It should be a dramatic debate on the subject of fidelity and infidelity, on the bearings of the apparent to the true, on the relation of reality in this our mortal life to illusion. As he studied the subject it assumed new significances and opened up wider issues. An actual Elvire and an actual Fifine may be the starting points, but by-and-by Elvire shall stand for all that is permanent and substantial in thought and feeling, Fifine for all that is transitory and illusive. The question of conjugal fidelity is as much the subject of *Fifine at the Fair* as the virtue of tar-water is the subject of Berkeley's *Siris*. The poem is in fact Browning's *Siris*—a chain of thoughts and feelings, reaching with no break in the chain, from a humble basis to the heights of speculation.

But before all else *Fifine at the Fair* is a poem. Of all the longer poems which followed *The Ring and the Book* it is the most sustained and the most diversified in imaginative power. To point out passages of peculiar beauty, passages vivid in feeling, original in thought, would here be out of place; for the brilliance and vigour are unflagging, and what we have to complain of is the lack of some passages of repose. The joy in freedom—freedom accepting some hidden law—of these poor losels and truants from convention, who stroll it and stage it, the gypsy figure of Fifine in page-costume, the procession of imagined beauties—Helen, Cleopatra, the Saint of Pornic Church—the half-emerging, half-undelivered statue by Michelagnolo, the praise of music as nearer to the soul than words, sunset at Saint-Marie, the play of the body in the sea at noontide (with all that it typifies), woman as the rillet leaping to the sea, woman as the dolphin that upbears Orion, the Venetian carnival, which is the carnival of human life, darkness fallen upon the plains, and through the darkness the Druidic stones gleaming—all these are essentially parts of the texture of the poem, yet each has a lustre or a shimmer or grave splendour of its own.

It is strange that any reader should have supposed either the Prologue or the Epilogue to be uttered by the imaginary speaker of the poem. Both shadow forth the personal feelings of Browning; the prologue tells of the gladness he still found both in the world of imagination and the world of reality, over which hovers the spirit that had once been so near his own, the spirit that is near him still, yet moving on a different plane, perhaps wondering at or pitying this life of his, which yet he accepts with cheer and will turn to the best account; the epilogue veils behind its grim humour the desolate feeling that came upon him again and again as a householder in this house of life, for behind the happiness which he strenuously maintained, there lay a great desolation. But the last word of the epilogue—"Love is all and Death is nought" is a word of sustainment wrung out of sorrow. These poems have surely in them no "perplexing cynicism," nor has the poem enclosed between them, when it is seen aright. Browning's idea in the poem he declared in reply to a question of Dr Furnivall, "was to show merely how a Don Juan might justify himself, partly by truth, somewhat by sophistry." No more unhappy misnomer than this "Don Juan" could have been devised for the curious, ingenious, learned experimenter in life, no man of pleasure, in the vulgar sense of the word, but a deliberate explorer of thoughts and things, who argues out his case with so much fine casuistry and often with the justest conceptions of human character and conduct. If we could discover a dividing line between his truth and his sophistry, we might discover also that the poem is no exceptional work of Browning, for which an apology is required, but of a piece with his other writings and in harmony with the body of thought and feeling expressed through them. Now it is certain that as Browning advanced in years he more and more distrusted the results of the intellect in its speculative research; he relied more and more upon the knowledge that comes through or is embodied in love. Love by its very nature implies a relation; what is felt is real for us. But the intellect, which aspires to know things as they are, forever lands us in illusions—illusions needful for our education, and therefore far from unprofitable, to be forever replaced by fresh illusions; and the only truth we thus attain is the conviction that truth there assuredly is, that we must forever reach after it, and must forever grasp its shadow. Theologies, philosophies, scientific theories—these change like the shifting and shredding clouds before our eyes, and are forever succeeded by clouds of another shape and hue. But the knowledge involved in love is veritable and is verified at least for us who love. While in his practice he grew more scientific in research for truth, and less artistic in his desire for beauty, such was the doctrine which Browning upheld.

The speaker in *Fifine at the Fair* is far more a seeker for knowledge than he is a lover. And he has learnt, and learnt aright, that by illusions the intellect is thrown forward towards what may relatively be termed the truth; through shadows it advances upon reality. When he argues that philosophies and theologies are the fizgigs of the brain, its Fifines the false which lead us onward to Elvire the true, he expresses an idea which Browning has repeatedly expressed in *Ferishtah's Fancies* and which, certainly, was an idea he had made his own. And if a man approaches the other sex primarily with a view to knowledge, with a view to confirm and to extend his own self-consciousness and to acquire experience of the strength and the weakness of womanhood, it is true that he will be instructed more widely, if not more deeply, by Elvire supplemented by Fifine than by Elvire alone. The sophistry of the speaker in Browning's poem consists chiefly in a juggle

between knowledge and love, and in asserting as true of love what Browning held to be, in the profoundest sense, true of knowledge. The poet desires, as Butler in his "Analogy" desired, to take lower ground than his own; but the curious student of man and woman, of love and knowledge—imagination aiding his intellect—is compelled, amid his sophistical jugglings, to work out his problems upon Browning's own lines, and he becomes a witness to Browning's own conclusions. Saul, before the poem closes, is also among the prophets. For him, as for Browning, "God and the soul stand sure." He sees, as Browning sees, man reaching upward through illusions—religious theories, philosophical systems, scientific hypotheses, artistic methods, scholarly attainments—to the Divine. The Pornic fair has become the Venice carnival, and this has grown to the vision of man's life, in which the wanton and coquette named a philosophy or a theology has replaced the gipsy in tricot. The speaker misapplies to love and the truths obtained by love Browning's doctrine concerning knowledge. And yet, even so, he is forced to confess, however inconsistent his action may be with his belief, that the permanent—which is the Divine—can be reached through a single, central point of human love, but not through any vain attempt to manufacture an infinite by piecing together a multitude of detached points:

> His problem posed aright
> Was—"From a given point evolve the infinite!"
> Not—"Spend thyself in space, endeavouring to joint
> Together, and so make infinite, point and point:
> Fix into one Elvire a Fair-ful of Fifines!"

If he continues his experiments, they are experiments of the senses or of the intellect, which he knows can bring no profit to the heart: "Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant." He will undoubtedly—let this be frankly acknowledged—grow in a certain kind of knowledge, and as certainly he will dwindle in the higher knowledge that comes through love. The poem is neither enigmatical nor cynical, but in entire accord with Browning's own deepest convictions and highest feelings.[115]

Although in his later writings Browning rendered ever more and more homage to the illuminating power of the affections, his methods unfortunately became, as has been said, more and more scientific, or—shall we say?—pseudo-scientific. Art jealously selects its subjects, those which possess in a high degree spiritual or material beauty, or that more complete beauty which unites the two. Science accepts any subject which promises to yield its appropriate truth. Browning, probing after psychological truth, became too indifferent to the truth of beauty. Or shall we say that his vision of beauty became enlarged, so that in laying bare by dissection the anatomy of any poor corpse, he found an artistic joy in studying the enlacements of veins and nerves? To say this is perhaps to cheat oneself with words. His own defence would, doubtless, have been a development of two lines which occur near the close of *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*:

> Love bids touch truth, endure truth, and embrace
> Truth, though, embracing truth, love crush itself.

And he would have pleaded that art, which he styles

> The love of loving, rage
> Of knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things
> For truth's sake, whole and sole,

may "crush itself" for sake of the truth which is its end and aim. But the greatest masters have not sought for beauty merely or mainly in the dissection of ugliness, nor did they find their rejoicing in artistic suicide for the sake of psychological discovery. To Browning such a repulsive story as that of *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* served now as well as one which in earlier days would have attracted him by its grandeur or its grace. Here was a fine morbid growth, an exemplary moral wen, the enormous product of two kinds of corruption—sensuality and superstition, and what could be a more fortunate field for exploration with aid of the scalpel? The incidents of the poem were historical and were recent. Antoine Mellerio, the sometime jeweller of Paris, had flung himself from his belvedere in 1870; the suit, which raised the question of his sanity at the date when his will had been signed, was closed in 1872; the scene of his death was close to Browning's place of summer sojourn, Saint-Aubin. The subject lay close to Browning's hand. It was an excellent subject for a short story of the kind that gets the name of realistic. It was an unfortunate subject for a long poem. But the botanist who desires to study vegetable physiology does not require a lily or a rose. Browning who viewed things from the ethical as well as the psychological standpoint was attracted to the story partly because it was, he thought, a story with a moral. He did not merely wish to examine as a spiritual chemist the action of Castilian blood upon a French brain, to watch and make a report upon the behaviour of inherited faith when brought into contact with acquired scepticism—the scepticism induced by the sensual temperament of the boulevards; he did not merely wish to exhibit the difficulties and dangers of a life divided against itself. His purpose was also to rebuke that romantic sentimentalism which would preserve the picturesque lumber of ruined faiths and discredited opinions, that have done their work, and remain only as sources of danger to persons who are weak of brain and dim of sight. Granted the conditions, it was, Browning maintains, an act of entire sanity on the part of his sorry hero, Monsieur Léonce Miranda, to fling himself into mid air, to put his faith to the final test, and trust to our Blessed Lady, the bespangled and bejewelled Ravissante, to bear him in safety through the air. But the conditions were deplorable; and those who declined to assist in carting away the rubbish of medievalism are responsible for Léonce Miranda's bloody night-cap.

The moral is just, and the story bears it well. Yet Browning's own conviction that man's highest and clearest faith is no more than a shadow of the unattainable truth may for a moment give us pause. An iconoclast, even such an iconoclast as Voltaire, is ordinarily a man of unqualified faith in the conclusions of the intellect. If our best conceptions of things divine be but a kind of parable, why quarrel with the parables accepted by other minds than our own? The answer is twofold. First Browning was not a sceptic with respect to the truths attained through love, and he held that mankind had already attained through love truths that condemned the religion of self-torture and terrified propitiations, which led Léonce Miranda to reduce his right hand and his left to carbonised stumps and dragged him kneeling along the country roads to manifest his devotion to the image of the Virgin. Secondly he held that our education through intellectual illusions is a progressive education, and that to seek to live in an obsolete illusion is treason against humanity. Therefore his exhortation is justified by his logic:

> Quick conclude
> Removal, time effects so tardily,
> Of what is plain obstruction; rubbish cleared,
> Let partial-ruin stand while ruin may,
> And serve world's use, since use is manifold.

The tower which once served as a belfry may possibly be still of use to some Father Secchi to "tick Venus off in transit"; only never bring bell again to the partial-ruin,

> To damage him aloft, brain us below,
> When new vibrations bury both in brick.

For which sane word, if not for all the pages of his poem, we may feel gratefully towards the writer. It is the word of Browning the moralist. The study of the double-minded hero belongs to Browning the psychologist. The admirable portrait of Clara, the successful adventuress, harlot and favoured daughter of the Church, is the chief gift received through this poem from Browning the artist. She is a very admirable specimen of her kind—the *mamestra brassicae* species of caterpillar, and having with beautiful aplomb outmanoeuvred and flouted the rapacious cousinry, Clara is seen at the last, under the protection of Holy Church, still quietly devouring her Miranda leaf—such is the irony of nature, and the merit of a perfect digestive apparatus.

The second narrative poem of this period, *The Inn Album* (1875), is in truth a short series of dramatic scenes, placed in a narrative frame-work. It is as concentrated as *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* is diffuse; and the unities of time and place assist the tragic concentration. A recast of *The Inn Album* might indeed have appeared as a drama on the Elizabethan stage side by side with such a brief masterpiece, piteous and terrible, as "A Yorkshire Tragedy"; it moves with a like appalling rapidity towards the climax and the catastrophe. The incident of the attempted barter of a discarded mistress to clear off the score of a gambling debt is derived from the scandalous chronicle of English nineteenth century society.[116] Browning's tale of crime was styled on its appearance by a distinguished critic of Elizabethan drama the story of a "penny dreadful." He was right; but he should have added that some of the most impressive and elevated pieces of our dramatic literature have had sources of no greater dignity. The story of the "penny dreadful" is here rehandled and becomes a tragedy of which the material part is only a translation into external deed of a tragedy of the soul. The *dramatis personae*, as refashioned from the crude fact and the central passions of the poem, were such as would naturally call forth what was characteristic in Browning's genius. A martyr of love, a traitor to love, an avenger of love,—these are the central figures. The girlish innocence of the cousin is needed only as a ray of morning sunlight to relieve the eye that is strained and pained by the darkness and the pallor of the faces of the exponents of passion. And a like effect is produced by the glimpses of landscape, rich in the English qualities of cultured gladness and repose, which Browning so seldom presented, but which are perfectly rendered here:

> The wooded watered country, hill and dale
> And steel-bright thread of stream, a-smoke with mist,
> A-sparkle with May morning, diamond drift
> O' the sun-touched dew.

We must feel that life goes on with leisurely happiness outside the little room that isolates its tragic occupants; the smoke from fires of turf and wood is in the air; cottagers are at their morning cookery. After all the poet of the inn album was well inspired in his eloquent address:—"Hail, calm acclivity, salubrious spot!" and only certain incidents, which time will soon efface, have touched the salutation with irony.

In this poem Browning reverts to his earlier method of clearly and simply dividing the evil from the good. We are not embarrassed by the mingling of truth with sophistry; our instinctive sympathies are not held in check, but are on the contrary reinforced by the undisguised sympathies of the writer. We are no more in doubt where wrong and where justice lie than if Count Gismond were confronting Count Gauthier. The avenger, indeed, is no champion of romance; he is only a young English snob, a little slow of brain, a little unrefined in manner, a "clumsy giant handsome creature," who for a year has tried to acquire under an accomplished tutor the lore of cynical worldliness, and has not succeeded, for he is manly and honest, and has the gentleness of strength; "for ability, all's in the rough yet." Of his education the best part is that he has once loved and been thwarted in his love. And now in a careless-earnest regard for

his cousin his need is that of occupation for his big, idle boy's heart; he wants something to do, someone also to serve. Browning wishes to show the passion of righteousness, which suddenly flames forth and abolishes an evil thing as springing from no peculiar knightly virtue but from mere honest human nature. The huge boy, somewhat crude, somewhat awkward, with a moral temper still unclarified, has enough of our good, common humanity in him to hold no parley with utter wickedness, when once he fully apprehends its nature; therefore he springs upon it in one swift transport of rage and there and then makes an end of it. His big red hands are as much the instruments of divine justice as is the axe of Ivàn Ivànovitch.

The traitor of the poem is "refinement every inch from brow to boot-heel"; and in this respect it cannot be said that Browning's villain departs widely from the conventional, melodramatic villain of the stage. He has perhaps like the stage villain a little too much of that cheap knowingness, which is the theatrical badge of the complete man of the world, but which gentlemen in actual life do not ordinarily affect. There is here and elsewhere in Browning's later poetry somewhat too free an indulgence in this cheap knowingness, as if with a nod and a wink he would inform us that he has a man of the world's acquaintance with the shady side of life; and this is not quite good art, nor is it quite good manners. The vulgarity of the man in the street may have a redeeming touch of animal spirits, if not of *naïveté*, in it; the vulgarity of the man in the club, "refinement every inch" is beyond redemption. The exhibition of Browning's traitor as having slipped lower and lower down the slopes of baseness because he has been false to his one experience of veritable love may remind us also of the melodramatic stage villain; but the tragic and pathetic motives of melodrama, its demonstrative heroisms, its stage generosities, its striking attitudes, are really fictions founded upon fact, and the facts which give some credit to the stage fictions remain for the true creator of tragedy to discover and interpret aright. The melodramatic is often the truth falsely or feebly handled; the same truth handled aright may become tragic. There is much in Shakespeare's plays which if treated by an inferior artist would at once sink from tragedy to melodrama. Browning escapes from melodrama but not to such a safe position that we can quite forget its neighbourhood. When the traitor of this poem is withdrawn—as was Guido—

> Into that sad obscure sequestered state
> Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
> He else made first in vain,

there will be found in him that he knew the worth of love, that he saw the horror of the void in which he lived, and that for a moment—though too late—a sudden wave of not ignoble passion overwhelmed his baser self, even if only to let the fangs of the treacherous rock reappear in their starkness and cruelty.

The lady, again, with her superb statue-like beauty, her low wide brow

> Oppressed by sweeps of hair
> Darker and darker as they coil and swathe
> The crowned corpse-wanness whence the eyes burn black,

her passion, her despair, her recovery through chilling to ice the heart within her, her reawakening to life, and the pain of that return to sensation, her measureless scorn of her betrayer, her exposure of his last fraud, and her self-sought death—the lady is dangerously near the melodramatic heroine, and yet she is not a melodramatic but a tragic figure. Far more than Pompilia, who knew the joy of motherhood, is she the martyr of love. And yet, before she quits life, in her protective care of that somewhat formidable, somewhat ungainly baby, the huge boy, her champion, hero and snob, she finds a comforting maternal instinct at work:

> Did you love me once?
> Then take love's last and best return! I think
> Womanliness means only motherhood;
> All love begins and ends there,—roams enough,
> But, having run the circle, rests at home.

Her husband, good man, will not suffer acutely for her loss; he will be true to duty, and continue to dose his flock with the comfortable dogma of hell-fire, in which not one of them believes.

The *Pacchiarotto* volume of 1876 was the first collection of miscellaneous poetry put forth by Browning since the appearance, twelve years previously, of *Dramatis Personae*[117] There is, of course, throughout the whole the presence of a vigorous personality; we can in an occasional mood tumble and toss even in the rough verse of *Pacchiarotto*, as we do on a choppy sea on which the sun is a-shine, and which invigorates while it—not always agreeably—bobs our head, and dashes down our throat. But vigour alone does not produce poetry, and it may easily run into a kind of good-humoured effrontery. The speciality of the volume as compared with its predecessors is that it contains not a little running comment by Browning upon himself and his own work, together with a jocular-savage reply to his unfriendly critics. There is a little too much in all this of the robustious Herakles sending his great voice before him. An author ought to be aware of the fact that no pledge to admire him and his writings has been administered to every one who enters the world, and that as sure as he attracts, so surely must he repel. In the *Epilogue* the poet informs his readers that those who expect from him, or from any poet, strong wine of verse which is also sweet demand the impossible. Sweet the strong wine can become only

after it has long lain mellowing in the cask. The experience of Browning's readers contradicted the assertion. Some who drank the good wines of 1855 and of 1864 in the year of the vintages found that they were strong and needed no keeping to be sweet. Wine-tasters must make distinctions, and the quality of the yield of 1876 does not entitle it to be remembered as an extraordinary year.

The poem from which the volume was named tells in verse, "timed by raps of the knuckle," how the painter Pacchiarotto must needs become a world-reformer, or at least a city-reformer in his distressed Siena, with no good results for his city and with disastrous results for himself. He learns by unsavoury experience his lesson, to hold on by the paint-brush and maul-stick, and do his own work, accepting the mingled evil and good of life in a spirit of strenuous—not indolent—*laissez-faire*, playing, as energetically as a human being can, his own part, and leaving others to play theirs, assured that for all and each this life is the trial-time and test of eternity, the rehearsal for the performance in a future world, and "Things rarely go smooth at Rehearsal." Browning's joy in difficult rhyming as seen in this serio-grotesque jingle was great; some readers may be permitted to wish that many of his rhymes were not merely difficult but impossible. At a dinner given by Sir Leslie Stephen he met successfully the challenge to produce a rhyme for "rhinoceros," and for Tennyson's diversion he delivered himself of an impromptu in which rhymes were found for "Ecclefechan" and "Craigenputtock." But in rhyming ingenuity Browning is inferior to the author of "Hudibras," in a rhymer's elegant effrontery he is inferior to the author of "Don Juan." Browning's good-humoured effrontery in his rhymes expects too much good-humour from his reader, who may be amiable enough to accept rough and ready successes, but cannot often be delighted by brilliant gymnastics of sound and sense. In like manner it asks for a particularly well-disposed reader to appreciate the wit of Browning's retort upon his critics: "You are chimney-sweeps," he sings out in his great voice, "listen! I have invented several insulting nicknames for you. Decamp! or my housemaid will fling the slops in your faces." This may appear to some persons to be genial and clever. It certainly has none of the exquisite malignity of Pope's poisoned rapier. Perhaps it is a little dull; perhaps it is a little outrageous.

The Browning who masks as Shakespeare in *At the Mermaid* disclaims the ambition of heading a poetical faction, condemns the Byronic *Welt-schmerz*, and announces his resolvedly cheerful acceptance of life. Elsewhere he assures his readers that though his work is theirs his life is his own; he will not unlock his heart in sonnets. Such is the drift of the verses entitled *House*; a peep through the window is permitted, but "please you, no foot over threshold of mine." This was not Shakespeare's wiser way; if he hid himself behind his work, it was with the openness and with the taciturnity of Nature. He did not stand in the window of his "House" declaring that he was not to be seen; he did not pull up and draw down the blind to make it appear that he was at home and not at home. In the poem *Shop* Browning continues his assurances that he is no Eglamor to whom verse is "a temple-worship vague and vast." Verse-making is his trade as jewel-setting and jewel-selling is the goldsmith's—but do you suppose that the poet lives no life of his own?—how and where it is not for you to guess, only be certain it is far away from his counter and his till. These poems were needless confidences to the public that no confidences would be vouchsafed to them.

But the volume of 1876 contains better work than these pieces of self-assertion. The two love-lyrics *Natural Magic* and *Magical Nature* have each of them a surprise of beauty; the one tells of the fairy-tale of love, the other of its inward glow and gem-like stability. *Bifurcation* is characteristic of the writer; the woman who chooses duty rather than love may have done well, but she has chosen the easier way and perhaps has evaded the probation of life; the man who chooses passion rather than duty has slipped and stumbled, but his was the harder course and perhaps the better. Which of the two was sinner? which was saint? To be impeccable may be the most damning of offences. In *St Martin's Summer* the eerie presence of ghosts of dead loves, haunting a love that has grown upon the graves of the past, is a check upon passion, which by a sudden turn at the close triumphs in a victory that is defeat. *Fears and Scruples* is a confession of the trials of theistic faith in a world from which God seems to be an absentee. What had been supposed to be letters from our friend are proved forgeries; what we called his loving actions are the accumulated results of the natural law of heredity. Yet even if theism had to be abandoned, it would have borne fruit:

> All my days I'll go the softlier, sadlier
> For that dream's sake! How forget the thrill
> Through and through me as I thought "The gladlier
> Lives my friend because I love him still?"

And the friend will value love all the more which persists through the obstacles of partial ignorance.[118] The blank verse monologue *A Forgiveness*, Browning's "Spanish Tragedy," is a romance of passion, subtle in its psychology, tragic in its action. Out of its darkness gleams especially one resplendent passage—the description of those weapons of Eastern workmanship—

> Horror coquetting with voluptuousness—

one of which is the instrument chosen by the husband's hatred, now replacing his contempt, to confer on his wife a death that is voluptuous. The grim-grotesque incident from the history of the Jews in Italy related in *Filippo Baldinucci* recalls the comedy and the pathos of *Holy Cross Day*, to which it is in every respect inferior. The Jew of the centuries of Christian persecution is for Browning's imagination a being half-sublime and half-grotesque, and wholly human. *Cenciaja*, a

note in verse connected with Shelley's *Cenci*, would be excellent as a note in prose appended to the tragedy, explaining, as it does, why the Pope, inclining to pardon Beatrice, was turned aside from his purposes of mercy; it rather loses than gains in value by having been thrown into verse. To recover our loyalty to Browning as a poet, which this volume sometimes puts to the test, we might well reserve *Numpholeptos* for the close. The pure and disempassioned in womanly form is brought face to face with the passionate and sullied lover, to whom her charm is a tyranny; she is no warm sun but a white moon rising above this lost Endymion, who never slumbers but goes forth on hopeless quests at the bidding of his mistress, and wins for all his reward the "sad, slow, silver smile," which is now pity, now disdain, and never love. The subjugating power of chaste and beautiful superiority to passion over this mere mortal devotee is absolute and inexorable. Is the nymph an abstraction and incarnation of something that may be found in womanhood? Is she an embodiment of the Ideal, which sends out many questers, and pities and disdains them when they return soiled and defeated? Soft and sweet as she appears, she is *La belle Dame sans merci*, and her worshipper is as desperately lost as the knight-at-arms of Keats's poem.

NOTES:

[112]

See Morley's "Life of Gladstone," vol. iii. p. 417.

[113]

Pages 46, 47 of the first edition.

[114]

Pages 58-60.

[115]

It may here be noted that Dante Rossetti in a morbid mood supposed that certain passages of *Fifine* were directed against himself; and so ceased his friendship with Browning.

[116]

Fanny Kemble also derived from the story of Lord De Ros the subject of her "English Tragedy."

[117]

Some sentences in what follows are taken from a notice of the volume which I wrote on its appearance for *The Academy*.

[118]

See Browning's letter to Mr Kingsland in "Robert Browning" by W. G. Kingsland (1890), pp. 32, 33.

Chapter XV

Solitude and Society

The volume which consists of *La Saisiaz* and *The Two Poets of Croisic* (1878) brings the work of this decade to a close.[119] *La Saisiaz*, the record of thoughts that were awakened during that solitary clamber to the summit of Salève after the death of Miss Egerton-Smith, is not an elegy, but it remains with us as a memorial of friendship. In reading it we discern the tall white figure of the "stranger lady," leaning through the terrace wreaths of leaf and bloom, or pacing that low grass-path which she had loved and called her own. It serves Browning's purpose in the poem that she should have been one of those persons who in this world have not manifested all that lies within them. Does she still exist, or is she now no more than the thing which lies in the little enclosure at Collonge? The poem after its solemn and impressive prelude becomes the record of an hour's debate of the writer with himself—a debate which has a definite aim and is brought to a definite issue. In conducting that debate on immortality, Browning is neither Christian nor anti-Christian. The Christian creed involves a question of history; he cannot here admit historical considerations; he will see the matter out as he is an individual soul, on the grounds suggested by his individual consciousness and his personal knowledge. It may be that any result he arrives at is a result for himself alone.

But why conduct an argument in verse? Is not prose a fitter medium for such a discussion? The answer is that the poem is more than an argument; it is the record in verse of an experience, the story of a pregnant and passionate hour, during which passion quickened the intellect; and the

head, while resisting all illusions of the heart, was roused to that resistance by the heart itself. Such an hour is full of events; it may be almost epic in its plenitude of action; but the events are ideas. The frame and setting of the discussion also are more than frame and setting; they co-operate with the thoughts; they form part of the experience. The poet is alone among the mountains, with dawn and sunset for associates, Jura thrilled to gold at sunrise, Salève in its evening rose-bloom, Mont-Blanc which strikes greatness small; or at night he is beneath the luminous worlds which

> One by one came lamping—chiefly that prepotency of Mars.

While he climbs towards the summit he is aware of "Earth's most exquisite disclosures, heaven's own God in evidence"; he stands face to face with Nature—"rather with Infinitude." All through his mountain ascent the vigour of life is aroused within him; and, as he returns—there is her grave.

The idea of a future life, for which this earthly life serves as an education and a test, is so central with Browning, so largely influences all his feelings and penetrates all his art, that it is worth while to attend to the course of his argument and the nature of his conclusion. He puts the naked question to himself—What does death mean? Is it total extinction? Is it a passage into life?—without any vagueness, without any flattering metaphor; he is prepared to accept or endure any answer if only it be the truth. Whether his discussion leads to a trustworthy result or not, the sincerity and the energy of his endeavour after truth serve to banish all supine and half-hearted moods. The debate, of which his poem is a report, falls into two parts: first, a statement of facts; secondly, a series of conjectures—conjectures and no more—rising from the basis of facts that are ascertained. To put the question, "Shall I survive death?" is to assume that I exist and that something other than myself exists which causes me now to live and presently to die. The nature of this power outside myself I do not know; we may for convenience call it "God." Beyond these two facts—myself and a power environing me—nothing is known with certainty which has any bearing on the matter in dispute. I am like a floating rush borne onward by a stream; whither borne the rush cannot tell; but rush and stream are facts that cannot be questioned.

Knowing that I exist—Browning goes on—I know what for me is pain and what is pleasure. And, however it may be with others, for my own part I can pronounce upon the relation of joy to sorrow in this my life on earth:—

> I must say—or choke in silence——"Howsoever came my fate,
> Sorrow did and joy did nowise—life well weighed—preponderate."

If this failure be ordained by necessity, I shall bear it as best I can; but, if this life be all, nothing shall force me to say that life has proceeded from a cause supreme in goodness, wisdom, and power. What I find here is goodness always intermixed with evil; wisdom which means an advance from error to the confession of ignorance; power that is insufficient to adapt a human being to his surroundings even in the degree in which a worm is fitted to the leaf on which it feeds.

Browning tacitly rejects the idea that the world is the work of some blind, force; and undoubtedly our reason, which endeavours to reduce all things in nature to rational conceptions, demands that we should conceive the world as rational rather than as some wild work of chance. Upon one hypothesis, and upon one alone, can the life of man upon this globe appear the result of intelligence:

> I have lived then, done and suffered, loved and hated, learnt and taught
> This—there is no reconciling wisdom with a world distraught,
> Goodness with triumphant evil, power with failure in the aim,
> If (to my own sense, remember! though none other feel the same!)
> If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's place,
> And life, time,—with all their chances, changes,—just probation—space,
> Mine for me.

Grant this hypothesis, and all changes from irrational to rational, from evil to good, from pain to a strenuous joy:—

> Only grant a second life, I acquiesce
> In this present life as failure, count misfortune's worst assaults
> Triumph, not defeat, assured that loss so much the more exalts
> Gain about to be.

Thus out of defeat springs victory; never are we so near to knowledge as when we are checked at the bounds of ignorance; beauty is felt through its opposite; good is known through evil; truth shows its potency when it is confronted by falsehood;

> While for love—Oh how but, losing love, does whoso loves succeed
> By the death-pang to the birth-throe—learning what is love indeed?

Yet at best this idea of a future life remains a conjecture, an hypothesis, a hope, which gives a key to the mysteries of our troubled earthly state. Browning proceeds to argue that such a hope is all that we can expect or ought to desire. The absolute assurance of a future life and of rewards

and punishments consequent on our deeds in the present world would defeat the very end for which, according to the hypothesis, we are placed here; it would be fatal to the purpose of our present life considered as a state of probation. What such a state of probation requires is precisely what we have—hope; no less than this and no more. Does our heaven overcloud because we lack certainty? No:

> Hope the arrowy, just as constant, comes to pierce its gloom, compelled
> By a power and by a purpose which, if no one else beheld,
> I behold in life, so—hope!

Such is the conclusion with Browning of the whole matter. It is in entire accordance with a letter which he wrote two years previously to a lady who supposed herself to be dying, and who had thanked him for help derived from his poems: "All the help I can offer, in my poor degree, is the assurance that I see ever *more* reason to hold by the same hope—and that by no means in ignorance of what has been advanced to the contrary.... God bless you, sustain you, and receive you." To Dr Moncure Conway, who had lost a son, Browning wrote: "If I, who cannot, would restore your son, He who can, will." And Mr Rudolph Lehmann records his words in conversation: "I have doubted and denied it [a future life], and I fear have even printed my doubts; but now I am as deeply convinced that there is something after death. If you ask me what, I no more know it than my dog knows who and what I am. He knows that I am there and that is enough for him." [120]

Browning's confession in *La Saisias* that the sorrow of his life outweighed its joy is not inconsistent with his habitual cheerfulness of manner. Such estimates as this are little to be trusted. One great shock of pain may stand for ever aloof from all other experiences; the pleasant sensations of many days pass from our memory. We cannot tell. But that Browning supposed himself able to tell is in itself worthy of note. In *The Two Poets of Croisic*, which was written in London immediately after *La Saisiaz*, and which, though of little intrinsic importance, shows that Browning was capable of a certain grace in verse that is light, he pleads that the power of victoriously dealing with pain and transforming it into strength may be taken as the test of a poet's greatness:

> Yoke Hatred, Crime, Remorse,
> Despair: but ever 'mid the whirling fear,
> Let, through the tumult, break the poet's face
> Radiant, assured his wild slaves win the race.

This is good counsel for art; but not wholly wise counsel for life. Sorrow, indeed, is not wronged by a cheerfulness cultivated and strenuously maintained; but gladness does suffer a certain wrong. Sunshine comes and goes; the attempt to substitute any unrelieved light for sunshine is somewhat of a failure at the best. Shadows and brightness pursuing each other according to the course of nature make more for genuine happiness than does any stream of moral electricity worked from a dynamo of the will. It is pleasanter to encounter a breeze that sinks and swells, that lingers and hastens, than to face a vigorous and sustained gale even of a tonic quality. Browning's unfailing cheer and cordiality of manner were admirable; they were in part spontaneous, in part an acceptance of duty, in part a mode of self-protection; they were only less excellent than the varying moods of a simple and beautiful nature.

When *La Saisiaz* appeared Browning was sixty-six years old. He lived for more than eleven years longer, during which period he published six volumes of verse, showing new powers as a writer of brief poetic narrative and as a teacher through parables; but he produced no single work of prolonged and sustained effort—which perhaps was well. His physical vigour continued for long unabated. He still enjoyed the various pleasures and excitements of the London season; but it is noted by Mrs Orr that after the death of Miss Egerton-Smith he "almost mechanically renounced all the musical entertainments to which she had so regularly accompanied him." His daily habits were of the utmost regularity, varying hardly at all from week to week. He was averse, says Mrs Orr, "to every hought of change," and chose rather to adapt himself to external conditions than to enter on the effort of altering them; "what he had done once he was wont, for that very reason, to continue doing." A few days after Browning's death a journalist obtained from a photographer, Mr Grove, who had formerly been for seven years in Browning's service, the particulars as to how an ordinary day during the London season went by at Warwick Crescent. Browning rose without fail at seven, enjoyed a plate of whatever fruit—strawberries, grapes, oranges—were in season; read, generally some piece of foreign literature, for an hour in his bedroom; then bathed; breakfasted—a light meal of twenty minutes; sat by the fire and read his *Times* and *Daily News* till ten; from ten to one wrote in his study or meditated with head resting on his hand. To write a letter was the reverse of a pleasure to him, yet he was diligent in replying to a multitude of correspondents. His lunch, at one, was of the lightest kind, usually no more than a pudding. Visits, private views of picture exhibitions and the like followed until half-past five. At seven he dined, preferring Carlowitz or claret to other wines, and drinking little of any. But on many days the dinner was not at home; once during three successive weeks he dined out without the omission of a day. He returned home seldom at a later hour than half-past twelve; and at seven next morning the round began again. During his elder years, says Mr Grove, he took little interest in politics. He was not often a church-goer, but discussed religious matters earnestly with his clerical friends. He loved not only animals but flowers, and when once a Virginia creeper entered the study window at Warwick Crescent, it was not expelled but trained inside the room. To his servants he was a considerate friend rather than a master.

So far Mr Grove as reported in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (Dec 16, 1889).

Many persons have attempted to describe Browning as he appeared in society; there is a consensus of opinion as to the energy and cordiality of his way of social converse; but it is singular that, though some records of his out-pourings as a talker exist, very little is on record that possesses permanent value. Perhaps the best word that can be quoted is that remembered by Sir James Paget—Browning's recommendation of Bach's "Crucifixus—et sepultus—et resurrexit" as a cure for want of belief. He did not fling such pointed shafts as those of Johnson which still hang and almost quiver where they struck. His energy did not gather itself up into sentences but flowed—and sometimes foamed—in a tide. Cordial as he was, he could be also vehemently intolerant, and sometimes perhaps where his acquaintance with the subject of his discourse was not sufficient to warrant a decided opinion.[121] He appeared, says his biographer, "more widely sympathetic in his works than in his life"; with no moral selfishness he was, adds Mrs Orr, intellectually self-centred; and unquestionably the statement is correct. He could suffer fools, but not always gladly. Speaking of earlier days in Italy, T.A. Trollope observes that, while he was never rough or discourteous even to the most exasperating fool, "the men used to be rather afraid of Browning." His cordiality was not insincere; but it belonged to his outer, not his inner self. With the exception of Milsand, he appears to have admitted no man to his heart, though he gave a portion of his intellect to many. His friends, in the more intimate sense of the word, were women, towards whom his feeling was that of comradeship and fraternal affection without over-much condescension or any specially chivalric sentiment. When early in their acquaintance Miss Barrett promised Browning that he would find her "an honest man on the whole," she understood her correspondent, who valued a good comrade of the other sex, and had at the same time a vivid sense of the fact that such a comrade was not so unfortunate as to be really a man.

Let witnesses be cited and each give his fragment of evidence. Mr W.J. Stillman, an excellent observer, was specially impressed in his intercourse with Browning, by the mental health and robustness of a nature sound to the core; "an almost unlimited intellectual vitality, and an individuality which nothing could infringe on, but which a singular sensitiveness towards others prevented from ever wounding even the most morbid sensibility; a strong man armed in the completest defensive armour, but with no aggressiveness."[122] A writer in the first volume of *The New Review*, described Browning as a talker in general society so faithfully that it is impossible to improve on what he has said: "It may safely be alleged," he writes, "that no one meeting Mr Browning for the first time, and unfurnished with a clue, would guess his vocation. He might be a diplomatist, a statesman, a discoverer, or a man of science. But, whatever were his calling, we should feel that it must be essentially practical.... His conversation corresponds to his appearance. It abounds in vigour, in fire, in vivacity. Yet all the time it is entirely free from mystery, vagueness, or technical jargon. It is the crisp, emphatic and powerful discourse of a man of the world, who is incomparably better informed than the mass of his congeners. Mr Browning is the readiest, the blithest, and the most forcible of talkers. Like the Monsignore in *Lothair* he can 'sparkle with anecdote and blaze with repartee,' and when he deals in criticism the edge of his sword is mercilessly whetted against pretension and vanity. The inflection of his voice, the flash of his eye, the pose of his head, the action of his hand, all lend their special emphasis to the condemnation." The mental quality which most impressed Mr W.M. Rossetti in his communications with Browning was, he says, "celerity "—"whatever he had to consider or speak about, he disposed of in the most forthright style." His method was of the greatest directness; "every touch told, every nail was hit on the head." He was not a sustained, continuous speaker, nor exactly a brilliant one; "but he said something pleasant and pointed on whatever turned up; ... one felt his mind to be extraordinarily rich, while his facility, accessibility, and *bonhomie*, softened but did not by any means disguise the sense of his power."[123] Browning's discourse with a single person who was a favoured acquaintance was, Mr Gosse declares, "a very much finer phenomenon than when a group surrounded him." Then "his talk assumed the volume and the tumult of a cascade. His voice rose to a shout, sank to a whisper, ran up and down the gamut of conversational melody.... In his own study or drawing-room, what he loved was to capture the visitor in a low arm-chair's "sofa-lap of leather", and from a most unfair vantage of height to tyrannize, to walk round the victim, in front, behind, on this side, on that, weaving magic circles, now with gesticulating arms thrown high, now grovelling on the floor to find some reference in a folio, talking all the while, a redundant turmoil of thoughts, fancies, and reminiscences flowing from those generous lips."[124]

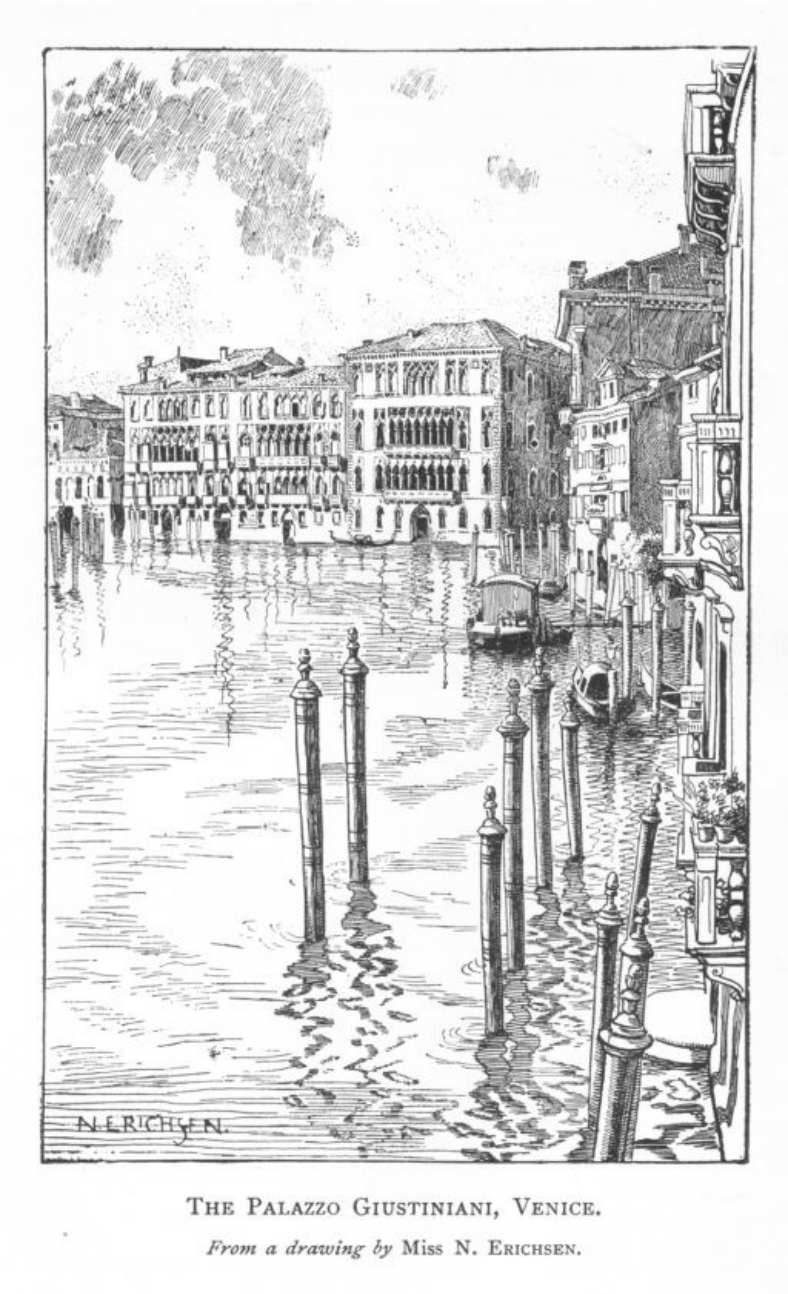
Mr Henry James in his "Life of Story"[125] is less pictorial, but he is characteristically subtle in his rendering of the facts. He brings us back, however, to Browning as seen in society. He speaks of the Italian as a comparatively idyllic period which seemed to be "built out," though this was not really the case, by the brilliant London period. It was, he says, as if Browning had divided his personal consciousness into two independent compartments. The man of the world "walked abroad, showed himself, talked, right resonantly, abounded, multiplied his connections, did his duty." The poet—an inscrutable personage—"sat at home and knew, as well he might, in what quarters of *that* sphere to look for suitable company." "The poet and the 'member of society' were, in a word, dissociated in him as they can rarely elsewhere have been.... The wall that built out the idyll (as we call it for convenience) of which memory and imagination were virtually composed for him, stood there behind him solidly enough, but subject to his privilege of living almost equally on both sides of it. It contained an invisible door, through which, working the lock at will, he could softly pass, and of which he kept the golden key—carrying about the same with him even in the pocket of his dinner waistcoat, yet even in his most splendid expansions showing

it, happy man, to none." Tennyson, said an acquaintance of Miss Anna Swanwick, "hides himself behind his laurels, Browning behind the man of the world." She declares that her experience was more fortunate; that she seldom heard Browning speak without feeling that she was listening to the poet, and that on more than one occasion he spoke to her of his wife[126]. But many witnesses confirm the impression which is so happily put into words by Mr Henry James. The "member of society" protected the privacy of the poet. The questions remain whether the poet did not suffer from such protection; whether, beside the superfluous forces which might be advantageously disposed of at the drawing-board or in thumping wet clay, some of the forces proper to the poet were not drawn away and dissipated by the incessant demands of Society; whether while a sufficient fund of energy for the double life was present with Browning, the peculiar energy of the poet did not undergo a certain deterioration. The doctrine of the superiority of the heart to the intellect is more and more preached in Browning's poetry; but the doctrine itself is an act of the intellect. The poet need not perhaps insist on the doctrine if he creates—as Browning did in earlier years—beautiful things which commend themselves, without a preacher, to our love.

In the autumn of 1878, after seventeen years of absence from Italy, Browning was recaptured by its charm, and henceforward to the close of his life Venice and the Venetian district became his accustomed place of summer refreshment and repose. For a time, with his sister as his companion, he paused at a hotel near the summit of the Splügen, enjoyed the mountain air, walked vigorously, and wrote, with great rapidity, says Mrs Orr, his poem of Russia, *Iván Ivànovitch*. When a boy he had read in Bunyan's "Life and Death of Mr Badman" the story of "Old Tod", and with this still vivid in his memory, he added to his Russian tale the highly unidyllic "idyl" of English life, *Ned Bratts*. It was thus that subjects for poems suddenly presented themselves to Browning, often rising up as it were spontaneously out of the remote past. "There comes up unexpectedly," he wrote in a letter to a friend, "some subject for poetry, which has been dormant, and apparently dead, for perhaps dozens of years. A month since I wrote a poem of some two hundred lines ['Donald'] about a story I heard more than forty years ago, and never dreamed of trying to repeat, wondering how it had so long escaped me; and so it has been with my best things."[127] Before the close of September the travellers were in a rough but pleasant albergo at Asolo, which Browning had not seen since his first Italian journey more than forty years previously. "Such things," he writes, "have begun and ended with me in the interval!" Changes had taken place in the little city; yet much seemed familiar and therefore the more dreamlike. The place had indeed haunted him in his dreams; he would find himself travelling with a friend, or some mysterious stranger, when suddenly the little town sparkling in the sunshine would rise before him. "Look! look there is Asolo," he would cry, "do let us go there!" And always, after the way of dreams, his companions would declare it impossible and he would be hurried away.[128] From the time that he actually saw again the city that he loved this recurring dream was to come no more. He wandered through the well-known places, and seeking for an echo in the Rocca, the ruined fortress above the town, he found that it had not lost its tongue. A fortnight at Venice in a hotel where quiet and coolness were the chief attractions, prepared the way for many subsequent visits to what he afterwards called "the dearest place in the world." Everything in Venice, says Mrs Bronson, charmed him: "He found grace and beauty in the *popolo* whom he paints so well in the Goldoni sonnet. The poorest street children were pretty in his eyes. He would admire a carpenter or a painter, who chanced to be at work in the house, and say to me 'See the fine poise of the head ... those well-cut features. You might fancy that man in the crimson robe of a Senator as you see them in Tintoret's canvas.'"

But these are reminiscences of later days. It was in 1880 that Browning made the acquaintance of his American friend Mrs Arthur Bronson, whose kind hospitalities added to the happiness of his visits to Asolo and to Venice, who received, as if it were a farewell gift, the dedication of his last volume, and who, not long before her death in 1901, published interesting articles on "Browning in Asolo" and "Browning in Venice" in *The Century Magazine*. The only years in which he did not revisit Venice were 1882, 1884 and 1886, and in each of these years his absence was occasioned by some unforeseen mis-adventure. In 1882 the floods were out, and he proceeded no farther than Verona. Could he have overcome the obstacles and reached Venice, he feared that he might have been incapable of enjoying it. For the first time in his life he was lamed by what he took for an attack of rheumatism, "caught," he says, "just before leaving St Pierre de Chartreuse, through my stupid inadvertence in sitting with a window open at my back—reading the Iliad, all my excuse!—while clad in a thin summer suit, and snow on the hills and bitterness every where." [129] In 1884 his sister's illness at first forbade travel to so considerable a distance. The two companions were received by another American friend, Mrs Bloomfield Moore, at the Villa Berry, St Moritz, and when she was summoned across the Atlantic, at her request they continued to occupy her villa. The season was past; the place deserted; but the sun shone gloriously. "We have walked every day," Browning wrote at the end of September, "morning and evening—afternoon I should say—two or three hours each excursion, the delicious mountain air surpassing any I was ever privileged to breathe. My sister is absolutely herself again, and something over: I was hardly in want of such doctoring."[130] Two years later Miss Browning was ailing again, and they did not venture farther than Wales. At the Hand Hotel, Llangollen, they were at no great distance from Brintysilio, the summer residence of their friends Sir Theodore and Lady Martin—in earlier days the Lady Carlisle and Colombe of Browning's plays.[131] Mrs Orr notices that Browning, Liberal as he declared himself, was now very favourably impressed by the services to society of the English country gentleman. "Talk of abolishing that class of men!" he exclaimed, "they are the salt of the earth!" She adds, as worthy of remark, that he attended regularly the afternoon Sunday service in the parish church at Llantysilio, where now a tablet of Lady Martin's placing

marks the spot. Churchgoing was not his practice in London; "but I do not think," says Mrs Orr, "he ever failed in it at the Universities or in the country." At Venice it was his custom to be present with his sister at the services of a Waldensian chapel, where "a certain eloquent pastor," as Mrs Bronson describes him, was the preacher. A year before his death Browning in a letter to Lady Martin recalls the happy season in the Vale of Llangollen—"delightful weeks—each tipped with a sweet starry Sunday at the little church leading to the House Beautiful where we took our rest of an evening spent always memorably."



THE PALAZZO GIUSTINIANI, VENICE.

From a drawing by Miss N. ERICHSEN.

THE PALAZZO GIUSTINIANI, VENICE.

***From a drawing by* Miss N. ERICHSEN.**

Before passing on to Venice, where repose was mingled with excitement, Browning was accustomed to seek a renewal of physical energy, after the fatigues of London, in some place not too much haunted by the English tourist, where he could walk for hours in the clear mountain air. In 1881 and 1882 it was St Pierre de Chartreuse, from which he visited the Grande Chartreuse, and heard the midnight mass; in 1883 and 1885 it was Gressoney St Jean in the Val d'Aosta—the "delightful Gressoney" of the Prologue to *Ferishtah's Fancies*, where "eggs, milk, cheese, fruit" sufficed "for gormandizing"; in 1888 it was the yet more beautiful Primiero, near Feltre. In the previous year he had, for the second time, stayed at St Moritz. These were seasons of abounding life. St Pierre was only "a wild little clump of cottages on a mountain amid loftier mountains," with the roughest of little inns for its hotel; but its primitive arrangements suited Browning well and were bravely borne by his sister.[132] From Gressoney in September 1885 he wrote: "We are all but alone, the brief 'season' being over, and only a chance traveller turning up for a fortnight's lodging. We take our walks in the old way; two and a half hours before breakfast, three after it, in the most beautiful country I know. Yesterday the three hours passed without our meeting a single man, woman, or child; one man only was discovered at a distance at the foot of a mountain we had climbed."[133] All things pleased him; an August snowstorm at St Moritz was made amends for by "the magnificence of the mountain and its firs black against the universal white"; it served

moreover as an illustration of a passage in the Iliad, the only book that accompanied him from England: "The days glide away uneventfully, *nearly*, and I breathe in the pleasant idleness at every pore. I have no few acquaintances here—nay, some old friends—but my intimates are the firs on the hillside, and the myriad butterflies all about it, every bright wing of them under the snow to-day, which ought not to have been for a fortnight yet."[134] And from Primiero in 1888, when his strength had considerably declined, a letter tells of unabated pleasure; of mountains "which morning and evening, in turn, transmute literally to gold," with at times a silver change; of the valley "one green luxuriance"; of the tiger-lilies in the garden above ten feet high, every bloom and every leaf faultless; and of the captive fox, "most engaging of little vixens," who, to Browning's great joy, broke her chain and escaped.[135] As each successive volume that he published seemed to him his best, so of his mountain places of abode the last always was the loveliest.

At Venice for a time the quiet Albergo dell' Universo suited Browning and his sister well, but when Mrs Bronson pressed them to accept the use of a suite of rooms in the Palazzo Giustiniani Recanati and the kind offer was accepted, the gain was considerable; and the *Palazzo* has historical associations dating from the fifteenth century which pleased Browning's imagination. It was his habit to rise early, and after a light breakfast to visit the Public Gardens with his sister. He had many friends—Mrs Bronson is our informant—whose wants or wishes he bore in mind—the prisoned elephant, the baboon, the kangaroo, the marmosets, the pelicans, the ostrich; three times, with strict punctuality, he made his rounds, and then returned to his apartment. At noon appeared the second and more substantial breakfast, at which Italian dishes were preferred. Browning wrote passionately against the vivisection of animals, and strenuously declaimed against the decoration of a lady's hat with the spoils of birds—

> Clothed with murder of His best
> Of harmless beings.

He praised God—for pleasure as he teaches us is praise—by heartily enjoying ortolans, "a dozen luscious lumps" provided by the cook of the Giustiniani-Recanati palace; to vary his own phrasing, he was

> Fed with murder of His best
> Of harmless beings,

and laughed, innocently enough, with his good sister over the delicious "mouthfuls for cardinals."[136] As if the pleasure of the eye in beauty gained at a bird's expense were more criminal than the gusto of the tongue in lusciousness, curbed by piquancy, gained at the expense of a dozen other birds! At three o'clock came the gondola, and it was often directed to the Lido. "I walk, even in wind and rain, for a couple of hours on Lido," Browning wrote when nearly seventy, "and enjoy the break of sea on the strip of sand as much as Shelley did in those old days."[137] And to another friend: "You don't know how absolutely well I am after my walking, not on the mountains merely, but on the beloved Lido. Go there, if only to stand and be blown about by the sea wind."[138] At one time he even talked of completing an unfinished villa on the Lido from which "the divine sunsets" could be seen, but the dream-villa faded after the manner of such dreams. Sunsets, however, and sunrises never faded from Browning's brain. "I will not praise a cloud however bright," says Wordsworth, although no one has praised them more ardently than he. From Pippa's sunrise to the sunrises of mornings when his life drew towards its close, Browning lavished his praise upon the scenery of the sky. A passage quoted by Mrs Orr from a letter written a little more than a year before his death is steeped in colour; when *Pippa Passes* becomes the prey of the annotating editor it will illuminate his page: "Every morning at six I see the sun rise.... My bedroom window commands a perfect view: the still, grey lagune, the few sea-gulls flying, the islet of S. Giorgio in deep shadow, and the clouds in a long purple rack, behind which a sort of spirit of rose burns up till presently all the rims are on fire with gold, and last of all the orb sends before it a long column of its own essence apparently: so my day begins." The sea-gulls of which this extract speaks were, Mrs Bronson tells us, a special delight to Browning. On a day of gales "he would stand at the window and watch them as they sailed to and fro, a sure sign of heavy storms in the Adriatic." To him, as he declared, they were even more interesting than the doves of St Mark.

Sometimes his walks, guided by Mrs Bronson's daughter, "the best cicerone in the world," he said, were through the narrowest by-streets of the city, where he rejoiced in the discovery, or what he supposed to be discovery, of some neglected stone of Venice. Occasionally he examined curiously the monuments of the churches. His American friend tells at length the story of a search in the Church of San Niccolò for the tomb of the chieftain Salinguerra of Browning's own *Sordello*. At times he entered the bric-a-brac shops, and made a purchase of some piece of old furniture or tapestry. His rule "never to buy anything without knowing exactly what he wished to do with it" must have been interpreted liberally, for when about to move in June 1887 from Warwick Crescent to De Vere Gardens many treasures acquired in Italy were, Mrs Orr tells us, stowed away in the house which he was on the point of leaving. And the latest bibelot was always the most enchanting: "Like a child with a new toy," says Mrs Bronson, "he would carry it himself (size and weight permitting) into the gondola, rejoice over his chance in finding it, and descant eloquently upon its intrinsic merits." Thus, or with his son's assistance, came to De Vere Gardens brass lamps that had hung in Venetian chapels, the silver Jewish "Sabbath lamp," and the "four little heads"—the seasons—after which, Browning declared, he would not buy another thing for

the house.[139] Returning from his walks on the Lido or wanderings through the little *calli*, he showed that unwise half-disdain, which an unenlightened masculine Herakles might have shown, for the blessedness of five o'clock tea. At dinner he was in his toilet what Mr Henry James calls the "member of society," never the poet whose necktie is a dithyramb. Good sense was his habit if not his foible. And why should we deny ourselves here the pleasure of imagining Miss Browning at these pleasant ceremonies, as Mrs Bronson describes her, wearing "beautiful gowns of rich and sombre tints, and appearing each day in a different and most dainty French cap and quaint antique jewels"? If other guests were not present, sometimes a visit to the theatre followed. The Venetian comedies of Gallina especially pleased Browning; he went to his spacious box at the Goldoni evening after evening, and did not fail to express his thanks to his "brother dramatist" for the enjoyment he had received. In his *Toccata of Galuppi* he had expressed the melancholy which underlies the transitory gaiety of eighteenth-century life in Venice; but he could also remember its innocent gladnesses without this sense of melancholy. When in 1883 the committee of the Goldoni monument asked Browning to contribute a poem to their Album he immediately complied with the request. It was "scribbled off," according to Mrs Orr, while Professor Molmenti's messenger was waiting; it was ready the day after the request reached him, says Mrs Bronson, and was probably "carefully thought out before he put pen to paper." It catches, in the happiest temper, the spirit of Goldoni's sunniest plays:

> There throng the People: how they come and go,
> Lisp the soft language, flaunt the bright garb—see—
> On Piazza, Calle, under Portico
> And over Bridge! Dear King of Comedy,
> Be honoured! Thou that didst love Venice so,
> Venice, and we who love her, all love thee!

The brightness and lightness of southern life soothed Browning's northern strenuousness of mood. He would enumerate of a morning the crimes of "the wicked city" as revealed by the reports of the public press—a gondolier's oars had been conveyed away, a piece of linen a-dry had corrupted the virtue of some lightfingered Autolycus of the canals![140] Yet all the while much of his heart remained with his native land. He could not be happy without his London daily paper; Mrs Orr tells us how deeply interested he was in the fortunes of the British expedition for the relief of General Gordon.

In 1885 Browning's son for the first time since his childhood was in Italy. With Venice he was in his father's phrase "simply infatuated." For his son's sake, but also with the thought of a place of retreat when perhaps years should bring with them feebleness of body, Browning entered into treaty with the owner, an Austrian and an absentee, for the purchase of the Manzoni Palazzo on the Grand Canal. He considered it the most beautiful house in Venice. Ruskin had described it in the "Stones of Venice" as "a perfect and very rich example of Byzantine Renaissance." It wholly captured the imagination of Browning. He not only already possessed it in his dream, but was busy opening new windows to admit the morning sunshine, and throwing out balconies, while leaving undisturbed the rich façade with its medallions in coloured marble. The dream was never realised. The vendor, Marchese Montecucculi, hoping to secure a higher price, drew back. Browning was about to force him by legal proceedings to fulfil his bargain, when it was discovered that the walls were cracked and the foundations were untrustworthy. To his great mortification the whole scheme had to be abandoned. It was not until his son in 1888, the year after his marriage, acquired possession of the Palazzo Rezzonico—"a stately temple of the rococo" is Mr Henry James's best word for it—that Browning ceased to think with regret of the lost Manzoni. At no time, however, did he design a voluntary abandonment of his life in England. When in full expectation of becoming the owner of the Palazzo Manzoni he wrote to Dr Furnivall: "Don't think I mean to give up London till it warns me away; when the hospitalities and innumerable delights grow a burden.... Pen will have sunshine and beauty about him, and every help to profit by these, while I and my sister have secured a shelter when the fogs of life grow too troublesome."

NOTES:

[119]

Some parts of what follows on *La Saisiaz* have already appeared in print in a forgotten article of mine on that poem.

[120]

"An Artist's Reminiscences," by R. Lehmann (1894), p. 231.

[121]

Thus he declaimed to Robert Buchanan against Walt Whitman's writings, with which, according to Buchanan, he had little acquaintance.

[122]

"Autobiography of a Journalist," ii. 210.

[123]

From the first of three valuable articles by Mr Rossetti in *The Magazine of Art* (1890) on "Portraits of Robert Browning."

[124]

Robert Browning, "Personalia," by Edmund Gosse, pp. 81, 82.

[125]

Vol. ii. pp. 88, 89.

[126]

Anna Swanwick, "A Memoir by Mary L. Bruce," pp. 130, 131. To Dr Furnivall he often spoke of Mrs Browning.

[127]

From Mrs Bronson's article in *The Century Magazine*, "Browning in Venice."

[128]

Related more fully in Mrs Bronson's article "Browning in Asolo" in *The Century Magazine*.

[129]

Mrs Bronson's "Browning in Venice" in *The Century Magazine*.

[130]

To Dr Furnivall, Sept. 28, 1884.

[131]

Some notices of Browning in Wales occur in Sir T. Martin's "Life of Lady Martin."

[132]

Letter to Dr Furnivall, August 29, 1881.

[133]

To Dr Furnivall, Sept. 7, 1885.

[134]

To Dr Furnivall, August 21, 1887.

[135]

See for fuller details the letter in Mrs Orr's *Life of Browning*, pp. 407, 408.

[136]

So described by Mrs Bronson.

[137]

To Dr Furnivall, Oct. 11, 1881.

[138]

Quoted by Mrs Bronson.

[139]

Mrs Orr, "Life of Browning," p. 400.

[140]

Mrs Bronson records this.

Chapter XVI

Poet and Teacher in Old Age

During the last decade of his life Browning's influence as a literary power was assured. The

publication indeed of *The Ring and the Book* in 1868 did much to establish his reputation with those readers who are not watchers for a new planet but revise their astronomical charts upon authority. He noted with satisfaction that fourteen hundred copies of *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* were sold in five days, and says of *Balaustion's Adventure* "2500 in five months is a good sale for the likes of me." The later volumes were not perhaps more popular, but they sent readers to the earlier poems, and successive volumes of Selections made these easily accessible. That published by Moxon in 1865, and dedicated in words of admiration and friendship to Tennyson, by no means equalled in value the earlier Selections made by John Forster. The volume of 1872—dedicated also to Tennyson—which has been frequently reprinted, was arranged upon a principle, the reference of which to the poems chosen is far from clear—"by simply stringing together certain pieces"; Browning wrote, "on the thread of an imaginary personality, I present them in succession, rather as the natural development of a particular experience than because I account them the most noteworthy portion of my work." We can perceive that some poems of love are brought together, and some of art, and that the series closes with poems of religious thought or experience, but such an order is not strictly observed, and the "imaginary personality"—the thread—seems to be imaginary in the fullest sense of the word. Yet it is of interest to observe that something of a psychological-dramatic arrangement was at least designed. A second series of Selections followed in 1880. Browning was accepted by many admirers not only as a poet but as a prophet. "Tennyson and I seem now to be regarded as the two kings of Brentford," he said laughingly in 1879.[141] The later-enthroned king was soon to have an interesting court. In 1881 The Browning Society, founded by Dr Furnivall—initiator of so much work that is invaluable to the student of our literature—and Miss E.H. Hickey, herself a poet, began its course. At first, according to Mrs Orr, Browning "treated the project as a joke," but when once he understood it to be serious, "he did not oppose it." He felt, however, that before the public he must stand aloof from its work: "as Wilkes was no Wilkeite," he wrote to Edmund Yates, "I am quite other than a Browningite." With a little nervousness as to the discretion which the Society might or might not show, he felt grateful for the interest in his writings demonstrated by persons many of whom had been unknown to him even by name. He was always ready to furnish Dr Furnivall with a note of facts or elucidation. His old admirers had made him somewhat too much of a peculiar and private possession. A propaganda of younger believers could not be unwelcome to one who had for so many years been commonly regarded as an obscure heretic—not even an heresiarch—of literature.

Other honours accompanied his old age. In 1884 he received the LL.D. of the University of Edinburgh, and again declined to be nominated for the Lord Rectorship of the University of St Andrews. Next year he accepted the Honorary Presidency of the Five Associated Societies of Edinburgh. In 1886 he was appointed Foreign Correspondent to the Royal Academy, a sinecure post rendered vacant by the death of Lord Houghton. Though so vigorous in talk, Browning could not make a public speech, or he shrank from such an effort; none of the honours which he accepted were such as to put him to this test. During many years he was President of the New Shakspere Society. His veneration for Shakespeare is expressed in a sonnet entitled *The Names*, written for the Book of the Show held in the Albert Hall, May 1884, on behalf of the Fulham Road Hospital for Women; it was not included in the edition of his works which he was superintending during the last two years of his life. Browning was not wholly uninterested in the attempts made to transfer the glory of the Shakespearian drama to Bacon; he agreed with Spedding that whatever else might be a matter of doubt, it was certain that the author of the "Essays" could not have been the author of the plays. On another question it is perhaps worth recording his opinion —he could see nothing of Shakespeare, he declared, in the tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*.

In 1879 appeared *Dramatic Idyls* and in the following year *Dramatic Idyls, Second Series*. They differed in two respects from the volumes of miscellaneous poetry which Browning had previously published. Hitherto the contents of his collections of verse in the main fell into three groups—poems which were interpretations of the passion of love, poems which dealt with art and artists, poems which were inspired by the ideas and emotions of religion. Unless we regard *Ned Bratts* as a poem of religious experience, we may say that these themes are wholly absent from the *Dramatic Idyls*. Secondly, the short story in verse for the first time becomes predominant, or rather excludes other forms, and the short story here is in general not romantic or fantastic, but what we understand by the word "realistic." The outward body of the story is in several instances more built up by cumulative details than formerly, which gives it an air of solidity or massiveness, and is less expressed through a swift selection of things essential. And this may lead a reader to suppose that the story is more a narrative of external incidents than is actually the case. In truth, though the "corporal rind" of the narrative bulks upon our view, the poet remains essentially the psychologist. The narrative interest is not evenly distributed over the whole as it is in the works of such a writer as Chaucer, who loves narrative for its own sake. There is ordinarily a crisis, a culmination, a decisive and eventful invasion or outbreak of spiritual passion to which we are led up by all that precedes it. If the poem should be humorous, it works up to some humorous point, or surprise. The narrative is in fact a picture that hangs from a nail, and the nail here is some vivid moment of spiritual experience, or else some jest which also has its crisis. A question sometimes arises as to whether the central motive is sufficient to bear the elaborate apparatus; for the parts of the poem do not always justify themselves except by reference to their centre, in the case, for example, of *Doctor——*, the thesis is that a bad wife is stronger than death; the jest culminates at the point where the Devil upon sight of his formidable spouse flies from the bed's-head of one who is about to die, and thus allows his victim to escape the imminent death. The question, "Will the jest sustain a poem of such length?" is a fair one, and a good-natured reader will stretch a point and say that he has not after all been so ill amused, which he might also say of

an Ingoldsby Legend; but even a good-natured reader will hardly return to *Doctor* —— with pleasure. Chaucer with as thin a jest could have made an admirable poem, for the interest would have been distributed by his lightness of touch, by his descriptive power, by slyness, by geniality, by a changeful ripple of enjoyment over the entire piece. With Browning, when we have arrived at the apex of the jest, we are fatigued by the climb, and too much out of breath to be capable of laughter. In like manner few persons except the Browning enthusiast, who is not responsible for his fervour, will assert that either the jest or the frankly cynical moral of *Pietro of Abano* compensates for the jolting in a springless waggon over a rough road and a long. We make the acquaintance of a magician who with knowledge uninspired by love has kicks and cuffs for his reward, and the acquaintance of an astute Greek, who, at least in his dream of life, imposed upon him by the art of magic, exploits the talents of his friend Pietro, and gains the prize of his astuteness, having learnt to rule men by the potent spell of "cleverness uncurbed by conscience." The cynicism is only inverted morality, and implies that the writer is the reverse of cynical; but it lacks the attractive sub-acid flavour of a delicate cynicism, which insinuates its prophylactic virus into our veins, and the humour of the poem, ascending from stage to stage until we reach Pietro's final failure, is cumbrous and mechanical.

The two series of *Dramatic Idyls* included some conspicuous successes. The classical poems *Pheidippides*, *Echetlos*, *Pan and Luna*, idyls heroic and mythological, invite us by their beauty to return to them again and again. Browning's sympathy with gallantry in action, with self-devotion to a worthy cause, was never more vividly rendered than in the first of these poems. The runner of Athens is a more graceful brother of the Breton sailor who saved a fleet for France; but the vision of majestical Pan in "the cool of a cleft" exalts our human heroism into relation with the divine benevolence, and the reward of release from labour is proportionally higher than a holiday with the "belle Aurore." Victory and then domestic love is the human interpretation of Pan's oracular promise; but the gifts of the gods are better than our hopes and it proves to be victory and death:

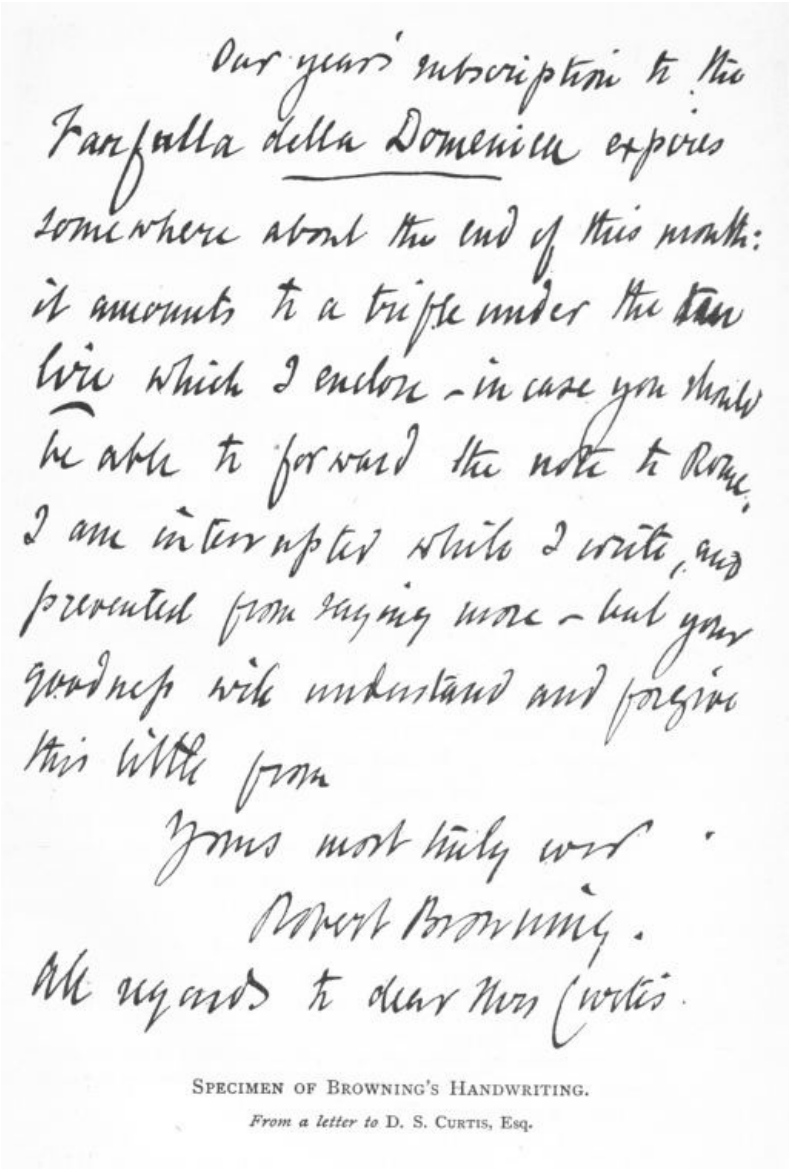
> He flung down his shield,
> Ran like fire once more: and the space 'twixt the Fennel-field
> And Athens was stubble again, a field which a fire runs through,
> Till in he broke: "Rejoice, we conquer!" Like wine through clay,
> Joy in his blood bursting his heart, he died—the bliss!

The companion poem of Marathon, the story of the nameless clown, the mysterious holder of the ploughshare, is not less inspiring. The unknown champion, so plain in his heroic magnitude of mind, so brilliant as he flashes in the van, in the rear, is like the incarnated genius of the soil, which hides itself in the furrow and flashes into the harvest; and it is his glory to be obscured for ever by his deed—"the great deed ne'er grows small." Browning's development of the Vergilian myth—"si credere dignum est"—of Pan and Luna astonishes by its vehement sensuousness and its frank chastity; and while the beauty of the Girl-moon and the terror of her betrayal are realised with the utmost energy of imagination, we are made to feel that all which happens is the transaction of a significant dream or legend.

In contrast with these classical pieces, *Halbert and Hob* reads like a fragment from some Scandinavian saga telling of the life of forlorn and monstrous creatures, cave-dwellers, who are less men than beasts. Yet father and son are indeed men; the remorse which checks the last outrage against paternity is the touch of the finger of God upon human hearts; and though old Halbert sits dead,

> With an outburst blackening still the old bad fighting face,

and young Hob henceforth goes tottering, muttering, mumbling with a mindless docility, they are, like Browning's men of the Paris morgue, only "apparent failures"; there was in them that spark of divine illumination which can never be wholly extinguished. Positive misdeeds, the presence of a wild crew of evil passions, do not suffice to make Browning's faith or hope falter. It is the absence of human virtue which appals him; if the salt have lost its savour wherewith shall it be salted? This it is which condemns to a swift, and what the poem represents as a just, abolishment from earth the mother who in *Ivàn Ivànovitch* has given her children to the wolves, and has thereby proved the complete nullity of her womanhood. For her there is no possible redemption; she must cease to cumber the ground. Ivàn acts merely as the instinctive doomsman of Nature or of God, and the old village Pope, who, as the veil of life grows thin, is feeling after the law above human law, justifies the wielder of the axe, which has been no instrument of vengeance but simply an exponent of the wholesome vitality of earth. The objection that carpenters and joiners, who assume the Heraklean task of purging the earth of monsters, must be prepared to undergo a period of confinement at the pleasure of the Czar in a Criminal Lunatic Asylum is highly sensible, and wholly inappropriate, belonging, as it does, to a plane of thought and feeling other than that in which the poem moves. But perhaps it is not a defect of feeling to fail in admiration of that admired final tableau in which the formidable carpenter is discovered building a toy Kremlin for his five children. We can take for granted that the excellent homicide, having done so simple a bit of the day's work as that of decapitating a fellow-creature, proceeds tranquilly to other innocent pleasures and duties; we do not require the ostentatious theatrical group, with limelight effects on the Kremlin and the honey-coloured beard, displayed for our benefit just before the curtain is rung down.[142]


Our years' subscription to the
Farfalla della Domenica expires
somewhere about the end of this month:
it amounts to a trifle under the dear
Lire which I enclose – in case you should
be able to forward the note to Rome.
I am interrupted while I write, and
prevented from saying more – but your
goodness will understand and forgive
this little form
Yours most truly ever
Robert Browning.
All regards to dear Mrs Curtis.

SPECIMEN OF BROWNING'S HANDWRITING.
From a letter to D. S. CURTIS, Esq.

SPECIMEN OF BROWNING'S HANDWRITING.

From a letter to D.S. CURTIS, Esq.

Martin Relph is a story of life-long remorse, self-condemnation and self-denunciation; there is something approaching the supernatural, and yet terribly real, in the figure of the strange old man with a beard as white as snow, standing, on a bright May day, in monumental grief, and exposing his ulcerated heart to the spectators who form for him a kind of posterity. One instant's failure in the probation of life, one momentary syncope of his better nature long years ago, has condemned his whole after-existence to become a climbing of the purgatorial mount, with an agony of pain annually renewed at the season when the earth rejoices. Only a high-strung delicate spirit is capable of such a perennial passion of penitence. *Ned Bratts* may be described as a companion, but a contrasted piece. It is a story of sudden conversion and of penitence taking an immediate and highly effective form. The humour of the poem, which is excellent of its kind, resembles more the humour of Rowlandson than that of Hogarth. The Bedford Court House on the sweltering Midsummer Day, the Puritan recusants, reeking of piety and the cow-house conventicle, the Judges at high jinks upon the bench—to whom, all in a muck-sweat and ablaze with the fervour of conversion, enter Black Ned, the stout publican, and big Tab, his slut of a wife,—these are drawn after the broad British style of humorous illustration, which combines a frank exaggeration of the characteristic lines with, at times, a certain grace in deformity. Here at least is downright belief in the invisible, here is genuine conviction driven home by the Spirit of God and the terror of hell-fire. Black Ned and the slut Tabby as yet may not seem the most suitable additions to the company of the blessed who move singing

> In solemn troops and sweet societies;

but when a pair of lusty sinners desire nothing so much as to be hanged, and that forthwith, we may take it that they are resolved, as "Christmas" was, to quit the City of Destruction; and the saints above have learnt not to be fastidious as they bend over repentant rogues. Thanks to the grace of God and John Bunyan's book, husband and wife triumphantly aspire to and attain the gallows; "they were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided." A wise economy of spiritual force!—for while their effectual calling cannot be gainsaid, the final perseverance of these interesting converts, had they lingered on the pilgrims' way, as Ned is

painfully aware, might have been less of a certainty.

Browning's method as a story-teller may be studied with special advantage in *Clive*. The circumstances under which the tale is related have to be caught at by the reader, which quickens his attention and keeps him on the alert; this device is, of course, not in itself difficult, but to employ it with success is an achievement requiring skill; it is a device proper to the dramatic or quasi-dramatic form; the speaker, who is by no means a Clive, has to betray something of his own character, and at the same time to set forth the character of the hero of his tale; the narrative must tend to a moment of culmination, a crisis; and that this should involve a paradox—Clive's fear, in the present instance, being not that the antagonist's pistol, presented at his head, should be discharged but rather that it should be remorsefully or contemptuously flung away—gives the poet an opportunity for some subtle or some passionate casuistry. The effect of the whole is that of a stream or a shock from an electric battery of mind, for which the story serves as a conductor. It is not a simple but a highly complex species of narrative. In *Muléykeh*, one of the most delightful of Browning's later poems, uniting, as it does, the poetry of the rapture of swift motion with the poetry of high-hearted passion, the narrative leads up to a supreme moment, and this resolves itself through a paradox of the heart. Shall Hóseyn recover his stolen Pearl of a steed, but recover her dishonoured in the race, or abandon her to the captor with her glory untarnished? It is he himself who betrays himself to loss and grief, for to perfect love, pride in the supremacy of the beloved is more than possession; and thus as Clive's fear was courage, as Ivan's violation of law was obedience to law, so Hóseyn's loss is Hóseyn's gain. In each case Browning's casuistry is not argumentative; it lies in an appeal to some passion or some intuition that is above our common levels of passion or of insight, and his power of uplifting his reader for even a moment into this higher mood is his special gift as a poet. We can return safely enough to the common ground, but we return with a possession which instructs the heart.

A mood of acquiescence, which does not displace the moods of aspiration and of combat but rather floats above them as an atmosphere, was growing familiar to Browning in these his elder years. He had sought for truth, and had now found all that earth was likely to yield him, of which not the least important part was a conviction that much of our supposed knowledge ends in a perception of our ignorance. He was now disposed to accept what seemed to be the providential order that truth and error should mingle in our earthly life, that truth should be served by illusion; he would not rearrange the disposition of things if he could. He was inclined to hold by the simple certainties of our present life and to be content with these as provisional truths, or as temporary illusions which lead on towards the truth. In the *Pisgah Sights* of the *Pacchiarotto* volume he had imagined this mood of acquiescence as belonging to the hour of death. But old age in reality is an earlier stage in the process of dying, and with all his ardour and his energy, Browning was being detached from the contentions and from some of the hopes and aspirations of life. And because he was detached he could take the world to his heart, though in a different temper from that of youth or middle age; he could limit his view to things that are near, because their claim upon his passions had diminished while their claim upon his tenderness had increased. He could smile amiably, for to the mood of acquiescence a smile seems to be worth more than an argument. He could recall the thoughts of love, and reanimate them in his imagination, and could love love with the devotion of an old man to the most precious of the things that have been. Some of an old man's jests may be found in *Jocoseria*, some of an old man's imaginative passion in *Asolando*, and in both volumes, and still more clearly in *Ferishtah's Fancies* may be seen an old man's spirit of acquiescence, or to use a catch-word of Matthew Arnold, the epoch of concentration which follows an epoch of expansion. But the embrace of earth and the things of earth is like the embrace, with a pathos in its ardour, which precedes a farewell. From the first he had recognised the danger on the one hand of settling down to browse contentedly in the paddock of our earthly life, and on the other hand the danger of ignoring our limitations, the danger of attempting to "thrust in earth eternity's concerns." In his earlier years he had chiefly feared the first of these two dangers, and even while pointing out, as in *Paracelsus*, the errors of the seeker for absolute knowledge or for absolute love, he had felt a certain sympathy with such glorious transgressors. He had valued more than any positive acquisitions of knowledge those "grasps of guess, which pull the more into the less." Now such guesses, such hopes were as precious to him as ever, but he set more store than formerly by the certainties—certainties even if illusions—of the general heart of man. These are the forms of thought and feeling divinely imposed upon us; we cannot do better than to accept them; but we must accept them only as provisional, as part of our education on earth, as a needful rung of the ladder by which we may climb to higher things. And the faith which leads to such acquiescence also results in the acceptance of hopes as things not be struggled for but rested in as a substantial portion of the divine order of our lives. In autumn come for spirits rightly attuned these pellucid halcyon days of the Indian summer.

In *Jocoseria*, which appeared in Browning's seventy-first year (1883), he shows nothing of his boisterous humour, but smiles at our human infirmities from the heights of experience. The prop of Israel, the much-enlightened master, "Eximious Jochanan Ben Sabbathai," when his last hour is at hand has to confess that all his wisdom of life lies in his theoric; in practice he is still an infant; striving presumptuously in boyhood to live an angel, now that he comes to die he is hardly a man. And Solomon himself is no more than man; the truth-compelling ring extorts the confession that an itch of vanity still tickles and teazes him; the Queen of Sheba, seeker for wisdom and patroness of culture, after all likes wisdom best when its exponents are young men tall and proper, and prefers to the solution of the riddles of life by elderly monarchs one small kiss from a fool. Lilith in a moment of terror acknowledges that her dignified reserve was the cloak of passion, and Eve acknowledges that her profession of love was transferred to the wrong man;

both ladies recover their self-possession and resume their make-believe decorums, and Adam, like a gallant gentleman, will not see through what is transparent. These are harmless jests at the ironies of life. Browning's best gifts in this volume, that looks pale beside its predecessors, are one or two short lyrics of love, which continue the series of his latest lyrical poems, begun in the exquisite prologue to *La Saisiaz* and the graceful epilogue to *The Two Poets of Croisic*, and continued in the songs of *Ferishtah's Fancies* and *Asolando*—not the least valuable part of the work of his elder years. His strength in this volume of 1883 is put into that protest of human righteousness against immoral conceptions of the Deity uttered by Ixion from his wheel of torture. Rather than obey an immoral supreme Power, as John Stuart Mill put it, "to Hell I will go"—and such is the cry of Browning's victim of Zeus. He is aware that in his recognition of righteousness he is himself superior to the evil god who afflicts him; and as this righteousness is a moral quality, and no creation of his own consciousness but rather imposed upon it as an eternal law, he rises past Zeus to the Potency above him, after which even the undeveloped sense of a Caliban blindly felt when he discovered a Quiet above the bitter god Setebos; but the Quiet of Caliban is a negation of those evil attributes of the supreme Being, which he reflects upwards from his own gross heart, not the energy of righteousness which Ixion demands in his transcendent "Potency." Into this poem went the energy of Browning's heart and imagination; some of his matured wisdom entered into *Jochanan Hakkadosh*, of which, however, the contents are insufficient to sustain the length. The saint and sage of Israel has at the close of his life found no solution of the riddle of existence. Lover, bard, soldier, statist, he has obtained in each of his careers only doubts and dissatisfaction. Twelve months added to a long life by the generosity of his admirers, each of whom surrenders a fragment of his own life to prolong that of the saint, bring him no clearer illumination—still all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Only at the last, when by some unexpected chance, a final opportunity of surveying the past and anticipating the future is granted him, all has become clear. Instead of trying to solve the riddle he accepts it. He sees from his Pisgah how life, with all its confusions and contrarieties, is the school which educates the soul and fits it for further wayfaring. The ultimate faith of Jochanan the Saint had been already expressed by Browning:

> Over the ball of it,
> Peering and prying,
> How I see all of it,
> Life there, outlying!
> Roughness and smoothness,
> Shine and defilement,
> Grace and uncouthness:
> One reconcilement.

But even to his favourite disciple the sage is unable so to impart the secret that Tsaddik's mind shall really embrace it.

The spirit of the saint of Israel is also the spirit of that wise Dervish of Browning's invention (1884), the Persian Ferishtah. The volume is frankly didactic, and Browning, as becomes a master who would make his lessons easy to children, teaches by parables and pictures. In reading *Ferishtah's Fancies* we might suppose that we were in the Interpreter's House, and that the Interpreter himself was pointing a moral with the robin that has a spider in his mouth, or the hen walking in a fourfold method towards her chickens. The discourses of the Dervish are in the main theological or philosophical; the lyrics, which are interposed between the discourses or discussions, are amatory. In Persian Poetry much that at first sight might be taken for amatory has in its inner meaning a mystical theological sense. Browning reverses the order of such poetry; he gives us first his doctrine concerning life or God, and gives it clothed in a parable; then in a lyric the subject is retracted into the sphere of human affections, and the truth of theology condenses itself into a corresponding truth respecting the love of man and woman.

Throughout the series of poems it is not a Persian Dervish who is the speaker and teacher; we hear the authentic voice of the Dervish born in Camberwell in the year 1812—Ferishtah-Browning. The doctrine set forth is the doctrine of Browning; the manner of speech is the manner of the poet. The illustrations and imagery are often Oriental; the ideas are those of a Western thinker; yet no sense of discordance is produced. The parable of the starving ravens fed by an eagle serves happily as an induction; let us become not waiters on providence, but workers with providence; and to feed hungry souls is even more needful than to feed hungry bodies:

> I starve in soul:
> So may mankind: and since men congregate
> In towns, not woods—to Ispahan forthwith!

Such is the lesson of energetic charity. And the lesson for the acceptance of providential gifts is that put in words by the poor melon-seller, once the Shah's Prime Minister—words spoken in the spirit of the afflicted Job—"Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?"[143] Or rather—Shall not our hearts even in the midst of evil be lifted up in gratitude at the remembrance of the good which we have received? Browning proceeds, under a transparent veil of Oriental fable, to consider the story of the life of Christ. Do we believe in that tale of wonder in the full sense of the word belief? The more it really concerns us, the more exacting grow our demands for evidence of its truth; an otiose assent is easy, but this has none of the potency of genuine conviction. And, after all, intellectual assent is of little importance compared with that love for the Divine which may co-exist as truly with denial as with assent. *The Family* sets forth,

through a parable, the wisdom of accepting and living in our human views of things transcendent. Why pray to God at all? Why not rather accept His will and His Providential disposition of our lives as absolutely wise, and right? That, Browning replies, may be the way of the angels. We are men, and it is God's will that we should feel and think as men:

> Be man and nothing more—
> Man who, as man conceiving, hopes and fears,
> And craves and deprecates, and loves and loathes,
> And bids God help him, till death touch his eyes
> And show God granted most, denying all.

The same spirit of acceptance of our intellectual and moral limitations is applied in *The Sun* to the defence of anthropomorphic religion. Our spirit, burdened with the good gifts of life, looks upward for relief in gratitude and praise; but we can praise and thank only One who is righteous and loving, as we conceive righteousness and love. Let us not strive to pass beyond these human feelings and conceptions. Perhaps they are wholly remote from the unknown reality. They are none the less the conceptions proper to humanity; we have no capacities with which to correct them; let us hold fast by our human best, and preserve, as the preacher very correctly expressed it, "the integrity of our anthropomorphism." The "magnified non-natural man," and "the three Lord Shaftesburys" of Matthew Arnold's irony are regarded with no fine scorn by the intellect of Browning. His early Christian faith has expanded and taken the non-historical form of a Humanitarian Theism, courageously accepted, not as a complete account of the Unknowable, but as the best provisional conception which we are competent to form. This theism involves rather than displaces the truth shadowed forth in the life of Christ. The crudest theism would seem to him far more reasonable than to direct the religious emotions towards a "stream of tendency."

The presence of evil in a world created and governed by One all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving, is justified in *Mirhab Shah* as a necessity of our education. How shall love be called forth unless there be the possibility of self-sacrifice? How shall our human sympathy be perfected unless there be pain? What room is there for thanks to God or love of man if earth be the scene of such a blank monotony of well-being as may be found in the star Rephan? But let us not call evil good, or think pain in itself a gain. God may see that evil is null, and that pain is gain; for us the human view, the human feeling must suffice. This justification of pain as a needful part of an education is, however, inapplicable to never-ending retributive punishment. Such a theological horror Browning rejects with a hearty indignation, qualified only by a humorous contempt, in his apologue of *A Camel-driver*; her driver, if the camel bites, will with good cause thwack, and so instruct the brute that mouths should munch not bite; he will not, six months afterwards, thrust red-hot prongs into the soft of her flesh to hiss there. And God has the advantage over the driver of seeing into the camel's brain and of knowing precisely what moved the creature to offend. The poem which follows is directed against asceticism. Self-sacrifice for the sake of our fellows is indeed "joy beyond joy." As to the rest—the question is not whether we fast or feast, but whether, fasting or feasting, we do our day's work for the Master. If we would supply joy to our fellows, it is needful that we should first know joy ourselves—

> Therefore, desire joy and thank God for it!

Browning's argument is not profound, and could adroitly be turned against himself; but his temperament would survive his argument; his capacity for manifold pleasures was great, and he not only valued these as good in themselves, but turned them to admirable uses. A feast of the senses was to him as spiritually precious as a fast might be to one who only by fasting could attain to higher joys than those of sense. And this, he would maintain, is a better condition for a human being than that which renders expedient the plucking out of an eye, the cutting off of a hand. Joy for Browning means praise and gratitude; and in recognising the occasions for such praise and thanks let us not wind ourselves too high. Let us praise God for the little things that are so considerately fitted to our little human wants and desires. The morning-stars will sing together without our help; if we must choose our moment for a *Te Deum*, let it be when we have enjoyed our plate of cherries. The glorious lamp in the Shah's pavilion lightens other eyes than mine; but to think that the Shah's goodness has provided slippers for my feet in my own small chamber, and of the very colour that I most affect! Nor, in returning thanks, should it cause us trouble that our best thanks are poor, or even that they are mingled with an alloy of earthly regards, "mere man's motives—"

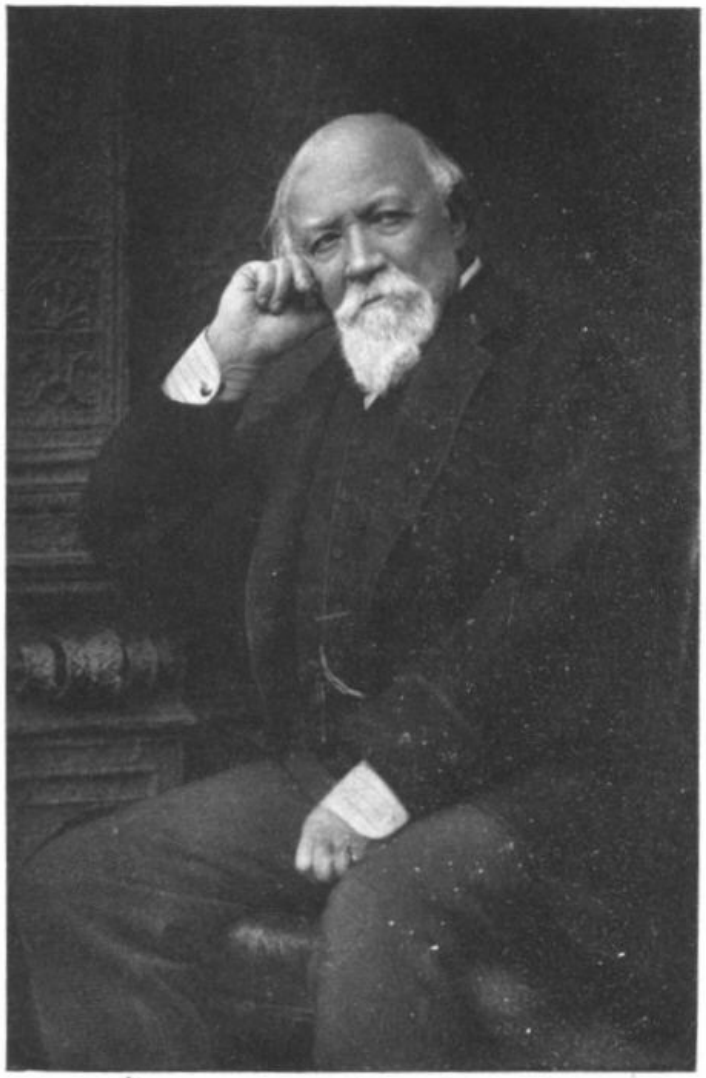
> Alas, Friend, what was free from this alloy,—
> Some smatch thereof,—in best and purest love
> Preferred thy earthly father? Dust thou art,
> Dust shall be to the end.

Our little human pleasures—do they seem unworthy to meet the eye of God? That is a question put by distrust and spiritual pride. God gives each of us His little plot, within which each of us is master. The question is not what compost, what manure, makes fruitful the soil; we need not report to the Lord of the soil the history of our manures; let us treat the ground as seems best, if only we bring sacks to His granary in autumn. Nay, do not I also tickle the palate of my ass with a thistle-bunch, so heartening him to do his work?

In *A Pillar at Sebzevah*, Ferishtah-Browning confronts the objection that he has deposed knowledge and degraded humanity to the rank of an ass whose highest attainment is to love—

what? "Husked lupines, and belike the feeder's self." The Dervish declares without shrinking the faith that is in him:—

> "Friend," quoth Ferishtah, "all I seem to know
> Is—I know nothing save that love I can
> Boundlessly, endlessly."



Robert Browning.

If there be knowledge it shall vanish away; but charity never faileth. As for knowledge, the prize is in the process; as gain we must mistrust it, not as a road to gain:—

> Knowledge means
> Ever-renewed assurance by defeat
> That victory is somehow still to reach,
> But love is victory, the prize itself.

Grasping at the sun, a child captures an orange: what if he were to scorn his capture and refuse to suck its juice? The curse of life is this—that every supposed accession to knowledge, every novel theory, is accepted as a complete solution of the whole problem, while every pleasure is despised as transitory or insubstantial. In truth the drop of water found in the desert sand is infinitely precious; the mirage is only a mirage. Browning, who in this volume puts forth his own doctrine of theism, his justification of prayer, his belief in a superintending providence, his explanation of the presence of evil in the world, is, of course, no Pyrrhonist. He profoundly distrusts the capacity of the intellect, acting as a pure organ of speculation, to unriddle the mysteries of existence; he maintains, on the other hand, that knowledge sufficient for the conduct of our lives is involved in the simple experiences of good and evil, of joy and sorrow. In reality Browning's attitude towards truth approaches more nearly what has now begun to style itself "Pragmatism" than it approaches Pyrrhonism; but philosophers whose joy is to beat the air may find that it is condemnatory of their methods.

In his distrust of metaphysical speculation and in regarding the affections as superior to the

intellect, Browning as a teacher has something in common with Comte; but there is perhaps no creed so alien to his nature as the creed of Positivism. The last of Ferishtah's discourses is concerned with the proportion which happiness bears to pain in the average life of man, or rather —for Browning is nothing if he is not individualistic—in the life of each man as an individual. The conclusion arrived at is that no "bean-stripe"—each bean, white or black, standing for a day—is wholly black, and that the more extended is our field of vision the more is the general aspect of the "bean-stripe" of a colour intermediate between the extremes of darkness and of light. Before the poem closes, Browning turns aside to consider the Positivist position. Why give our thanks and praise for all the good things of life to God, whose existence is an inference of the heart derived from its own need of rendering gratitude to some Being like ourselves? Are not these good things the gifts of the race, of Humanity, and its worthies who have preceded us and who at the present moment constitute our environment of loving help? Ferishtah's reply, which is far from conclusive, must be regarded as no discussion of the subject but the utterance of an isolated thought. Praise rendered to Humanity and the heroes of the race simply reverts to the giver of the praise; his own perceptions of what is praiseworthy alone render praise possible; he must first of all thank and praise the giver of such perceptions—God. It is strange that Browning should fail to recognise the fact that the Positivist would immediately trace the power of moral perception to the energies of Humanity in its upward progress from primitive savagery to our present state of imperfect development.

It has been necessary to transcribe in a reduced form the teaching of Ferishtah, for this is the clearest record left by Browning of his own beliefs on the most important of all subjects, this is an essential part of his criticism of life, and at the same time it is little less than a passage of autobiography. The poems are admirable in their vigour, their humour, their seriousness, their felicity of imagery. Yet the wisdom of *Ferishtah's Fancies* is an old man's wisdom; we perceive in it the inner life, as Baxter puts it, in speaking of changes wrought by his elder years, quitting the leaves and branches and drawing down to the root. But when in prologue or epilogue to this volume or that Browning touches upon the great happiness, the great sorrow of his own life, he is always young. Here the lyrical epilogue is inspired by a noble enthusiasm, and closes with a surprise of beauty. What if all his happy faith in the purpose of life, and the Divine presence through all its course, were but a reflex from the private and personal love that had once been his and was still above and around him? Such a doubt contained its own refutation:

> Only, at heart's utmost joy and triumph, terror
> Sudden turns the blood to ice: a chill wind disencharms
> All the late enchantment! What if all be error—
> If the halo irised round my head were, Love, thine arms?

All the more, if this were so, must the speaker's heart turn Godwards in gratitude. The whole design of the volume with its theological parables and its beautiful lyrics of human love implies that there is a correspondency between the truths of religion and the truths of the passion of love between man and woman.

NOTES:

[141]

Mr Gosse: "Dictionary of National Biography," Supplement, i. 317.

[142]

Of the mother in this poem, a writer in the "Browning Society's Papers," Miss E.D. West, said justly: "There is discernible in her no soul which could be cleansed from guilt by any purgatorial process.... Her fault had not been moral, had not been sin, to be punished by pain inflicted on the soul; it was merely the uncounteracted primary instinct of self-preservation, and as such it is fitliest dealt with by the simple depriving her, without further penalty, of the very life which she had secured for herself at so horrible a cost."

[143]

The story of the melon-seller was related by a correspondent of *The Times* in 1846, and is told by Browning in a letter to Miss Barrett of Aug. 6 of that year. Thus subjects of verse rose up in his memory after many years.

Chapter XVII

Closing Works and Days

Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day, published in 1887, Browning's last volume but one, betrays not the slightest decline in his mental vigour. It suffers, however, from the fact that several of the "Parleyings" are discussions—emotional, it is true, as well as intellectual—of somewhat abstract themes, that these discussions are often prolonged beyond

what the subject requires, and that the "People of Importance" are in some instances not men and women, but mere sounding-boards to throw out Browning's own voice. When certain aspects or principles of art are considered in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, before us stands Brother Lippo himself, a living, breathing figure, on whom our interest must needs fasten whatever may be the subject of his discourse. There is of course a propriety in connecting a debate on evil in the world as a means to good with the name of the author of "The Fable of the Bees," there is no impropriety in connecting a study of the philosophy of music with the name of Charles Avison the Newcastle organist; but we do not make acquaintance through the parleyings with either Avison or Mandeville. This objection does not apply to all the poems. The parleying *With Daniel Bartoli* is a story of love and loss, admirable in its presentation of the heroine and the unheroic hero. We are interested in Francis Furini, "good priest, good man, good painter," before he begins to preach his somewhat portentous sermon on evolution. And in the case of Christopher Smart, the question why once and only once he was a divinely inspired singer is the question which most directly leads to a disclosure of his character as a poet. The volume, however, as a whole, while Browning's energy never flags, has a larger proportion than its predecessors of what he himself terms "mere grey argument"; and, as if to compensate this, it is remarkable for sudden outbursts of imagination and passion, as if these repressed for a time had carried away the dykes and dams, and went on their career in full flood. The description of the glory of sunrise in *Bernard de Mandeville*, the description of the Chapel in *Christopher Smart*, the praise of a woman's beauty in *Francis Furini*, the amazing succession of mythological *tours de force* in *Gerard de Lairesse*, the delightful picture of the blackcap tugging at his prize, a scrap of rag on the garden wall, amid the falling snow of March, in the opening of *Charles Avison*—these are sufficient evidence of the abounding force of Browning's genius as a poet at a date when he had passed the three score years and ten by half an added decade. Nor would we willingly forget that magical lyric of life and death, of the tulip beds and the daisied grave-mound—"Dance, yellows and whites and reds"—which closes *Gerard de Lairesse*. Wordsworth's daffodils are hardly a more jocund company than Browning's wind-tossed tulips; he accepts their gladness, and yet the starved grass and daisies are more to him than these:

> Daisies and grass be my heart's bed-fellows
> On the mound wind spares and sunshine mellows:
> Dance you, reds and whites and yellows!

Of failure in intellectual or imaginative force the *Parleyings* show no symptom. But the vigour of Browning's will did a certain wrong to his other powers. He did not wait, as in early days, for the genuine casual inspirations of pleasure. He made it his task to work out all that was in him. And what comes to a writer of genius is better than what is laboriously sought. We may gather wood for the altar, but the true fire must descend from heaven. The speed and excitement kindled by one's own exertions are very different from the varying stress of a wind that bears one onward without the thump and rattle of the engine-room. It would have been a gain if Browning's indomitable steam-engines had occasionally ceased to ply, and he had been compelled to wait for a propitious breeze.

Philosophy, Love, Poetry, Politics, Painting (the nude, with a discourse concerning evolution), Painting again (the modern *versus* the mythological in art), Music, and, if we add the epilogue, the Invention of Printing—these are the successive themes of Browning's *Parleyings*, and they are important and interesting themes. Unfortunately the method of discussion is neither sufficiently abstract for the lucid exposition of ideas, nor sufficiently concrete for the pure communication of poetic pleasure. Abstract and concrete meet and take hands or jostle, too much as skeleton and lady might in a *danse Macabre*. The spirit of acquiescence—strenuous not indolent acquiescence —with our intellectual limitations is constantly present. Does man groan because he cannot comprehend the mind outside himself which manifests itself in the sun? Well, did not Prometheus draw the celestial rays into the pin-point of a flame which man can order, and which does him service? Is the fire a little thing beside the immensity in the heavens above us?

> Little? In little, light, warmth, life are blessed—
> Which, in the large, who sees to bless?

Or again—it is Christopher Smart, who triumphs for once so magnificently in his "Song to David," and fails, with all his contemporaries, in the poetry of ambitious instruction. And why? Because for once he was content with the first step that poetry should take—to confer enjoyment, leaving instruction—the fruit of enjoyment—to come later. True learning teaches through love and delight, not through pretentious didactics,—a truth forgotten by the whole tribe of eighteenth century versifiers. And once more—does Francis Furini paint the naked body in all its beauty? Right! let him study precisely this divine thing the body, before he looks upward; let him retire from the infinite into his proper circumscription:

> Only by looking low, ere looking high,
> Comes penetration of the mystery.

So also with our view of the mingled good and evil in the world; perhaps to some transcendent vision evil may wholly disappear; perhaps we shall ourselves make this discovery as we look back upon the life on earth. Meanwhile it is as men that we must see things, and even if evil be an illusion (as Browning trusts), it is a needful illusion in our educational process, since through evil we become aware of good. Thus at every point Browning accepts here, as in *Ferishtah's Fancies*, a limited provisional knowledge as sufficient for our present needs, with a sustaining hope which

extends into the future. On the other hand, if your affair is not the sincerity of thought and feeling, but a design to rule the mass of men for your own advantage, you must act in a different spirit. Do not, in the manner of Bubb Doddington, attempt to impose upon your fellows with the obvious and worn-out pretence that all you do has been undertaken on their behalf and in their interests. There is a newer and a better trick than that. Assume the supernatural; have a "mission "; have a "message"; be earnest, with all the authority of a divine purpose. Play boldly this new card of statesmanship, and you may have from time to time as many inconsistent missions and messages as ambitious statecraft can suggest to you. Through all your gyrations the admiring crowd will still stand agape. Was Browning's irony of a cynical philosophy of statesmanship suggested by his view of the procedure of a politician, whom he had once admired, whose talents he still recognised, but from whom he now turned away with indignant aversion? However this may have been, his poems which touch on politics do not imply that respect for the people thinking, feeling, and moving, in masses which is a common profession with the liberal leaders of the platform. Browning's liberalism was a form of his individualism; he, like Shakespeare, had a sympathy with the wants and affections of the humblest human lives; and, like Shakespeare, he thought that foolish or incompetent heads are often conjoined with hearts that in a high degree deserve respect.

Asolando, the last volume of a long array, was published in London on the last day of Browning's life. As he lay dying in Venice, telegraphed tidings reached his son of the eager demand for copies made in anticipation of its appearance and of the instant and appreciative reviews; Browning heard the report with a quiet gratification. It is happy when praise in departing is justified, and this was the case with a collection of poems which to some readers seemed like a revival of the poetry of its author's best years of early and mid manhood. *Asolando* is, however, in the main distinctly an autumn gathering, a handful of flowers and fruit belonging to the Indian summer of his genius. The Prologue is a confession, like that of Wordsworth's great Ode, that a glory has passed away from the earth. When first he set eyes on Asolo, some fifty years previously, the splendour of Italian landscape seemed that of

> Terror with beauty, like the Bush
> Burning yet unconsumed

Now, while the beauty remains, the flame is extinct—"the Bush is bare." Browning finds his consolation in the belief that he has come nearer to the realities of earth by discarding fancies, and that his wonder and awe are more wisely directed towards the transcendent God than towards His creatures. But in truth what the mind confers is a fact and no fancy; the loss of what Browning calls the "soul's iris-bow" is the loss of a substantial, a divine possession. The *Epilogue* has in it a certain energy, but the thews are those of an old athlete, and through the energy we are conscious of the strain. The speaker pitches his voice high, as if it could not otherwise be heard at a distance. The *Reverie*, a speculation on the time when Power will show itself fully and therefore be known as love, has some of that vigorous intellectual garrulity which had grown on Browning during the years when unhappily for his poetry he came to be regarded chiefly as a prophet and a sage. An old man rightly values the truths which experience has made real for him; he repeats them again and again, for they constitute the best gift he can offer to his disciples; but his utterances are not always directly inspired; they are sometimes faintly echoed from an earlier inspiration. In the *Reverie*, while accepting our limitations of knowledge, which he can term ignorance in its contrast with the vast unknown, Browning discovers in the moral consciousness of man a prophecy of the ultimate triumph of good over what we think of as evil, a prophecy of the final reconciliation of love with power. And among the laws of life is not merely submission but aspiration:

> Life is—to wake not sleep,
> Rise and not rest, but press
> From earth's level where blindly creep
> Things perfected, more or less,
> To the heaven's height, far and steep,
> Where amid what strifes and storms
> May wait the adventurous quest,
> Power is love.

The voice of the poet of *Paracelsus* and of *Rabbi Ben Ezra* is still audible in this latest of his prophesyings. And therefore he welcomes earth in his *Rephan*, earth, with its whole array of failures and despairs, as the fit training-ground for man. Better its trials and losses and crosses than a sterile uniformity of happiness; better its strife than rest in any golden mean of excellence. Nor are its intellectual errors and illusions without their educational value. It is better, as *Development*, with its recollections of Browning's childhood, assures us that the boy should believe in Troy siege, and the combats of Hector and Achilles, as veritable facts of history, than bend his brow over Wolfs Prolegomena or perplex his brain with moral philosophies to grapple with which his mind is not yet competent. By and by his illusions will disappear while their gains will remain.

The general impression left by *Asolando* is that of intellectual and imaginative vigour. The series of *Bad Dreams* is very striking and original in both pictorial and passionate power. *Dubiety* is a poem of the Indian Summer, but it has the beauty, with a touch of the pathos, proper to the time. The love songs are rather songs of praise than of passion, but they are beautiful songs of praise, and that entitled *Speculative*, which is frankly a poem of old age, has in it the genuine passion of

memory. *White Witchcraft* does in truth revive the manner of earlier volumes. The

> Infinite passion and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn

told of in a poem of 1855 is present, with a touch of humour to guard it from its own excess in the admirable *Inapprehensiveness*. The speaker who may not liberate his soul can perhaps identify a quotation, and he gallantly accepts his humble rôle in the tragi-comedy of foiled passion:—

> "No, the book
> Which noticed how the wall-growths wave," said she,
> "Was not by Ruskin."
> I said "Vernon Lee."

And in the uttered "Vernon Lee" lies a vast renunciation half comical and wholly tragic. There are jests in the volume, and these, with the exception of *Ponte dell' Angelo*, have the merit of brevity; they buzz swiftly in and out, and do not wind about us with the terror of voluminous coils, as sometimes happens when Browning is in his mood of mirth. There are stories, and they are told with spirit and with skill. In *Beatrice Signorini* the story-teller does justice to the honest jealousy of a wife and to the honest love of a husband who returns from the wanderings of his imagination to the frank fidelity of his heart. Cynicism grows genial in the jest of *The Pope and the Net*. In *Muckle-Mouth Meg*, laughter and kisses, audible from the page, and a woman's art in love-craft, turn tragedy in a hearty piece of comedy. *The Bean-Feast* presents us with the latest transformation of the Herakles ideal, where a good Christian Herakles, Pope Sixtus of Rome, makes common cause with his spiritual children in their humble pleasures of the senses. And in contrast with this poem of the religion of joy is the story of another ruler of Rome, the too fortunate Emperor Augustus, who, in the shadow of the religion of fear and sorrow, must propitiate the envy of Fate by turning beggar once a year. A shivering thrill runs through us as we catch a sight of the supreme mendicant's "sparkling eyes beneath their eyebrows' ridge":

> "He's God!" shouts Lucius Varus Rufus: "Man
> And worms'-meat any moment!" mutters low
> Some Power, admonishing the mortal-born.

There were nobler sides of Paganism than this with which Browning seems never to have had an adequate sympathy. And yet the religion even of Marcus Aurelius lacked something of the joy of the religion of the thankful Pope who feasted upon beans.[144]

In the winter which followed his change of abode from Warwick Crescent to the more commodious house in De Vere Gardens, the winter of 1887-1888, Browning's health and strength visibly declined; a succession of exhausting colds lowered his vitality; yet he maintained his habitual ways of life, and would not yield. In August 1888 he started ill for his Italian holiday, and travelled with difficulty and distress. But the rest among the mountains at Primiero restored him. At Venice he seemed as vigorous as he was joyous. And when he returned to London in February 1889 the improvement in his strength was in a considerable measure maintained. Yet it was evident that the physical vigour which had seemed invincible was on the ebb. In the early summer he paid the last of those visits, which he so highly valued, to Balliol College, Oxford. The opening week of June found him at Cambridge. Mr Gosse has told how on the first Sunday of that month Browning and he sat together "in a sequestered part of the beautiful Fellows' Garden of Trinity," under a cloudless sky, amid the early foliage with double hawthorns in bloom, and how the old man, in a mood of serenity and without his usual gesticulation, talked of his own early life and aspirations. He shrank that summer, says Mrs Orr, from the fatigue of a journey to Italy and thought of Scotland as a place of rest. But unfavourable weather in early August forbade the execution of the plan. An invitation from Mrs Bronson to her house at Asolo, to be followed by the pleasure of seeing his son and his son's wife in the Palazzo Rezzonico, Venice, were attractions not to be resisted, and in company with Miss Browning, he reached the little hill-town that had grown so dear to him without mishap and even without fatigue.

To the early days of July, shortly before his departure for Italy, belong two incidents which may be placed side by side as exhibiting two contrasted sides of Browning's character. On the 5th of that month he dined with the Shah, who begged for the gift of one of his books. Next day he chose a volume the binding of which might, as he says, "take the imperial eye"; but the pleasure of the day was another gift, a gift to a person who was not imperial. "I said to myself," he wrote to his young friend the painter Lehmann's daughter, addressed in the letter as "My beloved Alma"—"I said to myself 'Here do I present my poetry to a personage for whom I do not care three straws; why should I not venture to do as much for a young lady I love dearly, who, for the author's sake, will not impossibly care rather for the inside than the outside of the volume?' So I was bold enough to take one and offer it for your kind acceptance, begging you to remember in days to come that the author, whether a good poet or not, was always, my Alma, your affectionate friend, Robert Browning." A gracious bowing of old age over the grace and charm of youth! But the work of two days later, July 8th, was not gracious. The lines "To Edward Fitzgerald," printed in *The Athenaeum*, were dated on that day. It is stated by Mrs Orr that when they were despatched to the journal in which they appeared, Browning regretted the deed, though afterwards he found reasons to justify himself. Fitzgerald's reference to Mrs Browning caused him a spasm of pain and indignation, nor did the pain for long subside. The expression of his indignation was outrageous in manner, and deficient in real power. He had read a worse meaning

into the unhappy words than had been intended, and the writer was dead. Browning's act was like an involuntary muscular contraction, which he could not control. The lines sprang far more from love than from hate. "I felt as if she had died yesterday," he said. We cannot regret that Browning was capable of such an offence; we can only regret that what should have controlled his cry of pain and rage did not operate at the right moment.

In Asolo, beside "the gate," Mrs Bronson had found and partly made what Mr Henry James describes as "one of the quaintest possible little places of *villegiatura*"—La Mura, the house, "resting half upon the dismantled, dissimulated town-wall. No sweeter spot in all the sweetnesses of Italy." Browning's last visit to Asolo was a time of almost unmingled enjoyment. "He seemed possessed," writes Mrs Orr, "by a strange buoyancy, an almost feverish joy in life." The thought that he was in Asolo again, which he had first seen in his twenty-sixth year, and since then had never ceased to remember with affection, was a happy wonder to him. He would stand delighted on the loggia of La Mura, looking out over the plain and identifying the places of historical interest, some of which were connected with his own "Sordello." Nor was the later story forgotten of Queen Caterina Cornaro, whose palace-tower overlooks Asolo, and whose secretary, Cardinal Bembo, wrote *gli Asolani*, from which came the suggestion for the title of Browning's forthcoming volume. At times, as Mrs Bronson relates, the beauty of the prospect was enough, with no historical reminiscences, the plain with its moving shadows, the mountain-ranges to the west, and southwards the delicate outline of the Euganean Hills. "I was right," said he, "to fall in love with this place fifty years ago, was I not?"

The procedure of the day at Asolo was almost as regular as that of a London day. The morning walk with his sister, when everything that was notable was noted by his keen eyes, the return, English newspapers, proof-sheets, correspondence, the light mid-day meal, the afternoon drive in Mrs Branson's carriage, tea upon the loggia, the evening with music or reading, or visits to the little theatre—these constituted an almost unvarying and happy routine. On his walks he delighted to recognise little details of architecture which he had observed in former years; or he would peer into the hedgerows and watch the living creatures that lurked there, or would "whistle softly to the lizards basking on the low walls which border the roads, to try his old power of attracting them."[145] Sometimes a longer drive (and that to Bassano was his favourite) required an earlier start in the carriage with luncheon at some little inn. "If we were ever late in returning to Asolo," Mrs Bronson writes, "he would say 'Tell Vittorio to drive quickly; we must not lose the sunset from the loggia.' ... Often after a storm, the effects of sun breaking through clouds before its setting, combined with the scenery of plain and mountain, were such as to rouse the poet to the greatest enthusiasm. Heedless of cold or damp, forgetting himself completely, though warmly wrapped to please others, he would gaze on the changing aspects of earth and sky until darkness covered everything from his sight."

When in the evenings Browning read aloud he did not, like Tennyson, as described by Mr Rossetti, allow his voice to "sway onward with a long-drawn chaunt" which gave "noble value and emphasis to the metrical structure and pauses." His delivery was full and distinctive, but it "took much less account than Tennyson's of the poem as a rhythmical whole; his delivery had more affinity to that of an actor, laying stress on all the light and shade of the composition—its touches of character, the conversational points, its dramatic give-and-take. In those qualities of elocution in which Tennyson was strong, and aimed to be strong, Browning was contentedly weak; and *vice versâ*."[146] Sometimes, like another great poet, Pope, he was deeply affected by the passion of beauty or heroism or pathos in what he read, and could not control his feelings. Mrs Orr mentions that in reading aloud his translation of the *Herakles*, he, like Pope in reading a passage of his *Iliad*, was moved to tears. Dr Furnivall tells of the mounting excitement with which he once delivered in the writer's hearing his *Ixion*. When at La Mura after his dreamy playing, on a spinet of 1522, old airs, melodious, melancholy airs, Browning would propose to read aloud, it was not his own poetry that he most willingly chose. "No R.B. to-night," he would say; "then with a smile, 'Let us have some real poetry'"; and the volume would be one by Shelley or Keats, or Coleridge or Tennyson. It was as a punishment to his hostess for the crime of having no Shakespeare on her shelves that he threatened her with one of his "toughest poems"; but the tough poem, interpreted by his emphasis and pauses, became "as clear and comprehensible as one could possibly desire." In his talk at Asolo "he seemed purposely to avoid deep and serious topics. If such were broached in his presence he dismissed them with one strong, convincing sentence, and adroitly turned the current of conversation into a shallower channel."

A project which came very near his heart was that of purchasing from the municipal authorities a small piece of ground, divided from La Mura by a ravine clothed with olive and other trees, "on which stood an unfinished building"—the words are Mrs Bronson's—"commanding the finest view in Asolo." He desired much to have a summer or autumn abode to which he might turn with the assurance of rest in what most pleased and suited him. In imagination, with his characteristic eagerness, he had already altered and added to the existing structure, and decided on the size and aspect of the loggia which was to out-rival that of La Mura. "'It shall have a tower,' he said, 'whence I can see Venice at every hour of the day, and I shall call it "Pippa's Tower".... We will throw a rustic bridge across the streamlet in the ravine.'" And then, in a graver mood: "It may not be for me to enjoy it long—who can say? But it will be useful for Pen and his family.... But I am good for ten years yet." And when his son visited Asolo and approved of the project of Pippa's Tower, Browning's happiness in his dream was complete. It was on the night of his death that the authorities of Asolo decided that the purchase might be carried into effect.

THE PALAZZO REZZONICO, VENICE.
From a drawing by MISS KATHERINE KIMBALL.

THE PALAZZO REZZONICO, VENICE.

***From a drawing by* Miss KATHERINE KIMBALL.**

For a time during this last visit to Asolo Browning suffered some inconvenience from shortness of breath in climbing hills, but the discomfort passed away. He looked forward to an early return to England, spoke with pleasant anticipation of the soft-pedal piano which his kind friend Mrs Bronson desired to procure at Boston and place in his study in De Vere Gardens, and he dreamed of future poetical achievements. "Shall I whisper to you my ambition and my hope?" he asked his hostess. "It is to write a tragedy better than anything I have done yet. I think of it constantly." With the end of October the happy days at Asolo were at an end. On the first of November he was in Venice, "magnificently lodged," he says, "in this vast palazzo, which my son has really shown himself fit to possess, so surprising are his restorations and improvements." At Asolo he had parted from his American friend Story with the words, "More than forty years of friendship and never a break." In Venice he met an American friend of more recent years, Professor Corson, who describes him as stepping briskly, with a look that went everywhere, and as cheerfully anticipating many more years of productive work.[147] Yet in truth the end was near. Dining with Mr and Mrs Curtis, where he read aloud some poems of his forthcoming volume, he met a London physician, Dr Bird. Next evening Dr Bird again dined with Browning, who expressed confident satisfaction as to his state of health, and held out his wrist that his words might be confirmed by the regularity and vigour of his pulse. The physician became at once aware that Browning's confidence was far from receiving the warrant in which he believed. Still he maintained his customary two hours' walk each day. Towards the close of November, on a day of fog, he returned from the Lido with symptoms of a bronchial cold. He dealt with the trouble as he was accustomed, and did not take to his bed. Though feeling scarcely fit to travel he planned his departure for England after the lapse of four or five days. On December 1st, an Italian physician was summoned, and immediately perceived the gravity of the case. Within a few days the bronchial trouble was subdued, but failure of the heart was apparent. Some hours before the end he said to one of his nurses, "I feel much worse. I know now that I must die." The ebbing away of life was painless. As the clocks of Venice were striking ten on the night of Thursday, December 12, 1889, Browning died.[148]

He had never concerned himself much about his place of burial. A lifeless body seemed to him only an old vesture that had been cast aside. "He had said to his sister in the foregoing summer," Mrs Orr tells us, "that he wished to be buried wherever he might die; if in England, with his mother; if in France, with his father; if in Italy, with his wife." The English cemetery in Florence had, however, been closed. The choice seemed to lie between Venice, which was the desire of the city, or, if the difficulties could be overcome by the intervention of Lord Dufferin, the old Florentine cemetery. The matter was decided otherwise; a grave in Westminster Abbey was

proposed by Dean Bradley, and the proposal was accepted.[149] A private service took place in the *Palazzo Rezzonico*; the coffin, in compliance with the civic requirements, was conveyed with public honours to the chapel on the island of San Michele; and from thence to the house in De Vere Gardens. On the last day of the year 1889, in presence of a great and reverent crowd, with solemn music arranged for the words of Mrs Browning's poem, "He giveth his beloved sleep," the body of Browning was laid in its resting-place in Poets' Corner.

To attempt at the present time to determine the place of Browning in the history of English poetry is perhaps premature. Yet the record of "How it strikes a contemporary" may itself have a certain historical interest. When estimates of this kind have been revised by time even their errors are sometimes instructive, or, if not instructive, are amusing. It is probable that Tennyson will remain as the chief representative in poetry of the Victorian period. Browning, who was slower in securing an audience, may be found to possess a more independent individuality. Yet in truth no great writer is independent of the influences of his age.

Browning as a poet had his origins in the romantic school of English poetry; but he came at a time when the romance of external action and adventure had exhausted itself, and when it became necessary to carry romance into the inner world where the adventures are those of the soul. On the ethical and religious side he sprang from English Puritanism. Each of these influences was modified by his own genius and by the circumstances of its development. His keen observation of facts and passionate inquisition of human character drew him in the direction of what is termed realism. This combination of realism with romance is even more strikingly seen in an elder contemporary on whose work Browning bestowed an ardent admiration, the novelist Balzac. His Puritanism received important modifications from his wide-ranging artistic instincts and sympathies, and again from the liberality of a wide-ranging intellect. He has the strenuous moral force of Puritanism, but he is wholly free from asceticism, except in the higher significance of that word—the hardy discipline of an athlete. Opinions count for less than the form and the habitual attitudes of a soul. These with Browning were always essentially Christian. He regarded our life on earth as a state of probation and of preparation; sometimes as a battle-field in which our test lies in the choice of the worse or the better side and the energy of devotion to the cause; sometimes as a school of education, in the processes of which the emotions play a larger part than the intellect. The degrees in that school are not to be taken on earth. And on the battle-field the final issue is not to be determined here, so that what appears as defeat may contain within it an assured promise of ultimate victory. The attitudes of the spirit which were most habitual with him were two—the attitude of aspiration and the attitude of submission. These he brought into harmony with each other by his conception of human life as a period of training for a higher life; we must make the most vigorous and joyous use of our schooling, and yet we must press towards what lies beyond it.

From the romantic poetry of the early years of the nineteenth century comes a cry or a sigh of limitless desire. Under the inspiration of the Revolutionary movement passion had broken the bounds of the eighteenth century ideal of balance and moderation. With the transcendental reaction against a mechanical view of the relation of God to the universe and to humanity the soul had put forth boundless claims and unmeasured aspirations. In his poetic method each writer followed the leadings of his own genius, without reference to common rules and standards; the individualism of the Revolutionary epoch asserted itself to the full. These several influences helped to determine the character of Browning's poetry. But meeting in him the ethical and religious tendencies of English Puritanism they acquired new significances and assumed new forms. The cry of desire could not turn, as it did with Byron, to cynicism; it must not waste itself, as sometimes happened with Shelley, in the air or the ether. It must be controlled by the will and turned to some spiritual uses. The transcendental feeling which Wordsworth most often attained through an impassioned contemplation of external nature must rest upon a broader basis and include among its sources or abettors all the higher passions of humanity. The Revolutionary individualism must be maintained and extended; in his methods Browning would acknowledge no master; he would please himself and compel his readers to accept his method even if strange or singular. As for the mediaeval revival, which tried to turn aside, and in part capture, the transcendental tendencies of his time, Browning rejected it, in the old temper of English Puritanism, on the side of religion; but on the side of art it opened certain avenues upon which he eagerly entered. The scientific movement of the nineteenth century influenced him partly as a force to be met and opposed by his militant transcendentalism. Yet he gives definite expression in *Paracelsus* to an idea of evolution both in nature and in human society, an idea of evolution which is, however, essentially theistic. "All that seems proved in Darwin's scheme," he wrote to Dr Furnivall in 1881, "was a conception familiar to me from the beginning." The positive influences of the scientific age in which he lived upon Browning's work were chiefly these—first it tended to intellectualise his instincts, compelling him to justify them by a definite theory; and secondly it co-operated with his tendency towards realism as a student of the facts of human nature; it urged him towards research in his psychology of the passions; it supported him in his curious inquisition of the phenomena of the world of mind.

Being a complete and a sane human creature, Browning could not rest content with the vicious asceticism of the intellect which calls itself scientific because it refuses to recognise any facts that are not material and tangible. Science itself, in the true sense of the word, exists and progresses by ventures of imaginative faith. And in all matters which involve good and evil, hopes and fears, in all matters which determine the conduct of life, no rational person excludes from his view the postulates of our moral nature or should exclude the final option of the will. The person whose beliefs are determined by material facts alone and by the understanding unallied with our

other powers is the irrational and unscientific person. Being a complete and sane human creature, Browning was assured that the visible order of things is part of a larger order, the existence of which alone makes human life intelligible to the reason. The understanding being incapable of arriving unaided at a decision between rival theories of life, and neutrality between these being irrational and illegitimate, he rightly determined the balance with the weight of emotion, and rightly acted upon that decision with all the energy of his will. His chief intellectual error was not that he undervalued the results of the intellect, but that he imagined the existence as a part of sane human nature, of a wholly irrational intellect which in affairs of religious belief and conduct is indifferent to the promptings of the emotions and the moral nature.

Browning's optimism has been erroneously ascribed to his temperament. He declared that in his personal experience the pain of life outweighed its pleasure. He remembered former pain more vividly than he remembered pleasure. His optimism was part of the vigorous sanity of his moral nature; like a reasonable man, he made the happiness which he did not find. If any person should censure the process of giving objective validity to a moral postulate, he has only to imagine some extra-human intelligence making a study of human nature; to such an intelligence our moral postulates would be objective facts and have the value of objective evidence. That whole of which our life on earth forms a part could not be conceived by Browning as rational without also being conceived as good.

All the parts of Browning's nature were vigorous, and they worked harmoniously together. His senses were keen and alert; his understanding was both penetrating and comprehensive; his passions had sudden explosive force and also steadfastness and persistency; his will supported his other powers and perhaps it had too large a share in his later creative work. His feeling for external nature was twofold; he enjoyed colour and form—but especially colour—as a feast for the eye, and returned thanks for his meal as the Pope of his poem did for the bean-feast. This was far removed from that passionate spiritual contemplation of nature of the Wordsworthian mood. But now and again for Browning external nature was, not indeed suffused as for Wordsworth, but pierced and shot through with spiritual fire. His chief interest, however, was in man. The study of passions in their directness and of the intellect in its tortuous ways were at various times almost equally attractive to him. The emotions which he chiefly cared to interpret were those connected with religion, with art, and with the relations of the sexes.

In his presentation of character Browning was far from exhibiting either the universality or the disinterestedness of Shakespeare. His sympathy with action was defective. The affections arising from hereditary or traditional relations are but slenderly represented in his poetry; the passions which elect their own objects are largely represented. Those graceful gaieties arising from a long-established form of society, which constitute so large a part of Shakespeare's comedies, are almost wholly absent from his work. His humour was robust but seldom fine or delicate. In an age of intellectual and spiritual conflict and trouble, his art was often deflected from the highest ends by his concern on behalf of ideas. He could not rest satisfied, it has been observed, with contemplating the children of his imagination, nor find the fulfilment of his aim in the fact of having given them existence.[150] It seems often as if his purpose in creating them was to make them serve as questioners, objectors, and answerers in the great debate of conflicting thoughts which proceeds throughout his poems. His object in transferring his own consciousness into the consciousness of some imagined personage seems often to be that of gaining a new stand-point from which to see another and a different aspect of the questions concerning which he could not wholly satisfy himself from any single point of view. He cannot be content to leave his men and women, in Shakespeare's disinterested manner, to look in various directions according to whatever chanced to suit best the temper and disposition he had imagined for them. They are placed by him with their eyes turned in very much the same direction, gazing towards the same problems, the same ideas. And somehow Browning himself seems to be in company with them all the time, learning their different reports of the various aspects which those problems or ideas present to each of them, and choosing between the different reports in order to give credence to that which seems true. The study of no individual character would seem to him of capital value unless that character contained something which should help to throw light upon matters common to all humanity, upon the inquiries either as to what it is, or as to what are its relations to the things outside humanity. This is not quite the highest form of dramatic poetry. There is in it perhaps something of the error of seeking too quick returns of profit, and of drawing "a circle premature," to use Browning's own words, "heedless of far gain." The contents of characters so conceived can be exhausted, whereas when characters are presented with entire disinterestedness they may seem to yield us less at first, but they are inexhaustible. The fault—if it be one—lay partly in Browning's epoch, partly in the nature of his genius. Such a method of deflected dramatic characterisation as his is less appropriate to regular drama than to the monologue; and accordingly the monologue, reflective or lyrical, became the most characteristic instrument of his art.

There is little of repose in Browning's poetry. He feared lethargy of heart, the supine mood, more than he feared excess of passion. Once or twice he utters a sigh for rest, but it is for rest after strife or labour. Broad spaces of repose, of emotional tranquillity are rare, if not entirely wanting, in his poetry. It is not a high table-land, but a range, or range upon range, of sierras. In single poems there is often a point or moment in which passion suddenly reaches its culmination. He flashes light upon the retina; he does not spread truth abroad like a mantle but plunges it downwards through the mists of earth like a searching sword-blade. And therefore he does not always distribute the poetic value of what he writes equally; one vivid moment justifies all that is preparatory to that great moment. His utterance, which is always vigorous, becomes intensely

luminous at the needful points and then relapses, to its well-maintained vigour, a vigour not always accompanied by the highest poetical qualities. The music of his verse is entirely original, and so various are its kinds, so complex often are its effects that it cannot be briefly characterised. Its attack upon the ear is often by surprises, which, corresponding to the sudden turns of thought and leaps of feeling, justify themselves as right and delightful. Yet he sometimes embarrasses his verse with an excess of suspensions and resolutions. Browning made many metrical experiments, some of which were unfortunate: but his failures are rather to be ascribed to temporary lapses into a misdirected ingenuity than to the absence of metrical feeling.

His chief influence, other than what is purely artistic, upon a reader is towards establishing a connection between the known order of things in which we live and move and that larger order of which it is a part. He plays upon the will, summoning it from lethargy to activity. He spiritualises the passions by showing that they tend through what is human towards what is divine. He assigns to the intellect a sufficient field for exercise, but attaches more value to its efforts than to its attainments. His faith in an unseen order of things creates a hope which persists through the apparent failures of earth. In a true sense he may be named the successor of Wordsworth, not indeed as an artist but as a teacher. Substantially the creed maintained by each was the same creed, and they were both more emphatic proclaimers of it than any other contemporary poets. But their ways of holding and of maintaining that creed were far apart. Wordsworth enunciated his doctrines as if he had never met with, and never expected to meet with, any gainsaying of them. He discoursed as a philosopher might to a school of disciples gathered together to be taught by his wisdom, not to dispute it. He feared chiefly not a counter creed but the materialising effects of the industrial movement of his own day. Expecting no contradiction, Wordsworth did not care to quit his own standpoint in order that he might see how things appear from the opposing side. He did not argue but let his utterance fall into a half soliloquy spoken in presence of an audience but not always directly addressed to them. Browning's manner of speech was very unlike this. He seems to address it often to unsympathetic hearers of whose presence and gainsaying attitude he could not lose sight. The beliefs for which he pleaded were not in his day, as they had been in Wordsworth's, part of a progressive wave of thought. He occupied the disadvantageous position of a conservative thinker. The later poet of spiritual beliefs had to make his way not with, but against, a great incoming tide of contemporary speculation. Probably on this account Browning's influence as a teacher will extend over a far shorter space of time than that of Wordsworth. For Wordsworth is self-contained, and is complete without reference to the ideas which oppose his own. His work suffices for its own explanation, and will always commend itself to certain readers either as the system of a philosophic thinker or as the dream of a poet. Browning's thought where it is most significant is often more or less enigmatical if taken by itself: its energetic gestures, unless we see what they are directed against, seem aimless beating the air. His thought, as far as it is polemical, will probably cease to interest future readers. New methods of attack will call forth new methods of defence. Time will make its discreet selection from his writings. And the portion which seems most likely to survive is that which presents in true forms of art the permanent passions of humanity and characters of enduring interest.

NOTES:

[144]

Mrs Orr gives the dates of composition of several of the *Asolando* poems. *Rosny*, *Beatrice Signorini* and *Flute-Music* were written in the winter of 1887-1888. Two or three of the *Bad Dreams* are, with less confidence, assigned to the same date. The *Ponte dell' Angelo* "was imagined during the next autumn in Venice" (see Mrs Bronson's article "Browning in Venice"). "*White Witchcraft* had been suggested in the same summer (1888) by a letter from a friend in the Channel Islands which spoke of the number of toads to be seen there." *The Cardinal and the Dog*, written with the *Pied Piper* for Macready's son, is a poem of early date. Mrs Bronson in her article "Browning in Asolo" (*Century Magazine*, April 1900) relates the origin at Asolo 1889 of *The Lady and the Painter*.

[145]

Mrs Orr, *Life*, p. 414.

[146]

W.M. Rossetti, Portraits of Browning, i., *Magazine of Art*, 1890, p. 182. Mr Rossetti's words refer to an earlier period.

[147]

"The Nation," vol. 1., where reminiscences by Moncure Conway may also be found.

[148]

"My father died without pain or suffering other than that of weakness or weariness"—so Mr R. Barrett Browning wrote to Mrs Bloomfield-Moore. "His death was what death ought to be, but rarely is—so said the doctor." (Quoted in an article on Browning by Mrs Bloomfield-Moore in Lippincott's Magazine—Jan.—June 1890, p. 690.)

[149]

A grave in the Abbey was at the same time offered for the body of Browning's wife; the removal of her body from Florence would have been against both the wishes of Browning and of the people of Florence. It was therefore declined by Mr R. Barrett Browning. See his letter in Mrs Bloomfield-Moore's article in Lippincott's Magazine, vol. xiv.

[150]

E.D. West in the first of two papers, "Browning as a Preacher," in *The Dark Blue Magazine*. Browning esteemed these papers highly and in what follows I appropriate, with some modifications, a passage from the first of them. The writer has consented to the use here made of the passage, and has contributed a passage towards the close.

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[*The names of Robert Browning, the subject of this volume, and of Elizabeth Barrett Browning are not included in the Index*.]

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