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The Qualities of Browning

Harry T. Baker

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THE QUALITIES OF BROWNING

I

The opening lines of *Pippa Passes* pulse with the tremendous vitality which the reader of Browning has early learned to expect of his poetry:

"Day!
Faster and more fast,
O'er night's brim day boils at last:
Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim
Where spurting and suppressed it lay,
For not a froth-flake touched the rim
Of yonder gap in the solid gray
Of the eastern cloud, an hour away;
But forth one wavelet, then another, curled,
Till the whole sunrise, not to be suppressed,
Rose, reddened, and its seething breast
Flickered in bounds, grew gold, then overflowed the world."

Of this remarkable vital force the last poem from his pen, the *Epilogue to Asolando*, shows no diminution. Activity is the motto of his volume; few indeed are the lyrics of peace such as star the pages of his predecessor, Wordsworth. The only modern English poet with anything like an equal fund of vitality is Byron; but Byron has little of the intellectual eminence of Browning, who may not incorrectly be said to combine Byronic energy with Miltonic intellect.

There is another and kindred sense in which the foregoing quotation is typical: the effect of Browning's poetry as a whole is the effect of a sunrise, flooding the sky with joy. Optimism is probably the first quality which the average reader associates with the name of the author of *Pippa Passes*. And not without warrant, for illustrative quotations and entire poems might easily be multiplied. The only difficulty is to stop. One of the simplest and most familiar, although by no means the most penetrating, is the little song which closes with the somewhat hackneyed lines,

"God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world!"

This is perhaps the most elementary illustration of the fact that the poet's optimism is not chiefly of the intellect, is not purely philosophical, but is an attempt, generally successful, to impose his own splendid emotional confidence upon his reader. In the words of his contemporary and rival, Tennyson, it has little to do with "the freezing reason's colder part":

"Like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answered 'I have felt.'"

It is well to emphasise these points at the very outset, for the reason that they destroy one of the most pernicious misconceptions which have got abroad concerning Browning's poetry: the belief that it is too intellectual. Nor are his optimism and his energy the sole proof of the absurdity of the charge as applied to the whole body of his work: his frequent glorification of impulse so natural to the energetic optimist is diametrically opposed to undue glorification of the intellect. The use which he made of the impulses of two characters in *The Statue and the Bust* provoked for a time a storm of protest against his treatment of the moral life. In this, as in several others among his best productions, the prominent or marking characteristic is impulse rather than thought. *Childe Roland* is entire mystification except when regarded as an elaborate illustration of the maxim, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved." Just as Carlyle showed Emerson the slums of London in the hope of lessening his American friend's optimism, so the author of *Roland* shows us the slums of nature—but not with Carlyle's purpose. It is surely not unfair or unkind to say that neither Emerson nor Browning correlated his serene confidence in the scheme of the universe with the stern logic of seeming facts. As Professor Walter Raleigh has observed, Browning could exclude the object-world whenever he chose; and, what is more vital, he could often hypnotise his reader into doing so too. Perhaps the most genuine optimists are men like Stevenson and Lamb, who are optimists in spite of dispiriting circumstances: as someone has said, the word *optimist* has come to be very loosely employed when it is applied to every prosperous person who says "Good-morning" in a cheerful manner. But Browning, though he suffered no such adversity as the two writers just mentioned, at any rate retained his optimistic confidence even after the death of his wife, which was a sufficiently severe test. Occasionally he may

press this quality too far for some readers, as in *The Last Ride Together*, or in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*—which one critic declares to be a comparatively young man's poem on old age, not written in the situation and therefore not wholly convincing. Doubtless poetic enthusiasm did sometimes undertake to prove too much; but the total effect of Browning's optimistic poems is irresistibly tonic, and alone justifies his claim to recognition as a major poet.

II

Such recognition is aided by an analogy still insufficiently perceived by the public: his characteristics are strikingly Elizabethan, even more so than those of Keats, who has justly been called an Elizabethan born too late. It was, indeed, as a follower of Keats, and of Shelley, that Browning began his career as a poet, although he soon passed beyond any easily traceable influence. His love for bright colours, shown, among many examples, by his song, "Dance, Yellows and Whites and Reds," his love of excitement, of sensation—which Byron held to be the chief end of existence—these are unmistakable Elizabethan qualities. They are much less discernible in Tennyson. In the seventeenth century the passion for the sensational degenerated into the degrading; but Browning's healthy nature kept clear of such peril. The curious fact that he knew the details of every celebrated murder case for half a century does not (as it may seem to do at first blush) indicate that he craved sensationalism; it merely proves that he was passionately devoted to the search for the underlying motives of the criminals. This stamps his genius as primarily dramatic. It is, in fact, his closest link with Shakespeare. The insight into motive displayed by the author of *Men and Women* and *The Ring and the Book* was rarely at fault. Furthermore, he possessed a surprising power in depicting the evanescent shades of motive in women, a power which so many novelists conspicuously lack. And if he drew something of Elizabeth Barrett's personality in Pompilia, he assuredly did not in James Lee's wife or in Constance.

Another indication of his Elizabethan strain is his delight in the elementary facts and conditions of life—"the wild joys of living" of *Saul*. He assimilated the good elements of the frankly barbaric side of the Elizabethans without adding a taste for such intellectual amusements as bear-baiting and the tormenting of

insane persons. That he understood, however, the ideals of a man with these and lower tastes is revealed in his portrait of Guido, "drinking hot bull's blood fit for men like me." Is there any passage in modern poetry, even in Byron, which exhibits the sheer force, the frantic avowal of lust for existence which is flashed upon us in the following speech of Guido's after his condemnation of death?

"Life!

How I could spill this overplus of mine
 Among those hoar-haired, shrunk-shanked odds and ends
 Of body and soul old age is chewing dry!
 Those windlestraws that stare while purblind death
 Mows here, mows there, makes hay of juicy me,
 And misses just the bunch of withered weed
 Would brighten hell and streak its smoke with flame!
 How the life I could shed yet never shrink,
 Would drench their stalks with sap like grass in May!
 Is it not terrible, I entreat you, Sirs?—
 With manifold and plenitudinous life,
 Prompt at death's menace to give blow for threat,
 Answer his 'Be thou not.' 'Thus I am!'—
 Terrible so to be alive yet die?"

This is indeed Shakespearian, both in conception and in phraseology; and there are speeches of almost equal power in the scene between Sebald and Ottima in *Pippa Passes*, a scene which has always appealed to the present writer as the most genuinely Elizabethan which Browning or any other modern poet ever wrote. Within its pages is compressed the quintessence of sensation, in the dramatic sense of that word. The love of sudden effects is reminiscent of Webster and Marlowe. The same inexhaustible exultation throbs through many lyrics written late in Browning's life, including the memorable one which glorifies a "starved bank of moss."

This lyric also illustrates a notable fondness for climax which is discernible at the close of most of his best poems. The "dear, dead women" of *A Toccata of Galuppi's* lend charm to one of his most appealing passages, although some readers will probably prefer the spiritual intensity, aided so subtly by depiction of nature, at the conclusion of *Saul*; and others will cherish the lingering cadences of the monologues of Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope. Sensational, even startling, some of these conclusions may seem; but never, I think, in an unjustifiable strain.

This fondness for climax, for crises which contain the "eminent moments" of life, points unerringly to Browning's strength and to his defect, as a dramatic writer. His success in the conventional drama was but moderate. He was too eager to reach the centre of interest at once, too impatient to trace the inception and gradual growth of influences upon character; and he therefore failed to make his mark in any play of three or of five acts. It was over ten years before he himself discovered this fact and forsook ordinary drama. He was always adept, however, at tremendous concentration of attention on a few characters at some supreme moment of test. On the other hand, he never managed a complex group satisfactorily. The limitations of his peculiar dramatic genius are, therefore, clearly marked; but the genuineness of that genius is no less marked. His mastery of the dramatic monologue—virtually his own invention—gave him a form admirably suited to satisfying his absorption in motive. The influence of the silent listener or listeners enables him to push his speaker to the farthest limit of explanation and confession without artificiality. Hence the monologue is the clearest and in one sense the most nearly complete of dramatic forms. In it all the complexities of an unusual personality, such as this poet was continually depicting, may be unravelled. There is, indeed, no action, but the succession of motives supplies the lack. In the Sebald-Ottima scene—though it is not, to be sure, a monologue—the lack is met by an extraordinary rapid shift of moods which is quite as exciting as action itself. In a drama no such character as Caponsacchi's, with motives constantly open to grave misconception, could be presented with perfect clearness; but in his monologue before the court he makes himself admirably clear. From this standpoint of clearness, though not from any other, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would have been improved by a transfer to the monologue form. Hamlet is too difficult, too problematic a character for the pure drama. No other play of Shakespeare's is so obscure. In the field of motive, then, Browning has made an advance upon Shakespeare. And it is fair to emphasise this fact, since in breadth of dramatic genius the Victorian, despite his remarkable gallery of characters, cannot comfortably endure a comparison. For the continuities of life he had, as Professor Herford has said, altogether too little appreciation; but no dramatist save Shakespeare has shown equal power and truth in depicting crises and consummations.

Portrayal of intense emotion without actual sensationalism was extremely congenial to Browning. It often appears quite as plainly in his dramatic lyrics, idyls, and romances as in the monologues and dramatic scenes or fragments, such as the divisions of *Pippa Passes* and *In a Balcony*. The ferocious hatred of the monk in the Spanish cloister, the cold malevolence of the beautiful lady in the laboratory, the rapture of the musician in *Abt Vogler*, the agonised pride of Hoséyn in *Mulékkeh*,—all these and dozens of other examples testify to their author's skill in revealing poignant emotion. Yet, like Shakespeare, he is never really melodramatic. In *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* he comes perilously near to it; for motives are frequently inadequate; but in a lesser degree Shakespeare betrays the same fault in his early play, *Titus Andronicus*. As for the familiar charge that Browning often imports too much of his own personality into the speeches of his characters—into Pompilia's and Pippa's, for example—the reply may be made that this is never so apparent as to injure the total effect of the portrait. It is not unworthy of notice, also, that Browning offers more opportunity for criticism on this score than does Tennyson or Wordsworth, for the reason that he seldom speaks in his own person; nearly all of his poems are dramatic. Save in a group which could be counted upon the fingers of one's hand—*By the Fireside*, *One Word More*, and the *Epilogue to Asolando* are perhaps the most significant—he was totally averse to what he called "sonnet-singing" about himself. He was even reluctant to believe, as many critics now do, that Shakespeare revealed anything of his own soul in his sonnets. "If so, the less Shakespeare he."

III

Whether Browning's effectiveness as a dramatic poet, and indeed as a poet in general, is seriously lessened by his alleged obscurity is a question which cannot be ignored. The first remark to be made is that his poetry shows degrees of difficulty rather than that it is obscure as a unit; and the second, that his meaning is generally worth getting at, whatever the difficulties encountered. One should begin a study of Browning with the short and simple lyrics, of which there are a good many more than is commonly supposed. If a reader insists upon breaking his back at the outset over the burden of *Another Way of Love*

instead of enjoying *How They Brought the Good News*, that is his own fault; there are plenty of good volumes of selections from Browning to-day which will guide the tyro aright. The fact is that Browning clubs and societies are responsible for much cackle over alleged mysteries. There are, it is true, some poems of Brownings's which can be approached only in such a spirit; but they are fortunately few, and the poetic value of most of them is slender. It is not even necessary to read the whole of what is often considered his masterpiece, *The Ring and the Book*. Not more than half of its divisions are destined even for poetic longevity. In fact this bulky poem is perfectly representative of its author in that it shows, among other noteworthy points, his undeniable unevenness of quality, his wavering between the intellectual subtlety of a Hyacinthus and the sublime poetry of a Caponsacchi. This unevenness is least conspicuous in the period of *Men and Women* (1855), when he was under the salutary influence of his wife, an influence at once inspiring and clarifying. One cannot fancy Elizabeth Barrett approving the obscure and over-intellectualised portions of *The Ring and the Book*, which was written after her death.

There are, indeed, certain mannerisms which run through all of his poems and lend difficulty to passages rather than to complete productions; but one speedily becomes familiar with most of them. A proneness to abrupt, broken-off constructions, indicated by a too frequent use of that dangerous mark of punctuation, the dash, is evident. It injures the splendid *Epilogue to Asolando*. As Browning bursts into the indignant question, "Pity me?", one is certainly inclined to commiserate—not for the cause proposed, but for his defiance of orthodox construction and necessary continuity. Exasperating also to commonplace readers is his undue brevity, although to others it is often stimulating. One who is enamoured of the amiable perspicuity and placidity of Longfellow finds it hard to see any good in a rigid compression which extends not only to the omission of articles but of more important words, and even, upon occasion, of whole phrases. The beginner in Browning who could read offhand with comprehension the apostrophe to Elizabeth Barrett Browning at the close of the first division of *The Ring and the Book* ("O Lyric Love") would be a phenomenon indeed. But after all, this passage, though put into cold print, was hardly addressed to the prying public but to the spirit of his dead wife alone.

Browning does, however, constantly take too much for granted; he can never be said to insult the intelligence of his reader. How far this is due, as Mr. Chesterton suggests, to the poet's modesty in believing that his readers knew as much as he did, it is impossible to say. Mental alertness, however, plus sympathy, is all that is needed to understand four-fifths of the difficulties in Browning. And if we follow his own moral principle, so often reiterated in varying phraseology throughout his volume, we should

"Welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough."

Certainly the course of some of his poems is uncommonly like the traditional one of true love. Yet if one sympathises with the author's purposes and points of view, both in art and in the criticism of life, one meets few real difficulties. It is the reader who approaches Browning with a Tennysonian, or with some other equally unfortunate bias, who remains unrewarded. And why should he not? An unsympathetic reader has no claims upon any author. He who passes unseeing by such a phrase as "You know the red turns grey," in *The Lost Mistress*, had better turn back to his Longfellow or his Tennyson.

The phrase quoted shows at once Browning's acute observation of nature and his Shakespearian knack of using nature in the service of a moving portrayal of human character. Such passages indicate, it is true, a love for out-of-the-way analogies and methods, an impatience with ordinary materials which staggers the hopelessly conventional person. And it must be admitted that this is a fruitful source of difficulty to many a reader. As has been said of Burke, Browning often winds himself into his subject like a serpent. When in a line of that obscure poem, *Sordello*, he describes a rose, it is the complexity, the inner secrets of the flower that he emphasises:

"And still more *labyrinthine* buds the rose."

There is shown perhaps too much addiction to analysis, to a determination to reach the heart of heart, whatever the object. But Browning is by no means the only English writer who is a notable exponent of this method; he differs from others like George Eliot, Meredith, and Mr. James, in that he combines more passion with analysis than they. In Professor Winchester's

words, it is his remarkable combination of "an intense, eager temper with a casuistic, speculative temper" which is the chief mark of his obscurity. And this is inseparable from his distinction as a poet. In other words, if he had been clearer he would sometimes, though perhaps not generally, have been less stimulating, less poetic. This does not entirely justify his obscurity, but it indicates the point from which to view it.

IV

In such a poet the clear outlines of Greek art are not to be expected. Despite his admiration for things Hellenic, and his labour of love in translating some Greek plays, Browning was Gothic to the bone. The gargoyles of the *Spanish Cloister*, *Childe Roland*, *Caliban*, and *Old Pictures in Florence* are not sporadic or accidental. Browning loved the grotesque, and is admittedly the greatest English master of it. He positively gloats over the excruciatingly ugly landscape in *Childe Roland*. Here, though almost never elsewhere in his poetry, is line after line of description for its own sake; for surely not more than two-thirds of it is necessary to the cumulative effect which prepares for the startling climax. Moreover, the grotesqueness of Caliban as he appears in Shakespeare's *Tempest* is heightened, as well as differentiated, in Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*. Then there is the playful-grotesque of the *Old Pictures in Florence*, a poem which seems pedantic to some readers but which is seen to be drenched equally with truth and with local atmosphere, by those who have visited the Italian city and have come to know it as it is. The ingenious rhymes in certain stanzas are more in keeping than in some supposedly serious passages of *A Grammarian's Funeral* and other lyrics. Addiction to the grotesque is prone to betray its worshipper. That unconquerable Hellenist, Matthew Arnold, thought even Shakespeare's grandeur a mixed and turbid one when compared with Homer's, which had, he asserted, "the pure lines of an Ionian horizon, the liquid clearness of an Ionian sky." What his opinion of Browning in this connection may have been one is curious to know.

Browning's treatment of the grotesque, at all events, was highly individual. To use one of his own phrases, he "fished the murex up," and, unlike Keats, seems to have secured a good deal of "porridge," or popularity, thereby. There are abundant

indications that he believed in emphasising life as a mixture of grotesque elements which somehow produced a harmony—if not in this world, then in the next. *Rabbi Ben Ezra* and *Abt Vogler* will suggest themselves to many, in this connection. And in one of his less well-known poems of his late period *Pisgah-Sights* occurs one of the most significant passages which can be quoted:

“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 reconciliation.”

In most of his poems the reconciliation is complete.

As for the allied quality of humour Browning's provokes a comparison in certain respects with Lowell's. The former's, at all events, is as abundant as the latter's, and is more intellectual. *The Courtin'*, it is true, is fully equal to *Youth and Art* or *Confessions*; but Lowell never again attained that level in mingling humour with love. Browning, on the other hand, showed in several poems that he could sustain and vary such an effect. Moreover, some of his species of grotesque, such as *A Grammarian's Funeral*, seem unique. Holmes's *Last Leaf* has a dash of the same flavour, but is much shorter. The serious strain is so pronounced, in the praise of the old grammarian's devotion to pure learning, that the subtle ridicule of his personality falls at the climax into a secondary position. Humorous, however, Browning always was; and sometimes to the detriment of what promised to be entirely serious poems. By some odd quirk of phrase or curious image he too frequently snapped the thread of his discourse and dispelled the illusion. This is one of the most just criticisms upon his poetic product. In his avowedly humorous poems, however, he “reigns and revels.” Nor is his fun-making always combined with *grotesquerie*. *Up at a Villa* is humour at its simplest. Browning's high spirits, that perpetual boyishness in which he resembled Lowell, exhibited itself in preposterous devices of language and metre, and in many another instance of unchartered freedom which, even in his light verses, critics have loudly proclaimed faults. Whether faults or not, they were, in the case of both authors, inevitable expressions of whimsical

personality. Perhaps this lawlessness, this sublime anarchy, resulted, in the case of the British poet, from his being "defrauded of the sweet food of academic institution," Italy being, as he himself declared, his university; but the shades of the American Cambridge never weighed very heavily upon the spirits of Lowell. Neither of these great intellectual awakeners was in any pedantic sense academic. Yet, lawless as Browning may have been in some respects, he escaped any taint of vulgarity. His mastery of the grotesque never summons this doubtful aid, save dramatically, in characters to whom it is appropriate. Large, hearty, and strenuous as was his nature, it was fine of grain.

This fineness is always to be borne in mind when one is emphasising Browning's love of the rugged and strong, which is exhibited in so large a majority of his poems. So apparent is this preference that it needs but little comment. It denotes a species of poetry which must be judged by appropriate standards. There is something splendidly elemental and primitive, though not strictly barbaric, in Browning's verse which harks back to *Beowulf* and the heroic tales of the Middle Ages. His frequent references to St. George and the dragon, in the monologues of Caponsacchi and Pompilia, are indicative of this trait. And yet *The Ring and the Book*, as a whole, is as little as possible like a fairy tale or a mediæval romance; it is intensely and complexly modern in its tireless analysis and in its glorification of apparently sordid materials.

Ruggedness and optimism were, in Browning's case, closely related. To paraphrase Arnold's famous characterisation of Wordsworth, Browning's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which he feels the joy offered to us in the moral struggle of life; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows us this joy and makes us share it. The term, *moral*, is of course used here in its widest significance, as Arnold defined it: "Whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live.'" The true satisfaction of life, Browning insists, lies in avoiding passivity; and the next life will differ from this only in that we shall know better "what weapons to select, what armour to indue." Even in nature, in landscape, it is the rugged outlines that attract him,—hills that are "crouched like two bulls, locked horn in horn in fight," fields in a May morning that "look *rough* with hoary dew,"—a phrase which is pointed

out by Professor Herford as the most curious and characteristic which could be chosen.

Such a poet's ideal man is a fighter. In a rapturous passage of *The Statue and the Bust* he declares that those who have attained paradise are the "soldier-saints." The inactive duke and lady cannot share this splendour:

"They see not God, I know,
Nor all that chivalry of his,
The *soldier-saints* who, row on row,

"Burn upward each to his point of bliss."

The same compound epithet is applied to Caponsacchi by Pompilia; and it expresses with characteristic brevity Browning's view of life. No modern poet has confirmed so well Milton's words,

"To be weak is miserable,
Doing or suffering."

The inspiring array of passages from Browning on this theme, a shining phalanx, tempts one to quote indefinitely. Occasionally there is a vivid contrast, as in *Love among the Ruins*, "where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles"; but even this poem is partly concerned with chariot-races and war. The "still dews of quietness," sung in a beautiful hymn of Whittier's, are rare in Browning. He is a tireless apostle of the "strenuous life." His immense and benignant vitality craved continual exercise. Like Marlowe's, his heroes rush impetuously on toward impossible goals; but his sanity is a refreshing contrast to the frenzy of the young Elizabethan.

V

What differentiates Browning as a poet more than any other one element, however, is his originality, his constant avoidance of convention. He refuses the ruts of poetry, preferring, if need be, the roughest of untrodden ways. He is determined at all costs to be true to his individuality. Sometimes, as in *The Statue and the Bust*, his determination is executed at the cost of temporary misunderstanding; but the effect is generally stimulating to a high

degree. This unconventionality limited his fame for many years, and perhaps even to-day restricts him largely to readers who are accustomed to do some thinking for themselves. Yet it can scarcely be said that this is unfortunate. And at all events he is never bizarre. Yet even in the simplest of his narrative poems there may lurk some unusual motive, or setting, or metrical effect. In *Mulékkeh* a man is faithful to what at first looks like an absurd ideal, a willingness to lose a pet mare to a thief rather than allow her to be beaten in speed. In *Ivàn Ivànovitch*, the hero, taking justice into his own hands, cuts off with one blow the head of the hapless woman who, in order to save herself, has sacrificed her children to the wolves. Browning loved, also, the holes and corners of history. It is well known that he seldom chose familiar historical personages for his poems. An enumeration of these personages, if directed to an audience unacquainted with his works, would quite conceivably be greeted with cries of "Who was Abt Vogler? or Paracelsus? or Rabbi Ben Ezra? or, of all persons, Giuseppe Caponsacchi?" It is true that Andrea del Sarto is a famous figure; but there are not many to keep him company. Browning is forever illumining some cobwebbed recess, like the crevice in the plum-tree described in *Garden Fancies*, and showing some noteworthy object within. If Byron's *Childe Harold* is in part, as it has been called, "a glorified guide-book to Italy," Browning's poetry is a glorified guide to many un-Baedekered regions of the spiritual universe. He had a passion, too, for revealing what he conceived to be the truth about various maligned persons, including Paracelsus, the hero of one of his longest productions. He refused to accept some historical and moral verdicts which had lain comfortably somnolent for centuries. In spite of claims made to the contrary, it may be definitely asserted that in religion he was not orthodox. Sufficient proof of this assertion is to be found in his rejection of the doctrine of the Atonement, a doctrine which he was apparently unable to reconcile with his often reiterated theory of individual responsibility. As Professor Dowden has put it, Browning was in fact a "moral explorer." In that strange poem, *An Epistle of Karshish*, he solved to his own satisfaction what the attitude of Lazarus to life must have been after his return from a temporary journey into the life beyond the veil. He declined to believe that any rejected love is wasted. In *The Last Ride Together* he correlates this aspect of struggle with several others,

and at the close, with a superb defiance of pure reason, shuts out all but the present moment and bids us enjoy that. His line,

" Then the good minute goes "

is much more characteristic of him than that other,

" A few daylight doses of plain life. "

In a Balcony, however, contrasts with great dramatic power the too subtle, too imaginative temperament of Constance with the more conventional personality of her lover, Norbert, and aims to prove that, to vary somewhat Mr. Chesterton's phrase, although the intellect may be permitted to go on bewildering voyages, the soul walks best in a straight road. Indeed, Jesuitism in conduct never gains praise from Browning. But in most fields he carries his devotion to the unusual measurably close to the verge of good art—although one can seldom charge him with overstepping its bounds. Such poetry produces a sharpness of impression which is at any rate legitimate and which to many readers is entirely congenial.

Particularly is this true of his figurative language. His store of novel metaphor seems exhaustless. No modern English poet can compare with him in this respect; and it is one of the most important endowments of an author. *Paracelsus*, an early production, is almost too lavish of such originality, a spendthrift outpouring of new-minted gold. One can hardly fancy any description of Imogen or Ophelia as superior to that of Michal's face, which wears a

"Quiet and peculiar light
Like the dim circlet floating round a pearl."

His brevity is again to be seen in the suggestiveness of such comparisons. This crowded brevity grew upon Shakespeare in his later years. Indeed, in nothing is Browning more nearly Shakespearian than in his command of figures and the adaptation of them to his greatest dramatic situations. The suffering of Pompilia during one of the days of her flight from her despicable husband is etched in an image worthy of *Lear* or *Othello*:

"As in his arms he [Caponisacchi] caught me, and, you say,
Carried me in, that tragical red eve,
And laid me where I next returned to life
In the other red of morning, two red plates
That crushed together, crushed the time between,
And are since then a solid fire to me."

Perhaps the most notable thing about Browning's figures is that their originality is not lawless; it is always combined harmoniously with the subject of comparison. There is no affectation of originality, no desire to attitudinise. Browning had in his nature none of the theatrical strain of Byron and Poe, which often injures the otherwise powerful impressions of their works.

His originality is perhaps most curiously, if not most significantly, shown in his love poems. They differ remarkably from those of his contemporaries; but they do not differ in being unemotional or subtle; they are not thin-blooded productions or dainty exercises in metre, like so many Elizabethan sonnets. Browning's poems of love reveal an uncommon, indeed almost unique combination of deep passion with reflection on life. Hence the lovers are seldom in the first flush of unthinking youth; generally they are mature, and in some instances close to middle age. James Lee's wife, moreover, has no pretension to beauty; she herself compares her skin, perhaps a little unjustly, to "the bark of a gnarled tree." Yet, in the last lyrics of the group, her self-sacrifice shines with a radiance which to Browning was more attractive than

"The lip's red charm,
The heaven of hair, the pride of the brow,
And the blood that blues the inside arm,"

which he nevertheless always described so vividly. The sensuous appeal of the last line, which is by no means infrequent in Browning, is of the school of Keats. But in the stanzas which follow there is little of Keats. It is in the exaltation of feeling that the peculiar value of Browning's love poems resides. Even Ottima, in the last moments of her baneful existence, rises to a sublime point of self-sacrifice. This exaltation of feeling does not, however, imply sentimentality, than which nothing is less characteristic of his verses. Furthermore, the intellectual and spiritual charm of Elizabeth Barrett—whose face, said a friend, made the worship of saints seem possible—exerted a remarkable

influence upon Browning's lyrics of love. Before his acquaintance with her, he had written almost none. Her silent collaboration was even more important than Dorothy Wordsworth's in the work of her poet brother. In some of Tennyson's love poems like *Enoch Arden* and *Maud*, and in Longfellow's *Evangeline*, there is a studied sentimentality from which a cultivated normal taste dissents. Browning's lyrics of affection glow with a true light. From no group of his poems do we get a more satisfying impression.

VI

Such praise as has so far been bestowed on Browning cannot be granted to all of his poems or all aspects of his work. The prosaic period of seven years following *The Ring and the Book* is for the most part a lamentable revelation of intellectual subtlety antagonising poetry. *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* (1871), *Fine at the Fair* (1872), *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (1873), and *The Inn Album* (1875) are not productions upon which an admirer of Browning likes to dwell. The transition had been foreshadowed by the lawyer's pleas in *The Ring and the Book*. Happily the *Dramatic Idyls* of 1879-80 showed a return to his simplest manner. Indeed there is almost convincing indication that he could have written thus simply and movingly at every stage of his poetic career. It is evident, therefore, that, if this is the case, he believed that he could best fulfil his poetic ideal by other kinds of art. His absorbing interest in the development of personality, in complex analysis of the soul, in ferreting out the blindest motives, led him inevitably into poems that were problematic. It is not recognised with sufficient clearness that Browning's poetry must be judged from the following standpoint: he deliberately chose difficult poems, though he could always write simple ones, and he chose thus because for him the material and the results justified his choice. The man who could write *An Incident of the French Camp* in 1842, *Up at a Villa* in 1855, *Hervé Riel* in 1867, *Clive* in 1880, and *Summum Bonum* at the close of his life could always write with simplicity and clearness; but to him such a game was not worth the candle. The subjects suited to such poems did not interest him so deeply as the subjects of his more difficult poems.

After all, the real difficulty in judging Browning does not lie

in his originality, in his intellectual subtlety, or even in his form. It lies in his astonishing variety of theme and treatment, which makes it impossible to sum up his achievement adequately in general statements. This is the cause of most of the misconceptions, some of them nearly absurd, concerning his work. What is true of one poem often has no bearing upon another. *Bishop Blougram's Apology* is, if you will, too intellectual; *Up at a Villa* is not intellectual at all. *One Way of Love* is perfectly simple and serious; *Another Way of Love* is partly humorous and to a beginner annoyingly puzzling. Browning was radically Anglo-Saxon in qualities, far more so than Tennyson; yet Tennyson treated English themes chiefly, while Browning was a cosmopolitan of the cosmopolitans—with a noticeable bent, however, toward Italian subjects. Seldom does he sing of England; but when he does, as in *Home Thoughts from Abroad*, the poem thrills with patriotism.

The fact is that Browning was emancipated from any narrowing influence. He kept his windows open, not only toward Jerusalem, but toward all the four winds of the universe. His dramatic work is an attempt to allow every kind of person, saint or criminal, to explain himself adequately, to justify himself if he may. *The Ring and the Book* has been called "the epic of free speech." It is this cosmopolitan attitude both in theme and treatment which gives its peculiarly modern and indispensable value to Browning's work. Whatever may be his final place in English poetry, let it be set down to his honour that he frees the mind of his readers from all petty provincialism, that he effects a wonderful catharsis of the emotions, and that he leaves "joy in wideset commonalty spread."

HARRY T. BAKER.

New York City.