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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Carolyn L. Blair entitled "Robert Browning as a Literary Critic." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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ROBERT BROWNING AS A LITERARY CRITIC

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
The University of Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

---

by
Carolyn L. Blair
June 1961

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Carolyn L. Blair

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In reply to Mrs. John Everett Millais, who had asked Browning's opinion of the poems of a young friend, the older poet frankly pointed out the technical imperfections and lack of originality. He softened the criticism, however, by predicting success for the young man if he would set himself to the "proper studies of Nature and Art, as well as the secret of the effectiveness of whatever poetry does affect the said author." One should not repeat or copy effects, he added, but find out "why they prove to be effects," and so learn "how to become similarly effective."[1]

Such advice was not new. Browning might well have been remembering, for example, Shelley's statement in the Preface to Prometheus Unbound that "one great poet is a masterpiece of Nature which another not only ought to study but must study." On the other hand, there is every evidence that he was speaking from personal experience. Once he had determined upon a literary career, he himself had begun in earnest "the proper studies of Nature and

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[1]John G. Millais (ed.), The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1909), I, 439-40.

Art," especially Art. Mrs. Orr tells of his qualifying himself for his profession "by reading and digesting the whole of Johnson's Dictionary,"[2] and Edmund Gosse speaks of his "steeping himself. . . in all literature, modern and ancient, English and exotic."[3]

This reading represented simply an intensification of an already ambitious program that was underway by the time he was five years old. Pauline contains a reference to "my first dawn of life/ Which passed alone with wisest ancient books"[4]--books that formed a part of the collection of 6,000 volumes in his father's library, where the young Browning was not only encouraged to browse at leisure, but wisely led into the delights of literature by a father

> . . . who knew better than turn straight
> Learning's full flare on weak-eyed ignorance,
> Or, worse yet, leave weak eyes to grow sandblind,
> Content with darkness and vacuity.[5]

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[2]Mrs. Sutherland Orr, The Life and Letters of Robert Browning (New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1892), I, 75.

[3]Quoted by W. H. Griffin and H. C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), p. 288.

[4]The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning (Cambridge edition; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1895), p. 5. This is the edition that will be used for all further references to Browning's poetry and will be referred to hereafter simply as Complete Works.

[5]"Development," Ibid., p. 1003.

Thus his father, by helping him reenact the siege of Troy, awakened in the five-year-old boy a lifelong enthusiasm for Homer. He introduced other classical writers in their turn. Browning's copy of Dryden's translation of Juvenal's Satires contains the comment that his father read the whole of the dedicatory preface aloud to him as they walked together up Nunhead Hill, Surrey.[6] At eight, under his father's influence, Browning began to translate the Odes of Horace, thus beginning the acquaintance that was to result in his many later references to and quotations from Horace. And it was not long before he discovered the Greek dramatists, who became increasingly important to him as sources of study in technique. In his letters he frequently quoted from Euripides and discussed fine points in the translations of Greek plays.

Both Browning's poetry and his letters testify to his continuing enthusiasm for the classics. As sources for his poems he used, among others, Aristotle, Herodotus, Pausanius, Plutarch, Suetonius, and Lucian. In 1862 he wrote of reading "odd things in Latin and antique French," including "a crazy old Latin joke book";[7] and in 1873 of

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[6]Griffin and Minchin, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

[7]Thurman L. Hood (ed.), Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 70.

needing some object "to make me shut up by Greek books earlier and oftener."[8] Although the translations and Parleyings of his later years are ample proof that he never found such an object, he did not neglect other literature. At the same time he became aware of the Iliad, he was also reading "scraps of Ossian," which he imitated in his earliest attempts at composition,[9] and Quarles' Emblems, which he later referred to as "my childhood's pet book."[10] He probably early became familiar with the sixty-two volumes of Bagster's English poetry, known to have been in his father's library, and he absorbed minutiae about the poets. After thanking the author of a treatise on handwriting, for example, for sending him a copy of his book, Browning added, "I think Shenstone was the first to 'wish to see Mrs. Somebody's handwriting that he might judge of her character.'"[11]

The frequency of his later allusions to Shakespeare and his contemporaries indicates a knowledge of the Elizabethan dramatists that was acquired through long and

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[8]Ibid., p. 158.

[9]The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899), II, 466. (Hereafter referred to as Letters of R. B. and E. B. B.)

[10]Ibid., II, 444.

[11]Hood, op. cit., p. 188.

intimate association. That he knew the Bible thoroughly is evident in his use in The Ring and the Book alone of 199 allusions to the Old Testament and 369 to the New.[12]

With the study of French came an acquaintance with such poets as Marot and a passing enthusiasm for Voltaire, all of whose works were on his father's bookshelves. The study of Italian opened the door to Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, and such lesser-known poets as Sordello. The study of other languages came later, perhaps too late for him to feel at home in the literature, but at thirty he was writing to his friend Domett, "Do you prosecute German-study? I read pretty well now."[13] Whether Browning read Goethe in the original or in translation, he developed--partially perhaps through the influence of his good friend Carlyle--a strong admiration for him. Mrs. Orr records that in Browning's last decade he spent a short time studying Spanish and Hebrew, finding "a fund of new enjoyment" in the Spanish dramatists.[14] As early as 1844, however, he had spoken of a subject for drama proposed by Elizabeth Barrett as reminding him "of that wild Drama of

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[12]See Minnie Gresham Machen, The Bible in Browning (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1903), pp. 20-21.

[13]Frederic G. Kenyon (ed.), Robert Browning and Alfred Domett (London: Smith, Elder, and Company, 1906), p. 49.

[14]Orr, op. cit., II, 556.

Calderon's which frightened Shelley just before his death."[15]

Nor did Browning neglect contemporary literature. His debut as a man of letters, following the publication of Paracelsus in 1835, brought him into the circle of the prominent writers of the Thirties and further stimulated the already keen interest in current literature aroused by his boyhood discovery of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. His letters to Miss Barrett and to Alfred Domett in the early 1840's abound with references to new books and authors, and his later letters from Italy are filled with requests for news from the English publishers and complaints about the dearth of reading material in Florence. Next to English poetry, he was interested in French fiction, especially Balzac, Flaubert, and through his wife's influence, George Sand. Although it was said that in his later years he "would read anything short of an English novel,"[16] his letters contain evidence of his having read not only English, but even an occasional American novel. As he grew older, he became increasingly eager to see the new biographies and editions of letters.[17]

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[15] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 65.

[16] Orr, op. cit., II, 556.

[17] Ibid., II, 557.

Instead of confining himself to the familiar routes, Browning frequently ventured along the by-ways of literature, made accessible by his father's penchant for rare volumes, which the son came naturally to accept as part of the common heritage of literate people. Third-century Indian beast fables and odd lore from Nathaniel Wanley's Wonders of the Little World were woven into the texture of his poems. Miss Barrett had to remind him that not everyone was as familiar as he with Vasari's Lives of the Painters, while the public indifference brought on by his obscurity might also have reminded him that to most readers many of his favorite writers were strangers, including those "certain people of importance" with whom he chose to parley.

Browning's strong love for books, combined with his consciousness of the poet's need to analyze what he loved, caused him to become a careful and critical reader with strong, independent ideas. Mrs. Orr remarks that "the patient reading which he always required for himself was justified by that which he always demanded for others."[18] This patient reading frequently brought the pleasure that would vent itself in such appreciative phrases as "the

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[18]Orr, op. cit., II, 558.

silver speech of Sidney's self."[19] If, however, his reading suggested misplaced energy on the writer's part, he could be strong in condemnation, as in his verdict on Miss Frances Power Cobbe's Italics: "well-meant, poor, inexact, painful and mistaken stuff."[20] The young Dickens appeared to the young Browning "uproarious and (I think) disgusting, in his Pecksniffs."[21] On the other hand, Browning would champion and remain loyal to a writer whom others were inclined to forget. His "Rephan," the prefatory note tells us, was "suggested by a very early recollection of a prose story by the noble woman and imaginative writer, Jane Taylor of Norwich."[22]

There occurs at this point the question as to why one with such deep interests and strong opinions did not channel more of his writing into criticism. Only twice did he venture into formal criticism, once to write a preface

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[19]Complete Works, p. 75. It is interesting to compare here Whittier's "Arcadian Sidney's silvery phrase." For a more detailed study of Whittier's relationship with both Sidney and Browning, see Professor Alwin Thaler's "Whittier and the English Poets," New England Quarterly, XXIV (March, 1951), 53-68.

[20]Richard Curle (ed.), Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed in Their Letters (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1937), p. 91.

[21]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, pp. 51-52.

[22]Complete Works, pp. 1002-3.

to an edition of Shelley's letters, later found to be spurious, and again to write a review of Richard Henry Wilde's Conjectures and Researches concerning the Love Madness and Imprisonment of Torquato Tasso--a review that emerged as an essay on Chatterton. The Shelley essay he was in the habit of disparaging. His wife wrote that "Robert makes very light of it himself,"[23] and Browning mentioned to Carlyle that he had written a preface "not admitting of much workmanship of any kind, if I had it to give."[24] The Chatterton essay he kept so well hidden that it was not identified as his until more than a hundred years after it was published anonymously in the Foreign Quarterly Review.[25]

Although Browning might speak jocularly of his "corrupt and rotten cheese loving taste,"[26] he did not altogether lack confidence in his judgment. When he was offered the editorship of the Cornhill Magazine at the time of Thackeray's resignation, he wrote to William Story that

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[23]Frederic G. Kenyon (ed.), The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (New York: Macmillan, 1897), II, 52.

[24]Hood, op. cit., p. 36.

[25]See Donald Smalley (ed.), Browning's Essay on Chatterton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), pp. 6-7.

[26]Edward C. McAleer (ed.), Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 106.

he was considering it because he had an impulse "to figure as a man actually capable of choosing better articles from the quantity always on hand."[27] But he did not accept the editorship. Neither did he write for a new edition of Shelley the critical estimate that one of his correspondents declared "Mr. Moxon has long promised the public."[28] Nor did he write an introduction to the works of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, even at the constant urging of friends who felt that Browning was the one who might rescue the unfortunate poet from oblivion, and even though he declared himself awaiting the occasion to do what little he could to show his "abundant goodwill towards the author of some of the finest poetry of our times."[29]

The reluctance might have sprung partially from his awareness of the informality of his education and his tendency to be swayed by the impressions of the moment. One of his most embarrassing moments came when he found that his letter congratulating Thomas Noon Talfourd on the performance of Ion had been placed by the proud author in a

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[27]Henry James, William Wetmore Story and His Friends (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1903), II, 116.

[28]H. W. Donner (ed.), The Browning Box, or The Life and Works of Thomas Lovell Beddoes as Reflected in Letters by His Friends and Admirers (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 98.

[29]Ibid., p. 139.

bound collection where all might see it. He explained that while he admired the play, his letter had been prompted by "all the novelty, and social admiration at the friend." What others would think of his extravagant praise bothered him at a time when the merits of his own plays were open to question.[30] Another letter written more than thirty years later to comment on poems submitted for his criticism shows that he had not overcome his diffidence:

> I wish everybody that cares to ask my opinion about poetry to bear in mind that my own claims to be a poet have always been strongly contested, and not altogether by people I despised: so, there is always an appeal from me to a more favorable and presumably competent judge.[31]

It is also possible that Browning's attempts to evade the role of critic might be closely related to his avowed reason for avoiding magazine publication for his poetry. "I cannot bring myself to write for periodicals," he explained in reply to a request from a Boston editor.

> If I publish a book, and people choose to buy it, that proves they want to read my works. But to have them turn over the pages of a magazine and find me--that is to be an uninvited guest. My wife liked it. She liked to be with the others; but I have steadfastly refused that kind of thing from first to last.[32]

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[30] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 317.

[31] William C. DeVane and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (eds.), New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 234.

[32] Hood, op. cit., p. 244.

No group, Browning felt, played the role of uninvited guest with quite the effrontery of the common run of critics. He deeply resented their invasion of the privacy of their subjects. Writing to Miss Barrett that journalist William Howitt was "bookmaking about poets," he deplored Howitt's visiting Wordsworth and encouraging the old man to reminisce, while, unknown to Wordsworth, Howitt was taking notes.[33]

As a critic Browning would have been forced to forfeit the protection of expressing himself through "the utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine," thus leaving himself completely vulnerable. He would have been too truthful not to speak his mind and too sensitive to adverse criticism himself to want to occasion pain in others. It has been conjectured that he withdrew from publication "Gerousois Oinos," a poem intended for the Jocoseria volume, "because his contemptuous remarks upon contemporary poetry were certain to give great offence to his brother craftsmen."[34] He tried to be philosophical when he himself first became the object of critical attacks. "God send I be not too proud of their abuse!" he

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[33]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 118.

[34]William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (second edition; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 566.

wrote to Domett. "For there is no hiding the fact that it is of the proper old drivelling virulence with which God's Elect have in all ages been regaled."[35] Two years before his death, on being sent an unfair, harsh criticism, he replied:

> I have had too long an experience of the inability of the human goose to do other than cackle when benevolent and hiss when malicious; and no amount of goose criticism shall make me lift a heel at what waddles behind it.[36]

Between these two attempts to be philosophical, however, Browning was nursing his wrath.[37] The explosion came in 1876 with the publication of Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper, a counterattack on his critics, especially Alfred Austin, the calibre of whose criticism can be judged by Browning's epithets: "such vermin as little Austin"[38] and "such a filthy little snob as Mr. Alfred Austin."[39] "Whenever there is a funny piece of raving against me in a newspaper," he wrote to his brother-in-law,

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[35]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, p. 56.

[36]Hood, op. cit., p. 261.

[37]See Kenneth L. Knickerbocker, "Browning and His Critics," Sewanee Review, XLIII (July-September, 1935), 284-291.

[38]McAleer, op. cit., p. 359.

[39]Ibid., p. 333.

> you may be sure my little bug of an Austin is biting his best. . . . All this bug-juice from a creature I never saw in my life, and whose scribblings, except when they related to myself, I never read a line of![40]

While the bug-juice was not dangerous, a constant spray could be provoking. And Browning was provoked. Keats and Tennyson might "'go softly all their days' for a gruff word or two,"[41] but Browning stalked into enemy territory brandishing a big stick. The enemy, of course, was not repulsed. Although the attacker felt some temporary relief, he was doubtless soon embarrassed--as his friends have been ever since.

In Pacchiarotto the critics appear in the guise of chimney sweeps:

> "We critics as sweeps out your chimbly!
> Much soot to remove from your flue, sir!
> Who spares coal in the kitchen an't you, sir!
> And neighbors complain it's no joke, sir,
> --You ought to consume your own smoke, sir!"

But Pacchiarotto has grown wary:

> "Ah, rogues, but my housemaid suspects you--
> Is confident oft she detects you
> In bringing more filth into my house
> Than ever you found there!"[42]

These lines are clearly a commentary on a habit of Alfred

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[40]Paul Landis (ed.), The Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 300.

[41]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 19.

[42]Complete Works, p. 806.

Austin's that Browning found intolerable. In a letter to Edmund Gosse, he explained that he had seen a criticism of Balaustion's Adventure in which,

> undertaking to give "specimens of Mr B's inability to write a line" (or some such phrase) the critic produced several isolated lines--seven, I remember--five of which he had altered by omission or addition: in the first were two omissions and one addition of a syllable: the remaining lines untampered with contained each a break in the rhythm which the context would have justified.[43]

This kind of dishonesty was abhorrent to Browning, as was the dishonesty he had heard about early in his career when a friend told him that it was the common practice to pay a critic so much for praise or blame, depending on where the interests of the briber lay.[44] And he was deeply concerned when he found that a vicious attack in Blackwood's on young Coventry Patmore was aimed not at the poet himself, but at his father, who was an enemy of the critics. "Are not these things," he asked, "fit to make an apostle swear?"[45]

Browning was also impatient with the common practice of criticizing without reading. He was incensed when there appeared, for this reason, a review of Landor's works

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[43]Hood, op. cit., p. 175.

[44]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 409.

[45]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, p. 112.

without "one word right and reasonable."[46] At another time he found a criticism of his own complete poems in some respects fair, but completely unfair in

> saying I never even tried to do, what I have done, well or ill, in long poems he is pleased--not to call failures, but pass clean over: thus I never describe ("Flight of the Duchess")--never delineate the quieter female character ("Colombe") & so on. The fact is, there is more in my works than a new comer can take in at once--or by next month, when the article ought to be ready.[47]

One of the pleasures he derived from the Browning Society, he told Furnivall, was the "evident annoyance" it gave his "dear old critics" who went on "gibing and gibbering" at him. "If these worthies," he concluded, "could point to a single performance in which they themselves 'read and studied' anything of mine, far less induced others to do so, there might be a reason for their wrath." He had failed, however, to find such an article during "the entire existence" of the Saturday Review.[48]

A misconception of his poetry in an American review he attributed to the habit the critics had of "reading attentively the criticism of their brethren, and paying no attention to the text criticized."[49] The trouble with

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[46]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 418.

[47]McAleer, op. cit., pp. 180-81.

[48]Hood, op. cit., p. 207.

[49]Ibid., p. 216.

criticism, he decided at another time, was that the critics wanted nothing but to "look fine themselves at everybody's expense. . . . All they hope for is that people will never think of the book but as the text whence they preached so clever a sermon."[50] Or, again, he was astonished at the lack of a sense of values, noting that in the periodicals that had ridiculed his Paracelsus ten years before, there would often follow in the same column "a most laudatory notice of an Elementary French book, on a new plan, which I 'did' for my old French Master, and he published--'that was really an useful work'!"[51]

Criticism designed simply for appreciation left Browning impatient. He saw little worth in Lowell's critical essays:

> Whoever wanted Chaucer, or Chapman, or Ford, got him long ago--what else have Lamb, and Coleridge, and Hazlitt and Hunt and so on to the end of their generations. . what else been doing this many a year? What one passage of all these, cited with the very air of a Columbus, but has been known to all who know anything of poetry this many, many a year. . . . Ford's and Crashaw's rival Nightingales--why they have been dissertated on by Wordsworth and Coleridge, then by Lamb and Hazlitt, then worked to death by Hunt, who printed them entire and quoted them to pieces again, in every periodical he was ever engaged upon.

The passage begins to wilt, he adds,

as when, in the old dances, the belle began the figure

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[50] McAleer, op. cit., p. 163.

[51] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 208.

> with her own partner, and by him was transferred to the next, and so to the next--they ever beginning with all the old alacrity and spirit; but she bearing a still-accumulating weight of tokens of gallantry, and none the better for every fresh pushing and shoving and pulling and hauling. . . .[52]

Not all critics, however, become targets of Browning's scorn. In at least one instance a review opened the way for a long and satisfying friendship with the reviewer. In 1851 the Revue des Deux Mondes printed a sympathetic review of Browning's poems by Joseph Milsand, the French critic and philosopher. The following year when Browning was in Paris he met Milsand, found him compatible, and thereafter regarded him as one of his closest friends. Two years before his death, Browning was agreeably surprised to come across "a very noticeable book--'Studies on RB.' by a Mr. Fotheringham" whose name he had never even heard before. He found it "a very remarkable instance (so far as I have read--perhaps one tenth of it) of the interest a complete stranger can take in my 'unintelligible works.'"[53] Yet, in the final analysis, he told Furnivall, who was preparing a Browning bibliography, that he had taken out old reviews and discovered that "the sight of their very outsides" saddened him: "So much misconception

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[52]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 335.

[53]Hood, op. cit., pp. 279-80.

at best, ignorance at middling, and malice at worst, in those old slaps on my face in order apparently to keep some fellow's critical hands warm!"[54]

It was no wonder, then, that the writer so admirably qualified to become a poet-critic struggled to keep the poet in the starring role and the critic in the wings as prompter. Yet it was often the critic's voice that came through to the public, especially during the last twenty years of his life. Throughout the poems real artists mingle freely with those created for polemical purposes, and nearly all of the poems on art contain the author's views on the function of art and the role of the artist. In Pauline, Browning's first published poem, the speaker ponders his future as a poet in what one critic describes as an allegory "of the boy Browning's high adventures with the Spirit of Poetry, of which Pauline herself is but the symbol."[55] The invocation of the spirit of Shelley shows where Browning's early loyalties lay; and the idealism of the passages on the poet shows his almost fierce insistence, even then, on the sanctity of the poet's function:

> I shall live
> With poets, calmer, purer still each time,

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[54] Ibid., p. 205.

[55] Ibid., p. xv.

> And beauteous shapes will come for me to seize,
> And unknown secrets will be trusted me
> Which were denied the waverer once; but now
> I shall be priest and prophet as of old.[56]

Although John Stuart Mill's criticism of the "intense and morbid self-consciousness" of Pauline influenced its author to cast his next poem, Paracelsus (1835), in dramatic form, the reflections on poetry continue, and the affinity of "Aprile, an Italian poet," with the "I" of Pauline is immediately recognizable. Aprile "would love infinitely and be loved." He would express "every passion sprung from man" and "supply all chasms with music, breathing/ Mysterious motions of the soul."[57]

The main character in Sordello (1840) is another Italian poet, this time one with a basis in fact, but cast in much the same mould as his predecessors. To provide dramatic interest and a wider range for his poetic theories, Browning created a rival poet, Eglamour, as a foil for Sordello. One critic points out that the poet was at this time trying to work out a new style, including almost a new poetic language and that Sordello was attempting the same thing. "The passage in which this aim is set out," he continues, "contains some of the soundest

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[56]Complete Works, p. 11.

[57]Ibid., p. 23.

criticism ever made by a poet. . . . It is a presage, in 1840, of certain doctrines which in this day critics and poets regard as characteristically modern."[58] In spite of the obscurity of Sordello, there are lucid passages on poetry, including the division of poets into types and the description labeled "How a poet's soul comes into play."[59]

In the collections of short poems belonging to the next two and a half decades the critic continued to emerge through the poet. "Old Pictures in Florence" is a direct, detailed treatment of Browning's artistic principles. "The Glove" is a subtle commentary on Leigh Hunt's treatment of the same story. "Transcendentalism" and "How It Strikes a Contemporary" are continuations of the earlier interest in the function of the poet. "Pictor Ignotus" turns the spotlight on the artist's relationship with his critics. "Fra Lippo Lippi" touches on Browning's attitude toward realism in art. "Andrea del Sarto" and "Abt Vogler" pose questions regarding inspiration and the relationship of the artist to the philosophy of the imperfect. "Memorabilia" and "Popularity" are tributes to two of Browning's favorite poets. And "Saul," comments DeVane, "serves as a means of

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[58]F. R. G. Duckworth, Browning: Background and Conflict (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1931), p. 202.

[59]Complete Works, pp. 79, 100, 116.

measuring the development of Browning's religious ideas as well as a means of measuring his theory of poetry."[60]

Also significant are the signs of self-consciousness indicated by such internal references to the poet's own work as that at the end of "A Light Woman":

> And, Robert Browning, you writer of plays,
> Here's a subject made to your hand.[61]

This tendency to step out directly was to become increasingly pronounced. The Ring and the Book contains two direct addresses to his public, one in the first book:

> Such, British Public, ye who like me not
> (God love you!)--whom I yet have laboured for--[62]

and another at the end:

> So, British Public, who may like me yet,
> (Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence.[63]

There is much evidence in this poem of Browning's willingness to woo the British people by taking them into his confidence. Some of his most valuable discussions of his own art are to be found in the first and last books where, in order to justify his having taken "the artistic way to prove so much," he describes the process involved in

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[60] DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 257.

[61] Complete Works, p. 267.

[62] Ibid., p. 427.

[63] Ibid., p. 601.

fashioning a ring of truth from an old yellow book. One is able to follow the poem from its conception through the method of composition to its completion.

Balaustion's Adventure (1871), Aristophanes' Apology (1875), and Agamemnon (1877) represent the fruits of Browning's years of study of Greek drama. Through his transcriptions and translations he not only comments on his favorite dramatists, but also on the revival of classical interests among his contemporaries. Balaustion's Adventure is a tribute to and defense of Aristophanes. Aristophanes' Apology, a continuation of the adventures of Balaustion, is more polemical, with emphasis on the merits and weaknesses of the Greek tragedians and on Browning's theories regarding the origin and relative functions of comedy and tragedy. The preface to Agamemnon has critical value as a subtle reply to contemporary critics who regarded the Greek writers as models.

Fifine at the Fair (1872), interpreted as an attack on Rossetti,[64] is sprinkled with direct passages on the arts. Although Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (1873) and The Inn Album (1875) deal with contemporary events unrelated to the literary world, they contain allusions significant for

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[64]William C. DeVane, "The Harlot and the Thoughtful Young Man," Studies in Philology, XXIX (July, 1932), 463-84.

their critical value, including the very pointed one in The Inn Album on the current state of the author's reputation:

> That bard's a Browning; he neglects the form:
> But ah, the sense, ye gods, the weighty sense![65]

Pacchiarotto (1876), as was mentioned earlier, was written as a direct answer to his critics. In the title poem, as well as in several others, Browning's disguise wears thin as he reiterates his demands for privacy and denies ever having unlocked his heart with the sonnet-key. "The Two Poets of Croisic," which made up more than half of the La Saisiaz volume (1878) and has for a subject two historical poets, Rene Gentilhomme and Paul Desforges-Maillard, allowed Browning once more to present obliquely his views on the duties of the poet. Outstanding among the works of his last decade for its value as criticism is Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day (1887). Frankly autobiographical, the book is made up of monologues addressed to the men who represent the major interests of the poet's life--philosophy, history, poetry, politics, painting, Greek literature, and music. Through these monologues Browning comments on the nineteenth-century ideas with which he is in sharpest disagreement.

Although the poems contain numerous allusions to

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[65] Complete Works, p. 773.

other writers, their chief value lies in what they tell us of Browning's theories. For the more practical application of those theories, it is necessary to turn to his prose, the letters and essays, supplemented by reports of conversations recorded in the diaries and memoirs of his friends. For one who called himself "a born, bred, and bigotted hater of letter writing,"[66] Browning wrote an impressive number of letters; and for one who rebelled so vigorously against the invasion of his privacy, he was instrumental in preserving an impressive number. Fortunately he finally decided against destroying his seventeen-month correspondence with Miss Barrett--letters particularly valuable for a study of his criticism, since the two poets began writing on the basis of a mutual interest in literature. The letters are lively, sometimes controversial, and, until the mutual interests grew beyond the confines of literature, packed with observations on authors and books. During these months Browning was attending the theatre regularly, dining frequently with prominent men of letters, reading current books and reviews, fulminating against critics, and agonizing over his own writing.

Browning had thought of destroying his letters to

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[66]H. Allingham and E. B. Allingham (eds.), Letters to William Allingham (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1911), p. 97.

Isabella Blagden, but he also fortunately chose to preserve most of them. Covering a period of more than twenty years and addressed to a close friend who was not only on intimate footing with English and American writers living in Italy, but was herself a novelist of sorts, these letters are significant for their critical content and for what they reveal of the changing attitudes of the poet as he saw himself gradually rising from long years of public neglect. Another correspondent whose letters are especially pertinent to this study is Alfred Domett, the close friend of Browning's youth and young manhood who disappointed Browning by departing for New Zealand just as the latter felt that Domett was ready for a literary career. The letters cover only a short period in the early 1840's, but they contain those details about contemporary literature that Browning felt would be welcome to one so far removed from cultural circles.

Julia Wedgwood, a young woman who sought out the poet's acquaintance in the Sixties, was rewarded by long letters with some of his best comments on Tennyson and his most effective defense of the choice of subject for The Ring and the Book. There are also, of course, the many letters of both the Brownings to their families. On occasion, even Browning's letters to his practical brother-in-law, George Barrett, touch on subjects of

literary value, such as his explanations for his undignified public attacks on Edward FitzGerald and Alfred Austin.

When to all of these are added the letters to miscellaneous correspondents--including Tennyson, Ruskin, Carlyle, his publishers, members of the Browning Society, and aspiring young poets--the picture of Browning the critic begins to emerge distinctly. Further details are provided by his wife's letters to friends like Mrs. Jameson and Harriet Martineau, by excerpts from such diarists as W. C. Macready and William Allingham, by the reminiscences of loyal friends like Mrs. Orr and Mrs. Bronson, and by passages on Browning found in the letters of his contemporaries. To complete the picture there are the two critical essays previously mentioned.

While it is clear that Browning never thought of himself as a critic, it is equally clear that he had deep convictions founded on an intelligent and thorough study of art, and that his views taken altogether form a considerable body of criticism. When one with Browning's culture and sensitivity says simply, "The power of the man is immense and irresistible," the statement has critical value. When a number of such statements begin to suggest strong underlying critical principles, they cannot be ignored, either for the light they shed on his own poetry

or the understanding and appreciation they bring to the works of others.

As even a cursory study of Browning's reading shows, his interests were wide, ranging from the epics of Homer to the novels of Isa Blagden, from the drama of Aeschylus to the lyrics of Mrs. Felicia Hemans. Because of the informality of the criticism and the occasions which called it forth, one may expect more details about Miss Blagden's Nora and Archibald Lee than about the Iliad, more about R. H. Horne's Ballad Romances than about The Canterbury Tales, and more about Enoch Arden than Paradise Lost. Nevertheless, the nature and tone of his remarks often provide the key to his true feelings. In spite of the few references to the Iliad, for example, we know that it was one of his favorite books. Two years before his death he attributed an attack of rheumatism to "my stupid inadvertence in sitting with a window open at my back,--reading the Iliad"[67]--surely a tribute to Homer's powers to hold "old men from the chimney-corner."

We know from the tone of his few references to Chaucer that Browning regarded him as above the need for such weak witness as posterity might offer. And we know

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[67]Mrs. Arthur Bronson, "Browning in Venice," Century Magazine, LXIII (January, 1902), 576.

from his chiding of the public for taking only drips and drops from "the four big butts of Milton's brew" that he himself had been intoxicated with it. There are enough detailed discussions of many outstanding writers, however, to give force to his criticism and to help explain his views on minor writers. Euripides and Shakespeare, the English Romantic poets, and his eminent contemporaries figure prominently in his writings, not simply as objects of admiration, but as subjects for analysis as he attempted to find the secret of the effectiveness of whatever poetry did affect him.

Although many of Browning's opinions have been quoted in biographies and critical works, and detailed studies have been made of his relationships with various other writers, no attempt has been made up to the present time to bring together his opinions in an organized form or to evaluate his contributions as a critic. It is the purpose of this study to attempt such an organization and evaluation.

Since it is impossible in a short study to cover all of Browning's criticism, it seems wise to limit the discussion to that which has the most bearing on his own writing and for which he obviously had the best background. The emphasis of this study, therefore, is on poetry--dramatic, lyric, and that hazy category in between which

Browning chose to call the dramatic lyric. But before turning to these specific types, it is necessary to consider the major aesthetic principles upon which he based his criticism.

CHAPTER II

"ART IN OBEDIENCE TO LAWS"

As a child, Browning, like many gifted children, showed promise in any area in which he made serious effort, but particularly in painting and music. Through his father's influence he began early to frequent art galleries and to try his hand at sketching. Through his mother's influence he studied piano and was precocious in composition as well as performance. His enthusiasm for these two arts never waned, and they were to provide outlets during periods of poetic sterility. Thus it is not surprising that many of his poems deal with musicians and painters, that there are long passages on the function of art, or that three of the men chosen for the Parleyings were a musician, a painter, and a poet, and a fourth the author of Browning's favorite book on painting.

That he recognized, like Keats, the role played by art in giving permanence to truth and beauty is clear in the "Parleying with Charles Avison." Every artist, he says, is trying to capture the "soul's evanescent moods"--to keep

> Unalterably still the forms that leap
> To life for once by help of Art.[1]

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[1] The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert

Correggio's "Andromeda," his favorite painting, had long before convinced him of the painter's power:

> Andromeda!
> But she is with me: years roll, I shall change,
> But change can touch her not--so beautiful
> With her fixed eyes, earnest and still, and hair
> Lifted and spread by the salt-sweeping breeze.[2]

Eve and Helen, he says elsewhere, live today because the artists have insured their immortality:

> The Painter's Eve, the Poet's Helena
> Still rapturously bend, afar still throw
> The wistful gaze! Thanks, Homer, Angelo.[3]

With all this emphasis on art, however, it must not be assumed that Browning discounted life or regarded art as a substitute for actual experience. The present existence of Eve and Helen is not to be preferred to the flesh-and-blood reality. Life and experience are superior. Evidence for support of this view comes primarily from imaginary characters, but the frequency with which it is repeated gives force to the argument that the characters are expressing their creator's own convictions. "Art is my evidence," says the speaker in Fifine, "that something was, is, might be; but no more thing itself/ Than flame is

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Browning (Cambridge edition; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1895), p. 976.

[2]Ibid., p. 8.

[3]Ibid., p. 977.

fuel."[4] Norbert, of In a Balcony, compares artists with men like himself:

> We live, and they experiment on life--
> These poets, painters, all who stand aloof
> To overlook the farther.[5]

The kind of immortality that the two lovers attain through art in "The Statue and the Bust" is small consolation compared with the frustration of missing the rewards of warm, human love. The sculptor and the singer in "Youth and Art" sacrifice life for art. Both attain their goals, and the world applauds them. Only they know the meaning of the sacrifice:

> Each life unfulfilled, you see;
> It hangs still, patchy and scrappy:
> We have not sighed deep, laughed free,
> Starved, feasted, despaired,--been happy.[6]

Cleon the poet, longingly eyeing the young slave girl sent him as a gift from Protus, confesses to the donor:

> I can write love-odes; thy fair slave's an ode.
> I get to sing of love, when grown too gray
> For being beloved: she turns to that young man,
> The muscles all a-ripple on his back.[7]

Cleon, at least for the moment, would relinquish all claims to fame to be able to trade places with the young man. The speaker in "Transcendentalism" addresses a young poet:

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[4] Ibid., p. 711.

[5] Ibid., p. 370.

[6] Ibid., p. 396.

[7] Ibid., p. 361.

> You are a poem, though your poem's naught.
> The best of all you showed before, believe,
> Was your own boy-face o'er the finer chords
> Bent, following the cherub at the top
> That points to God with his paired half-moon wings.[8]

The lover in "The Last Ride Together" is convincing as he argues that his ride brings him more joy than all their accomplishments bring to the poet, the sculptor, and the musician whom he addresses with some pity.

Nevertheless Browning seems to have felt that while art is not a substitute for these experiences, it can heighten, deepen, broaden, and otherwise give meaning to them. It was the relationship between art and life that most concerned him. The artist awakens man's awareness of the infinite by appealing to him through the finite. In "Fra Lippo Lippi" and the "Parleying with Francis Furini," poems in which he is concerned with realism in art, Browning represents the painter as one who reaches the soul through the senses. Fra Lippo, who sees the world through the artist's eyes

> --The beauty and the wonder and the power,
> The shapes of things, their colors, lights and shades,
> Changes, surprises,--

believes that these should be painted just as they are:

> God's works--paint any one, and count it a crime
> To let a truth slip.[9]

As Browning makes clear here and elsewhere, however,

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[8] Ibid., p. 336.

[9] Ibid., pp. 344-5.

the artist must go beyond factual representation. Fidelity to detail is no assurance of great art. Andrea del Sarto can draw perfectly, can even correct Raphael's drawing, but he lacks the insight, the aspiration--or "the soul," as he himself calls it. He has failed to assume the artist's responsibility for finding the meaning behind the representation of nature. Fra Lippo, on the other hand, understands the artist's role. "The world's no blot for us," he says,

> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink.[10]

Art, then, is to Browning a medium through which man reaches truth. In Fifine the speaker defines it as "the love of loving, rage/ Of knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things/ For truth's sake, whole and sole."[11] Nowhere does Browning speak more emphatically on this point than in The Ring and the Book. At the end he poses the question which he knows the British public will be asking: "Why take the artistic way to prove so much?" His answer is one of his clearest and most important statements on aesthetics:

> Because it is the glory and the good of Art
> That Art remains the one way possible
> Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.

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[10] Ibid., p. 345. [11] Ibid., p. 712.

You can't look a brother in the face, he continues, and tell him that he has eyes but is blind, that his "ears are stuffed and stopped, despite their length." Even if his anger can be endured, the truth by the time it reaches him may look false.

> But Art,--wherein man nowise speaks to men,
> Only to mankind,--Art may tell a truth
> Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
> Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.

Thus through painting, through music, through poetry, the artist is able to "suffice the eye and save the soul beside."[12]

Art, Browning says in another passage in the same poem, is essential to spiritual growth. Man grows only through his attempts at creation, repeating "God's process in man's due degree." Man, being inferior--a product of creation himself--cannot actually create life where it has never been. Yet if he does not want to stagnate he is forced "to reach at, if not grasp and gain/ The good beyond him,--which attempt is growth." He must "so project his surplusage of soul/ In search of body" that although he may not create new life, "something dead may get to live again."[13] As the tragic scenes of the Francescini affair acted themselves out again in his mind, "The life in me

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[12]Ibid., p. 601.

[13]Ibid., p. 421.

abolished the death of things,/" he declares, "Deep calling unto deep."[14] It is in this sense that the artist saves his own soul.

The truth that art teaches involves the gradual perception, first on the part of the artist and then his public, of the universe in its wholeness. "Instinctive Art," one character says,

> Must fumble for the whole, once fixing on a part
> However poor, surpass the fragment, and aspire
> To reconstruct thereby the ultimate entire.[15]

It is the function of all the arts, the poet tells Charles Avison,

> To match and mate
> Feeling with knowledge,--make as manifest
> Soul's work as mind's work, turbulence as rest,
> Hates, loves, joys, woes, hopes, fears. . .[16]

The artist provides humanity, says Browning in the Essay on Shelley, with "a sublime fragmentary essay toward a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal."[17] The essay must necessarily be fragmentary because the artist, being human, is forced to strive always toward an unattainable perfection. But the greatness of the art is commensurate with the degree to which it

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[14] Ibid., p. 419.

[15] Ibid., p. 712.

[16] Ibid., p. 976.

[17] Ibid., p. 1014.

fulfills its function as a fragmentary essay and arouses in man an understanding and a sense of "oneness" with the universe.

In this sense art to Browning has a utilitarian purpose. Through the revelation of truth and the enlarging of experiences, it enables man to live more abundantly. On the other hand, he has Fra Lippo exhibit impatience, if not disgust, with the Prior's suggestion that painting should assume the immediately practical purpose of instigating to prayer, or reminding the spectators to fast on Friday. "Why, for this," retorts Fra Lippo,

> What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
> Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or what's best,
> A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.[18]

In his concern for all the arts and the relationship of one to the other, it was inevitable that Browning would raise the question as to which was the greatest. Acting received his nomination at least once. Tremendously moved by a performance of Salvini in King Lear, he is reported to have said to his companions, "I almost think that the actor is as great as the poet"; and after seeing the same actor in Oedipus, he told William Michael Rossetti, "in a tone of entire conviction," that it was "absolutely the finest effort of art he had ever beheld, not only the finest in

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[18] Ibid., p. 345.

the art of acting, but in any art whatsoever."[19] But years earlier, exasperated by Charles Kean's taking so much time to study his own Columbe's Birthday, Browning wrote, "The poorest Man of letters (if really of letters) I ever knew is of far higher talent than the best actor I ever expect to know."[20] Although this last statement may be somewhat discounted by its having come at the height of Browning's disillusionment not only with Kean, but with Macready and actors and the theatre in general, it is safe to say that acting was not a serious contender in his thinking for queen of the arts. The crown he offered at times to music and again to poetry.

Abt Vogler, the musician, claims for his art a spontaneity and originality denied to the painter and the poet. He might, he declares, have "painted the whole" or made verse:

> It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,
> Painter and poet are proud in the artist-list enrolled.

If he had painted or made poetry of his "soul's wish," however, the products would have remained for all to see and analyze: "There it had stood, to see, nor the process

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[19]William Michael Rossetti, Some Reminiscences (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), I, 189.

[20]Thurman L. Hood (ed.), Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 10.

so wonder-worth." The palace of music that he rears is soon gone, but even as he returns to "the C-Major of this life," he can comfort himself that in his music was "the finger of God," that momentarily he was able to capture "what never had been" and was himself made perfect. Out of three sounds he framed not a fourth, "but a star."[21] The implications are that Abt Vogler has achieved what Browning elsewhere denies even to the greatest of artists--the actual creation instead of the mere resuscitation of life.

The speaker in Fifine contends that one can express in music "truth that escapes prose,--nay puts poetry to shame" and again that music, more than the other arts, is victorious over the commonplace, keeping its freshness and surprises.[22] To Charles Avison Browning declares: "There is no truer truth obtainable/ By Man than comes of music." Music comes closer than the other arts to capturing emotion --"how we Feel, hard and fast as what we Know"; but--and here Browning seems to be contradicting what he had said earlier in "Abt Vogler"--even music "fails of touching":

> What's known once is known ever: Arts arrange,
> Dissociate, re-distribute, interchange
> Part with part, lengthen, broaden, high or deep
> Construct their bravest,--still such pains produce
> Change, not creation.

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[21] Complete Works, p. 383.

[22] Ibid., pp. 724-5.

Since music does come nearest to actual creation, one wishes that it could go a step further and "give momentary feeling permanence":

> Could Music rescue thus from Soul's profound,
> Give feeling immortality by sound,
> Then were she queenliest of Arts! Alas--
> As well expect the rainbow not to pass![23]

So music is not the "queenliest of Arts." The poet and the painter with their Helens and Andromedas surpass in this respect the musician, who cannot give immortality through sound. The very medium that makes near-creation possible, that gives evidence of "the finger of God," precludes permanence. And the poet of the Parleyings was deeply concerned with permanence.

Much earlier Browning had made a convincing case for the superiority of poetry over music. In "Saul," young David, yearning to wrest Saul from his lethargy, abandons the harp and turns to the inspired poetry that snatches Saul from ruin and creates in him a new harmony. The relative merits of poetry and painting are nowhere treated specifically, but Browning's preference for the former can everywhere be gleaned by implication and by the incontrovertible evidence of his lifelong practice and lifelong defense of it. Since, when he discussed art, it was most

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[23] Ibid., pp. 976-7.

often the poet's art, we have a fairly complete index to his views on poetry, from conception to effect.

The function of poetry he believed, of course, to be essentially that of the other arts, but he elaborated at greater length. His specific passages on poetry reiterate the belief that the poet's function is to teach, to communicate through the beauty and power of poetry the truths that will enrich the lives of the readers. Aprile, in Paracelsus, speaks of poets as those "God ever meant/ Should save the world, and therefore lent/ Great gifts to."[24] Sordello finally learns that the purpose of song is to incite to worthy action, while Eglamour, his foil, who has set himself apart from his fellowmen to cultivate beauty in the abstract, realizes too late that Sordello is the greater poet. In Aristophanes' Apology, Euripides, instead of producing his plays, "had taught 'Andromede'" and "would teach 'Kresphontes.'"[25] "Saul" clearly illustrates Browning's belief in the didactic. In the first nine sections, published in 1845, David is content merely to sing of the beauties of the earth. The last sections, published ten years later, indicate that the poet in the meantime had become convinced that song alone was insufficient.

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[24] Ibid., p. 22.

[25] Ibid., p. 630.

Browning's most emphatic pronouncement on the poet's function as teacher is in his "Parleying with Christopher Smart," a poem designed to vent his displeasure with the Art for Art's Sake Movement that was threatening at that time to dominate English poetry. After commenting on Smart's success in cataloguing "each strength, each beauty" of creation, he asks if it is enough for the poet simply to reveal the wonders of nature in one flash, to offer man knowledge without appointing its use. What, he demands, are the ends of strength and beauty?

> Why gains unemployed?
> Nature was made to be by Man enjoyed
> First; followed duly by enjoyment's fruit,
> Instruction--haply leaving joy behind:
> And you, the instructor, would you slack
> pursuit
> Of the main prize, as poet help mankind
> Just to enjoy, there leave them? Play the fool,
> Abjuring a superior privilege?
> Please simply when your function is to rule--
> By thought incite to deed?[26]

Browning's poet, then, is teacher and ruler, closely related to Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators." He "must be earth's essential king."[27] Balaustion speaks of the

> Bounty of poets, the one royal race
> That ever was, or will be, in this world![28]

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[26] Ibid., p. 961.

[27] Ibid., p. 115.

[28] Ibid., p. 625.

The true poet is a rarity. The world must shift along, Browning says in Sordello, "with counterfeits enough, a dreary sort/ Of warriors, statesmen, ere it can extort/ Its poet-soul."[29] It is important, however, that the poet look and act like other men. His physical appearance, e.g. Sordello's, may suggest the poet within--

> (The delicate nostril swerving wide and fine,
> A sharp and restless lip, so well combine
> With that calm brow)--[30]

but Browning was to dwell less and less on the poetic types found in his early poems and more on the poet as simply a man among men, leading a normal existence. The old Corregidor in "How It Strikes a Contemporary" is conspicuous only in the way he walks and taps the pavement with his cane, "scenting the world." When he goes home at night, it is not to a room "blazing with lights, four Titians on the wall,/ And twenty naked girls to change his plate," but to eat supper, play "a decent cribbage with his maid," and go to bed at nine o'clock.[31] In Aristophanes' Apology Aristophanes objects to Euripides' insistence on living in the midst of unpleasant realities and not encircling himself with poetic atmosphere, and through Balaustion Browning defends him. In "At the Mermaid"

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[29] Ibid., p. 88.

[30] Ibid., p. 79.

[31] Ibid., pp. 336-7.

Shakespeare is credited with having had a full, normal, and happy life outside his plays.

The poet must be like other men in order first to understand and then to teach them. Many of Browning's poets illustrate this idea. Eglamour learns too late that he has been wrong in setting himself apart, forgetting, through the pride in his calling, "to take counsel for cold hearts, comfortless faces."[32] Much of David's success as a poet stems from his overwhelming love for Saul and his fervent efforts to help him. Euripides' teaching is effective because he stoops to the common level from which his contemporaries remain aloof. Shelley is commended for his "irresistible sympathy with men," for his recognition "of the whole poet's function of beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection," and for the sense of duty that led him to communicate his sensations.[33] One is reminded of Wordsworth's "man speaking to men" and of Carlyle's emphasis on the great human sympathies of his poet-heroes, Dante and Shakespeare, and of Burns.

This lover of humanity becomes a poet by virtue of his special gift and his willingness to cultivate that gift:

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[32] Ibid., p. 85.

[33] Ibid., p. 1010.

More insight and more outsight and much more
Will to use both of these than boast my mates.[34]

Ronsard in "The Glove" is set up as a model poet because he demonstrates his will to learn more about human nature. Before he achieved success, Sordello developed his soul "in a thousand ways." Browning wrote to Carlyle in 1855: "As I believe no man a real poet or genius of any sort who does not go on improving till eighty and over, I shall begin again and again as often as you set me right."[35]

Browning's poet is willing to labor at his writing because he has a sense of mission--as Browning himself did. "I write from a thorough conviction," he wrote to Miss Barrett in 1845, "that it is the duty of me, and with the belief that, after every drawback and shortcoming, I do my best, all things considered."[36] The poor reception of his poetry strengthened his belief that the true poet scorns popularity, knowing that artistry is "battle with the Age/ It lives in."[37] He declared himself in full agreement with Miss Barrett's contention that art is the expression of "Humanity in the individual being," not the expression "of

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[34]Ibid., p. 421.

[35]Hood, op. cit., p. 44.

[36]The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846 (New York: Harpers, 1899), I, 17-18.

[37]Complete Works, p. 754.

the characteristics of an age except accidentally." The artist is always the leader, the innovator, who cannot afford to be concerned with public opinion, but must realize that "genius gives an age its character and imposes its own colour."[38]

The true poet is motivated by a sense of gratitude to his creator, not to the public, and he must settle with his own strict conscience as to whether he is making the best use of God-given talents. In a letter to Fanny Haworth expressing disappointment over the carelessness of her poems and her attitude that she would do as she pleased, he added: "I should not altogether wonder if I do something notable one of these days, all through a desperate virtue which determines out of gratitude--(not to man and the reading public, by any means!)--to do what I do not please."[39] No doubt he was tempted after the publication of each of his notable failures to give up poetry, but he found himself compelled "to live and just write out certain things which are in me and so save my soul."[40] After the reviewers started noticing him, he wrote to Isa

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[38]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 157-9.

[39]William C. DeVane and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (eds.), New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 42-43.

[40]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 213.

Blagden: "As I began, so I shall end, taking my own course, pleasing myself or aiming at doing so, and thereby, I hope, pleasing God."[41]

This attitude Browning summarized in a letter to Ruskin, who had praised Men and Women, but objected to the obscurity: "A poet's affair is with God,--to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward; look elsewhere, and you find misery enough."[42] From the poet in Pauline to Christopher Smart in the Parleyings, Browning's poets have a mystic communion with God, whom Aprile calls "the perfect poet." Browning describes in The Ring and the Book his discovery of the Old Yellow Book, brought to his attention "when a Hand,/ Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,/ . . . Across a Square in Florence."[43] As he reads the yellow document,

> A spirit laughs and leaps through every limb,
> And lights my eye, and lifts me by the hair,
> Letting me have my will again with these
> --How title I the dead alive once more?[44]

He refers to the story he is about to tell as "my due to God."

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[41]Edward C. McAleer (ed.), Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 220.

[42]W. G. Collingwood, The Life of John Ruskin (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1902), p. 166.

[43]Complete Works, p. 415. [44]Ibid., p. 421.

This relationship with God is perhaps most graphically portrayed in "How It Strikes a Contemporary," where the poet is literally God's spy. Like Carlyle's true poet, he is one "whose eye has been gifted to discern the godlike mystery of God's universe."[45] The narrator remembers him with his old dog at his heels, turning up an alley that led nowhere or appearing "on the main promenade just at the wrong time." He did not stare, yet saw everything, convincing the townspeople that

> We had among us, not so much a spy,
> As a recording chief-inquisitor,
> The town's true master if the town but knew!

He took account

> Of all thought, said and acted, then went home,
> And wrote it fully to our Lord the King
> Who has an itch to know things, he knows why,
> And reads them in his bedroom of a night.[46]

It seems hardly necessary to add that Browning's ideal poet is morally strong, but since morality appears as one of his most frequent bases for judgment, it might be well to elaborate here. In the Essay on Shelley he says emphatically:

> Meantime, as I call Shelley a moral man, because he was true, simple-hearted, and brave, and because what he

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[45]"Death of Goethe," The Best of Carlyle, Herbert L. Creek, editor (New York: The Ronald Press, 1929), p. 131.

[46]Complete Works, p. 336.

> acted corresponded to what he knew, so I call him a man of religious mind. . . .[47]

Shelley might not always have spoken the truth, but "in the purity of truth he spoke and thought always."[48] The highest kind of poetry issues from a pure source. Browning had difficulty later when he learned the facts about Shelley's treatment of his first wife, just as he had difficulty justifying Chatterton's forgeries, but although it sometimes taxed all his skill as a special pleader to reconcile biography with what instinct told him was great poetry, he never wavered in his belief that the morality of the poet determined in a large measure the greatness of his work.

The poet who embraces humanity and welcomes all new experiences, who believes himself to be in mystic communion with God and thus entitled to ignore the world's scorn, who takes seriously his mission as God's spy, and who lives a moral life will necessarily, in Browning's opinion, be the happiest man. "There's a simple test/ Would serve, when people take on them to weigh/ The worth of poets," he says in "Two Poets of Croisic":

> "Who was better, best,
> This, that, the other bard?" (Bards none gainsay
> As good observe! no matter for the rest.)
> "What quality preponderating may

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[47] Ibid., p. 1013.

[48] Ibid., p. 1012.

Turn the scale as it trembles?" End the strife
By asking "Which one led a happy life?"

The one who led the happy life easily wins over his opponent who "yelled or shrieked or sobbed or wept or wailed/ Or simply had the dumps."[49] In "At the 'Mermaid'" Shakespeare looks back over his life:

Have you found your life distasteful?
My life did and does smack sweet.
. . . .
Do your joys with age diminish?
When mine fail me, I'll complain.
Must in death your daylight finish?
My sun sets to rise again.[50]

An understanding of Browning's concept of the poet provides the key for an understanding of the source of poetry, or the raw material from which poetry is derived. His insistence on the need of the poet to be an active man, to mingle freely in society, to welcome opportunities for all new experiences suggests that the poet must look outside himself, concerning himself with the external world. On the other hand, his insistence that a poet's affair is with God and poetry "a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity," suggests that the poet may find the truest poetry within himself. Obviously the real poet combines the two sources. It is not enough merely to record, as we have seen through

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[49] Ibid., p. 872.

[50] Ibid., p. 808.

"Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto." The external world must be presented in the light of the truth the artist finds within himself.

One must have a starting point, however, and to Browning, the external world seemed to be the logical one. In his parleying with Smart he warns against attempting to scale the skies before understanding the earth. He realizes that the other method is favored in nineteenth-century poetry--

> The end ere the beginning: as you may
> Master the heavens before you study earth,
> Make you familiar with the meteor's birth
> Ere you descend to scrutinize the rose!--

but his own advice is to start at the bottom and climb steadily, not missing a single rung until the top has been reached:

> . . . learn earth first ere presume
> To teach heaven legislation. Law must be
> Active in earth or nowhere.[51]

The more his contemporaries struggled to stay in heaven or on Mount Olympus, the more Browning took pride in remaining on earth, even digging down occasionally to verify his position. Tennyson had taken refuge in the Middle Ages with King Arthur and his knights. Rossetti was ranging freely through the past seeking archaic subjects

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[51] Ibid., p. 961.

that he could treat in his typically archaic fashion. William Morris had boarded a Viking ship for adventures with the Norsemen. Matthew Arnold was seeking "truce to his restless thoughts" among the Greeks. These poets were returning with stories of men and gods, descriptions of castles and tournaments, all far removed from the kind of life the old Corregidor found as he "walked and tapped the pavement with his cane." Browning could well understand the public misconception of the poet's function. He has Mr. Sludge defend himself against charges of fraud by comparing himself with poets:

> . . . so, Sludge lies!
> Why, he's at worst your poet who sings how Greeks
> That never were, in Troy which never was,
> Did this or the other impossible thing![52]

Far from accepting poetry as a means to truth, Sludge expresses what Browning felt to be the common opinion. It was difficult to convince a public nourished on poetic lies that poetry could be anything else. In The Ring and the Book we are told that when he discussed his story, he was asked whether he was telling it as it actually happened or simply picking up a bit here and there --or, from the hardened skeptics:

> Or is there a book at all,
> And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,
> And the white lies it sounds like?[53]

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[52] Ibid., p. 411.

[53] Ibid., p. 418.

A discouraging reaction for one who had devoted his whole life to the pursuit and expression of truth! And he knew that his contemporary poets were largely to blame for the misconception. After containing himself for many years, he set out, through the "Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse," to reveal the truth to them, but like so many of his attempts "to tell a truth/ Obliquely" this one was too oblique to hit the target with much force. It nevertheless must have relieved him, and it has provided critics with a summary of his views on the proper subject matter for art.

Lairesse, a Dutch painter, was the author of The Art of Painting, a book which Browning declared that he read with more delight as a child than any other. Although he was never to part company with Lairesse, he did feel it necessary to challenge him on one point: the preference of the Dutch painter for subjects drawn from the past, for his canvas that

> . . . showed our sky
> Traversed by flying shapes, earth stocked with brood
> Of monsters,--centaurs bestial, satyrs lewd.[54]

In this respect Browning thought that Lairesse was allied with the majority of nineteenth-century poets, and especially with Matthew Arnold, who had declared in the preface to his 1853 volume that the great actions of

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[54] Ibid., p. 970.

classical times were far more interesting than those of the present, offering by way of example the actions of Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, and Dido. In answering Lairesse, Browning could also answer Arnold.

Taking an imaginary walk with Lairesse, as the artist had suggested to the readers of his book, he sees numerous paintings inspired by classical subjects. Here he has an opportunity to point out that perhaps the modern sees more in these subjects and in the landscape than Lairesse himself did, that the modern sees not simply flowers and weeds, but links with each one "the ultimate perfection":

> If we no longer see as you of old,
> 'Tis we see deeper. Progress for the bold!
> You saw the body, 't is the soul we see.[55]

There can be, then, some justification for dealing with subjects from the past if the modern poet goes deeply enough to reveal the soul. It looks here as if Browning is hastening to defend his own gallery of men and women drawn from history. He felt that his dealing with them in modern terms and using them for psychological study separated him from the artists who did no more than retell the stories. (Only once, in "Artemis Prologizes," did he treat a classical subject in the classical manner.) He could

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[55] Ibid., p. 972.

appreciate even Arnold's classical subjects when he put the emphasis, as he did in Empedocles, on the study of the soul.

Most of his contemporaries, however, failed to modernize--at least in Browning's opinion. Following the publication of Tennyson's Holy Grail and Other Poems in 1869, he wrote that he and Tennyson looked at poetry in completely different ways. Whereas in a story about a knight's being untrue to his friend and yielding to the temptation of the friend's mistress, Tennyson thought he should concentrate on the effect of moonlight on the castle, he himself would have judged "the conflict in the knight's soul the proper subject to describe."[56] In discussing the many ways in which Helen of Troy had been dealt with by artists, he told Julia Wedgwood that while he was in Rome he suddenly thought of an idea for a poem on Helen. Then he mentioned it to Rossetti, who immediately said, "I'll paint it." And, added Browning without further comment, "There it is, archaically treated indeed."[57]

All things considered, Browning believed that "the first of the new, in our race's story,/ Beats the last of

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[56]McAleer, op. cit., p. 328.

[57]Richard Curle (ed.), Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed in Their Letters (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1937), p. 60.

the old."[58] Why, then, he concludes in the parleying with Lairesse, do the poets

> Dream afresh old godlike shapes,
> Recapture ancient fable that escapes,
> Push back reality, repeople earth
> With vanished falseness, recognize no worth
> In fact new-born unless 't is rendered back
> Pallid by fancy. . . .

Let them quit dreaming and return to reality:

> Earth's young significance is all to learn:
> The dead Greek lore lies buried in the urn
> Where who seeks fire finds ashes.[59]

That fire was to be found in the present was not a conviction of Browning's old age. In the late 1830's when he was a constant visitor at Cheyne Row, he was certain to have heard Carlyle's sermon to the poets "on the duty of staying at home."[60] He found another strong ally in Elizabeth Barrett, who, in spite of her devotion to the classics, declared that artists should let the dead bury their dead and they themselves have the courage to find their subjects in life itself. "For there is poetry everywhere," she added.[61] Earlier she had expressed a desire to write a poem drawn from contemporary times--

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[58]"Old Pictures in Florence," Complete Works, p. 177.

[59]Ibid., p. 974.

[60]Creek, op. cit., p. 20.

[61]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 46.

doubtless a prediction of Aurora Leigh--and Browning had answered enthusiastically:

> The poem you propose to make for the times; the fearless fresh living work you describe, is the only poem to be undertaken now by you or anyone that is a Poet at all; the only reality, only effective piece of service to be rendered God and man; it is what I have been all my life intending to do, & now shall be much, much nearer doing, since you will along with me.[62]

Thus abetted by two of the people he most admired, Browning could begin with complete confidence his ventures into the back alleys--and some blind alleys--of poetry. In 1845, finding it a new sensation to have someone appreciate his verses, he told Miss Barrett that he was going to discontinue his practice of going out of his way "for a subject of offence to people; writing ugly things in order to warn the ungenial and timorous off my grounds at once,"[63] but that did not mean that he would stop putting his "whole pride, if that is the proper name, in the being able to work with the least possible materials."[64] Part of his sympathy and admiration for Chatterton stemmed from the boy-poet's "setting sometimes to work with the poorest materials"[65]--what in modern aesthetics might be termed

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[62] Ibid., I, 37-38.

[63] Ibid., I, 98.

[64] Ibid., II, 388.

[65] Donald Smalley (ed.), Browning's Essay on Chatterton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 133.

"difficult beauty," involving tension, as opposed to "easy beauty," achieved out of more tractable materials.

Perhaps Browning's public could have condoned his use of "the least possible materials" had he been content to represent the pain and sorrow without descending so far into the realm of the ugly and evil. The pursuit of truth, however, involved the latter. As he says in one of his later personal poems, he has seen in the course of his life the struggle between power and love,

> That sure, this dimly shown
> --Good rare and evil rife.[66]

Evil and ugliness, therefore, are valid materials for poetry because human experience is rife with them, but--and this is a point that must not be overlooked--they are to be regarded as

> . . . a foil
> For a new birth of life, the challenged soul's response
> To ugliness and death,--creation for the nonce.[67]

Art, if it is to represent the truth as Browning saw it, must represent the good and the beautiful in their eventual triumph over ugliness and evil.

Domett's diary contains an account of a discussion between Browning and Emerson in which the latter asserted

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[66]"Reverie," Complete Works, p. 1007.

[67]Ibid., p. 714.

that Shakespeare always avoided the horrible and disgusting in his plays, whereupon Browning mentioned the stamping out of Gloucester's eyes in King Lear, which he felt to be horrible enough. Domett later describes Browning's reaction to an episode that had been submitted to him as a possible subject for a poem. He stopped reading it to express his disgust and to dwell on the bad taste of such a theme--"As if," Domett quotes him as saying, "a painter would choose no colors to work in but bloodred and lampblack! Piling horror on horror in works of fiction served no purpose but to excite disgust."[68]

That he himself was in danger of brushing his own canvases too heavily with bloodred and lampblack he well knew. Julia Wedgwood accused him of having done so in The Ring and the Book. He answered more humbly than was customary with him:

> In this case, I think you do correctly indicate a fault of my nature. . . . I believe I do unduly like the study of morbid cases of the soul,--and I will try and get over that taste in future works.[69]

As his future works testify, he did not get over it. Nor did he show any real desire to do so. Even while

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[68]E. A. Horsman (ed.), The Diary of Alfred Domett, 1872-1885 (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 98-99, 177.

[69]Curle, op. cit., p. 143.

confessing that he liked unduly the morbid cases of the soul, he refused to admit that this was "a fault in this particular work, artistically regarded." But Miss Wedgwood was adamant. In her next letter she made a plea for more light. Guido was too black. His creator, she believed, had become too accustomed to the dark since his wife no longer served as a window for him.

Browning's answer this time was firm: "The worst is, I think myself dreadfully in the right, all the while, in everything." He had painted the world, he said, "as it was and would be," and even in this painting of it there was "a greater general amount of good" than one would ordinarily get. In the combination of six people, only one was completely black, and there was the goodness of Pompilia to offset all evil--"Surely, poor Pompilia is prettily done."[70]

Miss Wedgwood's nerves were wearing thin, but with the firm patience of a schoolmarm, she made one more effort to guide his wavering artistry, this time with regard to what she felt was an inconsistency in the characterization of Guido. Browning had protested that one could not quibble about the inconsistency because the story was true. He was recording. Her return lecture might have come out

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[70]Ibid., pp. 152-53.

of a textbook on how to create fiction from fact:

> Fate has no conception of the fitness of things, you must not copy her bungling sketches, full as they are of false perspective and harsh coloring, but give us some relief from her coarse picture gallery by your truer representation.[71]

The pupil was now openly defiant: "I think you are wrong about the proper treatment of facts--I don't say, as to my treatment of them. They want explaining, not altering."[72]

While Browning did not have as much to say about the methods of the poet as about the choice of subject matter, he nevertheless was fascinated with the way in which the poet took "inert stuff" and fused it with his own live soul, the process as he describes it in The Ring and the Book. "It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws," says Abt Vogler. Browning believed in inspiration--that which first becomes present "in a great light." How this light is born he refused to try to explain, but the mechanics involved in translating the light into a form of communication not only could be explained, he said, but should be studied by every serious poet. Instead of Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility," Browning thought of poetry as a great light reflected in tranquility. "Reflection is exactly what it names itself," he explained to Miss

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[71] Ibid., p. 178.

[72] Ibid., p. 183.

Barrett, "--a re-presentation, in scattered rays from every angle of incidence, of what first of all became present in a great light, a whole one."[73] The Ring and the Book was later to provide the perfect illustration of this process.

From the wealth of available material the poet must dig and let logic sift so that "the crude truths," as Browning has Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau say, are left "bare for poetry."[74] Browning felt that the poet's responsibility is to suggest, to capture the essence of the truth, rather than to explain and spell out. "You detail the effects too minutely," he told one young poet, "instead of leaving the causes to suggest the effects," which is "the strong and succinct way."[75] This firm preference for suggestion rather than elaboration made him impatient with the charges of obscurity brought against his work. It is all right, he wrote to Ruskin, to criticize prose for not painting in all the details, because it purports to be "the absolute representation of portions of truth, what chronicling is to history." But poetry is in an entirely different category: "In asking for more

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[73] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 98.

[74] Complete Works, p. 683.

[75] Lady Betty Balfour (ed.), Personal and Literary Correspondence of the Earl of Lytton (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1906), I, 103.

ultimates you must accept less mediates." He admitted that language was a barrier in the task of "putting the infinite within the finite."[76] Therefore the artist is forced to experiment; and if he is not always clear, the reader must understand that while "'bricks and mortar' is very easily said," some of the thoughts in Sordello are not.[77]

Language, like characterization, he felt, must go through a transformation--a kind of idealization--before it could be considered suitable for poetry. Some sailor language used in the poems of a contemporary he found

> good in its way; but as wrongly used in art as real clay and mud would be, if one plastered them in the foreground of a landscape in order to attain to so much truth, at all events--the true thing to endeavour is the making a golden colour which shall do every good in the power of the dirty brown.[78]

Genius may sometimes overcome the language barrier. Christopher Smart for once achieved greatness when he adjusted "real vision to right language," when he "pierced the screen/ 'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul."[79] But, on the whole, Browning was always to consider the inadequacies of language the chief barrier between the poet and his audience. An indication that it

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[76]Collingwood, op. cit., p. 164.

[77]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 454.

[78]Ibid., I, 378.

[79]Complete Works, p. 960.

was a persistent worry to him is seen in a letter from Julia Wedgwood containing the exclamation: "How truly you say we must speak lies, if we are to use language!"[80]

The one consolation Browning found for the poet was that he could elevate his language through the use of music. In "Transcendentalism" the poet is admonished not to talk, but sing:

> 'Tis you speak, that's your error. Song's our art:
> Whereas you please to speak these naked thoughts,
> Instead of draping them in sights and sounds.

They may be "true thoughts, good thoughts, thoughts fit to treasure up," but the poet communicates through music, not "stark naked thought."[81] Browning was disconcerted when the critics compared him with Tennyson and found him deficient in music. Had he been writing a hundred years later for an audience accustomed to the dissonances of Bartok instead of one hypnotised by the melodies of Chopin, his music would have met with a friendlier reception. Even Tennyson, who was inclined to be sympathetic, declared: "He has plenty of music in him, but he cannot get it out," and "He seldom attempts the marriage of sense with sound."[82]

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[80]Curle, op. cit., p. 168.

[81]Complete Works, p. 335.

[82]Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898), II, 285.

At the same time Browning was advising a young poet to let "the feeling and thought take the words and music they immediately suggest."[83] But he realized that his concept of music was different from that of his contemporaries, as this passage well illustrates:

> A tune was born in my head last week,
> Out of the thump-thump and shriek-shriek
> Of the train, as I came by it, up from Manchester;
> And when, next week, I take it back again,
> My head will sing to the engine's clack again,
> While it only makes my neighbor's haunches stir,
> --Finding no dormant musical sprout
> In him, as in me, to be jolted out.[84]

These experiments in diction and music are an indication of Browning's conviction that originality in form is essential for great poetry. Early in their correspondence he and Miss Barrett had discussed the topic, she writing: "I am inclined to think that we want new forms, as well as thoughts. . . . Why should we go back to the antique moulds, classical moulds, as they are so improperly called?"[85] If there were no new forms, then poetry, she believed, was dead. Browning seems to have had no fears for the future of poetry, only exasperation with the conservatism of his age. We can hear his powerful voice

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[83]John G. Millais (ed.), The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1909), I, 440.

[84]"Christmas Eve," Complete Works, p. 318.

[85]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 45.

speaking through Fra Lippo Lippi:

> Oh, oh,
> It makes me mad to see what men shall do
> And we in our graves![86]

Emphasis on Browning's concern for originality in form leads to the danger of forgetting that he always regarded form, important as it was, as secondary to substance, significant only as it furnished a means for communicating truth. As spirit triumphs over matter, so the truth or essence of poetry triumphs over the mould in which it has been placed. Thus Browning's comment in The Inn Album--

> That bard's a Browning; he neglects the form:
> But ah, the sense, ye gods, the weighty sense!--[87]

may be regarded as a half ironic, half proud comment on his own art.

What the world termed perfect form, Browning regarded as a sign of dead art. At this point his philosophy of art becomes inextricably interwoven with his philosophy of life--or the philosophy of the imperfect that had so captured the nineteenth-century imagination through Ruskin's popularization of it. The artist who can completely translate his conceptions into color, words, or

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[86] Complete Works, p. 345.

[87] Ibid., p. 773.

music, has not aspired high enough and can be considered little more than a craftsman. Examples to support this point of view are rife, but suffice it to say that the most significant applications are to be found in Browning's criticism of Greek art, particularly in the "Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse," already discussed in connection with subject matter, and in "Old Pictures in Florence," where he contrasts Greek painting with that of the early Christian masters and finds the latter superior. The Christian painters were most interested in the truth of content; the Greeks in the perfection of form.

Browning refused to join in the contemporary adulation of Greek style in literature, in spite of his admiration for the classical writers. Later writers, like the early Christian painters, he felt to be superior in the very fact that their imperfect productions were a sign of their striving for a goal beyond earthly attainment, whereas classical forms represented a degree of perfection possible only when the artist's reach has not exceeded his grasp.

Three strong principles underlie Browning's criticism. First, great art must show signs of growth, manifested chiefly through originality. "I have never seen an instance of success in verse," Browning wrote to a young poet, ". . . where something absolutely <u>new</u>, for

good, or even for bad, was not prominent in it."[88] The artists he holds up as models are almost all non-conformists, men who are willing to break with tradition and ignore the clamor of the public. His enthusiasm for originality was so great that he was sometimes momentarily misled. Explaining his too lavish praise of the poetry of a mutual friend, he wrote to Miss Barrett that he had spoken before he considered the work carefully. "It is a principle with me to begin by welcoming any strangeness, intention of originality in men," he said, ". . . so I began praising all that was at all questionable in the form . . reserving the ground-work for after consideration."[89]

This consideration of ground-work leads to his second major principle: Great art must have a moral purpose. Certainly, he says in the Essay on Shelley, any conspicuous achievement "warrants our belief in a great moral purpose having mainly inspired even where it does not visibly look out of the same."[90] In the Essay on Chatterton he comments that genius usually begins to develop through imitation, then "there grows up a faith in itself," enabling it to create rather than imitate.

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[88]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 234.

[89]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 378.

[90]Complete Works, p. 1010.

Finally it sees "cause for faith in something external and better, and having attained to a moral end and aim," it eventually "arrives at the more or less complete fulfilment of its earthly mission."[91]

The complete fulfilment, however, depends on a third criterion, which, for want of a better term, must be called inspiration--the "truer light of God" that Andrea found in Raphael and Michael Angelo, the "great light" that Browning told Miss Barrett could not be analyzed. Concerning the work of a new poet, he wrote that he failed to see evidences of creation. The poems, he admitted, had "cultivation, a pictorial and musical faculty, high and fine aims," but yet lacked "the wings for actual flight."[92] Rene Gentilhomme in "The Two Poets of Croisic" and Christopher Smart in the Parleyings are both described as having had sudden bursts of inspiration. Thus Browning illustrates the way in which two mediocre poets for once reached great heights, the heights that the great poet reaches frequently, enabling him to perceive simultaneously "Power and Love in the absolute" and "Beauty and Good in the concrete," or to connect the finite with the infinite.

There still remains to be considered Browning's

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[91]Smalley, op. cit., p. 111.

[92]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 234.

classification of poetry into types. His first emphasis on the distinctions among the various kinds of inspiration and expression came with the writing of Sordello, in which he places poets into three categories, based on degree of insight:

> For the worst of us, to say they so have seen,
> For the better, what it was they saw; the best
> Impart the gift of seeing to the rest.[93]

A later passage is more explicit. The three types are illustrated in the progress of one poet's soul, which is Browning's way of illustrating the actual history of poetry. Sordello describes how he moves from "'Deeds in their due gradation till Song dawned--/ The fullest effluence of the finest mind.'" The poet who sings of deeds, who says he "so has seen," is the "epoist." In the next stage he becomes the dramatist, or analyst:

> "I take the task
> And marshal you Life's elemental masque,
> Show Men, on evil or on good lay stress,
> This light, this shade made prominent, suppress
> All ordinary hues that softening blend
> Such natures with the level."

As dramatist he remains outside his creations, joining the spectators:

> "Myself, the while,
> As one of you, am witness, shrink or smile
> At my own showing!"

Finally, deciding that

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[93]Complete Works, p. 100.

> "Man's inmost life shall have yet freer play:
> Once more I cast external things away,
> And natures composite, so decompose
> That" . . .

"Why," exclaims the narrator, "he writes Sordello!"[94] Thus he has reached the third and highest stage. Browning calls him a synthetist.

By the time he came to write the Essay on Shelley in 1852, Browning had decided that all poets could be classified as either objective or subjective. A thorough self-analysis combined with his reading the year before of Milsand's criticism of his work had apparently influenced him in his choice of categories. Milsand had observed that "Mr. Browning has the rare qualification of being able to regard that which passes before him, although he reflects,"[95] which was exactly what Browning had been trying to prove to the world through his dramatic lyrics. He also doubtless knew of Schiller's division of poets into simple and sentimental, and from the words of the Shelley essay "an objective poet, as the phrase now goes," it is clear that he regarded this type of classification as one familiar to his readers.

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[94] Ibid., p. 116.

[95] Joseph Milsand, Robert Browning, trans. by Mrs. Thomas B. Stowell from the Revue des Deux Mondes (Los Angeles: The Browning Society, 1925), p. 30.

The objective poet, he explains, has the faculty for "seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply than is possible to the average mind." Attempting to present these objects with a minimum of interpretation, such a poet is properly called a fashioner. We do not know what the "inventor of Othello" thought about the facts. It is not important. We learn only what he wanted us to learn --"the fact itself,--which, with its infinite significance, each of us receives for the first time as a creation, and is hereafter left to deal with, as, in proportion to his own intelligence, he best may." The treatment of the actions in their pure form, when "even description, as suggesting a describer, is dispensed with, is what we call dramatic poetry." We can infer from this statement that Browning did not consider the dramatist as the only objective poet. The epic poet might also qualify. Homer he apparently regarded as essentially objective. An epic poet like Dante, on the other hand, he would surely have classified as primarily subjective.

The subjective poet, like the objective poet, is gifted with deep perception, but he differs in that he

> is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below us 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. Not what man sees, but what God sees, --the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly

> on the Divine Hand,--it is toward these that he struggles.[96]

This poet, then, is the seer, whose poetry "will be less a work than an effluence." In this category he places Shelley.

Emphatically he states: "It would be idle to inquire, of these two kinds of poetic faculty in operation, which is the higher or even rarer endowment." Then he proceeds to stack the cards--perhaps largely unconsciously --in favor of the subjective poet. We turn to the subjective poet, he says, "with stronger needs." Stronger carries weight. In the long passage quoted above, the phrase "ever aspired to, if but partially attained," gives the subjective poet, in the light of what we know of Browning's feeling regarding the philosophy of the imperfect, at least a slight edge. Furthermore, the word struggles suggests that the poet's goal is beyond his grasp. Browning does not say specifically, but he does imply that the objective poet, dealing as he does with the external, can come closer to perfection as far as man is concerned. Perhaps this is in part the implication of Bishop Blougram's remark about Shakespeare: "Ah, the earth's best can be but the earth's best."[97]

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[96] Complete Works, p. 1009.

[97] Ibid., p. 354.

Browning speaks of Shelley's having risen above "the contemplation of spots" to the "great Abstract Light," which is of course for Browning the symbol of the highest type of inspiration. And in a consideration of the relative merits of Shelley's works he points to successful instances of objectivity, adding:

> But I prefer to look for the highest attainment, not simply the high,--and seeing it, I hold by it. There is surely enough of the work "Shelley" to be known enduringly among men, and, I believe, to be accepted of God, as human work may.[98]

Here we are reminded of the three stages of the earlier poet, in the highest of which "he writes Sordello"; and, more important, of a letter in which Browning wrote of his dissatisfaction with his own dramatic poems, adding, "I have never begun, even, what I was born to begin and end--'R. B., a poem.'"[99] It was the subjectivity of Elizabeth Barrett that first attracted Browning. "You speak out, you," he wrote to her in one of his first letters, "--I only make men and women speak--give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me, but I am going to try."[100]

It was apparently his fear of the "pure white light"

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[98] Ibid., p. 1014.

[99] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 17.

[100] Ibid., I, 6.

on the one hand, and his fascination with it on the other that caused him to try to combine the two types of poetry almost equally in his own writing. There was the comforting assurance of Miss Barrett, who wrote that he was "both subjective and objective" in the habits of his mind. "You can deal both with abstract thought," she reassured him, "and with human passion in the most passionate sense. Thus, you have an immense grasp in Art."[101] And he also had Milsand's admiration for being able to combine the two successfully.

Therefore, in the Shelley essay, after declaring that both kinds of poetry are essential, since "the spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilized, but the raw material it operates upon must remain," he adds:

> Nor is there any reason why these two modes of poetic faculty may not issue hereafter from the same poet in successive perfect works, examples of which, according to what are now considered the exigencies of art, we have hitherto possessed in distinct individuals only. A mere running in of the one faculty upon the other is, of course, the ordinary circumstance.[102]

Browning doubtless aspired to become the first poet to be able to produce pure types in successive perfect works--"the perfect shield, with the gold and silver side set up for all comers to challenge," of which "there has

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[101] Ibid., I, 8.

[102] Complete Works, p. 1009.

yet been no instance." But Browning never wrote "R.B., a poem," and he found it impossible to delineate action without laying stress on "the incidents in the development of a soul." Had he been willing to concede the subjectivity of Shakespeare's Sonnets, Shakespeare would have been a claimant for the crown, but to Browning they were as objective as the plays. In the meantime he was taking long backward glances toward the older poets, scanning the horizon for new ones, often looking at the poet within, and subjecting each to his rigid tests.

CHAPTER III

DRAMA: ON STAGE AND OFF

If the autobiographical Pauline had met with the success its young author had hoped for, he might soon have been well on his way to writing "R.B.--a poem." But Pauline met with no success other than the usual appreciation from family and friends. Indeed it met with little response other than that which came from John Stuart Mill, who had been given a copy of the poem to review. When there seemed to be no call for a review, the book containing Mill's now famous marginal notes was returned--along with all the other copies--to the author. Mill was not entirely uncomplimentary. He found beautiful passages and some sound psychology. He also found, however, clear signs that the writer was "possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness" than he had ever known "in any sane human being." If the writer had not been morbidly self-conscious when he wrote Pauline, he immediately became so.

By the time Rossetti's discovery of a fugitive copy of the poem had forced Browning to bestow it with legitimacy by including it among his works, the lines

> And then thou said'st a perfect bard was one
> Who shadowed out the stages of all life

had been changed to

> And then thou said'st a perfect bard was one
> Who chronicled the stages of all life.

Consequently, Paracelsus, his next published work, although still a poem, and not a drama, as he makes clear in the preface, chronicled the life of one far removed in time and place, if not in spirit, from R. B. The poet could feel somewhat safer from the public gaze that he was always to dread and resent. At the same time, because of the small, but genuinely appreciative audience attracted by the poem, he was welcomed into a group of literary and theatre people who were to be influential in shaping the next stage of his career.

Chief among his new friends was William Charles Macready, one of the most capable actors and theatre managers of the day. As early as October, 1830, Browning had seen Macready's Hamlet, which he later described as one of the most vivid recollections of his life, to be classed with Edmund Kean's performance of Richard III. This new friendship with Macready sharpened the already keen interest Browning had in the drama. From 1836, when he became distinguished as "the author of Paracelsus," until 1846, when he married and went to Italy, he was frequently at Covent Garden, the Haymarket, or Drury Lane, seeing Macready in every role from Kitely in Every Man in His

Humour ("his Kitely was Kitely--superb 'from his flat cap down to his shining shoes'"[1]) to Alfred Evelyn in Bulwer-Lytton's Money.

He saw the young French actress Rachel and joined in the popular applause: "Rachel's 'Phedre' was admirable last night; quite through Racine up to Euripides--the declaration-scene with Hippolytus exquisite. . ."[2] He liked her well enough to go back to see her in Andromaque and to take his sister Sarianna to see her "repeat Hermione to-morrow night."[3] Another visiting actress failed to impress him as favorably:

> I went last night. . . to hear Miss Cushman and her sister in 'Romeo and Juliet.' The whole play goes. . horribly; 'speak' bids the Poet, and so M. Walladmir moves his tongue and dispenses with his jaws. Whatever is slightly touched in, indicated, to give relief to something actually insisted upon and drawn boldly . . here, you have it gone over with an unremitting burnt-stick, till it stares black forever! Romeo goes whining about Verona in broad daylight.[4]

There was also the famous amateur production of Every Man in His Humour, successfully engineered by Charles

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[1]Thurman L. Hood (ed.), Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 3.

[2]The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899), II, 326.

[3]Ibid., II, 410.

[4]Ibid., I, 443.

Dickens. Browning's report to Miss Barrett indicates his sensitivity to interpretation:

> The Theatricals 'went off' with great eclat, and the performance was really good, really clever or better. Forster's 'Kitely' was very emphatic and earnest, and grew into great interest, quite up to the poet's allotted tether, which is none of the longest. He pitched the character's key not too gravely, I thought, beginning with certainty, rather than mere suggestion, of evil. Dickens' 'Bobadil' was capital--with perhaps a little too much of the consciousness of entire cowardice. . . but the end of it all was really pathetic, as it should be, for Bobadil is only too clever for the company of fools he makes wonderment for: having once the misfortune to relish their society, and to need but too pressingly their 'tobacco-money,' what can he do but suit himself to their capacities?--and D. Jerrold was very amusing and clever in his 'Country Gull'--and Mr. Leech superb in the Town Master Mathew. All were good indeed, and voted good, and called on and cheered off, and praised heartily behind their backs and before the curtain.[5]

From Macready's diary we find that from 1837 to 1843, when a quarrel temporarily severed their relationship, Browning was a frequent companion of Macready's when the actor was reading a new play or relaxing after a performance. Macready mentions Browning's congratualting him after the performance of Lovell's Provost of Bruges and

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[5] Ibid., I, 217. Browning's opinion seems to have been the general one. It was certainly concurred in by Dickens himself. Jane and Thomas Carlyle, as usual, submitted the minority report, having found the acting contemptible, including that of "poor little Dickens, all painted in black and red, and affecting the voice of a man of six feet." See Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (New York: Simon Schuster, 1952), I, 571.

commenting that though he thought the acting good, he did not care for the play.[6] Again, Macready remarks that Browning "said that I had bit him by my performance of Othello,"[7] or Browning read some part of Brutus--"acted the part--partially well--not altogether."[8] Browning is mentioned as having been in the group that heard Bulwer-Lytton's Richelieu read for the first time,[9] and from another source we learn that he was to recall with satisfaction having given the first verdict in its favor.[10]

It is significant that most of the plays Browning mentions in his letters belong to the past, which suggests that there was little new blood in the theatre. Allardyce Nicoll divides the drama of this period into three distinct types: (1) the melodramas, farces, and extravaganzas, that made up the mass, (2) the plays like Talfourd's Ion and Bulwer-Lytton's Money, written by the more pretentious authors, and (3) the "poetic plays" frequently designed

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[6]William Toynbee (ed.), The Diaries of William Charles Macready, 1833-1851 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1912), I, 275.

[7]Ibid., I, 277.

[8]Ibid., I, 361.

[9]Ibid., I, 482.

[10]W. H. Griffin and H. C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), p. 112.

only for an imaginary stage.[11] A serious actor like Macready who did not want to waste his talents on the first group, or his money on the third, could either spend his time looking for possibilities in the second, or continue to draw on the all-time boxoffice favorites. Of the eighty-four plays in Macready's repertoire, about half were Elizabethan, Restoration, and eighteenth-century, including twenty-three by Shakespeare.

A list of contemporary dramatists makes clear to the modern reader the dilemma the actors were in if they wanted new roles. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Douglas Jerrold, Sheridan Knowles, Joanna Baillie, and Thomas Noon Talfourd would have been recognized by their contemporaries as the hope of the stage. Of these Bulwer-Lytton was the most original and the most popular. His Lady of Lyons ran for thirty-three nights and Money for eighty. Although Cardinal Richelieu was not as popular, it does stand out in the drama of the period, and it is to Browning's credit that he saw its promise. Douglas Jerrold, the author of the popular melodrama Black-Ey'd Susan, was faithful to English settings and modern, colloquial dialogue, but there is nothing to distinguish his writing. The other three turned

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[11]Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), p. 58.

for inspiration to classical and Elizabethan drama, as did the majority of the early nineteenth-century playwrights, and produced works almost completely lacking in vitality.

This, then, was the situation when Macready said to the author of Paracelsus, in the first flush of their friendship, "Write a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America." Browning was plotting by the time the words left Macready. This medium would offer an outlet for his accumulated theories about the drama, an opportunity to arouse the declining stage, and the hope of concealing his identity behind imaginary characters while he continued to probe into souls. The medium, as he was to decide ten years later, was not his best one, but the experience was to prove valuable, and his analysis of these efforts at playwriting constitutes some of his most enlightening and objective self-criticism.

There is no question but that Browning recognized the one basic weakness of the drama of his age, its lack of originality. "Were I you (save the mark!)," he wrote to Macready, "it should be my first condition with a playwright that his piece should be new for better or for worse."[12] Nicoll comments that it is not too much to say

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[12]William C. DeVane and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (eds.), New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 22.

of this period that the weakness of the drama "is due to Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans that dimmed the eyes of the critics and of the creative writers to the necessity of looking, not to the past, but to the present and to the future."[13] Here was the perfect example of the danger of genius becoming "the enemy of genius by over-influence," about which Emerson at the same time was warning his fellow Americans. The themes were borrowed, mainly from the Elizabethans, and dialogue was tortured into the artificialities of archaic language.

Browning also understood that the successful dramatist must, in addition to originality, have "insight into and sympathy with characters quite different from his own,"[14] that he must stand outside, like Shakespeare, assuming the role of showman. Between the theory and the practice, however, lay long stretches of discouraging endeavor. Within ten years he had written seven plays, four of which reached the stage without altering in any way the course of nineteenth-century drama. In a letter to Miss Barrett there is a tantalizing reference to another play, which sounds as if he might once have tried his hand

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[13]Nicoll, op. cit., p. 216.

[14]H. W. Donner (ed.), The Browning Box (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 103.

at farce or melodrama. He was reminded on reading the title of a book by Dane Anderson, Only a Fiddler, that he had written a play two years before (1843) entitled Only an Actress. Second thought assured him that the title was Only a Player-Girl and that the play had a Russian setting.[15] What Miss Barrett called in reply his "ungodlike indifference" to his creatures might perhaps be more accurately labelled "critical acumen," for Browning was developing the ability to look at his dramatis personae in the objective light in which he liked to think they had been created.

Strafford, the play written at Macready's request, is neither highly original nor outstanding in characterization. The main weakness is predicted in the preface, which proposes to reveal "Action in Character, rather than Character in Action." There is stress on character and the attempt to make the portraits faithful to history, but the play does not move. The speeches, long and involved, frequently obscure the plot. Nevertheless, it ran for four nights and was considered something of a success, especially since the odds were against it. Except for Macready the cast was mediocre, and the actor who played Pym suddenly decided to leave for America (which might be

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[15] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 154.

interpreted as one of the more candid judgments of the play). It was this kind of experience that prompted Browning's remark to Macready that "with the exception of Miss Horton there is not an actor or actress on the stage I can look at without loathing (that's the word) besides yourself: they vulgarize, and bestialize. . ."[16] He never got over the feeling that the play had not had a fair chance. In a letter to Furnivall fifty years later about staging Strafford again, he mentions with some bitterness the first performance with its "wretched acting of the inferior people. . . (a stone deaf Charles, a silly, simpering Carlisle, etc.),"[17] but he apparently soon overcame any illusions he might have had about the merits of the play, for he excluded it from the collected edition of his works in 1849, and Mrs. Browning referred to it as "his poorest work of all."[18]

King Victor and King Charles he said little about, except to call it an "indifferent substitute" published instead of A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, which had been delayed by the actors who were considering it. From his failure to refer to it later we can assume that his opinion was about

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[16]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 22.

[17]Hood, op. cit., p. 259.

[18]Frederic G. Kenyon (ed.), The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (New York: Macmillan, 1897), II, 436.

the same as the public's--an indifferent play. The Return of the Druses he seems to have had more faith in, at least in the beginning. Macready, by this time sure that Browning could never write a play suitable for the stage, was exasperated over his "self-opinionated persuasions upon his Return of the Druses." The diary entry ends with the terse comment: "I fear he is forever gone."[19] Two years later, on the publication of his new poems and this play, which was never acted, Browning was writing to Domett, "The things done (and my play out), I shall have tried an experiment to the end, and be pretty well contented either way."[20]

His feelings about A Blot in the 'Scutcheon were more fervent. In this domestic tragedy he felt that he had combined originality (in spite of the Romeo and Juliet theme) with action. "I have written a spic and span new Tragedy (a sort of compromise between my own notion and yours--as I understand it, at least)," he explained to Macready, "and will send it to you if you care to be bothered so far. There is action in it, drabbing, stabbing, et autres gentillesses,--who knows but the Gods

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[19]Toynbee, op. cit., II, 72.

[20]Frederic G. Kenyon (ed.), Robert Browning and Alfred Domett (London: Smith, Elder, and Company, 1906), p. 36.

may make me good even yet?"[21] What he overlooked was the unreal characters and stilted speeches. And Macready at this time was too troubled by serious theatre problems to be impressed even by drabbing and stabbing, especially when it might mean more dealings with the difficult playwright. Therefore when the play was finally acted, Macready was not in the leading role.

Even with its weaknesses the Blot represents Browning's attempts and partial success in achieving what he felt to be the aims of drama: fresh subject matter, action, and emphasis on character development. Dickens, for one, believed it superior to other contemporary plays. Having been given the play in manuscript, he wrote an enthusiastic appraisal:

> I know nothing that is so affecting, nothing in any book I have ever read, as Mildred's recurrence to that 'I was so young--I had no mother.' I know no love like it, no passion like it, no moulding of a splendid thing after its conception, like it.

After insisting that it was a tragedy that must be played, and played by Macready, he concluded, "If you tell Browning that I have seen it, tell him that I believe from my soul there is no man living (and not many dead) who could produce such a work."[22]

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[21]Hood, op. cit., p. 5.

[22]Edgar Johnson, op. cit., I, 441.

Forster, to whom the letter was addressed, did not see fit to tell Browning, a slight that Browning resented deeply thirty years later when he found out about the praise that would have meant much to him at the time. When this play did not achieve the success he thought it deserved, he was ready to turn to fresher fields, but only after he had cleared his brain of three other dramatic subjects, those he used for Colombe's Birthday, Luria, and A Soul's Tragedy. The first was written for Charles Kean and his wife, who, as it turned out, did not act it. Finally produced seven times at the Haymarket in 1853, with Helen Faucit in the lead, it met with critical approval. Browning never made explicit his own opinions about it, but he seems to have had affection for it.

About his opinions of Luria and A Soul's Tragedy, we can be much more certain because he was working on them during the time of his correspondence with Miss Barrett, and their letters are filled with comments. His first reference to Luria indicates a conscious Shakespearizing:

> Luria is a Moor, of Othello's country, and devotes himself to something he thinks Florence, and the old fortune follows--all in my brain, yet, but the bright weather helps and I will soon loosen my Braccio and Puccio (a pale discontented man), and Tiburzio (the Pisan, good true fellow, this one), and Domizia the Lady--loosen all these on dear foolish (ravishing must his folly be), golden-hearted Luria, all these

with their worldly wisdom and Tuscan shrewd ways.[23] Observing the "golden-hearted Luria" against those "with their worldly wisdom and Tuscan shrewd ways," one cannot help being reminded of the relationship between Othello and Iago, and there are many similarities, of course, in characterization, but the incident upon which the plot is based is fresh, and the motivations of the characters are, in general, original.

Discouraged by his experiences with actors, Browning announced that Luria was intended for "a purely imaginary stage--very simple and straightforward."[24] Thus he could safely concentrate on character development; and his criticism of the play concerns primarily characterization and motivation. Luria's suicide at the end Browning knew would be questioned on the basis of a lack of sufficient motivation--as it has been.[25] His explanation to Miss Barrett goes deeply into the character of Luria, concluding with the conviction that no other ending would be possible. He could never be as sure about the actions of Domizia:

Domizia is all wrong; I told you I knew that her special

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[23]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 26.

[24]Ibid.

[25]See T. R. Lounsbury, The Early Literary Career of Robert Browning (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), p. 69.

> color had faded,--it was but a bright line, and the more distinctly deep that it was so narrow. One of my half dozen words on my scrap of paper 'pro memoria' was, under the 'Act V.' 'she loves'--to which I could not bring it, you see! Yet the play required it still --something may yet be effected, though. . I meant that she should propose to go to Pisa with him, and begin a new life.[26]

When Miss Barrett's reading of the play convinced her that Domizia's retraction at the end was without sufficient motivation, Browning attempted a revision, but, in his opinion, with little success: "I could not bring her to my purpose. I left the stiff neck that was to have bowed of its own accord--for nothing graceful could be accomplished by pressing with both hands on the head above!" But Domizia refused to be as pliant as her creator intended. "O, enough of it!" he ended in disgust.[27]

The other main fault Browning found with the play, and one in which later critics have concurred, is its diffuseness. His correspondent agreed with him that it was more diffuse than his other works, but not in any bad sense --simply "round, copious, and another proof of that wonderful variety of faculty which is so striking in you."[28] But Browning decided that it was "a pure exercise of

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[26]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 466-67.

[27]Ibid., II, 24.

[28]Ibid., I, 573-4.

cleverness, even where most successful; clever attempted reproduction of what was conceived by another faculty, and foolishly let pass away. . . . I have corrected it, cut it down, and it may stand and pledge me to doing better hereafter."[29] His nausea over the whole operation can be summed up in a remark made in another connection: "Oh, it makes one sicker than having written 'Luria.'"[30] With more perspective he was to admit, "I like Luria better now,--it may do now,--probably because it must."[31]

Like Luria, A Soul's Tragedy was designed for an imaginary stage, and like Luria, it found little favor with its author:

> It is not a good ending, an auspicious wind-up of this series; subject matter and style are alike unpopular even for the literary grex that stands aloof from the purer plebs. . . so that, if 'Luria' is clearish, the 'Tragedy' would be an unnecessary troubling the waters.[32]

Like Luria, it was diffuse: "I cut out a huge kind of sermon from the middle and reserve it for a better time--still it is very long; so long!"[33] Like Luria, it was weak in characterization: "I put in a few phrases in the second part. . .--where Ogniben speaks--and hope that they give a little more insight as to his character--which I meant for

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[29] Ibid., I, 567.

[30] Ibid., I, 568.

[31] Ibid., II, 12.

[32] Ibid., I, 470.

[33] Ibid., I, 563.

a man of wide speculation and narrow practice."[34] And like Luria, it received only the begrudging approval of the author: "I looked yesterday over the 'Tragedy,' and think it will do after all."[35]

These opinions are in general posterity's opinions. Perhaps Browning hit on the cause of failure in confessing that "the life-incidents ought to have been acted over again, experienced afresh; and I had no inclination or ability."[36] He seems not to have been willing to spend as long in the composition of his plays or to have as much patience with revision as he did in his other poems. The Return of the Druses, for example, is reported to have been written in five days. This would suggest the growing lack of interest in drama that he was to express to Miss Barrett as he was finishing Luria and A Soul's Tragedy. And perhaps one of the highest compliments that can be paid his critical astuteness is that he recognized, after careful analysis, that his creative ability did not lie in drama--and this in spite of his belief that his interests did.

He was to write only one more play, In a Balcony, a fairly successful closet drama that enjoyed a stage presentation by the loyal Browning Society in 1884; but he never

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[34] Ibid., II, 24.

[35] Ibid., I, 506.

[36] Ibid., II, 2.

completely relinquished the dream of writing a great tragedy. "Shall I whisper to you my ambition and my hope?" he asked Mrs. Bronson in the last year of his life. "It is to write a tragedy better than anything I have done yet. I think of it constantly."[37]

For the most part, however, Browning was content to turn to other areas and probably found it a relief to rid himself of the problems connected with the theatre. His sister Sarianna was to write in retrospect:

> You ask me of Robert's experience of the stage. He was fond of the drama. . . but his experience of the actual realities of the stage of his day was utterly distasteful and disenchanting. He was naturally very pleased at the production of Strafford. . . but the Blot was nothing, from first to last, except a vexation of spirit. . . .[38]

Although Browning was disenchanted by actors and the vexations of stage productions, he maintained from first to last an interest in the poetic plays of his time, most of which belong to a class Nicoll terms "still-born drama." Among those written by the Romantic poets, his favorite was Shelley's "unrivalled Cenci," as he calls it in the Essay on Shelley. He later paid it a further compliment through

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[37]Mrs. Arthur Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," Century Magazine, LIX (April, 1900), 930.

[38]T. Sturge Moore (ed.), "Extracts from 'Works and Days,' the Diary of Michael Field," The Cornhill Magazine, LXXII (February, 1932), 140.

his own Cenciaja, which he offered as a sequel to Shelley's "superb achievement."[39] He doubtless was familiar with Byron's plays, five of which were in Macready's repertoire, but he had surprisingly little to say about them--only a note to the actor following the performance of Marino Faliero: ". . . how impressed I was by your admirable Faliero. . ."[40] There are no comments on Landor's Count Julian or his trilogy, in spite of Browning's close association with their author. His failure to mention the plays by Lamb, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey is not as surprising. The choice of the Cenci is in accord with other critical opinions. Although it is a difficult play for an audience to understand without more background than Shelley offers, it is considered better drama than those of the other Romantics, primarily because it moves faster, being less hampered by the intrusion of the lyric mood that predominates in other plays of its type.

Among his own contemporaries Browning singled out for special notice Thomas Noon Talfourd, Henry Taylor, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, and Tennyson. Talfourd was a classicist whose admiration for Addison is apparent in the style of his Ion and The Athenian Captive, and whose

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[39]Complete Works, p. 821.

[40]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 28.

addiction to classical themes is equally apparent in the subjects chosen for these two plays. In a third play, Glencoe, he moved closer to the nineteenth century, but all three plays, in spite of occasional good passages of poetry, deserve the neglect into which they have fallen. Macready chose Ion for his inauguration at Covent Garden on May 26, 1836, Talfourd's birthday. The birthday celebration that followed the opening also served as a celebration of the tremendous success of the play.

Browning, one of the guests, was caught up in the excitement of the evening, especially in finding himself in company with such worthies as Landor, Wordsworth, Ellen Tree, Miss Mitford, and Macready. Therefore when he wrote his letter of congratulations to Talfourd, it consisted of the extravagant praise that has been previously mentioned as being a source of embarrassment to him when he saw the letter ten years later--"the utterly forgotten letter, in the as thoroughly disused hand-writing, in the. . I fear. . still as completely obsolete feeling. . . " But, no, he confessed, it was not really that bad because "surely 'Ion' is a very, very beautiful and noble conception, and finely executed,--a beautiful work--what has come after, has lowered it down by grade after grade." And he was off on what was to become a kind of obsession with him--the way in which imitators lower the value of the original. Ion, he

complained, no longer stood apart. The real difference, however, he found to be in himself: "Another maker of 'Ion,' finding me out and behaving as Talfourd did, would not find that me, so to be behaved to, so to be honoured--though he should have all the good will."[41]

Miss Barrett's reply contains more accurate and pointed criticism: "Certainly it is a noble play--there is the moral sublime in it: but it is not the work of a poet."[42] Her next letter contrasts the poetry of Luria with the "polished rhetoric of 'Ion.'"[43] Browning felt it necessary to explain further that his enthusiasm for the play had not grown out of a reasoned consideration of the merits of the play, but merely an emotional reaction: "Still, the contrast between myself and Talfourd was so utter--you remember the world's wonder 'Ion' made,--that I was determined not to pass for the curious piece of neglected merit I really was not--and so!--"[44] And so he was finally vindicated--at least in his own mind. Pippa Passes was dedicated "most admiringly to the author of 'Ion'--most affectionately to Serjeant Talfourd," and

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[41]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 317.

[42]Ibid., I, 320.

[43]Ibid., I, 321.

[44]Ibid., I, 323.

Browning's final judgment of the play is still probably more accurate than the faint praise with which Wordsworth is reported to have damned it: "a very pretty tragedy."

Another work that Browning welcomed at first, probably because of its novelty, but continued to have respect for, was Henry Taylor's Philip Van Artevelde, a dramatic romance based on an historical figure who lived in Flanders in the fourteenth century. The subject is one Browning himself might have chosen: the change in Artevelde as he turns from a tranquil, contemplative life to a life of action when he is called upon to assume the dictatorship of Ghent. The emphasis, which Browning surely would have approved, is on the psychology of the change. The drama had many admirers, including Lockhart of the Quarterly Review, who devoted twenty-six pages to criticism and long quotations, his chief adverse criticism being that Taylor needed to "learn to brace his dialogue somewhat more tightly, and to indulge less in discursive reflection."[45]

Thirty-one years later Browning was quoting from the play, and thirty-eight years later he met the author when Browning's cousin invited him to dinner so that Taylor might meet him. Of that meeting his only comment is his

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[45]John G. Lockhart, "Review of Philip Van Artevelde," The Quarterly Review, LI (June, 1834), 391.

expression of regret over Taylor's report that he had never gained anything by his books, "which surely is a shame,--I mean, if 'no buyers' mean 'no readers.'"[46] Browning's admiration for Artevelde in spite of its preface, which argues for common sense in poetry and denies Shelley, among others, the poetic faculty, shows some objectivity.[47] Apparently he shared the opinion of the rest of the literary world in thinking of Taylor primarily as the author of Artevelde. Of the other plays he mentions only one. "Mr. Taylor's affected, unreal putting together, called 'Edwin the Fair,'" he reported to Domett on the debut of the play in 1842, "is the flattest of fallen."[48] Few would have disputed him.

Some of Browning's most capable and interesting criticism is of Death's Jest-Book by Thomas Lovell Beddoes, a contemporary whom he never met, but in whom he was to have a lifelong interest. Beddoes is known as the poet of death, as well as "the last Elizabethan," a title given him by Lytton Strachey. The nephew of Maria Edgeworth and son

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[46]Edward C. McAleer (ed.), Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 372.

[47]But doubtless Browning had Taylor in mind when, in the Essay on Shelley, he briefly brushed aside the claims of common sense to go on to what he found to be much more significant characteristics.

[48]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, p. 41.

of a beloved English physician, who died when the boy was very young, he early became known as something of an eccentric, never quite fitting into any system of education or any one occupation. His chief interests were medicine and poetry, both of which he pursued erratically, but brilliantly. He left England to attend a German university and remained in self-exile in Germany and Switzerland for most of his life, although he was constantly in trouble in both countries, mainly because of his radical politics.

As an Oxford undergraduate Beddoes published The Improvisatore, a book of poetry that he almost immediately tried to suppress. The next year he published The Bride's Tragedy, a drama in blank verse, which was fairly well received. He published little else, feeling as he did that his efforts were unappreciated, but when he died in 1849, he left numerous manuscripts, including the one of Death's Jest-Book, on which he had been working since 1825. It was not made known until years later that his death was by suicide, the cause probably partially explained by the quatrain called "On Himself":

> Poor bird, that cannot ever
> Dwell high in tower of song:
> Whose heart-breaking endeavour
> But palls the lazy throng.[49]

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[49]H. W. Donner, Plays and Poems of Thomas Lovell Beddoes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 398.

In spite of the enthusiastic efforts of some of Beddoes' close friends to publicize and popularize his works, he was many years in becoming recognized, and only in 1935 was it possible to publish a definitive edition. For a long time, however, he enjoyed the appreciation of a select group, including Landor, who dedicated the scenes from Beatrice Cenci to his memory, declaring that it was "if not a merit, at least a somewhat of self-satisfaction, to be among the earliest, if among the humblest, in my oblation."[50]

Samuel C. Chew speaks of Beddoes as "the most memorable figure of the transitional years," one who was at the center of the Elizabethan revival, not as an imitator, but as one having spiritual kinship with the Elizabethans. "In Beddoes' drama," he says,

> there is much of madness and more of sin; but horror is not the soul of the plot. There is a weird glee not only in some of the interspersed lyrics but in the antic prose; there is subtlety of thought and fancy; and over all there is a cast of shimmering loveliness. . . . He is memorable for scattered lines and passages, cadences of haunting beauty, and images of arresting grandeur.[51]

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[50]Donner, The Browning Box, p. 123. Browning did not know about Landor's admiration for Beddoes until he read this dedication after Landor's death. Needless to say, he was gratified to know that a man whom he so respected shared this opinion with him.

[51]Albert C. Baugh (ed.), A Literary History of England (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1948), p. 1258.

Strachey calls his verse "an instrument of many modulations, of exquisite delicacy, of strange suggestiveness, of amazing power."[52] Beddoes' editor, H. W. Donner, says of Death's Jest-Book: "His daring naturalism of language, entirely modern in its unavoidance of the homely and vigorous, was in complete contrast with his age."[53]

The freshness, the beautiful lyrical quality, and the whimsical humor combined with melancholy in Death's Jest-Book give Beddoes a spiritual kinship with the Elizabethans on the one hand and ally him with modern poet-dramatists like Christopher Fry on the other. Isbrand, the court jester and main character, says of his murdered brother:

> Were I buried, like him,
> There in the very garrets of the grave,
> But six feet under earth (that's the grave's sky),
> I'd jump into life. But he's a quiet ghost;
> He walks not in the churchyard after dew,
> But gets to his grave betimes, burning no glow-worms,
> Sees that his bones are right, and stints his worms
> Most miserly.[54]

Another speech of Isbrand's helps one to capture something of the combination of melancholy and light-heartedness that

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[52]Lytton Strachey, "The Last Elizabethan," in Books and Characters (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), p. 260.

[53]Donner, Plays and Poems of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, p. xli.

[54]Ibid., p. 251.

helps to set the mood of the play:

> O! it is nothing now to be a man.
> Adam, thy soul was happy that it wore
> The first, new, mortal members. To have felt
> The joy of the first year, when the one spirit
> Kept house-warming within its fresh-built clay,
> I'd be content to be as old a ghost.
> Thine was the hour to live in. Now we're common,
> And man is tired of being no more than human.[55]

When Browning was introduced to Beddoes' works through the manuscripts entrusted to their mutual friends, Barry Cornwall and Thomas Kelsall, he was tremendously impressed. So outspoken was his praise that Kelsall, whom Beddoes had made his literary executor, decided to leave all the manuscripts to Browning in the hope that, as Donner expresses it, "his great friend might rise to fame on the shoulders of the Victorian colossus."[56] Accordingly the box of manuscripts soon arrived at Browning's door, followed by polite inquiries at intervals from Kelsall, who was growing old, as to what progress Browning had made in reading them. Browning, now in demand everywhere as the author of The Ring and the Book, first postponed the reading of the manuscripts and then the decision as to what to do about them, though all the time reassuring Kelsall that his enthusiasm for Beddoes had not diminished.

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[55] Ibid., p. 313.

[56] Ibid., p. xxiv.

Something of the fervor with which Browning expressed this enthusiasm can be detected in a letter from Kelsall urging the poet to write a preface for a selection of Beddoes' works:

> . . . & when I found how enthusiastic an admirer you were of Beddoes & had contemplated making him the subject of an Oxford lecture, I co^{d} not help cherish^{g} the hope that you might be disposed to give, to a wider audience, a very similar work. . . . Pray think of it.--Surely more than one publisher might easily be found who wo^{d} like the speculation & be most happy to purchase y^{r} preface--in which your boiling admiration might overflow to the great delight of the lovers of Beddoes, & your own, & to the satisfaction & relief of your own devotion.[57]

Browning answered immediately, evading the request, and assuring Kelsall that the latter's zeal combined with "the marvellous power of the man" would raise Beddoes from oblivion. He commended him for the editing he had already done, for "the bookful of beauty and something beyond, which you have rescued out of that 'rough sketch of beginning Adam'--or Shakespeare. . . " Ironically, he ended with a blast at the editors of Blackwood's for their indifference when Kelsall, years before, had appealed to them to publish some of Beddoes' poetry.[58]

Doubtless, Browning did intend to do something, although Donner implies that the discovery of the suicide

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[57]Donner, The Browning Box, p. 110.

[58]Ibid., p. 111.

dampened his ardor,[59] a theory that can be at least partially supported by Browning's avowed belief in the inseparability of poetry and poet. Then, too, this was a period of many pressures, and Browning did not have the time to devote to editing. He finally turned the box over to Edmund Gosse, who was an eager, but not very careful editor. Fortunately, Browning had earlier allowed J. Dykes Campbell to make copies of the manuscripts, and it was these that made possible the modern definitive edition.

In 1872 Kelsall published an article on Beddoes in The Fortnightly Review, quoting in a footnote part of a letter from Browning about material to be included in a selection from Beddoes' works: "Now as to the extracts which might be made: why, you might pick out scenes, passages, lyrics, fine as fine can be: the power of the man is immense and irresistible."[60] Otherwise the "boiling admiration" Kelsall referred to never overflowed except in private. Yet there can be no question about the sincerity of the admiration, which probably first arose from Browning's feeling of affinity with Beddoes. They shared the honor of being among the earliest admirers of Shelley;

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[59]Donner, Plays and Poems of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, p. xxiv.

[60]Thomas F. Kelsall, "Thomas Lovell Beddoes," The Fortnightly Review, XII (July, 1872), p. 51.

and in the early work of both, the Shelley influence is apparent. Both early became interested in the state of contemporary drama and looked forward to an active part in its regeneration. A statement made by Beddoes in 1825 expresses the need for originality that Browning was to call for with such vehemence. After picturing the older dramatists as ghosts, and the attempts at reanimation as being "vampire-cold," he continues:

> With the greatest reverence for all the antiquities of drama I still think, that we had better beget than revive--attempt to give the literature of this age an idiosyncrasy & spirit of its own & only raise a ghost to gaze on not to live with--just now the drama is a haunted ruin.[61]

Like Browning, Beddoes realized that in spite of his desire to write great drama, his powers lay in the combination of dramatic with lyric poetry. "My cursed fellows in the Jest Book," he once complained, "would palaver immeasurably, and I could not prevent them."[62] One comment on Death's Jest-Book sounds like the criticism of Strafford: "All the characters seem to declaim into the void, and none answers the other."[63] Browning, however, had a much stronger feeling for character, and while, in his plays, he

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[61]Quoted by Nicoll, op. cit., p. 201.

[62]Quoted by Kelsall, op. cit., p. 58.

[63]Donner, Plays and Poems of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, p. lxxix.

does not reach the lyrical heights of Beddoes, he reveals a far stronger dramatic power. Beddoes' claims as a dramatist are well, though perhaps too severely, stated by Arthur Symons:

> Beddoes' genius was essentially lyrical: he had imagination, the gift of style, the mastery of rhythm, a strange choiceness and curiosity of phrase. But of really dramatic power he had nothing. He could neither conceive a coherent plot, nor develop a credible situation. He had no grasp on human nature, he had no conception of what character might be in men and women, he had no faculty of expressing emotion convincingly.[64]

That Browning was aware of these defects is clear in his statement to Kelsall that the first requisite for a dramatist is "insight into and sympathy with characters quite different from his own." Here he found Beddoes deficient:

> I fancy Beddoes, with no more change than is usual with any one man in various circumstances, at once Melveric, Ziba, Wolfram & the rest. He thinks and speaks now as this and now that personage,--in every sense, as he himself likes best,--I never find a new actor speaking his own peculiarities whether Beddoes like them or no. Sibylla, for instance, is thin as her own ghost,--speaking fine things, all the same,--but they stick on her like a fruiterer's contribution of real cherries and strawberries to an invisible wire-tree,--there is no living plant which one can see naturally has produced them,--a hand intervened and gave the skeleton 'non sua poma'.[65]

Browning had an explanation, however, for this

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[64] Ibid., p. lxxix.

[65] Donner, The Browning Box, pp. 103-4.

weakness--an explanation that again suggests the affinity he felt with the other poet. If Beddoes had gone ahead and published Death's Jest-Book in 1829, when his friends had discouraged him, he would have been able, Browning declared, "to deliver himself of what was absorbingly and exclusively interesting to him at the time." He could have considered the matter done with and thus "turned his attention to other subjects of thought and feeling, which, whether as congenial to him as the former, were at least new and unexpressed." What happened instead was that, having been thwarted in his attempts to give vent at that time to "these conceptions of death and life and the possible intermediate state," he kept mulling over them and revising and making them "the exclusive occupation of his soul" until he lost his objectivity. Suppose the work had fallen flat, been "blackguarded in Blackwood's," Browning continued, "Beddoes would not have much cared, but probably made a clean breast and begun on something else."[66] The author of Pauline might well have been thinking of the difference in his career had the generosity of an aunt not helped him to make a clean breast of his early emotions. Suppose he had spent twenty years revising Pauline!

Without commenting specifically on the involved plot

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[66] Ibid., p. 104.

and structure, Browning pointed out the weakening effect of the intermixture of inferior comic passages with the serious. He understood Beddoes' purpose, he said, "in this interfusion of the 'comic stuff' which Milton objects to when blent with 'Tragic sadness & gravity.'" But the "comic stuff" he found to be "immeasurably below the general texture: not that it is other than remarkable,--but what a word would this be for the poetry of the piece! Had the comic faculty, and one or two others, been developed in the author equally with the tragic power,--what would have the man been?"[67]

In the final analysis, what Browning admired most in Beddoes was his originality and his lyrical quality. After telling Kelsall that once he started reading the manuscripts he could do nothing but go on to the end, wishing there had been enough reading matter for a year rather than a few days, he added: "How such a dose of glorious poetry would have affected my brain had I gulped Beddoes for the first time, I hardly know."[68] There is no question but that Browning was also attracted by the grotesqueness and grimness of many of the passages. Edmund Gosse speaks of the "fierce stanzas" from the fourth act of Death's

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[67] Ibid., p. 103.

[68] Ibid.

Jest-Book, "which Robert Browning almost extravagantly admired, and was never weary of reciting."[69] The rhythm, the irony, and the terseness would have commended these lines to him:

> From the old supper-giver's poll,
> He tore the many-kingdomed mitre;
> To him, who cost him his son's soul,
> He gave it; to the Persian fighter:
> And quoth,
> Old art thou, but a fool in blood:
> If thou hast made me eat my son,
> Cyrus has ta'en his grandsire's food;
> There's kid for child, and who hath won?
>
> All kingdomless is thy old head,
> In which began the tyrannous fun;
> Thou'rt slave to him, who should be dead;
> There's kid for child, and who hath won?

Browning preferred to consider Death's Jest-Book as a series of splendid passages rather than as one unified piece. He knew that Beddoes' purpose had been to write a play that would present Death on familiar ground and strip him of his terrors, but he felt that the purpose was far from achieved:

> He does exactly the reverse, materializes and intensifies the horror, and frightens one to death at dying--just as they do abroad when on every church wall you see a horrible capering Death flourishing his scythe in your face, for 'a fair warning to a careless world', as the old divines have it.[70]

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[69]Edmund Gosse, Critical Kit-Kats (London: William Heinemann, 1913), p. 55.

[70]Donner, The Browning Box, p. 105.

Although Browning felt that the play did not achieve its purpose, was deficient in characterization and diffuse in plot, he was happy to settle for the "glorious poetry."

It was also glorious poetry that commended Tennyson's dramas to him, or, perhaps more accurately, the memory of glorious poetry, for Browning had long before come to esteem Tennyson for his lyrics, and it is likely that this admiration, combined with their warm friendship, predisposed him in favor of Tennyson's plays. It is the general opinion that Tennyson labored over his plays. The first three, Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket, designed to dramatize "the Making of England," he worked especially hard to make historically accurate. The plays, however, remain poems rather than drama because the characters, like those in so many of the "still-born plays," are still-born. It was Tennyson's prestige as laureate, strengthened by Henry Irving's skill as actor, that lent them, during performance, the illusion of life.

Of the first three plays we have Browning's comments on two. On receiving a copy of Queen Mary, which Tennyson considered the most successful, Browning wrote to thank him for "the gift, and even more for 'Queen Mary,' the poem." He found it "astonishingly fine," throughout could see "nowhere the shade of a fault," and closed enthusiastically, "I am going to begin it afresh now. What a joy it is that

such a poem should be, and be yours!"[71] From Domett's diary we find that all the praise was not simply for the author's benefit, but that on a walk with Domett, Browning "had expressed an opinion strongly in favour of Tennyson's play of Queen Mary."[72] Following the performance of the play a year later, Browning wrote again in an expression of appreciation that must have delighted the sensitive recipient:

> I want to be among the earliest who assure you of the complete success of your 'Queen Mary' last night. I have more than once seen a more satisfactory performance of it, to be sure, in what Carlyle calls 'the Private Theatre under my own hat,' because there and then not a line nor a word was left out; nay, there were abundant 'encores' of half the speeches: still whatever was left by the stage scissors suggested what a quantity of 'cuttings' would furnish one with an after-feast.
>
> Irving was very good indeed, and the others did their best, nor so badly.[73]

Harold, published two years later, called forth a similar response:

> True thanks again, this time for the best of Christmas presents, another great work, wise, good and beautiful. The scene where Harold is overborne to take the oath is perfect, for one instance. What a fine new ray of light you are entwining with your many coloured wreath!

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[71]Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), II, 181.

[72]Quoted by Griffin and Minchin, op. cit., pp. 256-7.

[73]Hallam Tennyson, op. cit., II, 185.

He tells of knowing the locale of the play well--the Castle of Bonneville on the spot where Harold was supposed to have taken oath; Dives, where William embarked; and the church built by Harold. "You light this up again and again for me," he ends.[74]

What Browning thought of Becket has not been recorded, though he surely saw the play, since it had a successful run with Irving in the leading role. Neither is there a recorded comment on The Falcon. Of The Cup, a play based on a story from Plutarch, we have Hallam Tennyson's comment that "Browning was loud in praise,"[75] and we know that Browning, during the time the play was being produced, was embarrassed over dining with Tennyson before he had had a chance to see it.[76]

The older Browning became, the less interest he showed in contemporary plays. His letters contain fewer and fewer comments, sometimes such non-committal ones as the "Oh, George!" with which he reacted to a volume of George Sand's plays.[77] His interest in stage productions

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[74]Ibid., II, 189.

[75]Ibid., II, 258.

[76]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 260.

[77]Richard Curle (ed.), Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed in Their Letters (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1937), p. 41.

diminished correspondingly. "Robert seldom went to the theatre in later years," his sister told friends who had inquired about his habits, "except to see his friend Salvini, or a play by his well beloved Tennyson."[78] One of Mrs. Browning's letters mentions their having seen the Italian actor Salvini in Othello and Hamlet;[79] Sidney Colvin records Browning's having been tremendously moved by Salvini's Lear;[80] and William Rossetti tells of Browning's thinking that Salvini's Oedipus "was absolutely the finest effort of art he had ever beheld."[81]

According to Mrs. Bronson's account, although he was rarely seen at the theatre in London, he enjoyed a "short season" at the Goldoni in Venice, where he went every night to see Gallina's comedies.[82] He was also present at a performance of his own Blot in the 'Scutcheon in 1885, after which he graciously told the stage manager that if his dramatic writing had met with half that encouragement

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[78]Moore, op. cit., p. 140.

[79]The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, II, 319.

[80]Sidney Colvin, Memories and Notes of Persons and Places (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), p. 84.

[81]William M. Rossetti, Some Reminiscences (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), I, 189.

[82]Bronson, "Browning in Venice," p. 582.

when he was writing plays, he might have continued.[83] Although he was in Venice when Alma Murray starred in his Colombe, he wrote an appreciative note.[84] In both letters he contrasts the conditions of the Eighties with those of the Thirties, expressing astonishment at "the thousands of pounds spent on scenery and costume,--the hundreds of rehearsals" that were not necessary when "an audience was rather 'all ears' than 'all eyes.'"[85]

For an old-timer who continued to be "all ears" nothing could be as satisfactory as "the Private Theatre under his own hat," where King Lear could rage majestically and Alcestis make her noble sacrifice, beyond the artificial glare of footlights. And that is where Browning saw most of his later performances, choosing the playwrights with great care and good judgment. He could insist on fresh style and subject matter from the new writers, but his love for the old seems to have grown stronger with the years. "He always found time for his favorite Greek plays," declares Mrs. Bronson, "which he read from a small edition, the fine print of which would have wearied any eyes less remarkable than his own."[86]

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[83]Hood, op. cit., p. 234.

[84]Ibid., p. 243.

[85]Ibid., p. 235.

[86]Bronson, "Browning at Asolo," p. 930.

"The most remarkable fact," says DeVane, "is that Browning ever had any dealings with the Greek spirit at all, for his temperament and his habit of mind are anything but Greek."[87] Reference has already been made to Browning's impatience with his contemporaries for setting up the Greeks as models. It cannot be said, however, that he failed to appreciate the power of the Greek dramatists when they were read in the light of their own times. That Aeschylus had long impressed him is evident in a passage from Pauline, in which he describes his early influences, including such memorable stories as the one of

> . . . that king
> Treading the purple calmly to his death,
> While round him, like the clouds of eve, all dusk,
> The giant shades of fate, silently flitting,
> Pile the dim outline of the coming doom;
> And him sitting alone in blood while friends
> Are hunting far in the sunshine; and the boy
> With his white breast and brow and clustering curls
> Streaked with his mother's blood, but striving hard
> To tell his story ere his reason goes.[88]

"The 'king,'" he explained to Edmund Gosse fifty years later, "is Agamemnon in Aeschylus, 'whose treading the purple carpets spread before him by his wife, preparatory

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[87] W. C. DeVane, "Browning and the Spirit of Greece," in Nineteenth-Century Studies (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1940), p. 182.

[88] The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning (Cambridge edition; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1895), p. 7.

to his murder, is a notable passage. 'The boy' is Orestes, as described at the end of the Choephoroi, by the same author."[89]

In 1845, no doubt prompted by Miss Barrett's use of superlatives in a preceding letter--"And tell me too, if Aeschylus is not the divinest of all the divine Greek souls?"--he quoted at length from Prometheus, suggesting that she restore a part of it as Shelley did and reinterpret the hero in modern terms.[90] Other letters indicate that he had spent a great deal of time comparing Greek and English texts to help her with her Prometheus.

Of Sophocles Browning had little to say except at the end of Balaustion's Adventure, when the heroine, hearing that Sophocles is going to write a new play on the Alcestis theme, declares firmly that it will not undo what Euripides has done:

> But no good supplants a good,
> Nor beauty undoes beauty. Sophokles
> Will carve and carry a fresh cup, brimful
> Of beauty and good, firm to the altar-foot,
> And glorify the Dionusiac shrine.[91]

The Oedipus plays were apparently favorites with him. In addition to his eulogy of Salvini's performance of Oedipus,

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[89]Hood, op. cit., p. 256.

[90]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 38-40.

[91]Complete Works, p. 625.

he expressed in a letter written in 1887 his hope of going again to Cambridge to see the Greek plays, this performance being of particular interest to him because Professor Kennedy was to direct Jebb's translation of Oedipus--this in spite of the attacks on Jebb through the notes of Kennedy's translation, which Browning had read the year before.[92]

Of the three Greek tragedians, Euripides was by all odds his choice. From "Artemis Prologizes," an early poem intended as a prologue to a play based on Euripides' Hippolytus, to his last correspondence, the preference is clear. While in France in 1864 he wrote to Isa Blagden: "For me, I have got on by having a great read at Euripides --the one book I brought with me."[93] He was probably gathering ideas then for the passages on Euripides that were to become an important part of The Ring and the Book (1867). Balaustion's Adventure (1871), which contains his version of Euripides' Alcestis placed in a framework designed for critical comments, is one of the greatest tributes that could be paid to any writer. Four years later he returned to the subject in Aristophanes' Apology, again casting Balaustion in the leading role and having

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[92]Hood, op. cit., p. 275.

[93]McAleer, op. cit., p. 193.

her defend Euripides against the attacks of Aristophanes. In 1879 he made a translation of a strophe from Hippolytus at the request of the Greek scholar J. P. Mahaffy.

The reasons for his enthusiasm for Euripides are not hard to find. They may be traced to one of his favorite poems by Mrs. Browning, "Wine of Cyprus," in which she tells of the reading sessions with her tutor when "the poets poured us wine." Among the poets was "Our Euripides, the Human/ With his droppings of warm tears." These lines Browning quotes twice in Balaustion's Adventure, emphasizing the presence of the spirit that was hovering over him as he wrote. He is clearly identifying Balaustion with Mrs. Browning.

Browning believed that in "Euripides, the Human," he had found a poet with whom he had much in common. Euripides was a pioneer psychologist. As one modern critic says, his greatest claims to fame

> rest on his superb studies of human problems considered on the human level, his penetrating psychological analyses of his characters, his capacity to create genuine pathos, and his sense of the dramatic possibilities of an individual scene.[94]

He was a champion of women and slaves, recognizing the worth of the individual. Browning has him say:

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[94]W. J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. (eds.), The Complete Greek Drama (New York: Random House, 1938), I, xxxi.

> Mere puppets once, I now make womankind,
> For thinking, saying, doing, match the male.
> . . . . . .
> Recognize in the very slave--man's mate,
> Declare him brave and honest, kind, and true,
> And reasonable as his lord, in brief.[95]

Browning saw Euripides as a realist:

> I paint men as they are--so runs my boast--
> Not as they should be: paint--what's part of man
> --Women and slaves,--not as, to please your pride,
> They should be, but your equals, as they are.[96]

In The Ring and the Book Euripides is presented as a moralist and teacher. He appears before the Pope, who is pondering the state of religious affairs in seventeenth-century Rome and seeking a satisfactory verdict for the case confronting him. Browning points out that the Greek dramatist, without benefit of Christ's teaching, instinctively adopted virtue as his rule of life and came close to guessing at what Paul knew. His writings Browning found to have a strong underlying moral purpose. Speaking for himself, Euripides declares:

> What my heart taught me, I taught the world,
> And have been teaching now two thousand years.
> Witness my work,--plays that should please, forsooth!
> They might please, they might displease, they shall teach,
> For truth's sake,' so I said, and did, and do![97]

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[95] Complete Works, p. 647.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid., p. 568.

Browning also has Euripides pride himself on his "strong style that spared/ No sin." It is significant that the same year The Ring and the Book was published, the poet wrote to W. G. Kingsland, confessing that perhaps his writing had been too hard for many, but that he "never designedly tried to puzzle people," and that he "never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar, or a game of dominoes, to an idle man."[98]

Euripides is presented as a normal, well-rounded man:

> But I, of body as of soul complete,
> A gymnast at the games, philosopher
> I' the schools, who painted, and made
> music,--all. . . .[99]

He is indifferent to criticism. Aristophanes, his critic, complains:

> No sign of wincing at my Comic lash,
> No protest against infamous abuse,
> Malignant censure,--naught to prove I
> scourged
> With tougher thong than leek-and-onion
> plait![100]

He seeks his subjects "not in that phantasmal sphere/ Proper to poet," Aristophanes complains against, but "on

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[98]Hood, op. cit., p. 129.

[99]Complete Works, p. 568.

[100]Ibid., p. 637.

vulgar earth/ Where people used to tread with confidence."[101]

Not only did Browning champion Euripides because of the affinity, both real and partially imaginary, with himself, but because Euripides was at that time badly in need of a champion. In the nineteenth-century classical revival Euripides was the underdog, having either been ignored in favor of Aeschylus and Sophocles, or openly challenged on both artistic and moral grounds, as he had been challenged centuries before by Aristophanes in The Frogs. A new edition in 1871 of Augustus Wilhelm Schlegel's Lectures Upon Dramatic Art and Literature, containing an attack upon Euripides, might easily have started Browning on the counterattacks found in Balaustion's Adventure and Aristophanes' Apology.[102] A statement by Swinburne well illustrates the extremes to which the sentiment against Euripides ran:

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[101] Ibid., p. 648.

[102] Thorough studies have been made of Browning's role in this controversy. See W. C. DeVane, "Browning and the Spirit of Greece," in Nineteenth-Century Studies, pp. 179-198 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1940); Thurman L. Hood, Browning's Ancient Classical Sources, in Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, XXXIII (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922); Donald Smalley, "A Parleying with Aristophanes," PMLA, LV (1940), 832-828; and Frederick M. Tisdel "Browning's Aristophanes' Apology," University of Missouri Studies, II (October 1, 1927), 1-46.

> As there is no poet morally nobler than Webster, so there is no poet ignobler than Euripides; while as a dramatic artist, the degenerate tragedian of Athens, compared to the second tragic dramatist of England, is as a mutilated monkey to a well-made man.[103]

This was the battle for which Browning had been keeping his spear sharpened and his shield polished. He could attack the classicists and defend Euripides at the same time. The defense became primarily a matter of showing how un-Greek Euripides was, with his strong style, his realism, his almost Christian viewpoint, his concern with teaching truth and righteousness--all of which he felt were in contrast with the pure Hellenism of the other tragedians. By allowing Balaustion to interpret as she narrates the story of Alcestis, the poet is able to achieve the modern interpretation that evoked Rossetti's comment that Balaustion's Adventure was "interlarded with Browningian analysis to an extent beyond all reason or relation to things by any possibility Greek in any way." He promptly dubbed it Exhaustion's Imposture.[104]

In Aristophanes' Apology, Balaustion, who had grown very attractive to her creator, is again the heroine, this

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[103]Edmund Gosse and T. J. Wise (eds.), The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne (London: William Heinemann, 1925), XI, 297.

[104]Quoted by Oswald Doughty, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, A Victorian Romantic (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), p. 516.

time with a new cause--the defense of Euripides against the charges of his own contemporaries, particularly Aristophanes, who had dealt him some rough blows in The Frogs. Here we receive a vivid impression of Aristophanes as he comes onto the scene "tolerably drunk" and correspondingly jovial, then becomes serious as he finds himself the object of Balaustion's hostility. Balaustion attempts to give him the credit due him:

> . . . Welcome to this honored hearth,
> Good Genius! Glory of the poet, glow
> O' the humorist who castigates his kind,
> Suave summer-lightning lambency which plays
> On stag-horned tree, misshapen crag askew,
> Then vanishes with unvindictive smile
> After a moment's laying black earth bare.
> Splendor of wit that springs a thunderball--
> Satire--to burn and purify the world,
> True aim, fair purpose: just wit justly strikes
> Injustice. . . .[105]

She deplores, however, the obscenity of his plays. "I heard 'Lusistrate,'" she says. And she implores the waves to take from her "that plague memory." The realism of Euripides seems to her "something healthy and commendable/ After obscenity grotesqued so much/ It slunk away revolted at itself." She wants to see no more of Aristophanes' plays:

> Well, for such reasons,--I am out of breath,
> But loathsomeness we needs must hurry past,--

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[105] Complete Works, p. 635.

> I did not go to see, nor then nor now,
> The "Thesmophoriazousai."[106]

Balaustion objects to Aristophanes' assertion that comedy was coeval with the birth of freedom (an idea advanced by Schlegel), that its growth is a sign of the greatness of a republic, and that its decline signifies the downfall. By way of argument she asks whether he has succeeded in effecting any changes in society--in bringing in peace, for example, "by dint of laughter and abuse and lies."[107]

The sharpness of the feminine tongue frequently cuts, but Aristophanes licks his wounds good-naturedly. Balaustion, also a good sport, decides to see The Frogs, and although she reports that Bacchus "lied, filched, played fool, proved coward, flung/ The boys their dose of fit indecency," she obviously enjoyed the play, especially the last part where Aeschylus and Euripides "weigh their words":

> Then came a contest for supremacy--
> Cra med full of genius, wit and fun and freak.
> No spice of undue spite to spoil the dish
> Of all sorts,--for the Mystics matched the Frogs
> In poetry, no Seiren sang so sweet![108]

And her creator explained to Swinburne, for fear the role

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[106] Ibid., p. 632.

[107] Ibid., p. 659.

[108] Ibid., p. 678.

assigned to Aristophanes had given the impression that he disliked the comedian:

> Indeed, I am no enemy of that Aristophanes--all on fire with invention,--and such music! I am confident that Euripides bore his fun and parodying good-humoredly enough--as even Cleon did: but a friend of Euripides, --above all, a woman friend,--feels no such need of magnanimity: when I had done with her, I had all but done with anything like enmity to him--the reservation being simply due to the circumstance that Euripides was not triumphantly happy like Sophocles.[109]

Balaustion exalts tragedy over comedy, since it is through tragedy, she says, that we feel "our puny hates refine to air,/ Our poor prides sink,. . ./ Our petty passions purify their tide";[110] but she dreams of a new medium:

> . . . --complex Poetry,
> Uniting each god-grace, including both:
> Which, operant for body as for soul,
> Masters alike the laughter and the tears,
> Supreme in lowliest earth, sublimest sky.[111]

Again she describes it as drama in which

> . . . Comedy and Tragedy combine,
> Prove some new Both-yet-neither, all one bard,
> Euripides with Aristophanes
> Co-operant![112]

Aristophanes eventually catches the spirit of her dream and predicts the second great age of drama, out of which will arise, in his opinion--and Browning's--a playwright superior to Euripides and Aristophanes:

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[109]Hood, op. cit., p. 193.

[110]Complete Works, p. 629.

[111]Ibid., p. 641.

[112]Ibid., p. 659.

> While, as to your imaginary Third,
> Who,--stationed (by mechanics past my guess)
> So as to take in every side at once,
> And not successively,--may reconcile
> The High and Low in tragicomic verse,--
> He shall be hailed superior to us both
> When born--in the Tin-Islands![113]

The prediction, of course, was for the coming of

> SHAKESPEARE!--to such name's sounding
> what succeeds
> Fitly as silence?[114]

A letter written by Mrs. Browning in 1847 tells of an unexpected visit from Mrs. Anna Jameson, the Shakespearean scholar who had endeared herself to the Brownings by assisting them in their flight from Wimpole Street to Pisa. Having suddenly remembered that it was Shakespeare's birthday, she came bringing "from Arezzo," Mrs. Browning wrote, "a bottle of wine to 'drink to his memory with two other poets,' so there was a great deal of merriment, as you may fancy, and Robert played Shakespeare's favorite air, 'The Light of Love.'"[115] It amounted for all three to a celebration for an old friend. He had been among the earliest sources of inspiration for Mrs. Browning, Mrs. Jameson was then in Italy to lecture on his heroines, and Browning was soon to voice his reverence for the poet in

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[113] Ibid., p. 675.

[114] Ibid., p. 947.

[115] The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I, 327.

Christmas-Eve:

> I would declare such a Christ our Saint,
> As I declare our Poet, him
> Whose insight makes all others dim:
> A thousand poets pried at life,
> And only one amid the strife
> Rose to be Shakespeare.[116]

Browning became acquainted with Shakespeare as a child and never stopped reading him. He followed Mrs. Jameson's studies with interest, and he was on hand in 1840 to hear Carlyle lecture on "The Hero as Poet." In 1843 he wrote to Domett that he was learning German by reading Schlegel and Tieck's translation of Shakespeare. At the same time, he was studying Shakespeare carefully as a guide to his own dramatic writing, storing up ideas, among others, for Luria, "a Moor, of Othello's country." When he became president of the Shakespeare Society in 1872, he reread the plays in chronological order to see what new ideas would occur to him. And Mrs. Orr says that "it was impossible to see or hear him, as even an old man, in some momentary personation of one of Shakespeare's characters, above all of Richard III, and not feel that a great actor had been lost in him."[117]

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[116] Complete Works, p. 324.

[117] Mrs. Sutherland Orr, The Life and Letters of Robert Browning (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), I, 73-74.

G. R. Elliott, in a study of Shakespeare's influence on Browning, declares: "References to and illustrations from Shakespeare. . . are more conspicuous in Browning's works and letters than in those of any other of the great nineteenth century poets."[118] Most of them are such casual references as "(and here Juliet's word rises to my lips)"[119] or "I will make an end of it, as Ophelia with her swan's-song."[120] Others are more detailed, such as the seventy-line passage in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" or the discussion of the "author of Othello" in the Essay on Shelley. Still others are complete poems, such as "At the Mermaid," "House," and "The Names."

It is hard to decide which play was Browning's favorite. His early letters contain more references to Othello, including one in which he tells of being asked if he were the author of Romeo and Juliet and Othello, the two plays then being presented at one of the local theatres. "I, author of 'Othello'!" he exclaims.[121] And he speaks in the Shelley essay, not of the author of King

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[118]G. R. Elliott, "Shakespeare's Significance for Browning," Anglia, XXXII (January-April, 1909), 126.

[119]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 10.

[120]Ibid., I, 52.

[121]Ibid., II, 131-2.

Lear, or Hamlet, but the author of Othello. As he grew older, however, King Lear seems to have been frequently on his mind. Of his father's self-exile in Paris in his old age, Browning wrote that he "goes book-hunting as of old, 'shaping his old course in a country new,' like Lear's Kent."[122] Asked once if he approved of the Browning Society, he replied that if he did not approve, it would be like "Lear's last instance of ingratitude"--"that of the mouth biting the hand for lifting food to it."[123] Further evidence for the impact made by Lear can be found in Pippa Passes, "How It Strikes a Contemporary," "Childe Roland," the motto for Ferishtah's Fancies, and the apostrophe in the last stanza of "Halbert and Hob."

Next to Lear and Othello probably came Hamlet. "Do you believe people understand Hamlet?" he asked Ruskin in connection with questions about his own obscurity.

> The last time I saw it acted, the heartiest applause went to a little by-play of the actor's own--who, to simulate madness in a hurry, plucked forth his handkerchief and flourished it hither and thither: certainly a third of the play, with no end of noble things, had been (as from time immemorial) suppressed, with the auditory's amplest acquiesence and benediction. Are these wasted, therefore? No--they act upon a very few, who react upon the rest. . . .[124]

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[122]Hood, op. cit., p. 39.

[123]Ibid., p. 202.

[124]W. G. Collingwood, The Life of John Ruskin (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1902), p. 166.

Macbeth is represented by an allusion in "Mr. Sludge" and a complaint in a letter to Macready that Charles Kean wanted to be Macbeth three times a week.[125] *Romeo and Juliet* is quoted frequently in the letters. The impression made by *The Tempest* is of course seen in his "Caliban," and much earlier in a remark about something "Caliban remembered when he was angry."[126] His favorite comedies seem to have been *Much Ado* (with special delight in Dogberry) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To George Barrett he wrote regarding the disposal of Mrs. Browning's letters that they "would glorify the privileged receiver beyond any imaginable crown in the world or out of it--but I cannot, any more than Timon, 'cut my heart in sums--tell out my blood.'"[127]

A mere survey of such references, however, cannot produce reliable conclusions. It is safer to say that Browning enjoyed all of Shakespeare, as is shown by his advice to the public in the "Epilogue to Pacchiarotto," in which he elaborates on the figure borrowed from his wife's "Wine of Cyprus." "The poets pour us wine--," he quotes,

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[125] DeVane and Knickerbocker, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[126] *Letters of R. B. and E. B. B.*, I, 427.

[127] Paul Landis (ed.), *The Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 321.

and he adds that he has been led to believe that the public "quaffed and browsed" in Shakespeare "the whole day long," whereas, he notices:

> There are forty barrels with Shakespeare's brand.
> Some five or six are abroach; the rest
> Stand spigoted, fauceted. Try and test
> What yourselves call best of the very best!
> How comes it that still untouched they stand?
> Why don't you try tap, advance a stage
> With the rest in cellerage?[128]

We can be sure that Browning did not leave a barrel untapped. The relish with which he "quaffed and browsed" is at least partially illustrated in a passage in which Bram Stoker recalls conversations between the actor Henry Irving and Browning:

> It was quite a treat to hear Irving and Robert Browning talking. Their conversation, no matter how it began, usually swerved round to Shakespeare; as they were both excellent scholars of the subject the talk was on a high plane. It was not of double-endings or rhyming lines, or of any of the points or objects of that intellectual dissection which forms the work of a certain order of scholars who seem to always want to prove to themselves that Shakespeare was Shakespeare and no one else--and that he was the same man at the end of his life that he had been at the beginning. These two men took large views. Their ideas were of the loftiness and truth of his thought; of the magic music of his verse; of the light which his work threw on human nature. Each could quote passages to support whatever view he was sustaining. And whenever those two men talked, a quiet little group grew around them; all were content to listen when they spoke.[129]

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[128] Complete Works, p. 828.

[129] Bram Stoker, Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving (London: William Heinemann, 1906), II, 89.

In an age of much talk about the unities, Hamlet and Ophelia as psychiatric cases, Shakespeare's homelife, and differences in versification in the various periods of the playwright's life, Browning, as the preceding passage makes clear, was interested in the larger view. We can imagine him smiling through Bishop Blougram's speech as the Bishop addresses his interviewer:

> You, Gigadibs, who, thirty years of age,
> Write belatedly for Blackwood's Magazine,
> Believe you see two points in Hamlet's soul
> Unseized by the Germans yet--which view
> you'll print. . . .[130]

But one question Browning could become disturbed about was that regarding the authorship of the plays. Shortly after the publication of the thesis that Bacon wrote the plays, Hawthorne wrote of Mrs. Browning's horror at the Baconian theory. Her husband shared the feeling. Among the recorded instances of his vehement reactions is that which he himself tells of in a letter written in 1880. He was sitting one evening next to John Bright, whose ignorance of literature he had noted before. Bright, he reported,

> "was convinced Shakespeare could not have written the plays--a man who could hardly write at all, and was known, in his own age, to nobody." I could not stand that, and let him know what I thought of it.[131]

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[130] Complete Works, p. 357.

[131] Hood, op. cit., p. 292.

Dowden mentions that Browning's opinion was that "it was certain that the author of the essays could not have been the author of the plays."[132] Mr. Sludge says simply: "Bacon advises, Shakespeare writes you songs."[133] As to the authorship of the individual plays, Browning believed Titus Andronicus too horrible for Shakespeare to have written, although the terrible scene in King Lear did not change his mind about the authorship of that play.[134] Titus Andronicus did not have the great beauty to redeem it.

Another popular question in nineteenth-century Shakespearean criticism concerned the consciousness of his genius, whether it was what Carlyle called "an unconscious intellect," or whether he wrote by plan and precontrivance. Browning has Bishop Blougram speak of "his power and consciousness and self-delight," but he also sensed the unusual spontaneity. Furnivall reports that Browning was most impressed, when he reread the plays chronologically,

> with the lordly ease with which he swung up to the throne whose lowest steps 'the rest of us' only reacht with infinite struggle. The hardest of all things

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[132] Edward Dowden, The Life of Robert Browning (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1915), p. 348.

[133] Complete Works, p. 411.

[134] Griffin and Minchin, op. cit., p. 252.

> Shakespeare did just naturally, as if they were no trouble to him.[135]

Regarding questions of Shakespeare biography, which grew out of Victorian attempts to establish the chronology of the plays and chart a pattern of growth, Browning expressed himself adamantly. Shakespeare's complete objectivity precluded the gleaning of any autobiographical data not only from the plays, but from the Sonnets--"those Sonnets of his," which Carlyle claims, "will even testify expressly in what deep waters he had waded. . . "[136] Furnivall tells of having tried to show Browning "what a heretic he was, but he didn't care to discuss the point in detail."[137]

Instead Browning has Shakespeare say in "At the 'Mermaid'":

> Which of you did I enable
> Once to slip inside my breast,
> There to catalogue and label
> What I like least, what love best,
> Hope and fear, believe and doubt of,
> Seek and shun, respect--deride?
> Who has the right to make a rout of
> Rarities he found inside?[138]

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[135]Quoted by W. J. Rolfe in "Browning on Shakespeare," Critic, XVI (January 11, 1890), 17-18.

[136]"The Hero as Poet," The Best of Carlyle, Herbert L. Creek, editor (New York: The Ronald Press, 1929), p. 441.

[137]Rolfe, op. cit., p. 18.

[138]Complete Works, p. 808.

And at the end of "House" is the famous answer to Wordsworth's "Scorn Not the Sonnet":

> 'With this same key
> Shakespeare unlocked his heart,' once more!"
> Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he,[139]

--to which Swinburne retorted: "No whit the less like Shakespeare, but undoubtedly the less like Browning."[140]

Browning liked to believe that he was as objective in his own dramatic poems as he believed Shakespeare to be in the plays. When word came to him that he had been accused of being strongly against Darwin and the truths of science, he explained:

> It came, I suppose, of Hohenstiel-Schwangau's expressing the notion which was the popular one at the appearance of Darwin's book--and you might as well charge Shakespeare with holding that there were men whose heads grew beneath their shoulders, because Othello told Desdemona that he had seen such.[141]

As with all his favorite poets, Browning attempted to create Shakespeare in his own image. The passages from "At the 'Mermaid'" have already been cited.[142] In "Bishop Blougram's Apology" he appears as a normal man who builds

> . . . the trimmest house in Stratford town;
> Saves money, spends it, owns the worth of things.

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[139] Ibid., p. 809.

[140] Quoted by Rolfe, op. cit., p. 18.

[141] Hood, op. cit., p. 199.

[142] Supra, p. 51.

He appreciates, like Browning,

> Guilio Roman's pictures, Dowland's lute;
> Enjoys a show, respects the puppets, too.[143]

Mrs. Bronson once quoted to Browning what an Italian critic had said about him: "I consider that his work has qualities not to be found even in Shakspere; in fact in some respects I regard him as the superior of the two." Browning's reply was vigorous in denial: "No, no, no; I won't hear that. No one in the world will ever approach Shakspere; never."[144] And Mrs. Orr tells of Browning's part in a conversation that turned on the celebration of the Shakespeare tercentenary:

> Here we are called upon to acknowledge Shakespeare, we who have him in our very bones and blood, our very selves. The very recognition of Shakespeare's merits by the committee reminds me of nothing so apt as an illustration as the decree of the Directoire that men might acknowledge God.[145]

About the other Elizabethans Browning had little to say, although there is no question of his high regard for the total dramatic output of the period. Marlowe figures as Shakespeare's predecessor in "At the 'Mermaid,'" and would have been the subject for a play if R. H. Horne had not published a one-act play about Marlowe's death before

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[143] Complete Works, p. 354.

[144] Bronson, "Browning in Venice," p. 580.

[145] Orr, op. cit., II, 369.

Browning had an opportunity to get his material together.[146] His interest in and knowledge of Ben Jonson can be seen in his comments on the production of Every Man in His Humour.[147]

His reading, if not his accurate memory, of Jacobean drama is demonstrated through his suggestion to R. H. Horne of a motto to preface the chapter on Mrs. Jameson in Horne's New Spirit of the Age. Quoting from James Shirley's masque, The Triumph of Peace, he attributes the quotation to "Middleton (I think)."[148] Nevertheless, his ability to quote accurately from little known works testifies to his wide reading. In discussing his fondness for red, he asked Miss Barrett if she knew "anything of Nat Lee's Tragedies" and continued:

> In one of them a man angry with a Cardinal cries--
>
> Stand back, and let me mow this poppy down,
> This rank red weed that spoils the Churches' corn.
>
> Is that not good? and presently, when the same worthy is poisoned (that is the Cardinal)--they bid him--
> 'now, Cardinal, lie down and roar!
>
> Think of thy scarlet sins![149]

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[146]Griffin and Minchin, op. cit., p. 112.

[147]Supra, pp. 80-81.

[148]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 33.

[149]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 514.

It is to be expected that Browning would have had some interest in Italian drama as well as English. His admiration for Salvini's acting and Gallina's comedies has already been mentioned.[150] He also admired Carlo Goldoni, the eighteenth-century writer of comedies, whom he honored in a sonnet as "good, gay, sunniest of souls," ending with these lines:

> Dear king of Comedy,
> Be honored! thou that didst love Venice so,
> Venice, and we who love her, all love thee![151]

Vittorio Alfieri, another eighteenth-century playwright, distinguished primarily for his tragedies, one of which was Saul and another a version of the Alcestis, probably gave Browning ideas for his own works. Griffin speaks of King Victor and King Charles as being "modelled on the simple lines of Alfieri, whose works Browning had been studying very closely."[152] But Browning was not entirely appreciative. "Alfieri," he wrote to Miss Barrett,

> with even grey eyes, and a life of travel, writes you some fifteen tragedies as colourless as salad grown under a garden glass with matting over it--as free, that is, from local colouring, touches of the soil

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[150] Supra, p. 115.

[151] Complete Works, p. 910.

[152] Griffin and Minchin, op. cit., p. 126.

> they are said to spring from,--think of 'Saulle,' and his Greek attempts.[153]

In the same letter Browning denied creative ability to Italians in general, elaborating on a favorite idea that they are poetry and not creators of it: "Pure Poetry there is none, nearly as possible none, in Dante even." Since he later apologized for this extreme view, we need not take the estimate of Alfieri too seriously.

There are noticeable omissions in Browning's criticism of drama. We do not know what he thought of Calderon, although we do know that he had read at least some of his plays. There are few comments on Goethe and none on Schiller and Moliere, although we can be sure that he was familiar with German and French drama, at least through Carlyle and contemporary stage productions. The criticism that we do have, however, provides the best possible range, dealing as it does with the two periods in which drama rose to its full height and a third in which it descended to probably its lowest depths. If Browning lacked the perspective to be completely objective about his contemporaries, he was in the company of far more pretentious critics than himself, many of whom did not come so close to analyzing correctly the weaknesses of

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[153] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 52-53.

nineteenth-century drama. If he tended toward idolatry in his eulogy of Euripides and Shakespeare, he was safely within established critical tradition.

CHAPTER IV

"TRUTH BROKEN INTO PRISMATIC HUES"

The two periods in which Browning identified himself most closely with Shakespeare and extolled most vociferously the merits of purely objective poetry were, significantly enough, the two periods in which he felt the most pressure from critics and the greatest need to hide his personal feelings. The first, in which he was studying Shakespeare and writing plays, followed Mill's criticism of Pauline and the young poet's resolution never to bare his heart to the public again. The second, in which he identified himself with Shakespeare and stressed his objectivity in some of his most subjective utterances, followed the attacks of Alfred Austin.

At other times Browning realized that while his abilities were not those of a Shelley, neither were they those of a Shakespeare. He knew that Milsand, in his 1851 review, was correct in his analysis:

> Mr. Browning. . . is of the family of Milton rather than of Shakespeare. His excursions are voyages of the spirit; his faculties seem to be spent within, from the depths of his intelligence. . . . If he lives in the same world as the thinker, he walks there with other instincts, with a sentiment for the picturesque and for dramatic genius. . . . In him, in a word, there are two beings; there is a thinker, who descends upon the earth in order to know, who conceived for example the character of man in accordance with the episodes of his own life; besides that there is a poet who looks at the

> character already conceived, and sees it suddenly resume its march and set itself to strange adventures with other abstractions which surround it.[1]

After offering reasons for not finding Browning's dramas satisfactory, Milsand continues: "What shall we say? That for Mr. Browning the drama is perhaps a step too much aside from feeling."[2]

That Browning had already recognized the accuracy of Milsand's analysis can be seen in the form chosen for Paracelsus and Sordello and in the title chosen for the Bells and Pomegranate Series, which included the six plays and two volumes of poetry published in the early forties. The title of the last was intended to convey the idea, he explained, of "something like an alteration, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought."[3] Before he had finished Luria and A Soul's Tragedy, the last two plays in the series, he was writing to Miss Barrett:

> I have lost, of late, interest in dramatic writing, as you know, and perhaps, occasion. And, dearest, I mean to take your advice and be quiet awhile and let my

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[1]Joseph Milsand, Robert Browning, trans. by Mrs. Thomas B. Stowell from the Revue des Deux Mondes (Los Angeles: The Browning Society, 1925), p. 25.

[2]Ibid., p. 33.

[3]The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning (Cambridge edition; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1895), p. 128.

> mind get used to its new medium of sight; seeing all things, as it does, through you: and then, let all I have done be the prelude and the real work begin.[4]

The real work was apparently intended to be "R.B., a poem." Through these letters there runs like a refrain his belief in the superiority of Miss Barrett's poetry over his own and the belief that the superiority lay in her being able to speak out spontaneously in her own person:

> Your poetry must be, cannot but be, infinitely more to me than mine to you--for you do what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, you,--I only make men and women speak--give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light even if it is in me, but I am going to try.[5]

As noted previously, however, the fear of "the pure white light" continued to haunt him, and he was forced to settle for "truth broken into prismatic hues"--a method which he may have deprecated, but which his readers have regarded as the source of his effectiveness. And Browning himself was not always displeased with the results. Sidney Colvin recalls Browning's having related with "amused gusto" the story of how, after hearing some verses read, he had slapped his thigh and said, "By Jove, that's fine." The verses, which he did not remember having heard before,

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[4]The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846 (New York: Harpers, 1899), I, 470.

[5]Ibid., I, 6.

turned out to be his own.[6] Unfortunately Colvin does not identify them.

Although Browning was not always a good critic of his own works while he was in the process of writing, he was able, with perspective, to come close to the judgments of posterity. In February, 1845, with a little over ten years of publication behind him, he selected Pippa Passes as his favorite work.[7] Except possibly for some of the shorter poems in Dramatic Lyrics, published in 1842, Pippa Passes best represented the combination of lyric and dramatic power that was to continue to characterize his finest poetry. Not long afterwards, when Miss Barrett asked to see the poems he had published in Hood's Magazine, he was reluctant to show her what he called "all my sins of commission with Hood": "The Laboratory," "Claret and Tokay," "Garden Fancies," "The Boy and the Angel," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," and the first nine sections of "The Flight of the Duchess."[8] Part of the reluctance no doubt stemmed from modesty, but with the exception of the last two, none of these can be considered among Browning's

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[6]Sidney Colvin, Memoirs and Notes of Persons and Places, 1852-1912 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), p. 80.

[7]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 28.

[8]Ibid., I, 133.

best poems. There is evidence that he later valued "The Bishop" more highly.[9] And after finishing "The Flight of the Duchess," he was happier with it. "So much for this 'Duchess,'" he wrote to Miss Barrett, "--which I shall ever rejoice in--wherever was a bud, even, in that strip of May-blooms, a live musical bee hands now,"[10] a comment that was partially an acknowledgment of the improvement brought about by her numerous suggestions.

The list of characters at the end of "One Word More," published in 1855, is another index to Browning's estimate of his own poems. Here he names six characters who appear in works that were among his best up to that time: "An Epistle," "Cleon," "In a Balcony," "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Childe Roland," and "Andrea del Sarto." In 1885, Edmund Gosse asked him for "four poems of moderate length, which represent their writer fairly." This list is valuable in that he compiled it at the end of his career after giving it careful consideration. As Browning remarked to Gosse, it was difficult to know what the term "moderate length" meant, but he divided his poems into four categories and made the following choices: lyrical, "Saul" or

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[9]William C. DeVane and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (eds.), New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 35-36.

[10]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 138.

"Abt Vogler"; narrative, "A Forgiveness"; dramatic, "Caliban on Setebos"; and idyllic (in the Greek sense), "Clive."[11] Doubtless he would have ranked other dramatic and lyric poems higher than "A Forgiveness" and "Clive," but the choice of four categories prevented the inclusion not only of more lyrical and dramatic pieces, but apparently those that Browning regarded as combinations, the dramatic lyrics and the dramatic romances, in which he was at his best.

Among the longer poems he found Balaustion's Adventure "a pretty thing in its way,"[12] but The Ring and the Book he considered his greatest achievement. When asked by one who wanted to become acquainted with his poetry what he should read first, Browning's reply was "The Ring and the Book, of course."[13] William Allingham remembered his saying, "It's admirable! I've ever so much more to tell."[14] Sidney Colvin reports that in reading it aloud,

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[11]Thurman L. Hood (ed.), Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 235.

[12]Edward C. McAleer, Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 362.

[13]Quoted by W. H. Griffin and H. C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), p. 233.

[14]William Allingham, A Diary (London: Macmillan and Company, 1907), p. 195.

Browning "could control neither his voice nor his tears in the Pompilia section";[15] and Mrs. Bronson tells of his reading aloud in his last days "from Shakespeare, Shelley, or his own Pompilia."[16]

Although it has been declared that "he never cared much to talk about his own poetry,"[17] he did not hesitate to defend himself against adverse criticism of The Ring and the Book. When Julia Wedgwood accused him of speaking in his own voice, he answered:

> Why is the allusion to Justinian mine and not the man's I give it to? The whole of his speech, as I premise, is untrue--cant and cleverness--as you see when the second speech comes: but he was quite able to cant, and also know something of the Pandects, which are the basis of actual Italian law. What are the other escapes from dramatic propriety into my own peculiar self--do tell me that![18]

As he grew older, he seems to have become more sensitive to the accusation that he was speaking through his characters. Earlier he had responded more mildly to that accusation from Ruskin: "I may put Robert Browning into Pippa and other men and maids. If so, peccavi: but I don't see

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[15]Colvin, op. cit., p. 84.

[16]Quoted by Griffin and Minchin, op. cit., p. 281.

[17]Anne Ritchie, Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, and Browning (London: Macmillan and Company, 1896), p. 195.

[18]Richard Curle (ed.), Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed in Their Letters (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1937), p. 147.

myself in them, at all events."[19] But he was always firm in his belief that once a writer had chosen to write dramatically, he must guard against letting his own personality show through. His inability to see the poet in such later poems as those in the Pacchiarotto volume is surely a sign of his failure to be objective about all his work; but, on the whole, he was justified in believing that much of his effectiveness lay in his ability to remain outside his characters.

Browning does speak out as the poet, of course, in certain passages in The Ring and the Book to tell the story of how the poem came to be written, but here he does not pretend to be another character. He is resorting to the kind of comment he has Balaustion explain as she begins her transcription of Euripides' Alcestis:

> '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.[20]

His finding a way in The Ring and the Book to speak both as Robert Browning and as a variety of distinct characters may well explain one of the reasons he regarded it as his

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[19]W. G. Collingwood, The Life of John Ruskin (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1902), p. 165.

[20]Complete Works, p. 605.

greatest poem. More important, however, he believed in its originality and moral purpose, and he was convinced that it had been divinely inspired.

As can be seen in his criticism of his own plays, Browning not only knew when he had succeeded, but also when he had failed. Pauline, of course, he considered his greatest failure. Sordello he knew to be obscure, with many faults of expression, although he refused to blame himself, "who did my best then and since; for I lately gave time and pains to turn my work into what the many might--instead of what the few must--like."[21] In thanking Leigh Hunt for his favorable review of Men and Women, Browning admitted knowing that some of his poems erred "in obscure and imperfect expression--wishing it were not so, and trying always for the future it may be less so. . . ."[22] Concerning Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau he wrote to a young friend:

> I expect you not to care three straws for what, in the nature of things, is uninteresting enough, even compared with other poems of mine which you have been only too good to. What poetry can be in a sort of political satire, made the milder because of the present fortunes of the subject?[23]

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[21] Ibid., p. 74.

[22] DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 95.

[23] Hood, op. cit., pp. 150-51.

This judgment has been confirmed by the opinions of later, and more objective, critics.

That Browning could misjudge his own work is evident in the "Epilogue to Pacchiarotto," in which he declares that he brews stiff drink and that

> Mighty and mellow are never mixed,
> Though mighty and mellow be born at once.[24]

Many of his own poems refute this judgment. But he was usually right. There is no better evidence of his ability as a self-critic than his maintaining the firm belief in his genius that kept him writing when few would have predicted for him any more than a place among the minor nineteenth-century poets.

When Browning read an article in the Temple Bar saying that in The Ring and the Book he was an analyst rather than a creator of character, he vigorously denied it, declaring that he had had to create, "out of the mass of almost equally balanced evidence," the characters of the book as he conceived them, and could analyze only after having gone through the process of creation.[25] It was this process of creation and analysis that fascinated him, whether in his work or that of others. And whereas in

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[24]Complete Works, p. 828.

[25]William Michael Rossetti (ed.), Rossetti Papers: 1862 to 1870 (London: Sands and Company, 1903), p. 401.

theory he maintained that the subjective was superior to the objective, and both superior to the hybrid forms, his critical comments show continued enthusiasm for the epic, the ballad, the idyll, the dramatic lyric, and other types of poetry in which he found truth "broken into prismatic hues."

Few writers made such a strong impression on him as Homer did. It is evident from his numerous references to the Iliad and Odyssey that he read these epics from his early childhood to his last years. "Development" is his commentary on the German critics who set out to prove

> . . . there was never any Troy at all,
> Neither Besiegers nor Besieged,--nay, worse,--
> No actual Homer, no authentic text,
> No warrant for the fiction I, as fact,
> Had treasured in my heart and soul so long.[26]

But "Helen, Ulysses, Hector and his Spouse, Achilles and his Friend" had been early enshrined in Browning's heart, and the truth and beauty of their actions had made an indelible stamp during his most impressionable years. He could have been taught, he points out, in other ways

> . . . to loathe, like Peleus' son,
> A lie as Hell's Gate, love my wedded wife,
> Like Hector, and so on with all the rest,[27]

but for the youngster, morality instilled through the

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[26]Complete Works, p. 1003.

[27]Ibid.

action and example of Homer's characters was far more effective than the abstract treatment in Aristotle's Ethics.

To Browning, Homer was a great teacher who approached truth by way of the imagination, appealing through his vivid descriptions both of external and human nature. From Switzerland he wrote in his later years: "To-day comes exactly such a snow-storm as I happened to read of this morning in the Iliad, the only book I brought with me."[28] Of the questions he proposed that he and Miss Barrett should settle between them, the first should be "what song the sirens sang to Ulysses."[29] Again, regarding explanations they would have to make about their acquaintanceship, he wrote, "As if you had to write the meeting between Hector and Andromache, not the parting."[30] And later, after his wife's death, thinking of the pain of revisiting Italy, he remarked:

> I always think of this when I read the Odyssey--Homer makes the surviving Greeks, whenever they refer to Troy, just say of it "At Troy, where the Greeks suffered so." Yet all their life was in that ten years at Troy.[31]

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[28]Hood, op. cit., p. 268.

[29]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 52.

[30]McAleer, op. cit., p. 267.

[31]Ibid.

If the number of references in his letters is any indication, we may conclude that although he loved both books, he read the Iliad more frequently and found more rapport with the characters.

There is no evidence of Browning's having read other epics with the same regularity. The dedication of the Parleyings to the memory of Milsand is accompanied by a quotation from the fourth book of the Aeneid, and a letter in 1865 tells of reading the Aeneid with his son,[32] but Virgil apparently was not the object of devotion that Homer was. Browning would doubtless have found somewhat cold Virgil's flawless form and classical expression, and it is not likely that Aeneas, as Virgil presents him, would have appealed to Browning as did the more human and fallible Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus.

Of the later Italian epic poets, Browning showed interest in three: Dante, Ariosto, and Tasso. Ariosto is represented in his writings only by casual allusions. Tasso seems to have been more interesting to him as a personality than as the author of Gerusalemme Liberata. He recommended to Elizabeth Barrett Landor's dialogue between Tasso and his sister, adding: "I see your Tasso with his prominent eyes as if they were ever just

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[32] Ibid., p. 224.

brightening out of a sorrow that has broken over them."[33] In the essay that purports to be a review of a biography of Tasso, Tasso's misfortunes become simply a point of departure for a discussion of the misfortunes of Chatterton, the only critical comment being a reference to "the touching glimmer, as an outbreak through prison-bars, that colours every page of the Giurusalemme."[34]

In spite of Browning's having once hastily condemned all Italian poetry, including Dante's,[35] he had great respect for the power and imagination of the Divine Comedy. When Miss Barrett gently remonstrated with him about calling "Dante's poetry only materials for the northern rhymers," he quickly tried to explain how he "came to say some nonsense . . . about Dante":

> I intended to shade down and soften off and put in and leave out, and before I had done, bring Italian Poets round to their old place again in my heart, giving new praise if I took old,--anyhow Dante is out of it all, as who knows but I, with all of him in my head and heart.[36]

Dante had been especially in Browning's head and heart a few years before--the Divine Comedy having

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[33]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 260.

[34]Donald Smalley (ed.), Browning's Essay on Chatterton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 108.

[35]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 52.

[36]Ibid., I, 56.

stimulated his interest in Sordello's story. In Sordello Dante appears as the one who finally took, for the world's sake, the step his predecessor, Sordello, spurned:

> Plucker of amaranths grown beneath God's eye
> In gracious twilights where his chosen lie.[37]

In 1845, when he was thinking of revising Sordello, Browning returned to Dante for new inspiration, which he received from the Purgatorio. "The first speech of the group of which Sordello makes one," he wrote, "struck me with a new significance, as well describing the man and his purpose and fate in my own poem." After quoting in Italian from the fifth canto, he translated the passage, which he felt to be "just my Sordello's story":

> And sinners were we to the extreme hour;
> Then, light from heaven fell, making us aware,
> So that, repenting us and pardoned, out
> Of life we passed to God, at peace with Him
> Who fills the heart with yearning Him to see.[38]

In "One Word More," Dante is presented as he is preparing to abandon his pen and paint an angel for Beatrice:

> Dante, who loved well because he hated,
> Hated wickedness that hinders loving,
> Dante standing, studying his angel,--
> In there broke the folk of his Inferno.
> Says he--"Certain people of importance"
> (Such he gave his daily dreadful line to)

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[37] Complete Works, p. 78.

[38] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 346-47.

"Entered and would seize, forsooth, the poet,"
Says the poet--"Then I stopped my painting."[39]

His favorite passage from the Divine Comedy was apparently that which he inscribed in the front of his wife's New Testament after her death. He quoted it at least twice in letters[40] and incorporated it later into La Saisiaz:

. . . Is it fact to which I cleave,
Is it fancy I but cherish when I take upon my lips
Phrase the solemn Tuscan fashioned, and declare the soul's eclipse
Not the soul's extinction? take his "I believe and I declare--
Certain am I--from this life I pass into a better, there
Where that lady lives of whom enamored was my soul."[41]

A later poem contrasts the lyrical poet who bursts easily into song with the one whose work is less spontaneous, but more enduring. The latter is typified by Dante:

Rock's the song-soil rather, surface hard and bare:
Sun and dew their mildness, storm and frost their rage
Vainly both expend,--few flowers awaken there:
Quiet in its cleft broods--what the after-age
Knows and names a pine, a nation's heritage.[42]

Browning may have admired Dante the teacher more than Dante the poet, but his admiration for both was strong. Visitors to Warwick Crescent in his last years

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[39]Complete Works, p. 362.

[40]See Hood, op. cit., p. 172; and Curle, op. cit., p. 44.

[41]Complete Works, p. 852.

[42]Ibid., p. 910.

remarked on the prominent position occupied by a cast of the Tuscan poet.[43] They might also have noticed in his study portraits of Milton and Spenser. These portraits, along with the lock of Milton's hair that Browning cherished among his keepsakes,[44] provide clues as to the esteem in which he held the two English epic poets, although there are few comments on either. One letter contains a paraphrase from The Faerie Queene,[45] another an allusion to what has been interpreted as The Faerie Queene,[46] and a third an allusion to DuBellay, "who wrote so much which Spenser translated."[47] In addition, there is an account of one of Browning's very rare public speeches--a response to a toast--in which he used a quotation from Spenser.[48]

His comments on Milton are more significant as criticism. In a letter to Miss Barrett, he chose as an example of supreme felicity "a man with 'Paradise Lost' or

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[43]T. Sturge Moore (ed.), "Extracts from 'Works and Days,' the Diary of Michael Field," The Cornhill Magazine, LXXII (January, 1932), 10.

[44]Hood, op. cit., p. 49.

[45]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 12.

[46]Ibid., p. 21.

[47]Ibid., p. 376.

[48]Moore, op. cit. (February, 1932), p. 132.

'Othello' to write."[49] The "Epilogue to Pacchiarotto" contains a passage chiding the public for not drinking more deeply of the "stiff drink" brewed by Shakespeare and Milton,[50] and in the Parleyings he presents Christopher Smart as the only poet of any stature between Milton and Keats, "the superhuman poet-pair."[51]

Among the narrative poets, Chaucer, of course, was a favorite, although Browning's comments are disappointingly scarce. A comparison of himself with Chaucer's Monk[52] and a reference to "Chaucer's graver at his work of 'graving smale seles' by the sun's light"[53] appear in the letters. And there is also his understandable delight in the poem in which Landor compares him with Chaucer:

> Since Chaucer was alive and hale
> No man has walked along our road with step
> So active, so enquiring eye, and tongue
> So varied in discourse.

In sending the verses to Domett, Browning remarked: "The first thing to notice is the kindness, and after, the blindness of such praise; but, these acknowledged duly, surely one may remark on the happy epithet 'hale' as

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[49] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 47.

[50] Complete Works, p. 828.

[51] Ibid., p. 960.

[52] Hood, op. cit., p. 28.

[53] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 426.

applied to Chaucer. . . ."[54] Since he also commented on "the felicity of the epithet 'hale'" when he sent the verses to his publisher,[55] we can assume that Landor had succeeded in creating what Browning considered a singularly appropriate image. It is also likely that Browning's wholehearted approval of the description stemmed partially from its enabling him to identify himself more easily with one of the earlier "normal" men of letters.

Between these older narrative poets and those of the nineteenth century, two stand out as favorites, James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton, now linked in literary history because of their forgeries, but linked in the mind of the young Browning as poets who filled his imagination with heroic deeds of primitive times. Macpherson's Ossianic poems appealed to the same instinct that led him to revere the Iliad:

> I have been long intending to read once again those Fingals and Malvinas [he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett]. I remember that somewhere a chief cries 'Come round me, my thousands!'--There is an Achilles! And another, complaining of old age remarks 'Now--I feel the weight of my shield!' Nestor; and both beautifully perfect, are they not. . . .[56]

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[54]Frederic Kenyon (ed.), Robert Browning and Alfred Domett (London: Smith, Elder, and Company, 1906), pp. 124-25.

[55]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 37.

[56]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 467.

He probably also associated Ossian with the Iliad because of having become acquainted with the two at about the same time. Regarding his memories of the former he wrote:

> You asked me about Ossian--now here is truth--the first book I ever bought in my life was Ossian. . it is now in the next room.[57] And years before that, the first composition I ever was guilty of was something in imitation of Ossian, whom I had not read, but conceived, through two or three scraps in other books. . . . I could not have been five years old. . . .[58]

Browning at first refused to believe that "Ossian was not Ossian," but although he would not read Laing's dissertation brought out to prove that there was no such person as Macpherson's Ossian, he could not help knowing its purpose, he confessed, "and the pitch of the hatefully-irresistible arguments." Then he continued:

> The worst came in another shape, though. . an after-gleaning of real Ossianic poems, by a firm believer whose name I forget--'if this is the real'--I thought! Well, to this day I believe in a nucleus for all that haze, a foundation of truth to Macpherson's fanciful superstructure. . . .[59]

Whereas incontrovertible evidence prevented his believing in a foundation of truth for Chatterton's Rowley, his admiration for Chatterton was so strong that he sought

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[57]It is interesting to compare here a statement made many years later in an account of a visit with Browning: "He showed us the first book he bought as a boy, Mrs. Hemans' Commonplace Book." Moore, op. cit., p. 10.

[58]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 466-67.

[59]Ibid., II, 467.

ways to exonerate him from the charges of his unsympathetic biographers, thus providing us with one of the two essays that make up his formal prose criticism. A letter from the young poetess Edith Cooper to her cousin in 1885 describes her first meeting with the seventy-three-year-old Browning. Included among other details is the statement that her host "talked of Chatterton (for whom he has a strange admiration) and Shelley."[60] Apparently during this meeting Browning mentioned having written an essay on Chatterton, because it was a reference to the article in Edith Cooper's diary, published in 1933, that led to the eventual discovery and identification of the article as Browning's.[61]

Published in the Foreign Quarterly Review for July, 1842, this article, like many of Browning's poems, is a type of special pleading. Browning argues that Chatterton began his hoax with no intention of doing other than confessing his authorship of the Rowley papers. "In a word," he says,

> poor Chatterton's life was not the Lie it is so universally supposed to have been; nor did he "perish in the pride" [Wordsworth's phrase] of refusing to surrender Falsehood and enter on the ways of Truth. We can show, we think. . . that he had already entered on those ways when he was left, without a helping hand,

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[60]Moore, op. cit., p. 8.

[61]See Smalley, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

> to sink and starve as he might. And to this single point we shall as far as possible restrict ourselves.[62]

Although most of the essay is devoted to confuting the popular notion of Chatterton through recourse to his biography and an interpretation of his personality, it contains some significant observations on Chatterton's method of composition and the merits of the Rowley manuscripts.

Browning expresses surprise "that there should have been a controversy for ten minutes about the genuineness of any ten verses of 'Rowley,'" finding it "a real disgrace to the scholarship of the age in which such a thing took place." Scholars should have recognized immediately the mixed nature of the composition in which Chatterton, "retaining what he supposed the ancient garb should also include every modern refinement." By way of illustration, Browning selects one of the most ingenious of the forgeries, which "has hitherto escaped detection," and proceeds to examine the technique that Chatterton used to translate a sermon by the Reverend John Hurrion into Rowley's Sermon on the Holy Spirit.[63] Browning's own ingenious explanation shows how thoroughly he had studied

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[62] Ibid., p. 110.

[63] Ibid., pp. 113-15.

Chatterton's methods; and, as Donald Smalley remarks, "Thanks to Browning's habit of random reading, we have at last a satisfactory answer to a very old puzzle."[64]

Part of the defense of Chatterton is based on Browning's observations of other poets, and more especially on his own feelings about the poet's relation to society and the natural resistance of society to the poet's first efforts:

> Is it worth while to mention, that the very notion of obtaining a free way for impulses that can find vent in no other channel. . . is implied in all literary production? By this fact is explained, not only the popular reverence for, and interest in even the personal history of, the acknowledged and indisputable possessors of this power-- . . . but also the as popular jealousy of allowing this privilege to the first claimant.

Thus, he adds, nine times out of ten, the young poet will offer his first work under a borrowed name.[65]

Browning's explanation for the development of Chatterton's genius is also drawn from experience. Smalley observes that in Pauline Browning had already described in poetry the course that he describes here in prose:

> Genius almost invariably begins to develop itself by imitation. It has, in the short-sightedness of infancy, faith in the world: and its object is to compete with, or prove superior to, the world's already recognised idols, at their own performances and by

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[64] Ibid., p. 187.

[65] Ibid., p. 116.

> their own methods. This done, there grows up a faith in itself: and, no longer taking the performance or method of another for granted, it supersedes these by processes of its own. It creates and imitates no longer.[66]

It is through finding faith in something external and better that the poet attains "to a moral end and aim" and eventually arrives at the more or less complete fulfillment of his earthly mission. Browning found this moral end and aim in Chatterton--"the Moral Sense which it is the worst want of charity to deny to him, and with direct and strong evidences of which his earliest poetry abounded." He sees the young poet leaving Bristol to disengage himself from "the still increasing trammels of his daily life of enforced deceit" so that he can begin a new life on "a wiser and happier course."[67]

Not only does Browning believe the moral aim to be obvious, but he also finds that "there is fine, the finest poetry in Chatterton,"[68] which the Bristolians, interested only in antiquity, were blind to. Furthermore, Chatterton set

> sometimes to work with the poorest materials; like any painter a fathom below ground in the Inquisition, who in his penury of colour turns the weather-stains on

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[66] Ibid., p. 111.

[67] Ibid., p. 120.

[68] Ibid., p. 133.

> his dungeon wall into effects of light and shade, or outlines of objects, and makes the single sputter of red paint in his possession go far indeed![69]

It was inevitable to Browning that a man who could write such poetry would be a moral man--"being, as such a genius could not but be, the noblest-hearted of mortals.[70] Once more there is the emphasis on the inseparability of the man from his work. Poetry of genius presupposes nobility of character.

Unfortunately, Browning quotes from Chatterton only his verses to Walpole, not as an example of the poetry of genius, but as proof of his "unhappy correspondence" with the man from whom the destitute young poet had expected help.[71] Had Browning been more concerned with Chatterton's claims as a poet than with his morality, he might have pointed out the metrical originality and the vigor of the ballads, both of which would have recommended the poetry to him. But he doubtless felt that the merits of Chatterton's poetry were apparent to all, whereas the facts of the biography had been clouded. And his first duty was to clear the poet's reputation, thus opening the way for new appreciation of his works.

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., p. 131.

[71] Ibid., p. 122.

It is not surprising that one drawn so irresistibly to these pre-Romantics would have exulted in the full-blown Romanticism of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, who, to the adolescent Browning, were "discoveries." In his criticism of these three favorites, Browning laid stress on those poems which for him were examples of "the pure white light," but he found in the dramatic and narrative poems of Shelley and Keats much to admire. Shelley's Prometheus was a favorite poem from which he could easily call up passages for illustration. And when Elizabeth Barrett was incredulous and disillusioned on finding Shelley to be the author of an inferior novel, Browning assured her that it was true, but added, "And now, please read a chorus in the 'Prometheus Unbound' or a scene from the 'Cenci'--and join company with Shelley again."[72] In the Essay on Shelley he points to "Julian and Maddalo" and "the magnificent 'Ode to Naples'" as "successful instances of objectivity in Shelley." "Julian and Maddalo" is a conversation from which, as Shelley suggests in the preface, the reader is left to draw his own conclusions about the two main characters. The "Ode to Naples" is objective in form and primarily descriptive, but designed to communicate, the poet says in his preface, "some of the majestic feelings"

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[72]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 228.

connected with Naples at the time of the proclamation of a constitutional government. It is not difficult to understand why a poem in this form dealing with Italian freedom would have appealed to Browning.

Neither is it difficult to understand why Keats's narrative poems, with their rich imagery, romantic settings, and conciseness, would have appealed to him. His attitude is well summarized in an account from William Allingham's diary. In 1881 he told Allingham of the inability of Carlyle and his circle to appreciate Keats, citing an exchange of critical opinion with Mrs. Carlyle in 1845:

> "One day I was talking of Keats and Carlyle's opinion of him, to Mrs. Carlyle; she asked me to lend her something of Keats's, and I brought her Isabella and The Eve of St. Agnes (I was too knowing to try her with Endymion). She wrote me a letter--'almost any young gentleman with a sweet tooth might be expected to write such things. Isabella might have been written by a seamstress who had eaten something too rich for supper and slept upon her back.' Do you think (B. said) I cared about this more than for the barking of a little dog?"[73]

He would not have tried Mrs. Carlyle with Endymion for the same reason that he would not have tried her with any of Keats's odes. They were poems on a higher, purer level, to be appreciated only by those who could achieve rapport with the poet, and Browning felt that Mrs. Carlyle was incapable

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[73]Allingham, op. cit., p. 310.

of rising to that height. His choice of Isabella and The Eve of St. Agnes shows that while he recognized their beauty, he did not rank them with the subjective poetry.

Browning's criticism of Wordsworth takes the opposite approach. A few years before Browning's death when he was asked to draw up a list of those poems by Wordsworth which he considered "most truly great and most likely to endure," he limited his list almost exclusively to the dramatic and narrative poems, not mentioning either "Tintern Abbey" or the "Ode on Intimations of Immortality." The explanation lies partially in his having known Wordsworth as an old man and having become perhaps too disillusioned with his coldness and growing conservatism to be able to appreciate fully his subjective utterances.

"The Lost Leader," published in 1845, shows some of the disillusionment of the younger poet with the older's seeming apostasy. Browning was following the lead of Shelley, Leigh Hunt and others who deplored the change in Wordsworth from the revolutionary youth, afire with idealism, to the Tory, receiving a government pension and complacently accepting the status quo:

> Just for a handful of silver he left us,
> Just for a riband to stick in his coat--
> Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
> Lost all the others she lets us devote.
> . . . .
> Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us,
> Burns, Shelley, were with us,--they watch from
> their graves!

He alone breaks from the van and the freemen,
--He alone sinks to the rear and the slaves![74]

Although Wordsworth's name is not mentioned in these lines, few failed to identify the Lost Leader.

At approximately the same time, Browning was filling his letters to Miss Barrett with scornful comments on the Laureate. His appearance at court had given rise to stories about his having borrowed for the occasion clothes and a wig that were too large for him. Miss Barrett wrote of his borrowing "Mr. Rogers' bagwig and the rest, and David Wilkie's sword," and reported "also that the Laureate, so equipped, fell down upon both knees in the superfluity of etiquette, and had to be picked up by two lords-in-waiting." She was inclined to think the stories exaggerated, however, and ended by paying tribute to the venerable old man.[75] Browning, on the other hand, made the most of the opportunity to ridicule the Laureate, observing that Wordsworth's wardrobe was furnished by Mr. Rogers "to the manifest advantage of the Laureate's pocket, but more problematic improvement of his person, when one thinks on the astounding difference of 'build' in the two Poets. . . ,"[76] and again:

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[74]Complete Works, p. 164.

[75]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 87.

[76]Ibid., I, 85-86.

> Wordsworth decides he had better go to court--then he must buy or borrow a court-dress. He goes because of the poetry in him. What irrationality in the bag and sword--in the grey duffil gown yonder, he wrote--half through the exceeding ease and roominess of it--'The Excursion'; how proper he should go in it, therefore. . beside it will wring his heartstrings to pay down the four pounds, ten and sixpence: good, Mr. Wordsworth! There's no compulsion; go back to the lakes and be entirely approved by Miss Norwick![77]

Another letter of the same period contains an echo of Shelley's scorn of the older poet:

> Did not Shelley say long ago 'He had no more imagination than a pint-pot'--though in those days he used to walk about France and Flanders like a man? Now, he is 'most comfortable in his worldly affairs' and just this comes of it! He lives the best twenty years of his life after the way of his own heart--and when one presses in to see the result of the rare experiment. . what the one alchemist whom fortune has allowed to get all his coveted materials and set to work at last in earnest with fire and melting-pot--what he produces after all the talk of him and the like of him; why you get pulvis et cinis--a man at the mercy of the tongs and shovel![78]

This tirade was brought on by Harriet Martineau's description of Wordsworth's daily life and her attributing the glory of his poetry to the peace and innocence of his surroundings. Browning declared himself "very glad to hear so much good of a very good person and very well told," but continued:

> She plainly sees the proper use and advantage of a country-life; and that knowledge gets to seem a high

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[77] Ibid., II, 47.

[78] Ibid., I, 476.

> point of attainment doubtless by the side of the Wordsworth she speaks of--for mine he shall not be as long as I am able! Was ever such a 'great' poet before? Put one trait with the other--the theory of rural innocence--alternation of 'vulgar trifles' with dissertating with style of "the utmost grandeur that even you can conceive" (speak for yourself, Miss M.!) --and that amiable transition from two o'clock's grief at the death of one's brother to three o'clock's happiness in the 'extraordinary mesmeric discourse' of one's friend. All this, and the rest of the serene and happy inspired daily life which a piece of 'unpunctuality' can ruin, and to which the guardian 'angel' brings as crowning qualification the knack of poking the fire adroitly--of this--what can one say but that--no, best hold one's tongue and read the 'Lyrical Ballads' with finger in ear.[79]

That age made Browning more tolerant of Wordsworth can be seen in a letter written in 1875 in reply to a question regarding the identity of the Lost Leader. "I did," he explained, "in my hasty youth presume to use the great and venerable personality of Wordsworth as a sort of painter's model." But, he added, Wordsworth served only to suggest some of the details. Had the poem been intended as an accurate picture, he would not have mentioned "handfuls of silver and bits of ribbon," for, Browning declared:

> These never influenced the change of politics in the great poet; whose defection, nevertheless, accompanied as it was by a regular face-about of his special party, was to my juvenile apprehension, and even mature consideration, an event to deplore.

Without denying that Wordsworth was his original, he nevertheless wanted it understood that the picture of the Lost

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[79]Ibid., I, 476.

Leader was not designed as an exact likeness of "such a moral and intellectual superiority."[80]

In the light of his selection of his favorite Wordsworth poems, however, one cannot but wonder if his exclusion of some of the subjective, lyrical poems highly valued by posterity was not due to his attempt to dissociate the man from the poems and his conviction that "pure white light" derives only from a pure source. His list includes only four poems that can be labeled subjective: "Rob Roy's Grave," an early poem in which Wordsworth the liberal speaks; "A Jewish Family," which contains a reference to Raphael and a tribute to a people Browning admired; "Dion," a philosophic poem; and "The Eclipse," which expresses faith in "Heaven's unfailing love and all-controlling power."

The others are dramatic or narrative, dealing with unsophisticated people in a simple, straightforward manner: "The Reverie of Poor Susan," "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman," "Goody Blake and Harry Gil," "The Danish Boy," "The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale," "The Power of Music," and "Star-gazers." "The Reverie of Poor Susan," "The Complaint," and "The Danish Boy" are effective in their simplicity and characterization, but there is little in the

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[80]Hood, op. cit., pp. 166-67.

others to justify special recognition. Perhaps it was the subject matter of "The Power of Music" and "Goody Blake and Harry Gil" that attracted Browning. Minchin suggests that the appeal of the latter was probably its very oddity, "for it is as bizarre as some of his own conceptions."[81]

The omissions in the list are noticeable. Browning left out not only "Tintern Abbey" and "The Intimations Ode," but also "Michael," long recognized as one of the most beautiful narrative poems in the language. Yet in all fairness to Browning, it must be made clear that he left the door open for these additions. In his letter to Professor Knight, who had asked him to draw up the list, he admitted that he went wholly upon his "individual likings and distastes," and that he hesitated to classify the poems as even good and less good "because in my heart I feel I should do it almost chronologically--so immeasurable superior seem the 'first sprightly runnings.'" He added that he had marked certain of the early poems not included in Knight's list because he could never "be tired of loving them." But as for many of the poems, he could "never do more than try to like them."[82]

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[81]H. C. Minchin, "Browning and Wordsworth," Fortnightly Review, XCVII (May, 1912), 97.

[82]Mrs. Sutherland Orr, The Life and Letters of Robert Browning (New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1892), II, 516.

His opinion that Wordsworth's best poetry had been produced in his first thirty-five years is the one generally held. Arnold, years before, had declared that all of Wordsworth's first-rate work was written between 1798 and 1808. And a modern critic, in his introduction to an anthology of Wordsworth's poems, states: "The Wordsworth who really mattered had been only alive for brief intervals during the last forty years of his life."[83] No one, however, has expressed the idea more happily than Browning. Remarking that he treasured as precious every poem written during this period, he continued:

> After these the solution grows weaker, the crystals gleam more rarely, and the assiduous stirring-up of the mixture is too apparent and obtrusive. To the end the crystals are to be come at; but my own experience resembles that of the old man in the admirable Resolution and Independence:--
>
> > "Once I could meet with them on every side,
> > But they have dwindled long by slow decay--
> > Yet still I persevere and find them where I may."
>
> that is, in the poet's whole work, which I should leave to operate in the world as it may, each recipient being his own selector.[84]

It is doubtful that Browning would have agreed with Arnold in ranking Wordsworth after Shakespeare and Milton in the list of English poets, but the mature Browning did

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[83]Laurence Housman (ed.), A Wordsworth Anthology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 2.

[84]Quoted by Minchin, op. cit., p. 817.

find in the youthful Wordsworth some of the qualities that he valued most highly: originality of subject matter and diction, inspiration, and moral purpose. Had he never known Wordsworth the man, or been influenced by Byron and Shelley, he might have been in full agreement with Arnold.

His personal acquaintance with Landor, on the other hand, had a very different effect. Whereas Browning might have remained doubtful of Wordsworth's place in literary history, he never wavered in his belief that Landor was "one of the greatest geniuses England ever produced!"[85] And this in spite of Landor's failure to measure up, in most respects, to Browning's theories about the ideal poet. In the first place, Landor was a classicist, writing in a style so close to perfection that he has been accused of coldness. Sidney Colvin, one of Landor's editors, says:

> Landor wrote in verse abundantly and well, but hardly with the full instinct of the born poet. His verse has many fine qualities, now of stateliness and weight, now of grace, clearness, and crispness, and always of sobriety and vigour; but it lacks the perfection of spontaneous charm, it even lacks something of the born poet's certainty of ear.[86]

Browning recognized Landor's paganism, was often unable to condone his conduct, felt that he had wasted his

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[85]McAleer, op. cit., p. 129.

[86]Sidney Colvin (ed.), Selections from the Writings of Walter Savage Landor (London: Macmillan and Company, 1882), p. xvi.

powers, and deplored his frequent intolerance of his fellowman. At the time of Landor's death, Browning wrote to Julia Wedgwood:

> Poor old Landor! and so he has gone to that land in which he had not much interest! There is something grand in that carelessness for one's own experiences, in any form, but the Pagan nature perplexes one. I hope after his purgatory he will be admitted to the asphodel meadows, with Pericles and his other friends, to whom I shd think he had afforded much entertainment of getting at our poor utterances. It must be a strange sort of interest to see a virtual contemporary having lost his way on the stream of Time, and committed the anachronism of coming into the world 2,000 years too late, and I shd think his friends would give him a hearty welcome after his long wandering.[87]

To another friend he wrote that there was no denying that Landor "wasted the finest powers and abused the happiest position in the world," but, he added, "I love his memory, poor dear grand misguided good and foolish man."[88] And to Isa Blagden, regarding all that he had done for Landor in his last years, he commented: "I have been more than rewarded for my poor pains by being of use for five years to the grand old ruin of a genius, such as I don't expect to see again."[89]

In seeking the source of adulation that appears to flout some of Browning's strongest principles, one might be

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[87]Curle, op. cit., p. 80.

[88]Hood, op. cit., p. 108.

[89]McAleer, op. cit., p. 195.

tempted to fix on Landor's public tribute to Browning at a time when the younger poet was feeling most strongly the sting of adverse criticism. But as early as Sordello, Browning had acknowledged the one to whom, his wife said later, he owed more than to any other contemporary:

> That's your kind suffrage, yours, my patron-friend,
> Whose great verse blares intermittent on
> Like your own trumpeter at Marathon,
> You who, Plataea and Salamis being scant,
> Put up with Etna for a stimulant.[90]

In 1846 he dedicated Luria to his patron-friend:

> I dedicate this last attempt for the present
> at dramatic poetry
> To a great dramatic poet;
> "Wishing what I write may be read by his light:"
> If a phrase originally addressed, by not the least
> noteworthy of his contemporaries
> to Shakespeare
> May be applied here, by one whose sole privilege is
> in grateful admiration
> to Walter Savage Landor.[91]

It was the great dramatic poet, one who was concerned with the development of souls, whom Browning revered. Sidney Colvin speaks of Landor as one who "kept his gaze fastened on objects which have an equal value for every age. . . on the great permanent conditions of human life and experience." Landor, says Colvin, "had a soul in love with heroism, in love with freedom, in love with

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[90] Complete Works, p. 101.

[91] Ibid., p. 299.

beauty, and as ardent in indignation as in compassion."[92] Browning seems to have been influenced more by his prose than his poetry, but in speaking of Landor's great genius, he did not distinguish between the two. "He has written passages not exceeded in beauty and subtlety by any literature that I am acquainted with," he declared to Julia Wedgwood.[93] And to Landor's brother Browning wrote that his friend "was gifted with more extraordinary endowments, as well of heart as of head, than ever met in a man before --so far as my experience goes."[94]

The Conversations are mentioned most often in Browning's letters, first in a recommendation to Miss Barrett of the dialogue between Tasso and his sister,[95] then a statement to Isa Blagden regarding his profound gratitude to the author of the Conversations,[96] and later a letter of appreciation to Havelock Ellis for his Selections from the Conversations.[97] There is also the testimony of Thackeray's daughter, who remembered

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[92]Colvin, op. cit., p. xiv.

[93]Curle, op. cit., p. 78.

[94]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 163.

[95]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 260.

[96]McAleer, op. cit., p. 18.

[97]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 329.

Browning's telling the pathetic story of the forlorn and homeless Landor wandering down the street. Browning, her account goes,

> . . . kindled at the remembrance of the old poet; he said his was the most remarkable personality he had ever known; and then, getting up abruptly from the table, he reached down some of Landor's many books from the shelves near the fireplace, declaring he knew no finer reading.
>
> He read us some extracts from Conversations with the Dead, quickly turning over the leaves, seeking, with his short-sighted eyes, for his favourite passages.[98]

One of Landor's narrative poems that Browning noted especially was "Gebir," recommending it to the painter Moscheles as a possible subject for illustration, and in the letter quoting choice passages from the witch's speech. "There is a picturesque account of the ruined City," he told the painter, "whereby is the 'lonely house' in which the operation takes place: but the whole poem is wild and fascinating in the highest degree. . . ."[99] The weirdness of many of Landor's scenes, the psychological depth, and the subtlety and strength of the style, combined with the appeal of the poet's personality, were apparently enough to offset for Browning his paganism, his classicism, and his lack of spontaneity.

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[98]Ritchie, op. cit., pp. 302-3.

[99]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., pp. 373-4.

Browning always showed marked interest in the dramatic and narrative works of his contemporaries. Although he declared that his love for his wife's poetry and that of Tennyson stemmed from their ability to write lyrically and subjectively, he singled out their narrative and dramatic poems for praise. He would make any sacrifice, he wrote Miss Barrett, even foregoing the pleasure of her letters, to keep her producing "more 'Berthas' and 'Caterinas' and 'Geraldines,' more great and beautiful poems of which I shall be--how proud!"[100] His having relatively little to say about Aurora Leigh, the verse novel that brought forth such extravagant praise from others, can be explained by his natural reluctance to indulge in what would have seemed to him at the time almost like self-praise. Furthermore, he did not need to say anything. Ruskin had declared it the "greatest poem in the English language," a statement that Browning proudly quoted to the publisher.[101]

Tennyson, however, he could and did praise generously, especially in his old age, when, according to Mrs. Bronson,

the slightest word of dispraise or faint praise of his

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[100] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 148.

[101] DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 99.

> friend and brother poet roused him to positive anger. His admirers frequently displeased him in this way, thinking to flatter him by some such expression of opinion, and his sharp, quick answer always punished their want of tact and discrimination.[102]

Although his feelings had not always been so strong, he had admired many of Tennyson's poems from the beginning, gradually having his admiration strengthened by the enthusiasm of Miss Barrett, who, two years before she met Browning, was writing to a friend that Tennyson was a "great poet," whereas Browning had only "noble capabilities."[103] Tennyson, she added, "makes me thrill sometimes to the end of my fingers, as only a true poet can."[104] In their correspondence one detects Browning's attempts to be generous--with reservations--to his rival.

Browning was particularly scornful at first of Tennyson's susceptibility to criticism. In sending Domett the 1842 volume of Tennyson's poems, the first he had published since he met with critical rebuff in 1832, Browning called Domett's attention to the volumes containing both new poems and alterations of the old:

> You will see, and groan! The alterations are insane.

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[102]Mrs. Arthur Bronson, "Browning in Venice," Century Magazine, LXIII (January, 1902), 580.

[103]Frederic G. Kenyon (ed.), The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (New York: Macmillan, 1897), I, 150.

[104]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 150.

> Whatever is touched is spoiled. There is some woeful infirmity in the man--he was months buried in correcting the press of the last volume, and in that time began spoiling the new poems (in proof) as hard as he could. "Locksley Hall" is shorn of two or three couplets.

His being so much disturbed about the changes is odd. Later critics who have compared the two versions have been convinced of the superiority of the latter. Perhaps Browning resented changes in poems he had come to know and love in their first form, or perhaps he was indignant because of what he felt to be the undue influence of the critics on the poet. After promising to copy out the old lines for Domett and adding the publisher's remarks about Tennyson's thin skin, Browning continued: "But how good when good he is--that noble 'Locksley Hall,' for instance--and the 'St. Simeon Stylites'--which I think perfect."[105]

His continued love for "Locksley Hall" is expressed in a letter written to Tennyson when "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" was published:

> Once more, and just as ever, you make me grateful for a new poem, strong and fine indeed. I could wish it were a substantively new and independent piece; you cannot write such a wonder as the old 'Locksley Hall' without startling us by any sort of change of its perfection, even the introducing into it of other and novel perfection.[106]

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[105]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, pp. 40-41.

[106]Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson. A Memoir by His Son (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), II, 7.

It was obviously Tennyson's dramatic poems that appealed to Browning. In an early letter he attacked Hunt for not understanding that Tennyson was a dramatic poet:

> Hunt's criticism is neither kind nor just, I take it--he don't understand that most of Tennyson's poems are dramatic--utterances coloured by an imaginary speaker's moods. Thus "the mermaid" is not purely sea-woman enough for him--too coquettish and conscious, and like a girl of our own fancying "the only blessed lie, the watery": whereas it is just that, a girl, looking characteristically at what might be viewed after many another fashion--Ariel's, for instance.[107]

Of The Princess, Tennyson's next dramatic poem, we have only Browning's comment when he heard what it was to be: "The projected book--title, scheme, all of it,--that is astounding."[108]

The Brownings were among the few who disagreed with the critical opinion that Maud, Tennyson's monodrama, had been misnamed (i.e., that omitting one or the other of the vowels from the title would have made for greater accuracy). Perhaps if the other critics could have shared the Brownings' experience of hearing the poem read by its author, they might have appreciated it more. One of Mrs. Browning's letters describes Tennyson's reading "exquisitely in a voice like an organ," until half past two in the morning, stopping every now and then to exclaim,

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[107]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, p. 97.

[108]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 443.

"There's a wonderful touch! That's very tender. How beautiful that is!"[109] And the Brownings were convinced that it was wonderful and tender and beautiful, marred only slightly by "an appearance of labour in the early part."[110] Mrs. Browning thought that the poet had attained more breadth and freedom than usual, "but at the expense of his characteristic delicious music."[111] It is not likely that her husband would have been as conscious of the sacrifice.

The one volume that delighted Browning more than any other was Enoch Arden and Other Poems, published in 1864. In addition to the title poem, there was the "Northern Farmer, Old Style," a character study written in the manner of many of his own. He expressed his appreciation directly to the author:

> Enoch continues the perfect thing I thought at first reading; but the 'Farmer,' taking me quite unawares, astonished me more in this stage of acquaintanceship. How such a poem disproves the statement in that strange mistake of yours, the Flower-apologue.[112]

Here Browning was referring to "The Flower," a short allegorical poem in which the poet tells how he once grew a plant that the public at first regarded as a weed. When it was recognized as a flower, his seed was stolen, and

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[109]Kenyon, Letters of Mrs. Browning, II, 213.

[110]Ibid., II, 209.

[111]Ibid.

consequently, everybody was able to grow flowers like his:

> And some are pretty enough,
> And some are poor indeed;
> And now again the people
> Call it but a weed.

Browning scoffed at the idea:

> "Steal your seed?" as if they want flower-seed in a gum-flower manufactory! One might cabbage out a tolerable rose, by adroit scissor-work on starched calico, after studying in your gardens of Gul, but the seed for the phenomenon itself comes from a place that was never reached from the top of a wall, you may be sure.[113]

The meter of "Boadicea," another poem from the same volume, Browning pronounced "admirable, a paladin's achievement in its way." The achievement he compared to "Roland's pass in the Pyrenees, where he hollowed a rock that had hitherto blocked the road, by one kick of his foot."[114]

In a letter to Julia Wedgwood he intimated that Enoch Arden was not quite so perfect that it could not be improved by some Browningesque touches. Whereas in Tennyson's poem, Enoch returns after his wanderings, just before his death, and reveals his identity to his children and his wife, who is happily remarried, Browning would have preferred that he die quietly without their knowledge:

And then on a mellow autumn evening, the right time

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Ibid.

> for a nutting excursion, should the happy family from the mill sally forth, with a tender reminiscence of old days, toward the well-known brow of the hill, and the hollow where the bushes abound, and there come upon a pauper's funeral, the cart and the four rough planks--and be so set, the party, upon natural speculations.

Browning imagines that the son would decide that this was the disreputable character he had seen skulking about the ale-house, or maybe one of the other village reprobates. The stepfather would take the occasion to impress on the young ones "the evil consequences of self-indulgence," while the wife and mother would

> treat herself to a little retrospective thankfulness--acknowledging that after a little roughness things had come satisfactorily round, and that, worst coming to the worst, dear Enoch's brave death in the storm--was it not better for him, and these beloved ones, than that he should. . . who can tell?. . . have lived on, even for such an end as this! And so they should proceed to their nutting, and Enoch, by a series of jolts, to his harbour in the churchyard--and we, to the considerations appropriate to one more view of this world.[115]

Browning was about to satisfy himself with this ironic ending when he happened to think of one other point on which he disagreed with Tennyson:

> The concluding touch in the poem about the fine funeral,--which Tennyson gave me to understand was a very pregnant one,--strikes me as ambiguous and unlucky--it coincides too exactly with an impudent speech in an old French play, I remember, wherein a gallant thus addresses his mistress, "And, talking of brutebeasts, how does your husband do? Whenever is he intending

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[115]Curle, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

> to die, that fellow? Let him make haste, and I promise him the finest of funerals."[116]

These suggested changes are, of course, in keeping with the differences in approach of the two poets--a difference of which Browning was very much conscious. Tennyson recorded in his diary that after he had read "The Holy Grail" to Browning, the latter called it his "best and highest."[117] By the time Browning wrote to Isa Blagden, however, it was, he confessed to her, "all out of my head already":

> We look at the object of art in poetry so differently! Here is an Idyll about a knight being untrue to his friend and yielding to the temptation of that friend's mistress after having engaged to assist him in his suit. I should judge the conflict in the knight's soul the proper subject to describe: Tennyson thinks he should describe the castle, and the effect of the moon on its towers, and anything but the soul. The monotony, however, you must expect--if the new is to be of a piece with the old.

After discussing his preference for Morris's old poems over the new, he remarked that the same was true with Tennyson's work--"the old 'Galahad' is to me incomparably better than a dozen centuries of 'Grail,' 'Coming of Arthur,' & so on."[118]

Part of Browning's change may be attributed to his

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[116] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

[117] Tennyson, op. cit., II, 59.

[118] McAleer, op. cit., p. 328.

growing impatience with the narrative and dramatic poets who could find nothing of interest in the nineteenth century. As early as 1842 he had complained of Macaulay's having taken the "stalest subjects" for his Lays of Ancient Rome,[119] and he had gradually been building up resentment against the trend toward the past. What would appear to be one exception was Matthew Arnold's Empedocles on Etna, a poetic drama in which Empedocles, a philosopher-poet, finding no solution to his problems, leaps into a crater. Arnold first published the poem in 1852 but later withdrew it because of the suicidal despair in which "everything is to be endured, nothing to be done." It was eventually republished, as Browning explained to Isa Blagden, "with a note saying it is all through my desire it should not be withdrawn: I am really flattered by that."[120]

Perhaps he was not so much flattered as pleased that further circulation of Empedocles would give more point to his own "Cleon," which Browning's critics believe to have been designed as an answer to Empedocles' despair. DeVane observes that in this poem "Browning attempts to correct the suffering of Arnold's Empedocles; in place of a barren intellectual despair he offers faith in a God of love and

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[119]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, pp. 48-49.

[120]McAleer, op. cit., p. 274.

in individual immortality."[121]

In all fairness to Browning, however, it must be said that his admiration for Empedocles was doubtless genuine. He could not have failed to be impressed with a poem that combined the lyric and dramatic qualities typical of many of his own poems, and was, in addition, the study of the development of a soul. That the following passage from Empedocles particularly impressed him is clear from the many references in his letters to Isa Blagden to Arnold's description of "two bright and aged snakes":

> Far, far from here
> The Adriatic breaks in a warm bay
> Among the green Illyrian hills. . .
> And there, they say, two bright and aged snakes,
> Who once were Cadmus and Harmonia,
> Bask in the glens or on the warm seashore,
> In breathless quiet, after all their ills.

In one letter, after deciding that Naples might be "the proper basking-ground for 'bright and aged snakes,'" he mentioned the possibility of returning to Florence:

> Perhaps--by some miracle, I shall do so--and look up at Villa Brichieri as Arnold's Gypsy-Scholar gave one wistful look at 'the long line of festal light in Christ Church Hall,' before he went to sleep.[122]

Browning's letters mention his dining with Arnold, calling

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[121]William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (2nd edition; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 265. See also A. W. Crawford, "Browning's Cleon," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 26 (October, 1927), 485-90.

[122]McAleer, op. cit., p. 330.

for a brief visit, or encountering him for a pleasant chat in the Athenaeum Club. From the tone of these references one can judge that in spite of basic differences in philosophy and ideas about subject matter for poetry, there was mutual affection and respect.

From Homer to Arnold Browning recognized and applauded the search for truth as revealed through character and action. Although he might claim to hold always before him an ideal represented by the purely subjective, the greater attention he gave the varied forms of narrative and dramatic poetry suggests at least a subconscious preference for the type of poetry he himself was attempting. And both his self-criticism and his comments on the dramatic poetry of others argue subtly for the triumph of his critical acumen over his sometimes false humility.

CHAPTER V

"THE GREAT ABSTRACT LIGHT"

In spite of Browning's own practice and his interest in the dramatic poetry of others, he persisted in elevating --in theory, at least--subjective poetry above the objective. In the Essay on Shelley he might refer to "the unrivalled Cenci" and "the magnificent Ode to Naples"; but preferring "to look for the highest attainment, not simply the high," he turned to "the work 'Shelley,'" beside which "the most elaborated productions of ordinary art must arrange themselves as inferior illustrations."[1] Shelley attained greatness when he "was raised above the contemplation of spots and the attempt at effacing them, to the great abstract Light. . . ."[2] That he placed the same high value on subjective poetry at the end of his career can be seen in his choice, from all the possible candidates, of Christopher Smart as the subject for one of the Parleyings. It can also be seen in his insistence that his own poetry was inferior to "the real poetry" of such subjective poets as Shelley and Tennyson.

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[1]The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning (Cambridge edition; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1895), p. 1014.

[2]Ibid., p. 1013.

These views were doubtless influenced in part by the notion, especially popular in the early nineteenth century, that the true poet is merely the instrument through which divine inspiration works. Browning could have found much support in Shelley himself, who, in his Defense of Poetry, minimizes the role played by the poet's consciousness in the process of creation, denying that the truly great poet ever says, "I will compose poetry." Instead, Shelley contends, "The mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to a transitory brightness. . . . "[3] Browning might also have found support in John Stuart Mill, who, in a review published in 1838, speaks of lyric poetry as being "more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other."[4] And he knew Carlyle's opinion that "all deep things are song." In a letter to Miss Barrett, he quoted Carlyle as having said to him, "Did you never try to write a Song? Of all things in the world, that I should be proudest to do."[5]

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[3]James H. Smith and Edd W. Parks (eds.), The Great Critics (New York: W. W. Norton), p. 578.

[4]John Stuart Mill, "Review of The Poems and Prose of Alfred de Vigny," The London and Westminster Review, VII (1938), 42-43, quoted by Alba H. Warren, English Poetic Theory, 1825-1865 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 74.

[5]The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846 (New York: Harpers, 1899), I, 27.

It should be understood, however, that Browning's use of the term subjective involved far more than song or lyric. A friend of his recalled having told Browning that he liked Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, but that the poet's old admirers wished that he would give them some more lyrics; whereupon Browning answered with contempt, "Lyrics, if you want lyrics, I can give you bucketsfull."[6] There is also the testimony of "Touch him ne'er so lightly," in which the poet who breaks into song spontaneously is compared unfavorably with the poet for whom "rock's the song-soil rather, surface hard and bare." The latter blends song with weightier matter to produce what Carlyle had earlier termed "musical thought."

In the Essay on Shelley Browning makes it clear that when he speaks of "the work 'Shelley,'" he means the lyrical expression of the "simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the Absolute." A passage from Paracelsus further illuminates his concept of subjective poetry:

> There is an inmost centre in us all,
> Where truth abides in fulness, and around
> Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
> This perfect, clear perception--which is truth.
> A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
> Blinds it, and makes all error; and, 'to know'
> Rather consists in opening out a way
> Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,

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[6] C. Kegan Paul, Memories (London: Kegan Paul, French, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1899), p. 339.

> Than in effecting entry for a light
> Supposed to be without.[7]

The subjective poet, therefore, instead of seeking truth outside himself, searches within for the "perfect, clear perception--which is truth," and then proudly proclaims it, not in dramatic guise, but in his own voice.

This was what Browning meant by his use of the term "real poetry." Mrs. Bronson recalled his frequent reply to her requests that he read from his own works:

> With a smile he would say, 'No, no; no R. B. to-night. Let us have some real poetry.' And after reading from Shelley or Keats, Coleridge or Tennyson, he would comment, 'This is poetry; don't you know it is?'[8]

One wonders if, in those twilight years, he remembered having confessed to Miss Barrett in 1845: "But I never have begun, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end--'R. B., a poem'"; or if he remembered promising, in spite of his fear of "the pure white light," to try writing subjectively.[9]

He had had much encouragement. Miss Barrett, while staunchly declaring that "there is none so great faculty as the dramatic," nevertheless urged him "to take the other

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[7] Complete Works, p. 444.

[8] Mrs. Arthur Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," Century Magazine, 59 (April, 1900), 929.

[9] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 17.

crown besides" and "speak yourself out of that personality which God made, and with the voice which He turned into such power and sweetness of speech." She probably made the strongest impression on her new friend by arguing that the influence of the subjective poet was stronger:

> And it is not, I believe, by the dramatic medium, that poets teach most impressively. . . it is too difficult for the common reader to analyze, and to discern between the vivid and the earnest. Also he is apt to understand better always, when he sees the lips move.

Remembering, however, Browning's earlier expression of fear, she qualified her final plea: "Now let us have your own voice speaking of yourself--if the voice may not hurt the speaker--which is my fear."[10]

We must conclude from the small number of personal poems that the voice did continue to hurt the speaker. Although he occasionally spoke out as Robert Browning in such admittedly personal poems as "The Guardian Angel" and "One Word More," in the majority he chose to remain aloof--a choice that caused Julia Wedgwood to cry out in protest:

> You have a photographic impartiality of attention that I cannot understand--you lead us through your picture gallery and your stable yard at exactly the same pace, which impartiality is, I suppose, the test of dramatic, as distinguished from mere lyric, feeling.

She, like Miss Barrett, wanted him to speak for himself. "I cannot bear," she declared, "to see your thoughts on

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[10] Ibid., II, 180-81.

loan to deck out a sleek pedantic buffoon."[11]

Several years later, in despair over the death of a beloved friend, Browning gave vent to his personal grief and doubts in La Saisiaz. In the Parleyings he again presented his own thoughts under no guise except their own obscurity--although this work is dramatic in form. In the Asolando volume came a bit of autobiography in "Development," and a reaffirmation of faith in "Reverie" and the "Epilogue." It is unlikely, however, that Browning would have thought of any of these as "R. B., a poem."

Although he apparently never overcame his own fear of the "pure white light," he was constantly attracted by the reflections that he recognized in the poetry of others. He early became acquainted with the English lyric poets of the seventeenth century, and, judging from references in his letters, remembered them with pleasure throughout his lifetime. In 1843 he was suggesting a passage from George Herbert's The Temple to preface the chapter on Bulwer Lytton in Horne's The New Spirit of the Age.[12] Two years later, in a letter to Miss Barrett, he was quoting with

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[11]Richard Curle (ed.), Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed in Their Letters (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1937), pp. 157-58.

[12]William C. DeVane and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (eds.), New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 34.

approval from Jonson's "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes."[13] The seventeenth-century poet who made the greatest impact, however, was John Donne. The Sotheby Catalogue lists five different Donne texts in Browning's library, including the edition by Grossart dedicated to Browning because of the poet's "wealth of admiration for Donne."[14] And Edmund Goss comments in his biography of John Donne that "the modern appreciation of Donne seems to begin with Robert Browning."[15]

From testimony provided by Browning's younger friends, it is evident that his appreciation had long been vocal. A letter from Owen Meredith to Browning in 1856 tells of a first meeting with a new acquaintance:

> We happened to have some conversation about Dr. Donne's poems, w^h^ he has been collecting and editing; in the course of w^h^ I mentioned to him that you were the first person that ever drew my attention to the many beauties of Donne. And he has begged me to inquire whether you will allow him to send you a copy of his work in token of his admiration for you and his admiration for Donne.[16]

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[13] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 466.

[14] The Browning Collections (Sotheby Catalogue, 1913), p. 94.

[15] Edmund Gosse, Life and Letters of John Donne (London: W. Heinemann, 1899), II, 353.

[16] Aurelia B. Harlan and J. Lee Harlan, Jr. (eds.), Letters of Owen Meredith to Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 1936), p. 144.

William Michael Rossetti's diary contains this entry for January 7, 1869: "Browning and others came to Euston Square. Browning speaks with great enthusiasm of a poem by Donne named Metempsychosis."[17]

At a time when few of his contemporaries were impressed with Donne's power, Browning had set "Go and Catch a Falling Star" to music.[18] He also recalled being, during the same period, "a little light-headed one night and fancied that I had to go through a complete version of the Psalms by Donne, Psalm by Psalm!"[19] And his letters to Miss Barrett are filled with allusions that suggest that both poets were thoroughly familiar with Donne. The first one, a quotation from Donne's letter "To the Countesse of Bedford," is used in connection with Carlyle's statement that he would some day in spite of his nature "burst into a song." Carlyle, not mechanically musical, Browning explained, held that "the music is the poetry. . . and should enwrap the thought as Donne says 'an amberdrop enwraps a bee.'"[20] Within a few months Miss Barrett was referring to

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[17]William Michael Rossetti (ed.), Rossetti Papers: 1862 to 1870 (London: Sands and Company, 1903), p. 302.

[18]W. H. Griffin and H. C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), p. 47.

[19]Curle, op. cit., p. 86.

[20]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 27.

"your Donne." Tennyson had a distaste for London, she reported, "'hating it perfectly' like your Donne"; and again: "Did you ever hear that I was one of

> 'those schismatiques
> of Amsterdam'

whom your Dr. Donne would have put into the dykes?"[21]

A year after the beginning of their correspondence Browning was tabulating the number of visits and letters: "And of letters, this makes my 104th and, like Donne's Bride,

> . . . I take
> My Jewels from their boxes; call
> My Diamonds, Pearls, and Emeralds,
> and make
> Myself a constellation of them all!"[22]

Later, from Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," came another allusion woven neatly into the context of the letter: "Why, 'lean and harken after it' as Donne says--"[23] Again: "Yesterday the very seal began with 'Ba' --Now always seal with that seal my letters, dearest. Do you recollect Donne's pretty lines about seals?" There follows a Latin quotation from Donne and then Donne's

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[21] Ibid., I, 115, 145.

[22] Ibid., I, 417. Here Browning is paraphrasing rather than quoting directly from Donne's "An Epithalamion, or Marriage Song on the Lady Elizabeth, and Count Palatine Being Married on St. Valentines Day."

[23] Ibid., I, 196.

own translation.[24]

The letters and poetry of his later years provide evidence that Donne's poetry retained its strong appeal for him, although it was not so constantly on his mind. When writing to Furnivall about his distaste for rereading old reviews, he turned to Donne for the apt phrase: "The unpleasantness is, as Donne phrases it, 'a loud perfume.'"[25] From Donne's "Progresse of the Soule" came Browning's use of the word outstreats in "Ned Bratts," and the lines quoted in The Two Poets of Croisic:

> He's greatest now and to de-struc-ti-on
> Nearest. Attend the solemn word I quote,
> O Paul! There's no pause at per-fec-ti-on
> Thus knolls thy knell the Doctor's bronzed
> throat!
> Greatness a period hath, no sta-ti-on!
> Better and truer verse none ever wrote
> (Despite the antique outstretched a-i-on)
> Than thou, revered and magisterial Donne![26]

Sidney Colvin recalls in his Memoirs Browning's having once come out "with a long, crabbedly fine screed by John Donne." The passage, which Browning declared that he had not called to mind for thirty years, was the one, Colvin continues, "in which Donne, who had written defying

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[24]Ibid., I, 437.

[25]Thurman L. Hood (ed.), Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 205.

[26]Complete Works, p. 869.

and belittling the power of death, now, death having carried off a virtuous and excellent lady of his acquaintance, recants. . . . "[27] The strong, almost grotesque imagery calls to mind the passages from Death's Jest-Book that Browning admired:

> Death I recant, and say, unsaid by mee
> What ere hath slip'd, that might diminish thee.
> Spirituall treason, atheisme, 'tis, to say,
> That any can thy Summons disobey.
> Th' earths face is but thy Table; there are set
> Plants, cattell, men, dishes for death to eate.
> In a rude hunger now he millions drawes
> Into his bloody, or plaguy, or sterv'd jawes.
> Now hee will seeme to spare, and doth more wast,
> Eating the best first, well preserv'd to last.
> Now wantonly he spoiles, and eates us not,
> But breakes off friends, and lets us peecemeale rot.

The intellectual quality of Donne's poetry, the combination of roughness and tenderness and ugliness and beauty, the use of irony, the experiments in metrics--all suggest the close affinity that Browning must have felt with the "magisterial Donne," an affinity causally referred to in critical articles since the end of the nineteenth century, but only recently explored with any thoroughness.[28]

Another of Browning's predecessors with whom he felt

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[27]Sidney Colvin, Memoirs and Notes of Persons and Places, 1852-1912 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), p. 82.

[28]See J. E. Duncan, "The Intellectual Kinship of John Donne and Robert Browning," Studies in Philology, L (January, 1953), 81-100.

an affinity was Christopher Smart, whose "Song to David" represented so perfectly for him poetic inspiration at its height that he elevated Smart beyond the position usually accorded him in English poetry. Smart consequently became the poet chosen for the "Parleying" in which Browning expressed his views on contemporary poetry. But he had much earlier shown the influence of Smart. As DeVane has pointed out, Pauline contains a catalogue reminiscent of that in the "Song to David"; Aprile, the poet in Paracelsus, resembles Smart in his delight in spontaneous song; Eglamour, in Sordello, shows a similar influence; and "Saul" owes both its subject matter and the style of the first nine stanzas to the "Song to David."[29]

A letter to Furnivall written in 1887 leaves no doubt as to the place the poem held in Browning's affections. "After fifty years," he wrote, "I remember the whole pretty well." That he could and did recite it often is clear from the rest of the letter:

> Depend upon it, no goody-goody writer ever conceived or executed the stanzas I could repeat--as I did, with all the effect I supposed would follow--to people of authority enough: Tennyson, the present Bishop of London, and last year to Wendell Holmes, who had asked me innocently at Oxford, "whether I knew the wonderful poem." Weak passages there undoubtedly are, but the

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[29]William C. DeVane, Browning's Parleyings, The Autobiography of a Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), pp. 112-13.

> strong ones are decisive as to Smart's power and right of place.[30]

His choice of one of the strongest passages, one may conclude from Colvin's Memoirs, was the dramatic ending. Colvin comments that he particularly remembered "the rich effect with which, though only for my private ear, he recited one evening on a sofa in a corner after a dinner party, the thundering final stanzas."[31] These were the stanzas beginning:

> Glorious the sun in mid career;
> Glorious the assembled fires appear;
> Glorious the comet's train:
> Glorious the trumpet and alarm;
> Glorious the almighty stretched-out arm;
> Glorious the enraptured main,

and ending:

> Glorious--more glorious is the crown
> Of Him that brought salvation down
> By meekness, called thy Son;
> Thou that stupendous truth believed,
> And now the matchless deed's achieved,
> Determined, dared, and done.

Here, in Browning's opinion, was the true creative spirit at work, a striking illustration of "some invisible influence," awakening the mind "to a transitory brightness," or of the escaping of "imprisoned splendour." From the "Parleying with Christopher Smart" we find that what most impressed Browning was Smart's having risen from

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[30]Hood, op. cit., p. 262.

[31]Colvin, op. cit., p. 83.

mediocrity just this once, and having reached this height during an attack of insanity:

> The man was sound
> And sane at starting: all at once the ground
> Gave way beneath his step, a certain smoke
> Curled up and caught him, or perhaps down broke
> A fireball wrapping flesh and spirit both
> In conflagration.[32]

After singing "a Song where flute-breath silvers trumpet-clang"--a song that stationed him between Milton on the one hand and Keats on the other--Smart subsided again to insignificance. How could one account for such a phenomenon except by attributing it to divine inspiration? How else could one who had written only prose before suddenly adjust "real vision to right language"? Never afterward did Smart write

> One line to show that he, who paced the sward,
> Had reached the zenith from his madhouse cell.[33]

But he had produced, for once, "one blaze of truth/ Undeadened by a lie." And for Browning that was enough to immortalize him.

It is surprising that with this enthusiasm for what he seems to have interpreted as a mystical experience Browning would not have exhibited more interest in Blake, with whose lyrical records of his ecstatic moments Browning

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[32] Complete Works, p. 959.

[33] Ibid., p. 960.

surely must have been familiar. His one reference to Blake indicates sympathetic understanding and approval, but it reveals little else. In a letter about Haydon, the painter, he commented on Haydon's leaving the "solid siren's isle amid the sea" (representing the serenity he found in his art) to "put out to sea again"; although, Browning added, "Even a smaller strip of land was enough to maintain Blake, for one instance, in power and glory through the poor, fleeting 'sixty years.'"[34]

There are also disappointingly few comments on Burns, whose spontaneity, sincerity, and pure lyricism must surely have delighted Browning, as they delighted his friend Carlyle. On at least one occasion when Browning dined with the Carlyles, he met Burns' son, but Browning's record of the evening is merely factual: ". . . there was a son of Burns' there, Major Burns whom Macready knows--he sung 'Of all the airts'--'John Anderson'--and another song of his father's."[35] Some indication of his early esteem for Burns, however, appears in his linking of Burns with Shelley on the side of the liberals in "The Lost Leader," and in a reference in a letter to the large number of people whom Burns "did, and does. . . make happier and

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[34]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 317.

[35]Hood, op. cit., p. 7.

wiser."[36] In 1877, he softened his refusal of an invitation to a Burns celebration by declaring, "How much I sympathize and admire the popular feeling of which you give ample evidence, it is unnecessary to say."[37] Again, in reply to a correspondent who had suggested that Browning "must needs love Burns," he indicated that the Scottish blood in his own veins provided a common ground.[38] And the year of his death, he answered a request for his autograph to be inscribed in an edition of Burns' poetry by protesting:

> You do me far too great an honour by supposing that the addition of my signature to a copy of the works of Burns will be of a moment's interest as prefacing the glory and beauty which follow.[39]

Smart, Blake, Burns--all three Browning revered for "the glory and beauty" of their poetry, but it was Keats and Shelley to whom he paid the greatest homage. He had discovered both poets, he said, "some time before 1830 (or even earlier)"[40] when he was at an impressionable age. Although Shelley was to exert the greater influence on his

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[36] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 477.

[37] DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 236.

[38] Ibid., p. 341.

[39] Ibid., p. 373.

[40] Hood, op. cit., p. 246.

critical comment, Mrs. Orr recalled that the two poets shared the honor of representing for him, even in his last years, the heights to which poetry could rise:

> Their utterance was, to such a spirit as his, the last, as in a certain word the first, word of what poetry can say; and no one who has ever heard him read the 'Ode to a Nightingale,' and repeat in the same subdued tones, as if continuing his own thoughts, some line from 'Epipsychidion,' can doubt that they retained a lasting and almost equal place in the poet's heart.[41]

On several occasions Browning spoke regretfully of the criticism of Keats which he thought stopped the sale of his books and brought about the premature death of the poet. Regarding the effects of such criticism, he remarked in a letter to Julia Wedgwood: "At least six years after his death, I sent to his publisher and got a copy of each first edition--no second having been called for even then."[42] This one statement tells its own story of the youthful enthusiasm that led Browning to purchase all of Keats's poetry after having read the one volume that his mother bought as a birthday gift for him.

Browning's comments on Keats are mainly casual, furnishing evidence of his admiration, but containing no real criticism. There is a record of one occasion,

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[41]Mrs. Sutherland Orr, The Life and Letters of Robert Browning (New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1892), I, 57.

[42]Curle, op. cit., p. 114.

however, on which Browning expressed a high opinion of Keats's "extraordinary powers of imagination and of the beauty of his diction."[43] In "One Word More," there is the line "D mb to Homer, dumb to Keats--him, even!" that gives his opinion of Keats's perceptive powers. Similarly, the "Parleying with Christopher Smart," in which Keats and Milton figure as "the superhuman poet pair," provides some idea of the rank Browning assigned to Keats. In "Popularity," Browning comments on his own early recognition of Keats's genius:

> Stand still, true poet that you are!
> I know you; let me try and draw you.
> Some night you'll fail us: when afar
> You rise, remember one man saw you,
> Knew You, and named a star![44]

Whereas Browning early placed Keats on a pedestal and continued to admire from a distance a genius too unlike his own to encourage a feeling of intimacy, Shelley became from the beginning a very real presence--god, teacher, and companion. Frederick A. Pottle, who succeeded in identifying Browning's first copy of Shelley, writes:

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[43]Quoted by Griffin and Minchin, op. cit., pp. 262-63.

[44]Complete Works, p. 195. It might be pointed out here that although this poem has been interpreted generally as a tribute to Keats, a recent critic argues that the "true poet" is not Keats, but Mrs. Browning. See Henry C. Duffin, Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1956), p. 255.

> One needs to have seen the little book of Miscellaneous Poems to realize 'the impression made on a boy by this first specimen of Shelley's poetry.'. . . They the pages are all scrawled over with feverish markings indicative of almost fierce approval. Browning evidently preferred above all The Indian Serenade, To Night, Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples, the Hymn of Apollo, and the Hymn of Pan, but nearly every poem in the volume bears a tangle of marks opposite it.[45]

Even a casual reading of Browning's early poetry is enough to convince one that Shelley was his chief source of inspiration. Browning's friend, Joseph Arnould, wrote to Domett that Pauline had been published three years before Paracelsus "when Shelley was his God."[46] Pauline records the sensations Browning felt on discovering in Shelley's poetry "a key to a new world":

> And my choice fell
> Not so much on a system as a man--
> On one, whom praise of mine shall not offend,
> Who was as calm as beauty, being such
> Unto mankind as thou to me, Pauline,--
> Believing in them and devoting all
> His soul's strength to their winning back to peace:
> Who sent forth hopes and longings for their sake,
> Clothed in all passion's melodies.[47]

Although Browning, with the help of John Stuart Mill's criticism, concluded that he should abandon subjective

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[45]Frederick A. Pottle, Shelley and Browning. A Myth and Some Facts (Chicago: The Pembroke Press, 1923), p. 27.

[46]Frederic G. Kenyon (ed.), Robert Browning and Alfred Domett (London: Smith, Elder, and Company, 1906), p. 141.

[47]Complete Works, p. 6.

poetry and make a conscious effort to keep the spirit of Shelley, or the "Sun-treader," from hovering over his poetry, the Shelley influence prevails in Paracelsus and Sordello. "Memorabilia," written thirty years after his first reading of Miscellaneous Poems, contains his own testimony of the awe which Shelley continued to inspire in him:

> Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
> And did he stop and speak to you,
> And did you speak to him again?
> How strange it seems, and new![48]

To Browning the mere seeing and speaking to Shelley was a memorable event which stood apart as a "hand's breadth" of a moor which shone alone "'mid the blank miles round about" because there he had once found an eagle-feather.

The most effective tribute and the most valuable service which Browning rendered Shelley was, of course, the essay written in his defense at a time when he was sorely in need of a defender. Thirty years after his death, Shelley's moral and political radicalism was still feared and ridiculed by the conservative critics. Malicious gossip about his domestic life spread, and rumors which would convict him of immorality were rife. Such critics as Carlyle, Kingsley, and Morris were antagonistic; and many who were not openly antagonistic shared Arnold's view

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[48] Ibid., p. 195.

that Shelley was simply a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain." In the face of such opinions, Browning had the courage to declare:

> Meantime, as I call Shelley a moral man, because he was true, simple-hearted, and brave, and because what he acted corresponded to what he knew, so I call him a man of religious mind, because every audacious negative cast up by him against the Divine, was interpenetrated with a mood of reverence and adoration,--and because I find him everywhere taking for granted some of the capital dogmas of Christianity, while most vehemently denying their historical basement.[49]

It was necessary to Browning that Shelley be a moral man, since the greatest poetry issues from a seer who produces not so much a work as an effluence--an effluence which is "indeed the very radiance and aroma of his own personality." Instead of painting pictures and hanging them on the walls, he "rather carries them on the retina of his own eyes." His study is himself, and he appeals through himself to the absolute Divine mind, selecting "that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart," and leaving "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."[50]

Shelley was, to Browning, a great poet because he

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[49] Ibid., p. 1013.

[50] Ibid., p. 1009.

had successfully opened out a way through which imprisoned splendor had escaped. Mrs. Shelley's notes to her husband's poetry emphasize his "genuine and unforced inspiration," his "taking more delight in the abstract and the ideal than in the special and tangible." She remarks that although he was urged to write in the more popular dramatic form, "the bent of his mind went the other way."[51] In his purely imaginative poems, she comments, there is "a clinging to the subtler inner spirit, rather than to the outward from--a curious and metaphysical anatomy of human passions and perception."[52] This suggests the kind of inspiration that, for Browning, raised Shelley to eminence. Shelley he believed to be in communion with the Infinite. His soul, "already arrived at the higher state of development," was "still aspirant to elevate and extend itself in conformity with its still-improving perceptions of, no longer the eventual Human, but the actual Divine."[53]

In Shelley Browning found rare powers of insight combined with the gift of expression:

a diction more adequate to the task in its natural and

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[51]Mrs. Mary Shelley, "Notes on The Cenci," in The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (Modern Library Edition; New York: Random House, n.d.), p. 366.

[52]Ibid., p. iv.

[53]Complete Works, p. 1011.

> acquired richness, its material color and spiritual transparency,--the whole being moved by and suffused with a music at once of the soul and the sense, expressive both of an external might of sincere passion and an internal fitness and consonancy,--than can be attributed to any other writer whose record is among us.[54]

In short, the Romantic poet combined moral purpose, inspiration, technical perfection, and music.

Browning wrote the essay, however, several years before he knew all the facts about Shelley's life, although not before he had heard the rumors. In the essay he speaks of "certain charges against his private character and life, which, if substantiated to their whole breadth, would materially disturb. . . our reception and enjoyment of his work." He could not ignore the charges that had already been substantiated, but he attempted to minimize their seriousness. It is necessary in judging the subjective poet, he states in the essay, to consider the poet's life before determining "some of the nicer questions concerning his poetry." A study of his biography enables one to learn "whether his spirit invariably saw and spoke from the last height to which it had attained." He reminds the reader that before passing judgment on Shelley, he should keep in mind that the "Remains" were produced within a ten-year-period, "and at a season of life when other men of at all

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[54] Ibid., p. 1011.

comparable genius have hardly done more than prepare the eye for future sight and the tongue for speech." He was inclined to overlook Shelley's youthful mistakes:

> Nor will men persist in confounding, any more than God confounds, with genuine infidelity and an atheism of the heart, those passionate, impatient struggles of a boy towards a distant truth and love, made in the dark, and ended by one sweep of the natural seas before the full moral sunrise could shine out on him. Crude convictions of boyhood, conveyed in imperfect and inapt forms of speech,--for such things all boys have been pardoned. There are growing pains, accompanied by temporary distortion, of the soul also.[55]

And having gone through a period of atheism himself, Browning could say confidently: "Had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians." He saw in Shelley's "instinct for helping the weaker side," his sympathy with the oppressed, and his very "hate of hate" the seeds which would have developed ultimately into a Christian character.

Shelley's instinct for helping the weaker side inspired admiration in Browning although he realized that the instinct was developed in him to an extraordinary degree at a time when his "general intellectual powers" were "immature or deficient." On reading Browning's apology for Shelley's mistakes, one is reminded of Carlyle's leniency with Burns because he was, above all else, sincere.

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[55] Ibid.

"Whatever Shelley was," Browning declares,

> he was with an admirable sincerity. It was not always the truth he thought and spoke; but in the purity of truth he spoke and thought always. Everywhere is apparent his belief in the existence of Good, to which Evil is an accident; his faithful holding by what he assumed to be the former, going everywhere in company with the tenderest pity for those acting or suffering on the opposite hypothesis. For he was tender and sincere.[56]

The very fervor with which Browning is defending Shelley here, however, suggests his discomfort in the face of the mounting accumulation of unpleasant facts about Shelley's personal life. Although at the time he wrote the essay he was aware of some of them, his love of the poetry enabled him to discount them. But within ten years he was on the verge of a complete reversal. "What you write about Shelley's servant is very interesting," he told Isa Blagden in 1862. "I am sadly unsettled in my feelings about Shelley, or rather confirmed in my secret apprehensions, by the recent books."[57] Not only the new biographies but his having seen some letters proving that Shelley had deserted his first wife served to bring about complete disillusionment. In 1870 he was writing to Miss Blagden out of the wisdom of a gradually acquired perspective:

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[56] Ibid., p. 1012.

[57] Edward C. McAleer, Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 137.

> The fact is, contemporaries see but little and amiss: wait thirty years, and examine your old idols and abominations,--they will have hardly kept their original place in your love or hate. I have just been reading Shelley's life, as Rossetti tells it,--and when I think of how utterly different was the fancy I had of him forty years ago from the facts as they front one today, I can only avoid despising myself by remembering that I judged in pure ignorance and according to the testimony of untruthful friends.[58]

At this stage it looked as if the exclusive compartment reserved in Browning's mind for great poets could not be expanded to include Shelley. The facts seemed to warrant a simple and obvious conclusion: Shelley was immoral; great poetry issues only from a moral source; therefore Shelley was not a great poet. Browning must have been at least vaguely aware of some weakness of judgment, but instead of trying to readjust his thinking, he began to make statements that affected his friends just as they affect the modern reader. "The longer I know B. (great and lovable as I always hold him)," exclaimed Allingham in bewilderment, "the less do I know how much weight to give to his utterances." This comment was provoked by a conversation with Carlyle, in which the latter had claimed Browning as his ally in the disparagement of Shelley. Allingham, used to Carlyle's vehement denunciation of Shelley's poetry as "all a shriek merely," had tried to avoid discussing the

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[58] Ibid., p. 328.

subject with him, because, he reasoned, "Carlyle knows perfectly well that my opinion is not his--that Shelley is a star in my sky. As to Browning, I have with pain heard him in later years speak slightingly of Shelley."[59]

When Browning, four years before his death, wrote to Furnivall to refuse the presidency of the Shelley Society, he expressed doubt as to the Society's serving a useful purpose since every scrap of Shelley's writing and his biography had already been turned up, not much to anybody's advantage. "For myself," he continued,

> I painfully contrast my notions of Shelley the man and Shelley, well, even the poet, with what they were sixty years ago, when I only had his works for a certainty, and took his character on trust.[60]

Yet, with all of these expressions of bitterness, there is enough evidence to indicate continued fascination with Shelley's poetry. In 1887 he wrote to Moscheles, the painter, suggesting Shelley's "Witch of Atlas" as a subject for a picture:

> The whole poem abounds in passages of extraordinary beauty: indeed there is one subject,--quite unmeddled with by anybody,--which you might treat capitally: I will read it to you some day, and hear what you think. Such a subject![61]

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[59]William Allingham, A Diary (London: Macmillan and Company, 1907), p. 242.

[60]Hood, op. cit., pp. 242-43.

[61]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 345.

In a letter written in 1877 to Buxton Forman, who had published an edition of Shelley's poetry, he suggested the restoration of certain lines as they had originally been printed--suggestions which reveal his careful study of seemingly insignificant words and phrases. For instance, he preferred, in the "Stanzas at Naples," "the moon's transparent light" to "might." "The notion of light as a veil and transparent is familiar with Shelley," he explained, "and the Italian practice of making words rhyme which have the same sound but a different sense, not infrequent."[62] Again he mentioned that "Similes" was first reprinted by Medwin in the Athenaeum where he read it--to remember it all his life; and he added:

> I am certain you will find, by referring to the Athenaeum, that the second line of the second stanza runs
>
> 'From their bower of deadly yew'
>
> --altered with characteristic blundering by Medwin and Mrs. Shelley into what you retain. Consider the original superiority of the reading, and I think you will insert it someday.[63]

In this same letter Browning offered his only adverse criticism of Shelley's style:

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[62]Hood, op. cit., p. 179.

[63]Ibid., pp. 181-82. The original superiority of "deadly yew" over "deadly hue" was duly recognized by Forman, and the substitution made in his later two-volume edition.

> Another dip alighted on the lines 'Buonna Notte'; they are so un-Italian that I can only suppose Shelley tortured them into accordance with some aid: there are misprints too, as of chi for che: but the metre is altogether impossible.[64]

Browning would naturally have been sensitive to an awkward handling of Italian, but Shelley's superficial knowledge of the language has not escaped notice by others. In the Cambridge edition of his poetry, for instance, "Buonna Notte" is introduced by a quotation from Medwin saying that the poem is interesting as a curiosity but proves that Shelley had not made a profound study of Italian.[65]

Although the mature Browning disapproved of Shelley's morals and could find flaws in his work, he nevertheless in his last years turned often to Shelley, as both Mrs. Orr and Mrs. Bronson testify, for "real" poetry. Mrs. Orr's statement is especially i portant in this connection:

> If Shelley became, and long remained for him, the greatest poet of his age--of almost any age,--it was not because he held him greatest in the poetic art, but because in his case, beyond all others, he believed its exercise to have been prompted by the truest spiritual inspiration.[66]

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[64] Ibid., p. 182.

[65] The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (Cambridge edition; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1901), p. 400.

[66] Orr, op. cit., I, 58.

The romantic element in Browning's nature that responded so fervently to Shelley and Keats responded in a like manner to Byron, whom he had read several years earlier. By 1824, he had already written a volume called Incondita, modeled, according to his own admission, after Byron. Sharp records how, at this period, "the young Robert yearned for wastes of ocean and illimitable sands";[67] and in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, Browning said of those years:

> I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his hair or one of his gloves, I am sure--while Heaven knows that I could not get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey were condensed into the little China bottle yonder, after the Rosicrucian fashion.[68]

La Saisiaz, written more than fifty years after Incondita, contains references to a pilgrimage to Villa Diodati, where he plucked ivy "for Byron's sake," and to "Byron prime in poet's power." In the fifty intervening years, however, his feelings for Byron underwent the same vacillation as did those for Shelley. While he never ceased to find Byron a fascinating personality and to admire his imaginative powers, he could not approve

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[67]William Sharp, The Life of Robert Browning (London: Walter Scott, 1890), p. 27.

[68]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 453.

unreservedly of poetry so void of moral purpose. Allingham's record of a conversation with Browning in 1876 shows how Browning felt about Byron's morals:

> Browning asks me about the Byron article in Fraser, and praises it most warmly. 'Shouldn't mind if my name were at the bottom of it. Only you did not say half a hundredth part as might be said of Byron's baseness and brutality. I might have rated Byron higher intellectually than you have done, in some respects, but what you have said of him morally is mild to what he deserves.[69]

Browning learned of Byron's "baseness and brutality" at an early age. When the publication of Mrs. Stowe's The True Story of Byron's Life was scandalizing most Victorians, he advised Isa Blagden not to "join the cackle of the geese about the incredulity of that story about Byron." He had heard it twenty-five years before "with circumstances, unknown to Mrs. Stowe," which left him with no doubt as to its truth.[70] That Browning would have "almost despised" himself upon finding that he had judged Shelley "in pure ignorance" while he was considerably less affected by the story about Byron is a commentary upon the increasing importance he placed on morals. It also suggests that in spite of his youthful admiration for Byron's swashbuckling air, and his imagination, music, and spontaneity, he did

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[69]Allingham, op. cit., p. 246.

[70]McAleer, op. cit., pp. 174-75.

not accord him a place among the "real" poets. While Byron was for a few years his hero, there is no suggestion of a time when "Byron was his god" in the sense that Shelley was.

Byron's poetry not only lacked the underlying moral purpose; it lacked sincerity, and it lacked faith in mankind. "What Shelley was, he was with admirable sincerity," but Browning failed to find that trait in Byron. In an early letter appears the phrase "attitudinizing a la Byron."[71] Byron's exalting of nature above man, especially in the lines from Childe Harold beginning "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean" was a source of constant annoyance to Browning, not only because of the contempt expressed for man, but because he believed Byron to be insincere. In Fifine at the Fair, he addresses the poet:

> Stay with the flat-fish, thou! We like the upper range
> Where the "gods" live, perchance the daemons also dwell:
> Where operates a Power, which every throw and swell
> Of human heart invites that human soul approach.

And he reminds him that

> . . . the ocean may be blue,
> And rolling and much more, and yet the soul have too,
> Its touch of God's own flame.[72]

When a Spectator critic accused him of calling Byron

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[71] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 77.

[72] Complete Works, p. 718.

a flat-fish, Browning denied it:

> I never said nor wrote a word against or about Byron's poetry or power in my life; but I did say, that if he were in earnest and preferred being with the sea to associating with mankind, he would do well to stay with the sea's population; thereby simply taking him at his word, had it been honest--whereas it was altogether dishonest, seeing that nobody cared so much about the opinions of mankind, and deferred to them, as he who was posturing and pretending to despise them.[73]

Ten years before, Browning had used Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau as a mouthpiece to voice the same opinion. The Prince condemns the foolish who call "life a burden, man a fly or worm or what's most insignificant," and though he does not call him by name, Byron is obviously his example:

> "O littleness of man!" deplores the bard:
> And then, for fear the Powers should punish him,
> "O grandeur of the visible universe
> Our human littleness contrasts withal!
> O sun, O moon, ye mountains and thou sea,
> Thou emblem of immensity, thou this,
> That and the other,--what impertinence
> In man to eat and drink and walk about
> And have his little notions of his own,
> The while some wave sheds foam upon the shore."

First of all, says Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, when the bard makes such a statement, "'tis a lie some three-times thick"; for all the time he is affecting this overpowering feeling for the sea and an indifference to humanity, he is thinking only of the impression he is making on Bond

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[73]Hood, op. cit., p. 157.

Street. In reality, he says to the sea:

> Shall I tell you what you are?
> Just fit to hitch into a stanza, so
> Wake up and set in motion who's asleep
> O' the other side of you in England.[74]

Browning does not underestimate Byron's power to awaken the public, but he intimates that it is romantic youth, not wise old age, that responds. The older man in The Inn Album speaks of his melancholy pupil who had loved in vain--

> Whence blight and blackness, just for all the world
> As Byron used to teach us boys.[75]

In "Dis Aliter Visum," sub-titled "Le Byron de nos Jours," Browning uses Byron, the passionate lover, to point up the irony and cynicism of his story. In La Saisiaz as the older Browning looks for comfort in his bereavement, he is reminded that man needs "something more than nature." Byron had recommended Lake Leman and the Alps as sources of comfort. Nature may provide the boy's needs, Browning protests, but

> . . . the spirit also needs comfort reached
> By no help of lake or mountain, but the texts whence
> Calvin preached.[76]

Domett quotes Browning as having said that as much as he

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[74]Complete Works, p. 686.

[75]Ibid., p. 797.

[76]Ibid., p. 851.

(Browning) admired Byron's poetry, he felt that, as a Christian, he must "protest against the assertion of the Soul's nothingness as compared with the ocean."[77]

It needs to be pointed out here that some of Browning's harshest attacks may be attributed to personal frustration. Alfred Austin, at about the time he began his needling of Browning, published the Vindication of Lord Byron in reply to Mrs. Stowe's biography; and in his critical articles he elevated Byron to a position second only to Shakespeare. Thus the bitterness of Browning's remarks in the letters and poetry of the seventies stemmed at least partially from his irritation with the critic.[78]

It should also be pointed out that he never lost interest in Byron or ceased to quote him. Complaining to Mark Rutherford about the poor choice Matthew Arnold had made in his selection of poems from Byron, Browning commented: "I--at all events--do not so 'select' when I go over his works in memory--where they pretty nearly all

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[77]E. A. Horsman (ed.), The Diary of Alfred Domett, 1872-1885 (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 70.

[78]See William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (2nd edition, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 352; also Allen W. Becker, "Browning on Byron: A Record of Admiration and Protest" (unpublished Master's thesis, The University of Tennessee, 1950), pp. 69-70.

are."[79] Mrs. Bronson illustrated his extraordinary memory by his ability to quote Byron: "If one quoted a line from Byron, who, he said, was the singer of his first enthusiasm, he would continue the quotation, never hesitating for a word."[80] Yet no record remains of his having singled out Byron to read on those occasions that called for "real" poetry. Except for the sentimental attachment and his admiration for Byron's style and imagination, Browning found little satisfaction in him. He was out of harmony with Byron's philosophy. Shelley may have torn at the roots of society, but he never lost his faith in man's perfectibility. Byron's verse was too marked by bitterness and disillusionment to retain its original appeal for the poet who was to write the "Epilogue to Asolando."

Browning's early attitude toward the other Romantic poets is well summarized in the statement that he "could not get up enthusiasm to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey were condensed into the little China bottle yonder. . . ." That he ever changed his mind about Southey is doubtful. There is no evidence of it. That he did change his mind about

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[79]Wilfred H. Stone, "Browning and 'Mark Rutherford,'" Review of English Studies, IV (July, 1953), 255.

[80]Mrs. Arthur Bronson, "Browning in Venice," Century Magazine, LXIII (January, 1902), 573.

Wordsworth, but revered him more for his objective than subjective poetry, has already been pointed out.[81] As to Coleridge, evidence is surprisingly scarce. The casual references in his correspondence with Miss Barrett reveal almost nothing of his attitude toward the poet. A letter dated 1881, in which he was answering a question about Mrs. Browning's use of the term "dulcimer of patience," suggests interest in "Kubla Khan": "I have no doubt the dulcimer was such an instrument as your authorities describe. My own most vivid notion of it must be caught from Coleridge and his 'Abyssinian maid.'"[82] The strongest clue to his feelings, however, is to be found in Mrs. Bronson's testimony that in his last days he would read aloud from "Shelley or Keats, Coleridge or Tennyson."[83] Browning would not have placed Coleridge in that company unless he had discovered in him at least flashes of "the great abstract light."

Among his contemporaries Browning found the presence of the highest type of poetic inspiration in only two. He was among the first to note and applaud the efforts of Elizabeth Barrett and Alfred Tennyson, who were to contend

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[81] Supra, pp. 170-177.

[82] Hood, op. cit., p. 204.

[83] Bronson, "Browning in Asolo," p. 929.

for the crown of Victorian poetry for years before anyone thought of offering it to Browning. So inextricably interwoven with his criticism of these two poets is the story of the development of two of his most significant personal relationships that it is difficult here to separate Browning the critic from Browning the husband and friend. But it must be remembered that it was his response to their poetry that led to the personal relationships.

"I believed in your glorious genius and knew it for a true star from the moment I saw it," he wrote to Miss Barrett a year after their first meeting; "long before I had the blessing of knowing it was MY star, with my fortune and futurity in it."[84] A year before he met her, he suggested to R. H. Horne a passage from Shelley to preface the chapter on Miss Barrett in The New Spirit of the Age:

> I'll sail on the flood of the tempest dark,
> With the calm within, and the light around!
> --And thou, when the gloom is deep and stark,
> Look from thy dull earth, slumber-bound,--
> My moon-like flight thou then may'st mark![85]

It is significant that, even this early, he was associating her with Shelley. There is a strong suggestion in the Essay on Shelley that he was using as his model for the subjective poet not only Shelley, but Mrs. Browning as

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[84]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 270.

[85]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 34.

well. She was, to him, the perfect example of the poet who embodied the things she saw with reference to the supreme Intelligence rather than the "many below." He could say of her, as he said of Shelley, that she preferred to seek the primal elements of humanity in her own soul "as the nearest reflex of that Absolute mind."[86] Unlike the objective poet, she was not forced to depend upon actual life for her poetic inspiration. For this reason he regarded her as the real poet and himself, as he told Isa Blagden, only "the clever person by comparison":

> Remember her limited experience of all kinds, and what she made of it--remember, on the other hand, how my uninterrupted health & strength, & practice with the world have helped me. One such intimate knowledge as I have had with many a person would have taught her,--had she been inclined to learn: though I doubt if she would have dirtied her hands for any scientific purpose.[87]

His insistence on the superiority of her poetry over his own runs like a refrain through their correspondence. In one of the early letters, he thanked her for some favorable criticism of his poetry, but assured her that it was too generous--"for I really believe you to be my superior in many respects, and feel uncomfortable till you see that, too."[88] As the correspondence progressed, he

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[86] Complete Works, p. 1009.

[87] McAleer, op. cit., p. 365.

[88] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 77.

continued to press the point: "I am but a very poor creature compared to you and entitled by my wants to look up to you."[89] Again, on the subject of her superiority, he wrote: "So Shakespeare chose to 'envy this man's art and that man's scope' in the Sonnets.'"[90]

Many years later when a friend expressed a preference for Browning's poetry over his wife's, Browning immediately set about to improve his poor taste:

> You are wrong--quite wrong--she has genius; I am only a painstaking fellow. Can't you imagine a clever sort of angel who plots and plans and tries to build up something--he wants to make you see it as he sees it--shows you one point of view, carries you off to another, hammering into your head the thing he wants you to understand; and whilst this bother is going on God Almighty turns you off a little star--that's the difference between us. The true creative power is hers, not mine.[91]

This conception of the spontaneity with which his wife's poetry was produced dated to the beginning of their acquaintanceship, when he confessed to her that he found no pleasure in the mere act of writing, only in the knowledge of having fulfilled a duty. "But I think you like the operation of writing," he told her, "as I should like that of painting or making music."[92] In her reply, Miss Barrett

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[89] Ibid., I, 79.

[90] Ibid., II, 87.

[91] Quoted by Orr, op. cit., II, 335.

[92] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 41.

completely confirmed his opinion:

> Why, what is to live? Not to eat and drink and breathe,--but to feel the life in you down all the fibers of being, passionately and joyfully. And thus, one lives in composition surely--not always--but when the wheel goes round and the procession is uninterrupted.[93]

In analyzing these two methods of approach to writing, Browning became aware of the difference he was to point out in the Shelley essay between the "effluence" of the seer and the "work" of the fashioner.

As to his more specific reasons for admiring her poetry, Browning was not clear, although he recognized an obligation as a fellow poet to offer constructive criticism. "Since the day last week when I first read your poems," he told her in the first letter,

> I quite laugh to remember how I have been turning and turning again in my mind what I should be able to tell you of their effect upon me, for in the first flush of delight I thought I would this once get out of my habit of purely passive enjoyment, when I do really enjoy, and thoroughly justify my admiration--perhaps even, as a loyal fellow-craftsman should, try and find fault and do you some little good to be proud of hereafter! --but nothing comes of it all--so into me has it gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, not a flower of which but took root and grew.[94]

He was able to give only in a general way the reasons for his enthusiasm. These he summarized as "the fresh, strange

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[93] Ibid., I, 44.

[94] Ibid., I, 1-2.

music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos, and true new brave thought." Later, after promising to point out the faults, he found himself forced to substitute a service which was more in his power: "One thing I can do--pencil, if you like, and annotate, and dissertate upon that I love most and least--I think I can do it, that is."[95]

If Browning's annotations were available, they would furnish valuable information as to the specific qualities that appealed to him. Since they are not, conclusions must be drawn from the few clues in his letters. "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" is usually alluded to as "the poem which brought Robert Browning to her feet." It was perhaps Stanza XLI that was most responsible for the conquest. After a reference to Wordsworth's "solemn-thoughted idyl" and Tennyson's "enchanted reverie," the speaker continues:

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

This being an accurate description of Browning's own conception of his poetry, it is not surprising that the poem in which it was contained should have had a special attraction for him. He also liked the rhythm. He might not have been able to point to one verse, as Poe did, and

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[95] Ibid., I, 10.

declare that "from the entire range of poetical literature there shall not, in a century, be produced a more sonorous, a more vigorous verse";[96] but he was able to say, in all sincerity: "Your music is more various and exquisite than any modern writer's to my ear."[97] In reply, Miss Barrett expressed surprise that he should praise her for her music when Tennyson and Mr. Boyd, her former tutor, had both found her "want of harmony" a serious defect.[98]

Browning's ideas about music, as has been pointed out, were not conventional. Many of his own verses give the impression that he used the word in a very special sense--an impression that is further strengthened by his comment on Miss Barrett's "Duchess," which he thought contained "perfect rhymes, perfectly new, all clashing together as by natural attraction."[99] How to interpret "clashing together as by natural attraction," one can only guess. He might have been referring to her skillful use of internal rhyme, but "clashing" is a queer word to use for

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[96]E. C. Stedman and George E. Woodberry (eds.), The Works of Edgar Allan Poe (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1895), VI, 305. The verse that elicited this praise was "Shining eyes, like antique jewels in Parian statue-stone!"

[97]Letters or R. B. and E. B. B., I, 98.

[98]Ibid., I, 100.

[99]Ibid., I, 244.

such a stanza as

> Oh, the little birds sang east, and the little birds sang west--
> Toll slowly.
> And I read this ancient rhyme, in the churchyard, while the chime
> Slowly tolled for one at rest.

The other poems from the 1844 volumes which Browning singled out for praise were "A Vision of Poets" and "Past and Future." His comment on the former explains the basis for his admiration:

> Let me say how perfect, absolutely perfect, are those three or four pages in the Vision which present the Poets:--a line, a few words and the man there--one twang of the bow, and the arrowhead in the white--Shelley's 'white ideal all statue blind' is perfect--how can I coin words? And dear deaf old Hesiod, and all--are perfect--perfect.[100]

Of "Past and Future" he said simply that it had affected him more than any other poem he had ever read. He was probably influenced by the sincerity and simplicity of the sonnet and the expression of faith that was so characteristic of his own poetry.

Later he chose "Wine of Cyprus" as the poem that had affected him "perhaps on the whole, more profoundly than any others you ever wrote."[101] The personal allusions appealed to him. "There is so much of you in it," he told

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[100] Ibid., I, 147.

[101] Ibid., II, 441.

her.[102] Here again we find him placing a high premium on subjectivity--the poet's boldness in speaking out in her own voice and expressing her own personal emotions, while he could only dream of writing "R. B., a poem." His praise of "Cry of the Children" as "that noble, pathetic 'lay'" which had done much good[103] shows his admiration for her use of contemporary subject matter in a worthy cause.

Marriage brought about the termination of this daily correspondence, and thereby cut off the most fruitful source of Browning's criticism. Except for the general statements about the superiority of his wife's poetry over his own, we know little about his opinions of the poems written after marriage. About publishing the Sonnets from the Portuguese, he is reported to have said: "I dared not reserve to myself the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's."[104] And about a revision of The Seraphim and Other Poems, Mrs. Browning wrote to a friend:

> I have had to rewrite pages upon pages of that volume. Oh, such feeble rhymes, and turns of thought--such a

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[102] Ibid., II, 446.

[103] Ibid., I, 532.

[104] Frederic G. Kenyon (ed.), The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (New York: Macmillan, 1897), I, 317.

dingy mistiness! Even Robert couldn't say a word for much of it.[105]

This last statement, mild though it is, is probably exaggerated, for it is unlikely that Robert ever found any serious fault with his wife's poetry. But before one is tempted to discount all of this as completely personal and subjective, he should remember that Browning was not alone in his opinions. The majority of the Victorians hailed Elizabeth Barrett as one of the greatest poets of the century. After 1844, she had no rival in popularity except Tennyson. At the same time that Browning was announcing to Alfred Domett, who was then in New Zealand, that there had come out "some divine things by Miss Barrett,"[106] Edgar Allan Poe was calling the attention of the readers of the New York Evening Mirror to "her wild and magnificent genius." America's most caustic critic forgot himself long enough to declare her book "one flame," and to name the poet "the greatest, the most glorious of her sex."[107] By 1850 her position in English letters was one which the Athenaeum staff felt entitled her to appointment as laureate to succeed Wordsworth, and many urged the

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[105] Ibid., I, 461.

[106] Kenyon, Browning and Domett, p. 113.

[107] Stedman and Woodberry, op. cit., VI, 297.

appointment. A few years later Ruskin wrote to Mrs. Browning: "I am going to bind your poems in a golden binding, and give them to my class of working men--as the purest and most exalting poetry in our language."[108]

Browning, in short, was voicing contemporary opinion when he elevated her to top rank because of her sincere expression of personal emotion, her strong moral purpose, her concern with contemporary problems, and her efforts against oppression. Had her noble impulses been coupled with a firmer command of her materials and a more infallible artistic sense, she might still occupy the pinnacle upon which Browning and other contemporaries placed her. Only in her sonnets did she transcend the confines of her era. But that she would become known primarily as a poet of an age apparently never occurred to her husband.

The position among the Victorian poets that history might have accorded Mrs. Browning is occupied today by Tennyson; for while his poetry pleased the Victorians, it has qualities that have entitled it to more lasting fame. Browning felt that the two, however, had a great deal in common. He saw in Tennyson's poetry, as in his wife's,

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[108]E. T. Cook, The Life of John Ruskin (London: Allen, 1911), I, 458.

signs of the "fearless fresh living work" which the times called for. Although he confined most of his comments to Tennyson's narrative and dramatic works, he shared his wife's enthusiasm for the music of Tennyson's more subjective poems. She, who admired Tennyson "with the most worshipping part of the multitude,"[109] provides us, through her letters, with information as to Robert's reaction to In Memorian and the lyrics of The Princess. "We have only this moment finished reading 'In Memoriam,'" she wrote from Italy in 1850, "and it was a sort of miracle with us that we got it so soon."[110] We may suppose that her further description of it as "exquisite" and "earnest and true" was concurred in by her husband, who was always ready to grant Tennyson's superiority in subjective poetry. Regarding the "Echo-Song" from The Princess, she remarked that it struck her--"and Robert also (who goes with me throughout), as quite inferior to the other lyrical snatches in the 'Princess.'"[111]

One of Browning's last letters, written to Tennyson on the occasion of the Laureate's eightieth birthday, summarizes what we may gather from other sources to be

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[109] Kenyon, Letters of Mrs. Browning, I, 434.

[110] Ibid., I, 470.

[111] Ibid., I, 434.

Browning's final estimate of Tennyson's contributions to English literature:

> To-morrow is your birthday--indeed a memorable one. Let me say I associate myself with the universal pride of our country in your glory, and its hope that for many and many a year we may have your very self among us--secure that your poetry will be a wonder and delight to all those appointed to come after.[112]

Thus, though Tennyson's spirit might not always have spoken "from the last height to which it had attained," it had done so consistently enough for Browning to place him in the ranks of the real poets, where posterity will doubtless keep him.

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[112]Hood, op. cit., p. 315.

CHAPTER VI

"THE STRANGER'S WELCOME"

The lull in poetic activity that followed the death of Byron in 1824 was partially responsible for the rise to prominence in the Thirties and Forties of such poets as Philip James Bailey, whose Festus went through twelve editions, and Martin Tupper, whose Proverbial Philosophy ultimately reached its fiftieth. Browning, surveying the scene, found the prospects bleak, he wrote to Domett in 1842, except for "the divine things by Miss Barrett" and the promise revealed in Tennyson's volume, published that year: "Here everything goes flatly on except the fierce political reality (as it begins to be). Our poems, etc., are poor child's play." As examples, he chose "Bulwer's sing-songs," which he thought "abominable," and "Mr. Taylor's affected, unreal putting together, called 'Edwin the Fair,'" which was the "flattest of fallen."[1]

Writing five months later, he reported that the only novelty was Macaulay's Lays of Rome, which, he declared, was

> a kind of revenge on that literature which so long plagued ours with Muses and Apollo and Luna and all

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[1]Frederic G. Kenyon (ed.), Robert Browning and Alfred Domett (London: Smith, Elder, and Company, 1906), pp. 41-43.

> that, by taking the stalest subject in it, and as plentifully bestowing on them the commonplaces of our indigenous ballad verse--'Then out spake brave Sir Cocles'--'Go, hark ye, stout Sir Consul'--and a deal more. I have only seen extracts, certainly, but they give me this notion.[2]

Mrs. Browning, who later said that she "could scarcely read them and keep lying down," came nearer voicing contemporary public opinion; and certainly it is unfair to dismiss the Lays without some recognition of their power. In Browning's opinion, however, as in Arnold's, the merit of the poems was hidden under the staleness of subject matter and the commonplaces of ballad verse.

Several months later, when he still saw no promising activity, Browning commented to Domett that everybody was sound asleep except Dickens, who had gone to the other extreme to become "uproarious" and "disgusting." In May, 1843, it was the same story: "What shall I tell you?--that we are dead asleep in literary things, and in great want of a 'rousing word'. . . from New Zealand or any place out of this snoring dormitory."[3]

This "snoring dormitory" was to Browning the scene of many a nightmare. There were, for instance, the popular journalistic productions of William and Mary Howitt. The

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[2]Ibid., p. 48.

[3]Ibid., p. 54.

former, Browning explained to Miss Barrett, was "book-making about Poets, where they were born, how they live, 'what relation their mothers' sons are to the fathers', etc." His wife had contributed to the People's Journal "a pretty, washy, very meritorious Lyric of Life," which Browning quoted and criticized at length in his letter.[4] In 1846 Moxon published Fanny Kemble Butler's A Year of Consolation, containing a record in both prose and poetry of her observations in Italy. Aside from its sincerity, the volume had nothing to distinguish it, but the state of public taste and the popularity of the author combined to give it a fair success. Browning, surprised that "Mrs. Butler could have written anything so mournfully mediocre," wrote to Miss Barrett with his usual frankness:

> With the exception of three or four pieces respectable from their apparent earnestness, all that album writing about 'sprites,' and the lily-bell, and 'wishes'--now to be dead and now alive,--descriptions without colour, songs without tune, why Bennett towers above it![5]

The Bennett to whom Browning referred was William Cox Bennett, a popular song writer whose poems were receiving wide circulation in periodicals. Browning's ranking him above Mrs. Butler placed the poetess in the

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[4]The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846 (New York: Harpers, 1899), II, 124.

[5]Ibid., II, 386-87.

lowest possible bracket. Bennett, however, commanded for years a far larger audience than Browning. His "Tearful Cornet" was widely reprinted, and even more strong in appeal were his "Home Poems," the most popular of which was "Baby's Shoes"--

> O those little, those little blue shoes!
> Those shoes that no little feet use!

In the introduction to his collected poems, published in 1862, Bennett modestly explained the reason for the edition:

> Critics have said that 'Baby May,' 'Baby's Shoes,' and 'The Worn Wedding-ring,' have been reprinted in almost every newspaper and popular periodical of England, America, and our colonies. It has been the pleasant fate of these and my other Home Poems to have gained the affection of their readers, and to have obtained a secure hold on the memories not only of the most cultivated, but of that immeasurably larger class which poetry seldom reaches or moves.[6]

Doubtless Bennett was thinking of Browning as being among "the most cultivated," for Browning had written to him ten years before:

> How good you have been this many a day and year in sending me and mine your poems, with not a few kind words in the fly-leaf of this last volume! . . . Your poems have abundant evidence of the right spirit, and some of the child-pictures go to our very hearts in all their truth and beauty, now that we have a child of our own.[7]

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[6]W. C. Bennett, Poems (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1862), p. viii.

[7]Thurman L. Hood (ed.), Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 35.

Browning's use here of "truth and beauty"--words that he ordinarily handled with great discretion--provides a capital instance of the triumph of friendship over honest criticism.

Considering the depths to which poetry had fallen, it is not surprising that Browning hailed Thomas Hood's "Waterloo Bridge" as "alone in its generation," and "The Haunted House" as having "admirable power."[8] The former, which is reminiscent of Browning's "Apparent Failure" in its speculation as to the causes for a suicide, is outstanding in comparison with most of the popular poetry of the day. He also wrote a cordial letter to John Anster, a professor at the University of Dublin, to thank him for Xeniola, "a very beautiful and melodious volume of Poetry";[9] and another to Lamon Blanchard, the author of Offerings, to commend him for his "noble and musical lines":

> that fine "sun-bronzed, like Triumph on a pedestal," that bridge "dark trees were dying round," that super-delicious "song of the wave," live within me yet, "being things immortal."[10]

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[8]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, p. 113.

[9]William C. DeVane and Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (eds.), New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 24.

[10]Hood, op. cit., p. 6.

It was characteristic of Browning to welcome with eagerness any poetry that showed signs of originality. In describing his attitude toward newcomers, Edmund Gosse remarked that Browning's hastening forward "with both hands full of entertainment" distinguished him from most creative artists, who regarded a stranger "as certainly a bore and probably an enemy"; whereas "to Robert Browning," Gosse declared, "the whole world was full of vague possibilities of friendship."[11] Browning gave a similar reception to newcomers to the literary world, which he looked upon as being full of vague possibilities of great verse. Although he realized that his open-arms policy might later lead to embarrassment or regret, he justified it as the "stranger's welcome--the right of every newcomer who must stand or fall by his behaviour once admitted within the door."[12]

Among those most grateful for the stranger's welcome was Coventry Patmore. "A very interesting young poet has flushed into bloom this season," Browning wrote to Domett in July, 1844. "I send you his soul's child." After expressing disgust over the cool reception Patmore had received, he remarked:

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[11]Edmund Gosse, Robert Browning: Personalia (London: T. F. Unwin, 1891), p. 88.

[12]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 378.

> 'Lilian' could never be other than a great and--for a man of twenty--wonderful success under any circumstances. The imitation of Tennyson is, rather, a choosing Tennyson's 'mode of the lyre,' as who should say, hearing a mode was in favor, 'I can adopt that, too'; but he will make more and meddle less in good time, it is to be hoped. In society, he is all modesty and ingenuousness.[13]

Before Browning wrote again, Christopher North, in a Blackwood's article, had brutally condemned Patmore's verse as "the ultimate terminus of poetic degradation." The sales stopped. Browning was enraged when he learned that the review was a blow aimed at the poet's father, who had been a second in the duel that ended in the death of Scott, editor of the London Magazine:

> I wanted to introduce the son to an influential critic at a party one night, and 'No,' said he, 'because of that bloody-minded father,'--who stood by, silent in his white cravat, and grateful to me for speaking to 'his boy.' Are not these things fit to make an apostle swear?[14]

The Poems of 1844, though faintly reminiscent of Tennyson and Miss Barrett, had enough real distinction and individuality to cause Browning to be concerned with the young poet's future. He followed Patmore's career with interest, giving him encouragement whenever possible; and when The Angel in the House was published, he joined Tennyson, the Rossettis, and countless others in enthusiastic acclaim.

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[13]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, pp. 107-8.

[14]Ibid., p. 112.

Another young poet to whom Browning early extended the stranger's welcome was Ebenezer Jones, whose Studies of Sensation and Event, published in 1843, met with indifference by the majority and received severe censure from most of those who noticed it. Browning, recognizing its merit, wrote to Domett: "A certain Ebenezer Jones vented a wild book--abounding in beauty, tho'--I want to get and send it to you."[15] It was indeed a wild book for that time. Jones, who was only twenty-three, exhibited real, though undeveloped, poetic power in poems ranging in subject matter from the commonplace "Early Spring" to the very sensuous "Whimper of Awakening Passion" and the strange psychological study entitled "A Development of Idiocy." The poems are, for the most part, morbid and painfully subjective--the work of a young man as intensely self-conscious as was the younger Browning. Occasional lapses into prose with jingling rhyme and monotonous verse form detract, but the earnestness of the poet is everywhere evident. Browning was probably impressed with his social consciousness and his honest probing for truth--and by the dedication of the volume to Shelley.

The book having made little impression on the

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[15]D. G. Rossetti, "Ebenezer Jones," Notes and Queries, 5 (February 5, 1870), 154.

English public, Jones was almost forgotten until Dante Gabriel Rossetti, thirty years later, spoke out in his behalf, expressing the hope that these poems, "full of wild, disorderly power," should one day "be disinterred from the heaps of verse deservedly buried." To strengthen his position, Rossetti mentioned having heard, some years before, "the great poet Browning speak in warm terms of the merit of his work."[16] As a result of Rossetti's efforts, Jones' book was republished. The only recorded comment from Browning is in a letter to Edmund Gosse:

> Has your attention been directed to an article of last week's Athenaeum, on a reprint of some of the poems of Ebenezer Jones, in which my name was introduced as that of one who thoroughly "appreciated" the author? That is undoubtedly true: but I never saw nor heard anything of him except his one book,--which was lent to me for a somewhat hurried reading. I remember speaking about it to W. J. Fox,--who told me he knew the writer personally, and shared my opinion in his power.[16]

Occasionally, as with the verses of Richard Hengist Horne, Browning found it necessary to modify his first impressions. Horne, who had collaborated with Miss Barrett on a modernized version of Chaucer, was also the author of The New Spirit of the Age, a book dealing with contemporary writers. His favorable treatment of Browning might have influenced Browning's first remark about him: "He has unmistakable genius, and is a fine, honest, enthusiastic

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[16]Hood, op. cit., p. 184.

chivalrous fellow."[17] His comments on Horne's Ballad Romances, published the next year, show him seeking out the signs of genius:

> I found Horne's book at home, and have had time to see that fresh beautiful things are there--I suppose 'Delora' will stand alone still--but I got pleasantly smothered with that odd shower of wood-spoils at the end, the dwarf story; cup-masses and fern and spotty yellow leaves,--all that, I love heartily--and there is good sailor-speech in the 'Ben Capstan'--though he does knock a man down with a 'crow-bar' instead of a marling spike, or, even a belaying pin! The first take, though good, seems least new and individual, but I must know more.[18]

After citing a favorite line from one of Horne's earlier ballads, he commented on the use of a toad in one of the poems, calling attention to his own "odd liking for 'vermin.'"

When Miss Barrett took a more conservative view, Browning confessed that his criticism had been hasty:

> You are entirely right about those poems of Horne's--I spoke only of the effect of the first glance, and it is a principle with me to begin by welcoming any strangeness, intention of originality in men--the other way of safe copying precedents being so safe. So I began by praising all that was questionable in the form, reserving the ground-work for after consideration.[19]

His first reversal was in regard to the elf story, which he

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[17] Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., I, 64.

[18] Ibid., I, 368.

[19] Ibid., I, 378.

now saw was a "pure mistake" because of its patronizing air. The best fairy stories, he had decided, were written for men and women, and "being true, pleased also children." He next qualified his praise of the sailor language by deciding that it was "as wrongly used in art as real clay and mud would be, if one plastered them in the foreground of a landscape" to attain "so much truth, at all events."[20]

Browning's chief objection to the entire volume was its occasional veering away from truth as he perceived it. Nevertheless, on the following day, in a letter to Horne, he elaborated on the praise contained in the first letter to Miss Barrett.[21] In spite of his adverse criticism, he still believed in Horne's ability. He mentioned in one letter having spent the previous night proving to a friend that "Horne was a poet, and moreover a dramatic one."[22]

Browning was not alone in his opinion of Horne's poetic powers. Orion, an allegory representing man's striving for progress, was, to Poe, "one of the noblest, if not the very noblest, poetical work of the age." And the Westminster Review reported that it was "as classic in its own way as Keats's Endymion, burning with a

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[20]Ibid.

[21]Hood, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

[22]Letters of R. B. and E. B. B., II, 410.

Shakespearean wealth of imagery, full of clear-cut scenes from nature, and idealized with lofty thoughts."[23] Orion, which reaches high points, is, as Browning might have said, "a noble conception"; but the beauty and power are not sustained throughout. The allegory is deeply embedded; and though one may read the poem simply for the story, the verbiage that encases much of it makes for slow reading. Browning must have recognized in Orion an example of the classical story with a modern application; and he doubtless approved the lofty idealism of such passages as the following:

> 'T is always morning somewhere in the world,
> And Eos ever rises, circling
> The varied regions of mankind. No pause
> Of renovation and of freshening rays
> She knows, but evermore her love breathes forth
> Of field and forest, as on human hope,
> Health, beauty, power, thought, action and advance.
> All this Orion witnessed, and rejoiced.[24]

Browning is reported to have said to Buxton Forman many years later:

> Having long been well-acquainted with the principal works of Mr. Horne, I cannot but believe them to be as thoroughly the product of true genius as any of the poetical performances of our time.[25]

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[23]Quoted in R. H. Horne, Orion (London: The Scholartis Press, 1928), p. xxix.

[24]Ibid., p. 95.

[25]Ibid., p. xxxvi.

Many passages in Orion support his convictions, and a number of the ballad romances have a charm that makes regrettable the oblivion into which they have fallen; but Horne was incapable of the sustained performance demanded by posterity.

During the Brownings' self-exile in Italy, their interest in contemporary English writers seemed to increase, rather than diminish. Letters to family and friends carried urgent requests for news from the publishers; Browning made regular visits to libraries to read English publications; and they often encountered British writers who, like themselves, had temporarily adopted Italy as their home. In this group was the son of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, young Robert Lytton, who, under the pseudonym Owen Meredith, was trying to dissociate himself from the name and influence of his famous father. The Brownings, finding him at first unusually personable, were ready to offer him the full benefit of the stranger's welcome. "One can hardly imagine a more interesting and attractive young man," Browning wrote to Forster, "and there is plenty of stuff in him, you will see--or probably, have seen."[26]

It is to the Brownings' credit, however, that they refused to let the personal relationship blind them to the

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[26]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 62.

defects of Lytton's poetry. Both were disappointed in The Abbess. Mrs. Browning wrote to the author, emphasizing the need for more originality:

> What we want in you is a more absorbing life of your own, my dear friend, more individuality, so that you should not remind us of this poet and that poet, when you are, so certainly and thoroughly a poet yourself.[27]

Her husband softened his criticism of the poems with the usual comment: "They abound in beautiful things." But he continued:

> I doubt, however, whether you will produce quite the work I want from you--I who do not want now mere proofs of your being a poet, but the fruit of having long been a poet: or rather, I want it now, and too soon perhaps, instead of waiting patiently.[28]

The Brownings' criticism was essentially that of Lytton's father, who decided that there were two reasons that his son had not achieved what might be expected of him: first, that he had immense imitative and small constructive invention; second and more important, he did not lead the life of a poet, and did not therefore "go through the actual experience of a poet's actual life."[29]

Lytton's The Wanderer, a reflective, romanticized

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[27]Lady Betty Balfour (ed.), Personal and Literary Letters of the Earl of Lytton (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1906), I, 105.

[28]Ibid., I, 79-80.

[29]Ibid., I, 144.

autobiographical record, published in 1857, contained a tribute to Browning, as well as some borrowing in the dramatic monologue technique. The book received good reviews. Mrs. Browning reiterated her belief that Lytton was "a real poet--only too sensual--with too straight a root of thought for such a broad outgrowth of flowers."[30] Her husband, writing to Isa Blagden that he was expecting a copy of the book soon, commented on one of the poems that he had already seen:

> Some extracts from "Cordelia" made my gorge rise, you know why: there was merit otherwise in what I read, music, picturesqueness and felicity, and I wish the whole of it into the cess pool, as Carlyle would say with less reason.[31]

"Cordelia," the insipid lament of a tearful lover, provided a preview of the weak hero whom Browning objected to in Lytton's Lucile, a sentimental verse novel filled with enough trite observations on human nature to assure it at least a corner on Victorian library tables and to give it circulation well into the twentieth century. The author aligned himself on the side of love of country, peace, right action, and the purity of womanhood as embodied in the heroine, who makes the driven snow look grey in

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[30]Edward C. McAleer (ed.), Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 33.

[31]Ibid., p. 36.

comparison:

> . . . born to nurse,
> And to soothe, and to solace, to help and to heal
> The sick world that leans on her. This was Lucile.[32]

A hero worthy of such a woman being beyond the scope of Lytton's imagination, he created one who goes through the emotions of passionate love, jealousy, and indecision until finally,

> More and more of his time Alfred pass'd at the table,
> Play'd high: and lost more than to lose he was able.[33]

After growing "feverish, querulous, absent, perverse," he finally seizes his "yet virgin sword" and loses himself in a worthy cause, but not before delivering a long monologue to Lucile, now a Sister of Charity, in which he reminds her of what might have been.

Browning would have been justified in losing all faith in Lytton's poetic powers, but in a long letter to the poet he began generously enough:

> I think your general power is increased and brought into new channels; there is wit, use of the world; wisdom too, and the old music and pathos; only the general dance of the metre fatigues, perhaps.

Turning then to constructive criticism, he noted that Lytton had detailed the effects too minutely instead of

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[32]Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, Lucile (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), p. 350.

[33]Ibid., pp. 214-15.

"leaving the causes to suggest the effects to the reader." And by "effects," he said, he meant "moral as well as merely material effects." Then he turned to the hero:

> I wish also your men were stronger. Is it in nature to truly say every now and then to a woman, "Had you held out a hand to me then, I should have been saved, whereas, etc. etc."? Did ever man or woman really save so a strong man? It seems to me like the point in cockney horsemanship of pulling your horses up by the curb when they stumble--it being still doubtful to me whether your curb does it, or the brutes' resolution and resource.[34]

Browning urged the younger poet to work for the highest kind of success. "I want you to be really great," he told him, "because it is in you." Browning must have actually believed in Lytton's potential, for his later attitude seems to have stemmed from the disappointment--and even disgust--that he felt toward one who had dissipated his powers. Three years after the publication of Lucile, Lytton sold his publishers a prose work, The Ring of Amasis, for a sum that he needed badly. He submitted it, in proof, to his father, Browning, and two other friends, all of whom advised against publication, but it was too late. Browning wrote to Isa Blagden after it was published:

> I had a letter from Lytton the other day. . . . His novel seems an absolute failure--but he has got the money for it: he said, it might be surprising, but

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[34]Balfour, op. cit., I, 103-4.

> he had really expected the thing to be an advance on all he had done before. I only observed two reviews of it--two contemptuous notices. He should act differently if he wants to get any permanent hold of people worth securing.[35]

The next year he wrote:

> I can't tell you how little I care about Lytton--he is utterly uninteresting to me,--I seem to know all about him. His cleverness surprised me a little, when I saw him,--he can extend <u>that</u> to almost any extent.[36]

Browning was apparently not interested enough to read Lytton's later works, for he wrote to Miss Blagden in 1869:

> No, I have not seen "Orval," nor indeed the last poems (in two Vols.). . . . It looks as if Lytton's luck had turned: I am told there are excellent things in those "Chronicles" or whatever he calls them,--but they make no impression apparently.[37]

An exchange of letters between Browning and Lytton in 1871 seems to have been an attempt to straighten out their relationship, but at best there was only "the glimmer of twilight,/ Never glad confident morning again." Lytton had violated the sacred office of poet.

Among the new authors who sent their poems to the Brownings in Italy were William Allingham and Frederick Locker-Lampson. To Allingham, with whom he was to have

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[35]McAleer, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 168.

[36]<u>Ibid.</u>, pp. 195-6.

[37]<u>Ibid.</u>, p. 317.

cordial relations later, Browning wrote in 1851:

> I can honestly congratulate you on the power, beauty and frankness of many of your productions. Certainly no one of the poets that have come forward within the last few years exhibits so much promise and performance together.[38]

The Irish poet did exhibit great fluency in many of his lighter songs and ballads, but it is unlikely that Browning would have expressed the same opinion to a disinterested person. Allingham's diary contains the record of a discussion of Laurence Bloomfield, his verse novel, in which Browning commended the book "with reservation."

To Locker-Lampson, whose light verse had just been published in 1858 under the title London Lyrics, Browning wrote, voicing an opinion in which most of Locker-Lampson's readers would have doubtless concurred:

> I shall tell you the exact truth in saying that I have been very much pleased (and a little inspired) by your poems--if you succeed so well when professing to attempt comparatively little, I should certainly advise you to try and do something higher--if you then hit, as exactly what you aim at, the effort will have rewarded itself.[39]

Mrs. Browning's letters of the early Fifties reflect the interest of the Browning circle in the "Spasmodics,"

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[38]H. Allingham and E. B. Williams (eds.), Letters to William Allingham (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1911), p. 94.

[39]Quoted by Augustine Birrill, Frederick Locker-Lampson: A Character Sketch (London: Constable, 1920), p. 101.

including Sydney Dobell, Alexander Smith, Philip James Bailey, and J. D. Bigg, who, it has been conjectured, "had names prosy enough" to suggest the Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes, and Nokes of Browning's "Popularity."[40] In 1850 Mrs. Browning asked Miss Mitford if she had read a poem called "'the Roman,' which was highly praised in the 'Athenaeum,' but did not seem to Robert to justify the praise in the passages extracted." It was "written by somebody with certainly a nom de guerre--Sydney Yendys," she continued. "Observe, Yendys is Sydney reversed."[41] As the Brownings probably discovered later, the poet was Sidney Dobell.

Three years later Mrs. Browning was writing to Fanny Haworth about another of the Spasmodics:

> Your Alexander Smith has noble stuff in him. It's undeniable, indeed. It strikes us, however, that he has more imagery than verity, more colour than form. He will learn to be less arbitrary in the use of his figures. . . and attain, as he ripens, more clearness of outline and depth of intention.[42]

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[40] See Jerome Thale, "Browning's 'Popularity' and the Spasmodic Poets," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LIV (July, 1955), 348-54.

[41] Kenyon, Letters of Mrs. Browning, I, 473. Thale (op. cit., p. 353) states: "There is no direct statement by Browning to indicate that he knew Dobell." That Browning did know Dobell is clear from Mrs. Browning's letter if one remembers the pseudonym. There is also an account of a party at the Patmores, at which both Browning and Dobell were present, in Derrick Leon's Ruskin (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), p. 342.

[42] Ibid., II, 120.

Shortly afterwards she pointed out triumphantly to Miss Mitford that Tennyson had given the very same judgment of Smith "in the very words, we had given here--'fancy, not imagination.' Also imagery in excess; thought in deficiency."[43] But in spite of the judgment of Tennyson and the Brownings, Smith was clearly having a field day in England. His being championed by even the stolid George Barrett brought protest from George's sister:

> So you set up Alexander Smith against us. . . . He is not the least of an artist, George. His imagery is, as the gods please--heavenly enough in the stuff of it, but dislocated by the fall from heaven into his earthly hands. Still, I have read him only in extracts you must consider, & my opinion can scarcely under these circumstances be worth having.[44]

It is likely that further reading resulted only in the further conviction of the Brownings that they were correct in the first place--a conviction that would help to explain the attack on imitators in "Popularity," written during this period. In view of Browning's emphasis on originality, it is not surprising that he attacked imitation both in this poem and in the later "Gerousios Oinos," in which the thin, watered-down poetry of the Seventies became his target.

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[43] Ibid., II, 134.

[44] Paul Landis (ed.), Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 203.

By the time Browning returned to England to live, the Spasmodics had been superseded by the Pre-Raphaelites, the chief of whom, the Rossettis, Browning had met on previous visits to England. He was fully aware that they were instrumental in popularizing his poetry. William Michael Rossetti accused his brother of being so enthusiastic about Sordello that he "thrust it down everybody's throat";[45] and Browning was able to show his appreciation by quoting from "The Blessed Damozel" on his first meeting with Dante Gabriel.[46] Though it is doubtful that Browning was at any time wholeheartedly in agreement with the Pre-Raphaelite tenets, he was ready once more to extend the stranger's welcome.

William Morris, not a member of the original Brotherhood, but closely identified with the Pre-Raphaelites, was the first to benefit. A letter from Lytton to Browning contains a request for "the name of the Pre-Raphaelite Poet whose Poems you showed me ('three Red Roses across the Moon,' etc)."[47] This poem (actually "Two Red Roses Across

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[45]G. B. Hill (ed.), Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 1854-1870 (London: T. F. Unwin, 1897), p. 28.

[46]William Michael Rossetti (ed.), Ruskin, Rossetti, Pre-Raphaelitism Papers (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1899), p. 103.

[47]Aurelia Brooks Harlan and J. Lee Harlan, Jr. (eds.), Letters of Owen Meredith to Robert and Elizabeth

the Moon") is a simple ballad with an ingenious use of the refrain. A number of years later, Lytton was writing again to ask for an extension on the loan of Morris's Life of Jason, to which Browning had also introduced him.[48] In the meantime, having read the first part of the Earthly Paradise, Browning wrote to Morris: "It is a double delight. . . to read such poetry, and know that you of all the world wrote it,--you whose songs I used to sing while galloping by Fiesole in the old days."[49]

When Morris's Defense of Guinevere and Other Poems was published, Browning wrote to William Michael Rossetti: "I shall hardly be able to tell you what I think and re-think of his admirable poems, the only new poems, to my mind, since there's no telling when."[50] It is no wonder that Browning admired the title poem. Primarily a monologue in form, it is the kind of defense that might well have come from his own pen. Browning realized, as others have, that Morris was not merely "an idle singer of an empty day." The modern interpretation that Browning placed

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Barrett Browning (Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 1936), pp. 209-10.

[48] Ibid., p. 226.

[49] Quoted by Lloyd W. Eshlemann, A Victorian Rebel: The Life of William Morris (New York: Scribner's, 1940), pp. 82-3.

[50] Rossetti, op. cit., p. 119.

on the Alcestis story in Balaustion's Adventure owes a direct debt to Morris's Love of Alcestis. But for the same reason that he lamented the waste of talent in Tennyson's Idylls, he could not sympathize completely with Morris's choice of subject matter. By the time the third part of the Earthly Paradise was published, Browning was beginning to lose interest. "Morris is sweet, pictorial, clever always," he wrote, "but a weariness to me by this time."[51]

This feeling of weariness extended to include Tennyson's Idylls and all of the contemporary poetry that sprang from classical or medieval sources. It also extended to include those works that seemed to be without moral purpose. Browning was beginning to view not only with weariness, but with alarm the trends in contemporary poetry that were to culminate in the Art for Art's Sake Movement. When, in 1869, Rossetti decided to rescue his poetry from his wife's grave and publish it, Browning had his first opportunity to see the fruits of the younger poet's early labors. He immediately wrote a commendatory letter, although he was frank about his displeasure with some of the typical Pre-Raphaelite touches:

> I cannot enjoy the personifications,--Love as a youth, encircling you with his arms and wings, gives me a turn,--and a few archaisms in sentiment and expression

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[51]Hood, op. cit., p. 134.

please me less than they probably do others. . . .[52]

Writing to Isa Blagden a month later, he was more outspoken:

> Yes,--I have read Rossetti's poems--and poetical they are,--scented with poetry, as it were--like trifles of various sorts you take out of a cedar or sandalwood box: you know I hate the effeminacy of his school,--the men that dress up like women,--that use obsolete forms, too, and archaic accentuations, to seem soft--fancy a man calling it a lily,--lilies and so on: Swinburne started this, with other like Belialisms,--witness his "harp-player," etc. It is quite different when the object is to imitate old ballad-writing, when the thing might be; then, how I hate "Love," as a lubberly naked young man putting his arms here and his wings there, about a pair of lovers,--a fellow they would kick away, in the reality. Good-bye, for I am getting ill-natured.[53]

From Domett's Diary comes still further evidence of Browning's impatience:

> He did not much admire Rossetti's poetry, 'hated all affectation.' He laughed at the cant about the 'delicate harmony' of his rhymes about the Haymarket. He quoted Buchanan's parody of them, adding a line or two of his own, similarly rhymed:
>
> But grog would be sweeter
> And stronger and warmer, etc.[54]

Browning's position in the controversy that began with Robert Buchanan's attack on Rossetti and his group in

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[52]Helen Rossetti Angeli, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (London: Hamilton, 1949), p. 168.

[53]McAleer, op. cit., p. 336.

[54]Quoted in W. H. Griffin and H. C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), p. 257.

The Fleshly School of Poetry is not clear. Although he did not openly side with Buchanan, the passage from Domett's Diary suggests that he was sympathetic with the point of view of the article. Rossetti, chaffing under Buchanan's attack and suspecting the rest of the world of being in league against him, read into Browning's Fifine at the Fair, published in 1872, a further attack on him and immediately broke off all relations with the poet who had been his lifelong idol. The tendency has been to regard the attack on Rossetti in Fifine as a product of Rossetti's imagination, because of his extreme sensitiveness at the time Fifine was published. DeVane, however, believes that Rossetti was not reading a false interpretation into the poem:

> In my opinion the critics have not seen what Rossetti saw in Fifine, because most of them have not read Fifine with the facts of Rossetti's recent history in mind. I think there was considerable ground for Rossetti's suspicions, and I think the clue to his actions lies in the history of the quarrel he had with Buchanan. In short, I think that Browning gave comfort and friendship to Rossetti's assailant, and his poem, Fifine, is a commentary upon Rossetti's poem, Jenny, a poem very near to Rossetti's heart, and the piece which had borne the brunt of Buchanan's attack.[55]

If Browning did intend an attack on Jenny--and DeVane's conjecture seems plausible in the presence of so

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[55]William C. DeVane, "The Harlot and the Thoughtful Young Man," Studies in Philology, 29 (July, 1932), 468.

much actual proof of Browning's feelings toward Rossetti--the situation is ironic. Jenny is the one poem which exhibits Browning's influence not only in the monologue form, but in the drawing of the subject matter from contemporary life.

If Browning found in Rossetti's poetry much to repel him, he found more in Swinburne's. Tennyson might delight in the young atheist because he was "a reed through which all things blow into music," but Browning could not close his eyes to the paucity of content long enough to appreciate the power of the music. His early misgiving about Swinburne's poems is evident in a letter written to Richard Monckton Milnes in 1863 after Browning had been accused of influencing a publisher against Swinburne:

> I know next to nothing of Swinburne, and like him much: I have received courtesy from him, and been told he feels kindly towards me--I believe it, indeed. Of his works, since his first volume, I know not a line, except a poem which I looked over a long while ago at Rossetti's, and the pieces he recited the other night: I could only have an opinion, therefore, on these. I thought them moral mistakes, redeemed by much intellectual ability. They may be a sample of the forthcoming book,--or just the exceptional instances--I hope so.
>
> When I was abruptly appealed to, some days after, for my estimate of Mr. Swinburne's powers,--I don't know what I could do but say "that he had genius, and wrote verses in which to my mind there was no good at all."[56]

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[56]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 150. For a full account of this particular phase of their relationship,

When Swinburne's Atalanta on Calydon was being applauded by the majority of critics, Browning referred to it as a "fuzz of words."[57] And he wrote to Miss Blagden:

> As to Swinburne's verses I agree with you--they are 'florid impotence', to my taste--the minimum of thought and idea in the maximum of words and phraseology. Nothing said and done with, left to stand alone and trust for its effect in its own worth. What a way of writing is that wherein, wanting to say that 'a man is sad,' you express it as, 'he looketh like to one, as one might say, who hath a sadness and is sad indeed, so that beholders think 'How sad is he!'[58]

Eleven years after writing this criticism, Browning wrote a letter directly to Swinburne to thank him for a copy of his recently published Studies in Song. The position taken in this letter only adds to the complexity of the relationship:

> You are the kindest and most generous of poets. I shall treasure up your book, but cannot pretend that I owe to this copy of it my delight in what it contains, seeing that I have, many days ago, read it at the "Athenaeum." As for the great appreciation (I can't say 'tribute')--well, the recognition, if you like, of our dear Landor,--it went at once to my heart's intimate depths: but there are poems over and above which even you have never surpassed, I think, in power and beauty--but I won't be noisy where silence is wisest if not--certainly not easiest.[59]

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see K. L. Knickerbocker, "Browning and Swinburne: An Episode," Modern Language Notes, 62 (April, 1947), 240-41.

[57]Quoted in Harold Nicholson, Swinburne (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 89.

[58]McAleer, op. cit., pp. 332-3.

[59]Hood, op. cit., p. 193.

Whether this letter was prompted by the praise of one of Browning's favorite poets in the "Song for the Centenary of Walter Savage Landor," by the fact that the "Songs Before Sunrise" had been inspired by the final struggle for Italian freedom, or by Browning's desire to show his appreciation for Swinburne's tribute to his own poetry is not certain. Perhaps Browning saw in these poems a more serious attempt to combine music with thought.

George Meredith, who was closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, but whose poetry indicates a closer affinity with Browning than with Rossetti or Swinburne, apparently enjoyed the wholehearted approval of the older poet. One of his biographers reports that Meredith was disappointed when his sonnet sequence, Modern Love, was not reviewed at all in the Saturday Review, "but he found consolation in an encounter with Robert Browning, who said he was 'astounded at the originality, delighted with the naturalness and beauty' of the poems."[60] And from Katherine Bradley, a young poetess who claimed both Browning and Meredith among her friends, went a letter to Meredith assuring him that "Modern Love is known and honored of us: and we love to remember with what fervour

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[60]Lionel Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 112.

of admiration Mr. Browning spoke of it to us."[61]

One of the poets championed by the Pre-Raphaelites, however, Browning was never in sympathy with. At about the time he returned from Italy, Rossetti, having just discovered Edward FitzGerald's translation of the Rubaiyat, was forcing its beauties on all his friends. It is not likely that Browning escaped, but if he was favorably impressed, his letters bear no record of it. The only indication of his response to the Rubaiyat is to be found in his "Rabbi Ben Ezra," which, it is believed, was written as a reply to the fatalism and materialism of FitzGerald's poem.[62] The later unfortunate episode involving Browning's fury at FitzGerald's tactless remark about Mrs. Browning's death belongs in the realm of personal criticism rather than literary criticism, but a letter written by Browning at that time indicates that until he read FitzGerald's remark, the translator of the Rubaiyat, as far as he was concerned, had not even existed.[63]

Whether "Rabbi Ben Ezra" was a response to the Rubaiyat or whether Browning was unaware of FitzGerald's

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[61]T. Sturge Moore (ed.), "Michael Field and George Meredith," The Cornhill Magazine, LXXII (March, 1932), 261.

[62]See William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (2nd edition, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), pp. 293-4.

[63]Landis, op. cit., p. 330.

existence does not alter the fact that he was disturbed by the growing cynicism and what he felt to be the general indifference of the poets to their moral responsibility. These were the poets to whom he attempted to speak in the "Parleying with Christopher Smart."[64] He was inclined to be far more charitable toward those who seemed to be taking their duties seriously than to those like Rossetti and Swinburne who, in his opinion, were wasting their powers.

Browning was so complimentary toward Edmund Gosse's first volume of verse, On Viol and Flute, that Gosse asked permission to dedicate King Erick, a verse tragedy, to him. When Browning received the book, he wrote to the author:

> I really have waited a little before writing to acknowledge your gift, from an apprehension that the delight I must express at its poetry might seem influenced by the pride I needs must feel at its preface. Of that--the preface--I shall even now be silent, if you permit,--for you ought to guess my feeling: but I will say that the dramatic power and understanding management of character were somewhat of a surprise even to me--whose recognition of your faculty was from the first complete and immediate. I hope you will continue these surprises--though they will now be increasingly difficult.[65]

Although less effusive, Browning was cordial in the Seventies and Eighties to other young poets who submitted their work to him. Among these were Arthur O'Shaughnessy,[66]

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[64] Supra, pp. 43-44.

[65] Hood, op. cit., p. 169.

[66] DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., pp. 200-201.

John Payne,[67] and Sidney Thompson.[68] And he was optimistic enough to see promise in a poem written by his own son, for which he would not give much "as an ultimate product," but in which he found "very welcome proof indeed of what may be still in him."[69]

The partiality toward women that characterized Browning's later social relationships extended to his literary criticism. Earlier he had shown some impatience with "scribbling women," especially when they applied to him for help in getting pensions they ill deserved, or when they criticized Mrs. Browning. As he grew older, however, he became increasingly tolerant of poetesses. To Mrs. Ellen Louise Moulton, an American whom he knew personally, he wrote that, having just closed her book, he had music in his ears and flowers before his eyes,--"not without thought across the brain."[70] Expressing sorrow at the death of Emma Lazarus in 1887, he mentioned that the Times had correctly quoted him as being one of those who appreciated her talents.[71] He found Jean Ingelow "too modest" in her

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Hood, op. cit., pp. 312-13.

[69] McAleer, op. cit., p. 331.

[70] DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., pp. 242-3.

[71] Hood, op. cit., p. 277.

appraisal of her own work.[72] To Miss E. Dickinson West went congratulations for verses that he thought "very sincere, deeply earnest and--I dare declare--beautiful."[73] Miss Edith Adams possessed "music and fancy in a high degree," and he would be watching for even abler proofs of her ability.[74]

Katherine Bradley and her niece, Edith Cooper, who together wrote under the pseudonym Michael Field, went to some pains to seek out Browning and pay him the homage due a venerable poet. They were rewarded by his careful reading and extravagant praise of their poems:

> It is long since I have been so thoroughly impressed by the indubitable poetic genius; a word I consider while I write, only to repeat it--'genius.' The second play is brimful of beauty; in thought and in feeling, admirably expressed; I think I see often enough the proofs of youth and perhaps haste; but the great promise is not promise only; there is performance in an extraordinary degree. So with the first play; it recalls, to its disadvantage in certain respects, the wonderful Bacchae of Euripides; and the deaths are dealt thickly about in hardly an artistic fashion; but the scene between Machaon and the Faun would compensate for almost any amount of crudeness and incompleteness; which probably will not be so observable when I read both poems again, as I mean to do.[75]

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[72] Ibid., pp. 118-9.

[73] Ibid., p. 168.

[74] Ibid., p. 318.

[75] T. Sturge Moore (ed.), "Michael Field and Robert Browning," The Cornhill Magazine, LXXII (January, 1932), 3.

Needless to say, few other readers recognized the genius, and this criticism must be regarded as having been motivated primarily by a desire to please those who had brought pleasure to him. The explanation for another piece of extravagant criticism, however, is not so simple. In July, 1881, Browning happened to find among his papers Dorothy, A Country Story in Elegiac Verse, a little book that had been sent to him months earlier. Opening it in the middle, he became so interested that he turned to the beginning, "whence I proceeded to the last," he wrote to Kegan Paul, the publisher, "with a surprise of delight as rare as it was thorough." He wanted the anonymous author to know that he had not admired and enjoyed a poem so much for years. "And I am carefully sober," he added, "in professing no more." Interestingly enough, Browning believed the author to be a woman:

> Of course I make no sort of guess at who the Author may be: but from some signal exquisiteness of observation, I almost fancy the fine hand must be feminine: if I mistake, my blunder is one tribute the more to a consummate male craftsmanship.[76]

The author, who turned out to be Arthur J. Munby, a minor poet for whom this praise was a high point, was duly informed of Browning's opinion, which he attempted to use,

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[76]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 265. See footnote 5, p. 265, for speculations as to why the poem appealed to Browning.

without appreciable success, to promote the sale of his book.

In 1872 Browning's good friend Alfred Domett returned after thirty years in New Zealand, bringing with him a 14,000-line epic, Ranolf and Amohia, that Browning persuaded Smith and Elder to publish. Browning thought he saw signs of genius in his friend before Domett left England, and in his short poem "Waring," he urged Domett to help instill new life into English literature. Ranolf and Amohia received the usual plaudits, including those of Tennyson, but it by no means proved the success that Browning expected. If he was disappointed, however, Domett did not know it, for he wrote:

> I hope I am no more surprised at the achievement than is consistent with my always having held to the belief that whenever 'Waring' reappeared some such effect would follow the phenomenon. . . . Whether people accept it now, or let it alone for a while, in the end appreciated it is certain to be.[77]

Five years later, again with Browning's assistance, Domett published Flotsam and Jetsam, a collection of things old and new, among which was a poem called forth by a hostile criticism of Pippa Passes. The book was dedicated to Robert Browning, "a mighty poet and a subtle-souled Psychologist." Browning wrote immediately to express

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[77]Quoted in Griffin and Minchin, op. cit., p. 250.

appreciation for the lines on Pippa Passes and to reassert his oft-expressed confidence in Domett's genius:

> I had read and well remember all the earlier portion: the second part is full of beauty and ingenuity. You know George the Gentleman was wont to wonder concerning Mr. Turveydrop--"Why, now has that man not fifty thousand a year?" I am sure, I wonder with better reason why this man has not as much recognition as he so generously himself gives away. Perhaps this may even yet be set right--but that it may not, is undoubtedly 'on the cards' also.[78]

In suggesting that Domett might never achieve fame, Browning was brushing aside the veil of friendship to see what less partial observers had already seen--that although serious thought had gone into much of Domett's poetry, the subject matter and his handling of it marked him as a leisure-time poet who lacked both the power and discipline to write enduring lines.

When the poet was neither a personal friend nor a woman, Browning could be objective. Three excellent examples can be found among his letters: one written to an unidentified correspondent and the other two addressed to correspondents who had asked advice about the poetry of their friends. Although he discussed their work in detail, his advice can be summarized: write only if you have something new to say;[79] let the "feeling and thought take the

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[78]Kenyon, Browning and Domett, pp. 155-6.

[79]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 171.

words and music they immediately suggest instead of "singing away" hoping that some thought will turn up;[80] and remember that "a pictorial and musical faculty," or even "high and fine aims" cannot take the place of "wings for actual flight."[81] Obviously Browning did not find in the newcomers all the qualities he demanded. He knew that real poetry was rare. And if his "stranger's welcome" was frequently too hearty, it was only that he cherished the hope, to use his own metaphor, of finding among the sparrows "a lark or a nightingale, or even an owl, which last is by no means to be despised."[82]

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[80]John G. Millais (ed.), The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1909), I, 439-40.

[81]DeVane and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 234.

[82]Millais, op. cit., I, 440.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Edgar Allan Poe once remarked that the "justice of a critique upon poetry" was commensurate with the poetical talent of the critic.[1] The history of English criticism contains the names of many noted poets: Sidney, Jonson, Pope, Dryden, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and, in our own century, T. S. Eliot. Browning obviously did not write enough criticism to warrant his inclusion on this list. Yet his poetical talent and the numerous critical comments found throughout his writings make essential some evaluation of his contributions as a critic.

It is natural that criticism as spontaneous and informal as Browning's would be strongly personal and impressionistic. He recognized one of his weaknesses when he admitted, in connection with his criticism of Wordsworth, that he went wholly upon his "individual likings and distastes"; and when he confessed to Miss Barrett that he found it impossible to point out faults--that he could only dissertate upon what he loved most and least. He was inclined to like best in the poetry of others those

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[1] E. C. Stedman and George E. Woodberry (eds.), The Works of Edgar Allan Poe (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1895), X, 146.

qualities that were outstanding in his own work. Although in theory he exalted lyric above dramatic and narrative poetry, he was most often attracted by monologues and skillful character analyses. Thus we have more evidence as to his standards for dramatic and narrative poetry than for lyric.

A further weakness is Browning's tendency to be too strongly swayed by the character and personality of the poet. In his treatment of Euripides and Shakespeare, for example, he exaggerated the points of similarity between them and himself. To justify his admiration for Chatterton, he had to exonerate the young poet from charges of fraud. Similarly, to justify his early admiration for Shelley, he had to convince himself that the avowed atheist was in reality an embryonic Christian. When the facts began to argue too insistently against the moral purity of both Shelley and Byron, he found a conflict that he was never able to solve satisfactorily. That an immoral man could write great poetry he refused to believe. That Shelley and Byron had written great poetry he could not deny. Wordsworth's personality kept Browning from an objective view, especially of his lyric poems, and there is strong evidence that learning of Beddoes' suicide prevented Browning's championing that poet except in private.

Well balanced criticism demands some consideration

of form, whereas Browning was almost wholly concerned with content, especially with the moral and spiritual meanings. Thus Christian art, with its imperfect form but high aspiration, would be, in his opinion, superior to Greek art, which might be flawless in execution, but lack that which Andrea del Sarto calls "the insight and the stretch." Browning's devotion to the Philosophy of the Imperfect prevented his seeing the danger of using it as a standard for all art.

Another weakness, which he himself recognized, was his tendency to encourage too freely--to extend the stranger's welcome. He also realized that he was too quick to praise on the basis of originality--"praising all that was questionable in the form, reserving the ground-work for after consideration." Yet his strict concept of morality prevented his extending the stranger's welcome to the most original poet of his century. Robert Buchanan, lunching with Browning one day, happened to express his admiration for Whitman. "No words were strong enough," Buchanan reported, "to express my host's loathing and contempt for poor Walt, and chiefly on moral grounds."[2] And another of Browning's admirers was amazed to find that "the virile

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[2]Quoted by Harold Blodgett, Walt Whitman in England (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1934), p. 138.

Robert Browning could not give recognition to the frank American--the Comrade!"[3]

These comments illustrate the order in which Browning applied a consistent set of criteria: moral purpose, signs of inspiration, and originality. Originality was important to him, as shown by his periodic attacks on imitators and his boredom with the subject matter chosen by his contemporaries. But originality was not enough. First, there must be moral purpose, then the signs of the highest type of inspiration manifested through sincerity, spontaneity, and song. These characteristics, he discovered, were ordinarily accompanied by originality, which he would place third.

A review of Browning's criticism reveals a consistent choice of the romantic over the classical. He preferred Euripides, in whom he found romantic tendencies, over Aeschylus and Sophocles, the favorites of the majority of his contemporaries. He preferred Homer over Virgil. He preferred among the eighteenth-century poets, not Dryden and Pope, but Smart, Macpherson, and Chatterton. And he singled out for special praise Shakespeare, Donne, Shelley, Keats, Beddoes, Mrs. Browning, and Tennyson--all primarily

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[3]T. Sturge Moore (ed.), "Extracts from 'Works and Days,' the Diary of Michael Field," The Cornhill Magazine, LXXII (February, 1932), 139.

romantic. Although he was enthusiastic about Landor, who seemed to him "to have lost his way on the stream of Time," that enthusiasm may be partially explained by Landor's choice of the dramatic form. Browning was most likely to be attracted to spontaneity, signs of vigor, primitivism, down-to-earth diction, and the bizarre and grotesque.

The study of the development of a soul he regarded as an ever-fresh source of poetic inspiration, and the more subtly the subject was treated, the more he delighted in it. His demand for subtlety, his appreciation for psychological probing, and his preference for poetry made out of unlikely materials show a gradual bridging of the gap between nineteenth-century romanticism and twentieth-century realism.

When one allows for changing tastes, as in his judgments of Wordsworth, and for some discrepancies between what he wrote to the poets themselves and what he wrote to others, Browning's criticism has a consistency that inspires confidence. When one discounts the spontaneous responses to some of the poetry of his contemporaries, his final judgments never drift far from the main stream of criticism. Had he devoted the time and effort to criticism that he devoted to poetry, he doubtless would have attained eminence as a critic. As a poet of discriminating taste, dissertating upon what he loved most and least, he

illustrated in his own writing the close correlation between poetical talent and critical ability.

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