

## BROWNING : THE POET'S AIM.<sup>1</sup>

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WHO now reads Browning? Booksellers and librarians, who judge by figures and not by rumours, tell us that he is almost dead and done with. There was a temporary reawakening in the north when the *Barretts of Wimpole Street* came. But the film was much more widely known than the play: and whatever the other charms of the film's Robert Browning, it seemed a safe conjecture to doubt whether he could ever have written a line of verse. He may have excited some of his audience to ask for the Browning Love Letters: but he drove nobody back to the poems. Yet Robert Browning was a great poet, in my own view, the greatest nineteenth-century English poet after Wordsworth. That may be prejudice rather than judgment: Browning was my boyhood's first poet, the volume I first bought, the one I carried about with me in my pocket; and youthful impressions may permanently distort a dispassionate adult judgment. But as the years go on, though many of one's earlier favourites recede before newer preferences, on the whole one finds oneself reaching a more settled way of valuation. Its application to individual poets may still be variable, but the sense of the something or other which makes for greatness in all poetry fixes itself more securely. Broadly speaking, I come more and more firmly to the opinion that the test of all poetry lies in its meaning. The poet has something to say which only he can say, because only he has seen it so; he seeks for the instrument which says it just as he sees it. His technical accomplishment sharpens and clarifies his own vision.

<sup>1</sup> An elaboration of the lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 13th of October, 1937.

and projects that vision in all its peculiarities. In the end, he has revealed the world, or a part of it, in the precise proportions in which its values have stamped themselves on his senses, his mind, and his imagination. That is what he gives to the world : his worth is the value his vision has for the world. It is of course a value which need not be translated into a moral or an intellectual currency. It is a value which exists in *Kubla Khan* as certainly as in the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*. It is perhaps better to call it the significance of the poem, rather than its meaning, for meaning tends to be taken didactically ; the poet is shorn of his prerogative and is falsely acclaimed as a teacher.

Today's neglect of Browning is from some points of view very odd indeed. The qualities in his work which from the outset have stood between him and a wide popularity are, one suspects, still obstructions to the general reader. His poetry is sometimes difficult : " when I wrote those lines, two people knew their meaning, God and Robert Browning ; now God only knows." There are difficulties of word and phrase ; there are distortions of syntax ; there are recondite references and glancing allusions. Yet in a way these are peculiarities of the Browning idiom, and they disappear as our familiarity with his language grows. There are, of course, other causes of difficulty : fancies so profound that they break through language and escape us, or tougher poems with subtle meanings of man and of life. But the hardness of these is as inherent in their subject as is the difficulty of Einstein's theory of relativity. Sometimes, too, the mechanism of the dramatic lyric, as for instance in *Dis Aliter Visum*, involves such a dovetailing of spoken and of unspoken discourse, now in the present and now recollected or imagined from the past, that the shape of the dialogue becomes almost like a Chinese puzzle. Still further, and not a little encouraged by the latter Browning, readers are deluded into the view that Browning is primarily a thinker. They come to his poems in a wrong frame of mind. They take *Rabbi ben Ezra* or *The Strange Epistle of Karshish* as pieces of argumentation to be judged finally by the logic of their statement. But both are poems : their structure is poetic ; they are not built as

ascending steps of ratiocination ; they are continuous utterances of a progressive mood. *Rabbi ben Ezra* works within its intellectual assumptions and never questions them. *Karshish* is not concerned with philosophic grounds for belief in a God of love : it is entirely occupied with the depiction of the impact on a man's mind and feelings of the notion that there may be a God who is a God of love. Similarly, " God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world " is taken as the assertion of Browning's philosophy of life : but even an optimist like Browning would never have regarded such a statement as philosophically adequate. It was just Pippa's intuitive apprehension of the world of which she was a part—as much a matter, not of what she thought, but of what she saw, as was her awareness of the lark on the wing and the snail on the thorn.

But all these drawbacks to Browning's popularity are in a sense drawbacks based on a misapprehension or an imperfect apprehension of Browning's poetry. There are others which rest on firmer ground. The reader comes to Browning, finds in him what is really there, but is dissatisfied with its claims to be called poetry. It is so markedly different from what he has come to expect from poetry. His eye, his ear and his feelings are affected by Browning in a way which is not commonly the poet's way. What is one to make of a poem which preludes its presentation of intense spiritual exaltation with images like this ?

Higgledy-piggledy, packed we lie,  
Rats in a hamper, swine in a sty,  
Wasps in a bottle, frogs in a sieve,  
Worms in a carcase, fleas in a sleeve.

Or this description of a country scene :

I think I never saw  
Such starved ignoble nature ; nothing throve :  
For flowers—as well expect a cedar grove !  
But cockle, spurge, according to their law  
Might propagate their kind, with none to awe,  
You'd think ; a burr had been a treasure-trove. . . .  
If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk  
Above its mates, the head was chopped ; the bents  
Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents

In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk  
 All hope of greenness ? 'tis a brute must walk  
     Pushing their life out, with a brute's intents.  
 As for grass, it grew as scant as hair  
     In leprosy ; thin, dry blades pricked the mud  
     Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood.  
 One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare  
 Stood stupefied, however he came there :  
     Thrust out past service from the devil's stud ! . . .  
 So petty, yet so spiteful ! All along,  
     Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it ;  
     Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit  
 Of mute despair, a suicidal throng :  
 The river which had done them all the wrong,  
     Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit.

This, too, for the customary music of verse :

Image the whole, then execute the parts—  
 Fancy the fabric  
 Quite, ere you build, ere steel strike fire from quartz,  
 Ere mortar dab brick !

Or this :

Irks care the crop-full bird ? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast ?

As music, this is hardly up to the tongs and the bones : no wonder Browning found inspiration in the thump-thump and the shriek-shriek of a railway train :

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 neighbour's haunches stir,  
 —Finding no dormant musical sprout  
 In him, as in me, to be jolted out.

It certainly is capable of making the haunches stir.

As in detail, so in the ensemble. When a church is not full of its " stinking and savoury, smug and gruff " horde of worshippers, its emptiness may disclose that a poor devil has ended his cares

At the foot of its rotten-runged, rat-riddled stairs.

If it should happen to be a nonconformist Bethel, the physical

horror of it is violently contagious, with its hot smell and the human noises :

Well, from the road, the lanes or the common,  
 In came the flock : the fat weary woman,  
 Panting and bewildered, down-clapping  
 Her umbrella with a mighty report,  
 Grounded it by me, wry and flapping,  
 A wreck of whalebones : then, with a snort,  
 Like a startled horse, at the interloper  
 (Who humbly knew himself improper,  
 But could not shrink up small enough)  
 —Round to the door, and in,—the gruff  
 Hinge's invariable scold  
 Making my very blood run cold.  
 Prompt in the wake of her, up-pattered  
 On broken clogs, the many tattered  
 Little old-faced peaking sister-turned-mother  
 Of the sickly babe she tried to smother  
 Somehow up, with its spotted face,  
 From the cold, on her breast, the one warm place ;  
 She too must stop, wring the poor ends dry  
 Of a draggled shawl, and add thereby  
 Her tribute to the door-mat, sopping  
 Already from my own clothes' dropping,  
 Which yet she seemed to grudge I should stand on :  
 Then, stooping down to take off her pattens,  
 She bore them defiantly, in each hand one,  
 Planted together before her breast  
 And its babe, as good as a lance in rest.  
 Close on her heels, the dingy satins  
 Of a female something, past me flitted,  
 With lips as much too white, as a streak  
 Lay far too red on each hollow cheek ;  
 And it seemed the very door-hinge pitied  
 All that was left of a woman once  
 Holding at least its tongue for the nonce.  
 Then a tall yellow man, like the Penitent Thief,  
 With his jaw bound up in a handkerchief,  
 And eyelids screwed together tight,  
 Led himself in by some inner light.

Apparently, no conventional theme is safe from unpoetic sacrilege. A death-bed—and a bishop's at that—and we have the pagan sensuousness of the dying Bishop of St. Praxed's.

These, be it remembered, are not exceptional things in Browning. They are characteristic of his art. Hence it is not strange that the general reader feels himself unfed. But the odd thing is that to-day's fashionable codification of literary values is curiously blind to Browning's likeness to their own chosen idols. Probably no later English poet, apart from our contemporaries, is nearer to Donne than is Browning. There is the same assault on conventional technique, the same preference for the out of the way, and alternatively for the flagrantly homely, the same exaltation of colloquialism to the pure currency of poetic speech, the same over-leaping of the sensuous image to establish the direct symbolic identification, the same thrust of passion beyond the merely physical manifestation of it. But Cambridge, in spite of it, has no use for Browning.

There is more reason for the general reader's dissatisfaction than for that of the pundits. Much of what Browning stands for in life is unfashionable or even positively suspect. He was given to violent romanticism. He idealised woman and the love of man and woman ; and doing so, he took no cognisance of the sexual bond as such. He glorified love as a purely spiritual experience which did not even require the spiritual reciprocity of the other person. Love at first sight, and love unspoken, love based merely on a momentary glimpse of her eye, love with nothing except that moment in its whole story : that is the love depicted in *Cristina*. Victorianism at its worst, one feels ; and forgets for the time being that the speaker in *Cristina* is almost as certifiable for a madhouse cell as was Johannes Agricola or Porphyria's Lover ; forgets also *The Statue and the Bust*, and Lippo's gallivantings ; forgets that for half Rome the hero and heroine of Browning's longest poem, *The Ring and the Book*, were adulterers glorifying an elopement as a form of spiritual enfranchisement.

Moreover, in spite of his confession that he had found life three parts pain, Browning is taken for a flamboyant optimist : and optimism hardly fits easily into the post-War world. Maybe the grounds of his faith were physiological rather than intellectual. Maybe, on the intellectual side, they presupposed an uncritically adopted theology. But in the last resort, is not

Browning's most intimate sense of man's insatiable thirst for experience very much like the groundwork of the "optimism" of Shakespearian tragedy? Life is a struggle, man strives and fails, but the very failure reveals in him hitherto unexplored regions of purely human nobility. Browning's optimism, however, must occupy us on some future occasion.

Then there is the indubitable circumstance that Browning professed himself a Christian. Moreover he did not mean by that that he respected Christianity as an admirable moral code: this would have been a doctrine not hostile to his own and to-day's prevailing sentiment. Unitarianism and untheological Christian ethics were anathema to him, as he makes clear in *Christmas Eve*. By declaring himself a Christian, he meant that he believed in Christ, in a way inapplicable to any other person, as in fact the Son of God, miraculously born through the immaculate conception of Mary. This was the fundamental article of his faith; compared with it the other articles were relatively unimportant. Here then, he seems to be taking refuge in the innermost sanctuary of orthodoxy, to be insisting on particular points which most lend themselves to to-day's criticism. Of course, we shall find that he held his orthodoxy unorthodoxically: that he believed the accepted belief for reasons entirely his own. In the real sense, he was a non-conformist because he did not conform to any articulated catalogue of beliefs. But Browning's religion, like his optimism, must be a topic deferred.

So much for the causes which strike the eye as obstacles to Browning's popularity in 1938. But as yet the most substantial has not been mentioned. More than that of any other poet of the nineteenth century, Browning's way of seeing life is an individualist's; and since Victoria's time the world has chosen to think socially rather than individually. It is not merely that politically Browning was a Liberal, believing in *laissez-faire*, in nationalism and in Cobdenite economics in general. It is more than that. Browning sees the world as an aggregation of individuals; it is the individual as such in whom he is interested. So he fails in his strictly dramatic writings. He fails in them to grasp the power of the something or other which emerges

wherever a group of people are met together. He resolves his plot or action as the mere impact of individual on individual. He chooses themes, as in *Strafford* or *King Victor and King Charles*, which involve the power of attachment to corporate ideals, and then works out the predicament merely in terms of the loyalty of person to person. Perhaps the most staring example of Browning's obliviousness to social forces and social institutions as such occurs in the most magnificent of his formally dramatic scenes, the Ottima-Sebald scene of *Pippa Passes*. A murder has been committed. There is anxiety to remove the corpse, but that is merely for the æsthetic reason that its presence is repulsive, and not for the strategic reason that with a *corpus delicti*, murder will out. Once the corpse is carried away

We may sleep

Anywhere in the whole wide house tonight

says Ottima. And even near the end of the scene—

Did you ever see our silk mills—their inside ?

There are ten silk mills now belong to you

she says to her paramour. One realises in retrospect what an unorganised community that of Asola is. There are in it only individuals, there are no policemen, there is no criminal law, and there is not even a system of legal inheritance.

The circumstance is typical of Browning. In every situation, the corporate as distinct from the individual reality is either forgotten or belittled. In *Columbe's Birthday*, where the issue is between love and public duty, love wins hands down, and the victory is applauded so unquestionably that those of us who have lived through recent dynastic changes are pulled up sharp. It is unquestionable that this social myopia interfered with Browning's work as a dramatist. But it drove him to the invention of the dramatic lyric, in which its limitations were turned almost completely to advantages. For the dramatic lyric is the presentation of an individual under the stress of circumstance ; and if, in that circumstance, other individuals are to be reckoned, they are usually as subsidiary as is the face of Florence in *Lippo Lippi* or the geranium flower in *Evelyn Hope*. Sometimes these complementary characters cannot but



thrust themselves on our attention : but the more they do so, the more is their nature dubious. One figure at a time is the range of Browning's normal vision. When in *Porphyria's Lover*, the other actor bulks largely, who shall say what Porphyria is ? There is no doubt that her lover is a morbid megalomaniac whose evidence is untrustworthy. But is Porphyria—who has the instinctive sense to shut doors on a stormy night, to poke fires which are going out, and to divest herself methodically of wet clothes before she pretends to be comfortable—is Porphyria a vamp, or, as she seems to me, a sensible sort of a girl who finds that a bit of fun which she had started through *ennui*, has grown to a pitch which is far beyond what she ever expected ? Or in *Any Wife to Any Husband*, do we side with the lady, or do we find her, in a way we can understand, relapsing into a distorted view of her husband's character and temperament ?

These, perhaps, are mainly points of the detailed interpretation of particular characters. But in some cases more general issues seem to be raised. *Love Among the Ruins* claims that the significance of the love of two nameless young folks is larger than that of the empires whose traces lie thickly scattered around their trysting-place :

In one year they sent a million fighters forth  
     South and North,  
 And they built their gods a brazen pillar high  
     As the sky,  
 Yet reserved a thousand chariots in full force—  
     Gold, of course.  
 Oh heart ! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns !  
     Earth's returns  
 For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin !  
     Shut them in,  
 With their triumphs and their glories and the rest !  
     Love is best.

It will clearly be difficult to put a scheme of values like this into the codes of modern social consciousness. Its assessments will appear as distorted as those of such flagrantly unbalanced minds as Porphyria's lover's, and Johannes Agricola's, to name only the two of his early characters to whom Browning allotted madhouse cells as their proper abode. But one will wonder

how far Browning's fondness for the abnormal types of individual sensibility eats even more deeply into his mind, allowing him to adopt, as reasonable apprehensions of reality, notions no less precariously individual in their origin than are the diseased intuitions of Porphyria's lover and of Johannes Agricola. What, for instance, is the absolute value of such views of life as are held by the man in *The Last Ride Together* or in *Evelyn Hope*? In these cases, however, it may in the last resort be no more than a recognition that this or that view, however individual and odd, shows itself at least substantial enough to give its holder a faith by which to live and in which to die. But what can be said of it in *The Statue and the Bust*, where the opportunity to test some forms of individual worth seems to be purchased at a price precariously near to the adoption of moral anarchy?

Or bring it to an even closer issue. One of the most characteristic of Browning's moral principles was his belief in apparent failure as real success :

What is failure here but a triumph's evidence  
For the fulness of the days ?

Or in *Rabbi ben Ezra* :

For thence,—a paradox  
Which comforts while it mocks,—  
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail :  
What I aspired to be,  
And was not, comforts me ;  
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale. . . .  
Not on the vulgar mass  
Called " work," must sentence pass,  
Things done, that took the eye and had their price ;  
O'er which, from level stand,  
The low world laid its hand,  
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice :  
But all, the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account ;  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount :  
Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act,

Fancies that broke through language and escaped ;  
 All I could never be,  
 All, men ignored in me,  
 This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Or from *The Last Ride Together* :

Who knows what's fit for us ? Had fate  
 Proposed bliss here should sublimate  
 My being—had I signed the bond—  
 Still one must lead some life beyond,  
     Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.  
 This foot once planted on the goal,  
 This glory-garland round my soul,  
 Could I descry such ? Try and test !  
 I sink back shuddering from the quest.  
 Earth being so good, would heaven seem best ?  
     Now, heaven and she are beyond this ride.

Or in *A Grammarian's Funeral* :

That low man seeks a little thing to do,  
     Sees it and does it :  
 This high man, with a great thing to pursue,  
     Dies ere he knows it.  
 That low man goes on adding one to one,  
     His hundred's soon hit :  
 This high man, aiming at a million,  
     Misses an unit.

So it runs through the whole of his poems. It is in many ways a tonic doctrine, an incentive to great endeavour. And so long as the final goal is the individual's salvation of his own soul, it is a faith in which one can live vigorously. But again, it takes no direct cognisance of immediate social circumstance. It is not only that man, gaining his own soul, may find himself without the means to feed his body, for that may possibly be another means of spiritual salvation. But what of the man's wife and his children ? Doubtless there is the same mode of salvation open to them as individuals. But, though that may be some meagre consolation for the wife, it is useless to the children until society has invented a social measure for the care of the helpless and the destitute. These remarks, however, are not urged as final arguments against Browning's doctrine : they are only

put forward to illustrate the wide gulf between Browning's instinctive way of seeing life and the way of to-day. Moreover, though Browning's comprehensive individualism be recognised as a limitation of his appeal to modern sentiment, it is to be remembered that his own view of the function of poetry claimed a large social value for it. He had strong beliefs about what a poet ought to do, and strong convictions about the social service which poetry fulfilled.

To appreciate his notion of the poet's form of social service, one must start with Browning's sense of his own personal relation as a poet to the society in which he lived. Indeed, one must go back further still, and discover what Browning felt to be the dominant features of his own poetic personality, and how this awareness affected his immediate and personal relationship to the human world about him.

His earliest poem, *Pauline*, is a semi-articulate confession. It discloses obscurely a personality which is not altogether attractive. His egocentricity leans to morbidity, and one needs to modify its intimations by recollecting that, in spite of affectations like the lemon kid-gloves, the adult Browning was patently "not one of those damned literary gents." But in one respect, its testimony is authoritative. Browning's introspection had given him a clear consciousness of his own poetic nature :

I am made up of an intensesst life,  
Of a most clear idea of consciousness  
Of self, distinct from all its qualities,  
From all affections, passions, feelings, powers ;  
And thus far it exists, if tracked, in all :  
But linked, in me, to self-supremacy,  
Existing as a centre to all things,  
Most potent to create and rule and call  
Upon all things to minister to it ;  
And to a principle of restlessness  
Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all—  
This is myself ; and I should thus have been  
Though gifted lower than the meanest soul.

Clearly a personality so passionately aware of its own identity, so intuitively assertive of its self-supremacy, and yet so restlessly stirred by its thirst for comprehensive experience,

is a personality which will be inordinately sensitive to its own rights and nervously resentful of all seeming infringements of those rights. It will regard privacy as its most sacred prerogative, the last stronghold of individual being.

But clearly, unless a poet refrains from publication, he is exposing to the public something which in some way is a part of his own nature. Browning felt this to be a permanent cause of antagonism between the poet and his public. In the first place, not being themselves poets, readers tend to value what the poet gives them by standards not only inapplicable to poetry as such, but merely material and gross. There is the painter in *Pictor Ignotus* who deliberately sidetracks his art, lest, following its bent, his pictures should become traffic for dealers and possessions domiciled in houses of worldly mercenaries.

I could have painted pictures like that youth's  
Ye praise so

he tells us. He could have built up a world-wide reputation, found himself honoured by Pope and Emperor, and his masterpieces treasured in the galleries of the world :

Oh, thus to live, I and my picture, linked  
With love about, and praise, till life should end,  
And then not go to heaven, but linger here,  
Here on my earth, earth's every man my friend. . . .

But . . . a voice changed it. Glimpses of such sights  
Have scared me, like the revels through a door  
Of some strange house of idols at its rites !

This world seemed not the world it was before :  
Mixed with my loving trusting ones, there trooped  
. . . Who summoned those cold faces that begun  
To press on me and judge me ? Though I stooped  
Shrinking, as from the soldiery a nun,  
They drew me forth, and spite of me, . . . enough !

These buy and sell our pictures, take and give,  
Count them for garniture and household stuff,  
And where they live needs must our pictures live  
And see their faces, listen to their prate,  
Partakers of their daily pettiness,  
Discussed of,—“ This I love, or this I hate,  
“ This likes me more, and this affects me less ! ”  
Wherefore I chose my portion.

So he turns his back on the way of fame, giving himself to cloistral decorations in monotonous conventional style. He foregoes his art to gain the seclusion of his own privacy :

If at whiles  
My heart sinks, as monotonous I paint  
These endless cloisters and eternal aisles  
With the same series, Virgin, Babe, and Saint,  
With the same cold calm beautiful regard,—  
At least no merchant traffics in my heart.

His pictures pass : “ So, die my pictures ! surely, gently die ! ”  
—for the praise of the world is not worth the desecration of one's innermost self :

O youth, men praise so,—holds their praise its worth ?  
Blown harshly, keeps the trump its golden cry ?  
Tastes sweet the water, with such specks of earth ?

This is no merely dramatic study of a recluse who feels the world's touch a contamination. The theme recurs as the main argument of the purely personal and non-dramatic poem, *One Word More*, with which Browning dedicated his *Men and Women* to his wife. It is a statement of the poet's endeavour, once and only once, and for one only, to declare his love for his own lady,

So to be the man and leave the artist,  
Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow.

In the exercise of his art he is like to desecrate it by memories of the stupidity of the public who will misjudge it.

Wherefore ? Heaven's gift takes earth's abatement !  
He who smites the rock and spreads the water,  
Bidding drink and live a crowd beneath him,  
Even he, the minute makes immortal,  
Proves, perchance, but mortal in the minute,  
Desecrates, belike, the deed in doing.  
While he smites, how can he but remember,  
So he smote before, in such a peril,  
When they stood and mocked—“ Shall smiting help us ? ”  
When they drank and sneered—“ A stroke is easy ! ”  
When they wiped their mouths, and went their journey,  
Throwing him for thanks—“ But drought was pleasant.”

Thus old memories mar the actual triumph ;  
 Thus the doing savours of disrelish ;  
 Thus achievement lacks a gracious somewhat ;  
 O'er importuned brows becloud the mandate,  
 Carelessness or consciousness—the gesture.  
 For he bears an ancient wrong about him,  
 Sees and knows again those phalanxed faces,  
 Hears, yet one time more, the 'customed prelude—  
 " How should's't thou, of all men, smite, and save us ? "  
 Guesses what is like to prove the sequel—  
 " Egypt's flesh-pots—nay, the drought was better."  
 Oh, the crowd must have emphatic warrant !  
 Theirs, the Sinai-forehead's cloven brilliance,  
 Right arm's rod-sweep, tongue's imperial feat.  
 Never dares the man put off the prophet.

And there is more than a desecrating stupidity in the public:  
 there is the feeling that it has purchased a right to intrude into  
 the secrets of the poet's privacy :

Hardly shall I tell my joys and sorrows,  
 Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving :  
 I am mine and yours—the rest be all men's,  
 Karshish, Cleon, Norbert and the fifty.  
 Let me speak this once in my true person,  
 Not as Lippo, Roland or Andrea.

In another poem, he presents Shakespeare as similarly eager  
 to protect the sanctity of his own personal experience :

Here's my work : does work discover—  
 What was rest from work—my life ?  
 Did I live man's hater, lover ?  
 Leave the world at peace, at strife ?  
 Call earth ugliness or beauty ?  
 See things there in large or small ?  
 Use to pay its lord my duty ?  
 Use to own a lord at all ?  
 Blank of such a record truly  
 Here's the work I hand, this scroll,  
 Yours to take or leave ; as duly  
 Mine remains the unproffered soul.  
 So much, no whit more, my debtors—  
 How should one like me lay claim  
 To that largess elders, betters  
 Sell you cheap their souls for, fame ?

And Shakespeare is made to denounce those who take a poet's writings as a documentation of his biography :

Which of you did I enable  
 Once to step 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 right to make a rout of  
 Rarities he found inside ?

It is easy to see how strong and persistent was this sentiment in Browning : *Pictor Ignotus* appeared in 1842, *One Word More* in 1855, and the poem just quoted, *At the Mermaid*, in 1876. Nor, in the 1876 volume is its expression confined to one poem. There is the poem *House*, in which he riotously scorns the prying inquisitiveness of a sacriligious public :

Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself ?  
 Do I live in a house you would like to see ?  
 Is it scant of gear, has it store of pelf ?  
 " Unlock my heart with a sonnet-key ? "

Invite the world, as my betters have done ?  
 " Take notice : this building remains on view,  
 Its suites of reception every one,  
 Its private apartment and bedroom too ;

" For a ticket, apply to the Publisher."  
 No : thanking the public, I must decline.  
 A peep through my window, if folk prefer :  
 But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine !

I have mixed with a crowd and heard free talk  
 In a foreign land where an earthquake chanced :  
 And a house stood gaping, nought to baulk  
 Man's eye wherever he gazed or glanced.

The whole frontage shaven sheer,  
 The inside gaped : exposed to day,  
 Right and wrong and common and queer,  
 Bare, as the palm of your hand it lay.



The owner ? Oh, he had been crushed, no doubt !  
 " Odd tables and chairs for a man of wealth !  
 What a parcel of musty old books about !  
 He smoked,—no wonder he lost his health !

" I doubt if he bathed before he dressed.  
 A brasier ?—the pagan, he burned perfumes !  
 You see it is proved, what the neighbours guessed :  
 His wife and himself had separate rooms."

Friends, the goodman of the house at least  
 Kept house to himself till an earthquake came :  
 'Tis the fall of the frontage permits you feast  
 On the inside arrangement you praise or blame.

Outside should suffice for evidence :  
 And whoso desires to penetrate  
 Deeper, must dive by the spirit-sense—  
 No optics, like yours, at any rate !

" Hoity-toity ! A street to explore,  
 Your house the exception ! ' *With this same key*  
*Shakespeare unlocked his heart,*' once more !  
 Did Shakespeare ? If so, the less Shakespeare he ! "

Doubtless Browning's extreme sensitiveness to this public prying was the nervous expression of his ideal individualism. But it did not finally distort his own sense of responsibility to the public. He could often transmute his indignation into hilarious nonchalance. He affects an amused indifference for the British Public at the beginning of *The Ring and The Book* :

British Public, ye who like me not,  
 (God love you !)—whom I yet have laboured for,  
 Perchance more careful whose runs may read  
 Than erst when all, it seemed, could read who ran,—  
 Perchance more careless whoso reads may praise  
 Than late when he who praised and read and wrote  
 Was apt to find himself the self-same one.

At the end of it there is a more serious recognition of a situation which is not finally hopeless :

So, British Public, who may like me yet,  
 (Marry and amen !)

In any case, there are always the few who read and really understand, and for whom the poet's word is the most prized event in a life-time's routine, as epoch-making as the casual encounter with a man who had once seen Shelley in the flesh :

. . . the memory I started at—  
 My starting moves your laughter.  
 I crossed a moor, with a name of its own  
 And a certain use in the world no doubt,  
 Yet a hand's-breadth of it shows alone  
 'Mid the blank miles round about :  
 For there I picked up on the heather  
 And there I put inside my breast  
 A moulted feather, an eagle-feather !  
 Well, I forget the rest.

It is, moreover, one of the most patent facts of history that though the true poet's reward lies not with his contemporaries, but with posterity, yet that reward is certain as is the rising of the stars :

My poet holds the future fast,  
 Accepts the coming age's duty,  
 Their present for this past.

Keats who fished the murex up, the Tyrian shell enclosing the dye of dyes, may have subsisted meagrely on porridge, whilst Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes and Nokes, putting blue into their line, gorged on turtle and claret. But Keats's light was saved only in due course to be spent in grander effulgence. It was a light helping wayfarers to find a footing in the well-nigh impenetrably dark world.

How, then, is the poet to serve mankind ? Though Browning is continually speaking his mind about the place of the artist in the world, it is much more the office of the painter and the musician about which he speaks than that of the poet. But their essential function is the same. There is, moreover, one poem in which he specifically indicates what a poet should do, and what he should not do. *Transcendentalism* distinguishes sharply between the versifier who expounds profound and mystical philosophy and the real poet who creates the things

the other writes thoughts about. The poem offers a real distinction between poetry and rhetoric on the one hand, and between poetry and thought on the other :

Stark naked thought is in request enough :  
Speak prose and hollo it till Europe hears.

For its promulgation, a megaphone, not a harp, is the fitting instrument. But stark-naked thought, and even mystified philosophies like Jacob Boehme's, with subtler meanings of what roses say, are not poetry. The poet is some stout mage like him of Halberstadt, John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about. He—that is the poet—

He, with a " look you ! " vents a brace of rhymes,  
And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,  
Over us, under, round us every side,  
Nay, in and out the tables and chairs  
And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all,—  
Buries us with a glory, young once more,  
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.

The musician, Abt Vogler, also fastens on this creative function as the distinctive gift of the artist, though dramatically he exalts the musician's exercise of it as superior to that of painter or poet. Awe-struck at the palace of sound he has created whilst extemporising upon his organ, he contemplates the miracle of it :

All through my keys that gave their sounds to a wish of my soul,  
All through my soul that praised as its wish flowed visibly forth,  
All through music and me !

Had his work been a painter's or a poet's half the mystery of it would not have been perceived, for explanations of it would have been proffered, another exhibition of skill, another technical triumph :

. . . For think, had I painted the whole,  
Why, there it had stood, to see, nor the process so wonder-worth :  
Had I written the same, made verse—still, effect proceeds from cause,  
Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told ;  
It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,  
Painter and poet are proud in the artist-list enrolled !

But, as it is, sheer music, it is indubitably the inexplicable manifestation of a miracle—man's one gift whereby he comes nearest in power to God :

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,  
 Existent behind laws, that made them and, lo, they are !  
 And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,  
 That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.  
 Consider it well : each tone of our scale in itself is nought ;  
 It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said :  
 Give it to me to use ! I mix it with two in my thought :  
 And there ! Ye have heard and seen : consider and bow the head !

In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning dwells at some length on the creative function of the poet's imagination and on the relation between poetic fiction and historic fact in the elucidation of ultimate truth. Poetry of the dramatic or informally dramatic kind is "mimic creation, galvanism for life," which is as close to divine creation as man can reach and is manifestly a glory portioned in the scale. The poet

Repeats God's process in man's due degree,  
 Attaining man's proportionate result,—  
 Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps.  
 Inalienable, the arch-prerogative  
 Which turns thought, act—conceives, expresses too !  
 No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free,  
 May so project his surplusage of soul  
 In search of body, so add self to self  
 By owning what lay ownerless before,—  
 So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms—  
 That, although nothing which had never life  
 Shall get life from him, be, not having been,  
 Yet, something dead may get to live again,  
 Something with too much life or not enough,  
 Which, either way imperfect, ended once :  
 An end whereat man's impulse intervenes,  
 Makes new beginning, starts the dead alive,  
 Completes the incomplete and saves the thing.

It is a repetition of Elisha's feat :

“ 'Tis a credible feat  
 With the right man and way.”

As Browning's argument runs in the above passage, he has passed from a description of the faculty of imaginative creation to an assertion of its value to man in his primary task of living rightly :

it is the glory and the good of Art  
That Art remains the one way possible  
Of speaking truth.

Fra Lippo Lippi, with less concern for the philosophic explanation of artistic creation, is more immediately occupied in telling what the artist does and in pointing out what good may come from his so doing. The painter, excited by the sight of beauty about him, transfers the image to his canvas, and so reveals to the world a beauty for which it had hitherto had no eyes :

For, don't you mark ? we're made so that we love  
First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see ;  
And so they are better, painted—better to us,  
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that ;  
God uses us to help each other so,  
Lending our minds out.

As man's responsiveness to larger and larger visions of more and more beauty increases, he is deepening his understanding of the universe :

. . . You've seen the world  
—The beauty and the wonder and the power,  
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,  
Changes, surprises,—and God made it all !  
For what ? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,  
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,  
The mountain round it and the sky above,  
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,  
These are the frame to.

Even if he feels no further impulse to delve into the mysteries of nature, he has a sufficient reward :

Or say there's beauty with no soul at all—  
(I never saw it—put the case the same—)  
If you get simple beauty and nought else,  
You get about the best thing God invents :  
That's somewhat : and you'll find the soul you have missed,  
Within yourself, when you return him thanks.

But for most who have been stirred by the artist's joy in beauty there are further questionings :

. . . What is it all about ?  
 To be passed over, despised ? or dwelt upon,  
 Wondered at ? oh, this last of course !—you say.  
 . . . Oh, oh,  
 It makes me mad to see when men shall do  
 And we in our graves ! This world's no blot for us,  
 Nor blank ; it means intensely and means good :  
 To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

As it is Lippo who is expounding his view of art as a way to truth, no one will mistake it for a proposition that the final value of painting lies in its didactic efficiency. He has always had the preachers against him :

“ Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer ! ”  
 Strikes in the Prior : “ when your meaning's plain  
 “ It does not say to folk—remember matins,  
 “ Or, mind you fast next Friday ! ”

And he is contemptuous of their desire to moralise art :

. . . Why, for this  
 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.

And he is scornful of those whose moral nature is so excited by his life-like representation of the slaves who are toasting St. Laurence on a grid-iron that they have gratified their indignation by scratching out the faces of the slaves in their religious fervour.

Nor is it difficult to see how Browning reconciles his objection to the pseudo-poet of *Transcendentalism* with his assertion of the high spiritual worth of art. It is bound up with his belief in “ the moment,” his sense that under the stress of circumstance when the whole conscious and sub-conscious being is mightily stirred, there come intuitive apprehensions of essential life which can be excited in no other way. These constitute for man a fuller, a profounder, and a truer awareness of the universe than do his less excited, less impassioned, more casual,

more orderly and more rational perceptions. They are the moments

Sure though seldom . . .  
 When the spirits true endowments  
 Stand out plainly from its false ones,  
 And apprise it if pursuing  
 Or the right way or the wrong way  
 To its triumph or undoing.  
 There are flashes struck from midnights,  
 There are fire-flames noondays kindle,  
 Whereby piled-up honours perish,  
 Whereby swollen ambitions dwindle,  
 While just this or that poor impulse  
 Which, for once, had play unstified,  
 Seems the sole work of a life-time  
 That away the rest have trifled.

Most commonly, and for most people, these moments are manifested when they are struck by the love of woman. Their validity, however, in these cases is conditioned so variously by the inexhaustible variations of human personality. But the artist is one whose personality is especially rich in the sensitiveness favourable to the excitation of these moments of vision. Hence he not only has his own richer store of visions to pass on to the rest of us ; he has also the faculty not only to pass on the vision but to excite in us the apprehensiveness which gives us the faculty of experiencing the vision for ourselves. His work is literally a revelation, and carries the conviction of actual revelation. He is, next to God, the surest guide to truth :

How look a brother in the face and say  
 " Thy right is wrong, eyes hast thou yet art blind,  
 " Thine ears are stuffed and stopped, despite their length :  
 " And, oh, the foolishness thou countest faith ! "  
 Say this as silverly as tongue can troll—  
 The anger of the man may be endured,  
 The shrug, the disappointed eyes of him  
 Are not so bad to bear—but here's the plague,  
 That all this trouble comes of telling truth,  
 Which truth, by when it reaches him, looks false,  
 Seems to be just the thing it would supplant,  
 Nor recognizable by whom it left :  
 While falsehood would have done the work of truth.

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.  
So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,  
Beyond mere imagery on the wall,—  
So, note by note, bring music from your mind,  
Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived,—  
So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,  
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.