

# BROWNING ONCE MORE \*

W. J. ALEXANDER

WHEN our President asked me to speak to the English Association on the present and future position of Browning's poetry, I conceived that the task imposed upon me was that of gathering the varying judgments of the critics of Browning in the publications of the first quarter of this twentieth century, of comparing them with those current in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when Browning's reputation had reached its high-water mark, and of making some conjectures thence as to his permanent place in English literature. That I should find some falling off in reputation I took for granted, from the tendency of the present century to react against the ideas and art of the Victorian era. A little investigation, however, showed me that I had a task much less straightforward and satisfactory. For I discovered that, at least during the last dozen years, there has been practically no evaluation of Browning's work either in periodicals or in more permanent publications; that, further, even in the earlier half of the first quarter of our century, not much appeared; and this was written by men who had already attained middle-age in the year 1900, so that it could not be accepted as expressing the ideas of the later era. I am therefore under the necessity of substituting for definite statements of contemporary criticism my own hazardous surmises as to the modern attitude towards Browning's poetry, and of the reasons why he has sunk in general estimation. That he has sunk, I infer not only from the general anti-Victorian tendencies of our day, and from the silence of the periodicals just alluded to, but also from various *obiter dicta* which have caught my attention in literature of recent years.

Notwithstanding this apparent decline of Browning's fame, the notices which the centenary of his birth produced in 1912 were very decidedly laudatory, and that was the last occasion on which any attempt was made to estimate the position of the poet. That year was marked by several appreciations in the leading literary periodicals—not very numerous perhaps; and as it seems to me, fewer than those which commemorated the centenary of Byron's death. In 1914 a volume containing poems by Browning and his wife, hitherto unpublished, was the cause of some notices; but

\* A paper read before the Toronto branch of the English Association, October 1925.

these poems were themselves unimportant, and the review was naturally brief and cursory. Finally, while writing this paper, I was much pleased to find in the *London Mercury* for June 1925 an article on Browning by Mr. Edward Shanks, the well-known poet, and assistant-editor of the *Mercury*. This at least should represent criticism up to date; unfortunately it is very brief. I therefore lack adequate information as to how Browning is regarded by the new age.

In consequence of all this, the light-heartedness with which I undertook this paper vanished. How am I, myself a relict of the Victorian era, to represent the views of this later time, and—what is more difficult still—to supply the reasons for these views? Is it possible for me—even now, 113 years after the poet's birth—to suggest any sort of plausible estimate as to Browning's permanent place in English letters? No one who is not familiar with the history of criticism has any conception of how unreliable are the judgments of any individual critic, when not influenced and supported by some large body of expert opinion, such as we have in regard to what we call our classics. All interesting criticism is, of course, the outcome of individual impressions; but the idiosyncracies of the critic are likely to count for too much, unless they are under the control of the accumulated body of opinion of the elect.

On the other hand, the opinions expressed in the leading reviews of the centenary year are of some help. A poet's status one hundred years after his birth is regarded as of considerable significance—and surely with justice. The writers of the reviews all take for granted that Browning's work is a permanent contribution to our greater poetry, and are not less laudatory, although perhaps more discriminating, than the critics of the last quarter of a century preceding. In the *Quarterly*, for example, Mr. Percy Lubbock refers to the fact that Browning seems to be less read than formerly, and continues: "And yet one needs only to re-read his work to feel its matchless energy, its various power, its swift and sudden beauty close upon the mind and call out with undiminished keenness the old response." In the *English Review* Mr. Darrel Figgis writes: "He has emerged, or is likely to emerge, in the foremost rank of English poets." In similar sense speaks Mr. Francis Gribble in the *Nineteenth Century*, as do also the anonymous writers in the *Spectator*, the *Athenaeum*, the *Saturday Review*. Notwithstanding, after this, there is silence broken as far as I can discover by the *London Mercury* alone. This article, while speaking in the highest terms of certain parts and aspects of the poet's work, seems to lend confirmation to the surmise that Browning

has lost hold and is comparatively of little interest to the new generations. Taking, then, for granted that his old poetic reputation has declined, I proceed to enquire what are the reasons for this decline. Does the poetry of Browning belong to that large class which for one reason or another wins the suffrage of contemporaries only? Or has it the elements of permanence? Have influences of a passing nature caused the partial eclipse?

One great source of distaste for Browning's poetry is the so-called philosophy which it embodies, the very thing which in the 70's and 80's contributed very greatly to its vogue. To the literature of our own day we are naturally more drawn than to that of the past, because we find reflected there what is specially characteristic of, and interesting to, our own time. But we must note that in this very advantage there is a presumption of decay. For fundamental things are permanent, and belong to every age; the superficial are subject to fashion and change. Transitoriness is specially characteristic of those wide interpretations which we call philosophic,—the general outlook of successive generations on the great facts of life. Intellectual conceptions become obsolete more rapidly than the records of direct perceptions, of emotion, of the sense of beauty. The art of Greece is more permanently satisfactory than its science or philosophy. It is not the intellectual system of Dante or Milton or Shelley that attracts readers among the later generations. Now, this element of decay is larger in Browning's poetry than usual; a certain system of ideas is not merely influential beneath the surface, but is consciously put in the foreground of his poetry. Philosophic views are especially repellent to those who have just escaped from them,—and more so, if they are still prevalent in society, or have a plausibility that makes them dangerous; whereas views that are remote, and have little or no appeal to the existing generation, are regarded with indifference. The theology of *Paradise Lost* is more likely to repel or irritate than that of the *Iliad*.

We are separated from the Victorians by one of those deep cleavages that from time to time show themselves in literary history. There have been division and conflict, and this has begotten hostility, misunderstanding, even dislike and contempt. There was no such break in the course of the nineteenth century; hence no such relations exist between the generation of Matthew Arnold and Dante Rossetti on the one hand, and that of Tennyson and Browning on the other; or again, between this last-mentioned generation and that of Wordsworth and Coleridge. But analogous cleavages do

separate Wordsworth or Dryden from his predecessors. The consequence is, in each of these two last cases, an excessive reaction as we now see against dominant tendencies; hence misunderstanding, undervaluation and peevish dislike are felt by these generations for the literature of their fathers. So, in the last half of the seventeenth century, a narrow and biassed criticism of Shakespeare and Spenser, and an absurd over-valuation of the merits of Waller and Denham. And later on, Wordsworth and Keats are incapable of a just appreciation of Pope. Is there not a parallelism in this century? I dwell on this, to suggest that some of the disabilities under which the poetry of Browning now labours may in the ultimate valuation of his work count for much less.

I suggest this with the greater confidence because I seem to see a certain unfairness and, as it were, personal pique in some of the characteristic criticism of the last twenty-five years. One can well understand and sympathize with an impatience at the Victorian's failure to apprehend conditions in the world about him, or the full significance of advances in knowledge. But personally I cannot accept the implication often involved that the great Victorians were consciously insincere, or deliberately shut their eyes to the truth. The nineteenth century was adding more rapidly to the stock of knowledge than any other century, I presume, in history. To apprehend fully and to digest this must be a matter of time. It is no mark of insincerity or stupidity that the age should have failed in completing so huge a task. With the community as with the individual, such a process must have its stages. Inconsistencies in its beliefs, in its feelings, above all in its wider generalizations, are not necessarily hypocritical, or cowardly, or stupid. Our latest psychology emphasizes the inevitable importance of non-rational factors in man's constitution; least of all, then, to us in this day should it seem surprising or a matter of reproach against the Victorians that they did not divest themselves of all the prepossessions in which they had been educated, or failed to perceive the full implication of what they had discovered. Carlyle rejected the supernatural creed in which he had been nurtured, but how much of Puritanism clung to him to the end! Was he a coward, or insincere? Matthew Arnold, though the representative in poetry of the current of thought which was to dominate this new age, could not divest himself of much of the sentiments and prepossessions of the orthodox Christianity in which he had been reared. Browning, who seemed to many of his contemporaries to have a philosophical profundity and originality which now-a-days is quite properly denied to him, embodies in his poetry one

of those partial rationalizations of Christianity characteristic of that time, as did Strauss or, later on, Arnold himself. Such compromises may, in our opinion, be utterly untenable. But so too may Milton's justification of the way of God to man, or Dante's conception of the universe. Browning surely was as sincere in his ideas as they in theirs. Manifestly his optimism had one great source in his temperament; and I do not see, when the Victorian reaction has spent itself, why these views of his should prevent his being accepted as one of our great poets. I think that this matter of doctrine is the chief cause of the present eclipse of Browning, but also that it is a cause that will count for less and less as years go on, provided his work has the fundamental qualities of great poetry.

So much for his philosophy: I pass now to other characteristics which stand in the way of his fame, but are not necessarily fatal to it. First, the bulk and unevenness of his work. It is said that Browning is the most voluminous of all English poets; a not unnatural accompaniment, he is very uneven. It is generally agreed that nothing written after 1868—the year of *The Ring and the Book*—reaches the level of his best work. Yet he lived and wrote diligently some twenty-five years after that date, and the product amounts to—roughly speaking—one-third of the whole. But such over-production and unevenness are certainly not fatal to admittance into the ranks of the great poets. According to Arnold, Wordsworth produced nothing of the highest class after 1818, though he continued to write for thirty years longer; and Wordsworth's latest critic, Mr. Garrod, even limits his best production to ten years. In course of time there is a canon of an author's work established which lets the reader know what to read, and what, at least in making a writer's acquaintance, may be passed over. There is no likelihood that one's first acquaintance with Shakespeare will be made through *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Titus Andronicus*, or *All's Well that Ends Well*. For Browning, however, not yet has an authoritative selection of poems been made which may do for him what Arnold's volume did for Wordsworth.

In the third place: apart from the chance of being repelled by encountering at the outset inferior work, one cannot deny that first impression of Browning upon an average reader is scarcely likely to be favourable. Even men of this century, who boast their emancipation from hampering conventionalities and proprieties, the idiosyncracies and individuality of Browning's style are likely to repel or embarrass. His poetry, more than perhaps that of any other Englishman of his century, departs from the traditional

norm. We may boast our openness of mind; but it is only natural that the accustomed, the regular, should for any ordinary reader be more congenial and find easier acceptance. Browning's contemporaries objected to the irregularity and lack of charm in his versification, the unusual and prosaic character of his diction, the harshness of his sound-combinations, and, in general, to his disregard—both in content and in style—of beauty in its commonly accepted and narrower sense. It is a curious fact that these supposed objectionable qualities are also to be found in one of the most esteemed poets of this later age,—Mr. Hardy.

Both these poets base their work on a fully conscious philosophy. In their verse-forms both manifest resourcefulness and novelty to the point of oddity. In both we find indifference to the ordinary distinctions of poetic and prose diction, boldness in the use of words, and a certain indescribable tang in style like the flavour of an olive—a sort of harshness very unlike the sugary smoothness which was cultivated in the later half of the nineteenth century. There is even something in common as regards the character of the subjects selected for poetic treatment. If there is a great difference in the attitude of the twentieth century to these two poets, I take it the chief reason is the optimism of the one poet and the pessimism of the other—the natural outcome, in each case, of the temperament of the man. Such characteristics of manner and subject, unpleasing to Browning's first readers, ought not—theoretically at least—to antagonize an age which has reacted against tradition and conventional beauty, and professes to care rather for force, truth and seriousness in poetry.

Then, there is the much-talked-of obscurity of Browning—an obscurity which, in my opinion, is not—as some critics assert—to be found only in certain poems like the notorious *Sordello*, but generally in his writing—even in many of the short lyrics. Yet this obscurity—as is admitted on all hands—does not arise from haziness in Browning's ideas, but from the condensation and swiftness of his thought, the subtlety and novelty of his conceptions. On the whole, and after the initial difficulty has been overcome, these qualities are a source of power—not of weakness. They do, of course, presuppose some intellectual vigour in the reader, some readiness for mental activity. Yet surely later views emphasize the fact that art is no mere source of passive enjoyment, but something serious, a stimulus to intense imaginative activity. Browning says somewhere in his correspondence—"I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or a game of dominoes to an idle man."

To conclude: these characteristics of which I have been speaking have been and always will be a hindrance, for the ordinary reader, in the approach to Browning's poetry, but will not necessarily prevent its acceptance by the serious lover of art. I now proceed to consider what are the real defects of this poetry—defects not occasional and accidental, but characteristic:—for all poets, even the greatest, have these; with the best poets they are the defects of their qualities. In the case of Browning the most characteristic of these is a tendency to be interested in the merely intellectual at the expense of the imaginative and creative. And so we find that often for the rich and suggestive aesthetic intuitions which poetry should embody are substituted the abstractions of a very lively and vigorous intellect. This is sometimes true of poems as a whole, e.g. *Fifine at the Fair*: sometimes it mingles itself with genuine poetic material; e.g., in *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day*. It is this tendency that makes the later additions to *Saul* poetically inferior to the original poem, and may perhaps spoil for later readers the once greatly admired *Rabbi Ben Ezra*.

Another real defect—not unconnected with the preceding—is that, though conciseness and condensation are often sources of power to Browning, yet elsewhere the restless activity of his mind, his lavish command of language and illustration, and a certain hurry and impatience of restraint, result in a wearisome diffuseness. This quality is notably exhibited in association with a partiality for subtle special pleading, such as is shown in Bishop Blougram, and in a more objectionable fashion in Prince Hohenstiel Schwangaun.

Finally—something which I confess to feeling, though I find it nowhere mentioned by the critics, a tendency to slopping over (if I may use the American phrase) excessive sentimentality, a straining after emotional emphasis. I find this, for example, in one of his most quoted and popularly admired short poems, *Evelyn Hope*.

I have thus reviewed what seems likely to stand either temporarily or permanently in the way of the success of Browning's poetry. I now pass from the negative to the positive. Notwithstanding, can one justify an expectation that Browning's work is destined to hold permanent place in the great heritage of English literature? You know well that in such matters no argument can convince the unbeliever. The conviction of the greatness of poetry is not a matter of logic, but of feeling and perception, and must arise directly from contact with the poetry itself. I shall therefore attempt, for those, if any, who might contemplate addressing themselves seriously to the study of Browning, to give some sugges-

tions which may be helpful, and at the same time may emphasize what in Browning—as I think—justifies the expectation of his being, like Chaucer or Spenser or Wordsworth, reckoned in the number of our great poets.

As a preliminary, it is necessary to guard the novice against beginning with the wrong poems. If Browning's poetry is to last, it will certainly not be on the basis of those later volumes, to which I have already referred, that were subsequent to *The Ring and the Book*. Nor, primarily, on *The Ring and the Book* itself—great as is the power and interest of that work for those who are already admirers of Browning. The accumulation of literature grows overwhelmingly large, and conditions are no longer favourable to long poems. *The Ring and the Book*, they say, is the longest poem in the language; it certainly numbers more lines than the *Iliad* and is twice as long as *Paradise Lost*,—and that too with no such broad and epic themes to justify its length. Nor, whatever the excellences and great merits they unquestionably have, will Browning survive in virtue of his plays—a form of art for which his genius was admittedly not specially well fitted; nor again in virtue of those longer somewhat obscure monologues which he wrote at the outset of his literary career: *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, *Sordello*. Leaving then all these out of consideration, we have still a very considerable body of poetry, certainly sufficient in amount to build a great reputation upon—say three fair-sized volumes made up of a variety of poems—none very long, and many short. These appeared either in the series of *Bells and Pomegranates* in '42, '44, and '45, or in the volume *Men and Women* of '55, and the similar volume *Dramatis Personae* of '64. If the unbeliever is to be won over, if Browning is to survive, it will be mainly by reason of these. Naturally, some of the poems thus included are not successful: others are no better than those we have discarded. But, in general, they seem to me to justify such opinions as those of Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Figgis quoted at the opening of this paper.

You might for example—I speak to those of you who are little familiar with Browning's work—begin with the most notable of his single publications, *Men and Women*, a volume of some 300 pages in the ordinary format. Of the fifty poems contained, not more than some five or six in my opinion fall below the first rank. Or I might suggest a less formidable introduction, and ensure perhaps a more favourable impression of the poet's varied power, by a selection. I would chose—let us say—*Love among the Ruins*, *The Bishop orders his Tomb*, *Confessions*, *A Woman's Last Word*, *The Heretic's Tragedy*, *Apparitions*, *Childe Roland*, *My Star*, *Cavalier*

*Tunes, Saul*, (the original poem §§ I-IX), *Caliban, One Way of Love, The Laboratory, Herve Riel, Up at a Villa, The Pied Piper, Meeting at Night, Mesmerism, My Last Duchess, Two in the Campagna, The Italian in England, How they brought the Good News, Any Wife to any Husband, The Lost Leader, Fra Lippo Lippi*. Here are twenty-five poems, none very long, some very short; each a masterpiece in its own kind. By a masterpiece I do not necessarily mean a poem which belongs to the very highest sort of poetry, but one which attains extraordinary excellence in its own poetic class—a bit of human experience brought home to the imagination with all the power which language can exercise. Vergil's *Aeneid* is a masterpiece, so is *Othello*; but so also in narrower limits and in varied spheres are Gray's *Elegy*, Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, Scott's *Lochinvar*, Burns's *To a Mouse*. In each of these the poet successfully achieves the poetic aim; he enables his reader to live imaginatively a possible experience, and he attains that end by the methods of poetic art:—by the general conception, by the unity of the whole, by the effectiveness and magic of the language, and by the nature, power and suggestiveness of the details. I do not think that from the pages of any other writer of the 19th century could we gather an equal number of eminently successful poems so varied in subject and treatment as can be found in the work of Browning at the height of his career—from the early 40's to the early 60's. This body of poetry is unique as compared with the work of any other writer of the century in the extent and variety of its representation of character, in the relative unimportance of external physical nature, in the freshness and frankness—for the Victorian era—of its treatment of the theme of love, and in the passionate force of many of its best love lyrics.

In the preliminary study of Browning, a quality which is likely to strike any reader is the breadth of power,—the variety of theme, treatment, style. In this respect he is certainly unequalled among his immediate contemporaries or predecessors. Take *Saul*, which seems to Mr. Arthur Symonds "to unite almost every poetic gift in consummate and perfect fusion." "Music, song, the beauty of nature, the joy of life, the glory and greatness of man, the might of love, human and divine: all these set to an orchestral accompaniment of magnificent, continuous harmony, now hushed as the wind among the woods at evening, now strong and sonorous as the storm battling with mountain pine"; and put beside it *The Laboratory*—lacking in what is popularly called beauty, with its odd, irregular, and at first sight clumsy versification, admirably suggestive notwithstanding of the breathless eagerness

Bishop of St. Praxed's Church, or the Old Cavalier of the Songs, or My Last Duchess, or the Italian exile in England.

The power of projecting himself into characters not his own—which I had supposed no one would question—is, oddly enough, denied him by Mr. Shanks in the article already mentioned. Since his article would seem to have special importance as the most adequate indication of the existing trend of opinion, I may fittingly conclude with some remarks thereupon. The main thesis is that Browning by innate aptitudes is a *lyric* poet; and hence the more close he comes to the expression of his personal feelings and experiences, the more successful his work. Further, that this personal inspiration came mainly from Elizabeth Barrett. The critic says, after a brief summary of her life before marriage, "Is it fantastic to think that something of this is reflected in *The Ring and the Book*, in the story of the rescue of Pompilia from her brutal husband by Giuseppe Caponsacchi? For this poem seems to me to represent the watershed of Browning's poetic life, being the last in which it is possible to detect the breath of personal passion."

So Mr. Shanks thinks it a misfortune that much of Browning's poetry consists of attempts at the purely dramatic, at interpretation of other minds, at the rendering of experiences not his own; it is when he made these attempts that he deserved Wilde's witticism, "Meredith was a prose Browning, and so was Browning." After naming some of the dramatic poems, the critic continues: "All these are great works of literature, but they are not poetry in the sense in which Browning's best and most personal utterances are poetry." Again, Mr. Shanks says "Poems like *Bishop Blougram's Apology* and *Andrea del Sarto* are not poems of the highest rank, are indeed only with difficulty to be reckoned poems at all."

We note that the objection depends upon Mr. Shanks's definition of poetry; Browning's first critics made a similar objection. So did Jeffrey against Wordsworth's poetry; in short, so have the orthodox critics always been asserting whenever poetry has made a marked advance; but one would think that the latest generations, with their boasted breadth and openness of mind, had learned that no one can prescribe limits to the poets. Further, on this particular matter one distrusts Mr. Shanks's judgment because of what is found elsewhere in the article. The reason for condemning these non-lyrical pieces is (he says) that Browning lacks dramatic power. Yet when expressing the highest admiration for several pieces in lyrical form, Mr. Shanks is forced to admit "These pieces are not, as far as we know, founded directly on experiences in the world of fact, and they are not therefore in that sense personal,

may indeed be regarded, as Browning intended them to be regarded, as dramatic." Surely here the writer contradicts the thesis of his own paper. Browning, then, *has* dramatic power: and Mr. Shanks never even alludes to why it is that this power abandons the poet as soon as he adopts a non-lyrical form. Does it, even in Mr. Shanks's own opinion? When he speaks of *The Ring and the Book*, he does not presumably limit his approval merely to the 30 dedicatory lines to his dead wife with which Book I. closes. Again I quote the article: "We can take the three works, *Men and Women*, *Dramatis Personae*, and *The Ring and the Book* as being the central mass of his poetry, and as also being that part of it which was inspired by Elizabeth Barrett." Now, the great bulk of these three volumes consist of pieces like *Andrea del Sarto*, and are "interpretations of other minds" and "the rendering of experiences not his own." Of the three books he names, the part in any sense lyrical is a small fraction. What, then, are the grounds for this admiration for the three books?

On the other hand, of Browning's lyrics our critic speaks with the highest praise. Quoting some stanzas from *The Lost Mistress*, "Artistry", he says, "can go not further than the cunning, apparently careless arrangement of these lines." Again comparing *The Lost Mistress*, *The Last Ride Together*, "and some dozens more of the same order, with pieces obviously dramatic", he quotes a part of *The Last Ride Together* and comments, "It would be waste of space to argue that this is a better piece than that with which I have contrasted it, for it is one of the loveliest and most triumphant poems in the language." Finally, in the last paragraph of his article the writer seems to distrust his own main position, and certainly gives a clue to his disapproval of the blank verse monologues, for he says:—

It may be that a taste, growing ever stronger and stronger, for personal poetry, for poetry that is, as it were, an impassioned diary, has led me to exaggerate the extent of this element in Browning, and its importance. I would not be taken as under-rating the other side of him, the subtle intellect, the immense powers of observation and construction.

For a comment on this confession, I turn for the last time to Mr. Abercrombie's book:

There is a heresy, very prevalent nowadays; it is the doctrine that poetry can only be lyrical; even epics and dramas, this doctrine supposes, can only justify themselves as poetry by their lyrical moments, their suddenly kindled raptures of imagination

that detach themselves and escape from a non-lyrical purpose . . . This opinion is not new. . . But it has lately taken on the airs of dogma.

No one critic can speak for an age, but Mr. Abercrombie, who has the great advantage of not being a Victorian, but of belonging to these later generations and the new order of things, thinks that the preference for lyrical work (which leads Mr. Shanks to condemn those very poems on which the reputation of our poet for the last fifty years has been mainly based) is itself one of the transient variations of literary fashion so frequently manifested. And, for that matter, as I have pointed out, the critic himself is half apologetic, and seems to distrust the main contention of his article as perhaps springing from the personal equation. In any case, there certainly enters some inconsistency or obscurity into his discussions, and even perhaps indication of lack of familiarity with his subject. Further, I note the extremely favourable judgment he pronounces on part of the poet's work—sufficient in amount to carry Browning down the stream of time with Chaucer, Pope, Wordsworth, Tennyson and the rest whom we reckon our greater poets. So I venture to claim even this last utterance of the newest generation of critics as evidence for what I have been trying to show, that notwithstanding some present partial eclipse, Browning—to use the words of one of the centenary critics already quoted—“has emerged in the foremost rank of English poets, and one has only to read his work to feel its matchless energy, its various power, its swift and sudden beauty.”