EDWARD DOWDEN

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Содержание

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

—Balaustion's Adventure.>

Editor's Preface

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

It is almost possible to count on the fingers of one hand the few men who could successfully write a book of this character and scope. The Editor believes that, in the present case, one of the very few has been found who had the qualifications required. Much of the apparent obscurity of Browning is due to his habit of climbing up a precipice of thought, and then kicking away the ladder by which he climbed. Dr Dowden has with singular success readjusted the steps, so that readers may follow the poet's climb. Those who are not daunted by the Paracelsus and Sordello chapter, where the subject requires some close and patient attention, will find vigorous narrative and pellucid exposition interwoven in such a way as to keep them in intimate and constantly closer touch with the "biography of Browning's mind."

D.M.

Preface

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

The materials accessible for a biography, apart from Browning's published writings, are not copious. He destroyed many letters; many, no doubt, are in private hands. For some parts of his life I have been able to add little to what Mrs Orr tells. But since her biography of Browning was published a good deal of interesting matter has appeared. The publication of "The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning" has enabled me to construct a short, close-knit narrative of the incidents that led up to Browning's marriage. From that date until the death of Mrs Browning her "Letters," edited by Mr Kenyon, has been my chief source. My method has not been that of quotation, but the substance of many letters is fused, as far as was possible, into a brief, continuous story. Two privately issued volumes of Browning's letters, edited by Mr T.J. Wise, and Mr Wise's "Browning Bibliography" have been of service to me. Mr Gosse's "Robert Browning, Personalia," Mrs Ritchie's "Tennyson, Ruskin and Browning," the "Life of Tennyson" by

his son, Mr Henry James's volumes on W.W. Story, letters of Dante Rossetti, the diary of Mr W.M. Rossetti, with other writings of his, memoirs, reminiscences or autobiographies of Lady Martin, F.T. Palgrave, Jowett, Sir James Paget, Gavan Duffy, Robert Buchanan, Rudolf Lehmann, W.J. Stillman, T.A. Trollope, Miss F.P. Cobbe, Miss Swanwick, and others have been consulted. And several interesting articles in periodicals, in particular Mrs Arthur Bronson's articles "Browning in Venice" and "Browning in Asolo," have contributed to my narrative. For some information about Browning's father and mother, and his connection with York Street Independent Chapel, I am indebted to Mr F. Herbert Stead, Warden of "The Robert Browning Settlement," Walworth. I thank Messrs Smith, Elder and Co., as representing Mr R. Barrett Browning, for permission to make such quotations as I have ventured to make from copyright letters. I thank the general Editor of this series, the Rev. D. Macfadyen, for kind and valuable suggestions.

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

determine.

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

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

E.D.

Chapter I
Childhood and Youth

The ancestry of Robert Browning has been traced[1] to an earlier Robert who lived in the service of Sir John Bankes of Corfe Castle, and died in 1746. His eldest son, Thomas, "was granted a lease for three lives of the little inn, in the little hamlet of East Woodyates and parish of Pentridge, nine miles south-west of Salisbury on the road to Exeter." Robert, born in 1749, the son of this Thomas, and grandfather of the poet, became a clerk in the Bank of England, and rose to be principal in the Bank Stock Office. At the age of twenty-nine he married Margaret Tittle, a lady born in the West Indies and possessed of West Indian property. He is described by Mrs Orr as an able, energetic, and worldly man. He lived until his grandson was twenty-one years old. His first wife was the mother of another Robert, the poet's father, born in 1781. When the boy had reached the age of seven he lost his mother, and five years later his father married again. This younger Robert when a youth desired to become an artist, but such a career was denied to him. He longed for a University education, and, through the influence of his stepmother, this also was refused. They shipped the young man to St Kitts, purposing that he should oversee the West Indian

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

estate. There, as Browning on the authority of his mother told Miss Barrett, "he conceived such a hatred to the slave-system … that he relinquished every prospect, supported himself while there in some other capacity, and came back, while yet a boy, to his father's profound astonishment and rage."[2] At the age of twenty-two he obtained a clerkship in the Bank of England, an employment which, his son says, he always detested. Eight years later he married Sarah Anna, daughter of William Wiedemann, a Dundee shipowner, who was the son of a German merchant of Hamburg. The young man's father, on hearing that his son was a suitor to Miss Wiedemann, had waited benevolently on her uncle "to assure him that his niece would be thrown away on a man so evidently born to be hanged."[3] In 1811 the new-married pair settled in Camberwell, and there in a house in Southampton Street Robert Browning—an only son—was born on May 7, 1812. Two years later (Jan. 7, 1814) his sister, Sarah Anna—an only daughter—known in later years as Sarianna, a form adopted by her father, was born. She survived her brother, dying in Venice on the morning of April 22, 1903.[4]

Robert Browning's father and mother were persons who for their own sakes deserve to be remembered. His father, while

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[2] "Letters of R.B. and E.B.B.," ii. 477.

[3] Letter of R.B. to E.B.B.

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

efficient in his work in the Bank, was a wide and exact reader of literature, classical as well as modern. We are told by Mrs Orr of his practice of soothing his little boy to sleep "by humming to him an ode of Anacreon," and by Dr Moncure Conway that he was versed in mediaeval legend, and seemed to have known Paracelsus, Faustus, and even Talmudic personages with an intimate familiarity. He wrote verses in excellent couplets of the eighteenth century manner, and strung together fantastic rhymes as a mode of aiding his boy in tasks which tried the memory. He was a dexterous draughtsman, and of his amateur handiwork in portraiture and caricature—sometimes produced, as it were, instinctively, with a result that was unforeseen—much remains to prove his keen eye and his skill with the pencil. Besides the curious books which he eagerly collected, he also gathered together many prints—those of Hogarth especially, and in early states. He had a singular interest, such as may also be seen in the author of *The Ring and the Book*, in investigating and elucidating complex criminal cases.[5] He was a lover of athletic sports and never knew ill-health. For the accumulation of riches he had no talent and no desire, but he had a simple wealth of affection which he bestowed generously on his children and his friends. "My father," wrote Browning, "is tender-hearted to a fault.... To all women and children he is chivalrous." "He had," writes Mr W.J. Stillman, who knew Browning's father in Paris in his elder years, "the perpetual juvenility of a blessed

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

child. If to live in the world as if not of it indicates a saintly nature, then Robert Browning the elder was a saint; a serene, untroubled soul, conscious of no moral or theological problem to disturb his serenity, and as gentle as a gentle woman; a man in whom, it seemed to me, no moral conflict could ever have arisen to cloud his frank acceptance of life, as he found it come to him.... His unworldliness had not a flaw."[6] To Dante Rossetti he appeared, as an old man, "lovable beyond description," with that "submissive yet highly cheerful simplicity of character which often … appears in the family of a great man, who uses at last what the others have kept for him." He is, Rossetti continues, "a complete oddity—with a real genius for drawing—but caring for nothing in the least except Dutch boors,—fancy, the father of Browning!—and as innocent as a child." Browning himself declared that he had not one artistic taste in common with his father—"in pictures, he goes 'souls away' to Brauwer, Ostade, Teniers … he would turn from the Sistine Altar-piece to these—in music he desiderates a tune 'that has a story connected with it.'" Yet Browning inherited much from his father, and was ready to acknowledge his gains. In *Development*, one of the poems of his last volume, he recalls his father's sportive way of teaching him at five years old, with the aid of piled-up chairs and tables—the cat for Helen, and Towzer and Tray as the Atreidai,—the story of the siege of Troy, and, later, his urging the boy to read the tale "properly told" in the translation of Homer by his favourite poet,

[6] "Autobiography of a Journalist," i. 277.

Pope. He lived almost to the close of his eighty-fifth year, and if he was at times bewildered by his son's poetry, he came nearer to it in intelligent sympathy as he grew older, and he had for long the satisfaction of enjoying his son's fame.

The attachment of Robert Browning to his mother—"the true type of a Scottish gentlewoman," said Carlyle—was deep and intimate. For him she was, in his own phrase, "a divine woman"; her death in 1849 was to Browning almost an overwhelming blow. She was of a nature finely and delicately strung. Her nervous temperament seems to have been transmitted—robust as he was in many ways—to her son. The love of music, which her Scottish-German father possessed in a high degree, leaping over a generation, reappeared in Robert Browning. His capacity for intimate friendships with animals—spider and toad and lizard—was surely an inheritance from his mother. Mr Stillman received from Browning's sister an account of her mother's unusual power over both wild creatures and household pets. "She could lure the butterflies in the garden to her," which reminds us of Browning's whistling for lizards at Asolo. A fierce bull-dog intractable to all others, to her was docile and obedient. In her domestic ways she was gentle yet energetic. Her piety was deep and pure. Her husband had been in his earlier years a member of the Anglican communion; she was brought up in the Scottish kirk. Before her marriage she became a member of the Independent congregation, meeting for worship at York Street, Lock's Fields, Walworth, where now stands the Robert Browning Hall. Her

husband attached himself to the same congregation; both were teachers in the Sunday School. Mrs Browning kept, until within a few years of her death, a missionary box for contributions to the London Missionary Society. The conditions of membership implied the acceptance of "those views of doctrinal truth which for the sake of distinction are called Calvinistic." Thus over the poet's childhood and youth a religious influence presided; it was not sacerdotal, nor was it ascetic; the boy was in those early days, as he himself declared, "passionately religious." Their excellent pastor was an entirely "unimaginative preacher of the Georgian era," who held fast by the approved method of "three heads and a conclusion." Browning's indifference to the ministrations of Mr Clayton was not concealed, and on one occasion he received a rebuke in the presence of the congregation. Yet the spirit of religion which surrounded and penetrated him was to remain with him, under all its modifications, to the end. "His face," wrote the Rev. Edward White, "is vividly present to my memory through the sixty years that have intervened. It was the most wonderful face in the whole congregation—pale, somewhat mysterious, and shaded with black, flowing hair, but a face whose expression you remember through a life-time. Scarcely less memorable were the countenances of his father, mother and sister."[7]

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

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

rules; there he would sit for an hour before some chosen picture, and in later years he could recall the "wonderful Rembrandt of Jacob's vision," the Giorgione music-lesson, the "triumphant Murillo pictures," "such a Watteau," and "all the Poussins."[8]

Among modern poets Byron at first with him held the chief place. Boyish verses, written under the Byronic influence, were gathered into a group when the writer was but twelve years old; a title—*Incondita*—was found, and Browning's parents had serious intentions of publishing the manuscript. Happily the manuscript, declined by publishers, was in the end destroyed, and editors have been saved from the necessity of printing or reprinting these crudities of a great poet's childhood. Their only merit, he assured Mr Gosse, lay in "their mellifluous smoothness." It was an event of capital importance in the history of Browning's mind when—probably in his thirteenth year—he lighted, in exploring a book-stall, upon a copy of one of the pirated editions of Shelley's *Queen Mab* and other poems. Through the zeal of his good mother on the boy's behalf the authorised editions were at a later time obtained; and she added to her gift the works, as far as they were then in print, of Keats.[9] If ever there was a period of *Sturm und Drang* in Browning's life, it was during the years in which he caught

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

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

from Shelley the spirit of the higher revolt. A new faith and unfaith came to him, radiant with colour, luminous with the brightness of dawn, and uttered with a new, keen, penetrating melody. The outward conduct of his life was obedient in all essentials to the good laws of use and wont. He pursued his various studies—literature, languages, music—with energy. He was diligent—during a brief attendance—in Professor Long's Greek class at University College—"a bright, handsome youth," as a classfellow has described him, "with long black hair falling over his shoulders." He sang, he danced, he rode, he boxed, he fenced. But below all these activities a restless inward current ran. For a time he became, as Mrs Orr has put it, "a professing atheist and a practising vegetarian;" and together with the growing-pains of intellectual independence there was present a certain aggressive egoism. He loved his home, yet he chafed against some of its social limitations. Of friendships outside his home we read of that with Alfred Domett, the 'Waring' of his poems, afterwards the poet and the statesman of New Zealand; with Joseph Arnould, afterwards the Indian judge; and with his cousin James Silverthorne, the 'Charles' of Browning's pathetic poem *May and Death*. We hear also of a tender boyish sentiment, settling into friendship, for Miss Eliza Flower, his senior by nine years, for whose musical compositions he had an ardent admiration: "I put it apart from all other English music I know," he wrote as late as 1845, "and fully believe in it as *the* music we all waited for." With her sister Sarah, two years younger than

Eliza, best known by her married name Sarah Flower Adams and remembered by her hymn, written in 1840, "Nearer my God to Thee," he discussed as a boy his religious difficulties, and in proposing his own doubts drew forth her latent scepticism as to the orthodox beliefs. "It was in answering Robert Browning;" she wrote, "that my mind refused to bring forward argument, turned recreant, and sided with the enemy." Something of this period of Browning's *Sturm und Drang* can be divined through the ideas and imagery of *Pauline.*[10]

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

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

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

Shelley opened up for his young and enthusiastic follower new vistas leading towards the infinite, towards the unattainable Best. Browning's only piece of prose criticism—apart from scattered comments in his letters—is the essay introductory to that volume of letters erroneously ascribed to Shelley, which was published when Browning was but little under forty years old. It expresses his mature feelings and convictions; and these doubtless contain within them as their germ the experience of his youth.[11] Shelley appears to him as a poet gifted with a fuller perception of nature and man than that of the average mind, and striving to embody the thing he perceives "not so much with reference to the many below, as to the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth—an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul." If Shelley was deficient in some subordinate powers which support and reinforce the purely poetic gifts, he possessed the highest faculty and in this he lived and had his being. "His spirit invariably saw and spoke from the last height to which it had attained." What was "his noblest and predominating characteristic" as a poet? Browning attempts to give it definition: it was "his simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the absolute, and of Beauty and Good in the concrete, while he

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

throws, from his poet's station between both, swifter, subtler, and more numerous films for the connexion of each with each, than have been thrown by any modern artificer of whom I have knowledge." In other words it was Shelley's special function to fling an aerial bridge from reality, as we commonly understand that word, to the higher reality which we name the ideal; to set up an aerial ladder—not less solid because it is aerial—upon the earth, whose top reached to heaven. Such was Browning's conception of Shelley, and it pays little regard either to atheistic theory or vegetarian practice.

A time came when Robert Browning must make choice of a future career. His interests in life were manifold, but in some form or another art was the predominant interest. His father remembered his own early inclinations, and how they had been thwarted; he recognised the rare gifts of his son, and he resolved that he should not be immured in the office of a bank. Should he plead at the bar? Should he paint? Should he be a maker of music, as he at one time desired, and for music he always possessed an exceptional talent? When his father spoke to him, Robert Browning knew that his sister was not dependent on any effort of his to provide the means of living. "He appealed," writes Mr Gosse, "to his father, whether it would not be better for him to see life in the best sense, and cultivate the powers of his mind, than to shackle himself in the very outset of his career by a laborious training, foreign to that aim. … So great was the confidence of the father in the genius of his son that the former

at once acquiesced in the proposal." It was decided that he should take to what an old woman of the lake district, speaking of "Mr Wudsworth," described as "the poetry business." The believing father was even prepared to invest some capital in the concern. At his expense *Paracelsus, Sordello*, and *Bells and Pomegranates* were published.

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

Pauline, published without the writer's name—his aunt Silverthorne bearing the cost of publication—was issued from the press in January 1833.[12] Browning had not yet completed his twenty-first year. When including it among his poetical works in 1867, he declared that he did so with extreme repugnance

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

and solely with a view to anticipate unauthorised republication of what was no more than a "crude preliminary sketch," entirely lacking in good draughtsmanship and right handling. For the edition of twenty years later, 1888, he revised and corrected *Pauline* without re-handling it to any considerable extent. In truth *Pauline* is a poem from which Browning ought not to have desired to detach his mature self. Rarely does a poem by a writer so young deserve better to be read for its own sake. It is an interesting document in the history of its author's mind. It gives promises and pledges which were redeemed in full. It shows what dropped away from the poet and what, being an essential part of his equipment, was retained. It exhibits his artistic method in the process of formation. It sets forth certain leading thoughts which are dominant in his later work. The first considerable production of a great writer must always claim attention from the student of his mind and art.

The poem is a study in what Browning in his *Fifine* terms "mental analysis"; it attempts to shadow forth, through the fluctuating moods of the dying man, a series of spiritual states. The psychology is sometimes crude; subtle, but clumsily subtle; it is, however, essentially the writer's own. To construe clearly the states of mind which are adumbrated rather than depicted is difficult, for Browning had not yet learnt to manifest his generalised conceptions through concrete details, to plunge his abstractions in reality. The speaker in the poem tells us that he "rudely shaped his life to his immediate wants"; this is

intelligible, yet only vaguely intelligible, for we do not know what were these wants, and we do not see any rude shaping of his life. We are told of "deeds for which remorse were vain"; what were these deeds? did he, like Bunyan, play cat on Sunday, or join the ringers of the church bells? "Instance, instance," we cry impatiently. And so the story remains half a shadow. The poem is dramatic, yet, like so much of Browning's work, it is not pure drama coming from profound sympathy with a spirit other than the writer's own; it is only hybrid drama, in which the *dramatis persona* thinks and moves and acts under the necessity of expounding certain ideas of the poet. Browning's puppets are indeed too often in his earlier poems moved by intellectual wires; the hands are the hands of Luria or Djabal, but the voice is the showman's voice. A certain intemperance in the pursuit of poetic beauty, strange and lovely imagery which obscures rather than interprets, may be regarded as in *Pauline* the fault or the glory of youth; a young heir arrived at his inheritance will scatter gold pieces. The verse has caught something of its affluent flow, its wavelike career, wave advancing upon wave, from Shelley:

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

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

By virtue of its central theme *Pauline* is closely related to

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

right and needful to speak of the "lesson" of Browning's poem, and the lesson of *Pauline* is designed to inculcate first loyalty to a man's highest power, and secondly a worshipping loyalty and service to that which transcends himself, named by the speaker in *Pauline* by the old and simple name of God.

Was it the problem of his own life—that concerning the conduct of high, intellectual and spiritual powers—which Browning transferred to his art, creating personages other than himself to be exponents of his theme? We cannot tell; but the problem in varied forms persists from poem to poem. The poet imagined as twenty years of age, who makes his fragment of a confession in *Pauline*, is more than a poet; he is rather of the Sordello type than of the type represented in Eglamor and Aprile.[13] Through his imagination he would comprehend and possess all forms of life, of beauty, of joy in nature and in humanity; but he must also feel himself at the centre of these, the lord and master of his own perceptions and creations; and yet, at the same time, this man is made for the worship and service of a power higher than self. How is such a nature as this to attain its true ends? What are its special dangers? If he content himself with the exercise of the subordinate faculties, intellectual dexterity, wit, social charm and mastery, he is lost; if he should place himself at the summit, and cease to worship and

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

to love, he is lost. He cannot alter his own nature; he cannot ever renounce his intense consciousness of self, nor even the claim of self to a certain supremacy as the centre of its own sympathies and imaginings. So much is inevitable, and is right. But if he be true to his calling as poet, he will task his noblest faculty, will live in it, and none the less look upward, in love, in humility, in the spirit of loyal service, in the spirit of glad aspiration, to that Power which leans above him and has set him his earthly task.

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

Two incidents in the history of a soul—studied by the speaker under the wavering lights of his hectic malady and fluctuating moods of passion—are dealt with in a singularly interesting and original way. He describes, with strange and beautiful imagery,

the cynical, bitter pleasure—few of us do not know it—which the intellectual faculties sometimes derive from mocking and drawing down to their own level the spiritual powers, the intuitive powers, which are higher than they, higher, yet less capable of justification or verification by the common tests of sense and understanding. The witchcraft of the brain degrades the god in us:

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

What he presents with such intensity of imaginative power Browning must have known—even if it were but for moments—by experience. And again, there is impressive truth and originality in the description of the state of the poet's mind which succeeded the wreck of his early faith and early hopes inspired by the voice of Shelley—the revolutionary faith in liberty, equality and human perfectibility. Wordsworth in *The Prelude*—unpublished when Browning wrote *Pauline*—which is also the history of a poet's mind, has described his own experience of the loss of all these shining hopes and lofty abstractions, and the temper of mind which he describes is one of moral chaos and spiritual despair. The poet of *Pauline* turns from political and social abstractions to real life, and the touch of reality awakens him as if from a splendid dream; but his mood is not so sane

as that of despair. He falls back, with a certain joy, upon the exercise of his inferior powers; he wakes suddenly and "without heart-wreck ":

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

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

The attention of Mr W.J. Fox, a Unitarian minister of note, had been directed to Browning's early unpublished verse by

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

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

Chapter II
Paracelsus and Sordello

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

In 1842 or 1843 he wrote a drama in five acts to which was given the name "Only a Player-girl"; the manuscript lay for long in his portfolio and never saw the light. "It was Russian," he tells Miss Barrett, "and about a fair on the Neva, and booths and droshkies and fish-pies and so forth, with the Palaces in the background."[15] Late in life, at Venice, Browning became acquainted with an old Russian, Prince Gagarin, with whom he competed successfully for an hour in recalling folk-songs and national airs of Russia caught up during the visit of 1833-34. "His memory," said Gagarin, "is better than my own, on which

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

I have hitherto piqued myself not a little."[16] Perhaps it was his wanderings abroad that made Browning at this time desire further wanderings. He thought of a diplomatic career, and felt some regret when he failed to obtain an appointment for which he had applied in connection with a mission to Persia.

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

In its combination of thought with passion, and not less in its expression of a certain premature worldly wisdom, *Paracelsus* is

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

an extraordinary output of mind made by a writer who, when his work was accomplished, had not completed his twenty-third year. The poem is the history of a great spirit, who has sought lofty and unattainable ends, who has fallen upon the way and is bruised and broken, but who rises at the close above his ruined self, and wrings out of defeat a pledge of ultimate victory. In a preface to the first edition, a preface afterwards omitted, Browning claims originality, or at least novelty, for his artistic method; "instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether excluded." The poem, though dramatic, is not a drama, and canons which are applicable to a piece intended for stage-representation would here—Browning pleads—be rather a hindrance than a help. Perhaps Browning regarded the action which can be exhibited on the stage as something external to the soul, and imagined that the naked spirit can be viewed more intimately than the spirit clothed in deed and in circumstance. If this was so, his conceptions were somewhat crude; with the true dramatic poet action is the hieroglyph of the soul, and many a secret may be revealed in this language, amassing as it does large meanings into one luminous symbol, which cannot be set forth in an elaborate intellectual analysis. We think to probe the

depths, and perhaps never get far below the surface. But the flash and outbreak of a fiery spirit, amid a tangle of circumstance, springs to the surface from the very centre, and reveals its inmost energies.

Paracelsus, as presented in the poem, is a man of pre-eminent genius, passionate intellect, and inordinate intellectual ambition. If it is meant that he should be the type of the modern man of science, Browning has missed his mark, for Paracelsus is in fact almost as much the poet as the man of science; but it is true that the cautious habits of the inductive student of nature were rare among the enthusiastic speculators of Renaissance days, and the Italian successor of Paracelsus—Giordano Bruno—was in reality, in large measure, what Browning has here conceived and exhibited. Paracelsus is a great revolutionary spirit in an epoch of intellectual revolution; it is as much his task to destroy as to build up; he has broken with the past, and gazes with wild-eyed hopes into the future, expecting the era of intellectual liberty to dawn suddenly with the year One, and seeing in himself the protagonist of revolution. Such men as Paracelsus, whether their sphere be in the political, the religious, or the intellectual world, are men of faith; a task has been laid on each of them; a summons, a divine mandate, has been heard. But is the summons authentic? is the mandate indeed divine? In the quiet garden at Würzburg, while the autumn sun sinks behind St Saviour's spire, Festus—the faithful Horatio to this Hamlet of science—puts his questions and raises his doubts first as to the end and

aim of Paracelsus, his aspiration towards absolute knowledge, and secondly, as to the means proposed for its attainment—means which reject the service of all predecessors in the paths of knowledge; which depart so widely from the methods of his contemporaries; which seek for truth through strange and casual revelations; which leave so much to chance. Very nobly has Browning represented the overmastering force of that faith which genius has in itself, and which indeed is needed to sustain it in the struggle with an incredulous or indifferent world. The end itself is justified by the mandate of God; and as for the means, truth is not to be found only or chiefly by gathering up stray fragments from without; truth lies buried within the soul, as jewels in the mine, and the chances and changes and shocks of life are required to open a passage for the shining forth of this inner light. Festus is overpowered less by reason than by the passion of faith in his younger and greater fellow-student; and the gentle Michal is won from her prophetic fears half by her affectionate loyalty to the man, half by the glow and inspiration of one who seems to be a surer prophet than her mistrusting self. And in truth the summons to Paracelsus is authentic; he is to be a torch-bearer in the race. His errors are his own, errors of the egoism of genius in an age of intellectual revolution; he casts away the past, and that is not wise, that is not legitimate; he anticipates for himself the full attainment of knowledge, which belongs not to him but to humanity during revolving centuries; and although he sets before himself the service of man as the

outcome of all his labours—and this is well—at the same time he detaches himself from his fellow-men, regards them from a regal height, would decline even their tribute of gratitude, and would be the lofty benefactor rather than the loving helpmate of his brethren. Is it meant then that Paracelsus ought to have contented himself with being like his teacher Trithemius and the common masters of the schools? No, for these rested with an easy self-satisfaction in their poor attainments, and he is called upon to press forward, and advance from strength to strength, through attainment or through failure to renewed and unending endeavour. His dissatisfaction, his failure is a better thing than their success and content in that success. But why should he hope in his own person to forestall the slow advance of humanity, and why should the service of the brain be alienated from the service of the heart?

There are many ways in which Browning could have brought Paracelsus to a discovery of his error. He might have learnt from his own experience the aridity of a life which is barren of love. Some moment of supreme pity might have come to him, in which he, the possessor of knowledge, might have longed to offer consolation to some suffering fellow, and have found the helplessness of knowledge to console. Browning's imagination as a romantic poet craved a romantic incident and a romantic *mise-en-scène*. In the house of the Greek conjuror at Constantinople, Paracelsus, now worn by his nine years' wanderings, with all their stress and strain, his hair already streaked with grey, his spirit

somewhat embittered by the small success attending a vast effort, his moral nature already somewhat deteriorated and touched with the cynicism of experience and partial failure, shall encounter the strange figure of Aprile, the living wraith of a poet who has also failed, who "would love infinitely and be loved," and who in gazing upon the end has neglected all the means of attainment; and from him, or rather by a reflex ray from this Aprile, his own error shall be flashed on the consciousness of the foiled seeker for knowledge. The invention of Browning is certainly not lacking in the quality of strangeness in beauty; yet some readers will perhaps share the feeling that it strains, without convincing, the imagination. As we read the first speeches addressed by the moon-struck poet to the wandering student of science, and read the moon-struck replies, notwithstanding the singular beauty of certain dramatic and lyrical passages, we are inclined to ask —Is this, indeed, a conjuror's house at Constantinople, or one of Browning's "mad-house cells?" and from what delusions are the harmless, and the apparently dangerous, lunatic suffering? The lover here is typified in the artist; but the artist may be as haughtily isolated from true human love as the man of science, and the fellowship with his kind which Paracelsus needs can be poorly learnt from such a distracted creature as Aprile. It is indeed Aprile's example and the fate which has overtaken him rather than his wild words which startle Paracelsus into a recognition of his own error. But the knowledge that he has left love out of his scheme of life is no guarantee that he

will ever acquire the fervour and the infinite patience of love. The whole scene, with its extravagant poetic beauties and high-pitched rhetoric, leaves a painful impression of unreality, not in the shallower but in the deepest sense of that word.

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

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

chews upon his worldly success and extracts its acrid juices. This is not the romantic melancholy of youth, which dreams of infinite things, but the pain of manhood, which feels the

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

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

A certain manly protectiveness towards Festus and Michal, with their happy Aennchen and Aureole in the quiet home at Einsiedeln, remains to Paracelsus; there is in it now more than a touch of "the devotion to something afar from the sphere of our sorrow."

When, driven from Basil as a quack amid the hootings of the crowd, Paracelsus once again "aspires"; but it is from a lower level, with energy less certain, and with a more turbid passion.

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

Like the dim circlet floating round a pearl.

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

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

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

In the dim and narrow cell of the Hospital of St Sebastian, where he lies dying, Paracelsus at last "attains"—attains something higher than a Professor's chair at Basil, attains a rapture, not to be expressed, in the joy which draws him onward, and a lucid comprehension of the past that lies behind. All night the faithful Festus has watched beside the bed; the mind of the dying man is working as the sea works after a tempest, and strange wrecks of memory float past in troubled visions. In the dawning light the clouds roll away, a great calm comes upon his

spirit, and he recognises his friend. It is laid upon him, before he departs, to declare the meaning of his life. This life of his had been no farce or failure; in his degree he has served mankind, and what *is* the service of man but the true praise of God? He perceives now the errors of the way; he had been dazzled by knowledge and the power conferred by knowledge; he had not understood God's plan of gradual evolution through the ages; he had laboured for his race in pride rather than in love; he had been maddened by the intellectual infirmities, the moral imperfections of men, whereas he ought to have recognised even in these the capacities of a creature in progress to a higher development. Now, at length, he can follow in thought the great circle of God's creative energy, ever welling forth from Him in vast undulations, ever tending to return to Him again, which return Godwards is already foretold in the nature of man by august anticipations, by strange gleams of splendour, by cares and fears not bounded by this our earth.

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

We receive from *Paracelsus* an impression of the affluence of youth. There is no husbanding of resources, and perhaps too little reserve of power. Where the poet most abandons himself

to his ardour of thought and imagination he achieves his highest work. The stress and tension of his enthusiasm are perhaps too continuous, too seldom relieved by spaces of repose. It is all too much of a Mazeppa ride; there are times when we pray for a good quarter of an hour of comfortable dulness, or at least of wholesome bovine placidity. The laws of such a poem are wholly determined from within. The only question we have a right to ask is this—Has the poet adequately dealt with his subject, adequately expressed his idea? The division of the whole into five parts may seem to have some correspondency with the five acts of a tragedy; but here the stage is one of the mind, and the acts are free to contract or to expand themselves as the gale of thought or passion rises or subsides. If a spiritual anemometer were invented it would be found that the wind which drives through the poem maintains often and for long an astonishing pace. The strangely beautiful lyric passages interspersed through the speeches are really of a slower movement than the dramatic body of the poem; they are, by comparison, resting-places. The perfumed closet of the song of Paracelsus in Part IV. is "vowed to quiet" (did Browning ever compose another romanza as lulling as this?), and the Maine glides so gently in the lyric of Festus (Part V.) that its murmuring serves to bring back sanity to the distracted spirit of the dying Aureole. There are youthful excesses in *Paracelsus*; some vague, rhetorical grandeurs; some self-conscious sublimities which ought to have been oblivious of self; some errors of over-emphasis; some extravagances

of imagery and of expression. The wonderful passage which describes "spring-wind, as a dancing psaltress," passing over the earth, is marred by the presence of "young volcanoes"

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

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

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

of genius amid the dangers and temptations of life. Here we may rightly disregard the order of publication, and postpone the record of external incidents in Browning's poetical development, in order to place *Sordello* in its true position, side by side with *Paracelsus*.

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

"The historical decoration," wrote Browning, in the dedicatory letter of 1863, to his friend Milsand, "was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study." Undoubtedly the history of a soul is central in the poem; but the drawings of Italian landscape, so sure in outline, so vivid in colour; the views of old Italian city life, rich in the tumult of townsfolk, military chieftains, men-at-arms; the pictures of sombre interiors, and southern gardens, the hillside castle amid its vines, the court of love with its contending minstrels, the midnight camp lit by its fires; and,

added to these, the Titianesque portraits of portly magnifico and gold-haired maiden, and thought-worn statist make up an environment which has no inconsiderable poetic value of its own, feeding, as it does, the inner eye with various forms and dyes, and leaving the "spirit in sense" more wealthy. With a theme so remote from the common consciousness of his own day, Browning conceived that there would be an advantage in being his own commentator and interpreter, and hence he chose the narrative in preference to the dramatic form; thus, he supposed he could act the showman and stand aside at times, to expound his own intentions. Unhappily, in endeavouring to strengthen and concentrate his style, he lost that sense of the reader's distance from himself which an artist can never without risk forget; in abbreviating his speech his utterance thickened; he created new difficulties by a legerdemain in the construction of sentences; he assumed in his public an alertness of intelligence equal to his own. When it needs a leaping-pole to pass from subject to verb across the chasm of a parenthesis, when a reader swings himself dubiously from relative to some one of three possible antecedents, when he springs at a meaning through the fissure of an undeveloped exclamatory phrase, and when these efforts are demanded again and again, some muscular fatigue naturally ensues. Yet it is true that when once the right connections in these perplexing sentences have been established, the sense is flashed upon the mind with singular vividness; then the difficulty has ceased to exist. And thus, in two successive stages of study,

the same reader may justly censure *Sordello* for its obscurity of style, and justly applaud it for a remarkable lucidity in swiftness. Intelligent, however, as Browning was, it implied a curious lack of intelligence to suppose that a poem of many thousand lines written I in shorthand would speedily find decipherers. If we may trust the words of Westland Marston, recorded by Mr W.M. Rossetti in *The Preraphaelite Brotherhood Journal* (26 February 1850), Browning imagined that his shorthand was Roman type of unusual clearness: "Marston says that Browning, before publishing *Sordello*, sent it to him to read, saying that this time I the public should not accuse him at any rate of being unintelligible." What follows in the *Journal* is of interest, but can hardly be taken as true to the letter: "Browning's system of composition is to write down on a slate, in prose, what he wants to say, and then turn it into verse, striving after the greatest amount of condensation possible; thus, if an exclamation will suggest his meaning, he substitutes this for a whole sentence." In climbing an antique tower we may obtain striking flashes of prospect through the slits and eyelet-holes which dimly illuminate the winding stair, but to combine these into an intelligible landscape is not always easy. Browning's errors of style are in part attributable to his unhappy application of a passage in a letter of Caroline Fox which a friend had shown him. She stated that her acquaintance John Sterling had been repelled by the "verbosity" of *Paracelsus*: "Doth Mr Browning know," she asked, "that Wordsworth will devote a fortnight or more to the discovery of a single word that

is the one fit for his sonnet?"[17] Browning was determined to avoid "verbosity"; but the method which seems to have occurred to him was that of omitting many needful though seemingly insignificant words, and jamming together the words that gleam and sparkle; with the result that the mind is at once dazzled and fatigued.

Sordello, the Italian singer of the thirteenth century, is conceived by Browning as of the type which he had already presented in the speaker of *Pauline*, only that here the poet is not infirm in will, and, though loved by Palma, he is hardly a lover. Like the speaker of *Pauline* he is preoccupied with an intense self-consciousness, the centre of his own imaginative creations, and claiming supremacy over these. He craves some means of impressing himself upon the world, some means of deploying the power that lies coiled within him, not through any gross passion for rule but in order that he may thus manifest himself to himself at the full. He is as far as possible removed from that type of the worshipping spirit exhibited in Aprile, and in the poet Eglamor, whom Sordello foils and subdues in the contest of song. The fame as a singer which comes suddenly to him draws Sordello out of his Goito solitude to the worldly society of Mantua, and his experiences of disillusion and half voluntary self-degradation are those which had been faintly shadowed forth in *Pauline*, and exhibited more fully—and yet with a difference—in the Basil experiences of Paracelsus. Like

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

the poet of *Pauline*, after his immersion in worldliness, Sordello again seeks solitude, and recovers a portion of his higher self; but solitude cannot content one who is unable to obtain the self-manifestation which his nature demands without the aid of others who may furnish an external body for the forces that lie suppressed within him. Suddenly and unexpectedly the prospect of a political career opens before him. May it not be that he will thus obtain what he needs, and find in the people the instrument of his own thoughts, his passions, his aspirations, his imaginings, his will? May not the people become the body in which his spirit, with all its forces, shall incarnate itself? Coming into actual acquaintance with the people for the first time, the sight of their multiform miseries, their sorrows, even their baseness lays hold of Sordello; it seems as if it were they who were about to make *him* their instrument, the voice through which their inarticulate griefs should find expression; he is captured by those whom he thought to capture. By all his personal connections he is of the Imperial party—a Ghibellin; but, studying the position of affairs, he becomes convinced that the cause of the Pope is one with the cause of the people. At this moment vast possibilities of political power suddenly widen upon his view; Sordello, the minstrel, a poor archer's son, is discovered to be in truth the only son of the great Ghibellin chieftain, Salinguerra; he is loved by Palma, who, with her youth and beauty, brings him eminent station, authority, and a passion of devoted ambition on his behalf; his father flings upon Sordello's neck the baldric which constitutes

him the Emperor's representative in Northern Italy. The heart and brain of Sordello become the field of conflict between fierce, contending forces. All that is egoistic in his nature cries out for a life of pride and power and joy. At best it is but little that he could ever do to serve the suffering multitude. And yet should he falter because he cannot gain for them the results of time? Is it not his part to take the single step in their service, though it can be no more than a step? In the excitement of this supreme hour of inward strife Sordello dies; but he dies a victor; like Paracelsus he also has "attained"; the Imperial baldric is found cast below the dead singer's feet.

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

had read that bitter sentence which declares that "collective man outstrips the individual":—

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

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

These prolonged studies—*Paracelsus, Sordello*, and, on a more contracted scale, *Pauline*—each a study in "the development of a soul," gain and lose through the immaturity of

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

and so admirable is it that in our infirmity we are tempted to believe that the process of flaying and dissection alters the person of a man or woman as Swift has said, considerably for the worse.

Chapter III
The Maker of Plays

The publication of *Paracelsus* did not gain for Browning a large audience, but it brought him friends and acquaintances who gave his life a delightful expansion in its social relations. John Forster, the critic, biographer and historian, then unknown to him, reviewed the poem in the *Examiner* with full recognition of its power and promise. Browning gratefully commemorated a lifelong friendship with Forster, nearly a score of years later, in the dedication of the 1863 edition of his poetical works. Mrs Orr recites the names of Carlyle, Talfourd, R. Hengist Horne, Leigh Hunt, Procter, Monckton Milnes, Dickens, Wordsworth, Landor, among those of distinguished persons who became known to Browning at this period.[18] His "simple and enthusiastic manner" is referred to by the actor Macready in his diary; "he looks and speaks more like a youthful poet than any man I ever saw." Browning's face was one of rare intelligence and full of changing expression. He was not tall, but in early years he was slight, was graceful in his movements, and held his head high. His dark

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

brown hair hung in wavy masses upon his neck. His voice had in early manhood a quality, afterwards lost, which Mr Sharp describes as "flute-like, clear, sweet and resonant." Slim, dark, and very handsome are the words chosen by Mrs Bridell-Fox to characterise the youthful Browning as he reappeared to her memory; "And—may I hint it?"—she adds, "just a trifle of a dandy, addicted to lemon-coloured kid gloves and such things, quite 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form.' But full of ambition, eager for success, eager for fame, and, what is more, determined to conquer fame and to achieve success." Yet the correct and conventional Browning could also fire up for lawlessness—"frenetic to be free." He was hail-fellow well-met, we are told—but is this part of a Browning legend?—with tramps and gipsies, and he wandered gladly, whether through devout sympathy or curiosity of mood we know not, into Little Bethels and other tents of spiritual Ishmael.

From Camberwell Browning's father moved to a house at Hatcham, transporting thither his long rows of books, together with those many volumes which lay still unwritten in the "celle fantastyk" of his son. "There is a vast view from our greatest hill," wrote Browning; a vast view, though Wordsworth had scorned the Londoner's hill—"Hill? *we* call that, such as that, a *rise*." Here he read and wrote, enjoyed his rides on the good horse "York," and cultivated friendship with a toad in the pleasant garden, for he had a peculiar interest, as his poems show, in creatures that live a shy, mysterious life apart from that of man, and the

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

An introduction to Macready which took place at Mr Fox's house towards the close of November 1835 was fruitful in consequences. A month later Browning was Macready's guest at Elstree, the actor's resting-place in the country. His fellow-traveller, then unknown to him, in the coach from London was

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

By August the poet had pledged himself to achieve this first dramatic adventure. The play was produced at Covent Garden on May 1st, 1837, by Macready, who himself took the part of Strafford. Helen Faucit, then a novice on the stage, gave an adequate rendering of the difficult part of Lady Carlisle. For the rest, the complexion of the piece, as Browning describes it, after one of the latest rehearsals, was "perfect gallows." Great historical personages were presented by actors who strutted or slouched, who whimpered or drawled. The financial distress

at Covent Garden forbade any splendour or even dignity of scenery or of costumes.[19] The text was considerably altered—and not always judiciously—from that of the printed play, which had appeared before its production on the stage. Yet on the first night *Strafford* was not damned, and on the second it was warmly applauded.[20] After the fifth performance the wretched Pym refused to save his mother England even once more, and the play was withdrawn. Browning declared to his friends that never again, as long as he might live, would he write a play. Whining not being to his taste, he averted his eyes and set himself resolutely to work upon *Sordello*.

"I sail this morning for Venice," Browning wrote to a friend on Good Friday, 1838. He voyaged as sole passenger on a merchantman, and soon was on friendliest terms with the rough kindly captain. For the first fortnight the sea was stormy and Browning suffered much; as they passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, Captain Davidson aided him to reach the deck, and a pulsing of home-pride—not home-sickness—gave their origin to the patriotic lines beginning, "Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the north-west died away." Under the bulwark of the *Norham*

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

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

Castle, off the African coast, when the fancy of a gallop on his Uncle Reuben's horse suddenly presented itself in pleasant contrast with the tedium of the hours on shipboard, he wrote in pencil, on the flyleaf of Bartoli's Simboli, that most spirited of poems which tell of the glory of motion—*How they brought the good news from Ghent to Aix*. The only adventure of the voyage was the discovery of an Algerine pirate ship floating keel uppermost; it righted suddenly under the stress of ropes from the *Norham Castle*, and the ghastly and intolerable dead—Algerines and Spaniards—could not scare the British sailors eager for loot; at last the battered hulk was cast loose, and its blackness was seen reeling slowly off "into the most gorgeous and lavish sunset in the world." Having visited Venice, Vicenza and Padua—cities and mountain solitudes, which gave their warmth and colour to his unfinished poem—Browning returned home by way of Tyrol, the Rhine, Liege and Antwerp. It was his first visit to Italy and was a time of enchantment. Fifty years later he recalled the memories of these early days when his delight had something insubstantial, magical in it, and the vision was half perceived with the eye and half projected from within:—

> How many a year my Asolo,
> Since—one step just from sea to land—
> I found you, loved yet feared you so—
> For natural objects seemed to stand

Palpably fire-clothed![21]

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

The publication of *Sordello* (1840) did not improve Browning's position with the public. The poem was a challenge to the understanding of an aspirant reader, and the challenge met with no response. An excuse for not reading a poem of five or six thousand lines is grateful to so infirm and shortlived a being as man. And, indeed, a prophet, if prudent, may do well to postpone the privilege of being unintelligible until he has secured a considerable number of disciples of both sexes. The reception of *Sordello* might have disheartened a poet of less vigorous

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

will than Browning; he merely marched breast forward, and let *Sordello* lie inert, until a new generation of readers had arisen. The dramas, *King Victor and King Charles* and *The Return of the Druses* (at first named "Mansoor the Hierophant") now occupied his thoughts. Short lyrical pieces were growing under his hand, and began to form a considerable group. And one fortunate day as he strolled alone in the Dulwich wood—his chosen resort of meditation—"the image flashed upon him of one walking thus alone through life; one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it."[22] In other words Pippa had suddenly passed her poet in the wood.

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

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

designed to expound the symbolism of this priestly decoration prescribed in "Exodus." From 1841 to 1846 the numbers of *Bells and Pomegranates* successively appeared; with the eighth the series closed. The first number—*Pippa Passes*—was sold for sixpence; when *King Victor and King Charles* was published in the following year (1842), the price was raised to one shilling. The third and the seventh numbers were made up of short pieces—*Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). *The Return of the Druses* and *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*—Numbers 4 and 5—followed each other in the same year 1843. *Colombe's Birthday*—the only number which is known to survive in manuscript—came next in order (1844). The last to appear was that which included *Luna*, Browning's favourite among his dramas, and *A Soul's Tragedy*.[23] His sister, except in the instance of *Colombe*, was Browning's amanuensis. On each title-page he is named Robert Browning "Author of Paracelsus"—the "wholly unintelligible" *Sordello* being passed over. Talfourd, "Barry Cornwall," and John Kenyon (the cousin of Elizabeth Barrett) were honoured with dedications. In these pamphlets of Moxon, Browning's wonderful apples of gold were certainly not presented to the public in pictures or baskets of silver; yet the possessor of the eight parts in their yellow paper wrappers may now be congratulated. Only one of the numbers—*A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*—attained the distinction of a second edition, and

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

this probably because the drama as published was helped to a comparative popularity by its representation on the stage.

This tragedy of young love and death was written hastily—in four or five days—for Macready. Browning while at work on his play, as we learn from a letter of Dante Rossetti to Allingham, was kept indoors by a slight indisposition; his father on going to see him "was each day received boisterously and cheerfully with the words: 'I have done another act, father.'"[24] Forster read the tragedy aloud from the manuscript for Dickens, who wrote of it with unmeasured enthusiasm in a letter, known to Browning only when printed after the lapse of some thirty years: "Browning's play has thrown me into a perfect passion of sorrow.... I know no love like it, no passion like it, no moulding of a splendid thing after its conception like it." Things had gone ill with Macready at Drury Lane, and when the time for *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* drew near it is evident that he feared further losses and would gladly have been released from his promise to produce the play; but Browning failed to divine the true state of affairs. The tragedy was read to the company by a grotesque, wooden-legged and red-nosed prompter, and it was greeted with laughter. To make amends, Macready himself undertook to read it aloud, but he declared himself unable, in the disturbed state of his mind, to appear before the public: his part—that of Lord Tresham—must be taken by Phelps. From certain rehearsals Phelps was unavoidably absent through illness. Macready who

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

read his lines on these occasions, now was caught by the play, and saw possibilities in the part of Tresham which fired his imagination. He chose, almost at the last moment, to displace his younger and less distinguished colleague. Browning, on the other hand, insisted that Phelps, having been assigned the part, should retain it. To baffle Macready in his design of presenting the play to the public in a mutilated form, Browning, aided by his publisher, had the whole printed in four-and-twenty hours.[25] A rupture of the long-standing friendship with Macready followed, nor did author and actor meet again until after the great sorrow of Browning's life. "Mr Macready too"—writes Mrs Orr—"had recently lost his wife, and Mr Browning could only start forward, grasp the hand of his old friend, and in a voice choked with emotion say, 'O Macready!'"

The tragedy was produced at Drury Lane on February nth, 1843, with Phelps, who acted admirably as Tresham, and Helen Faucit as Mildred. Although it had been ill rehearsed and not a shilling had been spent on scenery or dresses, it was received with applause. To a call for the author, Browning, seated in his box, declined to make any response. Thus, not without some soreness of heart, closed his direct connection with the theatre. He heard with pleasure when in Italy that *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* was given

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

by Phelps at Sadler's Wells Theatre in November 1848, and with unquestionable success. A rendering of *Colombe's Birthday* was projected by Charles Kean in 1844, but the long delays, which were inevitable, could not be endured by Browning, who desired to print his play forthwith among the *Bells and Pomegranates*. It was not until nine years later that this play, a veritable "All for love, or the world well lost," was presented at the Haymarket, Helen Faucit appearing as the Duchess. Soon after *Colombe's Birthday* had been published, Browning sailed once more, in the autumn of 1844, for Italy.[26] As he journeyed northwards and homewards, from Naples (where they were performing an opera named *Sordello*) and Rome he sought and obtained at Leghorn an interview with Trelawny, the generous-hearted friend of Shelley, by whose grave he had lately stood.[27]

Browning's work as a playwright, consisting of eight pieces, or nine if we include the later *In a Balcony*, is sufficiently ample to enable us to form a trustworthy estimate of his genius as seen in drama. Dramatic, in the sense that he created and studied minds and hearts other than his own, he pre-eminently was; if he desired to set forth or to vindicate his most intimate ideas or impulses, he effected this indirectly, by detaching them from his own personality and giving them a brain and a heart

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

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

other than his own in which to live and move and have their being. There is a kind of dramatic art which we may term static, and another kind which we may term dynamic. The former deals especially with characters in position, the latter with characters in movement.[28] Passion and thought may be exhibited and interpreted by dramatic genius of either type; to represent passion and thought and action—action incarnating and developing thought and passion—the dynamic power is required. And by action we are to understand not merely a visible deed, but also a word, a feeling, an idea which has in it a direct operative force. The dramatic genius of Browning was in the main of the static kind; it studies with extraordinary skill and subtlety character in position; it attains only an imperfect or a laboured success with character in movement. The *dramatis personae* are ready at almost every moment, except the culminating moments of passion, to fall away from action into reflection and self-analysis. The play of mind upon mind he recognises of course as a matter of profound interest and importance; but he catches the energy which spirit transfers to spirit less in the actual moment of transference than after it has arrived. Thought and emotion with him do not circulate freely through a group of persons, receiving some modification from each. He deals most successfully with each individual as a single and separate entity; each maintains his own attitude, and as he is touched by the common influence he proceeds to scrutinise

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

it. Mind in these plays threads its way dexterously in and out of action; it is not itself sufficiently incorporated in action. The progress of the drama is now retarded; and again, as if the author perceived that the story had fallen behind or remained stationary, it is accelerated by sudden jerks. A dialogue of retrospection is a common device at the opening of popular plays, with a view to expound the position of affairs to the audience; but a dramatic writer of genius usually works forward through his dialogue to the end which he has set before him. With Browning for the purpose of mental analysis a dialogue of retrospection may be of higher value than one which leans and presses towards the future. The invisible is for him more important than the visible; and so in truth it may often be; but the highest dramatist will not choose to separate the two. The invisible is best captured and is most securely held in the visible.

As a writer of drama, Browning, who delights to study the noblest attitudes of the soul, and to wring a proud sense of triumph out of apparent failure, finds his proper field in tragedy rather than in comedy. *Colombe's Birthday* has a joyous ending, but the joy is very grave and earnest, and the body of the play is made up of serious pleadings and serious hopes and fears. There is no light-hearted mirth, no real gaiety of temper anywhere in the dramas of Browning. Pippa's gladness in her holiday from the task of silk-winding is touched with pathos in the thought that what is so bright *is* also so brief, and it is encompassed, even within delightful Asolo, by the sins and sorrows of the

world. Bluphocks, with his sniggering wit and his jingles of rhyme is a vagabond and a spy, who only covers the shame of his nakedness with these rags of devil-may-care good spirits. The genial cynicism of Ogniben is excellent of its kind, and pleases the palate like an olive amid wines; but this man of universal intellectual sympathies is at heart the satirist of moral illusions, the unmasker of self-deception, who with long experience of human infirmities, has come to chuckle gently over his own skill in dealing with them; and has he not—we may ask—wound around his own spirit some of the incurable illusions of worldly wisdom? No—this is not gaiety; if Browning smiles with his Ogniben, his smile is a comment upon the weakness and the blindness of the self-deceiver.

Browning's tragedies are tragedies without villains. The world is here the villain, which has baits and bribes and snares wherewith to entangle its victims, to lure down their mounting aspirations, to dull their vision for the things far-off and faint; perhaps also to make them prosperous and portly gentlemen, easy-going, and amiably cynical, tolerant of evil, and prudently distrustful of good. Yet truth is truth, and fact is fact; worldly wisdom is genuine wisdom after its kind; we shall be the better instructed if we listen to its sage experience, if we listen, understand, and in all justice, censure. Ogniben can blandly and skilfully conduct a Chiappino to his valley of humiliation —"let him that standeth take heed lest he fall." But what would the wisdom of Ogniben be worth in its pronouncements on a

Luria or a Colombe? Perhaps even in such a case not wholly valueless. The self-pleased, keen-sighted Legate might after all have applauded a moral heroism or a high-hearted gallantry which would ill accord with his own ingenious and versatile spirit. Bishop Blougram—sleek, ecclesiastical opportunist—was not insensible to the superior merits of "rough, grand, old Martin Luther."

In Browning's nature a singularly keen, exploring intelligence was united with a rare moral and spiritual ardour, a passion for high ideals. In creating his chief *dramatis persona* he distributes among them what he found within himself, and they fall into two principal groups—characters in which the predominating power is intellect, and characters in which the mastery lies with some lofty emotion. The intellect dealing with things that are real and positive, those persons in whom intelligence is supreme may too easily become the children of this world; in their own sphere they are wiser than the children of light; and they are skilled in a moral casuistry by which they justify to themselves the darkening of the light that is in them. The passionate natures have an intelligence of their own; they follow a gleam which is visible to them if not to others; they discover, or rather they are discovered by, some truth which flashes forth in one inspired moment—the master-moment of a lifetime; they possess the sublime certainty of love, loyalty, devotion; if they err through a heroic folly and draw upon themselves ruin in things temporal, may there not be some atom of divine wisdom at the heart of

the folly, which is itself indestructible, and which ensures for them a welfare out of time and space? Prophet and casuist—Browning is both; and to each he will endeavour to be just; but his heart must give a casting vote, and this cannot be in favour of the casuist. Every self-transcending passion has in it a divine promise and pledge; even the passion of the senses if it has hidden within it one spark of self-annihilating love may be the salvation of a soul. It is Ottima, lifted above her own superb voluptuousness, who cries—"Not me—to him, O God, be merciful." The region of untrammelled, unclouded passion, of spiritual intuition, and of those great words from heaven, which pierce "even to the dividing asunder of the joints and marrow," is, for Browning's imagination, the East. The nations of the West—and, before all others, the Italian race—are those of a subtly developed intelligence. The worldly art of a Church-man, ingenuities of theology having aided in refining ingenuities of worldliness, is perhaps the finest exemplar of unalloyed western brain-craft. But Italy is also a land of passion; and therefore at once, for its ardours of the heart—seen not in love alone but in carven capital and on frescoed wall—and for its casuistries of intellect, Browning looks to Italy for the material best fitted to his artistry. Between that group of personages whom we may call his characters of passion and that group made up of his characters of intelligence, lie certain figures of peculiar interest, by birth and inheritance children of the East, and by culture partakers, in a greater or a less degree, of the characteristics of the West—a

Djabal, with his Oriental heart entangled by Prankish tricks of sophistry; a Luria, whose Moorish passion is enthralled by the fascination of Florentine intellect, and who can make a return upon himself with a half-painful western self-consciousness.

Loyalties, devotions, to a person, to a cause, to an ideal, and the sacrifice of individual advantages, worldly prosperity, temporal successes to these—such, stated in a broad and general way, is the theme of special interest to Browning in his dramas. These loyalties may be well and wisely fixed, or they may contain a portion of error and illusion. But in either case they furnish a test of manly and womanly virtue. With a woman the test is often proposed by love—by love as set over against ease, or high station, or the pride of power. Colombe of Ravestein is offered on the one hand the restoration of her forfeited Duchy, the prospective rank of Empress and partnership with a man, who, if he cannot give love, is yet no ignoble wooer, a man of honour, of intellect, and of high ambition; on the other hand pleads the advocate of Cleves, a nameless provincial, past his days of youth, lean and somewhat worn, and burdened with the griefs and wrongs of his townsfolk. Mere largeness in a life is something, is much; but the quality of a life is more. Valence has set the cause of his fellow-citizens above himself; he has made the heart of the Duchess for the first time thrill in sympathy with the life of her people; he has placed his loyalty to her far above his own hopes of happiness; he has urged his rival's claims with unfaltering fidelity. It is not with any backward glances

of regret, any half-doubts, prudent reserves, or condescending qualifications that Colombe gives herself to the advocate of the poor. She, in her youth and beauty, has been happy during her year of idlesse as play-Duchess of Juliers; she is happier now as she abandons the court and, sure in her grave choice, turns with a light and joyous laugh to welcome the birthday gift of freedom and of love that has so unexpectedly come to her. Having once made her election, Colombe can throw away the world as gaily as in some girlish frolic she might toss aside a rose.

The loyalty of men, their supreme devotion and their test may, as with women, spring from the passion of love; but other tests than this are often proposed to them. With King Charles of Sardinia it is duty to his people that summons him, from those modest and tranquil ways of life of which he dreamed, to the cares and toils of the crown. He has strength to accept without faltering the burden that is laid upon him. And if he falters at the last, and would resign to his father, who reclaims it, the crown which God alone should have removed, shall we assert confidently that Browning's dramatic instinct has erred? The pity of it—that his great father, daring in battle, profound in policy, should stand before him an outraged, helpless old man, craving with senile greed a gift from his son—the pity of it revives an old weakness, an old instinct of filial submission, in the heart of Charles. He has tasked himself without sparing; he has gained the affections of his subjects; he has conciliated a hostile Europe; is not this enough? Or was it also in the bond that he should

tread a miserable father into the dust? The test again of Luigi, in the third part of *Pippa Passes*, is that of one who sees all the oppression of his people, who is enamoured of the antique ideal of liberty, and whose choice lies between a youth of luxurious ease and the virtue of one heroic crime, to be followed by the scaffold-steps, with youth cut short. To him that overcometh and endureth unto the end will God give the morning-star:

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

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

> The only fault's with time;

All men become good creatures: but so slow.[29]

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

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

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

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

Djabal, at once enthusiast and impostor, Browning may seem, as often afterwards, to offer an apology for the palterer with truth; but in the interests of truth itself, he desires to study the strange phenomenon of the deceiver who would fain half-deceive himself.

Chapter IV
The Maker of Plays—*(Continued)*

The women of the dramas, with one or two exceptions, are composed of fewer elements than the men. A variety of types is presented, but each personality is somewhat constrained and controlled by its idea; the free movement, the iridescence, the variety in oneness, the incalculable multiplicity in unity, of real character are not always present. They admit of definition to a degree which places them at a distance from the inexplicable open secrets of Shakespeare's creation; they lack the simple mysteriousness, the transparent obscurity of nature. With a master-key the chambers of their souls can one after another be unlocked. Ottima is the carnal passion of womanhood, full-blown, dazzling in the effrontery of sin, yet including the possibility, which Browning conceives as existing at the extreme edge of every expansive ardour, of being translated into a higher form of passion which abolishes all thought of self. Anael, of *The Return of the Druses*, is pure and measureless devotion. The cry of "Hakeem!" as she falls, is not an act of faith but of love; it pierces through the shadow of the material falsehood to her one illuminated truth of absolute love, like that other falsehood which sanctifies the dying lips of Desdemona. The sin of Mildred is the very innocence of sin, and does not really alter the simplicity

of her character; it is only the girlish rapture of giving, with no limitation, whatever may prove a bounty to him whom she loves: —

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

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

Polyxena, the Queen of Sardinia—a daughter not of Italy but of the Rhineland—is, in her degree, an eighteenth century representative of the woman of the ancient Teutonic tribes, grave, resolute, wise, and possessing the authority of wisdom. She, whose heart and brain work bravely together like loyal comrades, is strongly but also simply, conceived as the helpmate, the counsellor, and, in the old sense of the word, the comforter of her husband. Something of almost maternal feeling, as happens at times in real life, mingles with her wifely affection for Charles, who indeed may prove on occasions a fractious son. Like a wise guardian-angel she remembers on these occasions that he is only

a man, and that men in their unwisdom may grow impatient of unalleviated guardian-angelhood; he will by and by discover his error, and she can bide her time. Perhaps, like other heroines of Browning, Polyxena is too constantly and uniformly herself; yet, no doubt, it is right that opaline, shifting hues should not disturb our impression of a character whose special virtue is steadfastness. The Queen of the English Charles, who is eager to counsel, and always in her petulance and folly to counsel ill, is slightly sketched; but she may be thanked for one admirable speech—her first—when Strafford, worn and fevered in the royal service, has just arrived from Ireland, and passing out from his interview with the King is encountered by her:—

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

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

such almost but not quite embodied shadows ultimately troop, is capacious.

In Browning's dramatic scene of 1853, *In a Balcony*, he created with unqualified success "a very woman" in the enamoured Queen, whose heart at fifty years beats only more wildly and desperately than a girl's.[30] The young lovers, Constance and Norbert, are a highly meritorious pair, who express their passion in excellent and eloquent periods; we have seen their like before, and since. But the Queen, with her unslaked thirst for the visionary wells under the palm-trees, who finds herself still amid the burning sands, is an original and tragic figure—a royal Mlle. de Lespinasse, and crowned with fiery and immitigable pain. Although she has returned the "glare" of Constance with the glare of "a panther," the Queen is large-hearted. The guards, it is true, arrive as the curtain falls; but those readers who have wasted their tender emotion on a couple of afflicted prisoners or decapitated young persons, whom mother Nature can easily replace, are mistaken. If the Queen does not die that night, she will rise next morning after sleepless hours, haggard, not fifty but eighty years old, and her passion will, heroically slay itself in an act of generosity.[31] Little more,

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

[31] I had written the above—and I leave it as I wrote it—before I noticed the following quoted from the letter of a friend by Mrs Arthur Bronson in her article Browning in Venice: "Browning seemed as full of dramatic interest in reading 'In a Balcony' as if he had just written it for our benefit. One who sat near him said that it was a natural

however, than a situation is represented in this dramatic scene. Of Browning's full-length portraits of women in the dramas, the finest piece of work is the portrait of the happiest woman—the play-Duchess of Juliers, no longer Duchess, but ever

Our lady of dear Ravestein.

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

In the development of his dramatic style Browning more and more lost sight of the theatre and its requirements; his stage became more and more a stage of the mind. *Strafford*, his first play, is the work of a novice, who has little of the instinct for theatrical effect, but who sets his brain to invent striking tableaux, to prepare surprises, to exhibit impressive attitudes,

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sequence that the step of the guard should be heard coming to take Norbert to his doom, as, with a nature like the queen's, who had known only one hour of joy in her sterile life, vengeance swift and terrible would follow on the sudden destruction of her happiness. 'Now I don't quite think that,' answered Browning, as if he were following out the play as a spectator. 'The queen has a large and passionate temperament, which had only once been touched and brought into intense life. She would have died by a knife in her heart. The guard would have come to carry away her dead body.' 'But I imagine that most people interpret it as I do,' was the reply. 'Then,' said Browning, with quick interest, 'don't you think it would be well to put it in the stage directions, and have it seen that they were carrying her across the back of the stage?'"

to calculate—not always successfully—the angle of a speech, so that it may with due impact reach the pit. The opening scene expounds the situation. In the second Wentworth and Pym confront each other; the King surprises them; Wentworth lets fall the hand of Pym, as the stage tradition requires; as Wentworth withdraws the Queen enters to unmake what he has made, and the scene closes with a tableau expressing the sentimental weakness of Charles:

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

And so proceeds the tragedy, with much that ought to be dear to the average actor, which yet is somehow not always even theatrically happy. The pathos of the closing scene where Strafford is discovered in The Tower, sitting with his children, is theatrical pathos of the most correct kind, and each little speech of little William and little Anne is uttered as much for the audience as for their father, implying in every word "See, how we, poor innocents, heighten the pity of it." The hastily written *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* is, perhaps, of Browning's dramas the best fitted for theatrical representation. Yet it is incurably weak in the motives which determine the action; and certain passages are almost ludicrously undramatic. If Romeo before he flung up his ladder of ropes had paused, like Mertoun, to salute his mistress with a tenor morceau from the opera, it is to be

feared that runaways' and other eyes would not have winked, and that old Capulet would have come upon the scene in his night-gown, prepared to hasten the catastrophe with a long sword. Yet *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, with its breadth of outline, its striking situations, and its mastery of the elementary passions —love and wrath and pride and pity—gives us assurance that Browning might have taken a place of considerable distinction had he been born in an age of great dramatic poetry. If it is weak in construction so—though in a less degree—are Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*.

In *King Victor and King Charles* Browning adopted, and no doubt deliberately, a plain, unfigured and uncoloured style, as suiting both the characters and the historical subject. The political background of this play and that of *Strafford* hardly entitles either drama to be named political. Browning was a student of history, but it was individuals and not society that interested him. The affairs of England and the affairs of Sardinia serve to throw out the figures of the chief *dramatis persons*; those affairs are not considered for their own sake. Certain social conditions are studied as they enter into and help to form an individual. The Bishop who orders his tomb at St Praxed's is in part a product of the Italian Renaissance, but the causes are seen only in their effects upon the character of a representative person. If the plain, substantial style of *King Victor and King Charles* is proper to a play with such a hero as Charles and such a heroine as Polyxena, the coloured style, rich in imagery,

is no less right in *The Return of the Druses*, where religious and chivalric enthusiasm are blended with the enthusiasm of the passion of love. But already Browning was ceasing to bear in mind the conditions of the stage. Certain pages where Djabal and Khalil, Djabal and Anael, Anael and Loys are the speakers, might be described as dialogues conducted by means of "asides," and even the imagination of a reader resents a construction of scenes which requires these duets of soliloquies, these long sequences of the audible-inaudible. With the "very tragical mirth" of the second part of Chiappino's story of moral and political disaster, the spectators and the stage have wholly disappeared from Browning's theatre; the imaginary dialogue is highly dramatic, in one sense of the word, and is admirable in its kind, but we transport ourselves best to the market-place of Faenza by sitting in an easy chair.

Pippa Passes is singular in its construction; scenes detached, though not wholly disconnected, are strung pendant-wise upon the gold thread, slender but sufficiently strong, of an idea; realism in art, as we now call it, hangs from a fine idealism; this substantial globe of earth with its griefs, its grossnesses, its heroism, swings suspended from the seat of God. The idea which gives unity to the whole is not a mere fantasy. The magic practised by the unconscious Pippa through her songs is of that genuine and beautiful kind which the Renaissance men of science named "Magia Naturalis." It is no fantasy but a fact that each of us influences the lives of others more or less every day,

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

and gratitude.

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

And original, in the best sense of the word—entirely true to his highest self—Browning was in the "Dramatic Lyrics" of 1842, and the "Dramatic Romances and Lyrics" of 1845. His senses were at once singularly keen and energetic, and singularly capacious of delight; his eyes were active instruments of observation, and at the same time were possessed by a kind of rapture in form—and not least in fantastic form—and a rapture

still finer in the opulence and variety of colour. In these poems we are caught into what may truly be called an enthusiasm of the senses; and presently we find that the senses, good for their own sakes, are good also as inlets to the spirit. Having returned from his first visit to southern Italy, the sights and sounds, striking upon the retina and the auditory nerve, with the intensity of a new experience, still attack the eye and ear *as* he writes his *Englishman in Italy*, and by virtue of their eager obsession demand and summon forth the appropriate word.[32] The fisherman from Amalfi pitches down his basket before us,

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

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

> God's own profound
> Was above me, and round me the mountains,

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

And under, the sea,
And within me, my heart to bear witness
hat was and shall be.

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

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

Or—a grief to booklovers!—the same eye is occupied by all the grotesquerie of insect life in the revel over that unhappy tome lurking in the plum tree's crevice of Browning's *Garden Fancy*, which creeps and crawls with beetle and spider, worm and eft.[33]

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

Or it is night and moonlight by the sandy shore, and for a moment —before love enters—all the mind of the impressionist artist lives merely in the eye:

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

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

Of these poems of 1842 and 1845 one *The Pied Piper*, was written in the spirit of mere play and was included in *Bells and Pomegranates* only to make up a number, for which the printer required more copy. One or two—the flesh and blood incarnations of the wines of France and Hungary, *Claret* and *Tokay*, are no more than clever caprices of the fancy. One, *The Lost Lender*, remotely suggested by the conservatism

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

of Wordsworth's elder days, but possibly deflected by some of the feeling attributed to Pym in relation to Strafford of the drama, and certainly detached from direct personal reference to Wordsworth, expresses Browning's liberal sentiment in politics. One, the stately *Artemis Prologuizes*, is the sole remaining fragment of a classical drama, "Hippolytus and Aricia," composed in 1840, "much against my endeavour," wrote the poet,—a somewhat enigmatical phrase—"while in bed with a fever." A considerable number of the poems may be grouped together as expressions or demonstrations of various passions, central among which is the passion of love. A few, and these conspicuous for their masterly handling of novel themes, treat of art, and the feeling for art as seen in the painter of pictures or in the connoisseur. Nor is the interpretation of religious emotion—though in a phase that may be called abnormal—wholly forgotten.

With every passion that expands the spirit beyond the bounds of self, Browning, as the dramas have made evident to us, is in cordial sympathy. The reckless loyalty, with its animal spirits and its dash of grief, the bitterer because grief must be dismissed, of the *Cavalier Tunes*, is true to England and to the time in its heartiness and gallant bluffness. The leap-up of pride and joy in a boy's heart at the moment of death in his Emperor's cause could hardly be more intensely imagined than it is in the poem of the French camp, and all is made more real and vivid by the presence of that motionless figure, intent on victory and

sustaining the weight of imperial anxieties, which yet cannot be quite impassive in presence of a death so devoted. And side by side with this poem of generous enthusiasm is placed the poem of passion reduced to its extreme of meanness, its most contracted form of petty spite and base envy—the *Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister*; a grotesque insect, spitting ineffectual poison, is placed under the magnifying-glass of the comic spirit, and is discovered to be—a brother in religion! A noble hatred, transcending personal considerations, mingles with a noble and solemn love—the passion of country—in the Italian exile's record of his escape from Austrian pursuers; with the clear-obscure of his patriotic melancholy mingles the proud recollection of the Italian woman who was his saviour, over whose conjectured happiness as peasant wife and peasant mother the exile bows with a tender joy. The examples of abnormal passion are two—that of the amorous homicide who would set on one perfect moment the seal of eternity, in *Porphyria's Lover*, and that of the other occupier of the mad-house cells, Johannes Agricola, whose passion of religion is pushed to the extreme of a mystical antinomianism.

Browning's poems of the love of man and woman are seldom a simple lyrical cry, but they are not on this account the less true in their presentment of that curious masquer and disguiser—Love. When love takes possession of a nature which is complex, affluents and tributaries from many and various faculties run into the main stream. With Browning the passion is indeed a regal power, but intellect, imagination, fancy are its office-bearers for a

time; then in a moment it resumes all authority into its own hands, resolves of a sudden all that is complex into the singleness of joy or pain, fuses all that is manifold into the unity of its own life and being. His dramatic method requires that each single faculty should be seen in the environment of a character, and that its operations should be clothed more or less in circumstance. And since love has its ingenuities, its fine-spun and far-flung threads of association, its occult symbolisms, Browning knows how to press into the service of the central emotion objects and incidents and imagery which may seem remote or curious or fantastic or trivial or even grotesque. In *Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli* love which cometh by the hearing of the ear (for Rudel is a sun-worshipper who has never seen his sun) is a pure imaginative devotion to the ideal. In *Count Gismond* love is the deliverer; the motive of the poem is essentially that of the Perseus and Andromeda myth refined upon and mediaevalised. In *Cristine* love is the interpreter of life; a moment of high passion explains, and explains away, all else that would obscure the vision of what is best and most real in this our world and in the worlds that are yet unattained. From a few lines written to illustrate a Venetian picture by Maclise *In a Gondola* was evolved. If Browning was not entirely accurate in his topography of Venice, he certainly did not fail in his sense of the depth and opulence of its colour. Here the abandonment to passion is relieved by the quaint ingenuities and fancies of love that seeks a momentary refuge from its own excess, and then returns more eagerly upon itself; and the shadow

of death is ever at hand, but like the shadows of a Venetian painter it glows with colour.

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

cage in Wimpole Street, and Robert Browning himself, growing in stature amid his incantations, played the part of the gipsy.

Another Duchess, who pined for freedom and never attained it, has her cold obituary notice from her bereaved Duke's lips in the *Dramatic Lyrics* of 1842. *My Last Duchess* was there made a companion poem to *Count Gismond*; they are the pictures of the bond-woman and of the freed-woman in marriage. The Italian Duchess revolts from the law of wifehood no further than a misplaced smile or a faint half-flush, betraying her inward breathings and beamings of the spirit; the noose of the ducal proprieties is around her throat, and when it tightens "then all smiles stopped together." Never was an agony hinted with more gentlemanly reserve. But the poem is remarkable chiefly as gathering up into a typical representative a whole phase of civilisation. The Duke is Italian of Renaissance days; insensible in his egoistic pride to the beautiful humanity alive before him; yet a connoisseur of art to his finger-tips; and after all a Duchess can be replaced, while the bronze of Glaus of Innsbruck—but the glory of his possessions must not be pressed, as though his nine hundred years old name were not enough. The true gift of art—Browning in later poems frequently insists upon this—is not for the connoisseur or collector who rests in a material possession, but for the artist who, in the zeal of creation, presses through his own work to that unattainable beauty, that flying joy which exists beyond his grasp and for ever lures him forward. In *Pictor Ignotus* the earliest study in his lives of the painters was made by

the poet. The world is gross, its touch unsanctifies the sanctities of art; yet the brave audacity of genius is able to penetrate this gross world with spiritual fire. Browning's unknown painter is a delicate spirit, who dares not mingle his soul with the gross world; he has failed for lack of a robust faith, a strenuous courage. But his failure is beautiful and pathetic, and for a time at least his Virgin, Babe, and Saint will smile from the cloister wall with their "cold, calm, beautiful regard." And yet to have done otherwise to have been other than this; to have striven like that youth—the Urbinate—men praise so! More remarkable, as the summary of a civilisation, than *My Last Duchess*, is the address of the worldling Bishop, who lies dying, to the "nephews" who are sons of his loins. In its Paganism of Christianity—which lacks all the manly virtue of genuine Paganism—that portion of the artistic Renaissance which leans towards the world and the flesh is concentrated and is given as in quintessential form. The feeble fingers yet cling to the vanities of earth; the speaker babbles not of green fields but of his blue lump of lapis-lazuli; and the last word of all is alive only with senile luxury and the malice of perishing recollection.

Chapter V
Love and Marriage

In 1841, John Kenyon, formerly a school-fellow of Browning's father, now an elderly lover of literature and of literary society, childless, wealthy, generous-hearted, proposed to Browning that he should call upon Elizabeth Barrett, Kenyon's cousin once removed, who was already distinguished as a writer of ardent and original verse. Browning consented, but the poetess "through some blind dislike of seeing strangers"—as she afterwards told a correspondent—declined, alleging, not untruly, as a ground of refusal, that she was then ailing in health.[35] Three years later Kenyon sent his cousin's new volumes of *Poems* as a gift to Sarianna Browning; her brother, lately returned from Italy, read these volumes with delight and admiration, and found on one of the pages a reference in verse to his "Pomegranates" of a kind that could not but give him a vivid moment of pleasure. Might he not relieve his sense of obligation by telling Miss Barrett, in a letter, that he admired her work? Mr Kenyon encouraged the suggestion, and though to love and be silent might on the whole have been more to Browning's liking, he wrote—January 10, 1845—and writing truthfully he wrote enthusiastically.[36] Miss

[35] *Letters of E.B.B.*, i. 288.

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

Barrett, never quite recovered from a riding accident in early girlhood, and stricken down for long in both soul and body by the shock of her brother's death by drowning, lay from day to day and month to month, in an upper room of her father's house in Wimpole Street, occupied, upon her sofa, with her books and papers—her Greek dramatists and her Elizabethan poets—shut out from the world, with windows for ever closed, and with only an occasional female visitor, to gossip of the social and literary life of London. Never was a spirit of more vivid fire enclosed within a tomb. The letter from Browning, "the author of *Paracelsus* and King of the mystics," threw her, she says, "into ecstasics." Her reply has a thrill of pleasure running through its graceful half-restraint, and she holds out a hope that when spring shall arrive a meeting in the invalid chamber between her and her new correspondent may be possible.

From the first a headlong yet delicate speed was in her pen; from the first there was much to say. "Oh, for a horse with wings!" Mr Browning, who had praised her poems, must tell her their faults. He must himself speak out in noble verse, not merely utter himself through the masks of *dramatis personae*. Can she, as he alleges, really help him by her sympathy, by her counsel? Let him put ceremony aside and treat her *en bon camerade*; he will find her "an honest man on the whole." She intends to set about knowing him as much as possible immediately. What poets have been his literary sponsors? Are not the critics wrong to deny contemporary genius? What poems are those now in his

portfolio? Is not Æschylus the divinest of divine Greek spirits? but how inadequately her correspondent has spoken of Dante! Shall they indeed—as he suggests—write something together? And then—is he duly careful of his health, careful against overwork? And is not gladness a duty? to give back to the world the joy that God has given to his poet? Though, indeed, to lean out of the window of this House of Life is for some the required, perhaps the happiest attitude.

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

So proceed from January to May the letters of Rudel and the still invisible Lady of Wimpole Street. It was happy comradeship

on her part, but on his it was already love. His spirit had recognised, had touched, a spirit, which included all that he most needed, and union with which would be the most certain and substantial prize offered by life. There was nothing fatuous in this inward assurance; it was the simplest and most self-evidencing truth. The word "mistrustful"—"do not see me as long as you are mistrustful of"—with its implied appeal to her generous confidence, precipitated the visit. How could she be mistrustful? Of course he may come: but the wish to do so was unwisely exorbitant. On the afternoon of May 20th, 1845, Browning first set eyes on his future wife, a little figure, which did not rise from the sofa, pale ringleted face, great eager, wistfully pathetic eyes. He believed that she was suffering from some incurable disease of the spine, and that whatever remained to her of life must be spent in this prostrate manner of an invalid.

A movement of what can only be imperfectly described as pity entered into his feeling for her: it was less pity than the joy of believing that he could confer as well as receive. But his first thought on leaving was only the fear that he might have stayed too long or might have spoken too loud. The visit was on Tuesday. On Thursday, Browning wrote the only letter of the correspondence which has been destroyed, one which overflowed with gratitude, and was immediately and rightly interpreted by the receiver as tending towards an offer, implied here, but not expressed, of marriage. It was read in pain and agitation; her heart indeed, but not her will, was shaken; and, after a sleepless night, she wrote

words effective to bar—as she believed—all further advance in a direction fatal to his happiness. The intemperate things he had said must be wholly forgotten between them; or else she will not see him again; friends, comrades in the life of the intellect they might continue to be. For once and once only Browning lied to Miss Barrett, and he lied a little awkwardly; his letter was only one of too boisterous gratitude; his punishment—that of one infinitely her inferior—was undeserved; let her return to him the offending letter. Returned accordingly it was, and immediately destroyed by the writer. In happier days, Miss Barrett hoped to recover what then would have been added to a hoard which she treasured; but, Browning could not preserve the words which she had condemned.

Wise guardian-angels smile at each other, gently and graciously, when a lover is commanded to withdraw and to reappear in the character of a friend. An incoming tide may seem for a while to pause; but by and by we look and the rock is covered. Browning very dutifully submitted and became a literary counsellor and comrade. The first stadium in the progress of his fortunes opened in January and closed before the end of May; the second closed at the end of August. To a friend Miss Barrett, assured that he never could be more, might well be generous; visits were permitted, and it was left to Browning to fix the days; the postal shuttle threw swift and swifter threads between New Cross, Hatcham, and 50 Wimpole Street. The verse of Tennyson, the novels of George Sand were discussed;

her translations from the Greek were considered; his manuscript poems were left for her corrections; but transcription must not weary him into headaches; she would herself by and by act as an amanuensis. Each of the correspondents could not rest happy until the other had been proved to be in every intellectual and moral quality the superior. Browning's praise could not be withheld; it seemed to his friend—and she wrote always with crystalline sincerity—to be an illusion which humbled her. Glad memories of Italy, sad memories of England and the invalid life were exchanged; there is nothing that she can teach him—she declares—except grief. And yet to him the day of his visit is his light through the dark week. He is like an Eastern Jew who creeps through alleys in the meanest garb, destitute to all wayfarers' eyes, who yet possesses a hidden palace-hall of marble and gold. Even in matters ecclesiastical, the footsteps of the two friends had moved with one consent; each of them preferred a chapel to a church; each was Puritan in a love of simplicity in the things of religion; each disowned the Puritan narrowness, and the grey aridity of certain schools of dissent. On June 14—with the warranty of her published poem which had told of flowers sent in a letter—Browning encloses in his envelope a yellow rose; and again and again summer flowers arrive bringing colour and sweetness into the dim city room. Once Miss Barrett can report that she has been out of doors, and with no fainting-fit, yet unable to venture in the carriage as far as the Park; still her bodily strength is no better than that of a tired bird; she

is moreover, years older than her friend (the difference was in fact that between thirty-nine and thirty-three); and the thunder of a July storm has shaken her nerves. There is some thought of her seeking health as far off as Malta or even Alexandria; but her father will jestingly have it that there is nothing wrong with her except "obstinacy and dry toast." Thus cordially, gladly, sadly, and always with quick leapings of the indomitable flame of the spirit, these letters of friend to friend run on during the midsummer days. Browning was willing and happy to wait; a confidence possessed him that in the end he would be known fully and aright.

On August 25th came a great outpouring of feeling from Miss Barrett. She took her friend so far into her confidence as to speak plainly of the household difficulties caused by her father's autocratic temper. The conversation was immediately followed by a letter in which she endeavoured to soften or qualify the impression her words had given, and her heart, now astir and craving sympathy, led her on to write of her most sorrowful and sacred memories—those connected with her brother's death. Browning was deeply moved, most grateful for her trust in him, but she had forbidden him to notice the record of her grief. He longed to return confidence with confidence, to tell what was urgent in his heart. But the bar of three months since had not been removed, and he hesitated to speak. His two days' silence was unintelligible to his friend and caused her inexpressible anxiety. Could any words of hers have displeased him? Or

was he seriously unwell? She wrote on August 30th a little letter asking "the alms of just one line" to relieve her fears. When snow-wreaths are loosened, a breath will bring down the avalanche. It was impossible to receive this appeal and not to declare briefly, decisively, his unqualified trust in her, his entire devotion, his assured knowledge of what would constitute his supreme happiness.

Miss Barrett's reply is perfect in its disinterested safe-guarding of his freedom and his future good as she conceived it. She is deeply grateful, but she cannot allow him to empty his water-gourds into the sand. What could she give that it would not be ungenerous to give? Yet his part has not been altogether the harder of the two. The subject must be left. Such subjects, however, could not be left until the facts were ascertained. Browning would not urge her a step beyond her actual feelings, but he must know whether her refusal was based solely on her view of his supposed interests. And with the true delicacy of frankness she admits that even the sense of her own unworthiness is not the insuperable obstacle. No—but is she not a confirmed invalid? She thought that she had done living when he came and sought her out. If he would be wise, all these thoughts of her must be abandoned. Such an answer brought a great calm to Browning's heart; he did not desire to press her further; let things rest; it is for her to judge; if what she regards as an obstacle should be removed, she will certainly then act in his best interests; to himself this matter of health creates no difficulty; to sit by her

for an hour a day, to write out what was in him for the world, and so to save his soul, would be to attain his ideal in life. What woman would not be moved to the inmost depths by such words? She insists that his noble extravagances must in no wise bind him; but all the bitternesses of life have been taken away from her; henceforth she is his for everything except to do him harm; the future rests with God and with him. And amid the letters containing these grave sentences, so full of fate, first appears a reference to the pet name of her childhood—the "Ba" which is all that here serves, like Swift's "little language," to indulge a foolish tenderness; and the translator of *Prometheus* is able to put Greek characters to their most delightful use in her "ω φιλτατε."

In love-poetry of the Middle Age the allegorical personage named "Danger" plays a considerable part, and it is to be feared that Danger too often signified a husband. In Wimpole Street that alarming personage always meant a father. Edward Moulton Barrett was a man of integrity in business, of fortitude in adversity, of a certain stern piety, and from the superior position of a domestic autocrat he could even indulge himself in occasional fiats of affection. We need not question that there were springs of water in the rock, and in earlier days they had flowed freely. But now if at night he visited his ailing daughter's room for a few minutes and prayed with her and for her, it meant that on such an occasion she was not too criminal to merit the pious intercession. If he called her "puss," it meant that she had not recently been an undutiful child of thirty-

nine or forty years old. A circus-trainer probably rewards his educated dogs and horses with like amiable familiarities, and he is probably regarded by his troupe with affection mingled with awe. Mr Barrett had been appointed circus-trainer by the divine authority of parentage. No one visited 50 Wimpole Street, where there were grown-up sons as well as daughters, without special permission from the lord of the castle; he authorised the visits of Mr Browning, the poet, being fondly assured that Mr Browning's intentions were not those of a burglar, or—worse—an amorous knight-errant. If any daughter of his conceived the possibility of transferring her prime love and loyalty from himself to another, she was even as Aholah and Aholibah who doted upon the Assyrians, captains, and rulers clothed most gorgeously, all of them desirable young men. "If a prince of Eldorado" said Elizabeth Barrett to her sister Arabel, "should come with a pedigree of lineal descent from some signory in the moon in one hand, and a ticket of good behaviour from the nearest Independent chapel in the other—" "Why, even then," interrupted Arabel, "it would not *do*" One admirable trait, however, Mr Moulton Barrett did possess—he was nearly always away from home till six o'clock.

The design that Miss Barrett should winter abroad was still under consideration, but the place now fixed upon was Pisa. Suddenly, in mid-September, she finds herself obliged to announce that "it is all over with Pisa." Her father had vetoed the undutiful project, and had ceased to pay her his evening

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

On two later occasions Browning sang the same battle-hymn against the enemies of God and with a little too much vehemence —not to say truculence—as is the way with earnest believers. His gentler correspondent could not tolerate the thought of duelling, and she disapproved of punishment by death. Browning argues that for one who values the good opinion of society—not for himself—that good opinion is a possession which may, like other

possessions, be defended at the risk of a man's life, and as for capital punishment, is not evil to be suppressed at any price? Is not a miscreant to be expelled out of God's world? The difference of opinion was the first that had arisen between the friends, and Browning's words carried with them a certain sense of pain in the thought that they could in any thing stand apart. Happily the theoretical fire-eater had faith superior to his own arguments;—faith in a woman's insight as finer than his own;—and he is let off with a gratified rebuke for preternatural submissiveness and for arraying her in pontifical garments of authority which hang loose upon so small a figure. The other application of his doctrine of resisting evil was even more trying to her feelings and the preacher was instant certainly out of season. Not the least important personage in the Wimpole Street house was Miss Barrett's devoted companion Flush. Loyal and loving to his mistress Flushie always was; yet to his lot some canine errors fell; he eyed a visitor's umbrella with suspicion; he resented perhaps the presence of a rival; he did not behave nicely to a poet who had not written verses in his honour; for which he was duly rebuked by his mistress—the punishment was not capital—and was propitiated with bags of cakes by the intruder. When the day for their flight drew near Miss Barrett proposed somewhat timidly that her maid Wilson should accompany her to Italy, but she was gratefully confident that Flush could not be left behind. Just at this anxious moment a dreadful thing befell; a gang of dog-stealers, presided over by the arch-fiend Taylor, bore Flushie

away into the horror of some obscure and vulgar London alley. He was a difficult dog to capture and his ransom must be in proportion to his resistance. There was a terrible tradition of a lady who had haggled about the sum demanded and had received her dog's head in a parcel. Miss Barrett was eager to part with her six guineas and rescue her faithful companion from misery. Was this an occasion for preaching from ethical heights the sin of making a composition with evil-doers? Yet Browning, still "a fighter" and armed with desperate logic, must needs declaim vehemently against the iniquity of such a bargain. It is something to rejoice at that he was dexterously worsted in argument, being compelled to admit that if Italian banditti were to carry off his "Ba," he would pay down every farthing he might have in the world to recover her, and this before he entered on that chase of fifty years which was not to terminate until he had shot down with his own hand the receiver of the infamous bribe.

The journey of Miss Barrett to Pisa having been for the present abandoned, friendship, now acknowledged to be more than friendship, resumed its accustomed ways. Visits, it was agreed, were not to be too frequent—three in each fortnight might prudently be ventured; but Wednesday might have to be exchanged for Thursday or Saturday for Monday, if on the first elected day Miss Mitford—dear and generous friend—threatened to come with her talk, talk, talk, or Mrs Jameson with her drawings and art-criticism, or some unknown lion-huntress who had thrown her toils, or kindly Mr Kenyon, who

knew of Browning's visits, and who when he called would peer through his all-scrutinising spectacles with an air of excessive penetration or too extreme unconsciousness. And there were times—later on—when an avalanche of aunts and uncles would precipitate itself on Wimpole Street—perspicacious aunts and amiable uncles who were wished as far off as Seringapatam, and who wrung from an impatient niece—to whom indeed they were dear—the cry "The barbarians are upon us." Miss Barrett's sisters, the gentle Henrietta, who preferred a waltz to the best sermon of an Independent minister, and the more serious Arabel, who preferred the sermon of an Independent minister to the best waltz, were informed of the actual state of affairs. They were trustworthy and sympathetic; Henrietta had special reasons of her own for sympathy; Captain Surtees Cook, who afterwards became her husband, might be discussing affairs with her in the drawing-room at the same time that Mr Browning the poet—"the man of the pomegranates" as he was named by Mr Barrett—held converse on literature with Elizabeth in the upper chamber. The household was honeycombed with treasons.

For the humours of superficial situations and passing incidents Miss Barrett had a lively sense, and she found some relief in playing with them; but with a nature essentially truthful like hers the necessity of concealment was a cause of distress. The position was no less painful to Browning, and in the end it became intolerable. Yet while there were obstructions and winding ways in the shallows, in the depths were flawless truth and inviolable

love. What sentimental persons fancy and grow effusive over was here the simplest and yet always a miraculous reality—"He of the heavens and earth brought us together so wonderfully, holding two souls in his hand."[37] In the most illuminating words of each correspondent no merely private, or peculiar feeling is expressed; it is the common wave of human passion, the common love of man and woman, that here leaps from the depths to the height, and over which the iris of beauty ever and anon appears with —it is true—an unusual intensity. And so in reading the letters we have no sense of prying into secrets; there are no secrets to be discovered; what is most intimate is most common; only here what is most common rises up to its highest point of attainment. "I never thought of being happy through you or by you or in you even, your good was all my idea of good, and *is*" "Let me be too near to be seen.... Once I used to be more uneasy, and to think that I ought to *make* you see me. But Love is better than sight." "I love your love too much. And *that* is the worst fault, my beloved, I can ever find in my love of *you*." These are sentences that tell of what can be no private possession, being as liberal and free as our light and air. And if the shadow of a cloud appears—appears and passes away—it is a shadow that has floated over many other hearts beside that of the writer: "How dreadfully natural it would be to me, seem to me, if you *did* leave off loving me! How it would be like the sun's setting … and no more wonder. Only, more darkness." The old exchange of tokens, the old symbolisms

[37] E.B.B. to R.B., March 30, 1846.

—a lock of hair, a ring, a picture, a child's penholder—are good enough for these lovers, as they had been for others before them. What is diffused through many of the letters is gathered up and is delivered from the alloy of superficial circumstance in the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." in reading which we are in the presence of womanhood—womanhood delivered from death by love and from darkness by; light—as much as in that of an individual woman. And the disclosure in poems and in letters being without reserve affects us as no disclosure, but simply as an adequate expression of the truth universal.

One obstacle to the prospective marriage was steadily diminishing in magnitude; Miss Barrett, with a new joy in life, new hopes, new interests, gained in health and strength from month to month. The winter of 1845-46 was unusually mild. In January one day she walked—walked, and was not carried—downstairs to the drawing-room. Spring came early that year; in the first week of February lilacs and hawthorn were in bud, elders in leaf, thrushes and white-throats in full song. In April Miss Barrett gave pledges of her confidence in the future by buying a bonnet; a little like a Quaker's, it seemed to her, but the learned pronounced it fashionable. Early in May, that bonnet, with its owner and Arabel and Flush, appeared in Regent's Park, while sunshine was filtering through the leaves. The invalid left her carriage, set foot upon the green grass, reached up and plucked a little laburnum blossom ("for reasons"), saw the "strange people moving about like phantoms of life," and felt that she alone and

the idea of one who was absent were real—"and Flush," she adds with a touch of remorse, "and Flush a little too." Many drives and walks followed; at the end of May she feloniously gathered some pansies, the flowers of Paracelsus, and this notwithstanding the protest of Arabel, in the Botanical Gardens, and felt the unspeakable beauty of the common grass. Later in the year wild roses were found at Hampstead; and on a memorable day the invalid—almost perfect in health—was guided by kind and learned Mrs Jameson through the pictures and statues of the poet Rogers's collection. On yet another occasion it was Mr Kenyon who drove her to see the strange new sight of the Great Western train coming in; the spectators procured chairs, but the rush of people and the earth-thunder of the engine almost overcame Miss Barrett's nerves, which on a later trial shrank also from the more harmonious thunder of the organ of the Abbey. Sundays came when she enjoyed the privilege of sitting if not in a pew at least in the secluded vestry of a Chapel, and joining unseen in those simple forms of prayer and praise which she valued most. Altogether something like a miracle in the healing of the sick had been effected.

Money difficulty there was none. Browning, it is true, was not in a position to undertake the expenses of even such a simple household economy as they both desired. He was prepared to seek for any honourable service—diplomatic or other—if that were necessary. But Miss Barrett was resolved against task-work which might divert him from his proper vocation as a poet. And,

thanks to the affection of an uncle, she had means—some £400 a year, capable of considerable increase by re-investment of the principal—which were enough for two persons who could be content with plain living in Italy. Browning still urged that he should be the bread-winner; he implored that her money should be made over to her own family, so that no prejudice against his action could be founded on any mercenary feeling; but she remained firm, and would consent only to its transference to her two sisters in the event of his death. And so the matter rested and was dismissed from the thoughts of both the friends.

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

if it seemed right to Browning, or was ready, if he thought it expedient, to wait for another year. His voice was given, with such decision as was possible, in favour of their adhering to the plan formed for the end of summer; they both felt the present position hazardous and tormenting; to wear the mask for another year would suffocate them; they were "standing on hot scythes."

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.