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# HOMAGE TO ROBERT BROWNING

On the Ohio State University campus, in the lovely Mirror Lake Hollow, is the Browning Amphitheatre, constructed early in this century for performances by the Browning Dramatic Society, an organization founded by a group of young women in 1883, the first Browning Society having been established in England in 1881.

This mark of honor to the English poet at the recently established Ohio State University attests to Browning's celebrity while he was still alive. He died on 12 December, 1889, in Italy, and was buried in the poets' corner in Westminster Abbey.

This being the centenary year of his death, English speaking people everywhere are led to reflect upon the achievement and legacy of this great Victorian poet. What was Robert Browning's reputation amongst those mighty minds of the Victorian era?--an era increasingly seen as one of the finest creative periods in modern Western civilization, with genius as powerful and different as that of Carlyle, Darwin, Tennyson, Dickens, Gladstone, George Eliot, Disraeli, Ruskin, J. M. W. Turner, Newman, Charlotte Bronte,

and Thomas Hardy, to name but those, What, in sum, is Browning's literary achievement?

All of us have read memorable lines from Browning: of the proud and deadly Duke of Ferara, negotiating for a new duchess, probably to be as short-lived as the last one:

> That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
> Looking as if she were alive. I call
> That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
> Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

--or, of the Bishop of St. Praxed's Church, as he lies dying in his church, telling his nephews (his illegimate sons of course) he wants the best marble tomb money can buy (money stolen from the church of course):

> Peace, peace seems all.
> St. Praxed's ever was the church for peace.
> And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
> With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know...
> Nay, boys, ye love me--all of jasper, then!
> One block, pure green as a pistachio-nut,
> There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world....

--or, of a modern musician, at the clavichord playing a tocatta of Galuppi's, the 18th-century Venetian composer, whose music suggests the heyday and decline of that great city, of living and dying, body and soul:

> "As for Venice and her people,
> merely born to bloom and drop,
> Here on earth they bore their fruitage,
> mirth and folly were the crop;
> What of soul was left, I wonder,
> when the kissing had to stop?"

--or, we remember Andrea del Sarto, a contemporary of Michel Angelo and called "the faultless painter," who was nevertheless a failure, knowing too well that unlike his colleague, he never aspired to great conceptions in art,

settling for what was easily doable for him, realizing too late,

> Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
> Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-gray,
> Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!

These are but flashes from the shining legacy of Robert Browning, but in evoking them, and in reappreciating them, in this the centenary year of his death, we in effect ask ourselves how much poorer our intellectual lives would be without these poems, or what is pretty much the same thing, if we forsake the ability, or the will, to read and appreciate his high imaginative art.

Robert Browning died at the age of 77, world famous, in the words of Henry James, "an accomplished, saturated, sane, sound man of the London world." By saturated James of course meant contentment and fulness, but there is also the blunt sense of saturation as being glutted and fat, as indeed Browning had become in those last years of lionization, petted by a society often of wealthy widows (some of them American), the poet prominent night after night in gilded salons in dinner jacket, so much so that Hallam Tennyson observed that he "wouldn't be surprised if Mr. B. expired in a white choker at a dinner party."

Browning's presence and fame had not always been that conspicuous. In fact, fame came to him slowly, not resoundingly until he was in his mid-50s with the publication of The Ring and the Book. At a time when he was

writing his very best poetry, he had at once the gratifying and galling experience of seeing his wife's work immensely more popular than his own. His lay unread while her verse novel, **Aurora Leigh**, was going through three quick editions, a poem John Ruskin hailed as "the greatest poem in the language." (Where, by the way Chaucer or Shakespeare or Milton were in Ruskin's mind when he said that is hard to guess, but then his blurbs and barbs often got him into trouble, as with Whistler who sued him for libel--and won--for saying that the painter "had flung a pot of paint into the public's face," or with Americans in general, when Ruskin declined an invitation to visit and lecture in this country, on the ground that he could not, he said, "even for a couple of months, live in a country so miserable as to possess no castles."

The love story of these two Victorian poets remains fascinating for all its familiarity because the facts are stranger than fiction. In a century fond of the romantic theme of ALL FOR LOVE--of the passionate loves of Lancelot and Guinevere, Paolo and Francesca, of Edward Fairfax Rochester and Jane Eyre--the romance of the real Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett vies with these fictional lovers.

We marvel at their deed, determined, dared, and done;

how Browning, child of an English bank clerk and an evangelical mother of Scottish-German descent, was educated at home, since dissenters from the Anglican communion were not allowed at that time to enter Oxford and Cambridge; how from fascination with Shelley Browning determined to be a poet and worked hard for more than a dozen years at plays and poems, without much success; how, at age 33, and somewhat aimless, he discovered Miss Barrett's poetry, fell in love with it, and with her, through correspondence: ("I love these books with all my heart," he wrote her, "and I love you too");

how, for her part, Elizabeth Barrett, 39 years old when the correspondence began, had spent much of her life in a secluded sickroom and believed herself an incurable invalid; ("I was born," she said, "with a double set of nerves, always out of order"); how she educated herself in this seclusion, with strong social conscience, and achieved high attainments as a classicist and poet, and had carefully followed the career of one Robert Browning;

how these two passionate poets, upon a year's secret courtship at Wimpole Street and some 560 pages of love letters between them, decided to elope, elope because the tyrannical papa Moulton-Barrett disapproved of men, marriage, for his much shielded daughter.

Elope then they did, to Italy, upon being married secretly in London, settling after a time in Florence, where

they lived for the next fourteen, creative years, the wife dying in her husband's arms in June, 1861, at age 56. She had known fame, love, and deep happiness, but she had lived long in pain, a pain "furrowed" deep in her face, Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne had noted in a visit to her, "such that the great happiness of her life cannot smooth away."

A couple more biographical details are of interest here. It is well known that everywhere in the Victorian age there is a fascination with childhood. It is not too much to say that Childhood was a Victorian creation, and exploitation. Wordsworth's great autobiographical poem, The Prelude, not published until 1850, powerfully explores the glorious legacy, and the loss, that is our common childhood. Our childhood, he asserts,

> Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne
> That hath more power than all the elements.

It is for Wordsworth the glorious creative formation of ourselves and our souls, a creativity we fall away from, like Adam and Eve from paradise, into the common everyday world. Childhood idealized, childhood lost and recovered in love--the theme is everywhere, as especially in Dickens' David Copperfield.

The Brownings themselves were shaped by a curiously protracted childhood, he by a strong-willed protective mother, she by an at once indulgent and autocratic father. Just before their marriage Robert had confessed to Elizabeth that, in marriage, he regretted losing "the prolonged

relation of childhood almost... nay altogether...." The Brownings' only child, Robert Wiedemann Barrett, born when Mrs. Browning was 43, had very indulgent parents to be sure, and the mother especially who, one biographer reports, lavished on his person "all the extravagance she withheld from her own, presenting him to the world in such a glory of silks and satins, of feathers and laces and long burnished ringlets, that whereever they went the poet was molested by the curiosity of strangers who wished to know whether the child was a boy or a girl." A sad fact about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's relationship to her own father was that she wrote him many letters after her marriage, asking forgiveness and wishing to see him, letters unanswered because, she found upon his death, cruel man, they had never been opened.

These glances at Victorian childhood are merely to suggest its importance in that age's life and art, and it is surely one of the period's powerful legacies to us, for good and bad. A good certainly is not only our cultural heritage of Jane Eyre and Alice in Wonderland and Oliver Twist and David Copperfield, but also that these cumulative, pervasive, elemental Victorian experiences of childhood, in life and in art, were key materials in the modern mapping our inmost psyches and selves by Sigmund Freud.

Browning and his son came back to England in 1862 and settled, with his sister, at Warwick Crescent near Regents' Park, his home now for most of the rest of his life. Now 50,

his fame had been secured upon the publication of his volume **Men and Women** in 1855, poems written over a ten-year period at the peak of his creativity, and poems by which we best know him. Upon his return to England too, he began writing his great Roman murder story, **The Ring and the Book**, which he published in 1868-69. The Court Circular of 13 March 1869 notes of presentations to Her Majesty the Queen that "two of the most distinguished writers of the Age--Carlyle and Browning--met with her at the Dean of Westminster's." And, about the same time, **The Atheneum** wrote, "We must record that **The Ring and the Book** is beyond all parallel the supremest poetical achievement of our time, ... that it is the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare."

The rest of my remarks I shall pretty much confine to these works, the fulness of Browning's genius, although he was to write a great deal more in the years left to him. (I am not the only one, certainly, who is impressed by the vast bulk of Victorian writing, of every kind, scientific, theological, literary, journalistic, and this without typewriters, much less PCs and other speed technologies. With all this prolixity, one is reminded of Richard Sheridan's quip about the historian Gibbon, whom he once introduced as "the luminous author of the **Decline and Fall**. A friend reproached this flattery, and Sheridan replied,

"You say I called him the luminous author, etc.; oh, I meant voluminous." (The distinction is good one to keep in mind, and not only about the Victorians.) But voluminosity is a sure mark of the Victorian ethic of work, of energy, and it is a mark also of their wide and deep curiosity--values, I think, we should be loathe to lose.

For Browning is the great Victorian poet of energy: of intellectual, imaginative, physical and spiritual energy, and that for the sake of human fulfillment. The self, nature around us, the universe, God himself, are but different forms of active energy striving toward realization and fulfillment, a fulfillment that recedes just out of our reach, or as Andrea del Sarto asks, What's a heaven for? This energy in Browning--comparable I think in Thomas Carlyle and in Walt Whitman in America--may be contrasted with the languorous Arthurian idylls of Tennyson, of a melancholic brooding on the long lost heroic past, and on "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean." As John Morley the Victorian critic notes, Browning brings us live men and women, "eager, passionate, indifferent; tender and ravenous, mean and noble, humorous and profound... And they all come with a certain Shakespearean fulness, vividness, directness."

There is Brother Lippo Lippi, just nabbed by the police as he has slipped out of his cloister, and confronted with what a good Brother (who has taken vows of obedience,

poverty, and chastity) is doing, out chasing girls at carnival time? And he has a good story: how as a starving streetboy he took those vows in return for a mouthful of bread, the lesson of that being,

> You should not take a fellow eight years old,
> And make him swear to never kiss the girls.

But Lippo Lippi, a painter, has deeper views on art and life for us to hear. His church superiors had admonished him in painting to forget the body, just paint the soul, they said:

> Now, is that sense, I ask?
> A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
> So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further
> And can't fare worse!...
>
> Or say there's beauty with no soul at all;
> I never saw it--put the case the same--
> If you get simple beauty and naught else,
> You get about the best thing God invents.

And beyond beauty itself, Lippi goes on,

> The shapes of things, their colors, lights and shades,
> Changes, surprises,--and God made it all!

Art itself then in merely one way to apprehend and interpet God's plenitude, by selecting, heightening, presenting reality.

> Art was given for that;
> God uses us to help each other so,
> Lending our minds out...
> This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

In those words Browning gives his interpretation of the highest Renaissance art, the art of the historical Lippo Lippi, Michel Angelo, Raphael, and the others: a historical period Browning admired because it had united beauty and

truth, body and soul, a period of the highest achievement because of the highest endeavor. It's no sin to fail when one aspires with all one has, as in the questing knight of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." Or the grammarian, in "The Grammarian's Funeral," spending a life on abstruse points of Greek syntax, may seem in the world's eye a life of trivial pursuits, but in Browning's ethic his is a worthy life and deserving the eminence his burial receives. The timid lovers of "The Statue and the Bust", on the otherhand, even though their yearned for union would have been a sin in society's code, they sinned the more in not taking the chance their hearts urged. Says Browning there,

Let a man contend to the uttermost

For his life's set prize, be it what it will!

If that sounds boy scoutish, it is--the Scouts afterall being a Victorian creation--but what is applauded here is the integrity of effort in dignity and self respect.

Browning's principle of striving, aspiring energy is indeed one of the fine distinguishing characteristics of Victorianism itself, of robust capitalism, progress, imperialism, and of the dramatic technological achievements of steam and steel. Abused, this energy is a Scrooge, and exploitation of the masses, or the materialism of Bishop Bloug^ram; well used, it is a model of the great giver of gifts and graces, Christ the ma^tchless darer and doer, of whom Christopher Smart had written:

Thou at stupendous truth believed,
And now the matchless deed's achieved,
DETERMIN'D, DAR'D, and DONE.

That last phrase--with its driving alliteration--was a favorite of Browning's, and it resonates throughout his life and work.

Browning, I noted, came from a dissenting religious tradition, as did Ruskin, Macaulay, George Eliot, among others. The age was a turbulent one for faith and doubt, and that for some decades before Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859. The dilemma of many sincere folk might be noted in this (alleged) Victorian prayer: "O God!--if there is a God--save my soul, if I have a soul". The alternatives of the righteousness and rant of much evangelical protestantism (what Sydney Smith called "the melancholy madness of the tabernacle") on the one hand, and on the other, the lifeless formalism of the Anglican Established Church ("the Tory Party at prayer," some wit said) were not appealing to truth-seekers like Browning. High church, low church, broad church, Roman church, and increasingly upon the advent of Darwin, no church, were the spiritual challenges of the time.

Darwinian science for Browning was no threat. Far from it. The air of course was full of confrontations between old and new truths, such as that between the Bishop of Oxford and T. H. Huxley on the idea of evolution, when Wilberforce, right reverendly, wished to know whether Huxley was descended from the apes on his grandfather's or

grandmother's side? Huxley's withering retort* surely pleased Browning, who never suffered fools or frauds gladly, especially pompous ones, as is wonderfully evident in his satire on a popular American spiritualist, "Mr. Sludge," Browning called him, "Mr. Sludge, the Medium."

New science, all new knowledge, was to be coveted for that above all was evidence of our imperfection seeking perfection, of a lower self seeking a higher one, which was what true spirituality and God were all about. Browning has one of his truth-seekers, Cleon, a pagan philosopher, brooding on what is ~~here~~ higher than man's latest, highest knowledge, and he observes:

> Man might live at first
> The animal life; but is there nothing more?
> In due time, let him critically learn
> How he lives; and, the more he gets to know
> Of his own life's adaptabilities, the
> More joy-giving will his life become.
> Thus man, who hath this quality, is best.

What Cleon himself finds lacking in his own life is a higher spirituality.

That poem is 1855. Directly stimulated by Darwin's theory, Browning wrote "Caliban Upon Setebos." Shakespeare's Caliban from **The Tempest**, Caliban half man, half monster, Browning places in the "cool slush" of an island, trying to figure out the chain of being, of creator and created, of his own relationship to the spiteful island gods and to Prospero, and of Prospero's relationship to a higher god yet--all of which Caliban but dimly and dumbly

*There is no definitive account, apparently because

perceives, his god-making and realizing limited by his own brutishness.

It is a primitivism seeking--in a very rudimentary natural theology--a higher evolution, a spiritual progress. And that I think is key to Browning's faith: a belief in God's greatness and fulness in the creation of the world and us in it, and our need to discern and appreciate that fulness by knowledge new, and renewing, which is our spiritual development, and our being worthy, indeed, of God. As I understand Browning, we are all process, God himself is process, not product. It's a principle not of stasis but dynamism, not of being or having been, but of becoming, both in man and in God.

there was no stenographic record of Huxley's reply, but the various versions recorded pretty much agree to the point, as noted by Leonard Huxley, Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley, London, 1900, I, 184: in June, 1860, there were some meetings in Oxford to hear scientific papers, and commentaries, among which the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, was reported to appear to "smash Darwin". His commentary was lengthy, scientifically irrelevant pretty much, and he made the remark to Huxley, in the audienc toward the end of his talk. THH was reported to have said to a friend on that remark: "The Lord hath delivered him into mine hands." THH arose to rebutt the Bishop, spoke dispassionately, and closed with the remark, to the effect that, he would not be ashamed to have a monkey for an ancestor, but would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used his great gifts to obscure the truth. "no one doubted the meaning and the effect was tremendous. One lady fainted and had to be carried out...."

And so it is that Browning, above all 19th century poets, I think, reveres old age in its harvest of knowledge, will, and spirit. A large number of his dramatic speakers are aged wise men--musicians, physicians, painters, poets, and philosophers--who reflect on experience and counsel the virtue of resilience, ability to change, learning from failure, humility in the infinite earth and heaven before us, pride in the mastery of our gifts, and the will to know and value what life means to the very last. Old age is our ultimate earthly test, reflects the Rabbi Ben Ezra, a medieval thinker:

> Youth ended, I shall try
> My gain or loss thereby;
> Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold:
> And I shall weigh the same,
> Give life its praise or blame:
> Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being old.

Of all these aged wise men the most appealing to me is the old pope in **The Ring and the Book**, Innocent the Twelfth, now in his 86th year, who is faced with a court appeal for a stay of execution against the Count Guido Franceschini, nobleman, murderer. Franceschini, a middle-aged aristocrat of decayed family and fortune, with the connivance of the church, married the 13-year old Pompilia Comparini for a dowry, it turned out, she didn't have, and more, unknown even to her, Pompilia was not the daughter of the Comparinis but an illegitimate child. To revenge her and her foster parents, and the young priest Caponsacchi who had rescued Pompilia from his fiendish custody, the Count hired accomplices, stabbed the parents to death, leaving Pompilia

with 22 dagger wounds for dead. She lives for four days more, giving her deathbed confession, her life story and evidence against her husband. This confession, with the depositions of the lawyers and the testimonies of the priest and of the Count the pope has in the appeal, not in the Count's denial that he committed the murders but that they were justifiable by what he claimed was his wife's adultery and the deceit of the Comparinis.

The pope broods on the inevitably tangled testimony of fact and fiction, half truths and half lies, much of it, the pope says in weary disgust,

> filthy rags of speech, this coil,
> Of statement, comment, query, and response,
> Tatters all too contaminate for use...

But the truth he must discern and it is Pompilia's confession that moves him and us to tears, and the truth so far as we can know it. Now 17, dying, the mother of a new baby, the Count's single gift to her, she expresses her heart's love for that boy and his promise, for the priest who sought to rescue her, for her real and foster parents who loved her though the first abandoned and the second deceived her, grateful for these gifts in her life though brief and brutal it had been. This courage and love, this most saint-like faith, moves the pope to address her thus:

> My flower,
> My rose, I gather for the breast of God,
> This I praise most in thee, where all I praise,
> That having been obedient to the end...
> Thou patient thus, couldst rise from law to law,
> The old to the new...

That is, she lived obedient to what the Old and New Testaments teach us of love, and courage, and forgiveness and faith, a soul, the pope pronounces, most worthy of "the softened gaze of God." And therefore, to the messenger awaiting his judgment on the Count's appeal, he says,

> Enough, for I may die this very night
> And how should I dare die, this man let live?
>
> Carry this forthwith to the Governor!

I have touched on Browning's main themes of energy and of spirituality. A word more about love. Like the Romantics, Browning believed in the transfiguring power of love, of love in the ideal sense that "it is the bond and sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything else," as Shelley put it. In its Christian sense this is only a version of St. Paul's "in Him we live and move and have our being," and we have seen Browning's faith in it. Of love between man and woman, there is of course his poems of great devotion to his wife, and after her death, troubled poems of separation, dreams, and might-have-beens. Of lust ("casual sex" we call it nowadays) there is a good deal in his poems early and late.

But of lyricism about love, especially in **Men and Women**, there is not much. Indeed, in recollecting "Andrea del Sarto," "A Tocatta of Galuppi's," "In a Balcony," and others, we think mainly of love thwarted and unfulfilled. And in this, Browning in his art is one of the most unsentimental realists about sexual love in the Victorian age. Love, a refined and idealized love as the union of man

and woman, fulfilling in joy and peace to body and soul, the two selves one in transcendence: such love is hard to achieve, impossible to hold, as Browning explores in his best love lyric, "Two in the Campagna."

Set in a May morning, with two lovers in the great plain outside Rome, surrounded by feathery grasses and flowers and enjoying the primal peace and unity of the place, a thought as hard to hold as a spider thread tantalizes the man. Can our love, heartfull as it is, ever be as primal in oneness in peace and joy as we would wish it? He says to his beloved,

> I would I could adopt your will,
> See with your eyes, and set my heart
> Beating by yours, and drink my fill
> At your soul's springs,--your part my part
> In life, for good and ill.
>
> No. I yearn upward, touch you close,
> Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,
> Catch your soul's warmth,--I pluck the rose
> And love it more than tongue can speak--
> Then the good minute goes.
>
> Already how am I so far
> Out of that minute? Must I go
> Still like the thistle-ball, no bar,
> Onward, whenever light winds blow,
> Fixed by no friendly star?
>
> Just when I seemed about to learn!
> Where is the thread now? Off again!
> The old trick! Only I discern--
> Infinite passion, and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn.

Our human condition, mortality, is our finite heart, even in the fulness of love, frustrated by our yearning for a passion beyond passing and pain. It was of such keen perception about love that Henry James called Browning a

classic, "on account of the extraordinary beauty of his treatment of the special relationship between man and woman." Which brings me to my summary.

Henry James, the great subtle psychological realist in his novels, is here praising Browning as one of his masters. For Browning's essential genius is his profound psychological insight into a whole range of men and women and his ability to present them in in their individual voices: in speech that is colloquial, racy, intense, natural, showing the pressure of thought and feeling, that is, the true voice speaking out of a real situation; and these the voices of artists, scoundrels, cowards, blowhards, criminals, quacks, heroes, lovers, and children like Pompilia, victims of good and bad-willed adults, of a terrorism that brings that good old pope, and us, to ask in God's name, what are we, and why are we.

**The Ring and the Book** is Browning's masterpiece. It influenced not only the texture of 20th century fiction, as especially in James' psychological realism, it also influenced the technique of story-telling itself in the stream-of-consciousness of a narrator, of the conscious mind (and then with Freud, the subconscious) recreating reality. In its dramatic fictionalizing of fact, Browning's verse novel is the precursor of fiction as new as E.L. Doctorow's; and the dramatic monologue itself, Browning's great

technical creation, has influenced 20th century poets as different as W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, and T. S. Eliot.

I suppose if one wanted to choose a single quality as characteristic of Browning, it would be **intellect.** He is an intellectual poet. And that was a difficulty for readers in his day, and even more in ours. Perhaps you noted Jonathan Lieberson's essay on TV in a recent issue of the NYRB (13 April, 89), in which he surveys the current breezy and quick-fix audience participation programs, the silly and increasingly vulgar soap operas involving Stormy, Misty, and the like, and the generally mindless mesmerizing that is modern television. What daily hours of that does for our youth, God knows, but it surely has something to do with inducing a habit of passivity of mind that dulls it to language or numbers of any subtlety. Browning makes us concentrate on meaning, on human intentions, good and evil, beauty and truth, because in fact these things are never ever the simple, one, whole, and nothing but the truth. There is some prolixity, Victorian complacency and unpersuasive optimism in the large body of Browning's work.

But, in the main, his poetry is his legacy of values which we do well to appreciate: sanity, work, aspiration, knowledge, spirituality, love, and these expressed in powerful, vigorous, enduring art. Hence this homage to Robert Browning.