

WARTON LECTURE

BROWNING'S LYRICISM

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Read 13 January 1971

The only man living who can touch the hem of his garment is Meredith. Meredith is a prose-Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing prose.<sup>1</sup>

OSCAR WILDE'S famous epigram had a serious purpose. In the same article in *The Nineteenth Century*, July 1890, he had written, 'Browning is the most Shakespearian creature since Shakespeare'. But who thinks of Shakespeare as a lyricist? And Wilde meant just this—that Browning was even less of one. 'I Shakespeare could sing with a myriad lips, Browning could stammer through a thousand mouths.' For Wilde, as for most subsequent critics, it is Browning's people, his men and women, who survive:

Even now, as I am speaking, and speaking not against him but for him, there glides through the room the pageant of his persons. There, creeps Fra Lippo Lippi with his cheeks still burning from some girl's hot kiss. There, stands dread Saul with the lordly male-sapphire gleaming in his turban. Mildred Tresham is there, and the Spanish monk, yellow with hatred, and Blougram, and Rabbi Ben Ezra, and the Bishop of St. Praxed's. The spawn of Setebos gibbers in the corner, and Sebald, hearing Pippa pass by, looks on Ottima's haggard face, and loathes her and his own sin and himself.<sup>2</sup>

So too, to most of us, Browning lives through his creation of character. Yet, paradoxically, it is his lyrics that have appealed more generally. 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad' has had a wider audience than 'Andrea Del Sarto'. And the very fact of its inclusion in innumerable anthologies is evidence of his lyric survival. But how do we relate the notorious idiosyncratic style, adept at conveying the quirks and mannerisms of the individual

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The True Function and Value of Criticism', *Nineteenth Century* (July 1890). Cited in *Browning, The Critical Heritage*, ed. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, 1970, p. 524. All subsequent quotations from contemporary reviews are annotated as from this volume.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 525.

personality to the traditional nature of lyric song? Browning is often comic, but we do not expect a lyric to make us laugh. He is unexpected and original in what he says, but we have come to require the simple expression of general commonplace truth in the lyric. He is sometimes boisterous or prosaic, and we equate lyricism with melody and a quintessential poetic insight which has little to do with extravagance.

Most of his contemporaries reacted unfavourably to Browning's lyric poems. They held various views of what a lyric was—the more commonplace opinion demanded mainly fluent versification and simple sentiment; the more sophisticated looked for a concentrated intensity expressed in lucid, unexpanded forms. Browning was perhaps ahead of his time in relishing the elaborate exfoliations of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, but he was, nevertheless, as much a post-romantic as an imitator of earlier modes. Donne had exploited the concentrated conceit of the sixteenth century, but that was itself nearer to epigram, to the concise, lapidary turn of thought and phrase which attempts to retain the simplicity of lyric utterance through an exercise of wit. Browning's lyrics are indeed further from the poignant fifteenth-century fragment:

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,  
The small rain down can rain,  
Christ! if my love were in my arms  
And I in my bed again!

than Tennyson's

O that 'twere possible,  
After long grief and pain,  
To feel the arms of my true love  
Round me once again.

But that brief verse of Tennyson's was the origin of *Maud*, and Browning shared Tennyson's inclination to elaborate and expand. Only, he does it in a different way, closer to the intricate, winding involutions of metaphysical verse than to the common expository manner of his age. Nevertheless, he is the heir to the romantic tradition. Wordsworth had felt that the poetry of the age should be written in the language of real men, and though the simplicity of *Lyrical Ballads* is, as Coleridge saw, far from the syntax of common speech, Wordsworth's principle allowed a later poet like Browning to take what it meant more literally. Lyrics are about life, about common feeling, and why, therefore,

should they not be written in the uncommon accents of unique and individual experience? The Victorians domesticated the romantic inspiration, and among them, Browning and Hardy, his successor and imitator, carried this domestication into the realm of lyric verse as well as into narrative and expository poetry.

But was Browning himself aware of any distinction between his brilliant innovatory mode of dramatic monologue and the old traditional lyric expression? His later critics, as well as his contemporaries, have concentrated so emphatically on the first that it is difficult to identify with any confidence his own interpretation of the second. In the advertisement to the *Dramatic Lyrics*, as they were first published in 1842 as the third of the 'Bells and Pomegranates' series, Browning wrote:

Such poems as the following come properly enough, I suppose, under the head of Dramatic Pieces; being, though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine.

Insisting on his invention here, Browning was, as always, anxious to avoid any identification of himself with his creatures. But when he came to rearrange his poems for the *Collected Edition* of 1863, he distinguished more precisely between predominantly lyric works, those which inclined towards story (dramatic romances), and dramatic monologues proper, in which the character of the speaker predominates. He never defines lyric expression as such, but the classification suggests that he was concerned to distinguish fairly narrowly between the three closely connected modes. From the original *Dramatic Lyrics*, Browning only retained four in this new disposition, including 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister'. The *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* of 1845 ('Bells and Pomegranates', No. VII) was similarly dismembered for the *Collected Edition* and nine poems, among them the familiar 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad' and '. . . from the Sea', 'The Lost Mistress', 'The Confessional', and 'The Laboratory' were retained as lyrics. Then from the original two-volume 1855 edition of *Men and Women* Browning transferred in all twenty-seven poems to the lyrical category, all the love poems (except 'The Last Ride Together' which he added to the *Dramatic Romances*) and including his two most original contributions to the lyric genre, 'Up at a Villa—Down in the City' and 'A Toccata of Galuppi's'. The new classification, though Browning did not consistently repeat its principle

in future editions, shows him distinguishing between those poems in which lyrical expression predominates over dramatic principle or situation and vice versa. We can only characterize this distinction by examining the selection he himself made.

Love poems come naturally under the lyrical category. But it may seem odd at first sight to find them rubbing shoulders with 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister', 'The Laboratory', 'The Confessional', and 'Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha'. Evidently Browning included the comic in his definition of lyric, as well as the expression of a singular or intense emotion, like the jealous triumph of 'The Laboratory', the agony of 'The Confessional', or the humorously exaggerated hatred of the 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister'. Here then, we have a rough indication of the themes of Browning's lyrics—love sentiments and love situations, and the humorous or serious expression of a self-sufficient passion. But in the lyric it is as much the mode of expression appropriate to the theme which characterizes the form, and the originality of Browning's lyrics depends on his adjustment of the two.

Perhaps less attention has been paid to what Browning meant by lyric expression than by dramatic principle because it is easier to detect the novelist in verse, the chronicler of fine and subtle consciences, than to analyse his peculiar use of that most ambiguous nineteenth-century mode, the lyric. In his own day the singularity of Browning's style, his improvised, fluent, jocular technique, the obtrusiveness of his manner and the elusiveness of his matter, provoked almost universal irritation. Only John Forster, who, in *The New Monthly Magazine* (March 1836), had already detected in *Paracelsus* an unusual visual acuteness, wrote nine years later, reviewing *Dramatic Lyrics* in *The Examiner*:

his best passages are full of the best Saxon words, and in the art of versification he must be called a master. It is his surpassing facility in this particular, that now and then plays bewildering pranks with his reader's ear—distracting, dazing, and confusing it, in mazes of complicated harmony. On more happy occasions, the flow with which his lines gush forth into the kind of music most appropriate to the thoughts that prompt them, is to us extremely charming; and for the neatness of his rhymes in his lighter efforts, we think that Butler would have hugged him.<sup>1</sup>

Everybody agreed about Butler, but for the most part the comparison was invoked only for censure. Hudibrastic is the

<sup>1</sup> *Critical Heritage*, p. 83.

favourite epithet of unsympathetic critics of Browning's style: 'a hardihood of rhythm and cadence little short of Hudibrastic';<sup>1</sup> 'Hudibrastic doggerel rhyme';<sup>2</sup> 'a certain Hudibrastic recklessness of thought and diction';<sup>3</sup> 'an idiot captivity to the jingle of Hudibrastic rhyme'.<sup>4</sup> The effect of the metrical athleticism, according to one commentator, is 'dislocation, not grace'.<sup>5</sup> And another finds 'the language spasmodic and tortured almost into the style of Alfred Jingle Esq.'.<sup>6</sup> If these effects were accidental, then Browning must be written off as a clumsy amateur; if deliberate, he must be accused, his critics felt, of abusing his own facility and affronting his readers.

Yet Browning had early shown his skill in traditional technique. The Shelleyan blank verse of *Pauline* is developed more flexibly in *Paracelsus*, and exchanged in *Sordello* for the traditional but remarkable feat of couplet rhyming over 886 lines. But for all his love of the craft of his art, Browning was obsessed by the realization that writing consists of more than versatility in handling words and metre. He wrote to Elizabeth Barrett in March 1845, 'But I think you like the operation of writing as I should like that of painting or making music, do you not?'<sup>7</sup> and later, in June of the same year, tells her:

Your music is more various and exquisite than any modern writer's to my ear. One should study the mechanical part of the art, or nearly all that there is to be studied, for the more one sits and thinks over the creative process, the more it confirms itself as inspiration, nothing more or less. Or, at worst, you write down old inspirations, what you remember of them—but with that it begins. 'Reflection' is exactly what it names itself—a representation in scattered rays from every angle of incidence, of what first of all became present in a great light, a whole one. So tell me how these lights are born, if you can! But I can tell anyone how to make melodious verses—let him do it therefore—it should be exacted of all writers.<sup>8</sup>

Thus a mingled delight in the exercise of technique and a larger dissatisfaction with its sufficiency characterizes Browning. The first accounts for that gratification which communicates itself in the exaggeration of his mastery over varied metre; the second for the underlying uneasiness which creates at best an

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, ed. Elvan Kintner, Harvard, 1969, vol. i, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

ironic, at worst an eccentric, discrepancy between the confident acrobatic mastery of the poet—a tight-rope walker who never loses his footing, and the elusive pursuit of something beyond this, where the poet's imaginative reach exceeds his technical grasp. Browning exploits the discrepancy, sometimes with a negligent accomplishment, sometimes with a wry, disarming admission of failure that turns to comedy in tone and effect.

It is an old dilemma and Browning is not exceptional in recognizing it. But the circumstances of his time focus it with a new sharpness. The lyrics of Donne, one of Browning's favourite poets with whom he is often justly compared, are themselves rhetorical exercises, retracing and reversing established modes of thought and expression, and, at the same time, original explorations of situations, emotions, and ideas. But Donne had the advantage of a highly ordered basis of thought and language on which to work. In bringing his verse nearer to the rhythms of common speech, he could draw on a more formal tradition of argument and utterance, with an effect at once objective and assured. The looser associative nature of nineteenth-century thought, the established informality of the romantic lyric mode, and the less clearly defined structure of nineteenth-century colloquial speech, all made Browning's task more complicated and more liable to lapses of tone and taste. Deprived of so many objective formulae, Browning is forced to rely on individual preference and choice. Thus, making a virtue of necessity, he chooses from traditional metres and devices, ideas and themes, and proceeds to counterpoint them against his own language and speech emphasis, his own argument, his unique contemporary sensibility. The effect on his public was often disturbing and bewildering.

One of his love lyrics—'A Lover's Quarrel'—entirely characteristic of his method, provoked a peculiarly puzzled response. 'What'—cries an anonymous reviewer in *The Athenaeum* for 1855—'can be more lyrical than the first verse of "A Lover's Quarrel"?'<sup>1</sup>

Oh, what a dawn of day!  
 How the March sun feels like May!  
 All is blue again  
 After last night's rain,  
 And the South dries the hawthorn-spray.  
 Only, my Love's away!  
 I'd as lief that the blue were grey.

<sup>1</sup> *Critical Heritage*, p. 156.

But the rest of the poem he can only find 'somewhat prosaic'. *Frazer's Magazine* for January 1856 thought it altogether too realistic,<sup>1</sup> and David Masson, including it among briefer love poems, all dealing with 'simple transient feelings' confessed that Browning does not seem to him 'at home in such brief and purely lyrical effusions, requiring as they do an instant gush of feeling . . . and a clear and flowing tune'.<sup>2</sup> Only William Morris singled it out with the appropriate epithet 'passionate' as one of the most impressive of Browning's lyrics.<sup>3</sup>

Like Donne's 'Good Morrow' and 'The Sun Rising', 'A Lover's Quarrel' deals with the self-sufficiency of love. But the title itself suggests the main difference between Browning's treatment and Donne's. Browning's poem is circumstantial, realistic as his reviewer complained, its statements and arguments are all subsidiary to detailed demonstration. It is neither the simple expression of transient feelings, as his readers mostly expected of love lyric, nor a witty and analytical exposition of a conventional theme. Yet Morris was right to call it passionate, though it is so in a different way from Donne.

'A Lover's Quarrel' opens with the speaker's complaint, recalling three happy months when he and his mistress lived 'blocked up with snow' enclosed in their own world, their sudden unaccountable quarrel and her leaving. It continues with the arguments he would use to coax her back and concludes with a vivid picture of her imagined return:

So, she'd efface the score,  
And forgive me as before.  
It is twelve o'clock  
I shall hear her knock  
In the worst of a storm's uproar,  
I shall pull her through the door,  
I shall have her for evermore.

The old conventional contrast in the first verse between the season and the lover's despair is introduced only to be reversed. He does not want her to return and make spring more lovely, but to recreate the winter world of their life together. Seven brilliant stanzas describe this—'When the mesmerizer Snow, With his hand's first sweep, Put the earth to sleep'—in precise, novelistic detail. Together the lovers traced pictures in the ash,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

laughed over *The Times* report of the emperor's marriage, imagined places they would never visit, turned tables, walked about embracing, admired each other, changed sex in play, creating a fantasy world of which the one condition was intimate and total isolation. And these kaleidoscopic glimpses cunningly draw the reader away from the argument to its embodiment. Then the speaker wrenches him back from realization to reflection as he broods over the vulnerability of love, comparing the accidental 'hasty word' that caused the quarrel to the fine obstructions, foreign bodies, tiny intrusions which disturb the delicate physical organism of the body:

What of a hasty word?  
 Is the fleshly heart not stirred  
     By a worm's pin-prick  
     Where its roots are quick?  
 See the eye, by a fly's foot blurred—  
     Ear, when a straw is heard  
 Scratch the brain's coat of curd!

This wincingly exact delineation of the fragility of love prefaces a more elaborate argument where the speaker returns to spring, as in the first stanza, and reveals unexpected reasons for his resentment of it:

Here's the spring back or close,  
 When the almond-blossom blows:  
     We shall have the word  
     In a minor third  
 There is none but the cuckoo knows:  
     Heaps of the guelder-rose!  
 I must bear with it I suppose.

Could but November come,  
 Were the noisy birds struck dumb  
     At the warning slash  
     Of his driver's-lash—  
 I would laugh like the valiant Thumb  
     Facing the castle glum  
 And the giant's fee-faw-fum!

Then, were the world well stripped  
 Of the gear wherein equipped  
     We can stand apart,  
     Heart dispense with heart



In the sun, with the flowers unnipped,—  
 Oh, the world's hangings ripped,  
 We were both in a bare-walled crypt!

Each in the crypt would cry  
 'But one freezes here, and why?  
 'When a heart as chill  
 'At my own would thrill  
 'Back to life, as its fires out-fly?  
 'Heart, shall we live or die?  
 'The rest, . . . settle by-and-by!'

This section is characteristic of Browning's peculiar wit; it is ingenious, exaggerated, surprising. Again, what he is saying is what Donne says in 'The Good Morrow'. But Donne dismisses the busyness of the outside world with brief contempt—'call country ants to harvest offices', and writes off climate and season as 'but the rags of time', in contrast to the still centre of the lovers' bed, their own small comprehensive world. Donne, too, starts with a convention: of situation—the lover speaking from the bed to which the thought returns in the epitomizing last line 'This bed thy centre is, these walls thy sphere'. His poem moves in a circle, the arguments ranging beyond place and returning precisely upon themselves. It produces, though through argumentative wit rather than the concentrated expression of simple feeling, the familiar end-stopped quality of traditional lyric. But Browning's poem is open-ended, in spite of its formal return to the original opposition of spring and winter. For it moves along a narrative sequence, from present, to past, to conjectured future, and its predominant idiom is narrative description. This is why even when the argument goes against them, spring's pleasures, guelder roses, and the cuckoo's song carry their natural associations of delight and the reader must hold them in his imagination alongside the speaker's rejection of them. The meaning in the last stanzas gradually unfolds itself through visual detail, but what had seemed natural description is now revealed as metaphor; winter is more than the backdrop to the scene; it *means* the nature of love and the conditions in which it flourishes. When life is frozen to stand-still, as if in a subterranean crypt, survival and mutual dependence become bare essentials, a matter of life and death: 'Heart, shall we live or die?' Browning had used the image of the crypt earlier in his first letter to Elizabeth Barrett in January 1845 when he recalls how many times before they

began to correspond he had almost met her, 'I feel as if I had been close, so close, to some world's wonder in chapel or crypt'.<sup>1</sup> It carries intimations of miraculous revelation, even in the poem where it is absorbed in the prevailing figure of winter.

No doubt insight is a better word than argument to explain how Browning proceeds in this poem. For argument requires rational judgement, but you cannot dispute the right or wrong of a revelation. Browning is characteristically making us suspend judgement. If we didn't we might notice that the speaker's idea of love in 'A Lover's Quarrel' is disturbingly like that of Porphyria's Lover who also found a way of having his mistress for evermore. But the whole tone and procedure of the lyric prevents such a comparison. Our attention is not focused on the character of the speaker or the situation; if it were, Browning could have classified the poem either as dramatic monologue or as dramatic romance. Instead we are drawn into the whole way in which he makes his definition of love, not by metaphysical argument or simple lyric effusion, but through the turns and traces of circumstantial detail, and a gradual metaphorical disclosure. The poem recalls what Browning had to say to Elizabeth Barrett in the letter quoted earlier about the nature of craft and inspiration. Love, revealed as absolute and timeless, is only manifest in the context of vividly realized time and place. So too in the creative process the reflections 'from every angle of incidence' of the first inspiration have to be fettered in words, metres, and rhymes. The technique of 'A Lover's Quarrel' was one that Hardy learned from, in whose works every lyric tells a story and every story embodies and unfolds a single truth of the original insight.

But if this is a new way of writing lyrics, it was not the only one Browning devised. 'A Lover's Quarrel' is discursive and wide-ranging, but Browning was just as capable of brevity. The earlier lyric 'Meeting at Night' had shown how tersely he could conjure a time, a place, and a situation, every detail expressing the sensuousness and heightened expectation of the theme. More complicated but equally concentrated is the remarkable poem 'Love in a Life'. It is brief enough to be quoted in its entirety:

Room after room,  
I hunt the house through

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, vol. i, pp. 3-4.

We inhabit together.  
 Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—  
 Next time, herself—not the trouble behind her  
 Left in the curtain, the couch's perfume!  
 As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath blossomed anew:  
 Yon looking-glass gleamed at the wave of her feather.

Yet the day wears,  
 And door succeeds door;  
 I try the fresh fortune—  
 Range the wide house from the wing to the centre.  
 Still the same chance! she goes out as I enter.  
 Spend my whole day in the quest,—who cares?  
 But 't is twilight, you see,—with such suites to explore,  
 Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!

What Yeats called 'the plunge into the labyrinth of another's being' has surely never been more obliquely but substantially realized. The poem is accurately domestic and, like its theme, tantalizingly elusive. This well-furnished drawing-room shimmers with the curious half-life of a recent presence, never quite identified. The intensely romantic theme is carried by a single image, familiar and haunting like the interiors of an Antonioni film. It is easier for us to see the poem, used as we are to an imagistic technique, than to hear it. But if we listen, we will hear a complicated pattern of sound that is cunningly attuned to the sense. There are three rhymes in each stanza and one of them is a feminine or double rhyme—the key rhyme, in fact, into which the final line of each stanza modulates. The effect is of unresolved suspense—Browning's familiar lyric conclusion. Is the speaker weary when he says, 'But 't is twilight, you see'—so sudden a reversal of tone after the confident 'Spend my whole day in the quest—who cares?' It is later than he thinks, but the repetition of '*such* suites to explore, *such* closets to search, *such* alcoves to importune' restores the tone of excitement, delight in the old game of hide-and-seek for its own sake.

Browning's unsympathetic critics accused him of an addiction to feminine rhymes. They did not stop to inquire how he used them. Like his preferred trochaic, dactylic, and anapaestic measures, double rhymes can give a humorous, improvised, off-hand impression. But he uses them, too, for very different effects. The anapaestic murmur of 'Love Among the Ruins' with its brief echo to every line moves from the meditative to the ecstatic. In 'The Lost Mistress' the change from the first three stanzas where the feminine rhyme occurs in the first and

third lines to the last two where it appears in the second and fourth again creates a suspended conclusion, a half-question:

Yet I will but say what mere friends say,  
Or only a thought stronger;  
I will hold your hand but as long as all may,  
Or so very little longer!

And here the tentative measure saves simple sentiment from sentimentality.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, who had found in Dryden the naked thews and sinews of the English language, perhaps because the conventional formality of Dryden's diction seldom distracts from the aural power of his measures, did not credit Browning with any such quality. His own fastidiousness rejected Browning's tone, his manner, and his extravagance. And Hopkins failed to discover in his contemporary an attempt, not unlike his own, to bring the traditional patterns of verse closer to the rhythms of common speech. Stress rhythm which is predominant in Browning is a form of sprung rhythm. A bold counterpointing of traditional metres with individual or colloquial stress is the secret of the power of many of Browning's most popular lyrics. One of the peculiar strengths of English poetry lies in the disposition of clusters of strong and weak syllables. Strong stresses coming together break the quantitative pattern of conventional metre; weak stresses coming together in groups produce the tripping effect of anapaests or dactyls, but in English speech a group of three or more unstressed syllables is as common as a group of two, and many of the most successful poetic rhythms are achieved by exploiting this. Take, for instance, Dryden's lines:

A fiery soul which, working out its way  
Fretted the pigmy body to decay  
And o'er inform'd the tenement of clay.

These are technically iambic, but the term is meaningless to explain the force of the measure. The words 'working out its way' compose a group of three unstressed as against one last stressed syllable; they are echoed by similar groups of three in 'and o'er informed the tenement of clay'. It was characteristic of his period that Dryden preferred polysyllabic words to achieve this inflection of unaccented clusters. Atterbury in his Preface to the 1690 edition of Waller's poems had spoken of Donne's

clusters of monosyllables 'which are certainly the most harsh untunable things in the world'. And Browning's critics repeated, in innocence, the same complaint. 'He clogs his verse with too many consonants and monosyllables', says an anonymous critic in *Frazer's Magazine* in 1846.<sup>1</sup> But monosyllables commonly carry strong stresses—those 'best Saxon words' for which Forster had praised Browning—and Browning, like Donne, and indeed like Hopkins, shows a preference for measures in which he can emphasize them. These, and a skilful use of the clashing opposition of a strong and half-strong stress account for much of his characteristic energy. It is unfortunate for academic critics that Browning had not, like Hopkins, studied Old English verse. But for the listening reader (generally the poet, since poets have always been intrigued by Browning's technique) it is easy to hear in his lyrics the effect which in Old English verse is known as Sievers's Type C. The best known of all his poems, 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad' illustrates it:

Oh, to be in England  
 Now that April's there,  
 And whoever wakes in England  
 Sees, some morning, unaware,  
 That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf  
 Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,

You can hear how the clashing stresses in 'England', less markedly in 'brushwood' and 'elm-tree' brilliantly compete against, and contrast with the rapid succession of unstressed syllables in the last two lines. A similar effect occurs in 'Home-Thoughts, from the Sea' a poem that has suffered unfairly for its bold expression of simple patriotism. The lines here could be scanned as conventional trochaics; they can only be read as speech stress with powerful emphasis on the groups of strong monosyllables falling together:

Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the North-west died away;  
 Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz Bay;  
 Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;  
 In the dimmest North-east distance dawned Gibraltar grand and  
 gray.

<sup>1</sup> *Critical Heritage*, p. 114.

These were the tunes that Browning's contemporaries often failed to hear. Not only his lyric mode, but his experiments with metre were misunderstood and neglected except by imitating poets like Hardy or eager rebels like the Pre-Raphaelites. Browning's style, for its vividness and its distortions, was more than once compared to Pre-Raphaelite painting, but the poems of the Brotherhood show little rhythmic evidence of his influence, except for Morris's *Defence of Guinevere*.

Readers of his own time found that Browning contradicted the common opinion of what a lyric should be, and even the most intelligent of them failed to respond to his originality in this vein. In a serious and reasoned essay in *The Westminster Review* for January 1856, George Eliot expressed their opinion. It has often been echoed since. She admired the monologues, the subtle novelistic investigations of human conduct; in Browning's poems she sought eagerly for the message. But, confronted with the lyrics, she repeats Masson's view that such an unintellectual mode was foreign to Browning's true genius. 'Instead of tripping along with an easy grace, or rolling with a torrent-like grandeur', she says, the lyrics 'seem to be struggling painfully under a burthen too heavy for them, and many of them have the disagreeable puzzling effect of a charade.'<sup>1</sup> It is the old complaint: obscurity, over-complexity, and lack of simplicity or song. But it derives from a rigidly limited idea of the lyric. Tennyson's poems, from 'Lilian' to 'Ulysses', perfectly display the tone George Eliot expected. But, had she looked back further to the romantics, she might have perceived its inadequacy. *The Ancient Mariner* and Keats's *Odes* neither trip nor roll. Blank verse, the medium George Eliot herself had unsuccessfully attempted, seemed to her better suited for the expression of interesting truth. Her attitude is typical of a predominantly prosaic culture in which the natural mode of literary expression was prose fiction. Browning, drawn to the novelist's manner, remained obstinately a poet, but his original blending of the two conventions failed to convince his contemporaries. Most of them, like George Eliot, admired his concrete vividness only to define it as dramatic rather than poetic.

But Browning's brilliant gift for word-painting, for the uniquely realized item, is a way of imagining especially proper to the poet. Arthur Hallam, reviewing Tennyson's early poems, had spoken of the ability of Keats and Shelley, the 'sensational'

<sup>1</sup> *Critical Heritage*, p. 177.

poets, to think through images. And Coleridge, glossing Milton's phrase that poetry should be 'simple, sensuous and passionate' explains 'sensuous'—that it should 'by its imagery elicit truth at a flash'.<sup>1</sup> Browning shared this mode of apprehension. It is essentially lyric: fragmentary but concentrated, a sudden disclosure or manifestation. In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett in February 1845 he had complained of his early work that:

these scenes and song-scrapes *are* such mere and very escapes of my inner power, which lives in me like the light in those crazy Mediterranean phares I have watched from at sea, wherein the light is ever revolving in a dark gallery, bright and alive, and only after a weary interval leaps out, for a moment, from the one narrow chink, and then goes on with the blind wall between it and you; . . .<sup>2</sup>

The light was unusually refracted in his lyrics. On the whole, though, it is not what flashes on the inward, but on the outward, eye that illuminates his verse—a brilliant, bewildering conglomeration of distracting detail; so many things themselves, identified, and delighted in.

Browning's answer to George Eliot and those later critics who look first for meaning or thought in poetry is contained in a work he classified as a dramatic monologue, 'Transcendentalism—a Poem in Twelve Books'. The reason for this classification is the two characters it contrasts—Browning himself in the person of the speaking poet, and his audience, the pseudo-artist, a nineteenth-century poetaster who believes that truth may be expounded in verse. 'Stop playing, poet! May a brother speak?' Browning opens, and in a rhythm strongly reminiscent of Donne's satiric style, continues:

Stark-naked thought is in request enough:  
 Speak prose and hollo it till Europe hears!  
 The six-foot Swiss tube, braced about with bark,  
 Which helps the hunter's voice from Alp to Alp—  
 Exchange our harp for that,—who hinders you?

'Boys seek for images and melody; men must have reason'; so he epitomizes the attitude of his age, and answers it in a digression on Boehme's treatise on the language of flowers which the rational reader may follow 'in that tough book he wrote' and afterwards 'shut the clasp and find life's summer past'. 'Then

<sup>1</sup> Coleridge, *Recapitulation and Summary of the Characteristics of Shakespere's Dramas*, 1818.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, op. cit., vol. i, p. 17.

who helps more, pray, to repair our loss?' the true poet asks  
Another scholar? Or:

Some stout Mage like him of Halberstadt,  
John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about?  
He with a 'look you!' vents a brace of rhymes,  
And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,  
Over us, under, round us every side,  
Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs  
And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all,—  
Buries us with a glory, young once more,  
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.

At their best this is what Browning's lyrics do—they irradiate common experience, dealing boldly, as Wordsworth has it, with substantial things. The sudden rose herself, but the tables and the chairs and the musty volumes too. All this paraphernalia of existence which pressed in on his imagination creates sometimes a comic exuberance in his handling of it, sometimes a distorting close-up intensity. Words delighted him as much as things. And, as he reassembles them in verse, he achieves feats of astonishing ingenuity in distinguishing things from the tone of the words he chooses to describe them. 'Up at a Villa—Down in the City' completely identifies the special quality of a provincial Italian town—noisy, vulgar, material, delightful; fountains playing, people chattering, processions parading—'Our Lady borne smiling and smart, With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords stuck in her heart'. Everything is reduced to the same simple level by the innocent garrulity of the speaker. The exuberant comedy, the pleasure of every detail, is irresistible. But with what greater skill Browning manipulates our vision of the boredom of the Tuscan villa, in its skeletal landscape, 'Stuck like the horns of a bull' among hills 'over-smoked by the faint grey olive-trees'—an evocation Tennyson would have stretched every vocable to achieve! It is as if Browning were deliberately challenging Tennyson's atmospheric style here in his own oblique manner. The famous 'murmur of innumerable bees' is blurred in contrast to the sharp immediacy of 'and the bees keep their tiresome whine round the resinous firs on the hill'. Just as Pope in his 'Epistle to a Young Lady on her Leaving the Town after the Coronation' condoles with the girl on the tedium of a country life he makes insidiously attractive by his precise evocation of it, so Browning makes us see this comically disvalued countryside with a painfully pleasurable acuteness. When he classified the poem as lyric, Browning



implied that, in spite of the brilliant characterization of the speaker, 'one of those dear, insipid, voluble gentlefolk, poor but pleasure-loving whom Goldoni loved to draw' (as a contemporary critic put it), the real secret of the poem lies in the oblique trick of realizing place discrepantly—the city as the speaker sees it, the villa as we do. Such a complicated agility of style is new to the lyric. But it is refined to perfection in Browning.

The finest example of the complexity and subtlety of Browning's lyrical mode is his 'A Toccata of Galuppi's'. It is his greatest poem in this unique and original style. Again it proposes a traditional theme—transience. But it is a poem about art, too, and the finest lyric expressions of transience have often contrasted the permanence of poetry with the mortality of its subjects and its creators, from Shakespeare's sonnets and Pope's 'Elegy'—'Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung; Deaf the praised ear, and mute the tuneful tongue', to Keats's Grecian Urn, that cold pastoral which survives the experience it celebrates. In Browning's poem the dramatic principle intrudes on this familiar theme. The speaker is a nineteenth-century man intrigued by the formal eighteenth-century music, and indulging himself in the pictures of Venice it creates for his imagination which is all, at first, that the music seems to convey:

Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.  
What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings,  
Where St. Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

Ay, because the sea's the street there; and 't is arched by . . . what you call  
. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:  
I was never out of England—it's as if I saw it all.

The nineteenth century was a visualizing age with a sense of history, and the speaker is typical of it, becoming more and more absorbed in the little drama he creates from the effect of the music. By this time, too, the reader has become aware of Browning's obtrusive technique—a sustained trochaic measure, parodying the rhythm of a toccata, and as he entertains the nineteenth-century speaker's images of eighteenth-century Venice, its amorous frivolity and charm, the deeper theme of time is subtly played off against the metronomic beat of the music. The metaphor is music now, not vision:

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,  
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—'Must we  
die?'

Those commiserating sevenths—'Life might last! we can but try!'

'Were you happy?'—'Yes.'—'And are you still as happy?'—'Yes.  
And you?'

'Then, more kisses!'—'Did *I* stop them, when a million seemed so few?'  
Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!  
'Brave Galuppi! that was music! good alike at grave and gay!  
'I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!'

The abrupt comic tone of that last line is Browning's own note. It is more than disruptive. It underlines the age-old love theme in a peculiar way (for who, reading the previous stanza, does not remember Catullus and all the kissing scores his many imitators made?); it reminds us that even what we imagine must have real substance—a precise human context. So far then, an old convention and a new method is what the poem has given us. But at this point Browning's dramatic principle again intrudes to complicate the procedure. The speaker begins to think about himself suddenly:

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,  
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from nature's close reserve,  
In you come with your cold music till I creep thro' every nerve.

The music, at first old, charming, and evocative, is now cold and mocking, hostile to the speaker's world and its security. The nineteenth-century sceptic had brooded on the fate of a few imagined puppets, and how, one by one, 'Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun'. But that was another world than this; the world of the imagination not the real one. The music, it seems, tells a different story. For the speaker finds himself inferring a response from the composer to whom his reflections were addressed, and what Galuppi seems to say is profoundly disturbing to his intellectual, self-sufficient, critical confidence:

'Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice  
earned,  
'The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.

'Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,  
'Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;  
'Butterflies may dread extinction,—you'll not die, it cannot be!

'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?'

The sceptical mockery chills the speaker of the poem and turns his tone from indulgent fantasy to a cold realization of a common fate:

'Dust and ashes!' So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.  
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what's become of all the gold  
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.

So the poem reveals itself as a dialogue, not a monologue; a dialogue between art and life—art reducing life so that it must recognize its true condition. Browning's lyric observes that art tells the truth without flattery, however we receive it. But tells it indirectly, in the traditional way, teaching through delight. The grand elementary principle of pleasure, which all good poets accept as the foundation of their craft, Browning especially exhibits in his technique. From 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' we can see how, as he admitted to Elizabeth Barrett, he would have loved the operation of music or painting. And in his verse his is not the art that conceals art, but the art that displays it. There is always an element of comedy in this bravura spectacle, but it had not often been demonstrated in lyric verse before, outside Donne. The hilarity Chesterton noticed in Browning's crowded poetry is tempered in his lyrics to an ironic paradoxical humour, while yet retaining the realism of precise evocation. In Browning's lyricism the mingling of new and old emerges as an original exploratory wit of method, and a playing of the poetic nature with traditional themes of joy and sorrow. These themes appear in a new guise in his verse—immediate, material, circumstantial in technique and substance. In his own words from *The Ring and the Book* Browning's lyrics 'Do the thing shall breed the thought'. They are performances in every sense, and what they perform is not an idea, or even an emotion, but, more ambitiously, the spectacle of life itself. Browning's lyricism is romantic in that it is concerned with experience—too raw, it transpired, for many of his readers. But not for his own restless pursuit of the ideal through the actual, of art through life.