

# BROWNING'S MEN AND WOMEN - THE WORLD THEY SHARED

**Vivienne Abela**

It was a Victorian precept that only servants talked about people; gentlefolk discussed things. Robert Browning, brought up in an atmosphere of middle-class industry and piety, talked about people in his poetry — but his voice was dramatically in revolt.

Browning's life, like Tennyson's, spanned the whole of the 19th century, a century too conveniently dubbed 'Victorian' because of the accident of Victoria's youthful accession and her long reign. This fact alone imposed an illusory show of continuity and uniformity on a tract of time where men and manners, science and philosophy, the whole fabric of social life changed more swiftly perhaps, and more profoundly, than they have ever changed in an age not Sundered by a political or a religious upheaval. The Victorian revolution began with the ballot and went on to compulsory education and a federated Empire.

Industrialism came over England like a climatic change. While the new proletariat was sinking below the median line of decency the emerging middle classes were raising themselves above it to a higher respectability. England was shifting uneasily and convulsively from an old to a new discipline, and the early stages were painful. The practical ideals of English society were at odds with its religious profession, and its religious belief was at issue with its intelligence.

This, then, was the world in which Browning lived, a shifting panorama of human life and circumstance, over which the poet's intelligence could operate at will. But Browning's interpretation of the life of the 19th century remains partly obscured by the inner tensions of the artist and his personal experience. Most of Browning's education took place in an informal and tolerant home atmosphere, where indulgence and persuasion replaced discipline. As a boy, the poet had free and uncensored access to his father's library. This youthful exploration of the world of legend and history provided the poet with the background and characters for so many of his poems but also earned him his contemporaries' charge of 'coarseness' and 'vulgarity', and the more serious one of 'obscurity'.

If the range of Browning's reading was free and liberal by Victorian standards, his religious education, under the direction of his mother, was narrower and more sombre. Weekly attendance at the York Street Congregational chapel gave Browning his life-long distrust of the Catholic Church, his immense Biblical knowledge and his skill in religious controversy. This early in-

fluence was strengthened and deepened after his marriage by the profoundly-felt faith of his wife. But a poet of such wide-ranging intellectual curiosity could not escape the religious doubt that afflicted so many of his generation. The great Victorian pendulum swung between faith and doubt, between hope and despair. In fact Browning's men and women provided him with the voices he needed to explore so many 'soul-states', as he aptly called them.

Another major inspiration of many of his finest poems, those most deeply felt upon the pulse, was Art. This was a boyhood passion which grew and struck fresh sparks after Browning's first visit to Italy and during the years he lived there after his marriage. The art treasures of Venice and Padova, the wealth and magnificence of Renaissance architecture, statuary and painting at Florence caught the poet's imagination and stimulated his keen perception and appreciation of art and the artist's creative processes. This total and willing self-immersion in this fascinating world of art added psychological authenticity to his many portraits of painters. But Browning was not just a poet who happened to write with Romantic feeling *about* painters; his poetry is, rather, the expression of what his own unerring artist's eye saw and apprehended in life.

The country, which quickened Browning's feeling for art in such a remarkably intense way, became in fact a major pervasive influence on his work and life alike. His love for the country of his adoption is celebrated in the oft-quoted lines from 'De Gustibus':

Open my heart and you will see  
Graved inside of it, 'Italy'.

Henry James praised "Browning's own particular matchless Italy, from the first the felt, rich coloured air in which we live ... The Rome and Tuscany of the early fifties had become for him so at once a medium, a bath of the senses and perceptions ... that wherever he might be touched afterwards he gave out some effect of that immersion."

Running parallel to Browning's appreciation of Art is his enthusiasm and feeling for Music, which can also be traced back to his boyhood. His own musical accomplishments ensured a responsiveness to music and familiarity with its techniques which made his poetic rendering of the composer's or performer's experience as vivid and as personal as that of the painter. Writing from inside knowledge of the subject gives Browning the vantage-point of a direct participant in the musical experience.

Browning's own private experience lent maturity and emotional fulfilment to one other theme of his poetry. His exploration of the most complex of all human relationships gained spiritual depth and intensity from the success of his courtship of Elizabeth Barrett and their subsequent marriage of Love. This famous Romantic love-story — on which Hollywood was quick to capitalise — led to the poet's exaltation of love as THE supreme experience in life, at the same time that he truthfully admits to the possibility of its loss or decay and goes on to register the consequent bitterness. For sheer range of

mood and sensibility of feeling, Browning's memorable love poems have hardly, if ever, been surpassed.

Literature, Religion, Art, Music, Love — this, then, was Browning's world. To what extent did he share this world with his men and women? It is interesting to note that, after Browning's initial lack of success in the composition of verse dramas, he turned to a form which was peculiarly suited to the limitations as well as the strength of his natural gifts. The dramatic monologue presented some character thinking aloud in a moment of stress or at some point of crisis, confiding to the reader, in his or her individual idiom, the conflicts of thought and emotion involved in this particular predicament. It showed, in short, what Browning himself referred to (in the preface to "Strafford") as action in character rather than character in action.

It is a matter for contention among the critics, though, whether Browning's men and women are effectively objectified as living lives of their own or whether they remain subjective self-dramatisations on Browning's part, mere projections of his own personality and preoccupations. He himself categorically denied any intention of self-portraiture. "You may be right," he wrote to Ruskin, "however unwitting I am of the fact. I *may* put Robert Browning into Pippa and other men and maids ... but I don't see myself in them at all events." The French critic, Joseph Milsand, however, came closer to the truth when he said that Browning's talents were "not in turn, but simultaneously, lyrical and dramatic, subjective and objective." While Cleon and Karshish, Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi each has a personality and life of his own, the voice with which they all speak, and the world they inhabit, are always identifiably Robert Browning's. The portraits in this rich and varied picture gallery still bear the stamp of the same master.

A portrait that stands out and arrests attention is that of Andrea del Sarto. Called the "faultless painter", this artist's sad meditations about his own life and activity present, in a way that is deeper and more thoughtful than that of any other Browning character, the poet's attempt to find a philosophical answer to those baffling questions 'What is success? What is failure?' As an artist, Andrea has fallen short of his ideal; as a man, he feels himself the slave of circumstance as his weary fatalism puts it "All is as God overrules"; as a lover, he is sacrificing his moral, and in some degree, his artistic, conscience to a woman who does not return his love. He looks blankly at the future, does nothing about the present and only bemoans the past. It is a many-sided sadness compounded of many failures, ironically underlined by the fact that Andrea's self-knowledge is only intermittent and partial, and made hopeless by the fact that he is passively resigned to the situation. There might even be despair in his concluding words. The man's self-abasement and over-whelming sense of failure are too deep for contempt; rather, tragic pity is evoked by this ironical self-portrait.

This great 'artist' monologue provided Browning with perfect opportunity to delve deep into the nature of art and the artist. All that Andrea

painted so perfectly remained yet a travesty of the ideal. It was Browning's faith that life is greater than art, and he never ceased proclaiming this in his poetry. Andrea has not committed the familiar Browningsque sin of rejecting life for art; but his tragedy is a double one. For both life and art have betrayed him, and he is debarred from tasting the full joys of either world. The tragedy of the creative artist, then, is to be viewed in the wider context of the tragedy of man in general.

It is to Andrea del Sarto that the privilege falls of giving voice to a main tenet of Browning's philosophy of life:

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a Heaven for?"

The aspiration is, indeed, all and the soul's consummation is attained through striving rather than achieving. Through Andrea, Browning is saying not only that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive, but that safe and effortless arrival is worth far less than the intensely experienced struggles of a journey which affords many glimpses of heaven, even if it ultimately ends in non-arrival at the hoped-for destination. If it was indeed Andrea, and not just Browning, who had this belief, the tragedy of his weary passivity becomes all the more striking.

Browning's quest for truth, his toleration, his broad Christian sympathy and sense of humour must have led him to choose the protagonist of his other 'artist' monologue. Like Andrea del Sarto, Fra Lippo Lippi was also a painter, and all the facts related about both of them are historical. But that is where the similarity ends. The melancholy cadences of Andrea's slow musing have been left far behind. This a lively friar, surprised by the guard while he was about to return from an equivocal neighbourhood after a night's frolic. Undismayed by the capture, he proceeds to supply a fair excuse for the escapade. This self-justification makes no apologies, has no regrets or complaints, but rather explains a set of beliefs which has shaped Lippo's entire life.

Fate had led the eight-year-old half-starved orphan to the convent. The allurements of food landed him with the monkish dress, which, in Lippo's case, certainly could never be equated with a vocation for the priesthood. Having received his earliest inspiration in the streets, it was no wonder that when Lippo started painting, flesh obtruded too much for the liking of the prior who complained that he could not see the soul for all the arms and legs! This launched Lippo on an exuberant, zestful exposition of what he conceived to be the artist's real function, at the same time that it served as a self-revelation and a self-defence.

The artist's cleared vision enabled other men to see what Lippo called "the beauty and the wonder and the power of this world." The eye that preferred the prior's niece to the patron saint was that which searched the beauty of the world, satisfied with it as a reflection of the beauty of God. In this doctrine, there is no conflict between flesh and spirit. The miracle of the senses is a help, rather than a hindrance, enabling man thus to discover his soul.

Take the prettiest face,

The Prior's niece ..... patron-saint — is it so pretty  
 You can't discover if it means hope, fear,  
 Sorrow or joy? Won't beauty go with these?  
 Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,  
 Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash.

This is, unmistakably, Browning's voice with his insistence on the goodness of life; Art is only a product of Life after all. But this vivid appreciation of life, which Lippo says is an essential prerequisite for Art, is conveyed not merely by statement, but by demonstration. And so simultaneously we hear Lippo's own voice, the voice of an excitable human being who loves life and squeezes from it the last drop of enjoyment. Words tumble out of his mouth, some times incoherently but all the more forcefully and credibly. The syntactical dislocations, broken-off half-sentences, sudden exclamations and ejaculations, homely phraesology and imagery are all in character. This is a monologue emphatically rendered in a major key. Lippo lives triumphantly in it from beginning to end; Browning is just one step behind, applauding and cheering him on.

No less alive than these two historical figures are such creatures of Browning's own invention as Cleon and Karshish. In both their epistles there is much soul-searching about religion, the Christian mystery and the enigma of existence. The solution remains finally hidden from both of them, though it is Karshish who trembles on the verge of truth since he is more receptive to new experience. In fact, Karshish reflects much of 19th century scientific spirit that Browning would have admired, especially its eager curiosity and healthy but not destructive scepticism. On the other hand, Cleon reflects a less admirable current of 19th century thought: the frequently expressed smug assumption that the 19th century had 'progressed' dramatically beyond all previous civilisations.

Cleon is an ancient Greek thinker writing to king Protus, his friend and patron. His epistle is a rational statement of his conviction that the immortality conferred by art is not enough to satisfy the innermost yearnings of a man's spirit, and that art alone can thus never constitute a way of life. The conception of youth and strength and wisdom is not its reality; the knowing (and depicting) what joy is, is not the possession of it. Therefore, the surviving of the artist's works, when he himself is dead, is but a mockery all the more because they still live on while he

the feeling, thinking, acting man  
 the man who loved his life so over much

sleeps for ever.

Cleon's soul thus cries out for an affirmation of permanence, sensing the existence of a

perfection hid,

Reserved in part, to grace the after-time.

His unsatisfied craving is reflected in the tormented cry "but is there **nothing more?**" His soul aspires to and longs for some future state limitless in its possibilities of joy — but he ignores the chance of this when it is within his grasp. This is the bitter irony crystallised in the conclusion of his epistle. He is too obtuse to recognise a truth plainly perceptible to us. Arrogantly and cursorily he dismisses the ability of any other philosophy to hold the key to truth. How could Paul, "a mere barbarian Jew", have "access to a secret shut from us"? His final contemptuous affirmation that "their doctrine could be held by no sane man" slams the door on the very solution towards which his intuition had led him.

Like so many others of Browning's men and women, Cleon is all the more credible because he has his own distinguishable idiom and speech-rhythms — those of the civilised rationalist philosopher. Calm language and orderly syntax present his deliberately reasoned argument. The tempo changes when personal frustration and spiritual hunger break up his utterance, though the final note is once again matter-of-fact.

The verisimilitude of both the inner and larger experiences that Karshish relates in his Epistle is similarly reinforced by Browning's precision in the creation of the voice with which he makes Karshish speak. The Arab physician is a scholar and philosopher, intensely interested in all forms of experience and possessing an enquiring mind. His scientific matter-of-factness makes him examine life and natural phenomena with a clinical, dispassionate eye.

It is in this vein that he makes his diagnosis of the "strange medical experience" of Lazarus. All his basic principles encourage him to interpret the situation in terms of medicine and madness, with Christ as "the learned leech" and Lazarus as "the madman", whose reason has been impaired by a too sudden awakening from a prolonged epileptic trance. It was consequent to this that Lazarus laboured under the fixed idea that he had been raised from the dead by the Nazarene physician who was no other than God in human form.

The very fact that Karshish reacts so strongly to this suggestion of Christ's divinity proves that this scientist is religious after his own fashion:

This man so cured regards the curer, then,  
As — God forgive me! who but God himself,  
Creator and sustainer of the world,  
That came and dwelt in flesh on it a-while!

While he regards this idea as mad, Karshish is, nonetheless, haunted and perplexed by its consistency and especially by the manner in which Lazarus' supposed vision of the heavenly life has transformed, even inverted, the man's judgement of earthly things. Karshish tries to combat this impression by recounting all his scientific discoveries — the new plants, minerals, sicknesses, or cures to which his travels in Judea have introduced him. But, the possibility of an alternative explanation persists — that Lazarus, unable to forget the world of the spirit, lives in a state of perfect realisation of the

imperfection of the world of the flesh.

The way Karshish is puzzled and intrigued by these strange matters, and the wonder with which he relates them belie his scepticism and show that he is less dogmatically hardened than Cleon, less curt in his dismissal of the possibility of salvation by means of Christianity. But Karshish too fails his testing moment. Confronted with a saving revelation, he finds this truth too tremendous to encompass, and does not, or will not, recognise it. But while conviction finally eludes Karshish, he has all our sympathy because his ranging, inquisitive mind has struggled manfully for truth all along. The last lines of his monologue, therefore, have a lingering impact with the pathos and irony of his final compulsive exclamation at the possibility of a truth which he cannot quite accept — as yet:

The very God! think, Ahib; dost thou think?

So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too —

... The madman saith He said so: it is strange.

It is not only religious belief that proves to be so enigmatic and elusive. Love, too, tantalizes the tired man of "Two in the Campagna". It is a sentiment best expressed in the poem's concluding words:

Infinite passion, and the pain

Of finite hearts that yearn.

The sufferer is a man who longs to rest in the affection of a woman who loves him, and whom he also loves, to achieve that condition of oneness in which he can identify his will completely with hers, see with her eyes, set his heart beating by hers. This longing is, however, perpetually thwarted of its fulfilment by the ultimate aloneness of each human soul. So, he is left asking the meaning of it all. The clue to the enigma seems to glance across him, in the form of a gossamer thread. The campagna all around them with its "feathery grasses" and drifting thistledown mirrors the elusiveness of "the floating weft" of thought the speaker tries in vain to grasp and hold fast. Just when he is on the brink of discovery, the revelation once more escapes him and the consummating spiritual union is as far away as ever. And this lover is worse off than Karshish, for his bafflement is that of bitter frustration.

Like this lover, the speaker in 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' remains anonymous. But his man-to-man tone makes credible his colloquy with the old composer. It creates a fantastic little vision of bygone Venice, evoked by the music of the old Venetian master. The toccata thus mirrors the ephemeral joy of life and youth and love, a brilliant but transient gaiety. But the introduction of solemn chords also conveys the warning of dust and ashes and the chill of annihilation soon to replace the glow of life. Browning, who is known to have enjoyed playing Galuppi toccatas on the organ, has imparted to the speaker in this poem his own technical familiarity with the form and his re-

sponse to the music's quality so that the fast, flowing verse-movement both evokes and echoes the organ-music until it can almost be heard by the inward ear.

What Childe Roland evokes is a different type of romanticism. The style of this "gloomy hieroglyphic" poem relies heavily on suggestive symbolism and strong dramatic elements. This is Browning's version of the "Pilgrim's Progress" story of the soul of Everyman on its journey. It turns out to be Browning's variation on the 'wasteland' theme. This knight is, therefore, a convenient medium for the expression of Browning's philosophy. But he also, identifiably, shares with all the other Browning men and women the idea that life is a search and a quest for the revelation of some ultimate truth which will make suddenly plain the purpose of human existence, too often hidden by chance and circumstance.

Though weary with travelling, Childe Roland courageously and stoically continues on the path which should lead him to his destination. Numberless others had set out before him but failed along the way. But neither their failure nor the nightmarish landscape which he has to traverse serves to daunt him or keep him back from pressing on. In fact, this accumulation of horrors in the diseased landscape is related in detail to the psychology of the Knight, to his mind overclouded with the idea of failure. Seldom has man's dark night of the soul been more powerfully conjured in such compulsive images of negation, repulsive ugliness, disgust and cruelty.

This sense of menace comes to a pitch in the vision of hills, which appear firstly

crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight

and then

like giants at a hunting, lay —

Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay.

But from out the horror and menace and the sense of failure, there comes, finally, action:

Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set  
And blew.

This is not the horn-blast of triumph or revelation, but rather the final determined act of chivalric self-dedication, affirming man's identity and the invincibility of the human spirit, in spite of all the odds.

This unrelenting pursuit of knowledge epitomises another of Browning's men. The dry-as-dust Grammarian has consumed his life with a hungry passion and a sacred thirst for learning. He "decided not to live but know". In the process, his infinite search for knowledge raised him with smug self-satis-



fied intellectual superiority above the level of the common herd. This is familiar Browning philosophy. The dedication of self to a high ideal unattainable in this life is better than success in a lower aim:

That low man goes on adding one to one,  
 His hundred's soon hit:  
 This high man, aiming at a million,  
 Misses a unit.

The inevitable corollary of this idea is an unquestioning belief in personal immortality. It is in the life to come that a noble failure here will be crowned with success:

He said, What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes;  
 Man has For Ever.

The Grammarian is now dead and his disciples honour him by carrying his body to its burial-place, the top of a high mountain, symbolic of the higher reaches of thought to which he had aspired. But what seems to be an apparently straightforward paean of praise by the Grammarian's students develops ironic revelations about the constricting nature of a life lived among books with no time left to taste the immediacy and intensity of first-hand experience, perfunctorily dismissed by him as "life's pale lure". Even while the students' peroration gathers momentum in accents of confidence, admiration and respect, it is given the lie by the increasing, if perhaps unconscious, savagery of their comments, questions, asides and ejaculations. Revulsion struggles with reverence. The real feeling which forces itself through the students' appropriate sentiments of respectful obituary is a human recoil from the spectacle of a wasted life.

In a letter written to Elizabeth Barrett, Browning once claimed: "I only make men and women speak, give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light". If we today recognise something 'modern' in the themes, forms, and above all in the varied voices of Browning, we are, perhaps, recognising the modernity of the experience of Robert Browning and its continuing relevance for us today.