

THE
FOCUSING
ARTIFICE

The Poetry of Robert Browning



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Athens, Ohio

1968



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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 68-20934
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To Austin Warren

Acknowledgments



I gratefully acknowledge the assistance given me by Park Honan, Gordon Pitts, Rainer Schulte, Sandra Smith, Robert Reid, and Jerry Trammell. I am also indebted to my graduate students at Ohio University and the University of Missouri at Kansas City, with whom I have engaged in a continuing dialogue about the poetry of Robert Browning ever since I began writing this book. Among us the role of teacher and student has constantly shifted, and I more often than not have been chief benefactor of our discussions.



. . . to join in the discussion of value and disvalue, one must see five hundred convictions *beneath* oneself—behind oneself.

—NIETZSCHE



What we do depends on what we are, but it is necessary to add also that what we are, to a certain extent, is what we do, and that we are continually creating ourselves.

—HENRI BERGSON



. . . being bound to trust
All feelings equally—to hear all sides:
Yet I cannot indulge them, and they live,
Referring to some state or life unknown.

—BROWNING, *Pauline*



Thus moaned
Man till Prometheus helped him,—as we learn,—
Offered an artifice whereby he drew
Sun's rays into a focus.

—BROWNING, *Parleyings*

PREFACE

✿ When I began work some years ago on *The Bow and the Lyre: The Art of Robert Browning*, I felt that critics had given too little attention to Browning's artistic achievements. The worst of the Browning Society era was over, but it was still widely assumed that Browning was an unpolished genius, more to be revered for what he said than for how he said it. My purpose was limited. I hoped to question the notion that there was a disjunction between Browning's matter and structure and to demonstrate, by detailed analysis of a few poems, that Browning's poetry, at its best, possessed the organic unity characteristic of all great art.

In the same year that my book appeared, 1957, Robert Langbaum in *The Poetry of Experience* gave us our first modern definition of the dramatic monologue, thus providing the necessary perspective from which Browning could be seen as poet rather than preacher or prophet.¹ Four years later, Park Honan published *Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique*.² Although his purpose differed from Langbaum's, he too was concerned about the development of character in Browning's poetry, and he demonstrated both in his argument and in his perceptive analysis of individual poems that Browning's significance lay primarily in his artistic achievements. These two important books prepared the way for the many excellent articles which have followed and today, perhaps for the first time, Browning is taken seriously by a great number of readers as a careful, conscious craftsman.

Now it seems to me, another kind of book is in order. I would like to go beyond the scope of *The Bow and the Lyre* to discuss not only the "art" of Robert Browning, but also what I call here, for want of a better single word, the "poetry" of Robert Browning. My interests are less in char-

acterizing Browning's achievement in one genre, the dramatic monologue, than in understanding, intellectually and artistically, the diverse whole of his work from *Pauline* through *Asolando*. I am concerned, primarily, to describe and evaluate his achievements for what they are, and, secondarily, to relate Browning's poetry, both as it was influenced by and as it contributed to the developing modern tradition.³

The Focusing Artifice has some of the surface characteristics of a traditional introduction. I have intended that it be more than that, however. I assume that my readers have some familiarity with Browning's poetry, and my aim is less to introduce them to entirely new materials than to suggest the outline of a new perspective from which they may see the whole of Browning's poetry. It is frequently assumed that Browning's genius culminated in *The Ring and the Book* and afterwards went into radical decline.⁴ As a result not only have a number of good poems gone unappreciated, but, more seriously, the whole of Browning's work has been seen in truncated and, therefore, distorted form. I propose that the poems most crucial to an understanding of Browning are *Sordello*, *The Ring and the Book*, *Fifine at the Fair*, and *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day*.

These four poems cannot be regarded as isolated works, however, but rather must be treated as organic parts of Browning's entire achievement, each marking a significant state in the process of development which begins with *Pauline* and continues throughout his life. We must be careful, of course, when we use such words as *organic* and *development* not to suggest a greater sense of entity in Browning than actually existed. There was not one Browning, fixed and static, but many Brownings, the dynamic, changing, sometimes affirming, sometimes negating nature of whom his poetry stands as a record. It cannot be assumed that pre-

cisely the same man wrote both *Pauline* and *Parleyings*. When we attempt something so tenuous and precarious as to interpret Browning, therefore, we must be continually aware both of chronology and context.

Moreover, I want to maintain the integrity of the individual poem. Some adequate notion of Browning's "thought" might be achieved by taking lines out of context and arranging them into a thematic pattern. We would be on dubious ground, however, if we were to do so. We cannot assume that all statements in Browning's poetry represent equally the poet's own thought, or that the ideas which he maintained at one time represented his thought at all other times. Ideas have meaning in relation to the context in which they occur. Two statements which seem to say the same thing may prove upon closer examination to be wholly or partly contradictory. Their possible diverse meanings may arise from the point of view from which they are spoken or they may take on intellectual, emotional, and sensuous meanings as a result of the context in which they appear. Browning meant to communicate much more than what he called "naked thought" in his poetry. My purpose seems best served by treating the poems as artistic entities in an essentially chronological order.

In order to relate Browning to the developing modern tradition, one must be aware of the intellectual and cultural forces that helped shape his vision of reality. Browning, like other intellectuals in the early nineteenth century, found himself in a world of rapidly changing values and of spiritual uncertainty. Many competent scholars and critics have traced the reorientation of Western thought during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.⁵ The change involved a transition from largely communal values to highly individual values. The old values derived from an order external to and independent of man. They

were subject to man's rational understanding, however, and capable of being embodied in creedal statements and social institutions. A man of the classical world not only assumed a meaningful universe but accepted the pronouncements and institutions of his culture as its rational embodiment.

Although statement and institution might become corrupted by the errors of man, the avenues for achieving and expressing those truths were never entirely closed. The Christian required his revelation because of Adam's willful rejection of the eternal order, not because of his native alienation from it. The mission of the Church always was to restore the natural order and to reconcile man with God, from whom he had been tragically and unnaturally separated. For all practical purposes, then, preromantic man found his orientation—toward God, man, and self—in the statements and creeds of his culture and in the institutions of his own making.

In the late eighteenth century, however, this world view came to be questioned by a minority, small but significant because they were the thinkers and artists who were to reshape Western thought and culture. These early modern men came to feel that they had lost contact with God, the source of meaning and value in the classical world which they had inherited. The heavens that once declared God's glory had become ominously silent or, at best, perversely uncommunicative. God's disappearance undermined, also, the thought and institutions, those human embodiments of divine order and meaning, which previously had constituted man's most concrete reality, leaving him utterly disoriented.⁶ Isolated from God, alienated from nature, bereft of values and uncertain of self, man was forced to seek reality within himself and to evolve from his own sense of consciousness a new set of values that were necessarily individualistic and subjective. The older values had given defi-

dition to the individual and pattern to his actions by imposing upon him a system derived from the external order which they reflected; the new values, emanating from within the individual, were to be used, in contrast, for imposing order and meaning upon the otherwise chaotic world. Thus, man's self, his "soul," as Goethe, Browning, and Baudelaire alike called it, became his chief concern.

As Carlyle pointed out, however, the self within exists less as an absolute entity than as a dynamic possibility.⁷ Modern man faced the almost overwhelming task of creating values from a self that was paradoxically at once the source and the end product of his actions. Under the old dispensation the good life was possible although not easy; under the new, even its possibility was questionable. Man stood, as Browning's Childe Roland, in the midst of a plain on which the road back toward the past and the road toward the future were alike obliterated.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that for Browning and most of his contemporaries God was obscured rather than dead. Certainly Browning had not reached the nihilism that Nietzsche was to express later in the century. Browning held it probable that God would not again emerge in his old guise as transcendental law giver; he was confident that he would not appear again in any form in response to traditional modes of supplication and search. Browning early lost his faith in Enlightenment rationalism, political activism, religious institutionalism, and evangelical pietism. How was he to discover a meaning and value in life without these traditional aids? That search remained the central action of his poetic career.

His problem was twofold. Like all men, he had, first of all, to determine the process by which man developed the self-consciousness from which he might evolve values that would illuminate his world. This activity is inevitably an imaginative, creative one which demands that all men be-

come artists to the extent of their powers, or perhaps more accurately to the extent of their willingness to act out those powers, great or small. Beyond this, however, the special artist—the poet, the painter, the musician—had another task. If he were to transcend the private, he had to create not only his own “soul” but an artifice capable of bringing together into a coherent vision which transforms the part into the whole and the merely private into the universal. These two problems are of course closely related.

At the height of his early career, looking back over his entire work but attempting particularly to clarify his objective in *Sordello*, Browning declared that his “stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul.” He obviously meant that he had attempted to depict that process by which a character achieves self-awareness. In *Fine at the Fair*, he elaborates,

*Alack, our life is lent,
From first to last, the whole, for this experiment,
Of proving what I say—that we ourselves are true.*

True, in context of the poem, clearly means real, authentic. In his last long poem he gives the idea of soul even sharper focus in a statement which brings inner and outer, metaphysical and material world together in a productive relation:

*soul's first act
(Call consciousness the soul—some name we need) [is]
Getting itself aware, through stuff decreed
Thereto (so call the body). . . .*

Becoming aware of one's self through the stuff of this body and the things of this world is the aim, conscious or unconscious, realized or unrealized, of Browning's *dramatis per-*

sonae. It is, indeed, for Browning the primary aim of all men.

In the three earliest poems, Pauline's poet, Paracelus, and to some extent *Sordello* attempt to possess God and to achieve self-realization immediately and wholly without material mediation. All fail. *Sordello* does come, however, to face the reality of his creaturehood and the limitations which that implies. He discovers that man's mind is limited and that he lacks capacity for immediate and total communion with God. Between him and the Infinite lies the obscuring reality of his own finiteness, a barrier that can neither be glossed over nor eradicated. By the time Browning finished *Sordello* he had discovered the general direction he was to pursue for the rest of his career.

Browning, characteristically, attempted to turn man's limitations into strengths. Although man must forego the perfect knowledge, the complete vision, he can realize some saving portion of Infinity through his finite faculties. The very fact that each of his efforts falls short of full realization provides incentive for his continuing to strive, to grow, to develop—in short, to remain spiritually alive, completely man. The dynamic rather than the static, the state of becoming rather than of being, shapes the amorphous gestalt from which Browning viewed human experience.

In his poetry after *Sordello*, Browning for a while gave up hope of achieving the total vision and contented himself with the patient observation and careful depiction of those fragments of Infinity permitted him. Multiplicity and diversity rather than completeness and singleness became his aim. Hence, the *dramatis personae*. Each of his men and women represents another fragment of the tantalizing but unattainable whole. Each records the personal search of a character for self. This is not to say that each of Browning's characters succeeds in discovering the nature of his being. Far from it. More often than not, Browning's

poems seem to argue, man's real interests are obscured and tragically misdirected by pressures from dead conventions and institutions outside himself. His will is blunted and sometimes perverted by his human inadequacies. Actually, few of Browning's characters achieve wholeness, complete and satisfying self-realization. Nevertheless, we infer, even man's hostile, negating actions are perverse forms of his natural drive for self-completing action. Man's nature is to grow. In the dynamic state of becoming man achieves his highest manhood.

To describe this search—both his own and that of his characters—⁸ was Browning's first concern; this desire shapes the vision that produced the great dramatic monologues, a creative effort culminating in *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864). Browning could not remain content, however, with capturing the isolated fragments. Increasingly, he became concerned to bring his men and women together in some pattern which would suggest, if not represent, a total vision of human experience. Such a vision might reveal a metaphysical ground for values, a common pattern for conduct. *The Ring and the Book* represents his first major attempt after *Sordello* to achieve this more comprehensive objective. Between these two works, Browning had learned much. He would not again make the mistakes of his youth. The structuring of life on the basis of a transcendental vision of God was for him no longer possible. (On one level *The Ring and the Book* is one of the most nihilistic poems of the nineteenth century.) Moreover, Browning had considerably improved his technique. What he had learned about creating character served him well.

Browning still had problems, in spite of his intellectual and artistic advances. To create a coherent, universal vision of human experience requires some perspective, some point of view, from which to work. Up to this point in his

career, Browning had more or less evaded this dilemma.⁹ Now he needed a system to bring his highly individual fragments into a whole. That he satisfactorily solved the problem is questionable. He had discarded the transcendental view of his youth; he was dissatisfied with his objective, fragmentary vision of men and women. At the same time, he rejected any externally applied system of organization that would violate their personal integrity. At times, he anticipates modern existentialism; indeed, he postulates as the ultimate reality something much like the "necessary fiction" of Wallace Stevens. His efforts to discover a ground for universal values are central in all his poetry beginning with *The Ring and the Book*. He comes closest to achieving his objective in *Fifine at the Fair* (1871) and *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1887). My second major aim in this book is to trace that struggle and to define, as nearly as I am able in the light of the evidence, the end to which it led.

Wallace Stevens has said, "Now that we no longer have religion we must look to poetry for life's redemption." Browning would not have made the statement in precisely those terms, but he would have understood Stevens' meaning, for he increasingly came to regard art as man's most—perhaps *only*—significant activity. He no longer held that art actually embodied the transcendental reality; he did assert that through the imaginative structures of art man experienced a sense of participating in meaning and value. In *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day*, Browning created the image that embodies his understanding of the artist and his work and at the same time provides the best perspective from which to approach his poetry. Art, he declared, is the artifice, the glass, which brings the Infinite the refracted rays of the sun, into focus, reducing and unifying them so that they become meaningful and useful to man.

Although this image expresses Browning's conception of art more fully than any other, it still is not entirely satisfactory. Art, indeed, provides a point of view that aids us in our search for meaning and value. It provides incentive for and makes self-defining action possible. Nevertheless, we are not to assume that any work of art or, for that matter, any body of artistic works can reveal Truth absolutely and finally. To assume that it can belies one of Browning's deepest convictions, arrived at when he was working on *Sordello*: The created artifice must be as multifaceted and dynamic as that which it records. It is crucial to remember that it depicts an internal rather than an external order or process, man's perception of meaning and not Meaning itself.

The image of the glass becomes more comprehensive and satisfying in *Parleyings*. There Browning presents the poet as myth maker, the creator of the imaginative vision, and the poet's work as the artifice of his mythic rendering of that reality. Man needs myth since he is incapable of responding directly to the Infinite and unable to act out any Ideal. But the necessary myth is potentially dangerous. When it ceases to operate as myth, or imaginative illusion—as it so readily can and generally does—and becomes a proscriptive intellectual or religious system, it enslaves rather than liberates. All the dead creeds and institutions standing between men and themselves are poetic myths which, preserved beyond their usefulness, have been transformed into external systems and forced into services they were never intended to perform. Myth must function both to fix and to free, to order and to destroy, to orient and to disorient. It must, above all, remain the dynamic, ever-changing, multifaceted expression in finite and concrete terms of man's ever changing sense of the Infinite.

Art significantly is not an analogy for or a symbol of the Infinite. Neither is it a platform from which man leaps

from this world into another. On the contrary, art fixes firmly on this world, circumscribing man's activities, indeed, but at the same time imbuing his finite efforts with a boundless significance.

In brief, then, my primary purpose in this book is to show how Browning sought to display the development of the individual "soul," as both the source and end of values, and to declare his vision of human experience, portrayed through men and women as the poet brings them together in that unified pattern of artifice that is his art. My second purpose is to relate Browning's achievements to the developing modern tradition.