THESIS

on

THE POSITION OF ROBERT AND ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

AMONG NINETEENTH CENTURY POETS.

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Department of English
ROBERT AND ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

"OH! I MUST FEEL YOUR BRAIN PROMPT MINE,
YOUR HEART ANTICIPATE MY HEART,
YOU MUST BE JUST BEFORE, IN FINE,
SEE AND MAKE ME SEE, FOR YOUR PART,
NEW DEPTHS OF THE DIVINE!"

—"BY THE FIRESIDE"
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-- "Wordsworth's solemn thoughted idyl, Howitt's ballad verse, or Tennyson's enchanted reverie, Or from Browning some "pomegranate", which, if cut down through the middle Showed a heart within blood-tinctured with a veined humanity".

(From Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Lady Geraldine's Courtship.)

Before we can write intelligently concerning any subject, we must understand exactly what we are writing about. As the title tells us, this thesis deals exclusively with the work and incidentally with the lives of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, two notable nineteenth century poets. A poet according to Steadman is the one who voices, in expressive language, his thoughts and feelings which lie too deep for ordinary speech. This speech, the product of a poet, is known as poetry, which in turn is defined by Browning as an art.

Art is aptly termed by some author "the bride of imagination from whose arms creative work must spring". Hence, by a logical process of reasoning, we reach the conclusion that poetry is the offspring of the bride of our imagination. However ably we may be permitted to describe poetry, no one can describe or define it more beautifully or with more meaning than does Ruskin when he
says that poetry is "the suggestion by the imagination, in musical words, of noble grounds for noble emotions, - love, veneration, admiration, and joy, with their opposites".

Poetry may not even be in the prescribed form and have the formal rhythm. So long as it expresses the author's exalted pleasures and noblest sentiments, its poetical distinction can not be disputed. The people in general, that is those who do not hold as high a place in the realm of the critics as does Ruskin, do not demand such high ideals of poetry. Poetry to them can be more properly called versification. It has the rhyme or jingle, and the stanza form but lacks almost entirely the noble sentiments and other requisites for good poetry. It is to be hoped that the masses will soon become acquainted with the real meaning and understanding of poetry and come to know some of the great poets and their productions. Especially such as hold prominent places among those who lived and wrote during the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century in England is particularly rich in poetical products. Poetry seemed to burst forth from its stronghold and wander at will regardless of any stated rules or traditions which had been handed down for years. The poets spoke out and were natural regardless of their neighbors' opinions.

The political, social, and intellectual conditions will effect the literature of any country. In this re-
spect, England is no exception to the rule. There were two general movements, including these three conditions which gave an impetus to the nineteenth century poets. They are the spread of democracy and the growth of the scientific spirit. The former is a political and social movement, while the latter is a social and intellectual movement. Many things included in these movements, such as the admission of Roman Catholics to Parliament, extension of suffrage to the middle classes, opening of Manchester and Liverpool railroad, the use of the telegraph, and steam navigation, the Oxford Movement, as well as many others, tended toward the prosperity of the country and above all to the intellectual development of its people.

The effects such movements have on poetry and poets have been reflected in some way in the novels of Dickens and others but above all in the poems of Tennyson, Browning and many others.

Poets were formerly divided into three distinct classes--dramatic, epic, and lyric--and sought to give refined pleasure; but later, when they began to appeal to the intellect and aim at instruction, a forth division was made, the didactic. A dramatic poet deals with the past happenings but represents them in the present. This class is not strongly represented among the nineteenth century poets but its honor is upheld by Goldsmith and Shakespeare of an earlier date.

The epic poet narrates a story as if he were present.
This group is ably represented by Edmund Spenser, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and Alfred Tennyson.

Lyric poetry voices the personal feeling, sentiment or passion of the poet himself. England's greatest writers of this type are Robert Burns and Sir Thomas Moore. The fourth class, the didactic poets, whose aim is to instruct their readers is represented by Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, with whose compositions this thesis is intended to deal.

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell, England, near London, in 1812 and died in 1889. He was from an ancestry composed of a mixture of German, Scotch, English, and Creole people. His father was quite handsomely endowed with worldly riches and as Robert was not allowed to enter a university at that time because he was a dissenter, his instruction was gained by means of private teachers. Much of his education was gained by travel as well as from books.

He was a great reader, considering Shelley and Keats as the two greatest poets, and he had every possible advantage in the study of books and language. Along with all of this intellectual training came an intense enthusiasm for poetry, the boy even composing Byronic verses at the age of twelve years. He studied music; became a critic in music, and took a deep interest in art and artists, even to the neglect of his mathematical and logical studies. But thorough all of this, it was a foregone conclusion
that he would eventually become a poet.

Browning did not care for notoriety as a statesman or politician but preferred to have his name remembered by posterity in connection with a succession of books. In this ambition, he was greatly aided by his invalid wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whom he married in 1864, and with whom he enjoyed fifteen years of nearly perfect life.

His continued residence in Italy, because of his wife's health, and his consequent study of its people has made him an authority on Italian history and habits, but through it all he remained a loyal Englishman. Some may criticise his writings quite severely and say that it is not in keeping with an Englishman to permit his work to partake of an Italian flavoring. Therefore; this, however, can not be considered as an unfavorable criticism.

Perhaps one of the most striking qualities of his poems, especially his earlier poems, is his fluent flow of language. He never lacks for something to say or words with which to express it and through it all can be felt the keen sense of actual fact which is exhibited. The supremacy of facts in his works is farther shown by his faithfulness in working out details often to the neglect of more important parts of his composition. Browning does his best in a narrow field, where, if extra stress is placed on details, the reader is not wearied with them. This alone causes people to read him less while the psychological element limits his readers to a smaller number.
All his works are filled with reasoning or psychologi
cal reflections, and he presupposes many things as a psy-
chologist must necessarily do. Apostrophes and parenthesis
are used to such an extent that some of his sentences must
be read several times before they can be understood. More
attention is probably given to them because of the vigor
with which he dogmatizes rather than by the doctrines
which he expounds. The energy of his own faith carries
the reader along notwithstanding the general attitude to-
ward the author's belief.

Browning is not able to take several characters and
trace their career during their whole lives. He succeeds
in the portrayal of a single character in its specific
moods. His attempts at beauty, concentration of in-
terest, economy of language, and the selection of the
best from his experiences are total failures. Because of
this, much of his work has never been readable; more is now
unreadable and the question of how much will be readable
at the end of the twentieth century still remains unans-
swered.

Though Browning is called a dramatist and a rep-
resentative of the English school, many faults have been
pointed out. His characters seem to have a common manner
and dialect, which when traced to their origin, we find
to be similar to those of the author, that is, they pos-
sess too much of his own personality. He thinks seriously
about his characters but when he begins to portray them,
his reasoning and psychology overcome the more common
part of them and we lose interest.

Notwithstanding the more or less severe criticism of his works, we know that there is a dramatic power in all of them and that he respects the dramatic element of his time. True his characters are psychological, but they are made to think. Since he was always a deep thinker, it is but natural that the people of his production should be made to think along the same line.

It is not advisable for people who are reading for the sole purpose of amusement to attempt to read Browning's works. They are too serious and deep, treating principally of the tragedies and comedies of the soul. However, he discriminates in favor of women characters and never forgets that women are women; and I believe that, as a dramatist, he holds a high place. His masterpieces in dramatic poetry are Pippa Passes, A Blot on the 'Scutcheon, and Colombe's Birthday. Of them all, the latter is by far the best.

Scarcely less prominent in his poetry is the formal dramatic monologue which is first found in his Dramatic Lyrics. He used it continually, in fact more than any other writer, until it reached perfection in his Men and Women, which scarcely surpasses Andrea del Sarto, Epistle of Karshish, and The Ring and The Book. From then on, it became the poet's staple form and special instrument. The finest part of his lyrics, romances, idyls, long and short poems are in the monologue form.

This form is intellectual and argumentative and
assumes the presence of a second person. Its use by Browning is in keeping with his deep and psychological thinking. He deals with all incidents connected with life, the different moods of our personality, and the consciousness of the failure or success of life that a man has at the end of his career. His apologetic monologues are addressed to visionary audiences. There is usually but one speaker and thus the monologues become monodramatic.

So accustomed did the poet become to this style that he could not refrain from long monologues which gave his action a stilted effect and made his metaphysical discussions much harder to understand. Notwithstanding these faults he is beyond a doubt one of the greatest masters of monologues to be found in literature.

So much of Browning's work is of a psychological nature and borders on metaphysics, that it is hard to distinguish between them. However, Paracelsus is a metaphysical dialogue and shows to what height he has risen as a poet in metaphysics. The Ring and The Book is one of the most precious and profound treasures of spiritual literature ever produced since Shakesperae's time.

Nearly all of his writings show that he is convinced that some spark of soul is to be sought for in all men, however weak and mean they may be. To him, life as we live it is the material from which our soul should be and is made. So concerned is he with the religion and the metaphysics of man, that practically all of his sim-
ple metaphysics belongs to a solution of the defects in man.

He uses metaphysics so thoroughly and satisfactorily that no student of theology can well complete his course without a thorough study of Browning. His work may not seem orthodox at first reading, but we find that it is all, and more than, orthodox. His poems show good theology and metaphysics which place their author as one of the foremost theologians that has yet made himself known.

Browning's lyrical poetry does not play such an important part when compared to his other work. His genius, to be sure, is shown to good advantage in lyrics and romances but his failing to choose a broad enough field the true effect of his lyrical poetry.

Dramatic and lyrical poetry are quite closely connected and are best represented by the Dramatic Lyrics, Cavalier Tunes, How They Brought The Good News, and The Last Ride Together. The few striking lyrics written by Browning show that he had within him the qualities of a lyrical poet and had it not been for the deep and psychological nature of his work in general, there is no doubt that he would always have been known as a lyrical poet. At any rate he has his place among England's greatest singers.

The reputed obscurity of Browning's verse should not hinder our approach to it. It is inseparable from the nature of his themes. Even in his monologues and dramas,
great gaps are left which must be spanned by our imagination. Others of his poems are exactly the reverse of these. They follow the minute details and go so deep as to investigate the secret regions which generate the force, the outward phenomena of which are represented by playwrights. In reading such a composition, we fail to get an idea of what it means or understand it until it has all been read and reread several times. The promiscuous halts, breaks, dashes, and the common unrelaxed demand upon our imagination will probably account for the obscurity of his verse.

It may all be on account of his lack of experience in composition, but to say that it is overfull, will include every reason for its obscurity. Browning is without a doubt the most obscure of England's poets. However, we should not hesitate to read and study anything that he has written.

His verse may be further objected to, because of its ruggedness. True, it is not melodious; but it does not lack melody because he did not know how to qualify in such a way, but rather because more important details appeared and it was set aside. If the author had eliminated some of the capital letters, dashes, and parentheses and chosen to write less and place more stress on form, the adjective could never have been used in a description of his poems.

Notwithstanding the reputed obscurity and ruggedness of Browning's verse, when thoughtfully read it is
found to be optimistic in every sense of the word. It is not a feeble optimism, but a large sighted, noble, thorough-going resolute kind which places him among the best moral inspirers and shows that he is England's healthiest poet.

His poetry is not morbid, but in it he takes an earnest view of life and treats it seriously and beautifully, as a thing to be enjoyed to the fullest extent. His optimism is often tested by the sight of evil but by sheer resolution he would refuse judgment until the affair was thoroughly investigated and all the good could be brought to light. He believed that there is more to life than just the mere fact that we are here for a short time only. True, he believed general progress to be wholesome and good for men, but to enjoy it thoroughly we must not confine it to worldly matters alone, but link it all to an infinite love and accept things as all for the best.

His gospels are preached according to his doctrine that God has ordered everything to the best advantage and that we should wait with patience the outcome of our lives. His conception of romantic love is far above the average conception. The Last Ride Together and the apostrophe to his wife in The Ring and The Book shows his high conception of this love, while Prospice shows the value he places upon infinite love. Lowell has written a phrase concerning "bracing the moral fibre" and as an illustration of this bracing quality, no author with more dauntless perseverance
and more moral significance can be cited than Robert Browning.

No author, however good, can write perfect poems. Browning is no exception to the rule and both favorable and unfavorable criticisms can be made concerning his work. Strafford, written in 1837 is his second drama. In the composition of this drama, he desires to gain popular sympathy and made it a tragedy. As a result, his characters are not real and it was played successfully for only five nights.

Sordelle, written in 1840, is the most impracticable of all of his works. It is faulty in conception and expression but served its purpose—"to cleanse the visual humors of the poet's eyes". That is, to bring him to a realization of what the reader really expected.

The Return of The Druses gives a scenic effect which may be likened to Byron's verse. The tragedy which takes place is marked by heroic situations and dramatic catastrophes. In this drama of Browning's, the most telling point of all his works are probably met, especially when the heroine calls for Harkeem. It has the classic qualities and still can be called a classic.

A Soul's Tragedy is probably the most interesting poem he has written. It dwells to some length upon the masterly distinction between action because of sentiment and action founded upon principle and purpose. The character, Legate, is probably the best one the author has ever drawn.
Pictor Ignatus differs somewhat from the poet's usual style and is quiet. Its beauty can be especially noted. The Bishop Orders His Tomb is without a doubt a misleading study of the Roman ecclesiastic. The language of Master Hugus, Abt Vogler, and A Grammarian's Funeral is intricate and as is customary with his work, hard to understand. In the poem, A Death in The Desert, he is upon ground which no one but himself can tread safely.

Such are the criticisms of a few of his lesser poems. But it would not be well to pass on without some special mention of his so-called dramatic masterpieces -- Colombe's Birthday, A Blot on The 'Scutcheon, and Pippa Passes. The first mentioned is a pleasant drama. Not very long and the most natural of any of Browning's verse. There is no doubt but that it could be successfully played before an exclusively intellectual audience. Such people alone would profit by it because others could not understand it.

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon is full of poetry and seems to picture a little of the sadness of life, but is narrow in range and does not relieve our spirits. The main character is somewhat improbable as he puts the mind of a Juliet in the head of a child of twelve or fourteen years.

Pippa Passes is a fairly good representative of the author's poems. It is without a doubt the simplest and therefore the easiest to understand of any of his poems.
In this poem, a girl, unaware of the fact that she is of noble birth, makes her living at the weaving trade and is given a holiday. As she goes singing on her holiday, she passes Sebald and Ottima who have murdered the latter's husband, Jules, who has been deceived into marrying a false lady; and Luigi, who is hesitating to join a conspiracy, and she changes the future course of their lives.

The best and certainly the longest of Browning's poems which is worthy of especial mention is The Ring and The Book. To enable it to be better understood by all, a review of this poem is given below.

The scene of this poem, Browning's best composition, is placed in Rome during the latter half of the seventeenth century. The ring which is mentioned in the title, has reference to the intricate chain of evidence which was produced during the trial of the leading character. The book refers to the source from which the author received his material for the poem. The story is told by seven different people, each from his own viewpoint. The plot, which is well constructed, is as follows.

The Comparini family lived in Rome surrounded with many luxuries, but childless. Their resources were very low and to be able to use the money they desired, they must have an heir.

In some mysterious manner, Violante secured a baby girl, Pompilia, and presented it to Pietro as his own, which he believed it to be. They lived happily until Pompilia was twelve years of age. Then Violante, hearing
of Count Guido Franceschini, believed him to be rich and immediately made arrangements for him to marry their supposed child.

As was customary at that time, Pompilia's family went to live with the newly married couple whose home was some distance from Rome. There they found that Guido was not rich; and were also harshly treated. They went back to Rome and were soon followed by Pompilia and the Canon Caponsacchi. This roused Guido to severe anger but he allowed the law to take its course; and when his wife gave birth to an heir and he learned that the Comparini were not her parents, his fury could not be checked. He summoned help and went to their home, gained admittance to the house, and killed his wife and her supposed parents.

The story is not a tale of adventure and it concerns manners very little. But the portrayal of character is given the most prominent part. That this is true is shown by the picturing of the scheming, under-hand character of Violante, the simplehearted Pietro, and the child-like simplicity of the girl-wife Pompilia, as well as the matter-of-fact Guido Franceschini, who believed he should according to custom, take unto himself a wife; and the modern affinity-like character of the priest Caponsacchi.

The subject matter being largely psychologogical and the story written in a most unusual style, it is not strange that the poem is difficult for the average student to understand. However, the student of psychology or
theology will, to my mind, do well to make a very thorough study of the poem. Although it is hard to read and understand, the lesson taught—"That murder will out"—or in other words, that truth is supreme above all semblance of truth—is well worthy of careful consideration.

Along with the consideration of Browning's verse, we must not forget to make some mention of the work and career of his true helpmate, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She was born in Herefordshire, in 1806 and died in 1861. Her father, like Browning's father, was a wealthy country gentleman, who was able to furnish her with every necessity.

When fifteen years of age an accident befell her, which caused her to become an invalid. Though she suffered much and was confined to her bed for many years, she made the most of every advantage which was presented to her. She cultivated her already loving disposition until it became unequaled in the ordinary person. Though she suffered much and at times the pain became almost unbearable, she accepted it as God's will and believed that it would all be well in the end.

She cultivated her ardent love for Greek and as a result published a version of AEschylus's Prometheus Bound. Later she gained a place among the rising poets by publishing The Seraphim and Poems.

At about this time, she became interested in the verses of Browning, then a young poet. She paid his poems a very high tribute by speaking of his Pomegranates as
with "blood-tinctured" heart and "veined humanity". This caused Browning to seek an interview with her and after repeated attempts he was successful. Their acquaintance gained through poetry ripened into love and they were married in 1846, very much against her father's wishes. He took her to Italy with the hope of bettering her physical condition and in this hope he was gratified. There they lived happy in their love for each other, and wrote the poetry which has long since placed them high in the scale of poets. The work of one is so interwoven with that of the other that a very few particular qualities can be attributed to one without feeling that they are acquired by the inspiration and suggestion of the other.

Her poetry like that of her husband, is of both a dramatic and lyric nature but the former takes such an unimportant part that they need not be given special consideration. That she is an emotional poet is a settled fact and in it alone is found her strength as well as weakness. Her poetry seeks to show some of the intricate ways of the heart hence she speaks of love and emotion and not of the soul. The human heart comes first and nature second in her estimation. She did her best in the treatment of themes which call the feeling into action, such as are displayed in Cowper's Grave, The Dead Pan, and The Lay of The Brown Rosary. Casa Guidi Windows records an inspiration gained by the Italians' struggle for freedom.

Her work being of an emotional kind, was doomed
to an early death. In fact as soon as the incident which caused the display of emotion was forgotten, the verse was also forgotten. Nothing now remains worth of serious consideration except her Sonnets from the Portuguese. So true and noble was her love for her husband that the record of this love still remains secure.

In the eighth sonnet of Mrs. Browning's, she asks what she has to give in return for his liberal love. Her body being weak and sickly. But in the ninth sonnet, she takes courage and will not make him sad and confesses that she loves none but him.

In the fifteenth sonnet she cautions him to love for love's sake only so that it will last throughout love's eternity. The twenty-eighth sonnet makes mention of the letters Browning wrote to her during their courtship. One asked her to be his friend, another permission to meet her, another expressed his love for her, and the last offered himself to her. The last one of her sonnets likens these letters to flowers which were grown in her heart and trusts them to her husband's safest keeping.

Even after this careful study of the Brownings, many objections may be justly raised to their verses. We may say and justly too, that Browning is too psychological for the masses, while Mrs. Browning is too emotional, but after all, the many good qualities of their productions outweigh them. True, much of their work has perished like the hands that penned them but enough still remains to
establish a standard which I think has never yet been attained by any other writer. That is they have produced a quality of poetry which will greatly influence the lives of its readers and lead them to think more seriously of the psychology and metaphysics of our lives.

Their rank in literature is still disputed on the ground that it will be won on other than poetical qualities. It is still too early in the century to make a definite decision upon this question. However, whether their fame shall be on poetical or reasoning elements, I believe they will rank high among England's poets in general and highest among her reasoning poets and poets of love.

Their poetry has rendered the greatest possible service to mankind by exerting the best possible influence upon its readers and indirectly upon every one. They have fulfilled the poet's mission, "to show us that to feel nobly is to be great and insist with a lofty eloquence and in an impassioned strain, upon the importance and sacred character of truth, beauty, and virtue". No greater tribute can be paid to them and to Browning in particular than does Landor in the following lines:

Shakespeare is not our poet but the world's,
Therefore on him no speech: and brief for thee,
Browning! Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
No man hath walked along our road with step
So active so inquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse. But warmer climes
Give brighter plumage, stronger wing: the breeze
Of Alpine heights thou playest with, borne on
Beyond Sorrento and Amalfi, where
The Siren waits thee, singing song for song.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.
The following references were used in the construction of this thesis.

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