

CHAPTER V - BROWNING IN LATER LIFE

Browning's confidences, what there were of them, immediately after his wife's death were given to several women-friends; all his life, indeed, he was chiefly intimate with women. The two most intimate of these were his own sister, who remained with him in all his later years, and the sister of his wife, who seven years afterwards passed away in his presence as Elizabeth had done. The other letters, which number only one or two, referring in any personal manner to his bereavement are addressed to Miss Haworth and Isa Blagden. He left Florence and remained for a time with his father and sister near Dinard. Then he returned to London and took up his residence in Warwick Crescent. Naturally enough, the thing for which he now chiefly lived was the education of his son, and it is characteristic of Browning that he was not only a very indulgent father, but an indulgent father of a very conventional type: he had rather the chuckling pride of the city gentleman than the educational gravity of the intellectual.

Browning was now famous, *Bells and Pomegranates*, *Men and Women*, *Christmas Eve*, and *Dramatis Personæ* had successively glorified his Italian period. But he was already brooding half-unconsciously on more famous things. He has himself left on record a description of the incident out of which grew the whole impulse and plan of his greatest achievement. In a passage marked with all his peculiar sense of material things, all that power of writing of stone or metal or the fabric of drapery, so that we seem to be handling and smelling them, he has described a stall for the selling of odds and ends of every variety of utility and uselessness:--

"picture frames White through the worn gilt, mirror-
sconces chipped, Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,
(Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade) Modern chalk drawings,
studies from the nude, Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry Polished and
rough, sundry amazing busts In baked earth, (broken, Providence be praised!)
A wreck of tapestry proudly-purposed web When reds and blues were indeed
red and blue, Now offer'd as a mat to save bare feet (Since carpets constitute
a cruel cost). * * * * * Vulgarised Horace for the use of
schools, 'The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody, Saint Somebody Else,
his Miracles, Death, and Life'-- With this, one glance at the lettered back of
which, And 'Stall,' cried I; a lira made it mine."

This sketch embodies indeed the very poetry of débris, and comes nearer than any other poem has done to expressing the pathos and picturesqueness of a low-class pawnshop. "This," which Browning bought for a lira out of this heap of rubbish, was, of course, the old Latin record of the criminal case of Guido

Franceschini, tried for the murder of his wife Pompilia in the year 1698. And this again, it is scarcely necessary to say, was the ground-plan and motive of *The Ring and the Book*.

Browning had picked up the volume and partly planned the poem during his wife's lifetime in Italy. But the more he studied it, the more the dimensions of the theme appeared to widen and deepen; and he came at last, there can be little doubt, to regard it definitely as his magnum opus to which he would devote many years to come. Then came the great sorrow of his life, and he cast about him for something sufficiently immense and arduous and complicated to keep his brain going like some huge and automatic engine. "I mean to keep writing," he said, "whether I like it or not." And thus finally he took up the scheme of the Franceschini story, and developed it on a scale with a degree of elaboration, repetition, and management, and inexhaustible scholarship which was never perhaps before given in the history of the world to an affair of two or three characters. Of the larger literary and spiritual significance of the work, particularly in reference to its curious and original form of narration, I shall speak subsequently. But there is one peculiarity about the story which has more direct bearing on Browning's life, and it appears singular that few, if any, of his critics have noticed it. This peculiarity is the extraordinary resemblance between the moral problem involved in the poem if understood in its essence, and the moral problem which constituted the crisis and centre of Browning's own life. Nothing, properly speaking, ever happened to Browning after his wife's death; and his greatest work during that time was the telling, under alien symbols and the veil of a wholly different story, the inner truth about his own greatest trial and hesitation. He himself had in this sense the same difficulty as Caponsacchi, the supreme difficulty of having to trust himself to the reality of virtue not only without the reward, but even without the name of virtue. He had, like Caponsacchi, preferred what was unselfish and dubious to what was selfish and honourable. He knew better than any man that there is little danger of men who really know anything of that naked and homeless responsibility seeking it too often or indulging it too much. The conscientiousness of the law-abider is nothing in its terrors to the conscientiousness of the conscientious law-breaker. Browning had once, for what he seriously believed to be a greater good, done what he himself would never have had the cant to deny, ought to be called deceit and evasion. Such a thing ought never to come to a man twice. If he finds that necessity twice, he may, I think, be looked at with the beginning of a suspicion. To Browning it came once, and he devoted his greatest poem to a suggestion of how such a necessity may come to any man who is worthy to live.

As has already been suggested, any apparent danger that there may be in this excusing of an exceptional act is counteracted by the perils of the act, since it must always be remembered that this kind of act has the immense difference

from all legal acts--that it can only be justified by success. If Browning had taken his wife to Paris, and she had died in an hotel there, we can only conceive him saying, with the bitter emphasis of one of his own lines, "How should I have borne me, please?" Before and after this event his life was as tranquil and casual a one as it would be easy to imagine; but there always remained upon him something which was felt by all who knew him in after years--the spirit of a man who had been ready when his time came, and had walked in his own devotion and certainty in a position counted indefensible and almost along the brink of murder. This great moral of Browning, which may be called roughly the doctrine of the great hour, enters, of course, into many poems besides *The Ring and the Book*, and is indeed the mainspring of a great part of his poetry taken as a whole. It is, of course, the central idea of that fine poem, "The Statue and the Bust," which has given a great deal of distress to a great many people because of its supposed invasion of recognised morality. It deals, as every one knows, with a Duke Ferdinand and an elopement which he planned with the bride of one of the Riccardi. The lovers begin by deferring their flight for various more or less comprehensible reasons of convenience; but the habit of shrinking from the final step grows steadily upon them, and they never take it, but die, as it were, waiting for each other. The objection that the act thus avoided was a criminal one is very simply and quite clearly answered by Browning himself. His case against the dilatory couple is not in the least affected by the viciousness of their aim. His case is that they exhibited no virtue. Crime was frustrated in them by cowardice, which is probably the worse immorality of the two. The same idea again may be found in that delightful lyric "Youth and Art," where a successful cantatrice reproaches a successful sculptor with their failure to understand each other in their youth and poverty.

"Each life unfulfilled, you see; It hangs still, patchy and scrappy: We have
not sighed deep, laughed free, Starved, feasted, despaired,--been happy."

And this conception of the great hour, which breaks out everywhere in Browning, it is almost impossible not to connect with his own internal drama. It is really curious that this correspondence has not been insisted on. Probably critics have been misled by the fact that Browning in many places appears to boast that he is purely dramatic, that he has never put himself into his work, a thing which no poet, good or bad, who ever lived could possibly avoid doing.

The enormous scope and seriousness of *The Ring and the Book* occupied Browning for some five or six years, and the great epic appeared in the winter of 1868. Just before it was published Smith and Elder brought out a uniform edition of all Browning's works up to that time, and the two incidents taken together may be considered to mark the final and somewhat belated culmination of Browning's literary fame. The years since his wife's death, that had been

covered by the writing of *The Ring and the Book*, had been years of an almost feverish activity in that and many other ways. His travels had been restless and continued, his industry immense, and for the first time he began that mode of life which afterwards became so characteristic of him--the life of what is called society. A man of a shallower and more sentimental type would have professed to find the life of dinner-tables and soirées vain and unsatisfying to a poet, and especially to a poet in mourning. But if there is one thing more than another which is stirring and honourable about Browning, it is the entire absence in him of this cant of dissatisfaction. He had the one great requirement of a poet--he was not difficult to please. The life of society was superficial, but it is only very superficial people who object to the superficial. To the man who sees the marvellousness of all things, the surface of life is fully as strange and magical as its interior; clearness and plainness of life is fully as mysterious as its mysteries. The young man in evening dress, pulling on his gloves, is quite as elemental a figure as any anchorite, quite as incomprehensible, and indeed quite as alarming.

A great many literary persons have expressed astonishment at, or even disapproval of, this social frivolity of Browning's. Not one of these literary people would have been shocked if Browning's interest in humanity had led him into a gambling hell in the Wild West or a low tavern in Paris; but it seems to be tacitly assumed that fashionable people are not human at all. Humanitarians of a material and dogmatic type, the philanthropists and the professional reformers go to look for humanity in remote places and in huge statistics. Humanitarians of a more vivid type, the Bohemian artists, go to look for humanity in thieves' kitchens and the studios of the Quartier Latin. But humanitarians of the highest type, the great poets and philosophers, do not go to look for humanity at all. For them alone among all men the nearest drawing-room is full of humanity, and even their own families are human. Shakespeare ended his life by buying a house in his own native town and talking to the townsmen. Browning was invited to a great many conversaciones and private views, and did not pretend that they bored him. In a letter belonging to this period of his life he describes his first dinner at one of the Oxford colleges with an unaffected delight and vanity, which reminds the reader of nothing so much as the pride of the boy-captain of a public school if he were invited to a similar function and received a few compliments. It may be indeed that Browning had a kind of second youth in this long-delayed social recognition, but at least he enjoyed his second youth nearly as much as his first, and it is not every one who can do that.

Of Browning's actual personality and presence in this later middle age of his, memories are still sufficiently clear. He was a middle-sized, well set up, erect man, with somewhat emphatic gestures, and, as almost all testimonies mention, a curiously strident voice. The beard, the removal of which his wife had resented with so quaint an indignation, had grown again, but grown quite white, which, as

she said when it occurred, was a signal mark of the justice of the gods. His hair was still fairly dark, and his whole appearance at this time must have been very well represented by Mr. G.F. Watts's fine portrait in the National Portrait Gallery. The portrait bears one of the many testimonies which exist to Mr. Watts's grasp of the essential of character, for it is the only one of the portraits of Browning in which we get primarily the air of virility, even of animal virility, tempered but not disguised, with a certain touch of the pallor of the brain-worker. He looks here what he was--a very healthy man, too scholarly to live a completely healthy life.

His manner in society, as has been more than once indicated, was that of a man anxious, if anything, to avoid the air of intellectual eminence. Lockhart said briefly, "I like Browning; he isn't at all like a damned literary man." He was, according to some, upon occasion, talkative and noisy to a fault; but there are two kinds of men who monopolise conversation. The first kind are those who like the sound of their own voice; the second are those who do not know what the sound of their own voice is like. Browning was one of the latter class. His volubility in speech had the same origin as his voluminousness and obscurity in literature--a kind of headlong humility. He cannot assuredly have been aware that he talked people down or have wished to do so. For this would have been precisely a violation of the ideal of the man of the world, the one ambition and even weakness that he had. He wished to be a man of the world, and he never in the full sense was one. He remained a little too much of a boy, a little too much even of a Puritan, and a little too much of what may be called a man of the universe, to be a man of the world.

One of his faults probably was the thing roughly called prejudice. On the question, for example, of table-turning and psychic phenomena he was in a certain degree fierce and irrational. He was not indeed, as we shall see when we come to study "Sludge the Medium," exactly prejudiced against spiritualism. But he was beyond all question stubbornly prejudiced against spiritualists. Whether the medium Home was or was not a scoundrel it is somewhat difficult in our day to conjecture. But in so far as he claimed supernatural powers, he may have been as honest a gentleman as ever lived. And even if we think that the moral atmosphere of Home is that of a man of dubious character, we can still feel that Browning might have achieved his purpose without making it so obvious that he thought so. Some traces again, though much fainter ones, may be found of something like a subconscious hostility to the Roman Church, or at least a less full comprehension of the grandeur of the Latin religious civilisation than might have been expected of a man of Browning's great imaginative tolerance. Æstheticism, Bohemianism, the irresponsibilities of the artist, the untidy morals of Grub Street and the Latin Quarter, he hated with a consuming hatred. He was himself exact in everything, from his scholarship to his clothes; and even when he wore the loose white garments of the loungeur in Southern Europe, they were in

their own way as precise as a dress suit. This extra carefulness in all things he defended against the cant of Bohemianism as the right attitude for the poet. When some one excused coarseness or negligence on the ground of genius, he said, "That is an error: Noblesse oblige."

Browning's prejudices, however, belonged altogether to that healthy order which is characterised by a cheerful and satisfied ignorance. It never does a man any very great harm to hate a thing that he knows nothing about. It is the hating of a thing when we do know something about it which corrodes the character. We all have a dark feeling of resistance towards people we have never met, and a profound and manly dislike of the authors we have never read. It does not harm a man to be certain before opening the books that Whitman is an obscene ranter or that Stevenson is a mere trifler with style. It is the man who can think these things after he has read the books who must be in a fair way to mental perdition. Prejudice, in fact, is not so much the great intellectual sin as a thing which we may call, to coin a word, "postjudice," not the bias before the fair trial, but the bias that remains afterwards. With Browning's swift and emphatic nature the bias was almost always formed before he had gone into the matter. But almost all the men he really knew he admired, almost all the books he had really read he enjoyed. He stands pre-eminent among those great universalists who praised the ground they trod on and commended existence like any other material, in its samples. He had no kinship with those new and strange universalists of the type of Tolstoi who praise existence to the exclusion of all the institutions they have lived under, and all the ties they have known. He thought the world good because he had found so many things that were good in it--religion, the nation, the family, the social class. He did not, like the new humanitarian, think the world good because he had found so many things in it that were bad.

As has been previously suggested, there was something very queer and dangerous that underlay all the good humour of Browning. If one of these idle prejudices were broken by better knowledge, he was all the better pleased. But if some of the prejudices that were really rooted in him were trodden on, even by accident, such as his aversion to loose artistic cliques, or his aversion to undignified publicity, his rage was something wholly transfiguring and alarming, something far removed from the shrill disapproval of Carlyle and Ruskin. It can only be said that he became a savage, and not always a very agreeable or presentable savage. The indecent fury which danced upon the bones of Edward Fitzgerald was a thing which ought not to have astonished any one who had known much of Browning's character or even of his work. Some unfortunate persons on another occasion had obtained some of Mrs. Browning's letters shortly after her death, and proposed to write a Life founded upon them. They ought to have understood that Browning would probably disapprove; but if he talked to them about it, as he did to others, and it is exceedingly probable that he

did, they must have thought he was mad. "What I suffer with the paws of these black-guards in my bowels you can fancy," he says. Again he writes: "Think of this beast working away, not deeming my feelings, or those of her family, worthy of notice. It shall not be done if I can stop the scamp's knavery along with his breath." Whether Browning actually resorted to this extreme course is unknown; nothing is known except that he wrote a letter to the ambitious biographer which reduced him to silence, probably from stupefaction.

The same peculiarity ought, as I have said, to have been apparent to any one who knew anything of Browning's literary work. A great number of his poems are marked by a trait of which by its nature it is more or less impossible to give examples. Suffice it to say that it is truly extraordinary that poets like Swinburne (who seldom uses a gross word) should have been spoken of as if they had introduced moral license into Victorian poetry. What the Non-conformist conscience has been doing to have passed Browning is something difficult to imagine. But the peculiarity of this occasional coarseness in his work is this--that it is always used to express a certain wholesome fury and contempt for things sickly, or ungenerous, or unmanly. The poet seems to feel that there are some things so contemptible that you can only speak of them in pothouse words. It would be idle, and perhaps undesirable, to give examples; but it may be noted that the same brutal physical metaphor is used by his Caponsacchi about the people who could imagine Pompilia impure and by his Shakespeare in "At the Mermaid," about the claim of the Byronic poet to enter into the heart of humanity. In both cases Browning feels, and perhaps in a manner rightly, that the best thing we can do with a sentiment essentially base is to strip off its affectations and state it basely, and that the mud of Chaucer is a great deal better than the poison of Sterne. Herein again Browning is close to the average man; and to do the average man justice, there is a great deal more of this Browningsque hatred of Byronism in the brutality of his conversation than many people suppose.

Such, roughly and as far as we can discover, was the man who, in the full summer and even the full autumn of his intellectual powers, began to grow upon the consciousness of the English literary world about this time. For the first time friendship grew between him and the other great men of his time. Tennyson, for whom he then and always felt the best and most personal kind of admiration, came into his life, and along with him Gladstone and Francis Palgrave. There began to crowd in upon him those honours whereby a man is to some extent made a classic in his lifetime, so that he is honoured even if he is unread. He was made a Fellow of Balliol in 1867, and the homage of the great universities continued thenceforth unceasingly until his death, despite many refusals on his part. He was unanimously elected Lord Rector of Glasgow University in 1875. He declined, owing to his deep and somewhat characteristic aversion to formal public

speaking, and in 1877 he had to decline on similar grounds the similar offer from the University of St. Andrews. He was much at the English universities, was a friend of Dr. Jowett, and enjoyed the university life at the age of sixty-three in a way that he probably would not have enjoyed it if he had ever been to a university. The great universities would not let him alone, to their great credit, and he became a D.C.L. of Cambridge in 1879, and a D.C.L. of Oxford in 1882. When he received these honours there were, of course, the traditional buffooneries of the undergraduates, and one of them dropped a red cotton night-cap neatly on his head as he passed under the gallery. Some indignant intellectuals wrote to him to protest against this affront, but Browning took the matter in the best and most characteristic way. "You are far too hard," he wrote in answer, "on the very harmless drolleries of the young men. Indeed, there used to be a regularly appointed jester, 'Filius Terrae' he was called, whose business it was to gibe and jeer at the honoured ones by way of reminder that all human glories are merely gilded baubles and must not be fancied metal." In this there are other and deeper things characteristic of Browning besides his learning and humour. In discussing anything, he must always fall back upon great speculative and eternal ideas. Even in the tomfoolery of a horde of undergraduates he can only see a symbol of the ancient office of ridicule in the scheme of morals. The young men themselves were probably unaware that they were the representatives of the "Filius Terrae."

But the years during which Browning was thus reaping some of his late laurels began to be filled with incidents that reminded him how the years were passing over him. On June 20, 1866, his father had died, a man of whom it is impossible to think without a certain emotion, a man who had lived quietly and persistently for others, to whom Browning owed more than it is easy to guess, to whom we in all probability mainly owe Browning. In 1868 one of his closest friends, Arabella Barrett, the sister of his wife, died, as her sister had done, alone with Browning. Browning was not a superstitious man; he somewhat stormily prided himself on the contrary; but he notes at this time "a dream which Arabella had of Her, in which she prophesied their meeting in five years," that is, of course, the meeting of Elizabeth and Arabella. His friend Milsand, to whom *Sordello* was dedicated, died in 1886. "I never knew," said Browning, "or ever shall know, his like among men." But though both fame and a growing isolation indicated that he was passing towards the evening of his days, though he bore traces of the progress, in a milder attitude towards things, and a greater preference for long exiles with those he loved, one thing continued in him with unconquerable energy--there was no diminution in the quantity, no abatement in the immense designs of his intellectual output.

In 1871 he produced *Balaustion's Adventure*, a work exhibiting not only his genius in its highest condition of power, but something more exacting even than

genius to a man of his mature and changed life, immense investigation, prodigious memory, the thorough assimilation of the vast literature of a remote civilisation. Balaustion's Adventure, which is, of course, the mere framework for an English version of the Alcestis of Euripides, is an illustration of one of Browning's finest traits, his immeasurable capacity for a classic admiration. Those who knew him tell us that in conversation he never revealed himself so impetuously or so brilliantly as when declaiming the poetry of others; and Balaustion's Adventure is a monument of this fiery self-forgetfulness. It is penetrated with the passionate desire to render Euripides worthily, and to that imitation are for the time being devoted all the gigantic powers which went to make the songs of Pippa and the last agony of Guido. Browning never put himself into anything more powerfully or more successfully; yet it is only an excellent translation. In the uncouth philosophy of Caliban, in the tangled ethics of Sludge, in his wildest satire, in his most feather-headed lyric, Browning was never more thoroughly Browning than in this splendid and unselfish plagiarism. This revived excitement in Greek matters; "his passionate love of the Greek language" continued in him thenceforward till his death. He published more than one poem on the drama of Hellas. Aristophanes' Apology came out in 1875, and The Agamemnon of Æschylus, another paraphrase, in 1877. All three poems are marked by the same primary characteristic, the fact that the writer has the literature of Athens literally at his fingers' ends. He is intimate not only with their poetry and politics, but with their frivolity and their slang; he knows not only Athenian wisdom, but Athenian folly; not only the beauty of Greece, but even its vulgarity. In fact, a page of Aristophanes' Apology is like a page of Aristophanes, dark with levity and as obscure as a schoolman's treatise, with its load of jokes.

In 1871 also appeared Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society, one of the finest and most picturesque of all Browning's apologetic monologues. The figure is, of course, intended for Napoleon III., whose Empire had just fallen, bringing down his country with it. The saying has been often quoted that Louis Napoleon deceived Europe twice--once when he made it think he was a noodle, and once when he made it think he was a statesman. It might be added that Europe was never quite just to him, and was deceived a third time, when it took him after his fall for an exploded mountebank and nonentity. Amid the general chorus of contempt which was raised over his weak and unscrupulous policy in later years, culminating in his great disaster, there are few things finer than this attempt of Browning's to give the man a platform and let him speak for himself. It is the apologia of a political adventurer, and a political adventurer of a kind peculiarly open to popular condemnation. Mankind has always been somewhat inclined to forgive the adventurer who destroys or re-creates, but there is nothing inspiring about the adventurer who merely preserves. We have sympathy with the rebel who aims at reconstruction, but there is something repugnant to the imagination in the rebel who rebels in the name of compromise. Browning had to

defend, or rather to interpret, a man who kidnapped politicians in the night and deluged the Montmartre with blood, not for an ideal, not for a reform, not precisely even for a cause, but simply for the establishment of a régime. He did these hideous things not so much that he might be able to do better ones, but that he and every one else might be able to do nothing for twenty years; and Browning's contention, and a very plausible contention, is that the criminal believed that his crime would establish order and compromise, or, in other words, that he thought that nothing was the very best thing he and his people could do. There is something peculiarly characteristic of Browning in thus selecting not only a political villain, but what would appear the most prosaic kind of villain. We scarcely ever find in Browning a defence of those obvious and easily defended publicans and sinners whose mingled virtues and vices are the stuff of romance and melodrama--the generous rake, the kindly drunkard, the strong man too great for parochial morals. He was in a yet more solitary sense the friend of the outcast. He took in the sinners whom even sinners cast out. He went with the hypocrite and had mercy on the Pharisee.

How little this desire of Browning's, to look for a moment at the man's life with the man's eyes, was understood, may be gathered from the criticisms on Hohenstiel-Schwangau, which, says Browning, "the Editor of the Edinburgh Review calls my eulogium on the Second Empire, which it is not, any more than what another wiseacre affirms it to be, a scandalous attack on the old constant friend of England. It is just what I imagine the man might, if he pleased, say for himself."

In 1873 appeared Red-Cotton Night-Cap Country, which, if it be not absolutely one of the finest of Browning's poems, is certainly one of the most magnificently Browningsque. The origin of the name of the poem is probably well known. He was travelling along the Normandy coast, and discovered what he called

"Meek, hitherto un-Murrayed bathing-places, Best loved of sea-coast-nook-
full Normandy!"

Miss Thackeray, who was of the party, delighted Browning beyond measure by calling the sleepy old fishing district "White Cotton Night-Cap Country." It was exactly the kind of elfish phrase to which Browning had, it must always be remembered, a quite unconquerable attraction. The notion of a town of sleep, where men and women walked about in nightcaps, a nation of somnambulists, was the kind of thing that Browning in his heart loved better than Paradise Lost. Some time afterwards he read in a newspaper a very painful story of profligacy and suicide which greatly occupied the French journals in the year 1871, and which had taken place in the same district. It is worth noting that Browning was one of those wise men who can perceive the terrible and impressive poetry of the

police-news, which is commonly treated as vulgarity, which is dreadful and may be undesirable, but is certainly not vulgar. From *The Ring and the Book* to *Red-Cotton Night-Cap Country* a great many of his works might be called magnificent detective stories. The story is somewhat ugly, and its power does not alter its ugliness, for power can only make ugliness uglier. And in this poem there is little or nothing of the revelation of that secret wealth of valour and patience in humanity which makes real and redeems the revelation of its secret vileness in *The Ring and the Book*. It almost looks at first sight as if Browning had for a moment surrendered the whole of his impregnable philosophical position and admitted the strange heresy that a human story can be sordid. But this view of the poem is, of course, a mistake. It was written in something which, for want of a more exact word, we must call one of the bitter moods of Browning; but the bitterness is entirely the product of a certain generous hostility against the class of morbidities which he really detested, sometimes more than they deserved. In this poem these principles of weakness and evil are embodied to him as the sicklier kind of Romanism, and the more sensual side of the French temperament. We must never forget what a great deal of the Puritan there remained in Browning to the end. This outburst of it is fierce and ironical, not in his best spirit. It says in effect, "You call this a country of sleep, I call it a country of death. You call it 'White Cotton Night-Cap Country'; I call it 'Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.'"

Shortly before this, in 1872, he had published *Fifine at the Fair*, which his principal biographer, and one of his most uncompromising admirers, calls a piece of perplexing cynicism. Perplexing it may be to some extent, for it was almost impossible to tell whether Browning would or would not be perplexing even in a love-song or a post-card. But cynicism is a word that cannot possibly be applied with any propriety to anything that Browning ever wrote. Cynicism denotes that condition of mind in which we hold that life is in its nature mean and arid; that no soul contains genuine goodness, and no state of things genuine reliability. *Fifine at the Fair*, like *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, is one of Browning's apologetic soliloquies--the soliloquy of an epicurean who seeks half-playfully to justify upon moral grounds an infidelity into which he afterwards actually falls. This casuist, like all Browning's casuists, is given many noble outbursts and sincere moments, and therefore apparently the poem is called cynical. It is difficult to understand what particular connection there is between seeing good in nobody and seeing good even in a sensual fool.

After *Fifine at the Fair* appeared the *Inn Album*, in 1875, a purely narrative work, chiefly interesting as exhibiting in yet another place one of Browning's vital characteristics, a pleasure in retelling and interpreting actual events of a sinister and criminal type; and after the *Inn Album* came what is perhaps the most preposterously individual thing he ever wrote, *Of Pacchiarotto*, and *How He*

Worked in Distemper, in 1876. It is impossible to call the work poetry, and it is very difficult indeed to know what to call it. Its chief characteristic is a kind of galloping energy, an energy that has nothing intellectual or even intelligible about it, a purely animal energy of words. Not only is it not beautiful, it is not even clever, and yet it carries the reader away as he might be carried away by romping children. It ends up with a voluble and largely unmeaning malediction upon the poet's critics, a malediction so outrageously good-humoured that it does not take the trouble even to make itself clear to the objects of its wrath. One can compare the poem to nothing in heaven or earth, except to the somewhat humorous, more or less benevolent, and most incomprehensible catalogues of curses and oaths which may be heard from an intoxicated navy. This is the kind of thing, and it goes on for pages:--

"Long after the last of your number Has ceased my front-court to encumber
While, treading down rose and ranunculus, You Tommy-make-room-for-your-
uncle-us! Troop, all of you man or homunculus, Quick march! for
Xanthippe, my housemaid, If once on your pates she a souse made With
what, pan or pot, bowl or skoramis, First comes to her hand--things were more
amiss! I would not for worlds be your place in-- Recipient of slops from the
basin! You, Jack-in-the-Green, leaf-and-twiggishness Won't save a dry
thread on your priggishness!"

You can only call this, in the most literal sense of the word, the brute-force of language.

In spite however of this monstrosity among poems, which gives its title to the volume, it contains some of the most beautiful verses that Browning ever wrote in that style of light philosophy in which he was unequalled. Nothing ever gave so perfectly and artistically what is too loosely talked about as a thrill, as the poem called "Fears and Scruples," in which a man describes the mystifying conduct of an absent friend, and reserves to the last line the climax--

"Hush, I pray you! What if this friend happen to be--God."

It is the masterpiece of that excellent but much-abused literary quality, Sensationalism.

The volume entitled *Pacchiarotto*, moreover, includes one or two of the most spirited poems on the subject of the poet in relation to publicity--"At the Mermaid," "House," and "Shop."

In spite of his increasing years, his books seemed if anything to come thicker and faster. Two were published in 1878--*La Saisiaz*, his great metaphysical poem on

the conception of immortality, and that delightfully foppish fragment of the ancien régime, *The Two Poets of Croisic*. Those two poems would alone suffice to show that he had not forgotten the hard science of theology or the harder science of humour. Another collection followed in 1879, the first series of *Dramatic Idylls*, which contain such masterpieces as "Pheidippides" and "Ivàn Ivànovitch." Upon its heels, in 1880, came the second series of *Dramatic Idylls*, including "Muléykeh" and "Clive," possibly the two best stories in poetry, told in the best manner of story-telling. Then only did the marvellous fountain begin to slacken in quantity, but never in quality. *Jocoseria* did not appear till 1883. It contains among other things a cast-back to his very earliest manner in the lyric of "Never the Time and the Place," which we may call the most light-hearted love-song that was ever written by a man over seventy. In the next year appeared *Ferishtah's Fancies*, which exhibit some of his shrewdest cosmic sagacity, expressed in some of his quaintest and most characteristic images. Here perhaps more than anywhere else we see that supreme peculiarity of Browning--his sense of the symbolism of material trifles. Enormous problems, and yet more enormous answers, about pain, prayer, destiny, liberty, and conscience are suggested by cherries, by the sun, by a melon-seller, by an eagle flying in the sky, by a man tilling a plot of ground. It is this spirit of grotesque allegory which really characterises Browning among all other poets. Other poets might possibly have hit upon the same philosophical idea--some idea as deep, as delicate, and as spiritual. But it may be safely asserted that no other poet, having thought of a deep, delicate, and spiritual idea, would call it "A Bean Stripe; also Apple Eating."

Three more years passed, and the last book which Browning published in his lifetime was *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day*, a book which consists of apostrophes, amicable, furious, reverential, satirical, emotional to a number of people of whom the vast majority even of cultivated people have never heard in their lives--Daniel Bartoli, Francis Furini, Gerard de Lairesse, and Charles Avison. This extraordinary knowledge of the fulness of history was a thing which never ceased to characterise Browning even when he was unfortunate in every other literary quality. Apart altogether from every line he ever wrote, it may fairly be said that no mind so rich as his ever carried its treasures to the grave. All these later poems are vigorous, learned, and full-blooded. They are thoroughly characteristic of their author. But nothing in them is quite so characteristic of their author as this fact, that when he had published all of them, and was already near to his last day, he turned with the energy of a boy let out of school, and began, of all things in the world, to re-write and improve "Pauline," the boyish poem that he had written fifty-five years before. Here was a man covered with glory and near to the doors of death, who was prepared to give himself the elaborate trouble of reconstructing the mood, and rebuilding the verses of a long juvenile poem which had been forgotten for fifty years in the blaze of successive victories. It is such things as these which give to

Browning an interest of personality which is far beyond the more interest of genius. It was of such things that Elizabeth Barrett wrote in one of her best moments of insight--that his genius was the least important thing about him.

During all these later years, Browning's life had been a quiet and regular one. He always spent the winter in Italy and the summer in London, and carried his old love of precision to the extent of never failing day after day throughout the year to leave the house at the same time. He had by this time become far more of a public figure than he had ever been previously, both in England and Italy. In 1881, Dr. Furnivall and Miss E.H. Hickey founded the famous "Browning Society." He became President of the new "Shakespeare Society" and of the "Wordsworth Society." In 1886, on the death of Lord Houghton, he accepted the post of Foreign Correspondent to the Royal Academy. When he moved to De Vere Gardens in 1887, it began to be evident that he was slowly breaking up. He still dined out constantly; he still attended every reception and private view; he still corresponded prodigiously, and even added to his correspondence; and there is nothing more typical of him than that now, when he was almost already a classic, he answered any compliment with the most delightful vanity and embarrassment. In a letter to Mr. George Bainton, touching style, he makes a remark which is an excellent criticism on his whole literary career: "I myself found many forgotten fields which have proved the richest of pastures." But despite his continued energy, his health was gradually growing worse. He was a strong man in a muscular, and ordinarily in a physical sense, but he was also in a certain sense a nervous man, and may be said to have died of brain-excitement prolonged through a lifetime. In these closing years he began to feel more constantly the necessity for rest. He and his sister went to live at a little hotel in Llangollen, and spent hours together talking and drinking tea on the lawn. He himself writes in one of his quaint and poetic phrases that he had come to love these long country retreats, "another term of delightful weeks, each tipped with a sweet starry Sunday at the little church." For the first time, and in the last two or three years, he was really growing old. On one point he maintained always a tranquil and unvarying decision. The pessimistic school of poetry was growing up all round him; the decadents, with their belief that art was only a counting of the autumn leaves, were approaching more and more towards their tired triumph and their tasteless popularity. But Browning would not for one instant take the scorn of them out of his voice. "Death, death, it is this harping on death that I despise so much. In fiction, in poetry, French as well as English, and I am told in American also, in art and literature, the shadow of death, call it what you will, despair, negation, indifference, is upon us. But what fools who talk thus! Why, amico mio, you know as well as I, that death is life, just as our daily momentarily dying body is none the less alive, and ever recruiting new forces of existence. Without death, which is our church-yardy crape-like word for change, for growth, there could be no prolongation of that which we call life. Never say of me that I am dead."

On August 13, 1888, he set out once more for Italy, the last of his innumerable voyages. During his last Italian period he seems to have fallen back on very ultimate simplicities, chiefly a mere staring at nature. The family with whom he lived kept a fox cub, and Browning would spend hours with it watching its grotesque ways; when it escaped, he was characteristically enough delighted. The old man could be seen continually in the lanes round Asolo, peering into hedges and whistling for the lizards.

This serene and pastoral decline, surely the mildest of slopes into death, was suddenly diversified by a flash of something lying far below. Browning's eye fell upon a passage written by the distinguished Edward Fitzgerald, who had been dead for many years, in which Fitzgerald spoke in an uncomplimentary manner of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Browning immediately wrote the "Lines to Edward Fitzgerald," and set the whole literary world in an uproar. The lines were bitter and excessive to have been written against any man, especially bitter and excessive to have been written against a man who was not alive to reply. And yet, when all is said, it is impossible not to feel a certain dark and indescribable pleasure in this last burst of the old barbaric energy. The mountain had been tilled and forested, and laid out in gardens to the summit; but for one last night it had proved itself once more a volcano, and had lit up all the plains with its forgotten fire. And the blow, savage as it was, was dealt for that great central sanctity--the story of a man's youth. All that the old man would say in reply to every view of the question was, "I felt as if she had died yesterday."

Towards December of 1889 he moved to Venice, where he fell ill. He took very little food; it was indeed one of his peculiar small fads that men should not take food when they are ill, a matter in which he maintained that the animals were more sagacious. He asserted vigorously that this somewhat singular regimen would pull him through, talked about his plans, and appeared cheerful. Gradually, however, the talking became more infrequent, the cheerfulness passed into a kind of placidity; and without any particular crisis or sign of the end, Robert Browning died on December 12, 1889. The body was taken on board ship by the Venice Municipal Guard, and received by the Royal Italian marines. He was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, the choir singing his wife's poem, "He giveth His beloved sleep." On the day that he died Asolando was published.