

CHAPTER VI - BROWNING AS A LITERARY ARTIST

Mr. William Sharp, in his *Life of Browning*, quotes the remarks of another critic to the following effect: "The poet's processes of thought are scientific in their precision and analysis; the sudden conclusion that he imposes upon them is transcendental and inept."

This is a very fair but a very curious example of the way in which Browning is treated. For what is the state of affairs? A man publishes a series of poems, vigorous, perplexing, and unique. The critics read them, and they decide that he has failed as a poet, but that he is a remarkable philosopher and logician. They then proceed to examine his philosophy, and show with great triumph that it is unphilosophical, and to examine his logic and show with great triumph that it is not logical, but "transcendental and inept." In other words, Browning is first denounced for being a logician and not a poet, and then denounced for insisting on being a poet when they have decided that he is to be a logician. It is just as if a man were to say first that a garden was so neglected that it was only fit for a boys' playground, and then complain of the unsuitability in a boys' playground of rockeries and flower-beds.

As we find, after this manner, that Browning does not act satisfactorily as that which we have decided that he shall be--a logician--it might possibly be worth while to make another attempt to see whether he may not, after all, be more valid than we thought as to what he himself professed to be--a poet. And if we study this seriously and sympathetically, we shall soon come to a conclusion. It is a gross and complete slander upon Browning to say that his processes of thought are scientific in their precision and analysis. They are nothing of the sort; if they were, Browning could not be a good poet. The critic speaks of the conclusions of a poem as "transcendental and inept"; but the conclusions of a poem, if they are not transcendental, must be inept. Do the people who call one of Browning's poems scientific in its analysis realise the meaning of what they say? One is tempted to think that they know a scientific analysis when they see it as little as they know a good poem. The one supreme difference between the scientific method and the artistic method is, roughly speaking, simply this--that a scientific statement means the same thing wherever and whenever it is uttered, and that an artistic statement means something entirely different, according to the relation in which it stands to its surroundings. The remark, let us say, that the whale is a mammal, or the remark that sixteen ounces go to a pound, is equally true, and means exactly the same thing, whether we state it at the beginning of a conversation or at the end, whether we print it in a dictionary or chalk it up on a wall. But if we take some phrase commonly used in the art of literature--such a

sentence, for the sake of example, as "the dawn was breaking"--the matter is quite different. If the sentence came at the beginning of a short story, it might be a mere descriptive prelude. If it were the last sentence in a short story, it might be poignant with some peculiar irony or triumph. Can any one read Browning's great monologues and not feel that they are built up like a good short story, entirely on this principle of the value of language arising from its arrangement. Take such an example as "Caliban upon Setebos," a wonderful poem designed to describe the way in which a primitive nature may at once be afraid of its gods and yet familiar with them. Caliban in describing his deity starts with a more or less natural and obvious parallel between the deity and himself, carries out the comparison with consistency and an almost revolting simplicity, and ends in a kind of blasphemous extravaganza of anthropomorphism, basing his conduct not merely on the greatness and wisdom, but also on the manifest weaknesses and stupidities, of the Creator of all things. Then suddenly a thunderstorm breaks over Caliban's island, and the profane speculator falls flat upon his face--

"Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos! 'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip, Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape!"

Surely it would be very difficult to persuade oneself that this thunderstorm would have meant exactly the same thing if it had occurred at the beginning of "Caliban upon Setebos." It does not mean the same thing, but something very different; and the deduction from this is the curious fact that Browning is an artist, and that consequently his processes of thought are not "scientific in their precision and analysis."

No criticism of Browning's poems can be vital, none in the face of the poems themselves can be even intelligible, which is not based upon the fact that he was successfully or otherwise a conscious and deliberate artist. He may have failed as an artist, though I do not think so; that is quite a different matter. But it is one thing to say that a man through vanity or ignorance has built an ugly cathedral, and quite another to say that he built it in a fit of absence of mind, and did not know whether he was building a lighthouse or a first-class hotel. Browning knew perfectly well what he was doing; and if the reader does not like his art, at least the author did. The general sentiment expressed in the statement that he did not care about form is simply the most ridiculous criticism that could be conceived. It would be far nearer the truth to say that he cared more for form than any other English poet who ever lived. He was always weaving and modelling and inventing new forms. Among all his two hundred to three hundred poems it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that there are half as many different metres as there are different poems.

The great English poets who are supposed to have cared more for form than Browning did, cared less at least in this sense--that they were content to use old forms so long as they were certain that they had new ideas. Browning, on the other hand, no sooner had a new idea than he tried to make a new form to express it. Wordsworth and Shelley were really original poets; their attitude of thought and feeling marked without doubt certain great changes in literature and philosophy. Nevertheless, the "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" is a perfectly normal and traditional ode, and "Prometheus Unbound" is a perfectly genuine and traditional Greek lyrical drama. But if we study Browning honestly, nothing will strike us more than that he really created a large number of quite novel and quite admirable artistic forms. It is too often forgotten what and how excellent these were. The Ring and the Book, for example, is an illuminating departure in literary method--the method of telling the same story several times and trusting to the variety of human character to turn it into several different and equally interesting stories. Pippa Passes, to take another example, is a new and most fruitful form, a series of detached dramas connected only by the presence of one fugitive and isolated figure. The invention of these things is not merely like the writing of a good poem--it is something like the invention of the sonnet or the Gothic arch. The poet who makes them does not merely create himself--he creates other poets. It is so in a degree long past enumeration with regard to Browning's smaller poems. Such a pious and horrible lyric as "The Heretic's Tragedy," for instance, is absolutely original, with its weird and almost blood-curdling echo verses, mocking echoes indeed--

"And dipt of his wings in Paris square, They bring him now to lie burned
alive.

[And wanteth there grace of lute or clavicithern, ye shall say to
confirm him who singeth--

We bring John now to be burned alive."

A hundred instances might, of course, be given. Milton's "Sonnet on his Blindness," or Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," are both thoroughly original, but still we can point to other such sonnets and other such odes. But can any one mention any poem of exactly the same structural and literary type as "Fears and Scruples," as "The Householder," as "House" or "Shop," as "Nationality in Drinks," as "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," as "My Star," as "A Portrait," as any of "Ferishtah's Fancies," as any of the "Bad Dreams."

The thing which ought to be said about Browning by those who do not enjoy him is simply that they do not like his form; that they have studied the form, and think it a bad form. If more people said things of this sort, the world of criticism

would gain almost unspeakably in clarity and common honesty. Browning put himself before the world as a good poet. Let those who think he failed call him a bad poet, and there will be an end of the matter. There are many styles in art which perfectly competent æsthetic judges cannot endure. For instance, it would be perfectly legitimate for a strict lover of Gothic to say that one of the monstrous rococo altar-pieces in the Belgian churches with bulbous clouds and oaken sun-rays seven feet long, was, in his opinion, ugly. But surely it would be perfectly ridiculous for any one to say that it had no form. A man's actual feelings about it might be better expressed by saying that it had too much. To say that Browning was merely a thinker because you think "Caliban upon Setebos" ugly, is precisely as absurd as it would be to call the author of the old Belgian altarpiece a man devoted only to the abstractions of religion. The truth about Browning is not that he was indifferent to technical beauty, but that he invented a particular kind of technical beauty to which any one else is free to be as indifferent as he chooses.

There is in this matter an extraordinary tendency to vague and unmeaning criticism. The usual way of criticising an author, particularly an author who has added something to the literary forms of the world, is to complain that his work does not contain something which is obviously the speciality of somebody else. The correct thing to say about Maeterlinck is that some play of his in which, let us say, a princess dies in a deserted tower by the sea, has a certain beauty, but that we look in vain in it for that robust geniality, that really boisterous will to live which may be found in Martin Chuzzlewit. The right thing to say about Cyrano de Bergerac is that it may have a certain kind of wit and spirit, but that it really throws no light on the duty of middle-aged married couples in Norway. It cannot be too much insisted upon that at least three-quarters of the blame and criticism commonly directed against artists and authors falls under this general objection, and is essentially valueless. Authors both great and small are, like everything else in existence, upon the whole greatly under-rated. They are blamed for not doing, not only what they have failed to do to reach their own ideal, but what they have never tried to do to reach every other writer's ideal. If we can show that Browning had a definite ideal of beauty and loyally pursued it, it is not necessary to prove that he could have written *In Memoriam* if he had tried.

Browning has suffered far more injustice from his admirers than from his opponents, for his admirers have for the most part got hold of the matter, so to speak, by the wrong end. They believe that what is ordinarily called the grotesque style of Browning was a kind of necessity boldly adopted by a great genius in order to express novel and profound ideas. But this is an entire mistake. What is called ugliness was to Browning not in the least a necessary evil, but a quite unnecessary luxury, which he enjoyed for its own sake. For reasons that we shall see presently in discussing the philosophical use of the grotesque, it did so happen that Browning's grotesque style was very suitable for the expression of

his peculiar moral and metaphysical view. But the whole mass of poems will be misunderstood if we do not realise first of all that he had a love of the grotesque of the nature of art for art's sake. Here, for example, is a short distinct poem merely descriptive of one of those elfish German jugs in which it is to be presumed Tokay had been served to him. This is the whole poem, and a very good poem too--

"Up jumped Tokay on our table, Like a pigmy castle-warder, Dwarfish to see, but stout and able, Arms and accoutrements all in order; And fierce he looked North, then, wheeling South Blew with his bugle a challenge to Drouth, Cocked his flap-hat with the tosspot-feather, Twisted his thumb in his red moustache, Jingled his huge brass spurs together, Tightened his waist with its Buda sash, And then, with an impudence nought could abash, Shrugged his hump-shoulder, to tell the beholder, For twenty such knaves he would laugh but the bolder: And so, with his sword-hilt gallantly jutting, And dexter-hand on his haunch abutting, Went the little man, Sir Ausbruch, strutting!"

I suppose there are Browning students in existence who would think that this poem contained something pregnant about the Temperance question, or was a marvellously subtle analysis of the romantic movement in Germany. But surely to most of us it is sufficiently apparent that Browning was simply fashioning a ridiculous knick-knack, exactly as if he were actually moulding one of these preposterous German jugs. Now before studying the real character of this Browningsque style, there is one general truth to be recognised about Browning's work. It is this--that it is absolutely necessary to remember that Browning had, like every other poet, his simple and indisputable failures, and that it is one thing to speak of the badness of his artistic failures, and quite another thing to speak of the badness of his artistic aim. Browning's style may be a good style, and yet exhibit many examples of a thoroughly bad use of it. On this point there is indeed a singularly unfair system of judgment used by the public towards the poets. It is very little realised that the vast majority of great poets have written an enormous amount of very bad poetry. The unfortunate Wordsworth is generally supposed to be almost alone in this; but any one who thinks so can scarcely have read a certain number of the minor poems of Byron and Shelley and Tennyson.

Now it is only just to Browning that his more uncouth effusions should not be treated as masterpieces by which he must stand or fall, but treated simply as his failures. It is really true that such a line as

"Irks fear the crop-full bird, frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?"

is a very ugly and a very bad line. But it is quite equally true that Tennyson's

"And that good man, the clergyman, has told me words of peace,"

is a very ugly and a very bad line. But people do not say that this proves that Tennyson was a mere crabbed controversialist and metaphysician. They say that it is a bad example of Tennyson's form; they do not say that it is a good example of Tennyson's indifference to form. Upon the whole, Browning exhibits far fewer instances of this failure in his own style than any other of the great poets, with the exception of one or two like Spenser and Keats, who seem to have a mysterious incapacity for writing bad poetry. But almost all original poets, particularly poets who have invented an artistic style, are subject to one most disastrous habit--the habit of writing imitations of themselves. Every now and then in the works of the noblest classical poets you will come upon passages which read like extracts from an American book of parodies. Swinburne, for example, when he wrote the couplet--

"From the lilies and languors of virtue To the raptures and roses of vice,"

wrote what is nothing but a bad imitation of himself, an imitation which seems indeed to have the wholly unjust and uncritical object of proving that the Swinburnian melody is a mechanical scheme of initial letters. Or again, Mr. Rudyard Kipling when he wrote the line--

"Or ride with the reckless seraphim on the rim of a red-maned star,"

was caricaturing himself in the harshest and least sympathetic spirit of American humour. This tendency is, of course, the result of the self-consciousness and theatricality of modern life in which each of us is forced to conceive ourselves as part of a *dramatis personæ* and act perpetually in character. Browning sometimes yielded to this temptation to be a great deal too like himself.

"Will I widen thee out till thou turnest From Margaret Minnikin mou' by
God's grace, To Muckle-mouth Meg in good earnest."

This sort of thing is not to be defended in Browning any more than in Swinburne. But, on the other hand, it is not to be attributed in Swinburne to a momentary exaggeration, and in Browning to a vital æsthetic deficiency. In the case of Swinburne, we all feel that the question is not whether that particular preposterous couplet about lilies and roses redounds to the credit of the Swinburnian style, but whether it would be possible in any other style than the Swinburnian to have written the Hymn to Proserpine. In the same way, the essential issue about Browning as an artist is not whether he, in common with

Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, and Swinburne, sometimes wrote bad poetry, but whether in any other style except Browning's you could have achieved the precise artistic effect which is achieved by such incomparable lyrics as "The Patriot" or "The Laboratory." The answer must be in the negative, and in that answer lies the whole justification of Browning as an artist.

The question now arises, therefore, what was his conception of his functions as an artist? We have already agreed that his artistic originality concerned itself chiefly with the serious use of the grotesque. It becomes necessary, therefore, to ask what is the serious use of the grotesque, and what relation does the grotesque bear to the eternal and fundamental elements in life?

One of the most curious things to notice about popular æsthetic criticism is the number of phrases it will be found to use which are intended to express an æsthetic failure, and which express merely an æsthetic variety. Thus, for instance, the traveller will often hear the advice from local lovers of the picturesque, "The scenery round such and such a place has no interest; it is quite flat." To disparage scenery as quite flat is, of course, like disparaging a swan as quite white, or an Italian sky as quite blue. Flatness is a sublime quality in certain landscapes, just as rockiness is a sublime quality in others. In the same way there are a great number of phrases commonly used in order to disparage such writers as Browning which do not in fact disparage, but merely describe them. One of the most distinguished of Browning's biographers and critics says of him, for example, "He has never meant to be rugged, but has become so in striving after strength." To say that Browning never tried to be rugged is to say that Edgar Allan Poe never tried to be gloomy, or that Mr. W.S. Gilbert never tried to be extravagant. The whole issue depends upon whether we realise the simple and essential fact that ruggedness is a mode of art like gloominess or extravagance. Some poems ought to be rugged, just as some poems ought to be smooth. When we see a drift of stormy and fantastic clouds at sunset, we do not say that the cloud is beautiful although it is ragged at the edges. When we see a gnarled and sprawling oak, we do not say that it is fine although it is twisted. When we see a mountain, we do not say that it is impressive although it is rugged, nor do we say apologetically that it never meant to be rugged, but became so in its striving after strength. Now, to say that Browning's poems, artistically considered, are fine although they are rugged, is quite as absurd as to say that a rock, artistically considered, is fine although it is rugged. Ruggedness being an essential quality in the universe, there is that in man which responds to it as to the striking of any other chord of the eternal harmonies. As the children of nature, we are akin not only to the stars and flowers, but also to the toad-stools and the monstrous tropical birds. And it is to be repeated as the essential of the question that on this side of our nature we do emphatically love the form of the toad-stools, and not merely some complicated botanical and moral lessons which

the philosopher may draw from them. For example, just as there is such a thing as a poetical metre being beautifully light or beautifully grave and haunting, so there is such a thing as a poetical metre being beautifully rugged. In the old ballads, for instance, every person of literary taste will be struck by a certain attractiveness in the bold, varying, irregular verse--

"He is either himsell a devil frae hell, Or else his mother a witch maun be;
I wadna have ridden that wan water For a' the gowd in Christentie,"

is quite as pleasing to the ear in its own way as

"There's a bower of roses by Bendemeer stream, And the nightingale sings in
it all the night long,"

is in another way. Browning had an unrivalled ear for this particular kind of staccato music. The absurd notion that he had no sense of melody in verse is only possible to people who think that there is no melody in verse which is not an imitation of Swinburne. To give a satisfactory idea of Browning's rhythmic originality would be impossible without quotations more copious than entertaining. But the essential point has been suggested.

"They were purple of raiment and golden, Filled full of thee, fiery with wine,
Thy lovers in haunts un beholden, In marvellous chambers of thine,"

is beautiful language, but not the only sort of beautiful language. This, for instance, has also a tune in it--

"I--'next poet.' No, my hearties, I nor am, nor fain would be! Choose your
chiefs and pick your parties, Not one soul revolt to me! * * *
* * Which of you did I enable Once to slip inside my breast, There to
catalogue and label What I like least, what love best, Hope and fear, believe
and doubt of, Seek and shun, respect, deride, Who has right to make a rout
of Rarities he found inside?"

This quick, gallantly stepping measure also has its own kind of music, and the man who cannot feel it can never have enjoyed the sound of soldiers marching by. This, then, roughly is the main fact to remember about Browning's poetical method, or about any one's poetical method--that the question is not whether that method is the best in the world, but the question whether there are not certain things which can only be conveyed by that method. It is perfectly true, for instance, that a really lofty and lucid line of Tennyson, such as--

"Thou art the highest, and most human too" and "We needs must love the

highest when we see it"

would really be made the worse for being translated into Browning. It would probably become

"High's human; man loves best, best visible,"

and would lose its peculiar clarity and dignity and courtly plainness. But it is quite equally true that any really characteristic fragment of Browning, if it were only the tempestuous scolding of the organist in "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha"--

"Hallo, you sacristan, show us a light there! Down it dips, gone like a rocket. What, you want, do you, to come unawares, Sweeping the church up for first morning-prayers, And find a poor devil has ended his cares At the foot of your rotten-runged rat-riddled stairs? Do I carry the moon in my pocket?"

--it is quite equally true that this outrageous gallop of rhymes ending with a frantic astronomical image would lose in energy and spirit if it were written in a conventional and classical style, and ran--

"What must I deem then that thou dreamest to find Disjected bones adrift upon the stair Thou sweepest clean, or that thou deemest that I Pouch in my wallet the vice-regal sun?"

Is it not obvious that this statelier version might be excellent poetry of its kind, and yet would be bad exactly in so far as it was good; that it would lose all the swing, the rush, the energy of the preposterous and grotesque original? In fact, we may see how unmanageable is this classical treatment of the essentially absurd in Tennyson himself. The humorous passages in *The Princess*, though often really humorous in themselves, always appear forced and feeble because they have to be restrained by a certain metrical dignity, and the mere idea of such restraint is incompatible with humour. If Browning had written the passage which opens *The Princess*, descriptive of the "larking" of the villagers in the magnate's park, he would have spared us nothing; he would not have spared us the shrill uneducated voices and the unburied bottles of ginger beer. He would have crammed the poem with uncouth similes; he would have changed the metre a hundred times; he would have broken into doggerel and into rhapsody; but he would have left, when all is said and done, as he leaves in that paltry fragment of the grumbling organist, the impression of a certain eternal human energy. Energy and joy, the father and the mother of the grotesque, would have ruled the poem. We should have felt of that rowdy gathering little but the sensation of which Mr. Henley writes--

"Praise the generous gods for giving, In this world of sin and strife, With
some little time for living, Unto each the joy of life,"

the thought that every wise man has when looking at a Bank Holiday crowd at Margate.

To ask why Browning enjoyed this perverse and fantastic style most would be to go very deep into his spirit indeed, probably a great deal deeper than it is possible to go. But it is worth while to suggest tentatively the general function of the grotesque in art generally and in his art in particular. There is one very curious idea into which we have been hypnotised by the more eloquent poets, and that is that nature in the sense of what is ordinarily called the country is a thing entirely stately and beautiful as those terms are commonly understood. The whole world of the fantastic, all things top-heavy, lop-sided, and nonsensical are conceived as the work of man, gargoyles, German jugs, Chinese pots, political caricatures, burlesque epics, the pictures of Mr. Aubrey Beardsley and the puns of Robert Browning. But in truth a part, and a very large part, of the sanity and power of nature lies in the fact that out of her comes all this instinct of caricature. Nature may present itself to the poet too often as consisting of stars and lilies; but these are not poets who live in the country; they are men who go to the country for inspiration and could no more live in the country than they could go to bed in Westminster Abbey. Men who live in the heart of nature, farmers and peasants, know that nature means cows and pigs, and creatures more humorous than can be found in a whole sketch-book of Callot. And the element of the grotesque in art, like the element of the grotesque in nature, means, in the main, energy, the energy which takes its own forms and goes its own way. Browning's verse, in so far as it is grotesque, is not complex or artificial; it is natural and in the legitimate tradition of nature. The verse sprawls like the trees, dances like the dust; it is ragged like the thunder-cloud, it is top-heavy like the toadstool. Energy which disregards the standard of classical art is in nature as it is in Browning. The same sense of the uproarious force in things which makes Browning dwell on the oddity of a fungus or a jellyfish makes him dwell on the oddity of a philosophical idea. Here, for example, we have a random instance from "The Englishman in Italy" of the way in which Browning, when he was most Browning, regarded physical nature.

"And pitch down his basket before us, All trembling alive With pink and
grey jellies, your sea-fruit; You touch the strange lumps, And mouths gape
there, eyes open, all manner Of horns and of humps, Which only the fisher
looks grave at."

Nature might mean flowers to Wordsworth and grass to Walt Whitman, but to Browning it really meant such things as these, the monstrosities and living

mysteries of the sea. And just as these strange things meant to Browning energy in the physical world, so strange thoughts and strange images meant to him energy in the mental world. When, in one of his later poems, the professional mystic is seeking in a supreme moment of sincerity to explain that small things may be filled with God as well as great, he uses the very same kind of image, the image of a shapeless sea-beast, to embody that noble conception.

"The Name comes close behind a stomach-cyst, The simplest of creations,
just a sac That's mouth, heart, legs, and belly at once, yet lives And feels,
and could do neither, we conclude, If simplified still further one degree."

(SLUDGE.)

These bulbous, indescribable sea-goblins are the first thing on which the eye of the poet lights in looking on a landscape, and the last in the significance of which he trusts in demonstrating the mercy of the Everlasting.

There is another and but slightly different use of the grotesque, but which is definitely valuable in Browning's poetry, and indeed in all poetry. To present a matter in a grotesque manner does certainly tend to touch the nerve of surprise and thus to draw attention to the intrinsically miraculous character of the object itself. It is difficult to give examples of the proper use of grotesqueness without becoming too grotesque. But we should all agree that if St. Paul's Cathedral were suddenly presented to us upside down we should, for the moment, be more surprised at it, and look at it more than we have done all the centuries during which it has rested on its foundations. Now it is the supreme function of the philosopher of the grotesque to make the world stand on its head that people may look at it. If we say "a man is a man" we awaken no sense of the fantastic, however much we ought to, but if we say, in the language of the old satirist, "that man is a two-legged bird, without feathers," the phrase does, for a moment, make us look at man from the outside and gives us a thrill in his presence. When the author of the Book of Job insists upon the huge, half-witted, apparently unmeaning magnificence and might of Behemoth, the hippopotamus, he is appealing precisely to this sense of wonder provoked by the grotesque. "Canst thou play with him as with a bird, canst thou bind him for thy maidens?" he says in an admirable passage. The notion of the hippopotamus as a household pet is curiously in the spirit of the humour of Browning.

But when it is clearly understood that Browning's love of the fantastic in style was a perfectly serious artistic love, when we understand that he enjoyed working in that style, as a Chinese potter might enjoy making dragons, or a mediæval mason making devils, there yet remains something definite which must be laid to his account as a fault. He certainly had a capacity for becoming perfectly childish

in his indulgence in ingenuities that have nothing to do with poetry at all, such as puns, and rhymes, and grammatical structures that only just fit into each other like a Chinese puzzle. Probably it was only one of the marks of his singular vitality, curiosity, and interest in details. He was certainly one of those somewhat rare men who are fiercely ambitious both in large things and in small. He prided himself on having written *The Ring and the Book*, and he also prided himself on knowing good wine when he tasted it. He prided himself on re-establishing optimism on a new foundation, and it is to be presumed, though it is somewhat difficult to imagine, that he prided himself on such rhymes as the following in Pacchiarotto:--

"The wolf, fox, bear, and monkey, By piping advice in one key-- That his pipe should play a prelude To something heaven-tinged not hell-hued,
Something not harsh but docile, Man-liquid, not man-fossil."

This writing, considered as writing, can only be regarded as a kind of joke, and most probably Browning considered it so himself. It has nothing at all to do with that powerful and symbolic use of the grotesque which may be found in such admirable passages as this from "Holy Cross Day":--

"Give your first groan--compunction's at work; And soft! from a Jew you mount to a Turk. Lo, Micah--the self-same beard on chin He was four times already converted in!"

This is the serious use of the grotesque. Through it passion and philosophy are as well expressed as through any other medium. But the rhyming frenzy of Browning has no particular relation even to the poems in which it occurs. It is not a dance to any measure; it can only be called the horse-play of literature. It may be noted, for example, as a rather curious fact, that the ingenious rhymes are generally only mathematical triumphs, not triumphs of any kind of assonance. "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," a poem written for children, and bound in general to be lucid and readable, ends with a rhyme which it is physically impossible for any one to say:--

"And, whether they pipe us free, fróm rats or fróm mice, If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise!"

This queer trait in Browning, his inability to keep a kind of demented ingenuity even out of poems in which it was quite inappropriate, is a thing which must be recognised, and recognised all the more because as a whole he was a very perfect artist, and a particularly perfect artist in the use of the grotesque. But everywhere when we go a little below the surface in Browning we find that there was something in him perverse and unusual despite all his working normality and

simplicity. His mind was perfectly wholesome, but it was not made exactly like the ordinary mind. It was like a piece of strong wood with a knot in it.

The quality of what, can only be called buffoonery which is under discussion is indeed one of the many things in which Browning was more of an Elizabethan than a Victorian. He was like the Elizabethans in their belief in the normal man, in their gorgeous and over-loaded language, above all in their feeling for learning as an enjoyment and almost a frivolity. But there was nothing in which he was so thoroughly Elizabethan, and even Shakespearian, as in this fact, that when he felt inclined to write a page of quite uninteresting nonsense, he immediately did so. Many great writers have contrived to be tedious, and apparently aimless, while expounding some thought which they believed to be grave and profitable; but this frivolous stupidity had not been found in any great writer since the time of Rabelais and the time of the Elizabethans. In many of the comic scenes of Shakespeare we have precisely this elephantine ingenuity, this hunting of a pun to death through three pages. In the Elizabethan dramatists and in Browning it is no doubt to a certain extent the mark of a real hilarity. People must be very happy to be so easily amused.

In the case of what is called Browning's obscurity, the question is somewhat more difficult to handle. Many people have supposed Browning to be profound because he was obscure, and many other people, hardly less mistaken, have supposed him to be obscure because he was profound. He was frequently profound, he was occasionally obscure, but as a matter of fact the two have little or nothing to do with each other. Browning's dark and elliptical mode of speech, like his love of the grotesque, was simply a characteristic of his, a trick of his temperament, and had little or nothing to do with whether what he was expressing was profound or superficial. Suppose, for example, that a person well read in English poetry but unacquainted with Browning's style were earnestly invited to consider the following verse:--

"Hobbs hints blue--straight he turtle eats. Nobbs prints blue--claret crowns
his cup. Nokes outdares Stokes in azure feats-- Both gorge. Who fished the
murex up? What porridge had John Keats?"

The individual so confronted would say without hesitation that it must indeed be an abstruse and indescribable thought which could only be conveyed by remarks so completely disconnected. But the point of the matter is that the thought contained in this amazing verse is not abstruse or philosophical at all, but is a perfectly ordinary and straightforward comment, which any one might have made upon an obvious fact of life. The whole verse of course begins to explain itself, if we know the meaning of the word "murex," which is the name of a sea-shell, out of which was made the celebrated blue dye of Tyre. The poet takes this blue dye

as a simile for a new fashion in literature, and points out that Hobbs, Nobbs, etc., obtain fame and comfort by merely using the dye from the shell; and adds the perfectly natural comment:--

"... Who fished the murex up? What porridge had John Keats?"

So that the verse is not subtle, and was not meant to be subtle, but is a perfectly casual piece of sentiment at the end of a light poem. Browning is not obscure because he has such deep things to say, any more than he is grotesque because he has such new things to say. He is both of these things primarily, because he likes to express himself in a particular manner. The manner is as natural to him as a man's physical voice, and it is abrupt, sketchy, allusive, and full of gaps. Here comes in the fundamental difference between Browning and such a writer as George Meredith, with whom the Philistine satirist would so often in the matter of complexity class him. The works of George Meredith are, as it were, obscure even when we know what they mean. They deal with nameless emotions, fugitive sensations, subconscious certainties and uncertainties, and it really requires a somewhat curious and unfamiliar mode of speech to indicate the presence of these. But the great part of Browning's actual sentiments, and almost all the finest and most literary of them, are perfectly plain and popular and eternal sentiments. Meredith is really a singer producing strange notes and cadences difficult to follow because of the delicate rhythm of the song he sings. Browning is simply a great demagogue, with an impediment in his speech. Or rather, to speak more strictly, Browning is a man whose excitement for the glory of the obvious is so great that his speech becomes disjointed and precipitate: he becomes eccentric through his advocacy of the ordinary, and goes mad for the love of sanity.

If Browning and George Meredith were each describing the same act, they might both be obscure, but their obscurities would be entirely different. Suppose, for instance, they were describing even so prosaic and material an act as a man being knocked downstairs by another man to whom he had given the lie, Meredith's description would refer to something which an ordinary observer would not see, or at least could not describe. It might be a sudden sense of anarchy in the brain of the assaulter, or a stupefaction and stunned serenity in that of the object of the assault. He might write, "Wainwood's 'Men vary in veracity,' brought the baronet's arm up. He felt the doors of his brain burst, and Wainwood a swift rushing of himself through air accompanied with a clarity as of the annihilated." Meredith, in other words, would speak queerly because he was describing queer mental experiences. But Browning might simply be describing the material incident of the man being knocked downstairs, and his description would run:--

"What then? 'You lie' and doormat below stairs Takes bump from back."

This is not subtlety, but merely a kind of insane swiftness. Browning is not like Meredith, anxious to pause and examine the sensations of the combatants, nor does he become obscure through this anxiety. He is only so anxious to get his man to the bottom of the stairs quickly that he leaves out about half the story.

Many who could understand that ruggedness might be an artistic quality, would decisively, and in most cases rightly, deny that obscurity could under any conceivable circumstances be an artistic quality. But here again Browning's work requires a somewhat more cautious and sympathetic analysis. There is a certain kind of fascination, a strictly artistic fascination, which arises from a matter being hinted at in such a way as to leave a certain tormenting uncertainty even at the end. It is well sometimes to half understand a poem in the same manner that we half understand the world. One of the deepest and strangest of all human moods is the mood which will suddenly strike us perhaps in a garden at night, or deep in sloping meadows, the feeling that every flower and leaf has just uttered something stupendously direct and important, and that we have by a prodigy of imbecility not heard or understood it. There is a certain poetic value, and that a genuine one, in this sense of having missed the full meaning of things. There is beauty, not only in wisdom, but in this dazed and dramatic ignorance.

But in truth it is very difficult to keep pace with all the strange and unclassified artistic merits of Browning. He was always trying experiments; sometimes he failed, producing clumsy and irritating metres, top-heavy and over-concentrated thought. Far more often he triumphed, producing a crowd of boldly designed poems, every one of which taken separately might have founded an artistic school. But whether successful or unsuccessful, he never ceased from his fierce hunt after poetic novelty. He never became a conservative. The last book he published in his life-time, *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day*, was a new poem, and more revolutionary than Paracelsus. This is the true light in which to regard Browning as an artist. He had determined to leave no spot of the cosmos unadorned by his poetry which he could find it possible to adorn. An admirable example can be found in that splendid poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came." It is the hint of an entirely new and curious type of poetry, the poetry of the shabby and hungry aspect of the earth itself. Daring poets who wished to escape from conventional gardens and orchards had long been in the habit of celebrating the poetry of rugged and gloomy landscapes, but Browning is not content with this. He insists upon celebrating the poetry of mean landscapes. That sense of scrubbiness in nature, as of a man unshaved, had never been conveyed with this enthusiasm and primeval gusto before.

"If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk Above its mates, the head was
chopped; the bents Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents In

the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk All hope of greenness? 'tis
a brute must walk Pashing their life out, with a brute's intents."

This is a perfect realisation of that eerie sentiment which comes upon us, not so often among mountains and water-falls, as it does on some half-starved common at twilight, or in walking down some grey mean street. It is the song of the beauty of refuse; and Browning was the first to sing it. Oddly enough it has been one of the poems about which most of those pedantic and trivial questions have been asked, which are asked invariably by those who treat Browning as a science instead of a poet, "What does the poem of 'Childe Roland' mean?" The only genuine answer to this is, "What does anything mean?" Does the earth mean nothing? Do grey skies and wastes covered with thistles mean nothing? Does an old horse turned out to graze mean nothing? If it does, there is but one further truth to be added--that everything means nothing.