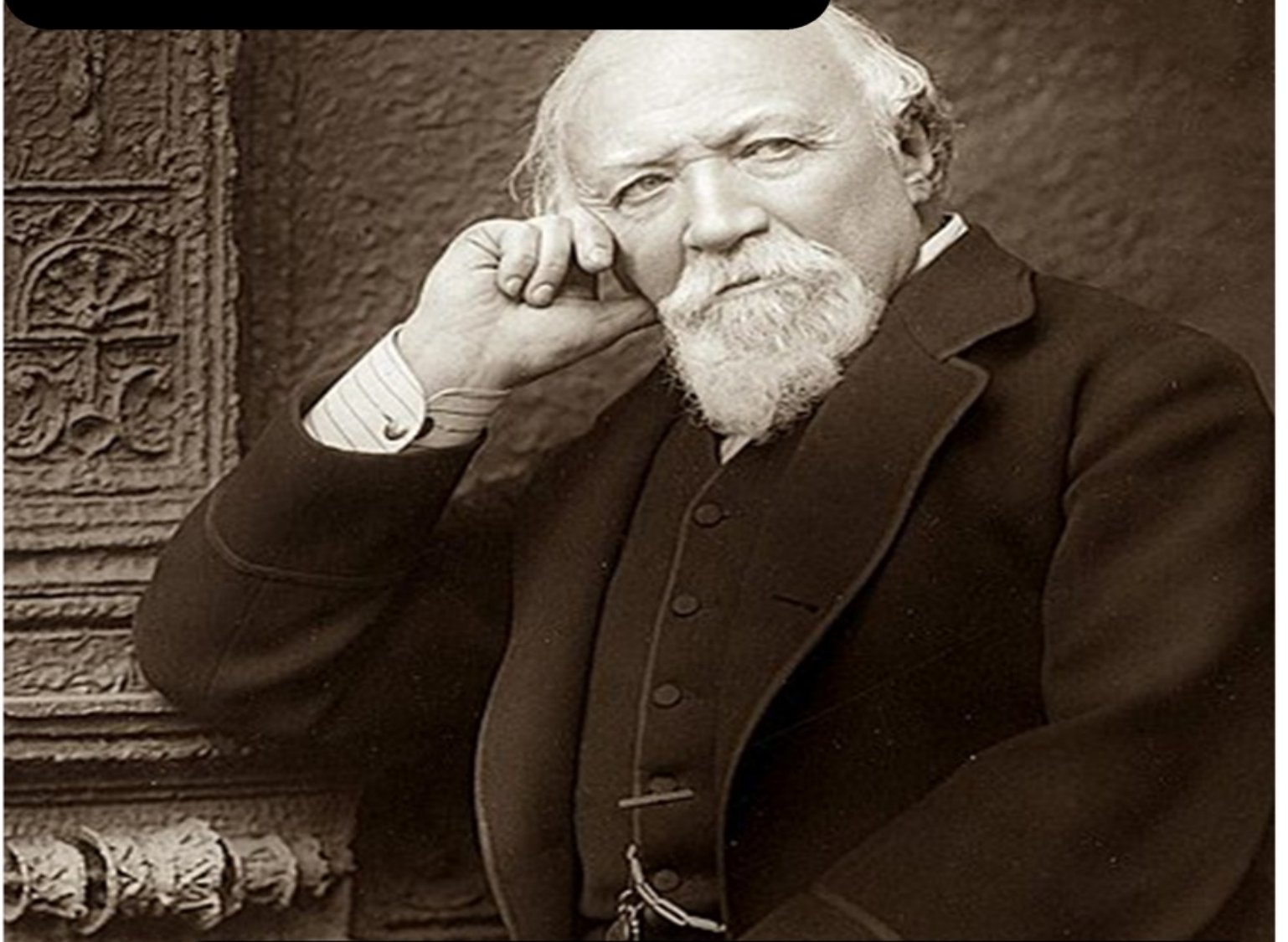


***WILLIAM LYON  
PHELPS***



***ROBERT  
BROWNING:  
HOW TO KNOW  
HIM***

**William Lyon Phelps**

# **Robert Browning: How to Know Him**

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# **BROWNING**

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## **I**

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### **THE MAN**

If we enter this world from some other state of existence, it seems certain that in the obscure pre-natal country, the power of free choice—so stormily debated by philosophers and theologians here—does not exist. Millions of earth's infants are handicapped at the start by having parents who lack health, money, brains, and character; and in many cases the environment is no better than the ancestry. "God plants us where we grow," said Pompilia, and we can not save the rose by placing it on the tree-top. Robert Browning, who was perhaps the happiest man in the nineteenth century, was particularly fortunate in his advent. Of the entire population of the planet in the year of grace 1812, he

could hardly have selected a better father and mother than were chosen for him; and the place of his birth was just what it should have been, the biggest town on earth. All his life long he was emphatically a city man, dwelling in London, Florence, Paris, and Venice, never remaining long in rural surroundings.

Browning was born on May 7, 1812, in Southampton Street, Camberwell, London, a suburb on the southern side of the river. One hundred years later, as I traversed the length of this street, it looked squalid in the rain, and is indeed sufficiently unlovely. But in 1812 it was a good residential locality, and not far away were fresh woods and pastures.... The good health of Browning's father may be inferred from the fact that he lived to be eighty-four, "without a day's illness;" he was a practical, successful business man, an official in the Bank of England. His love of literature and the arts is proved by the fact that he practised them constantly for the pure joy of the working; he wrote reams and reams of verse, without publishing a line. He had extraordinary facility in composition, being able to write poetry even faster than his son. Rossetti said that he had "a real genius for drawing." He owned a large and valuable library, filled with curiosities of literature. Robert was brought up among books, even in earliest youth turning over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore. His latest biographers have shown the powerful and permanent effects on his poetry of this early reading.

Browning's father—while not a rich man—had sufficient income to give his son every possible advantage in physical and intellectual training, and to enable him to live without

earning a cent; after Robert grew up, he was absolutely free to devote his entire time and energy to writing poetry, which, even to the day of his death, did not yield a livelihood. The young poet was free from care, free from responsibility, and able from childhood to old age to bring out the best that was in him. A curious and exact parallel is found in the case of the great pessimist, Schopenhauer, who never ceased to be grateful to his father for making his whole life-work possible. In his later years, Browning wrote: "It would have been quite unpardonable in any case not to have done my best. My dear father put me in a condition most favourable for the best work I was capable of. When I think of the many authors who had to fight their way through all sorts of difficulties I have no reason to be proud of my achievements."

Browning's mother, whom he loved with passionate adoration, was a healthy and sensible woman; better than all these gifts, she was deeply religious, with sincere and unaffected piety. She was a Dissenter, a Congregationalist, and brought up Robert in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, herself a noble example of her teachings. This evangelical training had an incalculably strong influence on the spirit of Browning's poetry. She loved music ardently, and when Robert was a boy, used to play the piano to him in the twilight. He always said that he got his devotion to music from her.

In these days, when there is such a strong reaction everywhere against the elective system in education, it is interesting to remember that Browning's education was simply the elective system pushed to its last possibility. It is



perhaps safe to say that no learned man in modern times ever had so little of school and college. His education depended absolutely and exclusively on his inclinations; he was encouraged to study anything he wished. His father granted him perfect liberty, never sent him to any "institution of learning," and allowed him to do exactly as he chose, simply providing competent private instruction in whatever subject the youth expressed any interest. Thus he learned Greek, Latin, the modern languages, music (harmony and counterpoint, as well as piano and organ), chemistry (a private laboratory was fitted up in the house), history and art. Now every one knows that; so far as definite acquisition of knowledge is concerned, our schools and colleges—at least in America—leave much to be desired; our boys and girls study the classics for years without being able to read a page at sight; and the modern languages show a similarly meagre harvest. If one wishes positive and practical results one must employ a private tutor, or work alone in secret. The great advantages of our schools and colleges—except in so far as they inspire intellectual curiosity—are not primarily of a scholarly nature; their strength lies in other directions. The result of Browning's education was that at the age of twenty he knew more than most college graduates ever know; and his knowledge was at his full command. His favorite reading on the train, for example, was a Greek play; one of the reasons why his poetry sometimes seems so pedantic is simply because he never realised how ignorant most of us really are. I suppose he did not believe that men could pass years in school and university training and know so little. Yet the truth is, that

most boys, brought up as Browning was, would be utterly unfitted for the active duties and struggles of life, and indeed for the amenities of social intercourse. With ninety-nine out of a hundred, such an education, so far as it made for either happiness or efficiency, would be a failure. But Browning was the hundredth man. He was profoundly learned without pedantry and without conceit; and he was primarily a social being,

His physical training was not neglected. The boy had expert private instruction in fencing, boxing, and riding. He was at ease on the back of a spirited horse. He was particularly fond of dancing, which later aroused the wonder of Elizabeth Barrett, who found it difficult to imagine the author of *Paracelsus* dancing the polka.

In 1833 appeared Browning's first poem, *Pauline*, which had been completed before he was twenty-one years old. His aunt, Mrs. Silverthorne, gave him one hundred and fifty dollars, which paid the expenses of publication. Not a single copy was sold, and the unbound sheets came home to roost. The commercial worth of *Pauline* was exactly zero; today it is said that only five copies exist. One was sold recently for two thousand four hundred dollars.

In 1834 Browning visited Russia, going by steamer to Rotterdam, and then driving fifteen hundred miles with horses. Although he was in Russia about three months, and at the most sensitive time of life, the country made surprisingly little impression upon him, or at least upon his poetry. The dramatic idyl, *Ivan Ivànovitch*, is practically the only literary result of this journey. It was the south, and not the north, that was to be the inspiration of Browning.

He published his second poem, *Paracelsus*, in 1835. Although this attracted no general attention, and had no sale, it was enthusiastically reviewed by John Forster, who declared that its author was a man of genius. The most fortunate result of its appearance was that it brought Browning within the pale of literary society, and gave him the friendship of some of the leading men in London. The great actor Macready was charmed with the poem, and young Browning haunted Macready's dressing-room at the theatre for years; but their friendship ceased in 1843 when *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* was acted. Browning wrote four plays for Macready, two of which were accepted.

Although Browning late in life remarked in a casual conversation that he had visited Italy in 1834, he must have been mistaken, for it is impossible to find any record of such a journey. To the best of our knowledge, he first saw the land of his inspiration in 1838, sailing from London on April 13th, passing through the Straits of Gibraltar on the twenty-ninth, and reaching Trieste on May 30th. On the first of June he entered Venice. It was on a walking-trip that he first saw the village of Asolo, about thirty miles to the northeast of Venice. Little did he then realise how closely his name would be forever associated with this tiny town. The scenes of *Pippa Passes* he located there: the last summer of his life, in 1889, was spent in Asolo, his last volume he named in memory of the village; and on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, the street where he lived and wrote in 1889 was formally named Via Roberto Browning. His son, Robert Barrett Browning, lived to see this event, and died at Asolo on July 8, 1912.

The long and obscure poem *Sordello* was published in 1840; and then for thirty years Browning produced poetry of the highest order: poetry that shows scarcely any obscurity, and that in lyric and dramatic power has given its author a fixed place among the greatest names in English literature.

The story of the marriage and married life of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning is one of the greatest love stories in the world's history; their love-letters reveal a drama of noble passion that excels in beauty and intensity the universally popular examples of Heloise and Abelard, Aucassin and Nicolette, Paul and Virginia. There was a mysterious bond between them long before the personal acquaintance: each admired the other's poetry. Miss Barrett had a picture of Browning in her sickroom, and declared that the adverse criticism constantly directed against his verse hurt her like a lash across her own back. In a new volume of poems, she made a complimentary reference to his work, and in January, 1845, he wrote her a letter properly beginning with the two words, "I love." It was her verses that he loved, and said so. In May he saw her and illustrated his own doctrine by falling in love with her at first sight. She was in her fortieth year, and an invalid; but if any one is surprised at the passion she aroused in the handsome young poet, six years her junior, one has only to read her letters. She was a charming woman, feminine from her soul to her finger-tips, the incarnation of *das Ewigweibliche*. Her intimate friends were mostly what were then known as strong-minded women—I suppose to-day they would seem like timid, shy violets. She was modest, gentle, winsome,

irresistible: profoundly learned, with the eager heart of a child.

Wimpole Street in London, "the long, unlovely street," as Tennyson calls it, is holy ground to the lover of literature: for at Number 67 lived Arthur Henry Hallam, and diagonally opposite, at Number 50, lived Elizabeth Barrett. This street—utterly commonplace in appearance—is forever associated with the names of our two great Victorian poets: and the association with Tennyson is Death: with Browning, Love.

Not only was Elizabeth believed to be a hopeless invalid, but her father had forbidden any of his children to marry. He was a religious man, whose motto in his own household was apparently "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." He had the particular kind of piety that is most offensive to ordinary humanity. He gave his children, for whom he had a stern and savage passion, everything except what they wanted. He had an insane jealousy of any possible lover, and there is no doubt that he would have preferred to attend the funeral of any one of his children rather than a marriage. But Browning's triumphant love knew no obstacles, and he persuaded Elizabeth Barrett to run away with him. They were married in September, 1846, and shortly after left for Italy. Her father refused to see either of them in subsequent years, and returned his daughter's letters unopened. Is there any cause in nature for these hard hearts?

Browning's faith wrought a miracle. Instead of dying on the journey to Italy, Mrs. Browning got well, and the two lived together in unclouded happiness for fifteen years, until 1861, when she died in his arms. Not a scrap of writing

passed between them from the day of her marriage to the day of her death: for they were never separated. She said that all a woman needed to be perfectly happy was three things—Life, Love, Italy—and she had all three.

The relations between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning had all the wonder and beauty of a mediaeval romance, with the notable addition of being historically true. The familiar story of a damosel imprisoned in a gloomy dungeon, guarded by a cruel dragon—and then, when all her hope had vanished, rescued by the sudden appearance of the brilliant knight, who carried her away from her dull prison to a land of sunshine and happiness—this became the literal experience of Elizabeth Barrett. Her love for her husband was the passionate love of a woman for a man, glorified by adoration for the champion who had miraculously transformed her life from the depths of despair to the topmost heights of joy. He came, "pouring heaven into this shut house of life." She expressed the daily surprise of her happiness in her Sonnets, which one day she put shyly into his hands:

I thought once how Theocritus had sung  
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,  
Who each one in a gracious hand appears  
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:  
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,  
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,  
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,  
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung  
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,  
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move

Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;  
And a voice said in mastery while I strove, ...  
"Guess now who holds thee?"—"Death!" I said. But, there,  
The silver answer rang ... "Not Death, but Love."

My own Beloved, who hast lifted me  
From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,  
And in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown  
A life-breath, till the forehead hopefully  
Shines out again, as all the angels see,  
Before thy saving kiss! My own, my own,  
Who camest to me when the world was gone,  
And I who looked for only God, found *thee*!  
I find thee: I am safe, and strong, and glad.  
As one who stands in dewless asphodel  
Looks backward on the tedious time he had  
In the upper life ... so I, with bosom-swell,  
Make witness here between the good and bad,  
That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.

Browning replied to this wonderful tribute by appending to the fifty poems published in 1855 his *One Word More*. He wrote this in a metre different from any he had ever used, for he meant the poem to be unique in his works, a personal expression of his love. He remarked that Rafael wrote sonnets, that Dante painted a picture, each man going outside the sphere of his genius to please the woman he loved, to give her something entirely apart from his gifts to the world. He wished that he could do something other than poetry for his wife, and in the next life he believed that it would be possible. But here God had given him only one gift—verse: he must therefore present her with a specimen of

the only art he could command; but it should be utterly unlike all his other poems, for they were dramatic; here just once, and for one woman only, he would step out from behind the scenes, and address her directly in his own person.

Of course Browning could have modelled a statue, or written a piece of music for Elizabeth, for in both of these arts he had attained moderate proficiency: but he wished not only to make a gift just for her, but to give it to her in public, with the whole world regarding; therefore it must be of his best.

He calls her his *moon* of poets. He reminds her how a few days ago, they had seen the crescent moon in Florence, how they had seen it nightly waxing until it lamped the facade of San Miniato, while the nightingales, in ecstasy among the cypress trees, gave full-throated applause. Then they had travelled together to London, and now saw the same dispirited moon, saving up her silver parsimoniously, sink in gibbous meanness behind the chimney-tops.

The notable thing about the moon is that whereas the earth, during one revolution about the sun, turns on its own axis three hundred and sixty-five times, the shy moon takes exactly the same length of time to turn around as she takes to circle once around the earth. For this reason, earth's inhabitants have never seen but one side of the moon, and never will. Elizabeth Browning is *his* moon, because she shows the other side to him alone. The radiant splendor of her poetry fills the whole earth with light; but to her husband she shows the other side, the loving, domestic woman, the unspeakably precious and intimate associate of



his daily life. The world thinks it knows her; but it has seen only one side; it knows nothing of the marvellous depth and purity of her real nature.

## **ONE WORD MORE**

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### **TO E.B.B. 1855**

#### **I**

There they are, my fifty men and women  
Naming me the fifty poems finished!  
Take them, Love, the book and me together:  
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also.

#### **II**

Rafael made a century of sonnets,  
Made and wrote them in a certain volume  
Dinted with the silver-pointed pencil  
Else he only used to draw Madonnas:  
These, the world might view—but one, the volume.  
Who that one, you ask? Your heart instructs you.  
Did she live and love it all her life-time?  
Did she drop, his lady of the sonnets,  
Die, and let it drop beside her pillow  
Where it lay in place of Rafael's glory,

Rafael's cheek so duteous and so loving—  
Cheek, the world was wont to hail a painter's,  
Rafael's cheek, her love had turned a poet's?

### III

You and I would rather read that volume,  
(Taken to his beating bosom by it)  
Lean and list the bosom-beats of Rafael,  
Would we not? than wonder at Madonnas—  
Her, San Sisto names, and Her, Foligno,  
Her, that visits Florence in a vision,  
Her, that's left with lilies in the Louvre—  
Seen by us and all the world in circle.

### IV

You and I will never read that volume.  
Guido Reni, like his own eye's apple  
Guarded long the treasure-book and loved it  
Guido Reni dying, all Bologna  
Cried, and the world cried too, "Ours, the treasure!"  
Suddenly, as rare things will, it vanished.

### V

Dante once prepared to paint an angel:  
Whom to please? You whisper "Beatrice."  
While he mused and traced it and retraced it,  
(Peradventure with a pen corroded

Still by drops of that hot ink he dipped for,  
When, his left-hand i' the hair o' the wicked,  
Back he held the brow and pricked its stigma,  
Bit into the live man's flesh for parchment,  
Loosed him, laughed to see the writing rankle,  
Let the wretch go festering through Florence)—  
Dante, who loved well because he hated,  
Hated wickedness that hinders loving,  
Dante standing, studying his angel,—  
In there broke the folk of his Inferno.  
Says he—"Certain people of importance"  
(Such he gave his daily dreadful line to)  
"Entered and would seize, forsooth, the poet."  
Says the poet—"Then I stopped my painting."

## VI

You and I would rather see that angel,  
Painted by the tenderness of Dante,  
Would we not?—than read a fresh Inferno.

## VII

You and I will never see that picture.  
While he mused on love and Beatrice,  
While he softened o'er his outlined angel,  
In they broke, those "people of importance":  
We and Bice bear the loss for ever.

## VIII

What of Rafael's sonnets, Dante's picture?  
This: no artist lives and loves, that longs not  
Once, and only once, and for one only,  
(Ah, the prize!) to find his love a language  
Fit and fair and simple and sufficient—  
Using nature that's an art to others,  
Not, this one time, art that's turned his nature.  
Ay, of all the artists living, loving,  
None but would forego his proper dowry,—  
Does he paint? he fain would write a poem,—  
Does he write? he fain would paint a picture,  
Put to proof art alien to the artist's,  
Once, and only once, and for one only,  
So to be the man and leave the artist,  
Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow.

## IX

Wherefore? Heaven's gift takes earth's abatement!  
He who smites the rock and spreads the water,  
Bidding drink and live a crowd beneath him,  
Even he, the minute makes immortal,  
Proves, perchance, but mortal in the minute,  
Desecrates, belike, the deed in doing.  
While he smites, how can he but remember,  
So he smote before, in such a peril,  
When they stood and mocked—"Shall smiting help us?"  
When they drank and sneered—"A stroke is easy!"  
When they wiped their mouths and went their journey,

Throwing him for thanks—"But drought was pleasant."  
Thus old memories mar the actual triumph;  
Thus the doing savours of disrelish;  
Thus achievement lacks a gracious somewhat;  
O'er-importuned brows becloud the mandate,  
Carelessness or consciousness—the gesture.  
For he bears an ancient wrong about him,  
Sees and knows again those phalanxed faces,  
Hears, yet one time more, the 'customed prelude—  
"How shouldst thou, of all men, smite, and save us?"  
Guesses what is like to prove the sequel—  
"Egypt's flesh-pots—nay, the drought was better."

## X

Oh, the crowd must have emphatic warrant!  
Theirs, the Sinai-forehead's cloven brilliance,  
Right-arm's rod-sweep, tongue's imperial fiat.  
Never dares the man put off the prophet.

## XI

Did he love one face from out the thousands,  
(Were she Jethro's daughter, white and wifely,  
Were she but the Æthiopian bondslave,)  
He would envy yon dumb patient camel,  
Keeping a reserve of scanty water  
Meant to save his own life in the desert;  
Ready in the desert to deliver

(Kneeling down to let his breast be opened)  
Hoard and life together for his mistress.

## XII

I shall never, in the years remaining,  
Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,  
Make you music that should all-express me;  
So it seems: I stand on my attainment.  
This of verse alone, one life allows me;  
Verse and nothing else have I to give you.  
Other heights in other lives, God willing:  
All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love!

## XIII

Yet a semblance of resource avails us—  
Shade so finely touched, love's sense must seize it.  
Take these lines, look lovingly and nearly,  
Lines I write the first time and the last time.  
He who works in fresco, steals a hair-brush,  
Curbs the liberal hand, subservient proudly,  
Cramps his spirit, crowds its all in little,  
Makes a strange art of an art familiar,  
Fills his lady's missal-marge with flowerets.  
He who blows thro' bronze, may breathe thro' silver,  
Fitly serenade a slumbrous princess.  
He who writes, may write for once as I do.

## XIV

Love, you saw me gather men and women,  
Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,  
Enter each and all, and use their service,  
Speak from every mouth,—the speech, a poem.  
Hardly shall I tell my joys and sorrows,  
Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving:  
I am mine and yours—the rest be all men's,  
Karshish, Cleon, Norbert and the fifty.  
Let me speak this once in my true person,  
Not as Lippo, Roland or Andrea,  
Though the fruit of speech be just this sentence:  
Pray you, look on these my men and women,  
Take and keep my fifty poems finished;  
Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also!  
Poor the speech; be how I speak, for all things.

## XV

Not but that you know me! Lo, the moon's self!  
Here in London, yonder late in Florence,  
Still we find her face, the thrice-transfigured.  
Curving on a sky imbrued with colour,  
Drifted over Fiesole by twilight,  
Came she, our new crescent of a hair's-breadth.  
Full she flared it, lamping Samminiato,  
Rounder 'twixt the cypresses and rounder,  
Perfect till the nightingales applauded.  
Now, a piece of her old self, impoverished,  
Hard to greet, she traverses the houseroofs,

Hurries with unhandsome thrift of silver,  
Goes dispiritedly, glad to finish.

## XVI

What, there's nothing in the moon noteworthy?  
Nay: for if that moon could love a mortal,  
Use, to charm him (so to fit a fancy),  
All her magic ('tis the old sweet mythos)  
She would turn a new side to her mortal,  
Side unseen of herdsman, huntsman, steersman—  
Blank to Zoroaster on his terrace,  
Blind to Galileo on his turret,  
Dumb to Homer, dumb to Keats—him, even!  
Think, the wonder of the moonstruck mortal—  
When she turns round, comes again in heaven,  
Opens out anew for worse or better!  
Proves she like some portent of an iceberg  
Swimming full upon the ship it founders,  
Hungry with huge teeth of splintered crystals?  
Proves she as the paved work of a sapphire  
Seen by Moses when he climbed the mountain?  
Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu  
Climbed and saw the very God, the Highest,  
Stand upon the paved work of a sapphire.  
Like the bodied heaven in his clearness  
Shone the stone, the sapphire of that paved work,  
When they ate and drank and saw God also!

## XVII



What were seen? None knows, none ever shall know.  
Only this is sure—the sight were other,  
Not the moon's same side, born late in Florence,  
Dying now impoverished here in London.  
God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures  
Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,  
One to show a woman when he loves her!

### **XVIII**

This I say of me, but think of you, Love!  
This to you—yourself my moon of poets!  
Ah, but that's the world's side, there's the wonder,  
Thus they see you, praise you, think they know you!  
There, in turn I stand with them and praise you—  
Out of my own self, I dare to phrase it.  
But the best is when I glide from out them,  
Cross a step or two of dubious twilight,  
Come out on the other side, the novel  
Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,  
Where I hush and bless myself with silence.

### **XIX**

Oh, their Rafael of the dear Madonnas,  
Oh, their Dante of the dread Inferno,  
Wrote one song—and in my brain I sing it,  
Drew one angel—borne, see, on my bosom!

**R. B.**

The Brownings travelled a good deal: they visited many places in Italy, Venice, Ancona, Fano, Siena, and spent several winters in Rome. The winter of 1851-52 was passed at Paris, where on the third of January Browning wrote one of his most notable poems, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. One memorable evening at London in 1855 there were gathered together in an upper room Mr. and Mrs. Browning, Mr. and Mrs. Tennyson, Dante and William Rossetti. Tennyson had just published *Maud* and Browning the two volumes called *Men and Women*. Each poet was invited to read from his new work. Tennyson, with one leg curled under him on the sofa, chanted *Maud*, the tears running down his cheeks; and then Browning read in a conversational manner his characteristic poem, *Fra Lippo Lippi*. Rossetti made a pen-and-ink sketch of the Laureate while he was intoning. On one of the journeys made by the Brownings from London to Paris they were accompanied by Thomas Carlyle, who wrote a vivid and charming account of the transit. The poet was the practical member of the party: the "brave Browning" struggled with the baggage, and the customs, and the train arrangements; while the Scot philosopher smoked infinite tobacco.

The best account of the domestic life of the Brownings at Casa Guidi in Florence was written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and published in his *Italian Note-Books*. On a June evening, Mr. and Mrs. Browning, William Cullen Bryant, and Nathaniel Hawthorne ate strawberries and talked spiritualism. Hawthorne and Browning stood on the little balcony overlooking the street, and heard the priests chanting in the church of San Felice, the chant heard only in June, which

Browning was to hear again on the night of the June day when he found the old yellow book. Both chant and terrace were to be immortalised in Browning's epic. Hawthorne said that Browning had an elfin wife and an elf child. "I wonder whether he will ever grow up, whether it is desirable that he should." Like all visitors at Casa Guidi, the American was impressed by the extraordinary sweetness, gentleness, and charity of Elizabeth Browning, and by the energy, vivacity, and conversational powers of her husband. Hawthorne said he seemed to be in all parts of the room at once.

Mr. Barrett Browning told me in 1904 that he remembered his mother, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as clearly as though he had seen her yesterday. He was eleven years old at the time of her death. He would have it that her ill health had been greatly exaggerated. She was an invalid, but did not give the impression of being one. She was able to do many things, and had considerable power of endurance. One day in Florence she walked from her home out through the Porta Romana, clear up on the heights, and back to Casa Guidi. "That was pretty good, wasn't it?" said he. She was of course the idol of the household, and everything revolved about her. She was "intensely loved" by all her friends. Her father was a "very peculiar man." The son's account of her health differs radically from that written by the mother of E. C. Stedman, who said that Mrs. Browning was kept alive only by opium, which she had to take daily. This writer added, however, that in spite of Mrs. Browning's wretched health, she had never heard her speak ill of any one, though she talked with her many times.

After the death of his wife, Browning never saw Florence again. He lived in London, and after a few years was constantly seen in society, Tennyson, who hated society, said that Browning would die in a dress suit. His real fame did not begin until the year 1864, with the publication of *Dramatis Personæ*. During the first thirty years of his career, from the publication of *Pauline* in 1833 to the appearance of *Dramatis Personæ*, he received always tribute from the few, and neglect, seasoned with ridicule, from the many. *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, *Pippa Passes*, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, *Christmas-Eve*, *Men and Women*—each of these volumes was greeted enthusiastically by men and women whose own literary fame is permanent. But the world knew him not. How utterly obscure he was may be seen by the fact that so late as 1860, when the publisher's statement came in for *Men and Women*, it appeared that during the preceding six months not a single copy had been sold! The best was yet to be. *The Dramatis Personæ* was the first of his books to go into a genuine second edition. Then four years later came *The Ring and the Book*, which a contemporary review pronounced to be the "most precious and profound spiritual treasure which England has received since the days of Shakespeare."

Fame, which had shunned him for thirty years, came to him in extraordinary measure during the last part of his life: another exact parallel between him and the great pessimist Schopenhauer. It was naturally sweet, its sweetness lessened only by the thought that his wife had not lived to see it. Each had always believed in the superiority of the other: and the only cloud in Mrs. Browning's mind was the

(to her) incomprehensible neglect of her husband by the public. At the time of the marriage, it was commonly said that a young literary man had eloped with a great poetess: during their married life, her books went invariably into many editions, while his did not sell at all. And even to the last day of Browning's earthly existence, her poems far outsold his, to his unspeakable delight. "The demand for my poems is nothing like so large," he wrote cheerfully, in correcting a contrary opinion that had been printed. Even so late as 1885, I found this passage in an account of Mrs. Browning's life, published that year, It appears that "she was married in 1846 to Robert Browning, who was also a poet and dramatic writer of some note, though his fame seems to have been almost totally eclipsed by the superior endowments of his gifted wife." This reminds us of the time when Mr. and Mrs. Schumann were presented to a Scandinavian King: Mrs. Schumann played on the piano, and His Majesty, turning graciously to the silent husband, enquired "Are you also musical?"

The last summer of Browning's life, the summer of 1889, was passed at Asolo: in the autumn he moved into his beautiful house in Venice, the Palazzo Rezzonico, which had the finest situation of all Venetian residences, built at an angle in the Grand Canal. Although seventy-seven years old, he was apparently as vigorous as ever: no change had taken place in his appearance, manner or habits. One day he caught a bad cold walking on the Lido in a bitter wind; and with his usual vehement energy declined to take any proper care of his throat. Instead of staying in, he set out for long tramps with friends, constantly talking in the raw autumn

air. In order to prove to his son that nothing was the matter with him, he ran rapidly up three flights of stairs, the son vainly trying to restrain him. Nothing is more characteristic of the youthful folly of aged folk than their impatient resentment of proffered hygienic advice. When we are children, we reject with scorn the suggestions of our parents; when we are old, we reject with equal scorn the advice of our children. Man is apparently an animal more fit to give advice than to take it. Browning's impulsive rashness proved fatal. Bronchitis with heart trouble finally sent him to bed, though on the last afternoon of his life he rose and walked about the room. During the last few days he told many good stories and talked with his accustomed eagerness. He died at ten o'clock in the evening of the twelfth of December, 1889, A few moments before his death came a cablegram from London announcing that his last volume of poems had been published that day, and that the evening papers were speaking in high terms of its contents. "That is very gratifying," said he.

Browning's life was healthy, comfortable, and happy. With the exception of frequent headaches in his earlier years, he never knew sickness or physical distress. His son said that he had never seen him in bed in the daytime until the last illness. He had a truly wonderful digestion; it was his firm belief that one should eat only what one really enjoyed, desire being the infallible sign that the food was healthful. "My father was a man of *bonne fourchette*" said Barrett Browning to me; "he was not very fond of meat, but liked all kinds of Italian dishes, especially with rich sauces. He always ate freely of rich and delicate things. He could make