

The Brownings' Correspondence, vols. 21 and 22, ed. Philip Kelley, Scott Lewis, Joseph Phelan, Edward Hagan, and Rhian Williams. Wedgestone Press. ISBN 978 0 911459 38 8 / 39 5. Hardback. \$110 per volume.

Robert Browning, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan. *21st Century Oxford Authors*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 978 0 19 059942 4. Hardback. £95

Browning Studies: Being Select Papers by Members of the Browning Society, ed. Edward Berdoe. *Routledge Revivals*. Routledge. ISBN 978n 1 138 02082 5. Hardback. £110.

Seamus Perry

Romanticism bequeathed a good many things to the beleaguered modern imagination, one of the most provoking of which was the thought that it should get out more. That bit of advice proved all the more challenging because it contradicted the other basic idea which the Romantics left behind – namely, that what mattered was staying inside, wrapped in the private world of subjectivity and ‘mental space’. To this view of things, the raw stuff of what’s out there was at best merely grist to the mill of consciousness: a true modern genius displayed itself, said Samuel Taylor Coleridge (who coined the phrase ‘mental space’), as ‘a fleeting away of external things, the mind or subject greater than the object’. Coleridge was much preoccupied by such thoughts: Carlyle remembered him sitting in his Highgate den, snuffling interminably about ‘sum-m-mjects’ and ‘om-m-mjects’; and other writers chose a less philosophical idiom to pursue the same sort of notion. Coleridge’s collaborator Wordsworth, for instance, pauses at one point in his verse autobiography to sound the note in his own way: ‘Of genius, power, / Creation and divinity itself / I have been speaking, for my theme has been / What passed within me’. Rarely can such weight have fallen on those formerly unostentatious words ‘within’ and ‘me’. It’s not so far from

that to the stylishly belligerent thing that Picasso is said to have said: 'I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them'.

The thought that the world is how you think it is no doubt striking, but somehow deeply boring at the same time: the sovereign consciousness can quickly turn out to be a rather airless place to hang out. And so, as though by virtuous reaction against its own penchant for ideality, the Romantic mind manifests an equal but opposite fascination with the whole independent abundance of the world outside. Coleridge, otherwise so instinctive a philosophical idealist, spent much of his time meditating the mysterious (for an idealist) phenomenon of 'outness', a favourite word he had unearthed in Bishop Berkeley; and a large element of his huge and contradictory mind remained deeply attached to those 'external things' that were otherwise meant obligingly to fleet away before the enchantments of Mind. Wordsworth, likewise, began his autobiographical epic with the description of a breeze chancing to blow across his cheek: the gust of air soon gets incorporated within the poem's peculiar metaphorical economy, but it's important that the breeze arrived in the first place as an unbidden breath of fresh air from outside. Articulating what's at issue in this is difficult without sounding simple-minded, as though what were at stake is actually not a thought at all but the opposite of thought or its deliberate avoidance; and the appearance of simple-mindedness was a pitfall that Wordsworth himself did not always avoid, it is true. But that there *is* something simple about it, in the sense of fundamental or intuitive, seems an important part of the quality of the experience, one that Wordsworth was surely right to try to work into his verses. Wittgenstein once spoke of a '*wonder at the existence of the world*', a profound and salutary response to the commonplace which lies beneath phrases that risk being merely commonplaces, such as 'how extraordinary that the world should exist'; and this is a rich and definitive Romantic feeling, quite as much as the counter-feeling that the mind altering alters all. Wordsworth himself captures it movingly and not at all simple-mindedly when he speaks of 'the very world, which is the world / Of all of us, — the place where in the end / We find our happiness, or not at all'. The persuasive emotional weight of those lines is partly to do with the marvellously handled line-break, so that we momentarily possess the audacious tautology 'the very world, which is the world'; and partly to do with the grown-up reflection that, actually, we might *not* find happiness in the end; but it also lies, more positively, in the suggestion

of communality or sharedness with which 'we' are acquainted with 'our' (plural pronouns) world. For it is our world as well as the poet's; it pre-existed both the poet and his poem; and for that matter it pre-existed our acquaintance with it too. There are some buried but formative instincts at work here, that is to say, which you might think of as 'political' and even as 'liberal': Wordsworth grew into an embattled reactionary, but he continued to be drawn to defining a space for the imagination in which we all have a shared stake.

Like the other great Victorian poets, Robert Browning came of age as a writer vividly aware of the exciting powers of Romantic inwardness, which, like most of his contemporaries, he found a burden as much as a spur to new achievements. His early poems revolve about subjectivity in an appropriately self-absorbed way: 'I am made up of an intensest life, / Of a most clear idea of consciousness / Of self', he thought out-loud in his first published work *Pauline* (1833), a visionary monologue notionally addressed to a love-object though her reality is pretty foggy. John Stuart Mill read the poem attentively in preparation for a review which never appeared, although Browning did later get to see his notes and he was understandably struck by one of Mill's sharper comments: 'the writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being'. The poem is full of Shelley, a great hero from early youth, and the author to whom Browning would devote his only substantial piece of critical writing, nobly defending Shelley as *the* ideal type of subjective genius. 'He does not paint pictures and hang them on the walls, but rather carries them on the retina of his own eyes', Browning says in his essay: 'we must look deep into his human eyes to see those pictures on them', which is impressive if a bit weird; but nevertheless, as you read on through the windings of the essay it is not difficult to discern that Browning's own heart really lies with the opposite camp. So it does not come as a surprise to hear him announce at the essay's crescendo: 'If the subjective might seem to be the ultimate requirement of every age, the objective, in the strictest state, must still retain its original value'. This is Wittgensteinian awe: 'For it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned'. A permanently admirable thing to have said, it seems to me: the aridity of Coleridge's sum-m-jects and om-m-jects suddenly sings with moral purpose like a Wesley hymn; and

Browning goes on, almost as splendidly: 'There may be no end of the poets who communicate to us what they see in an object with reference to their own individuality; what it was before they saw it, in reference to the aggregate human mind, will be as desirable to know as ever'.

Browning's prose expands there into a spacious world without, and the self-sustaining universe of Shelley's retina suddenly feels like an onset of claustrophobia. 'I know not what to wish for him but that he may meet with a real Pauline', wrote good wise Mill; but his level head surely missed the note of authorial bewilderment that already ran through Browning's poem. The speaker's mind turns and turns about the thought of its 'self-supremacy, / Existing as a centre to all things, / Most potent'; but the total effect feels anything but potent, and the poem only really bursts into eccentric life when the poet-figure gets momentarily taken up by something other than himself. Pauline doesn't do it for him, but there is a striking picture of a pool in a secret wood: 'the trees bend / O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl, / And thro' their roots long creeping plants stretch out / Their twined hair, steeped and sparkling'. That is creepily brilliant, anticipating many of Browning's sudden shocks of the real in the much better poems that were to come: his great theme was always going to arise not from self-absorption but from imagining encounters with what he called in *Sordello* (1840), another early epic of the self-entangling mind, 'the entire out-world'.

The episode that G.K. Chesterton, in his great and lasting study, identified as 'the crisis and centre' of Browning's life was all about getting someone out. Ted and Sylvia have eclipsed it a bit now, but for a long time the elopement from Wimpole Street was *the* great English literary romance, and all the more remarkable for the way that so much of it happened in great swathes of impassioned text. After Browning was dead their son brought out an edition of the complete correspondence, to which his father, normally a person of obsessive reticence, had given a gruff semi-blessing ('do with them as you please'), suggesting that he, too, recognised it as a sort of masterpiece. Which indeed it is: the best epistolary novel in English, quite as compelling and nerve-wracking as Richardson but without the sex-horror. In fact, the letters are full of just the feeling to which Coleridge admitted on putting down *Clarissa* and taking up Fielding: 'like emerging from a sick room heated by stoves, into an open lawn,

on a breezy day in May'. Their letters circle round and round the idea of Elizabeth's relationship with the world outside her window, of which Robert is the representative: 'I seem turning round to the outward world again', she tells him in her very first letter as though at the start of a long journey. It is certainly difficult to warm to Mr Barrett, though his controlling monstrosity was no doubt an expression of genuine anxiety about his housebound daughter; and even he could have been forgiven some misgivings had he ever seen the sort of things she was writing to the unsuccessful poet who kept dropping round: 'As the prisoners think of liberty, as the dying think of Heaven, so I think of you'. Elizabeth knew herself to be one 'shut up here too long face to face with my own spirit' – 'See how out of the world I am!' as she says in one of her early letters, and she more than once compares herself to Tennyson's Mariana, locked up in her moated grange awaiting a lover who does not show up. So when she began tentatively to rise from the sofa and move about, Browning was keen to cheer her on: 'Well – I have really been out; and am really alive after it', she reported back. Robert urged her not to stop there: '*go out*, without a moment's thought' – 'Never, pray, *pray*, never lose one sunny day or propitious hour to "go out or walk about"'. 'The brightest place in the house', she told him, 'is the leaning out of the window'; but her hesitancy is not at all difficult to comprehend: 'If you jump out of the window you succeed in getting to the ground, somehow, dead or alive' – to which Browning's vehement response was '*Now*, jump out with me, Ba!' And of course, miraculously, she did.

J. Hillis Miller plausibly speculated that part of the fascination of Miss Barrett was her very inaccessibility, 'immured in darkness and jealously guarded': in Browning's imagination her liberation assumed an operatic immensity, like the prisoners blinking into the light in *Fidelio*. Getting out is always good in Browning, and it's often the occasion for that kind of reckless but moral decision to which he was so repeatedly drawn, moments of total commitment which at once define and redeem an existence. Chesterton called it Browning's 'doctrine of the great hour' and rightly claimed it as the mainspring of his poetry, though the failure to take the leap could be just as absorbing. The wry and disarming poem 'The Statue and the Bust', for example, runs his own successful elopement story in reverse, like a counterfactual thought-experiment. A married lady sits by her window and catches the eye of the handsome Duke: 'She looked at him, as one who awakes, — / The past was a sleep, and her

life began'. But no sooner has life begun than they have both started to find reasons to put it off for the time-being; and she comes to sit immobilised by her window, looking out upon 'the world ... its noise and stir', time drifting aimlessly by. In a final twist, both non-lovers commission figures of themselves, he a striking equestrian statue, she a bust of excellent likeness: so that, in a manner of speaking, they are each transformed into stone, and 'sit and ponder / What a gift life was, age ago'. Browning concludes by brightly addressing the imaginary reader's objection that it was, after all, *adultery* that was on the cards here: 'Oh, a crime will do / As well, I reply, to serve for a test, // As a virtue golden through and through, / Sufficient to vindicate itself / And prove its worth at a moment's view'. That sounds like a practically existentialist lesson, though with a note of reassuring humour. There is a good deal of talk of God in Browning, but it is mostly God as the creative spirit or spark of the cosmos and often close to a kind of pantheism, and the main intuitions of his mind seem to me breezily untroubled by religion: he was free of the religious agony that beset many Victorian intellectuals – quite easy, for instance, in referring to the story of Christ even-handedly as a 'fact, or fancy', while contemporaries were tearing one another apart on the distinction.

'I think the fewer books we take the better', Robert wrote to Elizabeth in one of the last letters before they no longer needed to write letters to one another anymore, 'they take up room – and the wise way always seemed to me to read in rooms at home, and open one's eyes and see abroad' (559). He is cutting an impressive figure for her here, of course, and in many ways his imagination was incorrigibly bookish; but another, genuine, part of him liked to stake an interest in 'the world, and pictures of it, rather than writings about the world!' One of his most striking artist-heroes, the painter Fra Lippo Lippi serves as his best spokesman among several in this: the poem begins with Lippo, who has been leaning out of the window for fresh air, deciding to jump for it: in this case the window is in the Medici palace, where he has been locked up painting boneless saints, in favour of the sexy buzz of Florentine streetlife. He is stopped at once by the police, but he soon talks his way out of trouble: being in with the Medicis is evidently the Renaissance equivalent of knowing the Kray twins; and he seizes the opportunity this moment affords to explain his life and aesthetic opinions to the officers, which he is clearly bursting to pass on. Dire poverty drove him, still a child, to sign up for monastic life, which he despises; but, he

says, at least having survived such a tough childhood leaves a man with one gain – ‘The soul and sense of him grow sharp alike. / He learns the look of things’. The look of things is precisely what gets into his art at first, and the brothers gasp spontaneously at how lifelike it is, until the Prior tells them they’re bad and scolds Lippo for painting in so brazenly bodily a way: he should be painting souls rather than inspiring ‘wonder at lines, colours, and what not’. But the attempt to renounce the world proves as difficult for Lippo the painter as it does for Lippo the monk, and his pictures keep lapsing back to discover what he calls, in a striking phrase, ‘the value and significance of flesh’. Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters* repeats the rumour that Lippo was a farcically sensual and worldly sort of man for the cloth: Browning conjures that sensuousness and worldiness into an aesthetic vocation that would have surely puzzled the real fifteenth century. Wordsworth and Coleridge would have got it at once, though:

... we’re made so that we love

First when we see them painted, things which we have passed

Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see ...

... The world’s no blot for us,

Nor blank – it means intensely, and means good.

‘We would rather have “Fra Lippo Lippi” than an essay on Realism in Art’, said George Eliot in her warm and insightful review of *Men and Women*, the collection in which the poem was published, and without question Browning’s masterpiece. She singled out for similar admiration a passage from another poem in the book, ‘How It Strikes a Contemporary’, Browning’s portrayal of an imaginary poet, which she fancied was a piece of covert self-portraiture:

He stood and watched the cobbler at his trade,

The man who slices lemons into drink,

The coffee-roaster’s brazier, and the boys

That volunteer to help him turn its winch.

He glanced o’er books on stalls with half an eye,

And fly-leaf ballads on the vendor's string,
And broad-edge bold-print posters by the wall.
He took such cognisance of men and things,
If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
If any cursed a woman, he took note ...

That manages to be heroic and quotidian at the same time, describing at once a vocation in life and a stroll about town: how brilliantly Browning sets the raw stuff of the market-place off against the sophisticated abstraction of 'cognisance'.

Realism, says Julian Barnes, is 'essentially corrective', and if you ask what Browning's realism seeks to correct the answer is rather peculiar: it is the idea that the world is same-old-same-old. The beautifully poised way that Browning deploys the very word 'things' – 'the look of things', 'men and things' – tells a story: in his hands 'things' is at once the humdrum word it is outside his poetry and yet also marvellous, a splicing of mundanity and wonder. 'He really cares a lot about external things', an amused Elizabeth wrote to a friend, meaning that she hadn't suspected his taste for blingy furniture, but she was expressing something more fundamental about him at the same time. Browningsque 'things' are not just grammatically plural but metaphysically plural, participants in what he called the 'varied modes of creatureship'. The list of 'men and things' provided in 'How It Strikes a Contemporary' could potentially go on forever, for it possesses the endlessly surprising boundlessness of reality itself, in all its diversity and strangeness – it has, as he writes in the essay on Shelley, 'the inexhaustible variety of existence'. 'I always loved all those wild creatures God "*sets up for themselves*" so independently of us', he had told a possibly bemused Elizabeth Barrett during their courtship, referring to lizards and insects, 'with their strange happy minute inch of candle, as it were, to light them'. Or putting it another way, in characteristic verse: 'No creature's made so mean / But that, some way, it boasts, could we investigate, / Its supreme worth: fulfils, by ordinance of fate, / Its momentary task, gets glory all its own, / Tastes triumph in the world, pre-eminent, alone'.

The Browning universe is full of such busy and incorrigible individuality, and represents an important part of that great afterwash of Romanticism in the Western mind that Isaiah Berlin and others taught us all about: the notion is that (in Berlin's words) 'variety is, in general, preferable to uniformity', and that 'what is real is individual, that is, is what it is in virtue of its uniqueness, its differences from other things, events, thoughts, and not what it has in common with them'. These are the basic assumptions that underwrite those forms of modern thought known as 'liberalism', with its defining concern for the particular case and its valuing of diversity itself as a guiding moral principle. 'People should be eccentric', said John Stuart Mill, who is largely responsible for inventing liberalism: 'That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time'. Browning would have agreed. At any rate, he responded gamely when invited to compose verses on the topic 'Why I am a Liberal': it was his own good fortune, he says there, to have worked free of 'fetters, not a few, / Of prejudice, convention', and, as Chesterton approvingly summarised, how should one 'who had found truth in so many strange forms after so many strange wanderings ... be expected to stifle with horror the eccentricities of others'? Browning felt few things more strongly or intuitively than outrage at the thought of people being coerced, which is probably the main instinct at work in liberalism: he was always creditably disgusted by 'the execrable policy of the world's husbands, fathers, brothers, and domineers in general', in which category Mr Barrett naturally loomed large.

Chesterton himself constitutes a later chapter in this same Romantic-liberal story, of course, and his account of Browning is in part an heroic self-portrait, but he was quite right in identifying his predecessor's 'great ideal of energy and variety'. This energy and variety is not only a quality of the world of 'things', needless to say: it is also, and even more interestingly, the defining characteristic of the world of 'men and women'. Browning's poems are almost all spoken by assumed voices – 'so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine', as he insisted – so that reading a volume by Browning is like moving through a talkative crowd. An aspiring pre-Romantic poet might properly entertain the universalising ambitions of *An Essay on Man*; Browning, self-conscious of his modernity, pluralises that object of enquiry into *Men and Women*. The latest volumes to appear in the extraordinary, colossal edition of *The Brownings' Correspondence* cover the hectic period of the preparation of that

volume for the press in 1855, an exciting but exhausting chapter in their lives during which the Brownings and their small son move from Florence to Paris, and then to London to see the book into the publishers, and then back again to freezing Paris. (In the background the Crimean War rumbles on to their dismay.) Elizabeth, who enjoyed by far the greater celebrity, begins her next much-awaited work, *Aurora Leigh*, a remarkable attempt to write a contemporary verse-novel; but for most of these months it is Robert's poems that are uppermost in both their minds. Elizabeth was proud of *Men and Women*, and understood entirely the virtues that it was designed to embody: 'The poems, for variety, vitality, and intensity, are quite worthy of the writer, it seems to me, and a clear advance in certain respects on his previous publications'.

Browning loves imagining nothing more than elusiveness. 'What's become of Waring / Since he gave us all the slip?' begins a marvellous early poem, full of wonder at the ability of someone consistently to evade your idea of him. There are rumoured sightings of Waring all over the place, but he stays always on the edge of what's surely known – 'You saw Waring? Truth or joke?' Browning's people consistently give you the slip, their identities equivocating between truth and joke, and overspilling any explanatory categories that you might have wanted to bring to bear upon them. 'Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things', as Browning has his Bishop Blougram say, 'The honest thief, the tender murderer, / The superstitious atheist', and Blougram himself is a good case of that: he is at once a cynical old rogue and a reasonable enough man-of-the-world, and Browning doesn't want you to allocate him absolutely to either category. In his famous book *The Poetry of Experience* (1957) Robert Langbaum expressed this hallmark effect as a tussle between readerly sympathy and judgment: you are utterly caught up in the compelling life of the person on display, while at the same time you retain some purchase on the whole show. In some cases this amounts to twiggling that we have a monster or a weirdo on our hands: the charming aristocrat who speaks in 'My Last Duchess' unwittingly gives himself away as a psychopath, just as the cleric in 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' inadvertently reveals himself to be a hypocrite of the first water. Those are great poems, to be sure, large-hearted and cartoonish in their effect, but the effect of a Browning poem is typically more complicated. 'Up at a Villa – Down in the City', for instance, is ostensibly cast in the voice of a dullard who, stuck in the country, pines for

the specious distractions of the big smoke: 'the whole point', the scholar Philip Drew maintained, 'is that the contrasts drawn by the speaker, with his exaggerated ideas of *savoir vivre*, are all reversed by the reader'. But you don't need independently to know about Browning's love for a bustling urban scene to realise that part of the poet's imagination thoroughly endorses his vulgarian speaker's cry, 'Oh, a day in the city-square, there is no such pleasure in life!' 'You have not a great love for nature, have you?' a friend asked once Browning, the sort of question that great literary Victorians often had to face: 'Yes, I have', he replied, 'but I love men and women better'.

The great poems all work at cross purposes like that: his most characteristic speakers have experiences they don't understand, or depths they do not recognise, or emotions they do not register, or they exemplify human truths that are quite different to whatever it is they think they think. Loving 'men and women' was not to be confused with getting a handle on them: his sustained brilliance as a love poet stems from the intuition that it is precisely those with whom one is most intimate who may prove themselves the least knowable – 'Infinite passion, and the pain / Of finite hearts that yearn'. Such distance is a normal state of affairs, but it becomes especially palpable when imagining historical difference, or alien encounters between cultures. The vivid poem voiced by 'Karshish, the Arab Physician', for instance, describes a chance meeting with Lazarus in middle-age narrated by a pagan who naturally lacks the conceptual equipment to understand the Christian significance of what he has come across. Put like that, the poem threatens to be very tiresome, a tolerant laugh at the benighted; but the tone is brilliantly well handled, and one thing that emerges from the puzzlings of this good and intelligent man is the actually bizarre nature of the doctrine that we are meant to accept as the rational explanation: 'This man so cured regards the curer, then, / As – God forgive me – who but God himself, / Creator and Sustainer of the world, / That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile!' Karshish's final mystified words, 'it is strange', strike the keynote of *Men and Women*: they are poems that turn about the salutary estrangement of experience, moments of being which elude the mind's grasp but not the memory's hold. As in 'Memorabilia':

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,

And did he stop and speak to you?

And did you speak to him again?

How strange it seems, and new!

Against which, as though offering an unexplained parallel, the speaker sets his own quite unrelated memory, of crossing a moor, a wholly unmemorable space of which he recalls just the one luminous detail:

For there I picked up on the heather

And there I put inside my breast

A moulted feather, an eagle-feather—

Well, I forget the rest.

No-one else can do a throw-away ending as well as Browning: often his best poems close like that, as though slipping out of poetry and back into the life that preceded it.

Henry James, who was fascinated by Browning, spoke in an obituary piece about ‘the bristling surface of his individuality’: stylistically, the poetry is full of bristles, musically rough and jagged, full of dashes and exclamation marks, syntactically contorted, grammatically self-distracting, all this the better to evoke the spiky singularity of its inhabitants. Students sometimes say that he brings a fresh colloquial energy into verse, and he certainly brings something, but no-one has ever really spoken Browningese, so colloquialism isn’t quite the point. Chesterton was especially taken aback by the jaw-crunching line ‘Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?’; and indeed you would be hard-put to justify such distortions on the grounds of dramatic propriety. They are more the expression of what Elizabeth Barrett diagnosed in her husband as an ‘enormous superfluity of vital energy’. The very names of his characters feel as though they have been interfered with by some unharnessed linguistic excess: Gigadibs, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Mr Sludge, Bluphocks. ‘It is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer’, Gerard observed Hopkins, another poet to whom the diversity of things was an abiding

principle, adding: 'This vice I cannot have escaped'. John Ruskin didn't think that Browning had escaped it either: in a memorable exchange, both sides of which are represented here in the *Correspondence*, Ruskin complained that reading *Men and Women* was like traversing 'the worst Alpine Glacier' – 'Bright -- & deep enough truly – but so full of Clefs that half the journey has to be done with ladder & hatchet'. Browning's self-defence was unapologetic: 'You would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be'.

Before Browning, said T.S. Eliot, the usual complaint against modern poets was that they were silly; he was the first to be stigmatised as 'difficult'. The difficulty was partly stylistic, but it was also the attempt to find literary forms that would capture 'inexhaustible variety'. His most immense effort, *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), tells a story of appalling domestic betrayal and brutality from a whole range of competing perspectives, including the participants in the story, their lawyers, the wagging tongues of their neighbours, and finally the Pope. 'It is the epic of free speech', said Chesterton effusively, and it is indeed an extraordinary attempt to re-invent epic in a pluralistic spirit; but the editors of the Browning volume for the *21st Century Oxford Authors* were no doubt right to leave it out: it would be too big to include in its entirety and impossible to excerpt, for the whole point of it is the all-or-nothing of its garrulous plenitude. (I am the general editor of the series in which appears so it would be unseemly further to praise the edition, even though my contribution didn't go beyond nominating the editors.) However, they do include the dramatic poem *Pippa Passes* (1841), which Elizabeth thought 'most exquisite and altogether original', and which represents a smaller but no less striking solution to the same challenge. Pippa, a young silk-mill worker, begins the poem springing out of bed with her annual day's leave before her: 'how must I spend my Day?' She decides to pick a path through her town that will bring her close to a number of locals whose various happy situations she thinks she knows about, and with whom she innocently fantasises some sort of sympathetic identification. She knows there is no question of her engaging with any of them really, and one motive for pretending to be these other people for a few holiday minutes is that they appear to have the sort of interesting and expansive lives which she doesn't: 'Only to pass whom will remove — / Whom a mere look at half will cure / The Past', she says with some pathos, 'and help me to endure / The Coming'. Pippa sings as she goes, and

one of her songs ('God's in his heaven – / All's right with the world!') went on successfully to skewer Browning as an unthinking optimist; but, as has often been pointed out, Pippa's touching if slightly neurotic determination to be blithe is scarcely justified by the appalling interiors which Browning imagines for her to pass by. Two waking lovers discuss the body of the husband whom they have just murdered; an artist discovers he has been tricked into marrying and begins to extricate himself; a mother seeks desperately to dissuade her son from committing a terrorist action; a priest, talking to a murderer in his employment, tries to wriggle out of complicity in the killing of his own brother. Into these variously dreadful lives, Pippa's voice floats, as Browning's stage direction says each time, from '*Without*'; and each time, the songs she sings, though nothing remarkable in themselves, unwittingly effect a moral revolution. The artist leaves for the far seas with his bride, which is a moral improvement; but the other responses are much more ambiguous: the lover rejects his mistress with a sudden vituperative disgust, the young revolutionary sets off firmly intent on doing the assassination after all, and the old priest summons the guards to seize his lackey who is no doubt destined for the rack. The poem has a hard nose: Pippa doesn't scatter goodness like fairy-dust as she might have, and there is nothing that remotely resembles an epiphany, let alone a Forsterian moral that we are all somehow connected if we but knew. Pippa returns to her spartan cottage, none the wiser about what she leaves in her wake, and back to another year of toil. According to Mrs Sutherland Orr, his friend in later life and one of his most devoted and intelligent commentators, Browning had the idea of the poem, while walking in a wood near Dulwich: 'the image flashed upon him of someone walking thus alone through life; one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it'. It is a great poem and should be better known: it evokes something profound if necessarily elusive about the way that the world is really a set of diverse and often mutually uncomprehending worlds, and about the unexpected consequences that may arise when they come into glancing proximity.

In the years following Elizabeth's death in 1861 Browning grew into a sage, with poems such as 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' ('Then, welcome each rebuff / That turns earth's smoothness rough') apparently bringing solace to the troubled intelligentsia. His sometimes blustering good cheer spoke with special eloquence

to the serious Victorians who formed the Browning Society for the better explication of his message: ‘we are struggling with the waves of doubt – storm-tost and ready to sink’, said Dorothea Beale at a Society meeting in 1882, going on, as though unwittingly describing a *Punch* cartoon: ‘and as we look at him, we see him with a smile on his face, calmly floating, his head above the waves, his body supported therein’. (The paper appears in *Browning Studies*, originally published in 1895, a selection of highlights from the Society’s lecture programme, recently reissued in the Routledge Revivals series.) As a public figure Browning was certainly good at riding the waves of doubt. Do you occasionally entertain dark thoughts about death? ‘Death, death! It is this harping on death I despise so much, this idle and often cowardly and well as ignorant harping!’ Browning protested noisily to a correspondent: ‘Pshaw! it is foolish to argue upon such a thing even’. *Pshaw!* That is the Browning note that Hopkins perfectly caught: ‘a way of talking (and making his people talk) with the air and spirit of a man bouncing up from table with his mouth full of bread and cheese and saying that he meant to stand no blasted nonsense’.

But then a lot of Browning, even late Browning, is not *Pshaw!* at all. For one thing, he was repeatedly – and indeed increasingly – drawn to portray human behaviour of the most atrocious kind, as though testing the official optimism of his extractable philosophy to breaking point and beyond: ‘I believe I do unduly like the study of morbid cases of the soul’, he admitted to an admirer. The story of *The Ring and the Book*, which is true, is absolutely terrible; and his portrait of the hateful, corrupting, manipulative old *roué* in the late poem *The Inn Album* (1875) is a real masterpiece in sleaze. And, for another thing, multiplicity may turn out to be a trickier sort of virtue than it might seem. ‘Browning’, Matthew Arnold told his friend Clough, ‘is a man with a moderate gift passionately desiring movement and fullness, and obtaining but a confused multitudinousness’, apparently unwilling or unable to understand that one ‘must begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world’s multitudinousness’. That is unsympathetic but in its way astute, and it chimes with other sceptical responses to Browning’s multitudinousness, his refusal to tame the world with the ordering power of an idea. ‘He has no form’, said Benjamin Jowett, somewhat disloyally, to Lady Tennyson. ‘I hold with the old-fashioned criticism that Browning is not really a poet’, Hopkins wrote, ‘that he has all the gifts

but the one needful and the pearls without the string; rather one should say raw nuggets and rough diamonds'. 'He did not master life, but was mastered by it', said George Santayana in a once-celebrated essay; and in much the same spirit Henry James confessed himself moved by *The Ring and the Book* chiefly as a 'great loose and uncontrolled composition', a grab-bag of brilliantly diverse invention which was just crying out to be sorted out into the properly organised structure of a Jamesian novel.

James is being more than a little facetious, needless to say, but such remarks have critical traction because they respond to an unease that is already stirring within Browning himself. A sense of immense diversity was indeed at the centre of Browning, but he was haunted by the thought that saying so was a way of saying there *was* no centre to Browning. His creepy portrait in 'Mesmerism' of a medium able to summon up the existence of other people, is obliquely a self-hating version of his own ambiguous shapeshifting gift; the poem ends, chillingly enough, with a question: 'What the price is, who can say?' His loathing for the whole sham business of mesmerism and clairvoyance and spiritualism constituted one of the very few points of angry difference with Elizabeth, and it is difficult to resist the thought that he saw in their varieties of ventriloquism a grim parody of his own self-abnegating kind of creativity. 'You have the superabundant mental life and individuality which admits of shifting a personality and speaking the truth still', Elizabeth told him supportively; but she recognised other sorts of vocation, perhaps more intuitively: 'Yet I am conscious of wishing you to take the other crown besides – and after having made your own creatures speak in clear human voices, to speak yourself out of that personality which God made ... I do not think that, with all that music in you, only your personality should be dumb'. By contrast, what did he see to admire in her poetry? Daniel Karlin asked that question in his excellent book about the courtship, and answered 'in a word: nothing. It was not poetry that he read, it was personality' -- a coherent and whole personality which he took to be the antithesis to his own shifting and fugitive identity. 'You speak out, *you*', Browning wrote to her early in their correspondence, wooing by self-disparagement, 'I only make men and women speak – give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me'. He is finding fault with himself on grounds provided by his youthful favourite Shelley: 'The One remains, the many change and pass; / Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly; / Life, like a dome of many-coloured

glass, / Stains the white radiance of Eternity'. That puts diversity in its place: the multi-coloured effect sounds pretty alright, but its multiplicity remains a stain nevertheless. In his essay on the poet Browning eulogised Shelley's 'self-sufficing central light' with the heightened admiration of a man who felt the absence of his own: Browning's own genius seems to have sprung, contrarily, from the lack of anything central or self-sufficing. He told Elizabeth that he wished to write 'R.B. a Poem' and longed to escape 'this dancing ring of men and women', but he knew he never would. It is as though he could only find something to say by locating his voice himself somewhere outside himself: as his French friend Milsand observed to Mrs Orr, 'Quel homme extraordinaire! Son centre n'est pas au milieu'.

He was perfectly sincere in his insistence that Elizabeth was the real thing and himself only a very rough approximation: to people who professed their greater admiration for his works he would reply, 'You are quite wrong – quite wrong – she has genius; I am only a painstaking fellow' – '*she* was the poet, and I the clever person by comparison'. But this conviction, that he was somehow only incompletely or imperfectly a poet, not a real poet like Elizabeth or Shelley, was not at all disabling: in fact, it was the making of him. His poems, brilliantly contrived and meditated as they undoubtedly are, also feel like rough approximations to the finished poems that someone else might have made of them, and they certainly lack that composed self-possession of form that James looked for in the novel. A Browning poem feels like it slips into existence as though by accident, and, as Daniel Karlin says, the words somehow give the impression that, had they not found themselves in a poem by Browning, they would have been uttered in much the same sort of way anyhow. His poems start abruptly, as though lacking some nicety of manner (he learnt something here from his much-loved, unfashionable Donne), they wander and digress and complicate, and they end whenever they do, for they have the capacity to go on forever. As Henry James's philosophical brother William observed, one aspect of life in a pluralistic universe is that is *always* something more to be said; and Browning's verbose and casuistical creatures are always keen to add one more thing. He was, as Barbara Everett once excellently said in these pages,

‘the kind of human being who enters a room talking’.¹ His people, too, wander in to their poems, and talk and talk, and wander back outside, where they belong.

¹ ‘Browning Versions’, *LRB*, 4 August 1983.