

Tony Roberts

Living with Browning: an appreciation of the poet in his bicentennial year

I sometimes feel that Robert Browning and I were related, distant cousins perhaps. It stems from the ghostly intimacy of having read *nine* biographies of the man. His poetry and the books that feed on it have taken up five feet of my bookshelves for many years. Of course I frequently reread the poems, too, and quote Randall Jarrell in my defence. Celebrating Wallace Stevens' work, in *Poetry and the Age*, Jarrell concluded:

A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing
out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times;
a dozen or two dozen times and he is great.

By that measure Robert Browning is a great poet. On my count there are a dozen or more lightning strikes among the thicket of collections written by this most relentless of Victoriansⁱ. What I have loved of Browning is the plain speaking, “hip to haunch”, intimacy of the dramas. We are there with the watch seizing “brother Lippo”; at dinner with the worldly prelate, Bishop Blougram; gathered with the sons at the deathbed of the bishop of Saint Praxed's; attending on the dry, sadistic duke at Ferrara; eavesdropping on the cuckolded “faultless painter”. Here and elsewhere, Browning exhibits his genius for character and atmosphere – and for fine detail (“the ferrel of his stick/Trying the mortar's temper ‘tween the chinks”), the perfect imageⁱⁱ, sensuality (upperⁱⁱⁱ and lower caste^{iv}), the memorable aphorism (“incentives come from the soul's self;/ The rest avail not.”) adroit rhythms and rhymes and – in lighter moments – a sometimes knockabout sense of humour^v.

Straight got by heart that book to its last page

“A Grammarian's Funeral”

The editions of the poetry on my shelf came mostly from the eighties, when I was happiest making my rounds of the second hand bookshops in Manchester, York and, occasionally, Oxford. I consider the handsome, olive green Smith, Elder “Poetical Works” from 1910 as my standard text. These two volumes have a deckle-edged cragginess that seems appropriate to the poet. I also own a sober, one volume 1946 edition of the same from John Murray, on thinner, post-war paper. Most wieldable and attractive are the Oxford, dark blue, boldly printed, tight editions of the *The Poetical Works* and of *The Ring and the Book*, from 1946 and 1943. I also have my old, brown- patterned college copy, a 7/6 Penguin Poets from 1968, as well as an interesting ‘Penguin Illustrated Classics’ (by Iain Macnab) from thirty years before. Perhaps my most useful Browning is the ‘Norton Critical Edition’ of *Robert Browning's Poetry* (1979), which is annotated *and* offers insightful essays from Browning's critics, then and nowish. I also have ‘A Centenary Selection’ edited by Michael Meredith from ‘The Browning Institute’. Their ‘Newsletter’ printed a monologue of mine some years ago in which I masqueraded as the widowed poet. There are one or two other collections I enjoy, like the 1984 selected by James Reeves (from the estimable ‘Poetry Bookshelf’) and I admit to having given away a couple of other editions in saner moments.

Then there are the individual volumes, which savour of Victorian times. These include first editions of *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (Smith, Elder, 1873); *The Inn Album*, a tan first American edition from Boston (Osgood and Company, 1876); a dark brown *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* from 1871, of which Smith and Elder sold more than fifteen hundred copies in Britain. Then there is a brown *Ferishtah's Fancies* from 1884. The others are: a red eighth edition *Asolando* from 1890; a second edition of *Dramatis Personae* (by Chapman and Hall, 1864); and a brown, second edition of the 1872 *Balaustion's Adventure*. All this may make me a fit study for Browning himself, but I submit that I rarely paid much for them – even the first editions were under a tenner. The one much overlooked advantage of buying old Brownings, by the way, is that they were printed double spaced, which increases their readability significantly, especially with complicated passages, parentheses, dashes and hyphenated additions, abrupt syntax changes, rhetorical apostrophes, etc. – Browning's ticks .

Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself?

Do I live in a house you would like to see?

Is it scant of gear, has it store of pelf?

“Unlock my heart with a sonnet-key?”

“House”

Although the poetry must come first, I share a common weakness in being interested in the life that produces it. Whilst not going the distance Sainte-Beuve went in claiming *tel arbre, tel fruit* (that the fruit is like the tree), I do believe that biography sheds light on the ‘fruit’, and I know that it certainly indulges the appetite for more (That the life can become a substitute for the work is, of course, the peril). This is true of even a quiet life, like Browning's –perhaps more so, given the temptation it offers biographers to have their way with pet theories. G.K. Chesterton's idea that “considered as a narrative of facts, there is little or nothing to say” of Browning's life is, untypically, short-sighted in a post-Freudian age. It would be a skinny biography that offered only ‘a narrative of facts’. Here is one:

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell, South London, in 1812 and died in Venice. He had been educated largely at home and supported in his vocation by his parents, his father being a Bank of England clerk. Early attempts at poetry and drama were largely ignored. He married Elizabeth Barrett, an older, more celebrated poet (and an invalid), after an intense correspondence. The couple eloped to Italy in 1846, where they lived there until her death in 1861, when Browning returned to England with their son, Pen. With *The Ring and the Book* 1868/9, Browning's reputation was secured. His death coincided with the publication of *Asolando* in 1889.

Eschewing pithiness, the biographies line up fatly on my shelf: by Mrs. Sutherland Orr (1891), Edward Dowden, C. H. Herford (both in 1905), Hall Griffin and Minchin (1910), G. K. Chesterton (1920), Betty Miller (1952), the two Maisie Wards (1967, 1969), Irvine and Honan (1974), F. E. Halliday (1975), Donald Thomas (1983), Pamela Neville-Sington (2004), and Ian Finlayson (2004). Beside them are *The Browning Cyclopaedia* (1892) and a slim, wan, brown fifth edition (1906) of *Browning's Message To His Times*. Then there is *Browning: The Critical Heritage* (1970); Robert Langbaum's classic study of the dramatic monologue; *The Poetry of Experience*; Betty S. Flowers *Browning and the Modern Tradition*; plus books of letters: *The Love Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* (a 1969 selection, not the 1899 edition); those from the Brownings to George Barrett; from Elizabeth to her sister, Henrietta, to Miss Mitford, to Mrs. David Ogilvy; letters from Browning to his

American 'friends'. Finally there are a few books on Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I cannot claim to have read all of the above but I have read a weight of it.

Chronologically the lives begin with Frederick Leighton's elder sister, Mrs. Sutherland Orr, and her *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (1891), a book unpopular with Browning's son, written by a woman vividly described in the Irvine/Honan and Finlayson biographies ("At fifty, she had lost her demure fragile beauty and become an odd little creature given to superstitious fears and impenetrable silences"). The fact that she had known the poet well (and that my copy is a first edition) adds the frisson to what is admittedly a fond but unadventurous account. She begins with the great man's 'blood' and its' supposed Jewish, Creole and Italian sources. Then we have such topics as 'Inherited Nervous Temperament', 'His Father's Sympathy' and 'Fondness for Animals'. Nevertheless, Sutherland Orr offers glimpses into the letters and useful introductory comments on Browning's life and poetry ("He had been inspired as a dramatic poet by the one avowed conviction that little else is worth study but the history of a soul.") and is honest enough to raise her voice ever so slightly:

He also failed to realize those conditions of thought, and still more of expression, which made him often on first reading difficult to understand.

Edward Dowden, the Irish poet and critic, begins his *Browning* biography ominously, with cliché, "The ancestry of Robert Browning has been traced.....". The book, though, is not without insights ("There is little of repose in Browning's poetry.") and judgments ("failures are rather to be ascribed to temporary lapses into a misdirected ingenuity than to the absence of metrical feeling"). As with many of his Victorian contemporaries, Dowden sees Browning as a "teacher" (though the poet himself saw the moral force of poetry as something not to be "taught" as much as deployed), a point Betty S. Flowers took up in her excellent *Browning and the Modern Tradition*, where she quotes from an 1846 letter by Elizabeth Barrett to the poet:

I do not think that, with all that music in you, only your own personality should be dumb, nor that having thought so much & deeply on life & its ends, you should not teach what you have learnt, in the directest & and most impressive way, the mask thrown off however moist with the breath.

Elizabeth Barrett's attempt to have her admirer sideline the dramatic monologue had a shrewdness behind it ("it is not, I believe, by the dramatic medium, that poets teach most impressively... it is too difficult for the common reader to analyse, and to discern between the vivid and the earnest"). For all that there were those who sought his message, there were –and are now almost exclusively –those who read Browning for the "vivid" rather than the "earnest". How else when the concerns of one period fall away? Browning seems to have agreed with her, given his earlier disparaging comment about his own poetry in January 1845:

You speak out, *you*,– 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, but I am going to try.

At any rate her recognition and his determination were doomed to failure, since Browning concluded “it seems bleak melancholy work, this talking to the wind.” Certainly the Victorian public was eager for moral precepts, from the evidence of their interminably long sermons, their political declamations, or those inordinately long poems in which the poet is given room to elaborate on material versus spiritual concerns. To the modern reader the force of “Bishop Blougram’s Apology”, for instance, might be felt to have been dissipated after its first intriguing furlong.

Whatever his early self-doubt, Browning ‘bit the mask’s black velvet’ throughout his career, feeling that his voices were not, in a sense, his own. In a letter to Ruskin, quoted by Flowers, he guardedly acknowledges he may have sinned, “I *may* put Robert Browning into Pippa and other men and maids. If so, *peccavi*: but I don’t see myself in them, at all events.”

C.H. Herford, the Ben Jonson scholar, writing *Robert Browning* in the ‘Modern English Writers’ series provides a study which, though it has opinions (“His colouring is not subtle”; his violence is “genial”), cannot forgo the poetic – more dangerous than the narrative in a biography. Herford writes, “His typical children are well-springs of spiritual influence, scattering the aerial dew of quickening song upon a withered world”, and equally soaring:

He would not trumpet forth truth in his own person, or blazon it through the lips of the highest recognised authority; he let it struggle up through the baffling density, or glimmer through the conflicting persuasions of alien minds, and break out in cries of angry wonder or involuntary recognition.

W. Hall Griffin and H.C. Minchin’s 1910 *The Life of Robert Browning* set out to offer “not a study of the life of Robert Browning seen through a temperament, but a record based upon a sympathetic review and interpretation of accepted facts”. I enjoy biographies with a novelistic flourish, since they (unintentionally) remind the reader how close the genres are. This begins “On the fly-leaf of a large, old-fashioned, illustrated family Bible there stands written in a bold, clear hand...” The thirty-seven black-and-white illustrations contribute also, particularly the sometimes deserted Italian streets. The text is, as we were warned, “sympathetic”:

Men and Women, appearing in two volumes towards the close of this year 1855, must have been especially welcome to those readers whom the earlier *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Romances* had captivated.

Lest we dismiss the work of the period, G.K. Chesterton is outstanding in *Robert Browning* (for Macmillan’s ‘English Men of Letters’ series. The first edition of this modest-looking book was actually published in 1903). The pleasure to be gained from it is partly in its insights, much in its style, and part in Chesterton’s opinionated stand. Of *Pauline*, Browning’s first, anonymous, long venture of 1833, Chesterton tells us “It exhibits the characteristic mark of a juvenile poem, the general suggestion that the author is a thousand years old.” He goes on to describe Browning as “the only optimistic philosopher except Whitman” and surrealistically as “a cosmic detective who walked into the foulest of thieves’ kitchens and accused men publicly of virtue”. Discussing the unspoken feelings in the famous letters of the Brownings’ courtship, he refers to “the great central idea of the Browning

correspondence that the most enlightening passages in a letter consist of dots.” When describing Browning’s eccentricity, evident even in his telegrams, he offers:

A man would have to be somewhat abnormally conceited in order to spend sixpence for the pleasure of sending an unintelligible communication to the dislocation of his own plans.

One could quote endlessly. The book is one of those that transcends its subject, but at the same time has much to offer on it. Of the best of Browning’s monologues, Chesterton is of the opinion (replete with flourish) that:

the general idea of these poems is, that a man cannot help telling some truth even when he sets out to tell lies. If a man comes to tell us that he has discovered perpetual motion, or been swallowed by the sea-serpent, there will yet be some point in the story where he will tell us about himself almost all that we require to know.

It is the world of men and their motives which fascinates Browning, not the world of nature:

There are few poets who, if they escaped from the rowdiest waggonette of trippers, could not be quieted with again and exalted by dropping into a small wayside field. The speciality of Browning is rather that he would have been quieted and exalted by the waggonette.

Less picturesquely, but more startlingly, Chesterton concludes that the central opinion of Browning is “the hope in the imperfection of man, and more boldly as the hope in the imperfection of God.” Imperfection implies the possibility of perfection of man in a future ‘life’; for God it is in suffering and learning through the Crucifixion.

The world had turned and turned somewhat away from God before my next Browning biography. The teacher, the prophet to his times, had given way to the fallible man. In *Robert Browning: A Portrait*, the novelist Betty Miller presents us with an invalid, dependent Browning beneath the bluff and loud exterior. To her, Elizabeth was the lesser genius but the stronger character, both wife and mother-figure. One supposes Browning might have echoed his own Count Guido Franceschini from *The Ring and the Book* in this one sentiment:

With a wife I look to find all wifeliness,
As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree-
I buy the song o’ the nightingale inside.

On her part, having overestimated Robert’s practical grasp on worldly matters—understandably since she had been effectively housebound for years – Elizabeth was eventually disabused. Indeed Browning once confessed, “You shall think for me, that is my command”. As Elizabeth withered with illness, Browning continued to bloom and on to almost his dying day. Miller maintains that, “Losing Elizabeth, he escaped also from her shadow”. After her death and his grieving, the hearty Browning emerged into London society.

This is incarnation Henry James was to satirise in “The Private Life”, where the author Clare Vawdrey and his own social self are two distinct entities, “for personal relations this admirable genius thought his second-best good enough”. The idea was rooted, as Frank Kermode explains, in “the contrast between [Browning’s] work and his commonplace, though persistent, social presence.”

Maisie Ward’s entertaining two volume biography of Browning plays on James’ idea, with the subtitle of its second volume: ‘Two Robert Brownings?’ The general title is *Robert Browning and His World*, which advertises that it is Maisie Ward’s intention to give the reader a Browning in the context of the different milieu he inhabited: “the middle-class English dissenting society of his boyhood”, Italy, and then the social London of his later fame. It was with Elizabeth and Italy, however, that Browning truly *lived* his life, according to a letter Ward cites from 1867:

The general impression of the past is as if it had been pain. I would not live it over again, not one day of it. Yet all that seems my *real* life –and before and after, nothing at all; I look back on all my life when I look *there*: and life is painful.

Ward deals in some detail with Browning’s vexed relationship with Pen, ever love and frustration to the poet.

William Irvine and Park Honan’s *The Book, the Ring, and the Poet* is my favourite of the Browning biographies (along with the Chesterton). It is highly knowledgeable, very detailed and well written. I found myself agreeing with James F. Loucks, editor of the Norton edition of Browning’s poetry, who admired “their synthesis of several decades of Browning scholarship”. The biography is entertaining from its sly opening sentence:

It is not surprising that many Victorians were extremely serious and extremely illogical. The trouble was, in part, that some of their windows they never opened. The air in their houses was heavy and stagnant with conscientious affection and appropriative piety.

By the end one feels as if one has travelled from Victorian England to Italy and back in the loquacious and revealing company of one of its most formidable talents, which is as much a compliment as one can pass on a literary biography.

F. E. Halliday (1975), the Shakespearean scholar, writes an engaging biography, *Robert Browning: His Life and Work*, the virtues of which include his lifelong love of the poems, his simplistic but common sense view of Browning’s contribution to modern poetry and the relative slimness of the book (for Browning biographies). To Halliday, Browning was “a revolutionary” in discarding conventional subjects and forms and in his “language not far removed from real speech. He is, in brief, the founder of modern English poetry.”

Donald Thomas is a prolific author of novels and non-fiction centred on the Victorians. He subscribes to a similar view, albeit upping the critical ante. In *Robert Browning: A Life*

Within Life (1983), his poet has “a strong vein of post-romantic modernism which exploited the minutiae of reality with such powerful effect.” Although Thomas’ stated concern is more with the poetry than the correspondence, there is judicious balance. Thomas is clear and informative on “The Ring and the Book” and generous with Browning in old age.

Pamela Neville-Sington (2004) has some success in focusing on the poet as widower in *Robert Browning: A Life After Death*. At one point she writes, “The success of *The Ring and the Book* made him realise that his angelic, impressionable wife had to some extent stifled his poetic imagination.” Stated baldly it sounds unfeeling. Yet Neville-Sington’s is sympathetic with the bereavement and her bracing revisionism – in a lively narrative – has room to deal with Browning’s relationship with the ladies of his old age, with Pen, and with the past he buried with Ba, a past that is more complicated than some have supposed.

*Such, British Public, ye who like me not,
(God love you!) – whom I yet have laboured for.”*

“The Ring and the Book”

Of all popular poets Browning was and is one of the least popular and of great major poets the most controversial, condemned by his lesser work, his clotted style, his facile optimism, his over- productivity, the overestimation of his peers, even his irritating personality. Donald Thomas addresses the twin curses of “obscurity” and “optimism” that have dogged Browning’s reputation with only partial justification. Edward Berdoe, author of *The Browning Cyclopaedia* and *Browning’s Message to His Time*, acknowledged a century ago that “the popular opinion that Browning is difficult has “choked off” – to use a vulgarism – a host of people – with brains enough for anything in the way of intellectual work –from making any real attempt to read him.” Elizabeth Barrett touched on this by stealthy indirection in an 1845 letter to her future husband: “Subtleties of thought which are not directly apprehensible by minds of a common range, are here as elsewhere in your writings” Walter Bagehot approached the issue more bluntly, while also looking further afield:

But Mr. Browning’s occasional obscurity –or shall we say carelessness of explanation? – is not the only reason If Mr. Browning had studied England and the English character as faithfully and successfully as he has studied Italy and the Italian character, his position as an English poet would have been other than it now is.

Thomas cites Browning’s editor Augustine Birrell, who believed that the charge of obscurity could only really attach itself to the plays, where there would be few readers and therefore few to challenge it. Perhaps not surprisingly, Browning saw as difficulty what others saw as obscurity. In a letter to John Ruskin he defended himself:

I cannot begin writing poetry till my imaginary reader has conceded licenses to me which you demur at altogether. I *know*

that I don't make out my conception by my language, all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. You would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which *succeed* if they bear the conception from me to you....

Donald Thomas finds the charge of optimism more pernicious in post-Victorian times: "To more discriminating readers it was the reputation for optimism and robustness which proved the greater deterrent". Thomas sees that optimism as founded on an enthusiasm for life and Puritan belief. Ironic, then, that it should mask Browning as our contemporary. As Thomas observes, while

Tennyson had decorously taken his place behind the romantics in the procession of literary history. Browning, it seemed, had jumped several places further on, springing from the accepted romanticism at the beginning of the nineteenth century straight to a style of realism and psychological analysis which was not generally characteristic until that century was almost over.

This might partly explain Gerard Manley Hopkins aversion. He wrote to the poet and cleric Richard Watson Dixon on October 17th, 1881,:

I hold with the old-fashioned criticism that Browning is not really a poet, 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.

Alfred Austin and Oscar Wilde are among those who had already thought Browning prose ("Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning"). This is not perhaps quite as damning if we consider that there are those like Edmond Schérer, the French critic and theologian, who saw blank verse as cadenced prose. Wilde at least conceded Browning a master of what George Macbeth called "the great age of fiction in English poetry". Then there is the issue of length of Browning's work, which can rival prose. George Eliot, for one, shared a modern worry about *The Ring and the Book*: "Who will read it all in these busy days?" she wondered. (My 'Pan Classics' *Middlemarch* weighs in at 765 pages – without its introduction and notes).

After so many years of relative neglect Browning was highly sensitive to criticism. In a letter to Anne Thackeray Ritchie, in 1873, Browning had cautioned: "Remember that everybody this thirty years has given me his kick and gone on his way." The poet once told his friends the Storys, he "could never muster English readers enough to pay for salt & bread" and he famously addressed his readers in *The Ring and the Book*:

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
(Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence

Of many which whatever lives should teach:
This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind.
Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least.

Of course, this embattled Browning, who confronted the British public with his ‘lesson’ and finally forced it to capitulate, also irks his critics.

Thus they see you, praise you, think they know you!

“One Word More”

Browning’s biography has a way of working against the poetry, also. The supposed fairy tale elopement with Elizabeth Barrett aside, Browning’s social presence in later life won him fewer admirers among the diarists. If he was “authoritative and disputatious” in old age, according to Julia Wedgwood, to Henry James he was a trifle vulgar, too. James (who equally devoted much of his life to dining out) wrote to his sister in April 1877 of:

the chattering and self-complacent Robert B., who I am sorry to say, does not make on me a purely agreeable impression. His transparent eagerness to be the *dé de la conversation* & a sort of shrill interruptingness which distinguishes him have in them a kind of vulgarity. Besides which, strange to say, his talk doesn’t strike me as very good. It is altogether gossip & personality & is not very beautifully worded. But evidently there are 2 Brownings – an esoteric & an exoteric. The former never peeps out in society, & the latter hasn’t a ray of suggestion of *Men & Women*.

Such anecdotes as the following, cited by Maisie Ward, corroborate the negative image of the poet as a social being, wet as a well as windy:

Mrs. Drew (Mary Gladstone) in her diary complained of being constantly sent in to dinner with “old Browning.” He sat too close, she complained, he puffed and blew and even spat into her face; she saw him wipe Lady Marian Alford’s eyes with a dirty handkerchief. She tried in vain to think of “Abt Vogler” – but no “he *could* not have written it.

One could go on and on. A Casa Guidi neighbour, Mrs David Ogilvy, remembered the poet as “vehement, talkative, and hasty, full of gesticulation, and fond of argument’.

*We that had loved him so, followed him,
honoured him,
Lived in his mild and magnificent eye.*

“The Lost Leader”

At more of a social distance, Browning had a wealth of admirers and acolytes for much of the last thirty years of his life. Attempting to visit him in his last London home at De Vere Gardens in 1887, Anne Thackeray Ritchie’s could hardly cross the threshold with her brood, there being ladies in the dining-room, members of the Browning Society in the drawing-room and “some Americans” in the great man’s study. Then there was the infamous “Browning Society”, famously lampooned by Max Beerbohm, which has added little to Browning’s stock by its intense exploration of his “message” to his times. Where they looked for metaphysical pronouncements in his poetry, today we tend to look for the delineation of character as a literary coup in itself.

Pamela Neville-Sington gives evidence of the kind of heady enthusiasm that greeted the poet in person:

On a visit to London, a party of ‘Yankee schoolmarms’ spied Browning, let out a ‘wild whoop’, and chased him round and round the Albert Memorial, finally rushing at him from all sides. ‘They were all looking at him with an eager, hungry gaze, as if they were going to preserve his every word – to can them, in fact – and take them back to Boston,’ the *Pall Mall Budget* reported.

There were friends, more restrained, astute admirers like Edmund Gosse who, in *Robert Browning, Personalia*, testifies to his being both warm and a brilliant performer of his thoughts in private:

To a single listener, with whom he was on familiar terms, the Browning of his own study was to the Browning of a dinner party as a tiger is to a domestic cat.

Whatever is the truth of Browning in company, he became a willing victim of the cult of poetry celebrity, which had been inflamed by the savoury life of Lord Byron and the death of Browning’s hero, Shelley. (“Object to it? No, I like it! ... I have waited forty years for it, and now –I like it!”). His marriage to Elizabeth Barrett aside, however, that celebrity was based on a reading (or earnest misreading) of the sensational dramatic poetry, which Henry James judged to capture the interests of the English:

His voice sounds loudest, and also clearest, for the things that, as a race, we like best – the fascination of faith, the acceptance of life, the respect for its mysteries, the endurance of its charges, the vitality of the will, the validity of character, the beauty of action, the seriousness, above all, of the great human passion.

Perhaps it is this English vision that has attracted so many biographers to the otherwise quiet life of the poet. Yet I end where I began –living with Browning –for as I complete this I am a hundred pages into reading my *tenth* biography: Ian Finlayson’s jumbo *Browning* (2004). It seems that it will be an informative, enjoyable read, though there is inevitably something of the *déjà vu* for me (especially given its many references to Finlayson’s precursors). Perhaps I should ask myself the obvious question: do I really *need* to read a tenth? After all, how well do you want to know your distant cousin, however lightning-struck?

ⁱ Twenty personal favourites from Browning:

Dramatic Lyrics (1842): “My Last Duchess”; “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”.

Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845): “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church”; “The Laboratory”; “Meeting at Night/ Parting at Morning”.

Men and Women (1855): “How it Strikes a Contemporary”; “Up at a Villa – Down in the City”; “Fra Lippo Lippi”; “A Toccato of Galuppi’s”; “An Epistle containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician”; “Bishop Blougram’s Apology”; “Memorabilia”; “Andrea del Sarto”; “Two in the Campagna”; “Love in a Life”; “De Gustibus –”.

Dramatis Personae (1864): “Caliban upon Setebos”; “Confessions”; “A Likeness” and, finally, the wonderful catalogue accompaniment to Leighton’s portrait (and pithy company to Rilke’s famous piece): “Orpheus and Eurydice” (1864)

ii All we have gained then by our unbelief
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
For one of faith diversified by doubt:
We called the chess-board white,--we call it black.
(“Bishop Blougram's Apology”)

iii Your soft hand is a woman of itself,
And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.
Don't count the time lost, neither; you must serve
For each of the five pictures we require:
It saves a model. So! keep looking so--
My serpentine beauty, rounds on rounds!
--How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
Even to put the pearl there! oh, so sweet—
(“Andrea del Sarto”)

iv Saint, forsooth! While brown Dolores
Squats outside the Convent bank
With Sanchicha, telling stories,
Steeping tresses in the tank,
Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs
(“Soliloquy Of The Spanish Cloister”)

v Where a friend, with both hands in his pockets,
May saunter up close to examine it,
And remark a good deal of Jane Lamb in it,
"But the eyes are half out of their sockets;
"That hair's not so bad, where the gloss is,
"But they've made the girl's nose a proboscis:
"Jane Lamb, that we danced with at Vichy!
"What, is not she Jane? Then, who is she?"
(“A Likeness”)

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Tony Roberts was educated in England and American. He has published three poetry collections: *Flowers of the Hudson Bay* (Peterloo), *Sitters* (Arc) and, in 2010, *Outsiders* (Shoestring Press). His poems, reviews and essays appear regularly in the literary press.