

A Unifying Theme in Robert Browning's Poetry

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Chapter I

Introduction

Except for a few of the greatest geniuses, evaluation of literary artists is very difficult for us to decide. Hundreds of years may be needed for the establishment of their proper, literary reputations. The standard of assessing these artists has always undulated according to the relationship between authors and their readers, various circumstances, and literary trends and tastes of the times. For example, here is a poet whose literary evaluation was high in the last stage of his life, while in less than forty years after his death he fell into great disfavor with readers as well as with critics. He is one of the greatest poets in the Victorian era, Robert Browning.

As to the audience's attitude toward him in his days, James Fotheringham indicated in the "Preface" to the Second Edition of his work in 1888:

One difficulty of Browning study for some time appears very curiously to have been the impression that Browning readers were a sect, holding a poetic creed of their own, and even insisting on a sort of cult in relation to the poet, and too much of his kind of poetry, and to take him too seriously.¹

1 James Fotheringham, *Studies of the Mind and Art of Robert Browning* (London: Horace Marshall and Son, 1900), p. ix.

In the "Preface" to the Third Edition of the same book the next year, he pointed out that "the number of Browning readers had considerably increased during the last ten years."² No one would overlook the fact that in the background of Fotheringham's implications, there were the dogmatic and prolific activities of the London Browning Society which was founded by Furnivall in 1881 when Browning himself was still living. Although many famous men such as Arthur Symons, Walter Raleigh, Bernard Shaw, and so on held membership in this Society or became contributors to the Society Papers, yet it was soon dominated "by elderly matrons and liberal clergymen less endowed with judgment than enthusiasm."³ As it might be easily supposed, they were bent on finding not his poetical virtues, but such theological virtues or lessons as faith, and spirituality, which could be learned in individual lines or in passages of his poems.

Surely they might not have considered themselves the only authentic critics of Browning, but by using some lines and verses of his poems in their sermons or essays they participated more or less in making a false picture of Browning as a philosophical, spiritual, or religious leader. Worst of all, he was branded an optimist by a shallow criticism.

"In their own era," Lionel Stevenson said, "the Victorian poets were glorified by so many devout enthusiasts that the modern reader with critical intelligence hesitates to express himself in their favour."⁴ Or rather, what Roma A. King, Jr. said is more suggestive:

2 *Ibid.*, p. viii.

3 Roma A. King, Jr., *The Bow and the Lyre* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 4.

4 quoted by Park Honan in his *Browning's Characters* from "The Pertinacious Victorian Poets" (*University of Toronto Quarterly*, 21, 1952)

Their (i.e. members of the London Browning Society) dogmatic interest in Browning as a philosopher and teacher discouraged valid literary criticism; their emphasis on the extrapoetic in his work rendered him suspect for a younger generation less certain than their seniors concerning the whereabouts of God and the rightness of the world.⁵

Although there is a difference in using such a word as "hesitates" or "suspect" between both critics, they have analogously given us an interesting and attractive explanation of Browning's decline in modern times.

Certainly, the most intelligent and studious of our modern critics have tried to reassess him in the currents of English literature and to revive his fame, but they tend to mumble and stumble when faced with the necessity of making a definitive estimate of his place among English men of letters. Recently P. J. Keating has stated that although Browning's place is undoubtedly assured, it is hardly possible to indicate among scholars (even among scholars of Victorian poetry) a consensus of opinion on how to define or evaluate the nature of that place.⁶ This statement might prove the general tendency of criticism about Browning's poetry going on since the middle of the 19th century.

It is now almost ninety years since the death of our great poet, but the time is yet unripe for a final judgement. Browning's reputations have fluctuated while those of his most important contemporaries among Victorian poets, Tennyson and Arnold, have settled. Even in the future his poetry still might not be received with widespread approval and pleasure by readers. Needless to say, the poet himself is responsible for his modern

5 King, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

6 Peter Keating. "Robert Browning: A Reader's Guide" in *Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1974), pp. 299-300.

unpopularity, because even Mrs. Browning, one of the most famous poetesses in his days, set forth:

There are fine things in it — and the presence of genius, never to be denied! At the same time it is hard . . . you understand — isn't it? Too hard! I think so!⁷

The obscurity and difficulty of his poetry are notorious, even if these demerits were not to force an inferior status upon him. Judging from another point of view, ambiguity and difficulty are literary qualities rather welcomed by modern readers and suited to their sophisticated tastes. We know there are some literary artists today whose ambiguity is no less conspicuous than that of Browning and who are more popular than him. For example, Gerald Manley Hopkins, James Joyce to mention just a few.

In these days the efforts cumulated by many Browning scholars have gradually been effective in setting him free from disrepute. Above all, Roma A. King, Jr. and Park Honan direct us through his artistry to a right understanding of his poetry. The former took the attitude of the New Criticism, which asserts the close analysis and explanation of works as they are. In *The Bow and the Lyre* he concentrated mainly on five of Browning's most famous poems and tried to get a conclusion of the characteristics of his poetry. King's merit is that he doubted the conventional and traditional view of Browning as an optimist and that he tried to understand "Browning's men and women who are confused and disturbed and tortured."⁸ The way of his approach is well implied in the following passage:

7 Cited by P. J. Keating in *Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong, pp. 300-301.

8 *Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong, p. 319.

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... each poem may be read as an entity or in the context of Browning's whole work. The better poems contain within themselves all the parts essential to their total meaning, making it unnecessary for the critic to go outside the poem for his interpretation.⁹

The latter's approach is a little different from that of King. He puts stress on elucidation of the techniques which characterize Browning's poetry. Honan's merit is the close analysis or exposition of characters in Browning's poems. Therefore, as Keating puts it, "King and Honan share with each other a determination to rehabilitate Browning the conscious craftsman and experimenter."¹⁰

In 1973, William E. Harrold published *The Variance and the Unity*, in which he states Roma King's significant study of "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" in *The Bow and the Lyre* approaches the method, but stops short by treating the poems in separate chapters.¹¹ By the word "method" he means Browning's complementary methodology. Based on King's statement that Browning "avoided the single point of view preferring rather to approach problems from different intellectual and emotional positions," Harrold declares that Browning developed "a literary form by which he could best present his own search for meaning."¹² According to Harrold, the technique of writing complementary poems is a more encompassing literary device than the dramatic monologue, which Browning perfected as well. In Harrold's opinion, complementary poems do not mean poems which have only a superficial relationship to each other. He designates such poems as "poems

9 King, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

10 Isobel Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

11 Harrold, *The Variance and the Unity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1973), p. 8.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

on related topics, as opposed to ones which are genuine companions.”¹³ Then, what are complementary poems? He gives us the definition:

The term “complementary” actually denotes two types of artistic completion. One kind involves opposing elements which afford a double or multiple vision that results in the reader’s (seeing two or more sides of the situation rather than only one. This view thus offers a more complex and enlightening form of literary art than the simple point of view could give. The other type of complement denotes elements begun in one poem but actually completed in another.¹⁴

My approach to Browning’s poetry is rather that of Keating. When we read some of Browning’s poems, we find there is a sequence of meaning between them even if they belong to different categories. For example, let me choose one poem, “Youth and Art.” According to DeVane, the same theme in this poem is used in *Dramatis Personae*, in “Dis Aliter Visum,” “The Worst of It,” and “Too Late.”¹⁵ He also mentions that the theme of “Youth and Art” is one which Browning developed in “The Statue and the Bust” in *Men and Women*. These complementary poems treat the failure in the lives of lovers as their main theme, and so we should say that they belong to the category of “Love Poems.” Out of this category, I would like to deal with “The Statue and the Bust” and “Youth and Art” as parallel poems in the Second Chapter. Their theme seems to have a complementary relationship to the following poems.

“A Toccato of Galuppi’s” and “Master Hugues of Saxe-

13 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

14 *Loc. cit.*

15 DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 305.

Gotha" belong to the "lyrics with more music and painting than before."¹⁶ It is said that Browning was always delighted in recondite music and the study of music. Applying the pattern of two modes of music to poetic design, however, he does not discuss in these poems the functions and effects of music, but the significance of life instead. Chapter III is given to the analysis of these two poems. The Fourth Chapter treats "Abt Vogler," which also belongs to a set of music poems. However, this poem is better connected to the group of poems on infinity, such as "Prospice" and "Epilogue" to *Asolando*, so the study of the last two poems is also included in the same chapter.

My goal in this paper is to find a unifying logic in the following poems in Chapters II, III and IV.

I am glad to acknowledge that I owe a considerable debt to William E. Harrold. His recent research, *The Variance and the Unity*, has given me many suggestions.

Chapter II

"The Statue and the Bust" and "Youth and Art"

A. "The Statue and the Bust"

The background of this poem is the Riccardi palace, which is now known as the Palazzo Antinori. Many years ago a lady was taken to this castle as a bride. From the farthest window facing the East, she noticed a person riding by with a royal air. When she asked her bridesmaids who he was, they answered that he was the great Duke Ferdinand. At the same time the Duke cast his glance up at the bride and in his turn asked his servant who she was. Then he knew that she was the bride whom Riccardi brought home that day.

Browning effectively uses a simile of "a swordless sheath"

¹⁶ DeVane, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

when he describes the Duke who had not seen the lady until that time, and just at the moment when he saw her, the Duke became "a blade for a knight's emprise / Filled the fine empty sheath of a man." (ll. 25-29) When they looked at each other, he grew straightway brave and wise, and she, as one who awoke, thought her past was dream and her life began only that day. They fell in love with each other at first sight.

That night there was a wedding feast in the house of Riccardi and the great Duke was invited. The lovers stood face to face for a single moment. In the next five stanzas, a delicate situation is depicted, in which whether or not a word was spoken between these lovers is uncertain. The husband, who stood by, however, might have seen or heard something which offended him mortally. At night when the feast was over, the husband and his bride were alone in a bedchamber, where he told her calmly that the door she had passed through was shut on her till her body would be carried out of the palace for burial. The bride as calmly assented: "Your window and its world suffice." (l. 65) In her heart, however, she thought that by means of disguising herself as a page, she could easily fly to the Duke who loved her well and that she would save her soul.

Nevertheless, she checked herself, reflecting that her father would come to bless her next day. Therefore, she decided to tarry for a day, comforting herself with the hope that she would surely see the Duke riding past. The Duke also wished to embrace the lady in his own arms, but he had to wait a night, for the envoy from France was to visit him. He too consoled himself with the reflection that he could see the lady as he rode past her palace. They saw each other, and each decided that next day they would do what they vowed. But the days flew swiftly one after another. Weeks grew into months; months grew into years, till their youth and love withered and both perceived they

had dreamed a dream.

One day the lady saw the glory of her youth had faded; her hair streaked with silver threads; her brow so puckered, and chin so peaked. When she was looking at herself in the mirror, she suddenly asked her servants to call a famous sculptor to fix her beauty, so that it would never fade. Dalla Robbia was to make her a bust at her window waiting, as ever, to watch her lover pass in the square below. But long before Robbia's work was finished, the Duke had also noticed the escape of his own youth. So he too set John of Douay to make a statue of him on horseback, and to place it in the square he had crossed so often, so that men might admire him when he had died.

In this poem the two lovers are criticized for the procrastination and infirmity of will which kept them from eloping and securing love. The same theme of this poem is also treated in the next one.

B. "Youth and Art"

In this poem the speaker is evidently a lady who had married an old, wealthy lord. Before her marriage, she eagerly wanted to be a great opera singer like Grisi. On the other side of the street, there lived a young artist who also devoted himself to sculpture. It is apparent from the tenth and eleventh stanzas that she loved this young artist very much. On the other hand, it is not clear, but it can be judged from the fifteenth stanza, that he also loved her. In spite of their potential love, however, they did not confess it to each other nor risk sharing their fortunes together, because they were too prudent. Therefore, they lost their happiness that only once was within their grasp. Even if they did not follow their inner voices, their lives are not completely ruined because both of them have become members of the high society. She is the wife of a rich old lord and he was dubbed knight and is now a member of the Royal Academy.

Nevertheless, she laments at the end of this poem:

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

And nobody calls you a dunce,
And people suppose me clever:
This could but have happened once,
And we missed it, lost it forever. (ll. 61-68)

This poem would not sound serious to the reader when he reads it for the first time. Even though it tells us the miserable result of her love which ended in unfulfillment and frustration, it rather seems to be a “half-humorous soliloquy”¹⁷ in which she regrets her loss of a good time. On the other hand, it is said that in “The Statue and the Bust” Browning uses “something near to fairy story in order to express his conviction about human nature.”¹⁸ whether it is a half-soliloquy or something near to fairy story, it is a mask behind which the genuine truth is hidden. After reading these parallel poems over and over again, the reader would be introduced to a very important question to which the poet himself does not give us any solution at all. The question is where ultimate happiness is. Is the happiness created by men and women between themselves a true one? What on earth is the truth? These questions are treated and developed in the second unit of poems.

17 *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Charlotte and Helen A. Clarke (New York: Fred DeFau and Company, 1898), V. p. 314.

18 Thomas Blackburn, *Robert Browning: A study of His Poetry* (London: The Woburn Press, 1967), p. 82.

Chapter III

“A Toccata of Galuppi’s” and “Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha”

A. “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”

In this poem, the speaker is a modern Englishman. He is speaking to Baldassare Galuppi who was a popular Italian musician in the eighteenth century. Concerning this fact, Philip Drew explains to us that this Englishman’s audience is the spirit of the fashionable eighteenth-century composer.¹⁹ However, we might well say that this Englishman, a scientist, who probably is or has just been playing Galuppi’s music, is addressing the dead Galuppi in his imagination or is soliloquizing.

This poem can be divided into two parts, between the tenth stanza and the eleventh.

1. In the first part this speaker, although he has never been out of England, calls up a scene from the eighteenth-century Venice which consisted of St. Mark’s, the Doges, Shylock’s bridge, the canal and so forth. In his imagination, people in Venice are seeking pleasure one day in May. Especially ladies are attractively depicted as the symbol of lust or sensuous pleasure. Some of the people are dancing and others are love-making. In this Bohemian atmosphere, Galuppi sits at the clavichord and begins to play a Toccata. His music is very depressing to this young Englishman. In the opening scene of this poem this man has already stated that the clear meaning of Galuppi’s music induces “such a heavy mind.”

Then, what is his music suggesting and implying to the Venetian people or to this Englishman himself? It is clearly shown in the seventh stanza:

19 Philip Drew, *The Poetry of Robert Browning: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 120.

what? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixth
 diminished, sigh on sigh,
 Told them something? Those suspensions,
 those solutions — “Must we die?”
 Those commiserating sevenths — “Life might
 last! we can but try!” (11. 19-21)

The lesser thirds and sixths diminished symbolically suggest that the inevitable time of death is surely coming to the people in Venice. No one can evade it. Then the commiserating sevenths allure them to a despairing, delusive hope. The music implies inexorably in its dominant theme that every mortal must die. However, people in Venice seem to pay no attention to the meaning of Galuppi's music. In spite of its touching the hearts of the Venetians, his plaintive music contrarily seems to have inspired them to live for the day.

The Toccata finishes and Galuppi is politely praised by the people. Then, again they go back to their pursuit of pleasure, till:

...in due time, one by one,
 Some with lives that came to nothing, some
 with deeds as well undone,
 Death stepped tacitly and took them where
 they never see the sun. (11. 28-30)

This stanza shows us the natural result of ignoring the warning of Galuppi. In this first part of the poem, Browning gives us a solution to a problem which I have mentioned before. He clearly tells us here that there is no ultimate happiness in the love-making and pleasure-seeking lives of Venetian people. Still we have the problem unsolved.

2. In the second part of this poem Browning treats this problem from a different point of view. Apart from pleasure-seeking Venetian people, this Englishman is now thinking of himself. He

is not a hedonistic Venetian, but a scientist who has devoted himself to "reason." Galuppi gives an affirmation through his music that this Englishman will not die because his soul can be discerned. According to Galuppi, where there is a soul discernible the soul is, no doubt, immortal. Opposite to men and women in Venice, for whom life merely meant pleasure, this Englishman has studied nature as if there were nothing insoluble for him in it. However, even if Galuppi assures him that he will not die, he cannot be satisfied with it, because everything is transient on the earth and every man is mortal. In this sense, Galuppi's music has a tone of sardonic irony.

This Englishman might be a veteran scientist of natural science. But for all his pride in his scientific knowledge, he cannot find the ultimate happiness either in the hedonistic life of Venetian people or in his stoic life of scientific study. In other words, I can say that he cannot find it either in the life of love or in the life of reason, at least, not on earth.

George M. Ridenour tells us that this does not make it the best of the music poems, the one that offers the richest possibilities of experience.²⁰ Although he praises this poem, still we cannot find any solution to the problem of the ultimate happiness. However, we cannot overlook the clue to this problem which Galuppi gives us in the twelfth stanza. I would like to quote again what he has said:

The soul, doubtless, is immortal — where a
soul can be discerned. (l. 36)

It seems that this scientist did not pay attention to these words of Galuppi. On the contrary, he even sympathizes with the dead

²⁰ Quoted from Mr. Ridenour's essay "Browning's Music Poems" in *Browning's Mind and Art*, ed. Clarence Tracy (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p. 174.

woman in Venice who are, for him, the symbol of the happy enjoyment of this world. However, since he realizes that this worldly or earthly beauty vanishes away, he cannot help feeling chilly and grown old.

B. "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha"

In this poem, the speaker is a church organist who has an excellent technical skill. The situation is parallel with "A Toccata of Galuppi's" in that he meditates while playing a composition and determines to have a colloquy with an imaginary composer who wrote "mountainous" fugues. In a church where they have just concluded the evening service, he asks the composer, Master Hugues, the meaning of compositions for which the master was famous. There is only one inch of candle left in the socket, so that the master has to tell him what he wishes to say quickly. The question is discussed from verse xii.

First he delivers his phrase. There is not much in that. But it is answered, where no answer is necessary. Thus two themes have started. Then a Third is added, and a Fourth, until five subjects are going into "Wrangle, abuse and vociferance —" No one of them has anything to say. The structure and drift of the fugues are perfectly transferred into this poem by Browning's artistry, which is proved in five voices personifying characters taking part in the discussion. Berdøe's explanation is very much to the point:

So the disputation is like that of a knot of angry politicians, who all want to speak at once, and will scarcely allow each other to utter a complete sentence.²¹

The organist feels that Master Hugues may be trying to say something significant about life which, however, he cannot deduce

21 Edward Berdøe, *The Browning Cyclopaedia*. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1964), p. 266.

out of the fugue. If he did not perceive the composer's meaning, he would be "deaf". Furthermore, as he is a trained organist who knows how to analyse the structure of the fugues and how to perform them, the reason that he does not quickly understand the meaning of the music is not that he is incompetent and unqualified, but that what Hugues wished to convey is not expressed directly and explicitly. The organist has only perceived a moral of life. That is, life is a fugue, a web simple yet subtle and intricately woven by us, but aimless and resultless, full of impotent strife, and "Death ending all with a knife." (l. 110) This web obscures and conceals the truth, which is symbolized in the poem by "gold". Needless to say, the web stands for our traditions and inventions. By habits, customs, laws, morals, and so forth, we keep ourselves quite apart from the truth. And in the end we have no "glimpse of the far land" at all. Here the organist pauses and thinks better of it:

Who thinks Hugues wrote for the deaf?
Proved a mere mountain in labour?
Better submit — try again — what's the clef? (ll. 126-128)

Besides, at the end of this dialogue the speaker asks Master Hugues to "Bid One, Two, Three, Four, Five, clear the arena!" (l. 138) The composer has not been able to impart the truth through the fugue, so that the organist decides to unstop the Full-Organ, in order to "blare out the mode Palestrina." (l. 140) According to Worsfold:

Palestrina (c. 1524-94) called *Princeps Musicae*. The master of ecclesiastical music, who in the sixteenth century breathed into the perfect body of musical composition "breath of that artistic life which alone could enable it to give thanks to the Creator of all things in tones which

betokened the presence of the soul within it.”²²

The word “soul” in this passage is very meaningful because, when Harrold explains that Master Hugues’ failure of conveying the truth through the fugue is caused by the absence of soul in his work, he may have had the above-mentioned passage in his mind.²³

Whether or not the speaker could blare out the music of Palestrina is not depicted in the last stanza and so it remains ambiguous. However, the situation is that the light which began in the small glow of a candle ends in darkness.

While in the roof, if I’m right there —
... Lo, you, the wick in the socket !
Hallo, you sacristan, show us a light there !
Down it dips, gone like a rocket ! (ll. 141-144)

Therefore, we can symbolically deduce that the organist had to stop playing the organ halfway or could not play it at all in the darkness. The tone of the whole poem is rather comic. As I have mentioned before, humor or comicality is the mask behind which the genuine truth is hidden in this poem as well. As Roma A. King, Jr. states, “the chilling sense of nothingness increasingly overshrouds the speaker.”²⁴

Chapter IV

“Abt Vogler”, and “Prospice” and “Epilogue” to *Asolando*

A. “Abt Vogler”

In this poem the speaker, Abt Vogler himself, lets his imag-

22 *Men and Women*, vol. I, with introduction and notes by Kenji Ishida and Rinshiro Ishikawa (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1957) Note p. 121.

23 Harrold, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

24 Roma A. King, Jr., *The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 103.

ination work at will. His imaginative flight reaches up to heaven, and then suddenly drops to hell. It is very difficult for us to follow the dynamic leap of his imagination. However, my main point is not to analyse his imagination, but to examine where the ultimate happiness or the truth is and whether or not Abt Vogler can find it.

He has been sitting at a kind of small organ called an orchestration which he invented himself, and has been extemporizing. He seems to be in a state of absorption, out of which his imagination overflows. Up to the fourth stanza, he compares his music to the magic palace which King Solomon built for the delight of his beloved princess. According to ancient legends, Solomon was able to call up all the spirits, good and evil, and all the creatures when he pronounced the ineffable name of God. They came to do his will and built his palace. Vogler yearns and aspires that when he touches all the keys, he could build his visionary palace of music with the help of the spirits of sound, just as Solomon built his palace. In his vision, his music palace becomes higher and higher until it looks like St. Peter's brilliant dome. Then, in the fourth stanza Vogler's imagination let heaven and earth fuse with each other and there is no limitation of time and space in his visionary scope. In his imagination his upward movement towards heaven is met by a movement from heaven to him.

Nature in turn conceived, obeying an impulse as I;
And the emulous heaven yearned down, made effort
to reach the earth,
As the earth had done her best, in my passion, to
scale the sky:
Novel splendours burst forth, grew familiar and dwelt
with mine,
Not a point nor peak but found and fixed its wander-

ing star;
Meteor-moons, balls of blaze: and they did not pale nor
pine,
For earth had attained to heaven, there was no more
near nor far. (11. 26-32)

Furthermore, he can see all the generations of the past, the present and the future living in his imaginary cosmos.

Next, in the sixth stanza, Vogler compares himself with other artists, such as a painter and a poet. They have results in their arts. On the contrary, Vogler's music does not need to obey earthly laws. He tells us that "out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star." (l. 53) His music is made by a flash of God's will which is above every law of the world. However, his magnificent visionary palace is destined to vanish away, as he himself calls it "a flash" and also his music is an extemporized one. Here, he feels deep sorrow, crying, "It is gone at last, the palace of music I reared." (l. 57) Sitting at his musical instrument, he sheds tears because he can never recapture the wonderful music. His imaginative ecstasy is gone along with his imaginary palace of music. How on earth could he regain the good time? His frustration is in this question. However, his sorrow at this great sense of loss is comforted by his reflection on the source from which he gets his inspiration of extemporization. He says as follows:

Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable
Name?
Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with
hands! (11. 65-66)

In order that Vogler can cling with his mind "To the same, same self, same love, same God, what was, shall be," (l. 64) it is important to him that God is ever the same. At this point,

his logic is very clear. God once inspired him to make such wonderful music. After it has gone, how can he doubt that God's power fills the heart that He once expanded? Then, he suddenly gets an inspiration:

On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect
round. (l. 72)

Vogler's music of extemporization is transitory, evanescent and only partial on the earth. However, it is destined to be persistent and a perfect whole only in heaven. It is not too much to say that Abt Vogler's thinking about the ultimate happiness or the truth is condensed in this one line.

At the end of this poem, he returns to his music. It seems to me that he stopped playing his orchestrion in the middle of his soliloquizing meditation. In line 70, there is a word "silence." In line 83 we can find the word "pause." Also in line 89 there is the word "silence" again. These words seem to imply the break of his music.

Concerning the musical terms in the last part of this poem, many expounders have given us almost the same comment. Briefly speaking, Vogler descended through semitones to a poignant minor key, which seems to suggest the sorrows of life. This is then shifted into the alien ground of a ninth, which means a more satisfying, reassuring chord. The last "C Major" symbolized "both a return to the level of common existence and the restful harmony of the death which closes a well-spent life."²⁵ His musical aspiration reached its climax and stopped in the middle. Then, it was again resumed, died slowly and has just finished in quietude and beautiful harmony. He has just finished his

25 *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghten and G. Robert Mifflin Stange (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 282, n.

music not tragically, but hopefully and calmly, because he was able to find the ultimate happiness which is in heaven; that is to say, the truth. Therefore, he was able to decide that while he was on this earth, he would be patient and proud and would soberly try to sleep.

“Abt Vogler” was published in 1864. However, DeVane suggests:

There is nothing to set precisely the date of the composition of Abt Vogler, though we know that Browning sought consolation in music upon his return to England after his wife’s death in 1861. The spiritual fervor of the poem, and its profound seriousness and beauty, leads one to think that it was written after Mrs. Browning’s death.²⁶

In this poem, it seems to me that we can see Robert Browning himself who also sits at his piano by himself with patience and silent hope.

B. “Prospice” and “Epilogue” to *Asolando*

According to DeVane, “Prospice” was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* for June, 1864. He states, however, that it was probably written in the fall of 1861, shortly after the death of Mrs. Browning.²⁷ Therefore, this poem is chronologically akin to “Abt Vogler,” in which, I have already mentioned, we can see Browning’s solitary attitude of sitting at his piano through that of Abt Vogler.

When Abt Vogler’s magnificent visionary palace vanished away, his sorrow was very deep, but his solitude might not have been deeper than Browning’s when he felt it at the death of his most beloved wife. The love romance between him and his wife is even now highly respected as one of the most passionate and

²⁶ DeVane, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 303-304.

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beautiful events in the English-speaking world. Then, how could he console his own sorrow for himself? Playing the piano is one way, but he courageously tried to fight with himself who would have been liable to dejection, so as to bear with unbearable sorrow.

This poem consists of only 28 lines, in the first six lines of which the last moment of death is represented with terms of meteorology.

Fear death — to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe;
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form
Yet the strong man must go: (ll. 1-8)

The strong man must go to fight the unbeatable foe, because he is always a fighter and would hate that "death bandaged his eyes and forebore, and bade him to creep past." (ll. 15-16) His courage surely comes from the prospective reunion with his beloved one in an afterlife; that is to say, from the ultimate happiness in heaven. At the end of the poem, he declares:

For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall swindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest! (ll. 21-28)

Twenty-eight years after his wife went to heaven, Browning

also had to follow her. "Epilogue" to *Asolando*, which consists of 20 lines, is his swan song like "Crossing the Bar" by his contemporary, Tennyson. In "Epilogue" there is one stanza as follows:

One who never turned his back but marched breast
forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong
would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
sleep to wake. (ll. 11-15)

Browning had a strong belief in the infinity of human power. As Berdoe explained and annotated, "All Browning is here. From Pauline to this 'Epilogue' the message was ever the same, and confidence in the ultimate and eternal triumph of right uniform throughout."²⁸ The above stanza may be acknowledged as one of the examples manifesting his unceasing belief.

However, we should not hastily think that his belief is optimistic. Judging from the sequence of meaning in complementary poems, it is empirical. But for the experience of Abt Vogler who "projects, . . . a new vision of an existence beyond this one that will expand the fragment into a whole, transform the broken arc into the perfect round,"²⁹ he could not try to sleep, in order to wake like the speaker in "Epilogue" who falls to rise and is baffled to fight better. In this sense, it may be that his strong belief in the infinity of human power paradoxically comes from his hard, persevering struggle against his own self which is liable to be baffled, so that he might secure the ultimate happiness in heaven.

28 Berdoe, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

29 Roma A. King, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 120.

Chapter V

Conclusion

When we study Browning's poetry, we usually divide it into several categories for convenience's sake. One example will be enough: James Fotheringham separates Browning's poetry into such divisions as "Religious Poems," "Poems on Immortality," "The Love Poems," "Psychological and Casuistic Studies," and so forth. Furthermore, in his book he assigns three chapters to "Poem on Art," which is made up of "Poets and Poetry," "Music," and "Painters and Painting." As this classification shows us, many critics gather together the same kind of poems in one chapter and another kind in another chapter. This fact seems to be appropriate when we try to find out an author's characteristic way of thinking about some subject matter. This group of poems treated in one chapter are complementary poems which involve parallel or opposite elements affording "a double or multiple vision that results in the reader's seeing two or more sides of the situation rather than only one."³⁰

Some critics collect the same kind of poems from different volumes, while others look for them in one volume. In chapter 15 entitled "Time and Change: James Lee's Wife," Eleanor Cook concentrates on all love lyrics which belong to *Dramatis Personae*, in order to find out a theme "a certain fear of the changes now have a new reality."³¹ According to Cook:

In *Dramatis Personae* the love lyrics centre on more commonplace problems: in *James Lee's Wife*, a married couple separates, the man leaving the woman; in *The*

30 Harrold, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

31 Eleanor Cook, *Browning's Lyrics: An Exploration* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. 241.

Worst of It, the woman deserts the man; in *Dis Aliter Visum* and *Youth and Art*, the crucial moment is missed once and for all (a rarity in *Men and Women*: even the *Statue and Bust* lovers have more than one chance), and potentially joyful unions never take place . . .³²

From these love lyrics, we can acquire multiple facets of love. However, when we compare love poems with conviction poems, as Cook tries, we need complementary poems which fill the gap between the two different categories. Cook places two poems there:

In the *Epistle of Karshish*, the drama is strong, the focus on wonder, not on the implications of the decision for the rest of Karshish's life. In *A Death in the Desert*, the decision has been taken long before, the focus is on the effects of time and especially on the threats it brings.³³

Cook's trend of thinking is rather specific, because "Epistle of Karshish" symbolically represents the strife between religion and science in the Victorian era, while "Death in the Desert" predicts the controversy between High Criticism and orthodox Christianity. The latter poems do not give any solution to a question presented by those love poems.

As I have stated in the first chapter, my approach to Browning's poetry is that of Keating, especially the second type which denotes elements begun in one poem but actually completed in another. Rather, my approach starts from one category of poems and terminates in another category. I have selected two poems out of "Music Poems" to fill the above-mentioned gap, because even if they belong to "Music Poems" their main idea is "the significance of life." Therefore, through these two complements

32 Cook, *op. cit.* p. 241.

33 *Loc. cit.*

of continuation, the reader can attain the conviction which "grows from experience in *Abt Vogler*."³⁴ However, "Abt. Vogler" is not the termination of our logic. Cook says, "But in *Rabbi Ben Ezra* and *Prospice* the conviction must carry its own weight."³⁵

Furthermore, Browning carries the weight of conviction to his very swan song "Epilogue" to *Asolando*. In this poem he gives us the reflections of a man who does not claim to have found a final solution, but is content to remember that at least he never gave up the fight to discover one. This idea of Browning underlies his poems about religion, about life, about art, and even about love.

Robert Browning was a prolific poet. From his first work, *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession* (1833), to the last one, *Asolando: Fancies and Facts* (1890), there are, by count, thirty-three literary works, which are also made up of various kinds of poems, such as historical plays, long dramatic monologues of minute psychoanalysis, short lyric poems and so on. As for materials of his poems, they are derived from the whole history of Europe. Therefore, it is a task of extreme difficulty to find the common characteristic features of his poetry.

However, as Keating has suggested to us, there is surely a method of, or a clue to, finding it. He gives us the name "overpoem" to the artistic object rendered in combined reading. According to him:

The parallel elements in the poems allow the reader through memory to reactivate the experience of reading the other poems within the unit to aid in the construction of the overpoem.³⁶

34 Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Harrold, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

His theory of overpoem is very unique, because as its foundation Harrold has made very much use of the principle of Gestalt psychology. In his opinion, Gestalt psychology, which deals with form, patterns, and configurations, holds that perception consists of more than can be discovered in separate sensations.³⁷ He adapted this Gestalt psychology to Browning's poetry, saying that "two poems designed with parallel elements and read together produce an overpoem whose meaning is different from and greater than that derived from a separate reading of the poems."³⁸ In this sense we might say that Harrold's method of studying Browning's poetry is one step ahead of his predecessors. I have studied Browning's poems according to his suggestion. Concerning my method, what is different from Harrold's is that I have tried to find a unifying theme out of different categories of poems. Therefore, it can be said that I have stretched his way of studying to my own purpose.

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