

ROBERT BROWNING AT SUNSET AND MID-DAY

Apocryphal Reminiscences Attributed to Dr. F. J. Furnival,
Founder of the London Browning Society

Not being uppercrust Victorian
I sometimes wonder at the difference
between the public and the private life
of my late friend. Restraint, good taste are prized
above all else. Secrets should not be bared...
yet silence means that I will only be
a literary footnote. Now he's gone
I'm not so often quoted. Far too soon
I will be sinking back into the shadows.

For years I was an oftscorned busybody
who fawned upon the minor literati,
not one to win the friendship of a seer,
a major poet like our Robert Browning.
Who'd ever think an obscure grub in our Museum,
a lowly teacher at a workmen's school
would ever bask in such reflected glory?

My first lame schemes got nowhere rather fast:
my Early Text group hardly drew a handful;
I tried promoting Chaucer when but few
could read his early English. Next I launched
a ballad group long after Walter Scott's
too many imitators had exhausted
that vein. Who'd ever think my fourth society,
devoted to one cryptic and neglected,
would spread like a forest fire in a dry season?

Consider this: until I came along
the third phase Browning thought it good to sell
two thousand and five hundred copies while
Lord Tennyson soared up to forty thousand
with more of his Idyls, and over night at that.
In eighteen eighty-one, the year I founded
our London Browning group (without permission)
the bard was almost seventy. He had written
a whole shelf full of books, some thirty, yet
his wife, dead twenty years ago in Florence,
still earned more royalties than Robert did.

Some joked about my group but not R.B.
A hostess asked him once if he objected
to all this adulation. He replied:
"Object? I've waited forty years for it!"
The secret goes far deeper. Browning was
a lonely man with many battle scars
and hidden wounds that festered in his breast.

Lord Byron, as you know, awoke one morning world famous at just twenty-four. He made two thousand pounds a year, then fabulous. (It is ironical to think that those first two cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, The Traveler of Goldsmith, cast as Spenser, are sing-song, hardly readable today.) That freakish luck of Byron haunted Browning. Scott's Minstrel earlier won such acclaim that Edinburgh, crowned with its castle rock, half seemed another Athens, Periclean. Young poets love to dream that rose-lipped lasses will soon discover them, that sad young men will stride through Oxford's mall and Harvard's yard declaiming verses from their first thin books.

Who else among our major bards has known such desolate, cold cemetery years as Browning did? You might expect his Pauline, echoing loved Shelley, printed at one and twenty with a fond aunt's blessing, wouldn't sell one copy, or the blind detour of lifeless blank verse dramas written for Macready might just gather dust in shops. The poet scorned was fortune's favourite in one respect: a father quite unique, a banker-scholar barred in his green youth from Latin Quarter art dreams and resolved to free his kindred son from treadmill jobs, allow ten years for full apprenticeship. To gain a forum papa offered cash for three expensive books that didn't sell and when he hesitated (little dreaming there would be nine more, all without a profit), the publisher came up with a solution: cheap pamphlets, sixteen pages, double columns, at a cost of twelve or fifteen pounds apiece, the future Bells and Pomegranates series.

At thirty-one, older than Shelley now, with papa paying still, Bells three, book seven, had My Last Duchess, lyrics, monologues. After three other plays, Bells seven, book eleven, showed Robert Browning in full radiance: St. Praxed's Tomb, Lost Leader, his hymn to England. Belated fame at last? No cobwebs, dust.

Is it any wonder that he fell in love with an older lady poet, sight unseen, who praised his poems? You know of Wimpole Street, Quixote's rescue of a dying princess kept invalidated by her tyrant father. Dear 'Ba' (not ever Liz or Betty) was a tiny doll at thirty-nine, six years his senior but she made R.B. seem tall. The little giant was desperate for any

admirer. What you may not know is that her eyes were lovely but her face careworn, already middle-aged; for seven years shifted from bed to sofa and back to bed. While writing those love letters every day she took her sixty drops of laudanum. At fifteen she'd been given opium for TB bleeding. She gulped it now in terror of thunderstorms, in dark moods and by habit. In private she extolled "anreeta draughts," "red hood of poppies" like a Limehouse dupe. Her public only saw the Jeckyll side.

That made elopement! Like two teen-aged fools! She should have died before she reached the not so sunny Italy; she almost did in Paris. Flight and love and poetry became a trinity of miracles. The historic land, then freedom's battleground, to Robert was his university. He hailed Mazzini's rebels, trusted neither the kings nor popes....

To Ba, the Casa Guidi Windows looking on Dante's Florence, Michel's and Giotto's, the birthplace of the Renaissance was now far more exciting than in feudal days, the cradle of new liberty reborn. It was a glorious time to be alive. In Rome one could talk to the consul who befriended dying Keats. Hawthorne came here, the great, the near-great and the also-rans, the day's celebrities with their brief candles and arrogance; rebellious, hopeful youth flocked to the pagan or the Christian springs.

For a while the married poets helped each other flower. Browning struck fire with new monologues, the highlights of life's crossroads and regrets. Her Casa Guidi Windows, little read today, surpass those facile sonnets, those "love me for love's sake only" honied sonnets of pale, ethereal love, always God's grace, God's gifts, God's presence, views of Heaven, Heaven's music and angels, angel lover, angels, angels! She'd read too much of the fifth rate of her time, bypassed too long her England's glorious choir. They had to breed some future geniuses. Soon glimpses of a nightmare can be seen between the lines of letters. Browning writes Ba's sisters of her courage in giving up the crutch, morphine, for months before Pen's birth, a boast not made again. Miscarriages came after the one son. The hidden truth was broadcast by the Battle-Hymning Julia

whose eyes would see the glory of the Lord
just once but wanted Ba to praise dry, bloodless poems
that held no grapes of wrath.

For many years
being the man he was, devoted still
to this poor ghost, a slave to recent love,
a short Goliath here in chains, he tried
to minister to all her petty whims,
endured the awful tyranny that's voiced
by an invalid once loved. His art and craft
were luckily objective. Thanks to habit
he sought out other troubled folk for themes.
He wasn't one to pour a bleeding heart
into his poetry and make confessions.
A Meredithian Modern Love recording
those sickly years might be too much to bear.

As Missus Barrett Browning's husband he
composed no Sonnets From The Portuguese
to answer hers. Perhaps at times he wished
they never had been written. He had to be
the living legend of a once great love
when it was ashes. He knew those dulcet verses
enchained him closer still. His moods were black
at thoughts of how his greatest work to date,
his Men and Women hardly sold at all
while E.B.'s fat, verbose Aurora Leigh,
that novel written in prosaic verse,
half copied from Jane Eyre, with cardboard people,
went from edition to edition, proved
the table topic of the wives and daughters
of the expanding middle class, that vast
new market that skyrocketed book sales
but scorned the erudite and oft obscure
R.B. at summit, called him second rate.
Our hero was Prince Consort. Even Ruskin
preferred her poems. Rossetti worshipped her
and Poe inscribed a book. Her Florence friends
thought R.B. just a minor scribbler,
mere husband, servant to the greatest woman
Anne Thackeray had ever known. The two
self-helping poets seldom shared their work.

Too credulous of any nostrum offered,
a pattern of her life, Ba even saw
a liberal in a tyrant pope, extolled
Napoleon the Little as Liberator
(after he drove Mazzini out of Rome!).
Next Ba and Harriet Beecher Stowe went in
for table tapping and for spirits while
the skeptic wrote of Sludge the Medium
but kept it secret. Public shame again
came when a shocked, too realistic scribe
described Elizabeth for the U.S.A.
as "a crooked, dried-up woman," old, and "with

a horrible mouth." She was forty-eight. An envoy's wife retorted by extolling the beauty of Ba's soul despite a frame "long shattered by disease." R.B. himself said angrily that he could see without his spectacles and that his poet-wife was beautiful in face as well as mind. Meanwhile he wrote of sharp-eyed husbands seeing their fading wives, of matrimony's strains in sombre but dramatic monologues.

Despite the optimistic Pippa Passes (when he was young and still a bachelor), if God was in his Heaven, all was not right with the world. He had to learn to live with the nightmare. He had to face the ignominy of rout and the resulting blackness of despair. His Men and Women was his own Mount Blanc, his fourteenth and his fifteenth offering, two volumes, pruned of old obscurities, enriched with insights, skills of twenty years, the best new poetry since Shelley died and it was bought by some two hundred people. No trumpet voices championed his art. He was cold-shouldered when he should be crowned. In self-defense he lashed the great reviews, so prejudiced and blind to England's glory, as Goosey Fraser, Gander Blackwood cackling in the literary pond. In other quarters he was assailed for immorality: for sympathizing with Fra Lippo Lippi, "licentious artist-monk," and charged with praising adultery in The Statue and the Bust. Even controversy didn't sell more books. He had no heart to try new masterpieces. He haunted Story's studio, tried to sculpt. Year after year went by with few new poems except some hidden from his world-famed Ba. This should have been his golden harvest time.

Ba died on a June evening after an illness so brief, so like her regular attacks it hardly roused alarm. R.B. had sat up nightly through so many bigger crises for years of her mysterious malady, perhaps consumption and dope poisoning. He'd served her jelly and some lemonade not a quarter of an hour before the end. He'd sent for the doctor, volunteered to bathe her feet. Ba wanted quiet, sat with head against his cheek. Her crises were so often linked to the ebb and flow of the Sardinian fight to free Italia; the last blow seemed the death of that old statesman, loved Cavour.

R.B. made three decisions...
 Before he shipped her books and sofa back to England he had an artist friend record how Casa Guidi, home for fourteen years, should be remembered. He left Florence then forever. She was fifty-five and all he ever knew of Heaven and of Hell. R.B. at forty-nine had written most of his best poems. Someone remarked that none saw Browning really on the earth again, only a splendid surface. Oh, he wrote reams of verses like old Wordsworth did but who now reads The Ring or those long later poems? He soon became the greatest diner-outer since Doctor Johnson, another lonely man. Do you wonder why he put up with my questions, my gadfly search for new interpretations? I was the kettle-drum for the old hero. He was a Titian being rediscovered by members I enrolled like Bernard Shaw, James Thompson, Arthur Symonds, other poets and Marx's daughter, Eleanor. It was most pleasing for a time and then he went back to his long-loved Italy to die.

-- Walter Snow
 Coventry, CT

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Robt. Creeley's St. Martin's \$3, Tom Clark's Green \$2, Jim Koller's California Poems \$3, Robt. Kelly's Flesh Dream Book \$4.50, Diane Wakoski's Greed: Parts 5-7 \$3, David Bromige's Threads \$4, Joanne Kyger's Places To Go \$4 fm. Black Sparrow Press, P.O. Box 25603, Los Angeles CA 90025. ¶ Karen Waring's A Child's Poem & Poems \$1 fm. Open Skull Press, 2751 Castro Way, Sacramento CA 95818. ¶ New broad-sides fm. Dr. Generosity Press, 1403 2nd. Ave., New York, NY 10021: Paul Blackburn's Baggs, Bill Little's I Come Under Some Accusation Resembling the Moon, George Kimball's ¿Quiens?, Dan Maurice's In Plain English, Jack Micheline's It Is Not Here On Earth What I Am Seeking, Toby Olson's Tools, Peter Van Toorn's Love Song, James McMann's Monday, Ken Kwint's And The Hungry to The Thin Air, Ray Freed's Easter. ¶ Floyce Alexander's Ravines (Stone-Marrow Press) \$1 fm. Serendipity Books, Berkeley CA 94709. ¶ Two by Rbt. Carande & Jeff Woodward fm. Solid Erection, 177 Iroquois Trail, Ona, WV 25545. ¶ Latest fm Runcible Spoon, 2230 Jay St. (#6), Sacramento CA 95815: Doug Blazek's Baptismal Corruption in the Sunflower Patch and bp Nichol's Beach Head plus anthology 10,000 Names of the Buddha \$2.