

22 AT HOME WITH THE BROWNING? (April 2020)

Oh, to be in *England*
 Now that April's there,
 And whoever wakes in England
 Sees, some morning, unaware,
 That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
 Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
 While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
 In England—now!

Well, self-isolation from Covid-19 may be turning many of us towards nature but some of us have also been missing France rather than pining for England. And, sorry, but I haven't finished with 'eminent Victorians' just yet.

I, like many of my generation, first came across Robert Browning with "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" – ideal fodder for children to have to learn by heart with its rambunctious rhymes, rhythms and its cracking good, moralistic story. It's in many ways a wonderful poem, dramatic and full of voices (including that of a lone rat "stout as Julius Caesar").

But was Browning any *more* than this? "Home Thoughts from Abroad" (above) and "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" led me to think of him as a bluff, hearty sort of poet, on a par perhaps with poets like Henry Newbolt or John Masefield. Ruskin rather damningly wrote in 1855 that he "found them absolutely and literally a set of the most amazing Conundrums that ever were proposed to me." He wrote that after twenty lines, "the puzzlement.... increases with the comfortlessness till I get a headache and give in..."

Oscar Wilde's famous remark that "Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning" was a cruel (but funny) jibe and unlike Pound who did like Robert Browning, TS Eliot didn't think much of him ("Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose"). FR Leavis accused him of lacking "an adult, sensitive mind", and of concerning himself with "simple emotions and sentiments" – which is about as far off the mark, as I hope to show, as it is possible to be.

So, of course, being amongst the very last of the 'Leavis generation', I never came across his dramatic monologues until much later. And how wrong all his scathing critics were! Let's then revisit the Brownings, and my apologies to you if this is all old news.



© AP Photo/Wellesley College

Their story starts with Elizabeth Barrett (née Moulton-Barrett 1806-61), already an esteemed poet but virtually bed-ridden with a strange spinal (psychosomatic?) illness, who was visited in 1845 by a younger, aspiring poet, Robert Browning (he was six years younger (1812-1889)). Their mutual admiration for each other's poetry (she had published "*Poems*" in 1844) led to courtship and romance (which her controlling father would not tolerate), their dramatic elopement, their secret marriage and their flight to Italy in 1846. This was Robert Browning's most defining, romantic role in his

life – the artist as heroic lover, fleeing... to love and create! In Florence they became 'famous writers', had a son in 1849, Robert Wiedeman Barrett Browning, whom they both adored (the little boy's attempts to sound out his own name, Wiedeman resulted in "Pen", which is what he was called), and they lived out their lives in Italy, which Robert, having left University College (London University) after a year without taking his degree, called his *real* university.

I have *tried* to get on with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the precocious 'poetess', who started writing poetry at the age of 4 (!) and who championed worthy social causes like slavery and child-labour in factories and mines. But I have to admit to a block. Wanting to discover *why* she was so popular, I've several times started the dauntingly lengthy "*Aurora Leigh*", a novel in verse about a young girl's moral development and her tempestuous relationship with Romney, but I'm afraid that for me it's still a bit of a (weighty) *yawn*. Covid-19 may change all that, of course, as we now have time on our hands! I've discovered that her famed "*Sonnets from the Portuguese*" ("*from the Portuguese*" was added to disguise the fact that they were based on her real-life love for Robert) were originally going to be titled "*Sonnets from the Bosnian*", which somehow strikes an odd note.



Here is one, the celebrated 24th sonnet.

Sonnet XXIV from the Portuguese

Let the world's sharpness, like a clasp knife,
 Shut in upon itself and do no harm
 In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,
 And let us hear no sound of human strife
 After the click of the shutting. Life to life—
 I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm,
 And feel as safe as guarded by a charm
 Against the stab of worldlings, who if rife
 Are weak to injure. Very whitely still
 The lilies of our lives may reassure
 Their blossoms from their roots, accessible
 Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer,
 Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill.
 God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

Hmmm! Mawkish?

The image of the knife is useful, possibly; she wants to “shut” down the dangerous, unwanted “world”. Well, fair enough as an idea, but when we get to the sestet, the image changes to lilies “*whitely*” reassuring us... about what? What is growing straight? The “blossoms”, presumably, although “roots” grammatically seem more closely connected to “growing”. But if this access to “heavenly dews” (cliché...?) is so positive, then the last line seems at odds with the thrust of the poem. “God...can make us poor.” Really? Isn’t the point more that “God” is the only one who *could* make them “poor” (but he surely *won't!* Or *will* he...?)

Add to this the weak rhymes of “accessible/hill” and “fewer/poor” and I feel the poem is a bit of a mess. If I were a “worldling” I might well want to have a little bit of a “stab”.

Sonnet No. 43 is apparently often read out at weddings and, again, it’s bursting with sincerity and high-minded, unselfish ‘*love*’, but I *wish* she could be less earnest and declamatory – we have to take her pure “passion” on trust; there’s never any irony or self-

deprecation. Compare Shakespeare's far more upbeat and humorously ironic sonnet, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" – where the poet's love comes through precisely because he *doesn't* put either her or himself up on a pedestal, as Elizabeth does here.

Sonnet 43 from the Portuguese

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
 For the ends of being and ideal grace.
 I love thee to the level of every day's
 Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
 I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
 I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
 I love thee with the passion put to use
 In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
 I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
 With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
 Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
 I shall but love thee better after death.

Well, lucky for Robert! And, fortunately also, they *were* exceedingly happy together. It is, however, quite a *self-aggrandising* poem – "I" "me" or "my" comes in 16 times. The 'hero' of this poem is herself! Another celebrated poem, "The Cry of the Children" - while being very 'worthy' and condemning the abuse of child labour in Britain's calamitously unpleasant industries, is again trite and poorly fashioned as a poem (and far too long!). Here is just an extract:

"Alas, the wretched children! they are seeking
 Death in life, as best to have!
 They are binding up their hearts away from breaking,
 With a cerement from the grave.
 Go out, children, from the mine and from the city —
 Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do —

Pluck you handfuls of the meadow-cowslips pretty
 Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through !
 But they answer, " Are your cowslips of the meadows
 Like our weeds anear the mine ?
 Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,
 From your pleasures fair and fine!

"For oh," say the children, "we are weary,
 And we cannot run or leap —
 If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
 To drop down in them and sleep.
 Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping —
 We fall upon our faces, trying to go;
 And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
 The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
 For, all day, we drag our burden tiring,
 Through the coal-dark, underground —
 Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
 In the factories, round and round.

"For all day, the wheels are droning, turning, —
 Their wind comes in our faces, —
 Till our hearts turn, — our heads, with pulses burning,
 And the walls turn in their places
 Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling —
 Turns the long light that droppeth down the wall, —
 Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling —
 All are turning, all the day, and we with all ! —
 And all day, the iron wheels are droning ;
 And sometimes we could pray,
 'O ye wheels,' (breaking out in a mad moaning)
 'Stop! be silent for to-day! ' ”

“The wheels are droning...” is about it! The drama is completely artificial – our well-meaning poet is addressing imaginary children and then picturing their imaginary collective response. Even Wordsworth (who could also be a bore) dramatised scenes involving children with far more particularity (eg “We Are Seven”).



Robert was, however, totally charmed by Miss Barratt’s verses, just as she was by his. One could make a very crude distinction between the two of them – most of Elizabeth’s verse is highly *subjective* (*her* feelings essentially, her moral development, her affinities), while nearly all Robert Browning’s best verse is found in his development of the dramatic monologue, a genre that he virtually created by himself (although Tennyson’s “Ulysses” written in 1833 and published in 1842 is a masterpiece also). These have an *objective* feel about them - the poet steps aside and lets a ‘dramatic’ speaker talk to us in character, someone usually far removed from the poet’s own ‘persona’. Robert’s plays were all a failure, and Macready, who tried to stage them in London (egged on by Browning *père*), found them a persistent thorn in his side. Yet, by some fluke, Robert’s dramatic genius surfaced, not before the footlights on the stage but on the page, in lyrical verse rather than as a play-script.

After several false starts (like the unreadable “Sordello”), he found his ‘poetic voice’ in *other* ‘voices’ with his ground-breaking *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). This collection includes “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”, “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess”. I want to focus on these three early poems, and then consider just two more poems from his later, majestic *Men and Women* of 1855. I’m an enthusiast about many but some are quite lengthy, like “Andrea del Sarto”, though one of the advantages of Covid-19 is that we will now have no excuse for not exploring the full range of Browning’s dramatic monologues, if we wish.

Unlike my efforts with “Aurora Leigh”, I *did* manage many years ago to read his lengthy ‘masterpiece’, “The Ring and the Book”, a murder mystery novel in verse that has strangely modernist features, like many voices all clamouring to offer us their different viewpoints from which *as readers* we have to try to unravel the “truth” of the problems posed. Ruskin would certainly have been reaching for his Paracetamol well before line 20, but Covid-19 might encourage you to give “The Ring and the Book” a try.

Here, to start us off, is a wonderful, *manically* angry poem, vicious and bursting with spit, spite and fury. As it's a dramatic monologue, we can assume the 'voice' is *not* that of our urbane poet. Robert was an atheist early on (influenced by Shelley's atheism and vegetarianism) and, although interested in and knowledgeable about religion, he was never a declared Christian and was likely agnostic. Here, he imagines the thoroughly *un-Christian* thoughts and behaviour of a monk, who is bitter, hypocritical, vengeful and finally murderous. It becomes laugh-out-loud funny as he plots how he can cause Brother Lawrence's damnation even (by looking at the persona's own 'pornographic' *French novels*).

Notice the rhythm, which is trochaic tetrameter (DUM-di, DUM-di, DUM-di, DUM-di) and which has the effect of strongly emphasising the words in an angry fashion. *Wherever* before has a poem begun with "Gr-r-r!"? Very often, Browning's 'dramatic' trick is to throw us *in media res*. He demands of his readers an almost forensic, detective-like attention to clues and details, so that we 'discover' for ourselves (with the poet's help) what is going on. Browning rarely tells us what to think, preferring to let us make up our minds. Well before Jacques Derrida's "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (there is no out-of-context) and all the business of 'deconstruction', with Roland Barthes and the '*Death of the author*', Robert Browning is encouraging his *readers* to 'create' the story. It may become a rather disingenuous strategy later on – a sort of "Here is my story, make of it what you will..."- but it is also exciting. We have to be sleuths, working out what is going on. And, Browning, for all his apparently bluff heartiness, *is* actually scraping away at the very darkest corners of the human psyche. What interests him is murder, secrets, jealousy, revenge, guilt, shame, hatred! This poem is offered by him more as a joke and we end up laughing, but the psychology behind it is quite dark.

Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister

Gr-r-r--there go, my heart's abhorrence!
 Water your damned flower-pots, do!
 If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
 God's blood, would not mine kill you!
 What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
 Oh, that rose has prior claims--
 Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
 Hell dry you up with its flames!

At the meal we sit together;
Salve tibi! I must hear
 Wise talk of the kind of weather,
 Sort of season, time of year:
Not a plenteous cork crop: scarcely
Dare we hope oak-galls, I doubt;
What's the Latin name for "parsley"?
 What's the Greek name for "swine's snout"?

Whew! We'll have our platter burnished,
 Laid with care on our own shelf!
 With a fire-new spoon we're furnished,
 And a goblet for ourself,
 Rinsed like something sacrificial
 Ere 'tis fit to touch our chaps--
 Marked with L. for our initial!
 (He-he! There his lily snaps!)

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,
 --Can't I see his dead eye glow,
 Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?
 (That is, if he'd let it show!)

When he finishes refection,
 Knife and fork he never lays
 Cross-wise, to my recollection,
 As do I, in Jesu's praise.
 I the Trinity illustrate,
 Drinking watered orange pulp--
 In three sips the Arian frustrate;
 While he drains his at one gulp!

Oh, those melons! if he's able
 We're to have a feast; so nice!
 One goes to the Abbot's table,
 All of us get each a slice.
 How go on your flowers? None double?
 Not one fruit-sort can you spy?
 Strange! -- And I, too, at such trouble,
 Keep them close-nipped on the sly!

There's a great text in Galatians,
 Once you trip on it, entails
 Twenty-nine district damnations,
 One sure, if another fails;
 If I trip him just a-dying,
 Sure of heaven as sure can be,
 Spin him round and send him flying
 Off to hell, a Manichee?

Or, my scrofulous French novel
 On grey paper with blunt type!
 Simply glance at it, you grovel
 Hand and foot in Belial's gripe;
 If I double down its pages
 At the woeful sixteenth print,
 When he gathers his greengages,
 Ope a sieve and slip it in't?

Or, there's Satan! -- one might venture
 Pledge one's soul to him, yet leave
 Such a flaw in the indenture
 As he'd miss till, past retrieve,
 Blasted lay that rose-acacia
 We're so proud of! *Hy, Zy, Hine...*
 'St, there's Vespers! *Plena gratia*
Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r--you swine!

Ah! ‘Revenge is sweet’ – *even* in a monastery! What I love is how virulent this character is. He parades quite openly his hypocrisies, his envy, his lust (for “brown Dolores” and his “scrofulous” French novels). How many sins *doesn’t* he have? And like the Duke in “My Last Duchess”, he is quite unashamed in his disclosures – about his willingness to contemplate murder or *worse* (for a monk) with his attempt to send his brother monk’s soul to hell. The joke is delivered straight-faced in such an extreme way that the colossal hatred becomes funny. In real-life, of course, the psychology behind this is not funny at all and perfectly plausible. These are the petty jealousies and hatreds that infect our complex lives at all levels, though kept in check by society and (one would hope) by a religion based on Christian love! But, would someone of the monk’s calibre have the poetic imagination to conceive of,

“Steeping tresses in the tank,
Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs,” ?

This is the interesting flip-side of nearly all Browning’s most intriguing monologues; he focuses on characters and voices who are often highly ambiguous. When we are accosted by a ‘voice’ in real life, our instinct is to trust him or her, especially when they are confiding their innermost ideas to us. It is only on reflection that we may decide that we cannot take their side, for whatever reason. Browning plays on this ‘trust’ very cleverly in later poems.

Here, in the monastery, Brother Lawrence *may* be a hypocrite himself, we have only the speaker’s word for what so aggravates him about his fellow monk. Or, Brother Lawrence might be quite innocent, although if it’s true that the abbot gets a whole melon to himself, then the persona might be justified in feeling aggrieved. But, the persona has great skill with words (just as a poet has!) and it is this skill with words that is ultimately (and paradoxically) *dangerous*. Browning shows us through *art*, how language can be used *artfully* to distort perceptions or to play on (our?) prejudices. And we as readers, are often being addressed much more directly than is the case with most lyric poetry, where the poet/persona is more thinking aloud rather than directly seeking to sway or persuade the reader.

Perhaps the funniest thing is that the monk doesn’t seem to worry that we might not approve of his position. He’s so incensed that he doesn’t care who

overhears him – an arrogance that we will find elsewhere. In a nut-shell, Robert Browning in this last poem gives us his ‘method’, one that he hones in more subtle ways in later poems: a ‘voice’ (and other ‘voices’ referred to in italics), a very dramatic situation that is built up gradually, and a point where we have to decide on the reasonableness of the speaker’s attempts to win our trust and approve of his or her position. The last poem is cruder than most in that the monk’s anger seems excessive from the very first words. This excess continues to the end: “Hy, Zy, Hine...” probably refers to a black mass – the monk is ready to damn *himself* in order to achieve his revenge. But in the end, all of this is surely just for laughs.

“Porphyria’s Lover”, the next poem is another extraordinary poem. Reading it with pupils (I used to love reading Browning from a purely egotistic point-of-view – the *acteur manqué* in me who loves a bit of *drama* in a lesson), there was often a collective gasp at the realisation that what had seemed to be a romantic love adventure was so swiftly wrenched into a callous and brutal murder story.

Porphyria's Lover

The rain set early in to-night,
 The sullen wind was soon awake,
 It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
 And did its worst to vex the lake:
 I listened with heart fit to break.
 When glided in Porphyria; straight
 She shut the cold out and the storm,
 And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
 Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
 Which done, she rose, and from her form
 Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
 And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
 Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
 And, last, she sat down by my side
 And called me. When no voice replied,
 She put my arm about her waist,

And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
 And all her yellow hair displaced,
 And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
 And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
 Murmuring how she loved me — she
 Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
 To set its struggling passion free
 From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
 And give herself to me for ever.
 But passion sometimes would prevail,
 Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
 A sudden thought of one so pale
 For love of her, and all in vain:
 So, she was come through wind and rain.
 Be sure I looked up at her eyes
 Happy and proud; at last I knew
 Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
 Made my heart swell, and still it grew
 While I debated what to do.
 That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
 Perfectly pure and good: I found
 A thing to do, and all her hair
 In one long yellow string I wound
 Three times her little throat around,
 And strangled her. No pain felt she;
 I am quite sure she felt no pain.
 As a shut bud that holds a bee,
 I warily oped her lids: again
 Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
 And I untightened next the tress
 About her neck; her cheek once more
 Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
 I propped her head up as before,
 Only, this time my shoulder bore

Her head, which droops upon it still:
 The smiling rosy little head,
 So glad it has its utmost will,
 That all it scorned at once is fled,
 And I, its love, am gained instead!
 Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
 Her darling one wish would be heard.
 And thus we sit together now,
 And all night long we have not stirred,
 And yet God has not said a word!

What might be missed here – because we live in a different era – is how *risqué*, for its time, the narrative really is. Victorians would, however have been quick to spot the cultural clues. The persona, the ‘voice’ who speaks to us, *has* to be low class (he lives in a “cottage”) and this is really a Lady Chatterley scenario and his upper class lover, Porphyria, is visiting him at *night*, on her *own*, having come from a “gay feast”, presumably at *her* mansion or château of which the “lake” probably forms part of the grounds. She claims she sometimes cannot control her “passion” – and, in a very positive move, she gets the fire to “Blaze up”. That she is clearly out for sex is signalled by the fact that she lets her hair fall free about her “white shoulder bare”.

“She put my arm about her waist” – Porphyria acts decisively and authoritatively, but this would have been seen as an utter reversal of roles by Victorians. Yet she is, after all, the persona’s superior in terms of class and is clearly taking the lead in this scene of seduction. How then does our humble ‘gamekeeper’ react? DH Lawrence would probably have had him wresting control from her and forcibly, if needs be, assuaging her (and his) passion, making love to her probably on the hearth rug before her lovely fire. Browning, however, defeats expectation. The man *does* indeed assert control, but he does so by... strangling her with her voluptuous hair! *Why?*

It is here that the poem becomes more complex and puzzling. Browning characteristically by now, doesn’t tell us *ex cathedra* why the persona chooses to kill her; we have to rely on the persona’s disingenuous explanation:

“That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
 Perfectly pure and good”

He wishes to stop time and reclaim her as a “pure” possession. He even adjusts her head on his shoulder, as *she* had done earlier with his head on her shoulder.

“Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still:
The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead!”

Why should she have “scorned” anything if she wanted his love so badly? What was her “utmost will”? It seems to me that this is a story of a man who feels unequal, not so much in terms of social class, though that’s a part of it, but more in terms of matching the woman’s sexual appetite. Unable to satisfy her desires, I think the persona kills her to keep her “*pure*” on his terms and under his control at last. A Victorian horror of unbounded female sexual appetite...? Is he *mad*? Good question.

The sinister conclusion of the persona is that, “God has not said a word” and that divine retribution hasn’t stopped him in his tracks; he’s therefore convinced himself of the rightness of his action, even though we can sense that this is, by society’s standards, insane. On one level, this is an extreme form of male chauvinism (if you can’t beat ‘em, kill ‘em!), on another, a disturbing glimpse of the mind of a disturbed sociopath. (The following is off the internet):

Sociopaths - To receive a diagnosis of ASPD (anti-social psychology disorder), someone must be older than 18. Their behaviour must show a pattern of at least three of the following seven traits:

1. ***Doesn’t respect social norms or laws.*** They consistently break laws or overstep social boundaries.
2. ***Lies, deceives others, uses false identities or nicknames, and uses others for personal gain.***
3. ***Doesn’t make any long-term plans.*** They also often behave without thinking of consequences.
4. ***Shows aggressive or aggravated behaviour.*** They consistently get into fights or physically harm others.

5. *Doesn't consider their own safety or the safety of others.*
6. *Doesn't follow up on personal or professional responsibilities. This can include repeatedly being late to work or not paying bills on time.*
7. *Doesn't feel guilt or remorse for having harmed or mistreated others.*

?????

What does the structuring of the verse tell us? Well, there is a lot of lively enjambement, which makes for a very spontaneous utterance, but it is also tightly rhymed in iambic tetrameter, showing... skill in language, *artistry* - that dangerous gift that can beguile and distort our views just as much as it can reveal new facets of people, places and things. Oh, and by the way, has anyone looked at the photos of Elizabeth's own long tresses (although they are dark rather than "yellow"). Did *those* give him the idea...?!

One more thing to consider here, is the name.

Porphyria is a disease caused by a build-up of natural chemicals that produce porphyrin in our bodies. Porphyrins are essential for the function of hemoglobin — a protein in our red blood cells that links to porphyrin, binds iron, and carries oxygen to our organs and tissues. High levels of porphyrins can cause significant problems. Acute intermittent porphyria mimics a variety of commonly occurring disorders and thus poses a diagnostic quagmire.

Psychiatric manifestations include hysteria, anxiety, depression, phobias, psychosis, organic disorders, agitation, delirium, and altered consciousness ranging from somnolence to coma. (All again from the internet...!)

So, the choice of name can hardly be coincidental. Though the woman's name may *sound* romantic, when linked to the persona, it becomes yet another element of the story!

(Porphyria, by the way, is probably what King George III suffered from, and Alan Bennet in his play *The Madness of George III* was amused at the end by the fact that this hereditary disease is probably still lodged in the royal genes to this day!)

The next poem, which I touched on briefly in **No. 4 Poems and Storytelling**, is “My Last Duchess”, unquestionably a masterpiece. Subtitled *Ferrara*, it weaves a monologue, supposedly by a duke, who must be the Duke of Ferrara.

There are two levels of reading this poem – the virginal experience of *first* reading it, never again to be replicated, and then of course, there are the later readings... I shall, therefore, leave the poem to be read by all those for whom this is their first time, undisturbed and *untainted* by my subsequent remarks.



My Last Duchess

FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
 "Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
 Her husband's presence only, called that spot
 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
 Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
 Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint
 Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had
 A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
 The bough of cherries some officious fool
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
 She rode with round the terrace—all and each
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
 Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
 In speech—which I have not—to make your will
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
 Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
 Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
 E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
 Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
 The company below, then. I repeat,
 The Count your master's known munificence
 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Well, how was it for you?

When doing this with a class, and I tried to make my voice as silky smooth and reasonable as would be expected from this persona (ie. NOT obviously *sinister*), there would be a long silence, and then some intelligent or bemused voice, usually a girl's but not always, might mutter, “Oh, my God! He's... *killed* her!” – , a realisation that is not entirely obvious from a first reading.

One of my first questions was always “Who is being addressed here by the Duke?” It may be obvious to you, but far less so for teenagers who have to search quite a long way for



**Alfonso II d'Este
Duke of Ferrara**

clues: “The Count your master’s known munificence...”.

It’s an envoy from the Count, possibly a lawyer, certainly not just a menial servant. And the Duke is treating this intermediary so courteously for two essential reasons. He wants to remarry (on good financial terms), but he *doesn’t* want another ‘uppish’, independent-minded wife who won’t accept his absolute authority. This is the message he wants the envoy to be crystal clear about, though the sinister disclosures are veiled (“I gave commands...” “there she stands *as if* alive...”). These are to be relayed to the Count and are real threats; the Count must warn his daughter.

This is no common murderer – he is courteous, well-spoken, charming even (“Will’t please you sit and look...?”), an art collector and clearly highly cultured.

What is fiendishly clever is that the Duke is (almost) quite plausible. He is the *artist of language*! Who on earth *would* want a wife who answered you back, was *charmed* by the artist (a sneaky hint that they *might* have been lovers, as the Duke suggestively takes on the ‘voice’ of the artist Fra Pandolf)? A wife who did not value her husband’s lengthy pedigree enough and who valued the flowering branch of a cherry tree just as much? “Had you skill in speech – which I have not...” Oh, yeah?! No skill in speech? Really?

He could not confront her with his disapproval because he is too proud (“I choose never to stoop”), but also because he would probably have *lost* the battle. This was a woman who was not just young and beautiful, but she had spirit! She was generous and free – something intolerable to this supreme ‘control freak’.

But here’s the thing, the beautiful paradox of this poem, its ‘aporia’ even: a poem may be a work of art, but art and artistry is to be *feared*! Art can *objectify* life. The woman has ironically been turned *into* an art object, something the Duke can now control and curtain off if he wishes. The last *objet d’art* is one final symbol of the Duke’s power and brutality, as he clearly identifies with “Neptune” who is pictured subduing the delicate “sea-horse”.

What is deeply disturbing is that there is a certain attractiveness about him. Powerful, decisive, ‘cultivated’ men have always scored well with some people – this is an ‘alpha male’

par excellence, and I used to be a little worried when some of the girls in class found him ‘not unappealing’. Perhaps they were just trying to rile me?



(The Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II d'Este, who in 1558 married the 13-year old beauty (see above), Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici, who died in suspicious circumstances two years later in 1561)

Look at the form of the poem. In a more finished way we have the same elements of “Porphyria’s Lover” – but here the form marries better with the subject. The rhyming couplets are strictly disciplined, but barely noticeable, so free is the utterance in terms of enjambement and colloquial tone. This ties in with the Duke’s character perfectly. The tone is particularly interesting – there is a barrage of poetic effects, metaphors, rhetorical questions, subtle innuendo. Notice that subtle repetition of the phrase “as if she *were* alive” – there is hidden menace there. Look also at the Latinisms as he drifts insouciantly into the financial details of his next marriage:

“The Count your master’s known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed”

The double negative *hides* the brutal fact that he is really only out for money, NOT for romance. He couldn’t say, “I know the Count is rich and I want plenty of dosh!”

How clever that Browning allows him to be discovered, ‘found out’ without direct condemnation from the writer. It is up to *us* to see through the ‘art’ that dissembles, the propaganda, the words of the powerful (throughout history) who always count on slippery words to disguise their true intentions. It is, ironically, only through the Duke’s condemnation

of her that we are, in fact, allowed to glimpse her beauty and graciousness. She is a million times better than him, and, try as he might, we are (I hope) not tricked by his *trumpery*. His only answer (tyrants throughout the ages have always resorted to violence rather than to dialogue) is annihilation. This is a thoroughly modern focus on power and ‘art’; Browning shows he is fully alive to all the facets of this, but he allows the problem to be *felt* through his persona’s own words. It is a quantum leap from “The Cry of the Children”.

By the time of his masterly *Men and Women* (1855), Browning had finely tuned his medium. Here, however is a very odd poem. Browning claimed that it sprang with great immediacy into his imagination and that he wrote it furiously in just *one day*! That seems incredible, but it does have a thrilling immediacy about it. I used to ask pupils what they would like to do if they were offered a full film crew and could make a film. The usual teenage offerings would follow, often having to be curtailed as their imaginations spun into top gear.

“OK, OK... Well, how about this?” Here’s a weird scenario, ready-made for film.

Thomas Moran’s painting of “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” 1859



Childe Roland To The Dark Tower Came

I

My first thought was, he lied in every word,
 That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
 Askance to watch the working of his lie
 On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
 Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
 Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

II.

What else should he be set for, with his staff?
 What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare
 All travellers who might find him posted there,
 And ask the road? I guessed what skull-like laugh
 Would break, what crutch 'gin write my epitaph
 For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare,

III.

If at his counsel I should turn aside
 Into that ominous tract which, all agree,
 Hides the Dark Tower. Yet acquiescingly
 I did turn as he pointed: neither pride
 Nor hope rekindling at the end descried,
 So much as gladness that some end might be.

IV.

For, what with my whole world-wide wandering,
 What with my search drawn out thro' years, my hope
 Dwindled into a ghost not fit to cope
 With that obstreperous joy success would bring,
 I hardly tried now to rebuke the spring
 My heart made, finding failure in its scope.

V.

As when a sick man very near to death
 Seems dead indeed, and feels begin and end
 The tears and takes the farewell of each friend,
 And hears one bid the other go, draw breath
 Freelier outside, ("since all is o'er," he saith,
 "And the blow fallen no grieving can amend;")

VI.

While some discuss if near the other graves
 Be room enough for this, and when a day
 Suits best for carrying the corpse away,
 With care about the banners, scarves and staves:
 And still the man hears all, and only craves
 He may not shame such tender love and stay.

VII.

Thus, I had so long suffered in this quest,
 Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ
 So many times among "The Band" - to wit,
 The knights who to the Dark Tower's search addressed
 Their steps---that just to fail as they, seemed best,
 And all the doubt was now---should I be fit?

VIII.

So, quiet as despair, I turned from him,
 That hateful cripple, out of his highway
 Into the path he pointed. All the day
 Had been a dreary one at best, and dim
 Was settling to its close, yet shot one grim
 Red leer to see the plain catch its stray.

IX.

For mark! no sooner was I fairly found
 Pledged to the plain, after a pace or two,
 Than, pausing to throw backward a last view
 O'er the safe road, 'twas gone; grey plain all round:
 Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound.
 I might go on; nought else remained to do.

X.

So, on I went. I think I never saw
 Such starved ignoble nature; nothing throve:
 For flowers---as well expect a cedar grove!
 But cockle, spurge, according to their law
 Might propagate their kind, with none to awe,
 You'd think; a burr had been a treasure-trove.

XI.

No! penury, inertness and grimace,
 In some strange sort, were the land's portion. ``See
 ``Or shut your eyes," said nature peevishly,
 ``It nothing skills: I cannot help my case:
 ``'Tis the Last judgment's fire must cure this place,
 ``Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free."

XII.

If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk
 Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents
 Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents
 In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk
 All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk
 Pushing their life out, with a brute's intents.

XIII.

As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair
 In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud
 Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood.
 One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,
 Stood stupefied, however he came there:
 Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!

XIV.

Alive? he might be dead for aught I know,
 With that red gaunt and coloped neck a-strain,
 And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;
 Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;
 I never saw a brute I hated so;
 He must be wicked to deserve such pain.

XV.

I shut my eyes and turned them on my heart.
 As a man calls for wine before he fights,
 I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights,
 Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.
 Think first, fight afterwards---the soldier's art:
 One taste of the old time sets all to rights.

XVI.

Not it! I fancied Cuthbert's reddening face
 Beneath its garniture of curly gold,
 Dear fellow, till I almost felt him fold
 An arm in mine to fix me to the place,
 That way he used. Alas, one night's disgrace!
 Out went my heart's new fire and left it cold.

XVII.

Giles then, the soul of honour---there he stands
 Frank as ten years ago when knighted first.
 What honest man should dare (he said) he durst.
 Good---but the scene shifts---faugh! what hangman hands
 Pin to his breast a parchment? His own bands
 Read it. Poor traitor, spit upon and curst!

XVIII.

Better this present than a past like that;
 Back therefore to my darkening path again!
 No sound, no sight as far as eye could strain.
 Will the night send a howlet or a bat?
 I asked: when something on the dismal flat
 Came to arrest my thoughts and change their train.

XIX.

A sudden little river crossed my path
 As unexpected as a serpent comes.
 No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms;
 This, as it frothed by, might have been a bath
 For the fiend's glowing hoof---to see the wrath
 Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.

XX.

So petty yet so spiteful! All along,
 Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it;
 Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit
 Of route despair, a suicidal throng:
 The river which had done them all the wrong,
 Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit.

XXI.

Which, while I forded,---good saints, how I feared
 To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,
 Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek
 For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!
 ---It may have been a water-rat I speared,
 But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek.

XXII.

Glad was I when I reached the other bank.
 Now for a better country. Vain presage!
 Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage,
 Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank
 Soil to a splash? Toads in a poisoned tank,
 Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage---

XXIII.

The fight must so have seemed in that fell cirque.
 What penned them there, with all the plain to choose?
 No foot-print leading to that horrid mews,
 None out of it. Mad brewage set to work
 Their brains, no doubt, like galley-slaves the Turk
 Pits for his pastime, Christians against Jews.

XXIV.

And more than that---a furlong on---why, there!
 What bad use was that engine for, that wheel,
 Or brake, not wheel---that harrow fit to reel
 Men's bodies out like silk? with all the air
 Of Tophet's tool, on earth left unaware,
 Or brought to sharpen its rusty teeth of steel.

XXV.

Then came a bit of stubbed ground, once a wood,
 Next a marsh, it would seem, and now mere earth
 Desperate and done with; (so a fool finds mirth,
 Makes a thing and then mars it, till his mood
 Changes and off he goes!) within a rood---
 Bog, clay and rubble, sand and stark black dearth.

XXVI.

Now blotches rankling, coloured gay and grim,
 Now patches where some leanness of the soil's
 Broke into moss or substances like boils;
 Then came some palsied oak, a cleft in him
 Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim
 Gaping at death, and dies while it recoils.

XXVII.

And just as far as ever from the end!
 Nought in the distance but the evening, nought
 To point my footstep further! At the thought,
 A great black bird, Apollyon's bosom-friend,
 Sailed past, nor beat his wide wing dragon-penned
 That brushed my cap---perchance the guide I sought.

XXVIII.

For, looking up, aware I somehow grew,
 'Spite of the dusk, the plain had given place
 All round to mountains---with such name to grace
 Mere ugly heights and heaps now stolen in view.
 How thus they had surprised me,---solve it, you!
 How to get from them was no clearer case.

XXIX.

Yet half I seemed to recognize some trick
 Of mischief happened to me, God knows when---
 In a bad dream perhaps. Here ended, then,
 Progress this way. When, in the very nick
 Of giving up, one time more, came a click
 As when a trap shuts---you're inside the den!

XXX.

Burningly it came on me all at once,
 This was the place! those two hills on the right,
 Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight;
 While to the left, a tall scalped mountain ... Duncce,
 Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,
 After a life spent training for the sight!

XXXI.

What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?
 The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,
 Built of brown stone, without a counter-part
 In the whole world. The tempest's mocking elf
 Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf
 He strikes on, only when the timbers start.

XXXII.

Not see? because of night perhaps?---why, day
 Came back again for that! before it left,
 The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:
 The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay,
 Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay,---
 ``Now stab and end the creature---to the heft!"

XXXIII.

Not hear? when noise was everywhere! it tolled
 Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears
 Of all the lost adventurers my peers,---
 How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
 And such was fortunate, yet, each of old
 Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.

XXXIV.

There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
 To view the last of me, a living frame
 For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
 I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
 Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
 And blew. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."

"My first thought was he lied in every word..." The beginning of Childe Roland lands us slap-bang (as usual) inside a poem which is full of difficulties on a number of levels.

It describes a mysterious 'knightly quest' by someone who presents himself as a typical medieval knight, pledged to discover not a maiden or the holy grail, but the Dark Tower, "blind as the fool's heart". One level of difficulty, which Browning deliberately sets the reader, is the puzzle as to *what* is going on. Who is speaking, who has lied, why, and so on? Browning expects his readers to enjoy the puzzle of trying to work out what is going on, like any good detective novel. The mystery deepens when the persona, although he *knows* he has been set up in some sort of trick which could lead to his death, nevertheless continues along the path pointed out. The mystery continues as the knight traverses a wasteland of nightmarish proportions, where the grass grows like "leprosy" and where nature is described as despairing and even suicidal (the willows bending over the little river). What is extraordinary is that everything is described in terms of disease or pollution, as if the knight's task *might be* to rescue not just a person but a landscape, a real 'Waste Land' (hello, TS Eliot...!?): "Such starved ignoble nature".

Some clues are given to us, another level of difficulty. The full title is "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" - (See Edgar's Song in King Lear), but in fact that does not get us

very much further. If you remember, Edgar (Gloucester's 'good son') is on a 'Waste Land' of storm-blasted heath between London and Dover. He has to assume a disguise of 'Mad Tom', whose talk is interestingly 'insane' – in Freudian terms it is freely associative and plumbs the deadly, inner depths of the human psyche, just as the play - through a jester who is a professional 'madman', Edgar who is assuming madness as a protective disguise, and a king who is *really* bonkers-mad - also explores these dark regions of the human soul. So, where does the subtitle get us? It stresses perhaps the wasted landscape, the need to face up to despair and failure which is at the heart of the poem; but apart from madness, and the poem does seem full of paranoia and morbidity, the subtitle may only serve to confuse. Similarly, the reference to Apollyon, and thus Pilgrim's Progress, does not immediately increase our understanding of what is going on, but what we *do pick on* is all the literary referencing. What we might begin to suspect, and it is there is much of Browning's deepest poetic concerns, is that this is really all about *art*.

The ending presents us with the greatest difficulty, however. The narrator seems to have a moment of recognition and clarity: "Dunce, Dotard, a-doing at the very nonce", before deliberately raising his "slughorn" and blowing. This act of defiance in the face of his 'final combat', for which all his training and his experience has been a preparation, surely leads... to his death, we may presume.

On one level the ending is deliberately and perversely ambiguous. It is not clear if the last words: "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came", suggest that this is what the narrator *blew* - in other words the knight is blowing his own song, suggesting perhaps the heroism of an artist creating a work of art within a work of art, in order... to redeem the universe? Or else the final sentence could be read as an assertion by an exterior observer reporting that Childe Roland finally arrived at the Dark Tower.

One might level the accusation that the knight could hardly *relate* his quest if he is already dead - the sort of immature pupil's mistake of finishing a story with "... and then I died.". Taken at this level, the poem seems *almost* superficial. The finale is grandly heroic, but in the end totally unresolved. The difficulty might be, as for other poems, like "The Statue and the Bust", whether one could or should take this seriously: ("De te fabula" we are there told. The story is about YOU!).

One intriguing possibility, however, is that the Dark Tower "blind as the fool's heart" represents the persona's own *dark heart* - in other words he is finally confronted by... *himself*, his own moral pollution, which has recreated such an "artful" world (deliberately artificial, surrealistic, melodramatic even) out of his own psychological inadequacy. One

cannot help feeling, at the end, that the teasing puzzle, which seems to hint at allegories which should be deep, in the end may detract from a poem, which nevertheless achieves a lot of power in its haunted landscapes and its narrative construction.

Psychological inadequacy *is* something which fascinates Browning, whether in “Porphyria’s Lover” or “Spanish Soliloquy” or many others. Often, as in Childe Roland, we are not given the whole picture; in “Porphyria’s Lover”, for example, it is not clear whether Porphyria has perhaps been unfaithful, and we are left to wonder what the “pride and vainer ties dis sever” could refer to. This may weaken the poems to some extent, but it also makes the reader’s imagination work (Childe Roland’s persona says, “How thus they had surprised me, solve it you!” to the reader. A useful get-out clause!).

I would suggest we consider the ending more carefully in terms of *artistic fulfilment*:

XXXI.

What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?
 The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,
 Built of brown stone, without a counter-part
 In the whole world. The tempest's mocking elf
 Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf
 He strikes on, only when the timbers start.

XXXII.

Not see? because of night perhaps?---why, day
 Came back again for that! before it left,
 The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:
 The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay,
 Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay,---
 ``Now stab and end the creature---to the heft!"

XXXIII.

Not hear? when noise was everywhere! it tolled
 Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears
 Of all the lost adventurers my peers,---
 How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
 And such was fortunate, yet, each of old
 Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.

XXXIV.

There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
 To view the last of me, a living frame
 For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
 I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
 Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
 And blew. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."

All gathers for this culminating, climactic moment. It is presented, *artistically*, as a "frame" and a "picture", but instead of picturesque beauty, the "Tower" is almost perversely ugly and evil. Whether it symbolises the persona's foolish "heart" or not, both it and the landscape are there to be "read" and interpreted. In a sense, Childe Roland *is* an artist, 'painting' a scene for us – a scene with mortal consequences. All his fellow knights have failed, not just physically, but morally. They are shamed and condemned for their *moral* failure. If the persona is an artist, then the poem is making claims for the status and stature of art as a crusading tool for decoding morality. Just as *King Lear* is a heroic attempt to interpret not just power and politics but man's place in the cosmos ("As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport"), and the drama plays with paradoxes about moral, as well as physical blindness ("I stumbled when I saw"), so this poem extols the heroic objectives of art and the artist in deciphering our universe in moral terms.

Ending as it does with Mad Tom's quotation, some long-forgotten Elizabethan song, the poem might finally be *about* poetry and literature. About a knightly quest to redeem the world through art and literature.

OK, that reflection might seem somewhat grandiose or just a little bogus, but in the end, while one may sometimes be irritated by the tantalising difficulties Browning throws at his readers, particularly in a poem like "Childe Roland", his achievement is to use dramatic stories to make us engage with his odd set of 'voices' with their quirky hang-ups and their moral problems and failures: in many respects, one might say that the difficulties of the poems reflect the problematic lives his characters lead and the complexities out there in the world.

Another fine poem, also from *Men and Women*, is "Two in the Campagna", set near Rome. Here, the dramatic monologue is addressed to a lover; teasingly, we cannot know if it is Robert's own voice or an anonymous persona. It observes the workings of nature and

speculates about how love can appear to create the illusion that we can merge our souls with others, though nature seems to indicate that there will always be a haunting distance.

Two in the Campagna

I

I wonder do you feel to-day
As I have felt since, hand in hand,
We sat down on the grass, to stray
In spirit better through the land,
This morn of Rome and May?

II

For me, I touched a thought, I know,
Has tantalized me many times,
(Like turns of thread the spiders throw
Mocking across our path) for rhymes
To catch at and let go.

III

Help me to hold it! First it left
The yellowing fennel, run to seed
There, branching from the brickwork's cleft,
Some old tomb's ruin: yonder weed
Took up the floating weft,

IV

Where one small orange cup amassed
Five beetles,—blind and green they grope
Among the honey-meal: and last,
Everywhere on the grassy slope
I traced it. Hold it fast!

V

The champaign with its endless fleece
Of feathery grasses everywhere!
Silence and passion, joy and peace,
An everlasting wash of air—
Rome's ghost since her decease.

VI

Such life here, through such lengths of hours,
Such miracles performed in play,
Such primal naked forms of flowers,
Such letting nature have her way
While heaven looks from its towers!

VII

How say you? Let us, O my dove,
 Let us be unashamed of soul,
 As earth lies bare to heaven above!
 How is it under our control
 To love or not to love?

VIII

I would that you were all to me,
 You that are just so much, no more.
 Nor yours nor mine, nor slave nor free!
 Where does the fault lie? What the core
 O' the wound, since wound must be?

IX

I would I could adopt your will,
 See with your eyes, and set my heart
 Beating by yours, and drink my fill
 At your soul's springs,—your part my part
 In life, for good and ill.

X

No. I yearn upward, touch you close,
 Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,
 Catch your soul's warmth,—I pluck the rose
 And love it more than tongue can speak—
 Then the good minute goes.

XI

Already how am I so far
 Out of that minute? Must I go
 Still like the thistle-ball, no bar,
 Onward, whenever light winds blow,
 Fixed by no friendly star?

XII

Just when I seemed about to learn!
 Where is the thread now? Off again!
 The old trick! Only I discern—
 Infinite passion, and the pain
 Of finite hearts that yearn.

A day out in the “champaign” with Elizabeth? Apparently she loved this poem, so...maybe. I remember reading somewhere that Robert Browning claimed to have microscopic vision in one eye and telescopic clarity for distances in the other. I value this poem, which yet again, could be accused of dodging a final conclusion, evading decipherment and answers, the usual criticism. But RB is not just out to tease needlessly. Answers *can* be

trite and simplistic. The world *is* a difficult place to fathom and we are increasingly offered a plethora of clamouring ‘voices’ trying to persuade us that *theirs* is the voice to attend to. We must, however, learn to listen critically. Browning teaches us to be wary of art, *through* art!

Who have I missed? Why, Pen, of course (1849-1912). The pressure on Pen to write or produce great ‘art’ like his renowned parents (Browning lived to see *The Browning Society* formed, a dedicated fan club before such things had ever existed) must have been intense. Well, Pen *did* become a sculptor and artist – not so bad, but never ‘great’. Luckily, he married Fanny Coddington, an American *heiress*, so he never really had to work very hard for his living. He made some decent busts of



his father, but as a painter he was more taken with voluptuous females - “Finite hearts that yearn...”) The couple had no children and they gradually drifted apart, amid rumours that he was too close to a blonde Italian beauty, Ginevra, the housekeeper of Ca’ Rezzonico, the wonderful *palazzo* on the Grand Canal in Venice which Fanny and Pen had restored together so beautifully. Ginevra, it appears, *modelled* for him (probably not in this painting). He’s a *proficient* painter, but hardly ground-breaking. What I find startling is that he had lessons apparently from Rodin! *And* he gave art classes to – guess who? John Singer Sargent, who really WAS an artist!

By Pen Browning – also hot on “tresses”!

I have one last little treat for you. Here is the ONLY recording that was ever made of Browning - on Edison's new technological marvel. It was made at a meeting of The Browning Society and he was trying to remember that old favourite: "How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" (don't ask 'What good news, why, when?' because the poem is not concerned with all of that - just the HOW!). Unfortunately, poor Robert, now very old, couldn't remember how it went. But the Browning Society were either too polite or else too thrilled to have the Great Master with them to care.

Hip, hip, hip, HOORAY!

<https://youtu.be/OYot5-WuAjE>

Let's all hope April is *not* the "cruellest month".

Stay optimistic, safe, and here's to happy reading!