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Leslie T. White

University of New Orleans, ltwhite@uno.edu

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BROWNING AND HIS AUDIENCE:
"A BATTLE WITH THE AGE"

I can have but little doubt but that my writing has been in the main, too hard for many I should have been pleased to communicate with; but I never designedly tried to puzzle people, as some of my critics have supposed. On the other hand, I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar, or a game of dominoes, to an idle man.

—Robert Browning, 1868

Popularity is the one insult I have never suffered. The public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius.

—Oscar Wilde, 1891

Buried in Craig Turner's edition of *The Poet Robert Browning and His Kinsfolk by His Cousin Cyrus Mason* is a remark of Browning's that should take its place with the quaintly jocular lore that has gathered around *Sordello* and, more importantly, that invites a reevaluation of one of the central issues of Browning scholarship—that of the poet's vexed relationship with his audience. At a family gathering sometime in the mid-forties, the widow of Browning's grandfather, perhaps attempting some levity on what was clearly an awkward evening, approached the poet and dared query: "Robert, why don't you write something we ordinary folk can understand?" "I must tell you," Browning shot back, already annoyed or bored with "ordinary folk," "that what I do write is not intended to be understood by this generation."² In his review of Turner's edition, John Maynard rightly identifies the remark as "the only really striking moment in the memoir."³ Browning's riposte not only makes for amusing anecdote, but also distinguishes itself as prescient literary criticism and the astute cultural elitism of an inveterate Romantic transcendentalist.

²W. Craig Turner, ed., *The Poet Robert Browning and His Kinsfolk by His Cousin Cyrus Mason* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1983), p. 86. This is Browning's grandfather's second wife, who had aligned herself with the Mason clan's puritanical disapproval of Browning's association with the theater. On this evening, Maynard reports, "the family gathered to try to make head or tail of *Sordello* and ended up with a standing family joke" (p. 177), which Browning turned into a poetic program and which in turn would become a guide to reading his work (see also the Browning-Ruskin correspondence, the relevant passages of which appear in the text of this essay).

³Turner, p. 86.

⁴John Maynard, rev. of *The Poet Robert Browning and His Kinsfolk by His Cousin Cyrus Mason*, ed. and with an afterword by W. Craig Turner, *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 12 (1984), 177-80. While praising Turner, Maynard lambastes the prideful and petty Mason relations: "We understand entirely why the poet said so little about this particular branch of his family" (177). Maynard regrets that cousin Cyrus couldn't

Taking Browning at his word, then moving beyond this "striking moment," Maynard eloquently recasts the poet's remarkable if smug and petulant rejoinder and in doing so adds another voice to the consensus that Browning anticipated modern poetic consciousness and practice by several decades: "Here we find," he writes, referring to all of Browning, "a poetry that creates the sensibility of the future while it must alienate itself from the language of the tribe."⁴ Far from merely paraphrasing or contextualizing Browning's remark, Maynard comes near suggesting that the poet somehow envisioned what he and his contemporaries would face in writing for an age in which the nature and function of art and the role of the artist were being challenged and manifestly redefined. Maynard at least hints that Browning had already grasped (possibly internalized) how difficult it would actually be to write for his age, how gradually and grudgingly his critical and public acceptance would come, how precariously acclaim would sit as well as how misdirected it would be, what effects intimacy with his audience might have on his private life and his poetry, and to what extent and in what ways he would connect himself to his successors. One wouldn't want to ask of a statement quite likely tossed off in indignation, however accurate it turned out to be, that it bear such prophetic weight; what Browning in the mid-1840s could anticipate about the critical and popular response to his work (both during his life and after) should perhaps remain outside critical speculation. Yet the extreme, uniformly dismissive, in effect defamatory reactions to *Sordello*, as well as Browning's strained connection and lack of success in writing for Macready's theater, probably justify whatever apprehension and self-consciousness the poet unquestionably felt at the time; an exploration of the implications of Browning's statement ought to reveal to what extent the poet created—whether unconsciously, by design, or both—what we now see as one of the most anguished and antagonistic relationships ever between a major artist and his public.

Browning's "problem of audience" is the subject of recent studies by Lee Erickson and John Woolford, whose divergent readings reflect Browning's own elusiveness and equivocation on the matter. Erickson looks particularly at the "figure of the audience" within Browning's

transcend his own insecurities and moralistic tendencies and provide the world with first-hand observations of Browning's life. Though Maynard locates "some important moments and new perspectives, especially involving the scholarly life of the family" (178), he concludes that this is an "insipid chronicle, a poor history by a poor relation" and recommends it for those "interested in the byway of Browning studies" (180).

⁴Maynard, 178.

poems with the multiple intent of moving toward "an understanding of the poet's private and public position in the world," and of illustrating both "how Browning's desire for a great family of sympathetic and understanding readers is deeply disappointed and how he is reconciled to being read with love by Elizabeth and by God."⁵ Woolford's position is that for nearly forty years Browning put himself through a process of self-revision so as to please his audience and thus achieve popularity. "With *The Ring and the Book*," Woolford asserts, "Browning's long search for popularity was at last officially over," his long poem standing as "the climax of a series of experiments in reconciling himself, as far as he was able, to the taste of his time."⁶ Coming as it does at the conclusion of a work which argues for Browning's calculated if reluctant capitulation to the tastes and demands of the present, Woolford's qualifier "as far as he was able" essentially (and appropriately), though unintentionally, nullifies the thesis that Browning possessed the "ability" (and the desire) to write for his age, thus privileging its opposite—which is not so much an inability as an unwillingness. I shall argue that Browning's inherent resistance to mass appeal, what looked then and now like willful obscurantism,⁷ rests on a tense interaction between the poet's putative desire for acclaim and a fear that his work might somehow be devalued if met with public and critical approbation.

⁵Lee Erickson, *Robert Browning: His Poetry and His Audiences* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 19. In his introduction, Erickson states that the three major modern readings of Browning—E. D. H. Johnson's chapter in *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry*, Robert Langbaum's discussion of "sympathy and judgment" in *The Poetry of Experience* and Hillis Miller's chapter on Browning in *The Disappearance of God*—all deal "more or less explicitly with Browning's relations with his audience. Johnson has shown how Browning dramatized his alienation from his audience in his poetry; Langbaum has demonstrated how Browning's monologues require that the reader's response be divided between sympathy for and judgment of the speakers; and Miller, more abstractly, has pointed to the split between Browning's universal sympathy with all that is in the world and his uncertainty about his ultimate audience—God" (p.16). Though Erickson is right that Browning in time comes to shun openly the applause of a general audience, one may observe from the outset of Browning's career an anxious concern for what public and critical endorsement might mean, as well as a desire to experience both fame and celebrity. Elizabeth and God were not so much "primary" as sympathetic listeners that made up a larger audience; as is evident in his poetry, and especially his letters, the specific public that Browning had in mind and reacted against was instrumental in shaping the poet's poetic strategy, often determining the material itself and the language in which it would be presented.

⁶John Woolford, *Browning the Revisionary* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988), p. 197.

⁷Browning is consistently evasive, if not inconsistent, in answering charges that he is purposely obscure. In the same breath, the contrite, responsible man of letters can claim "I can have but little doubt that my writing has been, in the main, too hard for many I should have been pleased to communicate with; but I never designedly tried to puzzle people, as some of my critics have supposed"; while the keen observer of a utilitarian

Public demand for guidance, inspiration, and edification, more attractive and effective means of production, promotion and distribution of "high" and popular literature, increasing literacy, and other well-documented conditions tied to the democratization and popularization of art coalesced to bring the Victorian writer and his/her audience (or potential audience) into an odd, sometimes creatively stimulating and reciprocally profitable and sometimes uncomfortable and destructive, intimacy.⁴ Questions attractive to a Romantic temperament like Browning's and centered around the writer's relationship to his/her audience, as well as the role the artist was to play in a society experiencing the rigors of unprecedented economic, political, and cultural changes, had suddenly become ineluctably linked to the creative act itself. Early and mid-Victorian writers, then, found themselves among the first to encounter, in any thoroughgoing way, a conflict that issues from the writer's convergence with the conditions of democratized culture, and critiques of Victorian literary practice have had to make something of the fact that the artist couldn't, for perhaps the first time, withdraw entirely from his/her audience, and, more interestingly, that he/she did not seem to seek such withdrawal. Among the first to bring these issues of Victorian poetics into focus was E. D. H. Johnson, who sees the conflict as one "between the public consciousness of the man of letters who comes forward as the accredited spokesman of his world,

society, assessing the contemporary audience and finding nothing there, all but effaces the above by offering, "On the other hand, I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar, or a game of dominoes, to an idle man" (Letter to W.G. Kingsland, 27 November 1866. *Letters*, ed. T. L. Hood, pp. 128-29 [cited in Woolford, pp. 28-9]). There is no point in arguing that Browning cared nothing about popular success or that he did nothing at all to please and aid his readers, but it is significant that every remark of conciliation or compromise is negated by some witty, sarcastic, or ironic assertion of autonomy. Twenty years separate his statements, "I am full of ambition, eager for success, eager for fame," and, "I shall never change my point of sight or feel other than disconcerted and apprehensive when the public, critics and all, begin to understand and approve me," but the sentiment expressed in the latter was always the intimate underside of the former.

⁴See Richard Altick's *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), a fine historical examination of "the place of reading in an industrial and increasingly democratic society" (p. 1). More helpful for the purpose of this essay are two Altick articles collected in his *Writers, Readers and Occasions* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989): "English Publishing and the Mass Audience in 1852," and "The Literature of an Imminent Democracy." In the first essay, Altick looks to describe the true nature of the Victorian reading public, arguing that it was in the 1850s "that the reading public could first be called a mass public in anything like modern terms" (p. 142). In the second essay, which focuses largely on the growth of periodical publication and circulation, Altick concludes that it "seems likely that the literature of an imminent democracy does not vary much either in character or in general quality when the democracy has ceased to be imminent" (p. 172).

and the private conscience of the artist who conceives that his highest allegiance must be to his own aesthetic sensibilities.”⁹ This conflict, Johnson argues, created a “double awareness” in the day’s major writers, which in turn forced them to find ways to “make concessions to literary fashion, to sublimate their private insights without materially falsifying the original perceptions at the heart of their creative impulse.”¹⁰ Johnson’s term, “double awareness,” turns up in other versions all through the scholarship of the period. Two who look at this oft-discussed “divided artist” theme are Richard Altick, who points out that while Victorian writers “down through the middle of the era . . . felt [themselves] at home in [their] time,” they were torn between two impulses, “[their] natural bent and the public’s insistence that [they] devote [themselves] to society’s interests as sources of spiritual counsel, moral guidance, admonition and reassurance”¹¹; and Isobel Armstrong, who sees Browning fidgeting within a “double context of Victorianism and Romanticism”:

A more sober Victorian position is called in to modify Romantic largeness, extravagance, and optimism. Romantic concepts constantly push against and dislodge a more restricted Victorian view. . . . It is this double awareness which gives Browning’s explorations of almost any topic a shifting, unpredictable nature.¹²

Evoking this essentially modern (i.e. post-Romantic) image of the writer caught in the breach is what Maynard appears to have had in mind in using the seemingly antithetical phrases “sensitivity of the future” and “language of the tribe,” daunting yet irresistible extremes which fix the artist between two theoretically different audiences. Programmatically attempting to fashion a “sensitivity of the future,” taken rigorously to its limit, looks like elitist posturing. Intentionally alienating oneself and one’s work from “the tribe” and its language threatens to hinder if not efface meaningful exchange between the artist and a contemporary mass audience. Yet ignoring the desire to create such a sensitivity—eschewing artistic experimentation or imaginative daring, settling, that is, for communicating in the language of the tribe—might result in acquiescence to the demands of an

⁹E. D. H. Johnson, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. x.

¹⁰Johnson, p. xvi.

¹¹Richard Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973), p. 280.

¹²Isobel Armstrong, ed., *Robert Browning: Writers and Their Backgrounds* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), p. xiv.

audience that, by mid-century, was devouring with appalling yet somehow admirable enthusiasm epic poems and scientific treatises, self-help books and pulp novels and the serialized fiction of Charles Dickens and his contemporaries. In the main voracious and indiscriminate, the Victorian readership helped to create conditions in which the "great, important" writer, the artist as opposed to the hack, was hardly guaranteed exalted status, a careful reading, or in Browning's case, even serious notice. When Browning says that what he writes "is not intended to be understood by this generation," he apparently suspected that few would possess the stamina, curiosity or sense of risk necessary to engage productively in the sort of creative exchange that he seems to have demanded of his readers at the same time that he worked to make such participation almost prohibitively arduous.¹³ Browning's remark is in one sense smart literary criticism, but it is also a lie: perspicacious, in that no art of consequence will connect with those who want more than anything to understand it, perhaps so as to be edified, or worse, to have held beliefs confirmed; and false in that every artist, secretly or not, surely wants his/her work to find an audience of some considerable size and diversity. In a culture increasingly eager to make heroes, celebrities, and/or counselors of its writers and in which there was money to be made in literature, the professional man or woman of letters became a prominent figure in society for the first time. Given these conditions, a cult audience simply would no longer do; the desire to be popular, to be read, to make money and give the public what it wanted, expected, and thought it needed, was already becoming as much a part of artistic identity as the creative impulse itself. The Victorian writer who wanted to play some part in the intellectual life of the day was well-advised to find ways to do and say what he/she wanted in a manner that an audience had learned or could learn to accept.¹⁴

That Browning began his career engaging such demanding and urgent cultural/aesthetic questions as the above-mentioned is frequently, and curiously, deemphasized, if not ignored altogether.

¹³Believing that Browning "gave a high priority to pleasing a contemporary audience," which "compelled him into a continuous modification of his work, a long-sustained quest for 'words and forms' " (p. ix), Woolford also argues, drawing on one of Tucker's positions in *Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), that Browning engaged in a life long struggle to "get readers to contribute to his poetry without sacrificing intelligibility, to draw them into the poetic act" (p. 28).

¹⁴Johnson's well-known thesis is that Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold were all able to perfect techniques, disguising their private insights and opinions which might have been unacceptable to the Victorian reader.

Browning at twenty-one was, by his own admission, "full of ambition, eager for success, eager for fame, and what's more, determined to conquer fame and to achieve success."¹⁵ In Browning's long poems of the 1830's, especially *Paracelsus* and *Sordello* (less directly in *Pauline*),¹⁶ artist figures seek less to establish vital and productive communication with an audience than to find ways of avoiding disintegration in the face of possible public indifference. The tormented poet of *Pauline*, his "wild dreams of beauty and of good" (30) colliding with a reluctance to "unlock the sleepless brood / Of fancies from [his] soul, their lurking place" (6-7), turns to Shelley-Suntreader, unappreciated in life, who now in death must witness "all / Rush in to peer and praise when all in vain" (159-60).¹⁷ Less bitter than Arnold, the "hollow ghost" in "Growing Old" who refuses praise from those who "blamed the living man," the poet in *Pauline*, imagining Shelley's indignation at appreciation too long denied, can nevertheless fashion a crude version of what would evolve into Browning's final position that the artist must "await the coming age" for sympathetic reading (a position that Elizabeth Barrett helped to clarify during the correspondence of the mid-forties).¹⁸ More confident

¹⁵Mrs. F. L. Bridell-Fox, "Browning," *The Argosy*, XLIX (1890), 112.

¹⁶Worth reprinting here is the odd epigraph to *Pauline* which, if we are to take this pretentious caveat to be representative of the poet's position, commences Browning's career, more than the poem itself, on a note of defensiveness and antagonism that he was never to transcend fully. The passage (from Hen. Corn. Agrippa, *De Occult, Philosoph in Praetor*) is translated by Frederick Pottle, and appears in his *Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts* (Chicago: The Pembroke Press, 1923).

I have no doubt that the title of our book may by its unusual character entice very many to read it, and that many among them some of biased opinions, with weak minds—many even hostile and churlish—will attack our genius, who in the rashness of their ignorance will cry out, almost before they have read the title . . . that we are an annoyance to righteous ears, to enlightened minds an object of offence. . . . To these I now give counsel to read our book, neither to understand it nor remember it; for it is harmful, poisonous, the gate of Hell is in this book: it speaks of stones—let them beware lest by them it beat out their brains. But if you who come to its perusal with unprejudiced minds will exercise as much discernment and prudence as bees in gathering honey, then read with safety. For I think you will receive not a little of instruction and a great deal of enjoyment. On the other hand, if you find things which do not please you, pass over them and make no use of them. FOR I DO NOT RECOMMEND THESE THINGS TO YOU; I MERELY TELL YOU OF THEM. Yet do not on that account reject the rest. Therefore if anything has been said rather freely, forgive my youth; I wrote this work when I was less than a youth.

¹⁷References to the poetry of Robert Browning are quoted from *Browning: Poetical Works 1833-1864*, ed. Ian Jack (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) and from *The Poems. Volume II*, eds. John Pettigrew and Thomas L. Collins (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

¹⁸I rely here on information in the preface to *Browning the Revisionary*, in which Woolford appears to assign the phrase, "await the coming age," to Elizabeth Barrett (p.

than Robert in the legitimacy and inevitably (even necessity) of delayed fame and the intelligent assessment of an artist's work, Barrett Browning would eventually dramatize in *Aurora Leigh* the conviction that a poet looks for his/her audience in the future, even while representing (re-presenting?) "this live, throbbing age":

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
That, when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say,—
'Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked!
This bosom seems to beat still, or at least
It sets ours beating: This is living art,
Which thus presents and thus records true life.' (V: 213-22)¹⁹

Though *Aurora*, like Robert, longs for a contemporary audience, she nevertheless remains doubtful of immediate acceptance and wary of the dangers potentially concomitant with popular success. By dint of her own greater popularity, not to mention her status as female poet, Elizabeth must have understood these dangers in ways that Robert could not. As if to console Robert and to understand the reasons for (and implications of) the high place afforded her by the public and critics alike, she has *Aurora* confront the complex nature of popularity:

And whosoever writes good poetry,
Looks just to art. He does not write for you
Or me,—for London or for Edinburgh;

ix). He does not provide the source, however, and I have been unable to locate it, though I assume it to be from the early Browning-Barrett correspondence as this was a popular topic with the two poets. Several letters of 1845 from Elizabeth to Robert express a similar view. I cite lines from one here and refer the reader to others, by page number, all collected in Elvan Kintner, ed., *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845-1846* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969): "we both have high views of the art we follow, and steadfast purpose in the pursuit of it, and that we should not either of us, be likely to be thrown from the course, by the casting of any Atalanta-ball of speedy popularity. But I do not know . . . whether you are liable to be pained deeply by hard criticism and cold neglect . . . such as original writers like yourself, are too often exposed to" (EBB to RB, 3 Feb. 1845; p.14). See especially pages 222 and 260. The brief passages from *Aurora Leigh* which appear in this essay also suggest that Elizabeth might have authored the phrase. For calling my attention to lines from the Barrett Browning poem germane to this argument, I thank my colleague Joyce Zonana.

¹⁹All quotations from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry are cited from *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, eds. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (New York: AMS Press, 1973).

He will not suffer the best critic known
 To step into his sunshine of free thought
 And self-absorbed conception and exact
 An inch-long swerving of the holy lines.
 If virtue done for popularity
 Defiles like vice, can art, for praise or hire,
 Still keep its splendor and remain pure art?
 Eschew such serfdom. What the poet writes,
 He writes; mankind accepts it if it suits,
 And that's success; if not, the poem's passed
 From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand
 Until the unborn snatch it, crying out
 In pity on their father's being so dull,
 And that's success too. (V: 251-67)

As early as the Basel section of *Paracelsus* and the singing tournament episode of *Sordello* (well before he had met Elizabeth Barrett), Browning reveals this same preoccupation with the consequences of fame, of an audience's mindless transformation of artist into culture hero and its desire to bend the will of the artist to its own inclinations. Paracelsus' long debate with Festus shows the scholar to be cynical about his profession and contemptuous of the "thick skulled youths" who "will not look nor think" (III:149, 201). He questions whether he should "strive to make men hear, feel, fret themselves / With what is past their power to comprehend" (III:229-30). Paracelsus' imperious attitude is inseparable from his fear that such thoughtless devotion will lead to a deterioration of his work and a contamination of his noble quest "to KNOW":

Of the crowd you saw to-day
 Remove the full half sheer amazement draws,
 Mere novelty, nought else; and next, the tribe
 Whose innate blockish dulness just perceives
 That unless miracles (as seem my works)
 Be wrought in their behalf, their chance is slight
 To puzzle the devil . . . (III: 617-23)

And deeper degradation!
 If the mean stimulants of vulgar praise,
 If vanity should become the chosen food
 Of a sunk mind, should stifle even the wish
 To find its early aspirations true,
 Should teach it to breathe falsehood like life-breath—
 An atmosphere of craft and trick and lies;
 Should make it proud to emulate, surpass
 Base natures in the practices which woke
 Its most indignant loathing once . . . No, no!

Utter damnation is reserved for hell!
I had immortal feelings; such shall never
Be wholly quenched: no, no! (III: 784-94)

Browning wouldn't complete this initial, grim foray into the artist-audience question until *Sordello*, in which he depicts the self-styled prophet-poet, having gained victory in a singing tournament he chances upon in Mantua, carelessly letting the requisite distance between his creative autonomy and audience desire break down. *Sordello's* inadequate handling of the fame and adoration afforded him leads to a collapse of the artistic will that is both cause and effect of this disintegrative reciprocation.²⁰ Browning's subsequent work, diverse and wide-ranging as it is in both style and subject matter, rarely strays too far from the thematic line that celebrates the artist/intellectual as non-conformist, rebel, outsider, eccentric (Fra Lippo Lippi; Andrea del Sarto's contemporaries, their genius alternately stifled and teeming in "vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brains"; the poet in "How It Strikes a Contemporary"; and the grammarian are obvious examples). Browning meant for these figures to stand against images and forces of contentment and conventionality that threaten to trivialize any culture, reduce it to its meanest level of subsistence. Placing Browning in the long line of self-exiled artists from Byron to Wilde and Joyce might be yesterday's news, or merely wrong. The poet's almost life-long "exile" (which, I argue, is self-created) from the Victorian public does have something paradoxical about it, given Browning's near apotheosis in the sixties and his actual one with the advent of Browning Societies. Behind Browning's gestures of affirmation, compromise, and conciliation, and his statements (and there are many) expressing incredulity and hurt at critical censure and public neglect is, however, a negation, a refusal to go too far, to say yes entirely, that gives Browning's art its edge. If Browning himself succumbed to the comfortable security of eminent Victorianism, his poetry betrays no signs of capitulation, tantalizing his audience with sensational sketches of murder, intrigue, betrayal, infidelity, and the failed promise of genius and of love. Browning kept

²⁰In discussing this internecine conflict in *Sordello* in " 'Uproar in the Echo': Browning's Vitalist Beginnings," I try to illustrate what happens when the artistic will succumbs to the will of an audience (*BIS* 15 [1988]: 91-103): "Pride, or perhaps a premonition of the boredom that often accompanies complete success, smothers *Sordello's* will to push himself and his audience beyond his and their expectations. From this point, he begins to perform his songs rather than create them afresh, and the audience is merely entertained. *Sordello* begins to sing from a distance, half-heartedly, allowing his audience to fabricate its desire for his performance, a performance that is reduced to mimicry of the audience's distorted expectations" (100).

his readers at appropriate remove with recondite and arcane dramas rendered in tangled and allusive language. "Addicted to anticipation" and confident only in art "that resists its own finalities," Browning held tenaciously to his belief in the high position that art and the artist were to occupy, even if that high position were tantamount to marginalization.²¹

The long story of Browning's vacillating reputation has all but passed into cliché; a few favorable reviews of *Pauline* are negated, at least in Browning's mind, by John Stuart Mill's unpublished, sweeping dismissal. Not a copy sells, and Browning is devastated. *Paracelsus* is generally well-received. Browning's experiments with playwrighting, though not terribly distinguished, are at least not disastrous, as is *Sordello*, which supposedly destroys Browning's already tender reputation for twenty-five years. Vowing to write more "accessible" poetry, Browning publishes *Men and Women*—by many accounts a kind of *tour de force*, and surely Browning's most readable volume—but the collection again baffles some critics and many readers and fails as well. The second edition of *Dramatis Personae* is published in 1864 and is said to greatly expand Browning's modest readership. Still exasperated and bitter over the poor reception of *Men and Women*, Browning cleverly blasts readers in *The Ring and the Book* under the guise of helping them along the difficult way of the poem; then he gets famous, and from the late sixties on experiences a sharp decline in poetic power, so the mythology has it, writing poems more esoteric and eccentric than ever.²² As Browning Societies form, Browning stands as the prototype of another recognizable modern figure, the sometimes critics' darling who can't sell his books. If our image of Browning from the sixties onward is of the celebrated sage, the enthusiastic socialite, the revered man of letters, we are not wrong; but we should be mindful of the fact that, at the ostensible height of his popularity, Browning still sold poorly in comparison to his contemporaries, both English and American.

²¹Tucker, pp. 4-5. Tucker's Browning in *Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure* is the prophetic and idealistic Romantic follower of the philosophy of imperfection; he is "a perpetual and knowing beginner," creating art that "anticipates" (p. 5). My argument that Browning postponed "intelligibility" so as to save himself for each poetic effort supports Tucker's claim that Browning wrote the poetry of the future, and that this poetry required what he calls a "Browningesque reader," a highly imaginative participant in the action of literary give-and-take capable of "springing from sign to sign" throughout the experience of the poem (p. 15).

²²Ryals' *Browning's Later Poetry, 1871-1889* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) is one notable, relatively recent effort to bring about an overturning of the critical opinion that views Browning's poetry of the seventies and eighties as a "sprawling, unstructured

A British reading public which had bought within a few weeks of publication nearly 50,000 copies of Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*²³ and nearly a million copies of Longfellow's verse, made *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1883) Browning's best selling volume by a purchase of less than 7,500 copies. Obviously, Browning's fame as a great poet was disproportionately wider than his audience.²⁴

And this audience, apparently, was comprised largely of a critical, intellectual elite capable of appreciating Browning's demanding and peculiar genius. No doubt, however, a respectable number of households, its members equating difficulty with importance or brilliance, could claim ownership of a Browning volume or two, even if those volumes served merely as showpieces destined eventually to be banished to the shelf reserved for the (unread) classic. By the late sixties, Browning had become a curious object of mass desire, a kind

mass of versified argument written by a man whose artistic gifts had somehow become maimed or dissipated" (p. 14). Ryals' aim is "to present the later Browning as a poet intent upon discovering new forms that would give shape and meaning to thought and feeling" (p. 14).

²³In his collection of essays, *The Poet and His Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), Ian Jack examines the careers of six British poets from John Dryden to William Butler Yeats, considers "how far the audiences for which they wrote seem to have influenced them," and attempts to demonstrate "how each poet's need to adapt to prevailing conditions helped to determine the nature of his poetry" (p. 3). His assumption that every writer writes for a specific audience and to some significant degree is influenced by that audience—for good or for ill or both—is an extension of the book's epigraph, an observation of Graham Greene's which, with appropriate ambiguity, underscores the imprecise, shifting nature of this association. "I doubt if the best work has ever been produced in complete independence of a public," Greene wrote. "The awareness of an audience is an essential discipline for the artist." Of the major Victorian poets, Jack—somewhat surprisingly, as his primary work has been on Browning—chooses to write about Tennyson. Yet, of course, choosing to write about Lord Alfred Tennyson in this context makes perfect sense. Tennyson was a celebrity: he sold lots of books and his popularity, once gained, never wavered (at least with the public). Thus, his eminence, coupled with his willingness to "adapt to the age's prevailing conditions," to allow his poetry, at least to some extent, to be shaped by these conditions, makes him a more "representative" Victorian writer than Arnold, say, or even Dickens and certainly Browning. Tennyson, however, viewed the "public with apprehension, describing it to his uncle as 'a many headed monster'" (p. 118). Tennyson's wide popularity, which came rather rapidly, had been won at a price, and he came to hate it, not so much because of popularity's inherent vulgarity—as he might have viewed it—as he didn't seem to know what to do with adulation and fame so freely offered. And yet the "many headed monster" had its appeal. Professor Jack concludes his essay on the poet with these comments:

If the first half of Tennyson's career is the story of his conquest of the English reading public, the second half is the story of the reading public's conquest of Tennyson. His principal weakness, a weakness of character rather than of intellect, was increased by constant worry about the reactions of his readers. He seriously considered removing "Northern Farmer" from the *Enoch Arden* volume because someone feared that the old man's attitude toward the Almighty might offend religious susceptibilities. He was afraid that the publication of "The Revenge" might inflame public opinion against Russia at a critical time. He was

of coffee table poet as it were, the enigmatic culture hero worshiped from afar, presumed to be great, even important, and given little serious attention. Intent all his life on saving his poetry from a kind of commodification, Browning had somehow managed to allow himself to be made into a kind of spectacle, the "god of his admirer's idolatry," as one review had it.²⁵ Realizing this, Browning is horrified, uncertain as to how best to avoid the inevitable accusations of self-promotion without driving away his precious cadre of readers and supporters.²⁶ In *The Ring and the Book*, when Browning speaks in *propria persona*, he at once tactfully and not so subtly chastises readers for shrinking before the challenge of his work, for denying him the recognition and sympathetic reading he deserved.²⁷ Browning wanted to be read and hoped, was in fact certain, that fame would eventually come. Fame of a kind did come and with it a kind of deification, but so did the resentment and contempt that accompany a thoughtless devotion, an appreciation too long denied. Thus, it is not surprising that in much of the post-sixties work we find Browning continuing to explore familiar subjects: what it means to be an artist, a modern artist at that, and one at work in a culture in the incipient stages of democratization; the

harassed by Temperance enthusiasts and Little Englanders who objected to his exhortations to 'drink to health' in 'Hands all round'—a lyric set to music and sung by Lady Tennyson throughout the country in celebration of the Queen's birthday in 1882. 'On one occasion . . . he said that his great aim had been never to write a single word that an Eton boy could not read aloud to his sister' (p. 142).

Obviously, it is not that Tennyson's popularity made him a lesser poet: it is that his attraction to that popularity created in him a sense of responsibility that perhaps caused him to overvalue his work, to overestimate his impact. It would be fatuous to say that Tennyson betrayed his poetic genius in a calculated effort to become famous, but it may not be too much to say that Browning is the uncompromising and sturdy figure that he is because fame was so long in coming, or that in large part he saw to its deliberate pace. Jack comments in his conclusion that "a poet who had hardly any readers . . . is likely to exhibit some of the eccentricities of a man or woman too much in the habit of living alone. He becomes accustomed to speaking to himself elliptically, and often has great difficulty in communicating" (p. 170). Browning certainly had plenty of readers, especially compared to poets like Blake and Emily Dickinson, whom Jack mentions as poets without audiences, but not compared to Dickens or Thackeray or Tennyson. Perhaps Browning's "eccentricities," his difficulty in communicating and his elliptical manner, issue from interaction with a passive readership.

²⁵Roy E. Gridley, *Browning* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 163.

²⁶Charlotte C. Watkins, "Browning's 'Fame Within these Four Years,'" *Modern Language Review* 53 (1958), 495.

²⁷See William Peterson's *Interrogating the Oracle: A History of the London Browning Society* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 178 and following for an account of Browning's ambivalent attitude toward the adulation heaped on him by the Browning Societies. Though we are told the poet "regarded the Browning Society as an instrument which had helped him to triumph at last over the hostility of the press and the indifference of the reading public," Browning was never comfortable when faced with having to "openly condone [the Society] and support its activities" (p. 183),

complex and ironic nature of fame; and the degree to which critics shape public opinion, capriciously exalting one writer and vilifying another. Browning, of course, would finally lash out in *Pacchiarotto* at the critical "night men who [were] always emptying their cart at [his] door" before he settled into his last remarkably productive, relatively quiet decade.²⁸ My summary, of course, is only a crude outline. Browning's response to critical disfavor and modern criticism's sometimes confused assessment of this exchange tell another story, or at least provide the insides of the above overview. The poet's reaction to his critics, his dialogue with friends and fellow writers, and his opinions of his readership, such as he could imagine it—alternately expressed in correspondence and poetry—help to reveal ways in

suggesting that for Browning the Society was both a blessing and a curse.

²⁷See Kay Austen, "Browning Climbs the Beanstalk: The Alienated Poet in *The Ring and the Book*," *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 5 (Fall 1977): 17-27 for a review of the poet's attitudes toward his public and an explanation of his artistic purpose in the poem. See also Roy Gridley, "Browning and His Reader, 1855-69," in *The Nineteenth-Century Writer and His Audience*, eds. Harold Orel and George Worth (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1969), pp. 75-92. Gridley argues in his *Browning* that the poet "was . . . willing to make certain compromises with his readers; he may not have met his readers fully halfway, but he was willing to meet them part-way" (pp. 75-6). Professor Gridley claims that with *Men and Women*, "Browning resorted to certain extra-dramatic rhetorical devices to aid the reader" and was "willing to provide occasional indices to the dramatic speaker's intentions, tone of voice, and general truthworthiness" (p. 76). He concludes by saying that these concessions are especially evident in *The Ring and the Book*, and that as a result, "a more numerous and hardier breed of reader, willing to undertake the rigors of Browning's poetry, had evolved by the mid-1860's" (p. 102).

Erickson argues that "in his poetic dotage, Browning becomes more and more obsessed with fame" and that "fame is a melancholy motif in his later life and work" (258). His concern for fame is evident in "Pacchiarotto," "La Saisiaz" and the "Two Poets of Croisic," and in the "Parleyings" (p. 259). Ryals' comments on the later Browning are worth noting, as are the lines he cites from "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country": "Yet because the poet's apprehension of truth is always and necessarily in advance of any accepted formulation of truth, he finds himself set apart from his fellows. The 'life exercise' of poetry means, then, that the poet assumes an almost intolerable burden:

such exercise begins too soon,
Concludes too late, demands life and whole and sole,
Artistry being battle with the age
It lives in!

.
To be the very breath that moves the age,
Means not, to have breath drive you bubble-like
Before it—but yourself to blow: that's strain;
Strains worry through the life time, till there's peace;
We know where peace expects the artist soul. (II.1049-75)

Undoubtedly, Browning was speaking out of his own experience when he referred to the burden of loneliness and misunderstanding to which the modern poet is subject" (pp. 97-8).

²⁸W. C. DeVane and Kenneth Knickerbocker, eds., *New Letters of Robert Browning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 97.

which Browning's poetry is shaped by the age's prevailing conditions and tastes.

Many commentators have suggested that Browning made enough concessions to his audience throughout his career to indicate a consistent willingness to meet his readers halfway. Provocative and interesting as these suggestions are, they remain, I believe, highly questionable, as spurious and guarded as some of Browning's own remarks on the subject. Johnson writes that all three High Victorian poets found ways to concede "to literary fashions with which they were temperamentally out of sympathy" without costly imaginative compromise.²⁹ Yet later in his chapter on Browning he writes that "out of enthusiasm for his own highly individualistic beliefs Browning was unwilling to make concessions to the aptitudes of his readers."³⁰ Finally Johnson reveals his own confusion, and perhaps locates Browning's as well, in a wildly understated conclusion to this discussion of Browning's early poetry: "The artist can only achieve full self-realization through getting into productive communication with the external world. For Browning to embrace this theory, however, was one thing; to illustrate its operation through his poetry was quite another."³¹ And Roy Gridley asserts somewhat shakily that Browning "was willing to make certain compromises with his readers; he may not have met the readers fully half-way, but he was willing to meet them part-way."³²

Confusion exists in these and other critical assessments (Woolford's, as noted above) because Browning himself appeared on the one hand to distrust, even defy, his readers and on the other to court them. For some slight evidence of this latter in the work itself, one could point to the dedication to *Paracelsus*, the marginal glosses to *Sordello*, the extra-dramatic devices in some of the monologues, and later—after Browning had reappeared from behind the hundred masks of his middle period—to his instruction as to how readers should properly approach *The Ring and the Book*. If one takes these gestures both practically and symbolically, one is still left to contend with a great deal of demanding poetry, and one remains in the dark on the question of how accommodating Browning actually was. More revealing here, if far from conclusive, are the poet's own remarks about his purported efforts to become less cryptic, most of them coming in letters of the 1850s just prior to and just after the

²⁹Johnson, p. xvi.

³⁰Johnson, p. 71.

³¹Johnson, p. 82.

³²Gridley, "Browning and his Reader," pp. 75-6.

appearance of *Men and Women*—the volume that was supposed to bring an end to two and a half decades of derision and neglect. In a well-known 1853 letter to Joseph Milsand, Browning admits, "I am writing a sort of first step toward popularity (for me! 'Lyrics') with more music and painting than before so as to get people to hear and see."³³ To Leigh Hunt he wrote, "Of my books—I dare only reply to your 'third' note on them, that I know they err in obscure and imperfect expression—wishing it were not so, and trying always for the future it may be less so."³⁴ And to another friend, he promises. "I shall mend my ways, I assure you, get as smooth as I can, and as plain as I can."³⁵ And finally in the most telling statement of all, Browning wrote to Julia Wedgwood, "I keep trying to be intelligible next poem" (my italics).³⁶

Appearing concurrently with these ostensibly conciliatory claims is Browning's famous exchange with Ruskin, occasioned by the poems of *Men and Women* and including what seem to me to be Browning's definitive opinions on the autonomy of art, the mystery of creation, and the dullness of blatant intelligibility. Here, reacting to the mixed reviews of the volume, Browning announces that he has had enough of thinking that one day he might reach a wider public and achieve financial and poetic success. To depict Browning as the lonely and neglected poet, devoted solely to the sanctity and purity of his creative vision and utterly oblivious to the tastes and predilections of his public, would be erroneous. On the other hand, it would as well be unwise to give too much weight to Browning's rather perfunctory attempts to connect with the public. He seems, in fact, to have been quite wary if not fearful of that connection. And at the same time that he was contemptuous of a readership which appeared to lack the stamina for his verse, he expressed relief at the absence of such stamina: "I shall never change my point of sight," Browning wrote to Ruskin, "or feel other than disconcerted and apprehensive when the public, critics and all, begin to understand and approve me."³⁷ With unassailable confidence in the integrity and worth of his poetry, Browning came to take public indifference and battlement less as evidence of his obscurity than of his originality; we may see him as

³³W. Thomas, "Deux lettres inedites de Robert Browning a Joseph Milsand," *Revue Germanique* (July-September 1921), p. 251.

³⁴DeVane, p. 95.

³⁵Austen, p. 21.

³⁶Richard Curle, ed., *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed by their Letters* (New York: F. A. Stokes Company, 1937), pp. 41-42.

³⁷W. G. Collingwood, *The Life and Work of John Ruskin* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893), I, p. 202.

one of Mill's original minds, a creative genius whose power to conceptualize and envision is always far in advance of a contemporary audience's ability to comprehend fully the products of such genius. "Originality," Mill wrote in *On Liberty*, "is the one thing which unoriginal minds cannot feel the use of. They cannot see what it is to do for them; how should they? If they could see what it would do for them, it would not be originality."³⁸

Writing of some of the poems in *Men and Women*, Ruskin made the following complaint, cast in his inimitable metaphor of inspired lunacy so open to parody: "You are worse than the worst Alpine Glacier I ever crossed. Bright, deep enough surely, but so full of clefts that half the journey has to be done with ladder and hatchet."³⁹ Browning responded stiffly:

I cannot begin writing poetry till my imaginary reader has conceded licences to me which you demur at altogether. . . . I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you. You ought, I think, to keep pace with the thought tripping from ledge to ledge of my "glaciers" as you call them; not stand poking your alpenstock into the holes, and demonstrating that no foot could have stood there.⁴⁰

Browning had hoped readers (especially of Ruskin's eminence) would be willing to accept the challenge that he knew his work presented, or even as Gridley suggests, that his poetry might itself create a hardier brand of reader. When it became clear that he would have to be content with an enthusiastic minority, Browning with the famous declaration "a poet's affair is with God" retreated into what Erickson calls a "doctrine of prophetic esoterism."⁴¹ "Do you think poetry was ever generally understood—or can be?" he asks Ruskin and the rest of the world with not a little venom. "Is it the business of it to tell people what they already know, as they know it, and so precisely that they shall be able to cry out—'here you should supply this—that, you evidently pass over, and I'll help you from my own stock'"⁴²

"The artist who is seduced by mateyness," E. M. Forster wrote, "may stop himself from doing the one thing which he and he alone can do—the making of something . . . which has internal harmony and presents order to a permanently disarranged planet."⁴³ Forster meant by "mateyness" a capitulation to audience demands, a willingness to

³⁸John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1941), p. 77.

³⁹David J. DeLaura, "Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-five Unpublished Letters," *John Rylands Library Bulletin* 54 (1972), 326-27.

⁴⁰Collingwood, p. 200.

⁴¹Erickson, p. 136.

⁴²Collingwood, p. 200.

⁴³E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edwin Arnold Co., 1951), p. 102.

get too close, to write down to one's audience—something that always fails in the end because it results in the manipulation of the artist, the degradation of his/her art, and the perpetuation of received ideas and pre-established truths. Browning certainly seems to have recognized the importance of keeping a distance and of learning something of the value of that distance; for most of his career he thrived on doing so, working off the tension that crackled between him and his audience while at the same time longing for critical approval and public acceptance. He perceived the potential danger awaiting the artist who, in wanting too earnestly to communicate, allows his art to be transformed into something much less than what it might have been. Communication, Browning recognized early on, is in some significant way a kind of failure, in that getting what you have to say across to any audience of considerable size and questionable discernment might mean that what you have to say and in what form you say it are not substantial enough to make any difference, or even to mean anything. This defensive, elitist stance is evident in Browning's reply to his grandfather's widow; it is a statement, thoroughly Romantic in its disdain for completion or closure, that fixes Browning on the margins, and on the whole, I believe, there he remained—scheming and more or less unregenerate. Browning came at some point to feel that those who speak from the margins often offer a perspective so foreign to the dominant culture (and, superficially, so unthreatening or overly demanding) that usually no one even bothers to suppress their voices. If a writer's private discourse challenges conventionality and complacency, it might be irritating to certain authorities or arbiters of taste in certain quarters, but basically too it will be ignored. Often, as is likely the case in a democracy, rough, merely eccentric elements get pulled into the mainstream where they are reprocessed and reconstituted. The radical edge gets filed down until the point at which the dominant culture can bear it. A dilemma with its genesis in the nineteenth-century, this threat has always been at the heart of the problems facing the artist who works in a democracy. The thought of writing the sort of poetry that readers could bear, that is, "understand," was itself unbearable to Browning.

Browning's putative desire to make his poems more readable and intelligible was undercut by his deeply felt but infrequently articulated conviction that being understood in the way that his audience seemed to want to understand his work humiliates the moment of creation as well as devalues whatever balanced and reciprocal relationship ought to exist between artist, text, and reader. Rather than attempting to "understand" the text as an object external

to his/her experience from which some point or other is to be gleaned, the reader must make himself/herself available, even vulnerable, to the extent that he/she becomes a part of the aesthetic process. Browning's work asks for this sort of faith, a kind of recklessly precarious collaboration that operates in part on vitalist principles that Thomas Carlyle sets out in "Characteristics," say, or "On Heroes and Hero Worship"; this passage, from the former, offers as Romantic a definition of genius, of the imaginative give-and-take between artist and audience and of the inscrutable pull of art, as one is likely to read:

Manufacture is intelligible but trivial: Creation is great and cannot be understood. Thus if the Debator and Demonstrator, whom we may rank as the lowest of true thinkers, knows what he has done, and how he did it, the Artist, whom we may rank as the highest, knows not: must of Inspiration, and in one of the other dialect, call his work the gift of divinity. . . . For the end of Understanding is not to prove and find reasons, but to know and believe."⁴⁴

Carlyle here hints at the impossibly ironic and cramped position in which the Victorian artist found himself/herself: suspended between the Romantic vision of the artist as prophet-seer and the mid-Victorian demand that he/she get into productive communication with a public eager for edification and a little entertainment. Both images became for Browning nightmarish, threatening on the one hand to lift the artist too far away from the necessary tension that the audience provided, and on the other to align him directly with the values and tastes so unpalatable to the iconoclastic poet. Realizing that he couldn't ignore his audience entirely, even if it did tend to ignore him, Browning would conclude that interaction of a kind, and with finely controlled limits, was essential; largely ingratiating when not unsympathetic or hostile, this audience, real or imagined, provided a crucial source of artistic tension. It turned out not to be the aggressive, wise, critical audience that every great artist hopes for and deserves, but it was in the end complex and diverse enough to push Browning beyond comfortable limits. Having to respond to his audience in some way, then, he chose to elude it, to work off its needs, its demands and fantasies, even its fears, to stay just out of reach and thus to slide over its unconscious desire to make of him a counselor, a virtuoso, or worse, an autocratic, avuncular moralist. "I keep trying to be intelligible next poem" Browning had written Julia Wedgwood, wryly blurring his intentions. Intelligibility of the sort his readers clamored for would remain, for those who cared to read, a seductive promise, something that would forever be coming "next poem."

Leslie White—University of New Orleans

⁴⁴Thomas Carlyle, *Critical Essays* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1891), p. 4.