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## BROWNING: TALLOW AND BROWN SUGAR?

By E. M. CURRAN

CHARLES DICKENS, John Forster, and Robert Browning, all born in 1812, take their positions in a handsome Victorian triptych: the novelist and the poet on either side, speaking for their age and at the same time developing forms for a later generation to use; Forster in the middle, an early and important encourager of Browning, the friend and later the biographer of Dickens. According to John Stuart Mill, Forster was "the second worst critic of the age." Be that as it may, he wrote virtually the only enthusiastic reviews of Browning's *Pippa Passes*, *King Victor and King Charles*, and *Dramatic Lyrics* when these first three *Bells and Pomegranates* appeared in 1841 and 1842.

Initially neglected and then scoffed at as unintelligible, Browning within his own lifetime gained major position as prophet, philosopher, priest, and poet; the incense rose to his nostrils from Browning Societies made up largely of right reverends and maiden ladies. No sooner was he dead, however, than his stature was questioned: but the battle that raged concerned the priest and prophet only, not the poet. He was the moral and religious teacher of the age; or he immorally condoned evil by explaining it. When in the 1920s most of the Victorian idols were brought shattering to the ground, Browning to some extent escaped, but again not as a poet. Now he was seen as the great lover, and the idyllic story of his courtship and marriage was painfully and repeatedly retold. Not until the 1940s, over a hundred years after his first publications, was any serious attempt made to consider Browning as a poet.

Critics had sometimes called him an artist, but with what today appears an improper mixing of concepts. The confusion is epitomized by John T. Nettleship. In 1868, in his *Essays on Robert Browning's Poetry*, he lauded Browning as a healthy person and an orthodox preacher of a personal God. When in 1890 he reprinted the *Essays* as *Robert Browning: Essays and Thoughts*, he added several contradicting chapters which extolled the poet as painter. "Wherever he enters . . . he enters

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as the art worker, to make a picture of it"; Nettleship wished to look at almost any of the poems as "a picture and no more."

Other contemporaries had denied that Browning was capable of poetry or artistry. In 1855, after the appearance of much of Browning's most memorable work in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845) and *Men and Women* (1855), Charles Kingsley wrote to a friend:

*He will never be a poet. . . . He was born and bred a Dissenter of the trois état, and though he is a good fellow, nothing will take the smell of tallow and brown sugar out of him. He cannot help being coarse and vulgar, and is naively unaware of the fact. However, if he had been born either a gentleman (of course I mean a churchman, for all gentlemen owe that name to Church influence over themselves or their parents) or a hard handed working-man, in contact with iron fact, he might have been a fine poet.*<sup>1</sup>

The stupidly narrow snobbishness of course offends us now. We may smile to see one of Carlyle's disciples using the master's rod — the need to come "in contact with iron fact" — to belabor another respecter of the Sage of Chelsea. Whether offensive or amusing, however, the comment does give us an approach to Browning that may help explain certain difficulties — if what Kingsley smelled as "tallow and brown sugar" is still giving off an odor of some kind.

First we need the assistance of two excellent studies of Browning which appeared in 1957 — Roma King's *The Bow and the Lyre* and Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience*. They make their subject both meaningful and thoroughly compatible with modern sensibilities by showing how well he can be approached through the modern critical vocabulary. Both define the dramatic monologue in terms of ambivalences, paradoxes, ironies, and tensions; both see the form as forcing a suspension of judgment and a balancing of judgment and sympathy. A few questions remain, however, or are new intrusions coming with the new vocabulary. May not some of the tensions be ours rather than Robert Browning's? If the tensions are Browning's, does he resolve them, and if so, how? Why, in fact, is our judgment suspended? Not, it would seem, that we may merely reassert the normal unconsidered judgment. If in

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1 M. F. Thorp, *Charles Kingsley* (Princeton, 1937), 95.

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the end we do assert some judgment it must be one modified by what our consciousness has heard in the interval — modified, that is, by the sympathy created with the speaker. Langbaum takes the early monologue, "My Last Duchess," to illustrate his view. Certainly here we end with a still suspended judgment of the duke or, at most, with a judgment essentially unlike the conventional judgment which Browning forced us to hold in balance with a new and unfamiliar sympathy.

Browning does not always succeed so completely. Often, one suspects, instead of allowing himself this success, he creates the partial appearance of the tension while simultaneously or eventually denying it. Let us describe the difficulty another way. Browning frequently accepts the conventional judgment, the easy, oft-repeated generalization, even while assuring us most of the way that he is doing something else. He develops that form which Langbaum defines as keeping a balance between sympathy and moral judgment, but he often draws back from a complete acceptance of the implications of his own form. In the end some of Browning's most interesting poems leave the reader feeling disappointed or even cheated.

Consider, for example, "Bishop Blougram's Apology," one of the five poems which Roma King examines in detail. The poem presents a masterly study of a mind "balanced on the dangerous edge of things," simultaneously believing and sceptic, "medieval" and modern, institutional and independent, seemingly hypocritical yet ruthlessly honest. Blougram carries on a skillful fencing match with the shallow journalist Gigadibs. The mere sound of the journalist's name suggests inanity, and the name places him in Carlyle's *gigmanity*, among the philistines who equate morality and jig-owning. The weakness of this opponent does not spoil the fencing match; it is all the more sharply defined because it is actually not a "match" at all. Blougram executes his brilliant thrusts before an opponent never able to counter them or even to see how much he needs to counter: our attention is concentrated on the bishop. He answers attacks before they are made, seeing before Gigadibs does what attacks must follow. Not only must we admire Blougram's (and Browning's) virtuosity; we balance a truly sympathetic understanding of the bishop with a barely allowed suspicion of his sudden shifts and doublings. The tension main-

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tained for 970 lines is well described by King's general comment on Browning's monologues:

Browning is inevitably the poet of paradox and irony. The deceptiveness of appearances; the co-existence, even the dual nature, of good and evil, beauty and ugliness; man's proclivity for self-deception and his inability to disentangle and order the diversities produced by life's paradoxes make the poet an ironist on a cosmic scale. In this respect, more than any other, he is un-Romantic. His vision lacks the intense concentration, the single faith, the optimistic belief in social amelioration characteristic of the Romantics. He is content to treat the problem tentatively and skeptically, to concentrate upon its psychological impact upon character; the Romantics sought the solution and described the ecstasy of discovery. (pp. 137-138)

Unfortunately, however, those first 970 lines of "Bishop Blougram's Apology" are not the whole poem; Browning does, like the Romantics, seek a solution. After line 970 he draws a line and recommences in a different voice, this new speaker being heard through forty-four additional lines. One may try to avoid some of the difficulties of the epilogue by identifying its speaker as another Gigadibs, an average Englishman judging in terms of everyday action. However, he sounds too much like the omniscient author for us to disassociate him from Browning. When the Victorian uses that figure as a dramatic persona, as Thackeray does in *Vanity Fair*, he carefully establishes the device. Here Browning does not suggest any detachment.

What is the "solution" of the epilogue? Precisely that Gigadibs was right in his initial assumption of superiority. "Gigmanity" has been exalted, keeping to Carlyle's terms, into the worker, buying his tools and ploughing his land. King tries briefly to evade the difficulty by contending that "the Bishop succeeded in making untenable the young man's position." The last lines of the poem, however, do not allow Blougram a satisfactory rational connection with Gigadibs' "conversion." Gigadibs, not Blougram, is the "healthy" one; Browning, though finding the sick most interesting, in the end opts for the healthy. Moreover, Blougram has not really "succeeded"; the impulse, like the "vehemence," comes more from within Gigadibs than from without. Blougram's simile of cabin furniture was meant to lead one way; in fact it has led another, towards a simple reassertion of standards which have been questioned throughout the poem. Moreover, the assertion is too easy;

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Gigadibs sees, through some inner light, and Blougram is quick-ly and carelessly judged. One feels that Browning has gone part way along a new road, only to cut quietly back to the old along some convenient pathway.

So for one poem. But is it typical? I would suggest that it is, though we will find that the ways vary by which Browning simultaneously treads the "dangerous edge" and retreats from it. One may, for example, add a note to the difficulty critics often have with Browning's metrics. Each poem, it is pointed out, is structurally unique; each new experience, each psychological moment, requires its particular form. The artistic impulse here seems admirable, until we see what actually happens. In fact the expression often does not reflect the content but instead runs counter to it, distorts it, breaks an original order into disordered fragments through the use of jog-trot meters, burlesque rhymes, outrageous puns. These are all legitimate comic devices, and we admit Browning's humor — one more "healthy" touch, like Gigadibs' vehemence. But what if the humor, the comic vision, finds no answering echo in the matter of the poems? May it not then be the unconscious (Kingsley's "naively unaware") assertion of "tallow and brown sugar" — or let us say rather that a tension within the poet himself holds him suspended between the star-creating power of the poet and the fragmenting, "multitudinous" impulse of the healthy, word-distrusting, even word-mocking philistine who has "studied his last chapter of St. John."

One comes back to wondering if Browning is quite honest with us. Just as he suddenly shifts sides in "Bishop Blougram's Apology," so he often slackens the tension he seems about to maintain; he casts us off the tightrope almost as soon as he puts us there. "Love Among the Ruins" may give us a comic realization of the inadequacies of all temporal and material achievement; but the same device that elicits our smiling rejection of the "brazen pillar" and the "thousand chariots" carries over to the otherwise-intended "Love is best." That is, if we assume that Browning is consciously attempting to force a suspension of the usual awe felt in the presence of the ruined remains of ancient civilizations, to force in the end a different standard, that of the power of love, we must admit, first, that the awe is not suspended but mocked, and, secondly, that the

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smirk which belittles the ancient glory also greets "Love is best." Here the tension which Browning tries to maintain is frustrated by the metrics, and the tone thus established also wrecks the resolution of the tension.

Or there is the problem of "Caliban upon Setebos," where judgment is not suspended so much as confused. The varying interpretations of this poem betoken well enough the difficulties involved. Caliban's own confusion of the *I* and the *not-I*, evidenced in his indifferent use of first and third person singular, is part of the crux here, even after E. K. Brown's persuasive explanation of it.<sup>2</sup>

Equally instructive is the lack of any feeling of a necessary and unalterable whole in many even of the better known dramatic monologues. The sense of immediate conversation need not destroy a clear beginning, middle, and end. However, no inner necessity demands that we learn just such details as are given. Browning, that is, can easily oblige us to suspend our normal, everyday judgment so long as he does not approach a terminus, a sense of completion; as soon as he does that, and we ask to what purpose or with what effect judgment was suspended, the normal reasserts itself. The tension between it and the interposed view is neither maintained nor resolved. Here one might even cite "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church." The poem is a tour de force, impressive certainly, but only partially satisfying precisely because one suspects that the tension is created for its own sake only, manipulated without thorough belief in it, that once again there is a surrender to the "healthy" world.

Interestingly enough, certain poems in which Browning does maintain the tension have had tangled critical histories. Among these are "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician" and "Cleon." In many ways, of course, the poems are a pair: both are epistles rather than strict dramatic monologues; both present the sophisticated, accomplished, and rational man prevented by his background and training from believing a mystic truth which he instinctively wishes to believe. Here the monologue certainly works as

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<sup>2</sup> "The First Person in 'Caliban upon Setebos,'" *Modern Language Notes*, LXVI (1951), 392-395.

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Browning apparently intends it to: not only are we compelled to suspend judgment, but the sympathy which we balance with judgment prevents us from easily reasserting any conventional approbation or disapprobation. In a way our judgment therefore remains suspended even past the limits of the poems. Or so it would seem; the refusal of readers to accept this suspension and balance may explain Browning's own difficulties with his form. For years the "Epistle" was read as the inspiring story of Lazarus, not as the soul-struggle of Karshish, and "Cleon" provided grounds only for outrageous symbol-hunting (the slave women sent to Cleon, for example, symbolize "the degradation of the spiritual by its subjection to earthly ideals, as were the ideals of Greek art").<sup>3</sup> Since this lamentable allegorizing has become unfashionable, moreover, the two poems have received relatively little attention, particularly in terms of technique.<sup>4</sup>

The conclusion one comes to, I believe, is that Browning, like so many of the Victorians, is developing a new form which usually does not take full or final shape under his hands. It will be picked up and utilized by succeeding writers, though he himself, in one way or another, must generally retreat from his own goal. As Carlyle in his fantastic but impressive fictional-poetical essays seeks to blend reality and ideality, as George Meredith later embarks on the Comic Novel but can never remove himself thoroughly from the earlier undetached novel, so Browning in his dramatic monologues, even in the best and best known, only half achieves — perhaps what he only half comprehends.

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<sup>3</sup> Hiram Corson *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry* (Boston, 1889), 66.

<sup>4</sup> See, however, Park Honan, *Browning's Characters. A Study in Poetic Technique* (New Haven, 1961), 161-165.

