

## Robert Browning: Background, Reception, Influence

### Robert Browning: shorter poems

Writing 1 due at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday (typed, proofread, single-spaced, 1-2 pp.).

Lecture on Victorian poetry and the interior monologue.

Read biographical essay; "**Porphyria's Lover**," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," "Andrea del Sarto," and "**Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister**" and "**My Last Duchess**." Read "Love Among the Ruins," "Memorabilia," "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad," "**Fra Lippo Lippi**" and "**Two in the Campagna**."

### 1. Browning's biography/background

- a. **Birth and upbringing:** Browning born in Camberwell (comfortable London suburb) within a few months of Dickens and Thackeray. Mother Sarah Anne strong and ambitious; his father shy and literary. Father wanted to be painter but ambitions squelched by his own father; went into banking instead. One sister, Sarianna, independent and never married.
- b. **Marriage:** to older woman, the accomplished EBB, who was fluent in many languages, including Latin and Greek, and whose reputation far outshone his during their time together. A romantic and happy union, though her family didn't approve. Tension in Browning's poetry between egalitarianism of their union and his equal fascination with men who violate women; with the characteristically Victorian conundrum of purity/innocence we see in "Porphyria's Lover."
- c. **Romantic self-exile in Italy:** living, to escape censure of EBB's parents, in northern Italy for the duration of their marriage. An emotionally releasing and aesthetically shaping experience: a "renaissance" based on the long-dead Italian renaissance.
  - i. **Casa Guidi** (in Oltroarno near Pitti Palace); their relative isolation there from Italians, retreat to small community of English expatriates
  - ii. **EBB's involvement (intellectually, at least) in Italian freedom movement.**
  - iii. **RB's fascination with the art and excess of the Italian Renaissance. Sense of northern Italy as center of artistic production; fascination with the life of the artist. Conflict between spirituality/sensuality** emblemized in Italian art was Browning's topic as well: to "pluck the rose/and love it more than words can speak/And then the good minute goes."

### 2. Browning's reception/reputation: 'initially not, eventually hot'

- a. **Not traditionally English, but English -Italian hybrid**
- b. **Not immediately popular:** early poems ("Sordello") long and inaccessible; often Browning assumed his readers understood allusions they did not. Later, mostly after EBB's death, Browning enjoyed enduring popularity that has continued among scholars and non-scholars alike. Glenn Everett says: "Whereas modern criticism sees more similarities between Browning and his predecessors than differences, his contemporaries react as if they are facing something new and alien. Clearly, they did not know what strategies to use in reading Browning's poems."

- c. **Not a member of any recognizable "school" of Victorian poetry.** Completely unlike Tennyson, Hardy, Hopkins, and their American equivalents (Browning widely read and loved in America).
- d. **Not openly or consciously a founder of a tradition** (like Whitman, who is very like Browning in some ways). Among the modern poets, only Pound has recognized Browning outright as his predecessor, calling him "son père." **Yet** (in the words of David Cecil) "Browning may be looked upon as the original English ancestor of the "modernist school of English poetry." Contemporary poet Edward Lucie-Smith argues that he cannot "think of any other nineteenth-century poet whose work is still so much alive in the mid-twentieth century. Browning moves within contemporary English and American poetry like yeast in dough."

### 3. **Browning reflects Victorianism; inaugurates modernism.**

- a. **Dramatic monologue/interior monologue. Does not invent, but perfects a new form, the dramatic monologue,** which is connected to the most popular and representative genre of his time, the Victorian novel. **Influence of the novel on poetry.**
  - i. **Colloquial diction** - what T. S. Eliot called "non-poetic material" and "the relation of poetry to speech." Eliot used Browning as a technical model for his own poetry. Eliot used such colloquial language, and Browning's confessional form, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," among other places.
  - ii. **Confessional form featuring the narratives of less-than-perfect subjects**
  - iii. **Reader as auditor**
    - . Involving the reader in creating reality: the reader is auditor, seldom identifies with poem's subject; plays central role in evaluating speaker and poem
- b. **Technique: blank verse, "Old Hop o' the Accents" as well as lyric poetry.** Technical absurdities and innovations; dislike of Augustan purity and regularity; hearing the natural iambs (and other meters) in everyday talk and life. Accused of "lack of discipline" and "lack of elegance."