MHRA
Modern Humanities Research Association

Browning's Painters
Author(s): Laurence Lerner
Source: *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Victorian Literature (2006), pp. 96-108
Published by: Modern Humanities Research Association
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20479245
Accessed: 06-03-2020 04:00 UTC

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/20479245?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Modern Humanities Research Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Yearbook of English Studies*

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Browning's Painters

LAURENCE LERNER
Lewes, East Sussex

Gerard de Lairesse was a seventeenth-century Dutch painter who went blind and then wrote a large book, *The Art of Painting in all its Branches*, translated from Dutch into English in 1778. Browning, like posterity, was unimpressed by his paintings, but claimed that as a child he had read Gerard's *Art of Painting* more often than any other book. Gerard was a fanatical disciple of Greek classicism, painted nothing but mythological scenes, and dismissed those Dutch painters we now admire, considering them incapable of nobility because of the ordinariness of their subjects. In the poem in which he parleys with Gerard, Browning imagines himself taking one of the imaginary 'Walks' which Gerard took through the Dutch landscape, turning Holland into Dreamland. He imagines himself seeing the mythological episodes that Gerard favoured and tried to paint: Jove's eagle pouncing on its prey, a vision of Artemis, a satyr at noon consumed with longing for a nymph, and Alexander in battle with Darius. The noon landscape in which the satyr's longing is described is a set piece of verbal scene-painting that does not often occur in Browning:

> Noon is the conqueror,—not a spray, nor leaf,
> Nor herb, nor blossom but has rendered up
> Its morning dew; the valley seemed one cup
> Of cloud-smoke, but the vapour's reign was brief,
> Sun-smitten, see, it hangs, the filmy haze—
> Grey-garmenting the herbless mountain-side,
> To soothe the day's sharp glare: while far and wide
> Above unclouded burns the sky, one blaze
> With fierce immitigable blue, no bird
> Ventures to spot by passage [. . .].
> (*With Gerard de Lairesse*, ll. 262–71)[1]

The poet not only accompanies Gerard on his walk, he sees with Gerard's eyes, turning the dull Dutch landscape into vivid classical myths. It is a surprise, then, to read on and find that the poem is an attack on Gerard's mythologizing habit:

> Let things be—not seem,
> I counsel rather,—do, and nowise dream!
> Earth's young significance is all to learn:
> The dead Greek lore lies buried in the urn
> Where who seeks fire finds ashes.
> (ll. 389–93)

The moral of the poem is that instead of revelling in mythology we should live firmly and realistically in the present; past modes of seeing are left behind as

[1] From *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day*. All quotations from Browning's poems are taken from *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. by John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

Yearbook of English Studies, 36.2 (2006), 96–108
© Modern Humanities Research Association 2006

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

humanity progresses: 'Nothing has been which shall not bettered be | Hereafter' (ll. 371–72). And so the poem ends with a brief unmythological nature poem : 'rhyme | Such as one makes now' (ll. 421–22).

To begin a discussion of Browning's painters with *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day* is no doubt eccentric but has certain advantages. The *Parleyings* appeared in 1887, only two years before Browning's death, and like many of the other late poems is now read by no one except a few specialists. The syntax, as is usual in late Browning, is tortured to the point of bewilderment, leading us to wonder if he should be regarded as a proto-modernist—though comparison with, say, Pound or Hart Crane soon returns him to the Victorian age where he belongs. And the opinions are often as eccentric as the syntax. Two of these poems deal with painters, the other being a *Parleying* with the equally forgotten Francis Furini, who painted nudes until he gave up art to become a very conscientious parish priest. This poem defends the nudes (biographers take this, no doubt correctly, as an indirect defence of the nudes painted by Browning's son Pen), and then indulges in a long and tortured debate about evolution, in which Browning's highly eccentric interpretation is delivered to a safely dead opponent who naturally has no right of reply.

The parleying with Gerard is more interesting, perhaps because Gerard actually wrote about painting and so can be debated with on more equal terms. The strategy of debate is striking: first the poem imitates Gerard, painting in words the kind of mythical scene he defended, then it goes on to reject the very mythologizing it has so effectively indulged in.

The same switch occurs in *Old Pictures in Florence*, written over thirty years earlier. In that poem ancient Greek art is defended because it shows you 'as you wished you were, | As you might have been, as you cannot be' (ll. 89–90) and so leaves the spectator reconciled with his lot:

> So, testing your weakness by their strength,
> Your meagre charms by their rounded beauty,
> Measured by Art in your breadth and length,
> You learned—to submit is a mortal's duty.
> (ll. 105–08)

('You' here is the ordinary mortal, 'they' are the gods and heroes so perfectly sculpted.) That, however, was a stage that has been transcended: growth came when mortals began to believe 'What if we so small | Be greater and grander the while than they?' (ll. 115–16). Greek art is perfect, and will never change; but 'we are faulty—why not? we have time in store' (l. 124). So the 'early painters' who rejected Greek art began a revolution for which they must be praised, abandoning the visible for the invisible, perfection for new hopes and new fears, body for soul. Such is progress, and in both poems the art and mythology of the Greeks are rejected after they have been enthusiastically shown to us.

Since these early painters belong in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and Gerard in the seventeenth, Browning is clearly not greatly concerned about the chronology of the progress he is chronicling. That might not matter much, since he is interested in understanding the dynamic of a rejection of classical

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Greek art—the replacement of body by soul—that might occur at any time. A more serious historical error is the account of what lies behind the experiments of Cimabue and Giotto and the whole artistic movement that Browning feels so much sympathy with. It is surely wrong to claim that medieval painting had followed ancient Greek sculptures and then consciously diverged from them: Greek sculpture was probably not familiar to Dello, Giotto, Cimabue, and the other early masters named in the poem; their work is derived rather from Byzantine painting, which surely had all along aimed to paint soul rather than body. The *Parleying* with Gerard is more accurate than this historically because its strategy is so much easier: since Gerard actually wrote a book defending the use of Greek mythology, the poem does not need to speculate on when and how it entered or left artistic practice.

The crucial words in the account of art history found in *Old Pictures* are 'body' and 'soul'. Its point is basically very simple: Greek art was concerned with body, Christian art turns to soul. The point is not made quite as bluntly as this: Greek art is described as depicting soul through 'limbs', and Christian art as springing from a 'wider nature': 'for time, theirs—ours, for eternity' (l. 120); then as the account proceeds, it is praised as bringing 'the invisible full into play!' (l. 151), then finally, in stanzas XXI and XXII, is spoken of in terms of 'soul'. The shift from body to soul is clearly seen as progress, as an upward movement in the history of art, and it is quite plausible to regard it as beginning in the thirteenth century, then needing to be repeated each time a later painter slipped back into admiring Greek classicism. That is consistent enough—until we think of *Fra Lippo Lippi*.

This is a much more important poem than either of the two so far discussed, and for two reasons: its view of art history is more carefully worked out, and it takes us into the familiar territory of the dramatic monologue, the self-presentation of a complex character we both identify with and observe. Lippi was a poor boy who climbed out of poverty by using his wits: in that he resembles Mr Sludge, the charlatan claiming powers as a medium. Both these poems show that deprivation has its advantages: if you grew up hungry, you learnt to miss no opportunity to steal or scrounge a crust, and so learnt to read the human beings you might get something out of. Mr Sludge learnt early that for a poor boy to mention that he had money would get him into trouble, but claiming to see ghosts might be very profitable; and Lippi, taken to the monastery, was asked by the good fat monk if he was minded 'to quit this very miserable world' and to '"renounce" . . . "the mouthful of bread?" thought I; | by no means!' (ll. 96–97). And so both were launched on very successful careers: Mr Sludge's based directly on the skills he had learnt as a beggar boy, knowing what people wanted to hear and giving it to them, Lippi's based on his skill at drawing.

> First, every sort of monk, the black and white,
> I drew them, fat and lean: then, folk at church[.]
> (ll. 145–46)

This is offered to us as one of the great emancipatory moments in art history. Lippi is the Browning of painting: his gallery of men and women can hardly fail to remind us of Browning's *Men and Women*: they are all vividly real,

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and are a great success with the less sophisticated monks, but 'the Prior and the learned pulled a face' (l. 175)—as did the Victorian critics who thought that what Browning wrote was not poetry. The business of a painter, the Prior informs him, is not to capture the outward show 'with homage to the perishable clay', but to lift us out of the everyday and paint the *souls* of men:

> Here's Giotto, with his saints a-praising God,
> That sets us praising.
> (ll. 189–90)

The Prior's sort of painting has had its day: the long monotonous rows of identical saints may represent piety, but they will give way before a style that paints what it sees, and gives us the real world. Lippi, as clever as Mr Sludge, learns to handle the Prior by getting friends in high places, and practises art in a way that will lead to Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael (Browning's favourite trio): the painters of the future.

Fra Lippo Lippi is not an obscure poem, and this interpretation can be advanced with confidence—until we turn back to *Old Pictures in Florence*, which, after its casual opening, seems to be saying the precise opposite. In *Fra Lippo Lippi* medieval painters painted the soul because they were stiff and static, and art had not yet found its liberation through Lippi's brilliance in painting the body; whereas in *Old Pictures in Florence* they paint the soul as a sign of progress and liberation: it is through them that 'growth came'. They do not represent a stiffness the great Renaissance masters had to reject, but they are the elder brothers from whom the later painters derive. 'Old and New are fellows' (l. 62).

'Do I contradict myself?' wrote Whitman. 'Very well then I contradict myself, | (I am large, I contain multitudes.)'[2] Browning was at least as large a poet as Whitman, and has a much stronger claim to containing multitudes, but to defend his contradiction this easy defence will not quite do. No one would object to the contradictions between Mr Sludge and Cleon, or between Karshish and Caliban: we would not even call them contradictions, but simply see them as very different figures created by the same multitude-containing poet. But whether medieval painters painted soul because they were freeing themselves from the limiting perfection of Greek art, or because they were still stiff and had not learnt that 'if you get simple beauty and nought else | You get about the best thing God invents' (*Fra Lippo Lippi*, ll. 217–18): there we have two opinions, not two different kinds of person, and to maintain them both is to offer an aporia—to the delight perhaps of the modern deconstructionist, but not, surely, what we would expect from the opinionated Browning. They cannot both be true.

Or can they? If we think of the history of art as more like the history of humanity than the history of opinion, then two apparently contradictory interpretations could be two different ways of cutting through the multifariousness. We need only think about the word 'renaissance': if what was being reborn was classical civilization, then ancient Greek art was not something to be pushed

[2] 'Song of myself', ll. 1324–26, in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. by Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 77.

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

aside, but a stimulus to rebirth; and if—as can be plausibly argued—the Renaissance was a typically medieval movement, then the stimulus of ancient art was always there. I do not think it possible to exempt Browning from an inconsistency in his terminology—painting the soul can hardly be both a sign of progress and a sign of conservatism—but once we cease to see history as regular progress, we can expect to see the contrary pull of soul and of body occurring at any time. And so to *Pictor Ignotus*.

Lippi did sometimes do what the Prior wanted; he had to live, after all, and so, from time to time,

> I swallow my rage,
> Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint
> To please them—sometimes do and sometimes don't.
> (ll. 242–44)

But suppose he had given in completely, agreed to paint only the souls of men, even though that meant painting their bodies ill. Suppose he had done this not with a weary sigh:

> And I've been three weeks shut within my mew,
> A-painting for the great man, saints and saints
> And saints again [. . .]
> (ll. 47–49)

but with a kind of sad acceptance: 'I chose my portion' (*Pictor Ignotus*, l. 57). Then, instead of announcing a new style, he would have remained unknown: *ignotus*.

> I could have painted pictures like that youth's
> Ye praise so.
> (*Pictor Ignotus*, ll. 1–2)

'That youth' might no doubt be Lippi, though it is more likely (if we must name an individual) to be Raphael, Browning's golden boy, his figure for artistic genius (more on this later). But of course we do not need to put a name to him: the 'youth' is a painter of the new school, with patrons who praise him extravagantly, buy his work, and hire him to praise their wives and mistresses. He could even be Fra Pandolf, who knew how to paint and flatter at the same time:

> [. . .] 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.'
> (*My Last Duchess*, ll. 15–19)

Painting here has become so secularized that even a monk (for he is *Fra*, just like Lippi) knows how to win friends and influence people, knows not only how to paint but how to get commissions from noblemen with a nine-hundred-year-old name. That is the world that the unknown painter (whose name of course we do *not* know) refused to enter. He wanted to, and he could have: just as Lippi knew how to capture

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
> Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
> With the little children round him in a row
> Of admiration,
> (*Fra Lippo Lippi*, ll. 149–52)

so this painter could have captured it all, and longed to do so:

> And, like that youth ye praise so, all I saw
> Over the canvas could my hand have flung,
> Each face obedient to its passion's law,
> Each passion clear proclaimed without a tongue.
> (*Pictor Ignotus*, ll. 13–16)

So why did he refuse it? To put it tendentiously, because freedom means freedom to be vulgar, because secularization places the uninhibited self above the constraints of piety, because God in this new world has given place to Me: his new patrons would keep saying things like 'This likes me more, and this affects me less.' Lippi, Raphael, Fra Pandolf have entered this world, the world in which Leonardo has to design war machines for his patron; and the *pictor ignotus* has chosen to keep out of it. The attempts of some scholars to identify him with Fra Bartolommeo, for all the documentary evidence they can offer, are deeply misguided.[3] He has no original who can be named: he has refused history, and the price for that is to be forgotten.

Pictor Ignotus is a limit case for the understanding of what the dramatic monologue can do. All definitions of the genre see it as combining two different attitudes towards the speaker, variously defined by different critics: sympathy and judgement, identification and irony, sympathy and detachment. The wording I used earlier was that the reader both identifies with and observes the speaker. These differences of terminology are not important: about the nature of the dramatic monologue there is more agreement among critics than they are always ready to admit, so I shall use the terminology of Langbaum, whose discussion of the genre I take to be the classic one.[4] If there is no sympathy we have a merely comic or satiric poem; if there is no judgement (no irony) we have a pure lyric, in which the emotion is attributed to the poet himself. (It may seem odd, but should not, to equate 'judgement' with 'irony': since no one speaks except the created character, the only way the poet can convey

[3] The most substantial of such efforts is that of J. B. Bullen ('Browning's "Pictor Ignotus" and Vasari's "Life of Fra Bartolommeo di San Marco', *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 23 (1972), 313–19). Bullen's documentation establishes a strong case that Browning took some of his details from Vasari's *Life* of Fra Bartolommeo, but this need not—indeed, should not—mean that the reader of the poem is intended to rescue the *pictor* from his fate as *ignotus*.

[4] Examples of the terminology used in discussing the dramatic monologue are: 'Browning's ambivalent attitude towards his materials' (Roma A. King, 'Browning: "Mage" and "Maker". A Study in Poetic Purpose and Method', *Victorian Newsletter*, 20 (Fall 1961), 21–25 (p. 21)); 'the speaker/our assessment of the speaker' (Philip Drew, *The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 17); 'ironic betrayal' (Michael Mason, 'Browning and the Dramatic Monologue', in *Writers and their Background: Robert Browning*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: Bell, 1974), pp. 231–66 (passim, e.g. p. 236)); 'the feint', which requires us to read 'with a mixture of sympathy and ironic judgement' (Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Methuen 1977), p. 24—and passim). Robert Langbaum's treatment of the dramatic monologue is found in *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1963).

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

judgement is by implying an ironic distance between himself and the speaker.) The relative importance of sympathy and judgement can of course vary greatly: at the one extreme we can place the *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, where one might at first feel that the speaker is held up for our mere contempt (though in fact such a reading would diminish the poem: it is only because we can recognize—recognize in ourselves—the emotion of being intensely irritated by the mannerisms of a no doubt estimable colleague we are brought into constant contact with that the experience of reading this poem is so powerful). And at the other extreme—identification with, apparently, no irony—we can place *Pictor Ignotus*. This speaker seems totally aware, as capable as author or reader of knowing himself; so that by one criterion he is the perfect subject for a poem about himself, but by another he is totally unsuited to it, since there can be no humour at his expense, no shifting into and out of his awareness of himself. Because he knows as much as we know, there is no irony. Unlike Sludge or the Spanish monk, he could have written the poem himself.

Or could he? There is of course another possibility: that the apparent self-knowledge is a mechanism to keep the truth from himself. Not surprisingly, there have been plenty of modern critics who read the poem this way: I shall take as their spokesman Richard D. Altick, for whom the *pictor* is a totally unreliable narrator, whose refusal of the new painting is caused by his inability to practise it, and 'whose success lies in his inability to construct tenable rationalisations for his failure'.[5] Is he then projecting onto the outside world his own inability to take a decision? Is he suffering from fear of freedom, and therefore afraid to commit himself?

In our post-Freudian age, it is inevitable that the unknown painter, along with Blougram, Cleon, Porphyria's lover, Pompilia—no one is safe—should be psychoanalysed. Perhaps the most promising candidate for this treatment is Andrea del Sarto, to whom I now turn.

Andrea del Sarto is described by Vasari as endowed by nature with her rarest gift in all three branches of painting—colouring, design, and invention. Though Vasari does not himself use the label 'perfect painter', he does tell us that Andrea's figures are 'simple and pure, well conceived, flawless and perfect in every particular',[6] and the phrase 'senza errori' seems to have caught on as a label for Andrea. Vasari tells us too that Andrea's character was not worthy of his artistic skill, though on this he is ambiguous. In his conclusion, he offers a simple contrast between the character of the man and the prowess of the artist: 'if Andrea in life was mean-spirited and contented with little, in art his spirit was lofty and [. . .] he should serve as an example to Tuscan artists and bear an honoured palm among their most famous men'. But in his introduction Vasari suggests that the defect of character also invaded the art: 'had his spirit been as bold as his judgement was profound, he would doubtless have been unequalled'. This ambiguity, I want to suggest, is not confined to Vasari.

Most critics of the poem have concerned themselves with Andrea's defects

[5] See Richard D. Altick, *Writers, Readers and Occasions: Selected Essays on Victorian Literature and Life* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), p. 32.

[6] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550), trans. by A. B. Hinds, 4 vols (London: Everyman, 1927), II, 303–24 (p. 303).

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

of character. Thus King sees Andrea not as 'a searching mind attempting to discern truth, but a timid one afraid of discovering too much';[7] Harold Bloom goes even further, and in seeing Andrea as 'the extinguished hearth, an ash without embers', he claims that this is what Browning himself dreaded to become (and assures him that he had no need to fear being burnt out).[8] The most extreme position is that of Keith Polette, for whom Andrea is 'a kind of emotional money-changer who delights in the deficits [*sic*] which he secretly forces others to inflict upon him' and who contrives to turn almost every sentence uttered by the painter into a revelation of his ignominy: 'del Sarto can do little more than spout explanatory and excusatory statements which are rooted neither in deeds nor in sympathetic understanding'.[9] If choice of verbs is revealing, as it so often is in Browning himself, I cannot think of a less appropriate verb than 'spout'. Browning was certainly capable of writing poems in which the speaker reveals the obsessive violence of his hostile passions: *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* is an obvious example, and the contrast between the two poems should show the huge difference between the Spanish monk's violent spouting and Andrea's slow sad probing of his own limitations.

I have come across one critic whose contempt for Andrea is as great as Polette's: one Edward Berdoe, author of *The Browning Cyclopedia*,[10] who contrasts the reverence of Fra Angelico 'painting his saints and angels on his knees' with the 'soullessness' of Andrea, and declares 'the fellow has the tailor in his blood'. That this late Victorian bardolator and the modern American academic critic should agree in their contempt for Andrea shows that the value judgement is not necessarily tied to the critic's own ideology, but the comparison reveals the enormous advantage—or apparent advantage—enjoyed by the modern critic who knows about psychoanalysis. Andrea tells Lucrezia that her inadequacy as a wife is responsible for his not having reached the greatness of Raphael and Michelangelo, and the modern critic who sees this as evidence against Andrea will almost inevitably propose that it is his unconscious wish to fail as an artist that binds him to Lucrezia—and in Bloom's case, go on to psychoanalyse Browning himself. To interpret the poem in this way would free us from the suspicion of blaming things on the woman (as Vasari certainly does in the first version of his *Life*, which is very contemptuous of Lucrezia); Andrea then becomes a simple example of projection, externalizing an internal inhibition and investing in Lucrezia a weakness that actually belongs to him. The parallel with *Pictor Ignotus* would then be very clear, though the unknown painter does not project his unconscious wish to escape the test of modern greatness onto an individual, but onto a world, the world of the commercialization of art.

[7] Roma A. King, 'Eve and the Virgin', in *The Browning Critics*, ed. by Boyd Litzinger and K. L. Knickerbocker ([Lexington]: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), pp. 310–28 (p. 320).

[8] Harold Bloom, 'Browning: Good Moments and Ruined Quests', in *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 175–204 (pp. 193–94).

[9] Keith Polette, 'The Many-Walled World of "Andrea del Sarto"', *Victorian Poetry*, 35 (Winter 1997), 493–508 (pp. 498, 496).

[10] *The Browning Cyclopedia*, by Edward Berdoe, Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh, dedicated to the founders of the Browning Society, was published in 1912 (by George Allen & Co., London), but I have no hesitation in calling it late Victorian in spirit.

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The problem with this is the problem with all psychoanalytic interpretation, that it seems to deny the existence of any causation outside of the self. A world in which those who are run over by a bus wish, unconsciously, to break a leg or to be killed is a very convenient world for bus drivers; a world in which faithless spouses are helping to fulfil some unconscious wish to fail on the part of their partner is, similarly, a convenient world for adulterers.

How can we decide on the validity of such readings of these two poems (or, indeed, of the reading that sees Capinsacchi's idealization of Pompilia, in Book VI of *The Ring and the Book*, as expressing his own fear of sexuality)? Here is Freud's own definition of projection: 'the ego thrusts forth upon the external world whatever within itself gives rise to pain'.[11] This enables us to seize on the unknown painter's line 'The thought grew frightful, 'twas so wildly dear!' (*Pictor Ignotus*, l. 40), and claim that 'frightful' is the give-away word: he is afraid of the very triumph he believes he is longing for. The origin of the fear is to be found not in the objective situation, but in the speaker's own anxiety. But of course the experience of feeling afraid of any new and challenging—and longed-for—experience (one's first sexual consummation, one's first public appearance, one's first swim) is a familiar one, and this use of 'frightful' is normal and idiomatic. That objection will not daunt the determined Freudian, who can then claim that the language itself embodies elements of a theory that we already unconsciously hold. To decide whether that is true will launch us on the familiar arguments for and against psychoanalytic interpretations not just of a poem but of all experience, and discussion of the poem has then given place to discussion of psychoanalytic theory itself. This is inevitable, and should make it clear that the psychoanalytic reading is not generated by the poem, it is imported into our reading by our allegiance to psychoanalytic theory. The poem is not evidence for or against the theory, it is more like the experience that the theory sets out to explain.

I have begun with Lucrezia because Vasari—and most of the commentators—do so: when we move from Andrea's marriage to his painting we are offered an exploration of what is meant by calling him 'the perfect painter', and why this is a way of describing his limitations as well as his excellence. That is not the same subject: the limitations of Andrea's character, as revealed in his enslavement to Lucrezia, are a possible but not inevitable explanation of his limitations as a painter. Vasari believes it is the explanation, and his ready move from moral limitation to artistic limitation is one of the clearest signs of his naivety. For us simply to accept this—as both Berdoe and Polette appear to—would be mere gullibility. But we naturally ask whether Browning accepted it, and that is not an easy question to answer. In a life of failure and fraud, Andrea's artistic skill is the one achievement he can see as genuine:

[11] Sigmund Freud, 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes' (1915), in *Collected Papers*, 5 vols (New York: Basic Books, 1959), IV, 60–83 (p. 78). The unusual—and welcome—simplicity of this definition is so untechnical as to seem hardly psychoanalytic, since it makes no mention of the unconscious drives responsible for the projection. A fuller account would usually treat projection as deriving from infantile and violent impulses, and would lead us into some of the more extreme theories about the ubiquity of fantasy.

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> I do what many dream of all their lives,
> —Dream? strive to do and agonize to do,
> And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
> On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
> Who strive—you don't know how the others strive
> [...]
> Yet do much less, so much less.
> (*Andrea del Sarto*, ll. 69–73, 76)

The contrast here is between aspiration and attainment. It is quite clear that the 'twenty such' are inferior painters ('their works drop groundward', l. 83), but their striving gives them a spiritual superiority to the self-despising Andrea:

> There burns a truer light of God in them,
> In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
> Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
> This low-puls'd forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
> (ll. 79–82)

Searching for reassurance at such a moment of self-doubting, he remembers what Michelangelo once said to Raphael, that there is a certain 'sorry little scrub' (l. 189) in Florence who would bring the sweat to his brow: it is at the very moment when he clearly realizes that he will never be as great a painter as Raphael that the memory returns, and can be used as a way of claiming that Michelangelo himself did not accept Andrea's self-deprecation (but of course Michelangelo had only put it as a future possibility).

Andrea was the faultless painter: that was his limitation. The little sketch by Raphael that he has in his studio is wrongly drawn—the arm is crooked—and he could alter it if he had the nerve. That precisely shows his inferiority: accurate draughtsmanship is not the same as inspiration:

> Still, what an arm! And I could alter it:
> But all the play, the insight and the stretch—
> Out of me, out of me!
> (ll. 115–17)

Here I pause to raise an eyebrow at the choice of example. If we are looking for a perfect painter, a painter whose draughtsmanship is perfect, whose effects are predictable, who never breaks the rules and never offers unorthodox thrills, my candidate (Browning obviously would not agree) would be Raphael. But of course even if we dispute Browning's example the point is not invalidated: if Raphael were the faultless painter, longing to alter the arm in, say, a sketch by Michelangelo, we would still have the contrast between competence and inspiration, between the body and soul of a painting (by now it is, I trust, unnecessary to remark that this is not the same body/soul contrast as in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, though it is much the same as in *Old Pictures in Florence*).

What is the relation between the aspirations of the twenty inferior painters whose works drop groundward and the inspiration of a Raphael, who gets the arm wrong but has all the play, the insight, and the stretch? We can answer this by noticing the one actual error in King's paraphrase of the poem; Andrea, she claims, 'has the hand of a patient, skilful but uninspired craftsman, while in

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the works of his contemporaries "there burns a truer light of God"'.[12] But that is not what Andrea says. The truer light of God does not burn in the *work of* the 'twenty such' who strive to equal him: 'Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know, | Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me' (ll. 83–84) Raphael's genius (to accept Browning's example) was that the spiritual striving of those who cannot paint well finds its way into his work. 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp', says Andrea in the most famous line of the poem (l. 97). Andrea has skill, the twenty such have spiritual striving, only Raphael has both. Andrea is condemned to remain content with his grasp and his grisaille.

Did Browning see himself as a kind of Andrea? Did he believe that his undoubted skill in writing dramatic monologues meant that his works drop groundward? There are suggestions of this in his remarks on his own poetry:

> You speak out, *you*,—I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me, but I am going to try.[13]

Is this a confession that because he does not 'speak out' his works will 'drop groundward', that the true poet expresses his own feelings, and the dramatic monologue has a limitation to it something like the limitation of Andrea's art? The thought carries on into the next letter:

> What I have painted gives *no* knowledge of me—it evidences abilities of various kinds, if you will, and a dramatic sympathy with certain modifications of passion [. . .] *that* I think—But I never have began, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end—'R.B. a poem.'[14]

But he is writing to the woman he is about to fall in love with, whose poems he admires and whose sympathy he is trying to capture; so he is not, surely, on oath. She of course replies by telling him how good his poems are, then goes on to repeat his point:

> But I do not, you say, know yourself—you. I only know abilities and faculties. Well, then, teach me yourself—you. I will not insist on the knowledge—and in fact you have not written the R.B. poem yet—your rays fall obliquely rather than directly straight. I see you only in your moon. Do tell me all of yourself that you can and will [. . .] before the R.B. poem comes out.[15]

What she is saying seems very clear; but there is still an ambiguity. Of course these are the letters of two people getting to know one another, which makes it hard to know if they are really talking about poetry, or applying a point about poetry to their personal lives. In other words, is she saying that the dramatic monologue *is* fine but limited, and the greatest poems are those in which the poet gives us himself; or is she denying this, saying that there is nothing limited about it as poetry, but she is also interested in getting to know him as a person?

[12] King, p. 325.

[13] Robert to Elizabeth, 13 January 1845, in *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by Elvan Kintner, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 7.

[14] Robert to Elizabeth, 11 February 1845, in *Letters*, p. 17.

[15] Elizabeth to Robert, 17 February 1845, in *Letters*, p. 22.

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

And when she writes again on the subject more than a year later, when she has got to know him, and they are declared lovers, we can see the same ambiguity hovering. A longer quotation is now necessary:

I understand myself both the difficulty and the glory of dramatic art. Yet I am conscious of wishing you to take the other crown besides—and after having made your own creatures speak in clear human voices, to speak yourself out of that personality which God made [. . .]. Now here is yourself, with your wonderful faculty!—it is wondered at and recognised on all sides where there are eyes to see—it is called wonderful and admirable! Yet, with an inferior power, you might have taken yourself closer to the hearts and lives of men, and made yourself dear, though being less great—therefore I do want you to do this with your surpassing power—it will be so easy to you to speak, and so noble, when spoken.[16]

We can be sure that Browning took this to heart, for he wrote, as epilogue to *Men and Women*, a very striking poem that sets out to differentiate itself from the rest of the volume. That is *One Word More*, addressed to his wife. It tells about Raphael's sonnets and Dante's painting—about amateur works by two great professional artists, a private gift, in each case, to the woman he loved—and declares that 'you and I' would rather read Raphael's sonnets than wonder at all his splendid madonnas, that 'you and I' would rather see Dante's angel 'would we not?—than read a fresh Inferno' (l. 52). The poem then dwells on the burden of being a public figure, and claims that poet and painter long 'to be the man and leave the artist' (l. 71). But since he himself has no talent except for writing verses, he cannot paint a picture, or sculpt, or write music; all he can do is write a different kind of poem for her: 'Let me speak this once in my true person' (l. 138).

It is obvious that *One Word More* addresses the same issue that they both raised in the letters: that of writing 'R.B. a poem', that of deliberately and consciously abandoning the dramatic in order to write directly in one's own person. In fact, *One Word More is* an attempt to write 'R.B. a poem', and announces itself as different from the 'fifty men and women' who make up the rest of the volume. It is different in several ways. First, it is in trochaic not iambic verse, a difference that in itself has nothing to do with the public/private contrast, but that is immediately striking, an announcement that whatever else the poem is and is not, it is going to sound different. Second, it is personalized, in the mundane sense in which a cheque or a fountain pen can be personalized: it is dedicated to E.B.B., dated, and signed 'R.B.'. These initials are not, strictly, part of the poem, as the fountain pen would write as well without your name engraved on it, but you cannot use the one or read the other without noticing the name—and the personalizing also invades the poem itself, since it is now clear that the 'you' of 'you and I' is not the reader but is E.B.B.

And third and most important, it is not a dramatic monologue. The poet now speaks in his own person, and so conforms, in the most obvious way, to those Romantic theories of inspiration that locate a poem's power in the emotional pressure that led the poet to produce it. The dramatic monologue, as Ba's statements in the letters make clear, is not in principle a Romantic genre: its success depends on the ability of the poet *not* to express himself. To Browning

[16] Elizabeth to Robert, 26 May 1846, in *Letters*, pp. 731–32.

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the dramatic poet, *One Word More* is a poem that fails to use his peculiar talents. To Browning the Romantic love poet, it is an aesthetic manifesto.

In his *Browning Handbook* William Clyde DeVane concludes his account of *One Word More* with a fascinating ambiguity: 'to admirers of the Brownings, *One Word More* is perhaps the most valued of all Browning's poems'.[17] Is this claiming that it is his best poem? It seems like that, at first glance; yet 'admirers of the Brownings' are not quite the same as 'admirers of Browning's poetry'; the phrase seems to suggest those with an impure, a biographically slanted, even (if one wants to be dismissive) a gossipy interest in the poetry, those who might distinguish between the poems they believe to be the best, and the poems they most value. Exactly the same ambiguity comes in the poem itself:

> You and I would rather read that volume,
> (Taken to his beating bosom by it)
> Lean and list the bosom-beats of Rafael,
> Would we not? than wonder at Madonnas.
> (*One Word More: To E.B.B.*, ll. 18–21)

Why would we? Not, clearly, because Raphael was a better poet than painter; but because we are lovers, and we have another criterion besides poetic merit, a personal criterion that prefers the personalized to the impersonality of art. Yet to a believer in the Romantic doctrine of expression, which both the Brownings were, the claim that the most deeply felt will also be the greatest can never wholly be dismissed.

[17] *A Browning Handbook*, 2nd edn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1955), p. 278.

This content downloaded from 117.240.50.232 on Fri, 06 Mar 2020 04:00:11 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms