INTRODUCTION

In 1875 Browning wrote to a correspondent about the manner in which critics approached his works:

The notice had (to my apprehension) the usual fault of beginning at the very beginning of my somewhat lengthy series of works, and criticising those on a scale which, presently, the writer finds it impossible to sustain, and so he finds it convenient to dismiss the product of half my life with a summary sentence or two -- which, in the nature of things, must needs be a condemnatory one, for there is no calling a thing simply 'good' without advancing some proof of its goodness; whereas, if you call it indifferent or bad, readers will gladly dispense with a further sample. I myself have always liked to read a man's collected works, of any kind, backwards, and what I once thought a fancy I incline now to consider an eminently rational procedure.

The implication is that a correct appraisal of any literary development needs to take into account all its phases. This procedure has, unfortunately, not been applied to Browning's own works, the critical examination of which generally tends to end with The Ring and the Book (1868), on the premise that all the writing that followed was essentially minor. This neglect is surprising when we consider, on the

one hand, Browning's personal opinions on the
course of his later poetic development, and on the
other, the evidence of the later poems themselves.

In a letter to Carlyle dated January 23, 1856,
Browning wrote: ''As I believe no man a real poet or
genius of any sort who does not go on improving till
eighty and over, I shall begin again and again as
often as you set me right.''

Again, on December 19, 1864, he wrote to Isa Hlagden: 'On the other hand,
I feel such comfort and delight in doing the best I
can with my own object of life, — poetry, — which,
I think, I never could have seen the good of before,...
I hope to do much more yet ...''

In the twenty-one years that spanned the
period between The Ring and the Book (1868) and
Asolando (1889) Browning kept up a steady output
of poetry that intellectually and formally bear

3. Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella
Hlagden, ed. Edward C. McAlleeer (Austin: University
witness to his astonishing versatility. Relentlessly experimenting with new forms in which to express his ideas and seeking fresh perspectives to interpret a world in the throes of change, Browning in his later period can never be accused of stagnation.

Nevertheless, the significance of this period has generally escaped notice. The contemporary reviewers were puzzled by what they regarded as Browning's increasing eccentricity. Henry James, writing in *The Nation* of January 20, 1876, remarked:

Nothing that Mr. Browning writes, of course, can be vapid; if this were possible, it would be a much simpler affair. If it were a case of a writer running thin, as the phrase is, there would be no need for criticism,...But it may be said of Mr. Browning that he runs thick rather than thin, and he need claim none of the tenderness granted to those who have used themselves up in the service of their admirers. He is robust and vigorous; more so now, even, than heretofore, and he is more prolific than in the earlier part of his career. But his wantonness, his wilfulness, his crudity, his inexplicable want of secondary thought, as we may call it, of the stage of reflection that follows upon the first outburst of an idea, and smooths, shapes and adjusts it—all this alloy of his great genius is more sensible now than ever.4

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When twentieth century criticism censured Browning's poetry on the twin counts of form and content, the later poetry became its main target of hostility. A characteristic evaluation runs as follows: 'Here, in the sequence of works following The Ring and the Book, appears the figure of the Ancient Sage, the Browning who tiresomely reiterated his cherished beliefs with a boisterous optimism which has become positively offensive;'

Another estimate dismisses the later poetry as being enveloped in 'a dense smog of verbal pollution.'

But these misconceptions stem from the habit of judging Browning's poetry by standards alien to his art. What is urgently needed is a revaluation that views the later poetry as an integral part of the 'whole' Browning. While the earlier period was experimental and as such formed a prelude to the period of the great dramatic monologues, the later period was one of diversification, when ideas and techniques were expanded to suit a temperament that had undergone change with the years.

Recent Browning criticism has viewed the later poetry with sympathetic attention. The foundations were laid by William Clyde DeVane's pioneering research into the sources and background of these poems as well as his meticulous study of a significant later poem—the *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1885). Books by scholars like Roma A King, Philip Drew and Clyde de L. Ryals, as well as individual studies of the later poems by John Hintner, Mark Siegchrist, Charlotte Watkins and others, have brought home to us the importance of Browning's later phase. But apart from Ryals' work, no comprehensive attempt has hitherto been made to deal exclusively with the later poetry as representative of Browning's maturity. Ryals' method of examining the poems in the chronological order, illuminating as it is with

12. See Select Bibliography.
regard to the form and content of these poems needs, however, to be supplemented with an examination of the later poems as groups having markedly similar structural and thematic characteristics, so that the salient features of Browning's mind and art during this period may be more easily assessed. This is the approach adopted in the present study, an approach that allows for an evaluation of characteristic features within the group and facilitates comparison with earlier poems of the same kind so that Browning's later poetic development is clearly traced.

Six recurrent preoccupations in Browning's poetry—philosophy, love, casuistry, satire, aesthetic theory and Greek themes—are examined through the later poetry, with a chapter devoted to each, in order to assess Browning's mode of treating them in his maturity and to place them in relation to his earlier poetry. This approach serves two related purposes. First, it enables us to discern in the poetry of the later period a continuation of interests initiated in the earlier. Secondly, it gives a view of this poetry, not as mirroring Browning's decline, but as a culmination in practice of Browning's theory of the poet's development.
It has generally been held that Browning was a dramatic and objective poet, and that he rejected the Romantic tradition of subjective poetry. But in his *Essay on Shelley* (1852), after a discussion of the role of the poet as fashioner and seer respectively, Browning goes on to describe "a time when the general eye has, so to speak, absorbed its fill of the phenomena around it, whether spiritual or material, and desires rather to learn the exacter significance of what it possesses, than to receive any augmentation of what is possessed. Then is the opportunity for the poet of loftier vision, to lift his fellows, with their half-apprehensions, up to his own sphere, by intensifying the import of details and rounding the universal meaning." Sufficient attention has not been paid to the fact that, in his later period, Browning attempted to take his verse in this very direction. It was not enough for him at this later stage merely to present points of view as he had hitherto done; his work needed to be more explicitly meaningful. Possibly he now felt impelled to comply with his dead wife's desire that he express truths more overtly:

I do not think with all the music in you, only your own personality should be dumb, nor that having thought so much and deeply on life and its ends, you should not teach what you have learnt, in the directest and most impressive way, the mask thrown off however moist with the breath. And it is not, I believe, by the dramatic medium, that poets teach most impressively ... I have seemed to observe that! ... it is too difficult for the common reader to analyze, and to discern between the vivid and the earnest .... 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.

But along with this desire to fuse the inner and the outer worlds, the "spiritual comprehension" and the "raw material" that he had spoken of in the Essay on Shelley, was Browning's keener awareness of the difficulties of attaining to the absolute truth amidst the limited perceptions vouchsafed to man in this finite world. It is this tension between the desire to unequivocally express the truth and the realization that this expression can, at best, be partial, that permeates the later poetry and gives it its particular shape. Once this is understood and accepted, all the difficulties of Browning's later poetry may be seen as inescapable adjuncts to a poetry of search.

For Browning is led to present truth as he saw it, not dogmatically, but as an exploration of the process of attaining to that truth. Over and over again he insists that his assumptions hold good for his own self alone. This exploration demands the wider framework that is so noticeable in the later poetry, and even its unattractive features, argumentativeness, prolixity, may be traced to this desire to present as many perspectives as possible within a poem. The present study attempts to highlight this aspect of the later poetry in order to refute the fallacies that have been most detrimental to a true appreciation of the later work—the impression that these poems are merely versified argumentation and full of a blustering yea-saying. A detailed study of various themes in the poetry of this period is proposed so as to define the complexity of Browning's mind and art and to expose the hollowness of these charges.

Clyde de L. Ryals points out in the introduction to his book on Browning's later poetry that with the composition of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning came to discover that "what man is left with finally in his determination of truth, is himself: in his search for
'objective reality' he discovers that he always confronts himself alone.' 15  But Ryals fails to develop this crucial point further, and it will be the object of this study to show that the next step in Browning's growth as a poet was taken in the poetry that followed, when he evolved his theory of the imaginative vision, a theory that replaced the Incarnation as Browning's source of value in the later period and became his primary aid in the task of putting the infinite within the finite.

Chapters VII and VIII deal with Browning's later narrative art, an aspect of his poetry that, in the mass of critical attention devoted to the dramatic monologue as a form most characteristic of Browning, has generally been neglected. The contemporary critics who noted the 'prose effect' in Browning's verse, did so disparagingly. Henry James, however, saw a novel in The Ring and the Book.16

while R.L. Stevenson noted of *The Inn Album* (1875):

"It bears a remarkable resemblance to some of Balzac's shorter tales, ... it has the same purely human import."  

Oscar Wilde said: "Yes, Browning was great. And as what will he be remembered? As a poet? Ah, not as a poet! He will be remembered as a writer of fiction, as the most supreme writer of fiction, it may be, that we have ever had."  

More recently, Hugh Sykes Davies asked:

But when we read Browning are we reading poetry? Or are we reading him primarily because it is poetry? Those are the really dubious points, for it must be granted at once that with many of his young readers the real attraction is in the incident, the character, the gusto of the monologue. And this, after all, is an attraction by no means special or proper to poetry, for it is shared with prose fiction, and also with drama.

He further suggested Browning's affinities with the novel, pointing out that "he was the Victorian poet who most completely fell in with—surrendered to, if you like—this new and overwhelming literary impetus."

Philip Drew is of the opinion that Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau (1871), Fifine at the Fair (1872) Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (1873) and The Inn Album (1875) show a progressively greater affinity with the novels of the mid-century. But no critic has so far examined the links between Browning's techniques in his narrative poems of the later period and the techniques that have been used by 'modern' novelists, such as Henry James' rendering rather than reporting, and Conrad's putting the narrator inside the story to refract and interpret it. In fact, Browning himself faced a problem that was a major preoccupation with the modern novelists—the problem of approaching the subject through a point of view that was not the author's own. The interior monologue that is a feature of modern fiction bears a close resemblance to the dramatic monologue. The present study, however, proposes to show that in the longer narrative poems of his later phase, Browning sought to enlarge the range of the dramatic monologue in directions reminiscent of the point-of-view novel, in order to create, by juxtaposition of multiple perspectives, his sense of the manifold complexity of ideas, feelings and motives in individual minds.

All quotations from Browning's poetry from *The Ring and the Book* (1868) and onwards are from the second volume of *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, 2 vols., London: Smith Elder, and Co., 1904, with the exception of quotations from *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871) and *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875) for which *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning*, New York: The Modern Library, 1934, has been used. Line numbers have been added for the shorter poems, while page numbers or stanza numbers have been cited for the longer poems. All references to poems prior to *The Ring and the Book* are from *Browning: Poetical Works, 1833-1864*, ed. Ian Jack, London: Oxford University Press, 1970. Square brackets in quotations indicate my words.