Browning Notes

Liz (1806-1861)  Bob (1812-1889)
“Sonnet 43”—Love$^3$, or Love Cubed

• All the 44 poems in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnet sequence Sonnets from the Portuguese were written during the period of courtship that preceded her marriage to Robert Browning.

• Sonnet 43—often titled “How do I love thee?”—is the best-known of the collection; indeed, it’s one of the most-quoted love poems in English literature.

• As a complete sequence, Sonnets from the Portuguese describes the development of Liz’s love for Bob. As the 43rd poem in a sequence of 44, “How do I love thee?” describes a fully realized love.

• Earlier poems often had mentioned the past, when EBB did not dream that such happiness would ever be hers. In Sonnet 43, she defines her present happiness by explaining how her love incorporates and transcends her past spiritual and emotional experiences.

• Sonnet 43 is an Italian sonnet, a 14-line iambic pentameter poem written in a specific rhyme scheme. Sonnets are usually love poems written by men to women. EBB appropriates the genre here, as a woman writes to a man.

• Normally, sonnets end with a sestet or couplet that answers a question, conflict, problem, or possibility stated in the preceding 8-12 lines. EBB inverts this: the first line of the poem asks a question; the other 13 answer it (in various ways).

• The answer involves 7 different aspects of love, all of which are part of Liz’s feeling for Bob, and the projection of an eighth: eternal love in the future. As the poem proceeds, each variation on the theme of love is introduced with the words “I love thee.”

• In the octave (the first 8 lines), the poem speaks of the spiritual side of her love, which aspires toward God; then she mentions its earthly aspect, the love that enriches daily life (“sun”/“candlelight”).

• In the sestet (the final 6 lines), the poet looks at her love in 3 more ways:
First, EBB explains that this love makes use of the emotions once spent on grief or on misguided religious faith.

Second, she proceeds to a slightly different idea: that in loving Bob, she has rediscovered a love like that she once felt for the “lost saints” of religion.

Third, she explains that her love is all-encompassing, involving her entire life, including moments of unhappiness as well as happiness.

• In conclusion, the poet asserts that, God willing, this love can even transcend death and continue in the next world.

• It’s a mark of EBB’s skill that the repetition of the phrase “I love thee” — 9x in a poem only 14 lines long — actually serves to make the poem more effective. The phrase is first used in the question; then, when the poet sets out to “count the ways,” she “keeps score” by introducing each new idea with exactly the same words.

• The repetition is also realistic: at least in the early stages of the emotion, most people who are in love have a tendency to reiterate the declaration frequently. Form follows function here.

• Oddly enough, “How do I love thee?” has almost no descriptions. The only real images in the poem are the mention of light in the 6th line and the reference to “breath, / Smiles, tears” in the 13th.

• Instead of relying on sensuous imagery, Barrett Browning describes the abstraction, love, by means of other abstractions. The simple phrase “I love thee” helps the reader proceed through the abstractions, just as the word-pictures created by images do in other poems.
Definition of a dramatic monologue: “A single person, who is patently not the poet, utters a speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors’ presence, and what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker. The main principle controlling the poet’s choice and formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker’s temperament and character.” — M. H. Abrams

The poetic monologues are “dramatic” in the sense that they are like a drama, a play, in which one character speaks to another, and there is a sense of action and movement as on stage. Dramatic monologues are a way of expressing the views of a character and offering the audience greater insight into that character’s thoughts and feelings.

“Porphyria’s Lover” (1834)

• “Porphyria’s Lover” is a 60-line poem in twelve 5-line divisions. It is believed to be Robert Browning’s earliest study in abnormal psychology with a delusional or schizophrenic personality as narrator.

• The poem is perhaps more accurately termed a soliloquy or an inner monologue than a dramatic monologue, since it identifies no specific hearer/listener. Browning insisted that readers distinguished between his personal self (the poet) and the voices of the fictional speakers in his monologues. He did not want critics to think these poetic creations expressed his personal emotions.

• The title leads one to expect a love relationship; however, the perceptions reported by the speaker (or the “lover”) soon alert the reader to his unbalanced and unreliable perspective. Think Poe (1809-1849).
• The “reporter,” apparently prompted by a drive to preserve the moment of Porphyria’s surrender to him, murders her by strangling her with her own hair.

• Browning employs a monologue through which an unaware speaker reveals character disorders.

• Note the use of the passive voice throughout the poem, indicating a speaker who cannot feel responsible for what he does.

• Browning would not have used the term “schizophrenic” because it did not come into psychiatric parlance until the 20th century. He could, however, present the disordered thinking of one suffering from personality dissociation, experiencing alienation from self and from what is normally perceived as reality, exhibiting inappropriate emotion and behavior, and unable to feel responsible for his emotions or his actions.

• In Browning’s moral perspective, this speaker would be another jealously possessive and tyrannical male similar to the duke who speaks in the more widely known poem “My Last Duchess.”
**Fun Fact:** The name Porphyria derives from the Greek *porphyra*, meaning “purple pigment or discoloration.”

“My Last Duchess” (1842)

- The poem’s sole speaker is the Duke of Ferrara, a character based in part on Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara (in Italy) in the 16th century. Alfonso’s wife, a young girl, died in 1561, and Alfonso used an agent to negotiate a second marriage to the niece of the Count of Tyrol. The duke addresses this agent.

- The Duke begins by referring to “my last Duchess,” his first wife, as he draws open a curtain to display a portrait of her which is hanging on the wall. After saying that he alone opens the curtain, the duke promptly begins a catalog of complaints about the way his wife had acted.
• The duke blames his late wife for being courteous to everyone she encountered, for enjoying life too much. She failed to appreciate his name, which can be traced back 900 years, and she failed to see him as superior to others. The duke would not condescend to correct her attitude.

• The final characterization the duke gives of his former duchess reveals his obsessive possessiveness and jealousy. He acknowledges that she smiled when she saw him, but complains that she gave much the same smile to anyone else she saw. His next statement reveals that he caused her to be executed: “I gave commands; then all smiles stopped together.” He does not elaborate further.

• The duke tells the agent that they will next go downstairs to meet others. Then, in not quite 5 lines, the duke refers directly to the proposed marriage arrangement. He suggests that because the count is so wealthy there should be no question about his providing an “ample” dowry for his daughter to bring to the marriage.

• As the duke and the count’s agent start down the stairs, the duke points out a bronze statue of Neptune taming a seahorse and notes that it was made especially for him. Although this appears to be a change in subject, it summarizes the duke’s clear message to the agent: in addition to the wealth she must bring, the second wife, like the seahorse, must be “tamed” to her role as his duchess. The clear implication is that if she does not meet his requirements, she may well end up like the last duchess. Unless he can possess his next duchess as he possesses the portrait and the bronze statue, she too may become only an artifact on the wall, as nameless as the first duchess.

• The duke claims that he does not have skill in speech, but his monologue is a masterpiece of subtle rhetoric. While supposedly entertaining the count’s agent as his guest by showing him the portrait, the duke by implication explains his requirements for his new wife. His last duchess, according to his version of her, had a heart “too soon made glad” by such things as watching a sunset or riding her white mule around the terrace, and she should not have responded with pleasure to anything or anyone but the
duke himself. Instead of seeing an unfaithful wife as the duke pictures her, the reader sees the jealous and egotistical mind of the duke himself.

• Note, too, how twice the agent starts to question or interrupt, but the duke smoothly deflects the interruptions and continues speaking. He is in total control of the situation, however casual he may pretend to be.

• The matter-of-fact tone that he uses throughout the poem shows that the duke considers himself totally justified, and he remains unrepentant and secure in his sense of power over others. He considers himself superior to others and above laws and morality. As he had a painter and a sculptor create objects of art to his specifications, he assumes that the agent will provide the kind of duchess he wants.

• The jealousy and possessiveness that seem to accompany the duke’s assertion of power suggest that he will be equally suspicious of any living wife, and indeed the portrait of his last duchess is more satisfactory to him than was the duchess herself. He can open or close the curtain as he pleases; he can exert complete control.

“The Lost Leader” (1843)

Poem berates William Wordsworth, for what Browning considered his desertion of the liberal cause.
• From an early age, Browning (b. 1812) had been an admirer of the early works of Wordsworth (b. 1770). Browning had sought to become “Wordsworth’s radical successor.”

• However, when he began to perceive Wordsworth sliding into conservative politics and the Church of England, he became increasingly disillusioned.

• Wordsworth in his early days had been a youthful rebel, having witnessed the French Revolution first-hand. However, as England went to war against France, conditions in France deteriorated (with the Reign of Terror) and Wordsworth became disillusioned. Eventually, he “gave up his revolutionary dreams and settled down to the life of a recluse.”
For his part, Wordsworth seems to have thought very little of Browning, and one of the few recorded statements he made about Browning was in a letter written to a friend on the occasion of Robert’s wedding to Elizabeth:

Miss Barrett, I am pleased to learn, is so much recovered as to have taken herself a husband. Her choice is a very able man, and I trust that it will be a happy union, not doubting that they will speak more intelligibly to each other than, notwithstanding their abilities, they have yet done to the public.

In 1813 Wordsworth obtained the position of distributor of stamps, a government position. In 1842 he accepted a pension of £300 from the government, and in 1843 when Robert Southey died, he accepted the position of poet laureate.

Browning saw this acquiescence to orthodox tradition—with its image of Wordsworth literally on his knees in front of the queen—as his “final surrender to the forces of conservatism.” “The Lost Leader” arose from Browning’s resulting hatred and indignation.

The “handful of silver” is a reference to the 30 pieces of silver Judas received for betraying Jesus. Wordsworth was a Judas figure, having “sold out.”
• It gets worse: Browning saw as one of Wordsworth’s worst “crimes” his boasting his acquiescence and instructing the oppressed masses to patiently “crouch” and bear their burden instead of rising up in revolt.

• Wordsworth died five years later, in 1850. Browning later came to slightly regret the poem, and possibly even to see Wordsworth in a positive light again, as he made a few minor revisions, moderating the poem’s attack.

• Browning always made it clear that the poem was based on Wordsworth, but stopped short of saying that it was directly addressed to Wordsworth himself, instead saying that the portrait was “purposely disguised a little, used in short as an artist uses a model, retaining certain characteristic traits, and discarding the rest.” Thus the poem was on the “lost leader” in the abstract, with Wordsworth being the most prominent concrete example.

• In time, the poem was widely anthologized, and recognized for its direct attack. One editor wrote: [the poem] “is applicable to any popular apostasy. This is one of those songs that do the work of swords.”
“The Bishop Orders His Tomb” (1844)

- The setting is 16th-century Rome, Italy. A Catholic bishop lies on his bed, near death. He has summoned his nephews or sons — he is not always sure which — to impart his instructions for his burial in his present church, Saint Praxed’s.

- The Bishop’s primary consideration is that his tomb must outshine the tomb of his old rival, Gandolf, presumably his predecessor as bishop, now dead and buried inside the church, as was customary for high-ranking church leaders. The speaker cherishes the idea that old Gandolf always envied him, especially for his beautiful mistress. The Bishop wants Gandolf to envy his superior tomb as well and plans to enjoy this envy throughout eternity.

- The monologue opens with a garbled quote from Ecclesiastes about the vanity of worldly interests. Yet the rest of his long speech reveals him as vain, greedy, and hypocritical, interested only in possessions, pleasures, and besting his rivals. On occasion the Bishop interrupts his instructions about his tomb to utter pious phrases that a bishop would be expected to say, but he himself has not followed these precepts.

- Gandolf has already beaten the Bishop to the choice location for his vault, much to the Bishop’s annoyance, but he consoles himself that his own spot is satisfactory and that his vault will be much more elaborate.
St. Praxed's Church also houses a segment of the alleged pillar upon which Jesus was flogged and tortured before his crucifixion in Jerusalem. The authenticity of these relics, including the pillar, is disputed by historians and Christians alike, due to lack of forensic evidence and the massive proliferation of fake relics during the Middle Ages.

- He knows exactly what he wants for every detail: the best antique black basalt, with 9 peach-blossom-colored marble columns around it, arranged similar to the way the listeners are standing around his bed. When his former church had burned, the Bishop whispers, he had taken from it a huge lapis lazuli gemstone, and now he wants them to dig it up from the vineyard where he had hidden it and use it to adorn the effigy of himself atop his vault.
• Around the vault he wants a continuous band of bronze sculpture depicting various scenes, including Christ giving the Sermon on the Mount, Moses with the Ten Commandments, and — unsuitable for the Christian theme but totally suitable as a reflection of the Bishop’s character — a scene depicting pagan Greek Pans and Nymphs. Even his epitaph on the vault must be “choice Latin” from Tully (the classical writer Marcus Tullius Cicero).

• The Bishop hears the young men talking and turns to his son Anselm as though he were the only one he might hope to trust. He worries that they will take his riches for themselves rather than use them for his tomb. He alternately bribes and threatens. He tells them he can pray to Saint Praxed to send them horses and rare old manuscripts and mistresses. If they disobey his wishes, however, he will disinherit them and leave his villas to the Pope instead.

• The Bishop becomes increasingly confused as death approaches. He is unable even to remember which author he wanted quoted for his epitaph. As the nephews/sons start to leave, he tells them to leave him in his church, where Gandolf still envies him. As the candles burn down, the Bishop’s words show that his mind is drifting into delirium.

• Browning had an early interest in playwriting, and the poem is a compressed play with one speaking role, that of the Bishop. The minor characters, the nephews/sons, move together and function almost as a Greek chorus, with only Anselm named. The reader is the audience. Dramatic irony enables the audience to know more than the speaker intends to reveal, and as the Bishop unmasks himself he is hypocritical, instructing the audience in the folly of worldly corruption.
A major theme of the poem is moral decay. Although this is seen most obviously in the hypocritical and worldly Bishop, similar immorality is also suggested in the greedy and untrustworthy young men, in the envious and conniving Gandolf, in the material wealth of the churches, and in the implication that the Pope himself would welcome new villas to add to his riches. The total effect indicts the dominant Renaissance religious institution as corrupt and spiritually dead.

A bishop should guide his flock and be exemplary in Christian compassion and charity. This bishop, however, devotes himself to personal ambition, wealth, and pleasures. Rather than chastity, poverty, and obedience to God’s will, he relishes his memories of his mistress and the thought that Gandolf envied him. His villas and his indulgent luxuries show that he is no follower of Saint Praxed, who gave all she had to the poor. Even now, on his deathbed, rather than repenting his sins and thinking of God’s judgment, the Bishop concerns himself only with his earthly remains.

The Bishop’s closest human tie seems to be his hostile rivalry with Gandolf, which he assumes will continue after death; Gandolf will know the Bishop’s tomb is superior to his and will still envy him. The fact that the Bishop is a learned man who has had many privileges makes his attitude and actions especially reprehensible. To him, the Church has meant power, material goods, and sensual stimulation.

This literary example of moral corruption implies the need for change both in institutions and in individuals. Part of the solution is contained in the poem itself — the idea that man’s years are short, and the material things of this world are less important than creating a worthy soul.

“Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1862)

“Rabbi Ben Ezra” explores problems of faith and doubt, spirituality and evolution (for example, Darwinism) that troubled Browning’s Victorian contemporaries.

It expresses Browning’s optimistic philosophy of life regarding both youth and old age. Youth is a time of struggle for glimpses of God’s omnipotence in an imperfect world. Old age can usher in the wisdom of spiritual maturity that comes from recognizing divine perfection behind earthly imperfection and from perceiving God’s unbounded love as well as God’s omnipotence.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092?-1167) was a Spanish rabbi who, in his middle years, was driven by persecution from Spain into a life of travel and scholarship. He was a theologian, a philosopher, a linguist, and a scientist. A strong believer in immortality, he found the second half of his life much more productive and satisfactory than the first half. However, the ideas in the poem are Browning’s, and they are not always in accord with the rabbi’s actual sentiments.

The first stanza of the poem articulates the philosophy of the whole work and begins a series of exhortations encouraging readers to look forward to the aging process that brings a mature faith in God’s providence to take what is defective and partial in this world of seeming limitations and to make all right and whole.

Stanzas 2 through 9 refuse to chastise youth for the frustrated ambitions, doubts and confusions, and unsatisfying pleasures that serve the useful purpose of redirecting human striving for higher spiritual goals. Humankind was born to struggle and aspire and not to rest, as animals do. A divine spark energizes the human heart into undertaking a quest for infinite satisfactions centered in God.
• Stanzas 10 through 19 note that the experience of youth, with its glimpses of God’s power and perfection, prepare for the greater wisdom of old age and the discovery of God’s perfect love during the evolution of humans from brutes to spiritual beings. Therefore, let all that makes up humans — youth and age, body and soul — be cherished in their evolving spirituality and quest for the divine.

• Stanzas 20 through 25 affirm that the perception of ultimate truth in old age transcends the disputation of youth, the disparate convictions of confused thinkers, or the vogueish values of the masses. On the contrary, knowledge of the right, the good and the infinite rests on our intuitions of something immeasurably greater, too often ignored by the vulgar populace.

• Stanzas 26 through 36 elaborate on the biblical metaphor of God as the divine potter who molds the clay of a human’s spiritual nature on the spinning wheel of the world of time and transient matter. Under the divine fashioning of the struggling and striving human clay, humans are ultimately wrought into a heavenly chalice of spiritual perfection, satisfying the “thirst” of their Creator. Thus, human life in youth, age, and death has a providential purpose of attaining spiritual perfection.

• Two biblical passages inspired Browning’s metaphor of the potter. First, Isaiah 64:8, “But now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we are all the work of thy hand.” Also Romans 9:21, where Paul asks, “Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?”

• According to Browning’s philosophy of life, God created an imperfect world as a testing-ground for the full and final realization of human nature (with its immortal soul) in a heaven of spiritual perfection. The optimism that once made “Rabbi Ben Ezra” a favorite of Victorian fans of Browning, however, eroded the poem’s popularity among 20th-century readers accustomed to harsher cultural realities.

Fun Fact: The John Lennon song, “Grow Old with Me,” (one of his last) was inspired from two different sources: “Rabbi Ben Ezra” and a song by Lennon’s wife Yoko Ono called “Let Me Count the Ways” (which in turn had been inspired from the EBB poem). Lennon and Ono had for some time admired the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Browning, and the two songs were purposely written with the couple in mind.

The story goes that Ono woke up one morning in the summer of 1980 with the music of “Let Me Count the Ways” in her head and promptly rang Lennon in Bermuda to play it for him. Lennon loved the song and Ono then suggested to him that he should write a Robert Browning piece to accompany it. That afternoon, John was watching TV when a film came on which had the poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” by Robert Browning in it. Inspired by this turn of events, Lennon wrote “Grow Old With Me” as an answer to Ono’s song, and rang her back to play it to her over the phone.


All of us at times feel common, or useless, or unattractive. Learn something from simple clay. In its natural state, clay is common and far from beautiful. But in the hands of a master potter, it takes on a pleasing personality, becoming a thing both of usefulness and unique beauty.

But before clay can be made beautiful and useful, it must be centered on the potter’s wheel. As the wheel spins, the potter molds, shapes, and lifts the clay into the desired form. If the clay is not centered, it cannot be shaped properly. Eventually, natural forces fling it from the wheel. Our lives are like that.
We must become centered on Christ—and remain centered on Him. Only then can our Father in Heaven shape and mold our lives to His grand design for us.

Sometimes flaws appear in the clay and repairs must be made. It may be necessary to go back, to remold and reshape. The wonderful thing is, when properly repaired, the flaw is completely gone, as though it had never existed.

When we sin, we introduce flaws and defects. They may not be outwardly visible at first, but they weaken us just the same. And if they are not properly repaired, they can lead to our ultimate ruin. Fortunately, if we are humble and pliable as clay in the Potter’s hands, repentance will make us completely whole.

Clay that has been shaped and molded may become beautiful. And as it dries, it becomes harder. But it never achieves its full potential until it has been through the fire. In the great heat of the potter’s kiln, the clay is transformed.

Hidden flaws that were not repaired reveal themselves at this time, and the piece breaks or crumbles.

But a vessel that has integrity comes from the fire stronger and more beautiful than ever. In life, too, we pass through fiery trials that test our faith and integrity. Then if we have remained centered on Christ, and if through true repentance we have let Him make us whole and sound, taking from us our flaws and mistakes, we come forth from the fire as beautiful, useful vessels in His hands.

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