

The Unfamiliar and the Familiar

I still have yet to read Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "The Last Ride Together"—which I will get to over the weekend—but I can already notice a quality to his style that hasn't appeared in the other poets' works we have read so far. It seems as if he's presenting subjects that relate to and emphasize elements of human psychology, which is not something that I've noticed in the works of Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and others. As it is written in Browning's introduction pages in our textbook: "Browning catches [the speakers in his works] at a moment of great emotional intensity as they attempt to explain why they think and act as they do. In these passionate outbursts, they reveal their characters as much by idiomatic languages, patterns of imagery, speech rhythms, and unintended ironies as by what they actually say" (1323). It's like Browning is peeling back the superficial layers that make up our outward presentations to make clear observations about what our actions and subconscious decisions actually communicate. In doing this Browning is writing in a way that is unfamiliar and new.

In contrast, Tennyson seems to be treading more familiar ground, but in important and contributory ways. He represents a writer who is further developing and refining his craft, employing many of the styles and methods of the poets that came before him. His writings also participated in the events of the time. To pull another line from our text: "It is often said that Tennyson's greatness lay in eloquently presenting the anxieties and aspirations of his era" (1175). These are perhaps reasons for why he appeals less to "post-modernists": some quality of his works has dulled over time as the Victorian age continues to drift further into history.

Re: Tennyson and Browning

Browning in contrast was much easier to read. The form in which he wrote his poems are very easy to read, as is his language. With these components, Browning is more appealing to those of our time because his poems are easy to understand. And let's face it, an average person in our day doesn't like or have time to ponder what something might mean, so Browning is a clear choice.

It's interesting that you find Browning easier to read, as this was not the case for me (don't take this to mean that I enjoyed him less than Tennyson). I found the layers of descriptions for Browning's characters and events to be more unconventionally woven. After reading Wordsworth, Byron and Keats over the last few weeks, Tennyson's poems seemed recognizable and easier to dive into. With Browning there was very clearly something different going on from the first line, what I recognized as a new method of writing (at least, for what we are being assigned to read). His poems are quite involved and I found deciphering the "thread" to be a fun puzzle.

Re: Tennyson and Browning

I think Browning's poetry is less polished, but not of less value than Tennyson's.

This is a fair statement if you think about it from the more traditional way of writing popular poetry at the time. I believe that Browning probably spent more time crafting the mood and psyche of his characters than he did the ebb and flow of the words themselves. In fact, the unsettling subjects he discussed may have lent themselves to a less polished presentation of verse. He may have used the same amount of care that Tennyson did, but simply had different priorities as to where he should put that care.

On another note, it doesn't seem to me that words like "beauty" and "eloquence" should be used to describe Browning's poetry as they could be used for Tennyson's, but "surprising" and "engaging" will definitely fit.

Popularity of Poets

The themes of Tennyson, on the other hand, reflect an almost wistful looking-back upon the legends of the past, whether of Odysseus or of Arthur. While these themes appealed to the national pride and cherished heritage of the Britons of Tennyson's day, they are likely to be less popular with modern readers who have not had the education in classical literature and legend that Tennyson's readers did.

Plus the ideas of loss during rapid industrialization: "This included their fascination with the Renaissance and Middle Ages, which many Victorians saw as a period when the world was still 'whole'; I.e., not torn apart by industrialization and religious strife" (slide 4). We certainly don't long for those older days in the same way the Victorians did (although, maybe it would be good if we did).