The Artist Depicting Himself Sketching a Landscape in Southern France
(German, early 19th century. From the collection of the author.)
Becoming BROWNING
BROWNING RESOLVES TO BE A POET

In these red London labyrinths
I find that I have chosen
the most curious of human professions,
though given that all are curious, in their way.
Like alchemists
who looked for the philosopher's stone
in elusive quicksilver,
I shall make ordinary words—
the marked cards of the sharper, the people's coinage—
yield up the magic which was theirs
when Thor was inspiration and eruption,
thunder and worship.
In the wording of the day,
I in my turn will say eternal things;
I will try to be not unworthy
of the great echo of Byron.
This dust that is me will be invulnerable.
If a woman partakes of my love,
my poem will graze the tenth sphere of the concentric heavens;
if a woman shrugs off my love,
I will make music out of my misery,
a vast river reverberating on through time.
I will live by forgetting myself.
I will be the face I half-see and forget,
I will be Judas who accepts
the blessed destiny of being a traitor,
I will be Caliban in the swamp,
I will be a mercenary dying
without fear or faith,
I will be Polycrates, horrified to see
the ring returned by destiny,
I will be the friend who hates me.
Persia will grant me the nightingale, Rome the sword.
Agonies, masks and resurrections
will weave and unweave my fate
and at some point I will be Robert Browning.
INTRODUCTION

BROWNING'S WORLD IS EVER IN MOVEMENT. IN his verse energy, motion, and change are the salient traits of nature, character, and the consciousness of the poet himself. Only the physically or spiritually dead are fixed. The "principle of restlessness" iterated in his first published poem (Pauline, 277) finds expression throughout his work, even to his last poem, wherein men are urged to "strive and thrive" in this world and the next ("Epilogue" to Asolando). For Browning an entity becomes something so as to become something else, is created so as to be de-created, is formed so as to be transformed. Chaos → cosmos → chaos and so on ad infinitum—the principle of becoming is at the very heart of his thought and practice as a poet.

Browning's belief in dynamicism and change was part of his Romantic inheritance. But where his immediate poetic predecessors envisioned change as part of a revolutionary process leading to a new heaven and a new earth, Browning views change as a process without telos. The idea of an open, evolving universe is, to a certain degree, antithetical to the Romantics' notion of union of self and nature and of the work of art as a revelation of the meeting of the self and the Absolute. Coleridge, for example, speaks in chapter fourteen of the Biographia Literaria of the imagination as the means of synthesizing or reconciling opposites. And Shelley alludes everywhere in his work, both in his prose and poetry, to the encounter of the self with the Absolute in moments of harmonious union. To both men the poetic act was the enclosure of the chaotic world within a perfect sphere. Neither had fully emerged from the closed world represented by Platonic philosophy and medieval Christianity. Browning, on the other hand, maintains that it is the function of the imagination not to reconcile opposites but to transcend them by accepting them as antinomies, thereby substituting for the Romantics' circle of
enclosure an upward-tending spiral. It is, I believe, this idea of nonteleological becoming that from the beginning sets Browning off from Shelley and other Romantics from whom he is traditionally said to be descended, first as an eager son and then as a rebellious heir.¹

As far as his basic thought is concerned, Browning owes far more to German than to English philosophers and poets. Whether or not he got his ideas directly from the German is a matter for speculation, about which I shall have more to say later. I am, in any case, less interested in tracing the sources of his thought than in explaining its essential nature. His belief in the principle of becoming marks him as one embracing philosophical irony, which is grounded on the denial of any absolute order in natural or human events as they occur in the fertile abundance of the phenomenal world.² According to Friedrich Schlegel, the foremost theoretician of philosophical irony, the essence of reality is not being, a substance in itself, but becoming. In his view infinity is an ever-growing center of finite expressions and finitude a momentarily limited infinity. An exhaustless fund of life is constantly developing itself in nature, which itself is characterized by an ever-flowing vital energy, each one fueling the other. Reality is thus an interplay between the finite and the infinite, and in the creative process everything is simultaneously itself and something other. Ontologically the finite can never encompass the infinite, for to do so would cause life to cease. Epistemologically man can never attain full consciousness, an infinite self, so that any theoretical formulation or system of reality that he makes can only be an approximation, which ultimately must be transcended. When translated into psychological terms, this conception of the universe entails a tension in the individual, who simultaneously desires order and coherence—being—and chaos and freedom—becoming. The drive toward stability is usually experienced as love, the drive toward change as power. As we shall see, the conflict between love and power is dramatized in all of Browning’s early poetry.

Life, then, persists in, and is developed by, a continual reversal of order and disorder; the world is always being shaped so as to be destroyed and shaped anew. Correctly per-
ceived, this constant flux permits man opportunity for increasing self-realization by self-transcendence, demanding that he hold the double vision of himself as limited and also as able to transcend these limits through self-conscious acknowledgment of them. Schlegel's philosophical irony thus offers triumph to the self that hovers between system and chaos.

Schlegel termed this philosophy of infinite becoming ironic because on the one hand it urges the individual forward toward the infinite while on the other hand it pulls him back by making him aware of his finite limitations. In the case of the poet, the irony of such a philosophy is most evident, for it energizes him to seek a perfect system—a poem—that accurately depicts the beauties of the world while at the same time making him realize that any such perfection, which must belong to the infinite alone, is impossible. A poet can never fully comprehend the fertile yet chaotic abundance of the phenomenal world not only because of his limited perceptions but also because language, which itself is a structured system, never can fully or adequately deal with the unstructured world of becoming.

Philosophical irony involves then a dialectic of order and change, love and power, the conditioned and the free, the finite and the infinite. Schlegel's dialectic allows for no synthesis; his contradictions remain always unresolved. It is the function of philosophical irony as he expounds it to permit an individual to hold the two contrary states of being and becoming in mind at the same time and to recognize that they cannot be harmonized. Browning too espouses this view, but he introduces the element of progress, which is not clearly a part of Schlegel's philosophy. Insofar as he adopts the notion of progressive evolution, Browning is more nearly akin to Hegel. But he does not share with Hegel the notion that every thesis generates its antithesis, which is then resolved into a higher synthesis. Browning does not envision a synthesis; for him the dialectic remains unharmonized. He sees, however, a growth of consciousness resulting from the dialectic interplay that allows the individual and the race to evolve into ever higher spiritual, moral, and artistic states or conditions; for him becoming involves the notion of creative evolution.
As we shall see, Browning's conception of philosophical irony has profound implications for his art, ultimately determining not only the content of his verse but its form as well. Perhaps the least oblique statement of his poetic theory and the philosophy upon which it is based may be found in his Essay on Shelley, which was composed in 1851, fairly soon after the period of his career in which I am here interested, and thus may be taken as a summary of what he as a poet had been about during his early years.

Using the nineteenth-century commonplace critical terms "objective" and "subjective," he contrasts two different kinds of poets. The objective poet is mimetic, his concern being for men and their actions. A "fashioner" who shapes his art out of the multitudinous world around him, he is impersonal and his poetry is distinct from himself. His mode is narrative and dramatic. The subjective poet, on the other hand, is an illuminator who looks beyond things external to perceive their essence, his concern being with God and "what God sees," not with humanity in action. A "seer," he is personal, and his poetry is projected from, but not separate from, himself. His mode is essentially lyric. Having defined the two types of poets, Browning then proceeds to show that literary history has proceeded dialectically, in alternating cycles when one or the other type was dominant. But, Browning suggests, there is no reason why these two modes of poetic faculty might not be combined in the "the whole poet" who fully displays the objective and subjective modes.

Underlying the concept of the whole poet, of his perception and expression, is the idea of evolutionary advance or becoming. The whole poet beholds the universe, nature, and man "in their actual state of perfection in imperfection"; looks to "the forthcoming stage of man's being"; and presents "this ideal of a future man." Rejecting "ultimates" and aspiring always toward a "higher state of development," he strives "to elevate and extend" both himself and mankind. All this is embodied in a language "closely answering to and indicative of the process of the informing spirit." In brief, the whole poet is the poet of becoming, the kind of poet that Browning himself evidently wished to be.
“Certainly,” says Browning, “in the fact of any conspicuous achievement of genius, philosophy no less than sympathetic instinct warrants our belief in a great moral purpose having mainly inspired even where it does not visibly look out of the same.” What urges a poet on is ever greater insight into the nature of reality that he then reveals to “the masses.” “An absolute vision,” Browning hastens to state, “is not for this world, but we are permitted a continual approximation to it.” But what kind of approximation? A mythus, a provisional system or conception, something never fully to be believed in but to be embraced as a structure of belief.6 As Schlegel said, “It is equally deadly for a mind to have a system or to have none. Therefore it will have to combine both” (Athenaeum Fragment no. 53).

The Essay on Shelley shows that historically Browning dwells on an isthmus between the old religious view of life and the new positivist view. This was not for him, however, a cause for lamentation, as it was, for example, for Tennyson and Arnold.7 He wrote to Elizabeth Barrett: “The cant is, that ‘an age of transition’ is the melancholy thing to contemplate and delineate—whereas the worst things of all to look back on are times of comparative standing still, rounded in their impotent completeness” (Kintner, 2:710). The very indeterminancy and openness of the present is a cause for joy, offering opportunity for greater self-understanding and self-realization not only on the part of the individual but for mankind as a whole. Browning proclaims his liberty from the limitations of time by calling on its revolutionary potential: in a minute man can change his mind and revise all that he had thought or stated before; meaning is always in the making, man is always making and unmaking himself. In short, man is always in a state of becoming.

In the pages that follow, I propose to study this drama of becoming in Browning’s poetry to 1846, the year generally accepted as marking the close of his early career.8 By this time, with roughly one-third of his total work behind him, he was well on his way to becoming “Browning.” I shall draw special attention to his constantly evolving forms, to his preoccupation with language, and to the consciousness of his characters
that they are themselves *dramatis personae* in the process of constructing and deconstructing scripts. In brief, I shall trace his growth as an ironist. Others have dealt frequently with Browning’s irony but with specific or particular ironies—that is, corrective ironies and the ironies of paradoxes, dilemmas, and other impossible situations. I am not, however, mainly interested in his local ironies. I want to show his irony to be of a more general nature and of a greater magnitude. For Browning’s essential irony is not polemical; it is, rather, a disposition or a state of mind. It originates, as I have suggested, in his double vision of man as caught between the rival principles of objectivity and subjectivity, between the dualities of power and love, finitude and infinity. From one point of view, man as an individual is seen as a finite creature in a multitudinous world whose complexities he can never penetrate, whose contradictions he can never reconcile, and whose myriad possibilities he can never realize. From another point of view, man, endowed with the power of the imagination, is himself creative and free of dependence upon finite objects, which he can deal with as he will; he alone creates value and meaning. Which then is the true view? Neither one nor the other but both, says Browning, as in his art he gives us a composite image of man as infinite and free in imagination and thought but finite and bounded in understanding and action. “The spiritual comprehension,” he writes in the *Essay on Shelley*, “may be infinitely subtilised, but the raw material it operates upon must remain.” A “whole” poet represents the real and the ideal—the objective and the subjective—and comes to terms with both. He shows, in other words, both the irony of the world against man and the irony of man against the world—man as victim and as savior. And in presenting them ironically in his art, he transcends both. Browning shared Goethe’s belief that “art is the individual’s attempt to preserve himself against the destructive power of the whole.” It was because he embraced the philosophy of becoming that Browning became an ironist, and it is as an ironist that he is becoming in every respect.