

# Life Less One Immortal Lover

**Robert Browning and His World: Two Robert Brownings?**, by Maisie Ward (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 337 pp. \$8.50), and **The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning**, by Roma A. King, Jr. (Ohio University Press, 288 pp. \$7.50), refute the charges that the poet was obscure and that his work deteriorated after "The Ring and the Book." Bernard Grebanier's latest book is "The Great Shakespeare Forgery."

By BERNARD GREBANIER

I HAVE LONG REGARDED Robert Browning as the one English poet whose friend I should like to have been. No other seems to me so admirable and lovable as a man. Maisie Ward's balanced and sensitive biography, which varnishes and suppresses nothing, confirms me in this conviction. I suspect, though she does not say so, that she loves him, too.

The first volume of *Robert Browning and His World*, subtitled "The Private Face," published two years ago, shed much light on Browning's poetry. Its focus was inevitably on the Robert-Elizabeth story, one of the world's truly great romances, not to be debunked except at the expense of the debunker. While it has been told before (notably in Frances Winwar's *The Immortal Lovers*), Miss Ward's volume is rich in fresh insights.

The period dealt with in this second volume, however, has generally been treated cavalierly, more summarized and skimmed than studied. After all, Brown-

ing still had twenty-eight years to live after his wife's death in 1861, and he was by no means ready to retire from life despite his unrelenting grief. And he was also far from finished as a poet: his crowning achievement, *The Ring and the Book*, as well as numerous other magnificent poems, was written during the years he was deprived of her companionship. (Indeed, as Miss Ward suggests, *The Ring and the Book* might very well never have been composed if Elizabeth had still been by his side, for she apparently found the subject unsympathetic.)

Miss Ward has performed an inestimable service in giving us a full account of the man and his work during those twenty-eight years. She writes with ease, is full of cogent reflection ("There is no magic in Browning's correspondence, it has all gone into his poetry"), is fair and unbiased, sees flaws where they exist, and—what I find delightful—can on occasion be disarmingly feminine ("Had I been she [Elizabeth], I would have trembled after the reception of *Men and Women* . . ."). Miss Ward has culled an enormous amount of information, much of it heretofore unpublished. There is not a page on which interest flags. Her first volume was excellent; this one is brilliant and accomplished beyond praise.

Browning was not yet fifty when his wife died; he was still taking twenty-mile walks, was still ready to be at his desk writing at five in the morning. Twenty times, Elizabeth reported, he had tried to vow that if he survived her he would never marry again. She "held his lips together with both hands. I won't have it." After her death he was tempted

"to go straight to the old rooms at Casa Guidi and there live and die!" But he had his son Pen to live for, a consideration that was to be paramount the rest of his days; and he told himself, "Don't be afraid, my good fellow, you'll die too, all in good time."

So back to London he went, and gave himself up to the composition of *The Ring and the Book*. Thereafter he surrendered to his innate gregariousness by widening his circle of friendships. Carlyle and Tennyson were among his old friends; the Laureate's widow said in response to Browning's praise of her late husband: "He is the greatest-brained poet in England. Violets fade; he has given me a crown of gold." Not the least of Browning's admirers was Swinburne, who indignantly refuted the charge of obscurity so often brought against Browning. Obscurity, Swinburne said, is the product of "confused ideas" and "chaotic intellect . . . if there is any great quality more perceptible than another in Mr. Browning's intellect it is his decisive and incisive faculty of thought . . . To charge him with obscurity is about as accurate as to . . . complain of the sluggish action of the telegraphic wire." To speak of Browning's "obscurity" today would be almost too ironic, in view of the outpourings from some of our contemporary poets.

Miss Ward's book is full of vivid glimpses of Browning the man—his handshake, his conversation, his dislike of lawyers, the excessive kindness that in his last years caused him to exhaust himself answering endless letters—along with some astute appraisals of his poetry. She draws an interesting analogy between the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* and John XXIII.

Roma King's *The Focusing Artifice* achieves quite perfectly what the author states to be his primary purpose: "to show how Browning sought to display the development of the individual 'soul,' as both the source and end of values, and to declare his vision of human experience, portrayed through men and women as the poet brings them together in that unified pattern of artifice that is his art." Professor King's method is to analyze Browning's works in chronological order, examining the structure of the most important ones. Like Miss Ward, he attacks the old platitude that Browning's poetry went rapidly downhill after *The Ring and the Book*. He points out that *Fifine at the Fair*, which the Victorians misunderstood as a defense of adultery, is a wonderful if complex "dialogue of the soul," and that the *Dramatic Idyls* contains poetry equal to Browning's best, as does *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day*.

Both these studies will be invaluable to readers of Browning's poetry.



"Christmas catalogues are in the mail."

# Ever Green Was His Valley

**A Few Selected Exits: An Autobiography of Sorts**, by Gwyn Thomas (Little, Brown, 239 pp \$5.95), recounts the Welsh novelist's varied experiences and wanderings, and the disillusionments that led him to return to his native Rhondda Valley. Philip Burton, who was born in Mountain Ash, Glamorganshire, is director of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York.

By PHILIP BURTON

GWYN THOMAS WAS BORN in 1913, one of twelve children and the youngest of eight boys, in a coal mining town in the Rhondda Valley. In this autobiography he looks back over his life with wry amusement, and finds that it has been a series of exits from places and spheres tried and found wanting, until at last he has returned happily to the valley from which he made his first exit. "I was home, at my earth's warm center," he writes. "The scared monkey was back in the branches of his best loved tree. I've never had any truly passionate wish to be elsewhere." That word "scared" is a surprise, for Gwyn Thomas has always seemed to be a typical South Wales extrovert, fond of choirs and football teams, particularly in their hours of rowdy and relaxed celebration; yet all the time there was a scared monkey that the mellowed and established author can now acknowledge.

During his odyssey Thomas has been a misfit student of medieval Spanish literature, first at Oxford and then in Republican Madrid; a social worker; a teacher, and a writer of novels, plays and essays that have won him a growing band of loyal and enthusiastic readers. He finally achieved the ultimate popular canonization as an intellectual when he became a member, albeit an uncomfortable one, of the august BBC-TV Brains Trust. He was uncomfortable because "every phrase I uttered invoked in my mind a shower of blinding reservations. The volte-faces came along so fast a large part of the audience turned to face the back wall with a view to anticipating my next maneuver."

There are no reservations in his comments on Brains-Trusters and all their ilk. "Punditry in any shape or place is a base act. The ability to pontificate in public on a wide range of unlike subjects should involve a man in a kind of breathalyzer test in reverse. If he has done it without being loaded above a certain alcoholic level he should be put down on grounds of brazen arrogance." More characteristic is Thomas's account of the effect upon the "voters" back home of his

awesome elevation to the Brains Trust: "They would demand from me the winner of the Derby or the whereabouts of a pigeon or a wife that had failed to return to the loft. I would tell them."

The otherwise admirable book jacket refers to the Rhondda Valley as "wretched." Thomas did not find it so. He has gone back to draw it around him like a warm rug in a world growing ever colder. Here are the values he found there and celebrates in his writing:

I saw much radiance and goodness, a brightness of tongue and heart, an almost witless idealism. It was these things that held my eye and drove my pen, the whole great jumping joke of so many men and women, highly literate, wedded in equal measure to religious devotion and political militancy, invoking the mercy of God and the wisdom of Lenin in a worsening world.

He has little sympathy with modern muckraking authors: "Write as many theses on caries as you will, the human mouth remains a fairly good proposition."

Gwyn Thomas transmutes the commonplace into the delightfully grotesque by means of his keen perception, his twinkling compassion, his cartoon comedy, and his deft way with words. His



—From the book.

Gwyn Thomas—"all the time there was a scared monkey."

five chapters have characteristic headings, e.g., "And Ten More Dogmas Bit the Dust." My preferred title for this review would be "Here He Is Again, Thank God and Little, Brown."

## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

### COMMENTARY

Each of the authors in Column 1 said something in Column 2 about an author in Column 3. Robert Kohn of Yellow Springs, Ohio, asks you to make the right connections. The critical switchboard is on page 49.

- |                          |   |                       |
|--------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| 1. Van Wyck Brooks ( )   | A. <i>He is fundamentally trivial.</i>  | 1. Burns              |
| 2. E. Bulwer-Lytton ( )  | B. <i>Buffoon and poet, lover and sensualist.</i>                             | 2. Byron              |
| 3. Thomas Carlyle ( )    | C. <i>Three fifths of him genius and two fifths sheer fudge.</i>              | 3. Coleridge          |
| 4. W. E. Henley ( )      | D. <i>He writes very well for a gentleman.</i>                                | 4. Dryden             |
| 5. Robert Herrick ( )    | E. <i>His wife not only edited his works but edited him.</i>                  | 5. Ben Jonson         |
| 6. Samuel Johnson ( )    | F. <i>Outbabying Wordsworth and outglittering Keats.</i>                      | 6. Poe                |
| 7. Charles Lamb ( )      | G. <i>A poet without love were a physical and metaphysical impossibility.</i> | 7. Shaw               |
| 8. James R. Lowell ( )   | H. <i>The Pilgrim of Eternity.</i>  | 8. Shakespeare        |
| 9. Thos. Macaulay ( )    | I. <i>An archangel a little tarnished.</i>                                    | 9. William Somerville |
| 10. John Milton ( )      | J. <i>Outdid the meat, outdid the frolic wine.</i>                            | 10. R. L. Stevenson   |
| 11. Ezra Pound ( )       | K. <i>His imagination resembled the wings of an ostrich.</i>                  | 11. Tennyson          |
| 12. Percy B. Shelley ( ) | L. <i>Fancy's child.</i>  | 12. Mark Twain        |