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Browning, Victorian Poetics and the Romantic Legacy: Challenging the Personal Voice

Britta Martens

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Browning, Victorian Poetics and the Romantic Legacy: Challenging the Personal Voice Britta Martens Taking an original approach to Robert Browning's poetics, Britta Martens focuses on a corpus of relatively neglected poems in Browning's own voice in which he reflects on his poetry, his self-conceptualization and his place in the poetic tradition. She analyzes his work in relation to Romanticism, Victorian reactions to the Romantic legacy, and wider nineteenth-century changes in poetic taste, to argue that in these poems, as in his more frequently studied dramatic monologues, Browning deploys varied dramatic methods of self-representation, often critically and ironically exposing the biases and limitations of the seemingly authoritative speaker 'Browning'. The poems thus become devices for Browning's detached evaluation of his own and of others' poetics, an evaluation never fully explicit but presented with elusive economy for the astute reader to interpret. The confrontation between the personal authorial voice and the dramatic voice in these poems provides revealing insights into the poet's highly self-conscious, conflicted and sustained engagement with the Romantic tradition and the diversely challenging reader expectations that he faces in a post-Romantic age. As the Victorian most rigorous in his rejection of Romantic self-expression, Browning is a key transitional figure between the sharply antagonistic periods of Romanticism and Modernism. He is also, as Martens persuasively demonstrates, a poet of complex contradictions and an illuminating case study for addressing the perennial issues of voice, authorial authority and self-reference.

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