

Robert Browning: Poems Summary and Analysis of "Memorabilia"

Summary

The speaker of the poem meets a man who once knew Romantic poet P.B. Shelley. The speaker immediately reveals his great enthusiasm by asking the man questions, until he makes the man laugh.

In the last two stanzas, the speaker talks of walking through an evocative moor landscape until he found a "moulted feather" that he kept in his possession. He forgot all of the other impressions of the moor.

Analysis

This poem, printed in 1855, was inspired by a meeting Browning once had with a man who had known P.B. Shelley, one of Browning's great influences as a young man. Shelley was a seminal Romantic poet associated with the idea that moments can lead a man to great transcendence and truth. Though he was one of Browning's early inspirations, Browning would later move into much murkier territory in his poetry, emphasizing psychological complexity and systems of thought.

This poem, one of the few in which it is easy to consider the speaker to be Browning himself, is about the debt we owe to what came before us. The simplicity of the verse – two four-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter – calls to mind the poetry of Shelley or Wordsworth, a fitting choice since it was written in remembrance of these Romantic influences.

In the first two stanzas, the speaker is childishly excited even with this second-degree contact with Shelley. But when the man to whom he gushes laughs at him, the speaker notes "But you were living before that,/And you are living after," acknowledging that his one incident (his meeting with Shelley) is but a moment among a multitude of moments in life.

In general, Browning's work is interested with delving into the multitude of life's moments, seeking out their complexity and contradictions. However, the final two stanzas see the speaker ignoring the evocative landscape of the moor in exchange for one feather left by an eagle, a great and stately bird. Much as the Romantic poets might have been inspired to a full reflection by one small natural detail, so is Browning acknowledging in this poem that he retains the seeds of that influence. One moment can contain within it a lifetime of inspiration.

The poem can be read as a short reflection on how we hang on to small moments because they contain in them such profundity, a very Romantic idea. But in relation to Browning's career, the poem is a bit deeper: he is reflecting how even though he evolved past these Romantic tendencies and explored his myriad interests in his poetry, there is still a part of him that is awed by one "eagle-feather" amongst a landscape, or by a story of a simple meeting that had happened decades before. In other words, that childish Romantic part of Browning still exists, as do presumably many other parts.