Robert Browning  
“Pictor Ignotus” (1845)  

I could have painted pictures like that youth’s  
Ye praise so. How my soul springs up! No bar  
Stayed me—ah, thought which saddens while it soothes!—  
Never did fate forbid me, star by star,  
To outburst on your night, with all my gift  
Of fires from God: nor would my flesh have shrunk  
From seconding my soul, with eyes uplift  
And wide to heaven, or, straight like thunder, sunk  
To the centre, of an instant; or around  
Turned calmly and inquisitive, to scan  
The license and the limit, space and bound,  
Allowed to Truth made visible in man.  
And, like that youth ye praise so, all I saw,  
Over the canvas could my hand have flung,  
Each face obedient to its passion’s law,  
Each passion clear proclaimed without a tongue:  
Whether Hope rose at once in all the blood,  
A tip-toe for the blessing of embrace,  
Or Rapture drooped the eyes, as when her brood  
Pull down the nesting dove’s heart to its place;  
Or Confidence lit swift the forehead up,  
And locked the mouth fast, like a castle braved,—  
O human faces! hath it spilt, my cup?  
What did ye give me that I have not saved?  
Nor will I say I have not dreamed (how well!)  
Of going—I, in each new picture,—forth,  
As, making new hearts beat and bosoms swell,  
To Pope or Kaiser, East, West, South, or North,  
Bound for the calmly satisfied great State,  
Or glad aspiring little burgh, it went,  
Flowers cast upon the car which bore the freight,  
Through old streets named afresh from the event,  
Till it reached home, where learned Age should greet  
My face, and Youth, the star not yet distinct  
Above his hair, lie learning at my feet!—  
Oh, thus to live, I and my picture, linked  
With love about, and praise, till life should end,  
And then not go to Heaven, but linger here,  
Here on my earth, earth’s every man my friend,  
The thought grew frightful, ’twas so wildly dear!  
But a voice changed it. Glimpses of such sights  
Have scared me, like the revels through a door  
Of some strange house of idols at its rites!  
This world seemed not the world it was, before:  
Mixed with my loving trusting ones, there trooped  
. . . Who summoned those cold faces that begun  
To press on me and judge me? Though I stooped  
Shrinking, as from the soldiery a nun,  
They drew me forth, and spite of me . . . enough!
These buy and sell our pictures, take and give,
Count them for garniture and household-stuff,
And where they live needs must our pictures live
And see their faces, listen to their prate,
Partakers of their daily pettiness,
Discussed of,—“This I love, or this I hate,
This likes me more, and this affects me less!”
Wherefore I chose my portion. If at whiles
My heart sinks, as monotonous I paint
These endless cloisters and eternal aisles
  With the same series, Virgin, Babe, and Saint,
With the same cold calm beautiful regard,—
  At least no merchant traffics in my heart;
The sanctuary’s gloom at least shall ward
  Vain tongues from where my pictures stand apart:
Only prayer breaks the silence of the shrine
  While, blackening in the daily candle-smoke,
They moulder on the damp wall’s travertine,
  ’Mid echoes the light footstep never woke.
So, die my pictures! surely, gently die!
  O youth, men praise so,—holds their praise its worth?
Blown harshly, keeps the trump its golden cry?
  Tastes sweet the water with such specks of earth?