Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:

Buy me a coffee

https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology

PATREON

https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb

PayPal

https://paypal.me/robbradshaw

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

## ART. V.—POETRY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.
*(Concluded.)*

IN passing from the poetry of Tennyson to that of Browning we pass out of the atmosphere of some exquisite flower-garden into that of a wide moor, bleak, and exposed to the east winds, yet healthful, and possessed of a glory all its own. No poets could be less alike than these two eminent contemporaries; yet a comparison as well as a contrast would be a fruitful source of instruction. Both "saw life steadily and saw it whole," but from totally different points of view. Tennyson, touched by all the sadness of life, loved to muse upon its mystery, and was haunted by that "sense of tears in human things" which is the characteristic of some of the noblest thinkers, from the Preacher onwards; Browning, not really less sensitive of heart, knew little of that melancholy of temper, that wistful regarding of human life, to which his brother poet was so keenly alive. Browning was intensely optimistic; perhaps the fervour of his belief simply prevented him from watching the clouds while his thoughts were busied with the sun—that sun which (he knew) shone behind them not less radiantly because, for the time, hidden.

> God's in His heaven,
> All's right with the world

was more than a pious exclamation with him. He believed it with all the fervour of a strong nature, and that belief simply dominated his whole life, and life-work. From the day when he wrote the first lines of "Paracelsus," early in 1835, till the day when, after having composed the epilogue to "Asolando" (his final word to the generation), he laid aside his pen for ever, he never faltered in his faith, nor in the vigorous expression of it. True, he saw—none more clearly—the seamy side of human life, the pity of it all, and the darker elements in human passion and motive; but what of that? He saw—possibly more clearly than anyone else of his generation—that this was not all the truth, even in this world; that the law of compensation did redress many bitter grievances even in this life; but, above all, that *this* life was only the entrance-portal to a life beyond. Apart from such a conclusion to earthly existence, man's place in the cosmos would be simply an insoluble riddle, a meaningless blank; and truth, goodness, beauty, justice, love, a mere congeries of empty terms, as void of meaning or of rationality as a dream. This conviction was, for Browning, verily

> The master light of all his seeing,

and his poetry cannot be understood if this vital element fails to receive just recognition.

Many readers are apt to be discouraged in their first attempts to read Browning; he seems harsh and uncouth—"broiled bones and brandy," as the poet once humorously said of his work. And so he often is; for, unlike Tennyson, he is no master in the art of exquisite phrasing. A sound musician, a painter of no mean ability, with an observant ear and eye, and an all but boundless knowledge of the human heart in all its intricacies, it is singular that he should so often fail in giving his thoughts that artistic beauty, that graceful proportion, and that harmony of diction which other poets, far less amply endowed than he, eminently possess. Browning was a great genius, of rugged order, with a touch of native perverseness that often hampered the best expression of his art; but for sheer insight into character, dramatic intensity, and brilliant vigour of conception, he can only be compared with the very greatest in our literature.

The charge of obscurity, though often levelled at Browning, is only half true; much of the difficulty which meets us in approaching him is akin to the difficulty which faces the student of Hegel, when first he essays to grasp the great philosopher's secret. The obscurity is oftener on our side than on that of the poet. So swift is Browning in his thought, so instant to perceive what is real and essential in human conduct, so unerring in piercing to the root of motive and laying bare the springs of action, that our laggard wits flag in the endeavour to keep pace with him. Then, in his dramatic method, he reverses the usual procedure. The *objective* treatment, which is that generally followed, takes a subject in hand, and does not attempt to analyze character till it has sufficiently made clear to us the ruling circumstances; in the *subjective* treatment, the character is built up from the inside. Through the vision of the poet we watch the infinite play of hidden motive, of those strange and far-away phases of a man's personality that seldom rise to the surface, yet profoundly touch his life. And this is the way in which Browning loves to treat his subjects; he gives us no mere character sketches, which are, after all, of surface value; he probes deep into the main wonder of the human heart. Hence something of his difficulty; he is not only poet, but psychologist too—a mental physiologist searching out the secrets of the soul, and finding in the development of that soul, in all its ascending or descending stages, the only thing worth studying—

Man's thoughts, and loves, and hates.

About these clusters his interest; in depicting them he has lavished all the treasures of his vigorous genius, and splendidly decisive and incisive style. A strong masculine personality was Browning's, with a strong faith in the Unseen, a noble belief in his fellow-man—one who indeed

> Never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
> Never doubted clouds would break,
> Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
> Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
> Sleep to wake.

The forces of the early part of the century which have served to guide the destinies of the age are all but exhausted; we await at length the advent of some fresh quickening impulse, of newer sources of intellectual and social activity. That we should now be conscious of a reaction is inevitable, for we are passing through a period of mediocrity. But nothing can take from us the heritage of past splendours. Other bards may come to charm us, to instruct us, and to give us stronger confidence in the unseen universe of spirit, while, nevertheless, not uncareful to open the eyes of our understanding to the endless beauties, which, in this visible part of God's creation, surround us on all sides. But Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning—these are, spiritually, with us still; their pages are ever unsealed for us, to learn therein the lesson that genius inspires, or to find the abundant solace that springs from the contemplation of noble thought and high imaginings. To flash a glory upon the sum of man's life, to strike a music from the story of his hopes and joys, his despair and tears—this is the unique privilege of genius.

E. H. BLAKENEY.

## ART. VI.—THE ARCHDEACONRY OF LONDON.

### AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD.

IN introducing to you the subject of spiritual work in North and East London, it is right that I should first briefly explain to you why I venture to introduce it to your notice.

It is twenty-six years since I left the University of Oxford. In my undergraduate days I was greatly interested in the condition of the poor in London, and was constantly talking about the subject both to my friends and tutors. That was long before anybody had thought either of Toynbee Hall, or Oxford House, or School or College Missions. It was before Arnold Toynbee had entered at Balliol. It was therefore