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

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

The Religion of Browning.

By MARY BRADFORD WHITING.

ON May 7, 1812, Robert Browning was born in his father's house at Camberwell, and in this centenary year the articles written in commemoration of the poet who came so tardily into his kingdom of fame, will be as the sand of the sea for multitude. There are, indeed, so many points of view from which Browning's poetry may be regarded, that there is some excuse for the neglect from which he suffered through the early part of his career; he was not only a poet, he was a philosopher, a seer, a theologian, a moralist, and a scholar; a singer fired with the white heat of passion, yet at the same time never losing sight of his sacred mission. It is not strange that the work of such a man was bewildering in its effect; but now that a hundred years have passed since he first saw the light, his genius has found universal acknowledgment and its component parts are given a just recognition.

There are many critics who declare that Art and Religion can have nothing to do with each other, but few would be bold enough to attempt the interpretation of Browning's poetry without reference to his religion, for religion can scarcely be called a component part of his genius, it was rather the atmosphere in which his genius lived and moved and had its being.

"The development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so." This was his own statement in a letter to his friend, M. Milsand, and the practice of his whole literary life bears it out. He does not merely depict the thoughts and the deeds of men and leave them to point their own lesson; he holds them up to praise or blame according to their repressive or their incentive effect upon the soul of man. He does not revel in sensuous enjoyment: Keats may say:

> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know!"

But Browning strikes a deeper note :

> "Oh! world as God has made it, all is beauty;
> And knowing this is love, and love is duty,
> What further may be sought for or declared?"

Love is duty! Those words, alone, would mark him out as fundamentally different from the many poets who have maintained that love is not a discipline but a gratification, a lulling luxury and not a spur to effort.

But in dealing with the question of Browning's religion, we must not forget that his writings are in great measure dramatic. He himself tells us that his method of presenting his Men and Women is to

> "Enter each and all, and use their service;
> Speak from every mouth,"[1]

and therefore the test of haphazard quotation is almost as unfair with him as with Shakespeare. The only possible means of arriving at a conclusion is to trace out the main lines of his religious belief and follow them through his works; no characteristic of his faith is more marked than its continuity : what he believed when he took up his pen in 1833, that he still believed when he laid it down in 1889; but it is evident that such an inquiry can only be carried out very imperfectly within the limits of a magazine article, and that only a few of the necessary quotations can be given.

The first to be noticed of these main lines of belief, is his sense of the all-pervading presence of God. He neither holds that the world is a fortuitous concourse of atoms, nor that, having made it, the Creator leaves it to go on its way unguided and unremembered; he holds that the Creator is indispensable to the creature, that His omnipotence and His omnipresence are not only inseparable from His Divine nature, but inseparable from human existence; that God, in fact, is man's first and greatest need. We find this idea expressed in his first poem, *Pauline :*

[1] "One Word More."

"My God, my God! let me for once look on Thee
As though nought else existed: we alone!
And as creation crumbles, my soul's spark
Expands till I can say, 'Ev'n from myself
I need Thee, and I feel Thee, and I love Thee;
I do not plead my rapture in Thy works
For love of Thee—nor that I feel as one
Who cannot die—but there is that in me
Which turns to Thee, which loves, or which should love.'"

The same thought breaks out again and again throughout his works, as, for example, in *Abt Vogler*:

"Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable Name!
Builder and Maker, Thou, of houses not made with hands!
What, have fear of change from Thee, who art ever the same?
Doubt that Thy power can fill the heart that Thy power expands?"

And when towards the end of his life, he looks back over the years at work accomplished and fame achieved, he tells us that the one thing he wishes his fellow-men to remember:

"Confidently lay to heart, and lock in head their life long—this:
'He there with the brand flamboyant, broad o'er night's forlorn abyss,
Crowned by prose and verse; and wielding with Wit's bauble, Learning's rod,
Well? Why, he at least believed in soul, was very sure of God!'"[1]

This unalterable belief in God's omnipotence and omnipresence, has seemed to some of Browning's critics to be merely the result of his personal optimism. Here was a man, they say, of magnificent health, both mental and bodily; possessed of a competence that saved him from the heart-rending struggle with circumstances that has embittered so many poets, and crowned with that perfect satisfaction in love which so many men have longed for and sought in vain—why should the problems and pains of life press upon him? To such a one as this there is no merit in being able to say:

"God's in His heaven,
All's right with the world!"[2]

This brings us to another main line of the poet's religious thought. He did not, as some have declared, ignore the sorrow

[1] "La Saisaiz." [2] "Pippa Passes."

and suffering of the world, but he welcomed them as part of a mighty and beneficial plan. This belief may be traced through the whole of his works, but only a few selected illustrations can be quoted here. The object of *Paracelsus*, published in 1835, was to show that the sufferings, the sorrows and the disappointments of the great philosopher were all needed to teach him the lesson that God designed for him to learn. This thought is the comfort of his friend Festus, as he watches over the wreck that lies upon the bed in the hospital at Salzburg :

> "God, Thou art love! I build my faith on that,
> Even as I watch beside Thy tortured child,
> Unconscious whose hot tears fall fast by him;
> So doth Thy right hand guide us through the world
> Wherein we stumble."

So Rabbi ben Ezra is not only patient under sufferings and limitations, but hails them gladly:

> "Then welcome each rebuff
> That turns earth's smoothness rough,
> Each sting that bids not sit nor stand, but go!
> Be our joy three parts pain!
> Strive and hold cheap the strain;
> Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!"

This lack of content, this impossibility of perfect satisfaction, is, indeed, a proof of the divine spark within us; were we untouched by grief and disappointment we should be even as the beasts that perish :

> "For thence—a paradox
> Which comforts while it mocks,
> Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
> What I aspired to be
> And was not, comforts me:
> A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale."

Unless man could grieve as well as joy, he says in effect, he would be no man at all, but a mere puppet-like automaton; he must be capable of fear, of pain, of doubt and of loss, or he can never know happiness or lift up his soul in worship. This is the teaching of the great parable-poem, *Easter Day*: having realized what it would be to be shut outside the scheme of

human experience, the soul returns to God with a cry for reinstatement:

"'Thou love of God! Or let me die,
Or grant what shall seem Heaven almost!
Let me not know that all is lost,
Though lost it be—leave me not tied
To this despair, this corpse-like bride!
Let that old life seem mine—no more—
With limitation as before,
With darkness, hunger, toil, distress:
Be all the earth a wilderness!
Only let me go on, go on,
Still hoping ever and anon
To reach one eve the Better Land!'"

* * * * *

And so I live, you see;
Go through the world, try, prove, reject,
Prefer, still struggling to effect
My warfare; happy that I can
Be crossed and thwarted as a man,
Not left in God's contempt apart
With ghastly smooth life, dead at heart.'"

Nor does this sweet use of adversity reveal itself only in physical trials; it is revealed also in that worst of mental trials—doubt. Doubt, according to Browning, is not to be regretted, for without the faculty of doubt man could never offer to God an acceptable faith; he must be able

". . . To grieve Him,
But able to glorify Him too,
As a mere machine could never do,
That prayed or praised, all unaware
Of its fitness for aught but praise and prayer,
Made perfect as a thing of course."[1]

This idea is elaborately worked out in *A Death in the Desert*, where Browning deals with the question, Why, if belief is so necessary to the soul, did God not make the facts of religion as plain as the facts of every-day life: why is it not, for instance, as easy to believe in the salvation of Christ as in the benefit of that gift of fire which Prometheus is said to have brought down from heaven for men? To this he replies that the reason is

[1] "Christmas Eve."

plain to all who have ears to hear, for were there no possibility of any difference of opinion, the faculties of the soul would not come into play in choosing the better part:

"Were this our soul's gain safe, and sure
To prosper as the body's gain is wont,—
Why, man's probation would conclude, his earth
Crumble; for he both reasons and decides,
Weighs first, then chooses: will he give up fire
For gold and purple once he knows its worth?
Could he give Christ up were His worth as plain?
Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,
Nor may he grasp that fact like other fact,
And straightway in his life acknowledge it,
As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire."

This conception of pain as an agent of development, and of life as a preparation, leads us to another main line in Browning's religious thought: his belief in the immortality of the soul. Why were we placed here, he says, to suffer and to learn, if we had not a future before us in which our lessons might be put to use; let works of Art be perfect; they are limited by time and space:

"To-day's brief passion limits their range,
It seethes with the morrow for us and more.
They are perfect—how else? they shall never change;
We are faulty—why not? we have time in store.
The Artificer's hand is not arrested
With us—we are rough-hewn, nowise polished
They stand for our copy, and, once invested
With all they can teach, we shall see them abolished.
'Tis a lifelong toil till our lump be leaven—
The better! what's come to perfection perishes.
Things learned on earth, we shall practise in heaven.
Works done least rapidly, Art most cherishes."[1]

The same truth is taught in *La Saisaiz*:

"I have lived, then, done and suffered, loved and hated, learnt and taught
This—there is no reconciling wisdom with a world distraught,
Goodness with triumphant evil, power with failure in the aim,
If (to my own sense, remember, tho' none other feel the same)—
If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's place,
And life, time, with all their chances, changes, just probation space."

It is, in fact, only as man recognizes the power of God, and submits to the eternal law of suffering and limitation, that he

[1] "Old Pictures in Florence."

may hope one day to be made one with God, and enter into His glory :

> ". . . God is seen God
> In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod.
> And thus looking within and around me, I ever renew
> (With that stoop of the soul which in bending upraises it too),
> The submission of Man's nothing-perfect to God's All-Complete,
> As by each new obeisance in spirit I climb to His feet.'"[1]

But the proof of immortality is not found alone in human sorrow ; according to Browning, it is found also in human joy and love. The test of his faith came to him when the exquisite happiness of his married life ended with the death of his wife in 1861. If he had allowed his crushing load of grief to harden into despair, it might justly have been said that his beliefs were not strong enough to stand the shocks of experience ; but during the twenty-eight years of his loneliness, he never once wavered in his certainty of their re-union. Love cannot die ; this was the innermost core of his creed. Love is of God, and the love that we lose on earth we shall find in heaven, because love is God, even as God is love. This belief he held even before the desire of his eyes was taken from him :

> ". . . Love, which on earth, amid all the shows of it,
> Has ever been seen the sole good of life in it,
> The love, ever growing there, spite of the strife in it,
> Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it !
> And I shall behold Thee, face to face,
> O God, and in Thy light retrace
> How in all I loved here, still wast Thou !"[2]

But the separation which tore his life asunder could not disturb his faith, and he gives expression to it in *Prospice*—a poem written a few months after Mrs. Browning's death:

> "I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
> The best and the last !
> I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forbore,
> And bade me creep past.
> No ! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers,
> The heroes of old,
> Bear the brunt, in a minute pay life's glad arrears
> Of pain, darkness, and cold.
> For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
> The black minute's at end ;

[1] "Saul." [2] "Christmas Eve."

And the element's rage, the fiend-voices that rave
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain;
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!"

Nor was this a passing mood; the beautiful address to his wife in *The Ring and the Book* (written in 1868), which is too long for quotation here, shows that he thought of her as still living, still constant in her love to him as he in his love to her. And again, in *Abt Vogler:*

"There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;
The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;
On the earth, the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round."

Throughout the whole of his long poetical career we find illustrations of this belief, until at its close, in the volume published in 1887, we see it expressed with the same clearness as it had been in the beginning:

"By proved potency that still
Makes perfect, be assured, come what, come will,
What once lives, never dies; what here attains
To a beginning, has no end, still gains
And never loses aught."[1]

The field of inquiry is so wide a one that these few remarks can do no more than induce the reader to explore it for himself; but perhaps enough has been said to show that the fundamental facts on which Browning's religion is based are the existence of God and the existence of the soul. These facts he does not attempt to prove:

"Prove them facts? That they surpass my power of proving, proves them such!"[2]

What he does try to prove is that these two facts—God and the soul—are not at war, but are made one by love—a Divine, self-sacrificing, all-perfecting love:

"'He who did most, shall bear most; the strongest shall stand the most weak.
'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for! my flesh, that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee: a Man like to me

[1] "Gerard de Lairesse." [2] "La Saisaiz."

Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever! a Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand!'"[1]

Then, once reconciled with God, he seeks to show that the soul can "endure His act"—can face doubt, can master temptation, turning stumbling-block into stepping-stone, and can use the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears of life, as aids to that supreme object of our existence—the learning of love.

With such a noble conception of life as this, it is little wonder that Browning was able to look calmly upon death; such a splendid joy in strenuous living could not cease with the grave. William Sharp, in his life of the poet, repeats the indignant words that he once heard him let fall on that fear of death that creeps into so much modern thought: "The shadow of death—call it what you will, despair, negation, indifference—is upon us. But what fools who talk thus! Why, *amico mio*, you know as well as I do that death is life, just as our daily, our momentarily dying body is none the less alive and ever recruiting new forces of existence. Without death, which is our crape-like, churchyardy word for change, for growth, there could be no prolongation of that which we call life! For myself, I deny death as an end of everything. Never say of me that I am dead!"

It is the very spirit, the very words almost, of that *Epilogue* which he placed at the end of his last volume of poems so that those who might be tempted to pity him as laid low should be reminded that he was not "imprisoned" by death, but was still

"One who 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!

No, at noonday, in the bustle of man's worktime,
Greet the unseen with a cheer!
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be.
'Strive and thrive!' cry, 'Speed! fight on, fare ever
There as here!'"

[1] "Saul."