"THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING CONSIDERED AS A PRODUCT OF LITERARY EVOLUTION"

The domain of poetry is one into which very few writers have felt authorized to extend their researches in a quasi- scientific spirit. The poetic gift has always been enveloped by a peculiar atmosphere of sanctity. Men wholly intent on material gain disregard or despise it, while those who affect the study of poetry generally view it as a subject wholly beyond the jurisdiction of anything approaching to quasi-scientific treatment, in brief, as a subject in which the incidents of race, environment, and that indescribable but potent factor called by the Germans the Zeitgeist, are so inconsiderable as to be negligible.

The latter assumption, viz; that the poetic spirit "bloweth where it listeth", and is unchanged by lapse of time or mutation of environment, seems at first sight to be tenable. It is admitted that in certain poems of the Nineteenth Century we catch an echo of the old Homeric epic, and that in many cases where imitation is impossible we detect subtle similarities in the styles of poets who lived in periods widely different as regards time and circumstances. In spite of such occasional cases of reversion it may be safely stated that poetry, like all other branches by means of which human intelligence is displayed, is amenable to the general laws of evolution. Limiting myself to English poetry it is the intention in this essay to take the poetry of Robert Browning into consideration, to shew that his style and trend of thought are in harmony with the spirit of his age, and , by making a casual survey of the field of poetic effort in England, to demonstrate that his poetry represents the highest type of thought, and is consequently the most finished product of literary Evolution.

Constantly surrounded from prehistoric times by scenes of sublimity, and evidences of mighty powers which his rudimentary intelligence observed but did not dare to investigate, Mankind was doubtless thereby powerfully affected; the more so, since his imaginative powers still preserve their pristine vigor, sharpened by the fears and superstitions incident to a low state of civilization. Events, which if understood, had been comonplace, took on a mystery which further tended to stimulate the development of his imaginative and emotional powers.

Commencing with rude imitations of natural sounds, and leading through the recitative stage up to the time when minstrels and bards began to measure their songs by rythmical cadences, poetry has passed through many stages of development both as to form and thought. Of these I shall endeavor to outline a few of the most important.

Disregarding the tentative efforts of barbarous peoples, and commencing at the period of Homeric literature, we observe that the "Iliad" represents the highest and most powerful type of a certain class of poetry. Its excellence consists largely in the poet's power of flashing on the sensitive retina of his reader's imagination a vivid picture of the scene described by him, and of producing in the reader that peculiar pyschological condition in which he sees eye to eye with the poet, and shares with him the same virile emotions. The old English ballads have considerable of the Homeric quality in them, composed as they were in ages when the people were in a semi-barbarous condition. In such cases the poetry is in reality the joint product of the whole people. The bard or minstrel contribute the actual composition of the ballad, but the people contribute the color, the incidents of time and circumstance, and in short all the incidental matters arising from their particular environment and status In my opinion the latter contribution is the more important. The minstrel lived with the people, was subject to the same hopes and fears, lived a wild free life , lived, loved, fought and died, as one of the people . He knew their love of rhythm, of changing sounds, bold ballads, and onomatopoeiac phrasing. As yet the personal

element was lacking, as also any subtlety of thought. The style was distinctly narrative, and the versification and phrasing were often so crude as to be repellent.

Admitting that in all ages and countries there are certain peets whose work cannot be classed with that of their contemporaries, we can safely maintain that the bulk of English poetry preceeding Chaucer was strongly characterized by the qualities above mentioned. Undoubted -ly some poems of that period were not absolutely impersonal and narrative, but such was their general tenor.

Apart from minor matters such as versification, the poerty of Chaucer is marked by two qualities which exalt it above preceding contributions. The first is an absence of appeal to the primitive passions; the second a power of impressing a reader with his own opinions regarding various ethical problems. These opinions are never openly stated, but he has the gift of describing men and their actions in such a manner that the reader must perforce deduce certain well defined ethical ideas. Like that of his predecessors, his style is distinctly impersonal.

The lessons which Chaucer taught by implication were openly and sometimes laboriously , expanded by Spencer. In him we notice the steady growth of the didactic tendency, and instead of the untrained vigor of the older English poets we notice that his "FaërieQueen" is remarkable for a certain smoothness and polish which add to its beauty and do not detract from its power.

Between the style of Spencer and that of Milton or Dryden there is a wide divergence, yet when we consider the marvellous changes wrought by the Renaissance in the intellectual status of educated Englishmen, and we are enabled to understand the evolution

of the former into the latter.

For the purpose of this essay it is not necessary to describe how the Renaissance affected the poetry of that period beyond stating that for the first time the personal element in poetry burst forth into song. Crudity was replaced by classicism; wild vigor was restrained and chastened. With rare exceptions, however, the philosophical and religious ideas as then expressed were not in reality the innermost reflections of the poets' feelings. It is extremely doubtful, for example, whether Milton ever gave much thought to the religious ideas expressed in his writings. Doubtless he did not disbelieve them, but, born as he was in an age when creeds were tenaciously adhered to, and higher criticism was unheard of, he advocated his religious tenets in perfect good faith, feeling satisfied that their absolute truth was indisputable. Morally, he was sincere---mentally not so.

Leaving Shakespeare aside as one whose poetry possesses all the excellencies of all ages, the essential insincerity of poetry as regards the thought in it, was a noticable feature of nearly all poetic work from the Renaissance period to that of Gray, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and Keats. Then it was replaced by an insincerity of a different and probably less harmful stamp, namely, that arising from a morbid love of Nature and Freedom and an exaggeration of the personal element. There is no doubt that Wordsworth's love of nature was genuine, and that Shelley's revolutionary and at times atheistic effusions were the result of a passionate love of freedom and hatred of despotism. Byron, impostor as he was in many ways, must have actually experienced many of the emotions and sentiments attributed by him to his characters. In what respect, then, may such poets be said to be insincere ? Because they did not possess a comprehensive outlook on men and affairs. Each contributed greatly to English literature, but each had a particular panacea, which, if adopted by the nations, would at one stroke cure

all their ills . With Shelley it was freedom, with Keats beauty with Wordsworth a passionate devotion to Nature. Byron saw the evils attendant upon despotism and fanaticism, and believed that liberty of thought and action would be the most desirable boon for mankind. Of the gradual but slow progress of the race, of the countless shiftings of the ethical plane, of the infinite variety of temperament, of the deceptive nature of the human soul, such poets took no note, and to the extent to which they neglected to do so, their view was limited and their poetry unconsciously insincere.

The connecting link between the ultra-emotional poetry of such writers and the ultra-intellectual work of Robert Browning is formed by the poetry of Alfred Tennyson. Although his poetry exhibits in a modified form many of the traits noticeable in that of his predecessors, it is notable for a certain philosophical bent. This is shewn in such poems as "In Memoriam", "The Talking Oak", "The Two Voices", and "The Higher Pantheism". Such a tendency is absent from nearly all of the poets preceding him. His emotion seldom swept him beyond the bounds of good taste --- a statement not to be safely hazarded as regards his predecessors. When he discusses any abstract question he does so in what seems to be a dispassionate and judicial manner. In short any ethical ideas advanced by him are clearly stamped with the seal of sincerity. In his case the bulk of his poetry was of a narrative of descriptive nature. Only occasionally did he turn aside to discuss ethical problems, and then only when some outward event affected him and forced some question on his mind. Consequently his poetry is merely a variation of that of the ultra-emotional class. His emotions are more restrained, and, as before stated, his words are sometimes of a nature more clearly intellectual than those preceding

The advent of Robert Browning into the poetic world marks a distinct stage in the Evolution of poetry. It represents the highest level of intellectuality ever shewn in English poetry.

The rapid progress of scientific research, the remarkable inventions the wide-spread knowledge of distant peoples and places, and above all, the distinctive thirst for absolute Truth which for the last fifty years has been, and to-day is, the most potent element in modern thought, all these combined to produce a style of poetry in which rotundity, sanity, and unlimited breadth of view were salient characteristics. Whether it be for good or evil the reading public cannot now be easily moved by poems which are mere appeals to the ear or imagination. Such poems often produce a strong effect but it is evanescent. The value of the thought expressed in a poem is fast becoming the criterion of its excellence. Poems which are merely panegyrics on Nature or appeals to the primitive instincts are less regarded then formerly, unless they rest on some basal thought such as is found in "Kipling's" "Recessional", or "The Man with the Hoe". Poems which express narrow views of Life and Duty may enjoy a temporary popularity, but are soon forgotten by the multitude. People are not desirous of following the truth, but are intensely eager to know it. Occasionally a dogma, superstition, or time honored theory, is swept away in the search for it. Expression is subrogated to thought, fervor to sanity, aestheticism to Truth.

It is claimed, then, that the poetry of Robert Browning is at present the greatest example of how the inner life of a community is reflected in the productions of the poet who is a member thereof, and that if this can be established it is safe to state that the intellectual appeal of his poems is a distinct result of that literary Evolution which is in all cases a concomitant of the ethical and social changes taking place in any particular people.

In reading some poets we observe that certain characteristics belong to some of their poems, whilst in other poems they are absent. With Browning one feels that his peculiar literary traits are at once apparent in nearly all of his works. In "The Ring and the Book" we find that the two predominating qualities are comprehensiveness

of grasp, and untiring effort to discover absolute truth. In this poem he takes a set of circumstances and describes them from the point of view of each actor in the tragedy. Sometimes the point of view of the poet is extremely difficult to detect. Each character is psychologically dissected by him. Influences of environment, education, temperament, and immumerable others are brought into play and the net result is demonstrated to the reader. It is no easy thing to depict a character clearly, even from one point of view, but to do so from several points of view is a masterstroke of art, and Browning was the first English poet to attempt it.

In his other poems we observe the same eagerness for absolute Truth. Sometimes this tendency leads him into dangerous quarters as in "Fifine"; at other times we are conscious of a rather unpleasant sensation of distrust, as for example after reading "Bishop Blougram's Apology", but in all his poems we cannot but feel that there is in them a remarkable power of analyzing in a judicial manner the feelings and emotions of the soul, and of making due allowance for every possible circumstance and contingency which might affect its action. His poetry teaches us to judge not, since in order to do so justly, we would require a knowledge verging on omniscience.

Doubtless Browning's style of life greatly influenced his poetry. In many ways he was a man of the world, well travelled, observant of social forms and distinctions, and possessed of a fund of common sense. His work was done systematically. His love of Nature was strong, but far from morbid. In many ways he well represented the clear headed thoughtful Englishman of good education and training. With him form was sacrificed to substance, and harmony to subtlety of thought.

Living as he did in the centre of humanity, he was not, like Wordsworth, repelled by Man's presence, but on the contrary cultivated his social tendencies, and from such intercourse collected

material for his works. Another result of this was his adoption of religious ideas which amounted to Universalism. In his daily life he saw the combination of good and evil in poeple, and hopes that what is called Evil is not essentially such, but that eventually Divine Benevolence will unravel the twisted web of life's mysteries. Man is constantly advancing towards Absolute Good in spite of the weakness and depravity of the soul. The works of Carlyle depict God as a stern Task-master, a Power outside Man; but Browning teaches us that he is within Man and is manifested by the steady intellectual and moral progress of Mankind. Unlike Wordsworth he does not look down on man from an altitude of aesthetic contemplation, but shows that at bottom most men are actuated by similar motives and passions. His poems hold forth a hope of a future reconciliation of all warring elememts in Natural Law, Religion, and Man. That this optimism was not the result of an unreflecting temperament or of a placid uneventful life is apparent to all who read his poems or his biography. In promulgating views of the above nature he was simply reflecting the trend of religious thought in his age. Some writers claim that any nation follows the ideas advanced by their great poets. In my opinion this is an error so gross as not to need refutation. The poet expresses the crystallized thought and emotion of the people.

In reading some of Browning's poems I have often observed a subtle but powerful quality which is also strongly apparent in Shakespeare, and it is a very rare quality. It may be called a species of naturalism. About the best example of it is in "Macbeth" where Rosse breaks the news to Macduff of the massacre of his wife and children;

Macduff -"My children too ?

Rosse - "Wife, children, servants, all that could be found.

Macduff -"And I must be from thence? My wife too?"

Rosse - "I have said".

Malcolm- "Be comforted ------

Macduff- "He has no children.- All my pretty ones ?

Did you say all ? O hell-kite; All ?

What, all my pretty chickens and their dam at one fell swoop?" The inability of Macduff to grasp at once the full import of the calamity, and the questionsput by him shewing that he was hoping against hope, are most powerful because most natural. In the poem where Karshish , the Arab physician, tells the story of Lazarus branching off now and then to medical topics, and finally concluding his story rather abrubtly, to proceed with the, to him, more important matter of describing some plant, we catch the peculiarity again. Also in "The Statue and the Bust", and in "Caliban". The power may be described as an intuitive knowledge of what a certain character, under set circumstances, would say or do. The gift of divining this runs through all of Shakespeare's work, and isalso as before stated prominent in Browning's poetry. No poet can exercise it without possessing a remarkable faculty of detachment, and the poet who wrote "Caliban" certainly was so gifted.

Poetry, like all other departments of human endeavor, is subject to the law of compensation; and, although we find excellencies in Browning's poems, we are also sensible of the fact that much of the perfection of finish, ease of expression, and charm of color associated with the poetry of his predecessors is lacking in his productions. In some shorter poems the absence of these qualities is not so notable, but most of his longer efforts have very little beauty except that which arises out of the thought. What beauty there is in his longer poems is not diffused, but appears only in patches.

Furthermore, the sweep of his outlook on life resulted in a decided lack of fixity of view as regards not only the qualities of his characters but also as regards his ethical standards. Here again he was the type of the age. At times we get a clear definite impression of a character, as in "The Grammarian's Funeral", but in his longer poems the impressions are by no means clear. After read-

ing "The Ring and the Book", this fact is at once apparent. As we read the same story over and over our opinion of each character constantly varies, and at last we are undecided as to how to regard them. Although we feel that the ethical standard of his Works is high, yet he formulated no doctrine, promulgated no creed, and combatted no particular evil. In case of other poets we read between the lines, and without difficulty we deduce their religious and social views. Not so as regards Browning. We discover, that, although undoubtedly a few broad ideas such as Universalism and the complexity of the human soul pervade his works, yet, in many cases one is left in doubt as to whether a view is propounded as that of the poet, or merely as one which is in keeping with the particular character in whose mouth the words are placed.

In this Essay then it has been my aim to observe in a cursory manner how the most essential features of English poetry have gradually undergone a radical change from the time when a crude mind but acute imagination was satisfied with rhythm and vigor up to the present, when such incidentals of poetry are looked on as secondary elements only, effective it is true, but subsidiary to the intellectual stratum of the poem. It is not claimed that henceforth poetry will be of marked intellectual tendencies, nor that the Emotional rhythm and color elements will eventually be regarded as immaterial. But it is maintained that the poetry of Robert Browning is a fairly accurate reflex of the latter half of the Ninteenth Century, of its tolerance of thought and investigation, of its changing ethical standard, its lack of fixity in sociological views, its decreasing tendency to be dominated by purely emotional appeal, and its overpowering eagerness to discover absolute Truth. Poetry like all else must occasionally be subject to periods of reversion to former models. Periods of decadence or dearth will eventually occur. But I am firmly of opinion that any poetry, which is an accurate reflex of the poet's age and generation, will endure. For this reason alone it is not presumptuous to hold that although his

genius was recognized late, and that although even yet he is little read by the masses, yet the time will assuredly come when he will be regarded as the pioneer of a new field of poetic effort, a field in which the minor efforts of Man's artistic nature were made secondary to his intellect.