

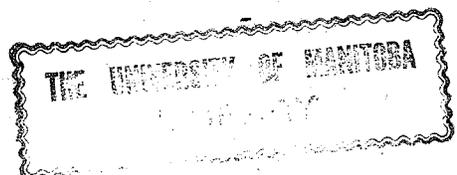
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R O B E R T B R O W N I N G ' S

I D E A O F L I F E

AN ESSAY UPON ROBERT BROWNING'S

VIEWS OF LIFE AND RELIGION.



BROWNING'S IDEA OF LIFE:

"I for my race and me
Shall apprehend life's law." (Reverie.)

The half century from 1830 to 1880 is a period in the religious and intellectual life of British and European thought which is likely to pass into the record of history as one of the most momentous of modern times.

The year 1833 had seen the revival in the Established Church, known as the Oxford Movement--a movement which, though mainly theological and ecclesiastical in its range, was yet stirring enough to influence others to think deeply about the fundamentals of the spiritual life.

Two years later appeared the first edition of Strauss' "Leben Jesu", this being followed by the revised fourth edition of 1840. "The work produced an immense sensation and created a new epoch in the treatment of the rise of Christianity." Men were startled, as never before, when they learned that such a conception of the Christ could be put forward by an esteemed theological professor. To state that the Christ of the Gospels was in effect the unintentional creation of the early Christian Messianic expectation was to undermine what many had thought to be the basis of all Christian ethics and morals. If Strauss' theories were upheld, then they would have to cry in the words of St. Paul to the unbelieving Corinthians "then is our preaching vain": our faith, on which we have built our life, is also vain. Mankind could cry:

"Oh faith! where art thou flown from out the world
Already on what an age of doubt we fall!" (Ring and the Book).

But Strauss' ideas were only exaggerated the more when Ernest Renan, lecturing at the College de France in 1862, declared Jesus Christ "an incomparable man", and in the following year (1863) published his memorable "Life of Jesus."

It was not, however, merely in the realm of theology that men's minds were stirred to the uttermost, but likewise in the field of science there were indications of a disturbing and awakening element at work. For in 1859 Darwin propounded his new theories regarding Evolution, and once again the faith of many was shaken, as many scientists, misinterpreting these theories, in effect denied the power of the spiritual life and reduced all life, as it were, to dead, inert matter.

These disturbing ideas continued to occupy men's minds and when in 1873 Matthew Arnold published his "Literature and Dogma" with its virtual denial of the existence of a divinely established Church, it was only a sign that materialism had gained a real foothold in the thought and lives of England's teachers. If Providence was but "a stream of tendency not ourselves which makes for righteousness," then indeed it would be wise to escape from "the sick fatigue, the languid doubt" and to admit the hopelessness of a cure:

"Before this strange disease of modern life

With it's sick hurry, it's divided aims,

It's heads o'ertaxed, it's palsied hearts."

Truly when we consider that Strauss had denied the reality of the Christ, that Renan had denied the Incarnation, that scientists had scorned the value of the spiritual, and that Arnold had maintained the idea of a personal God was in no way

involved in the Scriptures--all this in the short space of thirty odd years--do we realize that the half-century was a period, pregnant as to its effects on the years to follow.

But it is of the highest value to realize that the highest truths advance by antagonism--the conflict leads to a reconciliation, and within the period above instanced we have to record the lives and works of many who were able to stem the tide against the sure materialism which many were setting forth. The Oxford movement had strengthened the forces of the Established Church and the deepening of the spiritual life of the Church which Wesley had striven for at the close of the 18th. Century was now being manifested in many quarters.

In the realms of Theology one cannot now quote the many who stood up to defend the reality of the spiritual, but in letters two names stand out before all others. Over against the death dealing criticism of such as Strauss and Arnold we range the life-giving faith of Tennyson and Browning. And it is a noteworthy fact that in the midst of the period under discussion (namely in 1850) both these "Twin Brethren" put forth poems which for statements of personal faith have rarely been excelled in other works of like nature.^x Since, however, Lord Tennyson was mainly concerned with political and social truths we have to look to Robert Browning as the prophet of a "greater" life in an age when materialism and negation^{of the} spiritual were spelling ruin to come. And we do not look in vain.

Mr. Austin Foster when writing that the Hebrew Prophet

x 1850 Christmas Eve and Easter Day,
The only work published by Browning in 1850.
1850 In Memoriam,
The only poem published by Tennyson in 1850.

of old was a man with a message of arresting power states very forcibly "Browning has a message to deliver to the men and women of his age, to all succeeding ages--a message of life, of Hope, of Spiritual Realities, a message of the harmonies that issue from resolved discords, of the day-dawn of faith after the midnight of despair, of the beauty of righteousness after the unloveliness of sin, of the assurance of victory after the agony of defeat."

And it is because he has this message for us that "to know Browning well is to have acquired a liberal education," such education being best defined as Milton has it "to know God aright." While it may be conceded that no author requires such strenuous effort to arrive at his meaning, yet it must be granted that no writer more amply repays faithful study. Into an age of doubt Browning came as a "great remedial thinker," and taught us that there is a sure connection between the known order of things in which we live and move and that larger order of which it is a part. In other words Browning's idea of life included life here and life hereafter, the one part of the other--the two, being the possession of every man.

Dowden

We have stated that Robert Browning is a great remedial thinker in an age of doubt, but it will be objected that though we acknowledge the years 1830--1880 to be years of upheaval in the religious and intellectual life, yet we cannot affirm that they were such to Browning. We shall be told that the poet lived in Italy for many of these years and that his life and

letters do not bear witness to his having been much disturbed by the matters under discussion. Whether it be true or not that the poet wrote to counteract the materialistic tendency of his day, we are not concerned to answer; but we can say surely, that he is a product of his age--that the Spirit of Truth called him forth to witness for higher things; that he was inspired to write as he did, his full message of hope and life. In this connection it is interesting to note that Dr. A.S.W. Crawford^x puts forward the very interesting theory that the publication of Fitzgerald's translation of the pessimistic and materialistic poem "Omar Khay yam" in 1859 called forth in reply from Browning in 1864 the optimistic and spiritual psalm of life "Rabbi Ben Ezra." The arguments seem well founded and may lead us to extend the probability that in many others of his poems Browning conscientiously arose to oppose what he felt was materialistic in the age.

Before we attempt to study Browning's idea of life we must, however, give some attention to what makes the subject of his poems, for from this he gains his conception of life. We must further satisfy ourselves as to how far we may accept the ideas and thoughts put forth in the poems as those of Browning himself.

First then, his subject matter. This may be briefly stated to be "man as a spiritual being," or as Dr. Alexander points out, it is Browning's "neglect of the theme of man's material progress."

^x Methodist Review, Jan.-Feb. 1910.

The poet himself, early stated his "theme", for in the dedication to "Sordello" (1840) he writes to Mr. J. Milsand of Dijon "my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul; little else is worth study." And throughout the whole of his work stress is seen to be upon man's soul. Browning studies men and women as individuals; he gazes into the inmost recesses of their hearts; he watches the growth of their souls and from his careful observations is able to supply us with an idea of life which bears close analytical study. Mr. Augustine Birrell says in his essay on Browning: "No poet has such a gallery as Shakespeare, but of our modern poets Browning comes nearest to him." Such a statement one realizes is the truth but one can also say that Browning's gallery is more diverse than that of Shakespeare's. The latter is largely an historical gallery, whereas Browning's subjects are drawn from all sources. He has "gone the whole round of creation" and has looked at human life from its brightest and noblest to its darkest and meanest side and has examined the possible greatness and the possible vileness of man. Browning's love of humanity has prompted him to examine not alone the blameless life, but the ways of the sinner as well as the actions of the saint; he analyzes the thoughts and motives of an Andrea, a Capponsacchi, a Bishop, as well as those of a Pompilia, a Rabbi and a Saint John, and as Mr. G.K. Chesterton quaintly puts it, in all his examination of life he is "seeking God in a series of private interviews." For it is just this study of humanity

which Browning makes his great subject matter, the results of which study lead him to postulate the great eternal realities of life, death, immortality, soul and God. Altogether we can say with Bagshot "he has applied a hard strong intellect to real life" and though earlier poets had talked of the wonders of nature, Browning swept all these things aside and called man to a realization of his own majesty.

But though for fifty-seven years (1833-1889) Browning analyzed the lives of "Men and Women" and set forth his "Parleyings with certain people of importance in their day" in order that he might truly present a right idea of life; how far can we say that the poems in which he set forth his results contain also Browning's own conceptions and beliefs? For an answer thereto it seems necessary to glance briefly at the poet's personality and to study his poems in the light of his personal life and letters, of which latter, we have, alas! too few;

First then, as regards Browning's personality: If by a consideration of the parents of our poet and by examination of the poet's life we can show that he was a Theist and possibly a Christian, both as a result of his parent's teaching and his own conviction we shall, it seems to me, have done much to assure ourselves that Browning does speak through the words, let us say, -of the speaker in "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" and of Saint John in the "A Death in the Desert", as well as

other poems. That Browning's parents were Christians seems to be undisputed. Professor Dowden records the testimony of Mr. W.J. Stillman who knew the poet's father in Paris in his elder years, a testimony to this effect: "If to live in the world as if not of it indicates a saintly nature, then Robert Browning the elder was a saint; a serene, untroubled soul conscious of no moral or theological problem to disturb his serenity." Of the poet's mother, Professor Dowden writes: "Her piety was deep and pure. Her husband had been in his earlier years a member of the Anglican Communion; she was brought up in the Scottish Kirk. Before her marriage she became a member of the Independent Congregation, meeting for worship at York Street, Locke's Fields, Walworth....Her husband attached himself to the same Congregation, both were teachers in the Sunday School."

Of such persons it is only fair to conjecture that they would naturally teach their two children (Sarianna and Robert) of the "things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."

That Robert, the poet, in his personal life was a deep believer in the Christian faith is further evidenced by a few letters which we have. Professor Dowden records "He was not often a Church goer but discussed religious matters earnestly with his clerical friends." Mr.G.K. Chesterton states "(In 1887) He and his sister went to live in a little hotel in Llangollen. He, (i.e. Browning) writes of this "Another term of delightful weeks, each tipped with a sweet starry Sunday at the little Church."

Further than these religious tendencies there is an record a letter dated 11th.May 1876 from the poet to a correspondent who believed herself to be dying; in which after referring

to his correspondent's belief that life is a probation and its experience a witness to the power and love of God he continues "I see ever more reason to hold by the same hope." In the same letter, as if to illustrate his own faith, he goes on to relate the stories of Napoleon and Charles Lamb, in which the person of Christ is set forth with reverence due to the Son of God.^x To Dr. Moncure Conway, who had lost a much beloved son, Browning wrote "If I, who cannot, would restore your son, He who can, will"; which statement must be interpreted as a belief on the poet's part in a personal, loving God and in immortality as the gift to man from that personal God. In fact, as one dips into the life and records of Browning we have to say that Browning is undeniably a Christian poet, not perhaps in the orthodox or technical sense of the word but in the sense that his intellectual attitude is Christian, his culture is Christian, his sympathies are Christian, his aims are Christian. So much for Browning's personality.

But it will be asked: "How can we say that the poems set forth Browning's views?" The answer is: We must treat Browning as we would any other Christian writer and frankly admit that a man's views cannot but permeate what he writes. Mr. Chesterton seems to give us the right outlook as he writes: "Probably critics have been misled by the fact that Browning in many places appears to boast that he is purely dramatic,

^x See note "A" at end of Thesis.

that he has never put himself into his work, a thing which no poet, good or bad, who ever lived, could possibly avoid doing." Dr. Berdoe says: "Candidly, I must say that I do not believe Browning was enough of a dramatist to escape from himself in any of his poems: everyone of his characters talks Browning."

We must therefore admit that though a good deal of Browning's poetry is dramatic in form, yet that form is often but a veil and Browning speaks for himself through his poems. How otherwise can we account for the frequency with which he gives utterance to the great religious truths; how otherwise can we judge the sympathy with which such subjects are approached--the reverence with which Divine characters are set forth^x but that we are dealing with a Christian poet writing on Christian subjects.

We cannot, of course, advocate the wholesale acceptance of all the poems as containing the poet's views, but if we accept Professor Henry Jones' list together with Dr. Berdoe's list^x as those in which we find Browning's religious views, we shall gather all that is necessary to convince us that to read Browning is to know Browning, just as to read Shakespeare and Milton is to know Shakespeare and Milton.

x e.g., Compare "Christmas Eve" Division VlII, lines 1-5 and especially "I saw the back of Him, no more," with Exodus, Chap. XXXI, verses 18-23.

Such a touch is surely the work of a believer.

x See note "B" at end of Thesis.

Thus, to gather Browning's view of life we must read his poetry and from it gather what the poet believed.

Now, to Browning, life meant a very great deal. He did not conceive of it in the light of the Epicurean who aimed at self-gratification, neglecting the authority of reason, but rather he knew life here to be a struggle, a conflict, the reconciliation only to be attained in the hereafter.

"All to the very end is trial in life." l. 1305

.....

"Life is probation and the earth no goal." l. 1436.

But starting-point.of.man....." 1437

(Ring and the Book) (The Pope)

Such a view of life presupposes views on God, Christianity, Immortality, Evil, and Life as lived on earth. To gain the poet's view of life we must see what he has to tell us of these great subjects.

IDEA OF GOD: In his poetry there are two great postulates which Browning sets forth, namely; that God is and the Soul exists. "La Sasiaz", written in the very height of his maturity, and containing, as all critics agree, his personal feelings, closes with these words:

"...He at least believed in Soul,

Was very sure of God."

Herein Browning takes up the true position. Even before reason we must have faith. By Faith we get the material on which Reason works: we cannot reason about that which we do not believe exists. Browning is a transcendentalist in so far as he finds the fountain of truth within man; the innate idea that God is, exists as

part of man's self-consciousness. We have that within us that makes us grope upward toward our God. The Psalmist voiced the feeling of humanity when he wrote: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God." And Browning makes this innate aspiration the basis of his postulate that God exists.

Having therefore postulated God--and Browning does it in many of his poems--the poet can go on to reason of the attributes of God or to consider the evolution of the idea of God in the world's consciousness.

Browning held that the revelation of God and his attributes had been a gradual process. As the need of man evinced itself, so were the attributes of God disclosed to meet and satisfy his needs. In "Caliban" he depicts the failure of the study of nature alone as giving the conception that God is but power. The poem is a protest against the exaggeration of Natural Religion--a protest against the inadequate view of God held by the Calvinistic theological school of Browning's day;^x the reflection of a view early seen in the minds of men. The poem agrees with the primitive idea that from the beginning God exercised power apart from mercy, forgiveness and love.

In "Cleon" we see the poor Pagan locking in vain to his God Zeus for some revelation beyond that of power. In the darkest hour before the dawn of Christianity the poor soul is "without God and without hope in the world" as he realizes his

^x See article on "Caliban's Theology" by Prof. A. W. Crawford, Methodist Review Sept. 1911.

need--a God of Love and a revelation of immortality. In
 "Karshish we see the transport of delight which the wandering
 Physician would feel to be his if only he could know that--

"the All-Great, were the All-Loving too--".

Thus, as men grow in civilization, higher and purer in the
 soul life; man felt his need of newer and greater attributes
 of God and God was revealed to man to meet his need. Not that
 God changes, but that successive ages have apprehended God
 more closely.

"...All things suffer change save God the Truth.

Man apprehends Him newly at each stage

Whereat earth's ladder drops, its service done;"

(A Death in the Desert, lines 431-433).

The thought seems parallel to that voiced by the writer of the
 Epistle to the Hebrews "God, who at sundry times and in divers
 manners spake in time past unto the fathers...hath in these last
 days spoken unto us by his Son" (Heb.1.1)

For Browning, a Cleon has interest--a Karshish voices the
 need--for the poet sees that they are but steps in the revela-
 tion, which is not complete until the believer can accept St.
 John's utterance.--

"The acknowledgment of God in Christ
 Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
 All questions in the earth and out of it."

(A Death in the Desert lines 474-76).

And in this gradual revelation of God, Browning conceives of

special means being employed. Miracles were used to bring home to man the greater truth behind them--that of love and power.

"Wonders, that would prove doctrine, go for naught.
Remains the doctrine, love; well, we must love,
And what we love most, power and love in one,
Let us acknowledge on the record here,
Accepting these in Christ:"

(A Death in the Desert, lines 372-76).

Miracles have been means to an end, but Christianity exists as a living force today without their aid, for they have done their work.

To Browning therefore the idea of God comes as a result of a gradual process in the life of man.

Having therefore accepted in Faith a personal God, Browning can proceed to reason concerning the attributes of the Divine Being, and he finds clear evidence for the attributes of Power, Love and Intelligence. The poet looks out on life and nature and realizes that there must be a primal Cause for the ordered Universe, which Cause, his self-consciousness tells him, can be but God.

"... before me was my Cause--that's styled
God: after, in due course succeeds the rest--"

(Francis Furini, X lines 5.6).

It is false, the dying John says, to assert that ----

"What made and drives
The sun is force, is law, is named, not known,"
(A Death in the Desert 399.400).

It must be an intelligent Cause which has created a universe which requires the greatest intellect to unravel its mysteries. Like the Christian Apostle Paul, Browning would send forth the message "the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made even his everlasting power and divinity." Romans 1 20. R. V.) Such again is the thought which the Pope voices.

"Find cause to match the effect in evidence,
The work i' the world, not man's but God's; leave man!
Conjecture of the worker by the work:
Is there strength there?--enough: intelligence?

Ample:
(Ring and the Book. The Pope. 1360-1364).

Thus truly does Browning find that the external world proves the power of God; that the wonderful plan of creation proves His intelligence.

But the God of the New Testament, the God which answers to man's need is a God of Love, for

..." the loving worm within its clod,
Were diviner than a loveless god
Amid his worlds,"

(Christmas Eve V. 23-25.)

How are we to assure ourselves that God is Love? Browning finds his proof in an enquiry as to man's nature. The proof of God's intelligence and power may come from the external world but the certainty of the existence of the higher attribute of love is derived exclusively from the love that lives

in the heart of man. Browning does well to point out that the existence of love in our nature is an argument for the love of God. Can we mortals suppose that the great virtue of self sacrifice--an expression of love, which we see so often evidenced in every day life is the prerogative of man only. If man loved to the extent of self sacrifice and God did not, would it not be permissible to say that the creature surpasses the creator, and is to be worshipped and adored above all else? The poet expresses the thought in many of his works, perhaps most clearly in "Saul." David yearning to be of service to the stricken King and to open out before him the conception that God is love, cries-- "Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,

That I doubt His own love can compete with it? Here, the parts shift?

"Here the creature surpass the creator, -the end, what began?
Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,
And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet alone can?
(Saul, 266-269).

Man conscious of love in his own nature must likewise be conscious that God also possesses the attribute. The speaker in "Christmas Day" voices this conception,--

"...In youth I looked to these very skies,
And probing their immensities,
I found God there, His visible power;
Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
Of that power, an equal evidence,
That His love, there too, was the nobler dower."
(Christmas Eve V. 17-22).