

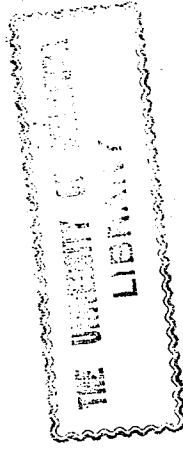
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AUTHOR. *YEMEN, JANE FYFE*.....  
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TITLE *The optimism of Robert Browning*.....  
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Thesis *M. A. 1909*.....

I, the undersigned, agree to refrain from producing,

Brownings' Optimism

Jane <sup>Life</sup> Jewers.



The Optimism of Robert Browning.

Jane Fyfe Yemen.

I

A boon of priceless value to any man, but more especially to a man of genius is a happy childhood. Who does not look upon the early years of Dean Swift or Lord Byron with a compassionate eye or an aching heart, and who does not rejoice in the beautiful homelife which surrounds the sweet serious Puritan boy, Milton, or in the joyous existence which fell to nature's own child, William Wordsworth? "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and happy is the man that getteth understanding"—happy, indeed, is the child whose father hath found wisdom, and whose mother hath gotten understanding! Such a child was Robert Browning. His father and mother are worthy to be remembered for their own sakes, and worthy to share in the fame of their son.

A single act of Browning, the elder, when only a youth passing from his teens, shows the fibre of his morality, and accounts for the untroubled conscience he bore till the close of his life. Two desires had possessed him, one to follow the career of an artist, the other to have a University education. Both these ambitions were thwarted by what looks like a near-sighted parental policy, and the young man was sent off to St. Kitts to oversee a West Indian estate, the property of his mother, who had died when her boy was only seven. There his whole soul revolted against the practices of slavery. Scorning to accept support from such a source he returned to England, as soon as possible, relinquishing for the future, as it proved, all prospects of wealth. At twenty-two he obtained a clerkship in the Bank of England. In 1811 he married Sarah Ann Wiedemann, the daughter of a Dundee Shipowner of German parentage. She inherited from her father a love for music and drawing<sup>2</sup> which in him was manifested in execution,

1. Proverbs III. 13.

2. Biographical Sketch. H. E. S. Cambridge Edition. R. Browning.

in her in good taste and appreciation." She was once described by Carlyle as "the true type of a Scottish gentlewoman"- one of the last century's types of the woman, of whom in older days, a certain Queen-mother spake unto her son King Lemuel.

Of these parents Robert Browning was born at Camberwell in London, May 7, 1812,- only three years behind the famous year which gave to science, music, poetry, statesmanship, masters, each in his craft—and to Robert Browning the poet, his poet-wife. In 1814 was born his only sister known in the household as Sarianna, who for her companionship and sympathy with her brother recalls another devoted sister, Dorothy Wordsworth. "Camberwell at that time was a suburb of London with rural spaces and near access to the open country. There was room for gardening and the keeping of pets, while the country gave opportunity for forays into nature's fastnesses. The boy kept owls and monkeys, magpies and hedgehogs, an eagle, snakes, even..... It is easy for a reader of his poems to detect the close, sympathetic observation which he disclosed for all lower life." A little poem entitled White Witchcraft shows his boyish trait and his sympathy with forms of animal life so often despised. When a boy, Browning had a pet toad. Mrs. Orr shall tell the story.<sup>(2)</sup> He visited it daily, where it burrowed, under a rosetree, announcing himself by a inch of gravel dropped into its hole; and the creature would crawl forth. allow its head to be gently tickled, and reward the act with a loving glance of its soft full eyes."

White Witchcraft.

If you and I could change to beasts, what

beast should either be ?

Shall you and I play Jove for once? Turn

fox then, I decree.

Shy wild sweet stealer of the grapes! Now

do your worst on me!

1 Biographical Sketch, H. E. S. Cambridge Edition. R. Browning.  
2 Mrs Sutherland Orr's R. Browning

And thus you think to spite your friend-  
turned loathsome? What, a toad;  
So, all men shrink and shun me! Dear men  
pursue your road!

Leave but my crevice in the stone, a reptile's  
fit abode!

Now say your worst Canidia! "He's loath-  
some I allow;

There may or may not lurk a pearl beneath  
his puckered brow;

But see his eyes that follow mine- love lasts  
there anyhow."

Browning's parents had rare judgment, and seem to have been peculiarly fitted for managing their "handsome, vigorous, fearless child who soon developed an unresting activity and a fiery temper." His mother's appreciation of music did much to encourage the talent inherited by her son from his Scottish-German grandfather. Her nature was serene, but energetic, and very affectionate. Her religion was simple and earnest. The impress of her character upon Robert Browning's is more and more evident as one reads <sup>through</sup> the poet's work, and returns <sup>again</sup> to Pauline, and the life at Camberwell. Browning reverently spoke of her as "a divine woman", and her death in 1849 was to him one of the deep sorrows of his life. His father's influence was even more marked than his mother's. It would seem that the work in the Bank, though always performed with efficiency, had never been congenial. A solace was furnished him in his artistic and scholastic tastes which had survived disappointment. "He was a wise and exact reader of literature both classical and modern" says Professor Dowden and from the same source we learn that

1. Mrs Sutherland Orr.

he was a dexterous draughtsman, a versifier composing excellent couplets after the eighteenth century manner. His library was a veritable treasure-house for a treasure-seeker. A perennially youthful heart, vigorous health, a wealth of affection and "the love he bore to learning" eminently fitted him to be his son's teacher and companion. A poem called Development gives a vivid glimpse of the tuition of this insatiably curious and imaginatively dramatic child.

My father was a scholar and knew Greek,  
When I was five years old, I asked him once  
" What do you read about ? "

" The Siege of Troy."

" What is a siege, and what is Troy?"

Whereat

He piled up chairs and tables for a town,  
Set me a-top for Priam, called our Cat  
- Helen, enticed away from home (he said)  
By wicked Paris, who couched somewhere close  
Under the footstool being cowardly,  
But whom - since she was worth the pains, poor  
puss -

By taking Troy to get possession of  
- Always when great Achilles ceased to sulk,  
(My pony in the stable ) - fourth would prance  
And put <sup>to</sup> flight Hector - our page-boy's self.  
This taught me who was who and what was what;

So far I rightly understood the case  
At five years old; a huge delight it proved  
And still proves - thanks to that instructor sage  
My father, who knew better than turn straight  
Learning's full flare on weak-eyed ignorance,  
Or, worse yet, leave weak eyes to grow sand-blind  
Content with darkness and vacinty.

1 Goldsmith's - Village Teacher

It happened, two or three years afterward,  
That - I and playmates playing at Troy's  
Siege -

My father came upon our make-believe.

"How would you like to read yourself the tale  
Properly told, of which I gave you first  
Merely such notion as a boy could bear?  
Pope, now, would give you the precise account  
Of what, some day, by dint of scholarship,  
You'll hear - who knows ? - from Homer's very  
mouth.

Learn Greek by all means, read the " Blind  
Old Man,"  
Sweetest of singers"

Time enough

Try, anyhow, to master him someday;  
Until then, take what serves for substitute,  
Read Pope, by all means.

So I ran through Pope.  
Time passed I ripened somewhat; one fine day  
"Quite ready for the Iliad, nothing less?  
There's Heine, where the big books block the shelf;  
Don't skip a work, thumb well the Lexicon!"

Learning was a great game to play, and with what zest he  
played. Art pressed upon him, music, painting, and poetry. Nature  
touched his senses to perceive and reverence beauty. Home love  
wrapped him about with loving ~~sympathetic~~ sympathetic compan-  
ionship, and the boy grew up unspoiled, and unconsciens that he was  
clever.

A subtle and profound change was taking place in the intel-  
lectual atmosphere, induced largely no doubt by the efforts of Words-  
worth, Coleridge, Shelly, Keats, and Byron. By 1824 the last  
three had died, but their fame was steadily increasing, and it was

they, particularly Shelly<sup>e</sup>, who "opened up for his young and enthusiastic follower," Robert Browning, "new vistas leading towards the infinite, towards the unattainable Best".

From 1833 when he published his first poem Pauline, he wrote persistently, Bracelsus, Strafford, and Sordello followed in succession, meeting in turn with a cold or indifferent reception, unless by the clear-sighted appreciative few. In 1841 Pippa Passes appeared, and with it, the "real Browning of the Modern world," says Chesterton. The public began to realize that a great man dwelt among them, when his Dramatic Lyrics were published in 1842. The Lyrics established him in the literary world.

Much has been written upon Browning's marriage with Miss Elizabeth Barrett in 1846. The fifteen years of blissful life which followed under Italian skies is "a beautiful and happy story beginning and ending nowhere". These years known as the Italian Period saw Brownings best work. Bells and Pomegranates, Men and Women, Christmas Eve, and Dramatic Personae made him famous.

One feels that the Arcadian existence should have continued indefinitely, but the health of Mrs. Browning, always delicate, failed under a double blow, the death of a favorite sister, and that of Cavour. She died on June 29, 1861. "The grief of the desolate man was an uncontrollable passion; his heart was strong, and all its strength entered into his sorrow."

The education of his only son, born at Asolo in 1849, required his removal to London, where his genial nature and constantly increasing fame caused him to be the centre of much of London's social life. His great epic The Ring and the Book which occupied some five or six years of his life appeared in 1868. It is a remarkable fact that, in the years following 1870 he produced a greater volume of work than in the thirty-five of his literary activity preceding "The Ring and the Book."

During the later years of his life he lived sometimes

- 1 Dowden's, R. Browning.
- 2 Chesterton - Chapter 'Browning in Italy'
- 3 Dowden R. Browning, Chapter XI.



with his sister, sometimes with his son, spending his winters in Italy, his Summers in England. In August 1888, he went to Italy for the last time " His work was over and done." He was soon to go forth, like a hero of old, " to one fight more, the best and last."<sup>2</sup> Death came for him at Venice on December, 12, 1889

Prospice.

Fear death ? - to feel the fog in my throat,  
The mist in my face,  
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote  
I am nearing the place,  
The power of the night, the press of the storm,  
The post of the foe;  
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,  
Yet the strong man must go;  
For the journey is done and the summit attained,  
And the barriers fall,  
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,  
The reward of it all.  
I was ever a fighter, so— one fight more,  
The best and 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 glad life's arrears  
Of pain, darkness and cold,  
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,  
The black minutes at end,  
And the elements 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

- 1 Tennyson's Ode to the Duke of Wellington.
- 2 Prospice.

O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,  
And with God be at rest!

II

The spirit of pessimistic melancholy found, in the Teutonic temperament, an environment favorable for its growth. The very conditions, which threatened the survival of the Teuton himself, promoted its development. The gloomy fatalism of his religion conspired with the unknown and relentless forces of nature, and with cruel human foes, to foster ~~this~~ this sombre cast of mind. In all the centuries since, this dark spirit has struggled for supremacy. Numerous powerful agencies have mitigated its harshness, until, at intervals, its music <sup>becomes</sup> ~~is~~ one of the chief charms of English verse. The softening influences of Christianity, the assimilation of Celtic imagination and sprightliness of thought, with Teutonic meditation and seriousness, the genial personality of Chaucer with his humour, love of nature, and sympathy for humanity, the discovery of the New World, the Renaissance, the Elizabethan writers, and Shakespeare the poet<sup>1</sup> for all time," - these were some of the forces before which the gloom fled, or was softened into twilight.

Then followed periods of political and religious conflict, of low standards of morality. The poets, save one whose <sup>+</sup> "soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart"<sup>2</sup> lost interest in man, and in individuality; they scorned sweet laughter, nature and imagination - and again pessimism swayed men's hearts. New ideals in religion, politics, literature and ethics entered the ~~strife~~, but the battle with doubt and perplexity was long - passing from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century. Life became vastly more complex; men became more highly civilized, and began to <sup>2</sup> "live less in the present, more in the past, and more yet in the future."<sup>3</sup> The spirit of inquiry was abroad. Darwin, Huxley,

<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson

<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth's Sonnet - 'To Milton'

<sup>3</sup> Dr. C. H. Saleeby - 'Worry - The Disease of the Age,'  
Canadian Magazine, Jan 1907.

Tyndall, and Herbert Spencer devoted themselves to scientific investigation. Evolution has impressed the literature with what may be termed the "growth idea". "The age is distinguished by a groping after truth in every direction. Physics, geology, biology, psychology, religion, sociology, ethics, government and every other subject that seemed to point towards truth - all have had patient investigators. The hypothesis of evolutionary development has caused men to regard from a new point of view, the origin of life, its worth here and its destiny hereafter". For a time men seemed to have lost themselves in the maze of theories. Swinburne, in the following lines, reflects the materialistic thought which in its train surely brings Weltschmerz.

<sup>2.</sup>  
"We thank thee with brief thanksgiving

Whatever gods may be  
That no life lives forever;  
That dead men rise up never;  
That even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

"Then star nor sun shall waken,  
Nor anything of light;  
Nor sound of waters shaken,  
Nor any sound or sight;  
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,  
Nor days nor things diurnal;  
Only to sleep eternal  
In an eternal light."

Is life worth living? asked men. Then God whispered in the ear of one of his musicians, as long ago, he had whispered in the ear of young David, and forthwith Browning sang for the curing of His wavering, faithless, pessimistic, analysis-torment-

1. Halleck's History of English Literature by Halleck.
2. This extract from Swinburne is quoted by Halleck.
3. I can tell whether this was, Dowden's, Chesterton's, or Brooke's.

ed world".

" And it came to pass when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took an harp, and played with his hand; so Saul was refreshed. and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him ". I Sam.XVI.23.

I.

Said Abner " At last thou art come, Ere I tell, ere thou speak,

Kiss my cheek, wish me well, " Then I wished it, and did kiss his cheek.

And he; " Since the king, O my friend, for thy countenance sent,

Neither drunken nor eaten have we; nor until from his tent,

Thou return with the joyful assurance the king loveth yet,

Shall our lip with the honey be bright, with the water be wet,

For out of the black mid-tent's silence, a space of three days,

Not a sound hath escaped to the servants of prayer nor of praise,

To betaken that Saul, and the spirit have ended their strife,

And that, faint in his triumph, the monarch sinks back upon life.

II

"Yet now my heart leaps, O beloved! God's child with his dew

On thy gracious ~~hair~~ gold hair, and those lilies still living and blue

Just broken to twine round the harp-strings, as if no wild heat

Were now raging to torture the desert !"

III

Then I, as was meet,  
Knelt down to the God of my fathers, and rose  
on my feet,  
And ran o'er the sand burnt to powder, The  
tent was unlooped;  
I pulled up the spear that obstructed, and under  
I stooped;  
Hands and knees on the slippery grass-patch,  
all withered and gone,  
That extends to the second enclosure, I  
groped my way on  
Till I felt where the foldskirts fly open  
Then  
once more I prayed,  
And opened the foldskirts, and entered, and  
was not afraid  
But spoke, " Here is David, thy servant!"  
And no voice replied.  
At the first I saw naught but the blackness!  
\* → the vast, the upright  
\* → Grew a figure against it, gigantic and  
blackest of all,  
Then a sunbeam, that burst through the  
tent-roof showed Saul.

IV

He stood as erect as that tent-prop, both arms stretched  
out wide  
On the great cross-support in the centre,  
that goes to each side;  
He relaxed not a muscle, but hung there as,  
caught in his pangs

\* The copist has omitted two lines, or rather parts of two.

but soon I descried  
a something more black than the blackness  
The vast, the upright  
main post which sustains the pavilion and slow into sight

And waiting his change, the king-serpent  
all heavily hangs,  
Far away from his kind, in the pine, till deliver-  
ance come,  
With the springtime - so agonized Saul,  
drear and stark, blind and dumb.

It is impossible to resist the charm of David's  
personality. Upon Abner his presence has a wonderful effect.  
The tried and valient captain has been well-nigh despairing,  
now he knows that all will be well, that David "will" return  
with the joyful assurance that king liveth yet " His boyish  
beauty and ~~youth~~ grace appeal to the stern soldier.

" O beloved! God's child with  
his dew  
On thy gracious gold hair!"  
Abner loves him; so do we.

David's childlike trust in God, his impetuosity, his  
acute observation, his ready comprehension of Saul's need,  
his compassion for the agonized Saul, cause us to bow our  
hearts in reverent gladness for such glorious youth and its  
possibilities. All these characteristics of David's were char-  
acteristics of Browning's. It is Browning who tunes his harp  
and sings to a people in darkness.

What joy he finds in mere living and how contagious is  
his exuberance!

Oh, our manhood's prime vigor! No spirit feels waste,  
Not a muscle is stopped in its playing nor  
sinue unbraced.

Oh the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock  
up to rock,

The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree,  
the cool silver shock

Of the plunge in a pool's living water, the  
hunt of the bear,

And the sultriness showing the lion is  
couched in his lair,

And the meal, the rich dates yellowed over  
with gold dust divine

And the locust-flesh steeped in the pitcher,  
the full draught of wine.

And the sleep in the dried river-channel where  
bulrushes tell

That the water was wont to go warbling  
so softly and well.

How good is man's life, the mere living!  
how fit to employ

All the heart and soul and the senses  
forever in joy!

Strength and ecstasy mark every phrase;

"manhood's firm vigor", "leaping from rock up to rock",

" the strong rending boughs", "the cool silver shock", of  
the plunge in a pool's living water". " the hunt of the bear",  
" the lion", "the rich dates yellowed over with gold dust "  
and the "draught of wine " .

All Browning's environment, all the material things that  
pressed upon his quickened senses, all the gifts with which he  
was endowed called forth rejoicing in some form or other.

' Have you found your life distasteful ?

My life did and does smack sweet, he wrote after he had  
passed his sixtieth year and in the same poem are these ex-  
quisite lines,

1 *The Mermaid* -