



ROBERT BROWNING

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BROWNING
AS A PHILOSOPHICAL
AND RELIGIOUS
TEACHER

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
MY DEAR FRIENDS
MISS HARRIET MACARTHUR
AND
MISS JANE MACARTHUR.

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PREFACE.

The purpose of this book is to deal with Browning, not simply as a poet, but rather as the exponent of a system of ideas on moral and religious subjects, which may fairly be called a philosophy. I am conscious that it is a wrong to a poet to neglect, or even to subordinate, the artistic aspect of his work. At least, it would be a wrong, if our final judgment on his poetry were to be determined on such a method. But there is a place for everything; and, even in the case of a great poet, there is sometimes an advantage in attempting to estimate the value of what he has said, apart from the form in which he has said it. And of all modern poets, Browning is the one who most obviously invites and justifies such a method of treatment. For, in the first place, he is clearly one of that class of poets who are also prophets. He was never merely "the idle singer of an empty day," but one for whom poetic enthusiasm was intimately bound up with religious faith, and who spoke "in numbers," not merely "because the numbers came," but because they were for him the necessary vehicle of an inspiring thought. If it is the business of philosophy to analyze and interpret all the great intellectual forces that mould the thought of an age, it cannot neglect the works of one who has exercised, and is exercising so powerful an influence on the moral and religious life of the present generation.

In the second place, as will be seen in the sequel, Browning has himself led the way towards such a philosophical interpretation of his work. For, even in his earlier poems, he not seldom crossed the line that divides the poet from the philosopher, and all but broke through the strict limits of art in the effort to express—and we might even say to preach—his own idealistic faith. In his later works he did this almost without any disguise, raising philosophical problems, and discussing all the *pros* and *cons* of their solution, with no little subtlety and dialectical skill. In some of these poems we might even seem to be receiving a philosophical lesson, in place of a poetic inspiration, if it were not for those powerful imaginative utterances, those winged words, which Browning has always in reserve, to close the ranks of his argument. If the question is stated in a prosaic form, the final answer, as in ix the ancient oracle, is in the poetic language of the gods.

From this point of view I have endeavoured to give a connected account of Browning's ideas, especially of his ideas on religion and morality, and to estimate their value. In order to do so, it was necessary to discuss the philosophical validity of the principles on which his doctrine is more or less consciously based. The more immediately philosophical chapters are the second, seventh, and ninth; but they will not be found unintelligible by those who have reflected on the difficulties of the moral and religious life, even although they may be unacquainted with the methods and language of the schools.

I have received much valuable help in preparing this work for the press from my colleague, Professor G.B. Mathews, and still more from Professor Edward Caird. I owe them both a deep debt of gratitude.

HENRY JONES.

1891.

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

"Grau, theurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum." (*Faust.*)

There is a saying of Hegel's, frequently quoted, that "a great man condemns the world to the task of explaining him." The condemnation is a double one, and it generally falls heaviest on the great man himself, who has to submit to explanation; and, probably, the last refinement of this species of cruelty is to expound a poet. I therefore begin with an apology in both senses of the term. I acknowledge that no commentator on art has a right to be heard, if he is not aware of the subordinate and temporary nature of his office. At the very best he is only a guide to the beautiful object, and he must fall back in silence so soon as he has led his company into its presence. He may perhaps suggest "the line of vision," or fix the point of view, from which we can best hope to do justice to the artist's work, by appropriating his intention and comprehending his idea; but if he seeks to serve the ends of art, he will not attempt to do anything more.

In order to do even this successfully, it is essential that every judgment passed should be exclusively ruled by the principles which govern art. "Fine art is not real art till it is free"; that is, till its value is recognized as lying wholly within itself. And it is not, unfortunately, altogether unnecessary to insist that, so far from enhancing the value of an artist's work, we only degrade it into mere means, subordinate it to uses alien, and therefore antagonistic to its perfection, if we try to show that it gives pleasure, or refinement, or moral culture. There is no doubt that great poetry has all these uses, but the reader can enjoy them only on condition of forgetting them; for they are effects that follow the sense of its beauty. Art, morality, religion, is each supreme in its own sphere; the beautiful is not more beautiful because it is also moral, nor is a painting great because its

subject is religious. It is true that their spheres overlap, and art is never at its best except when it is a beautiful representation of the good; nevertheless the points of view of the artist and of the ethical teacher are quite different, and consequently also the elements within which they work and the truth they reveal.

In attempting, therefore, to discover Robert Browning's philosophy of life, I do not pretend that my treatment of him is adequate. Browning is, first of all, a poet; it is only as a poet that he can be finally judged; and the greatness of a poet is to be measured by the extent to which his writings are a revelation of what is beautiful.

I undertake a different and a humbler task, conscious of its limitations, and aware that I can hardly avoid doing some violence to the artist. What I shall seek in the poet's writings is not beauty, but truth; and although truth is beautiful, and beauty is truth, still the poetic and philosophic interpretation of life are not to be confused. Philosophy must separate the matter from the form. Its synthesis comes through analysis, and analysis is destructive of beauty, as it is of all life. Art, therefore, resists the violence of the critical methods of philosophy, and the feud between them, of which Plato speaks, will last through all time. The beauty of form and the music of speech which criticism destroys, and to which philosophy is, at the best, indifferent, are essential to poetry. When we leave them out of account we miss the ultimate secret of poetry, for they cling to the meaning and penetrate it with their charm. Thought and its expression are inseparable in poetry, as they never are in philosophy; hence, in the former, the loss of the expression is the loss of truth. The pure idea that dwells in a poem is suffused in the poetic utterance, as sunshine breaks into beauty in the mist, as life beats and blushes in the flesh, or as an impassioned thought breathes in a thinker's face.

But, although art and philosophy are supreme, each in its own realm, and neither can be subordinated to the uses of the other, they may help each other. They are independent, but not rival powers of the world of mind. Not only is the interchange of truth possible between them; but each may show and give to the other all its treasures, and be none the poorer itself. "It is in works of art that some nations have deposited the profoundest intuitions and ideas

of their hearts." Job and Isaiah, Æschylus and Sophocles, Shakespeare and Goethe, were first of all poets. Mankind is indebted to them in the first place for revealing beauty; but it also owes to them much insight into the facts and principles of the moral world. It would be an unutterable loss to the ethical thinker and the philosopher, if this region were closed against them, so that they could no longer seek in the poets the inspiration and light that lead to goodness and truth. In our own day, almost above all others, we need the poets for these ethical and religious purposes. For the utterances of the dogmatic teacher of religion have been divested of much of their ancient authority; and the moral philosopher is often regarded either as a vendor of commonplaces or as the votary of a discredited science, whose primary principles are matter of doubt and debate. There are not a few educated Englishmen who find in the poets, and in the poets alone, the expression of their deepest convictions concerning the profoundest interests of life. They read the poets for fresh inspiration, partly, no doubt, because the passion and rapture of poetry lull criticism and soothe the questioning spirit into acquiescence.

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But there are further reasons; for the poets of England are greater than its moral philosophers; and it is of the nature of the poetic art that, while eschewing system, it presents the strife between right and wrong in concrete character, and therefore with a fulness and truth impossible to the abstract thought of science.

"A poet never dreams:

We prose folk do: we miss the proper duct

For thoughts on things unseen."^A

A: *Fifine at the Fair*, lxxxviii.

It is true that philosophy endeavours to correct this fragmentariness by starting from the unity of the whole. But it can never quite get rid of an element of abstraction and reach down to the concrete individual.

The making of character is so complex a process that the poetic representation of it, with its subtle suggestiveness, is always more complete and realistic than any possible philosophic analysis. Science can deal only with aspects and abstractions, and its method becomes more and more inadequate as its matter grows more concrete, unless it proceeds from the unity in which all the aspects are held together. In the case of life, and still more so in that of human conduct, the whole must precede the part, and the moral science must, therefore, more than any other, partake of the nature of poetry; for it must start from living spirit, go from the heart outwards, in order to detect the meaning of the actions of man.

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On this account, poetry is peculiarly helpful to the ethical investigator, because it always treats the particular thing as a microcosm. It is the great corrective of the onesidedness of science with its harsh method of analysis and distinction. It is a witness to the unity of man and the world. Every object which art touches into beauty, becomes in the very act a whole. The thing that is beautiful is always complete, the embodiment of something absolutely valuable, the product and the source of love; and the beloved object is all the world for the lover—beyond all praise, because it is above all comparison.

"Then why not witness, calmly gazing,
If earth holds aught—speak truth—above her?
Above this tress, and this, I touch
But cannot praise, I love so much!" ^A

A: *Song* (Dramatic Lyrics).

This characteristic of the work of art brings with it an important practical consequence, because being complete, it appeals to the whole man.

"Poetry," it has been well said, is "the idealized and monumental utterance of the deepest feelings." And poetic feelings, it must not be forgotten, *are* deepest; that is, they are the afterglow of the fullest

activity of a complete soul, and not shallow titillations, or surface pleasures, such as the palate knows. Led by poetry, the intellect so sees truth that it glows with it, and the will is stirred to deeds of heroism. For there is hardly any fact so mean, but that when intensified by emotion, it grows poetic; as 019 there is hardly any man so unimaginative, but that when struck with a great sorrow, or moved by a great passion, he is endowed for a moment with the poet's speech. A poetic fact, one may almost say, is just any fact at its best. Art, it is true, looks at its object through a medium, but it always seems its inmost meaning. In *Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, in *Falstaff* and *Touchstone*, there is a revelation of the inner truth of human life beyond the power of moral science to bestow. We do well to seek philosophy in the poets, for though they teach only by hints and parables, they nevertheless reflect the concrete truth of life, as it is half revealed and half concealed in facts. On the other hand, the reflective process of philosophy may help poetry; for, as we shall show, there is a near kinship between them. Even the critical analyst, while severing element from element, may help art and serve the poet's ends, provided he does not in his analysis of parts forget the whole. His function, though humble and merely preliminary to full poetic enjoyment, is not unimportant. To appreciate the grandeur of the unity of the work of art, there must be knowledge of the parts combined. It is quite true that the guide in the gallery is prone to be too talkative, and there are many who can afford to turn the commentator out of doors, especially if he moralizes. But, after all, man is not pure sensibility, any more than he is pure reason. And the aesthete will not lose if he occasionally allows those whom he may think less sensitive than himself to the charm of rhythmic phrase, to direct sober 020 attention to the principles which lie embedded in all great poetry. At the worst, to seek for truth in poetry is a protest against the constant tendency to read it for the sake of the emotions which it stirs, the tendency to make it a refined amusement and nothing more. That is a deeper wrong to art than any which the theoretical moralist can inflict. Of the two, it is better to read poetry for ethical doctrines than for fine sensations; for poetry purifies the passions only when it lifts the reader into the sphere of truths that are universal.

The task of interpreting a poet may be undertaken in different ways. One of these, with which we have been made familiar by critics of Shakespeare and of Browning himself, is to analyze each poem by itself and regard it as the artistic embodiment of some central idea; the other is to attempt, without dealing separately with each poem, to reach the poet's own point of view, and to reveal the sovereign truths which rule his mind. It is this latter way that I shall try to follow.

Such dominant or even despotic thoughts it is possible to discover in all our great poets, except perhaps Shakespeare, whose universality baffles every classifier. As a rule, the English poets have been caught up, and inspired, by the exceeding grandeur of some single idea, in whose service they spend themselves with that prodigal thrift which finds life in giving it. Such an idea gives them a fresh way of looking at the world, so that the world grows young again with their new interpretation. In the highest instances, poets may become makers of epochs; they reform as well as reveal; for ideas are never dead things, "but grow in the hand that grasps them." In them lies the energy of a nation's life, and we comprehend that life only when we make clear to ourselves the thoughts which inspire it. It is thus true, in the deepest sense, that those who make the songs of a people make its history. In all true poets there are hints for a larger philosophy of life. But, in order to discover it, we must know the truths which dominate them, and break into music in their poems.

Whether it is always possible, and whether it is at any time fair to a poet to define the idea which inspires him, I shall not inquire at present. No doubt, the interpretation of a poet from first principles carries us beyond the limits of art; and by insisting on the unity of his work, more may be attributed to him, or demanded from him, than he properly owns. To make such a demand is to require that poetry should be philosophy as well, which, owing to its method of intuition, it can never be. Nevertheless, among English poets there is no one who lends himself so easily, or so justly, to this way of treatment as Browning. Much of his poetry trembles on the verge of the abyss which is supposed to separate art from philosophy; and, as I shall try to show, there was in the poet a growing tendency to turn the power of dialectic on the pre-suppositions of his art. Yet,

even Browning puts great difficulties in the way of a critic, who seeks to draw a philosophy of life from his poems. It is not by any means an easy task to lift the truths he utters under the stress of poetic emotion into the region of placid contemplation, or to connect them into a system, by means of the principle from which he makes his departure.

The first of these difficulties arises from the extent and variety of his work. He was prodigal of poetic ideas, and wrote for fifty years on nature, art, and man, like a magnificent spendthrift of spiritual treasures. So great a store of knowledge lay at his hand, so real and informed with sympathy, that we can scarcely find any great literature which he has not ransacked, any phase of life which is not represented in his poems. All kinds of men and women, in every station in life, and at every stage of evil and goodness, crowd his pages. There are few forms of human character he has not studied, and each individual he has so caught at the supreme moment of his life, and in the hardest stress of circumstance, that the inmost working of his nature is revealed. The wealth is bewildering, and it is hard to follow the central thought, "the imperial chord, which steadily underlies the accidental mists of music springing thence."^A

A: *Fifine at the Fair*.

A second and still graver difficulty lies in the fact that his poetry, as he repeatedly insisted, is "always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine."^B In his earlier works, especially, Browning is creative rather than reflective, a Maker rather than a Seer; and his creations stand aloof from him, working out their fate in an outer world. We often lose the poet in the imaginative characters, into whom he penetrates with his keen artistic intuition, and within whom he lies as a necessity revealing itself in their actions and words. It is not easy anywhere to separate the elements, so that we can say with certainty, "Here I catch the poet, there lies his material." The identification of the work and worker is too intimate, and the realization of the imaginary personage is too complete.

B: Pref. to *Pauline*, 1888.

In regard to the dramatic interpretation of his poetry, Browning has manifested a peculiar sensitiveness. In his Preface to *Pauline* and

in several of his poems—notably *The Mermaid*, the *House*, and the *Shop*—he explicitly cuts himself free from his work. He knew that direct self-revelation on the part of the poet violates the spirit of the drama. "With this same key Shakespeare unlocked his heart," said Wordsworth; "Did Shakespeare?" characteristically answers Browning, "If so, the less Shakespeare he!" And of himself he asks:

"Which of you did I enable
Once to slip inside my breast,
There to catalogue and label
What I like least, what love best,
Hope and fear, believe and doubt of,
Seek and shun, respect—deride?
Who has right to make a rout of
Rarities he found inside?"^A

A: *At the Mermaid*.

He repudiates all kinship with Byron and his subjective 024 ways, and refuses to be made king by the hands which anointed him. "He will not give his woes an airing, and has no plague that claims respect." Both as man and poet, in virtue of the native, sunny, outer-air healthiness of his character, every kind of subjectivity is repulsive to him. He hands to his readers "his work, his scroll, theirs to take or leave: his soul he proffers not." For him "shop was shop only"; and though he dealt in gems, and throws

"You choice of jewels, every one,
Good, better, best, star, moon, and sun,"^A

A: *Shop*.

he still *lived* elsewhere, and had "stray thoughts and fancies fugitive" not meant for the open market. The poems in which Browning has spoken without the disguise of another character are very few. There are hardly more than two or three of much importance which