

TO THE
REV. F.E. MILLSON.

DEAR OLD FRIEND,

A generation has passed since the day when, in your study at Brackenbed Grange, your reading of "Ben Ezra," the tones of which still vibrate in my memory, first introduced me to the poetry of Robert Browning. He was then just entering upon his wider fame. You had for years been one not merely of the few who recognised him, but of those, yet fewer, who proclaimed him. The standpoint of the following pages is not, I think, very remote from your own; conversations with you have, in any case, done something to define it. You see, then, that your share of responsibility for them is, on all counts, considerable, and you must not refuse to allow me to associate them with a name which the old Rabbi's great heartening cry: "Strive, and hold cheap the strain, Learn, nor account the pang, Dare, never grudge the throe," summons spontaneously to many other lips than mine. To some it is brought yet closer by his calm retrospect through sorrow.

ει δη θειον ο νους προς τον ανθρωπον, και ο κατα τουτου βιος θειος προς τον ανθρωπινον βιον — ARIST., Eth. N. x. 8.

*"Nè creator nè creatura mai,"
Cominciò ei, "figliuol, fu senza amore."
— DANTE, Purg. xvii. 91.*

PREFACE.

BROWNING is confessedly a difficult poet, and his difficulty is by no means all of the kind which opposes unmistakable impediments to the reader's path. Some of it is of the more insidious kind, which may co-exist with a delightful persuasion that the way is absolutely clear, and Browning's "obscurity" an invention of the invertebrate. The problems presented by his writing are merely tough, and will always yield to intelligent and patient scrutiny. But the problems presented by his mind are elusive, and it would be hard to resist the cogency of his interpreters, if it were not for their number. The rapid succession of acute and notable studies of Browning put forth during the last three or four years makes it even more apparent than it was before that the last word on Browning has not yet been said, even in that very qualified sense in which the last word about any poet, or any poetry, can ever be said at all. The present volume, in any case, does not aspire to say it. But it is not perhaps necessary to apologise for adding, under these conditions, another to the list. From most of the recent studies I have learned something; but this book has its roots in a somewhat earlier time, and may perhaps be described as an attempt to work out, in the detail of Browning's life and poetry, from a more definitely literary standpoint and without Hegelian prepossessions, a view of his genius not unlike that set forth with so much eloquence and penetration, in his well-known volume, by Professor Henry Jones. The narrative of Browning's life, in the earlier chapters, makes no pretence to biographical completeness. An immense mass of detail and anecdote bearing upon him is now available and within easy reach. I have attempted to sift out from this picturesque loose drift the really salient and relevant material. Much domestic incident, over which the brush would fain linger, will be missed; on the other hand, the great central epoch of Browning's poetic life, from 1846 to 1869, has been treated, deliberately, on what may appear an inordinately generous scale. Some amount of overlapping and repetition, it may be added, in the analytical chapters the plan of the book rendered it impossible wholly to avoid.

I am indebted to a friend, who wishes to be nameless, for reading the proofs, with results extremely beneficial to the book.

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PART I.

BROWNING'S LIFE AND WORK

BROWNING.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY LIFE. *PARACELSUS.*

The Boy sprang up ... and ran,
Stung by the splendour of a sudden thought.
— *A Death in the Desert.*

Dass ich erkenne, was die Welt
Im Innersten zusammenhält.
— *Faust.*

Judged by his cosmopolitan sympathies and his encyclopædic knowledge, by the scenery and the persons among whom his poetry habitually moves, Browning was one of the least insular of English poets. But he was also, of them all, one of the most obviously and unmistakably English. Tennyson, the poetic mouthpiece of a rather specific and exclusive Anglo-Saxondom, belonged by his Vergilian instincts of style to that main current of European poetry which finds response and recognition among cultivated persons of all nationalities; and he enjoyed a European distinction not attained by any other English poet since Byron. Browning, on the contrary, with his long and brilliant gallery of European creations, Browning, who claimed Italy as his "university," remains, as a poet, all but unknown even in Italy, and all but non-existent for the rest of the civi-

lised world beyond the Channel. His cosmopolitan sympathies worked through the medium of a singularly individual intellect; and the detaching and isolating effect which pronounced individuality of thinking usually produces, even in a genial temperament, was heightened in his case by a robust indifference to conventions of all kinds, and not least to those which make genius easily intelligible to the plain man.

What is known of Browning's descent makes these contrasts in some degree intelligible. An old strain of Wessex squires or yeomen, dimly discernible in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, issued, about the middle of the eighteenth, in the first distinct personality among the poet's forebears, his grandfather, who also bore the name Robert. He was a robust, hard-headed, energetic, pushing man of business and the world, who made his way from a clerkship to an important and responsible post in the Bank of England, and settled accounts with religion and with literature in a right English way, by reading the Bible and 'Tom Jones' through every year, and very little else. More problematical and elusive is the figure of his first wife, Margaret Tittle, with whom, to judge from the character of her eldest son, literary and artistic sensibility first mingled in the hard practical Browning stock. In this second Robert Browning, indeed, the somewhat brutal and grasping egotism of the father gave place to a cultured humanity of almost feminine tenderness and charm. All his life long he was passionately devoted to literature, to art, to children. He collected rare books and prints with avidity, but was no less generous in giving them away. Indifferent to money, he hated to see a scrap of paper wasted. He had a neat touch in epigrams, and a boyish delight in grotesque rhymes. But there was no lack of grit in this accomplished, fresh-minded, and lovable man. He had the tough fibre of his race; only it was the wrongs of others that called out its tenacity, not his own. While holding an appointment on his mother's West Indian estate, he braved the fierce resentment of the whole colony by teaching a negro-boy to read; and finally incurred disinheritance rather than draw a livelihood from slave-labour. This Shelleyan act involved for him the resignation of his intellectual and artistic ambitions; and with the docility characteristic of him, where only his own interests were concerned, he

forthwith entered the fairly well-paid but unexciting service of the Bank.

In 1811 he married, and on May 7 of the following year his eldest son, Robert, was born. His wife was the daughter of a German shipowner, William Wiedemann, who had settled and married at Dundee. Wiedemann is said to have been an accomplished draughtsman and musician, and his daughter, without herself sharing these gifts, probably passed them on to her son. Whether she also communicated from her Scottish and German ancestry the "metaphysical" proclivities currently ascribed to him, is a hypothesis absolutely in the air. [1] What is clear is that she was herself intellectually simple and of few ideas, but rich in the temperament, at once nervous and spiritual, which when present in the mother so often becomes genius in the son. "She was a divine woman," such was her son's brief sufficing tribute. Physically he seems to have closely resembled her, [2] and they were bound together by a peculiarly passionate love from first to last.

[1] A similar but more groundless suggestion, that the author of *Holy-cross Day* and *Rabbi ben Ezra* probably had Jewish blood in his veins, can only be described as an impertinence — not to Browning but to the Jewish race. As if to feel the spiritual genius of Hebraism and to be moved by the pathos of Hebraic fate were an eccentricity only to be accounted for by the bias of kin! It is significant that his demonstrable share of German blood left him rather conspicuously impervious to the literary — and more especially to the "metaphysical" — products of the German mind.

[2] Browning himself reports the exclamation of the family doctor when trying to diagnose an attack of his: "Why, has anybody to search far for a cause of whatever nervous disorder you may suffer from, when there sits your mother — whom you so absolutely resemble!" (*Letters to E.B.B.*, ii. 456.)

The home in Camberwell into which the boy Robert was born reflected the serene, harmonious, self-contented character of his parents. Friends rarely disturbed the even tenor of its ways, and the storms of politics seem to have intruded as faintly into this suburban seclusion as the roar of London. Books, business, and religion

provided a framework of decorous routine within which these kindly and beautiful souls moved with entire content. Well-to-do Camberwell perhaps contained few homes so pure and refined; but it must have held many in which the life-blood of political and social interests throbbed more vigorously, and where thought and conversation were in closer touch with the intellectual life of the capital and the larger movements of the time. Nothing in Browning's boyhood tended to open his imagination to the sense of citizenship and nationality which the imperial pageants and ceremonies of Frankfurt so early kindled in the child Goethe. But within the limits imposed by this quiet home young Robert soon began to display a vigour and enterprise which tried all its resources. "He clamoured for occupation from the moment he could speak," and "something to do" meant above all some living thing to be caught for him to play with. The gift of an animal was found a valuable aid to negotiations with the young despot; when medicine was to be taken, he would name "a speckled frog" as the price of his compliance, and presently his mother would be seen hovering hither and thither among the strawberry-beds. A quaint menagerie was gradually assembled: owls and monkeys, magpies and hedgehogs, an eagle and snakes. Boy-collectors are often cruel; but Robert showed from the first an anxious tenderness and an eager care for life: we hear of a hurt cat brought home to be nursed, of ladybirds picked up in the depths of winter and preserved with wondering delight at their survival. Even in stories the death of animals moved him to bitter tears. He was equally quick at books, and soon outdistanced his companions at the elementary schools which he attended up to his fourteenth year. Near at hand, too, was the Dulwich Gallery,— "a green half-hour's walk across the fields,"— a beloved haunt of his childhood, to which he never ceased to be grateful. [3] But his father's overflowing library and portfolios played the chief part in his early development. He read voraciously, and apparently without restraint or control. The letters of Junius and of Horace Walpole were familiar to him "in boyhood," we are assured with provoking indefiniteness by Mrs Orr; as well as "all the works of Voltaire." Most to his mind, however, was the rich sinewy English and athletic fancy of the seventeenth-century Fantastic Quarles; a preference which foreshadowed his later delight in the great master of the Fantastic school, and of all who care for close-knit intellect in poetry, John Donne.

[3] *To E.B.B.*, March 3, 1846.]

Curiously enough, it was some fragments of the grandiose but shadowy Ossian which first stirred the imitative impulse in this poet of trenchant and clear-cut form. "The first composition I ever was guilty of," he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett (Aug. 25, 1846), "was something in imitation of Ossian, whom I had not read, but conceived through two or three scraps in other books." And long afterwards Ossian was "the first book I ever bought in my life" (*ib.*) These "imitations" were apparently in verse, and in rhyme; and Browning's bent and faculty for both was very early pronounced. "I never can recollect not writing rhymes; ... but I knew they were nonsense even then." And a well-known anecdote of his infancy describes his exhibition of a lively sense of metre in verses which he recited with emphatic accompaniments upon the edge of the dining-room table before he was tall enough to look over it. The crowding thoughts of his maturity had not yet supervened to prevent the abundant music that he "had in him" from "getting out." It is not surprising that a boy of these proclivities was captivated by the stormy swing and sweep of Byron; nor that he should have caught also something of his "splendour of language," and even, a little later, a reflection, respectable and suburban enough, of his rebellious Titanism. The less so, that in Robert's eleventh or twelfth year Byron, the head of the Satanic school, had become the heroic champion of Greek liberation, and was probably spoken of with honour in the home of the large-hearted banker who had in his day suffered so much for the sake of the unemancipated slave. In later years Browning was accustomed to deliver himself of breezy sarcasms at the expense of the "flat-fish" who declaimed so eloquently about the "deep and dark blue ocean." But it is easy to see that this genial chaff covered a real admiration,—the tribute of one abounding nature to another, which even years and the philosophic mind did not seriously abate. "I always retained my first feeling for Byron in many respects," he wrote in a significant letter to Miss Barrett in 1846. " ... I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his hair or one of his gloves, I am sure,—while Heaven knows that I could not get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were condensed into the little china bottle yonder." [4] It was thus no mere freak of juvenile taste

that took shape in these early Byronic poems. He entitled them, with the lofty modesty of boyish authorship, *Incondita*, and his parents sought to publish them. No publisher could be found; but they won the attention of a notable critic, W.J. Fox, who feared too much splendour and too little thought in the young poet, but kept his eye on him nevertheless.

[4] *To E.B.B.*, Aug. 22, 1846.]

Two years later the boy of fourteen caught the accents of another poetic voice, destined to touch the sources of music and passion in him with far more intimate power. His casual discovery, on a book-stall, of "Mr Shelley's Atheistical poem" seems to have for the first time made known to him even the name of the poet who had died in Italy four years before. Something of Shelley's story seems to have been known to his parents. It gives us a measure of the indulgent sympathy and religious tolerance which prevailed in this Evangelical home, that the parents should have unhesitatingly supplied the boy of fourteen, at some cost of time and trouble, with all the accessible writings of the "atheistical" poet, and with those of his presumably like-minded friend Keats as well. He fell instantly under the spell of both. Whatever he may have known before of ancient or modern literature, the full splendour of romantic poetry here broke upon him for the first time. Immature as he was, he already responded instinctively to the call of the spirits most intimately akin to his own. Byron's stormy power thrilled and delighted him; but it was too poor in spiritual elements, too negative, self-centred, and destructive to stir the deeper sources of Browning's poetry. In Keats and in Shelley he found poetic energies not less glowing and intense, bent upon making palpable to eye and ear visions of beauty which, with less of superficial realism, were fed by far more exquisite and penetrating senses, and attached by more and subtler filaments to the truth of things. Beyond question this was the decisive literary experience of Browning's early years. Probably it had a chief part in making the poet's career his fixed ideal, and ultimately, with his father's willing consent, his definite choice. What we know of his inner and outer life during the important years which turned the boy into the man is slight and baffling enough. The fiery spirit of poetry can rarely have worked out its way with so little disturbance to the frame. Minute scrutiny has

disclosed traits of unrest and revolt; he professed "atheism" and practised vegetarianism, betrayed at times the aggressive arrogance of an able youth, and gave his devoted and tender parents moments of very superfluous concern. For with all his immensely vivacious play of brain, there was something in his mental and moral nature from first to last stubbornly inelastic and unimpressible, that made him equally secure against expansion and collapse. The same simple tenacity of nature which kept his buoyantly adventurous intellect permanently within the tether of a few primary convictions, kept him, in the region of practice and morality, within the bounds of a rather nice and fastidious decorum. Malign influences effected no lodgment in a nature so fundamentally sound; they might cloud and trouble imagination for a while, but their scope hardly extended further, and as they were literary in origin, so they were mainly literary in expression. In the meantime he was laying, in an unsystematic but not ineffective way, the foundations of his many-sided culture and accomplishment. We hear much of private tutors, of instruction in French, in music, in riding, fencing, boxing, dancing; of casual attendance also at the Greek classes in University College. In all these matters he seems to have won more or less definite accomplishment, and from most of them his versatile literary talent took, at one time or another, an effective toll. The athletic musician, who composed his own songs and gloried in a gallop, was to make verse simulate, as hardly any artificer had made it before, the labyrinthine meanderings of the fugue and the rhythmic swing of hoofs.

Of all these varied aims and aspirations, of all in short that was going on under the surface of this brilliant and versatile Robert Browning of twenty, we have a chaotic reflection in the famous fragment *Pauline*. The quite peculiar animosity with which its author in later life regarded this single "crab" of his youthful tree of knowledge only adds to its interest. He probably resented the frank expression of passion, nowhere else approached in his works. Yet passion only agitates the surface of *Pauline*. Whether *Pauline* herself stand for an actual woman—Miss Flower or another—or for the nascent spell of womanhood—she plays, for one who is ostensibly the heroine of the poem, a discouragingly minor part. No wonder she felt tempted to advise the burning of so unflattering a record. Instead of the lyric language of love, she has to receive the confes-

sions of a subtle psychologist, who must unlock the tumultuous story of his soul "before he can sing." And these confessions are of a kind rare even amongst self-revelations of genius. Pauline's lover is a dreamer, but a dreamer of an uncommon species. He is preoccupied with the processes of his mind, but his mind ranges wildly over the universe and chafes at the limitations it is forced to recognise. Mill, a master, not to say a pedant, of introspection, recognised with amazement the "intense self-consciousness" of this poet, and self-consciousness is the keynote which persists through all its changing harmonies. It is the self-consciousness of a soul compelled by quick and eager senses and vivid intelligence to recognise a host of outer realities not itself, which it constantly strives to bring into relation with itself, as constantly baffled and thrown back by the obstinate objectivity of that outer world. A pure dreamer would have "contentedly lived in a nut-shell and imagined himself king of infinite space"; a purely scientific intelligence would have applied himself to the patient mastery of facts; in the hero of *Pauline* the despotic senses and intellect of science and the imperious imagination of the poet appear to coexist and to contend, and he tosses to and fro in a fever of fitful efforts, continually frustrated, to find complete spiritual response and expressiveness in the intractable maze of being. There had indeed been an earlier time when the visions of old poets had wholly sufficed him; and the verses in which he recalls them have almost the pellucid charm of Homer, —

"Never morn broke clear as those
On the dim clustered isles in the blue sea,
The deep groves, and white temples, and wet caves."

But growing intellect demanded something more. Shelley, the "Sun-treader," weaving soul and sense into a radiant vesture "from his poet's station between both," did much to sustain him; Plato's more explicit and systematic idealism gave him for a while a stronger assurance. But disillusion broke in: "Suddenly, without heart-wreck I awoke; I said, 'twas beautiful, yet but a dream, and so adieu to it!" Then the passionate restlessness of his nature stings him forth afresh. He steepes himself in the concrete vitality of things, lives in imagination through "all life where it is most alive," im-