

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

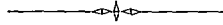
<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

to the few cases in which these limits are not observed, the proper persons to provide a remedy are the Bishops, as being the appointed rulers of the Church; and they, too, would deal most successfully with the clergy if they chiefly, and at all events in the first place, used their fatherly influence, and trusted to peaceful and kindly methods. But when a private society endeavours to exercise episcopal functions, and to keep the clergy, and even Bishops, in order, they will find that they have taken upon them a task which is beyond their power, and in which they must inevitably fail.

R. PAYNE SMITH.



ART. II.—ROBERT BROWNING.

ROBERT BROWNING is dead! The news from Venice announcing that, on December 12, 1889, the illustrious poet had passed away, has come with a painful shock to very many of his admirers throughout the whole English-speaking world. It is not easy to conceive of modern English literature without him; but it is so, and it is only too certain that he has left us to join the ranks of the "Immortals"—the kings and princes of song.

To treat at all adequately of Browning's life-work would be to treat of the whole history of English poetry for the last fifty years; all that is even attempted here is briefly to sketch the chief characteristics of the imperishable verse which Browning has bequeathed to us—surely a priceless possession!—and set down a few words as to the specially religious thought of some of them.

But first we are confronted at the outset by the objection which Browning's poetry has always been liable to—that of the poet's obscurity; nor is it easy to proceed unless we have said a brief word on this head. The charge is an old one, dating ever since the publication of "Sordello" in 1840, and reiterated *ad nauseam* ever since. There was some apparent excuse for the charge in the case of this poem, for the thought and the situation are of an extraordinarily complex character, being busied with the "development of a soul" throughout. But Browning is really the reverse of obscure. His thought is rugged, it is true, and often expressed in rugged verse; but (as Mr. Swinburne has so admirably shown) it is the intensity of light the poet throws on a subject that dazzles us; the matter in hand is "dark with excess of light," and, moreover, the poet's method of treatment, essentially dramatic in nature, has caused no small difficulty to his readers. "He is too brilliant and subtle," says

Mr. Swinburne, "for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the tract of an intelligence that moves with such incessant rapidity." Let any well-informed reader take up any one of the poems entitled "Dramatic Lyrics" or "Men and Women,"¹ and he will see how unfounded is such an objection of "obscurity."

But if we may consider for a moment this trite charge as refuted, there is another objection continually made against the poet, namely, that, granted his psychological insight, his dramatic vigour, and his strength, the element of pure poetry is continually absent from his work. The objection is one which deserves a little looking into. Certainly, mere beauty of expression seems a thing of small account as compared with direct and forcible statement of fact :

Truth ever ; truth only, the excellent,

he says in his last volume ; and in these few words we have the secret of his method. It is one that sets out to attain some definite end in view, and with restless energy and resistless power, forces a road towards that goal. Take, for example, two familiar poems of his, and examine well whether they do not fulfil adequately the object the poet had in view when writing them. I allude to "My Last Duchess" and "Andrea del Sarto." These are both dramatic monologues, a form of verse which seems to have suited the peculiar bent of Browning's genius.² In both poems the writer has evidently thrown himself, heart and soul, into the situation and mental circumstances of the person whose feelings he desired to portray. He does not present us with an outside view of what is going on, but, so to say, thinks backward, and describes, with remarkable intuition, the various steps in motive and feeling that go to make up a spiritual crisis. And such crises, moments of intense significance, are (as has been well said) struck out in Mr. Browning's poetry with a clearness and sharpness of outline that no other poet has achieved. A good instance of this subtle instinct

¹ Volumes v., vi. of the new collected Works of Robert Browning.

² It has been asserted that Mr. Browning revels (and he does so) in portraying uncommon types of character in preference to simple, no less than in the conception of extraordinary dramatic situations. This is the exact reverse of Tennyson's method—at any rate it was, till "Rizpah" was published. Whereas in Tennyson all the poet's genius is lavished on the workmanship of the poem, Browning concentrates all his strength upon the fullest setting forth of the intense mental crisis he is describing. After all, the flower of his work is, perhaps, to be found in the character-drawing of his women ; and where is there any more pathetic figure in the whole round of modern literature, than that of the child-wife Pompilia in the "Ring and the Book?"

"Little Pompilia with the patient brow
And lamentable smile on those poor lips."

of rapidly seizing and stereotyping dramatic situations is in a short lyric (published about twelve years since) entitled "Appearances." I quote it here, because it seems to me fairly typical of what I have been saying above :

And so you found that poor room dull,
 Dark, hardly to your taste, my dear ?
 Its features seemed unbeautiful :
 But this I know—'twas there, not here,
 You plighted troth to me, the word
 Which—ask that poor room how it heard.
 And this rich room obtains your praise
 Unqualified—so bright, so fair,
 So all wherewith perfection stays ?
 Ay, but remember—here, not there,
 The other word was spoken ! Ask
 This rich room how you dropped the mask.

But an impatient reader may say, "This is all very well in its place, but is it poetry?" To much of what Browning has written one attaches value, not for the easy tripping of the verses (and this, to nineteen out of twenty people, constitutes poetry, as they conceive it), or the swinging flow of melody, but rather for the art which has wrought out a subject on certain given lines, and, within its proper sphere, adequately fulfilled the conditions imposed by the nature of that subject. People do not like any sort of poetry which ventures to free itself from certain fixed laws, and resent any change in that established order to which they have grown accustomed by long use. Least of all do they inquire of the principles which may underlie these laws, nor do they care to test them and weigh their comparative worth. It is just on these points that they would be intolerant of the bold vigour, and oftentimes startling novelties, of Browning's poetry, which so frequently transgresses the laws of taste, as interpreted by them. Art has thus been unwisely conventionalized by an unscientific sentiment, and the better functions of criticism obstructed. Few will be inclined to doubt that Mr. Browning¹ has, within the limits imposed by himself, realized to the full the objects for which he wrote ; and, in so far as art has been satisfied on this score, does it not seem a fair inference to suppose that the higher laws of poetry, conforming to art, have received, at any rate in a great measure, a fair satisfaction ? Perhaps it may be well to select a poem, in order practically to test this principle in some of its bearings. Let us take "Fra Lippo Lippi," one of the great monologues that

I have derived much help all through this paper from Mr. Fotheringham's excellent "Studies in Robert Browning's Poetry," second edition, and especially from chapters i. and iv. of that book. Mr. A. Symon's *Introduction* has also been of service.

made up the 1855 volume—"Men and Women." What, apparently, was the poet's intention in writing this? Obviously, to depict as near to the life as possible, the jolly old painter-monk of the Renaissance, Fra Filippo. And he has succeeded; and Browning's picture of this rough and ready Frate is, as far as art is concerned, a perfect picture, finished in every detail. The nature of the man is essentially dare-devil and comic, but (strange irony!) he has become a monk. All this is adequately rendered in the verses of the poet, bubbling over with stinging wit and ceaseless humour as they are. Here is art in obedience to certain canons, carefully defined in the poet's mental vision; his object is secured precisely. Is not this poetry, in the highest sense of the word, a creation of art? At any rate, says Mr. Fotheringham, even if Browning's work *should* require a fresh consideration of the laws of poetic art, surely there is nothing to complain of.

Nevertheless, after all is said and done, Browning is emphatically a singer, pure and simple, as well as a great leader of thought and analyst of the mind. This must never be lost sight of. From "Pauline," his earliest work, dating from the year 1832, to "Asolando," published on the very day of his death; for all that great interval of fifty-seven years, he has never once ceased to be a singer, unless we make an exception, perhaps, in the case of "Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau" (1871), which is about the most unpoetical poem Mr. Browning ever produced. Even there there are some beautiful lines enough, but they are not common. Here are one or two pieces, of various dates, taken at random from the body of his works. The first shall be the sweet song in "Pippa Passes":

You'll love me yet!—and I can tarry
 Your love's protracted growing:
 June reared that bunch of flowers you carry,
 From seeds of April's sowing.
 I plant a heartful now: some seed
 At least is sure to strike,
 And yield—what you'll not pluck indeed,
 Not love, but, may be, like.
 You'll look at least on Love's remains,
 A grave's one violet:
 Your look?—that pays a thousand pains.
 What's death? You'll love me yet.

The next song I would venture to select belongs to the second period of Mr. Browning's life, and is taken from that lovely poem (or, rather, linked series of poems), "James Lee's Wife," written in 1864:

Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth,
 This autumn morning! How he sets his bones

To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet
 For the ripple to run over in his mirth ;
 Listening the while, where on the heap of stones
 The white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet.

That is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true :
 Such is life's trial, as old earth smiles and knows.
 If you loved only what were worth your love,
 Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you.
 Make the low nature better by your throes !
 Give earth yourself, go up for gain above !

Does not the simple beauty of these inimitable verses, sad and subdued, as becomes the theme, and yet alive with utter nobleness of feeling, strike ever so casual an observer? After this, it is strange to hear people talking about Browning's "habitual rudeness of versification," and the like.

I must only give one other instance of our poet's easy mastery of lyrical measures, and of the peculiar and rich quality of them; this is from "Asolando" (1889), and entitled "Summum Bonum"; it would be difficult to match it, in or out of Browning's poetry, for consummate workmanship:

All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one bee :
 All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart of one gem :
 In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine of the sea :
 Breath and bloom, shade and shine—wonder, wealth, and how far above
 them—

Truth, that's brighter than gem,
 Trust, that's purer than pearl,
 Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe—all were for me
 In the kiss of one girl.

The poetry of Robert Browning is essentially noble, healthful, and gives a bracing tone to our whole moral nature. We do not find any trace of that sickly sentimentalism or mawkishness too often discoverable in modern poetry. What have I to do, the poet asks, with the slothful, the mawkish, the unmanly? There is a deep-seated optimism apparent in every part of his work; an optimism that is not blind to what is evil in the world, but recognises that beyond the veil there is a Hand that, amid all the thundercloud of doubt, of evil, of misery, is certainly guiding Creation on to that "far-off Divine event" to which, in the fulness of time, it must attain. "What time, what circuit first," it is not ours to ask; but in "God's good time" we shall surely arrive. The very keynote of Browning's philosophy is in those simple words of his in "Pippa Passes":

God's in His heaven ;
 All's right with the world !

Every great poet must be something of a seer or teacher to his generation; and this is emphatically true of Browning, who has spoken, in no uncertain tones, upon the great questions of

immortality, man's life and destiny, and, in fact, all the great religious topics of the day. Evil, in his scheme, is necessary, that the contrast offered by Good may be more sharply defined; Evil is Divinely permitted that Good may be evolved the better from it. Why despair of ultimate success? "On earth the broken arcs," 'tis true; but "in heaven a perfect round."

This religious spirit (bias, some think) of Browning's poetry, running as it does throughout his whole work, is, nevertheless, more than elsewhere marked in the poems called "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day" (1850); in the fervid and splendid lyrical poem "Saul" (1855); in "The Sun"; in "Ferishtah's Fancies" (1885); and lastly, in "Reverie," the last poem but one of his latest volume (1889). In "Christmas Eve" we have the reasonings of a man who is deeply impressed with the truth and beauty of Christianity; but is dissatisfied with many of the existing forms of the creed. The sceptical spirit of modern-day thought and literature—that attitude of doubt which has set so firm a hold on the modern mind, have strangely impressed the subject of the poem. "Christmas Eve" is a remarkably able study of many of the religious positions of the century; for few have thought more deeply over the ethics and morality of Christian faith and doctrine than has Browning. As a body of opinions religion interests him little, but rather as the revelation of man's inner life, man's higher ideals and convictions. "Easter Day," with its burden, "How very hard it is to be a Christian!" treats the same questions of the life of the soul, and the power of Christ upon that life, from a new standpoint. "Man's dust instinct with fire unknowable"—that subtle sympathy with God—how beautifully does the poet enter into the subject! Love, after all, is everything; it is love that guides the stars along their courses, and puts life into the humblest weed; it is Eternal Love that the heart of man yearns towards through earth's every vicissitude. The figure of Christ rises on the sight, and mercy is infinite forthwith every way. To give a mere prose version of any portion of this great poem would be vain indeed; but no one can afford to neglect its teaching, and certainly one rises from its perusal with rekindled hopes and fresh energies.

As the "Sun," in "Ferishtah's Fancies," deals with the Incarnation, so "Saul" deals more at large with the great central doctrine of Christian faith—the efficacy of the personal work of Christ. "Saul" is a vision of life (says Mr. Symon), of time and eternity, told in song as sublime as the vision is steadfast. Music (the same writer goes on to remark), song, the beauty of nature, the glory and greatness of man, the might of love, human and Divine—all this is dwelt on in verse more majestic and more beautiful than it is possible to convey any

idea of. The singer, David, has gone the whole round of creation; then exclaims:

I spoke as I saw,
Reported, as man may of God's work—all's love, yet all's law.
Now I lay down the judgeship He lent me. Each faculty tasked,
To perceive Him has gained an abyss, where a dewdrop was asked,
Have I knowledge? confounded it shrivels at wisdom laid bare.
Have I forethought? how purblind, how blank, to the Infinite care!
Do I task any faculty highest, to image success?
I but open my eyes—and perfection, no more and no less,
In the kind I imagined, full fronts me; and God is seen God
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod.

In "Reverie" we have the religious teaching of a lifetime, (the same teaching that inspired "Rabbi-ben-Ezra" and "La Saisaiz,") brought to a final focus. The poet's belief in failure and struggling here, rather than in attainment and success, is reiterated; the grand doctrine of Abt Vogler is told again—"What is our failure here, but a triumph's evidence for the fulness of the days?"

Then life is—to wake, not sleep;
Rise and not rest, but press
From earth's level, where blindly creep
Things perfected, more or less,
To the heaven's height, far and steep,
Where, amid what strifes and storms
May wait the adventurous quest,
Power is Love. . . .
I have faith such end shall be:
From the first, Power was—I knew.
Life has made clear to me
That, strive but for closer view,
Love were as plain to see.

In an age like ours of much hollowness, false sentiment, and charlatanism, it is an encouraging sign to know that there has lived among us a soul filled with such lofty purpose, noble views of love and life, strong faith, and vigorous manliness, as was Browning's. Instinct with the fire of pure resolve, his verse is our possession, and for the possession of after-generations no less. It can never die, so long as "the soul of man be precious to man," and while traces of good still linger among us.

Robert Browning is gone—and in him the last of the Elizabethan poets, as has been so well said, has departed from us. On the last day of 1889, amid the "mourning of a mighty nation" he was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey, where so many of England's mighty men have been buried before him. We may well mourn our loss in the death of this man, with his generous and noble spirit, his large-hearted wisdom and catholic kindness. Nevertheless, the best tribute to his great

memory will be, not tears only, but a strenuous endeavour, on the part of each one of us, to do, as in God's sight, the work for the world which lies nearest our hand.

Strive and thrive ! cry Speed—fight on, fare ever
There as here !

EDWARD HENRY BLAKENEY.

Trinity College, Cambridge.
January, 1890.

ART. III.—FOUR GREAT PREBENDARIES OF
SALISBURY.

No. 2.—JOHN PEARSON.

JOHN PEARSON may be said to present an admirable type of the scientific theology and scholarship of the seventeenth century. He held for many years the same prebend as Hooker. Born in 1612—a year which also gave birth to another famous theologian, Jeremy Taylor—Pearson was the son of a country clergyman, who acquired some fame in his day. From the wild and mountainous district of Whinfall, in Kendal, Robert Pearson, the father, went up to Cambridge, and after a course of some distinction was, in 1610, made Archdeacon of Suffolk. He took a prominent part in Laud's attempt to revive a stricter discipline. From his mother, one of the well-known Welsh family of Vaughan, Pearson is said to have derived his literary taste. The stories of his precocious youth are certainly astonishing. A boy who at Eton lit his candle in the long chamber to read some of the Greek and Latin Fathers, was naturally looked upon as a prodigy. Pearson certainly showed in after-life a grateful recollection of his Eton days, and there is a passage in his "*Vindiciæ Ignatianæ*" well worthy of comparison with the words in which Isaac Casaubon records his gratitude to those who first impressed him with literary tastes. At Cambridge the career of the Eton scholar was a distinguished one. He was one of those who sang the praises of Edward King, the Lycidas of Milton, and there are various compositions of his Cambridge days which give direct evidence of the purity of his classical tastes. Upon the death of his father, in 1639, he inherited certain lands. His presentation to the prebend of Netheravon came from Bishop Davenant, and was probably due to the Bishop's friendship for his father. Pearson resigned a fellowship at King's College upon being made a prebendary, and in the same year he was made chaplain to Lord Finch, the Keeper of the Great Seal. The troubles of the long struggle between the Parliament and the King had begun. Pearson obtained a living