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BROWNING AS A PREACHER.

FIRST PAPER.

'L'ART POUR L'ART' is a motto that supplies us with a very satisfactory definition of the aim and purport of the poetry of those early times when men, not having lost their fresh childlike rejoicing in the present, sang—if they had the power to sing—aimlessly 'wie der Vogel singt,' just only because

Das Lied das aus der Kehle dringt
Ist Lohn der reichlich lohnet.

But every year is now carrying us farther away from a state of things in which it is possible that there should be produced poetry of the kind to which this definition is applicable. The great flood of subjectivity which has made its way into all modern thought has brought with it problems pressing for answer in such a crowd as to leave no room for thinking or feeling to be exercised unconsciously and without purpose. Of the poets now writing amongst us we cannot say that their work is 'pour l'Art.' In the generation immediately preceding theirs there was, indeed, one poet—Scott—who contrived to keep himself apart, as on an island, untouched by the waves of restless subjective thought that had come over the intellectual life of his age, and who retained the power of purposeless poetical utterance. But has there been produced, since his, any poetry seeking no further office than to become a beautiful or noble piece of art? Does not all, or by far the greater part of that which is of recent origin, seem to be sent forth for the purpose of gaining satisfaction of one kind or another for the craving self-consciousness of the writers, and of their contemporaries who are to share in the results of their quest? Poetry, like every other power which man has at command, has now been forced to take its part in supplying the two great wants, Pleasure and Truth—which, little felt in simple primitive times, become passionately urgent in a state of high civilisation and culture. We have not now—and probably the world will never have again—poets who are poets and nothing more. What we have now is truth-seekers and pleasure-seekers gifted with the power of

artistic perception and imagination, of rhythmical or melodious expression, and using these gifts to seek what without them they would have sought by other means.

The school of thought which is content to regard pleasure as the satisfaction for which all desires are craving, uses its poetry to go forth and bring in full richness of pleasures; careless, if only there can be found in them beauty and delight, from whence they come and of what sort they are. Not the value of a man's work as art, but the power it has to awaken in writer or readers a stranger susceptibility to pleasure of sense or imagination, is here the measure of his success. There is a great deal of poetry which seems on its surface to be altogether the free playing of spontaneous instincts, but which we find, if we look a little deeper into it, to have at bottom the principle of utilitarianism, not of art.

Nor can the men whose desires are towards the satisfaction of truth be poets more unconscious of a purpose. To find that satisfaction for themselves and for others is the aim towards which all their faculties are bent, and in proportion as their search is successful these men become teachers and preachers. The poet on whose characteristics the following pages will contain a few thoughts—Mr. Robert Browning—is one whose gifts as a poet, strong and true as they are, are perhaps oftener than any contemporary artist's, merged in his character as preacher of what he has gained as a truth-seeker. I cannot but think that the full value of his work can only be estimated by recognising him first in his office of preacher rather than of poet.

Any reader who has had patience enough to force his way through the bristling hedge of complicated sentences that forms so much of the outer fence of Browning's writings, and has gone in and got hold of intelligible meaning, must surely perceive that he has to do with something which cannot be judged of by æsthetic tests. We feel that what is to be found there is the work of a man who is bound by all the impulses of his nature to preach what he believes and to persuade other men. He seems to have chosen the office of poet voluntarily, for the sake of this preaching; partly because the rhythmical form of words will carry his doctrine where it might not otherwise reach and partly because amongst the truths he would set forth there are some which are of the kind that to men's present faculties must be always only as sights half seen, as sounds half heard, and which become dimmer and fainter if the attempt is made to define them into the accurate form and articulate speech of ordinary prose. Browning's place is amongst the teachers whose words come forth allowed by their own conscious will; not amongst the artists controlled by involuntarily instincts.

His poetry is not a great artist utterance that has fulfilled its end—or at least the only end with which the artist is concerned—when once it has got outside the mind in which it originated into audible sound

or visible form, whether that sound be heard or that form be seen or not; but it is a message intended to travel (the sender hardly cares *how*, provided that the end be reached) from the heart and brain of one man to the hearts and brains of those who will hear him. The necessity that is laid upon him, through his instincts, is the 'When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren;' and the setting himself to his work as a poet seems to be his choice of the way in which he will obey that impulse. Not for his own sake does poetry seem to be a necessity to him. As far as his own needs are concerned, such a man could afford to be silent. It is neither for the relief nor for the pleasure of self-utterance that he speaks. Nothing that he has written betokens the weakness and incapacity of reticence that have opened the mouths of so many poets in a great strong bitter crying, which they tuned into beautiful music whose sweetness might ease them of their pain. Nor has he that irrepressible joy in beauty for its own sake which forced Wordsworth to tell of the loveliness of the visible world.

And we cannot attribute his becoming a poet to the pressure of dramatic instincts. Though in power of imagining dramatic characters it is he and he only who at all fills the office of modern Shakespeare, yet there is something in his manner of exercising that power which tells us that in him it is subordinate to some other motive. This difference there is between Browning and other poets who could create 'men and women,' that whereas with others the production of life-like characters seems to be the aim and end, with him it is only the means to a further end—namely, the arguing out and setting forth of general truths. He cannot, as others have done, rest satisfied with contemplating the children of his imagination, and find the fulfilment of his aim in the fact of his having given them existence. It seems always as if his purpose in creating them was to make them serve as questioners and objectors and answerers in the great debate of conflicting thoughts of which nearly all his poetry forms part. His object in transferring (as he can do with such marvellous success) his own consciousness, as it were, into the consciousness of some imagined character, seems to be only to gain a new stand-point, from which to see another and a different aspect of the questions concerning which he could not wholly satisfy himself from his own point of view. He can create characters with as strongly marked individualities as had ever any that came out of the brain of dramatist or novelist, but he cannot be content to leave them, as Shakespeare did the characters he created, to look, all of them, off in various directions according to whatever chanced to suit best with the temper and disposition he had imagined for them. Still less can he leave to any of his men and women the *vraisemblable* attribute of having no steady outlook at anything in particular. They are all placed by him with their eyes turned in very much in the same direction, gazing towards the same class

of questions. And, somehow, Browning himself seems to be in company with them all the time, hearing their different reports of the various aspects which those questions present to each of them; and judging and choosing between all these different reports, in order to give credence to the true one. The study of no individual character would seem to him of much value, unless that character contained something which should help to throw light upon matters common to all humanity, upon the questions either as to what it *is*, or as to what are its relations to the things outside humanity. Desire to know the truth, and to make other men know it, seems to be the essential quality of his nature, and his poetry only its separable accident—a garment which it wears because it finds such best suited to it in the nineteenth century, but which it might very likely have gone without, if placed among the surroundings of some other age. If we can fancy him transferred back some five hundred years ago, he would be found surely not among the followers of the ‘gaye science,’ as a *trouvère* or troubadour, exercising his art to give pleasure at the court or the knightly castle, but rather in the solitude of a monastic cell, gazing with fixed eyes into the things of the unseen world, until they became the real, and the shows of earth the unreal, things; or, later on, would surely have been a worker, not in the cause of the great art revival of the sixteenth century but of its Reformation movement. One can fancy how grandly he would then have preached his gospel of the sanctity of things secular, in rough plain Luther-like prose, with the same singleness of purpose with which he now, as a poet, sets himself to preach a gospel—needed more than all others by his contemporaries—of the reality and presence of things immaterial and extra-human.

Browning’s poetry has one characteristic which gives its teaching peculiar influence over contemporary minds. I mean the way in which, all the while being perfectly free from egoism, it brings its readers in some inexplicable way into a contact with the real self of the author, closer and more direct than that which we have with any other poets through their writings. Once you succeed in construing the complicated thinking and feeling of this or that passage of his, you feel, not that you are seeing something that a man has made, but that you are in the immediate presence of the man himself. I know of no other writings (except J. H. Newman’s) having this peculiarity to such a degree (it is in this that the secret of the fascination of those wonderful sermons of Newman’s consists). These two men, so different, have yet this in common, that there is something in their written words which communicates to the men who read them the thrill of contact with the pulsations of another human life. And the knowledge that there is the real living mind of another man speaking to your mind, gives a restful sense of reality that is the starting-point of all belief and of all motive to action. Surely anyone who has received this from Browning must feel as if there would be a miserable ingrati-

tude in the sort of criticism which should carp at his poetry for its lack of polish in style or prettiness in ideas.

Browning is greater than his art, and the best work which his poetry does is to bring you into his own presence: and once there you no longer care what brought you there, and feel as if it mattered very little whether the means of communication had been poetry or other form of words. Tennyson's art is greater than Tennyson; and it is with *it*, and not with the man himself, that you have to do.

Of course, though Tennyson can have no direct influence as a teacher over anyone who feels thus about him and his work, yet his indirect influence over the minds of men is not to be lightly accounted of. His poetry is what it *is*, and may be accepted by us as we accept a beautiful painting or piece of music, as an end in itself. Acting through our æsthetic perceptions, it affects the tone and colour of our moods. And most of us know by experience that the character of our thinking is in a great measure dependent upon moods and feelings open to impressions of this sort. It is of course no slight gift that Mr. Tennyson has given to his contemporaries when he has shown them ideas so pure and calm and noble, by the contemplation of which their own lives may unconsciously become purer and higher.

Acknowledging this influence that he *has*, and giving him due honour for it, all I would say is that there is another kind of influence which he cannot exercise, and that his poetry, though making nineteenth century problems so constantly its theme, is not to be reckoned amongst the books that give any real availing help against the modern 'spectres of the mind.' To the needs of vital doubt it is no more than if it told us tales of fairy-land. And this because of its failing to give us that entire satisfaction as to its being truth *subjective*, which alone could be our guarantee for its being able to help in guiding us to truth *objective*. In the times when neither our hearts nor brains can get hold of the sense of reality in anything around us, we find that instead of aiding us 'aus diesem Meer des Irrthums aufzutauchen,' all that Tennyson's poetry seems to have done for us is to have made a beautiful word-phantom, having a semblance of wise human counsel, to add another to the number of the appearances that with aspects beautiful or horrible are floating over and under and around us, and perpetually eluding our grasp. Far more is to be gained at such times from poetry even such as Clough's, which, though it carries you to no farther resting-place, at least lets you take hold of one substantial thing—the veritable mind of a human being, doubting with its own doubts and having its certainties its own, each of those certainties, however few and imperfect, having a distinct place as independent testimony to truth.

Browning brings from out of his own individuality something which he did not receive from his age, and which he offers to it as a gift, and which is of a spirit so foreign to the atmosphere into which it comes that he requires men to accept him as a teacher before attaining to

sympathy with him. This that he has to give is some of the intense earnestness of Puritanism, and the strenuousness of effort which gave heroic grandeur to the old asceticism. He offers this to a state of society, which along with all its practical vigour and perseverance in the affairs of men's outer lives, has so much of aimlessness and abandonment of self-direction in all that concerns the life of inner thought and feeling.

Other men of present and recent times have had a like gift to bestow, but their manner of giving it was such as to make its acceptance for the most part impossible. J. H. Newman and the company of men who, with him, were the Puritans and ascetics of the nineteenth century, have gained no permanent influence as teachers of their age. Teachers of their age, indeed, they did not attempt to be, but only of whoever should be willing to betake himself out of it back into mediæval modes of thought; and with the thoughts and difficulties of the men who refused to do this, they either could not or would not sympathise nor have anything to do. Hence, the vigour and thoroughness of their own individual lives was able only very partially to affect the thinking and feeling of the world around them. But Browning undertakes the work which they would not attempt. The chief glory of his labour is that he has taken so much of what was good in the old Puritan spirit, and has brought it into harmony with the wider knowledge and larger life of later times. He devises for the fixedness of moral purpose and power of asceticism, which are the inherent characteristics of his own nature, another and a worthier use than the uses which in old times men had been wont to make them serve. He sees in moral fixedness a means that may be used not to check intellectual advance, but to help it forward by steadying its aim; and he finds that asceticism is capable of becoming, from having been the old monkish discipline of repression, the nobler *ἀσκησις* of the mental athlete, which is to prepare him for strenuous exertions whereby all parts of his human nature may develop themselves to the full.

The idea of a struggle and a wrestling in which the *wills* of men are to be engaged—the central idea of early and mediæval Christian thought—is recognised fully and distinctly by Browning in all that he has written. He holds that men's business in this world 'is labour and strife and conquest, and not merely free unconscious growth and harmonious development. He differs thoroughly from the modern thinking, which sees no moral evil distinct from and antagonistic to good; and again and again, directly or indirectly, his poems let us see how wide is his separation, both in belief and feeling, from the many poets of these present days, who have returned to the idea round which the old Greek poetry had all revolved, of the powerlessness of man's will and the drifting of his life before an unalterable destiny. In a recent criticism on Tennyson's and Browning's characteristics,¹

¹ Professor Dowden's lecture on 'Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Browning,' *The Dublin Afternoon Lectures on Literature and Art* (1867-68). London: Bell & Daldy.

Browning is distinguished as being pre-eminently the poet of impulse. This he doubtless is, but it seems to me that his *chief* point of difference from the majority of modern poets, is his being emphatically the poet of the will.

That this is the characteristic feature of his poetry strikes one most forcibly if one chances to take up a volume of it immediately after reading his contemporary Matthew Arnold's sufficiently to have let one's mood take the impress of his. The transition from the one man's conception of life to that of the other seems like the waking from one of those nightmare dreams in which we have the sense of being forever passive (all the while struggling in vain not to be) under some Compelling that is horrible and yet mockingly sweet; to find ourselves restored from this to the wide-awake state of things, in which we regain the consciousness of freedom of action.

There is much in which he makes common cause with J. H. Newman and the men who were imbued with his spirit. They and Browning alike realise the individuality of each human life, and the struggle which is for each man a separate work to be entered into by his self-determined will, and feel the intense mysteriousness of human personality. And they may be classed together as protesters against nineteenth-centuryism—the habit of thought which makes so little account of these things. The question on which they part company is the question as to whether the impulses which men find within them are to be opposed by their wills as enemies, or to be accepted by them as allies in the struggle that has to be engaged in. While, on the one hand, by Newman and those like-minded with him, the only guide internal to man which is acknowledged as having the authority of a voice from the invisible world, is the conscience—the sense of a law binding to the doing of one sort of actions and the refraining from another sort (the law by making its presence thus felt being in itself evidence for its giver); by Browning, on the other hand, *other* mental phenomena to be found in human nature are accepted, as having first their intellectual significance as evidences 'whence a world of spirit as of sense' is made plain to us, and afterwards their moral uses in raising us from the world of sense into the world of spirit.

Our human impulses towards knowledge, towards beauty, towards love—all these impulses, the feeling of which is common in various degrees to all men, and the expression of which by some few among them is Art—are revered by him as the signs and tokens of a world not included in that which meets our senses, as the

Intuitions, grasps of guess,
That pull the more into the less,
Making the finite comprehend
Infinity.

--not of course that Browning does not also recognise the evidential force of conscience as an internal witness, but still, I think, it is *chiefly*

in the human impulses which in the world of sense are never satisfied, that he considers the subjective evidence for the spirit world to lie.

And from this difference in the grounds of his and Newman's beliefs there results a difference in their whole conception of man's life and its aims. The part of human nature which alone Newman will acknowledge as a divine guide is a part which in itself furnishes no principle of growth or progress (the conscience being only a power capable of restraining and directing), and the ideal life in this world is therefore, according to him, only a state of *waiting*, a walking warily in obedience, until some other state shall be reached in which man shall be in a condition to begin growth. According to him the business of the earthly life is only to get safely out of it as out of an enemy's country.

And as a natural result of his theory of the earthly life, we find that Newman, even with all his vivid perception of each human soul's individual existence, becomes unable to sympathise with *diversities* of individuality: no scope for human diversities being allowed by the theory which sets all men to the same sort of work—the mere work of escaping (each with his unused individualities) to some future condition in which life, in the sense of an active and growing state, may begin.

But Browning, on the other hand, having taken all the higher human impulses and aspirations to be evidences whereby we discern an order of things extending beyond the world of which sense is cognizant, becomes able to conceive of the life that now is, as a condition, not of mere waiting and watching—not as a struggle only on the *defensive* against evil, in which safety is the only kind of success sought for—but as a state in which growth and progress are to be things of the present—in which the struggle is to be for acquisition and not alone for defence. His recognition of impulse as a guide to be accounted divine, makes him recognise human nature as being furnished with means of self-evolving growth and action, and not merely of obedience to laws given from without.

Browning's theory of human impulse removes him from a sort of asceticism which he would doubtless have been capable of exercising (if his judgment had decided in favour of it) as unflinchingly and as fiercely as mediæval monk or modern ascetic, such as Newman or Faber. He, like them, could have preached and practised the restraining of human feelings and hopes, and the reducing of life to a toilsomely-maintained condition of high-wrought quiescence. He is too entirely filled with the sense of the resolute human will to have ever let himself be driven along, Swinburne-like, by mighty art impulses. He would have been able to separate his thinking wholly from their influences, had it not been that he had deliberately accepted them as guides which ought to be followed. The moral half of him is stronger than the æsthetic; and the stronger could have crushed out the weaker if it had not chosen to yield it willing honour. A mind such as his is solitary and ascetic in its natural temperament; yet by his creed Browning

gains catholicity of thought and of interests. Wide sympathy with dissimilar types of human character would be a thing not to be looked for in a thinker who realises so intensely the mysteries of his own individual existence, if it had not been that he had taken those very things in which their dissimilarity lies—their multiform impulses—as the many witnesses for the same truths, each witness requiring to be understood by a reverent and appreciative sympathy. To a man whose whole soul could be absorbed by the vividly realised vision of an Easter Day, desires such as Abt Vogler's towards ideal beauty of sound; as those of Paracelsus towards knowledge; of Aprile towards love; and the restless battle-ardour of Luria, would seem trivial, and not worthy of detaining the eyes to search into them and analyse their peculiarities, were it not for his belief that in all such desires an infinite meaning could be discerned; and that they were the varying pledges, given to various human beings, of the individual immortality of each. From this his belief there follows a wide development of human sympathy which has a peculiar value, because of its not being the expression of naturally gregarious tendencies, but of an originally self-concentrated nature, transferring, as it were, its own consciousness, with all its intensity, into the diverse human individualities that come under its notice.

Very wide indeed is this sympathy. All human feelings and aspirations become precious in Browning's eyes, not for what they are, but for what they point to. He becomes capable of seeing a grandeur (potential though not actual) in human aims whose aspect would be, to careless unsympathising eyes, ridiculous rather than sublime. For instance, the instinctive craving after perfection and accuracy, which had for its only visible result the expending of the energies of a lifetime on the task of determining the exact force and functions of Greek particles, is treated by Browning, in that very noble poem of his, 'The Grammarian's Funeral,' with no contemptuous pity, but is honoured as being a pledge of the limitless future, which, lying before all human workers, renders it unnecessary that a man should slur over the minutiae of his work hastily, in the endeavour to compress into a lifetime all that he aims at accomplishing.

The sort of asceticism which Browning's theory of impulse makes impossible to him, is that which fears to let the senses enjoy the whole fulness of earthly beauty, and seeks to narrow and enfeeble the affections, and to stifle men's noble ambitions. Yet his poetry keeps for its characteristic spirit that other asceticism which implies the using of the world's material beauty and human passion, not as ends in themselves, but as means whereby man's spirit may reach to the heights above them, there to find new steps by which to ascend. He counsels no abstinence from beauty for the senses, but it is to be to men not as a banquet, but as a draught which will give them strength for labour, the fuller the draught the greater the strength.

He, more than any other poet, has ever present with him these two ideas: that the world—the material and the human—contains what is ‘very good;’ and also that ‘the fashion of this world passeth away.’ His noble christianised Platonism takes ‘all partial beauty as a pledge of beauty in its plenitude.’ *His* mood the pledge never wholly suffices. The earth is to him ‘God’s ante-chamber’—God’s, not a devil’s—yet still only an ante-chamber.

Asceticism of this kind is the great glory of his doctrine as a *preacher*. It may be that, considering him solely as a poet, he loses somewhat by it. One sort of beauty there is of which it deprives his work, however great may be the compensating gains. This is the artistic beauty of pathos, of which Browning’s poetry is wholly, or almost wholly, devoid. There are two kinds of pathos lying on opposite sides of the position which Browning occupies as a thinker. One of these is the pathos of mediæval art, and the other the pathos of pagan art. And with neither of these has he anything to do. The old ascetic conception of the earthly life gives a strange yearning tenderness, infinitely pathetic, to the manner in which the early and mediæval hymn writers and the modern mediævallists, Newman and Faber, look onward as if from out of a desert or an enemy’s country to the far-off unseen world—their ‘Urbs Beata Jerusalem,’ their ‘Paradise,’ their ‘Calm land beyond the sea.’ But Browning has no need nor room for pathos of this sort: the tender ‘Heimweh’ of this has no place amongst his feelings. He does not image to himself the life after death as a *home*, in the sense of a state that shall be rested in and never exchanged for a higher. He conceives of it as differing from the life that now is, not in permanency, but in elevation and in increase of capacities. And the earth has its own especial glory, which he will not overlook, of being first of an infinite series of ascending stages, showing even now, in the beauty and love that is abroad in it, the tokens of the visitings of God’s free spirit.

The feeling which we commonly call *pathos* seems, when one analyses it, to arise out of a perception of grand incongruities—filling a place in one class of our ideas corresponding to that in another in which the sense of the ludicrous is placed by Locke. And this pathos was attained by mediæval asceticism through its habit of dwarfing into insignificance the earthly life and its belongings, and setting the meanness and wretchedness which it attributed to it in contrast to the far-off vision of glory and greatness. But by Browning no such incongruity is recognised between what is and what shall be.

Another sort of pathos—the Pagan—is equally impossible to him. This is the sort which results from a full realising of the joy and the beauty of the earth, and the nobleness of men’s lives on it; and from seeing a grand inexplicableness in the incongruity between the brightness of these and the darkness which lies at either end of them—the infinite contradiction between actual greatness and the apparent

nothingness of its whence and whither—the mystery of strong and beautiful impulses finding no adequate outcome now, nor promise of ever finding it hereafter—human passion kindling into light and glow, only to burn itself out into ashes—the struggle kept up by the will of successive generations against Fate, ever beginning and ever ending in defeat, to recommence as vainly as before—the never-answered ‘Why?’ uttered unceasingly in myriad tones from out all human life.

The poetry of the Greeks gained from the contemplation of these things a pathos, which, however gladly a Christian poet may forego such gain for his art, was in its sadness inexpressibly beautiful. The *Iliad* had a deep under-current of it even in the midst of all its healthy childlike objectivity; and it was ever present amongst the great tragedians’ introspective analysings of humanity.

High art of later times has for the most part retained this pagan beauty. Though there is no reason to think that there was any paganism in Shakespeare’s creed, yet we cannot help feeling that, whether the cause is to be sought in his individual genius or in Renaissance influences, the spirit of his art is in many respects pagan. In his great tragedies he traces the workings of noble or lovely human character on to the point—and no further—where they disappear into the darkness of death; and ends with a look *back*, never on towards anything beyond. His sternly truthful realism will not, of course, allow him to attempt a shallow poetical justice, and mete out to each of his men and women the portion of earthly good which might seem their due: and his artistic instincts—positive rather than speculative—prefer the majesty and infinite sadness of unexplainedness to any attempt to look on towards a future solution of hard riddles in human fates. ‘King Lear,’ for instance, is pathetic because of its paganism; and would be spoiled, or at all events changed into something quite different, by the introduction of any Christian hope. One of the chief artistic effects of the story is the incongruity between the wealth of devotion poured out by Cordelia’s impulses of love and the dreary nothingness in which those beautiful impulses end. If there was anything in it to leave with us the impression that this was *not* the end of all, and that this expenditure of love was not in vain, but had its results yet to come, the story could not call forth in us an emotion of such keen and tender pity. And in this tragedy, as in Shakespeare’s others, one of its greatest effects, as art, is produced by the idea which had acted so mightily on the minds of old Greek poets—the powerlessness of man’s moral agency against his destiny. Hamlet, for instance, ends in accomplishing nothing of what he has set before him as his aim. Something, over and above his own irresoluteness is hindering him. He becomes, through no fault of his, the murderer of a harmless old man, and breaks the innocent young heart of Ophelia, becoming to her another link in the chain of involuntary evil, and being the cause of her unconscious sin of self-destruction. (It *is* as sin that Shakespeare

regards Ophelia's suicide; and this paradox of his, of guilt without moral volition is thoroughly Greek—akin, e.g. to the tragic aspect of the crime of *Cædipus*.)

So too, in *Othello's* character, there is no lack of noble impulses; yet they are productive of no results. His fate, taking advantage of the one vulnerable part of his nature, impels him to the destruction of all his happiness by the murder of *Desdemona*. And the artist breaks off, taking the murdered and the murderer out of our sight, and leaving with us only the impression of the irreparableness of the deed, and of the mysteriousness and inevitableness of the innocent suffering and almost involuntary guilt that came upon two human creatures. The effect of the tragedies depends upon the total absence in them of anything which might suggest the possibility of a future answer to the great 'Wherefore?' which their endings evoke from our hearts. Their pathos arises out of their tacit exclusion of hope.¹

The contrast between the spirit (apart of course from any thought as to the relative poetical rank) of Shakespeare's tragedies, and of Mr. Browning's greatest tragic work, '*The Ring and the Book*,' is very striking. The impression which the latter leaves upon the reader's mind is that of a great solemn looking forward, which absorbs into itself all emotions of pity that might have been awakened by *Pompilia's* innocent suffering and *Caponsacchi's* love; and which mitigates the hatred which we must feel for *Guido*, by the thought that even for him a far-off possible good may be waiting. The spirit of Shakespeare's tragic art (however much the form may differ from the classical) has much of the sort of completeness which was characteristic of Greek art. There is no suggestiveness in it of a state of things out of the reach of his art, and therefore he allows you to feel to the full (as far as you are able) any emotion which the character and circumstances of his dramatic creations should properly give rise to. When once he has shaped and fashioned his men and women, he leaves them with you—fixed as a sculptor might leave his work—in attitudes which appeal perpetually to one or other of your human feelings, with no indication of such attitudes not being the only possible ones in which they might appear. But Browning never completes, or would have his readers complete, the emotions called forth by his dramatic art. He checks them, while as yet only half realised, by his perpetual suggestiveness that what his art represents is only a portion of a great

¹ There is an analogy between the poetry of ancient and modern paganism, and some of the greatest poems in the modern art—music. The spirit which seems to pervade *Beethoven's* is essentially pagan. He is the great musical poet of unanswered seeking. There is joyousness enough in his music to contrast with its tones of mighty *Faust-like* despair; but I have never heard a passage of it that suggested emotions of hope or deep restful happiness. Outside the world in which *Beethoven* and his art move, there is for him only a 'dim gray lampless world.' Outside the world of *Mendelssohn*, however, who is no pagan, there is an infinite encircling love, to which he sings his '*Lobgesang*.' He seeks—and finds.

unknown whole, without knowing, which neither he nor you can determine, what the feelings with which you regard the portion ought to be. Considering, as he does, every human life as only a glimpse of a beginning, its minglings of greatness and imperfection have not for him the same aspect of pathetic mysterious paradox which they have for those poets who, either from their creed or from their *ἦθος*, regard it as a rounded whole.

The absence of any pagan spirit in Browning's writings deprives them also of a sort of beauty that belongs to so much of the modern poetry of external nature. Paganism is the source whence many poets have drawn their adoration of that loveliness of the earth—serene and terrible, outlasting and unmoved by human struggles. When these men behold the infinity of her beauty, they merge in their adoration of it all dissatisfactions with human life; attaining to one kind of intellectual repose, by giving up hope to find satisfaction for thought or moral feeling, and by taking instead, for solace, the unmeasured pleasure of æsthetic perception.

Shelley's creed, taking the visible world for its all in all, has for its product the intense vividness with which he perceives the richness and glory of the sights of that world. He looks *at*, rests *in*, the beauty that he sees; and it becomes more to him than it can be even to Wordsworth, who, with all his devotion to external nature, looked *through* rather than *at* her. And Shelley's poetry derives its strange intangible pathos from its having all this æsthetic brightness to set in contrast over against the darkness that surrounds those 'obstinate questionings' from *within*, which again and again, in spite of his own desire, distract his mind from its joyous vision of what is without. And there is a sort of passionate grasping, clutching rather, at the light of the sun, and all the sights and sounds and fragrances of the earth, which belongs especially to pagan poetry, ancient or modern, and which tells of a prizing of these things not for their own mere beauty's sake, but chiefly because in the perception of them *life* is implied, and the separation from them means extinction and dark nothingness. This idea, so all-pervading in the old Greek feeling for external nature, finds in our own days its chief exponent in Swinburne. I know of nothing in contemporary poetry that is so supremely pathetic as the perpetual alternations in those wonderful choruses in his 'Atalanta in Calydon,' between a wild revelling in the freshness and exuberant gladness of the earth, in the rush of her joyance, when—

'in green underwood and cover,
Blossom by blossom the spring begins'—

and a wailing lamentation over the life of man who has for his portion on the earth

'light in his ways,
And love and a space for delight,
And beauty and length of days,
And night and sleep in the night.'

Yet whose doom is only to abide there during a brief space, knowing neither content nor hope.

'His speech is a burning fire,
 With his lips he travaileth,
 In his heart is a blind desire,
 In his eyes fore-knowledge of death.
 He weaves, and is clothed with derision,
 Sows, and he shall not reap ;
 His life is a watch or a vision,
 Between a sleep and a sleep.'

The poem of 'Atalanta' is of course a direct utterance of *modern* paganism, and not merely expressive of historical sympathy with *ancient*; and is a specimen, most perfect of its kind, of that æsthetic beauty of which Browning's poetry is rendered incapable by the creed in which his strong, earnest mind, never able to rest without getting down into the realities that underlie the visible surface of things, finds the substantial reality that it seeks.

Yet it may indeed be that the feeling gained by Browning's onward gaze of expectation is higher, even if considered purely as an *artist's* feeling, than that of the wistful pathos that comes to other poets through their sense of a seeking baffled alike behind and before. And it may be that our inability instantly to recognise it as higher, is because of our having, although contemporaries with Browning, lagged behind him in thought and aspiration; and not having as yet attained to the conception towards which his poetry reaches in its beautiful imperfect grandeur, of a Christianity and Art—nowhere destructive of each other—two parts of one great Revelation.

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