X.

2. THE first thing that strikes you when entering upon a study of Browning is that there are two clearly defined camps into which students of literature are divided regarding him. The one will tell you that he is little more than a literary mountebank, tricky in expression and misleading in idea; that, read him as you may, back or forth, you cannot fathom him; that after spending time and trouble upon him, you have your labor for your pains. The other camp is equally decided that Browning is the only poet of the period worth studying; that he is at the very least the peer of Shakspere; that there are hidden treasures buried beneath his rugged verses, if you will only labor patiently enough and examine carefully enough the matter and form of his poems. Now, without going into either extreme, let us deliberately investigate the merits of this energetic and voluminous writer. As the result of my own reading, I must say that Browning stands out pre-eminently a great poet. This we may acknowledge without being blind to his shortcomings and his defects. The mastering of him is no slight labor, but it is a labor that well repays. However, it is a study that I would not recommend to children in years, or to children in mind. His subject-matter is frequently such as not every one can look full in the face. It deals with nearly every phase of the morbid and the abnormal in human nature. But in his treatment of such subject-matter the poet is never sentimental, and never attempts

to carry the reader's sympathies along with crime or falsehood. In his mode of handling the most delicate themes there is a robustness that is invigorating. Not that the reader can always accept his artistic interpretations of scenes, incidents, or events. So, too, does his form of expression sound rugged and harsh to the ear, and not unfrequently is it long-drawn-out. But the rhythm is complex, and the sense is involved, and this it is that renders it so difficult to decipher his poems. Nor can we quarrel with the poet or his work on that account. If the artistic conditions under which he constructs his poems are novel and do not fit into our present standards of criticism, it remains for us—it is the part of all wise criticism—to sit humbly at the poet's feet and enlarge our standards. A few years ago the music of Wagner was only discord to ears attuned to the music of Mozart and Beethoven; surely, no one will deny today that Wagner has enlarged the possibilities of musical expression. Even so is it with Browning. He has added a new form to poetical expression, in which the very pauses in his thinking, the very checks to the train of his ideas, find their place. It behooves us, then, to study his methods.

We shall begin with the estimate taken of his intellectual workings by no less an admirer than Mr. A. C. Swinburne, as one leading us to a better knowledge of his mode of thinking and composing: "If there is any great quality," says this master of English rhythm, "more per-

ceptible than another in Mr. Browning's intellect, it is his decisive and incisive faculty of thought, his sureness and intensity of perception, his rapid and trenchant resolution of aim. . . . He never thinks but at full speed; and the rate of his thought is to that of another man's as the speed of a railway to that of a wagon, or the speed of a telegraph to that of a railway. It is hopeless to enjoy the charm or apprehend the gist of his writings except with a mind thoroughly alert, an attention awake at all points, a spirit open and ready to be kindled by the contact of the writer's. To do justice to any book which deserves any other sort of justice than that of the fire or the waste-paper basket, it is necessary to read it in a fit frame of mind; and the proper mood in which to study for the first time a book of Mr. Browning's is the freshest, clearest, most active mood of the mind in its brightest and keenest hours of work." * The aptness of these remarks is soon made apparent.

The mental alertness here recommended by Mr. Swinburne is called for from the manner in which Browning constructs his poems. The narration is not consecutive. The various parts have an appearance of being thrown together without design. Mr. Hutton has characterized this state as "mere abruptness and hurry, the rapid, sketchy accumulation of a writer of notes from his mental note-book, tumbling one after another in a bewildering crowd." † That is the first impression after a first

* *George Chapman:* A Critical Essay. 1875. † *Essays*, ii., p. 173.

glance. You perceive the fitness of the various parts only after you have surveyed the whole poem. For instance, you must get well into the third book of *Sordello* before you can grasp the meaning of the first book. Again, through all he says there run two, sometimes three, currents of thought, and the poet sets one up against the other. He is not only asserting his own position, he is also anticipating the remarks and objections of his imaginary listener. Sometimes the remarks are repeated; more frequently is the reader left to infer them from the sudden digression of the poet. But it is this process of double thinking that gives the clue to Browning's meaning. And it is the effort to follow the various clashing trains of thought that renders the reading of his magnificent monologues such a strain. We will not call it obscurity. It is a new method of presenting thought, and Browning chooses to reveal character through its intellectual processes.

A source of great disappointment in reading Browning arises from the fact that we seek in his writings something else besides what Browning intends to put into them. We bring to the reading of him preconceived notions culled from our acquaintance with Shakspere, or Milton, or some other great poet. But Browning is not repeating what the great authors have so grandly said. He has his own methods; he takes his own views of life; he utilizes his own experiences of nature, and he gives them all forth after his own peculiar

fashion. He has nought to do with the beaten tracks. He is not repeating. What others have well expressed he leaves alone. He has his own message to deliver to his age.

And we may set it down that that message—the undercurrent of all that he sings—is one of cheerfulness, steady hopefulness, and consistent soundness of mind. He is a believer in perfection, and in perfection beyond the grave. He loves beauty and truth, and all art as the expression of beauty and truth. He is a wonderful searcher of hearts and interpreter of motives, and in scathing, unmincing language he reveals the hidden folds of souls. Read that sublime poem called *Easter Day*. Note the force and beauty and graphic distinctness with which the poet shows how the soul realizes the vanity of existence without the possession of the Highest Good and Supreme Love. Not the good things of this earthly life—not artistic work—not scientific pursuits—not mere earthly love—can satiate the soul; these are only shadows of the reality belonging to the Beatific Vision.

But it is not easy to disentangle what is of Browning's own conviction from what is in keeping with the character into whose mouth he puts the words. Thus, Mrs. Orr tells us that the character of Don Juan in *Fifine at the Fair* is a standing puzzle to Browning's readers, "because that which he condemns in it, and that which he does not, are not to be distinguished." * It will

* *Handbook to Browning*, fifth edition, p. 150.

help us in this instance to make the puzzle less intricate, if we bear in mind that Don Juan is an artist beyond the necessity of working for his art, with all the instincts of the Bohemian, loose in thought as he is loose in morals, yet just such a character as would be most likely to mingle with low and vile theories of life some of the sublimest ideas concerning the art of which he is passionately fond. In nearly all Browning's wonderful monologues is to be found this commingling of the high and the low, the true and the false, in such a manner that it takes thought and study to separate them. Amid patent sophistry, and an apparent trifling with his subject, there jets forth a flame of scorching truth that burns itself into the brain. Take *Bishop Blougram's Apology*. Bishop Blougram, as we know, represents Cardinal Wiseman, and Mrs. Orr tells us that "Cardinal Wiseman himself reviewed the poem, not disapprovingly, in a Catholic publication of the time." * You must not for a moment imagine that the explanation here given of the Bishop's faith and of his ecclesiastical position is the one approving itself to Cardinal Wiseman's own conviction. It is an explanation not to be taken seriously even in the poet's intentions. It is simply a meeting with flippancy and shallow pretence on their own ground.

> "For Blougram, he believed, say, half he spoke,
> The other portion, as he shaped it thus
> For argumentatory purposes,
> He felt his foe was foolish to dispute.

* *Browning Handbook*, p. 172.

The Cardinal, however, resented the liberty taken with him as an impertinence. See *The Rambler*, Jan., 1856.

Some arbitrary accidental thoughts
That crossed his mind, amusing because new,
He chose to represent as fixtures there." *

And yet, in the midst of this trifling with his subject, you come across some wholesome truths clearly expressed. In reply, for instance, to the request to purify his faith and purge it of all so-called modern "excrescences," such as belief in the liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius in Naples, the Bishop says:

"Clearing off one excrescence to see two,
There's ever a next in size, now grown as big,
That meets the knife: I cut and cut again!
First cut the Liquefaction, what comes last
But Fichte's clever cut at God himself?
Experimentalize on sacred things!
I trust nor hand nor eye nor heart nor brain
To stop betimes: they all get drunk alike." †

Destroy belief in miracles—in the power of God—and you destroy belief in God Himself. I need not tell you that the poet here alludes to an expression attributed to Fichte: "Gentlemen, in to-morrow's lecture we will create God."

Again, take *The Statue and the Bust.* The poet here seems to prefer activity to inaction, even when the end in sight is a bad one:

"Let a man contend to the uttermost
For his life's set prize, be it what it will."

* *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, p. 114.
† Ibid., p. 108.

But suddenly, in the last stanza, he turns the tables upon the complacently virtuous, with "the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin," who are content to avoid evil without making great effort to do good:

"You of virtue (we issue join),
How strive you? *De te fabula.*"

And thus does he turn an essentially immoral act into a moral sermon.

Another feature of Browning adding to our difficulty in understanding him, is that his themes are many of them foreign, and deal with obscure points of history. The humanity underlying these themes,—the love and the hate, the anger and the jealousy, the ambition and the cunning,—is indeed of the stamp that makes the whole world kin. He takes it for granted that his readers have travelled; that they are equally at home in Florence and Venice, in Paris and Geneva and Rome; that the picture-galleries of Europe are so many books in which they are well-read; that they are acquainted with the sayings and doings of prominent contemporaries; that they possess an intimate knowledge of history, and that they are familiar with the technique of music. Therefore does he claim a large share of culture in its broadest sense as a preliminary to the right understanding of his most characteristic poems. We are told that he wrote the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* for Macready's young son William; we regret that he has not done more such work with children in his mind's eye.

But as Browning is a teacher and an interpreter of life rather than an idle singer of an empty day, it behooves us to know definitely the lessons he would inculcate. To begin with, life is for him a stern reality, a matter of will, and pain, and suffering,—the good of it and the ill of it both essential to enable the soul to reach the goal of perfection. And so the poet exhorts us to welcome the pain, to persist in the strife:

"Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand, but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe."*

He is an optimist. He finds a place for every sin, a solace for every misery. Gazing on the wretched suicides in the Morgue at Paris, he says:

"I thought, and think, their sins atoned."

And in the concluding stanza of the same poem the poet thus expresses the hope that what is seemingly beyond repair shall be finally mended;

"It's wiser being good than bad;
It's safer being meek than fierce:
It's fitter being sane than mad.
My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
That after Last returns the First,

* *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

Though a wide compass round be fetched;
That what began best, can't end worst,
Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.*

Far from being properly fixed, the value of restraint and self-discipline is almost ignored in Browning's theory of life. His ideal of living is will-power carried into action. True, he would make of the evil in one's life an experience out of which one might rise to good. And so may one within clearly defined limits. But to go farther, as the poet seems to do, and make wrong-doing the essential out of which right-doing may come, were as false in art as it is false in morality. Under no circumstances is the doing of evil to be urged that good may follow. Perfection, with Browning, is not the soul's spiritual growth in holiness and conformity to the will of God. It is rather a taking hold of the goods and the ills of life indifferently as they present themselves, and utilizing them to the best advantage. Without evil there would be no growth of character; therefore does he call evil blessed.† Life, ideal life, he defines clearly enough to mean

"——learning to abhor
The false and love the true, truth treasured snatch by snatch."‡

But what is the false, what the true? False and true, instead of being contradictory, are in his philosophy supplementary one to the other. Hence in another

* *Apparent Failure.* † *Bishop Blougram's Apology.*
‡ *Fifine, p.* 421.

place he represents the dying soul as beholding evil merged in good:

"Over the ball of it,
Peering and prying,
How I see all of it,
Life there, outlying!
Roughness and smoothness,
Shine and defilement,
Grace and uncouthness;
One reconcilement.
* * * * *
"All's lend-and-borrow;
Good, see, wants evil,
Joy demands sorrow,
Angel weds devil!" *

The doctrine of Browning regarding pain is not to be identified with the pessimism or agnosticism that would sacrifice human nature to the general good without hope of personal advantage or belief in a personal God. Browning believes in a personal and a loving God. He can conceive no other:

"In youth I looked to these very skies,
And probing their immensities,
I found God there, His visible power;
Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
Of the power, an equal evidence
That His love, there too, was the nobler dower,
For the loving worm within its clod
Were diviner than a loveless god
Amid his worlds." †

* *Pisgah-Sights*, I. † *Christmas Eve.*

Browning had no patience with the agnosticism of the day. To the last, he retained his belief in certain saving truths of Christianity and in a Divine revelation. The Divintity of Christ is the great solution to all man's world-problems:

"I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ
Accepted by thy reason, *solves for thee*
All questions in the earth and out of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be wise.
Wouldst thou unprove this to re-prove the proved?—
In life's mere minute, with power to use that proof,
Leave knowledge and revert to how it sprung?
Thou hast it; use it and forthwith, or die!" *

That is, he would have men employ the short span of their lives, "life's mere minute," in living out the saving truths of Christianity rather than speculating upon them. And again, in *Ferishtah's Fancies*, a poem of his old age, written in 1883, he represents the imaginary Persian sage as counselling the disciple who in his blind zeal had cursed, kicked, and cuffed one who said:—

"God once on earth assumed a human shape,"

rather with all humility to hold in awe the great truth he does not understand—

"Fitlier thou saidst, '*I stand appalled before*
Conception unattainable by me,
Who need it most.'" †

* *A Death in the Desert.*
† *Ferishtah's Fancies*, v. *The Sun.*