Is there not here a covert rebuke to those of the present day who scorn the saving doctrine ?—

But the Christianity which Browning championed was too broad in its scope and too indefinite in its dogma to satisfy a sincere Christian soul:

> "One trims the bark 'twixt shoal and shelf,
> And sees, each side, the good effects of it,
> A value for religion's self,
> A carelessness about the sects of it.
> Let me enjoy my conviction,
> Nor watch my neighbor's faith with fretfulness,
> Still spying there some dereliction
> Of truth, perversity, forgetfulness.' *

This is a vague creed. It is the creed of indifferentism. It is not the steady, unwavering belief in definite dogmas revealed by God, and exactly defined by Him in the teachings of His visible Church. And so, whilst Browning in his own way holds by some truths of Christian revelation, he cannot in any sense or under any circumstances be set up as an expounder of Christian doctrine. At least, we Catholics prefer receiving the teachings of Christianity from our Little Catechism, from the decrees of the Councils, and the decisions of the Popes. Therein may we find the fulness of God's revelation to men so far as is needful for men's souls. Therein might Browning have received light regarding

* *Christmas Eve.*

many a problem upon which he has left enigmatic utterances. *

And yet Browning seemed to take an especial pleasure in dealing with Catholic ecclesiastical subjects: now it is monks, now it is bishops, now it is legates, now it is popes. But his treatment of these subjects is in the main void of sympathy. For a man so bold, so outspoken, and so apparently above human respect, it is astonishing to notice the persistence with which he ignores what is good, and what makes for good, in our Catholic faith, and misrepresents our ritual and ceremonies, our history, our popes and cardinals, our bishops and priests and monks. In *Christmas Eve* he describes the solemn hush, the awe and reverence accompanying the consecration of the host like one of the initiated. Elsewhere in the same poem he takes care to tell us what he thinks of it all. Cunning and worldliness and deep-laid selfishness are to his mind the leading traits of our churchmen. Mediæval Catholicity in the poems of Browning is far from being the garden of virtue Kenelm Digby has so glowingly described. The sanctifying influence of the sacraments is beyond his power of realizing. This is all the more astonishing when we remember that Browning spent the best and happiest portion of his life in Catholic Italy. "Italy,"

* See in *The Month* for February, 1890, a valuable article from the pen of the Reverend John Rickaby, S. J., on Browning as a religious teacher.

said he, "was my university." Except Pompilia in *The Ring and the Book*, of all his elaborately drawn characters he has scarcely left one in which the spirit of Catholicity has had a wholesome influence. He never learned to appreciate the earnestness and sincerity of this people's faith; except in the case mentioned, and perhaps in the beautiful character of Pippa, he has given but little evidence that he realized how to every Catholic his faith is as much a living presence as the material world. He simply presents those types of Catholics that constitute the stock-in-trade of Protestant fiction. That a man of his intelligence and natural inquisitiveness could have lived his days without ever noticing the flowers of Catholic piety that must have bloomed in every village in Italy, is another instance of the power of prejudice to blindfold the acutest, so that, having eyes they see not. Cardinal Newman told us long ago, as a deliberate opinion learned from his own experience, "that no conceivable absurdities can surpass the absurdities which are firmly believed of Catholics by sensible, kind-hearted, well-intentioned Protestants." *

There are noble exceptions to this imperviousness. Francesca, who has given us the pathetic *Story of Ida*, lived in the same town and breathed the same atmosphere with Browning. Her womanly, sympathetic soul learned to appreciate the inner Catholic spirit that she perceived. She found the beautiful wayside flowers of

* *Present Position of Catholics in England, p.* 41.

peasant poetry in Catholic Tuscany, so instinct with fervid Catholic devotion, possessed of a fascination that she could not resist, and she gathered a charming bouquet, fresh with the morning dews of piety, and large-hearted, noble-thinking John Ruskin tied them together with a beautiful ribbon of praise and commendation, and we inhale their fragrance and find it refreshing. And passing from the pages of this simple poesy, which reveals to us genuine Catholic Italian life, and which is so redolent of earth and sky, back to Browning's interpretations of Italian sentiment—to his records of crime and sinister motive and rampant passion — is like shutting out the light and air of heaven, and working amid the sickening odors of the dissecting room. The Puritanism of Browning's nature entered into his art and made it as cold and crotchety and narrow in sentiment as the religion of Puritanism itself. His subjects are largely drawn from the Italian chronicles of the seventeenth century. I fear that Browning's friend Stendhal did him but a doubtful service in putting within his reach, and directing his attention to,these revolting tales of crime.

No doubt the poet's aptitudes for interpreting certain phases of life were better than for picturing certain other phases. He had to consult his limitations. We dare say Browning could interpret the soul-workings of a Fra Lippo Lippi far better than those of a Fra Angelico, or the grovellings of a sensual and jealous Spanish friar more accurately than the aspirations of a Philip

Neri; or he could concentrate the bad side of the Renaissance spirit—"its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin," to borrow Ruskin's words *—in his poem *The Bishop orders his Tomb*, more powerfully than he could the good spirit of that period as illustrated in the words and acts of a Carlo Borromeo. But while we accept his work at its full value, it is proper that we enter protest against his interpretations being taken as the correct measure of Catholic life and Catholic faith. It is proper that, while we may admire his soul-studies—whether he depicts the disintegration of a sordid soul made dizzy by success, as in *A Soul's Tragedy*, or whether he shows the budding forth of a soul into life and light, raised up beyond the ambitions of place and power at the first touch of true love, as in *Colombe's Birthday*—we should refuse to accept his spiritual and religious teaching, wherever they in the least diverge from what we as Catholics believe to be true in faith and morals.

But in spite of all Browning's shortcomings—and his shortcomings are numerous as regards both matter and form—he is still a great poet, the full measure of whose greatness the present age has not yet taken. He is truly many-sided in his themes. He can be tender, and delicate, and pathetic. He can be humorous and tragical; he can be lyrical with a melody deep and subtle and controlling measures from the simple to the intricate; he

* *Modern Painters*, vol. iv., p. 379.

can tell a story with a life and energy that specially fit into his verse—witness *The Good News from Ghent*, and *Hervé Riel;*—he can build up a philosophical thought in his rugged verse. He is the poet of intense passion in its varied moods, from fierce hate to love in all its kinds and in all its degrees. In that lyric tragedy, suggested by a picture of Maclise's, *In a Gondola*, the dying victim is so absorbed in his guilty love that even the pain of his death-wound is numbed. In *Evelyn Hope*, one of Browning's most tender and pathetic lyrics, all time is annihilated in the heart of the lover as he sits by his child-love, whom—

> "God's Hand beckoned unawares,—
> And the sweet white brow is all of her;"

and in the intensity of his feelings he claims her as his in the future—

> "You will wake, and remember, and understand."

In *The Laboratory*, note the joy with which the jealous woman in her frenzy gloats over the poison that is being prepared for her rival. You can hear the hiss of hate in her voice and feel its scorching in her breath. Was ever passion so concentrated into words? Every expression in these poems is a passionate spark; every line is a flame.

Browning is unique as a master of the monologue. Take, for instance, one of the most perfect poems he has written, *Karshish, the Arab Physician*. Karshish, "the picker-up of learning's crumbs," writes to a brother

physician, "Abib, all-sagacious in our art," an account of his meeting with Lazarus, who had been raised from the dead. He pretends to treat the miracle in an off-hand manner, as something every physician can explain—

> " 'Tis but a case of mania—sub-induced
> By epilepsy, at the turning-point
> Of trance prolonged unduly some three days."

Even in such glib words would our own un-Christian medical experts decide upon the nature and cause of an approved miracle at Lourdes. Indeed, Karshish simply mentions the event to fill up his letter, and as part of other seemingly far more important news. But in order to make his report of the case complete—

> ——" (in writing to a leech
> 'Tis well to keep back nothing of a case) "——

he tells how Lazarus regards Jesus as none other than God Himself:

> " This man so cured regards the curer, then,
> As—God forgive me! who but God Himself,
> Creator and sustainer of the world,
> That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile! "—

And then, after repeating other sayings of Lazarus, he grows impatient and assumes indifference to him and his sayings as those of a madman!

> ——" But why all this of what he saith?
> Why write of trivial matters, things of price
> Calling at every moment for remark? "

And at once he turns to acquaint him of a species of plant that he noticed:—

> " I noticed on the margin of a pool
> Blue-flowering borage, the Aleppo sort,
> Aboundeth, very nitrous. *It is strange!* "

The last words show that, his seeming indifference notwithstanding, the story of Lazarus still haunts him, and after another apology for its prolixity—

> "Once more thy pardon and farewell,"

the whole force and truth and sublimity of the Incarnation flashes forth in a postscript:

> " The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too——
> So, through the thunder comes a human voice
> Saying, ' O heart I made, a heart beats here!
> Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
> Thou hast no power nor may'st conceive of mine,
> But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
> And thou must love me who have died for thee! '
> The madman saith He said so: it is strange."

The power of imagination that created that poem, with all its depth and subtlety of thought, is of a superior order. And a greater feat still—the master-piece of Browning's life—is the *Ring and the Book*. The poet comes across the verbal process of a domestic tragedy that happened several hundred years ago. An Italian nobleman murders his young wife and her parents under peculiar circumstances, and suffers the death-penalty. The poet breathes a spirit into the document and resuscitates the life of the period. He gives the very throbbings of the popular pulse under the consternation caused

by the red-handed act. You have two versions of the ordinary people and their comments upon the motives that led to it, upon the morning after it had been perpetrated—one favoring the husband and one the wife; you have a third version showing

> "What the superior social section thinks,
> In person of some men of quality;"

you have the special pleadings pro and con in the courts; you have the cool and cynical version of the murderer, confident in the prestige of his noble name—biting, sarcastic, thoroughly wicked; you have the pathetic story of Pompilia before her death, the child-wife and mother—parting with her two-weeks old babe—so tender and pure—so docile in her obedience to parents and husband—so strong to resist temptation—so resigned to God's will in her sufferings and her tragic death;—altogether, you have ten different versions of the same event according to the various points of view and the degrees of interest different persons or classes of persons take in it—

> ——"Learn one lesson hence,
> Of many which whatever lives should teach,
> The lesson that our human speech is nought
> Our human testimony false, our fame
> And human estimation words and wind."

It is a lesson that Browning has been inculcating from *Sordello* to *Fifine;* namely, that words frequently fall short of the full expression of truth, and that the fullest expression is to be found in the representation of art:

> ——"It is the glory and good of Art,
> That Art remains the one way possible
> Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least. . . .
> But Art,—wherein man nowise speaks to men,
> Only to mankind,—Art may tell a truth
> Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
> Nor wrong the thought missing the mediate word.
> So may you paint your picture, twice show truth
> Beyond mere imagery on the wall,—
> So note by note bring music from your mind
> Deeper than ever the Andante dived,——
> So write a book shall mean beyond the facts
> Suffice the eye and save the soul beside." *

Such is the kind of book Browning has been striving to give us all along—

> ——"A book shall mean beyond the facts
> Suffice the eye and save the soul beside,"——

and it is for us to get at the meaning beyond the facts and learn the greater truth. Furthermore, it is because of this deeper meaning, and of the poet's many-sided manner of regarding truth, that he seems so lavish of phrase and clause, each throwing light on different aspects of the proposition he would state, and employs involved sentences with parenthetical side-glances and elaborate digressions. The reading of such sentences is wearisome work, but when the sentences are grasped in all their bearings you find that no line, or clause, or phrase can be spared. Having done his utmost—

* *The Ring and the Book*, book, xii., 838–63.

and he tells us that he did his utmost—in the art to which his life was a devotion, he may well say: "Nor do I apprehend any more charges of being wilfully obscure, unconscientiously careless, or perversely harsh."* In the long list of his writings, from *Pauline* with its immaturities to *Asolando*, in which the poet for the last time runs his fingers along the various chords of his lyre, and strikes clearly and accurately the diverse notes at his command, there is much—however unwilfully so—that is obscure and unsatisfactory to the ordinary reader; nay, with his friend, biographer, and admirer we may add, that "of all his faults, the worst is that jugglery, that inferior legerdemain, with the elements of the beautiful in verse;" † but after making due allowance for his shortcomings, we can still find much in his poetry that is intensely earnest and suggestive, much that is new, fresh, broadening, and formative. ‡ Browning is one of the great forces in English literature.

Turn we now to an opposite pole from Browning in method of thinking and in form of expression.

* *Selections from Browning.* Dedicatory Letters to Tennyson, 1872.

† William Sharp, *Life of Browning*, p. 205.

‡ Cardinal Wiseman thus concludes his review of Browning's *Men and Women:* "For ourselves, we thank Mr. Browning, sceptical and reckless as he is, for a rare treat in these thoughtful and able volumes. . . . Though much of their matter is extremely offensive to Catholics, yet beneath the surface there is an undercurrent of thought that is by no means inconsistent with our religion." *The Rambler.*, Jan., 1856, p. 71.

XI.

I SHALL not dilate at length upon Tennyson. He has no peer among the world-singers of the day. He is deservedly popular. He has made his art the earnest study of a long life. From the feeble poetic touch of *Oriana* (1830) to the firm artistic grasp of *Rizpah* (1880) the distance in degree of merit far outnumbers the distance in years. But the delicacy and strength and finish in Tennyson's later work came to him after intense labor carried on without intermission for nigh half a century. It is not spontaneous. No poet has been more reserved about himself than has Tennyson. Still, in the comparative study of the various editions of no poet's works can you more clearly trace the development of the poet's mind and the growth in his firmness of artistic touch. You have all grown familiar with his beautiful thoughts, his noble ideals of life, his rare delicacy of expression, his exquisite taste, his conservatism in imagery, in propriety of conduct, and in the use of words. Unlike Browning frequently, and Goethe at times, he carries very few enigmas on his sleeve for the reading world to puzzle over. Unlike Wordsworth, he is reticent about self and very sparing in words. Minds open to his impressions and yield to his influence more easily than to the impressions and the influence of Wordsworth or Browning. Unfortunately, the Tennyson that is known to many readers is a traditional Tennyson, the measure of whose genius is determined by a few of his early