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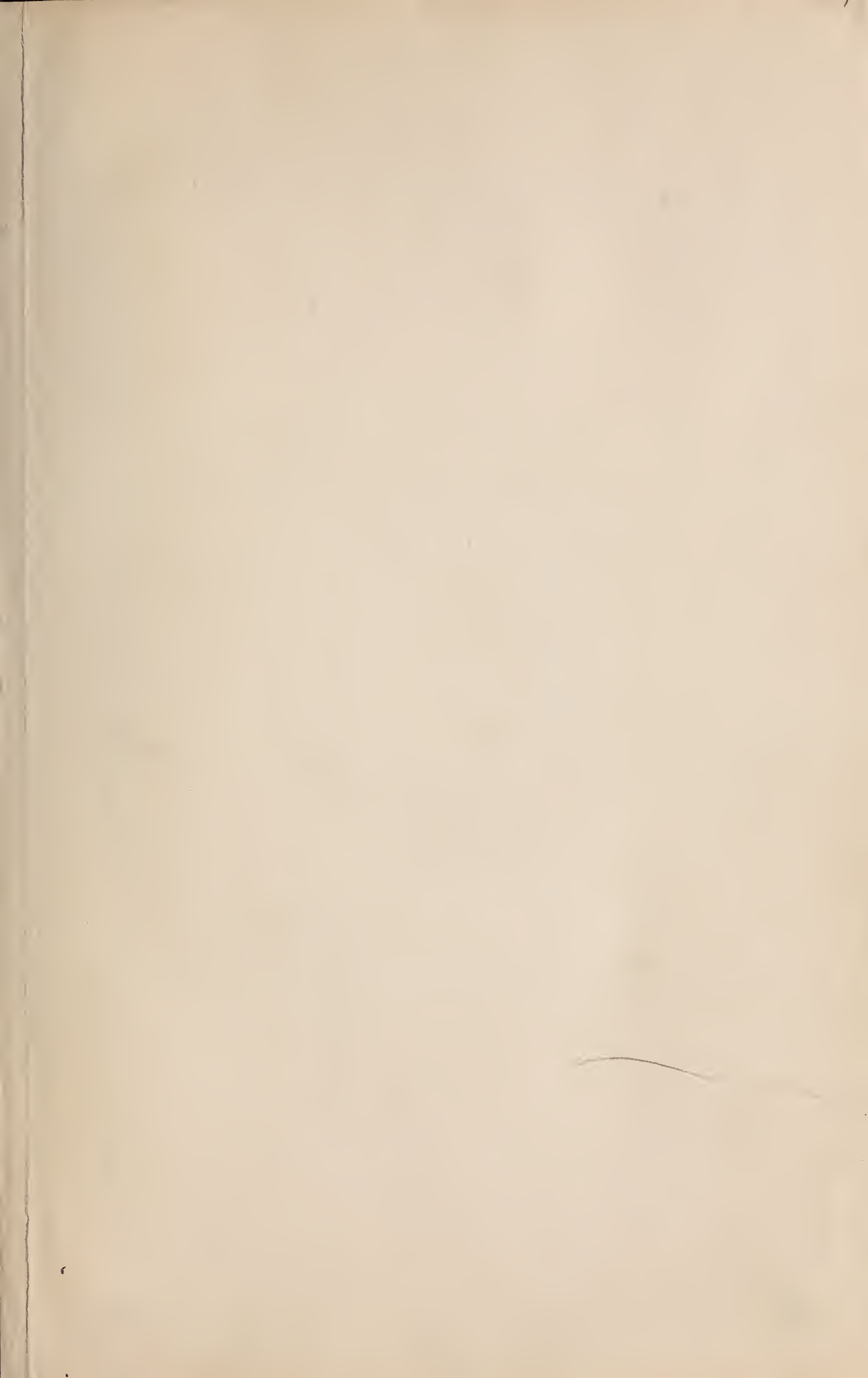

# BROWNING'S PLACE IN LITERATURE

BY

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# BROWNING'S PLACE IN LITERATURE*

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With one exception, the economic law of supply and demand governs the production of literature exactly as it determines the price of wheat. For the last fifty years, the Novel has been the chief channel of literary expression, the dominant literary form; in the days of Elizabeth, the Drama was supreme. During the early part of the eighteenth century, theological poetry enjoyed a great vogue. Pope's "Essay on Man" sold off like a modern detective story. The history of the English Sonnet is interesting. This form of verse was exceedingly popular in 1600: by 1660 it had practically disappeared, and remained obsolete for nearly a hundred years: in the middle of the eighteenth century it was "revived," during the nineteenth century became exceedingly fashionable, and is still right in style, as one may see by opening almost any current magazine. Why is it that writers chose to put their ideas on God, nature and man, in the form of a drama in 1600, and in the form of a novel in 1900? Why is it that inspired men should make poems of fourteen lines in 1580 and in 1880, and not do it in 1680? If we do not attempt an ultimate analysis, the answer is clear. The bookseller supplies the public, the publisher supplies the bookseller, and the author supplies

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the publisher. A bookseller will have on his shelves what the people want, and the publisher will furnish material in response to the same desire, just as a farmer plants in his fields some foodstuff for which there is a sharp demand. Authors are compelled to write for the market, whether they like it or not, otherwise they cannot get their work into print. The reason why the modern novel, with all its faults, is so full of ideas on every conceivable topic in religious, educational, political, economic, and sociological thought, is because the vast majority of writers are at this moment forced to put their reflections into the form of novels, just as Marlowe and Chapman had to write plays. With one exception, the law of supply and demand determines the metrical shape of the poet's frenzy, and the prose mould of the philosopher's ideas.

The exception is so rare that it establishes the rule. The exception is Genius — the scarcest article on earth. And even Genius often follows the market — it takes the prevailing literary fashion, and adapts itself to the form in vogue in an incomparably excellent way. Such Genius — the Genius for Adaptation — never has to wait long for recognition, simply because it supplies a tremendous popular demand. Such a Genius was Shakespeare; such a Genius was Pope; such a Genius was Scott; such a Genius was Byron; such a Genius was Tennyson. But the real exception to the great economic law is found in the Man of Original Genius, who cares nothing for the thing in vogue except perhaps to destroy it. This man is entirely outside the law of supply and demand, because he supplies nothing to meet any demand, and there is absolutely no demand for him. Indeed, he has

to create the demand as well as the supply. Such a man in Music was Wagner; such a man in the Drama was Ibsen; and such a man in Poetry was Browning. These men had to wait long for recognition, because nobody was looking for them, nobody wanted them. There was no demand for Wagner's music — but there is now, and he made it. There was no demand for plays like those of Ibsen; and there was not the least demand for poetry like "Pauline" or the "Dramatic Lyrics." The reason why the public does not immediately recognize the greatness of a work of original genius, is because the public at first apprehends only its strangeness. It is so unlike the thing the public is seeking, that it seems merely grotesque or absurd — many indeed declare that it is exactly the opposite of what it professes to be. Thus, many insisted that Ibsen's dramas were not plays at all; they were merely conversations on social topics. In like manner, the critics said that Wagner, whatever he composed, did not compose music; for instead of making melodies, he made harsh and discordant sounds. And, for nearly eighty years, many men of learning and culture have been loudly proclaiming that Browning, whatever he was, was not a poet; he was clever, he was thoughtful, a philosopher, if you like, but surely no poet. When "The Ring and the Book" was published, a thoroughly respectable English critic wrote, "Music does not exist for him any more than for the deaf."

Nothing is more singular to contemplate than the variations in form of what the public calls Melody, both in notation and in language. What delights the ears of one generation distresses or

wearies the ears of another. Elizabethan audiences listened with rapture to long harangues in bombastic blank verse; a modern audience cannot endure them. The senses of Queen Anne Englishmen were charmed by what they called the melody of Pope's verse — by its even regularity and steady flow. Pope had the audacity to "versify" the Satires of Donne. To us Pope's verse is full of wit and cerebration, but we find the measure intolerably monotonous. Indeed, by a curious irony of fate, Pope, who regarded himself supremely as a Poet, has since frequently been declared no poet at all. Keats wrote "Endymion" in the Heroic Couplet — the very measure employed by Pope. But his use of it was so different that this poem would have seemed utterly lacking in melody to Augustan ears — Pope would not have hesitated to "versify" it. And yet we like it. It seems ridiculous to say that the man who wrote "Der fliegende Holländer" and "Tannhäuser" could not write melody, and yet it was almost universally said. It is strange that critics should say that the man who wrote "Evelyn Hope" and "Love Among the Ruins" could not write rhythmical verse, and yet such was once almost the universal opinion. Still, the rebellious instinct of the public that condemned Wagner in music and Browning in poetry was founded on something genuine; for Wagner was unlike other musicians, and Browning was unlike other poets. They did not give the public what the public really thought it wanted. They were Leaders, not Followers.

Fraser's Magazine, for December, 1833, contained a review of "Pauline," from which the follow-

ing paragraph is worth quoting: — " '*Non dubito quin titulus,*' etc., quotes the author of 'Pauline,' our next poem, from Cornelius Agrippa; which we, shearing the sentence of its lengthy continuation, translate thus: — 'We are under no kind of doubt about the title to be given to you, my poet;' you being, beyond all question, as mad as Cassandra, without any of the power to prophesy like her, or to construct a connected sentence like anybody else. We have already had a Monomaniac; and we designate you 'The Mad Poet of the Batch;' as being mad not in one direction only, but in all. A little lunacy, like a little knowledge, would be a dangerous thing."

There were, of course, some men of discernment, like Fox, Mill, and others, who recognized instantly the extraordinary, if undeveloped power displayed in this poem; but Fraser's review adequately voiced the sentiment of the majority of those who read it for the first time.

It is utterly impossible to understand Browning's poetry or to discover his place in literature without firmly fixing in the mind what his theory of poetry actually was, and at the same time fully comprehending his ideal and his aim. Fortunately he gave us in "Pauline," a definite statement on this subject. He clearly set forth his theory of the function of the poet, and although he was only twenty years old when he wrote it, he never wavered or departed from this standard.

> *And then thou said'st a perfect bard was one*
> *Who chronicled the stages of all life.*

These two lines furnish the key to Browning's entire poetic career.

What is most remarkable about this definition of poetry is what it leaves out. The average man regards poetry as being primarily concerned with the creation of Beauty. Not a word is said about Beauty in Browning's theory. The average man regards poetry as being necessarily melodious, rhythmical, tuneful, above all, pleasing to the senses; indeed, the sensations of many readers of poetry are chiefly physical — they wish to be soothed by agreeable recurrence of rhyme, even as a cat enjoys the soothing strokes along its back. But Browning makes no allusion to rhyme or rhythm; not even to melody or music of any kind. To him the bard is the Reporter of Life, the man who observes human nature in its various forms, and gives a faithful account of it. And, exactly in proportion to his power to accomplish this, is the poet great; if he correctly describes a wide stretch of life, he is greater than if he has succeeded in a narrow range; and the Perfect Bard is the one who chronicles the stages of *all* life. Shakespeare is the supreme poet because he has approached nearer to this ideal than any one else — he has chronicled nearly every phase of humanity, and has accurately portrayed an infinite variety of character. The poet's verses at times will be beautiful, because then he is chronicling some phase of beauty. Browning had no difficulty in writing melodiously when he placed the posy in his Ring, although just a moment before he was anything but musical. His picture of the triple light at sunset in the "Last Ride" is almost intolerably beautiful, because such a scene fairly overwhelms the senses. Pompilia's dying speech of adoring passion for Caponsacchi is sublime music,

because the thought demands it. On the other hand, the two books devoted to the lawyers are jolting doggerel, because each lawyer was a pedantic and self-satisfied ass. The criticisms directed against Browning's lack of artistic beauty immediately fade if we only understand his theory of poetry. How could the man who wrote such flowing and noble music as we find in "Saul" also have written such impossible harsh stuff as "Mr. Sludge, the Medium"? The answer is that in the former poem he was chronicling a stage of life that in its very essence was Beauty; in the latter, something exactly the opposite. And in each case, the style fits the thought and the character. Browning regards the poet as primarily the Interpreter of Life; and life has its trivialities and its uglinesses, as well as its sublime aspirations. It is always interesting to observe in Browning's poetry, that whenever the thought rises, the style automatically rises with it.

This theory of poetry Browning not only endeavored to exemplify in his work — he often distinctly repeated it. In "The Glove," while all the court, hide-bound by conventional ideas, unite in deriding the lady, Peter Ronsard is deeply interested in discovering the motives that underlay the lady's action. He runs after her.

> I followed after,
> And asked, as a grace, what it all meant?
> If she wished not the rash deed's recallment?
> 'For I' — so I spoke — 'am a poet:
> Human nature, — behoves that I know it!'

In "Transcendentalism," we are informed that the real poet deals with the concrete, not with the

abstract. Transcendentalism is not a fit subject for poetry, because it deals with a philosophical idea, whereas it ought to discuss men and women. Botany is compared with roses, to the great disadvantage of the former. A few pedants may like botany, but humanity prefers flowers. In "How it Strikes a Contemporary," which Browning finally placed immediately after "Transcendentalism," as though to illustrate further his meaning, the true poet is quite naturally mistaken for a Spy. He is indeed a spy, if he be a real poet; he is a spy on human life.

He walked and tapped the pavement with his cane,
Scenting the world, looking it full in face . . .
He took such cognizance of men and things,
If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
If any cursed a woman, he took note.

The true poet *scents* the world, smells it out. A still stronger expression is used in "Christmas Eve." Here the poet actually *pries* at life.

> As I declare our Poet, him
> Whose insight makes all others dim:
> A thousand poets pried at life,
> And only one amid the strife
> Rose to be Shakespeare.

From first to last Browning understood the prevailing criticism of his poetry, directed against his lack of musical rhythm. He commented on it more than once in his work. But he answered it always in the same way, in "Pippa Passes," in the last stanzas of "Pacchiarotto," and in the "Epilogue" to the same volume. He insisted that what

the critics really meant by Melody was the childish jingle of rhymes like Mother Goose. Referring to "Sordello," he makes the Second Student in "Pippa" remark, "Instead of cramp couplets, each like a knife in your entrails, he should write, says Bluphocks, both classically and intelligibly. . . . *One strip Cools your lip. . . . One bottle Clears your throttle.*" In "Pacchiarotto," he calls to his critics

> And, what with your rattling and tinkling,
> Who knows but you give me an inkling
> How music sounds, thanks to the jangle
> Of regular drum and triangle?
> Whereby, tap-tap, chink-chink, 't is proven
> I break rule as bad as Beethoven.
> "That chord now — a groan or a grunt is 't?
> Schumann's self was no worse contrapuntist.
> No ear! or if ear, so tough-gristled —
> He thought that he sung while he whistled!"

In the "Epilogue," Browning says that flowers growing here and there in a pasture are much better than cut and gathered into a nosegay, and that the fields of his verse really have the cowslips. Changing the figure, and replying to those who say that his wine has strength but not sweetness, body but not bouquet, he declares that new wine is always heady, but that it will grow sweet with age. To the present generation his verse seems unpalatable; future generations will enjoy it.

Browning felt too that there was at times a certain virtue in mere roughness; that there were certain thoughts, which, if expressed in harsh phrase, would make a deeper impression, and be longer remembered. The opening stanza of "The Twins" emphasizes this idea: —

> Grand rough old Martin Luther
> Bloomed fables — flowers on furze,
> The better the uncouther:
> Do roses stick like burrs?

Such a theory must be recalled to explain such a line as

> *Irks care the cropfull bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?*

Of course Browning's theory of poetry does not justify all the unmusical passages in his works. He felt, as every poet must, the difficulty of articulation — the disparity between his ideas and the verbal form he gave them. He had his faults and limitations of expression, and realized them keenly. The Pope insists with intense energy that in the next world there will be some means of communication far better than language. His feeling on the matter is so strong that he undoubtedly represents some of the trials in composition that afflicted the poet: —

> Expect nor question nor reply
> At what we figure as God's judgment bar!
> None of this vile way by the barren words
> Which, more than any deed, characterize
> Man as made subject to a curse: no speech.

Finally, at the very end of "The Ring and the Book," Browning declared that human testimony was false, a statement that will be supported by any lawyer or judge of much court experience. Human testimony being worthless, there remains only one way for the Poet to tell the truth, and that

is through his Art. The poet should use his art not primarily with the idea of creating something beautiful, but with the purpose of expressing the actual truth about human life. The highest art is the highest veracity — and this was Browning's theory of poetry — this was his ideal, and by adhering to this he hoped to save his soul. Like the truly great artists, he felt deeply the responsibility of his splendid endowment. In one of his early letters, he said, "I must write poetry and save my soul." And in the last few lines of his "Ring and the Book" he repeated this thought.

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
(Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence
Of many which whatever lives should teach:
This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind.
Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
Because, 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 e'en Beethoven dived, —
So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.

Browning's place in English literature is not with the great verse-sculptors, not with the Masters of the imperishable beauty of Form; he does not

belong to the glorious company where reign supreme Milton, Keats, and Tennyson; his place is rather with the Interpreters of Life, with the poets who use their art to express the shine and shadow of Life's tragi-comedy — to whom the base, the trivial, the frivolous, the grotesque, the absurd seem worth reporting, along with the pure, the noble, and the sublime, since all these elements are equally human. In this wide field of art, with the exception of Shakespeare, who is the exception to everything, the first-born and the last-born of all the great English poets know no equal in the five centuries that rolled between them. The first person to say this publicly was himself a poet, and a student of Form — Walter Savage Landor. When he said it, people thought it was mere hyperbole, the stressed language of compliment; but we know now that Landor's words are as true as they are beautiful.

> Shakespeare is not our poet, but the world's,
> Therefore on him no speech! and brief for thee,
> Browning! Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
> No man hath walk'd along our roads with step
> So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
> So varied in discourse.

Browning waited with patient cheerfulness over thirty years for fame, but it came at last. He never lacked a few discriminating admirers, but he had no public until 1864. His wonderful "Bells and Pomegranates," which contain some of his best work, attracted no wide attention; and at the time of his marriage to Elizabeth Barrett in 1846, his reputation was nothing in comparison with hers. It was spoken of as the runaway match between a

young literary man and a woman of genius. Not even the publication of the fifty "Men and Women," universally known as these poems are to-day, made any impression on England. So late as 1860, when the publisher's copyright statement for the preceding six months arrived, it appeared that during those six months not one single copy of "Men and Women" had been sold! Mrs. Browning died with not the slightest public ratification of her faith in her husband's powers. But in 1864, with the "Dramatis Personæ," a group of undergraduates at Oxford became wildly enthusiastic over the poet who had been steadily publishing works of genius since 1833; their enthusiasm communicated itself to the British public; and a second edition of this volume was printed during the year. Then Browning's reputation grew with a rapidity that more than atoned for the years of silence. Five years later, on the completion of the publication of the "Ring and the Book," a critic confidently asserted, that the poem was not only "the supremest poetical achievement of our time," but the "most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has received since the days of Shakespeare." Since then Browning's poems have become a portion of English speech. The language of his men and women constantly appears in English books, with the absence of quotation marks, the highest compliment one author can pay to another.

Not only are his works now familiar to all English-speaking people, but there is every sign of his becoming a world-poet. He has enormously influenced modern thought everywhere; his poems are being translated into foreign languages, and one of

the greatest living men of letters, Maurice Maeterlinck, did not hesitate to borrow a scene in "Monna Vanna" directly from "Luria." The present writer was the first to notice this, and in response to his observation, he received a personal letter from M. Maeterlinck, which is interesting as the evidence of Browning's continental fame. "I am," wrote the Belgian dramatist, "an ardent admirer of Browning. He is to me one of the greatest poets that England has ever had. He is one of the great poets of the world, whom every one is supposed to know. Borrowing from him is a kind of public homage, just as one borrows daily from Homer, Æschylus, or Shakespeare." There are not wanting English critics who are still loudly predicting the approaching death of Browning's name; but they are as powerless before the rising tide of his reputation as the old king was before the incoming sea. His poetry was built to last, and it cannot be destroyed, either by the nibbling tooth of criticism or the sharper tooth of time. The exact place he will hold in the distant future it is now impossible to predict; but his works cannot die, because as Elizabeth Barrett wrote many years ago, they have in them the "principle of life."

Wm Lyon Phelps

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