BROWNING AND TENNYSON

J. M. ROBERTSON

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Two Studies

BY

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I.

FOR the lover of poetry, it must be avowed, there is a certain irksomeness in the task of analysing for its message the work of a poet, whose due function is to delight. Poets, it cannot too often be said, are not by rights teachers. To try them primarily and finally by the test of their doctrinal rightness, whether in philosophy or in moral precept, is to pass out of the field of æsthetics, where alone poetry as such can be judged, and to frame for it alien laws, which to obey would mean the surrender of its right of existence. What is more, it means the loss, for those who follow that procedure, of the whole priceless ministry of poetic art. To make instruction the first instead of the last function of any of the fine arts is to bring them as arts to naught. This much must always be maintained, in the endless discussion as to the relations of art and morality. Indeed, perhaps the best way to bring that discussion to close quarters, and to end it, is to admit and even insist that the artist, as such, is not necessarily a moral organism; and that just because morality has no jurisdiction over his work, not only is he not specially a moral influence, but he tends not

infrequently to be an anti-moral one, while retaining artistic superiority. It is a matter of normal function. The essence of morality is an anxious comparison and control of the impulses of conduct, to the end of perfecting action as between man and man. The essence or ideal of art commonly so-called is the perfecting of an action pursued for itself and its outcome apart from the artist's human relations. And it stands to reason that while the artist, working in ideas and sensations aloof from human communion, *may* be constitutionally a highly moralised type, there is no security in his work for his becoming so, and there is a fair chance that he shall not clearly realise moral responsibilities. Moral indifferentism, in fact, might be regarded as the special defect to his special quality; just as it is to be said that the moralist, though he *may* have great artistic gifts, is on the whole more likely to lack them.

But this discrimination, which may seem to have settled the question as to the relations of art and morals, and by consequence the relations of art and philosophy, is really only the preliminary plain statement of the problem of practice. For while the artistic activity and the moral activity are very different and indeed incommensurable, it remains perfectly true that art, so-called, tends to connect with morals. Just as all science is interdependent, so all art is interdependent; and

morality in the end, or the end of morality, is properly to be defined as the art of life in terms of human relationships. Now, this being so, the artist—as distinct from the mere caterer—can at most only seem to be out of all relation to morals in his work, in respect, it may be, that his particular province of art chances to have very few directly human associations, or very few or indeterminate connections with social emotion.

Thus music, though it certainly has such associations and connections in abundance, touches for us very vaguely on morals, because the connections are so deeply embedded in physical structure, in the mysteries of body which underlie and evolve the phenomena of mind, that we cannot yet dissect them out with any certainty. Again, a nocturne of Mr. Whistler's represents, I suppose, as purely artistic an activity as the imitative arts have to show; and yet, though we seem here to be dealing solely with æsthetic impressions, it is only a matter of time and trouble to trace out the minute connections between the sensations such pictures set up, and the admittedly moral or social sensations. Nothing, indeed, is more striking in this regard than the way in which artists of Mr. Whistler's school, who suppose themselves to dismiss all moral significance from art, will yet introduce the most emphatically moral associations into their mere descriptions of

his pictures. And when we pass watchfully from the artistic treatment of sense appearances, as ostensibly apart from moral relations, to the pictorial art which directly sets forth moral relations, it becomes clear that there is not and cannot be any absolute break between the two extremes, even if one extreme be the most disinterested impressionism and the other the most meretricious story-painting and didactic sentimentalism.

But if this holds good of the arts of sound and form and color, it is doubly obvious as regards the arts of speech; and it gives us the final justification for our study of a poet as teacher. We may wish, perhaps, that the poet would *not* theologise, just as we may immensely prefer, say, Mr. Greiffenhagen's 'Idyll' to any semi-didactic picture whatever; but if we can rise above our predilections for scientific purposes we shall admit that the poet, half the time, really cannot help himself.

The case lies in a nutshell. Poetry is just beautiful metrical speech, speech become beautiful by selection of terms and cadences; and the poet's success lies not in his thinking proper but in the way he expresses his thought. He is not, as such, a philosopher, any more than he is a historian. Yet he must needs speak about what he feels about; and since he cannot, like Mr. Whistler, lay aside his proper art and appeal

didactically to his fellows by another medium; since his medium is always words, and he naturally seeks for the advantage which poetic art gives him over prose, it is almost a matter of course that he should seek to teach and persuade concerning some matters of very general concern, although they are matters on which it is the especial business of other men, not poets, to teach and persuade. And we must concede his right, even in the province of æsthetics. After all, Keats's Ode to a Nightingale is a kind of didacticism; only it is so highly generalised and subtilised that for all of us it passes into emotion spontaneously, as ether into air. The trouble for the theological or ethical poet, as we shall see, is that he precariously follows the ancient bent to turn the general into a particular, to precipitate, as it were, the infinite mystery of things, instead of rising up to it for relief from the pressure of finite detail.

In fact, though it may sound perverse to say so, the poet as such is a realistic, or, in the non-philosophic sense, a materialistic instead of an idealistic person. His art is, as Milton of old saw, simple, sensuous, passionate; so that, if he ever passes from his happy task of giving the sensuous and the passionate their most refined and ennobled expression, he is just as like as not to drag down the abstract and the transcendent to

the level of the sensuous, passionately combatting the austere denial of knowledge, the stern avowal of human impotence and nescience. And that is, of course, the immemorial tendency of all religion. The poet is constitutionally only too apt to play the theologian. If he does not, it is because he chances to have the natural gift of mental science, as the artist may chance to have that or the gift of morals. In a word, he is apt not only to theologise but to do so rather worse than usual. And all the while he not only ranks with many as a teacher, but has an influence utterly disproportionate to the real value of his thought. When people quote such lines as

> "Well roars the storm for those who hear
> A deeper voice across the storm,"

they really think they have settled the theistic controversy. The felicity and the music of the phrase transfigure its purport, so that men hail as a great saying and a deep thought that which, put in plain prose, they would see to be unoriginal and indecisive. When a proposition becomes a classic quotation, its weight is scriptural with the many who do all their higher thinking at secondhand. Thus it comes about that as the painted ideas and ideals of ignorant artists, good and bad, great and small, crystallise falsely for men the facts of history and especially of reli-

gious history, so do the philosophisings of poets confirm men in unphilosophic solutions of the riddle of the painful earth. And if artist and poet necessarily fulfil themselves in these misguidances of their fellows, just as necessarily must others of us fulfil ourselves in gainsaying them. Where they mislead, we must protest. If it be meet for them by the medium of art to propagate their controversial notions of things, it must be meet for us, setting the merit of the art aside, to criticise their notions like anybody else's.

II.

Without more ado, let us look into the theology, the ethic, of the most artistic, the most art-loving, of all our modern poets, perhaps of all the poets of our tongue. If the foregoing thesis did not serve, it would suffice to say that he himself has forced us to reckon with him as a moralist. Of all modern poets Tennyson most remarkably combines the didactic temper with the love of exquisite performance: in the hey-day of his young fame he put sermons in his songs; and not merely has he obtruded his theology on his readers a hundred times, vacillating and inconsistent as it is: he has again and again attacked men of another way of thinking, not only with arrogance but with fanaticism.

I wish at the outset to dwell on this marked temperamental difference between Lord Tennyson and the other great theological poet of his day. Browning's mind was certainly no less theological, it was indeed much more spontaneously and confidently believing, than Tennyson's; and yet I cannot recall in all his work a trace of that bitter *odium theologicum* which Tennyson so often breathes, any more than a trace of that fleshly lust for war which in Tennyson is no less flagrant than his pietism. Browning, indeed, could strike a far angrier blow than Tennyson on purely personal provocation; so provoked, he could even be ignoble; but on grounds of mere opinion he seems to have been incapable of malice; whereas Tennyson could become on such grounds distinctly malevolent; so much so that ignobleness is not far off.

Singular are the physiological differences of men; and it is impossible not to feel the value of the clue given us by our knowledge of the physique of our two poets. Browning was physically an optimist, with a continuous level of high spirits. Tennyson, indeed, outlived his more strenuous contemporary, but at a far lower level of vitality. Tennyson, we know, inherited physical strength or toughness with nervous defects on both sides of the house. His father was often gloomy and miserable; and in 1839 he describes

his mother as "grovelling on the floor in an extremity of fear" in a thunderstorm.* We shall often find him intelligible only in terms of his own saying:—"People do not consider that every human being is a vanful of human beings, of those who have gone before him, and of those who form part of his life."† Among his van-load were not only the often unkind and often despairing father, and the mother who grovelled for fear in a thunderstorm, but ancestors such as the Calvinist aunt "who would weep for hours because God was so infinitely good." "'Has he not damned,' she cried, 'most of my friends? But *me*, *me* He has picked out for eternal salvation, *me* who am no better than my neighbours?' One day she said to her nephew, 'Alfred, Alfred, when I look at you, I think of the words of Holy Scripture—Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.'"‡

It was an abnormal stock; and we have the record that the poet in his youth called himself "the most morbid of all the Tennysons". In compensation, he had all their poetry, save what went to the brother who set out with him to climb Parnassus. His father, to judge from some of

* 'Memoir,' by his son, one-volume ed., p. 143 (1st ed., i, 171). His mother was nonetheless extremely pious (*Id.* p. 380). As to the father see pp. 12-13.

† *Id.* p. 271, *n.* (i, 323).

‡ *Id.* p. 12.

his counsels to his son, had a true taste for good verse; and from his childhood the boy seems dedicated to poetry.

> "At about twelve and onward," he told in old age, "I wrote an epic of six thousand lines à la Walter Scott—full of battles, dealing, too, with sea and mountain scenery—with Scott's regularity of octo-syllables and his occasional varieties. Though the performance was very likely worth nothing, I never felt myself more truly inspired. I wrote as much as seventy lines at one time, and used to go shouting them about the fields in the dark. . . . . Somewhat later, at fourteen, I wrote a Drama in blank verse, which I have still, and other things. It seems to me, I wrote them all in perfect metre."*

One doubts the "perfect metre": his metres were precarious even in his twenties; but there is no questioning the poetic predestination. The instinct of rhythm and cadence was in all his nerves; so that all through his life he refuses to attempt prose; even his letters having a certain willed brevity. One of his counsels to his friend Arnold was "not to write any more of those prose things, like 'Literature and Dogma', but to give us something like his 'Thyrsis', 'Scholar

* 'Memoir,' p. 10.

Gipsy', or 'Forsaken Merman'".† No man, perhaps, not even Wordsworth, ever dedicated himself more single-mindedly to the poet's vocation. But it is one thing to give one's life to the poetic art, and another to prepare to think rightly on all the themes open to its treatment. Tennyson had the usual school and university education of the England of his day; and he was as normal in his intellectual processes as he was abnormal in the æsthetic. Hence, in fact, the ultimate completeness of his triumph. But with the æsthetic singularity there went a psychosis which kept him for a time at odds with his contemporaries.

One of our most luminous traces of him, as of so many other men, comes from the pen of Carlyle, who gives an often-quoted description of the youthful Tennyson to Emerson in one of his letters written in 1844, when the poet was 34 years old:—

> "One of the finest-looking men in the world. A great shock of rough dusty-dark hair; bright laughing hazel eyes; massive aquiline face, most massive yet most delicate; of sallow-brown complexion, almost Indian-looking; clothes cynically loose, free-and-easy; smokes infinite tobacco. His voice is musical metallic .... speech and speculation free and plen-

† *Id.* p. 607.

teous: I do not meet, in these late decades, such company over a pipe! . . . . He is often unwell; very chaotic,—his way is through Chaos and the Bottomless and Pathless; not handy for making out many miles upon."

It is the last sentence that is specially significant for us. Of course, it was Carlyle's way to regard every man he met as floundering more or less in the Bottomless and Pathless; he alone being firmly placed in his Diogenes-tub in the middle of the bog, where at times he would swing his lantern round his head *pour encourager les autres.* But in this case the emphasis of the specification, coming along with the evidently cordial praise, counts for something; and the plain datum "he is often unwell" throws a strong side-light on the whole matter. That and the other two points in the diagnosis, the "very chaotic" and the "infinite tobacco", coincide rather strikingly with the notion we are led to form of Carlyle himself; and a great many of the things which have to be said of Tennyson as a thinker will in large part hold good of his prose-writing friend.

III.

Let us consider first the way in which his mind moved in the earliest poems in which he philosophised at any length—the 'Two Voices' and

the 'Palace of Art', published a year before Carlyle etched his vignette. The 'Two Voices' is probably the earlier piece, if we may judge from its more diffuse tissue and smaller proportion of highly-wrought passages. It may be shortly described as a dialogue between the voices of constitutional pessimism and constitutional optimism, or despondency and hope; and the very simple upshot is that the voice of hope carries the day when the poet passes out of doors into the Sunday sunshine and sees good folks going to church, his good cheer being apparently not unconnected with the fact that he is not going thither himself. It is as if, after being low-spirited before breakfast—a touch of nature which has been alleged to make the whole world kin—an average person in imperfect health should simply pluck up heart on a full stomach in the morning walk on a fine day. And there an end, for the analysis goes no further.

Here, then, as regards the purport, we have a very simple exposition of a very common experience, but an exposition in part made musical by the poet's already fine gift of phrase and melody. The lover of poetry would do ill, indeed, to complain; both sides of the case are current impressions, and both are spoken with a charm of word and line which is as welcome as music. But here asserts itself the inevitable antinomy: the poet's

business is not to reason with us, but he must needs try to reason with us inasmuch as he is fain to sing his deepest thought. We in turn must judge his thought as such; and there is no escaping the fact that this simple, superficial, and inconclusive process of reflection is for him a survey of the philosophy of life—as penetrating a study as he is minded to make. He does not at this stage dogmatise, indeed: he deprecates being thought to philosophise; but, nevertheless, he is elaborately doing his best.

Turn we now to the 'Palace of Art', which expresses his early philosophy of morals as the 'Two Voices' did his philosophy of human existence. Here, particularly in the later and re-arranged version which stands in the current editions, we have a more strenuous artistic performance, but an equally simple moral theorem. Both poems may be taken as autobiographic in their different ways and degrees: the first as expressing the young poet's ups and downs of temperament, the second as setting forth how, after a period of that absorbing devotion to the æsthetic and mentally pleasurable side of things which is so natural to intellectual youth, he comes to realise the force of human claims and human bonds. The allegory is somewhat forced and violent, a little savoring of the Romantic Drama of the time; but the point for us to consider is the

amount of elaboration given to the very simple and indisputable moral:

"That Beauty, Good, and Knowledge are three sisters
That doat upon each other, friends to man,
Living together under the same roof,
And never can be sunder'd without tears.
And he that shuts Love out, in turn shall be
Shut out from Love, and on her threshold lie
Howling in outer darkness."

And even this inexpensive thesis, wrought out through so many jewelled stanzas, was so slackly held that in the later version the poem suffers no doctrinal change from being taken to pieces and rebuilt, for purely artistic reasons. Here, in fine, we have a very large proportion of artistic labor and power to a very small proportion of reflective or philosophic labor and power. And this, as we said, would be just as it should be if the poet were to rank as an artist pure and simple; but it is thus far a plain disproof of the claim that he is a thinker of authority or capacity.

IV.

That claim has been somewhat forcibly put by Professor Masson, among others, in his little book on 'Recent British Philosophy'.

"To those," says the Professor, "who are

too strongly possessed with our common habit of classifying writers into kinds, as Historians, Poets, scientific and speculative writers, and so on, it may seem strange to include Mr. Tennyson in this list [of philosophers]. But as I have advisedly referred to Wordsworth as one of the representatives and powers of British philosophy in the age immediately past, so I advisedly name Tennyson as succeeding him in the same character. Though it is not power of speculative reason alone that constitutes a poet, is it not felt that the worth of a poet essentially is measured by the amount and depth of his speculative reason? Even popularly do we not speak of every great poet as the exponent of the spirit of his age? What else can this mean than that the philosophy of the age, its spirit and heart in relation to all great elemental problems, finds expression in his verse? Hence I ought to include other poets in the list, and more particularly Mr. Browning and Mrs. Browning, and the late Mr. Clough. But let the name of Mr. Tennyson suggest such other names and stand as a sufficient protest against our absurd habit of omitting such in a connection like the present. As if, forsooth, when a writer passed into verse, he were to be abandoned as utterly out of calculable relationship to all on this side of that boundary, and

no account were to be taken of his thoughts and doings except in a kind of curious appendix at the end of the general register. What if philosophy at a certain extreme range, and of a certain kind, tends of necessity to pass into poetry, and can hardly help being passionate and metrical?"

After an attempt to develop this theorem, the Professor concludes:—

"But there hardly needs all this justification, as far as Mr. Tennyson is concerned, of our reckoning *him* in the present list. He that would exclude 'In Memoriam' (1850) and "Maud" (1855) from a conspectus of the philosophic literature of our time, has yet to learn what philosophy is. Whatever else 'In Memoriam' may be, it is a manual, for many, of the latest hints and problems in British metaphysics."

It is impossible, surely, to forbear the comment: So much the worse for those who get their metaphysics—British or other—from verse, and turn a poetic memorial into a philosophical manual. The poet himself protests, in some imperfectly-inspired verses, against any such practice:—

"If these brief lays, of Sorrow born
Were taken to be such as closed

Grave doubts and answers here proposed,
Then these were such as men might scorn:

"Her care is not to part and prove;
She takes, when harsher moods remit,
What slender shade of doubt may flit,
And makes it vassal unto love:

"And hence, indeed, she sports with words,
But better serves a wholesome law,
And holds it sin and shame to draw
The deepest measure from the chords:

"Nor dare she trust a larger lay,
But rather loosens from the lip
Short swallow-flights of song, that dip
Their wings in tears, and skim away."

But while he does thus speak, it is to be said on the other hand that in other passages he lays down the law on points of metaphysics dogmatically enough; and that in these dogmatisings we have some of the first of a long series of theological deliverances of his, which, in later years, have come to be more and more bitter expressions of intolerance towards men of another way of thinking.

There is, for instance, the passage in which, after praising Knowledge, he speaks of her as—

"Half-grown as yet, a child, and vain—
She cannot fight the fear of death.

What is she, cut from love and faith
But some wild Pallas from the brain

"Of Demons? fiery hot to burst
All barriers in her onward race
For power. Let her know her place;
She is the second, not the first.

"A higher hand must make her mild
If all be not in vain; and guide
Her footsteps, moving side by side
With wisdom, like the younger child:

"For she is earthly of the mind,
But Wisdom heavenly of the soul."

If we take this as metaphysics, it is simply empirical commonplace. The separation between knowledge and wisdom, as if wisdom were not simply the flower or consummation of knowledge, is not worth technical discussion. He who professes to conceive of wisdom *guiding* knowledge (a very different conception from that of wisdom *seeking new knowledge*) will never render any service to mental science; and he who calls knowledge earthly of the mind, but wisdom heavenly of the soul, has turned his back on science altogether. It is the poet who is playing the child. The context shows that what was in his mind was simply the crowning value of what he calls reverence and charity as consummating a

character: reverence and charity, which, in their most valid meaning, are simply the fruits of the fullest knowledge. If the poet had spoken of Knowledge as leading Will by the hand, calling Will the primary or bodily characteristic, and Knowledge the sublimated instinct which is the highest thing in man, he would at least have been turning metaphors in a fairly right direction. But what he has done is merely to give sounding expression to the ancient gospel of the spirituality of Ignorance, and to encourage whoever listeth to believe that he starts in life with a heavenly wisdom of the soul, what theologians call spiritual insight, which places him above the necessity of any painful study of the infinite complexity of things.

Yet it is impossible not to notice, throughout the whole of 'In Memoriam', how little of fixity or clearness there is in the theology it sets forth. There, as in the 'Two Voices', we have a divided mind, pulled this way and that by the changing moods of confidence and diffidence. The key-note is struck in the preluding stanzas:—

"Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they."

In the very avowal we have one more little sys-

tem—"thou, O Lord, art more than they". The little systems are broken lights, but we are still to be quite sure that we know what they light, or light-from, our sureness being *our* system.

Again, as regards the treatment of the problems of immortality and the moral government of the universe, there is really no more semblance of philosophical solution of them in 'In Memoriam' than there is in 'The Two Voices'. We have a simple statement, in still more admirable verse, of the alternations of hope and fear in a temperament which is not healthily related to life, and which yearningly craves for the sense of "cloudy companionship" beyond the verge of knowledge. The most majestic passages in the entire poem, or rather book, are those which confess the baselessness of the assumption of the traditional, personal, and sympathetic Deity, and of future personal human existence. Against these great strains there stand as antiphonies only the despairing cry that if that be the truth, life is a wholly desperate thing; and the simple reiteration of the old revulsion of hope. It is categorically put in the last stanza of all, which proclaims—

"That God, *which* ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves."

This is not only a mere arbitrary choice to hold a particular view because it seems agreeable, but it is a contradiction in terms. If there be "one law, one element," then there cannot be any "one event" to which the whole "creation" moves, but only an eternal transmutation. The proposition is valid only in a sense in which it expresses the philosophy that dismisses the old concept of a God of love altogether; and that this is the poet's real philosophy is strongly suggested by his use of the pronoun "which" instead of "who". As loose Pantheism, his deliverance may pass: as Theism it is a mere addendum to the Athanasian creed.

V.

Once more, however, this is not a criticism of the poem as poem, save in so far as Professor Masson may be right in saying that "the worth of a poet essentially is measured by the amount and depth of his speculative reason." That doctrine clearly needs complete recasting and extensive guarding before it can pass as sound æsthetics. We may all agree, I suppose, that, *other things being equal*, the abler reasoner of two poets is the greater; but as the other things never are equal, the problem of adjudication is impracticably complex. Seeing, however, that Tennyson does speculate and reason, and not

only uses his poetic prestige to give vogue to his view of things but seeks to bring odium on other views, it is a plain necessity that his reasoning, such as it is, should be looked into. There is a fatality of self-opposition in his relation to his readers. He well says that he should better serve a wholesome law by lightly dwelling on "grave doubts and answers"; and he is well-advised when he "holds it sin and shame", artistically speaking, "to draw the deepest measure from the chords". And yet to the deepest measure are the chords struck, again and again. This is a mind chronically at issue with itself; and it is very natural that, while it ranks for the most part as a pillar of orthodoxy, it should also serve to some extent as a force of scepticism. The lines

> "There lives more faith in honest doubt,
> Believe me, than in half the creeds,"

are perversely applied to such service; and yet the whole drift of the context is simply to give praise to that doubt as honest which ultimately repasses into orthodox creed—a sufficiently commonplace form of tolerance. When Tennyson comes to deal with positive denial of his faith he pretends no sympathy, no tolerance; and this is the great disfigurement of his teaching—so long, that is, as there is a practical necessity for

controverting him. One day, doubtless, it will have a special charm and interest because of its very perturbation, its dramatic mirroring of the intellectual conflict of his time, as seen in minds of average depth. For in this sense he may with great justice be called the poet of his age: not that he has decisively risen to its highest philosophy or ethics, but that in his changing song he voices by turns its forward and its backward impulses. Of him men will one day say sympathetically, in his own words,

"Sick is he, a divided will."

None had seemed more eagerly to rise than he did in his youth to the new vision of all-pervading science: none had hailed it with more stirring song. Tennyson's poetry is throughout enriched by his concrete knowledge, invigorated by his exact observation of nature, in which no poet since Shakspere has equalled him. He is the most trustworthy of poetic naturalists, and all but the most catholic; yet is he but the more poetic because of his accuracy. Nor are there any more forceful flights in his poetry than those in which he turns to deep music "the fairy tales of science and the long result of Time":—

"There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
O earth, what changes hast thou seen!

There where the long street roars, hath been
The stillness of the central sea.

"The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go."

How does the purified vision of knowledge transcend the poor cosmogonies of barbarism! It becomes plain that not only philosophy, as Professor Masson says, but science, tends to pass into poetry at a certain point, to wit, the point at which generalisation passes into emotion—a very different thing, observe, from saying that the poet is either a philosopher or a man of science. He has just sung a scientific emotion. But, as ever, the reaction comes. The young poet is "often ill, and very chaotic," and he has all Carlyle's faculty of seeing life in distemper. So the note changes:—

"The man of science himself is fonder of glory, and vain,
An eye well-practised in nature, a spirit bounded and poor."

Perfectly true, too often, but no less true is the rest:—

"The passionate heart of the poet is whirl'd into folly and vice"

—and there are folly and vice of the intellectual as of the bodily life. The speaker in 'Maud' goes on:—

"I would not marvel at either, but keep a temperate brain."

But that would be science; and the poet must be passionate. And so we had at length the singular spectacle of the opening of a new review, designed to set forth the best thought of the time, with a poem in which the now aging laureate speaks of the men who seek to read all life with the eyes of science as being

"sworn to find
If any golden harbor be for men
In seas of Death and sunless gulfs of Doubt."

Conceive Shakspere being asked to render the service, and imagine him putting that note of affront into what should have been a song of cheer to all on the new ship, sailing into the new time! The new seas are of Death for Tennyson, and the gulfs for him grown sunless, because of his own inveterate infirmity of soul, the "old hysterical mock disease" which weighs heavy on him from the past, whence fatally he draws his fundamental bias. And nothing will make him believe that where his eye dims for him the sky and sea, other men may see as of old the multi-

tudinous laughter of the wave, as well as the law, so old and so new, of perpetual mutation.

VI.

Yet the fact finally stands out from all his work that to him as to so many other professed theists of his day there is no steadfast comfort in his creed. It was so with Carlyle, with Thackeray, and with Ruskin: all three profess, in their different fashions, to find comfort in the thought of deity; and all alike are in the main uncomforted. Tennyson recalls Pascal rather than Fénelon: he affirms his faith violently by way of scaring off the shadows of doubt, and finally believes not from pressure of conviction but from fear of standing alone. He has Pascal's very prescriptions.

> "This is a terrible age of unfaith," he would say. "I hate utter unfaith: I cannot endure that men should sacrifice everything at the cold altar of what with their imperfect knowledge they choose to call truth and reason. One can easily lose all belief, through giving up the continual thought and care for spiritual things."*

So that the faith must be carefully nursed in the leading strings of habit—truth and reason

*'Memoir,' p. 259 (i, 309).

being sacrificed at the burning altar of what the sacrificer with his worse than imperfect knowledge chooses to call spiritual intuition!

And when all is said, where are the signs of comfort? Always declaiming about the sustenance he gets from faith in a future life, Tennyson in his old age writes his second 'Locksley Hall' in a spirit of utter bitterness: his protested confidence in the "divine plan" of which, like his school, he holds the existence to be disclosed to him by the fact of his necessary ignorance of it, never avails him for comfort or calm, save when he happens to attain it in the ordinary way of his physiology. His protested faith in immortality thins at last to a mistily cold speculation:

"Red of the Dawn!
Is it turning a fainter red? so be it, but when shall we lay
The Ghost of the Brute that is walking
And haunting us yet and be free?
In a hundred, a thousand winters?
Ah, what will *our* children be,
The men of a hundred thousand, a million summers away?"*

Browning, with his more exuberant vitality, could find a conceptual comfort in the notion of an immortality which consisted in a perpetual

* 'The Dawn.'

evolution, keeping up (at least) with the pace of the evolution on the earth. But Tennyson explicitly negated any such concept:—

> "He held undoubtingly the doctrine of a personal immortality, and was by no means content to accept our present existence as a mere preparation for the life of more perfect beings. He had once asked John Sterling whether he would be content with such an arrangement, and Sterling had replied that he would. 'I would not,' added Tennyson emphatically; '*I should consider that a liberty had been taken with me if I were made simply a means of ushering in something higher than myself.*'"‡

The incomparable "bull" of the italicised passage, perfectly unperceived by the poet and apparently by his interlocutor, tells of the measure of his faculty for serious metaphysic; and by putting it alongside of the speculation in 'The Dawn' we can partly realise what a perpetual fluctuation went on in the poet's faith.

A sense of the essential futility of it all puts one in an attitude of not very respectful attention to the curious confession of *quasi*-faith contributed to the present Lord Tennyson's memoir

‡ Tyndall's statement, in the 'Memoir', p. 816.

of his father by the late Professor Sidgwick. Telling how he and his young contemporaries stood related to 'In Memoriam' when it appeared, the Professor writes that their views "were more sceptical and less Christian, in any strict sense of the word: certainly this was the case with myself. . . . . And this more sceptical attitude has remained mine through life; while at the same time I feel that the beliefs in God and in immortality are vital to human well-being."* To human well-being, observe: that is to say, no man can live well without them; and with them men have in the mass lived well. In a little while the ground is shifted.

"What 'In Memoriam' did for us, for me at least . . . . was to impress on us the ineffaceable and ineradicable conviction that *humanity* will not and cannot acquiesce in a godless world; the 'man in men' will not do this, whatever individual men may do, whatever they may temporarily feel themselves driven to do, by following methods which they cannot abandon to the conclusions to which these methods at present seem to lead." Here, apart from the question-begging as to men being "driven" to differ from the writer, we have first a mere blank statistical prediction, of no more intellectual significance

* P. 253 (i, 301).

than an affirmation that men will always be foolish and given to alcohol and unveracity. Then we have a phrase about "the feelings which Atheism outrages, and Agnosticism ignores", whereupon it may suffice to reply that Professor Sidgwick's method here outrages the feelings of men who love truth for itself, and ignores facts which confute him even on the low plane of statistics. The facts are simply not as he says; and men to-day confute him by living their lives in myriads on the lines on which he said they could not live. For a critical "sceptic", the philosophical Professor came by his "ineffaceable and ineradicable convictions" rather easily.

If the logical stress of Professor Sidgwick's proposition is to be laid strictly on the bare denial that men will ever attain to unanimity, to what does it amount? If that be the issue, we have only to answer that we cannot conceive of mankind being ever unanimous on any arguable question. They have never been unanimous about speaking the truth, or doing justice, or loving mercy; and the concept of evolution implies a perpetuity of variation from all norms. But as communities have collectively learned to do without human sacrifice, and slavery, and blood feuds, they are visibly learning to do without the theosophy of their fathers. Taken either broadly or narrowly, the Professor's dictum is a blank ful-

mination, on a par with similar deliverances from the worshippers of Assur.

We seem, indeed, debarred from any severity of criticism on the poet as thinker when the professed philosopher, the chaired teacher, thus loosely handles the themes on which we expect him to think with vigilance and intensity. And the same comment is forced from us by many of the utterances which figure in the Tennyson memoir from the pen of the poet's academic friend, Professor Jowett. There is something staggering to the critical sense in the magistral chaos of Jowett's mind as thus presented, with its official acceptance of Christian truth, ending in a kind of superior Sadduceeism, apparently adopted in the interests of the college and the students. But when all is said, the *ex officio* faith of Jowett and the negative convictions of Sidgwick were apparently as efficient forms of consolation for them as was the intuitionist faith of Tennyson for him. Never does he long transcend the attitude of a man praying in the dark to keep up his courage: from first to last he is confessedly afraid of life without the protecting presence of Something-not-Himself, and not his fellow-creatures.

VII.

In one later poem he brings himself to mere

derision by his tractarian promulgation of his fear. The poem called 'Despair' is thus introduced: "A man and his wife having lost faith in God, and hope of a life to come, and being utterly miserable in this, resolve to end themselves by drowning. The woman is drowned, but the man rescued by a minister of the sect he had abandoned." Two details, here omitted, but thrown-in in the poem, will make this explanation more effective. The woman was already dying of cancer, and her only son had "forged on his father and fled." Under these circumstances, the poet is concerned to prove, unbelief in God is a source of unhappiness, as contrasted with the anæsthetic virtue of a sound Theism!

And all the while the miserable man, seeing his dear wife doomed and his son a felon, his house blasted and his name dishonored, is not an unbeliever at all, but an indignant opponent of what he believes to be a bad God, and a convinced believer in a better one! Describing the God of orthodox religion, which is quite as logical a conception as any of the poet's, he cries:—

> "But the God of Love and of Hell together—
> they cannot be thought;
> *If there be such a God, may the Great*
> *God curse him and bring him to nought.*"

This distracted declaimer has been severely de-

scribed as a "flotsam idiot, who may be a Theist or a Polytheist, but is certainly not an Atheist"; and in point of fact the effect of the poem is to fasten despair upon Theism, while it does nothing whatever to show why the people who believe in a better future life should hesitate to get to it by ending this one. Yet the poet clearly supposed he was connecting despair and suicide with the contrary way of thought, though perhaps also with Calvinism. He certainly implies that faith in a good God will enable us to bear with patience other people's cancer!

And a worse development of this phase of his mind comes out in his abortive stage-play, 'The Promise of May,' a performance of which it is not pleasant to think or to speak. Its purpose is simply to show that when a man does not hold Lord Tennyson's religious sentiments he is to be expected to be a heartless villain; and so cheap is the dramatic art with which that cheap doctrine is elaborated, that it evoked the ridicule of even a theatre audience. Bad drama, bad poetry, bad philosophy, bad feeling, it is every way his worst dramatic work. And though the Carlylean note of Godly rage was struck yet later in the new 'Locksley Hall', it may be supposed that the general displeasure evoked by 'The Promise of May' gave the poet pause, and forced him to restrain the temper of doctrinary fanati-

cism that had so far grown upon him. The last of all his religious pieces, the beautiful song in which he figures for himself the coming end, is lovely for all of us alike,* even as that earlier and fainter strain in which the far-off Ulysses sings the Pagan dream:—

"It may be we shall touch the happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles whom we knew."

With that strain in our ears, we can hardly go on to analyse with utter severity the stanzas on 'The Higher Pantheism', which are printed immediately after. Their reasoning is very sufficiently disposed of in the rollicking parody, I suppose by Mr. Swinburne, in 'The Heptalogia, or the Seven against Sense'—one poet's logic serving sufficiently to confound another's. Let it suffice to note the customary simplicity with which the poet finally makes out his case:—

"God is law, say the wise; O Soul, and let us rejoice,
For if He thunder by law the thunder is yet His voice.

"Law is God, say some: no God at all, says the fool;
For all we have power to see is a straight staff bent in a pool;

*An exception must be made for a ship-captain of my acquaintance, whose remarks about the idea of meeting the Pilot *after* crossing the bar are pungent.

"And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye
of man cannot see;
But if we *could* see and hear, this Vision—
were it not He?"

Or She, or It? The question lacks actuality, as the editor of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* said of a prose article on a similar thesis. On questions on which the mental ear or eye of man admittedly cannot hear or see, it is really inexpedient that the tongue of poet or man should thus ineptly dogmatise.

VIII.

In fine, Tennyson has the philosophic air only in virtue of his Pantheism, always a facile garment for incoherent thought; but no Pantheist has more completely than he stultified his general formula by his particular dicta, much as Pantheists are given that way. To the last he had one foot fast in the orthodoxies of his neighbours, and the other on the bridge of transcendentalism.

"If God", he used to say, "were to withdraw Himself for one single instant from this Universe, everything would vanish into nothingness."* And then we have this: "My most

* 'Memoir,' 1-vol. ed., p. 268 (1st ed., i, 319-20).

passionate desire is to have a clearer and fuller vision of God. The soul seems to me one with God, how I cannot tell. I can sympathise with God in my poor little way."*

That the man who could so express himself ever realised the vastness even of the Pantheistic conception is hard to think: he is essentially at the point of view of the ordinary theist of all time; and when he declares again that "Every man has and has had from everlasting his true and perfect being in the Divine consciousness,"† while admitting that "mankind is as yet on one of the lowest rungs of the ladder", he is verbally combining the two frames of mind. The philosopheme never really modifies his attitude to life and conduct, or to the lives of other men: on every practical issue he relapses into intuitionism, and if he ever seeks to solve a problem it is in terms not of his Pantheism but of his theology.

That theology, ethics apart, is in the end a naked affirmation of his emotional need for a comforting presence: that is to say, his weakness is a clue to the law of the universe. In the "Apostolic" Society at Cambridge in his student days they discussed, among other things, the question

* 'Memoir,' 1-vol. ed., p. 268 (1st ed., i, 319-20).
† *Id.* p. 272 (i, 324).

"Is an intelligible First Cause deducible from the phenomena of the Universe?" and he voted "No".* Nor is there anything to show for his later Theism save the "heart's answer, I have felt," the sick soul's insistence upon having its anodyne, and the later and more complacent insistence of the restored spirit on the necessity of a correspondence between its belief and the scheme of things.

His pessimisms were mainly on his own private account: his optimism had the same basis. When he lost his small capital in 1844, "so severe a hypochondria set in upon him that his friends despaired of his life. 'I have,' he writes, 'drunk one of those most bitter draughts out of the cup of life, which go near to make men hate the world they move in'."† For such a cause can a theist and a poet turn desperate; a pension and an increasing income restore him to peace of mind; and on the strength of a very large income and an assured success he is finally quite sure that there must be a good God and a hereafter. When things go well with him, he simply puts aside the problem. About the age of thirty, he writes to his *fiancée* in the stereotyped fashion about all men preferring free-will and trouble to dull pleasure on a lower plane; and on the question "why

* *Id.* p. 37, *note* (i, 44).
† *Id.* p. 185 (i, 221).

God has made one suffer more than another" he pronounces thus:—

> "Let us be silent, for we know nothing of these things, and we trust there is One who knows all. God cannot be cruel. If he were, the heart could only find relief in the wildest blasphemies, which would cease to be blasphemies. God must be all-powerful, else the soul could never deem Him worthy of her highest worship. Let us leave it therefore to God, as to the wisest."‡

Of any deeper questionings than these, he seems never to have heard. Had he been asked to reflect that the universal power can have *no* finite attribute, can be kind no more than cruel; and that *worship* of mere infinite power is essentially a mere non-moral prostration, remote from all intelligent judgment, he could but declaim. Always his statement of the problem is superficial, his solution commonplace. When the primary laws of rational thought, which veto the attribution of mode to infinity, were pressed upon him, he would make the usual theistic pretence of accepting them; "but at the same time he insisted that . . . . our highest view of God *must be* more or less anthropomorphic, and that 'Personality', *so far as our intelligence goes*, is the

‡ *Id.* pp. 142-3 (i, 170).

widest definition, and includes 'Mind', 'Self-Consciousness,' 'Will,' 'Love,' and other attributes of the Real, the Supreme, 'the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth Eternity, Whose name is Holy'."† Here, as usual, the issue is verbally dodged, as it might be by a medicine-man; and we are left wondering whether men normally moral in matters of conduct can ever be generally depended upon to be passably honest in matters of doctrine.

IX.

If we who criticise him were to turn upon him his own fanatical method of imputation, and to say that such intellectual improbity as his was bound to affect his conduct, we should perhaps have the easier task in the matter of circumstantial evidence. But it seems to be the psychological fact that the egoism (in the philosophic sense) of his theosophic doctrine characterised not a little his personal equation on the social side. To say that his pessimism and his optimism were alike on his own private account may seem to be an injustice to his faculty of sympathy, as shown in his poems. His son writes that

> "he was occasionally"—observe the term—"much troubled with the intellectual problem of the apparent profusion and waste of life, and

† *Id.* p. 261 (i, 312).

by the vast amount of sin and suffering throughout the world, for these seemed to militate against the idea of the Omnipotent and All-loving Father. No doubt in such moments he might possibly have been heard to say what I myself have heard him say: 'An Omnipotent Creator who could make such a painful world is to me *sometimes* as hard to believe in as to believe in blind matter behind everything. The lavish profusion in the natural world appals me, from the growths of the tropical forest to the capacity of man to multiply—the torrent of babies."

And he could write once in a way that the aspect of things was—

"As if some lesser God had made the world,
But had not force to shape it as he would."*

But to all this he only returned the answer:

"*Yet* God *is* love, transcendent, all-pervading. We do not get *this* faith from Nature or the world. If we look at Nature alone, full of perfection and imperfection, she tells us that God is disease, murder, and rapine. We get this faith from ourselves, from what is highest within us, which recognises that there is not one fruitless pang, just as there is not one lost Good."

* *Id.* p. 263 (i, 313-314).

To such mere reiteration and egoism as this it might suffice to make answer that if every man is to be free to settle great issues by declaiming that his special dogma comes from "what is highest within *us*", the show of reasoning is a rather offensive imposture. When, however, not universal reason but personal bias is admittedly the ground of a man's formulas, we are entitled to track him into his personality and try him by that. Now in his travel diary, written for his wife, we have these entries in the year 1860:—

"August 31st. Union Hotel, Penzance. I am so very much grieved for poor Simeon's loss of his wife; it casts a gloom on my little tour: what will he do without her and with all those children? I have now walked 10 miles a day for 10 days, that is 100, and I want to continue doing that for some time longer. . . ."

"September 5th. Land's End Inn. I will write to Simeon to-day, though I rather shun writing to him on such a subject, for what can one say, what comfort can one give? We are here at this racketty, rather dirty inn, but we have had four glorious days and magnificently colored seas. . . ."†

Sir John Simeon was the last of the "three dead men whom he loved";‡ and it is of Simeon in

† *Id.* p. 388 (i, 462).

‡ The others were Arthur Hallam and Henry Lushington.

particular that he sings in the nobly beautiful elegy, 'In the Garden at Swainston'. Observe, then, the deadly difference of tone between his sense of his dearest friend's loss and his sense of his own. When Arthur Hallam died, the world was darkened; when the poet's money went, he came near dying, and loathed the human race; when Simeon died he could sound a rare note of melodious grief for his own lost friends, but when "poor Simeon" loses *his* life's partner the poet's thought is, "It casts a gloom *on my little tour.* What will he do without her and with all those little children? I am walking ten miles a day. . . . What comfort can one give? . . . . We have had four glorious days and magnificently colored seas."

I know nothing in all literature that more miserably hints the immeasurable egoism of the natural man, or more pitifully discounts the credit of a poetic sorrow. One almost wonders whether the chanted grief for the "last of the three" was itself but a literary pose. But if it were as true as it is beautiful in sad simplicity of phrase and cadence, this remains burned upon our sense: that the only things that ever darkened the world for Tennyson were Tennyson's own deprivations; and that for the eternal tragedy of the human kind he had nothing more than a literary and unscathing compassion. He himself, per-

haps on a compunction, was fain to claim the contrary: In 'In Memoriam', he said, "'I' is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking through him."* But this will not stand, save in the secondary sense that the rest of us can find in the poet our mouthpiece: the sorrow of his kind he does but perceive as a framework or background for his own. The poet's philosophy, in fine, is but his statement of his personal account of joy and sorrow. He has not fronted the riddle of the world, save with well-chosen words: he is but the Aeolian harp of a temperament, singing of the airs of death and life that strike its own heart-strings: his individual griefs are for him the measure of human well-being.

Let it be agreed that this is, as we originally affirmed, the poet's real function. It is most true. That is our first and last word: he is no true thinker, no true teacher, save by chance. And when it is thus murderously demonstrated that his philosophy is only his egoism, his affirmation of how the world suits him, his sense of having been well cared for, let us hope we shall see hereafter a little less of the obscurantist resort to such declamation as his for a mock confutation of the judgment passed by reason on his creed.

* *Id.* p. 255 (i, 305).

X.

If we track Tennyson's theology further, the revelation of its hollowness becomes only more dismal. Mr. Morley has said that there are few more execrable forms of sentiment than "the complacent religiosity of the prosperous". The expression is doubtless over-severe: it would be juster to see in the sentiment stigmatized one more of the pitiable devices whereby men seek to fend off pain; and when Tennyson in his last days, like so many another, falls back on formulas of pious optimism, he is but doing what he did throughout his life. But the hollowness of the pretence challenges comment. "A week before his death," says his son, "I was sitting by him, and he talked long of the Personality and of the Love of God, 'That God, Whose eyes consider the poor,' 'Who catereth even for the sparrow'." He would not be finally true even to his formula that evil abounds but "we know not how all is designed"; he must pretend that the poor *are* considered, that the sparrow *is* catered for. Were it true, what "mystery of suffering" is there to account for? How can there be "incest in the warrens of the poor" with an omnipotent God's eyes ceaselessly "considering" them in a spirit of infinite love?

With all these dogmatisings he thought it quite consistent to say habitually that "humility is the

only true attitude of the human soul."* As if it were humility to affirm that the mote, man, can conceive and appraise the scope of an infinite universe. "Fear not, then, the hidden purpose of that Power which alone is great." A man who could so write is really incapable of true intellectual humility: he is inveterately bent on making out his moral and intellectual affinity with his "Power".

On the question of Free-will Tennyson is as superficial as on the other; his mental course being one of chronic relapses towards a scientific attitude, with regular returns to the plane of platitude. Once he wrote for his son:—

> "Man's Free-will is but a bird in a cage; he can stop at the lower perch, or he can mount to a higher. Then *that which is and knows will enlarge his cage*, give him a higher and a higher perch, and at last break off the top of his cage, and let him out to be one with the Free-will of the Universe."†

Here we have a half perception of the force of the principle on which he always professed to stand, that of monistic natural law. Man is in the cage of environment. But the organism, he persists, *can mount* to a higher perch. Then if the organism *does* not, one asks, what is the explana-

* *Id.* p. 265 (i, 316). † *Id.* p. 267 (i, 318-319).

tion? "It would not." But if one organism tends to mount, and another to stay, surely these are organisms differently framed? "It was lack of will." Then is not lack of will on all fours with lack of muscle, of brain; and is the weak bird to be condemned because its energy and aspiration are so small? It does not appear that Tennyson ever considered these obvious demurrers to his dogma; like Arnold, who writes even more ineptly on the same theme, he brings home to us the conviction that in the English universities of those days young men were not in the smallest measure taught to think; but were established in the conceit that their most superficial answers to the deepest problems were valid. For sheer lack of philosophic discipline they seem to have virtually lost the philosophic faculty.

XI.

Putting his infirm theology for the moment aside, let us try to grasp the ethic which the poet evolves from or equates with it. Let us, that is, consider how he commonly expresses or exhibits himself as a moralist. Going through the body of his work on this quest, we find, I think, what we might naturally expect—the same duality of temper, the same dividedness of impulse in the morality as in the religion. Professor Dowden,

a judicial and considerate critic, has pronounced that the master feeling in Tennyson's ethic is "a strong sense of the dignity and efficiency of *law*—of *law* understood in its widest meaning. Energy nobly controlled, an ordered activity, delight his imagination. Violence, extravagance, an immoderate force, the swerving from appointed ends, revolt—these are with Tennyson the supreme manifestations of evil."* And it is certain that this attitude, this temper, is often found in our poet, and that he has expressed it in some of his greatest verses. In his early poem 'Œnone' he sympathetically ascribes the ideal to the pagan Pallas:—

"Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
These three alone lead life to sovereign power.
Yet not for power (power of itself
Would come uncall'd for), but to live by law
Acting the law we live by without fear;
And, because right is right, to follow right
Were wisdom in the scorn of consequence."

And no man, whatever his political creed, can refuse to acclaim those august verses in which Freedom is enthusiastically identified by the English poet with the motherland herself:—

"Grave mother of majestic works,
From her isle-altar gazing down,

* 'Studies in Literature,' 1878, p. 195.

Who, God-like, grasps the triple forks,
And, King-like, wears the crown:

"Her open eyes desire the truth.
The wisdom of a thousand years
Is in them. May perpetual youth
Keep dry their light from tears;

"That her fair form may stand and shine,
Make bright our days and light our dreams,
Turning to scorn with lips divine
The falsehood of extremes!"

Nor can it more than partially undo the best ministry of this strain of thought, if we are forced to admit that even here it flattens at the close to a conventional formula, and that at times it sinks to a commonplace and indeed vulgar temper of mere royalism, in which the throne is worshipped as if it were really the loadstar of a high ideal. That alloy in Tennyson is an old trouble; and it will trouble a later generation, when it shall say "Lord Tennyson", and try to think "Lord Browning". But what is almost fatally wrong is the practical negation of, or lapsing from, the ideal of law, of seemly and ordered activity. He has spoken with insular arrogance of "the blind hysterics of the Celt"; but it is the sad truth that no poet has ever given more voluminous voice to the sufficiently myopic hysterics of the Saxon. 'Maud' is full of them. Its cadenced gospel of

war, its harmonised heroics, its lyric shrieks against the "long, long canker of peace,"* its absurd national partisanship, its worse than absurd sociology, is not all that—couched as it is in the most exquisite verse that even Tennyson ever wrote—an execrable counterblast to the strain of Pallas, "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control"? And did any good citizen ever read it without mentally saying to the poet what he makes his hero say to himself—

"It is time, O passionate heart and morbid eye,
That old hysterical mock-disease should die!"

—extending that description to what hero and poet seem to regard as the cause of the disease? It has been argued for the poet that he is not to be taken as meaning in his own person the doctrines he puts into his poetry—that they are dramatic, not didactic. Only those who wish to be persuaded can harbor such an explanation. It is easy to see when Tennyson is dramatic, and when he is expressing himself. Nobody is misled by 'The Two Sisters' or the 'Northern Farmer'. But every reader knows that he is listening to Tennysonian sentiment—albeit the sentiment is unstable—in 'Maud' and the later 'Locksley Hall'. The defence is fatal; for when it is seen

* Altered to "the peace that I deemed no peace" in later editions, on some wholesome prompting of shame.

through, the case is settled past appeal. It were better to urge that the poet's moods must vary.

The truth is, this chronic insurgence of elemental impulse, the very spirit of lawlessness, is as strong in Tennyson as the higher mood which recoils from all barbarous passion. Always he is twy-natured. And it is the great insanity of our popular ethic that whereas we recoil or affect to recoil from the least approval of certain instincts which, even when ill-controlled, do not necessarily make so much for ruin and retrogression as this instinct of sheer destruction, the worse passion is always complacently or delightedly endorsed by many, if not by most. When, then, we find them heated to the top of their bent by the most accomplished poet, how shall we comport ourselves to the claim that the poet is a great teacher? What shall we do but turn against him his own words:—

> "Let him know his place,
> He is the second, not the first!"

XII.

As this judgment is sure to be indignantly challenged, let us take the trouble to follow, step by step, Tennyson's path in matters political. In his youth we have from him the sonnet on Buonaparte, immature as to manner and phrase, but per-

fectly Tennysonian in its vauntings of "That island queen who sways the floods and lands From Ind to Ind", and its puerile assumption that in the naval battles of the Nile and Trafalgar "we" showed our superiority to the madman Napoleon. That note is recurrent. At nineteen he writes the song, 'There is no land like England', containing what he later confessed to be "a beastly chorus against the French", which he altered in 1891 for 'The Foresters'.* In 1852 he "along with many others regarded France under Napoleon as a serious menace to the peace of Europe", and so, by way of preserving the peace so menaced, he wrote his songs, 'Britons, Guard Your Own', and 'Hands All Round', wherein he speaks of France as she "Whom martial prowess only charms", adding:—

"Her frantic city's flashing heats
But fire to blast the hopes of men.
Why change the titles of your streets?
You fools, you'll want them all again."

In 1854, however, France and England had joined hands to make war on Russia—a war of aggression on a State which had menaced neither—and so the poet tunes up afresh:—

"Frenchman, a hand in thine!
Our flags have waved together.

* 'Memoir,' p. 746.

Let us drink to the health of thine and mine
At the battle of Alma River.

Our flags have waved together.
Henceforward no other strife—
Than which of us most shall help the world,
Which lead the noblest life."†

The Muse is placable, not to say cheap: the "fools" are helping us to wreak "God's just doom on a giant liar"; and the twin paladins of truth are jointly to regenerate the world. But in 1859 there is a new rumor of trouble, so we get the song of 'Jack Tar',‡ beginning:—

"They say some foreign powers have laid their heads together
To break the pride of Britain, and bring her on her knees"

—even as France and England had erewhile sought with Godly zeal to do for Russia. That had been a wholly noble enterprise; but other people's enterprises are of the Evil One:

"They will not let an honest Briton sit at home at ease,"

—and so the Jack Tars are to "Up and save us", and the Riflemen at the same time are to "form" and "storm"—the poet helping them—and so "meet the storm".

† 'Memoir,' p. 319. ‡ *Id.* pp. 367-8.

But the typical and permanent expression of this side of his spirit is his combination of his very worst social, political, and moral teaching with his very finest work. It is one of the puzzles of the literary history of that time that 'Maud' on its publication was generally disparaged or denounced—so generally as to make the second edition something of a commercial failure. Here was the most lyrically beautiful and variously masterly volume of poetry that the century had yet seen, studded with the rarest jewels of song and wrought with a subtlety of rhythmic craftsmanship that was a new glory in English literature, a book, too, litten with passionate pride in the war into which the nation had plunged with something like unanimous zest; and the great body not only of the newspaper critics but of the educated class gave it nothing but censure. "Among the few who recognised merit in 'Maud'," writes his son, "were Henry Taylor, Jowett, and the Brownings."* Gladstone, whose friendship for Tennyson had always in it a notable measure of protecting affection, was among the censors. Making recantation twenty years later, he writes:—

"I can now see, and I at once confess, that a

*'Memoir,' p. 337 (i. 399). But as the 'Memoir' incidentally shows, Tyndall, Palgrave, Ruskin, and Lord Houghton were also among the few.

feeling which had reference to the growth of the war-spirit in the outer world at the date of this article (*Quarterly Review*, 1855) dislocated my frame of mind, and disabled me from dealing even tolerably with the work as a work of imagination."†

And Gladstone was a member of the ministry which had made the war that Tennyson glorified. Can it be that "through all the roaring and the wreaths" men were ashamed when they saw their squalid passions put into splendid poetry? Carlyle, we know, had no sympathy with the war, probably, indeed, because it was waged against his favorite Russia and on behalf of "the unspeakable Turk", rather than on any general principle of sane internationalism. Could it be that instructed men in general were on any such grounds apathetic while the nation was delirious? Some of the critics did venture to betray such a state of mind,‡ but they cannot have been the majority, either in the press or in the public. Rather it would seem that most men resented what was morally the best element in the book, the indictment of the "wrongs and shames" of the normal life of peace. A lady who visits the poet in 1855

† 'Gleanings,' vol. ii, cited in the 'Memoir', p. 336 (i. 399).

‡ See the extract from Dr. Mann's '"Maud" Vindicated', in the 'Memoir', p. 338, *note*.

writes that "He excuses all that people pronounce sardonic in his poems by saying he does not cry out against the age as hopelessly bad, but tries to point out where it is bad in order that each individual may do his best to redeem it."* So that the gospel of war, which made Gladstone wince, merely failed for others to outweigh the presumption of the attack on the home life of the warring race!†

However that may be, we of a later day are on neither score so shaken out of our æsthetic sense as to fail of response to the artistic perfection of a work which for us was never on the artistic side aught but a revelation of beauty. 'Maud' is the high-water mark of Tennyson's genius, one of the highest flights, for some of us, in all English song. Well might he account it his masterpiece, and declaim its matchless music more often than any other strain in his incomparable repertory.‡ And it is one of the great consolations of

* 'Memoir,' p. 393.

† There are various other clues, some of them very odd. For instance, his aunt, Mrs. Russell, "was vexed at what she thought an attack on coal-mine owners" (*Id.* p. 345).

‡ He read it so often to those who asked, that, I am told, he somewhat lost his own sanity of palate for it, and was capable of so speaking the lovely lines—

"And Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud,
The birds are crying and calling"

—as to make the first a succession of caws: a crude literal insistence on what ought never to have been more

art that to those of us who most unchangingly detest its central doctrine and dramatic thesis, it is possible to get from the master's song, at the hundredth recollection, all the delight it could ever yield to the most unmoral devotee of art for art's sake.

But the question here is precisely the moral, and not the art; and where Gladstone recanted it is necessary to repeat the indictment. He, finally swayed by his affection, sought for his excuse in the apparent return of the poet upon himself in the powerful passage that follows on the duel scene, with its lines:—

> "I swear to you, lawful and lawless war
> Are hardly even akin."

That cry the humane statesman seems to have latterly taken as a protest against "unjustifiable" as compared with just or justifiable war. But this construction will not stand for an instant. By lawful and lawless war the poet means respectively not just and unjust wars, but war between nations and war between individuals—war commonly so called as distinguished from the duel. Thus for him all war between nations is "lawful". He can be so crudely conventional in

than a poetic suggestion. Because readers hardly ever divined that he meant to say the caw of the rooks was like 'Maud', he thrust his whim upon listeners in reciting.

his ethic as to believe that there is a difference in kind between the tribal impulse, on which all go a-slaughtering together, and the individual impulse, on which two enemies go about to slay each other in open combat. For him the duel is "lawless" simply because the "law" forbids it—a merely puerile discrimination. In plain fact the duel is a much less demoralising thing, to say nothing of its being an infinitely less destructive thing, than war, being hedged about with the strictest rules of equal combat, of openness, of decency, of barbaric "honor"; where war is a matter of reciprocal deceit, espionage, stratagem, stealth, and scheming for numerical or other advantage, and leads to savagery, rapine, slaughter in cold blood, and the heartless infliction of misery on women and children. To call all this "lawful" because it is customary, and at the same time to declaim against the egoisms and rapacities of the life of peace, the lawful and the lawless alike, is to reduce all ethics to the plane of the market place.

Of course the poet was perfectly "sincere" when he went on to declaim against

> "the Christless code
> That must have life for a blow";

because he was congenitally incapable of seeing that his own code was simply the one in question

raised to the *n*th power, he being all the while egregiously elate at the thought of taking uncounted lives for something less than a blow! One day, perhaps, posterity will wonder at our theory and practice in the matter of war as we wonder at the olden sacrifices of children to Moloch, or the massacres of Helots by the Spartans.

XIII.

In any event, Tennyson will serve to keep the problem fresh for them. His lyric life, always ready to be swayed to didactic ends, yet unruled by any higher political wisdom than the commonplaces of domestic conservatism, is a grievous series of services to those destructive instincts with which conservatism so strangely goes hand in hand. Every rumor of international dispute sets him whooping: to every wind of international change he reacts as promptly as the weathercock, and as wisely as the mob, whose psychology he duplicates and whose ethic he voices. England is for him always in the right. When she is the insensate aggressor she is the chosen instrument of God; when other nations aspire to the same self-conferred office they are but bullies who will not let the honest Briton live at peace. At the first hint of foreign provocation, the Christian poet is at work hounding on the passions of

the populace: when they wish it, he will rail at French hysteria; anon, at the same behest, he will weep on the Frenchman's neck. Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control! And when the fury-fit is over, our sage will moralise that the Celt "yields more to his imagination than his common-sense. Yet his imagination does not allow of his realising the sufferings of poor dumb beasts. The Irish are difficult for us to deal with. For one thing, the English do not understand their innate love of fighting, words and blows."‡

Thus is wisdom justified of her children. The poet's son and biographer, the present Lord Tennyson, tells us* that he "was unprejudiced and cosmopolitan in seeing the best side of other nations", and that he was one who "above all things loved Love".† And the worst of it is that these things are in a measure true! How far they are more true, however, of Tennyson than of the average Christian is hard to say. The average Christian, we know, supposes himself to be part of an organisation that seeks peace on earth and ensues it; professes to believe that in terms of his faith all men are brothers; and supposes himself to admire, in the teachings ascribed to Jesus, especially the inculcation of the spirit of forgiveness, and the command to return good for evil. All

‡ 'Memoir,' p. 701. * *Id.* p. 287. † *Id.* p. 778.

the while, no Christian community dreams of practising collective forgiveness where it can do otherwise; and there is no case on record of a Christian statesman suggesting that international evil should be met with forbearance, much less with kindness. Statesmen know that such a suggestion would be scouted by two-thirds of the members of every orthodox Christian Church; and that even for a commonsense policy of arbitration and conciliation their support will come much more readily and in a much larger proportion from Quakers, Unitarians, and Freethinkers. Christian belief, in short, appears to count for absolutely nothing in controlling the belligerence of the average man: in most Christian countries, certainly in this, the highest pitch of public recognition and acclaim is always given to the professional fighter. And still the Christian multitude habitually speaks of its Founder as "the Prince of Peace", and annually affects to aspire to "ring in the Christ that is to be", meaning the reign of fraternity.

It is difficult to grasp, in the spirit of science, the psychology of such minds. To say that they are sodden with insincerity leaves the problem unsolved, for the difficulty is to comprehend such radical insincerity. To say on the other hand that the average Christian is "sincere" alike in his profession of loving peace and his practice of

loving war, is to reduce all the terms of the case to insignificance. One can but reason that the profession of any traditionally received religion stands in the mass for no determination of character whatever; and that even as regards the considerable number who are devotionally inclined, the anti-rational character of the traditional cults is fatal to the cultivation of intellectual consistency in those who have most need to aim thereat.

The result, in any case, is so strange a medley of anomalies that it may seem invidious to try the case of Tennyson singly on its moral merits. But this is precisely what we must do if we are to reckon with his undertaking as a teacher and the claims made for him in that capacity. We are told, as aforesaid, that he was a lover and promoter of peace on earth, and on the face of the case there is color for the claim. It was no ordinary war-monger who played the part as we have seen him do: it was a poet capable of noble apprehensions, and, albeit rather æsthetically than morally, of a large inspiration of good-will. When other nations were at war, and his blood chanced to be cool, he recoiled: when France and Germany were at death-grips he found "the continuance of such a war too horrible to think of".*

* *Id.* p. 503.

It was the singer of the federation of the world who could at a push turn into a brawling and boasting patriot. It is with that perfect unconsciousness, that utter moral incoherence, which makes "sincerity" so vain a pretence, that he proclaims in one mood the supreme virtue of "humility", the "only true attitude of the human soul", and in another tells us that we are the people

"whom the roar of Hougomont
Left mightiest of all peoples under heaven";

and angrily warns us anew against "craven fear of being great"—declaiming thus at sixty-three as he had done in his teens. But in the face of the eternal oscillation it is sufficiently idle to tell us that "though he advocated war of defence and of liberty . . . . no one loathed war more than he did, or looked forward more passionately to the 'Parliament of man, the Federation of the world'."†

Once for all, it is necessary to meet this kind of claim with a flat denial. It is not true. All wars that England could undertake were to him wars of "defence" or of "liberty": he was capable of seeing liberty at the end of the nightmare of imbecile bloodshed called the Crimean War. Thus his discrimination is only an imbecility the more:

† *Id.* p. 338.

no mob could be less judicial. Thousands of men and women, in Tennyson's day and ours, have loathed war as he never loathed it, as he was incapable of loathing it, because they have realised what he could not realise, the animal stupidity on which it nearly always proceeds, and the profound moral futility of nine-tenths of its solutions, as well as the immeasurable misery it inflicts. And thousands of men and women have longed as he never longed for universal peace. Of "passion" for that consummation there is no trace in his work: in the famous line itself there is no passion: it is but a musical minting of other men's ideals. But in the 'Charge of the Light Brigade', and still more in the egregious 'Charge of the Heavy Brigade'—a poem so violently labored and so uninspired that his late publication of it tells of a final blunting of his judgment—there is passion *in excelsis*. In the latter performance the poet seems to foam at the mouth: he has sunk from the relatively spiritual and intellectual motion and emotion of the former to a panting and convulsive rhythm that vainly stamps and leaps to get along, and to an imagery of mere delirious struggle, as of maddened herds of horned beasts. To this resuscitated failure, which one cannot read without wincing for him, he appends an 'Epilogue' in which, half-conscious of its futility, he yet argues volubly with a very tongue-tied

'Irene', to whose extremely prim protest he answers with all the pathetic prolixity of his closing period:—

"You wrong me, passionate little friend.
I would that wars should cease,
I would the globe from end to end
Might sow and reap in peace,
And some new Spirit o'erbear the old
Or Trade refrain the Powers
From war with kindly links of gold
Or Love with wreaths of flowers.
Slav, Teuton, Kelt, I count them all
My friends and brother souls,
With all the peoples, great and small,
That wheel between the poles.
But since our mortal shadow Ill
To waste this earth began—
Perchance from some abuse of Will
In worlds before the man
Involving ours—*he needs must fight*
To make true peace his own,
He needs must combat might with might
Or Might would rule alone;
And who loves War for War's own sake
Is fool, or crazed, or worse;
But let the patriot-soldier take
His meed of fame in verse;
Nay—though that realm were in the wrong
For which her warriors bleed,

It still were right to crown with song
The warrior's noble deed—
A crown the singer hopes may last
For so the deed endures";

and so on, and so on, till we wonder whether we are reading Noodle's Oration, done into rhyme. If any man has ever written in prose or verse a more explicit justification of War for War's sake than is here supplied by the poet in the very breath in which he pretends to repudiate the thought, I have yet to discover and should despair of divining it. The man who strung this flimsy tissue of threadbare platitudes—the very rags of vulgar commonplace—simply cannot reason on his theme.

To dwell on the nullity of the argument were too grievous: it is a humiliation to read it; but at least we must note how utterly devoid not merely of "passion" but of sincerity is the profession of desiring "that wars should cease". These verses indeed set up a disagreeable misgiving as to the poet's capacity for sincerity in anything, prattling as he does of his love for Slav and Kelt after bestowing repeated gratuities of racial contempt on the one and calling for a national crusade against the other. But valueless as such sincerity is, we must realise that after the storm of antagonism and Berserker passion is over there really does ensue a tepid tide of inex-

pensive philanthropy, the languid moralising of the man who is quite willing to welcome perpetual peace but has no fear of being reduced to it.

Real and ringing passion there is again in the lines on "the long, long canker of peace," and "their love of a peace that was full of wrongs and shames", wherein is implicit the gross sophism that the wrongs and shames were products of peace as against war. And we have the full play of passion in the magnificent strain—as artistically exquisite as it is morally execrable—that ends with the wonderful lines:

"And the cobweb woven across the cannon's throat
Shall shake its threaded tears in the wind no more."

We are told, again, that he enjoyed his own latter-day line in 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After':

"Universal ocean softly washing all her warless isles."

And well he might relish it. But he said such things not as a man pining for the better day: the context tells of his temper—the ordinary mock-pessimism vending the ordinary tags:—

"Warless? when her tens are thousands, and her thousands millions, then—

All her harvest all too narrow—who can fancy warless men?
Warless? war will die out late then. Will it ever? late or soon?
Can it, till this outworn earth be dead as yon dead world the moon?"

A passionate longing, truly, for the federation of the world!

No: he sang for war again and again, when men were ready enough for war without his urging; and never once at such a time did he plead for peace. He could denounce war when the very wording of his denunciation was a way of making more malice between nations, as when he wrote with Pharisaic fatuity of "this French God, the child of Hell, wild war"; as he could yet again sing of an eternal union with the said worshippers of the said Child of Hell on the strength of a compact with them to obey its commandments as against Russia. But not once did he take up his lyre to charm men out of the mood of tiger and ape when the mood was on them.

And the total phenomenon is to be explained only in terms of the moral duality of his nature—a duality in virtue of which he is at once the most nearly infallible of literary judges and the most nearly impeccable of artists, while for all pur-

poses of abnormal moral criticism he remains to the end a schoolboy, with moments of ethical elevation, the precarious fruit of mere revulsion against other men's blatancies. When poor Alexander Smith sang in his febrile falsetto:

"Fame, fame, thou art next to God,"

Tennyson's comment was, "'Next to the Devil,' say I"†—this in the very year of the issue of 'Maud', with its line on "the sudden making of splendid names", and of the great chant on the Charge of the Light Brigade, with its

"When can their glory fade?".

We are dealing with a man helplessly possessed alternately by two spirits, speaking alternately with two voices. The moral and intellectual rifts run through his whole life: the double nature asserts itself at every turn.

XIV.

Inevitably, it does so on the moral side of his creed, as against his action. Again and again he delivers himself in the normal Christian manner about the ostensible Christian ideal: "I am always amazed when I read the New Testament

† 'Memoir,' p. 393 (i, 468).

at the splendor of Christ's purity and holiness, and at His infinite pity."‡ Yet he has never a misgiving when he is whooping for a war of Christian nations: he can live in the one temper as easily as in the other; and it is with the incurable complacency of an utterly divided nature that he can alternately flame in pity over "poor dumb beasts" hamstrung and exult over a war which means myriads of disembowelled horses and men, weeping widows, and orphaned children. *His* imagination avails him nothing when the fit is on him: of war, in that mood, he can see nothing but the mirage: he is the very voice of the eternal blood-drunken savage incarnate in man, finding vent like every other passion in song. Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control!

The self-righteousness of the pose, in both swings of the temperament, would be either ludicrous or sickening if it did not become for us by perpetual repetition a pathological spectacle. The "divided will" is seen to be hopelessly inherent in blood and brain; and though in old age as in youth the poet has fits of self-perception, they serve him in nowise for self-rectification. When he is not reacting to the racial impulse, he is reacting against his race. In this mood the life around him is a "clamor of liars belied in a hub-

‡ 'Memoir,' p. 274 (i, 325).

bub of lies": his countrymen are to him almost what they latterly were to Ruskin—"a rotten mob of money-begotten traitors": there is "incest in the warrens of the poor"; greed and debauchery in high places; cruelty in all social relations; baseness and corruption everywhere. But at the scent of powder the lying and the cruelty become for our lyric cynic the attributes of Russia: the poet joins hands in spirit with the "smooth-faced snub-nosed rogue" who leaps from his counter and till, and whose "cheating yard-wand" becomes straightway a holy thing by being thrust into a fellow Christian's bowels. It is as if there stood behind the singer some fiendish sorcerer, some grinning Mephistopheles, who with one mesmeric touch makes him pass from cursing to blessing, from hailing Christ to invoking the fiend, from the pose of the peace-lover, rebuking "the Celt", to the frenzy of the Teutonic skald ready to drink blood out of the foeman's skull.

It is all of a piece, visibly, with the neurosis of the young poet's 'Two Voices' and the psychosis of the mature man's theology, as above scanned. He goes through life, so to speak, doubting on an empty stomach and dogmatising on a full one; exhorting men to "let the ape and tiger die", and compounding with them in the end by feeding their tiger and scourging their ape;

singing to them of Christ and self-renunciation and pandering to their most commonplace self-conceit; preaching self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control, and all the while reverencing himself indeed a good deal too much, knowing himself hardly at all, and controlling himself only inasmuch as the good spirit chronically thrusts out the bad—to sweep and garnish the chamber for its return!

Before such a spectacle, what can we say but this, that if there be any way of averting it in the case of any other son of man so divided in spirit, it must be the way of knowledge, of reasoned discipline, of the life of the head, of the rule of that Pallas whom this disciple of the Mœnads has blasphemed! If we study Tennyson's inner life we find him not only gifted but accomplished in all save one of the studies that should form a great poet. As we said, he is a student, a loyal learner of science, carrying exactitude of notation in the things of nature further than any man since Shakspere*—a singular grace in one whose bodily eye was dim. All poets are appreciative of the stars; but he, to whom the stars showed themselves with that peculiar glory which is the compensation of shortness of sight, knew their lore

* This is vouched to me by a student friend, a biologist, who has deliberately gone through all our leading poets scanning them on this side.

with scientific accuracy. And on the side of all literary appreciation, all recognition of art in prose and verse and imaginative construction, he seems to some of us so catholic and so unerring that if we found him against us at any point we should be perplexed. And with it all, and with the consummate faculty of lyric utterance, no power of reasoning, no sense of the difference between a bad argument and a good, no more gift for true thinking than is possessed by the average man in the smoking room!

One goes through all his deliverances as reported in the Memoir, always interested, indeed, but without finding a solitary instance of true ratiocinative faculty as against the spontaneous æsthetic perception which was part of his genius. On religion his utterances are either platitudes or fallacies: he is always either begging the question or ignoring the elenchus: a curate could be more plausible. It must be this defect of the higher reason, one feels, that makes it possible for him to apotheosize the throne and set the symbol of political superstition above the aspirations which transcend it, frowning down always the aspiration, never the superstition. Even on problems concerning his own art, when it is a matter of analytical reasoning as distinct from an æsthetic perception, he is an unprofitable witness. Let us take as a test his versified verdict on that

theme of "Art for Art's Sake" with which we set out:—

"Art for Art's sake! Hail, truest Lord of Hell!
Hail Genius, master of the Moral Will!
'The filthiest of all paintings painted well
Is mightier than the purest painted ill!'
Yes, mightier than the purest painted well,
So prone are we toward the broad way to Hell."

These lines, says his son,† "in a measure expressed his strong and sorrowful conviction that the English were beginning to forget what was, in Voltaire's words, the glory of English literature—'No nation has treated in poetry moral ideas with more energy and depth than the English nation.'"

Now see the confusion. Voltaire was thinking of Pope, in whose verse the critical and didactic purpose etiolated the art, but who could yet put in his work more of evil intention than ever did the most pagan of the Elizabethans. And the middle lines of the six, concerning the filthy painting painted well and the pure one painted ill, are the expression of a sheer failure of understanding. For a truly filthy painting *cannot* be painted well, in terms of the very thesis of "Art for Art's sake",

† 'Memoir,' p. 494.

inasmuch as a painting to be filthy must *aim* at a filthy effect, and to do this is to undertake not art for art's sake but filth for filth's sake; which is, in the terms of the case, at the very least as much of a deviation from artistic loyalty as any other non-artistic selection of theme. The fallacy might be voted worthy of Mr. Bumble; if only we did not feel that the temper in which it is framed is worthy of Dominic. And it is wholly beside the case, finally, to speak of an ill-wrought painting as "pure." To be recognisable as pure, a painting *must* be well done, whether or not the artist aimed at expressing purity: complete failure of execution excludes all possibility alike of moral and of æsthetic significance, for the instructed eye. A "pure" subject mispainted is a pure affliction.

It is lamentable that it should be needful thus to gainsay in the mouth of a great artist so pitiful a perversion of a thesis which, albeit usually connoting some psychological oversights, expresses broadly an eternal æsthetic truth. The truth, as regards painting, is simply this, that he who seeks to paint moral lessons is only ethically, not artistically, better than he who seeks to paint immoral ones; that both attempts are away from the purpose of painting, which is, to hold *the artist's* mirror—not any visionary mirror of abstract truth, but just the artist's faculty of re-

sponse—up to nature in the artist's way, the way of color and form. So long as he is genuinely bent on these he may indeed well be "pure"; and he *cannot* be filthy. And if he seeks to be prurient he is but sinning against art in a more offensive way than he would have done had he sought to be ethical, or to appeal to the sentimentalist instead of the sensualist. Then of a surety he is painting ill.

XV.

Alas, we come back to our starting point with a vengeance! It *is* possible, as we said, for the artist to give to his work great moral significance in virtue of his having chosen, not *for* its moral, a subject that subtly lends itself to moral associations: nay, where he does great work it can never wholly escape such significance, so subtly do our emotions reciprocate. But when he, the instrument of color and form, sets out in malice aforethought to play the prophet or the pulpiteer, who shall warrant him against contumely? Be it Mr. Watts joylessly painting a monstrosity and calling it Mammon, or another painting an inanity and appending to it a text, what is he but a presumptuous meddler, a cobbler away from his last, for all save such as are even further from art, and

no deeper in morals, than he? And does he do well, with his studio schooling and his amateur thinking, to venture on measuring himself with his fellows at large on the alien ground when the chances are so grievously against him?

When all is said, the issue turns on a hazard. It *may* be that the great artist shall once in a way chance to combine even a moral intention with an artistic triumph in virtue of having reached a moral perception by the gateway of light and color; and inasmuch as the poet *must* touch on moral issues, his province being the field of human action and feeling and sensation, he may chance to clothe a great moral truth with the magic robe of beauty. But we have just seen how a great poetic artist, ambitious to teach and to guide as well as to delight, can rouse us to revolt by his moral maladroitness even while he delights our æsthetic sense with his song. The moral is simple: he has need to learn in morals as he did in art; if he would think for us in song he must be thinker as well as poet; and if he would satisfy us he must be steadfast in thought and single in bias as in art. After all, it may be vain to ask it of him! It may be that we owe his very gift to his being in intellectual overbalance; that Tennyson gives his life to song just because he has all the singer's needs and instincts and faculties without those of the reasoner. That would not be

out of the common way of Nature, the thriftless, the planless, the riddle!

But lest we end by putting a gratuitous discouragement on some soul haply fitted in part to essay his task anew, let us cast into the scale of hope and affirmation two poems of Tennyson's which do yield us at once the ministry of art and the large satisfaction of a moral rightness that has not yet become commonplace. We now know from the Memoir that the story of his once taking leave of George Eliot with a "Well, good-bye to you, you and your molecules" is false;* but that does not forbid us to surmise still that he was making amends to her for some argumentative antagonism when he wrote his song of 'Wages'.

"Glory of warrior, glory of orator, glory of song,
Paid with a voice flying by to be lost on an endless sea—
Glory of Virtue, to fight, to struggle, to right the wrong—
Nay, but she aim'd not at glory, no lover of glory she:
Give her the glory of going on, and still to be.
"The wages of sin is death: if the wages of Virtue be dust,

*It was credible, it must be said, precisely because most of the stories current about Tennyson tell of petulances or rudenesses—doubtless because such things are most easily remembered in the utterances of a poet! Yet there are many testimonies to his gift of courtesy too.

Would she have heart to endure for the life
of the worm and the fly?
She desires no isles of the blest, no quiet seats
of the just,
To rest in a golden grove, or to bask in a
summer sky,
Give her the wages of going on, and not to
die!"

Whether it were done for George Eliot or for another, there the memorable fact stands, that he sang a worthy song for another ideal than his own. All through life he was obsessed by the craving for future life: it pervaded his talk on religion, and chronically transformed him into an aggressive fanatic; and yet after all he sounds one of his noblest strains for undeluded stoicism and hearty human endurance. And yet again, it is with a purpose of guidance and edification that he frames still another song which perfectly meets every challenge of art, and makes universal moral appeal, while transcending no less perfectly the everyday atmosphere:—

"O well for him whose will is strong!
He suffers, but he will not suffer long;
He suffers, but he cannot suffer wrong:
For him nor moves the loud world's random
mock
Nor all Calamity's hugest waves confound,

Who seems a promontory of rock,
That, compass'd round with turbulent sound
In middle ocean meets the surging shock,
Tempest-buffeted, citadel-crown'd.

"But ill for him who, bettering not with time
Corrupts the strength of heaven-descended
Will,
And ever weaker grows through acted crime,
Or seeming-genial venial fault,
Recurring and suggesting still!
He seems as one whose footsteps halt,
Toiling in immeasurable sand,
And o'er a weary sultry land,
Far beneath a blazing vault,
Sown in a wrinkle of the monstrous hill,
The city sparkles like a grain of salt."

To art, it is clear, nothing is à priori impossible; here we see the touch of magic laid on a moral lesson: on the ethical allocution "the rose of beauty burns". And thus ultimately—thus alone—is Art vindicated. To the fevered poet, importunately petitioning for immortality from the dumb immensities, she silently metes out another meed of deathlessness, won not by wilful imposition of self on Nature, but by self-forgetting loyalty at once to Nature's impulse and Art's law. And so even we who set forth to judge him for his defiance of the equally valid law of another

triumphed by resort not to a thesis but to æsthesis, not to argument and dogma but to the lyric commentary of emotion on a law of conduct and character which no man doubts; he has won his end on his own plane, in his own "mystery", not as a finder of intellectual truth, but as one who adds to truth ecstasy of utterance.

And thus ultimately—thus alone—is Art vindicated. To the fevered poet, importunately petitioning for immortality from the dumb immensities, she silently metes out another meed of deathlessness, won not by wilful imposition of self on Nature, but by self-forgetting loyalty at once to Nature's impulse and Art's law. And so even we who set forth to judge him for his defiance of the equally valid law of another realm, have to end by acknowledging his faithfulness to this, and turn back carrying in our ears, like his own Tithonus, a memory of immortal melodies, of wizardries of cadence and witcheries of phrase,

"Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing
When Ilion like a mist rose into towers."

THE TEACHING OF BROWNING

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WE have said of Tennyson that of all modern poets he combines in the highest degree the didactic purpose with the love of artistic performance. When we turn to Browning, no reader, probably, will dispute that in no other poet of the highest rank is the love of artistic performance so deflected, so subjugated, by the didactic purpose. Tennyson, when all is said, is an artist who to a certain extent bent his art to theology and ethics. Browning, when all is said, is a publicist of exalted and impassioned temperament, who from childhood was moved by that temperament to make poetic art the medium for his thousandfold reflection on life, religion, philosophy, and the individual human soul; but in whom the art is always secondary to the message or the statement, whatever it may be. Browning would thus come far nearer than Tennyson to Emerson's definition of the true poet; for just as obviously as Tennyson delighted in verbal melody and obeyed and worked towards that, did Browning coerce his verse to the servitude of his doctrine and narrative. In Emerson's words, it is not metre but the metre-making argument that determines his poetry.

I do not think anything more is needed to show how entirely transcendental, how inapplicable to real life and real art, is Emerson's doctrine. For it is perfectly clear that if the metre, the form, the art, is not the most essential thing in poetry, the Emersonian definition in no way separates poetry from prose; and if Browning be the ideal poet as compared with Tennyson, there is nothing to show that Ruskin's prose is not more ideal poetry still. And Emerson, as so often happens with him, unsays his own definition, and elsewhere passes such praise on a few old lyrics whose worth lies essentially in their finish and lilt, as to bring upon himself—unfairly, no doubt—the taunt of Whitman that he preferred dainty elegance to all higher qualities in poetry.

The truth is that the philosophy of art is too complex to be summed up in Emerson's fortuitous fashion. In reading the bulk of Browning, one seldomer feels that verse is a benefaction to thought than that the verse form is a hindrance and an irritation; that the superfoetation of ideas which is his great characteristic is opposed to the very nature of verse, which calls for rhythm, order, and sequence in the ideas as in the utterance of them. And yet on the other hand we must recognise this perpetual antinomy of the art—that poetry, which is finally such by virtue of the completest control of expression, has its birth in an

insurgence of feeling, an abnormal flight of idea, that specifically transcends the ordinary and orderly processes of thinking. Emerson, in his definition of the Poet, stated one half of the truth, putting it forward as the whole. The danger thereupon arises that the other half in turn may be put forward as the whole, as when some people deny that Browning's verse is poetry. And the solution of the see-saw will never be reached by any à priori process, any metaphysical game of aërial leap-frog, in which "Nokes outdoes Stokes in azure feats", each out-soaring the other's absolutism, but in a humble and possibly humiliating descent to the simple facts of psychology, the real channels through which our æsthetic impressions and conclusions are attained.

But this enterprise cannot be gone about by way of an excursus in a study of one poet's teaching. Suffice it here to say that the candid lover of poetry must needs confess that even when Browning's verse is most joyless in its dissonant rush of uncharmed syllables, it is never wholly out of sight of the exaltation, the ecstasy, which marks off poetry from prose, as rhythm and rhyme mark off verse from prose. He could write doggerel in his later days, certainly; but when he is most deliberately writing casuistic divinity in his earlier books he ever and anon catches the higher winds of feeling and rises

above the solid ground of the tractate. The artistic form for him, whatever be his success in it, is no mere dilettantist experiment, but a necessity of his spirit. To show as much, let us take the most crabbed of all his works, 'Sordello'—that fascinating ferment of narrative and psychology, in which exasperation at the disappearance of the meaning is always tripping up the reader's interest in the development of the story—take this almost unreadable work, or at least the first book, and consider what an intensity of mental activity has gone to the making of every page. Compare this couplet pentameter with Pope's, and try to gauge the interval between 'Sordello' and the 'Essay on Man'. You feel at once, almost by a sense of physical impact, that in the later poet the mere process of cerebration, the molecular action which yields thought, is tenfold swifter and intenser than in the earlier. And compared with the interest of 'Sordello'—that is, when you can catch the interest—that of the 'Essay on Man' is, comparatively speaking, such as a mathematician might find in working out sums in simple arithmetic. It would be too cheap an argument to say that if Pope is poetry then Browning is; for Browning is a moving poet for those to whom Pope's verse is but an endless tinkling of cymbals. Browning's is the temper of poetry at all stages of his theme: to impugn him you

must attack his art in the concrete, not in the abstract.

In Browning's concern for "form" we may note a certain periodic fluctuation. The word carries the two senses of perspicuity or charm and technical structure; and in respect of both meanings he may be said to show little preoccupation with form in 'Paracelsus' and 'Sordello'. Then comes a time, after his marriage, when, perhaps under the æsthetic influence of his wife, but perhaps partly also under that of the example of Hugo, he experiments widely and brilliantly in metres and stanza-forms, thus producing much if not most of his most inspiring and inspired work. It would seem as if, finding his best still imperfectly or inextensively appreciated by his countrymen, he resentfully reacted just as Mr. Meredith did, set his teeth and shrugged his shoulders, did a great book in which he gave the freest play to his immense natural flow of discursive utterance, and thereafter, in a series of dramatic-narrative volumes, developed a style of headlong volubility in which poetry merely emerges at times as a passing white heat of imagination and phrase in a long current of merely vivacious discourse, where the poet seems to suppose that perpetual ellipsis is a security for poetic elevation.

It is these later volumes, full of eager argument and of almost unintelligibly elliptic narrative, that

have wrought the neglect into which his poetry has latterly fallen. As so often happens in England, his earlier work found general recognition only after he had outlived its mood; and his fame was made for him by devotees brought up upon that, after he had entered on his last period of half-inspired fecundity. New readers, coming to the works of that, promptly resented their repellent qualities, and with the more zest because of the movement of deification. Some of us who felt as sharply as they did the disenchantment of performances like 'The Inn Album' are now fain, having sympathy alike with the devotees and the blasphemers, to remind the recalcitrants that the artistic extravagances they resent are yet the extravagances of a great poet, who had in a sense no choice as to how he should unburden himself. Browning, like Tennyson, practically could not write prose, so early and so intensely had he devoted himself to verse as a form for his thought. His letters, and the accounts of his conversation, show that to the last all serious utterance was for him inevitably impassioned and straining towards flight. In talk with him, "feeling, imagination, and the vividness of personal points of view, constantly thwarted the attempt at a dispassionate exchange of ideas".* Thus it

* Mrs. Sutherland Orr, 'Life and Letters of Robert Browning,' 2nd ed., p. 387.

was for him a necessity, and not an affectation, to tell such a story as that of 'Red Cotton Nightcap Country' by way of a poem.

And yet, and yet, we cannot choose but ask, not only over 'Sordello' and these, but over fifty other poems, Why was the poetic form chosen to give utterance to what is here sought to be said; why is the difficult task of lucid exposition thus hampered by rhyme and metre? Why could not the subtlest or the most soaring thought here be put in patient prose, so that men should know with much less ado what it is that is being told them? I think we shall find the best answer to this, as to the concrete question concerning the faults of the poet's art, in a survey of his youthful circumstances and the conditions of his development.

II.

In the foregoing study I have contrasted Browning and Tennyson, in respect of physique, as constitutional optimist with constitutional pessimist, the sunny with the cloudy temperament. Let us further contrast their upbringing. Excepting Keats, Browning is the one great English poet since Milton, as it happens, who has not passed through the university*—that is, unless we

* I leave out of the question the possible attainment of the status of "greatness" by the younger poets of the present day.

call Pope, his antithesis, a great poet. His desultory schooling, followed by his untrammelled liberty of life, developed in him in the greatest degree the natural bent of a literary or poetic faculty, and tended in the least degree to govern it by the forces of social friction, criticism, and comparison. His parents, both of them remarkable people, helped him to develop but not to chasten his faculty. From his mother, whom he tenderly loved, he received an ineffaceable pressure of her intense religious feeling; from his father, a man of unworldly and artistic tastes and wide culture, he had a constant and beautiful sympathy; "but the mental equipments of the two differed far less in themselves than in the different uses to which temperament and circumstances trained them";* so that, as so often happens, the parents were not the people to educate the child. The father was clearly a fine soul and a true lover of letters; but he was not a mentor for his poet son.

Now, our most consciously artistic poets, as Coleridge and Tennyson, have clearly had their idiosyncrasy fostered in a very great degree by their technical training; and Keats, no less great a poet, and a more spontaneous artist than either, would certainly have profited greatly by more intercourse with culture-loving and tasteful com-

* Mrs. Orr, 'Life and Letters,' pp. 11-12.

panions. The faults of Keats's early work are as certainly those of indiscipline and inexperience as the faults of Tennyson's and Coleridge's early work are those of a faculty backward in development relatively to its educational experience. In Keats, however, the spirit of art was so intense that he developed with wonderful rapidity; and we feel that, being so gifted, he even gained by not having the academic training, of which the special disadvantage is to stunt or freeze the budding exuberance of genius, as its special advantage is to prune the wild luxuriance of nature into rarer and richer flower and fruit.

But Browning (as Mrs. Sutherland Orr recognises in her admirable biography) was a poet who would just as certainly have profited by the academic training and the daily criticism of irreverent young comrades, inasmuch as the spirit of vigilant art in him was always secondary, and his intellectual faults were pre-eminently those of undisciplined self-will. As a child he was "fiery", and as a boy "impatient", even to the extent of being at times unamiable; and though his deep affections kept his character right on that side, he had nothing equivalent to balance his intellect. English schooling is certainly not famous for intellectual discipline; but its mere contacts would have done him good. He would not have been merely bruised by the friction as the tender Shel-

ley was: he was too abundantly and healthily capable of various comradeship; and he was further too vigorously self-assertive, despite a "nervous" temperament, ever to have been dangerously nipped by the frosts of authority. He would have gained in disciplined care for the universal prescriptions of art, which rest on wide comparison of experience and of tastes: he would have learned that no man is cleverer than all the world, and that to despise all the exigences of the average intelligence is to play the egoist to bad effect. And, what is more immediately to our present purpose, he would have gained the early experiential knowledge that what came to him as transcendent poetic truths were simply very familiar old ideas which had been countered by other and later ideas, and that propositions which he went about to set forth under all the difficulties of verse had been handled with much greater exactitude of analysis by men who availed themselves more or less of all the scope of prose.

Such discipline, indeed, a man may well have without going through a university, since critical comradeship may be had elsewhere; but Browning, with immense natural gifts, was first of all lacking in the bias to self-criticism, which is needed to make a man seek to profit by the criticism of others; and in the next place he passed a very large part of his life in semi-seclusion, away

from his native country. Thus it came about that "the fiery child and the impatient boy left their traces in the man".* I have remarked in the preceding study on the noteworthy fact that, while he was quite superior to Tennyson in his aloofness from the lust of war, and in his entire freedom from malice on the score of mere difference of opinion, he was capable of a far hotter anger than Tennyson's on mere personal provocation. His answer to his critics, and to one in particular, in the volume entitled 'Pacchiarotto', is the proof of this. In later life, as well as there, he spoke forcibly of what he called the goose criticism directed against him. But it was obvious that the nature of his attitude towards goose criticism depended a good deal on whether the goose cackled or hissed. We might have been spared 'Pacchiarotto', and some other things, if Browning had gone through some of that discipline of rough-and-tumble which men get in youthful companionship with their peers, and which tends to develop in them a certain magnanimity, or at least stoicism, towards critical attack. But Browning, through large parts of his life, the most important parts as regards mental formation, missed alike habitual critical intercourse and the converse of contrary thought and literature, first in respect of his comparatively separate educa-

* Mrs. Orr, as cited, pp. 388-9.

tion, and later in respect of his life in Italy. His later English life came after his fame was made, and he was received with deference wherever he went.

This reasoning may sound presumptuous in view of Browning's unquestionable genius for the handling of human nature, and for actual human converse. Mr. Gosse has testified to his constant openness to intercourse: his way of regarding every human being as a possible friend. Even the harsh things said of his later over-exuberance in social intercourse are answered by the testimony that he developed that manner in the effort to avoid the air of superiority—a better mistake to make than Tennyson's contrary one of oracular pose and aloofness, in a selected atmosphere of adoration. Even the Browning Society never taught its oracle so to esteem himself as the other oracle was helped to do by incense from a different social plane. And those of us who have read every line of him can testify to the unfailing interest of his problems or presentments of human nature, whatever might be the success or charm of the artistic form.

But at the same time many of us have had to express our feeling that some of his subtlest dramatic psychologising is not so much a transcript from observed character as a projection of the poet's own mind into professedly different types;

and that his women, for instance, tend one and all to contain a large proportion of Robert Browning and a trifle of the Eternal Male. And this impression, as well as the still more general sense of the deficit of beauty and delightfulness in his technique, and the further conviction of the arbitrariness of his philosophy, even where he indulges in actual controversial dialogue—all these criticisms justify themselves in respect of the actual history of the poet's conditions of life.

III.

Coming to our central theme, his theology, we premise that the qualities of Browning's style which make his verse in the average lack clearness will naturally tell for obscurity when it dwells especially on obscure topics. For, despite the pages of incomplete analysis in which Mr. Swinburne undertakes to show that Browning is not obscure, the ordinary uses of language must hold good to the extent of reaffirming that he is. The gist of Mr. Swinburne's argument* is that if Browning ever seems obscure, the fault lies in us; whereas when Chapman, say, is obscure, the fault lies with Chapman. Now Mr. Swinburne's own pleading leaves it clear that Browning and Chapman are really obscure for the same kind of rea-

* In his introduction to the Minor Poems of Chapman.

son, namely, the rapid collocation of many ideas in few words, and the craving to say all things indirectly or sideways rather than directly and straightforwardly. "Obscurity," says Mr. Swinburne, "is the natural product of turbid forces and confused ideas; of a feeble and clouded or of a vigorous but unfixed and chaotic intellect." I can see nothing in this definition but a determination to make out that Browning's obscurity shall not be called obscurity.

As a matter of fact, feeble intellects are not obscure: they are shallow and transparent. Obscurity is, in plain terms, a matter of expression. Kant is often obscure: Hegel is often obscure. You may if you like call these vigorous but unfixed and chaotic intellects; and perhaps it would be true; but in the end obscurity is simply a matter of using words in such a way that the reader is left guessing which of several possible meanings may be the right one, or wondering whether the words are capable of any meaning at all. Mr. Swinburne will finally allow of Browning what Coleridge allowed of Persius, that he is "hard, not obscure"; and he confesses of 'Sordello' that it is "written at least partially in shorthand". In Chapman's earlier work, again, he complains of "the incessant byplay of incongruous digressions and impenetrable allusions". But that is mostly just what we complain of in Brown-

ing. All that Mr. Swinburne can say is that Browning may always be deciphered if you have all your wits about you and take trouble enough. But so it is with Chapman; and I am free to say that Chapman's original verse has much of the sort of attraction which I have acknowledged in regard to 'Sordello', the display of an intellect peculiarly rich in subtleties of thought association and excursive expression—a play of thought in which a large part of the motive power seems to be generated by the simple needs of rhyme and rhythm. Chapman is endlessly ingenious in phrase; but if you like to take time enough you may always make him out. The question is whether, when there are so many other things to read, the game is quite worth the candle; and that troublesome inquiry is likely to be put rather frequently by posterity in regard to Browning. He has been well described as a strayed scholastic, despite his non-scholastic training; and this last, as it happens, is one of Mr. Swinburne's terms for Chapman. The truth is that in both poets the verbal and inventive endowment is greater than the reflective, though even on the reflective side they have such a strong bias that only a great overplus of verbal fancy could deflect or outgo it. The difference is that Chapman's literary scholasticism is the more medieval, the more pedantic as to vocabulary, and of course much the more

confined on the side of speculation and poetic psychology.

But while Browning's speculation is freer than that of scholasticism, even in the hands of its professors, is it in sum any more satisfying? When we have gone through those many volumes of ecstatic or dramatic theology, and worked out the plain meaning of it all, how do we stand to it? Does it convince? Does it persuade? The first problem that arises, after the difficulty of deciphering his speech, is as to what the poet really believed. For he has himself again and again repudiated the idea that his own opinions are to be gathered from his poetic utterances, which he insists are predominantly dramatic. Of course this claim will only partly hold good; for no poet, at least none of Browning's strenuous and self-fulfilling type, can finally conceal his mental bias. But it holds that if his purpose is predominantly dramatic, some of his theological dissertations are at least intended as exhibitions of mind in action, as pieces of *ex parte* or special pleading, rather than as propaganda on the poet's own part.

Take, for instance, such poems as 'A Death in the Desert' and 'Saul'. Only in a very special sense of the much-abused term "dramatic" can these be regarded as dramatic studies. The David of the one poem, and the Apostle John of the other, are not even faintly true to historical

possibility. If the poet really thought he was limning any conceivable shepherd-boy, or Galilean fisherman, or Ephesian Christian, he cannot have had any truer notion of the actual past than prevailed among medieval artists. He puts into the mouths of David and John alike dissertations which are possible only to the nineteenth century, and only to himself in that. The "local color" is purely circumstantial, physical: of mental verisimilitude there is simply none. Their power lies in the vividness and intensity with which the poet projects his own mentality into the phantoms of another world, even as happens in his 'Caliban upon Setebos' where the intensity of the brute-man's introspection and self-analysis is the negation of his assumed nature. It is an Æsop's fable raised to an immeasurably higher power, and raised to poetry at the same time.

IV.

But while the 'Death in the Desert' and 'Saul' lack all semblance of fidelity to history, it is not to be supposed that Browning meant them to stand as strict expressions of his own views. The 'Death in the Desert' subsumes the truth of the Gospel narratives; and we have distinct testimonies that Browning was not an orthodox Christian. Mr. Buchanan* has testified to his in-

* In the dedicatory letter to his poem 'The Outcast'.

dignant repudiation of orthodoxy: in the directest and most emphatic way he orally denied that he was a Christian. It is an interesting circumstance, which I learn from Mrs. Bridell-Fox, daughter of the great orator and preacher, W. J. Fox, that Browning was not only, as we knew, her father's friend and protégé, but was often to be seen in South Place Chapel when Mr. Fox preached there as a Unitarian; and further, that Browning's earliest religious poem, the 'Johannes Agricola', was published under Mr. Fox's editorship in the *Monthly Repository* in 1836. Add to this the testimony of Mrs. Sutherland Orr, and the point of the poet's orthodoxy may be taken as settled. Mrs. Orr's testimony, however, notably modifies that of Mr. Buchanan; and shows that his denial had reference to some special or normal conception of Christianity which he did not share.†

> "Mr. Browning," she says of her friend, "neither was nor could be a Christian in the orthodox sense of the word; for he rejected the antithesis of good and evil, on which orthodox Christianity rests; he held in common with Pantheists, though without reference to them, that every form of moral existence is required

† See her article, "The Religious Opinions of Mr. Browning" in the *Contemporary Review*, December, 1891, p. 877.

for a complete human world. This conviction never rendered him callous towards the practical aspect of wrong-doing. No man was more capable of healthy moral indignation, or more anxious for the enforcement of human justice *in its most stringent forms.* But he would have denied eternal damnation under any conception of sin. He spurned the doctrine with his whole being as incompatible with the attributes of God; and, since inexorable divine judgment had no part in his creed, the official Mediator or Redeemer was also excluded from it. He even spoke of the Gospel teachings as valid only for other mental states than his own. But he never ceased to believe in Christ as, mystically or by divine miracle, a manifestation of Divine love. In his own way, therefore, he was and remained a Christian; and never, I am convinced, hesitated to declare himself such if he judged the moment fitting for doing so."*

And she thus explains—inadequately, as I shall go on to contend—his retention of that position:

"God could only exist for Mr. Browning as source and origin of thought; in this respect, therefore, as first and last word of creation. But he otherwise imagined Him in all the ne-

* Art. cited, p. 878.

gations of pure being. . . . . He was at best a colorless Omnipotence, or a Power combined with Will. It was because the Deity of his conception had nothing in common with the emotional life of man, that Christ, whether in His mystical or historical character, became for him a necessity of belief; and I can account in no other way for the constant appeal which meets us in all his works of the middle period against the denial of Christ or the worship of a 'loveless' God."†

All the while she insists‡ on "his heterodox attitude towards Christianity". He was convinced of the historicity and abnormality of the Gospel Jesus; "but the arguments, in great part negative, set forth in *La Saisiaz* for the immortality of the soul, leave no place for the idea, however indefinite, of a Christian revelation on the subject. Christ remained for Mr. Browning a mystery, a message of Divine Love, but no messenger of Divine intention towards mankind."

I shall deal later with the question here raised by Mrs. Sutherland Orr as to Browning's ethics. As to his "own way" of being a Christian, it is probable, despite the characteristically bitter cavils of Christian Browningites, that Mrs. Orr's state-

† *Id.* p. 883.
‡ 'Life and Letters,' p. 318.

ment is entirely accurate, since it is in harmony with what we know of him and his habits of mind from his works. His historic sense was undisciplined; and he followed the ordinary course of constructing an ideal Christ from certain portions of the Gospels, without the least investigation of their historical character, leaving alone also the many portions of the Gospels which are in conflict with the ideal. But the conception of Christ as "mystically or by actual miracle a manifestation of divine love", though loosely enough framed, and in itself sufficiently inconsistent, in its exclusiveness, with Pantheism, is clearly a very different thing from a belief in a God-man supernaturally born and working miracles, and demanding belief in his mission as a condition of salvation from eternal punishment.

It appears then that poems such as 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day', and 'A Death in the Desert', and the 'Epistle of Karshish the Physician', in so far as they embody or imply Christian dogmas are no more to be taken as representing Browning's personal convictions than his episodic poems are to be taken as giving his personal experience. On the last head most of us have our own reservations; but it is clear that he loved to imagine situations for artistic treatment, and to handle them sympathetically. Yet it is significant that in so far as he dramatically or im-

personally discussed religious problems, his efforts always run to finding arguments for faith. Even in 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', where we are introduced to a virtually sceptical bishop, who justifies his profession on the score, first, that you can never be sure about things, and, second, that it is an agreeable thing to be a bishop—even there, after bringing religion to such a pass, the poet finally turns the head of the Bishop's interlocutor, Gigadibs, the literary man, towards pious mysticism. This, again, squares with Mrs. Orr's further account. His beliefs, she tells us, did not remain stable; and in 1869 she noticed in him the traces of "spiritual disturbance".

> "The affirmations of belief which he made in the course of our conversations had a ring of self-defence scarcely justified by the circumstances which had immediately provoked them. 'I know the difficulty of believing,' he once said to me, when some question had arisen concerning the Christian scheme of salvation, 'I know all that may be said against it, on the ground of history, of reason, of even moral sense. *I grant even that it may be a fiction.* But I am none the less convinced that the life and death of Christ, as Christians apprehend them, supply something which their humanity requires, and that it is true for them.' He then

proceeded to say why, in his judgment, humanity required Christ. 'The evidence of Divine power is everywhere about us; not so the evidence of Divine love. That love could only reveal itself to the human heart by some supreme act of *human* tenderness and devotion; the fact, or fancy, of Christ's cross and passion could only supply such a revelation.' I did not at the time," adds Mrs. Orr, "regard these words as a plea for an even modified belief on his own part. What I read into them was an apology for the varying degrees of literalism with which the Christian doctrine has been accepted, as well as an expression of sympathy for its more mystical or more subjective forms. This was probably all he meant at the moment of speaking, although the need to which Christ responds was more real, even for him, than I then knew."*

V.

This is really a plain prose summary of Browning's Christian poems, and as such is very useful. It shows the real arbitrariness and inconsequence of his reasoning, bringing out with particular clearness the illogicality of his theory of divine love; for the doctrine of the love of God in

* Article cited, p. 879.

Christ rests historically and necessarily on that very doctrine of wrath or perdition which Browning repudiated. Were there no wrath or perdition there could be no meaning in the divine sacrifice; no process of God or man laying down life for mankind; but simply the ghastly spectacle of a humanly meaningless immolation. Browning's fallacy in these matters is outrageous. Himself an optimistic Theist-Pantheist, as we have him in 'Saul', he wanted to purge men's minds of the notion of a retributive God; and yet he held up as a necessity of their nature the conception of a God who shed his Son's blood to avert his retribution from men, when on the face of the case they could only harbor the second conception because they harbored the first. And his notion of "the grounds of history, of reason, of even moral sense," is sadly to seek in his view that a fiction may rightly be bolstered up as a universal human necessity. This is really one of the commonest forms of empiricism; and the final doctrine "it is true for them" amounts simply to this, that we believe what we believe. My disbelief in the story is equally true for me; and the upshot of the thesis is mere verbiage. The earth is flat for you if for you it is flat, and it is a necessity of your humanity to believe it flat if you cannot bring yourself to believe it is round. That such a vivacious intelligence as Browning's should find

final refuge in such logical positions as these is peculiarly significant of the tendency of his positive creed and of his mind. The fact is that his sympathies always lay towards supernaturalism and faith, and this inevitably, because his own final creed could be stated only in terms of supernaturalism and faith.

What this final creed was, may be gathered on the theoretic side, I think, from the 'Epilogue' in which he makes three speakers successively set forth three conceptions of religion. The first is David; the second is Renan; the third is anonymous. But while it is very clear that Mr. Browning's David is not David, and Mr. Browning's Renan is not Renan, the anonymous third is really Mr. Browning. David sings a Hebrew hymn, representing a late and poetic presentment of the Jewish faith, far removed from the primitive barbarism of the Semitic bandit. Renan is made to deliver an allocution, of which the triple-twisted and double-knotted texture is in amusing contrast to the pellucid empiricism of the real Renan; and of which the net purport is that the Christ-Dream, the Christ-Face, must vanish from men's minds as the belief has vanished in the Hebrew Yahweh, inhabiting the incense fumes of the temple. Then comes the third speaker, who, again making the statement with unnecessary involution and obscurity, points out how, just as

every individual is for himself the centre of the cosmos, every religious conception is as it were a face of the cosmos for those who have seen it. And then comes the moral:

> Why, where's the need of Temple, when the walls
> O' the world are that? What use of swells and falls
> From Levites' choir, Priests' cries, and trumpet-calls?
>
> That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
> Or decomposes but to recompose,
> Become my universe that feels and knows!

That is to say, we end in Pantheism. But as usual the Pantheism is lop-sided, and evades half its implications. If "that one Face" becomes the universe that feels and knows, then equally so do a thousand other faces, Apollo, Asklepios, Osiris, Buddha, Krishna, Dionysos—whatever name men have ever dreamt they could be saved by. And if the Dream-Faces are to be philosophised so, equally are the doctrines which set the Dream-Faces aside with the idol and the demon and the Brocken-phantom. Browning in this matter never would come to the final issues. There is a type of reasoner going about at present who is at great pains to show that all reli-

gious beliefs have been only part of a process of human education; that in that sense all have been true; and that the lowest and crudest is to be regarded in the same spirit as the highest. But this argument is most oddly inverted the moment the reasoner comes to deal with the latest phases of all. Divine purpose he finds to pervade the universe, but only up to the point at which somebody brings forward a contrary theory of the universe. So that not only is the atheist an absolute exception to the order of Providence, but those persons who nowadays hold by an earlier instead of a later Theism are also overruling the intentions of Omnipotence. The primeval fetish-worshipper, the Mexican cannibal, eating the sacrificial victim's flesh, the Christian devil-worshipper and witch-burner—all these are seemly figures in the upward progression. But when you come to propose a totally new plan, to explain away the higher as well as the lower forms of religious hallucination, then our quasi-philosophic friend refuses you any place in the scheme of nature at all. The Viking roaring the praises of Odin and Thor is as he should be; so are Peter and Paul; and the Popes even; and General Booth: these are voices of the cosmic movement: but when it comes to Voltaire or Clifford or Ingersoll the whole doctrine collapses, and we are invited to contemplate these as fight-

ing against the stars in their courses, and upsetting the very laws of the universe!

VI.

This thesis, though some account it philosophical, need not be further discussed. But there is no denying that the phase in which Browning always left his religious exposition is just this phase, slightly disguised. Not that he, with his essential catholicity, would have adopted the neo-fanaticism which accords the right of existence to all beliefs save rationalism; but that he never faced the final philosophical problem. An atheistic philosophy may explain Browning, but Browning cannot explain an atheistic philosophy. He never rises so high in his Pantheism as the Hindu vision of Brahma, turned into song in a rare mood by Emerson:

"I am the doubter and the doubt."

To say that God meant men to conclude that God was a chimæra, would be too severe a strain on Browning's inveterate anthropomorphism; which was really strengthened by his humanity. What he is always eager to demonstrate is that God must be good at bottom, though things seem to go so far wrong. An early Christian occasionally might, like the late Calvinist, console himself by deciding that God made men resist

him, and that God might in the end rightly torture such men in perpetuity for so resisting. On this view Atheism would be judicial blindness, the work not of a loving but of a diabolical God. But Browning is incapable of abstract hate, much less of the concrete ferocity of Dante; and his notion of vindicating the ways of God to men is to keep on suggesting that they really do not know what surprise is in store for them; that if God can keep the universe going he can surely mend its cracks; or rather that the cracks, which to man appear ruinous, are in all probability details in a scheme of absolute beauty, if only we could see it.

The unquenchable optimism of the man—and the practical half of his creed—come out with peculiar force in the little poem entitled "Apparent Failure", in which he describes his visit to the old Morgue at Paris—describes it in some of his most helter-skelter verse, snatching his rhymes anyhow, and bringing in the Sorgue in defiance of reason because it happens to be the only chime to Morgue. There he describes the different types: the passionate boy, the old Socialist, the voluptuary, all lying quietly in death together on the copper couch. At the very outset we have the avowal:

"I thought, and think, their sin's atoned."

And this is the conclusion:

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

What, then, is the end to be? And what is the meaning of the assumption that "God blessed once" the totality of things? Is it that he started them right; and they somehow got wrong; but they are yet to be rectified? That is the clear implication; and here lies the fundamental contradiction in the poet's philosophy. At the height of his argument he will hold that sin and evil are only apparent flaws in the infinitely perfect whole, visible as perfection to Deity alone at present, but one day also to be so perceived by men. He puts this doctrine, undramatically enough, into one of Pippa's songs:

"God's puppets, best and worst
Are we; there is no last nor first."

And yet we come back to the old finite ethic: "it's fitter being sane than mad". Fitter, that is, from the point of view of imperfect man: from

the point of view of the Infinite there can be no unfitness. The very title of the present poem is 'Apparent Failure', as who should say, not *real* failure. But our Transcendentalist, say what he will, cannot really rise above humanity; and so he eludes his dilemma by a plunge into optimistic platitude: "it will all come right somehow". If you are not satisfied that he has really given up his case, his usual thesis that God doeth all things well, turn to that memorable passage at the end of the tenth book of his greatest performance, 'The Ring and the Book,' where the wise Pope, dismissing the problem of utter villainy, speaks of

> "that sad, obscure, sequestered state
> Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
> He else made first in vain."

That is not the Pope's final philosophy only. It is Robert Browning's. And what a philosophy! Broadly speaking, it leaves off where the real task of philosophy begins. It is only a humanised version of the mythus of hell and purgatory: even more naïvely than they, it negates the very assumption on which it stands, the infinitude of Deity. This conception of Omnipotence as an artificer who chronically makes a misfit, so to speak, what is it but primeval puerility made to look profound?

Mrs. Orr, we saw, said that Browning rejected the antithesis of good and evil, and held pantheistically that "every form of moral existence is required for a complete human world". There is a fallacy here, as usual, in respect of the à priori method of Pantheism, with its use of the word "required"; but, stated in any way, the doctrine is in conflict with Browning's own practical ethic, as Mrs. Orr shows. He could not help himself. His philosophy, she says, "never rendered him callous towards the practical aspect of wrong-doing. No man was . . . . more anxious for the enforcement of human justice *in its most stringent forms.*" A word to the wise! This is what we come to by way of Pantheism and the doctrine that all forms of existence are "*required* for a complete human world". Is it a whit better than Calvinism, which taught that God fore-ordained men to sin, and then to suffer everlastingly for their fore-ordained sin? What are the "most stringent forms of human justice", so called, but atrocious survivals of the combined methods of iniquity, ignorance, and unreason? Here at last we come to a plain issue. Men who reject Browning's machinery of omnipotent love and human demand for such love, have arrived at so much of human love as consists in treating evil minds in as pure a spirit of beneficence as they do unsound bodies. To such thinkers the "most

stringent forms of human justice" are at once senseless and odious, the mere wreaking of animal instinct in the name of religion and morals. Which way then do we best get to the practice of human goodwill—by poetising about love denaturalised by infinitude, or by setting the mock lore of infinitude aside? Let the just and the humane man judge. One is fain to hope that Mrs. Sutherland Orr was in error in her description of her friend; and that he was *not* a votary of "human justice in its most stringent forms"—though he has certainly used language that justifies her statement. It would be a sad anomaly if the poet who was so far above sectarian malice and national prejudice alike, and who never gave a single song to war, should have been a devotee of the lash and the hangman, the solitary cell, and the whole dark prison world of cruelty and fear. If he were, he has supplied us with one more proof that Theism, even when ostensibly rooted in pantheism, is to-day as ever a lead not to humanity but to inhumanity; and it must be said that Browning's professed pantheism was even more liable than other men's to lapse into ordinary theism. Here we must join issue with his accomplished biographer, Mrs. Sutherland Orr.

VII.

As we have seen, Mrs. Orr accounts for

Browning's clinging to a supernormal if not a supernatural Christ by the nature of his conception of Deity. In a passage leading up to the one before cited she writes: "Mr. Browning's Theism was more definite than his Christianity, but his mental idiosyncrasies were still more strongly impressed upon it. . . . . His abstract idea of the Deity was, in fact, far more the Supreme Being of metaphysics than the God of Theology."* And at the end of the 'Life and Letters,' with a candor which deserves special recognition, she admits the relative validity of the following criticism, by Mr. R. Mortimer:—

> "His position in regard to the thought of the age is paradoxical, if not inconsistent. He is in advance of it in every respect but one, the most important of all, the matter of fundamental principles: in these he is behind it. His processes of thought are often scientific in their precision of analysis: the sudden conclusion which he imposes upon them is transcendental and inept."

Mrs. Orr's admission is well worth transcribing in full:

> "This statement is relatively true. Mr. Browning's positive reasonings often do end

* Art. cited, p. 885.

with transcendental conclusions. They also start from transcendental premisses. However closely his mind might follow the visible order of experience, he never lost what was for him the consciousness of a Supreme Eternal Will as having existed before it; he never lost the vision of an intelligent First Cause, as underlying all minor systems of causation. But such weaknesses as were involved in his logical position are inherent to all the higher forms of natural theology when once it has been erected into a dogma. As maintained by Mr. Browning, this belief held a saving clause which removed it from all dogmatic, hence all admissible grounds of controversy: the more definite or concrete conceptions of which it consists possessed no finality for even his own mind; they represented for him an absolute truth with contingent relations to it. No one felt more strongly than he the contradictions involved in any conceivable system of Divine creation and government. No one knew better that every act and motive which we attribute to a Supreme Being is a virtual negation of His existence. He believed nevertheless that such a Being exists; and he accepted His reflection in the mirror of the human consciousness, as a necessarily false image, but one which bears witness to the truth. *His works rarely indicate this*

condition of feeling; it was not often apparent in his conversation. The faith which he had contingently accepted became absolute for him from all practical points of view; it became subject to all the conditions of his humanity. On the ground of abstract logic he was always ready to disavow it; the transcendental imagination and the acknowledged limits of human reason claimed the last word in its behalf. This philosophy of religion is distinctly suggested in the fifth parable of 'Ferishtah's Fancies'.

It must here be respectfully remarked that Mrs. Orr's claims and admissions will not consist. In her *Contemporary* article she retracts the word "felt", on the score that "the ground of feeling in him was entirely occupied by belief"; and she substitutes "logical" for "virtual" in the next sentence. We are left either with the double proposition that Browning believed that all concepts of Divine government are contradictory, *and* that there is nevertheless Divine government, or with the last proposition, and the addendum that such a proposition is logically its own negation. What then becomes of the claim that "No one knew better" the suicidal character of modal descriptions of the Infinite? It is a proposition on a par with that above discussed concerning Ten-

nyson, that no one detested war more than he; and we must meet it, either, as we had to meet that, by answering that it is not true, or by pointing out that it is psychologically on a par with the claim by a drunkard that no one knows better than he the perniciousness of alcohol. We must either impute disease of the will or pronounce that every man "knows better" the force of the argument who honestly acts upon it. To avow that you know you are acting irrationally is really not to justify your position; and to talk of your "transcendental imagination" when you are simply sticking to what you were taught in your childhood really does not mend matters. On that principle your transcendental imagination can be "made in Germany"; and if you are a Hindu it will entitle you to believe in Shiva and Kali, or, for that matter, in the entire pantheon. Browning, like Tennyson, in the terms of the case, simply insisted on gratifying his propensities after he had seen them—on other people's pressure—to be, so to speak, acts of intellectual sin.

The practical truth seems to be, however, that neither poet *did* see the force of the argument against him, though in discussion he may occasionally have affected to do so. At least, it is very hard for some of us to conceive how a man can clearly recognise that his belief is self-con-

tradictory, and still go on believing. What *is* belief? One can understand division of will over an action; the experience is practically normal; but the *belief* in contradictories—the conjoined beliefs that Infinity excludes attributes and is made up of attributes—this is a mental state so hard to realise that one can see no way of accommodating it save by saying that one of the alleged beliefs is not really held, or that they are held alternately.

Either way, it seems at least clear that Mrs. Orr's account of Browning's reason for his kind of belief in Christ falls to the ground. It now appears that his conception of a governing Providence had "become absolute for him from all practical points of view", which is a somewhat infelicitous way of saying that it was his normal state of mind. Then the alleged contingent need for an interposing Christ disappears; and we are left to speculate whether Browning held that "belief" as he did his "practical" God-idea, because it comforted him, or whether he only held it occasionally, when he grew uncomfortably logical in his theism. In her *Contemporary* article, after her very clear account of Browning's necessity for believing in Christ, she writes that—

> "His language was, in later years, more habitually that of a Theist than that of a

Christian. And, as his abstract Supreme Being was more remote than the God of Christian theology, so was the God of his real life more familiarly near, more anthropomorphic in character than the image of Deity usually reflected by the educated religious mind. I had once occasion to think that no alleged instance of Divine intervention could strain his powers of belief. He was willing to admit that, in this concrete form, his faith must be a delusion, but he held it as imposed on him by the conditions of his humanity, and as justified by them."*

VIII.

It thus begins to appear that Browning, like Tennyson, was finally an inefficient intelligence in a sphere of thought in which he insisted on instructing his fellows. This may seem a hard saying; and again we are bound to listen to Mrs. Orr, who so admirably combines loyalty to her poet with loyalty, or at least the spirit of loyalty, to critical justice. Dealing with the fundamental issue of the relation of a poet as such to truth, on which Mr. Sharp in his biography of Browning had pronounced broadly in the sense of the foregoing argument, she writes:

"No man is a great poet who has not within

* Art. cited, p. 885.

him the materials and the capacity for thought; but his mental processes are opposed to those of the thinker, and *it is his function to step in where thought can no longer find its way.* When, however, the failure in intellectual method is imputed to Mr. Browning as a reproach, it is the duty of his biographer to defend him where this is possible. I have shown in my Conclusion through what special and re-recent utterance the reproach had been brought home to him; and I tried to show that, while this was often justified by his works, a deeper insight into the operations of his mind would rob it of a great deal of its force. I felt that, in that vision of different planes of truth, of which we find an imperfect reflection in his casuistry, he had proved himself, though not a systematic thinker, one who, by his faculty of poet, could grasp the deepest subtleties to which thought can attain."†

It would be ungracious to dispute narrowly such a claim: Browning certainly had a subtle intelligence, and to prove the negative would be operose. For my own part I would rather not claim to have grasped the deepest subtleties to which thought can attain. But in the interests of the critical reason it is still necessary to point out

† Art. cited, pp. 886-7.

that the phrase above italicised either concedes the thesis that the poet's faculty is not to reach truth but to sing emotion, or reintroduces the claim that his "transcendental imagination" is a source of truth before which criticism is impotent. If the former, Mrs. Orr is really at one with Mr. Sharp; and the poet's "message" has exactly the doctrinal validity of his poetry in general, neither more nor less. If the latter, it may suffice to point out that at a pinch we can all play the transcendental gambit, albeit in prose, and that our conviction of Mr. Browning's deludedness as to the Nature of Things—a conviction which at this stage need give no account of its origin—"steps in" to end the discussion.

Leaving the transcendental question in that state, we may finally apply something in the nature of a practical test to Browning's philosophy by weighing on their merits some of the arguments in one of the subtlest of his later versified tractates, 'Ferishtah's Fancies' (1884). It is introduced by some Hudibrastic verses which one could wish not to have seen; and it contains a number of lyrics which leave us sighing for the old wine, of the scantier but how much more exquisite vintage! Of the main matter, the verse is so full of commonplace prosaisms that it takes an effort to read it, apart from the task of following the argument. Still, let us not swerve.

Ferishtah is a Persian dervish who, when introduced to us, is yet a long way from the attainment of wisdom, theosophic or other, and who, later, in successive appearances, gives more or less dubious evidence of having grown wiser by reflexion and experience. 'The Eagle' is the title of the first instalment of Ferishtah's ratiocinations; and it consists of a recital of how the dervish—"(though yet un-dervished, call him so, No less beforehand . . . .)" stipulates the poet—once saw an eagle feed certain motherless and starving ravenlets, and went home to put his faith in Providence and his hands in his pockets; till he at length swooned with hunger, and God "in dream" pointed out to him that he was able to help himself and had better do it; whereupon Ferishtah resumed his normal habits, deciding, however, to go to Ispahan to gain knowledge. By such steps, it seems to be implied, does man attain to true theosophy. The dervish, "half-way on Dervishhood, not wholly there," is next seen at Ispahan, where he is severely snubbed by an ex-Vizier in reduced circumstances for asking whether the latter did not curse God for having exalted him so high, only to reduce him to final costermongerhood. Ferishtah is called a fool; told that God sends both good and evil, and that it is better to think of the good than of the evil; and exhorted to go to school; and the poet sub-

joins a reference to the (Talmudic) doctrine of the Jews that the Elohim create the good but not the evil, favoring us with the Hebrew text in his latterly acquired fashion of pedantry.

In the third section we find Ferishtah schooled and "full Dervish"; but, whether of the poet's design or through his infirmity, the Dervish's first disputation, so far as it can be made out, fails to attain to the primary quality of coherence. As I read it, the narrative runs thus. Ferishtah, reading from "the roll wherein is treated of Lord Ali's life", pauses "abrupt"—"disabled by emotion"; and a listener challenges him to something like the following effect (I condense the blank verse into plain prose):—"When I asked if this (or some other) beautiful story was true, you said that beauty lives in truth. I persisted, asking whether the beauty existed outside as well as in our minds—in deed as well as word—whether this life was lived, not dreamed. You said that many attested the fact. I reminded you that only half as long ago reigned Shah Abbas, of whom it is told that he stopped a lion in its leap on a stag's haunch, yet that same day died of fear on seeing a spider in his wine-cup. Do you believe this?" Ferishtah answers, "Why not? the story is circumstantially told; besides, the cup-bearer saw it." Here the dispute turns topsy-turvy, the disputants apparently changing sides. "Do you be-

lieve one cup-bearer's story, probably false, certainly futile," demands the antagonist, "and do you 'hesitate to trust what many tongues combine to testify was beautiful in deed as well as word'?"

The inverted commas show the questioner to be speaking; he who had himself doubted being now made to reproach Ferishtah for doubting what in point of fact Ferishtah has asserted to be true. Hereupon Ferishtah retorts with: "The reigning Shah has found that you are the descendant of that careless cup-bearer who caused the death of his ancestor: he therefore orders you to pay a fine of twelve dinàrs. Will you say now that you believe the story?" The man had actually called the Shah Abbas story "false, very like, and futile certainly"; and he now goes on to corner Ferishtah: "There we agree: neither of us will say he 'believes' the story"—(after Ferishtah had said he believed it). "Now I get near you. Why did you pause abrupt, *disabled by emotion,* over this story of Ali's life, which might match for credibility the figment of the spider and the cup, and which is "unevidenced, thine own word'?" No such word has hitherto appeared in the story; Ferishtah having on the contrary said that there was much evidence. The course of the debate so far seems in brief to be this. The interlocutor questions the Ali story,

and points out that the preposterous lion and spider story is as well vouched. Ferishtah, however, believes that too. Then "do you believe that and doubt the Ali story?" is the consistent challenge; and "do you mean to say you really believe the spider story?" is the dervish's rejoinder. "Certainly not: then why did you believe the Ali story?" is the lucid reply.

We now enter on a new stage. The harlequin assailant mentions that he weeps over the fate of a lady recorded to have been eaten by a snake with nine heads, and then laughs at the nine-heads figment, knowing no snake has more heads than three. His weeping and laughing he thinks "right alike", but he wants to know how the sapient Ferishtah could plead so before God concerning *his* beliefs and disbeliefs. On this Ferishtah tells the story of the sons of Ishak, who was reported killed at Yezdt, but who has come home after a lapse of ten years. A baggage-boy had told the sons he had seen their father well and cured, on which one son had hailed the news and the other sadly disbelieved. Now after ten years the father returns, and the neighbours tell the son who had believed to welcome his father, but exhort the other to hide. "Do you not say the same?" asks Ferishtah. His interlocutor promptly pooh-poohs such reasoning. "Suppose," he asks, "that the believing son had re-

gretted his father's survival? Would Ishak be such a fool as to reward belief of that kind?" Then, says Ferishtah, closing the sederunt: "Is God less wise? Resume the roll!" And the poem concludes with: "They did." One hopes they profited by it, for certainly an idler or a more muddle-headed wrangle than theirs never occurred outside of a monastery. It is only fair to say that this third instalment of the 'Fancies' stands supreme in the book in respect of sheer confusion; but the publication of such a hopeless tangle of miscarried casuistry raises insistent questions as to its author's habits of mind.

The fourth of the Ferishtah studies, loosely titled 'The Family', is highly characteristic and instructive. A neighbour wants to know why Ferishtah, who yesterday argued that it was monstrous to think to influence God's conduct by prayer, has to-day prayed for a sick friend, and on that account feels relieved. Ferishtah, *more suo*, tells a story of how a married woman, being bitten in the leg by a serpent, was prescribed amputation; how the husband sighingly acquiesced; how the oldest son deprecated haste; how the next insisted on having his mother cured without amputation; and how the youngest told his brothers the doctor must certainly know best what to do, and exhorted him to proceed at once. Ferishtah's new questioner, with Browningese

promptitude, pronounces the youngster a young devil. "Why, he held with the Hakim," says Ferishtah, in his Socratic way. "Yes, but was he filial in doing so?" asks the now entrapped neighbour. "Now I have you," in effect replies Ferishtah. "God is the Hakim; the husband's attitude is the obedient angel's; the first son's is that of wise humanity; the second's that of wrong-headed yet right-hearted humanity; while the chit 'thinks to discard humanity itself', 'so, missing heaven and losing earth—drops how but hellwards'? Moral: pray when your emotions prompt you to." That is a fair specimen of Ferishtah, and, be it added, of Browning. The story is an ingenious justification, in his special style of thinking, of irrationality in religion; and the lesson taught is: "Do not be as wise as you can." The rationalist who does not pray is compared to the clear-headed, cold-hearted boy who has no hesitation about letting his mother's leg be amputated; and, for the polemic purpose, the admission as to the angelic wisdom of the husband's course is set aside, as is Ferishtah's philosophy of yesterday. It is the explicit inculcation of unreason. It may be argued that Browning does not endorse this "fancy" of Ferishtah any more than he did the first; but those of us who have studied him know better. The voice is the voice of Jacob.

Space fails for the examination of all the reasonings of Ferishtah, but one more must be noticed—that of the twelfth section, entitled 'A Bean-stalk: also Apple-eating'. Ferishtah is asked by a scholar to say whether life is a good or a bad thing, and the poet makes the questioner elaborate his problem in such a way as to give himself into Ferishtah's hands. "Take a lot of beans," says the querist: "you can tell me whether they are white or black; take the days of life in the same way, and tell their color: I say they are black." No inquirer with an atom of dialectical acuteness would have put such a leading question. Ferishtah's cue clearly is to answer: "Here is a row of beans, black and white: see—the effect of the whole is greyish; only, if, instead of taking in the whole row in your glance, you let your eye rest on one bean, the chances are that it is the blackest". The questioner had contended that life consisted of memory of past and fear of future pain—the breathing spaces of "blank", "which simple folk style Good," only serving to let consciousness of evil pass into apprehension of evil to come. Ferishtah has but to reply that we ourselves make the days black or white—turning them white as the moon turns dark clouds to silver. For the rest, pleasure is the more pleasurable because "enhanced by pain's shade"; and before a peaceful death, welcomed as sleep after

toil, the impression from the whole past is that of whiteness. To this the pessimist, girding up his loins somewhat, rejoins with a reference to the "immeasurable miseries" of life apart from Fershtah; and Fershtah's reply is weak enough to counterbalance the previous weakness of his antagonist. First he argues, circumspectly enough, that he—like, say the palm-aphis—knows his "own appointed patch i' the world"; and that how the aphides on other leaves really feel is for him "past conjecture". But, mindful of his theosophy, he must proceed to say that, unlike the aphis, he perceives a "world of woe" around him; and that, all things considered, he leaves the matter with God; sympathising with his kind, but not seeing any irretrievable harm. "Man's impotency, God's omnipotence," he says, "these stop my answer"—which is simply a shelving of the entire question. His companion reminds him that certain Indian sages find life entirely black; on which he spins a parable to convey the old rebuttal, "How or why, then, do they live? Their living proves they lied"; and the dialogue runs into an exposition of God's purposes, concluding with an announcement of intention to be for ever grateful for God's goodness.

IX.

Here again we have a familiar lesson. Browning we knew of old to be an optimist; and he makes it quite intelligible for us why he was so. It was the personal equation. An excellent constitution, a good income, a sense of having no duty to humanity that is not fulfilled by writing poems, a capacity for cosmopolitanism, tolerable insensibility to the woes of the world, and the capacity to fall in love when past seventy—these were the conditions of the poet's optimism, and they were certainly ample. His lines had been cast in pleasant places, and with his à priori belief in God it was meet that he should be grateful. But for all men who can get outside their theological training or predilections this order of philosophy, when offered by way of doctrine for others, has an ineffaceable quality of well-to-do commonplace. That it should be chronically offered by poets is one more proof that poets are not the most imaginative of men—in the sense, that is, of normally realising how the world goes outside their own field. Somehow their protestations recall to us that severe phrase of Mr. Morley about "the complacent religiosity of the prosperous". And in Browning's case the personal theism really will not square with Mrs. Orr's account of his philosophic view of deity. Not only for every-day purposes, but for poetic purposes,

he becomes an ordinary prehistoric animist—witness in particular the lines he penned for the "Jubilee window" of St. Margaret's Church in 1887.

When an ordinary man says, "Thank God" there may or may not be in his mind a notion of personal indebtedness to deity for some favor supposed to be specially conferred. Often the phrase is only an emphatic equivalent for "I'm so glad!"; but it must be assumed that the expletive is sometimes coincident with a religious sentiment. What that amounts to, in turn, appears to be a notion that Omnipotence is periodically seized with a wish to do a mortal a kindness, and is likely to be hurt if thanks are not returned. The remorse often expressed by Christians for their past ingratitude is explicable only on the view that they make this modest estimate of their relations with the supposed Upholder and Sustainer of the universe. He is a benefactor whom they feel they have neglected, perhaps discouraged; and they wish to do what they can to make up for past disregard. The feeling is such as they might cherish towards a great neighbour, or towards the lord of the manor. Let any man who will, try to associate for a moment the dignity of Pantheism with the quatrain aforesaid:

"Fifty years' flight! wherein should he rejoice

Who hailed their birth, who as they die
decays?
This—England echoes his attesting voice:
Wondrous and well—Thanks, Ancient Thou
of Days."

These unhappy verses—of which the construction runs: "*Wherein* should I rejoice? This—Wondrous and well, Thanks," etc.—set us asking what was the value of Browning's claim that he never worked carelessly. "I never take anything *but* pains," is one of his affirmations, quoted by Mrs. Orr. In the face of the grammarless outburst before us we are driven to fall back upon her account of him as conspicuously excitable; and this is indeed the probable explanation of his too common failure to attain moderate lucidity. "I am nervous," he declared, "to such a degree that I might fancy I could not enter a drawing-room if I did not know from long experience that I can do it";* and unless an artist of this cast, gifted with fluency, can at *some* stage of his work transcend his excitation and play the critic, so much the worse for his art. Browning's "pains" were too often taken in a state of nerves that yielded him no view of his artistic miscalculations, whence a sad amount of cryptic English, to which most men will steadfastly refuse to give the reverent

* 'Life and Letters,' p. 389.

study that he, on challenge, hotly demanded for it. And in the case before us he actually loses sight of syntax in addressing his Deity.

What we are mainly concerned with, however, is not so much the syntax as the significance of the verses, so far as they can be said to have any. Here is the ripe utterance of cultured theism, by its accepted poetic exponent in England: what shall be the comment of reason on the exhibition? As here seen, the expert in divine things puts to himself the question, What is the upshot of the past fifty years of England's or the world's history? and being on the whole extremely satisfied, proceeds to put a complimentary verdict in a church window for the deity's encouragement. It is an interchange of civilities between Mr. Browning and the Eternal, so-called; the poet evidently feeling that his obliging remarks will be taken in good part. What ordinary Christians think of the expression "Ancient Thou of Days" it is hard to divine; but to an impartial reader nothing could better convey the impression of assuring the deity that he is really doing very well. And one simply cannot admit that the poet who thinks in this fashion is normally even in sight of the problem on which he is always declaiming. To say that in the past fifty years Eternal Omnipotence has done wondrously and well in Eng-

land is to lose from consciousness every notion of Omnipotence and Eternity: it is to make verses for God as Tennyson made them for the Queen and the Royal family, only a great deal worse.

There are two empirical views reasonably open to all men as regards the insoluble problem of the goodness or badness of human life in sum. They may conclude that the good is not worth the price of the evil, or they may more sincerely note that a balance of happiness is implied in the continuity of the race. Neither proposition counts for much as explanatory philosophy, yet both stand for a comparatively practical form of reflection. But to turn the human problem into a question whether or not we are to take a favorable moral view of a supposed personal Power who controls and conducts the infinite process of things—whether we are to thank or to arraign Infinity—this is to be intellectually frivolous indeed; frivolous with the frivolity of scholastics and Brahmans, without their outcome of metaphysical address.

X.

One of the most obvious evils of thus misdirecting moral inquiry is that the presuppositions involved deflect the judgment on real moral issues. An ethic which is so enormously concerned about accrediting equivocal appearances

on behalf of Deity is bound to be either equivocal or inconsistently dogmatic in regard to human actions; and the ethical dilemma of pantheism is an old scandal. It does not follow, of course, that Browning, so inconsistent at other points of his philosophy, was consistent enough to see any dilemma for his ethics; but the fact remains that his Pantheism is in conflict with his morality; and not only that, but it at times leads him towards—I do not say into—anti-moral doctrine. One sometimes wonders what would have been said by the champions of orthodox morality if any avowedly irreligious poet had laid down some of the moral lessons subscribed by Tennyson and Browning. Let us take a sample from each, putting first the 53rd section of 'In Memoriam':—

"How many a father have I seen,
A sober man, among his boys,
Whose youth was full of foolish noise,
Who wears his manhood hale and green:

"And dare we to this fancy give,
That had the wild oat not been sown,
The soil, left barren, scarce had grown
The grain by which a man may live?

"Or, if we held the doctrine sound
For life outliving heats of youth,
Yet who would preach it as a truth
To those that eddy round and round?

"Hold thou the good: define it well
For fear divine Philosophy
Should push beyond her mark and be
Procuress to the Lords of Hell."

The poet, be it observed, does not attempt to define the good, either well or ill; and if it had been Shelley or Mr. Swinburne who had advanced the proposition, instead of the author of 'The Promise of May', it would have evoked more criticism than it has met with, including the suggestion that the poet either could not define the good, or did not want to. And if anybody less religious than the author of 'Pippa Passes' had written the closing stanzas of 'The Statue and the Bust', affirming the doctrine that be our ends bad or good we should resolutely effect them, these lines too would have raised some outcry:—

"Stake your counter as boldly every whit,
Venture as warily, use the same skill,
Do your best, whether winning or losing it,

"If you choose to play!—is my principle.
Let a man contend to the uttermost
For his life's set prize, be it what it will!

"The counter our lovers staked was lost
As surely as if it were lawful coin:
And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost

"Is the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a vice, I say."

This is indeed not an immoral doctrine as it stands: it is in a sense more moral than many solemnly established moralities—in the particular case in the poem, much more so, for the morality to be rebelled against was essentially vicious. But it brings out two things: first, that the "high priori way" leads quite as surely as the other way to the overthrow of many established moralities; and secondly that Pantheism, as distinguished from Atheism—that is, Pantheism which stops short of complete consistency—supplies in itself no moral guide whatever, even if it should chance to be bound up with any established ethic. Pantheism in ethics is just the principle of self-fulfilment, preached in these lines by Browning; the thesis being that the infinite life seeks fulfilment in all its forms, and that all the fulfilment is moral. It is the less pretentious philosophy that declares morality to be merely a matter of human relations, and unthinkable in terms of infinitude, but to be for that very reason the most essential of human studies. Hence an atheistic morality, properly gone about, is of necessity the most circumspect of all, and the least liable to egotistic perversion on the plea of individual inspiration; but at the same time the most merciful to wrong-do-

ing of whatever sort. It alone can afford to be consistent; since it has no transcendentalism to reconcile with its practice. And if it errs, it cannot err worse than the transcendentalist does; nor can it take more commonplace views of human relations than we find constituting the final politics of Browning, as of Tennyson, after all their exaltations. When we learn that the poet of the individual soul, to whom, as poet, none is alien, from the Christian martyr and the doomed patriot to Bishop Blougram and Caliban—when we learn that this singer of universal humanity in his old age took a "passionate" interest in what is called the Unionist party, we are moved to wish that his own Aristophanes could sum up the situation.

It is to be gathered from Mrs. Orr's account that, like most men of his race, Browning had sat unconcerned before the unmeasured infamy of the English misrule of Ireland since the age of feudalism, blind alike to the sheer wickedness that sought for a century to arrest her industrial development, and the deadly incompetence that left her subject to medieval land law when all other European nations had long cast it off, save England, which has prospered in virtue of being no longer an agricultural State, while Ireland, in virtue of past English management, is almost entirely so. Finding in all this nothing to rouse

him, whether on Mill's or any other man's telling, Browning became a "passionate Unionist" because of "those considerations of law and order, of honesty and humanity, which have been trampled under foot in the name of Home Rule";* and "no pain of Lost Leadership was ever more angry or more intense than that which came to him through the defection of a great statesman whom he had honored and loved, from what he believed to be the right cause".

Thus can a great poet, who "had difficulty in acknowledging any abstract law which did not derive from a Higher Power",† solve a practical problem in the humanities. It is true that the solution of Home Rule was presented by Mr. Gladstone in an imperfect and indeed impractical form; but that was just where the poet's instinct, if it were good for anything scientific, should have enabled him to transcend details. As it was, he had an eye only for some details: none for moral and social essentials. He had seen no trampling of honesty and humanity underfoot in the name of property, under a regimen which for centuries wrung from the peasant the whole fruits of the toil by which he turned bog into corn-bearing land, and drove him forth, with his little ones and his aged ones, to live or die by the roadside

* Mrs. Orr, 'Life and Letters,' p. 374.
† *Id.* p. 373.

or beg his way to other lands, when another could outbid him for the use of the very soil he had half-created. All that the poet could see was the random cruelties committed by such peasants, a race not at all normally cruel or criminal, under the eternal exasperation of an irrational rule which protected never the people but always the rent-drawers. And for this pathological condition of things, so clearly the result of the special political antecedents, he had no thought of curative remedy save the continuance of that rule, with " human justice in its most stringent form ". In other words, like the leaders he latterly chose, he had no grain of statesmanship.

Well may Mrs. Orr say that " his dominant individuality barred the recognition of any judgment or impression, any thought or feeling, which did not justify itself from his own point of view. . . . . He appeared, for this reason, more widely sympathetic in his works than in his life, though even in the former certain grounds of vicarious feeling remained untouched. The sympathy there displayed was creative and obeyed its own law. *That which was demanded from him by reality was responsive, and implied submission to the law of other minds.* . . . . No one saw more justly than he, when the object of vision was general or remote. Whatever entered his personal atmosphere encountered a refracting me-

dium in which objects were decomposed, and a succession of details, each held as it were close to the eye, blocked out the larger view."* Thus it comes about that some of us who once looked up to him as a humanist, finding in him finally a diner-out susceptible to his environment, turn away in a mood that would be contempt were it not wholly shaded to sadness.

One other account of his opinions points the same way. His "virtual admission of equality between the sexes, combined with his Liberal principles to dispose him favorably towards the movement for Female Emancipation. He approved of everything that had been done for the higher instruction of women, and would, not very long ago, have supported their admission to the Franchise. But he was so much displeased by the more recent action of some of the lady advocates of Women's Rights that, during the last year of his life, after various modifications of opinion, he frankly pledged himself to the opposite view. He had even visions of writing a tragedy or drama in support of it. The plot was roughly sketched, and some dialogue composed, though I believe," writes Mrs. Orr, "no trace of this remains."†

We have thus been spared one work which, had it come into existence, would have been predestinate to literary damnation by all the laws of

* *Id.* pp. 371-3. † *Id.* pp. 396-7.

art. But the news is as bad as the play would have been; for it shows that while the poet had a gift for "creative" sympathy, that is, for sympathy with lives wholly or partly imagined by him, he had none for justice, which means sympathy with the lives that obtrude their own claims, irrespective of our imagination. The poet changed his mind, it will be noted, because *some* women advocates of Women's Rights displeased him. By that test, no cause, however great, could ever have sympathy save from its fanatics; and Browning, with his "Unionism", was clearly not often concerned to apply it. "No intercourse was more congenial to him than that of the higher class of English clergymen," says Mrs. Orr ‡— meaning, doubtless, the intellectually higher, though she does specify as his friends archbishops, bishops, and deans. And the poet does not seem to have thought of asking whether the English clergy were to be judged by what has been said and done in their name, not by some but by thousands of their order, in every generation since Cranmer. Unfortunately, too, only a few of his readers can finally fall back on their affection to solve for them the anomaly of such divagations from the simplest human righteousness by a poet who undertook to expound to them the righteousness of Omnipotence.

‡ *Id.* p. 375.

XI.

It is fair to remember, as regards these latter issues, that Browning did not give his view of them to the world, though, as we saw, he planned a drama to show that women were wrong about their Rights. And it would perhaps be difficult to show that where he does impress his moral and intellectual limitations on his work he has affected average opinion for the worse. At most he has tended to give new zeal to the convictions of some of those similarly limited and not similarly gifted. But as regards certain forms of bad or loose theological thinking he appears to have had a good deal of influence on his day and generation; and above all he seems to have affected it—some would say, for good—as regards its belief in a future life.

It would be interesting, but it is impossible, to get some census or plebiscitum as to Christian notions of Heaven, which should enable us to check the statements once made by Archdeacon Farrar.* "I do not know," wrote Dr. Farrar, "a single reasonably educated Christian who takes the mere *symbols* of heaven for heaven. We do not suppose that heaven is a cubic city, or a pagoda of jewels, or even an endless sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies."

* In a letter published in April, 1891.

That is to say, the heaven-idea of the enormous majority of Christians, since the formation of the Christian Canon, has been a hallucination, a taking of a symbolic picture for an actuality.

It is only the "reasonably educated" Christians, even now, who have got rid of the delusion. But who are the "reasonably educated"? From my point of view, they are sadly few—I wish I could feel I was among them: from Dr. Farrar's they may have been more numerous, but he must still, I fancy, have reckoned them a minority. And what were his tests? Dr. Newman and Dr. Pusey, I suppose, passed for reasonably educated from his point of view; but was their view of Heaven his? Certainly not. "The great white throne" was for Newman no symbol; still less was his Heaven "a temper". And this brings us to the question, What did Archdeacon Farrar really mean by his remarks about Heaven? He referred to his "Eternal Hope" for a refutation of the Calvinistic view of a necessary eternity of punishment; but if he really believed what plain people would understand by the phrases "Heaven is a temper", "Heaven means principle," where was the ground for an Eternal Hope? And where was the need for any elaborate proof that Hell may not be eternal? His words, naturally construed, would mean that there is no "future state"; that Heaven is inward peace and Hell

inward agony *in this life.* But this cannot be what Dr. Farrar meant, for he expressly defined Heaven as a "place of progress, of fruition of all that is noble, of growth and progress upwards and onwards, of endless and beneficent activity, of a love which knows no fear and no hatred, of a growing more like to God because we shall see him as he is.". This, said Dr. Farrar, "we" believe—meaning by "we" the "reasonably educated" Christians. And he referred us to Browning for the general doctrine.

Dr. Farrar might well refer to Browning; for it is he who has set the fashion of the "progressive" theory of Heaven in England and America. Dr. Farrar's prose very fairly summed up the average drift of Browning's teaching; but he did nothing to rationalise it or connect it with the general structure of human beliefs. If we ask how Browning figured to himself the Heaven or futurity of which he sings, we are at once brought up sharp by the question: Did he count on being in future a body, an organism, a sentient thing, a visible "spirit" or form, in communion with other visible spirits or forms? No definite answer is possible. In 'Evelyn Hope' he makes his elderly sentimentalist (against whom I confess I have always had a very strong bias) place a leaf in the dead girl's hand and say, "You will wake, and remember, and understand". But it is more

than doubtful whether Browning really conceived of the girl waking again in the body, ages hence, and seeing the re-animated leaf with bodily eyes, and inferring who gave it her and what he meant. If the poet believed that, we need go little further. In that case he was just spinning fancies such as any schoolgirl may manufacture by the hundred. It is worth no "reasonably educated" man's while to spend any but æsthetic reflection over such fancies, were they signed by fifty poets, with much more charm of versification than Browning here compassed. But what then *did* he mean?

The elderly sentimentalist, mooning in his egotistical and (to me) odious way over the young girl's corpse, intimates that their future meeting may be delayed

> "for more lives yet,
> Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few:
> Much is to learn, much to forget,
> Ere the time be come for taking you."

She is reserved for his distant delectation in some sweet by-and-by. And what are the "more lives" to be? Not resurrections of the body after spells of inanition—we are always driven to that assumption—but a sort of "spiritual" lives, which carry on the process of experience unbroken. And here we see the essential triviality of the poem,

for if the sequent lives are unbroken, Evelyn Hope is already launched on one of them, and the dead clay is no more she than the dead leaf. It was school-girl mooning after all. The poet does not believe a word he says. He does not in his heart think there will be any future personal communion—that Evelyn's spirit is away somewhere in an "upper world". He has no belief in anything but body; and he is doing a mawkish pose before the unmoving mask, unawed by its mystery, unstricken by the infinite pathos of death.

But I have admitted that this elderly sentimentalist has always been an offence to me; and in mere fairness one should try to take a teacher's meaning under the most attractive form. Let us put aside the elderly prig and his priggish impiety —if we may use that word to describe the blatancy of self-love in the very chamber of death— and try to get at Browning's idea in its most philosophic form. What does it amount to? To something like the Hindu fancy, which comes so easily to the ignorant speculator, and is so widely cherished by savages—that every organism represents but one phase of some single continuous individuality. That fancy collapses the moment it is tried by tests which exclude the elementary fallacy of substitution of terms. Our entire notion of individuality, of personality, subsumes

self-consciousness; and an individuality without memory is a contradiction in terms. Thus it is all one whether or not we affect to suppose that our personality was once somebody else. It is an absolutely meaningless proposition, which is only made to seem significant by tacking on the absolutely unrelated proposition that Smith suffers to-day for deeds once done by Jones.*

Browning, however, affirms not this but a continuous development of one personality, *beginning now*, but continued eternally henceforth. If he does not mean this he is out of court at once; for the admission that possibly this human "personality" existed before and has forgotten it, reduces his idea at once to the insignificance of the Hindu formula. If the future "lives" are not to carry on memory, there is an end of "experience" and "development"; and immortality is only the *future life of something else.* Now, on the face of the case, the eternal prolongation of a personality *beginning now* is unsatisfying even to the mystical sense of symmetry; and that is why those who cherish the notion are always tending to fall back on the theory of pre-existence, though that is the negation of that personality which to satisfy is the whole purpose of the speculation. But let us take the idea of mere

* Tennyson, as we saw, confusedly but vehemently resented the notion of merely becoming somebody else.

"future eternity of life from this moment" and ask what it signifies. The eternity of life must be an eternity of something living; but it is not to be an eternity of flesh and blood and eyes and ears and speech. Yet it is to be an eternity of reminiscence of the functions and sensations of the bodily organs, for our death-bed-side amorist (we must return to him for an instant) has not an idea to suggest that is not such. He is to think in future without a head, but he must figure himself as meeting Evelyn face to face. For sane and wholesome men and women, what is the measure of comfort, consolation, or satisfaction in such child's play as that? A friend of mine likens all metaphysics to the child's game of grasping the right thumb in the left fist, leaving it projecting, and then suddenly trying to catch it with the withdrawn right hand. He says that you may get to do the snatch quick enough to seem to yourself to have caught with your right hand your right thumb where it was in your left fist, because a visual impression lasts a measurable time on the retina, and you may by dexterity run two impressions into one for the jaded eye. Then, my friend says, you are a successful metaphysician. I think he is unjust to metaphysics; but he seems to me to supply a good notion of the process of ideas which constitutes Browning's doctrine of a future life.

For there is positively no more in Browning's thought than we have seen. The logical collapse occurs in the same way in 'The Grammarian's Funeral' and a score of the other poems which raise the subject. He fills up the blanks of his reasoning with words, as Mr. Gladstone was said to do his pauses; but we never get another grain of tangible thought. The quasi-idea of the perpetual expansion of a finite intelligence towards infinity, alongside of Infinite Intelligence separate from it, is as profitable a mental exercise as imagining an infinite succession of ciphers filling up infinite space. Any one who can work out a real philosophic problem will see that for Browning to set forth his infinite future life in words is not a whit more plausible than for Mr. Whistler to set it forth in color. Mr. Whistler would not try, because in matters of color he is sane and scientific. It is painters like Martin who try, with the result of producing a drop-scene representing a glorified Hyde Park, peopled by strollers dying of boredom. From the picture every "reasonably educated" man turns away with a smile or a sigh, because a picture does not admit of the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*. But so easy is it to befog the average mind with disorderly speech, that the most vacuous verbiage will impose on it if only there be a poet behind. Perhaps, indeed, I go too far in saying that the artist cannot do as

much; nay, I have carelessly committed the fallacy of setting the "reasonably educated" man, that *rara avis*, as an equivalent to the "average mind". The fact is, I should finally say, that half of the average man's ideas are the cheap ideals of ignorant artists and irrational poets. The "reasonably educated" man must contemn both—when he is at home.

Thus once more we are led to conclude that Browning's world-philosophy represents simply the vivacious empiricism of an egoist of literary genius, who would never take a tithe of the trouble to analyse a philosophic problem that he did to read Euripides or conceive Paracelsus. His endless talk about God is as valuable as Victor Hugo's spontaneous intuitions about Scotch geography, English names, and the poetry of Goethe and Schiller. The same key unlocks both men for the student who will use it. There is necessary only the courage to see and say that a poet is an artist, not a thinker, and that his philosophy is as likely as not to vie with the mathematics of Hobbes. Mr. Whistler (to take his name in vain once more) does not attempt to work out a theory of color, any more than Rubinstein seeks to supersede Helmholtz. But poets are less wise.

After all, it is not surprising that Browning's Heaven should have its vogue like the rest.

Every Heaven yet projected is a series of contradictions in terms; but, that being so, if one can be accepted, so may any other. The Redskin has his "humbler heaven", where he seriously hopes to ride his resurrected horse and hunt unearthly game, as Mr. Lang, not seriously, in his "Last Chance" prays to Persephone that

> "in the shades below
> My ghost may land the ghosts of fish".

The ancient Greek gave up the conundrum of the future state with an almost openly sham solution. The Scandinavian, the Mexican, the Peruvian, each worked out his own transparent sophism; and the Christian, taking the leavings of Paganism, established his inane Heaven and his insane Hell. The "reasonably educated" Churchman to-day sees that both are played out for the civilised world, and so makes them out to be "symbols". Why not confess frankly that they are just the guesses of childish ignorance, equally with the formulas of all other creeds?

It would hardly do to confess, I suppose, for this among other reasons, that the new Churchmen are claiming in turn to have true knowledge where they too are only offering an irresponsible and unconsidered guess. On this subject, religious men and women take to themselves an unlimited license of solemn absurdity. While

Browning was promulgating his new Heaven, the author of 'The Gates Ajar' was propounding hers, which was to have pianos, books, newspapers, babies, secrets, all the features of happy human life—and also, I suppose, sewage, though somehow not death. On those topics you may talk as you please; there are always plenty of weak or suffering souls who will catch at any straw of make-believe or sophistry. Alas, that they should so long be driven to such consolations; but sympathy with their yearnings cannot be allowed to override the knowledge of their intellectual frailty.

XII.

In fine, the very acceptance by Christians of Browning's quasi-concrete theology is an admission of the breakdown of their own; and the hope of finding an abiding-place in a doctrine built up by a poet is doomed by the laws in virtue of which poetry exists. Browning indeed represented in his own person a doctrinal evolution. Starting in life with the beliefs instilled in him by his much-loved and lovable Christian mother, he soon assimilated, as new doctrine, the teachings which had come down from Socinus and others, through Priestley and his Unitarian school, to W. J. Fox, the gifted and eloquent preacher of South Place, who was Browning's literary god-

father. First among the moderns, Socinus and a series of his disciples rejected the doctrine of eternal punishments, and otherwise strove to attenuate Christian supernaturalism. On most essentials, Locke thought very much as they did;* and Locke probably counted for much in the development of Unitarianism, as against Deism and Atheism, in the eighteenth century. In the opinion of Professor James, the Christian Church in general is in these days coming to the Unitarian point of view; and there is plenty to show for the claim; but it is doing this in terms of poetic solutions precisely when the severer processes of reason, to which Unitarianism has been so imperfectly faithful, are finding a far larger solution in terms of historic and cosmic science. And if poetry sets its face against the process of universal science, it will be discredited just as theology has been.

We end as we began by averring that any such didactic antagonism is away from the purpose of poetry, and that the poets henceforth will do well to abjure it. We have followed the attempts of Tennyson and Browning in that kind, and in the case of both we end with a sense of incompleteness and inadequacy, alike as regards their philo-

* Compare 'An Account of Mr. Lock's Religion, out of his own Writings' (by John Milner, B.D.), London, 1700, pp. 179-188.

sophy of the universe and their philosophy of conduct. They indeed curiously supplement and illustrate each other's deficiencies. Browning, the strayed scholastic, has scarcely tasted of modern science, and carries on his theosophy with endless ingenuity, in disregard of the prose arguments which refute it. Tennyson, touched by science, embodies in his song the thoughts which shatter the scheme of Browning, and likewise his own. On the other hand, Browning, without science, is intellectually less primitive than Tennyson, and brings to Tennyson's theological purposes an ingenuity of pleading that Tennyson wholly lacks. This intellectuality it is that maintains his repute as beside his friend and contemporary—this and the intense vividness of his human creations, real or unreal. Tennyson's effort has gone to what is most special to his art, melodious expression, beauty of cadence, golden speech:—

> "All the charm of all the Muses
> Often flowering in a lonely word."

Browning's ideal, on the contrary, was more didactic than artistic, so that if, as he claimed, he "took nothing but pains", the pains mostly went to another end than delightfulness; and here will lie the great stumbling-block to his fame after the passing of the generation which he challenged

and fascinated by his strenuous discussion of its problems as well as by his commanding presentment of his own creative visions. Tried by the achievements of his imagination as such, he easily holds his own against the poets of his century. Tried by his claim to attain cosmic truth where he was still exercising that same imagination in the thinnest of thin air, he is doomed.

And they do him an ill service who, with artistic faults enough to avow for him, subordinate his artistic triumphs to his untenable claims as a message-bringer. His great flights of noble energy, in which beauty is born of sheer passion and power; his fortunate strains, his tendernesses, his white radiances, his manifold divinations of human feeling—these will always defy oblivion; but his rhymed or unrhymed metaphysics, strongly touched as it is by his peculiar ardency of thought, how shall that continue to enthral or satisfy the broadening mind of men? Infallibly we come back to the avowal of the fatality of the poetic art. What we finally demand from the poet is the turning into rhythmic beauty of the simple, the passionate, the sensuous—that is, that all his thoughts shall have passed the crucibles of æsthesis, and come out as pure as may be of mere dogmatic or sectarian idiosyncrasy. When Tennyson turned earth-lore into thrilling song, it

was not by arguing problems in geology, but by taking the residual truth as given him, and making it vibrate into emotion. An untruth, of course, an error, may yield a similar vibration, and many dead creeds may be remembered by strains of undying song. But the argumentative vindication of the incredible, the proving of the impossible, this is not a thing etherealised enough to float far adown the ages. For the residual truth in religion, in philosophy, as in any other sphere of science, is not to be reached by the poet's methods; and if he insists on usurping the province that is not his he will pay the penalty in neglect.

XIII.

Browning, as it happens, himself once put the case with perfectly clear perception, albeit—even there—with imperfect loyalty to his own precept, in the lines at the beginning of 'Men and Women', entitled, 'Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books'. They begin:—

"Stop playing, poet! May a brother speak?
'Tis you speak, that's your error. Song's our art:
Whereas you please to speak these naked thoughts
Instead of draping them in sights and sounds."

In the very act of seeking to be scientific, of course, the poet's doctrine goes amiss no less than the poetry. The analysis is astray. It is not "draping them in sights and sounds" that raises thoughts to poetry: it is the distillation from them of their essence of emotion, by the subtlest chemistry of phrase and cadence; and while Browning here as always has on him the mood of exaltation, the spirit of song, he will not command himself to the rapt introspection of the perfect artist, but must needs run into a fume of argument—argument against argument—which only in a line or two becomes poetic flame. Doubtless he has even thus transcended the poet of Transcendentalism, whoever that might be; for most philosophic poetry, from Wordsworth down, normally misses even the pulse of feeling, whereas Browning's utterance is never long short of it. But the pulse of ecstatic feeling in an utterance of matter not rightly purified to poetic quality is much more of a tantalisation than a satisfaction; and those lines of genial rebuke to the versifying thinker finally recoil on the rebuker. *De te fabula*, murmurs the racked reader, if he does not add the poet's own line:—

"You are a poem, though your poem's naught!"

His figure of the true singer's instrument, the harp held to the heart, as against

"The six-foot Swiss tube, braced about with bark
Which helps the hunter's voice from Alp to Alp,"

is as true as the counter-figure is extravagant; but how often, as here, does his song leave us asking whether it is not to the Alpine tube that we are listening, if that *is* to be our figure for the voice of the doctrinaire!

But if we are finally to justify the autonomy of the province of truth-seeking, we shall not part from the poet on terms of mere protest or judgment. He, too, is a problem for us; and it is when we study him so, rather than his work, that he and we come back into harmony. We saw how he was prepared for his performance by his manner of education; by his master passion of love for his mother, whose way of thought so profoundly determined his. She it was who gave him his religious conceptions: her faith it was that he eagerly sought to justify when he could no longer hold it for himself. As he said of himself in late years, he never refused a demand made on him in the name of love. And if it be obvious that his doctrine of a progressive immortality (which to analyse as I have done is perhaps to break a butterfly on the wheel) is the unpondered expression of his own fulness of life, equally clear is it that it was intertwined with the

great affections of his existence, which lie at the roots of all his finest poetry. So once more—but this time without asking further whether it need have been so—we recognise that we ostensibly have the charm as a correlative of the overpoise of the personality. In terms of the personality, at least, that is the final fact; and we are left more or less contentedly weighing against some volumes of congested psychology and inconclusive argumentation, so many strangely searching visions of the human heart, rising into song by sheer intensity; so many splendid flights of passionate speech; such a magical tale as 'The Flight of the Duchess'; such a miracle of triumphant imagination as 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'; such lyrics as the 'Home Thoughts from Abroad', and 'There's a Woman Like a Dewdrop'; such a masterpiece of manifold reverie and sympathy as 'The Ring and the Book'; such a cantilene as the 'One Word More'. They are permanent additions to life, to art, to joy.

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