Irish Church Quarterly

The Attitude of Wordsworth and Browning towards Human Nature

Author(s): Alice Maye Finny

Source: *The Irish Church Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 14 (Apr., 1911), pp. 154-166

Published by: [Irish Church Quarterly](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30067086>

Accessed: 12/06/2014 12:30

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Irish Church Quarterly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Irish Church Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE ATTITUDE OF WORDSWORTH AND BROWNING TOWARDS HUMAN NATURE.

POPE stated a universal truth when he declared that "the proper study of mankind is man." In his pedantic way he had the knack of uttering striking truths without perhaps an adequate realization of their full value. But art in all ages has recognized this truth: that man, in spite of his limitations, is still the chief figure in the universe—subservient in interest being the wonderful and complex scheme in which he is enshrined. The beauty of nature, the glory of the heavens, the fury of the elements, are in themselves of no intrinsic value until they are placed in relation to man's emotions.

In certain essentials human nature remains the same in every age and every clime; but superimposed upon these rudimentary qualities is such a variety of race, creed, time and character that no one individual resembles another, nor is any one period a replica of any previous age. The eighteenth century suffered from disillusionment and the consequent lowering of former high ideals, and the study it devoted to man, and that to the practical exclusion of all else, was directed to one part of his nature, the superficial one—the crust of social and political life which indicates, while it does not reveal, the real man within. This was the great mistake of the age; man should be studied in every aspect and under every condition; in his relation to God and his fellow-men; in his attitude towards knowledge, and in his capacity for experiencing emotion. Wordsworth perceiving the loss to true poetic feeling which this misunderstanding entailed, and recognizing the neglect of nature, her beauties and teaching, which had followed from such an arid and unproductive study of human nature, set himself with great singleness of purpose to remedy the evil.

It almost seemed as though, after having her influence ignored during the previous century, nature had specially endowed this poet with a clearer insight into her wonders, and given him a more intimate revelation of herself than is

vouchsafed to most poets. Rarely do we find in poetry such complete absorption in nature, such comprehension of her varying moods, such calm strength and repose gained from a contemplation of her mysteries. When to most poets she is but the setting to a scene, the frame to a picture, to Wordsworth she comes first, and her influence pervades all his life and writings like the subtle perfume of some fragrant flower.

Brought up heart to heart in intimate communion with her wonders, it was not for some time that he began to realize the importance of human nature. Indeed for a long while he felt a strange distaste for social life—a distaste which perhaps he never altogether lost. Even during his college days he wandered alone by night through “the college groves and tributary walks,” seeking solace from the constant society of his fellow-men which was so congenial to his meditative soul. Life in London, with its revelation of human misery and suffering, its hurrying, busy crowds, oppressed and bewildered him, and it was with intense relief that he returned once more to his secluded country home, and to the renewal of his close companionship with nature, unspoiled by human society. Gradually, however, with a growing perception of the unity and harmony in the universe, he began to have a comprehension of “the human creature’s absolute self.” He idealized the simple dalesmen and shepherds who lived out their primitive lives upon the lonely hills, and invested them with a certain shrewd and lofty wisdom :

Blessed be the God
Of nature and of man, . . .
That men before my inexperienced eyes
Did first present themselves thus purified,
Removed, and to a distance that was fit.
. . . Were it otherwise,
And we found evil fast as we find good,
How could the innocent heart bear up and live?
But doubly fortunate my lot, . . .
That first I looked
At man through objects that were great or fair .
First communed with him by their help.
And thus was founded a sure safeguard and defence
Against the weight of meanness, selfish cares,
Coarse manners, vulgar passions that beat in
On all sides from the ordinary world.¹

¹ *Prelude* viii. 301.

But still man was subordinate to nature :

A passion she,
A rapture often, and immediate love
Ever at hand; he, only a delight
Occasional, an accidental grace.¹

It was only after a full realization of nature that he began
to realize the wonders of human nature :

Thus was man
Ennobled outwardly before my sight,
And thus my heart was early introduced
To an unconscious love and reverence
Of human nature; hence the human form
To me became an index of delight,
Of grace and honour, power and worthiness.²

Thus he came slowly to a fuller conception of the unity of man and of his place in the universe; of the value of linking past and present, until his heart was finally introduced to "an unconscious love and reverence of human nature," and he gained a deeper knowledge and a strengthened belief in the future of the human race. He learnt to love man for his potential greatness; to admire him for his mental abilities; to appreciate him for his courage and power of emotion, and to sympathize with him for his capacity for suffering.

He himself, like all the young minds of the day, was imbued with brilliant hopes of the revolution in France. The whole age was alight with new ideals and unbounded possibilities for the future of mankind. A new era was to come upon the earth; an era of peace and freedom, bringing into the world liberty, equality and the bond of universal brotherhood in their noblest sense.

His whole soul went out in sympathy with the struggle against oppression and wrong, and his sensitive nature received a severe shock when he realized that all his fairest dreams were shattered; that the name of liberty became synonymous with atrocious cruelty; that the sacred bond of fraternity became a cloak to cover murder, masquerading as justice, and that France, the pioneer of the new epoch, ran red with the blood of innocent victims. For the time he lost his faith in God and his belief in human nature; doubts and scepticism clouded his mental vision, and it was only through the tender care and loving faith

¹ *Ib.* 352.

² *Ib.* 275.

of his devoted sister, and under the influence of nature's calm, that he finally regained a sound and serene frame of mind :

I had known
Too forcibly, too early in my life,
Visitings of imaginative power
For this to last; I shook the habit off
Entirely and for ever, and again
To nature's presence stood as now I stand,
A sensitive being, a *creative* soul.¹

Here is the key to Wordsworth's attitude. He felt himself a "dedicated spirit," one set apart to reveal, like the high priest of a temple, the beauties and meaning of nature's revelation of herself, and through her to advance mankind in spiritual freedom and greater knowledge of God Himself. He had a call, a message to deliver; he was appointed to give to the world a new thought, and in order to do this he felt he must be specially prepared. To express the realization of God in nature, and the divinity in man, he had to live in direct and constant communion with nature—the great source of his inspiration—and keep himself as far as possible unspotted from the world. His mind felt cramped and oppressed in the "busy haunts of man;" his inspiration waned, the sordid aspect of life struck him too forcibly, and in the near contemplation of the conflicting passions, the struggles and failures, the tragedies and comedies, the trivial little commonplaces which go to form every-day human life, he lost sight of faith, and his grasp of the great facts of truth, beauty and goodness grew weak.

Away in his country retreat, in the clear bracing air, far from immediate intercourse with "common, vulgar men," he could let his genius have full expression; he could experience sympathy for and appreciation of mankind. But placed in the midst of crowded, bustling humanity, caught in a maze of details which he could neither understand nor interpret, his perspective seemed altered, his vision dimmed, and he lost sight of the finer qualities which, none the less, he knew to exist.

He stood like a spectator before the drama of life; he could feel emotion very keenly; his sympathy was wide and delicate; he viewed the struggles and efforts of others with intense interest, and could call out encouragement

¹ *Prelude* xii. 201.

from the safety of his seclusion; but he never seemed to step down into the arena himself, to fight shoulder to shoulder in the great battle between good and evil.

Wordsworth is like a prophet on the mountain top. To him it belongs to point out the way, to declare the glory of the rising sun, to urge men on to climb the heights whereon he stands. But to those who can see no glimmer of the coming light, struggling in the mists of doubt and oppression, the voice sounds very faint and far away, and does not always carry conviction or bring encouragement.

The truth is that Wordsworth was too much inclined to look upon mankind as a whole; he fully appreciated the grandeur of the race; he believed intensely in the sublime ideals of its future, but—perhaps because of the very wideness of his view—he lacked comprehension of, and true sympathy with, individual beings.

He felt supreme dislike for worldliness of spirit and the meaner side of life; he was impatient with its minor failings; he distrusted artificiality and conventionality in life and thought to such an extent that, in his very effort to abolish all such insincerities, he lost an understanding of the natural human spirit underlying them.

The seclusion with nature and his lofty ideals tended to make him overlook the humanity of the men and women at his doorstep.

This tendency to idealize human nature, rather than to understand it thoroughly, accentuates a quality in Wordsworth's poetry which often jars upon a certain type of mind, namely, the frequent introduction of his own personality in order to point the moral—although the average man intensely dislikes having a moral thrust upon him at all.

Wordsworth was an egotist of the purest type, in no way selfishly so, for his desire was to benefit, not himself, but mankind; yet his secluded life, his attitude towards nature and the trend of a reflective mind taught him perhaps to overvalue "the self-sufficing power of solitude," and fostered a certain self-centredness and spirit of introspection which was encouraged by the nature of the task he set himself. Feeling satisfied that he was called upon to write "a monumental literary work that might live," he decided to subject himself to a severe examination of his qualifications for such an undertaking, with the result that "as subsidiary to this preparation he undertook to record in

verse the origin and progress of his powers," and accordingly wrote the *Prelude*—a somewhat tedious account of the growth and development of his mind, written as a preface to the great philosophic poem which was never completed—which was to contain "news of man, nature and society," and have for its principal object "the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement."

In pursuance of this object Wordsworth closely watched his own thoughts and feelings; investigated his sensations; analysed the growth of his ideas, and recorded in minute detail everything which he experienced.

This constant dissection of motive and deliberate system of introspection tend to become very wearisome to the reader, and detract from belief in the spontaneity of the writer's feelings. We would fain be allowed to enjoy the quiet of some hidden nook, the peaceful beauty of an evening sky, or the inspired rapture of the lark's clear song, without the presence of the poet to intrude upon our enjoyment, and tell us how it all affects himself.

Wordsworth is nearly always personal, and this element in his poetry affects the treatment of his literary characters; they do not act or speak like natural men and women; they have no passion, no spontaneity; above all, no individuality, and therefore they are not convincing. We never seem to get close to them, or stand beside them in their intimate moments of passion or emotion. They remain people in a story, and the story-teller is always the more prominent figure. Like the figures on the base of some classic vase, they enhance the value of a work of art; they typify youth, beauty, pleasure or pain, but they have no independent or active life of their own. We find cultured philosophy in the mouths of simple shepherds, noble sentiments in the hearts of common rustics, sublime conceptions of love and duty in the minds of wandering tramps. We can admire the sentiments, but we are always conscious that they issue from the speaker's lips at the instigation of the prompter behind the scenes. The critical mind cannot be deluded into thinking such thoughts natural to those who utter them. Wordsworth had a total lack of dramatic power; he attempted no evolution or delineation of character; there is a placidity and mildness of feeling running through all his poetry; problems are discussed in a quiet, contemplative manner, and from the first we are convinced that a satisfactory conclu-

sion will finally be reached. We are not presented with a portrayal of human nature, but are forced to view everything through a Wordsworthian glass, which reflects the world from one particular aspect, and which is encircled by the one frame—nature.

Wordsworth achieved a wonderful work; it is difficult now perhaps to appreciate fully how great and wonderful it was when we accept the fruits of his labours as a commonplace. He broke loose from the narrow conventions and polished correctness of the previous age, which stifled and confined the true poetic spirit, and in the face of severe opposition and discouragement, inaugurated the great romantic movement, which gave new life to poetry, and which became a predominating influence during the Victorian era, in art, literature, and thought.

But in so far as he lacked comprehension of ordinary humanity; in so far as he remained a preacher rather than a fellow-worker, he fails to satisfy the demands of modern life, and we turn to the poetry of Browning for help and encouragement in the needs of to-day.

Like Wordsworth, Browning was a philosopher, and desired to find a unity and harmony in life; like him, too, he had a fine conception of the grandeur of the human race, a firm belief in its moral destiny and potentialities for greatness, but his grasp of it was from within, while Wordsworth's was from without.

This strikes the key-note of the essential difference between the two poets. The one had sympathy with mankind, the other had sympathy with men and women. The one loved the whole race, was anxious for its progress, jealous for its happiness, pitiful of its sufferings, but entered little into its individual interests; the other held no lower conception of its greatness, but realized that the advancement of the whole must depend upon the efficiency of the unit—that mankind is indeed “made up of all the single men.” Wordsworth was a mystic and a seer; he strove to find a help, a comfort, an oblivion outside ourselves; he tried to show that men could get beyond themselves, so to speak, into a region where sordid cares and all the common trials and failings of ordinary human beings would not affect the spirit—where it might soar untrammelled by the limitations of the flesh. He speaks of life as “a sleep and a forgetting;” a time of trial and suffering, to be endured with patience, when the soul loses

its innocence and purity, and "shades of the prison house begin to close upon the growing boy."

Browning, on the other hand, rejoices in human nature as such; he accepts all the sorrow, suffering and limitation as unique privileges almost: for does not man, alone of all creation, possess the limitations and potentialities of being human? He alone can rise on the wings of genius and inspiration to the level of the gods, or sink even lower than the brutes. This power of choice, this freedom of will for the doing of good or evil is one of the themes, of which Browning never tires:

God, whose pleasure brought
Man into being, stands away
As it were a handbreath off, to give
Room for the newly-made to live,
And look at him from a place apart,
And use his gifts of brain and heart,
Given indeed, but to keep for ever.
Who speaks of man, then, must not sever
Man's very elements from man,
Saying, 'But all is God's'—whose plan
Was to create man and then leave him
Able, His own word saith, to grieve Him,
But able to glorify Him, too,
As a mere machine could never do,
That prayed or praised, all unaware
Of its fitness for aught but praise or prayer.
.
.
.
Man, therefore, stands on his own stock
Of love and power as a pin-point rock.¹

Throughout all his poetry we find this same idea, and with it, as a natural accompaniment, the necessity for man to aim so high that he can never attain his desire for perfection, and yet, with all his great aspirations, he must still work and aspire as man, and not attempt to rid himself of human imperfections and love, as Paracelsus did at first.

In *Sordello*, Browning finally dedicates himself and his art to the love of humanity—no beautiful, ideal vision, but an unhappy, suffering, blundering creature, full of sin and misery.

To help humanity he must not live in philosophic dreams, in mere abstractions; he must not shrink from the daily tedious struggle, the eternal fight between good and evil, nor from the realization of men and women as they

¹ *Christmas Eve*.

really are, not as they may become, or as one might wish them to be. Filled with this desire to help and understand, Browning was not content simply to sympathize and pity, and to the better comprehension of the human character he has given all the great powers of his genius.

He loved to enter into each human heart, stand beside it in its moments of joy or sorrow, love or hate, test its endurance in the crucible of suffering and temptation, and glory in its vindication over circumstance and environment. To Wordsworth the revelation of his message entailed the revelation of himself, but to Browning the dramatic method appealed intensely; he preferred to lose himself in his characters, and, although his personality is underlying everything, it is not apparent, and he very rarely speaks directly of himself.

Browning was born into the world at only a slightly later date in years than Wordsworth, but in thought the world had gone a long way since the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798.

The romantic movement had become an accepted fact; the art of poetry had returned to nature as its natural inspiration; discoveries of all kinds had been made, full of importance for the human race; the failure of certain schemes for the regeneration of mankind had kindled a sceptical trend of thought, while increased scientific knowledge had sown the seeds of a materialistic and barren philosophy. Then came Browning, afraid of no evil, and fearing no problem. He cared nothing for dark corners; his was not the attitude to avoid the horrible, or shirk tearing the cloak from misery and vice. He delighted to penetrate the dark and gloomy places of the earth, to sweep away the dust and dirt by his own unquenchable optimism, and to show by the illuminating light of his genius that "the good" can always exist, hidden away and obscured though it may be by error and oppression.

Instead of dreading the evil in life, hiding away from it as Wordsworth sometimes did, or trying to crush it down, Browning liked to drag it up into the pure light of day, and find some good point to redeem the most guilty and miserable. Does man lose the greatness of his nature through his failures and weakness? Is he not rather great in overcoming the temptations and failings which beset him?

There is no such thing as real failure, cries Browning; failure can only come with man's consent, for as long as he strives after perfection, he will achieve success, though not, perhaps, in the eyes of the world. The very fact of our imperfection here proves that there is a future perfection to be gained, when the broken arc will become the perfect arch, and the discords dissolve into eternal harmony.

Content and satisfaction alone spell living death; again and again do we meet this thought in his poetry, urging men ever to strive after the ideal both in life and thought. Man must be true to the best and highest in his own nature, for in him is planted a spark of the Divine. The higher we aim the more difficult is the attainment.

That low man seeks a little thing to do,
Sees it and does it,
This high man with a great thing to pursue,
Dies ere he knows it.
That low man goes on adding one to one,
His hundreds soon hit,
This high man aiming at a million,
Misses a unit.¹

Here is Browning also denouncing worldly cares, and the pursuit of material gain. What is the use of a unit gained here if we miss the spiritual million?

Browning vividly realized the fact that "progress is the law of life," and that man has only reached a certain stage in the great scheme of evolution. This stage perfected, he will progress to another higher and more spiritual plane. Man is a complex being, made up of physical as well as spiritual nature, and the former cannot be ignored. It must be kept in due control, but it is the human part of us, and cannot and should not be crushed. Pain and suffering are needed, in man's present incomplete state, to teach him sympathy and compassion; hate must exist to show the need of love; knowledge is necessary to learn truth; it must not be made an end in itself, but a means to teach the higher wisdom where it is joined with love. Browning ever strives to show that the small things matter as much as the great; or rather, that there is nothing really small in itself. It is the motive which makes an action noble or mean; and a cup of cold water may be as acceptable as the goblet of rare wine.

¹ *Grammarians' Funeral.*

This brings us to one of Browning's most remarkable qualities; his power of delineating character, and perceiving the salient traits in human nature, under whatever guise it may present itself. He can not only portray the feelings, thoughts, and motives of his characters, but present them in such complete harmony with their surroundings that we come to know and love them ourselves. He deals with every type of nationality, every kind of temperament, every class of man and woman; we not only see them, hear them speak and feel the influence of their age, but see them from within and understand the working of their hearts.

And his characters develop. We observe the strengthening of the fine nature, the deterioration of the weak, and the evolution of the undeveloped. As in the character of Festus, trial and suffering bring out fine qualities unsuspected before.

Browning's poetry is like a great stage upon which appears every kind of character; his play embraces the whole gamut of human emotion, although there is only one actor for every part.

Yet he undertakes each different rôle with such consummate skill, that, even while we admire it, we forget it is only acting. Browning always goes straight to the very heart of the matter; brushing aside outer considerations and conventional judgements he seeks the motive and mainspring of action. He never attempts to hide or shirk a fact, or cover anything with fair words. "Down he goes—right to the bottom. Through evil—takes good—so up to God." He is never afraid of anything; for he is so confident in the power of good to vindicate itself. He can take a common, sordid little story, and make it into one of the most wonderful works that ever have been written. In *The Ring and the Book* the same subject is discussed from every point of view. It becomes the battlefield for the highest emotions and the most brutal passions; in it are revealed cruelty, wickedness, meanness, patience, self-sacrifice, heroism and wisdom.

Here are no idealistic types of vice and virtue, but living, feeling human beings like ourselves, neither wholly good nor wholly bad. In reading of such people we learn pity and compassion for the weakness, and admiration and respect for the fine qualities in humanity. Browning plunges into every-day things and the incidents of daily

life with the same clear perception and intense sympathy which he brings to the consideration of great events, casting over all the wonderful radiance of his genius, and turning the ordinary and commonplace into the eternal and beautiful. Browning, like Paracelsus, dedicated himself to man;

For God is glorified in man,
And to man's glory vowed I soul and limb.

He is immortal because he is universal, human and natural, and his message is one of hope and encouragement.

His philosophy is sound, because it is based on knowledge and experience. He does not advocate the good because he knows no evil. He knows both good and evil, and perceives that the former must ultimately predominate. The time may come when Wordsworth's work may not be properly appreciated; nay, it has already come to a certain extent, for that which he desired has been achieved, and much of his poetry is now neglected or overlooked. But Browning cannot be neglected or overlooked; he is too vital, too strong. He deals with elemental things, human passions, love and hate, and these persist in every age and through all changes.

Wordsworth offers us repose and calm belief, and reveals the order and harmony of the universe. He has gained a quiet, restful strength through his living consciousness of the Supreme Will revealing itself in life and all creation—for he possessed, to a great extent, that "peace which passeth understanding, and a repose in moral judgements."

But it is Browning to whom we turn, and will turn in the future. He is the poet of the future, for he is always ready to understand and to hold out a hand of help at every stumble. Nothing can dim the light of his radiant optimism, intense faith in the power of God, and unshaken belief in the good lying dormant in every human being.

His is not the faith of ignorance, but the faith of knowledge. In a self-conscious age of sophistry and scepticism, when enthusiasm runs dry and materialism is rife, Browning's absolute faith and joyous philosophy shine forth like a beacon.

Like Paracelsus, made wise by love, he grew to learn how

To trace love's faint beginnings in mankind,
To know even hate is but a mask of love's,
To see a good in evil, and a hope
In ill-success.

And with him he might say, in a superb burst of faith :

If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; its splendour, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom. I shall emerge one day.¹

Critics may complain—and with certain justice—that Browning's style is often careless and uncouth; that he outrages all conventions of poetic diction, and that he is obscure and brutal in his language. Browning's thought is so eager and vital that it is often expressed roughly and abruptly; but it is none the less forcible for that. Does not the trembling voice of emotion touch us more nearly than the most polished rhetorical periods?

It is the thought which, after all, is of chief importance, and that Browning has given us—strong, helpful, original thought, rough-hewn and rugged, perhaps, but torn from the very rock-bed of truth itself, convincing in spite of its lack of polish, conveyed to us through a poetry which cannot be judged by ordinary standards, and which has not even yet been fully appreciated or understood.

ALICE MAYE FINNY.

¹ *Paracelus*. Part v.