

## THE MINISTER AND THE POETS—ROBERT BROWNING.

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Robert Browning is the Poet's poet, but he is still more pre-eminently the minister's poet. Probably no poet of the Nineteenth century, perhaps of any century, has so gripped the heart and thought, so touched the imagination, expressed the soul, and strengthened the spirit, of the thoughtful preacher of the gospel as has this sturdy, buoyant, confident, forthright, courageous prophet of the eternal, whom some one has called "subtlest asserter of the soul in song". There are many reasons for this successful appeal of his to the minister. With all his humor, satire, charity, breadth, poise, love of the slight as well as the great, he is a profoundly serious poet, with whom substance is of more account than shape, who attacks great themes man-fashion without too great regard for niceties or beauties of expression; and the minister is one who may not underrate form, but can hardly overrate substance. He is a writer who imperiously demands thought. He can not be read in a doze. The mind that would get at his mines of gold, or even follow where he leads, must bend all its energies in that one direction. A page of Browning is a challenge to a mental wrestling bout and, spite of President Eliot and others as famous and as ignorant of evangelical thought as he, the minister who thinks at all does not shrink from tense muscles and contracted brows; he is stirred to joyful activity by the invitation. Especially so, as Browning not only demands and challenges thought, but he stimulates it. The substance, and the statement, the reach, the conception and the method, of our author send the blood tingling through our veins. We can think, we must think,

we do think, we are glad to think. He is a mental tonic as his very presence in the flesh was a vital tonic.

Furthermore, he is most interested in what we are most interested in,—*men*. Wordsworth is interested in his own mind, in vast ideas, in nature as the expression of an indwelling divinity, very suggestive, uplifting, glorious, but as gigantic, cold, and vaporous almost as the mist around his own cloud-cupped Skiddaw. Swinburne is interested in artistic forms and classical myth and poetic fancies and the melodious succession of sweet sounds in which he is so easily master. Tennyson, with all his grip and grapple with great ideas and living thought and the hard spiritual problems of the modern man, nevertheless leaves on you the resultant impression that you and he are like his hero in "The Princess", under a seizure, moving in a world where you are uncertain which is substance and which is cloud. You walk as in his "Idylls of the King" amid beautiful, impressive, gleaming characters who are after all no more than personified virtues, vices, or endeavors; and you turn away as did that lady from her mirror: "I am half sick of shadows, said the Lady of Shalott". But Browning, lover as he is of nature, lover as he is of music, liquid architecture; and architecture, "frozen music", is more in love with men. Men, not mankind in the large, in the aggregate, but men in particular, in the individual, in the concrete, in the actual living, trying, soul-testing, soul-revealing situation. "There they are" he says

"There they are, My fifty men and women,  
Naming me the fifty poems finished."

Like his Pope he has trod many lands, known many deeds, probed many hearts, beginning with his own:

"Take them, Love, the book and me together;  
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also".

And in his chosen subject, Men, his area of thought is precisely our area of thought. He is, like us, philo-

sphico-religious; philosophical because he is an analyzer, an anatomizer, a reasoner, a searcher after the depths of things, a tracer of the relations of things; and religious, because the whole orbit of his thought swings around two foci, which it is his constant effort to realize as one, God and man. His problems are ours. Not the origin of evil, for he does not touch that, but the object of it, its purpose in the world; the immortality of man, God's touch on this world, man's method of reaching truth, strength, virtue, God. Herein Tennyson and he, linked together as the nineteenth century's two greatest poets, are worthy coadjutors and compeers. But to Browning one is fain to accord the precedence in breadth of vision, firmness of grasp, manfulness of fibre, vigor of blow.

It is not only our problems that he grapples with; he represents also our point of view all through the grapple. His is the aspect, the outlook, of sturdy theism, of an essential Christianity, of a large, liberal, some may say, loose-jointed Christianity, but a Christianity in which Christ is the living, throbbing, eternal, all-moving center. He is a vigorous non-conformist in more ways than one, but it is a "non-conformism" of abundant conviction and positive faith. No more emphatic, complete and satisfactory statements of essential Christian faith can be found than in his poems. No great poet has better given voice to the deepest and highest in the Christian hope. Here is possibly his largest value for he is the poet of adjustment, of the reconciliation, nay, rather, of the co-ordination of the deep things of our faith with the deep true things in modern science and philosophic thought. He, too, found "it hard to be a Christian" in the face of these unsettling things, and fought not his doubts, but fought through the perplexities and difficulties and uncertainties and won out to sound the note:

"But Easter day breaks! But Christ rises! Mercy  
every way is infinite."

Tennyson and he among the larger voices are the two who have thus led the world back to faith. Arnold is lost amid his clear, cold paganizing; Swinburne, amid his passionate, unbelieving, sensuous, beautiful heathenism; poor Arthur Hugh Clough, with soaring spirit and aspiring heart, unable to see the vision of the Christ in or above the mists of sun and doubt and shame and ignorance; William Watson, with his blind if beautiful and earnest sardonic skepticism,—all these are entangled; but Tennyson and Browning with their eyes upon a star, or more truly upon the Sun of righteousness, move forward and lead us on into the light.

And Browning is the minister's poet, too, because he is so different from us, as different from us as he is from any other poet the world has known. He is a strange phenomenon in poetry. We think of the poet as a creature of "imagination all compact, his eye in a fine frenzy rolling", as he seeks to "give to airy nothings a local habitation and a name". He is a creature who walks in a different world, a recluse, a cloistered scholar, or one who stalks abroad under the yellow moon", mouthing his hollow O's and A's and Ae's", an idealist who rarely touches earth. But though no man may surpass our author in his idealism, no man of all of us excels his solid toehold and foothold of "the good brown earth". He is that rarest of all combinations, an idealist who is a man of the world. Look at Tennyson's latest portrait. Was there ever more poetic presentment than that bold outline, that noble brow, those waving locks, those piercing eyes? As our own Bryant needs only the flowing robes of Greece to stand forth a picturesque and noble an Aeschylus or Sophocles or Homer, as nay bard of old, so Tennyson could with but a change of dress be some old British bard or Norrowayan skild. But now see Browning! That elderly Englishman in the fashionable clothes, that air of comfortable acquaintance with all things worldly, that look of conversance complete with good so-

ciety, those wide-spaced, observant, shrewd, kindly-cynical eyes! Dome-like forehead, it is true. Reflective pose of head, no doubt. But this is a man of affairs, a denizen and citizen of the world of men, whose eagle beak might spell romance, but does spell power. Whatever dreams he has he holds after keen insight and analytic dissection and shrewd comparison and long experience of men and things and forces. His head may be in the clouds but there is no daylight between him and the ground. He is the man of affairs plus the idealist, the philosopher and the aesthete plus the Christian, the broad-visioned student and sympathizer with all things human, plus the spiritual seer.

And so when he makes report on things spiritual his voice has a deeper and surer ring to us than that of our own narrower experience:

“I have gone the whole world round of creation. I  
saw and I spoke;  
I, a work of God’s hand for that purpose, re-  
ceived in my brain,  
And pronounced on the rest of his handwork—re-  
turned Him again  
His creation’s approval and censure: I spoke as  
I saw;  
I report as a man may of God’s work—all’s love,  
yet all’s law.”

We like to hear that report, just as we like to get Victor Hugo’s sonorous voice in his testimony to God and spirit and immortality. But it steadies and strengthens us more, because this is a calmer, deeper, higher, broader, saner view and voice than that of the French Colossus. And he does us untold good.

It is with the minister’s poet we are to deal here. It is not the purpose to spend much time in assigning him his place among the poets. It is too early yet, any way. Greatest poetical dramatist since Shakespeare, beyond a doubt. Sturdiest, broadest, highest poet of the nineteenth

century, without contradiction. Deepest philosophizing poet of all the centuries, one can hardly question. If a poor second to Tennyson in literary art, yet towering above him in masculine intellect, and reach, and grip. Yet hardly would one place him in the row with Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, Goethe, Homer. And hardly would one dare to deny him in some ways a place with these immortals. The English university has a phrase of one who stands at the summit of the graduates of his year at college but with here and there a defect or dimming of his brightness where it just falls short of perfection or does not quite attain pre-eminence. This phrase we may apply to Browning and call him "a shady first" with, some of us think, Tennyson "a shadier", but with all but the immortal five left far behind.

Neither can we spend much space upon his technique. His details here are not pre-eminently valuable to us, nor as much so as those of many a lesser poet. He has a technique of his own, part of which is a bold disregarding of technique, but it will not yield us much of special weight; as he says somewhat ironically,

"This bard's a Browning; he neglects the form;  
But ah the sense, ye Gods! the weighty sense!"

It is the sense we are after. But one thing about his technique it may be necessary to speak of. Everyone does speak of it who writes of Browning; his reputed, and too often actual, difficulty. Many, hearing thereof, in fear desist from him before they begin, and others, beginning wrong, soon leave off. Part of his difficulty is in the reader, and part in himself. Part is in the reader, for Browning never intended to be read in a hammock. But a large part is in himself. His favorite literary form is not easy and cannot be easy. It is the dramatic monologue. It's hero begins to speak without a word of introduction as to who or what he is, or what he has been suffering, or what he has been doing. You have to guess

that as the poem goes on. A similar method makes the interpretation of Solomon's Song so hard. That is a dramatic idyl, in which the only evidence as to which character is speaking, or how many and what characters there are, is internal. The title tells you something but not much. The "Death in the Desert", after its little prologue descriptive of the manuscript from which the account is supposed to be taken, begins

"I said, if one should wet his lips with wine  
And slip the broadest plaentain leaf we find,  
Or else the lappet of a linen robe,  
Into the water vessel, lay it right,  
And cool his forehead just above the eyes,  
The while a brother, kneeling either side  
Should chafe his hand, and try to make it warm,  
He is not so far gone but he might speak".

But who, where, when, how, why? Read on, but it will be 116 lines before you discover that it is the aged Apostle John. Obviously all your brains must be busy, to apprehend. For one, I question the real eminence of the literary art which makes such extravagant demands on reason, memory and imagination. Once grasped, to be sure, it is most effective. It is nature's way. She plunges us into the story of each man just where our life touches him, without explanation. But it is so hard to grasp. It is one thing to stimulate; another to tantalize. And what increases the difficulty is that Browning chooses such little known human pegs on which to hang his thought, and illustrates by allusions and references from his own wide reading and observation, but beyond the ordinary reach. "Who ever heard", said a sharp-voiced indignant, middle-western critic, we are told, "who ever heard of George Bubb Doddington"? Assuredly he had not, and he lost Browning's point entirely.

“Do you see this Ring?  
 ’Tis Rome-work, made to match  
 (By Castellani’s imitative craft)  
 Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,  
 After a dropping April; found alive  
 Spark-like mid unearthed slope-side, fig tree-roots  
 That roof old tombs at Chiusi; soft, you see,  
 Yet crisp as jewel-cutting.”

That is easy. But who is Castellani? Where is Chiusi?  
 Why Etrurian?

As to this point, however, just as the derisive urchin saith to the stranded automobilist, “get a horse”, so to the stranded Browningite relief is easy: “get a horse”, “get a guide-book”, and have all these explained, and save your brains for difficulties no other brains can solve for you. And these are sure to come, for the author, as more than one has said, has a language of his own. He does not speak English, he speaks Browningese. The peculiarity of his dialect is not in the meaning or form of his words, it lies in his omission of connectives and symbolics largely, of the who’s and which’s and that’s and what’s, that in ordinary speech enable us to see which verb belongs to what noun, and what it is that follows, and who is saying what.—Browning’s compression leaves these

“Free me from shame, I bend  
 A brow before, suppose new years to spend,—  
 Allow each chance, nor fruitlessly, recur,  
 Measure thee with the minstrel, then, demur,  
 At any crowd he claims. That I must cede  
 Shamed now my right to my especial need,  
 Confess thee fitter help the world than I  
 Ordained its champion from eternity,  
 Is much”.

A few “who’s”, “to’s”, “that’s”, “and’s”, would make all this as clear as need be.

And then with all the compression, now and then our author is prolix. It is not so much that he strings out words for words' sake, but in the pursuit of his thoughts his fancy kindles over the details, and he "goes on refining while we think of dining"; and yet each refinement is so good, has so much insight, imagination, humor, beauty!

Still more, his thought itself is subtle, the thread that underlies this beautiful beadwork of fancy, or imagination, or allusion, is hard to follow, because it lies far underneath the surface; and it is pretty big to grasp when you get down to it. He gets at the roots of things, and these are not seized or handled like chips or flowers on the surface. If a man has little imagination, if he can not generalize, if he can not gather grains of sand into mountains, and take a wide view of mountains shaped into continents, he can't read the *Ring and The Book*, or *Fifine at the Fair*, or *Bishop Blougram* or *La Saiziaz*. He will have to take little cruises in simpler, shallower, smoother waters.

And this is an admirable suggestion for any beginner in Browning. Let him not launch out into the deep seas at once. Let him take those poems in which the form is easier, the thought simpler, and the allusions less recondite. Of these, there are not a few. Let him, as Leon Vincent suggests, begin with "A Tale", "The Boy and the Angel", "Prospice", "Apparitions", "My Last Dutchess", etc.; then go on to "Saul", "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "Karshish"; then to "Holy Cross Day", "A Heretic's Tragedy", "Caliban on Setebos". Then he is in trim for "Abt Vogler", "Audrea Del Sarto", "Lippo Lippi", "Colombe's Birthday", "Pippa Passes", "The Blot on the Scutcheon", and then he may be ready for the crowning, delightful, glorious plunge into that opulent ocean known as the "Ring and the Book". After which, if he has time and energy and patience, he may undertake such magnificent classical excursions as "Balaustion's Adventures" or seek to drown himself in "Pau-

line", "Paracelsus", "Sordello". For myself I reserve Sordello for eternity, and if there is another one after that, I will take the "Red Cotton Night Cap Country"!

But when the minister presses through the bristling hedge of thorns which affrights the many, and which is so largely imaginary, and withal in places so terribly real, what does he find? Prizes without number! Such opulence of strong and subtle intellect as no other poet but Shakespeare offers, and in some respects not even he.

The reader does not get so much of quotable poetry as from many a lesser bard. He gets a lot of it.

"I but open my eyes, and perfection, no more and  
no less,  
In the kind I imagined, full fronts me, and God is  
seen God  
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and  
the clod."

"Old year's sorrow,  
Cast off last night, will come again tomorrow;  
Whereas if thou (today) prove gentle, I shall bor-  
row  
Sufficient strength of thee for New Year's sorrow."

"Tis in a child man and wife grow complete:  
One flesh: God says so: let him do his work."

"To me one glance  
Was worth whole histories of noisy utterance."

"Addison's tye-wig preachment."

"The love which to one, and one only, has reference  
Seems terribly like what perhaps gains God's pref-  
erence."

"With this same key  
Shakespeare unlocked his heart. Once more,  
Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!"

- “The marvel of a soul like thine—Earth’s flower  
She holds up to the softened gaze of God!”
- “Do not these publicans the same? Outstrip!  
Or else stop race you boast runs neck and neck;  
You with the wings, they with the feet—for  
shame!”
- “Enough, for I may die this very night  
And now should I dare die, this man let live?”
- “The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say,  
If faith overcomes doubt.”
- “The year’s at the spring, and day’s at the morn;  
Morning’s at seven, the hillside’s dew pearled;  
The lark’s on the wing; the snail’s on the thorn;  
God’s in his heaven—All’s right with the world.”
- “My business is not to remake myself  
But make the absolute best of want God made.”
- “One wise man’s verdict outweighs all the fools!”
- “Our interest’s in the dangerous edge of things.”
- “What can I gain on the denying side?”
- “Ice makes no conflagration!”
- “You find in this the pleasant pasture of our life  
Much you may eat without the least offence;  
Much you don’t eat because your maw objects;  
Much you would eat, but that your fellow flock  
Open great eyes at you or even butt.”
- “Gilded starfashion by a glint from hell.”
- “The angel of this life,  
Whose care is lest men see too much at once.”
- “A courtly spiritual Cupid, squire of dames,  
By law of love and mandate of the mode.”
- “A-bubble in the larynx while he laughs  
As he had fritters deep down frying there.”

But the trouble with Browning is that one starts in with some telling passage and does not know where to stop. His poems are not strings of pearls, from which any time, anywhere, you can take one as you please. They are living wholes, animate bodies. There is no easy way, usually no possible way, to cut off six inches or a foot, without severing some vital part. Sometimes when you do want a quotation you feel like the jealous lady whose husband rebuked her annoying habit of picking hairs from his coat collar, by procuring a hair from the "Circassian beauty" six feet long, and letting her pull it out in church at her leisure and to her mortification. You wonder when you can come to a good cutting off place. You can't. Take the poem as a whole. He is too large, too vital, too impetuous a poet to be as quotable as many.

Nor, as before remarked, do we learn from Browning very much of technique, at least of its lesser details. He has deliberately disregarded the lesser arts of the poet, not because he was incapable of them, but because he was doing larger things. We will not go to him to study the liquid languorsome lilt of Swinburne, the delicate outlines and exquisite finish and haunting sweetness of so much of Tennyson. The Greek, severely cold, classic form of Arnold, that "strayed", not "reveller", but Grecian, will not be found very often in the work of this big-bodied, full-blooded English Christian. What irritates a Browning lover is that the man was perfectly capable of it. When he put his hand to it, few excel him. Has any one beaten for quick impulsive onomatopoeic description the "Ride from Ghent to Aix"?

"I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;  
 I galloped, Derch galloped, we galloped all three;  
 "Good speed"! Cried the watch as the gate bolts  
 undrew;  
 "Speed"! echoed the wall to us galloping through;  
 Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest  
 And into the midnight we galloped abreast."

Who, for pure beauty of simple words musically expressing pathetic thought, has excelled

“Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead;  
Sit and watch by her side an hour;  
That is her bookshelf, this her bed;  
She plucked that piece of geranium flower  
Beginning to die too, in the glass;  
Little has yet been changed, I think;  
The shutters are shut, no light may pass  
Save two long rays through the hinges’ chink”?

Some one has said in substance that there was no mastery of word music, no delicacy of thought or sound or treatment of which he is not capable. Listen to his “*Summum Bonum*” (Curious thing for a man of 77 to write)!

“All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag  
of one bee;  
All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart  
of one gem;  
In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine  
of the sea;  
Breath and bloom, shade and shine,—wonder,  
wealth, and far above them,  
Truth, that’s brighter than gem,  
Trust, that purer than pearl,  
Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe, all  
were for me in the kiss of one girl.”

One art he is master of, and perpetually exercising, that of quick, vivid, salient, suggestive, picturesque description. It may be description of nature, or of cities, or of men, but in any case it is instantly and vitally revealing:

“The gray sea, and the long black land,  
And the yellow half moon, large and low,  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow  
And quench its speed in the slushy sand;

Then a mile of warm, sea-scented beach,  
 Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
 And blue spirit of a lighted match,  
 And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,  
 Than the two hearts beating each to each.”

Or take Pippa’s rhapsody of summer sunrise:

“Day!  
 Faster and more fast  
 O’er night’s brim, day boils at last;  
 Boils, pure gold, o’er the cloud cup’s brim  
 Where spurting and suppressed it lay;  
 For not a froth flake touched the rim  
 Of yonder gap in the solid gray  
 Of the Eastern clouds, an hour away;  
 But forth one wavelet, then another, curled,  
 Till the whole sunrise, not to be suppressed,  
 Rose, reddened, and its seething breast  
 Flickered in bounds, grew gold, then overflowed  
 the world!”

See how the young Englishman’s room and character,  
 temporary at least, grow before you:

“The portrait’s queen of the place,  
 Alone amid the other sports,  
 Of youth,—masks, gloves and foils,  
 And pipe sticks, rose, cherry tree, jasmine,  
 And the long whip, the tandem lasher  
 And the cast from a fist (“not alas, mine,  
 But my master’s, the Tipton Smasher”)  
 And the cards where pistol balls mark ace  
 And a satin shoe used for cigar-case  
 And the chamois horns, shot in the Chablais,  
 And prints—Rarey drumming on Cruiser,  
 And Sayers, our champion, the bruiser,  
 And the little edition of Rabelais,  
 Where a friend with both hands in his pockets

May saunter up close to examine it,  
And remark a good deal of Jane Lamb in it,  
“But the eyes are half out of their sockets!  
That hair’s not so bad, where the gloss is;  
But they’ve made the girl’s nose a proboscis—  
Jane Lamb, that we danced with at Vichy!  
What, is she not Jane? Then who is she?”

But if he is not rich in usable quotations as many, and if his lesser technique usually has little for us, what a bewildering picture gallery, what a crowded stage of the players in life’s gay or serious theater he shows us! Victor Hugo is not vaster here, and hardly is Shakespeare. He has studied every class of men (not so extensively woman; possibly, perhaps, his worship of his wife has made him less free to treat of certain classes) Popes and peasants, princes and postboys, Greek, Barbarian, Scythian, bond, free, soldiers, sailors, authors, poets, musicians, street waifs, in every age, at every stage, of every sort, crowd his pages. He is at once the anatomist and the exhibitor of human nature. He takes a typical human character at a typical and critical and epochmaking moment, personal and public, and exhibits the inmost workings of that complex soul, for in Browning’s hand, as in life, the simplest soul is complex. He turns that man inside out for our inspection. Probably only in Hawthorne can you find such intimate and effective dissection, and not in Hawthorne expressed and revealed so vividly, truly and sanely, for a touch of New England morbidity is over that taciturn descendant of the Puritans. Pitiless vivisection of the soul is this, unsparing puppet pulling. Where is there a more perfect study and a more perfect portrayal of cowardly, brutal, remorseless villany than Count Guido Franceschini in “The Ring and the Book”? Shakespeare’s Iago is almost child’s play to him, more playable on the boards of a theatre, but clumsy, unrefined, compared with this. Browning has been called the greatest dramatist since

Shakespeare. He is not. He *is*, if you think of him as the dramatist of the closet, of the reading-stand, but not of the rough, rude stage of Shakespeare or (in essence) of our day. His revelations of character are too subtle and refined, he leaves you too much to catch the story for yourself. His is the drama of the soul. The theatre audience must be let at once into the secret. Browning is truer to life, which does not let us at once into the secret. He is the dramatist to be read, not acted. No nobler portrayal of womanhood is found than Pompilia in "The Ring and the Book". That flower from a dunghill is not only a miracle of grace, but a miracle of drawing. And the marvelous art of the poet is shown in this, that the crowning touch on Pompilia's character is not after all in her own self-revelation, but in the reflection her white life has cast into the black depths of Franceschini's soul. He, her husband, the outrager of her heart, plotter against her peace and chastity, her murderer, triple murderer, caught red-handed, imprisoned, convicted, at bay, a sneering, snarling human snake and wolf and tiger, cynic and assassin, breaks down when the executioners come, and in his frenzy-fear makes his appeal to all the good or power he knows:

"Who are these you have let descend my stair?  
 Ha, their accursed psalm! Lights at the sill!  
 Is it 'Open' they dare bid you? Treachery!  
 Liars, have I spoken one word all this while  
 Out of the world of words I had to say?  
 Not one word, all was folly—I laughed and mocked!  
 Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,  
 Is . . . . save me notwithstanding! Life is all!  
 I was just stark mad,—let the madman live  
 Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!  
 Don't open! Hide me from them! I am yours,  
 I am the Grandduke's—No, I am the Pope's!  
 Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God,—  
*Pompilia*, will you let them murder me?"

Let the student of church history who wants to understand the Renaissance read again and again the pitiless satire, "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's", where the old pagan, cynic, voluptuary, superstitious, half believer, half infidel, lays bare his spotted soul with a mingling of selfishness and pious reflections on the vanity of life:

"Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity,  
Draw round my bed: is Ansilem keeping back?  
Nephews—sons mine—ah God, I know not! Well  
She, men would have to be your mother once,  
Old Gaudolf envied me, so fair she was!  
What's done is done, and she is dead beside;  
Dead long ago and I am bishop since;  
And as she died, so must we die ourselves,  
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream."

And so in countless instances are we led into the secret chambers of the human heart where are found the myriad cords that move the human life. Tho ever he must confess "imperfect cognizance, since now heart moves brain, and both move hand, what mortal in captivity ever saw"?

But not even this is Browning's chief service to the preacher. All these are merely incidental, instrumental. His one crowning value is his message on Philosophy and Religion and Life. This was the thing he lived for, and it is the thing in which he lives for us. His is one of the two great poetic voices of the Nineteenth Century in this sphere, and in substance, tone and volume in breadth, sanity, poise, clearness, he is by all odds the greater. No single poem of his can quite take the place of "In Memoriam", but the net results of the aggregate of his touches is larger and deeper. He was far more of a philosopher than Tennyson, and far more of a man among men, and hence his voice has deeper, more resonant tone. The foundation of all his teaching, the summit of all his thinking, the sphere that contained yet transcended all

his life, is God, a personal, living, loving, all pervading, all moving, all directing God. From his earlier poems from Pippa's "God's in His heaven, Alas well with the world", to his very latest he never loses this noble note. Nay, it deepens and heightens. In his very last volume, to Fordsworth's complaint "That now a flower is just a flower", he rejoins "The purged ear apprehends Earth's import, not the eye late dazed".

"The voice said, Call my works thy friends;  
At Nature dost thou shrink amazed?  
God is it who transcends!"

Time would fail to give samples of his teaching here or expound the details of his conception of God, not pantheistic but immanent, beyond our complete knowledge, but not unknowable.

"Oh thou—as represented here to me  
In such conception as my soul allows,—  
Under thy measureless, my atom width!—  
Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass  
Wherein are gathered all the scattered points  
Picked out of the immensity of sky  
To reunite there, be our heaven for earth,  
Our known unknown, our God revealed to man?  
Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole,  
Here as a whole proportioned to our sense,—  
There (which is nowhere—speech must babble thus)  
In the absolute immensity, the whole  
Appreciable solely by thyself—  
Here by the little mind of man, reduced  
To littleness that suits his faculty  
In the degree appreciable too."

"Must we deny recognized truths  
Obedient to some truth  
Unrecognized yet, but perceptible;—  
Correct the portrait by the living face  
Man's God, by God's God in the mind of man?"

For the minister the Christocentric philosophy and theology of Browning is his greatest charm and strength. This is clearer in his early work than in his later. Perhaps because he had declared it with such intellectual fullness, such passion and assurance of conviction then that it needed no farther exposition. Possibly the influence of his wife's fervent faith had somewhat died away. Hardly, for some of his most emphatic utterances were before their marriage. But, working backward, we find them in every stratum of his life. In his last book, "Asolando", issued the day he died, is just a touch where the Roman in his bath contrasts with the all-potent but earth-powerless Augustus:

“Caesar Augustus, regnant, shall be born—one to  
master him,  
Him and the universe? An old wife's tale!”

This, by the way, the light significant touch, the dramatic contrast, is one of Browning's favorite methods of hinting the greatest truths, as the point of stone protruding above the soil witnesses to the great rock-roots beneath! In "Ferishtah's Fancies", 1885, five years before he died, he pays his respects to those who find it impossible to believe in the deity of Christ, in this fashion. A great Oriental teacher has a pupil who has just cursed and cuffed and kicked a man who said:

“(Abominable words which blister tongue)  
God once assumed on earth a human shape.”

The teacher supposes a case of one who believed that the Sun in the heavens was God, and that the Sun was flesh once. "How?" says the pupil.

“An union inconceivable with fact?”  
“Son, if the stranger have convinced himself  
Fancy is fact—the sun besides a fire  
Holds earthly substance somehow fire pervades  
And yet consumes not,—earth, he understands,

With essence he remains a stranger to,—  
 Fittler thou saidst 'I stand appalled before  
 Conception unattainable by me  
 Who need it most'—than this—'What? boast that  
     he holds  
 Conviction where I see conviction's need,  
 Alas,—and nothing else? then what remains  
 But that I straightway, curse, cuff, kick the fool''.

One may call that Christian pragmatism, on the one side, but it is sustained by Christian experience on the other.

In his epilogue to "Dramatis Personae", 1864, he tells of the effect of all new thought and change and enlarging knowledge upon his Christian faith:

"That one Face, far from vanish, grows  
 Or decomposes, but to recompose,  
 Becomes my universe that feels and knows."

While in the book itself, in that remarkable of poems "The Death in the Desert", he concludes.

"See if, for every finger of thy hands,  
 There be not found, that day the world shall end  
 Hundreds of souls, each holding by Christ's word  
 That he will grow incorporate with all,  
 With me as Pamphylax, with him as John,  
 Groom for each bride!' Can a mere man do this?  
 Yet Christ saith, this he lived and died to do.  
 Call Christ, then, the illimitable God,  
 Or lost!"

    But 'twas Cerinthus who was lost."

In the Epistle of Karshish, an Arabian physician, he meets the raised Lazarus, and Lazarus, among other strangenesses,

"Regards the curer there  
 As—God forgive me,—who but God Himself,

Creator and sustainer of the world,  
That came and dwelt in flesh on it a while!"

His Arab monotheism revolts at it, and he turns his mind to other and weighty subjects, but he can not leave the thought:

"The very God! Think, Abib, dost thou think?  
So, the All Great, were the All-loving too—  
So, through the thunder comes a human voice,  
Saying, 'O heart I made, a heart beats here!  
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!  
Thou hast no power, nor mayst conceive of mine,  
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,  
And thou must love me, who have died for thee!"

"Christmas Day" he says, amid much in the same tenor:

"Thus much of Christ doth he reject  
And what retain? His intellect?  
What is it I must reverence duly?  
Poor intellect for worship, truly,  
Which tells me simply what was told  
(If mere morality bereft  
Of the God in Christ be all that's left)  
Elsewhere by voices manifold  
With this advantage, that the stater  
Made nowise the important stumble  
Of adding, that he, the sage and humble  
Was also one with the Creator!"

And back in that splendid, glowing, imperiously powerful poem of Saul, the very passion of triumphant faith, how the words thrill:

"Would I suffer for him that I love?  
So would'st thou! So wilt thou!"  
So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest, utter-  
most crown

And thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up  
 down  
 One spot for the creature to stand in. It is by  
 breath  
 Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation joins is-  
 sue with death!  
 As thy Love is discovered almighty, almighty be  
 proved  
 Thy power that exists with and for it, of being be-  
 loved!  
 He who did most, shall bear most; the strongest  
 shall stand the most weak.  
 'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for. My  
 flesh that I seek  
 In the Godhead! I seek, and find it. O Saul, it  
 shall be  
 A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man alike  
 to me  
 Thou shalt love and be loved by forever; a Hand  
 like this hand  
 Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See  
 the Christ stand!

We must pass over with but a touch our author's firm  
 grasp of immortality and clear note of confidence in the  
 fact and meaning of another life; it is as strong in the  
 last word he wrote as in the first.

"I have faith such end shall be;  
 From the first, Power was—I knew  
 Life has made clear to me  
 That, strive but for closer view  
 Love were as plain to see.  
 When see? When there dawns a day  
 If not on the homely earth,  
 Then yonder, worlds away  
 Where the strange and new have birth  
 And power comes into play."

His teaching of heaven and its meaning, his views of the larger hope, are interesting studies which there is not space for here.

His views of evil, as really and intensely evil and not to be condoned, yet as an indispensable incident and instrument in the shaping of character, are scattered all through his writings. This world is the arena in which men grapple with wickedness, truth grapples with error, minds work out through the shows of things toward clearer truth. But perhaps the pope's words in the "Ring and the Book" sum up most strongly his teaching.

“Was the trial sore,  
Temptation sharp, Thank God a second time!  
Why comes temptation, but for man to meet  
And master, and make crouch beneath his foot,  
And so be pedestalled in triumph? Pray  
'Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!'  
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,  
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,  
Reluctant dragons on to who dares fight  
That so he may do battle and have praise!”

And this brings us finally to Browning's highest service of all. It is not so much what we may quote of his, not his power of description, not his picture-gallery and dissection and X ray insight into character, not his view of God and Christ and heaven and sin, not any formal thing he says or writes or thinks or believes, that helps us most, but his general attitude and tone and spirit as he looks out at life. He lived in an age when faith's foundations were shaking—some feel the tremor yet—when values were growing indecisive, when for many "the native hue of resolution was sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thoughts" many. How about this man? Well, as on mountain heights when some climber slips and falls he feels his rope grow taut and vibrate like a harp string held by the firm unshaken form and muscle of his guide,

so in the presence of this sturdy thinker, great hearted lover, farsighted seer, we have felt our feet grow firm and have escaped again and again the threatening precipice. So healthy, so sane, so wholesome is he. Idealist, and so he never fails to see, or at least to feel, the true reality beyond the fleeting shows of things. Optimist, because, he says "He is very sure of soul, believes in God". Healthy partaker at life's loaded table which groans under its weight of luscious, varied fruits, yet no glutton, and no wastrel: "Have you found your life distasteful? Mine I kept and hold complete".

Abounding in vitality, it is said his hand-clasp was an electric shock. Past seventy, thus he says:

"Then life is, to wake not sleep.  
Rise and not rest, but press  
From earth's level where blindly creep things perfected more or less  
To the heavens height, far and steep!"

A vitality that age can not wither nor custom stale. At fifty, in imagination placing himself in the midst of old age, he makes his Rabbi Ben Ezra say

"Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life for which the first was made;  
Our times are in his hand  
Who saith, A whole I planned:  
Youth shows but half: trust God: see all, nor be afraid!

And in his old age the last published words he wrote, twenty-seven years later, read aloud to his family just before his last illness:

"What had I on earth to do  
With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?  
Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivell  
—Being—Who?"

One who never turned his back but marched breast  
forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed the right were worsted, wrong  
would trample,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better  
Sleep to wake.

No, at noonday in the bustle of man's worktime,  
Greet the unseen with a cheer;  
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should  
be;  
"Strive and thrive!" cry "Speed,—fight on forever  
There as here!"

And now in his own words, for a sentence or two, "Wanting is what?" Not much, as compared with any other of want may be called the secular poets. There is a note we do not find as deep and full in him as we wish it was. But we do not find it in many others either. We find it in his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning, more than in any other man or woman except possibly Miss Rossetti. Miss Havergal had it but we can not rank her among these singers of the higher aid. Sidney Lanier approaches it, but perhaps his poor insufficient body kept him from its fulness. This is the note of spiritual *passion*. Possibly it is too much to ask of Robert Browning, full-blooded Englishman, interested in all things mundane and human, careful analyst of human nature, man of the world, his faith continually exposed to the chill air and brutal buffetings of the world in which he lived. He had the intellectual interest and the intellectual passion for God and truth and right, and no man could have written as he has of Jesus Christ as God's incarnate love without more than an intellectual knowledge of the Son of God. But his interests are too predominantly intellectual, analytical, scholarly, dialectic. Would that he might have fallen, to the roots of his being, not only in-

tellecually, theologially, philosophically, ethically and esthetically, but spiritually, “head over heels in love with Jesus Christ, till every chord of that great nature of his vibrated irresistibly under the Master’s hand! What a poet the world would have seen! As it was, in his wife’s words:

“My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes  
 God set between his After and Before,  
 And strike up and strike off the general roar  
 Of the rushing worlds a melody that floats  
 In a serene air purely. Antidotes  
 Of medicated music answering for  
 Mankind’s forlornest uses, thou canst pour  
 From thence into their ears”.

But what would have been the thrill in human hearts and lives if that strong, manly voice had quivered with the highest religious passion?

O well! We are waiting for that poet. Meanwhile God speaks to us on a lower level, but of things strong, high and pure, from the manliest of Christians, the most Christian man of the world, the prophet of the soul, the Tyrtæus of triumphant fight with sin and wrong, the sturdiest champion of reasoned faith, Robert Browning!