

### III

#### BROWNING ON ART, RELIGION, AND SCIENCE

I BEGAN with the art of Browning and I have dwelt at length upon it because it is an aspect of his work that has been comparatively neglected. But we should be betraying most of Browning's best intentions if to his manner we were to sacrifice his matter, that is to say, his thought. After the novel artist, we must study the novel thinker.

The study of Browning's thought is indispensable, for there is more in him of the analytical or critical mind than in any poet I know, more in fact than we could have expected to be transferred into poetry. Into his verse he has re-introduced certain subjects and discussions which from the days of didacticism had been banished from poetry, though, as I have shown, he does not present them in a didactic way. I shall of course examine his thought chiefly in relation with, or as it contributes to, his poetry. But a peculiarity of Browning is that we cannot simply dismiss all the poetically weaker passages, for these may be interesting literature still; or at least they may help us to understand the thought of the better passages.

Browning's thought must be examined in depth and in width, that is to say, as power and as knowledge. His analytic power is as keen and shrewd as that of any psychologist, whether he applies it to the momentary flash of passion or to the subtleties of a tortuous intellectual process. In that respect he may be compared to the great psychological novelists of the century, to Meredith,

Dostoëvsky, and to such later writers as Henry James or Marcel Proust. But in comparison with the latter, there are always limitations to Browning's inquiries: for, however attracted he may be by curious and unusual cases, Browning stops short of the morbid, the monstrous, the abnormal; and subconscious elements also remain outside of his ken.

As to knowledge or general culture, we have already said that Browning was almost in advance of his own century. Professor Santayana once compared Browning and Walt Whitman as "poets of barbarism". This is paradoxical, because, as Professor Santayana would admit, there is one capital difference between the two men. Browning is an old world humanist, saturated with Greek, French, and Italian quotations, knowing all the pictures in all Italian galleries, so full of his knowledge that he plays with it and constantly presupposes it in his readers; whereas Walt Whitman, whom I love for his freshness, power, and healthiness, and who could do so well with no culture at all, sometimes annoys me with a half-culture that is not unwilling to make a show of itself.

Browning's culture, which is eminently historical, helps his poetry to create life, that is, to revive with picturesque accuracy alien modes of life, like that of the old Greeks or the Renaissance Italians. Browning's erudition, therefore, is a form of his love of life. It is first hand, fresh from the sources. He wants to know the Greeks as they really were, the Athenians in the street, laughing, swearing, shouting, and he learns them straight from Aristophanes. He does not accept on Greek art and literature the conventional view of many professors of Greek, the traditional view, handed down from Winckelmann to Goethe and from Goethe to Matthew Arnold, of simplicity, measure, restraint, "noble simplicity and calm grandeur". He has found out for him-

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self that this traditional view applies to certain periods only, not to all, not to Æschylus, and it is in irony that in his translation of *Agamemnon* he quotes the sentence of M. Arnold that "there is not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in"; he knows in fact that there is in the Greeks more freedom, abandonment, and even violence than is generally supposed.

Browning has also painted oriental peoples, the Arabs and the Jews, the latter with so much sympathy and truth that, in view of the poet's physical type and his use of Hebrew quotations in Hebraic form, it was at one time believed that Browning himself must have some Jewish blood in him, but this Dr. Furnivall has proved untrue.

He has also depicted Old Germany in *Paracelsus*, eighteenth century France in *The Two Poets of Croisic*, and second empire France in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. He has even tried to introduce some American local color in the Bostonian Society round *Mr. Sludge*, "*The Medium*". He speaks of V-notes and of Greeley's newspaper. Perhaps some of this local color is already antiquated, or artificially antiquated by law. I have tasted interesting things in my American journey, but I have not come across Catawba wine nor across that eggnog which Mr. Sludge receives with a parting cigar.

But above all, Browning feels at home in Italy, and though many English poets make Italy a place of pilgrimage, it may be said that no one knew it better in its past and present, manners and works, than Browning. Following him as a guide, we might take a delightful journey through Italy, but it would take us too long. Indeed, such a journey would carry us through the half of his works, and it has been done already, by an American lady, in a volume illustrated with prints. Moreover, you all remember the won-

derful pictures of mediæval Italy with its struggles between Guelphs and Ghibellines in *Sordello*, and the seventeenth century Italian background of *The Ring and the Book*, with its florid decay of Renaissance. Or again, in short poems, the delightful study of Italian predilection for urban life—in *Up at a Villa—Down in the City*, with its last word

Oh, a day in the city-square, there is not such pleasure in life!<sup>50</sup>

Or, finally, the sketch of the Renaissance bishop who orders his tomb at St. Praxed's Church, of whom Ruskin said: "I know of no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told as in those lines, of the Renaissance spirit, its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is, namely, all that I said of the Central Renaissance in thirty pages of the *Stones of Venice* put into as many lines, Browning's being also the antecedent work."

This leads us to Browning's knowledge of art, where Ruskin's testimonial is precious in showing Browning's priority. In fact, he knew all the Italian pre-Raphaelite painters, before they became the fashion in England, before English painters were named after them and the National Gallery began to buy their works. He was a pioneer as we see from the quotation of Ruskin taken from *Modern Painters*, fourth volume, published in 1856. Before that time, Browning had already studied the primitives, the mystics in *Old Pictures in Florence*, the later realists in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, and the Renaissance masters in *Andrea del Sarto*.

His general æsthetics in the beginning of his career resemble those of Ruskin, though they owe little to him. They have the same defect, looking at art from the point of view of the moralist rather than of the artist. For Browning also, art is a form of praise, that is, of religion. In making art a form of religion, he does not insist enough on their

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differences. But in so doing he has contributed much, like Ruskin, to enhance the respect of his countrymen for art. He had to fight many prejudices, among others, the Puritan prejudice against the reproduction of the nude, which I think in great part responsible for the dearth of sculpture in Anglo-Saxon countries. Browning attacks it through the mouth of the painter-priest, Francis Furini, who salutes the nude form as

The type untampered with, the naked star,<sup>60</sup>  
who thanks God for

making, in this human shape, a mask—<sup>61</sup>  
A match for that divine.

He shows that in the artist who endeavors to imitate the loveliness of the human shape "there is no room for alien (immoral) thoughts".<sup>1</sup> If this is not so with the public who look at the picture, that is the fault of their education. In England, that education is not complete, and the devout commentator of Browning, Mr. Berdoe, cannot quite conceal his uneasiness in the passage: "Mr. Browning deals very severely with those who think that pictures of the nude have a deleterious influence on the public character and who endeavor to prevent their exhibition. . . . Where the governing bodies of the two great cities of the world take the same view of this serious moral question, we must take leave to hold that if 'the gospel of art' has no better means whereby to elevate the race than those of familiarizing our youth of both sexes with

the dear<sup>62</sup>  
Fleshly perfection of the human shape,—  
we can very well afford to dispense with it".

Some distinguished people in England have told me that to them the sculpture of the nude is absurd, because we live

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Sutherland Orr, "A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning," George Bell and Sons, London (1899), p. 352.

in clothes. This shows the misunderstanding which is at the root of the matter. For of course the aim of sculpture is not simply to imitate men and women as they live. Imitation is here only a means to an end. It is abstraction. For a born sculptor, the attitudes of the body are only a language by which to convey thoughts and feelings. A sculptor is a man to whom the whole body is expressive of the soul. This is precisely what Furini understands so well:

Let my pictures prove I know<sup>63</sup>  
Somewhat of what this fleshly frame of ours  
Or is or should be, how the soul empowers  
The body to reveal its every mood  
Of love and hate, pour forth its plenitude  
Of passion.

As he advances in his career, Browning's ideas on art in general, and on the beautiful in particular, become deeper and seem to be chiefly influenced by Plato, whom he interprets freely in *Fifine*. Here we find an interesting comparison between the artist and the lover:

That Art,—which I may style the love of loving, rage<sup>64</sup>  
Of knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things  
For truth's sake, whole and sole, not any good, truth brings  
The knower, seer, feeler, beside,—instinctive Art  
Must fumble for the whole, once fixing on a part  
However poor, surpass the fragment, and aspire  
To reconstruct thereby the ultimate entire.  
Art, working with a will, discards the superfluous,  
Contributes to defect, toils on till,—*fat lux*,—  
There's the restored, the prime, the individual type!

But the type seems to be something less objective than in Plato. It exists only in the soul of the artist, who proceeds exactly like the lover. Love is the discovery of a soul by another soul. Now, if nature worked like an artist, nature would create for each soul a form, let us say, a face exactly fitted to it. But nature is "a bungler", and gives

—Here too much, there too little,—bids each face, more or less,<sup>65</sup>  
Retire from beauty.

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It is for the lover then to transform the beloved face should it acquire for him the features which it should have if nature really expressed the soul. And in the same way, the artist will mend and complete what he imitates. In short, art is the revelation of the artist's soul through the thing which he loves.

This somewhat subjective view is corrected in another poem, *Charles Avison*, by the complementary idea that art can make nothing out of nothing, that all arts must build on nature which they can only reconstruct.

Arts arrange,<sup>66</sup>  
Dissociate, re-distribute, interchange  
Part with part, lengthen, broaden, high or deep  
Construct their bravest,—still such pains produce  
Change, not creation.

In the same poem there is an interesting comparison of the arts according to their various possibilities. Music goes deepest, but it is ephemeral. Poetry and painting, or, as the poet says,

The Poet's word-mesh, Painter's sure and swift<sup>67</sup>  
Color-and-line-throw,

change a fleeting moment into eternity.

Fleet the years,<sup>68</sup>  
And still the Poet's page holds Helena  
At gaze from topmost Troy—  
· · · · ·  
Still on the Painter's fresco, from the hand  
Of God takes Eve the life-spark whereunto  
She trembles up from nothingness.

Browning understands sculpture even better than painting, but the strong point of this least musical, or at least, least euphonic of poets, was music. Here he is unrivalled, for not only does he know the technicalities, but his insight into the essence of music is so deep that I reserve this aspect until I shall be speaking of Browning's general philosophy.

Besides art, there is another human fact, which Browning

has admirably studied, not as a social phenomenon, of course (that would not be like Browning), but as an individual one. Religion he has explored in its most primitive as in its most developed forms. *Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island* is a remarkable piece of insight into rudimentary forms, into the origin of rites and sacrifices, that makes Browning one of the founders of the science of comparative religion. How many theories of the anthropological school are summarized and dramatized in that Caliban who, sprawling in the mire, credits his god Setebos with his own malignity, jealousy, cunning, pictures him creating things, just to kill time, treating men just as Caliban treats the crabs, letting twenty pass unhurt but pulling off a claw from one with purple spots by mere caprice,

Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.<sup>69</sup>

Now Browning is quite as able a psychologist of the higher forms of religion and, especially, of Christianity itself. His poem *Saul*, for instance, is an inspired study of religious inspiration. But this subject is so bound up with Browning's own religion that we had better reserve it and finish our survey of Browning's general culture by examining first his attitude towards physical science.

The scientific knowledge of Browning has been exaggerated by Mr. Berdoe, who, in a chapter on *Browning's Message to his Time*, enumerates passages where he deals with anatomy, astronomy, botany, geology, chemistry, optics, electricity, medicine, and what not. The fact is that the poet occasionally borrowed picturesque comparisons from the various sciences, but he did not love them for themselves as he did history.

Perhaps we had better examine only his position on the doctrine of evolution. It has been said that he was hostile



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to it. Yet, in 1881, he wrote to Dr. Furnivall, "All that seems proved in Darwin's scheme was a conception familiar to me from the beginning". This refers chiefly, I suppose, to the magnificent passage where Paracelsus shows us

Imperfect qualities throughout creation,<sup>70</sup>  
Suggesting some one creature yet to make.

But even in that scheme of progressive creation there is an idea of finality that is alien to modern evolutionism and nearer perhaps to the spirit of Aristotle than to that of Darwin. Moreover, the conception is theistic, not pantheistic. Browning speaks of creation; he shows us God rejoicing in the young volcanos, cyclops-like,

Staring together with their eyes on flame <sup>71</sup>

God dwelling in all,

From life's minute beginnings, up at last <sup>72</sup>  
To man—the consummation of this scheme  
Of being.

Later, he got nearer to the point of view of science. Mr. Berdoe tells us that Browning, five years before Herbert Spencer, had given a scientific explanation of the origin of our nervous fibres when he says in *Easter-Day* that

flesh refine to nerve <sup>73</sup>  
Beneath the spirit's play.

I can find another line in *Fifine*, illustrating the same idea, an idea of Lamarck rather than of Darwin, that function precedes and creates the organ. I read in *Fifine*:

For bodies sprouted legs, through a desire to run.<sup>74</sup>

But these isolated lines which refer, after all, only to the mechanism of evolution, are of much less importance in the work of Browning than two longer passages where he positively attacks evolutionism, not in itself, but as leading to false conclusions, and to atheism, and as offering only an explanation, whereas the explanation has itself to be

explained. The first passage is in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, where after unfolding the chain of evolution, the poet implies that it does not exclude what we should call a providential plan:

Yes,—and who welds a lump of ore, suppose <sup>75</sup>  
 He likes to make a chain and not a bar,  
 . . . . . why, there's forethought still  
 Outside o' the series, forging at one end,  
 While at the other there's—no matter what  
 The kind of critical intelligence  
 Believing that last link had last but one  
 For parent, and no link was, first of all,  
 Fitted to anvil, hammered into shape.

This is a hit on the critical intelligence which believes that it can do without a first cause.

The second passage is in *Francis Furini*, and, as in the last, the words are introduced in such an artificial way, not necessarily belonging to the characters, that we may be sure they are Browning's own. Furini says that in painting

—the dear <sup>76</sup>  
 Fleshly perfection of the human shape,—

he is praising the work of God, whereas (this is the implied transition) evolutionists deny God:

Evolutionists! <sup>77</sup>  
 At truth I glimpse from depths, you glance from heights.

The meaning of this rather difficult passage is not that Furini and the evolutionists have different starting points. For both, the starting point is man. But they look at him in a different light. For the pious painter, man is surrounded by an infinite universe ruled by God. For the self-satisfied scientist, man is a summit. Man is

The sum and seal of being's progress.<sup>78</sup>

And yet when they look upwards from man to explain him, they find but an initial spasm which explains nothing at all. Their "sum and seal of being's progress" has neither creative power nor real knowledge.

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True, he makes nothing, understands no whit:<sup>79</sup>  
Had the initiator-spasm seen fit  
Thus doubly to endow him, none the worse  
And much the better were the universe.

There is much irony in these words. They mean that man alone, having righteousness and moral sense, can see that all is wrong with the world and would set things right, if he had the power.

Accept in Man, . . . . .<sup>80</sup>  
The Prime Mind, therefore! neither wise nor strong—  
Whose fault? but were he both, then right, not wrong  
As now, throughout the world, were paramount.

Having thus shown the inconsistency of seeing in Man the prime Mind, Furini proceeds to tell us that he, on the contrary, begins "at the bottom", that is, at his own consciousness, with this one intuition, which he calls knowledge:

before me was my Cause—that's styled<sup>81</sup>  
God.

The secret he has learned in painting the body that expresses the soul, is that the cause of the soul must be looked for outside of Man

Externe,<sup>82</sup>

Not inmost, is the Cause, fool!

And whereas the evolutionists declare that everything is wrong with the world, Furini expresses here with particular force Browning's favorite idea that evil is the necessary condition and antitype of good

Though wrong were right,<sup>83</sup>  
Could we but know—still wrong must needs seem wrong  
To do right's service, prove men weak or strong,  
Choosers of evil or of good.

To sum up, evolutionistic science ends, in Browning's eyes, in a complete failure with regard to the great problems which surround our life. Browning does not reject the doctrine, in a way he reaches it; but he does reject the conclusions drawn from it. He cannot be satisfied with

that "critical intelligence" or that "Prime Mind" of Man hanging, as it were, in the void. He cannot admit that consciousness flows from no source and stand so to speak self-revealed. He cannot do without a Cause. And it would be of no avail to quote Kant to him and tell him that the idea of cause applies only to phenomena and not to the relation between the phenomenal world and the Unknown. This would be no reply to the irrepressible human instinct of which Browning is a noble and eloquent exponent. Nor would it avail to oppose to him the positivist's objection: But who made God? For Browning would reply that his intuitive definition of God is such as to exclude the question. We are thus inevitably led to pass from Browning's idea on science to the study of Browning's own philosophy and religion.

In speaking of Browning's philosophy, we must take care not to imitate certain critics who read into Browning the system of their own favorite philosopher. Thus Professor Henry Jones, in his well known book on the *Philosophy of Browning*, and before him, Mr. John Bury in an able essay in *Browning Studies* have too much Hegelianized our poet. Now, it is true that you may find in him the idea of the implication of opposites, of falsehood being a condition of truth and evil a condition of good. But Browning did not want Hegel to teach him this notion which he thought he had found in his own experience. It is true also that Love and Knowledge are represented by Browning as complimentary forces. In his first great poem, Paracelsus represents, broadly speaking, science without love, whereas Aprile is love without science or knowledge. And again, the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* asks

why live <sup>84</sup>

Except for love,—how love unless they know?

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But when Mr. Bury says that God or Love according to Browning manifests itself as Power in Nature, and as Knowledge in Man, when he defines Knowledge as Love's recognition of itself through the medium of Power, when he arranges into a Hegelian triad Love (affirmation), Power (negation), and Knowledge (synthesis), he abandons the ground of sound interpretation.

For, in the first place, I doubt if Browning ever studied Hegel. The only philosopher I find positive traces of in his work, for instance, in *Fifine*, is Plato, not Hegel. Nowhere in Browning do I find this striking view of Hegel's *Weltanschauung*, that of God or the Idea revealing itself progressively in the twin streams of history and nature, of Man and of things. And there is more: the whole temperament of Browning, his ingrained individualism was averse to thus absorbing man into God, and here we have, I think, the key of Browning's attitude. On the one hand, he will not, as we have already seen, merge God into man, he longs for an infinite source, he feels that there is more in God than in man, that man is not all that there is of God, does not exhaust God, so to speak; on the other hand, he cannot give up his atomistic conception of the individual soul, distinct and eternally distinct; this is an idea to which he is most obstinately attached:

Man, therefore, stands on his own stock<sup>88</sup>  
Of love and power as a pin-point rock.

He will not abandon this pin-point rock and considers all humanity as a sea studded with such rocks. The same image occurs in several places; Furini, for instance, speaks of

that profound<sup>89</sup>  
Of ignorance I tell you surges round  
My rock-spit of self-knowledge.

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The poet clings to that rock-spit. It makes him diffident towards all monistic views of the universe, evolutionist or not. It prevents in him the pantheistic flights of other poets. His pantheism is but half-hearted, as we see in the end of *Paracelsus*. All this is admirably summed up by Professor Herford, when he says: "Browning's theology is double-faced between the pantheistic yearning to find God everywhere and the individualist's resolute maintenance of the autonomy of man".

The philosophic foundations of Browning's religion are summed up in the last line of *La Saisiaz*:

Well? Why, he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God.<sup>87</sup>

Notice those two points: he at least was very sure of God and of the Soul. Browning does not rest content with one of them. Some people would think that these terms are interchangeable, that the Soul includes God or that God includes the Soul, they would content themselves with a more vague idealism, including one term only, such as is expressed in another line of Browning's:

Hold on, hope hard in the subtle thing<sup>88</sup>  
That's spirit.

But God, or the spirit, is not enough for Browning. For the Soul which he wants for his conception of immortality is not only a spark of the great light of the spirit, it is a Soul, so to speak, absolute, self-sufficient, and independently eternal. And the Soul does not suffice to Browning either. It is to him simply absurd to imagine that will and love appear in man self-generated, for the first time in the world. It is for him a "gigantic stumble", something like deifying ourselves, an enormous conceit that will prevent progress:

That man has turned round on himself and stands,<sup>89</sup>  
Which in the course of nature is, to die.

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It may be questioned, by the bye, that such a conceit would indeed be an obstacle to progress: think of Nietzsche and his belief in the Superman. Nevertheless we can understand Browning hesitating, before the infinite Unknown, to make himself, man, the summit and the measure of all things. He will not stop before that Unknown. He will call it God. He says: to know that I do not know something is an interesting fact—and, trespassing beyond logic, he adds: and proves that the something exists!

Fact it is I know I know not something which is fact as much.<sup>80</sup>

He boldly applies the same reasoning to his two postulates, God and Soul.

Call this—God, then, call that—soul, and both—the only facts for me.<sup>81</sup>  
Prove them facts? that they o'erpass my power of proving, proves them such.

This is of course liable to the objections long since made against proving the existence of God by the existence of the idea of God. But Browning happily corrects his reasoning by saying that it is valid only for himself (proves them such for me). In other words, he improves the "ontological proof" by basing it on a personal religious experience.

The existence of God being thus proved to his intuition, how will he imagine God, and above all, will he give Him personality? In these philosophic foundations of his religious belief Browning is indeed very careful, very wise, and shows a fine psychological insight into religious conscience. His reason plainly tells him that God surpasses our knowledge and that it is vain to give Him human attributes such as will, since nothing opposes his power, or a plan and intentions, since God cannot progress.

What need of will, then? nought opposes power:<sup>82</sup>  
Why, purpose? any change must be for worse.

But, on the other hand, the heart of man requires a god with whom he can enter into some form of relation, "a dear necessity makes us for a moment imagine humanity in an object which the next confesses unimaginable"<sup>93</sup> Therefore

I needs must blend the quality of man<sup>94</sup>  
 With quality of God, and so assist  
 Mere human sight to understand my Life,

words which are very interesting indeed, and which again show Browning as an authority in religious matters. Mrs. Orr was probably thinking of these lines when speaking of Browning's "Supreme Being, not to be invested with human emotions but only to be reached through them".

Personalization of God, according to Browning, is not necessarily anthropomorphism, but an expedient, a sort of image, a metaphor indispensable to religious life. And the finest instance of this expedient is in the religion of which the founder said, not belief in good, in justice, but:

Believe in me,<sup>95</sup>  
 Who lived and died, yet essentially  
 Am Lord of Life.

This brings us to the somewhat disputed question of Browning's attitude towards Christianity. Here, as much as I have emphasized that no poet is more Christian in spirit, as much must I emphasize that he is a very undogmatic, unorthodox Christian. It is true that no historian has looked with more penetrating insight into the soul of a Christian than the author of *Saul*, of *Christmas-Eve*, and *Easter-Day*. No one has interpreted with warmer sympathy the beauty and original value of this religion in all its historical phases, including even Roman Catholicism. Browning is so much a Christian in spirit that orthodox critics do not for a moment suspect in him anything like a heretic. "I must claim for Browning", says the Rev. J.



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Kirkman in the introductory address of the London Browning Society, "the distinction of being the greatest Christian poet we have ever had". There is in fact no proof that he adheres to a single dogma except personal immortality of the soul, and that, not as a dogma, but as a surmise, as a hope "no more, no less than hope".

Browning not only knows nothing of predestination, justification, faith, etc., not only rejects with scornful indignation, in *Ixion* and the *Inn Album*, the notion of eternal punishment, but he omits, even in its undogmatic form, an integral part of the faith which in other writers, such as the Russian Dostoëvsky, plays a prominent part, I mean the idea of original sin and consequently of redemption. For Browning, Christ is not the Redeemer, but simply "a manifestation of divine love in the human form best accessible to humanity". And the argument by which he defends this view is untheological, and quite that of an outsider. It is what Mr. Chesterton wittily calls "the hope drawn from the imperfection of God". It means that if God did not know sacrifice and loving pity, he would lack some of the virtues of man,

For the loving worm within his clod,<sup>96</sup>  
Were diviner than a loveless god.

So God would be inferior to man. It is possible, exclaims the poet, that

God had yet to learn<sup>97</sup>  
What the meanest human creature needed.

And, again, in *Saul*:

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,<sup>98</sup>  
That I doubt his own love can compete with it? Here, the parts shift?  
Here, the creature surpass the Creator,—the end, what Began?

All this is in some ways a justification of the doctrine of the incarnation, that is to say, it explains its success, its appeal to men, how it answers to a spiritual need in them;

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and Browning has shown it prophetically longed for by Saul and by the Roman Cleon and by the Arab doctor Karshish. But all this does not prove that Browning believes in the incarnation, and that it appeals to him in any other sense than that of a myth, a symbol, or embodiment of the Divine in Man and of the loving principle in God. Much stress has been laid upon a passage in *A Death in the Desert*:

I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ<sup>89</sup>  
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee  
All questions in the earth and out of it.

But, first we have no absolute right to attribute these words of John to the poet himself, and secondly, "the acknowledgment of God in Christ" is not exactly the divinity of Christ.

It is true that in the *Epilogue to the Dramatis Personæ*, Browning makes little of modern biblical criticism and says that the truth of Christianity must rest on its own internal evidence. But, on the other hand, his John in the Desert, foreseeing all this higher criticism, says to the believer:

the fault was, first of all, in thee,<sup>100</sup>  
Thy story of the places, names and dates.

It is, therefore, doubtful that Browning accepts this story of places, names, and dates, that is, historical revelation. He certainly never appeals to the authority of revelation, even to enforce his most cherished hope of personal immortality. And it seems to me that the nature of Browning is contrary to the idea of truth revealed once for all, for we know that he likes the struggle for truth better than truth itself.

In what, then, consists Browning's religion, or rather Browning's Christianity? It is a reasonable Christianity, which does not mean that it is cold and unimpassioned.

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Browning makes a choice, but into the elements of that choice he throws himself with all the energy of his soul. His religion is a compromise, a true Victorian compromise between his philosophy or his reason and the religion of his first education. What he owes to the latter is, first, laying stress on the principle of Love as the truest revelation of the Divine, the idea that the God in whom we live and move and have our being is Love. He might have found something of this in Plato, as we see in *Fifine*; yet, it is so colored by Christianity in Browning, that it is better to trace it straight to that source. The second belief which he owes to Christianity is that of a direct personal intercourse between his philosophy and this belief, in that justification of divine personality which I quoted as an instance of his religious psychology. That relation is one of duty, probation under the eyes of God to whom the soul will have, so to speak, to give account. For Browning, duty consists less in abstention than in action, growth and progress of the individual soul, so that his religion is above all a religion of individual moral progress.

Intimately connected with this form of religion is Browning's optimism, of which so much has been said that I may be brief. Browning believes in something like Providence, not perhaps for nature, but for the soul: he believes that the circumstances of life are adapted to the guidance of each separate soul, and especially that our misfortunes play a beneficent part. The peculiarity of Browning's optimism is that our very causes of grief he finds motives of consolation; the reverse of Keats who, a deep pessimist, found the saddest thing in life, not in our miseries, but in the nature of our joys.

For Browning, for instance, the imperfection that clings to us as an original sin is less a curse than a blessing. This

is what Mr. Chesterton calls "the hope drawn from the imperfection of Man". For this native imperfection, joined with an idea of perfection, is the chief condition of progress, as doubt is a condition of faith, and error a condition of truth—error including errors of conduct or mistakes. Browning differs from Carlyle, who has been reproached with a worship of success, in that he is never tired of speaking of the usefulness of our defeats, in showing us lives like that of Sordello, that succeed in that they seem to fail. How is that possible? Because their defeats show them their error and because our intentions count more than the results attained. But this requires a third point of belief which he borrows from Christianity. It is that God will give a sanction to this present life in after-life. And the very exacting way in which Browning put this condition proves, as we shall see, that it is rooted both in his religious education and in his individualistic instincts, rather than in any philosophy.

We could never insist enough on that ineradicable instinct of individualism in Browning, as much an explanation of his art as of his morals and religion. No Englishman has expressed in more varied ways that he is an island in his island, and an insubmersible one. One of his characters, for instance, says:

From first to last of lodging, I was I,<sup>101</sup>  
And not at all the place that harbored me.

This tendency makes him rather indifferent about national life, general movements, collective progress of the race and all that fills with enthusiasm a poet like Walt Whitman. However, to those who would tax him with egotism, Browning might reply that to develop oneself according to one's powers is the best way of serving the commonweal, or, in his own lines

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And each of the Many helps to recruit <sup>102</sup>  
The life of the race by a general plan;  
Each living his own, to boot.

But it remains true that for Browning the primary duty is duty to one's self, to one's own soul. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that he considers the material universe as made for each soul of us.

To man, propose this test— <sup>103</sup>  
Thy body at its best,  
How far can that project thy soul on its lone way?

Notice the characteristic expression: the lone way of the soul. The result of this spiritual solitude is nowhere better seen than in Browning's doctrine of immortality.