IV

BROWNING ON LOVE, MUSIC, AND IMMORTALITY

BROWNING'S stubborn attachment to his own individuality, together with his own religious education, explains that belief in personal immortality of the soul which was largely responsible for his general hold on the public. But I find traces in him of another doctrine, much more general and vague, and philosophically more easy to define, namely, that nothing which pertains to the life of the spirit dies, that there never will be one good lost, that as he says in *Abt Vogler*:

> All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist,[104]

which is the same as when he says:

> Hold on, hope hard in the subtle thing [105]
> That's spirit.

This is the immortality of the spirit which every idealist will accept, but Browning soon left that track; he became more exacting and set out to develop with wonderful eloquence a belief deeply rooted in most human hearts, a very natural and very touching one, too, namely, that we shall personally survive, that friends and lovers will meet hereafter, that Evelyn Hope, when she wakens in another world will find in her hand the geranium leaf placed there by her lover, and remember, and understand. This is of course only an image, and especially so with respect to the geranium leaf. Yet, he himself, a widower, thought of Elizabeth in those realms of hope, in the "whiteness" which her

face makes proud, in that wanness where her foot may fall, and you remember the end of *Prospice,*

> Then a light, then thy breast,[106]
> O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
> And with God be the rest!

In this connection, there is a poem of especial interest not so much poetical as biographical, a poem where for once, rejecting imagination and fancy, discarding religious revelation, he means to argue philosophically for himself in his own name. It is that impassioned meditation which he wrote under the shock of the sudden death of his friend, Miss Egerton-Smith, at La Saisiaz, the villa in Savoy which he had hired with her and his sister. This time, he will not dream, he says, but once for all discuss the question: does the soul survive the body? Is there God's self, no, or yes? Yet, he is biased and the very way he puts the question is fallacious. For the word soul may mean either the soul of the world, spirit, or, as Browning takes it, our individual soul, and in that case the equation between the survival of soul and the existence of God ceases to be correct. He will not dream, he says, he will submit to the testimony of fact, for truth is truth. He will act as an umpire between Reason and Fancy. Yet he does not even state the most commonplace objections of Reason, namely, that our person seems to be bound up with a certain body and certain circumstances of time and space; and, moreover, that it is difficult to admit of the immortality of some persons who do not seem to have evolved in them any divine spark at all, who remain for all their lives what he calls "finite and finished clods", or, as the speaker says in *A Toccata of Galuppi's:*

> The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.[107]

So much for the negative side of Reason. But there is another side of the question which he does not see either. He sets out as if he were going impartially to examine other views than his own, but proves curiously incapable of grasping and doing justice to them. It cannot be said that he gives a fair recognition, for instance, to the idea of survival in other people's minds, of immortality by remembrance. It seems that for him just to state that view is to refute it. Lifting the body of his friend, he exclaims:

A tribute to yon flowers and moss,[108]
What of you remains beside? A memory!

He then proceeds, in a perfunctory way, to describe that "memory" as something very imperfect and fleeting: I shall remember you while I live, but I also shall die

And so both memories dwindle—[109]

that is all he has to say, but surely there is more!

Some persons, perhaps the more so as they do not dare to hope in personal immortality, will practise what I call denial of death by remembrance. They will make a shrine in their memory to the saintly image of some beloved mother, sister, or friend, of their heroic sufferings, of their saintly death, and their own soul may be colored and their conduct pervaded by it, and those moments of which Wordsworth says:

Some silent laws our hearts will make,[110]
Which they shall long obey:
We for the year to come may take
Our temper from to-day.

In Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* there is a vulgar soldier who thought it great fun to see a witch being burned, but he comes back in tears and cries that by Joan and not by Christ, his soul has been saved: a good instance of the influence of personality. And as to Christ himself, how many

thousands of people who do not actually believe in his divinity, yet follow or revere his teaching, affording one of the most splendid historical instances of survival by remembrance, even if they see nothing actually supernatural in his life.

Let us now take the side of the person who dies. A mother may die happy, consoled by the thought of her children who live after her. And if we have no children, our very acts, if not the thought of us, may be transmitted in endless waves, and have incalculable repercussions in the life of the world. It is curious that Browning did not see this, and failed to make the most of his doctrine of personal influence so wonderfully set out in *Pippa Passes*. The idea of the play is that the song of Pippa, by the joy and innocence it breathes, unconsciously influences the lives of four groups of people under the windows of whom she passes in her round through Asolo. Pippa has brought them, in Professor Corson's words "new feelings fresh from God". The poet has shown us that all spirit is mutually attractive, that the humblest life has therefore its value, that no man is great or small in the sight of God,

> All service ranks the same with God.[111]

He consoles us all, ordinary people, for having no genius and producing no masterpiece: our lives may yet not be useless. He goes a step further elsewhere in saying that even our intentions count, as much as our acts:

> All I could never be,[112]
> All, men ignored in me,
> This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

But it is no longer so in *La Saisiaz;* it is no longer enough for him to be the well shaped cup that "slakes the Master's thirst". He must be there himself and remember. We find now in the poet a want of self-abnegation which is

naïvely, almost cynically expressed in the lines following those we began to quote:

> And so both memories dwindle, yours and mine together linked,[113]
> Till there is but left for comfort, when the last spark proves extinct,
> This—that somewhere new existence led by men and women new
> Possibly attains perfection coveted by me and you.

He says again, and he puts this, mind you, ironically:

> Why repine? There's ever someone lives although ourselves be dead![114]

Well, there are those who find rest in this idea, and I strongly doubt if they are inferior, if their attitude of mind is less religious than that of Browning.

There are even those who go further, who say: what if humanity, if the world, perishes? There may be other worlds and, above all worlds, there is the Spirit. There are those who have learned to find a solace in the idea that not their person, but a part of them, the best they could evolve, may live and be remembered, say, in God. There are others for whom the supreme goal is a disappearance of individuality into an unimaginable feeling of eternity, of which some of them, like Spinoza, have had faint forebodings in this life. Browning has been congratulated for summarily disposing of the social immortality of the positivists, but, in *La Saisiaz,* at least, he fails likewise to understand the immortality in God. To put it otherwise, Browning to a certain extent sacrifices to the idea of immortality that of eternity. To some minds it will seem that he encroaches too much on the Unknown and that in demanding much, he does, perhaps, not demand enough. There is some truth in Professor Santayana's saying that "with an unconscious mixture of heathen instinct with Christian doctrine, he thinks of the other world as heaven, but of the life to be led there as the life of Nature".

This leads us to inquire into the motives of Browning's craving for personal immortality. The chief is, perhaps, that he has such a love of this present life that he wants to make it last forever. It is certain that he pictures future life after the image of the present and mainly as a continuation of its struggles. In *Fifine,* he speaks of

> eternity, that's battle without end.[115]

In *Old Pictures in Florence,* he says:

> There's a fancy some lean to and others hate—[116]
> That, when this life is ended, begins
> New work for the soul in another state,
> Where it strives and gets weary, loses and wins:
> . . . .
> Only the scale's to be changed, that's all.

Browning is evidently among those who "lean to that fancy". Therefore future life, among other things, is conceived as the life where scholars and artists may continue to develop and improve. This was the craving of the refined pagan Cleon in the poem so entitled. It is also that of Browning in the sequel of the passage of *La Saisiaz* already quoted:

> While ourselves, the only witness to what work our life evolved,[117]
> Only to ourselves proposing problems proper to be solved
> By ourselves alone,—who working ne'er shall know if work bear fruit
> Others reap and garner.

I have already pointed out that there is want of self-abnegation in this. I may add that this desire for a life where we might end the work begun and see the result of effort, looks much like a form of the desire for recompense, whereas a virtuous effort ought to find its recompense in itself.

In the next place, future life is also for Browning the meeting of those who have loved. This is clear from the occasion on which *La Saisiaz* was written and from the

expressed wish to meet hereafter the "Dear and True", that is to say, Miss Egerton-Smith herself:

> Only grant my soul may carry high through death her cup unspilled,[118]
> Brimming though it be with knowledge.
>
> Grant me (once again) assurance we shall each meet each some day.[119]

I have said that this last wish, however respectable, is not insuperable and may be replaced by what I call denial of death by remembrance.

But there is another wish that is, to my mind, almost insuperable, and therefore the most legitimate motive for Browning's hope, I mean the wish to atone for so much innocent suffering in this life. Now, this motive is expressly disclaimed for Browning by the Rev. W. Robertson in an important essay on *La Saisiaz* republished by the London Browning Society and sometimes requoted by the critics. "It is not the injustice of life that afflicts him but its unintelligibility." I say: if so, the worse for Browning! Our author explains "unintelligibility" by saying that this world is a scene of education and that without immortality there would be no motive for effort. I have replied to this that it looks much like a desire for recompense. To me the chief unintelligibility or inexplicableness of life is its apparent injustice. I cannot admire the love of recompense; but compensation for apparently useless pain is another thing, based on pity, or on a feeling of justice. It is true that to bear pain is an heroic achievement and may become blessedness, as in *Ixion*. But there is also pain so crushing that it leaves no room for the serenity of a philosopher-saint like Spinoza. There is a physical torture of which we can see no use to the sufferer.

In *Mihrab Shah* Browning tries to vindicate the existence of physical suffering by saying that it produces thankfulness to God in those who do not suffer, which is weak,

and also, that it produces pity for the sufferers. But I am glad that this explanation did not always satisfy him, and that even his strenuous optimism could not stop the voice of his conscience, when he cried in a line of *La Saisiaz:*

> Needs there groan a world in anguish just to teach us sympathy.

This thought is not in the foreground of his discussion, but at least, it is there.

To sum up, though there is much that is human and heartfelt and vigorously expressed in Browning's doctrine of immortality, there is no reason to give him especial praise for the doctrine laid down in *La Saisiaz,* for it is not necessarily the highest morally and it deprives his poetry of some noble sources of inspiration. We owe to it those pathetic cries for reunion with his wife, but the mystic moments of which we spoke, and the glimpses of the eternal and the infinite which we find in some other poets, are rare with Browning. He is stopped in his lyrical flights, his wings being bound by his individualism. He is the captive of it. It biases his ideas of immortality. It also hampers his outlook on the universe, and the expression of his pantheistic feeling.

But this tenacious, paralyzing individualism is relaxed, so to speak, when he touches on two subjects, namely, love and the art of music. Love, of which he had such a marvellous and unique personal experience, the expression of which is always both dramatic and lyrical, brings us to some of the summits of his poetry. In sexual love, he finds the revealing power and the same moral virtue which Wordsworth found in his communion with nature, and which others find in asceticism and mysticism. Love means the momentary solution of the antinomies of life. It is something like a sacrament, the blending of soul and matter,

just as art is the blending of idea and form. It opens the Infinite.

> Oh moment, one and infinite![121]

> Oh, the little more, and how much it is![122]
> And the little less, and what worlds away!

> A moment after, and hands unseen[123]
> Were hanging the night around us fast;
> But we knew that a bar was broken between
> Life and life: we were mixed at last
> In spite of mortal screen.

Love is a means of intuitive metaphysical knowledge. Here Browning puts new life into Plato by his own experience:

> knowledge means[124]
> Ever-renewed assurance by defeat
> That victory is somehow still to reach,
> But love is victory, the prize itself.

Love is

> O' the sole spark of God's life at strife[125]
> With death.

It unbinds the chains of space and time. It gives the poet a glimpse of that eternal life which he has somehow failed to conceive in his direct discussions on immortality. See *The Last Ride Together:*

> What if we still ride on, we two[126]
> With life for ever old yet new,
> Changed not in kind but in degree,
> The instant made eternity,—
> And heaven just prove that I and she
> Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

But love has another value. It is the great agency for the growth of our souls, for their mutual fecundation, so well explained in *Fifine.* By it they come to fruition:

> How the world is made for each of us![127]
> How all we perceive and know in it
> Tends to some moment's product thus,
> When a soul declares itself—to wit,
> By its fruit, the thing it does!

> So, earth has gained by one man the more,[128]
> And the gain of earth must be heaven's gain too.

The moment of the revelation of love

> Seems the sole work of a life-time[129]
> That away the rest have trifled.

> I am named and known by that moment's feat;[130]
> There took my station and my degree.

And so we may never, according to the poet, repel true love when it offers, either by procrastination, or by considerations of prudence, respectability, and the like. It is forfeiting our destinies, making what Dante would call the *gran rifiuto*. Browning does not show, like Corneille, conflicts between love and duty, because for him, in most cases, love is duty. This is put very boldly in *Bifurcation, Respectability,* and especially in the *Statue and the Bust.* Here a married lady is actually rebuked by the poet for not saving her soul by leaving her husband and following the duke who passes under her windows,

> Empty and fine like a swordless sheath,[131]

that would have been filled by love.

> I hear you reproach, "But delay was best,[132]
> For their end was a crime."—Oh, a crime will do
> As well, I reply, to serve for a test.

There is here in Browning a love of vitality, sheer energy, Italian *virtu* which Macchiavelli or Stendahl might envy. Browning admits the crime in unfaithfulness to a despotic husband. But he does not call it a sin, the only sin for him being that of the people whom Dante places in the limbo of his *Inferno*—want of courage, the sin of

> the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin.[133]

I like Browning, flinging, in his enthusiasm for love, that stone in the face of Victorian respectability. I have a mind to cry well done! For there was no real conflict of

duties here, or only such a conflict as a law on divorce might remove.

The admirers of Browning, however, were perplexed. Professor Herford tells us that in condemning his lovers for wanting energy the poet does not imply approval of the crime they failed to commit. Yet still less does he disapprove of it. The most amusing of Browning's critics and admirers is Mr. Berdoe, author of the *Browning Cyclopædia,* who feels obliged in conscience to take exception to this passage: "If every woman flew to the arms of the man whom she liked better than her own husband and if every governor of a city felt himself at liberty to steal another man's wife merely to complete the circle of his own delight [of course it is not a question of delights] Society would soon be thrown back into barbarism. The sacrifice to conventionality and the self-restraint these persons practised may have atoned for much that was defective in their lives . . . It was a sacrifice justly due to human society". The last point the poet certainly would not admit. He has already replied that the growth of an individual soul is a principle of action and benefits society at large:

> So, earth has gained by one man the more,[154]
> And the gain of earth must be heaven's gain too.

This passage is further interesting in its bearing on Professor Santayana's objection that "Browning regards his passions as their own excuse for being, and does not domesticate them, either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal goal".

What we find in Browning is not the defense of passion for its own sake, of what Georges Sand (whom Browning did not like) and the Romantics called the rights of passion, *les Droits de la Passion.* Love with him is not

immoral, irreligious, anti-social. He does try to understand the cause of his passion which for him is simply God, and he does conceive its ideal goal as the development of the soul of man.

My own objection to Browning is a little different. I believe that he simply exaggerates the importance of love, not absolutely, but in making of it an almost indispensable factor in the individual life of man. I am not going to say with Bernard Shaw that the idealizing of sex is a false idol of romanticism and sentimentalism. But I will not admit that only by love, that is to say by sex, can our souls be saved and, this is very nearly the gist of the passage in *Cristina* where the man who speaks, if not Browning, has at least all of Browning's sympathy:

> Doubt you if, in some such moment,[135]
>   As she fixed me she felt clearly,
> Ages past the soul existed,
>   Here an age 'tis resting merely,
> And hence fleets again for ages,
>   While the true end, sole and single,
> It stops here for is, this love-way,
>   With some other soul to mingle?
>
> Else it loses what it lived for,
>   And eternally must lose it;
> Better ends may be in prospect,
>   Deeper blisses (if you choose it),
> But this life's end and this love-bliss
>   Have been lost here.

It would appear from these lines that love is really the supreme end of existence and that those who have not met with it have missed the aim of their lives. And this is a disheartening thing to say to many unfortunate persons who through no fault of their own have not found that blessing, and a hard thing to say to so many unmarried lady-friends of Browning who did much for him and formed the majority in many of the Browning Societies. It seems

to me that he does not help them to live, and that his moral teaching, so much admired, is here slightly at fault.

Need I emphasize that the principle "by love are we saved" can only be accepted in taking love in a much wider sense than Browning takes it here, including all sorts of love, religious, ethical, filial, parental, the love of the scholar and the artist for their work, or add that between these various sorts conflicts may arise? Browning has produced in *Bifurcation* a conflict between love and what the lady of the story calls her duty. He does not say what that duty was, but blames the apparent saint for sacrificing her lover who, deprived of love's guidance, stumbles, falls, and becomes morally ruined. But suppose that the lady's duty was her love to her children, should you blame her? And cannot we imagine other cases where to renounce love may be a higher form of courage than to surrender to it? Such renunciation, as any other sacrifice, may be and is a frequent means of the development of soul at which Browning aims. As a moralist, he has neglected that point.

There is another prejudice in him. Just as he overlooks many unhappy persons who have not come across propitious Eros, he rather disdains the happier ones who met with the god several times. In other words, he shares in the romantic superstition of one only love predestined, foreordained between two souls, from eternity. In *Any Wife to Any Husband,* we have the lament of a dying wife who foresees that her husband will seek solace with other women. Has it never occurred to Browning that people marry again, and sometimes, let us hope, for love? But then if you allow this suggestion, Browning perhaps foresaw that a second love, given his too definite notions about immortality, his hope that the lovers will meet, might involve great difficulties in after-life! In spite of these

exaggerations, I must repeat that Browning's partiality and even superstition of love, is in itself lovable, a great source of lyrical power to him and an occasional source of metaphysical intuition. Love sometimes leads him beyond love. In *Two in the Campagna,* love itself remains unsatisfied. Here the poet speaks of

> Infinite passion, and the pain [156]
> Of finite hearts that yearn,

which, with the solitude of the Roman Campagna, gives us a sense, rare with him, of an immanent being including both nature and ourselves.

Another source of this intuition one finds in Browning's comprehension of music. There is above all a passage on music, in *Charles Avison,* one of the *Parleyings with Certain People,* which I am astonished not to find noticed by any of his critics, for it contains, perhaps, his profoundest and most genuine insight into the nature of the Unknown. It comes after the statement,

> There is no truer truth obtainable [157]
> By Man than comes of music.

It begins by a distinction between soul and mind. Soul is

> A word which vaguely names what no adept [158]
> In word-use fits and fixes so that still
> Thing shall not slip word's fetter and remain
> Innominate as first, yet, free again,
> Is not less recognized the absolute
> Fact underlying that same other fact
> Concerning which no cavil can dispute
> Our nomenclature when we call it "Mind"—
> Something not Matter—"Soul," who seeks shall find
> Distinct beneath that something.

Soul is something elusive, which however elusive we recognize underneath Mind. Mind means our intelligence with the help of which our senses build our "solid knowledge", that is, science. But our "solid knowledge" falls short of many things. It is compared by the poet to a bridge

of masonry which can over-arch but never grasp or comprehend the gulf underneath, which is soul:

> So works Mind—by stress [139]
> Of faculty, with loose facts, more or less,
> Builds up our solid knowledge: all the same,
> Underneath rolls what Mind may hide not tame,
> An element which works beyond our guess,
> Soul, the unsounded sea.

The opposition here drawn between the mind and the overflowing stream of soul inaccessible to it is curiously akin to the discrepancy which the French philosopher Bergson sees between the essence of life, the vital impulse, *l'élan vital,* and science, which can only fix, like the cinema, what is fluent and moving—interrupt and thereby disfigure, what is continuous.

How shall we reach the soul, cries the poet, how shall we "shoot liquidity into a mould"?

> Soul's sea,—drawn whence,[140]
> Fed how, forced whither,—by what evidence
> Of ebb and flow, that's felt beneath the tread,
> Soul has its course 'neath Mind's work overhead,—
> Who tells of, tracks to source the founts of Soul?

Curiously Bergsonian, too, is the idea that where science fails, music to some extent succeeds. Browning applies this only to the life of our soul, the human soul, but it would remain true for the soul of life in general. Music according to the poet is superior both to science and the other arts, in that it catches our

> nether-brooding loves, hates, hopes and fears,[141]
> Enwombed past Art's disclosure.

> Outdo [142]
> Both of them, Music! Dredging deeper yet,
> Drag into day,—by sound, thy master-net,—
> The abysmal bottom-growth, ambiguous thing
> Unbroken of a branch, palpitating
> With limbs' play and life's semblance!

What Browning says of the life of our souls, Bergson says still better of life in general and in terms of his own

philosophy. Music carries us into the heart of things, the core of change, in what he calls pure duration. Dwelling on the idea of mobility which Browning rendered by the image of the stream under the bridge: "Ecoutons une mélodie", says Bergson, "en nous laissant bercer par elle: n'avons nous pas la perception nette d'un mouvement qui n'est attaché à aucun mobile, d'un changement sans rien qui change? Le changement se suffit, il est la chose même". Let us listen to a melody and let ourselves be rocked by it; have we not a clear perception of a movement independent of any moving object, of a change without a thing that changes? The change is sufficient in itself, it is the thing itself.

Browning's philosophy of Music is also akin to that of Schopenhauer who said that the world was only music realized. After looking into the philosophy of *Charles Avison* we are able to understand more fully his other poems on music, such as *Abt Vogler,* with its deep word

> 'tis we musicians know,[143]

that is, we musicians alone penetrate into the inmost secrets of life; and with its magnificent vision of the organist who builds his palace of Music, rising to heaven while heaven seems to descend on earth,

> Not a point nor peak but found and fixed its wandering star; [144]
> . . . .
> For earth had attained to heaven, there was no more near nor far.

Here again we have the sense of the One, Infinite and Absolute.

To conclude, though Browning's individualism was to his poetry a great source of force and beauty, yet his highest flights occur when he allows this individualism to be for a moment immerged in the contemplation of the infinite sea that surrounds his insulated ego. And these

moments occur chiefly in his poems on love and on music. It will be more fair, however, and more in accord with Browning's inmost wishes if we choose our supreme example and our final quotation from his own personal religion, his religion of moral development. For though I have dwelt much on his art, and have not admired everything in his morals, his art does not suffer from the fact that he does help us to live. He does so, not by direct teaching, but by the lyrical contagion of his faith in life, for instance, in those famous stanzas of *Rabbi Ben Ezra* where moral enthusiasm carries him into an ecstasy, a sort of lyric dance, which may be compared to the dance of Zarathustra in Nietzsche:

> He fixed thee mid this dance [145]
> Of plastic circumstance,
> This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
> Machinery just meant
> To give thy soul its bent,
> Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

The beauty of such a poem, intensely characteristic of Browning, is in the combination of his realistic, precise and concrete imagination with a sublime moral exaltation, each supporting the other and producing a quality never felt before. We see the clay, the potter, the straps of the potter's wheel

> What though the earlier grooves [146]
> Which ran the laughing loves
> Around thy base, no longer pause and press?

We see these grooves pressing on a clay cup, and yet we see heaven. And I venture to say that the chief beauty is that the cup, that is Browning, if you like, does for once not think of itself, but, with a more complete surrender than is usual, thinks only of its highest use, namely, to slake the thirst of God.

Look not thou down but up![147]
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips aglow!
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou with earth's wheel?

It is in such poems that Browning appears at his best, by such poems that he will be remembered as a poet so familiar and yet so sublime, so original in form and matter, in sound, rhythm, and image, that it becomes irrelevant to compare him with others, to decide whether he is greater than they, for it is enough to declare that he is unique.

I shall spare you, therefore, the worn out parallel between Browning and his great contemporary and rival, but I wish to say that to us, French-speaking people, Browning is, or ought to be, of more interest and value than Tennyson. For he is not narrowly insular as is the latter; he is a citizen of all nations, past and present, of Germany, France, or Italy; he has, of course, a much more powerful mind. And finally, whereas Tennyson's qualities are not uncommon with us, Browning, owing to an originality amounting to genius, is, even as an artist, full of suggestions and has infinitely more to give us, if only we would read him. But, in spite of what M. Maeterlinck says, he is not read with us. To be read, he wants an interpreter, and such an interpreter I am trying to be. It has, I trust, been worth your while to know that something was being done for Browning abroad, and in what spirit it was being done.

PAUL DE REUL.