**THE PROBLEM OF PARACELSUS.**
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# THE PROBLEM OF PARACELSUS.

THE collection of poems belonging to what may be called the "Faust-cycle," in the literature of the present century, contains no extended work whose machinery of plot and of incident is, when externally regarded, simpler than that of Browning's "Paracelsus."[1] The relations of hero and tempter are nowhere freer from external complication than when the hero is explicitly the deceiver of his own soul. With Paracelsus this is actually the case.

For classing "Paracelsus" with the Faust-cycle in this way there are many grounds. The real Paracelsus was a contemporary of the historic prototype of Faust. The two figures were, as a fact, closely linked in Goethe's mind, as they must have been in

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[1] This paper was read before the Boston Browning Society, Nov. 26, 1893.

Browning's. Such a classification in no wise detracts from the sort of originality which the poem possesses, while it aids us in finding our way when we consider its problem. The absence of an external tempter in no wise excludes the poem from the Faust-cycle; for the tempter in most such creations is but the hero's other self, given a magical and plastic outer reality, as with Manfred. As regards the positive aspects of the analogy, the typical hero of a poem of the Faust-cycle is a man of the Renaissance, to whom the church is no authority, and to whom the world is magically full either of God's or of Satan's presence, or of both. This hero risks his soul in a quest for some absolute fulfillment, of pleasure, power, wisdom or peace. Thus staking everything, he gets, like an early voyager to the New World, either the doom of the outlaw, or the glories of the conquistador; but meanwhile he comes near, if he does not meet, an evil end in the abyss.

Thus regarded, the problem of Paracelsus readily defines itself. We are to study the career of a spiritual relative of Faust. Accordingly, we have to consider his original quest, and the strong Satanic delusion to which he fell prey. In such a light we may hope to express the sense of his tragedy.

I. Browning has told us several times, in the course of the poem, where to look for the heart of the mystery. Paracelsus made it his early ideal "to know." Failing in this undertaking, conceived as it was in a spirit of ideal youthful extravagance, the maturer Paracelsus learns from the poet Aprile, in the scene at the Greek conjurer's house, that the goal of life ought to be "to love" as well as "to know." He endeavors, in consequence, to reform his life according to the new insight; but the attempt comes too late. The "love" that the great alchemist tries to cultivate in his heart turns rather to hate. He flees from his office as professor at Basel, wanders, wastes years fruitlessly, and dies, seeing indeed at last his true defect, and explaining it in the wonderful closing speech of the poem.

The whole tragedy thus turns explicitly upon this poetic antithesis between "loving" and "knowing." But these words are among the most manifold in meaning of all the words of human language; from the nature of the case they have to be so. In this poem, then, just as in daily usage, they will mean whatever the whole context of the action shows. Browning portrays, as usual, a "mood" (the word is his own, used in the preface to the first edition of the poem). He leaves us to draw for ourselves the conclusion from the situation before us. His choice in this regard but embodies the natural privilege of the dramatic poet; the critical problem that results for us is one of the most legitimate sort. A tragic conflict has occurred through the interplay of two of the most universal and Protean of human interests. How these interests are here colored and defined, and why they thus conflict, we are, as readers, to determine. Such questions of interpretation are necessary in case of every serious dramatic issue.

The very simplicity of seeming of the two familiar words "love" and "knowledge" has, however, blinded many readers to the actual complications of the poem. Of the critics some, like Mr. Arthur Symons, find the tragic error of Paracelsus in the fact that he is "one whose ambition transcends all earthly limits, and exhausts itself in the thirst of the impossible." This is of course true in a measure of any hero of the type of Faust; but one thus defines, as it were, only the genus, not the species, of this particular flower from the fields of tragedy. Of the antithesis between "love" and "knowledge" itself, other critics, notably Mr. Berdoe, together with far too large a number of readers, appear to make little more than would be expressed by the comparatively shallow and abstract platitude that the intellect without the affections is a vain guide in life. I doubt not that Browning most potently believed this platitude. Who of us does not? But with such abstractions one gets but a little way, and creates no tragic issues. As a fact, nobody who has a nature on the human level, ever lives by either the intellect alone or the affections alone. Every rational being both "knows" and "loves," if by these words be meant only the bare abstractions called the "pure intellect" and the "affections." One might "love" Hebrew roots, or "know" the art of love-making. In either case, in actual life, one would combine the two functions of loving and knowing, whatever one did. But the problem of life is always what to know and what to love. Apart from specific objects, the two tendencies have no true antithesis. If, then, Browning's contrast means anything, these two words must be used, as St. Paul used them, or as common sense always uses them, in a pregnant sense, and with an implied reference to particular objects known or loved.

Browning cannot mean to ascribe his hero's failure to the fact that he is a "pure intellectualist," in the sense in which that term is often applied to a man who is exclusively in love with the study of some one abstract science. Such a devotee of pure science Browning actually sketched for us later in the "Grammarian's Funeral." The poet, fond as he is of strenuousness, has no word of blame for the ideal of such a student, whose one-sidedness he finds not tragic, but glorifying.

> Let a man contend, with his utmost might,
> For his life's best prize, be it what it may.

That is Browning's creed, from first to last. I can conceive, then, no error more hopeless than to suppose that the pregnant words which name the ideals of "love" and "knowledge," here tragically and sharply opposed to each other, are merely names for the intellectual and the affectionate sides of human nature, or that the poem is merely a sentimental protest on the part of a young poet against the too exclusive devotion of a thoughtful hero to his life's chosen business. Were that the case, it would be the solitary instance in all Browning's works where a hero suffers in the poet's estimation because of a too sincere devotion to his chosen ideal.

As a fact, such an estimate of our poem would here contradict the most obvious facts of the text. The man Paracelsus, at his coldest, never even tries to appear in this poem as a partisan either of a pure intellectualism of any sort, or of what we nowadays should call the "scientific spirit." He is no abstract reasoner, but a man of intuitions; no admirer of the so-called "cold intellect," but a passionate mystic; no steadily progressive student, busied with continuous systematic researches, but a restless wanderer; no being of clear-cut ideas, but a dreamer. The attentive reader cannot miss these altogether fundamental considerations. Unless we bear in mind these characteristics — the dreaminess, the ardor, the mysticism, the unsteadiness, and the essential unreasonableness of Browning's Paracelsus, — the man and his fortunes will remain a sealed book. No interpretation that forgets these facts in defining what "knowledge" meant for Paracelsus, and how it was opposed to the "love" of the poet Aprile, will be able even to approach a comprehension of the text, or to see wherein Paracelsus was deceived.

I may observe in passing that Browning was fond of using the words "love," "knowledge," and "power" in a pregnant sense. All three are so used not only in this poem but also down to the latest period of the poet's work. The use of familiar words in a pregnant sense, to be defined by the context, is the poet's substitute for technical terms. In "Reverie" in "Asolando," precisely the same antithesis as that upon which the tragedy of "Paracelsus" is based is treated, not in its relation to a hero's character, but in a general and meditative fashion, with the use of the words "love" and "power" as the terms. In fact the problem of "Paracelsus" involves one of Browning's most frequent and favorite topics of reflection.

II. In the case of a tragedy of Browning's creation, one can do little with the ideas, unless one first understands the hero's personality. How ideal are the aspirations which Browning attributes to his hero, every reader knows. What many readers neglect is that other and far less ideal disposition which, with a characteristic respect for the complexities of human nature, he attributes to what one may call his hero's lower self. Browning has affixed to the poem certain prose notes, meant to help us in understanding the author's attitude. Read by themselves, these tend to make us think of Paracelsus and his fortunes in anything but an ideal light. The excesses, the charlatanry, the other marks of degradation, — the roughness of speech of this rugged being, when once he is angered, his pettiness of motive when once he is involved in difficulties, — to all these the notes deliberately attract attention. All are fully reflected in the poem itself. Browning is not the slavish admirer of his own hero, but the true dramatic poet, who takes interest in the struggle of a great but burdened and in some respects degraded soul for the far-off light. Until the very end we must not expect to find Paracelsus wholly or even very largely an enlightened being. He has to work aspiringly in the dark.

As a creature of flesh and blood, Browning's Paracelsus is, first of all, rather a dreamer than a thinker. He is extremely intelligent, but essentially a creature of flashes of insight. He is of indomitable courage and of restless temper, impatient of restraint, and extremely fond, like many other professional men, of the sound of his own voice. He is very unconscious meanwhile of a certain curiously sentimental fondness for his intimate friends which lurks in the background of his rugged temperament, and which, especially in the third and fourth acts, gets very noteworthy expressions. Unable to bring this sentimental motive either to form or to consciousness, he is driven to search ceaselessly for exciting experiences, to the end that a heart which can never be satisfied may be kept constantly stimulated. So long as life is new, he indeed is able to refrain absolutely from all meaner indulgences; but he is somewhat coarse-fibred, and when higher excitements fail, he takes a certain rude delight in more ignoble sport, and meanwhile despises himself therefor. He is overwhelmingly proud, and is by nature condemned to a profound loneliness of experience.

In order to comprehend what sort of "knowledge" is in question in the poem, let us observe something suggested by the relation of our hero to the real Paracelsus. Browning says: "The liberties I have taken with my subject are very trifling; and the reader may slip the foregoing scenes between the leaves of any memoir of Paracelsus he pleases, by way of commentary." Browning was twenty-two years old when he thus wrote. His previous reading had been varied and industrious. From first to last he was fond of what is called mystical literature. Mrs. Sutherland Orr mentions among the books read in the poet's boyhood an old treatise on astrology. For the poem itself he read during a few months very extensively. There is no evidence, however, that he considered it his task, as poet, to trouble himself much concerning the technical aspect of the opinions which distinguish the actual Paracelsus from other thinkers of a similar intellectual type. It is fairly plain, however, that Browning had interested himself to collect from such sources as he used a number of illustrations of the characteristic speeches and the personal attitudes of his hero. The special doctrines of the thinker had less concern for him. Their spirit, and the deeper nature of the man, he sought authentically to portray.

Especially authentic as characterizing the real Paracelsus, and especially important, also, for understanding the poetic antithesis of "love" and "knowledge," as here developed, is an intellectual trait which Browning makes prominent in his hero throughout the poem, — the curious union of a very great confidence in private intuitions, in the inner light, as such, with a very great respect for what Paracelsus regards as the right sort of external experience of the facts of nature. Here is a man to whom "knowledge" means his own private, immediate and intuitive apprehension of truth through the inner light; but to whom this inner light means nothing except in relation to the details of outer experience, as he himself has verified them; a dark-lantern sort of spirit who has to shine alone apart from other lights, and whose spiritual insight forever flashes its brilliant beams now on this, now on that chance fact of the passing moment. To understand the significance of this tendency we must give the matter still closer scrutiny.

III. Browning well read in the real Paracelsus the just-mentioned fundamental and noteworthy feature of his mental processes. Some men believe in the intuitions, in the inner light, of either the reason or the heart; and therefore they find these intuitions so satisfying that they neglect or even abhor the baser revelations of the senses. Such men go into their closet and shut the door, or, as Schiller has it, they "flee from life's stress to the holy inner temples." Here they can be alone with God, with the truth, with their love, or with all their noble sentiments. Such men may be abstract thinkers, serene and deep, like Spinoza. If they are more emotionally disposed, they become, in various untechnical and devout fashions, contemplative mystics, quietists, seers of divine and incommunicably beautiful dreams. On the other hand there are men who stand in sharp contrast to the former; these believe, as they say, only "in the hard facts of experience." Accordingly, they mistrust all intuitions, whether rational or emotional. Men of this type we call pure empiricists or positivists.

But these two sharply contrasted types do not anywhere nearly exhaust the possibilities. Many men there are who join, in one way or another, intuition and experience. Of these latter there are not a few, — even among the patient students of natural science, still more, among the students of the moral world, — who look to see the divine law illustrated and incarnated in the facts of experience, vivifying either the whole, or some luminous part thereof, with its own grace and significance. In the classification of these mixed types we must appeal to a very ancient and familiar distinction, — that between the world of our physical and the world of our moral experiences. Upon this distinction the problem of our whole poem turns.

Granted, then, that one may expect a divine order, such as the higher intuitions have seemed to reveal to the mystics, to be more or less obviously embodied and exemplified in some type of the concrete facts of our experience, there still remains the question, Is it Nature, or is it Spirit; is it the physical world, or the moral world; is it the outer order of natural events, or is it the conscious life of mankind in their social, their moral, their emotional relations; is it the world as the student of natural wonders, or the world as the lover of human life, the artist, the portrayer of passion, comprehends it; in fine, is it the world of the "powers" of nature, or the world of the heart of man, that is the most likely and adequate to furnish facts capable of illustrating and embodying the divine purpose? This question is one of the oldest in the history of the higher problems of human thought. The vision of Elijah at Horeb is an ancient comment on this topic. Is God in the wonders of nature — in the storm, the thunder, the earthquake? No, answers the story, He is not in these. He is in the "still small voice." The antithesis is thus an extremely familiar one; it was a favorite topic of consideration with Browning. His own personal view agrees with that of the narrator of the vision of Elijah.

Many men (for instance, the modern followers of the ethical idealism that resulted from Kant's teachings) have learned to be very skeptical about finding any revelation of the divine will, or of any absolute truth, in the world of the facts of physical nature. These facts they find, like Browning in "Reverie," too complex, too deep, too full of apparent evil, too dark, to show us the divine will. God may be behind them, but they merely hide Him. Our insight into external nature is essentially limited. We vainly strive, in the present life, to peer into such mysteries. The world of physical experience is, as Kant declared, but the world of our limitations. It is the moral world, then, and not the physical world, that can show the divine. In "Reverie" Browning states the issue and its possible solution substantially thus: If one looks outwards, one sees a world which Browning calls the world of "power," that is, the physical universe. It is a world of rigid law, and in the observer it begets a state called knowledge, that is, in the language of this poem, an outward-looking and helplessly submissive acceptance of what one finds there: —

> "In a beginning God
> Made heaven and earth." Forth flashed
> Knowledge: from star to clod
> Men knew things: doubt abashed
> Closed its long period.

"Knowledge obtained, Power praise," continues the poet; but he observes that what knowledge has thus revealed is everything and anything but a manifestly divine order. This world of natural knowledge shows itself full of strife, evil, death, decay. Can one hope, then, for a solution here? No, but there is another world, the moral world, the world of love, and of conscious and ideal activity. This is the world that to the hopeful lover of the good shows, amidst all its incompleteness, genuine traces of the divine will. The poet contrasts this, the moral world, as being, despite its mixture of tendencies, rather the world of "Love," with the other world, — that of "Power."

The world of "knowledge," whose facts come from without and simply mould the passive mind to accept and submit in the presence of an undivine destiny, is still further contrasted with the facts revealed in the "leap of man's quickened heart," in the "stings of his soul which dart through the barrier of flesh," and in all that striving upwards, that moral idealism, which is for Browning, somewhat as for Kant, the one basis for the assurance that "God's in his heaven; all's right with the world."

One is to get the final revelation in terms of decidedly moral categories. It is "rising and not resting," it is "seeking the soul's world" and "spurning the worm's," it is not passively "knowing," but morally acting, that is to confirm one's faith. What already tends in the present life towards such confirmation is not "knowing" the outer world, but living "my own life."

Where, among these rather manifold types of mankind, did Paracelsus stand? Was he a mystical quietist, or was he in any fashion a mere positivist? Did Browning conceive him as in substantial agreement with his own views? We need not attribute to Browning, at twenty-two years of age, any very elaborate or articulate philosophy when we conceive him taking sides concerning this ancient and familiar issue with regard to the method and the region of the divine revelation. In "Paracelsus," as in "Asolando," the general view and the terminology of the poet are identical. Paracelsus is no mystical quietist or positivist. He unites experience and intuition. But he does not look in the moral world for the divine revelation. He looks elsewhere. He belongs, then, to another class than Browning or the ethical idealists who follow Kant. What is this class?

There is a type of men whom one might call the Occult Idealists, or in other words the Physical Mystics. Men of this type seem to themselves to possess overwhelmingly clear intuitions of the divinest depth; but these always relate to the spiritual interpretation of particular physical facts. The word of the Lord comes to such men, but in the form of a theoretical revelation as to the meaning of this and this in the world of outer experience. They therefore are never content in the "holy inner temples." They dislike purely speculative systems, as well as all inner dreaming. They are very impatient, too, of the limitations of human nature. They deny such limitations. One can know whatever one is deep enough to interpret in the facts of nature. Equally, however, such men despise those mere non-mystical empiricists, who have and who respect no holy intuitions. Our empirical mystics find no facts "hard," as do the positivists, but all facts deep. They do not much believe in a God whom either speculation or meditation finds in the cloistered solitudes of the mind. They want to find him in this or in that physical fact, in this sign or wonder, in that natural symbol, in yonder reported strange cure of a sick man, in weird tales of second sight, in the still unread lore of the far East, in "psychical research," in the "subliminal self," in the stars, in the revelations of trance mediums, in the Ouija board or in Planchette, — perhaps in a pack of cards, or in the toss of a coin. Nowadays we are more or less familiar with this type of empiricists, who still rather uncritically trust their intuitions; of collectors of facts, who mean thereby to prove the reality of the universal order and of the spiritual world; they seem never quite sure of the divine omnipresence until they have looked behind this door, or have peered into that cupboard, to see whether God after all is really there.

IV. The historical Paracelsus was, on the whole, a man of this type, — an empirical mystic who devoted himself to physical studies. For this class we have the rather awkward but almost unavoidable general name, Occultist. By Occultist we do not mean merely one who believes that there are divinely mysterious, i. e., truly occult, things in our world. The Kantian or Ethical Idealist believes in such mysteries, and is in no wise an occultist. But the latter is rather one who believes in a particular method of proving and interpreting the presence of the divinely occult. This method is a sort of restless collection of quaint and varied facts of experience. Quaint these facts must be; for what lies near at hand is never so clearly divine, to such eyes, as the distant, the uncommon, the foreign. In our own day God is to be found in the far East; here at home we can obtain him only at second hand. The Arabs and the Hindoos are the true adepts. So Browning's Paracelsus sets out on long and indefinite travels. The occultist's facts must be varied. In the Father's house are many mansions, and their furniture is extremely manifold. Astral bodies and palmistry, trances and mental healing, communications from the dead and "phantasms of the living" — such things are for some people to-day the sole quite unmistakable evidences of the supremacy of the spiritual world. Some of these things were known to the real Paracelsus; others, as varied, he also knew and prized.

The real Paracelsus was a medical man, whose philosophy and occultism were chiefly valuable in his own eyes as laying a foundation for his skill as a healer. This aspect retreats into the background in Browning's poem, for obvious reasons, such as the difficulty of employing forgotten medical lore in verse. The Paracelsus of the poem is at once a dreamer of universal dreams and an ardent empiricist.

> What fairer seal
> Shall I require to my authentic mission
> Than this fierce energy? — this instinct striving
> Because its nature is to strive?

So he tells us in the first act, where the young aspirant for a divine mission bids farewell to his two friends ere he sets out on a long wandering in search of his knowledge. But what this "striving" proves is, he says, the presence of

> God helping, God directing everywhere,
> So that the earth shall yield her secrets up,
> And every object shall be charged to strike,
> Teach, gratify, her master God appoints.

In other words Paracelsus is going, in the service of God and man, to scour the earth in the search of numerous lost facts of some vast significance for human welfare.

To this conception of the young dreamer's life mission his friend Festus replies, with a certain wonder, that one so sure of God as Paracelsus at the outset of his great quest appears to be, might as well seek for all this healing truth near by, in

> Some one of Learning's many palaces.

Why should Paracelsus thus look for the truth only "in strange and untried paths"?

> What books are in the desert? Writes the sea
> The secret of her yearning in vast caves
> Where yours will fall the first of human feet?

Festus doubts the very sincerity of his friend's quest for knowledge, since it seems to involve scorn for all the accessible lore of the past ages of learning, and a mere resort to the accidental experiences of the aimless wanderer.

The reply of Paracelsus goes very deep into his own character, and reveals to us a certain scorn of the mediocrity of ordinary men, a scorn often characteristic of dreamers of every type; a sense of the unique intensity of his own inner life, — a sense upon which is founded his love for lonely ways; his assurance of his immediate intuitions of the divine; and finally, a curious and very characteristic belief that this immediate intercourse with God is not of itself enough, and that it points out to him a very hard, a very long, but a very wonderful path along which he must henceforth go, — a path that is to lead to the discovery of an endless multitude of special truths, and such a multitude as it almost crazes him to contemplate; this path is the path of the collector of special facts of experience. This passage of the poem contains some of the most frequently quoted and least understood lines of the whole work. Paracelsus tells first about the moment of his discovery of his mission, when he learned the wide contrast between his own powers and calling and those of ordinary men. He then narrates his inner experience of a conversation with the divine voice that spoke in his soul at that great moment, and he closes: —

> I go to prove my soul!
> I see my way as birds their trackless way —
> I shall arrive! What time, what circuit first
> I ask not: but unless God send his hail
> Or blinding fire-balls, sleet, or stifling snow,
> In some time — his good time — I shall arrive.

This spirited announcement of the youthful undertaking of Paracelsus contains thoughts that many readers too lightly pass over. One is too easily deceived by this young man's ardent words. One forgets that Browning is here but the dramatic poet, who does not mean us to take these tenders for true pay. As a fact Paracelsus is by no means as inspired as he fancies. Let us analyze the situation a little. Paracelsus has already gained, as he thinks, a very deep insight into the world. God is, and Paracelsus communes with him, directly, and in his own heart. Nevertheless, he must go somewhere, for years far away, to find — what? A new religion? No, Paracelsus is no religious reformer. A new revelation of God's "intercourse" with men? This is what he himself says. In fact, however, this "intercourse," from his point of view, concerns the cause and cure of human diseases. This is indeed a grave matter, and one for a long quest. But where would the medical student of that time naturally look for the path to be followed in this quest? The reply of course would be, "some one of Learning's many palaces." One would study the traditional medical art, and would then try to improve upon it as one could. But Paracelsus rejects this way altogether. Why? Because the immediate intuition, this direct revelation from God, shows him that not upon such traditional ways lies the goal. But if one communes thus directly with God, why not learn the secrets of the medical art at first hand, by immediate revelation, at home in solitary meditation, without wandering? This is the well-known way of some modern "mental healers." God speaks in the heart. Why try the desert and the sea-caves? Why wander through nature, looking for new remedies? The reply is that Paracelsus is a born empiricist, and cannot rest in his intuitions. They are vast, these intuitions, and immediate, but they are not enough. There is the whole big outer world, this storehouse of specimens of divine truth. One must see, feel, touch, try. In that way only can one learn God's will, and the art of healing.

Still one asks, with Festus, Did not the ancients, whom Paracelsus rejects, collect experiences in their own way? Could not one study facts wherever there are "learning's palaces" and sick men? Why wander off into the vague? If the world of experience concerns you, then, precisely as if you were a mere positivist, you need the coöperation of your fellows in your research. Why not then, like the modern ethical idealist of the Kantian type, accept the inner light as giving you ideals, but obtain also the outer world facts by the aid of public and common labors, researches, traditions? Why despise one's fellows in order to learn God's will?

Nay, our occultist must reply, just there is the rub. One wants the facts, but only as interpreted by the inner light; and the inner light, for an occultist, is not something rationally universal and human, like the insights upon which a Kantian idealist depends, but is the possession only of the favored few. One must therefore find out God's will all alone by one's self. One may accept no help from another's eyes, no coöperation from one's meaner fellows. At best the traditions of some far off occult lore, the secrets of unknown Oriental adepts, may be trusted as guides. This inner light of the occultist is something so personal, immediate, and precious, that one cannot believe it common to all mankind in case they only reason. Nor can one regard one's intuitions as concerning only a spiritual order, such as the natural world, being a merely phenomenal expression of man's limitations, fails to embody. One is too ardent an empiricist, and too impatient a mystic, to accept any human limitations at all. Thus then the occultist's view gets its definition. We have to take into account all the elements, the vast, immediate, private intuition, and the restless love of facts, in order to get this definition. The hard path before Paracelsus is the path of an endless collection of precisely the most novel and scattered facts of nature. Only such novel and scattered facts can be worthy of the attention of a person whose intuitions are private, immediate, and yet universal. One's intuition is that these facts somehow all belong together, as all the world is one. Therefore, the farther off, the more incoherent, the dimmer, the more "secret" the special facts, the better will they serve, when you find them, as examples of God's will; for God made them all somehow into his one world, to magnify his own power, to display his glory, to heal his suffering children. But how long the "trackless way," where indeed only God is to guide, because the entire search has no principle save the single intuition that God himself is great, and that therefore even the remotest things in time and in space are in his eyes one, since He made them, and must somehow secretly have linked them!

Here lies a sick man. What has caused his sickness? Perhaps something astral. The stars are linked to us by a divinely ordained sympathy. Astronomy is one of the "pillars of medicine." We must know the stars well, else we cannot judge about their effect upon diseases. What is best fitted to cure this patient? God of course has provided a remedy, and has left it lying somewhere in the world, — that vast world which is all one place for God, but which, alas, is so wearily big and manifold for us. The only way is to look with the eye of a trained intuition for some hidden sign, such as quite escapes the vulgar eye, whereby the remedy of this particular disorder may be recognized when you meet with it in nature. The divine kindliness has provided each of nature's remedies with a sort of sign or label. The flowers, the leaves, the fruits of remedial plants indicate by their colors, forms, textures, the particular diseases that they are fitted to cure. This was the famous doctrine of "signatures," of which the real Paracelsus made so much. But again, only the experienced man, taught at once by the God within and by his own eyes that restlessly look hither and thither without, can learn to recognize these signs, labels, remedies. The divine apothecary (the phrase is borrowed from the real Paracelsus himself) has marked, as it were, all these his natural medicine flasks — flowers, plants, minerals — with a certain sort of occult language, and has then left them scattered about the whole world. Only a wanderer can find them. Only a philosopher, taught of God direct, can read the labels, these cryptograms of nature. Hence this possessor of intuitions must ceaselessly wander; and this wanderer must ceaselessly depend only upon the inner light to guide him. Everything in the universe is connected with everything else. Hence "the mighty range of secret truths that long for birth." Mystic links bind man, the microcosmus, to the whole of nature, the macrocosmus. The physician must know these links in order to heal. Above all must he remember that everything in nature reveals, not so much itself, as something else. The world is all symbolic. God loves, in nature, to express himself darkly by signs, portents, shadows of truth. All these concern the philosophical physician, and they are, alas, so secret, so hard to read. God, who in the heart, speaks so plainly — well, in nature He hides himself in a mystic dumb show, and helplessly gesticulates like an untaught and enthusiastic deaf-mute. Such is the essential creed of any occultist. Here is a kind of doctrine that pretends, above all, to honor God; yet, as a fact, one who pursues this "trackless way" behaves as if the God of nature were a sort of Laura Bridgman, whom the occultist first teaches to talk intelligibly.

V. I have thus thought it right to insist upon certain characteristics of the real Paracelsus, whom Browning unquestionably had in mind as he wrote the passage the close of which has been quoted. I have dwelt long upon these characteristics because here lies the key to the whole poem. Browning has a certain deep personal fondness for the occultists. Their type fascinates him. He reads and portrays them often. Yet, on the other hand, he is never able, either in his youth, when he wrote this poem, or in later life, to share their doctrine. In "Paracelsus" he means to set forth their great defect. He often later returns to the problem. The same theme is treated in "The Strange Experience of Karshish." Karshish and Paracelsus are, to borrow the speech of the occultists, different incarnations of the same spirit. Browning admires the "picker-up of learning's crumbs," the mystic who pursues the occult all through the natural world. The error of the occultist lies in supposing that God is in this way revealed, or to be found. Browning's own opinion, as poet, has a close relation to ethical idealism.

For Browning, God is revealed within, not without, our own human nature. Therefore, and here is the main point of Browning's criticism of occultism, it is in our spiritual communion with one another, it is in our world of human loves, and even of human hates, that one gets in touch with God. When man really meets man, in love, in conflict, in passion, then the knowledge of God gets alive in both men. The true antithesis is not between the pure intellect and the affections; for your occultist is no partisan of the pure intellect. He, too, is in love, in mystical love, but with outer nature. Nor is the antithesis that between the scientific spirit and the spirit of active benevolence. Paracelsus, as one devoted to the art of healing, is from the first abstractly but transcendently benevolent. His is simply not the scientific spirit. The antithesis between "knowledge," as the occultist conceives it, and "love," as the poet views it, is the contrast between looking in the world of outer nature for a symbolic revelation of God, and looking in the moral world, the world of ideals, of volition, of freedom, of hope and of human passion, for the direct incarnation of the loving and the living God. The researches of the occultist are fascinating, capricious, — and resultless. It is the student of men who talks with God face to face, as a familiar friend. The occultist, peering about in the dark, sees, like Moses in the cleft of the rock, only God's back. The truly occult world is that where the lovers and the warriors meet and part. There alone God is revealed. Search as you will in the far East, in the deserts, in the sea caves, you will never find any natural object more verily occult than are his love's eyes to the lover. Browning's mysticism thus has always an essentially human object before it. He therefore sometimes depicts, with especial fondness, the awakened occultist, who has just learned where lies the true secret of our relations with God. So it happened with Karshish, —

> Why write of trivial matters, things of price
> Calling at every moment for remark?
> I noticed on the margin of a pool
> Blue-flowering borage, the Aleppo sort,
> Aboundeth, very nitrous. It is strange!

Here speaks the true occultist. But now there awakens in him, unrestrainable, the new insight, which the meeting with the risen Lazarus has suggested: —

> 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!"
> The madman saith He said so: it is strange.

It is the Christian mystery of the Incarnation that is here in question. But as we know, Browning was no literally orthodox believer, and the essential truth of Christianity was, for him, identical with his own poetical faith that the divine plan is incarnate in humanity, in human loves and in all deep social relationships, rather than in outer nature. A similar train of thought guides the half-conscious inspiration of the young David in the poem "Saul," as the singer of Israel feels after the prophecy of the Incarnation, and reaches it at last through a sort of poetic induction by the "Method of Residues." First, with all the fascination of the occultist, though with all the frank innocence of the untutored shepherd, David ransacks the whole natural world for God. As the youth is an optimist, he meets here indeed with no obstacles to his fancy; he is troubled by none of the natural mysteries that would baffle the more technical occultist; but still the story, even when most rapturously sung, when fullest of the comprehension of nature's symbolism, lacks the really divine note. God is somehow not quite revealed in all this. And hereupon David struggles, toils, pauses, hesitates, — and then, with one magnificent bound of the spirit, springs wholly beyond the world of the occultist to grasp at once the most transcendent of mysteries and the most human of commonplaces: —

> 'T is the weakness in strength that I cry for! my flesh that I seek
> In the Godhead! I seek it and find it. O Saul, it shall be
> A Face like my face that receives thee: a Man like 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!

It is by the light of this kind of poetic intuition of the true place of the divine in our world that Browning, in "Paracelsus," lets experience criticise the occultist.

VI. As the hero, therefore, of such a critical poem, Browning chooses a mystic of the Renaissance. This mystic's creed is, on the whole, that of the real Paracelsus, — a neo-Platonic philosophy of nature. The first of its main features, as expounded in the dying speech of Paracelsus, is Monism. God is not merely above all, He is through all nature; He is included in everything. Then there is the symbolism so characteristic of the whole doctrine. Every natural process has a mystic meaning. Everything is alive, and has relations to all other things. Further, man, as microcosm, is a copy in miniature of the whole universe. Hence, in order to understand man, as a physician must do in healing diseases, one must look about in all directions, without. Thus arises the need of an endless collection of special experiences, and hence also the constant need of deep intuitions in order to comprehend the maze of facts. Every speck expands into a star. Such a search means in the end madness and despair. As a fact, for Paracelsus, the stellar world is needed to explain all sorts of phenomena in the lower regions. This view, and the doctrine of "signatures," inspired all his work, — and poisoned the very life-blood of it.

Browning, too, had his own sort of mysticism. He also was a monist. But the poet makes his hero confess that he "gazed on power" till he "grew blind." Not that way lies the truth. He who gazes not on power, but on the "weakness in strength" of the human spirit, he alone finds the way to God.

In the course of the poem, Browning brings this occultist face to face with a spiritual opponent, who tries to show him the truth, and in part succeeds. This opponent is a typical, a universally sensitive, a thoroughly humane artist. The "lover" and the "knower" of the poet are thus explicitly the artist and the occultist. The doctrine that Aprile teaches is, first, that God is love, and, secondly, that the meaning of this doctrine is simply that God is the "perfect poet, who in creating acts his own creations." God, then, is related to his world as the true lover is to the desires of his own faithful heart, or as the artist is to his own inspired works. This is, indeed, mysticism, and it is neither for the young Browning nor for his characters any highly articulate theory of the world, — any technical philosophy. But it is certainly an intelligible and intuitively asserted doctrine as to hów to find the divine in experience. What it asserts is this: If you want to know God, live rather than peer about you; be observant of the moral rather than of the physical world; create as the artist creates rather than collect facts as the occultist collects them; watch men rather than things; consider the secrets of the heart rather than the hopelessly mysterious symbolism of nature; be fond of the most commonplace, so long as it is the commonplace in human life, rather than of the most startling miracles of the physical world; discover new lands in man's heart, and let the deserts and the sea caves alone; call nothing work that is not done in company with your fellow-men, and nothing true insight that does not mean work thus shoulder to shoulder with your comrades. All this, in substance, Aprile teaches; and this, and nothing else, is what he and Browning here mean by "Love." The parallelism with the later poems, "Karshish" and "Saul," is emphasized in a later edition of the "Paracelsus" by the lines added at the end of Aprile's dying speech: —

> Man's weakness is his glory — for the strength
> Which raises him to heaven and near God's self
> Came spite of it: God's strength his glory is,
> For thence came with our weakness sympathy,
> Which brought God down to earth, a man like us!

It is not the power of God as revealed in nature, but the love that in Him, as a being who is alive like us, links his perfect life to our striving, and lives in active and passionate sympathy; it is this alone which makes God comprehensible to us. For only in this attribute is He revealed to us. His other attributes are, in our present state of existence, hopelessly dark to us.

If this is true, then indeed the quest and the method of Paracelsus have been, in Browning's eyes, vain enough. Let us be frank about it. The heroic speech of Paracelsus consists of tenders and not of true pay. It is vainglorious boasting; and must be regarded as such. Or, to speak less bluntly, it is a pathetic fallacy. Paracelsus does *not* see his way as birds their trackless way. On the contrary, his instinct is false, and his way, before one reaches the very moment of his final dying enlightenment and confession, is a blind flight no-whither through the blue. God has no need to waste any hail or fire-balls on the case. Paracelsus is left to himself, and he does not arrive, except, indeed, at that very last moment, at the insight that another man ought to be formed to take his place. All this, from Browning's hopeful point of view, means no absolute failure. Our alchemist, amid all his delusions, remains a worthy tragic hero, devoted, courageous, indomitable, enduring, a soldier at heart. Even the wrath of man praises God, much more his misguided devotion. It is this devotion that to the end we honor even amid all our hero's excesses. But Paracelsus, as he is, is a sincere deceiver of his own soul, and, as far as in him lies, he is a blind guide of his fellows. Here, in the contrast between the truth that lies, after all, so near to his ardent spirit, and the error that is, despite this fact, so hopeless, is the tragedy. Were the truth not so near, the error, indeed, would not be so hopeless. Were the man not so admirably strenuous, he might be converted before his deathbed. He is no weakling, but a worthy companion of Faust. Yet just herein lies his earthly ruin.

VII. Let us now apply the central idea of the poem to its action in a brief review. Paracelsus the occultist aspires, bids farewell to his friends, and then sets out on his great quest. Years later we find him, older, but hardly wiser, at the house of the Greek conjurer in Constantinople, where he seeks magic enlightenment as to his future. The reply to his request comes in the shape of the sudden meeting with that mysterious figure, the dying poet Aprile, who has come to this place upon a similar errand after a life of failure. The two men meet, and, in the wondrous scene which follows, Paracelsus learns and, as far as his poor occult wit comprehends it, accepts the ideal of the poet, who "would love infinitely and be loved." The characters here brought into tragic conflict, the "lover" and the "knower," are the Artist and the Occultist. Both are enthusiasts, both have sought God, both have longed to find out how to benefit mankind. There is no clash of reason with sentiment. On the contrary, neither of these men is in the least capable of ever becoming a reasoner; both are dreamers; both have failed in what they set out to do. There is no contrast of "love," as Christian charity or practical humanitarianism, with "knowledge" as something more purely contemplative. Aprile is no reformer. He longed to do good, but as an artist; he longed to create, but as a maker of the beautiful. His ideal attitude is, in its way, quite as contemplative as is that of Paracelsus. This "knower" is a physician. This artist, with all his creative ideals, longs to "love" by apprehending the works of God as shown forth in the passions of man.

The real contrast lies in the places where the two men have sought for God, and in the degrees of strenuousness with which they have pursued the quest. The artist has sought God in the world of human passion, Paracelsus in the magical and secret places of outer nature. The artist has no cause to repent his choice of God's abode; God is, to his eyes, even too dazzlingly and obviously there in human hearts, lives, forms and deeds. The occultist has been baffled despite his labors. In strenuousness, Paracelsus has had by far the advantage. In this he is indeed the king. But had Paracelsus combined Aprile's ideals and powers with his own strenuousness, what a kingdom might by this time have become his! Such is the obvious significance of this wonderful scene.

Now let us attempt an explanation of the vicissitudes and of the degradation of our hero's later career. The dying legacy of Aprile to Paracelsus is the counsel not to wait for perfection, but to do what the time permits while life lasts. Accepting this counsel, but very dimly apprehending the meaning of the artist's ideal of "love," and falsely supposing himself to have "attained," where he had only vaguely and distantly conceived, the occultist now resolves to show his love for mankind in more immediate practical relations with them. The artist has counseled just such closer relations, and this is all that Paracelsus has been able as yet to comprehend. The result is the abortive life in the professorship in Basel. To Paracelsus the actual spirit of the dead Aprile seems after all to be unable or unwilling to do anything for him. One preaches occultism to his students, supposing himself to be acting in the sense of the artist who had counseled him to get nearer to men's hearts. But the words of these lectures sound hollow even to one's own ears, and so one is driven to "bombast." The few "crumbs" of learning, picked up through all those years of wandering, appear now as nothing to the mysteries still unlearned. One had not known, in fact, how small was one's store of collections until after he had burned the books of Galen and the rest, and then had actually begun to teach. One must now resort to boasting, charlatanry, melancholy, self-reproach and foreboding. The man is too ardent of purpose to admit in public his own defect, but too really noble of soul to tolerate in the least his own charlatanry. God is now indeed far off. The artist said that one found him best and most among living men. But in this lecture-room the poor occultist, peer as he will, can discover with certainty only a mass of fools. The most occult, the darkest, the most fearsome of all the arts turns out to be the art of pedagogy, — the one truly creative art whereby Paracelsus could have hoped to enter Aprile's world.

The inevitable downfall comes, and Paracelsus is driven from Basel. His indomitable temper wins our admiration even after we have learned the utter uselessness of all his magic arts. He now gives us a new version of Aprile's doctrine as he conceives it. In the song, "Over the sea our galleys went," he depicts the hopelessness of trying to come into close relations with men by the devices that are within his own reach. Unlike the real Paracelsus, he can be a poet, but not, like Aprile, an artist comprehending and depicting other men. In his chaos of excitement, in his lamentation over his failure, — yes, in his cups, one must add, — he can sing in verse his own tragedy, not the meaning of any life but his own. At length he seems to see the truth. What Aprile really meant must have been that a man must live, — a short life and a full one, in loneliness, in chaos, but at any rate in a whirlwind of passion. Thus alone can one learn to know. The occultist shall be joined now with the man of passion. Thus, once again, Paracelsus aspires.

An occultist must finish his days magically. From weary dreams and furious delirium the dying seer miraculously arises, full of seeming vigor and of cool insight, to tell to his friend what knowledge he has attained at this supreme moment. Now at last we do indeed learn the truth. Paracelsus has not "arrived" at what he sought, an earthly mission; but he now sees why he has failed. The old mystical monism was right; but as the seer depicts it before us, a new spirit has come into it. The story of the world is right as of old; but the artist alone had put the true interpretation upon it. Could the Paracelsus of former days but have understood in his time what love meant, could he but have known how all the waves and eddies of human passion, even when they seem farthest from the divine, reveal God as no object in outer nature, however wonderful, can ever do, — the occultist would not have aspired in vain! He would have been transformed, as the man of the future shall be, into the artist. This is the final message of Paracelsus, and the meaning of the whole tale.

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