BROWNING'S THEISM.
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A POET'S originality may be tested in two ways, — first, by observing the novelty of his various individual inventions; secondly, by considering the peculiar coloring that he has given to well-known and traditional ideas. For the rest, when we consider any man's originality, we commonly find that it shows itself rather more significantly in the manner than in the matter of his discourse, so that it is usually what I have just called the coloring of a man's work, rather than the material novelty of his imaginings, that concerns us when we try to comprehend his personal contribution to the world's treasures. Shakespeare wrought over earlier plays and stories; Sophocles and Æschylus re-worded ancient myths; the Homeric poems were woven out of a mass of earlier poetic narratives. Yet it was just the manner of doing this work which in each case constituted the poet's originality. Nor does one at all make light of human originality by thus calling it frequently more significant as to its manner than as to its matter. All truth concerns rather the form than the stuff of things; what we call the ideal aspect of the universe gets its very name from a word that means visible shape; and when we call truth ideal, we imply that shape is of more importance than material, and manner than mere content. The difference between man and the anthropoid apes, while it involves man's structure, is far more a difference in functions, i. e. in the manner in which certain physiological processes of movement go on, than it is a difference in anatomical constitution. Amongst men, a genius may have, for all that we now know, no more brain-cells than many a very commonplace fellow.

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It is the manner in which these cells function that gives us the genius. Civilization itself as a whole also turns upon recognizing that "good form," as it concerns the way in which you perform your act, is often of far more dignity than is the material act itself. We also often call this way of performance, in so far as the doer himself intends it, the spirit of the act. And every one now knows that charity does not mean giving all your goods to feed the poor, nor giving your body to be burned, and that unless the spirit, the deliberate manner, the sincerely meant inner form called charity, is in your act, then, whatever you do, you are as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

Manner, then, is not to be despised. Wisdom, virtue, and genius are all of them largely affairs of form and manner. By manner man differs most from monkey, civilization most from savagery, the original thinker most from the prosaic copyist, the great poet most from the weakling. On the whole, then, of the two tests just mentioned as helping us to estimate a poet's originality, the test furnished by his originality of style, of coloring, of form, of attitude, of treatment, even when he deals with very old ideas, is more likely to prove significant, in any given case, than is the easier test furnished by merely counting how many apparently unheard-of incidents, characters, or scenes he may chance to have invented.

In this essay I am to speak of an aspect of Browning's thought which had no insignificant place in determining his personal originality as a man and as a poet. This aspect concerns not any disposition on his part to invent new stories, plots, or people, but the fashion in which he treated the most familiar of religious conceptions, namely, the conception of God. I need not say that Browning as little invented any portion of that conception of God which he possessed as he invented the conception itself in its wholeness. Nor could he invent new arguments for God's existence: for those, if such inventions were any longer possible at all after all these ages of thinking, would concern the work of the speculative thinker; and Browning is not such a thinker, but is a poet. On the other hand, what a man can render to divine things, at the present day, is not his personal aid in inventing novel notions of their nature, but his individual attitude and manner of service, of exposition, of concern for the unseen world. When a man is as original as was Browning, his attitude and manner in respect of these divine things will have its own noteworthy and original type. And it is this and this alone which we desire to study when we consider Browning's Theism.

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I.

As we begin, a few words are necessary concerning the traditional conception of God, as historical conditions have defined it for the whole Christian world. The individual's way of viewing God can be estimated only when set off against the background of the current fashion of conceiving the divine nature. The word God is one of the earliest great names that we hear. The common lore concerning God is amongst the most familiar of the teachings of childhood and youth for most of us. Yet few of us ever pause to ask with any care whether this our traditional conception of God is derived from one source or from many, or whether it is a comparatively simple or an extremely complex idea. As a fact, the Christian notion of God, as the church has received, defined, and transmitted it, may be traced to at least three decidedly distinct sources, each one of which has contributed its own share to the formulation which has now become current in Christendom. The unlearned believer no longer distinguishes the elements due to each source; but part of the very consciousness of mystery which he feels, when he tries to think what God is, results from the fact that, in forming the Christian views of God, three great streams of opinion, as it were, have met, and the bark of faith, moving about over the dark waters at the confluence of these streams, is often borne hither and thither upon eddies and varying currents of opinion, whose manifold whirlings are due to the fact that these streams, as they come together, mingle the diverse directions of their flow in a very uncertain and unequal fashion. One of the greatest problems of technical Christian theology has in fact been to reconcile the seeming contradictions of the three tendencies to which our conception of God is historically due.

The first and best known of these three tendencies is what may be called the moral view of God, or, more technically expressed, the ethical monotheism of the prophets of Israel. Christianity, from the very beginning, enriched this ethical monotheism, added to it a deeper coloring, by especially emphasizing the doctrine of the love of God for the individual soul, and mingled with it the conception of the incarnation. But the doctrine, even as thus enlarged, is still essentially unchanged in character, and constitutes only one of our three streams of theistic opinion. As the prophets first taught the doctrine, so in essence it still remains. God is the righteous and loving ruler of the world.

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Ruler He is, so to speak, only as a mere expression of his perfected righteousness. His power is self-evident, and hardly needs argument. The explicit arguments of the original teachers of this faith concern in no sense the proof of God's existence, and only in a minor sense the demonstration of his power, which is everywhere assumed. What the original teachers of this faith aim to make clear is the meaning of God's righteousness, the law that embodies his will, and the genuineness of his love. Meanwhile, of his nature apart from these his ethical attributes, both the prophets and the earliest teachers of Christianity, in so far as they were free from foreign influences, have comparatively little to say. That little we all well know. God is One, for there is no god beside Him. God is personal, for only a person can will and love. He is conceived as sundered from the world that He rules; for the world contains evil, which opposes his righteous will. Moreover, He created the world, and one looks, upon occasion, as does the Psalmist, for signs of his wisdom in nature. But all these considerations centre in the one essential feature, namely, that God is righteous, and that He will prevail against evil and will love his own. Speculation as to the divine essence is in the background, and is even feared. Proof is needless. God has spoken. One has but to obey and to love. This, then, is the first tendency that has contributed to Christian theism.

But Christianity, ere it became a world-religion, had to meet the world in intellectual conflict. The world already had conceived of God, and had conceived him otherwise. Hence, in converting the world, Christianity had to mingle its primal thoughts with others. This process began very early, and the first mingling of Greek and Jewish thought had actually antedated Christianity. Accordingly, the second tendency which is represented in our modern conception of God is historically due, not to the faith of Israel, but to the philosophy of Greece, and, above all, to two thinkers, Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle himself was the first pure and explicit monotheist in the history of Greek speculation; but Plato had already contributed elements to philosophical thought which profoundly affected all the later theistic formulations, in so far as such formulations embodied the Greek tradition. The essence of the theistic doctrine that resulted from this source lies in the fact that God is conceived as the being whose wisdom, and whose rational perfection, self-possession, omniscience, and ideal fullness of intelligent and intelligible nature explain whatever is orderly, harmonious, rational and sig-

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nificant in the universe. If God, for Israel, is righteousness, and in the end love, for Greek philosophy he is primarily the truth, the self-possessed mind, the source of all designs, the ideally harmonious being in whose presence all things move, because all things aim to imitate by the lawfulness and beauty of their movements, his moveless perfection. The prophets of Israel know that God loves Israel. The Christian teachers insist that God loves the world. But in Aristotle's famous account it is rather merely the world that loves God because of his ideal perfection, while this very perfection is the assurance that God, as He is in himself, is above special concern for any finite end. In Him all ends are eternally attained, and in this sense He can indeed be called the Good. But, on the other hand, this his supreme goodness stands in strong contrast to the righteousness which was attributed to God by Israel. For Israel's theism, whose Deity, although sovereign, has to war with evil and unrighteousness, appears at first, in comparison with the Greek or Aristotelian theism, as a doctrine that stains the purely ideal fulfillment of the divine life by adding the notion that God hates, loves, strives with man, pities, and finally, in the Christian view, becomes incarnate. Here was the first great difficulty in the way of Christianity when it undertook to win over the world; here was what to the Greek was foolishness in the early Christian idea of God. The church boldly met the objections of the world by undertaking, from the first, to unite the theism of Greek philosophy with her own native ethical monotheism, — to assert that both views are true, and to conceive of God at once as ideally perfect, as ethically active, and as in Christ sufferingly incarnate. Hence the deeply paradoxical character of the Christian theology, — a character always openly avowed, but of a nature to insure endless controversy and heresy.

But a third element entered to deepen still further the mystery of the new faith. The Greek God of Aristotle is still in one aspect a personal God, for he not only possesses wisdom, but himself knows that he is wise. He does not strive, or war with ill, or pity his children, or die to save mankind, but he appears to be at all events self-conscious, and this character he shares with our own rational selfhood. But from the Orient, and perhaps also from sources independently Grecian, there had come still another view of the divine nature, — a view which is the parent of most forms of pantheism. In its earliest developed shape, this view appears as the classical doctrine of the most characteristic Hin-

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doo philosophy. According to this conception God, as he is in himself, is simply the One and only genuinely Real Being, the impersonal Atmân or Self of the Universe. The whole world of finite beings is more or less completely an illusion; for this world has not the grade of reality that God possesses. He truly is; all finite things are a vain show, — a product either of a mere imagination, or of some relatively non-essential process of emanation, or of divine overflow, whereby the all-perfect and all-real becomes the parent of a realm of shadowy half-realities, whose truth lies in him, not in themselves. Thus our third conception of God is closely linked to a denial of the substantial existence of both the natural and the moral worlds. God is conceived with such emphasis laid upon his supreme reality that one no longer says, "He rules," "He loves," "He fashions," or even "He knows," "He is conscious," — but rather, "He is, and all else is a dream." For wisdom, power, love, self-consciousness, and any form of definite personality, are predicates too human to express his inmost nature. He is above predicates, above attributes, or, as Meister Eckhart the mystic expresses it, the Godhead is "*ungewortet*," i. e. is above the meaning of all conceivable words.

Now this view of God's essence, derived as I have said from sources which are some of them Oriental, while others may have been independently Grecian, is a well-known and fruitful mother of the pantheistic heresies that the church has opposed. But the Christian faith has never been willing to miss any means of exalting the divine nature. As a fact, the church actually undertook not only to oppose, but also to assimilate, this third conception, and to unite it with the others, while always condemning as heresy any too great or exclusive emphasis that might be laid upon it. The result is a well-known Christian tendency which has again and again appeared both in Catholic and in Protestant mysticism. The reader of the "Imitation of Christ" to-day absorbs, often unwittingly, this Oriental notion of the divine nature, even while he thinks himself dealing with the incarnation of God in Christ. As a mysterious, esoteric, and only half-conscious motive, this faith that there is no real created world at all, but rather a mere hint of God's ineffable being in whatever you feel and see, — this sense of "One and all," of God as the only reality, of the visible universe as a vain show, of life as a dream, of evil as a mere illusion, of personality as a mistake, — has actually played a large part in the Christian consciousness. In its technical doctrine the theology of the church has often deliberately tried

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to reconcile this view of God both with the theism of Aristotle and with the ethical monotheism of Israel. How hard the undertaking, is obvious. And yet the modern man, if a believer, is likely to feel that in each one of these views of God's nature there must be some element of truth.

These three tendencies, then, — the ethical monotheism of Israel enriched by the doctrine of the incarnation; the Greek theism of Aristotle, for which God is the wise source of beauty and of rationality; the Monism of India, for which there is but one superpersonal Real Being in all the world, while all else is a mere vain show, — these are the three streams of doctrine whose waters now mingle in the vast and troubled estuary of the faith of the Christian church. It is towards the problems resulting from this mingling of ideas that the individual believer has to take his stand. And now what stand does Browning take?

II.

Browning is a poet who very frequently mentions God, and who a number of times has elaborately written concerning his nature and his relations to man. The arguments in question are frequently stated in dramatic form, and not as Browning's own utterances. Paracelsus, Caliban, David in the poem "Saul," both Count Guido and the Pope in "The Ring and the Book," Fust in the "Parleyings," and Ferishtah, are all permitted to expound their theology at considerable length. Karshish, Abt Vogler, Rabbi Ben Ezra, Ixion, and a number of others, define views about God which are more briefly stated, but not necessarily less comprehensible. On the other hand, there are the two poems, "Christmas-Eve" and "Easter-Day," which, without abandoning the dramatic method, approach nearer to indicating, although they do *not* directly express, Browning's personal views of the theistic problem. These poems are important, although they must not be taken too literally. Finally, in "La Saisiaz," and in the "Reverie" in "Asolando," Browning has entirely laid aside the dramatic form, and has spoken in his own person concerning his attitude towards theology. I do not pretend by this catalogue to exhaust the material for a study of Browning's theism, but as important specimens these passages may serve. As for the method of using them for the interpretation of Browning's manner of dealing with the idea of God, that method seems by no means difficult. Whether it is Browning himself or any one of his dramatic creations, whether it is Count Guido or the

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Pope, Caliban or Rabbi Ben Ezra, who speaks of the nature of God, the general manner of facing the problem is, on the whole, very characteristically the same, so far as the character in question proceeds to any positive conclusion, and that however various the results reached, or the personalities dramatically presented. This manner, identical in such highly contrasted cases, at once marks itself as Browning's own manner, and it is, as already observed, a decidedly original one, not indeed as to the ideas advanced, but as to points emphasized, the doubts expressed and the general spirit manifested. The road Godwards is for Browning the same, whoever it is that wanders over that lonely path or pauses by the wayside after obtaining a distant view of the goal, or traitorously abandons the quest, or reaches at last the moment of blowing the slughorn before the Dark Tower.

In all cases the idea of God and the problem of God's nature define themselves for Browning substantially thus: First, a glance at the universe, so to speak, at once informs you that you are in presence of what Browning loves to call Power. Power is the first of Browning's two principal names for God. Now this term Power means from the start a great deal. Browning and his theologizing characters, say for instance even Caliban and Count Guido, resemble Paracelsus in standing at first where at all events many men aspire at last to stand. Namely, this Power that they know as here in the world is not only One, real, and in its own measure and grade defined, so far as possible, as world-possessing, but it is so readily conceived as intelligent that, even when most skeptical and argumentative, they spend no time in laboring to prove its intelligence. The conception of mere blind nature as an independent and substantially real realm, hiding the God of Power, they hardly possess, or, if they possess such conception, a word suffices to set it aside. If, like Caliban, they work out an elaborate argument from design, as if it were necessary to prove the Creator's wisdom from his works, the argument is accompanied by a certain sense that it has either trivial or else, like David's survey of Creation, merely illustrative value. The God of Power *is*, and he means to work his powerful will. Hence he is never a mere Unknowable, like Spencer's Absolute. That is what one simply finds. That is fact for you whenever you open your eyes. In other words, Browning makes light of all those ancient or modern views of nature, nowadays so familiar to many of us, which conceive of mechanical laws, or of blind nature-forces, as the actually given and independently real causes of all our experi-

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ence. The dying John in the desert prophesies that there will hereafter come such views, but regards them as too absurd for refutation. Materialism, and other forms of pure naturalism, never became, for Browning, expressions of any definitely recognizable possibilities. Herein he strongly differs from the Tennyson of "In Memoriam." Equally uninteresting to Browning is Greek polytheism, whose powers are numerous, unless indeed one conceives these powers as the wiser Greeks did, and calls them mere aspects or shows of the One divine Nature. God as Power is thus in part identical with the Greek view of ὁ Θεός, or of τὸ Θεῖον, in so far as this divine was viewed as expressed in nature, and as only symbolized by the names of the various gods. The various gods of Greek polytheism have special interest to Browning only in so far as they reveal the other aspect of the divine nature, namely, the divine Love, as Pan revealed his disinterested love for Athens to Pheidippides, or else in so far as they are mere individual persons in a dramatic story.

In this conception of the God as Power, revealed as a perfectly obvious and universal fact, Browning combines, in an undefined way, that Aristotelian notion of God as the intelligent source of the world-order and that relatively Oriental faith in the One Reality, which we have already seen as factors in our Christian idea of God. For our poet, God as Power is One and is Real. Our knowledge that He is so is direct, is a matter almost of sense, and needs no special proof. Like Xenophanes, the early Greek monist, Browning simply "looks abroad over the whole" (for so Aristotle phrases the matter in the case of Xenophanes) and says, "It is One." This knowledge is a sort of easy and swift reflex action, on the poet's part, in presence of the physical universe. The directness of the insight resembles that of the mystics; but this is not, like theirs, as yet a comforting insight. For the God of mere Power is no humanly acceptable God. Meanwhile Browning, who so easily individualizes when he comes to the world of men, very readily sees all natural objects as mere cases or symbols of the universal Power; and so, whenever he theologizes, the natural objects quickly lose their individuality and lapse into unity as manifestations of the one Power, even while one continues, like David, to dwell upon their various beauties with enthusiastic detail. As we shall soon see, there does indeed arise a contradictory sort of variety and disharmony within the world of the One Power, but this is an inevitable afterthought. One means to view Power as One. So far then, our poet seems a

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Monist of almost Oriental swiftness in identifying everything with his One Power. The Pope, in "The Ring and the Book," does indeed give the argument from Power a somewhat Aristotelian definiteness of development, as a sort of design-argument: but the Pope is a technical theologian; and, for the rest, his restatement of the Aristotelian argument for God is cut as short as possible. The manifold and occult wisdom that Paracelsus seeks, as he runs about the world in search of strange facts, is not meant to prove, but to illustrate and apply, with restless empirical curiosity, the wonders of the divine unity. The designs, the exhaustless ingenuity, of the God of Power "obtain praise," as the "Reverie" in "Asolando" points out, from our reason, from the knowledge within us: but it is plainly not thus that we gradually acquire the notion of God; but it is rather thus that we merely exemplify, variegate, and refresh our direct sense that God is almighty.

As for the directness of Browning's insight into the presence of Power, this may readily be shown by quotations. "La Saisiaz" is to be a poem of explicit reasoning: —

> Would I shirk assurance on each point whereat I can but guess —
> Does the soul survive the body? Is there God's Self, no or yes?

The poet thus resolves to get definite mental clearness. But the first answer to his questions is a fair instance of the absolutely direct argument concerning Power: —

> I have questioned, and am answered. Question, answer presuppose
> Two points: the thing itself which questions, answers, *is* it knows;
> As it also knows the thing perceived outside itself, a force
> Actual ere its own beginning, operative through its course
> Unaffected by its end — that this thing likewise needs must be;
> Call this — God, then, call that soul, and both — the only facts for me.
> Prove them facts? that they o'erpass my power of proving, proves them such:
> Fact it is I know, I know not something which is fact as much.

In the "Reverie" in "Asolando" the soul, after its early and brief "surview of things," learns to say: —

> Thus much is clear,
> Doubt annulled thus much: I know.
> All is effect of Cause:
> As it would has willed and done
> Power: and my mind's applause
> Goes, passing laws each one,
> To Omnipotence, lord of laws.

To "pass" the laws of the physical world in this ready way — i. e.

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to make little of any study of the interposing nature, and to go direct to the highest in the realm of Power is very characteristic of this aspect of Browning's reasoning. It is in this fashion too, namely, by very quickly passing from one stage to a higher, that the Pope abbreviates his version of the argument for the divine wisdom. To be sure, Bishop Blougram, in his assumption of extreme skepticism, has to declare that "creation 's meant to hide" God "all it can." But even in his case, not natural law, but natural evil, is the veil that hides God. And he too admits that

> The feeblest sense is trusted most; the child
> Feels God a moment.

It is, therefore, not the brutishness of Caliban, but the very essence of the argument from the fact of Power, that leads Caliban to begin his theology with the directly stated thesis:

> 'Thinketh he dwelleth in the cold o' the moon.

One has not first to prove that Setebos exists. The only question for Caliban is as to where his lair is. On the other hand, far higher in the scale of being, the sense that the universe consists just of man and of this God of power may come over the soul of a sufferer with a pang all the keener because this sense of God's mercilessly potent presence is so direct. The love-forsaken heroine of the lyric "In a Year" closes with words whose sense the foregoing considerations may serve to make plainer:

> Well, this cold clay clod
> Was man's heart:
> Crumble it, and what comes next —
> Is it God?

God and the heart, we see, are the two and sole realities; crumble one, and only the other is left you.

I do not know that anywhere the otherwise so argumentative poet throws much fuller light upon this fashion of making clear God's existence. What Power does, many of Browning's characters very elaborately describe, according to their lights; but that the one Power exists, needs for Browning no fuller proof than the foregoing. Browning apparently is not, at any rate consciously, a Berkeleyan idealist, yet for him the existence of the God of Power is not only as sure as is the existence of one's own self, but is surer, and apparently more real, than is the existence of what we call the outer world, i. e. the world of nature.

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The young Browning, for the rest, was partly under Platonic influence in regard to the definition of the world of Power. This influence appears in "Pauline" and in "Paracelsus." But the influence was hardly that of a technical interest in Plato, and the neo-Platonic pantheism attributed to "Paracelsus" is transformed into a highly modern and romantic rhapsody, conceived after Renaissance models, but much in Schelling's spirit. The Greeks had first found their natural world real, beautiful, and mysterious, as well as obviously embraced within the unity of the celestial spheres. Hence the thoughtful Greek finally reasoned, but by slowly attained successive stages, that the world is both one and divine. His Gods gradually blended in the abstraction called τὸ θεῖον; his philosophical theories of nature slowly lost their early materialism; and thence he passed, next, to Plato's world of the eternal ideas, then to Aristotle's monotheism. But in Browning's view of the universe of power this whole Hellenic process is condensed, as it were, to a point, and blended with the monistic tendency that came into Christianity, through Neo-Platonism, from the East. Nature, for Browning's view, is swiftly surveyed, and seen to be wise and beautiful. Then nature is referred to one principle, — God as Power. This reference is an immediate intuition. Hereupon God as Power seems actually to absorb the very being of the natural world, and the result is so far pantheistic. The individual Self that observes all this remains, to be sure, still unabsorbed and problematic.

But now, in strong contrast to this first aspect of Browning's Theism, is a second aspect, and one which forms the topic of our poet's most elaborate reasoning processes. God as Power is grasped by an intuition. There is, however, another intuition, namely, that God is Love. This latter intuition, taken by itself, Browning can as little prove as the foregoing. What it means, we have yet to see. But its presence in the poet's mind introduces a new aspect of his doctrine. The difficulty, namely, that here appears, is the one which taxes every power of his reflection. The difficulty is: How can the God of Power be *also* the God of Love? Neither of the intuitions can be proved; neither is a topic of more than the most summary reasoning process. But the relation between the two intuitions is a matter worthy of the most extensive and considerate study. Moreover, to Browning's mind, herein lies the heart of our human interest in divine matters. Hence dramatic portrayals of even the basest efforts to make the transition in thought from the God of Power to the

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God of Love; even the dimmest movings of the human spirit in its search for the conception of the God of Love, — all these will be, in Browning's view, of fascinating interest.

But now what, from Browning's point of view, does one mean by speaking of God as Love? As I once tried to point out,[1] Browning uses the word Love, in his more metaphysical passages, in a very pregnant and at the same time in a very inclusive sense, — almost, one might say, as a technical term. Love, as he here employs it, includes indeed the tenderer affections, but is in no wise limited to them. Love, in its most general use, means for Browning, very much as for Swedenborg, the affection that any being has towards what that creature takes to be his own good. Paracelsus, in his dying confession, declares: —

> In my own heart love had not been made wise
> To trace love's faint beginnings in mankind,
> To know e'en hate is but a mask of love's,
> To see a good in evil, and a hope
> In ill-success; to sympathize, be proud
> Of their half-reasons, faint aspirings, dim
> Struggles for truth, their poorest fallacies,
> Their prejudices, and fears, and cares, and doubts;
> All with a touch of nobleness, despite
> Their error, upward tending all though weak,
> Like plants in mines, which never saw the sun
> But dream of him, and guess where he may be,
> And do their best to climb and get to him.

In brief, then, the totality of human concerns, on their positive side, all passion, all human life, in so far as these tend towards growth, expansion, increasing intensity and ideality, — all these, however rare their expressions may now seem, constitute, in us mortals, Love. Stress is laid, of course, upon this expanding, this positive and ideal tendency of love. This is the differentia of love amongst the affections. Content, sloth, indolence, hesitancy, even where these are conventionally moral states, as in "The Statue and the Bust," are cases of what is not love. Strenuousness, however, even when its object is the theory of the Greek particles, is, as in "The Grammarian's Funeral," an admirable case of love. Ixion loves, even in the midst of his wrath and anguish: —

> Pallid birth of my pain, — where life, where light is, aspiring
> Thither I rise, whilst thou — Zeus, keep the godship and sink.

If this then, in man, is love, what must it mean to say that

[1] In "The Problem of Paracelsus," the *New World* for March, 1894.

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God is Love? It must mean first, that there is something in God that corresponds to every one of these aspirations of the creature. Now this, to be sure, is so far what even Aristotle had in one sense said. For Aristotle declares that the world loves God, and that the world is thus moved to imitate — every finite being in its own measure — God's perfection. But, in Aristotle's conception, it is the world that loves; God is the Beloved. But now Browning plainly means more than this. He means that to every affection of the creature, in so far as it aims upwards, towards greater intensity and ideality, there is something in God that not only corresponds, but directly responds: —

> Thoughts hardly to be packed
> Into a narrow act,
> Fancies that broke through language and escaped,
> All I could never be,
> All men ignored in me,
> That I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

God's love for us, if it exists, must thus have not merely to aim at some distant perfection and heavenly bliss for us, but to find in our very blindness, suffering, weakness, inefficiency, — yes, even in our very faultiness, so far as it involves a striving upwards, — something that He met with appreciation, sympathy, care, and praise, as being love's "faint beginning" in us. God's love, in Browning's mind, does not mean merely or even mainly his tenderness or pity for us, or his desire to see us happy in his own arbitrarily appointed way, but his delight in our very oddities, in the very narrowness of our ardent individuality. It means his sharing of our very weaknesses, his sympathy with even our low views of himself, so long as all these things mean our growing like the plant in the mine that has never seen the light. If God views our lives in this way, then, and only then, does He love us. He must love us, at the very least, as the artist loves his creations, heartily, open-mindedly, joyously, not because we are all fashioned in one abstract image, but because in our manifoldness we all together reflect something of the wealth of life in which he abounds. This is the view of Aprile, never later abandoned by Browning.

Here, I take it, we have indicated the core of Browning's doctrine of the divine Love. But now how is this doctrine related to that of Christianity? The notion of God as Power was, we saw, a summary and blending of that Greek monotheism and Oriental pantheism which have always contributed their share to the

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theism of the Christian church. Browning's doctrine of God as Love, on the other hand, brings him, of course, into intimate contact with the remaining aspect of Christian theism, or with the more central and original portion of the faith of the church. Yet here, as appears of this central and original portion of Christian faith, only one article immediately and personally appealed to Browning himself. This article he selects from tradition for repeated and insistent illustration, at periods very remote from one another in his life. It is the doctrine of the Incarnation. God, according to the Christian faith, became man. To the significance of this doctrine, as Browning viewed it, the dying Aprile (in the revised edition of the "Paracelsus"), David, Karshish, and Ferishtah all bear witness, conceived by the poet as coming from the hearts of men who are *not* under the spell of the faith of the church itself. The dying John in the desert, the Pope in his meditation, give the same tale its more orthodox form: yet neither of these is merely reporting a tradition; each is giving the personal witness of a soul. Speaking more obviously in his own person, or at least under thinner dramatic disguises, the poet more than once returns to the topic. About this point long arguments cluster. It is an ineffable mystery. Could it be true? The poet very noteworthily loves to view this article of faith as if from without, as Karshish or as Ferishtah has to view it,—as an hypothesis, as something that might some time occur. Browning himself regards with an unpersuaded interest the historical arguments *pro* and *con* as to the authenticity of the Gospel narrative. It is noteworthy, moreover, that the incarnation has small connection, in his mind, with the other articles with which the faith of the church has joined it. The atonement, the death on the cross, have at all events a very much smaller personal interest for the poet, although they are mentioned in the two poems, "Christmas-Eve" and "Easter-Day." But it is the reported fact of the incarnation over which he wonders and is fain to be clear. Why this intense concern of an essentially independent intellect, which mere tradition, as such, could never convince? For Browning was certainly no orthodox believer.

The answer is plain. The truth of the doctrine of the incarnation, if ever it became or becomes true, must lie in its revelation of a universal and transcendently significant aspect of God's nature,—namely, the human aspect. God, the All-Great, if he is or can become human, is thereby shown to be the All-Loving too.

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Then one can see that He really *does* and so *can* contain an attribute that qualifies him to see the meaning of our every imperfection, and to respond to our blindest love with love of his own. To say God is Love is, then, the same as to say God is, or has been, or will be incarnate, perhaps once, perhaps — for so Browning's always monistic intuitions about the relation of God and the world suggest to him — perhaps always, perhaps in all our life, perhaps in all men.

So far, then, Browning's general attitude towards the manifold traditions of the Christian faith. So far his contrast between God as Power and God as Love. So far too his interest in what, if completely believed, would for him be the doctrine that would reconcile God as Power with God as Love.

III.

Let us turn next to a more special aspect of the conflict which these two conceptions of God undergo in the various cases where they are dramatically represented.

People who conceive God almost exclusively as Power are in Browning's account, in general, beings of a lower mental or moral grade. Such is the intolerant believer with whom Ferishtah argues in "The Sun." Such, more markedly still, are Count Guido and Caliban. On the other hand, sufferers in general, like Ixion, have of course this aspect of the divine nature emphasized in their experience, and are in so far pathetically blinded, unless, like Ixion, they escape from blindness by a supreme act of faith. The Greek, on the whole, also had to conceive of God merely as what Browning would call Power. But on this side Browning, as before pointed out, does not sympathize with the Greek. Browning prefers Euripides, partly because the latter had gone distinctly beyond what Browning would call mere power in his conception of the moral world, although he had not yet quite reached the Christian conception of the divine love. But now, as Browning portrays the thoughts of those who are disposed to exclude the conception of God as Love, there is one very noteworthy feature about certain of their arguments which, so far as I know, has escaped general notice. This feature lies in the fact that the God of Power, even before we learn quite positively to conceive him as the God of Love, sometimes appears to us, despite his all-real Oneness, as somehow requiring another and higher if much dimmer God beyond him, either to explain his existence or to justify his being. This contradictory and

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restless search for a God beyond God, this looking for a reality higher still than our highest already defined power, appears in several cases, in our poet's work, as a sort of inner disease, about the very conception of the God of Power, and as the beginning of the newer and nobler faith. The God beyond God is in the end what gets defined for us as the God of Love. The World of Power, despite all the monistic intuition, is inwardly divided, is essentially incomplete, sends us looking further and further beyond, until, as to David so to us, it occurs that what we are looking for is just the weakness in strength that the God who loves us face to face, as man appreciates man, would display.

The general idea of the God beyond God has considerable common human interest, quite outside of Browning. We find traces of such conceptions in many mythologies, in child life, and in the ideas even of some very unimaginative people. A writer on English country parish life narrated a few years since a story, according to which a clergyman, who had frequently condoled in a formal way with a steadily unfortunate farmer amongst his parishioners, and who had often referred in this connection to the mysterious ways of Providence, was one day shocked by the farmer's outburst: "Yes, I well know it was Providence spoiled my crops. It was Providence did this and did that. I hate Providence. But there's One above that'll see it all righted for me yet." This is an example of the Over-God.

Well, the God beyond God appears in Caliban's theology, very explicitly, as "the something over Setebos that made him, or he, maybe, found and fought." "There may be something quiet o'er his head." Caliban at one point develops the idea until it degrades Setebos to a relatively low rank; but thereupon he finds the attributes of "The Quiet" unworkably lofty, and devotes the rest of his ingenuity to Setebos. In far nobler form, Ixion rises from Zeus to the higher law and life beyond him. I have already mentioned David's use of a similar process in his gradual rise towards his wonderful climax. On the other hand, and for very obvious reasons, Augustus Cæsar in the poem in "Asolando," while he is celebrated by his flatterers and subjects not only as already the God of Power, but also as the proper dethroner of Jove, lives in the shadow of the fear of the Over-God that may any day make worm's meat of him. And meanwhile, Augustus reigning, Christ is born. John, dying in the desert, prophesies that in future, just because of this general problem of might beyond might, some will arise who will say that there is no Power

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at all in the universe, but only natural law. Both John and the poet obviously, as we saw, make light of this way of escape. The true significance of the striving beyond the God of Power is its tendency to bring us into the presence of the God of Love. I do not know whether it has often been consciously observed that herein lies at least part of the incomparable irony of that thrilling closing line of Count Guido's last speech. Guido has already fully explained his theology to the death-watch about him, stating, to be sure, a not altogether harmonious system of opinion. At one point he believes in a certain Jove Ægiochus, the ægis-bearer, as the one highest power — a belief not inconsistent, he says, with a reasonable polytheism. One needs powers beyond powers, for various reasons. The main concern for this dying wretch is to find out who is really the highest power in the universe, since he himself is badly in need of help. In a fashion that even in its ghastly burlesque, after all, suggests by its form the radiant flight of David through the glorious world of the higher powers, Guido now flees, but through his own bosom's hell, seeking for a power that one can somehow rest upon. He meets face to face more than once the God of his church, — a power more unacceptable and incomprehensible to him than the others. Hereupon he elaborately defies all Power. He has never taken the Pope for God. In heaven he never will take God for the Pope. But in vain: he falls helpless at last, and, even while he wrestles beneath hell's most overwhelming might, still, like Ixion, like Karshish, and like David, he conceives at last the Over-God, afar off, beyond the great gulf fixed; and this Over-God, mentioned in his final cry for help after all the powers, — after Grand Duke, Pope, Cardinal, Christ, Maria, God, — is Pompilia. At last, even from the depths of hell, even in the chaos of error, one has thus conceived of the God of Love, and thus Guido, too, learns the deeper meaning of the Incarnation. His cry is as heretical as the irony of his fate is bitter, but he at least has called on the name of what is beyond Power.

It is interesting to glance at the corresponding process occurring in a purely Grecian setting. I have already mentioned Euripides, as Browning viewed his position. Euripides, as exhibited in the Pope's statement of his faith, fails in some respects to conform to Browning's own categories; for our poet is here portraying an independent historical personality, whose way of approaching the ultimate problems is not precisely his own. But still the general parallelism is obvious. Euripides, so the Pope

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here tells us, recognizes Nature as the world of power. Nature, for Euripides, has unity, and somehow imparts this unity of the Eternal and the Divine to the doubtful and manifold world of the gods beneath. The gods, as symbols of this power, to which they have relations to us quite mysterious, are deserving of awe "because of power." Yet, on the other hand, man knows, through the witness of his own heart, a truth whose warrant is superior to that of this whole world of powers. "I," says Euripides, in this dramatic statement of his case, —

> I, untouched by one adverse circumstance,
> Adopted virtue for my rule of life,
> Waived all reward, loved but for loving's sake,
> And what my heart taught me, I taught the world.

This consciousness of the supremacy of virtue raises Euripides to the world where love is above power:

> Therefore, what gods do, man may criticise,
> Applaud, condemn, — how should he fear the truth?
> . . . .
> Thus, bold
> Yet self-mistrusting, should man bear himself,
> Most assured on what now concerns him most,
> The law of his own life, the path he prints,
> Which law is virtue and not vice, I say, —
> And least inquisitive where search least skills
> I' the nature we best give the clouds to keep.

Euripides, too, in his way, then, found the Over-God, and found him in the world of love, beyond nature, and yet within man's heart. It is this quality which Browning finds in Euripides, this beginning of a conquest of the realm of power in the interest of man, and in the quest for love that makes Euripides, in our poet's eyes, the chief of the Greek tragedians. Balaustion, at the close of her first adventure, retells, in this sense, the Alkestis legend. The conquest of death, the power of powers, by love simply as love, and not by any might, — this, Balaustion tells us, is the deeper ideal that Euripides has awakened in her own heart. In her narrative the death-goddess herself recognizes the Over-God in the person of Alkestis. This is the poem that Euripides meant, even if he could not quite make it. But the ideal story of the Alkestis, thus retold, comes very near in its significance to the tale that arouses the insistent wonder of Karshish. The raising from the dead of Alkestis or of Lazarus, — what matters the name of the tale, so long as it arouses afresh the thought to which the doctrine of the incarnation bears witness, the thought

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that, if ever we pierce through the world of Power to the heart of it, to that which is beyond Power, we find, as the Over-God, Love?

IV.

Such then, for Browning, the inner process whereby we pass from the conception of Power to that of Love. Some inherent restlessness forbids the partisans of Power to remain in their own realm. Their souls are always discontent with their own conceptions. They are themselves lovers, and to seek the sun is their destiny.

But the fully awakened lover, who conceives God as Love, is now, after all, in presence of his hardest trial. For if the God of Power has been thus always transformed into the God of Love, the God of Love remains responsible for all the horrors of the world of Power. The problem of evil looms up before one, the dark tower at the end of this long quest. What has the poet to say of this problem? How reconcile Love with Power in the world as we know it?

Already, in stating the meaning that Love has for Browning, we have indicated that love, which is so complex and paradoxical a thing, involves, from our poet's point of view, very much more than mere benevolence. In Shelley's "Prometheus," the war of Love and Power is depicted in terms such as in some wise appeal to Browning, as he himself has told us. But love, in Shelley's mind, means pure kindliness, benevolence, mutual toleration and a fondness for lovely objects. And so Shelley's only solution of the problem of Evil is simply that Eternal Love has unaccountably absented himself from the present world, leaving there, as reigning monarch, the Power-tyrant Zeus. Why love has done this is an absolutely inexplicable and capricious mystery. Some day, in an equally capricious fashion, Eternal Love is to return, and then, by a single magical act, he will hurl the tyrant headlong into the abyss. Henceforth the stars will sing, and Prometheus and the ladies will weave flowers and tell stories, and they all will live happy ever after. This is the essentially trivial thought that Shelley makes explicit in a poem whose wonderful beauty and true significance really depend upon something of which Shelley was unconscious, — namely, upon the eternal fact, richly though unconsciously illustrated by Shelley, that the world of the sufferingly heroic Prometheus Bound, the unconquerable lover, is actually far more significant and noble, despite Zeus the accursed, than is the later world of Prometheus the Loosed, as Shelley

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himself pictures it; namely, the world free from Zeus and devoted to agreeable society and to flowers, but with nothing whatever to do save to be petted, admired, and caressingly encouraged to tell Asia and Panthea how once upon a time he used to be a hero. The true moral of Shelley's "Prometheus" is that, in an ideal world of Love, we can indeed well get on without tyrants, but that we cannot get on without heroes, who must, as heroes, not only love but suffer; not only sing but endure; not only be kindly but be strenuous; not only wear flowers, but bear on their brows, upon occasion, the cold sweat of an anguish freely accepted for cause.

Now it is just this strenuous aspect of the significant life of love that Browning always consciously sees. Hence, when he tries to reconcile the world of Power with the world of Love, he does not, like Shelley, picture a solution in terms of mere benevolence and jollity. Both benevolence and jollity he praises, but they do not make the whole of Love. Love includes strenuousness; therefore the human lover must be often far from his goal, embarked on a dark quest, and so at war with Power. Love means triumph amid suffering, and so the fifty and more "Men and Women" must illustrate love's griefs and blindness quite as much as love's attainment. For the lover of the two lyrics, "Love in a Life" and "Life in a Love," the very power that holds him away from his beloved is consciously recognized as at one with the spirit of his love; for, as he declares, endless pursuit is the only conceivable form of endless attainment. If these things are so, then even the divine love itself must need for its fulfillment these struggles, paradoxes, estrangements, pursuits, mistakes, failures, dark hours, sins, hopes, and horrors of the world of human passion in which, according to our poet, the divine is incarnate. Perfect love includes and means the very experience of suffering, and of powers that oppose love's aims. Herein may — yes, must — lie the solution of the problem of Evil.

This general doctrine, for which our author's whole range of lyric poetry furnishes the illustration, is given an expressly theological turn, as suggesting the true and general reconciliation of the worlds of Love and Power, in a number of places. It is this view, as a justification of the ills of the world, that is stated by Abt Vogler, who prefers the musical metaphors known already to the Greek Heraclitus, and who declares that discord is essential to a perfect series of harmonies, and that the whole may be perfect even where the parts are evil. Rabbi Ben Ezra employs other

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figures, but expresses the same intuition. The poet himself is never content with the present life as showing us the sufficient solution of the problem; but he sees, in the world as it is, enough of love's faint beginnings in mankind to be sure that with more life more light would come, until we learned of God's love, not by getting rid of the world of dark Power, but by seeing in Power, as the opponent of Love, the source of that element of conflict, of paradox, of suffering, and of ignorance, without which Love — Love that is heroic in conflict, earnest with problems, patient in suffering, and faithful amidst doubts — could never possess the fullness of the divine life. That divine life, completed in God, incarnate in man, is much hidden from us by death, but is somewhere fully seen as good, when viewed in the light of the attainment and wholeness of the external world.

This appears to be Browning's theistic faith, — never a philosophy, always an intuition, but freely illustrated from experience, and insistently pondered through long and manifold arguments. By this faith he met, in his own way, the problems set before him not only by life, but by that extremely complex product of tradition, the Christian conception of God.

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