Robert Browning

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ROBERT BROWNING

CHAPTER I - BROWNING IN EARLY LIFE

On the subject of Browning's work innumerable things have been said and remain to be said; of his life, considered as a narrative of facts, there is little or nothing to say. It was a lucid and public and yet quiet life, which culminated in one great dramatic test of character, and then fell back again into this union of quietude and publicity. And yet, in spite of this, it is a great deal more difficult to speak finally about his life than about his work. His work has the mystery which belongs to the complex; his life the much greater mystery which belongs to the simple. He was clever enough to understand his own poetry; and if he understood it, we can understand it. But he was also entirely unconscious and impulsive, and he was never clever enough to understand his own character; consequently we may be excused if that part of him which was hidden from him is partly hidden from us. The subtle man is always immeasurably easier to understand than the natural man; for the subtle man keeps a diary of his moods, he practises the art of self-analysis and self-revelation, and can tell us how he came to feel this or to say that. But a man like Browning knows no more about the state of his emotions than about the state of his pulse; they are things greater than he, things growing at will, like forces of Nature. There is an old anecdote, probably apocryphal, which describes how a feminine admirer wrote to Browning asking him for the meaning of one of his darker poems, and received the following reply: "When that poem was written, two people knew what it meant--God and Robert Browning. And now God only knows what it means." This story gives, in all probability, an entirely false impression of Browning's attitude towards his work. He was a keen artist, a keen scholar, he could put his finger on anything, and he had a memory like the British Museum Library. But the story does, in all probability, give a tolerably accurate picture of Browning's attitude towards his own emotions and his psychological type. If a man had asked him what some particular allusion to a Persian hero meant he could in all probability have quoted half the epic; if a man had asked him which third cousin of Charlemagne was alluded to in Sordello, he could have given an account of the man and an account of his father and his grandfather. But if a man had asked him what he thought of himself, or what were his emotions an hour before his wedding, he would have replied with perfect sincerity that God alone knew.

This mystery of the unconscious man, far deeper than any mystery of the conscious one, existing as it does in all men, existed peculiarly in Browning,

because he was a very ordinary and spontaneous man. The same thing exists to some extent in all history and all affairs. Anything that is deliberate, twisted, created as a trap and a mystery, must be discovered at last; everything that is done naturally remains mysterious. It may be difficult to discover the principles of the Rosicrucians, but it is much easier to discover the principles of the Rosicrucians than the principles of the United States: nor has any secret society kept its aims so quiet as humanity. The way to be inexplicable is to be chaotic, and on the surface this was the quality of Browning's life; there is the same difference between judging of his poetry and judging of his life, that there is between making a map of a labyrinth and making a map of a mist. The discussion of what some particular allusion in Sordello means has gone on so far, and may go on still, but it has it in its nature to end. The life of Robert Browning, who combines the greatest brain with the most simple temperament known in our annals, would go on for ever if we did not decide to summarise it in a very brief and simple narrative.

Robert Browning was born in Camberwell on May 7th 1812. His father and grandfather had been clerks in the Bank of England, and his whole family would appear to have belonged to the solid and educated middle class--the class which is interested in letters, but not ambitious in them, the class to which poetry is a luxury, but not a necessity.

This actual quality and character of the Browning family shows some tendency to be obscured by matters more remote. It is the custom of all biographers to seek for the earliest traces of a family in distant ages and even in distant lands; and Browning, as it happens, has given them opportunities which tend to lead away the mind from the main matter in hand. There is a tradition, for example, that men of his name were prominent in the feudal ages; it is based upon little beyond a coincidence of surnames and the fact that Browning used a seal with a coat-of-arms. Thousands of middle-class men use such a seal, merely because it is a curiosity or a legacy, without knowing or caring anything about the condition of their ancestors in the Middle Ages. Then, again, there is a theory that he was of Jewish blood; a view which is perfectly conceivable, and which Browning would have been the last to have thought derogatory, but for which, as a matter of fact, there is exceedingly little evidence. The chief reason assigned by his contemporaries for the belief was the fact that he was, without doubt, specially and profoundly interested in Jewish matters. This suggestion, worthless in any case, would, if anything, tell the other way. For while an Englishman may be enthusiastic about England, or indignant against England, it never occurred to any living Englishman to be interested in England. Browning was, like every other intelligent Aryan, interested in the Jews; but if he was related to every people in which he was interested, he must have been of extraordinarily mixed extraction. Thirdly, there is the yet more sensational theory that there was in Robert

Browning a strain of the negro. The supporters of this hypothesis seem to have little in reality to say, except that Browning's grandmother was certainly a Creole. It is said in support of the view that Browning was singularly dark in early life, and was often mistaken for an Italian. There does not, however, seem to be anything particular to be deduced from this, except that if he looked like an Italian, he must have looked exceedingly unlike a negro.

There is nothing valid against any of these three theories, just as there is nothing valid in their favour; they may, any or all of them, be true, but they are still irrelevant. They are something that is in history or biography a great deal worse than being false--they are misleading. We do not want to know about a man like Browning, whether he had a right to a shield used in the Wars of the Roses, or whether the tenth grandfather of his Creole grandmother had been white or black: we want to know something about his family, which is quite a different thing. We wish to have about Browning not so much the kind of information which would satisfy Clarencieux King-at-Arms, but the sort of information which would satisfy us, if we were advertising for a very confidential secretary, or a very private tutor. We should not be concerned as to whether the tutor were descended from an Irish king, but we should still be really concerned about his extraction, about what manner of people his had been for the last two or three generations. This is the most practical duty of biography, and this is also the most difficult. It is a great deal easier to hunt a family from tombstone to tombstone back to the time of Henry II. than to catch and realise and put upon paper that most nameless and elusive of all things--social tone.

It will be said immediately, and must as promptly be admitted, that we could find a biographical significance in any of these theories if we looked for it. But it is, indeed, the sin and snare of biographers that they tend to see significance in everything; characteristic carelessness if their hero drops his pipe, and characteristic carefulness if he picks it up again. It is true, assuredly, that all the three races above named could be connected with Browning's personality. If we believed, for instance, that he really came of a race of mediæval barons, we should say at once that from them he got his pre-eminent spirit of battle: we should be right, for every line in his stubborn soul and his erect body did really express the fighter; he was always contending, whether it was with a German theory about the Gnostics, or with a stranger who elbowed his wife in a crowd. Again, if we had decided that he was a Jew, we should point out how absorbed he was in the terrible simplicity of monotheism: we should be right, for he was so absorbed. Or again, in the case even of the negro fancy; it would not be difficult for us to suggest a love of colour, a certain mental gaudiness, a pleasure

"When reds and blues were indeed red and blue,"

as he says in The Ring and the Book. We should be right; for there really was in Browning a tropical violence of taste, an artistic scheme compounded as it were, of orchids and cockatoos, which, amid our cold English poets, seems scarcely European. All this is extremely fascinating; and it may be true. But, as has above been suggested, here comes in the great temptation of this kind of work, the noble temptation to see too much in everything. The biographer can easily see a personal significance in these three hypothetical nationalities. But is there in the world a biographer who could lay his hand upon his heart and say that he would not have seen as much significance in any three other nationalities? If Browning's ancestors had been Frenchmen, should we not have said that it was from them doubtless that he inherited that logical agility which marks him among English poets? If his grandfather had been a Swede, should we not have said that the old sea-roving blood broke out in bold speculation and insatiable travel? If his great-aunt had been a Red Indian, should we not have said that only in the Ojibways and the Blackfeet do we find the Browning fantasticality combined with the Browning stoicism? This over-readiness to seize hints is an inevitable part of that secret hero-worship which is the heart of biography. The lover of great men sees signs of them long before they begin to appear on the earth, and, like some old mythological chronicler, claims as their heralds the storms and the falling stars.

A certain indulgence must therefore be extended to the present writer if he declines to follow that admirable veteran of Browning study, Dr. Furnivall, into the prodigious investigations which he has been conducting into the condition of the Browning family since the beginning of the world. For his last discovery, the descent of Browning from a footman in the service of a country magnate, there seems to be suggestive, though not decisive evidence. But Browning's descent from barons, or Jews, or lackeys, or black men, is not the main point touching his family. If the Brownings were of mixed origin, they were so much the more like the great majority of English middle-class people. It is curious that the romance of race should be spoken of as if it were a thing peculiarly aristocratic; that admiration for rank, or interest in family, should mean only interest in one not very interesting type of rank and family. The truth is that aristocrats exhibit less of the romance of pedigree than any other people in the world. For since it is their principle to marry only within their own class and mode of life, there is no opportunity in their case for any of the more interesting studies in heredity; they exhibit almost the unbroken uniformity of the lower animals. It is in the middle classes that we find the poetry of genealogy; it is the suburban grocer standing at his shop door whom some wild dash of Eastern or Celtic blood may drive suddenly to a whole holiday or a crime. Let us admit then, that it is true that these legends of the Browning family have every abstract possibility. But it is a far more cogent and apposite truth that if a man had knocked at the door of every house in the street where Browning was born, he would have found similar legends in all of them. There is hardly a family in Camberwell that has not a story

or two about foreign marriages a few generations back; and in all this the Brownings are simply a typical Camberwell family. The real truth about Browning and men like him can scarcely be better expressed than in the words of that very wise and witty story, Kingsley's Water Babies, in which the pedigree of the Professor is treated in a manner which is an excellent example of the wild common sense of the book. "His mother was a Dutch woman, and therefore she was born at Curaçoa (of course, you have read your geography and therefore know why), and his father was a Pole, and therefore he was brought up at Petropaulowski (of course, you have learnt your modern politics, and therefore know why), but for all that he was as thorough an Englishman as ever coveted his neighbour's goods."

It may be well therefore to abandon the task of obtaining a clear account of Brownings family, and endeavour to obtain, what is much more important, a clear account of his home. For the great central and solid fact, which these heraldic speculations tend inevitably to veil and confuse, is that Browning was a thoroughly typical Englishman of the middle class. He may have had alien blood, and that alien blood, by the paradox we have observed, may have made him more characteristically a native. A phase, a fancy, a metaphor may or may not have been born of eastern or southern elements, but he was, without any question at all, an Englishman of the middle class. Neither all his liberality nor all his learning ever made him anything but an Englishman of the middle class. He expanded his intellectual tolerance until it included the anarchism of Fifine at the Fair and the blasphemous theology of Caliban; but he remained himself an Englishman of the middle class. He pictured all the passions of the earth since the Fall, from the devouring amorousness of Time's Revenges to the despotic fantasy of Instans Tyrannus; but he remained himself an Englishman of the middle class. The moment that he came in contact with anything that was slovenly, anything that was lawless, in actual life, something rose up in him, older than any opinions, the blood of generations of good men. He met George Sand and her poetical circle and hated it, with all the hatred of an old city merchant for the irresponsible life. He met the Spiritualists and hated them, with all the hatred of the middle class for borderlands and equivocal positions and playing with fire. His intellect went upon bewildering voyages, but his soul walked in a straight road. He piled up the fantastic towers of his imagination until they eclipsed the planets; but the plan of the foundation on which he built was always the plan of an honest English house in Camberwell. He abandoned, with a ceaseless intellectual ambition, every one of the convictions of his class; but he carried its prejudices into eternity.

It is then of Browning as a member of the middle class, that we can speak with the greatest historical certainty; and it is his immediate forebears who present the real interest to us. His father, Robert Browning, was a man of great delicacy of

taste, and to all appearance of an almost exaggerated delicacy of conscience. Every glimpse we have of him suggests that earnest and almost worried kindliness which is the mark of those to whom selfishness, even justifiable selfishness, is really a thing difficult or impossible. In early life Robert Browning senior was placed by his father (who was apparently a father of a somewhat primitive, not to say barbaric, type) in an important commercial position in the West Indies. He threw up the position however, because it involved him in some recognition of slavery. Whereupon his unique parent, in a transport of rage, not only disinherited him and flung him out of doors, but by a superb stroke of humour, which stands alone in the records of parental ingenuity, sent him in a bill for the cost of his education. About the same time that he was suffering for his moral sensibility he was also disturbed about religious matters, and he completed his severance from his father by joining a dissenting sect. He was, in short, a very typical example of the serious middle-class man of the Wilberforce period, a man to whom duty was all in all, and who would revolutionise an empire or a continent for the satisfaction of a single moral scruple. Thus, while he was Puritan at the core, not the ruthless Puritan of the seventeenth, but the humanitarian Puritan of the eighteenth century, he had upon the surface all the tastes and graces of a man of culture. Numerous accomplishments of the lighter kind, such as drawing and painting in water colours, he possessed; and his feeling for many kinds of literature was fastidious and exact. But the whole was absolutely redolent of the polite severity of the eighteenth century. He lamented his son's early admiration for Byron, and never ceased adjuring him to model himself upon Pope.

He was, in short, one of the old-fashioned humanitarians of the eighteenth century, a class which we may or may not have conquered in moral theory, but which we most certainly have not conquered in moral practice. Robert Browning senior destroyed all his fortunes in order to protest against black slavery; white slavery may be, as later economists tell us, a thing infinitely worse, but not many men destroy their fortunes in order to protest against it. The ideals of the men of that period appear to us very unattractive; to them duty was a kind of chilly sentiment. But when we think what they did with those cold ideals, we can scarcely feel so superior. They uprooted the enormous Upas of slavery, the tree that was literally as old as the race of man. They altered the whole face of Europe with their deductive fancies. We have ideals that are really better, ideals of passion, of mysticism, of a sense of the youth and adventurousness of the earth; but it will be well for us if we achieve as much by our frenzy as they did by their delicacies. It scarcely seems as if we were as robust in our very robustness as they were robust in their sensibility.

Robert Browning's mother was the daughter of William Wiedermann, a German merchant settled in Dundee, and married to a Scotch wife. One of the poet's

principal biographers has suggested that from this union of the German and Scotch, Browning got his metaphysical tendency; it is possible; but here again we must beware of the great biographical danger of making mountains out of molehills. What Browning's mother unquestionably did give to him, was in the way of training--a very strong religious habit, and a great belief in manners. Thomas Carlyle called her "the type of a Scottish gentlewoman," and the phrase has a very real significance to those who realise the peculiar condition of Scotland, one of the very few European countries where large sections of the aristocracy are Puritans; thus a Scottish gentlewoman combines two descriptions of dignity at the same time. Little more is known of this lady except the fact that after her death Browning could not bear to look at places where she had walked.

Browning's education in the formal sense reduces itself to a minimum. In very early boyhood he attended a species of dame-school, which, according to some of his biographers, he had apparently to leave because he was too clever to be tolerable. However this may be, he undoubtedly went afterwards to a school kept by Mr. Ready, at which again he was marked chiefly by precocity. But the boy's education did not in truth take place at any systematic seat of education; it took place in his own home, where one of the quaintest and most learned and most absurdly indulgent of fathers poured out in an endless stream fantastic recitals from the Greek epics and mediæval chronicles. If we test the matter by the test of actual schools and universities, Browning will appear to be almost the least educated man in English literary history. But if we test it by the amount actually learned, we shall think that he was perhaps the most educated man that ever lived; that he was in fact, if anything, overeducated. In a spirited poem he has himself described how, when he was a small child, his father used to pile up chairs in the drawing-room and call them the city of Troy. Browning came out of the home crammed with all kinds of knowledge--knowledge about the Greek poets, knowledge about the Provençal Troubadours, knowledge about the Jewish Rabbis of the Middle Ages. But along with all this knowledge he carried one definite and important piece of ignorance, an ignorance of the degree to which such knowledge was exceptional. He was no spoilt and self-conscious child, taught to regard himself as clever. In the atmosphere in which he lived learning was a pleasure, and a natural pleasure, like sport or wine. He had in it the pleasure of some old scholar of the Renascence, when grammar itself was as fresh as the flowers of spring. He had no reason to suppose that every one did not join in so admirable a game. His sagacious destiny, while giving him knowledge of everything else, left him in ignorance of the ignorance of the world.

Of his boyish days scarcely any important trace remains, except a kind of diary which contains under one date the laconic statement, "Married two wives this morning." The insane ingenuity of the biographer would be quite capable of seeing in this a most suggestive foreshadowing of the sexual dualism which is so

ably defended in Fifine at the Fair. A great part of his childhood was passed in the society of his only sister Sariana; and it is a curious and touching fact that with her also he passed his last days. From his earliest babyhood he seems to have lived in a more or less stimulating mental atmosphere; but as he emerged into youth he came under great poetic influences, which made his father's classical poetic tradition look for the time insipid. Browning began to live in the life of his own age.

As a young man he attended classes at University College; beyond this there is little evidence that he was much in touch with intellectual circles outside that of his own family. But the forces that were moving the literary world had long passed beyond the merely literary area. About the time of Browning's boyhood a very subtle and profound change was beginning in the intellectual atmosphere of such homes as that of the Brownings. In studying the careers of great men we tend constantly to forget that their youth was generally passed and their characters practically formed in a period long previous to their appearance in history. We think of Milton, the Restoration Puritan, and forget that he grew up in the living shadow of Shakespeare and the full summer of the Elizabethan drama. We realise Garibaldi as a sudden and almost miraculous figure rising about fifty years ago to create the new Kingdom of Italy, and we forget that he must have formed his first ideas of liberty while hearing at his father's dinner-table that Napoleon was the master of Europe. Similarly, we think of Browning as the great Victorian poet, who lived long enough to have opinions on Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill, and forget that as a young man he passed a bookstall and saw a volume ticketed "Mr. Shelley's Atheistic Poem," and had to search even in his own really cultivated circle for some one who could tell him who Mr. Shelley was. Browning was, in short, born in the afterglow of the great Revolution.

The French Revolution was at root a thoroughly optimistic thing. It may seem strange to attribute optimism to anything so destructive; but, in truth, this particular kind of optimism is inevitably, and by its nature, destructive. The great dominant idea of the whole of that period, the period before, during, and long after the Revolution, is the idea that man would by his nature live in an Eden of dignity, liberty and love, and that artificial and decrepit systems are keeping him out of that Eden. No one can do the least justice to the great Jacobins who does not realise that to them breaking the civilisation of ages was like breaking the cords of a treasure-chest. And just as for more than a century great men had dreamed of this beautiful emancipation, so the dream began in the time of Keats and Shelley to creep down among the dullest professions and the most prosaic classes of society. A spirit of revolt was growing among the young of the middle classes, which had nothing at all in common with the complete and pessimistic revolt against all things in heaven or earth, which has been fashionable among the young in more recent times. The Shelleyan enthusiast was altogether on the

side of existence; he thought that every cloud and clump of grass shared his strict republican orthodoxy. He represented, in short, a revolt of the normal against the abnormal; he found himself, so to speak, in the heart of a wholly topsy-turvy and blasphemous state of things, in which God was rebelling against Satan. There began to arise about this time a race of young men like Keats, members of a not highly cultivated middle class, and even of classes lower, who felt in a hundred ways this obscure alliance with eternal things against temporal and practical ones, and who lived on its imaginative delight. They were a kind of furtive universalist; they had discovered the whole cosmos, and they kept the whole cosmos a secret. They climbed up dark stairs to meagre garrets, and shut themselves in with the gods. Numbers of the great men, who afterwards illuminated the Victorian era, were at this time living in mean streets in magnificent daydreams. Ruskin was solemnly visiting his solemn suburban aunts; Dickens was going to and fro in a blacking factory; Carlyle, slightly older, was still lingering on a poor farm in Dumfriesshire; Keats had not long become the assistant of the country surgeon when Browning was a boy in Camberwell. On all sides there was the first beginning of the æsthetic stir in the middle classes which expressed itself in the combination of so many poetic lives with so many prosaic livelihoods. It was the age of inspired office-boys.

Browning grew up, then, with the growing fame of Shelley and Keats, in the atmosphere of literary youth, fierce and beautiful, among new poets who believed in a new world. It is important to remember this, because the real Browning was a quite different person from the grim moralist and metaphysician who is seen through the spectacles of Browning Societies and University Extension Lecturers. Browning was first and foremost a poet, a man made to enjoy all things visible and invisible, a priest of the higher passions. The misunderstanding that has supposed him to be other than poetical, because his form was often fanciful and abrupt, is really different from the misunderstanding which attaches to most other poets. The opponents of Victor Hugo called him a mere windbag; the opponents of Shakespeare called him a buffoon. But the admirers of Hugo and Shakespeare at least knew better. Now the admirers and opponents of Browning alike make him out to be a pedant rather than a poet. The only difference between the Browningite and the anti-Browningite, is that the second says he was not a poet but a mere philosopher, and the first says he was a philosopher and not a mere poet. The admirer disparages poetry in order to exalt Browning; the opponent exalts poetry in order to disparage Browning; and all the time Browning himself exalted poetry above all earthly things, served it with single-hearted intensity, and stands among the few poets who hardly wrote a line of anything else.

The whole of the boyhood and youth of Robert Browning has as much the quality of pure poetry as the boyhood and youth of Shelley. We do not find in it any trace

of the analytical Browning who is believed in by learned ladies and gentlemen. How indeed would such sympathisers feel if informed that the first poems that Browning wrote in a volume called Incondita were noticed to contain the fault of "too much splendour of language and too little wealth of thought"? They were indeed Byronic in the extreme, and Browning in his earlier appearances in society presents himself in quite a romantic manner. Macready, the actor, wrote of him: "He looks and speaks more like a young poet than any one I have ever seen." A picturesque tradition remains that Thomas Carlyle, riding out upon one of his solitary gallops necessitated by his physical sufferings, was stopped by one whom he described as a strangely beautiful youth, who poured out to him without preface or apology his admiration for the great philosopher's works. Browning at this time seems to have left upon many people this impression of physical charm. A friend who attended University College with him says: "He was then a bright handsome youth with long black hair falling over his shoulders." Every tale that remains of him in connection with this period asserts and reasserts the completely romantic spirit by which he was then possessed. He was fond, for example, of following in the track of gipsy caravans, far across country, and a song which he heard with the refrain, "Following the Queen of the Gipsies oh!" rang in his ears long enough to express itself in his soberer and later days in that splendid poem of the spirit of escape and Bohemianism, The Flight of the Duchess. Such other of these early glimpses of him as remain, depict him as striding across Wimbledon Common with his hair blowing in the wind, reciting aloud passages from Isaiah, or climbing up into the elms above Norwood to look over London by night. It was when looking down from that suburban eyrie over the whole confounding labyrinth of London that he was filled with that great irresponsible benevolence which is the best of the joys of youth, and conceived the idea of a perfectly irresponsible benevolence in the first plan of Pippa Passes. At the end of his father's garden was a laburnum "heavy with its weight of gold," and in the tree two nightingales were in the habit of singing against each other, a form of competition which, I imagine, has since become less common in Camberwell. When Browning as a boy was intoxicated with the poetry of Shelley and Keats, he hypnotised himself into something approaching to a positive conviction that these two birds were the spirits of the two great poets who had settled in a Camberwell garden, in order to sing to the only young gentleman who really adored and understood them. This last story is perhaps the most typical of the tone common to all the rest; it would be difficult to find a story which across the gulf of nearly eighty years awakens so vividly a sense of the sumptuous folly of an intellectual boyhood. With Browning, as with all true poets, passion came first and made intellectual expression, the hunger for beauty making literature as the hunger for bread made a plough. The life he lived in those early days was no life of dull application; there was no poet whose youth was so young. When he was full of years and fame, and delineating in great epics the beauty and horror of the romance of southern Europe, a young man, thinking to please him, said,

"There is no romance now except in Italy." "Well," said Browning, "I should make an exception of Camberwell."

Such glimpses will serve to indicate the kind of essential issue that there was in the nature of things between the generation of Browning and the generation of his father. Browning was bound in the nature of things to become at the outset Byronic, and Byronism was not, of course, in reality so much a pessimism about civilised things as an optimism about savage things. This great revolt on behalf of the elemental which Keats and Shelley represented was bound first of all to occur. Robert Browning junior had to be a part of it, and Robert Browning senior had to go back to his water colours and the faultless couplets of Pope with the full sense of the greatest pathos that the world contains, the pathos of the man who has produced something that he cannot understand.

The earliest works of Browning bear witness, without exception, to this ardent and somewhat sentimental evolution. Pauline appeared anonymously in 1833. It exhibits the characteristic mark of a juvenile poem, the general suggestion that the author is a thousand years old. Browning calls it a fragment of a confession; and Mr. Johnson Fox, an old friend of Browning's father, who reviewed it for Tait's Magazine, said, with truth, that it would be difficult to find anything more purely confessional. It is the typical confession of a boy laying bare all the spiritual crimes of infidelity and moral waste, in a state of genuine ignorance of the fact that every one else has committed them. It is wholesome and natural for youth to go about confessing that the grass is green, and whispering to a priest hoarsely that it has found a sun in heaven. But the records of that particular period of development, even when they are as ornate and beautiful as Pauline, are not necessarily or invariably wholesome reading. The chief interest of Pauline, with all its beauties, lies in a certain almost humorous singularity, the fact that Browning, of all people, should have signalised his entrance into the world of letters with a poem which may fairly be called morbid. But this is a morbidity so general and recurrent that it may be called in a contradictory phrase a healthy morbidity; it is a kind of intellectual measles. No one of any degree of maturity in reading Pauline will be quite so horrified at the sins of the young gentleman who tells the story as he seems to be himself. It is the utterance of that bitter and heartrending period of youth which comes before we realise the one grand and logical basis of all optimism--the doctrine of original sin. The boy at this stage being an ignorant and inhuman idealist, regards all his faults as frightful secret malformations, and it is only later that he becomes conscious of that large and beautiful and benignant explanation that the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. That Browning, whose judgment on his own work was one of the best in the world, took this view of Pauline in after years is quite obvious. He displayed a very manly and unique capacity of really laughing at his own work without being in the least ashamed of it. "This," he said of Pauline, "is

the only crab apple that remains of the shapely tree of life in my fool's paradise." It would be difficult to express the matter more perfectly. Although Pauline was published anonymously, its authorship was known to a certain circle, and Browning began to form friendships in the literary world. He had already become acquainted with two of the best friends he was ever destined to have, Alfred Domett, celebrated in "The Guardian Angel" and "Waring," and his cousin Silverthorne, whose death is spoken of in one of the most perfect lyrics in the English language, Browning's "May and Death." These were men of his own age, and his manner of speaking of them gives us many glimpses into that splendid world of comradeship which. Plato and Walt Whitman knew, with its endless days and its immortal nights. Browning had a third friend destined to play an even greater part in his life, but who belonged to an older generation and a statelier school of manners and scholarship. Mr. Kenyon was a schoolfellow of Browning's father, and occupied towards his son something of the position of an irresponsible uncle. He was a rotund, rosy old gentleman, fond of comfort and the courtesies of life, but fond of them more for others, though much for himself. Elizabeth Barrett in after years wrote of "the brightness of his carved speech," which would appear to suggest that he practised that urbane and precise order of wit which was even then old-fashioned. Yet, notwithstanding many talents of this kind, he was not so much an able man as the natural friend and equal of able men.

Browning's circle of friends, however, widened about this time in all directions. One friend in particular he made, the Comte de Ripert-Monclar, a French Royalist with whom he prosecuted with renewed energy his studies in the mediæval and Renaissance schools of philosophy. It was the Count who suggested that Browning should write a poetical play on the subject of Paracelsus. After reflection, indeed, the Count retracted this advice on the ground that the history of the great mystic gave no room for love. Undismayed by this terrible deficiency, Browning caught up the idea with characteristic enthusiasm, and in 1835 appeared the first of his works which he himself regarded as representative--Paracelsus. The poem shows an enormous advance in technical literary power; but in the history of Browning's mind it is chiefly interesting as giving an example of a peculiarity which clung to him during the whole of his literary life, an intense love of the holes and corners of history. Fifty-two years afterwards he wrote Parleyings with certain Persons of Importance in their Day, the last poem published in his lifetime; and any reader of that remarkable work will perceive that the common characteristic of all these persons is not so much that they were of importance in their day as that they are of no importance in ours. The same eccentric fastidiousness worked in him as a young man when he wrote Paracelsus and Sordello. Nowhere in Browning's poetry can we find any very exhaustive study of any of the great men who are the favourites of the poet and moralist. He has written about philosophy and ambition and music and morals,

but he has written nothing about Socrates or Cæsar or Napoleon, or Beethoven or Mozart, or Buddha or Mahomet. When he wishes to describe a political ambition he selects that entirely unknown individual, King Victor of Sardinia. When he wishes to express the most perfect soul of music, he unearths some extraordinary persons called Abt Vogler and Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha. When he wishes to express the largest and sublimest scheme of morals and religion which his imagination can conceive, he does not put it into the mouth of any of the great spiritual leaders of mankind, but into the mouth of an obscure Jewish Rabbi of the name of Ben Ezra. It is fully in accordance with this fascinating craze of his that when he wishes to study the deification of the intellect and the disinterested pursuit of the things of the mind, he does not select any of the great philosophers from Plato to Darwin, whose investigations are still of some importance in the eyes of the world. He selects the figure of all figures most covered with modern satire and pity, the à priori scientist of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. His supreme type of the human intellect is neither the academic nor the positivist, but the alchemist. It is difficult to imagine a turn of mind constituting a more complete challenge to the ordinary modern point of view. To the intellect of our time the wild investigators of the school of Paracelsus seem to be the very crown and flower of futility, they are collectors of straws and careful misers of dust. But for all that Browning was right. Any critic who understands the true spirit of mediæval science can see that he was right; no critic can see how right he was unless he understands the spirit of mediæval science as thoroughly as he did. In the character of Paracelsus, Browning wished to paint the dangers and disappointments which attend the man who believes merely in the intellect. He wished to depict the fall of the logician; and with a perfect and unerring instinct he selected a man who wrote and spoke in the tradition of the Middle Ages, the most thoroughly and even painfully logical period that the world has ever seen. If he had chosen an ancient Greek philosopher, it would have been open to the critic to have said that that philosopher relied to some extent upon the most sunny and graceful social life that ever flourished. If he had made him a modern sociological professor, it would have been possible to object that his energies were not wholly concerned with truth, but partly with the solid and material satisfaction of society. But the man truly devoted to the things of the mind was the mediæval magician. It is a remarkable fact that one civilisation does not satisfy itself by calling another civilisation wicked--it calls it uncivilised. We call the Chinese barbarians, and they call us barbarians. The mediæval state, like China, was a foreign civilisation, and this was its supreme characteristic, that it cared for the things of the mind for their own sake. To complain of the researches of its sages on the ground that they were not materially fruitful, is to act as we should act in telling a gardener that his roses were not as digestible as our cabbages. It is not only true that the mediæval philosophers never discovered the steam-engine; it is quite equally true that they never tried. The Eden of the Middle Ages was really a garden, where each of God's flowers--truth and beauty

and reason--flourished for its own sake, and with its own name. The Eden of modern progress is a kitchen garden.

It would have been hard, therefore, for Browning to have chosen a better example for his study of intellectual egotism than Paracelsus. Modern life accuses the mediæval tradition of crushing the intellect; Browning, with a truer instinct, accuses that tradition of over-glorifying it. There is, however, another and even more important deduction to be made from the moral of Paracelsus. The usual accusation against Browning is that he was consumed with logic; that he thought all subjects to be the proper pabulum of intellectual disquisition; that he gloried chiefly in his own power of plucking knots to pieces and rending fallacies in two; and that to this method he sacrificed deliberately, and with complete self-complacency, the element of poetry and sentiment. To people who imagine Browning to have been this frigid believer in the intellect there is only one answer necessary or sufficient. It is the fact that he wrote a play designed to destroy the whole of this intellectualist fallacy at the age of twenty-three.

Paracelsus was in all likelihood Browning's introduction to the literary world. It was many years, and even many decades, before he had anything like a public appreciation, but a very great part of the minority of those who were destined to appreciate him came over to his standard upon the publication of Paracelsus. The celebrated John Forster had taken up Paracelsus "as a thing to slate," and had ended its perusal with the wildest curiosity about the author and his works. John Stuart Mill, never backward in generosity, had already interested himself in Browning, and was finally converted by the same poem. Among other early admirers were Landor, Leigh Hunt, Horne, Serjeant Talfourd, and Monckton-Milnes. One man of even greater literary stature seems to have come into Browning's life about this time, a man for whom he never ceased to have the warmest affection and trust. Browning was, indeed, one of the very few men of that period who got on perfectly with Thomas Carlyle. It is precisely one of those little things which speak volumes for the honesty and unfathomable good humour of Browning, that Carlyle, who had a reckless contempt for most other poets of his day, had something amounting to a real attachment to him. He would run over to Paris for the mere privilege of dining with him. Browning, on the other hand, with characteristic impetuosity, passionately defended and justified Carlyle in all companies. "I have just seen dear Carlyle," he writes on one occasion; "catch me calling people dear in a hurry, except in a letter beginning." He sided with Carlyle in the vexed question of the Carlyle domestic relations, and his impression of Mrs. Carlyle was that she was "a hard unlovable woman." As, however, it is on record that he once, while excitedly explaining some point of mystical philosophy, put down Mrs. Carlyle's hot kettle on the hearthrug, any frigidity that he may have observed in her manner may possibly find a natural explanation. His partisanship in the Carlyle affair, which was characteristically

headlong and human, may not throw much light on that painful problem itself, but it throws a great deal of light on the character of Browning, which was pugnaciously proud of its friends, and had what may almost be called a lust of loyalty. Browning was not capable of that most sagacious detachment which enabled Tennyson to say that he could not agree that the Carlyles ought never to have married, since if they had each married elsewhere there would have been four miserable people instead of two.

Among the motley and brilliant crowd with which Browning had now begun to mingle, there was no figure more eccentric and spontaneous than that of Macready the actor. This extraordinary person, a man living from hand to mouth in all things spiritual and pecuniary, a man feeding upon flying emotions, conceived something like an attraction towards Browning, spoke of him as the very ideal of a young poet, and in a moment of peculiar excitement suggested to him the writing of a great play. Browning was a man fundamentally indeed more steadfast and prosaic, but on the surface fully as rapid and easily infected as Macready. He immediately began to plan out a great historical play, and selected for his subject "Strafford."

In Browning's treatment of the subject there is something more than a trace of his Puritan and Liberal upbringing. It is one of the very earliest of the really important works in English literature which are based on the Parliamentarian reading of the incidents of the time of Charles I. It is true that the finest element in the play is the opposition between Strafford and Pym, an opposition so complete, so lucid, so consistent, that it has, so to speak, something of the friendly openness and agreement which belongs to an alliance. The two men love each other and fight each other, and do the two things at the same time completely. This is a great thing of which even to attempt the description. It is easy to have the impartiality which can speak judicially of both parties, but it is not so easy to have that larger and higher impartiality which can speak passionately on behalf of both parties. Nevertheless, it may be permissible to repeat that there is in the play a definite trace of Browning's Puritan education and Puritan historical outlook.

For Strafford is, of course, an example of that most difficult of all literary works--a political play. The thing has been achieved once at least admirably in Shakespeare's Julius Cæsar, and something like it, though from a more one-sided and romantic stand-point, has been done excellently in L'Aiglon. But the difficulties of such a play are obvious on the face of the matter. In a political play the principal characters are not merely men. They are symbols, arithmetical figures representing millions of other men outside. It is, by dint of elaborate stage management, possible to bring a mob upon the boards, but the largest mob ever known is nothing but a floating atom of the people; and the people of which the

politician has to think does not consist of knots of rioters in the street, but of some million absolutely distinct individuals, each sitting in his own breakfast room reading his own morning paper. To give even the faintest suggestion of the strength and size of the people in this sense in the course of a dramatic performance is obviously impossible. That is why it is so easy on the stage to concentrate all the pathos and dignity upon such persons as Charles I. and Mary Queen of Scots, the vampires of their people, because within the minute limits of a stage there is room for their small virtues and no room for their enormous crimes. It would be impossible to find a stronger example than the case of Strafford. It is clear that no one could possibly tell the whole truth about the life and death of Strafford, politically considered, in a play. Strafford was one of the greatest men ever born in England, and he attempted to found a great English official despotism. That is to say, he attempted to found something which is so different from what has actually come about that we can in reality scarcely judge of it, any more than we can judge whether it would be better to live in another planet, or pleasanter to have been born a dog or an elephant. It would require enormous imagination to reconstruct the political ideals of Strafford. Now Browning, as we all know, got over the matter in his play, by practically denying that Strafford had any political ideals at all. That is to say, while crediting Strafford with all his real majesty of intellect and character, he makes the whole of his political action dependent upon his passionate personal attachment to the King. This is unsatisfactory; it is in reality a dodging of the great difficulty of the political play. That difficulty, in the case of any political problem, is, as has been said, great. It would be very hard, for example, to construct a play about Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill. It would be almost impossible to get expressed in a drama of some five acts and some twenty characters anything so ancient and complicated as that Irish problem, the roots of which lie in the darkness of the age of Strongbow, and the branches of which spread out to the remotest commonwealths of the East and West. But we should scarcely be satisfied if a dramatist overcame the difficulty by ascribing Mr. Gladstone's action in the Home Rule question to an overwhelming personal affection for Mr. Healy. And in thus basing Strafford's action upon personal and private reasons, Browning certainly does some injustice to the political greatness, of Strafford. To attribute Mr. Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule to an infatuation such as that suggested above, would certainly have the air of implying that the writer thought the Home Rule doctrine a peculiar or untenable one. Similarly, Browning's choice of a motive for Strafford has very much the air of an assumption that there was nothing to be said on public grounds for Strafford's political ideal. Now this is certainly not the case. The Puritans in the great struggles of the reign of Charles I. may have possessed more valuable ideals than the Royalists, but it is a very vulgar error to suppose that they were any more idealistic. In Browning's play Pym is made almost the incarnation of public spirit, and Strafford of private ties. But not only may an upholder of despotism be public-spirited, but in the case of

prominent upholders of it like Strafford he generally is. Despotism indeed, and attempts at despotism, like that of Strafford, are a kind of disease of public spirit. They represent, as it were, the drunkenness of responsibility. It is when men begin to grow desperate in their love for the people, when they are overwhelmed with the difficulties and blunders of humanity, that they fall back upon a wild desire to manage everything themselves. Their faith in themselves is only a disillusionment with mankind. They are in that most dreadful position, dreadful alike in personal and public affairs--the position of the man who has lost faith and not lost love. This belief that all would go right if we could only get the strings into our own hands is a fallacy almost without exception, but nobody can justly say that it is not public-spirited. The sin and sorrow of despotism is not that it does not love men, but that it loves them too much and trusts them too little. Therefore from age to age in history arise these great despotic dreamers, whether they be Royalists or Imperialists or even Socialists, who have at root this idea, that the world would enter into rest if it went their way and forswore altogether the right of going its own way. When a man begins to think that the grass will not grow at night unless he lies awake to watch it, he generally ends either in an asylum or on the throne of an Emperor. Of these men Strafford was one, and we cannot but feel that Browning somewhat narrows the significance and tragedy of his place in history by making him merely the champion of a personal idiosyncrasy against a great public demand. Strafford was something greater than this; if indeed, when we come to think of it, a man can be anything greater than the friend of another man. But the whole question is interesting, because Browning, although he never again attacked a political drama of such palpable importance as Strafford, could never keep politics altogether out of his dramatic work. King Victor and King Charles, which followed it, is a political play, the study of a despotic instinct much meaner than that of Strafford. Colombe's Birthday, again, is political as well as romantic. Politics in its historic aspect would seem to have had a great fascination for him, as indeed it must have for all ardent intellects, since it is the one thing in the world that is as intellectual as the Encyclopædia Britannica and as rapid as the Derby.

One of the favourite subjects among those who like to conduct long controversies about Browning (and their name is legion) is the question of whether Browning's plays, such as Strafford, were successes upon the stage. As they are never agreed about what constitutes a success on the stage, it is difficult to adjudge their quarrels. But the general fact is very simple; such a play as Strafford was not a gigantic theatrical success, and nobody, it is to be presumed, ever imagined that it would be. On the other hand, it was certainly not a failure, but was enjoyed and applauded as are hundreds of excellent plays which run only for a week or two, as many excellent plays do, and as all plays ought to do. Above all, the definite success which attended the representation of Strafford from the point of view of the more educated and appreciative was quite enough to establish

Browning in a certain definite literary position. As a classical and established personality he did not come into his kingdom for years and decades afterwards; not, indeed, until he was near to entering upon the final rest. But as a detached and eccentric personality, as a man who existed and who had arisen on the outskirts of literature, the world began to be conscious of him at this time.

Of what he was personally at the period that he thus became personally apparent, Mrs. Bridell Fox has left a very vivid little sketch. She describes how Browning called at the house (he was acquainted with her father), and finding that gentleman out, asked with a kind of abrupt politeness if he might play on the piano. This touch is very characteristic of the mingled aplomb and unconsciousness of Browning's social manner. "He was then," she writes, "slim and dark, and very handsome, and--may I hint it?--just a trifle of a dandy, addicted to lemon-coloured kid gloves and such things, quite the glass of fashion and the mould of form. But full of 'ambition,' eager for success, eager for fame, and, what is more, determined to conquer fame and to achieve success." That is as good a portrait as we can have of the Browning of these days--quite self-satisfied, but not self-conscious young man; one who had outgrown, but only just outgrown, the pure romanticism of his boyhood, which made him run after gipsy caravans and listen to nightingales in the wood; a man whose incandescent vitality, now that it had abandoned gipsies and not yet immersed itself in casuistical poems, devoted itself excitedly to trifles, such as lemon-coloured kid gloves and fame. But a man still above all things perfectly young and natural, professing that foppery which follows the fashions, and not that sillier and more demoralising foppery which defies them. Just as he walked in coolly and yet impulsively into a private drawing-room and offered to play, so he walked at this time into the huge and crowded salon of European literature and offered to sing.