CHAPTER VII - THE RING AND THE BOOK

When we have once realised the great conception of the plan of The Ring and the Book, the studying of a single matter from nine different stand-points, it becomes exceedingly interesting to notice what these stand-points are; what figures Browning has selected as voicing the essential and distinct versions of the case. One of the ablest and most sympathetic of all the critics of Browning, Mr. Augustine Birrell, has said in one place that the speeches of the two advocates in The Ring and the Book will scarcely be very interesting to the ordinary reader. However that may be, there can be little doubt that a great number of the readers of Browning think them beside the mark and adventitious. But it is exceedingly dangerous to say that anything in Browning is irrelevant or unnecessary. We are apt to go on thinking so until some mere trifle puts the matter in a new light, and the detail that seemed meaningless springs up as almost the central pillar of the structure. In the successive monologues of his poem, Browning is endeavouring to depict the various strange ways in which a fact gets itself presented to the world. In every question there are partisans who bring cogent and convincing arguments for the right side; there are also partisans who bring cogent and convincing arguments for the wrong side. But over and above these, there does exist in every great controversy a class of more or less official partisans who are continually engaged in defending each cause by entirely inappropriate arguments. They do not know the real good that can be said for the good cause, nor the real good that can be said for the bad one. They are represented by the animated, learned, eloquent, ingenious, and entirely futile and impertinent arguments of Juris Doctor Bottinius and Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis. These two men brilliantly misrepresent, not merely each other's cause, but their own cause. The introduction of them is one of the finest and most artistic strokes in The Ring and the Book.

We can see the matter best by taking an imaginary parallel. Suppose that a poet of the type of Browning lived some centuries hence and found in some cause célèbre of our day, such as the Parnell Commission, an opportunity for a work similar in its design to The Ring and the Book. The first monologue, which would be called "Half-London," would be the arguments of an ordinary educated and sensible Unionist who believed that there really was evidence that the Nationalist movement in Ireland was rooted in crime and public panic. The "Otherhalf-London" would be the utterance of an ordinary educated and sensible Home Ruler, who thought that in the main Nationalism was one distinct symptom, and crime another, of the same poisonous and stagnant problem. The "Tertium Quid" would be some detached intellectual, committed neither to Nationalism nor to Unionism, possibly Mr. Bernard Shaw, who would make a very entertaining

Browning monologue. Then of course would come the speeches of the great actors in the drama, the icy anger of Parnell, the shuffling apologies of Pigott. But we should feel that the record was incomplete without another touch which in practice has so much to do with the confusion of such a question. Bottinius and Hyacinthus de Archangelis, the two cynical professional pleaders, with their transparent assumptions and incredible theories of the case, would be represented by two party journalists; one of whom was ready to base his case either on the fact that Parnell was a Socialist or an Anarchist, or an Atheist or a Roman Catholic; and the other of whom was ready to base his case on the theory that Lord Salisbury hated Parnell or was in league with him, or had never heard of him, or anything else that was remote from the

world of reality. These are the kind of little touches for which we must always be on the look-out in Browning. Even if a digression, or a simile, or a whole scene in a play, seems to have no point or value, let us wait a little and give it a chance. He very seldom wrote anything that did not mean a great deal.

It is sometimes curious to notice how a critic, possessing no little cultivation and fertility, will, in speaking of a work of art, let fall almost accidentally some apparently trivial comment, which reveals to us with an instantaneous and complete mental illumination the fact that he does not, so far as that work of art is concerned, in the smallest degree understand what he is talking about. He may have intended to correct merely some minute detail of the work he is studying, but that single movement is enough to blow him and all his diplomas into the air. These are the sensations with which the true Browningite will regard the criticism made by so many of Browning's critics and biographers about The Ring and the Book. That criticism was embodied by one of them in the words "the theme looked at dispassionately is unworthy of the monument in which it is entombed for eternity." Now this remark shows at once that the critic does not know what The Ring and the Book means. We feel about it as we should feel about a man who said that the plot of Tristram Shandy was not well constructed, or that the women in Rossetti's pictures did not look useful and industrious. A man who has missed the fact that Tristram Shandy is a game of digressions, that the whole book is a kind of practical joke to cheat the reader out of a story, simply has not read Tristram Shandy at all. The man who objects to the Rossetti pictures because they depict a sad and sensuous day-dream, objects to their existing at all. And any one who objects to Browning writing his huge epic round a trumpery and sordid police-case has in reality missed the whole length and breadth of the poet's meaning. The essence of The Ring and the Book is that it is the great epic of the nineteenth century, because it is the great epic of the enormous importance of small things. The supreme difference that divides The Ring and the Book from all the great poems of similar length and largeness of design is precisely the fact that all these are about affairs commonly called important, and

The Ring and the Book is about an affair commonly called contemptible. Homer says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven as exhibited in a great legend of love and war, which shall contain the mightiest of all mortal warriors, and the most beautiful of all mortal women." The author of the Book of Job says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven by a tale of primeval sorrows and the voice of God out of a whirlwind." Virgil says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by the tale of the origin of the greatest people and the founding of the most wonderful city in the world." Dante says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by uncovering the very machinery of the spiritual universe, and letting you hear, as I have heard, the roaring of the mills of God." Milton says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you of the very beginning of all things, and the first shaping of the thing that is evil in the first twilight of time." Browning says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you a story out of a dirty Italian book of criminal trials from which I select one of the meanest and most completely forgotten." Until we have realised this fundamental idea in The Ring and the Book all criticism is misleading.

In this Browning is, of course, the supreme embodiment of his time. The characteristic of the modern movements par excellence is the apotheosis of the insignificant. Whether it be the school of poetry which sees more in one cowslip or clover-top than in forests and waterfalls, or the school of fiction which finds something indescribably significant in the pattern of a hearth-rug, or the tint of a man's tweed coat, the tendency is the same. Maeterlinck stricken still and wondering by a deal door half open, or the light shining out of a window at night; Zola filling note-books with the medical significance of the twitching of a man's toes, or the loss of his appetite; Whitman counting the grass and the heart-shaped leaves of the lilac; Mr. George Gissing lingering fondly over the third-class ticket and the dilapidated umbrella; George Meredith seeing a soul's tragedy in a phrase at the dinner-table; Mr. Bernard Shaw filling three pages with stage directions to describe a parlour; all these men, different in every other particular, are alike in this, that they have ceased to believe certain things to be important and the rest to be unimportant. Significance is to them a wild thing that may leap upon them from any hiding-place. They have all become terribly impressed with and a little bit alarmed at the mysterious powers of small things. Their difference from the old epic poets is the whole difference between an age that fought with dragons and an age that fights with microbes.

This tide of the importance of small things is flowing so steadily around us upon every side to-day, that we do not sufficiently realise that if there was one man in English literary history who might with justice be called its fountain and origin, that man was Robert Browning. When Browning arose, literature was entirely in the hands of the Tennysonian poet. The Tennysonian poet does indeed mention

trivialities, but he mentions them when he wishes to speak trivially; Browning mentions trivialities when he wishes to speak sensationally. Now this sense of the terrible importance of detail was a sense which may be said to have possessed Browning in the emphatic manner of a demoniac possession. Sane as he was, this one feeling might have driven him to a condition not far from madness. Any room that he was sitting in glared at him with innumerable eyes and mouths gaping with a story. There was sometimes no background and no middle distance in his mind. A human face and the pattern on the wall behind it came forward with equally aggressive clearness. It may be repeated, that if ever he who had the strongest head in the world had gone mad, it would have been through this turbulent democracy of things. If he looked at a porcelain vase or an old hat, a cabbage, or a puppy at play, each began to be bewitched with the spell of a kind of fairyland of philosophers: the vase, like the jar in the Arabian Nights, to send up a smoke of thoughts and shapes; the hat to produce souls, as a conjuror's hat produces rabbits; the cabbage to swell and overshadow the earth, like the Tree of Knowledge; and the puppy to go off at a scamper along the road to the end of the world. Any one who has read Browning's longer poems knows how constantly a simile or figure of speech is selected, not among the large, well-recognised figures common in poetry, but from some dusty corner of experience, and how often it is characterised by smallness and a certain quaint exactitude which could not have been found in any more usual example. Thus, for instance, Prince Hohenstiel--Schwangau explains the psychological meaning of all his restless and unscrupulous activities by comparing them to the impulse which has just led him, even in the act of talking, to draw a black line on the blotting-paper exactly, so as to connect two separate blots that were already there. This queer example is selected as the best possible instance of a certain fundamental restlessness and desire to add a touch to things in the spirit of man. I have no doubt whatever that Browning thought of the idea after doing the thing himself, and sat in a philosophical trance staring at a piece of inked blotting-paper, conscious that at that moment, and in that insignificant act, some immemorial monster of the mind, nameless from the beginning of the world, had risen to the surface of the spiritual sea.

It is therefore the very essence of Browning's genius, and the very essence of The Ring and the Book, that it should be the enormous multiplication of a small theme. It is the extreme of idle criticism to complain that the story is a current and sordid story, for the whole object of the poem is to show what infinities of spiritual good and evil a current and sordid story may contain. When once this is realised, it explains at one stroke the innumerable facts about the work. It explains, for example, Browning's detailed and picturesque account of the glorious dust-bin of odds and ends for sale, out of which he picked the printed record of the trial, and his insistence on its cheapness, its dustiness, its yellow leaves, and its crabbed Latin. The more soiled and dark and insignificant he can

make the text appear, the better for his ample and gigantic sermon. It explains again the strictness with which Browning adhered to the facts of the forgotten intrigue. He was playing the game of seeing how much was really involved in one paltry fragment of fact. To have introduced large quantities of fiction would not have been sportsmanlike. The Ring and the Book therefore, to re-capitulate the view arrived at so far, is the typical epic of our age, because it expresses the richness of life by taking as a text a poor story. It pays to existence the highest of all possible compliments--the great compliment which monarchy paid to mankind--the compliment of selecting from it almost at random.

But this is only the first half of the claim of The Ring and the Book to be the typical epic of modern times. The second half of that claim, the second respect in which the work is representative of all modern development, requires somewhat more careful statement. The Ring and the Book is of course, essentially speaking, a detective story. Its difference from the ordinary detective story is that it seeks to establish, not the centre of criminal guilt, but the centre of spiritual guilt. But it has exactly the same kind of exciting quality that a detective story has, and a very excellent quality it is. But the element which is important, and which now requires pointing out, is the method by which that centre of spiritual guilt and the corresponding centre of spiritual rectitude is discovered. In order to make clear the peculiar character of this method, it is necessary to begin rather nearer the beginning, and to go back some little way in literary history.

I do not know whether anybody, including the editor himself, has ever noticed a peculiar coincidence which may be found in the arrangement of the lyrics in Sir Francis Palgrave's Golden Treasury. However that may be, two poems, each of them extremely well known, are placed side by side, and their juxtaposition represents one vast revolution in the poetical manner of looking at things. The first is Goldsmith's almost too well known

"When lovely woman stoops to folly, And finds too late that men betray, What charm can soothe her melancholy? What art can wash her guilt away?"

Immediately afterwards comes, with a sudden and thrilling change of note, the voice of Burns:--

"Ye banks and braes o' bonnie Doon, How can ye bloom sae fair? How can ye chant, ye little birds, And I sae fu' of care?

Thou'll break my heart, thou bonny bird, That sings upon the bough, Thou minds me of the happy days When my fause Love was true."

A man might read those two poems a great many times without happening to

realise that they are two poems on exactly the same subject--the subject of a trusting woman deserted by a man. And the whole difference--the difference struck by the very first note of the voice of any one who reads them--is this fundamental difference, that Goldsmith's words are spoken about a certain situation, and Burns's words are spoken in that situation.

In the transition from one of these lyrics to the other, we have a vital change in the conception of the functions of the poet; a change of which Burns was in many ways the beginning, of which Browning, in a manner that we shall see presently, was the culmination.

Goldsmith writes fully and accurately in the tradition of the old historic idea of what a poet was. The poet, the vates, was the supreme and absolute critic of human existence, the chorus in the human drama; he was, to employ two words, which when analysed are the same word, either a spectator or a seer. He took a situation, such as the situation of a woman deserted by a man before-mentioned, and he gave, as Goldsmith gives, his own personal and definite decision upon it, entirely based upon general principles, and entirely from the outside. Then, as in the case of The Golden Treasury, he has no sooner given judgment than there comes a bitter and confounding cry out of the very heart of the situation itself, which tells us things which would have been quite left out of account by the poet of the general rule. No one, for example, but a person who knew something of the inside of agony would have introduced that touch of the rage of the mourner against the chattering frivolity of nature, "Thou'll break my heart, thou bonny bird." We find and could find no such touch in Goldsmith. We have to arrive at the conclusion therefore, that the vates or poet in his absolute capacity is defied and overthrown by this new method of what may be called the songs of experience.

Now Browning, as he appears in The Ring and the Book, represents the attempt to discover, not the truth in the sense that Goldsmith states it, but the larger truth which is made up of all the emotional experiences, such as that rendered by Burns. Browning, like Goldsmith, seeks ultimately to be just and impartial, but he does it by endeavouring to feel acutely every kind of partiality. Goldsmith stands apart from all the passions of the case, and Browning includes them all. If Browning were endeavouring to do strict justice in a case like that of the deserted lady by the banks of Doon, he would not touch or modify in the smallest particular the song as Burns sang it, but he would write other songs, perhaps equally pathetic. A lyric or a soliloquy would convince us suddenly by the mere pulse of its language, that there was some pathos in the other actors in the drama; some pathos, for example, in a weak man, conscious that in a passionate ignorance of life he had thrown away his power of love, lacking the moral courage to throw his prospects after it. We should be reminded again that there was some

pathos in the position, let us say, of the seducer's mother, who had built all her hopes upon developments which a mésalliance would overthrow, or in the position of some rival lover, stricken to the ground with the tragedy in which he had not even the miserable comfort of a locus standi. All these characters in the story, Browning would realise from their own emotional point of view before he gave judgment. The poet in his ancient office held a kind of terrestrial day of judgment, and gave men halters and haloes; Browning gives men neither halter nor halo, he gives them voices. This is indeed the most bountiful of all the functions of the poet, that he gives men words, for which men from the beginning of the world have starved more than for bread.

Here then we have the second great respect in which The Ring and the Book is the great epic of the age. It is the great epic of the age, because it is the expression of the belief, it might almost be said, of the discovery, that no man ever lived upon this earth without possessing a point of view. No one ever lived who had not a little more to say for himself than any formal system of justice was likely to say for him. It is scarcely necessary to point out how entirely the application of this principle would revolutionise the old heroic epic, in which the poet decided absolutely the moral relations and moral value of the characters. Suppose, for example, that Homer had written the Odyssey on the principle of The Ring and the Book, how disturbing, how weird an experience it would be to read the story from the point of view of Antinous! Without contradicting a single material fact, without telling a single deliberate lie, the narrative would so change the whole world around us, that we should scarcely know we were dealing with the same place and people. The calm face of Penelope would, it may be, begin to grow meaner before our eyes, like a face changing in a dream. She would begin to appear as a fickle and selfish woman, passing falsely as a widow, and playing a double game between the attentions of foolish but honourable young men, and the fitful appearances of a wandering and good-for-nothing sailor-husband; a man prepared to act that most well-worn of melodramatic rôles, the conjugal bully and blackmailer, the man who uses marital rights as an instrument for the worse kind of wrongs. Or, again, if we had the story of the fall of King Arthur told from the stand-point of Mordred, it would only be a matter of a word or two; in a turn, in the twinkling of an eye, we should find ourselves sympathising with the efforts of an earnest young man to frustrate the profligacies of high-placed paladins like Lancelot and Tristram, and ultimately discovering, with deep regret but unshaken moral courage, that there was no way to frustrate them, except by overthrowing the cold and priggish and incapable egotist who ruled the country, and the whole artificial and bombastic schemes which bred these moral evils. It might be that in spite of this new view of the case, it would ultimately appear that Ulysses was really right and Arthur was really right, just as Browning makes it ultimately appear that Pompilia was really right. But any one can see the enormous difference in scope and difficulty between the old epic which told the

whole story from one man's point of view, and the new epic which cannot come to its conclusion, until it has digested and assimilated views as paradoxical and disturbing as our imaginary defence of Antinous and apologia of Mordred.

One of the most important steps ever taken in the history of the world is this step, with all its various aspects, literary, political, and social, which is represented by The Ring and the Book. It is the step of deciding, in the face of many serious dangers and disadvantages, to let everybody talk. The poet of the old epic is the poet who had learnt to speak; Browning in the new epic is the poet who has learnt to listen. This listening to truth and error, to heretics, to fools, to intellectual bullies, to desperate partisans, to mere chatterers, to systematic poisoners of the mind, is the hardest lesson that humanity has ever been set to learn. The Ring and the Book is the embodiment of this terrible magnanimity and patience. It is the epic of free speech.

Free speech is an idea which has at present all the unpopularity of a truism; so that we tend to forget that it was not so very long ago that it had the more practical unpopularity which attaches to a new truth. Ingratitude is surely the chief of the intellectual sins of man. He takes his political benefits for granted, just as he takes the skies and the seasons for granted. He considers the calm of a city street a thing as inevitable as the calm of a forest clearing, whereas it is only kept in peace by a sustained stretch and effort similar to that which keeps up a battle or a fencing match. Just as we forget where we stand in relation to natural phenomena, so we forget it in relation to social phenomena. We forget that the earth is a star, and we forget that free speech is a paradox.

It is not by any means self-evident upon the face of it that an institution like the liberty of speech is right or just. It is not natural or obvious to let a man utter follies and abominations which you believe to be bad for mankind any more than it is natural or obvious to let a man dig up a part of the public road, or infect half a town with typhoid fever. The theory of free speech, that truth is so much larger and stranger and more many-sided than we know of, that it is very much better at all costs to hear every one's account of it, is a theory which has been justified upon the whole by experiment, but which remains a very daring and even a very surprising theory. It is really one of the great discoveries of the modern time; but, once admitted, it is a principle that does not merely affect politics, but philosophy, ethics, and finally poetry.

Browning was upon the whole the first poet to apply the principle to poetry. He perceived that if we wish to tell the truth about a human drama, we must not tell it merely like a melodrama, in which the villain is villainous and the comic man is comic. He saw that the truth had not been told until he had seen in the villain the pure and disinterested gentleman that most villains firmly believe themselves to

be, or until he had taken the comic man as seriously as it is the custom of comic men to take themselves. And in this Browning is beyond all question the founder of the most modern school of poetry. Everything that was profound, everything, indeed, that was tolerable in the aesthetes of 1880, and the decadent of 1890, has its ultimate source in Browning's great conception that every one's point of view is interesting, even if it be a jaundiced or a blood-shot point of view. He is at one with the decadents, in holding that it is emphatically profitable, that it is emphatically creditable, to know something of the grounds of the happiness of a thoroughly bad man. Since his time we have indeed been somewhat over-satisfied with the moods of the burglar, and the pensive lyrics of the receiver of stolen goods. But Browning, united with the decadents on this point, of the value of every human testimony, is divided from them sharply and by a chasm in another equally important point. He held that it is necessary to listen to all sides of a question in order to discover the truth of it. But he held that there was a truth to discover. He held that justice was a mystery, but not, like the decadents, that justice was a delusion. He held, in other words, the true Browning doctrine, that in a dispute every one was to a certain extent right; not the decadent doctrine that in so mad a place as the world, every one must be by the nature of things wrong.

Browning's conception of the Universe can hardly be better expressed than in the old and pregnant fable about the five blind men who went to visit an elephant. One of them seized its trunk, and asserted that an elephant was a kind of serpent; another embraced its leg, and was ready to die for the belief that an elephant was a kind of tree. In the same way to the man who leaned against its side it was a wall; to the man who had hold of its tail a rope, and to the man who ran upon its tusk a particularly unpleasant kind of spear. This, as I have said, is the whole theology and philosophy of Browning. But he differs from the psychological decadents and impressionists in this important point, that he thinks that although the blind men found out very little about the elephant, the elephant was an elephant, and was there all the time. The blind men formed mistaken theories because an elephant is a thing with a very curious shape. And Browning firmly believed that the Universe was a thing with a very curious shape indeed. No blind poet could even imagine an elephant without experience, and no man, however great and wise, could dream of God and not die. But there is a vital distinction between the mystical view of Browning, that the blind men are misled because there is so much for them to learn, and the purely impressionist and agnostic view of the modern poet, that the blind men were misled because there was nothing for them to learn. To the impressionist artist of our time we are not blind men groping after an elephant and naming it a tree or a serpent. We are maniacs, isolated in separate cells, and dreaming of trees and serpents without reason and without result.