ROBERT BROWNING.*

Lovers of Browning ought to feel indebted to the great Boston publishing house for placing within their easy reach this compact and legible edition of all the poetical and dramatic work of this prolific poet, from "Pauline" (dated 1832) to the "Parleyings" (1887). This edition is worthy, in every respect, of being placed beside the well-known "Riverside Edition" of the British Poets; indeed, many will prefer the present volumes on account of the superior quality of the paper. Such an edition as this may be expected to attract many American readers to the earlier works of a poet whose recent publications do not fairly represent him. It may be doubted whether any other equal number of volumes of contemporary poetry contain so much entertainment for the reader that finds entertainment in reflection. It seems, therefore, a fit time to make an appraisal of the poet, based upon a wider survey than can be gained from any single one of his works.

What is Robert Browning's poetical lineage? With respect to a writer so thoroughly original the question is a very difficult one. He has a peculiar tang traceable in no earlier poet, least of all in Shelley, whom he most frequently mentions as his master. Browning frequently refers to Shelley in a way that leads one to surmise that Shelley did for him what "The Faery Queen" did for Cowley,—made him "irrecoverably a poet." The parallelism, both of likeness and of contrast, between Browning and Shelley is singularly fascinating,—the more so inasmuch as the relationship is in no wise one of accent or garb, but is the far deeper one of spiritual kinship.

Perhaps their most obvious point of resemblance consists in this: both are as far as possible removed from the conventional and the commonplace, and afford, therefore, for genuine souls, a delightful refuge from false society and spurious sentiment. In most British poets, the average Englishman—that complacent being so unlovely to all eyes but his own—is remarkably strong. It is the very great merit of these two poets that in them this flavor of the cockney and the cad is not present. They were saved from becoming impregnated with this flavor by the kindly fate that made them both lovers and haunters of Italy, that most ideal of the kingdoms of this world—that land to which the poet and the artist are drawn as the sparks fly upward. Apart from this, how different the circumstances of their residence in Italy! Shelley attended by companions incapable of understanding him and who would fain make him over in the image of the world; Browning in the felicity of perfect union with a kindred and equal spirit.

In the outward circumstances of their lives, indeed, the contrast between the two poets is marked and, to the lover of Shelley, painful. These circumstances have enabled Browning to become the most discursive, wide-ranging, and cultivated of modern poets since Goethe. At a time when Arnold is contentiously cosmopolitan, Swinburne rebelliously radical, Tennyson contentedly English, Browning is calmly and sedately universal. He is more Italian than English, more Greek than Italian, more Browning than Greek. He has the art of taking to himself all modern knowledge, as the ocean takes all the rivers of the world without becoming swollen or losing its pungent and wholesome salt. The cultivated and well-read Browning is everywhere Browning, just as unmistakably as the uncultivated Whitman is the average American plus the accident of genius. Whitman is extraordinary by presenting a common type in an uncommon capacity; in Browning the type is as unique as the capacity.

Being the most highly cultivated and the most discursive, Browning is the most thoughtful and thought-stirring of contemporary poets. In these respects, he gains very much by contrast with his master, Shelley. Shelley's mental altitude is as far as Browning's from that of the vulgar, but Shelley's weak-winged fancies, like his own skylark, flutter above us rather than uplift us. On the other hand, Browning's imaginative wings are strong enough to carry us whithersoever the magician will, for they are ribbed like Burke's with the steel and whalebone of fact, science, and experience. Both Shelley and Browning are often read without being understood, but by reason of opposite qualities. Shelley is pure music or picture, and when the music dies away or the picture fades one straightway forgets it as one forgets one's image in a glass. The airy dream has vanished like sunlight from the water; no trace remains. In Browning, too, there is music and light and imagery, but all this plays upon the surface of a thought as subtle and profound as that of a philosopher. His thought must be encountered with alert faculties and agile mental action in order to be caught and mastered.

Browning is, therefore, no amusement for the listless or the fatigued. If he dispels lassitude, it is by arousing the soul to the lithe activity of the tiger, or by stiffening the mental sinews to the iron pose of the expectant gladiator. He is the equal companion of the best minds in their untrammelled moments of joyous activity; he incites to generous emulation of his own abounding life. Browning fills with

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new wine but never intoxicates, he fatigues but never enervates, he puzzles but never benumbs; he renders the reader thoughtful and sad but never despondent and hopeless. There has been a poetry of despair; Browning is the poet of exhilarating and abounding hope. Not that he shrinks from darkness and misery, but that he sees these to be local, while light and blessedness are universal and all-enveloping.

As Professor Corson remarks in his useful "Introduction to the Poetry of Browning," the inner relationship between our poet and Shelley is as good as divulged by the former in his essay on Shelley. "I would rather," says Browning, "consider Shelley's poetry as a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal, than I would isolate and separately appraise the work of many detachable portions which might be acknowledged as utterly perfect in a lower moral point of view under the mere conditions of art." He further remarks of Shelley that "he sees not as man sees but as God sees." If it be admitted that in Browning there is this same endeavor to exhibit the correspondency between the actual and the ideal and to regard human affairs from a higher angle of vision, then the wide divergencies between the two poets as to method and manner disappear in the essential oneness of their aim. Browning deals chiefly with the real world; Shelley with the ideal. Browning dwells habitually upon the solid earth which he treads with the firm step of an accomplished man of the world. He knows the tangle of human society down to its minutest interlacements, and can show us that the web is here and there streaked with golden threads reaching off beyond eyeshot—perchance to the garment of God himself. Browning, too, has the freedom of the ether where Shelley soars, but Browning is more companionable and is therefore more likely to give to ordinary men impulses to climb the golden ladders of poetry. Browning may be compared to a rapid river that turns not one wheel the less, irrigates no less efficiently a single farm, because it sings as it flows through the haunts of men; while Shelley is like the vast cloud-reservoirs that feed the sources of the stream,—reservoirs none the less inexhaustible for their gorgeous architecture of dawn-painted battlement and pinnacle. Nor should the comparison be pushed beyond its limits so as to intimate that Browning is diluted and Shelley vaporous; it is enough to suggest the poetical paternity of the later poet by saying that Shelley, the soaring cloud, is condensed in Browning, the singing river.

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