

Browning, Grammar and Christianity

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A Grammarian's Funeral is possibly one of Browning's best known poems, and one which provides a useful introduction to his work as a whole. To begin with, the subject is typical; the grammarian is a man of intense energy and determination who has devoted his life to the pursuit of an unattainable goal. As such he is a figure who affords Browning an opportunity for doing what he can do well. Time and again Browning chooses themes which allow him to exercise his skill in describing violent emotion and strenuous activity. Not that his range can be entirely restricted to any simple formula: one has only to recall Andrea del Sarto, 'the weak-eyed bat', and the deft strokes with which his mood of fatalistic apathy is evoked. Nevertheless, the fierce exultation of the *Epilogue to 'Asolando'* and *Prospice*, the grimly amusing pent-up fury of the *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, the searing jealousy of *The Laboratory*, the bitter hatred of *The Confessional*, the boisterous enthusiasm of *Fra Lippo Lippi* and the desperate exhilaration of *How they brought the Good News* are sufficient indication how well grounded is the common association of Browning with strong feelings and vigorous effort. The poem is rich, moreover, in examples of those technical devices which he employs to express themes of this kind. The distorted syntax, which wrenches words from their normal order, frequently with the aid of parenthesis, produces a broken, abrupt, breathless rhythm which is characteristic of his style; as is the use of ellipses to achieve compression, and of thick clusters of explosive, aggressive consonants and short vowels to intensify the assertive, at times even brutal tone of the poem. The outrageously far-fetched rhymes—with their suggestion of a joyful wrestling with intractable material—are indicative of the kind of violence Browning is ready to do, here as elsewhere, to the conventional idea of what rhyme ought to be. The imagery of the poem is significant of the poet's love of untamed energy, and prepares the reader for other works in which he will glory in bold colours and strident contrasts rather than placid twilight harmonies; in indented line rather than in relaxed, flowing form. These are the hall marks of

his style, and it is a style which, when Browning is at his best, is so appropriate to his subject that the two cannot be separated, save for the purpose of reflective analysis.

To praise Browning for the way in which his language successfully embodies what fascinates him as a poet is tantamount to saying, of course, that his famous (or notorious) 'obscurity' belongs to the surface only. The 'difficulty' of his verse is very largely the product of the verbal techniques mentioned above (especially of compression and inversion) the function of which is to convey not profound psychological or philosophical truths but passion and activity of a powerful but essentially simple variety. He has been applauded by his admirers for his 'character studies', but there is no great subtlety or complexity of character in most of the persons he portrays. Language is dislocated and an assault made on our normal expectations, but not in the same way as in the paradoxes of Christianity, for example, in which logic is transcended in the interests of some deeply important human experience which resists formulation in more sedate terms. 'The characteristic corrugation of his surface', as Dr Leavis has said, 'is merely superficial, and not the expression of a complex sensibility'.¹ But although this is to remark a severe limitation in his work, it is not to deny that, within his limits, he succeeds. Browning, however, like those characters whom he admires, is reluctant to keep within his limits. He is ambitious to offer us something more than the poetry of simple feeling and action. When this happens—and it is not confined to those passages in which he is explicitly 'philosophizing'—his poetry repels the adult mind. For what it tends to become then is not merely a graphic presentation, but an adulation of what it describes. The staccato rhythms, the dissonances, the grotesque imagery lose their sense of propriety; the verse begins to shout and bludgeon, to jarr and grow monotonous. Something of this can be seen in *A Grammarian's Funeral*: in the extravagant rhymes, for example ('fabric' and 'dab brick'; 'failure' and 'pale lure'). In theory one might justify them by saying that Browning, like the grammarian, is grappling with language; and up to a point one agrees that they succeed in practice, too. But Browning's use of them, surely, is somewhat wanton. He is enjoying himself, but rather overmuch. It is as though he delights in mangling language beyond the legitimate demands of the subject, and consequently to the detriment of the poem. This is the

¹*New Bearings in English Poetry* (New Ed. 1950), p.20. Dr Leavis devotes little more than one page to Browning, but his brief comments constitute a juster estimate of the poet than any other I know of, save Santayana's.

Browning whose poetry so often becomes irritatingly boisterous and eccentric and occasions the complaints about his unbearable heartiness. The objection is not simply to the vigour, but to the inordinate vigour which pervades so much of his work; and if we recoil it is because we have the impression of a vitality which is omnipresent and omnipotent, whereas our own experience tells us that energy must have an end outside itself, in the service of which it reveals direction and control and in the presence of which it is restrained.

This impression is reinforced by an examination of those parts of Browning which carry his so-called 'philosophy of imperfection'. In *A Grammarian's Funeral*, for example, the poet does more than record the grammarian's prodigious labour; through the mouth of one of the students he claims that it is fraught with spiritual significance. The grammarian, we are told, was one of those who knew better than to 'draw a circle premature'; instead, he chose to 'throw on God . . . God's task to make the heavenly period Perfect the earthen'. A few lines later, the distinction between two different attitudes to life is restated:

That low man seeks a little thing to do,
 Sees it and does it:
 This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
 Dies ere he knows it.
 That low man goes on adding one to one,
 His hundred's soon hit:
 This high man, aiming at a million,
 Misses an unit.
 That, has the world here—should he need the next,
 Let the world mind him!
 This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed
 Seeking shall find him.

It is astonishing the number of readers and commentators who offer no resistance to this passage. What happens, one suspects, is that they read it, in effect, out of context, seizing on it as an example of something which they already expect to find in Browning, the suggestion that it is better to dedicate oneself to a spiritual goal and to fail than to aim lower and succeed. And because this, in the abstract, seems sound enough, the lines which supposedly illustrate it are accepted. But this is to forget that Browning's concrete example of what he means by a 'high' man is the grammarian, whose goal—on the evidence of the poem—has nothing spiritual about it whatever, and is transcendent not in any metaphysical sense but only in that it happens to be impossible to achieve. The

grammarian's 'sacred thirst' is sacred only by the grace of hyperbole. His insatiable lust to 'know all' (particularly in philology) is not to be confused with an exploration of what Newman was to call the grammar of assent! This is apparent to the attentive reader even if the passage is considered in isolation; for Browning's imagery betrays his carelessness concerning the nature of a man's ultimate aim. A million, it is true, is greater than a hundred—sufficiently so it would seem, to persuade the majority of readers that the difference is more than a quantitative one, and that if the 'high' man's success is of an entirely different order from the 'low' man's it is because of the difference in quality between their goals. But this is not the case of course: a hundred and a million differ in degree only, and if the one man is destined for heaven and the other not, it can only be because in Browning's eyes the mere fact of having elected to strive for what he cannot achieve necessarily makes him so. It is the incessant activity of the person whose task cannot be completed that Browning admires, and strictly speaking it would not matter from his point of view (though it would certainly rob his assertion of most of its specious appeal) if the targets were reversed.² To aim for a hundred only, providing it were beyond one's ability to reach it, would be sufficient to satisfy Browning—as *Andrea del Sarto* indicates. It is important to remember that Andrea, who paints 'faultless' pictures, is contrasted unfavourably not only with Leonardo, Raphael and Michael Angelo, who are not content with mere technical perfection, but also with a score of other artists in his town. It is of these latter that Andrea says, 'there burns a truer light of God in them'. Yet what these unknown painters are struggling to achieve ('you don't know how the others strive') is nothing other than Andrea's own kind of low-powered perfection. The goal is the same; the only difference is that whereas Andrea achieves it with ease, 'the others strive'; and as a result 'they reach a heaven that's shut to me'. Unobscured by any talk of hundreds

²I have not read Mr John Atkin's study of Graham Greene, but I am told that Greene emerges from this book as the Browning of the novel. The resemblances, however, are superficial. Both writers may be said to be fascinated by the paradox of the successful failure; but in very different senses. For Greene, the nature of what a man believes in is so important that he is willing to deprive his heroes of precisely those qualities which Browning idealizes. For Browning, the power and the glory belong to man and his dauntless pursuit and unwavering fidelity, regardless of the end. It is amusing to note that, thanks to the imagery, the grammarian is not in fact, as so many readers seem to think, a failure by the world's standards. Missing his million by a unit, he scores 999,999 to the low man's 100. A successful failure indeed.

and millions, Browning's position is clear here: struggling is all. The well known remark, 'Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?' is no more than a recommendation to dedicate one's life to feverish exertion; and Browning's grotesque habit of identifying his religion with Christianity should mislead no one. The service of God, insofar as his heroes pause to consider such a thing, is firmly relegated to a next world conceived in the image of their own spiritual poverty. God's role is to make use in heaven of what man on earth has made of himself; and heaven is won by the impulsive determination of the man who 'throws himself on God' only in the sense that he imposes on him the responsibility of providing another life where he can 'strive and thrive . . . there as here'.

When Browning is in this mood, elevating impassioned energy into an absolute good, his poetry is an offence to both sense and sensibility; and not only if we are Christians, though the Christian, above all, ought to possess the kind of awareness which reveals at once what is wrong here. We rebel against the facile and painless way in which the poet reconciles himself to the disharmonies and deficiencies of the human condition. Since his ideal is resolute aspiration towards an impossible goal, it follows that restlessness and instability, frustration and stress, far from signifying that all is not well with this world, are to be relished as the very essence of the good life ('Then, welcome each rebuff'). With imperfection so readily translated into its opposite, one might suppose the Atonement to be rendered superfluous. What in fact Browning makes of it can be seen in *Saul*, with its suggestion that without self-denial God would be less than the noblest of his creatures. This springs naturally from his conviction that human devotion at its most intense, with its ability to 'Strive, and hold cheap the strain . . . dare, never grudge the throe!' is, literally, of supreme value. Theologically, what Browning displays here is his ignorance of the fact that the divine perfection of God is neither dependent on nor increased by his compassion for mankind. But again, one does not need to be a Christian to reject this deification of the human capacity for self-sacrifice, or to recognize the justice of Santayana's observation that Browning's religion has little in common with that of the cross.³ Like Dickens, like so many of his contemporaries, Browning retains a good deal of the vocabulary, but hardly anything else of the Christian religion. Dickens, whose ideal life

³My debt to Santayana's invaluable essay on Browning in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* will be obvious to readers familiar with this book, now available in a paperback edition (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1957).

is one of radiant idleness,⁴ and Browning, who prefers zealous industry, may seem an incongruous pair; but their versions of the good life are alike in that both reduce the good to merely human terms. And in this each reveals his kinship with an age which had largely lost its vision of the power and the glory of the omnipotent and omniscient, and with it, its awareness of the goodness which is conferred only from above and beyond this finite, limited world.

This affinity with the age is something which it is easy to overlook. Those whose acquaintance with the Victorian period is dominated by an impression of stern, unbending moralizing might well think of the author of, say, *The Statue and the Bust* as essentially a rebel against the *mores* of his age. It was in this light that E. D. H. Johnson sought to present the poet some years ago. In his book *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry*⁵ he argued that Browning's ideas and beliefs, although superficially in harmony with those of his day, were fundamentally subversive of them. But this would seem to be the reverse of the truth. Thus in the poem just mentioned, the readiness to set aside questions of right and wrong in face of the 'higher' issues of determination and irresolution ('Let a man contend to the uttermost for his life's set prize, be it what it will!') is likely to strike the more casual reader as uncharacteristic of what is generally thought of as the Victorian temper. What is not so immediately apparent, perhaps, is that at a deeper level the 'moral' of the story must have made a strong appeal to a public among whom initiative, enterprise and personal driving force were widely revered. Browning belonged to an age which preached the reliance of the individual on his energies and the virtue of unremitting hard work, and it is this aspect of Victorianism which, in his own way, he exemplifies. For Santayana, his religion recalled the worship of Thor and Odin, but its more immediate and important affinities are with the creed of Samuel Smiles. It is interesting in this connexion to place the *Grammarians' Funeral* by the side of those passages in R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* describing the Puritanism which was to provide the Victorian self-made man with a religious sanction for a life of commercial enterprise. Tawney speaks of the 'practical ascetic whose victories are won not in the cloister, but on the battlefield, in the counting house, and in the market'. One need only add the scholar's study (cloister-like, admittedly, but scene of an activity which is thoroughly

⁴See George Orwell's chapter on Dickens in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*; also my article on Dickens in *BLACKFRIARS*, Nov., 1957.

⁵Princeton University Press, 1952.

secular, and evaluated by Browning in imagery drawn from the counting house) to make this an apt comment on the grammarian. True, Browning does not usually associate the qualities he admires with material success in the typical Victorian manner. They are supposed, on the whole, to be the possession of world forsakers. But of his Early Renaissance scholar, as of many a middle class Victorian, it could be said that he sought 'to hammer out his salvation, not merely *in vocatione* but *per vocationem*', and identified strenuous and exacting enterprise with the service of God.⁶

As for Browning's much discussed optimism, it needs to be emphasized that it helps to place him firmly in his Victorian milieu. In the first place, it does not seem to be sufficiently recognized that if it appears facile, this is not because he believes naively in God, but, as we have seen, in man. His defenders have reminded us often enough that 'God's in his heaven—All's right with the world!' must not be taken out of its context. To heed the advice, and read *Pippa Passes* as a whole, is to learn that the author is indeed very far from thinking that all is right with the world, but that he is convinced that it very well could be—and without any recourse to God in his heaven. Pippa, the unlettered child of nature, whose artless songs transform the lives of those who hear them, is a symbol of Browning's invincible belief in the goodness and innocence of natural man, as is Pompilia in *The Ring and the Book*. Like Pippa, Pompilia ('perfect in Whiteness') responds unhesitatingly to emotional impulse, and is contrasted with a world in which established institutions and traditions corrupt the purity of man's instinctual nature. Mr Johnson sees in this, again, a deep-rooted antagonism to the elaborate system of conventions behind which the Victorians, with their regard for social stability, sought to entrench themselves. But the age which was preoccupied with the need for social stability was also the age of liberalism, in which it was not uncommon to hear preached the original goodness of man. Browning was very far from being alone in his belief that, given the liberation of man's deepest instincts from all traditional restraints, all would be well with the world. He was neither alone nor the finest flower of the tradition he belonged to. And something of what he stands for, one may add, is still very much with us. It will continue to be so for as long as there are those who are avid for news of the man who dies trying to fly further, or climb higher, or drive faster than was possible. Their 'philosophy' might be described as that of the arrested adolescent, and it is blind. Dazzled and mesmerized by the spectacle of

⁶See *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, especially chapter IV, iii.

Herculean endeavour, they do not stop to enquire about ends; the endeavour alone is enough—an end in itself. They are prone to think of their heroes as superhuman beings, of whom it can be said that they (in the words of the lover in Browning's *In a Gondola*) 'have lived indeed'. But passion and physical endurance are, by themselves, grossly inadequate criteria for judging the degree of a person's humanity and the quality of his living.

Perhaps one's final regret is for the fact that Browning achieved so little when he might have accomplished so much. For he was a potential liberator. In love as he was with energy—even savage energy—he was not afraid to try to bring to life in poetry the ugly or sordid, the sharp, the angular and the rough. He was not inhibited by the conventional Victorian restriction of the poet to subjects which evoked tender or exalted emotions, and to a language which was mellifluous and choicely cadenced. Free from those nineteenth century presuppositions which led Matthew Arnold to object to what he called 'the deficiency of the beautiful' in the work of a fellow poet, and which prevented Arnold himself (except on one or two rare occasions) from rendering vividly in his own verse the nineteenth century predicament, Browning might have become a poet capable of bringing home to us, alive on the pulses, all that Arnold meant to convey by 'this strange disease of modern life'. Certainly no other poet, save Gerard Manley Hopkins, had so successfully shaken off the language-habits of contemporary poetry; and it was this that had to be done if 'modern life' (harsh, unlovely and 'unpoetical') were to be illuminated. But Browning's freedom did not extend this far. His unconventional techniques were not, even at best, the means of arriving at and recording the profoundest insights (which are the gift of something more finely organized and developed than that 'primitive feeling' for which Chesterton praised him so highly); and at worst, they were the instruments of what Santayana rightly termed 'the poetry of barbarism'.