

# THE HOMILETIC REVIEW.

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## REVIEW SECTION.

### I. — HARMFUL BOOKS.

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READERS of *The Forum* have undoubtedly been interested in a well conducted series of papers on the suggestive topic, "Books That Have Helped Me." As the caption indicates, the papers have been mainly personal in character, their respective authors aiming to show the varied forms of benefit that they have received in their perusal and study of books. An equally interesting series of articles might be written on the correlative topic, Books That Have Harmed Me. *A priori*, when we speak of books, we speak of good and helpful books, of those to which ex-President Porter refers in his treatise on "Books and Reading," or to those so ably discussed by Prof. Phelps in his "Men and Books."

There are, however, books and there are books, and though, as Mr. Howells tells us, "more good books are read now than ever before," still, the proportion in favor of the bad is greater than ever. Of all forms of evil current, none is more harmful than such a literature, now made so cheap as to be within the reach of the day laborer and even of the idler, and furnishing to thousands of the people the only staple of education. No page will ever record the sad experience of the multitudes of our race who have been injured or ruined by these pernicious volumes, and who, with the bad book in head and heart, have been proof against every moral appeal. It will be our purpose in this paper to call attention to certain generic classes of books that are harmful in character and tendency. As we write, our eye will be specially fixed upon the educated youth of the land, while we intimate to them, as best we may, what not to read.

#### UNWHOLESOME BOOKS.

These belong to the category of the positively immoral, as opposed to that literature which is wholesome and ethically pure. They con-

#### IV.—THE POETRY OF BROWNING: ITS VALUE TO CLERGYMEN.

BY PROF. J. O. MURRAY, D.D., DEAN OF PRINCETON COLLEGE.

PERHAPS there may lurk in the minds of some, though we trust a few only, the question, Had clergymen better give any of their time to reading poetry? Or if they give any, should it not be that only which they may lawfully take for recreation from their sacred duties? We happen to know of one hard-working and successful pastor in one of our city churches—a man as devoted to theological study as he is to pastoral work—who always takes with him on his Adirondack trips his well-worn copy of Milton's "Paradise Lost." We strongly suspect he gives beside many a quiet hour in his study to other great poets. But the feeling of some is that except in vacations the minister has his hands too full of higher matters to justify him in giving any attention to poets and poetry; that his studies must be absorbingly biblical, with perhaps a few outside to help him get up sermons; that he will only disqualify himself for the most effective pulpit work should he attempt anything like serious and constant study of the poets.

The best answer perhaps to this fallacious view, in so far as it exists, may be furnished in an exposition of what the study of a poet like Robert Browning can do for a minister in direct furnishings for his calling. Let the way be cleared, however, for such an unfolding by a few "general observations."

There is a class of minds so hopelessly utilitarian in their philosophy that we despair of any success in convincing them. They belong to the so-called practical people, who can praise Pascal for inventing the omnibus,\* but who think this was also the best outcome of his amazing genius, since his other writings deal only with matters of doctrine or abstruse mathematical speculation. So there are people born with no ear for music, no eye for color. We must simply accept them as God has made them, and be thankful they are so few.

The study of poetry by ministers is not for the purpose of making sermons poetical. In the early days of the English Church sermons were sometimes put into rhyme for the sake of arresting the attention of the people. But nobody wishes to have a poetical air about the sermon. Such study may at times give a preacher the use of a poetical quotation. If suitably done, the hush that steals over a congregation as it is recited attests its power and its usefulness. A glance at Dr. Shedd's "Discourses to the Natural and to the Spiritual Man," or Dr. W. M. Taylor's "Limitations of Life," will show how effectively two masters in opposite styles of sermonizing can use their studies among the poets.

\* *Vide* Tulloch's "Life of Pascal," p. 51.

Not, indeed, to make poetical sermons, but to cultivate the imaginative side of our being, to rouse all our mental power by stirring the depths of emotion, to make us less prosaic and more keen-sighted in the comprehension of life and its problems—this is what a study of poetry can do and has done for many a hard-working parish minister. Dr. Tucker of Andover Theological Seminary, we understand, makes a study of some poets part of his homiletical course. In this he is wise. As incidental training, nothing could be better adapted to make effective preachers.

Aside from all this, such studies would prepare ministers to appreciate far more fully the glorious poetry of the Bible. How many of the ministry after all feel this, or are able to tell their people what the secret of its power is! They praise it in the hackneyed and set phrases of immemorial usage. But if they were to try to set forth in a lecture what the poetic elements really are in the Book of Job, or the Psalter, or the Prophets, they might be somewhat at a loss. They could not be if they had made themselves familiar with the best of uninspired poetry, specially if they brought some critical study to bear upon it.

And yet the clergyman may be pardoned if he stops to select, and to select carefully, his authors in the vast poetic field. Some he must neglect, for life is short and his necessary reading is long. Some he can well afford to neglect. He need not give much time to the love-lyrics of Herrick. He can afford to let the "fleshly school" of poetry severely alone. But there are poets like Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Browning whom he neglects to his own cost. For they can help him to better work as well as give him the delight and the culture true poetry can freely bestow. What, then, of Browning? A word or two on his personal history. Robert Browning was born at Camberwell, near London, May 7, 1812, and is therefore now in his seventy-sixth year of age. He cannot, like most of his great compeers in English literature, be called university bred, for he is a graduate of neither Oxford nor Cambridge, and is only said "to have attended some lectures" at the London University. In 1832 he went to Italy, where he made close studies of the Italian people in every condition of life and devoted himself to the study of mediæval times and characters. The fruit of all this is seen in his poetic works. His first poem, "Pauline," appeared in 1833, followed by his "Paracelsus" in 1835. The latter poem especially, satisfied the discerning few that a poet of high order had risen to divide the honors with Tennyson, then also looming on the horizon a bright particular star. Since that time Mr. Browning has been incessantly at work, "bringing forth fruit in old age," until his poetry is more voluminous than that of any other English poet. It may be admitted that, like Wordsworth's work, it must suffer some elimination. But the large residue is poetic work of the highest order. The range is wide from "How they brought the good news from Ghent to

Aix" to the "Ring and the Book." Yet Browning is essentially a dramatic poet, more so perhaps in his dramatic monologues and dramatic lyrics than in such dramas as his historical tragedy, "Strafford." But dramatic poetry is apt to be richest in its lessons for religious teachers, because it deals with the human soul in its deepest passions. Of all poets, Shakespeare is the best study for clergymen, and the verdict of competent criticism has awarded to Robert Browning the high praise of being more Shakespearian in his treatment of human life than any poet since Shakespeare wrote.

There has been indeed loud and long complaint against what is called the *obscurity* of Browning. He has been curtly dismissed by many, who say he is hard to read and hard to understand. It is only the blind partisanship of a Browning *cult* which refuses to see anything of this in their idol. He is not always easy reading. Not seldom he must be read over and perhaps over again before his meaning is grasped. We freely admit his poetic diction to be rough at times, and he seems to have a delight in rugged versification. Alas, however, for our age, the vice of which it is that it craves only *easy* reading. The voracious appetite for fiction has made many unwilling to make any effort toward comprehending an author. Sermons that tax thinking power in the pews are apt to go a-begging. Browning in all his best poetry is not obscure to those who are willing to make an honest effort to take in his meaning. It is not that Browning is obscure, but that some of his critics are shallow, that makes the trouble.

It ought to draw all religious teachers to this poet, that in all his poetic interpretation of external nature "it is not the order and regularity in the processes of the natural world which chiefly delight [his] imagination, but *the streaming forth of power and will and love from the whole face of the visible universe.*"\* How exactly this coincides with the view of nature given in the inspired poetry of such a Psalm as the 104th! "A law of nature means nothing to Mr. Browning if it does not mean the immanence of power and will and love." Hence, when he is describing the flooding light of an Oriental noonday he finds words like these convey his thoughts :

*"He glows above  
With scarce an intervention, presses close,  
And palpitatingly, His soul o'er ours."*

Compare this with the view of God in nature set forth in the strophes of the 104th Psalm. It is evident that the Hebrew and the English poet use the same lyre and sweep its strings with the same touch. Surely a poet who looks out on nature with such an eye ought to be the study of men who are compelled to protest against a "science falsely so called" which beholds the created universe only to say, "*Here's law. Where's God?*"

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\* Professor Dowden. The italics are ours.

It is not, however, as the poet of nature but as the poet of the human soul that Browning has achieved his best work. Rev. Prof. Westcott has most aptly said, "he recognizes rarely and as it were at a distance the larger life of humanity, but the single soul in its discipline, its progress, its aspirations, its failures, is the main object of his study, analysis and portraiture." "Little else is worth study," Browning says himself.\* A large class of his poems are a dramatic unfolding of the darker passions of the human soul. Shakespeare has not more keenly analyzed nor more graphically portrayed the working of the human conscience. Nor does any poet deal as Browning does with the "corrupt semblances, the hypocrisies, formalisms, and fanaticisms of man's religious life."

What his power is in depicting human passion can perhaps best be seen in "The Ring and the Book." All through it are found no lay figures, but men and women, actual flesh and blood creations, giving vent to every form of passion. Its characters range through the entire scale of human nature. It is a poem too of awful contrasts—the womanly innocence of Pompilia and the consummate villainy of Count Guido. What is there in Shakespeare more finely said than this passage on temptation :

. . . "Was the trial sore?  
Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time.  
Why comes temptation but for man to meet,  
And master, and make crouch beneath his foot,  
And so be pedestalled in triumph? Pray,  
'Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!'  
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,  
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,  
Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,  
That so he may do battle and have praise."

The "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is a poem which will well illustrate Browning's treatment of false forms of religion. It is a picture of "superstition which has survived religion," while in "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" we have an "Antinomian predestinarianism" drawn with a graphic power only equaled by the portrait of the persecutor in the "Heretic's Tragedy."

And the treatment of conscience by Browning is only second, if it is second, to Shakespeare's handling of this subject in his great tragedies. "Paracelsus," "Pippa Passes," "Sordello," all are masterpieces in this analysis of its workings. Browning delights also in studies of life as a school of moral discipline. He believes profoundly in man's capacity for moral progress. His creed is found in lines like these from "A Death in the Desert":

. . . "Man . . .  
Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,  
And in this striving

\* Dedication to *Sordello*,

Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone—  
 Not God's and not the beast's: God is, they are,  
 Man partly is and wholly hopes to be. . . .

Getting increase of knowledge, since he learns  
 Because he lives, which is to be a man  
 Set to instruct himself by his past self."

His early poem, "Paracelsus," embodies clearly this conception, wrought out in his life. The career of Paracelsus is traced from his wreck of manhood in the desire for *knowledge*, to its redemption through *love*. He "stands at last where the Christian is enabled by faith to stand at first. He is humbled, broken, purified."

The poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is another which embodies the poet's philosophy of life. "Our present life is to be taken in its entirety. . . . Its lets and limitations are not to be disparaged and overborne, but accepted and used in due order. Each element in human nature is to be allowed its proper office. Each season brings its own work and its own means." No quotation can do it justice, but a single stanza may reveal its spirit.

"Grow old along with me !  
 The best is yet to be,  
 The last of life, for which the first was made :  
 Our times are in His hand  
 Who saith, 'A whole I planned.  
 Youth shows but half ; trust God ; see all, nor be afraid.'"

Even more suggestive is Browning's unfolding of the view that life means final success through repeated failures. He teaches that an acknowledged failure is a promise of future attainment. It springs often from the corruption of man's heart. It comes too through our environments, specially a deprivation of needed helps to success. Take his little poem on "Apparent Failures." Its closing stanza reveals the poet's philosophy of failure :

"It's wiser being good than bad,  
 It's safer being meek than fierce,  
 It's fitter being sane than mad.  
 My own hope is, a sun will pierce  
 The thickest cloud earth ever stretched,  
 That after Last, returns the First ;  
 That which began best can't end worst,  
 Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst."

This note is frequent. It is struck in "Abt Vogler," in "Saul," in "Popularity," in "James Lee." He is the poet of Hope, and his philosophy of failure as a discipline for final success reminds us over and over again of Shakespeare's immortal lines :

"The worst is not  
 So long as we can say, 'This is the worst.'"

It is only, however, when we consider Browning as *pre-eminently the Christian poet* that his claims for study by ministers can be fully set

forth. Professor Corson has put the matter well when he says that "Browning is the most essentially Christian of living poets." He is such beyond a doubt. "Christianity is with [him], and this he sets forth again and again, in a *life* quickened and motivated and nourished by the Personality of Christ." There are two of his poems which perhaps convey most fully this aspect of his poetry. They are his "Christmas Eve" and his "Easter Day." Perhaps, his "Death in the Desert" also should be named. These poems embody what he conceives to be the essential spirit of Christianity. It is St. John rather than St. Paul whose spirit Browning has embodied. But he is attracted to St. John because he finds there most powerfully drawn out the power in Christ's divine personality. This, rather than any dogmatic statement of the atonement, has fascination for Browning. It may not be the whole truth, but it is a truth of Christianity immense in its power as it is soul-subduing in its conception.

There is one poem, "Bishop Blougram's Apology," which should be studied by every clergyman. It is said to be a picture of Cardinal Wiseman. But whether this be so or not, it is an amazing vivisection of worldliness in the garb of sanctity. Nothing like it can be found in the whole range of English poetry.

Of Browning as the poet of God and immortality we have not space to treat. Enough, however, has been said to show how deeply his poetry is imbued with truths and views of life which clergymen are concerned to grapple with. The poet is a seer. He may see deeper into the meaning of life, after all, than the so-called and much-vaunted *practical* man, who thinks he understands human life because he is well up in all the tricks of the trades or the caucus. We do well to study life as these seers of the soul embody it for us. No attempt has been made to set forth any presentation of Browning's poetic genius. That is many-sided. But its discussion belongs rather to the literary than to the homiletic magazine. We have only aimed to show that here is a great living poet whom our clergy cannot afford to neglect. One word by way of counsel to any who may be inclined to study him. Get Professor Corson's "Introduction to Browning" and read it first. That will disclose the secret of Browning's power. Read then the poems named in this article, and let alone those called the more obscure. There is plenty in Robert Browning against which no hint of obscurity will be charged. One thing is certain, that he is growing more and more in favor with thoughtful people, and has helped many souls into a nobler life. Can the clergy afford to let alone any poet of whom this can be said?