

The Religion of Tennyson and Browning.

BY THE REV. W. J. DAWSON.

WHEN the complete history of Victorian poetry is written, one of its most marked features will be found in the paramount influence which religion has had upon it, and that influence has had its completest expression in the words of Tennyson and Browning. Speaking in a general way, it may be said that the theological movement in modern poetry began with Cowper. "The burden of this unintelligible world" lay heavy upon Cowper's delicate and sensitive spirit; nor is there in the whole range of poetry a bitterer cry of spiritual anguish than that which vibrates in his well-known lines:—

Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,
Scarce can endure delay of execution,
Wait with impatient readiness to seize
My soul in a moment.
Man disavows and Deity disowns me :
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter,
Therefore Hell keeps her ever-hungry mouths
All bolted against me.

But with the solitary exception of Cowper, whose unhappy personal history may account for much of his religious despair, the religious note is not struck among the earlier poets of the nineteenth century. Scott stands far aloof from all religious problems, and contents himself with reviving the old troubadour spirit of martial glow and chivalry. Byron sings of passion; and whatever were his theological speculations, they find but the faintest and most fugitive reflection in his poetry. Shelley is in desperate revolt against Christianity, but after his first burst of angry denunciation, drifts away into sensuous nature-worship; and, since no one had taught him that God was love, invents for himself the axiom that love is God. Keats was purely pagan, and Wordsworth's religion is again a form of nature-worship, purer and calmer than Shelley's, and admirably expressed in his own lines:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky :
So was it when my life began,
So is it now I am a man,
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die !
The child is father of the man ;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each in *natural piety*.

When we come to Tennyson and Browning, we are conscious of an entire change of theme and temper. For the first time religious problems are eagerly debated, analysed, and discussed, and the noblest, and what seems likely to prove the most enduring, work of each poet is that large section of his poetry in which his religious views and aspirations are expressed.

It is scarcely surprising that Tennyson should be a great religious poet. He was, as we should say in Scotland, "a son of the manse". Reared in what may be described as the cloistral calm and seclusion of clerical life in England, familiar with sacred things from his infancy, absorbing a delicate spiritual culture in every impression of his home and childhood, it is but natural that the spell of religion should have touched his whole life of thought and labour. His poems abound in allusions to things ecclesiastic: the font, the chime of bells ringing to each other through the Christmas rime, the gnarled yew tree whose roots grasp the bones of buried sires, the clock in the church-tower which measures out the lives of men, the holy sacrament, where the

Kneeling hamlet drains
The chalice of the grapes of God :

these are all pictures stamped upon the brain by the environment of childhood and early life. Probably no one who had not been reared under the shadow of the Church could have written "In Memoriam". Its very form is hymnal; it is indeed one long collection of sacred hymns, to which we seem to hear the mellow diapason of accompanying organ music, thro'

The height, the gloom, the space, the glory,

of some noble minister, sanctified by the traditions of the ages. So true is this, that it may be doubted whether any reader who is not familiar with the reverent forms of life which the Church of England has nourished, can fully appreciate the more delicate beauties of the poem. And in other poems, such as "Sir Galahad" and "St. Agnes Eve," the same tendency is noticeable. It would not be difficult to imagine the poems of Tennyson as having been written in a quiet country rectory, so complete is the religious spirit which pervades them. Crabbe was a country rector, but his poetry is not nearly so religious in its tone as Tennyson's. If I may use a familiar phrase so as not to be misunderstood, I might say that Tennyson's is not a "worldly" muse: it is from first to last controlled by a religious gravity, and is profoundly serious and devout.

Browning, on the other hand, was a man of the world, in the sense that he belonged to no particular section of the community, and was singularly free from all sectional bias. Yet Browning also was from the first a religious poet. He was reared in Nonconformity, which usually imparts to its children a certain robustness of thought, if it frequently fails to instil anything like æsthetic reverence. Had

not Browning been a Nonconformist, he would doubtless have been educated in one of the great Universities; and who can estimate at what loss to the daring of his genius? As it was, he breathed the atmosphere of a strong secular life, and learned early to think for himself. When some one asked him once where he was educated, he replied, "In the University of Italy," for he was an early lover of that most inspiring of countries. But another element of his education, which was not suggested in this epigrammatic reply, was found in the Nonconformist environment of his childhood. South London sixty years ago was a perfect hotbed of theological controversy. It was in South London that the strange and almost numberless sects of the Commonwealth took refuge when the Restoration drove them into the obscurest hiding-places. Perhaps there is such a thing as theological heredity: any way, South London has always been a seminary of theological life, and the largest congregation in the world, which is attracted by any dissenting minister, has worshipped for the last quarter of a century in Newington Butts. It was a most natural thing that Browning from youth, therefore, should have had a bent toward theological discussion. While Tennyson from childhood must have felt the charm of religion, Browning felt its problems: while one was trained to feel, the other was trained to think. The difference in the training is accurately reflected in the work of the two poets: it is the difference between "In Memoriam" and "A Death in the Desert".

It is characteristic of Browning that his first poem, "Pauline," largely concerns itself with religious problems. Already he is a doubter, but it is with that species of doubt "which doubts men's doubts away". The battle of religious perplexity must have come early to Browning, and it is clear that he obtained a complete victory. How terrible that struggle was, however, we may judge by such distant echoes of the battle as come to us in "Pauline". It was surely a soul in the last grip of spiritual struggle which could exclaim:

A mortal, sin's familiar friend, doth here
Avow that he will give all earth's reward,
But to believe and humbly teach the faith,
In suffering, and poverty, and shame,
Only believing he is not unloved.

Nor does he leave us without a clue to the method of his deliverance when he says:

I have always had one love-star: now,
As I look back, I see that I have wasted
Or progressed as I looked toward that star—
A need, a trust, a yearning after God.
I felt as one beloved, and so shut in
From fear; and thence I date my trust in signs
And omens, for I saw God everywhere;
And I can only lay it to the fruit
Of a sad aftertime, that I could doubt
Even His being—having always felt

His presence, never acting from myself,
Still trusting in a Hand that leads me through
All danger: and this feeling still has fought
Against my weakest reason and resolve.

Above all, in "Pauline" Browning has already grasped one truth, which was his rock of refuge to the last, when he tells us he was "sure of goodness as of life". In that resolute and intelligent optimism Browning never faltered. He saw life as a good thing, and God as the infinite Good. And from that belief there naturally sprang a cluster of other beliefs—the perfectibility of man, the nobleness of human impulse—

So glorious is our nature, so august—
Man's inborn, uninstructed impulses,
His naked spirit so majestic—

the divine ministry of suffering, the futility of evil, and the final triumph and consummation of good—a conviction expressed with superb force in the last poem he ever wrote, when he tells us he was one who—

Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right was worsted, wrong would
triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep or
wake.

So far as we can fathom the spiritual history of Robert Browning it is the story of a brief but tremendous battle ending in an assurance of faith, so exhilarating and triumphant, that we know no parallel to it among the great poets of this or any other time.

Tennyson also is a doubter, and has passed through the deep waters of religious perplexity, but with a difference of experience. In the early poems of Tennyson there is no indication of spiritual struggle. They are musical, sensuous, lovely: works of metrical art for which the love of art is a sufficient explication. It was not until Arthur Hallam died in 1833 that Tennyson entered into the cloud of religious perplexity. The period from 1833 to 1850—the year in which "In Memoriam" was published, is the most interesting period in Tennyson's history, and precisely that of which we know least. He is found in many places, wandering hither and thither, a solitary man, pondering the deep mysteries of sorrow, and slowly building up his immortal lament for his dead friend. Portions of the poem were written in Lincolnshire, London, Essex, Gloucestershire, Wales, and perhaps in many other localities of which we know nothing. Probably during this period he was poor, and the combined forces of solitude, poverty, and sorrow were sufficient to test to the utmost the quality of his nature. The main thing, however, to be observed is this, that Tennyson's doubts were bred of circumstance, while Browning's were the fruit of intense intellectual acuteness acting in union with an imagination of extraordinary vividness and force. If no

great sorrow had overtaken Tennyson, it is very possible that he would have been content with an entirely commonplace acceptance of religious truth, and it is certain the character of his poetry would have been wholly different. But Browning's intellect was too keenly analytic to have been content with any merely commonplace orthodoxy, and he did not need the pressure of personal sorrow to drive him into the region of religious speculation. Here, then, the two poets stand strongly differentiated. Browning has an inborn love of controversy, partly due to his Nonconformist training, but mainly to the analytic force of his own genius: Tennyson is forced out of a sensuous artistic content into religious speculation by the pressure of sorrow, but feels the atmosphere to be alien and hurtful to him nevertheless. To Tennyson doubt is a "spectre of the mind": Browning recognises it as a process of the intellect, and tells us—

You must mix some uncertainty
With faith, if you would have faith be.

These two pregnant quotations precisely indicate the intellectual differences of the two men.

This essential difference of temperament and history colours completely the religious views of the two poets. Browning's grasp on truth is always much firmer, and his understanding of truth more robust, than Tennyson's. Tennyson is the greater artist, but Browning is the greater mind. The intellectual equipment of Tennyson is not equal to the artistic, and consequently he suffers many fluctuations of hope, and his vision is frequently obscured. He is not consistently hopeful, because his vision is not consistently clear. He often falters

Where he firmly trod;
And falls with all his weight of cares
Upon the world's great altar-stairs,
Which slope through darkness up to God.

More than once he has relapsed into sheer pessimism, and has written verses full of a bitter vehemence and querulousness. His view of society has varied between the extremes of extravagant hope and equally extravagant unhopefulness, the best illustration of which may be found in the two "Locksley Halls". Yet, upon the whole, he has clung to religious optimism, though often as one believing in his unbelief. He feels that somehow good is the final goal of ill, that there is a triumphant issue to the difficulties of humanity—

The one far-off divine event
To which the whole creation moves;

and he is one with Browning in his faith in Christ, his belief in prayer, his love of purity, his strenuous devotion to righteousness, his worship of duty. In the writings of no English poet are the ethics of Christianity so nobly stated and enforced as in the poetry of Tennyson.

But the singular and striking thing about Browning is that through the more than fifty years of his ardent intellectual toil he never once knew what it was to falter in his religious faith. He is always optimistic, consistently and intelligently optimistic in all his views of man and society, striking one long reverberating note of certainty and good cheer in all his writings, from first to last. One of his most optimistic poems is written in the very sanctuary of despair—the Morgue. Even there, standing before the ghastly tragedy of life, he can remind himself—

My own hope is a sun shall pierce
The thickest cloud earth over-stretched,
That after Last returns the First,
Though a wide compass first be fetched;
That what began best can't end worst,
Nor what God blest once prove accurst.

Theologically put, both he and Tennyson believe in universal restoration, and the future is coloured for both by their great hope. But what Tennyson puts half-doubtingly, Browning announces with triumphant vigour and assurance. He does not permit us to coquet with doubt; he takes our doubt up and pulverises it, and, with mingled irony, logic, and banter, laughs or shames us out of our hopeless moods. Some one has well said, "Blessed is he who heals us of our self-despairings". That beatitude has been fairly earned by Robert Browning. He makes us feel the weakness of despair. And in his robust presence we catch a glow of exhilarating health and hope. Much more might be said, but my space is ended. I simply indicate a line of suggestion which my readers may profitably follow out for themselves. The religious influence of Browning and Tennyson on their times has been immense, and is likely to be an increasing influence; nor is it possible to overstate the service rendered to Christianity by two such lives as these—each lived without the shadow of moral error, each devoted to the truth, and each permeated with a noble Christian faith which finds abundant illustration in writings which must secure the attention and admiration of men through many generations of the future.

Reading the Word.

BY THE REV. W. M. TAYLOR D.D.

I begin with the reading of the Word of God. They tell in Scotland that when a worthy minister in Aberdeenshire was remonstrated with for making this exercise a prominent part of public worship, he turned to the title-page of the Bible, which is printed in Great Britain by royal authority, and showed them these words: "By His Majesty's special command appointed to be read in churches". But we have "another King, one Jesus," and when we learn that "He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up for to read," we have the highest warrant for bringing into the foremost place in the exercises of the sanctuary the Word of the living God.