

## Robert Browning's poetry and philosophy: Beacon of supreme truth and love in this materialistic terra firma

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### Abstract

Robert Browning was regarded as a sage and philosopher-poet in Victorian era of English Literature. His philosophy and writing was based on divinity, love and truth intended to save people of his age by supplementing the defects of science and counteracting the intellectual narrowness. Browning influenced upon faith into the materialistic and skeptic age of the then time which is equally applicable in modern days. The findings of this paper suggests that Browning's philosophy and poetry was different from other poets and writers of his time and completely based in search of divinity, supreme truth and love as a self-saving idea to establish the notion that literature and art forms are not only for mere amusement and escape from the miserable and painful human life but the medium to find the ultimate truth of life.

**Keywords:** divinity, love, truth, materialism, science, intellectualism

### Introduction

That lost traveler who yearns for home, who strayed without a guide in dark forest, takes many times the wrong road, goes, returns upon his steps, is discouraged, sits down at a crossing of the roads, utters cries to which no one responds, resumes his march with frenzy and pain, throws himself upon the ground and wants to die, and reaches home at last only after all sorts of anxieties and after sweating blood.' The underlying idea behind these lines, spoken of Pascal in another context, is shared by Browning also. He had strong faith in his vision for 'the ideal dawn'.

'Haply for us the ideal dawn shall break...  
And set our pulse in tune with moods divine',-

The poet believes in nothing short of the return journey, for one and all, toward 'an illustrious origin'. In the age of disbelief and despair his profound faith in the destiny of man 'attests a moral nature of a high rank and a mental nature stamped with the seal of the archangel'.

Browning is a poet of the Romantic Age which is characterized by individualism and freedom and not of submission to authority. The influence of the age-its 'sick hurry' and 'divided aims'-its feverish ardor and one-sided views-is reflected in the works of the celebrities of the period. The melancholy tone of the age (Age of Romanticism) is reflected in writings of Carlyle, Sorrow is the life of poets, it is the key to their thought-it is another name for seriousness'. To Ruskin the age is characterized by ennui, jaded intellect and want of faith leading to chaos, Confusion and unrest and distraction. Indeed it was the age of Werther, of Rene, of Faust, of Paracelsus, of Obermann.' Even the 'sincerest laughter of Shelley is fraught with some pain'. William Wordsworth had learnt to hear often with some pain the 'still sad music of humanity'. Against this of the sick age, the poet is looked upon as a beacon -light assuring the voyagers on the sea of life. His faith in God and his ordination on the unfolding fruition of His Love

conveying the practical message of hope and love is calculated to regenerate the world of the future, vibrating with new life pulse and new sympathies. Indeed he is one of the constellations of brilliant stars that illumined the poetic sky of the period.

To evaluate his philosophy we must have a grasp over the spirit of the age. The French Revolution was transformed into a movement of bitter despair. It finally manifested itself into a succession of reactionary convulsions that threatened to uproot the fabric of society. It was the bread-riots, Chartist agitation, *coup-de-etat*, Fenian out-breaks, 'Oxford Movement' which rudely shocked the cherished beliefs of the people. Skepticism, agnosticism, nihilism and socialism were in the air. This is epitomized in the lines of Cowper:

'... an impious world  
Who deem religious frenzy, and the God  
That made them, an intruder on the joys.'

'To have felt the growing difficulties of faith, and the increasing intellectual anarchy in the year between 1832 and 1851, one must have been born some year later than Tennyson, and to have known Oxford in those days...' In the words of Mr. Froude the like the youths of the time were whirling leaves in autumn storm.

Browning was born in 1812. Standing on the terra-firma of unshakable faith in God, he never swayed away like his great compeers by the strong current of intellectual aberration. His parentage, his early education, mode of living was all favorable to the magnificent growth of an original crop of poetry, free from formalism and traditionalism. Rather he popularized Absolute God of the Vedas in his works. He was a genius. He had too much originality, and far too large a share of that 'vision and faculty divine'. He never took 'art as a mere amusement, as a mere escape from the graver problems of life.' He did belong to the class of poets who are dubbed as 'idle singer of an empty day'. Although he was a poet of the Romantic

Age, the contemporary events are not reflected in his poems. He was more concerned in the superhuman task or salvaging the ship-wrecked people condemned to intellectual morbidity of the soul. He made a splendid spade –work to clear the debris, as if, being called forth by the peculiar exigencies of an age. He focused the life-saving ideas of God and Love. These two Concepts are looked upon as lifebelts to the ship-wrecked passengers on an unchartered ocean.

'Europe in the years 1847 and 1848', says Dowden in his life of Robert Browning, 'was like a sea broken by wave Revolutionary passion. 'The sad lucidity of soul' was an echo of the age of morbid intellectualism caused by the doctrines of Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling and also by the materialistic science in the hands of Darwin Huxley, Lamarck and others. The iconoclastic tendency of the period also shook the foundation of traditional art and poetry. "The poetry of Mathew Arnold reflects, along certain lines even more faithfully than the poetry of either (i.e. Tennyson or Browning) some peculiar significance of 19th century thought." (Cambridge History of English Literature).

Shelley, Keats and Coleridge turned idealists. Shelley yearned for pure joy and beauty that was remote and unearthly, 'beating in the void his luminous wings in vain'. Keats found delight in pursuing ideal beauty. Wordsworth eschewed the path of 'poetic diction' and arrested our eyes to the common things around us. Browning, in fact, was the only towering personality who remained unperturbed like a rock. His robust faith in God, Love and Truth, his optimism and sense of equality remained undisturbed by the iconoclastic movement of the age. He, like a chivalrous knight of the medieval period, faced the challenge of the hostile thought currents and came out victorious with laurels of faith in one hand and of Love in the other. Politically it was an age of democracy, for philosophers it was the age of humanity, 'respect a person and be a person' being the ethical maxim of Hegel and service to humanity being the religion of Compete.

Browning had a mission to fulfill. He along with the well-meaning men of genius like Goethe, Carlyle, Ruskin, Mathew Arnold, and Tennyson wanted to liberalize and enrich ideas to re-construct art, to uplift people by opening their eyes to higher possibilities. Browning wanted to save people of his age by supplementing the defects of science and counteracting the intellectual narrowness of philosophy through poetry. 'Faith in God'

'Sun-treader, I believe in God, and truth and love' (Pauline). Browning's creed has been put in a nut-shell here. It is really surprising, for it required a good deal of moral courage to make this plain and bold confession in that age of skepticism and unbelief. The greatest intellectuals were being carried helplessly by the strong current of agnosticism. It affected even Tennyson and Arnold. Tennyson could not attain optimism clear of all doubts. Arnold could not claim full faith; but defined God as 'a stream of tendency, not ourselves, making for righteousness'. Browning alone remained unmoved like a rock. 'In fact, faith is the starting point of his philosophy, as of his poetry, as *cogito ergo sum* is the starting point of Descartes' philosophy'. He applied his talent to infuse faith and life into the materialistic and skeptic age. He never totally deprecated the worth of 'cosmogony, Geology, Ethnology' but at the same time he had no intention to keep people in the darkness of ignorance. He saw with dismay the

pernicious effects of the pseudo-believers who relapse into a state of barbarism. He would not have men,

'Believe- and yet lie, kill, rob, fornicate,  
Full in belief's face, like the beast you'd be.'

He simply wanted to infuse more love, more feelings, and more wisdom for the complete fruition of the intellectual advancement. He did not consider that full faith was incompatible with full knowledge in any way. But he would 'prefer' He would not give any reason for his belief. He repudiated the pretensions of pure intellect to understand such transcendental things. 'Like a man in wrath' he would lodge protest against all disbeliefs. So in 'Easter Day' he says:

'God is, thou art, - the rest is hurled  
To nothingness for thee.'

The poet has recorded how he got the glimpse of God in 'Paracelsus' through intuition-  
'The secret of the world was mine  
I knew, I felt, (perception unexpressed),  
Uncomprehended, by our narrow thought.'

He had faith in personal God and Christ. He referred to his conception of Absolute God 'as the Supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their Absolute Truth'. The spirit of God fills every bit of the Universe- flowers, trees, animals. He sang the Joy of Immortal life.

Browning had faith in the personal God. He was devoted to Christ. He also could 'entertain the idea of absolute God without any sense of incongruity,' the subtle and complex ramifications of life are being interpenetrated by this absolute idea which transcends passions and senses. His faith in God gave him the insight to feel the presence of God in everything – in good and bad, in great and small and in success and failure. This idea enabled him to grasp the conception of the Universal in the body of the particular. In all the cases we find the discovery of Absolute God in some transcendental moment through intense emotion of love. He viewed the universe standing upon bedrock of Absolute God. He had tremendous love for God which culminated in his love for man- low and high. The solid world melted and dissolved before ardent love.

But mechanical and soulless ceremonies and rituals stifled his springs of devotion. They had no appeal to him. His catholicity and broadmindedness are reflected in his poems:

'Oh, let men keep their ways  
Of seeking Thee in a narrow shrine-  
Be this my way! And this is mine.'  
(Christmas Eve, V)

'...For me,  
I have my own church equally:  
And in this Church my faith sprang first!  
(Ibid.)

'Why, where's the need of Temple,  
When the walls  
O' the world are that?...  
(Epilogue to Dramatis Personae, XI)

The ordinary man with his limited vision does not get the true view of things around us. In the eye of God all are alike. It is required that the weakness of ordinary man is to

be conquered. Then he shall not be confronted with the idea of joy and sorrow, good and evil.

“Small, great are merely terms we bandy here;  
Since to the spirit’s absoluteness all  
Are alike.”  
(Sordello, VI)  
(p. 613, The Poems of R. Browning)

These sentiments are also echoed by Shelley in his ‘Queen Mab’.

“Every grain  
Is sentient both in unity and part,  
And the minutest atom comprehends  
A world of loves and hatreds; these beget  
Evil and good.”  
(IV. 146)

Browning’s broad and harmonious view of life taught him to see God in everything. Pauline says:

‘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.’

It may be thought that Browning withdrew himself from the dust to din of this hard realistic world into the pure atmosphere of unworldly beauty. Like Wordsworth’s Skylark, he gave full recognition to the limitations of the finite. But the dull, drab, prosaic world of materialism did not attract him. He saw finite soaked with the Infinite. Rainbow hues spread over it. He had tremendous love for man. He loved God with personal love, the same kind of love that subsists between two lovers. He focused the peculiar needs and symptoms of the times with earnestness and sympathy. His message was – ‘all love yet all’s law.’ And the watch- word of the poet was not more knowledge but more love.

In the words of Santayana, ‘he is something far more convincing, far more comforting, far more religiously significant than an optimist’. Milton in his days had justified the ways of God to man in the traditional way. Browning, in the romantic age, took upon himself to justify the ways of God, struggling under the impact of the modern notions of Science and metaphysics.

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