IMPRESSIONS OF BROWNING AND HIS ART.

DRAWN FROM LIFE IN 1886 BY J. W. ALEXANDER. ROBERT BROWNING.

THERE is a good fortune which has not infrequently befallen England. It is to have within her, living at the same time and growing together from youth to age, two great poets of such distinct powers, and of such different fashions of writing, that they illustrate, even to the most unseeing eyes, something of the infinite range of the art of poetry. The immensity of the art they practise reveals itself in their variety; and this is the impression made on us when we look back on the lives of Tennyson and Browning, and remember that they began in 1830–33, and that their last books were published in 1890. They sang for sixty years together, each on his own peak of Parnassus, looking across the Muses' Valley with friendly eyes on each other. The god breathed his spirit into both, but they played on divers instruments, and sang so different a song, that each charmed the other and the world into wonder. One of the summits, alas! is vacant now, and Tennyson sings

alone. It is a solitary height, and he must often think of his brother. Yet, while the god inspires, no singer is alone or weak; and at least once more we who, in too dark an age, still haunt the laureled ledges of the hill may hope to hear the old man sing again, and, rejoicing in the music, think also with love and regret that we shall hear his brother sing no more.

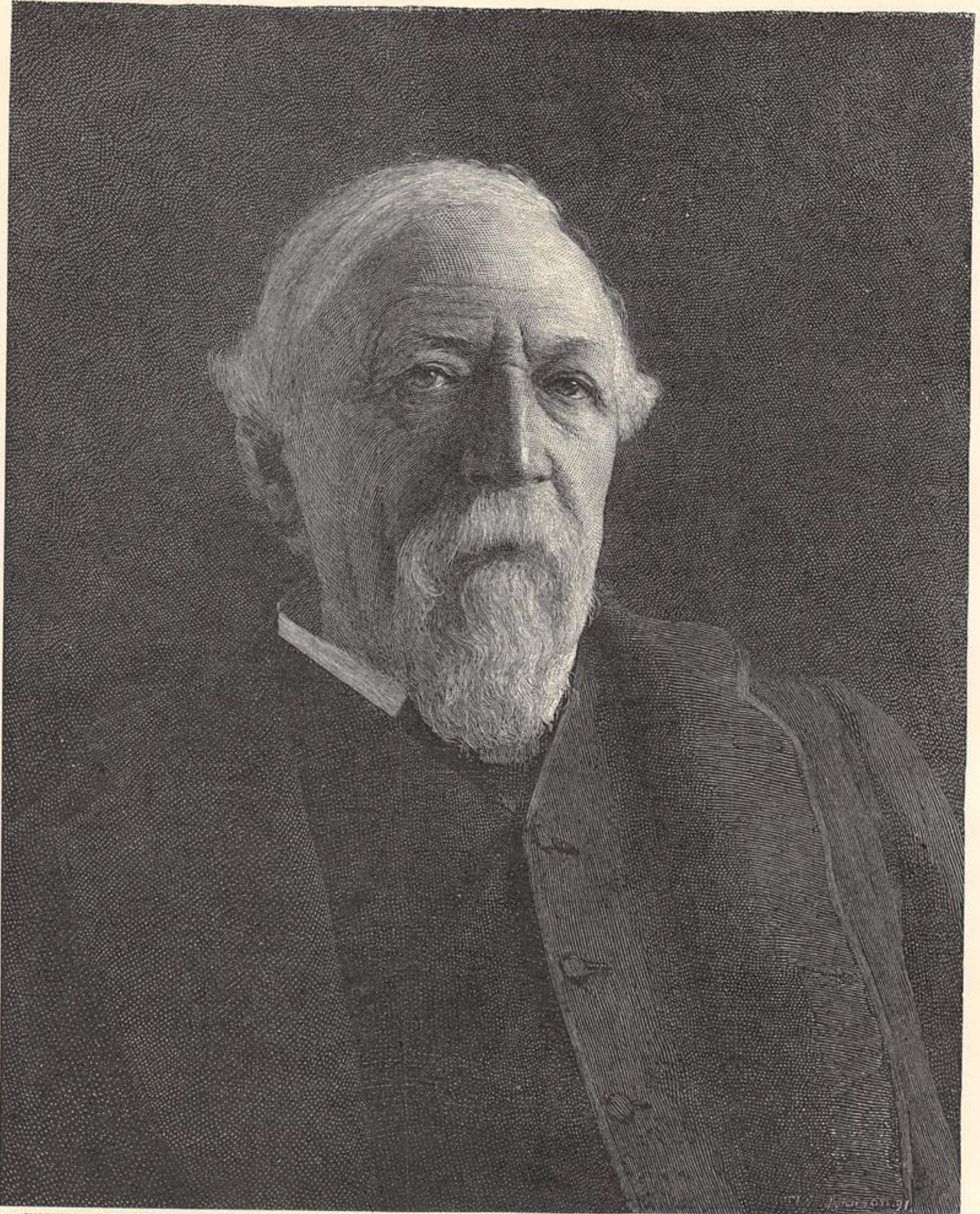
However different they were in development, their poetry arose out of the same national excitement on political, social, and religious subjects. The date of 1832 is as important in the history of English poetry, and as clearly the beginning of a new poetical wave, as the date of 1789. The poetical excitement of 1832 is unrepresented, or only slightly represented, in the poetry of these two men, but the excitement itself kindled and increased the emotion with which they treated their own subjects. The social questions which then grew into clearer form, and were more widely taken up than in the previous years,— the improvement of the condition of the poor, the position of women, education, and labor,— were not touched directly by these two poets; but the question how man may best live his life, do his work, or practise his arts, so as to better humanity — the question of individual development for the sake of the whole — was wrought out by them at sundry times and in divers manners. It is the ground-excitement of "Paracelsus," of "Sordello," of Browning's dramas from "Pippa Passes" onward, of a host of his later poems; of "Maud," of "The Princess,"[1] of the "Idyls of the King," and — to mention one of the latest of a number of Tennyson's minor poems — of "Locksley Hall, or Sixty Years After." The religious questions, both theological and metaphysical, which took in 1832 a double turn in the high-church and broad-church movements were vital elements in Tennyson and Browning. No poets have ever been more theological, not even Byron and Shelley. What original sin means, and what position man holds on account of it, lies at the root of half of Browning's poetry; and the greater part of his very simple metaphysics belongs to the solution of this question of the defect in man. The "Idyls of the King" Tennyson has himself declared to be an allegory of the soul on its way to God. I was sorry to hear it, but I have not the same objection to the theology of a poem like "In Memoriam," which plainly claims and has a religious aim.

Both men were then moved by the same impulses; and long after these impulses in their original form had died, these poets continued to sing of them. In a changed world their main themes remained unchanged. Different then as they were from each other,— and no two personalities were ever more distinct,— there was yet a far-off unity in this diversity. In all the various songs they made the same dominant themes recur.

Along with this difference of personality and genius there was naturally a difference of development. The growth of Tennyson has been like that of an equal-growing tree, steadily and nobly enlarging itself, without any breaks of continuity, from youth to middle age, and from that to old age. The growth of Browning was like that of a tree which should thrice at least change its manner of growing, not modified so much by circumstances as by a self-caused desire to shoot its branches forth into other directions where the light and air were new. He had what Tennyson had not — an insatiable curiosity. Had he been in the Garden of Eden he would have eaten the fruit even before the woman. He not only sought after and explored all the remote, subtle, or simple phases of human nature which he could find when he penetrated it in one direction, he also changed his whole direction thrice, even four times, in his life. East, west, south, and north he went, and wherever he went he frequently left the highroads, and sought the strange, the fanciful places in the scenery of human nature. Men have divided his work into three manners or periods, and if the divisions are not too defined, there is some truth in the opinion; but it must be remembered that on whatever line he was he had a habit of momentarily wearying of it and of flying back to the line he had apparently abandoned, suddenly picking up again old interests and old forms of verse. That is clearly to be seen in successive volumes, and it appears in "Asolando," his last book. In the very year he died he reverts to many of his original types. He was as unfixable as quicksilver, and Silver-all-alive fairly enough expresses him. Nevertheless, there are certain permanent elements in his work, and there is always the same unmistakable, incisive, clear individuality, persistent through all change.

I do not propose to mark out these periods, with their several interests — they lie on the surface; but various as his mind was, these changes of direction made it still more various. I am not sure that the too-restless, the too-curious in him — the overfondness he had for fresh paths and for the complex rather than the simple — did not make him less the great artist than he might have been. But we cannot unmake a man after our own fancy, and when we accept this element in Browning, which is of his very nature, making the best and not the worst of it, we find it to be part of his charm. Those

[1] "The Princess" treats one of these social questions in a way which is none the less effective because, for the sake of art, it is thrown into a mock-heroic form.



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ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

ROBERT BROWNING.

who met him in social intercourse, much more those who companied with him at home, knew how delightful this changeful variety and curiosity made his society; and when, knowing him better, they recognized the unchangeableness of affection, of moral and spiritual ideas and their principles which lay beneath the restless movements of his intellect, they were charmed the more. They passed from delighted acquaintances into faithful friends. Moreover, what he was in society he was as a poet. He has been accused of being too much a man of the world for a poet, too much a *persona grata* in the drawing-room and at the dining-table, too desirous to shine; and the accusation would be of some weight if the cause of it had been apart from his poetic life. But all that in him gave any grounds for this accusation was an integral part of the man, and is equally a part of his poetry. What went on between hearts at the opera, in the morning and evening ride; what this man thought in a corner of the ball-room, and that woman dreamed of as she was dancing; the sudden recollection which brought five minutes' silence to an old man at the dining-table; the talk of a bishop and a nonconformist over their wine; the follies of society when Sludge crawled through it, and a thousand other aspects of that artificial life beneath which the natural heart of man is always moving, are represented by him as a poet, not as a mere looker-on might do, but as one who shared in that life, and was gracious and gentle in it, and saw below its surface things to love, to admire, and to reverence. There was but little which was artificial in Browning's interest in society; he liked as a man to move to and fro in the world, and he liked it also as a poet. We owe a great deal of keen and suggestive work bearing on the true life of men and women to the pleasure, the true sentiment, and the endless curiosity concerning human nature with which Browning went from garden-party to dinner-table, from the dinner-table to the theater, from the theater to the ball. His pleasure and his curiosity were never felt in anything which was slanderous, vile, or ugly, but always in that which belonged to the subtle changes of the nobler passions, to the deep-lying pathos of those dramatic situations which are so common in a very mixed and crowded world, to the transient moments when a great love or sorrow broke irresistibly upward to the surface of society. Of these he was curious, but curious with sympathy and tenderness. He showed the human heart below our conventional life, and he made us see it; and when he did touch what was mean or cruel, he did it with a sacred and fiery indignation. Some have said that he was spoiled by his fondness for the world. It was not the case. He was true and tender and simple in heart to the end. My wonder has always been that a man moving among all ranks in the fashionable world for more than thirty years should have remained so untainted, and kept his soul and his art so clear. He lived in Gaza, Ekron, and all the cities of the Philistines, yet he never served their lords and never made sport for them. Moreover, he was just as pleased, as happy, as interested, gave himself just as much trouble, and was just as much carried away in talk when he was with a few unknown men and women, quite out of the fashion, as he was among persons of great fame or of high rank. One of the first times I met him was in the company of a few young men of no name and position whatever, and I never remember him more brilliant. He seemed enchanted to talk to us, and told us of his youthful life when he was writing "Paracelsus," of all the men he then met, and of what kind they were, and of all his doings with the actors and the stage when he was bringing out "Strafford." As I listened, I seemed to look within and to see arranged in his wonderful memory a multitude of subjects and compositions, as it were, of the scenery of human nature; nor was I less struck with his capacity for bringing forth out of his treasures things new and old, when on a day of his later life, leaning over the balcony of the Hôtel Universo at Venice, he was moved to speak to me of his life in Italy. All that he met he remembered, and what he remembered he naturally composed, like an artist, into drama, or lyric, or narrative in his heart. He had hundreds of unwritten poems within, and could use them when and how he pleased; and if such multitudinousness would have been troublesome, for example, to Tennyson as an artist, it was not a trouble but a stimulant to Browning. He was master of the many "studies" he possessed. He gained them in his social existence, and if he had not lived in this continual to-and-fro of human life, we should have lost not only a large number of those poems which touch and fix lyric moments of passion or conscience or spiritual feeling, but also that incessant by-play of human nature which, carried on by a number of minor characters, fills the background of his larger pieces. There is no need to give examples of this coruscating by-play. Their name is legion, but the putting of them in, the incessant parentheses in which they are inserted, the side-steps he runs out of his main subject to make, the incursions off the road into the wild country, account for a great deal of the obscurity with which slothful persons have charged him, and if they are not quite good art, are at least of extraordinary interest.

Had this love of society of which I speak

made him in any sense false to his art, or led him into suiting his art to society, or using it for the sake of gaining wealth, it would have been very ill-fortuned; but Browning had the profoundest reverence for his art, preferred it to everything else in the world, and followed it with undeviating truthfulness. Had society, bringing with it fame, rank, money, offered them all to him if he would write only to please it, or would sacrifice what his impulse led him at the moment to write, he would have flung society to the winds. The history of the reception of his poetry proves this to the hilt. He was clever enough to catch the public ear if he liked. He sometimes did so in a dramatic lyric, and he might have followed that vein and sold his books. But he followed only that to which his art impelled him, what his own soul loved and enjoyed to shape. It was *not* what the public wanted; and he waited longer than Wordsworth, but with the same consistency and faith in his art, for appreciation. It came at last, and it was received without a word of reproach for past neglect, with a kind of naïve wonder, and with so natural and grateful a humility that I never remember anything so delightful in my whole life.

His knowledge, too, of all that had been done by the poets, both ancient and modern, was like that of Tennyson, very extensive. He loved his art, not only in his own hands, but in the hands of others. There was not a grain of envy or grudge or jealousy of other living poets in his conversation. Even when he did not care for the subjects or the kind of poetry, he appreciated and praised the work. It was characteristic of his searching curiosity and his love of discovery that he was not content with reading the best work of the bygone poets, but sought out the little nooks where some unknown poet had planted one flower, the sole poem of his whole life, and brought it to excellence. Long before Smart's "Song to David" had taken its place in so many collections, I remember his quoting a long passage out of it at a dinner, and well he rolled out, and with special pleasure, this fine verse:

> Strong is the lion — like a coal
> His eyeball — like a bastion's mole
> His chest against the foes:
> Strong the gier-eagle on his sail;
> Strong against tide the enormous whale
> Emerges as he goes.

Eager thus concerning his art, and full of intellectual curiosity concerning human nature as seen in modern society, and in diverse times and countries of the past, it might seem that he would be too analytic or too ethical a poet, and indeed that is the view which many persons who love analysis, or who want a moral foundation for life, take of him. But though he did love to wind in and out of a character like a serpent, as Goldsmith said that Burke did into his subject, and though he had his clear view of the position and the aims of human life, and what could and ought to be done within its limits; and loved to lay these things down as he conceived them, both from the religious and the moral side — the subject-matter he felt the most, and concerning which he wrote his best poetry, was the natural passion of the human heart. It was not the theme of the bulk of his poetry,—he was sometimes too much seduced by his intellectual play and by his theological theories,— but it was at the foundation of his soul. When any phase of it was directly taken as a subject, the poem is more poetical than its comrades. Wherever the natural affections are touched on incidentally in poems which are descriptive, theoretical, or which concern, like "Sordello," the growth of a soul, these passages glow and gleam among the rest. They spring from the inmost fire in him, and kindle his intellectual analysis into life. One example of this, out of many, is "La Saisiaz," in which his friendship with Miss Egerton Smith, whose sudden death gave rise to this book on the "Soul and Immortality," inflames the whole; and I well remember walking home with him through the Park shortly after the poem appeared, and the profound and quiet emotion with which he told me the whole story of her death, of his sorrow and its questioning, and of the way in which the subject took form in his mind. It was rare, at least for me who did not know him intimately, to find Browning in this intense and open mood, and I felt how far and how apart this side of him was from that he showed to the world. Indeed, when he was at his work as an artist he was as lost to the world, as rapt away, as if he were feeding flocks alone with Apollo; yet had society claimed him in the midst of this self-isolation he would have been in fellowship with it in a moment. The last time I saw him, not long before he died in Venice, was in Kensington Gardens. He was seated on one of the benches in the Broad Walk, alone and tired, his head sunk between his shoulders, his body fallen in upon itself. It was the rarest thing in the world to see him thus, for, to the very last, he faced the world erect, like a soldier on parade, and, as I passed on, I could not help thinking with sorrow that the fires were burning low. I did not speak to him; he was so unlike his usual aspect that I felt half ashamed of surprising him, and I did not think he would be pleased. Had I spoken, he would have resumed his bright, bold carriage in a moment, and by some swift, quaint turn of phrase and thought have explained his weary attitude. But, in spite of his physical

abandonment to the hour, it was plain that he was thinking out a poem. He saw and heard nothing, lost in his work; and I was sure, from this sight of him, which I have always kept in view with reverence and pleasure, that when he was "making," as our Scotch neighbors used to say, he was as unconscious of the whole outward world, as far away from it in his own soul, as he was vividly conscious of it when he chose to belong to it. The next thing I heard of him was that he was ill in Venice, and then that he was dead.

It is not fitting, and it would not be just either to him or his art, to appraise or criticize his whole work so shortly after his death. We are as yet too near the star to see it as a whole; and the modernness of Browning makes it extremely difficult for us, who live in the same society of which he wrote, to say what is permanent and what is transient, what belongs to the best art and what to the less excellent, in his poetry. We are liable to be most interested in that which is nearest to the age to which we belong; and it depends on the character of that age whether the poetry which is close to it is likely to be lasting. I do not think that the part of Browning's poetry which has to do with our present unhappy society will continue except as the amusement or the interest of the student. Nor do I think that his special theories concerning the aim of life, its growth and its means, or his metaphysics and his theology, are likely to awaken emotion in, or to reveal beauty to, the men and women who are to come; but all that he wrote in the atmosphere of his passionate humanity will endure, whenever it is expressed in a form not too difficult or too rugged for the multitude of those who, in humility, love nature and human nature. There is nothing really obscure in Browning; his thoughts are clear enough to himself, and a few simple clues, easily won by those who will take the trouble, will lead a student to the center of any labyrinth to be found in his work. Nor are the thoughts themselves complex. The difficulty of understanding his poetry lies in the way in which thoughts in themselves quite simple are expressed. They are twisted, entangled, and broken up in a manner which I do not like to call wilful, but which has that air; and this is not good art. What is simple ought to be kept simple, not changed into riddles, or overwhelmed with fantastic ornament. He has also another fashion, and quite a different one, which makes him difficult. Sometimes he is as compressed, incisive, and vigorous as he is at other times careless and fluttering in thought. He has a way of leaping straight to his thought and clinching it at once, without taking us through any of the thoughts that led to it. We see the thing, but not the process; and we have to work out the process for ourselves. That is quite legitimate in poetry, when there is not too much of it, and the man who complains of that difficulty has no business to read poetry at all. But when a number of these completed thoughts are expressed one after another in a few lines, without any care for showing their connection; when they so jostle and trip up one another that they are not really seen as wholes but as halves—then the poetry does become more difficult than any artist ought to permit his work to be.

Some people like this; but it is for the most part the trouble it gives them which they like, and not the poetry; the intellectual exercise to which they are put, and not the passionate feeling in the verse, which is, of course, what Browning most wished them to enjoy. The thought, when they have disentangled it, is dear to them and pleases their vanity, because they had such hard work to find it out—the nut tasting sweet in proportion to the difficulty of the shell. But this is not love of poetry, but of one's own cleverness. Moreover, when the thought is found out, it is often the same as Wordsworth or Milton has expressed in luminous language, but which, being quite clear to a child, does not give these persons the pleasure of a double acrostic. Neither is that pleasure pleasure in poetry. Indeed, one evil result of the artist not caring to make his form simple and clear is that men are led to depreciate the best poetry. They get a fondness for difficulty, and ask for its peculiar flavor. Not finding it in the greatest men, who as a rule avoid the strange and the fantastic, they neglect them: and hundreds of analytic persons who proclaim their adoration of Browning never open Milton, have only heard of Chaucer, and some enjoy no other poet at all but Browning. Another evil result is that these men and women who are greedy of the difficult, deceive themselves into a belief that they enjoy poetry because they enjoy Browning. But what they enjoy is not the poetry, but their own power of unraveling a problem. And the more they enjoy that, the further away are they getting from any power of enjoying poetry, till at last, if you quote to them passages where Browning's poetic power is moving in its finest and loveliest fashion, they think these passages weak.

It is a great pity that the ruggedness and the abruptness of Browning's style should have had these results. No doubt the style *was* the man, and we accept it for the sake of the great individual it represents. But then the artist ought to have improved his style. There are poems in which he uses it with simplicity, dignity, power, and grace. That Browning did not—having created his style—make it a better ve-

hicle for beauty than he did was a fault in him as an artist.

But it would be very stupid to extend these remarks, which, indeed, are not so much on Browning as on his intellectual admirers, over the whole of his poetry. They apply only to a limited number of poems, nor do they mean to say that the poet had not the right, if he liked, to amuse himself in this fashion. But they do mean to say that the method is not to be extolled, and that Browning himself was the last man in the world to desire that it should be praised. His best work, the work which will last when the noises are done, is as simple as it is sensuous and passionate; and it is entirely original. It stands more alone and distinct than the work of any other English poet of the same wide range. There is a trace of Shelley in "Pauline," but for the rest Browning is like Melchizedek: he has neither father nor mother in poetry; he is without descent; and he will be — but this belongs to all great poets — without end of days. "Whole in himself and owed to none" may well be said of him, and it is a great deal to say.

It is even more to say that in spite of this keen distinctiveness his range was very great. A strong individuality often limits a man, but Browning had with it so much imagination that he flung himself — retaining still his distinctive elements — into a multitude of other lives, in various places, and at various times of history. In each of these he conceives himself, imagines all the fresh circumstances, all the new scenery, all the strange passions and knowledge of each age around himself, and creates himself afresh as modified by them. It is always Browning, then, who writes, but it is Browning seen again and again across the ages in transmigration after transmigration; and in this fashion his poetic range is very great. Of course it is not that highest creative work, when the poet makes men and women quite fresh, not in his own image; who have their own clear individuality which their creator feels has nothing to do with himself.

This is what the imperial poets do, and it is the greatest and most beautiful work which is done on earth. The difference between them and other men, in any sphere of intellectual power, is immeasurable. The very highest scientific intellect is a joke in comparison with the intellectual power of Shakspere, Dante, or Homer. The difference between them and the second-rate poets is also immense. No poet of the last hundred years is worthy to approach the sacred inclosure where they sit apart who, like the gods, make, beyond themselves, men and their fates.

When we look, however, at the second-rate poets of these hundred years we can mark the point at which Browning excels the rest. Others have gone closer into the heart of Nature; others have seen clearer into that which is universal in humanity; others have sung more sweetly and ideally; others have seen Beauty more face to face, and loved her better; others have far excelled him in the technic of their art; but Browning has excelled the rest in character-making, and in the multitude and variety of his characters. Nevertheless, as I said,— and it is this, as well as his want of fine form and simple aim, which differentiates him from the greater character-builders,— Browning himself always turns up in every character. When his characters are men, a sudden turn confronts us in them (even when they are so far away as Caliban) with which we are well acquainted. It is like recognizing a friend under his domino in a masked ball by some trick of voice or manner, or in his conversation by some theory of life outside of which he cannot get.

When, again, Browning's characters are women, they are more invented than the men, but they are not so good in drawing. There are two or three distinct types of them, but these types are related at several points to one another. It would have been impossible for Browning to conceive or portray women so distinct as *Portia* and *Imogen* and *Desdemona*. Moreover, the women are more built up by intellectual analysis based on Browning's own emotion — that is, on a man's specialized emotion — than created at a single jet, or by one who, like the greatest poets, makes both men and women with equal power out of that humanity in him which is not specially male or specially female. On the whole, the women in Browning are somewhat tiresome, except when, like *Pompilia* or *Pippa*,— and I choose two diverse types,— they run on the simplest lines. There are plenty of sketches of women, it is true, which are very full of interest, but their interest is the interest of sketches. He was wise to leave them as they are; he would not have been able to make a finished picture of them.

It is on account of all this that he is not a good dramatist. The essential difference of drama is the creation of a number of distinct characters, within the same set or web of circumstance, on each of whom the circumstances act differently, and whose action and thought in and through the circumstances are different and clashing; and the clashing produces the catastrophe. But in Browning's plays, Browning meets Browning more or less in every character; and the talk is a series of his soliloquies on the events. There is little or no interlocking of character and of action, and there is no necessity in the catastrophe. "The

Blot in the 'Scutcheon," which is the best of them, might with just as much of probability have ended happily. All of them are interesting as revelations of the poet's way of thinking on the problem of life, but they are not dramas, though they may be, if I may coin a word, dramatical. They are also poetical enough, but they are not half so poetical as the undramatized poems, where everything, it would seem, in earth and heaven is brought, and with extraordinary brilliancy, keenness, and swiftness,— flash after flash of lightning,— into his one subject, till its farthest recesses are lighted up, then left in darkness, and then lighted up again. In that way also we are made to see Nature in his poetry. A long essay might be written on Browning's treatment and description of natural scenery, and on the way it is always modified by the character in the poem which sees it, and even by the movement of passion in which that character is placed. There is nothing in which Browning's art is better and more instinctive than in this.

I wish I could speak as fully as I feel of some of the lyrics and of many of the lyrical poems; but to do this, or to expand the brief statements I have made, or to enter into the vast wealth of thought with which the simple main lines of his view of this life and the life to come are developed, illustrated, supported, and completed, would be beyond the sphere of this brief paper; nor do I think, as I said at the beginning, that the time for this has yet come. But still I hold fast to one thing — that the best work of our poet, that by which he will always live, is not in his intellectual analysis, or in his preachings, or in his difficult thinkings, but in the simple, sensuous, and passionate things he wrote out of the overflowing of his heart.

Stopford A. Brooke.

PRESENT-DAY PAPERS.

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THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY.

STUDIES OF POVERTY.

IT might be difficult to agree upon a definition of poverty; but it ought to be possible, without disputing over definitions, to ascertain pretty accurately the conditions under which our neighbors of the less fortunate classes are living.

Such is the conclusion to which a few wise men in this generation have lately come; and we have, as the result, several studies of poverty by which our judgment of this difficult subject may be greatly assisted. Mr. Jacob A. Riis has undertaken to tell us "How the Other Half Lives" in the city of New York. The book is not strong on the statistical side, but it gives us in a series of vivid pictures a good idea of the sinking circles of that Inferno whose gates stand open every day before the eyes of the dwellers in New York. It would be a simple matter for any intelligent citizen to find out these facts for himself; but it is not probable that one in ten of the well-to-do denizens of the metropolis has any adequate conception of the depth of the degradation in which some hundreds of thousands of his neighbors live. Mr. Riis has performed a valuable service in publishing his reporter's sketches; his essay ought to incite some one with ample leisure and abundant resources to make a scientific study of the conditions of life among the poor of New York.

Mrs. Helen Campbell's "Prisoners of Poverty" is another series of sketches of life among the working-women of New York by which much light is thrown upon this dark problem. Certain phases of the subject reveal themselves most clearly to a woman's insight. The Rev. Louis Albert Banks, in a number of popular discourses delivered in Boston, and lately published, has made rather a startling picture of the condition of the "white slaves" of the metropolis of New England. And we are told that a much more careful and thorough