

Biblical Influences Upon the Formation of Browning's Ideas: Introductory Chapter

Michiko Watanabe

Robert Browning (1812-89), one of the greatest poets of the Victorian age, has often been exposed to the waves of excessive applause or criticism as if an incarnation of sheer optimism. To be sure, his positive, cheerful, and almost confident vision of earthly life is not to be denied. Joy and happiness abounding in this life are obvious characteristics of many of his best works. Therefore, such a gloomy theme as death, for instance, is naturally liable to be overlooked in his poems by many scholars. This is partly because Browning himself was rather unwilling to ponder over the matter.¹⁾

The theme of death, however, holds a very important clue to solving the mystery of the poet's deepest inner feelings and fundamental ideas. In the course of his actual life, Browning met with the death of his wife Elizabeth at the age of 49. *Dramatis Personae*, which was published in 1864, is famous as his first collection of poems after her death. This work clearly includes a notable shift in Browning's main interest. Before *Dramatis Personae*, although in which the germs of Browning's unique ideas of life and death are here and there detected, a predominant color covering his poetry is a sense of joy in the present. At this first stage of his poetic career Browning is grappling with the meaning of life in the light of his own creativity. He is fully awakened to the fact that he himself is an excellent creator and accordingly the master of his products. As a whole, the young poet embraces a great ambition and relishes much self-confidence in regard to his artistic skill and power to create something original. Among others, in a few poems of *Men and Women*, where Browning's notion of positivity in creation (himself as creator) is closely connected with his fundamental principle of art (in "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea

del Sarto"), there is hardly an indication of death or failure in life ("Fra Lippo Lippi"). Such possibilities somehow hide behind the scenes in the presence of the light of Lucrezia's incomparable beauty ("Andrea del Sarto").

Yet, in *Dramatis Personae* one cannot but find something changed or intensified in Browning's attitude toward life. To be more exact, the figure of death makes its appearance. "Prospice", composed in the autumn of 1861 when Mrs. Browning died, is as much a masterpiece of Browning as a "Hymn of Death". It stands unrivaled among other poems of mourning.²⁾ The title in Latin, which means "Look forward", indicates his temperament very well. In this poem, Browning is compelled to come to grips with the shadow of death seriously for the first time. The mere understanding of death found in *Paracelsus* (1835) has gone away; now he has to experience in reality "the Arch Fear in a visible form" by himself. The mood penetrating through the whole poem is that of a warrior in the face of battle. He is fearless, courageous, and disobedient to the fateful attack of the terrible foe. He hopes to become like a hero in olden days who never shrunk back from the enemies. He shouts:

I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last!
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forbore,
And bade me creep past.
No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,.....

(p.517, 11. 11-16)

Here is his basic apprehension of death. He clearly recognizes the existence of evil, suffering, and pain in this life. He himself is involved in such a frustrating world, troubled by its poisonous results. Death is the final and most solemn fact of all. It can almost completely turn man's life upside down. Amid such a great crisis in his life, Browning desperately tries to catch hold of the heavenly Father's strong protecting hands.³⁾ He finds ultimate repose and courage in the love of God. To Browning at

this stage, death is no more a fancy but a reality. He not only accepts its existence but also cultivates an affirmative attitude toward it: even death becomes a blessing in that it solidifies his belief in God's love and eternal happiness in heaven. This realization in turn makes his present life more and more significant. As Dr. Berdoe observes: "Uninterrupted pleasures turn to pain. Pain makes us fight against it, and so becomes an actual tonic. The contest against pain has brought us all that is most valuable in life."⁴ Thus in his deepest mind, death has come to be understood in connection with life. Before *Dramatis Personae* Browning's view of earthly life in a sense stands itself alone, though some hints at heavenly life are made. The conception of this life in relation to the next life handled in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" has attained a greater importance because of the appearance of death. Browning's grand vision of what life really is does not falter in front of death; on the contrary, death operates as something which strengthens his belief.⁵ So Browning acknowledges the undeniable working of death especially when he sees it in its closest relationship with life.

Browning's unconquerable fighting spirit shown in "Prospice" is wonderfully taken over to *Asolando: Fancies and Facts* (1889) his final big work. It contains two of his last masterpieces: "Reverie" and "Epilogue". It is interesting that both poems are given short lyrical forms instead of long tedious prose-like sentences as given in some of his other poems. Browning entertains a lively concern for heavenly life in each of them. In "Reverie", the poet makes a comparison between heaven and earth. In spite of his consistent stress on the relationship between Creator and creature, he has somehow restrained himself from freely expressing the distinction between heaven and earth. This is to a certain extent owing to his peculiar method of dramatic monologue where he tries in vain to hide himself. Or, the main reason may be that Browning dislikes spiritualism or mystical trance by nature. He always does his best to be sober and clear-sighted. By contrast, Alfred Tennyson (1809-92) his contemporary possesses a tendency to vagueness and mysticism even in his last days. These traits are unmistakably present in *In Memoriam* (1850).⁶ He is also liable to be immersed in dreams at night even at his age. *The Silent Voices* (1892)

and *The Dreamer* (1892) are good illustrations of his taste. Tennyson continued his struggle with doubt to the end of his life (*Doubt and Prayer* and *Faith*). In *Crossing the Bar* (1889), Tennyson brings his visions of sunset and twilight into full play; it is well known as his death poem. Browning, on the other hand, wrote "Epilogue" in the defiant mood of an old fighter who has just started marching in the direction of an unknown land.

No, at noonday in the bustle of man's worktime
Greet the unseen with a cheer!
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,
"Strive and thrive!" cry "Speed—fight on, fare ever
There as here!"

(p. 1317, 11. 88-92)

It is the hopeful noonday that has dominion over his mind. It is not the dim midnight. This is quite in contrast to Tennyson's idea. Tennyson's hope of eternal life expressed in *In Memoriam* is fundamentally based on his desire to meet Hallam again and live together in heaven.⁷⁾ Browning is confident of eternal life as a guarantee of a complete self-realization intended by God. There is no such a mediator as Hallam standing between God and himself.

I truly am, at last!
For a veil is rent between
Me and the truth which passed
Fitful, half-guessed, half-seen,
Grasped at—not gained, held fast.

(p. 1315, "Reverie", 11. 69-73)

At his last stage, Browning shows the importance of love and gratitude no less than that of death. The vision of these factors represented in *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884) is nothing but a continuation of his deep meditation over how to live in this world. By nature, especially in such a poem as

Paracelsus, Browning displays his youthful mental trait: superiority of intellect over feeling. *La Saisiaz* (1878) seems to have partly recovered this tendency by employing a logical method of questions and answers. But in *Ferishtah's Fancies* a becalmed and less philosophical turn of mind gets the better of both reason and intellect. Though entitled 'fancies', this collection of poems is in fact full of wisdom about daily life as offered by an experienced Persian sage Ferishtah. In the first poem, "The Eagle", Browning's humour and gravity are shown at once. Ferishtah, not yet a sage, observes the scene where an eagle stays the craving of young ravens whose mother is dead. It makes him acknowledge divine care. Then he follows the example of those little birds and waits for God's nourishment. He just muses on and on without working. But at God's admonition, he realizes his folly and becomes convinced that what matters most is to arise and work so that he can "feed who lack". Moreover, it occurs to him that his mission is to fill the starved in soul. Then he becomes a sage.

In "The Melon-Seller", Ferishtah meets an old acquaintance who is selling melons. He was formerly the Shah's prime minister. Answering Ferishtah's question if he curses God for giving him such a misery after having been granted bliss, the man says:

"Fool, does thy folly think my foolishness
Dwells rather on the fact that God appoints
A day of woe to the unworthy one,
Than that the unworthy one, by God's award,
Tasted joy twelve years long? Or buy a slice,
Or go to school!"

(p. 1218, 11. 58-63)

Here is a beautiful expression of a long-suffering man's faith in God's love and his gratefulness.

"Mihrab Shah" is a very impressive poem because Browning finds in pain the true cause of man's thanks to God and love for his fellowmen. Pain makes manifest the divine wisdom at work. It contributes to moulding man as he ought to be. The notions of gratitude and love no doubt

come from the two major Biblical teachings:

And Jesus answered him, The first of
all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel;
The Lord our God is one Lord:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God
with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and
with all thy mind, and with all thy strength:
this is the first commandment.

And the second is like, namely this, Thou
shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There
is none other commandment greater than these.

(St. Mark, 12:29-31)

Browning's conception of love has a practical side; it is best revealed in his affection for his wife in heaven. In the reflective part of "Mihrab Shah", he calls to her above, just as Tennyson frequently does to Hallam in *In Memoriam*.⁸⁾ Looking back upon his own sluggishness, he tries to pluck up courage to advance by her unchanged assistance. It is not unnatural for an aged person to long for someone's encouragement and help to finish his remaining days.

Browning's notion of the practice of loving deeds culminates in "A Pillar at Sebzevar". Ferishtah's way of living presented in the poem is quite a practical and even sensual one. He weighs love more than knowledge.

So let us say—not 'Since we know, we
love,'
But rather 'Since we love, we know
enough.'

(p. 1233, 11. 9-10)

He continues:

Once more then,

Friend—

(What ever in those careless ears of thine
Withal I needs must round thee)—know-
ledge doubt

Even wherein it seems demonstrable!

Love,—in the claim for love, that's gratitude

For apprehended pleasure, nowise doubt!

(p. 1233, 11. 16–21)

Ferishtah thinks of man's ideal way of living as something filled with joy, thanks and praise by practising deeds of love. This idea is very different from that of the poet who in his youth tended to conceive knowledge as the most important thing in life.

Even in *La Saisiaz*, where the problems of life, death, and eternal life are seriously discussed, he still follows his usual step, laying stress on reason.⁹⁾ It seems that in *Ferishtah's Fancies* man and his life have come to be appreciated entirely in terms of love. Ferishtah the sage says to his disciple:

“For why? The creature and creator stand
Rightly related so. Consider well!
Were knowledge all thy faculty, then God
Must be ignored: love gains him by first leap.
Frankly accept the creatureship: ask good
To love for: press bold to the tether's end
Alloted to this life's intelligence!

(p. 1233, 11. 53–59)

He no more holds the idea of Paracelsus that he is entrusted with a divine mission to save mankind. Rather, far more humbly, he evaluates man's worth in his faculty of love for others. At the same time, he does not hesitate to ground its cause on the deepest relationship between God and man as Creator and creature. Here one finds that Browning's early notion of creation has not withered away but has been clearly preserved and

developed.¹⁰⁾

Let me add a few words about the significance of *Ferishtah's Fancies* in connection with the themes of death and life handled in Browning's poems. The connection, at first glance, may be obscure. This is because the poem concentrates on the topic of love which seems to be an expansion of his earlier vision of it as represented in his love poems. But *Ferishtah's Fancies* is not with love between man and woman. It is a broader vision of love for men. In this respect, it may be more proper to say that this poem is a continuation rather from *Paracelsus* or "Saul" (*Dramatic Lyrics*) than from his genuine love poems. My reasons for this assumption are: 1) In *Paracelsus* the poet holds the hero responsible for rescuing mankind from degradation. And in *Ferishtah's Fancies* he extends his concern for humanity to the love of individuals. This aspect of Browning is expertly characterized by G.K. Chesterton.¹¹⁾ 2) In "Saul", to adopt James Fotheringham's explanation, "The idea of self-sacrificing love as the only adequate to the facts of life, and as essential to the ideal of divine excellence was never so finely expressed or so vitally 'argued.'" ¹²⁾ The particular kind of love treated in *Ferishtah's Fancies* also rests on self-sacrifice and gratitude toward the Creator.

From these reasons it may be deduced that Browning's utmost interest in this life and the next one shown in the preceding poems (e.g. *Paracelsus*, "Saul", *Luria: A Tragedy* (1846), "Bishop Blougram's Apology", "Rabbi Ben Ezra", "A Death in the Desert", and *La Saisiaz*) offers the basis of *Ferishtah's Fancies* because the practice of love is ultimately human life in its truest sense. Earthly life in effect determines life after death.

Through a brief survey of Browning's attitude toward life and death, it is only natural to say that a strong foundation is necessary in considering such delicate and metaphysical problems. If a fixed standing-point is lacking, any attempt to work them out will easily turn out to be fleeting and fruitless. In the history of Browning studies, some have paid special attention to the poet's philosophical idealism and others have thrown a light upon the poet's profound mentality concerning those existential questions in the doctrine of Christianity.¹³⁾ To look into Browning's ideas

from a religious or Biblical point of view is surely very interesting and inspiring. Yet, many of the latter type seem to share, consciously or unconsciously, a similar trend to look up to Browning as their unprecedented, great religious teacher. This is probably because these men and women have gone through some kind of trouble, suffering, sadness, and many other bitter experiences in their lives and then find a great comfort and even encouragement in the words of Browning. It is quite understandable that "The Browning Society" was founded in 1881 in order to propagate his message which was regarded almost as a modern gospel, though one admits an excess of enthusiasm in their attitude and activity. Apart from the fervor and admiration of Browning disciples, however, a far more calm and reasonable communication with or study of the poet is still possible, without neglecting the close relationship between Browning and the Bible.

Minnie Gresham Machen in *The Bible in Browning* (1903) testifies to such a possibility. Machen in this laborious work attempts quite a thorough and sincere comparison between "the words of Browning" in *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9) and "the corresponding Scriptural passages" which "have been given fully". This book consists of two parts; the preliminary essay precedes the comparison. At the opening of the essay, the author says: "...no modern poet has manifested such intimate acquaintance with the Bible as Robert Browning. His writings are thoroughly interpenetrated by its spirit, and in many of his poems a Scriptural quotation or allusion may be found on almost every page."¹⁴ She gives a general outlook on Browning's attitude toward the Bible in quoting from it. According to her analysis: 1) As to the Scriptural quotations and allusions found in *The Ring and the Book*, she says: "...I discover more than five hundred distinct Biblical quotations and allusions, beside a number of indirect references to the teaching of the Bible, or to customs and ceremonials derived from it or supposed by those who observe them to have been so derived." And further, "These Scriptural quotations and allusions are so spontaneous and drawn from so many of the Sacred Books that they give evidence of a very thorough acquaintance with the whole Bible."¹⁵ The author offers readers a table grounded on her analysis where "the distribution through the whole Bible" in *The Ring and the Book* is shown.¹⁶

2) At the same time, however, she is also aware that in spite of his familiarity with the Scriptures, Browning makes no Scriptural allusions in his classical poems. Besides, she notices "the scarcity of such allusions in his dramas, even those which are not classical."¹⁷ Machen attributes the cause of these facts to the poet's strict observation of historical accuracy or deliberate consideration of "artistic propriety".

Concerning the poet's actual method of quotation, a similar paradoxical trait may be detected. Machen refers to the following two points: 1) employment of the simple language of the Bible almost as it is, 2) obscurity or inaccuracy. Putting main emphasis on Browning's intimacy with the Bible, she does not ignore his doubtful or inaccurate references to it (e.g. Browning's attribution to "Jesus Christ a saying which is not found in any of the Gospels, and which is not in accord with his teachings or character"—'honorem' instead of 'gloriam', p. 27-28). Yet she defends the poet's position, saying: "Such inaccuracies as those just cited serve to prove that Browning's allusions are not studied for the occasion, but flow spontaneously from a mind thoroughly imbued with the subject..."¹⁸ And, "In interpreting some of Browning's more intricate allusions to the Bible, we must bear in mind that his thought was not simple, but exceedingly complex in substance as well as in expression. He himself gives this as an excuse for his obscurity..."¹⁹ Then she argues: "But the allusions which it is most difficult to refer to particular texts are the very ones which manifest the most profound knowledge of the Bible and thorough assimilation of its essential truths. Many texts have been gathered and distilled to make the essence which Browning brings, like the 'ointment of spikenard very precious,' to pour out at the Master's feet."²⁰

Next, the author raises questions about Browning's individual faith and understanding of the essential truths which are hidden among "the mere opinions of his created characters." Laying the foundation of Browning's personal belief on his own proclamation: "Why, he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God" (*La Saisiaz*), the author examines some of the fundamental truths clearly represented in Browning's poems, and as a result of her examination, she comes to the conclusion that the poet whose faith was in a personal God was not at all agnostic, as many critics

have expressed. But she is not yet satisfied. She tries to dive deeper into the mysterious sphere of Browning's heart to acquire "the best of his faith". At a later stage Machen argues the problem of the poet's acceptance of Christ as the Divine Saviour and expresses her ultimate conviction of it.

"The evidence of Browning's acceptance of Christ as the Divine Saviour receives confirmation from the fact that disbelief in Christianity is not in a single case expressed by his best characters. Each one of these, according to his light, accepts the divinity of Christ, or, when not sufficiently instructed to accept it, acknowledges its power. The utterance of these characters is, of course, in a sense dramatic; but their sentiments, it must be borne in mind, are imputed to them by the poet. It is after all, Browning himself who looks at the great central truth of Christianity from the point of view of each character; and always, from every side, Christ is set forth, not merely as a great prophet and exemplar, but as the divine Son of God."²¹⁾

In the middle of her essay, Machen provides an apology for her 'ascribing to a Scriptural origin of so many minute turns of expression or modes of thought' to a scholar "who has neglected his Bible" in looking into Browning's poetry.²²⁾ But the real cause of her study lies in the love of both Browning and the Bible. In a word, the author's conviction of Browning's faith at least in the divinity of Christ and God's love for man is based on her serious, persevering, and scholarly personal inquiry into the poet's poems (*The Ring and the Book* in particular). She is undeniably one of the so-called Browning disciples. But her presentation of Browning's fundamental belief in Christianity has very persuasive power. The reason is that her standing-point is not so much in a mere sentimental, admiring, passionate celebration and blind acceptance of the poet's ideas as in a more scientific re-examination of them through a careful re-reading of his poetry.

Machen's great labor to compare Browning with the Bible as much in

detail as possible is surely worthy of due evaluation. Her main purpose in *The Bible in Browning* seems to show how deeply Browning was influenced by the Bible by contrasting his poem with the Scriptural passages and his remarkable familiarity with the phraseology of the Holy Scriptures. She has succeeded in listing many parallel sentences between Browning and the Bible.

For all her merits, however, she has said little about the inner development or change of the poet's essential Biblical ideas; say, "man and God", "life, death, and eternal life", "body and soul", "sin, punishment and redemption", and so on. Here is another conceivable way of tracing the actual influence of the Bible upon Browning. Now that it is understood that the Bible is inseparable from Browning at least in his biggest work *The Ring and the Book*, there is room left for studying the influence of the Bible upon the formation or process of the poet's basic ideas. This will be the central theme of my next article.

(notes)

All the quotations of Browning's poems are from *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Augustine Birrell (1907; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1912).

1) G.K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, English Men of Letters (1903; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1920), p.130.

2) *Select Poems of Robert Browning*, introd. and nn. Rinshiro Ishikawa, Kenkyusha English Classics (Tokyo: Keukyusha, 1939), II, nn. pp. 176-7.

3) The poet's strong belief in a loving Creator is illustrated by Edward Berdoe in *Browning and the Christian Faith* (London: George Allen, 1896), pp. 171-2.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 216.

5) This article is in effect a succession of my former one, "Browning's Vision of Life and Death in *Dramatis Personae* and *La Saisiaz*", *Studies in English Literature*, No. 18 (Shimonoseki: The English Literary Society of Baiko Jo Gakuin College, 1982). The basic role of death as grasped by Browning is discussed here.

6) Sections XC-XCV, in which Tennyson experiences the heightened moment of meeting Hallam's spirit on earth.

7) For a comparison between Browning and Tennyson, see the article cited above.

8) Tennyson, feeling his own defects and evils, hopes that Hallam's spirit

will come down from heaven to help him. cf. Sections L-LIV.

9) Browning's preference of reason or intellect over feeling is referred to in my two former articles. cf. Minnie Gresham Machen in *The Bible in Browning: with Particular Reference to The Ring and the Book* (New York: Macmillan, 1903) says as follows: "La Saisiaz," although treating of kindred themes, does not refer to the inspired writings—naturally, since it embraces a strenuous attempt to prove the immortality of the soul by the light of reason alone. (p.14)

10) As to the notion of "creation", a very important factor in appreciating Browning's poems, see M. Watanabe, "Browning's Presentation of Human Life in His Poems Before *Dramatis Personae*", Soundings No. 8 (Tokyo: Soundings English Literary Association, 1982).

11) Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, pp. 185-7. cf. Edward Dowden, *The Life of Robert Browning*, Everyman's Library, No. 701 (London: J.M. Dent, 1917), p. 68, where he makes comments on Browning's interest in history and states that he was much more interested in individuals than society.

12) James Fotheringham, *Studies in the Poetry of Robert Browning*, 2nd ed. rev. and enl. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1888), p.205.

13) A representative of the former group is Henry Jones, *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher* (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1891) and that of the latter is Edward Berdoe in *Browning and the Christian Faith*.

14) Minnie Gresham Machen, *The Bible in Browning*, pp. 1-2.

15) *Ibid.*, p.17.

16) *Ibid.*, p.19.

17) *Ibid.*, p.12.

18) *Ibid.*, p.28.

19) *Ibid.*, p.35.

20) *Ibid.*, p.37.

21) *Ibid.*, p.78.

22) *Ibid.*, p.41.