Biblical Influences Upon the Formation of Browning's Ideas

(I)

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"England became the people of a book,
and that book was the Bible."[1]

This well-known passage by John Richard Green best represents what a profound influence the Book has exercised upon the long history of England's national development—in the formation of its character, language, common life, and above all, its culture including the flowering prosperity in literary achievement. The representative authors in each age are more or less, in a sense, students of the Bible. One cannot appreciate the real Shakespeare, Milton or Dickens without taking into account this deeply-rooted, formative influence upon them. Robert Browning (1812–89), a leading Victorian poet, is no exception.

In the present study that I am going to make, I would like to share the fundamental view held by the author of *The Bible in Browning* (1903).[2] That is, Minnie G. Machen, the writer of this laborious work on Browning's relation with the Bible, after a conscientious re-reading of *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9), confirms her confidence that Browning as a poet and man is in reality inseparable from the Scriptural influence. Her method of confirmation is to point out such lines in the voluminous poem as have the corresponding Scriptural passages and set them down one by one as a couple. Her earnest research plus the preliminary essay are surely appealing enough to direct one's attention to the religious aspect of the poet. Yet, if one really wishes to make a certain point clear, in the case of a literary man in particular, a more effective and comprehensive way seems to be to trace the process of it from the earliest stage on to the last. My aim in this

study and a series of studies to come lies in clarifying the actual relationship between Browning and the Bible, how and to what degree the former is associated with the latter, laying special emphasis on the process of some of the poet's essential biblical ideas. Besides, I presuppose that Mrs. Sutherland Orr's remark that "Mr. Browning's work is himself" is right.[3] Browning's fifty or hundred characters are,even though rendered objectively in dramas or dramatic monologues, in essence none other than silhouettes of Browning himself. Edward Dowden says that his (Browning's) characters "served to give his ideas a concrete body."[4] Therefore, all poems referred to in this study, whether dramatic or confessional, may be understood as expressions of the poet's own mind and feelings.

I

There are a variety of technical terms illustrating the main stream of biblical thought: God, man, heaven, earth, life, death, sin, punishment, and so forth. The biblical idea to be handled this time is 'flesh'. Although employed at times as a synonym of 'body', the term is often no less important than its antonym 'spirit' or 'soul' from a biblical point of view. According to A. Cruden, an authoritative scholar of the Old and New Testaments,it is classified under four headings(with three additional ones):[5]

1 The muscles and other soft parts of the animal body, whether of man, beast, bird, or fish.
2 All beings possessed of flesh, man and the inferior animals, especially man; often in contrast with God, who is spirit.
3 Human nature considered as unregenerate and unsanctified.
4 The word is also used for one of near kindred.
(5) To be one flesh, denotes an intimate communion, as if the two were but one person or one body.
(6) This phrase is used by the Apostle to shew the union between Christ and believers.
(7) Flesh also signifies the human nature of Christ.

Cruden covers both unique meanings respectively seen in the Old and New Testaments. No.4 is the idea peculiar to the paternal world of the Hebrews

whereas No.3 definitely provides a summing-up of St. Paul's thought that "the flesh is the willing instrument of sin, and is subject to sin to such a degree that wherever flesh is, all forms of sin are likew. present, and no good thing can live in the σάρξ (flesh).[6] The idea of 'sin against God' being omitted, 'flesh' as "the bearer of sinful feelings and desires as well as the means of sensual enjoyment" can be reasonably applied to the Greek comprehension of it "as the seat of the affections and lusts, fleshly nature"[7] and further to the Latin word "caro" denoting especially "of the human body (in opp. to the spirit), as the seat of the passions."[8] No doubt, No.1 indicates the meaning of 'flesh' as universally acknowledged.

Browning's usage of 'flesh' is likewise wide-ranged. So, in order to follow the footsteps of Browning's ideas as shown through the repetitive application of the term, we will take up and combine two ways of approaching his poems. They are: 1) to examine 'flesh' itself directly in word-combination: the modifiers and phrases it is put in. 2) to observe 'flesh' indirectly in terms of its context: adjoining terms. The adjoining terms mean: a) those coming immediately before or after 'flesh'. b) those put relatively close to 'flesh'. c) Being placed comparatively at a distance, none the less crucial or influential in their relation to 'flesh'.

Throughout Browning's poems from youth to age, a distinct turning-point may be detected in the year 1864 when *Dramatis Personae* was published. He lost his beloved wife Elizabeth in 1861 and her death dealt him a deadly blow, resulting in a clear change of mood in his successive works.[9] Therefore, our discussion will be divided into two parts: the one involves Browning's poems from 1833 (*Pauline*) to 1855 (*Men and Women*) and the other those from 1864 (*Dramatis Personae*) to 1889 (*Asolando*). In the first half of his poetic career, particularly in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845) and *Men and Women*, Browning positively makes frequent use of 'flesh'. The following key points may be deduced from what is said about the employed method above:

A. nature of flesh
B. function of flesh
C. in connection with spirit and soul
D. in connection with such adjoining terms: stone, fire, light,

clothes, dream, glory, etc.

E. in phrases such as flesh and blood

F. with genuinely biblical terms

G. with such terms as perfection, union, order, centre

H. in relation to art

I. in relation to this life, after life

J. with law(s)

The second half of his life as a poet (1864–1889) generally takes over all of these, adding to or casting off several ideas on the way. In turn, another large quantity of new adjoining words are introduced (this will be discussed later). Now, let us look at these chronologically.[10]

A. Nature of Flesh

There are four kinds of flesh in view of its nature, or in other words, four different attributes: 1) something weak, dirty, and wicked. 2) something hurt, injured, troubled, an object for pity. 3) something beautiful, of value. 4) the idea of new flesh.

1) weak, dirty, wicked flesh

It is rather interesting that *Pauline* (1833), Browning's earliest published work, has no mention of 'flesh'. Young Browning's interest in 'flesh' is first revealed in *Paracelsus* (1835): "There is a way:/'T is hard for flesh to tread therein, imbued/With frailty —" (I. 539). The idea of 'shattered flesh' caused by a foul disease and with the verb 'eat', which is to play an important role in later poems, first comes into sight:

> To free the flesh from fell disease, (III.343)
>
> the iron ring/Festering about a slave's neck grows at length/Into the flesh it eats. (III.535-7)

The idea of 'eating (feeding) flesh', developed and stressed now and again, is noteworthy from a biblical point of view:

> Eat flesh and bread by wholesale, (37, *Strafford*, IV. 185)
>
> —So is my spirit, as flesh with sin, /Filled full, eaten out and in/ with the face of her, (45, "Time's Revenges", 55-7, though in the context what is in fact eaten is "my spirit".)
>
> How scorpion-like he feeds on human flesh—
>
> (75 *Aristophanes' Apology*, 1121)

"Eat flesh?... (84, "A Camel-Driver", 47)

These expressions undeniably reflect those in the Bible:

"eat flesh of captains, flesh of." (Rev 19:18)

"him bread and flesh in morning, bread and flesh in evening." (I Ki 17:6)

"rust shall eat your flesh" (Jas 5:3)

"man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52)

"I will feed them with own flesh" (Pr 49:26)

"foldeth hands, eateth his flesh" (Eccl 4:5)

Flesh as 'meat' and 'meal' is depicted in *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus*(1877) in an awful way:

Hands they have filled with flesh, the meal/domestic— (1. 1245)

Thuestes' feat, indeed, on flesh of children, (1. 1267)

Serve up a meal, the flesh of his own children (1. 1654)

Of course, it may be rather unreasonable to lay *Agamemnon* with its pagan background and customs side by side with, say, *Paracelsus* within a Protestant atmosphere of the Renaissance age. Nevertheless, it may be at least pointed out that Browning was to a considerable extent interested in the idea of 'flesh eaten by some force' (be it man, animal, or worm).

Now, the notion of 'worm-eaten flesh' is frequently stressed. First appearing in *Paracelsus* (1835), the fellowship of flesh and skin disease develops accordingly as Browning becomes vigorous and energetic at work.

This plague-seed set to fester his sound flesh,... (68–9, *The Ring and the Book*, II. 629)

The worm which wormed its way from skin through flesh/To the bone and there lay biting,... (V. 1485–6)

This bastard then a nest for him is made, /As the manner is of vermin, in my flesh:/Shall I let the filthy pest buzz, flap and sting,... (V. 1537–9)

Such a devastating infiltration of evil power into human flesh may effectively be compared with *Job:* "my flesh is clothed with worms" (7:5), for instance, and with William Shakespeare (1564–1616):

So then thou hast but lost the dregs of life,/The prey of worms, my body being dead;... (Sonnet LXXIV, 9–10)

Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,/Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end? (Sonnet CXLVI, 7–8)

In his sonnets Shakespeare seems to prefer using 'body' in a similar situation. King Lear, pouring a rain of consoling words into Gordelia, utters:

Wipe thine eyes;/The goujeres shall devour them, flesh and fell,/Ere they shall make us weep:... (V. iii)

Here although the emphasis is on his prophecy of hopeful future for both of them, the wicked nature of Goneril and Regan also rises up to the surface. Corresponding passages are also to be seen in the Bible:

"look on plague in skin of his flesh" (Ex 13:3)

"away the filth of the flesh" (1 Pet 3:21)

"cleanse from all filthiness of the flesh" (2 Cor 7:1)

"these filthy dreamers defile the flesh" (Jude 8)

The Christian idea of 'flesh filled with sin' (corresponding to Cruden No.3) is apparent in Browning's mind not so much in terms of 'sin' itself as in a number of complicated forms. In relation to 'flesh', 'sin' is first mentioned in *Paracelsus* (1835), "inborn germs of sin" (I. 541). "Flesh with sin", in comparison with the spirit,is emphasized in "Time's Revenges" (1845). Various modifiers (adjectives and adverbs) and nouns are provided in order to illustrate the existence of sinful flesh:

vile flesh and blood (68-9, *R. and B.*, VIII. 542)

Concede I be all one bleedguiltiness/And mystery of murder in the flesh,... (XI. 335–6)

Twelve hours hence he'll be scraping his bones bare/Of that intolerable flesh, and die,... (XI. 354–5)

that wickedness/Was bred of flesh and innate with bone (XII. 581–2)

departure from design/As flagrant in the flesh, (72, *Fifine at the Fair*, 680–1)

Purified now and henceforth, all the past/Reduced to ashes with the flesh defiled! (73, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, 2625–6)

Had flesh sinned the worst,/Yet help were in counsel:... (87, "Fust and His Friends", 110–1)

Other Shakespearian equivalents are:

My blood is mingled with the crime of lust:/For if we two be one and thou play false,/I do digest the poison of thy flesh,.....

(*The Comedy of Errors*, II. ii. 145–7)

...why, she—O! she is fallen/Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea/ Hath drops too few to wash her clean again,/And salt too little which may season give/To her foul-tainted flesh.

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, IV. i. 141–5)

Thus, the problem of sin and flesh, planted in his early days, is retained and varied by degrees throughout his career.

This is true of 'the weakness of flesh'. Having germinated in *Paracelsus* (1835) it goes on like this:

casting off/The embodied Awe's tremendous mystery,/The weakness of the flesh disguise,...

(43, *The Return of the Druses*, I. 193–5)

Sudden the weak flesh fell like piled-up cards,/All the frail fabric at a finger's touch,...

(in the form of "weak flesh", direct modifier, is f.a. 68-9, *R. and B.*, III. 1142–3)

Patrizj, zealous soul/Who, having but duty to sustain weak flesh,...

(IV. 1408–9)

Even at the last when the bewildered flesh,/The cloud of weariness about my soul/Clogging too heavily, sucked down all sense,—

(VII. 1571–3)

"Become necessity to feeble flesh!" (IX. 1275)

Since all flesh is weak,/Bind weaknesses together, we get strength:

(X. 1492–3)

It is the will runs the renewing nerve/Through flaccid flesh that faints before the time. (XI. 1900–1)

Learn, if Admetos die now, so much more/Will pity for the frailness found in flesh,... (71, *Balaustion's Adventure*, 2533–4)

On "shivering" flesh below,... (72, *Fifine*, 1113)

Or whisper due sustainment to weak flesh,.....

(73, *Red Cotton*, 1279)

I resolved—/No matter how the struggle tasked weak flesh—

(75, *The Inn Album*, 2272–3)

These expressions are reminiscent of a biblical passage: "spirit willing, flesh is weak" (Mat 26:41; Mark 14:38). An echo of this sentence is heared in Browning, too: Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak: (*R. and B.*, IX. 734).

Two points seem to be crucial in relation to the Bible: 1) sinful flesh. 2) flesh burning as a solution. The following passages represent the presence of them in young Browning as early as 1840 and 45. "So is my spirit, as flesh with sin," (45) and "burned/Taurello's entire household, flesh and fell,..." (40, *Sordello*, II. 336–7). Yet, these ideas become predominant in the second period, nearly aggressive in *The Ring and the Book* (68–9). The best example is: "He burned that garment spotted by the flesh." (VII. 1735) Sinful and plague-stricken flesh is doomed to be burned; the idea of 'flesh burning' is typically biblical ("burn the flesh" Ex 29: 14; Lev 9:11; Num 19:5). The exactly corresponding line is here: "hating even garment spotted by flesh" (Jude 23). The idea is taken over to *Aristophanes' Apology Herakles* (1875): "or, this flesh/Burning away with fire, so thrust away/The infamy, which waits me there, from life?" (11. 4784–6). The image of burning, even though in no immediate connection with 'flesh', is recurrent in Browning:

'Hear, Israel, our Lord God is One'? Or thou,
Jischab?—who smiledst, burning, since there lay,
"Burning along with thee, our Law!

(1883, "Jochanan Hakkadosh", 176–8)

Curiously enough, Browning never employs the adjective 'sinful' in describing the nature of 'flesh'. It seems as if he restrains himself from using it on purpose. The most biblical modifier is detected not in *The Ring and the Book* but in *Red Cotton:*...with the flesh defiled! (1. 2626). Something in the connotation of the term might have been out of harmony with the poet's disposition or his poetic genius. Even apart from 'flesh', he uses the modifier only eight times in all of his works.[11] In spite of this fact, however, 'sin' is apparently an important subject which captured Browning's mind in his last stage in particular. In "Mihrab Shah" (1884), at the opening of the poem, referring to the existence of evil, he seriously

thinks over "ache of flesh," crying:

Yea, there began, from when my thumb last throbbed,
Advance in question framing, till I asked
Wherefore should any evil hap to man—
From ache of flesh to agony of soul—
Since God's All-mercy mates All-potency?
Nay, why permits He evil to Himself—
Man's sin, accounted such?

(11. 9–15)

Compelled to suffer from aches, 'flesh' consequently becomes "a burthen" to man. The passages echo the line in the Old Testament, "I will bring evil on all flesh" (Jer 45:5). His consideration of 'sin' continues to the very last, as understood from the following utterances: "Had flesh sinned the worst,..."(1887), "Restitution once made,/Sin no more!"

(89, "Ponte Dell' Angelo, Venice", 150–1).

2) injured, troubled, and pitiful flesh

Browning often refers to 'wearied or tattered flesh' as well as to 'weak flesh'. The examples are as follows:

In the first period—

1. —Not flesh, as flake off flake I scale, approach,
Lay bare those bluish veins of blood asleep?

(1841, *Pippa Passes*, II. 108–9)

2. And called the red bloom to the pale skin back,
And laid the strips and jagged ends of flesh
Even once more, and slacked the sinew's knot
Of every tortured limb—

(1842, "Artemis Prologizes," 108–11)

3. Fairly had fretted flesh and bone away
In cares that this was right, nor that was wrong,

(1843, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, I.i.90–1)

4. Ask, else, these ruins of humanity,
This flesh worn out to rags and tatters,
This soul at struggle with insanity,

(1850, "Christmas-Eve", 1317–9)

5. "Make new hopes shine through the flesh they fray,
"New fears aggrandize the rags and tatters:
"To bring the invisible full into play!
(1855, "Old Pictures in Florence", 149–51)

6. Like me inquisitive how pricks and cracks
Befall the flesh through too much stress and strain,
(1855, "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician", 9–10)

7. Think, could we penetrate by any drug
And bathe the wearied soul and worried flesh,
And bring it clear and fair, by three days' sleep!
(1885, "An Epistle...", 113–5)

A corresponding biblical line is here:

"flakes of his flesh are joined" (Job 41:23)

In the second period, the idea of 'injured flesh' becomes more and more stressed, ornamented with a far harsher note of cruelty and trouble.

1. And since the course was much to his own mind,
Of pinching flesh and pulling bone from bone
To unhusk truth a-hiding in its hulls,
(1868–9, *The Ring and the Book*, I. 987–9)

2. "Armed with those little hook-teeth on the edge
"To open in the flesh nor shut again:
(68–9, *R. and B.*, II. 148–9)

3. A wound i' the flesh no doubt wants prompt redress;
It smarts a little to-day, well in a week,
Forgotten in a month; or never, or now, revenge!
(68–9, *R. and B.*, IV. 1529–31)

4. How this quite novel form of taking pain,
This getting tortured merely in the flesh,
(68–9, *R. and B.*, V. 22–3)

5. A trifle of torture to the flesh, like yours,
While soul is spared such foretaste of hell-fire,
Is naught. (68–9, *R. and B.*, V. 75–7)

6. Discomfort to his flesh from noose or axe—
For that, out come the implements of law!
(68–9, *R. and B.*, V. 103–4)

7. "Twelve hours hence he'll be scraping his bones bare
"Of that intolerable flesh, and die,
"Frenzied with pain: no need for poison here!
(68–9, *R. and B.*, XI. 354–6)

8. I did not turn cheek and take pleasantry,
But flogged while skin could purple and flesh start,
To teach fools whom they tried conclusions with.
(1875, *Aristophanes' Apology*, 1658–60)

9. My Just Judge only venture to decide
Between two suitors, which is god, which man,
By thrashing both of them as flesh can bear.
(1875, *Aristophanes*, 2663–5)

10. Was, Into what dim hole can she have dived,
She and her wrongs, her woe that's wearing flesh
And blood away?'
(1875, *The Inn Album*, 1481–3)

11. Crack, to-day,
Shall, slash, to-morrow, slice through flesh and bone!
(1875, *The Inn Album*, 2380–2)

12. But we pay nought here: through our flesh, age-weighed,
(1877, *Agamemnon*, 73)

13. I fall—fall as I ought—quite on the babe I guard:
I overspread with flesh the whole of him. Too hard
To die this way, torn piecemeal?
(1879, "Ivân Ivânovitch", 221–3)

14. Forsooth, her flesh a fire-flake stings:
The mother drops the child!
(1879, "Ivân Ivânovitch", 349–50)

15. Such martyrdom might tax flesh to afford:
(1883, "Jachanan Hakkadosh", 179)

16. Here's poor flesh and blood,

Like thine and mine and every man's, a prey
To hell-fire!

(1884, "Mihrab Shah", 99–101)

Here one cannot but feel the accelerating pitch of increasing pain that the poet acutely feels in his own flesh but reveals through the mouths of his characters. It culminates in *The Ring and the Book* and instead of fading away, it continues growing stronger. This phenomenon is good proof of Browning's realistic view of life; he is well aware of the existence of trouble and suffering in the world as well as joy and happiness. He is not a mere optimist.[12]

As regards the same subject, one finds similarly wonderful expressions is Shakespeare:

He like a thievish dog creeps sadly thence,
She like a wearied lamb lies panting there;
He scowls and hates himself for his offence,
She desperate with her nails her flesh doth tear;

(*The Rape of Lucrece*, 736–9)

Who led me instantly unto his cave,
There stripp'd himself; and here, upon his arm
The lioness had torn some flesh away,
Which all this while had bled; and now he
fainted,
And cried, in fainting, upon Rosalind.

(*As You Like It*, IV. iii. 147–51)

And Hamlet's famous soliloquy in which, annoyed at his mother's infidelity against the dead king, he desperately utters words of deep sorrow:

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O
God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world.

(*Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, I. ii. 129–34)

There are references to 'an eagle' in connection with 'flesh' in both poets:

Responsive to which doubt, sudden there swooped
An eagle downward, and behold he bore
(Great-hearted) in his talons flesh wherewith
He stayed their craving, then resought the sky.
(1884, "The Eagle," 13–6)

Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast,
Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh and bone,
Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste,
Till either gorge be stuff'd or prey be gone:;
(*Venus and Adonis*, 55–8)

Browning is fond of such phrases as 'flesh and blood' and 'flesh and bone'. With the first appearance of the former in 1843 (He—the insane Khalif,/Dead near three hundred years ago, come back/In flesh and blood again? [*The Return of the Druses* V. 45–5]) and that of the latter in the same year (Fairly had fretted flesh and bone away/In cares that this was right, nor that was wrong, [43, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, I. i 90–1]), both phrases are employed many times.[13] So are the authors of the Old and New Testaments. For instance, "flesh from off their bones" (Mi 3:2), "touch his bone and his flesh" (Job 2:5), "are thy bone and thy flesh" (2 Sam 5:1; 1 Chr 11:1), "flesh and blood cannot inherit" (1 Cor 15:50).

Various painful descriptions naturally lead to the vision of death. 'Death' is first mentioned in relation to 'flesh' in *The Return of the Druses* (1843):..., as the Khalif vanished erst/In what seemed death to uninstructed eyes,/In red Mokattam's verge—our Founder's flesh,/As he resumes our Founder's function! (I.5–8). The unique display of some interpretations of 'death' follows: Death!—a fire curls within us/From the foot's palm, and fills up to the brain,/Up, out, then shatters the whole bubble-shell/Of flesh, perchance! (III. 115–8); "And like the hand which ends a dream,/ "Death, with the might of his sunbeam,/"Touches the flesh and the soul awakes,/"Then—" (45, "The Flight of the Duchess", 686–9). This quotation recalls some biblical lines to mind:

"what shall touch flesh thereof" (Lev 6:27)
"that toucheth the flesh of him" (Lev 15:7)

It is quite significant that in *The Ring and the Book*, the term 'death' is scarcely employed in association with 'flesh'. Instead, in *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871) the poet makes frequent use of 'death' or 'die' with a biblical connotation:

1. Give ear to me, then! For all flesh to die,
   Is nature's due; nor is there any one
   Of mortals with assurance he shall last
   The coming morrow:

(11. 1790–3)

2. Let the flesh perish, be perceived no more,

(1. 2562)

The lines from the Bible are:

all flesh died that moved upon. (Gen 7:21)
all flesh shall perish together. (Job 34:15)

Further 'death' is compared to some poison:

—Death, dreadful not in thew and bone, but like
The envenomed substance that exudes some dew
Whereby the merely honest flesh and blood
Will fester up and run to ruin straight,
Ere they can close with, clasp and overcome
The poisonous impalpability
That stimulates a form beneath the flow
Of those grey garments;...

(11. 2689–96)

Here, although the image is paradoxical ("honest flesh and blood") from that of No.1) ('wicked flesh'), now the dirtiness is lent to 'death' not to 'flesh'. *Balaustion* is one of the classical poems where, according to Machen's opinion, "Browning makes no Scriptural allusions."[14] Nevertheless, her assertion is not necessarily the case in this poem.

From numerous instances through his poetry above, even in just one phase of 'flesh', one realizes Browning's continuous, ever-growing interest in the subject and his marvellous, effective choice of words, especially modifiers in delineating what he wants to. As if with some biblical phrases that he must have learned by heart in his childhood still in his

bosom, Browning gradually enlarges the scope of expression, with an incredible increase of suitable vocabulary at his disposal. Interestingly enough, it almost coincides with P. Honan's insight: "we have seen that Browing's use of imagery underwent a surprisingly steady development through the plays, successive works instancing richer and more subtle uses of dramatic imagery as a means of character portrayal."[15]

3) beautiful, valuable flesh

There is also quite a contrasting interpretation of 'flesh' in Browning. Paradoxically, in contrast with the figures presented in No.1) and 2), 'flesh' is crowned with modifiers that denote healthy, colorful attributes of an object. For example, at the starting-point of his career:

> My glozing self-deceit, my outward crust
> Of lies which wrap, as tetter, morphew, furfair
> Wrapt the sound flesh!
>
> (35, *Paracelsus*, IV. 629–31)

The same adjective reappears at the final stage of his life:

> Spare Fust, then thus contrite!—who, youthful and healthy,
> Equipped for life's struggle with culture of mind,
> Sound flesh and sane soul in coherence, born wealthy,
> Nay, wise—how he wasted endowment designed
> For the glory of God and the good of mankind!
>
> (87, "Fust and His Friends", 141–5)

Here is the poet's ideal realization of man's life. It seems as if he almost predicted as a young man what he would be fifty years thenceforth. In the Bible, however, this expression is nowhere to be seen. Conversely, the authors of the Old Testament assert "no soundness in my flesh" (Ps 38:3, 7) or lend the adjective to another term: "sound heart is life of the flesh" (Pr 14:30). On the other hand, the line "holiest flesh" (68–9, *R. and B.*, VI. 268) has a few corresponding ones in the Bible, though not in the superlative degree: "and the holy flesh is passed" (Jer 11:15); "if one bear holy flesh in" (Hag 2:12). Similar modifiers are employed to indicate good men:

> "Here's a shred
> "Of saintly flesh, a scrap of blessed bone,

"Raised King Cophetua, who was dead, to life
"In Mesopotamy twelve centuries since,
"Such was its virtue!"

(68–9, *R. and B.*, XI. 567–71)

'Equals we are, Job, labour for thyself,
Nor bid me help thee: bear, as best flesh may,
Pains I inflict not nor avail to cure:

(84, "Two Camels", 96–8)

'Flesh' as something valuable is rendered in the following lines:

and, my lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.

(55, "Fra Lippo Lippi," 267–9)

Lippo sees God "A-making man's wife" in the garden, and celebrates his beautiful product (woman) that is alive. His comfortable surprise is taken over to the first collection of poems published immediately after Elizabeth's death:

Little girl with the poor coarse hand
I turned from to a cold clay cast—
I have my lesson, understand
The worth of flesh and blood at last.

(64, "James Lee's Wife", VIII, 292–5)

"Learning the veritable use
"Of flesh and bone and nerve beneath
"Lines and hue of the outer sheath,

(64, "James Lee's Wife", VIII. 311-3)

Browning's notion of 'valuable flesh' cannot be cut off from the fact that he is an artist in high spirits with exuberant praise for color as a means of thought delivery. The first example of this is shown in "shrinking Caryatides/Of just-tinged marble like Eve's lilied flesh/Beneath her maker's finger when the fresh/First pulse of life shot brightening the snow." (40, *Sordello*, I. 412–5) The beauty of whiteness crystalized in a girl or a woman often comes up:

I was a human creature too,

With flesh and blood like one of you,
A girl that laughed in beauty's pride
Like lilies in your world outside.

(45, "The Confessional," 9–12)

And in the second period:

Too white, for the flower of life is red;
Her flesh was the soft seraphic screen
Of a soul that is meant (her parents said)
To just see earth, and hardly be seen,
And blossom in heaven instead.

(64, "Gold Hair", 6–10)

The most typical representative of a woman of this kind may be Pompilia. In her case, the innocence of a maiden is also implied.[16] Here one notices an interesting phenomenon that the contrasting color to 'white' in relation to 'flesh' is regarded not as 'black' but as 'red'.

According to Honan's analysis of Browning's use of color imagery in *The Ring and the Book*, Guido and Caponsacchi are labeled "black" and "red", which stand for "villainy" and "courage" respectively.[17] Yet so far as 'flesh' is concerned, there is no 'black' color reference not only in *The Ring and the Book* but all through his works. By contrast, 'red' has at least three significant references:

1) Too white, for the flower of life is red;...("Gold Hair")
2) "Hell also," simpleness subjoins,/By White and Red describing human flesh.

(73, *Red Cotton*, I 557–8)

3) "Flesh is red"/(Or some such just remark)—" by no means white/As Guido's practice teaches: you are right."

(89, "Beatrice Signorini", 77–9)

To offer a few words of explanation:

1) The heroine of the poem is a beautiful girl full of heavenly purity and delicacy to all eyes; being too weak in body and soul to live in the harsh, temporal world, she dies. Though this saintly girl ironically proves to be a persistent lover of money later, in the introductory stanzas (I, II), her stainless beauty is wholly described in 'white' color which in turn,

lacks the youthful energy or passion as shown by 'red'. Here , 'white' denotes weakness while 'red' represents strength.

2) The color 'red' reflects the title of the poem, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*. The story told in it actually took place in the region called "White Cotton Night-Cap Country" by Anne Thackeray, daughter of the famous novelist. Browning "changed the white to red because of the bloody nature of the tragedy which occurred there, and which he describes in the poem."[18] The tragedy means the hero's suicide. The passage above is preceded by another: "Heaven" saith the sage "is with us, here inside/ Each man:" "Hell also,"...(11. 556–7). It means that heaven (white) and hell (red) substantially coexist in each man. They are distinctly opposing colors in human life. Of course one must take it into consideration that it is "simpleness" that utters it. It may be rather arbitrary to interpret life in terms of two colors alone.

3) "Beatrice Signorini" describes the love story of a painter Francesco Romanelli. The passage comes from his mouth. Romanelli is trying to "have her (Artemisia) his and make ministrant with every gift of body and of soul to him." Artemisia Gentileschi is another painter and both were actually living characters. Artemisia was a beautiful talented artist who was not only good at painting portraits but skilful in reproducing "with marvelous naturalness every kind of fruit."[19] In this situation Artemisia may be painting some fruit or other, although Browning lets her confess that it is flowers that she is willing to paint in her idle hours. Browning replaces fruits with flowers in his poem. When Romanelli, "leaning above her easel," says "flesh is red," he is most probably thinking in intellect (not feeling in heart) a sort of guilt of a man whose instinct forces a woman to be subjugated to himself. He is disguising his true passions. Or, he may bear in mind Artemisia's flaring emulation. She is confident, strong, and not at all hesitant in parting with him. She is proud and disobedient to a "male" who is "the master". Again, the utterance may hint at the furious behaviour of "the placid-perfect wife" Beatrice later, who in a fit of jealousy, destroys her husband's masterpiece with a dagger. Anyhow, 'red' here may point to an instinctively bloody tendency in human nature.

As for the biblical references to similar kinds of adjectives, a few

examples may be noted:

"fairer and fatter in flesh" (Dan 1:15)

"to make a fair shew in the flesh" (Gal 6:12)

Such a picturesque rendering of a mixture of colors, however, derives from Browning's innate exquisite sense for art; descriptions of the Bible on this point are far less artistic. Another example of Browning's is:

And end with the prickly-pear's red flesh
That leaves thro' its juice
The stony black seeds on your pearl-teeth.
(45 "The Englishman in Italy", 113–5)

Undoubtedly 'flesh' here typifies the Greek notion of it: "fleshy, pulpy substance of fruit."[20]

4) new flesh

This seems to be a unique idea. It is nourished in *Sordello* (1840): What may serve for sun, what still/"Wander a moon above me? What else wind/"About me like the pleasures left behind,/"And how shall some new flesh that is not flesh/"Cling to me?..."(VI. 370–4). Young Sordello a troubadour reflects upon "Fate" in the presence of his own death. Imagining "a second and superbar spectable" which "Fate" may provide for him, he still weighs "to-day's delight" and cries, "Enough that I can live, and would live!" (VI. 361). In some of the later poems, such relating words and phrases as "renewing" (43, *The Return of the Druses*, II. 228; 68–9, *R. and B.*, XI. 1900), "make anew" (*R. and B.*, V. 1965; 71, Prince *Hohenstiel-Shcwangau Saviour of Society*, 321), "renovate" (71, *Prince Hohenstiel*, 2115) are to be observed. The idea of something new or more positively, making something new, is the favorite of Browning a creative poet. It is significant, however, that the phrase "new flesh" appears only once here in all of his works.

The following two modifiers present themselves in the second period for the first time:

5) something pleasant

For pleasant is this flesh;
Our soul, in its rose-mesh
Pulled ever to the earth, still yearns for rest;

(64, "Rabbi Ben Ezra", 61–3)

6) something sensitive

Say, I was born with flesh so sensitive,
Soul so alert, that, practice helping both,
I guess what's going on outside the veil,

(64, "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium' ", 1242–4)

Now, the first section of our inquiry into the relation between Browning and the Bible through a survey of Browning's usage of 'flesh' (its nature) has come to an end. Next time a further investigation will be made on the matter of greater importance: 'flesh and spirit', the contrasting biblical terms.

(to be continued)

notes

1) John Richard Green, *A Short History of the English People* London: Macmillan, 1902), p.460.

2) Minnie Gresham Machen, *The Bible in Browning with Particular Reference to the Ring and the Book* (New York: Macmillan, 1903). As for the details, see M. Watanabe, "Biblical Influences Upon the Formation of Browning's Ideas: Introductory Chapter", *Studies in English Literature*, No.19 (Shimonoseki, Baiko Jo Gakuin College, 1983).

3) Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning*, 2nd ed., rev. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1886), p.15.

4) Edward Dowden, *The Life of Robert Browning*, Everyman's Library, No. 701 (London: J.M. Dent, 1917), p.178.

5) Alexander Cruden, *Cruden's Complete Concordance To the Old and New Testaments* (London: Lutterworth, 1951), p.224.

6) *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.751.

7) *A Greek-English Lexicon*, com. by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, a new ed. (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1843; rept. ed., 1961), p.1585. Both meanings (in parentheses) in this sentence are adopted by Epicurus.

8) *A Latin Dictionary*, by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1879; Impression of 1966), p. 294.

9) As regards a kind of shift of interest found in Browning's poems after Elizabeth's death, see M. Watanabe, "Browning's Vision of Life and Death in *Dramatis Personae* and *La Saisiaz*", *Studies in English Literature*, No. 18 (Shimonoseki: Baiko Jo Gakuin College, 1982).

10) The rules which I lay down within the discussion are as follows:

Concerning the method of quotation:

1) to show the published year first, the title in an abridged form next, and the lines last. e.g. 35, *Paracelsus*, 10

2) to point out at times the first appearance of a term in question which is related to 'flesh' (to be abbreviated to f.a.)

3) All the underlines are drawn by the writer.

All quotations of Browning are from *The Works of Robert Browning*, with introductions by Sir F.G. Kenyon, in 10 vols. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966). This is a reprinted edition of The Centenary Edition published in 1912 by Smith Elder & Co., London.

All quotations of the Bible are from *Cruden's Concordance.*

Those of Shakespeare are from *Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. by W.J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, reset & rept. ed., 1966).

11) See *A Concordance To the Poems of Robert Browning* by Leslie N. Broughton and Benjamin F. Stelter, in 2 vols. (New York: G. E. Stechert and Co., 1924), Vol. I, p. 692.

12) Thus it is only fair to quote a few scholars who perceive at the bottom of Browning's poetry the presence of tears as a mortal human being. First, according to V.C. Harrington:

> ...Browning's is the optimism of a man who knows the worst there is in the world, has probed it to the bottom, and feels to the uttermost the cruelty and the tragedy of life, but who, in spite of all this, believes that God will not be defeated,but that good will triumph at the last...
>
> *Browning Studies* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1915), p.44.

Then, William Lyon Phelps says:

> ...They miss in Browning the note of sorrow, of internal struggle, of despair...
>
> *Robert Browning* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1915), p.295.

13) A detailed discussion on this point will not be done in this study. An

attempt will be made in the next one.

14) Machen, *The Bible in Browning*, p.12.

15) Park Honan, *Browning's Characters A Study in Poetic Technique* (Yale Univ. Press, 1961, rept. 1969), pp. 167-8. The author, who thinks highly of Browning's poetic genius as revealed in his rare dramatic handling of imagery, refers to Miss Caroline Spurgeon's study of Shakespeare: "For just in the Spurgeon sense, each imaginary Browning monologuist is himself a little Shakespeare, selecting and forming images as he goes along in order to make his thought clear and to create special effects,...Indeed, one might say that in twenty dramatic monologues Browning manages to use imagery to reveal imaginary men in practically every way that Miss Spurgeon found Shakespeare's dramatic imagery revelatory of Shakespeare the man." (p.169)

16) Honan, *Browning's Characters*, p.193.

17) Ibid., p.194.

18) William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts), p.371.

19) Ibid., p.544.

20) "Flesh" No I-3 in *A Greek-English Lexicon.*