'Man and God' as Represented in Browning's "Saul"

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I

It is often said that Robert Browning (1812-98) was an optimist. As a highly talented and energetic poet, he struggled with the grim realities of life, resulting in a tremendous amount of poetic work which shows his ideas concerning man and the world. To be sure, his optimism is apparent in such a poem as "Fra Lippo Lippi" where Lippo (the artist) and the poet himself share 'joy of life' through drawing paintings (the former) and writing poems (the latter). Browning's optimistic view of life is to be seen here and in many other of his works. His optimism, however, is not a superficial one. It is based on his deep speculation for years on human life. "Saul" is one of the poems in which Browning considers much about life philosophically and religiously. A careful reading of this poem will incite thought regarding the meaning of one's being in this world. Such thinking may be of spiritual help to those who are troubled by the confusion in the world today. This paper is going to look into the nature of 'man' in "Saul" in stark contrast with the nature of 'God.' It is this 'contrast' which is a most effective method of clarification. The two contrasting ideas of man and God are to be considered mainly from a viewpoint of 'terms' used in the text.[1)]

II

First, let me point out the chronological structure of the poem. The first nine sections (102 lines) were put in *Dramatic Romances* (1845) with the rest (ten new sections, 239 lines) added later. The whole poem as it is now was published in *Men and Women* (1855).

This period of ten years is very meaningful, for it is in 1845 that young Browning became acquainted with Miss Elizabeth Barrett. He wrote to her a letter where he hinted at the poem.[2] Miss Barrett actually read the first "Saul" in the same year and gave Browning her suggestions. They married in 1846. The second part of the poem was written in the year of 1852-3. It is undoubtedly a succession of the first one. However, in the second there is a philosophical and religious development caused by the great influence of Mrs. Browning upon her husband's ideas and faith.

There is also a difference between the two parts with regard to sources:

The first "Saul": I Samuel 16: 14-23 and Christopher Smart's *A Song to David* (1763).

The second "Saul": *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850) and Sir Thomas Wyatt's *Seven Penitential Psalms* (1550).[3] Although many of its images, phrases or words are drawn from Smart's and Wyatt's works, Browning's "Saul" is an expression of his own ideas. Browning's favorite terms or those he repeatedly uses in the poem are good exponents of his thoughts. How does he meditate upon the problem of 'man and God' and give expression to this difficult theme? The terms I'm going to pay special attention to are 'God' and 'Creator' (and several other denominations) and 'man' and 'creature'.

For the original source of "Saul" we must go back to the Old Testament. I Samuel represents King Saul who is possessed with "an evil spirit from God" for his sin of not obeying God, and David "a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite" who is "a cunning player on an harp."[4] In the Bible the king orders his men to bring David to him. He loved David very much and was cured by the young man's wonderful harp. The text of the Bible tells of the fearful outcome of Saul's disobedience to God as well as God's mercy to the king through David. On the other hand, in Browning's "Saul" he lays stress not so much on Saul as on David. David is, in a way, none other than the poet himself. Browning ponders over the re-

lationship between God and himself by means of the words David utters.

The first reference to 'God' is "God's child with his dew . . ." (Ⅱ) . But, in fact, the initial reference that is of importance in connection with the theme is:

God made all the creatures and gave them
our love and our fear,
To give sign, we and they are his children,
one family here.
(VI. 11. 6-7)

David the shepherd plays one tune afrer another on his harp, charming the creatures (quails, crickets, jerboa) while keeping watch on the sheep. Another important reference in the first "Saul" is:

Let one more attest,
I have lived, seen God's hand thro' a
lifetime, and all was for best?
(IX. 11. 17-8)

Here is a clear indication of God working for the benefit of man.

Yet, references to 'man and God' in its true sense can be seen in the second "Saul" for the first time. 'Man' is described as follows:

1. "Yea, my King,"
I began--"thou dost well in rejecting
mere comforts that spring
From the mere mortal life held in common by man and by brute:
(XII Ⅰ. 11. 13-5)
2. But the license of age has its limit; thou diest at last:
As the lion when age dims his eyeball, the
rose at her height

So with man--so his power and his
beauty for ever take flight.
(XIII. 11. 26-8)

For all his grandeur, 'man' is, after all, a mere mortal being. As for the relationship between 'man and God,' one can find a good illustration of the poet's ideas in David's prayer:

Still be with me, who then at the summit of
human endeavour
And scaling the highest, man's thought
could, gazed hopeless as ever
On the new stretch of heaven above me--
till, mighty to save
Just one lift of thy hand cleared that dis-
tance--God's throne from man's grave!
(XVI. 11. 5-8)

These passages present numerous suggestive terms to illustrate Browning's ideas. First, there is a reference to the places on which God and man lay their foundations, throne and grave. Next, the first reference to "heaven" in the text is detected. David tries to fill the gap ("distance") between God (heaven) and himself (earth) in vain, but God does it easily with his hand. From now on, a personal relationship between God and David is deepened.

Section XVI forms an opening to the concluding part of the poem. Section XVI to XIX may be called the third "Saul" for its contents. Finally, throwing away his harp and song, David begins:

I have gone the whole round of creation :
I saw and I spoke:
I, a work of God's hand for that porpose,
received in my brain
And pronounced on the rest of his hand-

work--returned him again
His creation's approval or censure: I
spoke as I saw:
I report, as a man may of God's work--
all's love, yet all's law.
(XVII. 11. 1-5)

One sees an outspoken confession of the true foundation of the relationship between 'man and God.' God is Creator and man is His work (creature). God's creation of man serves as a key to unlock Browning's deepest ideas, although various denominations for God are used: Wisdom, the Infinite Care, the Giver, what Began.

Then how is the idea of mutual relationship between 'man and God' developed in the poem? David utters:

And thus looking within and around me
I ever renew
(With that stoop of the soul which in bending upraises it too)
The submission of man's nothing-perfect
to God's all-complete,
As by each new obeisance in spirit, I
climb to his feet.
(XVII. 11. 14-7)

Together with this recognition, however, David further refers to his own power to love Saul, which he expects is possibly stronger than that of God. Or rather, he seems to be almost sure of the possibility as his utterance shows:

Yet with all this abounding experience,
this deity known,
I shall dare to discover some province,
some gift of my own.
There's a faculty pleasant to exercise,
hard to hoodwink,

I am fain to keep still in abeyance, (I
laugh as I think)
Lest, insisting to claim and parade in it,
wot ye, I worst
E'en the Giver in one gift. --Behold, I
could love if I durst!
But I sink the pretention as fearing a
man may o'ertake
God's own speed in the one way of love:
I abstain for love's sake.

(XVII. 11. 18-25)

At the same time, he is well conscious of its danger:

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's
ultimate gift,
That I doubt his own love can compete
with it? Here, the parts shift?
Here, the creature surpass the Creator,--
the end, what Began?

(XVII. 11. 29-31)

David is thinking about himself in two contrasting ways:

1) as a man created by God

2) as a man who can create (in this case, love and consolation for Saul) and, in a sense, may surpass God. He is confident of his love toward Saul and feels it to be true. But his faith in the Creator turns him back and does not allow him to make his own way.

The questions and answers in his own mind come to a conclusion in Section XVIII.

I believe it! 'Tis thou, God, that givest,
'tis I who receive:
In the first is the last, in thy will is my
power to believe.

(XVIII. 11. 1-2)

David finally has to admit his weakness or inability to save Saul before the power of the almighty Love.

But once again one cannot but notice in the following lines David's self confidence in his love for Saul, or to be precise, his passionate desire to be able to save the king for himself.

As thy Love is discovered almighty, al-
mighty be proved
Thy power, that exists with and for it, of
being Beloved!
He who did most, shall bear most; the
strongest shall stand the most weak.
'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry
for! my flesh, that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it.
O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a
Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever:
a Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to
thee! See the Christ stand!

(XVIII. 11. 19-26)

These lines above seem to prove his challenging spirit to God as a man. Even if they are part of David's prophecy and David is symbolic of the Christ that is to come,[5] one senses the poet's human will to know God and strong self-assurance which turns up again and again in the process of thinking about God and himself. His self-assured voice is also heard in this line:

What stops my despair?
This;--'tis not what man Does which
exalts him, but what man Would

do!

(XVIII. 11. 8-9)

Here David laments over his not fulfilling what he wishes to do. Yet, the important thing is David's self-confidence is supported by his conviction that he is "a work of God's hand." In other words, David finds the ultimate ground for his existence not only as a skilful player of the harp but also as a man who can actually love the king in God's creation. "God made all the creatures and gave them our love and our fear" (VI, 11. 6) Even Saul is called thus: "--all/ Brought to blaze on the head of one creature--King Saul!" (XIX. 11. 29) Man is created by God in order to accomplish something on earth. He is, therefore, blessed with some wonderful talent as God's gift to man. This belief enables him to live, struggling, to the end in this world.

The idea of "gift" is recurrent in the poem. King Saul is described as follows:

He is Saul, ye remember in glory,--ere
error had bent
The broad brow from the daily communion; and still though much spent
Be the life and the bearing that front you,
the same, God did choose,
To receive what a man may waste, desecrate, never quite lose.

(XV. 11. 9-12)

"The daily communion" refers to Saul's spiritual communion with God. Saul was formerly the king chosen by God. The king must be endowed with many blessings--materially and spiritually. This line of the poem shows the greatness of the man, which is the gift of God (in Saul's case, goodliness and unparalleled height) . The idea of "gift" is undoubtedly a continuation from one of the concerns in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850) where Brown-

ing meditates upon 'man and God' seriously. 'God as Creator and man as creature with gifts' are the cardinal ideas in Browning's religious poems. For example,

You know what I mean: God's all,
man's naught:
But also, God, whose pleasure brought
Man into being, stands away
As it were a handbreadth off, to give
Room for the newly-made to live,
And look at him from a place apart,
And use his gifts of brain and heart,
Given, indeed, but to keep for ever.
Who speaks of man, then, must not sever
Man's very elements from man,
Saying, "But all is God's"--whose plan
Was to create man and then leave him
Able, his own word saith, to grieve him,
But able to glorify him too,
As a mere machine could never do,
That prayed or praised, all unaware
Of its fitness for aught but praise and prayer,
Made perfect as a thing of course.

(Christmas-Eve, V. 11. 26-43)

In the poem, the poet, who is disappointed at "the sermon," "the pastor," and "the flock" of a chapel he dropped in on a rainy night, confesses:

I have my own church equally:
And in this church my faith sprang first!

(V. 11. 10-1)

Then, in his imagination he meets the Lord and asks forgiveness for not choosing the way most Christians believe. The poet seems confident of his own position, perhaps the reason being:

I thought it best that thou, the spirit,
Be worshipped in spirit and in truth,
And in beauty, as even we require it--

(VIII. 11. 38-40)

In the next imaginary discussion against the Gottingen professor, the poet puts emphasis on man's gifts "from God descended," clearly discerning man who is given and God the giver.

I would praise such a Christ, with pride
And joy, that he, as none beside,
Had taught us how to keep the mind
God gave him, as God gave his kind,
Freer than they from fleshly taint:

(XVI. 11. 78-82)

Further:

Take all in a word: the truth in God's
breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed:
Though he is so bright and we so dim,
We are made in his image to witness him:

(XVII. 11. 1-4)

This is precisely the cause to which the poet so confidently attributes man's being on earth. "So, prize we our dust and ashes accordingly!" (XVIII. 1. 26)

In "Easter-Day," after a series of reasoning on faith with a friend, the poet finally chooses the world. On "the Judgment-Day," he defiantly appeals to God:

So was I framed by thee, such way
I put to use thy senses here!
It was so beautiful, so near
Thy world,--what could I then but
choose

My part there? Nor did I refuse
To look above the transient boon
Of time; but it was hard so soon
As in a short life, to give up
Such beauty: I could put the cup
Undrained of half its fulness, by;
But, to renounce it utterly,
--That was too hard!

(XVI. 11. 19-30)

On this particular day, one has to stand before God to face Him. The poet is accused by God sternly:

This infinite life, thou hast preferred,
In disbelief of God's plain word,
To heaven and infinity.

(XX. 11. 14-6)

Yet, the poet will not give in.Here the poet's troubled reasoning with God begins. However, his seeming gallentry gradually loses strength against God's convincing words of love shown in Christ:

Haste to take
The show of love for the name's sake,
Remembering every moment Who,
Beside creating thee unto
These ends, and these for thee, was said
To undergo death in thy stead
In flesh like thine: so ran the tale.

(XXX. 11. 19-25)

At last the cowering poet cries for God's mercy and salvation. His last voice seems to stand for his acknowledgment of himself (a man), being attracted by and involved in the world as he is, still being embraced by God (Love). Therefore he feels hopeful of the possibility of entering "paradise."

III

Browning's fundamental ideas on 'man and God', as represented in such religious poems as "Saul" and *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day,* are also clearly seen in some other poems in *Men and Women.* In "Fra Lippo Lippi," Lippi the painter, defending his own position as a Renaissance artist against the Prior who urges him to depict "the souls of men," argues:

> For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
> I always see the garden and God there
> A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
> The value and significance of flesh,
> I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.
>
> (p. 449, 11. 71-5)

The reason for his painting man's flesh is that it is full of beauty invested by God. We can see the importance of God's creation reflected even in Browning's non-religious poem.

Thus, Browning as a man, as well as an artist, is acutely aware of the exertion of God's creative power in man's world. As Berdoe asserts: "... Browning did not know God merely as a Theist, nor did he teach the doctrine of a personal God only from that point of view.He recognized the Creator as a Father, and himself as His loving child--... The abstract conception of God finds no place in Browning's teaching. A concrete conception of the Divine is found in Browning's works from first to last...."[6] Even his over-confidence deeply roots in this belief. This is a crucial point never to be overlooked when one studies Browning's poetry, not only his poems in *Men and Women,* but also those published afterwards. Then, how does Browning's understanding of the relationship between'man and God' affect out lives today? Are his ideas out of date now? The answer is "No." On the contrary, his view of man's life based on God's creation is up to date, or rather,

involves the truth which once was, now is, and is yet to be. Whatever great progress man has attained in various regions of science, technology, and culture during the last hundred years, man still finds it difficult to solve the riddle concerning man, whence he came and where he is going, primarily because the question is directly related to the meaning of his own existence on earth. What kind of knowledge can bring the "right" answer? Browning was continually inquiring after something; the greatest question for him was nothing but the value of man (including himself) in relation to God. Browning behaves as a child (with much intellect, curiosity and will) playing freely under the protection of the heavenly Father. He is at ease with God even though often attacked and censured by Him for his boldness and self-reliance as an artist. Through his mental struggle with his egoism, Browning sincerely encourages us to reflect upon the important problems in our lives.

(Notes)

1. The text used in this paper is *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Augustine Birrell (1907; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1912)

   All the underlines in the quotations are drawn by the writer of the paper.
2. For the details of the background of "Saul," see William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* (New Youk: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1955), pp. 254-7.
3. Wyatt's sequence of poems treats the agonies and repentance of David the king who has sinned against God for Bathsheba's sake. It is interesting that Browning, though indebted to Wyatt's composition, handles David in his younger days (at the time when he was just anointed king by God).
4. *The Holy Bible, the Authorized King James Version* (New York: The

World Publishing Company), p. 215. I Samuel 16: 14, 16, 18.

5. See *Select Poems of Robert Browning*, with introduction and notes by Rinshiro Ishikawa, Vol.I, 5th ed. (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1940) , notes, p. 57.
6. Edward Berdoe, *Browning and the Christian Faith*: *Evidences of Christianity from Browning's Point of View* (London: George Allen, 1896), p. 14.