

BROWNING'S DOCTRINE OF SUCCESS
IN FAILURE PRESENTED IN
"RABBI BEN EZRA"

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One of the fundamental themes in Browning's poetry is the doctrine of success in failure. Where we usually praise success and blame failure, Browning praises not only success but also failure. Browning believed that while we may be encouraged by temporary success, we must be inspired by failure as well. Browning might have forgiven any daring criminal; but he could not have forgiven the man who was selfishly satisfied with his attainments and his position, and thus accepted compromises with life. It is the deep conviction of Browning that a man's soul that ceases to grow is utterly damned, and therefore, his life is considered utter failure. A man's true success must not be measured by things done, which have their prices in the world.

Browning's optimism is not based on any discount of the sufferings of life, nor any attempt to overlook such gross realities as sin and pain. It is generally thought that the optimist must be shallow and superficial while pessimism is associated with profound and sincere thinking. Many critics declare that Browning dodges or leaps over the real obstacles in life, and that he thinks he has solved difficulties when he has only forgotten them. They miss in Browning the note of sorrow, of internal struggle, of despair; and insist that he has never accurately portrayed the real bitterness of the heart's sufferings.

It is only fair to Browning to remember that his optimism has a philosophical basis, and is the logical result of a firmly-held view of the universe. Browning did not fail to see that the world is full of sin and

sorrow, and cannot be remade without obstacles, struggles, and torments.

Browning suffered for his optimism with all his heart. If failure is only apparent, is it, then, that right and wrong are only illusions to sting men to effort? It is more relevant to observe what conception Browning had when he said that human effort was essential for the realization of the true worth of human life—the realization which is the basis of his optimistic view of life. Browning explains what he means by "effort" in his letter to Dr. Furnival dated March 2, 1889:

I should prosaically state the meaning thus: I do not ask a full disclosure of Truth, which would be a concession contrary to the law of things, which applies equally to the body and the soul, that it is only by striving to attain strength (in the one case) and truth (in the other) that body and soul do so—the effort—(can not be both) being productive, in each instance, of the necessary initiation into all the satisfactions which result from partial success; absolute success being only attainable for the body in full manhood—for the soul, in its full apprehension of truth—which will be, not here, at all events.⁽¹⁾

Browning admits that it is completely out of reach for men to attain to absolute success. But he still urges us to go on with effort hoping to make our "broken arcs the perfect round in heaven." Effort is the standard by which Browning measured the true worth of men. Browning indicates the standard by which he estimates art-work, in the closing paragraph of his *Essay on Shelley*. He says:

I would rather consider Shelley's poetry as a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal, than I would isolate and separately appraise the worth of many detachable portions which might be acknowledged as utterly perfect in a lower moral point of view, under the mere conditions of art. It would be

(1) Thurman L. Hood (ed.), *Letters of Robert Browning* (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 301.

easy to take my stand on successful instances of objectivity in Shelley: there is the unrivalled "Cenci"; there is the "Julian and Madalo" too; there is the magnificent "Ode to Naples": why not regard, it may be said, the less organized matter as the radiant elemental form and solution, out of which would have been evolved, eventually, creations as perfect even as those? But I prefer to look for the highest attainment, not simply the high, —and, seeing it, I hold by it. There is surely enough of the work "Shelley" to be known enduringly among men, and, I believe, to be accepted of God, as human work may; and around the imperfect proportions of such, the most elaborated productions of ordinary art must arrange themselves as inferior illustrations. (Written in 1852)

Browning himself wrote many poems in which he estimated the nature of the aspirations of men and artists by the standard presented in these passages, by the "presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal." This standard is presented most notably in "Rabbi Ben Ezra."

The doctrine of success in failure is stated explicitly in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," a masterpiece of argumentative and imaginative passion.

For thence, —a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks,—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink
i' the scale.⁽²⁾

This paradox, which comforts while it mocks, means that the speaker's achievements are ridiculously small in comparison with his ambitions and dreams. He was not content with low aims for his aspirations pointed to future development. In the twenty-third, twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth stanzas, Browning distinctly develops the idea that efforts,

(2) "Rabbi Ben Ezra," 11. 37-42.

which count for nothing in worldly estimation if unsuccessful, pay an enormous ultimate dividend and must therefore be rated high in the appraisal of the human soul.⁽³⁾

"Life's true success is secured through obstacles, and seeming failure, and unfulfilled aspirations."⁽⁴⁾ There can be no true progress without obstacles: no enjoyment without its opposite: no vacation without duties: no virtue without sin.

The second line of the poem is startling in its direct contradiction of the language and lamentation of conventional poetry. Regret for lost youth and terror before old age are stock ideas in poetry, but here we are invited to look forward to old age as the best time of life.⁽⁵⁾ The first stanza asserts the superiority of age over youth.

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made.⁽⁶⁾

Then the Rabbi tries to clear up a potential misunderstanding. Some may imagine that he has asserted the superiority of age because youth is troubled by a restless longing for an impossible perfection, but this restlessness, in his view, is by no means a disadvantage. The indecisions, perplexities, and yearnings; the hopes and fears of youth are the necessary elements of vitality and growth. They distinguish man's life from the limited completeness of the "low kinds" (stanza 3) of creation and should be given as essential to man's high rank in existence.⁽⁷⁾ The beast is passive and content; the "crop-ful bird" (l. 24) is untroubled; only man strives and strains because he is more than flesh. This is his glory.⁽⁸⁾

(3) William Lyon Phelps, *Robert Browning* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1932), p. 341.

(4) Hiram Corson, *An Introduction to Robert Browning's Poetry* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1886), p. 131.

(5) Phelps, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

(6) ll. 1-3.

(7) Corson, *op. cit.*, p. 130-131.

(8) David Fleisher, "'Babbi Ben Ezra,' 49-72: A New Key to an Old Crux," *Victorian Poetry*, I, No. 1 (1963), p. 47.

To man, propose this test—
Thy body at its best,
How far can that project thy soul on
its lone way?⁽⁹⁾

The real knowledge of life comes only in age; and in the beautiful words of the sixteenth stanza we have the close of one phase of thought. When youth is ended, then comes a time when there is light:

For note, when evening shuts,
A certain moment cuts
The deed off, calls the glory from the gray:
A whisper from the west
Shoots—"Add this to the rest,
Take it and try its worth: here dies
another day."⁽¹⁰⁾

From the twenty-sixth stanza to the end, Browning develops the figure of the potter, the wheel, and the clay. "The metaphor gives rein to the imagination."⁽¹¹⁾ In this metaphor, the potter is God: the wheel is the kaleidoscope of life's experience: the clay is man. God holds men on the wheel to mold them into the shape. If there are flaws, the burden is sometimes too heavy, and some men are wrenched and twisted by hard discipline: others, made of better material, constantly grow more beautiful and more efficient under the circumstance.⁽¹²⁾ On the wheel of life man is molded for his noble task in another world. "And portions of the eternal are embedded in the temporal."⁽¹³⁾ The soul never loses its gains and aspiration is an earnest hope of immortality. Death is only a crisis, a point in the life of a soul; and only

(9) 11. 46-48.

(10) 11. 91-96.

(11) Henry Charles Duffin, *Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1956), p. 84.

(12) Phelps, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

(13) F. G. R. Duckworth, *Browning: Background and Conflict* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1931), p. 157.

immortality can explain the incompleteness of all effort.

Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:

What was, is, and shall be:

Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay
endure.⁽¹⁴⁾

While our attention is directed to the conviction of the spiritual nature of human existence, we must not overlook the *raison d'eter* of flesh in the poem. Raymond emphasizes that man's finite experiences are, in their ultimate purpose, "machinery just meant" like the potter's wheel, to fashion the soul. It is clear that the poet attributes positive values to the material as well as to the spiritual aspects of man's dual nature. Nothing is more characteristic of Browning's humanism than the importance he attributes to the body and the senses.⁽¹⁵⁾

Although the body and the senses are from one point of view limitations of man's spiritual insight, they are the necessary conditions of his moral probation. Throughout life the spiritual is bound up with the material; the body and the senses are meant to serve as means to a realization of the spirit:

Let us not always say,

"Spite of this flesh to-day

I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"

As the bird wings and sings,

Let us cry, "All good things

Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now,

than flesh helps soul!"⁽¹⁶⁾

Corson agrees with Raymond that flesh and soul must be mutually serviceable; one must not be merely subjected to the other, not even

(14) 11. 159-162.

(15) W. O. Raymond, "The Jewelled Bow: A Study in Browning's Imagery and Humanism," *Robert Browning*, ed. Philip Drew (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 121.

(16) 11. 67-72.

the inferior to the superior.⁽¹⁷⁾ Fleisher calls attention to the fact that the Rabbi hastens to point out that the God-given body, endowed with sight, hearing and other senses, enables the soul to recognize the wonderful work of God in the unification of flesh and soul.

In youth, the pleasant charms of the flesh impede the flight of the soul; in youth, the yearning of soul to be freed from the constant struggle with flesh is unappeased. What the Rabbi wished for man is an harmonious integration of forces which will match the beast's but will represent a higher, human level of integration—an integration that is achievable only in age.⁽¹⁸⁾

In thus reviewing Browning's paradoxical presentation of the theme of success and failure in poem, my aim has been to show how Browning endeavored to solve the metaphysical questions of the meaning of human life. And, in proceeding further, I must observe that the spirit of the times is embodied in Browning's paradoxical presentation of his characteristic doctrine of human life.

Browning's view of life was stimulated by the general tone of the intellectual currents of his time, as were the other prominent writers of the Victorian period. Browning was keenly alive to the necessity of sharing the climate of his age; therefore his doctrine of human life must be understood in the light of the stimulating problems to which the Victorian intellectual world was exposed.

His conviction is the great nineteenth century doctrine of the glory of the imperfect, which was made famous by John Ruskin:

... But the modern English mind has this much in common with that of the Greek, that it intensely desires, in all things, the utmost completion or perfection compatible with their nature. This is a noble character in the abstract, but becomes ignoble when it causes us to forget the relative dignities of that nature itself, and to prefer *the perfectness of the lower nature to*

(17) Corson, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

(18) Fleisher, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

the imperfection of the higher; not considering that as, judged by such a rule, all the brute animals would be preferable to man, because more perfect in their functions and kind, and yet are always held inferior to him, so also in the works of man, those which are more perfect in their kind are always inferior to those which are, in their nature, liable to more faults and shortcomings, for the finer nature, the more flaws it will show through the clearness of it; and it is a law of this universe, that the best things shall be seldomest seen in their best form.⁽¹⁹⁾ (The italics are mine.) [*The Stones of Venice*, V. II (1853), Chapter VI.]

This passage reminds us of Browning's *Essay on Shelley* (1852) quoted earlier in this article. The poet's conviction in this doctrine of the imperfect is illustrated in his enthusiastic appraisal of Shelley's poetry in his *Essay*. Browning himself, in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," examined and estimated the nature of the aspirations of men and artists by the standard presented in his *Essay*, measuring them by the "presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal."

Ruskin gives two lessons, in his *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), to show his doctrine of the glory of the imperfect to his world of the nineteenth century:

... the more beautiful the art, the more it is essentially the work of people who *feel themselves wrong*; —who are striving for the fulfilment of a law, and the grasp of a loveliness, which they have not yet attained, which they feel even farther and farther from attaining the more they strive for it. And yet, in still deeper sense, it is the work of people who know also that they are right. The very sense of inevitable error

(19) Charles Frederick Harrold, and William D. Templeman, ed. *English Prose of the Victorian Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 903-904.

from their purpose marks the perfectness of that purpose, and the continued sense of failure arises from the continued opening of the eyes more clearly to all the sacredest laws of truth.

This is one lesson. The second is a very plain, and greatly precious one; namely—that whenever the arts and labours of life are fulfilled in this spirit of striving against misrude, and doing whatever we have to do, honourably and perfectly, they invariably bring happiness, as much as seems possible to the nature of man. In all other paths by which that happiness is pursued there is disappointment, or destruction: for ambition and for passion there is no rest—no fruition; the fairest pleasures of youth perish in a darkness greater than their light: and the loftiest and purest love too often does but inflame the cloud of life with endless fire of pain. But, ascending from lowest to highest, through every scale of human industry, that industry worthily followed, gives peace

“Whatever thy hand findeth to do—do it thy might.”⁽²⁰⁾

One of the most powerful influence on the Victorian thought was the German idealism represented by Kant, Hegel, Schelling and Fichte. Carlyle played a leading role by interpreting German philosophy for his countrymen. He preached the doctrine of work and the development of one's real self. To Carlyle, the secret of living is growth; life is dynamic and is to be measured by the fullness of its expression and the spirit in which it is lived. “The man is the spirit he worked in,” said Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*; “not what he did but what he became.”²¹

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 980. Ecclesiastes, ix 10. (Cf. the final sentences in Book II, Chapter ix, *Sartor Resartus*, 1833-34).

(21) C. F. Harrold comments on this line: “This thought became one of the dominating ideas in the nineteenth century, especially in Browning. Carlyle is here adapting *Wilhelm Meister*, II, 76: ‘The spirit in which we act is the highest matter.’” q. v. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed with an Introduction by C. F. Harrold (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1937), n. 1, p. 203.

The whole nineteenth century thrilled to this ideal.

In the similarity between Carlyle's idealism and Browning's philosophy of the imperfect, we see the same reaction of great minds to the metaphysical speculations postulated in the Victorian intellectual milieu. While Fichte stressed the ethical nature of the divine process, Hegel emphasized the rational. Reality is, for Hegel, a logical process of evolution; God is the living, moving reason of the world, revealing himself to men.⁽²²⁾

For a writer like Hegel, the real is the ideal and the rational. He is least likely of all great minds to grant that "a man's reach should exceed his grasp,"⁽²³⁾ or to admit that "what I aspired to be, and was not, comforts me."⁽²⁴⁾ He is wholly engrossed in showing the rationality of the actual. To condemn it, even from the point of view of that better future toward which it aims, would seem to him treasonable scepticism. Hegel tries to explain God, man, the soul, history and particularly Christianity by reason alone.⁽²⁵⁾ Browning's paradoxical thinking makes a dialectic progress toward a perfect world which is not yet his except by faith and hope. In this view of the idea of progress set forth as the background of the nineteenth-century thought the alliance of Browning with Ruskin, as evidenced by his appealing dictum that all poetry is the problem of "putting the infinite within the finite," shows the alliance of the nineteenth-century doctrine of the glory of the imperfect with the Christian-Platonic philosophy. And it seems that Browning attributes the doctrine of the imperfect to the ideas of Plato:

(22) R. Mackintosh, *Hegel and Hegelianism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p. 252.

(23) "Andrea del Sarto," l. 97.

(24) "Rabbi Ben Ezra," ll. 40-41.

(25) Johannes Hohlenberg, *Soren Kierkegaard, trans. by T. H. Croxall* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1954), pp. 136-151.

. . . Not what man sees, but what God sees, —the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand,— it is toward these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity, he has to do; and he digs where he stands,— preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute Mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak.⁽²⁶⁾

Nature of paradoxical elements in Browning's doctrine of success in failure, thus analyzed, serves to ascertain his basic standpoint for his lofty idealism to belong to the main stream of Platonism running through the history of Western thought.

(26) *Essay on Shelley.*