

CHAPTER XXXI

PHILOSOPHICAL POEMS OF THE VICTORIAN AGE

I

BROWNING'S "RABBI BEN EZRA"

IN a certain sense every great poet is a great priest. While it is quite true that few of the greater poets of any country in Europe have been orthodox believers—strict member of any church or creed; while it is even true that most of them have been distinguished rather as free-thinkers than as believers—nevertheless it is equally true that all of them, or nearly all of them, have been men of deep faith. Their faith has been their own—they have recognized in their own free way the great mystery of the universe, the feebleness of human wisdom to read that mystery, the impermanency of most things, and the ethical necessities of ordered existence. Being men of peculiarly fine and delicate organization, they have also been for the most part sensitive to wrong, strenuous for right, and in a certain way better able to tolerate and to judge than the majority of lesser men. Life has oppressed them more heavily, perhaps, than any others; they have accordingly been almost forced to give more thought to the reasons of human sorrow and social inequality. Finally, by the very nature of their profession, they have had to live a great deal alone, under conditions compelling them to think and feel profoundly. Whoever thinks and feels profoundly about life and the riddles of life, almost necessarily becomes something of a religious teacher if he puts his best thoughts into print. And it is to men of this class that the world has learned to look for a certain kind of unconventional moral teaching and for con-

solation in unconventional philosophic thought. The world has recognized that the poet—the great poet—is a kind of priest; the term World Priest has well been given to several of the greatest.

Now there are two ways in which the great poet figures as a priest. One is by simply reflecting and teaching the best moral thought of his own country and time. The other and larger method is by teaching men to think in entirely new ways about whole-truth, and so teaching that the boundaries of religions, countries, races, all vanish in the consideration of expanded verities. The men who can teach in the latter way are, indeed, very few, but they are the true World Priests. The great German Goethe was a poet of this kind.

During the last period of English poetry there were very few philosophical poems of the very first rank produced, for the obvious reason that men's minds were at that time in an unsettled state. A new philosophy, a new theory of the universe, was being fiercely debated; old beliefs were weakening or vanishing, and between the past and the present many poets did not really know how to choose. Some few kept to the old order of things, two or three dared to speak new thoughts fearlessly, a majority remained wavering, half-way. At the present time the new thought seems to have conquered, but poetry has become silent. The new poets have not yet learned, perhaps, how to face the new riddles. But it is very interesting in this moment of hush, to look back to the Victorian period, and see what its great philosophical compositions expressed of the thought of the time. Four or five poems will teach us a great deal in regard to the psychological aspects of Victorian poetry.

No personality of this period is more interesting than that of Browning, and we should naturally expect even more from him than he has given us of philosophical poetry. Many and many a reader has studied Browning in vain for a clear explanation of what he thought about the problems of his time. Here and there we find a hint of the influence

of new ideas, but perhaps upon the very next page, or even upon the same page, we find some expressions of sympathy with vanishing beliefs. Books have been written about the philosophy of Browning, and I think that most of them are simply nonsense. The truth is that Browning never attempted to express any one kind or school of philosophy; what is more, he very seldom tried to express his own opinion at all. The whole of his method was opposed to such presentation. It was a psychological method; its purpose was not to put forth personal ideas, but to explain by sympathetic intuition the ideas and the beliefs of other great minds. To illustrate this fact better, let me speak in detail of Browning's method. He would read a book of history, philosophy, ethics, metaphysics—it matters little what—by some great man; then he would try to understand from that book the soul of the man who wrote it. He would say to himself, "A man who wrote like this, must have thought in such and such a way; I can understand him, and I can make him live again, make him speak as if he were alive." Then he would write about that man, and make him act according to his conception. It was in this way that Browning wrote philosophical poems. Naturally it was not the living men of his own time who could have furnished him with the material that he wanted; they were too near him, they had not yet completed their life-work. He turned naturally to the great minds of the past, and he cared nothing about when they lived, or where they lived, or what creed they belonged to; he did not even care whether they were right or wrong, provided that they had a great lesson to teach, which he could understand.

But although this was Browning's distinguishing dramatic method, he nevertheless sometimes becomes a poet-priest by virtue of that intense sympathy which he was able to feel and to express even for beliefs that were not his own. If you can understand another person's religion—the emotional germ of truth which is in it, the promptings which it gives to conscience, the consolations which it bestows on him in

the time of trouble; if you can understand all this and faithfully express it, you virtually preach the boon which is in that religion, whether you believe it or not. Browning could do this. He could also understand wickedness and express that.

By his poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" Browning made his most notable contribution to the metaphysical poetry of the Victorian age. He took for his subject the character of a famous Spanish Jew, more generally known in literary history by his Arabian name Ben Ezra, who was born at Toledo early in the eleventh century. Having read the work of this man, Browning tried to express the character of him in the form of an imaginary discourse upon old age, the riddle of life, and the purpose of God—supposed to be spoken by this Jewish teacher of nine hundred years ago. The poem is partly religious, but that portion of it regarding the relation of old age to the life of man is philosophical in the best sense. Already this composition has become very famous, and nobody can be said to know much about Browning's poems who is not acquainted with it. We can study it without necessarily reading the whole of it—for it is rather long; but we shall take each of the gems which it contains, and dwell a little upon their lustre.

The first part of the poem relates to old age considered from a different standpoint from that in which Cicero viewed it in other times.

Grow old along with me!
 The best is yet to be,
 The last of life, for which the first was made:
 Our times are in His hand
 Who saith, "A whole I planned,
 Youth shows but half; trust God; see all, nor be afraid!"

A confession of Jewish faith at the outset need not make you doubt the broad interest of wider thoughts to come. And even here the introduction promises well, with its startling suggestion about the value of old age. Some Greek

writers indeed spoke of old age as a period of calm from troubles, but most of them expressed the dread of its coming, and the sadness of an old man's memory. Cicero has nothing to say about old age that can console a modern old man who reads it; for Cicero's proposed consolations for old age would require a good deal of money to procure. The idea that old age might really be better than youth did not occur very often to minds that lived in the period when the chief purpose of living was thought to be personal happiness. It required some sterner creed to insist upon an answer to this plain question, "Is the object of life really personal happiness?" Of course the creed of Ben Ezra declared the very contrary, but he was certainly one of the first to declare boldly that old age is better than youth simply because of its being the time of knowledge and understanding. That is the meaning of the line "The best is yet to be." All the experiences of youth and of middle age should be thought of as only a preparation for old age. The life of man should be considered as a complete circle, a God-planned whole, and old age is the best part of that whole, the jewel in the ring-circle. Quite true, it is the period preceding death, and the old man is obliged to think a good deal about death, but what has he to be afraid of? Let him trust the power that has made him, and fear nothing.

But Ben Ezra says, "Do not imagine that I wish to find fault with youth, and the follies of youth, and scepticism of youth." The young man seeks pleasures, tires of them, goes in search of them, then talks about what he thought was best. Or he is wildly ambitious—he wants to be not only as great as the great men that he sees or reads about, but greater and more famous than any. All this is only because of his innocence and ignorance; and for the same reason in those early years he does not think about serious things—he doubts the teachings of wisdom. But, says Ezra, "Doubt is a good thing in the mind of a young man when it comes in a natural way—when it comes as the necessary

result of limited knowledge.” Indeed it is only the utterly ignorant, the hopelessly stupid, who never doubt—they are mere lumps of matter, “clods untroubled by a spark,” as the poet recites. Doubt and folly have their reason for being; but the time comes with every sensible man when he must perceive that the true object of life is not enjoyment, not selfish pleasure. If it were, what difference could there be between a man and a beast? For the beast indeed seeks its own pleasure, and if man does the same, it were but right that he should end in the same way. And the time comes when he has to recognize that there is something much more for him to do in the world than cultivate his appetites.

The first part of the poem, then, may be summarized thus: Old age is the flower and crown of life, because it is the age of wisdom, and all other years of life are but a preparation for it. The faults of youth are not to be despised nor unreasonably regretted; we learn only through making mistakes. The greatest of such mistakes is the fancy that life is to be valued in terms of pleasure. That is an animal idea of life.

Here the student should remember that the poet is expressing the ideas of a Jew, not a man of the nineteenth century, not of a philosopher of to-day. The distinction between the animal and the man is too strongly made, and belongs to an age in which thinking life was denied to animals by the metaphysicians. To-day we know better. Animals think, animals reason, and animals have a simple morality of their own, a moral consciousness and a very strong sense of duty. Indeed, in any modern great work on psychology you will find something relating to the morality of animals.

But to continue from the point of the poem at which we stopped. It is a man's duty, the poet says, to consider pain not as a misfortune but as a blessing. He has told us that we learn by mistakes, and that is only another way of saying that we learn wisdom through pain. It is pain that

makes us wise, that makes us unselfish, that makes us good men.

Then, welcome each rebuff
 That turns earth's smoothness rough,
 Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
 Be our joys three-parts pain!
 Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
 Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the
 throe!

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.

We should welcome every rebuff, every blow, every mishap that interrupts our pleasure in this world, or, as the poet puts it symbolically, "turns the smoothness of the world rough" for us. We should welcome every shock of necessity that does not allow us to remain idle, to sit and amuse ourselves, but obliges us to make a strong effort in order to live. It is well for us that three parts of every pleasure must be pain (I believe that this is the accurate philosophical calculation of the true proportion of pain and pleasure in common life); if it were otherwise we could not make so much moral progress. We should think that the pain of effort is really cheap, we should learn without thinking about the cost, we should never be afraid to do the best we can, or be unwilling to pay the cost of effort in suffering. The truth is that everybody's life is more or less of a success to just the same degree that it is more or less of a failure! This seems like a paradox, but it is a truth, and we shall find it a very comforting truth when we understand the meaning of life and the meaning of law. It is not what a man is able to do that Heaven judges him by;

it is by what he wishes and tries to do; and if he tries to do the impossible in a good direction, he will not be judged by his failure, but by his purpose.

Nevertheless, we must not think contemptuously of the body and of the senses, and of the pleasures that the senses provide. For by these we can learn, and do learn. There is no ascetic spirit in Ezra; he would consider such a spirit folly.

For pleasant is this flesh;
 Our soul in its rose-mesh
 Pulled ever to the earth, still yearns for rest:
 Would we some prize might hold
 To match those manifold
 Possessions of the brute,—gain most, as we did best!

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!”

Very pleasant, he says, is this natural life of the body, the life that inclines us to pleasure, to idleness, to mere delight. The body is like a rosy net which keeps the bird of the soul from flying to the heaven which it desires. Indeed, it may seem hard that we cannot get our reward for effort in the same way that the animal does. The animal that is most active, most swift, most strong, gets most pleasure out of existence. It is not that way in the case of man. We do not get pleasure in proportion to the moral effort which we make—nor need we expect it. We must be content to anticipate a higher form of reward when freed from the net of the body. But do not say for that reason that the body is a hindrance—do not struggle unreasonably against nature. If you are wise, you will find that the body can help the soul just as much as the soul can help

the body, which means "use your best faculties, and your senses in the wisest way; and your very senses will help you to become wise and good." From the moral point of view the foregoing reflection will pass criticism very well. But, as a matter of fact, and although there are exceptions to this rule, the man who struggles best in the world is very likely to obtain the best that it has to offer. The race is to the stronger. However, Ben Ezra is not speaking of worldly success.

The next few verses deal with the rewards of a good life in the time of old age. It is only when old, he tells us, that a man can fairly judge his own acts in the past—can really know whether he was right or wrong about many things. From the experience of the past we can learn to face the future. It is better that, as young men, we cannot know, for the experience which makes us know is better for us than any teaching of texts or lips.

Youth ended, I shall try
My gain or loss thereby;
Be the fire ashes, what survives is gold:
And I shall weigh the same,
Give life its praise or blame:
Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being old.

Here the fire referred to is the fire of youth, of impulse, of passion, of unreflecting emotion. But when this fire has been burned out—that is to say, when the man has become old,—what is left of his mind is like gold that has been in the furnace, and has been separated from all dross. "Was I right to be angry that day? Was I right to yield on that other day?" Such questions as these cannot be justly answered in the moment that the young man first puts them to his conscience. But when he puts those questions again to himself in the time of his old age, he can answer them, perhaps only he—and God. The judgment of the world, as to a man's actions, must not be trusted. How should it be trusted? How can the world truly judge a man?

Was I, the world arraigned,
Were they, my soul disdained,
Right? Let age speak the truth and give us peace at
last!

Now, who shall arbitrate?
Ten men love what I hate,
Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;
Ten, who in ears and eyes
Match me: we all surmise,
They, this thing, and I, that: whom shall my soul believe?

If we rely upon mere human evidence, as to our personal worth, indeed we shall never know what that worth is. For every man of action must have at least ten enemies, or antagonists, who affect to despise him or openly hate him. Ten men will unite their ten opinions against his one. They will say, "What you did was foolish, what you obtained was of no value, what you liked was altogether worthless." How are you to prove that you are right and those ten men are wrong? Can you prove that they are not so learned as you, so clear-seeing as you, so quickly perceiving as you? Very probably they are more learned, more intellectually keen, more perceiving—altogether, as human forces, much better men than you. Nevertheless you must not be afraid of this evidence, if your conscience declares you right. The whole world may condemn you, but if you are right you must not heed the condemnation; your conscience and God ought to be friends enough for you. Besides, it is not by what the man does that God will judge him, but by what he wanted to do. Here the poet compares man to a vessel of clay shaped by a potter. The potter is God himself; the clay-vessel is the cup or body of our life. From this point begins a series of very beautiful verses—those which have especially made the poem famous. The following deal with human purpose as distinguished from human action:

Not on the vulgar mass
Called "work," must sentence pass,

Things done, that took the eye and had the price;
O'er which, from level stand,
The low world laid its hand,
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice:

But all, the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account;
All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's
amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

The world judges the man by his work, by the quantity of it, vulgarly; and the approbation of the world is really worth nothing at all. The worth of a man is in what the coarse judgment of the world cannot estimate—in what the coarse fingers of the world cannot span or measure—in what the man has never done, and could not do, but might have done if heaven had permitted. The best of a man may be in the thoughts that he could not express, in fancies that he never could utter by mere words, and therefore quickly forgot again. It may be exactly in the things that a man only wished to do, but could not do, that his real worth lies. In short, his worth may be only "potential," to use the philosophical term. Even from the scientific point of view there is a good deal of truth in this. The best qualities of a man may appear in his grandchildren or great grandchildren; they furnish the proof of the worth of the ancestor. But Ben Ezra refers only to the purpose of the infinite potter, who knows perfectly well the qualities and the possibilities of the clay which he is moulding.

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,
 That metaphor! and feel
 Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,—
 Thou, to whom fools propound,
 When the wine makes its round,
 "Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize
 to-day!"

Fool! All that is, at all,
 Lasts ever, past recall;
 Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:
 What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be:
 Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

The metaphor of the potter and the wheel is taken from Isaiah, lxiv, 8. The poet makes the metaphor still finer by representing the whirl of time as the whirling of the wheel—the mighty wheel of Cosmos, upon which all forms are shaped. But though the form and the name may pass, the Substance and the Maker have neither beginning nor end; and whatever is real, has always been and will always be. I need scarcely tell you that this is rank heresy from the narrow standpoint of any orthodox Christian. This is not Western thinking at all, but Oriental thinking, with something of Platonism in it. It is not even Jewish in an orthodox sense. The idea that the soul of man will always be, is both Hebrew and Christian; but in the idea that it always has been, and that the mere fact of its existence would prove that it always had been, the teaching of Ben Ezra comes very near to the thinking of the Far East. As a matter of fact, Ben Ezra considered the soul very much as it is considered in the great Eastern religions, a compound; and only the best of a man, the absolutely pure qualities of self, he imagined to be eternal and immortal. The evil and the folly, the sensuous part of self, might crumble and die, but the elements of pure wisdom would continue for ever. And now observe how the metaphor of the potter and the vase is still further elaborated. The body

of a man and the common part of his mind is but a cup or vase, made by the Supreme Potter to be filled with that water of life which is pure wisdom and immortal. That is all. That is the truth which every man should try to recognize—that he is only like a cup, for the use of the Supreme. In the making of old Greek and Roman vases, it was occasionally the custom to decorate such vases with figures in relief. This was managed by moulding the cup in a particular way—and the fact suggests to the poet a still finer elaboration of the metaphor. About the bottom of the vase of life, representing youth, there are certain dancing figures, images of loves, cupids. But about the rim of the cup, the part last finished, the decoration consists of figures of skulls—grim things that suggest death and perhaps the decay of old illusions.

What though the earlier grooves
Which ran the laughing loves
Around thy base, no longer pause and press?
What though, about thy rim,
Skull-things in order grim
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?

Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips aglow!
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what needst thou with
earth's wheel?

That is to say, "O man, thou who art but a cup made for the use of the Divine Maker, be not dismayed because the first part of the work is ended and done,—because that part of the cup which represented youth and beauty and the illusion of existence is finished,—nor because at this moment thou feelest that the Decorator is making upon you images of death, and not of life! Think only of the use of the cup; think only of the immortal banquet at which you

are to be filled for the use of the Master! The earth was indeed the wheel upon which you were shaped by the great Potter; but the work of the wheel being done, why regret it? Thou hast no more need of the wheel, no more need of the world. Thy destiny is the table of the eternal banquet.”

But I need, now as then,
Thee, God, who moulded men!
And since, not even while the whirl was worst,
Did I,—to the wheel of life,
With shapes and colours rife,
Bound dizzily,—mistake my end, to slake Thy thirst:

So, take and use Thy work!
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o’ the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times be in Thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!

The last verses embody the whole religious philosophy of the poem; and the last stanza may be regarded as a little prayer to the eternal Potter begging him to make perfect his work and to remove all the imperfections of the material. Every line is doubly suggestive. Now it is very curious to notice how the Persian poet Omar Khayyám, of whom I spoke to you, uses the very same comparison of the Potter and the clay for an entirely opposite teaching. The contrast of the ideas inspired by the same metaphor in two utterly different minds, is one of the most remarkable things in metaphysical poetry.

II

SWINBURNE’S “HERTHA”

THE really great work of the Victorian period in the metaphysical direction seems to be represented by four poets only,—Tennyson, Browning, Meredith, and Swinburne. Tennyson’s work you know: it is chiefly to be found in the great elegiac

poem of "In Memoriam," the couplets of "The Two Voices," and in a number of shorter pieces, such as "Vastness." But Tennyson is rather a reflector, a mirror, of ideas of a class than an original voice. He never suffered himself to go very far out of the common track of thought followed by his own particular class, which always remained on the safe side of heterodoxy. What gives his utterances on the subject literary value is never their newness, but the extreme beauty of the language in which they are expressed. Browning is very much deeper, and we have read the best of his work in this direction, such as the musical poem of "Abt Vogler" and the religious poem of "Rabbi Ben Ezra." Swinburne we have not yet studied. It is rather surprising to find him in the rôle of philosopher; for it is as a poet of the senses that he is particularly noted. But the student ought to know that perhaps the very best poem which he has written—if it be possible, in view of such perfection, to call any one of his poems better than another—is a metaphysical poem, and one that will probably never disappear from the treasure house of English literature. It is entitled "Hertha."

Hertha was the name given by old northern races to the goddess or spirit of the earth. In other words, it is very much the same name as earth in a female personification. All of the great polytheistic religions had such a divinity; the old classical goddess, Ceres, mother of harvest, was a goddess of this kind. Now the ancient ideas regarding an earth divinity have never entirely passed away. They linger in literature with hundreds of idioms and phrases preserved from Greek and Latin sources. And when we talk to-day about nature's doing this, or producing that, desiring this, opposing that,—we are really speaking and thinking very much in old Roman and Greek ways. Observe also that we invariably speak in good literature of nature as "she." Nature remains still feminine in our poetry and our prose, and in our imagination, as in the imagination of a Roman in the days before Christianity.

Now in all these ancient conceptions of an earth goddess

there was a certain grain of truth. The mystery of life and of the world is not a bit clearer to the scientific mind of to-day than it was to the minds of the ancients. Indeed, all that science has done is to make plainer for us certain laws of nature, certain directions in which she moves, but of what nature is, science cannot tell us anything at all. Life is just as much a riddle as it ever was, and it will probably be a riddle as long as time endures. However, I think we may define nature scientifically as signifying forces which shape all things and dissolve all things—the powers of creation and the powers of disintegration. This makes nature at one with all that men have called God. Nature means for the scientist Force, for the scientific philosopher, the Unknown, and for the religious believer, God. If we unite the three conceptions in one, the result will be very much what Swinburne's Hertha is,—the spirit of all things, mothering all things, directing all things, containing all things. With this explanation, the beauty of the poem will be more manifest to our minds.

I am that which began ;
 Out of me the years roll ;
 Out of me God and man ;
 I am equal and whole ;
 God changes, and man, and the form of them bodily ; I am the soul.

Before ever land was,
 Before ever the sea,
 Or soft hair of the grass,
 Or fair limbs of the tree,
 Or the flesh-colour'd fruit of my branches, I was, and thy soul was
 in me.

First life on my sources
 First drifted and swam ;
 Out of me are the forces
 That save it or damn ;
 Out of me man and woman, and wild-beast and bird ; before God
 was, I am.

Beside or above me
 Naught is there to go;
 Love or unlove me,
 Unknow me or know,
 I am that which unloves me and loves; I am stricken, and I am
 the blow.

I the mark that is miss'd
 And the arrows that miss,
 I the mouth that is kiss'd
 And the breath in the kiss,
 The search, and the sought, and the seeker, the soul and the body
 that is.

Before we examine the verses in detail it must be observed that, beautiful as they are, there at first sight appears to be an inappropriate use of imagery. Here is the spirit of the universe addressing us—yet comparing itself to a tree! You know that it is considered a kind of literary rule not to compare the great with the small, and here we have the infinite comparing itself with a tree! But really this use of imagery is very skilful; it is justified by the old northern mythology. In that mythology the source of all life was said to be the great ash tree Yggdrasil, whose roots were in the shadows of death, and whose head rose far above the highest heavens. Upon its lower branches the world was suspended, like a disc, and upon its middle branches were the heavens of the gods. That is the tree to which the poet refers, and you see that the image is a tremendous one. He could not have used it, perhaps, if he had not called his poem “Hertha”—but that title justifies the introduction of the tree of life. Now let us paraphrase.

“I am that which made all beginnings; and I created Time. God and men alike came from me; yet I am always infinitely ONE and infinitely complete. Human conceptions of God change with the years; human character changes; everything having bodily form changes. But I change never, because I am the soul of all things.

“Before there was any land or sea, any life, even of

grass, my life was; and the life that is now your life was even then contained within me (the image of 'flesh-colour'd fruit' used in the fifth line of this second stanza signifies the human race).

"On the sources of my being all life first appeared as upon the surface of the sea. I shape, but I unshape also; I preserve, but I likewise destroy. Human beings and animals and birds and all creatures are of me, and I was before any gods ever were.

"Neither is it possible to go outside of me—either above me or below me; for I am equally all depth and all height. Nor is it possible to have any knowledge or any feeling that is not of me. Hate me or love me; it is I who am the hater and the lover. Strike me; the blow is given by me, not by any other.

"I am the target which is shot at, and I am the arrows shot; and I am the lips of the girl that is kissed; yet I am also at the same time the life in the lover that kisses her. I am the seeker, and the act of seeking, and the thing sought for—the soul in everything, yet the body or form of everything as well."

The northern imagery in the early part of the verses is here suddenly exchanged for Oriental imagery. I need scarcely remind you that the fourth and the fifth stanzas are almost literal renderings of passages from the Sanskrit "Bhagavad-Gita,"—the greatest of all pantheistic poems ever written. Whether Swinburne actually took his inspiration from some translation of the Indian poem, or whether from some other source, I cannot say. But there is a very famous poem entitled "Brahma" translated from the Persian by Ritter, which would have given him the same inspiration; and the succession of images in the work of the Persian mystic happens to be very much the same as in Swinburne's poem. You can find the poem in the "Poems of Places," in the library, in the volumes relating to India. Very much like the Ritter translation in spirit, but less impressive as poetry, are Emerson's verses "Brahma." The Indian imag-

ination has appealed at once to thinkers of every class and in almost every country.

Swinburne has used a great many other images of recognizably Indian origin, but he has not by any means confined himself to this source. The inspiration of the following verses is Hebrew.

Hast thou known how I fashion'd thee,
Child, underground?
Fire that impassion'd thee,
Iron that bound,
Dim changes of water, what thing of all these hast thou known of
or found?

Canst thou say in thine heart
Thou hast seen with thine eyes
With what cunning of art
Thou wast wrought in what wise,
By what force of what stuff thou wast shapen, and shown on my
breast to the skies?

Who hath given, who hath sold it thee,
Knowledge of me?
Has the wilderness told it thee?
Hast thou learnt of the sea?
Hast thou communed in spirit with night? have the winds taken
counsel with thee?

Have I set such a star
To show light on thy brow
That thou sawest from afar
What I show to thee now?
Have ye spoken as brethren together, the sun and the mountains
and thou?

Of course this irony is taken directly from "The Book of Job," the most sublime of all the poetical books of the Bible. And it does not lose in the borrowing—which is saying a great deal. Thus we have in the first part of the poem a very wonderful mingling of inspiration from three sublime sources—northern mythology, the "Bhagavad-Gita," and "The

Book of Job.” Any man capable of uniting such widely different elements into one symmetrical whole could not fail to make a good poem; and this Swinburne has done. But, as we shall see, he has gone also to other sources for the material of “Hertha,” including the best work of the great Greek poets.

The poet denies the work of the gods,—or rather the existence of any other gods than nature, making this nature speak in the name of Hertha, who is

Mother, not maker,
Born, and not made;
Though her children forsake her,
Allured or afraid,
Praying prayers to the God of their fashion, she stirs not for all
that have pray'd.

A creed is a rod,
And a crown is of night;
But this thing is God,
To be man with thy might,
To grow straight in the strength of thy spirit, and live out thy life
as the light.

I am in thee to save thee,
As my soul in thee saith;
Give thou as I gave thee,
Thy life-blood and breath,
Green leaves of thy labour, white flowers of thy thought, and red
fruit of thy death.

Be the ways of thy giving
As mine were to thee;
The free life of thy living,
Be the gift of it free;
Not as servant to lord, nor as master to slave, shalt thou give
thee to me.

O children of banishment,
Souls overcast,
Were the lights ye see vanish meant
Always to last,

Ye would know not the sun overshadowing the shadows and stars
overpast.

I that saw where ye trod
The dim paths of the night
Set the shadow called God
In your skies to give light;
But the morning of manhood is risen, and the shadowless soul is
in sight.

There is here a strange mixing together of old Greek and of modern ideas, of paganism and Christianity, of paganism and of individualism. The poet suggests, rather than declares, with modern science, that there is no creation—that what is, always was in essence. The universe came into being, but the substance of it has always been; its becoming was only a becoming of form. So, too, it was with man. Only as form was man born; the spirit within him has always been, and that spirit is one with the spirit of the universe.

The second stanza contains a few lines characteristic of Swinburne's radical views. "A creed is a rod," means that any religion is but a system of terror, a force of fear to rule human conduct. "A crown is of night," means that governments all represent an inferior and ignorant condition of society—that in a perfect society no government would be necessary. Then comes the assurance that man is god-like in proportion as he is able to cultivate his faculties; this is the gospel of individualism, reaching in fact to old Greek thought on the one hand, and touching Emerson on the other. Nature, says the poet, offers everything, and we in return should be generous in all things to nature. It is not right or necessary that we should worship her with fearful reverence; she does not want that. Neither is it necessary that we should consider her as a servant; if we do that, she will soon teach us our mistake. What she wants is our love, and we should give ourselves to her freely, out of love, for no other motive. As suggestions, there are great truths

here; but there are also positions taken to which it would not be possible to give any moral definition. Does Swinburne mean to say that the end of life is to live, in the highest sense of the word,—cultivating all our power and gratifying all our desires? If he does, his position is not at all satisfactory. As I suggested to you in a recent discourse, nature seems to be implacably opposed to individual selfishness; she sacrifices the individual without mercy for the sake of the species; and the tendency of the universe seems to be toward the creation of altruism, not toward the creation of egotism. I do not think that any great moral philosopher would be satisfied with Swinburne's position, if we interpret it in this way. But it is otherwise if we simply regard his poem as a beautiful song of the unity of life. So far as it expresses this grand truth, it is beautiful and worthy of all admiration. But we must not look upon it as a moral sermon. I have given you the cream of it, and you will find many other beauties if you desire to look for them. Only, no matter how much we may admire such verses as the following, we must remember that it would be quite impossible to shape any ethical belief out of them:

Thought made him and breaks him,
 Truth slays and forgives;
 But to you, as time takes him,
 This new thing it gives,
 Even love, the belovèd Republic, that feeds upon freedom and lives.

For truth only is living,
 Truth only is whole,
 And the love of his giving
 Man's polestar and pole;
 Man, pulse of my centre, and fruit of my body, and seed of my soul.

One birth of my bosom;
 One beam of mine eye;
 One topmost blossom
 That scales the sky;
 Man, equal and one with me, man that is made of me, man that is I.

This is a kind of assertion that, as belief in God passes away with time, the religion to be substituted for it will be the religion of human love: and this is Shelley's thought in another form. Scientifically, it has been said that the future tendency of human morals will certainly be toward such a consummation—there is no fault to be found with the hope; but the declaration that love is truth, is very much open to discussion. It requires qualifications of a very profound description before we can entertain it at all. There is here, to the ordinary mind, a confusion of words with things. Unless we accept only one possible moral suggestion, that a state of love, unselfish love, represents the best possible condition, and that the best of all possible conditions is likely to be the nearest to truth, we can get no satisfactory meaning out of it. As a poem, "Hertha" is beyond praise; as philosophy and morality it is unquestionably thin and disappointing. But let us see how a more powerful thinker has treated the same subject in poetry

III

MEREDITH'S "EARTH AND MAN"

LIKE Swinburne, Meredith preaches the unity of life, but he preaches it in a much vaster way, even beyond all time and space. Like Swinburne, he would probably regard all gods and all religions as perishable phenomena; but he can find truth and beauty and use in all beliefs, in spite of their ephemeral forms. And like Swinburne, he regards all past and present and future existence as linked together. But when he comes to speak of the meaning of life in relation to ourselves, he has very much more to say than Swinburne. He will not tell you that

This thing is God,
To be man with thy might.

Indeed, to any person making such utterances he would immediately put the Socratic question: "What is the mean-

ing of your phrase 'to be man with thy might'? Be so kind as to define the word 'man' and the word 'might,' so that I can understand what you are trying to say." Meredith is probably not so far from Swinburne's way of thinking as might appear; but he is at least much more definite, and leaves us no doubt at all about his opinion. For Meredith, nature is indeed a god, but a very terrible god, a very exacting god; and our duty to that divinity is plain enough. Life is duty; the character of that duty is effort; the direction of that effort should be self-cultivation; and the self-cultivation must be of the highest human faculties at the expense of the lower. That is to say that man must cultivate his mental and moral faculties, and subjugate all his senses to that end. All sensualism, all vice, all cruelty, all indolence, represent crime against the purposes of nature. So Meredith frankly preaches a nature-religion, and his religion is very terrible,—all the more terrible because we feel it to be perfectly true, because it is the religion of a thinking man of science, who is almost incapable of any sentimental weakness. Indeed, Meredith's moral poems are strangely awful; there is no word of pity in them, no syllable of mercy for human weakness of any sort. Nature is said to be unforgiving in the supreme degree, and Meredith is also unforgiving in the supreme degree. There is no tenderness in him,—none whatever. He is speaking for nature, speaking with her own voice, and he is teaching ethics according to the philosophy of Herbert Spencer. But he is not by any means so quietly dispassionate as Herbert Spencer; he is not content with an agnostic position in regard to the far-off tendency of things. He believes in the moral order of the universe, and it is quite enough for him that we can guess the immediate future without troubling ourselves in regard to infinite time. But we can best understand the quality of his teaching by turning to his poetry, and I shall quote herewith his introduction to "Earth and Man."

On her great venture, Man,
Earth gazes while her fingers dint the breast

Which is his well of strength, his home of rest,
And fair to scan.

More aid than that embrace,
That nourishment, she cannot give: his heart
Involves his fate; and she who urged the start
Abides the race.

For he is in the lists
Contentious with the elements, whose dower
First sprang him; for swift vultures to devour
If he desists.

His breath of instant thirst
Is warning of a creature matched with strife,
To meet it as a bride, or let fall life
On life's accursed.

. . . .

By hunger sharply sped
To grasp at weapons ere he learns their use,
In each new ring he bears a giant's thews,
An infant's head.

And ever that old task
Of reading what he is and whence he came,
Whither to go, finds wilder letters flame
Across her mask.

Earth is here compared to a living nurse, who presses her breasts in order to help her child-man suck the milk of life. Man is her "venture"—the word is here used in the sense of "doubtful undertaking." She has made man—that is, formed him, but she does not know whether her work will be successful as she wishes. Body she has given him, but the inner life of him, the ghost of him, that is beyond her power to make or unmake: she cannot help him in regard to his spiritual being. She is only the nurse, she can only give him nourishment; for all the rest he must help himself. She tells him to run, but she cannot help him win the race.

What is the race? The Race of Life,—the struggle for existence. Every being must take part in that race or perish. Man is in the “lists”—that is, on the race-course of life, and his competitors are very terrible; for they are no other than the elemental forces of nature. These forces gave him life, but they will also give him death if he lose the race. Let him stop running for one moment, and the vultures of death will descend upon him and destroy him.

The hunger of a new-born child,—the thirst of a babe for the mother milk,—is in itself a proof of the condition of man. Born hungry, he must struggle all his life for nourishment, and he must not be afraid of striving. The being that strives joyously, the creature that rejoices in effort even as a bridegroom rejoices at the prospect of greeting his bride,—only that creature can be successful. He who refuses to struggle is nature’s accursed; let him perish! let the curtain of death hide him away for ever!

Now this hunger with which man came into existence obliged him to struggle before he had any weapons to help him in his contest. Doubtless his first weapons were of stone; and he must have attempted to use the weapons long before he was able either to make them well or to use them well. Follow his history back through the past, and you find him in primitive ages a giant in strength indeed, but only a baby in intelligence.

But becoming a little more intelligent, he begins to think about the secret of his existence. Where did he come from? Why is he in the world? Whither is he going? The secret of the Whence, the Why, and the Whither is completely hidden from the beginning. He tries to explain the mystery, and at every attempt to explain it, the more difficult it becomes. The line describing how man, at every such effort, “finds wilder letters flaming across the mask of nature,” reminds us of the old story about the veil of the Egyptian goddess Isis, who also after a fashion represented the divine principle in nature. Before her statue there hangs a veil, and whoever attempts to lift it, finds another veil. And if

he tries to lift the second, behind it appears a third. If he tries to lift the third, behind it appears a fourth—and so on for ever. This old legend has furnished us with many excellent comparisons for the mystery of nature. Science is often compared to a man trying to lift the veil of Isis, and always finding behind each fold another fold. The word “mask” you must understand in the sense of disguise or illusion, and the expression about letters of fire hints at old legends about magical riddles. Nature presents man riddles to read. As soon as he reads one, another appears written in its place. If he cannot read, he must die; but if he reads, then a still harder task is put before him.

Now follows a description of how nature appeared to man. At first he worshipped her as a terrible divinity, and she showed him no more kindness on that account. Then he worshipped her as a beautiful and loving divinity; and she treated him no whit more kindly than before. Now again, because of his experience with her, she appears to him without pity and blind,—a monstrous force that cannot see or hear—“blind as fire.”

Seen of his dread, she is to his blank eye
The eyeless Ghost.

Once worshipped Prime of Powers,
She still was the Implacable: as a beast,
She struck him down and dragged him from the feast
She crowned with flowers.

Her pomp of glorious hues,
Her revelries of ripeness, her kind smile,
Her songs, her peeping faces, lure awhile
With symbol-clues.

He may entreat, aspire,
He may despair, and she has never heed.
She drinking his warm sweat will soothe his need,
Not his desire.

She prompts him to rejoice,
Yet scares him on the threshold with the shroud.
He deems her cherishing of her best-endowed
A wanton's choice.

Albeit thereof he has found
Firm roadway between lustfulness and pain;
Has half transferred the battle to his brain,
From bloody ground;

He will not read her good,
Or wise, but with the passion Self obscures;
Through that old devil of the thousand lures,
Through that dense hood:

Through terror, through distrust;
The greed to touch, to view, to have, to live:
Through all that makes of him a sensitive
Abhorring dust.

Nature is at once frightful and inexplicable of character, simply because we cannot understand her moral teaching. Once learned, there is nothing unlovable in nature. Refuse to learn, and the result is pain, horror and death. Nature is like a divinity inviting us to a great banquet, where all the tables are made beautiful with lights and flowers, and she says "Come in, eat and drink and be merry—how good it is to eat and drink!" So men go and eat and drink at nature's table; but in the middle of the feast she seizes the guests, tears them in pieces, and devours them. At another time she tempts us with beauty and youth and lust, saying, "Behold these creatures, how fair they are! they were made to gratify these eyes; caress them!" And the tempted man yields to the caress—and nature again destroys him. What does all this mean? Is nature utterly wicked and cruel? No, she is not; she is teaching—that is all. And she will never tell you her lessons in advance—never! She will never tell you why you are hurt; you must find that out for yourself. She will give you power,—but never will she give you

what you ask for. She invites men to pleasure, and in the same moment terrifies them with death; therefore men refuse to understand, and imagine that nature is kind only to the wicked. What people sometimes imagine to be wicked, is not, however, at all wicked according to nature's laws. We see persons successful whom we know to be not moral in the common acceptance of the word. But these men must be nature's "best-endowed," otherwise they would not succeed. Then again what does all this mean?

The meaning is this: the real purpose of nature is to force man to develop himself until he reaches the divine condition. The first step in self-development is the conquest of the animal-self, the passions which man shares with inferior creatures. Now you will see the meaning of the poem more plainly. In order to make her selection, nature offers men the strongest temptation to the indulgence of these very passions. Those who yield to the temptations are destroyed from the face of the earth; those who resist the temptations, even for cunning and for selfish reasons, are spared. For these are the strong ones, in whom intelligence can master appetite. That is why we often find successful evil in this world. The evil people who greatly succeed are never altogether evil. They have at least learned to master their passions;—that is the first requisite for success. Once men have acquired the power to conquer the animal part of themselves, the second stage of development is possible, intelligent morality—morality not based on superstitious ideas, or traditional ideas, or self-seeking motives of any kind, but morality as inherent feeling, as natural law.

Do you observe the startling suggestion here? Does Meredith mean to say that the best human beings are not the most moral human beings in the religious sense of the word, but those who have acquired the most complete mastery over themselves? I am afraid that I must say very plainly that this is what he means. The idea may shock some of you. But all new ideas give a shock; and when we examine this one, we shall find that perhaps it is not so

very shocking. To be good only for religious reasons may often mean to be good only through fear. To be good only through fear is not to be really good. Nor can we praise justly the morality of a man who is moral only through fear of public opinion, or through fear of the law. There is only one other motive of goodness in the religious sense of the word,—a natural sense of kindness and justice and sympathy. Is that good? Certainly—but Meredith would tell you that it is good only in a limited degree, unless accompanied by intelligence and will. A sheep is a very gentle and sympathetic animal, a dove is a very good bird, but Meredith has told us very plainly in another of his poems that he prefers the lion and the eagle, both of which are creatures of prey, but higher works of nature. Perhaps this sounds very immoral. I do not think so. Meredith's position is that goodness and weakness combined are of less value than force and courage without any goodness at all. And I imagine that he is right, for this reason—the tendency of all weakness is to destruction and death, no matter how moral it may be. Force without pity, courage without sympathy, may seem to us very horrible,—even diabolical; but the tendency in these cases is to larger life and higher development, and these qualities of strength alone can form the firm foundation for future moral development. It is not enough to be good if you are weak: you must try to be both good and strong. But if humanity has to choose between being good and being strong, then it is better to be strong. The goodness will come later on. But it will never come to the weak. You must remember that Meredith classes the highest form of strength as intellectual strength. Strength of mind, capacity to govern one's passions independently of moral motives, is better than weakness of mind conjoined with the best of moral motives.

Now to return to the text. He tells us that man has up to this time only "half transferred the battle to his brain from bloody ground." This means that man is yet only half master of himself, only half intellectually developed.

Paraphrased, the expression would be about thus: So far man has only been able to transfer the real struggle for existence from the physical world of war to the mental world of war. His first battles were with his own kind or wild beasts; his new battle is with himself. It is much harder fighting. But he will never win that victory until he has learned to give up all other forms of struggle. By fighting with himself he will become stronger. At present it is very hard for him to understand this. He is still so selfish that he can see facts only through the medium of his own selfish desires. Therefore he is still comparatively blind. But he will eventually be able to overcome all his selfishness; and then he will see clearly and will understand the mysteries that now trouble him. Then he will understand nature and the divine law, and read all those riddles quite easily which at present cause him so much sorrow and pain.

But that the senses still
 Usurp the station of their issue mind,
 He would have burst the chrysalis of the blind:
 As yet he will;

As yet he will, she prays,
 Yet will when his distempered devil of Self;—
 The glutton for her fruits, the wily elf
 In shifting rays;—

When this Self, described in several verses more, shall become completely purified, the poet suggests—but when will that be? Meredith very plainly says, as Spencer would also say if he could agree with Meredith's metaphysics, never in this world. Never in this world will man become altogether good and strong, never perfect. But that is only because this world will not last long enough. It will be in a future universe that man will become perfect—

When fire has passed him vapour to the sun,
 And sun relumed.

After this system shall have returned to its parent sun,

planet by planet, and all have been burned, then after the death of that sun himself there will be another sun and other worlds and other moons. I suppose you know that this is mathematically certain. There is no doubt at all as to the astronomical history of the present universe, as to the certainty of its dissolution; neither is there any doubt that by reason of the recognized laws of matter and force another universe will be evolved out of the very same substance. We know the history of matter. But the question of the continuance of human tendencies, moral tendencies, after the destruction of the universe, can only be discussed by persons having a certain amount of faith. The great mathematicians would probably remain silent on this subject. Meredith has the faith required for the grand hypothesis. He considers that mind goes through the same form of cosmic evolution as matter,—that, indeed, the two are inseparable (there he accords with Spencer); and that all the tendencies and impulses of the present existence will have their results in another existence. Mankind can complete only a part of its evolution upon this planet; the rest will be accomplished upon other planets, and throughout all time, till man becomes divine.

So you see that Meredith is a very strong believer in the moral order of the universe, and that his attempt to apply the philosophy of evolution to ethics is well worthy of study. But I must warn you that unless you understand his moral position very clearly, you might easily misjudge him, especially in regard to this insistence upon the union of strength with goodness. Persons who worship only force might easily twist some of his teachings into a false direction. I imagine that the true direction of his thinking is not far from that of a great Arabic teacher, who, when asked by one of his pupils to define what was right and what was wrong in a few words, boldly answered,—“Do as you please in this world—only be careful that nothing which you do can cause any pain or any injury to your fellow man.” Deeply considered, this is the essence of all religious

teachings; and the ideal humanity of Meredith's hope would probably have no fault to find with it.