

BROWNING AS A POPULAR WRITER.

"And bravely furnish'd all abroad to fling
The winged shafts of truth."

SCARCELY had Browning completed and given to the world "*Asolando*," before news was flashed from continent to continent that the great man was dead. He had visited Venice for the benefit of his health, where, on December 12th, he quietly passed away. His body now rests amongst England's honoured dead in Westminster Abbey, but his memory is cherished and honoured by English-speaking people the world over.

Perhaps the last statement needs to be modified a little. His works are pleasing to a class, but we cannot say he was a popular poet. There is no need of attempting to prove what is generally conceded; and so we make the statement that, though a great writer, he was not a popular writer, when by popularity we mean that which pleases the masses as well as the sage.

At about the time Browning came on the stage, there opened a new era of English poetry. Shelley and Keats were gone. It is said that both of these felt that the world in which they lived was exhausted of beauty and excitement; so Shelley, after trying to interest himself in the struggle for Grecian liberty, took to love songs and metaphysics, while Keats, at about the same time, wrote concerning Greek and Mediæval Italian subjects, as in "*Endymion*" and "*The Eve of St. Agnes*."

Then there is a lull. No really great writers, but such as Mrs. Hemans and L. E. L., who wrote pretty poems, but rather enervating in their sentiment. These latter were not calculated to stimulate the mind and to infuse vigor into the souls of the people, but,—as in old Rome, after a mighty career of conquest, her citizens abandoned themselves to luxuries—so now, after a lengthened period of literary brightness, the popular taste was somewhat after the same style.

Then, after the religious agitation at Oxford, came the new race of poets. With these, theological, political, and social affairs were important elements. Nor must we neglect to mention that of human character and its analysis. Amongst those who dealt with this last phase, in particular, we place Browning.

It is but reasonable to suppose that poems, drawn from the subjects mentioned in the last paragraph, would not catch the popular ear nearly so readily as would those of such a writer as Mrs. Hemans, or as some of the earlier poems of Tennyson, which are somewhat after the same style. Yet they were contemporaries. Considering then the topics with the period at which he was writing, join with this certain of the peculiarities mentioned afterwards, and we can account, to a certain extent, for his lack of popularity.

Born at Camberwell, London, in 1812, and having studied at London University, he began early to write. At twenty his first poem, "*Pauline*," was sent to the press. In it he discusses certain theological questions, not taking up such phrases as were common to all men, but what were special. Then follow "*Paracelsus*," "*Strafford*," and "*Sordello*." Notwithstanding able support, "*Strafford*" met with very moderate success. Listen to the public verdict then:—"An unintelligible rhapsody, with no meaning at all." Some said, however, that "there was meaning in it, though hard to come at, and that patient and diligent search would reveal passages of profound thought and rare beauty." Patient and diligent search! The world had not time for this, neither has it yet; so the poems of Browning have been read by comparatively few.

We cannot, in accordance with the definition of poetry, say the prime object of Browning's is to please. While keeping that in view, to a certain extent, he never sacrificed sense for sound. He seemed to have carried this to excess, and to have written in the extreme of significance. Adjectives are few, parentheses are frequent. Everything possible seems to have been done to give the greatest amount of thought in the least space. On this account he became "obscure." He never intended to be so, but we can readily account for that fact by the previous supposition.

Some would object to his choice of subjects. There are good causes too for objections here. Turn to a table of contents and notice some of them. Those that seem interesting are few. Try the majority of them and your conjectures are found to be quite correct.

How do these appear:—*Pictor Ignotus*, *Summum Bonum*, *A Toccata of Galuppi's* and *Dis Aliter Visum*, or *Le Byron de nos Jours*?—interesting, perhaps, to the scholars; but to a busy man of this busy world just a little too deep. He prefers to read that which will be intelligible to him without careful study.

Who has ever read "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*," and when he finished, possessed a clear conception of its meaning? Few indeed! Perhaps much study may be put upon it, and yet, without the aid of notes or hints from authorities on the subject, the student may still be in blissful ignorance.

Where Browning has chosen to write in a plain manner he has excelled. Look over such poems as "*Evelyn Hope*," "*Hervé Riel*," or "*The Pied Piper of Hamelin*," and in them a mighty style is joined with a vivid picture, which gives pleasure to the reader, however careless. Instinctively he draws in fancy that which the poet describes. There is the "*Rider of Aix*." See the steed galloping away from Ghent at moon-set—through the night—past sunrise—with