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The Mantle of Browning

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THE MANTLE OF BROWNING

As one grows older one becomes sadly conscious that there are problems in one's life and in society for which there is no solution in the poetry of Robert Browning. A very great deal has happened since Robert Browning wrote; and what he tells us to do is not the thing we want to do, and his presentation of the situation in which we stand is not one that commends itself as entirely adequate. Part of the great outcry for the practical with its too wholesale rejection of the idealistic teachings of the last century, is a definite feeling that we do not know what to do or how to do it. There is even in some quarters a well-founded distrust of pure literature, because it is thought to have so little to say about life. All centuries speak disparagingly of their predecessors and we are no exception. The coat that our fathers left us is out of style: we are tired of being told what is the matter with it; we want to know how to make it over or get a new one.

The voice that bids us be brave and true, to pour our whole hearts into our tasks and to have faith in the ultimate outcome, can never be despised, never cease to be useful, never cease to be a true voice. Such are the voices of Browning and Carlyle for the past. But are there any writers who hold for our age the commanding position that these men held for the late Victorian period? Is there anybody who voices the best aspirations of the most loyal, the most far sighted, the most aspiring men and women of our time? Is there anything special to our time which would demand a great potent voice for its expression? Something beyond Carlyle and Browning, because more recent than Browning and Carlyle; more favoured than they, because more experienced, and less under the spell of illusion? Is it true, for example, that "God's in his heaven; all's right with the world"? Perhaps, if we are disposed to answer negatively, it is only that we feel a certain degree of conviction, above that of the late Victorians, that if God is in his heaven, things ought to be more nearly right with the world.

For this note of dissatisfaction, as far as it appears in literature, we have to thank a different variety of individualists, the continental variety rather than the English or the American.

There is a kind of individualism which expresses itself, not as in the case of Browning, with an effort to make the individual endeavour to realize himself as fully as possible and build up in himself a firmer faith and a more efficient personality; but which expresses itself in a rebellion against the restrictions of established society. It is a commonplace of criticism to say that of all English poets of the nineteenth century Byron has had the widest influence on the continent of Europe. It has loved him for his mad onslaught on conventional society. Here also we have the great social dramas of Ibsen with their grim and inexorable sapping of the foundations of church and state and social caste; so much so that to many of us it has seemed, as to Shaw, that Ibsen means to say that the golden rule is that there is no golden rule. Here too, it seems to me, we are to place Strindberg.

This vein crops out in English literature most markedly in Shaw and Wells. Shaw has gone so far as to philosophize this attack upon custom and conventionality and relate it to social progress. "Social progress takes place through the replacement of old institutions by new ones; and since every institution involves the recognition of the duty of conforming to it, progress must involve the repudiation of an established duty at every step." "It is always," he says, "a case of the ideal is dead, long live the ideal." But he adds, "the advantage of the work of destruction is that every new ideal is less of an illusion than the one it has supplanted; so that the destroyer of ideals, though denounced as an enemy of society, is in fact sweeping the world clear of lies."

Some of Shaw's critics have thought that in his case this clearing of the ground was for the purpose of presenting the definite and positive tenets of Fabian socialism. Certainly that is the positive thing that he has insisted most upon. His influence seems to me, however, to be mainly negative. It is felt that he has insisted upon iconoclasm; the world is suffering from its slavery to outworn ideals. He has assaulted the institution of private property and its attendant evils—the shams and feints of courtship, the atmosphere of romantic mystification round about marriage, the too high price put upon marriage in society, the foibles of married men; these and other lighter aspects of the sex problem. "The ideal wife," he says, "is one who does everything that the ideal husband likes and nothing else. Now to treat a person as a means and not an end is to deny that person's right to live."

Shaw has been adverse to war, to the English government of Ireland, and to all parliamentary pretensions whatever. Finally, together with a multitude of institutions great and small, he has made much of assaulting Shakespeare. Shaw saw—what any teacher of literature, if he would be frank with himself, would have to admit—that Shakespeare has become pretty much of an institution; that very, very few people ever actually read Shakespeare, and yet everybody pretends to, and therefore with most people to defend Shakespeare is to protect themselves. He is a sign of gentility, a symbol of the educated respectability of the family. The very letter-carriers and business men, the professors of science themselves, will pretend that they read Shakespeare. Now, if you collect the Shakespeare criticism of Shaw, you will find that he has not held Shakespeare responsible for the social vanity of men. He is a very good Shakespeare critic, limited in scope by his incorrect historical views, perhaps, and by his anxiety to prove some social theses of his own, for he is an incorrigible debater; but his method is excellent and it has been a benefit to Shakespeare study, as he possibly meant it to be. He refuses to treat Shakespeare as an unknown and unknowable god, but treats him as a fellow mortal and, what is cleverest of all, as a rival playwright, as to be sure he is. The accident of his being dead is the merest circumstance. Shaw viewed him as an unfair competitor, and he tried to abolish his special privilege. Of course he did not succeed, but it was a clever literary notion. The funniest thing of all is that Shaw has actually conceived of Shakespeare so vividly that he has debated with him like the veriest fellow Fabian, and has done him the honour to be jealous of him on various accounts, particularly for Shakespeare's distinctly modern idea of courtship, an idea which Shaw has delighted to exploit. He wishes that Shakespeare had left behind some prefaces; Shaw would like, genuine debater that he is, to hear what Shakespeare would have to say in defence of some of the ideas he has expressed; but Shakespeare is dead and has nobody but the author of *Thelma* to look after his interests. It is, however, nothing short of a miracle of criticism to have looked at Shakespeare so keenly and sanely as Shaw has.

Of all this particular school of militant individualists, the man who stands out with greatest definiteness is H. G. Wells. He has achieved the most complete emancipation from everything like tradition, from the whole past and the whole organized present,

a thing which makes him seem like some visitant from his favourite planet Mars. He is objective, looks at mankind and their ways as if they did not concern him. This gives him a degree of sanity in the midst of his iconoclasm that seems to me greater than that of Shaw. His genius is entirely remarkable. It is the genius of a scientist; and those who have read some of his expositions of social conditions must have felt that his clarity ought to lead to some great constructive modern idea. He has so far, however, seemed little more than a social anatomist, or at best a diagnostician. Perhaps his own words at the end of *The New Machiavelli* express best his failure; it is the expression of an unsolved problem:

"There's this difference that has always been between us, that you like nakedness and wildness, and I, clothing and raiment. You are always *talking* of order and system, and the splendid dream that might replace the muddled system you hate, but by a sort of instinct you seem to want to break the law. . . . Now I want to obey laws, to make sacrifices, to follow rules. I don't want to make, but I do want to keep. You are at once makers and rebels. . . . You are bad people . . . criminal people, I feel, and yet full of something the world must have. . . . You remind me of that time we went from Naples to Vesuvius, and walked over the hot new lava there. . . . One walked there in spite of the heat because there was a crust; like custom, like law. But directly a crust forms on things, you are restless to break down to the fire again."

I think there is something else in our literature, or ought to be, besides this revolutionary individualism, necessary and pertinent as much of it is. Perhaps it is young yet and will find adequate expression by and by; perhaps it is non-existent; perhaps it will die in infancy. It is a voice of our time that we seem to demand, a song of labour, not dumb muscular labour, or isolated labour, or the cant of labour-organs; but a conception of the world's work so catholic that all who toil well and unselfishly may be included. It will be the voice of all of those who are on the right side, not in feeling alone but in action also. A great thirst for the actual is the characteristic of our time. We wish to set things right. Surveys are the characteristic documents of our civilization, surveys and reform bills and the reports of commissions. We have felt definitely that idealism is not to be trusted, and yet we are the most idealistic people of the world. Mr. Arnold Bennett found us idealistic, and the foreign diplomats stand aghast at Mr. Wilson's tone of high ideality.

Our expectations of a new era in literature are necessarily

indefinite. Genius will no doubt emerge as freshly and abundantly in the future as in the past. We are not looking for another Tennyson or another Wordsworth, but for some creator just as surprising; and yet it is probably a mistake to centre our hopes on one man who shall completely express our minds. The Superman and the Carlylean hero are exploded myths. We should no doubt regard the followers of Nietzsche, particularly when they present such congenial Anglo-Saxon ideals as those of Kipling and Stevenson, as most important and valuable members of the positivistic individualistic school of writers. No man by taking thought can add a cubit to his stature; but these glorifications of mere physical prowess and bodily health and sheer courage and manliness may help us to add a sticking place to our wills. It is no doubt a splendid thing to make one's way in the primeval forest with the bright efficiency of the timber wolf; but after all, our teeth are not equal to it, and we are subject to rheumatism; so that perhaps the Superman will be a spiritual force and not a physical force. I feel that it will have to be embodied in many individuals, all willing to work, without reward if need be, for the accomplishment of ends.

Chesterton has had much to say about the various aspects of modern literature, and he has attacked modernity, progress, individualism, the spirit of the age; for looking at each separate manifestation of modern enthusiasms and specializations, he has come to the conclusion that the world has cut loose from its mental and moral moorings altogether and that it must go back to established orthodoxy. Mr. Chesterton is doubtless right in believing that the world needs sanity. The most potent, the most important voice in the world at the present time is that which bids us to be sensible, orderly, clear-headed, unsentimental, which bids us to achieve the temper in which things are done. Everyone is familiar with the skill of Mr. Chesterton's attack, a method which he borrowed from Mr. Bernard Shaw, for Chesterton is the first disciple of Shaw. He follows Shaw's method of "revolutionizing the revolutionists by turning their rationalism against their remaining sentimentalism." Consider the following attack upon the Simple Life fad: in the paper entitled *Sandals and Simplicity* he suggests that there is more simplicity in the man who eats caviare on impulse than in the man who eats grapes on principle. "Let us," he says, "put a complex entrée into a simple old gentleman; let us not put a simple entrée into a complex

old gentleman." And there is in a certain way much truth in what he means to convey. His way of getting down to a common-sense view of things might be illustrated from another paper in *Heretics* in defence of the institution of the family. The disgust with the family professed by Nietzsche and his followers he contends is due to their disgust with the world, to their weakness of nerves; it is, he says, altogether too robust an institution for these heralds of the Superman. The family is not dull, because the very proximity of one's intimates in the family gives them all the variety in the world.

"It is," he says, "exactly because our brother George is not interested in our religious difficulties, but is interested in the Trocadero Restaurant, that the family has some of the bracing qualities of the commonwealth. It is precisely because our uncle Henry does not approve of the theatrical ambitions of our sister Sarah that the family is like humanity . . . Aunt Elizabeth is unreasonable like mankind. Papa is excitable like mankind. Our youngest brother is mischievous like mankind. Grandpa is stupid like the world; he is old like the world."

It follows from this line of reasoning that romance, like charity, begins at home; and if people really want strange and exciting experiences let them poison their neighbour's dog, or violate their mother-in-law's sense of the dignity of the family.

Chesterton is, however, frankly reactionary; and, if it be not a Hibernicism, his positive recommendations are negative. His solution is, for many persons, impossible. We have to thank him, however, for his sanity.

I expect interesting things in the older veins; I expect, further, absolutely original and eminently valuable manifestations of the spirit of individualism, both that which lays stress upon the welfare of the individual and that which makes onslaught upon the restrictions of society. There is a new and interesting school of English poets at the present time. Their artlessness is not less marked than their love of crudeness, of broad colours thickly laid on, of rough and impolite words and startling comparisons. Their presentation of elemental things and primitive people seems almost a return to earlier conditions or perhaps one of the manifestations of a new spirit animating European thought and life and art. Mr. John Masefield, Mr. W. W. Gibson, and Mr. James Stephen are almost too new to classify.

The thing which I have specially in mind is quite as much a matter of American as of English literature. If I may try again

to suggest the meaning I have in mind, I would say that it has manifested itself in descriptions of attempts to live the thing. The best expression I have found is in what seems to be one of the greatest of all the works of our time, Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe*. It would be foolish in me to attempt at this time to give anything like an account of that book. It demands too much time; it is ten volumes long, and a great slow book without sensational appeal. It shows the reaction of modern life, in multifarious phases, upon an ingenuous Germanic temperament, idealistic, tenacious, upright. It answers the question how a man shall adjust his personality, his temperament, the terms of his life to the modern world, as well, I think, as it has been answered. *Jean Christophe* manages to live through the neglect which befalls one who practises the best of art, and is not soured by it; and he achieves certain successes without being spoiled by them. When he dies, you are told and you believe it, that, everything considered, it has been worth while for him to live, since he has adequately fulfilled the end of life.

So, it seems to me, the literature that expresses adequately the best of our modern life will have in it something of the ingenuousness, the patience, the tenacity of purpose, the fiery perseverance, the zealous earnestness about things that characterizes Rolland's *Jean Christophe*.

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