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Tragic spirit in Browning as defined by Joseph Wood Krutch

Hunt, Ruth Elizabeth.

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Thesis
THE TRAGIC SPIRIT IN BROWNING
AS DEFINED BY JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

Submitted by
Ruth Elizabeth Hunt
(B.S., Bridgewater Normal School, 1924)

In partial fulfillment of
requirements for the degree of Master of Education

1930

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# THE TRAGIC SPIRIT IN BROWNING

**AS DEFINED BY JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH**

## I Introduction

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THE TRAGIC SPIRIT IN BROWNING AS DEFINED BY JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

I Introduction

A Précis of Krutch's theory of tragedy

In The Modern Temper Krutch has included a section on The Tragic Fallacy in which he contrasts the "glorious vitality" of Shakespeare, for instance, with the feebleness of Ibsen as a typical modern.

In Krutch's sense we moderns misuse the word tragedy for -- "We write no tragedies today, but we can still talk about the tragic spirit of which we would, perhaps, have no conception", were it not for the great Greek or Elizabethan tragedies which "no longer can have for us the immediacy which they had for those to whom they originally belonged, but they have not yet eluded us entirely." "No increased powers of expression, no greater gift for words, could have transformed Ibsen into Shakespeare. The materials out of which the latter created his works - his conception of human dignity, his sense of the importance of human passions, his vision of the amplitude of human life - simply did not and could not exist for Ibsen, as they did not and could not exist for his contemporaries. God and Man and Nature had all somehow dwindled in the course of the intervening centuries, not because the
realistic creed of modern art led us to seek out mean people, but because this meanness of human life was somehow thrust upon us by the operation of that same process which led to the development of realistic theories of art by which our vision could be justified."

In Krutch's opinion Ibsen's Ghosts is not a tragedy for - "mean misery piles on mean misery, petty misfortune follows petty misfortune, despair becomes intolerable because it is no longer even significant or important." A typical modern, then, is incapable of either creating, experiencing, or appreciating tragedy in Krutch's sense.

The agnosticism, disillusionment, depression, sense of futility which are so much a part of our modern literature are in marked contrast with the spirit inherent in Krutch's definitions which follow:

a. "Tragedy arises when, as in Periclean Greece or Elizabethan England, a people fully aware of the calamities of life is nevertheless serenely confident of the greatness of man, whose mighty passions and supreme fortitude are revealed when one of these calamities overtakes him."

b. "The tragic spirit sees man occupying the exact center of a universe which would have no meaning except for him" and assuming that "each of his acts reverberates through the
universe. His passions are important to him because he believes them important through all time and space."

c. "...it is a profession of faith, and a sort of religion; a way of looking at life by virtue of which it is robbed of its pain. The sturdy soul of the tragic author seizes upon suffering and uses it only as a means by which joy may be wrung out of existence, it is not to be forgotten that he is enabled to do so only because of his belief in the greatness of human nature and because, though he has lost the child's faith in life he has not lost his far more important faith in human nature."

d. "Tragedy is essentially an expression, not of despair, but of triumph over despair, and of confidence in the value of human life."

B Aim of thesis

It seems to me that tragedy as it appears in Browning will stand the test of Krutch's definitions, that although Browning's contemporaneous with Ibsen there is no kinship in point of view. I shall attempt to demonstrate that the tragic spirit in Krutch's sense, strongly present in Browning's poetry.
II BODY OF THESIS

A The tragedy of the idealist

1 The Patriot

In The Patriot we are shown a man who certainly reveals "supreme fortitude" when calamity overtakes him.

"It was roses, roses, all the way,
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
The house roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
A year ago on this very day."

In contrast to this scene of a year ago:

"There's nobody on the house-tops now -
Just a palsied few at the windows set;
For the best of the sight is, all allow,
At the Shambles' Gate - or, better yet,
By the very scaffold's foot, I trow.

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
A rope cuts both my wrists behind;
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
For they fling, whoever has a mind,
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds."
As he walks to the scaffold contrasting these two scenes he reflects that once they had been willing "to give him the sun" but he had aimed at the impossible:

"Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun
To give it my loving friends to keep!
Naught man could do, have I left undone:
And you see my harvest, what I reap
This very day, now a year is run."

A calamity indeed, but Browning does not leave us with the depressing conviction that there is no justice, that the whole thing has been futile. Had he been paid by the world he might have fallen dead in the sense of deadness of soul to his erstwhile ideals. As it is he has a sublime triumph for:

"T'is God shall repay; I am safer so."

Tragedy here, then is "an expression, not of despair, but of triumph over despair." We are fully aware of the personal dignity, perhaps majesty of this man who knows that he has done the best of which he is capable and whose
confidence in God's personal attention, interest, and reward seems somehow justified.

2 Incident Of The French Camp

In this very familiar poem describing the arrival of the boy to Napoleon with the news of the French victory of Ratisbon we have another death dignified by the triumph of confidence in faithful service to an ideal.

"You're wounded!" "Nay," the soldier's pride
Touched to the quick, he said:
"I'm killed, Sire!" And his chief beside,
Smiling, the boy fell dead.

The ideal here is probably the man, Napoleon, and the implied here - worship presupposes a "belief in the greatness of human nature," his here's and his own. The boy's happiness at dying bravely for what he believes to be a great cause is, I think, a worthy example of the tragic spirit.
3 Luria

The third idealist is the hero of one of Browning's long dramatic romances. Luria, a young Moerish mercenary has been given the leadership of the Florentine army which is trying to conquer Pisa and Lucca. A series of successes has made it probable that one more battle will end the war. Although not a native, Luria loves Florence devotedly as the mother of men like Dante, Boccaccio, and Giotto who were making her a cultural leader and hoped to live to enjoy the life of a Florentine. Luria had been hired because history had showed that a Florentine general might use his position to usurp the rule of Florence. Braccio, commissioner for the republic, unable to believe that a mercenary could prove more trustworthy, watches Luria closely, planning to accuse him of treachery as soon as he has won the victory.

Just before the battle Tiburzio, the Pisan general, and a personal admirer of Luria tries to induce him to take command of the Pisan forces since he has proof that Florence means to betray him. Tiburzio makes the point that inasmuch as Luria is not a native Florentine he may as honorably fight for Pisa. Luria is crushed by the very possibility and unable to believe it. 'But what can I do if I lose my faith in Florence? She stands to me for mankind.'
My friend, you may be very sagacious, but here you must be mistaken. His heart tells him that Tiburzio speaks the truth but he wonders if he can trust his heart.

"Oh world, where all things pass and naught abides,
Oh life, the long mutation - is it so?
Is it with life as with the body's change?
- Where, e'en though better follow, good must pass,
Nor manhood's strength can mate with boyhood's grace,
Nor age's wisdom, in its turn, find strength,
But silently the first gift dies away,
And though the new stays, never both at once.
Life's time of savage instinct o'er with me,
It fades and dies away, past trusting more,
As if to punish the ingratitude
With which I turned to grow in these new lights,
And learned to look with European eyes."

Refusing to read the document before the battle, Luria wins victory for Florence. In a series of dramatic interviews he meets with ingratitude and insult. Luria's army is eager to accept him and avenge him against the wrong being done to their patient, quiet hero.

Left alone, temporarily, his life illusion fled, unable
to understand how Florence could have been so mistaken in
him he thinks of how sad Florence will be when she at last
learns that his heart was hers. If he waits for dismissal
he will teach the friends of Florence to distrust her and
thus he would be ungenerous. He will not let the enemies
of Florence shelter him against her, and he is determined
to save Florence the disgrace of inflicting death upon him.
All that he brought from his native land is a phial to be
used when defeated hopelessly. He closes his day of tri­
umph by drinking from it.

At midnight Braccio and Tiburzio return to tell Luria
that Braccio has admitted his error, that he knows Luria
now. Tiburzio says that all Luria's prophecies are ful­
filled except one. Luria had said that he would punish
Florence. Then they see that this, too, is done, for
Luria is dead.

Injustice and martyrdom, surely. But can we regret
or be depressed by a calamity that brings out the majesty
of a man whose act must "reverberate through the universe?"
Here, indeed, is the exaltation of tragedy.
B  The tragedy of Mass Incidents

1  Evelyn Hope

Evelyn Hope is dead at sixteen and a man many years older than she stands over her.

"Perhaps she had scarcely heard my name;
It was not her time to love; beside,
Her life had many a hope and aim, - "

Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope?
What, your soul was pure and true,
The good stars met in your horoscope,
Made you of spirit, fire, and dew -
And, just because I was thrice as old
And our paths in the world diverged so wide,
Each was naught to each, must I be told?
We were fellow mortals, naught beside?

No, indeed! for God above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love:
I claim you still for my own love's sake!
Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few:
Much is to learn, much to forget
Ere the time be come for taking you.

So, hush, - I will give you this leaf to keep:
See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand!
There, that is our secret: go to sleep!
You will wake, and remember, and understand."

Ethel Colburn Mayne who wrote Browning's Heroines finds the "unconscious egotism of the man who can imagine no meaning for the loveliness of a girl's body and soul but that it shall 'do something' with him" a "curious lapse" in Browning. Be that as it may, we find here his doctrine of elective affinities, a force unaware of any artificial, human obstacles. So powerful and transcendent a thing is it that even death means only postponement. We are reminded of Krutch's contention that the tragic spirit finds man's passions "important to him because he believes them important through all time and all space."

2 Life in a Love

"Escape me?"
Never -
Beloved!
While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue.
My life is a fault at last, I fear:
It seems too much like a fate, indeed!
Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed.
But what if I fail of my purpose here?
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And baffled, get up and begin again,
So the chase takes up one's life, that's all.
While, look but once from your farthest bound
At me so deep in the dust and dark,
No sooner the old hope goes to ground
Than a new one, straight to the selfsame mark,
I shape me -
Ever
Removed!

"The desire of the man is for the woman; the desire of the woman is for the desire of the man." That they seem to eternally elude each other constitutes the tragedy of loss. The spirit of gaiety, courage, and persistence saves it from the despair of mere frustration.

* Ethel Colburn Mayne, *Browning's Heroines*
Loss here is two-fold. First Edith married another man who her lover knew did not really love her. Then she dies. Her lover reviews the whole situation, realizing how completely she has preoccupied his life in spite of his youth, health, and success. He is quite aware that to no one else in the world was she particularly precious or desirable. He is capable of dispassionately criticising her physical and mental defects which he has found adorable, - of saying:

"Such a funny mouth, for it would not shut;
   And the dented chin, too - what a chin!
There were certain ways when you spoke, some words
   That you know you never could pronounce:
You were thin, however; like a bird's
   Your hand seemed - some would say, the pounce
Of a scaly-footed hawk - all but!
   The world was right when it called you thin.

But I turn my back on the world: I take
   Your hand, and kneel, and lay to my lips.
Bid me live, Edith! Let me slake
   Thirst at your presence: " 
She was his whole life and she is dead. He feels that she needs help in her grave, warmth from his heart. So he dies, too, giving no sense of failure or surrender but of dying for intenser life, that she may be his queen "while his soul endures."

"And enjoy our death in the darkness here."
He seems to see her standing there, and the poem ends with:

"Warm too, and white too: would this wine
Had washed all over that body of yours,
Ere I drank it, and you down with it, thus!"

Courage appears again as in all of Browning's tragedies.

No love is in vain:

"For God above creates the love to reward the love."
If not in this life then ultimately, for faith in future lives is strong in Browning.

"What is our failure here but a triumph's evidence?"

C The tragedy of suppression of personality

1 A Woman's Last Word

Married lovers have come to a spiritual crisis. She cannot think as he does. But perhaps thinking is unimportant, since she loves - is that not enough? There shall be no way but his.

"What so false as truth is
False to thee?"
Where the apple reddens
Never pry
Lest we lose our Edens
Eve and I,

Be a god and hold me
With a charm!
Be a man and fold me
With thine arm!

Teach me, only teach, Love!
As I ought
I will speak thy speech, Love,
Think thy thought -

Meet, if thou require it,
Both demands,
Laying flesh and spirit
In thy hands."

But even as she glories in the surrender of herself, something tells her that this is wrong. He does not wish to know the real herself so the real herself shall "sleep".

"That shall be tomorrow,
Not to-night;
I must bury sorrow
Out of sight:
- Must a little weep, Love,  
  (Foolish me!)

And so fall asleep, Love,
Loved by thee."

Her sorrow is for his unworthy tyranny. But tomorrow her love and intuition shall lift him above this episode. Her suppression is a wise not an ignominious one. It is not a denial of freedom for herself or the exercise of her best influence on the man she loves. But talking just now "is not the sum of individuality's expression."

*James Lee's Wife*

"In this song cycle of nine poems we are shown the death of a woman's heart." Love has failed her. "She and her husband are at variance in the great things of life - like the couple in A Woman's Last Word." But even the complete surrender of individuality resolved upon by the wife in that poem would not now avail, if indeed it ever would have availed the wife of James Lee. All is over, and, as she gradually realizes, over with such finality, that there is only one thing she can do, and that is to leave him - 'set him free.'" The mournful story is told by the wife. "All the formulas have failed but this one. This one will not fail."

*Ethel Colburn Mayne, Browning's Heroines*
"She had to go; and neither him nor her can we condemn. She saw and loved too well: one or the other she should have been wise enough to hide from him. But she could not. Character is fate; and two characters are two fates. Neither, with that other could be different; each might with another 'other', have been all that each was meant to be." *

Surely this woman's love for her husband is on a scale that admits her among tragic heroines. Even if she does not win our admiration she must command our respect.

D The Tragedy of the Victim

1 Pompilia in The Ring and the Book

The Ring and the Book is a story told from ten different points of view, including the chief actors in the tragedy, those who were concerned in trial and judgement, and public opinions of the Rome of the day. It is based on the court record of a murder that had taken place in Rome in the seventeenth century.

Count Guido Franceschini and four hired assassins murdered his child wife, Pompilia and her mother and father after she had fled from him with the help of Guiseppe Caponsacchi, a priest. She had given birth to a son a few weeks after her flight. The case was tried by the papal court.

* Ethel Colburn Mayne, "Browning's Heroines"
Pompilia was the innocent victim first of the "mediocre, ignorant, small souled, then of the very devil of malignant baseness; such a victim, moreover, first and last, for the paltriest of motives—money. And money in no large, imaginative sense, but in the very lowest terms in which it could be at all conceived as a theme for tragedy. A dowry, and a tiny one: this created 'that old woe' which 'steps on the stage' again for us in *The Ring and the Book.*" *

"Another day that finds her living yet,
Little Pompilia, with the patient brow
And lamentable smile on those poor lips,
And, under the white hospital—array,
A flower-like body, to frighten at a bruise
You'd think, yet now, stabbed through and through again,
Alive i' the ruins. 'Tis a miracle.

It seems that when her husband struck her first,
She prayed Madonna just that she might live
So long as to confess and be absolved;
And whether it was that, all her sad life long
Never before successful in a prayer,
This prayer rose with authority too dread-

*Ethel Colburn Mayne, *Browning's Heroines*
Or whether because earth was hell to her,
By compensation when the blackness broke,
She got one glimpse of quiet and the cool blue,
To show her for a moment such things were,"

Avid of position and nobility for her adopted daughter, Pompilia's mother secretly arranges a marriage between Count Franceschini and her thirteen year old daughter, too young to understand anything about it. The Count was to receive her tiny dowry and her in return for conferring an old name upon her and for agreeing to let her foster parents live at the old castle for the rest of their lives. It later develops that there is no dowry and that the rank of the Franceschinis carries with it none of the appurtenances of nobility. The parents flee leaving poor Pompilia behind. Count Guido's real motive for his triple murder is that he can then claim whatever property there is in behalf of his legal heir, Pompilia's son. Before deciding upon this, he tries another method, to prove her guilty of adultery with the priest, Caponsacchi. Their only encounter at that time had been a look exchanged in a theater when both realized what earthly love might have been, but both accepted without question its impossibility now. When she knew that she was to have a child, she abandoned the idea of suicide and pleaded with Caponsacchi to take her to Rome with her parents. He did so but they were overtaken on the road while Pompilia was resting at an inn. They were acquitted by the papal court to which Count Guido has brought an accusation of adultery.
James Cassidy in his commentary on *The Ring and the Book* sums up the point of view of the pope as follows: "These two are brought together as nor priest nor wife should stand, and there is passion in the place, power in the air for evil as for good, promptings from heaven and hell, as if the stars fought in their courses for a fate to be."

We are reminded here of Krutch's definition:

"The tragic spirit sees man occupying the exact center of a universe which would have no meaning except for him" and assuming that "each of his acts reverberates through the universe. His passions are important to him because he believes them important through all time and space."

The beauty of Pompilia defies analysis. It is difficult to imagine a victim much more cruelly used by life. She had had her moments, though, which gave significance to her suffering and a sense of future beauty and realization. She had had a precious fortnight with her baby son. She had known the friendship and love of Caponsacchi. James Cassidy says of Pompilia's message to Caponsacchi, "Tell him that I am arrayed for death in all the deathless flowers of what he said and did. He is a priest and cannot marry, nor would he if he could, the true marriage is that of heaven, where those who love know themselves into one."
"So let him wait God's instant men call years; Meanwhile hold hard by truth and his great soul, Do out the duty! Through such souls alone God stooping shows sufficient of his light For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise."
Like Pompilia, Caponsacchi had had his sublime moment when his eyes met hers in the theater in Arezzo. And like her he had never considered any earthly fulfillment of his love. His almost reverent love for her and his wistful treasuring of her words and looks appear repeatedly, as when she wishes that their flight might never be interrupted, that she might see

"No face nor voice that change and grow unkind."

and again,

"This time she might have said, - might, did not say -

'You are a priest.' "She said, 'my friend'."

His reminiscences continue, tenderly wistful, adoring, despairing.

"They bore her off, to separate cells of the same Ignoble prison, and, separate, thence to Rome. Pompilia's face, then and thus, looked on me The last time in this life: not one sight since, Never another sight to be! And yet I thought I had saved her. I appealed to Rome: It seems I simply sent her to her death."

* * * *

"I never touched her with my finger - tip
Except to carry her to the couch, that eve,
Against my heart, beneath my head, bowed low,
As we priests carry the paten."

In agony Caponsacchi lives again the tragedy of Pompilia as he testifies before the papal court against Count Guido. He has just recovered from an outburst of despair and rage and grief at the fate of the woman he loves:

"Sirs, I am quiet again * * * what's to move so much?
Pompilia will be presently with God;
I am, on earth, as good as out of it,
A relegated priest; when exile ends
I mean to do my duty and live long.
She and I are mere strangers now; but priests
Should study passion; how else cure mankind,
Who come for help in passionate extremes?
I do but play with an imagined life -
O great, just, good God! Miserable me!"

Caponsacchi's greatness of soul together with his pathetic human grief appear in these lines. In the midst of his wretchedness he is able to say with sublime conviction, "O great, just, good God." A triumph over despair, a revelation of supreme fortitude in the face of calamity.
In a Gondola

As their gondola glides lazily down a canal in Venice, two lovers speak, sing, muse, rehearse the stages of their drama, their happiness intensified by the danger which constantly hovers; for if 'The Three', husband, father, and brother of the lady become aware of this secret liaison, only tragedy can follow. While they are laughing, her lover is stabbed by the dagger of her husband.

To be stabbed when youth and love and life are offering all that the eternal search for perfection could demand seems a cruel waste. But is it, after all, a waste? They have known ecstasy. Ecstasy illuminates the whole poem.

"The Three, I do not scorn
To death, because they never lived: but I
Have lived indeed, and so - (yet one more kiss)-
can die!"

Nothing, now, can dim the glory they have known. He has died at the moment when earth seemed nearest heaven. To her he will never seem less than a hero, the great experience of her life. Their love and their personalities express for
each the greatness of human nature as perhaps they could not continue to do had he not been killed. Their story is touched by no mean misery. They have known great joy. And she will survive to know great pain. But always their experience is on the level where greatness is, and hence is tragedy.

3 My Last Duchess

A Duke of Ferrara is showing to the envoy froma Count whose daughter he plans to make his next Duchess a portrait of his last Duchess whom he had killed by his egotism, or possibly in some other way. He is intent on making it clear in what ways she erred that the same mistakes may not occur again. He had been too proud to tell her how she displeased him.

" She had
A heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace — all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, — good!
but thanked
Somehow, I know not how — as if she ranked
My gift of a five-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech — (which I have not) — to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark" — and if she let herself
Be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
— B'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
When'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together."
In contrast to the ghastly Duke we see a frank and charming girl who had come from a happy home an eager bride, expecting life to continue to offer her all that she had known of the pleasantness of life. How could she possibly think that kindness and responsiveness, so naturally hers that she was unconscious of them could possibly meet with coldness and scorn from the husband for whom she had left her home? Her spontaneous expression of interest and appreciation of all that she found in her new home were greeted only with disdain and even hatred. Because of her very loveliness, "all smiles stopped together". Such a girl could necessarily have no comprehension of such a character, such a point of view as the Duke's.

That so lovable a person should be killed for being true to her charming self is indeed a tragedy. That this death should be a release from an intolerable life gives us that implied "triumph over despair" which leaves us content that she should have been a victim.
E The tragedy of the single great moment

1 Abt Vogler

* "Weak and shaken with the storm of divine inspiration that has just passed through him," the musician sits at his keys. He reflects that had he been an architect, poet, or painter his dream would have endured, but the "fine, careless rapture of his unpremeditated music" has vanished.

"But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can, Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are! And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man. That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star. Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself is naught. It is everywhere in the world - loud, soft, and all is said: Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my thought: And there! Ye have heard and seen: consider and bow the head!"

* William Lyon Phelps, Robert Browning
"Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music
I reared;
Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that
come too slow;
For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that
he feared,
That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was
to go.
Never to be again!"

Krutch's typical modern writing of Abt Vogler as we find
him at the beginning of the poem would probably have derived
from the experience no faith in the rightness of a divine
plan. He might have found in the fact that the tremendous
moment could not be recaptured, that the ecstasy had passed,
just an evidence that there was no divine plan. To be capable
of such creative heights and then to find that his resting
place was "the C-major of this life" might carry to him only
a sense of defeat and futility.

"All we have willed or hoped of good
shall exist;
"Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty nor good
nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for
the melodist
When eternity confirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth
too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in
the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by
and by.

And what is our failure here but a triumph's
evidence
For the fullness of the days? Have we withered
or agonized?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing
might issue thence?
Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony might
be prized?

* * * * *

But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;
The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians
know."
"Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes
her reign:
I will be patient and proud, and soberly acq-
uesce.
Give me the keys. I feel for the common
chord again,
Sliding by semitones till I sink to the
Minor, — yes,
And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand
on alien ground,
Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from
into the deep;
Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my
resting plac is found,
The C-major of this life: so, now I will
try to sleep."

It is a tragic experience in that the beauty which he was
able to capture in his music had come to him for so brief a
moment and was gone so completely that he could give it no
permanent form nor offer it to the world.

Unlike Krutch's typical modern, Browning has his Abt
Vogler emerging from the experience with the exalted sense
that the finger of God had selected him as its instrument
for the moment. He has a faith in the beauty of God's plan which is beyond his finite power to realize except for that moment of awareness and insight. His failure here gives Abt Vogler a faith which makes it a tragedy rather than a meaningless despair.
"She should never have looked at me
If she meant I should not love her!"

She was a queen. His social world was remote from hers. There could be no earthly consummation. Yet that look was the great experience in both of their lives.

"There are flashes struck from midnights,
There are fire-flames noon-days kindle,
Whereby piled-up honors perish,
Whereby swollen ambitions dwindle,
While just this or that poor impulse,
Which for once had play unstifled,
Seems the sole work of a lifetime
That away the rest have trifled.

Doubt you if, in some such moment,
As she fixed me, she felt clearly,
Ages past the soul existed,
Here an age 'tis resting merely,
And hence fleets again for ages,
While the true end, sole and single,
It stops here for is, this love-way,
With some other soul to mingle?
Else it loses what it lived for,
    And eternally must lose it;
Better ends may be in prospect,
    Deeper blisses (if you choose it),
But this life's end and this love-bliss
    Have been lost here. Doubt you whether
This she felt as, looking at me,
    Mine and her souls rushed together ?"

For Browning no love is in vain. "Grief, anguish even,
may attend it, but never can its issue be futility. The
glory of love for Browning resides most radiantly in what
it does for the lover's own soul." *

"Oh, observe! Of course, next moment,
    The world's honors, in derision,
Trampled out the light forever:
    Never fear but there's provision
Of the devil's to quench knowledge
    Lest we walk the earth in rapture!
-Making those who catch God's secret
    Just so much more prize their capture!

* Ethel Colburn Mayne, Browning's Heroines
Such am I: the secret's mine now!
She has lost me, I have gained her;
Her soul's mine; and thus grown perfect,
I shall pass my life's remainder.
Life will just hold out the proving
Both our powers, alone and blended;
And then, come the next life quickly!
This world's use will have been ended."

In these two ideas, first that time is measured by the intensity of spiritual experiences, and second, that life on earth is a trial and a test, the result of which will be seen in the higher and happier development when the soul is freed from the limitations of time and space, we find the depth of feeling and vastness of stage which give to Cristina the dimensions of tragedy.

3 Porphyria's Lover

Here, as in Cristina, is the situation of a man in love with a woman whose social world is hopelessly above his own. On a sullen, rainy evening he "listened with heart fit to break" in his lonely cottage "when glided in Porphyria." She built up the fire.
"She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread o'er all, her yellow hair,
Murmering how she loved me — she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties disserver,
And give herself to me forever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could tonight's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:
So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up in her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good; I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her."
Her lover believes that at this moment Porphyria is in the grip of the noblest impulse she has ever known, for she is able to forget the paltry conventions of her social group. He also knows that this exalted moment cannot last, that Porphyria will never again be so near to heaven. So, believing that he is saving her soul, he risks his own damnation. His act may seem insane — yet he has had the courage of his profound conviction. He seems to see divine sanction in the fact that —

"And all night long we have not stirred, And yet God has not said a word!"

The significance of these last two lines is debatable. In any case there is an implied belief that his act "reverberates through the universe," that his passion is "important through all time and space."
The Tragedy of Rennunciation

1. The Lost Mistress

Another chivalrous lover appears in The Lost Mistress who does not regard his lady as less intelligent or less adorable because she rejects him. His sorrow has nobility, he tries to make the awkward situation easier for the girl and accepts her request that their friendship shall continue although they are no longer to be lovers.

"To-morrow we meet the same then, dearest?

May I take your hand in mine?

Mere friends are we, - well, friends the merest

Keep much that I resign:

For each glance of the eye so bright and black,

Though I keep with heart's endeavor,-

Your voice, when you wish the snowdrops back,

Though it stay in my soul forever,-

Yet I will but say what mere friends say,

Or only a thought stronger;

I will hold your hand but as long as all may,

Or so very little longer!"
A noble, tender, heroic song of renunciation, with an irresistible touch of the whimsical. I think there is no question that he suffers but he is unwilling to hurt her by letting her see how much.

2 The Last Ride Together

"I said - Then, dearest, since 'tis so,
Since now at length my fate I know,
Since nothing all my love avails,
Since all my life seemed meant for, fails,
Since this was written and needs must be -
My whole heart rises up to bless
Your name in pride and thankfulness!
Take back the hope you gave, - I claim
Only a memory of the same,
-And this beside, if you will not blame,
Your leave for one more last ride with me.

With debonair dignity and without resentment this lover accepts his lady's ultimatum which wrecks his life's happiness. She was free to choose and she did not choose him. Here is pain but no resentment. He cannot wish that he did not love her, that he had not "caught God's secret." He has done his best to win. When he loses we gather that he would rather have been rejected by her than accepted by anyone else.
"My last thought was at least not vain:
I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.

Who knows but the world may end tonight?"

He is able to exult in the joy of the moment in spite of his pain.
As he helps her into the saddle he has her in his arms for one moment more.

"Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!
Thus leant she and lingered - joy and fear

Thus lay she a moment on my breast."

Then we began to ride. My soul
Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll
Freshening and fluttering in the wind.
Past hopes already lay behind."

Now, again, Browning's sturdy philosophy of triumph over despair appears in the lover's thought as he rides and savors to the full the beauty of the moment.

"Fail I alone in words and deeds?
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?"
Look at the end of work, contrast
The petty done, the undone vast,
This present of theirs with the hopeful past!
    I hoped she would love me; here we ride

What act proved all its thought had been?
What will but felt the fleshly screen?

Who knows what's fit for us? Had fate
Proposed bliss here should sublimate
My being - had I signed the bond -
Still one must lead some life beyond,
    Have a bliss to die with, dim - descried.
This foot once planted on the goal,
This glory - garland round my soul,
Could I descry such? Try and test!
I sink back shuddering from the quest.
Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?
    Now heaven and she are beyond this ride."

Rejection may be better for him because now he has an unrealized ideal.
This ride definitely cuts him off from the woman he loves. We might expect bitterness and black despair to follow his rejection, or a helpless storming against a blind and stupid fate. But Browning's hero finds rightness and hope in the belief that "heaven and she are beyond this ride." His love is no ephemeral thing to grow and vanish in a moment. It is greater than an earthly frustration, and passes on into a life beyond, thus attaining the dimensions of tragedy.
"And yet - she has not spoke so long!
What if heaven be that, fair and strong
At life's best, with our eyes upturned
Whither life's flower is first discerned,
We, fixed so, ever should so abide?
What if we still ride on, we two,
With life forever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity,-
And heaven just prove that I and she
Ride, ride together, forever ride?"

May this moment be eternal! Its beauty and intensity have more value than a lifetime might have yielded.

G The Laboratory

In this poem we have a study of a woman's jealousy and revenge. Ethel Colburne Mayne says of her, "She is a completely realized human creature, uttering herself in such abandonment of all pretense as never fails to compass majesty. Into the soul of this woman in The Laboratory, Browning has penetrated until he seems to breathe with her breath. I question if there is another fictive utterance to surpass this one in authenticity. ***** Not Shakespeare has outdone it in power and concentration. Every word counts, almost
every comma — for, like Browning, we too seem to breathe with this woman’s panting breath, our hearts to beat with the very pain and rage of hers, and every pause she comes to in her speech is our pause, so intense is the evocation, so unerring the expression of an impulse which, whether or no it be atrophied in our more hesitating and civilized consciousness, is at any rate effectively inhibited."

A court lady of the ancien régime is buying from an old alchemist in his laboratory the draught which is to kill her triumphant rival. *="Small, gorgeous, and intense she sits in the strange den and watches the old wizard set about his work. She is due to dance at the King’s, but there is no hurry: he may take as long as he chooses. Now she must put on a glass mask like his, the old man tells her, for ‘these faint smokes that curl whitely’ are themselves poisonous — and she submits, and with all her intensity at work ties it on tightly; then sits again, to peer through the fumes of the devil’s smithy. But she cannot be silent; even to him — and after all, is such an one as he quite truly a man? — she must pour forth the anguish of her soul. Questions relieve her now and then :"

"Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?"

but not long can she be merely curious; every minute there breaks out a cry:

*  Mayne,  Browning’s  Heroines
"He is with her, and they know that I know

Where they are, what they do * * *

* * * *

"they believe my tears flow

While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear

Empty church, to pray God in, for them / I am here."

* * * *

For only last night as they whispered, I brought

My own eyes to bear on her so, that I thought

Could I keep them one half minute fixed, she would fall,

Shrivelled; she fell not; Yet this does it all!"

She wants her rival to feel death, wants the proof of
death to remain,

"Brand, burn up, bite into its grace -

He is sure to remember her dying face!"

Her complete dedication of every power within herself
to this white - hot passion of revenge makes her an unfor-
gettable picture. Nothing that may happen to her either
now or later is of the slightest importance. Such a frenzy
of diabolical vindictiveness, caring for nothing in earth
or heaven or hell earns her a place among tragic heroines.
Andrea Del Sarto

William Lyon Phelps says, "Browning, with his fixed idea of the glory of the imperfect, the divine evidence of perpetual development, could not forgive Andrea for being called 'faultless painter'." The text of the poem is found in the line, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp."

In a mild, Autumn twilight, sitting with his wife who is physically beautiful, but devoid of soul, this artist whose paintings show perfection of form without spirit surveys his own achievement. It is a poem of calm, of acquiescence, of failure in success. He understands his wife's limitations, but so sensitive to beauty is he that her physical perfection has enslaved him and really been his ruin. He also understands his own successes and failures as the following quotations suggest:

"No sketches first, no studies, that's long past: I do what many dream of, all their lives,
- Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive - you don't know how the others strive
To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,-
Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,
(I know his name, no matter) - so much less!
Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged.
There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed, forthright, craftsman's hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
Enter and take their place there sure enough,
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.

*   *   *   *   *

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-gray,
Placid and perfect with my art; the worse!
I know both what I want and what might gain;
That arm is wrongly put - and there again -
A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines
It's body, so to speak: its soul is right,
He means right - that, a child may understand.
Still, what an arm: and I could alter it:
But all the play, the insight and the stretch -
Out of me, out of me! And wherfore out?
Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you.
Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think -
Moren than I merit, yes, by many times.
But had you - oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare -
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
"God and the glory! never care for gain.
The present by the future, what is that?
Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!
Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!"
I might have done it for you. So it seems:
Perhaps not. All is as God overlites.
Beside, incentives come from the soul's self;
The rest avail not."
"How could it end in any other way?

You called me and I came home to your heart.
The triumph was, to have ended there; then, if
I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost?

*  *  *  *  *  *  *

No doubt there's something strikes a balance. Yes,
You loved me quite enough, it seems to-night.
This must suffice me here. What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance—"

Even Lucrezia whom he prefers to all that he might have
been without her is not true to him.

Although his technical perfection gave him the reputation
of the faultless painter, Andrea is not guilty of that
unlovely vice, self-satisfaction. His achievement, after all,
is great, yet he is great enough to understand its lack
even though he is unable to change. He does understand that
"a man's reach should exceed his grasp", he does look for-
ward to "in heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance."
His is a quiet, wistful comprehension that gives his story
the dignity of tragedy.
Two in the Campagna

This poem is an expression of that universal, human tragedy, the doom of isolation of every individual in the world from every other individual.

"Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

"I wonder do you feel to-day
As I have felt since, hand in hand,
We sat down on the grass, to stray
In spirit better through the land,
This morn of Rome and May?

For me I touched a thought, I know,
Has tantalized me many times,
* * * *
Help me to hold it!
* * * *

The champagne with its endless fleece
Of feathery grasses everywhere!
Silence and passion, joy and peace,
An everlasting wash of air.
Rome's ghost since her decease.
Such life here, through such lengths of hours,
    Such miracles performed in play,
Such primal naked forms of flowers,
    Such letting nature have her way
While heaven looks from its towers!

How say you? Let us, O my dove,
    Let us be unashamed of soul,
As earth lies bare to heaven above!
    How is it under our control
To love or not to love?

I would that you were all to me,
    You that are just so much, no more.
Not yours nor mine, nor slave nor free!
    Where does the fault lie? What the core
O' the wound, since wound must be?

I would I could adopt your will,
    See with your eyes, and set my heart
Beating by yours, and drink my fill
    At your soul's springs, - your part, my part
In life, for good and ill.
No. I yearn upward, touch you close,
    Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,
Catch your soul's warmth, - I pluck the rose
    And love it more than tongue can speak -
Then the good minute goes.

Already how am I so far
    Out of that minute? Must I go
Still like the thistle ball, no bar,
    Onward, whenever light winds blow,
Fixed by no friendly star?

Just when I seemed about to learn!
    Where is the thread now? Off again!
The old trick! Only I discern -
    Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

In the pain lies the tragedy. There is the implication,
always present in Browning that although our hearts are finite,
the fact of this recurrent pain of yearning is a guarantee of real-
ization and completion in a future life. This promise gives a val-
ue to human life which it is robbed of if we believe that yearning
and failure here have no meaning and no later justification. In
this faith is a triumph over despair which glorifies tragedy.
III Conclusion and summary

Martyrs and heroes, fragile girls and beautiful women, saints and fiends, musicians and painters from all periods of history, against every kind of background have passed in review before us.

Each figure in this colorful pageantry created by Robert Browning has felt tragedy. It is through tragedy that their personalities reached their full dimensions and became significant. At no time, I think, did the sufferings of these people come under the stigma which Krutch places on Ibsen's characters who experience "mean misery piled on mean misery, petty misfortune following petty misfortune, despair becoming intolerable because it is no longer even significant or important." Always there was a grandeur and dignity, a heroic beauty in their sufferings which saved them from futility or despair. The "greatness of human nature" did not suffer by any of these examples. The "joy wrung out of existence" might lie only in a faith in the future consummations beyond death, or in the joy of eternal quest with the object always eluding, but it was there. To most of us this faith seems a frail will-o'-the wisp, an unconvincing and airy phantom, but we can feel
for the moment the sturdy exaltation of Browning's men
and women. For these people did seem to occupy the exact
center of a universe which would have no meaning except for
them. Their acts did seem to "reverberate through the uni-
verse," to be "important through all time and space." In
short, they seemed to be worthy illustrations of the tragic
spirit.

In conclusion may I again quote Krutch on the value
of this tragic spirit we have concerned ourselves with for
many pages:

"And if, then, the Tragic Spirit is in reality the
product of a religious faith in which, sometimes at least,
faith in the greatness of God is replaced by faith in the
greatness of man, it serves, of course, to perform the func-
tion of religion, to make life tolerable for those who par-
ticipate in its beneficent illusion. It purges the souls
of those who might otherwise despair and it makes endurable
the realization that the events of the outward world do not
correspond with the desires of the heart, and thus, in its
own particular way, it does what all religions do, for it
gives a rationality, a meaning, and a justification to the
universe."
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