

Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson and the Contemporary Crisis of Faith

Dr. Indu Singh Rajput

*Associate Professor
G.D.H. Girls P.G. College
Moradabad*

Subhash Kumar

*Research Scholar
M.J.P. Rohilkhand University
Bareilly*

Abstract

Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson minutely observed the contemporary social anarchy and ethical degeneration. They didn't remain idle spectators of the economic chaos. With their poems, they instructed the readers to have faith in life. They created an awakening among the people so that they may understand the values of human life. Both of them asked people to concentrate on the positive values of life and have firm faith in God and the eternal soul. S.A. Brooke studied their poems minutely and delivered many lectures to establish the validity of their thoughts. These two poets understood the difference between men and animals. They inspired readers to pay attention to lofty ideals and a sense of reason and have faith in a bright future. Why to waste this life for the pleasures of the senses? Why to ignore divinity? Why to waste time and energy for material gains? They did succeed in their mission and S.A. Brooke, the torch-bearer, aptly admires their poems.

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

**Dr. Indu Singh Rajput
Subhash Kumar,**

*Robert Browning and Alfred
Tennyson and the
Contemporary Crisis of
Faith*

Notions Dec. 2020,
Vol. XI, No. II,
Article No.23 pp. 117 - 125

Online available at :
[https://anubooks.com/
notions-vol-xi-no-2-july-dec-
2020/](https://anubooks.com/notions-vol-xi-no-2-july-dec-2020/)

Introduction

Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson were the great observers of contemporary British life and generally felt fed up with the prevailing social, economic, and political evils. Like Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle, they hated the enemies of culture and civilization and made serious efforts to fight against falsehood, violence, greedy people, and uncultured brutes. There was a lot of turmoil in the economic field as many factories had been established for personal profits. Capitalists exploited the poor laborers and as there were no factory laws. They worked hard in the factories from morning till night. Low wages were given to the laborers and medical facilities were fully lacking for them. There was no arrangement of old age security for them. They were born in debts, led a life of poverty and misery, and died in debts. The growth of materialism made the authorities cruel, and British traders established markets in other countries for earning huge profits. The East India Company was a tool of exploitation. Manchester, Glasgow, Leicester, etc. became the major centers of industrial production and nobody thought of the welfare of consumers. Anti-human trade policies were adopted and the British ministers felt forced to help the industrialists. Even Queen Victoria was happy with British economic progress. Nobody bothered for the poor sections of society. As a matter of fact, the laborers survived as animals and their children were given no education. The gap widened between the rich and the poor and *The Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx failed to change the economic scenario. The laborers of the world failed to unite. Unions failed to protect the interests of laborers. Yet Alfred Tennyson didn't raise his voice in favor of laborers. As Matthew Arnold said, $\frac{3}{4}$ Sweetness, light, and hope were missing in the lives of the poor people. No welfare schemes were made for their welfare and as a result, the crisis of faith could be easily observed in society.

The Victorian age was remarkable for heartless civilization as Darwin wrote the book *The Origin of Species* which cut the roots of the church. Now the new theory of evolution condemned the traditional theory of the creation of earth and fall of man. New inventions of science cut the foundation of faith and attacked the supremacy of the church. The educated Britishers started losing faith in *The Bible* as they now trusted reason. But Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson made serious efforts to bring moral discipline in life and inspired people to have faith in God and Right Conduct, Right Philosophy, and Right Knowledge. Like Matthew Arnold, they told people that God is permanent and certain things like death are inevitable. It is not enough to work upon the new machines as scientific knowledge is not capable of

guiding the masses. It is true that new knowledge is essential for human development. It is true that knowledge is power and power brings money. But men don't live with material assets only. How can people afford to forget the basic questions of life such as $\frac{3}{4}$ What is spirit? How is spirit superior to matter? Who am I? What dies with death? What is the nature of the soul? What is divine authority? How does God control the earth and other elements? How have men failed to reach final conclusions about the sun, the moon, the planets, etc.? How material civilization is inferior to spiritual vision? Indeed, Browning and Tennyson didn't pretend to be prophets. Their poems are full of ethical values and yet they never pretended to be propagandists and preachers. In his poem, *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle told readers that the soul never dies. He felt indebted to *The Gita* and reasserted that men should work regularly without expecting any reward for his actions.

In his poems Tennyson asks the questions $\frac{3}{4}$ What am I? Is he merely body or soul? Of course, both the poets raise their voices against moral anarchy and this is the reason that Stopford A. Brooke admires them in his lectures.

Tennyson and Browning observed various contemporary people and found that everybody aspired for joy, delight, and happiness but didn't make proper efforts for the same. He fails to realize that the delights of the future depend upon the proper usage of the present. Time continues to pass without giving any warning to anybody. This system of time ever continues and will continue in the future too. Present does not stay in the life of any person as it is momentary. If a person neglects the present, his future is bound to be doomed. The gates open for future bliss at present only. Let nobody waste the present. Why to waste the present simply because a few mistakes have been committed in the past? Wise people of their poems make the best use of the present and hope for a bright future. This is the secret of the popularity and validity of their thoughts even today. When the ignorant people sleep, the wise people are fully awake. In the poem, *Rabbi Ben Ezra* Rabbi tells people that the wheel of time is ever moving and the process of God's creation goes on. Let them come out of ignorance and the poem *The Grammarian's Funeral* advocates that knowledge brings the power as well as prosperity. In the poem, *Ulysses* Tennyson's hero seeks new knowledge even in old age. Both the poets assert the importance of right vision, awakening, positive thoughts, powers of determination, and zeal for work. It is true that human life may end any day at any time and yet people should go on working with full vigor and zeal till death. The fear of death should not check their activities any day. Human beings must develop a temper to

fulfill their noble ambitions

Exposition

In his lectures, *Imaginative Representations* S.A. Brooke admires the particular poems of Robert Browning and the learned poet has been admired for 'creation, invention, and art'. (PRB 211) Here S.A. Brooke aptly says that man differs from animals because the former can create complex things with his complex thoughts. Browning's Caliban invents a new world out of the persons he knows, but different from them, and a second self outside himself. No lower animal has ever conceived of such a 'creation'. Secondly, Browning makes 'Caliban noble, to exercise his wit and his sense of what is beautiful, fall to making something $\frac{3}{4}$ a bird, on insect, or a building which he ornaments, which satisfies him for a time, and which he then destroys to make a better. This is an art in its beginning and the highest animal we know of is incapable of it. (PRB 211) When Stephano and Trinculo hear strange voices on the island, they feel a lot of fear and terror. But Caliban consoles them that strange sounds are heard on this island regularly and yet there is nothing to be afraid of. Many musical voices make him sleep for long hours. At times Caliban utters words in a poetic manner and S.A. Brooke admires him for this skill. As a matter of fact, Caliban is a lover of nature without any ill-will against the sun, moon, stars, sea, thunder, and storm. No animal will behave as he does. S.A. Brooke regards Caliban as 'an intellectual personage' (PRB 208) as Browning shows his keen sympathy for him. (PRB 209) Browning's Caliban does not curse Prospero as Shakespeare's does.

Nucleus

In the second lecture on *Imaginative Representations*, S.A. Brooke analyzes Browning's love for Renaissance paintings, sculpture, architecture, etc. with the help of the poem *The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*. Here the dying Bishop requests his nephews and sons to prepare his tomb near the St. Praxed's church. He is on the verge of death and yet fails to get rid of his envy against another Bishop Gandolf. Bishop Gandolf was jealous of him as the latter got married to the most beautiful woman in the world. Secondly, he manipulated a better site for his grave near the church from where he could see the divine service even after death. This Bishop promises to leave a lot of villas and assets for his sons and nephews so that they may select the best stones for his grave. Let him be remembered for his love of fine arts by the future generations. No ordinary stones are to be used for his grave. A decent canopy with costly blue stone is to be built on his grave. Let

his soul listen to the divine music from the church every day.

In this poem, Robert Browning describes the vanities of human life. People have a lot of passions and then they die. They struggle hard for useless things and achieve nothing. Soon they are forgotten by their friends and relations. But this Bishop does not regard his life as a mere dream and wants to be remembered for his grandeur and lofty ideas. He knows that everyone dies. Yet he wants to leave a memorial in the shape of an attractive grave. Let grand lines be carved on his grave from the pen of grand scholars like Tully. Let there a picture of the lover of the nymph. Here Browning shows his love for Renaissance architecture. A Pan should be shown snatching a garment from a nymph.

But this Bishop feels that his sons and nephews are careless and greedy and will not spend money on the grandeur of his grave. His psychology has been analyzed by the poet and S.A. Brooke admires him for this skill. How can his tomb be ridiculous in the eyes of the followers of Bishop Gandolf? This Bishop fails to get peace due to his jealous nature. The question arises $\frac{3}{4}$ How can dead be beyond these evils but this Bishop is not prepared to accept basic facts associated with death. How does a grand tomb bring glory and peace to a person who is dead? He himself will mix with dust. How can he feel solace with costly black stones even after his death? How will he get rid of his sins committed in this life? How will Ulpian's sentences spoil the grace of his tomb? Why does he not offer prayers to get the blessings of Jesus Christ? Why does he remain sensual thinking of the lovemaking of Pan and the nymph? Why does he not give up his interest in his costly villas? How can he carry his assets with him to the next world? How does it matter if fewer tapers are lighted on his tomb after his death? How can he hope to see the glories of present life after death? Will his soul have physical eyes to see the practical side of his aspirations? His follies have been exposed by the poet. Due to confusion, he fails to understand:

Do I live, am I dead? (BC III)

Does Robert Browning answer any questions regarding the function of art in the poem *Fra Lippo Lippi* such as $\frac{3}{4}$ What is the relation of art with life? How is art related to ethics and culture? How is an artist a social human being as he can survive in isolation? What is the relation between art and beauty and truth? Can an artist survive in the world of imagination, far away from the real world of human beings? How did art flourish in the Renaissance age? Does Lippo achieve the aim of his life? Does he paint the picture of the Virgin Mary? Is he not realistic in his approach to art?

There is no denying the fact that Robert Browning admired Italian paintings of the Renaissance period. Fra Lippo Lippi was a famous Italian painter of the 15th century. Unfortunately, his parents died when he was merely a child. His aunt looked after him for five years and then left him in the monastery of Carmelites. Here he developed his interest in paintings and painted several pictures of saints who devoted themselves to the purity of the soul. He was promoted to the ranks of Chaplain and Rector after a service of a few years. But he often felt depressed and lonely in the monastery. One day he looked into the street to get some fresh air. As he saw some girls wandering in the street, he came down and wandered with them. But the police offers to arrest him and asked $\frac{3}{4}$ What was a monk doing at night in the defamed street of prostitutes? But the monk Fra Lippo Lippi was not a lustful fellow and had no interest in the prostitutes. Just he wanted some company to get rid of loneliness. The poet shows his zest for life as nobody can survive alone in the world of art. After all, men want to remain fresh and often wish to exchange their thoughts with others. It was too much with the monk to be alone with his thoughts and go on painting divine pictures. How long could he glorify the divinity of the soul? How could he forget the realities of this world? What about the adventures of life? What checked him in mixing up with the women of the street? How could he judge from his window that the women below were prostitutes in the street? How did he know that it was a street of ill-repute? What forbade him not to seek a corner for an escape from the dull routine of life? After all Ulysses, the King of Ithaca, also got bored with the dull routine of kingly life and then moved out for adventures in the sea. The watchmen had no right to treat him roughly. How did he lose his character simply by wandering in a defamed street? How did this single act degrade him as a monk? He tells the history of his life to the watchmen $\frac{3}{4}$ How had he suffered poverty in his early life? He had decided to give up his interest in this material world as he had no interest in the physical pleasures of the earth.

The poet here depicts the crisis of faith that he noticed in the Victorian age. Fra Lippo Lippi is more than a monk as he wants to see all the shades of life. In the monastery, he existed just like a prisoner. How could he ignore life around him as his 'business is to paint the souls of men'? After all, God is the creator of various objects and human beings. Why should an artist miss the realities of life? The various shades of beauty attract the monk and he comes out of the monastery. After all, he does not commit any sin and he can't be blamed for moral lapses. If he wants to see the good things of the world, he does not commit any crime. Browning, like Tennyson, believed

that the world is good as God has created it. The glory of God is unlimited and Fra Lippo Lippi wants to realize this fact. The learned critic Mark Roberts admires this approach of the monk. The thought of the person's love for art and life attracted Robert Browning very much and he expressed it in this poem. When Lippo is captured by the watchmen, he asks them :

I am a poor brother Lippo, by your leave!
You need not clap your torches to my face.
Zooks, what's to blame? You think you see a monk!
What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,
And here you catch me at an alley's end
Where sportive ladies leave their doors afar? (FLL 1-6)
After all, he had come out of the monastery for fun and not to satisfy lust.

He asks them not to doubt his integrity :

Come, what am I a beast for? (FLL 80)

In his lecture *Imagination Representations II* S.A. Brooke calls it a work of genius and remarks :

The poem seems as easy as a chat in Pall Mall last night between women and intelligent men, which read to hundred years hence, would inform the reader of the trend of thought and feeling in this present day. But in reality, to do this kind of thing well is to do a very difficult thing ... This is what divine thing, the ease of genius. (PRB 223)

What traveling is for Ulysses, painting is for Fra Lippo Lippi!

Conclusion

S.A. Brooke admires their approach to death as their characters hope for the next life. These two poets appreciate man as he has the capacity to think and argue about the problems of life. He can analyze his past, present, and future. Due to his sense of reason he can plan the journey of life. In the Victorian age, a lot of educated and rich people became proud of their intelligence and as a result, failed to find the path of virtue. Due to crisis of faith, inventions of science, and growth of industries they became mad for temporary physical pleasures and could not find the difference between right and wrong, finite and infinite, rational and irrational. Browning and Tennyson told people that they should pursue higher aims in life. In *Rabbi Ben Ezra* and *Two Voices*, these poets assert the value of righteousness, mercy, generosity, noble character, ethics, etc. as they have to achieve noble aims of life. They must

not be afraid of death as it is inevitable. Moreover, it is the body that dies with death and the soul remains immortal. In *Rabbi Ben Ezra* and other poems Robert Browning regards God as 'potter' and soul as 'clay' and both of them 'endures forever'. Only men have the capacity to reunite with the divine soul. But this communion of the human soul with the divine soul is possible only with ethical conduct. If people continue to work only for the pleasures of the senses, they will not be able to get higher goals. In the fifth stanza of *Rabbi Ben Ezra* Browning says that only animals work for satisfying their physical needs. But noble people have to struggle hard for lofty aims of life. The same is the case with people like Ulysses, King Arthur, Hallam, Ida, etc. who devoted themselves to seeking new knowledge. When King Arthur is deeply wounded in the battle against Modred, he does not lament for imminent death. He tells his courtiers that he will take birth again and return to them soon. In *Prospice* the hero is not afraid of death and prepares himself for the last battle against death. S.A. Brooke is justified in appreciating this heroic spirit of the characters of Browning and Tennyson.

To them, people are fools if they regard the body as real life. The body is matter and the soul is eternal and real. Why to feel fear of the end of this journey? In the poem *Crossing, The Bar* Tennyson is personally well-prepared to die so that he may start leading a new life. In *Idylls of The King* King hopes to meet his unfaithful wife in the next life. So, both the poets guided the desperate contemporary people so that they may accept the existence of an eternal soul. They removed the fear of their mind regarding death.

Thus, Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson found contemporary people intellectually poor, confused, and bewildered. Due to so many new political theories such as Anarchism, Utilitarianism, Idealism, Socialism, Scientific Socialism, Individualism, etc., people failed to realize the exact functions of the state. With their poems, they taught the value of common senses, sweetness, light, trust, resolution, enthusiasm, humanitarian approach, etc., and asserted : 'Know thyself!' They asked the politicians and merchants to make proper use of political and economic powers in the common interest. They were advised to possess a passion for the common good and general welfare. In the poem *Evelyn Hope* Robert Browning asserted that everybody has to learn so many new things and new books for a noble life :

'Much is to learn and much to forget ... (EH 31)

Towards the end of *Ulysses* Tennyson advised people :

... to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield. (471)

References

1. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Bangalore: Prism Books Pvt. Ltd. 1993.
2. Brooke, Stopford A. *The Poetry of Robert Browning*. New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers. 2007.
3. Brooke, S.A. *Tennyson And His Art And Relation To Modern Life* Vol. I & II, Meerut : Shalabh Publishing House, 2004.
4. Chopra, D.K. *Carlyle : Heroes And Hero-Worship*. Agra : Lakshmi Narain Agarwal 2003.
5. Cook, Tim (Dr.) (ed.) *The Works of Robert Browning*. Hertfordshire London : Wordsworth Editions Ltd. 2007.
6. Furst, Lilian R. *Romanticism* London : Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1978.
7. Hodder, Karen *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Hertfordshire London : Wordsworth Editions Ltd. 2008.