



***ROBERT
BROWNING,
ELIZABETH
BARRETT
BARRETT***

***LOVE LETTERS
BETWEEN
ROBERT
BROWNING AND
ELIZABETH
BARRETT
BARRETT***

Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Barrett

Love Letters between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett

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The Brownings: Their Life and Art

Letters (1845 - 1846)

To LEIGH HUNT A joint epistle 1857

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ROBERT BROWNING

From a drawing made by Field Talfourd, in Rome, 1855

FOREWORD

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The present volume was initiated in Florence, and, from its first inception, invested with the cordial assent and the sympathetic encouragement of Robert Barrett Browning. One never-to-be-forgotten day, all ethereal light and loveliness, has left its picture in memory, when, in company with Mr. Browning and his life-long friend, the Marchesa Peruzzi di' Medici (*náta* Story), the writer of this biography strolled with them under the host's orange trees and among the riotous roses of his Florentine villa, "La Torre All' Antella," listening to their sparkling conversation, replete with fascinating reminiscences. To Mr. Browning the tribute of thanks, whose full scope is known to the Recording Angel alone, is here offered; and there is the blending of both privilege and duty in grateful acknowledgements to Messrs. Smith, Elder, & Company for their courtesy in permitting the somewhat liberal drawing on their published Letters of both the Brownings, on which reliance had to be based in any effort to

"Call up the buried Past again,"

and construct the story, from season to season, so far as might be, of that wonderful interlude of the wedded life of the poets.

Yet any formality of thanks to this house is almost lost sight of in the rush of memories of that long and mutually-trusting friendship between the late George Murray Smith, the former head of this firm, and Robert Browning, a friendship which was one of the choicest treasures in both their lives.

To The Macmillan Company, the publishers for both the first and the present Lord Tennyson; To Houghton Mifflin Company; to Messrs. Dodd, Mead, & Company; to The Cornhill Magazine (to which the writer is indebted for some data regarding Browning and Professor Masson); to each and all, acknowledgments are offered for their courtesy which has invested with added charm a work than which none was ever more completely a labor of love.

To Edith, Contessa Rucellai (*náta* Bronson), whose characteristically lovely kindness placed at the disposal of this volume a number of letters written by Robert Browning to her mother, Mrs. Arthur Bronson, special gratitude is offered.

“Poetry,” said Mrs. Browning, “is its own exceeding great reward.” Any effort, however remote its results from the ideal that haunted the writer, to interpret the lives of such transcendent genius and nobleness as those of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, must also be its own exceeding reward in leading to a passion of pursuit of all that is highest and holiest in the life that now is, and in that which is to come.

LILIAN WHITING

THE BRUNSWICK, BOSTON
Midsummer Days, 1911

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CHAPTER I

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1812-1833

“Allons! after the Great Companions! and to belong to them!”

“To know the universe itself as a road—as many roads—as roads for travelling souls.”

THE MOST EXQUISITE ROMANCE OF MODERN LIFE—ANCESTRY AND YOUTH OF ROBERT BROWNING—LOVE OF MUSIC—FORMATIVE INFLUENCES—THE FASCINATION OF BYRON—A HOME “CRAMMED WITH BOOKS”—THE SPELL OF SHELLEY—“INCONDITA”—POETIC VOCATION DEFINITELY CHOSEN—“PAULINE.”

Such a very page *de Contes* is the life of the wedded poets, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that it is difficult to realize that this immortal idyl of Poetry, Genius, and Love was less than fifteen years in duration, out of his seventy-seven, and her fifty-five years of life. It is a story that has touched the entire world

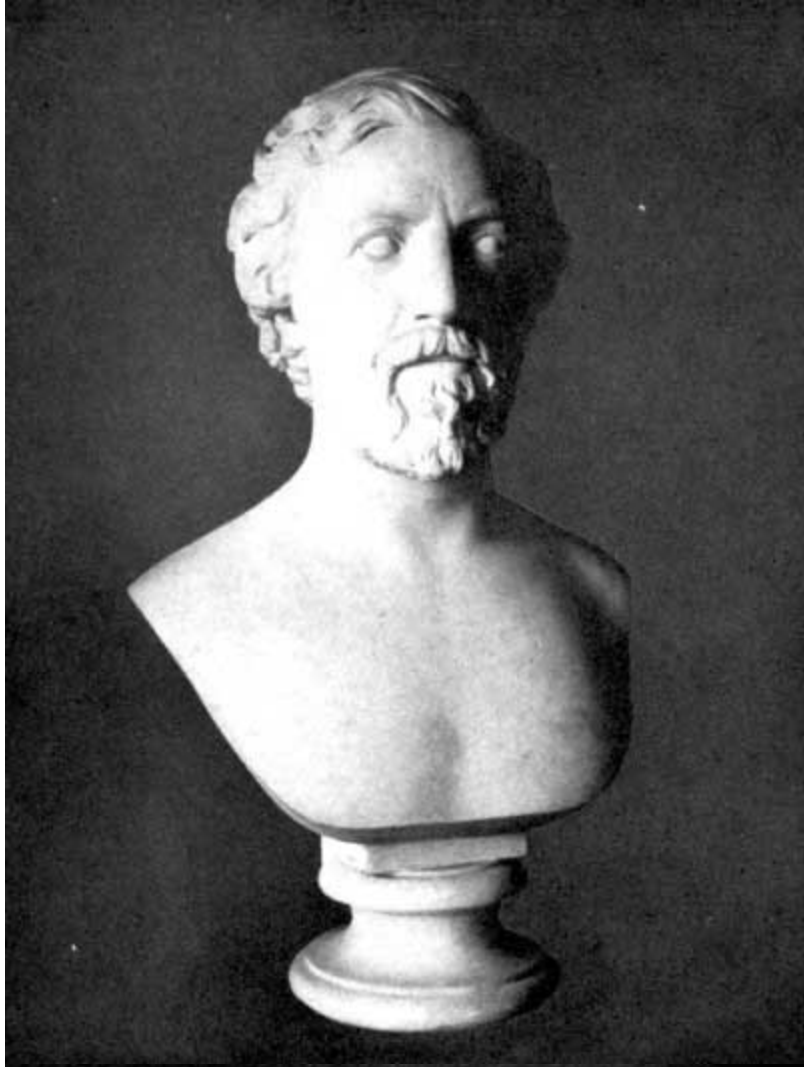
“... with mystic gleams,
Like fragments of forgotten dreams,”

this story of beautiful associations and friendships, of artistic creation, and of the entrance on a wonderful realm of inspiration and loveliness. At the time of their marriage he was in his thirty-fifth, and she in her forty-first year,

although she is described as looking so youthful that she was like a girl, in her slender, flower-like grace; and he lived on for twenty-eight years after

“Clouds and darkness
Fell upon Camelot,”

with the death of his “Lyric Love.” The story of the most beautiful romance that the world has ever known thus falls into three distinctive periods,—that of the separate life of each up to the time of their marriage; their married life, with its scenic setting in the enchantment of Italy; and his life after her withdrawal from earthly scenes. The story is also of duplex texture; for the outer life, rich in associations, travel, impressions, is but the visible side of the life of great creative art. A delightful journey is made, but its record is not limited to the enjoyment of friends and place; a poem is written whose charm and power persist through all the years.





BUSTS OF ROBERT AND ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Made in 1861 by William Wetmore Story

No adequate word could be written of the Brownings that did not take account of this twofold life of the poets. It is almost unprecedented that the power and resplendence and beauty of the life of art should find, in the temporal environment, so eminent a correspondence of beauty as it did with Robert and Elizabeth Browning. Not that they were in any wise exempt from sorrow and pain; the poet, least of all, would choose to be translated, even if he might, to some enchanted region remote from all the mingled experiences of humanity; it is the common lot of destiny, with its prismatic blending of failure and success, of purpose and achievement, of hope and defeat, of love and sorrow, out of which the poet draws his song. He would not choose

“That jar of violet wine set in the air,
That palest rose sweet in the night of life,”

to the exclusion of the common experiences of the day.

“Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
Who never spent the darksome hours

Weeping, and watching for the morrow,
He knows you not, ye unseen Powers.”

But to those who, poets or otherwise, see life somewhat in the true proportion of its lasting relations, events are largely transmuted into experiences, and are realized in their extended relations. The destiny of the Brownings led them into constantly picturesque surroundings; and the force and manliness of his nature, the tender sweetness and playful loveliness of hers, combined with their vast intellectual range, their mutual genius for friendships, their devotion to each other and to their son, their reverence for their art, and their lofty and noble spirituality of nature,—all united to produce this exquisite and unrivaled romance of life,—

“A Beauty passing the earth’s store.”

The rapture of the poet’s dream pervaded every experience.

“O Life, O Poetry,
Which means life in life.”

The transmutation of each into the other, both Life and Poetry, as revealed in their lives, is something as exceptional as it is beautiful in the world’s history.

It is only to those who live for something higher than merely personal ends, that the highest happiness can come; and the aim of these wedded poets may well be read in the lines from “Aurora Leigh”:

“... Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.”

In the ancestry of Robert Browning there was nothing especially distinctive, although it is representative of the best order of people; of eminently reputable life, of moderate means, of culture, and of assured intelligence. It is to the Brownings of Dorsetshire, who were large manor-owners in the time of Henry VII, that the poet's family is traced. Robert Browning, the grandfather of the poet, was a clerk in the Bank of England, a position he obtained through the influence of the Earl of Shaftesbury. Entering on this work at the age of twenty, he served honorably for fifty years, and was promoted to the position of the Bank Stock office, a highly responsible place, that brought him in constant contact with the leading financiers of the day. Born in 1749, he had married, in 1778, Margaret Tittle, the inheritor of some property in the West Indies, where she was born of English parentage. The second Robert, the father of the poet, was the son of this union. In his early youth he was sent out to take charge of his mother's property, and his grandson, Robert Barrett Browning, relates with pardonable pride how he resigned the post, which was a lucrative one, because he could not tolerate the system of slave labor prevailing there. By this act he forfeited all the estate designed for him, and returned to England to face privation and to make his own way. He, too, became a clerk in the Bank of England, and in 1811, at the age of thirty, married Sarah Anna Wiedemann, the daughter of a ship-owner in Dundee. Mr. Wiedemann was a German of Hamburg, who had married a Scotch lady; and thus, on his maternal side, the poet had mingled Scotch and German ancestry. The new household established itself in Southampton Street, Camberwell, and there were born their two children, Robert, on May 7, 1812, and on January 7, 1814, Sarah Anna, who came to be known as Sarianna through all her later life.

The poet's father was not only an efficient financier, but he was also a man of scholarly culture and literary tastes.

He was a lover of the classics, and was said to have known by heart the first book of the Iliad, and the Odes of Horace. There is a legend that he often soothed his little son to sleep by humming to him an ode of Anacreon. He wrote verse, he was a very clever draughtsman, and he was a collector of rare books and prints. Mr. W. J. Stillman, in his "Autobiography of a Journalist," refers to the elder Browning, whom he knew in his later years, as "a serene, untroubled soul,... as gentle as a gentle woman, a man to whom, it seemed to me, no moral conflict could ever have arisen to cloud his frank acceptance of life as he found it come to him.... His unworldliness had not a flaw." In Browning's poem entitled "Development" (in "Asolando") he gives this picture of his father and of his own childhood:

"My Father was a scholar and knew Greek.
When I was five years old, I asked him once
'What do you read about?'
'The siege of Troy.'
'What is a siege, and what is Troy?'
Whereat
He piled up chairs and tables for a town,
Set me a-top for Priam, called our cat
—Helen, enticed away from home (he said)
By wicked Paris, who couched somewhere close
Under the footstool....
.....
This taught me who was who and what was what;
So far I rightly understood the case
At five years old; a huge delight it proved
And still proves—thanks to that instructor sage
My Father...."

The poet's mother was a true gentlewoman, characterized by fervent religious feeling, delicacy of perception, and a great love for music. She was reared in

the Scottish kirk, and her husband in the Church of England, but they both connected themselves after their marriage with an "Independent" body that held their meetings in York Street, where the Robert Browning Hall now stands. They were, however, greatly attached to the Rev. Henry Melvill (later Canon at St. Paul's), whose evening service they habitually attended. While the poet's mother had little training in music, she was a natural musician, and was blessed with that keen, tremulous susceptibility to musical influence that was so marked a trait in her son. William Sharp pictures a late afternoon, when, playing softly to herself in the twilight, she was startled to hear a sound in the room. "Glancing around, she beheld a little white figure distinctly outlined against an oak bookcase, and could just discern two large wistful eyes looking earnestly at her. The next moment the child had sprung into her arms, sobbing passionately at he knew not what, but, as his paroxysm of emotion subsided, whispering over and over, 'Play! Play!'"

The elder Browning was an impassioned lover of medieval legend and story. He was deeply familiar with Paracelsus, with Faust, and with many of the Talmudic tales. His library was large and richly stored,—the house, indeed, "crammed with books," in which the boy browsed about at his own will. It was the best of all possible educations, this atmosphere of books. And the wealth of old engravings and prints fascinated the child. He would sit among these before a glowing fire, while from the adjoining room floated strains "of a wild Gaelic lament, with its insistent falling cadences." It is recorded as his mother's chief happiness,—“her hour of darkness and solitude and music.” Of such fabric are poetic impressions woven. The atmosphere was what Emerson called the "immortal ichor." The boy was companioned by the "liberating gods." Something mystic and beautiful beckoned to him, and incantations, unheard by the outer sense, thronged about him, pervading the air. The lad began to recast in English verse the Odes of Horace. From his

school, on holiday afternoons, he sought a lonely spot, elm-shaded, where he could dimly discern London in the distance, with the gleam of sunshine on the golden cross of St. Paul's,—lying for hours on the grass whence, perchance, he

“Saw distant gates of Eden gleam
And did not dream it was a dream.”

Meantime the boy read Junius, Voltaire, Walpole's Letters, the “Emblems” of Quarles (a book that remained as a haunting influence all his life), and Mandeville's “Fable of the Bees.” The first book of his own purchase was a copy of Ossian's poems, and his initial effort in literary creation was in likeness of the picturesque imaginations that appealed with peculiar fascination to his mind.

“The world of books is still the world,” wrote Mrs. Browning in “Aurora Leigh,” and this was the world of Robert Browning's early life. The genesis of many of his greatest poems can be traced directly to this atmosphere of books, and their constant use and reference in his childhood. Literature and life, are, indeed, so absolutely interpenetrated and so interdependent that they can almost invariably be contemplated as cause and effect, each reacting upon the other in determining sequences. By the magic of some spiritual alchemy, reading is transmuted into the qualities that build up character, and these qualities, in turn, determine the continued choice of books, so that selection and result perpetuate themselves, forming an unceasing contribution to the nature of life. If with these qualities is united the kindling imagination, the gift that makes its possessor the creative artist, the environment of books and perpetual reference to them act as a torch that ignites the divine fire. Browning's early stimulus owes much, not only to the book-loving father, but to his father's brother, his uncle Reuben Browning, who was a classical

scholar and who took great interest in the boy. Preserved to the end of the poet's life was a copy of the Odes of Horace, in translation, given to him as a lad of twelve, with his uncle's autograph inscription on the fly-leaf. This was the translation made by Christopher Smart, whose "Song of David" soon became one of the boy's favorites, and it is curious to trace how, more than sixty years later, Browning embodied Smart in his "Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day," as one with whom

"... truth found vent
In words for once with you...."

Browning, with the poet's instant insight, read the essential story of his boyhood into the lines:

"... Dreaming, blindfold led
By visionary hand, did soul's advance
Precede my body's, gain inheritance
Of fact by fancy...?"

No transcription of the poet's childhood could even suggest the fortunate influences surrounding him that did not emphasize the rare culture and original power of his father. The elder Browning was familiar with old French and with both Spanish and Italian literature. "His wonderful store of information might really be compared to an inexhaustible mine," said one who knew him well.

It is easy to see how out of such an atmosphere the future poet drew unconsciously the power to weave his "magic web" of such poems as the "Parleyings," "Abt Vogler," "Ferishtah's Fancies," and was lured on into that realm of marvelous creation out of which sprang his transcendent masterpiece, "The Ring and the Book."

The elder Browning's impassioned love of books was instanced by the curious fact that he could go in the dark to

his library, and out of many hundreds of volumes select some particular one to which conversational reference had incidentally been made regarding some point which he wished to verify. He haunted all the old book-stalls in London, and knew their contents better than did their owners.

Books are so intimately associated with the very springs of both character and achievement that no adequate idea of the formative influences of the life and poetry of Robert Browning could be gained without familiarity with this most determining and conspicuous influence of his boyhood. The book with which a man has lived becomes an essential factor in his growth. "None of us yet know," said Ruskin, "for none of us have yet been taught in early youth, what fairy palaces we may build of beautiful thought, proof against all adversity, bright fancies, satisfied memories, noble histories, faithful sayings, treasure-houses of precious and restful thoughts,... houses built without hands for our souls to live in." These houses for the soul, built in thought, will be transposed into outer form and semblance.

There is a nebulous but none the less pernicious tradition that great literature is formidable, and presents itself as a task rather than as a privilege to the reader. Devotion to the best books has been regarded as something of a test of mental endurance, for which the recompense, if not the antidote, must be sought in periods of indulgence in the frivolous and the sensational. Never was there a more fatal misconception. It is the inconsequential, the crude, the obtuse, that are dull in literature, as in life; and stupidity in various languages might well be entitled to rank among the Seven Deadly Sins of Dante. Even in the greatest literature there is much that the child may easily learn to appreciate and to love.

"Great the Master
And sweet the Magic"

that opens the golden door of literary stimulus. Books are to the mind as is food to the body. Emerson declares that the poet is the only teller of news, and Mrs. Browning pronounced poets as

“The only truth-tellers now left to God.”

Familiarity with noble thought and beautiful expression influences the subconscious nature to an incalculable degree, and leads “the spirit finely touched” on “to all fine issues.”

Browning lived in this stimulating atmosphere. He warmed his hands at the divine fire; and the fact that all this richness of resource stimulated rather than stifled him is greatly to the credit of his real power. Favorable surroundings and circumstances did not serve him as a cushion on which to go to sleep, but rather as the pedestal on which he might climb to loftier altitudes. It was no lotus-eating experience into which the lad was lulled, but the vital activity of the life of creative thought. The Heavenly Powers are not invariably, even if frequently, sought in sorrow only, and in the mournful midnight hours. There are natures that grow by affluence as well as by privation, and that develop their best powers in sunshine.

“Even in a palace life can be well lived,” said Marcus Aurelius. The spirit formed to dwell in the starry spaces is not allured to the mere enjoyment of the senses, even when material comfort and intellectual luxuries may abound. Not that the modest abundance of the elder Browning’s books and pictures could take rank as intellectual luxury. It was stimulus, not satiety, that these suggested.

Pictures and painters had their part, too, in the unconscious culture that surrounded the future poet. London in that day afforded little of what would be called art; the National Gallery was not opened until Browning was in his young manhood; the Tate and other modern galleries were

then undreamed of. But, to the appropriating temperament, one picture may do more than a city full of galleries might for another, and to the small collection of some three or four hundred paintings in the Dulwich Gallery, Browning was indebted for great enjoyment, and for the art that fostered his sympathetic appreciation. In after years he referred to his gratitude for being allowed its privileges when under the age (fourteen) at which these were supposed to be granted. Small as was the collection, it was representative of the Italian and Spanish, the French and the Dutch schools, as well as of the English, and the boy would fix on some one picture and sit before it for an hour, lost in its suggestion. It was the more imaginative art that enchained him. In later years, speaking of these experiences in a letter to Miss Barrett, he wrote of his ecstatic contemplation of “those two Guidos, the wonderful Rembrandt’s ‘Jacob’s Vision,’ such a Watteau....” An old engraving from Correggio, in his father’s home, was one of the sources of inspiration of Browning’s boyhood. The story fascinated him; he never tired of asking his father to repeat it, and something of its truth so penetrated into his consciousness that in later years he had the old print hung in his room that it might be before him as he wrote. It became to him, perhaps, one of

“the unshaped images that lie
Within my mind’s cave.”

The profound significance of the picture evidently haunted him, as is made evident by a passage in “Pauline” that opens:

“But I must never grieve whom wing can waft
Far from such thoughts—as now. Andromeda!
And she is with me; years roll, I shall change,
But change can touch her not—so beautiful
With her fixed eyes....”

Is there gained another glimpse of Browning's boyhood in those lines in "Pauline"?:

"I am made up of an intensest life,
Of a most clear idea of consciousness
Of self, distinct from all its qualities,
From all affections, passions, feelings, powers."

The various and complex impressions, influences, and shaping factors of destiny that any biographer discerns in the formative years of his subject are as indecipherable as a palimpsest, and as little to be classified as the contents of Pandora's box; nor is it on record that the man himself can look into his own history and rightly appraise the relative values of these. Nothing, certainly, could be more remote from the truth than the reading of autobiographic significance into any stray line a poet may write; for imagination is frequently more real than reality. Yet many of the creations of after life may trace their germination to some incident or impression. William Sharp offers a beautiful and interesting instance of one of these when he ascribes the entrancing fantasy of "The Flight of the Duchess" to a suggestion made on the poet's mind as a child on a Guy Fawkes day, when he followed across the fields a woman singing a strange song, whose refrain was: "Following the Queen of the Gypsies, O!" The haunting line took root in his memory and found its inflorescence in that memorable poem.

It was not conducive to poetic fancy when the lad was placed in the school of a Mr. Ready, at Peckham, where he solaced himself for the rules and regulations which he abhorred by writing little plays, and persuading his school-fellows to act in them with him.

Browning's first excursion into Shelley's poems, brought home to him one night as a gift from his mother, was in one of the enchanting evenings of May; where, at the open

window by which he sat, there floated in the melody of two nightingales, one in a laburnum, "heavy with its weight of gold," and the other in a copper-beech, at the opposite side of the garden. Such an hour mirrors itself unconsciously in a poet's memory, and affords, in future years, "such stuff as dreams are made of."

Byron, who, as Mazzini says, "led the genius of Britain on a pilgrimage throughout all Europe," stamped an impress upon the youthful Browning that may be traced throughout his entire life. There was something in the genius of Byron that acted as an enormous force on the nature in response to it, that transformed nebulous and floating ideals and imaginings into hope and resolution, that burned away barriers and revealed truth. By its very nature influence is determined as much by the receiver as by the inspirer, and if a light is applied to a torch, the torch, too, must be prepared to ignite, or there will be no blaze.

"A deft musician does the breeze become
Whenever an Æolian harp it finds;
Hornpipe and hurdygurdy both are dumb
Unto the most musicianly of winds."

The fire of Byron, the spirituality of Shelley, illuminated that world of drift and dream in which Robert Browning dwelt; and while Shelley, with his finer spirit, his glorious, impassioned imagination,

"A creature of impetuous breath,"

incited poetic ardors and unmeasured rapture of vision, Byron penetrated his soul with a certain effective energy that awakened in him creative power. The spell of Shelley's poetry acted upon Browning as a vision revealed of beauty and radiance. For Shelley himself, who, as Tennyson said,

“did yet give the world another heart and new pulses,” Browning’s feeling was even more intense.

In the analysis of Shelley’s poetic nature Browning offers the critical reader a key to his own. He asserts that it is the presence of the highest faculty, even though less developed, that gives rank to nature, rather than a lower faculty more developed. Although it was in later years that the impression Shelley made upon his boyhood found adequate expression in his noted essay, the spell reflected itself in “Pauline,” and is to be distinctly traced in many of his poems throughout his entire life. He was aware from the first of that peculiarly kindling quality in Shelley, the flash of life in his work:

“He spurreth men, he quickeneth
To splendid strife.”

Under the title of “Incondita” was collected a group of the juvenile verses of Robert Browning, whose special claim to interest is in the revelation of the impress made upon the youth by Byron and Shelley.

Among the early friends of the youthful poet were Alfred Domett (the “Waring” of his future poem), and Joseph Arnould, who became a celebrated judge in India.

With Browning there was never any question about his definite vocation as a poet. “Pauline” was published in 1833, before he had reached his twenty-first birthday. Rejected by publishers, it was brought out at the expense of his aunt, Mrs. Silverthorne; and his father paid for the publication of “Paracelsus,” “Sordello,” and for the first eight parts of “Bells and Pomegranates.” On the appearance of “Pauline,” it was reviewed by Rev. William Johnson Fox, as the “work of a poet and a genius.” Allan Cunningham and other reviewers gave encouraging expressions. The design of “Pauline” is that spiritual drama to which Browning was always temperamentally drawn. It is supposed to be the

confessions and reminiscences of a dying man, and while it is easy to discern its crudeness and inconsistencies, there are in it, too, many detached passages of absolute and permanent value. As this:

“Sun-treader, life and light be thine for ever!
Thou art gone from us; years go by and spring
Gladdens, and the young earth is beautiful,
Yet thy songs come not....”

Mr. Browning certainly gave hostages to poetic art when he produced “Pauline,” in which may be traced the same conceptions of life as those more fully and clearly presented in “Paracelsus” and “Sordello.” It embodies the conviction which is the very essence and vital center of all Browning’s work—that ultimate success is attained through partial failures. From first to last Browning regards life as an adventure of the soul, which sinks, falls, rises, recovers itself, relapses into faithlessness to its higher powers, yet sees the wrong and aims to retrieve it; gropes through darkness to light; and though “tried, troubled, tempted,” never yields to alien forces and ignominious failure. The soul, being divine, must achieve divinity at last. That is the crystallization of the message of Browning.

The poem “Pauline,” lightly as Mr. Browning himself seemed in after life to regard it, becomes of tremendous importance in the right approach to the comprehension of his future work. It reveals to us in what manner the youthful poet discerned “the Gleam.” Like Tennyson, he felt “the magic of Merlin,”—of that spirit of the poetic ideal that bade him follow.

“The Master whisper’d
‘Follow The Gleam.’”

And what unguessed sweetness and beauty of life and love awaited the poet in the unfolding years!