

**ROBERT BROWNING AS A
RELIGIOUS
TEACHER, BEING THE
BURNEY ESSAY FOR 1900**

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Robert Browning as a religious teacher, being the Burney essay for 1900 by Arthur Cecil Pigou

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AS A

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BURNEY ESSAY

FOR 1900,

BY

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LONDON:

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1901

TO MY MOTHER.

PREFACE.

THE following Essay secured the Burney Prize for the year 1900 at Cambridge University and is now published in compliance with the conditions of the Prize. While preparing it for the Press, I have introduced a number of changes in language and arrangement, especially in the discussion of Browning's theory of knowledge; have increased the length of the last two chapters by the addition of some new matter; and have been led, by the criticisms of friends and by further reflection, to modify my view of the poet's attitude towards Christianity and to rewrite the chapter dealing with that subject.

I have made no attempt to distinguish Browning's religion from his philosophy, but have interpreted the phrase 'religious teacher' in the widest possible sense. The main purpose of the Essay is to expound the views which he seems to have held upon various philosophical and theological problems in such a way

as to bring out the relations between them, and to unite them into some kind of a system. A complete discussion of the subject would, of course, also include an estimate of the importance and validity of his thought. But such an estimate could only be arrived at by the employment of one of two methods, neither of which was open to me. The one consists in the composition of a treatise upon ethical and metaphysical philosophy, interwoven with a discussion of the poet's various beliefs; the other in a comparison of these beliefs with some theory of the Universe, the truth of which could be taken for granted. While the first of these methods is clearly impracticable, the second has been pursued with considerable success by Professor Jones in his work on *Robert Browning as a religious and philosophical teacher*, where he has expounded the poet's philosophy alongside of his own, and praised or condemned its different elements according to the extent of their correspondence with the Hegelian position which he himself adopts. It was impossible, however, for me to claim the right either to propound or to postulate any theory of the Universe, and I was therefore debarred from estimating the value of Browning's thought by the method of comparison. Consequently, the only criticism upon which I could venture had to come, as it were, from inside his system, and to be directed towards ascertaining, not whether his

beliefs are absolutely valid, but how far they are consistent with one another. It must, however, be remembered that criticism of this kind presupposes the existence of a definite system of thought underlying the whole of his poetry, and that it is only upon this assumption that charges of inconsistency can fairly be urged against him. A growing conviction that his moods varied greatly at different times, not merely oscillating about a fixed and constant body of thought, but transforming the whole character of his outlook upon the world and making an unified philosophy impossible for him, has led me more and more to look upon my work as something of a *tour de force*; so that, were it not for the obligation imposed upon the successful candidate for the Burney Prize, I should hesitate long before undertaking to publish it.

The principal sources to which I have gone for information have, of course, been Browning's poems and his *Essay on Shelley*. I have received some guidance as to reading from Mrs Orr's *Handbook*, from the summary of the poems referred to, at the end of Professor Jones' work, and from Mr R. Somerville of Harrow School. Mr Nettleship's Collection of Essays, and Professor Dowden's article on *Tennyson and Browning*, though both admirable in their way, have not been of much assistance, but Mrs Orr's *Life of Browning* has occasionally thrown light upon