

BROWNING FOR BEGINNERS

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Browning for beginners by Thomas Rain

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THOMAS RAIN

**BROWNING
FOR BEGINNERS**

BROWNING FOR BEGINNERS

BY
REV. THOMAS RAIN, M.A.



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PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1904

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TO MY WIFE

1959 50

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Browning for Beginners.

I. PROEM.

WHEN some years ago I began to read Browning I took pencil notes of certain things as I went along. The habit then formed has been continued, and it is from notes thus accumulated that this small volume has been formed. My great object in reading was to arrive at the meaning, the thought, which always is and must be the chief thing in literature. The style is not unimportant, but it is secondary to the thought, and in fact grows out of it, is determined by it. Thought and the expression of it are psychologically, organically related; as even our bodies are the expression of our souls.

I have not attempted literary criticism in the ordinary way of that art, for which I possess no qualifications. My object has been to get face to

face with a mind, the mind of Browning, to make its acquaintance, to discover its ideas, and to judge for myself whether, and how far these were true—or shadowed truth. It was to help me in the ordering of my life that I read in the first place, not that I might produce a book; my purpose was not literary but practical. Browning has been already treated by several literary persons, and perhaps little new from the literary standpoint can be said about him. It is not a standpoint from which we can get a profound, a satisfying view. The following pages tell how he affected a reader of average intelligence, who studied him leisurely, amid other avocations, and as opportunity allowed. That is all they profess to do, or attempt. I have aimed to be general in my statements—to present both the man and his work in broad outline; feeling that they who become interested can fill in the picture for themselves. What sort of people did Browning spring from? how was he brought up? where did he live? what type of mind had he? what class of subjects interested him? what was his final attitude towards life? how did he feel about religion—the eternal problem with the eternal fascination? and, as naturally following, was he optimistically or pessimistically inclined?—upon such general questions I have tried to throw light.

I was prepared for a good deal of obscurity, but not so much as at first I appeared to encounter. I got on no quicker with "Sordello" than I had got on with Aschylus in my second winter at the university;

yet "Sordello" was its author's favourite literary child. Something in him possibly told him that this bantling needed friends; as John Bunyan was moved towards his blind child above all his others:

"Especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides. Poor child, thought I, what sorrow art thou like to have for thy portion in this world! Thou must be beaten, suffer hunger cold, nakedness, and a thousand calamities, though I cannot now endure the wind should blow on thee."

This is the human heart. How often has it been so! How very often has the black sheep of the flock been the mother's pet lamb! But the world in its preferences does not often follow the lead of the fond parent. Accordingly "Sordello" has been neglected by the world; worse, has been vilified, condemned, "cast into the limbo of abortive creations," to use a phrase of Mr. Gladstone's. Deservedly, I do think, upon the whole. Determined to do it well, as nobody had ever done it before, Browning has overdone it, and done it to death; has so condensed himself that he has choked himself,—and his readers too for that matter. Let no one begin his Browning studies with "Sordello." He who does so is like the general who attacks the citadel before he has stormed the out-works.

When we approach this writer for the first time we must go cautiously, feeling our way, as we go down a shelving beach into the sea. Browning has a few short poems that are, by comparison with his others,