

# Religious Elements in the Poetry of Robert Browning

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**Abstract**—No doubt, philosophy is not the forte of Browning in spite of his beliefs. It is a curious product from the heated Cauldron of his brain into which had been thrown shreds and patches from Victorian Sentimentalism. Actually poetry of Browning lives and would live “if precious be the soul of man to man.” Like true character of Browning, he conceives of life in transcendental terms. The few years of life were only a preparatory period for the greater life to come. And it is the test of this life that will decide prospects for the next. The saint and the martyr of scholarship denote himself to an endless pursuit of points of grammar. So what if his aims have not been attained in a complete manner. But it matters little. In fact high aims, though unattained, are of far greater worth than lower ones achieved within the span of earthly life. Browning always sucks some glory out of failure. There is a contrast between idealism and worldly glory and glitter. It is aspiration not achievement that matter most

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## Introduction

‘A Grammarian Funeral’ perhaps represents the philosophy of Browning in a more comprehensive way even than ‘The Last Ride Together’. The hero of this poem, a grammarian, supposed to have lived shortly after the Revival of Learning in Europe, is a character illustrative of Browning’s idealism. This lover of learning is as significant in poetic world of Browning as is the lover in ‘The Last Ride Together’. He has not sought any earthly joys, even that of love. He has lived a rare life committed every inch to the pursuit of learning. His destination has nothing humanly attractive about it. It might be considered ridiculous by the worldly and pedestrian.

This poem describes the philosophy of the imperfect- so dear to Browning. It celebrates success in the middle of failure. The pupils of grammarian are bringing his coffin. Their desire is to bury him on some high mountain. During this process, one of his pupil sketches the lofty ideas and heroic dedication of their master. How he dedicated his whole of to the noble pursuit of learning. He had a lust for knowledge and it was this thirst which he kept on quenching throughout his life. His nears and dears advised him not to waste his youth and health for this. But all these worldly things could not distract him from his

slow and steady journey towards his destination. He would only say:

“Leave now for dogs and apes  
Man hath forever.”

The narrator is all admiration and celebration of his passion for learning. Some critics call it a quest poem. The march of the funeral procession through the rugged and hilly path symbolizes the difficulties and pitfalls on such ways. The lofty and peak mountain to which the procession moves symbolizes the rare and lofty idealism.

There are some critics who consider this poem an implied satire on certain type of scholars how they waste their life in empty pursuits. By doing so they become dead to any other beauty or poetry of life. There is a clear cut contrast between the knowing of life and that of living. Those who claim to know the book of learning miss to know the book of life because knowledge is never much for them. It is a bloodless substitute for actual life.

But as Chesterton also holds, this type of analysis of the poem much water. It is reading it either above or below the lines whereas a poem should be read between the lines. Moreover satire has never been a forte of Browning. His monologues are seldom satirical.

To much extent, dead Grammarian seems to be the alter ego of the poet himself. He represents most of the values which the poet propounds as well as celebrates in his poems. For example, he champions unshaken faith in God and the idea of life after death. Thus there is an affinity between the creator and created.

A lyrical enthusiasm is here amply punctuated with prosy sides in typical manner of Browning. Like Wordsworth’s ‘Skylark’, Browning has his heart and eye upon the earth where coarse realities abound. He drops at will into common place and grab facts of life. Unfortunately these jumps are not always artistically effective.

'Rabbi Ben Ezra' is a tribute paid by Browning to a Jewish poet of the same name. The poem finds some affinity between Rabbi and himself. By doing so, he has propounded his own philosophy also. This poem has some metaphysical touch about it. The platonic philosophy of Rabbi has closeness to Browning's concept of life. For example both believe in the imperishable nature of human soul. And both have firm and unshaken faith and trust in God's merciful nature. Both take life in totality.

'Rabbi Ben Ezra' holds that childhood prepares man for youth and youth for old age. In other words, all these stages of life have their own calls and claims about them. It is negative to discard old age as a useless state in human development. On the contrary, the poet opens his poem saluting to old age:

"Grow old along with me  
The best is yet to be "

There is an overt use of Biblical imagery in the poem. It shows the deep religious faith of Browning in the ultimate good of life. Accused to live in the age torn with endless disputes and doubts, the poet champions the all-powerful nature of God. He holds that human soul is immortal.

The poet is all praise and admiration for the Christian Gospel. He disdains those who try to talk about religion in a critical manner. In other words, religion is something to be followed not to be criticized. The poet champions complete harmony between the pleasures of body and claims of spirit. It reminds us of the following lines by Whitman, a great American poet:

"I am the poet of the body  
And I am the poet of the soul. "

'Rabbi Ben Ezra' can be considered the mouthpiece of the poet. It is through him that he has propounded his philosophy. There are two schools of philosophical thoughts. The first school is for self-mortification. The second believes in the philosophy of 'Eat, drink and be Merry'. But Browning preaches and advocates the middle path. In fact, both the body

and the soul are interdependent. Therefore it is absurd to study them in isolation.

The philosophy of Browning is a complete foil to the hedonistic philosophy as celebrated by Omar Khayyam in his poetry (Rubiyat). By using the same symbols, Browning has recited hedonism in a logical manner. He takes up the symbols of potter, the wheel and clay. In the poetry of Omar Khayyam, the potter is the blind destiny. But in Browning, it is metaphor of God and the clay is man. It is God who shapes us on the wheel accordingly. This poem, like almost all great poems of Browning, is also drenched in robust and unshaken optimism. 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' too holds that "All is well with the world and God is in the heaven. The whole poem is composed in a reflective mood. It is the mood of calm, contemplation and spiritual poise. The speaker puts his full faith in the value and significance of human life. Perhaps by doing so, Browning might be balm his painful state which he has been passing through at that time. It was caused by the death of his beloved wife. But it could not shake his faith in the ways of god. He is very much aware of the sufferings and sorrows which make an integral part of human life. But it does not mean that man should crumble under these passing and temporary pains. In fact these trials and tests are there to bring man into his real elements. Moreover it is by aspiration not by achievement that a man should be judged. Passive acceptance was considered a great sin by Browning.

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