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**"FATE, WILL AND THE BALANCE OF
FORCES:
A THEOLOGICAL READING OF
ROBERT BROWNING'S POEM
'LIFE IN A LOVE'"**

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"Fate, Will and the Balance of Forces:
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Although challenging on more than one point as well as important and illuminating in more than one respect, Browning's poem "Life in a Love" has often been neglected in critical assessments of his works. For Example, Judith Weissman's feminist reading of Browning's love poems, both lyrical and dramatic, draws heavily on the poet's collection of Men and Women yet ignores this piece. E. LeRoy Lawson's thorough investigation of Browning's religious attitude, for another example, also overlooks it. Rachel Trickett's celebration of Browning's innovative lyrical powers, for a third example, dismisses the "unresolved suspense" of a companion poem to this piece namely, "Love in a Life" as a "familiar Lyric conclusion" in Browning but makes no commentary on the enigmatically elliptical ending of "Life in a Love" (75). And the list may extend endlessly and uselessly. The sole critical reference available on the poem treats it, as a love poem and shows no awareness of its theological implications. In this secular reading, Eleanor Cook merely concentrates on the image of endless pursuit in the poem and attributes the ensuing lack of fulfillment to the speaker's fear of intimacy with the lady. Cook, however, fails to remain consistent in her argument, for she moves on to assert that "the pursuit is good, it is true, but some end to it is ardently desired" because long pursuits in Browning usually generate "fear of perpetuity" (146). This inconsistency creates confusion over the

ending of the poem. It leaves the reader at a loss whether to interpret the enigmatic "Ever / Removed" as a reference to the object of endless pursuit, the lady in this particular case, or to repeal this interpretation in the light of Cook's claim that some end to the endless pursuit is necessary.

The phenomenological reverberation of the poetic image of pursuit in the poem makes it impossible for the lady to become an "Ever / Removed" object of the speaker's quest.¹ The pattern of the relationship that the image suggests is linear in form. It places the speaker and the woman on one line of an endless pursuit with an insurmountable and unchanging distance between the two of them. The speaker reveals the insurmountable distance between himself and his beloved when he asserts:

Escape me?
Never
Beloved
While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue.

Each is moving yet within fixed and unchanging limits. The distance between the two of them will not decrease but, more significantly, it will not increase. She refuses to yield but, most importantly, he has no intention of relinquishing her. Despite her illusiveness and resistance, he has no intention of allowing her to fall off the linear pattern of the relationship nor to transcend

toward a state of eternal removal from his eternal pursuit. Though unattainable, she will not become an "Ever / Removed" object of his quest. The speaker must have had something else in mind, apart from the lady, when he elliptically ends his monologue. In discovering this alternate intention a theological reading of the poem resides. Such reading, in turn, yields valuable revelations about Browning's religious attitude.

Cook's inability to discern the theological aspects of the poem is a mistake not uncommon in readings of Browning's poetry. For there are some critics who do believe that Browning "separates love from the other subjects in his poems instead of connecting it with some larger entity" (Weissman 209). My reading of "Life in a Love," however, depends on discovering the theological implications of a professed love theme. For in this poem the religious and the secular are not only closely intertwined, but the latter becomes a plea for a demonstration of a theological stance.

Although it opens the poem, the love motif soon loses its first position to the religious motif. The speaker chooses to call the previous pattern of endless pursuit and evasion "fate" not love. Fate, not the woman, soon becomes the center of his universe and the core of his argument. For instead of blaming the woman for her reluctance and evasion, he blames fate: "My life is a fault at last, I fear: / It seems too much like a fate, indeed". This transfer of the speaker's interest from the woman to fate, dominates the rest of the poem. Instead of waging war against her rejection, he

accepts the challenge of fate to his will. And rather than yearning for fulfillment, he becomes keen on defining the meaning of fate and discovering his own position in relationship to it.

The meaning of fate that the speaker discovers and discloses is that of fate as a superior and transcendental power over which he has no control. Fate as such has predetermined the couple's personal attributes (While I am I, and you are you) and their physical entrapment in one location (So long as the world contains us both) so that he cannot choose but to love and pursue and she can only respond in reluctance and evasion (Me the loving and you the loth). In other words, fate has predetermined the components of the faulty pattern of pursuit and evasion in which the speaker finds himself trapped (While the one eludes, must the other pursue). This entrapment in the design weaved by fate occurs despite the speaker's full knowledge of the inevitability of failure in his case: "Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed." Such knowledge complicates the speaker's conception of fate. Fate is not only a determinant of his action, but it is also a blind and arbitrary force that contradicts man's best efforts by constantly and hopelessly failing him.

The speaker's relationship with fate in which he recognizes it as a determining power and a blind force, receives a sudden shift that surfaces, a few lines down, in his assertion: "I shape me." Such assertion of his own power in shaping his own character, and probably his own life, seems inconsistent with his earlier claim that fate has predetermined their psychological attributes and

physical entrapment in one location. The speaker's initial response of helpless entrapment in, and passive acceptance of, the manipulative influence of fate changes into an active assertion of his own power. The religious acquiescence to the workings of the superior power that he calls fate changes into an existential assertion of human will and power.

In their response to this theological issue in Browning, critics are divided into two groups. One group fails to see the tension altogether, while the other discerns it but disagrees over the possibility of its resolution.

The critics' disregard of this theological tension in Browning is a result of their attending to other more importunate theological concerns in his poetry. Among these concerns comes the classification of Browning as a Christian believer or a dissenter from the Church. For example, between Glen Omans's philosophical assignment of Browning to the Kantian tradition, on the one hand, and Daniel Schwarz, Mary Mishler and Samuel Chell's traditional reading of Browning's faith within the Christian framework, on the other hand, Browning's poetry is caught. To Glen Omans "Browning has expressed the transcendentalist epistemology in terms of the Christian metaphor" in his poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" (134). Daniel Schwarz's traditional reading of Browning's religious position, however, emphasizes the poet's belief that "man's potential for antisocial behavior and atavistic energy could be controlled only by Christian faith" (401). This traditional assignment of Browning to the Christian credal line

also runs through Mary Mishler's analysis of "Karshish." She points out how the Egyptian physician's non-Christian faith has been enriched through his Christian contacts. Thus, his initial concept of God as transcendent and "All-Great" improves through his Christian insights into knowledge of God as descendent and "All-Loving" (137). To this traditional reading Samuel Chell also belongs. According to his analysis of Browning's religious views the "entire universe is the incarnation of a God who is not pure spirit, merely but a vital dynamic force" (52). The interpretation of the meaning of the incarnation in Browning's poetry is another theological concern that diverts critics' attention from a consideration of the polar tension, in his poetry, between submission to the determining influence of fate and the human assertion of will and power.

The very few critics who have observed the tension and chosen to discuss it disagree over the potential for resolution. In his existential reading of Browning's poetry, E. LeRoy Lawson denies such potential: "Browning's casual employment of the term God as controller of his actions . . . seems inconsistent with his usual emphasis upon individual freedom" (131). And to the evinced possibility of balance and reconciliation, Lawson responds: "If everything 'lies on the knees of the Gods,' then men are free only insofar as the gods allow, which is not real freedom at all" (131). And he concludes: "This inconsistency in Browning's thinking was never resolved" (131).

In contrast with this denial, Herbert Tucker's Marxist reading of Browning senses both tension and its resolution in the poet's religious outlook. He claims that "the Victorian ultimates of will and circumstances--variants of Browning's polar terms 'soul' and 'God'- converge" in his poem "Abt Vogler" "in personally realized meaning" (211). Towards this latter opinion of possible balance between seemingly opposing values, I am more inclined in my reading of Browning's poem "Life in a Love."

Lawson's skeptical denial of real human freedom in religious matters and his rejection of the possibility of resolution of tension in Browning's poetry, do not hold true for "Life in a Love." Browning's speaker in this particular poem is capable of asserting real freedom of will and of striking a fine balance between the opposition of fate and will. Without denying human freedom, he submits himself to the power of fate. And without eliminating the influence of fate, he powerfully asserts his own will.

Browning's speaker achieves this paradoxical state of being when he experiences half-way through the realization that the faulty pattern of pursuit and evasion in which he is trapped is actually wronging his life: "My life is a fault at last, I fear." The speaker thus juxtaposes his initial state of submission to the power of fate (as evinced in his recognition and acceptance of the sense of the inevitability of psychological structure and physical entrapment) against the awareness that the design of fate is a faulty one and makes a choice. Significantly, he chooses not to terminate

the quest but to persist. This latter persistence, operating under the influence of his new awareness, is different from the early passive and inevitable one. Just as he has chosen to persist, the speaker, now, could have chosen not to, for fate has predetermined failure as well and the speaker knowing its injurious effect, willed persistence. The second persistence thus becomes one of active choice, not passive assent. The speaker hence subjugates the initial state of acquiescence to the dictates of fate to another state of will power and control. The absolute power of fate undergoes marked reduction and modification.

The reductive treatment that fate receives at the hands of human will becomes more evident in the change of the speaker's psychological state. He shifts in his mood from despair to hope and from defeat to triumph. Following the realization that the faulty pattern of fate is wronging his life, the speaker asserts that the new choice is psychologically rewarding. Questioning his own failure, the speaker asks: "But what if I fail of my purpose here?" And the answer shows that persistence is psychologically constructive:

It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And baffled, get up and begin again,-
So the chase takes up one's life, that's all.

Alertness of senses, renewal of the wish to live, strengthening of inner power of resistance and generating a sense of life's perpetuity all become the speaker's reward for choosing to persist.

Persistence gives a sense of purpose to his life and enriches it with new meanings. The compromising tone of the last line, however, is very much in keeping with his own conviction that fate has predetermined the unattainability of his suit. Nevertheless, the psychological enforcement resulting from personal choice and freedom of will grows into hope:

While, look but once from your farthest bound
At me so deep in dust and dark,
No sooner the old hope goes to ground
Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark,

goes. Despite frequent falls and repeated shocks, the speaker renews his quest because he finds it psychologically nourishing. Falling into the pit of dust and darkness does not defeat his spirits nor disperse his hopeful sense of renewal.

The speaker's reductive treatment of fate is no indication that he denies its presence and influence. Rather, it works to change the image of fate in the poem. Instead of its early image as a determining power and a blind and arbitrary force, fate becomes a sort of a positive stimulus that challenges the speaker's will into positive reaction. Without its repeated blows there would be no renewal of quest. And the renewal is psychologically rewarding. Had he given up hope and allowed fate to drag him into irrevocable disappointment, the speaker would have kept its initial image as a blind force fully alive. Yet because he makes a choice that turns out to be psychologically fulfilling, the speaker thus

succeeds in eliminating the destructive side of this power and manages, subsequently, to coexist with its positive aspect.

The speaker's ability to eliminate the negative side of fate and to retain its psychologically constructive aspect, explains the poem's elliptical ending: "Ever / Removed!". Following the active assertion of human will and personal power in "I shape me," the ellipsis becomes a reference to the destructive aspect of fate that the speaker has managed to remove altogether. It cannot be a reference to fate as a transcendent presence because it actually descends and stimulates. Indeed, the phenomenological presence of the poetic image of defeat and persistence supports this interpretation of the poem's ending.² The image reveals the speaker's relationship with fate as one of circular movement around fate as a core of power and a center of his universe. Defeat pulls the subject to the center while persistence pushes him back to the circumference. This pattern continues even when the speaker discards the negative influence of fate out of the gravitational context of his relationship with it. The only difference is that without the removal of the disagreeable aspect of fate the falls into the center would be terminal. There would be no healthy return to the circumference. The absorption into fate would be irrevocable. Human will would be destroyed. The removal of the negative influence of fate thus maintains the healthy balance between human will and fate. Hence, the poem's ending can only be a reference to the destructive side of fate that the speaker has managed to expel before he could co-exist with this power in a constructive and psychologically supportive kind of relationship.

The juxtaposition of the speaker's submission to fate in the poem against his assertion of will and power then is not an irresolvable opposition of forces, nor an irreconcilable conflict in a religious context. The speaker's ability to coexist in both states without annihilating either is actually a resolution of tension, and a fine balance of forces akin to that which Tucker has divulged and Lawson has failed to sense. And it is only fit in conclusion to point out that critics' inability to discern the polar tension and its resolution in Browning is no indication that they are totally unaware of either. Indeed, critics tend to look at the two sides of the argument in terms of either or. Omans's stress on Browning's "transcendental epistemology" and Mishler's underscoring of God in "Karshish" as "All-Great" and "All-Loving" are signs of critics' attention to the objective and transcendental nature of Browning's faith.³ However, the emphasis on the subjective character of the poet's faith is more common in readings of his poetry. John L. Lammers claims that "Browning believes that a factual or historical revelation is superfluous to real faith and that man is intuitively drawn to verify the truth of the basic ideas of Christianity" (4210-A). Such stress on the human contribution to faith also appears in Philip Drew's commentary on Browning. According to Drew, the emphasis on "human choice which Browning formed in his Christian years, remained with him even when he no longer retained an active Christian faith" (107). Such polarization of the subjective and the objective sides of Browning's faith among critics, despite a lack of synthesis, remains helpful in an important respect. It proves, at least, that the

poet's faith has a subjective as well as an objective side to it, regardless of critics' ability to discern both or not.

Notes

1. The concept of the phenomenological reverberation of the poetic image occurs in Bachelard's introduction to his book The Poetics of Space. This paper employs Bachelard's principle twice. It is also phenomenological in the sense that it strives to avoid interpretation and records its views as a result of a process of coexistence with the text.
2. This is the second instance where I employ Bachelard's principle of the phenomenological reverberation of the poetic image.
3. This is my classification of these critics' Interpretation of Browning's religious stand. Indeed, Mishler's reading of "Karshish" claims a recognition of a subjective as well as an objective character of God, though by subjective she means a God that descends and loves which is different from my association of the subjective with human action and choice.

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