THE BROWNING-BARRETT LOVE-LETTERS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LOVE.

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THE greatest boon in the way of biographical record which has been vouchsafed to us in recent years is the love-letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett.[1] To the literary artist they are full of subtle and deep suggestion; to the lover they will be an ever dear delight; and to the psychologist they are human documents of the highest worth because the directest expression of the deepest experience of two of the deepest souls this earth has known. From psychologists in general the phenomenon of love has received little attention, even Professor James's large work dismissing the subject in two or three pages. Schopenhauer and Von Hartmann have endeavored to connect the theory of love with their philosophical systems; but with neither psychologists nor philosophers do I know of an analysis of a single case. But these incomparable letters furnish, however, a document, upon which at present I wish merely to make a few salient notes, and thus perhaps supply in some measure the correctly criticised incompleteness of my *Evolutionary Psychology of Feeling* on this point.

From these letters we discern that the first and main factor in their love—as perhaps in all romantic love—is mutual spiritual mastery. Before they ever met, Elizabeth Barrett felt Browning's mastery through his works and correspondence, a mastery of intellectual breadth and depth, of masculine force and various dramatic powers, and of a generous noble character. In a letter to a friend Miss Barrett refers proudly to her correspondence with the author of "Paracelsus" and the "King of the Mystics" and at the time of her marriage she wished the notice in the newspapers to men-

[1] *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, 1845–1846. Harpers, New York, 1899.

tion Browning as the "author of Paracelsus." At the first meeting she at once feels his mastery, and yields with downcast eyes as to a supernal force. And long after she does not raise her eyes, so that we have complaint from him and rejoinder from her that make delightful reading—infinitely delightful and delicious. "Shall I dare write down a grievance of my heart, and not offend you? Yes, trusting in the right of my love—you tell me, sweet, here in the letter, 'I do not look so well'—and sometimes, 'I look better' . . . *how do you know?* When I first saw you—*I saw your eyes*—since then, *you*, it should appear, see mine—but I only *know* yours are there, and have to use that memory as if one carried dried flowers about when fairly inside the garden-enclosure. And while I resolve, and hesitate, and resolve again to complain of this—(kissing your foot . . . not boldly complaining, nor rudely)—while I have this on my mind, on my heart, ever since that May morning . . . can it be?" To which she answers "Now *is* it just of you? isn't it hard upon me? And if the charge is true, whose fault is it, pray? I have been ashamed and vexed with myself fifty times for being so like a little girl, . . . for seeming to have 'affectations'; and all in vain: 'it was stronger than I,' as the French say. And for *you* to complain! As if Haroun Alrashid after cutting off a head, should complain of the want of an obeisance!—Well!—I smile notwithstanding. Nobody can help smiling—both for my foolishness which is great, I confess, though somewhat exaggerated in your statement—(because if it was quite as bad as you say, you know, I never should have *seen you* . . . and I *have!*) and also for yours . . . because you take such a very preposterously wrong way for overcoming anybody's shyness. Do you know, I have laughed . . . really laughed at your letter. No—it has not been so bad. I have seen you at every visit, as well as I could with both eyes open—only that by a supernatural influence they won't stay open with *you* as they are used to do with other people . . . so now I tell you. And for the rest I promise nothing at all—as how can I, when it is quite beyond my control—and you have not improved my capabilities . . . do you think you have?"

To love, at least deeply, Elizabeth Barrett must happen upon a greater genius than her own; for certainly in general the woman cannot love the man of inferior intellect, and a woman of highest mind, like Miss Barrett, has slight chance of meeting a superior. Schopenhauer, indeed, makes the remark that "want of understanding does a man no harm with women; indeed extraordinary mental endowment, or even genius, might sooner influence them unfavorably as

an abnormity." But it is obvious to all observers and readers that genius reputed or real is the most powerful attraction to women. Elizabeth Barrett whose greatest capacity, as she says, was that of loving, and who for long weary years of suffering had been "eating her own heart" with her "face so close against the tombstones that there seemed no room even for the tears," yielding to the mastery of love, was overwhelmed by a flood of joy which fairly dazed her; and in all love literature there is no more powerful description of the joy of new-found love. She had hoped only for friendship and sympathy at the best from him she reverenced as past master of the divine art of poetry, as wise, noble, great; but that he should love her was more than any dream,—it was a miracle.

But the mastery was by no means one-sided; if Elizabeth Barrett feels at once that Robert Browning in her master, he equally feels that she is his "mistress." He sees at once in her a superior nobility, gentleness, and unselfishness which enthral him. And this paradox of a mutual mastery leads to the prettiest of lovers' quarrels, the constant protestation of each side against being looked up to by the other. Love seeks ever to adore and serve, and not to be served and adored; and so each lover spends a vast deal of time and energy in trying to get down from the pedestal erected by the other.

If the first and most notable element in this love is mutual mastery, which unconsciously disguises itself in mutual service, another element quite as paradoxical is the absolute frankness and simplicity and truthfulness which underlies all this romance. In their absolute trust and belief there is plain and direct speaking, complete utterance which does not fashion its phrases. Both Browning and Miss Barrett are frank by nature, and give fullest expression in all the love passages. But Elizabeth Barrett is peculiar above all women in being entirely open from the first concerning her age—being seven years his senior—her illness, and other disabilities which she knew ought to dissuade Robert Browning from wooing her, though she might reasonably hope for friendship. This absolute lack of artifice and coquetry, and this deep sense of unworthiness which she proclaims from the first, makes Elizabeth Barrett a highly exceptional woman; yet this trait became her chief attraction to Robert Browning after his long experience with the frivolities of society. Schopenhauer mentions as the essential prerequisites of love: health, strength, beauty, and youth; but in all these Elizabeth Barrett felt she was totally lacking, yet she attempted no gloss. Hence his trust in her was perfect from the be-

ginning as an absolutely true woman. And so also was hers in him as an absolutely true man; but she only slowly allowed herself to believe that his love could be more than passing infatuation, because she seemed to herself so unlovely. The "I trust you" and "I believe in you" is a constant refrain in these letters.

These lovers debate the reason of love, and of course with lover-like unreason find that they love for no reason at all. Thus Robert Browning declares, "I love you because I *love* you; I see you once a week because I cannot see you all day long, because I most certainly could not think of you once an hour less, if I tried, or went to Pisa, or abroad (in every sense) in order to be happy." To which she answers "Shall I tell you besides?—the first moment in which I seemed to admit to myself in a flash of lightning the *possibility* of your affection for me being more than dream work . . . the first moment was *that* when you intimated (as you have done since repeatedly) that you cared for me not for a reason, but because you cared for me. Now such a *parce que* which reasonable people would take to be irrational, was just the only one fitted to the uses of my understanding on the particular question we were upon . . . just the 'woman's reason' suitable to the woman." To all which we must say that love while in itself rational is of necessity always reluctant to analyse, or at least is dissatisfied with its own analysis—though it returns ever to this as we see in these letters. And it is but natural for love to take this stand, for love is intensely toward the person *per se*, and so it dislikes any abstraction of any quality; and further it is false to the nature of love to merely know its object, for knowledge is external to the object, but love seeks identification. In the most sacred love also there is to itself a measure of impiety in mere explication. But to the psychologist, of course, love has both its elements and its reasons, for whatever lovers may think, love cannot be accounted a supernatural phenomenon. But we cannot agree with Herbert Spencer that love is a mere complex of physical feeling, of feeling for personal beauty, of reverence, love of approbation, of self-esteem, of property, love of freedom and sympathy. But love is not a mere complex, nor does it find its power therein. This formula does not give the full real quality. Love in its highest types, at least in this case of Elizabeth Barrett, is a fire of absolute devotion which sets ablaze all its material. Again in her, "self-esteem," as in highest love generally, is drowned in the object. She even fears the refined selfishness that she may love his love rather than him, as we see from this exquisite love passage. "I

love your love too much. And *that* is the worst fault, my beloved, I ever can find in my love of *you*."

Further Spencer's category neglects *trust* which Elizabeth Barrett rightly regards as elementary, as when she says in one of her attempts at analysis: "The elements of love. . . (I say 'the love' *mine*, because I *will* not know, nor hear, nor be taught anything by any one else about 'love,' the one love everybody knows, it seems, and lives and dies by)—my love's elements are so many that the attempt to describe them is to bring about this failure. . . the first that comes is taken up and treated of at length . . . as that element of '*trust*' just now . . . and then in the feeling of incompetence which makes the pen sink away and turns the mind off, the others are let pass by unnamed, much less described, or at least acknowledged for the undeniable elements they are. What were all the *trust* without—and thus I could begin again!" And Elizabeth Barrett is undoubtedly right that mere enumeration of elements does not fully define love nor reach its essence, for love is a new psychosis which, given its bases few or many, rises as a simple, fervid, joyful emotion, leading toward union and absorption with the object. Romantic love then constitutes a new chapter in the evolution of life, as does the wing of a bird; and as a method of adaptation in evolution it signifies the complete co ordination of two psychisms in perfecting monogamy.

We have touched on the spiritual side of love as exemplified in these letters, and we have now to notice the sensuous side which, as might be expected, is chiefly revealed in the letters of Robert Browning. References to lips, hair, eyes, hands, kisses, are very frequent in his letters but there is scarcely a mention in her letters to these matters, save as he directly suggests and asks. Robert Browning draws out the contrast of spiritual and sensuous love in one of his letters in which he makes a supposed third person remark to him "'you can't kiss Mind! Mere intellectual endowments —though incontestably of the loftiest character—mere Mind, though that Mind be Miss B's—cannot be *kissed*.' So judges the third person! and if, to help him, we let him into your room at Wimpole Street, suffered him to see with Flush's eyes, he would say with just as wise an air, True, mere personal affections may be warm enough, but does it augur well for the durability of an attachment that it should be *wholly*, *exclusively* based on such perishable attractions as the sweetness of a mouth, the beauty of an eye? I could wish, rather, to know that there was something of less transitory nature co-existent with this—some congeniality of mental pursuit."

This is a very delicate and playful way of putting his sensuous regard to which she very properly replies, "nonsense." The sensuousness of love, though largely only latent, is yet basal even in this most exalted type of love, though we need not affirm with Schopenhauer that love is sublimated lust. Elizabeth Barrett's shyness and modesty—which is truly girlish—recoils from masculine impetuousness; but her expression of the sensuous side is most vivid in her "Sonnets from the Portuguese."

As contrasting with and hindering the sensuous caress Prof. William James in his *Psychology* remarks on what he terms "instinct of personal isolation," the repugnance to personal contact which with some people goes so far as to make shaking hands disagreeable. But it is greatly to be doubted both whether personal delicacy is instinct and whether it acts as repressive to sensuous love. Certain it is to any one who observes ordinary humanity in street cars that mere personal delicacy—apart from sexual—is practically non-existent, and further with very young children it is rarely in evidence. Thus, if instinct at all, it is deferred instinct, appearing often rather late, and very apt to increase with age. But the shunning of bodily contacts with strangers, not through fear or sex motives, but as mere personal delicacy, is not, so far as we can judge from these letters and other evidence a deterrent to sensuousness. Certainly no lover ever had this repugnance to conquer.

We have now to remark on what is called the illusion of love which is seen as clearly in these letters of two most wise and self-conscious individuals as in the love of two ordinary persons. Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett seek in vain to express the absolute value of the other to the one. Elizabeth Barrett declares to Robert Browning "you are all the world and the stars besides to me," but certainly this expresses the real feeling, the actual valuation of the moment, and all the universe is as nothing, for the whole individual life is lost in the other. Thus honest perfect love cannot exaggerate, and the standpoint of the world outside, to whom this particular individual is not supremely precious, and to whom the love language seems silly, is not the true standpoint. The individual standpoint is the true standpoint for the individual; what makes his life is his life. Still we can say that no person of sense allows the universe to fade into insignificance before the claims of a single mortal, but will keep himself to the highest work in the most general relations of truth, goodness and beauty. And this is the question which constantly disturbs these high-minded

lovers; they have constantly to urge upon each other that each does not, will not, stand in the way of the other's life work in poetry, will not allow personal service to interfere with world service. Elizabeth Barrett even, which may be counted rather exceptional with women, perceives the higher significance of the universal, and is quite ready with the sublime heroism of an absolutely unselfish nature to sacrifice her union with Robert Browning, if it shall reduce him from writing the highest poetry to scribbling potboilers. Truly we have in the marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning the extremely rare—even perhaps unique case—of two great creative minds accomplishing their peculiar universal work not in spite of, but largely by virtue of their personal relation and service. We cannot, indeed, say with certainty that Robert Browning's work might not have been as great if he had never loved and married Miss Barrett; yet she was his good genius to clarify and humanise his reckless abrupt originality. As to Elizabeth Barrett, her life work would certainly have been comparatively insignificant but for the inspiration of this love. She had a positive genius, profoundly womanly, for love, and her poetry before she loved Robert Browning was but the pale tendril of the cellar plant reaching vaguely toward light.

But there is another standpoint for what seems to the outsider, love illusion. Why may not romantic love in its highest forms be, like art, a world of its own, which is not to serve life, but life it; and the illusion so-called of love be like the self-illusions of art? Romantic love is then self-evidential, a mode of life and emotion which vindicates itself within and for itself. Romantic love may often in this form be self-conscious indulgence, as with Goethe, where the man is always master of his love, is never—unless momentarily—mastered by it, and continually self-consciously uses his emotions as materials for literary art. In flirtation again romantic love is nascent or playful but is always self-conscious indulgence. But romantic love, whether shallow or deep, whether evanescent or eternal, may be defined as a form of human experience which has developed like art for its own sake; it is a mode of super-biological evolution wherein psychic experience develops in manifold phases to higher and higher realisations for its own sake, and thus love belongs with pure art, science, philosophy, and other modes of self-developing experience.

But we may pass from the illusion of love as to the value to itself, which is after all no illusion, to the real illusion where the love overestimates its object not to its own personal relation but in gen-

eral relations. Thus Elizabeth Barrett regards Browning as always "the poet of the age," and to Robert Browning Elizabeth Barrett's juvenile essay on Mind is "every way a wonderful work." However, their critical artistic insight is usually strong enough to break through love illusions, and they render just judgments on each others works. But as to personal charm and attraction of character there is much the same exaggeration as with ordinary lovers. That love blinds to defects, and even transforms them into perfections, causing moles to appear as beauty-spots, is a significant and well-known fact. And this blinding to the truth by love is the reproach which common sense, scientific spirit, and philosophic thought alike make to all love. Self-love, filial love, maternal paternal, fraternal, patriotic love, sexual love, every kind alike tend to unduly magnify, as hate tends to unduly minify. Passionate personalism, particularism, individualism, herein set themselves against the common universalism of science and philosophy. The life of reason will not allow its sight to be clouded by any love, and thus it is enabled to see the whole of life in its real values, and so attain wisdom. So then neither truth nor wisdom come through human love, and a life ordered scientifically, philosophically, cannot admit them, at least as dominant forces. And if reason must disown exaggerating love, so must also practical prosaic life which sees herein only moonshine. And the injury which a love of every kind does to the loved ones and other individuals simply because it does not perceive rightly and truly the general relations is plainly multiform and great. The incessant frictions and discordances of life are due chiefly to the interferences of all these biased personal affections. Will then the age of science upon which we are entering congeal all affection, and so render the earth loveless and lorn, inhabited solely by acute investigators and logic machines? Or may not science have its perfect work and the human heart grow larger and stronger, because truer; and thus emancipate love of its illusion, making all love thereby deeper and nobler? We must say that these letters lead toward the last conclusion, that the highest love is nourished upon truth, and hence makes toward betterment. With the Brownings the blindness and distortion of personal affection is but momentary, and they, being fully conscious and self-conscious, quickly correct it by the largest measure. The success of their constant love was due not so much to their romanticism as to their realism; both were haters of sham and conventionality, were seekers of the real, true, vital, genuine; and after each had given up the search, Robert Browning finds in Elizabeth Barrett

the true woman, and Elizabeth Barrett in Robert Browning finds the true man. Perhaps the strongest impression left upon us by these letters is their absolute sincerity, frankness, simplicity, in other words, realism; so that two powerful noble natures are at once *en rapport*, in mutual understanding, appreciation, sympathy and confidence, all which is set at white heat by the glow of past sionate love.

We have mentioned the illusion of love—which is no illusion—as to the value of the beloved to the lover, and we have noted also the illusion of general exaggeration, but there is also another illusion, that of happiness. This is the illusion on which Schopenhauer and Von Hartmann insist, namely, that the so-called love-happiness is but a cheat by which nature secures the continuance of the species at the real expense of the individual. Romantic love is an instinct which, not seeing and aiming at the real end, yet makes the best selection for the good of the species under the guise of individual satisfaction and happiness, which at the best is only a passing phase, and is more than counterbalanced by all the difficulties and pains of the after-life. Thus Schopenhauer declares that love "exerts an adverse influence on the most important events, interrupts the most serious occupations of the hour, sometimes embarrasses for a while even the greatest minds, does not hesitate to intrude with its trash, interfering with the negotiations of statesmen and investigations of men of learning, knows how to slip its love letters and locks of hair even into ministerial portfolios and philosophical manuscripts, and no less devises daily the most entangled and the worst actions, destroys the most valuable relationships, breaks the firmest bonds, demands the sacrifice sometimes of life or health, sometimes of wealth, rank, and happiness, nay, robs those who are otherwise honest of all conscience, makes those who have hitherto been faithful, traitors; accordingly, on the whole, appears a malevolent demon and strives to pervert, confuse, and overthrow everything." But what are the facts in this Browning-Barrett case? Here we certainly have the most unequivocal testimony, pre-nuptial and post-nuptial, as to complete unalloyed happiness, and on Mrs. Browning's side it is life itself. There is no sacrifice of the individual, only furtherance, and it is the fundamental error of Schopenhauer that he contrasts the welfare of the individual and species, as if the nature of the new generation were not dependent upon the real welfare and so happiness of the individuals of the former generations. But apart from all this, the present instance is plainly a personal happiness of the

completest type; and if Schopenhauer rejoins that such cases are made so not by love *per se* but by friendship, sympathy, etc., which are radically independent of romantic love, it is yet certain enough from Miss Barrett's love letters that the real overwhelming, suffusing, constant joy of life was her love for Robert Browning, and that these other elements were pale in comparison.

The final point on which we must touch is the function of romantic love in the evolution of humanity. We have already intimated that while love helps monogamy, it may also be considered a self-sufficing mode of experience, like art emotion, and so ever to be enlarged and refined in the evolution of experience. Thus in all higher phases romantic love is not a mere servant of the species, and is not an instinct. In fact, there is much evidence that highly organised, cultured, romantic human beings tend even to eliminate the sexual instinct *per se*, and that what is fundamental is taught and learned. Certainly those that multiply and replenish the earth are not as a rule the most romantic, and from the point of view of the species the Browning-Barrett marriage was comparatively a failure, being unprolific, and resulting in no transmission of genius. From that standpoint Browning was certainly led amiss by the romantic love which Schopenhauer makes an unerring instinct toward the highest good of the species. Romanticism scientifically considered on this ground is a very fallible selective agent.

We have in this article traced in these Browning-Barrett Love-Letters the main elements basal to love in mastery, trust, and sensuous motive; but we have noted that love is none of these, but has its own quality; and we have considered the illusions of love, the only one that is really such being the illusion producing general exaggeration, and this does not seem essential to all love passions. Further as to the evolutionary function of romantic love, while it certainly in early phases has some relation to the species, yet in its culmination it may be accounted a life of its own. Such are some of the conclusions which we gather from these love-letters, letters which deserve a place among the richest treasures of humanity, for they express with absolute genuineness and in the fullest, deepest way the strongest of the emotions. We see here a love as beatific as earth-born humanity has ever felt, and we here find all the delicious *nuances*, all the fascinating battledore and shuttlecock of love. Love reverses the struggle of existence, tries always to give more than it receives, to freely confer advantage and exact no return; and in this instance of the Brownings we see the highest triumph of courtesy and chivalry, and in all the grand simplicity of

large and noble natures. Yet Elizabeth Barrett appears the saner of the two, and her letters, read in connexion with the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," are undoubtedly the finest expression in any language of woman's love. Robert Browning's letters are always written in that eager haste wherein he, as often in his poems, stumbles over himself like an interfering race-horse; but yet by these letters, with all their furious brevity and abrupt torrential rapidity, he would take that fort by storm which yet required a many months' siege of reiterated storming.