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James Thomson's Reflection on the Life and Works of Robert Browning

In a contribution to the Browning Society's papers, James Thomson writes a very strong opinionative piece on the life and work of Robert Browning. What opinions of Thomson, regarding both his poetry and his own life, can be seen in his reflections on Browning? Are some of these of these opinions also found in The City of Dreadful Night?

Although the poets James Thomson and Robert Browning seem to have never interacted directly, Thomson speaks very positively about Browning and his works in his article titled "Notes on the genius of Robert Browning" (1882). While Browning may not have been a direct inspiration to Thomson's poetry, there are some notable connections between Thomson's imagery in *The City of Dreadful Night* and his description of Browning that potentially reveal some of Thomson's feelings about his own writing and life when compared to Browning's.

Throughout the brief article, Thomson addresses several aspects of Browning's poetry, including an apparently common critique of Browning: that his use of unusual or dark portrayals oftentimes made his poetry difficult to approach for first-time readers or students. In response to this opinion, Thomson writes:

His strong, intensely original, and many-sided individuality has, among finer savours, a keen relish for the odd, the peculiar, the quaint, the grotesque; and when these offer themselves in the subject-matter, his guiding genius is apt to throw the reins on the necks

of the vigorous talents and eager perceptions, which run risky riot in language as quaint and grotesque as the theme. (Thomson 242)

Based on this statement, it is clear that Thomson sees the value in the “peculiar” and “grotesque” aspects of Browning’s poetry, but perhaps this also shows that Thomson is able to relate to Browning. Undoubtedly, Thomson was aware of the dark or “grotesque” nature of the *City of Dreadful Night* which more than likely made it a difficult piece for many readers of his time. From his comments above, Thomson’s enthusiasm for Browning seems to suggest that he sees Browning’s darker poetry as an ideal for portraying things that Thomson had also hoped to portray in his own work.

Perhaps far more significant than Thomson’s discussion of the poetry of Browning is his reflection on Robert Browning’s character and Thomson’s possible evaluation of his own life. Near the end of the article, Thomson states: “I look up to Browning as one of the very few men known to me by their works who, with most cordial energy and invincible resolution, have lived thoroughly throughout the whole of their being, to the uttermost verge of all their capacities...” (250). Thomson’s view of many other lives, however, is much less optimistic: “...whereas nearly all of us are really alive in but a small portion of our so much smaller beings, and drag wearily toward the grave...dead from the suicidal poison of misuse and atrophy of disuse” (250). His mention of poison calls up a recurring image from *The City of Dreadful Night*:

My wine of life is poison mixed with gall,

My noonday passes in a nightmare dream,

I worse than lose the years which are my all:

What can console me for the loss supreme? (City XVI, 35-38)

The character speaking these lines can be seen to represent many human beings who have fallen and now suffer eternal loss. Furthermore, if Thomson's poem is read as partially autobiographical, Thomson may be conceding that he too (or at least a part of him) is among those who are dragging towards the grave and mostly dead from a sort of metaphorical poison. Browning, on the other hand, is described by Thomson as one who did not fall amongst the despairing and lived to his fullest. From this, it can be concluded that Thomson looks up to Browning as having succeeded, where Thomson feels that many others, and perhaps even himself, have failed.

James Thomson's respect and reverence towards Robert Browning and his poetry speak to Thomson's understanding of life, however dark it may have become to him. In looking at Browning's poetry, Thomson may have realized that he had an ally in his attempts to explore the more grim side of the human experience through writing. In looking at Browning's life, Thomson was willing to humble himself and defer to Browning as one of the greatest poets of his time. Interestingly, this article was published (and potentially written) in 1882, the year of Thomson's death. In an almost prophetic conclusive statement, Thomson, while still considering Browning, says: "Confident and rejoicing in the storm and stress of the struggle, he has conquered life instead of being conquered by it; a victory so rare as to be almost unique, especially among poets in these later days" (250).

Works Cited

Thomson, James. "Notes on the genius of Robert Browning." Browning Society's papers. Part 2
(1882): 239-250. Print.