

Rabbi Ben Ezra

By Robert Browning¹ (1864)

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

Not that, amassing flowers,
Youth sighed "Which rose make ours,
Which lily leave and then as best recall?"
Not that, admiring stars,
It yearned "Nor Jove, nor Mars;
Mine be some figured flame which blends, transcends them all!"

Not for such hopes and fears
Annulling youth's brief years,
Do I remonstrate: folly wide the mark!
Rather I prize the doubt
Low kinds exist without,
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.

Poor vaunt of life indeed,
Were man but formed to feed
On joy, to solely seek and find and feast:
Such feasting ended, then
As sure an end to men;
Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

Rejoice we are allied
To That which doth provide
And not partake, effect and not receive!
A spark disturbs our clod;
Nearer we hold of God
Who gives, than of His tribes that take, I must believe.

Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

For thence,—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks,—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning>

What is he but a brute
Whose flesh has soul to suit,
Whose spirit works lest arms and legs want play?
To man, propose this test—
Thy body at its best,
How far can that project thy soul on its lone way?

Yet gifts should prove their use:
I own the Past profuse
Of power each side, perfection every turn:
Eyes, ears took in their dole,
Brain treasured up the whole;
Should not the heart beat once "How good to live and learn?"

Not once beat "Praise be Thine!
I see the whole design,
I, who saw power, see now love perfect too:
Perfect I call Thy plan:
Thanks that I was a man!
Maker, remake, complete,—I trust what Thou shalt do!"

For pleasant is this flesh;
Our soul, in its rose-mesh
Pulled ever to the earth, still yearns for rest;
Would we some prize might hold
To match those manifold
Possessions of the brute,—gain most, as we did best!

Let us not always say,
"Spite of this flesh to-day
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"
As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry "All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!"

Therefore I summon age
To grant youth's heritage,
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:
Thence shall I pass, approved
A man, for aye removed
From the developed brute; a god though in the germ.

And I shall thereupon
Take rest, ere I be gone
Once more on my adventure brave and new:
Fearless and unperplexed,
When I wage battle next,
What weapons to select, what armour to indue.

Youth ended, I shall try
My gain or loss thereby;
Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold:
And I shall weigh the same,
Give life its praise or blame:
Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being old.

For note, when evening shuts,
A certain moment cuts
The deed off, calls the glory from the grey:
A whisper from the west
Shoots—"Add this to the rest,
Take it and try its worth: here dies another day."

So, still within this life,
Though lifted o'er its strife,
Let me discern, compare, pronounce at last,
This rage was right i' the main,
That acquiescence vain:
The Future I may face now I have proved the Past."

For more is not reserved
To man, with soul just nerved
To act to-morrow what he learns to-day:
Here, work enough to watch
The Master work, and catch
Hints of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's true play.

As it was better, youth
Should strive, through acts uncouth,
Toward making, than repose on aught found made:
So, better, age, exempt
From strife, should know, than tempt
Further. Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid!

Enough now, if the Right
And Good and Infinite
Be named here, as thou callest thy hand thine own
With knowledge absolute,
Subject to no dispute
From fools that crowded youth, nor let thee feel alone.

Be there, for once and all,
Severed great minds from small,
Announced to each his station in the Past!
Was I, the world arraigned,
Were they, my soul disdained,
Right? Let age speak the truth and give us peace at last!

Now, who shall arbitrate?
Ten men love what I hate,
Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;
Ten, who in ears and eyes
Match me: we all surmise,
They this thing, and I that: whom shall my soul believe?

Not on the vulgar mass
Called "work," must sentence pass,
Things done, that took the eye and had the price;
O'er which, from level stand,
The low world laid its hand,
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice:

But all, the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account;
All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,
That metaphor! and feel
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,—
Thou, to whom fools propound,
When the wine makes its round,
"Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize to-day!"

Fool! All that is, at all,
Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:
What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be:
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

He fixed thee mid this dance
Of plastic circumstance,
This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent,
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

What though the earlier grooves,
Which ran the laughing loves
Around thy base, no longer pause and press?
What though, about thy rim,
Skull-things in order grim
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?

Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips a-glow!
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou with earth's wheel?

But I need, now as then,
Thee, God, who moulded men;
And since, not even while the whirl was worst,
Did I,—to the wheel of life
With shapes and colours rife,
Bound dizzily,—mistake my end, to slake Thy thirst:

So, take and use Thy work:
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times be in Thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!

Summary & Analysis "Rabbi Ben Ezra"²

Summary

The poem is narrated by Rabbi Ben Ezra, a real 12th-century scholar. The piece does not have a clearly identified audience or dramatic situation. The Rabbi begs his audience to "grow old along with [him]" (line 1). He stresses that age is where the best of life is realized, whereas "youth shows but half" (line 6). He acknowledges that youth lacks insight into life, since it is characteristically so concerned with living in the moment that it is unable to consider the deeper questions.

Though youth will fade, what replaces it is the wisdom and insight of age, which recognizes that pain is a part of life, but which learns to appreciate joy more because of the pain. "Be our joys three parts pain!" (line 34). All the while, one should appreciate what comes, since all adds to our growth towards God, and embrace the "paradox" that life's failure brings success. He notes how, when we are young and our bodies are strong, we aspire to impossible greatness, and he explains that this type of action makes man into a "brute" (line 44).

With age comes acceptance and love of the flesh, even though it pulls us "ever to the earth" (line 63), while some yearn to reach a higher plane. A wise, older man realizes that all things are gifts from God, and the flesh's limitations are to be appreciated even as we recognize them as limitations.

His reason for begging patience is that our life on Earth is but one step of our soul's experience, and so our journey will continue. Whereas youth is inclined to "rage" (line 100), age is inclined to await death patiently. Both are acceptable and wonderful, and each compliments the other.

What complicates the philosophy is that we are wont to disagree with each other, to have different values and loves. However, the Rabbi begs that we not give too much credence to the earthly concerns that engender argument and dissention, and trust instead that we are given by God and hence are fit for this struggle. The transience of time does not matter, since this is only one phase of our existence; we need not grow anxious about disagreements and unrealized goals, since the ultimate truth is out of our reach anyway. Again, failure breeds success. He warns against being distracted by the "plastic circumstance" (line 164) of the present moment.

He ends by stressing that all is part of a unified whole, even if we cannot glimpse the whole. At the same time that age should approve of youth and embrace the present moment, it must also be constantly looking upwards towards a heaven to come and hence simultaneously willing to renounce the present.

² Cedars, S.R.. Joyce, Meghan ed. "Robert Browning: Poems "Rabbi Ben Ezra" Summary and Analysis". GradeSaver, 27 January 2013 Web. 11 July 2017. <http://www.gradesaver.com/robert-browning-poems/study-guide/summary-rabbi-ben-ezra>

Analysis

"Rabbi Ben Ezra" is unique in Browning's oeuvre of dramatic monologues because though it is written from the perspective of a historical figure, it does not contain any clear audience or dramatic situation. As such, it is more a philosophical text than a proper poem. Much of its meaning is dissected in the "Summary" above, though this section will provide some context and simplification.

Rabbi Ben Ezra was a real historical figure of the 12th century, known primarily for his philosophy that suggested good sometimes lies in its opposite (badness, or pain). Browning often takes a figure from the past and uses dramatic irony to propose a conflict between the words and the meaning, but here, lacking any sense of the audience to whom he speaks (a congregation? God? Himself?) or of any stakes (what he hopes to gain), we are merely to dissect the philosophy.

The Rabbi's philosophy is a paradox: the struggles of life hold little meaning since life is but our soul's first step, yet the wise man should appreciate everything about life. He praises old age as the time when our soul reaches best fruition on earth, because only in age can this paradox be appreciated. The Rabbi is willing to admire and appreciate every stage of life, even as he is quick to show the folly of those stages. For instance, youth operates from a place of *carpe diem*, 'seizing the day' constantly, and trying to transcend the limits of the body. The Rabbi notes that with age comes an awareness of the pain and difficulty of life, but he says that a wise man should not be weighted down but rather lightened by that realization. He preaches that we should accept the present, but not let the concerns of the present dominate us. What lies at the center of his creed is patience and complicity to what comes. He does not deny the basic tenants of a *carpe diem* philosophy: time is short and transient; the body does not keep its youth; the world is full of wonderful things to be exploited. But at the same time, he believes that focusing on the ways of the world distracts us from our greater goal, which is to continue growing even in the afterlife.

However, it is important to see that while he praises age as superior, it is only superior because it recognizes the beauty of youth's yearnings. Without the latter, the former does not have the insight to both admire and renounce such actions. The most important lesson we learn in old age is that we can know nothing and never truly transcend ourselves. By accepting this limitation, we learn to be content and patient as we near death, which is not an end but a release to a greater sphere where our soul may continue to grow.

The Rabbi embraces body and soul, youth and age, death and life, pain and joy, all the while recognizing that the contradictions are the goal. They are beyond our comprehension, and by accepting that can we find true serenity.

Browning and "Rabbi ben Ezra"³

The story as it is usually told (eg Garrard, as note 1f, p.81) – and to which we will return later – is as follows. Robert Browning was given a copy of FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1861. In 1864, Browning published a collection of poems called *Dramatis Personae*. In this collection was the poem entitled "Rabbi ben Ezra" (= Abraham ibn Ezra, a 12th century poet, scholar and mathematician) which, basically, rejects the hedonistic sentiments of FitzGerald's Khayyam in favor of higher things. Indeed, "Rabbi ben Ezra" might be described as Browning's reply to FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat*, Browning's

³ http://www.bobforrestweb.co.uk/The_Rubaiyat/Appendices/app08.htm

Rabbi being the opposite number to FitzGerald's Omar. Instead of a nihilistic "live for today" approach to life, Browning's Rabbi ben Ezra sees life's trials and tribulations as a road to spiritual development and maturity of soul. Rather than holding onto today and prolonging our youth, with all its follies, we should welcome the wisdom and understanding of God's Plan which we gain as we progress through life's troubles to old age and, ultimately, to death. The first two lines of Browning's poem are in direct opposition to FitzGerald's regret "that Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript should close!" (verse 72) The whole first verse reads as follows:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in his hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

In other words, old age is the best part of life, for which youth is a preparation. We must trust God, and not be afraid. In verse 2, the Rabbi decries the follies of youth, whilst at the same time (verse 3) valuing the doubts of youth as part of our development. In verse 4 The Rabbi again directly opposes Omar's "eat, drink and be merry" philosophy:

Poor vaunt of life indeed,
Were man but formed to feed
On joy, to solely seek and find and feast;
Such feasting ended, then
As sure an end to men;
Irks care the crop full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

In other words, life is more than just joy and feasting! (This last line is a good example of the obscurity of Browning as opposed to the directness of FitzGerald – the line means that the sated bird or beast feels nothing beyond its fullness.)

Verses 6 and 7 are again in direct opposition to Omar and his "sorry scheme of things", for here the Rabbi places value on life's problems, because they are part of our developmental process. Paradoxically, they are not problems but valuable lessons:

Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

For thence, – a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks, –
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i'the scale.

As the Rabbi says in verse 9, "How good to live and learn!" In verse 10, the Rabbi praises God's plan, which he now realizes is perfect. He then thanks God that he is a human being, and expresses his trust in God's purposes. Verses 11 & 12 are rather obscure references to life as a mutually supportive mixture of body and soul, and to getting the balance right in meeting the needs of both: "Life may err as gravely by

being over-spiritual as over-worldly.” (Edward Berdoe, *Browning’s Message to his Time: his Religion, Philosophy, and Science* (1890), p.205.) In verse 13, we return to spiritual development through ageing:

Therefore I summon age
To grant youth's heritage,
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:
Thence shall I pass, approved
A man, for aye removed
From the developed brute; a God though in the germ.

In other words, spiritual development is what distinguishes Man from Beast. Verses 14 to 18 further extol the virtues of the ageing process, to the point where death is seen as the natural culmination of that process: “Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid!” (verse 19) Verses 20 to 25 debate the relative worth of the events in one’s life (the virtue of work, for example), arriving at the conclusion (verse 25) that the sum total of those events – both good and bad – measures one’s worth in the eyes of God. It is at this point that the Rabbi begins his rebuttal to Omar’s Potter, referring to “God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.” Verse 26 reads thus:

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,
That metaphor! and feel
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay, –
Thou, to whom fools propound,
When the wine makes its round,
“Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize to-day.”

The last three lines of this verse, of course, are directly opposed to Omar’s “drink, and live for today” philosophy. Verses 27 & 28 read:

Fool! All that is, at all,
Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:
What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be:
Time’s wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

He fixed thee ’mid this dance
Of plastic circumstance,
This Present, thou, forsooth, would fain arrest:
Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent,
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

Verse 27 tells us that our souls and God endure through Time and Change; verse 28 that Time and Change are the mechanism by which our souls are given chance to develop. These ideas are expanded in subsequent verses, the final verse – verse 32 – ending with the notable line: “Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!”

Rabbi ben Ezra is not easy to follow in a lot of places and so, as stated earlier, it lacks the immediacy and impact of FitzGerald’s verses. Obscurity was a common complaint leveled against Browning’s poetry generally. For example, the art historian Anna Jameson summed things up nicely when she wrote that whilst she admired “the wondrous wisdom and subtlety of thought” of Browning’s poetry, she did not admire his “obscurity in the expression of the thought”!