ROBERT BROWNING'S RELIGION AS SHOWN IN HIS CHARACTERS

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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By

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Religion was at the basis of Robert Browning's character and it was the function of religious poetry that his work fulfilled. Men and women were the means by which he expressed his religion. Into an imaginary person taken from varied settings, he put his own thoughts. Thus is the poet's religion seen in his characters.

This is the plan of the thesis: The first and last chapters give an over-all picture of Browning's religion. In the intermediate chapters Browning speaks for himself of the various aspects of his religion. All these aspects --- his attitude toward science, nineteenth century sects, progress, love, immortality, doubt, unity, and free will --- taken together reveal his religious point of view. They define that point of view as mystical, transcendental, anti-rationalistic, all of which is an implicit criticism of the nineteenth century's drift toward a compromise of religion in which beliefs not susceptible to a rational explanation were quietly discarded. This then is the substance of the paper.

Browning believed that the most important matter in the world is the soul of man and that a sense of effort is coincident with the soul's development. By noting the chronology of Browning's poems we may ascertain the progress of his own soul. His early poems contain little

Christianity but, after resolving his own skepticism by the discovery of divine love as manifest in Christ, he added from that time forward to the philosophy of progress in his poetry the glorification of God. The numerous manifestations of this all-prevailing divine love, linking God to man, have as their aim progress.

Browning's immortality was colored somewhat by this belief in divine love but still more by his belief in progress. Immortality to him was no more a place of reward than of punishment. It was simply a continuation of the life begun on earth --- another stage of development.

Three movements --- the Oxford crisis, transcendentalism, and the Broad Church --- comprising the major trends in Victorian religious thought are reflected to varying degrees in Browning's poetry. He took little interest in the Oxford Movement but was affected greatly by transcendentalism. Both the Broad Church Movement and transcendentalism championed an earnest and free spiritual faith which, in the case of the Broad Church, was also Christian. The latter explains Browning's religious attitude for its emphasis, like his, was on conduct, not dogma. Hence Browning admired in Catholicism all that was sincere but rejected their dogma. No religious sect, in fact, fitted his tastes perfectly although that of the Non-Conformists came closest. His religion seems to be summed up in the doctrine of a universe divinely governed.

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PREFACE

John J. Chapman, in his assertion that Robert Browning was a theologian and a doctor of philosophy, points out that Browning himself tried to show that a poet is a religious teacher. He states that Browning's own definite creed is fully set forth in any one of twenty poems. Religion was at the basis of the poet's character and it was the function of religious poetry that his work fulfilled. What that religion was and how it may be divined from the characters in his poems is the subject of this paper.

Men and women were the means by which Browning expressed his religion. He had been comparatively unsuccessful at the drama. This new type of literature, however, called the dramatic monologue, which he himself evolved, suited his needs naturally. The settings of these dramatic monologues are varied. The country may be Greece, Italy, or the Holy Land; the time may be as remote as the Old Testament, the Renaissance, or the early years of our Lord. And into an imaginary person of such a setting, he put his own thoughts. Thus is Robert Browning's religion seen in his characters.

The range of Browning's ideas is not as great as the range of his poetry. The ground he goes over is pretty much the same; the arguments he uses are the same. For this reason, and for the reason that one example often serves as well as a dozen, the list of characters chosen in this paper to illustrate one particular point of Browning's religion is suggestive rather than complete. Many more could have been added had they seemed necessary, for Browning has furnished us with ample examples.

It has been said that no man invents his own theology but takes it from the current world and moulds it to his needs. Robert Browning was no exception. Just how very true this was of him will be seen in the various parts of this paper. His emphasis on progress was particularly characteristic of the middle nineteenth century and his Christianity, although shaped to his own personality, was drawn from the Victorian century. Thus, John Chapman could say,

> It was inevitable that Robert Browning should find and seize upon as his creed all that was optimistic in Christian theology. Everything that was hopeful, his spirit accepted; everything that was ... for the brave soul he embraced.[1]

Browning's mysticism in like manner was drawn from his century.

The first chapter of this paper is an outline of Robert Browning's religion as shown in his characters. There, each of the aspects of Browning's religion is mentioned briefly. The outline is intentionally sketchy since it is to serve subsequent chapters only as an opening movement does a piece of music. In these later chapters the various phases of mysticism --- progress, love, doubt, faith, transcendentalism, immortality --- the poet's attitude toward science and toward nineteenth century forms of religious thought are discussed, each in turn. Although there is an attempt in these later chapters, for the sake of clarity, to divide Browning's religion on the basis of these different aspects, it must be confessed that any such separation is necessarily artificial. The mystical thread of unity at the root of and connecting all his ideas does not allow any such cleavage.

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[1] John Jay Chapman, Emerson and Other Essays, 185-213.

There is likewise an overlapping of his ideas within his written works. As has been stated before, his creed may be found fully set forth in any one of a number of poems. One poem, for instance, does not tell of success in failure alone while a second deals with love exclusively and still a third is given to progress. Rather, each poem, although one of these features may predominate, is likely to include love, success in failure, progress, and even more.

Perhaps a minor point of this paper, aside from pointing out how Browning disclosed his religion through the persons in his poems, is to determine the extent of his Christianity. This seems to have been much debated among the critics. Some have called him the greatest Christian poet of the age. Others have stated that he was hardly Christian at all in certain respects. Thus the intermediate chapters (Chapters II-VIII) may contain frequent references to Browning's Christianity for they deal primarily with his poems --- and these are nothing more than his philosophy put into the mouths of men and women. No attempt is made, however, to draw a conclusion regarding his Christianity until the last chapter.

Finally, then, the plan of the paper is this: The first and last chapters are primarily critical. They try to give a general over-all picture of Robert Browning's religion as shown in the characters of his poems. In the chapters which lie between we let Browning speak for himself.

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Chapter I

BROWNING, NON-CONFORMIST AND MYSTIC

That a writer's characters are often his own mouth-pieces is true of Robert Browning's. In them we see his thoughts, philosophy, and religion. In their actions we perceive his mysticism, his non-Conformist background, and his attitude toward nineteenth century religion.

Mysticism is comprised of various aspects --- progress of the soul, love, immortality, determination, the power of limitation, free will, doubt, faith, transcendentalism, and dogma versus conduct --- and Browning's characters reveal his attitude toward each of these. They all speak of what Browning, as a nineteenth century mystic, held as his religion.

Mysticism is characterized by unity. The above-mentioned phases may be cited as one instance for, running through them, connecting them, so that one phase cannot be isolated from the others is a current of unity. We cannot, for instance, separate determination from the progress of the soul for determination helps the soul to grow. Neither can immortality be isolated from progress or from love, and so on. Each is united to the others. Another instance is the mystic's view of life. He believed that all things were unified. Browning, speaking through the personalities of his poems, showed that good and evil often fuse, that emotion cannot be separated from thought, that the mind must not disclaim the body, that the spiritual and material worlds are linked and that knowledge and love must not be separated. To the mystic all phases of life show this unity.

In its larger sense, however, mysticism is an elusive term. To the question, "What is mysticism?" Caroline Spurgeon replies,

> Mysticism is a term which it does not seem possible satisfactorily to define, perhaps because a quality which is above reason is in its very essence undefinable. It is possible, however, to some extent to analyze and interpret it. It is an attitude toward life, a mode of thought, a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy.[1]

The "analysis" which Miss Spurgeon makes of mysticism amounts to a conviction that the aim of life is to attain union with the divine. The mystic believed this possible inasmuch as he was convinced that man himself was a manifestation of the divine being.[2] Hence, the individual was capable of attaining this union with God through the godlike quality of his own nature.

Robert Browning, as a nineteenth century mystic, was very much aware of the divinity of man. He states, through the speaker in "Christmas Eve and Easter Day", that man is, in form, a lesser God. He iterates the same thought when he states, or causes Rabbi Ben Ezra to state, that man is a God "though in the germ." We may then see in his characters that this "analysis" of Miss Spurgeon's, namely, that the aim of life is to attain union with the divine, was a belief shared by the poet Browning.

Miss Spurgeon also points to the fact that mysticism is characterized by unity. Many of the examples which she cites were referred to at the beginning of this chapter. In addition to these, however, she

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1 Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, "Mysticism in English Poetry," Quarterly Review, CCVII (1907), 429.

2 August Hopkins Strong also makes note of this in his book Great Poets and Their Theology. He says, "It is in man that God most perfectly reveals himself. Every man has in him a divine element" (422).

mentions the unity between God and man referred to in the paragraph above. She also states that there should be no conflict between science and religion for they are but different aspects of the same thing. Browning's conception of humanity she considers still another manifestation of unity --- a collection of individuals, separate and unalike, sometimes discordant, but still one whole. To the mystic all these instances are evidence that there is unity under diversity at the center of all existence. All things about us are but manifestations of the one divine life, and, "although the manifestations are fleeting, the spirit which informs them is immortal."[1]

There is another evidence of the mystic's belief in unity which should perhaps be dealt with at more length. That is the unity between knowledge and illumination. The essence of this thought is, briefly, that intuition may be relied upon in preference to a process of thinking based upon experience. It assumes that we know not through our minds or through reason but through our souls. This particular aspect of mysticism, known as transcendentalism, was the distinguishing mark of the mystic. That it played a considerable role in Browning's thinking we shall see later by examining his characters. It might be added parenthetically that those characters who exhibit transcendental qualities seem very near Miss Spurgeon's "analysis". Browning has exalted them to such an extent that their aim in life, attaining union with the divine, seems nearly accomplished. In some instances, such as in the cases of Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope in "The Ring and the Book," Browning

[1] Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 429.

has, perhaps unconsciously, transfigured three earthly characters. In their case, knowledge has become illumination, if not revelation.

By keeping in mind the fact that unity characterizes mysticism, one may proceed logically to the nineteenth century belief in progress. For instance, if we start with the hypothesis that the aim of life is to attain unity with the divine, then we may conclude that life is a continual advance, a ceaseless aspiration. Reality (the ideal) or truth is a vista constantly expanding and being opened to those who will seek it.

Just how much an individual may progress is contingent upon various factors. One of those factors is mentioned by Frances Russell and John Chapman. Frances Theresa Russell says that to the mystic misery is a blessing in disguise.[1] John Chapman also mentions the identity of spiritual suffering with spiritual growth in Browning's thinking.[2] The point they are trying to make is that, instead of shrinking from pain and evil, the mystic will welcome them, for it is only by overcoming such things that his soul may take one step forward. Other factors which the mystic will remember are that the higher is never degraded by having worked up through the lower and that the consciousness of our present failures should spur us to unending progress. All of these factors are united to the soul's growth.

Finally, mysticism is imbued with idealism, a deep sense of the mystery of life, of symbolism, and of that which is beyond human understanding. The mystic considers the ideal as the only real. He considers

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[1] Frances Theresa Russell, One More Word on Browning, 105.
[2] John Jay Chapman, Emerson and Other Essays, 185-213.

nothing trivial or unimportant and believes that each man's god resembles that man's own personality.[1] This, then --- together with a belief in the value of limitation, doubt, free will, love, transcendentalism, and unity --- is mysticism.

A number of characters, speaking in the voice of Browning, reflect the poet's attitude toward nineteenth century religion. Through his characters he shows his distaste for the bigotry of the Dissenters, the pageantry of the Catholics, and the coldness of the deists. George M. C. Brandes, referring to Roman Catholicism, states that Browning had no use for "faith petrified into dogma."[2] Such a personality as the Pope in "The Ring and the Book" shows that it was not the Catholics as persons that he disliked but rather their elaborately formal ritual. Hugh Walker points out that in "ultra-Protestantism" as well, Browning finds much to question and reject.[3] However, both Catholicism and "ultra-Protestantism" have love and Browning, always disposed to give the heart a higher place than the head, placed first, the church of the Dissenters (because of their lack of ritual plus their recognition of love); secondly, Catholicism because of their recognition of Christ's love; and lastly rationalism which he liked not at all. "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" is the poem which most clearly states this as Browning's attitude toward various aspects of nineteenth century religion.

In addition to the poet's position regarding the sects of the nineteenth century, there were at least two trends in religion on which

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1 Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, op. cit., 427-59.
2 George M. C. Brandes, Naturalism in England, Vol. IV of Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature,
3 Hugh Walker, Literature of the Victorian Era, 421.

Browning took a definite stand. One was the rising tide of spiritualism. The other was a religious skepticism caused by the increased popularity of science. Sludge in "Mr. Sludge, the Medium" shows Browning's dislike of spiritualism. Caliban in "Caliban upon Setebos" is his answer to the other rising nineteenth century trend. Browning's implication in this latter instance is that those who try to deduce an idea of God from their reasoning will obtain a God very similar to their own personality. They will have missed something which is higher, more mysterious and which cannot be comprehended through the senses. These three poems, "Christmas Eve and Easter Day," "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," and "Caliban upon Setebos" reveal Browning's attitude toward nineteenth century religion as opposed to rationalism, ritualism, spiritualism, and the scientific attitude. He was, in short, a nineteenth century mystic.

In his preference for the church of the Dissenters, Browning was influenced by two persons --- his mother first and later his wife. During his early manhood (around the age of twenty) Browning drifted away from the influence of his mother and the non-Conformist Church of his childhood. Some ten years later the influence of his wife, who was also a Dissenter, brought him back to his original position. Browning, like his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, undoubtedly found a good deal to bear in the Dissenter's chapel, but still it was in that particular creed that his "sympathies were least ruffled and disturbed."

All these aspects of his religion --- progress of the soul, love, immortality, free will, doubt --- taken together reveal Browning's religious point of view. They define that point of view as mystical, transcendental, anti-rationalistic, all of which is an implicit criticism of

the prevailing drift of the nineteenth century toward the scientific method and toward a compromise of religion in which various beliefs not susceptible of a rational explanation are quietly discarded.

Chapter II

THE SOUL AND ITS PROGRESS

The two fundamental beliefs of Browning are, first, that the most important matter in the world is the soul of man, and second, that a sense of effort is coincident with the soul's development. In "Sordello" he declares that "little else (than the incidents in the development of a soul) is worth studying." Browning, as a nineteenth century mystic, held progress as his dominant thought.

Helen Archibalde Clarke speaks of the mystic Browning's theory of the soul's development as "evolutionary progress."[1] Progress, she says, is spiritual evolution. In considering the influence which the evolutionary aspect of nineteenth century thought had upon Browning, she says,

> Evolution means for him the progress toward the infinite, and is full of beauty and promise. The failures in nature and life ... furnish to Browning's mind a proof of the existence of the absolute or a somewhere beyond where things will be righted.

Evolution here has no degrading suggestion because, as Clarke points out, the movement is always upward. Thus, in Browning's thinking, evolution means, on the whole, progress, and progress is the law of life.

Scientific evolution was a subject much talked about in the 1860's. It was of course impossible that Browning was not cognizant of the scientific attitude of the time. Miss Clarke, however, is of the opinion that Browning acquired his ideas on this topic not so much from the nineteenth century scientists, such as Darwin, Lyell, and Spencer, as he did from his readings in ancient Greek. She says that when asked what his attitude was

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[1] Helen Archibalde Clarke, Browning and His Century, 354.

toward Darwin, he replied, "In reality all that seems proved in Darwin's scheme was a conception familiar to me from the beginning."[1]

Browning's thinking however, went beyond the scientists for, to him, evolution does not end with the attainment of man's self-consciousness. After this stage has been reached there continues an evolution which is distinctively spiritual --- or as Clarke calls it, "a tendency toward God." When the evolutionary progress reaches its highest point, love takes command. The soul then progresses to "other lives in other worlds." Thus regarded, immortality becomes the final outcome of evolution and progress.

It would be difficult to say where the poet's idea of progress leaves off for all his ideas lead to this one end. His conception of love contains his theory of progress --- his notion of immortality amounts to progress. His belief in free will, his explanation of the presence of evil, doubt, temptation, difficulty, the value of "apparent failure" and of limitation all contribute to the growth of the soul. Cleon, in the poem by that same name, saw that relentless progress was a law in all around him.

A few of these topics are lengthy enough to merit distinct chapters. Others, however, may well be discussed here to show how so large a number of his separate beliefs do have as their purpose growth.

The character Rabbi Ben Ezra in the poem by the same name shows how difficulties may help the soul to grow. He meets hardships and suffering with a high spirit. He welcomes

> 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 pain; dare,
> Never grudge the throe![2]

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[1] Helen Archibalde Clarke, op. cit., 24.

[2] Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra," in Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works, Riverside ed., (812); All references to Browning's works are to the texts in this edition.

The fact that the Rabbi did make a great effort, even though obstacles kept him from attaining his goal, shows what was in him and is therefore a comfort to him. His attempt to overcome those obstacles has also contributed to the development of his soul and, with all the hardship and failure he has met, he is glad that he maintained his high ideals.

Browning also felt that a limitation might aid the soul's growth. A dumb person, for instance, is able to speak through the eyes as a person with speech never could. A deaf person will express his love with actions as others never will. A prism appears only a blank white, yet only a prism can turn a sunbeam into a jewel. "So may a glory from defect arise."[1]

A passage from Andrea del Sarto's monologue also suggests the value of a limited talent as an aid to the soul's growth. Andrea the painter seems to envy those who might ordinarily envy him since his talent is so much greater than theirs. He paints so easily while they strive and agonize and fail over their works of art. Yet Andrea says,

> There burns a truer light of God in them,
> In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
> Heart, or whate'er else, then goes to prompt
> This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine,
> Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
> Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
> Enter and take their place there sure enough.[2]

Andrea feels that their souls, by overcoming or striving to overcome their limitation, have made more progress than his.

The poet Browning believed in free will for somewhat the same reason. He felt that evil cannot be abolished without abrogating the laws of life. Browning's philosophy was to face life --- not turn from it, and God's

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[1] Robert Browning, "Deaf and Dumb," op. cit., 395.
[2] Robert Browning, "Andrea del Sarto," op. cit., 346.

leaving man's will free is another test for man. If man were given only one choice, namely good, there would be no merit in his choosing the right goal. It is only by being allowed a choice and by taking the harder course that the soul grows. Bishop Blougram in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" speaks of this. He says that God gave man free will to mould his life as he chooses and that he intended that "mankind should strive and show forth." A man is worth something when the fight begins within himself. When God and Satan are tugging at once, a man's soul awakes and grows.

> Prolong that battle through this life!
> Never leave growing till the life to come![1]

In this connection, he recognizes the good service done by evil in the world. The bishop, then, considered free will a part of and necessary to the soul's development. Like many of the bishop's remarks, this is, for him, a sophism, for the bishop was a reprobate; but for Browning this represents the truth.

The speaker in "Christmas Eve" speaks briefly concerning God's plan of free will. Had man not been allowed to choose between good and evil, he would have been a mere machine. He would have prayed or praised automatically. He would have been created perfect as a matter of course. It happens, however, that man stands on his own "stock of love and power." He can use his gifts of heart and brain either to degrade or to glorify himself. A machine could never do this.[2]

Browning's explanation of the presence of evil in the world is closely akin to his belief in free will. This can be deduced from the remarks of

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[1] Robert Browning, "Bishop Blougram's Apology," op. cit., 355.
[2] Robert Browning, "Christmas Eve," op. cit., 319-20.

both Bishop Blougram and of the speaker in "Christmas Eve" in the paragraphs above. The pope in "The Ring and the Book" states that evil is part of man's test on earth. It tests his power to struggle, strive, and overcome difficulties in preference to an easier choice. He concludes that that is the purpose of all the "blessed evil" in the world.

Nor are these the only difficulties one must overcome in the continuation of the soul's life. Having a firm purpose, following the dictates of one's conscience, doing what is right even though externally it may seem wrong will also contribute to the growth of the soul. The characters in "Dis Aliter Visum," "The Statue and the Bust," and "Bifurcation" are Browning's mouth-pieces warning men against dilatoriness and against a life of stagnation. All of the personalities in these poems met difficulties which, had they accepted the challenge, would have aided their souls' development. They did not, however, accept the challenge.

The title of "Dis Aliter Visum" came from Virgil's "Aeneid" (II, 428) and means "To the gods it seemed otherwise." A man of age and experience has found himself attracted to a younger woman. Not knowing whether the marriage would be a success, he did nothing. They drifted apart, each married someone else, and neither was completely happy. Browning's implication is that they have sinned by not following the dictates of their hearts. It would have been better to form the union and work to make a success of the marriage rather than lazily drift apart. The very difference between their ages and experience would have been a challenge to each which would have given vitality to their lives and to their souls. As it is, they have failed by not giving their souls this

necessary opportunity to progress. The explanation of the title is obvious. From outward appearances, or from an observer's point of view, in marrying someone else, the lovers have done the only practical thing, but actually, or as Browning puts it, "to the gods," it was otherwise. They should have followed the commands of the inner conscience.

"The Statue and the Bust" will serve as a second illustration to point out for Browning that everything that disturbs the balance of life gives vitality to the soul. In this poem the characters' sin is their dilatoriness. That the woman is already married is the difficulty in this case. As a bride, she looks down from a window, sees "The Great-Duke Ferdinand," and falls in love with him. The Duke returns her love. Each knows that, in spite of the fact that she is married, they should be together. Each, however, finds a reason for postponing the flight. Her first excuse was that she must wait a few days for her father's sake. She consoles herself with the thought that one day more can matter very little and that they will see each other tomorrow. The Duke has similar thoughts. He lets each day slip by until love no longer is as it was before. They are growing older. Their physical appearance changes until each becomes so altered that she, at length, has a bust made duplicating her former youthful and beautiful face and the Duke has a statue made of himself as he looked at the time he met the lady. She places the bust in her window over-looking the square where the duke rides. He places his statue in the square facing the bust.

Browning's object was to point out the deadening effect of not overcoming obstacles. If the lady and the duke felt that they could be happy

together, it was a sin for them to stay apart. Browning was not, however, advocating adultery. This particular act was merely to serve as an illustration and any other act would have served as well. The fact that this act would have been a sin had it been carried out does not alter the truth of the principle. Browning's point is --- the couple sinned by doing nothing. Browning's frame of mind is very clearly described by Vernon C. Harrington. He states that one of Browning's characteristics is his impatience with those who shrink from difficulty. He has nothing but

> "contempt for indecision, irresolution, half-hearted endeavor, and fear ...
>
> Everywhere what he wants is no dallying, but decision, action. This has led some purblind critics to imagine that Browning approved of sin, just as some critics have supposed that Jesus approved of dishonesty because he "commended the unjust steward" in the parable: it was only the steward's long-headedness and shrewdness which Jesus commended, not the acts by which he showed it. So Browning distinguishes the quality of soul shown in certain acts from the moral quality of those acts themselves. The most familiar stumbling-stone is "The Statue and the Bust," in which a man and woman plan an elopement, an adulterous affair, and cherish the plan for years, but never have the courage to carry it out. And Browning condemns them for their failure. It is not that he approves their sinful scheme, but he feels that it was a thing to test their mettle just as much as a better thing would. He has stated this so plainly at the end that I marvel that anyone could miss it:
>
> I hear you reproach, 'But delay was best
> For the end was a crime."--Oh a crime will do
> As well, I reply, to serve for a test,
> As a virtue golden through and through.'
>
> Let a man contend to the uttermost
> For his life's set prize, be it what it will!"[1]

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[1] Vernon C. Harrington. Browning Studies, 38-40.

This uncompromising view of life runs through all Browning's works. Man is put to the test. When he fails to accept that test, his soul shrivels --- so it was with these lovers.

"Bifurcation," meaning "divided two ways,"[1] is a contrast in characters. The woman, who followed the same course as the lovers in the "Statue and the Bust" and in "Dis Aliter Visum" would probably be condoned by outsiders. The man followed the dictates of his heart. He is the speaker of the poem. His and his lover's paths had diverged. The woman, believing that in leaving him she was doing what was noble, seems confident of her ultimate reward in heaven. She expects him to wait for her just as she left him but, Browning says,

> "man needs must move.
> Keep moving—"[2]

The man, knowing that in heaven duty and love are one and cannot be separated, says, in effect, "Write on her grave, 'My reason bade me prefer duty to love'." He would have written on his,

> I loved her: love's track lay
> O'er sand and pebble, as all travellers know.
> Duty led through a smiling country, ...
>
> Inscribe each tomb thus: then, some sage acquaint
> The simple---which holds sinner, which holds saint![3]

It is obvious that Browning himself considers the woman the sinner, the man the saint.

Although Browning felt that no experience whatsoever is wasted, he particularly welcomed those involving some sort of difficulty such as

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[1] Williams Clyde DeVane. A Browning Handbook, 359.
[2] Robert Browning, "Dis Aliter Visum," op. cit., p. 812.
[3] Ibid, p. 812.

those mentioned above---some sort of impediment, either visible or invisible, which led to spiritual conflict and growth. Many of his characters are a warning. Browning seems to say, "Observe these persons and beware!"

However, not all of Browning's characters who show his insistence on firmity of purpose, following the dictates of the conscience, and doing what is right, whether it seems so from outward appearances, fall on the negative side. The grammarian in "A Grammarian's Funeral" is a person of whom Browning approved. He spent his life probing books, learning, reading, mastering a subject. His head became bled, his eyes lead. And what did he produce? He gave us the doctrine of the enclitic -de--- "dead---completely dead." To others his life was a complete waste. Browning sees in the man courage, determination, and purpose. The grammarian has not let others sway him. He has set his goal and steered toward it. The poet says,

> That low man seeks a little thing to do,
> Sees it and does it:
> This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
> Dies ere he knows it.
> That low man goes on adding one to one,
> His hundred's soon hit:
> This high man, aiming at a million,
> Misses an unit.
> That, has the world here---should he need the next,
> Let the world mind him!
> This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed
> Seeking shall find him.[1]

Browning suspects that such a person is far loftier than the world imagines. The grammarian contained an ambition which will not let him rest. He felt

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[1] Robert Browning, "A Grammarian's Funeral," 280.

that he must strive continually. Whether the ambition was a worthy one does not concern Browning.---It is the continual striving which he admires.

The grammarian and the Rabbi are characters who resemble Browning himself. It is said that he faced life with determination and lack of fear. He seems to indicate that in his Epilogue (to "Asolando"). He wonders what people will think of him when he is dead, whether they will mistake him, as is usually the case. Rather than being thought of as dead, he prefers to be thought of as alive, struggling and progressing. Harrington says that in life he was none of "the slothful, the mawkish, the unmanly"---he was not among "the aimless, helpless, hopeless." He was

> One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
> Never doubted clouds would break,
> Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
> Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
> Sleep to wake.[1]

These are a number of Browning's ideas which lead to his theory of progress. In all of them, there is a sense of effort. The number of characters selected in each instance is suggestive rather than exhaustive for many more could be cited to illustrate progress of the soul. "Christina" and "Evelyn Hope," for instance, point to the distinctness and continuity of the soul's life. In "Death in the Desert" John says, "Man is made for progress and received therefore, step by step, such spiritual assistance as is proportionate to his strength."[2] John answers posterity's doubts concerning Christianity by saying that man could not progress if his doubts were at once changed to certainties. In "Cleon"

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[1] Vernon C. Harrington, op. cit. p. 113.
[2] Mrs. Sutherland Orr, A Handbook to the Words of Robert Browning, 261.

Browning states that in passing from simple to complex, man has obeyed the law of progress. In all of the characters in these poems, one may see their creator's belief that man's soul should expand---that one must continually look forward. Taken together they also contain the thought that man's success or failure must not be judged from outward appearances of his accomplishments but from that which he has aspired to do, or as Rabbi Ben Ezra says,

> What I aspired to be,
> And was not, comforts me:
> ...
> 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 account:
>
> 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.[1]

To strive, then, is the main factor in the soul's growth. All these other factors, doubt, evil, temptation, free will, limitations, are put here as tests or difficulties and are "just the stuff to try men's souls."

Apparent failures, then, are not actual failures if the subject has made an earnest effort for this effort will have resulted in adding strength to his spirit. He will have become a better man because of the attempt. Many critics have referred to this particular dogma of Browning's

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[1] Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra," op. cit., 385.

as "success in failure" which is perhaps a more accurate designation. This was the case with the grammarian. By the standards of society his life was a failure but, because he had made a great effort, his life was in reality a success.

This mystical concept of progress also advocated small beginnings. That way there is room left for growth. In the poem "Rephan" the speaker feels that perfection is stagnation. Rephan is the planet from which he came. Unlike Earth, that planet contained only perfection where there was no opportunity for improvement. There was no want, no unhappiness, no deficiency, no excess, no hope, no fear. The speaker did not care for the sameness of a place where today was exactly like tomorrow, where there was no change---no growth. He yearned for Earth with its differences ---where hate might teach love, where one might wring knowledge from ignorance, and where one might strive. Browning, or rather this inhabitant of Rephan, says,

> Earth's rose is a bud that's checked or grows
> As beams may encourage or blasts oppose.

There, one may

> Not reach --- aspire yet never attain
> To the object aimed at![1]

The poem shows Browning's sympathy with the character on whom all the perfection of the planet Rephan grows stale. Perfection leaves nothing to accomplish.

In view of all this striving man should set his goals high. It is better to have a high aim strived for yet unaccomplished than an aim within our possibilities. Andrea del Sarto in his monologue says,

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[1] Robert Browning, "Rephan," op. cit., 1004.

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

and these two lines of Browning's imply everything stated in this chapter.

Chapter III

DEVELOPMENT OF BROWNING'S OWN SOUL

It has been said by Frances T. Russell that Browning's writings are a fugue on each of a few favorite themes, namely emphasis on the individual's development, the value of difficulty and of refusal to accept "apparent failure," the value of high aims rather than low achievements, the value of love,[1] and all the things that have already been stressed in this paper. The characters of Browning's poems, taken as a whole, seem to attest to the accuracy of Miss Russell's statement.

In spite of this, however, by observing Browning's stress at a particular period of his life on each of these "favorite themes," and by noting the chronology of his poems, we may ascertain the progress of his soul. In his early poems, "Pauline,""Paracelsus," and "Sordello" there is little Christianity. His later poems, "Christmas Eve and Easter Day," "Saul," the Pope in "The Ring and the Book" express a deep sense of Christianity. They are reminiscent of the following words which he wrote to Mrs. Sutherland Orr.

> Evidence of Divine Power is everywhere about us; not so the evidence of Divine Love. That love could only reveal itself to the human heart by some supreme act of human tenderness and devotion; the fact, or fancy, of Christ's cross and passion could alone supply such a revelation.[2]

These are the sentiments revealed by the characters who were drawn during his mature years rather than during his earlier period of skepticism.

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[1] Frances T. Russell, One More Word on Browning, 11.
[2] Mrs. Sutherland Orr, "The Religious Opinions of Robert Browning," Contemporary Review, LX, 879.

A constant striving is one tenet, and I might add the only tenet, which Browning maintained through all his life. It appears at the time he first began writing and it appears again in his last poem, the Epilogue (to "Asolando"), which he wrote a short time before he died.

At about the time Browning became twenty years of age he experienced a period of religious doubt. After reading Shelley's poems, this was increased to the point of his becoming almost an atheist.

"Pauline," his first poem, written at this particular time reveals this state of mind. DeVane says,

> The real matter of 'Pauline' is Browning's struggle with his religious skepticism between the years of 1826 and 1832. In the latter year he thought himself well cured. Before 1826 he seems to have accepted entirely, with only an occasional unruliness, the Non-Conformist principles of his devout and pious mother...But in 1826 his growing mind and his wide reading brought him to challenge that faith.[1]

Browning, later ashamed of this poem, considered it childish and immature. The character in the poem who reveals this skeptical attitude of the young Browning's is writing to his love, Pauline, telling her of his victory over his doubts and religious skepticism. He tells her that he has progressed beyond these to faith, hope, and love. John Stuart Mill, however, detected a bit of falseness in this Sartor Resartus. He felt that Browning had not recovered from his religious skepticism. The poem is thoroughly autobiographical, and as DeVane says, in spite of the poet's later declarations to the contrary, Browning is the speaker, hardly disguised at all.

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[1] William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 41.

Paracelsus, the character of Browning's second poem, is very similar to Browning himself. He carried out Browning's philosophy of always doing one's utmost. He has Browning's own invincible courage in that he never gives up. Like his creator, he has no fear. In short, the unconquerable soul of Paracelsus is the unconquerable soul of Robert Browning, and that is the kind of soul Browning's religion advocated.

The titles which Browning has given to each of the five scenes in "Paracelsus" are revelatory of his philosophy and religion. They are:

Scene I.	Paracelsus Aspires
Scene II.	Paracelsus Attains
Scene III.	Paracelsus
Scene IV.	Paracelsus Aspires
Scene V.	Paracelsus Attains

The aspiring and attaining in this case is after knowledge.

In Scene V, however, of this particular poem, the title character disclaims striving after absolute knowledge and asserts another of Browning's "favorite themes," namely, the value of limitation in every energy of this existence. To know had been Paracelsus' one purpose. In spite of his vast accumulation of information he is entirely unsatisfied. There is another character in the poem, Aprile, a poet, who has set love as the goal of his ambition. Aprile too is dissatisfied. Thus, through these two characters, Browning has indicated that there is value in limitation.

From outward appearances, Paracelsus might well consider himself successful. He has maintained the position of professor and is considered learned. This was his object, yet he scorns his popularity and finds no comfort in his learning. It is not until scene four when his

life is coming to an end that he sees that he has erred in not realising that knowledge alone is insufficient to happiness. On the other hand, love, which was Aprile's aim, would not have produced a happy life either.

He learns at last that a successful life requires a combination of the two. If Paracelsus had been content with a limited supply of knowledge, he would have discovered the joys of love before it was too late to be happy. Likewise, if Aprile had not been completely absorbed in the pursuit of love, he might have gained some knowledge and satisfaction.

We might well say that this, Browning's second poem, contains at least three aspects of his religious philosophy---first, aspiration and attainment which of course amounts to his dominant thought, progress---second, the value of limitation as set forth in Paracelsus' unhappy life, which also leads to progress---and third, unity, in this case between knowledge and love and necessary to a good life. This particular poem is characteristic of Browning in that he is not content with letting one character illustrate one point. Each character must illustrate as many points as possible for the poet.

In considering Sordello, the personality of Browning's fourth poem, we again note the continual striving. Like Paracelsus and like Browning, as soon as one goal has been achieved, he begins working on another. Sordello was not always successful but the point is---he tried. In this way "Sordello" stands as Browning's central poem in the study of the "incidents in the development of a soul."

In "Sordello" browning wished to illustrate the development and growth of the true type of poet who "sees profound disclosures in the most ordinary type of face,"[1] Browning felt that some poets are content

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[1] Edward Berdoe. The Browning Cyclopaedia,

to simply tell of impressions while others present the deeper significance of things which would never be seen without the poet's aid. It was this latter type whose soul Browning wished to emphasize.

Sordello is made minstrel in place of Eglamor, a rival poet, who is introduced merely to enhance Sordello and to allow Browning the opportunity to contrast accepting a limited goal with boundless aspiration. This is well brought out in the following quotation from "Sordello."

> In just such songs as Eglamor (say) wrote
> With heart and soul and strength, for he believed
> Himself achieving all to be achieved
> By singer---in such songs you find alone
> Completeness, judge the song and singer one,
> And either purpose answered, his in it
> Or its in him: while from true works (to wit
> Sordello's dream-performances that will
> Never be more than dreamed) escapes there still
> Some proof, the singer's proper life was 'neath
> The life his song exhibits, this a sheath
> To that: ...
> ...

While Sordello says,

> "My life commenced before this work,"
> (So I interpret the significance
> Of the bard's start aside and look askance)---
> "My life continues after: on I fare
> With no more stopping."[1]

Eglamor had a limited goal, or in this case, limited art. His life was spent in accordance with his limited goal. When Sordello was made minstrel in his stead, he was unable to face the future and died of spite. He was a weak character to whom death proposed amends.

Sordello was Eglamor's opposite. He is the character who represented boundless aspiration. He learned first one, then another aspect of the truth of life. He aspired, achieved, and died.

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[1] Robert Browning, "Sordello," in Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works, Riverside edition, 98. (In addition to showing an indomitable courage Browning undoubtedly intended the last portion of this quotation to show his conception of immortality).

The boy Sordello wanted to be perfect. Apollo became his ideal. Not content with his own life, he combined into it all the lives of his imaginary heroes. He ambitiously aimed his love at Palma. He studied his companions, learned their true relationship, their nature with his own. This was his acitivity. Otherwise he spent a dreamy, drowsy, introverted childhood.

As a young man Sordello was egotistical, selfish, and full of vain ambition. He haddreamed away his childhood but, as a young man, he sickened for reality and, in spite of his shortcomings, there was within him a seed of spiritual ambition.

Sordello had not learned that body and soul must work together. His body, remaining inactive, separated from his active soul, or as Browning says,

> flesh leaves soul free to range,
> Remains itself a blank, cast into shade,
> Encumbers little, if it cannot aid.
> So range, free soul![1]

Although his soul craved joy, his body preferred merely tasting these by proxy, thus sparing itself all effort. In other words, Sordello was living in a dream-world.

He finds that to create the best song he must exclude everything else and dedicate himself to his work. Not having done this, he has succeeded a little by the attempt, but has failed more by not attempting enough. Sordello's attempts are never fully carried out. Each one, however, makes his soul grow a little more.

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[1] Robert Browning, "Sordello," op. cit., 67.

Having failed to please his patrons by not giving himself completely to his work, he makes a second attempt but is no better satisfied with himself. This time his thoughts are too lofty. The people cannot understand him. He becomes contemptuous and thus pleased neither his patrons nor himself. His failure to reach his ideal destroys the pleasure of his success. Soon the true Sordello has vanished, the poet thwarting the man. His soul sees less and less to strive about. He has wanted to do something but the question is——what! He had tried giving up pleasure, abolishing his body, leaving only his soul, but

> by and by,
> To balance the ethereality,
> Passions were needed; Foiled he sank again.[1]

Still body and soul are not working together. In this way, he sinks lower and lower until at last he leaves his task as minstrel.

Naddo here acts as a foil, again giving Browning an opportunity to contrast accepting a limited goal with boundless aspiration. Naddo, of course, represents the limited goal. He advised Sordello to go along with the tide, think others' thoughts, speak their speech, abjure the soul, be content with the body, and remain secure. He believes Sordello ought to be content in being a bard. That should be attainment enough without striving for more.

However, the fact that he does strive means still a little more growth to his soul. Although Sordello has not yet brought actual experience obtained through work to correct his mere reflections and observations, he has overcome indecision. He knows that he must forge ahead.

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[1] Robert Browning, "Sordello," op. cit. 91.

Sordello at length learned altruism. This part of the poem is thoroughly auto-biographical for, while in Venice, Browning was moved by the sight of the peasants' suffering. He was touched by their "warped souls and bodies." He has consequently written his own feelings into his character Sordello. The more Sordello pries into this problem of the people's extreme poverty the less satisfied he is with Himself. Wanting to rectify the matter, he resolves to re-build Rome---a Rome which will mean the rights of mankind. But he soon finds that a man can do but a man's portion or, to quote Browning,

> Sordello, wake!
> God has conceded two sights to a man---
> One, of men's whole work, time's completed plan,
> The other, of the minute's work, man's first
> Step to the plan's completeness: what's dispersed
> Save hope of that supreme step which, descried
> Earliest, was meant still to remain untried
> Only to give you heart to take your own
> Step, and there stay---leaving the rest alone?
> Where is the vanity? Why count as one
> The first step, with the last step? What is gone
> Except Rome's aery magnificence,
> That last step you'd take first?--an evidence
> You were God: be man now! Let those glances fall!
> The basis, the beginning step of all,
> Which proves you just a man--[1]

Sordello's mistake was that he wanted to accomplish too much at once. Mankind cannot be exalted immediately. The work of ages cannot be done in a day. He knows that the New Rome is one thing more which he can imagine but cannot make come true. The work at hand is the first step to the whole work of man. Sordello, therefore, must not attempt the last step first. He must rather take the first step and be a man if he cannot be a god.

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[1] Robert Browning, "Sordello," op. cit., III.

Browning felt that all things must have just such small beginnings as this for all cannot be solved at once. First must come the foundations, then things must progress step by step, until, at last, the devine influence of religion supersedes all previous steps. This is the last and highest step. This is the pattern Sordello should have followed when setting about to do his good work of re-building Rome.

Thus, Sordello learned one bit of the mystic's belief in unity --- namely, that to will and to do must be combined. Browning says that he has found a body for his soul. In other words, he has learned that it is necessary to put some action behind his thinking. He has learned that neither strength nor knowledge is alone sufficient. Knowing how to do a thing will never accomplish its being done unless the necessary physical effort is put forth. Likewise, physical strength is useless without an accompanying knowledge of how to rebuild Rome. Sordello had failed in not being able to completely realise his goal of rebuilding Rome, he has, however, advanced one step more in that he has gained this new realisation of mystical unity--that all things must work together.

DeVane has named three stages in the development of Sordello's soul. The first is the young poet to whom Eglamor and Naddo are foils. The second is the lover and warrior for whom Palma is invented. The third is the political thinker whose idealistic nature is contrasted with Salinguerra, a man of action who does all Sordello should have done.

The endless combats between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines (represented by the Ecelini family and their great warrior, Salinguerra) constitute the background of the poem. As Sordello reviews both Guelf and Ghibellines in his mind, wondering which of the two powers will bring the

most good, he finds he can approve of neither. Although he has done nothing during his thirty years, he feels that both sides have done worse than nothing. The plot turns upon the disclosure of Sordello's identity as Salinguerra's son. As Salinguerra's son and a Ghibelline, he is allied by blood to the Ghibelline cause. He feels, however, that the Guelf cause is the cause of the people.

The temptation is obvious. As Salinguerra's son, he could become chief of the Ghibellines, the greatest man of his time, and successor to the rule of northern Italy. Browning says he "may, even from the depths of failure yet spring to the summit of success, if he consent to oppress the world."[1] He might have Palma as his Ghibelline bride. He asks himself why he should give up all the joy of life for the multitudes. The conflict within his soul is so great he dies under the strain but not before choosing the side of the people and trampling Salinguerra's badge under his foot. Thus, Berdoe concludes, "In seeming defeat he achieved his soul's success."[2]

It is evident that this poem --- undoubtedly more than any other Browning poem --- may be labelled PROGRESS OF THE SOUL. All the incidents in Sordello's life were intended to lead to his soul's development. All the difficulties in his life, all the temptations, his high aims even though unattainable contributed to the growth of his soul.

Sordello is also a portrayal of Browning's love of work. Sordello's failure at the beginning of the poem was due to his inactivity. This insistence upon work, Browning shared with another great Victorian, Thomas Carlyle.

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1 Robert Browning, "Sordello," op. cit., 118-9.
2 Edward Berdoe. The Browning Cyclopaedia, 296.

Comparing Sordello with later characters is an excellent means of observing the development of Browning's own soul. There is, for instance, no mention by Sordello of the power and wonders of love, a tenet which was very dear to the later Browning. Neither is there any mention of immortality except as one step of progress.

Let us compare Sordello with David in "Saul." Both persons are, of course, Browning. Thus it is that David, like Sordello, aspires to much that he cannot accomplish but is comforted by the thought that

> "—— 't is not what man Does which exalts
> him, but what man Would do!"[1]

In both instances Browning is expressing the belief that the effort, whether successful or not, will help man's soul to grow. This then is the point of similarity.

The point of dissimilarity lies in the fact that David is a much later Browning than Sordello is. Thus it is again that their attitudes toward love and immortality are in striking contrast. To Sordello, immortality appeared merely as progress just as it did to the Jew, Rabbi Ben Ezra. It is devoid of Christianity and love. Browning had not yet reached the firm belief in the saving power of Christ's love which he attained later and which David (a later Browning) held. To David the next life was accredited to Christ's great love for man. To the speaker in "Easter Day" this is also true. He attributes immortality to the fact that "Christ's love is infinite."[2] Sordello has no notion of this. The entire poem seems lacking in an atmosphere of Christianity.

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[1] Robert Browning, "Saul," op. cit., 184.
[2] These two aspects of Browning's religion, love and immortality, will be dealt with at length in subsequent chapters.

The speaker in "Christmas Eve," the companion poem to "Easter Day," also shows the development of Browning's religious attitudes. It shows him, after his youthful period of religious skepticism, returning to the attitudes which were shaped as a young boy in his non-Conformist home.

In spite of the abundance of faith expressed in "Saul," "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" and other poems written during Browning's middle and old age, he also experienced some periods of doubt. "La Saisiaz," written because of the death of a friend of Browning's, seems to be his most complete expression within one poem of both faith and doubt. In the poem Browning considered the place where his friend's soul might abide now that her body lay buried in Cologne. Although this poem, like so many others, may be considered another "fugue" on several various themes, it says, most of all, that after the body dies, the soul lives again, that God exists and the soul exists, and last of all, that there cannot be faith without some doubt.

DeVane says that "La Saisiaz" was Browning's contribution to a series of articles called A Modern Symposium upon The Soul and Future Life, and that his arguments, like those of most of the contributors skirted around the question of the authority of the Christian revelation. However, although he wrote according to the rules of the Symposium, his arguments were those he had been preparing since "Christmas-Eve and Easter Day," and his position is somewhat anticipated by his opinions in "Saul," "Karshish," and even more by the major poems of "Dramatis Personae." DeVane's description is so concise as to be worth quoting at length. He says,

"La Saisiaz" has been said to be "instinct with Christian feeling," yet without dogma. The poet's fundamental position was one of belief in the future life, and he still endorsed Dante's words which he had written in his wife's Testament after her death in 1861: "Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another better, there, where that lady lives of whom my soul was enamoured." But partly because the conditions of the Symposium forbade Browning to draw comfort and faith from his strongest belief in the Christian revelation, and partly because he was profoundly shocked by the suddenness of his friend's death, Browning gave voice in "La Saisiaz" to some of the most pessimistic of his utterances. He is inclined to deny that this life, without a future life to correct its mistakes and sufferings, either for the race of men or for the individual man, is worth the pain. He says for himself,

> "I must say — or choke in silence — "Howsoever came my fate,
> Sorrow did and joy did nowise, — life well weighed, —
> preponderate."

And in his argument Browning develops, for the first time at length, the idea characteristic of his later thinking, that our human knowledge is of no use to us whatever in solving the riddle of our doubtful doom. In short, we cannot prove anything about God by our human intellects, and must resort to the intuitive knowledge of our hearts....He invariably concluded that it was morally best for us to be left in uncertainty concerning God and the future life, but for his own part he was strongly reassured by his belief in the revelation of Christ.[1]

"La Saisiaz" is one of Browning's main expositions on faith and doubt.

The character in Browning's last poem Epilogue (to "Asolando"), written just before the poet's death-illness, is the poet himself not disguised at all. In stating in the poem that he himself has always been a fighter, he fears that it almost sounds like bragging and as if he ought to cancel it, then adds, "But it's the simple truth; and as it's true, it shall stand."[2] The character in the poem has no use for those who are helpless, hopeless, and aimless. Although the poem also mentions love, it is dominated by an atmosphere of progress. Here again immortality is coincident with progress. Thus it is that the poem ends

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[1] William Clyde DeVane. A Browning Handbook, 376-7.
[2] Robert Browning, Epilogue (to "Asolando"), op. cit., 1007.

"Strive and thrive!" cry "Speed, --- fight on,
fare ever
There as here!"[1]

The "there" of course refers to life after death. The lines picture Browning still striving in the next life as in this.

These seven poems serve to show the development of Browning's religious ideas. "Pauline," "Paracelsus," and "Sordello" were written during his '20s. "Pauline," as stated before, reveals the poet as a religious skeptic. The other two poems are filled with the concept of progress rather than with a concept of Christianity. The last poem of his life, Epilogue (to "Asolando"), also emphasises progress causing that one thought to be the thread uniting the characters of all his poems from beginning to end.

"Saul" has been called by DeVane a barometer of Browning's religious development. His reason for terming the poem in this way is that Browning, having begun the poem when he was thirty-three or thereabout, was unable to finish it for nearly ten years. During this time he developed his belief in Christ as a power of love and immortality. The first nine sections of "Saul" simply record the good things of earth for which Saul should be thankful. The writing of "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" (1850) in this interim of nearly a decade pressed him to solve the religious questions which troubled him, and gave him his clue to the conclusion of "Saul." The last ten sections are therefore an anticipation of the love of Christianity, making the poem as a whole a measure of Browning's own religious development.

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[1] Robert Browning, Epilogue (to "Asolando"), op. cit., 1007.

The David who appears in the last ten sections of "Saul" is Browning around the age of forty. Browning had resolved by this time his own religious problems, his own doubts and skepticism by the discovery of devine love as manifested in Christ. "Saul" with its two parts, the first showing a love of worldly goods, the second showing a love of Christ, records this "discovery." David, representing Browning, there rejected the material goods of earth as being insufficient. The difference between the first and last sections records the change in Browning's religious point of view. From this time forward he added to the mystical philosophy of progress in his poetry the glorification of God.

Chapter IV

LOVE

Love forms a significant part of mysticism. We cannot over-emphasize the part it played in Browning's religion following his "discovery" while writing "Christmas Eve." Louis Wann has estimated that at least sixty four of his poems deal with this mystical subject.[1]

In considering Browning's conception of love we must keep in mind that to a mystic love is characterized by unity. Browning, like other mystics, found all love to be the same. That is, he felt no severance between the divine love which links God and man and the earthly love, exemplified by man's love for woman. He seems to have considered the divine love as all-prevailing and the earthly love as a manifestation of divine love.

For this reason the characters in Browning's dramatic love lyrics may be included as revealing his religion. While showing manifestations of divine love, these characters also show a wide variety of life and character. This has been attributed to the fact that Browning seldom expressed feeling as detached from thought. Some of these numerous manifestations include love as conquering time, love as the special gain of life, love as triumphing over small discords, love in its ideal maturity, love in its ideal of constancy, love as an unsatisfied yearning, love as indomitable purpose, love as the completeness of self-surrender, love as the intensity of expectant hope, love as the intensity of a precarious joy, love as the tyranny of spiritual appropriation, love as saddened by

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[1] Louis Wann, "Browning's Theory of Love," Personalist, VI, 27.

change, and love as the one lasting reality.[1] These are the various kinds of love, manifestations of divine love, which Mrs. Orr has listed in her Handbook.

Of these points enumerated by Mrs. Orr there are six which seem most closely related to Browning's religion. They are love as conquering time, as the special gain of life, as the most important possession, as repairing the broken harmonies of life, as the completeness of self-surrender, as the momentum of an indomitable purpose or progress. The others mentioned by Mrs. Orr, such as love as an unsatisfied yearning, as the intensity of joy or hope, and love as saddened by change tend merely to picture that emotion in its various phases. Although they are not wholly unimportant, there are other characters who speak more directly of Browning's religion.

In addition to these manifestations of divine love there are characters in other poems who do speak for Browning of Christ's love. They show that Christ was for him a spiritual mystery, not a definable or dogmatic fact and that the need for him was real to the poet. They show that love, to him, was the one thing worth possessing.

Browning discarded the sterner aspects of Christian faith embodied in the austere God of the Old Testament and accepted instead the Christian God of love. In this way, love became the solution to the mystery of life, the link between God and man. As Louis Wann points out, this emphasis on divine love is an evidence of the deepest kind of mysticism.[2]

Concerning the manifestations of divine love as found in the love lyrics we see that Browning has illustrated the above-mentioned varieties

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[1] Mrs. Sutherland Orr, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, 223-4.
[2] Louis Wann, op. cit., 26.

of love by means of a number of characters. In every instance, it is the speaker whom we must observe for he is Browning's mouth-piece.

In "Evelyn Hope" the speaker believes that love will conquer time. Evelyn, a young girl, lies dead. She scarcely knew his name, yet he loved her. Must he believe that because their paths never met, they were nothing to each other? The answer is of course no. God will create a love to reward his love, and he must wait. There will be many worlds to traverse, many lives to live, and much knowledge to gain or lose before he may claim her. The time will at last come, however, when she will wake, and remember, and understand. His love will conquer that time.

"Christina" shows how love may become the special gain of life even though that love is not fulfilled in this life. Again it is the speaker who has discovered this truth. He has found his soul's mate. The woman involved has recognized her completion in him too, but, rather than allow its fulfillment, she has chosen worldly ambition and honor. It follows that although she has lost him, he has retained her soul and has thus grown perfect. Their love has become the special gain of his life.

The above examples show why Browning has been called a preacher as well as a poet. Each of the above poems is didactic. From "Evelyn Hope" we may infer that love will develop a patience that will enable us to wait. Even though the interim may seem tedious, love alone will smooth the way and help us conquer that time. "Christina" shows how love may completely change and elevate one's life. Love, therefore, would be the best---the one thing worth retaining. The following poem also shows in a somewhat different way that love is best.

In "Love Among the Ruins" the speaker believes that "love is best." In this particular instance he is comparing it with the grandeur and glory of the past. As he views a particular spot that is now pasture land, he thinks of the chariot races held there ages ago. Here a palace once stood, a king once lived. Soldiers were sent out from this place to conquer the known world. These are gone now and in their place is a girl waiting to share her love with him. He reflects on the passing of royalty, gold, triumphs, and glories --- all material things --- while love remains the one lasting reality. It is love then that is best.

The closing lines of "Two Poets of Croisic" is an illustration of love repairing the broken harmonies of life. The character in this instance is a cricket symbolizing love. The story follows: As a bard, or poet, sat playing his lyre before a group of especially critical judges, one of the strings broke. Had it not been for a cricket, that note would never have been heard again. As it was, each time the poet needed to strike a note on the missing string the cicada sang it for him. In this way, the note, sung out of the cricket's love, was more beautiful than it would have been if the poet had struck it. Life, like the music of the lyre, has its low and high notes. When something occurs to snap the harmony, love fills the vacant place and repairs the broken melody. This then is another instance of what love can do.

Another of the poet's favorite themes---namely, love as the completeness of self-surrender, appears in several Browning poems. "A Women's Last Word," "A Serenade at the Villa," "One Way of Love," and "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli," all contain this idea. In the first of these, a man

and his wife have been arguing. She has grown silent, not because she feels that he is right, but because an argument with him is not worth the losing of his love. Her last "word" to him is a request to teach her his ways. She will speak his speech, think his thoughts, and, surrendering her body and mind to be moulded to him, continue in his love.

Love and Progress

Although it will not be possible to show all the powers of love as found in characters in the love lyrics, still there is one more who forms a direct connection with Browning's mystical teaching -- progress. That character is the speaker in "Love in a Life" and "Life in a Love." He is an instance of doing what the heart informs us is right regardless of whether it seems so from outward appearances, or, in this case, regardless of whether that one aim appears to be a failure. These two poems show how love may be the momentum of an indomitable purpose. The speaker is devoted to one worthy ideal, the pursuit of his loved one. In the first poem he is searching the rooms of a house for her. He never finds her, for she is always just ahead of him. In the next poem he realizes that she will probably never be his. Although most persons in this situation would consider the chase a failure and turn their energies to something else, he continues waiting for her. As soon as an old hope dies a new one springs up to take its place. So his love has inspired him with an aim and made him steadfast to it.

The above sampling of Browning's characters illustrates the power of love. Browning has used here the mystic's method of illustrating a teaching by means of symbolism. As such, these actors constitute a vital section of the characters who show us the poet's religion.

Just as a sampling of actors showed the value and power of earthly love, so must a sampling show his dependence upon Christ's love. There are, however, a few which seem impossible to omit. One of them, David in "Saul," was mentioned in the previous chapter. The others are Lazarus in "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," and the speakers in "Christmas Eve and Easter Day." As stated before, David may be considered the barometer of Browning's own spiritual development. In "An Epistle" and in "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" Browning sets forth two themes--one, that God is love, -- the other, that love of God is to be valued above earthly goods. All three of these poems, as contrasted with Browning's earlier poems, are Christian in atmosphere.

In "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician" it is Lazarus, raised from the dead, who has found that God is Love. The poem is a letter written by Karshish, the scholar-physician, to his teacher, Abib. In the letter Karshish hesitates to tell Abib of Lazarus because the story sounds so unbelievable. It concerns a medical "case of mania subinduced by epilepsy" --- quite easy to diagnose. The cure, however, is impossible to understand. It was accomplished apparently by some trick or spell for, after Lazarus had been dead three days, he was restored to life by a Nazarene's merely uttering the command, "Rise." The Nazarene has since been put to death. Lazarus, however, insists that the healer was God himself who "came and dwelt in flesh awhile." We may see how profoundly impressed Karshish was by these words:

> The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too---[1]

In this last line it is Browning expressing his own thought through his mouth-piece, Karshish, when he states that the All-Great is the All-Loving too. A reader of Browning may find repeated in other words in other poems the same idea -- God is love.

A further point regarding Karshish is the conflict between material and spiritual in him. In this respect the poem is similar to "Easter Day." After such a discussion Browning invariably concludes, either directly or by implication, that material goods are not sufficient, that the love of Christ is the one thing worth possessing.

The speaker in "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" also knew the sanctity of divine love. Here again the speaker is clearly Browning himself. Although these poems bring together more of his religious ideas than most other single poems, they are, nevertheless, pervaded by a spirit of love. To these speakers also, love is the one thing worth possessing.

Browning takes for granted that we cannot know God except through love. In "Christmas Eve" Browning views three aspects of nineteenth century Christianity, namely, Dissentism, Catholicism, and Rationalism. Browning preferred both Catholicism and the religion of the Dissenters because they acknowledged love whereas Rationalism did not. Browning believed that the deistic professor, in recognising only reason and intellect, had missed the point completely, for it was love that Christ himself emphasised. Christ said,

> Believe in me,
> Who lived and died, yet essentially
> Am Lord of Life.[2]

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[1] Robert Browning, "An Epistle," in Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works, Riverside edition, 340.
[2] Robert Browning, "Christmas Eve," op. cit., 324.

The rationalistic professor had no notion of this yet he expected his audience to know and respect Christ as a person. Browning believes this impossible in view of the fact that God can be reached only through love.

Browning felt that a religion must have more than power and intellect. It must have love and of that there never can be too much. He felt that Christianity met those requirements, for the Christian God is a God of love and created man out of that love.

In the final analysis, of these three aspects of nineteenth century Christianity--Dissentism, Catholicism, and Rationalism--Browning chooses the first. This is partly indicative of his Non-Conformist background. Although he was probably influenced, either consciously or unconsciously, by his Non-Conformist mother and wife, there is another reason for his choosing the Dissenting Chapel in "Christmas Eve." The deists seemed to him to have rejected what was most beautiful in the Christian religion and the Catholics, on the other hand, "stirred up a dust," in which it appeared excusable not to see. He found much to tolerate in the Dissenters' Chapel but still it was there where his "sympathies were least disturbed" by the unwritten prayers, the sacraments administered quietly, the simplicity, and above all, the love of Christ.

In "Easter Day" Browning through the speaker of that poem again rejects the material things of this earth for the spiritual. DeVane adds that it is the revelation of divine love, "such as God showed in sending his Son to live and die among men that links 'Easter Day' to 'Christmas Eve.'"[1] In "Easter Day" Browning condemns the man who loves the beautiful

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[1] William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 184.

world and knowledge but never aspires above them to God's love. They are shut out of the spiritual world of heaven and must glut their senses upon this world.

The plot of the poem concerns the speaker who on Judgment Day is delegated to live on earth forever. He is at first elated, but soon realizing that nature is insufficient for contentment, he turns to art. He will live among Greek statues and Italian painting. But neither is that enough. He cries out, "Mind...the mind is best." He decides to forget art and nature for the pursuit of knowledge. He will learn science, philosophy, history, music. But this, like the other goals, turns out to be false. He learns that love alone can repair all ills, cure all wrongs, and sooth grief. In quiet humility he wishes to let the world go and instead take love. He does not wish to be bound to this life, but to go on hoping to some day reach the "Better Land." Although "condemned to earth" would include material wealth, the beauty of nature, art, knowledge, earth alone would be insufficient. There is needed to complete one's existence Christ's love and immortality.

The outline of "Saul" is quite similar to that of "Easter Day." Both begin with a list of the good things of an earthly existence and end with the thought that they are to be rejected in favor of a spiritual existence. David sings of the joy of youth, of labor and its benefits, of high ambitions, of great deeds, of the gifts and powers of human nature, and of Saul himself. All these are the fullness of a material life.

But, thinking beyond the grave, David yearns to give Saul more than this present material life. He wants him to have an eternal life --- one

equal to this present life in goodness but everlasting. He feels that

> what he, as man, would desire for his fellow-men, God will surely give. What he would suffer for those he loves, surely God would suffer. Human nature in its power of love would otherwise outstrip the Divine.[1]

It would not do for the creature to surpass the creator. Since these good things have been given, it enters David's mind to give one more gift, namely, a new life. In a sudden burst of inspiration he makes a bold prophecy foretelling the coming of Christ. He sees his own flesh in the Godhead and tells Saul that a man will be born, God manifest in Christ, who will love him forever. Because of that man's love there will be life forever. Thus he has promised Saul immortality.

These are a few of the characters who speak of Browning's conception of love. In many instances it may be seen how Browning illustrated that love may help the soul to grow. Of the points enumerated by Mrs. Orr we may discern several which gave a steadfastness to the individual character's life. These actors were none of the "aimless, helpless, hopeless" that Browning so detested. One critic has said that in Browning love is the finest means to man's ultimate end--the development of character and the production of good works. Thus we can see that Browning considered love united to progress.

In the three poems illustrating Browning's need for divine love we also see that love may be construed as united to progress. In each poem there is a struggle between the material and spiritual. Rejecting the material must have, as in the case of Karshish, necessitated an effort

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[1] Mrs. Sutherland Orr, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, 239.

which would add to the soul's stature. Whether Browning discussed love, immortality, or any particular aspect of his religious attitudes, he always seems to conclude with this one thought, progress.

Chapter V

IMMORTALITY

It is not difficult to comprehend that Browning believed that there is a life after death. The fact that he believed so emphatically in Christ would exclude any doubt as to whether he believed in eternity. As devout a Christian as the poet would of course recognize immortality, for it would seem that to deny it would be to deny Christ's mission.

However, in addition to this logical deduction there is evidence in the Browning characters of the poet's faith that life does not end with the grave. In "Saul" David says,

> By the pain-throb, triumphantly winning
> intensified bliss
> And the next world's reward and repose,
> by the struggle in this.[1]

Through other characters too Browning stated that he believed that God would be no God at all if there were nothing but the grave to look forward to. He believed there would be no love in a diety who would grant merely the brief space of a few years on this earth. In "Easter Day" he says,

> How dreadful to be grudged
> No ease henceforth, as one that's judged,
> Condemned to earth forever, shut
> From Heaven![2]

The poem continues with the thought that for a Christian there is hope that he may reach the "Better Land." As the poem concludes, Browning leaves this picture: Easter Day breaks! Christ rises! And mercy is infinite because God, in Christ, lived, loved, and died for man.

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[1] Robert Browning, "Saul," Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works, Riverside edition, 184.

[2] Robert Browning, "Easter Day," op cit., 335.

It is then not difficult to comprehend that Browning believed in a life after death. There seems to be, however, some difference among the critics as to just what his concept of immortality consisted of. Canon Hamphill felt that in reaching immortality, Browning is hardly Christian, while another critic says that in this respect he is neither mystic nor Christian. A third critic, Helen Archibald Clarke, says that his immortality suggests reincarnation, that his future for the soul is not a heaven of bliss, but life in other worlds full of activity and aspiration. Hence in "One Word More" his successive incarnations take one on to higher heights --- "other lives in other worlds." Miss Clarke also mentions the supremacy of love in connection with immortality and, although she herself does not believe that Browning was an orthodox Christian, she recognizes the fact that others do.[1] Frances T. Russell, in answering what becomes of the soul in the hereafter, states that Browning's reliance on mysticism is a plea for illusion. She states that he "glows with conscious virtue as one who displays a medal when he announces that at least he 'believed in soul and was very sure of God.' Beyond that, however, she says he declined to answer specifically."[2] To William F. Revell Browning's immortality consisted of a ceaseless yearning to attain fellowship with God.[3] This interpretation is of course mystical and refutes those who stated that in considering immortality Browning was not mystical. There is one other critic, Augustus Hopkins Strong, whose opinion I would like to emphasize. He states that Browning

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1 Helen Archibald Clarke, Browning and His Century, 365-9.
2 Frances T. Russell, One More Word on Browning, 103.
3 William F. Revell, Browning's Criticism of Life, 30.

sees in love a guarantee for immortality.[1] Then there are of course those whom Miss Clarke mentions who considered Browning an orthodox Christian. Finally whatever differences of interpretation may exist among the critics regarding Browning's belief in immortality, there is no doubt that he did believe that the soul still lives after the body is dead.

Browning's view on this particular subject is actually much simpler than some of the critics have made it. It is characterized by belief in divine love and progress and he is therefore both Christian and mystic. Miss Clarke's statement that the supremacy of love influenced Browning's ideas of a future life and Mr. Strong's opinion that Browning saw in love a guarantee for immortality are borne out by the characters of the poet's writings. Likewise, any critic who identified immortality with the mystical concept of progress can find justification for it in the Browning personalities. We need only let the poet speak for himself.

Of the two influences --- progress and divine love --- the first seems to be the stronger. At least more of the poems mentioning immortality can be identified with progress than with God's love. This may be because of the fact that a number of his poems were written before he came to believe so firmly in the power of Christ's love. At any rate, through all his characters he states that the soul is eternal and life on earth is but one stage of the soul's progress and that the next life is very much like this one only better. These were his thoughts regarding a future existence. After his "discovery" while writing "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" he added to this philosophy that immortality was due to divine love.

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[1] Augustus Hopkins Strong, Great Poets and Their Theology, 444.

"Prospice" shows how immortality is characterised by progress. The title means literally "Look Forward." The poet is looking forward to the time when his soul may join his wife's. After his wife's death Browning wrote in her Testament a translation of Dante's words concerning Beatrice (Convito, II, 9).

> Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another, there, where that lady lives of whom my soul was enamored.[1]

Hence "Prospice," in addition to being an illustration of the poet's belief in the progress of the soul, is also an affirmation of faith in the soul's immortality. The two are, in fact, in this instance identical.

In "Rabbi Ben Ezra" the title character speaks for Robert Browning. Here again it is not possible to discuss immortality as a thing separate from progress. Rabbi Ben Ezra also links growth with eternal life. Since he was a Jew, he probably did not believe in salvation through Christ. He did, however, believe that the soul is eternal, that life on earth is but a preparation for the life to come. Thus the climax of earthly life is not attained in the middle of it but at its close, the time nearest death. Old age, according to Rabbi Ben Ezra, is the time when we reap what we have been sowing during younger years. Youth is a time for work and preparation for old age when one may, having "proved" the past, face the future and await death unafraid. At this time he will pass from the stage of a developed brute to "a God though in the germ." From this we may conclude that Rabbi Ben Ezra, and hence Browning, looked upon what comes after death as but one more step in the progress of the soul just as the

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1 William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 268.

soul passes from youth to old age. The whole poem conveys a sense of unity and movement of experience toward a goal.

"Abt Vogler" like "Rabbi Ben Ezra" implies that the next life is very much like this one only better. Abt Vogler, a musician, has just finished improvising a piece of music which he considers perfect. He regrets that, being extemporaneous, it was not recorded and so will not live. He reasons that it was much too beautiful to perish--only what is ugly should die while beauty and goodness should be permanent. Although there is imperfection on earth, there is another place--namely, heaven--where there is only perfection. What is beautiful on earth will become permanent in heaven so that there will never be one lost good. What was, shall live as before. Evil will act merely as a contrast, thus making the good "so much good more." And in the tenth stanza Abt Vogler, or rather Browning, for Abt Vogler is Browning, says

> All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good
> shall exist;
> Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor
> good, nor power
> Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives[1]
> .....

On earth we have the "broken arcs" --- in heaven the "perfect round" and, as Berdoe says,

> The harmony of a few bars of music on earth suggests the eternal harmonies of the Author of order; the rays of goodness which brighten our path here suggest a Sun of Righteousness from which they emanate.[2]

So it would seem from the above poems that Browning's conception of immortality consisted of not another life but rather a continuation of this one where perfection exists and where evil only emphasizes the good.

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[1] Robert Browning, "Abt Vogler," op. cit., 383.
[2] Edward Berdoe, The Browning Cyclopaedia, 4.

Thus the poet's expression in "Old Pictures in Florence" that he hopes that there is no eternity for he is tired and wants to rest is merely dramatic and not in harmony with his general views.[1] There is another idea in this same poem which is more indicative of Browning's true opinion. A group of men are looking at some pictures which seem perfect. Instead of being awed by them they feel that what has come to perfection perishes, and we are imperfect because eternity is before us and because we were made to grow. It is part of the total existence.

Augustus H. Strong stated that Browning saw in love a guarantee for immortality.[2] The best character to illustrate this is David. He tells Saul that a man will be born, God manifest in the flesh, who will love him forever and because of that man's love, there will be eternal life. Browning in this poem seems to see love behind the will and might in the incarnation of God and in immortality.

"Cleon," by a negative method also states Browning's belief in love and immortality. Cleon has heard of Christ but he cannot be troubled to learn from a mere barbarian Jew. From what he has heard, the doctrine of Christianity can be held by no sane man. Thus, by showing the emptiness and despair of a life in which the simple love-compelling religion of Christ is absent, he also shows how much more hope there is in the life of a Christian whose God has revealed eternity.

This poem purports to be a letter. In it, Cleon answers the question as to whether he fears death as others do. It seems that he fears it even more than the "unlearned and untutored" for he is leaving behind music and art which posterity will admire and which will keep his name alive. While

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1 Mrs. Sutherland Orr, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, 210.
2 Augustus H. Strong, op. cit., 444.

people are singing his praises he, the originator, will lie rotting. He wishes it were not so, that there were an after-life. In this letter then, by the absence of a love for Christ, Browning shows the value of a belief in immortality by showing how a lack of it causes one to over value the things of this world.

On the basis of these characters who speak in the words of Browning one may deduce that he did quite certainly believe in immortality, that the next life for him was much like the present one only better, that his conception of immortality was colored somewhat by his belief in divine love and that it was colored even more by his belief in progress. It was no more a place of reward than of punishment. It involved neither condition of fitness nor possibility of exclusion. It was simply a continuation of the life begun on earth --- another stage of development.

Chapter VI

BROWNING, NINETEENTH CENTURY RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHER

That Browning was a nineteenth century religious philosopher is brought out in many ways. There are, first of all, a number of persons in his poems who tell of his attitude toward various religious sects of the nineteenth century and toward Catholics in particular. Other persons show his feeling toward spiritualism, science as opposed to religion, rationalism. They show in an indirect manner how he was influenced by the Broad Church Movement and transcendentalism, and, in addition to these six items, there are a number of poems in which the poet speaks directly of doubts so prevalent in his century. All of these trends were of his age and that he was keenly aware of them is shown in his poetry.

Religious Background of 19th Century

The beginning of the nineteenth century marked an epoch of religious thought. The deists of the previous century had exalted reason. Their God had been an absentee-God whose divine activity included nothing more than creating the world. Their belief as far as God was concerned was that he had made the world, started it running like a machine, and it had been going without him ever since. They were skeptical of supernatural revelation or anything which could not be perceived through the senses. Religion by the beginning of the nineteenth century was nothing more than a cold morality.

In view of this background and the discoveries of science, the nineteenth century became a period of conflict and a search for some kind of religious authority. There were conflicts within economics, morals,

society as a whole and also within religion. There was a clash between scientific theories and religious sects. All these factors disturbed the Victorians and caused them to search for some kind of authority that would answer their questions and soothe their disturbed minds. Some Victorians found their answer to this search in the Oxford Movement. Others found it in the school of transcendentalism.

The Oxford Movement appealed to the authority of the historic Catholic Church of which, it contended, the national church of the country was a part. Immediate cause of the movement was the suppression by the reform government in 1833 of ten Irish bishoprics along with the hint to the English prelates to "set their house in order." The first step was taken at a meeting of a few friends. It was there decided to begin publication of "Tracts for the Times" to combat liberalism by sacramentalism. Those last four words, in fact, "combat liberalism by sacramentalism," are the essence of the whole movement for it was just that --- conservative, sacramental, and opposed to the growing liberalism of religion in England. These Oxford Tracts, short and incisive, were the motivating power of the movement, and its leaders were soon known as Tractarians.

Under the leadership of John Keble (professor of poetry at Oxford), Cardinal John Newman, and Pusey (professor and canon of Christ Church, Oxford), the movement gathered strength in its effort to return in doctrine and worship to the Anglicanism of the seventeenth century. With the effort to make the national church more truly Catholic was the doctrinal teaching that may be summed up in one word --- incarnation. Their emphasis was on Christ as the basic truth of religion and He was to be found only through the Catholic Church.

When William George Ward and other younger men entered the movement (about 1839), the emphasis shifted from the historic to the ethical and philosophical aspect of the Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation was pictured as a sin and restoration with the Roman Church was pictured as the ideal. The result was that the movement was split in half. Pusey and Keble stood firm for the original historical view point. Newman wavered. He had wanted something between Catholicism and Protestantism, but an imperial church such as the younger men pictured, appealed to him. The final step came in 1845 when Newman transferred his allegiance from the Anglican to the Catholic Church.

Although this affected Browning very little, the remarks he did make concerning the Tractarians were unfriendly. Bred as he was in dissenting Camberwell and immersed in his writing in Italy, he was "probably neither surprised nor interested" when Newman joined the Catholic Church. However, in 1845 he wrote to his wife, "I don't think I shall let you hear, after all, the savage things about Popes and imaginative religions that I must say."[1] Again in 1850 when Mrs. Browning was alarmed at their little son's religious fervor, "kneeling on his knees to the first sound of music, and folding his hands and turning up his eyes in a sort of ecstatical state," Browning remarked that "it is as well to have the eyeteeth and the Puseyistical crisis over together."[2] On the whole, however, Browning seems to have been interested very little in the Oxford Movement.

The transcendental school found its answer to this search for religious authority in an "inner light," conscience, or faith. Whereas the

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[1] William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 181.
[2] Ibid, p. 181.

Oxford Movement saw God in sacraments and ordinances, transcendentalism saw him in man and nature.

The most ready way to understand transcendentalism is by recognising it as a part of mysticism and by surveying its history. Its tendency toward idealism dates back to the second and third centuries A. D. when there sprang up a school of philosophy called Neo-Platonism. This philosophy investigated the human soul. It embraced the idea that the soul originated in a spirit world (God), then descended into earthly forms. Through its adaptation to earthly life the soul lost its sense of divine origin and returned to God (or Heaven) only by loving the spirit. The Neo-Platonists believed that by contemplation of ideal values man might free himself from the domination of sense and attain a state of "ecstasy" in which he becomes one with God.

This idealistic atmosphere was imparted to transcendentalism through transcendentalism's mystical nature, for mysticism is, in fact, an important part of Neo-Platonism and other idealistic systems.[1] James Freeman Clarke says,

> Mysticism may be called the belief that man can come into union with the Infinite Being by means of a wholly passive self-surrender to divine influence. The organ in man by which he thus communes with God is not will or reason; it is not moral nor intellectual but a hidden faculty of the soul behind them all. In the ecstatic moment of this union, time, space, body, soul, personal existence, all disappear, and man becomes absorbed into the Divine Being.[2]

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1 The College Survey of English Literature, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942, 9-10.

2 James Freeman Clarke, Events and Epochs in Religious History, 276. This is of course identical to Caroline Spurgeon's "analysis" of mysticism. (See p. 2 of this paper.)

Transcendentalism combines features of most of these forms of idealism. It is the opposite of empiricism, a doctrine which maintains that truth is to be sought and found in the evidence of the five senses. In the theological sense, transcendentalism holds that religious truth may be apprehended outside of ordinary sense experience, or "the source of religious truth is an organ or process of apprehension transcending (rising above) ordinary sense experience."[1]

Thus inasmuch as to know is not an intellectual process, the mystic, because of the transcendental aspect of his nature, is distinguished from the theologian, the logician, the rationalist, and the man of science. Belief, to the mystic, is based not on logic or facts but on feeling --- intuitive inner knowledge. Truth comes through emotion or transcendental feeling rather than through experience or reason, which are subordinate to intuition. The soul and not our brain will inform us as to what is right. The senses, however acute and highly developed, may mislead us and, if we are to obtain their full value, we must realize their limitations. This then is the background of transcendentalism. It is mystical and idealistic in nature.

Whereas Browning was affected only slightly by the Oxford Movement, he was affected a great deal by this nineteenth century transcendentalism. Many of the personalities of his poems are simple people who had had little contact with the world. They were ignorant in the sense that they were untutored and unlearned, yet they were wise. Their wisdom came not through the mind or experience but through the soul, and through this intuition[2] they were able to follow good.

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[1] The College Survey of English Literature, 10.

[2] Various other terms for this are inner light, mystical insight, religious consciousness.

People who felt that scientific findings had upset the frame-work of religion often found a solution in this new philosophy. By making the real world the world of ideas, of the mind, and of the spirit, and by making the world of matter merely a garment or symbol of spiritual reality, man was able to regain confidence in himself as a spiritual being. His world again became a spiritual order and God a reality. Transcendentalism exalted man's individuality.

English transcendentalism was derived from the German philosopher Kant who taught that science can describe the way things appear to us through our senses but it is limited in that it can give us no picture of things as they would appear to a perfect mind such as that of God. It can describe the world as man sees it through his understanding, but it cannot tell him what the world is like when not viewed through that gift. In other words, understanding prescribed its laws to nature instead of vice-versa. Viewing the situation from that standpoint, it is probable that space, time, and matter did not look so self-sufficient, so tyrannous to the Victorian.[1]

The Broad Church Movement, another religious trend of the nineteenth century, seems to have had much in common with transcendentalism. Both championed an earnest and free spiritual faith which, in the case of the Broad Church, was also Christian. Both were influenced by Coleridge and German philosophy, and both in turn influenced Robert Browning.

Broad Church Party is a term loosely applied. It was, in fact, repudiated by the leaders themselves. However, there is some historical

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[1] Charles F. Harrold and William D. Templeman. English Prose of the Victorian Era. xxxvii-xlvi.

justification in that it described their tendency toward doctrinal comprehensiveness. The Broad Church Movement also explains somewhat Robert Browning's attitude toward religion for its emphasis, like his, was on conduct, not dogma.

These three movements--the Oxford crisis, transcendentalism, and the Broad Church--comprised the major trends in nineteenth century religious thought, and they are reflected in Robert Browning's characters.

Browning's Attitude Toward Catholicism

Critics often point to Browning's treatment of the priesthood as a curious matter. He has spoken of them slightingly in a number of poems--in "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," "The Bishop Orders his Tomb," and "The Ring and the Book." Vernon Harrington feels, however, that Browning was in sympathy with the Roman Catholic Church. Although he was an extreme Protestant, the mystic in him responded to much that he found in Catholicism. His aesthetic sense, for instance, felt strongly the appeal of the artistic side of the Church's worship. He also respected the genuine piety which so many Catholics felt. Harrington points out that Browning made the finest figure of nobility and self-sacrifice in his poems a young Roman Catholic priest, Guiseppe Caponsacchi, in "The Ring and the Book," and the Pope in that same work is an example of justice and wisdom.

The poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" is an example of this duality in Browning's treatment of Catholics. Fra Lippo Lippi, who shows transcendental characteristics, is contrasted to his superior church officials who are considered good but who, in Browning's opinion, are superficial and shallow.

They scorn Brother Lippi, criticize him because his beliefs ("unlike a bell or two bits of stick nailed crosswise") do not encourage people to repeat their prayers or to fast on Friday. And Lippo Lippi, to atone for his capriciousness of sliding out of his window on the bed sheets, proposes to paint a picture which will please the Church. This seems to imply how cursory and affected Browning considered such ostentatious and dogmatic religions. The innate goodness and intuitive knowledge of this unlearned monk is a contrast to the priests who conceived of Christ as a wafer to be eaten all day long.

Another contrast in Browning's consideration of the Catholic priesthood occurs in "The Ring and the Book." There is, first of all Paul Franceschini, the heroine's brother-in-law, who is sneaking, mean, and primarily interested in furthering his own prospects or those of the Franceschini family. Secondly, there is Pompilia's (the heroine's), husband, Count Guido Franceschini, also a member of the priesthood. In addition to the sneaking meanness of his brother, he is pictured by Browning as a villain and murderer. His one interest in life was obtaining his wife's fortune. A third member of the Catholic order who is treated in a disparaging manner in "The Ring and the Book" is the archbishop of whom Pompilia sought aid. He promised to help her by writing a letter to her foster parents informing them of her unhappy life with Count Guido. However, reflecting later on the power held by the Franceschini family and how their influence might in some manner determine his own position, he decided against sending the letter. In the vernacular, these three were "hiding behind the church."

The young priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, is a contrast to the above characters. He acted as his mystical insight advised regardless of personal gain or loss. Vernon Harrington points out that

> by a keen insight Caponsacchi knew that the letters which were brought to him were not Pompilia's work but Guido's...The struggle which Caponsacchi went through before he decided to take Pompilia away is a great study in the development of a soul. He was staking everything and would lose everything. He knew that no one would give him credit for right motives in running away with Count Guido's wife. His whole future was at stake. Yet here was the service of God, and he knew he could never have any respect for himself before God if he failed to help this woman in her need:
>
> "how true,
> I am a priest! I see the function here."
>
> This moral struggle through which he passed between the time when she first spoke to him and the hour when they fled is something great. He actually persuaded himself not to do it; he thought he had decided that he would not help her escape. He honestly went to her window the second time to comfort her and advise her not to despair. But when she appealed to him again, threw herself on his help in her desperate straits, all he had decided to do and say went to the winds. He recognized here the challenge of duty, --- a challenge which could not be refused without making him a coward before God, and he told her how to meet him and escape.[1]

Browning has portrayed Caponsacchi as a priest who, rather than concern himself with matin-songs, automatic prayers (which Browning says, is not actual praying), and other superficialities of the Catholic Church, was willing to do what he felt was right regardless of the criticism such an act would bring upon himself. This brought growth to his soul, and this is the kind of person of whom Browning approved regardless of religious creed.

The Pope is also a contrast to Paul, Guido, and the archbishop. When he sentenced Count Guido to death, recognizing the limitation of his judgment, he said,

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[1] Vernon C. Harrington, Browning Studies, 197-8.

> How can I speak but as I know?
> ....
> God who sent me to judge thee meted out
> To much of judging faculty, no more:
> Ask Him if I was slack in use thereof![1]

The Pope is an example of justice and wisdom. He recognized truth as truth, called good good, and evil to him was still evil. There was no compromise. He preferred those people who, like Pompilia and Caponsacchi, know good by instinct and adhere to it. They have the transcendental quality of perceiving truth. He says of the young priest,

> Does he take inspiration from the Church,
> Directly make her rule his law of life?
> Not he: his own mere impulse guides the man ---[2]

The Pope felt that it would be better for Catholics to put more effort into good deeds (such as Caponsacchi's) than into becoming "martyrs" whenever some dogma of the Church needed defence. He considered it ridiculous that some should have been disturbed by the fact that the Chinese converts used as God's name, not Tien-chu, but plain Tien. The Church had issued a decree to correct the matter but were not at all concerned that within the interior of China plague and famine were laying waste whole cities. For himself, the Pope prefers adopting virtue as his way of life. He will preach to the world what his heart has taught him. The central truth as he sees it is "Power, Wisdom, Goodness, --- God."

Browning's attitude toward Catholicism as demonstrated by the characters in these few poems seems to consist of an admiration for all that was sincere in that religious creed and a distaste for all that was insincere and dogma.

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[1] Robert Browning, "The Ring and the Book," op. cit., 349.
[2] Ibid, p. 422.

Browning's Attitude Toward Transcendentalism and Broad Church

In addition to revealing Browning's attitude toward Catholicism, Fra Lippo Lippi also reveals Browning's attitude toward transcendentalism. He is a simple character who has never mastered much formal learning yet he is full of wisdom and proverbs. For instance, he was wise in recognizing that life in the flesh is good and that those who ignore its value are, in effect, telling a lie and hurting themselves. He recognized the beauty of the world, its wonder and its power. He felt that the shapes of things, "their colors, lights, and shades, changes, surprises" were a truth it would be a crime to let slip. "It means intensely," Fra Lippo Lippi states, "and means good." Browning implies that Brother Lippo Lippi was correct in painting the Prior's niece as beautiful as she truly appeared instead of ignoring the flesh and painting only the soul, for there cannot be beauty without soul. Supposing that there could be, however, Fra Lippo Lippi (or Browning) says that simple beauty and nothing else would be the best thing God invents, for then you will find the soul you missed within yourself.

Fra Lippo Lippi, Caponsacchi, and the Pope are also examples of the Broad Church Movement's influence upon Browning in that they are all examples of conduct versus dogma. Fra Lippo Lippi, for instance, paints as his heart tells him to paint. He lives what he feels to be a good life, enjoying the beauty of things, and is not influenced by such things as the Church's dogmas and prayers written in Latin. In Caponsacchi's case the accustomed routine of daily church duties became insignificant in the face of a greater purpose. His conduct in rescuing Pompilia, Browning implies, is nearer Godliness than the superficialities of the Catholic Church.

The Pope too, in sentencing Pompilia's husband and murderer, exhibits Browning's preference for conduct rather than dogma. All of these persons follow the dictates of their consciences rather than the dogmas of church and society.

Browning Chooses Protestantism

In an Epilogue to Dramatis Personae Browning surveys the three major tendencies in christianity during the sixth and seventh decades of the nineteenth century and makes a final statement of his own position. The three aspects which he observes in the Epilogue are the same three he delineated in "Christmas Eve" in 1850. The first is of course the ritualistic Catholic Church which had influenced the Anglican Church immensely. David is made to speak for this ritualistic point of view, "honoring the House of the Lord, the Church, as the residing place of God."[1] The second speaker is Renan, author of La Vie de Jesus, who represents the rationalist. The increase of historical knowledge has caused the divinity of Christ to fade for him. He is, in this respect, comparable to the German professor in "Christmas Eve."

Browning himself as the third speaker answers these two aspects of nineteenth century Christianity. His position is the same as in "Christmas Eve." DeVane says,

> He appealed from historical criticism to intimate personal feeling, to the need for Christ in life and the human heart. This is the position he had taken in "Saul," "Karshish," "Cleon," and "A Death in the Desert," and the position he was to hold to the end of his days. When Browning once read the Epilogue to Mrs. Orr, he said to her, "That Face, is the face of Christ. That is how I feel him."[2]

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[1] William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 278.
[2] Ibid, p. 279.

Browning declares in this poem that God is everywhere in the universe, that he is not limited to church creeds or church buildings.

DeVane points out that Browning's choosing the simple chapel of the Dissenters in preference to the Catholic Church or the loveless religion of the rationalists was influenced greatly by his wife. The following letter which she wrote in 1846 states in clear prose the exact substance of the views which Browning has set forth in the Epilogue and in "Christmas Eve":

> I meant that I felt unwilling, for my own part, to put on any of the liveries of the sects. The truth, as God sees it, must be something so different from these opinions about truth --- these systems which fit different classes of men like their coats, and wear brown at the elbows always! I believe in what is divine and floats at highest, in all these different theologies --- and because the really Divine draws together souls, and tends to a unity, I could pray anywhere and with all sorts of worshippers, from the Sistine Chapel to Mr. Fox's, those kneeling and those standing. Wherever you go, in all religious societies, there is a little to revolt, and a good deal to bear with --- but it is not otherwise in the world without; and within, you are especially reminded that God has to be more patient than yourself after all. Still you go quickest there, where your sympathies are least ruffled and disturbed---and I like, beyond comparison best, the simplicity of the dissenters...the unwritten prayer,...the sacraments administered quietly and without charlatanism; and the principle of a church, as they hold it, I hold it too...Well, there is enough to dissent from among the dissenters...you feel moreover bigotry and ignorance pressing on you on all sides, till you gasp for breath like one strangled. But better this, even, than what is elsewhere...The Unitarians seem to me to throw over what is most beautiful in the Christian Doctrine; but the Formulists, on the other side, stir up a dust, in which it appears excusable not to see. When the veil of the body falls, how we shall look into each other's face, astonished,...after one glance at God's![1]

That is what Browning seems to have been trying to say in "Christmas Eve" and in the Epilogue to Dramatis Personae. No religious sect seemed to fit his tastes perfectly but the religion of the non-Conformists came the closest.

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[1] William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 178-9.

Chapter VII

BROWNING ALLAYS 19TH CENTURY SKEPTICISM

When one considers that Browning wrote for his own century, it seems consistent that he should have written so much concerning doubt and faith. Had he lived, let us say, 200 years before and had been asked whether he believed in God and immortality, his answer would have been most assuredly in the affirmative. Had he lived in the eighteenth century with its skepticism and had had the same question put to him, the reply would probably have been the opposite. But to Browning's own generation there was more uncertainty than there was either belief or disbelief. To those who were asking themselves and each other whether there was a God, whether there was a life after this one, Browning's writings came as a solace.

The speaker in the poem very appropriately entitled "Fears and Scruples" gives Browning's answer to the doubters. The speaker has an unseen friend. His only evidence of this absent person is through letters from him and through hearing of his actions. Disbelievers taunt him with the fact that he has no proof that the letters are not forgery, that the actions are not misrepresented. They would have him believe that it is a fancy.

In spite of these taunts the speaker still loves the unseen friend. He does wish, however, that his friend would confirm his hopes. To the suggestions that the friend is concealing himself to test the speaker's belief and that such a person would seem to be no friend at all but rather a monster, the speaker answers,

Hush, I pray you!
What if this friend happened to be --- God?[1]

This last line makes clear the meaning of the poem. The letters then become the Scriptures, the actions the actions of Christ or God.

Browning wrote the following letter to W. G. Kingsland to explain the poem to him. If for "friend," we read God, for "letters," we read Scriptures, and for "actions" we understand the miracles of God, we realize that the letter purports to be an expression of the poet's own faith. Browning wrote,

> I think that the point I wanted to illustrate was this: Where there is a genuine love of the "letters" and "actions" of the invisible "friend," --- however these may be disadvantaged by an inability to meet the objections to their authenticity or historical value urged by "experts" who assume the privilege of learning over ignorance, --- it would indeed be a wrong to the wisdom and goodness of the "friend" if he were supposed capable of overlooking the actual "love" and only considering the "ignorance" which, failing to in any degree affect "love," is really the highest evidence that "love" exists. So I meant, whether the result be clear or no.[2]

The poem itself is an expression of a very simply religious person who is disturbed by his inability to prove to others that God and faith are real, however sure he may be of them himself.

It cannot be said that the speaker is totally without some doubt. Such lines as

He keeps absent, --- why, I cannot think.

and

He himself was busied with my betters:
What of that? My turn must come some day.

"Some day" proving --- no day! Here's the puzzle.
Passed and passed my turn is. Why complain?[3]

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[1] Robert Browning, "Fears and Scruples," op. cit., 811.
[2] Ibid, 811.
[3] Ibid, 811.

indicate that he did have some misgivings, but in spite of these he continues certain that God will some day notice him. So it was with Browning.

Doubts Concerning Biblical History

Much of the nineteenth century doubt seems to have been based on a seeming conflict between Biblical stories and history. There was a feeling that if there appeared no analogy in the Talmud for a given piece of Biblical literature, that part of the Bible could not be true. The exact date of St. John's death was the subject of one such debate. Many considered it to be the year 70 A. D. and thereon based their doubts and criticism. How could the New Testament book of John have been written by that person at the end of the first century if his death, according to history, occurred before that time? This, of course, is only one such example.

Browning often made retort to these historical critics of the scriptures. One evidence of this is contained in his letter to W. G. Kingsland explaining his purpose in "Fears and Scruples." When he says,

> however these may be disadvantaged by an inability to meet the objections to their authenticity or historical value urged by "experts" who assume the privilege of learning over ignorance.[1]

he is, of course, indirectly addressing the historians.

Doubts Concerning the Personality of Christ

Another seeming conflict between Biblical stories and history was exemplified in the personality of Christ. The nineteenth century wondered

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[1] Robert Browning, op. cit., 811.

whether the Church's view of Christ's person and power was true to the facts or whether their picture of him was merely an idealization. Browning based his reply, as contained in the speech of St. John in "Death in the Desert" on the importance of love. Harrington says,

> Now Christ is the Love of God, and the man who rejects Christ is caught in this illogical position, viz. that he
>
> "'knows himself,
> That he must love and would be loved again,
> Yet, owning his own love that proveth Christ,
> Rejecteth Christ through very need of Him.'
>
> The imaginary 19th century objector against whom St. John is arguing asks: Why didn't you tell the story of Christ's life in such a way as to preclude doubt? Why all this lack of exactness and scientific proof? Doesn't your work allow room for the conviction that the story is simply the vehicle for a doctrine which you want to teach, as is admittedly the case with the story of Prometheus? St. John answers that no man's work is perfect. Man is neither God nor beast, but a creature who is struggling
>
> from old to new,
> From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
> From what once seemed good to what now proves best."
>
> The only attitude that befits man is for him in humility to do what he can to set things aright and to follow the truth. So the Apostle has sincerely done what he could, shaping his story of Christ to "pluck the blind ones back from the abyss".[1]

Browning has here repeated in every stanza his belief that God is love.

Doubts Concerning Miracles

St. John also makes answer to the nineteenth century objectors concerning Christ's powers or miracles as well as regarding his person. The answer which he makes is Browning's mystical tenet of progress. First must come the recognition of God's might as represented in miracles, then the recognition of his will behind the might, and last should come

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[1] Vernon C. Harrington. Browning Studies, 197-8.

the recognition of his love (behind the will and might). St. John says to the nineteenth century doubters,

> ... this is death and the sole death,
> When a man's loss comes to him from his gain,
> Darkness from light, from knowledge ignorance,
> And lack of love from love made manifest.[1]

His theory of perpetual progress leads him to believe that man was made to grow, not stop, and that help once needed may be withdrawn when that help is no longer needed. God gave man miracles to aid his belief until man's mind reached a point of development where such help was no longer necessary as an aid to faith. God expected man from that time on to acknowledge God in Christ because of man's advanced reason.

These are the arguments presented by Browning through his character St. John in "Death in the Desert" to the historical judges of the Bible. The critics, according to Browning, had overlooked love in Christ's personality and progress in regard to the cessation of miracles. It has been well said that Browning attempted by this poem to turn the flank of the rationalistic critics of the scriptures.

Another kind of "miracle" that was much discussed in the nineteenth century was the miracle of spiritualism. Many Victorians, including Browning's wife, believed in it and A. Conan Doyle called it

> the greatest of human tasks, to prove immortality,
> to do away with the awful mystery of death, to found
> religion upon positive knowledge.[2]

To Browning, however, spiritualism was "a lot of bunk." He was strong in his denunciation of the "swindlers."

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[1] Robert Browning, "A Death in the Desert," op. cit., 890.
[2] William Lyon Phelps, "Robert Browning on Spiritualism," Yale Review, XXIII, 125.

Mr. Sludge, the Medium, in the poem by that name, is Browning's character who reveals how sarcastically the poet viewed such persons. The character is presumed to equal Mr. Hume, a famous nineteenth century spiritualist. Browning depicts this character as a "sneaking, cringing faker." Mr. Phelps points out that Browning was unfair in his judgment for Hume never took money for his seances.

Here are parts of the conversation Browning wrote for Mr. Sludge:

> I don't unsay
> A single word: I cheated when I could,
> Rapped with my toe-joints, set sham hands at work,
> Wrote down names weak in sympathetic ink,
> Rubbed odic lights with ends of phosphor-match,
> And all the rest; believe that: believe this,
> By the same token, though it seem to set
> The crooked straight again, unsay the said,
> Stock up what I've knocked down;
> ...
> Who was the fool
> When, to an awe-struck wide-eyed open-mouthed
> Circle of sages, Sludge would introduce
> Milton composing baby-rhymes, and Locke
> Reasoning in gibberish, Homer writing Greek
> In naughts and crosses, Asaph setting psalms
> To crotchet and quaver? I've made a spirit squeak
> In sham voice for a minute, then outbroke
> Bold in my own, defying the imbeciles---
> Have copied some ghost's pothooks, half a page
> Then ended with my own scrawl undisguised.[1]

In spite of his admission to cheating, Mr. Sludge felt that he was serving religion. He stated that he "laid the atheist sprawling on his back," had propped up Saint Paul, and proved that man has a soul. He sees no reason why Bible truths should not still operate. If Samuel's ghost appeared to Saul, why then, should not someone's mother's appear to him. And, since religion is all or nothing, he considers himself the most religious of men. Browning indicates that after everything has been

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[1] Robert Browning, "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," op. cit., 403-5.

said against Sludge, there is left a residue of truth for Sludge seemed to realize that there was a mystical aspect to the universe.

Doubts Caused by Science

Science and religion in Browning are but different aspects of the same thing. Helen A. Clarke notes that all chief poets of the nineteenth century except Tennyson and Browning reflected the prevalent disbelief and doubt that came with the revelations of science and that, of the two, Browning alone indicated the direction in which future religious aspiration might turn. He combined an intuitional with a scientific outlook. To Browning knowledge accumulated was not actual gain but only a means to gain in so far as it might bring home to the human mind the fact of its own inadequacy. He asserted (as did Spencer some years after him) that there is in man's consciousness an intuition which is the only certain knowledge possessed by him. Thus, to the scientific and metaphysical side, Browning added a mystical side based on feeling.

This combining of an intuitional and scientific view resulted, for Browning, in a concept of evolutionary progress toward the infinite. Therefore, evolution to him was full of beauty and promise and not something to be feared as it was by many Victorians. The failures in nature and life furnished to Browning's mind a proof of the existence of the absolute, or a somewhere beyond where things might be righted.[1]

The nineteenth century thinking world was divided into materialists and supernaturalists. Miss Clarke cites Paracelsus, the character of Browning's second (in point of chronology) monologue, as the poet's reply

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[1] Helen Archibald Clarke, Browning and His Century, 354. See also p. 8-9 of this paper.

to this struggle between science and supernaturalistic religion. To the mind, he gave the attribute of knowledge. To the spirit, he gave the attribute of love. Paracelsus had a glimmering of the scientific methods which would discover the secrets of life's law. He would then use these natural laws to bring about life's betterment, "instead of hope for salvation through the discovery of some magic secret by means of which life's law might be overcome."[1] Paracelsus, who himself had an intuitive mind, believed that truth is inborn in the soul. At the end of the poem, Browning seems to have resolved the whole problem. He reconciles the differences between the materialists and supernaturalists by concluding that love and knowledge must work together. He allays the doubts caused by evolution by saying that man must have instinct "with the idea of evolution."

In "Paracelsus" Browning has brought the idea of evolution to bear upon all natural, human and spiritual processes of growth (and this twenty-five years before Spencer, Miss Clarke points out). In recognising the evolutionary progress of plant life, and animals, Browning does not seem to fear evolution in the least, for he realised that ultimate knowledge is beyond the grasp of the intellect, and that the spirit and mind are both needed. What Browning felt that his century had overlooked was that, in Christianity, the highest symbol of divine love had been reached.

Paracelsus is not the sole poem in which Browning speaks of science. Sordello, for instance believed that what science teaches is made useless

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[1] Helen Archibald Clarke, op. cit., Chapter I.

by the shortness of life, and that truth must therefore come from the poet. "Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island" and "Death in the Desert" both state that one's god resembles one's own personality.

The grotesque personality of Caliban grovelling in the mud and the similar personality of his vengeful God are a satire "on those who, having no revelation of God save that afforded by reason, insist upon creating Him in their own image without admitting their own limitations."[1] Browning implies in this character, that we need something more than a cold, scientific, materialistic view point, that reason is not enough. There is something higher, something more mysterious that cannot be comprehended through the senses.

DeVane states that it was Darwin's "Origin of the Species" (1859) and the talk during the 1860's of the "missing link," of a creature that must have been half-man half-ape that caused Browning to write "Caliban upon Setebos." Caliban is the half-beast man of Shakespeare's "The Tempest," but Browning being Browning and a nineteenth century mystic, has given him a theology---something he never had in Shakespeare's play.

These four characters, Paracelsus, Sordello, St. John, and Caliban represent Browning's views regarding science. The characters show that he was one Victorian who was undisturbed by Renan, Strauss, Darwin, and Lyell and their books on Christ and the antiquity of man, for to Browning, these writers had overlooked one thing, the divine love of Christianity. As William Revell mentions, God is the one force at work in the whole variation of nature.[2]

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[1] William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 265.
[2] William F. Revell, Browning's Criticism of Life, 40.

Doubt versus Faith

Although the bishop in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" is an out-and-out hypocrite, the poem as a whole served as an aid to bolster nineteenth century faith. The bishop "believed" principally because he felt that it was the way to get ahead. His posing before the people as a believer had brought him ease, worldly comfort and position. Browning of course did not admire such a man and, even though this is evident from the tone of the poem, he has further safeguarded himself against our supposing that he did by speaking near the end of the poem of the bishop's "mind long crumpled." He also states that the bishop expressed whatever accidental thoughts happened to enter his mind and did not himself believe all he said. He stated them simply because he found them new and hence amusing. Still amid the bishop's worldliness and hypocrisy is a great deal of sincerity. As Browning said, the bishop often said right things although he called them by wrong names and it is in these places in the poem that Browning is speaking himself, encouraging nineteenth century faith.

This poem is one of Browning's main expositions concerning faith versus doubt. The bishop tells his listeners that doubt proves faith's existence. The more of doubt the stronger faith, if the faith is great enough to overcome the doubt. The bishop knows this by life and by man's free will to mould that life as he chooses. As for the bishop himself, his doubt is great but his faith's still greater.[1] He compares his doubt to sleep, his faith to his waking hours, and states that the main thing is "to wake, not sleep."

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[1] Robert Browning, "Bishop Blougram's Apology," op. cit., 354-5.

I say, faith is my waking life:
One sleeps, indeed, and dreams at intervals,
We know, but waking's the main point with us,
And my provision's for life's waking part.
...
And when night overtakes me, down I lie,
Sleep, dream a little, and get done with it,
The sooner the better, to begin afresh.
What's midnight doubt before the dayspring's faith?"[1]

Browning seems to find in all these objects of nature --- the sunset, a flower, death --- and in all the accomplishments of man --- such as the chorus-ending from Euripides --- a mystical quality which would attest to God's presence in the world and would therefore preclude any permanent doubt.

The bishop also points out that atheists who try to chuck faith overboard are faced with this problem: They them have unbelief disturbed by belief. He says

All we have gained then by our unbelief
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
For one of faith diversified by doubt.[2]

The position is simply reversed and no peace of mind has been gained. He advises Victorians that just as it is difficult to stop once you begin to cut away points of faith one considers false, so is it difficult to draw the line once one starts believing.

Instinct or transcendental intuition are still a further argument against any permanent disbelief.

You own your instincts? why, what else do I,
Who want, am made for, and must have a God
Ere I can be aught, do aught?"[3]

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1 Robert Browning, op. cit., 51.
2 Ibid, 351.
3 Ibid, 357.

The bishop felt that without faith --- faith in something --- nothing is accomplished. The great things in the world have been brought about because of someone's faith in some one thing.

One may argue at great length both for and against belief in a deity but one always comes up with this inevitable truth: There is a power immanent in all nature and in man himself that can be sensed but cannot be totally apprehended.

> Soon or late you hit
> Some sense, in which it might be, after all.
> Why not, "The Way, the Truth, the Life?"[1]

Perhaps the "breaks in the road" were but tests to teach man what faith is.

Although Browning may or may not have been a theologian and doctor of philosophy as John Jay Chapman called him, he undoubtedly did give his readers more peace of mind and a more tenable belief than many did who were preaching from the pulpit.

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[1] Robert Browning, op. cit., 351.

Chapter VIII

MORAL ETHICS AND "GOOD" AND "EVIL" IN ROBERT BROWNING

Mrs. Sutherland Orr claimed that Robert Browning could not have been an orthodox Christian since he rejected the antithesis of good and evil on which orthodox Christianity rests.[1] It is true that to Browning "good" and "evil" seem to have been relative terms. He felt that one could not exist without the other. In order to know good, for instance, we must also know evil. Thus, in "Francis Furini", the poet says,

> For me ... knowledge can but be
> Of good by knowledge of good's opposite —
> Evil — since, to distinguish wrong from right,
> Both must be known in each extreme, ...[2]

To Browning, then, both good and evil were necessary.

Caroline Spurgeon says that others had previously dealt with this theory that good and evil were relative and that one could not exist without the other but that Browning was the first to treat it at any length. It seemed quite logical to Miss Spurgeon that Browning should have taken this attitude for, she says, mysticism is always a reconcilement of opposites: Science and religion can be reconciled; knowledge must exist beside love and vice versa; and so must good and evil.[3]

Browning's ideas of good and evil regarding moral ethics seem to have been misunderstood by many critics. Philip Wicksteed is one of these.

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1 Mrs. Sutherland Orr, "The Religious Opinions of Robert Browning," Contemporary Review, December, 1891, 86-9. Whether orthodox Christianity exactly rests on the antithesis of good and evil might well be questioned.

2 Robert Browning, "Francis Furini," in Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works, Riverside edition, 908.

3 Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, "Mysticism in English Poetry," Quarterly Review, CCVII, (1907), 47-59.

He stated that the poet had a system of religion, a theory of the meaning of human life, but no trace of a theory of conduct. He felt that Browning sympathized too much with vice and evil and with passion of every kind, that he was too thoroughly convinced that it was human. He experienced no moral repulsion, no ethical earnestness, and no resentment of social wrong. Browning, in the eyes of Wicksteed, was not enough interested in the rights and wrongs, the habits and fates of society.[1]

Contrary to Cardinal John Newman, who in his "Season of Repentance" expressed the thought that comfortable living on earth condemns us from heaven, Browning in the main accepted the essential goodness of the material world.[2] The "old notion of sinfulness of the flesh", as another critic put it, was not in Browning. He felt that life was good and should be lived fully. Browning's only condemnation was of the man who loved the world and its material wealth so much that he never yearned to progress beyond it. Such a character was represented in "Easter Day". And that Browning personality at length recognized that the beautiful world, art, and learning are not enough without a desire to go beyond them to God's love.

Most of the controversy regarding Browning's moral ethics as presented in his poetry turn around his poem "The Statue and the Bust" which contained the story of the couple who planned an illicit love affair but never did anything about it. Browning condemned the lovers for never carrying out their plan. This naturally led some people to believe that

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1 Philip H. Wicksteed, "System of Religion and Theory of Life," Contemporary Review, 83, (1903), 86-89.

2 W. F. P. Stockely, "Faith and Morals in Robert Browning," Thought, I (1926), 520.

he advocated adultery. It caused Frances Theresa Russell to say that "social ethics and mundane idealism lay low on Browning's horizon."[1] It caused Wicksteed to say that there was no sound moral indignation in the poet. Other references of just such an unfriendly nature would not be difficult to find.

What Browning was actually advocating was that all activity, including conventional morality, must be viewed from the standpoint of how it affected the actor's conduct and what effect it had on his spiritual growth. He felt that "man in his progress outgrows the narrow creeds of right and wrong and presses on toward the living God."[2]

The two critics who seem to have the greatest insight into this disputed poem and its socially moral implications were Caroline Spurgeon and Vernon L. Harrington and of these two the latter is the more accurate.[3] Miss Spurgeon gives the poem a completely different twist which, although inaccurate, does seem to be consistent with the rest of Browning's thinking. She says that the lover, in his very capacity for vice, proves his capability for virtue, and a failing of energy in one implies a corresponding failure of energy in the other. This is an attitude that might well be expected of Browning. It does, in fact, remind one of another Browning character, namely, the young priest Caporsacchi in "The Ring and the Book". What Miss Spurgeon has here said of the Great-Duke Ferdinand might well have been said of him. She is not accurate, however, in

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1 Frances Theresa Russell, "Browning the Artist in Theory and Practice," University of California Chronicle, XXVII, (1925), 89-98.
2 William F. Revell, Browning's Criticism of Life, 31.
3 See Harrington's discussion of the controversy regarding "The Statue and the Bust" in Chapter II, pp. 14-5 of this paper.

applying this interpretation to the lovers in "The Statue and the Bust," for, rather than seeing virtue in their dilatoriness, Browning is blaming them for their lack of effort. Miss Spurgeon has failed to take into account the few lines near the end of the poem where, as V. L. Harrington has pointed out, Browning says,

> I hear you reproach, "But delay was best
> For the end was a crime." — Oh a crime will do
> As well, I reply, to serve for a test,
> As a virtue golden through and through.

Except for these few lines, the motives which Miss Spurgeon has attributed to Browning might correctly be attributed to him. These few lines, however, would make it seem that Browning is here concerned only with the development of the soul. Evil, to him, existed only for the development of good in us, for goodness alone would defeat its own end and paralyse all moral effort. So Browning's answer to those who ask the cause of evil might well have been that it is a blessing in disguise. Its purpose is to aid the soul's growth and he closes his poem still in this frame of mind:

> Though the end in sight was a vice, I say,
> You of the virtue ...
> How strive you?

Chapter IX

CONCLUSION

To the question of Browning's Christianity and the orthodoxy of that Christianity I would reply: he was by all means a Christian but I would agree with Helen Archibald Clarke that he was not a strictly orthodox Christian. The section of this paper on love, immortality, and moral ethics are the points on which I rest that conclusion. His emphasis on love and his belief in immortality, although in themselves denoting a Christian, are in Browning's case edged too much with his theory of progress to be part of an orthodox Christian's belief. The same statement may be made of his theory of behavior. Browning falls short of orthodoxy --- he is an anti-dogmatist.

We see this duality in Browning's treatment of love. He advised men to cultivate love that it might become a transforming power in their lives. This word "cultivate" indicates that love, to him, was something to be developed. It was a part of his all-embracing theory of progress. He delighted in the kind of situation that tested men's souls, that set up difficulties and obstacles before them. And love was simply one of the means he advocated for solving or overcoming these difficulties and, at the same time, it added to their souls' stature.

Yet he believed also in Christ as mystical and as a manifestation of divine love. In his later years particularly he leaned more on his belief in Christ's love as exemplified by the passion of the cross. Rather than accepting the austere God of the Old Testament, Browning accepted instead the Christian God of love and goodness. When he said, "God, thou

art love! I build my faith on that!" he could only have had in mind the deity of the New Testament.

His theory of immortality, showing this same duality, has been so thoroughly discussed in Chapter V that it would be repetitious here. Mrs. Orr has said that Browning's "heaven" was not a reward for the good. It excluded no one but was simply a continuation of man's life as he had lived it on earth. It was another step in his development and the poet's reason for believing in immortality at all was that his nature was too vivid to admit the thought of annihilation.

What Mrs. Orr has said cannot be refuted but she has on the other hand not mentioned the aspect of divine love which, especially when he was older, colored his theory of immortality. She has not taken into account his poem "Easter Day" which concludes with the thought that mercy is infinite because God, in Christ, lived, loved, and died for man.

On the basis of evidence presented by the characters in Browning's poems, his belief in immortality is both Christian and progressive. It is characterized by divine love and by a spirit of development and, as has been stated in Chapter V, considering his life and writings as a whole, the latter influence seems to be the stronger of the two.

His code of behavior was Christian. He did not recommend adultery or any other pattern of conduct which the Christian tenets condemn. He recognized adultery as a sin and called it by that name. But he also condemned man's sacrifice to prudential considerations if it involved a standing-still or a regression of that man's soul. He felt that it was better to sin and learn than to abstain from socially unaccepted behavior

and stagnate as a consequence. All behavior must lead to the soul's growth and, in this connection, for a complete world there was required every form of moral existence --- including both good and evil.

Browning then, is Christian but not a dogmatic or orthodox Christian. His mind never accepted any complete body of religious dogmas.

Concerning the whole of Robert Browning's religion we can only say what has been said before, and Arthur Symons in his Introduction to the Study of Browning has stated the whole of it in very concise terms.

> Life exists for each of his characters as completely and separately as if he were the only inhabitant of our planet. In the religious sense this is the familiar Christian view; but Browning, while accepting, does not confine himself to, the religious sense. He conceives of each man as placed on the earth with a purpose of probation. Life is given him as a test of his quality; he is exposed to the chances and changes of existence, to the opposition and entanglement of circumstances, to evil, to doubt, to the influence of his fellow-men, and to the conflicting powers of his own soul; and he succeeds or fails, toward God, or as regards his real end and aim, according as he is true or false to his better nature, his conception of right. He is not to be judged by the vulgar standards of worldly success or unsuccess; not even by his actions, good or bad as they may seem to us, for action can never fully translate the thought or motive which lay at its root; success or unsuccess, the prime and final fact in life, lies between his soul and God. The poet, in Browning's view of him, is God's witness, and must see and speak for God. He must therefore conceive of each individual separately and distinctively, and he must see how each soul conceives of itself.[1]

The development of the soul, as can be seen from the above quotation, is the main end of existence. The stress of life is incidental to its growth and is therefore desirable. Development and growth mean a closer union with God, for man in this growth should tend away from nature and nearer God and his own godlike qualities.

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[1] Arthur Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, 3-4.

That Browning, in addition to influencing his own time, was also influenced by it may be seen in his writing. He preferred, for instance, the Church of the Dissenters to Catholicism and to Rationalism. His interest in these three bodies of religious creed shows his regard for nineteenth century forms of Christianity. His transcendental nature, also indicative of the nineteenth century, is shown in his exaltation of intuition over knowledge. He neither feared nor ignored science and its implications. He was not troubled that doubt at times disturbed his faith, for that, he felt, was inevitable. He was, in short, of and for the nineteenth century.

The poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is nearly a full revelation of Browning's religion. There is no dogma in the poem --- nothing distinctive of either the Jewish or the Christian faith. The poem is completely Robert Browning. It includes all the points mentioned above. A few of them are, for instance, the conception of immortality as a further step in life, a continual advance. The Rabbi had a good deal of faith which could not but at times have been troubled by some doubt. He welcomed pain and doubt for they indicated a kinship to God. He preferred high aims to low achievement, and finally, the whole poem may be summed up in the doctrine of a universe divinely governed.

These many characters of Browning's poems, through whom he so freely expressed his thoughts, have enabled those of his time and of our own to know him well. In addition to Rabbi Ben Ezra, there are other Browning characters who deliver a complete sermon for the poet. There are even more who speak of certain aspects of his religious creed. Perhaps the religion of no other poet has been known through the medium of his characters as well as we know Robert Browning's.

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