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The Dialectic of the Theology of Browning's Bishop Blougram

Sylvia Eunice Lowe
Eastern Illinois University

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THE DIALECTIC OF THE THEOLOGY

OF BROWNING'S BISHOP BLOUGRAM

(TITLE)

BY

Sylvia Eunice Lowe

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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The latter part of the nineteenth century was, in Prentiss Cummings' phrase, "an age when skepticism walked up the steps into the pulpit."¹ As early as 1800, Sir Charles Lyell hinted at evolution in Principles of Geology, giving an almost mortal blow to the story of Genesis, the Biblical account of creation. Men might naturally now suppose that if Genesis were a fiction, the God of Moses was probably a fiction too. Where, then, should man turn to account for the universe and to find a philosophy to make living in it worthwhile? Men turned the full force of intellect to the answering of the question. Some, like James Thomson and A. H. Clough, found no solutions. Others, taking a cue from Darwin, redefined God as Evolution. Still others decided that God concealed Himself somewhere behind the inaccuracies and half-truths of the Bible and could be found through careful seeking. There might never be a "glad, confident morning" of faith again, but there could be intermitted belief. And by husbanding that belief, it was still possible to be an optimist in the world.

The husbanding process required a certain dialectic. The features of this dialectic varied from thinker to thinker, the most remarkable perhaps appearing in the work of Robert Browning, brought up a Congregationalist²

¹The Boston Browning Society Papers: 1886-1897 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1906), p. 406.

²William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 4.

but early buffeted by the crosswinds of skepticism. An inspection of Browning's carefully elaborated argument is the purpose of this paper.

Browning's powerful theological poem, "Bishop Elougram's Apology," is based on two charges against the bishop that are brought forth by Gigadibs, a minor journalist. Gigadibs asserts that it is impossible for an intelligent man to believe Catholic dogma; he also criticizes Elougram because, since he holds so responsible a position in the Church, and since he is not an absolute believer in all of the dogma, he must be a hypocrite. In the "Apology" Elougram proves to Gigadibs that a life of faith diversified by doubt is preferable to a life of doubt diversified by faith, thereby defending his position. An analysis of Elougram's dialectic is best made through careful examination of his propositions as they occur in the text of the poem. It is also helpful to have a general understanding of Browning's own religious convictions, as well as some knowledge of Victorian reasoning.

Berdoe states that, according to Browning, "the great argument for immortality is not for reward, but because it is reasonable."³ This is surely what Elougram argues in the "Apology". It is necessary for a man to have some degree of faith, however small, on the chance that there is a life after death. Elougram effectively convinces Gigadibs of this fact—so much so that the journalist begins his new examination of faith.

Browning's religious convictions, in which Elougram's dialectic is ultimately rooted, can be summed up in four main principles. First, Browning

³Edward Berdoe, Browning's Message to His Time (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., Ltd., 1897), p. 40.

was convinced that uncertainty was essential to spiritual life; doubts about religious beliefs and man's relationship to nature, once overcome, made ultimate faith stronger. Second, when man's uncertainty ceased, stagnation began; the continual struggle with doubt strengthened man's faith, and only this struggle provided spiritual growth. Third, while man had no definite knowledge of the divine scheme of life, he was everything in it; life, earthly existence, was a probation period provided for man so that he could, through his faith, achieve eternal life. Finally, God was not to be vested with human emotions, but he could be reached through them; love and the search for truth through examination of doubt were man's links with God. "On the one hand, the truth was many-sided, relative, shadowy; on the other hand, it was single, absolute, and plain. . . . Brain truth was of man; heart truth was of God."⁴ This theology accepted human nature; Browning felt that no power man had should be stifled. Further, the soul should embrace beauty and use the universe because the soul ultimately lived in eternity through man. The spirit was enlarged by knowledge, strengthened when it accepted hard tasks, purified by self-sacrifice which was the essence of love, and thereby moved toward God. According to Browning, the judgment day was not the end of life, but merely another step for the soul in its journey to eternity. "Life [moved] on ceaselessly, death [was] no barrier."⁵ Chapman, in his essay "Robert Browning," states ". . . God is of not so much importance in Himself, but as the end towards which man tends."⁶

⁴Boyd Litzinger and K. L. Krickarbocker, The Browning Critics (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 218.

⁵The Boston Browning Society Papers, p. 44.

⁶John Jay Chapman, Emerson and Other Essays (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), p. 188.

Browning did not disagree completely with the implications of the scientific movement, but he did oppose the wide-spread materialism and agnosticism that sprang up as a result of the teachings of the new science. Darwin's theory merely set another obstacle in the path of faith in God, and man's struggle to surmount it, according to Browning, ~~strengthened~~, rather than dissipated, belief in a divine scheme of life. "In Robert Browning we are introduced to a religion which . . . is just the reasonable belief of a great English nineteenth century thinker, who is in sympathy with all the science and progress and mental activity of [the] day."⁷

Many critics are of the opinion that Cardinal Nicholas Patrick Wiseman was Browning's model for the character Bishop Elougram; the Cardinal was noted for his ~~opportunism~~ and leniency in matters concerning Catholic dogma. He was made a bishop in 1840, and was sent to England as Vicar Apostolic of the Central District. A papal bull in October, 1850, divided England into districts, and as a result Wiseman was made Archbishop of Westminster and head of the Catholic Church in England.⁸ DeVane, however, believes that the conception of "Bishop Elougram's Apology" may have resulted from Browning's conversations in Florence in 1843 with Father Prout, an ex-Jesuit who was the Italian correspondent for the Daily News when Dickens was editor. Mrs. Browning described Father Prout as "kind-hearted and clever, but skeptical and even cynical" ⁹; DeVane suspects that he was Browning's model not for Elougram, but for Gigadibs.

Cardinal Wiseman, the possible pattern for Elougram, reviewed "Bishop

⁷Bardoe, Browning's Message p. 31.

⁸DeVane, p. 240.

⁹Ibid., p. 241.

Elougram's Apology" in The Rambler, a Roman Catholic journal, in January, 1856. An excerpt from this review follows:

"Bishop Elougram's Apology," though utterly mistaken in the very ground-work of religion, though starting from the most unworthy notions of the work of a Catholic bishop, and defending a self-indulgence which every honest man must feel to be disgraceful, is yet in its way triumphant Though much of the matter is extremely offensive to Catholics, yet beneath the surface there is an undercurrent of thought that is by no means inconsistent with our religion; and if Mr. Browning is a man of will and action, and not a mere dreamer and talker, we should never feel surprise at his conversion.¹⁰

Although Browning did not have thorough knowledge of Catholicism, he saw it as a creed able to deal with the world on its own terms;¹¹

In his essay "Browning's Art in Menologues," Grant states that "[the modern poet] must be ornate, overlaying the truth he would reveal with a multitude of analogies and suggestive comments."¹² This is precisely what Browning did in the poem "Bishop Elougram's Apology." Although the poem has been classified as a dramatic monologue, Grant feels that this is a misnomer; he points out that "Browning is never truly a dramatic poet, -- one who lets life act itself freely before his readers"¹³ Grant overlooks the fact that in the "Apology" Browning sets the stage for the reader in a bishop's apartment after dinner, and that the purpose of the encounter of Elougram and Gigadibe is to discuss Gigadibe's accusations of hypocrisy against Elougram; this in itself has a dramatic element, but Browning goes even further. Throughout the poem Elougram refers to actions

¹⁰ DeVane, p. 243.

¹¹ J. M. Cohen, Robert Browning (London: Western Printing Services, Ltd., 1952), p. 92.

¹² The Boston Browning Society Papers, p. 42.

¹³ Ibid., p. 66.

occurring during the discussion, such as the pouring of another glass of wine, which forces the reader to realize that the poem is not merely a lengthy discourse by Browning, although he is the main speaker, but that it is a live discussion of Christian doctrine. According to Curry, "the monologue . . . is dramatic [because] it interprets human experience and character."¹⁴ Cooke states that Browning's poetry is dramatic because it portrays living people speaking for themselves realistically; the characters are individuals who "impress themselves on the reader with the force of the keenest and most vital personality."¹⁵ Perhaps the best definition of dramatic monologue, and one which is most applicable to "Bishop Browning's Apology," is given by Mable when he states that "the dramatic monologue . . . has this great advantage over other forms of expression, that it gives us with the truth the character which that truth has formed; instead of an abstraction we have a piece of reality."¹⁶

Before textual explication of "Bishop Browning's Apology" is attempted, it will be helpful to have definitions of "doubt" and "faith" set forth by the Catholic Church, since it is here that the basis of the argument begins. Doubt is the suspension of judgment in the presence of the two parts of a contradiction, a withholding of assent to either side; it is positive if it is due to sound reasons on both sides (weight in both

¹⁴S. S. Curry, Browning and the Dramatic Monologue: Nature and Interpretation of an Overlooked Form of Literature (Cambridge: The University Press, 1908), p. 9.

¹⁵George Willis Cooke, Poets and Problems (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1901), p. 329.

¹⁶Hamilton Wright Mable, Essays in Literary Interpretation (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1892), p. 132.

pan of the balance); it is negative if the suspension is due to the absence of grave reason from both sides (no weight in either pan).¹⁷ Faith is the object of belief, and the sum of the truths taught by the Catholic religion; it is a theological virtue by which the intellect is disposed to assent firmly to all the truths revealed by God, because of the infinite truth and wisdom of God who can neither deceive nor be deceived.¹⁸

The opening lines of "Bishop Blougram's Apology" acquaint the reader with the setting of the dialogue--Blougram's private apartment after a dinner, complete with appropriate wine. The reference in line six to Pugin, an architect who built many gothic churches in England, allows the reader to identify Blougram with Cardinal Wiseman, who disagreed with Pugin.¹⁹

Blougram initiates the dialectic by establishing the opponent's position. He immediately declares that he knows Gigadibs despises him, and the bishop does not all ow the journalist to refute the statement. The dawn of truth is close at hand, as Blougram promised Gigadibs it would be--
 "... truth that peeps / Over the glasses' edge when dinner's done, / And
 body gets its sop and holds its noise / And leaves soul free a little."²⁰
 Blougram then reveals to the reader that, although Gigadibs despises the bishop personally, he does not despise the bishop's status and worldly position; on the contrary, Gigadibs is quite proud of the fact that Blougram is

¹⁷"Doubt", The Catholic Encyclopedic Dictionary.

¹⁸Ibid., "Faith".

¹⁹DeVane, p. 241.

²⁰The Works of Robert Browning, ed. F. G. Kenyon (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966), p. 129. All subsequent references to "Bishop Blougram's Apology" will be in the form of a line reference only.

entertaining him for an evening, and Elougram is fully aware of it. Further, Elougram states "You'll turn it to such capital account!" (l. 30); he then proceeds to project Gigadibs' possible conversations in the future, and says the journalist has no right to object to this projection. "It's fair give and take . . ." (l. 46). Gigadibs had taken opportunity earlier to state what he thought Elougram's ideas were, and now it is Elougram's turn to answer these statements.

Gigadibs says his ideal of life could never be realized if he were a bishop; he would rather be ". . . Goethe, now, / Or Buonaparte, or . . . lower still, / Count D'Orsay . . ." (ll. 52-54). Elougram apparently has little, if any, use for the Count, who was an intellectual French dandy of the times.²¹ Gigadibs' ideal of life is to be completely his own self, and this element of honesty is not possible for Elougram to adopt in his position as bishop. The height of success for Elougram would be his being made Pope; "an unbelieving Pope won't do . . ." (l. 65), declares Gigadibs. Elougram as Pope would be a hypocrite for two reasons: he would not be honest with the Catholic Church, and he would not be honest with himself. "Best be yourself, imperial, plain and true!" (l. 77), according to Gigadibs.

At this point Elougram pits two ideals of life against each other. His ideal (being made Pope) has been approached to some degree because he has achieved the position of bishop in the Church. Gigadibs' ideal, the "grand simple life" (l. 82), has not been realized by him at all. Elougram states, "I am much, you are nothing; you would be all, / I would be merely much . . ." (ll. 84-85).

²¹Edward Berdoe, The Browning Cyclopaedia (New York: Macmillan Co., 1958), p. 79.

The fallacy of Gigadibs' argument is that he creates an ideal life, and then tries to impose it on life as it actually is; Elougram believes a man should accept life on its own terms, and then make the very best of it. Gigadibs' "abstract intellectual plan of life" (l. 92) can never be workable, because he develops it with disregard for "life's plainest laws" (l. 93). According to Elougram, a plan of life, to be workable, must be one possible for man to lead in an imperfect world.

Elougram now introduces his comparison of life as a voyage, a dialectical analogy which he effectively refers to throughout the rest of the poem. Assuming that life is a voyage over the oceans of the world, and that the destination is death, after which there may or may not be an eternal life, a man must prepare for the journey appropriately. Gigadibs would purchase stores extravagantly, and all of his possessions would be material (books, paintings, a piano, and other luxuries); but since his cabin is only six feet square, he could take none of his luxuries aboard but would be forced to go on the voyage empty-handed, his ideal of life completely unrealized, unworkable. Elougram would prepare for the voyage by choosing a few, small, well-appointed furnishings, to fit the limited space. Although he, too, sees the value in what Gigadibs would take, he realizes that Gigadibs' ideal is impractical; however, Elougram's ideal is realizable, if only imperfectly, because he would be able to take aboard furnishings to make the voyage pleasant. Elougram takes a few comfortable possessions; Gigadibs can take none of his many luxurious ones. The bishop sums it up by saying, "meantime you bring nothing: never mind— / You've proved your artist-nature: what you don't / You might bring, so despise me, as I say" (ll. 141-143).

Now Elougram poses a variation of the voyage, assuming he and Gigadibs are two friends going on the journey together, checking one another for appropriateness of baggage. Elougram's outfit is that of a bishop, and he asks Gigadibs to criticize it. Since it is a workable outfit, why won't Gigadibs be a bishop too?

Because Gigadibs will not accept the validity of divine revelation, he cannot be a bishop. That is, he is incapable of believing in it "stately, . . . and fixedly / And absolutely and exclusively" (ll. 151-152), as he can believe in himself, honest and true. The only things that Gigadibs accepts are those that can be proven to him. Here, Elougram states that he, too, "find[s] believing every whit as hard" (l. 158). Gigadibs' view of faith and belief is too narrow for Elougram; therefore, according to Gigadibs, the bishop does not believe. Elougram accedes: "I do not believe-- / If you'll accept no faith that is not fixed, / Absolute and exclusive, as you say" (ll. 161-163). But Gigadibs is illogical in his definition of belief, and Elougram plans to prove it to him. To begin the proof, the bishop suggests that they both throw out their personal beliefs, and take a fresh approach to the problem; Elougram says, "I mean to meet you on your own premise" (l. 171).

Now Elougram assumes unbelief with Gigadibs. But are their lives, the bishop asks, calm and complete, untroubled by any potential intervention of the Infinite? No, even Gigadibs sees in a sunset, a flower-bell, a chorus from Euripides that something immortal comes intermittently to man. Is it God? Elougram thinks that "all we've gained is, that belief, / As unbelief before, shakes us by fits, / Confounds us again like its predecessor . . ." (ll. 177-179). How is it that unbelief is superior to

belief, then? There is still the "grand Perhaps" (l. 190) with which they must contend. "Once feel about, and soon or late you hit / Some sense . . . [that there may be a God] after all" (ll. 195-196).

In the next step of his argument, Elougram employs symbolism to prove that faith must now be conquered, as doubt had to be overcome before. When he stands on the road of faith over the mountain of life, he is apt to doubt whether it is a road at all, though it appeared so from afar. Seen from the plain below, it is almost a solid line. A few breaks, allegorical "doubts", are insignificant; these breaks may actually be obstacles to overcome to reach the zenith of faith; they may prove to be "the most consummate of contrivances / To train a man's eye, teach him what faith is" (ll. 206-207). For when the road disappears one finds he must trust the invisible, the infinite, and so man must overcome the doubt in order to conquer the faith. The only difference as a result of changing belief to unbelief has become "a life of doubt diversified by faith, / [rather than] . . . one of faith diversified by doubt" (ll. 210-211).

At this point Gigadibs questions the validity of the bishop's argument: "Why not confess then, where I drop the faith / And you the doubt, that I'm as right as you?" (ll. 215-216). For answer, Elougram returns to the simile of the voyage.

The baggage for the journey now becomes extremely important; belief is the comfort Elougram would take; unbelief is the barrenness Gigadibs would take. More specifically, faith and belief come to mean appropriate accommodations for the trip of life over the seas of the world; Elougram points out that if Gigadibs "consult[s] our ship's conditions . . . [he'll] find / One and but one choice suitable to all" (ll. 224-225). His own

choice is to do the things becoming a man who has attested to faith: studying, making plans for his church, building friendships. He enjoys these things so much he can hardly wait for each new dawn. Elougram lives for the day. Gigadiba, on the contrary, finds such actions pointless, wearisome. He likes to get through the unavoidable, meaningless things of the day and go to his sleep. The bishop thinks Gigadiba torpid from lack of action—a child of the night. Belief is best in order to live a waking life.

Having proven the utility of belief, Elougram points out that faith cannot be too completely followed and/or proven in terms of reality as man knows it. A man may choose what type of life suits him best—one of riches, honor, leisure, work and so on; on the basis of a man's personal choice, he "is not judged a fool / Because his fellow would choose otherwise" (ll. 285-286). This type of criticism, which may be extended to included Gigadiba's jabs at Elougram's choice of life, is unfair and invalid. But before a man makes his choice, he must be certain that it is correct the first time; "nothing can compensate his mistake / On such a point [the choice] . . . / He cannot wed twice, nor twice lose his soul" (ll. 298-300).

The despicable, power-hungry elements in Elougram's personality are portrayed at this time. He admits that he was born into the Catholic faith, but also that as he gained maturity he re-examined his religion carefully, and found it to be "most potent of all forms / For working on the world . . ." (ll. 308-309). Elougram then discovered that, in keeping within the bounds of Catholicism, he could gain power over men as well as provide physical comforts for himself. He states, "In many ways I need mankind's respect, / Obedience, and the love that's born of fear" (ll. 324-325); at the same time,

Elougram's conscience will not allow him to take these things ruthlessly from others, but he feels he must gloss his nature: "I must take what men offer, with a grace / As though I would not, could I help it, take!" (ll. 330-331). The bishop uses rationalization to justify his deerskin uniform, saying it is not worn by his choice, but is a part of his position as bishop. Elougram enjoys it when "folk kneel / And kiss [his] hand—of course the Church's hand" (ll. 334-335).

Gigadibs retorts that, although Elougram's choice of life plan is a success, if he were a nobler man he would overcome his materialistic instincts.

Elougram replies that he is living up to his ideal as much as possible, inferring that he is a man first and a bishop second; "my business is not to remake myself, / But make the absolute best of what God made" (ll. 333-334). The bishop does not have absolute faith, according to Gigadibs' standards of what faith should be; Elougram addresses himself, in Gigadibs' eyes, to "grosser estimators than should judge" (l. 369), and has a lower ideal of life than a bishop should have. Gigadibs believes that among the many members of the Church "some dozen men of sense / Eye me [Elougram] and know me, whether I believe / In the last winking Virgin, as I vow, / And am a fool, or disbelieve in her / And am a knave, —approve in neither case" (ll. 375-379). But even these wise men are capable of error in their judgment, says Elougram; "even your prime men who appraise their kind / Are men still . . . , / See more in a truth than the truth's simple self, / Confuse themselves" (ll. 388-391). Elougram introduces another comparison: the ordinary multitude walks on streets in safety; when one man steps into danger, as in walking a roof-top, all men watch him, certain he will

fall. "Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things" (l. 395), Elougram observes. Because it is expected of him as a bishop, Elougram paints the picture of himself as having absolute faith in public; the few wise men who are aware of the bishop's doubts are "held unable to explain / How a superior man who disbelieves / May not believe as well . . ." (ll. 409-411). Men do not take note when an insignificant person, such as Gigadibs, disbelieves; but men are perplexed when a bishop has mere doubts, and still believes.

Since Elougram does not lead a life Gigadibs considers ideal, the bishop asks him to choose an ideal man, possibly Napoleon. Still on the grounds of unbelief, Elougram asks, "where do you find his star?—his crazy trust / God knows through what or in what?" (ll. 445-446). If Napoleon had been known to have no faith or trust in a Supreme Being, he would have been deemed a crazy man; he must have had a purpose, a trust in something superior to man, else his followers would have condemned him. With "the merest chance / Doubt may be wrong—there's judgment, life to come! / With just that chance, I dare not [do as Napoleon did]" (ll. 476-478). A moral man's conscience cannot accept pillage for its own sake.

Another man with an ideal life, Shakespeare, is offered to Gigadibs. Elougram's choice of author is especially appropriate for an example, since to Gigadibs, a third-rate journalist, Shakespeare is the epitome of literary success. Elougram realizes he could never be so great as Shakespeare, but Gigadibs urges that the attempt would be great enough. The bishop's knowledge of his own limitations restrains him from trying; this is a direct reflection on Gigadibs' own philosophy of being one's self, and being honest with one's self. Why should he, Elougram asks, attempt the absolutely

unachievable? The pleasures of life for both Shakespeare and Elougram are the same; the difference between the two men lies in the fact that what Elougram wants he has, and what Shakespeare wanted he dreamed of only, and never obtained. "We want the same things, Shakespeare and myself, / And what I want, I have; he, gifted more, / Could fancy he too had them when he liked, / But not so thoroughly that, if fate allowed, / He would not have them also in my sense" (ll. 539-543). Therefore, Elougram's ideal is achieved, realized, more than Shakespeare's was.

The fire of enthusiasm sparks life, for good and bad, according to Elougram; but it must be real, since a picture of a fire will not burn. Luther's doctrines gave a fire to life, but if he had totally succeeded, there would be nothing left to do but follow his simple formula to eternity. Disbelief has no enthusiasm, so there is no life in it. At this time Gigadibs falls into the trap Elougram has so carefully laid for him; Gigadibs cries, "it's not worth having, such imperfect faith, / No more available to do faith's work / Than unbelief like mine. Whole faith, or none!" (ll. 596-598). Elougram jumps to dispute Gigadibs, saying, "you call for faith; / I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists. / The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say, / If faith o'ercomes doubt" (ll. 601-604). God gave man life, and also gave him the power of choice, free will; and through this power man's only way of coping with the world is to deal with it on its own terms. God intended life to be a struggle, so that man would have to work to gain eternal life. "If you desire faith—then you've faith enough; / What else seeks God—nay, what else seek ourselves?" (ll. 634-635). As long as man struggles to find some small degree of faith, regardless of how he goes about it, he has enough; the more difficult the struggle, the stronger the

faith. Pure faith is impossible, even dangerous, for man to achieve, because it is too blinding to behold; the purpose of evil in the world is to hide God from man. For Elougram, "faith means perpetual unbelief" (l. 666).

The rise of science, advance of knowledge, causes faith to be doubted even more than ever before. In this light, overcoming scientific facts of doubt to achieve faith makes the faith obtained stronger than ever.

Elougram states that his "doubt is great, / My faith's still greater," and adds, "then my faith's enough" (ll. 724-725). If man prunes his faith little by little in an effort to have total belief in the parts of doctrine that remain, he will find himself denying all points of doctrine, on the weak basis that they are not provable. But, on the chance that the sacred dogma is true, Elougram will not risk his future, "experimentalise on sacred things" (l. 745). Then Elougram effectively gives a justification of his luxurious life on earth when he states, "let us concede . . . / Next life relieves the soul of body, yields / Pure spiritual enjoyment: well, my friend, / Why lose this life i' the meantime, since its use / May be to make the next life more intense?" (ll. 775-779).

Gigadibs feels that "truth is truth, / And justifies itself by undreamed ways" (ll. 807-808); in other words, a truth should have evidence of its validity. Elougram supposes that Gigadibs' life of unbelief is similar to a life of natural religion, one of the concepts of the new science movement; but, if Gigadibs were indeed honest, he would perceive that he would "seem as much a slave as [Elougram] , / A liar, conscious coward and hypocrite, / Without the good a slave expects to get, / In case he has a master after all!" (ll. 841-844). The slightest chance that there may be a God after all should force Gigadibs to search for one, at least.

Blougram's arguments against total unbelief are more effective than even he imagined they would be. Gigadibs' ideal and the fallacy of his judgment are crushingly exposed to him by Blougram. As a result, the journalist, having fled a world he could not hope to cope with, begins his voyage through life with a thorough re-examination of the scriptures of Christianity.

Both Blougram and Gigadibs are victims of "positive doubt," as defined by the Catholic Church. Blougram's doubt is able to be overcome by his faith, and he points out repeatedly that the greater the doubt is, the stronger the ultimate faith will be. Gigadibs is unable to overcome his doubt and resulting disbelief until it is proven to him that the absence of belief makes for an empty life, and that belief is useful as a means to a possible end (life after death). Neither man gains absolute "faith," as defined by the Catholic Church. Blougram acknowledges the fact that some facets of Christianity are not provable, but must be accepted blindly by man; but the bishop never fully overcomes doubt, nor does he expect to. Gigadibs, at the end of the "Apology," strives to find some meaning, some truth of God through re-examination of the scriptures; the attempt is a starting place for him, and, if Blougram is correct, "if you desire faith—then you've faith enough" (l. 634).

Harrington says that:

Browning purposely chooses a Roman Catholic to be his mouthpiece in this philosophizing about Faith, because in demands for sheer Faith all branches of the Catholic Church so far exceed any Protestant Church—in all the Catholic systems there is so much more which the faithful are expected to believe, and some of it (e.g., Transubstantiation) is more staggering to Faith than is almost any Protestant doctrine.²²

²²Vernon C. Harrington, Browning Studies (Boston: Gorham Press, 1915), p. 147.

In the "Apology" Browning states through Elougram that if Luther, a prime example of Protestant Christianity, had been totally successful, the work of the Church would be finished, and all that would be necessary would be for man to follow Luther's simple formula to have faith. But then the bishop says that the more difficult the struggle to find faith, the stronger the faith will be when gained. Therefore, since Luther was not successful in reforming all of Christianity, stronger doubts, hence stronger faith, are inherent in the Roman Catholic dogma.

Litzinger and Knickerbocker, in their introduction, accuse Browning of having ". . . provided Elougram with the only antagonist—an atheist—the Bishop could defeat with his hedonistic arguments."²³ In my opinion this accusation is twice incorrect. I can not believe that a true atheist could possibly be converted, to any small extent, in the course of one evening's dialogue of such a curious nature. In the first place, I do not think that Gigadibs was an atheist. Elougram states that "all [they] gained then by [their] unbelief / Is a life of doubt, diversified by faith. / For one of faith diversified by doubt" (ll. 209-211). Bearing in mind that this is after their individual dogmas are thrown overboard, how then can faith re-enter the situation if Gigadibs did not have some small amount previously? Secondly, Elougram's arguments are not purely hedonistic. He admits that doubts occur to him, but he also admits that, although simple belief would be most comfortable, a thoughtful man must necessarily struggle to overcome doubt; the fight for faith does not always give pleasure; only the end result—a degree of imperfect faith, better than no faith at all—can give

²³Litzinger and Knickerbocker, p. xviii.

man comfort.

Although Browning himself was a member of a dissenting church, all of his major religious beliefs are also those of Blougram. After "Bishop Blougram's Apology" was published, the climax of the new science was reached in 1859, with Darwin's publication of Origin of Species. Thoughtful people in Victorian England were totally perplexed with Darwin's hypothesis, and strong repercussions were felt in both literary and religious circles as a result of the implications concerning man's immortality. Darwin completely removed man from his superiority as a divinely created being, which placed him in the category of lower animal life. As a result, pessimism about life after death became more wide-spread than ever before, and many intelligent people began to discard the tenets of Christianity. Yet Browning, as illustrated in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" and his other religious poetry, retained his optimism and belief in God, regardless of the doubts that the new science presented.

Some of his spirit has lingered to us who live in a disenchanted world. Yet the critics of our own day are inclined to disregard much of what Browning says, and to fasten intently upon how he says it. He is now seen to have been a pioneer and a revolutionist in the art of the new psychological poetry, a century before his time; and this aspect, at least, of his present fame would have delighted Robert Browning.²⁴

²⁴DeVane, p. 38.

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