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Browning's Poems of Faith and Doubt

by

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To my mother

and the memory of my father

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Summary

The subject of my thesis being 'Browning's Poems of Faith and Doubt' I have limited my study to those poems that deal directly with the theme of religious doubt and uncertainty. I have divided the study into six chapters. The first chapter deals with the Victorian Age and the multiple forces within it that gave rise to the sense of religious doubt. The remaining chapters are devoted to the poems dealing with matters of faith and unbelief, commencing with Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850) and concluding with Asolando: Fancies and Facts (1889). My endeavour has been to trace the theme of faith in the poems and to relate it to the development of the poet's personal belief.

Chapter I deals with the conflicting forces acting on the different spheres of life--moral, political and social, and the effect of these forces upon the minds of Victorian poets.

Chapter II takes up the problem concerning faith in some detail, the poem under discussion being Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. Christmas-Eve is primarily an examination of the different religious sects (Catholicism, Dissent, and Rationalism), and of the purpose and sincerity inherent in each of these. The divergent views are examined against the

basic fact of the Christian faith, namely, the birth of Christ. The gist of Easter-Day is the realisation that the ideal attitude is one that renounces temporal pleasures. The inherent weakness of man prevents him from fulfilling such an extreme requirement. The conclusion suggests that even for the narrator, there is some hope and that hope rests on the mercy of God as exemplified by the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

Chapter III traces the line of development of Browning's faith by examining the monologues from Men and Women (1855) and Dramatis Personae (1864). In these poems, the problems of contemporary religion and the difficulty of reconciling faith with intellect and science are discussed. The study involves not only the poems dealing with faith, and with the positive qualities of love and goodness, but also those treating the subject of rationalistic scepticism, unbelief, and total misinterpretation of life. In addition, there are poems dealing with religious abuse and the various ways by which Church doctrines can be manipulated to serve one's own advantage.

In Chapter IV, The Ring and the Book (1868-9), my approach has been an examination of truth, partial truth and deviation from truth in the separate monologues, and to relate the entire poem to Browning's religious convictions. In addition, I have analysed the poem as an unravelling of the dichotomy between 'fact' and 'fancy'. The two important issues I have discussed are (a) the poet's attempt to ally 'fact' with 'fancy' and (b) his abiding faith in a purpose behind the travails of life. These issues have been examined with reference to Book I and Book X, and also the monologues of Guido, Caponsacchi and Pompilia. I have treated the

monologue of the Pope (Book X) in some detail, under the title 'A Reassessment of Truth in the context of "self-authorized" action'. Special attention has been given to those passages which serve to indicate Browning's attitude to the existence of evil in a divinely planned universe and to the Higher Critics of his own day and age.

Chapter V deals with the poems written after 1870. Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, La Saisiaz, Ferishtah's Fancies and Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day have consequently been discussed under the heading 'Browning's Later Poetry'. Red Cotton Night-Cap Country has been dealt with as a poem concerned with the ways of belief, and with the advantages and drawbacks involved within different creeds. In the course of my study of the poem I have traced the difference between an honest apprehension of faith, and a blind adherence to religious ceremonies. La Saisiaz deals with the theme of death and immortality and is at once a meditation and a revelation of the poet's personal difficulties. My aim has been to show that Browning found the meaning of life in the realisation that the quest itself is as important as the object sought after, and it remains with the readers to come to their individual decision. Passages where Browning's religious hopes and fears are most evident have been stressed. At the same time I have pointed out that the speculations of the speaker (presented through the debate between Reason and Fancy) should not be dismissed as 'glib philosophy' and 'anti-rational argument' due to their subjective nature. Finally, the importance of choice has been discussed, as has the validity of partial knowledge. Ferishtah's Fancies are in effect a series of lessons propounded by a Persian sage to his disciples. The poem deals not only with religion and

the question of faith, but upholds the worth and dignity of the human flesh. I have concentrated on the poems dealing with the former--in particular with 'A Bean-Stripe' and 'A Pillar at Sebzevar'. In Ferishtah's Fancies I have examined the theme of uncertainty, not unmixed with hope. Like the dervish Ferishtah, Browning searched for an optimistic interpretation of life, even in the face of conflicting contemporary ideas.

Chapter V concludes with Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day. The work is of considerable length and complexity, and I have limited my analysis to those poems which deal with the theme of faith and doubt. The essence of Parleying with Mandeville is that we must take life with its share of good and evil; the paradoxical parleying is an attempt by Browning to explain the existing anomalies of the earth. The implication of Parleying with Christopher Smart is a justification of the ways of God to man and in the parley with Gerard de Lairese Browning attempts to refute the cliché that idealist art is higher than realistic art. I have treated the 'Prologue' and 'Fust and his Friends: An Epilogue' in brief.

Chapter VI deals with Asolando; Fancies and Facts (1889). In this chapter I have traced the final thoughts of Browning regarding (a) the nature of truth, (b) the nature of the next world and of the consequences that follow when a certainty of eternal life is provided to man. The poems on which attention has been centred are the Prologue, Dubiety, Rephan, Development, Reverie and the Epilogue. Dubiety deals with the necessity of doubt, Rephan and Reverie concern the problem of whether there is, or is not, an existence after death, Development deals with Browning's personal experience. The title 'Reverie' and stanza seven

of the poem in particular suggest that Browning is recording his own thoughts in this poem. Consequently, I have traced a parallel between the ideas presented in the poem and the poet's personal hopes and speculations. Once more, the emphasis has fallen on the most human of all virtues--love. In the Asolando volume, Browning continues his quest, trusting to his personal convictions which in turn are based upon his capacity to love.

My aim has been to show that, to Browning, life is a process of continuous growth and, consequently, the efficacy of an eternal life would remain incomplete unless the strivings were continued in the life to come. Seen thus, the Epilogue does not proclaim a final solution, but offers a set of hopeful assumptions founded on Browning's personal experiences. No simple answer has been found and the question of 'Doubt and Faith' remains open.

Chapter One

The Victorian Age

Browning's preoccupations with the religious insecurity of the nineteenth century, were in some sense shared by his contemporary poets, Tennyson, Arnold and Clough. The great task of the nineteenth century was to live down the materialism which was the fruit of science. Tennyson, Arnold, Clough and Browning tried to counteract the feelings of doubt and at the same time to keep in touch with reality, but the forces of fragmentation worked to a different extent upon the personality of each in turn. What was common to all these poets was their attempt to find an individual solution to the general problem.

On Browning, the philosophical and scientific findings of the century made a firm and long-lasting impression.¹ He not only grasped the significance of evolution, but was among the first to express its meaning adequately. Any criticism that Browning made, was directed not against the theory, but against the conclusions drawn from the theory and based on imperfect premises. A plausible explanation of the diversity of the forms of life, involving purely physical mechanisms, had been put forward by the scientists. What remained to be offered to the Victorian public was the certainty that there is nevertheless a Loving God, and Browning's task was to provide this faith. It was not an easy matter and it was necessary for Browning to arrive at a form of personal faith before he set about propounding the idea in his poetry.

The ultimate hopefulness of Browning derives its validity from its grounding in experience. It was preceded and accompanied by a profound awareness of the difficulties of his time. The political changes did not pass by Browning unnoticed and he was concerned with social facts to an equal degree. But the problem which occupied Browning's mind most deeply was that concerning faith.² Browning's faith in Christianity did not admit of the combination of worldliness and ritualism that was characteristic of the Roman Church in the nineteenth century. Browning was equally aware of the extremism of Non-Conformity and the misuse of clerical positions in Romish Churches, but he did not ridicule their doctrines.³ The vital element in Christianity was whole-heartedly accepted by Browning and constantly emphasised in poem after poem, and this was the element of love. Browning repeatedly stressed this quality, from Paracelsus, through Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day to the speech of the Pope in The Ring and the Book. And in the 1855 version of Saul the idea (of love) finds its most compelling lyrical expression. The subject of 'love' was treated in Saul as early as 1845. The first nine sections of the poem appeared in the same year in Dramatic Romances. At that point the poem was laid by. Despite upholding the beauty of the natural world and listing the good things of the earth, Browning apparently failed to reach a conclusion that satisfied him.

Browning's next major work was Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850). The mood of debate and uncertainty that marks Christmas-Eve and the introductions of the Christ-figure at the conclusion of Easter-Day point the way to the final version of Saul (1852-3).⁴ We may conjecture

that the earlier difficulties in Saul were resolved by the poet's own religious development. Since Browning's preoccupation with religion and matters involving faith and doubt found its first articulate and complete expression in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, I begin my discussion with a treatment of these poems.

Notes

¹ For authoritative general discussions of the impact on the Victorian world of scientific developments, see:

D.R. Oldroyd, Darwinian Impacts, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1980.

C.C. Gillispie, Genesis and Geology: A Study in the Relations of Scientific Thought, Natural Theology and Social Opinion, 1790-1850. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1951.

² 'Political questions seemed to Browning to shape themselves in local and temporary ways, and he preferred to look at things in their universal and permanent aspects'. Hugh Walker, The Greater Victorian Poets, p. 283.

³ General introductions to the religious controversies of the nineteenth century are offered in the following:

J.B. Schneewind, Backgrounds of English Victorian Literature

A.O.J. Cockshut, Anglican Attitudes

Frederic Harrison, Studies in Early Victorian Literature

Richard A. Levine, The Victorian Experience

Hugh Walker, The Greater Victorian Poets

⁴ In the final version, after having 'gone the whole round of creation' David realises that the supreme quality which is possessed by God and man alike is the virtue of love. In order to draw a closer connection between this 'human' faculty and the boundless source of Love in the Creator, David is brought by the conditions of the poem (and his own religious consciousness) to predict the amalgam of the man-love (partial) and God-Love (eternal) in the perfect Christ-figure:

. . . my flesh, that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me . . .

Saul (lines 308-310)

The 'atonement' implication in the crucified Christ-figure bridges the gap between fallible mankind and the remote and terrible Godhead of the Old Testament.

Chapter II

The Incarnation in the Poetry of Robert Browning

Introduction

Argument about man's place in the universe, and of the ultimate purpose of existence is as old as human speculation. It is not surprising that in an age of disbelief (or, of a diffuse ethos lacking a unified centre), this disquieting condition should be deepened considerably. Yet it is not, perhaps, too much of an oversimplification to consider two major positions amidst the welter of conflicting views in the social and religious sphere of Victorian England. The first stance would reveal the universe to be what our senses show it to be. This view would be undoubtedly simplistic, uncomplicated and assuring. Considered within this framework, man would be no more than a functioning part of the universe. The second position would admit of man being a higher kind of creature; a being who by the virtue of some kind of faith or knowledge is raised above nature. The first position is pantheistic, the second can be embodied in a variety of Christianity. It was this second position that met with constant attack in the Victorian world, and although the main issues it involved were to an extent connected with Biblical criticism and were consequently academic, it nevertheless influenced the political and social spheres.

Though sceptics and non-believers had existed in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, Christianity's basic story and creed was believed in, and accepted by the majority of the people. The debate on the factual truth of the Bible, and of its validity for men professing to be Christians, caused a considerable stir. This attack on the literal accuracy of the Bible came from the Continent, and by 1830 Germany alone had produced a host of 'lower critics'. Apart from the critics influenced by the writings of Gotthold Lessing and Johann Gottfried von Herder, a number of writers proposed views according to which the Bible should be seen, not merely as a historical document, but as a treatise presenting a higher kind of truth. The former group of critics investigated the grammar and the philology and the received text of both parts of the sacred book, while the latter examined the internal consistency and the historical plausibility of the Gospel narratives, and concluded that they (Gospels) were myths.

The first of these 'higher critics' to make a massive impression on the Victorian mind was D.F. Strauss. His Life of Jesus (Das Leben Jesu) written in 1835, first appeared in a complete English version translated by Mary Ann Evans in 1846, and immediately caused a stir of unrest. Although Strauss's theme was the significance of the life of Jesus, he held that the Gospel narratives were essentially myths. This conclusion was in direct opposition to the conviction of believing Christians.

In 1844 an anonymous publication called Vestiges of Creation appeared, and succeeded in throwing the Victorian reading public into further disquiet. The writer set up a hypothesis according to which

all the marks of design (creation) in the universe could be explained without calling in a designer. According to the author, all the different species, both flora and fauna, could be accounted for by accepting the theory of a long process of evolution. The publication suggested the thought that man was no more than a product of his environment, and this automatically brought the theory of 'free will' and the belief in the immortality of the soul into question.

The advances of scientific workers showed that rigid and un-exceptionable laws ruled the movements of the universe. What room could then be left for Providential interpositions, for God's direct guidance of his creation? The Victorians believed in progress, but they realised that this failed to bring either relief or renewal of faith. The decline of religion in the future seemed inevitable and painful to the Victorian mind. This sense of anxiety was felt acutely by the poetic voices of the period, giving rise to the elegiac note that is predominant in the poetry of the age.

The 1850-60s are undoubtedly marked by the greatest crisis of faith. In the wake of an industrial civilization, and the new findings in the realm of science, values, beliefs and shared assumptions became increasingly blurred. While very obviously sharing the intense awareness of his age, which so troubled contemporary men of literature, Browning is distinguished by his acceptance of the conditions of that age. Browning's theory had not been imposed upon him by external arguments or forces, but emerged as a response to his own needs, and product of his argument. Initially, Browning studied churches and creeds for their dramatic possibilities alone, and a group of his poems

is devoted to representing the bigotry and inconsistency of various dogmatic creeds, particularly those which encourage men to be self-centred and intolerant, qualities which were antithetical to Browning's creed of service and love.¹

After his marriage, the earlier aloof and slightly satirical treatment of ecclesiastical themes gave place to more serious efforts to analyse the religious instincts. The first evidence of the change was the poem under discussion, Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. Considered from the point of view of Clyde DeVane, the poem is a result of Browning's attempt to use the 'white light' of his own personality, rather than the 'broken lights' of the characters through whom he had spoken hitherto. There is general agreement among the critics that the poems signify or represent a serious approach on Browning's part to religious problems he had ignored in his poetry up to 1850. DeVane felt that the poems were the result of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's religious persuasion, and a host of other critics trace the origin to the dual event that influenced Browning's life in the spring of 1849; the birth of Pen, and the death of his mother. The varied speculations on religion at the time could have added further inspiration. However, my concern is not to trace the conditions that led to the formulation of the poem, but to trace the development of Browning's religious ideas.

It is perhaps worth noting, that Browning's poem appeared almost simultaneously with In Memoriam. Both works resemble each other in examining at some length the problems of contemporary religion, and the difficulty of reconciling faith with an intelligent interest in philosophy and science. Tennyson and Browning both appear to believe

that such a reconciliation is possible, since faith depends on an intuitive sense transcending reason. The arguments in the respective poems are based on the authors' particular 'metaphysical interpretation of evolution'. The differences are in treatment and mental processes: Tennyson uses the didactic method and Browning the dramatic; Tennyson proceeds from the individual problems to the general theory, Browning applies the revealed vision to the individual problems. To Browning, all disagreements and tensions are finally resolved in a heaven which is 'not another realm of reality, but a reward for participating in the vitality of a single cosmic principle: "on earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round"'.²

Browning's ambition for complete understanding is sustained by his belief in a benevolent cosmic purpose. His belief in a personal God is reaffirmed, time and again, and there is nothing more real in the universe than the believer and Christ:

My God, my God, let me for once look on thee
As though nought else existed, we alone!
And as creation crumbles, my soul's spark
Expounds till I can say,--Even from myself
I need thee and I feel thee and I love thee.
I do not plead my rapture in thy works
For love of thee, nor that I feel as one
Who cannot die: but there is that in me
Which turns to thee, which loves or which should love.

Pauline (lines 822-30)

From Pauline onwards Browning retains this drive towards an all-inclusive consciousness on the part of the poet. By 1849 Browning appears to have accepted the doctrine of the Incarnation, and was applying it as a solution in Paracelsus to the disparity between the

finite and infinite. The additional line 'A troop of yellow-vested,
white-hair'd Jews / Bound for their own land where redemption dawns,'
gives to the previous metaphor^{2a} a distinctly Christian context, and
also points to the major theme of Christmas-Eve. (The latter was
published a year after the revised edition of Paracelsus appeared.)

Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day

Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850), are always linked together as
expressions of Browning's religious views, and the characteristic
tone that runs through the poems is not that of certainty, or absolute
belief, but that of a tentative hope. The poems have received special
attention for they are said to represent directly, without the recourse
to dramatic concealment, the mature thoughts of Browning. Both the
reflective tone and the substance of the poems--earnest probing of
life's mystery and purpose--have aided them in occupying a prominent
place amidst Browning's poems of religious inquiry.

Christmas-Eve is primarily an examination of the different religious
sects, and of the purpose and sincerity inherent in each of these. The
poem can be accepted as the expression of Browning's personal stand in
an era when Catholicism, Dissent, and Rationalism were engaged in severe
opposition against each other. Browning examines the three divergent
views against the basic fact of the Christian faith, namely, the birth
of Christ.

The poem opens with the narrator standing in the doorway of a
chapel on Christmas eve. He has been driven by stress of weather to
take refuge in this shelter, which turns out to be a little dissenting

chapel on the edge of a desolate common. The unsavoury atmosphere, the crowd of unattractive worshippers, and the overall monotony of the sermon are described realistically and with a hint of irony. A parody of the biblical parable of the shepherd and his flock conveys the first impression the congregation has on the speaker. Browning, with his unerring eye for detail, describes the motley crowd, and their resentment of the stranger who has encroached on their service:

'Good folks', thought I, as resolve grew stronger,
'This way you perform the Grand-Inquisitor--
When the weather sends you a chance visitor? . . .
If I should choose to cry, as now, "Shares!"--
See if the best of you bars me my ration!'

(lines 104-116)

The animosity of 'the chosen ones' heightens the narrator's distaste, and the final resolve to enter the chapel is not prompted by religious fervour, but by his determination to call out for 'Shares' and make known his demands:

'. . . shut your mouth, and open your Testament,
And carve me my portion at your quickliest!'

(lines 121-122)

The combination of the 'hot smell and human noises', and 'the preaching man's immense stupidity', drive the narrator out again. The contrast between the narrow and stifling atmosphere of the Zion chapel meeting, and the free, open earth and sky is treated admirably. Nature shall be the place of worship, and the method of instilling belief into the heart of the speaker. Whereas men seek God in their

cloistered shrines, he wishes to make the whole wide world his place of prayer. We know from the poem that the speaker will return again, and despite the disagreeable elements he has encountered, he will decide to remain. But first he is given a chance to consider two alternatives. Once more, Browning, introduces the importance of choice in the life of an individual.

Standing on the common outside the chapel, the narrator suddenly becomes aware of a double rainbow in the sky, and looking up, he beholds a vision of Christ. The main characteristic of the vision is the air of kindness and humanity.

All at once I looked up in terror.
He was there.
He himself with his human air.

(lines 430-433)

The figure seems to have just left the chapel, and the face, turned away from the speaker, fills him with guilt. He feels that the Lord is deliberately withholding His blessings from the 'deserter'. The vision brings to his mind the recollection of how:

. . . he did say,
Doubtless that, to this world's end,
Where two or three should meet and pray,
He would be in their midst, their friend;

(lines 443-446)

The speaker proclaims his love for Christ, and emphasises that it was this element of love in him that led him to repudiate the congregation and their 'unattractive' mode of worship. His own love and reverence for

God had prompted his scorn for the humble gathering. He had mistakenly supposed that God could not accept a form of worship that was not aesthetically pleasing and morally uplifting.

The speaker humbly acknowledges his mistake, and hastens to make atonement for his act of vanity and intolerance. Grasping the hem of Christ's vesture, in a voice filled with fear and contrition, he cries out:

'But not so, Lord! It cannot be
That thou, indeed, art leaving me--
Me, that have despised thy friends!
Did my heart make no amends?
Thou art the love of God--above
His power, didst hear me place his love,
And that was leaving the world for thee . . .
Folly and pride o'ercame my heart.
Our best is bad, nor bears thy test;
Still, it should be our very best.
I thought it best, that thou, the spirit,
Be worshipped in spirit and in truth,
And in beauty, as even we require it--
Not in the forms burlesque, uncouth . . .

(lines 455-470)
(my italics)

As a sign of forgiveness, Christ gathers the suppliant in His long and sweeping garment, although the speaker's belief that he is treated with special favour may be erroneous. He may well be the 'lost sheep' in need of being saved. The protagonist is to be carried across the world, to witness other sights, and learn the entire lesson of love, of which but the merest rudiments seem as yet to have been learned.

The first place the speaker visits is Rome. The midnight Mass at St Peter's Basilica is in progress, to the accompaniment of music and ornate ceremonial. The atmosphere is solemn, filled with the expectant

awe as the silver bell announces the consummation of the sacred mystery--symbol to the worshippers of the new day of endless life which is their Lord's and therefore theirs. The congregation, though externally different from their brethren in the Zion chapel, are true worshippers. Above the obvious error, sincere faith and love are discernible:

. . . Though Rome's gross yoke
Drops off, no more to be endured,
Her teaching is not so obscured
By errors and perversities,
That no truth shines athwart the lies:

(lines 614-618)

The chief merit of the worshippers in the Basilica lies in their capacity to love. The over-embellishment is cloying and faintly repelling, but the laity consists nevertheless of 'So many species of one genus / All with foreheads bearing lover'. (lines 705-706)

But love not only abides in the homes of 'faith', whether humble or magnificent, but may also live in the place of honest doubt and inquiry. From Rome, the stronghold of dogma, the speaker is transported to Germany, outside the Higher Criticism lecture hall at Göttingen. Browning portrays this as a fostering place of doubt and denial. According to the professor 'with a wan pure look', reason should assist men in periodically correcting their tendency to swerve from the right line of truth. This error is committed by accepting traditional accounts blindly. The professor and his students have alert, inquiring minds, and the lecture, for all its scepticism, is not devoid of reverence. Through the doubt and denial, love can be seen, and Christ enters the place and remains there.

The speaker concludes that tolerance is after all the most reasonable and the most religious attitude, wherein one may experience the value of religion's self and afford to be careless about its sects:

'Let me enjoy my own conviction,
Nor watch my neighbour's faith with fretfulness,
 . . . various climes . . .
 Fuse their respective creeds in one
Before the general Father's throne!'

(lines 1144-1157)

Yet, this resolve of the speaker (to attempt a genial tolerance of all creeds and religious beliefs) is, at its best, a line of easy compromise, and, at its worst, a deliberate shirking of making a moral choice.

Indifference is the easiest of attitudes; tolerance is the most difficult. By avoiding the responsibility of making a decision, and thereby choosing one particular form of worship, the speaker is weakening his position and revealing his religious apathy. What he is mistakenly referring to as 'tolerance' turns out to be a form of moral atrophy.

Thus the climax of Christmas-Eve is not reached till the speaker finds himself once more in the little chapel. The wanderings and visions have been, after all, a dream. The sermon in the dissenting chapel is near the end, and the speaker wakes to join in the concluding hymn. His earlier contempt gives way to sympathy, and the cold aloofness to a genuine companionship of the spirit.

The substance of the first poem is then the review of the three distinctively Christian points of view upon religious matters in 1850. Although the speaker can understand the germ of love and sincerity that informs these religious doctrines, he is clearly more in favour

of the Non-conformist and the Catholic forms of worship. The figure of the professor, at the institute of Göttingen, bent upon demolishing the Christ-myth, is significant. He can be taken as a composite of Comte and Strauss. He embodies the rationalistic tendency of the time; and while Browning is not blind to the merits of the professor's point of view, 'he condemns this scientific analysing of Christianity as he condemned in his letters the scientific vivisection and classification of nature.'³

The Göttingen professor is both sincere and learned. What causes the speaker to rise up and leave the lecture hall is not the professor's lack of erudition, but the total absence of love:

Truth's atmosphere may grow mephitic
When Papist struggles with Dissenter,
Impregnating its pristine clarity,
 One, by his daily fare's vulgarity . . .
 One, by his soul's too-much presuming . . .
But the Critic leaves no air to poison;
Pumps out with ruthless ingenuity
Atom by atom, and leaves you--vacuity.

(lines 900-913)

The speaker emphasises the essential part played by love in the relationship of God and man. Through this virtue alone man intuitively recognises his own importance despite his apparent insignificance in the cosmos. The skies reveal God's power, but the human heart gives equally convincing evidence of the 'nobler-dower', His love.

For the loving worm within its clod,
Were diviner than a loveless god
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say.
 You know what I mean: God's all, man's nought:

(lines 285-288)

God, after creating man, and endowing him with the faculty of love, leaves man to exercise it in accordance to his (man's) own desire. The speaker had felt intimations of God's love in his youth, and had realised that it is this quality that establishes a direct relation between man and God:

. . . gazing up in my youth, at love
As seen through power, ever above
All modes which make it manifest,
My soul brought all to a single test--
That he, the Eternal First and Last . . .
Whose wisdom, too, showed infinite,
Would prove as infinitely good;
Would never, (my soul understood,)
With power to work all love desires,
Bestow e'en less than man requires . . .
 Would never need that I, in turn,
 Should point him out defect unheeded,
 And show that God had yet to learn
 What the meanest human creature needed . . .

(lines 329-350)

From these lines it is clear that to Browning (as to the speaker), love is 'the nobler dower', but it is equally clear that God created man to use 'his gifts of brain and heart . . .' (Section V, lines 289-296.) Man's mind (power) is as important as the heart (love); but, love is fundamentally unlike mind or power in that its sum cannot be increased:

But love is the ever-springing fountain:
Man may enlarge or narrow his bed
For the water's play, but the water-head--
How can he multiply or reduce it? . . .
 But 'tis not a thing to bear increase
As power does: be love less or more
 In the heart of man, he keeps it shut
 Or opes it wide, as he pleases, but
Love's sum remains what it was before.

(lines 318-328)
(my italics)

It is here stated with absolute clarity that the sum of knowledge not only may be, but must be enlarged from birth to death. Love, on the other hand, is a fixed quantity, and affords a test of whether man elects to shut his heart to it, or open it wide. Love is given to us complete, and knowledge is given in the germ. Both are kinetic attributes, and should be exercised ceaselessly.

Thus, one of life's greatest tests is to see whether man will take this great gift of love, which is present not in an absolute or total quantity, but 'less or more / In the heart of man,' and open his heart wide to it's (love's) growth. Love, like everything else in life, is a growing and becoming attribute. It should not be considered as a stagnant absolute. Nor can it be considered to be an all-inclusive quality, existing independently of reason. W.O. Raymond states 'Even though he (man) may not know until the Day of Judgement that they are in accord with divine reality, he must act in obedience to their guidance . . .'⁴ And yet, this is exactly what Browning is warning his protagonist against. Man is expected to 'use his gifts of brain and heart,' and although it is very likely that the intuitions may be reliable guides of life, they are not infallible. Part of the test of life is to examine the principles and dogmas, and to consider the motives before 'leaping' into the 'act'. Browning traces this co-existing feature of love and knowledge as early as in Paracelsus, and gives it the sublimest utterance in the monologue of the Pope (The Ring and the Book, Book X.) In the present poem, the thought can be seen in the words of the speaker, as he sums up his 'new resolves':

So I summed up my new resolves:
Too much love there can never be.
And where the intellect devolves
Its function on love exclusively,
I, a man who possess both,
Will accept the provision, nothing loth,
Will feast my love, then depart elsewhere,
That my intellect may find its share.

(lines 731-738)

Although the sentiments of the speaker of Christmas-Eve do not appear to betray a contempt for knowledge, Browning has been repeatedly accused of exalting the quality of love to the detriment of 'intelligence'. E.D.H. Johnson writes 'Browning's most forcible condemnation of rationalism, however, comes in those poems which deal with the problems of belief. In Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, published in the same year as In Memoriam, the poet had worked on the grounds of his own highly individualistic faith. It sprang from a purely intuitive conviction of the necessity of a loving God. . . .'⁵

This is an unfair criticism of one of Browning's most cherished beliefs. By introducing the scene of the arid lecture-room at Göttingen, Browning is not denouncing the validity of reason. It is not really Strauss's historical findings that the speaker is objecting to, it is rather the purely intellectual, cold and unemotional substitute that he (the professor) offers for the Christ of the Evangelists. Browning sees the need for something more substantial than a Fable, Myth, or Personification. It may be partially true that

. . . the ineptitude of the time
And the penman's prejudice, expanding
Fact into fable fit for the clime,
Had, by slow and sure degrees, translated it
Into this myth, this Individuum,

(lines 871-875)

Yet, the speaker continues:

'Tis one thing to know, and another to practise.
And thence I conclude that the real God-function
Is to furnish a motive and injunction
For practising what we know already
. . . Whoever can take
The same to his heart and for mere love's sake
Conceive of the love, that man obtains
A new truth; no conviction gains
Of an old one only, made intense
By a fresh appeal to his faded sense.

(lines 1039-1061)

Douglas Bush interprets the scene at Göttingen in the following way:

Browning could not take historical criticism as final, because human reason and knowledge are limited and fallible and because the real evidence is within the soul. He sees the divinity of Christ and the transforming power of human and divine love as facts of experience which mere biblical scholarship cannot overthrow. Thus in spite of his antagonism to Strauss, Browning's attitude was not altogether different, though his positive faith was less intellectual and more fervent.⁶

Discussing the same sections, a simple but perceptive statement has been made by John Bury in Browning Studies, (1882): that to Browning

there are two sides to an individual's Weltanschauung, the individual and the universal. And again, that although to Browning Love is 'the end and purpose of life, knowledge is the means whereby it perfects and fulfills itself.'⁷
(my italics)

Bury quotes as evidence of his theory the query of the Pope:

Why live
Except for love--and how love unless they know?

Thus, in Christmas-Eve, Browning finds something valuable, something unpleasant. This dichotomy of emotion applies to the Evangelical chapel and Roman Catholic Cathedral--the purely intellectual approach is finally found unimportant. Having explored the three modes of belief, the narrator chooses the first. His first visit to the chapel had proved to be exceedingly distasteful. In fact, this was the congregation that had provoked his scorn and ridicule, but now the speaker feels an urgency to align himself with this sect. The Roman Catholic ritual is permeated with love, but there are too many incidentals added to the service. These detract from its original purpose, namely, to bring the worshippers close to God. The Higher Critics depend solely on reason, and do not possess 'love' but only the 'ghost of love'. The vacuum created by the intellectual approach of the Biblical Critic is the only position totally rejected.

We cannot know why the narrator's final choice should be the Evangelical chapel. The Evangelicals are portrayed as vulgar, but the speaker decides that here, where the fewest impediments are placed between the believer and his religious experience, he must cast his lot:

I then in ignorance and weakness,
Taking God's help, have attained to think
My heart does beat to receive in meekness
That mode of worship, as most to his mind,
Where earthly aids being cast behind,
His All in All appears serene
With the thinnest human veil between . . .

(lines 1301-1307)

Whether or not Browning himself actually adopted the Evangelical position in practise is of little real consequence in my present discussion. I agree with the opinion of T.J. Collins, that what is important is that the narrator picks the most 'fleshly' of the three alternatives as the surest route to God. The term 'fleshly' stands for that mode of worship which is nearest to our common life, and is not far removed from our everyday experiences. The congregation in the little dissenting chapel are poor, ignorant and not very clean. Their mode of worship is crude, and the sermon is not without error. Yet their earnestness and religious zeal is no less than the 'raree show of St Peter's successor, / Or the laboratory of the Professor!' Here, as elsewhere, Browning supports the warmth and genuineness of the human heart, although it may lack intellectual awareness and ritualistic excesses.

Secondly, certain ideas emerge from the poem which are attributable (or can be attributed) to Browning, because they are consistent with similar ideas in Easter-Day, the Essay on Shelley, and later in Men and Women. The ideas are 'the necessity of belief in Christ as the mediator between the human and the divine; the value of love shared by man and God as the instrument which makes such mediation possible, and the definiteness of the assurances for faith provided by reason.'⁸

Collins treats Christmas-Eve not to add another definition of Browning's 'religion' to the numerous ones already in existence, but primarily to consider it (and the companion poem) as reflections of the religious ideas Browning was exploring and assimilating during

this stage of his development. He further wishes to argue that 'these ideas embody, in their preoccupation with bringing into a harmonious relationship the human and the divine, the basic problem of poetic theory which Browning was investigating at the same time.'⁹ I concur with the theory of Mr Collins, and my effort will be to consider Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day as articulations of Browning's 'contemplation' regarding prevalent religious ideas. They should not be treated as Browning's final convictions, but as stepping stones which serve to guide the readers to perceive the workings of the poet's mind, and a clearer understanding of his conflict.

It is an interesting fact, however, that Miss Barrett had anticipated the matter (regarding the choice of the protagonist in Christmas-Eve), and in her letter dated August 15, 1846, writes as follows:

I meant that I felt unwilling, for my own part, to put on any of the liveries of the sect. The truth, as God sees it, must be something so different from these opinions about truth . . . I could pray anywhere and with all sorts of worshippers, from the Sistine Chapel to Mr Fox's, those kneeling and those standing . . . still you go quickliest there, where your sympathies are least ruffled and disturbed-- and I like, beyond comparison best, the simplicity of the dissenters. . . .

(my italics)

Here, in compact prose, the substance of Christmas-Eve is hinted at.

The letter continues:

When the veil of the body falls, how we shall look into each other's faces, astonished . . . after one glance at God's!

The magnificent scene of the Day of Judgement in Easter-Day is suggested here. Browning agreed with Miss Barrett, and although he felt unwilling to constrain his religion to any sect, if a choice has to be made, he too chooses the Dissenting position. It would be however, both presumptuous and critically misleading to accept the 'thoughts' presented in the poem as indubitably those of the poet. Browning wrote House and Shop to discredit self-revelation of the artist. It is true that Christmas-Eve (as well as Easter-Day, Epilogue to Dramatis Personae, La Saisiaz) written manifestly in propria persona express personal values to a greater measure than do the other poems. Thus, while refraining from accepting the final choice as a conclusive proof of Browning's religious preference, we can present three tentative views.

1. The reasoning of the speaker within the poem establishes him as a liberal believer. Browning, too, was from the outset, always an inquirer, and the faith of his heart was infinitely more important to him than any organised religion.
(lines 363-374)
2. It is as foolish to adore the mind as to 'worship' . . . 'simple work of nomenclature', or to hold that Harvey is the Supreme Being because he has invented the circulation of blood. Of the three viewpoints in matters of the spirit, none is entirely acceptable or perfect, and rightly so. If forced to make a choice, it is preferable to elect unreasoning love over unloving reason; but man is never asked to make such an extreme choice. Consequently, the happy man rests in a choice involving both head and the heart, not one alone.
(lines 1301-1310)
3. Freedom to Browning is always within set limits. Even while showing the efficacy of the human heart, he never advocated the anarchy of absolute individualism. Life is a test of each man individually, and each must face the test essentially alone and seek help both from his intelligence and from his intuition. Browning does not, however, counsel each individual 'to set up his own code of ethics in a vacuum, absolutely divorced from all others, and perhaps at cross purposes to them.'¹⁰

Easter-Day

Easter-Day is organised around a debate. Since neither of the speakers has a name, we can refer to the first speaker as the sceptic (not sceptical in the matters of faith, but sceptical as to how far it is possible to practise Christianity without being exposed to strife and stress). To the second speaker, a naturally uncomplicated individual, we can give the name 'the easy believer'.

Like the preceding poem, Easter-Day is marked by the absence of that dramatic disguise which more or less conceals the other works of Browning. The differences between Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day is, that whereas in the first there is only one speaker, in the present one there are two interlocutors. Consequently, it would be a mistake to identify Browning with either. We can rather assume that Browning's opinions shine through both the speakers.

Whereas Christmas-Eve opens with the lively account of the little dissenting chapel, Easter-Day plunges at once into a sort of rumination, leading to religious discussion. The opening lines are charged with emotional tension: 'How very hard it is to be / A Christian!' Clearly, the speaker is a deeply religious man, but he appears to be labouring under some kind of emotional distress. Thus his religion has not brought him certainty and peace of mind. The words of the speaker reveal that he has spent a great deal of time in thinking over his position, and has finally come to the conclusion that the road to the Christian faith is difficult and uncertain. At the outset the speaker feels vulnerable, and his words betray his anxious state of mind. We, having read the poem, know however that this very 'uncertainty of

Christian faith' will later be accepted by the individual, and that he will learn that the essence of religion lies in the continuous shift of faith. Thus it is not only impossible, but against the laws of the universe to achieve complete certitude.

To come back to the introductory lines of the poem, the speaker complains that the various aspects of faith offer him little satisfaction. He is caught in the throes of dichotomous emotions--his natural impulses prompt him to enjoy material comforts, while his conscience warns him of the consequence:

How very hard it is to be
A Christian! Hard for you and me,
Not the mere task of making real
That duty up to its ideal . . .
But hard I mean, for me and you
To realise it, more or less,
With even the moderate success
Which commonly repays our strife
To carry out the aims of life.

(lines 1-12)

The speaker admits that if he could be sure of the ultimate purpose behind this universe, and of God's express will, then he would gladly suffer every adverse condition to carry out 'the least Command of God.' Yet it is this certainty that is denied to mankind, and according to the first speaker, this lack makes belief difficult, if not impossible.

. . . The whole, or chief
Of difficulties, is belief.
Could I believe once thoroughly,
The rest were simple.
Prove to me, only that the least
Command of God's is God's indeed,
And what injunction shall I need
To pay obedience?

(lines 29-37)
(my italics)

In reply, the second speaker admits that he finds no cause for agitation or perplexity in his life. His attitude can be said to be that of an 'easy believer', or 'detached' Christian. He is satisfied to base his belief on probability and uncertainty:

You must mix some uncertainty
With faith, if you would have faith be.

(lines 71-72)

Furthermore, he contends that those who wish to turn a blind eye upon the beauty of the world, are only showing ingratitude to God for the varied splendours he has provided:

Such is man's usual gratitude,
Such thanks to God do we return,
For not exacting that we spurn
A single gift of life, forego
One real gain,--only taste them so
With gravity and temperance,
That those mild virtues may enhance
Such pleasures, rather than abstract

(lines 205-211)

The narrator (or, the ascetic speaker) cannot be convinced, and pursues his earlier theorem, namely, man must reject the world if he wishes to be saved. He concludes his torrent of negative and ascetic generalisations with a plea for his friend's advice. The 'easy believer' attempts to placate the anxieties of his companion by agreeing that:

I'd take, by all means, in your place,
The safe side, since it so appears:
Deny myself a few brief years,
The natural pleasure, leave the fruit
Or cut the plant up by the root.

(lines 268-272)

Curiously enough, the first speaker now changes his mind. So far he was convinced that it is hard to be a Christian and was resolved to make the most of his self-inflicted abstinence. Yet, now that his friend agrees in part with him, he contemplates the uncertainty of an after-life. There is no guarantee that a life of piety and rejection will ensure happiness in the life hereafter. How is he to know, or any man for that matter, that he would not be renouncing everything for an empty future:

If after all we should mistake,
And so renounce life for the sake
Of death and nothing else?

(lines 297-299)

The question that persistently presents itself is 'Is it therefore worth while to try?' The easy believer is now impatient, and warns his friend not to put the seeds of doubt into his mind. But the 'ascetic believer' is not to be subdued, and the second section of the poem is taken up with the account of a vision that he experienced three years before on the common.

The attitude of the easy believer is one of apathetic tolerance, and his arguments can be seen to find a more 'worldly' utterance in a memorable monologue that Browning later wrote. Bishop Blougram's Apology was first published in Men and Women, November 1855, and according to several biographers, it was probably written in February, 1850. The monologue deals with Blougram, a worldly and erudite ecclesiastic. The reasonings of the bishop are an echo of the words of the 'easy believer' in Easter-Day:

You must mix some uncertainty
With faith, if you would have faith be.

(lines 71-72)

According to Bishop Blougram:

All we have gained then by our unbelief
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith
For one of faith diversified by doubt
We call the chess-board white, we call it black.

(lines 209-212)

The words of the bishop make the dialectical victory (in the context) easier, but they intensify the appearance of insincerity. Blougram's premises may contain certain ideas that were held by the poet, but the corollaries that follow run counter to Browning's values.

Browning wishes the bishop to be understood as a man, who 'said true things, but called them by wrong names'. But although Blougram lacks whole-hearted belief, faith rather than scepticism is his element. He has Browning's sympathy, at least his intellectual sympathy.

In Bishop Blougram's Apology, the arguments are being directed at a journalist, called Gigadibs. Just as many of the bishop's theories can be superficially compared to the beliefs of the second speaker in Easter-Day, similarly Gigadibs' views can be compared to those of the 'sceptical' or 'ascetic' believer in Easter-Day. Gigadibs' tragedy is that he cannot act as long as he demands absolute faith as a condition of accepting Christ, and with no action there can be no test and no growth. The 'ascetic' speaker in Easter-Day craves likewise for 'complete knowledge' of God's purposes, and his initial distress springs from this inordinate desire. But here the superficial

similarities of the two poems end. Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day is an endeavour to examine the grounds upon which a Christian believer may base his faith, while Bishop Blougram remains unparalleled in its breadth of sophistical arguments.

The poet's own thoughts are not perceptible through the speech of either of the speakers: one trusting, the other assailed by doubts. Browning does enunciate his own ideas in the next section (Section XX) through the voice of God who counsels the troubled narrator about the correct use of earthly aids in the struggle for belief. The importance of the vision lies in the message that although the ideal way to serve God would mean a dissociation from all earthly lures, the natural weakness of mankind makes it impossible for them to live up to this extreme principle. Since God is All-Powerful and All-Love, He understands human limitations and does not expect them to behave in any way which is inconsistent with ordinary humanity. The beauty and pleasures of this world should not be spurned, and neither should they be accepted as the final means to reach God. The world and all the creature-comforts are only a partial apprehension of truth--they are the means to an end, not the end in themselves. To the 'ascetic' believer, even today, three years after the manifestation, life is still a continual 'warfare'.¹¹

In Easter-Day, as in Christmas-Eve, the redeeming quality of love is emphasised. The ultimate need and the supreme satisfaction of the soul consists in Love. Christianity is a matter of faith. While a scientific certainty on the subject is impossible, and not even desirable, might not a greater measure of probability be reasonably demanded before engaging in so arduous an undertaking?

The answer that is given is practically that which is contained in Christ's fourth beatitude: 'Blessed are they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.' The soul of man yearns for love, not finite love, but that which is unlimited and eternal. The meaning of the parable-vision can be understood when it is considered within this context.

The vision had come upon the narrator (ascetic believer) one Easter evening, three years ago, by the chapel upon the desolate common. He was meditating on the apparent worth or worthlessness of earthly life, and the thought struck him as to what his case might be if he chanced to fall dead that very minute:

How were my case, now, did I fall
Dead here, this minute--should I lie
Faithful or faithless?

(lines 396-398)

His commonsense stressed that he was a Christian, and he was momentarily lulled into a false sense of security. Suddenly, the midnight was lit up with red flames, the hour of Judgement had come, and passed by swiftly, inexorably.

The speaker met with an answer regarding his position immediately; he was judged to be 'faithless': 'There stood I, found and fixed.'
(line 552).

The speaker stands condemned to that which had been his choice through life. He had committed the error of preferring the shadow to the substance. All the incredible beauty and variety of wonders which the world of nature possesses, were his, from the remote grandeur of

the Alps to the tiny graces of the humming-bird, from the flowing rivers to the myriad intricacies and laceworks of the ferns. But all this, the 'voice' reminds him, is but a paltry gain. The man stands excluded from the grace of God.

Thou said'st, 'Let spirit star the dome
Of sky, that flesh may miss no peak,
No nook of earth, I shall not seek
Its service further!' Thou art shut
Out of the heaven of spirit; glut
Thy sense upon the world: 'tis thine
For ever--take it!

(lines 693-699)

The voice of God confirms the narrator's evaluation of his own weakness in the expressed preference for the imperfection of earth to the perfection of heaven. On the surface, the passage (lines 675-707) contradicts Browning's celebration of the value of imperfection. But when we read the ensuing discussion carefully, we realise that it centres on the relative values of earthly attributes, and consequently it does not contradict, but substantiates the opinions concerning imperfection. The same ideas were expressed by Browning earlier, in Paracelsus and Sordello. The world should not be utterly rejected, but should be viewed as something which can help man to a higher goal.

As the narration proceeds, the speaker recounts how he made repeated choices, and how every choice that succeeded the previous one, deepened his anguish. He craved for art objects, and the boon was granted. The realisation that beauty is but the first rung of the ladder to eternal joy caused him to retract his wish and entreat for knowledge. Yet, this goal in its turn left him as dissatisfied as the previous ones had done:

All still is earth's, to know, as much
And feel its truth, which if we touch
With sense, or apprehend in soul
What matter? I have reached the goal . . .
The goal's a ruin like the rest!

(lines 893-901)

Science, philosophy, music, should be able to break earth's bond, but their temporal quality imposes limitation. (Here I find a strong parallel to Faust. Like the protagonist in Goethe, the speaker in Easter-Day aspires to infinite beauty and knowledge, yet fails to realise the all-embracing quality of love.) The 'voice' bade him remember that all the intuitions of man's mind, his guesses at truth, his graspings after the infinite, are God-given, and none are the inherent property of man. (lines 904-920)

Such gleams made bright the earth an age;
Now the whole sun's his heritage!

(lines 927-928)

Once more the speaker makes his petition. He no longer wishes to catch at the broken reeds, but hopes to reap the flower of love. He has realised his mistake in attaching all values to earthly things, and finally grasps the importance of love. Nature, Science, Art, Humanity, have no separate value from faith. Even man's love for his fellow humans is secondary, and it is the love of God that is integral. All other factors are dependent upon this awareness. Love is the one quality accessible to man, upon which he may completely depend for salvation; it is an attribute that envelops all things on earth, and its value is further enriched by the fact that through His love for man, and as evidence of it, God became flesh and suffered death.

Finally, the lesson has been learnt, and humbly the man prays:

Thou Love of God! Or let me die,
Or grant what shall seem heaven almost!
Let me not know that all is lost,
Though lost it be--leave me not tied
To this despair . . .
Only let me go on, go on,
Still hoping ever and anon
To reach one eve the Better Land!

(lines 992-1004)
(my italics)

The day was breaking, and the man awoke to the struggles and crosses of everyday life. He felt thankful that he was not left in God's contempt apart, bound down to the earth, 'the fiend in angel's shape'. The ascetic believer ends his declaration as he had begun, by asserting that all said and done, he finds it 'hard to be a Christian'.

The gist of Easter-Day is the realisation that the ideal attitude is one that can renounce temporal pleasures. No human substitute possibilities can replace Christian faith. But mankind is by nature fallible and this inherent weakness of man prevents him from fulfilling such an extreme requirement as the Christian religion demands of its adherents. It is difficult for man to deny the joys and comforts of this world. Thus the final hope for our deliverance is the infinite mercy of Christ.

Browning concludes the poem by suggesting that even for the narrator, there is some hope and that hope rests on the mercy of God as exemplified by the life, death and resurrection of Christ:

But Easter-Day breaks! But
Christ rises! Mercy every way
Is infinite, and who can say?

(lines 1038-1040)

In strong contrast with the note of hope in Browning's poem is the experience of Clough. When for Clough religious certainties disappeared, the initial sense of desolation and loss was 'urgent, explicit and plangent, and found expression in what is probably the most powerful of the poems of the "lost generation":¹²

Easter-Day

Christ is not risen!
Christ is not risen, no,
He lies and moulders low;
Christ is not risen . . .
As circulates in some great city crowd
A rumour changeful, vague, importunate, and loud . . .
Or authorship exact,
Which no man can deny
Nor verify;
So spread the wondrous fame;
He all the same
Lay senseless, mouldering, low
He was not risen, no,
Christ was not risen!
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust;
As of unjust, also of the just--
Yea, of that Just One too.
This is the one sad Gospel that is true,
Christ is not risen.

(lines 5-8, 48-63)¹³

And yet, the reply in the second part of the poem, though sombre, is not devoid of an element of hope:

Joy with grief mixes, with despondence hope.
Hope conquers cowardice, joy grief;
Or at least, faith unbelief.

Easter-Day II

(lines 32-34)

It would be erroneous to claim that Browning knew all the answers to the problems of his age, in matters of religious belief. He too, was assailed by feelings of doubt, not unlike those felt by Clough and Matthew Arnold. Browning was never a sectarian or leaner upon creeds, (though the conclusion of Christmas-Eve proves to be an exception to this point) and he preferred to worship outside church walls. Secondly, Browning believed in the necessity of uncertainty (or partial certainty) in matters both secular and theological. Whereas for Arnold and Clough the doubts in the sphere of religion spelled utter pessimism, for Browning they were necessary to prevent a 'torpor of assurance' from settling down. He writes in A Death in the Desert:

God's gift was that man should conceive of truth
And yearn to gain it, catching at mistake,
As midway help till he reach fact indeed.

(lines 610-612)

And finally, Browning at no time interpreted the Bible literally. As Kingsbury Badger has said in his article on Browning's religion,

If we may say of Browning that 'he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God' [La Saisiaz, 604], we cannot truthfully add any more than that he believed in the incarnation of Love. He did believe in a Supreme Being, but his Trinity was the metaphysical Power, Intelligence, and Love, rather than the theological Father, Son and the Holy Ghost.¹⁴

Consequently, Browning would not echo Clough's lament, but assert:

But . . . Christ rises! (since) Mercy every way
Is infinite,

According to Collins, Easter-Day is truly written in the spirit of the Christian 'Magnificat', and its source does have its deepest roots in Browning's religious convictions and in his appreciation of the truth revealed through the Incarnation. Browning's growing interest in the figure of Christ, and in specific Christian doctrines associated with Christ can be seen from the poems completed between 1845-1852. Earlier, in 1841, Saul had been attempted and left incomplete. The solution came in 1845, and the second half of the poem centres around David's prophetic vision of the Incarnation, that is on the figure of Christ as representative of the union of flesh and spirit, of man and God.

Saul does not stand alone as evidence of Browning's growing faith during this period. Apart from the two poems discussed in this section, the two revisions of Paracelsus and the Essay on Shelley all help to 'point to Browning's increasing conviction that in the figure of the Incarnate Christ he has found both an idea on which to ground his religious faith, and a symbol which at one and the same time states and solves the aesthetic problems of reconciling the fleshly and the spiritual, the spotted and the pure.'¹⁵

Although the chronology of publication seems to suggest that Browning first 'solidified' his religious position and then advanced his aesthetic on the basis of this position, his activities during this period (as poet, letter writer, critic) indicate that his religious and aesthetic thoughts developed simultaneously, and were mutually dependent. His energy was directed towards the fundamental problem of apprehending perfection through imperfection, of somehow fusing apparent opposites.

It would be incorrect to assume that Browning could not complete Saul in 1841 because he was unaware of the existence of certain Christian doctrines. The doctrines of Incarnation were familiar to Browning before he expressly used them in his poetry after 1846, but they did not constitute an integral part of his thoughts. Discussing the relation of Browning and Philosophy, Philip Drew writes:

I shall limit 'philosophy' to 'ethics' and begin my account in 1850. The poems before that date, though important in the evolution of Browning's characteristic literary stance are not of first importance in the history of his thought. The major exception is Sordello.

The first poem which shows clearly his preoccupation with the problems with which he was to struggle for the rest of his life is Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850).¹⁶

The basic tenet of Browning's thought as a philosopher and as a poet before Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day is that man must recognise the limitations of his own powers. For the philosopher, this means that it is impossible to know God directly, and for the poet, this means that it is impossible to present an absolute vision of truth in a work of art. The implications of these ideas are examined in Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello. Browning tried to resolve the conflicting demands of infinite aspiration and finite ability, by adopting a conscious belief in the man-God synthesis of Christ.

Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day are lifted above the position of mere theological arguments by their beauty, and the spiritual fervour which informs them. The opening section, with its description of the gathering of the dissenting congregation, is rich with bold, racy humour. The depiction is almost parallel to the genial and tinted tapestry-work with which Chaucer unfolds his Canterbury Tales.

Well, from the road, the lanes or the common,
In came the flock: the fat weary woman . . .
Prompt in the wake of her, up-pattered
On broken clogs, the many-tattered
Little old-faced peaking sister-turned-mother . . .
Then a tall yellow man, like the Penitent Thief,
With his jaw bound up in a handkerchief,
And eyelids screwed together tight,
Led himself in by some inner light.

(lines 47-84)

One cannot say that the lines have been shaped by Browning's dissenting up-bringing, since he depicts the German professor's room with similar interest. The technique of chronicling the minutest and meanest detail has a specific aim: the external detail conjures up an atmosphere of deprivation and ignorance, and this (knowledge) is delicately balanced with the astonishing realisation that Christ has entered and accepted the worship.¹⁷ The congregation is, as it were, a page or a sheaf of pages, from the book of life, and like life itself, the warring qualities here are both rare and plebeian.

Easter-Day is less varied than the first poem. It has, however, a large share of the beauty of apocalyptic visions. The clearness of the vision is the most prominent characteristic of both poems, but it does not mean, however, that Browning would have accepted all the views he may seem in these visions to support. We should refrain from reading too much of a positive and dogmatic theology into them.

Elizabeth Barrett was wiser than the Browning Society when she declared: 'Don't think that he has taken to the cilix--indeed he has not--but it is his way to see things as passionately as other people feel them.'¹⁸

Browning's argument, if argument it can be called, is an appeal to the common facts of man's religious experience and an indictment of any form of intellectual analysis which attempts to discount the strength of human sentiment. 'The Victorian honest doubt remains on the intellectual surface and the bedrock of intuition is not disturbed. In fact it is this prior emotional assurance which prepares for and justifies the emotional ardour of the visionary climax of the poem Easter-Day: this section of the poem would only seem uncharacteristic if the very definite limits to the scope of Browning's free inquiry were ignored . . .'¹⁹

The three predominant ideas which appeal to the readers most in the poems under discussion, are:

- a) the importance of love, and its redeeming quality,
- b) the importance of choice in the life of an individual,
- c) the essence of the theophanic event is not the spectacle, but the impact.

I shall end my discussion by recounting the views of a few critics and assessing whether they are justified in their assumption, by referring to the three central ideas I have mentioned before.

According to Barbara Melchiori, Browning's attitude to Catholicism was contradictory, and his works betray 'depths of bitter anti-Catholic prejudice underlying his frequent attempts at broadmindedness.'²⁰

Owing to the employment of the dramatic monologue technique, Browning's characters have to speak for themselves, and according to Melchiori, they constantly voice Browning's prejudiced criticism of the Catholic Church and the Catholic religion. It is true, the

declarations of Browning in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day are open and broadminded, but these should not be taken as being his last word on the subject. Ms Melchiori quotes the following passage to justify her opinion, and points out that here too, 'the operative word is "error"':

Though Rome's gross yoke
Drops off, no more to be endured,
Her teaching is not so obscured / By error and perversities,
That no truth shines athwart the lies: (lines 614-618)

I see the error; but above
The scope of error, see the love. (lines 647-648)

I fail to see why one particular word should be extracted from the rest and made to harbour a different meaning from that which is obviously apparent. I should like to revise the statement, and to add that the interpretation of a poem depends in part upon the nature of the context, and in part upon a reader's interpretation of the context. For Browning, the word 'error' may have had the same weight of argument as the words 'gross' and 'lies'. The line ends with the reference to the sincerity of the worshippers. Surely a poet is entitled to present his 'reflections' upon a subject without having to answer to the charge of wilful prejudice and narrowmindedness? Browning at all times preferred to worship outside formal churches, yet his natural tolerance enabled him to see the 'embers of love and faith' in diverse forms of worship. I feel DeVane was right to say that 'much as he disliked to surrender himself to authority, Browning could appreciate the beauty of the ritual and the goodness of many of the priests in the Roman Church and in the High Church of England, and in The Ring and the Book he was to deal more generously with the Catholics.' 21

A poem hardly, or rarely, meets with unanimous approval. Some critics felt, at the time of the publication of the poems, that there was a false air of philosophy, coupled with 'affected quaintness'.²² To others more tolerant of Browning's style and reasonings, the poem expressed 'a sincere and earnest spirit.'²³ But it is an extraordinary piece of work, fascinating and undoubtedly unparalleled among its kind. The poet has made his effort, he has produced a work both beautiful and accurate, and it is now left for the readers to meet him halfway by making an effort, in their turn, to understand the nuances within the poems.

To conclude, Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day both deal with the problem of belief. The former examines man and his relation to the various creeds, the latter explores man's direct relation to God. Each poem dwells on the same basic theme: revelation of the Divine love. Browning's search for tenable grounds upon which one might be a Christian brings him face to face with the folly of the commonplace temporizing style of belief which simply ignores everything that menaces it. The visions in Christmas-Eve, and the 'voice' in the succeeding poem emphasise the importance of choice, which is an act of worth in itself. The burden of the poems is that however tempting it may be to take refuge in a 'mild indifferentism' (XIX) a man must finally stop vacillating and make a choice, and this choice should be influenced by his intelligence, his intuition, and by his belief in the 'God of Love':

Meantime, in the still recurring fear
Lest myself, at unawares, be found,
While attacking the choice of my neighbours round,
With none of my own made--I choose here.

(lines 1338-1341)

The poem is not a philosopher's answer to Strauss or Renan, but a poet's speculation.

Notes

- 1 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church';
'The Confessional'. (Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, 1845)

'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister';
'Johannes Agricola in Meditation'.

(Dramatic Lyrics, 1842)
- 2 Roger Sharrock, 'Browning and History', in Writers and their Background, p. 92, ed. I. Armstrong.
- 2a

See how bright St Saviour's spire
Flames in the sunset; all its figures quaint
Gay in the glancing light: you might conceive them
A troop of yellow-vested, white-hair'd Jews.

(Part V, lines 342-346)
- 3 Lionel Stevenson, Darwin Among the Poets, p. 150.
- 4 'Lack of confirmation of its objective reality never makes the poet swerve from the conviction that man should act in accordance with the intuitions and promptings of his conscience which urge him to follow good rather than evil. These are rationally, subjective, confined apparently to each individual's private experience, but they are an absolute for him. A man's ignorance of their ultimate worth the poet regards as a part of his probation on earth. Even though he may not know until the Day of Judgement that they are in accord with divine reality, he must act in obedience to their guidance.' William O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning, 2nd edn, Toronto, 1965, p. 223. (my italics)
- 5 E.D.H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry, p. 97.
- 6 Douglas Bush, Science and English Poetry, New York, Oxford, 1950, p. 132.
- 7 John Bury, 'Browning's Philosophy', Browning Studies, London 1895, pp. 31, 33.
- 8 Thomas J. Collins, Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory, p. 105.
- 9 Ibid, p. 99.

- 10 N.B. Crowell, The Convex Glass, p. 89.
- 11 In a review of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day in Living Age 25 (1850) the commentator concludes that 'the purpose of the poem is to express belief in Christianity, not without doubts, but against doubts'. The Christian faith that Browning examines in the poem has no ease or certainty about it. The purpose of the poem is to take into account the painful stabs of doubt that might plague a conscientious Christian.
- 12 Miriam Allott, 'Matthew Arnold: All One and Continuous', in The Victorian Experience: The Poets, pp. 79-80, ed. Richard A. Levine.
- 13 From The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough, edited by F.L. Mulhauser, 2nd edn, 1974, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- 14 K. Badger, 'See the Christ Stand!: Browning's Religion', Boston University Studies in English, I (1955-6), pp. 53-73.
- 15 Thomas J. Collins, Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory, p. 93.
- 16 Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy', in Writers and their Background, ed. I. Armstrong, p. 104.
- 17 At all times, Browning championed the cause of imperfection and apparent failures. His belief is expressed with exquisite delicacy in the poem Deaf and Dumb:
- Only a prism's obstruction shows aright
The secret of a sunbeam, breaks its light
Into the jewelled bow from blankest white,
So may a glory from defect arise.
- (lines 1-4)
- 18 F.G. Kenyon, ed. The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1897, i, 449.
- 19 Roger Sharrock, 'Browning and History', in Writers and their Background, ed. I. Armstrong, pp. 79-80.
- 20 Barbara Melchiori, 'Browning in Italy', *ibid.*, pp. 177-178.
- 21 Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 181.

22 ' . . . It requires esoteric knowledge to speak of a peculiar faith. We cannot tell what those may think who see originality in strangeness; but it does not strike us that Mr Browning has at all advanced himself by this new poem.' (Unsigned review, The Spectator, 6 April 1850). The Critical Heritage, p. 140, eds Litzinger and Smalley.

23 'His style is . . . a garment, not a mould; it takes the varying shapes of varied movement, and does not force its one monotone on all.' (Unsigned, The Leader, 27 April, 1850).

Chapter III

Men and Women and Dramatis Personae

In the words of Philip Drew, 'The importance of the poem (Christmas-Eve and Easter Day) to the student of Browning resides in its refusal to claim to stand on firm ground'. The poem centres on the debate regarding religious beliefs in general, and Protestant Christianity in particular. Yet it should not be treated 'as a day-by-day journal of Browning's personal doubts and fears, but as a dialogue designed to clarify the issues and thus share Browning's experience with his fellow men. . . . The concluding words "Who can say?" aptly epitomise the poem's speculative, inquiring, anxious approach to matters of faith'.¹

I should like to take up the next group of poems with this 'speculative, inquiring, anxious' note of Easter-Day in mind. I do not wish to assume that Browning was a born optimist, or even a consistent optimist. In the present chapter I shall trace the line of development of Browning's faith by examining the monologues from Men and Women (published 1855), and Dramatis Personae (1864). This will involve a comprehensive study not only of the poems dealing with faith, and with the positive qualities of love and goodness, but also of those (poems) treating the subjects of unbelief, rationalistic scepticism, and total misinterpretation of the purpose of life. Under the last category I hope to analyse Caliban Upon Setebos.

Despite his belief in the goodness of mankind and faith in the benevolence of God, Browning was aware of the forces of evil. He believed that terrestrial suffering can be explained and resolved. But intellect on its own cannot explain the dichotomies in the world, and unless we embrace the quality of hope, integration of the self and spirit is difficult if not impossible.

Several poems of Browning deal with the paradox of the concept of a Loving God on the one hand, and the experience of various forms of suffering and failure on the other. Rabbi Ben Ezra deals with the contrary aspects of life, and attempts to explain the imperfections as necessary factors contributing to the moral growth of an individual. Fra Lippo Lippi deals with the warring factors of epicurean instinct and asceticism. His experience of life embraces within its gamut harshness and poverty on the one hand, and 'the beauty and the wonder . . .' of the world on the other. A Grammarian's Funeral takes up the subject of a total dedication to knowledge and textual facts. It measures the 'apparent' failure of the scholar (as judged by the world) against his personal aspiration. The quest of knowledge the Grammarian embarks upon is peculiarly insular. The arid world of books stunt his temporal desires and prevent the complete development of his personality. Yet earthly attainment is not all. Browning wishes to draw the parallel between finite achievement and infinite aspiration in this monologue. Bishop Blougram treats of religious abuses, and explores the various ways by which the Church doctrines can be manipulated to suit one's own advantage. The poem is an examination of the ways of dealing with unbelief.

Browning's lifelong concern was with incidents 'within' a person, but he was also fascinated by the variety of the universe, and again, with man's energy for self-assessment and self-delusion. He concerned himself with describing incidents which are 'soul baring, the urgent but often compromised impulse to determine one's worth'.²

Karshish, Bishop Blougram, and Cleon deal with speakers who face the situation when the determination of 'one's worth' becomes a necessity. The poems appeared in the Men and Women volume in 1855, and deal with subjects concerning faith or the wilful suspension of an act of faith. In each monologue the speaker has reached a point where an inner assessment becomes an imperative necessity. The protagonist in Karshish and Cleon is engaged in a sincere if somewhat confusing self-analysis, while Bishop Blougram launches on the 'apology' fully aware that he is holding the cards. The discourse that follows is fascinating but naturally leaves the reader and listeners in a sceptical frame of mind. Karshish and Cleon are baulked in their attempt to perceive and grasp the truth by their insular nature. Bishop Blougram, the noted ecclesiastic, is well-read and apparently open to the ideas of other individuals. What prevents him from convincing his audience is the uncertain nature of his premises and the pre-framed conclusion. His position is essentially spurious, though he personally feels no regret in maintaining a stance between 'absolute faith' and 'total doubt', and passing it off as a state of true faith.

I shall deal with the three monologues--Cleon, Karshish, and Bishop Blougram in turn and emphasise the points where (a) Browning comments on matters of doubt and faith, and (b) the possibility of accepting these

overtly warring factors as co-existing. The second point is not stated implicitly in the monologues, but emerges within the context of the speakers' speculations.

In dramatic monologue, the materials or facts are presented empirically--that is they are shown to be 'existing before and apart from moral judgement which remains always secondary and problematical. Even where the speaker is specifically concerned with a moral question, he arrives at his answer empirically as a necessary outcome of conditions within the poem and not through appeal to an outside moral code. Since these conditions are always psychological and sometimes historical as well--since the answer is determined, in other words, by the speaker's nature and the time he inhabits--the moral meaning is of limited application but enjoys within the limiting conditions of the poem a validity which no subsequent differences in judgement can disturb.'³

It will be helpful to consider the monologues in the light of Robert Langbaum's statement. The thought-processes of the speakers and the situational condition determining their action should be examined, without ascribing to the poet the opinions and beliefs of his characters. It is an irrefutable fact that all forms of art are alloyed with a certain amount of subjective element of the creator, since they (the art forms) are the expression of his sentiment. Browning's poems dealing with religion reveal his personal hopes and fears, but whereas the poems as a group lead the reader to an intimation of the poet's religious position, the individual poems should not be accepted as undiluted philosophical treatises in which the protagonist speaks for the poet. Each poem is a separate entity, and consequently each requires a fresh approach in understanding the subtleties portrayed within, without confusing the revealed opinions with those of the poet.

Cleon and Karshish emphasise Browning's deepening interests in questions of a theological character. This idea was further developed in A Death in the Desert. In these poems, Browning sets out to examine at some length the problems of contemporary religion and the difficulty of reconciling faith with intellect and science. Yet, in both the poems under discussion, we are led to deduce that such a reconciliation is possible, since faith depends on an intuitive sense transcending reason. At all times, Browning was deeply aware of the need to suspend disbelief, and of the precedence of heart over the logical, analytical mind.

The speakers of the two epistolary monologues Cleon and Karshish are first century pagans. The subject is the impression made on a contemporary by Christ's coming to earth. A cursory glance at the poems reveals that the speakers are vainly groping for a larger faith, dissatisfied with their present state of existence. Their psychological requirements make them perceive the need for a God of Love (Karshish), and a promise of personal immortality (Cleon). The monologues are thus similar to Saul and La Saisiaz, where Browning emphasises the quality of Divine Love. The universe had its rise through causes beyond the comprehension of man. Both Cleon and Karshish share the forestated concepts, but here the similarity ends. Saul and La Saisiaz conclude with a message of hope and trust; Cleon and Karshish show that the speakers have arrived at the threshold and are prevented from embracing the Christian answer that lies before them by their secular concepts.

My intention is to trace the subtle development of religious perceptions in the speakers of Cleon and Karshish. The mode being that of dramatic monologue, Browning makes Cleon and Karshish intimate the

existence of a higher hope without their realising that they have done so. Michael Mason calls this form of treatment 'ironical'. 'The speaker betrays important aspects of mind rather than articulating them.'⁴ It is necessary to acknowledge and understand the strain of irony that runs through the dramatic poems, and I shall endeavour to discuss the philosophical and religious ideas in the monologues under consideration within their ironical framework. Although Karshish was written before Cleon, I would like to reverse the order in my discussion. There is a deeper tone of religious thinking in Karshish, and this is the reason for my change in the order.

The theme of Cleon centres around an ancient Greek poet, writing from 'sprinkled isles, / Lily on lily, that o'erlace the sea', to answer certain queries of his king and master Protus. The introductory lines are in the usual style of Browning, abrupt, dramatic, and instantly capturing the attention of the readers. The concise and epigrammatic style has no hint of ambiguity. Browning introduces his readers to the two main characters naturally and instantly. There is no sign of the indecision and deviation that marks Karshish. Cleon is a Greek of the last period, master of poetry, music, sculpture, a painter and philosopher. He is the embodiment of Greek culture, and yet, for all his sensibility and power of words, Cleon is curiously blind and self-centred. This decadence of Cleon can be ascribed to the Greek philosophy which had led men to despair ultimately. Cleon is a representative of this refined civilisation, and the characteristic element of hedonism is ingrained in his personality.

The weary old pagan confesses to Protus that the thought of death is dreadful to one who has devoted himself to the pleasures of this world, and especially so to the artist because he savours this fleeting life so intensely. According to Cleon,

. . . we have discovered . . .
That there's a world of capability
For joy, spread round about us, meant for us,
Inviting us; and still the soul craves all . . .

(lines 237-241)

Life is infinitely varied and desirable. The multiple pleasures of life are lovingly touched and dwelt upon by Cleon in the following lines:

The grapes which dye thy wine, are richer far,
Through culture, than the wild wealth of the rock;
The suave plum than the savage-tasted drupe;
The pastured honey-bee drops choicer sweet;
The flowers turn double, and the leaves turn flowers;
The young and tender crescent-moon, thy slave
Sleeping upon her robe as buoyed by clouds,
Refines upon the women of my youth.

(lines 130-137)

Cleon is aware of the importance of progress, and although he praises the culture of perfection and gives it a higher place than that which flourished in its naive simplicity, his inner agitation is betrayed in the final:

Beyond the natural man, the better beast,
Using his senses, not the sense of sense.
In man there's failure, only since he left
The lower and unconscious forms of life.
We called it an advance . . .
A tower that crowns the country. But alas,
The soul now climbs it just to perish there!

(lines 223-236)

Cleon has gained success in his time, and yet as he advances in age, his mind is fraught with despair and doubt. He contrasts the insufficiency of the artistic life with that of his master Protus. It is true that in the eyes of the world Cleon has 'effected all those things' his patron 'wonderingly dost enumerate'. The epic poems on Protus's hundred plates of gold are the creation of Cleon, and also the simple 'little chant, / So sure to rise from every fishing bark'. He is the author of philosophical treatise and the composer of new music. In the words of Cleon:

In brief, all arts are mine;
Thus much the people know and recognise,
Throughout our seventeen islands.

(lines 61-63)

Since Cleon is surrounded with fame and success, we are prompted to ask what makes him feel his life is 'insufficient'. The sense of futility arises in Cleon because he cannot believe in the immortality of the soul. Consequently, he feels Protus is in a more advantageous position since he lacks Cleon's thirst for knowledge. This insatiable thirst is the cause of Cleon's despair, because he feels his own fate is 'deadlier':

In this, that every day my sense of joy
Grows more acute, my soul (intensified
By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;

(lines 310-312)

The sharpening of Cleon's sensitivity and intellect is in ironical contrast to his failing physical powers. With the enlargement of his vision, his health fails, while his palsied limbs serve to quicken the sense of

approaching horror, and 'The consummation coming past escape'. The following lines are imbued with the same elegiac mood and sense of nullity that occur in Ulysses:

My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase--
The horror quickening still from year to year . . .
When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy--
When all my works wherein I prove my worth,
Being present still to mock me in men's mouths,
Alive still, in the praise of such as thou,
I, I, the feeling, thinking, acting man,
The man who loved his life so over-much,
Sleep in my urn.

(lines 310-320)

For Ulysses, life is an eternal quest, 'to follow knowledge like a sinking star'. Like Cleon, Ulysses has reached the end of his finite journey, but the tone of Ulysses is comparatively calm and controlled, as befitting a warrior. As Ulysses prepares to embark on his final voyage, his words to his mariners are of hope and perseverance. The future is indefinite, but Ulysses discerns the germ of infinite 'possibility' in it. Whereas Cleon makes no effort to break out of the confining bonds of his classical perfection Ulysses does not hesitate to embark on a new voyage. This 'search' lifts Ulysses out of his hitherto sterile existence and gives him cosmic stature. The final utterance comes as a magnificent burst of hope 'to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'.

Ulysses and Cleon can be read as companion pieces, in so far as the external setting is concerned, but here the similarity ends. Cleon's state is more terrible than the Tennysonian hero's. The pagan philosopher is the nearest to modern man, and like the latter his tragedy lies in the division between his intellect and his emotion.

In answer to Protus's queries, Cleon advises:

Live long and happy, and in that thought die;
Glad for what was!

(lines 336-337)

However this recommendation of epicureanism is followed by Cleon's disparaging remark about Paulus, 'a mere barbarian Jew', and this is the moment of 'ironic giveaway'. As I have stated earlier, Browning's crucial innovation is that the speaker betrays important aspects of his state of mind instead of articulating them. This 'ironic betrayal' is an integral part of the poem. As Mason writes, 'Consider the irony of Cleon whereby Cleon mentions but dismisses the man, Christ, whose teaching would fill out his own speculations. The force of this is a kind of nudging . . . joke between Browning and the reader. Cleon has dropped out of the picture.'⁵

In Cleon, Browning has then depicted a refined and pessimistic philosopher in order to show that without the belief in immortality, the very argument which is a proof of man's potentialities produces only despair. Cleon holds that the expansion of culture is fulfilling a harmonious scheme:

For, what we call this life of men on earth,
This sequence of the soul's achievements here
Being, as I find much reason to conceive,
Intended to be viewed eventually
As a great whole, not analysed to parts,
But each part having reference to all--

(lines 73-78)

Cleon believes that the 'sequence of the soul's achievement' in human life is to be viewed as a great whole, in which every individual part is synthesized, and he continues:

How shall a certain part, pronounced complete,
Endure effacement by another part?

(lines 79-80)

Progress, therefore, is the gradual combining of the original 'perfect separate forms'. The eventual result is mankind.⁶ Growth is the only reason for staying on earth, and Cleon prefers his civilised mind to the cruder genius of his ancestors:

We of these latter days, with greater mind
Than our forerunners . . .
Look not so great, beside their simple way,
To a judge who only sees one way at once . . .
And ours is greater, had we skill to know!

(lines 64-72)

Browning presents the intensity of Cleon's conviction in the process of growth ironically:

I have not chanted verse like Homer, no--
Nor swept string like Terpander, no--nor carved
And painted men like Phidias and his friend . . .
Say, is it nothing that I know them all?
The wild flower was the larger; I have dashed
Rose-blood upon its petals, pricked its cup's
Honey with wine, and driven its seed to fruit,
And show a better flower if not so large:
I stand myself.

(lines 139-151)

Cleon is quick to notice the progress that has been brought about in the world of culture. But Cleon's belief in the simple advance of arts has been ironically treated by the poet. The greatest progress that has

occurred, namely the spread of Christianity, is unnoticed by Cleon. And it is this ignorance and blindness that is made clear in the lines 139-151. Cleon ends the first part of his monologue, emphasising growth and development, and summing up his convictions in the single line 'Why stay we on the earth unless to grow?'

The second question deals with the scheme on earth and of man's place in this. Protus inquires of Cleon if the thought of death fills him with dismay and horror, or is he resigned to the thought (of death) since his memory will linger on in men's mind 'in the poems men shall sing', and in the 'pictures men shall study'.

Cleon goes on to say that the scheme of beings upon this earth suggests the superiority of man above all the rest. This quality does not mean that while man is perfect, the other forms of creation are 'imperfect'. Man's advantage over 'all earth's tenantry, from worm to bird', lies in his sense of discrimination. Thus, the final endowment, possessed by man alone, is self-consciousness--

. . . by that alone
All's perfect else: the shell sucks fast the rock,
The fish strikes through the sea, the snake both swims,
And slides, forth range the beasts, the birds take flight
Till life's mechanics can no further go--

(lines 198-202)

The brute creation represents the perfection of 'life's mechanics', mere matter inspired with the 'joy in natural life', whereas man has an introspective quality within his soul which enables him to observe and analyse his own behaviour. But instead of making man happy, this power is responsible for his misery, because it makes him conscious that there

is a 'world of capability for joy' all around him which he cannot attain. The barrier is the restriction of the flesh: 'life's inadequate to joy, / As the soul sees joy . . .' (lines 249-250).⁷

Therefore, it would have been better if our race had never progressed beyond the 'natural man'. Cleon calls him 'the better beast, using his sense, not the sense of sense.' (lines 223-224, my italics).

Cleon concludes in profound discouragement that 'most progress is most failure', and that there is consequently no difference between the artist (himself) and the king Protus. Both are subject to mortality, and the thought of death is equally distasteful for both. Cleon feels that the fruit of culture, namely self-consciousness and the increased capacity for joy, are curses. They heighten our awareness that we must die before tasting the joy our refinement has taught us to conceive. In comparison, a humble slave is more fortunate. His ignorance is an armour that prevents him from brooding over the subject of final annihilation:

Indeed, to know is something, and to prove
How all this beauty might be enjoyed, is more:
But knowing nought, to enjoy is something too.
Yon rower with the moulded muscles there
Lowering the sail is nearer it . . .

(lines 291-295)

For Cleon, life without belief and hope in immortality is terrible. At this point in the poem, Browning points to the need for Christianity. It is an empiric fact, just because it appears in spite of intellectual and cultural objections. This contrast between the Hellenic discouraging emphasis on perfection and the Christian promise of development had been treated earlier in Old Pictures in Florence.

Cleon is a delicate suspension between self-examination and dramatic confession. The focus of Browning is on the representation of the great civilisation that is crumbling down. The triumph of the new era lurks in the background, and is perceived in the concluding lines, when Cleon says as an accidental afterthought:

. . . And for the rest,
I cannot tell thy messenger aright
Where to deliver what he bears of thine
To one called Paulus . . .
Their doctrine could be held by no sane man.

(lines 337-353)

The words bring to the readers' mind the earnest desire of Cleon to know more about 'some future state'. The pagan philosopher has come to the conclusion that his spiritual longing cannot be gratified, and that there is some fault in existence 'per se'. The thought of death is so horrible, says Cleon, that,

I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in desire for joy.

(lines 324-327)

But his hopes are in vain, for 'Zeus has not yet revealed it; and alas, /
He must have done so, were it possible!'

The reference to 'Paulus' is made just four lines later, and the irony lies in the fact that the doctrine of St Paul is alluded to as the raving of a madman. The writer of the epistle has heard reports, but only to pass them by.

At this juncture it would be helpful to revert to the opening lines of the poem, or, more particularly to the first line:

As certain also of your own poets have said--

The quotation is from St Paul, and as Hugh Walker has said, it gives the key to the poem. The epistle is from 'a poet and artist not Christian, but with seeds of what might develop into sympathy with Christianity'. St Paul's address to the Athenians may well have been to indicate that some of these already had had a foretaste of the truths of Christianity.⁸ Thus we see that a wave of change was already coming over the social ethos in which Cleon lived. Indeed, as we gather from Cleon's letter, the great king Protus has expressed his desire to know about the 'barbarian Jew'. This interest on the part of the king is not looked upon favourably by Cleon, but his private opinions cannot efface the interest of Protus. If we let our imagination wander back to the era of Cleon (roughly 52 AD), we could believe with comparative ease that a new generation was imminent; a generation that would break away from the pagan doctrines and believe in the God of Love. Cleon is a foil to the shepherd boy David, but the conclusion of both Saul and Cleon lead to the same concept: man's hope for immortality, and his consequent need for faith.

Ian Jack finds Cleon is bereft of the slightest hint of pathos. He ascribes this peculiarity to the fact that Cleon failed to engage Browning's attention as Fra Lippo Lippi or the Bishop do, and goes on to add 'Browning portrays him (Cleon) as spiritually blind in his arrogance, and the resultant poem is nearer to satire than the greatest of Men and Women poems.'⁹

But Cleon is no different from the other men of eminence who lived in that age. Browning does not seem to ridicule the person or his opinions. Browning's dramatic interest is in the impression made on a contemporary by Christ's coming to earth. Secondly, he hopes the readers will perceive the subject's direct significance to his (Browning's) contemporaries.

Cleon represents a culture that is at its extremities and moving into the phase when new life will spring from death and despair. Our emphasis should not be solely upon the opinions of Cleon, but also upon the background against which he stands. Having devoted his life to the arduous pursuit of Art and Knowledge, Cleon is faced with the horror of a nihilistic interpretation of human existence, and yet turns away from the teachings of Christ. The latter have been reported to him in an unpersuasive form, and consequently evoke his contempt. Our business, then, is not to accept or reject Cleon the speaker, but to concentrate on the theme of 'movement' in the poem, and seen thus, it will find a legitimate place beside Saul, Karshish, and Imperante Augusto Natus est, all poems that centre on reports of the Advent of Christ. The poems deserve particular attention because their concern is with the immediate influence of Christ.

Hoxie N. Fairchild comments that despite Cleon's epicurean advice to Protus 'Live long and happy, and in that thought die, / Glad for what was!' the sentiments of Browning are evident in the final ironic 'giveaway':

Their doctrine could be held by no sane man.

Browning seeks to make the speaker expose the 'real' truth which underlies the 'surface play of intellectual sophistication'. In Cleon, as in his other religious poems, Browning skilfully achieves this purpose. Seen in this context, the earlier lines in the monologue describing the beauty and the wonder of the world pass away to take a subordinate role besides the final:

Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew
As Paulus proves to be, one circumcized
Hath access to a secret shut from us?
Thou wrongest our philosophy, O king,
In stooping to inquire of such an one . . .
(lines 343-347)

The casual words 'as I gathered from a bystander' remind us of Karshish's similarly nonchalant words 'The madman saith He said so: it is strange'. In both poems, the letter ends abruptly, without having reached a formal conclusion.

Langbaum writes that there is 'a distinction between the undeniable fact of the speaker's response to the conditions of the poem and the general Christian formulation which the reader may or may not draw for himself. The speaker starts with a blank slate as regards Christianity, and is brought by the conditions of the poem to a perception . . . the perception is not expressed in the vocabulary of Christian dogma and the speaker does not himself arrive at a Christian formulation.'¹⁰

At the end of the day, Cleon conveys to the readers a potpourri of mixed emotions: the beauty in life and movement; the importance of progress and growth; the sensuous enjoyment of material pleasures tinged with the consciousness that 'life's inadequate to joy / As the soul sees joy'; and finally, that all this refinement and development would pale

into insignificance unless we have faith in God, and hope in an after-life. There is also the strong implication that God was available to Cleon and is available to the reader.

Karshish is a complementary poem to Cleon, and was written in 1853-54. The form of the poem is epistolary, and the burden of the poem is the effect upon the speaker of his encounter with Lazarus. The latter is a Jew whom Christ recalled to life after he had been proclaimed dead for three days. Karshish, the narrator, is an Arab physician, and the poem deals with his mind and beliefs, and the gradual development in his consciousness. The subtitle of the monologue is 'Containing the strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician'.

Like Cleon, the subject in Karshish is the impression made on a Semitic contemporary by Christ's coming to earth. Karshish has a more adaptable mind than Cleon, and consequently his inner mind responds to the events with more alacrity. Karshish, the monologist, is a first century pagan, and during his travel in Judea he encounters Lazarus. There is, however, no mention of Lazarus at the beginning of the monologue, indeed, it is not until the sixtieth line that he is mentioned, and Browning makes the protagonist go through a further forty before the reader (and Abib) is told his name. As the form of the narrative is epistolary, this omission on the part of Karshish is significant. At the very beginning of his epistle, Karshish must have given the subject some thought. He presumably knows why he is writing this hurried letter to his master physician, in an uncongenial setting. In Karshish's own words:

. . . this poor covert where I pass the night,
This Bethany, lies scarce the distance thence
A man with plague-sores at the third degree
Runs till he drops down dead.

(lines 36-39)

Later on we shall hear that Karshish's meeting with Lazarus took place in a barren stretch of land, when the physician's physical and mental faculties were at their lowest state of concentration. Why then, we find ourselves asking, does Karshish launch out into an interminably long letter, when he could well have written it after he reached Jerusalem.

The reason for the speaker's apparent haste is understood as the poem proceeds. Whatever Karshish has gathered from his chance meeting with Lazarus has impressed him forcibly. His scientific, rational mind is shaken to the core after he has heard Lazarus's strange, improbable tale, and he cannot efface the incident from his mind. His letter to Abib may be interpreted in several ways. Karshish is an able disciple of Abib, and since he cannot converse with the latter in the present situation, the letter acts as a manifestation of Karshish's thought processes. Thus, the letter is not a piece of pre-meditated work, indeed, it is entirely spontaneous.¹¹ Karshish makes the letter a medium to converse with his absent teacher, and to salvage some of his fast-slipping convictions. His tussle with disbelief and hope is reflected in the lines where he states that the letter may or may not reach Abib:

I send thee what is writ.
Regard it as a chance, a matter risked
To this ambiguous Syrian--he may lose,
Or steal, or give it thee with equal good.

(lines 297-300)

In the case of such uncertainty, the letter is curiously out of context. Karshish's words make the reader feel that not only is he sure that the letter will be safely delivered, but that he assumes it has been delivered, before he moves on to his next stop:

Jerusalem's repose shall make amends
For time this letter wastes, thy time and mine;
Till then, once more thy pardon and farewell.

(lines 301-303)

The reader gathers from the above lines, that Karshish has by no means done with the subject of Lazarus and the Healer, and that, refreshed in Jerusalem, he will take up his pen once again.

The second possibility (of Karshish's action) is that Karshish, being a good scientist, wishes to make a record of what has happened. This interpretation seems partially acceptable, since a good scientist need not necessarily betray a multitude of conflicting emotions. The letter is interspersed with numerous references to plants and animals, but the overall tone is one of agitation, and this excited behaviour of the speaker prevents the reader from ascribing the origin of the 'epistle' to a scientist's curiosity for case-history.

The third interpretation might be that Karshish wishes to shake off the memory of Lazarus, and he feels it is possible only by recounting it, or, in this case, talking about it through the medium of a letter. The meeting has unsettled the Arab physician. He is agitated and wishes to cleanse himself of the incident. I feel that this interpretation is not entirely convincing, particularly when considered in the context of the final lines:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too--
So, through the thunder comes a human voice . . .
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
And thou must love Me who have died for thee!

(lines 304-311)

The splendid oratorical burst does not hint that Karshish wishes to forget the meeting with Lazarus, nor does it suggest that it (meeting) carries unpleasant associations for him. The lines are spoken in a fervour. Karshish's hitherto carefully preserved calm is shattered with the conclusion of the poem, where the words used by the physician have the throbbing intensity of the Voice itself. The repetition of words and phrases--'think Abib: dost thou think?' suggests the excitement that follows a splendid revelation. Only at the end of the letter does Karshish suddenly awake to his present condition--he, a physician of repute, a scientist, is indulging in childish prattle. Once this awareness of his 'profession' dawns upon him, he closes his letter with the cryptic words: 'The madman saith . . . it is strange' (my italics).

In a last attempt to establish his scientific findings over the faith of Lazarus, Karshish has transferred the words he had earlier used to describe a rare plant to Lazarus. The 'Blue-flowering borage' was a natural wonder, a botanical rarity; Lazarus's case is a medical phenomenon. Whatever seeming indiscretion Karshish has just committed can be effaced by cleverly ascribing the words to 'the madman', but this final statement does not convince the reader, nor does it convince Karshish himself.

To return to the first few lines of the poem, particularly the subtitle '. . . Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the

Arab Physician' (my italics). Browning has deliberately placed the underlined words side by side, to stress the fact that the speaker/writer would like to treat his 'finding' as a peculiar medical case-history. Thus at the outset, the travelling physician reports the meeting with Lazarus as a medical curiosity, regarding the 'Nazarene' as a sort of master physician who has a cure for the disease that simulates death:

'Tis but a case of mania--subinduced
By epilepsy, at the turning point
Of trance prolonged unduly some three days:
When, by the exhibition of some drug
Or spell, exorcization, stroke of art . . .
The evil thing . . . Left the man whole and sound . . .

(lines 79-86)

Superficially Karshish is calm and in control of the situation. These qualities can be seen in the routine manner in which he begins his letter, sending 'to his Sage at home'

. . . greeting (health and knowledge, fame with peace)

After the conventional form of address, Karshish continues to tell Abib of his new discoveries, and to relate the rare properties of the snake-stones he is enclosing with his letter. The meticulous nature of the physician is first made apparent in 'And writeth now the twenty-second time'. The line betrays Karshish's attention to details, and is curiously out of tune with his deliberate delay in naming 'the Man'. Throughout his letter, Karshish takes special care to let Abib know the names of the places he has been visiting, the sights that have met his eyes and even the surrounding conditions of the inns where he has rested.¹² His

manner of narration is direct, comprehensive and compressed. The entire itinerary is presented with superb ease and precision. It comes, therefore, as a surprise to the readers when Karshish shows unwillingness, or forgetfulness, or maybe both in reference to 'the very man . . . whose ailment is the subject' of his discourse. And all the time that Karshish spends postponing the mention of the actual subject Lazarus, his letter is marked by a sort of tension and feverish haste. The following lines are coherent when considered independently, but somehow lack a thematic pattern when taken in their totality:

A viscid choler is observable
In tertians . . .
 There's a spider here
Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs
Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-grey back . . .
I reach Jerusalem at morn,
There set in order my experiences,
Gather what most deserves, and give thee all--
(lines 42-54)

Karshish's diffidence may stem from the fear that since the subject he wishes to discuss is of such a fantastic nature, it is decorous to let a reasonable time elapse before burdening Abib with his tale. Since we have noticed the Arab's formal politeness at the beginning of the poem, this trait might easily be accepted as the cause of his hesitation, but is it the only cause?

C.W. Hassett feels that in Karshish 'defensiveness takes the form of deferral--the Arab's resistance to the tale of Lazarus, stems in part, from his skill as a physician. He is prepared to accept new cures, but cannot entertain the possibility of a miracle. Consequently, he forestalls consideration of Lazarus's belief. Karshish postpones explaining "what set (him) off a-writing first of all".¹³

Karshish explains the letter in the following lines:

I half resolve to tell thee, yet I blush,
What set me off a-writing first of all.
An itch I had, a sting to write, a tang!

(lines 65-67)

Finally, he comes out with the description of the strange man. The moment Karshish launches into his experience, his tone changes. There is awe, excitement, disbelief in his words--he would fain conceal the dynamic effect Lazarus has produced upon him, but the 'giveaway' comes with:

The very man is gone from my but now,
Whose ailment is the subject of discourse.

(lines 76-77)
(my italics)

The physician has not wasted one moment after the departure of the 'case of mania'. Lazarus has filled him with bewilderment. Apart from the apparent 'impossibility' of the miracle that has brought Lazarus back to life, the element he (Lazarus) possesses is of radical passivity. Completely uninterested in defending himself, he has a self-effacing but unshakeable self-regard. His obliviousness to the world's scepticism is eloquent; at the same time he is an interpreter:

This grown man eyes the world now as a child.
. . . obedient as a sheep,
. . . yet no fool.

(lines 117-124)
(my italics)

We are reminded of Christ's declaration that 'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it'.¹⁴ Lazarus is neither negative nor dull. Karshish shows the Jew's unusual interest in details coupled with a lack of interest in the larger issues (like the approach of the Roman armies). Thus:

Speak of some trifling fact--he will gaze rapt
With stupor at its very littleness,
(Far as I see) as if in that indeed
He caught prodigious import, whole results;
And so will turn to us the bystanders
In ever the same stupor (note this point)
That we too see not with his opened eyes.

(lines 150-156)

Karshish knows that Lazarus believes his 'healer' to be God himself, yet he does not affect to preach 'The doctrine of his sect whate'er it be, / Make proselytes as madmen thirst to do:' (lines 214-215). It is this detachment or refusal to 'proselytize' that captures the attention of Karshish, and makes him realise that the self-contained attitude of Lazarus is based on something deeper than mere medicinal cure. The world may regard the Jew as a fool, but his calm manner serves as a witness to the depth of his belief. The word that connects the two opinions Karshish holds regarding Lazarus is 'Contrariwise', and indeed, the resurrected man seems to be far removed from the world of ordinary men. Karshish cannot fit Lazarus into a ready-made compartment of humanity, so first he describes him as 'apathetic' and then hastily retracts his words to replace it with 'he loves both old and young'.

Lazarus is caught up in a world of his own. He is gentle, subdued, mysterious, after the Spirit of Christ has passed over him. According to Robert Bell, 'Nothing could be nobler or truer than the description of

Lazarus . . . The result produced in Lazarus by the visible presence of God is such as now appears frequently in men when the invisible Spirit actuates.'¹⁵

Lazarus's attitude adds an important element to Browning's theory of conversion. According to Constance Hassett 'Karshish recognises that the "discerner" is not disoriented but primally re-oriented. It is this condition, the undeniably total alteration of Lazarus's perception, that unsettles the physician.'¹⁶

Throughout the poem, the account of Karshish is apologetic and guarded, yet it is not a public utterance. The root of his hesitation and caution is embedded in himself, since he is guarding the truth from his own self. His caution is then a mode of 'repression', and the professional tone he adopts is a shield to conceal from himself the excitement the man (Lazarus) arouses in him. Karshish's patterned mode of thought cannot accommodate Lazarus's personal convictions, and the anxiety stems not from an external source of bewilderment, but from the dubious, if new, state of Karshish's own mind.

Langbaum has stated that the characters in Browning's monologues hardly show a conversion. According to him, neither Cleon nor Karshish change from their earlier state. Their already uneasy paganism is 'simply made more uneasy by their exposure to Christianity'. Karshish comes close to conversion. Whereas Cleon ends his letter maintaining his earlier statement and dismissing St Paul with derision, Karshish's final words seem to bring him a step closer to the truth. It is true that he returns in the last line to scientific judgement, calling Lazarus mad and using to characterise the story the same words he had used earlier 'it is strange',

yet Karshish has moved a step closer--however unwillingly or imperceptibly. David Shaw writes 'Karshish is a sceptical scientist with a mixture of true knowledge, partial apprehension, and the immense curiosity of an Arabian Fra Lippo.'¹⁷

Another point of interest in a comparative study of Cleon and Karshish is the difference in tonal quality. The words of Karshish are marked with hesitation, evasion and even guilt. Cleon, on the contrary, speaks of death and its aftermath, but his voice has conviction. The characteristic elements of Cleon are arrogance and blindness, while the chief concerns of Karshish are incompleteness and inhibition. It is on these notes that the poem ends.

How far can we then say that Karshish is a poem of spiritual development or progress? And if we accept such a change in the character of the speaker, what are the 'signs' on which we can establish our statement?

In his essay on Karshish, Joe McClatchey describes the poem as an expression of 'Browning's fascination with the play of belief and unbelief'.¹⁸ Having chosen a character with a scientific mind, Browning sets about to show the reader how the 'rationalist' struggles with the philosophical question of belief, and this struggle is the first proof that some sort of change is at work.

That Karshish has been affected by the 'strange matter' is evident in the fact that he speaks of it, at length, in his letter. Secondly, at all times we are aware that Karshish is consciously trying to 'mask' his actual feelings. It is this guise or mask that leads one to conclude that Karshish is more involved in the miracle than he would care to admit.

Once he has described the nature of Lazarus's sickness, and also his mind, Karshish moves on to reveal his own mind. The latter swiftly becomes a parallel to that of Lazarus:

But, flinging (so to speak) life's gates too wide,
Making a clear house of it suddenly,
The first conceit that entered might inscribe
Whatever it was minded on the wall . . .
. . . that nothing subsequent
Attaineth to erase those fancy scrawls.

(lines 87-93)

Lazarus's post-death condition is that of a man who has encountered an experience so deep and all-embracing that nothing can efface it from his memory. The point of interest in Karshish is in the fact that the physician is likewise impressed by the 'first conceit' of Lazarus's case. Hitherto Karshish had been contented with his life and profession, but now his life's gates are flung 'too wide' and he is shaken by what he sees. The genuine capabilities of Karshish act as hindrances and this unacknowledged inner self threatens his public identity. His awareness becomes self-alienating, since it clashes with his skill in the sphere of medical sciences. Towards the end of the poem, Karshish has allowed his scientific mind to entertain the possibility of such a miracle as Lazarus has spoken of. His (Karshish's) inadvertent hearkening back to the incident is more authentic than his calm examination of the evidence of the cure.

The last section of Karshish has been treated in a variety of ways. The deepest feelings of Karshish are revealed in the final:

The very God! think Abib, dost thou think?
So the All-Great, were the All-Loving too--

(lines 304-305)

The illumination at the end of Karshish is comparable to the ecstatic cry of David in Saul. The process of Karshish's writing is thus a form of revelation (just as the thanksgiving songs of David help him to perceive the Love and Mercy of Christ). The poem shows a progress in the understanding of Karshish, since it elucidates the questions he has been asking himself. Viewed thus, the whole movement of the poem is a growth of what had been present already at the outset. By the end of his epistle, Karshish has a new sense of his inner need and the limitations of his intellect. The climax is imbued with a sense of peace and ecstasy, and brings to our mind the words of David:

. . . O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever:
a Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!
See the Christ stand!
(stanza XVIII, lines 309-312)

David's words, having the richness of the Psalms, speak of the love of Christ. This belief is so deep in David that his words seem prophetic. There is no hesitation in his mind, no doubt regarding 'the gates of new life'.

Karshish ends with the mention of the Voice, that comes through the thunder and the wind. The images have biblical connotations, identifiable with the agent and symbol of the Holy Spirit (wind), and His voice (thunder).

Karshish views the world now with new eyes, similar to those of Lazarus. Earlier on, in the course of his letter, he had described the nature of the landscape where he had first met the Jew. The hills are once again described, as short, sharp and broken like the menacing face of

an old lion. The moon is scarred and veiled in shadow. The mysterious-
ness of the landscape is enhanced by the atmospheric strangeness, 'a
wind arose behind me'. The entire setting brings strongly to mind the
concluding stanzas of Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came:

Not see? because of night perhaps? why, day
Came back again for that! before it left,
The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:
The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay,
Chin upon hand . . .

and finally,

Not hear? When noise was everywhere! it tolled
Increasing like a bell . . .

(Stanzas XXXII, XXXIII,
lines 187-191, 193-194)

In Childe Roland the setting serves to sharpen the speaker's aware-
ness, and the truth flashes before him with blinding intensity. He
discovers what he does not wholly wish to discover. His state is similar
to that of Karshish, who is reluctant to stare the truth in the face.
Karshish stops at the threshold of his discovery. He tries to pass off
the entire episode as trivial, and his final words are pregnant with
irony 'it is strange'. It is indeed strange that a man as learned as
Karshish is so singularly blind to the need of his personal faith and
solace.

Karshish like Cleon deals with Browning's concept of our own need
for faith. The monologues are appropriate parallels to the conditions
of religion existing (or non-existing) in the nineteenth century. The
old antithesis of Power and Love which Browning had first expounded in

Paracelsus appears in these poems as the central problem. The world shows ample evidence of a Power, matched by an Intelligence. What is hard to see is a Love that equals this Power and Intelligence. To find this 'love' and to reconcile it with the 'power' was the life-long quest of Browning. And this is the fundamental thought that underlies his religious poems, Saul, Karshish, Cleon, A Death in the Desert, and finds its most able expression in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, culminating in The Ring and the Book.

Bishop Blougram's Apology was first published in Men and Women, 17 November 1855. It was probably written in February 1850, soon after the completion of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day.

Bishop Blougram's Apology is a dramatic monologue in defence of Christianity. Within the monologue, Browning examines points that deal with matters of faith, partial faith, and unbelief. The monologue is written 'in the confessing vein', like so many other works of Browning, namely, The Bishop Orders His Tomb, Fra Lippo Lippi, Mr Sludge 'The Medium', and Book V (Guido's defence) of The Ring and the Book. Browning is as adept at portraying manipulative logicians as honest ones. David and Caponsacchi uphold the nobler virtues of life through the medium of their arguments; Andrea, Mr Sludge, and Bishop Blougram tend to vindicate their personal failings through the labyrinth of clever sophistry. Browning was at all times aware of humanity's capacity for guile. His bishop is consequently not an innocent prelate whose arguments have to be taken at their face value,¹⁹ but a manipulative speaker whose specious arguments are aimed at humiliating his listener Gigadibs. The monologue can be treated as a companion poem with Cleon and Karshish. While Cleon and the Arab physician are groping for a larger faith, Blougram seems to be troubled with a superfluity of it, not in himself, but in what forms his world.

The monologue opens with the bishop and his guest, the journalist, seated in their chairs, on the verge of launching into an informal after-dinner talk. Like the listener, Gigadibs, the reader is lulled into a false sense of security. The opening lines, true to Browning's versatile style, arrest the attention of the reader by dint of their easy affability:

No more wine? then we'll push back chairs and talk
A final glass for me, though: cool, i' faith!

(lines 1-2)

The bishop rambles on, talking of sundry matters, treating his visitor as a confidant rather than an opponent to be reckoned with. His choice of conversation topics and the easy grace with which he presents them reveal him at the outset to be a gifted conversationalist. Gigadibs has been commenting on the bishop's religious beliefs, and is unprepared for the amiability of the latter. Suddenly, Blougram channels his words into prior topics, and this deft change of subject jerks Gigadibs from his comfortable position. He is visibly disconcerted, as Blougram expected him to be; and as the monologue progresses, Gigadibs' humiliation deepens. A dozen lines have served to complete the conversion--beginning with 'No more wine? . . .' and ending with the forceful resolve 'Now, we'll talk'.

Blougram's next words inform the reader as to what has transpired before the evening meal. Gigadibs is a sceptic and he finds the professed faith of Blougram difficult to understand and believe. In his view, the prelate is either a fool who believes in miracles, or a disbeliever who is intelligent enough to indulge in constant pretence to secure his profitable office. Gigadibs cannot accept the notion of 'partial' belief,

and his reasonings are tantamount to calling Blougram a hypocrite. The monologue serves as the bishop's answer to Gigadibs, although it is more appropriate to call the 'explanation' a form of ironic defence.

This same defensiveness gives the poem an aura of spuriousness. Blougram is rhetorically wily and engaging, and proceeds to justify himself by using his critic's own premise. The bishop is less interested in truth than in victory, and his motive is to extract the journalist's approval on his own terms.²⁰ Accordingly, he refrains from explaining his personal faith, and indulges in making his case without once establishing his religious integrity. The words of the bishop's argument are chosen with care, and the entire flow of reasoning is guided into channels more intellectual than religious.

It is evident, despite the title of the poem, that Blougram's speech is an apology only in so far as it attempts 'to convert Gigadibs--to a new respect for his host'.²¹ Blougram is not indulging in self-analysis; nor is he defending himself to his own satisfaction. In the course of his monologue, Blougram indicates clearly that he is satisfied with the present state of affairs:

See the world
Such as it is, you made it not, nor I;
I mean to take it as it is . . .
I know the special kind of life I like,
What suits the most my idiosyncrasy,
Brings out the best of me and bears me fruit
In power, peace, pleasantness and length of days.

(lines 230-237)

At the same time, Blougram is prompt to point out that all the comforts he enjoys stem directly from his faith (or avowed faith):

I find positive belief does this
For me, and unbelief, no whit of this.

(lines 238-239)

Blougram is a practical man, and he is not eager for any form of change, spiritual or otherwise. Understandably, the process of transformation does not occur, since Browning believed that the essence of conversion is self-confrontation.

Bishop Blougram is more of a contemplative effort, but it is obvious that the speaker's introspection is far from genuine. Although Blougram surveys his life and considers his deficiencies, the motive behind such soul-baring is to humiliate Gigadibs. His speech is a misrepresentation and is not likely to alter his self-assessment. Blougram's culminating assertion 'My business is not to remake myself' only points to apparent passivity.

Gigadibs is by no means the central figure in the monologue, and certainly not the central speaker, but curiously enough, the change or transformation occurs in him. This probably is an indication that a change can be effected only if the individual is willing. Gigadibs is a foil to the complacent Blougram, and although the latter is intellectually his superior, his (Blougram's) interest in the universe, in religion, in philosophical discourses is distorted by his colossal egotism. At the end of the 'Apology', the speaker resumes his prior activity, and it is the listener who is stirred to 'healthy vehemence' and departs for the alien shores of Australia.

The monologue, with its curious mixture of blatancy and truth has puzzled many readers, and has consequently produced a spate of explanations.

Most interpretations of Bishop Blougram's Apology start with the assumption that the monologue is an attempt to present the best that the character can say for himself, and to mitigate his limitations. This genre of critics give to the word 'apology' its popular meaning-- confession of an error. Secondly, carrying this interpretation a step further, such a reading demands lenience from the readers. Yet I do not see how Browning could hope to stimulate the sympathy of the readers for a person who has been revealed throughout as the practitioner of falsehood.

Blougram is not helpless, neither is his monologue completely honest. He offers settled convictions to Gigadibs, but these 'convictions' are in reality a series of amusing notions that chance to cross his mind. At the same time he is clever enough to hide 'certain hell-deep instincts' which are more fundamental in his nature than the ideas he expresses. Any possible ambiguity regarding the sympathies of Browning should be removed by a careful study of Blougram's avowals. If Browning's monologues are to be considered as defences of Christianity, the case of Blougram is complicated by the inappropriateness of the speaker. Blougram, we are told in the epilogue, 'said true things, but called them by wrong names'. How can we then expect Browning to defend him and approve of his actions?

Neither can we judge and set aside the monologue as a piece of satire. It is true that Browning often adopted a contemporary mind or life-style as his satiric object, but Bishop Blougram cannot be classed with those works. According to Priestley:

The whole monologue is an apology in the sense of a piece of apologetics; its whole course is dictated by Gigadibs. In no other monologue of Browning is the *muta persona* so important; in no other monologue is Browning so careful to keep us aware of the presence of the auditor.²²

Considered from this perspective, Blougram's involved diatribe is not spontaneous, but is the product of methodical calculation. Every word is uttered with a full understanding of the character of the journalist-guest, and by pre-judging every move of Gigadibs, the bishop forestalls it with his sophistical arguments. The monologue serves to dramatize the mechanisms of 'fraudulent self-consciousness'.

Yet a third interpretation requires Bishop Blougram's Apology to be regarded simply as the manifestation of an 'idea'. The dramatic monologue, more than any other poetic form, deals with ideas. There is within it a consciousness at work. This consciousness is the mark of the poet's projection into the poem, and it is also the point that grasps the attention of the speaker. The meaning of the dramatic monologue is what the speaker comes to perceive--but the thing he comes to perceive is often more than the sum of what he initially sees and thinks. Sometimes this is an advancement in the speaker's understanding of his own self and the attendant conditions.

Secondly, a dramatic monologue presents a new facet of the original theme. In the course of the poem, that part of the speaker's life that normally stays in the shadows, is gradually revealed. Blougram serves to act as the personification of an idea or a creed. The point of interest is the effect these have on Gigadib's theories, and the conversion in him.

Gigadibs lives a life devoid of faith and his simple life is a contrast to the worldly success of the bishop. The latter attributes his personal qualities and limitations to a divine will, and is consequently able to vindicate his position instead of admitting the need for atonement. Blougram believes that the Church can accommodate the world (enjoyment of worldly pleasure). Ordination on such terms is a form of self-betrayal. Blougram lives a life of impersonations: by his own admission he cannot lead a life of comfort:

Without declaring at the outset, 'Friends,
I absolutely and peremptorily
Believe!'

(lines 243-245)

The following assertions are clearly manoeuvres to suit the secular ends of the speaker:

. . . waking's the main point with us
And my provision's for life's waking part.
Accordingly I use heart, head and hand
All day, I build, scheme, study, and make friends;
And when night overtakes me, down I lie,
Sleep, dream a little, and get done with it,
The sooner the better, to begin afresh.

(lines 247-253)

Despite Blougram's involved arguments, the words serve to emphasise the casuistry which underlies an apparently sincere and honest declaration. 'With me' the bishop says 'faith means perpetual unbelief / Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot / Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe.' (lines 666-668). At first sight, the very balancing of the bishop's argument may work as a kind of deception. Read more attentively it begins to grow clear that the words are something more than a

confession. What Browning means here is that faith can never be free of doubt, and that therefore faith is not a state, but a perpetual activity. We can trace a parallel between Blougram's words and the thoughts expressed in A Death in the Desert.²³

Ranged with the other sophists created by Browning (Mr Sludge, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Bernard de Mandeville, Don Juan), Blougram forms a helpful contrast. It is dramatically immaterial whether Blougram's premises or reasons are valid bases for Christianity. In order to understand the speaker, it is necessary to extract the simple truth from attending subtleties. Browning takes on the task of unveiling the truth, but as the monologue progresses it becomes evident that 'Browning the psychologist had made the bishop talk too cleverly to satisfy Browning the moralist.'²⁴

And so we stumble at truth's very test!
All we have gained then by our unbelief
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
For one of faith diversified by doubt:
We call the chess-board white, we call it black.

(lines 208-212)

Blougram is insistent on living according to what is, rather than according to what should be (lines 87-91). This doctrine is a favourite one of Browning, voiced more frequently in his later poems. A fallacy lurks in the idea that no one can be either a complete believer or a complete non-believer: 'We call the chessboard white, we call it black.'

The argument for exercising the concept of will, to believe in the absence of demonstrative proof stands in danger of being accepted too glibly. Consequently it is Browning, in his own person, who furnishes the 'giveaway'. The bishop, we are told 'believed, say, half he spoke',

and made up the rest for the pleasure of argument. Browning cannot be accused of betraying sympathy for the bishop, or of attempting to make a good case 'for the individual hypocrite'.²⁵ There are several places in the course of the monologue where the bishop's manipulations can be recognised as unacceptable. By observing these places the reader can identify the parts of Christianity on which no compromise is possible.

In the course of the monologue Browning discusses a number of points:

- (a) he emphasises the importance of choice in life,
- (b) he stresses the co-existence of doubt and faith, and
- (c) he analyses the conditions leading to a conversion.

Repeatedly, in Browning's poetry, the importance of choice is stressed, and while the issue is often religious, the specific questions may or may not be abstrusely theological. Blougram lives a life of 'faith diversified by doubt' of his own choice, and to him, the importance and meaningfulness is not whether his position is true or false, but that he has willingly made a choice and intends to abide by it. He introduces the analogy of a ship and its cabin-passengers to clarify his opinions:

We mortals cross the ocean of this world
Each in his average cabin of a life;
The best's not big, the worst yields elbow-room.
Now for our six-months' voyage--how prepare?

(lines 100-104)

The bishop is rational and practical. He feels it is but natural for man to desire stability and comfort in his earthly life, and by tracing his own career he makes Gigadibs realise that an enjoyment of pleasures is infinitely preferable to a pursuit of abstract truth. Since Gigadibs

is an atheist, Blougram sets out to defeat him with his hedonistic arguments. The following words are used to point to the truth of the fact that a layman's basic intention is self-preservation through an act of choice:

The common problem . . . (is)
No abstract intellectual plan of life
Quite irrespective of life's plainest laws,
But one, a man, who is man and nothing more,
May lead within a world . . .

(lines 87-95)

Blougram has achieved by way of the Church the good things of this world, and he flaunts his success as a sign that he has made the right choice. In the eyes of the unsuccessful literary man, Gigadibs, the bishop is guilty of hypocrisy, a vice Gigadibs cannot be accused of since he has made no commitments. Yet this absence of commitments makes Gigadibs open to Blougram's attack. Thus, the reader of the monologue faces the paradox of the compromising worldly Christian against the uncompromising, unworldly infidel. The bishop has twisted Browning's idea that the proofs do not matter, and can be considered from multiple points of view.

For Browning, the making of choices is a form of assertion, and the assessment of a choice can be a moral awakening. An authentic choice is just a beginning, and the moment of decision is comparable to a whole process of discovery and commitment.

Constance Hassettt feels that some of Browning's poems revolve obsessively around conversions that do not occur. Self-confrontation can be mortifying and painful, consequently it is a phase to be resisted.

Accordingly the protagonist can manipulate the past to make the present seem inevitable, right, or even best. Browning guides his readers to a comprehension of the difference between authentic and distorted confession.²⁶

The distinction between genuine confession and its reverse is so basic to Browning's psychology that it 'leads him to develop--for Andrea del Sarto, Mr Sludge, and others--a distinctive new genre, that of the confession manqué.'²⁷

Blougram is to an extent a moral coward. He consoles himself for his actions by fancying that his choice is similar to the daredevil feat of individuals who keep the equilibrium, the 'giddy line midway'. On the one hand, the bishop is a liberal thinker, on the other he can be classified with Andrea, Sludge, and other 'moral failures'. To make the wrong decision is not so culpable as to elect the wrong reasons for making a decision. Speaking of Browning's morally weak monologists, Hasset writes:

The illusion of confronting the brink bestows a spurious aura of volition upon their subsequent withdrawals; and when the aura fades they refresh it by rehearsing their supposed choices.²⁸

Browning considers man to be willing to change, but he also recognises a tendency for moral resistance. Individuals with well-protected identities tend to be morally intransigent. Thus the skill of the bishop is a spiritual liability whereas the simplicity of Gigadibs permits him to reach a meaningful goal.

The second characteristic of Bishop Blougram is the emphasis on the compatibility of intelligence and religion.

Browning was fascinated by ambiguities of thought, and casuistical rationalisations. He knew that on the one hand truth was many-sided and relative, and at the same time it was single and absolute. Thus 'brain truth was of man; heart truth was of God'. Browning tirelessly pursued this phenomenon, and hoped to resolve the dichotomies at the end of the day. Several of his characteristic poems (Blougram among them) attempt to reconcile the complex brain and the simple heart.

Gigadibs suggests that Blougram's faith is incompatible with his intelligence. Although we do not hear the journalist speak, the words of Blougram give us sufficient indication of all that has transpired earlier. In his own estimation, Gigadibs is no ordinary figure. He is an artist, with nobility of aim and stern integrity. To him, unbelief is a sign of honesty and he is proud of his scepticism. According to Gigadibs, it is a self-evident proposition that intelligence and religious faith are incompatible.

This then is the premise to Blougram's apology, and during the course of his argument, the bishop tries to prove that faith and unbelief, intelligence and religious fervour are not only co-existent, but equally essential in their respective capacity:

Naked belief in God the Omnipotent,
Omniscient, Omnipresent, sears too much
The sense of conscious creatures to be borne. . . .
The feeblest sense is trusted most; the child
Feels God a moment, ichors o'er the place,
Plays on and grows to be a man like us.
With me, faith means perpetual unbelief
Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot
Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe.

(lines 648-668)
(my italics)

Gigadibs holds the bishop in contempt because his own 'ideal of life /
Is not the bishop's.' Blougram's acceptance of the genuineness of the
liquifactions of the blood, and of the movement of the eyes of painted
Madonnas, secures him in his office as a bishop. Gigadibs is unable to
believe in miracles because he is aware of his honest scepticism regarding
them. Blougram advises him (Gigadibs) to lighten his intellectual burden
by 'overhaul(ing) theology', and adds:

Nay, I too, not a fool, you please to think,
Must find believing every whit as hard:
And if I do not frankly say as much,
The ugly consequence is clear enough.

(lines 157-160)

Still, Gigadibs cannot accept the bishop's explanation. To him, faith
should be absolute and fixed, and any deviation from it should point to
the hypocritical assumptions of an individual. Blougram acknowledges
that he cannot believe totally in miracles in the face of empirical facts:

. . . you don't believe, you don't and can't,
(Not statedly, that is, and fixedly
And absolutely and exclusively)
In any revelation called divine.

(lines 150-153)

This admission makes Blougram come down on the same level as Gigadibs.
They are now unbelievers--both of them. Yet this state of unbelief
cannot exist forever (and indeed there is no reason why it should).
Blougram is not averse to playing the game Gigadibs' way, but he sees
the possibility of their changing their former opinion at some later
point. Their calm and complete scepticism may or may not last, and

Blougram's approach to life being more positive, he is confident that truth will break out at last:

And now what are we? unbelievers both,
. . . all we've gained is, that belief
As unbelief before, shakes us by fits,
Confounds us like its predecessor. Where's
The gain? how can we guard our unbelief,
Make it bear fruit to us?

(lines 173-181)
(my italics)

Thus Blougram makes his case, even on inappropriate grounds. His two important achievements are first to make Gigadibs see what the agnostic's proper grounds are, and secondly, convince him by starting the discourse without any assumptions as to faith and transcendental values, but arriving at them methodically. Belief and unbelief are equally problematical, yet the former is more constructive in that it bears 'fruit'. The validity and the utility of the fruit may be debatable, but it is more positive than unbelief.

Browning presents the bishop as a born dialectician, who has found that 'reasoning' often tends to confuse an issue and weave increasing doubts. Mere rationalisation serves to work against the convictions man's soul requires, and it is possible to achieve a unified vision only by the contributory help of faith. This faith cannot be always complete and absolute, and allowance has to be made for the element of doubt. Browning presents this idea through the following words of Blougram:

What matter though I doubt at every pore,
Head doubts, heart-doubts, doubts at my fingers' ends,
Doubts in the trivial work of every day,
Doubts at the very bases of my soul . . .
All's doubt in me; where's break of faith in this?
It is the idea, the feeling and the love,
God means mankind should strive for and show forth
Whatever be the process in the end.

(lines 610-623)

The words 'If you desire faith--then you've faith enough' establishes the main idea of the monologue. Through the convoluted and sophisticated arguments of Blougram Browning has presented his own convictions. The final intention of the monologue is to unfold the conversion of Gigadibs, and this will be the last point I shall be dealing with.

Gigadibs, the listener, is a journalist. He is ambitious, and his interest in sensational or dramatic antithesis makes him a target for the bishop's scorn. Gigadibs is interested in:

The honest thief, the tender murderer
The superstitious atheist, demirep
That loves and saves her soul . . .

(lines 396-398)

To him, these characters are colourful and arresting. In order to embody these, the journalist needs 'simple labels, neat summary phrases' Phrases, indeed, serve him instead of thought; he has never pursued thoughts far enough to reach solid ground; his opinions are loose cards, 'flung daily down, and not the same way twice.'

Blougram, on the contrary, is a man of imagination, wide reach of thought, and even shares Browning's love for Euripides. Into the rich and glamorous world of Blougram, Gigadibs steps with naïve expectations. He misjudges the astute bishop, and hopes the meeting will provide him with a sensational story. Unfortunately, the bishop apprehends every move of Gigadibs, and commences his 'apology' with insulting ease and languor. From the outset, Blougram tries to humiliate his guest. Even his preliminary 'epicurean directive', 'try the cooler jug / Put back the other but don't jog the ice!' are attempts to disconcert the non-connoisseur.

Blougram knows that Gigadibs despises him, and further knows that he holds his position (as a bishop) in awe. Accordingly he tells the journalist:

You do despise me then.
And if I say 'despise me', never fear!
I know you do not in a certain sense--
Not in my arm-chair, for example: here,
I well imagine you respect my place
(Status, entourage, worldly circumstance)

(lines 21-26)

Blougram is a perceptive prelate, and understands the psychology of a layman. He knows that Gigadibs considers it an honour to have been asked to dine with 'Sylvester Blougram, styled in partibus / Episcopus, nec non,' and that this dinner will form his conversation theme for many years to come. Blougram is the unquestioned master of the situation, and the few glasses of wine do not cause him to commit indiscreet utterances. On the contrary, they sharpen his incisive wit. By cleverly steering the line of conversation, Blougram actually utters the very 'confidences' that Gigadibs had expected of him.

The reader of the monologue is apt to think Gigadibs is the unfortunate victim, and the astonishment comes when it is disclosed that Gigadibs has actually learnt something positive from what appeared to be a vituperative harangue. The 'trap' has proved to be a release in disguise. The bishop's challenge to Gigadibs rouses the healthy vehemence of the latter. He sees his own mode of life has been as selfish and false to ideals as that of the bishop. Like the bishop, Gigadibs has forsaken the real for the unreal. With this realisation, Gigadibs sets off speedily to rectify the state of affairs.

Gigadibs can here be compared to a potential convert. He is pursuing a role he should abandon and the bishop's words precipitate the conversion and allow the emergence of his (Gigadibs') authentic self.

The final lines of the monologue evoke a multitude of interpretations. Browning admired the Gospel of John because it presented philosophical rather than thaumaturgic treatment of Christianity. The pun in the last line is on the word 'his'. It is both paradoxical and conclusive. Till this point, Gigadibs has been pursuing a path that has been dictated by his own reasonings, without considering alternative possibilities. At the end of the talk, Gigadibs wakens to acknowledge that 'he has been as intellectually and morally dishonest with his sentimental liberalism as the bishop with his casuistry.'²⁹ Rid of his false intellectual pride, Gigadibs will presumably start from the beginning, 'inducing the Truth from himself'.³⁰

The personal touch on the word 'his' makes Gigadibs more of a man than an empiricist fond of quibbling in terms of logical premises. He is not the winner, but neither is he the defeated party that the bishop believes him to be. His apparent failure to watch the wit and oratorical brilliance of Blougram has not robbed him of integrity and personality, but on the contrary, has opened the doors to a world of new possibility.

The second interpretation is that Gigadibs' interest in the Gospel has neither been increased nor decreased by Blougram's talk of faith. The chapter in question could well be the final one, and could equally stand for an intermediary section. What interests the poet, and the readers, is the positive conversion of the journalist. He changes not

to embrace Blougram's words with blind awe, but to give recognition to the honest promptings of his mind. His outlook upon the world at large, and religion in particular, becomes more liberal and honest. He has come a long way from the individual of whom Blougram had said earlier: 'I live my life here, yours you dare not live'.

The final reference to Gigadibs beginning his new life with a plough and the Gospel of St John ought to indicate that he is getting closer to the truth than Blougram, and herein lies the irony of the monologue. Gigadibs decides to do away with the incidentals and concentrate on the essence of Christian religion. Accordingly he dismisses the epicurean advice of the bishop and devotes his time to honest work. Following the teachings of St John, Gigadibs intends to lead a simple life and devote his time to hard work and contemplation upon Christ. He emerges from his experience a maturer man, if not a convert. He will henceforth remain true to the values that Christianity requires of its adherents.

Saul is one of Browning's finest attempts to reconcile faith and doubt. It strives to resolve the dichotomy between worldly suffering and a belief in a God of Love. The first nine sections of Saul were published in 1845 in Dramatic Romances, but although they formed a convincing catalogue of the good things of the earth, Browning failed to reach a conclusion after his own heart. The remaining stanzas were added in 1852-1853, and we may conjecture that this was aided by the poet's own religious development. In the interim period, Browning had written Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850) and the mood of debate and uncertainty that marks the poem is finally resolved in Saul. There is a subtle difference in the first draft of Saul and the revised version.

The emphasis shifts from the rapturous praise of animate and inanimate objects of the earth to the philosophical vindication and the prophecy of Christianity as the monologue proceeds.

Saul, thus, is not only a paean to the 'joys of living', but also reveals the awareness in man of God's benevolence, and the consequent growth and development of the soul. In Saul, Browning defends the possibility of an interior and wholly human method of achieving faith and belief--without the help of miracles. Saul is an affirmation of the importance and goodness of the finite world of living, as well as of the world beyond, and it is this development that I wish to trace in the poem.

Saul is more lyrical than its companion monologues. The language of David is more heightened and formal than the colloquial, conversational style of the other poems dealing with the question of religion.³¹ David relates his experiences not to any particular listener, but to the readers; to mankind in general. There are moments when the choric burst of praise introduces a strong resemblance to the Psalms, and we feel that David is speaking not only to the world at large, but to God.

The poem commences with Abner's relief at the approach of David. In a few lines, Browning has expertly sketched the preceding events that have led to David's being summoned to minister to Saul. The shepherd boy has been presented as God's chosen, and the lines suggest his innocence and purity. The words 'God's child, with His dew, / On thy gracious gold hair' are suggestive, and, in the words of Ian Jack, crown David with the 'chrism of the prophet'.

The introductory stanzas build up the sense of despair and brooding apathy of the monarch. The exact nature of his sufferings is not disclosed, and this deliberate omission makes them more terrible. We are told by the priest that the king has not spoken, nor stirred from his tent for three days, and that his subjects have no notion whether the strife between 'Saul and the Spirit' has ended.

What is clear to the readers is the strange apathy of Saul. This noble and powerful king has lost the will to live, and David's role is to release the flood of joy and interest in his heart. In order to rescue Saul from this 'arid condition' David has to re-create in him the 'sense of this world's life.'

The introductory stanzas build up the sense of despair and the picture of the tent is a convincing chiaroscuro, where light and darkness, life and death, faith and despair meet and grapple with each other. Browning at no point wishes to project a dogmatic acceptance of God's kindness, and consequently his David is presented as an uncertain child, caught between hope and bafflement. If David is sure of one thing, it is his willingness to help Saul, but beyond this certainty he is as unaware of the outcome of his visit as the readers. His initial diffidence gives way to a firmness of purpose, with the prayer that rises to his lips:

. . . I groped my way on
Till I felt where the foldskirts fly open. Then once more
I prayed,
And opened the foldskirts and entered, and was not afraid
But spoke, 'Here is David, thy servant!'

(lines 19-22)

The phrase 'thy servant' deserves consideration. It is true that Saul is the monarch and David, in consequence, is his subject. Yet the word 'servant' seems to imply the utter devotion of David in his attempt to cure Saul of his soul-sickness. It is this willingness in David that brings about the final peace and redemption of Saul.

As the monologue proceeds, we are conscious of the fact that David and Saul are linked with an inseparable bond, that of love. The earlier role of David, namely that of a physician and saviour changes subtly to a person seeking deliverance from the hand of God. (However, the role of the saviour and the saved is less distinct in Saul than in Pippa Passes and The Ring and the Book.)

Critics have offered various interpretations of the poem. Most agree in stating that it is primarily based on the motif of redemption and conversion. C.W. Hasset writes that Browning was fascinated 'with sudden crisis' and this found expression in tales of deliverance: The Flight of the Duchess, Saul and finally The Ring and the Book. 'Browning believes in the moral force of innocence and the renovating power of self-confrontation. To recognise these beliefs is to discover the motive and injunction behind Browning's poetry.'³²

This need for conversion is also stressed by Paul E. More. He looks upon Saul as a poem emphasising man's relation with the phenomenal world, and states that this relation is a revelation. It is thus seen that Saul is to a great extent a poem dealing with redemption, but there is more to it than an answer for the scepticism of the nineteenth century. It not only emphasises the redemptive power of Christianity, but teaches just

the acceptance of life in itself as needing no conversion into something beyond its own impulsive desires. There is a strong overtone of the philosophy enunciated (later) by Rabbi Ben Ezra:

Oh our manhood's prime vigour! no spirit feels waste,
Not a muscle is stopped in its playing, nor sinew unbraced.
Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock up to rock,
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree . . .
How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses, for ever in joy!
(stanza ix, lines 68-79)³³

Browning takes the reader on a wonderful tour, and the realm to be discovered anew is our familiar world. David attempts to raise Saul from his stupor by playing his harp and singing of the splendours of this earth. Browning evokes a picture of utter suppleness and ease by introducing the image of the lilies that twine round the harp's chords. The flowers bring a sense of peace and their soft petals resting on the tautened strings are a parallel to the soothing presence of David. The medicinal quality of his songs acts as a cool balm on Saul's mental affliction.

As David watches the agonized Saul 'drear and stark, blind and dumb', he hopes to alleviate the monarch's pain by flooding his mind with a host of associations--he plays the tune that the birds and beasts know and follow, and goes on to play 'the help-tune of (our) reapers, their wine-song, when hand / Grasps at hand, eye lights eye in good friendship, and great hearts expand / And grow in the sense of this world's life . . . The images culminate in 'the last song / When the dead man is praised on his journey.'

This generous unfolding of the tapestry of life evokes a responsive groan from Saul. The mighty shudder is the first sign of his deliverance, and the primal task has been achieved by David. This first sign of life in the hitherto comatose monarch reveals that a great burden has been eased from his shoulders, and the final redemption is a matter of gradual effort.

At the beginning of the poem, Saul has been described as in a state of 'life-denying enervation, alone and virtually crucified.'³⁴ He stands:

. . . both arms stretched out wide
On the great cross-support in the centre, that goes to
each side.

(lines 28-29)

David succeeds in freeing Saul from this condition (stanza iv) by virtue of his honesty and simplicity. He does not speak about philosophical abstractions, and his characteristic quality is his awareness of the universe. Life appeals to him with its everyday activity, and sound, and shape and colour. It is this close acquaintance with life that preserves the freshness and unique quality of David's song. David's song is compelling not because his message is new, but because it is authentic. (At the same time David is fully aware of the suffering of Saul. The king is a visible evidence of the existence of 'evil', the term being used as equivalent to 'suffering'.)

By the virtue of David's song, Saul is led to the fields where the sheep graze on the long grasses that have 'stifled the water within the stream's bed'; to the cornland where the quails browse and the sandy

habitat of the jerboa. David's concept of the universe (indeed Browning's concept of the world at large) is summed up in the concluding lines of the sixth stanza:

God made all the creatures and gave them our love
and our fear,
To give sign, we and they are his children, one family here.

(lines 47-48)

From the realm of nature Browning turns the attention of his readers to facts of greater importance, namely life and death. The wine song of the reapers can be accepted as a symbol of the ephemeral quality of mortal existence, and the funeral procession is immediately followed by a bridal entourage. This serves to emphasise the eternal cycle in creation, at once mysterious and beautiful.

David pauses in his song as 'in the darkness, Saul groaned'. This part-cure reassures David, and with Saul shedding his stupor the first part of the movement comes to a close.

The ninth stanza witnesses David's song of thankfulness and joy rising into ecstasy. The 'wild joys of living' are portrayed in a series of images, jostling each other. Browning's own affirmations can be heard in David's 'How good is man's life, the mere living!'³⁵

The vibrant song of David moves next to the familiar household scene. A sense of 'belonging' infuses the lines that describe the 'white locks' of the father and the kind hands of the mother. David is here appealing to Saul, the man, and not Saul the king. But although Saul has been roused from his initial despair and isolation, he remains suspended in a state of indifference.

As David sings of the high ambition and deeds which have proved to be Saul's characteristic qualities, a slow but gradual change comes over the monarch, and with each mention of his name he advances a step closer to reality. Saul is seen as a gigantic figure of distress, a Byzantine Job awaiting his final redemption. The long shudder that 'thrilled all the tent till the very air tingled, then sank and was stilled' is the second indication of Saul's recovery. Browning compares this overt change in the king with the sudden and miraculous change which is wrought by Spring. The parallel is a bare, isolated mountain, bereft of 'freedom and flowers'. For long this barren crag has stood with 'a year's snow bound about for a breast-plate'. Suddenly, the summons of spring causes an avalanche to descend, till:

Fold on fold all at once it crowds thunderously down
to his feet,
And there fronts you, stark, black, but alive yet,
your mountain of old,
With his rents, the successive bequeathings of ages untold . . .
Now again to be softened with verdure . . .

(stanza x, lines 108-113)

Thus Saul arises from his amnesia, and David is left with:

. . . the King's self left standing before me released
and aware.
What was gone, what remained? all to traverse, 'twixt hope
and despair;
Death was past, life not come: so he waited.

(stanza x, lines 117-119)

At this point, Browning solves the problem by making David turn introspective. Suddenly the truth flashes across his mind, and he realises that if Saul's sickness can be cured by love, then there is

a greater, far enriching source of love, namely God. He suddenly knows the inadequacy of earthly joy, yet this realisation does not depress him, but on the contrary, fills him with inexpressible joy and thankfulness:

Then the truth came upon me. No harp more--no song
more outbroke--

I have gone the whole round of creation: I saw and
I spoke:

I, a work of God's hand for that purpose, received in
my brain

And pronounced on the rest of his handiwork--returned
him again.

His creation's approval or censure: I spoke as I saw.

(Stanzas xvi, xvii,
lines 237, 238-241)

Here, the position of David changes from that of a deliverer to one seeking deliverance. The catharsis works equally in Saul, labouring under pain like 'the king serpent', and in David, opening his eyes to the beauty and perfection of the universe, and the warm tears gushing forth as a sign of his thankfulness to God:

. . . And doth it not enter my mind (as my warm
tears attest)
These good things being given, to go on, and give,
one more, the best?

(stanza xvii, lines 275-276)

Just as the inadequacy of earthly joy awakens David to a new awareness, similarly Browning's knowledge of the imperfections of man's world gives him the strength to withstand these very imperfections. Through the medium of his poems, Browning tried to find a meaning not only behind human existence, but in existence. The present poem turns on David's

discovery of the world's relative insufficiency, and the earlier yearning to help Saul changes to a trustful faith in the will and kindness of God:

Now I lay down the judgeship he lent me. Each faculty
tasked
To perceive him, has gained an abyss, where a dewdrop
was asked.

(stanza xvii, lines 242-243)

David's sense of the world's limits is amplified by an awareness of the love so full in his nature, and it is this dichotomy that prompts his flash of intuition:

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
That I doubt his own love can compete with it? here the
parts shift?
Here the creature surpass the Creator, the end what Began?
Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,
And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet alone
can?³⁶

(stanza xvii, lines 266-270)

Herein lies the true meaning and appeal of Saul. The anomalies of this world can be accepted and explained by seeking religious faith. The lesson David (and the reader) learns is not that evil is non-existent, but that the plan of life is perfect, and admits of the necessity of faith.³⁷ David attains a vision of the perfection that is God's. He is a direct foil to Caliban, who is sure that Setebos will penalise man for his love and happiness. From one point of view, life is an unceasing aspiration, and from another, it must be a continuous stooping to a world of weakness and limitations. It is this gesture of humility that alters David's relationship with the universe.

David's song, listing in traditional Old Testament manner the glories of God's power and kindness had failed to release Saul completely. Yet when David leaves the harp and begins his curious monologue with God, Saul is restored. David not only wishes to cure Saul, but wants him to be revitalised with new energy, faith and happiness: 'Could I help thee my father, inventing a bliss, / I would add to that life of the past, both the future and this; / I would give thee new life altogether,' (stanza xv, lines 233-235).

While David speaks of his devotion and love for the ailing king, claiming 'I know that my service is perfect' he gradually realises that God's love is unending, and that He too shall suffer for Saul, and for all mankind. It is more than a coincidence that David's description of the monarch in stanza four prefigures a crucified Christ, and later, it is this very image of Christ's redemptive suffering that cures Saul.

David is a rescuer who achieves personal transcendence, and his experience is remarkably like that of the saved. His task complete, he moves on towards home, through a landscape filled with 'wonder and dread'. David's experience brings to our mind the corollary figure of Abraham in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling.

Saul and Ia Saisiaz are companion pieces. Like Saul, the latter has been said to be 'instinct with Christian feeling, yet without dogma'. I have introduced Ia Saisiaz in the present context because it is here that Browning most fully develops the idea that our human intellects are limited, and that to accept God we must resort to the intuitive knowledge of our hearts.

I do not categorise Saul as a subjective poem, and yet I am inclined to feel that there is a strong bond between Browning and his protagonist David. It is true that often Browning puts ingenious and rational arguments into the mouths of his characters and yet his heroes and heroines are those who 'apprehend and act upon truths not open to intellectual inquiry'.³⁸ Browning chooses David as the 'curer' since he believed that divine perfection is unknowable to man except in rare moments. These moments are described as mystical rapture or intuitive apprehension, which can not be understood or translated through the medium of reason, or human speech. Browning valued song over speech (Transcendentalism) and perhaps this interest has made him choose the theme of Saul and David. Apart from the religious significance, the poem deals with music and traces the function of the poet and the artist. Like Pippa Passes, Saul is an attempt to prove the practical value of song.

Saul is an ecstasy of prayer and love, yet nowhere is there a break between the lower and the higher nature of man, or between the human and the celestial character. Browning, through the songs of David, infuses the poem with a vivid sense of God's distinct personality. And in the closing vision of Saul, this thought of the identity of man's love and God's love is uttered by David in a kind of delirious ecstasy:

'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for!
my flesh that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul,
it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man
like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: a Hand
like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!
See the Christ stand!

(stanza xviii, lines 308-312)

Saul is not a casuistic poem, and neither does it deal with the cleavage between man's faculties of love and reason. In it, Browning attempts to vindicate his ethical convictions and create a firm basis for his religious faith--and it is an attempt which brings him a step closer to his comprehension of the meaning of this universe and its relationship with the Maker. The poem can be considered as a kind of therapy for Robert Browning.

The final stage in the development is still to come with the grand synthesis in The Ring and the Book.

A Grammarian's Funeral

The monologue postulates sacrifices of life and its enjoyments to knowledge. The poem is set in the era which followed the revival of learning in Europe. The Grammarian spent his entire life in the pursuit of knowledge. He did not have the time or the inclination to turn his glance to the 'common crofts' and 'unlettered plain' with its herd and crop. Unlike the protagonist in Fra Lippo Lippi and Rabbi Ben Ezra the Grammarian decided to spend his life within the four walls of his room. He is presented before the readers as an ascetic who voluntarily leaves the comforts of the world to settle 'Hoti's' business, and present the scholars with his doctrine 'of the enclitic De'.

The disciple who narrates the monologue is able to appreciate the ethical and religious levels on which the Grammarian moved. But this perceptiveness on the part of the speaker does not prompt him to follow the arduous path that the Grammarian had taken. The disciple personally embraces the less difficult mode of living, and this mode could also be termed the 'aesthetic' stage. Although the speaker does not rise to

the stature of the scholar, he is aware of the singular greatness of the Grammarian's aim, and the readiness with which he (speaker) undertakes to defend the Grammarian's choice is an indication of Browning's personal preference.

The monologue introduces the deceased as a man of potential talents. He could have been a great artist and a social success. It is not as if the Grammarian suffered from a curious affliction or malady of the physical self, his self-exile was prompted by his thirst for knowledge. His followers remember his eagerness to 'know all' and they respect him for his lofty aim. During the hours and moments when the world was busy enjoying the little comforts and varieties of life, the Grammarian was growing wiser, more adept in mastering 'learning's crabbed text', and progressively grey. Certain critics feel that the heroic character ascribed to the Grammarian by his students is unconvincing, and that he is neither a hero nor a saint. It is quite true that the central figure is presented as an 'alien' to life, but I find no words or lines that suggest the poet's disparagement of the Grammarian's peculiar way of life. The student followers say:

Learned, we found him.
Yea, but we found him bald too, eyes like lead,
Accents uncertain:
'Time to taste life,' another would have said,
'Up with the curtain!'
This man said rather, 'Actual life comes next?
Patience a moment!'

(lines 52-58)

Thus the Grammarian celebrated life in his own individual way. The question mark after 'Actual life . . . ' suggests that the scholar neither believed nor disbelieved in the importance of experience as

contributing towards eternal life, but he did believe in utilising the moment, the present hours. For him, the best way to spend them was to go on to 'the comment', even after he had mastered the actual text:

This man said rather . . .
'Grant I have mastered learning's crabbed text,
Still, there's the comment.

(lines 59-60)

One is reminded of the speaker in Easter-Day. Like him, the disciple in the present monologue is made to realise that it is not an easy task to fulfil the conditions necessary to live a full life. The word 'life' undergoes successive definition, and the flux of the poem depends on the connotation the reader attaches to the term at different places in the narrative. To the hedonist, 'life' stands for the here and now, and this ephemeral existence attains a frenzied importance not unmixed with haste: 'time escapes', and consequently, the instinctive urge is 'Live now or never!' (lines 81-82, my italics).³⁹

For the Grammarian, the 'now' is equivalent to the semblance, not the substance, since it denotes temporal existence. Thus, he is content to abandon the momentary and illusory pleasures for the 'dogs and apes' and aspire to higher planes. His faith is:

Man has Forever.

(line 84)

The philosophy of the Grammarian is a direct opposite of the comments found in the Rubáiyát. The latter encourages men to enjoy the ephemeral moment, since the speaker believes that there is nothing after death.

The Grammarian leaves the pursuit of temporal pleasures and his belief is that since man possesses a soul, he should consequently be worthy of this divine gift.

Others mistrust and say--'But time escapes:
Live now or never!'
He said, 'What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!
Man has Forever.'

(lines 81-84)

The Grammarian is no different from the gourmet in The Englishman in Italy, since he is as much interested in his books as the Englishman is interested in delicacies. The scholar not only desires to widen his knowledge, he actually enjoys the process of learning, and compares the textual details with the items of a lavish feast:

Let me know all! Prate not of most or least,
Painful or easy!
Even to the crumbs I'd fain eat up the feast,
Aye, nor feel queasy.

(lines 61-64)

The Grammarian is not 'false to facts'. Nor is the poem a paradox in which we are 'led on and involved in an emotion over some situation which does not honestly call for the emotion.'⁴⁰ The scholar is like a Trojan warrior, who goes through life undaunted, with one single aim before him. His sacrifice of youth and health before the altar of knowledge calls for respect, if not for enthusiastic approval. The poem has, according to Edward Dowden 'moral ardour and spiritual faith and vigour of human sympathy . . .'⁴¹

In the context of the poem two different paths of life have been discussed. One is the path of 'achievement' and in this every act contributes and adds up to the final success. By adopting this path the doer can never be without some solitary achievement. The second attitude is that of 'aspiration'. This is the path of the ascetic. This journey is more appropriately compared to the ascent of a steep mountain-side. The summit is the final goal, yet many a conscientious climber fails to reach it. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that after a life spent in sincere labour, there is no overt reward:

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 adding one to one
His hundred's soon hit:
This high man, aiming at a million,
Misses an unit.

(lines 113-120)

How should one account for the peculiar life and actions of the Grammarian? Is he to be treated as a dry pedant whose refusal to enjoy life makes him an object of ridicule, or is he to be compared to Rabbi Ben Ezra?

At one point in the monologue the Grammarian is imagined dismissing worldly existence, 'Hence with life's pale lure!' (line 112, my italics). It is important to distinguish clearly between the word 'life' used here and the earlier reference to it in 'Actual life comes next?' (line 57, my italics). The paradox rests on the protean nature of the term 'life'. The Grammarian is using the word alternately as a continual condition in infinity, and the more popular concept, namely the existence from one moment to the next. The climax comes when the speaker of the monologue

adroitly turns the perspective so as to emphasise that it is not the Grammarian, but his pupils, who have failed the test.

The poem contains a certain amount of satire, but it is minimal. The principle irony is not at the Grammarian's expense, but at the insular point of view held by the world at large. The epitaph at the end is particularly significant: 'This man decided not to Live but Know' (line 139, my italics). The Grammarian seems somewhat absurd by aesthetic standards. In the course of the monologue, the inadequacy of the disciple's attitudes has been revealed. But at the same time the poet has portrayed the scholar's beliefs to discredit them. The obvious question facing the reader would be which of the two beliefs is considered by Browning to be more praiseworthy. W. David Shaw feels that 'the Grammarian is another victim of Renaissance disintegration . . . He lacks the rational fulness that would enable him to see the connections between his own discipline and the rest of life'.⁴² Perhaps, but Browning seems to admire the Grammarian without qualification. I feel the Grammarian is closer to the typical 'Christian' of Easter-Day and holds the poet's regard and approval.

A few lines from Edward Dowden's article 'Browning's poetry: A Galvanic Battery' would substantiate my point:

For asceticism, in the sense of the word which signifies a maiming and marring of our complete humanity, Mr Browning's doctrine of life leaves no place; but if asceticism means heroic exercise, the askesis of the athlete, the whole of human existence, as he conceives is designed as a school of strenuous and joyous asceticism.⁴³

Seen from this perspective, the Grammarian has lived a successful and worthy life. Browning presents a particular form of life in this poem, and approves of the protagonist, as can be best seen in the concluding lines:

Here--here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,
Lightnings are loosened,
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
Peace let the dew send!
Lofty designs must close in like effects:
Loftily lying,
Leave him--still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying.

(lines 141-148)

The grand finale raises the figure of the scholar to cosmic heights, and instils reverence into the hearts of the disciples and readers alike. I shall end my interpretation of the poem with the comment of Philip Drew: 'A corollary, almost a necessary corollary, of Browning's refusal to measure men by conventional standards of achievement is the insistence that there is a merit of a kind which the world does not recognise . . . these pivot on the contrast between fame or position on the one hand and human worth on the other. More obviously the same idea animates Apparent Failure and A Grammarian's Funeral.'⁴⁴

Fra Lippo Lippi and Rabbi Ben Ezra were published at different times, but both advocate the belief that the development of the individual soul is the main end of existence. And both the speaker of Fra Lippo Lippi and Rabbi Ben Ezra stress the importance of the 'flesh' and acknowledge its worth in aiding the development of the soul. Fra Lippo and the Jewish rabbi are related to each other by their identical praise of and

thankfulness for every living thing. Fra Lippo stresses the 'moment' while the rabbi turns to the readers with 'Grow old along with me'. The rabbi emphasises development and accepts that experience is an essential factor towards this growth.

Fra Lippo Lippi first appeared in Men and Women, vol. I, February 1853. The monologue portrays an artist-monk, humorous, talented and brimming with vitality. Fra Lippo is not happy at the restrictions which the Church has imposed upon him, and his discontent is deepened by the virtual exile he finds himself in. The monk has been commissioned by a nobleman, and his work involves the 'painting of saints'. This demands constant attention, and a consequent severance from the life outside the studio walls. Lippo is sensuous, so that when he hears the songs and lute-strings of some passing girls, he seizes the opportunity and scrambles down to meet them. The monk had renounced the world at the age of ten, and his act had been prompted by hunger rather than religious zeal. Thus, although he embraced the priestly vocation, it was under the force of circumstance, not choice.

The monologue is spoken by Fra Lippo, and presents his justification of his values. Browning was conscious of human failings, and although he does not censure the monk for his lapse, I do not feel that he totally approves of the monk's attitude towards life. Fra Lippo brings to the reader's mind the clever sophism of Blougram. Like the bishop, Fra Lippo is a casuist, and the monologue should be considered with this fact in mind.

The character of Fra Lippo is presented without any camouflage or apology. Lippo is at once himself, and his creator. It is not possible

to trace the poet's philosophy in every word and gesture of his subject. This would change the dramatic nature of the poem and make it a piece of subjective utterance. And yet Lippo and Browning seem to be synonymous from a specific point of view, namely in their attitude to living objects; not, I hasten to add, in their attitude to life. In Fra Lippo Lippi Browning reveals his sympathy with the humanism of Renaissance Art, its protest against the abstractions of the Middle Ages, its appreciation of the value 'and the significance of flesh', its conviction that 'the world and life's too big to pass for a dream', its delight in earth's sensuous loveliness:

The beauty, and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises--and God made it all!

(lines 283-285)

To Lippo, life is at once beautiful and meaningful. He is comparable to a pagan devotee of Nature, and he looks kindly upon all objects that are animate. Nothing is mean or lowly in the gamut of his universe--the starry night brings to him the same sense of fulfilment that he gets when he meets the night-revellers and hears the snatches of song. 'His sensuality is not just a lovable weakness in a licentious monk, but is itself a profoundly religious attitude towards the beauty of God's world.'⁴⁵

Browning has depicted the monk as an advocate of sensuous pleasure, and strangely, this sensuous obsession with life verges on the brink of sublimity. For Lippo, the gratification of the senses is as essential as that of the soul, and this 'gratification' does not apply only to the realm of physical passion, but to the realm of nature outside. The monk states to the guards:

Flower o' the broom
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!
Flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good's in life since?

(lines 53-56)

yet the quaint and flippant words of the song are not the complete revelation of the man Lippo. The guards, who have found the monk in a street of dubious repute, see in the culprit a middle-aged painter, good-natured and given to excesses, unscrupulous and a trifle verbose, fawning. Lippo's ribald humour reminds us of Falstaff, and like Falstaff, our initial impulse is to pass him by. Yet this artist-monk possesses deep insight, and has been through periods of privation and stress. Consequently, there is a sort of comical heroism draped around his shabbier self. Circumstances have sharpened his awareness, and his early days of privation have made him appreciate the basic needs of life. Despite the buffets of fate, Lippo's exuberance and gaiety have not been diminished, and it is this aspect of his character which appeals to the audience.

Lippo is aware of the seamier side of life. For him, existence is not confined to 'a sweep of lute-strings, laughs, and whiffs of song' but means taking cognizance of 'simple bodies':

First, every sort of monk, the black and white
 . . . then folks at church,
From good old gossips waiting to confess
Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends,
To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
With the little children round him in a row
Of admiration . . .

(lines 145-152)

and, continuing to include 'the old mill-horse, out at grass' (line 254).

In Fra Lippo Lippi Browning does not merely sketch the character of a robust and vital friar, chafing against a variety of circumstances and the 'burgher patronage' of the Medici, but describes with care and precision a painter and commentator on life. Pigou quotes the following lines and infers from them that to Browning, evil is stuff for transmuting:

. . . This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:

(lines 314-315)

This interpretation demotes Browning to the position of a naïve pantheist. There is at all times a tacit difference between the terms 'illusory' and 'transient'. The former denotes false beliefs and deception, while the second term emphasises the finite nature of all temporal objects and conversely stresses the belief that the life hereafter holds promise of righting the wrongs. Fra Lippo is aware of evil and ugliness and realises that these factors often remain unresolved. To him life is a riddle, and doubly welcome for its paradoxical nature. Pigou has stopped short of the monk's next words, and perhaps they can help to refute his (Pigou's) statement:

it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

(lines 315-316)

(my italics)

If life was to Lippo a uniform stage of happiness and comfort, he would not have spoken thus. He knows life is teeming with starvation, hypocrisy, lust, and these are side by side with plentitude and joy. Fra Lippo's intention is to explore the meaning of life and not give way to pessimism.

Lippo's enthusiasm for life is epicurean, and the question that raises its head is 'How far is the attitude of the friar akin to Browning's own belief?'

DeVane emphasises the relationship between Browning and Lippo and feels that Browning 'could not have chosen a better poem with which to challenge the orthodox conception of poetry in mid-nineteenth century.'⁴⁶ My aim, however, is not to discuss the formal and technical merits of the poem. That it is a unique work as far as the craftsmanship of the poet is concerned goes without argument. I wish to draw attention to those moments in the monologue where Lippo voices the poet's sentiments regarding doubt and faith.

We learn from the monk that his parents died when he was but a child and that thereafter he was left to his own devices. He lived

On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,
Refuse and rubbish.

(lines 84-85)

The speaker is not expecting to be pitied for his misfortune but merely telling the guards that when a boy starves in the streets, he learns to be practical and to understand the value of things both material and moral. The latter quality has been bred in Lippo by the Church (though he happily disregards the implication of the oath he took when he was a boy of ten); the material worth of things has been apprehended by him during his days of misfortune:

Eight years together, as my fortune was,
Watching folk's faces . . .
Why, soul and sense of him grew sharp alike,
He learns the look of things, and none the less
For admonition from the hunger-pinch.

(lines 113-126)

(my italics)

Lippo has turned the misfortune of his early days to positive result, namely, by reproducing the faces that have met him in the different moments of his life. It is true that since Lippo is making a case for himself in an attempt to exonerate his conduct, his words are a mixture of craft and frankness. I however feel that Browning commends the spirit and clear-sightedness of the speaker.

Although Fra Lippo is a monk he does not believe that abnegation of the flesh, or the condemnation of beautiful objects brings a person nearer to religion. Like the Rabbi, Lippo feels that it is important to appreciate God's creation, and though the reader may take Lippo's avowal (lines 266-269)⁴⁷ with reservation, there can be no doubt that the monk is genuinely appreciative of 'The beauty and the wonder' of this world:

. . . Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
These are the frames to? What's it all about?
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
Wondered at? oh, this last of course! you say.

(lines 286-292)

Fra Lippo is an example of vigour and good-will, and if his moral integrity is diluted by his hedonistic urges these same urges prompt him to make the best of life, and life's adverse conditions. Lippo is clearly not made to be a 'soldier-saint/priest' like Caponsacchi or a teacher like the Jewish rabbi. He is an ordinary man and he is an artist, and it is this latter quality that Browning upholds in the course of the monologue.

Rabbi Ben Ezra (1859-1862) is a direct statement of a philosophical idea. There is no characterisation or setting. The rabbi postulates a series of philosophical arguments, and the entire fabric of the poem takes on uniformity of substance by virtue of the logical propositions, culminating in the final deduction:

As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry 'All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than
flesh helps soul!'

(xii)

To the rabbi, life is a period of probation on this earth and has to be borne with fortitude and faith. The opening lines strike the key-note of his faith: 'Grow old along with me!'

The stanza can be interpreted as an assertion of an old and experienced teacher, to whom age is desirable. It can also be accepted as a belief in the accumulation of experiences of 'youth' which adds to the wholeness of vision that comes with maturity.

In Rabbi Ben Ezra the affirmations are necessarily a-posteriori. The speaker has attained the 'old' age that is synonymous with growth and is therefore justified in uttering his convictions. The words of the rabbi have often been criticised due to their apparently glib philosophy. The following lines have at once been commended for their lucid doctrine of faith, and deplored for their smug and didactic tone:

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

(stanza i, 1-6)

While reading the poem, it is essential to bear in mind that the words are spoken by an old man, and since he has experienced his life to the full, he is simply recounting his convictions concerning the merits of old age. For the first time in the sphere of Browning's religious poems, the ideas presented bear a mark of authority, and it is this tone of assurance that has earned the disapproval of certain readers. The rabbi has reached certainty, for him there is a specific purpose behind this universe, and he wishes to allay the trepidation of his disciples by assuring them 'Our times are in His hand'. These assumptions may bring peace and renewed vigour in the individuals who have faith. The problem that beset the nineteenth century was one of disbelief, or at least of the difficulty of finding a firm base for belief. In such a climate of religious uncertainty the well-meant affirmations of the rabbi were apt to be misinterpreted by not a few. The rabbi's doctrines can be paralleled with those delivered by the dying St John in A Death in the Desert. John's words are directed towards a sceptical audience, and consequently, the speaker does not make statements expecting the hearers to share his assumptions. This 'caution' on the part of John prevents the monologue from becoming didactic.

Rabbi Ben Ezra's vision of old age is free from fear. For him, greying hair, diminishing vision and the general impairment of senses are minor sacrifices as compared to the final gift--maturity. Seen thus, the first stanza emphasises that 'ripeness is all', and is religious in its implication. The words of the rabbi bring to our mind the lines from Prospice. Like Ben Ezra, the speaker of Prospice faces the end of

life with courage and trust. In both these poems, Browning has changed his customary note of 'hope' to introduce that of 'belief', but whereas the rabbi's words are spoken after he has undergone that particular state of experience, those spoken by the hero of Prospice are a-priori, or stated in advance.

The monologue advocates not only maturity but the teeming life that must be experienced before one wins it. The emphasis in the poem is upon 'life' and it is 'this dance of plastic circumstance' that helps to give an individual maturity and poise. According to the rabbi an individual is no better than the brute creature if he fails to appreciate the beauty of the universe and the significance behind this external beauty. The lines 'I see the whole design, / I, who saw power, see now love perfect too' are equally relevant in the context of the monologue as in presenting the poet's personal faith. Since the poem is spoken by the rabbi to no particular disciple or audience, the words break out from their situational confines and attain universal significance. At the same time they can be accepted as the poet's thoughts. The following lines present Browning's ideas to a certain extent:

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

(lines 13-18)

(my italics)

And, again in the following:

Should not the heart beat once 'How good to live and learn'?
Not once beat 'Praise be Thine!
I see the whole design,
I, who saw power, see now love perfect too:
Perfect I call Thy plan:
Thanks that I was a man!
Maker, remake, complete, I trust what Thou shalt do!'

(lines 55-60)

(my italics)

Contrary to the singularly ascetic attitude of the scholar (A Grammarian's Funeral) the rabbi encourages his disciples to enjoy the moment, since it forms an integral part in the development of the individual. The giddy fervour of youth, the days spent in deciding 'Which rose make ours, / Which lily leave and then as best recall?', is also taken into account. The important requirement is to have an active and inquiring mind. The rabbi gives to the soul the name 'spark', and the significance lies in the fact that not only is the soul luminous and sentient, it is dynamic. It is not enough to be a recipient of faith, but in order for the 'spark' to be efficacious, constant movement is essential. The stress is on the word 'disturb' (v) as it was on 'untroubled' (iii):

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

(stanza v, lines 25-30)

(my italics)

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

(stanza vi, lines 31-36)

The emphasis on movement is reintroduced in the sections xvii-xix in the metaphor of the spirit-at-constant-strife. The rabbi advocates the advantages of old age and at the same time keeps reverting to the past and to the years youth spent in 'acts uncouth'. Notwithstanding the apparent irrelevance of these acts, the process of 'striving' deserves attention:

As it was better, youth
Should strive, through acts uncouth,
Toward making, than repose on aught found made:

(xix, 109-111)

The aim behind this repetitive process is to give importance to the 'rage' that in youth 'was right i' the main', and to relate it to the absence of it in old age: 'So, better, age exempt / From strife, should know, than tempt / Further' (lines 112-114).

Rabbi Ben Ezra does not betray hurry or agitation to snatch at the fleeting moment. The rabbi acts as a foil to Lippo and while both the speakers (of Fra Lippo Lippi and Rabbi Ben Ezra) celebrate the world of physical phenomena, the pervading tone of the latter poem is contentment. To the rabbi, 'moment' cannot be treated as a separate event, it is woven into the very fabric of existence. The rabbi states his firm conviction of the importance, and conversely, the ephemerality of the 'moment'. This notion is strengthened by the metaphor of the potter's wheel:

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

(xxvii, lines 157-162)

(my italics)

The world (wheel of the potter) tests man (clay) and gives him shape and form. In the following lines dealing with the paradox of a loving God (the potter) and the apparent misfortunes of the product (man) Browning is replying to the ironical assertions of Fitzgerald in the translation of the Rubáiyát.⁴⁸ According to the speaker of the 'rubáiyát' there is neither a purpose behind this universe, nor is there any hope of immortality. The creator of mankind is like some dispassionate craftsman, who creates good and evil with apparent unconcern:

After a momentary silence spake
Some vessel of a more ungainly Make
'They sneer at me for leaning all awry;
What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?'

Then said another 'Surely not in vain
My Substance from the common Earth was ta'en
That He who subtly wrought me into Shape,
Should stamp me back to common Earth again'.

The concluding lines of Ben Ezra reveal the implicit trust of the speaker in the illimitable love and mercy of God. He acknowledges that since man is necessarily fallible, the importance of the test lies in the use that the 'limited qualities' of man have been put to. This element of faith in the rabbi permits him to achieve a wholeness of vision. The same concept was developed by Browning in his later poems, culminating in The Ring and the Book. The rabbi, like the Pope (Book X), turns to God and His Mercy in the final lines:

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

(xxxii, lines 187-192)

According to certain critics, the strength of the rabbi's affirmation make his belief a kind of overbelief; the a-priori nature of his assumptions make the readers less inclined to believe his experience. I admit that the 'difficulties of Christianity' do improve Browning as a poet, but I fail to see why the a-priori nature of the poet's experience should invalidate the a-posteriori affirmations of the rabbi.

From the jocularly of Fra Lippo Lippi and the patriarchal guidance of Rabbi Ben Ezra we come to Caliban's island. The monologue Caliban Upon Setebos was published in 1864. The previous year had seen the publication of Renan's La Vie de Jésus (19 November, 1863), and Darwin's The Origin of Species had been published a few years earlier (1859). Browning chose the subject of his monologue from Shakespeare's The Tempest and by giving the poem the sub-title of 'Natural Theology in the Island' he brought it to bear upon the religious contentions which were prevalent in his own time.

The language in Caliban Upon Setebos is rudimentary, simple, and poetic. It serves to hold the attention of the reader and affords him a glimpse of the religious workings of the mind of Caliban. In the opening lines, Caliban is heard to describe his immediate environment and the words he uses make the reader immediately aware of a shifting, creeping world. The sensation is more tactile than visual. The soft and soggy nature of the bog is aptly summed up in the words 'cool slush', and the tickling sensation is further deepened by the reference to 'small eft-like' things that 'run in and out each arm, and make him laugh'. Setebos is presented as the creator of the island, with its strange inhabitants. There is no reference to the kindness or benevolence of the creator. The

dominant impression the reader receives is of ruthless power. Caliban has known no other master than Setebos, and in his naïve ignorance transfers these qualities upon the god he imagines. To Caliban, strength and power are not only desirable virtues, but they form his paradigm of an ideal state.

Throughout the monologue Browning introduces creatures which are at once ungainly and brimming with energy. It appears that the entire island of amphibians is a heaving mass of energy, with the same vigour and the same blindness of purpose.

The opening lines are spoken in the third person, and throughout the monologue, Caliban frequently lapses into this form. Since he is a creature who stands undoubtedly at the very bottom of the ladder of ascent, this deviation from the normal mode of expression is not only acceptable but remarkably appropriate. The language of Caliban (third person narrative) is not uncommon in children. Thus, Caliban's mode of speech reveals his childlike nature. He is curious, and at the same time unconcerned about the effects of his actions.

The crude and half-formed awareness of Caliban cannot form independent and self-sufficient sentences, and the vague, undefined fears that beset his mind give rise to a stream of utterances, part inchoate, part meaningful. Discussing the art of dialectics in the religious poems of Browning, Shaw ascribes the language of Caliban to his (Caliban's) inability to differentiate himself from his environment.⁴⁹ Caliban lacks the rational power to consider himself a different, independent being from the subaqueous environment that surrounds him. He is so completely at home with the 'touch and tickle' of strange plants and insects, and

so ready to identify himself with the 'beast and creeping thing, / Yon otter . . . Yon auk . . . a certain badger brown . . .' (lines 45-48), that he loses the line of demarcation between himself and the other creatures that inhabit the bog. The pronoun 'he' remains at once a part of Caliban, and 'I' becomes a word he uses to describe his own situation from a detached perspective, but there is a constant shift of tone coalescing the two pronouns.

Caliban may betray difficulty in dissociating the pronoun 'he' from the first person singular, yet he possesses a mind rich with a host of different associations. This seemingly uncomprehending creature can 'make a live bird out of clay', fashion a crude pipe out of 'pithless elder-joint' and aim an accurate shot at some unfortunate crab. Caliban is the victim of necessity and circumstance, and clearly, his failings are to be dwelt upon rather than condemned. The monologue is a gradual unfolding of consciousness in the mind of Caliban. Through the movement of the poem Browning aims to present a gradual dawning of ethical and religious consciousness, and although at the end of the monologue, Caliban has failed to understand and grasp the significance of a God of Love, he has brought himself forward by means of his reasoning capacity. What prevents the final conversion is the inherent error of Caliban's logic. The storm at the end of the monologue is misinterpreted by Caliban, and though he could have attained a more coherent and benevolent view of the universe, his perverse reasoning lead him away further from the truth. The storm reintroduces his feeling of dread and guilt, and intensifies the terror of his past. The monologue ends with Caliban cowering on the ground, promising to offer a sacrifice and hoping to escape the wrath of Setebos.

What makes the monologue truly original is the imaginative power contained in it. Caliban constructs a god by modelling him after his own mind. Since Caliban is selfish and envious, he creates a deity who torments his creatures through malice and pride:

He made all these and more,
Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?
He could not, Himself, make a second self
To be His mate; as well have made Himself:
He would not make what he dislikes or slights,
An eyesore to Him, or not worth His pains:
But did, in envy, listlessness, or sport,
Make what Himself would fain, in a manner, be
Weaker in most points, stronger in a few,
Worthy, and yet mere playthings all the while,
Things He admires and mocks too, that is it.

(lines 55-65)

(my italics)

Caliban can understand the wrath and unpredictable nature of Setebos since his own attitude to the world is one of indifference and callousness. Judging by his own impulse to construct a clay bird and later smash it in a fit of pique, Caliban reasons that a creator has the right to destroy his creation, since such behaviour:

shows nor right nor wrong in Him,
Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord.

(lines 98-99)

For Caliban the law of life is that the strong dominates the weak. Drawing a parallel between Setebos and the creatures of the island, and himself and the crabs, Caliban muses:

'Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs
That march now from the mountain to the sea;
'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,
Loving not, hating not, just chossing so.

(lines 100-103)

Again, Caliban creates a god who is not only difficult to please, but who takes great offence if the creature shows a consistency of behaviour. Arbitrariness is stressed overtly. Setebos is conceived by Caliban after his own image, morally indifferent, like Hardy's President of the Immortals or the vengeful Jove of Paracelsus. This apparent detachment makes the god of Caliban at once remote and terrible. To Caliban's mind, the burden of existence is:

There is the sport: discover how or die!
All need not die . . .
Those at His mercy, why, they please Him most
When--when--well, never try the same way twice!
Repeat what act has pleased, He may grow wroth.
You must not know His ways, and play Him off,
Sure of the issue.

(lines 218-225)

(my italics)

This seemingly 'contrary' nature of Setebos does not astonish Caliban, since the savage likes to impose his power upon the weaker creatures in the island. To him, it is not a perverse action to spare a squirrel one day and destroy it the next. In Caliban's code of conduct, all such arbitrary actions find validity simply because they signify overlordship:

Doth as he likes, or wherefore Lord? So He.

(line 240)

Caliban Upon Setebos introduces a speaker who does not have a stable view of the world, nor of his own personality. W. David Shaw writes in his article, that the essence of Caliban's name has been defined by Browning in the very letters that make up the word. The speaker is not only sans enlightenment, but also sans pity and principle. The word

'cannibal' is brought to the readers' minds as the monologue opens, and as the poem progresses, this idea is deepened. 'His systematic ascent is closest in structure to David's and Cleon's, a passage from sensual bondage to dawning ethical and religious consciousness. But whereas David's analogical argument includes the lower stage in the higher, Caliban habitually explains the higher stage by the lower.'⁵⁰

When Caliban cites examples of the human category, he reduces the attributes of Prospero, Ariel, and Miranda, and identifies himself with a lump of 'sea-beast'. Instead of glorifying his shortcomings, Caliban is quite contented to take over the position just above his, although he is well aware that his mirth is based upon a game of make-believe:

Himself peeped late, eyed Prosper at his books . . .
Has peeled a wand and called it by a name;
Weareth at whiles for an enchanter's robe
The eyed skin of a supple oncelot . . .
. . . and now pens the drudge
In a hole o' the rock and calls him Caliban;
A bitter heart that bides its time and bites.
'Plays thus at being Prosper in a way,
Taketh his mirth with make-believe: so He.

(lines 150-169)

Caliban's mother has told him that there is a Power over and above that of Setebos. This deity is different from Setebos in that he 'made all things' and is consequently not under Setebos. In addition, the over-Power, whom Caliban calls 'the Quiet', is not vengeful and cruel like Setebos. The only way in which Caliban can construct a coherent picture of 'the Quiet' is to imbue the deity with attributes that are contrary to those of Setebos. Thus, 'the Quiet' is the representative of supreme power in the mind of Caliban, but this omnipotent nature of 'the Quiet' does not include the quality of love.

. . . the something over Setebos
That made Him, or He, may be, found and fought,
Worsted, drove off and did to nothing, perchance.
There may be something quiet o'er His head,
Out of His reach, that feels nor joy nor grief,
Since both derive from weakness in some way.

(lines 129-134)

This Quiet, all it hath a mind to, doth.
Esteemeth stars the outposts of its couch,
But never spends much thought nor care that way.

(lines 137-139)

Caliban's two deities, Setebos and the 'Quiet', lack the essential element of love, for Setebos' needless cruelty is no worse than the 'Quiet's' who must be feared. Caliban is partially right to say that God intended weakness, but wrong to deduce that God's plan was to force the obedience of the weak creatures. Several of the thoughts that Caliban presents in the course of his monologue are true to fact. As the reader progresses through the poem, the plight of Caliban and the despotic power of Setebos are made obvious. And it is easy to agree with Caliban's reasonings that if Setebos is God, then God is not good; if the 'Quiet' is God and concerned about his creatures, then the continued cruelty of Setebos implies that the 'Quiet' is not omnipotent. Since either Setebos or the 'Quiet' is the ideal divinity, God cannot be good and supremely powerful at the same time. From the absurdity of his own situation Caliban tries to establish the pointlessness of God's purpose . . . and through this point of view the monologue reveals the monologue reveals the limitations of a purely naturalistic theology.

Hugh A. Clark describes the poem as an attack 'against the tendency in all religions to formulate the conception of God from man's own

consciousness'. C.G. Ames suggests that the poem is 'a satire upon all religious theories which construct a divinity out of the imperfections of humanity'.⁵¹

Both Clark and Ames emphasise the satirical element in Caliban Upon Setebos. John Howard feels that the subject of the poem is clearly religious, but the intent of the poet is not predominantly satirical:

Rather it can be shown that Browning endeavoured to capture the limitations of the subhuman mind when confronted with religious speculation. The meaning of Caliban, as Robert Langbaum suggests, 'is the life-persistence, the biological vitality and cunning which Caliban finds in the swamp world and in what he deduces from the swamp world about the nature of the god, Setebos. The meaning is Caliban as he stands revealed in what he sees and thinks'. In short, the poet's extreme care in handling even the small details of characterisation gives a clear picture of Caliban as a primitive subhuman who contemplates God in the only way that he can.⁵²

I have quoted at length from the essay 'Caliban's Mind' by Howard since I share his opinions to a great extent.

Time and again, Browning employs metaphors to reflect the kind of mind he is trying to portray, primitive, simple, unscientific, but deeply perceptive. At the beginning of the monologue Caliban describes the surrounding sub-aqueous world he inhabits, and to his unscientific gaze the sea is a mesh 'of fire' crossed and recrossed by the noonday sun. As the monologue progresses, it is important for the readers to keep in sight this primitive nature of the monologist, and seen thus, the element of satire becomes considerably less. Towards the end of the poem, Caliban wakes to a new awareness of his situation. Life does

not hold any promise of comfort if things continue in the island of Caliban as they have always done. The final rumination of Caliban is 'Believeth with the life, the pain shall stop' (line 250). The closest Caliban comes to revelation is in the reasonings at the close.

'Conceiveth all things will continue thus,
And we shall have to live in fear of Him
So long as He lives, keeps His strength: no change,
If He have done His best, make no new world
To please Him more, so leave off watching this,
If He surprise not even the Quiet's self
Some strange day, or, suppose, grow into it
As grubs grow butterflies: else, here are we,
And there is He, and nowhere help at all.
'Believeth with the life, the pain shall stop.

(lines 241-250)

Far from giving his life a new direction, the revelation at the end of the monologue intensifies the terror of Caliban, and with the thunderstorm breaking over the island, the final distancing between Caliban and a loving, compassionate deity has been effected. Shaw states that 'Whereas grace should bring the religious man closer to God, this show of transcendent force drives God and Caliban further apart . . .

Without the synthesis of love that would provide the necessary communication between his thesis, the Quiet, and its antithesis, Setebos, opposition cannot yield to counterpart. His mind's circular, eddying motion arrests his dialectic and prevents Caliban from making any further advance.'⁵³ (my italics)

In the monologues dealing with religion, Browning has tried to show that a belief in immortality and the Goodness of the Maker is not only possible, but has to emerge from the individual himself. Caliban is

represented as being on the lowest rung of the ladder of ascent. Cleon, the Greek poet, and Karshish, the physician are far above Caliban, while the disciples of St John belong to a period of enlightenment closest to our own day and age. The clear implication in the religious monologues is that although mankind has progressed far beyond the point at which Caliban was produced, men are still incapable of giving a full and reasoned account of 'the deity', and of the paradox of life.

I shall end the analysis of Caliban Upon Setebos by citing the opinions of certain critics. C.R. Tracy points out that the lines describing Setebos' lack of justice or feeling are possibly a parody of the Calvinist conception of an amoral God, and Philip Drew draws attention to the anti-Calvinism of the poem by quoting the lines 100-103: 'Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs . . . / Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.' Both C.R. Tracy and Philip Drew agree that the poem is not entirely a satire. Caliban is a primitive man, and his comments upon the universe should be accepted as a limited segment of knowledge, without the refining quality of enlightenment that is perceptible in the reasonings of Karshish and Cleon. In a letter to Furnivall, Browning admitted the similarity of his speaker to the character created by Shakespeare. The stress, in both cases, is upon a creature who holds a limited view of the universe.⁵⁴

The gradual changes in the mind of Caliban can be considered beside Herbert Spencer's explanation of the development of religion. Spencer explained religion in terms of the law of evolution. He defined evolution as 'a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity, to a definite,

coherent, heterogeneity'. He further suggested that this type of change 'which we everywhere see going on, has been going on from the first, and will go on.'⁵⁵

In the books written by Spencer we are shown how simple entities gradually differentiate their structures into individual parts. These parts change in relation to their environment, and so evolve new functioning parts. In due course, a completely new and different group of parts are reached. According to Spencer, religion has a typically simple origin--it begins as vague fear of the powerful dead, graduates into the acceptance of a priest to act as the mediator, evolves to the point of monotheism, and finally allows complete liberty of thought to each man (by accepting a 'deanthropomorphized notion of God).

Caliban can be examined in the light of Spencer's theories. But instead of portraying a particular phase in the religious development (as described by Spencer), Caliban seems to show at once a gradual unfolding of the religious thoughts that have dominated society through the ages. Thus Caliban is comparable to the early man who strove to counteract his fear of ghosts by propitiating the dead, and he is also the comparatively modern protagonist who dimly intimates the consciousness of a higher ethical standard, a 'consciousness which transcends the forms of distinct thought, though it remains forever a consciousness.'⁵⁶ This will be in short an awareness that there is something Unknowable, and that nothing more can be said about it. What prevents Caliban from reaching a positive state of belief is the limitation of his own sensibility. W. David Shaw writes:

Though his blend of dishonesty and fear is never more repellent than in his parody of Christ's personal substitution, Caliban's formal sacrifice to appease an angry God anticipates the doctrine of atonement. All that remains to complete his argument is the substitution of love for hate, a step he can never take.⁵⁷

Caliban Upon Setebos is a picture of the belief of a creature, who tries to understand the Power behind his island and the environment that surrounds it. The character of Caliban indicates what sort of God one might expect if He were nothing but the objectifying of the qualities of man. The poem enunciates 'that God reveals to each individual only what he is capable of understanding.'⁵⁸ Caliban Upon Setebos is not a satire. It can be interpreted as a poem showing that religious faith has primitive origins. Caliban's limited view causes in him the fear of a vindictive over-Power. But the readers Browning addresses are not Caliban. Caliban, having no knowledge of love, imagines a loveless God. Browning's nineteenth-century readers are invited to compare the God they worship with the God Caliban imagines, and to recoil in horror if they find a similarity, not from Caliban but from themselves. According to Philip Drew:

Caliban's transference of his own cruelty and envy to Setebos leads him to create a vindictive, jealous God; the reader having observed this and perceived Caliban's error, is required to examine afresh his own conception of God and to see how far he is himself guilty of worshipping a deity without love and compassion for his creation.⁵⁹ (my italics)

In A Death in the Desert, published nine years after Men and Women, Browning's favourite theorem continues to be the importance of faith. His later years were given more and more to the consideration of eternal

questions rather than temporal ones. Darwin's Origin of the Species (1859) had appeared between the publication of Men and Women (1855) and its successor, Dramatis Personae (1864). In the latter volume there is unmistakably an added seriousness in Browning's proclamation of Immortality and Divine Love. His wife's death in 1861 brought him face to face with grave spiritual doubts, and the polemics of the time, whetted by the pronouncements of Renan, Strauss, and the Tübingen school of critics, did little to abate his discomfort. Thus Browning set forward to voice his personal convictions in the immortality of the soul, and in the importance of earthly failures.

Browning's initial purpose in writing the religious monologues might have been to validate the essential truth of the Scriptures, but I feel that this was not the sole reason for the conception of the poems, in particular for A Death in the Desert. In the religious poems Browning attempts to reason out his beliefs, and to arrive at a clearer comprehension of the eternal truths that baffle mankind. The progression in the discourse of the individual poems is simultaneous with the progression within Browning himself.

Browning's chief concern in later poems was 'with the exposition and exploration of an abstract idea. The energy of these speculative poems comes from the interest of the idea: the articulation of the argument is the structure'.⁶⁰ Perhaps this accounts for the 'discursive' nature of A Death in the Desert when it is compared with earlier works on religious perception, namely Karshish, Saul and Cleon. The purpose in these (earlier) poems is to relate the speakers' immediate experience.

Nevertheless, A Death in the Desert is in the tradition of Karshish, Cleon and Saul. In the two epistolary monologues, Karshish and Cleon, the speakers are brought by their psychological requirements to perceive the need for a God of Love (Karshish), and a promise of personal immortality (Cleon). They arrive at the perception through secular concepts, and are prevented by the same from embracing the Christian answer that lies before them. In Saul, Browning blends lyrical description with the process of thought and feeling. From the love of man there follows as a moral necessity the Love of God.

A Death in the Desert appeared nine years after the final version of Saul, and to a certain extent, the two poems act as a complement to each other. David's hope:

. . . O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: a Hand like
 this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the
 Christ stand!

(xviii, lines 309-312)

seems to come true afresh with John and his experience. In both cases, Christ is heaven's fulfilment of earth's desire.

The present poem is rather elaborate, dealing with the last words of St John, the Evangelist. The account is partly by Pamphylax, (an Antiochene martyr, formerly the follower of St John) and later, by the apostle himself. The ailing saint addresses his dying words to a small group of friends, and expresses his concern at the fate of the generations to come, when questions would be raised regarding the promise of Christ's coming, and even regarding His existence. John, the last person living

to have seen Jesus, has outlived the generation that witnessed the miracles. His death will mean a termination of that particular period, leading to a further distancing of faith, and finally to its passing away. The sceptical new generation will have no one to turn to, and their query will be left unanswered:

Was John at all, and did he say he saw?
Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!

(lines 196-197)

The apostle sincerely desires to assure his 'struggling' brothers by proffering his helping hand, and his last words are:

So long as any pulse is left in mine,
May I be absent even longer yet,
Plucking the blind ones back from the abyss,
Though I should tarry a new hundred years!

(lines 639-642)

But he dies, and is dutifully buried by his five followers. Dying, John leaves behind a kind of 'Fifth Gospel' for generations that will question the validity of Christ's existence. The last words of John are preserved (supposedly) by Pamphylax and Phoebus. They are meant to provide proof of his existence, and to counteract the doubts he anticipates. The poem suggests that faith does not necessarily depend upon witnessing a miracle, and that there is a crucial difference between a text (Scripture) and its content. Clyde DeVane feels that Browning has the new forms of Biblical criticism in mind, those currently jeopardising the authority of the Scriptures.⁶¹ But whatever be the deciding factor behind the composition of the poem, it is undoubtedly an examination of Browning's personal faith.

Although the poem is dramatic, it cannot be doubted that its spiritual teaching is Browning's. The dramatic utterance is made through the lips of St John, and the fact that he is the last surviving man who has seen Christ makes him an appropriate mouthpiece. The utterance is consistent with the character conceived, but the argument on miracles appears to be more typical of a writer of the generation of Strauss. Even if we admit this argument as conceivably an answer to the scepticism already rising at the close of St John's life, the voice of Browning is discerned in the doctrine that man's very limitations are the necessary conditions of his progress:

Such progress could no more attend his soul
Were all its struggles after found at first
And guesses changed to knowledge absolute,
Than motions wait his body, were all else
Than it the solid earth on every side
Where now through space he moves from rest to rest.
Man, therefore, thus conditioned, must expect
He could not, what he knows now, know at first.

(lines 589-596)

According to Hugh Walker, this thought runs all through the works of Browning, but it was not within the reach of the age of St John.

Browning has conceived a dramatic situation, and has most skilfully represented it: the old man dying in the cave, the faithful disciples round him, and the Bactrian sentry 'a wild childish man' crying his warnings at intervals. The scene is impressive, and with the backdrop of the desert, cosmic.

One reason for Browning's choice of St John for the utterance of religious thoughts has been stated, and another may be easily inferred. The apostle of love was a fit vehicle for Browning's personal thoughts.

The gospel of St John interested Browning, and was treated as a subject with great care in Karshish. Thus it might be either St John or Robert Browning who tells us that:

. . . life, with all its yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear, believe the aged friend,
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
Such prize despite the envy of the world,
And, having gained truth, keep truth: that is all.

(lines 243-250)

Having drawn a parallel between the utterances of John and the personal convictions of the poet, I stand charged of having put the conclusion before stating the premise. In an attempt to repair the error I shall go back to the beginning of the poem, more precisely, to the events that followed the words

I am the Resurrection and the Life.

(line 64)

The setting of the monologue is the semi-dark interior of a cave. St John has been brought here for safety. The trance, which has lasted for sixty days, heralds death, and while the disciples are sorrowful, they are anxious to hear what last words St John may utter. According to Pamphylax 'we would not lose / The last of what might happen on his face.'

The setting is significant. The apostle has been carried out from 'the secret chamber of the rock' to 'the midmost grotto'. The fact that he lies in a trance, a state of existence between life and death makes the central grotto a fitting place of rest. The speaker is made to utter

his final words while his body is in a state of transition. He is in control of his faculties, but removed from his earthly companions:

So is myself withdrawn into my depths,
The soul retreated from the perished brain.

(lines 76-77)

It is perhaps natural that the physical state of the protagonist coincides with the external surroundings. Whether Browning deliberately arranged the setting, or it was an unconscious contribution, is immaterial. I can only say that the result is appropriate.

The apostle is shown to be well beyond the reach of sensory stimulation, and he is impervious to sunlight, wine, and the chafing of his limbs. Yet he responds to the repetition of Christ's words with alacrity:

Whereat he opened his eyes wide at once,
And sat up of himself, and looked at us.

(lines 65-66)

This drastic change in the physical condition of John may seem improbable to a great many readers, and it is but natural that they will view the rest of the poem with misgiving. Yet this first 'unnatural' event strikes the keynote of the monologue. The importance of trust in the love of God is emphasised, and the entire poem moves on this pivot. For John, the repetition of Christ's words act as a resuscitating potion, an elixir. The hitherto inert man wakes up as from a trance, and sets forth on a long and fruitful discourse. He seems to be replete with energy, and commenting upon this state, Gerald Massey writes: 'The dying man rises and dilates, "as on a wind of prophecy", whilst in solemn vision his spirit ranges forward into the far-off time, when in many lands men will

be saying, "Did John live at all? and did he say he saw the veritable Christ?" And, as he grows more and more inspired, and the energy of his spirit appears to rend itself almost free from the earthy conditions, the rigid strength of thought, the inexorable logic, the unerring force of will, have all the increased might that we sometimes see in the dying.⁶²

The initial confusion that John suffers from is partially induced by his state of exhaustion, but it can also be interpreted as the apostle's withdrawal into an interior world:

So is myself withdrawn . . .
. . . Whence it was wont to feel and use the world
Through these dull members, done with long ago.
(lines 76-79)

The words that immediately follow are:

Yet I myself remain; I feel myself:
And there is nothing lost. Let be, awhile!
(lines 80-81)

John has now reached the final threshold, described thus by Theotypus:

This is the doctrine that he was wont to teach,
How diverse persons witness in each man,
Three souls which make up one soul: first to wit
A soul of each and all the bodily parts,
Seated therein, which works, and is what Does,
. . . next soul . . . is what Knows:
. . . the last soul, that uses both the first,
Subsisting whether they assist or no,
And, constituting man's self, is what Is.
(lines 82-97)

Once revived, John generalises from his personal state to that of future generations. He wonders, 'How will it be when none more saith "I saw"?'!

John speaks about the future of Christianity, since with the passage of time scepticism will be rampant. He has seen the growing disbelief in the past years. In the beginning, people readily believed when John 'went, for many years, about the world, / Saying "It was so: so I heard and saw"'. (lines 136-137) Then came a day when his teachings were challenged by the 'Antichrists, who answered prompt:

Am I not Jasper as thyself art John?
Nay, young, whereas through age thou mayest forget:
Wherefore explain, or how shall we believe?

(lines 160-162)

With his advancing years, John has become mellow and patient. Consequently, instead of betraying agitation at the heretics and 'calling down fire on such', he has striven to explain to them facts concerning the Lord. A great deal of the facts have been either forgotten or misdelivered, or gained a new significance, both for St John and for others.

What first were guessed as points, I now knew stars,
And named them in the Gospel I have writ.
For men said, 'It is getting long ago:
Where is the promise of His coming?' asked
These young ones in their strength . . .

(lines 174-178)

John prophesies the days when doubt shall strike even deeper, since the questioners will be left stranded without John's personal testimony. They can be saved by faith, yet absolute knowledge will never be granted to them, but a knowledge that is 'relative' and 'progressive'. The passage of time can be advantageous, since with years, a man's personality becomes more mature. The 'ripened soul' is the means of discovery. The years assist in wearing away 'the thickness' of youth, and finally the

soul lies 'bare to the universal prick of light'. The hypothesis ends with

Is it for nothing we grow old and weak,
We whom God loves? When pain ends, gain ends too.

(lines 206-207)

(my italics)

Faith, according to St John, should be divested of dogma and blind acquiescence. It should come to man as a realisation, and self-awareness. John believes that temporal distance can be compared to an 'optic glass' or a 'tube'. Whatever is doubtful and confused will become clearly defined once man chooses to delve deep within himself. A crafty smith will turn the tube onto 'objects brought too close,

Lying confusedly insubordinate
For the unassisted eye to master . . . (and)
Just thus, ye needs must apprehend what truth
I see, reduced to plain historic fact,
Diminished into clearness, proved a point . . .
Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death
Stay there and gaze, till it dispart, dispread,
As though a star should open out, all sides,
Grow the world on you, as it is my world.

(lines 231-243)

Life is for learning, and for putting this learning to manifold uses. The body learns quickly once and for all the worth of fire. The growth of the physical self is then finite, as opposed to the development of the soul which has infinite possibilities. This potential quality in the soul should be put to constant use. If the soul amassed all knowledge, there would be an end to man's probation and progress on the earth. To escape stagnation the mind must have fresh questions rising within its sphere continually:

Then, as new lessons shall be learned in these
Till earth's work stop and useless time run out,
So duly, daily, needs provision be
For keeping the soul's prowess possible
Building new barriers as the old decay,
Saving us from evasion of life's proof,
Putting the question ever, 'Does God love,
And will ye hold that truth against the world?'

(lines 266-273)

What John says coheres closely with what Browning says in many other poems, Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, Saul, La Saisiaz, and The Pope in The Ring and the Book. The prevailing thought in A Death in the Desert is the necessity of doubt, and a contrast is drawn in the poem between bodily good, which is weighed and measured once and for all, and accepted at its value ever after, and the soul's gain, which has to be won again and again. Were spiritual truths as indisputable as truths physical, then once experienced, man's probation would conclude:

 this gift of truth
Once grasped, were this our soul's gain safe, and sure
To prosper as the body's gain is wont,
Why man's probation would conclude, his earth
Crumble . . .
Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,
Nor may he grasp that fact like other fact,
And straightway in his life acknowledge it,
As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire.

(lines 287-298)

Thus truth is, to man, ever a process. At no point is it permanently or absolutely safe, but on the other hand, if man uses his faculties aright, it is always sufficient for his needs. This explains at once the difficulty in every age of believing in Christ, and also suggests a possibility of it. The poem illustrates the importance Browning attaches to intuition, and the simple trust growing out of it as a

natural consequence. According to Philip Drew 'Here, as elsewhere, Browning's poetry implicitly asks for the reader's assent to the proposition that simple-hearted, straightforward, loving, trustful behaviour is still possible and still the best for man even in an age of fear, doubt, casuistry and mistrust, a position which must be respected in any debate on man's ethical nature.'⁶³

But, such a state is not brought about with ease, and John is well aware of the 'burthen for late days'. His followers may well say that belief had been easier once. The apostle admits that he was fortunate, in that he possessed an immediate personal experience. He had been a close companion of Jesus and had witnessed many miracles. Yet, his actual experience did not make the lesson of faith any easier for him, since it (faith) crumbled before

. . . a torchlight and a noise
The sudden Roman faces, violent hands,
And fear of what the Jews might do! Just that,
(lines 307-309)

Under the grip of this momentary panic, John denounced Christ and fled, he who had seen Christ transfigured, treading the sea and bringing the dead to life, failed in the most severe test.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, John claims that his 'soul had gained its truth, could grow.' The episode made him aware of his limitations. He realised that the individual soul defines itself not only by its unflickering faith but also by the barriers it overcomes. Therefore, it stands to reason that such a barrier must be present at some point in life. Obstacles are meant for 'keeping the soul's prowess possible', and doubts regarding Christ serve a necessary moral function. John asserts simply 'to test

man, the proofs shift', and gives an account of the weak women and children who had neither seen nor heard Christ, but who nevertheless clasped the Cross willingly. John has learnt that religion should not involve blind belief or apathetic acceptance. He knows that truth is ever likely to be misinterpreted, and that 'Already had (has) begun the silent work / Whereby truth, deadened of its absolute blaze / Might need love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt'. (lines 319-321)

The apostle anticipates the loss of conviction, and urges future generations to 'use it (faith) and forthwith, or die!' According to C. Hassett, 'the self-division of the disbelieving-believer must be endured; the severance from truth must be the basis for living faith.'⁶⁵ John bids his disciples to 'tell the whole mind out / And (let us) ask and answer and be saved!' The miracles will not be repeated time and time again. What has been proved, should be accepted as such, without desiring further proof.

Mythology tells us of Prometheus and Aurora. The sophist may laugh at the myth of Aeschylus, but 'fire, how'er its birth / Here it is'. Thus our forefathers declared that the sun was brought up by a charioteer's yoked steeds', and although we have not experienced the actual event the sun nevertheless rises and sets. Continuing by the same hypothesis, we should believe in the Love of God, even if there are no miracles to inform us of it. Man was made to grow, and although it is only natural for him to raise questions, he must not doubt the efficacy of past faith.

I say that man was made to grow, not stop;
That help, he needed once, and needs no more,
Having grown but an inch by, is withdrawn:
For he hath new needs, and new helps to these.

This imports solely, man should mount on each
New heights in view; the help whereby he mounts,
The ladder-rung his foot has left, may fall,
Since all things suffer change save God the Truth.
Man apprehends Him newly at each stage
Whereat earth's ladder drops, its service done;
And nothing shall prove twice what once was proved.

(lines 424-434)

Throughout the monologue, the prime intention of the dying teacher is not to summon miracles as proof of the Power and Love of God, but to instil faith in his friends by narrating his own experience. He reminds them that the last phase has begun, that Christ as well as anti-Christ are already in the world, and the 'manifestation' will occur now.

Is not God now i' the world His power first made?
Is not His love at issue still with sin?
Visibly when a wrong is done on earth?

(lines 211-213)

John's abandonment of historical sequence changes the interpretation considerably. The confused and sceptical comments: 'It is getting long ago / Where is the promise of His coming?' are met with gentle reasoning. He emphasises the importance of perspective, and points out that a change in it is not only natural, but essential. Truth remains unchanged, but with every shift of the generation, there is a distancing and refraction of vision. This is inevitable. Just as it is not possible for us to grasp the same outward facts of truth as was possible for our ancestors, 'truth' remains for each generation to rediscover for itself. Myth and man's apprehension may change, but future generations will be able to induce God's love from their own and from their need to conceive a love higher than theirs.

We can note the possible influence of Feuerbach in lines 448-451,
and again in lines 472-481:

. . . Was man made a wheelwork to wind up,
And be discharged, and straight wound up anew?
No! grown, his growth lasts; taught, he ne'er forgets:
May learn a thousand things, not twice the same.

(lines 448-451)

(my italics)

So faith grew, making void more miracles
Because too much: they would compel, not help.
I say, the acknowledgement of God in Christ
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be wise.
Thou hast it; use it and forthwith, or die!

(lines 472-481)

(my italics)

The important thing is not the witnessing of the 'Burning Bush' but to
feel the need and the urge for faith within one's own self. It is from
this standpoint that John meets the objections of his questioners.⁶⁶

A Death in the Desert may be set against Caliban Upon Setebos as
a natural antithesis. The latter is clearly a product of modern anthro-
pology and a study of the first 'incipient religious ideas' of the human
mind emerging from the mere animal life of instincts. Caliban dis-
believes in (a) immortality, and in (b) development. As a contrast to
the primitive superstition of Caliban, A Death in the Desert sets forth
a theory of religion in which development is admitted. The world as it
is conceived by scientific empiricism is bound to discredit Christianity
on account of the element of miracle it involves. In A Death in the
Desert, Browning has not introduced a variety of theophanies as a means

of indulging Victorian nostalgia. The fantasies reported by John have their allotted place, and are not used to present an aura of miracle. Browning has tried to solve the problem of Divine 'remoteness' by finding an alternative to miracles and miraculous visitation. In his view 'the essence of the theophanic event is not the spectacle, but the impact; not the visitation of God, but the revision of man. If God does not 'come in thunder from the stars', this absence means only that self-confrontation is more subtly achieved.'⁶⁷

Thus Browning implicitly believed in an 'interior' form of revelation, and a 'non-miraculous' route to the transcendent. Reasoned thus, human acts and psychological impulses deserve special recognition. The events act as a blinding vision that causes an individual to confront his inner self and recognise the truth. In order to accept the gross irregularities of the world, we have to perform an act of decisive trust. Unless we realise that the Power behind this universe is capable of love and compassion, we cannot accept life as it is.

To conclude, in A Death in the Desert Browning has stressed the importance of self-consciousness. He understood the hazard of presenting subjective experiences and through them trying to establish a general truth. Subjective scrutiny may seem a very dubious way to discover either God's or the Soul's truth. But again, according to Philip Drew, both Browning and Kierkegaard 'insisted on the simultaneous importance of the subjective and the objective in ethical and religious matters, in that subjective faith (not empirical objectivity) is a response to and the means of apprehension of the objectively real, eternal and transcendent God'.⁶⁸

Self-awareness, or self-consciousness is thus presented as the absolute core of being. Our existence is organized from within, and whatever the initial difficulties of coming to terms with oneself, finally it is the interior self that we have to be true to. It is not necessary for future generations to witness the Second Coming. The absence of Christ as a corporal Presence should not negate a possibility of self-confrontation, and to Browning, this discovery was the highest achievement. Let us then view A Death in the Desert in the same light that we would view Saul. It is not merely a theological argument answering to the assumptions of Strauss and Renan, but it is Browning's quest to find a Universal Love and reconcile it to Power.

Notes

¹ Philip Drew, Facts and Fancies, pp. 149-150.
Browning Institute Studies, Vol. 3 (1975), New York, The Browning
Institute, Inc.

² Constance W. Hassett, The Elusive Self in the Poetry of Robert
Browning, p. 3.

³ Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 98.

⁴ Michael Mason, 'Browning and the Dramatic Monologue', in
Writers and their Background, ed. I. Armstrong, p. 234.

⁵ Ibid, p. 238.

⁶ Lines 89-94:

. . . first the perfect separate forms were made,
The portions of mankind; and after, so,
Occurred the combination of the same.
Or where had been a progress, otherwise?
Mankind, made up of all the single men,
In such a synthesis the labour ends.

⁷ Cleon's rumination on the 'brute creation' and the advantages
shared by the non-human forms of life finds an echo in Arnold's
Resignation and The Darkling Thrush of Thomas Hardy. The following
lines from Hardy's poem are particularly appropriate:

So little cause for carollings / Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things / Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through / His happy good-
 night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware.

31 December 1900

(lines 25-32)

⁸ Browning's epigraph comes from Acts xvii 28, 'For in him we live,
and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have
said, For we are also his offspring.'

Robert Browning: The Poems, Vol. I, ed. John Pettigrew. Notes, pp.710-716.

19 W.O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment and other Essays, p. 133.

Raymond discovers Browning to be as confused and enmeshed in the toils of casuistry as Gigadibs himself:

. . . Hence it becomes an interesting question, how far his (Browning's) hand is dyed by the same medium in which he works. To what extent is he at one with them (casuists).

20 Lines 170-171:

I mean to meet you on your own premise:
Good, there go mine in company with yours!

21 Arnold Shapiro, 'A New Reading of Bishop Blougram's Apology', in Victorian Poetry 10 (1972).

22 F.E.L. Priestley, 'Blougram's Apologetics', University of Toronto Quarterly, XV (January 1946), pp. 139-47.

23 Lines 295-298:

Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,
Nor may he grasp that fact like other fact,
And straightway in his life acknowledge it,
As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire.

See also lines 582-586, 595-598 in A Death in the Desert.

24 Hoxie N. Fairchild, 'Browning the Simple-Hearted Casuist', University of Toronto Quarterly, XVIII (April 1949) pp. 234-40.

25 John Chapman, 'Robert Browning' from Emerson and Other Essays, pp. 185-213.

. . . Browning's mission led him occasionally into paradox and jeux d'esprit. Bishop Blougram is an attempt to discover whether a good case cannot be made out for the individual hypocrite.

(Also consider the article by Lord Dunsany, 'Browning is Blougram', Nineteenth Century and After, April 1946, pp. 175-177.)

26 Lines 284-297:

. . . whoso chooses wealth or poverty
. . . Whate'er the process of conviction was.

Lines 345-349:

But friend,
We speak of what is; not of what might be
And how 'twere better if 'twere otherwise. . . .
Grant I'm a beast, why beasts must lead beasts' lives.

26 continued

Lines 354-355:

My business is not to remake myself,
But make the absolute best of what God made.

27 C.W. Hassett, The Elusive Self in the Poetry of Robert Browning, p. 5.

28 Ibid, p. 60.

29 Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 101.

30 W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, p. 211. A completely different theory is held by Shaw:

On his sheep farm in Australia, where he is urged to study his last chapter of St John, 'Feed my sheep' Gigadibs will still be the slave of his flocks, while Blougram is the master of his.

31 Karshish(?1853-54), Cleon (?June 1854) and Bishop Blougram's Apology (?February 1850). The dates are DeVane's conjectures.

32 C.W. Hassett, The Elusive Self in the Poetry of Robert Browning, p.68.

33 Stanza xii, lines 67-72:

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

34 C.W. Hassett, The Elusive Self in the Poetry of Robert Browning, p.45.

(According to W. David Shaw even before he discards his harp to assume his final, prophetic role, David establishes himself as a bard and a sage. Also, the posture of Saul presages the symbol of the crucified Christ and determines the end of the poem. 'What delayed Browning was not an inability to think of how the poem ought to end . . . but an inability to decide how much he himself believed in the ending'. The Dialectical Temper, p. 224.

35 In Saul, as in Fra Lippo Lippi, Browning reveals the 'value and the significance of flesh'. The world and life are 'too big to pass for a dream':

the beauty, and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises, and God made it all!

Fra Lippo Lippi (February 1853)
(lines 283-285)

36 A parallel idea is found in lines 505-513 in A Death in the Desert:

(Man) He reasons, 'Since such love is everywhere,
And since ourselves can love and would be loved,
We ourselves make the love, and Christ was not,
How shall ye help this man who knows himself . . . Yet,
Rejecteth Christ through very need of Him?
The lamp o'erswims with oil . . . and that man's soul dies.

37 Unlike Henry Jones's assumption, evil for Browning is neither an illusion, nor is man's moral effort dependent on ignorance and delusion. To Browning, the world 'may' have been a gymnasium, but it is entirely unfair to claim that he crowded it with 'phantoms' or 'nonexistent evils'.

38 Roy E. Gridley, 'Robert Browning', Routledge Author Guides, p. 74.

39 W.D. Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, p. 84. According to Shaw, the term 'life', 'narrows the meaning of the key word to emphasise the difference between the "preparations" of the aesthetic man for a life of immediate pleasures and the intellectual's philosophic and ascetic disciplines which render his whole life probationary.'

40 Edward Dowden, 'Browning's Poetry: A Galvanic Battery', 'Victorian Literature' Fortnightly Review, XLVII (June 1887) pp. 835-867.

41 John J. Chapman, 'Robert Browning' from Emerson and Other Essays, p. 45.

42 W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, p. 85.

43 Edward Dowden, 'Browning's Poetry: A Galvanic Battery', ('Victorian Literature' Fortnightly Review, XLVII (June 1887) pp. 835-867.

44 Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy', in Writers and their Background ed. I. Armstrong, p. 136.

45 Roy E. Gridley, Robert Browning, Routledge Author Guides, Chapter IV.

46 Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 219.

47 Lines 266-269:

I always see the garden and God there
A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards . . .

48

What though, about thy rim,
Scull-things in order grim
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?

(xxix)

Look not thou down but up!
To uses of a cup . . .
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou
with earth's wheel?

(xxx)

49 W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, pp. 193-203.

E.K. Brown notices that whenever Caliban feels himself more powerful (and godlike) he shifts from the third to the first person. 'The First Person in "Caliban Upon Setebos"', Modern Language Notes, LXVI (1951), pp. 392-395

50

W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, p. 193.

51 Hugh A. Clark, Omphalos (London, 1857) pp. 352-353.

C.G. Ames, 'Caliban', Poet Lore, III (May 1891) p. 293.

52 John Howard, 'Caliban's Mind', Victorian Poetry, I (1963) pp. 249-57.

Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 107.

53 W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning, p. 201.

54 Herbert Spencer, First Principles (published 1862), p. 4.

55 Letters of Robert Browning collected by Thomas J. Wise (April 25, 1884) p. 228, ed. Thurman L. Hood (London 1933).

I don't see that, because a clown's conception of the laws of the Heavenly bodies is grotesque and impossible, that of Newton must be necessarily as absurd, or that the writer of La Saisiaz must see through such horny eyes as those of Caliban.

56 Herbert Spencer, Ecclesiastical Institutions (1885), p. 658.

57 W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, p. 200.

58 John Howard, 'Caliban's Mind', Victorian Poetry, I (1963), pp. 249-57.

59 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction, p. 152.

60 Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy' in Writers and their Background, ed. I. Armstrong

61 The authenticity of the Fourth Gospel had been challenged by Renan, Strauss and the Tübingen school. The German critic Baur had stated that the author of the Gospel (AD 100) and the fisherman of Galilee were not the same. Among the books contesting the validity of the Scriptures and Christ were La Vie de Jésus (June 1863) by Renan and Life of Jesus (1835) by Strauss.

62 Gerald Massey, The Quarterly Review (July 1865) in Browning: The Critical Heritage, p. 271, eds Litzinger and Smalley.

63 Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy', in Writers and their Background, p. 137, ed. I. Armstrong.

64 Lines 301-310:

Look at me who was present from the first!
Ye know what things I saw; then came a test . . .
And it is written, 'I forsook and fled:'

65 Constance W. Hassett, The Elusive Self in the Poetry of Robert Browning, p. 115.

66 According to Feuerbach, 'consciousness of God is self-consciousness' and therefore 'The divine being is nothing else than the human being . . .'(a)
If the sceptics in A Death in the Desert accept this part of Feuerbach's thesis, then the reasonings that will follow will be an echo of:

Who then is our Saviour and Redeemer? God or Love? Love; for God as God has not saved us, but Love, which transcends the difference between the divine and human personality. As God has renounced himself out of love, so we, out of love, should renounce God; for if we do not sacrifice God to love, we sacrifice love to God, and in spite of the predicate of love, we have the God--the evil being--of religious fanaticism. (b)

This is an argument Browning sets out to refute through the reply of St John. A complete knowledge of man's own nature would negate the purpose of growth and progress. Man learns 'a thousand things' and still there is more to learn. But at the same time, the traditional beliefs

66 continued

should not be held in doubt, because they made perfectly good sense as they were and nothing can be gained by a knowledge that leads the questor back to (the source of) doubt:

. . . grown, his growth lasts; taught, he ne'er forgets

(line 450)

(a) Preface, The Essence of Christianity, translated Mary Ann Evans (1854) pp. x-xi, also chapter I, pp. 12-13.

(b) Ibid, chapter IV, pp. 52-53

Source: The Poetry of Browning, Philip Drew, pp. 215-216.

⁶⁷ Constance W. Hassett, The Elusive Self in the Poetry of Robert Browning, p. 53.

⁶⁸ Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy', in Writers and their Background, p. 106, ed. I. Armstrong.

Chapter IV

The Ring and the Book

(a) An assertion of Faith

(b) A reassessment of Truth in the context of self-authorised action

My approach to The Ring and the Book¹ will be to examine the elements of truth, partial truth, and deviation from truth in the separate monologues, and to relate the entire poem to Browning's religious convictions. The motive is not to emphasise a doctrinal form of religion or religious practise, but merely to examine the poem as an assertion of Browning's faith. In addition, it would be interesting to study The Ring as an unravelling of the dichotomy between fact and fancy. The problem had occupied Browning since the conception of Paracelsus, and he sought to resolve it in a number of poems, including the present one. Whether he was able to achieve his objective remains to be seen.

The primal question remains 'what is fact?' And if the answer is 'Certainly it is not synonymous with truth', the prompt rejoinder is 'What then, is the nature of truth?' It is this that I wish to trace through the poem in general, and through Books I, VI, VII, and X in particular.

It will be useful to pause awhile and study the structure of The Ring before examining the contents. The poem deals with an incident, namely the murder of Pompilia and her foster-parents by

her husband and his four accomplices. This incident is presented from ten points of view--the poet's aim being to create the awareness that the central truth is inextricably tangled with the multiple versions of the deed. Some of the 'facts' are seen to be inaccurate as the trial proceeds. Their inaccuracy and deviation from truth may be due to prejudice, ignorance or deliberate manipulation, and Browning would wish the readers to examine carefully every monologue and test its veracity in relation to what has been revealed in Book I. Yet, early in the poem it has been proclaimed 'Fancy with fact is just one fact the more' (line 458).

This statement is crucial, and helps us in understanding the purpose behind the labyrinthine maze of monologues. Fact is not necessarily divorced from fancy, and vice-versa. Since 'fact' is but a step towards truth, it needs the aid of 'fancy' to grasp it and therefore, the two are natural allies in understanding a situation. Browning broadens this analogy considerably in the course of his poem, till 'fact' and 'fancy' are seen as vital (and inseparable) entities in human development.

The Ring and the Book is thus presented to the readers as a narration of an event the conditions and causal factors of which shift continually. Book I introduces the poem who explains the significance of the title. The 'fancy' or 'imagination' of the poet is compared to the alloy used by a jeweller to mix with gold so that the gold becomes workable. This artistic procedure helps to amplify the facts, and at the same time sustains the attention of the readers. After explaining the ring-analogy, the poet goes on to acquaint the readers with the

rudimentary facts regarding the events that preceded and led up to the murder. It is clear that the speaker is no impartial observer (as he claims to be), but an active participant in the drama, now past. His agitation is clearly seen in his choice of descriptive words and phrases--Guido is an unmitigated villain, Pompilia the purest of the pure, and Caponsacchi a courageous hero. Although the events occurred in the distant past, by reading and re-reading the source book the speaker has succeeded in immersing himself in the period, and his senses are imbued with the tragic event.

Having been told the truth in Book I, the readers are next introduced to three perversions of truth. The first speaker, representing Half-Rome, is a great believer in the rights of husbands. His reaction to the murder is understandably coloured by his personal experiences. Since he is doubtful of his own wife's fidelity he adopts the point of view of Guido with alacrity. The murder is excusable in his sight, since he considers it an act of honour.

The second speaker, although as ill-informed as the first in regard to the actual facts, shares Pro-Pompilia feelings with the Other Half-Rome. He is a man of finer instinct and shrewder judgement, and the helplessness of Pompilia arouses his pity and sympathy.

The nobleman in Tertium Quid is anonymous, like the two preceding speakers. His words are cynical. He is on the one hand a balance, a contrast to the two intemperate speakers. Tertium Quid is presented devoid of immoderate excesses and prejudices. But, on the other hand, the unnecessary cynicism of the speaker is obvious. He is a contrast to the Pope (Book X).

The above versions (in Books II, III, IV) are inaccurate and Browning desires his audience to recognise their inherent weakness. Browning's point is that people, by and large, have a limited view of truth. Truth, they fancy, lies on the surface for all to see who will. Thus,

Fancy with fact is just one fact the more;
To-wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced,
Thridded and so thrown fast the facts else free,

(I, lines 464-466)

Fact, when fused with fancy becomes rearranged truth, the 'facts else free' become organized. The inadequate version of 'truth' recounted in the monologues of Half-Rome, the Other-Half-Rome and Tertium Quid have their validity in the context of the poem. As the narration progresses, we see that '. . . each monologue exemplifies various kinds of judgement, involving the non-rational, imaginative process of inference and selection. The process is the same in all the monologues but the product is different.'² It is the comprehension of this 'difference' that Browning is asking his readers to realise. Like the decision of the Pope (Book X), the final assessment of the readers should stem from (a) a rational and intelligent appraisal of the facts leading up to the case in question, and (b) an intuitive grasp at the truth of the matter by placing oneself in the midst of the events. 'Everyone who reasons, is his own centre', Newman said, and I agree in admitting that the reader of the monologues in The Ring has to, or is forced to rely on his own centre.

Books V, VI, and VII bring us to the three main personae--
Guido Franceschini, Pompilia, and Canon Caponsacchi.

Guido is a consummate orator and sets out to exonerate his conduct by presenting the deed as entirely reasonable and natural. He is completely callous to Pompilia and blames the Comparini for his actions. A clever defender of his case, Guido appeals to the court to witness the treatment that has been meted out to a nobleman of his rank and lineage. He claims, further, the clerical privileges and hopes thereby to save his life. Despite Guido's casuistic speech the true nature of the man does not remain concealed, and the readers' surmise is proved correct in Book XI, where Guido is once more allowed to have his say--before his execution.

Caponsacchi's monologue is abrupt, but filled with indignant charges and passionate appeals. It is noteworthy that he alone (as compared to the previous speakers) is aware of the fact that while the harangue continues,

Pompilia is bleeding out her life belike,
Gaspng away the latest breath of all,

(VI, lines 61-62)

Finally, to complete the pattern, we are presented with Pompilia. Browning has portrayed her as both innocent and helpless, and except for the Pope, she is perhaps the only character who is permitted to recognise truth by help of her intuitive faith alone. There is not much to be said about the actual 'development' of Pompilia's character in the course of the monologue. Neither can she be admitted as a tragic heroine, or as a

rational, integrated individual. By her own admission, a great deal of her actions have had to rely solely on the promptings of her 'heart'. And although this moral purity and element of faith is repeatedly stressed (Books I, VI, X, XII), till the very end Pompilia remains, a half-realized or partially realized character.

The final movement of The Ring and the Book consists of two monologues by the lawyers--the defendant lawyer Dominus Hyacinthus, and the Prosecuting attorney, Doctor Johannes Baptista Bottinus. Their arid and singularly self-centred monologues are a flagrant contrast to the sincere reasonings of the Pope. The Pope is depicted as mature and just, and the lucidity of his reasoning helps to resolve a great many questions that have been presented before the readers in the course of the poem. I intend to treat the monologue of the Pope at some length at a later point.

Books XI and XII are devoted respectively to Guido, and a resident gentleman. The latter is identified once more with Browning, as was the speaker in Book I, but in the final monologue several other speakers are introduced for poetic purpose. The multiple speakers help in presenting an unbiased account of the event and bring the narrative to a fitting close. Although Guido remains an unmitigated villain, the reader is left in no doubt as to the meaning of the poem, and the worth of faith and personal convictions are admirably highlighted in the last report. This concerns a sermon preached by Fra Celestino at the church of San Lorenzo. According to the priest, the case of Guido-Pompilia-Caponsacchi does not establish the belief that truth and virtue are always triumphant. Yet, this apparent uncertainty leaves much place for

hope and improvement. Even while determining the issue, the book opens up The Ring to immense possibility.

The two important issues I wish to discuss are (a) the poet's attempt to ally 'fact' with 'fancy', and (b) his abiding faith in a purpose behind the travails of life. These issues can be examined in reference to Book I and Book X, and also the monologues of Guido, Pompilia and Caponsacchi.

Book I takes up the first issue, viz, how far 'fact' and 'fancy' are consistent with each other. At first glance, the monologue seems to revolve around an interminable discussion regarding the respective merits of 'facts' and 'fancies', and the correlation of the two. The difficult 'ring' metaphor in Book I has been the object of intense critical scrutiny. That the ring figure is an analogy of the poetic process is obvious, emphasised by the line:

beseech you, hold that figure fast!

(142)

The metaphor 'ring' can be elaborated as follows. In order to make the metal or gold workable, it is necessary to mix a certain amount of alloy with the actual metal. The alloy helps the gold to become more firm, less malleable, and after the gold has been thus treated, it is easier for the craftsman to carve intricate designs on it. The formerly non-resistant metal stands up better under the chisel of the goldsmith. Once the objective has been gained, or in other words once the gold ring has been shaped, the craftsman gives the ring an 'acid bath'. The dash of fiery acid burns away the alloy and restores the gold to its former pure condition.

Critics have argued that if the alloy is the poet's fancy, it is not possible to remove it totally from the final form of the poem. In the case of a gold ring, it is possible to purge the alloy and retrieve the metal in its pure form. But in the sphere of poetry, a removal of the alloy (imagination of the poet) will cause the structure of the poem to suffer. And all said and done, J.E. Shaw, Paul A. Cundiff and other critics maintain that The Ring is more a creative product of fancy than a faithful reproduction of its source book. According to J.E. Shaw, 'The Ring is a glorious misinterpretation of the Old Yellow Book.'³

The two charges are (1) how could Browning claim to remove the alloy and still leave the poem intact; (2) how could he reiterate his point that his sole 'business has been . . . to explain fact'⁴ and nothing but the fact. Considered from the above viewpoint Browning's assertion and the consequent result prove to be inconsistent. To understand Browning's claim (as seen from his letter to Julia Wedgewood), one needs to recount the words in Book I:

. . . once the thing a ring,
Oh, there's reparation! Just a spirt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;
While self-sufficient now, the shape remains . . .
No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.

(lines 22-30)

The speaker immediately goes on to say:

What of it? 'Tis a figure, a symbol, say;
A thing's sign: now for the thing signified.

(lines 31-32)
(my italics)

The emphasis here is on the word 'symbol'. It is clear that Browning wishes his readers to accept the 'ring' analogy as a symbol, with appropriate reservations, and not take it for its literal meaning. The implication of the 'repristination' is that it makes the initial metal pure by burning away the alloy. When extended to its contextual parallel (the poem), the gold aligns itself with the actual facts of the case (as represented in the Old Yellow Book) while the alloy becomes replaced by the imaginative fancy of the poet-speaker. Thus although the facts in The Ring have been left unchanged in their essence, they have been imbued with the poet's own fancy to be made workable. The final result is the completed poem, comparable to the gold ring:

No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.

(line 30)

Working on the concept of the ring, we should note that just as the alloy (in the gold ring in its unfinished form) was not perceived overtly, similarly the fancy of the poet cannot be pinpointed. The alloy existed in the ring in fundament, and this is the important factor. The imagination of the poet is mixed in his work, and though the process of repristination removes the fancy (overtly), it lies submerged in the final poem. Browning never intended to say that the fiery dash of acid removed all the alloy (art), leaving just the gold (facts as they occur in the Old Yellow Book). He was fully aware of how much alloy remained, since the total removal of the base would only cause the structure to collapse.

By accepting Browning's explanation, that the alloy is only 'apparently' removed, we can examine the validity of his statement . . . 'The business has been . . . to explain fact'.

Browning freely admits his departures from the source-book, and the way he presents the events (Pro-Pompilia Book I, inaccurate version of truth Books II, III, IV, the litigations, Books VIII, IX) only deepens the hypothesis that he wished to make his readers aware that no true judgement of an act is possible. The central truth cannot be studied in isolation, but has to be understood in relation to the individual speakers, and the narrator of Book I is one of them and has to be consequently considered as prone to falsifying (and exaggerating) the actual facts as his fellow speakers.

The essence of the 'ring' metaphor can be explained by the following excerpt from The Convex Glass:

. . . the sense seems clear that Browning intended by his metaphor to say that the work of art, whether ring or book conveys the illusion of fidelity to facts through the alchemy of art, which shapes, sustains, and transfigures the inert mass of facts. What remains is in the highest sense truth, not in a figurative, but in a most actual sense . . . '5

The Ring is not 'a glorious misinterpretation of the Old Yellow Book' but rather its reverse. The poem's treatment of the murder trial helps to prove Browning's belief regarding the Janus-nature of mere 'transcripts, fact and false'. Values are dependent upon the individual's interpretation and acceptance of them. Factual evidence may, or may not relate to the essential truth, the germs of which can be comprehended only by a sincere examination of the facts, and performing the decisive act of trust.

Discussing 'The Function of Book I in The Ring . . .' M.R. Sullivan states that when he uses the term 'repristination' Browning merely

indicates that he removed his 'imaginative additions from the surface of the poem.'⁶ Fancy, according to Browning is the power by which he:

May so project his surplusage of soul
In search of body, so add self to self

(I, lines 723-724)

The poet's job is not to create facts, but to 'resuscitate' them through his imaginative genius. Yet once the poet's subjective interpretation has been introduced, it must remain in the completed design--'remain submerged, unobserved, undetectable. For the greatest poetic achievement, says Browning, the poet must let his recreated beings speak for themselves, each in his own voice--in the dramatic monologues which constitute the "self-sufficient" ring.'⁷

If this is the aim of a poet, Browning has succeeded in attaining his objective in The Ring. The very accusations of critics can be turned to Browning's own advantage, and we can perceive the individual characters not only as 'case-persons' but human embodiments of their intrinsic qualities and values.

In the record of the Old Yellow Book, Guido Franceschini was merely an avaricious man, 'vicious by force of circumstances as well as from inherent defects of character'. Browning has taken the character from the court-register and has created a corporeal villain. The effort has been to lift the whole action of the major characters of the poem to a higher and more significant plane. The portraits are convincing. Admittedly, Browning has deviated from 'fact' to a considerable extent. At the end of the poem the appeal to the audience is to accept that knowledge is relative and always imperfect:

So British Public . . . learn one lesson hence
. . . human speech is naught
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimations words and wind.

(XII, lines 831-836)

Man is peculiarly limited in judgement, and is constantly subject to error. All the speakers in the poem have their limitations, including the Pope. The attainment of absolute truth is impossible, but man must have the courage to act, knowing all the while the risk of error common to all men.

The repetition of the murder-story (with perceptible difference) in Book I, has a functional purpose. In the first stage, we are acquainted with the Old Yellow Book and made to see it, even feel it palpably. The speaker describes the external features of the book with great care, and even tosses it up to emphasise its concrete presence (lines 33-35, 38, 89-90). The second stage re-introduces the self-same subject, but here the emphasis shifts from the actual facts and includes the speaker's subjective interpretation. His apparent partiality is discernible in the extravagant language, and this is precisely what Browning is aiming at. The first description, the recounting of the 'Roman Homicidiorum' had been objective. Later, the speaker arraigns Guido in stronger terms. As Guido's evils are magnified (he is referred to as 'Lucifer' seeking admittance to the Garden of Eden, and again as 'the worm of hell'), so are the virtues of Pompilia and her soldier-priest Caponsacchi. Well aware of the reaction of an audience to the second version of the tale, Browning has provided an explanation at the beginning. To the query 'And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe, / And the white lies it sounds like?' the speaker answers:

Yes and no!

From the book, yes; thence bit by bit I dug
The lingot truth, that memorable day
. . . from something else surpassing that,
Something of mine, which, mixed up with the mass,
Made it bear hammer and be firm to file.
Fancy with fact is just one fact the more;

(lines 457-464)

As the poem moves towards the third and final movement in Book I, we perceive that Browning or the speaker has once more started distancing himself from the event. Once the creative spirit of imagination had been fused with the 'facts' the product

Lay ready for the renovating wash
O' the water. 'How much of the tale was true?'
I disappeared; the book grew all in all;

(lines 685-687)
(my italics)

The primary sense in these lines is how far has the speaker's imaginative interpretation preserved the essential spirit of the original:

Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse?
Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?

(lines 696-697)

The main tenets of Browning's argument concerning the efficacy of fancy and its integral contribution to truth can be judged by the following lines:

Well now; there's nothing in nor out o' the world
Good except truth: yet this, the something else
What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
This that I mixed with truth . . . what's your name for this?
Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
The somehow may be thishow.

(lines 698-706)

The third summary of the murder trial acts as a kind of prologue to the next section. It prepares us for the individual voices of the monologue and while having offered the necessary cautions, (by way of objective report of the incident) leaves yet enough space for our judgements to be formed. In her article M.R. Sullivan has stressed that the ten monologues constitute in themselves the act of re-pris-tination.⁸

After having provided us in Book I with the premise to his syllogism, Browning moves on to justify his theory. The dual factors 'fancy' and 'fact' occur in all the monologues, and culminate in the reasonings of the Pope (Book X).

The speaker in Book V, Count Guido Franceschini, is an impoverished nobleman from Arezzo. The book opens with the trial of Guido in progress. After murdering his wife Pompilia and her foster-parents, the Comparini, Guido faces the jury with boastful words:

I am representative of a great line,
One of the first of the old families
In Arezzo, ancientest of Tuscan towns.

(lines 140-142)

In his speech Guido makes his pride of lineage apparent, and later gives evidence that despite his noble birth he is cruel and malicious (Book XI, lines 2056-2063). At the outset of his defence Guido admits to his guilt, and by this admission proves his cunning and casuistic nature. Guido bares his 'grievances' to the court, and to the world at large. Having undertaken to give a truthful defence 'I' the name of the indivisible Trinity!' (line 121), Guido sets off to justify his own action by

disparaging Pompilia and her foster-parents. The gist of his argument is that because the Comparini practised deception (in hiding from Guido the actual facts regarding Pompilia's birth) they have been justly dealt with by the noble and righteous Guido:

I killed Pompilia Franceschini, Sirs;
Killed too the Comparini, husband, wife,
Who called themselves, by a notorious lie,
Her father and her mother to ruin me.
There's the irregular deed: you want no more.

(V, lines 109-113)

That this seeming 'irregularity' is by no means comparable to his own monstrosity does not cross Guido's mind. He stresses the fact that he had been duped--'There's the irregular deed' and appeals to the court to look upon his deed merely as a means of recovering lost honour.

Various examples are introduced by Guido in the course of his narration, and all the events revolve around personages of noble birth. By the help of their high station Guido's 'ideals' manage to exonerate their heinous acts. Guido hopes that as in the past nobility has always been given the priority, he himself will be pardoned and allowed to go free.

As the monologue proceeds, Guido maintains that his own conduct has been blameless. His marriage to Pompilia was in the nature of a transaction, and an honest one at that. He kept his part of the bargain, and naturally turned to look at her:

. . . to find all wifeliness,
As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree--
I buy the song o' the nightingale inside.

(V, lines 604-606)

The reader will notice that the analogy Guido so carefully presents is untrue--by buying the tree the purchaser does not buy either the nightingale or its song. Yet Guido continues, 'Such was the pact: Pompilia from the first / Broke it . . .'

Not content with involving Pietro and Violante in her cause, Pompilia soon had the town discussing the affair.

This accusation of Guido is presented with devious cunning. The fact remains that Pompilia did refuse 'Either in body or soul to cleave' to Guido, her lawful husband, and secondly, she confided her misery to her parents. Seen superficially, Guido's allegations 'seem' to be true, but the deliberate distortion of facts makes Guido's crime take on a blacker tinge. He is not a simple, hot-tempered individual who has carried out his actions in a fit of rage. The careful selection of words reveal Guido to be crafty and cruel. This trait in his character is seen in the most condemnable light when he makes an admission that had Pompilia answered the door (on the fateful night), he would have checked his anger. Guido describes the event as the will of God, and ascribes his final 'choice' to 'the Cross'. As the preconceived notion of murder crystallised within his brain, Guido felt that there was

Left nothing more to interpose 'twixt me [him]
'Peace upon earth,' louder and louder pealed
'O Lord, how long, how long be unavenged?'

(V, 1607-1610)

In a burst of diabolical casuistry, Guido claims that the final deed was not a voluntary action, but was guided and consecrated with divine sanction:

And so, all yet uncertain save the will
To do right, and the daring aught save leave
Right undone, I did find myself at last
I' the dark before the villa with my friends,
And made the experiment, the final test,
Ultimate chance that ever was to be
For the wretchedness inside.

(V, 1622-1628)
(my italics)

Browning has time and again emphasised the importance of an act of choice, and pointed out that moral decisions are not easy to make. In the character of Guido, Browning has revealed a crafty and manipulative individual, one who is perfectly aware of making the wrong choice, but attempts to justify it, and hides his guilt under the cloak of morally acceptable terms--'the will to do right', 'final test', 'Ultimate chance'. Like the other monologists in The Ring, Guido makes his instinct the sanction of his action. But the fact that he was at all times aware of the cruelty of his act becomes more and more firmly established as the monologue proceeds, and in Book XI the actual nature of Guido becomes totally revealed.

The entire poem revolves upon the complexity of views, and considered within this structure, Guido's interpretation of his conduct appears normal if not acceptable. What invalidates his admission is not the fact that he is basically evil, but the additional fact that he is conscious of his evil nature. This awareness magnifies the horror of the deed. In the present monologue Guido states that his blind anger had met with added provocation when the door of the Comparini household had been opened by Violante. She is compared to a 'serpent's head / Coiled with a leer at foot of it' (lines 1659-1660). Guido brings in

the image of the Cross. He claims that he had tried his best to keep the Cross in sight and thereby save his soul, but Violante had foiled his efforts. She was the noxious serpent, coiled at the base of the Cross. Consequently she had to be destroyed.

We learn in Book XI that the account given by Guido in Book V is neither strictly true, nor simple as it sounds. The truth of the matter was a ruthless killing of the victims. By his own admission:

So Pietro, when I chased him here and there,
Morsel by morsel cut away the life
I loathed, cried for just respite to confess
And save his soul: much respite did I grant

(XI, lines 470-474)

And again, Guido acknowledges his slanders and lies:

God bless us liars, where's one touch of truth
In what we tell the world, or world tell us,
Of how we love each other? All the same,
We calculate on word and deed, nor err.

(XI, lines 1391-1394)

Guido is not a sub-human Caliban, lacking imagination and sensitivity. He is calculating and implacable in his desire for revenge. Critics have aptly compared him to Iago.⁹ Like Iago, Guido is a contriving agent--he is inhuman.

Thus although The Ring deals with an isolated incident, viewed within a periphery of diverse opinions (Browning's method being primarily to temper any supposition that the story was either biased or subjective) Guido remains an unmitigated villain.

In the course of Guido's soliloquy (Book V), Browning makes it abundantly clear that Pompilia is indubitably good and pure, and the speaker is indubitably evil. Guido refuses to recognise his own defects, and his method of shifting the blame of his action on society, Church, the Comparini, Pompilia, and finally God, is stressed in Book XI:

Away with man! What shall I say to God?
This, if I find the tongue and keep the mind
'Do Thou wipe out the being of me, and smear
'This soul from off Thy white of things, I blot!
'I am one huge and sheer mistake, whose fault?
'Not mine at least, who did not make myself!'

(XI, lines 935-940)

The monologue of Guido in Book V has been the subject of much critical interpretation. Admittedly, the opinions of Guido, Caponsacchi, Pompilia, have been presented by Browning without any moral judgement. Seen thus, an act (any act) should be studied in relation to the intent and purpose. This approach has led some to consider Browning in The Ring a relativist. But all said and done, the reader knows that Guido is guilty, and although the poem fulfils the initial function of a relativist poem, in that it displays a multiple interpretation of a single event, '... the end of the poem is so clearly stated at its beginning, a procedure which violates the aims of relativist art.'¹⁰

John Killham writes that from time to time we get the suggestion that the purpose behind The Ring was to show 'that judgements of motives are hard to come at because the truth is never a simple thing.' Quoting Pater 'the reader of the fiction should enjoy, not the fruits of experience but experience itself' Killham writes:

From this . . . we deduce that Browning's end was to enable us to enter sympathetically into the human condition, to make us see and feel what it is like to look at things from a standpoint which the world at large is content to judge by imputation.¹¹

I feel that Browning starts with 'suspension of judgement', that is, he does not presuppose, but he is quick to stress that truth is unchangeable. Circumstances may colour a person's perceptive faculty--the speakers of Half-Rome, The Other Half-Rome, and Caponsacchi, the two lawyers--all view the actual situation from their individual viewpoint. Yet although the perspectives might differ, the essential facts of the story remain the same. To complete the circle of narrators, it was necessary to introduce Guido, just as it was imperative that Pompilia be granted enough time to falter out her personal defence before succumbing to her wounds. By creating Books V and XI Browning did not suggest that the audience should pity Guido, or sympathise with him. His motive was to present the entire story and all the participants in the event without any reservations or bias.

Speaking of the poem, Robert Langbaum feels that it relates to unique people and circumstances. 'It is relativistic', he writes, 'in that the social and religious absolutes are not the means for understanding the right and wrong of the poem; they are for the most part barriers to understanding.'¹² But Langbaum is quick to emphasise that the monologues are not to be accepted at mere face value, for 'Judgement goes on, in other words, below the level of argument'. Hence, a final judgement of Guido's character can be only possible after an examination of the other monologues, and his own confession in Book XI.

Book VI: Caponsacchi

Book VI traces the narrative through the monologue of Caponsacchi, the priest who helped Pompilia to escape. Apart from telling the audience the truth of the central event (as it appears to his sight), and acquainting the court with the singular purity of Pompilia, Caponsacchi's monologue provides valuable insight into the development within the speaker. Under the influence of his love for Pompilia, Caponsacchi changes from a light-hearted priest to a man of fortitude and determination. Book VI unfolds this process of conversion, and is therefore at once an objective record and conscious self-analysis.

The two qualities that distinguish Caponsacchi's monologue from the others are an abundance of emotion and an attempt to understand his own motives within the framework of the events. Although self-justification and motive form the pivot on which the poem turns, Caponsacchi presents his external actions with a parallel change in his personal life. The external actions have been subject to much criticism, and as the monologue proceeds, the readers are told that Caponsacchi was sent to Civita as a consequence of his act. The rescue of Pompilia and the flight have been an external manifestation of the change that has suddenly come upon the sonneteer-poet. The other conversion has been infinitely subtle and has naturally passed unperceived by the world at large. Caponsacchi's monologue provides his hearers with a glimpse of this internal conversion, and the priest reveals his heart with a conscious effort and awareness. He knows that initially the court accepted his words with 'Laughter--no levity, nothing indecorous . . .

(with) the blameless shrug, permissible smirk . . . (and) The pen's pretence at play . . . ' Not satisfied with his defence, the Judge had sent Caponsacchi to a secluded monastery. Yet, six months later, the grisly murder of the Comparini and Pompilia have caused the officers of justice to revalue their earlier decision.

Caponsacchi is aware of this change and his address to the court is both sarcastic and bitter. His anger and accusations are directed a good deal at the Judge, the court, and finally, at himself. Coupled with the tone of reproach is the intense grief for Pompilia and a consistent assertion of her superior worth.

The monologue opens with abrupt retort, and immediately goes on to recognise the deed as a most hideous deviation from the norm. The words 'fact' and 'fancy' are introduced once more, though in Caponsacchi's speech 'fact' is associated with truth (Pompilia, himself) and 'fancy' with the deliberate distortion of this fact. However, the emphasis here, as elsewhere in The Ring is on the contention that fact and fancy are veritably undistinguishable, and that only a hair's breadth separates what is true from what is a gross distortion of the same.

Caponsacchi's monologue is fraught with agitation; he is overcome by the horror of the murder and justifiably states that his mind is in a whirl:

. . . In this sudden smoke from hell,
So things disguise themselves, I cannot see
My own hand held thus broad before my face
And know it again. Answer you? . . .

(VI, lines 2-5)

He attempts to recount the events that led up to the flight, and what followed thereupon, but his struggle to remain calm and objective is ineffectual. He is a foil to Guido. The latter's words are well-chosen and balanced to suit his own purpose. Although Guido has been subjected to physical torture, he is careful not to incur the displeasure of the court, and his bland address 'Thanks, Sir, but, should it please the reverend Court, / I feel I can stand somehow, half sit down . . . ' is a striking contrast to Caponsacchi's righteous anger. Guido's monologue is punctuated with courteous words, Caponsacchi needs no pretense and the intemperance of his speech 'You, Judge Tommati, who then tittered most,' (line 34) betrays his sincerity. Coupled with his anger is the realisation that Pompilia is dying while the court proceedings continue, and despair serves to make his speech even more incoherent. The court is understandably bewildered, and Caponsacchi is quick to perceive this:

. . . But she--
The glory of life, the beauty of the world,
The splendour of heaven . . . well, Sirs, does no one move?
Do I speak ambiguously? The glory, I say,
And the beauty, I say, and splendour, still say I.

(VI, lines 117-121)

Caponsacchi recognises in Pompilia the epitome of beauty and splendour, and feels that her divine quality stems directly from God. To him, she is all woman, and also, all divine. At the outset of his speech Caponsacchi admits his love for Pompilia, and likens this love to the adoration a devotee feels for the Madonna. To save her from her imminent peril was not only an act of valour, but also his duty as a priest:

. . . gospel too
Has a claim here, may possibly pronounce
Consistent with my priesthood, worthy Christ,
That I endeavoured to save Pompilia?

(VI, lines 137-140)

Caponsacchi presents a truthful description of his early career in the course of the monologue. He had been persuaded to become a priest against the promptings of his heart. His situation is comparable in part to that of Fra Lippo Lippi. The painter-monk joined the Church to assuage his pangs of hunger, Caponsacchi was persuaded by the Bishop since he possessed the qualities which were of interest to the Church. His own bewilderment 'How shall holiest flesh / Engage to keep such vow inviolate . . . ' are checked by the Bishop's benign

. . . Cultivate
Assiduous that superior gift you have
Of making madrigals . . .

(VI, lines 330-332)

Caponsacchi accordingly became a 'priest, coxcomb, fribble and fool' (line 98). This disclosure is to show that the role as the Church was ready to assign Caponsacchi was inconsistent with his character. His meeting with Pompilia made him realise the uselessness of his present vocation, and in his determination to redeem himself he vowed, to be in the future

At the Pieve, constant to this faith at least--
Never to write a canzonet any more.

(lines 466-467)

Caponsacchi's resolve was encountered with harsh criticism--
'Are you turning Molinist?' Caponsacchi attempted to parry the thrust
by replying 'Sir, what if I turned Christian?' The rebuke served to
crystallize his determination and although he decided to go to Rome,
the chain of events brought him and Pompilia once more together. Again,
Caponsacchi's actions were held in critical regard, and after Guido
found them, the authorities sent him to Civita. This decision was
tantamount to charging Caponsacchi with guilt, and, as Guido says:

Why should law banish innocence an inch?
Here's guilt then, what else do I care to know?

(V, lines 1285-1286)

Caponsacchi's 'later conduct' was in fact consistent with his true
character. By his act he fulfilled both his priestly role and his
chivalrous instinct. Here, then, his assigned role and his true role
merged, which had erstwhile been incompatible. 'Fact' and 'fancy'
appear once more. Caponsacchi was in 'fact' a priest, yet he did not
make this an excuse for inaction, as the Archbishop and the friar had
done. The latter, somewhat overcome by Pompilia's misfortune, had
initially,

Crossed himself, showed the man within the monk.

(IV, line 811)

but had speedily revised his former intention, the excuse being:

Here am I, foolish body that I be,
Caught all but pushing, teaching, who but I . . .
This life is brief and troubles die with it.

(IV, lines 827-837)

So, while Pompilia suffered, the good monk 'burnt the letter
he had writ, / Said Ave for her intention, in its place, / Took snuff
and comfort, and had done with all.' (IV, lines 839-841)

In contrast, Caponsacchi not only shows 'the man within the monk'
but goes a step forward. He proves his essential manhood by arranging
the flight, and is banished to Civita as a consequence of his unpriestly
act. His motive is praised and justified by two individuals only, the
first being Pompilia, the second the Pope.¹³ The Pope questions
'Where are the Christians in their panoply? . . .' and reasons that
they are diverted from the true path by their inordinate selfishness,
which they ascribe to religion and caution. To the Pope, these men are
dishonest to their professed religion, impervious to the sufferings of
their fellow men:

These are the Christians not the worldlings, not
The sceptics, who thus battle for the faith! . . .
Sell lamps and buy lutes, exchange oil for wine,
The mystic Spouse betrays the Bridegroom here.

(Book X, lines 1486-1491)

Caponsacchi is an exception to this creed of caution practised by
his fellow priests. Like Pompilia and Guido, Caponsacchi carries out
his act sanctioned by instinct, although his monologue shows that
intellect and rational perusal of facts had never been absent from his
mind. The prolonged moral conflict and debate that continued for two
days in the recesses of his heart, and delayed the action, proves that
he at least has acted by acknowledging the importance of intellect and
instinct alike.

Throughout the events, Caponsacchi seeks to analyse his emotions and relate them to the validity of his newly awakened consciousness. He is neither as innocent as Pompilia, nor as wise as the Pope, and his functional role in The Ring is to personify the poet's concept of honesty and truth. Both these attributes involve the terrible conflict of a moral 'choice' and Caponsacchi fulfils his function by making this choice.

It is vital that a man should have a clear knowledge of what he is doing before arriving at a solution. Caponsacchi realises that his ministrations to Pompilia are not condoned by law. He says:

I saved his wife
Against law . . .

(VI, lines 1857-1858)

Yet, he considers Pompilia's circumstances to be exceptional, and consequently they require an exceptional remedy:

Here's the exceptional conduct that should claim
To be exceptionally judged on rules

(VI, lines 1851-1852)

At the outset, Caponsacchi has acknowledged honestly to himself the implications of the alternatives before him, and his final choice is to help Pompilia in the escape. This 'choice' is also the 'truth', unlike the choice of Guido which has been neither the result of rational analysis, nor of honest self-scrutiny.¹⁴

Browning's fundamental moral insight is illustrated in the characters of Pompilia, the Pope and Caponsacchi. The priest is midway within the continuum. He has been frivolous, but there is ample evidence to

show he may one day become wise: hence his potential value. With reference to lines 2089-2093, where Caponsacchi ponders whether it is possible

To have to do with nothing but the true,
The good, the eternal--and these, not alone
In the main current of the general life,
But small experiences of every day,
Concerns of the particular hearth and home.

Philip Drew says 'He may, as the Pope says, learn "Soldiership, / Self-abnegation, freedom from all fear / Loyalty to the life's end!" These, unlike wisdom and innocence, are attainable qualities, which will enable man to live in the world as it is.'¹⁵

The final line of the present monologue--'O great, just, good God! Miserable me!' is informed by all that has gone before it. Caponsacchi in realising that Pompilia is dying is once again convulsed by grief. His calmness had been momentary, schooled by his vocation as a priest. Yet, in the process of putting his experience into words, Caponsacchi has come to discover and accept a new definition of himself. This role, although it is consistent both with his manhood and priestly ordination, prevents him from accepting the tragic outcome. Caponsacchi, the priest recognises the greatness, the justice and the goodness of God behind the tragedy; Caponsacchi the man is unable to achieve complete catharsis and is bowed with grief.

I conclude with an excerpt from Roy E. Gridley:

As an interpreter Caponsacchi formulates a partial view; his reconstruction of the events of the tragedy is only one of the broken arcs that each monologue, save perhaps the Pope's, fashions for the reader . . . In Caponsacchi's

monologue, his experience assumes order . . . he recognises that heroic action alone could never fulfil him as a man and priest . . . He was a St George 'to this woman for a splendid minute and no more' as the Poet of Book I says.¹⁶

Book VI traces the speaker's gradual articulation and apprehension of what he finds to be the truth of his character. This discovery, together with his experience, provided the dramatic justification of the monologue.

Book VII

In The Old Yellow Book, Pompilia was an ordinary girl, from a deprived background. She was neither completely virtuous, nor completely innocent. Judge Gest's summary on Pompilia was as follows:

Pompilia was an ordinary girl, deprived of advantages in childhood, with sufficient good looks to attract, and insufficient character to resist temptation, and with instincts stronger than her principles. The victim of an unhappy marriage, she is an object of compassion rather than of admiration.¹⁷

By dint of his imaginative genius (and his consistent regard for the Perseus-Andromeda myth), Browning is said to have infused the story with warmth and compassion. And though he refrained from changing the factual material, he introduced a deeper spiritual meaning to what had been erstwhile a sordid murder story. In order to carry out his objective, Browning dehumanized Guido, at the same time exalting Pompilia and presenting Caponsacchi as an intrepid 'soldier-priest'.

Defending Browning's re-shaping of the original characters, Hodell writes: 'the poet has lifted the whole action of the major characters of the poem to a higher and more significant level than the actions, and

personages of his source--just as the Greek dramatists exalted human nature by magnifying it in tragedy.¹⁸

Professor Hodell's view can be held true only if we accept an idealistic aesthetic that Browning seems to dismiss in favour of realism. The purpose of the present discussion is, however, not to trace the parallel of an epic character in the person of Pompilia, but to accept the realism in her speech and relate her realistic faith to the element of doubt present in the other monologuists. The question remains that if The Ring is accepted as a poem of evil and good, doubt and faith, how far is the poet successful in presenting Pompilia as an authentic case of goodness and purity, and whether this purity in any way helps to banish the sense of evil and calamity looming over the entire poem.

Aware of Browning's slight deviation from the source book, we accept Pompilia for what she appears to be in The Ring: young, tragic and motivated by instinct. Pathos is the keynote of her speech, which is at once a reappraisal of her past life and a revelation of the life to come. Throughout her life, Pompilia has been submissive, first to her parents, then to Guido, and, when her personal sufferings have failed to move the Archbishop, submissive to his advice. She does eventually break out of her earlier submissiveness, and takes the decision to run away, but even this decision is prompted not from a sense of self-preservation, but from the determination to save her unborn child from the horrors of her situation. It is therefore tragic that she learns to combat the harsh realities just on the point of death. In her own words, the Archbishop's injunction was wrong, but ironically this realisation is followed by her death:

But I did wrong, and he gave me wrong advice
Though he were thrice Archbishop, that, I know!
Now I have got to die and see things clear.

(VII, lines 731-733)

Pompilia's monologue opens with the hint of her approaching death, and throughout the speech we are aware of its chilling presence. Yet, contrary to the despair and disorientation that one naturally expects in a dying person, Pompilia seems to be curiously calm, balanced and mature. It is this last quality that appears to be slightly at odds with a personality who has been acclaimed so far as childlike and unworldly. Pompilia's words preceding her death are free of agitation--both external and mental, and it is this passive quality that prevents her from rising to the stature of a tragic heroine.

Pompilia, through her monologue, presents the picture of guilelessness. She begins her account:

I am just seventeen years and five months old,
And, if I lived one day more, three full weeks . . .

(VII, lines 1-2)

Her words are plaintive and entirely without bitterness, and although her character appears to lack development with the progress of the poem, the impression of her purity and goodness is deepened constantly.

At the very beginning, Pompilia appears to be curiously childlike (though I feel this quality changes later into one of realistic 'guile'). True, she entreats her hearers to tell her son that despite her chronological age, she did attain some maturity, yet this in itself is an admission of her naïvete.

Yet, while making this naïve admission (lines 72-75) Pompilia also reveals another side of her difference from the usual crowd of 'Lucias, Marias, Sofias, who titter or blush', and this disclosure tempts us to deduce that Pompilia was not entirely childlike after all. However, this revelation does not detract from the sense of honesty and purity that her personality gives. Pompilia, then, a girl of seventeen and exposed to a series of nightmare-episodes, rises before the readers as infinitely radiant and vulnerable. Her qualities are all the more praiseworthy considering the succession of misfortunes she has encountered.

Throughout her narrative, Pompilia sees her conscience as the 'clear voice of God'. She is illiterate, and consequently cannot make a choice relying on her practical ability as to whether the letters she receives from Caponsacchi are compromising or innocent. Her impulses are non-rational, stemming from her deep faith in God and the instincts of her heart.

Pompilia's first meeting with Caponsacchi is brief and impersonal. She, on being rudely diverted by the 'cornet' flung into her lap, looks up, only to decide:

Whoever flung them, his was not the hand

(line 983)

This is the first indication of Pompilia's instant faith in Caponsacchi. She has yet to wait another moment before she discovers that it was indeed not Caponsacchi, but the 'Fat, waggish Conti, friend of all the world', who threw the twist of comfits. But even before she realises

the identity of the thrower, Pompilia has already made up her mind that Caponsacchi is blameless. And as she watches him, a psalm of Don Celestine comes to her mind, and she recognises Caponsacchi in the role of a deliverer (lines 997-1007).

Pompilia's assessment of the character of Caponsacchi is proved to be true in the course of the poem, yet the fact remains that she made the assessment by trusting her instincts alone. Like Guido, Caponsacchi, and the Pope, Pompilia makes her impulse the motive for action.

Pompilia's second meeting with Caponsacchi occurs in part due to the contriving of Guido and his maid, part due to Pompilia's own decision. We learn that she has been subjected to mental harassment by the maid Margherita. The latter's continual interference makes Pompilia suddenly decisive, and she bids the maid to tell Caponsacchi to come. Yet, even this decision of Pompilia lacks intensity and strength of purpose. The reason behind her action is again not logic but weakness--unable to withstand the persistent mockery of Margherita, Pompilia accepts the inevitable.

When Caponsacchi arrives, Pompilia's belief that he alone is her deliverer is intensified. Again, the poet offers no rational explanation of her attitude. Caponsacchi becomes at once a messenger from God, a 'soldier-priest', or as the Conti cousin had said, a 'true Saint George' sent 'To slay the monster, set the Princess free'. (VII, lines 1323-1324, 1385-1388, 1409-1415)

Caponsacchi's first words to Pompilia 'I am yours' bring renewed hopes into her heart, and the plan for the journey to Rome is made, and shortly afterwards carried out.

Book VII reveals Pompilia as naturally trustful. Her cardinal virtue (and also error) has been to depend upon individuals who have betrayed her trust. Caponsacchi proves to be an exception to this and wins Pompilia's devotion. But by his own admission, Caponsacchi is a 'fribble, and coxcomb' (VI, line 339), and he was precisely the same when Pompilia first saw him. True, the meeting makes him question the usefulness of his life, and he becomes serious and dedicated in his work. But Pompilia accepts him as a patron-saint and no less, and her adamant faith seems to be somewhat misplaced at times. Her one desire is to be led by Caponsacchi.

In the course of her monologue, Pompilia's weakened condition threatens to interfere with her narrative. This occurs twice, and on both occasions, she recovers by relying upon Caponsacchi's name. Like the medicinale pages of the Yellow Book (that brought renewed life and vigour in the speaker's heart, Book I, lines 774-779), the priest's name releases a flood of new strength in Pompilia (lines 938-941, 1769-1781).

The character of Pompilia is integral to The Ring because she is the embodiment of a beautiful soul. Bereft of education, material wealth, and the guidance of a superior intelligence, Pompilia establishes her worth by dint of her faith alone. And her faith is not the dogmatic creed found in the cloister, since it is the institution of religion that fails to support her.

Through the monologue of Pompilia, Browning shows the worth and potentiality in every human being. It does not mean that Browning is stating that men are necessarily pure and, consequently, will be saved. Rather, he is implying the imperfect nature of mankind. Guido is convicted,

but he dies unrepentent. Pompilia's innocence is proved, but she dies a painful death, and the very lawyer who defended her honour earlier, is seen later contemplating proving her guilty. In the monologue of Pompilia, Browning only hints at what he reveals more directly in Book X (Pope), and Book XII, particularly in the sermon of the Augustinian monk:

I demand assent
To my enunciation of my text
In the face of one proof more that 'God is true
And every man a liar'

(XII, lines 598-601)

The Pope, Caponsacchi, Pompilia, Celestino himself--all seem to be caught in a paradox. The great and abiding truth is that God is the only Truth, and mankind can be redeemed from their sin by their capacity to love. It is this love, a part of the Divine Love, that justifies an act and proves its worth. Pompilia's foster-parents had recourse to dishonesty, but their act was prompted by good intention, and by natural love for a helpless child. Pompilia muses that though Violante committed a deceitful act, in the final analysis the act 'seemed right' although it was wrong. Once again, the co-existence of 'fancy' and 'fact' is suggested. Violante's white lie was in effect beneficial, since,

She thought, moreover, real lies were lies told
For harm's sake; whereas this had good at heart.

(VII, lines 306-307)

Here, Browning is not condoning the telling of a deliberate untruth, but merely trying to establish the difference between a lie that is harmful and one that contributes to a person's happiness. Pompilia is not blind to this reasoning, and at the end of her generous excuses offered on behalf of Violante, is prompt to add 'Wrong, wrong, and always wrong! how plainly wrong! (line 312).

The purpose, or one of the purposes behind the writing of The Ring is to demonstrate that though each man is peculiarly limited in judgment and subject to error, they should not flinch from acting. It is this act, and the courage to act that is the purpose of life.

Secondly, Browning stresses the importance of love. Life's supreme gift is a beautiful soul, and in The Ring Pompilia is the epitome of purity and love, just as the Pope is of wisdom and justice. Discussing Browning's attitude to religion, Kingsbury Badger writes 'People of lower mentality and morality--Caliban, Guido and the intolerant believer with whom the Ferishtah argues in The Sun--may conceive of God as only Power; but not so David, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia. Rightly conceived as the central energy of God's being and man's, Love is something greater than affection or benevolence; it is all of the passion, development, spiritual striving, morality, ideality of human life.'¹⁹ Just as Guido's trouble was not his disbelief in Church dogma but his incapacity to realise Love, the salvation of Caponsacchi and Pompilia was effected neither by law nor by ecclesiastical Christianity but by Love. . . . Redemption of even Guido was possible if he could feel the power of Love. In the words of the Pope, there is hope yet for Guido:

So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.

(X, lines 2127-2128)

But Guido fails to feel this truth, until, having called upon all the other powers he can think of, he finally recognises Pompilia's worth (Book XI, lines 2425-2427).

Pompilia is therefore Browning's most glorious creation in whom Love is incarnate. She not only forgives her husband for his acts, but strives to make excuses for his violent nature (lines 1722-1730). Of particular importance are the following lines:

So he was made; he nowise made himself:
I could not love him, but his mother did.

(VII, lines 1731-1732)

Pompilia's final words express Browning's attitude towards truth--and life and death,

. . . Could we by a wish
Have what we will and get the future now,
Would we wish ought done undone in the past?
So, let him wait God's instant men call years;
Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,
Do out the duty! Through such souls alone
God stooping shows sufficient of His light
For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise.

(VII, lines 1838-1845)
(my italics)

Book X: A Reassessment of Truth in the context of 'self-authorized' action

The monologue of Pope Innocent XII comes at the end of a series of monologues, part fascinating, part tedious; statements intermingling fact with fancy and subjective opinion with the truth of the matter. The Pope's monologue is 'a sifting out and a summing up of the central truth from all the diverse and often conflicting evidence regarding the Franceschini murder case.'²⁰ The potency of the monologue lies in the fact that the speaker is an objective listener and this distancing from the main nexus of events permits the necessary clarity of vision. Pompilia, Guido and Caponsacchi are, like the Pope, interpreters of the event from their individual points of view. And yet, unlike the Pope, the former speakers are active participants in the plot and consequently their statements have to be accepted with reservation.

In The Ring and the Book, Browning's main aim is to study the particular incident from all possible points of view, and he blends objective facts with subjective motives in the powerful monologue of the Pope. The method of approach, hitherto emotional and analytical, changes finally into a deeper, more contemplative approach. In order to understand the factual details of the case, Pope Innocent XII takes the help of analysis, but after a certain point, intellect seems to provide no positive solution, and then the monologue shifts into an 'inner-dwelling' form. Unable to take a decision regarding the final punishment of Guido, the Pope appears to retreat from the external world and sink, howsoever briefly, into the recesses of his own mind. This shift from 'inspection' to 'introspection' is both psychological and

moral. Psychologically, by imagining and re-living the episodes (like the speaker in Book I), the Pope finds it easier to understand the true nature of events. Through the fabrication of art and subjective defenses Pompilia, Guido and Caponsacchi have provided structures that resemble truth yet are not quite the truth. Their monologues cannot be dismissed as falsification of facts, and yet the very nature of subjective statement displaces their speeches to the category of 'half-formed arcs', contributory to the main circle but not the circle itself.

The Pope knows by dint of his wisdom and scholarship that all human judgements, his own included, are fallible. The opening of the monologue finds him engaged in the arduous task of reading a chronicle. By carefully reading the documents left behind by his predecessors, the Pope hopes to find some illumination of the controversial nature of the case before him. He goes through the recorded facts, painstakingly and with an open mind, only to realise the relative nature of judgements. There is no doubt in the Pope's mind regarding the absolute nature of Truth, but as the monologue progresses he is convinced that this 'absolute truth' is unattainable by man. Due to his mortal limitations, man can only comprehend an absolute truth (in the figure of God) while grasping at a partial or relative revelation of it. The chronicled history reinforces the queries in the Pope's mind:

Which of the judgements were infallible?
Which of my predecessors spoke for God.

(X, lines 150-151)

The Pope has been given the supreme task of acting as the ultimate Judge, and although he is uncertain of the validity of his judgement, he is conscious that a judgement is demanded, and he, the Vicegerent of God, however old and infirm, has to do his duty as his predecessors have done in the past. The awfulness of the decision is chilling, and even while realising the evil nature of Guido, the Pope is reluctant to send him to his death. His painful dilemma is described in the following words:

Once more appeal is made
From man's assize to mine: I sit and see
Another poor weak trembling human wretch
Pushed by his fellows . . .
With nothing to arrest him but my feet.
He catches at me with convulsive face,
Cries 'Leave to live the natural minute more!'

(X, lines 169-178)

The Pope is wise, kind and compassionate. He is loath to take a fellow human's life and although he knows a choice is necessary, he would gladly take the kinder course of action. He is well over eighty years and has seen life in all its diversity. His admission:

. . . if reprieve were possible for both
Prisoner and Pope, how easy were reprieve!

(lines 201-202)

is touching in its simplicity. It makes the readers realise that despite his elevated position, the Pope is only human, with the natural urges to preserve life. He is certain of Guido's guilt, as at the same time he is convinced of Pompilia's purity, and although he has reached a decision, the psychological and intellectual abilities are not proving in themselves

consummate means to decide upon a final course of action. Hence, the Pope resorts to moral introspection, and with this shift of interpretation, the monologue takes on a deeper, more religious note.

The problems within the poem can be comprehended by the following lines from the Pope's monologue:

Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these--
Not absolutely in a portion, yet
Evolvable from the whole: evolved at last
Painfully

(X, lines 229-232)

With this realization, the Pope's agitation comes to an end and the dichotomy of 'apparent truth' and 'actual truth' is resolved. The Pope decides to ratify Guido's guilt and sentence him to death. There is now no doubt in his mind. Yet, just as he is about to ring the handbell, the seed of irresolution crops up again:

Perchance, that since man's wit is fallible
Mine may fail here? Suppose it so, what then

(X, lines 238-239)

Once more the Pope accepts the fallibility of human estimates and the infallibility of the Supreme judgement. That knowledge is relative and always risks misinterpretation can be seen by the story the Pope recounts (X, lines 243-256). He is aware, and so is the poet, that God does not demand uniformity of judgement from man but wants to test man's courage and virtue in the application of the 'judging faculty' God has given him. The Pope says:

God who set me to judge thee meted out
So much of judging faculty, no more:
Ask Him if I was slack in use thereof!

(X, lines 264-266)

Imaginative interpretation is thus essential, and just as the remedy offered to the peasant suffering from snake-bite was in effect wrong but right in the act, similarly by sentencing Guido to death the Pope can be accused of ignorance, but not of wilful evasion of the truth. His duty is to judge, and he does so, knowing all the time

Mankind is ignorant, a man am I:
Call ignorance my sorrow, not my sin!

(X, lines 258-259)

And if what one's judging faculty sees as true is indeed 'truth', then the Pope is right in denouncing Guido, and once he has come to understand man's 'ignorance', he is prepared to 'face Guido's ghost nor blanch a jot' if what the world takes for his guilt be proved to be innocence 'in after-time'.

In his monologue, the Pope pronounces judgement on all the preceding speakers, except Pompilia. The section devoted to Pompilia is replete with praise and affectionate pride. The opening lines affirm the deep impression Pompilia's purity has made upon the aged and disillusioned Pope:

First of the first,
Such I pronounce Pompilia, then as now,
Perfect in whiteness: stoop thou down, my child,
Give one good moment to the poor old Pope
Heart-sick at having all his world to blame.

(X, lines 1004-1008)

The Pope has been appalled by the condition of the Church. Abate Paul and Canon Girolamo have been revealed to be not defenders of the persecuted, but corrupt representatives who practice deceit 'Armed with religion,

fortified by law' (line 888). On the Archbishop the Pope pronounces his severest indictment, and proposes to have a word with him in private. In contrast to these churchmen who parade 'white-cinct and red-socked',²¹ stands Pompilia. The Pope believes she is nearer God than the men who serve the Church to gain private ends. Pompilia has neither abundance of intellect nor the determination to rebel, yet for the Pope she is illumined with an inner light that is almost celestial. The following lines can be accepted as the sentiment of the Pope and Browning alike:

. . . Everywhere
I see in the world the intellect of man,
. . . but they make not up, I think,
The marvel of a soul like thine, earth's flower
She holds up to the softened gaze of God!

(lines 1013-1019)

This may expose Browning to the charge of demoting intellect and giving priority to the urges of the instinct. Yet Browning did not mean to degrade the intellect by elevating the soul, since he has given the highest honour to the Pope, who is the epitome of wisdom. The reason why Browning chose to glorify Pompilia (through the monologue of Caponsacchi and through the Pope) was that to him love was the touchstone that made life worthwhile. Pompilia is the embodiment of this unselfish love, and therefore rises above the other speakers.²²

In addition to her gift of loving and forgiving, Pompilia possesses a deeply religious soul, and this, coupled with her capacity to love earns her an exalted place both in the finite and the infinite world.²³

Everywhere Browning advocates the efficacy of the human heart, when it is difficult to sustain faith by help of intellect alone. As early as 1850 Browning had stated 'The human heart's best; you prefer / Making that prove the minister / To truth . . . That faith plucks on such substantial fruit / Wherever these two correspond . . .'²⁴

It is this 'human heart' of Pompilia that meets with the approval of Browning and the Pope, and the monologue in Book X brings to light her quality of perseverance. If life entails confronting a test and bringing all of one's capability to the fray, then Pompilia stood her test with fortitude. Despite her lack of education and timid nature, she tried in her own way to come to terms with her situation, 'According to the light allotted, Law / Prescribed' to her. And the Pope accepts Pompilia as the chosen child of God, a fragrant rose.

Caponsacchi earns much praise from the Pope. Speaking of his action, the Pope says:

(for this) . . . impulsive and prompt self-display!
Bear thou such imputation, undergo
The penalty I nowise dare relax,
Conventional chastisement and rebuke.
But for the outcome, the brave starry birth
Conciliating earth with all that cloud
Thank heaven as I do!

(X, lines 1147-1156)

The Pope knows that Caponsacchi's impulsiveness and his 'healthy rage' are not the manifestations of an uncontrolled passion, but the outcome of his ready sympathy, chivalry, love and faith. However, while Pompilia's value is her present worth, Caponsacchi is presented still in the process of being moulded--he has 'let light into the world /

Through that irregular breach o' the boundary'. The Pope has implicit faith in Caponsacchi's potential value. Once more, irrational behaviour, prompted by love is shown to have had positive results.

Discussing The Ring, Ryals writes 'As early as The Ring and the Book Browning had despaired of any system either religious or political, as a means of universal salvation . . . To no institution can man appeal for help; he can save only himself.'²⁵ This is the truth that eludes Guido and is realised by Caponsacchi. The latter will resume his journey assured,

Learning anew the use of soldiership
Self-abnegation, freedom from all fear,
Loyalty to the life's end!

(X, lines 1208-1210)

The first movement in the Pope's monologue ends with the Pope remaining steadfast to his beliefs. He is confident that his motives have been pure, and that by deciding on Guido's death-sentence he has 'found the truth' and 'disparted the shine from the shade'. His faith in the will of God and in the purity of his intention is stated in the lines:

For I am ware it is the seed of act,
God holds appraising in His hollow palm
Not act grown great thence on the world below,
Leafage and branchage, vulgar eye admire . . .

(X, lines 272-275)

and finally,

I am near the end; but still not at the end;
All to the very end is trial in life:
At this stage is the trial of my soul
Danger to face, or danger to refuse?
Shall I dare try the doubt now, or not dare?

(X, lines 1303-1307)

The second movement within the monologue is almost entirely contemplative. In the course of his monologue soliloquy, the Pope lets his mind play freely over the subjects of doubt and faith, Truth and striving, and, finally, upon the ineffable mercy and love of God. It is here that the echo of Browning's own voice is most noticeable, and not without reason. According to Philip Drew, 'The most celebrated example of the first approach (demythologizing of Christianity) is the Pope's monologue in The Ring. This is often quoted as Browning's final word on theological matters, but some caution is necessary.'²⁶ W.C. DeVane and R. Simpson agree in recognising that 'the theology with which Browning endows Innocent XII is an anachronism and may be definitely ascribed to the poet'²⁷ and that although the monologue of the aged Pope is perhaps the most brilliant and most satisfactory . . . 'It is not however that the poet becomes romanized, but the Pope becomes tinctured with his presenter.'²⁸

It is the general consensus of the critics that Browning speaks behind the mask of the Pope. In his analysis of The Ring, Philip Drew has pointed out that the essential requirement while reading a poem, any poem, is to check one's impulse to ascribe to the poet ideas that occur consistently in the poem. There are several instances in the monologue of the Pope, where the speaker expresses opinions that are almost parallel to those of Browning. The Pope's philosophy in general, and his prophetic utterance regarding an 'age to come'²⁹ in particular are instinct with Browning's personal convictions. But these concepts should not be used merely as yardstick . . . 'What matters is not simply the value of this idea in abstraction but what we learn fresh about it each time we encounter it actually operating in a poem.'

The Ring and the Book traces 'the pursuit of truth', and the concept includes virtue (Pompilia), integrity or the courage to make a choice (Pope, Caponsacchi), and Love (perfected in God). The change in the Pope's monologue is evident from line 1308 onwards. The words that follow are almost invocatory in their earnestness (lines 1308-1320.)³⁰ Earlier in his monologue the Pope has said 'He the Truth, is, too / The Word' (line 375). This does not imbue the poem with a pessimistic light. The Pope cannot mean that mankind is doomed to ignorance, but that man should resist the weary dispirited renunciation of mind and of the pursuit of knowledge, and persevere. 'Man's conquest of truth is always partial, since his mind is but convex glass / Wherein are gathered all the scattered points / Picked out of the immensity of the sky . . . ' (X, lines 1311-1313). The imagery is amplified further in the Pope's meditation upon the historic life of Christ (lines 1632-1660) and, again in his justification of the fragmentary truths that are the best for mankind (lines 1759-1771).

The Pope's rationalization is a subtle contrast to the assertion of the poet-speaker in Book I. In The Ring the speaker knows for certain Guido is guilty. He arrives at this conviction not merely by assaying the facts of the case, but from 'something else surpassing that',

Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,
Made it bear hammer and be firm to file

(lines 462-463)

This 'something' is introduced once more in the final monologue, Book XII. There, the reader is confronted with the poet-speaker for the final time, and learns from him that man can only apprehend partial truth,³¹ and

that absolute truth is for the realm of Art alone. The speaker of Book I and Book XII justifies the righteousness of his interpretation by claiming that 'Art may tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought, / Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word. / So may you paint your picture, twice show truth.' (lines 858-862). And since the monologue in Book I and Book XII is spoken by the poet, the readers accept his surmises as the sanction granted to the artist. The monologue of the Pope comprises a great many concepts which are seen to be similar to those shared by the speakers of the first and last monologue. But contrary to the assertion of the speaker (Book I) who seems to know the final truth by instinct, the Pope realises that it is this central truth which is unattainable. The difference in the interpretation of the speaker of Book I and that of the Pope is due to the portean nature of the word 'truth'. To the former 'truth' stands for 'formal wholeness' while to the Pope 'truth' represents 'visionary unity' or 'wholeness of vision'. It is possible to realise this 'formal' wholeness or verisimilitude of external facts both in the sphere of art and life. A case presented before the court may or may not have the semblance of innocence, and a judgement will accordingly depend upon the acumen of the hearers. Thus, as far as the external evidences, or the 'form' of the case is concerned, it is possible to apprehend the essential factors and pronounce a judgement thereupon. But below this 'formal' structure of the events lie a complex matrix of factors. These cannot be judged by mere man, and it is necessary to have a 'visionary' power to unravel the complexity and arrive at a truth. The Pope knows that although we can never reach this state, we can strive to apprehend it by the power of Love alone:

What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
But just the instance which this tale supplies
Of love without a limit? So is strength,
So is intelligence; let love be so,
Unlimited in its self-sacrifice,
Then is the tale true and God shows complete.

(X, lines 1367-1372)

Again, thinking about the murder case, the Pope acknowledges that the cavalcade of 'sin and sorrow, would confound' him, unless there remained the possibility 'to evolve, / By new machinery in counterpart, / The moral qualities of man--how else--/ To make him love in turn and be beloved. / Creative and self-sacrificing too, / And thus eventually God-like' (X, 1375-1383). The Pope accepts the weaknesses of the Church as a proof of the relativity of the finite as contrasted with the absoluteness of the infinite. His cardinal philosophy, an echo of Browning's own is 'Life is a probation and the earth no goal / But starting-point of man:' (X, lines 1436-1437).

There has been, and there always will be a disparity between truth in its absolute essence and in its partial manifestation through dogmas, creeds and forms of religion. The Pope realises that although mankind has progressed and gained enlightenment this very progress has introduced debility in purpose. By seeing the weaknesses of the Abate and the Archbishop, and the nuns of the Convertities monastery, the Pope realises that Christianity is defeated in its purpose. Religion is

A thing existent only while it acts,
Does as designed, else a nonentity--
For what is an idea unrealized.

(X, lines 1511-1513)

The Pope's opinions expressed in the preceding lines are seemingly parallel to those of Browning. In the Pope's speech there is no inordinate respect for the Holy Orders or for the Church. He recognises that often diligent churchmen neglect the cardinal points of Christianity. Although these men are 'girt about with truth, the breasts / Righteousness plated round, the shield of faith . . .' intact, at the hour of test they lack courage. Perhaps the most bitter accusation hurled at the Church is the comparison of the manifold corruptions within it to the one offence committed by the Roman soldiers:

The soldiers only threw dice for Christ's coat;
We want another legend of the Twelve
Disputing if it was Christ's coat at all,
Claiming as prize the woof of price--for why? . . .
Can it be this is end and outcome . . . to show . . .
. . . this year
The seventeenth-hundredth since God died for man.

(X, lines 1526-1535)

The Pope traces the relation between faith and revelation. He is certain of divine love, and when his intellect frames the awful question as to whether the present conditions foretell the inefficacy of a Power, 'Well, is the thing we see, salvation?' (line 1630), he sturdily affirms that the cardinal truth remains unchanged. God came to the earth and died to save us from our sins, and although the historical details of this event will change from age to age, as is only natural, the essential significance will remain. Thus, while one person states 'He died in dark whence never morn arose' the other may point out that 'day succeed(s) the deepest night'. For his part, the Pope says:

. . . my speech
Must be, throughout the darkness, 'It will end:
'The light that did burn, will burn!' Clouds obscure
But for which obscuration all were bright?
Too-hastily-concluded! Sun suffused
A cloud may sooth the eye made blind by blaze,
Better the very clarity of heaven:
The soft streaks are the beautiful and dear.
What but the weakness in a faith supplies
The incentive to humanity . . .

(lines 1641-1650)
(my italics)

and concludes 'No, I have light nor fear the dark at all'. (line 1660).
Lines 1645-1646 may be seen elaborated and stressed in 'Development'
(Asolando).

It is significant that Browning bases his Christian beliefs not on the historical character of the events of the life of Christ, but on an unswerving faith in the realization of their worth within our hearts. It is not essential to prove or disprove whether a man died upon the Cross. The significance of the story lies in its conception of infinite love and infinite mercy. It is this human quality within the myth which appeals to mankind and our spiritual growth depends on our apprehension of these qualities within ourselves.

With regard to the historical truth of the Gospel narratives, the Pope admits that it is impossible to prove their veracity by use of Intellect alone. This 'intellectual agnosticism' can once more be traced to Browning. The words of Pope Innocent XII fit in with more appropriate ease in the Victorian setting of doubt and disbelief. Discussing the points where Browning's voice merges with that of the Pope, Philip Drew says, finally 'the Pope pictures Euripides scornfully contrasting the wisdom and insight and virtue of pagan Athens . . . with the blindness of modern Christians. . . .'³²

The Pope's anticipation of a larger and more adequate apprehension of truth bursts upon the readers with eloquent force. (lines 1851-1857). The dash and vigour of the words can be ascribed to an old man, who at the end of his life, apprehends truth and the possibilities of reaching towards it. At the same time the rhetorical force can be accepted as Browning's sincere (if not final) pronouncement on religion:³²

What if it be the mission of that age
My death will usher into life, to shake
This torpor of assurance from our creed,
Re-introduce the doubt discarded, bring
The formidable danger back, we drove
Long ago to the distance and the dark?

(X, lines 1852-1857)

As we broke up that old faith of the world,
Have we, next age, to break up this the new--
Faith, in the thing grown, faith in the report--
Whence need to bravely disbelieve report
Through increased faith i' the thing reports belie?

(lines 1865-1868)

The words, considered within the context of The Ring, can be accepted as the Pope's criticism of the Church; considered outside the framework of the action, the passage illuminates Browning's attitude to the Higher Critics of his own day and age.

The Pope's monologue is neither mere high-sounding confidence nor the febrile imagination of an old man. Innocent XII has reached the acme of wisdom, and although we see him taking Christ's staff with 'uncertain hand' (X, line 165), his final decision is confident. In the process of his monologue, the Pope shows his willingness to accept the benefit of the reflective faculty and also of intelligence. The Ring

stresses the importance of man's judicious use of his free will. Guido, in failing to do so is destroyed. The final lines of the Pope's speech conclude one phase of action, while opening it to another possibility. The Pope sentences Guido to death on the grounds 'I know just so, not otherwise, As I know, / I speak (lines 1290-1291). At the same time the Pope hopes that even an unmitigated villain like Guido may suddenly realise and accept truth, and be consequently saved. (Book XI presents Guido before the readers once more, and his self-indictment leaves no doubt that he is essentially evil. Professor Armstrong discusses the poem and emphasises the value of 'self-authorised insight').³⁴

The final long quotation (lines 2119-2128) of the Pope shows him to hold a steady faith of God's purpose in creating man imperfect in faculty and judgement. The conviction at the end of the prolonged and painful ratiocination is not that the Pope 'has made the right decision but that there is a right decision to make.'³⁵ Man's search for truth is also his search for God, wherein are evolved the moral qualities of man.

The Ring and the Book would be incomplete without Book XII, and the sermon of the Augustinian monk in particular. This sermon, delivered at San Lorenzo, on the case of Guido, is one of Browning's most articulate statements on the nature of truth. The monk's sermon takes as its text 'Let God be true, and every man / A liar' (XII, lines 560-561). Neither the monk nor Browning betrays contempt for truth, neither is the line ironical or pessimistic (as many critics have found it). The point made is simply this, that (a) it is folly to conclude from the trial that

innocence is always vindicated. Pompilia's purity was apprehended by the Pope, and by Caponsacchi before him, but there are many similar cases of wronged innocence which never come to light. The monk knows that in life we can only be certain of one fact--that is of 'uncertainty'. The moral of the story is

. . . that who trusts
To human testimony for a fact
Gets this sole fact--himself is proved a fool;
Man's speech being false . . .

(lines 601-604)

The second point presented by the monk is that no man can attain absolute truth in a world which prohibits absolutes, because (b) ' . . . truth seems reserved for heaven not earth'. Truth is far too relative a concept on earth, for if God's view of truth became unmistakable to man, then the trials of life would end, and with them man's 'development' will cease. 'Browning knew that the concept of an absolute God is beyond human comprehension, and, indeed, that such a notion, were it miraculously received, would be utterly useless to everyone, including the recipient.'³⁶

In conclusion, The Ring is an attempt to understand certain problems, and does not aim at resolving the problems completely, since their very nature eludes complete resolution. At the structural level, the poem is undoubtedly a brilliant success. The 'ring' metaphor is justified by the gradual building up of the monologues, each independent yet converging on the other and gaining validity thereby. 'This return of the poem upon itself, reincarnating yet again, but with further shifts and connotations . . . enables the reader to multiply distinctions, to achieve a fuller

imaginative grasp of the moral question Browning explores . . . "The moral sense grows by exercise" the Pope says (X, line 1415). Here the poem itself is the exercise.³⁷

As far as the main story is concerned, the poem cannot be called relativistic. Behind the distortions of facts, whether through ignorance or private motives, the actual truth can be deduced. Also the conclusion (of the main murder story) is optimistic, 'for in rejecting the rule of law, Browning implies that man, without artificial restraints, may live together better.'³⁸

At the level of 'content' or 'visionary wholeness' the present poem triumphs again. Browning had sought to resolve, not truth and falsehood, but doubt and hope in his great poem. The informing spirit in The Ring, through the speeches of Pompilia, Caponsacchi, the Pope, and the Augustinian monk and the poet-speaker in the final book, is the importance of a decisive act of trust. Orthodox belief is proved as a sterile doctrine and utter scepticism is equally undermining. The foothold has, then, to be discovered in a state of mind which accepts the possibilities of failure but is confident that this limitation is temporal and essential in its way.

Two quotations should help in revealing that the ideas held by Browning in The Ring did not suffer dilution with the progress of his life. On the reverse, the initial doubt of 1868 matured to a readier acceptance in the 'Asolando: Fancies and Facts' of 1889.

Let gauziness shade, not shroud, adjust,
Dim and not deaden, somehow sheathe
Aught sharp in the rough world's busy thrust,
If it reach me through dreaming's vapour-wreathe.

(stanza III)

What is it like that has happened before? . . .
Perhaps but a memory, after all!
Of what came once when a woman leant
To feel for my brow where her kiss might fall.
Truth ever, truth only the excellent.

(stanza V-VI)

'Dubiety' Asolando

Notes

¹ The Ring and the Book was published in four separate volumes, dates of publication: 21 November 1868, 26 December 1868, 30 January 1869, 27 February 1869.

² 'The Ring and the Book: The Uses of Prolixity', in Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, ed. I. Armstrong, p. 184.

³ 'The "Donna Angelicata" in The Ring', EMIA, XLII (March 1926); also see 'Robert Browning: "Our Human Speech"', Paul A. Cundiff, Victorian Newsletter, XV, (Spring 1959) pp. 1-9.

⁴ Letter to Julia Wedgwood, 18 November 1868:

The business has been . . . to explain fact--and the fact is what you see, and worse, are to see. The question with me has never been 'Could not one, by changing the factors, work out the sum to better results? . . . here my pride was concerned to invent nothing.

⁵ N.B. Crowell, The Convex Glass, pp. 186-187.

⁶ M.R. Sullivan, 'The Function of Book I in "The Ring"', Victorian Poetry, Vol. VI, p. 233, (Autumn-Winter, 1968).

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 234.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 240-241.

The whole series of ten monologues equals--comprises--his vision of truth (hence his justified insistence that he has dealt in fact) and it is this final complete vision on which he stakes his claim of exalted power, not on the first, incomplete, subjective reaction which he recreates in Book I for our benefit.

⁹ Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 297.

He shows his wolfish nature, and shows that he has all the time been motivated by sheer hatred of his superiors, his Church, and above all of Pompilia--a hatred as subtle and pervasive as Iago's hatred of the decent people about him.

10 'The Uses of Prolixity in The Ring', in Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, ed. I. Armstrong, p. 178.

11 J. Killham, 'Browning's Modernity: The Ring . . . and Relativism', in Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, ed. I. Armstrong, p. 153.

12 Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 113.

13 Book X, lines 1556-1565:

For see this priest, this Caponsacchi, stung
At the first summons, 'Help for honour's sake,
'Play the man, pity the oppressed!'--no pause,
How does he lay about him in the midst,
Strike any foe, right wrong at any risk,
All blindness, bravery and obedience! . . .
Let him rush straight, and how shall he go wrong?

14 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning, p. 248.

Thus 'truth' is to Browning more than just a term of moral approbation: it is an essential condition of man's understanding and realisation of his manhood. It is not hard to see why Browning is so hostile to causists and sophists, who distort the truth (6), intellectualize their choices (4) and do this as a device for avoiding energetic action (2d).

15 Ibid, p. 249.

16 Roy E. Gridley, 'Browning's Caponsacchi', in Victorian Poetry, Vol. VI, p. 294, (Autumn-Winter, 1968).

17 The Old Yellow Book, Source of Browning's The Ring. A new Translation with Explanatory Notes and Critical Chapters upon the Poem and its Source, p. 624, 1925, Judge J.M. Gest.

18 Ibid, p. 290, 1908, Professor Hodell.

19 K. Badger, 'See the Christ Stand!': Browning's Religion, Boston University Studies in English, I (1955-6), pp. 53-73.

20 W.O. Raymond, 'The Pope in The Ring and the Book', in Victorian Poetry, Vol. VI, p. 323, (Autumn-Winter, 1968).

21 Lines 1160-1164:

Watch we long . . . His bodyguard
White-cinct because in white stalks sanctity
Red-socked, how else proclaim fine scorn of flesh.

22 Clyde Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, p. 244. In his article on The Ring, Ryals writes: Love, art and religion are the three basic and interconnected concerns of the poetry of Browning. 'All three individually and collectively are subsumed for Browning in the Incarnation, the idea of "God, man, or both together mixed" (Fifine, LIX).'

23 Book X, lines 1092-1094:

. . . Go past me
And get thy praise, and be not far to seek
Presently when I follow if I may!

24 Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, VII, lines 185-191.

25 Clyde Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, p. 242.

26 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 227.

27 Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 296.

28 R. Simpson, 'The Ring and the Book', in Victorian Scrutinies, ed. I. Armstrong, p. 284.

29 Book X, lines 1851-1857: Unless . . . the dark? Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 231.

30 Book X, lines 1308-1320:

O Thou, as represented here to me . . .
Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass
Wherein are gathered all the scattered points
Picked out of the immensity of sky,
To re-unite there, be our heaven for earth,
Our known unknown, our God revealed to man?
Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;
Here as a whole proportioned to our sense
There . . . In absolute immensity . . . Appreciable solely
by Thyself.

31 Book XII, lines 835-844:

So British Public . . . learn one lesson hence
This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind.
Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.

32 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 229.

33 K. Badger, 'See the Christ Stand!: Browning's Religion', Boston University Studies in English, I (1955-6), pp. 53-73.

Browning himself must be speaking in The Ring when the Pope utters his prophetic words about an age to come, after his death, whose mission shall be 'to shake this torpor of assurance from our creed.' As he sees it, triumph over paganism has been followed by slavish adherence to creeds and beliefs in the letter of the Scripture . . .

34 I. Armstrong, 'The Ring: Uses of Prolixity', p. 195.

Guido's recognition that he lacks the sense of a 'nucleus' of the self completes the spiral of the poem for it suggests that whatever weaknesses the sanction of 'self-authorized' action carries within itself it at least posits some feeling of identity, a centre, a stable ego, by which the world can be given shape and meaning . . . And so the poem returns to . . . the value of self-authorized insight, the truth 'within ourselves'.

35 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 232.

36 Clyde Ryals, 'La Saisiaz: The Two Poets', Browning's Later Poetry, p. 161.

37 I. Armstrong, 'The Ring: Uses of Prolixity', p. 180.

38 Philip Drew, 'A Note on the Lawyers', in Victorian Poetry, Vol. VI, (Autumn-Winter 1968), p. 297.

Chapter V

Browning's Later Poetry (1870-1889)

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (1873)

Nearly thirty years earlier, in the Essay on Chatterton, Browning had tried his first experiment in making the best of a 'dubious case'. He had attempted to show what a character, condemned by the world, might say in his defence. Later on, Browning wrote poems which dealt with the psychology of an anti-hero. Critics have referred to such poems as 'exercises in special pleading'. With the advance of his poetic career, Browning continued to project the inner thoughts of the 'defendant' characters and to treat their individual cases with acumen and sympathy. Some of Browning's monologues dealing with casuistic speakers are Bishop Blougram's Apology (1855), Mr Sludge, 'The Medium' (1864), Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau (1871) and Fifine at the Fair (1872).

The question that confronts us at the outset is: to what extent is Browning above his casuists, and how far does he agree with them. On the basis of an examination of the pre-1870 casuistical poems, and of The Ring and the Book (1868-69) in particular, the reader will be led to perceive that although Browning presents his monologuists with force and apparent sincerity, he does so without the intention of securing a full acquittal on their behalf. The falsity of their argument (that of Guido in particular in Book V in The Ring) is revealed in the course of the monologue, and although the poet's tone is often devoid of sarcasm, the implied irony is nevertheless discernible.

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (hereafter referred to as RCNC)

written in 1873, centres around 'a painful story of profligacy and suicide' that appeared in the papers in France in 1871. The location of the event is Normandy and the poem is imbued with an aura of Romanism. But for once this spirit is not presented as constructive or attractive. The poem, with its over-emphasis on religion, tends to portray the dangers of practising religion with blind fascination. It also shows the weakening effect of sensualism, when it is not controlled by balanced and unselfish conduct.

In the present poem Browning attempts to reveal the central character's intimate point of view, and to analyse his actions in relation to his beliefs and dogmas. Judged from this point of view, RCNC can be treated as an example of 'special pleading'.

On the other hand, RCNC can be considered as a poem dealing with ways of belief, and with the advantages and drawbacks involved within different creeds. Examined from this perspective, the career of the protagonist serves to show the readers how and when an 'act of trust' is meaningful. Such an act cannot issue from intellect alone, but has to depend upon the individual's intuitive capacity. The danger involved in this case is of deciding on a course of action which is necessarily blind and automatic, and ascribing this mindless acceptance to an intuitive 'touch with truth'. RCNC traces the difference between an honest apprehension of faith, and a fanatic and blind adherence to religious ceremonies.

The poem begins on a casual note-- almost deceptively unassuming. The description of the quiet peacefulness of the countryside matches the apparently 'purposeless' walk of the speaker and his companion. A series

of images are evoked before the reader with ingenuous charm--the 'un-pretending beach', 'little village', 'Meek, hitherto un-Murrayed bathing place', 'Sea-coast-nook-ful Normandy' all contribute in presenting an atmosphere of captivating quaintness. The following lines present a simple but artistic description of the beach:

. . . first, the sifted sands, then sands in slab,
Smooth save for pipy wreath-work of the worm:
(Granite and mussel-shell are ground alike
To glittering paste, the live worm troubles yet.)
Then, dry and moist, the varech limit-line,
Burnt cinder-black, with brown uncrumpled swathe
Of berried softness, sea-swoln thrice its size;
And lo, the wave protrudes a lip at last,
And flecks my foot with froth, nor tempts in vain.

(lines 32-40)

There comes a point, however, where the speaker states the deceptiveness of external appearances. Things are not necessarily what they seem to be. A place devoid of 'prominently likeable' objects may still suffice to capture the attention of a perceptive viewer. The apparently plebeian surroundings may undergo a magical and positive transformation, when the viewer uses his imagination:

Nothing is prominently likeable
To vulgar eye without a soul behind,
Which, breaking surface, brings before the ball
Of sight, a beauty buried everywhere.
If we have souls, know how to see and use,
One place performs, like any other place,
The proper service every place on earth
Was framed to furnish man with: serves alike
To give him note that, through the place he sees,
A place is signified he never saw,
But, if he lack not soul, may learn to know.
Earth's ugliest walled and ceiled imprisonment
May suffer, through its single rent in roof,
Admittance of a cataract of light . . .

(lines 54-67)

Proceeding from the above analogy, the speaker goes on to say that the transformation may also involve a different set of images, in other words the seemingly innocent drowsiness of the landscape may reveal a history of violence and horror. Although the companion-lady gives to the area the name 'White Cotton Night-Cap Country' the word 'red' may be more appropriate on a closer examination.

The opening lines serve to establish the theme which forms the groundwork on which the entire structure is built up. Just as, in the course of the narrative, the initial 'white' is replaced by the flagrant 'red', the change or shift of perspective works on yet another level. In the process of unravelling the controversy behind the accident of the hero, the speaker unmask his personal concepts and beliefs. The innocent ramble develops into a quest, 'an exploration into history, human psychology, and phenomenal existence.'¹ The function of the speaker changes into that of a narrator, and almost imperceptibly, the poet enters and takes his stand.

The stroll in RCNC begins upon the beach, quiet and unexceptional. The word 'unpretending' serves as an irony--while the unchecked profusion of wild mustard flowers and the blue-green luzern allay any feeling of unease. At first glance, the place seems to be totally devoid of any shade but the 'white' of tranquillity.

The narrator surveys the countryside with the numerous spires and churches, and once again nothing seems to break the even tenor of peace and languidness, the land reveals:

. . . its quietude, productiveness,
Its length and breadth of grain-crop, meadow-ground,
Its orchards in the pasture, farms a-field
And hamlets on the road-edge . . .

(lines 110-114)

Everything is contributive 'of one and all the sweet rusticities'.

In keeping with the languorous charm of the surrounding features the inhabitants reveal a consistent quality of sleepy inactivity. They are diligent in their respective jobs, but even that has a mechanical evenness--'nobody esteems it worth his while, / If time upon the clock-face goes asleep, / To give the rusted hands a helpful push'. It is as if the viewers are looking on upon a nation of somnambulists.

The word 'nightcap' thus serves more than its descriptive purpose. It symbolises the insulation of the inhabitants from the modern world and its activities.

The walk takes the narrator and his companion to Clairvaux, the country seat of Miranda, a jeweller of Paris. To complete their survey, the couple go round the Priory . . . the 'solid walls, big barns, / Grey orchard-grounds, huge four-square stores for stock . . .' and finally reach 'a cul-de-sac with stoppage at the sea'. It is only at the end of their careful survey that the narrator reveals the 'red' in his tale. It was here that Leonce Miranda, the owner of Clairvaux, committed suicide two years ago. Miranda had been a prosperous jeweller and a seemingly happy man. He was also deeply devout. This macabre incident establishes the speaker's assertion that it is possible to

. . . arrive here, there and everywhere,
At a fierce ground beneath the surface meek?

(lines 409-410)

The central question that occupies the narrator's mind (and consequently of his audience) is what led Miranda to leap, for that was the nature of his suicide.

In RCNC Browning deals with contemporary Victorian problems, namely love, social conformity and religion. He places particular emphasis on religion. These problems intermix in the course of the poem, and lying on the peripheral margin, jointly focus on the central question of identity. Miranda was religious and at the same time enamoured of his mistress. His ultimate failure could stem from his inability to resolve the two warring forces--the Church and his mistress. This is a probable explanation of Miranda's action, and the narrator intends to retrace Miranda's career and see how far his conjecture can claim validity.

RCNC can be and indeed is divided into four parts, roughly coinciding with the development of the plot. The introduction and the walk can be considered as the first division.

The second movement of the poem deals with the childhood and youth of Miranda. Born of mixed parentage, Miranda's passionate nature (inherited from his Castilian father) proved to be at constant conflict with the trait he had received from his mother's spirit ('French and critical and cold'). Before introducing the reader to the boyhood of Miranda, the speaker breaks into an 'aside', and here the personality of Browning is unmistakable. Browning, as the narrator, elaborates and explains the terms which form the sub-title of the poem and which recur incessantly within the monologue. The poem's alternative title is 'Turf and Towers', and these are its two organising symbols. It could be said that they

derive from Browning's story, from the 'tower' or belvedere that dominates Miranda's country house, and the 'turf' or parkland 'à l'Anglaise' surrounding the elegant architecture.

But the attempt to weave the poem's symbols into the fabric of its narrative is no more than a gesture. The 'turf' stands for the sensory world--the whirl of sound, smell, touch, taste and sight. These attributes form the basis of all our experience. The 'tower' is any structure of belief that man builds in an attempt to reach out from the chaos of his sensory life to some transcendental truth that he dimly perceives, and yearns for.

In the context of the poem, Miranda's tower is the church, denoting a life of self-abnegation and asceticism. But the edifice is rotten, crumbling slowly back onto the turf from which it arose, and any attempt to climb such a tower involves the risk of death.

On further examination, the term 'tower' extends from the immediate context to embrace a wider perspective. Browning perceives the towers set within historical process. Human history is the construction of a series of towers, each equally provisional and unstable. Each in turn is hailed as the one true church, and despite the temporary service rendered, finally each crumbles on the turf. In the later nineteenth century, the period of the action in the poem, the tower of Christianity that has been building for centuries is crumbling, rotting, being slowly invaded by the turf from which it arose. The poem's third symbol is the 'tent' which serves as a temporary and ineffectual structure for Miranda. Being an alternative to the remote and ascetic tower, the tent offers protection not so much from the weather as from bewilderment in

the face of the ceaseless flux of sensory experience that is the turf-dweller's only reality. The tent in its turn is unstable--a structure of illusion (lines 1965-1970, 2434-2438).

Browning compares true apprehension of religious truth to a stable column, and points out the similarity between partial truth (or worse still, blind faith) and a hollow structure. Miranda's belief in the Church was mindless, and can be compared to a crumbling pillar. His judgement was equally faulty, and while he mused:

. . . Yon buttress still can back me up . . .
. . . at a touch down came both he and it.

(lines 1111-1112)

But man cannot remain inactive, and although the climb is hazardous, for Miranda no other tower is available. Consequently he climbs the rotten structure and meets his death.

The Church that Miranda believed in was the 'crumbling tower'. The outmoded doctrines of the Church referred to by Browning as 'towers' are like 'Some work of art gnawn hollow by Time's tooth' (line 1040). Miranda was led on to believe in the indestructible solidness of the 'towers' and the final catastrophe was as much the result of his own carelessness as the misguidance of the Church. Browning, in the role of the narrator admonishes:

Be cautious how you counsel climbing, then!

(line 1136)

According to the precepts learnt in the Roman Catholic Church, Miranda grew up to regard the 'turf' as not only secondary but totally incompatible with his religious aspirations, symbolised by the 'towers'.

Miranda was taught to accept the rituals and ceremonies practised in the Church, and he did so with singular faith. So staunch was his adherence to the principles taught by the Church that he believed in miracles--not in their essential significance, or in the symbolism behind the symbol, but in their literal manifestation. The origin of the 'Ravissante' statue (or the figure of the Virgin and her Baby) was part fiction, part truth, yet it was accepted by Miranda as an actual event. His fanatic zeal was further 'fortified by blind Castilian blood'. Inspired by St Eldobert, Miranda believed in a life of piety and chastity. From his 'infancy to boyhood', Miranda stood 'impenetrably circuited' with faith, but the tower on which Miranda based his faith, and his consequent actions, was rotten at the core. Thus the aspiration for the 'towers' or for a life of self-abnegation did not last long. Soon Miranda discovered the pleasures earthly life had to offer, and he changed to the position of comfortable compromise that the spirit of Sganarelle prompted him to resort to:

Pleasant station here!
Youth, strength and lustihood can sleep on turf
Yet pace the stony platform afterwards.

(lines 1252-1254)

Miranda left his religious aspirations, temporarily, and discovered that 'there spread a standing space / Flowery and comfortable' which he could enjoy for a while without incurring the disapproval of the Church. According to Miranda's way of thinking, this 'provisionary arrangement' did not appear to be detrimental as long as he kept 'in sight the battlement', which could be reached by one bold leap.

This approach of 'compromise' was the fatal flaw in the character of Miranda, and the poet-narrator offers his personal opinion in no uncertain terms:

Saint Eldobert--I much approve his mode;
With sinner Vertgalant I sympathise;
But histrionic Sganarelle, who prompts
While pulling back, refuses yet concedes . . .
Surely, one should bid pack that mountebank! . . .
The Devil, that old stager, at his trick
Of general utility, who leads
Downward, perhaps, but fiddles all the way!

(lines 1275-1293)

Miranda pursues his course, happily dabbling at whatever canvas his fancy alights on. His actions and decisions are purely instinctive, but this cannot be held as a moral sanction of his conduct. It is true that in his poems 'Browning is repeatedly at pains to make the point that crucial moral choices are not logical . . . so when a man has a great decision to make he will have to perform an act of trust.'² But at the same time he emphasises that a man must have 'a clear knowledge of what he is doing and acknowledge honestly to himself the implications of the alternatives before him.'³

Miranda's instinctive resolve on compromise is neither tantamount to a 'moral choice' nor can he be said to have a coherent idea of his ultimate aim. At this stage in his life, Miranda meets Clara, and his infatuation for her removes him yet another step from making the choice between 'turf' and 'towers'.

The world advises Miranda:

Entrench yourself
Monsieur Léonce Miranda, on this turf,
About this flower, so firmly that, as tent
Rises on every side . . .
The question shall become, Which arrogates
Stability, this tent or those far towers?

(lines 1965-1970)

Accordingly, Miranda retires with Clara to Clairvaux, to stay in a world of illusion and make-believe. Even the building he chooses to have is mere mimetic reconstruction. He is a contrast to the speaker in Fra Lippo Lippi. There are certain superficial similarities between Fra Lippo and Miranda--both are seen to be in a set of circumstances not entirely suited to their nature. But whereas Lippo's words are ironic yet confident, Miranda's behaviour betrays his vacillation. Lippo is an artist, contrary to the imitative instinct of Miranda. Fra Lippo is as far removed from the ascetic world of the Church as one can hope for, and he can successfully resolve the discontent born of a life of abstinence by allowing himself brief 'escapes' from the cloisters. Lippo gives 'life' his first preference, and his casuistical explanations are presented merely to appease the officers.

To return to the subject of the poem, Miranda and Clara reputedly continued their pastoral existence for five years. Their idyll was rudely interrupted when Miranda received a summons from his mother. He went to Paris, and what followed can roughly be identified as the third division within the monologue.

Throughout the poem Miranda is presented as devout and sincere. He is a practitioner of the customs of the Catholic faith. His alliance with Clara is based on his assumption that the Church can grant him sanction by virtue of his confession and acts of atonement. A great deal of Miranda's confusion and inability to make a choice stems from the doctrines he has learnt both at the Church and at home. The problem put before him by Church and mother alike was not 'Choose! Cut clean in half your all-the-world of love, / The mother and the mistress: then resolve . . .' but:

Keep both halves, yet do no detriment
To either! Prize each opposite in turn!

(lines 2239-2246)
(my italics)

As the poem proceeds the reader learns that Madame Miranda and the Church decide to countenance Miranda's relationship with Clara. By her own admission, Miranda's mother acknowledges that she and her husband kept silent and 'shut eye / To what was past prevention' on their part. The 'illicit bond' was no doubt reprehensible, but Miranda's late extravagance at Clairvaux was doubly so. In short, Madame Miranda's admonition does not have the desired effect. Once again, Miranda is beset with anxiety and seeks to avoid the problem by jumping into the Seine. He is rescued, and in due time returns to his mistress, only to hear, shortly afterwards, that his mother is dead.

The conflict remains unresolved, and after the death of his mother, Miranda is overcome by a paroxysm of guilt and remorse. He tries yet again to destroy himself, and succeeds partially in his objective, namely burning his hands as atonement for his sins. His act is both futile and irrational, yet the narrator is quick to point out that Miranda is merely carrying out what he believes to be an effective remedy for his sins. He is simply putting to test the professed doctrines:

The doctrine he was dosed with from his youth--
Pain to the body--profit to the soul;
Corporeal pleasure--so much woe to pay
When disembodied spirit gives account.

(lines 2518-2521)

In RCNC Browning puts before his readers the dangers of adhering to a faith blindly and confusing the symbolic worth of a doctrine in its

figurative expression. Léonce Miranda burnt his hands because he believed the act would purify his soul. He derived 'absolute satisfaction at the deed', and the only lament he had was 'Why am I hindered when I would be pure? / Why leave the sacrifice still incomplete . . . I must have more hands to burn'.

However, Miranda's acknowledged 'absolute satisfaction' is not long lasting, and he returns in due time to Clara and Clairvaux. Having vacillated between his love for Clara and his loyalty to the Church, Miranda admits the validity of each. According to the narrator,

The man had simply made discovery,
By process I respect if not admire,
That what was, was: that turf his feet had touched,
Felt solid just as much as yonder towers
He saw with eyes, but did not stand upon,
And could not, if he would, reach in a leap.

(lines 2820-2825)

Furthermore, people had told him

One fair stride / Plants on safe platform and secures man rest.
That was untrue . . .

(lines 2828-2830)

Miranda realises that 'Each may oppose each, yet be true alike! / (and since) To build up, independent of the towers, / A durable pavilion o'er the turf / Had issued in disaster' Miranda resolves to harmonise the two warring factors. Since he is not sure how the opposites can be united, not having the practical spirit of Fra Lippo or the mature wisdom of the Rabbi Ben Ezra, he seeks the guidance of The Ravissante.

Once more the poet presents the error of blind belief, arising from an automatic and passive acceptance of religion. The false move of Miranda

crystallises his earlier error, and brings him yet a step nearer the final catastrophe.

While describing the position of Miranda and stressing his conviction that 'this is native land of miracle', Browning pays a tribute to his friend Milsand. According to the poet, if miracles were possible to be wrought, surely an angel would have advised Miranda to quit paying homage to the inanimate statue and seek the help of a true guide:

So would he soon supply your crippled soul
With crutches, from his own intelligence.
Able to help you onward in the path
Of rectitude whereto your face is set,
And counsel justice . . .

(lines 2933-2937)

The warmth and perceptive quality of Milsand, the 'man of men' is a contrast to the cold insensibility of a mere statue. The latter can be symbolic, but it cannot offer the love and understanding a living individual can. Browning ends his aside with the realistic retort:

Since angel would not say this simple truth,
What hinders that my heart relieve itself,
Milsand, who makest warm my wintry world,
And wise my heaven, if there we consort too?
Monsieur Léonce Miranda turned, alas . . .
And got him guidance of The Ravissante.

(lines 2943-2949)

The last two lines reveal Browning's conviction that a 'revelation' has to take place within an individual, with the individual's active contribution in making it possible. Miranda's acceptance of the implied assent of The Ravissante stems from his moral blindness. There may be angels, but they are not winged creatures hovering in the air, but impulses of

rationality and determination born within an individual. The church can be a chief bearer of religious progress, and the Bible can help one in a clearer apprehension of truth. But the myths are not the foundation of faith. That lies in the spiritual nature of man. Myths become out-moded and are replaced by new myths. We can penetrate through the ancient modes of expression to find the 'eternal verities behind them'.⁴

Miranda is a direct contrast to Browning's characters possessing an intuitive faith. He cannot exclaim with David:

Oh, our manhood's prime vigour!
No spirit feels waste,
Not a muscle is stopped in its playing nor sinew unbraced.
Oh, the wild joys of living! . . . Let one more attest,
I have lived, seen God's hand throu' a life-time, and all
was for best?

(Saul IX)

Nor can he rhapsodise with the painter-monk:

. . . you've seen the world
The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises, and God made it all!

Fra Lippo Lippi
(lines 282-285)

David says that there is no need for knowledge, forethought or the 'tasking of higher faculty' to experience the mercy of God: 'I but open my eyes, and perfection, no more and no less, / In the kind I imagined, full-fronts me, and God is seen God . . .' In contrast to the intuitive acknowledgement of David

. . . God is seen God
In the star, in the stone in the flesh, in the soul and
the clod.

Miranda's dependence on the 'vaporous Ravissante' appears to negate the very purpose God has behind creating this universe. Miranda sways between two extremes, but fails to realise that an intimation of eternal life can be got while appreciating the more ephemeral objects. It is not necessary to search for signs of assent or disapproval on the face of The Ravissante, because complete asceticism is not possible. Nor does God want mankind to ignore the beautiful sights of this world, and be impervious to love. If Miranda had realised this truth, he could have echoed with David,

I ever renew
(With that stoop of the soul which in bending upraises
it too)
The submission of man's nothing-perfect to God's all-
complete
As by each new obeisance in spirit, I climb to his feet.

(Saul XVII)

Since Miranda is neither Fra Lippo nor David, the poem progresses with the protagonist being carried on, caught up in the tides of his misinterpretations. Two years pass--and throughout the period Miranda presents alms to the poor and costly offerings to the Church. He is joined in his religious endeavours by Clara. Miranda hopes to escape God's disapproval by his pious deeds. The narrator says:

In mercy he was strong, at all events.
Enough! he could not see a beast in pain,
Much less a man, without the will to aid.

(lines 3135-3137)

Yet Miranda's generosity was not always sensible, and in his zeal to 'stay in sin and yet stave off sin's punishment', he committed acts that

were hardly praiseworthy--'Such slips of judgement, gifts irregular'
can be seen from the particular incident when he ordered a cask of wine
to be delivered to a mob of beggars. The latter had been thirsty, and
Miranda's generosity had unforeseen effects--the revellers 'dead-drunk /
So satisfied . . . strewed the holy place'.

Not content with offering gifts to God and 'God's poor', Miranda
proceeded to make his penance doubly fruitful by 'mortifying his flesh'.
He trudged the distance from the site of The Ravissante to Clairvaux on
his knees.

Browning arraigns the Church for the greater guilt of complicity
in the affair of Miranda and his mistress. By excusing Miranda's behaviour,
the Church authorities were guilty of treating lightly the decree of
Christ--'What God hath joined / Let no man put asunder'. Their inter-
pretation of the Bible differs according to the nature of the confessor--
and the amount of his wealth. Miranda and Clara are not bid to 'wash
their hands' and be purified, but are advised to present an appearance of
conventional decorum:

. . . somehow gloves were drawn o'er dirt and all,
And practice with the Church procured thereby.

Forgiven by the Church, now that there is 'nothing like a snatch percep-
tible' in his life, Miranda's days are passed blissful peace, 'Much as of
old, in simple work and play'. He feels he has extracted the sanction to
live with Clara, and accordingly:

No word at any time escaped his lips . . .
. . . no regret for mischief done--
Punishment suffered, he would rather say.
Good-tempered, schoolboy-fashion, he preferred
To laugh away his flogging, fair price paid
For pleasure out of bounds: if needs must be,
Get pleasure and get flogged a second time!

(lines 3195-3202)

But the self-delusion of Miranda fails to bring total peace, and finally one spring day he climbs the Belvedere. What transpired in his mind is merely the narrator's conjecture--but the fact remains that Miranda leapt from the Belvedere and was instantaneously killed.

The narrator, perceptibly Browning, re-creates the fatal day in April, and proceeds to examine the conditions that combined to make the act possible. The meditative soliloquy Browning ascribes to Miranda can be called the fourth and final part of the movement of the poem.

It is true that there were no external signs of discontent in Miranda's conduct prior to his suicide. The climb had been prompted by a desire for 'tasting, just as those two years before, / Spring's bright advance upon the tower a-top . . .' Yet, the conflict, hitherto latent, renewed itself as Miranda beheld The Ravissante.

Browning wants to make sure that the reader realises that Miranda's conduct has to be interpreted from his youth to his apparent suicide in terms of this conflict. At the very beginning he had admonished:

Keep this same
Notion of outside mound and inside mash,
Towers yet intact round turfy rottenness,
Symbolic partial-ravage, keep in mind!

(lines 1144-1147)

In his apostrophe to The Ravissante, Miranda admits that his sacrifices have not borne the expected reward 'in peace, content . . . added strength to bear or to forbear'. At the best he has succeeded in establishing a truce. Even his passionate love for Clara seems a sham, it is a love that is based on an unsatisfactory relationship. Miranda realises that he has

wasted his days at Clairvaux, content 'with mock love / That gives while whispering "Would I dared refuse!"' And at last Miranda decides upon an act of choice. He steps off the Belvedere with the belief that he will be transported to The Ravissante 'from Clairvaux through the air, an easy trip'. The emphasis is on the word 'trust'. Miranda has full confidence in the possibility of a miracle. However, as Miranda steps off the Belvedere, armed in his unshakable trust, he lands on the turf.

The world judges the action of Miranda as that of a madman, but the narrator has quite a different opinion. Browning re-enters and the following lines are particularly illuminating in revealing the poet's philosophy:

No! sane, I say.
Such being the conditions of his life
Such end of life was not irrational.
Hold a belief, you only half-believe,
With all-momentous issues either way,
And I advise you imitate this leap,
Put faith to proof, be cured or killed at once!

(lines 3603-3609)

These lines seem to hold the central message of Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, and it would be helpful to come back to them later.

The end of Miranda's life is coincident with the end of his fallacy. Seen thus it carries an element of achievement, in a rather oblique way. Browning's justification of Miranda's action is a prologue to what he states with more emphasis in a later poem.⁵ As Philip Drew writes, for Browning there is 'more to the judging of a man's act than a simple inspection of consequence. As Rabbi Ben Ezra puts it, Not on the vulgar mass / Called "work" must sentence pass . . . wheel the pitcher shaped.' He goes

on to say 'Perhaps the most revealing comment is that made by Browning in his own person in an aside in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, when he breaks off the story and reflects on his own narrative technique:

Along with every act--and speech is act--
There go, a multitude impalpable
To ordinary human faculty,
The thoughts which give the act significance . . .
He said, then, probably no word at all,
But thought as follows--in a minute's space--
One particle of ore beats out such leaf!

(lines 3277-3287)⁶

The poet's particular gift is his insight into the human motives, 'which give the act significance'. The importance of an act has to be located within the individual.

Browning feels that Miranda's act is neither contemptible nor unexpected. Miranda has been taught by the Church to believe in miracles and to accept the validity of confession and repentance. Given these faulty beginnings, there is small wonder that Miranda's deduction is erroneous. The fault lies not in the conclusion, but in the nature of the premises. It is these that Browning indicts.

The cause of the tragedy can be traced to a multiplicity of facts:

- (1) the importance of choice;
- (2) the dangers involved in religious fanaticism;
- (3) the acceptance of the unreal or 'partially' real for the actual in life.

The first involves the personality of Miranda in particular, and the doctrines of the Church in general; the second deals solely with orthodox beliefs, while the last concerns the relationship of Miranda and Clara.

Miranda is blamed by Browning for his indecisive character. He waits for twenty-eight years before deciding upon an act of choice. RCNC is not a casuistical poem, and what at first glance appears to be casuistry is in effect a rational and subtle exposure of the 'weakness' of the towered structure upon which Miranda based his faith. The central question that occupies Browning's mind is what led Miranda to leap. He (Browning) feels that Miranda's final resolve is more balanced and meaningful than his entire life has been. He has at last acted on what he believes:

Better lie prostrate on his turf at peace,
Than, wistful, eye, from out the tent, the tower,
Racked with a doubt . . .

(lines 3613-3615)

Miranda's final act is in a way his moment of triumph.

Browning compliments Clara as 'the happier specimen' but the comparison is valid only 'through that artist preference / For work complete, inferiorly proposed, / To incompleteness, though it aim aright.' Clara had 'forethought' and this assured her of material comforts even after Miranda died. Although Clara possessed a more balanced and integrated personality, it is clear that Browning considers her a moral failure. She never strove to 'aspire and break bounds' but was content 'to sustain / Existence, grow from grub to butterfly, / Upon unlimited Miranda-leaf;' Her all-embracing, almost suffocating concern for Miranda was 'her prime article of faith confirmed'. Browning states the qualities of true love. It is neither limiting nor morally blinding, and it involves an element of sacrifice. Love is a touchstone that 'bids touch truth, endure truth, and embrace / Truth, though, embracing truth, love crush itself.'

Clara's love for Miranda involved a great deal of self-interest. This prevented her from 'smoothing truth away' or from encouraging Miranda--'Worship not me but God!' In addition, her passive and slightly 'chameleon' nature is described in the following lines:

If he smiled 'Let us love, love's wrong comes right
Shows reason last of all! . . .
. . . back she smiled . . .
If he sighed 'Ah, but She is strict, they say,
For all Her mercy at the Ravissante,
She scarce will be put off so!' straight a sigh
Returned 'My lace must go to trim Her gown!'
I nowise doubt she inwardly believed
Smiling and sighing had the same effect
Upon the venerated image . . .

(lines 4086-4097)

Like Miranda's parents and the representatives of the Church, Clara's resolve to abide by everything Miranda said, contributed to the tragedy.

RCNC is a poem dealing with religious beliefs. It shows the unconscious or deliberate misrepresentation of the Church doctrines. Miranda was wrong in his conviction that the 'towers' can be reached. His error did not rest in partaking of the pleasures the 'turf' had to offer, but in failing to reconcile the relative values of 'turf' and 'tower'. Browning shows in RCNC that all human beings have their share of doubt and they can only 'hope' for an approximation to a state of perfectness. Agitation of the soul also means movement for it prevents an individual from sinking into the quagmire of apathy or clinging blindly to myths and tales of miracles. Miranda's mind showed a lack of interest in stimulation. He did not wish to create new art-structures but was content to emulate. He embraced the mythical reports regarding The Ravissante, when

He might have opened eye, exerted brain,

(line 3998)

Miranda resolutely 'refused more sun' and although Browning concedes that 'his heart was wise according to its lights and limits' his intellect 'craved less space'. This moral blindness is blameworthy.

Browning wrote in the Essay on Shelley 'An absolute vision is not for this world, but we are permitted a continual approximation to it . . . xii, 288' According to a modern critic 'Browning knew that the concept of an absolute God is beyond human comprehension, and, indeed, such a notion, were it miraculously received, would be utterly useless to everyone, including the recipient.'⁷

RCNC deals with misguided beliefs, yet the reader realises that there is nothing unduly harsh about Browning's reflections upon religion in general. Certain critics have found the poem to be anti-Romish,⁸ yet it was important for Browning to create, within the structure of the poem, the personalities of a 'Father Priest' and 'Mother Nun'. They serve their dramatic function by providing the 'personification' of faulty Church doctrines. Within the framework of the plot, the characters of Father Priest and Mother Nun are essential and acceptable.

Beaumont, the physician, is on the other hand, treated with a hint of irony. Although the poet likes Beaumont to an extent, it becomes clear that even the superstitious faith of Miranda is preferable to the 'new Religio Medici' doctrine of the physician. According to Beaumont,

Body and soul are one thing, with two names,
For more or less elaborated stuff.

(lines 2653-2654)

Browning cannot condone a doctrine that refuses to admit the existence of spirit. He sides with 'antiquated faith' in affirming '. . . body is not

soul, but just / Soul's servant.' That Miranda's faith was genuine is true. As the narrator says:

Now, into the originals of faith
Yours, mine, Miranda's, no enquiry here!
(lines 2950-2951)

What concerns the narrator, and Browning, is how far could Miranda claim an efficacy of this faith. The 'seeking' after and 'parading' of proof can have little result and the course to take is 'try, and what you find wrong, remedy, / Accepting the conditions / As with body, so with soul.' However foolish and fantastic be the germs of faith, we should 'grudge . . . to play the doctor and amend mistake.'

Because a wisdom were conceivable
Whence faith had sprung robust above disease
Far beyond human help, that source of things!
(lines 3003-3005)

This is the first stage, and according to Browning, it should be left alone. But caution is needed with 'what comes afterwards'. Although in the world of faith, truth cannot be grasped totally, one has to use his own discretion in dealing with, and accepting the phenomena that lie at hand.

. . . leave this first! (stare of apprehension)
Little you change there! What comes afterward--
From apprehended thing, each inference
With practicality concerning life,
This you may test and try, confirm the right
Or contravene the wrong that reasons there.
The offspring of the sickly faith must prove
Sickly act also: stop a monster-birth!

(lines 3009-3016)

The proper time for chemical tests is not when the clouds sail by, but when the water is in a cup, ready for testing. Browning states that an individual should likewise learn to discriminate between the real worth of a myth, and its outmoded 'fantastic' quality. The faith represented by the miracles of *The Ravissante*, the monk, the nun and the pilgrims who flock there daily, is outmoded and ineffective. They but 'practise in the second rate of things' and offer 'dogma in the bottle, bright and old'. Miranda, however, trusts them and in the words of the Pope (from Book X of The Ring and the Book) only a new age can shake this 'torpor of assurance' and bring back the discarded doubt, at once healthy and honest.

Miranda is destroyed as much by forces without as forces within, and among these external forces 'none is more vicious than the Church which actually encourages Miranda's perversions'.⁹

sane, I say,
Such being the conditions of his life,
Such end of life was not irrational.
Hold a belief, you only half-believe,
With all-momentous issues either way,
And I advise you imitate this leap,
Put faith to proof, be cured or killed at once!

(lines 3603-3609)

Browning aims to reveal the mischief wrought by the superstitious nature of a religion which practises avarice and dishonesty in the name of God. Although he cannot be held guilty of wilfully maligning the Church and Church authorities, the irony that informs Browning's description of them is transparent. Clara is compared to a grub that 'feeds on Miranda leaf', but this description is less caustic than that associated with the ministers of the Church. The latter are equated with a scavenging

beetle, the scarabeus, thus revealing Browning's distaste for the Church's abuse of its pretended 'miraculous powers'.¹⁰

The poem is a series of loosely related incidents and thoughts, not a tightly structured development of the action. By presenting the psychological changes in the mind of Miranda and a parallel portrayal of the attitude of the Church towards Miranda's indiscretions, the speaker achieves a unifying pattern in the development of the poem. The fallibility of the Church and Miranda's misplaced faith are jointly responsible in precipitating the final catastrophe. In a brilliantly conceived soliloquy Miranda exposes the conflicts of his soul and develops the rationale (lines 3297-3304, 3339-3350, 3470-3484) leading to that perverse act of faith which destroys him:

Therefore to prove indubitable faith . . .
Those angels that acknowledge you their queen,
I summon them to bear me to your feet
From Clairvaux through the air, an easy trip!
Faith without flaw! I trust your potency,
Benevolence, your will to save the world--
By such a simplest of procedures, too!

(lines 3517-3523)

If Red Cotton Night-Cap Country is to be seen as an interpretation of Miranda's inner conflict, and consequently of the action that follows, the most obvious symbols are Clara and The Ravissante. They are supported by a series of complementary and parallel images--turf versus tower, Paris versus country, red versus white. These seemingly antithetical images do not however preserve a clear-cut distinction of evil and good, but show signs of dove-tailing with each other. The ambiguity is clearly intentional and the implied message is that an individual has to perceive and understand

their intrinsically different worth and make a sensible choice. The choice should be determined by taking into account the probable consequences of the action that results from an individual's beliefs.

Being brought up in the Roman Catholic faith, Miranda believed in the powers attributed to the Virgin by numerous legends. The world around him was strewn with ruins of misunderstood or partially understood faith, and although Miranda aimed at ascetic piety, the tower on which he based his faith was rotten at the core:

Keep this same
Notion of outside mound and inside mash,
Towers yet intact round turfy rottenness,
Symbolic partial-ravage, keep in mind!

(lines 1144-1147)

The terms 'tower', 'platform', 'buttress', are symbols for faith, but in the context of the poem they are described to be in a state of ruinous disrepair:

the world lay strewn
With ravage of opinions in his path . . .
In his adventure to walk straight through life
The partial-ruin, in such enterprise,
He straggled into rubbish, struggled on,
And stumbled out again observably.

(lines 1103-1110)

Do you advise a climber? . . .
Head-break to him will be heart-break to you
For having preached 'Disturb no ruins here!'
Are they not crumbling of their own accord?
Meantime, let poets, painters keep a prize! . . .
Be cautious how you counsel climbing, then!

(lines 1125-1136)

Miranda's faith in Christianity was based on its miracles and not on its moral influence on the heart of man. His error in accepting myths as the literal truth precipitated the end. Since local reports claimed that two and a half centuries ago, a nobleman of Claise and his wife had received 'Divine illumination', Miranda wondered if the same guidance could not be given to him by The Ravissante:

May a man, living in illicit tie,
Continue, by connivance of the Church,
No matter what amends he please to make
Short of forthwith relinquishing the sin?

(lines 3042-3045)

The 'leap' was initiated as an act of faith. Considered as the final choice in resolving Miranda's inner conflict, the act is praiseworthy. On the other hand, the efficacy of the act is undermined by its unnatural and irrational nature:

The heart was wise according to its lights
And limits; but the head refused more sun,
And shrank into its mew and craved less space.

(lines 4010-4013)

RCNC can be compared in parts to the Grammarian. The lines 'Success is naught, endeavour's all / But intellect adjusts the means to ends . . .'¹¹ can be compared with lines 57-58 of A Grammarian's Funeral.

'A man's reach should exceed his grasp' Andrea del Sarto says. He is right, to be sure, but what is being reached for makes some difference. Like the Grammarian, Léonce Miranda can hope to get 'full marks no doubt, for selfless and total dedication, but certainly not for any reasonable view of what he can and cannot hope to accomplish as a mortal man'.

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country has to be accepted as the story of a man who feels that there are two choices open to him--tower and turf. Both seem absolute and incompatible. Miranda is caught between the cross-currents of two ideals and becomes the uncomprehending victim of excessive piety and excessive pleasure in turns. Tormented by feelings of intense guilt, Miranda's chief activity becomes the forging of weak reconciliations between things incompatible.

The praise Browning accords Miranda is for his last mad act of faith, which seems to be a fitting outcome of an unreal existence. If Miranda is judged 'according to his lights' (lines 4010-4012), his act appears meaningful. Should we then infer that Browning approved of Miranda's blind act of faith?

The passage on Milsand serves to provide the key to the poem, and to the poet's interpretation of the 'leap'. Milsand lived not far from Miranda's estate, and the former's quiet commonsense is the miracle Miranda died seeking. The rival duties (homage to The Ravissante; love to Clara) that tormented Miranda's heart could have been reconciled, by the application of common sense. The lines 'Milsand, who makest warm my wintry world, / And wise my heaven, if there we consort too?' (lines 2945-2946) prove that it is possible to enjoy the comforts of the temporal world, without having to give up our hopes of heaven. To Miranda, the life of the sense (red) and the life of the Church (white) appear as warring factions. To Milsand, and to the poet, the colours are in their combination the defining tint of humanity: 'By white and red describing human flesh'.

What is the purpose behind the writing of Red Cotton Night-Cap Country? According to Roma King 'Beneath his jocularly, Browning displays here a

disillusionment which sees life as more red than white, too often an irreconcilable struggle between turf and tower. His bitterness is directed against social and religious institutions which use their power to destroy rather than serve human life. He comes closer in this poem perhaps than in any other to seeing man as a victim of his environment.¹²

Stopford Brooke writes that RCNC and Fifine were redeemed by Browning's steady effort to show that underneath these evil developments of human nature lay immortal good; and that a wise tolerance, based on this underlying godlikeness in man, was the true attitude of the soul towards the false and the stupid in mankind.¹³

The interpretation of Brooke seems closest to the poet's own admission regarding the creative origin of the poem: 'I heard, first of all, the merest sketch of the story on the spot. . . . some other particulars . . . at once struck me as likely to have been occasioned by religious considerations as well as passionate woman-love, and I concluded there was no intention of committing suicide; and I said at once that I would myself treat the subject just so.'¹⁴

The comment does not suggest any personal disillusionment or pessimism, and still less does it admit the poem to be the fruit of 'bitterness . . . directed against social and religious institutions.'

The poem is a psychological study, and although the theme is macabre, it is redeemed by the poet's effort to pursue and find out the truth behind the external facade. To the criticism that RCNC revolves around a subject which is alien to the world of poets, Browning would have retorted with 'Homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto'--'I am a man, and nothing human can be alien to me.'¹⁵

La Saisiaz (1878)

La Saisiaz published in 1878 (15 May) along with The Two Poets of Croisic deals with the theme of death and immortality. La Saisiaz has much in common with Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850), for while the latter poem had been prompted by the death of Browning's mother, La Saisiaz was occasioned by the death of Miss Anne Smith, a close friend of the poet and his sister. Miss Smith had been staying with Browning and his sister near Mount Salève, Geneva, and her untimely death was a profound shock to the poet. Worth mentioning is the fact that Miss Smith and Browning had been discussing the subject of death, the immortality of the soul, and the possibility of an after-life earlier in the week. This discourse on 'the Soul and Future Life' had occupied their minds on the evening preceding the death of Miss Smith.¹⁶ Consequently with the tragedy, the subject suddenly lost its facade of objective and academic interest. The personal nature of the poet's grief, and the urgency of the situation lead to a fresh review of the topic.

La Saisiaz is at once a meditation and a reevaluation of the poet's personal difficulties in the matters of faith and doubt. The fact that the poet had planned to climb Mount Salève with Anne Smith made her death on the morning of the proposed climb doubly difficult to accept and come to terms with. Her death became at once a personal loss and at the same time symbolic of the mystery of evil. The incident induced Browning to examine again the grounds whereon his faith rested. The poem is an articulate elaboration of the question that was foremost in Browning's mind as he struggled to grasp the fact that Miss Smith was dead:

Did the face, the form I lifted as it lay, reveal the loss
Not alone of life but soul?

(lines 173-174)

La Saisiaz is presented without the usual cover of a dramatic disguise, and this frank revelation of self is at once appealing and convincing.

The poem is a meditation on the possibility of an after-life and the sense of personal grief causes the poet to view the topic with extraordinary clarity and depth. The debate within the poet's own spirit finds expression within the dramatic framework of the poem.

The opening section is replete with various images--the long, leisurely walks, the superb scenery, the restful, unexplored nooks and the scintillating yet human conversation between the poet, his sister, and Miss Smith present a charming picture. The life in the chalet seems an invigorating existence. Yet the apparent stability has something of the nature of an interlude. The death of Miss Smith breaks into the contented world and shocks the poet out of his prior equanimity. The description of the picturesque setting gradually passes into a long and subtle course of reasoning on the probability of a future life. The speaker's affirmation is eloquent, but he does this undogmatically and without selfconsciousness.

The monologue commences with the poet narrating the sights and sounds that greet him on his gradual ascent to the summit of Mount Salève, yet, as the monologue proceeds, this apparent 'narrative' subtly changes shape and becomes a touching and sensible record of the poet's thoughts and arguments upon the subjects of life and death. The transmutation is so gradual, so balanced, that it does not hamper the style of the poem. The conversational tone is matched with an effortless metre, making the final proclamation acceptable:

. . . he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God.

(line 604)

The gist of La Saisiaz, then, deals with the ephemerality of life-- or should we call it the 'apparent' ephemerality?

The title of the poem is appropriate and serves to emphasise Browning's love of paradox. It could be interpreted in diverse ways. It could well be that Browning chose to name his monologue after the chalet where he had spent those pleasant hours in the company of Anne Smith. It could also be that by naming his effort 'La Saisiaz' (the Sun) Browning wishes to draw the attention of his readers to the affirmation that there is a life hereafter. The 'sun' symbol has been repeatedly used in the past to signify 'source of light and energy', 'life', and 'immortality'. The connotations affixed to the word in the past had not become obsolete with the passing of years. Considered against the backdrop of the nineteenth century, La Saisiaz may well stand for the Sun, and stretching the concept even further, 'immortality'. Whatever the primary thoughts of Browning may have been, the title is justified.

Browning starts the poem by assuming the existence of God, and the immortal quality of the soul. These are facts which are at once accepted as (1) certain, and (2) incapable of being proved. Since Browning wishes to rest his argument solely on what he knows to be certain fact, he wishes to speak only for himself and avoids charting out a philosophy for other people. There are two things that the speaker knows for certain--his own existence, and that of a 'non-self' existing independently from him:

I have questioned and am answered. Question, answer
presuppose.

Two points: that the thing itself which questions, answers,
is, it knows;

As it also knows the thing perceived outside itself, a force

Actual ere its own beginning, operative through its course,
Unaffected by its end, that this thing likewise needs must
be;

Call this--God, then, call that--soul, and both--the only
facts for me.

Prove them facts? that they o'erpass my power of proving,
proves them such:

Fact it is I know I know not something which is fact as much.

(lines 217-224)

(my italics)

The aim of the speaker is to arrive at a faith regarding the immortality of the soul, and this movement is intended to pivot on a consideration of the two unprovable yet known entities--soul and God. Browning rules out the possibility that the doubts that trouble the human heart can be set at rest by Christian revelation alone. Yet the subject of Christian revelation is neither derided nor by-passed. The poem is an attempt of Browning to find an answer in human terms to the questions that have occupied man's mind from time immemorial:

Life thus owned unhappy, is there supplemental happiness
Possible and probable in life to come? or must we count
Life a curse and not a blessing, summed-up in its whole
amount,
Help and hindrance, joy and sorrow?

(lines 204-207)

Having weighed the pros and cons of such an examination into the paradoxical nature of life, the speaker resolves to continue in his quest:

Why should I want courage here?
I will ask and have an answer, with no favor, with no fear,
From myself. How much, how little, do I inwardly believe
True that controverted doctrine?

(lines 207-210)

The quest of the speaker is balanced upon the pinpoint of the fact that although 'I am' is the starting point of all knowledge to man, the resulting discovery is 'I myself am what I know not'. For each man, his individual experience of pain and pleasure, doubt and hope remains the essential reality--'this is sure, the rest surmise'. Consequently, for each individual, knowledge rests on the fact of his own experience and existence. This idea is developed further along the monologue, in the lines 561-571.

There are two lines of reasonings within the consciousness of the speaker. An existence teeming with sorrow and evil can be accepted only by a faith in a second life. The first part of the poem (1-140) is a vivid description of the surrounding landscape. The painstaking attention to detail makes the reader aware of the poet's descriptive ability and of his equally strong impulse to immortalise the place where Anne Egerton Smith lies buried. Yet the colourful pageant is brought to rest with:

. . . there's something more than Nature, man requires,
And that, useful as is Nature to attract the tourist's
foot,
. . . the spirit also needs a comfort reached
By no help of lake or mountain . . .

(lines 100-104)

The second movement of La Saisiaz (lines 140-216) deals with the possibility of life after death, and with the moral implications of the conclusion that the speaker hopes to reach. The poem's meaning evolves as an elaboration of the question 'Does the soul survive the body? / Is there God's self, no or yes?' The evidences of this world do not point to 'a cause all-good, all-wise, all-potent'. Since a disbelief in a life after death only leads

us to an impasse, it is worthwhile to change position and examine argument from a fresh perspective, namely, can the sufferings of the world be endured if man has hope of personal immortality?

The lines that bring the second movement of the first section a close are at once tender and resonant with faith. The poet's ab love for his wife acts as a lodestar, infusing him with the hope t 'from this life I pass into a better, there / Where that lady live whom enamoured was my soul.¹⁷

It is worth noting that throughout the monologue the tussle i revealed in the mind and heart of the speaker. The reiteration of words 'I', 'my', 'mine' serves to show that at no point does the s claim objective validity for the conclusions he arrives at. The f of his own experience and his own perception emerges as the premis the theological argument:

Well, and wherefore shall it daunt me, when 'tis I myself
am tasked,
When, by weakness weakness questioned, weakly answers--
weakly asked?
. . . whispered by my soul to me. . . .
I shall no more dare to mimic such response in futil
speech,
Pass off human lisp as echo of the sphere-song out of reac
(lines 147-1

And again later on in the argument:

I myself am what I know not . . .
What to me is pain and pleasure: this is sure, the rest-
surmise. . . .
If (to my own sense, remember! though none other feel th
same!)

(lines 260-26

(my italic

Understandably, the conclusion of the debate between Fancy and Reason is not asserted as being generally true, but offered tentatively as the speaker's own reasoning. The scheme of values that evolve with the progress of the monologue are based on the speaker's own experience (lines 287-292).

La Saisiaz has been set down as 'a moan out of temporary depression' by H.C. Duffin,¹⁸ and the lines that have received strongest disapproval are the ones mentioned above. A careful reading of the poem dispels this allegation. The single conjunction 'if' provides the key to the discord and the meaning of the rest of the sentence hinges upon this word. The lines that have been often quoted to suggest the pessimistic quality of the poem are as follows:

I must say--or choke in silence--'Howsoever came my fate,
Sorrow did and joy did nowise, life well weighed, preponderate.'
(lines 332-333)

It is true that once torn from the context, and presented without the prefix 'if', the lines appear to be almost unique in their pessimism. But such a method defeats the purpose of the poem, for the lines have to be considered within the framework of the monologue and not accepted as a 'segment' of the poet's message. When A.C. Pigou¹⁹ and W.C. DeVane²⁰ (among other critics) regret the 'pusillanimous' and 'doubtful' tone of La Saisiaz, they are making the same mistake that has caused the lines from Pippa Passes to be wrenched from the actual body of the poem and made to appear the cornerstone of a 'glib' philosophy.

The purpose of the conjunction 'if' is to imply conditions contrary to the chartered facts, thus:

If the harsh throes of the prelude die not off into the swell
Of that perfect piece they sting me to become a-strain for, if
Roughness of the long rock-chamber lead not to the last of cliff,
. . . if this life's conception new life fail to realise . . .
(Then) I must say or choke in silence . . .

(lines 322-333)

(my italics)

Clearly what Browning is trying to say here is that if the adverse condition had been irrevocably true, if the 'harsh throes of the prelude' continued without the final 'swell', then, and only then would his life be marked by sorrow and not with joy. The sentiment that informs the forementioned lines find a companion source in The Guardian Angel. Here, again, it is easy to disregard the subtle subjunctive and pronounce the poem as evidence of Browning's denial of evil.

The following lines from The Guardian Angel are a striking parallel in their syntactical structure, (if not in their subject-matter) to La Saisiaz:

If ever this was granted, I would rest
My head beneath thine . . .
And all lay quiet, happy and suppressed.
How soon all worldly wrong would be repaired!
I think how I should view the earth and skies
And sea, when once again my brow was bared
After thy healing, with such different eyes.

(lines 22-32, iv, v)

(my italics)

By the use of the subjunctive, Browning is admitting the existence of evil, just as he had implied the contrary fact (existence of good) in La Saisiaz. In both the poems the emphasis is on the transient nature of evil, and not upon its illusory nature. Life is not all-good, but neither is it unrelieved suffering, and under no circumstances is evil unreal or 'stuff for transmuting'.

The central section of La Saisiaz (lines 217-404) involves the speaker reminiscing upon his own experience. He is forced to acknowledge that life can offer no meaning or coherence unless it be viewed as probationary:

. . . there is no reconciling wisdom with a world
distraught,
Goodness with triumphant evil, power with failure in
the aim . . .
If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's
place,
And life, time, with all their chances, changes, just
probation-space,
Mine for me.

(lines 266-271)

Again and again the poet emphasises that all his reasonings are based on his personal experience 'Knowledge stands on my experience . . .' It is essential for every individual to discover the truth for himself, in proportion to the capacity of reasoning afforded to him.

Worth comparing are lines 274-278 from La Saisiaz and those (13-16, 27-29) from Christmas-Eve. While Browning stressed the validity of personal choice and experience in the absence of concrete, external proof, he is by no means guilty of implying that truth is relative. Truth is absolute, but the imperfections of man permit him to reach at best an approximation of this 'absolute truth'. Man's conviction should find a basis in his personal experience.

Turning to judge the world according to the nature of his own experience (lines 293-348) the speaker discovers innumerable paradoxes. To a casual reader the God of La Saisiaz does not seem to offer any additional promise or comfort and provides a curious parallel to the callous indifference of Caliban's imagined deity.

The speaker rejects the assumption that only by experiencing the pangs of pain and suffering can happiness be apprehended more completely. The following lines are a direct rebuttal of the idea that Browning refuted the existence of evil in La Saisiaz:

What, no way but this that man may learn and lay to heart
how rife
Life were with delights would only death allow their taste
to life?
Must the rose sigh 'Pluck--I perish!' must the eve weep
'Gaze--I fade!' . . .
Can we love but on condition, that the thing we love must
die?
Needs there groan a world in anguish just to teach us sympathy--
Multitudinously wretched that we, wretched too, may guess
What a preferable state were universal happiness?

(lines 307-314)

Working on the previous theory, until and unless the lesson man learns on earth is to be put to use elsewhere, somewhere beyond the finite limits of this life, the present pain and suffering would be devoid of meaning:

Nay, were fancy fact, were earth and all it holds illusion
mere,
Only a machine for teaching love and hate and hope and fear
To myself the sole existence, single truth 'mid falsehood--
well!
If the harsh throes of the prelude die not off into the swell . . .
I must say or choke in silence . . . preponderate.

(lines 319-334)

There is an element of hope in the poet's reasoning that an omnipotent God could not have created this world without the blessing of an after-life. The seemingly limited and imperfect qualities of God (line 348) are put aside, while the speaker determines to reach 'truth's self' from examining the basic premises. These are (1) the existence of God, and

(2) the existence of the soul. The third conviction to be arrived at is the hope of personal immortality, and the second part of the poem sees the unfolding of this problem. To examine the problem, Browning introduces the dialogue form. The debate between Fancy and Reason progresses as a development of the principles laid down in the first part of the poem, while 'soul' takes the position of the umpire. Thus:

God is, and the soul is, and, as certain, after death shall be.
Put this third to use in life, the time for using fact!

(lines 408-409)

Before moving on to the second part of the poem (lines 405-545) it will be well to consider the lines where the speaker suggests that the anomalies of the world can be resolved (in theory, if not in practice) on the assumption that there is a life to come:

. . . Only grant a second life; I acquiesce
In this present life as failure, count misfortune's worst
assaults
Triumph, not defeat, assured that loss so much the more
exalts
Gain about to be.

(lines 358-361)

This boon of a second life granted, reconciliation would be possible:

Worst were best, defeat were triumph, utter loss were utmost
gain
Can it be, and must, and will it?

(lines 389-390)

Like the speaker of Prospice it should be possible to say:

For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the element's rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light . . .

(lines 21-26)

The second part of the poem explores this possibility of a future life and presents the issue in the form of a dialogue between Fancy and Reason. Fancy starts with the assumption 'that after body dies soul lives again.' To the two facts 'acknowledged late' a third and equally pertinent one is added--'God is, and the soul is, and as certain, after death shall be.' (my italics)

Line 408 is immediately followed by a more dynamic advice--'Put this third to use in life, the time for using fact!' Since the purpose of life is action, it is important to have a clear picture of the meaning and significance of life before an action can be accomplished. Since human knowledge is imperfect, the 'surmises' or 'postulates' that go beyond the facts help to sustain the picture of a perfect and purposeful universe and an All-Benevolent God. Considered from this point, the 'postulates' cease to be mere 'fancy' and merge into 'facts', or to put the matter in simpler terms, the postulates once accepted as 'facts' make human life intelligible.²¹

Discussing the relationship of 'facts' and 'postulates' F.E. L. Priestley writes in his essay:

Our knowledge being limited, we must supplement it, or indeed arrange its fragments, with the help of postulates which 'go beyond the facts'. Since these postulates are a vital part of the system of relations which turns 'facts'

into 'knowledge', they can be properly considered themselves 'facts' in the popular sense (which equates facts with knowledge).²²

In La Saisiaz 'fancy' does not mean poetic imagination but the popular significance of the word, namely 'fiction'.

The dialogue that follows is at once a debate, and a mutual effort of Reason and Fancy to search for truth. Reason joins in with Fancy in attempting to elicit how one should act in this life if he had the assurance of a future state of existence. Although Fancy and Reason agree in the main, namely, that it should be known to all men that the present life is a probation period, Reason rightly points out that such a knowledge would destroy the efficacy of action involving choice. Once the postulate becomes a certainty, man's moral nature would automatically lose credit. Secondly, granted that there is a future life, a better existence, the immediate query is why then should man delay in obtaining entry to this life-to-come? The promise of a happier state can rightly tempt man to put an end to his life, and to the burden attached to it. How far can such an action be condoned?

Life to come will be improvement on the life that's now, destroy
Body's thwartings, there's no longer screen betwixt soul and
soul's joy.

O'er this life the next presents advantage much
and manifold:
Which advantage--in the absence of a fourth and
farther fact
Now conceivably surmised, of harm to follow from
the act--
I pronounce for man's obtaining at this moment.
Why delay?

(lines 411-412, 424-427)

The answer offered is that since misery is an inescapable condition of mortal life, there must be a purpose behind the latter. At the same time a passive acceptance of the existing conditions is an impediment to moral development. In the words of Priestley:

. . . the guide to proper conduct, the moral law, must be sufficiently discernable to allow the exercise of judgement, but not so unmistakable as to preclude will and choice. Natural laws 'enforce themselves': 'to hear means to obey': the moral law, no less powerful, is not compulsive: a man may see and praise / the best yet follow the worst, 'since he disbelieves / In the heart of him that edict which for truth his head receives'.²³

To the arguments offered by Reason regarding the logic behind committing suicide, Fancy replies by stating that the act of living here is a condition for the after-life, and our awareness of this truth should come to us while we are here, amidst good and evil conditions. Thus although Reason is right to point out that 'after dying, man will live again', and that life makes 'as plain the absence, also of a law to contravene / Voluntary passage from this life to that by change of scene,' Fancy makes clear the belief that man must be spared 'direct plain truth' for such truth is destructive to the worth of life and man's values.²⁴ Evil is neither a necessity nor is it an illusion. Life is not a mimic war, but a battlefield where each man has to fight the adverse conditions according to his personal capacity.

Norton B. Crowell considers the poem's treatment of the problem of evil and offers a parallel between the convictions of Browning and those of his protagonist-speaker in The Two Poets of Croisic:

I think no such direct plain truth consists
With actual sense and thought and what they take
To be the solid walls of life: mere mists--
How such would, at that truth's first piercing, break
Into the nullity they are!

No, we must play the pageant out, observe
The tourney-regulations, and regard
Success--to meet the blunted spear nor swerve,
Failure--to break no bones yet fall on sward;
Must prove we have--not courage? Well then, nerve!
And at the day's end, boast the crown's award--
Be warranted as promising to wield
Weapons, no sham, in a true battle-field.

(lines 489-493, 497-504)

According to Norton B. Crowell 'Absolute truth on earth, once seen steadily, would destroy the test of life, remove entirely the purpose of life, and reduce men to puppets, fighting a purposeless tourney'.²⁵ This idea had been developed by Browning from the early years of 1850 (publication of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day), and been given an important place in poem after poem.²⁶ It is therefore not surprising that in his closing period the subject occupied his mind to an inordinate degree. Whether he was able to reach a satisfactory conclusion remains to be seen.

In the course of the debate between Fancy and Reason, the subject of eternal happiness and eternal damnation receives extensive treatment. According to Fancy, man's acts upon this earth act as conditions to his attainment of future happiness or suffering. Just as boundless ambition and a disregard of the divine plan behind the probation period implies punishment, similarly the actions done on earth secure the joys of heaven or the eternal sufferings of hell:

He by absolute compulsion such as made him live at all,
Go on living to the fated end of life whate'er befall.
He shall find--say, hell to punish who in aught curtails
the term,
Fain would act the butterfly before he has played out
the worm!
God, soul, earth, heaven, hell, five facts now: what is
to desiderate?

(lines 459-465)

. . . not alone do I declare
Life must needs be borne, I also will that man become aware
Life has worth incalculable, every moment that he spends
So much loss or gain for the next life which on this life
depends.
Good, done here, be there rewarded, evil done here, there
amerced!

(lines 475-479)

Reason examines the arguments offered by Fancy, and rightly draws attention to the fact that the certainty of an act being rewarded or condemned in the future life would make men frame their deeds according to a specific expectation. This would negate the importance of 'choice' in the life of human beings, and in the absence of a moral choice the deeds themselves would be scarcely better than a 'barter' or 'exchange'. Fancy had declared that not alone must life needs be borne, but that it is essential that man:

. . . become aware
Life has worth incalculable, every moment that he spends
So much gain or loss for that next life which on this life
depends.

(lines 476-478)

To this conjecture Reason answers with:

There was good and evil, then, defined to man by this
decree?

Was--for at its promulgation both alike have ceased to be . . .

Prior to this last announcement, earth was man's probation-
place:

Liberty of doing evil gave his doing good a grace;

Once lay down the law . . .

Thenceforth neither good nor evil does man, doing what he must.

(lines 481-482, 491-497)

Here again, the importance of choice is stressed. Moral good and evil should be discriminated and rationalised within the heart of an individual. The hope for eternal happiness should not spell easy acquiescence, nor should it (hope) compel man to obey a 'law' automatically. The efficacy lies in the implied 'struggle', and it is through this struggle that the soul develops. The inevitability of the effect of an action induces stagnation of man's discriminating abilities and moral death.

Thus doubt is essential. It is the necessary weakness on which faith is based. What is certain needs no striving after, for, the very nature of the result would prompt indiscriminate, non-contemplative behaviour.

The debate between Fancy and Reason comes back to the starting point of the problem with the concluding lines:

. . . God there is, and soul there is,
And soul's earthly life-allotment: wherein, by hypothesis,
Soul is bound to pass probation, prove its powers, and
exercise
Sense and thought on fact, and then, from fact educing fit
surmise,
Ask itself, and of itself have solely answer, 'does the scope
Earth affords of fact to judge by warrant future fear or hope?'

(lines 519-524)

The speaker of La Saisiaz is left with no firmer grasp of the truth than he had possessed at the beginning. The debate between Fancy and Reason has just gone to prove another 'unacceptable terminus'.²⁷ Earlier the dichotomy had been between the imperfections of this world and the notional benevolence of a Creator, with the debate a fresh suggestion is introduced, namely, the assurance of a future life negates the significance of actions in this world.

Since all the postulates are unacceptable, the speaker is left without any certainties. He is, however, not dejected. The lines immediately following the termination of the debate contain Browning's characteristic message of optimism:

Break my warrant for assurance! which assurance may not be
If supplanting hope, assurance needs must change this life
to me.

So, I hope--no more than hope, but hope--no less than hope.

(lines 533-535)

(my italics)

The imperfection of man's knowledge becomes a necessary condition for the immortality of the soul. This theory is however implied rather than stressed.

The final lines are saddened by the memory of Miss Smith's death, and are accordingly, once again addressed to her. But the pain of his loss does not cause the poet's voice to be fretful or agitated. Browning maintains that certainty cannot supersede hope without abrogating the moral laws of life and destroying the value of goodness. But as things are, at least he is not left entirely without consolation in his darkness:

Hope the arrow, just as constant, comes to pierce its
gloom, compelled
By a power and by a purpose which, if no one else beheld,
I behold in life, so--hope!

(lines 543-545)²⁸

At a casual glance it appears that the labyrinthine reasonings in La Saisiaz have not occasioned any forward movement, and that the debate between Reason and Fancy ends in an impasse. But the answer has really been given, and the realisation that there is no absolute yardstick and no proof for the surmise brings an end to the conflicts of the poet. The end of the speaker's quest is a return to his earlier deduction--'that they o'erpass my power of proving, proves them such.'

There is a discernible parallel between La Saisiaz and the Pope's speech (Book X) in The Ring and the Book. Absolute Truth is not possible to be reached, and this realisation is the one certainty we can possess. Although the conclusion of La Saisiaz seems more paradoxical than logical, it is nevertheless true.

In the context of La Saisiaz, Browning also considers the nature of worldly fame. The Swiss mountains had been the abode of Byron and Rousseau, Voltaire and Gibbon. Like his ancestors, Browning claims to have a right to his personal convictions, and he chooses hope and stands by it. Yet Browning does not wish to present his readers with a blueprint for faith. Each man should hammer out and chisel his own brand of hope, and not be solely dependent upon the doctrines of famous men, however rhetorical be their message.

The intention behind La Saisiaz is to implant the seed of question and self-examination in every reader, 'From thine apprehended scheme of

things deduce / Praise or blame of its contriver . . .' Hope should be a gradual emergence from man's personal awareness of the meaning of life, and this 'surmise' should evolve notwithstanding the disparity and misery in the world.

Browning has found the meaning of life in the realisation that the nature of the quest is no less important than the object sought after, and that it remains with the readers to come to their individual decision. Consequently, the irony that informs lines 561-571 stems from Browning's distaste for a passive acceptance of the theories put forward by men who have been in the lime-light. The fame of a Rousseau or a Byron is acceptable since they were indeed men of merit. What is regrettable is their audience's desire to be spoon-fed, not merely in their creative works, but also in matters of far greater importance. Poetry and philosophy can serve educational and aesthetic purpose, but they should not be accepted as a substitute for religion:

Sad summing-up of all to say!
Athanasius contra mundum, why should he hope more than they?
So are men made notwithstanding, such magnetic virtue darts
From each head their fancy haloes to their unresisting hearts!

(lines 545-548)

Rumination upon the above lines causes the speaker to indulge upon a fresh play of fancy--could he not attain to the fame of his ancestors, and by virtue of the fame be able to spread his message among his readers? Although the debate between Fancy and Reason remains inconclusive at the end of La Saisiaz, and although the question regarding the immortality of the soul goes by unresolved, Browning feels he is justified in his sincere attempt to find the truth. His basic assumptions, religious

and human, have been maintained and examined through the poem, and, at the conclusion, they serve to lift the speaker above grief and scepticism:

Lo, I lift the coruscating marvel--Fame! and, famed, declare . . .
He there with the brand flamboyant, broad o'er night's
forlorn abyss,
Crowned by prose and verse; and wielding, with Wit's bauble,
Learning's rod . . .
Well? Why he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God!
(lines 595-604)

Only by a careful examination of the alternative positions, does Browning arrive at his decision in La Saisiaz. The process involves the propounding and elimination of various hypotheses. The final position, cannot be dismissed as irrational, but holds the status of a belief honestly arrived at.

The poem was written in London, in November. Although at the time of Miss Smith's death, the arguments in the mind of the poet could not be put down or examined at length, the dull, grey evening of November has seen them articulated, and the initial ambiguities clarified.

It is an interesting factor in La Saisiaz that throughout the debate Browning's concern is with his wife's immortality as well as that of his deceased friend.²⁹ This thought (of the absent Elizabeth) deepens the poignancy of the poem. The last line 'Least part this: then what the whole?' is significant and can be interpreted as:

- a) if the poem represents only a minor part of what Anne Smith meant to the poet, how great must be the actual memory of her in the poet's heart.
- b) Miss Smith's death is painful, yet the sense of bereavement is not as intense as that associated with the death of Elizabeth. If the poet cannot dare to bring to life the memory of Anne, how can he ever bear to share with the public the memories of his beloved wife.

The final section of the poem (lines 605-618), in the nature of an epilogue (or, as Priestley has defined it, 'a short envoi'), has been interpreted variously. According to Priestley, the poem gradually moves away from its earlier position of emotional divulgence till it takes on the art of reticence. Priestley further draws a parallel between the nature of the concluding lines of La Saisiaz, and the stance adopted by the bishop in Bishop Blougram's Apology.³⁰

It could be argued that the phrase 'not so loosely thoughts were linked' could well mean that the thoughts which occupied the speaker's mind primarily (following the death of Anne Egerton) were pertinent, but at the same time under some sort of strain. With the passage of six weeks this initial strain has been eased considerably and, in the privacy of his room, the speaker views the death, the climb, the quest, and the final descent to everyday life with greater clarity. The word 'loosely' does not imply 'diffuse' or 'casual', but emphasises the complicated nature of the quest. What remained tangled during the climb has been smoothed. The climb can be compared to the first view of a territory. The mind and eye can comprehend the variety but cannot re-create the entire landscape lucidly. There is at once something that appeals and something that eludes. A second survey makes the landscape clearer. The pattern, which was earlier a part of the whole, emerges from it as the eyes grow accustomed to the landscape. In the course of six weeks, the agitation of the speaker has been replaced by calm, so that at the moment of writing down his experience, the paradox of life becomes easier to view.

The word 'untangled' could also mean distinct, the suggestion being that initially the personal nature of the loss made the speaker view the

event from a proximity, and thus contributed to an honest but partial point of view. There was no distancing between the problem and the individual who arrived at a solution.

Likewise, the meaning of line 609 'Not so filmy was the texture' becomes apparent once the word 'filmy' is considered as a synonym for 'transparent'. The speaker admits that the debate within his heart between Reason and Fancy had imbued his thoughts with a texture--the very word suggesting something tactile. No longer were his thoughts mere abstractions of a theological dilemma, they had been provided with a structure. But this structure did not afford absolute clarity. Six weeks later, the event becomes more 'filmy', more coherent.

A third interpretation could be that the disturbing nature of the problem made the speaker leave the answers as they had come to his mind--without trying to re-arrange them further. Even the task of contemplation involved an effort and a pain, and having once apprehended the meaning behind the scheme of things, the speaker was contented to let the matter rest.

A-top the mountain the chain had 'appeared' to be flawless, but this was not entirely true. The speaker had been able to contemplate the mystery of life, death and the immortality of the soul with considerably less pain. Once he reached the grave, the abstract problem became at once more real, and correspondingly, more painful.

Not so loosely thoughts were linked,
Six weeks since as I, descending in the sunset from Salève,
Found the chain, I seemed to forge there, flawless till it
reached your grave,

(lines 606-608)

(my italics)

The grave was a re-confrontation with brutal truth, with the inescapable realisation that Anne Smith would not return. It is one thing to contemplate the subject of death and mourn personal loss, it is quite different to stand beside the last corporeal proof of the dead person. Both experiences are genuine and involve pain, but the concrete nature of the latter (grave) is an ironic contrast to the invisible and non-corporeal soul, and even the most carefully arranged philosophical construction can suffer a momentary trauma. This may have been the reason for the poet's inability to unravel 'link by link . . . any tangle of the chain'.

After six weeks have elapsed, the speaker still feels dissatisfied with his findings. In a moment of sudden urgency, he decides to live 'all o'er again / That last pregnant hour', and this time his introspection bears fruit--'Here it lies, for much or little! I have lived all o'er again / That last pregnant hour: I saved it,' (lines 612-613). For Browning, the recollection of 'that last pregnant hour' evokes memories '. . . whose resurrection could not be without earthquake!'

The lines suggest a strange ambivalence. The speaker cannot rest without giving voice to the thoughts which he has carefully preserved hitherto. Yet his intention to re-live and contemplate them 'when the time best helps to shoot' is shaken when he encounters pain at the narration of Anne Egerton's death. Since Browning's deeper memories are bound up with the death of his mother, and more intensely, the death of his wife, he is chary of attempting a resurrection of certain 'germs of torpid life'.

The end of La Saisiaz, 'Least part this: then what the whole?' is at once eloquent in its brevity, and at the same time imbued with unuttered possibilities. I fail to agree with the opinion that 'Many other poems, including the Blougram, suggest much deeper grounds for the poet's faith than the "chain" which occupies the main part of La Saisiaz. I would suggest that his real thoughts on Mount Salève included many of these deeper elements; the chain was not the loose and simple chain the poem presents, with its successive links of postulates conceded; but was stronger, more tangled, and included very different sorts of links, particularly where it reached the grave.'³¹

There are several prevalent misconceptions regarding the nature of Browning's optimism in general, and in La Saisiaz in particular. Readers and critics are apt to ascribe to him opinions which he has put into the mouths of his characters. Granted that the demands of elegy led Browning to speak in propria persona in La Saisiaz, caution should be employed in ascribing to the poet every opinion that he presents in the course of the poem. Analysing La Saisiaz Henry Jones feels that Browning is confused and not entirely truthful.³² F.R. Leavis maintains '... It is too plain that Browning would have been less robust if he had been more sensitive and intelligent. He did indeed bring his living interests into his poetry but it is too plain that they are not the interests of an adult sensitive mind . . . He was a naive romantic of love and action on the waking plane . . .'³³ Leavis's view is shared by Derek Colville.³⁴ W.T. Watts, less caustic on the subject of the poem, has nevertheless failed to perceive its 'rational' if not 'materialistic' nature. To Watts, La Saisiaz is an anti-rationalistic, anti-materialistic effort,

a general protest against the current trends in thought (nineteenth century), and is 'nothing more or less than a vigorous and eloquent protest against the scientific materialism of the age.'³⁵

Such shortsightedness on the part of eminent critics is surprising. Their attitude not only makes them blind to the essential merits of the poem, but also holds Browning guilty of the particular 'glib' optimism which he never claimed to possess.

In La Saisiaz Browning re-emphasised the importance of choice in the life of an individual, and the validity of partial knowledge. Since the poem is the fruit of his maturer years, the problems that have occupied his mind in the past years are all treated with firmness and great clarity of perception. The result is not only a fresh and un-dogmatic approach, but one that has been carved out, so to speak, by the poet's accumulated experiences over the years. This a-posteriori nature of the theme is perhaps unintentionally the cause of a poem that dismisses the external trappings of verbal nicety and concentrates on the immediate problem at hand. La Saisiaz is far from being a 'mere grey argument', but that it is long, occasionally given to 'asides' and beyond the conventional limits of 'poetic-craft' cannot be denied. In the poem, as elsewhere, Browning has portrayed the human psyche not only with exceptional clarity but made a convincing portrait of it. As in many other poems (Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, A Death in the Desert) he rather indicates than expresses thoughts which have in his own mind both a logical and an imaginative sequence. The truth Browning arrives at is limited by man's finitude, but it remains the truth. Browning had clarified earlier that his effort will be to present 'man's truest answer', even if this be not the ultimate truth as God sees it (lines 147-152).³⁶

Browning has been harshly criticised for statements such as:

Take the joys and bear the sorrows--neither with extreme
concern!
Living here means nescience simply: 'tis next life that
helps to learn.
Shut those eyes, next life will open, stop those ears, next
life will teach
Hearing's office, close those lips, next life will give the
power of speech!

(lines 467-470)

Henry Jones stated 'The further assertion that the poet makes in La Saisiaz and repeats elsewhere, that sure knowledge of the consequences that follow good and evil actions would necessarily lead to the choice of good and the avoidance of evil, and destroy morality by destroying liberty of choice, raises the whole question of the relation of knowledge and conduct . . .',³⁷

Browning revelled in ambiguity, yet he was not guilty of transgressing the limits of language. He often affixed connotations to words that were not commonly accepted, but then this is what poets do all the time. Seen thus, Browning was no more guilty of 'wilful ambiguity' than were his contemporary poets. The two words in the present poem which have received the greatest criticism are 'evil' and 'knowledge'. In the context of La Saisiaz Browning admits to the reality of evil. What he holds to as the bulwark of his faith is the belief in the transitory nature of this evil. Again, 'by the term "knowledge" Browning means particularly the kind of unreal ratiocination which tries to replace the experience of the individual by an abstract generalisation.'³⁸

Browning is not trying to exalt love and faith at the expense of intellect and knowledge, but attempting to bridge the gap between the

two. Throughout La Saisiaz, Browning attempts to make distinction between logical conviction and an act of faith. We cannot demand proof for every process. There are many things upon this earth that elude our limited comprehension, and cannot be understood in their entirety. In many instances, we have to depend upon our faith and attempt to bridge the gap (in knowledge) by an act of trust. In La Saisiaz Browning traces the development of philosophical speculation, from an emotional denial of man's intellectual shortcomings to an eventual acceptance of the same (viz, intellectual limitations).

Ferishtah's Fancies (1884) are in effect a series of lessons which are propounded by a Persian sage to his disciples. The doctrines are partly mysterious, sometimes expressed in parables, and for the most part tending to the refutation of the supposed errors of the disciples. The work as a whole is thus a study of Browning's criticism and understanding of life. The subjective element in the poems is easily inferred, and under the guise of the 'Dervish' Browning offers his own ideas as to the meaning of Existence, and the godness of the Creator. Ferishtah's Fancies witness a further development in Browning's religious ideas, which found abiding expression in Christmas-Eve and Easter Day, Saul, Karshish, Cleon, A Death in the Desert, and finally in The Ring and the Book.

Ferishtah's Fancies embraces the earlier theories, and goes a step further in that it explores the chief tenets of Browning's philosophy. The parables include within their gamut questions regarding the importance of choice in the life of an individual; the emphasis on aspiration as against achievement; the worth of reasoned disbelief (against blind faith);

and the harm arising from a rigidly abstemious behaviour. 'Two Camels' is a parable meant to inculcate the rights of the body as against the exaggerations of asceticism, and Browning's treatment of this topic brings to our mind the utterance of the painter-monk Lippo and the rabbi Ben Ezra. Ferishtah's Fancies thus deals not only with religion and the question of faith, but upholds the worth and dignity of human flesh.

To each part of Ferishtah's Fancies there is attached a lyric expressing the idea of the preceding section in terms of a love-lyric. They are important in introducing a note of light-hearted freshness to the otherwise pedantic arguments. In addition, they express the importance of earthly love and help to preserve a thematic unity through the entire series.

In Ferishtah's Fancies, as elsewhere, Browning chooses the mode of the dramatic monologue for a variety of reasons. The prime reason is that the form allows him to talk of religion empirically. Secondly, it prevents him from committing himself to a position. Furthermore, it allows the readers to give assent to the speaker's experience without having to agree on doctrine. Finally, the speaker enables the poet Browning to dramatise an 'emotional apprehension' in advance of or in conflict with the intellectual convictions of Robert Browning the man. This last state of mind, which Langbaum refers to as 'a disequilibrium' is perhaps inevitable to Victorian minds.

The 'Prologue' to Ferishtah's Fancies opens with Browning's partly ironic, partly affable style. In the first line the speaker introduces the reader to a kind of quail, which is enjoyed when cooked in Italian fashion (or otherwise). The bewilderment of the reader increases as the

poet continues--talking in a leisurely fashion about the palatability of the products, and the contrasting nature of its accompanying 'dressings'. Here, as in the 'Epilogue' to the Pachiarotto volume, Browning's intention is to activate the reader's mind, to make him participate in the poem. The 'Prologue' is a comment by Browning upon his own poetry in Ferishtah, hard and relatively unappetising on the outside, pungent next, and finally yielding to the meat as the 'gust! Flavour' unite and 'Flies, permeating flesh and leaf and crust / In fine admixture.' Browning's main purpose in the Prologue is to 'Lyre with Spit ally'; his poems are fruits of creative genius, and like the preparation of ortolanes, need careful handling. Both have to be enjoyed in a systematical, if rather a ritualistic manner.

'The Eagle' introduces the Dervish Ferishtah to the Divine Purpose behind this world. Ferishtah is depicted as a young man, and like all youths, he is given to hasty judgements and irrational behaviour. From the observation of an eagle feeding some orphaned ravens, Ferishtah comes to the conclusion that God is aware of His creatures, and consequently man should depend solely upon the Creator for sustenance. His theory 'Who toil and moil to eke out life, when lo / Providence cares for every hungry mouth!' is soon put to practise, with disastrous results: '. . . his head swam and his limbs grew faint.' (line 23). Ferishtah awakens from his dream to a new realisation. Providence is benevolent and cares for every weak creature, but human effort is essential to make life successful. Man's purpose is to strive, and he is ordained to protect the weaker creature, not sink into helplessness himself. The first lesson Ferishtah learns from the eagle is the innate worth and importance of man.

God intends man to emulate the eagle and feed his weaker brethren.

Providence does not encourage the absence of earnest activity.

The second lesson arises in part from the first. Just as the strong should care for the weak (physically), likewise it is essential to provide nourishment to the soul. Having learnt his lesson, Ferishtah proceeds towards the town of Ispahan, there to teach and guide men. The final search of the Dervish is not for comfort, neither for outward appearances, but for the souls that are shrouded by squalid and mean bodies. The lyric explicates the idea of the parable.

'The Melon-Seller' is a link between 'The Eagle' and the parables to follow. Ferishtah is still a learner, and his meeting with the Shah's former minister makes him doubt the Love and Judgement of God. Whatever be the agitations in the mind of the Ferishtah, the melon seller (former minister to the Shah) is contented with his fate, and points to the truth and significance of the passage:

Shall we receive good at the hand of God
And evil not receive?³⁹

(lines 41-42)

Rather than blaming the Almighty for his change of fortune, the man acknowledges gratitude to God for having been awarded twelve years of comfort. His simple faith makes him disregard his present state, and transforms his personality:

. . . the beggar raised a brow, once more
Luminous and imperial, from the rags.

(lines 25-26)

According to the poet, this spiritual enrichment of the melon seller was the source of Ferishtah's wonder and admiration. Consequently, his faith in the Divine Will and Purpose was once more restored.

'The Melon-Seller' reveals Browning's trust in the final purpose behind our earthly sufferings. Since progress entails a movement from ignorance to knowledge, in order to maintain the continuity of the process (i.e. progress) a lack of complete knowledge is essential to man. This concept is later treated in 'The Family' and 'A Bean-Stripe'.

The first lesson to be learnt from the parable 'The Melon-Seller' is that uncertainty and not certainty, is of spiritual value. The second truth to be observed is that the value of human activity lies not in achievement but in aspiration.

'Shah Abbas' treats the theme of doubt and faith in an oblique way. The problem posed in the parable is the question of belief, and the poem discusses the relative values of love and belief, and love and knowledge. During the course of the discussion three fables are introduced. A clear demarcation is drawn between the use of the two words 'belief' and 'acceptance'. Easy acquiescence is not belief, nor is honest doubt a condition of disbelief. The Ferishtah establishes the difference between historical evidences and our conception and acceptance of them.

The moral of 'Shah Abbas' is that life is essentially a medley of doubt and faith. The elements of doubt do not disappear when the light of 'trust' shines on them, but they become familiar and natural aspects of life. It is not possible to eradicate doubt completely, and the emphasis is on the fact that every individual has to work out his own problems. The Ferishtah's reasonings receive further clarification in

the lyric succeeding the poem. The speaker (in the lyric) is not denying that the objects in the room are of discordant nature. Freedom of gait is made possible not by the reorganisation of the 'object, late awry', but by the lighting of the lamp. After the lamp has been lit, the previous difficulties are resolved, though technically not a single object is changed from its prior place. Thus the 'footing free' is brought about by a clarity of perception, and this condition is comparable to the element of faith in an individual. Faith does not make the evil appear good, but it allows the viewer to see the evil and recognise its place in the universe. This recognition permits him to employ the faculty of choice, and since every individual is free to accept certain facts and reject others, it is possible to possess faith even in the face of difficulties. Just as the room described in the lyric is filled with different objects, each having their allotted place, similarly the hearts of individuals are 'furnished' in a like manner. The 'lamp' does not change the actual positioning of the objects, yet by its radiance 'all, discordant late', grows into 'simple symmetry'. Similarly love and trust help to show that evil has its necessary place. And once man accepts its place in the general pattern of the universe, all conflicts can be replaced with faith.

'The Family' deals with the subject of prayer, while in 'Mihrab Shah' the themes of pain and pity are jointly treated. 'The Sun' stands slightly apart from 'The Family' and 'Mihrab Shah'. Ferishtah, on being confronted by an angry disciple who has heard another say that God once assumed on earth a human shape, tries to calm him by stressing the importance of faith.

By introducing the sun-symbolism, the Ferishtah tells his audience how the Persians practised 'sun-worship'. The religion of the Persians made them imagine that the sun was a sentient power, conscious of its beneficence to the earth. In the absence of this theory, the Persians ascribed the bounties of this earth to a greater Power that ruled the sun. But in both cases the Persians were inspired with love and praise (lines 31-39). After some time the Persian worshipper attributed human qualities to their unseen deity. This they did as a matter of consequence--by mounting 'slow and sure' in the progression of reasoning, till they reached the conclusion that the 'prime giver' had all the potentialities of man, only in far greater quality and quantity (lines 44-52).

The deductions had been arrived at gradually and with honesty of thought, and Ferishtah points out that such ideas should not be scoffed at, since they stemmed from faith.

Man needs to know by some sign that the Power, or God, has the interests of man at heart. To answer that crying need, the legend arose that God once took human shape and came to man. To the Persians, the sun attained authenticity once it was graced with human attributes--qualities of love and strength. Divested of these elements, it shrank to 'Mere fire'. By 'ejecting the man' and 'retaining the orb' nothing remained to love and praise but a stone (lines 110-117).

The parable is Browning's solution to the scientific findings and the religious uncertainties of his own day and age. The Supreme power becomes easier to accept and reckon with, once man accepts it as a 'kindred soul':

Man's soul is moved by what, if it in turn
Must move, is kindred soul: receiving good
Man's way--must make man's due acknowledgement,
No other, even while he reasons out
Plainly enough that, were the man unmanned,
Made angel of, angelic every way,
The love and praise that rightly seek and find
Their man-like object now, instructed more,
Would go forth idly, air to emptiness.

(lines 123-131)

'The Sun' ends with the realisation that just as it seems far fetched to perceive a union between fire (sun) and flesh (man), similarly an ordinary man would find it difficult to reconcile himself to the thought that 'God assumed a human shape'. Yet, to a believer, both theories will seem equally plausible. The Ferishtah feels that we ought to praise and admire a man who believes in such legends. His simplicity of faith is enviable and not worthy of our contempt.

In 'Mihrab Shah' the Dervish draws his disciple's attention to the fact that the role of pain is to teach love, compassion, and brotherhood. This awareness of the common lot binds all mortals together. Pain likewise teaches men gratitude to God for the disasters they escape and the blessings they receive. Yet pain in itself does not possess any virtue, and by itself does not give rise to moral result. The message of 'Mihrab Shah' is twofold. We cannot explain pain with our limited experience, but we can learn from it and conquer it. Secondly, in the eye of God, pain may have purpose, and be justified:

In the eye of God
Pain may have purpose and be justified:
Man's sense avails to only see, in pain,
A hateful chance no man but would avert
Or, failing, needs must pity. Thanks to God
And love to man, from man take these away,
And what is man worth?

(lines 124-130)

The parable that takes up the subject of 'faith' and 'doubt' directly is 'A Bean-Stripe' while 'A Pillar at Sebzevar' treats the theme to an extent, linking it with the relation between love and knowledge. The repeated use of these subjects (explanation regarding the existence of evil; relation between love and knowledge) by Browning reveals not only their importance to him, but also allows us to catch a glimpse of his inner conflicts and doubts. He uses the themes over and over again to allay his suspicions--more correctly, to hold firm to his convictions in the face of a rapidly changing world.

In 'A Pillar at Sebzevar' the Ferishtah explains to his disciple the importance of faith. A particular object may be imbued with infinite possibilities, and we may or may not comprehend these due to our limited knowledge. Should we then hold our admiration in abeyance and refrain from recognising the merits of the object. The limitation clearly is not of the specific object, but ours, since we cannot know all. The 'pillar' in the parable has one function which is known to all and sundry, namely, it tells the hour of the day by its shadow. It is this definite act of service that concerns the townsfolk, and merits recognition. Similarly God should be loved and praised, not because we hope to know all, but because we witness His love and justice continually, even in the face of evil and pain. Ferishtah strengthens the conviction of the insufficiency of knowledge when unaided by love. In order to harbour the latter (love) it is not essential for us to unriddle the mysteries of existence:

So let us say--not 'Since we know, we love,'
But rather 'Since we love, we know enough'.

(lines 87-88)

The same position is suggested in A Death in the Desert (1864).

St John had stated, like Ferishtah in the present poem, that we infer the infinite love of God from our own acts of love. Therefore:

. . . Consider well!
Were knowledge all thy faculty, then God
Must be ignored: love gains him by first leap,
Frankly accept the creatureship: ask good
To love for: press bold to the tether's end
Allotted to this life's intelligence!

(lines 133-138)

The parable 'A Pillar At Sebzevar' has led many critics to accuse Browning of deliberately sacrificing intellect to emotion. DeVane felt that 'the theme of the sermon is the complete inefficacy of human knowledge . . .'. He continues:

We should trust our hearts, our instincts, our intuitions, says Browning; for if we attempt to build on the products of our minds, our intellects, we shall find ourselves building houses on shifting sand. This aspect of Browning's philosophical thinking, easy to comprehend but not so easy to accept, is perhaps the most peculiar development of his thought in the last fifteen years of his life.

. . . He, therefore, repudiated the evidence of the intellect in a series of poems, from La Saisiaz to the end of his life, and correspondingly exalted the desires and intuitions of the heart. A Pillar at Sebzevah is perhaps the bluntest and clearest statement of this doctrine.⁴⁰

(my italics)

Henry Jones has charged Browning with being an agnostic and a disbeliever in science. Refuting his charges, Edward Berdoe writes: 'Browning certainly invites us to faith, but faith does not supplant but supplements reason.' He further adds:

He does not disparage knowledge when he points out its limitations. As well argue that the anatomist and physiologist disparage the powers of man when they tell us that we are not constituted like birds for flying in the air, or like fish for living under water.⁴¹

In 'A Pillar at Sebzevar', Browning is thus merely protesting against the notion that 'Man with his narrow mind, must cram inside / His finite God's infinitude . . . ' or that man's failure is evident

Since man may claim a right to understand
What passes understanding.

Parleyings with Bernard de Mandeville

At all times, Browning, in the guise of the Dervish, states that 'becoming wise meant making slow and sure advance / From a Knowledge proved in error to acknowledged ignorance.'⁴²

Before moving to the final parable, it would be helpful to view the argument of a present day critic against DeVane's 'view that the theme . . . is complete inefficacy of human knowledge'. In his article 'Henry Jones on Browning's Optimism' (1964) Philip Drew has written 'It is only when he (Browning) has proved, or even enacted, the inefficacy of the intellectual processes, that Browning decides to perform the crucial act of trust. Even then he is fully aware of what he is doing as the last stanza of the Epilogue to Ferishtah's Fancies clearly shows.'⁴³

'A Bean-Stripe' appears to be the most involved of all the poems in Ferishtah's Fancies in its argument. It is therefore, perhaps natural that it should include a number of statements which have been dealt with in the earlier discourses. The main argument revolves round the question 'Does evil predominate over the good in life, or is the reverse true?'

In answer to a scholar's question, regarding the existence of evil and good in life, Ferishtah presents the example of beans. The handful of beans he scatters before his disciple, are black and white. The Ferishtah states that like the beans, good and evil, white and black

co-exist in life. Each bean by itself is either black or white, yet, ranged in a row, it takes the hue from its adjacent beans. The colours borrowed thus serve to influence the shade of the particular bean, without changing its own colour:

. . . How look they now,
Viewed in the large, those little joys and griefs
Ranged duly all a-row at last, like beans
These which I strew? This bean was white, this black,
Set by itself, but see if, good and bad
Each following either in companionship,
Black have not grown less black and white less white,
Till blackish seems but dun, and whitish-grey . . .
The main result is, both are modified
According to our eye's scope, power of range
Before and after.

(lines 49-61)

(my italics)

The disciple wants a definite pronouncement of life. He cannot come to terms with a form of existence that harbours both states, evil and good. When the Ferishtah points to the beans, the scholar can perceive a certain pattern. The teacher next asks the disciple to substitute the concept of painful moments and happy hours in place of the beans--and no moment or experience in life can stand isolated. Each instant is surrounded, coloured, and affected by past and the immediate future:

. . . pain's shade enhanced the shine
Of pleasure, else no pleasure! Such effects
Came of such causes. Passage at an end,
Past, present, future pains and pleasures fused
So that one glance may gather blacks and whites
Into a life-time, like my bean, streak there,
Why, white they whirl into, not black--for me!

(lines 130-136)

A general deduction can be reached, namely, every moment in life is affected by what goes before. At the same time, man is ever aware of the future to come. Joy is enhanced by a sorrow that has occurred in the past, and is also sobered by the sense of calamity which might yet come. Memory and hope and fear all go into the making of a moment, so that life is neither completely swayed by pain, nor totally devoid of it.

The explanation offered by the Dervish does not totally satisfy the questioner, who still wishes to know the absolute truth regarding the presence of evil in the world. The Ferishtah gives the example of the glowing flames of a fire. We should similarly accept unseen and unknown casual factors and proceed to increase our store of knowledge gradually, without wanting to possess all the facts at once. We can progress on our way with the facts we have learned, and our ignorance of the remaining facts should not prevent us from keeping faith.

The Ferishtah's analysis of the inherent weakness of man and the corresponding Omnipotence of God are presented in lines 209-217, and again in lines 291-296:

. . . Why, if God be just,
Were sundry fellow-mortals singled out
To undergo experience for his sake,
Just that the gift of pain, bestowed on them,
In him might temper to the due degree
Joy's else-excessive largess? Why, indeed!
Back are we brought thus to the starting-point--
Man's impotency, God's omnipotence,
These stop my answer.

(lines 209-217)

God is all-good, all-wise, all-powerful: truth?
Take it and rest there. What is man? Not God:
None of these absolutes therefore, yet himself,
A creature with a creature's qualities.
Make them agree, these two conceptions! Each
Abolishes the other.

(lines 291-296)

(my italics)

A similar idea had been offered by Browning in A Death in the Desert where man's limitations had been discussed. It is interesting to note that not only is the idea a parallel one, but even the words and phrases used in A Death are similar to those that appear in the present poem.⁴⁴

The Ferishtah ends the last parable with the statement that man cannot attain 'truth, plain and absolute, untinged with fiction'. This limitation should not be a barrier in man's understanding of God's love and kindness. The Power above us is 'past knowledge, nay, past thought', but we may still 'know of' and 'think of Him'. Our idea of God, while it is not a complete idea, is yet a workable one. For himself, the Ferishtah admits that

I looked beyond the world for truth and beauty:
Sought, found and did my duty.

(lines 13-14)

Like the Dervish, Browning searched for an optimistic interpretation of life, even in the face of conflicting contemporary ideas. The scholar in 'A Bean-Stripe' feels that the earth was filled with sorrow, unrelieved by the white light of hope. The Ferishtah admits that evil is evident in all walks of life, but explains that it is ephemeral. The method adopted by the Ferishtah to instil faith in the disciple is neither dogmatic nor irrational. It finally rests with the scholar to benefit from the lesson, or remain firm in his own beliefs. Browning did not believe in the act of forced conversion. The parable 'A Bean-Stripe' does not end with the scholar's immediate acceptance of the Dervish's words. The awareness may or may not come, but if it does, it will be his salvation, and he can say with the Ferishtah that evil cannot be irrevocably evil:

Of absolute and irretrievable
And all-subduing black, black's soul of black
Beyond white's power to disintensify,
Of that I saw no sample: such may wreck
My life and ruin my philosophy
Tomorrow, doubtless . . .

(lines 200-206)

Such was Browning's faith, and from Pippa Passes to the end of his career, his one poetic purpose was to make evil declare itself, and at the same time reveal the worth of good with added force. This does not mean that Browning did not accept the possibility of wickedness. His works abound with casuists, rogues, and perhaps no character matches the unredeemed blackness of Shakespeare's Iago with more exactitude than Guido in The Ring and the Book. But Browning maintains that it is still possible for such men to repent, and in many poems he shows that the process of conversion has begun, if not been completely achieved. Like the Ferishtah, to Browning the general hue of life, though wonderfully mixed, is grey, whirling finally towards whiteness. It was this whiteness that he searched for throughout his life. It was this self-same philosophy that made him formulate the hope that nothing goes unredeemed, and that all said and done, this earth was 'rosy', the heaven 'fair of hue', and, that the final meaning behind the apparent disorder was 'one reconcilment'.⁴⁵

Ferishtah's Fancies revolves round the theme of uncertainty, not unmixed with hope. The final lyric appears to be a personal utterance by Browning, addressed to his wife. Evil and misery appear to vanish when the moon shines down upon the world. The doubts and fears disappear as surely as do the clouds. Yet, suddenly, the speaker has visitations of doubt, and his heart's 'utmost joy and triumph' is shaken by the realisation:

. . . What if all be error (All the late enchantment)
If the halo irised round my head were, Love, thine arms?

(lines 27-28)

This same fear and tremor had been referred to by the Ferishtah in 'A
Bean-Stripe', when even in the height of optimism the speaker recognises
the existence of 'the constant shade / Cast on life's shine,'

. . . Here and there a touch
Taught me, betimes, the artifice of things--
That all about, external to myself,
Was meant to be suspected, not revealed
Demonstrably a cheat, but half seen through,
Lest white should rule unchecked along the line;
Therefore white may not triumph. All the same
. . . hence the constant shade
Cast on life's shine, the tremor that intrudes
When firmest seems my faith in white.

(lines 193-207)

(my italics)

According to DeVane, 'It is significant that this appalling doubt
should be appended as an epilogue to the most dogmatic and blunt statement
of Browning's cheerful creed.'⁴⁶ For the reader the poem's integrity is
saved by this final frank and human admission. Browning's search had been
to discover the ultimate meaning behind existence, whether he was success-
ful or not in the final search is another matter. It is the effort that
interests us.

Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day (1887)

Parleying with Certain People was published in 1887. Browning was
often requested to provide biographical details concerning his career,
and although the request was entirely normal and a predictable outcome of
a successful career, Browning could not comply with it entirely. As he

reached the last decade Browning used the dramatic mask less often, but even so he found it difficult to resort to direct statements. He finally settled for a mode that permitted him the most diverse simultaneous perspectives. The result of his efforts was the Parleyings .

A 'parley', as the word is defined in the dictionary, means 'conference for debating of points in dispute'. Since this entails the involvement of multiple persons, namely the two contending parties and also a referee or mediator, the particular form appealed to Browning. It was an appropriate medium for presenting his line of thought, without being accused of subjectivism. The Parleying thus permitted Browning dual vision in the contemplation of an object or an idea. The parleyings are a part-summation of Browning's career, and although they are retrospective to an extent, they also afford the reader a glimpse of the poet's present thoughts as well as his hopes for the future. The poems are the utterances of Browning's deepest convictions, the predominant one being that of the presence of a positive purpose behind the universe. The transitory nature of evil is also suggested, and strengthened in the symbolic chiaroscuro of the poems' setting.

The 'parleyings' are introduced by a Prologue that takes the readers to the abyss of darkness, an atmosphere of dreariness and hopelessness. The poem ends with the salvation of Fust and the comfort of sunshine. Browning ends his work with a note of hope. Like Shelley's West Wind, Fust's discovery (the art of printing) will:

. . . go forth to the world, like God's bread
--Miraculous food not for body but mind,
Truth's manna!

(lines 437-439)

The poet foresees the advent of a new age, strengthened by new hopes and faith. The final tribute in the Parleyings goes not to classicism but to the present world, howsoever filled with despair and strife.

Parleyings is a work of some length and complexity, and the present study is an attempt to trace the theme of faith and doubt within it. The poem consists of parleyings with seven people of eminence, flanked by a prologue and an epilogue. The seven men represent seven major interests of Browning, philosophy, history, poetry, politics, painting, the classics (Greek) and music. To say the personages were instrumental in shaping Browning's thoughts and career would be a gross misrepresentation of facts. It should suffice to accept the personages as individuals who interested Browning. However, whatever be the extent of the influence wielded upon the poet by his 'persons of some importance in their day', it goes without saying that the work contributes deeply to our knowledge of facts regarding Browning's mind and art.

Apollo and the Fates serves as the prelude and the section is instrumental in introducing the various themes to be developed in the course of the parleys. The gist of Apollo's request to the three Fates is the plea for the life of his friend Admetus. Seen in this light, Apollo's intervention with 'death' appears purely personal. The Fates pay scant attention to the plea, stating that since life is devoid of hope or happiness Admetus would be more content to accept his ordained fate. Apollo attempts to placate the 'moirai' and takes a final chance. He tries to make them realise that life is worth living, and that suffering is essential as well as inevitable. It is at this point that the scene changes to embrace a wider perspective. The plea on behalf of Admetus becomes a plea in justification of man's thoughts and ideas.

The prologue introduces multiple perspectives--the Fates see the life of man in its blackest colours, unredeemed by any ray of hope; while Apollo maintains that the darkness is ephemeral and disperses with the rays of light. The former state that only the glamour of Apollo serves to camouflage reality. This glimmer is an illusion and transmutes the starkness to hues of golden hope. (lines 66-70, 85-90). The 'hope' that mankind lives by is thus a lure effected by the bounty of Apollo and gradually the 'shimmer / Succeeds to sure shade . . .'

Apollo admits the truth of the charge--partially. It is true that bathed in the aura of hope man accepts misfortune, and yet 'debarred / Of illusion . . . Man desponds and despairs.' Hope is the touchstone in life, but man has an independent virtue, and this allows him to cherish life for its own worth. Apollo decides to resolve the doubts of the Fates by offering them a chalice of wine. This

illuminates gloom without sunny connivance,
Turns fear into hope and makes cowardice bold,
Touching all that is leadlike in life turns it gold!

(lines 128-130)

Wine is introduced by the poet to serve a dual purpose. On the one hand wine is acknowledged to be a gift of the gods to man. The reference to Zeus, Semele, and Bacchus helps to preserve the authenticity of the situation. Since Bacchus is neither a human nor a godhead it is appropriate that he be introduced to resolve the argument. 'Blithe Bacchus' the youngest of the gods is 'human of instinct--since Semele's son, / Yet minded divinely--since fathered by Zeus.' It is this admixture of 'instinct' and 'mind' that gives birth to a 'new guerdon to grace the new advent.'

The second motive that prompts Browning to introduce wine is to emphasise the creative nature of man. Although Bacchus is the legendary god of wine, it is in reality the product and symbol of man's art. The final credit goes to man, since it is he who enables 'life's fact (to grow) from adverse and thwart / To helpful and kindly'. With the aid of art life becomes bearable and the very misfortunes in 'earth's nature sublimed':

Eyes, purblind at first, feel their way in due season,
Accept good with bad, till unseemly debate
Turns concord--despair, acquiescence in fate.

(lines 183-185)

The Fates, after partaking of wine, affirm that man's life, studied with care, shows magnificent potentialities and may indeed be a triumph.

Browning describes the anomalies of life (through the statements of Lachesis) and contemplates how these can be resolved:

. . . . I could skip
In a trice from the pined to the plain in my woof!
What parts each from either? A hair's breadth, no inch.
Once learn the right method of stepping aloof,
Though on black next foot falls, firm I fix it, nor flinch,
Such my trust white succeeds!

(lines 135-140)

In fact, good and evil are inextricably mingled in life, and Browning maintains that in the stress of life good and evil are often indistinguishable from each other.⁴⁷ As the Moirai drains the bowl of wine, life is transformed, or 'seems' to be transformed. Earlier they had condemned Infancy as 'ignorance, idleness and mischief.' Youth to them was arrogance mixed with greed, while Age held no relief from

'impotence, churlishness, rancour'. Bathed in the imaginative light of art, the Fates judge life with compassion and tolerance. But even now, they do not perceive the true meaning of life; to them life appears attractive and pleasant. Their euphoric state enhances the positive aspects of life, and as subtly effaces the woes. Wine serves to drown the senses of the Fates just as Apollo's rays serve to blind mankind. The questions posed by the Prologue are: Is this state of mind an illusion? Can we only accept life as tolerable if we are drunk or drugged? Or does imagination enable us to transform life in some way?

According to DeVane 'By wine Browning means to symbolise the imagination, the latest gift of the Gods to man. Imagination permits man to see life as a steady march of progress.'⁴⁸

The redeeming virtue is awareness and this comes to the Fates with the explosion from the earth's centre. They wake from their trance and are recalled to reality.

The explosion is introduced by Browning with a dramatic purpose. The poem could not be allowed to close on a note of 'all's right with the world'. That would have been an easy victory for the poet. The Fates (and the readers) realise that knowledge is an ambiguous thing. It cannot teach us to know absolute good or absolute evil, and life means learning, the true significance being disclosed only by death.

Apollo and the Fates serves not merely as a backdrop to the main movement of the Parleyings, but also as the foundation upon which the entire structure rests. Man's life, at best, is a riddle, a mixture of good and bad, and the resolving factor is faith.

Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville is the first of the debates, and it is an appropriate development of the ideas expressed in the Prologue. Once again the contention is regarding the co-existence of good and evil and whether they serve a beneficent purpose in life. The scene for the parleying is changed drastically from the dim-lit cave below Parnassus to the nineteenth-century trappings of the speaker's room. The time is midnight, an hour when fancy is bred by the silence and drowsiness. In keeping with the time, the ghost of Mandeville⁴⁹ is entreated to come forth and cast his 'loaded line' of logic once more. In the past his probity and analysis:

. . . touched a quietude and reached a shrine
And recognised harmoniously combine
Evil with good . . .

(lines 7-9)

The speaker stands in need of Mandeville's counsel and support. He does not wish for fresh knowledge but merely craves 'Fuller truth'. In order to survive in life, it is necessary to:

. . . deal fairly, turn
To what account Man may Man's portion, learn
Man's proper play with truth in part, before
Entrusted with the whole.

(lines 13-16)

The contestant in this debate is an agnostic (DeVane has identified him with Carlyle) and the pessimistic attitude is presented in the lines:

'No sign' groaned he--
'No stirring of God's finger to denote
His will that right should have supremacy
On earth, not wrong!

(lines 43-46)

The agnostic believer in the parley feels that there is no set plan or purpose behind this Universe. His pessimism arises from the conviction that God was uninterested in and unsympathetic to the problems of mankind. Under these circumstances, the best stance a person can assume, is that of 'suspended belief' or agnosticism. The following passage is one that appears not only relevant to the twilight world of Victorian faith, but also to the present century:

With power and will, let preference appear
By intervention ever and aye, help good
When evil's mastery is understood
In some plain outrage, and triumphant wrong
Tramples weak right to nothingness . . .
 . . . what help it were
If wrong lay strangled in the birth--each head
Of the hatched monster promptly crushed . . .

(lines 75-83)

At first glance, one is inclined to agree with the logic behind the supplication. The theory that wrong should 'merely peep abroad to meet / Wrong's due quietus, leave our world's way safe / For honest walking' appears rational. Yet, as the poem proceeds, we are led to question the very rationality of the above argument. Surely the master creator knows his plan and chooses to execute it in the best possible way? The speaker introduces at this stage the fable of the 'Gardener of Man's Ground', believing in the expertise of the gardener and stating his own naivety thus:

 . . . what know I
But proof were gained that every growth of good
Sprang consequent on evil's neighbourhood?

(lines 111-113)

Again, the tough-tendoned mandrake root has some use, and its very existence endows it with this positive quality. To destroy it would defeat the purpose, since if the fields are purged:

. . . It follows plain
Who set him there to grow beholds repealed
His primal law: his ordinance proves vain.

(lines 127-129)

In The Fable of the Bees Mandeville states that evil forms the solid basis for life, and supports all trades. Mandeville's paradox seems to be both brilliant and devastating. On the one hand he establishes a standard for private actions. This calls for a certain code or norm of ethical behaviour. On the other hand is the utilitarian standard. Here, the effects of the actions determine the conduct of an individual. Consequently anything contributing to general happiness and prosperity becomes automatically 'good' and 'ideal'.

Mandeville's Fable can be taken at its face value, or, in the reverse, as a satire. Coleridge found the fable a keen satire on the inconsistencies of Christianity, while Dr Johnson thought well of Mandeville. According to DeVane Browning saw a stout defender of virtue in the protagonist, so caught up was he in the paradoxes.

Browning's love for novelty does not however prove that he took the spurious for real. Mandeville's ideas may have fascinated him, but he had sufficient discriminating ability to see through the clever arguments. The ideas of Mandeville Browning chooses to adopt and present in the course of the poem ought to be taken as half-truths, or as a series of emblems. The readers of the Fable are faced with the dilemma of either wishing to

renounce material prosperity, or denying their Christian creed. The ideas propounded in the 'parley' should by no means be taken as a yardstick of Browning's doctrines. Browning tries to project here, as elsewhere, the picture of a conflict-ridden universe.

Philip Drew states that Browning believed this world is only one of a succession of human states. To Browning, life is a process of continual learning or probation. This progress is 'man's distinctive mark alone' since it entails a movement from ignorance to knowledge. There is a corresponding implication that lack of knowledge is an essential part of man's nature.

'To accommodate the clash of conflicting interests in his picture of the world as progressing forward by stages', Browning felt liberty for each man to pursue his own ends is of first importance.⁵⁰ Thus he welcomes Mandeville's ironical Fable of the Bees because it can be interpreted as supporting the idea that perhaps 'every growth of good / Sprang consequent to evil's neighbourhood.'⁵¹

One is led to concur with Philip Drew in saying that although Browning fails to perceive the satire in its entirety (as the Parleying reveals), he is justified in adopting the parable to suit his own train of thoughts. 'Browning adopted this line of argument not simply because it made it much easier for him to entertain optimistic thoughts about human progress but also because it seemed to suggest some way of making the difficult transition from private moral insights to a concern for the general welfare and thus to principles of ethical validity.'⁵²

The essence of the Parleying with Mandeville is that we must take life with its share of evil and good. It is as improbable for our soul

to mature in a vacuum as for a baby to stand upright soon after birth.
Evil is a condition for the growth and emancipation of the soul. The
body and soul strive alike for good--through suffering:

as with body so deal law with soul
That's stung to strength through weakness, strives for good
Through evil, earth its race-ground, heaven its goal,
Presumably . . .

(lines 35-38)

In the course of the parleying, Browning tries to explain the existing
anomalies of the earth by the help of a geometrical drawing, substantiated
by a parable. We grow to accept a thing by signs and symbols, likewise
with life and the philosophy it has to offer. The fallacy lies in man,
since he--

with the narrow mind, must cram inside
His finite God's infinitude, earth's vault
He bids comprise the heavenly far and wide,
Since man may claim a right to understand
What passes understanding.

(lines 151-155)

We are next introduced to the myth of Prometheus. The philosophy behind
the myth is that it is far wiser to accept the world and to make the best
use of its beauty than try to comprehend mysteries beyond our ken.

Throughout the parleying with Bernard de Mandeville, Browning is
aware of the cultural and moral crisis in which the Victorians existed.
According to W.O. Raymond 'Browning uses the imagery of the Sun as represen-
tative of God's absolute being, and the myth of Prometheus bringing fire
as a symbol of a revelation of the Divine Nature which is adapted to the
lowliness and imperfect faculties of man'.⁵³

The Barleying with Christopher Smart deals with the Song of David, which reaches the highest pinnacles of poetry, and catches the exaltation and the splendour of the Psalms of David.

The influence of Smart on Browning was considerable. The mystery of the production of the Song indicated to Browning that Smart's mental illness had caused him to produce poetry of amazing quality. The incident strengthened Browning's belief in a divine purpose behind every human state--be it of joy or sorrow, hope or despair.

Secondly, Smart stood as a representative of a type of lyrical poetry--a poetry which poured out love and gratitude to God. The listing of the beauty and wonders of the earth proved beyond doubt that whatever be the reason behind such fervour, Smart for once had been 'permitted insight into undisguised nature and naked truth'. Christopher Smart aids Browning in his attempt to confute the tenets of the Aesthetic Movement which was flourishing in the 1880s.⁵⁴

According to the poem, Smart was 'sound and sane at starting' till suddenly he received a revelation that changed his personality:

. . . all at once the ground
Gave way beneath his step, a certain smoke
Curled up and caught him, or perhaps down broke
A fireball wrapping flesh and spirit both
In conflagration . . .

(lines 77-81)

This state of affairs did not continue long--'as heaven were loth to linger', and soon:

. . . off fell
The flame robe, and the untransfigured man
Resumed sobriety, as he began
So did he end nor alter pace, not he!

(lines 83-86)

Later the man resumed his prior sobriety, but he never again created a work to match his Song to David.

During the execution of his poem, Smart was confined in an asylum. Perhaps this madness shut his thoughts from the world around him and worldly affairs, and sharpened his senses to feel and perceive the greatness of the Creator. His infirmity, which acted as a barrier between the 'workaday' world and his ability to communicate with it, served to bring him closer to the realisation of the infinite mercy and goodness of God. This apocalyptic vision helped Smart and he 'pierced the screen / 'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul.'

Browning hails Smart as the true representative of poets since he was not blinded by the mere external beauty of nature, but perceived a link between the creation and the Creator. He could tell:

. . . others of her majesty and might
In large, her loveliness infinite
In little . . .

(lines 143-145)

The implication of the Parleying with Christopher Smart is a justification of the ways of God to man, '. . . Live and learn, / Not first learn and then live, is our concern.'

The poem also stresses the power of poetry and discusses the poet's responsibility to act as a moral force.

The Parleying with Gerard de Lairese deals with the life and works of the blind painter, who looked to the past for inspiration. De Lairese is shown to be caught in the nostalgia of the past. To him, the past is instinct with greatness, a period when man reached the height of achievement.

The subject under discussion in the 'parley' is Classical or Hellenistic tendency in the poetry and paintings of the nineteenth century. Although Browning was personally a sincere admirer of the art and literature of Greece, he felt that Greek civilisation could not be proclaimed as the 'greatest'. His central belief was Christian and progressive. He felt that the Christians were successful in depicting the soul and consequently their works were preferable to those of the Greek civilisation.

Secondly, Browning was a firm believer in the innate potential for goodness of man and all living objects. Greek philosophy had ultimately led men to despair, the Christian revelation had given men new hope--in immortality. Consequently, Browning proclaims the superiority of the modern age, and of its revived consciousness. He repudiates the sentiment of the speaker, who, torn between two desires, spends his time 'Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born'.⁵⁵

Browning does not reject the opinions of de Lairese entirely. The Dutch painter's conception of the co-existence of the beautiful and horrible (in landscape) made a lasting impression on Browning. De Lairese advocated that an artist should be able to discern abundant worth in the most commonplace objects. It is this doctrine which is prized by Browning. De Lairese further taught that an individual should not feel discontented with the prevalent state of affairs--'the ugly actual' can be transformed into a dreamland by using the faculty of the imagination (lines 56-62).

In order to decide whether a dual consciousness (the power of mingling the false with the true) is good or detrimental, the speaker invites de Lairese to accompany him on a walk. The 'walk' commences, and in a series of breath-taking images Browning captures the world of fancy. The scenes are the re-creation of the Classical world of mythology as well as history. They include the description of Prometheus chained to a rock, Diana with her quarry, the sylvan world of Satyrs and nymphs and the confrontation between Alexander and Darius. The final scene introduces a shrouded figure, who, according to the critics, represents the decadence of Arcadia. At the end of this series of vignettes the modern poet is declared the victor.

De Lairese ends on a note of affirmation. The speaker, having initially claimed that 'Earth's young significance is all to learn' retracts his words, or hastens to temper them. He recognises the eternal truth of:

What once lives never dies--what here attains
To a beginning, has no end, still gains
And never loses aught.

(lines 413-415)

In the Parleyings with Gerard de Lairese, Browning attempts to refute the cliché that idealist art is higher than realist art. The aim of the imaginary 'walk' with de Lairese is to show that the speaker, a realist, is perfectly capable of creating ideal landscapes if he so wishes. An idealist like de Lairese on the other hand, was quite incapable of describing a landscape realistically. Browning notices, nevertheless, that idealist art is a response (though a weak one) to a genuine human need.

The need to 'resolve the strife 'twixt soul and sense', i.e. to resolve the discrepancy between human experience and human values, is felt as much by Browning as it was felt by de Lairese.

Browning resolves the strife in the poem's final lyric by positing the Christian notion of immortality. He does this indirectly, drawing the readers' attention to the fact that the Greeks looked upon death as the necessary end of existence. They did not have the solace of believing in an after-life, and regarded death as an evil. Consequently the Greeks were forced to flinch from their real experience of the world towards an ideal version of it. The Christian, on the other hand, has faith in personal immortality. His belief lends him the confidence to accept the world for what it is--good and evil, beautiful and ugly. Browning would have us see that a belief in personal immortality is more daringly imaginative than the idealism claimed by de Lairese and his contemporaries. The Parleying poses the paradox that realism (the Christian realism possessed by Browning) is more imaginative than de Lairese's kind of idealism.

The Parleyings come to an end with 'Fust and his Friends: An Epilogue'. Fust gives Browning the opportunity to touch again upon the major ideas of Parleyings. Fust, the printer, realises the dual power his invention is capable of releasing to the world. This machine can act 'like God's bread / Miraculous food not for body but mind, / Truth's manna!' (lines 437-439). It can also promote the spread of unbelief and anarchy, since the same aids that give 'wings' to truth may 'Cause Falsehood to range just as widely'. Fust's dejection is relieved by his faith in God. His work has been a definite step forward, and he believes that God will approve of it.

The Parleyings contain Browning's convictions with regard to some of the greater and lesser problems of human life, and it is of considerable significance that Browning chose to make the printing-press the concluding symbol.⁵⁶

In the Parleyings Browning presents his convictions logically, and despite the subjective nature of the theme, the form of presentation allows him the freedom to study every situation with depth and objectivity (apart from Frances Furini).

The poems do not state that Browning was able to conquer doubt, but they point out his eventual acceptance of doubt as part of the divine plan. The speaker of Parleyings looks upon a world where evil co-exists with good, but he hopes that the faculty of imagination will permit man to come to terms with the contrary factors.

The Parleyings are a record of Browning's doubts and his effort to resolve them. A fitting conclusion can be made by introducing the parallel sentiments of a twentieth century author:

Formerly, I could not understand why I received no answer to my questions; today I cannot understand how I could have believed I could question. But indeed I did not believe, I simply questioned.

Aphorisms, Franz Kafka
(1884-1924)

Notes

¹ Clyde de L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, 1871-1889, p. 87.

² Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy', in Writers and their Background, ed. I. Armstrong, p. 140.

³ Ibid, p. 248.

⁴ J.B. Schneewind, Backgrounds of English Victorian Literature.

⁵ Apparent Failure:

That what began best, can't end worst
Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.

⁶ Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy', in Writers and their Background, pp. 111-112.

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

Rabbi Ben Ezra

⁷ Clyde de L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, p. 161.

⁸ According to G.K. Chesterton, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country was 'written in something which, for want of a more exact word, we must call one of the bitter moods of Browning'. Robert Browning, p. 124.

⁹ Roma A. King, Jr, 'The Dialogue of the Soul', in The Focusing Artifice, p. 191.

¹⁰ 'The climaxing scene in which Miranda throws himself from the tower is an obvious parody of the second temptation of Christ. Miranda, with the Church as guide, does precisely what Christ refuses to do. By implication, then, Browning associates the Church with the devil, the instrument of human destruction rather than of light.' Ibid, p. 191.

Roma King's study identifies Browning with the physician Beaumont.

11 Richard D. Altick, 'Grammarians' Funeral: Browning's Praise of Folly?', in A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 205, ed. Philip Drew.

A Grammarian's Funeral, lines 57-58:

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.

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, lines 4019-4023:

Success is naught, endeavour's all
But intellect adjusts the means to ends,
Tries the low thing, and leaves it done, at least;
No prejudice to high thing intellect
Would do and will do, only give the means.

12 Roma A. King, Jr, The Focusing Artifice, pp. 192-193.

13 Stopford A. Brooke, The Poetry of Browning, p. 106.

14 Letters of Robert Browning, p. 309, ed. Hood.

15 Terence, 190-159 B.C. Heauton Timorumenos, 77.

16 In 1877 a series of articles appeared in the Nineteenth Century. The various authors offered their opinions on 'The Soul and Future Life'. A two-part article by Frederic Harrison appeared in the June and July numbers (1877). Browning and Anne Smith were greatly interested in the subject. According to the Symposium, earthly immortality (in the form of reputation, progress of future generations, propagation of the race) is the only solace for mortal man. This concept is discussed in lines 185-195 of La Saisiaz.

The above information has been taken from A Browning Handbook by W.C. DeVane.

17 '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.'

Letters of Robert Browning, p. 172, collected by Thomas J. Wise,
edited by Thurman L. Hood.

18 'No one doubts that Browning is speaking in his own person in Prospice, when he declares to pay, in the pangs of death, "glad life's arrears of pain, darkness, and cold." It is this last handsome admission that makes it hard to forgive that pusillanimous passage in La Saisiaz about sorrow preponderating in his own life, which I must regard as a moan out of a temporary depression.' Amphibian, A Reconsideration of Browning, p.236, (London, 1956), H.C. Duffin.

19 A.C. Pigou, Browning as a Religious Teacher.

20 'La Saisiaz' and 'The Two Poets of Croisic' in A Browning Handbook,
W. Clyde DeVane.

'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 shocked by the suddenness of his friend's death, Browning gave voice in La Saisiaz to some of the most pessimistic of his utterances.' (p. 377)

To Clyde DeVane's proposal that in La Saisiaz Browning 'deliberately leave(s) aside the question of Christian revelation', Roma King replies with the suggestion that the 'absence' was not due to the poet's being caught up in a contemporary discussion, but due to the personal and urgent nature of the subject: 'Indeed, both the substance and the tone of the poem undercut such speculation. Browning's obvious sincerity and his sense of urgency, his emphatic rejection of "fence-play", suggest that he is using all the resources available to him.' Roma A. King, 'The Necessary Surmise', p. 354.

The point of interest is how much the speaker inwardly believes in doctrinal concepts. Although the thoughts discussed in lines 185-195 are similar to those which appeared in the Symposium, the speaker of the poem finds that such thoughts betray a defeatist attitude, and he is determined to have an answer 'with no favour, with no fear'. His invocation to his own 'self' to provide him with an answer is coupled with his moving tribute to the memory of Elizabeth and to their lasting love for each other:

'I believe and I declare--
Certain am I--from this life I pass into a better, there
Where that lady lives of whom enamoured was my soul'

(lines 213-215)

21 F.E.L. Priestley, 'A Reading of La Saisiaz', University of Toronto Quarterly, XXV (1955), pp. 47-59.

22 The Ring and the Book (Chapter I):

Fancy with fact is just one fact the more;
To-wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced,
Thridded and so thrown fast the facts else free . . .

23 F.E.L. Priestley, 'A Reading of La Saisiaz', from Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew, pp. 250-251.

24 The following lines from The Two Poets of Croisic (1878) may be studied in juxtaposition with lines 423-430, 441-444 of La Saisiaz:

Well, I care--intimately care to have
Experience how a human creature felt
In after-life, who bore the burden grave
Of certainly believing God had dealt
For once directly with him . . .
How such a soul--the task performed to point--
Goes back to life nor finds things out of joint?

(lines 465-480)

25 Norton B. Crowell, The Convex Glass, p. 41.

26 Easter-Day (lines 50-58, 59-72, 992-1002, 1018-1025)

An Epistle: Karshish (lines 137-144, 198-201)

A Death in the Desert (lines 206-210, 287-298, 588-591, 605-607)

The Two Poets of Croisic (lines 465-480, 1257-1265)

27 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction, p. 162.

28 Ibid, p. 163.

29 Clyde de L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, 1871-1889, p. 157.

According to Clyde Ryals, in La Saisiaz Browning 'has said all that he is capable of saying metaphorically. And having rested his argument on experience ("fact") he is unwilling to offer for public consumption his most overwhelming argument ("fancy") for immortality--namely, his love for Elizabeth Barrett Browning and his confidence that it transcends death itself'.

30 F.E.L. Priestley, 'A Reading of La Saisiaz', from Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 254, ed. Philip Drew.

'The poem has, up to this last paragraph, tended to move away from the strongly personal and emotional tone of its opening; the problem has been strenuously forced into an intellectual pattern . . . until in the coda Browning has, to use his own House and Shop analogy, closed the door to his living-quarters. Now, in the envoi, he returns to the immediate experience from which the poem started, but with his instinct for concealment active, as the obliqueness of the lines shows.'

³¹ F.E.L. Priestley, 'A Reading of La Saisiaz', from Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 256, ed. Philip Drew.

³² Henry Jones has alleged that La Saisiaz is not 'entirely truthful'. The poem is a deeply subjective one, and the norm of 'truth' held by Professor Jones need not necessarily be identical to that held by Robert Browning. Browning was increasingly aware of the subjective nature of his own judgement, and time after time, he makes the protagonist state that no man can teach another / others how to live or what to believe. In La Saisiaz the speaker reiterates this opinion (lines 287-292) and the very nature of the struggle goes on to show that the conclusion arrived at by the poet is through a process both painful and intellectually honest.

³³ F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, pp. 19-20.

³⁴ According to Colville, when Browning contends with religious problems, his worst qualities as a poet are evident: 'Browning constantly gives an impression that he is not working from his own experience. His often-expressed belief in some imprecise form of Christianity . . . has an oddly automatic quality about it . . . Browning's optimism, for all its emphasis, appears simply rootless, occurring as an isolated, pre-determined phenomenon supported, if at all, only by consequent argument.' Derek Colville, Browning: Victorian Poetry and the Romantic Religion, pp. 160-161.

³⁵ W.T. Watts, La Saisiaz (The Athenaeum, 1878) 25 May, p. 662.

While W.T. Watts classifies La Saisiaz as an anti-rationalistic, anti-materialistic statement, the reverse of this view can be gathered from the opinion of Hugh Walker: 'He (Browning) uses reason to dethrone reason; and he has no sooner done so than he sets reason to work again to test his results. The fact is significant, that in La Saisiaz it is with Reason, not with Fancy, that the ultimate truth lies.' Hugh Walker, The Greater Victorian Poets, p. 320.

³⁶ Lines 147-152:

Well, and wherefore shall it daunt me, when 'tis I myself
am tasked,
When, by weakness weakness questioned, weakly answers--
weakly asked?
Weakness never needs be falseness: truth is truth in each
degree
Thunder-pealed by God to Nature, whispered by my soul to me.
Nay, the weakness turns to strength and triumphs in a truth
beyond:
'Mine is but man's truest answer--how were it did God respond?'

36 continued

According to Philip Drew, in La Saisiaz Browning is determined 'to discover whether it is possible to found a way of life on what can be known for certain, and he will not claim among the fundamental certainties of life the existence of an objective reality. Provided he can reach some solid ground, no sacrifice of doctrine is too painful, no flight of speculative reason too dangerous. It is a solitary struggle, and never easy, but in the end Browning survives as a man with something that may be called religious faith. To retain even this limited belief in the face of pain and the evil in the world, he has had to make a deliberate act of trust, and even when he has done so, he can still be plagued by misgivings.' Browning's Poems on Christianity, pp. 232-233 The Poetry of Browning, Philip Drew.

37 Henry Jones, 'The Heart and the Head' (1891), in The Browning Critics, p. 4, eds, Litzinger and Knickerbocker.

38 Philip Drew, 'Henry Jones on Browning's Optimism' (1964), *ibid*, p. 368.

39 Translation from Job 1:10 (Hebrew). William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 429.

40 *Ibid*, pp. 436-437.

41 Edward Berdoe, Browning and the Christian Faith, pp. 225-226.

42 La Saisiaz.

43 Philip Drew, 'Henry Jones on Browning's Optimism', in The Browning Critics, pp. 379-380, eds, Litzinger and Knickerbocker.

44 Lines 572-591:

He is mere man, and in humility
Neither may know God nor mistake himself;
. . . a thing nor God nor beast,
Made to know that he can know and not more:
Lower than God who knows all and can all,
Higher than beasts which know and can so far
As each beast's limit, perfect to an end,
Nor conscious that they know, nor craving more;
While man knows partly but conceives beside,
Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,
And in this striving, this converting air . . .
Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone,
Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.
Such progress could no more attend his soul
Were all it struggles after found at first
And guesses changed to knowledge absolute . . .

(my italics)

My own hope is, a sun will pierce
 The thickest cloud earth ever stretched . . .
 That what began best, can't end worst,
 Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.

Apparent Failure

(lines 58-63)

I find earth not grey but rosy
 Heaven not grim but fair of hue . . .

At the Mermaid

(lines 93-94)

Over the ball of it, / Peering and prying,
 How I see all of it, / Life there, outlying!
 Roughness and smoothness, / Shine and defilement,
 Grace and uncouthness: / One reconciliation.

Pisgah-Sights

(lines 1-8)

⁴⁶ W.C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 439.

In his article 'Henry Jones on Browning's Optimism' Philip Drew writes: '. . . Browning's starting point is not a conviction but a question, that he has brought to it a mind unshackled by prejudice, and that his final position is held sincerely but undogmatically. It is characteristic of Browning that what he wants to maintain is not that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, but that for him personally there is still room, if not for certainty, at least for hope.' The Browning Critics, p. 380, eds Litzinger and Knickerbocker.

⁴⁷ The same thought has been developed in Ferishtah's Fancies where the black beans lie mingled with the white, representing 'those little joys and griefs / Ranged duly all a-row at last'. Further on the Ferishtah points out that neither black nor white can destroy each other's properties. They have to co-exist. (lines 52-61)

This bean was white, this--black . . . both are modified
 According to our eye's scope.

⁴⁸ Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 444.

49 Bernard de Mandeville was the eighteenth-century philosopher-physician. He first published (anonymously) his rhymed fable as The Grumbling Hive: Or, Knaves turn'd Honest in 1705. In 1714 Mandeville incorporated his verses into a larger book called The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits. In the Fable in 1724 Mandeville added a Vindication which Browning seems to have consulted especially for his Parleyings. W.C. DeVane, p. 445.

50 At the same time, each individual must be aware of the implication of his choice and the effect(s) his action is bound to produce. Browning had no respect for casuists and sophists, who attempted to exonerate their conduct by intellectualising their choices and distorting the truth

51 Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy', in Writers and their Background: Robert Browning, p. 120, ed. I. Armstrong.

52 Ibid, pp. 120-121.

53 William O. Raymond, 'The Jewelled Bow', in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 121, ed. Philip Drew.

54 The Pre-Raphaelite School of Art and Poetry was founded in 1848 to resist existing conventions in art and literature.

55 Matthew Arnold, The Grande Chartreuse.

56 The Epilogue brings 'the message that Browning felt his own choice in life had been the right one--not art, not music, but poetry. The written word will outlast all else'. Maisie Ward, Robert Browning and his World, p. 282.

Asolando

Receptivity and imperfection are thus revealed as cognate categories: each stands for a consciousness that brings about an increased sense of significance for the other. And both together profoundly affect and modify that active expression which in the religious consciousness represents the ethical. Religion stripped of the ethical becomes poetry or metaphysics; religion stripped of receptivity and the sense of imperfection is externalism, and tends to become the thin beer of politics. But the deeper the sense of imperfection the more passionately profound is the gratitude,¹ and the more powerful its promptings to an ethical striving.

But one thing is certain: no man who approaches the God-idea from any other standpoint than from the standpoint of his own moral imperfection will ever have occasion to know the height and breadth and depth of the love of God, which passes all human understanding.²

. . . I do not ask for a full disclosure of Truth, which would be a concession contrary to the law of things, which applies equally to the body and the soul, that it is only by striving to attain strength (in the one case) and truth (in the other) that body and soul do so--the effort (common to both) being productive, in each instance, of the necessary initiation into all the satisfactions which result from partial success; absolute success being only attainable for the body in full manhood--for the soul, in its full apprehension of Truth--which will be, not here, at all events.³

Chapter VI

Asolando: Fancies and Facts

Asolando was published on the day of Browning's death (12 December, 1889), and, as a volume, is of immense importance. It gives to the readers Browning's last thoughts on the subject that had occupied his mind from The Ring and the Book (1868-9) onwards, namely, the nature of truth. In this very personal collection the voice of the poet retains its poise. There is no regret or agitation regarding the final uncovering of the true nature of things.

By its very nature Asolando is a miscellaneous volume. According to DeVane the poems fall into three groups: (a) love poems, (b) narrative, (c) philosophical and personal utterances. The last group is of direct importance to the present examination of Browning's poems of 'faith' and 'doubt'. Not only are the poems concerned with the main subject, namely, the 'philosophic mind', they also illustrate the sub-title Fancies and Facts. The preference for facts had always been a part of Browning's poetic creed, and in the present volume he enlarges upon his convictions with unusual sincerity.⁴ To a large extent, the poems are restatements of opinions that have been held by Browning through his literary career. It is this characteristic which lends the volume an air of finality.

Finally, Asolando gives the readers an illuminative insight into Browning's concepts regarding the nature of the next world, and of the consequences that follow when a certainty of eternal life is provided to man. The poems Rephan and Reverie are contemplations of the problem of whether there is, or is not, an existence after death.

The name of the present volume was taken from 'Asolare', the term being adopted from Cardinal Bembo's fanciful verb, meaning 'to disport in the open air, amuse oneself at random'. The poems were for the most part written, or revised, at La Mura, the house of Mrs Bronson.

Prologue: The speaker of the first two stanzas, an unnamed poet, laments the departure of youth, and the imaginative faculty that is associated with it. With the maturing of his vision, the original perspective has changed; the imagination that had clothed common objects with an ethereal glow has departed to give place to 'the naked very thing' (line 16).

The following lines are part-meditative, part nostalgic, but certainly not imbued with disillusion:

And now? The lambent flame is--where?
Lost from the naked world: earth, sky,
Hill, vale, tree, flower, Italia's rare
O'er running beauty crowds the eye--
But flame? The Bush is bare.

(lines 31-35)

The second speaker thus points out that it is better to know reality and recognise its intrinsic worth. It is true that the once 'palpably fire-clothed' objects have been replaced by the 'naked world' and 'the bush is bare', yet this loss does not call for lament. The speaker has dispensed with his prior need of an optic glass, and to his present perception each object stands revealed in its pristine quality and worth 'its shape / Clear outlined, past escape' (14-15). The new clarity of vision permits the speaker to understand 'Earth's import' with greater

depth, and he accepts the removal of the veil--'falsehood's fancy-haze' without rancour. At the end of the day, the beauty and variety pale into insignificance before the all-enveloping knowledge of God's power and love:

No, for the purged ear apprehends
Earth's import, not the eye late dazed:
The Voice said 'Call my works thy friends!
At Nature dost thou shrink amazed?
God is it who transcends.'

(lines 41-45)

The Prologue recalls to mind Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey and Kierkegaard's Repetition. Though the spot has remained the same, the speaker has changed--his old visionary habit has given way to a realistic and truer way of perceiving the world. With the departure of fancy, the poet has learnt to understand 'earth's import' and realized that finally 'God is it who transcends'.

Browning was at all times more interested in human beings than the beautiful but impersonal world of nature. His message in the Prologue, 'it is not nature which calls for our admiration and praise, but the Creator behind it', may be interestingly compared with Meredith's Modern Love. The following lines, spoken by a tramp reveal Meredith's view of the lessons to be learned from 'reading the earth':

Lord no, man's lot is not for bliss;
To call it woe is blindness
It's here a kick and it's there a kiss,
And here and there a kindness.

(lines 63-66)

According to Clyde Ryals 'There is surely a sense of loss expressed in the Prologue, but the sadness of the loss is mitigated by a more than

compensatory gain. Better plain fact, Browning says, than embellished fancy'.⁵ Lines 11-20 are a close parallel to the theory put forward in Parleying with Gerard de Lairese (lines 382-387, 389-393).⁶

For the speaker in the Prologue, as for de Lairese, the past contributes to man's understanding and interpretation of the world. The myths of old have served their function by aiding man in his early, uncertain stage of progress. With the passage of time these same legends become inappropriate, and have to be replaced with new forms of expression:

Soon shall fade and fall
Myth after myth--the husk like lies I call
New truth's corolla-safeguard: Autumn comes
So much the better!

Parleying with Charles Avison
(lines 378-381)

Charles Avison holds up Browning's theory that the fact of the present is better than the fancy of the past. A person has to learn by degrees, and fancy helps the mind to grasp the new significance of truth with each fresh stage of development. New stages hold in them the promise and possibility of even greater good to come.

During the first period of his career, Browning used the term 'sense' to denote falsehood while 'soul' came to denote truth. Gradually he came to accept the realisation that everything is in a state of flux, and that there is no clear demarcation between the two states. The opposition between 'falsehood' and 'truth' is more apparent than real. Ryals describes this realisation in Browning as 'his doctrine of evanescence', and goes on to say: 'This is indicated

by his change in nomenclature from 1876 on, when he prefers to talk more about "fact" and "fancy" than "soul" and "sense". . . . All is in a state of flux; . . . During the first phase Browning occasionally finds this a cause for sadness. During the final phase, however, he accepts it unquestioningly.⁷

In his later years, especially after the death of his wife in 1861, Browning found increasing difficulty in finding any stability in a world of relative, temporal, and partial values. He came to depend on the memory of Elizabeth as an antidote to the forces that threatened the foundation of his faith. His quest for some degree of permanent truth is admirably presented in the 'Epilogue' to Fifine at the Fair, the 'Epilogue' to Ferishtah's Fancies, La Saisiaz (lines 210-216), and Dubiety in the Asolando volume.

In all the poems, Browning attempts to compare the nature of perfect love with the closest approximation of an enduring truth.

Dubiety deals with the subject concerning the necessity of doubt. The speaker desires to be granted the comfort of partial knowledge. He does not wish, however, that the cares and ills of existence should be totally removed from his gaze and knowledge. The 'dubiety' that the speaker yearns for is of a positive and progressive kind, a state of mind that acts as an encouragement. Thus 'dubiety' would lead him through life with renewed hope rather than suffer stagnation of soul by having all his doubts permanently resolved. In order to construct a screen between the ideal and the real, the required device should possess the qualities of 'a cloud / Suffusing day too clear and bright:' (lines 5-6).

The aim of the invocation is not to ask for the boon of eternal oblivion, the escapist method of deliberately shutting one's eyes to the realities of life. 'Dubiety' for the speaker stands for a mood of continual queries and not for the arrestment and cessation of all activities. Consequently he prefers the comfort of an alleviating medium but dismisses the inactivity of 'sleep':

Let gauziness shade, not shroud, adjust,
Dim and not deaden, somehow sheathe
Aught sharp in the rough world's busy thrust,
If it reach me through dreaming's vapour-wreath.

(lines 9-12)

In order to apprehend life with candour and compassion one has to take the help of fancy or imagination, yet these qualities are in themselves not the ends but merely means to the end. The lines are similar to Browning's discussion of 'fancy' and 'fact' in Development (lines 20-23). Browning narrates here how his father refrained from turning 'Learning's full flare on weak-eyed ignorance, / Or worse yet, leave weak eyes to grow sand-blind, / Content with darkness and vacuity' (lines 21-23).

The speaker in Dubiety has no wish to close his eyes to the suffering and evil on the earth. He is prepared to accept 'life . . . (with) all things ever the same! (line 13). The redeeming element which is at once a realisation of his dream (the finding of an All-Loving power) and a part of reality (that is available in this earth, at this moment) is the 'capacity of loving' present in all human beings. The speaker is aware of this essential human quality which acts as the bridge between certainty of belief and total disbelief. To the speaker this is present in the memory of the love of his wife Elizabeth:

Perhaps but a memory, after all!
--Of what came once when a woman leant
To feel for my brow where her kiss might fall.
Truth ever, truth only the excellent!

(lines 21-24)

In Browning's opinion 'The 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.'⁸

To find this love and to reconcile it with power was the life-long quest of Browning. The truest fancy, the flame in the bush alluded to in the Prologue, is to be found in the fact of love:

. . . I am wrapt in a blaze,
Creation's lord, of heaven and earth
Lord whole and sole--by a minute's birth--
Through the love in a girl!

A Pearl, A Girl

(lines 11-14)

Ryals writes 'What convinces Browning that the Power is also Love-- what, in other words, makes him a Christian, doctrinally heterodox though he might be--is his own experience of love . . . human love is the one unchanging fact of which man can be certain. More than half the poems of the volume deal specifically with love and the truth to be discovered in the disclosure of one heart to another.

Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe--
all were for me
In the kiss of one girl.

Summum Bonum⁹

The necessity of doubt is the prevailing thought in two earlier poems, A Death in the Desert (1864) and Bishop Blougram (1855). The casuist bishop turns the statement 'With me, faith means perpetual unbelief / Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot' to suit his own advantage. It is however true that faith contains, potentially at least, an element of doubt.

In A Death in the Desert John reasons that if spiritual truth were indisputable and established facts, then 'man's probation would conclude, his earth / Crumble . . . bliss of fire.' (lines 290-298). The lines in Dubiety describing the necessity of a veil between the absolute nature of truth and its partial apprehension by mankind can be studied in reference to A Death (lines 199-205).¹⁰

Dubiety deals with a subject that had occupied Browning's mind since the earliest days of his literary career. In his Essay on Shelley Browning wrote 'An absolute vision is not for this world, but we are permitted a continual approximation to it, every degree of which in the individual, provided it exceed the attainment of the masses, must procure him a clear advantage.' (December 1851). In The Ring and the Book, the Pope uses the imagery of the 'spectrum' and the 'convex glass' to illustrate the media through which the white light of eternal truth must pass in order to reach the heart of human beings:

Clouds obscure--
But for which obscuration all were bright?
Too hastily concluded! Sun-suffused,
A cloud may soothe the eye made blind by blaze,
Better the very clarity of heaven:
The soft streaks are the beautiful and dear.
What but the weakness in a faith supplies
The incentive to humanity . . .

(Book X, lines 1643-1650)

Again, in Easter-Day, the speaker realises that this world is a stage in preparation for something beyond, and consequently it is not to be rejected but to be considered in reference to a further end: 'All partial beauty was a pledge / Of beauty in plentitude.' (lines 769-770). For Browning, the world, though 'sharp' and 'rough' provides ample opportunity for continual strivings after 'Truth ever, truth only the excellent!'

Rephan serves to link the thought processes of Dubiety with those of Reverie. In Rephan, as in Dubiety, the importance of continual struggle and the disinclination to accept a condition of undisturbed certainty is stressed. Furthermore, the realisation of an All-Loving, All-Powerful God is developed through the partial potentialities that human beings possess. The central idea of Rephan is that the conflicting elements on this earth are the necessary conditions for a life hereafter. To the speaker in Rephan, the 'all's at most--not more, nor less:' of his planet appears monotonous, and he reasons that there must be a reverse existence somewhere--with 'Hopes, fears, loves, hates,' The 'neutral best' of the planet-star Rephan prompts the speaker to discover a world where change succeeds change, and he wishes to escape to an existence which is not synonymous with stagnation and death of the soul.

The speaker in Rephan (as well as the speaker in Reverie) adopts the position of faith, reasoning that every 'wrong will prove right'. The phrase does not suggest that every wrong will miraculously be transformed into something good and wholesome. At the risk of inviting comments parallel to those propounded by Fairchild and Pigou,¹¹ one

can uphold the soundness of the phrase. Browning does not imply that wrong is right, but points out that all forms of doubts and distress will be resolved in the life to come; the apparently inexplicable nature of 'wrong' will become clear.

The speaker in Reverie occupies the other end of the continuum. He is aware of deprivation, fear, evil, effort meeting with failure. These anomalies instil in him the hope that a reverse condition must lie elsewhere, in a world far away 'Where the strange and new have birth, / And Power comes full in play' (lines 219-220). Rephan and Reverie approach by different routes the problems regarding immortality and earthly sufferings. Rephan centres around the idea of an inhabitant from another planet, and how this individual conceives the desire to change his existing state of life. The star Rephan is the domain of tranquillity, boasting of a state of absolute perfection (lines 22-26). There is no occasion in the planet for experiencing either the fluctuations associated with seasonal variation, or the hopes and fears which form the inseparable companions of mortal life--in Rephan there are ' . . . No springs / No winters . . . No hope, no fear:'¹² There is no cause to banish the dark and no need for the protective screen which was desired by the speaker in Dubiety.

The speaker relates that the characteristic quality of his native planet was a general uniformity (lines 34-36). The absence of desire (lines 43-44), envy, want, lack of competitive spirit (lines 52-54) and deferment of choice (lines 33-34) gave rise to a succession of events 'merged alike in a neutral Best'.

At first glance, the planet Rephan seems to possess that serenity and total freedom from conflict which is coveted by all mortals. Yet by the speaker's own admission, the life in Rephan was tantamount to a mimic game, a condition devoid of growth (lines 77-79). Clearly the star Rephan left much to be desired even though it seems to be the ultimate gift of heaven: a domain where desire itself is quenched.

The speaker narrates how he came to recognise his existence in the planet as totally meaningless, barring him from further development. In the sphere of the 'all-perfect' there was understandably no cause for change and revision. Since the planet was a region devoid of restlessness or agitation, the speaker finds it difficult to analyse his feelings, and to describe the change within himself to his audience. His feelings cannot be termed as germs of discontent, since in Rephan there is 'No want . . . No growth' The speaker muses as to how and when the seed of disquietude (lines 25-26) was planted in his heart (lines 64-75). Just as he was unable to trace the length of time he had stagnated in Rephan (lines 77-79), similarly the cause 'at whose behest / The passion arose' remained partially elusive. All he can define to his mortal listeners is that he felt his life 'grown a-tremble' and recognised the intervention of a possible 'Prime-Potency'. The earlier statement 'One better than I--would prove I lacked / Somewhat: one worse were a jarring fact / Disturbing my faultlessly exact' changes to describe the longing to 'aspire yet never attain / To the objects aimed at!', and to the possibility to improve, even at the risk of doubts and hopes, fears and aspirations. Finally the prior

equanimity of the speaker was replaced with restlessness and a yearning
'for no sameness but difference / In thing and thing' (lines 82-84).

A day came when the Power that had implanted the restlessness in the
speaker's heart unbarred 'The prison-gate of Rephan . . .'

The poem ends with the speaker being granted his desired boon:

When the trouble grew in my pregnant breast
A voice said 'So wouldst thou strive, not rest?
'Burn and not smoulder, win by worth,
Not rest content with a wealth that's dearth?
Thou art past Rephan, thy place be Earth!'

(lines 105-109)

A poem at once a contrast and a parallel to Rephan is Jochanan Hakkadosh from Jocoseria (1883). The plot is derived from Rabbinical lore. Like the speaker of Rephan, the Rabbi has been granted the privilege to experience a way of life that is completely different from his present one. At the end of the probationary period, the rabbi attains to 'ignorance confirmed / By knowledge' (lines 683-684). He infers that the imperfections on this earth will be harmonised in the life to come, and concludes:

. . . hopes which dive,
And fears which soar--faith, ruined through and through
By doubt, and doubt, faith treads to dust--revive
In some surprising sort, as see, they do!
Not merely foes no longer but fast friends.

(lines 721-724)

While Jochanan yearns to receive a glimpse of the eternal life (which he deems 'perfect' as opposed to the evil predominant in the mortal world), the stranger on earth from the planet Rephan longs to 'wring

knowledge from ignorance' (line 95). To him, the imperfections on this earth are desirable, and he in turn yearns to suffer, to doubt, hope, fear, agonize (lines 82-99).

In Jochanan and Rephan Browning embodies the two contrasted ways of life in the experience of the respective speakers. Yet both poems agree in describing an earthly life that is of striving and incomplete realization of the ideal, and both offer complementary views of the possibility of hope. The speaker in Rephan, and the rabbi Jochanan are not unaware of evil, but both agree that even from a consideration of the pain and evil it is possible to derive a certain comfort.

The rabbi arrives at 'utter acquiescence' and discovers that 'this life proves a wine-press--blends / Evil and good, both fruits of Paradise, / Into a novel drink . . .' (lines 727-729). The inhabitant from the star Rephan encourages his audience to reason that 'earth at end, / Wrong will prove right? Who made shall mend / In the higher spheres to which yearnings tend?' (lines 100-102).

Yet another collection of poems that admits of the need for faith even in the face of contrary factors is James Lee (Dramatis Personae, 1864). Of particular importance is section VI, and the thought processes of the speaker in this poem can be paralleled with the sentiments expressed by rabbi Jochanan, and by the stranger from Rephan. The following lines, spoken by the wife of James Lee, serve to emphasize the importance of change, and also to show that life is possibly a probation:

Nothing can be as it has been before;
Better, so call it, only not the same.
To draw one beauty into our heart's core,
And keep it changeless! such our claim;
So answered, Never more!

Simple? Why this is the old woe o' the world;
Tune, to whose rise and fall we live and die.
Rise with it, then! Rejoice that man is hurled
From change to change unceasingly.
His soul's wing never furred!

That's a new question; still replies the fact,
Nothing endures: the wind moans, saying so;
We moan in acquiescence: there's life's pact,
Perhaps probation--do I know?
God does: endure His act!

(lines 61-75)

'Reading a book, under the cliff'
James Lee

In concluding the study of Rephan, two excerpts have been offered.

Both serve to bring out Browning's sympathy and love for man, and at the same time they underline the religious note in his poems.

Browning, perhaps more than other poets, demands that he shall be kept out of the hands of the theological anatomist; for Browning is the poet of life, of its anguish, its search, its doubt, its despair, its triumph. He does not find life through theology; he finds theology, so far as he finds it at all, through life.¹³

Browning was the least theoretical, the least abstruse and the most vital, the most practical poet who ever wrote philosophically. To Browning, the least disturbing moral or theological problem was the problem of evil in a world created by a loving God . . . He would have sensed a truly insoluble dilemma if he had found the world another planet worshipping the god Rephan and experiencing no growth or possibility of growth.¹⁴

Development, a delightful poem about Browning's own education in the Classics, traces the relationship between 'fancy' and 'fact', and whether the latter is synonymous with 'truth'. The poem ostensibly deals with the stages of Browning's acquaintance with Greek literature.

Despite the risk involved in ascribing to the poet the opinions he puts into the mouth of his creation, Development can be accepted as a poem describing Browning's personal experience (line 84).

Speaking of his own childhood, Browning recollects how his father had introduced him to the wonders and excitement of the Iliad. The poet had been a mere child of five, yet his intellectual limitations had posed no obstacle to his grasping of the surface meaning of the epic. By the help of an assortment of furniture, the cat and two dogs, and the histrionic contribution of the page-boy, the speaker's father had enacted the siege of Troy to the complete satisfaction and comprehension of the child.

The curiosity of Browning having temporarily abated, his father let a couple of years elapse before re-introducing to him the self-same subject, this time through the scholarship of Pope. Finally Browning was mature enough to read Homer in Greek, and the simple pleasures of childhood were no less dimmed by his introduction to 'Heine' and the Lexicon. Although the poet was convinced that he had at long last

. . . learned
Who was who, what was what, from Homer's tongue,
And there an end to learning.

(lines 48-50)

the findings of the German critics shook his initial confidence and brought a host of conflicting thoughts in his mind. Fortunately, the dismay did not persist long, and Browning realised that 'All the same, while we live, we learn, that's sure'. He consequently decided to bend 'brow o'er Prolegomena' and discovered:

. . . there was never any Troy at all,
Neither Besiegers nor Besieged, nay, worse,
No actual Homer, no authentic text,
No warrant for the fiction I, as fact,
Had treasured in my heart and soul so long.

(lines 69-73)

Despite the unsettling theories presented by Wolf, Browning maintains that the 'fiction' he had believed in as 'fact' continued to occupy a special place in his heart:

. . . the fiction, I, as fact,
Had treasured in my heart and soul so long
 . . . as fact held still, still hold,
Spite of new knowledge, in my heart of hearts
And soul of souls, fact's essence freed and fixed
From accidental fancy's guardian sheath.

(lines 72-77)

Browning admits later that a knowledge of the genuine nature of things is preferable to a state of blissful ignorance, since 'No dream's worth waking'. Yet he does not blame his father for having practised deception and let him believe that the Iliad was a collection of true stories. Logically, it would have been appropriate if the poet had been left to learn the values that Homer recommends (lines 99-102) without the aid of fiction. Aristotle's Ethics serves the same purpose, namely, awakens the reader to his moral responsibilities--but Ethics is difficult and arid, and undoubtedly the reader's attention would have strayed from the text (as a boy) and the purpose would have been defeated. Once wooed by the charm of Homer's story, the speaker is at least prepared to treat Greek literature, including Ethics, with concern and interest. At the end, Browning tells his readers that '. . . Truth is an absolute good-- the Ethics have to be studied at last--and a lifetime is not too much to devote to its attainment.'¹⁵

It is easy to infer Browning's personal view of truth from Development. On the one hand, truth is present in multiple and complex points of view, on the other, it is an absolute entity. In order to apprehend truth clearly it is essential to mix fact with fancy and thereby 'leaven the lump' of arid scholarship of Ethics.

The implication of the poem is that the five year old child was rightly encouraged to believe in the historical truth of Homer. Once his interest had been roused, he was left to discover gradually for himself the true nature of things. Had these been presented to the young unformed mind of a child, they would have mitigated the delight and turned straight 'Learning's full flare on weak-eyed ignorance' (line 21). In contrast, as the child grows up, by repeated acquaintance with the text of his childhood, improved and more pervasive with each reading, he reaches at a clear and vivid realization of ethical values (lines 38-43, 48-50, 113-115). Having outgrown the mimic warfare of Troy, it becomes possible for the poet-speaker (as it should for other men), to approach the Ethics with more patience and understanding. And all the time, the pageant from Iliad continues to vivify itself and imbue Browning's life with meaning--the 'fact's essence freed and fixed / From accidental fancy's guardian sheath' remains implanted in the speaker's heart, and :

However it got there, deprive who could
Wring from the shrine my precious tenantry,
Helen, Ulysses, Hector and his Spouse,
Achilles and his Friend? . . .¹⁶

(lines 79-82)

According to Philip Drew (The Poetry of Browning, p. 238), 'Browning is attempting to illuminate the paradox that while truth is never easy and is sometimes so difficult of access that it is sometimes only to be approached through fictions, it has nevertheless a value of its own which no fiction can ever have--"Truth ever, truth only the excellent."¹⁷ (Dubiety, line 24)

In dealing with criticism regarding the myth of Homer, Browning is conscious of the nineteenth-century parallel instance, namely, the Higher Criticism of the Bible. Since his childhood, experience has taught the poet that truth is independent of and in advance of any formulation of it. He acknowledges that 'facts' as well as 'fancy' (myths) are but provisional constructs, not the absolute truth. The proper way to apprehend the essence of the Greek epics and grasp the significance is to 'pass beyond the accidentals of both fact and fancy'.¹⁸

From the overt discussion of Homer, the reader can infer Browning's defence of the Bible and the emphasis on the innate worth of the Gospels.¹⁹ The Scriptures could well have historical inaccuracies, and the critics are justified in pointing these out, sifting 'the grain from chaff, / Get truth and falsehood known and named as such'. But despite the surface differences the truth regarding essential Christianity perseveres. Like the essence of Homer's teachings, the eternal verities behind the Gospels continue to influence and activate all thinking minds. Belief in the literal and historical accuracy of the Bible is a necessary prop in the development of faith. Belief in these serves the proper function in the elementary stages of Christianity. Once the essential meaning has been realised, the props can be dispensed with, and the 'dream' becomes unnecessary since 'No dream's worth waking' (line 84).

In conclusion, 'fancy' is as necessary as 'fact' and helps the mind in each stage of its growth till the truth emerges on the surface. The dream or myth is redeemed by its didactic efficacy. Factuality need not be the primary issue to conduct the 'truth' to the understanding of an individual. Truth must not descend suddenly on a child of five, nor should it be completely hidden, leaving 'weak eyes to grow sand blind'. Truth must needs be realised in anecdote, instance or narrative.

Browning's religious position was at all times one of faith in the more important aspects of Christianity. Writing to Mrs Orr, Browning states the important aspects of religion, and why in his judgement humanity required Christ:

I know the difficulty of believing . . . I know all that may be said against it (the Christian scheme of salvation) on the ground of history, of reason, of even moral sense. I grant even that it may be a fiction. But I am none the less convinced that the life and death of Christ, as Christians apprehend it, supply something which their humanity requires, and that it is true for them.²⁰

What matters is not simply the value of this idea in abstraction but what we learn afresh about it each time we encounter it . . .²¹

The subject of figurative language finds an oblique expression in Poetics. Conventional metaphors serve their purpose to a certain extent. Beyond this limit, art gives way to truth and appreciation of human qualities (despite their defects) for their own sake.

The question remains 'What is fact?' It is not synonymous with 'truth'. Facts are not objects that are observable and consequently provable, (La Saisiaz, line 223). Neither are they totally divorced

from 'fancy', (The Ring and the Book, I, line 458). 'Fact is but a step toward truth, which frequently cannot be grasped without the aid of fancy, so that fact and fancy are natural allies in human development'.²²

Unlike Arnold, Browning practised a large degree of tolerance. To him, the very absurdities of doctrine serve their purpose, in that they are instrumental in preparing simpler minds to receive the higher truth.²³ In the Essay on Shelley (1851) Browning writes:

For it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned. The spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilized, but the raw material it operates upon, must remain.

Reverie occupies the last but one place in Browning's volume of Asolando, and in it some major religious thoughts are discussed simultaneously. The title Reverie leads a reader to parallel the ideas presented in the poem with the poet's personal hopes and speculations. At the same time it links the thought processes within the poem with the active, waking world of reality, and the dreamlike existence of a larger world beyond the finite barriers. The poet is hopeful of a state of eternal reward hereafter, when the unfulfilled hopes and unrequited merits of this world will find recognition, and an All-Loving God will manifest himself to the speaker.

The ardour and simple faith of the speaker are evident in the opening lines, at once simple and fervent: 'I know there shall dawn a day'. The emphasis is on the faith that such a day will come to pass,

though the speaker is not entirely sure when or where it will 'dawn'. What he does believe in is that not only will the imperfections of human knowledge be overcome (lines 16-25), but that the whole of 'the legend of man' (lines 26-30) will be finally unfolded:

I for my race and me
Shall apprehend life's law²⁴

Stanza vii (lines 31-35) discusses the close relationship between the mortal soul and the surrounding world, since both have been created by the same Power, and therefore share 'common heritage'. The mortal man is a microcosm in this universe, and he has to understand his own nature before he can grasp the significance behind the world at large (lines 31-40). The poet embarks upon a step by step reminiscence into his past and re-lives the first faint forming of faith in his young mind. This retrogression, (which is at the same time an advancement since it helps to develop the structure of the poem) brings the speaker to dwell upon his earliest experiences (lines 41-60).

The title and stanza vii in particular suggest that Browning is recording his own thoughts, without the usual dramatic cover. In his youth, Browning admits having surveyed the whole world of Nature and found complete satisfaction therein. Everything in the natural world seemed to revolve round a set purpose and indicated the presence of a methodical Craftsman, illimitable in Power. The regularity of the diurnal and seasonal changes, the regeneration in the sphere of animal and plant-life (lines 100-110), indicated alike that the 'creator' was 'Omnipotent'. Having had his fill of surveying the world and its manifold

creatures the speaker could rejoice and acknowledge 'Thus much is clear, / Doubt annulled thus much: I know' (lines 54-55).²⁵

The diffidence sets in when the eye goes beyond the pale of creation and examines the conditions more minutely--the applause is arrested as the 'heart refrains . . . evil reigns' (lines 61-65). Yet, as the poem progresses, the speaker reasons that what is good on earth is good and deserves to be praised:

Yet since Earth's good proved good--
Incontrovertibly
Worth loving--I understood
How evil--did mind descry
Power's object to end pursued--
Were haply as cloud across
Good's orb, no orb itself:

(lines 66-72)

Once more, the emphasis falls on the most human of all virtues--love. Since man can 'descry / Power's object' and successfully purge 'life's gold' of the 'dross' by his faculties of intelligence and love, it stands to reason that a Power Illimitable in Love can eradicate the dross completely (lines 120-124, 136-140).

The speaker in Reverie recognises the infinite Power behind the Universe, at the same time he acknowledges the worth of good which 'Seems--scanned by the human sight, / Tried by the senses' test-- / Good palpably:' (lines 78-80). His fervent supplication to the Power is to provide mankind with Omnipresent and unlimited good, thus ending evil once and for all and enabling man to pay his final tribute of Love (lines 191-195). All through his life, the speaker (like the rest of mankind before him), has seen that Power seems actually to be

at odds with Love, since it has failed to invent a new law of nature
which would effectively eradicate all evil:

Stop change, avert decay,
Fix life fast, banish death,
Eclipse from the star bid stay,
Abridge of no moment's breath
One creature! Hence, Night, hail Day!

(lines 116-120)

Do I seek what heals all harm,
Nay, hinders the harm at first,
Saves earth? Speak, Power, the charm!
Keep the life there unamerced
By chance, change, death's alarm!

(lines 131-135)

As promptly as mind conceives,
Let Power in turn declare
Some law which wrong retrieves,
Abolishes everywhere
What thwarts, what irks, what grieves!

(lines 136-140)

This seems strange, since it is difficult to believe that man possesses an attribute which his creator falls short of. The human mind sees the evidence of Divine Power everywhere, and finds this present in a lesser degree within his own self. Reversing the process of logical reasoning, and adopting an inductive method of analysis, man can add that Universal Power is matched with Love Illimited, since all human beings possess this element (love). But although this curious rationalisation can be accepted within the framework of a logical syllogism, it is difficult for the heart to assent to it.

Not satisfied with the existing state of things, and chary to conclude that God is deficient in the attribute of love (when compared to mankind), Browning is reduced to evolving a faith that rests not on certainty but hope.

From the time of Paracelsus, Browning has held firmly to a faith that was both subjective and instinctive. This attitude was severely criticised and dismissed as 'pernicious optimism', 'mindless' and 'energy lacking direction'. Yet 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'.²⁶ Browning repeatedly stressed that dynamism must have moral direction, and that an assent of the heart becomes essential only when the faculties of intellect have failed to bring about the final act of 'faith'. As he relates in Reverie:

Even as the world its life,
So have I lived my own--
Power seen with Love at strife,
That sure, this dimly shown,
Good rare and evil rife.

(lines 171-175)

Yet Browning clung to the faith that eventually wrong will be righted. 'Why faith?'--because in the Kierkegaardian sense 'the deeper the sense of imperfection the more passionately profound is the gratitude . . .'
Faith is needed

. . . to lift the load,
To leaven the lump, where lies
Mind prostrate through knowledge owed
To the loveless Power it tries
To withstand, how vain!

(lines 181-185)²⁷

Browning hopes that some day there will be a reconciliation of opposites, and his faith refuses to consider any possibility of disappointment. Consequently, although the poem starts with a query, it ends

on a note of affirmation--'When see? When there dawns a day, . . .
/ Where the strange and new have birth, / And Power comes full in
play'. (lines 216-220).

In Reverie, the speaker admits to the extent of human suffering,
and the only way in which he can reconcile the seemingly opposite
factors is by turning his gaze from the world of outer nature and
examining the intuitions of his heart. As J. Royce states,

The antithesis between the terms 'knowledge', as the
oculist conceives it, and 'love', as the poet views
it, is the contrast between looking in the world of
outer nature for a symbolic revelation of God, and
looking in the moral world, the world of ideals, of
volition, of freedom, of hope and of human passion,
for the direct incarnation of the loving and the
living God.²⁸

Once again, the concept of 'development' is introduced to strengthen
Browning's faith. Man is by nature limited in knowledge and in order
to 'apprehend life's law' he has to devote his finite life to 'waking'
not 'sleeping' (lines 206-210). The guerdon lies in the process of
aspiration--man should strive to ascend to the difficult steep of
Heaven where alone Power is Love:

Then life is--to wake not sleep,
Rise and not rest, but press
From earth's level where blindly creep
Things perfected, more or less,
To the heaven's height, far and steep,

Where, amid what strifes and storms
May wait the adventurous quest,
Power is Love--transports, transforms
Who aspired from worst to best,
Sought the soul's world, spurned the worms'.

(lines 206-215)²⁹

(my italics)

Discussing Reverie, W.O. Raymond treats the subject of 'the limitations imposed upon the soul by the finite conditions of time and sense.' The following passage bears immense importance to the analysis of Reverie, and is therefore quoted at length:

The world to Browning, as to Keats, is 'the vale of Soul-making,' and, in this moulding of souls, the finite as well as the infinite has a positive part to play. The limitations imposed on man by the imperfect conditions of the earthly existence are a school of discipline intended to serve the end of spiritual growth. To refuse to use the instrumentalities of life, faulty though these may be, and to disregard its laws, is to scorn the means through which the spirit is nourished and enabled to elicit the divinity that lies within it. To attempt to overleap the finite or to neglect the claims of the material and temporal realities of life, is to evade life's test and to fall into the error of spiritual abstraction. While placing the goal beyond all limited accomplishment, the soul must learn to make a fruitful use of the means and possibilities of man's earthly lot. Thus, while, from one point of view, life must be an unceasing aspiration in pursuit of an infinite ideal, from another it must be a continuous stooping to a world of weakness and finitude.³⁰

(my italics)

In his Essay on Shelley, Browning wrote

The whole poet's function is that of 'beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection,' and his virtue is of 'being untempted by the manifold partial developments of beauty and good on every side, into leaving them the ultimates he found them'.

Reverie is in the nature of an amalgam, conceptually treating the questions discussed in La Saisiaz, Jochanan Hakkadosh (Jocoseria), Development and Rephan. In the words of Philip Drew, 'It is interesting to note that the Earth is now characterised by "Things perfected". Power has operated with extraordinary efficiency, but the world that has resulted

is blind and servile, whereas Browning is careful to stipulate that even in Heaven, where Power and Love are conjoined, "strifes and storms" await "the adventurous quest". Jochanan's heaven of oppugnant natures fused into harmony is given its final amenity, the promise that man's spirit will not be obliterated in a world of universal perfection, but will still aspire.³¹

A poem treating a similar subject, namely the nature of belief and disbelief, is Fears and Scruples in the Pacchiarotto volume (1876). The poem deals with the speaker, his listener, and the 'unseen friend'. The keynote of the poem is hope and trust (stanza 1 in particular). The 'letters' are meant to stand for the Scriptures, just as 'actions' are the miracles of former ages, once ascribed to God. There is a strong parallel between the bewilderment of the speaker in Reverie 'Would Power to a plentitude / But liberate, but enlarge . . .' (lines 91-96),³² and the wistful longing of the speaker in Fears and Scruples:

I can simply wish I might refute you,
Wish my friend would, by a word, a wink,
Bid me stop that foolish mouth, you brute you!
He keeps absent, why, I cannot think.

(lines 25-28)

However, the speaker in Fears and Scruples shrugs off the impending doubt with a resolute 'Never mind' (line 29) and the succeeding lines are the affirmation of his boundless love for the 'unseen friend' (lines 28-36). He thus finally finds a reaffirmation of his faith in the proof of his personal love.

In context with the present poem, it is interesting to recount Hugh Walker's statement 'But then, if we insist upon a demonstration after

the manner of Euclid, what can be proved that is worth proving? "The intellectual interest of a truth is gone the moment it becomes a fact". It is the truth towards which we reach through darkness'.³³

The Bean Feast deals with the episode of Pope Sixtus and is in nature very close to the parables from Ferishtah's Fancies. The story recaptures the theory presented in Jochanan Hakkadosh and later, through the dervish in Ferishtah ('Apple-Eating', lines 468-478).

In brief, Pope Sixtus, intent in upholding justice and preventing wickedness, made it a habit to go around Rome disguised as a mendicant. Roaming about the alleyways of the city, he chanced to come across a dwelling in a state of ruin. He entered the humble abode and sought to learn the grievances of the family with the intention of resolving them. The family were hesitant, and in a bid to allay their diffidence, Sixtus drew back his hood, and revealed his true identity. Overcome with joy, the family sought to pay their homage to the Pope, when the latter expressed his desire to be allowed to join them for supper. The Pope partook of the frugal meal, and offered his heartfelt thanks to God. He realised the infinite mercy of God--for despite their apparent poverty the family had been able to satisfy their guest. The Pope, in his turn, felt grateful for being blessed with appetite and health.

The Bean-Feast does not deal with matters of great philosophical depth but considers the incidents of everyday life, and discovers the infinite care and love of God--extending to the simplest wants of man:

Thy care extendeth to Nature's homely wants,
And, while man's mind is strengthened, Thy goodness nowise
scants
Man's body of its comfort, that I whom kings and queens
Crouch to, pick crumbs from off my table, relish beans!

(lines 43-46)

Epilogue

The final poem in the Asolando volume is a vibrant reiteration of the values Browning had struggled with and abided by all his life. It is fitting that the last poem should be in the spirit of an undaunted warrior, one who has come through the battle of life with faith, courage, and conviction in his ideals unimpaired.

The speaker imagines a situation which may arise after his death, and tries to establish the truth of the fact, that the soul being immortal his earthly absence should not bring grief to his beloved. Browning chooses the hour of midnight for his final parley. It is an appropriate time, when thoughts run rife and the barrier between life and death seems almost non-existent. The tone and slow-moving rhythm adopted by Browning in the opening lines induce a quality of mesmerism, and since sleep is the nearest semblance of death, the hour (midnight), the tone, and the theme of the poem draw together the speaker and the listener in a curious bond.

The first two stanzas deal with Browning's beliefs--the faith in an eternal state of existence, and faith in the all-embracing and deeply satisfying quality of love. An individual sharing the poet's beliefs need not despair at the thought of death. Browning stresses the fallacy that is commonly associated with death (lines 3-4) and sets about to vindicate his personal theory (lines 6-15).

The Epilogue being the final poem, within its gamut the doctrines held by different dramatis personae at different times, can be discerned, all moving toward a confluence of faith held by the poet personally:

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.

(lines 11-14)³⁴

The lines bring to mind the Epilogue to Ferishtah's Fancies:

Was it for mere fool's-play, make-believe and mumming,
So we battled it like men, not boylike sulked or whined?
Each of us heard clang God's 'Come!' and each was coming:
Soldiers all, to forward-face, not sneaks to lag behind!

(lines 13-16)

Whereas in Ferishtah the words are spoken by 'the famous ones of old' (line 10), brave soldiers, concerned with following their 'Leader' (line 17), in the Asolando volume, the final responsibility is taken on by the speaker himself. While writing the lines 11-16, Browning is stressing the importance of personal belief and the worth of individual choice. The force of the actions rests not upon a group of men, not upon the leader who issues the order, but upon the individual and his own convictions.³⁵

One who never turned his back . . .

(line 11)

(my italics)

Browning is confident that the 'clouds would break', and even in the absence of an earthly 'cheer leader' the end of the battle would be triumph and an awakening to eternal life. Accordingly, he continues his march, trusting to his personal convictions which in turn are based upon his capacity to love.

Whenever Browning experienced difficulty in reconciling an Illimitable Power with Illimitable Love, he turned introspective, and by experiencing the love within his own self he strove to intimate the Love in the Creator.

Prospice (published in 1864), deals with a theme similar to Epilogue to Asolando. In Prospice, Browning presents the speaker as ready to meet death with eyes unbandaged. Death is a foe to be challenged, and the pangs of death are accepted as painful though necessary. The guerdon to be obtained is the eternal life, but the initial barriers have to be crossed, and an enemy to be reckoned with.

In contrast, the speaker in Asolando shows no sign that death is to be feared or challenged. The entire poem is written in a reflective mood, and the tone is spirited but not imbued with the tension of an unpleasant fight though the fight may well be 'the best and the last!' (line 14). It is difficult to see how a deepening of faith, and the consequent strengthening of assertion can be equated with 'raucous cry' or 'strident affirmation'. That the faith extended in Asolando cannot be held by all and sundry is true, but it is unfair to deduce from this that the faith that was held by Browning was necessarily dishonest and glib.

The concluding lines of the Epilogue are at once the summation of Browning's career, and at the same time suggestive of the continuation of his struggle in another sphere. Since to Browning life is a process of continuous growth, the efficacy of an eternal life would remain incomplete unless the strivings were continued. In the nature of the speaker in Prospice, Browning once again desires a confrontation with

death. The surface similarities between the two poems are self-evident--the vigour of the speaker, the lack of fear or regret, the final clash between the opponents, and the faith that there will be an existence hereafter. But whereas death in Asolando will come 'at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time' and is to be greeted with 'a cheer', for the protagonist in Prospice preparation is required to meet 'the Arch Fear in a visible form'. Finally, in Prospice, after the alarm in the night has died out, the speaker believes in a final state of peace, and eternal companionship with his wife. The poem ends with 'And with God be the rest'. To the poet in Asolando, the battle continues, but it is never a 'brunt', never a potion 'Of pain, darkness and cold', and the 'summit' has to be attained and reattained.

Commenting on H.C. Duffin's article, Crowell says:

Duffin is accurate in his belief that the race will not end even in heaven. Illimitably man must evolve, through struggle against ignorance and opposing forces. It seems unlikely that even beyond the screen between this life and the next man will be permitted the luxury --or the stagnation--of dogma. . . .³⁶

Epilogue to Asolando has a maturer perspective in that Browning is ready to accept death not as an adversary but as a fellow contestant. The line 'Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,' reveals that the speaker is not entirely sure whether the confrontation will be pleasant or the reverse, but is quite willing to leave the matter open to the future. An important point to be noted is that for Browning death is not necessarily a synonym for old age and inactivity. Since every failure spells success and life is a continual process of awakening to

new knowledge (line 14), the moment of death should not be an arrestment of comprehension and movement, but a sharpening of them. The actual cessation of life will be an 'act', and this act will ensure a future state which is neither devoid of volition nor struggle.

Seen thus, the Epilogue does not proclaim a final solution, but offers a set of hopeful premises moulded from Browning's personal experiences. The answer has not been found and the problem of 'Doubt and Faith' remains open.

In Asolando he gives us the reflections of a man who does not claim to have found a final solution, but is content to remember that at least he never gave up the fight to discover one. This is perhaps the only sense in which Browning may fairly be said to have prized the quest for its own sake. The idea of human responsibility, of the need to keep trying to do what is right for a man to do, is never long absent from Browning's poems about religion: when the framework of religion is stripped away the responsibility remains, and is even heavier.³⁷

Philip Drew's sympathetic view is not shared by all Browning critics alike.

The Epilogue, like Prospice before it, has been written in an a-priori vein. The optimistic if slightly rhetorical tone (particularly in lines 11-14, 17-18) has been praised and depreciated alike. W.D. Shaw writes:

The dead lover of the Epilogue, in reply to the fears expressed by his beloved in the first two stanzas, uses the argument . . . Because he has lived at the ethical stage, beyond the sensual bondage of the hedonists, 'the slothful' and 'the mawkish' (line 8), he is confident of an eternal happiness beyond the grave . . . His raucous cry has less in common with the religious dignity of David or St John . . . The call to battle is a false alarm. He is simply making an exchange between fighting 'here' and fighting 'There', with no real transformation of his moral terms.³⁸

What Shaw does not explain is the possible dishonesty revealed by an individual's 'fighting "here"' and 'fighting "There"', and the connection (or lack of it) between the continuation of action and 'no real transformation . . .'

DeVane feels that 'It is well to have Browning's work concluded on such an inspiring note, for courage is the quality with which he best provides men, to meet the ills of the world . . . Browning's hope and courage are his permanent gifts to the world.'³⁹

Commenting on the entire volume, Ryals writes 'Far more appropriate would it have been, both aesthetically and symbolically, had Browning concluded Asolando with Bad Dreams'. He then goes on to say 'We feel that the ambivalences of these dreams are more expressive of the complex nature of Robert Browning than is the strident affirmation of the Epilogue. The subconscious "fancies" could be truer than the waking "facts".'⁴⁰

When writing 'Browning's doubt and occasional despair run like counterpoint to his cheerfulness all through these later years' (Ryals, p. 239), the critic clearly does not include Jochanan Hakkadosh (Jocoseria), the Epilogue to Ferishtah's Fancies, and Dubiety (Asolando), or take into consideration Browning's reiterated emphasis upon the importance of 'facts'. (Inapprehensiveness, line 18, 'Oh, fancies that might be, oh, facts that are!').

It is difficult to infer the meaning behind 'The subconscious "fancies" could be truer than the waking "facts".' The former may be the more preferable, and rightly so, but it is not clear how they can be accepted to be of a 'truer nature than the waking facts'. (my italics)

Browning expresses his intention very clearly in the Prologue (stanzas 3 and 4, lines 11-20). These are written in no uncertain terms, and Browning makes it evident here as later (in Development, line 84) that on no condition is he ready to sacrifice 'facts' to 'fancies'.

Furthermore, Bad Dreams are a collection of rival emotions, and although they have a distinctive place in the Asolando volume, one is led to question their worth in lending a final and coherent shape to the collection. A poem does not gain automatically the position of supremacy by simply being complex and pessimistic. The aim behind the volume was to present Browning's positive beliefs, not merely his moods of doubt.

Ryals observes 'Furthermore, the blustering yea-saying is untrue', while Shaw states 'In his vehement gesture of greeting "the unseen with a cheer", he is unduly confident of that eternal happiness which only a self-surrender before God, in the "black minute" referred to in Prospice, can make viable.' (page 220). The change in tone between Prospice (1864) and Asolando (1887-88) should not be held against Browning. His poetry is a record of the development of his own soul, and the constant flux is suggestive of the changes in his thoughts and the gradual development of his faith.

Ryal's opinion is echoed, in part, by Roma A. King. In The Focusing Artifice King writes:

The series of disjointed, distorted dream images that constitute the movement of the poems is closer, we come to feel, to the 'real' than are their waking counterparts.⁴¹

It is true that the difficulties (in the sphere of religion and every-day life) improve Browning as a poet, and admittedly it is easier to assent to the gradual developments of religious consciousness (Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, Saul, The Ring, La Saisiaz) than to accept the a-priori thoughts of the Epilogue. One reason for the easy assent to the one (Saul) and the difficulty in accepting the second (Epilogue to Asolando) is that the former fits in with the experiences and emotion of the reader with greater ease. An individual can be very often riddled with doubts, while the soul-sickness that Saul seems to be suffering has become a pervasive malaise of the present century. Consequently it is easier to accept the opinions of others in a situation similar to ours. The vibrant optimism in the Epilogue comes as a surprise to many readers. Very often in trying to project our own ideas onto the poet we tend to adopt the inductive process of reasoning --because we feel poem A is a reflection of our thoughts, and because poem B is the reverse, the experiences of Browning must have been the same. Consequently when he makes an affirmation of his optimism, he is naturally being dishonest to his personal feelings (which should obviously be those of doubt and disbelief, because we feel so). Any deviation from the imposed structure that the readers have built up, becomes at once suspicious.

Browning tried his convictions carefully and without dishonesty in the crucible of his personal experiences. The letters bear further testimony to the fact that for him the keyword is never certainty of belief, but the possibility of hope. Statements that allege that Browning was intellectually shallow and irresponsible deprive him of

his essential worth. While Browning spent his life struggling to uphold his faith in the face of adverse factors, he has often been held guilty of the easy assurance that he never claimed to possess.⁴²

In writing the Epilogue to Asolando, Browning at once established his relationship with contemporary writers and also suggested their differences. Asolando was published in 1889, and Browning was nearing eighty at the time. Tennyson had also proclaimed the steadfastness of his faith at the age of eighty. Crossing the Bar is a companion piece to Asolando, both in the choice of subject and in the tone of conviction. As for Browning, for Tennyson 'honest doubt' had a distinctive value in that it helped to strengthen faith. The following lines bear strong similarity with the philosophy enunciated by Rabbi Ben Ezra:⁴³

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

In Memoriam (xcvii)

Again, the implicit hope that there is a purpose in life, despite the suffering, is expressed in the faith:

One God, one law, one element
And one far off divine event
To which the whole creation moves.

In Memoriam (cxxxix)⁴⁴

The Asolando collection is a fresh examination of the grounds whereon Browning rested his faith. The poems are a development of his lifelong principles.⁴⁵ In Asolando, Browning is relating his own experience but relating it in such a manner as to allow a wider application. 'The tale he undertakes to tell--the effort to find "life's law" for himself and the race is recounted in reference to the facts and fancies of the title.'⁴⁶

The title of the volume is justified by the poems, which are light and musical, and the buoyancy of movement is particularly pleasing, coming after a period of speculative monologues, serious in tone and of protracted length. An unsigned reviewer describes the poems to be in the most 'thoughtful style of the author, but not in the style in which "thoughtfulness induces verbiage and mannerisms".⁴⁷

Asolando was a recollection of all the facts and fancies of Browning's lifetime, and for him it came to symbolize the changes that are the inseparable concomitants of the passage of time. Browning's conception of truth had undergone revision between the years 1839-1889, and it emerged the maturer if devoid of the iridescent hue of fancy. The volume is at once a reminiscence of the poet's past and a speculation on his future state of existence.

Notes

¹ Lectures on the Religious thought of Sören Kierkegaard: The Stone Foundation lectures (Princeton Theological Seminary), March 1936, Edward Geismar, ed. David F. Swenson.

² Ibid, xxxvii.

³ Letter from Robert Browning to Dr F.J. Furnivall, from Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise, ed. Thurman L. Hood.

⁴ W. Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 528. DeVane aptly comments: 'Not only, then, does the poet concern itself with the main subject of the volume, but it illustrates also the sub-title, Fancies and Facts. The preference for facts is of course a part of Browning's poetic creed'.

⁵ Clyde de L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, p. 230.

⁶

Dream afresh old godlike shapes,
Recapture ancient fable that escapes,
Push back reality, repeople earth
With vanished falseness, recognise no worth
In facts new-born unless 'tis rendered back
Pallid by fancy . . .
Let things be--not seem,
I counsel rather, do, and nowise
Earth's young significance is all to learn:
The dead Greek lore lies buried in the urn
Where who seeks fire finds ashes.

Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse

(lines 382-393)

⁷ C.L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, 'Conclusion', pp. 242-243.

⁸ Mrs Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters, p. 879.

⁹ C.L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, pp. 235-236.

10

. . . Can they share
--They, who have flesh, a veil of youth and strength
About each spirit, that needs must bide its time,
Living and learning still as years assist
Which wear the thickness thin, and let man see--
With me who hardly am withheld at all,
But shudderingly, scarce a shred between,
Lie bare to the universal prick of light?

A Death in the Desert

(lines 199-205)

11 H.N. Fairchild, 'Browning's Whatever Is, Is Right', College English, XII (April 1951), pp. 377-382.

A.C. Pigou, Robert Browning as a Religious Teacher.

12

. . . No springs,
No winters throughout its space, Time brings
No hope, no fear: as to-day, shall be
To-morrow: advance or retreat need we
At our stand-still through eternity?
All happy: needs must we so have been,
Since who could be otherwise? All serene:
What dark was to banish, what light to screen?

Dubiety

(lines 38-45)

13 W. Boyd Carpenter, The Religious Spirit of the Poets, pp. 204-205.

14 N.B. Crowell, The Convex Glass, p. 170.

15 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 238.

16 Lines 424-432 from A Death in the Desert can be compared with Development: '. . . man should mount on each / New height in view; the help whereby he mounts, / The ladder-rung his foot has left, may fall, Since all things suffer change save God the Truth.'

17 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 238.

18 C.L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, p. 232.

19 W.C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 548. DeVane observes
' . . . the higher criticism of Homer . . . was only a parallel to
the higher criticism of the New Testament.' (my italics)

I agree with Philip Drew when he states 'The parallel is not exact, but a valid point remains, that the Higher Criticism of the Bible also affects only the accidentals of the story and leaves its essential trueness intact'. (Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 238.)

20 Mrs Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters, p. 879.

21 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 231.

22 C.L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, p. 231.

23 Hugh Walker, The Greater Victorian Poets, p. 169.

24 H.N. Fairchild, The Literary Digest International Book Review, August 1925, p. 608.

Browning has been charged with 'glib' and 'facile' optimism once too often. One of the purveyors of this fallacy is H.N. Fairchild. Commenting on Browning's philosophical convictions, Fairchild writes:

Browning holds, with Rupert Brooke's pious fish, 'That somewhere, beyond space and time / Is wetter, water, slimier slime'. The affirmation that failure is a great blessing, that it matters little what we do so long as we are men enough to close our eyes and swallow it whole --these are crystallized in Pippa's doctrine 'All service ranks the same with God'. The less we accomplish, the more ardently we hope that God lacks discrimination.

25
Nature, earth's heaven's wide show
Which taught all hope, all fear:
Acquainted with joy and woe,
I could say 'Thus much is clear,
Doubt annulled thus much: I know.

(lines 51-56)

The lines bring to mind the speaker of Christmas-Eve. He too, had found boundless joy and contentment by surveying the world of natural phenomena. The mystery of the surrounding creation brought him into closest communion with God:

For me,
I have my own church equally:
And in this church my faith sprang first . . .
In youth I looked to these very skies,
And probing their immensity,
I found God there, his visible power:

(lines 271-281)

26 Hebrews, 11:1, New Testament.

Henry Jones, Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher, p. 342. According to Henry Jones 'the faith' which Browning professed, 'was not the faith that anticipates and invites proof, but a faith which is incapable of proof'.

27 The concept of growth (treating of the philosophy of the 'imperfect') is developed in Old Pictures in Florence. The following lines bear a strong resemblance to lines 181-185 of Reverie:

'Tis a life-long toil till our lump be leaven--
The better! What comes to perfection perishes.
Things learned on earth, we shall practise in heaven:
Works done least rapidly, Art most cherishes.

(lines 129-132)

And again, in Abt Vogler, lines 81-84:

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fullness of the days? Have we withered or agonized?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might
issue thence?
Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized?

28 Josiah Royce, The Boston Browning Society Papers, pp. 221-248.

29 Lines 206-210 can be compared to the words of the Pope in The Ring and the Book (Book X, lines 409-413).

Is this our ultimate stage, or starting place
To try man's foot, if it will creep or climb,
'Mid obstacles in seeming, points that prove
Advantage for who vaults from low to high
And makes the stumbling-block a stepping-stone?

30 W.O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment, p. 162.

31 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 174.

32 Would Power to a plenitude
But liberate, but enlarge
Good's strait confine, renewed
Were ever the heart's discharge
Of loving! Else doubts intrude.

(lines 91-96)

33 Hugh Walker, The Greater Victorian Poets, p. 328.

34 The Epilogue can be safely treated as the final utterance of the poet's personal faith, since by Browning's own admission: 'it's the simple truth; and as its truth, it shall stand'. Reported by the Pall Mall Gazette of 1 February 1890.

Robert Browning is reputed to have said the above words to his sister and daughter-in-law while reading the Epilogue from a proof.

35 'Central to Browning is the concept that man is tested as an individual, not in groups; but part of the test is his fulfilment of social responsibilities.' N.B. Crowell, The Convex Glass, p. 84.

36 H.C. Duffin, Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning, p. 232, from The Convex Glass by N.B. Crowell (p. 74.)

37 Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 242.

38 W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, p. 219-220.

39 W.C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 499.

40 C.L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, pp. 239-240.

41 Roma A. King, Jr, The Focusing Artifice, p. 235.

42 In the final chapter of his book Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher (1891) Henry Jones writes:

I have tried to show that Browning's theory of life, in so far as it is expressed in his philosophical poems, rests on agnosticism; and that such a theory is inconsistent with the moral and religious interests of men. The idea that truth is unattainable was represented by Browning as a bulwark of the faith, but it proved on examination to be treacherous. His optimism was found to have no better foundation than personal conviction, which any one was free to deny, and which the poet could in no wise prove. (p. 342)

In his article 'Henry Jones on Browning's Optimism' Philip Drew makes an appropriate rejoinder to Jones' statement:

. . . Jones complains about Browning's optimism that it 'was found to have no better foundation than personal conviction, which any one was free to deny, and which the poet could in no wise prove.' Jones does not, of course, show that there is any proof of an optimistic view of the world. In default of this what better foundation could a man have than personal conviction, or, indeed, without personal conviction, what foundation at all?

The Browning Critics, p. 376, eds Litzinger and Knickerbocker.

42 continued

The conclusion of Ferishtah shows that to retain his limited belief in the face of evil and suffering, Browning had to make a deliberate act of trust. After the ecstatic affirmation of the 'good and beauty, wonder crowning wonder,' (line 25) comes the sudden flash of doubt, at once reverting the former 'joy and triumph':

Only, at heart's utmost joy and triumph, terror
Sudden turns the blood to ice: a chill wind disencharms
All the late enchantment! What if all be error--
If the halo irised round my head were, Love, thine arms?

(lines 25-28)

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

Rabbi Ben Ezra (lines 13-18)

44 Compare lines 99-101 from the Epilogue (Dramatis Personae)

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows.

45 The insoluble contradictions of the world can be explained by admitting (a) this earth as a probation-place; life here is a condition of the hope beyond. (b) moral good and evil imply a struggle, a liberty of choice, and finally, the growth of the soul. Since any 'law' by its very nature involves an automatic obeying, the certainty in knowledge would weaken the nature of faith. (c) Love is the highest virtue in human beings, and it establishes a link between human beings and the God of Love.

46 C.L. Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, p. 230.

47 'The Saturday Review', 21 December 1889, pp. 711-712.

Conclusion

In the Asolando volume, the final doubt is resolved in the hope that 'Somewhere, below, above, / Shall a day dawn' (lines 16-17, Reverie) when faith will triumph, ripeness will replace things now rathelike, wrong will be righted, and 'each chain unbound / Renewal born out of scathe' (lines 176-180). The cardinal virtue which will effect the 'renewal' is love. For Browning, love is both the supreme value and the final arbiter.

In Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day the protagonist recognises 'love' to be life's supreme value (at the same time keeping in mind that illimitable love in no way precludes the development and use of the intellect). Discussing the poem, Crowell states 'The great vision of the Judgement Day teaches him (the speaker) that love is the basis of God's plan; that the test of life is conducted through the agency of frustration, ignorance and doubt; and that knowledge is a valid tool-- for man's dim perception of infinity through the imperfection of the finite.'¹

The central message most often repeated in the poetry of Browning is that Love is the great principle of Nature. The dichotomy between doubt and faith can be lessened (if not completely resolved), when man learns that 'God is Love'.² His poems are the expression of the poet's personal gropings towards a firmer and more positive religious consciousness, and are accordingly the records of a tentative, unsure, and difficult progress from the insecurity of 'doubt' to the confidence of 'faith'.

It is easy to dismiss the religious opinions held by Browning in an increasingly sceptical and secularly-minded modern world. The Browning Society and their twentieth-century followers have elevated Browning to the dubious post of a vates, a poet-prophet. Such mindless idol-worship has had its ill-effects, and Browning has been exposed, willy-nilly, to face a board of hostile critics who are as sceptical of his prophet-power as the Browning Society were convinced of the same.

There are several poems where Browning's light-hearted comments are presented merely to fit in with the dramatic structure of the poem. Consequently such passages should be accepted with reservations. At the Mermaid (Pacchiarotto volume, 1876) presents a simplicity of trust and optimism which induces caution in the readers (lines 73-80, 89-96, see footnote 3a). Such 'easy assurance' has predictably evoked a storm of criticism. In her 1927 article Frances T. Russell writes:

Yet hordes of your fellow beings are doomed to live and die on a minimum physical and spiritual ration, and few indeed are endowed with your aes triplex of happy environment, buoyant disposition and naïve theology. Since life for you never was reduced to its lowest terms, you naturally are not qualified to grapple with ultimates.^{5b}

Again, discussing Pippa Passes, Russell states that Browning had the habit of accepting hope for certainty. The innocent lines sung by Pippa, so appropriate within the context of the play, seem to have wrought more damage than a group of poems would have effected. The song 'The year's at the spring . . .' concluding with the reaction-inducing 'God's in his heaven / All's right with the world!' is a source of controversy even in the present day and age. Such stray instances should not be cited as reductio ad absurdum of Victorian optimism. Nor should they prompt us to make a generalisation and dismiss Browning's poems as 'spurious in sentiment'.

John J. Chapman's wonderfully wrongheaded tribute evokes mirth and disappointment in an equal measure:

Religion was at the basis of his character, and it was the function of religious poetry that his work fulfilled . . . everything that was sunny and joyful and good for the brave soul he embraced. What was distressing he rejected or explained away. In the world of Robert Browning everything was right.⁴

That 'everything' was not right and earth's evil and good were equally real (and intermixed) can be cited from Apparent Failure (lines 55-63), and the two poems from Pisgah-Sights (I, lines 1-8, 17-24; II, lines 33-40). Yet Browning was not a pessimist as F.T. Russell would have us believe. Crowell makes an accurate estimation of the modern mind and modern values when he writes:

Of all the optimists who ever lived, Browning saw most steadily all the evils that inform the darkest pessimism. He was not an easy, shallow optimist . . . but the word optimism in our time has assumed a perjorative connotation of insensitivity, naivete, and unwillingness to face unpleasant facts.⁵

Russell's statement can be quoted to strengthen the above evaluation. In her article 'The Pessimism of Robert Browning', Sewanee Review (1924), Russell seems intent upon rehabilitating the poet for the twentieth century and points out the realism or pessimism in the works of Browning:

So great a change has recently occurred . . . that the time seems ripe for the Zeitgeist to manifest itself in a cynic's Calendar for Browning . . . In quality, the pessimism is the more sincere and spontaneous, the optimism laboured and rationalised.⁶

Richard Altick believes that Browning's so-called optimism was an inadequate cover for his personal inadequacy, while R.A. Foakes finds that the answers Browning has to offer remain 'empty rhetoric . . .'⁷

A brief study of three poems, The Ring and the Book, La Saisiaz, and Reverie will reveal that neither did Browning 'celebrate' the glories of the incomplete with the abandon of a religious-fanatic, nor did he cling to the generalisation 'that all is really for the best' (my italics).

The special significance of The Ring (Book X) lies in the expression of doubts which go deeper, since man's conception 'of the worker by the work' admits strength and intelligence but stops short at 'Goodness in a like degree'. Doubt is born when man surveys the actual condition of the world and he wonders why the universe is 'an isoscele deficient in the base'. But for Browning, just as difficulty has a necessary place in the scheme of life, so has faith:

What but the weakness in a faith supplies
The incentive to humanity, no strength
Absolute, irresistible comports?
How can men love but what he yearns to help?
And that which men think weakness within strength,
But angels know for strength and stronger yet--
What were it else but the first thing made new,
But repetition of the miracle,
The divine instance of self-sacrifice
That never ends and aye begins for man?

(Book X, 1649-1658)

The humble hope of man is presented in the Pope's words:

Let love be so,
Unlimited in its self-sacrifice,
Then is the tale true and God shows complete.

(lines 1370-1372)

K. Badger writes 'The one doctrine of religion that supplies what humanity requires is the doctrine of incarnation, the central doctrine, though no dogma, of Browning's religion. . . . Revelation of God as Love, then means the manifestation of Love in a soul or souls of human beings; it means incarnation not in the sense of God's becoming a supernatural man, for there is no distinction between natural and supernatural, but in the sense of manifestation of God as Love in natural man or men.'⁸

La Saisiaz, Browning's most direct discussion of evil (and a poem spoken without a dramatic cover), presents the terrifying sense of the dominant reality of evil in life. The theme of the poem is human isolation, frailty and doubt. The immediate experience that floods the poet's mind as he sees the lifeless body of Anne Smith is scarcely that of faith in a Divine Plan, and still less that of joy in the conviction that his friend has departed for a richer, happier immortal life. The following lines betray the agony and doubt that rack the speaker's mind:

Does the soul survive the body? Is there God's self,
no or yes?

(line 144)

Only a few days previous to the death of Anne Smith, Browning had been discussing with her the subject of 'The Soul and Future Life'. Now, by the poet's own admission, the subject has taken a painful and ironic stance:

Much less have I heart to palter when the matter to
decide
Now becomes 'Was ending ending once and always, when
you died?'
Did the face, the form I lifted as it lay, reveal the
loss
Not alone of life but soul?

(lines 171-174)

And again, the gnawing doubt regarding evil and its place in a Divinely
planned world:

Life thus owned unhappy, is there supplemental happiness
Possible and probable in life to come? or must we count
Life a curse and not a blessing, summed-up in its whole
amount
Help and hindrance, joy and sorrow?

(lines 204-217)

At the conclusion of his contemplation, the truth that is arrived at by
Browning is not 'all is best', but that in the absence of certainty
regarding the mystery of life and death, it is better to accept the
quality of hope. This very act of 'choice' is in itself a dynamic
activity, and is better than a passive or a pessimistic attitude, both
of which involve 'atrophy' of the soul.

I agree with the opinion of Professor Drew when he says that the
main tenor of Browning's thought is not foolishly optimistic. He con-
tinues 'He was able to assent to the idea that God is Love, but he
recognised that his assent, in the face of the woes of the world, was
grounded on Faith, and that his faith was ultimately a matter of Hope.
If to acknowledge this precarious interdependence of the three Christian
virtues and yet not to lose heart is to be an optimist, then Browning
was one indeed. But if the alternative was a poetry of despair I do not
think that he would have rejected the title.'⁹

Notes

¹ N.B. Crowell, The Triple Soul, p. 23.

² In Saul, the lesson David learns is not that evil is non-existent, but that the plan of life is perfect and includes evil in order to ensure the necessity of faith.

3a

Have you found your life distasteful?
My life did, and does, smack sweet.
Was your youth of pleasure wasteful?
Mine I saved and hold complete.
Do your joys with age diminish?
When mine fail me, I'll complain.
Must in death your daylight finish?
My sun sets to rise again.

(lines 73-80)

3b

My experience being other,
How should I contribute verse
Worthy of your king and brother?
Balaam-like I bless, not curse.
I find earth not grey but rosy,
Heaven not grim but fair of hue.
Do I stoop? I pluck a posy.
Do I stand and stare? All's blue.

(lines 89-96)

⁴ John J. Chapman, 'Robert Browning', Emerson and Other Essays, New York: Scribner, 1898, pp. 185-213.

⁵ N.B. Crowell, The Convex Glass, p. 171.

⁶ 'The Pessimism of Robert Browning', Sewanee Review (1924), p. 132.
Reprinted in One Word More on Browning, Frances T. Russell.

⁷ Richard D. Altick, 'The Private Life of Robert Browning', Yale Review, 41 (1952).

His fervent celebration of the glories of the incomplete, the imperfect, as being part of God's inscrutable but unquestionable plan for men, is far less the manifestation of an intellectual conviction than it is the result of Browning's growing need to salve his awareness of failure.

7 continued

Reginald A. Foakes, The Romantic Assertion: A Study in the Language of Nineteenth Century Poetry, p. 147.

He seems to escape from the profound disquiet at the heart of these poems into generalisations that all is really for the best, and thus to evade the dramatic issues raised in them with assertions that often remain empty rhetoric . . .

⁸ K. Badger, 'See the Christ Stand!': Browning's Religion', Boston University Studies in English, I (1955-6), pp. 53-73.

⁹ Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, pp. 240-241.

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(Where possible, the authors of unsigned articles in periodicals have been identified by using The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900, ed. Walter E. Houghton.)

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