

**INSUBSTANTIAL PAGEANTS FADING: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF EPIPHANIC DISCOURSE,
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THREE OF ROBERT BROWNING'S MAJOR RELIGIOUS POEMS**

by

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SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the nature of epiphanic discourse in three of Robert Browning's religious poems, namely, 'Christmas-Eve', 'Easter-Day' and 'La Saisiaz'.

Chapter 1 investigates epiphany from religious, historical and theoretical perspectives, followed by a discussion of Browning's developing Christian beliefs. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the epiphanic moment in the companion poems, 'Christmas-Eve' and 'Easter-Day'. Chapter 4 explores how the double epiphany initiated from Browning's personal experience recounted in 'La Saisiaz', finds its resolution in 'The Two Poets of Croisic'.

Browning's 'good minute' or 'infinite moment' originates in Romanticism and reverberates into the twentieth century mainly in the writing of James Joyce, who first used the word 'epiphany' in its literary sense.

Because Browning's faith allowed continual interrogation of Christian doctrine, his experience and reading of epiphanic moments avoid any attempt at closure. Thus they offer the reader both a human image for recognition and a coded legend for individual interpretation.

'Christmas-Eve'; 'Easter-Day'; epiphanic; epiphany; 'La Saisiaz'; religious; Robert Browning; Romantic; 'The Two Poets of Croisic'; Victorian

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INTRODUCTION

Thought and feeling and soul and sense -
Merged in a moment....

'Now' Robert Browning

Until relatively recently, epiphany, or the moment of revelation, was imbued with religious significance, specifically grounded in the Biblical tradition. There are a few antecedents in classical literature, for example Plato's hallucinations or Socrates' chimeras, but the moment of vision leading to enlightenment is essentially a religious phenomenon and, in the West, particularly a Christian one. I believe that epiphany differs from mystical vision in that unlike the visionary experience in which the self is annihilated, the revelation is often intensely personal, with an emphasis on the personality of the subject rather than on the object revealed.

The focus on the personality of the subject is distinctly Augustinian. Although in his Confessions Augustine never allows us to forget that his experience arose not so much out of himself as from an external force, he makes it clear that if the idea of man has existed in God from eternity, man has therefore existed from eternity. Time then, although an objective phenomenon, takes on a psychological emphasis. Augustine says:

...the world was made, not in time, but simultaneously with time. For that which is made both after and before sometime - after that which is past, before that which is future....

(Hutchins, 1952: 325)

The notion of the psychological coexistence of all time leads naturally on to the idea of the intuitive moment of inspiration,

which the Romantics explored. This began a gradual movement away from divine revelation or an external force to a concentration on the subjective elements of experience - the mind and the imagination. Wordsworth's 'spots of time' in 'The Prelude' exemplify this in what is virtually a theory of epiphany:

There are in our existence spots of time
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue...
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced
That penetrates, enables us to mount,
When high, more high, and lifts us up, up when fallen.
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life that give
Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
The mind is lord and master - outward sense
The obedient servant of her will. Such moments
Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
From our first childhood.

(12: 208 - 25)

Although Wordsworth leaves us in no doubt that the mind is lord and master, I do not consider this as evidence of the secularisation of epiphany which many modern critics propound. The epiphanic experience may have its situation in the events of the ordinary world and its illuminative revelation emanating from the mind of man, but if we are to return to Augustine's statement that man co-existed with God from eternity, then man is first and essentially a spiritual being. All revelations given to him emanate from the divine source within him. Further discussion on this issue will be found in Chapter 1, where I attempt to define epiphany, tracing its historical and religious roots.

It was Joyce who first used the word 'epiphany' in a literary sense; thus any discussion on epiphanic discourse will refer to key passages in his novel Stephen Hero, where Joyce has his protagonist-artist adapt the religious term to literary purposes. I will attempt to show the very specific link between

Wordsworth and Joyce's use of epiphany. Reading further in the same section of 'The Prelude' quoted previously, we can observe how Wordsworth's 'efficacious spirit' of 'renovating virtue' abiding among certain 'passages of life' (12: 210 - 20) (perhaps meaning as pathways and as texts) anticipates the duplicity of the Joycean epiphany as something lived through, yet also something written down.

In the second part of Chapter 1 my focus falls on how Robert Browning as a mid-century dissenting Victorian conceived the idea of epiphany in his poetry. Because he lived in an age of scepticism, he felt it necessary to test his basically optimistic faith by vigorous interrogation of Christian doctrine. I submit that his writings are sceptical and affirmative simultaneously, for they compel a strenuous reading, assuming an active reader who will participate in the struggle of the lyric voice. They call for the activity of a reader with choices to make - choices which are created by the terms of the poem itself. The active reader is compelled to internalize and recompose the poem's processes in the act of interpretation, thereby continually renewing its contents with fresh creative constructs.

A parallel to the above can be drawn with Browning's vision of the particular moment as the medium in which man creates himself. His poetry is a testimony to the struggle of how a good moment attains a continuity beyond itself to become an infinite moment. The numerous epiphanic moments I have detected in his poems attest to his belief that man's life is measured by a series of momentary illuminations which, through energy and intensity of commitment to another person or to God, are

transformed into a continuous reaching out to another or towards the infinite. This experience involves a leap of faith and in this regard I have commented on Browning's similarity to Kierkegaard and modern existentialists who apprehended the nineteenth-century problem of man's inability to ascertain universal moral and religious truths through objective facts and reason. Individual and subjective experience can find its meaning only by being informed by intuition, emotion, faith and intensity.

In the following chapters I have selected what I believe to be three of Browning's major religious poems for close scrutiny, namely 'Christmas-Eve' and its companion poem 'Easter-Day' and 'La Saisiaz'. The varieties and differences in the epiphanic moments will be identified and analysed. Broadly speaking then, the first two poems reveal visionary manifestations which lead to the speakers' moments of enlightenment, whereas in 'La Saisiaz' the double epiphany arises out of internal discourse finding its resolution in 'The Two Poets of Croisic' to which I refer briefly.

From the outset 'Christmas-Eve' and 'Easter-Day' have avoided popularity. The volume containing the two poems sold only about two hundred copies when first published. Critics tended to dismiss it as an aberration, or an interlude between better things, or as a work of 'conscience' rather than imagination, interesting only in what it tells us about Browning's ideas. Even a modern sympathetic reader like William Clyde De Vane can say that 'in spite of many splendid passages...', Browning's mid-century work 'was not significant,

for its day, and is even less so for ours' (1947:35). However, after its initial reception the poem seemed to have crept into people's consciousness because - apart from its artistic innovation - it seemed to characterize the dilemmas many nineteenth-century readers faced in an age where the Christian faith had become most questionable when it was most needed. Even Hardy, not an admirer of Browning, quotes a few lines from 'Easter-Day' in Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1994: 104):

you indeed opine
That the Eternal and Divine
Did, eighteen centuries ago,
In very truth...
(229 - 32)

Hardy no doubt expected his readers to understand the allusion made in this incomplete quotation. Browning's speaker in the original poem interrupts himself at this point to make it clear:

... Enough! you know
That all-stupendous tale, - that Birth,
That Life, that Death....
(232 - 34)

Browning offered no glib assurances of faith and the difficulties facing a believer are made apparent in the unsatisfactory resolution of 'Christmas-Eve', which anticipates the opening lines of 'Easter-Day':

How very hard it is to be
A Christian! Hard for you and me....
(1 - 2)

Browning appears to be tracking his way through doubts and fears rather than establishing the rights of a particular sect or of the Higher Criticism. The confessional, essentially inward self-conscious nature of Christianity itself, coupled with the evangelical and puritanical fervour of nineteenth-century

revivalist movements coincided with the self-exploratory aspect implicit in Romantic literature. This background provided a springboard for specific assessments of faith and doubt.

When the critic George Lewes described Browning's achievements in 'Christmas-Eve' and 'Easter-Day' as 'a page out of the history of a life' (Litzinger and Smalley, 1970: 140), he perhaps had in mind the idea of art as the particular expression of a particular personality, of dramatized intuition. One assumption behind such a remark is the essentially expressive nature of poetry, which for Browning, as for Tennyson and Wordsworth, is at the same time epistemological. I contend then, that these two poems are about knowing rather than about knowledge, and about knowing in terms of renewed perceptions revealed through the epiphanic experience. 'The world,' as Browning says, 'is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned' (Pettigrew, 1981, I: 1003).

'La Saisiaz' in Chapter 4 deals with how a tragic personal experience in Browning's later life gave rise to his speculations on death and the immortality of the soul. The poem takes the form of a hypothetical debate between 'Fancy' and 'Reason', demonstrating its balanced combination of intellectual argument grounded on personal experience. 'Does the soul survive the body? Is there God's self, no or yes?' (144) are the questions the next four hundred lines are devoted to answering.

When 'La Saisiaz' was published in 1878, Browning had moved beyond his uneasiness with the 'Higher Critics' in Germany and his questioning of the historicity of Jesus, to a brand of theism which was substantially, if not dogmatically, that of central

Christianity. Within these parameters I will attempt to show how the poem is indicative of the late nineteenth-century shift from the consciousness of a transcendent order which is no longer rationally apprehensible and explicable to a felt or sensed order, incapable of proof or demonstration. All is in a state of flux, process and change and at best our language, our art and our myth are but provisional constructs.

The insubstantial pageants fade only to re-emerge and fade again and the epiphanies are only half realized at the end of the poem. Browning's belief is that what ultimately saves the world from total absurdity is the experience of love, the one sure manifestation of truth. I will attempt to demonstrate this idea in a brief over-view of 'The Two Poets of Croisic' where the unfulfilled double epiphany of 'La Saisiaz' is resolved in the love between men and women as paradigmatic of the love between God and man.

Finally, the trajectory of this dissertation is to show Browning's quests to capture the infinite within the finite through the epiphanic moment and its subsequent coded legend, allowing him to approach ever closer to Ultimate Reality.

In the writing of this dissertation I have used the Harvard system of reference. I have refrained from using footnotes, believing that any point worth mentioning is worth inclusion in the main body of the discussion. For the purposes of this dissertation I have used masculine generic terms such as 'man' and 'mankind' for 'humanity', and 'he' and 'him' as appellations for 'God', which is consistent with the Victorian world-view and the usage in the Browning sources.

The edition I have chosen to use for Browning's poems quoted in my dissertation is The Works of Robert Browning (Vols. I - X), with introductions by Sir F. G. Kenyon, K.C.B., D. Litt. (Barnes and Noble, Inc.: New York, 1966). Browning's 'Essay on Shelley', the Prologues for 'La Saisiaz' and 'The Two Poets of Croisic' are from Robert Browning: The Poems Vols I and II, edited by John Pettigrew, supplemented and completed by Thomas J. Collins, (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1981). Quoted poetry texts by Wordsworth are from William Wordsworth: Poetical Works, edited by Thomas Hutchinson, (O.U.P.: London, 1969). All quotations from the above sources are referenced simply by line numbers (108 - 21) or section and line numbers (6: 121 - 38).

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CHAPTER 1: EPIPHANY AND EPIPHANIC DISCOURSE

The aim of this chapter is, first, to examine briefly the origin or derivation of the term 'epiphany'; secondly, to discuss the problematics of epiphanic discourse within an historical perspective; and, lastly, to focus on Browning's concept of the epiphanic moment.

The term 'epiphany' derives from the Greek phanein 'to show', and the prepositional prefix epi, which means variably 'on', 'over', 'at' and 'after'. 'Phanein' can also be translated 'to bring to light' or 'to cause to appear'. In this sense it is the root of 'fantasy', 'phantom' and 'phenomenon'. The term originally referred only to the notion of literal illumination. The Greek forms epiphanein and epiphaneia mean respectively 'to manifest' and 'appearance' or 'manifestation'.

In Greek literature and religion the term epiphaneia was used to refer to supposedly miraculous occurrences with or without the visible presence of a deity. In this sense the word referred only to a manifestation of the power of the divinity, not to a vision of the god itself.

In almost all cultures, individuals have testified to moments of temporary divine inspiration that most often produce religious conviction or creative impulses. An important corollary to this state is its effect on the individual: 'Certain persons are supposed to be possessed from time to time by a spirit or deity. While the possession lasts their own personality lies in abeyance' (Frazer, 1958: 106). A similar idea was expressed by Plato in his dialogue between Socrates and Ion.

Socrates maintains that all good poets compose their poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed by a divinity moving in them:

For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his, and the mind is no longer in him....
(Hutchins, 1952: 144)

Plato goes further to include the poet's audience, that we who hear him may know that he is not speaking of himself in his state of unconsciousness. God is in fact the speaker and through the poet, He is conversing with us. Thus, in the epiphanic experience the person feels as if his own will is in abeyance; as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.

The most widespread historical use of the term 'epiphany' derives from its place in the Christian Calendar. The early Christians adopted January 6 as the Feast of the Epiphany to celebrate the manifestation of Christ's divinity to the magi. The magi carry away a vision of a world transformed, of a direct divine intervention in the affairs of humanity. The promise of salvation has been conveyed to them in an epiphany. As in earlier classical epiphany a visible manifestation of something invisible records the arrival of divinity on earth for the purpose of aiding mankind.

Turning to the question of the problematics of epiphanic discourse, many literary critics of the twentieth century see a movement away from traditional forms of epiphanic experience where the interpretation of the event was fixed and determined to a signification of relativism and indeterminacy. In other words, the interpretation of the event was open-ended, allowing the

possibility of many meanings. Ashton Nichols (1987: 4) argues that the modern literary epiphany represents an important departure from forms of experience with which it has often been confused: divine inspiration, religious conversion and mystical vision. He sees the modern epiphany as a purely secular revelation emerging by way of the symbolist aesthetic, dominant in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century literature.

Langbaum (1971: 46 ff), too, characterises 'the poetry of experience' as a poetry that relies on the structure of human experience for its values, and creates a new mythos out of the imaginative insights into the enduring nature of things. He sees epiphany in this sense as discontinuous from all earlier forms of inspiration and as a characteristic aspect of modern literature. Whereas I agree that the epiphanies in literature of the last two centuries have been grounded in the commonplace, or have emanated from within the individual rather than the traditional divine visitation, I do not agree that these can be termed secular. Creating literature is not simply a logical exercise, but an exercise of the spirit or mind of man; it is a spiritual communication of the author to his audience. Epiphanies in literature are the revelations of the author as he apprehends and interprets the infinite. This need not be understood in terms of a specific concept of God, as in the Christian sense, but as an understanding of the infinite, the spiritual, that which is beyond us. By secularising the idea of epiphany, we reduce man's thought to the realm of the logical and the empirical.

Heidegger, in dealing with the distinction between epiphany and 'mere optics', points out that things are seen as being:

...available to everyone, already there, no longer embodying any world - now man does as he pleases with what is available. Every being becomes an object, either to be beheld (new image) or to be acted upon (product and calculation). The original world-making power, Physics, degenerates into a prototype to be copied and imitated.... The original emerging and staying of energies, the phainesthai, appearing in the sense of a world epiphany, becomes a visibility of things that are already there and can be singled out. The eye, the vision which originally allowed the dynamism of the phainesthai to presence, becomes a mere looking-at or a looking-over or a gaping at. Vision has degenerated into mere optics.

(1961: 52)

Vision or the epiphanic moment transcends both the secular and the so-called spiritual; it collapses the difference between the infinite and the mundane and transcends both. Critics who secularise the epiphanic experience 'into mere optics' reveal a false dichotomy which distorts more than it tells. Consequently, we find the sense of the world around us as we ordinarily experience it as out of joint, whereas, in contrast, the fulness of the epiphanic moment transfigures this world through representation and renders objects 'translucent' where something of great moral or spiritual significance becomes manifest. The locus of a manifestation defines or completes the experience even as it is revealed and therefore possesses significance somehow inseparable from its embodiment.

From the Romantic era onwards, the epiphanic experience encompasses not only the aesthetic of a work of art, but also a view about its spiritual significance and about the nature and situation of the artist. Through epiphany the artist achieves contact with something which fosters and itself contributes

spiritually significant fulfilment or wholeness. This may create the problem of how we describe an experience in language which is beyond contradictions and distinctions. The artist must translate his heightened perception into words and audible rhythms, so from the very first he is influenced by verbal and rhythmic necessities. Because language is embedded in the space-time continuum, it cannot communicate directly any phenomena outside these co-ordinates. Thus we may conclude that in religious discourse, which is necessarily metaphoric, language must fail to reveal what is, in a sense, incommunicable.

Because the epiphanic experience has to be trapped in language, the very nature of epiphanic art can make it difficult to say just what is being celebrated: the deep recesses beyond or below the subject, or the subject's uncanny powers. The very fact that there can only be refracted visions through the medium of language means that we cannot separate what is manifested from the medium which we have created to reveal it. Thus, language masks the manifestation.

We may now ask what the nature of the manifestation is. Brockington states that there are personal spiritual experiences of two kinds: 'visionary experiences and intuitions connected with ordinary appearances and events. Both these kinds of experiences are linked with God, or, at any rate, with some power outside ourselves which influences and guides us' (1963: 263). It appears that the locus of literature shifted towards the latter from the outset of the Romantic era. Through the medium of both people and things most of the great Romantic poets saw themselves as articulating something greater than themselves:

the world, nature, being, the word of God. They were not concerned primarily with an expression of their own feelings. Thus I believe, it is a caricature to view the Romantics as concerned only with self-expression. According to Langbaum, the subject and object coalesce to create the individual experience that is translated into poetry. This is, in some ways, the central issue of epiphanic art and the Romantics recognised this.

Many Romantic writers testified to a deeply significant experience in which an instant of consciousness or else an ordinary object or event suddenly blazes into revelation; the unsustainable moment seems to arrest what is passing, and is often described as an intersection of eternity with time.

(Abrams, 1971: 421)

M. H. Abrams calls such experiences 'moments' drawing his term from Augustine's momentum and the German der Moment. He suggests that these Romantic moments possess affinities with instants of inspiration recorded over the centuries and rightly does not make the seemingly false distinction between traditional revelation and the modern so-called secular counterpart. As previously stated, I contend that any revelation emanates from a spiritual source and it is the experience only which may occur in a religious or secular context.

Wordsworth referred to his epiphanic moments as 'spots of time' ('The Prelude': 208) in which a commonplace event takes on a revelatory quality in the mind of the observer. Coleridge's flashes of inspiration and Shelley's moments of ecstasy provide important developments on the Wordsworthian epiphany, in that they begin to transcend the ordinary everyday experience, suggesting a greater psychic intensity and emotional importance. Thus they emphasise the role of the mind in such elevations of

ordinary events into moments of extraordinary significance.

Further developments of the epiphanic moment occurred during the Victorian period. Browning's 'infinite moment' ('By the Fire-side': 181) reveals the mind's ability to focus emotion and perception in a fleeting illuminated moment. Likewise Tennyson's 'trances' derive from an imaginative power that produces a 'sudden spiritual manifestation' ('In Memoriam', 95: 36) out of an otherwise ordinary object or event. Arnold's 'gleaming' moments continue the movement on towards the twentieth century ('Dover Beach': 3 - 4).

James Joyce was not the first person to appropriate the term 'epiphany' into his aesthetic and literary theory. It was in fact Emerson who expanded the meaning of the term in the nineteenth century by referring to 'facts, dull, strange, despised things' which the aroused intellect finds to be 'an Epiphany of God':

Day creeps after day, each full of facts, dull, strange despised things that we cannot enough despise, call heavy, prosaic and desart. The time we seek to kill. The attention it is elegant to divert from things around us. And presently the aroused intellect finds gold and gems in one of these scorned facts, then finds that the day of facts is a rock of diamonds, that a fact is an Epiphany of God, that on every fact of his life he should rear a temple of wonder and joy.

(Spiller and Williams, 1971: 47)

The idea of the mind's ability to produce meaning and value out of a seemingly insignificant event reveals an important strand of nineteenth-century thought that connects the Wordsworthian 'spot of time' through Emerson to the Joycean epiphany.

Joyce defines his epiphanic mode in Stephen Hero when Stephen Daedalus is discussing his desire to collect trivial incidents which possess a unique intensity into a volume of

epiphanies:

By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself.

(1963: 211)

Joyce's definition suggests a return to the original, literal meaning of the Greek term that referred to appearances, illuminations based on actual light and physical objects suddenly revealed.

Again, in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man Joyce defines the artist's role in the epiphanic moment as that of 'a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life' (1954: 252). The daily bread - the commonplace - becomes revelatory and epiphanic at the point where it takes on a radiance of something beyond itself. This process occurs in the mind where the raw data of consciousness are transformed into illuminated manifestations of meaning. It should be noted, that in such moments of transformed consciousness, whether visionary or intuitive, the interpretations tend to speak in equivocal ways. In other words, the interpretation is open-ended, allowing a free flow of many meanings.

Joyce uses the word 'epiphany' as a critical term in Stephen Hero, and appears to have adopted it because of his full agreement with the Romantic tendency to associate all manifestations of divinity with the creative spirit of man. But Joyce seems to have thought of the basis of the epiphany, in its literary context, as an actual event brought into contact with the creative imagination but untouched by it, so that it

preserves the sense of something contained by the imagination and yet actual in its own terms.

Wordsworth was the great pioneer, almost the discoverer, of epiphany in this sense, as something observed but not essentially altered by the imagination, which yet has crucial significance for that imagination.

(Frye, 1968: 158)

Frye sees such experiences as important because of their ability to produce 'an association between the random and the oracular' (1968: 159). In Anatomy of Criticism, Frye connects epiphany with an 'archetypal' form of criticism, that is, one that rests on a theory of myths. In this context he characterises the 'point of epiphany', which he parallels to the Wordsworthian spot of time, as a point at which the 'undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment' (1971: 223).

It is therefore evident that Joyce's goal, like Wordsworth's, is the production of a kind of astonishment in his readers. The object is suddenly revealed as an interaction between the world and the mind. 'Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestments of its appearances. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.' (Joyce, 1963:218). The world provides the objects and the sensitive imagination provides the radiant point of epiphany. In this intuitive epiphany the visible reveals something invisible, but the status of the invisible component is not fixed in meaning and its mystery or open-endedness becomes part of the value of the experience.

The epiphanic experience may be private and subjective

insofar as it originates in the mind and emotions of the poet, but its power, its tone and ability to radiate significance are not limited by its origins in a particular mind. That is why any reader of an epiphanic experience becomes a potential participant in the intuitive experience, for its lack of closure allows the reader to complete the epiphany in his own mind. The event is fixed and definite but the 'pageant fades', opening up to a multitude of interpretations without challenging the powerful moment itself.

There has been a shift from the pre-Romantic visionary type of epiphanic experience to the Romantic and Modern intuitive moment. The possibility of this form of revelation emerges in part from the profound changes that were occurring in the early nineteenth-century conceptions of time. For centuries time had been seen as an unbroken linear flow sustained in its continuity by the mind of God, and moving from the beginning of the Universe to a final apocalyptic end with the single human life assumed within it. The Judaeo-Christian tradition calls this kind of time 'teleological', i.e. heading for a predestined end. Georges Poulet has argued that an emphasis on continuous time was replaced by an emphasis on time conceived in momentary terms:

It is the greatness of the eighteenth century to have conceived the prime moment of consciousness as a generating moment and generative not only of other moments but also of a self which takes shape by and through the means of these very moments.

(1956: 23)

This generating of self within the generating moment was one of the reasons why the Romantics abandoned themselves to the most fleeting emotions, as in Wordsworth's 'spots of time'. Browning's 'infinite moment' likewise emerges from the idea that a moment

can suggest limitless duration. It seems then that Romanticism distinguishes two different conceptions of time, one which chronologically orders events, and the other which evaluates experience on the basis of its atemporal significance.

Frank Kermode has adopted two theological terms to describe these two senses of time: chronos, or chronological time, and kairos, or imaginative time. This latter term is given to moments of significance. Chronos time is relentlessly passing and can never be recaptured, whereas kairos time can overcome chronos with the possibility of momentary mental redemption. Kermode says of Wordsworth's capturing moments in time:

The hiding places of power, for Wordsworth...are the agents of time's defeat, discovered by involuntary memory, pure of discursive significance like the girl with the pitcher, they provide the structure and meaning and pleasure which constitute our deliverance from the long meaningless attrition of time.

(1967: 169)

The 'structure and meaning and pleasure' of the epiphanic moment allows for the large number of associations that are focused in a single moment. For the Romantic, the self is re-created through an intense short-lived transcendent moment, and the multiplicity of meanings after it has faded increases the potential value.

J. Hillis Miller suggests a continuity of moments over the past two centuries in terms of what he calls the 'linguistic moment'. He points out that:

...in poems from Wordsworth to Stevens...the intrinsic equivocations of ordinary language interfere with the expression of a univocal meaning.

(1985: 55)

The equivocal language allows the moment to offer many interpretations and, in this way, the words manifest the power of language to reify experience, although, as I have mentioned, even the power of language must fail to communicate adequately the essentially incommunicable of the transcendental realm.

So we can see that the epiphanic mode can take a variety of forms and display varying tendencies within these forms. Wordsworth's 'spots of time' are not identical to Browning's 'good moment'; Shelley's fleeting upward flights are not equivalent to Coleridge's 'flashes'. But the similarities in these forms of epiphany are greater than the differences which separate them. All epiphanic moments involve a way of evaluating the experience of objects of the common world being transformed and transfigured through the creative imagination.

The problem of the epiphanic moment in literature is that it cannot be declared significant until it assumes verbal form. In its verbal form it attempts two things: to point beyond language, to beyond the text, so that it may have meaning in the minds of the readers, and reveal the ways in which language can attempt to manifest the essence of experience. This individual experience passes into the realm of the symbolic when the reader relates the epiphany to the wider details of experience. In the process, the individual reader/poet engages in a multifarious search for the meaning of existence and his/her experience of the world achieves a new open-ended significance.

From considerations of the nature of epiphany and the epiphanic mode, I will attempt to examine briefly Browning's religious beliefs from which emanate his 'infinite moment'.

Over the last century there has been much debate on what Browning's religious standpoint was. This is due, I think, to Browning's unorthodox religion and to the dramatic versatility of his mind which represents not an impediment, but a key to his ideas concerning ultimate reality and meaning. In 1891 Mrs Sutherland Orr initiated debate in the Contemporary Review for the December of that year with an article entitled 'The Religious Opinions of Robert Browning'. She believed that the clue to Browning's heterodoxy was his exclusion of any belief in historical revelation. Her conclusion was based on a misunderstanding of Browning's distrust in reason to undergird faith. William O. Raymond (1929: 609 - 10) rightly points out that firstly, Browning's canon and the evidence of his life refute this. Secondly, Raymond contends that his staunch affirmation of the spiritual significance of the Incarnation and Christ's sacrifice on the Cross override any of Browning's supposed intellectual agnosticism in dealing with Christianity as an historical revelation.

Another critic of Browning's religious position is worth noting briefly, particularly for his views on the poet as a philosopher - a title which Browning seemed never to have claimed. In 1891 Henry Jones charged the poet with severing feeling from intelligence in order to be able to ignore intellectual arguments when they encountered his emotional optimism. It appears that Jones, in his zeal for the systematic order of a philosopher, ignores the techniques of a poet who embraced non-rational religious considerations, such as love between human beings and the importance of existential choice.

The tentativeness of Browning's questions and his open-minded, unprejudiced search for answers conflicted with Jones's rigorous philosophic system.

Another factor which contributed to the discussion of Browning's religious opinions may be that, during the century in which he lived, people were witnessing profound changes in scientific, humanistic and religious thought about the world, the self, and the reciprocal relations between them. J. Hillis Miller's provocative article 'The Theme of the Disappearance of God in Victorian Poetry' describes the Victorian Age thus:

Life in the city, the breakings of mediaeval symbolism, the imprisoning of man in his consciousness, the appearance of the historical sense - each of these is another way in which modern man has experienced the disappearance of God, and taken together they form the essential background against which much Victorian literature must be seen.

(1963: 211)

I believe that Miller is wrong here. God did not disappear in Victorian England; it is perhaps doubt that became more widespread. The historian G. Kitson Clark supports my contention in a chapter of his book concerning life in Victorian times. He maintains, in fact, that the years following 1859 saw a number of great religious revivals in the nation, challenging men and women of every class and level of education. He goes on to mention that the revival 'in all its forms - Anglican, Roman Catholic and Protestant Nonconformist - gave shape and meaning to many lives which otherwise would have had none' (1965: 196).

Nevertheless, being of the age, Browning in a sense did perhaps experience a withdrawal of God, the impossibility of a face-to-face confrontation with God, which diminished man's life and impoverished his spirit. But this incompleteness prevents the

completeness of stagnation and death. Norton B. Crowell (1968: 229) rightly says that man's doubt and uncertainty, his incompleteness, is the foundation stone in the whole structure of God's plan which spurs man on the earthly road toward heavenly perfection. Thus, far from affirming that man and his surroundings are impoverished by God's plan, Browning never ceased to emphasise in his poetry the idea of existential and dynamic growth toward God, toward truth and toward the larger and nobler life - always through doubt and imperfection and trial. He believed that the prize is in the process, not in the attainment. Life is a series of challenges which culminates in Death's summons, whilst Death itself is the passage to immortality. In that transformed state, the inevitable unevenness of life's passage would be straightened and refined. Added to this completing process, behind all the drive and struggle of living, is divine love. Later in this dissertation, I will demonstrate and verify these assertions of Browning in the analyses of his three major religious poems.

There is much the same realisation in Duffin. He pin-points Browning's attitude thus:

The feeling for life, the joyous acceptance of the whole of life, which gives the poems their characteristic colour, is a vivid thing beside what had been called Tennyson's 'terrified denial of pessimism'. The pronouncements on life are preponderantly sober, but the sky is lighted by courage and faith.

(1956: 252)

Browning's 'preponderantly sober' outlook reveals an understanding of that duality in us which is the source of conflict in the soul between good and evil. Even many of his casuistic characters of the dramatic monologues, in their worst

moments, were able to apprehend the inherent good in themselves, for example, Andrea del Sarto, Cleon and Thamuris. Conversely, Browning's courage, hope and faith have caused him to be labelled as an optimist. Herbert Tucker (1980: 184) believes that the term 'meliorist' describes his stance more accurately, for Browning believed in the best of all possible worlds, only and precisely as a possibility: one that was situated in the future, from which it highlighted and criticised the shortcomings of the present. 'God's in his heaven,' Pippa famously sings, 'All's right with the world' ('Pippa Passes': 227-8). But her song falls on the ear of Sebald, an adulterous murderer whose awakened conscience finds no better recourse than suicide. This hardly endorses the rightness of the world that contains Pippa and Sebald alike! This is no facile optimism but a clear-sighted power of seeing the world 'warts and all'. Browning's optimism is not the cause of his religious convictions: rather, his conviction is the root of his optimism.

Because the Victorians believed that God's immanence was lost to their world and the gap between man and divine power seemed great, man could experience the transcendent God only in finite moments of enlightenment. Moreover, Browning realized the failure of the finite to encompass the infinite; his emphasis on the brevity of the infinite moment still involves incompleteness and dissatisfaction. No finite moment, however intense, can have the full plenitude of God, or a complete possession of another person. This is why Browning insists on multiple perspectives in his poetry, on many infinite moments. This will be demonstrated particularly in his dramatic lyric, 'La Saisiaz'.

From these infinite moments something else appears; something which can never be said directly in words. The 'something' is at once the central truth of the human condition and the transcendental truth which underlies all particular human facts. Through these 'insubstantial pageants', we may reach at last God's own infinite perspective. But this again is bound to fail, for Browning believed that on earth we 'see through a glass darkly' (I Cor. 13: 12), yet in this failure lies unexpected success. Man's perpetual striving is his most God-like attribute.

For Browning the individual and his experience of life was of the utmost importance. He saw the self defined not by the events of its life but by its moments of assertion and commitment. In a letter to Julia Wedgewood he writes of:

...the rare flashes of momentary conviction that come
and go in the habitual dusk and doubt of one's life....
(Curle, 1937: 29)

The poem 'Now', which was written towards the end of his life states this conviction that shapes so much of his earlier poetry:

Out of your whole life give but a moment!
All of your life that has gone before,
All to come after it, - so you ignore,
So you make perfect the present, - condense,
In a rapture of rage, for perfection's endowment,
Thought and feeling and soul and sense -
Merged in a moment

(1 - 7)

This moment of crisis which absorbs past and future can reveal the meaning of a man's life in an intense consciousness of the present. Such experiences are characterised by thought and feeling, not by a sustained ratiocination that can be discursively articulated. Here we can see the influence of the Romantic movement on Browning's poetry. Thus, the intensity which

derives from the ability of the epiphanic moment to transcend chronological time, makes the experiences stand out from ordinary consciousness.

Whenever the epiphanic moment occurs, it will be a moment when a man's inner power shows itself in its most essential form. In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett in February 1845 Browning describes his poetry:

...like the light in those crazy Mediterranean phares
... wherein the light is ever revolving in a dark
gallery, bright and alive, and only after a weary
interval leaps out, for a moment, from the narrow chink,
and then goes on with the blind wall between it and you.
(Kintner, 1969, I: 17)

This 'narrow chink' occurs when the poet transcends the temporal world and experiences a vision or intuition of the infinite for a moment, before returning to the ordinary 'blind' world. The memory of the experience may last, but the intensity of the feeling fades. Roma King describes Browning's balance between the ordinary and the extraordinary as art that:

...fixes firmly on this world, including man's
activities, indeed, but at the same time imbuing his
efforts with a boundless significance.
(1968: xxiii)

This 'boundless significance' includes the declaration of a soul aware of its place in the universe. In his 'Preface to Sordello' Browning says: 'My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study' (288). Once the moment has come in which the soul has declared and defined itself by the things it does, events are insignificant. Character after character in Browning's world reveal and commit themselves in a moment's deed. 'Childe Roland', the lovers in 'In a Gondola', or 'The Last Ride Together' are named and known in a single moment

of commitment, while the worst failures of Browning's world, such as the lovers of 'The Statue and the Bust' or 'Youth and Art' are those who fail to seize their moment and commit themselves to it. It is worth noting that many of his poems are suddenly truncated, ending with the characters' assertion of commitment, and the progress of events is never completed. Each of the characters has committed an act that validates his whole life and any event after that, despite its consequences, will not affect that moment or that identity.

This commitment has been found by critics to be similar to modern existentialism, particularly to the Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith'. For Kierkegaard, as for Browning, the defining reality of a man's life is the instant of private commitment. This idea seems to emanate from a growing conviction in the nineteenth century that universal religious and moral truths could not be wrested from objective reason but only through the certainty of intense, individual and particular experience. Christopher Clausen has observed from the Romantics through to the Victorians that

The truths of poetry that seemed to wear best were no longer the 'great truths' of which Wordsworth spoke in 'The Prelude', but rather flashes of insight into experience, highly focused clarifications of life ... amalgams of thought and feeling expressed in lyric form.
(1981: 706)

Only by intuition, emotion, faith and intensity could the connection between the general and the particular be revealed. Browning, like Kierkegaard, sees the intensity of commitment creating an answering revelation from God. This I will attempt to show in the analyses of three dramatic lyrics in the following three chapters.

Thus, the energy which flows from the intensity of the epiphanic moment enables man to make the leap out of the temporal, in which experience is confined, and into the infinite. Man must throw himself entirely into the particular moment with all the energy he possesses. It is the intensity of man's striving, the force of his energy and love, that enables these moments to suggest a passage from the temporal to the eternal. For example, in 'Cristina', Browning shows how temporality is transcended by the epiphanic moment.

Doubt you if, in some moment,
As she fixed me, she felt clearly,
Ages past the soul existed,
Here an age 'tis resting merely,
And hence fleets again for ages....

And then, come the next life quickly.
(33 - 37; 69)

This kind of moment provides a sense of immortality at least for the soul capable of love. Two souls, by virtue of having once loved, will love forever. In contrast to this, 'Porphyria's Lover' perverts this view by trying to preserve the epiphanic moment in an inverted sense. In the warped mentality of the lover, the epiphanic moment leads not to immortal love, but to murder. He kills Porphyria because he wants her for ever as he saw her in an instant as his: a body that would be beside him always. As a result the epiphany becomes ironic:

- she,
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me for ever.

...at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise

Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do....

(21 - 25; 32 - 38)

This demonstrates that the epiphanic moment is always threatened by failure if one tries to hold on to it or capture it. That is why the lover in 'Two in the Campagna' who longs for a feeling of permanence, loses his emotion as soon as he achieves it. The 'good minute' arrives only to be snatched from him by the flow of his own rational thought:

... I pluck the rose
And love it more than tongue can speak -
Then the good minute goes.

(48 - 50)

The 'good minute' when he catches the warmth of his lover's soul in his love for the rose fades as he attempts to interpret its meaning. In the end the speaker gains only a sense of the finite limitations and the infinite nature of his longings. For an epiphany to last, it must issue from a powerful perception of the present and the mingled associations of the past, which can both exist in the intensely realised instant.

Browning's vision of the particular moment as the medium in which man creates himself, leads to the problem of how the moment attains a continuity beyond itself; how a 'good moment' can become an 'infinite moment'. In 'By the Fire-side' the poet suggests how to achieve and preserve the intensity of a moment. The speaker muses on the walk he and his lover took through the Italian countryside, which confirmed their love. They are suddenly halted by a powerful perception that gives way to an intense emotion:

Oh moment, one and infinite!
The water slips o'er stock and stone;
The West is tender, hardly bright:
How grey at once is the evening grown -
One star, its chrysolite!

A moment after, and hands unseen
Were hanging the night around us fast;
But we knew that a bar was broken between
Life and life: we were mixed at last
In spite of the mortal screen.

(181 - 185; 231 - 235)

The mysteriousness of the connection between the elements of perception come without will or even anticipation. The two lovers can achieve a spiritual mystification in an act of grace that resists rational definition and is characterised by a feeling of timelessness. Even 'A moment after' the initial power of the feeling fades, it leaves something of its value behind.

In the multiple epiphanies of life, man can achieve a focus of all these facet-flashes; a unity identified with God. The Ring and the Book suggests a synthesis that can be identified with truth, all the more powerful because of its multiteity. Learn and love, Browning says, not only each individual and powerful experience, but:

Each facet-flash of the revolving year! -
Red, green and blue that whirl into a white,
The variance now, the eventual unity,
Which make the miracle.

(X: 1361 - 64)

Conversely, too, just as one facet-flash can suggest infinity because of its seemingly limitless associations - Browning's 'infinite moment' - so one fragment of experience can imply a whole, of which it is only a suggestive part. The Pope, who is the speaker of the monologue, suggests that man's mind is but a reflection of the infinite truths of God's mind revealed to us in fragments of knowledge which re-unite into a coherent symbol of

the eternal:

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?
(X: 1311 - 15)

During the epiphanic moment a focus is achieved through an image which possesses a mysteriousness; a spiritual quality. The effect is always one of revelation or manifestation which transcends the world of objects into the infinite and the eternal.

Thus, we can see a development from Wordsworth's autobiographical experience to Browning's epiphanic moment in which the location of the experience occurs within the consciousness of a character. The 'insubstantial pageant' of the epiphany fades, with emotion subverting interpretation, giving rise to meaning(s) only after the event. During the epiphanic moment a focus is achieved through an image which possesses a mysteriousness, a spiritual quality. The effect is always one of revelation or manifestation which transcends the world of objects transforming this world into the infinite and eternal.

Browning's ability to unite the individual and the concrete with the infinite is succinctly summarised by Duckworth who contends that his contemplative qualities as a poet see

...each minute sealed with the mark of the infinite and eternal because the infinite and eternal include and swallow up the finite and temporal.

(1966: 210)

CHAPTER 2: CHRISTMAS-EVE

Although Browning wrote 'An Essay on Shelley' two years after the publication of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day in 1850, these dramatic lyrics appear to preface, in poetic form some significant ideas postulated in the essay. In his essay Browning distinguishes between two kinds of objective poet or 'fashioner'. Concerning the creative impulse of the first kind, the question asked is, 'Did a soul's delight in its own extended sphere of vision set it, for the gratification of an insuppressible power, on labour, as other men are set on rest' (Pettigrew, 1981, I: 1001 - 2)?

For the second class, the question is rephrased as follows: 'Or did a sense of duty or of love lead it to communicate its own sensations to mankind? Did an irresistible sympathy with men compel it to bring down and suit its own provision of knowledge and beauty to their narrow scope' (1981, I: 1002)? 'Pictor Ignotus' and 'Andrea del Sarto' seem to exemplify the corrupt extremes of these two types. The unknown painter has become the morbidly self-conscious victim of his 'soul's delight in its own extended sphere of vision', while Andrea in his desire to communicate, has sacrificed originality and compelled his talent 'to bring down and suit its own provision of knowledge and beauty' to the 'narrow scope' of a vulgar audience.

'An Essay on Shelley', however, goes on to propose another kind of poet whose response to experience is primarily subjective. This is the seer, described by Browning as follows:

He, gifted like the objective poet with the fuller perception of nature and man, is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth, - an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul.... Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity he has to do; and he digs where he stands, - preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of the absolute Mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak.... He is rather a seer, accordingly, than a fashioner, and what he produces will be less a work than an effluence.

(1981, I: 1002)

Although Browning declined to favour either the objective or the subjective artist at the expense of the other, the general tone of his remarks strongly suggests that in his concept of the seer, he was proposing a higher orientation for the poetic impulse than would result from conforming to the demands either of the individual ego or society at large. It is the seer who emerges as the supreme type of artist, embodying in transmuted form the two aspects of the fashioner and merging them under the authority of a transcendent vision or epiphanic experience adequate to the opposing impulses which inhere in a double awareness. In other words, Browning believed that the creative instinct could only function at its highest potential under divine inspiration, and it follows then, that the poet-seer must acknowledge the sanction under which he writes: he will be 'impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth' (1981, I: 1002).

Thus, who is better equipped to apprehend the spirit world

than the artist-seer endowed with special intuitions? His senses are more keenly responsive to beauty and his mind probes deeper into the laws of cause and effect, but the faculty on which before all others he relies is imaginative insight.

Browning's imaginative insight in 'Christmas-Eve' appears to manifest a desire for a logically coherent and morally valid content which, for all its particular application, '...is but for myself I know' ('Christmas-Eve': 1187), yet involves a definite moral stand on the values of religion, human responsibility, and the need for salvation. To give expression to this ambivalent content, Browning draws elements of drama, satire and exposition into a complex narrative form of individual experiment. This is evident from the interaction between the particular and the general, subjective and objective, personal and fictional, strikingly reflected in the ambiguity of the basic narrative assumption of the poem.

Unlike the traditional dream or vision form, in which the shift from reality or fantasy is clearly marked, 'Christmas-Eve' seems deliberately to leave both the moment and the nature of the experience undefined. The poem opens with apparent reality: the speaker leaves the slum chapel for the stormy heath, is emotionally shaken by the apparition of the moon and the moon-bow over the dark clouds, and then has his vision of Christ just before him on the common path. In his vision he is then swept up and visits Rome ('Now I see; it is no dream' (543)) and Gottingen, and is finally returned to the chapel, which he re-enters. But the reality of the vision is challenged by the reality within the chapel. His neighbours show obvious signs of

distaste, indicating that he has slumbered and dreamed the whole experience. On the other hand, since he has heard the sermon and can judge it, how could he have been asleep? But both these possibilities of a dream-vision or an exercise of the imagination within the chapel seem incompatible with the contrast between the 'reality' of the experience of the moon-bow and the 'vision' of Christ. While there is a fundamental 'double awareness' about the actuality of the experience, there is no doubt in evaluating the spiritual validity of the experience, whatever its position in terms of logical reality:

For the Vision, that was true, I wist,
True as that heaven and earth exist.
(1244 - 45)

This is borne out by William Clyde De Vane where he mentions that "In a conversation with W.G. Kingsland, Browning asserted, concerning Zion Chapel, that 'all the incidents are imaginary - save the lunar rainbow: I saw that'" (1955: 199). To the epiphanic experience of the lunar rainbow I will return, but first it is important to mention that the imaginary incidents of the narrative, namely the Zion Chapel, St Peter's in Rome and the Professor in the Gottingen lecture-hall possibly owe their imaginative origin to a letter written by Elizabeth Barrett to Browning nearly a year later, in 1846, in her first confession of faith to him:

Dearest, when I told you yesterday, after speaking of the many coloured theologies of the house, that it was hard to answer for what I was... I meant that I felt unwillingly, for my part, to put on any of the liveries of the sects. The truth, as God sees it, must be something different from these opinions about truth - these systems which fit different classes of men like their coats, and wear brown at the elbows always. I believe in what is divine and floats at highest, in all these different theologies - and because the really

Divine draws together souls, and tends so to a unity, I could pray anywhere and with all sorts of worshippers from the Sistine Chapel to Mr. Fox's, those kneeling and those standing. Wherever you go, in all religious societies, there is a little to revolt, and a good deal to bear with - but it is not otherwise in the world without; and, within, you are especially reminded that God has to be more patient than yourself after all. Still you go quickest there, where your sympathies are least ruffled and disturbed - and I like, beyond comparison best, the simplicity of the dissenters... Well - there is enough to dissent among the dissenters - the Formula is rampant among them as among others - you hear things like the buzzing of flies in proof of a corruption - and see every now and then something divine set up like a post for men of irritable minds and passions to rub themselves against, calling it a holy deed - you feel moreover bigotry and ignorance pressing on you on all sides, till you gasp for breath like one strangled. But better this, even, than what is most beautiful in the Christian Doctrine; but the formulists, on the other side, stir up a dust, in which appears excusable not to see. When the veil of the body falls, then we shall look into each other's faces astonished... after one glance at God's!

(Kintner, 1969: 962)

In his reply, Browning concurs with her ideas, clearly stating that the 'truth as God sees it' must differ from the many opinions about it. To many critics, especially those of the pre-1970s, the poem deals ostensibly with Browning's exploration of different modes of worship with his final choice being the Dissenters' chapel, but when one reads further in his reply to Miss Barrett:

See the levity! No - this sort of levity only exists because of the strong conviction, I do believe! There seems no longer need of earnestness in assertion, or proof... so it runs lightly over, like foam on top of a wave...

(Kintner, 1969: 969)

he belies the idea of the serious consideration of denominational choice by his satiric burlesque of the ugly and mean congregation being preached to by an ignorant man in the Zion Chapel, the 'posturings and petticoatings' (1325) of Rome and the 'exhausted

air-bell of the Critic' (899) in Gottingen.

Clyde de L. Ryals (1987: 42) interprets the 'levity' that informs the narrative as ironic, suggesting the insoluble conflict between the absolute and the relative, the necessity and yet the impossibility of total communication. This interpretation I believe is valid, in that in Browning's universe any affirmation is only provisional. His kind of irony does not allow the subject to come to a stop at a single point but causes it to travel incessantly between the finite and the infinite, the bounded and the free, the signifier and the signified, in a balance of dialectical movement. For example, in 'Christmas-Eve' Browning forgoes a single, fixed, central meaning, purposefully leading the reader into confusion of what in the narrative is fact and what is fiction. This causes him/her to become caught up in his/her own self-consciousness, thereby implicating the reader in the drama of interpretation. Thus, the artist in Browning plays with the subject, deconstructing the narrative order and determinable meaning that it pretends to offer. Underpinning this self-conscious artistry is the poet-seer who does believe, no longer needing 'earnestness in assertion or proof' (Kintner, 1969: 969).

E. Le Roy Lawson believes this ironic attitude is contradictory to the religious attitude. If one's faith is the speaker's ultimate concern, he can never enjoy an ironic distance from its object. Lawson says that the problem of the use of irony is solved when 'one sees that the poem is not a search for a true form of worship or a deeper understanding of God at all.' (1974: 68). He believes it is a didactic poem in

dramatic form using as his proof the lack of any real development of the speaker, the absence of crisis and a lack of genuine tension within the narrative itself. If we take the speaker to be Browning himself, he already knows what he believes and the source of that belief. He believes in Love because his heart tells him to. Having secured himself on a Rock of Love, he can view from above the religious controversy swirling beneath him.

Another problem that has concerned critics is the levity of the language itself. Blackburn (1967: 118) finds its jog-trot rhythms offensive, denigrating the 'meaning' of the poem and disallowing adequate discussion of the infinite in language of such levity. But surely 'the foam on top of a wave', the lightness of touch, is a way of ironically emphasising depth of meaning through satire and understatement. Lines from 'With Charles Avison' reinforce the idea that meaning may exist in other ways besides the mind's gathering of loose facts into solid knowledge. There exists an intangible dimension, 'Soul', which is unbound by the structures of the mind and escapes from the depths of feeling, revealing itself in effervescent moments of 'flower and foam':

So works Mind - by stress
Of faculty, with loose facts, more or less,
Builds up our solid knowledge: all the same,
Underneath rolls what Mind may hide not tame,
An element which works beyond our guess,
Soul, the unsounded sea - whose lift of surge,
Spite of all superstructure, lets emerge,
In flower and foam, Feeling from out the deeps
Mind arrogates no mastery upon -
Distinct indisputably.

(156 - 65)

So again, in 'Christmas-Eve', Browning's apology through his speaker reminds us that:

Looking below light speech we utter,
When frothy spume and frequent sputter
Prove that the soul's depths boil in earnest!

(1351 - 53)

The central core of 'Christmas-Eve' is the epiphanic moment the speaker experiences in sections V - IX where he is a man alone after flinging himself from the little chapel. The speaker has an awed sense of Divinity pervading the entire cosmos and wishes to worship by himself alone, free from the irksome limitations of any sectarian service. He talks of the origins of his own religious faith and relates that even in youth he was aware of the power of God made manifest in His creation:

- In youth I looked to these very skies,
And probing their immensities,
I found God there, his visible power;
Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
Of the power, an equal evidence
That his love, there too, was the nobler dower.

(279 - 84)

This is a theme to which Browning returns again and again, using part or whole of what I believe is the following circle of ideas according to the needs of the poem. Love is the noblest human quality. God, if he exists, must, if he is God at all, be at least as capable of loving as his creatures. Therefore God is a God of Love. We can not only prove this intellectually, but establish it empirically, for God has shown us his love by sending Christ into the world. This we recognise as a supreme act of love. What is required of us in return is that we should also love God. When we love God or love our fellow-men we are ourselves closer to God. Therefore Love is the noblest human quality.

Never really questioning the existence of God, the speaker nonetheless experiences God's qualitative and spatial distance

from him:

You know what I mean: God's all, man's nought:
But also, God, whose pleasure brought
Men into being, stands away
As it were a handbreadth off, to give
Room for the newly-made to live.

(288 - 92)

God allows man freedom of choice by his transcendent nature; by his distancing himself from man. This is the counterpart of the idea that certainty in matters of faith would compel belief and that a belief so compelled would be worthless. 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' is perhaps one of Browning's best examples of how doubt can act as a corollary to faith. Although it may appear that in using his pragmatic philosophy of religion to justify the comforts of his life as a bishop, Blougram nevertheless warns his sceptic friend, Gigadibs, of the danger of judging by appearances. Blougram's beliefs are too secure - not too frail - to be undermined by doubt. He insists:

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....

(610 - 13)

I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists.

(602)

This idea is akin to another of Browning's great religious poems, 'Saul', where David, in an impassioned speech of selfless love, pours out the prophecy of the coming of the greatest lover:

...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!

(309 - 12)

Browning of course does not use this argument as an

incitement to scepticism, as if doubt were per se good, but as a justification of God's ways in refusing to vouchsafe to man incontrovertible proofs of His existence. Man's faith on earth, for Browning, is a process of growing and learning from empirical experience, mainly observed in the natural world:

What love can do in the leaf or stone,
(So that to master this alone,
This done in the stone and leaf for me,
I must go on learning endlessly.)
('Christmas-Eve': 343 - 46)

The evidence in nature of God's power is important but secondary for Browning. His heart's feelings in effect state the a priori qualification of divinity. In this impulsive statement lies the essence of the epiphanic moment; that although the God he finds in nature is power, the heart's need is for love. And since the greatest human need is love, the highest possible concept for God is love. The speaker's highly charged understanding of love becomes the object of his worship, to which he attaches the name 'God'. In 'Christmas-Eve' the fusion of God-Christ and Love is made explicit in the following passage:

No: love which, on earth, amid all the shows of it,
Has ever been seen the sole good of life in it,
The love, ever growing there, spite of the strife in it,
Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it.
And I shall behold thee, face to face,
O God, and in thy light retrace
How in all I loved here, still wast thou!
(359 - 65)

Love is all for him: 'the sole good of life', the means through which his soul will continue to grow and develop, his assurance of life beyond death.

But the speaker's understanding of his epiphanic moment is not complete. There is a hint of pride and exclusiveness at the end of Section V when he asserts:

Oh, let men keep their ways
Of seeking thee in a narrow shrine -
Be this my way! And this is mine!
(372 - 74)

This leads on to further revelations in Section VI confronting the speaker directly with his overwhelming confidence in his mode of worship. The precise details of this scene have an important structural function for the epiphanic moment. The imagery of the moon, previously barred behind clouds, struggling to shine through prepares us for the emotional and symbolic implications of the sudden emergence of the moon and the moon-bow:

The black cloud-barricade was riven,
Ruined beneath her feet, and driven
Deep in the West; while, bare and breathless,
North and South and East lay ready
For a glorious thing that, dauntless, deathless,
Sprang across them and stood steady.
'T was a moon-rainbow, vast and perfect,
From heaven to heaven extending, perfect
As the mother-moon's self, full in face.
(379 - 87)

This epiphanic moment is consequent upon the prayer of praise to God for the beauty and power of nature but it is also a preparation for a further mystic vision. The transition is symbolised by the imagery of rainbow colours fusing into pure white light. White is of course made up of all colours; and the speaker can discern separately the coloured components of the whiteness of truth, but seldom the white light of truth itself. For man, truth is transcendent, always dimly veiled. This flash of truth gives way again to another rainbow 'mightier,/ Fainter, flushier and flightier, -' than the first (399 - 400).

Though Browning offers no explicit comment to such an effect, these rainbows symbolise perhaps his own theology of unlimited progression which contrasts with the chapel's one

probationary existence followed by a static heaven or hell. But the speaker still possesses an element of pride in his ability to read natural revelation; he interprets this phenomenon as a sign of God's blessing:

This sight has shown me, there are thou and then, -
Me, one out of a world of men,
Singled forth, as the chance might hap
(405 - 7)

and treats the phenomenon as a modern-day interpretation of the Transfiguration (Mark 9: 2 - 8). Like Peter, he exclaims:

"If thou wilt, let me build to thee
"Service-tabernacles three,
"Where, forever in thy presence,
"In ecstatic acquiescence,
"Far alike from thriftless learning
"And ignorance's undiscerning
"I may worship and remain!"
(413 - 19)

His contempt for others' ignorance, with its corollary of pride in the exclusiveness of his own revelation, is soon punished by the disintegration of the rainbow: 'palely serpentining round/into the dark with mazy error' (428 - 29), teaching him (and us) that epiphanic moments are not easily read by man's finite perception. When heavenly revelations like rainbows or Biblical texts get translated into earthly terms, they inevitably get tainted by 'mazy error'.

Although the speaker is 'Glutted with the glory' (422) his feelings of liberation quickly give way to an equally intense sense of being overshadowed by the towering figure of Christ. Even in the one moment of the moon's full splendour, at Christ's coming in radiance, the speaker cannot see Christ's face 'only the sight/ Of a sweepy garment, vast and white' (437 - 38).

On the one hand he never looks directly at the clear white

light of truth because to do so would result in blindness. Truth itself can never be apprehended, only aspects of it perceived. This is why the speaker never embraces Christ directly but holds the hem, or is swept up in the folds of his vesture. Truth can never be directly embraced. As Browning says in the 'Essay on Shelley': 'An absolute vision is not for this world, but we are permitted a continual approximation to it...' (Pettigrew, 1981, I: 1005). He receives no full revelation of all metaphysical truth, but what is revealed is Christ as the full embodiment of love, the highest example for human behaviour.

On the other hand, when the speaker is unable to see the figure's face, averted perhaps in disapproval, he remembers the words in the New Testament which seem a direct rebuke to any man who would worship alone, or at least to any who scorn those who worship together:

"I remember, he did say
"Doubtless that, to this world's end,
"Where two or three should meet and pray,
"He would be in the midst, their friend;
"Certainly he was there with them!"
(443 - 47)

and he recognises his pride, pleading with the figure not to abandon him for choosing to worship alone:

"Therefore thou must not turn from me
"As I had chosen the other part!
"Folly and pride o'ercame my heart."
(462 - 64)

The figure moves away, as though to express displeasure and the speaker calls after, in penitence and prayer, acknowledging his own 'Folly and pride'. Christ then turns back:

The whole face turned upon me full.
And I spread myself beneath it,
As when the bleacher spreads, to seethe it
In the cleansing sun, his wool, -
Steps in the flood of noontide whiteness
Some defiled, discoloured web -
So lay I, saturate with brightness.
And when the flood appeared to ebb,
Lo, I was walking, light and swift....

(487 - 95)

Here again, the speaker is unable to confront the figure of Christ face to face: the pure white light of truth. Browning feels that he cannot endure the central incandescence of revelation, but he is able to feel and experience the saturating brightness of Christ's love. According to him, unlike Christopher Smart (1722 - 71), the English poet whom he much admired, no other poet between Milton and Keats, including himself, has been able to pierce the screen between the epiphanic experience and the recording of it in language. He recognises Smart's gift to confront the pure 'fire-flame' ('With Christopher Smart': 123) of truth while he acknowledges that 'with life be my concern -' (122). In other words, Browning is content to experience, like most men, the revelation of truth to man while on earth through love. And this, for him, is the essence of the epiphanic moment. I believe that it is not as Duckworth (1966: 199) suggests, that Browning desired the white light of truth yet was terrified by it, but that only by rarest chance is naked truth revealed to some men.

... and whoso saw for once could tell
Us others of her majesty and might
In large, her loveliness infinite
In little....

('With Christopher Smart': 142 - 45)

But the poet can speak confidently of the divinity of love because the evidence of the inner man supports this belief.

Further on in 'Christmas-Eve' he maintains that the one reliable testimony to truth comes from within:

Take all in a word: the truth in God's breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed....
(1018 - 19)

A man can be certain that he knows more in his conscience

Of what right is, than arrives at birth
In the best man's acts that we bow before:
This last knows better - true, but my fact is,
'T is 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.
(1036 - 42)

The speaker then finds that motive and injunction in Christ and that the truth of the conscience is identical with the truth of God. Ironically it is God's (and not man's) true function to serve man's moral needs. Truth, he realises, is not something one knows; it is something one does, and for Browning love is a concrete action, not an abstract principle. Without an unobstructed vision of truth, man can still act upon what he knows: the limited truth that he does possess. He knows that he can love, therefore he must.

The denouement of the epiphanic moment occurs when, clinging to Christ's garments, the speaker is carried to Rome where he witnesses the Christmas service in St Peter's, and then the Christmas eve lecture at Gottingen. Through these two visions the speaker realises that for him the Roman Catholic religion provides for the love that is the central core of religion, but denigrates the intellect, while German rationalism elevates the intellect and ignores the essential human need for a super-rational and loving relationship with the Divine. Through

exposure to these views, the speaker has learnt in his own experience to balance the claims of heart and head, using his intellect to evaluate and his feelings to emphasise. He has also learnt that the position of detached observer is yet more dangerous to the self than any imbalance of commitment. Thus in essence these experiences have led him to the realisation of man's need to express his religious feeling which essentially reflects both love and knowledge in an act of corporate worship, however imperfect its nature.

For I, a man, with men am linked
And not a brute with brutes; no gain
That I experience, must remain
Unshared.

(1176 - 79)

Because all forms of worship are but vessels and of value only as they carry the living water, and because the Dissenter tradition for him places the least emphasis on the vessel, the speaker chooses 'in ignorance and weakness' (1301) to worship with the Dissenters:

For the preacher's merit or demerit,
It were to be wished the flaws were fewer
In the earthen vessel, holding treasure
Which lies as safe in a golden ewer;
But the main thing is, does it hold good measure?
Heaven soon sets right all other matters!

(1311 - 16)

But the speaker's choice of Zion Chapel is secondary in significance to the sense of elation based upon the total experience clarified by the vision of Rome and Gottingen. And this elation Browning does not present as the final and only armour for all men. This is the individual truth the poet himself arrived at through his own experiences, realistic and imaginary:

- I cannot bid
The world admit he stooped to heal
My soul, as if in a thunder-peal
Where one heard noise, and one saw flame,
I only knew he named my name....
(1206 - 10)

Even though the particular choice may have relevance only to the particular man and his experience, the fact of his committed choice has a wider moral implication. The whole tenor of the poem expresses Browning's didactic imperative of the urgency of each man's individual choice and commitment.

Critics such as Peterson (1986: 363 - 80) and Ryals (1987: 39 - 44) have taken the ending of the poem to be ironic and suffused with ambiguity. Was the speaker caught up in some genuine visionary experience or did he merely fall asleep? Can we trust him either as a conveyer of interpretation or as an interpreter himself? What they fail to recognise is that 'Christmas-Eve' is presented as a dramatically conceived experience carrying its full meaning in the intensity of the epiphanic moment rather than in any logically coherent body of thought. The ambivalences lie not in the sincerity (or not) of the poet's choice of the Zion Chapel, for, when he says, 'I choose here!' (1341) he has moved from the narrative past to the writing present, underlining again the need for man to confront personally and individually his own religious beliefs. The multivalent meanings of the epiphanic moment are Browning's own religious questionings of his essentially deep-rooted faith, contained within an artistic construct.

CHAPTER 3: EASTER-DAY

Before focusing on the epiphanic moment in 'Easter-Day' it is important to comment on the dramatic lyric mode which Browning employs in this companion poem to 'Christmas-Eve'. The first twelve sections are cast in the form of a dialogue between two speakers, neither of whom, as we see from Section IV, is the same as the speaker in 'Christmas-Eve'. But as Harty comments, 'This poem confirms and develops the personal individualistic approach to Christianity which concluded 'Christmas-Eve'' (1981: 133).

The first speaker, whose monologue the poem is, finds it difficult to be a Christian while the second speaker puts forward, for the most part, the arguments for not allowing one's faith to become a burden - 'Here I live / In trusting ease' (325 - 26). It is difficult to define Browning's attitude to both speakers as both express views with which Browning has sympathy. Unlike Mrs Sutherland Orr (1887: 184) who labelled the two characters as the 'sceptic' and 'the man of faith', I believe that Drew's (1970: 206 - 7) idea of the speaker representing one side of Browning's mind, while the Easy Christian the other, is closer to defining Browning's continual debate and struggle with his faith. As with 'Christmas-Eve', 'Easter-Day' too reveals Browning's abhorrence of passivity and complacent certainty in matters of faith, considering the true substance of faith to be a dynamic process, rather than a conclusion finally won and held.

In a letter written to Elizabeth, Browning explained that one must make one's choice amid uncertainty, 'For all one's life

is some form of religion and all our action some belief' (Kintner, 1969:213). Belief therefore should be judged not by its proximity to orthodoxy, but by a personal effort expended in believing. This insistence on the personal nature of religious experience leads to an examination in 'Easter-Day' of the vital question, 'What does Christianity mean to me?' or similarly, 'How am I to become a Christian?'

We can observe in these questions strains of Kierkegaardian theology: the emphasis on a personal working out of one's faith based on empirical experience. Even stylistically, Browning's way of proceeding by argument and debate is very much in the manner of the Danish theologian. Browning's existential posture is therefore to be reflected in his belief that man confronts God personally and the only reliable information upon which religious decisions can be made is personal. Ultimate truth cannot be pressed into verbal propositions or safeguarded by hallowed institutions. Kingsbury Badger notes that:

Because Browning found ample evidence of religion in human experience, he did not need either the external evidence of miracles or the facts of history to strengthen his faith.

(1966: 91)

Browning's emphasis on the 'evidence of religion in human experience' may explain his later theory of Christianity as a dynamic and evolving faith in which mankind grows in love for God and his fellow creatures. It is then not surprising that his favourite Gospel was John, the one that records only six miracles and is less concerned with the historical sequence of events than with showing Christ's divinity and God as a God of love. 'A Death in the Desert' examines, among other issues, Browning's

fear that historical 'fact' might trample on spiritual truth and the empirical knowledge of Christianity evidenced in love. Victorian man saw himself as the master of his own destiny and even of love, as the following lines declare:

But when, beholding that love everywhere,
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,..."
(504 - 7)

William O. Raymond puts it succinctly when he postulates:

...that Browning considers the historical evidences of Christianity only as a corollary to what may be called the Gospel of the eternal Christ, or less theologically, the unceasing revelation of the infinite love and self-sacrifice of a divine being in lives transfigured by his presence.

(1929: 608 - 9)

The speaker too in 'Easter-Day', wishes to find proof in historical fact, looking for comfort in 'some mummy-scrap' (178) declaring Moses lives, or explaining Jonah's whale, but no - 'The human heart's best' (185). The final authority in religious choice is the chooser. In his uncertainty and loneliness, Browning's man must choose to believe in God, desiring to satisfy Him, and he admits that it is belief and not knowledge which motivates him.

But this belief is not finite and unquestioning; it is not without its difficulties. The second speaker claims that Christian practice would be easy if Christian doctrines were only certain:

Could I believe once thoroughly,
The rest were simple. What? Am I
An idiot, do you think, - a beast?
Prove to me, only that the least
Command of God is God's indeed,
And what injunction shall I need
To pay obedience?

(31 - 7)

The first speaker answers him by contending that certainty of God's will which is not to be had while in the human condition would make the Christian life inevitable and without value when we are not confronted with the choice between good and evil. It is interesting to note that in his last years, Browning continued to explore in greater depth, the problem of good and evil. In 'La Saisiaz', which will be analysed in the following chapter, this debate forms the main thrust of the poem.

Could he acquit us or condemn
For holding what no hand can loose,
Rejecting when we can't but choose?
(62 - 4)

But even in man's free choice, he cannot always rely on his intuitions as unfailing guides to conduct. If it were so, the test of life would be destroyed. The first speaker corroborates this idea:

You must mix some uncertainty
With faith, if you would have faith be.
Why, what but faith, do we abhor
And idolize each other for -
Faith in our evil or our good,
Which is or is not understood
Aright by those we love or those
We hate, thence called our friends or foes?
(71 - 8)

Not even man's experiences may be relied on as a guide. The moral choice of yesterday which fitted the exigencies of the moment so well, may not be blindly relied on to answer the needs of tomorrow. Each test is new and fresh and individual and the ambivalence of our response must be directed by the daily immanence of God in our lives.

In Section VI the second speaker is forced to agree that faith cannot be founded on certainty - 'A scientific faith's

absurd' (124) but pleads for at least probability: 'the chance must lie/ Clear on one side' (128 - 9). The first speaker replies that there are many probabilities which affirm the Christian faith and one will find 'evidence enough' (172).

'T is found,
No doubt: as is your sort of mind,
So is your sort of search: you'll find
What you desire....

(172 - 5)

But once all these 'proofs' are found 'what remains?' (198). Immediately, the second speaker responds fervently with 'Renounce the world!' (199). This, suggests the first, is easier said than done.

- Ah, were it done
By merely cutting one by one
Your limbs off, with your wise head last,
How easy were it! - how soon past,
If once in the believing mood!

(199 - 203)

To cut oneself off from the world is an easy evasion of probation done in the heat of momentary fervour. Browning believed this unthinking submission of will and intellect as contrary to true faith. His letter of 1845 to Elizabeth echoes these sentiments:

Chop off your legs, you will never go astray, - stifle your reason altogether and you will find it difficult to reason ill; "it is hard to make such sacrifices!" - Not so hard as to lose the reward or incur the penalty of an Eternity to come, "hard to effect them, then, and go through with them" - not hard, when the leg is to be cut off - that it is rather harder to keep it quiet on a stool, I know very well.

(Kintner, 1969: 213)

The second speaker, because he fundamentally refuses to confront the problems of belief that his friend poses, misunderstands the challenge 'Cut off your limbs' and accuses him of looking for difficulties where none exist:

More pettishly we try and cull
Briers, thistles, from our private plot,
To mar God's ground where thorns are not!
(224 - 26)

The debate now becomes somewhat confused which shows how Browning felt torn between the views of the doubter and the one who fervently wishes to accept unquestioningly:

Do you say this, or I? - Oh you!
Then, what, my friend? - (thus I pursue
Our parley)....
(227 - 29)

The first speaker then poses a trenchant question. He asks whether belief in the stupendous drama of Christ's Incarnation was merely played out to heighten our joys and make our sorrows easier to bear. Surely then, faith would simply be utilitarian in function. In other words he is demanding more of faith than this. He illustrates his contention with an example of a martyr, who having endured many trials, experiences a personal confrontation with Christ:

But at the Close a Hand came through
The fire above my head, and drew
My soul to Christ, whom now I see.
(283 - 85)

This revelation is enviable and far above the simplistic renunciation of the world for the sake of an intellectual acceptance of a faith which happens to be beyond our knowledge. Is this not then self-delusion? And he reiterates the opening lines of the poem:

- how hard it is
To be a Christian!
(320 - 21)

Clearly, in Section XI, the second speaker feels disarmed and

rebukes his friend for unsettling his beliefs of 'trusting ease'
(326) and

... causing me to lose what most
Yourself would mourn for had you lost!
(327 - 28)

But as the first speaker points out, this faith is illusory and one based on blind hope and a death-wish brought about by a need to renounce the world. Thus the dialogue ends and both doubter and easy believer admit that proof of God's designs are inaccessible. Absolute knowledge of God cannot be ours. Far closer than our duty to believe is our doubt:

I wish indeed 'God's kingdom come - '
The day when I shall see appear
His bidding, as my duty, clear
From doubt! (458 - 61)

The dialectic has led nowhere and the believer can only appeal finally to personal experience. In the remainder of the poem the first speaker works out a definition by which he can understand faith to be a conclusive and definite choice, yet avoid seeing such conclusiveness as a condition of stagnant passivity. The speaker recounts a remarkable vision in which he confronted Christ three years earlier. On a walk while meditating about life after death, he asks himself:

How were my case, now, did I fall
Dead here, this minute - should I lie
Faithful or faithless?
(396 - 98)

This is the question the speaker of 'Easter-Day' sets himself to answer. On the night before Easter, he asks himself what meaning for him personally lies in 'That History, that Faith' (388). His answer comes in an epiphanic moment: a vision of Judgement, a magnificent rending of the heavens which leaves

... exposed the utmost walls
Of time, about to tumble in
And end the world.

(544 - 46)

It is an existential moment for him. He is alone before the final Judge, choosing his destiny.

There, stood I, found and fixed, I knew,
Choosing the world. The choice was made;
And naked and disguiseless stayed,
And unevadable, the fact.

(552 - 55)

Having chosen the world rather than God is the speaker's attempt to excuse himself on the grounds that the world, being God's creation, was too beautiful to renounce. It is met only by a solemn voice saying:

Life is done,
Time ends, Eternity's begun,
And thou art judged for evermore.

(594 - 96)

The debate, which once again Browning uses, this time between the speaker and God himself, provides the explanation of this stern decree in the following eleven sections. It is evidence of Browning's determination through the personal epiphanic moment to view Christianity not from the outside, but as an empirical basis for his way of life. It is a confrontation with Christ himself, not as an historical personage, but as an epiphany of majestic splendour. He is Browning's creation. In 'Christmas-Eve', although he appears 'with human air' (432), the speaker sees 'the back of him, no more' (434). He recognises the hem of his 'vast and white' (438) garment, and he is terrified. This awesome Christ is called 'the love of God' (459). In 'Easter-Day', Christ appears as Judge, meeting the speaker in his vision of death. The description is more vivid than in 'Christmas-Eve' but Christ

is no more real.

He stood there. Like the smoke
Pillared o'er Sodom, when day broke, -
I saw Him. One magnificent pall
Mantled in massive fold and fall
His head, and coiled in snaky swathes
About His feet: night's black, that bathes
All else, broke, grizzled with despair,
Against the soul of blackness there.

(640 - 47)

The awfulness of the moment reduces the speaker to 'a mass,/ No man now' (654). So the voice of God speaks:

This world,
This finite life, thou hast preferred,
In disbelief of God's plain word,
To Heaven and to infinity.
Here the probation was for thee,
To show thy soul the earthly mixed
With heavenly, it must choose betwixt...

Thy choice was earth: thou didst attest
'T was fitter spirit should subserve
The flesh, than flesh refine to nerve
Beneath the spirit's play.

(667 - 73, 679 - 82)

As the speaker has chosen earth, then all the earth shall be his and he foolishly rejoices at the gifts of the world's 'Vast Exhaustless beauty.' (745). But the Christ figure who stands before him tells him that as he has deliberately chosen the world, the finite life, in opposition to God, heaven is forever denied him.

Thou art shut
Out of the heaven of spirit; glut
Thy sense upon the world: 't is thine
For ever - take it!

(696 - 99)

Realising that nature, which divorced from any supernatural order offers no evidence of life's plan or direction, the speaker struggles with his decision as he remonstrates with God about the endless wonder and beauty of creation. Later, in 'Caliban upon

Setebos' (1864) Browning was, in darker tone, to set out in more detail his rejection of natural theology, exposing the imperfections of a 'natural' religion and its God of mere power. He believed that it is not possible to arrive at a proof of the nature of God by reasoning from His universe. Caliban, 'the natural man', never experiences the moment of revelation, of insight, so necessary for spiritual fulfilment, in spite of being intimately part of God's natural creation. Thus, in 'Easter-Day' the 'austere voice' (704) rebukes him explaining that the earth is merely the antechamber to Heaven. A wise man would know how much Heaven must exceed the earth in beauty. For man,

All partial beauty was a pledge
Of beauty in its plenitude:
But since the pledge sufficed thy mood,
Retain it! plenitude, be theirs
Who looked above!

(769 - 73)

Art, to which the speaker turns next, can record man's hopes, struggles and limitations, but it cannot serve as a basis for faith. Great works of sculpture and painting, even though transcending Nature are at best imperfect reflections of the ideal beauty in the artist's mind, as this world is an imperfect reflection of heaven. Using the metaphor of a lizard's hole in a rock which can be easily shattered to explain the insufficiency and limitations of the world 'To house man's soul, man's need fulfil' (845), the speaker realizes how his choice is limited and inadequate. This argument from the imperfections of earth to the perfection of Heaven is an example of Browning's belief in treating the world as a time of learning, probation and development.

Similarly the concept of Art as transcending Nature and as offering a glimpse of the perfections to come is evidence for a future life in which the artist's shadowing forth of the ideal shall become reality. The artist is therefore a tool in the hands of the Creator and apprehends, although at many removes, a complete world. Thus he shares and makes manifest some of God's power.

Realizing that he is being consistently rebutted in his reliance on the natural world and Art as revelations of God's love, the speaker despairingly then proclaims 'Mind is best' (874), testing reason as a foundation for faith. But the mind depends on unreliable physical senses and thus is itself inadequate. All operations of the intellect are earthbound and the question 'Whereto does knowledge serve!' (897) is sufficient to show the limitations of mental activity.

Even poetry, which offers a means of transcending the human condition is rejected by God at the end of Section XXVIII. The poet can only offer fleeting glimpses of the world of the spirit because no man can experience it for long:

else were permanent
Heaven on the earth; its gleams were meant
To sting with hunger for full light....
(919 - 21)

These fleeting glimpses are an oblique vision of the spirit world of reality and again are inadequate reflections of truth. Finally realizing the emptiness of the strictly physical and temporal, the speaker cries out:

Behold, my spirit bleeds,
Catches no more at broken reeds, -
But lilies flower those reeds above:
I let the world go, and take love!

Love survives in me, albeit those
I love be henceforth masks and shows,
Not living men and women: still
I mind how love repaired all ill,
Cured wrong, soothed grief, made earth amends
With parents, brothers, children, friends!

I pray, -
Leave to love, only!

(931 - 40, 950 - 51)

This is the speaker's internalizing of the epiphanic moment, the moment to which God has been compelling him and he realizes that all that is left to him is love. And yet the revelation is not clear. He says he will try to find a woman with whom he can live in affection. To this he receives a scornful reply from God that man's love is a poor reflection of God's love which has always been manifest in His dying for him. God asks how anyone could reject that event on the grounds that there was 'Too much love!' (979) in it. Thus the central moment becomes clear for the speaker and one which compelled Browning the most: the Incarnation as the supreme act of God's love.

Only in Love, in reaching outward and being touched by both the human and the divine can life's meaning be found. What begins as existential anguish, with a solitary figure searching for order in chaos, leads - not to a sense of absurdity and meaninglessness in his personal universe - but to an assertion of himself and a commitment to cosmic and personal love:

- Now take love! Well betide
Thy tardy conscience! Haste to take
The show of love for the name's sake,
Remembering every moment Who,
Beside creating thee unto
These ends, and these for thee, was said
To undergo death in thy stead
In flesh like thine: so ran the tale.
What doubt in thee could countervail
Belief in it? Upon the ground
'That in the story had been found

Too much love! How could God love so?
He who in all his works below,
Adapted to the needs of man,
Made love the basis of the plan, -
Did love, as was demonstrated:
While man, who was so fit instead
To hate, as every day gave proof, -
Man thought man, for his kind's behoof,
Both could and did invent that scheme
Of perfect love....

(968 - 88)

The clarity, depth and meaning of the vision is too much to bear and the speaker cowers deprecatingly, crying, '...leave me not tied/To this despair' (995-6). The threat of non-being and its corresponding anguish, dread and isolation are real but his choice of love represents his determination to affirm meaning in life and his universe. Even following his choice there is no real assurance except to exercise 'the courage to be', subsuming doubt within his belief because conclusive proof is missing. 'The courage to be' is a technical term used by theologian Paul Tillich, and described by him in the following terms:

It takes seriously the radical doubt experienced by many people. It gives one the courage of self-affirmation even in the extreme state of radical doubt. In such a state the God of both religious and theological language disappears. But something remains, namely, the seriousness of that doubt in which meaning within meaninglessness is affirmed. The source of this affirmation of meaning within meaninglessness, of certitude within doubt, is not the God of traditional theism, but the "God above God", the power of being, which works through those who have no name for it, not even the name God.

(1968, 2: 13 - 14)

Thus, all Browning can do is to ask that he shall at least be spared the knowledge that all is lost in a life of uncertainty and struggle:

Only let me go on, go on,
Still hoping ever and anon
To reach one eve the Better Land!
(1001 - 3)

With this cry of angst the unmoving Judge is transformed into a form of archetypal Love, the incarnation - not of God - but of Browning's mature and complex conception of Love.

Then did the form expand, expand -
I knew Him through the dread disguise
As the whole God within His eyes
Embraced me.

(1004 - 7)

The speaker comes to the conclusion that the only worthy evidence for faith is Love - not human love, which like Art is only a reflection, though in itself a valuable guide - but Divine Love such as God showed in sending His son to live and die among men.

One could profitably compare the experience of love's embrace here with Saul's embracing of David in the poem 'Saul'. The blending of human love through fleshly contact is infused with divine illumination as David wishes passionately for the redemption of the soul of King Saul:

...he spoke not, but slow
Lifted up the hand slack at his side, till he laid it with
care
Soft and grave, but in mild settled will, on my brow thro'
my hair
The large fingers were pushed, and he bent back my head,
with kind power -
All my face back, intent to peruse it, as men do a flower.
Thus held he me there with his great eyes that scrutinized
mine -
And oh, all my heart how it loved him!....

(226 - 32)

After the 'insubstantial pageant' has faded the speaker in 'Easter-Day' finds himself back on the 'grey plain' (1008) uncertain of his moment of confrontation with Christ: 'Was this a vision? False or true?' (1010). His final words suggest the ambiguity of the epiphanic moment and the ambivalence of his response. So he goes on in doubt, but

happy that I can
Be crossed and thwarted as a man,
Not left in God's contempt apart,
With ghastly smooth life, dead at heart,
Tame in earth's paddock as her prize.

(1021 - 25)

This, paradoxically, is an affirmation of his awareness of the world's temptations and although he cannot bring himself to renounce the world totally, he has been moved to a sharper realisation that its goods are imperfect goods, valuable only as they enable the soul to mount even higher on the ladder of love. The epiphanic moment is not final, but it has been an instance of clarity in his struggle within the human condition. The reiteration of the words of the poem's opening:

and I find it hard
To be a Christian, as I said!
(1030 - 31)

show that Browning is not wholly secure in the knowledge that it will be sufficient on Judgement Day to plead that though unable to renounce the world, he had ever aspired beyond it. In other words, the Judgement has already been made, but retains a sense of continuity in that the individual's response to that judgement is what will finally decide his fate. In this he continues to follow the Johannine eschatology:

He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, ... And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light....

(John 3: 18 - 19)

Because of this he does not despair when he recalls Christ's sacrificial act and the infinite mercy of God which he accepts is beyond man's temporal knowledge:

But Easter-Day breaks! But
Christ rises! Mercy every way
Is infinite, - and who can say?
(1038 - 40)

The speaker's words here reflect the fact that although judgement has been passed, he is required to make a continual response to that judgement. So despite his apparent triumphalism and certainty of the Resurrection, he nevertheless ends on a note of doubt: ' - and who can say?' (1040), emphasizing the fact that this response, which we might call faith, is one which must continually answer new questions.

'Christmas-Eve' prepared for Browning's future development of religious themes, and in 'Easter-Day', as De Vane says, he 'built his conception of a modern Christian, discussing this time not man's relation to the various creeds (as in 'Christmas-Eve') but his direct relation to Christ who lived and died on earth for him and rose from the dead on Easter day' (1955: 202).

Typical of his thought both poems analyse, through a process of doubt, the obstacles to belief instead of rendering their substance in doctrinal form. They both lay far more stress upon the epiphanic moment of choice than upon the church or the creed being chosen. Thus arises a peculiar coincidence of the eternal with the opportune, the arbitrary with the redemptive. These contraries meet at occasions of ethical crisis and seem to constitute a Browningsque mythology of the 'good moment'. The characters of these two poems, like those in his other dramatic monologues become most themselves at the 'good moment', when they make up their own minds in despite of sufficient evidence and extenuating scruples, 'Life's business being just the terrible choice' (The Ring and the Book: 1237). The encounter of

an existential ultimatism and the response ultimately constitute a person's world.

Tucker detects in Browning

The tension between dramatic sympathy and dramatic irony that is induced by a reading of his monologues corresponds to the thematic contrasts they dramatise: between artistic realism and idealism; between subjectivity and objectivity as philosophical modes; between theological immanence and transcendence; between ethical commitment to a penultimate meaning, for the time being, an intuition of an eternally ulterior reality always yet to be grasped.

(1987:212)

So for Browning, reality - the state of things as they are - could never be ultimate. The speaker in 'Easter-Day' who makes no choice and is content to be swept along by the values of this world, condemns himself. To make a choice - any choice - would appear for Browning more important than whether that choice were right or wrong. His ambivalent stance, for example, is highlighted in both 'The Flight of the Duchess' and 'The Statue and the Bust'. In the former, he endorses the Duchess's decision to leave her husband and take a gypsy lover, while in the latter, he criticises the protagonist's inability to make either the 'right' or the 'wrong' decision. Thus without choice the individual is unable to experience an epiphany of light or conversely, one of darkness, and consequently loses what meant most to the poet: the future as the locus of ultimate meaning and value, and the desire for continuing transformation while in this world.

CHAPTER 4: LA SAISIAZ

Browning's final period of writing in the years 1870 - 1889 could be labelled expository and includes all the work after The Ring and the Book (1868). In these poems, the poet moves out from behind the dramatic mask and speaks directly, often imposing his ideas upon his poems, no longer struggling to maintain dramatic tension. His chief concern is with the exposition and exploitation 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.

In 'Fifine at the Fair' (1872) and 'La Saisiaz' (1878), Browning undertakes a methodical scrutiny of the bases of man's moral life. In the earlier poem, his speaker, 'one who loves and grasps and spoils and speculates' (1555), offers a ruthlessly reductionist analysis of human values; in the second he reverses the process and attempts to construct a model of man's moral nature by the controlled addition of postulates judged to be essential. It is when Browning is moving in this territory that we notice the confirmation of sceptical premise and optimistic conclusion. The last words of 'Easter-Day' - 'who can say?' (1040) aptly convey his speculative and inquiring approach to religion and show the inadequacy of regarding him as dedicated to a rigid conformity to an optimistic faith. By 1864 Browning had certainly modified his early rejection of the Higher Criticism so apparent in 'Christmas-Eve' with his publication of 'A Death in the Desert' and later with poems dealing with the transmission of supposedly historical fact, such as 'Development' (1888 or 1889)

and 'Imperante Augusto Natus Est - ' (1888 or 1889). I believe that William O. Raymond is correct in stating that because Browning made a distinction between love and reason, feeling and intelligence, which led him to adopt a sceptical view of human knowledge, he came to regard the Incarnation and Crucifixion as historical facts, incapable of proof or disproof. As Raymond says:

... his faith in the intuitive testimony of the heart to the existence of a loving, self-sacrificing God, working with redemptive and transfiguring power in human experience, never wavers. ...It is the function of the heart to "melt the freezing reason's colder part." His gnosticism is primarily emotional.

(1929: 607 - 8)

Always obsessed by the thought of the mystery of human life and the profound mystery of true religion, Browning's heterodoxy would not allow him to have solved the ultimate problems; nor would he agree that any religious sect possesses the complete answer. He could only offer declarations of what faith he had himself attained to, mute before the mystery no man should dare to presume to understand.

It was symptomatic of his relentless honesty that he should write a poem of 'honest doubt' when confronted with the problem of sudden death. This sudden death of a friend partly prompted the conception of 'La Saisiaz' which was probably written between September 14 and November 9, 1878. Browning at 66 and a widower for 17 years had as his constant companion in his latter years a Miss Ann Egerton Smith. In 1877 he, his sister and Miss Smith had taken a chalet 'La Saisiaz' (Savoyard for 'The Sun'), situated near Mt Saleve, some five miles south-west of Geneva. Browning and Miss Smith had planned an ascent of the mountain on

September 14 which was prevented by her sudden death from heart disease.

Two days later she was buried in the nearby village of Collonge. The suddenness of this unexpected event led Browning to the consideration of the abode of his friend's soul, now that her body was buried in Collonge. This moment of intensest experience of the break up of the flesh in death, prompted the epiphanic moments evident in 'La Saisiaz'.

Browning may also have had in mind the debate Miss Smith and he had been following in the Nineteenth Century, based on a series of articles called, 'A Modern Symposium upon the Soul and Future Life'. De Vane (1955: 422) believes that the poem may be said to be Browning's contribution to the debate and that his arguments, like those of the contributors to the symposium, deliberately excluded the authority of Christian revelation by attempting to evolve an advanced form of religious belief from first principles:

I shall pick a clod and throw, - cry "Such the
sight and such the sound!
What though I nor see nor hear them? Others
do, the proofs abound!"
Can I make my eye an eagle's, sharpen ear to
recognize
Sound o'er league and league of silence? Can I
know, who but surmise?
If I dared no self-deception when, a week since,
I and you
Walked and talked along the grass-path, passing
lightly in review
What seemed hits and what seemed misses in a
certain fence-play, - strife
Sundry minds of mark engaged in "On the Soul
and Future Life,"....

(157 - 64)

Thus the combination of deep shock and the fresh memories of lively discussion with Miss Smith caused what Priestly calls

'Browning's katharsis, his successful emergence from shock' (1966:242). The poem expresses, then, Browning's deepest emotions about life beyond the grave and his reasons for belief in immortality.

Although the subject of the poem is immortality, this theme cannot be considered apart from Browning's other religious convictions mentioned in previous chapters: the essential nature of man who subjects all facts and choices to personal judgements; the limitations of man who escapes bondage to himself through projection into other personalities and times; the necessity of a future which calls man into himself, drawing him purposefully through his probationary period into his fulfilment; and the reality of a God who informs and presides over all.

Unlike in 'Christmas-Eve' and 'Easter-Day' where the epiphanic experience emerges out of a visionary revelation, in 'La Saisiaz' Browning comes to it through a process of inner debate, putting forward all the arguments against immortality in order to refute them. The climax of the epiphanic moment is two-fold, recorded first in the lines:

Why, he at least believed in Soul, was
very sure of God

(604)

and then again recollected in tranquillity later when he completed the poem 'in London's mid-November!' (606):

Least part this: then what the whole?

(618)

Later in this chapter I will explain how this double epiphany is achieved after Browning's rigorous debate on the subject.

Although it is true that he wrote in the short prologue to the poem:

Soul that canst soar!
Body may slumber:
Body shall cumber
Soul-flight no more...

(13 - 6)

postulating the idea that the poet was convinced of the immortality of the soul, it was not Browning's way to accept the soul's flight without wrestling long and steadfastly with the problem of the real relationship of body and soul and exactly what the intrusion of death meant to that relationship. Furthermore, the circumstances of the poem's conception make it more than just an intellectual exercise.

In the first part of the poem (1 - 216), Browning tenderly addresses Miss Smith, evoking the pleasures of their holidays together and the beauty of the countryside around Mt Saleve. The first words of the opening:

Dared and done; at last I stand upon the summit,
Dear and True!
Singly dared and done; the climbing both of us
were bound to do...

(1 - 2)

are a forceful yet poignant declaration of the pilgrimage he made to the summit 'Singly' in memory of Miss Smith's and his proposed venture. It is a symbolic act: a movement upward, suggestive of the journey of life. Just as Browning has 'Dared and done' at the summit, so his companion has 'dared and done' with life. The first intimations of his painful sorrow of her earthly loss are revealed where he compares the abyss between the summit to the barrier separating the living and the dead:

- Oh the barrier!
Yon Profound
Shrinks beside it, proves a pin-point: barrier this,
without a bound!
Boundless though it be, I reach you: somehow
seem to have you here
- Who are there....

... howe'er disjoints
Past from present, no less certain you are here,
not there....

(19 - 22; 24 - 25)

Amidst the happy recollections of her companionship and descriptions of the breathtaking scenery, we sense in the introduction the theme of human isolation and desolating loneliness, suggesting man's existential situation. Browning's individual is alienated from the common throng of humanity, distinct from the natural world, feeling but unable to explain or rationalize a spiritual reality. Knowing well his own limitations, he learns the meaning of his and mankind's solitude. Although his Rabbi Ben Ezra, Abt Vogler and Pippa radiate optimism, Roma A. King is right when he remarks that "... for the most part, Browning's men and women are confused, disturbed, tortured" (1957: 129). In 'La Saisiaz' Browning's state of mind is just this, as he wonders whether Miss Smith's loving and modest personality will survive in any other way beyond the memories of those few who knew her. The transient quality of man's earthly existence and the livings' memories of the dead, introduces the main debate of the poem:

- dared and done to-day
Climbing, - here I stand: but you - where?
(138 - 9)

Browning's primary question in the poem is twofold:

"Does the soul survive the body? Is there
God's self, no or yes?"
(144)

Beneath the surface tone of quiet philosophical cogitation, we can sense the emotional strain and tension as the poet speaks in his own voice on the death of his friend, severe in itself, but doubly devastating as a reminder of the earlier death of his wife. This personal confrontation with the earthly finality of death belies the idea that the poem is merely an intellectual exercise in the guise of a literary elegy. In facing death, Browning explores his deepest thoughts about life beyond the grave and his reasons for belief in immortality. He realises that he cannot find total satisfaction for his quest, but he knows nonetheless, that his search will uncover as much truth as his human knowledge will allow.

Well, and wherefore shall it daunt me, when't is
I myself am tasked,
When, by weakness weakness questioned, weakly
answers - weakly asked?
Weakness never needs be falseness: truth is truth
in each degree
- Thunderpealed 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?"

(147 - 52)

The immediacy and depth of his philosophical debate is given force and intensity by the juxtaposition of the events which evoked it: the memory of lively discussion shared on the 'Nineteenth Century Symposium' contrasted with the chill of loneliness and terror as he lifts the silent figure of Ann Egerton Smith:

Did the face, the form I lifted as it lay, reveal the
loss
Not alone of life but soul? A tribute to you
flowers and moss,
What of you remains beside? A memory!
(173 - 75)

All that remains of her, he speculates, is the memory he has of her, which is, of necessity, a unique memory, differing from all others. Man, he says, forever proposes problems to be solved 'By ourselves alone' (191), even though he will never live to see the fruits of his labours, or to discover whether there are fruits at all. He asks whether life be not really 'a curse and not a blessing' (206), man's hopes for redress in the next life in reality being an amiable illusion of the coward who cannot face the nothingness of death:

Why should I want courage here?
I will ask and have an answer, - with no favour,
with no fear, -
From myself. How much, how little, do I inwardly
believe
True that controverted doctrine?
(207 - 10)

But then Browning draws strength from his two great losses, that of the death of Miss Egerton Smith and of Elizabeth, to call his Beatrice to his poetic aid. Using Dante's device, he examines the problem:

... I take upon my lips
Phrase the solemn Tuscan fashioned, and declare the
soul's eclipse
Not the soul's extinction? take his "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" - where this
Other lady, my companion dear and true, she also is?
(211 - 16)

The poet will have an answer from himself. He asks how much he

inwardly believes the doctrine of the soul's immortality and whether the doctrine is fact or fancy. These questions are underpinned by the Beatrice-Elizabeth image which acts as a kind of poetic inspiration never far below the emotional surface, spurring Browning on to probe the truth 'howe'er it strike' (197).

Thus ends the opening of the poem, and the main section (217 - 548) presents the answer. His starting point is, as always, an affirmation of his own existence and, by implication, the existence of God:

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.

(217 - 24)

Without the introduction of Christian evidences, Browning is determined to start with brute facts, that is, with facts which he knows certainly but which he is incapable of proving. The two facts from which he begins are the thing perceiving and 'the thing perceived outside itself'. The thing perceiving is his own existence as a being, capable of distinguishing pleasure and pain, and a something else which is independent of his existence. These two entities he calls 'soul' and 'God' and he wishes to discover whether or not the immortality of the soul can be proved

or disproved from a consideration of these two facts. But this is where Browning's logic tends to become specious. The self / not-self distinction may be an adequate experiential foundation from which to begin and can be compared with Descartes' 'Cogito ergo sum', as is the experience of pleasure and pain, but the leap from the not-self to God seems logically tenuous. His glaring sophistry is evident in his attempting to establish unassailability by saying that he does not know the facts, whereas the fact is that he knows! Again he makes a similarly unacceptable shift from self to soul and I take it that by soul he means a spiritual (non-material) entity and not simply a thinking entity. Although Browning gives to these constructions, thought of as the work of reason and knowledge, the names 'fancy' and 'surmise', he appears to be confusing the concepts of knowledge and belief which is strange in view of his earlier insistence on their mutual exclusion. Perhaps his confusion arises from the fact that his argument is marked by a strong sense of the personal and therefore relative character of human experience and knowledge. It accepts the subjective synthesis of the non-theistic thinkers, though excluding the negations of the spiritual (or God-centredness) on which it rests. Whatever the shortcomings in Browning's argument are, we can nevertheless detect a greater maturity in his ability to re-cast his earlier doctrines of personal (or subjective) truth into a more philosophic form.

Various possible methods of proceeding with his argument are canvassed and rejected, some with scorn, some with regret:

"We believe" is sighed. I take the cup of
comfort proffered thus,
Taste and try each soft ingredient, sweet infusion,
and discuss
What their blending may accomplish for the cure
of doubt, till - slow,
Sorrowful, but how decided! needs must I o'er-
turn it - so!

(251 - 54)

and he guards himself against imposing the verdict of his own
experience on any other man, believing that all that can be
certainly known is one's own experience:

... out of which there crowds con-
jecture manifold,
But, as knowledge, this comes only - things may
be as I behold,
Or may not be, but, without me and above me,
things there are;
I myself am what I know not - ignorance which
proves no bar
To the knowledge that I am, and, since I am,
can recognize
What to me is pain and pleasure: this is sure,
the rest - surmise.

(257 - 62)

Again at the end of this section Browning is at pains to
re-iterate that he will not pretend to speak for other people,
only for himself, therefore claiming no objective validity for
his conclusions. He refuses to assert that his own experience
and perceptions of what is painful or pleasurable are generally
true for his fellows. As in 'Christmas-Eve' and 'Easter-Day'
Browning again advances a theory of ethical/moral relativity
which accords with his position of existential choice as the
basis for morality.

If my fellows are or are not, what may please
them and what pain, -
Mere surmise: my own experience - that is know-
ledge, once again!

(263 - 64)

This emphasis on personal experience leads into the next

section of the poem (265 - 92) where the poet testifies to the incompleteness of life and even its preponderating unhappiness. Surveying his own experience, he is forced to the conclusion that life appears to hold no coherence unless it is viewed as probationary:

- there is no reconciling wisdom with a
world distraught,
Goodness with triumphant evil, power with fail-
ure in the aim,
If - (to my own sense, remember! though none
other feel the same!) -
If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's
place,
And life, time, - with all their chances, changes,
- just probation-space....

(266 - 70)

This idea of life as 'probation-space' stands as one of the corner stones of Browning's religious thought; a theme previously demonstrated in 'Christmas-Eve' and 'Easter-Day' and appearing again in 'La Saisiaz'. And this 'probation-space', each man being given simply his own knowledge which stands on his experience, must evolve an order out of seeming incoherence. His task is to learn as best he can 'What is beautiful and what ugly, right to strive for, right to shun,/ Fit to help and fit to hinder' (283 - 4), to 'understand so much as may be understood' (286).

It may therefore appear that Browning regards truth as relative, placing an experiencing subject in such a central position as to constitute solipsism. But, as Harty correctly maintains:

...to the solipsist, the self is not merely central in the universe, it is the entire universe, since nothing exists apart from it. Browning on the other hand, posits a self and a not-self ('without me and above me,

things there are') although the knowledge and the certainty of the not-self is immanent to the thinking self, no appeal being made to empirical or positivist criteria of verification. Furthermore, Browning insists, what he knows as the not-self is, simply, God. It follows that the perceived universe of apparently independent objects belongs either to God's existence or to the thinking subjects existence, and that its independence is illusory.

(1981: 219)

Thus knowledge for Browning is of pragmatic value, to be used in the living out of one's life. Knowledge is a means of discerning the good and evil in the world, and so is the determining factor in matters of choice. But the actual choice of action remains the really decisive human action. Hope itself, whether in life or in an afterlife, is a mode of knowledge and so has also to be used, like all theological virtues. At the end of this section of the poem the poet then judges the power, wisdom and benevolence of the Creator in the world of his own experience, a judgement of whether man is happy or not:

Solve the problem: "From thine apprehended
scheme of things, deduce
Praise or blame of its contriver, shown a niggard
or profuse
In each good or evil issue! nor miscalculate alike
Counting one the other in the final balance,
which to strike,
Soul was born and life allotted: ay, the show of
things unfurled
For thy summing-up and judgement, - thine, no
other mortal's world!"

(287 - 92)

Immediately, the poet finds the world of his own experience is filled with paradoxes, irrationalities and incoherence, things which are difficult to reconcile with God's attributes of wisdom, goodness and power. Now the poet faces the theological dilemma which has disturbed others before him:

- did He lack power or was the
will in fault
When He let blue heaven be shrouded o'er by
vapours of the vault,
Gay earth drop her garlands shrivelled at the
first infecting breath
Of the serpent pains which herald, swarming in,
the dragon death?

(303 - 6)

This is based on the third datum or 'given': the experience of pain and pleasure. Thus Browning meets the problem of evil and the world's misery as reality, but with his optimistic attitude he refuses to give up the belief that man, the creation of God, is really a reflection of the greatness of his maker. Man has a dignity of his own, arising from the power of free will which he exerts in the moral struggle.

Browning seems to vacillate between a pessimistic, deterministic view of his personal experience of life (see lines 333 - 35 quoted overleaf) and a tenacious belief in the idea of a universal benevolent order, with man as a morally free person within that order. The flaw in his argument runs thus - If God were all loving, He would wish to destroy evil and eliminate all misery, and if He were all powerful He could do so. The idea of such a God is inconsistent with the existence of evil. Yet if a man is to have a free will, there must be evil for him to discriminate against and to fight against.

If we regard this life as final we must relinquish our conception of the power of God, for His work is then open to human judgement, and therefore can yield only imperfect results. But if we regard our present state as one of probation, evil and misery are no longer a mark of failure in the execution of the Divine Scheme: they become essential to it, and Browning's

experience represents it as such:

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?

(311 - 14)

The poet cannot conceive evil as abolished without abrogation of the laws of life. For it is not only bound up with all the good of life, it is often its vehicle. Gain he believes is enhanced by recent loss, ignorance places us nearest to knowledge, truth is potent where ugliness and falsehood prevail. What but the loss of love teaches us what its true value has been?

To the rationalist or those who groan in an anguished world suffering under famine, oppression and horrific wars, 'pie in the sky' arguments are neither rational nor popular. But looking at the matter logically, the hypothetical syllogism 'If God is all-loving and omnipotent, then there must be an after-life of happiness' depends on the truth of the hypothetical premise, and this can only be affirmed or refuted after death. So the whole matter remains essentially and necessarily conjectural, as Browning concludes at the end of the debate between Fancy and Reason. In fact Browning admits that the woes (and he again speaks for himself) of our present existence far exceed the joys:

Only my own joys and sorrows now to reckon
real instead, -
I must say - or choke in silence - "Howsoever
came my fate,
Sorrow did and joy did nowise, - life well weighed,
- preponderate."

(332 - 35)

Henry Duffin takes this statement as 'mean-spirited in tone and monstrous as a statement of fact' (1956:216), proceeding to give reasons as to why he considers De Vane and Knickerbocker's (1951: 3) justification of Browning's 'fair share of suffering' unjustified. The aforementioned critics enumerate a number of reasons for this, namely, the misunderstanding of critics, the long delay of recognition, the sense of failure, financial anxieties, Elizabeth's poor health and early death, his lonely later years, and the failure of his son, Pen, to live up to his father's expectations. Duffin states that these tribulations are no more than the ordinary person has to bear. But surely Duffin misses the point that life receives its value not from itself alone, but from its significant relation to the eternal, and if Browning judges God's qualities of benevolence, omniscience and omnipotence purely on the evidences of this world, then He must seem as limited in power as man. 'Goodness, wisdom, power, all bounded, each a human attribute!' (348). Of course, there are those theists who will affirm this outlook, maintaining that the act of creation per se limits God's power because He no longer exhausts all Being. If there is God and not-God, then He cannot possess the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience. In other words, our very existence undermines the God-dynamic.

But Browning is able to endure the sufferings of this world in the hope, which for him is grounded in certainty, of 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 ...

While for love - Oh how but, losing love, does
whoso loves succeed
By the death-pang to the birth-throe-learning
what is love indeed?

(358 - 61; 365 - 66)

In his bid for assurance of a life to come, he interrupts his propositions by returning to personal events which have so recently deeply affected him. He wishes that not knowledge, but his heart (intuition) would assure him of another meeting with those who are now hidden from his sight, by 'Yonder precinct which henceforward holds and hides the Dear and True' (386). His language becomes more reliant on metaphor, more vivid and passionate, interspersed with exclamatory interjections as he pleads with God to:

Grant me (once again) assurance we shall each
meet each some day,
Walk - but with how bold a footstep! on a way
- but what a way!
- Worst were best, defeat were triumph, utter loss
were utmost gain.
Can it be, and must, and will it?

(387 - 90)

This forceful and spontaneous utterance from the heart Browning suddenly silences as if to rein in his emotions by declaring in his final enquiry that he will accept only the testimony of 'fact's self' (393), the basic premises of the existence of God and the soul, Surmise is rejected; he seeks no answer in the beauties or voices of nature, none in the minds of

his fellow men, none even in the depths of his 'sentient self' (398), with its 'aspiration' and 'reminiscence' (399), its plausible assurances that God would be 'unjust' and men 'wronged' (400) if a second life were not granted to us. The 'fact's self' forces man at the end to fall back on the 'half-escape:/ "We believe"' (250 - 1). All we can be certain of is our self-consciousness and our own experience. Or, as Browning puts it, 'my own experience - that is knowledge' (264); 'this is sure, the rest - surmise' (262). And one man's experience is not that of another. Time after time, the speaker makes the point that no man can teach others how to live or what to believe. Yet the uniqueness of personality and personal experience does not imply that truth is relative. Experience must help a man decide, the earth being a giant teaching machine from which to learn what is beautiful, right and good (274 - 85). In the same way the speaker's own experience has taught him that what is beautiful, right and good cannot be reconciled with the ignorance, evil and failure he finds wherever he looks. The only way in which he can resolve the problem is to see earthly experience as a prelude to something better.

If this is the case, what then may 'fact's self' reveal? Just as God must stand as referee 'twixt man and me' (278), so the speaker's soul will be umpire between the surmises of Fancy and the conclusions of Reason in their debate on the question of immortality. In other words, Browning reverts to interior dialogue such as characterised 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau', dividing himself into two persons to do battle with each other. Through the interior dialogue, Browning has his speaker discover

within himself 'the truth' of his views about life. Thus, although he rejects the spontaneous utterance of his own spirit, he also relies on its conclusions. He rejects it as pleader but constitutes it a judge and this distinction is carried out in a dialogue in which Fancy speaks for the spontaneous self, Reason for the judicial - the one making its thrusts and the other parrying them. The question at issue has, however, slightly shifted its ground and the poet finds himself asking, not 'Is the soul immortal?' but, 'What would be the consequences to life of its being proved so?'

This becomes the heart of the poem and I will show how the colloquium between Fancy and Reason leads to the climax of the double epiphanic moment. Argument held an irresistible fascination for Browning and as a powerful casuist he was pre-eminent in poetry. In this section he reverts to his favoured way of speaking through a dramatic mask. This mode enables him to present all sides and eventually sift the grain of truth from the chaff of falsehood. This ability, I believe, gives him his unique power and value as a Christian poet.

Critics agree that 'fancy' in the context of this poem means 'surmise' or 'hypothesis', rather than the Romantic notion of the creative imagination that Browning employed in The Ring and the Book. Philip Drew rightly remarks that "Fancy usually means 'the right to make assumptions which can be shown to be necessary to the debate'" (1970: 161). Since assumptions are 'necessary' they have the status of certainties or 'facts'. Although Reason and Fancy wage war, their 'war' is 'amicable' and they 'play the foe', actually co-operating in the search for truth, as the

dialogue which follows suggests.

In the debate Fancy proposes several secondary facts which can be inferred from the primary facts of knowledge of oneself and of God. Reason offers justification for Fancy's propositions, corroborating them by demonstrating their pragmatic and psychological value. Fancy finds no 'certainty' more plain, but it is of course a surmised certainty:

I concede the thing refused: henceforth
no certainty more plain
Than this mere surmise that after body dies soul
lives again.
Two, the only facts acknowledged late, are now
increased to three -
God is, and the soul is, and, as certain, after death
shall be.

(405 - 8)

Reason agrees, promising that 'Life to come will be improvement on the life that's now.' (411) but the 'use' of it will be that the wise man will take his own life, since death, in the absence of any supernatural law to the contrary must be clear gain! There is some sense of humour in Reason's antithetical proposals that we should invoke death as the deliverer from our happiness or sadness, as both states lead either to certain decay or a weary compromise between hope and fear, between failure and attainment. But for the purposes of discussion Fancy and Reason agree to the postulates that there is life after death, that suicide is forbidden, that life is the testing ground for a future life, and that the moral law must be discernible but not imposed on man to preclude freedom of choice:

Present life is judged in aught man counts advantage
- be it hope,
Be it fear that brightens, blackens most or least
his horoscope, -
He, by absolute compulsion such as made him
live at all,

Go on living to the fated end of life whate'er be-
 fall.
 What though, as on earth he darkling grovels,
 man descry the sphere,
 Next life's - call it, heaven or freedom, close above
 and crystal-clear?
 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?

(457 - 65)

'Nothing' (466), Reason responds, promising that 'Soon shall things be unperplexed/And the right and wrong, now tangled, lie unravelled in the next' (473 - 4). We must note parenthetically that Browning worries as little about precise definitions of heaven in Fancy's argument as he does elsewhere about the meaning of 'soul' and 'God'. Although the alleged reality must of necessity be communicated in language, precise terminology is not Browning's primary concern. He refuses to make words signify one denotative meaning. Instead, the signifier may assume meaning in the mind of each reader. Thus each respondent comes to his own definition of 'heaven', 'soul' and 'God'.

Fancy moves on, conceding more still, to the fact that man shall not only be compelled to live, he shall know the value of life. Every moment he spends in it is gain or loss for the life to come - every act he performs involves reward or punishment in it. What is implied here is certain knowledge of a comprehensive moral code:

...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 gain or loss for that next life which on
 this life depends.

Good, done here, be there rewarded, - evil, worked
here, there amerced!

(475 - 79)

Fancy and Reason have now reached the point where they agree that if moral laws are known as certainly as natural laws, there is no freedom of choice. The liberty to do evil depends on the existence of doubt and uncertainty in relation to moral norms. No man is good because he obeys a law so obvious and so stringent as to leave him no choice, and such would be the moral law if punishment were demonstrated as following upon the breaking of it, reward on its fulfilment. Doing evil would be as difficult as to stop breathing and doing good would have no more merit than in breathing regularly. The thrust of the argument is that certainty in the moral sphere reduces morality to the same level as natural law. Man can claim no credit for it:

- Prior to this last announcement, earth was man's probation-place:
Liberty of doing evil gave his doing good a grace.

(491 - 92)

Browning's thoughts expressed here can perhaps be traced back to a letter he wrote to Elizabeth on September 25, 1845 where he discusses the problems of man's freedom of choice according to his knowledge of moral laws:

The partial indulgence, the proper exercise of one's faculties, there is the difficulty and problem for solution, set by Providence which might have made the laws of Religion as indubitable as those of vitality, and revealed the articles of belief as certainly as that condition, for instance, by which we breathe so many times a minute to support life. But there is no reward proposed for the feat of breathing, and a great one for that of believing - consequently there must go a great deal more of voluntary effort to this latter than is implied in the getting absolutely rid of it at once, by

adopting the direction of an infallible church, or private judgement of another - for all our life is some form of religion, and all our action some belief, and there is but one law, however modified, for the greater and the less.

(Kintner, 1969: 213)

The debate has now reached a virtual impasse with Fancy's argument having in fact collapsed. Here one can detect marked similarities in Browning's argument to that used in 'Easter-Day' where he maintains that a doubt-free faith is a contradiction in terms. He ingeniously overturns Reason by using it against itself to show his lack of faith in man's rational faculties. We cannot through knowledge, and therefore certainty, prove a future life from first premises, nor do we have an adequate explanation for the imperfections of this world. All we can know is that only in man's present state of imperfection and limited knowledge is a life of probation conceivable; while only on the hypothesis that this life is one of probation can that of a future existence be maintained. Thus, the poet believes that the imperfection of man's state becomes a necessary condition for the immortality of the soul. This may be true for Browning, but immortality is not a necessary consequence of this condition and we are forced to conclude that an after-life is not provable from first premises. There can be no certainty on the matter. What stance then must one adopt? Should one hope and act as if the 'surmise' were 'fact'?

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?"

It is thus made clear that only in a man's present state of limited knowledge is a life of probation conceivable, while only on the hypothesis that this life is one of probation, can that of a future existence be maintained.

Thus concludes the main section of the poet's philosophical and metaphysical speculation with a return to the original question:

Thus have we come back full circle: fancy's
footsteps one by one
Go their round conducting reason to the point
where they begun....

(525 - 26)

Browning then returns to the personal, imploring Miss Egerton Smith for some assurance from beyond the grave. Knowing this to be a fruitless exercise, he consoles himself with the realisation that for the ultimate questions of life certainty and proof are impossible. Nonetheless, though there is no absolute assurance, he can at least hope:

So, I hope - no more than hope, but hope - no
less than hope, because
I can fathom, by no plumb line sunk in life's
apparent laws,
How I may in any instance fix where change
should meetly fall
Nor involve, by one revisal, abrogation of them
all....

(535 - 38)

It should be noted that Browning's 'hope' is not simply a vague feeling of looking on the bright side of things, but more in line with the Pauline 'hope' constituting certainty. That is why he gives such prominence to the concept by building up its force at the conclusion to the main part of the poem. A modest 'no more than hope' is followed immediately by a more emphatic

'no less than hope' leading up to a final triumphant 'hope'.
Because of hope he is not left entirely without consolation in
his darkness:

Hope the arrowy, 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!

(543 - 45)

His exultant tone at the end is not merely a vague feeling
of encouragement to himself, but is born out of a conclusion
reached after all the alternative positions have been
systematically scrutinised and found unacceptable. Again, his
emphasis is exclusive, 'if no one else beheld, / I behold'
reminding the reader that it is his empirical knowledge that
leads him to hope.

But at this high point he suddenly imagines his audience's
sad, sceptical comments as their search for a 'message' is
unfulfilled. This leads Browning to speculate, with a certain
envy, on the literary fame and 'magnetic virtue' (547) of those
masters of despair such as Rousseau, Byron, Gibbon and Voltaire.
They bewitched the world not by their irresistible reasoning but
with their persuasive rhetoric. Browning wonders whether he has
not the right to choose hope, as other men have the right to
choose despair. 'Knowledge stands on my experience' (272).

It is then that the first epiphanic moment breaks when he
wishes for the attributes of these famous men, to make his
statement to the multitude:

Confidently lay to heart and lock in head their
life long - this:
"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.

(601 - 4)

This ironic revelation, it will be remembered, is grounded on the two 'brute facts' which originally began his reflections - 'soul' and 'God'. Browning's belief in the soul precedes the assurance of God and, in complementary fashion, the redoubled affirmative, 'very sure of God', summons the authority of an ontological essence, outside the self that implies faith as its grounding object. Thus it can be observed that the two halves of this statement are interdependent, as the latter predicate affirms in terms of objective certitude what the former affirms as subjective experience.

The experience on Mt Saleve was subsequently relived in Browning's mind six weeks later in 'London's mid-November' (606) when he could recollect the event in relative tranquillity; when the pain of the experience had become less immediate. Out of these memories emerges a second, more powerful, epiphanic moment, which I believe has far more spiritual significance than most critics accord it. It is true that in the passage of time the poet suppressed the memories, 'bore it in my breast / Safe thus far' (609 - 10), fearing to expose himself to the power of those thoughts once he set them down. But the power of his poetry leads him not only to live the tragedy over again with its double poignancy of Miss Egerton Smith's death and reminders of his wife's, but to experience a second moment of enlightenment. The 'insubstantial pageant' fades and the sweet memories are caught up in a greater moment of revelation where Browning is left

amazed before the immensity of the divine attributes:

... Least part this: then what the whole?
(618)

Although the first half of the sentence may be yet another affirmation of man's limited knowledge while on earth, it is counterbalanced by Browning's idea of God revealed as immanent and transcendent and the poet eagerly awaits the eschatological verification of his epiphanies. In so doing, he gives expression to man's inherent need to grow towards a future which promises greater possibilities than the present. Hope, here at the end becomes objectified as Future. Right from the poet's yearning after God in 'Pauline' and Paracelsus's 'tendency to God' (773) to Johannes Agricola's belief that "'tis to God I speed so fast' (7), it is evident that Browning conceives of God as both above and ahead of men, attracting them upwards towards a greater realisation of their potential and a compulsion onwards towards the future.

Although 'La Saisiaz' can be seen as an intellectual exercise with many of the arguments leading nowhere except to a pre-arranged dead-end, the ironical effect of it shows the total inefficacy of words to describe and define God. Browning is convinced that words function as inadequate symbols; that 'the whole' cannot be signified, as it lies beyond present reality, beyond any rational belief and reason.

If the poem represents only part of his reflections on life and death, then how much greater must be those unexpressed. He has said all that he is capable of saying metaphysically. Having rested his argument on personal experience ('fact') he is

unwilling to offer for public consumption his most overwhelming argument ('fancy') for immortality - namely, his love for Elizabeth and his confidence that, that love transcends death itself. Ryals (1975: 157) proposes that the Prologue was written after the main part of the poem, representing Browning's release from the sombre mood displayed in his tangled arguments. 'Good, to forgive; / Best, to forget!' (1 - 2) gives voice to the sentiments expressed in the last lines of the coda. Our knowledge of what lies beyond the grave may be incomplete, but at least the soul is set free, untrammelled by the woes of mortal existence. Cares for fame and doubts about survival may now be abandoned.

'La Saisiaz' deals with Browning's speculations on the nature of knowledge. If this is so, then 'The Two Poets of Croisic' is his statement of belief culminating in an affirmation of life and love. Davies in his article 'From Knowledge to Belief in "La Saisiaz: The Two Poets of Croisic"' makes the point that the latter poem was begun on November 10, 1877, a day after the completion of 'La Saisiaz'. Although the two poems differ radically in style they should be read together in terms of their thematic and stylistic progression. This is in keeping with Browning's familiar artistic insistence on continuity, progression and unity within the dynamic structures of his poetry:

The two poems complement each other; they should not be read exclusively of one another; in fact, they ask to be considered as companion pieces. The epilogue should be read as an epilogue to the complete volume, and the two prologues should initiate the progressive reading.

(1978: 12)

Davies' main thrust in his article is that Browning, in challenging his reader, was inviting the Positivist, Frederic Harrison, responsible for the essays entitled 'On the Soul and Future Life', to participate directly in the total movement of the volume. Just as Browning, in part, wrote 'La Saisiaz' in order to defend the high seriousness of poetry against Harrison's charges of 'mere paltering with a loose fancy' (Davies, 1978: 11), so 'The Two Poets' is, in part, a further defence against the dangerously limiting view of poetry held by Harrison. The more light-hearted tone of most of the latter poem is Browning's answer to the reader and to Harrison that the serious subjects of death and immortality, knowledge and belief, can be addressed within ever-shifting and ever-enlarging contexts.

But my main point is that the double epiphanic moment which emanated from a largely hypothetical discussion in 'La Saisiaz' finds its true resolution in 'The Two Poets'. Browning deliberately carries over the words 'fact' and 'fancy', 'truth' and 'know' when early in the poem he describes the poetic process in the extended fire metaphor:

Launched by our ship-wood, float we, once adrift
In fancy to that land-strip waters wash,
We both know well!....

...What we have sailed to see, then, wafted there
By fancy from the log that ends its days
Of much adventure 'neath skies foul or fair....

(73 - 5: 129 - 31)

Then again the unresolved epistemological problems concerning 'fact' and 'fancy' raised in 'La Saisiaz' find their poetic resolution now in the conclusion to the problems of hope and fear, and knowledge and doubt in stanza CLVIII:

Who knows most, doubts most; entertaining hope,
Means recognizing fear; the keener sense
Of all comprised within our actual scope
Recoils from aught beyond earth's dim and dense.
Who, grown familiar with the sky, will grope
Henceforward among groundlings? That's offence
Just as indubitably: stars abound
O'erhead, but then - what flowers make glad the ground!

(1257 - 64)

'The poet's face/ Radiant...' (1271 - 2) at the end of the poem finally leaves Browning's audience to respond to a tempered but joyful affirmation of life and the 'live pretender' (1280) will continue to sing for the sake of love and will be indifferent to present fame. The epiphany finds its final expression in the playful but deep epilogue about love, echoing the prologue where Browning's belief is the key to his hope not only for the future life, but for his poetic achievement in the present as well. He is 'very sure of God' when the embodiment of love, in the face of his beloved Elizabeth Barrett Browning appears as confirmation of 'God's own smile' (11).

Thus responsive readers of the unified volume will be satisfactorily rewarded by an investigation of their own into what Browning leaves for our consideration concerning the understanding of fancy, fact, truth, knowledge, doubt, belief and love through the medium of poetic expression.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters of this dissertation I have attempted to debate the nature and structure of the epiphanic experience and show how it is revealed in three of Browning's religious poems.

Firstly, the epiphanic experience may be prepared for over long periods of time through the poet's inner debate, but when the experience does come, it is not gradual but immediate. The sudden manifestation is a 'spiritual' one, whether emanating from an apparent external divine force revealing the truth, or from the mind. I tend to disagree with modern critics such as Beja (1971), Langbaum (1971) and Nichols (1987), who see in the modern movement a secularisation of epiphany, in that an epiphany may occur from the ordinary experiences of life rather than from the Augustinian moment of divine revelation. Beja remarks that:

No longer confident (however), of a divine answer, men have wanted their own; no longer willing to wait for Truth until God calls them to it, they have sought for it today, on earth, here and now. There has been a general secularization of what one has inevitably regarded ... as the divinely inspired moment of new knowledge....

(1971: 21)

My problem lies particularly with the phrase 'men have wanted their own'; as if we are somehow separate from our divine source, having no intimate connection to God. It is true that the Romantic tradition moved away from man's perception of the divine centre of things as he became less preoccupied with God and more interested in man; less amazed by supernatural visitants than by the power of the poet; less concerned with the object perceived than with the perceptive subject; less appreciative of grace and

more fascinated by the imagination. But I contend that whether the epiphanic moment originates from an external source or the mind, both experiences are mutually inclusive because they emanate from the same spiritual source. In other words, I believe that God may work through external events affecting our lives or from within through our minds and intuitions.

Here I tend to take Emerson's point of view that, 'the aroused intellect', when it confronts 'facts, dull, strange, despised things', finds 'that a fact is an Epiphany of God' (Spiller and Williams, 1971, 3: 47). This idea of transcending time and coming upon a new vision in a profound moment is grounded in the power of inner light emanating from the mind itself, rather than being dependent, as in earlier orthodox religion, upon divine visitation or manifestation.

Secondly, epiphany comes in the moment of interpretation rather than in the moment of vision. There may be an initial sense of wonder, amazement and empowerment but the realization of its effects comes in the moment of recollection. Although in 'Christmas-Eve' the epiphanic moment is more a vision in the traditional sense, coming from an external source, we are not sure whether this is an actual experience or a dream sequence from the speaker's subconscious. Added to this, the speaker witnesses only a partial vision of Christ where he sees only His robe. The speaker's epiphanic moment 'proper' occurs when he is returned to the Dissenter's chapel. 'Easter-Day' acts as a kind of transition between the traditional vision of 'Christmas-Eve' and the epiphanic moments in 'La Saisiaz' which arise out of intellectual debate between 'Fancy' and 'Reason'. In 'Easter-Day'

there is a subtle combination of vision and argument, again, within a dream sequence. The later poem 'La Saisiaz' demonstrates a double epiphany: the moment on the mountain where the speaker concludes that, 'he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God.' (604) and then back in London where he realizes his partial understanding of life after death and an anticipation of 'the whole' (618) of eternity. His full understanding of the double epiphany is finally concluded in 'The Two Poets of Croisic' where love for his fellows and hope in the Eternal are the only gifts given to men in this present reality.

Thus in a sense, epiphany is a retrospective experience where the moment of illumination or revelation comes in the interpretation of the subject who experiences it. The insubstantial pageant fades and is recollected in tranquillity, revealing the open-ended dialectic that informs much of Browning's poetry. Browning's very scepticism, his theology of doubt, contributes to his own epiphany as a speaking self in his progression towards the infinite. It corresponds to the potentially infinite process that frames hermeneutic consciousness and to the rhetorical entanglements in which his poetry involves the reader. Consequently, my approach to epiphany and epiphanic discourse dissents from the majority opinion (for example, Whitla (1963) and Nichols (1987)) in which Browning's 'good minute' becomes an 'infinite moment' constituting a timeless transcendence of contingency. Whitla contends that in Browning, 'the moment of vision is also the moment of Incarnation', which 'gives significance to the whole poem' (1963: 17), but this standard formulation elides the role

of interpretation in determining 'significance'. For, in epiphanic poetics, opposed to an incarnational one, stress falls on the moment not of vision but of reading.

Thus the conception of the epiphanic experience in Browning emerges from a post-structuralist theory: 'manifestation itself does not reveal a presence, it makes a sign' (Derrida 1976: 49); 'The symbolic manifestation of a thing is a matrix of symbolic meaning as words... The manifestation through the thing is like the condensation of an infinite discourse' (Ricoeur 1967: 11). The 'thing' or 'sign' in acts of epiphanic contextualization constitutes what Bornstein describes as a 'continual tension between the public prophetic stance and the private concern for lyrical moments' (1988: 121) and Browning invites the reader to experience his own epiphanic moment. What the interpretation of an epiphanic moment manifests in the final analysis is the character - psychological or formalist, deconstructive or historicist - of its interpreter. Beja remarks:

The artist has accomplished his full task only when an epiphany produces a revelation of nature, when fiction illuminates reality, when literature becomes experience.
(1971: 232)

Thus, despite the limitations of language the artist attempts not merely to record epiphanies but to produce or reproduce them, bringing about the effect not so much of communication as of revelation in the mind of the reader. When all is said, the end of the text is the epiphany of the reader, when he/she is sensitized through a series of associations in the work of art, to produce an epiphany in himself/herself. Thus it can be said that epiphany dissolves the distinction between art and life,

allowing the epiphanic moment encapsulated in the work of art, to take place in the beholder of that art. Langbaum quotes Bergson's description of what an epiphany might produce:

Our ideas and sensations succeed each other with increased rapidity.... Finally, in extreme joy, our perceptions and memories acquire an indefinable quality, comparable to heat and light, and so new, that at certain moments, returning upon ourselves, we experience an astonishment of being....

(1987: 51)

Although the three poems under discussion are examples of Browning's more personal voice, where he drops the mask used in the dramatic monologue, they exhibit that same blend of objective uncertainty about universal truths and subjective certitude based on personal experience which is endemic to all his poetry. He could not proclaim a message of certainty to all men, nor was he prepared to utter a message of despair. His message was a qualified 'I don't know'. Isobel Armstrong aptly calls it 'creative agnosticism' (1993: 14).

Finally, it is interesting to note that the two subjects I have selected for enquiry in this dissertation, namely Robert Browning and epiphanic discourse, have both at different times this century experienced rejection or remained unexplored. However, over the past few decades Browning has been restored to his position as a Victorian poet of renown, whose writings are as relevant to our own age as to his. 'Christmas-Eve', 'Easter-Day', 'La Saisiaz', 'Caliban upon Setebos' and 'Death in a Desert', to name but a few poems, are studied not only for their poetry, but for their insights into religious controversies and questions which are still pertinent today, in our age of technological revolution.

In spite of the trends in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries towards 'scientism', 'individualism', 'materialism' and 'secularism', there is no apparent indication that interest in either God or religion, however deviant it may be, has diminished. Browning's preoccupation with religious questions seems equally pertinent to his time and ours. It is encouraging and salutary to note that eminent modern critics such as Armstrong and Tucker find points of reference for us in Victorian poetry in general, and in Browning in particular. Armstrong notes that:

Rereading Victorian poetry, (then) involves a reconsideration of the way we conceptualise history and culture, and the way we see the politics of poetry. It also involves rethinking some of the major criticisms of this century, Marxist and feminist criticism and deconstruction, and considering how the language and form of Victorian poetry questions the theories they have developed.

(1993: 17 - 18)

Tucker views Browning as an important precursor of future poets within his own century, such as the Rossettis, Hopkins and Swinburne, and those of the twentieth century such as Hardy and Yeats. He boldly claims that Browning is now generally acknowledged to be the Victorian poet who has 'exerted the greatest influence on poetry written in English during the present century' (1980: 3). It is my hope that interest in Browning's poetry and in Browning scholarship will continue to flourish as long as man continues to search for meaning in his life.

And what of the future of epiphanic discourse as an acknowledged theory within the parameters of literary criticism? From its classical and religious roots through the Romantic

phase, conceived chiefly in Wordsworth's 'spots of time', to Browning's 'good moment' and on to Joyce's epiphanic theory, the intrinsic experience of an unforgettable moment of miraculous revelation has changed little. What has evolved is the situatedness of the experience into ordinary commonplace existence. The interpretation thereof avoids any attempt at closure thereby initiating in artist and reader alike a variety of meanings. The modern spirit of epiphany has also tended towards decontextualization and become more impersonally streamlined in interior monologues and the stream-of-consciousness technique. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Joseph Conrad are among these modern practitioners. This is in contrast to the Browningsque model of character made manifest in the language and ideology of a conditioning time and place.

Epiphanic exploration enjoyed popularity when it spread from Joycean scholarship to the New Criticism at mid-century. But the use the New Critics made of epiphany was essentialist and a-historical, as was their sense of the literary background from which the term emerged in the modernist period. The alleged non-ideological poetics and pedagogy of the New Criticism tilted against Romanticism and all else thereafter. Moreover, Tucker finds it somewhat ironic that '...given the frequently Christian complexion of their work ... they also slighted the scriptural tradition from which the term ultimately derives' (1992: 1209). With the displacement of the New Criticism in the late 1960s by structuralist theories with their linguistic emphasis, and then by the decentered readings of deconstruction, epiphanic discourse

fell into academic neglect. Nowadays, while scholarly enquiry into and sophisticated criticism of epiphany has grown faint in the academe, the word and concept seem to be flourishing in a popular and colloquial idiom in book review columns, first person narratives and writers' workshops. Perhaps this is an indication to the 'ivory tower league' to extend their bounds of literary practice from exclusively rhetorical and textual concerns to a broader cultural pertinence. To make connections between empirical actuality and literary practice in a world which is becoming ever increasingly expansively integrated may help to initiate the rehabilitation of epiphanic discourse. It would be an interesting study to investigate whether the nature of the epiphanic experience is a universally similar phenomenon or whether it is grounded in particular cultural constructs. But this question lies outside the bounds of this dissertation.

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