EVOLUTIONISM AND SKEPTICISM IN THE THOUGHT
OF ROBERT BROWNING

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This thesis has two primary objectives. The first is the presentation and the evaluation of various critical dicta regarding Browning's prowess as a thinker. The second is an attempt to recast Browning's religious and philosophical attitudes into the terms of evolutionism and skepticism. The review of twentieth-century criticism is intended to demonstrate an almost universal tendency among scholars to dismiss the philosophical tenor of Browning's poetry and to give their attentions to the form and technique of the dramatic monologue.

Since it is generally held that Browning was a poor metaphysician and that he was unable to think systematically, the second part of this thesis proposes that Browning was, indeed, an astute and subtle philosopher. This defense of Browning's intellectual ability relies, for the most part, upon the recognition that his thought was not confined to the narrow doctrines of orthodox Christianity, that his poetry was not chiefly concerned with moral didacticisms, and that his concept of human progress, being far from the orthodox one, was essentially an existential idea.
For the purpose of illustrating and illuminating Browning's skepticism and evolutionism, a comparison is made between Browning's ontological doctrine of growth and strife and the evolutionism of the French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Like most comparative studies, this one is designed to superpose a new perspective over material which has been crystalized into a sort of critical dogma, a set of conventions which has deprived the original work of much of its meaning and, hence, much of its power and continuing vitality. This study is not intended to be apodictic, nor does it attempt to invalidate all of the arguments it refutes. It simply offers students of Browning's poetry an alternative, and hopefully a more satisfactory, method of coming to terms with the complex poetry of a very complex man.
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OF ROBERT BROWNING

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In attempting to establish Browning's merit as a thinker, one must become aware of two divergent critical attitudes, both of which treat the relationship between poetry and philosophy. On the one hand there are those who affirm the validity of the romantic paradigm of the poet-philosopher, and, on the other hand, there are critics who maintain that poets, and Browning in particular, are least remembered as philosophers. Robert Langbaum, who places Browning not at the end but in the middle of the romantic tradition in which "the poet is always in the process of formulating values, although he never arrives at a final formulation,"\(^1\) belongs to the former group of critics. The latter group, taking the opposite position, observe that the opacity of Blake's mysticism, the naive zeal of Shelley's skepticism, and the quixotic character of Keats's theory of the imagination illustrate the inability of poets to think philosophically.

These critics have been strongly influenced by the examples of Coleridge and Arnold, both of whom found the roles of the poet and the philosopher incompatible. Both men attempted

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and failed to sustain a productive union between imaginative intuition and rational contemplation. Arnold recorded his own inner conflict in Empedocles on Etna, a lyrical drama in which the philosopher, Empedocles, rejects poetry as a valid medium of profound thought. The fact that Arnold abandoned poetry and turned his efforts to the writing of social philosophy and literary criticism can be cogently adduced to point up a morphological difference between the aesthetic vision and rational philosophy.

However, if one follows the presentments of those critics who insist upon divesting the poet of his philosophical mantle and concentrates solely upon elements of method and style, the protean substance of the romantic experience is altogether obscured, and its poetic expression becomes a series of tenuously related technical achievements. If, on the other hand, one adopts the opposite view and regards romanticism as a philosophical tradition, as a continuum of infinite variations upon a central theme, he should realize that the poet must be seen as both artist and philosopher or, more to the point, that no distinction be made between the two. To Blake, for example, the philosopher was necessarily a poet, a creator. In "Jerusalem" he wrote, "I must Create a System or be enslaved by another Man's./I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create."² Blake is saying here that truth is created by

the active imagination, not discovered by the reasoning and reductive mind.

Shelley, whose influence upon Browning was as powerful as any other, gives a more systematic statement to Blake's epistemological proposition that truth is an experiential phenomenon. In "Speculations on Metaphysics" Shelley wrote:

But thought can with little difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits. It is like a river whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outward;—like one in dread who speeds through the recesses of some haunted pile, and dares not look behind. The caverns of the mind are obscure, and shadowy; or pervaded with a lustre, beautifully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals. If it were possible to be where we have been, vitally and indeed—if, at the moment of our presence there we could define the results of our experience,—if the passage from sensation to reflection—from a state of passive perception to voluntary contemplation, were not so dizzying and tumultuous, this attempt would be less difficult.3

To Shelley the function of the poet was primarily a philosophical one. It was the poet's Promethean task to transcend the limitations of rational philosophy, to overcome the tyranny of reason, and to create a new and ever changing vision of the world in which experience and reflection are fused by the power of love. In a foreshadowing of the transfigured Prometheus, the Earth in Prometheus Unbound sees man forsake reason as the only avenue to truth.

Leave man, who was a many sided mirror,
Which could distort to many a shape of error,
This true fair world of things, a sea reflecting love;
Which over all his kind, as the sun's heaven

Gliding o'er the ocean, smooth, serene, and even, 
Darting from the starry depths radiance and life, doth move.⁴

However strong Shelley's influence was upon the early 
Browning, the later Browning evinces a striking closeness to Keat's aesthetic philosophy. Keats felt that truth was both 
created and apprehended by the poetic imagination. In a let-
ter to his friend Bailey, Keats argued that the logical pro-
cesses of rational thought closed the mind to truth and wisdom, 
while the aesthetic imagination rendered man a true picture of 
himself and his world. "The imagination," he declared to 
Bailey, "may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found 
it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I 
have never been able to perceive how anything can be known 
for truth by consequitive reasoning."⁵

The truth created and revealed by the imagination was not 
to Keats a static or complete view of the world; it was, on 
the contrary, the active involvement of the mind with itself 
and with the world of external phenomena. The imaginative 
powers of the poet enabled him to overcome his selfhood, to 
transcend his ego-consciousness, and to become identified with 
things outside himself. Keats was compelled to internalize 
the world of particulars into a new and holistic vision. 
J. Hillis Miller indicates that Browning, like Keats, found

⁴Shelley, p. 380. 
the solution to his existential dilemma in a continuing process of becoming identified with his own imaginative creations. Miller contends:

Browning's inability to speak directly in his own voice, the neutrality and pliability of his spirit, link him to a certain aspect of the romantic tradition, an aspect not only visible in German romantic poetry and philosophy but also in English romanticism. Browning carries just about as far as it can go the Keatsean notion of the chameleon poet who, having no nature of his own, is able to enter into the nature of things around him. One might say that Browning's distinctive contribution to romanticism is his extension of the idea of sympathetic imagination from natural objects to other people.6

Miller's phrase "chameleon poet" refers to Keats's concept of "negative capability," a concept which, when applied to Browning's poetics, completely effaces the problem of moral relativism. Keats believed that "the poetical character itself . . . it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no character . . . it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen."7 Neither Browning's nor Keats's poetry was informed by the precepts of moral philosophy; instead their poetry was the direct answer to the underlying ontological question, "What must I become?" In a statement that parallels Keats's formulation of "negative capability," Miller remarks that Browning "remains in a state of pure virtuality, torn to pieces by 'multifarious sympathies' . . . potentially everything, he is actually nothing at all."8

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7Keats, pp. 386-387. 8Miller, p. 95.
For both Browning and Keats the poetic imagination transmuted the ordinary state of human consciousness into a perpetual process of becoming, a process which imitated the divine act of creation. Keats felt that the productive power of the imagination was animated by the same force which generated and maintained human life. The "Imagination," he declared to Bailey, "and its empyreal reflection is the same as human life and its spiritual repetition."\(^9\) Browning, especially in his early dramatic works, regarded his own creative activity as a kind of divine effort. Miller comments that "Paracelsus and Sordello are Browning's versions of the central adventure of romanticism—the attempt to identify oneself with God."\(^10\) Both Keats and Browning demonstrate a remarkable affinity in that they both illustrate the Coleridgean precept that "the imagination in creating poetry . . . echoes the creative principle underlying the universe."\(^11\)

Although Miller does not amplify his statement that Browning's ontological predicament relates him to certain elements of German romanticism, Miller's suggestion merits some examination. Since much of the criticism of Browning's thought is informed by the belief that he unconditionally affirmed the tenets of evangelical Christianity, it is interesting to note that, on the contrary, in several respects

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\(^9\)Keats, p. 185. \(^10\)Miller, p. 95. \\
Provning's aesthetic theory is quite similar to Nietzsche's view of the ontological significance of art, a view which preferred the Greek mythos to the Christian ethos. If one accepts Miller's notion that Browning's early dramas were attempts to become identified with God, with the divine process of creation, the link between Browning and German romantic philosophy becomes evident. Nietzsche postulated that "only as the genius in the act of creation merges with the primal architect of the cosmos can he truly know something of the eternal essence of art."\(^\text{12}\) While in the act of musical composition, Abt Vogler becomes aware of the divine nature of his actions; he recognizes that "here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,\text*/\text{Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!}^\text{13}\)

The similarity between Browning's philosophical view of art and Nietzsche's aesthetic dicta becomes even more apparent when one recognizes that "Browning vacillates between the desire to become some one concrete thing, and the desire to remain permanently uncommitted, and therefore the only material mirror of the infinite richness of God."\(^\text{14}\) The implication


\(^\text{14}\)Miller, p. 84.
of Miller's contention here is that Browning realized himself through illusion, through the imaginative existence of his own creations. From this perspective Browning's art stands as the solution of his own inner tensions; he continually resolved the inner antinomy between the drive for selfhood and the equally strong desire for greater consciousness through the variety and intensity of his dramatic characters.

Nietzsche believed that art is synthesized from internal conflict, from the kind of self-division and self-deification one observes in Browning. In one of the initial statements of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche wrote:

> I attributed purely aesthetic meaning—whether implied or overt—to all process; a kind of divinity if you like, God as the supreme artist, amoral, recklessly creating and destroying, realizing himself indifferently in whatever he does or undoes, ridding himself by his acts of embarrassment of his riches and the strain of his internal contradictions. Thus the world was made to appear, at every instant, as a successful solution to God's own tensions, as an ever new vision projected by that grand sufferer for whom illusion is the only possible mode of redemption.\(^1\)

In his exegesis of dithyrambic tragedy, Nietzsche maintained that the Dionysiac character sprang not only from the overwhelming vitality of a youthful race but also from the pain and conflict of man's encounter with himself, from the agon of self-consciousness. The unified world view of the pre-rational sentience was shattered by the advent of a systematic...

\(^{15}\text{Nietzsche, p. 8.}\)
mode of self-awareness—morality. As a result the Dionysiac poet, like Browning, was impelled by a desire for self-realization in art, by a desire to re-assert his intuitive vision of a unified world; but the poet was simultaneously driven by a tendency for self-effacement, a tendency one finds manifested in Keats's numinous love of death and in Browning's unwillingness to crystallize his identity and to become "one concrete thing."

If romanticism embraced a single but general philosophical tradition, a tradition to which both Browning and Nietzsche rightfully belong, it was that of anti-rationalism. Langbaum contends that the anti-rational disposition of romanticism, an antithetical and revolutionary temper generated by the Enlightenment, often manifested itself in both poetry and philosophy as historicism, or the tendency to idealize history, to see perfection in the past and to contrast it with the imperfection of the present. The romanticist sought to re-establish man's primal vision of "oneness"; he attempted to achieve a state of psychic unity, a state of pure potentiality and unalloyed power in which experience and consciousness stood undivided. Only by penetrating history with art could the romanticist hope to anneal the wounds inflicted upon the human experience by the keen edge of rationality, the chief weapon of moral philosophy and Christian apologetics. Langbaum terminates his examination of the aesthetic historicism of both Browning and
Nietzsche with the statement:

Modern anti-rationalists seek, as the next step in history, to reverse the historical process, to recover through history the concreteness of vision which history has progressively destroyed. That is what distinguishes their self-conscious kind of sympathy, their deliberate attempt to recover a sense of attachment, from the instinctive, almost biological, sense of attachment which we may suppose to have existed in the original Dionysian situation. That is what makes the modern anti-rationalist movement so very modern and rational.

Remaining for a moment with German romanticism, one finds that the vigor with which Nietzsche's philosophy attacked the system of "self-enclosed rationality" that pervaded nineteenth-century thought was matched in poetry by Heinrich Heine. Aside from the fact that Nietzsche saw in Heine, as in Wagner, the resurgence of the Dionysiac spirit, Nietzsche was undoubtedly attracted by Heine's belief in the inherent unity of the human psyche, a belief which permeated his lyrical mode. Laura Hofrichter explains:

The distinguishing thing in Heine's attitude is that he takes as an indivisible unit what is generally taken as opposites. He held steadily to the unity of the physical and the psychic, the material and the spiritual, the rational and the irrational, and he consistently avoided putting the one before the other, or as was usual in nineteenth-century literature, playing the one off against the other.

16Langbaum, p. 235.
What is truly important here is that Browning embraced a unified view of the world which, like Heine's Weltanschauung, strove to break through the pale of reason and to overcome the purely cognitive distinctions between the physical and spiritual worlds. In an ontological formulation which very much resembles the hylozoic materialism of the early Greeks (a similarity which will be more closely examined in Chapter IV), Browning averred, "For how can one look at nature as a whole and doubt that, whenever there is a gap, a 'link' must be 'missing'—through the limited power and opportunity of the looker? But go back and back, as you please, at the back, as Mr. Sludge is made to insist, you find (my faith is as constant) creative intelligence acting as matter but not resulting from it." 19 What Browning has Mr. Sludge insist is:

We find great things are made up of small things,
And little things go lessening till at last
Comes God behind them. Talk of mountains now?
We talk of mould that heaps the mountain, mites
That throng the mould, and God makes the mites.
The Name comes close behind a stomach-cyst,
The simplest of creations, just a sac
That's mouth, heart, legs, and belly at once, yet lives
Yet feels, and could do neither, we conclude,
If simplified still further one degree;
The small becomes dreadful and immense! 20

Miller, in trying to objectify Browning's anti-rational inclination towards hylozoism, hypothesizes that in Browning's

20Browning, Complete Works, V, 260.
view "God himself is the shaping force, present everywhere in the universe in a thousand distinct forms, delighting in the multitudinous variety of his creations." 21

In a brief passage Luria articulates the two prevalent aspects of Browning's romanticism—his belief in the immanence of God and his skeptical regard of the human reason. Luria proclaims:

How nearer God we were! He glows above
With scarce an intervention, presses close
And palpitatingly, his soul o'er ours:
We feel him, nor by painful reason know! 22

To Browning, as to other romantics, truth must be felt, must be experienced, rather than apprehended by the reasoning mind. One might even go so far as to say that Browning subsumed all concepts of truth, all formulations of moral knowledge, and all results of the human understanding under the actuality and potentiality of man's experience. Like Coleridge, Browning felt that it was the purpose of poetry to create experience rather than to reflect a two dimensional image of it and that the poetic imagination was able to weld experience and contemplation, sensation and reflection, into a unified vision. Browning, like the Milesian materialists and like Nietzsche, superposed ontological considerations over ethical knowledge, and he responded to the problem of Being with Becoming.

21 Miller, p. 93.
22 Browning, Complete Works, III, 252.
CHAPTER II

BROWNING AS OPTIMIST AND ANTI-INTELLECTUAL

IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CRITICISM

However convincingly such scholars as Miller and Langbaum argue that Browning's anti-rationalism allied him with romantic skepticism and with modern existentialism, there are numerous critics who view Browning's anti-rationalism as anti-intellectualism. And, in similar fashion, there are several critics who interpret his skepticism to be little more than a dogmatic rejection of scientific discovery and its philosophical corollary, positivism. Taken as a whole, Browning's poor reputation as a thinker rests upon two general assumptions. The first of these is that his intransigent, almost pathological, insistence upon the goodness of God and the immortality of the soul not only concealed a deeply felt sense of insecurity but also belied his woeful inability to answer the important philosophical questions of his era. The second assumption is that Browning's predilection for individuality and singularity, his enchantment with the particular and the anomalous, precluded any capability on his part of achieving the comprehensive objectivity, the synoptic detachment, which is considered essential to philosophic thought.
Richard Altick's critical treatment of Browning's philosophy is informed by both of these assumptions. In "The Private Life of Robert Browning," Altick imputes that Browning's act of faith sprang from anxiety. With little regard for the limitations of psychological criticism, Altick maintains:

The usual vehemence of Browning's assertion of faith, then, is not, as most commentators have easily assumed it to be, a sign of his own inner confidence. Far from it; his unrelenting, sometimes hysterical, insistence upon faith, his return to the theme over many years, suggests that he was obliged to keep talking down the intrusive devils of doubt. His poems of religion seem often like exorcization rituals. As Paul de Reul has observed, "If he persuades us, it is through his attempt to persuade himself, by contagious emotion rather than logical demonstration."¹

Altick then asserts that Browning's preoccupation with particularity and his intense scrutiny of his dramatic figures obfuscated what little ability he possessed to think rationally and systematically.

His intellectual myopia, which made him so aware of the details of an edifice of thought but prevented him in viewing it in its totality, led him to reject formal thought and to concentrate upon its antithesis--pure intuition, impulse--as the only possible way to truth, because it was the only way available to Robert Browning.²

If Altick's diagnosis is correct, if Browning did indeed experience difficulty in seeing things in their entirety,

²Ibid., p. 261.
in reaching a complete understanding of the thought of his
day, it was a problem he shared with other Victorians.
Matthew Arnold, for example, in *Empedocles on Etna*, makes
the sage Empedocles complain to Pausanius that

Hither and thither spins
The wind-borne, mirroring soul,
A thousand glimpses wins,
And never sees a whole;
Looks once, and drives elsewhere, and leaves its last

Whatever the psychology behind Browning's "intellectual myo-
pia," it is certain that his varied and apiculated vision
was more productive in the aesthetic sense than would have
been a general scheme or perspective into which all ideas
and all experience might be integrated and reduced to a set
of maxims. On the contrary, one may well contend that it
was precisely Browning's passion for detail and his intimate
association with the fragmentary and the concrete that led
him to his Neo-Platonic doctrine of imperfection, a doctrine
which posited that the teleological development of the world
manifested itself through individual acts of striving and
aspiring.

Although many students of Browning attribute his philo-
sophy of the imperfect to Shelley's Platonic idealism,
Altick maintains that it arose from Browning's need to
rationalize his failure as a poet.

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His fervent celebration of the glories of the incomplete, the imperfect, as being part of God's inscrutable but unquestionable plan for men, is far less the manifestation of an intellectual conviction than it is the result of Browning's growing need to salve his awareness of failure.\footnote{Altick, p. 252.}

Altick's criticism on this point is significant not because it strikes at the center of Browning's ontological theory but because it exhibits the tendency of many critics to ignore the historical influences upon Browning's thought, to neglect the more fruitful practice of comparative scholarship, and to become concerned instead with the often specious endeavor of psychoanalysis.

The enthusiasm with which Altick pursues his psychological examination of Browning's religious and philosophical attitudes finally defeats itself with the assertion of a nonsense proposition. In an absurd hypothesis, Altick claims that Browning's life would have been less troubled by insecurity if he had been born with less intellect. "How much easier it would have been for Browning," Altick exclaims, "had he been devoid of intellectual gifts and endowed simply with a fervent emotional life."\footnote{Ibid., p. 260.} Yet despite the faults of Altick's method of inquiry, he concludes his study of Browning's ability as a philosopher with a statement that has been repeated with little modification by many critics of Browning's thought. Altick writes:
For although a whole dismal shelf of treatises has been published on Browning as a thinker, actually he was not a thinker at all, either by native gift or by training. His reading in the classics of Western Philosophy was unsystematic and spotty. Neo-Platonism he was well acquainted with—witness "Abt Vogler," one of the most Neo-Platonic poems of recent centuries—but he blandly admitted to Mrs. Orr that "he knew neither the German philosophers nor their reflection in Coleridge." Compared with Tennyson or Arnold or Newman, he was philosophically illiterate.⁶

Even though the smugness and overt hostility of Altick's attack upon Browning's intellectual abilities might disincline one to concur with Altick's final judgment, the opinion of William DeVane, which is essentially the same as that of Altick, cannot be so easily overlooked. DeVane's treatment of Browning, however, altogether lacks the virulence of Altick's censorship of Browning's thought. DeVane's critical work exemplifies the tendency to overlook the apparent naiveté and peremptoriness of Browning's philosophical attitudes by emphasizing the superior importance of his style. In commenting upon Browning's proclivity in his later life to be both didactic and philosophical, DeVane typifies an attitude of tolerance and indulgence which characterizes much of the criticism of Browning as a thinker.

In 1884 he published "Ferishtah's Fancies," and here under the thin disguise of a Persian sage set himself up as a philosopher... to defend the tenets of the genuine Christian faith which he held... But his early education was at fault and like most self-educated

⁶Altick, p. 258.
men he had no good notion of the history which lies behind ideas.  

However heavily DeVane chides Browning's ineptitude as a man of thought, the underlying disposition of all of his commentary is that Browning's stature as an artist and an innovator is paramount and is not diminished by his arduous attempts to give philosophical justification to orthodox Christianity. DeVane observes:

The critics of our own day are inclined to disregard much of what Browning says, and to fasten intently on how he says it. He is now seen to have been a pioneer and a revolutionist in the new art of psychological poetry, a century before his time.

In spite of DeVane's report, however, few critics of Browning's dramatic mode can resist the allure of devising new variations on the theme of his weakness as a thinker.

From a perspective of Jungian psychology, Stewart W. Holmes postulates that Browning's failure as a philosopher was the result of his inability to think abstractly, to disassociate the word from the phenomena it denotes. An entire realm of rational thought and articulate expression, Holmes asserts, was closed to Browning because he lacked the faculty to manipulate language in a logical manner; he was, in short, a "semantic stutterer." Proceeding from the Jungian diagnosis of the "inarticulateness of 'prophet poets,'" Holmes


8Ibid., p. 38.
discloses that he will

... examine the hypothesis that Browning had the characteristics of a semantic stutterer. To be more precise, when the poet wrote as a prophet, as a metaphysician, he lost his ability to write meaningfully, chiefly because, like stutterers of the kitchen garden variety, he confused the levels of abstractions and dealt with the thing-word relationship intentionally rather than extensionally.9

Since Holmes attempts to establish a causal relationship between Browning's "verbal impotence" and the obscurity and dissonance of his verse, ultimately his argument becomes an indictment of Browning's poetics as well as of the poet himself.

Unlike Holmes, who attempts to demonstrate Browning's intellectual inadequacy by pointing out the deficiency of his poetry, J. M. Cohen confines his criticism of Browning's prowess as a thinker to the shallowness of his moral precepts. In reviewing Betty Miller's biography of Browning, Cohen flatly declares:

It is no doubt better to search with Mrs. Miller for the reasons of his weakness than to hymn with the Browning Society and his friend and first biographer, Mrs. Sutherland Orr, his profound message to the world. For Browning had no deep moral message, and his blustering exterior certainly hid an inner self-dissatisfaction.10

Yet Cohen, in his own biography of Browning, adopts a more benign attitude towards the poet. Like DeVane, Cohen suggests


that Browning's failure as a philosopher is extenuated, if not obviated, by his eminence as a poet. In urging students of Browning to overlook the optimism of his orthodox view of Christianity, Cohen writes:

The contemporary reader finds it hard to forgive Robert Browning the optimism of those two lines. But Pippa speaks for one side of Browning's nature only, voices only his simple belief in a certain primal innocence, of which he made her the symbol. He was, nevertheless, at heart an optimist, though of a far from naive kind. He certainly believed that there is no virtue in doubt, and that behind the apparent disorder and contradictions of earthly events there is both a meaning and a purpose.11

The charge that Browning lacked any profound moral insight, like the manifold allegations that he was incapable of demonstrating a sustained and organized pattern of intellectual thought, is informed by the popular belief that his affirmation of the essential elements of the Christian faith was little more than an irresponsible attempt to extricate himself from the tumultuous and disconcerting milieu of nineteenth-century rationalism and skepticism. It is perhaps this opinion of his irresponsibility, of his refusal to confront the philosophical controversies of his age, that is productive of much of the aversion with which his ideas are often met. DeVane, in his article "The Virgin and the Dragon," asserts that Browning recoiled from the increasing tendency towards empiricism which attended the advancement of science and which threatened to supplant all moral and religious...
principles and to replace them with the absolute laws of physics and biological development.

The fierce assaults of the Higher Criticism upon the literary authority of the Bible had undermined and doomed the evangelical position in which Browning had been bred. Science, furthermore, had shaken his faith in his dearly loved doctrine of progress, or at least had changed that conception from the triumphal march of an earlier notion to the long, slow evolution of man with many setbacks and retrogressions.12

Browning's reaction to the Higher Criticism has received much scholarly attention because it is often seen as the direct manifestation of his theory of knowledge. Critical opinion on this issue is divided. On the one hand, such critics as DeVane, Altick and Cohen avow that Browning's rejection of Strauss' study of Biblical historicity exemplifies Browning's defensive and dogged anti-intellectualism. On the other hand, one finds other critics who maintain that Browning's attitude towards the Higher Criticism was the logical realization of an epistemological concept which enjoys ample precedent in the annals of the skeptical tradition of Western philosophy.

As early as 1927 DeVane had contended that Browning defended his own untenable faith in a defunct Christian ethos by disparaging man's ability to apprehend religious and philosophical truth with the unaided reason.

... Browning preserved his optimism by casting aspersions upon man's knowing faculty; and he proclaimed

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with increasing vehemence his faith that God was love,—
the faith he had learned as a child from his mother,
and he had temporarily rejected in his youth—he in-
sisted on the necessity of man's ignorance. His faith
is thus ultimately blind, and he is intellectually
agnostic. 13

The problem with DeVane's treatment of Browning's skepticism
is that it tacitly suggests that Browning stood apart from
the mainstream of nineteenth-century thought. Nothing could
be further from the truth unless one would argue that Carlyle
also had little in common with his contemporaries. Like
Browning, Carlyle distrusted man's ability to comprehend
truth by means of scientific logic. In his introduction to
Sartor Resartus, Charles F. Harrold notes that "Carlyle as
a literary man never tired of stating the supremacy of imag-
inative and moral intuition over analytical reasoning." 14

In the chapter "Pure Reason," Carlyle has the sagacious
Professor Teufelsdrockh exclaim:

Shall your science . . . proceed in the small chink-
lighted, or even oil-lighted, underground workshop
of Logic alone; and man's mind become an Arithmetical
Mill, whereof Memory is the Hopper, and mere tables
of Sines and Tangents, Codification, and Treatises
of what you call Political Economy, are the Meal?
And what is Science . . . but one other of the mechan-
ical and mental handicrafts. . . . I mean that Thought
without Reverence is barren, perhaps poisonous. 15

13 William C. DeVane, Browning's Parleyings: The Auto-
biography of a Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927),
p. 34.

14 Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, ed. Charles F.

15 Ibid., p. 68.
Amid a critical tradition which sees Browning's "intellectual agnosticism" as the emollient of his sensitive and tenuous faith, there are several scholars who view Browning's skepticism as a valid philosophical attitude which was widely embraced in nineteenth-century thought. Douglas Bush suggests that Browning's version of Christology was somewhat similar to Strauss' concept that Christ represented the apotheosis of mankind, or that Christ's reality rested upon the condition of his ideal perfection. Commenting on Browning's attitude towards the Higher Criticism, Bush observes:

Browning could not take historical criticism as final, because human reason and knowledge are limited and fallible and because the real evidence is within the soul. He sees the divinity of Christ and the transforming power of human and divine love as facts of experience which mere Biblical scholarship cannot overthrow. Thus, in spite of his antagonism towards Strauss, Browning's attitude was not altogether different, though his power of positive faith was less intellectual and more fervent.16

Norton B. Crowell directly refutes the charge that Browning "cast aspersions on man's knowing faculty." In recapitulating the thesis of his study, Crowell writes:

In Browning's view man has a three-fold soul of body, mind, and spirit making one soul; and man's surest duty is to keep the three in healthful cooperation in meeting the issues of life. There appears to be no real evidence that he at any time deplored the use of intellect, degraded the role of

thought, or counseled men to throw out mind as an evil power inherently inimical to love and the intuitive life. What DeVane and others term anti-intellectualism or irrationalism in Browning is interpreted by Growell as the proper integration of the rational consciousness into the harmony of a psychic unity. Although it is certain that Browning favored the powers of intuition over the powers of logic, there is little indication that he dismissed rational thought as unthinkable; for him it was a means, a method, which enabled man to perceive reality on a contingent basis, but it was, by no means, an instrument which could reveal to man the divine power which animated all life and which culminated in consciousness itself.

To Browning the reason was but a single dimension of the phenomenon of human awareness. The dominance of reason over the faculties of imagination and intuition, in Browning's view, deprived man of the possibility of a complete life; it distorted his view of the world; and it enslaved him to a closed and narrow system of perception. Browning's fear of the supremacy of reason was no more ignoble and no more irrational than was Blake's fear of Urizen and Shelley's dread of Zeus. The tyranny of rationality symbolized by both Urizen and Zeus must be overthrown if man is to realize, or even to enjoy the possibility of realizing, his own potential.

There is a strong likelihood that Browning objected to the Higher Criticism not because it deprived the Bible of historical authenticity but because it divested Christ of His mystery and because it stripped Him of His divinity, of His power to transform the fragmentary world of becoming into a vision of union in which all disparities are synthesized into a harmonious whole. The important thing to understand is that if Browning saw Christ not only as will and idea but also as ideal, then the Higher Critics posed a threat to Browning's view only in that they emphasized a reasoned Christ rather than a revealed Christ. That Browning had little appreciation for a deduced Christianity is given elaborate illustration in Caliban's absurdly logical assertion of the divinity of Setebos.

In discussing Browning's chief objection to the Higher Criticism, William O. Raymond maintains:

In summing up Browning's attitude toward the historical evidences of Christianity it must be borne in mind that, in conjunction with the spirit of romantic idealism which aspires toward the infinite, he has a very deep sense of the necessity of stooping to the limited and finite channels of human experience. . . . By robing itself in the prismatic colours of imagery and symbol the Christian story captivates the heart, where the white radiance of absolute truth, like Laurus' vision of heaven, would sear and blind through excess of light.18

It seems probable that Raymond, in his explanation of Browning's interpretation of the mystery of Christ, is

iterating Shelley's intuition that "Life, like a dome of
many-colored glass,/Stains the white radiance of eternity."\(^{19}\)
If Browning's rendering of Christianity and his doctrine of
the imperfect is seen from the point of view of Shelley's
Nec-Platonism, one must conclude that there was indeed a
rational side to Browning's faith. It is more than evident
that Browning developed Shelley's belief that "The One re-
mains, the many change and pass;/Heaven's light forever
shines, Earth's shadows fly"\(^{20}\) in Abt Vogler's phrase "On
earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a/perfect round."\(^{21}\)

The general drift of DeVane's and Altick's criticism of
Browning's skepticism is that he did not formulate his ideas
in a legitimate fashion; that is, unlike Shelley before him
and unlike many of his more philosophically inclined con-
temporaries, Browning did not commit himself to a systematic
study of the historical precedents of his own anti-rational
principles. Browning was, in short, a skeptic for all the
wrong reasons. His philosophy, however similar to those of
more respected reputation, was uninformed and hence untenable.
However untenable DeVane and Altick find Browning's philo-
sophical thought, neither of them is inclined to find fault
with his poetry on philosophical grounds.

\(^{19}\)Shelley, p. 277.
\(^{20}\)Ibid.
\(^{21}\)Browning, \textit{Complete Works}, V, 173.
This tendency to view Browning's philosophy apart from his poetry was in no way incorporated into the criticism of the first and most vigorous opponent of Browning's thought, George Santayana, in what is perhaps the most derisive single body of philosophical criticism directed against Browning, made no distinction whatever between Browning the poet and Browning the thinker. To Santayana, Browning's dramatic mode formed the palpable integument of his intellectual "barbarism." In a statement which defines the modern literary barbarian and which explicitly associates the poetical self with the philosophical self, Santayana wrote:

> For the barbarian is a man who regards his passions as their only excuse for being; who does not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal cause. He is the man who does not know his derivations nor perceive his tendencies, but who merely feels and acts, valuing in his life its force, its filling, but being careless of its purpose and its form. His delight is in abundance and vehemence; his art, like his life, shows an exclusive respect for quantity and splendor of materials. His scorn for what is poorer and weaker than himself is only surpassed by his ignorance of what is higher.22

The remainder of Santayana's essay attempts to demonstrate that the profusion with which Browning created individuality in his poetry marked his inability to perceive the world from any other than an elemental perspective. Santayana's writing suggests that Browning sought refuge from contemplation in emotion, in the aureate dissipation

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of his undisciplined exuberance. Santayana also implied that Browning attempted to approbate his withdrawal from the active intellectual community through the adoption of a distorted and primitive interpretation of the Christian doctrine. Santayana insisted that Browning's philosophy was really not a philosophy at all but was instead an incoherent compendium of desultory emotional utterances. That Browning was never able to ascend from the world of sensation into the realm of contemplation, that he was never disposed to forsake the particular for the general and comprehensive, and that he was wholly dominated by his temperament are the central contentions of Santayana's argument.

And what does the temperament say? That life is an adventure and not a discipline; that the exercise of energy is the absolute good, irrespective of motives or consequences. These are maxims of frank barbarism; nothing could express the lust for life, the dogged unwillingness to learn from experience, the contempt for rationality, the carelessness about perfection, the admiration for mere force, in which barbarism always betrays itself. The vague religion which seeks to justify this attitude is really only another outburst of the same irrational impulse.

In Browning this religion takes the name of Christianity . . . but it has more affinity to the worship of Thor or Odin than to the religion of the Cross.23

Although Santayana's essay is latent with contradictions (e.g., he applauds the barbaric spirit in Homer and censures it in Whitman and Browning), it does more than

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23 Santayana, p. 172.
define limits to which critical opinion has gone in the denunciation of Browning's thought. Ironically Santayana points in the right direction by insisting again and again that Browning's philosophy, barbaric though it may be in Santayana's sense of the word, is inextricably caught up in the texture and form of the dramatic monologue. In 1900 Santayana attacked Browning with the arguments which reflect, to a remarkable degree, an ability to penetrate the superficiality of Browning's optimism and orthodoxy and to focus on the experiential significance of the dramatic monologue. Yet despite Santayana's trenchant perception, he could not see beyond what he considered the hedonism in Browning. Unlike Langbaum, Santayana was unable to reconcile the disparities in Browning's thought and poetry and to resolve the tension between Browning's attraction to the particular and experiential and his paradoxical commitment to both skepticism and idealism. In a statement which is quite reminiscent of Kierkegaard's notion that "the aesthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy,"^24 Santayana remarked of Browning:

> He remained in the phenomenal sphere; he was a lover of experience; the ideal did not exist for him. No conception could be further from his mind than the essential conception of any rational philosophy, namely, that feeling is to be treated as raw material for thought, and that the destiny of the emotion is to pass into objects which shall contain all its value while losing itself in formlessness.^25

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^25^Santayana, p. 167.
However virulent one finds "The Poetry of Barbarism," it should be observed that there is a valuable insight beneath the zeal and prolixity of its invective. The essay inevitably leads one to the conclusion that an affirmative appreciation of Browning's poetry, at least in the terms of most modern criticism, depends largely upon the artificial disassociation of Browning's religious and philosophical thought from the structure and technique of the dramatic monologue. Whether one adopts Santayana's view that Browning had no conception of the ideal or whether one assents to DeVane's notion that Browning was so given to idealism that he sacrificed his intellectual integrity, an entire dimension of Browning's thought is lost. Crowell cogently points out that "to fail to see that all of Browning's philosophy is premised on values is to reduce his belief in progress to a faith simply in motion itself, whatever its direction, and to empty his works of both dignity and meaning."26

26Crowell, p. 229.
CHAPTER III

SKEPTICISM AND FAITH:
BROWNING'S EVOLUTIONARY FORMULA

Even though Browning's concept of human progress was, as Crowell indicates, "premised on values," his theory of development also had a broad empirical base which was not altogether dissimilar to Darwin's hypothesis that species evolved from simpler and less differentiated forms. Whether Browning's own notion of evolution was influenced by the work of Erasmus Darwin or by Sir Charles Lyell's Principles of Geology, it should not be considered odd that Browning proposed a theory of psychological and biological development with the publication of Paracelsus in 1835, twenty-four years before Charles Darwin completed the Origin of Species. Beliefs in the mutability of matter and beliefs in the progressive perfectibility of man had been widely circulated since at least the middle of the eighteenth century. Carlyle, for example, adhered to an idea of evolution which "best approximates the Fichtean concept of the realization of an idea, the unfolding or actualization of a plan."1 Browning's view of the evolutionary process, of course, like Carlyle's, did

1Carlyle, p. liv.
not affirm the essential axiom of Darwin's theory—that all
the diverse forms of life, even life itself, were the results
of inexplicable fortuity.

Yet Browning, even in the irascibility of his later life
when he felt obliged to refute Darwin's doctrine of chance,
never argued in favor of a detached God who stood outside the
process he created and who directed it according to the pre-
scriptions of a pre-ordained plan. This is not to say that
Browning perceived no direction to the evolutionary process;
on the contrary, he firmly persisted in the belief that God—
the purposive force underlying the universe—had His dynamic
life in the internality of things and not in the omniscient
execution of a divine scheme. In this respect Browning's
evolutionary philosophy bears a close similarity to the one
conceived by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose work, accord-
ing to Bernard Towers, represents the most significant philo-
sophical achievement since Aquinas.²

To Browning evolution was more than a descriptive scien-
tific law which objectified and explained the visible flux
of matter and energy in the world. Browning held, like
Teilhard after him, that evolution is the inner principle
regulating and directing the course of natural and human
history. Teilhard, in The Phenomenon of Man, postulates
that evolution is the prescriptive law of all life and that

²Bernard. Towers, Teilhard de Chardin (Richmond: John
an awareness of its principles is the necessary requisite to all valid philosophical thought.

Is evolution a system, a theory, or a hypothesis? It is much more: it is the general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must bow and which they must satisfy if they are to be thinkable and true. Evolution is the light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow.3

While much of Teilhard's work is concerned with establishing a scientific groundwork for his carefully detailed study of the phenomenon of consciousness, he does, nevertheless, as did Browning, focus his inquiry upon the anfractuous course of psychic evolution. As far as their theories of evolution are concerned, both Browning and Teilhard moved rapidly from the area of physical evolution to the realm of psychogenesis and the exploration of its implications.

The initial statement of Browning's concept of evolution in *Paracelsus* underwent little modification in his later poems. In *Paracelsus* his theory found its most complete and perhaps its most definitive expression, at least insofar as the physical aspects of evolution are concerned. Browning's Paracelsus, who shows little similarity to the medieval peripatetic metaphysician of the same name, comes to the height of his wisdom on his deathbed. Like several of Browning's later dramatic figures, Cleon, Rabbi Ben Ezra, and the Apostle John, Paracelsus is impelled by the immanence of

death to synthesize some purpose from the diffuse actions and thoughts of his life. On his hospital bed at St. Sebastian's infirmary in Salzburg, Paracelsus proffers his companions, Aprile and Festus, the distillate of his multifarious intellectual experience. He has learned that empirical knowledge can be transmuted into knowledge of the divine and eternal only through the power of love. Yet his more startling discovery is in the apprehension that inside the palpable envelope of evolution there moves a more profound becoming, and that the inception of consciousness in the world, as well as the birth of awareness in each man, marks the end of biological evolution and the incipience of spiritual or psychic evolution.

Paracelsus initiates the rather lengthy elucidation of his evolutionary theory with an allusion to the geological changes that have marked the development of the earth's surface.

And the earth changes like the human face;  
The molten ore bursts up among the rocks;  
Winds into the stone's heart, outbranches bright  
In hidden mines, spots the barren river-beds;  
Crumbles into fine sands where sunbeams bask—  
God joys therein."

Through Paracelsus, Browning seems to suggest in the phrase "God joys therein" that God himself is striving through a pre-life force, through an inorganic metamorphosis, to attain life, to assume a more plastic and malleable form.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{Browning, Complete Works, I, 159.}\]
It is important to observe at this point that Browning's theory of evolution contains an element of ambiguity which might lead one to overemphasize its similarity with the earlier concepts of Jean Baptiste Lamarck and with the later notions of Henri Bergson, both of whom embraced a purposive but fatalistic view of evolution, a view which precluded any belief in immortality. Lionel Stevenson, in his work *Darwin Among the Poets*, demonstrates the tendency to link Browning too closely to positivism.

The idea of evolution in Paracelsus resembles the recent theories of "creative evolution" rather than Darwin's theory of "natural selection." God is perceived as the life-force and is identical with joy, existing in all manifestations of life, from the lowest to the highest.7 While such a comparison is illuminating to a certain degree, it leads ultimately to the misconception that Browning, in identifying God with joy, extolled energy and progress for its own sake and, like Bergson, deduced no moral principles from the laws of motion and mutability.

On the contrary, Browning's phrase "God joys therein" must be taken to mean that God lives within and affirms the very process which He animates; He is of that process, He realizes himself through it, but He is not identical with it. This distinction, however caliginous it may appear in Browning's thought, is clarified by Teilhard in his brief discussion of pantheism, in which he explicitly points up the

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relationship between God and the process in which He moves.

To put an end once and for all to the fears of 'pantheism', constantly raised by certain upholders of traditional spirituality as regards evolution, how can we fail to see that, in the case of the converging universe such as I have delineated, far from being born of the fusion and confusion of the elemental centres it assembles, the universal centre of unification . . . must be conceived as pre-existent and transcendent. A very real 'pantheism' if you like (in the etymological meaning of the word) but an absolutely legitimate pantheism— for if, in the last resort, the reflective centres of the world [i.e., mankind collectively] are effectively 'one with God', this state is obtained not by identification (God become all) but by the differentiating and communicating action of love.6

That Browning embraced this doctrine of "legitimate pantheism" is illustrated by Paracelsus' conviction that

Savage creatures seek
Their loves in wood and plain—and God renews
His ancient rapture. Thus he dwells in all,
From life's minute beginnings, up at last
To man.7

It is, of course, Browning's inclination towards this higher pantheism which clearly distinguishes his ideas of evolution from those of Bergson and the English positivists. Browning accepted the antilogy, the paradox, that God "dwell in all" and yet transcends His own means of realization; He is both Being and Becoming; He "renews His ancient rapture" by the continual enactment of creating the world again and again through the independent agency of man's will and consciousness. To use Nicholas Berdyaev's idea, man was thus

6Teilhard, Man, pp. 309-310.
7Browning, Complete Works, I, 160.
created in the image of God—a creator for whom freedom is the essential condition of his creativity. Berdyaev, in attempting to indicate the weakness of Bergson's theory of evolution, could very well be speaking on Browning's behalf when he writes:

Bergson's expression 'creative evolution' must be considered a misunderstanding in terms. Evolutionism is completely in the power of determinism and causal relationships. In evolution, as it is understood by naturalistic evolutionism, a real novelty cannot arise, since there is no creative act. And a creative act is always traceable back to freedom and it interrupts the chain of causal relationship. The evolutionary theory is only applicable to the results of creative acts, but it does not accept the idea of an active subject development. Evolution is objectivization. 8

Although "naturalistic evolutionism" was held by both Browning and Teilhard to constitute the physical condition in which psychogenesis must take place and have its initial existence, they were primarily concerned with the inner force which animated the process itself and which at last burst through the biological sphere into the sphere of consciousness, the noosphere, to use Teilhard's term. To both men the visible evidences of the evolutionary process not only symbolized but also directly pointed up an inherent tendency in matter to organize itself in increasingly more complex forms, a tendency which finally culminated in human consciousness. Browning's Paracelsus articulates the idea that the centripetal tendency of the universe reached a profound

focus in human sentience.

Man—the consummation of this scheme
Of being, the completion of this sphere
Of life, whose attributes had here and there
Been scattered o'er the visible world before,
Asking to be combined, dim fragments meant
To be united in some wondrous whole,
Imperfect qualities throughout creation,
Suggesting some one creature yet to make,
Some point where all those scattered rays should meet
Convergent in the faculties of man.9

Yet despite Browning's belief that man grew out of a
process which preceded him, a process which was consummated
by his advent, it is often argued that Browning held fastly
to the orthodox concept of the creation of man. "Browning's
universe," according to Stevenson, "is still the old anthro-
pocentric one. . . . The world was made for man."10 In sim-
ilar fashion to Stevenson's notion that Browning believed
the physical world, the process of evolution notwithstanding,
to have been prepared for the descent of man, some critics
contend that he failed to perceive in man a "naturalistic
soul" and that he saw man living in the natural world but
not as a scion of the natural process of development to
which the world owes its existence. Boyd Litzinger reports:

Browning's failure to grasp scientific truth . . .
or to assimilate it . . . is given further testament in
Joseph Warren Beach's The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth
Century Poetry. The reader of Browning must always re-
call, warned Beach, "how completely his thinking was
dominated by teleology—how little he thought in terms

9Browning, Complete Works, I, 160.
10Stevenson, p. 169.
of ends or final causes." Further Beach complained that Browning, seeing the soul from the point of view of orthodoxy, failed to conceive of a naturalistic soul. 11

That Browning "failed to conceive of a naturalistic soul," that he believed God to be an objective and omniscient power detached from the universe He created, that he held man's soul to have come from without rather than from within are charges that arise more from the spirit of modern criticism than from a detailed study of his poetry. It is difficult, indeed, to imagine a detached, anthropomorphic God who "dwells in all,/From life's minute beginnings, up at last/To man--the consummation of this scheme of being." Browning is not saying here that God, from the vantage point of infinite wisdom, manipulates the evolutionary process but rather that God is the

Power--neither put forth blindly nor controlled
By perfect knowledge; or to be used
At risk inspired or checked by hope or fear:
Knowledge--not intuition, but the slow
Uncertain fruit of an enhancing toil
Strengthened by love. 12

It is of primary importance to observe here that Browning's concept of the creation is far from the orthodox one. His ontological proposition that God simultaneously dwells within yet transcends the evolutionary process demonstrates a


remarkable affinity for the kind of thought which lies behind Teilhard's premise that God is coextensive with nature, with the universe, in the act of becoming. Browning's statement that God effected His creation, not through the omnipotent execution of a grand design, but through "the slow/Uncertain fruit of an enhancing toil/Strengthened by love" suggests that God is the inner force of coherence which gives vitality and direction to the process of evolution. Teilhard refers to the regulative principle of this coherence as orthogenesis, "the manifest property of living matter to form a system in which 'terms succeed each other experimentally, following constantly increasing degrees of centrocomplexity.'"¹³ Teilhard explains that "without orthogenesis life would only have spread; with it there is an ascent of life that is invincible."¹⁴

One phase of this ascent ends with the birth of man, "the consummation of this scheme/Of being," who inherits and multiplies the glory of the process from which he emerged. Teilhard's remark on the significance of man's appearance in relation to the evolutionary process itself should bring Browning's idea into sharper focus.

On every hypothesis, however solitary his advent, man emerged from a general groping of the world. He was born the direct lineal descendant from the total effort

¹³Teilhard, Man, p. 108.
¹⁴Ibid., p. 109.
of life, so that the species has an axial value and a pre-eminent dignity.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet central to Browning's evolutionary idealism is the belief that the process of development which culminated in man did not halt with his advent; it attained a new dimension in which the vital principle was man's will and creative intelligence. That Browning held that biological evolution had given way to psychological and spiritual evolution is given lucid expression in Paracelsus. Abandoning his usual grandiloquence, it would seem, for the sake of clarity, Paracelsus discloses that man's consciousness is both nascent and seminal; its promise of greater consciousness and its potential for greater harmony is yet unfulfilled.

And this to fill us with regard for man, With apprehension of his passing worth, Desire to work his proper nature out, And ascertain his rank and final place, For these things still tend upward, progress is The law of life, man is not Man as yet, Nor shall I deem his object served, his end Attained, his genuine strength put fairly forth.\textsuperscript{16}

Teilhard, like Browning, maintained that since the birth of thought, evolution "has overflowed its anatomical modalities to spread . . . into the zones of psychic spontaneity" and that the sphere of consciousness, the noosphere, is still in a state of development.\textsuperscript{17} To Browning the coming of man signaled the "completion of this sphere of life" and marked

\textsuperscript{15} Teilhard, Man, p. 189.

\textsuperscript{16} Browning, Complete Works, I, 162.

\textsuperscript{17} Teilhard, Man, p. 203.
the beginning of a new "tendency to God." This new "tendency to God" must be interpreted as man's conscious striving, his free creative effort, to realize the potential of his sentient being, to move upward through acts of conation towards the vision of Being which itself has arisen from the phenomenon of consciousness. In Teilhard's ontological formulation, human awareness is moving in the direction of greater consciousness, and reflection is moving in the direction of hyper-reflection.

We have seen that evolution is the ascent towards consciousness. Therefore it should culminate in some sort of supreme consciousness. But must not that consciousness, if it is to be supreme, contain in the highest degree what is the perfection of our consciousness—the illuminating involution of being upon itself? It would manifestly be in error to extend the curve of hominization in the direction of a state of diffusion. It is only in the direction of hyper-reflection—that is to say hyper-personalization—that thought can extrapolate itself.

Perhaps the most significant parallel element in Browning's and Teilhard's theories of evolution is the concept that man's consciousness is the natural manifestation of the afferent tendency of the universe, a tendency towards unity and harmony which underlies all progress and development. This similarity in the thought of both men is most salient in the particular way in which they both apply the word convergence to the evolutionary process. Browning, as

18 Browning, Complete Works, I, 163.

19 Teilhard, Man, pp. 258-259.
has been indicated, conceived man's consciousness to be the point of confluence, a new locus of synthesis, in which the inchoate elements of the universe are brought from their dimension of existence into a dimension of meaning and order. "The faculties of man" compose the "point where all those scattered rays should meet/Convergent." In his introduction to The Phenomenon of Man, Julian Huxley remarks that Teilhard usually uses convergence to denote the tendency of mankind, during its evolution, to superpose centripetal on centrifugal trends, so as to prevent... fragmentation, and eventually incorporate the results of differentiation in an organized and unified pattern.

Both Browning and Teilhard, by using convergence in this sense, necessarily maintained that mankind is more than the culmination of the diverse morphological concatenations of the evolutionary process. The appearance of man as the final achievement of biological evolution affords the whole process a direction and a center. The phenomenon of reflection radically revolutionizes the universe by turning it inward upon itself. Paracelsus speaks of the subtle but profound change that man has wrought upon nature through his power of reflection.

So far the seal
Is put on life; one stage being complete,
One scheme wound up; and from the grand result
A supplementary reflux of light,
Illustrates all the inferior grades, explains
Each step back in the circle. Not alone
For their possessor dawn those qualities,
But the new glory mixes with the heaven

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And earth; man, once descried, imprints forever
His presence on all lifeless things.21

In recapitulating Teilhard's conception of psychogenesis,
Huxley explains:

Before the appearance of man, life consisted of a vast array of separate branches, linked only by an unorganized pattern of ecological interaction. The incipient development of mankind into a single psychosocial unit, with a single noosystem, or a common pool of thought, is providing the evolutionary process with the rudiments of a head.22

It is at this point that another essential difference between Browning's idea of evolution and the positivist adaptation of Darwinian theory should be mentioned. While the positivist conception generally recognized some direction to the evolutionary process and pointed to the development of nervous systems as the criterion for ascertaining this direction, it altogether obviated any belief in immortality. The positivists, who, as Berdyaev points out, "secularized and naturalized" the idea of progress,23 failed to follow the spiritual implications of evolutionary theory. Browning's objections to positivism might well be expressed in Teilhard's statement that

the radical defect in all forms of belief in progress, as they are expressed in positivist credos, is that they do not definitely eliminate death. What is the use in detecting a focus in the van of evolution if that focus

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21Browning, Complete Works, I, 161.
22Teilhard, Man, p. 20.
23Berdyaev, Existentialism, p. 158.
can and must some day disintegrate?24

Although the positivist rendering of evolutionary theory was well known to Browning ("Cleon," for example, is replete with references to a truncated evolutionary process), he adopted a view that is quite similar to Teilhard's concept of immortality. To Browning immortality meant the final and eternal unification of man's spirit with the vision of perfection towards which it consciously strives and with the ultimate purpose or principle of the natural process from which it sprang. Even though Browning's belief in immortality owed more to his own intuition than to a well ordered method of extrapolation—the method by which Teilhard asserts the immortality of the soul—there seems to be a notable consistency between Browning's idea of immortality and his concept of evolution.

This consistency is rather tenuously exemplified by Paracelsus when he reveals his own faith to his comrades.

If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; its splendor soon or late
Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day.
You understand me? I have said enough?25

To Paracelsus immortality is not the logical projection of the evolutionary progress of life but the necessary consequence of the advent of consciousness into the world. Human consciousness—that "supplemental reflux of light" in the

24 Teilhard, Man, p. 20. 25 Browning, Complete Works, I, 166.
universe—is not subject to the laws of biological disintegration; the splendor of "God's lamp," the logos-fire which charges man's consciousness with divine energy and which illuminates the world is, like God himself, immersed in and transcendent of its physical setting. Teilhard, like Browning, believed that man "must overcome death by finding God in it."26

Browning's metaphorical use of light to point up the divine and immortal aspect of the soul is amplified and given more systematic expression in Teilhard's idea that "the divine milieu reveals itself to us as an incandescence of the inward layers of being" and that "nothing is more consistent or more fleeting—more fused with things or at the same time more separable from them—than a ray of light."27

In attempting to understand Browning's belief in immortality, it will be helpful to recall his idea of "creative intelligence acting as matter but not resulting from it."

Browning was saying that man's divine character, his creative intelligence, although it is woven into a corporeal fabric for a brief duration, is not the fortuitous product of matter acting upon itself in a purely deterministic manner; nor is it swept away by the entropy which eventually overtakes all physical creations however complex the form they have attained. Man's creative impulse is liberated from its material


27Ibid., p. 131.
dimension with death and tends towards God. Similarly
Teilhard believed that "the soul can only rejoin God after
having traversed a specific path through matter—which path
can be seen as the distance which separates, but it can also
be seen as the road which links."28

It is at this point that Teilhard's theory departs from
the realm of extrapolative speculation and enters the realm
of faith; and it is also at this juncture that Teilhard's
transition from reasoned thought to mysticism closely approxi-
mates Browning's assertion of faith, an assertion which in
no way justifies Santayana's charge that he "could not fit
phenomena into a meaningful system . . . and failed to rise
above the animal--the barbaric--concept of immortality."29
Regardless of how logically one might "fit phenomena into a
meaningful system," the vision of the divine presence in man
and of immortality is, as Browning realized, an intuitive
apprehension. Griffin reports Browning as having said, "As
to immortality I don't need arguments, I know by intuition
which is superior proof."30 Teilhard, too, was aware of the
limitations of rational thought when he declared:

The perception of the divine omnipresence is essentially
a seeing, a taste, that is to say a sort of intuition
bearing upon certain superior qualities in things. It
cannot therefore be attained . . . by any process of
reasoning, nor by any human artifice.31

28 Teilhard, Divine Milieu, p. 108.
29 Litzinger, p. 37. 30 Griffin, p. 294.
31 Teilhard, Divine Milieu, p. 131.
However much Browning's faith in the ubiquity of God and in the immortality of the soul depended upon the superior proof of intuition, it was, nevertheless, reinforced and given a certain degree of objective and rational expression in Paracelsus' view of the evolutionary process. And it represented an attempt on Browning's part to subsume the particularities of the world he perceived under the unity and order of the world of perfection he intuited. It is not to be argued, of course, that Browning deduced his vision of divine ubiquity and ideal perfection from the fragmentary world of actuality, but rather that he induced a direction and an order in the imperfect world of becoming from his intuitive awareness of God in both worlds.

Any attempt to ascertain Browning's personal conceptions from a study of his poetry inevitably runs awry of the contention that he seldom spoke directly through his dramatic figures, and even then he permitted them only partial access to the whole of his thought. Paracelsus, however, can be considered a valid spokesman for Browning's thought, particularly insofar as the theories of biological and spiritual evolution are concerned. In the first place, Paracelsus was written early in Browning's career, and he had not yet achieved that degree of detachment and objectivity which many commentators feel is so characteristic of his later poems. In 1834 and 1835, when Browning was seriously attempting to write for the stage, he was still very much in
the process of experimenting with his dramatic technique, and he had not yet abandoned the practice of investing his protagonists with his own emotion and his own ideas. Maisie Ward believes that Paracelsus "is chiefly Browning's own conception--largely perhaps of himself." In the second place, Browning himself indicated that Paracelsus was the legitimate representative of his view of the evolutionary process. In an open letter written to those of his contemporaries who complained that he was "strongly against Darwin, rejecting the truths of science and regretting their advance," Browning averred:

In reality, all that seems proved in Darwin's scheme was a conception that was familiar to me from the beginning: see in Paracelsus the progressive development from senseless matter to organized until man's appearance... also in 'Cleon' see the order of 'life's mechanics'--and I daresay in many passages of my poetry.

Thus one finds in Paracelsus a theory of an evolving universe, the physical aspects of which are permeated with a divine fire. "The progressive development from senseless matter to organized" is, as Teilhard puts it, "an immense ramification of psychism seeking itself through different forms." Diffusion continually gives way to greater complexity and organization until the entire evolutionary

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33Griffin, p. 295.

34Ibid.

35Teilhard, Man, p. 151.
process culminates "in the faculties of man," where matter itself becomes spiritualized. The forces of natural evolution are transformed into the forces of will and creative intelligence in man's consciousness, where the whole process finally achieves sentience and meaning and begins a new movement towards God.
CHAPTER IV

FRANCIS FURINI AND CLEON:

EXPOSITION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF BROWNING'S EVOLUTIONISM

Fifty-one years after the publication of *Paracelsus*, Browning completed the manuscript of the "Parleying with Francis Furini." It was in this poem that Browning, for the first time since 1835, embarked upon a lengthy discussion of evolutionary theory. Although much of the poetry intervening in these years (1835 through 1886) had treated the theme of evolution either implicitly or in brief references to the mechanistic aspects of the process, it was, nevertheless, in the "Parleying with Francis Furini" that he dealt with the subject in a forthright manner for the second time. Evolution was, of course, by this time more than a controversial topic of learned conversation; one's ability to accept or to modify the essential principles of Darwinian theory determined his rank in the intellectual community. Browning, probably impelled by charges that he preferred the benighted dominion of orthodox Christianity to the enlightened realm of scientific truth, was moved to define his own position as a skeptic and an evolutionist, a position which had changed little since 1835.
DeVane, however, believes otherwise. He contends that Browning, speaking through the voice of Furini, in part disavowed his earlier doctrine of evolutionary progress. DeVane writes:

Though Browning had as early as 1835 in Paracelsus ... in his own fashion partly anticipated the evolutionary conception of life, and had used the idea many times in his own poetry, he grew more and more distrustful of the doctrine, without understanding it well, as he grew older.¹

DeVane seems to have missed the point of Furini's argument altogether. In the first place, Browning did not anticipate any doctrine of evolution in Paracelsus; he simply gave expression to his own adaptation of an evolutionary theme which had been treated extensively in English and German romantic poetry. In the second place, Browning's evolutionary concepts had never included the distinguishing precepts of Darwinism which Furini ultimately rejects— that progress is essentially fortuitous and that the ascent to consciousness ends in oblivion. If one takes into account the skeptical aspect of Browning's evolutionary theory, his unwavering belief in the fallibility of the reasoning mind, then his objections to Darwinism, however vituperative they might appear to some critics,² were, by no means, inconsistent with his earlier ideas on the evolutionary progress of life.

¹DeVane, Handbook, pp. 514-515.
²Ibid., p. 512.
In fact, the entire drift of Furini's apologia should be recognized as an attempt by Browning to clarify his evolutionary ideas against the background of Darwinian theory. Consequently Furini's argument assumes a polemical tone which reflects not the irate and defensive attitude of a dogmatist but rather the untiring faith of a skeptic and a visionary. Furini argues that the doctrine of naturalistic evolution, regardless of its perception of progress, is little more than an attempt to resurrect the phantoms of eighteenth-century rationalism and to assert the sovereignty of the reason over the legitimate triumvirate of matter, mind, and spirit. Furini finds fault with Darwinism because its method of inquiry is unilateral; it examines the physical origins of life; it observes the progressive development of living organisms; but it refuses to take into account the phenomenon of observation itself, and it offers no explanation whatever of the significance and power of human consciousness.

There have been efforts, of course, to ascribe the phenomenon of consciousness to purely physiological causes, and to view sentience as the complex result of neurological interactions and responses to the phenomenological world. Determinism of this sort, since it still lacks the empirical evidence it assumes to exist, manifests itself as no less than a faith in the powers of human reason to apprehend the truth about nature and about itself. And it is precisely
this faith in reason along with the tendency of Darwinians
to look outward and behind rather than inward and forward
which Furini disparages. Unambiguously Furini declares:

"Evolutionists!
At the truth I glimpse from depths, you glance from heights,
Our stations for discovery opposites,—
How should ensue agreement? I explain:
'T is the tip-top of things to which you strain
Your vision, until atoms, protoplasm,
And what and whence and how may be the spasm
Which sets all going which stops you: down perforce
Needs must your observation take its course,
Since there's no moving upwards: link by link
You drop to where the atoms somehow think,
Feel, know themselves to be: the world's begun,
Such as we recognize it. Have you done
Descending? Here's ourself,--Man, known today,
Duly evolved at last,--so far, you say,
The sum and seal of being's progress. 'Good!' 3

Furini then urges:

"I at the bottom, Evolutionists,
Advise beginning, rather. I profess
To know just one fact--my self-consciousness,—
'Twixt ignorance and ignorance enisled. . . ." 4

Browning was saying here that the evolutionists,
standing themselves at the summit of the process of biologi-
cal development, attempted to ascertain the worth of man by
looking down the long road of his ascent rather than looking
forward towards his destiny as a conscious being. In like
fashion the evolutionists were concerned with the visible
evidence of biological evolution rather than with the inner
principle of coherence and development which provided the

3 Browning, Complete Works, I, 129.
4 Ibid., pp. 131-132.
evolutionary process with its initial stimulus and which subsequently gave direction to its course. In short, Darwinian theory was to Browning a new ideological justification for the old tyranny of rational thought. It was probably somewhat disturbing to Browning that an awareness of the evolutionary development of life led many of his contemporaries to the renunciation of any religious faith; it was as though faith in God was wholly dependent upon the notion of special creation, and once the creation was seen to be a process of infinite duration rather than a single definitive act, the existence of a creator was necessarily obviated. This was nonsense to Browning, and Furini demonstrates Browning's increasing annoyance at those who would vitiate the doctrine of evolution by refusing to look beyond or beneath the palpable flux of matter and to see God in it. To the Darwinians evolution was the great leveler of mankind; it exposed his natural origins and hence threw out the possibility of his kinship with God; it extirpated the divinity in man. To Browning the evolutionary process elevated man; it established his link with the godhead from the beginning; and it contained the very real promise of man's redemption, a promise of ontological finality in a life with God.

If Francis Furini is the personification of Browning's vehemence towards the Darwinians, and DeVane insists that he is, it must be realized that in Browning's mind Darwinism
would represent a heresy of the worst order. It was rationalism seeking to justify itself by discerning God's process, a process in which He Himself toiled unceasingly, without seeing God at all. In an effort to come to terms with the often offensive tone of the "Parleying with Francis Furini," Crowell explains:

The "Parleyings with Francis Furini," which includes Browning's well-known attacks on the methods of the evolutionists, may seem to supply evidence of his opposition to science, especially to the theory of evolution. The irony here is that Browning's life-long message was wholly evolutionary. In lines reminiscent of Goethe, he affirms that man grows in mind and spirit by steps upward towards perfection, which can never be attained. Growth is all to Browning: the progress toward perfection rather than perfection itself informs all of Browning's thinking. What he objected to was the one-sidedness of the evolutionists: they looked backward to see whence man had come, not ahead to see where he was going.5

Since the "Parleying with Francis Furini" contains no deviation from the evolutionary formula found elsewhere in Browning's poetry, it might be concluded that the significance of this poem lies not in its objective expression of Browning's thought but rather in the fact that Browning was moved to give explicit statement to the very belief which formed the warp and woof of his dramatic poetry. Regardless of how directly and explicitly Browning stated his evolutionary philosophy in the "Parleying with Francis Furini," the poem should not be regarded as one of his most exemplary

5Crowell, p. 108.
attempts to express his doctrine of progress. As was indicated, this doctrine composes the basic fabric of his dramatic monologues; it underlies the vitality and the individuality of many of his characters; it accounts for the lassitude and wickedness of many others; it gives meaning to their actions and thoughts; and ultimately it is according to the principles of his evolutionary formula that they are judged. Unlike many of Browning's earlier figures, Paracelsus among them, Furini does not exemplify this doctrine; he simply articulates it without ever becoming a part of it, and as a dramatic character, he is one of Browning's most poorly portrayed.

In trying to observe the organic link between Browning's evolutionary theory and the form and texture of the dramatic monologue, it will be helpful to examine in detail one of his characters who implicitly demonstrates as well as overtly articulates his concept of evolutionary development. In "Cleon," perhaps one of Browning's most misunderstood poems, one finds such a character. Cleon is both aware of the evolutionary process and at the same time driven by its forces into the world of sublime strife, where consciousness disencumbers itself of naturalistic drives and begins to work out its own destiny. Also in "Cleon" one discovers certain suggestions concerning the sources and influences of Browning's skepticism and of his idea of evolution.
Despite the ontological significance of Cleon's inner struggle, his desire to overcome his own finitude and to liberate his consciousness from its corporeal envelope, most interpreters of the poem have fastened upon the outward and less significant conflict in the poem between Greek paganism and the nascent Christian faith. For the most part these critics have centered their examinations of the poem upon the ironic tension created in the last stanza of eighteen lines in which Cleon peremptorily rejects the Gospel of St. Paul. Although divergent views radiate from this point of critical focus, there seems to be agreement among commentators that Browning intended the poem as a vindication of his own act of faith and that the essential meaning of the poem is to be educed from the encounter of Greek fatalism and rationalism with the eschatological vision of the Christian faith. Such critics are inclined to judge Cleon solely within the context of his repudiation of Paul's message to the Greeks; they are content to classify Cleon as a representative of Greek culture with little regard to what is really Greek and, paradoxically, what is truly modern about him.

DeVane's comment that Browning portrayed Cleon "as a later philosopher and poet who represented the final product of Greek culture, and who in the blindness of his pride rejected the Christianity which fulfilled every one of the needs already recognized by his own superb mind," is

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typical of those interpretations which view the entire poem from the framework of its final stanza. Curtis Dahl contends that the monologue proceeds towards the implicit questioning of Cleon's human worth according to the moral principles of evangelical Christianity, and that "for Browning the answer is: he would lack the Christian hope of immortality."\(^7\) Following similar lines of argument, A. W. Crawford maintains that "by bringing his imaginary Cleon into contact with the new doctrine of Christianity, Browning is enabled to put the Greek view of the world and of man that regards all as finite, in contrast with the Christian view that looks upon man as an immortal spirit."\(^8\)

There are several problems encountered in approaching "Cleon" from this point of view. First, the text of the poem does not lend adequate support to convictions that the poem itself is chiefly concerned with the playing off of Greek paganism against Christian idealism. The introduction of the Christian element does not occur until Cleon writes his postscript, until after he has attempted unsatisfactorily to resolve his own dilemma. The body of Cleon's epistle makes no allusion whatever to Christianity. And although his unwillingness to investigate the few ideas he has obtained from his brief and indirect association with Pauline Christianity

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\(^7\)Curtis Dahl, "Who Was Browning's Cleon?" *Cithara*, 4 (1965), 72.

\(^8\)A. W. Crawford, "Browning's 'Cleon','' *Journal of English and German Philology*, 26 (1927), 488.
consummates the development of ironic incongruity in the poem, it should not be regarded as the central flaw in Cleon's thought. Secondly, the protracted vacillations of these thoughts, a pattern of irresolution sustained throughout the poem, demonstrate that Browning was certainly more concerned with Cleon's struggle with himself than with his summary dismissal of the Christian faith.

Cleon's mind, a mind "greater . . . /Than [its] fore-runners since more composite," continually strives with three distinctly conflicting traditions of Greek thought—Milesian materialism (hylozoism), Platonic idealism, and Epicurean fatalism. A fourth tradition, that of Stoicism, may be seen to appear briefly as Cleon desperately attempts to reorganize the concepts of Greek philosophy into a unified theme. As the monologue proceeds, these philosophical attitudes are placed in constant tension, and even though there seems to be little logical order in their enumeration and discussion in the poem, there is, nevertheless, a certain dialectical tension achieved among them, a tension which Cleon's final judgment does not efface.

The general pattern of Cleon's monologue, therefore, may be seen as a continuum of contrasts between various Greek philosophical traditions, at certain junctures in which he attempts to synthesize piecemeal solutions but

9Browning, Complete Works, V, 82.
succeeds only in reproducing the changes already brought about in the history of Greek thought. None of his conclusions are original, and none of them solve the religious problem towards which he directs them. His lengthy ruminations go a full circle in a search for a valid premise upon which he can construct the rationale of a faith, and they end where they began with Epicurean empiricism.

Departing from his Epicurean position, in which he enumerates the diverse achievements of his life, achievements which reflect the Epicurean desire to excel moderately in all endeavors, Cleon initiates his philosophical inquiry with a statement which seems to recapitulate the Heraclitian doctrine of the logos:

For what we call this life of men on earth,  
This sequence of the soul's achievements here  
Being, as I have much reason to conceive,  
Intended to be viewed eventually  
As a great whole, not analyzed to parts,  
But each having reference to all,—  
How shall a certain part, pronounced complete  
Endure effacement by another part?\(^{10}\)

Although the idea of the "unity of all things" was not necessarily the exclusive prerogative of the early materialists of whom Heraclitus was one, Cleon's reasoning here bears a close similarity to the Heraclitian concept that a universal flux integrates all things into a holistic scheme of existence. Kirk and Raven give the following account of Heraclitus' notion that a profound unity pervaded the apparent fragmentation

\(^{10}\text{Browning, Complete Works, V, 82-83.}\)
of the world:

The effect of arrangement according to a common plan or measure is that all things, though apparently plural and discrete, are really united in a coherent complex of which men themselves are a part, and the comprehension of which is logically necessary for the enactment of their own lives. Yet "formula", "proportionate arrangement", and so on are misleadingly abstract translations of this technical sense of Logos: the Logos was probably conceived by Heraclitus as an actual constituent of things, and in many respects it is co-extensive with the primary cosmic constituent, fire.

It is quite ironic to find Cleon halfheartedly toying with one of Browning's most firmly embraced convictions—that the "sequence of the soul's achievements," the translation of natural evolutionary progress into conscious acts of will and volition, marked the final movement of a unified world towards the ultimate unity in God. Cleon is enamored of this idea, and he flirts with it at several crucial points in the poem, but he never develops it to its fullest potential. Cleon is, in short, unable to transcend the Platonic distinctions between the physical and the spiritual worlds.

From this concept of early materialism that human life both reflects and is an integral part of the whole of existence, a concept which does not differentiate the forms of the perceptible world from the world itself, Cleon moves immediately to an espousal of the Platonic dictum that recognized a profound difference between the abstract form and

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physical being. This radical transition in Cleon's thought, although it seems to lack any logical method, is smoothly accomplished in the poem with the line: "Was the thing done?--Then what's to do again?" Cleon reasons that "the thing done," the completion or perfection of certain modes of consciousness, precludes its abrogation, perhaps even its death, by virtue of its own perfection. The logic is hard to follow, but briefly what he means is that once the perfect forms of divine origin have been realized on earth, nothing is left for man to accomplish. The form is everything, man's striving is significant only in that it tries to approximate such form; man is ephemeral, the form is eternal.

Cleon's allusion to the perfect and absolute forms envisaged in the Platonic cosmogony is remarkably explicit. He avers:

So first the perfect separate forms were made,
The portions of mankind; and after, so,
Occurred the combination of the same.
For where had been progress otherwise?
Mankind, made up all of single men;--
In such a synthesis the labor ends.13

Cleon's idea here that "the portions of mankind" are derived from perfect and separate forms appears to be a distillation of the lengthy account in Plato's Timeaus in which the divine soul is seen to insinuate itself into animal life.

12 Browning, Complete Works, V, 83.

13 Ibid.
through the special creation of man. There is also a description of the gods' mixing certain essences—sensation, love, anger and fear—in various combinations in the souls of men. Cleon's use of Platonism is, of course, somewhat specialized; his contention is that each man of genius, each philosopher and each artist, in his own unique way, imitates some pre-existent mode of consciousness. And even though he is concerned at this point with the origin and perfection of various art forms, his approach is clearly a Platonic one which can be observed as growing out of but defeating his previous notions of unity and organicism.

In attempting to objectify these art forms by comparing them to the ideal figures of plane geometry, the "perfect rhomb," the "lozenge," and the "trapezoid," Cleon recalls another section of Timaeus. To explain the origins of the forms of the elemental universe, Timaeus correlates them, in a long and recondite passage, with the perfect forms of geometric figures. Also Cleon's use of the image of the sphere to objectify the phenomenon of human consciousness is strongly suggestive of Timaeus' statement that "first . . . the gods, imitating the spherical shape of the universe, enclosed two divine courses in a spherical body, that, namely which we now term the head, being the most divine part

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1^ Browning, Complete Works, V, 83-84.
of us and lord of all that is in us."

These allusions to Platonism are terminated with the usual irony that marks all of Cleon's shifts in thought. Unable to support his need for a personal God with the precepts of Platonism, Cleon laments, "And thus our soul, mis-known cries out to Zeus/To vindicate his purpose in our life." Even though Timaeus believed that the divine principle of the soul was immortal and that it returned to its source of creation after death, its "native star," Cleon's desire for immortality demands a more explicit and less abstruse promise of eternal life. Since his chief animating impulse is the quest for the immortality of his own consciousness and his own vitality, and since he can find no precedent for this sort of immortal life in the Platonic tradition, Cleon is forced by his own hegemonic rationality to embrace his former Epicurean resolve that man's soul ascends the tower of consciousness only to lose itself in oblivion. Cleon remarks:

This grew the only life, the pleasure-house,
Watch-tower and treasure-fortress of the soul
Which whole surrounding flats of animal life
Seemed only fit to yield subsistence to;
A tower that crowns a country. But alas,
The soul now climbs it just to perish there! 

16Plato, p. 35.
17Browning, Complete Works, V, 84.
18Plato, p. 23.
19Browning, Complete Works, V, 87.
Perhaps Cleon could satisfy himself with the Platonic doctrine of immortality were it not for the fact that it fails to identify human sentience with the divine principle of the soul, and hence, to Cleon, it represents a rational but meaningless concept of immortal life. It is interesting to observe that Arnold's Empedocles finds himself on the horns of a similar dilemma. He is unable to reconcile his wish for a meaningful immortality with the idealist tradition of Greek philosophy. At the height of his speculations, Empedocles asks, "But mind, but thought, /If these have been the master part of us, -- /Where will they find their parent element?" 20 Although Empedocles is driven to suicide by his own inability to break through the narrow perceptions of rational thought, he dies not without the hope of an amorphous concept of eternal being. With his last words he exclaims:

And therefore, O ye elements! I know--
Ye know it too--it hath been granted me
Not to die wholly, not to be all enslaved.
I feel it in this hour. The numbing cloud
Mounts off my soul; I feel it, I breathe free. 21

Empedocles, implicitly assenting to the doctrines of the Milesian materialists, believes that his death will unite him with the ultimate unity of all things, with the "all."

Like Empedocles, Cleon is "the slave of sense," 22 yet paradoxically he too derives a temporary hopefulness from

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20 Arnold, p. 172.
21 Ibid., p. 175.
22 Ibid., p. 172.
the earlier doctrines of Milesian materialism which held the universe to be a single living organism. Cleon is attracted by the latent presence of hylozoism in the beliefs of these early materialists who, unlike the Platonists, felt the physical world to be invested with spiritual significance. The Ionian thinkers, particularly Xenophanes and Heraclitus, believed that physical being and spiritual life were two aspects of the same divine phenomenon. Kirk and Raven comment that Heraclitus, "perhaps enlarging on Xenophanes, seems to have regarded god as in some probably undefined way immanent in things, or as the sum total of things." 23

Although Cleon finally rejects this sort of intuitive pantheism, the same pantheism which informs Browning's evolutionary theory, Cleon does, nonetheless, attempt to come to terms with it. From a theological point of view then, the central conflict of the poem is generated by Cleon's intuitive apprehension of a revealed god, a palpable presence of divine will with an explicit promise of eternal life, contending with his intellectual demand for a reasoned god, an objective spiritual essence from which all cognitive forms are derived. For Cleon both formulas are tragically incomplete and ultimately irreconcilable, and his ambivalence towards the Ionian persuasion that God is revealed as the animating force of the world is revealed in the lines:

23 Kirk and Raven, p. 192.
Long since, I imagined, wrote the fiction out,
That he or other god descended here
And, once for all, showed simultaneously
What, in its nature, can never be shown
Piecemeal or in succession;—shoved I say
The worth both absolute and relative
Of all his children since the birth of time,
His instruments for all appointed work.
I now go on to image,—might we hear
The judgment which should give the due to each,
Show where the labor lay and where the ease,
And prove Zeus' self latent everywhere!
This is a dream;—but no dream let us hope.2

Aside from demonstrating Cleon's ambiguous attitude
towards early materialism, this passage is significant because it marks the beginning of his futile attempts to bring two conflicting traditions of Greek philosophy into a consonant relationship. In the above passage he seems to be trying to place Platonic absolutism into harmonious contiguity with the hylozoism of the early materialists. That Zeus proffered mankind a criterion by which all human activity, "both absolute and relative," might be judged is suggestive of the Platonic idea that the reason is the most divine quality of the soul in that it is able to apprehend the forms of godly perfection and that through the agency of reason man can judge the merit of his own works. Cleon then concatenates this Platonic precept with the hylozoic belief in the ubiquity of God, the latent presence of "Zeus' self." The result of this linking is the production of a distinctly Stoic argument, and in it one can discern the

24. Browning, Complete Works, V, 84.
transformation of the Heraclitian concept of the *logos*, the spiritual principle of coherence in the universe, into the Stoic idea of the *logos*. H. C. Bradley points out:

The concept of the unity of mankind is regarded as a necessary part of the Stoic outlook as a whole—the doctrine that the entire cosmos is permeated and governed by a *logos*, a divine principle of rationality, which is implanted in the form of reason in every human soul. . . . The universality of the common *logos* is an aspect of the complete supremacy of Zeus.25

After unsuccessfully having tried to justify the Ionian belief in the immanence of God with the more rational notion that God is ubiquitous through the universality of reason, Cleon is again attracted by the primitive simplicity and paradoxical mystery of hylozoism. In a statement which is clearly derivative of Ionian materialism, Cleon proposes a theory of organic evolution and simultaneously explains the creation of the human soul in the terms of Heraclitus' *logos* fire. Cleon imagines Zeus to ask:

"Shall I go on a step, improve on this,
Do more for visible creatures than is done?"
[Cleon replies] . . . "Ay, by making each
Grow conscious in himself—by that alone.
All's perfect else: the shell sucks fast the rock,
The fish strikes through the sea, the snake both swims
And slides, forth range the beasts, the birds take flight,
Till life's mechanics can no further go—
And all this joy in natural life is put
Like fire from off thy finger into each,
But 'tis pure fire, and they mere matter are;
It has them and not they it: and so I choose
For man, thy last premeditated work
(If I might add glory to the scheme)

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A quality arise within his soul,
Which, intro-active, made to supervise
And feel the force it has, may view itself. 26

The evolutionary account of man's origins here can be related
to the Ionian materialists through Anaximander, who developed
a theory of evolution which held that life arose from marine
organisms to develop into more complex and differentiated
forms. 27 Also Cleon's idea that human consciousness is the
culmination of the force of divine fire acting through physi-
cal matter parallels Heraclitus' notion that all things have
their origin in fire and that God Himself is the living fire.

Yet despite his iteration of hylozoic arguments and be-
liefs, Cleon again lapses into Stoicism. From the hylozoic
conception of the origin of the soul, Cleon educes a disap-
pointing maxim which reflects the Stoic idea that happiness
is found in knowing one's own limitations and capabilities;
to Cleon the "intro-active" quality of reflection becomes a
supervisory faculty. He maintains:

In due time let him critically learn
How he lives; and the more he gets to know
His own life's adaptabilities
The more joy-giving his life will become.
Thus man, who hath this quality, is best. 28

It is ironic that Cleon has extracted a Stoic apothegm from
a materialistic concept of the origin of consciousness.

26 Browning, Complete Works, V, 86-87.

27 W. K. C. Guthrie, A History of Greek Philosophy

28 Browning, Complete Works, V, 87.
Browning was undoubtedly satirizing those Victorians who extolled the virtues of knowledge for its own sake and those Darwinians who insisted that man's only progress lay in his ability to discover the extent of his own "adaptabilities." But for Cleon the passage demonstrates the length to which he will go to achieve the conceptual balance of ideas which he is convinced will answer the great riddle of Greek thought—can happiness and mortality co-exist in a purposive union? In regard to Cleon's own purpose, the Stoic maxim is ironic because it necessitates the recognition of limitations which he seeks to overcome. For him there is no limit to the soul's capacity for pleasure; man's desires are infinite, yet his ability to realize them is limited.

The regulative principles of Stoicism are not only useless to his quest for immortality but also they seem to deprive the belief from which they were derived (hylozoic materialism) of its mystery and of its promise of future development. Cleon appears confounded by his own logic and abandons the Stoic approach to his problem. It is as though he has found that the teleological vision of early materialism is lost as it is crystalized into the rigid precepts of Stoicism.

Having failed to synthesize a hopeful doctrine from the various schools of Greek philosophy, Cleon returns to his original Epicurean mode of thought. Oddly enough, Epicureanism, even to a greater degree than Stoicism, vitiates the implicit
teleology of early materialism. The contrast between Epicureanism and the hylozoism of the Ionian materialists strikes deeply into the roots of Cleon's despair. His entire life has been the realized ideal of Epicurean virtue. He has mastered all the known arts without showing inordinate attention to any single one of them and without exhibiting the immoderate zeal that is characteristic of the artist. And not the least of all he has "written three books on the soul, /Proving absurd all written hitherto." All of his diverse achievements have had but one purpose—that of giving him sublime and limitless pleasure. In his old age he discovers his joy in life to be circumscribed by mortality, and yet he cannot confront his own death with that firm faith in the finitude of all things, a faith that disencumbers the Epicurean of his mortal burden. Death is so horrible to Cleon that he is momentarily tempted to cast his sanity aside so that he might embrace his dream of a revealed Zeus.

Yet Cleon, by his allusions to the concepts of the early materialists, has been standing at the threshold of a faith over which his Epicurean pragmatism refuses to let him pass. The difference between these two atomistic philosophies is a critical one, and it is essential to the meaning of the poem. Thales' proposition that the world is animated by a divine vitality is representative of the

29Browning, Complete Works, V, 82.
optimistic tenor of early materialism.

Thales meant that all things in sum . . . were inter-penetrated by some kind of life-principle. . . . The point was that the range of soul, or of life, was much greater than it appeared to be. Thales was giving an explicit statement of a broad supposition common to all early physicists, that the world was somehow alive.30

It is not known whether Thales conceived any divine scheme to be the conscious principle of life in the universe, but certainly there is ample evidence here to deduce the existence of such a scheme. It is known, however, that Heraclitus' conception of the logos-fire is associated with the directive capacity of the godhead.31

Epicurus, on the other hand, denied the possibility of a plan or purpose underlying the arrangement of matter in the universe. George K. Strodach notes that since Epicurus rejected the idea that the world is animated by a purposive force "and held instead that the world is a 'fortuitous concourse of atoms,' the view of the world as nonpurposeful was the only one that was consistent with his materialism."32

Like Epicurus, Cleon is compelled by the conventions of his own intellect to deduce his theology from his scientific atomism. From his heightened vantage point in the history of Greek philosophy, he considers his own wisdom too

30Guthrie, p. 455.
31Kirk and Raven, p. 200.
sophisticated and too comprehensive to indulge the more primitive beliefs of early materialism.

But unlike Epicurus, Cleon desperately seeks a revealed God and an affirmation of immortal life. His intuitive response to his own intense life demands the belief in a purposeful life, but his rational self is inextricably caught up in the narrow epistemology of Epicureanism. Only for a brief time in the extent of his monologue is he able to transcend his own belief that sense perception and reason are the only agencies through which truth can be discovered. Following lines of Platonic reasoning, Cleon tries to extrapolate the perfection of an immortal life with God from the imperfection seen in man.

That imperfection means perfection hid,
Reserved in part to grace the after time.

Ere man at last appeared upon the stage
Thou wouldst have seen them perfect and deduced
The perfection of others yet unseen.33

Cleon, of course, can make no such deduction in earnest because to do so would be to commit apostasy against his chosen creed. Cleon, the artist and the feeling man, struggles for a synoptic vision of the world in which man's brief life is integrated into a teleological and universal scheme of becoming. But Cleon, the thinking man, with his intransigent belief in the Epicurean theory of knowledge, refuses his approbation of the search for faith.

33Browning, Complete Works, V, 86.
If one is able to see that the central conflict of the poem is the unresolved encounter between Cleon's tendency towards idealism and faith and his inexorable rationality and empiricism, it becomes evident that the poem is a commentary on the post-Darwinian milieu. Cleon, like the positivists, rejected the mythos of his culture; he stripped it of its mystery and placed upon it the alien demands of logic and reason. In the same manner, the positivists superposed a matrix of rationality and scientific logic over the essentially intuitive and numinous character of the Christian mythos. Also Cleon exemplifies the positivist tendency to discern some meaning and progress in the evolutionary process but to believe fatalistically that the process itself is ultimately non-purposive since death is its final goal.

Yet Cleon is more than an allegorical figure. He really wants to believe in the visions of divine ubiquity, and he really wants to participate in the vitality and hopefulness of a primitive religion, a religion in which God has not yet been objectified and abstracted, a religion in which the logos is still an ineffable mystery and not an immutable, conceptual entity. Caught in what is essentially an existential predicament, Cleon truly strives to take charge of his own destiny, but alone and unwilling to accept the non-rational and paradoxical nature of faith, he is unable to create his own solution to the apparent meaninglessness of life and to the inevitability of death. His thoughts are, to use
Carlyle's phrase, without reverence. Despite the magnitude and diversity of his accomplishments and despite his powerful struggle against his own limitations, Cleon is, in Browning's view, the evolutionary process run afoul, simply because he believes in his own finitude.
CHAPTER V

ISTE PERFECT OPUS:

THE MORALITY OF ART IN BROWNING'S POETICS

It seems superfluous to judge Cleon the poet according to the orthodox principles of the Christianity he rejects. For Cleon both judges and condemns himself; and he rejects the essential element of Christianity long before he spurns the doctrine itself. He denies meaning and purpose to his own life and works; his creative efforts have resulted in masterpieces of imitation; he has striven backwards towards success rather than forwards towards failure and redemption; and ironically his feats of classic mimetic art testify to his ultimate failure as an artist and a creator. If one accepts Berdyaev's belief that "creativity means breaking through the world of non-being, from freedom, into the world of being," it becomes clear that Cleon has not brought his works of art from a condition of freedom into a dimension of meaning but that he has, on the contrary, given flawless reproduction to the past achievements of Greek art.

Afraid to face the uncreated void of the future and unsure of his own ability to create something wholly new, Cleon has turned away from the possibility of his own failure.

and has sought refuge in the more comfortable enterprise of giving technical perfection to the greatness of previous works. In this respect Cleon's life must finally be seen as an immoral one because it is informed by fear. Cleon is not only restrained by a fear of death but also by a fear of transgressing the lines of rational thought to enter the resplendent and terrifying world of imaginative creation and of faith. He desires the infinite, but he despairs of it; and in imposing limits upon his own creative genius, he denies God in himself; he puts out the \textit{logos} lamp in his own soul: he refuses to Become.

If Browning's evolutionism possessed any moral aspect, it was, to use Berdyaev's phrase, an ethic of creativity, an ethic regulated by his doctrine of strife and of failure. To Browning the artist was morally obligated to fulfill his divine character, to actualize the image of God in himself---to become more than himself by imitating the eternal act of creation. Consequently, art was, in Browning's view, both absolute and relative. It stood as the final achievement of the poet's moral energy, but it did not stand at the end of man's evolutionary potential; man must go beyond himself in art, and he must go beyond art to God. Browning would have affirmed Kierkegaard's notion that art must contain the means of its own transcendence,\footnote{Will, p. 340.} and this means is the
simultaneous creation and apprehension of truth. Man must become part of the process in which he moves before he can understand it; he must himself create before he can fully grasp the meaning of the divine presence in a world which is forever in the incomplete state of becoming. Man must become, through his own will and creative intelligence, the process of evolution. Moral knowledge was, to Browning, creative work itself. Berdyaev's statement that "Truth is revealed only by the creative activity of the spirit" illustrates very well Browning's own belief in the philosophical significance of art.

To Browning, then, morality was an ontological problem rather than an ethical one in the strict sense of that word. And his characters are to be judged according to their willingness to overcome the finality of their selfhood and to transcend the relativity of their works in order to see both selfhood and art as God's own instruments of creation and realization. Fra Lippo Lippi expresses Browning's belief that truth is to be found not in nature but in what Berdyaev terms its "creative transfiguration." And Lippi also recapitulates Browning's doctrine that art is a vehicle of divine revelation in the passage:

For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;

\[^3\text{Berdyaev, Existentialism, p. 159.}\]

\[^4\text{Ibid.}\]
And so they are better, painted—better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,
Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,
And trust me but you should, though! How much more,
If I drew higher things with the same truth!
That were to take the Prior's pulpit-place,
Interpret God to all of you."

Lippi is saying that art, without sacrificing its organic integrity, not only reflects the image of God in man but also contains the eschatological promise of man in God. Although this latter concept of man in God is not explicitly detailed until Lippi has a vision of himself entering the kingdom of heaven through the agency of his own art, it is, nevertheless, implied in the line, "Interpret God to all of you."

The organic integrity of art, its freedom from Platonic didacticism, from any rigid doctrine or norm whatever, is paradoxically the essential condition of its moral value. It must arise from the very edge of non-being; it must regress to the elemental, to the unorganized state of reality; and there it must begin its synthetic process of bringing meaning and order forth from nothingness if it is to result in works of true creativity, if it is to imitate the creative acts of God himself. Exemplifying Browning's belief in the necessary freedom of art, Lippi rejects the Byzantine aesthetic philosophy which requires that art must serve no

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5Browning, Complete Works, V, 33-34.
other purpose than to illustrate the doctrinal precepts of orthodoxy. Lippi's art, unlike Cleon's, refuses to begin with precedent; it begins anew at the elemental level with "black and white," "fat and lean," with "old gossips," and "candle ends." His art moves to synthesize from these things a vision of "the beauty and the wonder and the power" of God, a vision which a hundred Madonnas could not produce. In commenting on Browning's idea that absolute freedom, freedom to begin at the very foundation of being, is the necessary condition for the creative process, Hillis Miller notes:

First the poet will break the old picture of reality into pieces. This will allow him to get at a new substance and see things no one else has seen. The new material will spontaneously take shape in the imagination of a later subjective poet. Finally, that new structure will reveal its resonance with God Himself, its correspondance with the deity at a higher level than any so far achieved.  

Art, according to Browning, ultimately places man at the threshold of the spiritual life, of life with God; art is the last triumph of the evolutionary process in the material world, the final phase of an ontological movement which must culminate in the complete liberation of unalloyed psychic energy from its physical dimension. In man's consciousness represents, as Teilhard contends, the illuminating involution of being upon itself, then art represents a secondary and supplemental involution of consciousness upon itself. In art the centripetal energy of the universe becomes more

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6 Miller, p. 115.
and more intensified, increasingly bright and magnetic, until the inevitable result must come as a revelation of divine presence, as a discernable liberation of the inner force of coherence and meaning from the phenomenological world it animates. In this respect art penetrates the veil of reality and reveals the truth which lies behind it.

If one follows Teilhard's statement that it is man's work "to establish ... an absolutely original centre in which the universe reflects itself in a unique and inimitable way," Browning's dramatic monologues may be regarded as secondary or extentional centers of consciousness in which the world turns in again upon itself. The poet goes out of himself and moves in his creations the way God moves in His. But the creative powers of man end in art; they can go no further. Man, even in his art, cannot become God. At best man can only actualize the divinity in himself and in doing so he is both crucified and redeemed. He can do no more than Lippi when he humbly autographed his work: Iste perfecit opus.

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7 Teilhard, Man, p. 261.
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