BROWNING'S THEME: "THE LETTER KILLETH, 
BUT THE SPIRIT GIVETH LIFE."

THESIS

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This thesis is concerned with the establishment of an underlying philosophy for Robert Browning's many themes. It asserts that a notion found in II Corinthians 3:6, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," is basic to ideas such as Browning's belief in the superiority of life over art, of the wisdom of the heart over the intellect, and of honest skepticism over unexamined belief. The sources used to establish this premise are mainly the poems themselves, grouped in categories by subject matter of art, love, and religion. Some of his correspondence is also examined to ascertain how relevant the philosophy was to his own life. The conclusion is that the concept is, indeed, pervasive throughout Browning's poetry and extremely important to the man himself.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning's poetry contains many recurring themes. His major themes, which have been discussed by various scholars, are sometimes independent of each other and sometimes overlapping. Some of his themes are variants of others. It is generally accepted that Browning's philosophy is made up of ideas such as the superiority of the wisdom of the heart over that of the brain, the preferability of life to art, the value and significance of love, the preference for honest skepticism to unexamined belief, and anti-asceticism. There is, however, one notion in Browning's poetry that covers all these premises. It is to be found in II Corinthians 3:6, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," and it is basic to much of Browning's philosophy. The fact that Browning was familiar with the Biblical passage is evident in two excerpts from Book XI of The Ring and the Book where the verse is paraphrased.

The letter kills, the spirit keeps alive
In law and gospel. ¹

¹Robert Browning, The Complete Poetical Works of Browning, edited by Horace E. Scudder (Boston, 1895), p. 586. All subsequent quotations from this eleventh printing of the Cambridge Edition will be noted by page numbers following the quotation, because line numbers are not furnished in this edition.
The law stand though the letter kills: what then? The spirit saves as unmistakeably. (p. 590)

Browning's interest as well as his belief in this philosophy is apparent throughout much of his poetry. He opposes adherence to any letter or law when no conjunctive, deep emotion is either felt or expressed. Browning's poems in which this underlying concept recurs can be grouped in three categories of subject matter: art, love, and religion.

The poems about art which illustrate the theme present various art forms, including painting, music, and poetry. In each instance, the artists who merely master technique are portrayed as professionally deficient; whereas artists who possess and engender inspiration are considered valuable because of their ability to assist others in a greater appreciation of life.

In poems belonging to the second category, the superiority of the wisdom of the heart over the intellect is a sub-theme. A life devoted to the search for knowledge alone is portrayed as insufficient; only a search for love engenders fulfillment. Browning's best examples of proponents in this group of poems search for knowledge and love in combination.

The group of religious poems deals with man's highest search for a meaningful life: his search for expression of "the spirit" in religion. Again, by use of example and contrast, Browning judges religion as valid and meaningful only
when a man's love of God is more important to him than the gestures of his ritual.

Browning projects the theme that "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" against many different settings. The label of "the letter" can apply to various situations, but Browning always applies it to anything that limits life or causes it to stagnate. In contrast, he applies the label of "the spirit" to that which expands or provides for growth and inspiration--that is, furthers life. Illustrations from several poems in each of the three above-mentioned categories will provide evidence that the theme is pervasive throughout Browning's poetry. Moreover, the correspondence between Browning and Elizabeth Barrett during their courtship offers insight into some of the opinions and events which helped to shape or support his expression of the theme in his poetry.
CHAPTER II

THE ESSENCE OF ART

The theme "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" permeates many of Browning's poems in which the focus is on the work of artists in general. For purposes of this discussion, the word artist will apply to one who produces works in any of the arts that are primarily subject to aesthetic criteria. Painters, musicians, and poets are various types of artists analyzed by Browning. His general application of the theme to those in an artistic profession is that art is to be considered a failure when the work is an extension of mere technical perfection rather than emotional and spiritual inspiration. In some poems, the characters illustrate the theme by being good examples of artists whose works show evidence of "the spirit." In other poems, the deficient artists are examined.

Browning's evaluations of artists can therefore be ascertained from his poetry. These evaluations correspond to the express definition of the "whole poet" found in Browning's "Essay on Shelley." The true poet is able to integrate the roles of the "fashioner," who deals with the "raw material" of reality, and the "seer," who attains "spiritual comprehension" (pp. 1008-09). The quality of the poet's ability to give other people this spiritual comprehension determines
whether or not his art form enriches man's spiritual life. Browning's description of the "whole poet" also applies to artists who deal with other media.

"Andrea del Sarto" is one of the poems which feature a painter who lacks the ability to impart spiritual comprehension and enrichment through his works. His paintings are technically perfect and monetarily rewarding but are aesthetically inferior to works of famous painters whom he calls Rafael, Leonard, and Michel Agnolo. Andrea's skill in perfect duplication of form comes easily to him.

No sketches first, no studies, that's long past:
I do what many dream of all their lives,
--Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing.

(p. 346)

Yet Andrea knows that his skill is little more than that of a draftsman\(^1\) and is, therefore, deficient: "All is silver-gray/Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!" (p. 346).

Andrea's statement, "A common grayness silvers everything" (p. 346), presents the effect of "the letter." Silver-gray and other subdued shades are used throughout the poem to indicate lifelessness.

My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Eh? the whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight-piece.

(p. 346)

Andrea gave up his one opportunity for advancement when he failed to keep his commitment to paint for King Francis at Fontainebleau. In contrast to the tones of "silver-gray," the vibrant color used to describe this opportunity is "golden," symbolic of the challenge of spiritual growth.

Too live the life grew, golden and not gray,
And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt
Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.  
(p. 347)

Andrea fears the challenge of excellence, even though he wishes he were able to escape beyond the "four walls" of "the letter" and to produce paintings exhibiting "the spirit." He realizes that technical skill alone is inadequate. A painting by Rafael in Andrea's possession demonstrates the attainment of perfection by imperfection.

That arm is wrongly put--and there again--
A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,
Its body, so to speak: its soul is right.  
(p. 346)

Rafael's painting has the "spirit which giveth life"; while Andrea's work is indicative of only "the letter" of painting. Andrea's attempt to correct the technical flaw in Rafael's painting results in a painful comparison of the two artists' qualities.

And indeed the arm is wrong.
I hardly dare...yet, only you to see,
Give the chalk here--quick, thus the line should go!
Ay, but the soul! he's Rafael! rub it out!  
(p. 347)

Andrea never strives beyond the depiction of perfect but earth-bound beauty. Lucrezia, his wife, is symbolic of his limited
aspiration because she is physical perfection and spiritual emptiness. He alternately blames her, Fate, or God for his failure, in his attempt to escape responsibility; but he occasionally faces the truth that all limitations in his painting have been his choice.

But all the play, the insight and the stretch--
Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?
Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you!

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
I might have done it for you. So it seems:
Perhaps not. All is as God overrules.
Beside, incentives come from the soul's self;
The rest avail not.

(p. 347)

His awareness of his lack of incentives is insufficient; he is not motivated to overcome his problem. Striving beyond his limitations would lead to the spiritual growth attained by greater artists.

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

(p. 346)

Andrea has sacrificed his integrity as a man and an artist by continuing to paint mainly to pay for Lucrezia's desires for material things, even though there is no appreciation from her or the fulfillment of creativity for him. His grasp of "the letter" is never exceeded by a reach for "the spirit."

2Collins, p. 146.
"Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" is another poem which illustrates deficiency in art. Although Master Hugues is a fictitious composer, it is thought that he was intended by Browning to exemplify one of the "dry-as-dust imitators" of Bach, who developed the fugue. By the nineteenth century, the fugue was a dead form of music which Browning associated with "the letter." The speaker in the poem is an organist who has played Master Hugues' masterpiece in the church service. He directs his monologue to the composer as a request for an insight concerning the significance of Hugues' mastery of the difficult fugal structure. The organist is reluctant to accept the composition as great simply because tradition requires placing value on the inventions of past ages. He yearns to feel he has not wasted his time in playing Master Hugues' music and "Tiring three boys at the bellows" (p. 196). The organist can see "Nothing propound" in the first part of the composition--nothing that requires an answer from the needless rejoinders of the four counterpoints. He compares the fugue with the spider-web that hides the gilt roof of the church. Both are intricate compositions which required a "mountain in labour."

So your fugue broadens and thickens,
Greatens and deepens and lengthens,
Till we exclaim--"But where's music, the dickens?
Blot ye the gold, while your spider-web strengthens
--Blacked to the stoutest of tickens?"

(p. 196)

Master Hugues, like Andrea, achieves only technical perfection. There is so much emphasis on form in the composition that no truth or beauty comes from it. It does not inspire. The speaker wonders if there is an analogy between the composition and the kind of joyless life that results from merely attending to required rituals.

Is it your moral of Life?
Such a web, simple and subtle,
Weave we on earth here in impotent strife,
Backward and forward each throwing his shuttle,
Death ending all with a knife?
(p. 196)

In Browning's opinion, the performance of rituals usually becomes mechanical. Mere motion does not indicate life. Since they preclude the possibility of spontaneity, he equates observances of ritual with "the letter."

To turn to poems which illustrate "the spirit," a discussion of Browning's view of music is appropriate. Music is the artistic media which causes the most frustration and at the same time offers the most hope for expressing "the spirit." Browning's frustrations and hopes are expressed in "Parleying with Charles Avison." Browning's opinion that the potential in music to best capture "the spirit" is greater than the potential in other art forms is expressed in these lines:

There is no truer truth obtainable
By Man than comes of music.
(p. 976)

To match and mate
Feeling with knowledge,—make as manifest
Soul's work as Mind's work, turbulence as rest,
How we Feel, hard and fast as what we know--
This were the prize and is the puzzle!--which
Music essays to solve.

(p. 976)

Browning describes the attempts of poets, painters, and
musicians to "Arrest Soul's evanescent moods." He observes
that "Poetry discerns, / Painting is 'ware of passion's rise
and fall" (p. 976). Browning gives examples of these achieve-
ments and then urges Music to achieve more.

And still the Poet's page holds Helena
At gaze from topmost Troy--

Still on the Painter's fresco, from the hand
Of God takes Eve the life-spark whereunto
She trembles up from nothingness. Outdo
Both of them, Music!

Give momentary feeling permanence,
So that thy capture hold, a century hence,
Truth's very heart of truth as, safe to-day,
The Painter's Eve, the Poet's Helena
Still rapturously bend, afar still throw
The wistful gaze! Thanks, Homer, Angelo!
Could Music rescue thus from Soul's profound,
Give feeling immortality by sound,
Then were she queenliest of arts! Alas--
As well expect the rainbow not to pass!

(pp. 976-77)

Therein lies the frustration felt by Browning. While vitality
of spirit can be well demonstrated through music, the essence
of its truth and beauty is mutable. Changes in ideals and
perspectives reduce the lasting quality of music. Very
quickly a composition becomes a dead form; and we frequently
need something new for spiritual enrichment. Browning gives
us hope since "Music's throne / Seats somebody whom somebody
unseats" (p. 977). A new master will interpret a new truth.
One of these masters is featured in "Abt Vogler." The composer is famous for his creations of beautiful extempore music which are played and heard only one time. Abt Vogler draws an analogy between the beauty of his extemporizations and the structure of Solomon's palace. The regrettable difference is that the music dies immediately after being created. He knows that his work achieves the level of "the spirit."

All through my keys that gave their sounds to
a wish of my soul,
All through my soul that praised as its wish
flowed visibly forth,
All through music and me!

(p. 382)

Abt Vogler reflects that if he had created his structure on canvas or in poetry, his work would be less vivifying. He states that painters and poets can be proud of their work; but he sees their art forms more "in obedience to laws" than is music.

But here is the finger of God, a flash of
the will that can,
Existent behind all laws, that made them
and, lo, they are!
And I know not if, save in this, such gift
be allowed to man,
That out of three sounds he frame, not a
fourth sound, but a star.

(p. 383)

Even though the "palace of music" that he builds is one that fades quickly, "Never to be again," other palaces "As good, nay, better perchance" will be created by the "same self, same love, same God" (p. 383). Abt Vogler sees musicians as
more dependent on "the spirit" than are other artists but also more blessed by it.

But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear; The rest may reason and welcome: 't is we musicians know. (p. 383)

The composer must accept the transitoriness of the enrichment from his music, contenting himself that "the spirit" will survive and be exhibited again. The sorrow he feels when the beauty fades intensifies the joy he feels when it reappears.

Even though Browning praises music highly, he believes that beauty and truth can be found in many ways. Each person has his own means to search for "the spirit." Browning's illustrations of poets who succeed in their search can be supported and clarified by an in-depth statement from his "Essay on Shelley." Browning described the "whole poet's function" as that of

beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection; . . . of looking higher than any manifestation yet made of both beauty and good, . . . to reconstitute and store up, for the forthcoming stage of man's being, a gift in repayment of that former gift in which man's own thought and passion had been lavished by the poet on the else-incompleted and magnificence of the sunrise, the else-uninterpreted mystery of the lake,—so drawing out, lifting up, and assimilating this ideal of a future man, thus descried as possible, to the present reality of the poet's soul already arrived at the higher state of development, and still aspirant to elevate and extend itself in conformity with its still-improving perceptions of, no longer the eventual Human, but the actual Divine. In conjunction with which noble and rare powers came the subordinate power of delivering these attained results to the world in an embodiment of verse more closely
answering to and indicative of the process of the informing spirit, . . . the whole being moved by and suffused with a music at once of the soul and the sense, expressive both of an external might of sincere passion and an internal fitness and consonancy. (pp. 1010-11)

"Parleying with Christopher Smart" illustrates the idea of a "whole poet" by showing the contrast in a poet's works of "the letter" and his work of "the spirit." Smart's "Song to David," the only great work produced by him, was written during a period of insanity. Browning was convinced that Smart had received a divine revelation during his madness and only then could touch the pinnacle of poetry. In other words, there was only one time when Smart possessed and conveyed spiritual comprehension. Browning uses the exploration of a huge house as an analogy for the examination of Smart's entire poetry. He evaluates the design of most of the rooms and poems as lacking sufficient inspiration, thereby resulting in structures of "the letter."

Safe mediocrity had scorned the lure
Of now too much and now too little cost,
And satisfied me sight was never lost
Of moderate design's accomplishment
In calm completeness.

(p. 959)

The Chapel, symbolizing "Song to David," is the one room that has artistic merit. Browning describes it as "from floor to roof one evidence/Of how far earth may rival heaven" (p. 959). In a passage which parallels his definition of the "whole poet,"

4DeVane, pp. 504-08.
Browning asks if Smart's expression of "Real vision" in "right language," evident in only the one poem, resulted from spiritual insight:

Was it that when, by rarest chance, there fell
Disguise from Nature, so that Truth remained
Naked, and whoso saw for once could tell
Us others of her majesty and might
In large, her lovelinesses infinite
In little,--straight you used the power wherewith
Sense, penetrating as through rind to pith
Each object, thoroughly revealed might view
And comprehend the old things thus made new.

So did you sing your Song, so truth found vent
In words for once with you?

(p. 960)

As in "Andrea del Sarto," Browning uses brilliant colors for "the spirit" and subdued shades for "the letter." He describes the Chapel as enriching the "gaze with gold and gems" and glowing colors of "rainbow-substance" (p. 959). Browning calls Smart's spiritual revelation a "fire-flame," which he could see only for a short while, then

bidding vivid work good-by,
Doffed lyric dress and trod the world once more
A drab-clothed decent proseman as before.

(p. 961)

Just as all other rooms in the house showed "signs of decent taste,/Adequate culture" (p. 959), the poet of "the letter" produces work described as no more than "decent." Only "the spirit" can change his work to that of a "whole poet."

The poet described in "How it Strikes a Contemporary" embodies the keen understanding mentioned in Browning's definition of the "whole poet." He also exemplifies Shelley's
comment that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind." The "scrutinizing" poet in this poem takes "such cognizance of men and things" that the speaker views him as "a recording chief-inquisitor,"

Through a whole campaign of the world's life and death,
Doing the King's work all the dim day long.
(pp. 336-37)

DeVane calls the poem "an excellent description of the tremendous interest in human affairs" and says that the description of the poet's function involves the "idea of observing men and women as if one were in the service of God." Indeed, the poem does present a poet who has the attitude which is necessary for spiritual enrichment. Wherever he goes, he is "Scenting the world, looking it full in face" (p. 336). The "whole poet" is not content to merely read about life; he insists on experiencing and examining it fully.

The latter concept is an integral part of Browning's portrayal of painters who succeed in their search for "the spirit." "Parleying With Francis Furini" features a priest and painter of nudes whom Browning uses to express his belief that spiritual growth can come through sensuous and sensual awareness. Only by observing, experiencing, and expressing the reality of life can man build steps to spiritual enrichment.

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5 DeVane, p. 237.
6 Ibid.
Browning sees no incongruity in true religion and appreciation of the flesh. His belief is succinctly expressed in the lines from this poem which follow:

"... what comes first, take first, I advise!
Acquaint you with the body ere your eyes
Look upward:

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Only by looking low, ere looking high,
Comes penetration of the mystery."
(p. 969)

But the ample gift
Of gracing walls else blank of this our house
Of life with imagery, one bright drift
Poured forth by pencil,--man and woman mere,
Glorified till half owned for gods,--the dear
Fleshly perfection of the human shape,--
This was apportioned you whereby to praise
Heaven and bless earth.
(p. 965)

"Bounteous God,
Deviser and dispenser of all gifts
To soul through sense,--in Art and soul uplifts
Man's best of thanks!"
(p. 966)

"The letter" of traditional morals which attempt to repress consideration of the flesh would prevent drawing bodies "Just as God made them" (p. 965). Browning asserts that if art can inspire man to give thanks to God through an appreciation of his earthly gifts, then art should not be denied that spiritual potential.

The artist-monk in "Fra Lippo Lippi" is another painter whom Browning praises for his sensual awareness. Although Browning equates Fra Lippo Lippi with a "whole poet," the monk's superiors in the monastery are horrified by his artistic realisms. According to "the letter" by which the
Prior has been taught, the traditionally accepted Byzantine art is the only form that he can view as a portrayal of spiritual essence. Lippo's paintings are repulsive and worldly to the Prior.

Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
Faces, arms, legs, and bodies like the true
As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!
Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,
Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men.

(pp. 343-44)

Fra Lippo Lippi not only disagrees with his superior's view of the nature and purpose of art but also doubts that the distortions of Byzantine art capture either reality or spiritual essence. Lippo's scorn is apparent in his narrative of the Prior's feeble attempt to describe the soul.

Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke...no, it's not...
It's vapor done up like a new-born babe--
(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
It's...well, what matters talking, it's the soul!

(p. 344)

Lippo believes that reality in art need not be a distraction from spiritual matters. The depiction of the flesh can be a means to perception of the soul.

Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn.
Left foot and right foot, go a double-step,
Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,
Both in their order?

Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
And then add soul and heighten them threefold?

(p. 344)

Fra Lippo Lippi believes that all things created by God have value. The realistic depiction of these things can cause the
viewer to become aware of beauty previously unperceived.

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;
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.

(p. 345)

Lippo has been described as "earthy, sensually alive, but yet
sensitive, artistic, and in the truest sense spiritual, without being dogmatic or negative," as opposed to his superiors
who "live by the book, not by life." The poem is illustrative of the contrast between "the spirit" and "the letter."
DeVane calls the poem "one of the happiest expressions of
Browning's belief in art and in the joy of living." DeVane's statement describes well the crux of Browning's
application of his theme in poems about art. The artist who
experiences and inspires a joyous life is to be admired and
cherished.

8Ibid., p. 109.
9DeVane, p. 218.
CHAPTER III

THE ESSENCE OF LOVE

The transformation of Browning's theme into a statement to the effect that a thirst for knowledge ("the letter") is incomplete without a search for love ("the spirit") can be traced through several of his poems. Evidence of the theme in the poems to be discussed in this section seems elusive because of the many different adaptations Browning has made of it; however, close examination will show that the theme is pervasive in many poems which touch on the subjects of knowledge and love.

The first group of poems to be discussed here is concerned with aspiration to knowledge. Browning, highly educated himself, originally took the stance that aspiring to knowledge is admirable but less important than proper attitudes toward and actions in life. This opinion can be traced in his earliest works, *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*.

In the latter poem, Paracelsus aspires to know "the secret of the world,/Of man, and man's true purpose, path and fate" (p. 15). His motives, however, are self-centered. His friend Festus is concerned about the plans of Paracelsus. Festus urges him to study the works of previous sages instead of seeking knowledge "in strange and untried paths" (p. 16).
Paracelsus arrogantly replies that he considers their work as "dry wells," which he needs to discard if he is to find true comprehension. To his friend's wish that he become "great and grand," Paracelsus replies:

Not great and grand. If I can serve mankind
'T is well; but there our intercourse must end:
I never will be served by those I serve.
(p. 17)

Festus cannot understand such an attitude. He asks, "How can that course be safe which from the first/Produces carelessness to human love?" (p. 17). The art and value of giving and receiving are unknown to Paracelsus. He does not want any relationship of obligation with mankind. He wants instead to elevate and isolate himself through knowledge to the extent that he would even "withdraw from their officious praise"
(p. 16). Paracelsus admits that he longs

At once to trample on, yet save mankind,
To make some unexampled sacrifice
In their behalf,

Yet never to be mixed with men.
(p. 16)

Festus fears that Paracelsus will remain "A being knowing not what love is" (p. 18). He warns Paracelsus:

You cannot thrive--a man that dares effect
To spend his life in service to his kind
For no reward of theirs, unbound to them
By any tie.
(p. 18)

Still convinced that his "course allures for its own sake" (p. 18), Paracelsus begins his exclusive search for knowledge. Years later, "left with gray hair, faded hands,/And furrowed
brow" (p. 21), Paracelsus meets the poet Aprile whom he calls his "strange competitor in enterprise" (p. 28), for Aprile aspires to "love infinitely, and be loved" (p. 23). They both have come to feel that the results of their individual and exclusive goals are insufficient. After a comparison of successes and failures, Paracelsus cries:

Love me henceforth, Aprile, while I learn
To love; and, merciful God, forgive us both!
We wake at length from weary dreams; but both
Have slept in fairy-land: though dark and drear
Appears the world before us, we no less
Wake with our wrists and ankles jewelled still.
I too have sought to KNOW as thou to LOVE--
Excluding love as thou refusedst knowledge.
Still thou hast beauty and I, power. We wake:
What penance canst devise for both of us?
(p. 25)

He begs Aprile not to die "Till thou the lover, know; and I,
the knower,/Love--until both are saved" (p. 25). From his relationship with Aprile, who "loved too rashly," Paracelsus, who "saw no good in man," gains insight.

I learned my own deep error; love's undoing
Taught me the worth of love in man's estate,
And what proportion love should hold with power
In his right constitution; love preceding
Power, and with much power, always much more love.
(p. 48)

Paracelsus comes to view himself and Aprile as "halves of one dissevered world" (p. 25). Neither the search for knowledge nor the search for love is unworthy but only incomplete without the other.

There are further examples that Browning regards knowledge as mere pedantry when it is disassociated from love and
life. In "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis" (p. 167), the second portion of "Garden Fancies," Browning treats the theme comically. "Plague take all your pedants, say I!"--the opening line--precedes a narration about the fate of a book which the speaker considers "rubbish." Having come to this conclusion, he has revengefully dropped it in a fitting place: a crevice in an old tree filled with stagnant water. The book's proper environment is contrasted to the environment of the speaker's next choice of reading material.

Then I went in-doors, brought out a loaf,  
Half a cheese, and a bottle of Chablis;  
Lay on the grass and forgot the oaf  
Over a jolly chapter of Rabelais.

The first book is equated with stagnation ("the letter"); the second with enjoyment of life ("the spirit"). The speaker later takes pity, "for learning's sake," and fishes the discarded book out of the tree. Surveying its near-disintegrated condition, he wonders, "Did he guess how toadstools grow, this fellow?/Here's one stuck in his chapter six!" The toadstools symbolize death--a hyperbolic equation with the book's contents. Personifying the book as an abuser of the intellect because it is a denial of life, the speaker conjectures that the book's companions in the tree, the worms, slugs, efts, water-beetles, and newts, with "All that life and fun and romping,/All that frisking and twisting and coupling," must have been distressing to a book as dull as this. The fact that the speaker has not allowed the book to
be totally destroyed reflects some respect of knowledge in general, but it is the type of respect paid to something which has no further usefulness. He vows to put the book in a "snug niche" on his book-shelf where it can "Dry rot at ease till the Judgment-day."

Another poem dealing with pedantry is "A Grammarian's Funeral." Although many scholars have interpreted it as a statement of Browning's philosophy of the imperfect, there are several passages which support a less admirable opinion of the grammarian's goals. There is no doubt that the grammarian strives beyond his professional grasp, but there are other worthy goals in life which Browning considers superior and praises too frequently for the reader to suppose that Browning recommends the approach to life which the grammarian chooses. In contrast to Paracelsus, who refused to study the teachings of previous scholars, the grammarian is determined to master the Greek language so that he can study not only the classical texts but also the commentaries. By undertaking this gigantic task, the grammarian plans to learn how to live. Eventually his youth is gone and his health is failing, but the grammarian only redoubles his efforts and is no closer to experiencing life than when he began his task.

So, with the throttling hands of death at strife,
   Ground he at grammar;
Still, through the rattle, parts of speech were rife:
   While he could stammer
He settled Hoti's business—let it be!
Surely, exclusive concentration on such minute details as Greek particles renders a scholar as dead as the object of his study. His elevation of "the letter" over "the spirit" has prevented any contact with life, other than intellectual, or any joy, other than that resulting from his own narrow efforts.

A passage which supports the opinion that Browning condemns the grammarian's approach to life can be found in a previously discussed poem, "Parleying with Christopher Smart." The idea can be applied to professional specialization or to life in general.

The other method's favored in our day! The end ere the beginning: as you may Master the heavens before you study earth, Make you familiar with the meteor's birth Ere you descend to scrutinize the rose! I say, o'erstep no least one of the rows That lead man from the bottom where he plants Foot first of all, to life's last ladder-top: Live and learn, Not first learn and then live, is our concern.

The reference to the ladder occurs in several of Browning's poems. The point it illustrates in "Parleying with Christopher Smart" is the necessity of beginning on the bottom rung. The same idea is illustrated in "A Grammarian's Funeral" as the need to climb.
There are other poems besides "A Grammarian's Funeral" which project Browning's opinion of Greek and Latin as dead languages and symbolic of "the letter," notably "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" and "Fra Lippo Lippi." In the former, the use of those languages is associated with empty ritual; in the latter, it is linked with meaningless, drudging study disassociated from experience. The monks' efforts to teach a dead language to the young Lippo are wasted on a boy who has learned the lesson of life while starving in the streets. After Lippo's superiors offer advice as to what will make him a great painter, he sarcastically implies that knowledge of the language bears no application to contemporary life.

... bless us, they must know!
Don't you think they're the likeliest to know,
They with their Latin?

(p. 344)

Lippo believes that time is too precious to spend on pedantic pursuits at the expense of life. He reveals this attitude to the police guard.

You speak no Latin more than I, belike;
However, you're my man, you've seen the world
--The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colors, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises,--and God made it all!

(p. 344)

Delight in change, as opposed to reverence for the traditional, allows for growth and an enjoyment of life that beautifully illustrates "the spirit." The depth of Lippo's spiritual fulfillment is unmistakable.
Browning deals with the absence of fulfillment in "A Toccata of Galuppi's." A British scientist, the speaker is both horrified by and attracted to the superficial hedonism and fatalism which he hears reflected in the music about the eighteenth-century Venetians. Although he correctly views the surface gaiety as symptomatic of a hollow and ephemeral life, he fears that his complete devotion to science has decreased the range and depth of his own experience. While he equates the Venetian way of life with frivolity, the scientist has missed joy and love because of his own narrow intellectual pursuits. He is painfully aware that he has spent his time dealing with the fringes of existence. Knowing that there may be little time or possibility to correct the imbalance, he says, "I feel chilly and grown old" (p. 175). The poem shows that a lack of "the spirit" attends the lives of those who concentrate exclusively on either physical or intellectual pursuits.

In Browning's opinion, even knowledge that concerns the core of life rather than its periphery does not compare with actual experience. In "Cleon," the king asks the master of the arts and the intellect if the certainty of death is more comfortable to one who leaves behind him living works. Cleon replies:

What? dost thou verily trip upon a word,  
Confound the accurate view of what joy is  
(Caught somewhat clearer by my eyes than thine)  
With feeling joy? Confound the knowing how
And showing how to live (my faculty)
With actually living?
(p. 360)

He concretely illustrates the difference between "the letter" and "the spirit" by describing the young slave-woman's indifference to him and attraction to the rower.

I can write love-odes: thy fair slave's an ode.
I get to sing of love, when grown too gray
For being beloved: she turns to that young man,
The muscles all a-ripple on his back.
I know the joy of kingship: well, thou art king,
(p. 361)

Cleon feels that his many accomplishments in art and science have been bought with the time in which he could have experienced love and life.

Browning's strongest statement recommending love over knowledge is found in "A Pillar at Sebzevah," a poem in **Ferishtah's Fancies**. Written in his later years, the poem reflects Browning's experience with the mutability of truth. Browning has come to view knowledge as untrustworthy to build on as shifting sand and recommends trust in the heart, instinct, and intuition.¹ In the poem, Ferishtah compares the fruits of the searches for knowledge and for love, speaking first of knowledge:

The prize is in the process: knowledge means
Ever-renewed assurance by defeat
That victory is somehow still to reach,
But love is victory, the prize itself:

\[ \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \]

So let us say--not 'Since we know, we love,'
But rather 'Since we love, we know enough.'
(pp. 940-41)

¹DeVane, p. 487.
Ferishtah states that knowledge is no gain when what is known as truth is proved false or incomplete and replaced by better knowledge, which is also inconstant. He advises, "Wholly distrust thy knowledge, then, and trust/As wholly love allied to ignorance!" (p. 941). Although Browning's early poems reflect the view that the search for knowledge must be combined with the more important search for love, this poem is more clearly expressive of the concept that "the letter killeth."

A second group of poems supports the point that true love is one of the most important equations Browning makes with "the spirit." The label of love does not apply to the attachments which Browning portrays as selfish or marred by jealousy. This type of love is not conducive to "the spirit." Browning shows the distinction in "My Last Duchess." Jealousy prevents the Duke from having concern for anyone except himself. To him, the Duchess is not a person to care for but an object to control and possess. He can possess her only in the form of art—in a painting of the Duchess. Only there is she predictably static and uninvolved with people. The Duke has her killed because he can not accept her enthusiasm for life and her love for people.

The true spirit of love fills the emptiness of an otherwise beautiful world. The prelude to Jocoseria (entitled "Wanting is--What?") illustrates this concept.
WANTING is—what?
Summer redundant,
Blueness abundant,
—Where is the blot?

Beamy the world, yet a blank all the same,
—Framework which waits for a picture to frame:
What of the leafage, what of the flower?
Roses embowering with naught they embower!

Come then, complete incompleteness, O com'er,
Pant through the blueness, perfect the summer!
Breathe but one breath
Rose-beauty above,
And all that was death
Grows life, grows love,
Grows love!

(p. 911)

"Which?" is a poetic narration of a contest among court
ladies in which the Abbé is to decide which of them holds the
best judgment of the love of a man. The losers of the contest
are (1) the Duchesse, who requires that a lover be above all
faithful to God and loyal to his king, and (2) the Marquise,
who insists that a man must prove his love for her by brave
deeds in which he is wounded. The winner, the Comtesse, does
not mind if a man is judged a wretch, infidel, or traitor, as
long as he loves her completely: "What care I, so he stretch/
Arms to me his sole savior, love's ultimate goal" (p. 991).

Several poems compare love with the glories of states-
manship and of the arts. In "The Last Ride Together," the
speaker scoffs at these glories and yearns only that his love
be returned. In "Dis Aliter Visum" appears the question:

... what's the earth
With all its art, verse, music, worth--
Compared with love, found, gained, and kept?

(p. 379)
The speaker in "Love among the Ruins" views an area which once contained a magnificent city. He imagines the city as architecturally superb, with a multi-gated marble wall around a domed palace, temples, bridges, and aqueducts, protected by a million fighters and a thousand gold chariots. All that is left of such glory is a single turret protruding through grazing land. It is on this site that his love, "a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair," awaits him. The speaker anticipates their meeting:

When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,  
Either hand  
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace  
Of my face,  
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech  
Each on each.

(p. 172)

The speaker thinks of the centuries and lives which have been dedicated to faded triumphs and accomplishments. He concludes confidently that "Love is best."

Two other poems show the depth of emotion inherent in true love. The emotional enrichments of loving and of being loved are described in the last verse of "A Pearl, a Girl."

A woman ('t is I this time that say)  
With little the world counts worthy praise:  
Utter the true word--out and away  
Escapes her soul: I am wrapt in blaze,  
Creation's lord, of heaven and earth  
Lord whole and sole--by a minute's birth--  
Through the love in a girl!

(p. 988)

The second poem, the title of which is itself a manifestation of Browning's valuation of love, is "Summum Bonum" (p. 988).
In it, "the kiss of one girl" is the representation for Browning of the "Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe."

Browning firmly believed that this trust in the universe is possible for those who strive for growth. Sensual awareness and intellectual pursuits can intensify the enjoyment of life; but love, the general concern for the well-being of Man or the intimate relation with an individual, is the blessing of "the spirit" which can only generate more love.
CHAPTER IV

THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION

Browning's poems on religion supply further evidence of his equation of love with "the spirit." In these poems, man's capability to love is viewed by Browning as a reflection of a Greater Love. As important as "the spirit" is in man's relationship with man, it is overshadowed by the importance of "the spirit" in man's relationship with God. Browning's many poems on religion are analyses of "the spirit" resulting in growth toward Greater Love and of "the letter" prohibiting full religious development. The study of the development of the soul is, in Browning's opinion, the most worthy subject to contemplate. From the beginning to the end of his poetic career, Browning continually is concerned with religious matters.

Several of Browning's poems show his belief that "the letter killeth" in the absence of love. The poet implies that adherence to "the letter" is conducive to corruption. The first two poems to be dealt with illustrate the equation of "the letter" with rituals, an expression of dogmatic acceptance in which Browning sees no growth of "the spirit."

In "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church," Browning not only shows us a man whose religion has had no real meaning in his life but also an age which has allowed
and even encouraged his kind of corruption. The fact that the religion of the Renaissance Bishop is one of "the letter" rather than of "the spirit" can be seen in his expectations of burial in the church.

And then how I shall lie through centuries,  
And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,  
And see God made and eaten all day long,  
And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste  
Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!  
(p. 349)

The Bishop's anticipations involve the senses of hearing, seeing, feeling, and tasting. However, instead of viewing sensual awareness as the bottom rung of the ladder from which one can climb to intellectual and spiritual awareness as does Fra Lippo Lippi, the Bishop speaks of stupefaction. For the Bishop, the ritual of the mass is only a fixed course of procedure without thought. No growth is involved. His love of "Choice Latin, . . . marble's language" (p. 349), also typifies the lifelessness of "the letter" and exemplifies the formal emptiness of his spiritual life. The Bishop, on his deathbed, is totally unconcerned about the state of his soul; instead, he is obsessed with his desires for a luxurious tomb. His monologue is directed to his illegitimate sons, from whom he wants cooperation in his burial plans. In these requests, his corruption is evident--typical of the Renaissance age with "its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin."¹

¹DeVane, pp. 167-68, citing from Ruskin, Modern Painters, IV, 380.
His pleas for a tomb, made of "Peach-blossom marble . . . Rosy and flawless" (p. 348) and decorated with lapis lazuli, jasper, and a bronze bas-relief, illustrate his materialism. When his thoughts wander from his purpose, the Bishop spouts ritualistic phrases which roll from his tongue but do not come from his heart. He is unaware of any spiritual meaning in the phrases and oblivious to any discrepancy between the phrases he mouths and the life he has led. For example, the opening line of the poem, "Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!" (p. 348) is followed by his vain request for a burial which will make him envied by Gandolf, his old rival. The Bishop cites the reputation of his church, "Saint Praxed ever was the church for peace" (p. 348), then proceeds to describe his ministry there as one of fighting, cheating, and stealing. He projects his own distrust of mankind in his fear that his sons will not bury him in the manner he requests. His pleas that they follow his wishes include a promise to pray to Saint Praxed, a virgin saint, for mistresses for his sons. His own mistress was the one person who seemed important to him, but not for admirable reasons. In fact, she was only a trophy that he could flaunt before Gandolf. The Bishop's only consolation as he approaches death is that he was envied by a rival. Browning's portrait of the Bishop is one of a man who has memorized "the letter" but whose life and religion lack any semblance of "the spirit."
Browning's evaluation of ritual is also evident in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," in which he portrays a character supposedly committed to Christianity, a character who is far from living a life exemplifying Christ's teachings. The speaker is a Catholic monk who reveals his hatred toward Brother Lawrence, a fellow monk. The speaker spends much of his time dwelling on his desire to see Brother Lawrence damned eternally by a mortal sin committed immediately before death. The speaker's obsessions with this idea lead to delusions that Brother Lawrence is guilty of lust for Delores and other sins which, in reality, are the speaker's own. If he were sure of Brother Lawrence's guilt, he would not need to spend so much time in plans to entice his fellow monk to sin. It is ironic that the speaker is so familiar with the "Twenty-nine distinct damnations" (p. 168) in Galatians without being concerned about his own sin of hatred. One outburst of hate--"Gr-r-r--you swine!" (p. 168)--erupts while the speaker is reciting his rosary; this outburst shows that his own forms of worship are merely ritualistic--an observance of "the letter." Yet the speaker is convinced that his rituals demonstrate that he is the better Christian. He says of Brother Lawrence:

When he finishes refection.
Knife and fork he never lays
Cross-wise, to my recollection,
As do I, in Jesu's praise.
I the Trinity illustrate,
Drinking watered orange-pulp--
In three sips the Arian frustrate;
While he drains his at one gulp.
(p. 168)
The poem is an excellent example of Browning's contention that following "the letter" of rituals does not indicate necessarily "the spirit" of a loving heart.

In the next four poems to be dealt with here, there is an equation of "the letter" with dogma itself. Browning implies that a doctrine of "absolute truth" can be construed to justify evil attitudes and actions.

One poem from which this inference can be drawn is "Johannes Agricola in Meditation." When the poem was first published in The Monthly Repository, a quotation from the Dictionary of All Religions followed the title, naming John Agricola as founder of the sect of Antinomians and defining their creed:

. . . that good works do not further, nor evil works hinder salvation; that the child of God cannot sin, that God never chastiseth him, that murder, drunkenness, etc. are sins in the wicked but not in him, that the child of grace being once assured of salvation, afterwards never doubteth. . . .

(p. 1021)

The attitude of those who followed "the letter" of this creed, thus rejecting "the spirit" of love, is described in the poem. Johannes Agricola, as the speaker for the sect, believes that he has "God's warrant" even if he blends "All hideous sins, as in a cup,/To drink the mingled venoms up." He does not believe that God would show mercy to an unchosen soul, regardless of good works, be he

Priest, doctor, hermit, monk grown white
With prayer, the broken-hearted nun,
The martyr, the wan acolyte,
The incense-swinging child,—undone
Before God fashioned star or sun!
(p. 341)

In Browning's opinion, belief in predestination does not reflect a Greater Love. If God is love, then evil is the inability to love. Browning's evaluation of the creed is perhaps indicated by the fact that Browning kept the poem under the title "Madhouse Cells" for twenty-one years.²

Another poem in which the value of dogma is questioned is "Holy-Cross Day: (On which the Jews were Forced to Attend an Annual Christian Sermon in Rome)." Preceding the poem is a mock-diary entry by a Bishop's Secretary, dated 1600. The Secretary describes the "moving sight" of the Hebrews "maternally brought--nay, (for He saith, 'Compel them to come in') haled, as it were, by the head and hair, and against their obstinate hearts, to partake of the heavenly grace" (p. 281). The Secretary views the use of force, an unloving action, as justified by "the letter" of the Scripture. Although the Secretary describes the occasion as a success, Browning prefaced the poem with this statement: "What the Jews really said, on thus being driven to church, was rather to this effect:--" (p. 281). The Jewish speaker in the poem protests the annual infringement upon the beliefs of his people. His description of their reaction is very similar to the observation by John Evelyn of such a service.

²DeVane, p. 124.
A sermon was preached to the Jews, at Ponte Sisto, who are constrained to sit till the hour is done; but it is with so much malice in their countenances, spitting, humming, coughing, and motion, that it is almost impossible they should hear a word from the preacher. A conversion is very rare.

The speaker in the poem gets through the service by silently quoting Rabbi Ben Ezra's "Song of Death." The song includes a statement to Christ that, if He be the Messiah, the Jews will indeed be bruised by their non-acceptance of Him; however, He will surely join sides with the Jews against the Christians,

Whose life laughs through and spits at their creed,  
Who maintain thee in word, and defy thee in deed!  
(p. 282)

In a religion of "the spirit," there is no justification for actions which inflict pain. Browning does not attack Christianity but merely those people who abuse others through a religion that clings to "the letter."

The third illustration of Browning's concept of a misdirected dogma is found in "The Heretic's Tragedy." The model for the main character is Jacques du Bourg-Molay. The historical figure was the last Grand Master of the Knights Templars, a very popular and strong order which was active during the crusades. Envy of their wealth by Pope Clement V and Philip IV of France resulted in the destruction of their organization and the confiscation of their property. Molay spent many years in prison, where he signed a false confession.

3 DeVane, p. 261, citing from The Diary of John Evelyn, ed. A. Dobson, I, 203.
of simony under torture. Even though he retracted his confession, he was burned at the stake. Browning's preface to the poem describes the grotesque account of the burning at the stake "as distorted by the refraction from Flemish brain to brain, during the course of a couple of centuries" (p. 280). In the poem, Browning implies that misusing a doctrine to obtain power, wealth, or fame regardless of the innocence or fate of others bears no relation to "the spirit" of religion. The speaker's attitude and his tone express the same hypocritical viewpoint of those who throughout history have killed in the name of God, or of those who have been more concerned with "the law" than with "love."

An attack on dogma based on fear and misanthropy is found in the fourth poem, "Caliban upon Setebos." While some scholars have come to accept the poem as an illustration of a primitive stage of religion, based on the theory that evolutionary man chooses a theology to fit his present needs, others see the poem as a satire of Darwinians or Calvinists. Whether or not either of these speculations is accurate, the poem describes a religion without love: a religion which does not enrich "the spirit." Caliban's god, named Setebos, is a god of wrath and vengeance whose creations were made in order to satisfy his sadistic tendencies.

4 DeVane, p. 268.

5 Crowell, p. 220.
He made all these and more,  
Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?  
Who made them weak, meant weakness He might vex.  
(pp. 392-93)

In order to avoid punishment or cruelty, Caliban tries not to show any signs of happiness. Viewing the maliciousness of Setebos as arbitrary, Caliban projects his own traits and actions toward creatures of less strength.

'Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs  
That march now from the mountain to the sea;  
'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first.  
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so,  
'Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots  
Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off;  
'Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,  
And two worms he whose nippers end in red;  
As it likes me each time, I do: so He.  
(p. 392)

Caliban's speculations in theology include a disbelief in Hell, but not because of any association of god with love. Instead, he attributes the worst to Setebos, feeling that if there were any greater pain to be inflicted, he would inflict it immediately. Caliban is certain that he would be severely punished if his statements were known to Setebos and is prepared to do whatever he can to appease his wrath.

If he caught me here,  
O'erheard this speech, and asked  
"What chucklest at?"  
'Would, to appease Him, cut a finger off,  
Or of my three kid yearlings burn the best,  
Or let the toothsome apples rot on tree,  
Or push my tame beast for the orc to taste.  
(p. 394)

This passage relates clearly to Psalm Fifty, in which God chastizes the Israelites for the same offer to perform
sacrificial ceremonies as a substitute for obedience. Both offers are adherences to "the letter." Taken from this same Psalm is the motto preceding the poem: "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself." The poem is an illustration of the kind of God who can be created in the image of man, much like the God pictured in Verse 22, who demands obedience lest he tear the Israelites to pieces. Browning's choice of the motto makes clear that he rejects the vengeful God of Caliban and of the fundamentalists of his own time whose religion seemingly was without love.  

In other poems, Browning uses the theme to state that faith in God is not possible through "the letter" but only through "the spirit." This train of thought is developed in detail in the poems to be discussed below but is also stated briefly and succinctly in "A Pillar at Sebzevar."

Were knowledge all thy faculty, then God
Must be ignored: love gains him by first leap.
(p. 941)

Three poems develop the first statement of the above passage in which "the letter" is equated with reason. In "Cleon" and "Karshish," the central characters, who lived in or near the time of Christ, both illustrate Browning's notion that rationalism is not a path to faith. The speakers cannot get beyond "the letter" of their philosophical and scientific knowledge, even though belief in the divinity of Christ might fill their spiritual void. A Greek artist-philosopher

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6 Crowell, p. 222.
trapped by his rationalism, Cleon has a closed mind toward the possibility of eternal life although he is extremely depressed by the prospect of approaching death.

I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,
The man who loved his life so over-much,
Sleep in my urn. It is so horrible,
I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in desire for joy,

But no!
Zeus has not yet revealed it; and alas
He must have done so, were it possible!
(p. 361)

Karshish, an Arab physician, seems more tempted than Cleon to believe in Christianity. He feels compelled to write about the ramblings of the "madman," Lazarus, about the "Nazarene physician" who raised Lazarus from the dead. However, Karshish reveals his ambivalence by constantly changing the subject from Lazarus to medicine. Karshish is blinded by his own scientific rationalism. Neither Cleon nor Karshish is able to believe in "the spirit" which "giveth life."

The third poem, "Bishop Blougram's Apology," shows a contrast between a skeptic who finds faith untenable because of his reasoning process and a Bishop who allows "the spirit" to lead him. The speaker of the poem is Bishop Blougram, whose comments on the problem of faith in an age of intellectual skepticism are directed to Gigadibs, a literary man.
The Bishop's position is that he does not find either absolute belief or unbelief possible. He therefore chooses belief, accepting his moments of doubt as a means to make his faith stronger. This course of action results for him in the type of life which he says "Brings out the best of me and bears me fruit/In power, peace, pleasantness and length of days" (p. 351). Recognizing that he needs "mankind's respect,/Obedience, and the love that's born of fear" (p. 352) and also the means to obtain physical comfort, he finds that his profession very adequately fills those needs. The Bishop defines faith as

the idea, the feeling and the love,
God means mankind should strive for
and show forth
Whatever be the process to that end,—
And not historic knowledge, logic sound,
and metaphysical acumen, sure!

(p. 355)

He feels that if a person desires faith, then he has faith enough. For the Bishop, only faith will provide him with the vitality of life to give him a sense of direction and well-being, rather than the stagnation and self-abnegation which he perceives in Gigadibs. Knowing that faith is more difficult in the midst of scientific discoveries, the Bishop would still choose his moment in history over the Middle Ages, when faith was not questioned. He fears that a person in such an age would feel and act

As other people felt and did;
With soul more blank than this decanter's knob,
Believe--and yet lie, kill, rob, fornicate,
Full in belief's face.

(p. 355)
The Bishop believes that the soul exercises and grows through experiencing both faith and doubt. He is anti-ascetic, feeling that a man who lives this life as if he were halfway into the next has lost this end, perhaps, the next life. The growth gained through experiencing this life may well result in a more intense life in the hereafter. In Blougram's opinion, his faith explains the basic difference between himself and Gigadibs: "I live my life here; yours you dare not live" (p. 357). The Bishop says that if Gigadibs were

A zealot with a mad ideal in reach,
A poet just about to print his ode,
A statesman with a scheme to stop this war,
An artist whose religion is his art--
I should have nothing to object; such men
Carry the fire, all things grow warm to them. (p. 357)

Gigadib's lack of faith is to Blougram a paralyzing element which gives no "spirit" or purpose to his life more than to

Write statedly for Blackwood's Magazine,
Believe you see two points in Hamlet's soul
Unseized by the Germans yet--which view
you'll print. (p. 357)

Blougram's final attack against "the letter" changes the literary man's life into one more "outward-bound" as an Australian settler.

By this time he has tested his first plough,
And studied his last chapter of Saint John. (p. 358)

Thus the skeptic is led beyond those restrictions of reason which prevent the experience of love. Gigadib's rationalism
has not resulted in the happiness possible for those who strive for spiritual growth.

While Browning has narrowed his definition of the essence of religion in the above poems by pointing to deficiencies, there are other poems in which he gives us positive revelations of a vital religious philosophy. Implied in these poems is Browning's opinion that spiritual growth is attained through love.

"Fra Lippo Lippi," the first of these illustrations, has been discussed in the preceding chapters as a vehicle that carries Browning's view of "the letter." Fra Lippo Lippi's resistance to painting unrealistic pictures and to learning a dead language is an example of his rejection of strict adherence to "the letter." The poem also offers a positive approach to an understanding of "the spirit" in religion. For Lippo, religion is a feeling of appreciation which results from one's absorbing as many as possible of all the gifts from God. In rejecting the Prior's circumscriptions, Fra Lippo Lippi vows to find more perspective and fulfillment in life.

This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.
(p. 345)

Lippo does not intend to leave unexamined any part of God's creation. His increased awareness enables him to find beauty and truth beyond what he considers traditional boundaries.
Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, woman, child.
These are the frame to? What's it all about?
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
Wondered at? oh, this last of course!
(pp. 344-45)

Self-denial and rejection of the world are sacrileges from Lippo's viewpoint. He is able to remove from his way the stumbling blocks of "the letter" of prescribed morality and attitudes.

For me, I think I speak as I was taught: I always see the garden and God there
A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned, The value and significance of flesh, I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.
(p. 344)

Lippo lives life as he feels it should be lived rather than as he is told he should live it. In so doing, he escapes a dull and lifeless existence devoted to "abundantly detestable" conformity. Instead, he enjoys a sense of fulfillment with an emotional depth otherwise unattainable. His relationship with God is based on love and appreciation.

And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over, The world and life's too big to pass for a dream.
(p. 344)

Lippo's faith is built on his own personal feelings and intuitions and seems richer by far than the "religion" which results from adherence to "the letter." In all probability, he could answer readily Paul's question in Galatians 3:2: "This only would I learn of you. Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?"
Browning's own faith has been described as unconventional because it too is built on personal feelings and intuitions rather than on an orthodox creed. The range in attitude in his poems about religion results in their being used by Christians and atheists alike to support their positions. In some ways, Browning's poems reflect views which seem closer to "the letter" or orthodoxy but are really closer to "the spirit," for he chooses the God of Love over the God of Vengeance.

The first nine sections of "Saul" were written before Browning completely developed a viable religious viewpoint. These sections of the poem praise life's physical delights. In contrast, the last ten sections are "a discourse on the inadequacy of life's physical delights, good as they are, unless they are accompanied by 'soul wine,' the life of the spirit."  

David's songs in the poem are attempts to cheer Saul out of complete dispondency and immobility. In section nine, David states his belief in the enjoyment of life. He is basically in accord with Fra Lippo Lippi.

> How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ All the heart and the soul and the senses forever in joy!  

(p. 180)

The implications in the last ten sections, in contrast with "Fra Lippo Lippi," are more in keeping with orthodox Christian theory. Although in "Fra Lippo Lippi" there is the assertion that the joys of the flesh are a necessary first step to

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7Crowell, p. 98.
spiritual awareness, in "Saul" there is more concentration on the necessity of the addition of "the spirit." When David does not receive sufficient response after his first attempt, he says to Saul:

"Yea, my King,"
I began--"thou dost well in rejecting mere comforts that spring
From the mere mortal life held in common by man and by brute:
In our flesh grows the branch of this life,
in our soul it bears fruit."
(p. 181)

Although Saul becomes mobile, he remains despondent. David yearns to find a way to be of more help.

And oh, all my heart how it loved him!
but, where was the sign?
I yearned--"Could I help thee, my father, inventing a bliss,
I would add, to that life of the past, both the future and this;
I would give thee new life altogether, as good, ages hence,
As this moment,--had love but the warrant, love's heart to dispense!"
(p. 183)

When David realizes how important love is--that it is the emotional ingredient necessary to "the spirit"--he has a revelation about the true nature and capabilities of God. The reason that Caliban is not able to see Setebos as anything other than a god of vengeance is precisely the reason that David is able to see God as a God of Love. Just as Caliban sees Setebos in his own image of a primitive nature, the evolved David can see a more compassionate God.

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

(p. 183)

David sees that God has the power and the love to give man eternal life. By means of David's spiritual insight and growth, he is able to prophesy the embodiment of love in Christ.

For Browning, his certainty that "God is Love" requires no proof. In "A Death in the Desert," he responds to rationalistic critics of the Bible not only in general but also specifically to those who expressed doubt regarding the authenticity of the Book of John. Through the disciple John, Browning explains that miracles were once needed to engender belief for a more primitive man.

"I say, that as the babe, you feed awhile,
Becomes a boy and fit to feed himself,
So, minds at first must be spoon-fed with truth:
When they can eat, babe's nurture is withdrawn.
I fed the babe whether it would or no:
I bid the boy or feed himself or starve."

(p. 389)

The myth of Prometheus about his theft of fire from the gods has been discarded as false; still man regards fire as a necessity. According to Browning, miracles are no longer needed for man to know that love also is a necessity.

Wonders, that would prove doctrine, go for naught,
Remains the doctrine, love; well, we must love,
And what we love most, power and love in one,
Let us accept on the record here,

8DeVane, p. 295.
Accepting these in Christ: must Christ then be? Has he been? Did not we ourselves make him? (p. 389)

In this poem, Browning equates absolute truth with "the letter" because only stagnation or death would result from such knowledge. He equates life with searching and progressing. For Browning, if absolute truth were revealed by God, there would be no life or "spirit." The realization that love is a necessity is sufficient basis for a viable faith.

One last poem gives the essence of religion from Browning's viewpoint. In the "Epilogue" to Dramatis Personae, Browning rejects any acceptance of religion based on rituals and creed; he also rejects the dismissal of religion on the grounds of rationalism. Instead he presents his personal view of what he considers as the optimum "spirit" in religion. There are three speakers in the poem. David describes the ceremony performed for the dedication of Solomon's Temple.

When the thousands, rear and van, Swarming with one accord, Became as a single man (Look, gesture, thought and word) In praising and thanking the Lord. (p. 413)

Browning cannot find his religious niche in the conformist's rituals, characteristic of "the letter." He is even less able to embrace the rationalistic, skeptic position described by Renan, the second speaker in the poem. The French rationalist published in 1863 the controversial Vie de Jésus,
described as being "in the cold, depressed tone of the skeptic who has cleared away superstition, only to find that he has created a vacuum." Renan is compared to the "bulbous-headed rationalistic professor in 'Christmas Eve' who lectures without love or hope and who leaves the air 'mephitic,' incapable of supporting the life of the spirit." Browning proposes his own third view instead of the two, "Witless alike of will and way divine" (p. 413). "The spirit" must be present in his religion but need not be housed in a church or be brought forth by ritual. The intertwinements of "heaven's high with earth's low" (p. 413) can best be seen in man. The world itself is a temple, adorned with unique expressions of individuality and struggles for spiritual growth.

Why, where's the need of Temple, when the walls
O' the world are that? What use of swells and falls
From Levites' choir, Priests' cries, and trumpet calls? (p. 414)

The thinking, feeling, and loving human being will make mistakes. In "Old Pictures in Florence" Browning states, "What's come to perfection perishes" (p. 177). It is the search for "the spirit" which gives life and prevents the void felt in those who can no longer see God.

9 Crowell, p. 240.
10 Ibid.
That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows!
(p. 414)

What Browning's universe "feels and knows" continues to change. The spirit is not found where stagnation exists. Only by seeking new truths and new beauties can one avoid decay. It is the continual search for a higher rung of the ladder that is the true essence of religion.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Browning's concern with his theme came early in his life, as evidenced in Paracelsus, written long before he met and married Elizabeth Barrett. Their correspondence during their courtship, however, shows that she shared many of his ideas. She even may have influenced or inspired his expression of the theme in his poetry, since most of the poems used as illustrations were written after he met his wife. At least it can be said that there are subjects discussed by the two of them which are interesting to consider in connection with the theme.

On the subject of art, there are several comments in their correspondence. One in particular relates to the attitude about art which Browning expresses through Fra Lippo Lippi. In one letter, Browning tells Elizabeth about Mary Shelley's view of Italian art.

Her remarks . . . are amazing--Fra Angelico, for instance, only painted Martyrs, Virgins &c.--she had no eyes for the divine bon-bourgeoisie of his pictures; the dear common folk of his crowds, those who sit and listen (spectacle at nose and bent into a comfortable heap to hear better) at the sermon of the Saint--and the children, and women,--divinely pure they all are, but fresh from the streets and market place--but she is wrong every where, that is, not right, not seeing what
is to see, speaking what one expects to hear—I quarrel with her, for ever, I think.

Mary Shelley saw only the depiction of "souls" through the same prescribed means of art which the Prior in "Fra Lippo Lippi" required. Browning's description of the "divine . . . common folk" shows his agreement with Lippo's view that "the spirit" can best be depicted through realism.

There are other comments dealing with the definition of "the spirit" in art. Elizabeth discerned "the spirit" in Browning's poetry long before he was held in general esteem. The following excerpt from one of her letters is a typical example of her encouragement.

... you who have so much great work to do which no one else can do except just yourself!—& you . . . who have courage & knowledge . . . must know that every work, with the principle of life in it, will live, let it be trampled ever so under the heel of a faithless & unbelieving generation . . . All men can teach . . . by tradition & translation:—all, except poets, who must preach their own doctrine & sing their own song, to be the means of any wisdom or any music.

They both agree on the necessity of knowledge and skill in artistic endeavors but believe that "the spirit" is more valuable. In one of Browning's letters, he states:

One should study the mechanical part of the art, or nearly all that there is to be studied—for the more one sits and thinks over the creative process, the more it confirms itself as "inspiration," nothing more or less. Or, at worst, you write down old inspirations, what you remember of them—& but, with that it begins: "Reflection" is exactly what it names

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2Letters, p. 349.
itself—a re-presentation, in scattered rays from every angle of incidence, of what first of all became present in a great light, a whole one. So tell me how these lights are born, if you can!  

Elizabeth replies that she agrees with his equation of the creative process with inspiration. She adds to Browning's analogy her view of the creative process as one where, in effect, "the spirit" builds and grows.

And still more wonderful than the first transient great light you speak of... & far beyond any work of reflection, except in the pure analytical sense in which you use the word... appears that gathering of light on light upon particular points, as you go (in composition) step by step, till you get intimately near to things, & see them in a fulness & clearness, & an intense trust in the truth of them which you have not in any sunshine of noon (called real!) but which you have then... & struggle to communicate—: an ineffectual struggle with most writers (oh, how ineffectual!) & when effectual, issuing in the "Pippa Passes," & other master pieces of the world.

Browning's view of the exclusive search for knowledge as being insufficient is very much shared by Elizabeth. In one letter, she scolds herself for allowing Browning to help her with some translations. She fears that his time spent in "melancholy comparisons between the English and the Greek" keeps him from his real business of living and loving.  

Elizabeth views wisdom as encompassing much more than "the letter" of knowledge; this opinion is evident in her description of an encounter with her father.

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3 Letters, p. 95.  
4 Letters, pp. 96-97.  
5 Letters, p. 85.
When my father came into the room to-day & found me hiding my eyes from the lightning, he was quite angry & called "it disgraceful to anybody who had ever learnt the alphabet"--to which I answered humbly that "I knew it was"--but if I had been impertinent, I MIGHT have added that wisdom does not come by the alphabet but in spite of it? Don't you think so in a measure?6

In the same vein, still another comment of hers relates strongly to Browning's attitude later expressed in "A Grammatician's Funeral."

I have, for the last few years, taken quite to despise book-knowledge & its effect on the mind--I mean when people live by it as most readers by profession do, cloistering their souls under these roofs made with hands, when they might be under the sky. Such people grow dark & narrow & low, with all their pains.

Neither Elizabeth nor Browning expected to find a love relationship better than the kind observed everywhere. Both of them felt that they would want no part of a shallow relationship. Elizabeth refers to love as "that word which rhymes to glove & comes as easily off and on (on some hands!)."8 This image of the glove, in the form of a barrier to loving, appears in Browning's poem "Respectability."

I know! the world proscribes not love; Allows my finger to caress Your lips' contour and downiness, Provided it supply a glove. (p. 191)

The standards of love accepted by society ("the letter") engender marriages of ritual only in which a husband and wife

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6Letters, p. 120.
7Letters, p. 167.
8Letters, p. 341.
merely go through the motions of saying that they care for each other. In one letter, Elizabeth describes in detail her view of love without "the spirit" of true caring.

It is true of me...very true...that I have not a high appreciation of what passes in the world...under the name of love; & that a distrust of the thing had grown to be a habit of mind with me when I knew you first. It has appeared to me, through all the seclusion of my life & the narrow experience it admitted of, that in nothing, men...& women too!...were so apt to mistake their own feelings, as in this one thing. Putting falseness quite on one side...quite out of sight & consideration, an honest mistaking of feeling appears wonderfully common--& no mistake has such frightful results--none can. Self-love & generosity, a mistake may come from either--from pity, from admiration, from any blind impulse--oh, when I look at the histories of my own female friends...to go to step further!--And if it is true of the women, what must the other side be?--To see the marriages which are made every day!--worse than solitudes & more desolate! In the case of the two happiest I ever knew, one of the husbands said...that he had "ruined his prospects by marrying"; & the other said to himself at the very moment of professing an extraordinary happiness,..."But I should have done as well if I had not married her."  

Browning agrees that such relationships are commonplace. He seems to condone the practice to some extent for the sake of populating the world:

...the conduct which is atrocious...may be no more than the claims of the occasion justify...in certain other cases where the thing sought for and granted is avowedly less by a million degrees: it shall all be traffic, exchange--(counting spiritual gifts as only coin, for our purpose)--but surely the formalities and policies and decencies all vary with the nature of the thing trafficked for....Where so little is to be got, why offer much more?...He who honestly wants his wife to sit at the head of his table and carve...that is be his help-meat (not "help mete for him")--he shall assuredly find a girl of his degree who wants the table to sit at...[and would not offer] that woman a bunch

of orange-flowers and a sonnet, instead of a buck-horn-handed sabre-shaped knife, sheathed in a "Every Lady Her Own Market-Woman."  

Browning's objectivity, however, applies only to other people; he would never have been content with mediocrity. He describes his love as "beyond admiration, and respect, and esteem and affection." These characteristics are rarely found, but he feels his love is even more.

And this is my first song, my true song--this love I bear you--I look into my heart and then let it go forth under that name--love--I am more than mistrustful of many other feelings in me: they are not earnest enough; so far, not true enough--but this is all the flower of my life which you call forth and which lies at your feet.

In another letter, he reveals the importance of their love to him and describes how that type of love enriches life.

I have your memory, the knowledge of you, the idea of you printed into my heart and brain,--on that, I can live my life--but it is for you, the dear, utterly generous creature I know you, to give me more and more beyond mere life--to extend life and deepen it--as you do, and will do.

Elizabeth certainly shared his attitudes about love. Their correspondence is filled with statements which describe the depth of their feeling for each other. She, too, found that only such a love as theirs, full of "the spirit," would

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10 Letters, pp. 343-44.
11 Letters, p. 331.
12 Letters, p. 352.
13 Letters, p. 335.
enable her to give and receive completely. The following excerpts from her letters are typical illustrations:

I have put some of . . . [your] hair into a little locket which was given to me when I was a child by my favorite uncle . . . . And now I remember how he once said to me: 'Do you beware of ever loving!--If you do, you will not do it half: it will be for life & death.'

So I put the hair into his locket, which I wear habitually, & which never had hair before--the natural use of it being for perfume:--& this is the best perfume for all hours, besides the completing of a prophecy.14

But to say only that I was in the desert & that I am among the palm-trees, is to say nothing.15

. . . if the entireness of a gift means anything . . . I have not given with a reserve . . . I am yours in my life & soul, for this year & for other years.16

Elizabeth's idea of "the letter" of religion also echoes that of Browning's. The first mention in her correspondence of her religion refers to her preference for the Independent Dissenting Chapels. She speaks of her dislike of orthodoxy:

[I am] not "schismatical," I hope--hating as I do from the roots of my heart all that rending of the garment of Christ, which Christians are so apt to make the daily week-day of this Christianity so called--& caring very little for most dogmas & doxies in themselves . . . & believing that there is only one church in heaven & earth, with one divine High Priest to it,--let exclusive religionists build what walls they please & bring out what chrism . . . [The preference for the independent chapel results] from liking the simplicity of that praying and speaking without books--& a little too from disliking the theory of state churches. There is a narrowness among the dissenters . . . but it seems to me clear that they know what the "liberty of Christ" means, far better than those do who call themselves

14 Letters, p. 320.
15 Letters, p. 323.
16 Letters, p. 355.
churchmen; & stand altogether, as a body, on higher ground.17 Browning's own background is similar; and his dislike of "the letter" or orthodoxy is later illustrated in Christmas Eve. He assures Elizabeth that her "confession" is only another expression of their common attitudes.18

The massive bulk of Browning's correspondence prevents a thorough examination of all excerpts which pertain to his theme. The above quotations do indicate, however, that the underlying philosophy of the theme is very much a part of his own life. It is precisely because the philosophy is so related to his own life that Browning's poems about art, love, and religion convey his message both in content and by example. Another factor in his success is the poet's personal knowledge of each subject. His reach for "the spirit" is coupled with his grasp of knowledge.

Browning undoubtedly is extremely knowledgeable about art. His profession as a poet certainly enables him to speak with authority on that subject. His interest and activity in the areas of music and painting are also remarkable. His personal involvement in all these areas provides the realism necessary to project life ("the spirit") into his own poetry about any of these artistic media. As one critic said, "These

17 Letters, p. 141.
18 Letters, p. 143.
Browning poems do not merely deal with painting; they smell of paint."

Having described the "dangers and disappointments which attend the man who believes merely in the intellect," Browning goes on to describe the importance of "the spirit" in love. The argument that his love poems themselves are vibrant with "the spirit" is again based on his ability to deal with the subject realistically. Whereas the intellect can be discussed in logical terms and in abstractions, the subject of love demands a more personal approach.

Rationalism can live upon air and signs and numbers. But sentiment must have reality; emotion demands the real fields, the real widows' homes, the real corpse, and the real woman. And therefore Browning's love poetry is the finest love poetry in the world, because it does not talk about raptures and ideals and gates of heaven, but about window-panes and gloves and garden walls... Browning never forgets the little details which to a man who has ever really lived may suddenly send an arrow through the heart... And if any of us or all of us are truly optimists, and believe as Browning did, that existence has a value wholly inexpressible, we are most truly compelled to that sentiment not by any argument or triumphant justification of the cosmos, but by a few of these momentary and immortal sights and sounds, a gesture, an old song, a portrait, a piano, an old door.

Just as Browning exhibits "the spirit" in his poetry about art and love because of personal experience, he is also able to give us religious poetry of the same vitality. The

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20Ibid., p. 24.
21Ibid., pp. 49-51.
depth in his religious poetry comes not from mere exposure
to theology but from joyful experience resulting in optimism.

Browning's optimism is of that ultimate and unshakeable order that is founded upon the absolute sight, and sound, and smell, and handling of things. . . . His mysticism was not of that idle and wordy type which believes that a flower is symbolical of life; it was rather of that deep and eternal type which believes that life, a mere abstraction, is symbolical of a flower. With him the great concrete experiences which God made always come first; his own deductions and speculations about them always second.22

The supreme value of Browning as an optimist lies in . . . [the fact] that beyond all his conclusions, and deeper than all his arguments, he was passionately interested in and in love with existence. . . . He is a great poet of human joy for precisely . . . [this reason]: that his happiness is primal, and beyond the reach of philosophy. He is something far more convincing, far more comforting, far more religiously significant than an optimist: he is a happy man.23

Happiness is indeed the core of Browning's being, transfigured by a much more valuable Midas-touch. It is the result of the application of the theme, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," to his poetry, his marriage, his life.

22 Chesterton, pp. 182-83.
23 Ibid., pp. 185-86.
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