CHAPTER V

AESTHETIC THEORY IN THE LATER POETRY

Browning’s later poetry presents the surprising spectacle of an ostensibly ‘dramatic’ poet frequently setting aside the dramatic mask in order to speak out explicitly in his own voice. This element is not entirely new. In Sordello, Browning diverges occasionally from the narrative in order to speak out on the role of the poet and on the nature of poetry. Its re-emergence in the later poetry is not merely the result of his growing need to tell the truth (in a much more unambiguous fashion than dramatic indirection would allow) of his feelings on the perennial problems of life, art and faith, but as a response to contemporary pressures. The chief of these was the necessity of defending his art against the hostility of its detractors.

Though Browning explicitly disavowed personal self-revelation in poetry, he was not averse to dealing with the problems of his art therein. In poems like Balaustion’s Adventure, Aristophanes’ Apology and Fifine at the Fair Browning presents his views on art through the mouths of his characters, using the theories to illuminate and develop the particular situations in these poems. In Balaustion’s Adventure poetry is a ’power that makes’ (p.782), and which ”brings forth
new good, new beauty from the old'' (p.808). The creative aspect of poetry is emphasized in order to justify a reinterpretation of the original tragedy by Euripides. In Aristophanes' Apology Donald Smalley points out that Browning's 'exposition of the poetic principles of Euripides represented in large part a justification of his own principles as a poet'.¹ Smalley further says: 'it is clear that Browning believed with his Euripides that realism is justifiable only when it searches for a spiritual 'truth' beneath all coarseness and bestiality.'² In Fifine at the Fair art becomes a means by which the artist reconstructs the whole and primal truths out of the fragments afforded by life (XLIV). Don Juan asserts: '...Art is my evidence/ That something was, is, might be; but no more thing itself,/ Than flame is fuel' (XLI). The transfiguring, resuscitating power of the artistic imagination becomes a key theme in Don Juan's argument. In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country Browning as narrator comments on the necessity for poetry to look beyond the bare facts to the psychological truth:

2. Ibid., p.833.
Along with every act—and speech is act—
There go, a multitude impalpable
To the ordinary human faculty,
The thoughts which gave the act significance.
Who is a poet needs must apprehend
Alike both speech and thoughts which prompt to speak.
Part these, and thought withdraws to poetry:
Speech is reported in the newspaper. (p.412)

Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper: With Other Poems (1876) is the first collection of shorter poems since Dramatis Personae (1864), and DeVane remarks that the volume "must remain a book of great importance to the critic and biographer of Browning, for here the poet speaks more directly than anywhere else in his poetry concerning his own art and his feelings towards it." 3

The title poem repudiates the idea of the artist as reformer:

"Let tongue rest and quiet thy quill be!
Earth is earth and not heaven, and ne'er will be.
Man's work is to labour and leaven
As best he may—earth here with heaven;
'Tis work for work's sake that he's needing:
Let him work on and on as if speeding
Work's end, but not dream of succeeding! (Stanza XXI)

The latter half of the poem castigates the critics who complain of the poet's 'harsh analytics', bad grammar, broken rules, of 'ear, so tough-gristled—/He thought that he sung while he whistled', and above all, of his

obscurity. Browning asserts his right to continue
'whistling and singing' as he chose:

Mine's freehold, by the grace of the grand Lord
Who lets out ground here,—my landlord:
To him I pay quit-rent—devotion;
Nor hence shall I budge...

(XXVII)

This establishment of a personal link between the poet
and God is reminiscent of the poet's relationship with
''our Lord the King'' in ''How It Strikes a Contemporary''.
As regards obscurity, Browning's stand remains unchanged—
complex thoughts demand complex utterance.

In ''At the Mermaid'', ''House'', ''Shop'' and the
''Epilogue'' Browning asserts that the business of the

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4. As early as 1855, Browning was defending himself
against this charge. In a letter to John Ruskin,
he wrote: ''I cannot begin writing poetry till my
imaginary reader has conceded licenses to me which
you demur at altogether. I know that I don't make
out my conception by my language, all poetry being
a putting the infinite within the finite. You would
have me paint it all plain out, which can't be, but
by various artifices, I try to make shift with touches
and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the
conception from me to you. You ought, I think, to
keep pace with the thought tripping from ledge to
ledge of my 'glaciers' as you call them, not stand
poking your alpenstock into the holes and demonstrating
that no foot could have stood there,—suppose it
sprang over there?'' in W.G. Collingwood, Life and
And as late as 1882, he wrote to Edmund Yates of the
''Fifty-years long charge of unintelligibility against
my books.'' Letters, ed. Hood, p.212.

5. In Sordello, obscurity is seen as a matter of language—
''brothers' speech'' (V,635), where nuances of suggestion
and association are conveyed without explicit recourse
to language. In the later period, obscurity is seen
mainly as a matter of complexity of thought.
poet is not with personal expression but with his craft, and that the critical emphasis should be not upon the poet but upon the poetry.

The speaker of 'At the Mermaid' is ostensibly Shakespeare, but the identification between the speaker's views and Browning's own is so complete that it is almost as if Browning himself is the speaker. He asserts that he claims recognition on the basis of his works: 'Mine remains the unproffered soul' (1.28). The poem is also an affirmation of Browning's hopeful view of life, and a re-iteration of the life-after-death theme that recurs so often in the later poetry: 'My sun sets to rise again' (1.80). Linked with his hopes and beliefs is Browning's resentment against his critics that forms the motive force of this volume. Browning must have remembered the critic in Fraser's Magazine, who in his review of Men and Women, wrote of the 'selfish temper and carelessness for the gratification of others which lie at the root of all Mr. Browning's faults'. In 'At the Mermaid', he states his refusal to compromise with his art for the sake of fame:

7. Browning wrote to Isa Blagden on August 19, 1865: 'As I began, so I shall end, taking my own course, pleasing myself or aiming at doing so, and thereby, I hope, pleasing God.' Dearest Isa, ed. McAleer, p.220.
...not to buy your laurel
As last king did, nothing loth.
Tale adorned and pointed moral
Gained him praise and pity both. (ll. 57-60)

Unlike the posturings of certain poets who "sell you cheap their souls for fame" (1.32), he has been true to his own self, "...never once have wished/Death before the day appointed:/Lived and liked, not poohed and pished!" (ll. 126-28). The reference is to poets like Byron who made a parade of their personal emotions. 8 For, as Preyer points out, "he knew that Romantic disillusionment, romantic contempt for normal living, could easily turn into something contemptible, an evasion of moral choices and a striking of attitudes." 9

In this poem, Browning expresses an opinion similar to T.S. Eliot's who says in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion...it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality." 10 This does not mean that a poet should not have something to say, but that what the poet

8. Cf. Browning's letter to Miss Anne Egerton Smith, August 16, 1875: "I never said or wrote a word against or about Byron's poetry or power in my life; but I did say, that, if he were in earnest and preferred being with the sea to associating with mankind, he would do well to stay with the sea's population; thereby simply taking him at his word, had it been honest—whereas it was altogether dishonest, seeing that nobody cared so much about the opinions of mankind and deferred to them, as he who was thus posturing and pretending to despise them." Letters, ed. Hood, p. 159.

has to say should be objectified, and that it is with
the shape and character of this object that the critic
should properly be concerned.

In "House" Browning asserts: "Outside should
suffice for evidence." (1.33) The poem is not only
a plea for personal privacy, it maintains that the
highest art is impersonal. Though DeVane is of the
opinion that Browning's view as expressed in "House"
"agrees so little with his practice, especially in his
apprentice years and again in his decline". It must
be noted that what Browning set himself against is the
uninhibited exposure of personal feelings, and not
objectified (however perfunctorily) affirmation of
beliefs that would have some value for mankind in
genral. Browning's contempt is reserved, not for
those who revealed themselves through their poetry,
but for those who made of poetry a confessional rather
than a dramatic art. To Browning this meant all the
difference between a concern for the self and its own
point of view, and the higher concern of fitting the
infinite into the finite.

In "Shop" we have the flesh-spirit dichotomy
that forms the base of much of the poetry of the later

period. It is Browning's imaginative reconstruction of the theme, "Man lives not by bread alone":

Because a man has shop to mind
In time and place, since flesh must live,
Needs spirit lack all life behind,
All stray thoughts, fancies fugitive,
All loves except what trade can give?  

(11.100-5)

The poet stresses the need for man's imaginative vision in order to give life to his everyday world. He also criticizes the poet whose "shop" is all his "house"—who exposes his personal affairs to the public view for cheap popularity. The poem is an attack on those who treat their vocation as a "trade" merely, and neglect its essential function as a nourisher of the spirit. Thus Andrea's art becomes a commodity to be traded in, because he has perverted the values of the spirit.

In the "Epilogue", Browning uses an extended simile of poetry (and, by implication, truth) as wine, and contrasts its opposing qualities "stark strength" and "sheer sweet". The analogy had previously been used in "Popularity", where the true poet praises God: "Others give best at first, but Thou/forever set'st our table praising/Keep'st the good wine till now" (11.18-20). In Fifine at the Fair, when Don Juan comes to accept the permanence of truth, inspite of its changing forms, the realization to him is "'No fresh and frothy draught, but
liquor on the lees,/Strong, savage and sincere'" (CXIII).

Later, in the Prologue to the *Parleyings*, wine is again linked to the poetic imagination. In this poem, Browning brings together the two central themes of this volume by affirming that in poetry "Mighty and mellow are never mixed" (1.106) and also arraigning his critics who, while ostensibly lauding Shakespeare and Milton, have essentially a very superficial acquaintance with their works. Browning angrily contends that the critics will not see diamonds even if they are there in plenty. His poetry is made from "Man's thoughts, and loves and hates!" (1.153) and he refuses to sweeten it with 'cowslips' to please his audience. In fact, he says, the ingratitude of these critics will not allow them to appreciate him even if he made 'wine of the memories/Which leave as bare as a churchyard tomb/My meadow, late all bloom? (11.198-200).

In the poems of the *Pacchiarotto* volume Browning refuses to pander to the current demand for conventional poetry

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12. The idea of the obtuseness of the critics had found expression in *Sordello*. Sordello learns 'to live in weakness as in strength'. Even when he gave the best of himself, wrotes dramas and adopted the language of common speech for greater effect, Naddo, the busybody, the mouthpiece of the crowd, charged him with lack of originality on the ground that he gave them only what they could understand (II, 775-867).
celebrating conventional notions of beauty, great ideas or significant actions. All these views are crystallized in the poetry of his later period.

In The Two Poets of Croisic (1878) the attempt at factual narration is replaced towards the end by the poet's own thoughts about matters suggested by the main body of the poem. Browning's desire to explore the nature of poetic creation and poetic fame underlies the satiric intention of the poem. The tale of Rene Gentilhomme, the shoddy rhymester, whose heavensent moment of inspiration changed the course of his career, leads Browning to a consideration of the nature of poetic inspiration. The moment of inspiration, fleeting though precious, is the ultimate truth. Its transforming power leaves the common poetaster a changed man for the moment, "'luminous, erect,/Triumphant, an emancipated slave'" (XLI). The moment is described in terms of light and fire, "'burning moment', "'bright escape of soul'. Browning's purpose becomes more explicit in Stanza LIX and in the following stanzas, in which he speculates on the kind of attitude to life a man would have after such a visitation:

Well, I care--intimately care to have Experience how a human creature felt In after-life, who bore the burden grave Of certainly believing God had dealt For once directly with him: (LIX)
His conclusion is that "we must play the pageant out, observe/The tourney regulations", (LXIII). This idea will receive greater attention in the "Parleying with Christopher Smart".

In The Ring and the Book the poetic imagination, often divinely inspired, was the fancy that made "dead" fact come alive. In The Two Poets of Croisic, however, Browning hastens to insist that truth (the fact) is the "gold", and that

...All fume and fret
Of artistry beyond this point pursued
Brings out another sort of burnish: yet
Always the ingot has its very own
Value, a sparkle struck from truth alone. (CLII)

Art, now, becomes a means of highlighting the inherent significance of facts. The poet does not invest facts with truth; his task is rather to give new eyes to people by which they might pierce beneath the surface impressions to the truth within. 13

The question of poetic fame was one that concerned Browning intensely. 14 In The Ring and The Book we have

13. In Paracelsus, the hero asserts that truth is an "imprisoned splendour" (I, 735) which is within man; but while this becomes a source of egotism for Paracelsus Browning's stress is always on the altruistic motives of art
14. In Sordello Browning dramatized the twin impulses within the poet—his desire as a human being to secure fame by offering what the public want—the obvious and the commonplace, and his aim as a poet to cling to the truth at all costs. "Pictor Ignotus" and "The Grammarian's Funeral" also treat the problem of fame.
his rueful summary of his relationship to his reading public, (I, 1378-86). In Le Saisiasz the issue of fame becomes more urgent, with Browning wishing for the fame of a Byron or a Rousseau, so as to set off their pessimism with his own 'brand flamboyant', his message of hope. But fame, though desirable, is not to be acquired at the expense of ideals. The career of the second poet of Croisic is satirized because its success is based on cunning. Sordello's fault had been that he loved song's results, not song. In Fifine at the Fair Browning speaks through Don Juan of art as ''the love of loving, rage/Of knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things/For truth's sake'' (XLIV). The creation of poetry is its own reward in so far as the process repeats the divine act of creation.

Browning further affirms that the poet who lives with joy (''led a happy life'') is to be regarded as the best poet, for pessimism is an acknowledgement of defeat.\(^{15}\) The joyful poet is not necessarily one who feels, sees or suffers less. His joy, rather, gives him the strength to gain mastery over sorrow. This is Browning's view of his optimism. Further on, he awards the palm to the poet who dares, who chooses the ''vivid horse/Whose neck God clothed with thunder'' (CLIX) in preference to ''the steer/Sluggish

and safe'" (CLIX). Stanza CLVIII of The Two Poets of Croisic is among the more important assertions about the nature of Browning's own poetry and is particularly relevant to the later poetry in general:

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

This passage is Browning's answer to those who accused him of being unaware of disharmonies in existence. It also firmly bases poetry on earthly experience. Even the divinely inspired poet cannot spurn the finite.

The '"Epilogue' to Dramatic Idylls, Second Series, "Touch Him Ne'er So Lightly'' is, in DeVane's opinion, '"one of the most important of his later utterances upon the function of the poet and of poetry.'" The poem repudiates the notion of an overflow of lyrical emotion as most expressive of a '"poet-soul'". He describes, rather, the rigours of the poet's task, and the ruggedness of his nature. If he produces no flowers, the forbidding rocks of his poetry nurture the pine-seeds of truth'. Browning thus champions the cause of the prophet-poet rather than the lyric poet and indirectly

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justifies his poetry as he had done earlier in the 'Epilogue' to the Pacchiarotto volume.

The problem of encompassing the infinite within the finite is Browning's major preoccupation as a poet and as a theorist of poetry. In his later poetry Browning evolves a theory of imagination that both aesthetically and morally resolves this problem.

The Prologue and the Epilogue to the Parleyings create overtly dramatic situations, but the main speaker in each is used quite directly as a spokesman for the poet's own views. There is no ironic distancing of the speaker's point of view as in the dramatic monologue, so that through Apollo and Fust, the poet appears speak in his own voice on the role of the imagination in life.

The contention of the Fates, in the Prologue, that happiness in life is an illusion is a major idea that Browning would refute in the 'Parleying with Mandeville'. Evil is without doubt a reality. And yet, as Apollo argues, there is the possibility that there is in man 'Some power in himself, some compensative law' (p.686). This power, as the Prologue goes on to show, is the power of the imagination symbolized by the wine that Apollo offers to the three sisters. The Fates mockingly hold that though
"Life mimics the sun" (p.686), the reality proves to be nothing more than "an ice-ball disguised as a fire-orb" (p.686). In "Mandeville" Browning would show that it was just this mimicry that helped man to "infer immensity" (p.695), and though good and evil were blent in life, there was always the hope, made possible, once again, by the imaginative faculty, that good would eventually triumph. For even the Fates are forced to admit that good and evil are not fixed entities—"Worst, best/Change hues of a sudden" (p.690). It is the imagination that compounds "Fancy with fact" so that the "lost secret is found" (p.689). The worth and beauty of human life is no illusion because of the infinite possibilities of the human spirit. Not "What is", but "What may be" is man's essential (p.689). Defeat in this life means triumph in the next; and death is not extinction but something that "completes living, shows life in its truth." (p.690).

Since Browning views the poet as a leader and a teacher of men, the importance of the kind of creative imagination that the Prologue describes for the poet is axiomatic.
In the "Parleying with Christopher Smart" Browning focuses his attention once again on a poet in order to clarify his ideas on poetry and the poetic imagination. As Roma A. King writes: "Smart's one triumph illustrates the means of apprehension (intuitive, imaginative) and of communication (symbolic, artistic) by which man grapples with reality."¹⁷

The parleying once again discusses the problem of the relationship between the infinite and the finite. Since it is only rarely that the whole truth can be comprehended in a single flash of vision, the ambitious attempt to understand the infinite while impatiently rejecting the particular, can only lead to futility.¹⁸

Browning's insistent highlighting of the uniqueness, almost miraculous nature of Smart's experience becomes a necessary device for the elaboration of his argument. Significantly, Smart's visionary moment is defined in terms of fire and flame—"A fire-ball wrapping flesh and spirit both/In conflagration." (V) It was during this transfiguring moment that the poet

¹⁸. Browning had earlier explored the problem in Paracelsus where the hero "attains" only when he comes to realize that absolutes cannot be achieved by man in his imperfect, finite state of being, and that man must gracefully accept his limitations. Cf. V, 889-898.
...pierced the screen
'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul--
Left no fine film-flake on the naked coal
Live from the censer—shapely or uncouth,
Fire suffused through and through, one blaze of truth
Undeadened by a lie...

(VI)

But this is patently a rare visitation. More often than not, man has to come to terms with the limitations of his human perspective. Nevertheless, Smart's experience can set an example for other poets wishing to embody the truth:

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

(VII)

Acknowledging the strengths and beauties of the natural world are a step towards the apprehension of the infinite being. Yet even here, the complexities inherent in the case are embodied in a poet like Aprile, of whom W.O. Raymond says: 'He yearns to reveal and transfigure the beauty of the natural world by reclothing it in the glorious forms of art. Thus his works would remain in the sight of all as pledges of the love which exists between himself and the beautiful. But desiring to grasp the whole sum and absolute essence of beauty, he cannot rest with any finite manifestation of it. Dazzled by his visions of the infinite, the poet is in danger of dissipating truths in dreams and abstractions.'

Sordello had termed the concept of the Maker-See, i.e. the poet's progress from the stage of merely seeing and telling what he sees to the highest stage in which he can "Impart the gift of seeing to the rest" (III, 868). Such poetry will be of the synthesist type—a representation not only of the inner psychological import of external objects but of its transcendental implications.

The idea is resuscitated in the present parleying. The true poet's task is to point out hitherto unsuspected beauties on earth and to trace a primal Design operating through all:

For Man to know by,—Man who, now—the same
As erst in Eden, needs that all he sees
Be named him ere he note by what degrees
Of strength and beauty to its end Design
Ever thus operates— (VII)

It is significant that this assertion of the functions of the poet resembles Browning's description of the subjective poet in his Essay on Shelley as one who "lifts his fellows with their half-apprehensions, up to his own sphere, by intensifying the import of details and rounding the general meaning."21

Browning's conception of poetry with a purpose was not merely a feature of his later poetic development, as

is revealed by a letter he wrote to Ruskin in 1855: "It poetry is all teaching, and the people hate to be taught.... A poet's affair is with God, to whom he is accountable and of whom is his reward." To Carlyle's definition of the true poet as "ever a Seer, whose eye has been gifted to discern the godlike mystery of God's Universe", Browning would add that the true poet's function is to convey his spiritual comprehension, to "'rule' and not merely to 'please'. It is essentially a religious undertaking.

Moreover, the poet must convey his awareness of the infinite through the finite. Will, Power and Love, the three attributes of God, can be discerned not just through soul-shaking visions, but through their finite manifestations on earth itself. Scrutinizing the rose before embarking on an investigation of the meteor's birth is the correct method for the poet to adopt. Like Paracelsus, who ultimately finds in the smallest "'chance-sown plant'" the laws of the spiritual world, man must accept the finite as the defining human quality. As Browning puts it in the "'Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville': "'In little, light, warmth, life are blessed—/Which, in the large, who sees to bless?'" (XI). Through the poet's imaginative,

23. Quoted in Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p.6 (footnote).
symbolic, finite representation of the infinite, man can gain his conception of the formless and the illimitable. Philip Drew sums up Browning's viewpoint aptly: "Browning is here repudiating two distinct types of poetry. The first is the kind that merely entertains, which does no more than particularize the wonders of the world. This is inadequate because it offers no guidance to mankind: it pleases simply, whereas the poet's 'function is to rule'. He rejects also the kind of poetry, at present even more popular, which offers 'the end ere the beginning', that is, pretends to teach the inmost secrets of the universe without having studied things as they are. In between lies the recommended middle way, which is to proceed from a limited but adequate observation of the earth step by step to such general conclusions about universal laws as are possible in a man's lifetime.'\(^\text{24}\)

The "Parleying with Christopher Smart" is thus not only a resume of Browning's characteristic conceptions of poetry. It is also a refutation of current notions of the Aesthetic School of poetry. That particular school was in revolt against the idea that art was linked with morals. To Swinburne, who, as DeVane has pointed out,\(^\text{25}\) was the

\(^{25}\) DeVane, Handbook, p.508.
main target of Browning's attack, the pursuit of beauty and the pursuit of uninhibited experience was an end in itself. In fact Browning would have found totally alien Swinburne's idea (as described by Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony*) that "God smites equally the just and the unjust, and perhaps the former rather more than the latter; also the other idea that pain and death are everywhere in Nature, that crime is Nature's law; and the conception of God as a Being of supreme wickedness ('the supreme evil, God') and the revolt of man against the divinity he disowns." The Aesthetic School urged the artist to experience sin and corruption; it exalted immediate, personal, sensory emotion, often borrowed poetic experience from the visual sense alone. All this must have seemed to Browning to be an abrogation of poetic responsibility. To Browning the mere "raw material" of poetry without the "spiritual comprehension" behind was unthinkable. In "Saul" he had shown David as "fashioner" informing Saul of the physical truth, and then, in the higher role of "seer", of spiritual truth.

The "Parleying with Smart" affirms Browning's belief in the importance of the poet's role as a link between the temporal and the spiritual.²⁷ It also asserts that

²⁷. Cf. Browning's description of the subjective poet: "...he digs where he stands--preferring to seek them in his own soul, as the nearest reflex of that absolute, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak." *Essay on Shelley*, Op. Cit., p.38.
spiritual reality is not very far away from our world of ordinary perceptions. God's immanence is evident in nature, and more directly, within man himself if he has but eyes to see.

The Epilogue to the Parleyings carries to a conclusion the informing idea of the Parleyings, that of the imagination as an aid to truth. "Truth in God" says Fust, so that the pursuit of truth by means of the imaginative faculty becomes man's means of salvation. This is the ultimate message of the Parleyings. Fust's imaginative creation (the printing press) has linked fancy with fact. The toil leaves him a transformed man: "...Creation/Revealed me no object, from insect to Man,/But bore thy hand's impress: earth glowed with salvation" (p.738). Thus Fust joins the ranks of the men who receive the highest commendation in the Parleyings, those who see imaginatively and acknowledge the hand of God in their creations, who humbly recognize that it is the Creator himself who "'concedest a spark/Of thy spheric perfection to earth's transitory/Existences!'" (p.740).

The Epilogue further embodies a recurrent theme in the Parleyings—the impossibility of gaining complete knowledge of the infinite. Yet, the enlargement of the consciousness brought about by the imagination leads the
artist to strive for higher goals: "So approximates
Man—Thee, who reachable not, / Hast formed him to yearningly
follow Thy whole/Sole and single omniscience!" (p.741).
One gets an idea of the closeness of the relationship
between Browning's moral and aesthetic theories.

The 'Prologue' to Asolando records the change that
has come with maturity in the poet's vision. It is
Browning's answer to the sense of loss recorded in
Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' and an affirmation of
his belief in the beneficent effects of change. For if
man has lost one way of seeing life—the fanciful vision,
"falsehood's fancy-haze"(l.20), that embued with "ruby,
emerald, chrysopras,/Each object"(ll.13-14), he has
attained to another and truer vision:

The very naked thing?—so clear
That, when you had the chance to gaze,
You found its inmost self appear
Through outer seeming—truth ablaze. (ll.16-19)

The poem is a reiteration of Browning's favourite theme
as expressed earlier in the 'Parleying with Gerard de
Lairesse'—facts are superior to fancies. The Biblical
reference to the burning bush gives a religious dimension
and resonance to a poem essentially concerned with poetic
vision, and emphasizes the essential quality of Browning's
poems—their awareness of a loving, powerful Divine Being
in the universe. It also marks the culmination of Browning's poetic progress from the poetry of subjective experience through dramatic poetry to a poetry where the subjective and the objective are fused in the interests of spiritual truth. It is a progress recorded as early as Sordello where the ascent to the highest level of perception begins with beauty and delight for its own sake and ends when the various aspects of beauty are seen as a unity representing the sum of all beauty—God.

"Development" (Asolando) records Browning's reminiscence of his father, who could transform even the most formidable subject into a delightful concoction of comic rhymes and games, making it vividly alive and interesting. It records how the poet's father not only introduced him to the story of the Iliad by means of a game, but, in the words of Irvine and Honan, "softened Homer's Greek by beginning with Pope's Iliad, encouraging Robert to get the Iliad by heart before mastering the original, as he did at the age of twelve." It also marks the culminating stage in Browning's continued interest in the role of fact and fancy in poetry. The poem softens Browning's own contention in the Prologue to Asolando as to the superiority of facts over fancy. As in "A Death

[28. The Book, the Ring, and the Poet, p.6]
in the Desert" he asserts the necessity of myths and
cancies at the undeveloped stages of man's perceptions,
for it is by their means that man can attain to the
awareness of truth that would otherwise be beyond his
comprehension. But as in the image of the ring in
The Ring and the Book where fancy is needed to temper
the "gold" of fact till it is able to "take its own
part as truth should,/Sufficient, self-sustaining" (I, 373-74)
so in this poem, fancy is but an aid to fact till truth
is firmly perceived by the mind—" in my heart of hearts/
And soul of souls, fact's essence freed and fixed/From
accidental fancy's guardian sheath" (11. 78-80). Clyde de L.
Ryals sums up thus: "During the course of his development,
he comes to realize that 'facts' as well as myths are but
provisional constructs never to be taken as truth itself
alone since, as the Pope in The Ring and the Book pointed
out, truth is always in advance of any formulation of it."

It is interesting to trace the changing connotations
of the concepts of 'fact' and 'fancy' through Browning's
later poetic theory. In The Ring and the Book fact is the
untempered gold that needs fancy, the poetic imagination,

to transform it. Fancy here is creative: "'I fuse my live soul and that inert stuff,/Before attempting smithcraft,'" (I, 469-70).

In *La Saisiaz* fancy assumes the nature of conjecture and surmise as opposed to the facts provided by reason. But these concepts, initially seen as opposites become, as the poem progresses, to be twin adjuncts in the process of belief. Both fact and fancy are supplemented by a superior force—hope.

In *Fifine at the Fair* Don Juan opposes fancy and truth, the former being "'Mere/Illusion'" (XXVI). Yet, in the idea of the seeing soul he comes to giving fancy the same imaginative, creative force that Browning gives it in the ring analogy in *The Ring and the Book*: "'And naught i' the world, which, save for soul that sees, inert/Was, is, and would be ever,—stuff for transmut-ing,—'" (*Fifine at the Fair*, LV).

In *The Two Poets of Croisic* we see the beginning of the process by which Browning in his later poetry came more to insist on the superiority of fact over fancy:

But truth, truth, that's the gold! and all the good I find in fancy is, it serves to set Gold's inmost glint free, gold which comes up rude And rayless from the mine.

(CLII)
In Ferishtah's Fancies fancy is once again equated with illusion:

When shall we rest upon the thing itself
Not on its semblance?—Soul—too weak, forsooth,
To cope with fact—wants fiction everywhere!
Mine tires of falsehood: truth at any cost!

("A Bean-Stripe", ll. 292-95)

Ferishtah is of the opinion that the facts of our experience are sufficient to enable us to infer the absolute truth.

In the "Parleying with Mandeville" fancy once again becomes the scapegoat whose soaring visions, because unrealizable on earth, lead men to pessimism and despair. While earlier fancy had been a means of man's communion with the infinite, it is now explicitly rejected: "Abjure each fond attempt to represent/The formless, the illimitable!" (VI). Browning now advocates the truth that can be apprehended through finite manifestations of fact. Nevertheless, in place of fancy Browning brings in something very like it, the myth or the symbol as the earthly representation of the divine. As in the Prologue to the Parleyings poetic imagination is the link between fancy and fact.

In the "Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse" the issue of fact and fancy is stated unequivocally. Referring to the decorative mythologizing of Greek art, Browning states his modern approach:
Oh, we can fancy too! but somehow fact
Has got to—say, not so much push aside
Fancy, as to declare its place supplied
By fact unseen but no less fact the same,
Which mind bids sense accept. (VI)

In the 'Prologue' to Asolando fact and fancy are sharply
separated, the one representing truth, the other falsehood;
but in 'Development', finally, the two come together
again as indispensable aids for the apprehension of truth.

We may note in passing the striking similarity of
 Browning's views on the imagination with that of Coleridge,
who wrote: "'The primary Imagination I hold to be the
living power and the prime Agent of all human perception,
and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act
of creation in the infinite I Am.'" It is in Coleridge's
'Dejection: An Ode' that we have the lines: "'Ah! from
the soul itself must issue forth/A light, a glory, a fair
luminous cloud/Enveloping the Earth'" (IV, 53-55). Much
of the Parleyings deals with men from whom this light did
issue forth, and in contrast with their opponents,
detractors or anti-types in whom this light has been
deadened by hyper-intellectualization. In fact Coleridge's
account of the aesthetic reconciliation wrought by the

30. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIII. Quoted
in William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, Literary
Criticism: A Short History, 1957 (Second Indian Reprint,
imagination—"Imagination...reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities...the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and of freshness, with the old and familiar objects"—forms the base of all the ideas presented in the Parleyings. Ultimately, the reconciliation of opposites includes another and more complex pair (and one which engaged Browning most intimately), the inner human spirit and the outer transcendent or supernatural entity.

In the "Parleying with Christopher Smart" Browning's description of the poet's functions had religious overtones. The poet's symbolic representation of the beauties of the earth turns men's eyes to the presence of a Design in the universe. But Browning saw all artists, whether poets or painters, attempting to join the infinite to the finite. In the "Parleying with Francis Purini" he chooses a painter to parley with, one who feels that "art is a natural accompaniment to his priestly calling, because in both he saw himself fulfilling religious functions."32

The poem is the same multi-layered composition as the other parleyings, encompassing a juxtaposition of

32 Clyde de L.Ryals, Browning's Later Poetry, p.217.
two images of Furini's character, Browning's and Baldinucci's, leading to a defence of the nude in art and a tirade against the Darwinian Evolutionists. In the first part, Browning reiterates a theme presented earlier in 'Fra Lippo Lippi' and again in the 'Parleying with Smart'--the artist as communicator who gives eyes to people to look into the significance of reality.

The conflict presented in the poem in once again between a sterile, narrow-minded conception of art, and a dynamic one that deals with the actual in order to derive meaning and significance from it. Against the kind of people like the prior in Pra Lippo Lippi, who protests:

...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. (11.178-83)

Browning sets a painter-priest who believes in the significance of the flesh. The idea is consistent with Browning's life-long belief in the physical and the finite as the pathway to the spiritual and the infinite, the former being no less important than the latter. In the present poem, the apex of 'each rendered loveliness' lies in

...Art's endeavour to express
Heaven's most consummate of achievements, bless
Earth by a semblance of the seal God set
On woman his supremest work. (III)
By using the flesh to illuminate soul, the true artist sees meaning in what is beautiful in the world. This is valuable to other men, who are brought by art to see what there is inherent in the world of nature all along, but invisible to them. Art becomes the means whereby the essentials are separated from the outward shows:

Where else the uninstructed ones too sure
Would take all outside beauty—film that's furled
About a star—for the star's self .... (V)

This idea had earlier been expressed in "Fra Lippo Lippi":

... 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. (11. 300-306)

The parleying places a more explicit emphasis on the truth that is the essential centre of all beauty. The true artists are those who "Have the grace to see Thy purpose, strength to mar/Thy work by no admixture of their own,--Limn truth not falsehood," (VII).

Browning's conception of the union of the body and the soul is symbolized in the poem through the figure of Andromeda. As Douglas Bush points out: "He is not now, as in Pauline, mainly content with romantic picture-making... and Andromeda is not simply a beautiful girl rescued by a
heroic champion. Her body is the work of God which the artist can see and make others see.'

33 Art becomes the means whereby man may render gratitude to God. It is also a repetition in finite terms of God's creative acts: "(Man, poor elf,/Striving to match the finger-mark of Him/The immeasurably matchless)" (II). In painting as in poetry, Browning champions realism transformed by the imagination that integrates the world of nature with the world of the spirit.

The "Parleying with Francis Furini" emphasizes the need for apprehending the particulars from one's personal experience as a means of gaining insight into the universal. Browning champions the cause of realism in painting on the assumption that if man was represented exactly as he was, the soul would, of necessity, shine through. In the "Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse" he moves a step further in this proposition by choosing a painter who began as a realist, who felt that the artist should recognize the worth of the "trivial commonplace" (II), who believed that

...Beyond
The ugly actual, lo, on every side
Imagination's limitless domain
Displayed a wealth of wondrous sounds and sights
Ripe to be realized by poet's brain
Acting on painter's brush!

(II)

33 Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry, p. 381.
Yet, with mistaken zeal, this artist became bent on banishing "All except beauty" and rejected the "daily and undignified" for "Fancy's rainbow-birth/Conceived 'mid clouds in Greece" (IV).

In contrast Browning presents his own temperament, content with "hard, fast wide-awake/Having and holding nature for the sake/Of nature only" (V). He describes himself as one "who, bee-like, sate sense with the simply true,/Nor seek to heighten that sufficiency/By help of feignings proper to the page" (V).

The parleying thus becomes an assessment of two modes of poetic practice and the functioning of two opposed forms of the poetic imagination—the imagination that seeks to heighten reality by decorating it with myth, and the imagination that seeks to express reality by looking deep into its psychological truth. In effect, it is the contrast between the Hellenic and the "modern" psychological approach to art.

Browning seeks to find an explanation for the need to heighten and add to reality. It is probably based, he says, on the fact that sense "Cannot content itself with outward things,/Here beauty: soul must needs know whence there springs—/How and why—what sense but loves" (V). This particular desire Browning finds entirely legitimate.
It is merely an indication of the chasm that exists between heaven and earth, the infinite and the finite. What he rejects is the "Fancy" which is the product of the "freakish brain" (VI). This kind of fanciful mythologizing merely distorts the truth with its trappings of "Joves and Junos, nymphs and satyrs" (V). One remembers Browning’s vindication of the poetry of Euripides in Aristophanes’ Apology. Euripides refused to encircle himself "with poetic atmosphere" (p.838) or to live apart from the unpleasant realities of the world. Aristophanes comments: "...the real he wants, not falsehood,—truth alone he seeks, /Truth, for all beauty! Beauty, in all truth—" (p.838). Beauty is not something to be added to truth, but inherent in it.

In 'Laisses' too, Browning advocates a different kind of fancy, an imaginative realism which presents "fact unseen, but no less fact the same,/Which mind bids sense accept" (VI). He upholds the psychological art that reveals the inner meaning without having recourse to mythological apparatus. Thus, as Langbaum puts it, "Browning defined his realism precisely through opposition to myths as overt subject-matter."34 A higher reality can be made manifest if the artist faithfully reproduces

the world of his perceptions and tries to illuminate its significance by using the double vision mentioned in the parleying, but not by linking the outward world to some imagined, outworn concepts of value. 35

In his earlier poetry Browning had praised those artists who had achieved in their work a fusion of the flesh and the spirit, the real and the ideal. For what may technically be perfect may, nevertheless, like Andrea's paintings, lack soul. What really matters is the insight that transforms, that enables the artist to break through the boundaries of the here and now to participate in the limitlessness of eternity. This is what Browning means by his assertion: "If we no longer see as you of old,/'T is we see deeper...Progress for the bold,/You saw the body,

35. Browning's idea that instead of employing fanciful tales or antiquated myths the poet should draw upon the actual material of the times which alone can furnish material for the presentation of valid truths, is, reminiscent of Carlyle's: "The ordinary poet, like the ordinary man, is forever seeking in external circumstances the help which can be found only in himself. In what is familiar and near at hand, he discerns no form or comeliness: home is not poetical but prosaic, it is in some past, distant, conventional heroic world, that poetry resides....Let them be sure that heroic ages and heroic climates can do little for them...

The poet, we imagine, can never have far to seek for a subject: the elements of his art are in him, and around him on every hand; for him the Ideal world is not remote from the Actual, but under it and within it: nay, he is a poet precisely because he can discern it there." (Essay on Burns in Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, London: Chapman and Hall, 1888, 1, 205).
't is the soul we see.'"(VII). Progress implies continued development. In "Old Pictures in Florence" Browning expressed his preference for early Christian art as against Greek art not only on the basis of the realism of the former, but also because of its inherent possibilities for improved excellence:

Today's brief passion limits their range;  
It seethes with the morrow for us and more.  
They are perfect--how else? they shall never change,  
We are faulty--why not? we have time in store.  
(XVI)

Perfection in art is rejected as implying negation. Ultimately, Browning's concept of 'soul' in relation to art is based on the worth of the artistic vision in revealing to man the truth that lies beyond the finite apprehension. Even the most powerful and gorgeous poetry is insignificant if it cannot do this.

The "Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse" closes on a note of renewal as represented by the pattern of death and rebirth in the vegetation cycle. In the "Parleying with Charles Avison" this idea is examined with reference to music and its changing patterns. The parleying is, in fact, the culmination of Browning's characteristic conceptions of music, its functions and its effects. As in Pauline, "A Toccata of Galuppi's", Fifine at the Fair, "the effect of music upon the poet", says DeVane, 'is to people melody
with the figures of ancient men, now dead.' 36 This
linking of the past and the present leads Browning to
a comparative assessment of the two.

In the "Parleying with de Lairesse", too, Browning
had examined the past in the light of present needs and had
found it to be deficient. Greek art, which had reached the
very acme of perfection in the past, was now outworn as
touchstones for modern man, chiefly because of its underlying
pessimism which provided empty answers to man's hopeful,
enquiring spirit. Both these parleying posit change as an
essential feature of the human condition and of art in
particular. In ''Avison'' Browning writes:

... Ah, but such and such
Beliefs of yore seemed inexpugnable
When we attained them! E'en as they, so will
This their successor have the due morn, noon,
Evening and night...

.........................
So will it be with truth that, for the nonce
Styles itself truth perennial: (XII)

In the ''Parleying with De Lairesse'' Browning had asserted:
"Nothing has been which shall not bettered be" (XIII).
In the ''Parleying with Avison'' he propounds the even more
vigorously hopeful belief that while it was given to the
past to ''Nourish truth merely'' it was for the future to
achieve ''Novel creation'' (XIII). If music was the myth

of the inner life, this principle of symbolic transformation represents a fresh fountainhead, a generative force providing fresh motives. Thus the transitoriness of the arts as a repository of truth becomes for Browning not a pessimistic conception, but a hopeful one, for it repeats the pattern of life itself.

The paradoxical idea emerges that while truth remains essentially unchanged, it yet assumes new shapes: "'Truth was at full within thee long ago,/Alive as now it takes what latest shape/May startle thee by its strangeness'"(XIII). This idea had been treated at great length in Fifine at the Fair, surprisingly by means of the imagery of food. Don Juan plays Schumann's Carnival and sees

...how food o' the soul, the stuff that's made
To furnish man with thought and feeling, is purveyed
Substantially the same from age to age, with change
Of the outside only for successive feasters. (XCII)

He comes to realize the inevitability of change in art no less than in nature. Thus we see that in both the parleyings, "'Lairesse'" and "'Avison'" Browning opposes himself to the mythical attitude which, as Langbaum says, "'idealizes the past in order to set it up as a permanent criterion of value'. 37 Myths that had value previously may change

and fade away; but nothing can change the "corolla" of truth that these myths safeguard (XIII), and the essential hopefulness embodied in these truths.

What is needed is the double vision mentioned in "De Lairesse" (V) to apprehend the intrinsic as distinguished from the externals, to feel intuitively the deeper truth beyond the surface impressions. Thus music becomes for Browning the highest art in so far as it not only bridges the gulf between Mind and Soul, as the other arts do, a star" (as he writes in "Abt Vogler", 1.52), musical creation becomes the closest analogue to God's creative act. The other arts produce novelty, not creation:

.....Arts arrange
Dissociate, re-distribute, interchange
Part with part, lengthen, broaden, high or deep
Construct their bravest,—still such pains produce
Change, not creation: simply what lay loose
At first lies firmly after;...

(VIII)

W.O. Raymond remarks: "Music to Browning was always a symbol of the infinite, the art in which, above every other, the soul may aspire towards the spiritual, eternal and divine." 38 In Paracelsus the poet Aprile "To perfect consummate all" (II, 475) rises above poetry to the sphere of music. In "Abt Vogler" painting and poetry are triumphant arts, but art in obedience to laws" (1.47); it is in music that one can see "the finger of God" (1.49).

38. The Infinite Moment, p.51.
Thus for Browning the best art is that which
instinctively apprehends the soul beneath the surface
flesh and acknowledges the hand of God in all artistic
creation. In *La Saisiaz* the term 'soul' had been used
to denote man's knowing faculty. In the 'Parleying with
Avison', however, the 'soul' becomes the feeling faculty
or the non-rational, as Roma A King calls it.39 And art
becomes the means that helps to

... shoot
Liquidity into a mould, --some way
Arrest Soul's evanescent moods, and keep
Unalterably still the forms that leap
To life for once. (VIII)

But if music is the art which embodies the soul's
feelings most exactly, it is also the most evanescent.
This is what makes it all the more precious. In 'Abt
Vogler' the musician's failure to hold on to his trans­
cendental moment is converted into an assertion of
triumphant optimism: 'And what is our failure here but
a triumph's evidence/For the fullness of the days?(11.81-82).
In the 'Parleying with Avison' too, with the awareness
of fleetingness comes the promise of renewal:

...off they steal--
How gently, dawn-doomed phantoms! back come they
Full-blooded with new crimson of broad day--
Passion palpable once more. (VIII)

Unlike the complex, structure of Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha's music (''those spider-webs'', 1.95) which would obliterate ''God's gold'''(1.114) Browning finds in Avison's march-music a ''Truth which endures re-setting'' (XIV). The image of fire is again used to indicate the spiritual implications of this truth:

...Still lives the spark enough
For breath to quicken, run the smouldering ash
Red right through.... (IX)

The unchangeable truth lies in man's ceaseless march forward into the future. But the future does not invalidate the core of truth that resides in the art of the past. To illustrate his point, Browning goes back to recreate what had been created in the past in order to infuse it with fresh meaning and to reveal its essential truth. His imaginative shaping of Avison's March fills the ''vacant sky with stars/Hidden till now''(XV), and becomes a paean to the continuity of human aspirations. Once again, Browning emphasizes the importance of the imagination as a guide to the truth and as a link between the past and the present. The creativity of art--''new good, new beauty, from the old''--as Balaustion says in Balaustion's Adventure is also stressed.
To sum up: Browning in his later period sets himself against the convention by which the criticism of poetry tended to become the criticism of the character and way of life of the poet. He demands that his work be judged by its literary merits alone. He affirms that his poetic make-up is optimistic and joyful rather than pessimistic, not because he is insensitive to realities, but because as a poet he has attained to the larger consciousness; and he explicitly repudiates the romantic pose of disillusionment as unworthy of the high calling of the poet.

Realism in art receives considerable attention in Browning's later pronouncements on art. He rejects sentimentalizing and poeticizing in poetry and decorative mythologizing in both painting and poetry. He affirms that the material for poetry could be found in the ugly as much as in the beautiful, that "Strength and utility charm more than grace" and that beyond the beauty that appeals to the sense is the truth that speaks to the soul.

As regards poetic style, Browning answers the charge of obscurity and harshness with the contention that complex thoughts cannot be couched in mellifluous language. He
opposes the traditionally held assumptions as to the appropriate subject-matter for poetry.

In the importance laid on the imagination as the shaping power in all artistic endeavour we can discern a movement towards a theory that defines the means by which the fusion of the poet's role as fashioner and seer, (as envisaged initially in the Essay on Shelley), takes place. Between the external phenomena that is the sphere of the objective poet and the ultimate view that the subjective poet aspires to, lies the synthesizing faculty of the imagination that controls the material so as to enhance the value of both. The poet's imagination helps him in his symbolic representations, for the symbol' is the embodiment of the infinite within the finite. The symbol thus becomes the via media between the actual and the ideal, the representation in concrete of the most abstract conceptions. Through its use, the objective poet, who reproduces 'things external' and appeals to the 'aggregate human mind' can give depth to his poetry by establishing the relationship between the world and God. On the other hand, the subjective poet who appeals to the 'absolute Divine mind' is enabled to shape his experiences,
which are often inchoate, into intelligible form and
to curb his impulse to reach the truth instantly by
impatiently rejecting the particulars. For the poet
is essentially a communicator, of the strengths and
beauties of this earth as much as of the moral significance
that is to be discerned through them. And the best kind
of communication is achieved through the symbolic method
which uses finite means towards illuminating the infinite.

Though Browning's aesthetic theory holds a high
estimate of the importance of artistic creation, it does
not support a vague loftiness. One thinks of such phrases
occurring through Matthew Arnold's critical writings as
''high seriousness'', the ''noble and profound application
of ideas to life'' and the ''grand style'' that arises
when ''a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with
simplicity and severity a serious subject.''' The contrast
that Browning presents is telling, a contrast particularly
evident in Browning's treatment of Greek myths and legends,
in which he translates his aesthetic theory into practice
and examines the contemporary cult of Hellenism from his
own particular point of view. The following chapter thus
proposes to study those later poems in Browning which
have Greek themes.