CONCLUSION

On October 18, 1862, Browning wrote to Isa Blagden: 
"...life is, as you describe Mr. Landor's dressing gown, 'all the colour washed out of it'—but, with the particular incentives I retain, I hope to fight a good fight and finish my course." ¹ This is expressive of the dual strain in Browning's temperament in his later years, of his awareness, on the one hand, of pain and frustration, and the vigorous resolve, on the other hand, not to be overcome by life's difficulties. While a poet like Matthew Arnold wilted and withdrew in the face of the pressures of existence, Browning was impelled to conduct an exploration in order to discover meaning in life, using all the means at his disposal, intellectual as well as intuitional.

The duality finds expression in all aspects of his later art. As the preceding analysis of the poems has shown, the thought embodied in them veers between the poles of affirmation and doubt. For while Browning held the view that "the world is not to be learned and thrown aside but reverted to and relearned", ² his own course of relearning his world brought with it an accompanying realization of the gap between the ideal that is imagined and the actual that is realized. Poem after poem in the later period records this awareness. On the one hand it leads to satire, when the aberrations from the ideal are

1. Dearest Isa, ed. McAleer, p.160
too glaring to be exculpated, and to an exposure of the casuistry that attempts to bridge the gap solely through the reasoning faculty. Conversely, it leads to an emphasis on love as a means of transcending limitation and as a mediator between the real and the ideal.

When Browning treats the theme of love in his later poetry, there is on the one side an affirmation of its supreme value as the ultimate reality, the idea of love as a bulwark against negation, and of its creative powers in positing the ideal in the real. On the other side, there is a keenly-felt realization of the difficulties that beset love, the fleeting nature of true communion, of time and death as realities that serve to separate lovers in the flesh. Thus Browning stresses the need for accepting love in its human, physical aspect (with its imperfections and partial fulfilsments) as well as its spiritual aspect embodying completion and perfection.

In his treatment of philosophical questions, Browning emphasizes that God is an essentially unknowable entity and that man's attempts to gain complete knowledge can only lead to frustration. But this does not occasion despair, for Browning presents a two-fold way of coming to terms with this limitation: the exercise of love, which repeats God's love on earth and through which the ideal may be discerned in the real; and the exercise of the imagination, in which
the symbolic method is used to encompass the infinite within the finite. Thus belief, for Browning, becomes an intuitive process, based on the facts of personal experience, whose validity lies in its response to personal needs.

In the face of his awareness of flux, change and dissolution, Browning found hope in the creative capacities of man's imagination. The importance of the imagination for the poets and painters is particularly stressed. The imagination allows them to view themselves as part of an evolving tradition, but also to cut across the superficial accretions of that tradition to its central core of truth and to shape it anew in a more meaningful way. Browning's own imaginative rendering of Greek myths and legends is an illustration of this principle. It is seen as particularly necessary to the artist in his role as interpreter of the higher reality that he envisions. As Browning demonstrates in the Parleyings, symbolic art is the appropriate vehicle for the imaginative experience, in that it represents a coalescence of the duality that is the artist's concern to resolve. This suggests his affinities with romanticism, which in the words of Robert Langbaum, is "both idealistic and realistic, in that it conceives of the ideal as existing only in conjunction with the real and the real as existing
only in conjunction with the ideal. The two are brought into conjunction only in the act of perception when the higher or imaginative rationality brings the ideal into the real by penetrating the external world as a way of knowing both itself and the external world. "

In Browning's later poetry, whether it deals with philosophic questions, love art or the everyday business of living, the imagination becomes the shaping power whereby man is impelled through his personal experience towards self-realization, self-discovery and self-development.

Nevertheless, as we have seen in our study of the poems, Browning presents his affirmations, not in a positive and authoritarian manner, but in terms of a "sustained query." In La Saisiaz he explicitly rejects the passive acceptance of formulated beliefs, and in the "Epilogue" to Ferishtah's Fancies throws doubt on the concept of absolute truth. Thus it is not so much that "the answer of goodness and greatness is dying away" in the later poetry, but that Browning refuses to provide any answers that encourage inert acquiescence. If, in a sense, Browning may be called a Romantic—that is, in his assertion of the importance of the self as a creator of value, he may also be seen as a modern, keenly aware of

3. The Poetry Of Experience, p.16.
ambiguity, uncertainty and impermanence. Few poems embody this aspect of his mind as subtly as Fifine at the Fair does. This realization of the relativity of points of view, of the subjective nature of all apprehensions and of the multiplicity of reality leads Browning to the view that there is no one truth that can be held valid for all. Truth is to be evolved by each one out of his own experience in response to his own needs.

This attitude is reflected in the longer poems of this period (e.g. Red Cotton Night-Cap Country) where the concern is not just with a point of view, but with the manifold forces that operate within that view, thus creating multiple levels of significance. The aim is to evoke the 'feel' of an experience in much the same way as the novel does, by juxtaposing different perspectives and thereby creating a pattern of meaning. In The Inn Album Browning discards the stance of the omniscient narrator, preferring to let meaning emerge through the inter-play of dramatized situations and consciousnesses. But this is more than a technical device. It is a choice grounded on moral conviction that the right or wrong of any episode depends on our awareness of it in its full intensity, there being no truths apart from those that emerge from experience. This results in an increased use of the narrator as an imaginative participant or imaginative recreator of the
event, to focus our attention not so much on the things that happened as on their meaning. The ultimate emphasis is not on the objective reconstruction of fact but on the subjective, imaginative leap to the truth. The "fancies" are as important as the "facts". In each of the longer narrative poems that we have examined, the truth created by the ordering of significant detail is far above the empirical facts which, in themselves, may be merely sordid, grotesque or mundane.

Browning's art in the later period represents a growth and an advancement, for his wider range allows for a more complex treatment of his subject-matter. From _Balaustion's Adventure_, with its dual interpretation of a single story; _Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau_, where multiple points of view operate more or less simultaneously within a dramatic monologue; _Fifine at the Fair_, in which what has been termed its "shifting perspectives in time and space" are used to explore the protean nature of reality, through the novelistic techniques of _Red Cotton Night-Cap Country_ and _The Inn Album_ to the wide-ranging, three-tiered viewpoints of the _Parleyings_—we may discern an increasing technical maturity.

The form, however, represents the poet's mind in the later period. For while the later poetry has links with the earlier in its realization that man lacks direct access to absolutes and that his resolutions are, of necessity, partial, it goes beyond this awareness in its attempts to chart a way by which man may achieve fulfilment and a sense of unity and wholeness despite his limitations. But Browning appears to have moved beyond the basic assumption of the dramatic monologue, the notion, as J. Hillis Miller puts it, that one "can approach an absolute vision only by attempting to relive, one by one, all the possible attitudes of the human spirit."6 The later poetry takes a wider view, positing further ways of achieving this absolute vision to the extent allowed to man in this world—the process of seeing in each facet of life a multiplicity of aspects which need to be viewed with a corresponding comprehensiveness of vision; and the process of creating value from within one's own self, from the facts of one's own experience operating on the external world. It establishes an inseparable link between the inner self and the outer world, each being necessary for the total experience.

Browning's own pursuit of the total experience continued with unabated vigour through his later years, and produced a body of work which disturbs and challenges conventional assumptions about poetry even as it illuminates and extends the range of poetic experience. It reveals a poet rooted in his age, but also ahead of it in many ways, whose attitudes foreshadow the more radical literary innovations of the coming generation.