CHAPTER - I

PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT IN THE LATER POETRY

With the founding of the Browning Society in 1881 and the publication of Mrs. Sutherland Orr's Handbook (1886), where she noted that "much of Mr. Browning's moral influence lies in the hopeful religious spirit which his works reveal," the adulation of Browning's so-called moral fervour reached its height. Sir Henry Jones in his book *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*, 1891, specifically called Carlyle and Browning "the prophets of our age." In fact, Bernard Shaw was led to remark wryly of the Browning Society—"No matter what paper they had before them, in the discussion they always got into Browning's optimistic theology."

It was this emphasis on Browning as a philosopher, teacher and religious thinker, and the impression created of a hearty, blustering optimist that proved so unpalatable to twentieth century opinion. The general consensus was: "From being a comfort to his century, a stay against confusion, he has become an irritant to ours."

The increasingly direct philosophic burden of the later poetry appeared in response to the atmosphere of religious uncertainty in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It was also the result of Browning's increasing need to voice what he felt was the truth, as evinced by his letter to Isa Blagden, "...but I look on everything in this world with altered eyes, and can no more take interest in anything I see there but the proof of certain great principles, strewn in the booths at a fair."\(^5\) Between the barren intellectual despair of an Empedocles and a passive non-involvement (both totally alien to Browning's nature), lay his own choice of intellectual search supplemented by intuitive guidelines. Having rejected Romantic idealism and historical dogma, Browning in his later poetry embarks on a hard quest to go beyond traditional solutions towards a view that is experiential and not doctrinaire. The basis of this quest is the belief that solutions have to be evolved by man himself in response to his own personal needs.

The philosophy in the later poetry is thus not didacticism, but an exploration of meaning and values. A central feature of these poems is the intellectual

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pattern of enquiry followed by an assertion of the necessity for the imaginative apprehension of truth. This apprehension is of necessity partial, tentative, subjective. It is often neither logical nor consistent, not a formulated idea that dispels the problem, but an advancement in perception. To point out the illogicality of the process and its imprecision, as critics like Henry Jones have done, is to miss the point that Browning is not advocating a system. As Roma A. King points out: "We ask rather if it provides the motive and means by which man may act out his being and achieve a sense of wholeness. Its validity rests upon the quality of life which it makes possible." 

Recent studies, assessing Browning's poetry anew, have found in him "a spirit which ached with longing and uncertainty"  and "a probing, questioning mind" behind the deceptively confident exterior. Poems like La Saisiaz and the ''Epilogue'' to Ferishtah's Fancies reveal Browning's sensitive awareness of the ambiguities and complexities that surround human life. His

8. Ibid, p.22.
resolutions at this later stage waver between incisiveness and an awareness of the tentative nature of all judgements. Even as he presents man's imaginative perception and loving faith as the means of apprehending the infinite and as antidotes to the meaninglessness that is consequent upon man's realization of his imperfections, he stresses its validity for his own self alone. The later Browning is much less strident than he is generally held out to be, and the "thought" in the later poetry is best approached not in terms of theological doctrine but in terms of the felt experience of a man seeking truths by which to live.

In 1877, the year in which La Saisiaz was written, Browning was 65 years old, and the reality of death appears to have impinged on his consciousness with forceful immediacy with the sudden death of his close friend, Miss Annie Egerton Smith, at the chalet 'La Saisiaz' near Geneva, where they were spending a summer holiday together. The emotional upheaval engendered by this event may have set Browning upon a course of elucidation of the problem of personal salvation and life after death. In "Bishop Blougram's Apology", he had voiced his awareness of the uncertainties that underlie human existence with lyrical sincerity:
Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides—
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient idol, on his base again—
The grand Perhaps!

In La Saisiaz, Browning takes up the same problem of
faith and belief and examines it, not as a vehicle to
explore its psychological ramifications in a dramatized
character (as he had done in "An Epistle of Karshish"
and "'Cleon'"), but as a personal question which demands
an agonizing debate of the mind with the self.

Browning's assault on the possibility and nature
of the after-life is characteristically a vigorous one,
devoid of either pessimism or despairing apathy. While
profound grief made Tennyson lyrically poignant, it
makes Browning all the more tortuously argumentative
as he seeks to come to grips with that grief. His
exploration is based on the belief that though man is
a limited finite creature, he holds infinity within
him and demands infinity as an end. Whether this
instinctive demand can have a rational basis is the
problem that engages Browning in La Saisiaz.

9. Cf. In Memoriam, XLIX
Beneath all fancied hopes and fears
Ay me, the sorrow deepens down,
Whose muffled motions blindly drown
The bases of my life in tears.
The dedication lyrically presents the main theme of the poem—death and the consequent release of the soul from earthly bondage. The sudden realization of the barrier between the living and the dead gives intensity to the first part of the poem which describes the climb up Mount Salève, a climb originally planned by Miss Smith, but now attempted by Browning alone. Browning's playful rejoinder to Miss Smith at the end of an initial reconnoitre—'With yourself it rests to have a month of tomorrows like today' (1.58)—becomes painfully ironic in retrospect. With a quick description of the hours of pleasant companionship, Miss Smith's shy nature, the suddenness of her passing away, the first part ends with 'Climbing—here I stand; but you—where?' (1. 139).

The personal mode of utterance in the poem serves to emphasize the depth of the emotion that is at the base of the poem and to off-set the aridity of the analytical argument that forms its structure. Yet, the argument is not always a 'mere grey' one. As Geoffrey Tillotson remarks: "It is always vigorous and better still, always breaking into pictures." 10

One example will suffice to illustrate Browning's firm hold on the concrete even amidst the most abstruse philosophising. Browning talks of the five days since Miss Smith's death:

Five short days, sufficient hardly to entice from its den
Splintered in the slab, this pink perfection of the cyclamen;
Scarce enough to heal and coat with amber gum the aloe-tree's gash,
Bronze the clustered wilding apple, redden the mountain ash:

(ll. 15-18)

The debate in *The Nineteenth Century* conducted on the subject of "The Soul and Future Life", which had been followed with keen interest by both Miss Smith and Browning, provided the basic premises on which Browning grounded his arguments on immortality. DeVane notes that these arguments 'like those of most of the contributors to the Symposium deliberately left on one side the question of the authority of the Christian revelation.' While on the one hand the ideas have a familiar echo from *Easter-Day* (1850) and "A Death in the Desert" (*Dramatis Personae*, 1864), on the other, *La Saisiaz* marks a change in the direction of Browning's thought. For if, as T.J. Collins says, "in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* Browning moves from

the God-centred non-doctrinal Christianity of his early poetry to an equally liberal, but more specifically doctrinal mode of belief,"¹² then La Saisiaz shows him reverting to his former position and adopting a freer, more exploratory point of view.

A recurrent motif in Browning's poetry—the antithesis between Power and Love is in this poem transposed into specific questions, "Does the soul survive the body? Is there God's self, no or yes? (l. 145), and into personal terms—"Was ending once and always, when you died?" (l.173), Browning rigidly imposes control on his emotions by establishing the precise pattern of the question-and-answer debate with which to examine his beliefs. Since he cannot know but can only surmise, he acknowledges his willingness to accept the truth, however unpalatable, as also to accept the fact, as F.E.L. Priestley states it, that "the truth arrived at will be limited by man's finitude: it will be truth for 'truth is truth in each degree', but will not be the ultimate truth as God sees it."¹³

A famous philosopher once said, "Only the feeble resign themselves to final death and substitute some other desire for the longing for personal immortality."¹⁴ For Browning, the first possibility in the face of this longing is the transcendentalist concept of a cosmic continuity. But the idea of a consciousness ceasing to be its unique self is repugnant to the ego. What remains is the feeling that without the certainty of continued existence after death, life itself is a cruel mockery. Having rejected a scientific hypothesis, Browning's next step in his exploration of the 'controverted doctrine' (l. 211) is based on intuitive belief, his personal belief in the 'soul's eclipse' (l. 213) and not the

"Soul's extinction" (l. 214). He finds corroboration in Dante's lines: 'I believe and I declare--/ Certain I am--from this life I pass into a better, there/Where that lady lives of whom enamoured was my soul' (ll. 214-16).

15. Browning's belief in reunion after death, as a sign of both God's Power and Love was a constant one. In a letter to Isa Elagden on December 19, 1864, he wrote: '...I sometimes see a light at the end of this dark tunnel of life, which was one blackness at the beginning. It won't last forever. In many ways I can see with my human eyes why this has been right and good for me--as I never doubted it was for Her--and if we do but re-join any day--the break will be better than forgotten, remembered for its uses.' (Dearest Isa, ed. McAleer, pp.200-01). And again, to a correspondent, on May 11, 1876: 'It is a great thing, the greatest, that a human being should have passed the probation of life, and sum up its experience in a witness to the power and love of God...I see ever more reason to hold by the same hope--and that by no means in ignorance of what has been advanced to the contrary; and for your sake I would wish it to be true that I had so much of 'genius' as to permit the testimony of an especially privileged insight to come in aid of the ordinary argument. For I know I, myself, have been aware of the communication of something more subtle than a ratiocinative process, when the convictions of 'genius' have thrilled my soul to its depths....as when Dante wrote what I will transcribe from my wife's Testament wherein I recorded it fourteen years ago, 'Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another better, where that lady lives of whom my soul was enamoured.' ' (Letters, ed. Hood, pp.171-72).
But this also is temporarily set aside, for
instinctive feeling has no place in Browning's scheme
for this debate. What he sets out to prove has to be
gleaned through rationally acceptable facts. Therefore,
he begins again with two of the very basic facts—the
existence of God and the soul. What lies beyond these
Browning terms "conjecture styled belief" (1.234).
Various arguments in favour of immortality—God is
wise and good, He seems potent, Anyhow we want it—are
propounded and demolished as inapplicable to the
argument because hypothetical. For the poet is
determined to go only on facts, and the one fact
of which he can be absolutely sure is the fact of
his own experience: "Knowledge stands on my own
experience'' (1.273). 16 So now his course of action
is this: "From thine apprehended scheme of things,
deduce/Praise or blame of its contriver'' (11. 288-89).

Browning's own apprehension of the scheme of
things results in a struggle within him between the
intellect searching for the certainties of life on
the basis of reason alone, and the heart intuitively

16. Browning treats this idea again in "'A Pillar at
Sebzevar'' (Ferishtah's Fancies): "Were knowledge
all thy faculty, then God/Must be ignored''
(11.135-36).
reaching out for something which defies logical explanation but which is emotionally a reality.

When he attempts to solve his problem on a purely intellectual level, pushing his speculations as far as they would go, his efforts are doomed to failure. For reason: shows him on all sides a world of evil and despair and darkness, which then confronts him with the dilemma—"...did He lack power or was the will at fault." (l.304). Reason by itself can only lead man to pessimism, for everywhere he is faced with evidence of Power but not of Love. In the poems of the earlier period, this duality is reconciled by recourse to the concept of the Incarnation, through the belief that in sending Christ, His son, to suffer and die for man, God revealed his infinite love. In "A Death in the Desert", John says—"I say, the acknowledgement of God in Christ/Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee/All questions in the earth and out of it!" (11.474-76). In The Ring and the Book, the Pope's response is similar:

This isosceles deficient in the base.
What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
But just the instance which this tale supplies
Of love without a limit?...

(1366-69)
In *La Saisiaz* the solution is sought to be attained through reason alone, but Browning cannot for long maintain this position. In fact, he is led to some jugglery at this point in order to justify his carrying over the argument into the realms of the emotions. Having already prepared the ground by stating that his personal experience is the "fact" on which he bases his assumptions, he can now safely assert that since his own experience corroborates it, he is sure of the presence of love in his heart, and that this love includes hope and faith in the future life, where all the imperfections of this earth are made perfect. The inference is clear that the approach which leads to hope is to be preferred to that which is conducive to despair. Without the certainty of the after-life, the burden of this life is meaningless. It is this certainty that provides him "solid, standing place" amidst the "wash and welter of doubts", as he would say later in the "Parleying with Francis Furini" (section X).
Taking a stand similar to that of the peasant who, when told by the philosopher that there might be God in the form of an universal consciousness but that man's soul might not be immortal, replied, "Then wherefore God?", Browning can find no explanation for the obvious limitations of the goodness, wisdom and power of the Divine Being on earth, if it is not linked with Love in ordaining man immortality after death. He is brought to a point similar to Cleon's situation, a point at which he feels that life would be meaningless without Divine concern and Divine intervention:

Only grant a second life; I acquiesce
In this present life as failure, count misfortune's worst assaults
Triumph, not defeat, assured that loss so much the more exalts
Gain about to be.

(II. 359–62)

17. It is easy to see why critics have expressed dissatisfaction with Browning's line of reasoning. But both the reviewer in The Athenaeum, May 1878, who wrote "'his answer if weak is worse than worthless; for, as Bacon has told us, the worst enemies of truth are its weak defenders'", and the critic in The Saturday Review, June 15, 1878, who wrote--"'the argument is written in a shorthand of crabbed and condensed phrases, which seem designed rather to remind the poet of his own process of reflection than to communicate his conclusions to others'", miss the point that Browning is not aiming at "conclusions" but attempting to enact the process of a personal exploration. Quoted from Browning; The Critical Heritage, p.448 and p.451.
At this point, Browning again changes his vantage-point to view his problem from the other side. He realizes that his belief in the afterlife has not been proved as fact through the rational process, but neither is he willing to acknowledge that it is merely a fancy that he cherishes so dearly. Now, in the face of his dominant need to believe, categorical imperatives become unimportant. The train of his thoughts ranges from doubt to will-to-believe to uncertainty. Only one option remains open. If the realm of fact can offer no hope, then perhaps conjecture and surmise, hitherto rejected, may be made use of. The tension is thus delicately sustained between the inter-play of opposing forces—the intuitive belief and the analytical propensity to discard all but the proven facts.

Following the sudden realization that he has been straying into just the territory that he had stipulated to exclude, Browning once again avows: "Ay, well and best, if fact's self I may force the answer from" (I.396). To this end, ad Clyde de L. Ryals observes, he "reverts to interior dialogue such as characterized Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, dividing
himself into two persons to do battle with each other.'', Fancy is now allowed to take as proven fact the existence of the soul after death. The focus of the argument is thus reversed and at once becomes more complex; for now it is no longer the fact that is to be examined, but the consequences and suppositions that may be drawn from it.

Both Fancy and Reason begin with the accepted premise that 'O'er this life the next presents advantage much and manifold'' (I.428). Reason goes on to argue that if death is so desirable, should not man choose death 'at suspicion of first cloud athwart his sky/Flower's departure, frost's arrival...?' (II.457-58). Fancy then adds another proviso—suicide is prohibited. Reason counters with the philosophy of passive acceptance of life on earth, whether for good or evil, because all shall be righted in the next life. This again is inadmissible, with Fancy demanding that 'man become aware/Life has worth incalculable, every moment that he spends/So much gain or loss for that next life.''' (II.480-82). Reason proceeds to pinpoint the flaw in this line of reasoning. Fixed laws regarding reward and punishment will make man's moral nature of no significance, 'Prior to this announcement, earth was

man's probation place/Liberty of doing evil gave his
good a grace;' (II.495-96). The debate between Fancy
and Reason thus reaches, as Philip Drew points out "an
equally unacceptable terminus." The inference is that
it is not possible for the mind to prove anything with
certainty, for whether one begins with the hypothetical
possibility of the after-life, or whether one accepts
it as fact and then analyzes the effect of this knowledge
on man, all lines of argument end in uncertainty. The
emphasis is on the essential incommunicability of faith.
What remains is hope, but, for Browning, this is once
again a personally held belief: "Hope the arrowy, just
as constant, comes to pierce its gloom, compelled/By a
power and a purpose which, if no one else beheld,/I
behold in life, so—hope!" (II.547-49). Philip Drew
is correct in his conclusion that for Browning "an act
of trust was an essential element of faith: this meant
believing even when the reason withheld its assent."20
Bishop Hougram expresses a similar idea:

All's doubt in me, where's break of faith in this?
It is 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! (II.620-625)

20. Ibid., p.194.
In *La Saisiaz*, Browning expresses his awareness that the conclusion reached is not unassailable, but just about the best that can be done under the circumstances. If the doctrine of hope is but the "Sad summing up of all to say" (I.550), it is nevertheless the only alternative to spiritual despair. This message of despair had been preached by Rousseau: "'All's that's good is gone and past;/Bad and worse grows the present, and worst of all comes last'" (II.566-67); and also by Byron: "'Of all objects found on earth/Man is meanest'' (I.573-74). Men acquiesced because "'the famous bard believed'' (I.577) and also because they found "'significance in fire-works'' (I.605). F.E.L. Priestley rightly points to the irony behind these lines, which highlight Browning's contempt for men who passively accept formulated doctrines without testing them against their own experience. In fact, the whole process in *La Saisiaz* is directed to showing how men may shape their own beliefs in a way that would be true to their individuality. The doctrines of pessimism are entirely opposed to Browning's belief in man's essential nobility and his unceasing progress towards goodness. In a fine frenzy of indignation, he yearns for fame, the "'coruscating marvel''

21. "'A Reading of *La Saisiaz*', p.56.
(1.600), and with a prolonged metaphor suggestive of fire and light and energy—Beacon-like, dazzling, flashed, sparkled, kindled, effulgence, brand flamboyant—he gives voice to his own message as a man who 'at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God' (1.609).

Browning's argument may thus be summed up: that while objective certitude is not possible or even desirable (because it would destroy the freedom of man's ethical choices), still, since believing is first an act of will or desire, since faith in the thing helps to create the thing itself, the final test of truth lies in the consequences which it produces. For Browning himself, it results in a hopeful stance with which to face the world. His final position is thus a return to his initial one of belief in the two unshakeable certainties of self and God. The rest is personal conviction, frankly admitted as such, though none the less important for being based on his own experience. Like Tennyson in In Memoriam he can '... trust, /With faith that comes of self-control, /The truths that never can be proved' (CXXXI).

After the breathless urgency of the passage on fame, the movement of the poem slides down to a muted phase of emotion recollected in tranquillity. The
poet admits his failure in conducting the enquiry on the purely intellectual level. His thoughts are the linked chain whose arguments are valid only until they encounter that unfathomable entity, death. Like a root that is transplanted at a congenial time most suited to its flowering, he has carried the memory of the climb and the thoughts there evoked, to London, where he has "link by link, unravelled any tangle of the chain" (l. 616). But those memories whose awakening would cause greater emotional upheaval still lay dormant within him. The reticence that had briefly been pushed aside in the lyrical assertion of his wife's immortality now descends again to veil his deepest thoughts and emotions about her. His argument as represented by the poem is but the "least part" (l. 623) of his total feelings. We remember Browning's disgust for the mawkish, sentimental poetry of self-revelation. So even in such a personal utterance as La Saisiaz there is the imposition of an intellectual pattern that helps to objectify and distance the emotion, while in its turn, the personal note serves to lend sincerity and credibility to the philosophy.
La Saisiaz represents an attempt by Browning to approach the problem of faith, salvation and immortality from an intellectual standpoint. His failure to do so is his answer to the Harrison essayists who, as has been pointed out, insisted on "knowledge not feeling, on fact not fancy, on evidence and proof not surmise, on law not hypothesis, on prose, not poetry as a serious and effective medium." Browning's own conclusion is that reason is ineffectual without the wider apprehensions of the intuitions. A comparison with "Cleon" is illuminating. In the figure of Cleon, Browning combines the rationalistic philosopher with the imaginative poet, and shows how inability to reconcile these two aspects leads to despair. Cleon's intellectual pride blinds him to the very apprehension that he desires and that would save him.

Both John in "A Death in the Desert" and the Pope in The Ring and the Book recognize the need in man for an indication of love along with his awareness of will and might. Just as man's instinctive need for

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love makes him respond to the Christian story, so, in *La Saisiaz*, Browning argues that man's instinctive need for life after death is the most powerful evidence of its truth. No scientific evidence can provide certain proof. But to reject the partial revelations of God's love on earth is to invite despair and negation.

In a letter to Julia Wedgewood in 1866, Browning tells her that "though his temper is inclined to dispute both authoritative tradition and mere wishes of the mind, he reasons upon 'the rare flashes of momentary conviction that come and go in the habitual dusk and doubt of life' and so, taking the result of all this to be indisputable, believes in re-union after death." His plea, in *La Saisiaz*, is a plea for the acknowledgement of the validity of the imaginative and the intuitive along with the rational and the intellectual, and is characteristic of the later poetry in general, reiterated in various guises in *Ferishtah's Fancies* and in the *Parleyings*.

"'Disgah Sights I and II'" (*Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper: With Other Poems, 1876*) present a recurrent theme in Browning's poetry, the mixed nature

of man's existence on earth, with good and evil coexisting side by side, and the necessity of accepting this state as a challenge. The speaker realizes that there is more to be gained in experiencing all the aspects of life than in unwisely attempting to change any particular one.

In 'Jochanan Hakkadosh', the longest poem of the Joosseria volume (1883), Browning carries out another exploration of the nature and the implications of man's awareness of the existence of the other world. The philosophical content is only superficially dramatized. DeVane remarks: 'Browning's main intention in the poem is to expound the favourite metaphysical doctrines of his old age—the superiority of the intuitive faculties over the intellectual ones in giving man a knowledge of God.'

The old and wise Hakkadosh is granted an extension to his life by periods of three months at a time, the gifts of a lover, a soldier, a statesman, a poet and a young boy. Jochanan finds 'Love, war, song, statesmanship—no gain, all loss' (1.427).

These make man aware of his body, not his soul. It is only in the period of his last gift that he finds himself ''Absurdly happy'' (1.468). He has attained to the ''calm struck by encountering opposites, / Each nullifying either'' (ll. 476-77). Speaking from the vantage point of an enlarged consciousness, Hakkadosh finds that the opposites of right and wrong, false and true, dream and reality only appear irreconcilable to man because of his limited perceptions. Even man's reason cannot help him to perceive truths in their ''primal clarity'' (ll. 526) for reason which ''sees light half shine half shade, / Because of flesh, the medium that adjusts / Purity to his visuals'' (ll. 519-31) is both ''an aid / And hindrance'' (ll. 531-32). Only to a man freed from the bondage of the bounded self does life appear as ''Waves brackish, in a mixture, sweet with brine, / That's neither sea nor river but a taste of both—so meet the earthly and the divine'' (ll. 580-82). From the juxtaposition of faith and doubt and of hopes and fears, Hakkadosh discovers that this life is as a winepress, blending both good and evil. The idea of the relativity of knowledge as a necessary condition of finite existence receives similar attention in the
Pope's monologue in *The Ring and the Book*:

Absolute, abstract, independent truth, Historic, not reduced to suit man's mind,— Or only truth reverberate, changed, made pass A spectrum into mind, the narrow eye,— The same and not the same, else unconceived— Though quite conceivable to the next grade Above it in intelligence,—as truth. (X 1389-95)

The story in the sonnets that follow the main body of the poem is "pure mystification", according to DeVane, but the last lines merit attention. The axe that keeps falling without reaching the bottom of what appears to be a shallow rivulet is man's understanding of God which can never encompass the total reality. The poem thus illustrates Browning's belief that the intimations of the divine in this world are necessarily unsatisfactory, but that man must strive to attain that larger perspective that can fuse the actual and the ideal.

Most of the poetry immediately following *La Saisiaz* is narrative in form, the impression they give being that of a story telling itself. But Browning's intellectual and moral seriousness

25. Loc.Cit.
impelled him in a contrary direction. His desire to give fuller expression to his understanding of human nature caused him to turn to poetry that was frankly an embodiment of his personally held beliefs. To put it differently, he used his poetry as a vehicle for exploring the validity of his beliefs. In *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884), the dramatic tension is reduced to sundry philosophical reflections and speculations. But though the sense of taking part in an actual, living experience is missing, Browning's thought rarely veers into the abstract. His method of using homely, everyday analogies to illustrate his concepts firmly establishes his philosophy as an integral part of human personality.

The quotation from *King Lear* in the epigraph is revealing; the garments are ostensibly Ferishtah's, but they can be 'changed' i.e. transferred to somebody else (in this case to the poet himself). As Philip Drew notes, "the resultant discourse is so much in accord with Browning's own temper that there is little pretence at dramatic distancing of poet and speaker."26

The form of the poem is whimsically explained in the "Prologue" in terms of the Italian style preparation of ortolans—toasted bread, followed by a pungent sage-leaf and then by the roasted bird. So the poem will have "sense, sight and song", i.e. the meaning or the philosophy, its exposition through a parable and a lyric embodying the theme in concrete terms. Clyde de L. Ryals describes it thus: "The structure of Ferishtah's Fancies manifests Browning's belief that all philosophical questions can be answered only by reference to human love; or, to put it another way, the form reflects the poet's philosophy that the counsels of the intellect which form the dialectic of the fancies, are authenticated by man's ability to love."27

The "Prologue" presents the context for the arguments that follow, acceptance of God's will on earth and faith in the beneficence of what is to come hereafter.

The Fancies, may, for convenience, be divided into three broad groups. The first group of poems deals with man's duties towards God and humanity at large.

'The Eagle' narrates the incident which prompted Ferishtah towards dervishhood—the sight of the eagle feeding the helpless raven fledgelings inspires him to the thought that man's duty is to acquire 'helpful strength' (1.28) for the benefit of mankind. And yet, since one should (in the words of Festus in Paracelsus) 'Presume not to serve God apart from such/Appointed channels as wills shall gather/Imperfect tributes' (I, 306-8), the lover in the lyric abjures isolation for the pressing throngs of the world.

'Two Camels' illustrates the point that wholesome joy is to be preferred to righteous misery. Asceticism is to be condemned because it does not contribute to the joys of others. Man exists to serve God and he can do so only when he accepts thankfully the pleasures that God provides, not when he mortifies himself by rejecting them. The lyric enlarges upon a theme touched upon very frequently in Browning's poetry—that of acceptance of man's finite conception of God's infinitude. Yet, in the fact of human love lies our best evidence of divine beatitude. Once again, there is a characteristic idea that recurs over and over again in the later poetry—life on earth is not to be disdained because it is imperfect:
...how should I conceive
What a heaven there may be? Let it but resemble
Earth myself have known! No bliss that's finer, fuller,
Only—bliss that lasts, they say, and fain would I believe.

"Cherries" carries forward an idea that Ferishtah had initially propounded in "Two Camels", namely that man render gratitude to God for His gifts and work to multiply his talents. But though man's means are limited, though his good will meets obstacles at every step, his loving gratitude for the simple pleasures of life is dear to the Giver. The idea is transposed into concrete terms in the lyric. Even if the little that can be accomplished falls short of man's aspirations, it is better than nothing at all. The speaker asserts that he has carried on with verse-making and love-making, if not with transcendental effect, but at least to the best of his ability. Waiting for great blessings for which to render gratitude in larger measure is undesirable. Neither is man to doubt the worth of his least gifts of gratitude. Another parable in the same poem illustrates the necessity of paying thanks for the present pleasures and not probing unwisely into what is essentially unknowable.

"Plot-Culture" discusses the validity of the gratification of the senses. Ferishtah's position is
that man has been apportioned his plot on earth to use as he deems fit, provided he "remember doomsday'" (1.46) when he must account to God. The lyric affirms the importance of sense as well as soul in a love-relationship. The duality that Browning had established in earlier love poems is reaffirmed.28 DeVane reads this poem as "Browning's protest, as in the lyric attached to "The Family' in Ferishtah against a Platonic infatuation." 29 The memories that intrude, which DeVane believes to be those of Mrs. Browning may be more logically attributed to those of Lady Ashburton, so that, viewed in this light, the lyric becomes an assertion on Browning's part of his hopes of reunion with his wife in a fully integrated relationship.

The second group of poems in Ferishtah's Fancies concerns itself with the theme of acceptance of God's will on earth and trust in his ultimate beneficence.

Both good and evil are part of God's dispensation in "The Melon-Seller", but, while some may find prayer to be an imposition on God's will, Ferishtah would

28. See "By the Fireside", stanza XLIV.
rather believe that prayer serves to express the vital emotions of pity, sympathy, fear and love, with the ultimate decision left trustingly to God's wisdom.

An important theme in this group of poems is the problem of evil. The question had engaged Browning from his earliest poetry. In Paracelsus, the faculty of love enhances that of knowledge, leading man to see "a good in evil, and a hope/In ill-success" (V, 875-76). The idea is present in Easter-Day:

Mere misery under human schemes,
Becomes, regarded by the light
Of love, as very near, or quite
As good a gift as joy before. (11.218-21)

A further corollary to the idea is given by the Pope in The Ring and the Book, who believes that "this dread machinery/Of sin and sorrow" (X,1375-76) has been devised" to evolve/By new machinery in counterpart/
The moral qualities of man" (X, 1378-80). In Fifine at Fair, evil and falsehood are the means by which truth is attained. La Seisiaz acknowledges the immense burden which evil in this world poses to a consciousness that would come to terms with the conception of a loving God. The reality of evil is accepted, because, when seen in the light of the possibility of an after-life for man, it becomes virtually a necessity for this life of probation.
In "Mihrab Shah", pain becomes the bond of sympathy between man and man, and also the means for giving thanks to God for escape from it. The conclusion is that without gratitude to God and loving sympathy towards fellowmen, Man's life would not be a worthy one. Browning's manner of explaining the presence of evil and pain in this world centres on his characteristic belief that man's finite perceptions are limited while "In the eye of God/Pain may have a purpose and be justified" (11.136-37). The approach in La Saisiaz, seems, however, to be less open to criticism, when he justifies the evil in this world as being necessary for the exercise of man's moral faculty and his freedom of choice.

The most extended examination of the question of evil is conducted in the twelfth Fancy, entitled "A Bean-Stripe: Also Apple-Eating". The problem as posed by Ferishtah's disciple is, "A good thing or a bad thing--Life is which?" (1.5). The solution is again a characteristic of Browning's later thought—since certainty is not possible, man must of necessity accept ignorance of God's plan. Evil can serve to increase man's joy in goodness and to act as a testing

30. In "A Death in the Desert", John echoes a similar idea: "And as I saw sin and death, even so/See I need yet the transiency of both", (11.218-19).
ground for faith. Ferishtah concludes with the assertion that life is a mixture of both joy and sorrow. Thus for him, the appropriate colour to assign to the world is neither black nor white, but grey. But in order to achieve this view, man must widen his perspective, "Pass from such obvious power to powers unseen" (1.384), and thus attain to a wholeness of vision in which he realizes that "Deepest in black means white most imminent" (1.112).

As in Le Saisiaz, however, this affirmation is qualified with a proviso, that what he speaks of is "my own appointed patch i' the ground" (1.168). If he is an optimist, he is also aware, in Blougram's words of "a thousand diamond weights between" (1.406). Ferishtah admits that while he has not seen life as "all-subduing black" (1.205), yet

...such may wreck
My life and ruin my philosophy
Tomorrow doubtless: hence the constant shade
Cast on life's shine,—the tremor that intrudes
When firmest seems my faith in white. (ll.207-11)

Yet his response, he feels, is more honest than that of the "sourly-Sage" (1.256) who proclaimed "Life's best was that it led to death" (1.261) and who yet

31. cf. "Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville," X and XII.
"Lived out his seventy years, laughed loud, / liked— 
above all—his dinner" (ll.275-76). DeVane points to these lines as a reference to Thomas Carlyle, whom Browning would again accost in the "Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville."  

In the second part of the fancy, the doubting disciple wants "'truth at any cost'" (ll.295). But Ferishtah points out that absolute conviction is untenable. If the conditions of life do not meet our desires and expectations, it is because our conceptions are bounded and finite and distinct from God's. What man needs is the imaginative vision to "'Blend the quality of man/With the quality of God, and so assist/Mere human sight to understand'" (ll.358-60). For if absolute knowledge is denied to man, the mind can infer immensity. Ferishtah illustrates the point with the analogy of fire:

Yet since to think and know fire through and through Exceeds man, is the warmth of fire unknown,
Its uses—are they so unthinkable?
Pass from such obvious power to powers unseen,
Undreamed of save in their sure consequence: (ll.382-86)

From his examination of the scheme of life, Ferishtah reaches to the conception of a beneficent giver: "'The sense within me that I owe a debt/Assures me—somewhere

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must be somebody/Ready to take his due'" (ll.422-24).
Thus he eats his apple, relishes, praises, admires; and
thanks, not the apple, but the creator, 'but for whose
work, the orchard's wealth/Might prove so many gall-nuts'
(ll.485-86). The lyric postulates the idea of not caring
for the world's reactions, for man has his rewards in the
after-life to look forward to. The world might be
unappreciative, but the poet for his own part has "looked
beyond the world for truth and beauty."

The problem of belief, faith and knowledge is
the central theme of the third group of fancies.

In '"Shah Abbas"', Ferishtah argues with the
disciple who asks: 'Did beauty live in deed as well as
in word,/Was this life lived, was this death died—not
dreamed?" (ll.13-14). Thus at this late stage, Browning
once more takes up the discussion of the authenticity of
the story of Christ. As DeVane has shown, the three
analogies or fables used in the argument illustrate
varieties of belief\(^{33}\)--the belief in historical fact
(as revealed by the story of Shah Abbas); the belief
in fiction (as exemplified by the tale of Thamasp who
saw his beloved Zurah devoured by a nine-headed snake),
a belief which appeals to the emotions even while the

intellect doubts its validity; and thirdly, the kind of belief that is prompted by love (as shown by the story of the return of Ishak to his sons). The inference is that it is the last kind of belief that man needs to respond to Christ. The validity of the instinctive will to believe had been propounded in La Saisiaz. As Caponsacchi's brave act demonstrates, the instinct stands surer than the intellect. Browning's firm conviction that in matters of faith and belief the intuition achieves more positive results, is very evident here. The lyric embodies the idea of loving faith as a means of illuminating the heart's darkness.

In 'The Sun', the question discussed is once again that of faith in the historic fact of the Incarnation. An angry man confronts Ferishtah with the statement that someone had dared to say 'God once assumed on earth a human shape' (1.10). Ferishtah's arguments follow the lines of John's in 'A Death in the Desert', 'Man apprehends Him newly at each stage' (1.432). The sun was, formerly, worshipped as the giver of light and life, but step by step man attained to the conception of 'purpose with power' (1.100). For a homelier example, he takes the case of a man eating a tasty fig, who gives
thanks to the gardener. But since "gift claims gift's return" (1.74), man can only love what gives love. Thus man desires some evidence of God's love operating on earth. So, says Ferishtah, to meet the yearnings of man, the legend arose that God once took human shape and came down to earth. The proper response to such a revelation should not be one of disbelief, but the feeling—"I stand appalled before/Conception unattainable by me/Who need it most" (ll.175-77). The accompanying lyric traces man's heavenly origins, reminiscent of Wordsworth's "Our birth is a sleep and a forgetting" in the "Immortality Ode".

DeVane calls "A Pillar at Sebzevar" "perhaps the bluntest and clearest statement of Browning's doctrine of the inefficacy of human knowledge." In Easter-Day the narrator discards knowledge in favour of love and so wins God's approval. In La Saisiaz Browning asserted the superiority of intuitive faith and love to rational, intellectual analysis. In the present fancy, the idea is stated much more dogmatically: "Wholly distrust thy knowledge, then, and trust/As wholly to love allied to ignorance." (ll.64-65). This seems anomalous in a poet who placed so much emphasis on the processes of the mind.

But Philip Drew correctly points out that knowledge does not mean Reason itself, but "that kind of unreal ratiocination which tries to replace the experience of the individual by an abstract generalization." One feels that Browning formulated this particular theory to counter the negativism engendered by rationalistic criticism of religion. Browning's solution to the problem of belief rests not in historic, external truth, but in the truth within man himself, tested by his personal experience. In "Epilogue" to Dramatis Personae (1864) he had propounded the same idea, that God is actually present in the universe and in all mankind, so that man need not look beyond his own world to find God. In the present fancy, the analogy that Fereshtah uses is that of water, the drop of water that man finds when he scoops up sand should be enough for him if it quenches his thirst. What need of further digging fifty fathoms deep:

Thy soul's environment of things perceived,
Things visible and things invisible,
Fact, fancy—all was purposed to evolve
This and this only—was thy wit of worth
To recognize the drop's use, love the same,
And loyally declare against mirage
Though all the world asseverated dust
Was good to drink? Say, 'What made meirst my lip,
That I acknowledge moisture': thou art saved!

[1.124-32]

35. The Poetry of Browning, p.189.
But even as he lauds the method of personal choice based on individual experience, Browning cannot be said to be unaware of its dangers. Earlier in "A Death in the Desert", John had said, "Truth, deadened of its absolute blaze/Might need love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt". But he also warns of the dangers of the misapplied one's reasoning powers, as when a man is led to say, "Since love is everywhere,/And since ourselves can love and would be loved,/We ourselves make the love, and Christ was not," (11.505-7). The lyric appended to "A Pillar at Sebzevar" sings of unspoken love. Words of praise cannot do justice to intuitive appreciation.

As "A Camel-Driver" shows, Browning does not discard wholly the reasoning faculty, for that would be advocating mindlessness:

Reason aims to raise
Some make-shift scaffold-vantage midway, whence Man dares, for life's brief moment, peer below:
But ape omniscience? Nay! (11.71-74)

When man attempts by his reason to overleap the bounds of life, then this quality is to be denigrated. In this poem, Fericstah advocates the necessity for man to chart out his own beliefs based on his own inner promptings: "Ask thy lone
soul what laws are plain to thee,—/Thee and no other,—
stand or fall by them'' (ll.99-100).

The ''Epilogue'' to Ferishtah's Fancies is both an affirmation of the major ideas presented in the Fancies and a sober questioning of their worth. In fact, the whole import of the poem is changed by the ''Epilogue''. If the tone of the main body of the poem has been optimistic, the conclusion presents a mood of troubled uncertainty. If Browning had earlier presented man's intuitive promptings as the basis of his belief, he now points out the dangers that accompany subjectivism. David Shaw observes that ''Browning dramatizes the dark foundations of belief, the voids beneath the affirmations of theology'', and further remarks that ''The poet who grants that his central faith may be in error lives from a great depth of being''. The speaker is very clearly the poet himself. He has been a ''happy one'' (1.4) for whom appeared ''bright-edged the blackest shroud'' (1.8). He achieves a vision of the glorious souls who battled valiantly in life without thought of reward, but only of duty, and comes to realize the worth of their endeavour. It is a vision of ''All the good and beauty, wonder crowning wonder,/Till my heart and soul applaud perfection, nothing less''(ll.23-24). Yet this enchantment becomes suddenly fraught with terror at the thought that his hopeful view of life may be only a

reflection of his own happiness in love, and may not be a true interpretation of the scheme of things in the universe at large. The "Epilogue" may thus be cited as a rejoinder to Leavis, who felt that "Browning was unaware of disharmonies because for him there were none, or rather, only such as were enough to exhilarate, to give him a joyous sense of physical vitality."37 It provides the evidence to refute the conventional view of the later Browning as a hearty optimist, who conveniently shut his eyes to unpleasant realities.

In the "Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville" (Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day, 1887), Browning elaborates his discussion of the problem of evil by arguing with Carlyle about the necessity of accepting evil in this world without undue pessimism. Carlyle said of Browning: "But there's a great contrast between him and me. He seems very content with life, and takes much satisfaction in the world. It's a very strange and curious spectacle to behold a man in these days so confidently cheerful."38 The parleying provides Browning's explanation for his hopeful attitude.

As already noted, the problem of evil had engaged Browning from his earliest poetry. To the Pope in *The Ring and the Book*, the presence of evil is an indication for man to struggle valiantly towards goodness and truth. Even Guido’s unmitigated evil has its uses—it becomes a means for the revelation of goodness in Pompilia and Caponsacchi. In this poem, man’s confrontation with evil is seen as a matter of instinctive responses:

...See how this mere chance-sown, cleft-nursed seed, That sprang up by the wayside 'neath the foot of the enemy, this breaks all into blaze, Spreads itself, one wide glory of desire To incorporate the whole great sun it loves (X,1041-45) as well as of conscious choices: "White shall not neutralize the black, nor the good/Compensate bad in man, absolve him so:/Life's business being just the terrible choice." (X,1236-38)

In all his poems treating this theme, Browning does not deny evil and suffering, but puts forward the belief that love in a man's heart is an indication of God's love, and an indication of God's ultimately beneficent purpose for man. In *Ferishtah's Fancies*, as we have seen, Browning asserts that the quest for the unknowable through the medium of the intellect can only lead to pessimism and despair. It is only through love
and trust that man can come to terms with the existence of pain and sorrow. Love gives man the wisdom to see that evil may serve some definite purpose.

In the Parleying, Browning reproaches Carlyle for wanting certain knowledge of the goodness, in spite of existent evil, of God's plan for man. Mandeville had, according to Browning, shown how men could accept the evil of this world in a realistic and positive way. He had believed that "Every growth of good/Sprang consequent on evil's neighbourhood" (V) and that both together were products of a "Primal law" (V). The Biblical parallel of the story of the wheat and the tares gives depth to the argument. On the one side is presented the contention that the "Gardener of Man" plants both wheat and tares "for a purpose" (V), on the other is the inability to understand and accept this intermingling: "Why grant tares leave to thus o'erstep, o'ertower/Their field-mate, boast the stalk and flaunt the flower/Triumph one sunny minute?" (VI).

Browning's explanation repeats an idea already presented in Ferishtah's Fancies, namely that man's perceptions are finite and limited, and so can never
encompass the infinitude of God. Paracelsus comes to learn that absolutes are not within man's reach and man must ever be content with the "uncertain fruit of an enchanting toil" (V,697) and the "weakness" (V,699) of human love.

Yet even in the midst of his limitations man can aspire. As early as Paracelsus Browning uses the sun as the image for something vast, desirable and essentially unknowable: "Like plants in mines which never saw the sun, / But dream of him, and guess where he may be, / And do their best to climb and get to him" (V,882-84). In The Ring and the Book the Pope insists on the need for clouds to shade man's eye, which "Sun-suffused" (X,1645) may be made "blind by blaze" (X,1646). In a passage which anticipates Browning's arguments in "Mandeville", the Pope refers to the need for man to accept a knowledge of God that best suits his finite nature:

0 Thou,—as represented here to me
In such conception as my soul allows,—
Under Thy measureless my atom width!—
Man's mind—what is it but a convex glass
Wherein are gathered all the scattered points
Picked out of the immensity of sky,
To reunite there, be our heaven on earth,
Our known unknown, our God revealed to man?
Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;  
Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense,—
There, (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!)  
In the absolute immensity, the whole
Appreciable solely by Thyself,—
Here, by the little mind of man, reduced
To littleness that suits his faculty,
Appreciable too in the degree;  (X, 1306-23)

In "A Bean-Stripe: Also-Bating", as already mentioned, Ferishtah uses the image of fire to describe the limited yet inescapable nature of man's conception of infinity. In "Mandeville", the same idea is expressed in "Look through the sign to the thing signified" (VII). Countering Carlyle's imagined assertion (as described by DeVane) that 'Spiritual things are not to be comprehended in human terms', Browning shows the means whereby the infinite may be apprehended by the finite. The fiction which makes fact alive is fact too, as he had explained in The Ring and the Book (I, 461-472). Thus the sign or the symbol assumes great importance in man's attempts to understand the nature of God. As W.O. Raymond puts it: 'Browning uses the imagery of the Sun as representative of God's absolute being, and the myth of Prometheus bringing fire from heaven in a hollow tube as the symbol of a revelation of the Divine nature which is adapted to the lowliness

39. W.C. DeVane, Browning's Parleyings, p. 43.
and imperfect faculties of man. It is true that the fire thus won is 'glass-conglobed' and narrowed to a 'pin-point circle'. Nevertheless it is 'the very Sun in little' sharing its elemental nature.\textsuperscript{40}

Man's imagination, operating through symbolic representations, lifts him from the darkness of meaninglessness and into the light of hope and faith in the beneficence of God. The fervour, almost religious though non-doctrinal, of Browning's belief is emphasized by the concluding imagery of light and warmth (sun, fire). As Park Honan points out, light images combine with those involving fire and seeing in ''A Death in the Desert'' to reveal the spiritual nature of an experience.\textsuperscript{41} Browning's stress on the symbol is in keeping with his belief that it is through the finite that the infinite manifests itself.

Ultimately, Browning's arguments serve not to discount the reality of evil, but to point to a way in which this evil may have positive implications. Browning derives hope from the fact that God is not a

\textsuperscript{40} W.O. Raymond, \textit{The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning}, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p.205.
remote being indifferent to man's agonizing, for
man's emotional and moral consciousness in itself
is an evidence of a God of Love. In the poems of
the earlier period the Incarnation provided the fact
that man needed to prove God's love for man. Now in
the last major poem, embodying his mature views,
Browning's emphasis shifts from the historic fact
of the Incarnation to its significance as a symbol
of the communion between the divine and the human.
God's love and concern for man is further evinced in
the love that exists in the human heart. As Browning
would affirm in the later parleyings also, man's own
experience is sufficient for apprehending God. And
thus he proves Carlyle's pessimism as uncalled-for.

In the ninth and tenth sections of the ''Parleying
with Francis Furini'', Browning moves from a discussion
of Art to Science, and makes his criticism of the
evolutionists a vehicle for his characteristic philoso-
phical thought.

Browning was not against the theory of Evolution
as such, for in many ways the theory accorded well with
his faith in progress. But what he set himself against was those interpretations of the theory that made negative all positive assertions about humanity. Ultimately, his stand against the Evolutionists may be summed up by the concepts Abstraction versus Experience, Knowledge (ratiocination) which leads to sterility and a loving Ignorance (acceptance) which leads to faith and hope. The parleying asserts that no matter how far the speculations of the scientists take them, ultimately "You drop to where the atoms somehow think/Feel, know themselves to be..." (ll.282-83)

42. In a letter to Furnivall on October 11, 1881, Browning wrote: "In reality, all that seems proved in Darwin's scheme was a conception familiar to me from the beginning: see in Paracelsus the progressive development from senseless matter to organized, until man's appearance (Part V). Also in "Cleon", see the order of 'life's mechanics',--and I daresay in many passages of my poetry: for how can one look at Nature as a whole and doubt that, wherever there is a gap, a 'link' must be 'missing'—through the limited power and opportunity of the looker? But go back and back as you please, at the back, as Mr. Sludge is made to insist, you find (my faith is as constant) creative intelligence, acting as matter but not resulting from it. Once set balls rolling, and ball may hit ball and send any number in any direction over the table; but I believe in the cue pushed by a hand." (Letters, ed.Hood, p.199).
Browning attempts to combat the feelings of despair and pessimism that the evolutionary theories might give rise to. For it had been contended that, as a facet of organic nature subject to mechanistic laws, man no longer was such a splended figure.

Browning's argument runs thus: "... Where began/Righteousness, moral sense except in Man?" (IX) and concludes: "Accept in Man advanced to this degree,/The Prime Mind, therefore" (IX). He puts his belief in the moral consciousness that is symbolic of God in man. It is true that both power and knowledge are sharply limited in man, that everywhere he finds "'faults to mend/Omissions to supply'" (IX). Yet he "'stands/Confessed supreme—the monarch whose commands/Could he enforce, how bettered were the world!'" (IX).

To Browning it was unthinkable that the evolutionist concept of the mechanical weeding out of individuals for their physical survival value should set at nought all human aspiration and striving. Unthinkable too, was the idea that no evidence existed of a loving Creator. Once again, Browning is on familiar ground, arguing that self-knowledge is just about the only thing that man can be sure of on earth. The rest
is a "profound/Of ignorance I tell you surges round/My rock-spit of self-knowledge" (X). This is a repetition of what he had already made clear in La Saisiaz—"Knowledge stands on my experience" (1.273).\footnote{In La Saisiaz, his personal experience had led him to base all his speculations on two basic facts: the thing perceiving and "the thing perceived outside itself" (1.220), which he terms soul and God. But in Paracelsus, he had presented a reverse idea that God was to be found in the soul itself: "There is an inmost centre in us all, Where truth abides in fullness!" (I, 728-29).} In the present parleying, the glorious ruptures of the soul point to a "consummator sealing up the sum of all things past and present and to come—/ Perfection? No, I have no doubt at all" (X). On the other hand, man's experience forces him to acknowledge the reality of evil. Browning's position in this respect is familiar: "...still must needs wrong/To do right's service, prove men weak or strong/Choosers of evil or good" (X).

Browning then proceeds to use Furini's painting of Andromeda as an illustration of how pain and sorrow, whether as reality or illusion (as in a painting) serve to inspire nobility in man. It is not desirable for man to be passive, but to struggle to overcome evil. DeVane points out that at this point, "Andromeda represents
Browning's own faith, standing precariously upon the rock of consciousness amidst the growing darkness of the sky and the waters waste and wild, and awaiting destruction from the monster of new scientific thought, or rescue from heaven'. 44 And according to Douglas Bush: "Andromeda on the rocks awaiting the serpent becomes the poet himself, standing on the firm ledge of his individual consciousness amid the wash and welter of ignorance, facing the monster evil; needless to say, the all-wise deliverer is God." 45

Mrs. Orr points out that this "constant assertion of the necessity of evil would land Mr. Browning in a dilemma, if the axiom were presented by him in any character of dogmatic truth...But the anomaly disappears in the more floating outlines of a poetic experience." 46 Therefore, Browning insists that his belief in a Supreme Cause—"Strong, wise, good" (X) is a very personal belief: 'All—for myself—seems ordered, wise and well/ Inside it,—what reigns outside, who can tell?' (X).

Philip Drew points out that by the time Browning came to write the Parleyings he had moved away from dogma, the Church and traditional philosophy, so that "even the idea of God's love of man being made manifest in the incarnation of Christ, which had animated so many of his poems, is found rarely in his later works." Hence, Browning is led more and more to stress individual responsibility and individual consciousness. In the "Parleying with Francis Furini", Browning once again focuses on individual experience as the source of an innate perception of a higher reality made manifest through the appearances of the world: "Though Master keep aloof, / Signs of his presence multiply from roof / To basement of the building" (X). Therefore, it behoves man to "Look around, learn thoroughly" (X). Browning firmly places the burden of creating value on man himself.

The Asolando volume (1889), though predominantly lyrical and narrative in content, contains two poems which are embodiments of Browning's philosophical thought. "Rephan" is the story of a human being who remembers a previous life when his home was "the Star of my God Rephan" (1,3). It was a realm of absolute perfection and bliss, "Nowhere deficiency nor excess" (1.24).

47. The Poetry of Browning, p.226.
Unlike this world where, as Don Juan discovers in *Fifine at the Fair*, "'nowhere things abide, /And everywhere we strain that things would stay, "'(LXXXIV), in "'Rephan" there is no fear nor hope, no growth, no change, everything is "'faultlessly exact'" (1.54). Yet, perfection becomes irksome. It is the challenge to aspire, if not to attain, to suffer for love's sake, to wring knowledge from ignorance, that is desirable, all the more so because of the hopeful assurance that life hereafter will right all wrongs.\footnote{cf. "Rabbi Ben Ezra", XXVI.} That this striving is valuable for its own sake had been expressed by Browning in "'Life in a Love'" (Men and Women, Vol.I, 1855):

> But what if I fail of my purpose here?
> It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
> To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
> And baffled, get up and begin again,—
> So the chase takes up one's life, that's all. (11.11-15)

The Chorus of the Fates in the "'Prologue'" to the *Farleyings* sings: "'What is? No, what may be--sing!
That's man's essential'" (1.239). As in "'Jochannan Hakkadosh'", the present poem, too, describes life on earth as one of striving and effort that does not always bring fulfillment, and the after-life as one of harmony and completion. But perfection can mean stagnation. The
vitality of the challenge to realize the infinite gives man the deepest sense of his own being, and the speaker yearns to exchange his neutral, uniform state for the conditions of earthly life—with its hopes, fears, loves, hates and doubts.

The acknowledgement of the imperfections of this world and the necessity of reconciling it with the idea of a just and loving God is, once again, the theme of "Reverie". DeVane observes: "The old antithesis of power and love which is he had first propounded in Paracelsus (1835) appears here again as the central problem." The poem is an amalgam of Browning's characteristic ideas: a veil lies between man and the ultimate truth, which man cannot attain in totality in this world; man's attempts to gain knowledge of the infinite should begin with the finite—"How but from near to far/Should knowledge proceed, increase/Try the clod are test the star!" (11.36-38) Evil exists, but men should regard it "haply as cloud across/Good's orb, no orb itself:" (76-77). Life on earth is beset by "chance, change, death's alarm" (1.135), but its effect is to create faith in man.

To Karshish, the idea that "The All-Great were the All-Loving too" (1.305), is a conception that almost defies belief. What is lacking in this world is the evidence of Love as obvious as that of Power. But for Browning, this veil of ignorance as to the true purposes of the Creator is a necessity for engendering faith. As in La Saisiaz the sorrows of this life leads to the hope in the after-life where wrongs are righted. It is faith which elevates man's mind, burdened with knowledge which can never be complete and hence is always unsatisfying: So life on earth becomes a process of endless questing and striving (11.105-9) to reconcile the power and love of God, a reconciliation brought about by man's personal, imaginative reconstruction of the facts of his experience. As Roma A. King writes: "Browning's awareness of man's situation, his alienation, his impotency, his unfulfilled frustrated desires, and his transformation of external structures from sources of values into hypothetical constructs which enable man to create values provides the basic reality that underlies his creative efforts. What is implicit in the earlier poems becomes increasingly explicit in the later ones." 50

Structurally, the later poems which embody Browning's philosophical thought use different forms. In *La Saisiaz*, for example, he speaks in his own voice, but contrives to mask the personal with impersonal argumentation. In *Ferishtah's Fancies* he uses the form of the parable spoken by a scholarly dervish, but by using everyday analogies and appending love-lyrics, contrives to infuse warmth and emotions into what would otherwise be mere argumentation. The pattern of the debate, with its various lines of argument raised through the persons of imaginary objectors and interlocutors, or as in *La Saisiaz*, through two aspects of the poet's own personality and the three-layered argument in the *Parleyings*, is a pattern which best conveys Browning's speculative, inquiring, exploratory approach to philosophical questions.

In the later poems Browning evolves a mode of belief based on personal experience and feeling, that he sets forth, very tentatively, as a means of withstanding onslaughts on the foundations of faith. Love, being the central feature of man's personal experience, is an inseparable adjunct to Browning's philosophy of life, and the next chapter proposes to examine this theme in the later poetry.