CHAPTER II
THE THEME OF LOVE

Browning's assertion of the supreme importance of love is based on his belief that it is a means of communicating with the infinite, that, as one critic puts it, 'in their imperfection created things can serve as instruments which ultimately lead, through human love, to a fuller appreciation of spiritual perfection.' ¹ The magnificent love poems of the earlier period had been written under the glowing aura of a happy marriage. The death of Elizabeth Browning was the major influence that operated in the love poetry of the later years. The concept of re-union after death, first postulated in "Evelyn Hope" (Men and Women, 1855) took hold of Browning in a significant way after Elizabeth's death,² so that the later love poetry encompasses such ideas as love as the supreme reality amidst change and impermanence,³ its power to transform and complete what is incomplete, and the hope of reunion of lovers after death. Love in the later poetry becomes a means of transcending the temporal

³. See Browning's letter to Isa Hlagden, July 2, 1870:; "Nine years ago, completed on the 29th. The years they come and go--The races drop in the grave--But never the love doth so." (Dearest Isa, ed. McAleer, p.338).
and of becoming one with the eternal. 4

In Balaustion's Adventure (1871), the power of love conquers death itself. In Fifine at the Fair, (1872) Don Juan asserts: "Beneath the veriest ash, there hides a spark of of soul/Which, quickened by love's breath, may yet pervade the whole/0' the gray, and, free again, before?'' (XLIII). He formulates "love's law"— "'...each soul lives, longs and works/For itself, by itself, because a lodestar lurks,/An other than itself'', (LIX). In the end he comes to realize that inconstancy to the truth of love is to deny oneself anchorage in the flux of life.

In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (1873), love as mere selfish passion is condemned:

Love bids touch truth, endure truth, and embrace/
Truth, though, embracing truth, love crush itself.
"Worship not me but God!''
The angels urge:/That is love's grandeur: (p.423).

In, The InnAlbum (1875) love is a saving power, of which "one drop saves--sends to flower and fruit at last/The laggard virtue in the soul which else/Cumbers the ground'' (p.453).

The "Epilogue" to Fifine at the Fair depicts the householder being reunited by death to his wife. The complex emotions that the occasion arouses are deliberately

4. In "Dis Aliter Visum (Dramatis Personae, 1864), love involves "gaining a share/O'the sole spark from God's life at strife/With death.''' (ll.26-28).
underplayed by means of the conversational tone of the poem. The staccato rhythms in the early lines are evocative of the turbulence of the poet's mood, intensifying to a climax with "When, in a moment, just a knock, call, cry, / Half a pang and all a rapture, there again were we!" (1.5-6). The poem ends with the triumphant assertion: "'Love is all, and Death is nought!' quoth She" (1.32).

It is this hope of the invincibility of love that can support lovers in the midst of despair and disappointment.5

For the speaker in the "Prologue" to Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper (1876), reunion is not yet an accomplished fact. He sees himself as a "prison-bird" (1.19), separated by the barriers of the world from his beloved. For him, the only thing to do is to soar free in the imagination to the final reunion of souls. The deep emotion of longing is expressed through the precise and denotative imagery of segregation—wall, prison-bird, cloister. But here, as in all Browning's poetry, the world is desirable in its own way:

And lush and lithe do the creepers clothe
Yon wall I watch, with a wealth of green;
Its bald red bricks draped, nothing loth,
In lappets of tangle they laugh between (1.4-8)

As with other sensitive lovers in Browning, the speaker here finds the world alive with intimations from the world of the spirit.

5. For a fuller discussion, see Chapter III, pp. 120-13.
The ability of love to breathe life and beauty into emptiness is the theme of "Natural Magic". What is required is imagination and a sensitive receptivity. Yet, if bareness becomes "embowered/With—who knows what verdure, o'erfruited, o'erflowered?" (11.7-8) it 'can, at best, remain a purely personal experience. In love as well as in philosophical thought, Browning's affirmations are always undercut by tentativeness.

In "Magical Nature", Browning reverses the conventional metaphor for a loved one. Instead of a flower which is at the mercy of time, his beloved is a jewel, which, though "Dim to sight and rough to touch" (1.4), defies the onslaught of Time.

"Bifurcation" is structured on the tension created by the opposing concepts of love and duty. The poem is, in fact, shaped by these antitheses, and imitates the ultimately tragic structure of reality. The reason for the failure of the lovers in this poem to achieve harmony is because the woman chooses the dictates of conventional behavior. The poem begins on a casual, narrative tone, and proceeds to build up by a series of antitheses the dichotomy between the flower-strewn path and the pavement, heaven and earth, light and darkness, truth and falsehood,
sinner and saint. The disappointed lover chooses the "darkling half" (1.19) but finds the going rough. In words reminiscent of Pompilia's dying speech—"In heaven we have the real and true and sure" (VII, 1826), he awaits "the new world where light and darkness fuse" (1.20). Browning's mastery over characterization reveals itself through telling phrases which tell us all we need to know of the false mistress, the patent falsity of whose words, "How I loathe a flower/How prize a pavement!" (1.9-10) "caressed" "the deafish friend's ear" who "laughed (coughing)" (11.10-12). The reader is left in no doubt as to which character is to be praised and which condemned. As E.D.H. Johnson points out, "Browning holds that undue reliance on the intellect with its ulterior motivations makes for failure in affairs of the heart." 6 In "Bifurcation", self-deluding conformity to conventions turns truth into falsehood. The poem echoes "Youth and Art" in Dramatis Personae with the further addition of hope of completion in the hereafter.

Browning called "Numpholeptos" 'an allegory of an impossible ideal of love.' 7 DeVane agrees with Mrs. Miller in her interpretation of the poem as 'an allegory of Browning's mood in 1876, his feeling that his lot is harder

than that of his dead wife's—since he has to live through all the temptations of a passionate nature, while she is immune from such experience—his momentary rebellion from his bondage to a memory, and his capitulation to his fate."

But while the predominant moon-symbolism, which Browning invariably uses with reference to his wife would seem to support this interpretation of the poem as an expression of Browning's depressed state of mind after the Lady Ashburton affair, the emotion is much more complex than that of mere self-pity. On the one hand, the feeling that his infidelity to his wife's memory had created a rift between them and in the invisible harmony that still linked them results in an emphasis on pardon and forgiveness. On the other hand, there is the feeling of rebellion, for his failure is consequent of the conditions of finite life. As other dejected lovers in Browning's poetry do, the speaker vows to resume his quest, hoping against hope for the final reward. The strength of passion straining at the leash is vividly presented through a riot of prismatic hues—purple, yellow, scarlet, crimson, saffron, orange. "Numpholeptos" emphasizes Browning's conception of manhood as a state of striving for the ultimately unrealizable, of love on this earth as a process of suffering which nevertheless liberates and exhilarates.

8. Loc. Cit.
The joy of perfect union, as expressed by Don Juan in *Fifine*, is fleeting:

...What joy, when each may supplement
The other, changing each, as changed, till, wholly, blend,
Our old things shall be new, and, what we both ignite,
Fuse, lose the varicolor in achromatic white! (LIX)

"Numpholeptos" presents the obverse side of perfect communion between lovers. It gives expression to the poet's perception of the fate of love in a world of time, of the gulf between lover and the object of love, a gulf that can but rarely be completely bridged.

The falsity and deceptiveness of appearances which had been a major theme in *Fifine*, reemerges in the lyric "Appearnnces", where the main idea is the power of love to transform what is insignificant. The "poor dull/Dark" (11.1-2) attains significance from the love it has been witness to, while the rich room is associated with deceit, the place where "The other word was spoken" (1.11).

The bare simplicity of the language heightens the complex evocations produced by the phrase "dropped the mask" (1.12).

Like the lover in "Two in the Campagna" (*Men and Women*) who can discern only "Infinite passion and the pain/Of finite hearts that yearn" (11.59-60), the lover in "St. Martin's Summer" is aware of the fickleness of
Time and the changeableness of human nature. Hence he would "weave a bower" (1.8) instead of building "durable mansionary" (1.58), prefer the fluid instead of the rigid in human relationships, because the former may prove the more lasting and rewarding because less restricting. Yet, he has a past of his own to contend with, a past that extends its insistent claims on the present. Though he protests his innocence, he is aware that "Love's ghost plays truant" (1.56) and that "dead loves are the potent" (1.91). The memories of past love infuse the present. The present appears to be a "mere semblance" (1.93), it is the past that has substance. To be bereft of past memories of love is to be left anchorless. We have a similar insistence in Fifine on constancy in love as a bulwark against negation. Critics have pointed out the biographical significance of "'St. Martin's Summer'. Beyond this, however, is Browning's awareness of the complexities embodied in a love-relationship, and the mysterious ways in which this relationship can continue to operate between the living and the dead.

In the introductory poem to The Two Poets of Croisic (1878), human love is equated with divine love that can make violets grow in a "'starved bank of moss'" (1.1) or

10. See Maisie Ward, Robert Browning and His World: "'Two Brownings? 1861-1889."
cause a star to be revealed in "a scowl of cloud" (1.5) The emphasis is on the creative power of love. "Starved", "scowl", "walled", suggest the insistent claims of man's mortal nature, reminiscent of the "flapping door" and "echoing roof" of the "Epilogue" to Fifine. The "Epilogue" to The Two Poets of Croisic, a delightful story of a musician who was helped to win a prize despite a broken lyre by a cicada, affirms the power of love to aid man in times of adversity. The prologue to Jocoseria (1883), "Wanting is--what?", reveals what DeVane calls "The delightful faculty that still existed in the old poet in spite of much mere grey argument." It re-affirms the idea of love as the power which makes "complete incompleteness" (1.9), which breathes life into what was till then only a framework. Individual growth, indeed salvation itself, depends on the wholeness of a soul's union in love with another soul.12 "Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli" joins the ranks of pieces like "James Lee's Wife" and "In a Year" as a poem of unrequited love. Like other Browning women, the heroine of this piece has an appealing humility. It is Browning's tribute to the depth in love that a woman is

12. See "By The Fire-side" (Men and Women) XXVII and LI. Also Fifine at the Fair, XXXIX and XLIV.
capable of, that we are made to feel of this group of poems that the woman ''suffers not because of any innate unworthiness, but rather because of some flaw in her lover.' 13 In this poem, however, the lack of images which act as objective correlatives to the emotion lessens the emotive force that characterized earlier poems with similar themes.

In ''Adam, Lilith and Eve'' Browning uses a Biblical analogy in the title to emphasize the universality of the experience portrayed and thus to intensify its meaning. As a dramatization of deception and unfulfilment in love, it is a companion piece to the preceding poem, revealing the diverse facets of disillusionment. The two poems together form an ironical comment on the fallacy of ideal love.

''Never the Time and the Place'' presents feeling that is genuinely realized, for its theme gives rise to emotions that are deeply felt by the poet. The speaker affirms his hope that the future will be as the past, and that the grave will reunite him with his beloved—''Oh, close, safe, warm sleep I and she,/I and she'' (ll.20-21). The repetition of the last phrase functions importantly to stress the main idea of ''completeness''. The passage of time, with all its temptations, becomes the arch—enemy that the poet has to contend with, and the only armour is

the invincibility of his love. One can discern an undercurrent of distress in the early lines of the poem, the feeling that perfect union is hardly possible in this hostile temporal world. Thus the awareness of frustration and pain is never far away in these later love poems. The '‘rough world's busy thrust'' is an ever-present reality. The antidote to the '‘hostile eye'' (1.10), the '‘furtive ear'' (1.9), the '‘malice that marks each word, each sign'' (1.11) is the true love between two souls, a love that continues beyond the grave. The vivid, supple, concentrated presentation of the idea, with its emotional intensity and depth of suggestion, makes this poem one of the finest lyrics in the later poems.

The Asolando volume (1889) shows the poet in a mellow mood of reminiscence. In '‘Dubiety'', he reiterates the sustaining powers of the memories of love, which alone is '‘Truth ever, truth only the excellent!'' (1.24).

But the very precariousness of the love-relationship leads to an emphasis not only on future completion but on present fulfilment. The lover in '‘Now'' sweeps away time past and time future in the wholeness of his response to the present. He realizes that the moments of perfect communion are as rare and fleeting as they are precious. The physical here is the pathway to the spiritual; sense is the means by which the soul can express itself.

14. See '‘Two in the Campagna'' (Men and Women), Stanza X.
The lover in "Humility" recognizes the value even of unreciprocated love. In love nothing is insignificant, for love is not an end in itself but a process of finding realization in life. This spirit of humility and self-sacrifice is the counterpart to the spirit of aspiration which is so important in Browning's poetry.

The fantasizing extravagance of conventional metaphor in love will not do justice to "Her human self" (1.8). In "Poetics" Browning makes a case for realism in love, as opposed to abstract idealism, for the former helps to achieve a truer sense of identity.

In "Summum Bonum" Browning once again speaks of subjective experience as being the base for all value perceptions. "Truth" is that which enhances a man's awareness of self, and enlarges his consciousness in relation to the universe. In this poem, as in "Dubiety", the brightest truth is "In the kiss of one girl" (1.8).

The imperfections of the finite are transformed through the transcendental power of love in "A Pearl, A Girl". Once again, the love that is celebrated is preeminently human.

"Speculative" boldly reverses a recurrent theme in Browning's poetry, that of heaven as the place where
the incompletion of effort is made complete as achievement. Here the lover eschews renewed possibilities in the next life and opts for the pleasures and pains of earthly life, with the one qualification that he and his beloved remain together for ever. The poem reveals a characteristic tension between Browning's desire for the perfection of a world beyond time and the invigorating challenges posed by experience within time.

"Which" and "Beatrice Signorini" deal with singleminded purposefulness in love which brings its reward in terms of a prize to the woman who chooses her man for love alone in the first poem, and the return of an errant husband "Past power to change" in the latter poem.

"Inapprehensiveness" and "Flute Music with an Accompaniment" are written as dialogues between lovers who have not attained that ultimate awareness of each other when two souls are fused. In the former poem, the woman is absorbed in her fancies, yet oblivious to the fact of the man's "dormant passion" (1.23) needing but a look to break into a "rush of life (1.24). In "Flute-Music" the fanciful speculations belong to the man, whom the snatches of music set musing on "Passion insuppressive" (1.9). But though the woman coldly dampens his enthusiasm,
he protests:

What if all's appearance?
Is not outside seeming
Real as substance inside?
Both are facts, so leave me dreaming. (ll.185-88)

These two poems embody an idea that occurs frequently in Browning's poetry—that if the significant moment in a relationship is not recognized, the chances of spiritual growth and integration may be lost. Unimaginativeness, as much as timidity, may result in a sterile relationship, just as the attempt to substitute ''knowing'' for ''being'' can destroy harmony.

The four poems entitled ''Bad Dreams'' use the unconscious levels of our dream-life to dramatize the complexities inherent in any love-relationship, the terror of the void that exists just beneath the surface of the conventional. The inner life is glimpsed by a series of nightmarish images—the huge hall with chained dancers, the chapel with its dark spirit, the forest and the city devouring each other—ending in the last poem with the tombstone representing death. The compression and the suggestiveness of the sequence is remarkable. As in ''Childe Roland'' the nightmare quality is emphasized

15. Cf. ''The Statue and the Bust'', (Men and Women), ''Youth and Art'' and ''Dès Aliter Visum: Or, Le Byron De Nos Jours'' (Dramatis Personae).
by the way in which events emerge without apparent logic. The images of horror become a portrayal of the upheaval within the souls of unhappy lovers. The idea of the passing of time as an instrument of reconciliation and as a means of union after death is an idea characteristic of the later love poetry. Along with "Numpholeptos" and "St. Martin's Summer", "Bad Dreams" is a portrayal of the darker side of love.

The love-lyrics in Ferishtah's Fancies celebrate love that can lead to wholeness of being, in contrast to knowledge that at best can only bring partial fulfilment. The lyrics may be regarded as an extension of the awareness reached in Paracelsus of love not as an abstract quest for an ideal of perfection, but a reconciling of the claims of the world and the spirit. In these lyrics, we may discern the sharply "descendental" thrust in Browning's vision in the later period, his conviction that heavenly or spiritual love is not superior to earthly love, and that love is as much a matter of sense as of soul. These poems cherish man's humanity with all its changeableness and imperfections. The experiences of human love are not less valuable because less perfect than transcendental love. If infinite, perfect love is an ideal unattainable on this earth, man can be content with what he can achieve with his limited means.
This is not the passive acceptance of a "meaner spirit" but the acceptance of one "clothed/In humbler guise" as Aprile puts it in Paracelsus (II, 567, and 568-69). Further, love in these lyrics is not only an aid in finding universal harmony. It is also the power that creates harmony out of discord and sees the flaws in the object of love as a source of fresh affection.

The "Parleying with Daniel Bartoli" (1887) is important as a gathering point for all Browning's characteristic ideas on love.

Browning here takes up a story from the past, not as an emotional sentimentalist, but as a dramatic realist, once again affirming his belief that poetic interest and moral truth could reside in ordinary human circumstance. The story of the druggist's daughter who sacrificed her happiness for the sake of the man she loved becomes the focal point for many of the ideas that had been embodied in Browning's poetry from the earliest phases. Marianne Pajot stands representative of that admirable class of women who "Would waive, when need were, all but love—from pelf/To potency (X). She refuses to compromise with honour and pleads with her husband-to-be (risking her own security) not to compromise either: "Never dare alienate God's gift you hold/Simply in trust
for him! Choose muck for gold?'' (X). In the magnificence of her moral stature she is as far above the Duke as was Alcestis above her husband Admetos. Her action in deliberately renouncing the duchess-ship is all the more remarkable because she lived at a time when ''to be duchess was to dance the hays/Up, down, across the heaven amid its host:'' (XV) and also ''to be hailed the sun's self almost'' (XV). The lady's sacrifice in this poem is similar to Alcestis' because both recognize the weakness in their men, yet calmly continue with their planned course of action. Their magnanimity is the other side of Browning's belief that self-interest is love's greatest enemy.

Browning's treatment of the story is in keeping with the theme of the Parleyings—loving imagination and intuition as superior to reason, the former as a more infallible means of reaching the central truths of life than the latter. In glorifying the nobility of a woman's sacrifice, he is transposing into the story the flesh-spirit dichotomy that is a major theme in his poetry. It is for those who are true in spirit in spite of loss as regards worldly success and ambition that Browning has the highest regard. Thus, in ''Bifurcation'', Browning holds as a sinner the woman who turns truth into falsehood by faint-heartedly choosing the conventional path of duty to the
The decisiveness of the lady in the Parleying also reinforces a recurrent theme in Browning's poetry---weakness and cowardice in love irretrievably mar the lives of the lovers. She exemplifies the kind of character whom Browning admires, those who, as E.D.H. Johnson puts it, "are all exceptionally clear-sighted in their confrontation of actuality. They see through the false shows at which society connives, preferring to meet life on its own terms rather than to indulge in fanciful self-delusion."  

Further, in depicting the wide-ranging ramifications of a single act of moral struggle and decision, Browning also draws on his theory of the conflict of good and evil. Each successful confrontation with evil in this world makes man stronger and benefits him in some way. Thus, for the lady, there is mental peace and well-being of a kind denied to the Duke, as it had been denied to the false DeLorge in "The Glove" and to the remorseful lover in "Dis Aliter Visum".

Professor Raymond says in his chapter on "The Statue: and the Bust": "The worth of the moral conflict  

cannot be confined to the mere process of subjective experience. Its motivation and goal have an ethical and spiritual objective value and reality."" Because Browning grounds the lady's choice on an instinct that is almost spiritual in nature, he lets us see the transforming effects on all those concerned: the young man, who recognized her greatness and was given a taste of the "'exquisite deliciousness'" (XIV) of joy; the Duke who, entranced by a dancer, too late recognized that what he had taken for the moon was merely a cloud that "'moon-suffused, plays moon perhaps'" (XVII), and so was willing to have the "'brisk-marching, bold she-shape'" (XVIII) conquer him. For what she asserted her power over was his ghost: "'he died since left and lorn,/As needs must Samson when his hair is shorn'" (XVIII). The Biblical image is powerfully evocative.

As with the artists whose work increases in value in proportion as they scorn worldly success and conformity, so with the lovers. The true banner of love is upheld by those who refuse to compromise: salvation is granted to those who opt for the lonely integrity of the spirit.

Thus Browning stresses the folly of looking for the miraculous in legends. The divine is manifested in the human. Modern man has his miracles in the infinite capacity for love that exists in the human heart. Browning re-affirms his belief in love as the link between the finite and the infinite. Characteristic of the love poetry of the later period is the insistence, at the end, of a reunion of lovers in the hereafter. "Some day, and soon, be sure himself will rise,/Called into life by her who long ago/Left his soul whiling time in flesh disguise" (XVIII). This is strongly reminiscent of the 'Epilogue' to Fifine at the Fair, and thus lends credence to the view that Browning saw himself both as the young man who married the lady and as the duke who betrayed her. The later love poems very often have this markedly autobiographical ring.

Love, as represented by Browning, has many aspects. In Paracelsus, the love that is a corrective to Paracelsus' overweening desire for supreme knowledge is in the nature of sympathy and fellowship with human kind and with all

18. Cf. "A Death in the Desert": "...Himself conceives of life as love,/Conceived of love as what must enter in,/Fill up, make one with His each soul He loved" (11.670-72).
finite manifestations of life. The romantic and transcendent characteristics of love that Aprile represents, are as imperfect as Paracelus’ hunger for knowledge, for ultimately love answers to the claims not only of the spirit but also of the flesh.

In *Easter-Day*, the concept of love has Christian overtones. Love is now seen as a manifestation of God and its value proved by the fact that through his love for man, God came down to earth and suffered for man. Similarly, in *'Saul'* (*Men and Women*) love is the medium by which man is linked to the divine—"a man like to me,/ Thou shall love and be loved by, for ever!" (11.310-11).

In the poems of *Men and Women*, the emphasis is on various aspects of human love, whether harmonious or unfulfilled. The fulfilled lovers are those who have used love to overcome the barriers of the flesh and attained to a true fusion of the spirit. The unfulfilled are those who have let worldly considerations, sheer faintheartedness or intellectual pride destroy the delicate link. In these poems, true love leads to an enlargement of consciousness which enables lovers to see "'New depths of the divine'" ("'By the Fire-Side'" (1.140).
In the later poems on love, as we have seen, the theme of time, death and eternity become a new adjunct to Browning's treatment of love. Few love poems in the earlier phase had a reference to death; 'Evelyn Hope' (Men and Women) affirms the immortality and invincibility of love. Less specifically, 'A Lover's Quarrel' in the same volume refers to the emptiness that is in the heart of the disappointed lover as a 'bare-walled crypt' (l.140), and describes true love as a means to 'thrill/Back to life' (ll.144-45) his dead heart. In 'Prospice' (Dramatis Personae), death is welcomed because it means reunion.

Death, now, is a reality that separates lovers in the flesh. The hostility of the world is an everpresent feature to be contended with, while another insidious enemy is the passing of time. Thus, Browning is led to emphasize the importance of all aspects of love, physical as well as spiritual, imperfect as well as ideal. In the later love poetry, love is not only intrinsically valuable in itself, it becomes a mode for discovering meaning and value in man's limited world.
But just as love leads man to a perception of truth, its negation through the inordinate exercise of ratiocination can pervert the truth and lead to falsehood. The casuistry in the poems that will be examined in the following chapter illustrates what W.O. Raymond calls "'the cleavage between man's faculties of love and reason.'"\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{19} Op. Cit., p.130.