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Christ in the Poetry of Robert Browning

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CHRIST IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING

A Thesis

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For the Degree of Master of Arts

With English as Major Subject

by

Sister Juliana Ludick, S.C.C.

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This study does not pretend to be new or exhaustive. The field it covers is too vast to admit of minute analysis, and the religious element in the poetry of Robert Browning has been treated of too largely to lend newness in itself. In method and aim, however, the discussion may boast some freshness. It attempts to point out in how far the poet accepted or rejected the ideas of Christ current in the nineteenth century, and how faithfully his poetry reflects Christ as the Catholic Church teaches Him. It limits itself to a consideration of the Person of Christ as He appears in the pages of the poetry; and the term Christianity, when it occurs here, is used in its identification with Jesus Christ who is its beginning, center, final aim, and heart.

The investigation opens with a résumé of nineteenth-century Christology in its bearing on the prevailing literary trends, specifically on the poetry of Robert Browning. Chapter ii takes up the more intimate influences of home and social environment that were brought to bear on Browning's religious development. Some critics have been unfair, others superficial or adulatory in their treatment of Browning's Christianity; therefore, a chapter on Browning's Christ as his critics have found Him has been included. Chapter iv sifts out of the poetry the passages referring to Christ, and chapter v attempts
The subject is timely. If there was need to vindicate the God-Man in Browning's age when intellectual combat was being waged against Him, there is even greater need to proclaim His divinity in our own day when intellectual forces have precipitated a physical struggle against Him. A little more than a hundred years ago Browning declared,

\[ \text{God! Thou art Love! I build my faith on that.} \]

(Paracelsus, V, 50)

Coming from a man who was keenly alive to his time and whose mind was delicately attuned to the good, the true, and the beautiful, that utterance was a soul-cry that wants trumpeting today as Christ stands again before the tribunal of an unbelieving world.

From the Catholic point of view little has been written on Browning's Christianity. Back in 1890 the Reverend John Rickaby, S.J. wrote for The Month an article of considerable length on Browning as a religious teacher. More recently, in the first volume of Thought (December, 1926) appears "Browning on Faith and Morals" by Professor F. W. Stockley of Dublin University. There are comments in both articles that are challenging.

The best and fullest relative account from the Non-Catholic point of view is by Dr. William O. Raymond of Bishop's University, Quebec. In 1917 Dr. Raymond wrote a doctoral dissertation on the intimate connection between Browning's view
of the Incarnation as a motivating force in his attitude toward life and his conception of the supreme worth of personality and love as the essence of personality. The writer is deeply indebted to Dr. Raymond for his Browning studies and his kind personal advice and encouragement. Dr. A. Joseph Armstrong, Director of the Browningiana of Baylor University, and Dr. Morton Dauwen Zabel of Loyola University, Chicago, have also been helpful, each in his way.
CHRIST IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING
CHAPTER I
CHRIST IN THE AGE OF BROWNING

For all its discordance Pauline is a remarkable poem. Browning wrote it when he had just turned twenty, yet in it he sounds a note that was to find its full resonance in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, "Karshish", "Saul", and "A Death in the Desert", and to recur in softer, though not less clearer tones, throughout his later poems. To the Christ over whom nineteenth-century theologians were holding controversy, he cries with passionate ardor:

O thou pale form, so dimly seen, deep-eyed!
I have denied thee calmly — do I not
Pant when I read of thy consummate power,
And burn to see thy calm pure truths outflash
The brightest gleams of earth's philosophy?
Do I not shake to hear aught question thee?

. . . oft have I stood by thee —
Have I been keeping lonely watch with thee
In the damp night by weeping Olivet,
Or leaning on thy bosom, proudly less,
Or dying with thee on the lonely cross,
Or witnessing thine outburst from the tomb.¹

An historical sense, a heritage from Romanticism, impelled men of the nineteenth century to study the chronicles of antiquity not for the facts recorded in them but for the actors, taking sides for or against them as if they were contemporaries. All the Victorians fell under the spell of finding peculiar

¹P.11, 11.68-84 of the Macmillan Edition. This edition is used throughout the study.
satisfaction in a sympathetic appreciation of modes of thought and feeling very different from their own. Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Stevenson — none of the great novelists of the century failed at one or other period of their careers to emulate Sir Walter Scott's method of seeking in history material through which to work out their ambitions. Robert Browning, who with Tennyson shares the first place in Victorian poetry, betrayed kinship with Coleridge, Byron, Landor, and Scott in his power of psychological analysis and his predilection for the study of past history and biography. To this the dramatic monologues bear ample testimony. It was inevitable that the study of the Scriptures should be affected by the new ideals, and there arose the higher criticism of first the Old Testament, then, with graver fears and stronger opposition, the New.

In a discussion that confines itself to only certain religious aspects of the works of one poet, it is impossible to trace the full history of the current religious controversy. Nineteenth-century Christology forms a chapter for itself in the philosophy of the period. However, a résumé of the ideas of Christ prevailing on the Continent is necessary to an understanding of the presence of those ideas in English thought and literature generally, and certainly in the poetry of a man who was so intensely a part of his age as Robert Browning.

The history of Christian theology in the nineteenth century came to be one of increased insistence upon the central
position of Christ as the God-Man in the religion which He founded. Some of the most notable religious movements of the period, though fundamentally ecclesiastical or philosophical, are illustrations in point. The Oxford Tractarians, without in any way denying the inspiration of the Epistles or the authority of tradition, were greatly concerned to recall attention to the supreme importance of studying in the Gospels the life and teaching of Christ. The Ritschlian Movement was Christocentric, and in some of its representatives went to extravagant lengths in declaring that it is not Jesus in Himself that counts in religion, but Jesus in His value to the individual soul. Liberal theologians, on the other hand, found proof of Christ's right to claim worship not in miracles or prophecies, but in Himself.

One of the first departures of New Testament criticism and one that called forth much refutation was Das Leben Jesu by David Friedrich Strauss, a German Hegelian. The real impetus of the controversy, however, came from another follower of Hegel, Ferdinand Christian Baur, who constructed the famous Tübingen theory by applying to the sacred writings his master's mode of reasoning that thought forever sets up against each position which it embraces a counter-position, and passes thence to a fuller truth which reconciles them. Baur saw in the view of early Christian history presented in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Catholic Church, whose origin he
professed to describe, the result of a compromise between two contending parties: the Petrine, which believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but clung to Judaism; and the Pauline, which divorced Judaism, aimed at a universal faith, introduced supernatural elements, was victorious over its Petrine rivals, and founded Christianity with all that is contained in the Epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians. While later investigation has not left this theory in possession of the field, Baur set in motion a process which by the end of the period had reached results by no means final yet, up to a certain point, assured.

The energy that primarily gave momentum to the radical forces of nineteenth-century higher criticism came from the rationalists of the seventeenth century, whose leaders were English Deists. The supernatural elements of the New Testament stood squarely against their principles and had to be explained away. German rationalism of the eighteenth century in imitation of English Deism discarded them. Reimarus attributed them to fraud, Paulus to natural causes, Strauss to myths gradually and unconsciously built up by popular religious enthusiasm, and Renan to the romantic imaginations of the early Christians.

Reduced to their least common denominator the ideas of Christ prevailing in France and Germany in the nineteenth century were two. There was the historic person, the Christ who
really lived and died in Judea. Nothing that he said, since he was but a man, could rise above the human. Nothing that he did was other than what man can do. As to any recorded revelations made by him of supernatural truth, any recorded works of his that transcended the powers of nature, any miracles in short — his birth of a virgin and his resurrection from the dead — these things are pure myths. This Christ of History or Mythic Christ, no matter the name, was a man of choice spiritual intuitions, and of high moral nature, a man whose consciousness of the activity of his religious sense was very great and intense, but no more. This is the Christ of Renan, Strauss, Baur, and their fellows. On the other hand, men like Schleiermacher and Ritschl, after profound Kantian cogitation, rejected the historic Christ on the ground that history cannot recognize the superhuman and miraculous power that he possesses and fashioned a Christ independent of scientific knowledge. One must accept Christ because he is conscious that immortal joy is assured him and that Christ is of value in bringing him to that end. Religion is not knowing but feeling, and every new religion is determined by a new feeling or intuition of the world outside self. Christ had such a new intuition. His divinity lay in a consciousness of mediatorship and Godhead. He did not have eternal existence, and did not rise from the dead. He is divine in the complete satisfaction He gives to the Christian conscience. This is the Christ of Experience,
the Ideal Christ, the Christ of Faith.

The Christ of the nineteenth century was indeed the fool of Herod's court. Sometimes it was asserted that He never existed, at others that He was an impostor or a fanatic. Critics in less blasphemous jest made Him the perfect man in close communion with God, the preacher of a pure code of morals based on the universal fatherhood of God.²

Such were in the main the tendencies of Continental Christology in Browning's day. English theology during the first decades of the century was at a standstill, but after German higher criticism crossed the channel there is probably no more significant period of religious thought in England than the fifty years immediately following 1820. One need only mention Whately, Ward, Newman, Pusey, Arnold, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Maurice, to see how very full this period was of vital religious energy.

In 1825 Connop Thirlwall introduced Schleiermacher's A Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke to the English public. Strauss' Das Leben Jesu appeared in 1835, and though the classical version of it was that of George Eliot in 1846, this was not the first translation of the book. In 1843 William G. Ward observed that Strauss' work was selling more than any


*Essays and Reviews* and Renan's *La Vie de Jésus* followed in the early sixties. The publication of *Essays and Reviews* was a shock to many, for it was a declaration by the Broad Church party of their right to free inquiry into the history of the Scriptures, of the Church, and of nature. The volume was a collection of seven dissertations by Dr. Temple of Rugby, Professor Jowett of Oxford, and other English churchmen. At the same time William Colenso, Bishop of Natal, became a subject of great controversy for his publications on the Pentateuch and the Epistles to the Romans. "Heresy is creeping in through very narrow meshes", wrote a British review. "We have the poison of the *Essays and Reviews* creeping in through the veins of the talented, the philosophical, and the learned; we have the false arithmetic of Colenso making the books of Moses a cunningly devised fable; we have Renan's 'History of Christ', in which our Savior is painted in terms so beautiful as to make him a moon-eyed enthusiast and unworthy impostor. Are these

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the times in which we are to remove the landmarks of our fathers?"⁴ Books, pamphlets, and articles were hurled at the "Septem contra Christum", as the contributors of Essays and Reviews were dubbed. Maurice pointed out the chief defect of the volume when he complained of the absence of theology in it. The writers did not recognize "the full revelation of God in Christ". It was Stanley who exposed the Englishman's attitude toward it, "No book which treats of religious questions can hope to make its way to the heart of the English nation unless it gives, at the same time that it takes away."⁵ Mrs. Browning was fearful of the effect the book would have upon faith⁶ and Robert Browning wrote "Gold Hair" to show his indignation.

The outlook for Christianity in the seventies was one of impending peril, for neither science nor culture was inclined to be docile. "Huxley made merry in the monthly reviews, and Matthew Arnold subjected the defenders of traditional theology to successive volleys of Gallic raillery."⁷

How religion rallied literature to her aid in the conflict with science is seen only too well in the works of Matthew Arnold, Newman, Tennyson, and Browning. Though

⁷Hutchinson, op.cit., p.330.
Browning could never close with the theologians on their own ground, poet that he was, he often saw farther and deeper than they. In a letter to Miss Blagden on November 19, 1863, he wrote:

I have just read Renan's Book, and find it weaker and less honest than I was led to expect. I am glad it is written; if he thinks he can prove what he says, he has fewer doubts on the subject than I, but mine are none of his. As to the Strauss school, I don't understand their complacency about the book, he admits many points they have thought it essential to dispute, and substitutes his explanation, which I think impossible. The want of candour is remarkable; you could no more deduce the character of his text from the substance of his notes, than rewrite a novel from simply reading the mottoes at the head of each chapter; they often mean quite another thing, unless he cuts away the awkward part, as in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. His admissions & criticisms on St. John are curious. I make no doubt he imagines himself stating a fact, with the inevitable license, so must John have done. His argument against the genuineness of Matthew, from the reference to what Papias says of the λόγια is altogether too gross a blunder to be believed in a Scholar, and is repeated half a dozen times throughout the book . . . miracles were cheats, and their author a cheat! What do you think of the figure he cuts who makes his hero participate in the wretched affair with Lazarus, and then calls him all the pretty names that follow? Take away every claim to man's respect from Christ and then give him a wreath of gum-roses and calico-lilies or, as Constance says to Arthur in King John "Give Grannam King John and it grannam will give it a plum, an apple and a fig."

Browning spent most of his years after 1846 in Italy. It is surprising, therefore, how keenly alive he was to all that was happening in England. In "Christmas Eve" he made a general survey of the rationalistic tendencies of the day, satirizing the Tübingen School and the Mythic Christ. "A Death in the

"Desert" is a defense of the Beloved Disciple and the authenticity of the fourth Gospel. Renan is one of the speakers of the "Epilogue" to *Dramatis Personae*, and the subject of the poem is Browning's assertion of the essential divinity of Christ in answer to what he regards as the thoroughly negative conclusion of the French theologian. Moreover, he contrasts his own belief with the Tractarian and rationalistic points of view. In "Bishop Blougram's Apology" Cardinal Wiseman under a thin disguise is placed between the Apostle and Luther as types of ardent faith and Strauss as a type of "bold unbelief". The "letters" in "Fears and Scruples" are meant to stand for the Scriptures which the higher critics were challenging.

Whether Browning read these critics in the original remains a disputed question. Mrs. Orr insists that Browning "had no bond of union with the German philosophers but the natural tendencies of his own mind"; that "he knew neither the German philosophers nor their reflection in Coleridge". This assertion, coming as it does from one who knew Browning very well, demands scrutiny in the light of two of his own statements. In a letter to Alfred Domett he writes that he reads German tolerably and is using Schlegel and Tieck's translation of Shakespeare to aid him in the study of the language.

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9 P.462, 11.45-81.
another letter he informs the same friend that certain quarter-
lies contain articles on Leibnitz, Spinoza, and Descartes. The
striking resemblances between Feuerbach's *Wesen des Christen-
tums* and "A Death in the Desert" bear further evidence that
Browning was not completely ignorant of German thought.13

However much Browning was influenced by his age,14 the
true origins of his religious poems are to be found in the more
intimate influences of his environment and association.

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12 Ibid., p.57.
13 Cf. W.O. Raymond, "The Incarnation in the Poetry of Browning" (Doctoral
dissertation, University of Michigan, 1917), chap.v.
14 Professor Raymond traces these influences at length in "Browning and
Higher Criticism", *Publications of the Modern Language Association*,
44:590-621 (June, 1929).
His parents, his native Camberwell, and his wife were the most potent influences in Robert Browning's religious life. His mother, brought up in the Scottish Kirk, was a devout member of the Congregational Church of York Street, Walworth, for the last forty-three years of her life. His father, not so devout, and originally an Anglican, was something of an eighteenth century rationalist, though he was later persuaded to join the church in which his wife worshipped. Both Robert and his only sister, Sarianna, were christened at the York Street Chapel and attended services there regularly, if somewhat reluctantly.

How the influences of Camberwell affected the young poet can only be conjectured. It is worth noticing that his close friend of later years, Benjamin Jowett, was born in the same region, and that John Ruskin, also a South Londoner, was attending Beresford Chapel, Walworth, at the time. More important and significant in its bearing on "Christmas Eve" and some of the other poems, was the general religious atmosphere of South London in those years. Southwark, the Borough, and Camberwell were the high places of Calvinism. "Reverie" in his last volume of poems is, Calvinists say, Browning's profession of the "soul of their philosophy, their theology, and
their dreams". Except for the brief period of his "growing pains", Browning held fast to the evangelical Christianity inculcated by his mother, and became "passionately religious", as he described himself in later years. So his written word attests and most biographers affirm.

His marriage with Elizabeth Barrett deepened in a sense his Christian spirit and doubled his formal nonconformist affiliations. Her convictions are best set forth in her own words: "And talking of Italy and the cardinals, and thinking of some cardinal points you are ignorant of, did you ever hear that I was one of 'those schismatiques of Amsterdam' whom your Dr. Donne would have put into the dykes? unless he meant the Baptists, instead of the Independents, the holders of the Independent church principle. No — not 'schismatical', I hope, hating as I do from the roots of my heart all that rending of the garment of Christ, which Christians are so apt to make the daily week-day of this Christianity so-called — and caring very little for most dogmas and doxies in themselves — too little, as people say to me sometimes, (when they send me 'New Testaments' to learn from, with very kind intentions) — and believing that there is only one church in heaven and earth, with one divine High Priest to it; let exclusive religionists

15 British Weekly, December 20, 1889, as quoted in "Notes and Queries", No. 21, The Browning Society Papers, 3:44*-45* (1889-1890).
16 From Browning's Essay on Shelley, "There are growing pains, accompanied by temporary distortion, of the soul also," ed. Richard Garnett (London, 1903), p. 56. The passage may aptly be applied to Browning when his own views were temporarily distorted by the influence of Shelley and Voltaire.
build what walls they please and bring out what chrisms. But I used to go with my father always, when I was able, to the nearest dissenting chapel of the congregationalists — from liking the simplicity of that praying and speaking without books — and a little too from disliking the theory of state churches. There is a narrowness among the dissenters which is wonderful; an arid, grey Puritanism in the clefts of their souls: but it seems to me clear that they know what the 'liberty of Christ' means, far better than those do who call themselves 'churchmen'; and stand altogether, as a body, on higher ground." \(^\text{17}\) And in another letter: "I like, beyond comparison best, the simplicity of the dissenters, the unwritten prayer, the sacraments administered quietly and without charlatanism! and the principle of the church as they hold it, I hold it too . . . The Unitarians seem to me to throw over what is most beautiful in the Christian Doctrine; but the Formalists, on the other side, stir up a dust, in which it appears excusable not to see." \(^\text{18}\)

In his answer Browning agrees very simply with all that Elizabeth has professed, "Dearest, I know your very meaning in what you said of religion, and responded to it with my whole soul — what you express now is for us both . . . those are my own feelings, my convictions beside — instinct confirmed by


\(^{18}\)Ibid., II, p.427.
Elizabeth's intense personal devotion undoubtedly quickened what was personal in Browning's belief, and gave to that "revelation of God in Christ" which both regarded as what was "most beautiful in the Christian Doctrine" a more vital hold upon his intellectual and imaginative life.

In the "Abstracts of the Proceedings of the Meetings" of the Browning Society is this interesting entry: "Dr. Furnivall had once considered Browning a Christian poet, but had now come to the conclusion that he was a monotheist, with the deepest reverence for all that is noble and beautiful in Christianity. He held that all the passages from 'Karshish', 'Saul', Xc., usually cited to prove Browning a doctrinal Christian, were so plainly dramatic, so clearly belonged to the person for whom the poet was speaking, that he wondered at their being brought forward to prove the poet's personal belief. The poem which decided the question was 'La Saisiaz', where Browning faced the difficulty and spoke for himself. In that there was no Christ, only God; no Trinity, but one God. A doctrinal Christian couldn't have written of his own faith, in such a poem, without putting his Binitarian or Trinitarian doctrine into it. In the earlier Shelley Essay of 1851-2, Browning no doubt spoke for himself too. In that he called Christ a 'Divine Being', and said Shelley would ultimately have become a Christian; but these expressions did not

19 Ibid., II, p.434.
necessitate Christ's Godship, or Shelley's acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, on a subject like this, on which the thought of educated men had moved forward during the last thirty years, a man was to be judged by his last utterance, not his first." 20 The question of Browning's belief in Christ came up again and again in the Society's meetings. 21

Mr. Robert Buchanan in the "Letter Dedicatory" of The Outcast records a pertinent reminiscence. "I well remember the amazement and concern of the late Mr. Browning when I informed him on one occasion that he was an advocate of Christian theology, nay, an essentially Christian teacher and preacher. In the very face of his masterly books, which certainly support the opinion then advanced, I hereby affirm and attest that the writer regarded that expression of opinion as an impeachment and a slight. I therefore put the question categorically, 'Are you not, then, a Christian?' He immediately thundered, 'No!'" 22 Commenting on Buchanan's statement, W. H. Griffin regrets that it was not made in the poet's lifetime that he might have dealt with it himself. 23 In the face of the letter that follows, the thunderous "No!" becomes not less perplexing.

20 Third Meeting, January 27, 1882, The Browning Society Papers, 1:11*-16*.
22 P. 198.
To a lady who wrote to Browning to thank him, before she died, for the help she had derived from his poems, he replied:

19 Warwick Crescent,
London, W.
May 11th, 1876

Dear Friend,

It would ill become me to waste a word on my own feelings except inasmuch as they can be common to us both, in such a situation as you describe yours to be, and which, by sympathy, I can make mine by the anticipation of a few years at most. 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 dare congratulate you. All the help I can offer, in my poor degree, is the assurance that 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 could 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 Napoleon, shutting up the New Testament, said of Christ: "Do you know that I am an understander of men? Well, He was no man!" ("Savez-vous que je me connais en hommes? Eh bien, celui-là ne fut pas un homme.") Or when Charles Lamb, in a gay fancy with some friends as to how he and they would feel if the greatest of the dead were to appear suddenly in flesh and blood once more, on the final suggestion, "And if Christ entered this room?" changed his manner at once, and stuttered out, as his manner was when moved, "You see, if Shakespeare entered, we would all rise; if He appeared we must kneel." Or, not to multiply instances, 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, there, where that lady lives of whom my soul was enamoured." Dear friend, I may have wearied you in spite of your good will. God bless you, sustain, and receive you! Reciprocate this blessing with

Yours affectionately,

Robert Browning. 24

Mr. Griffin explains away the doubt by averring that if Buchanan put in the forefront of Christianity the doctrine which makes a system of rewards and punishments the whole motive of right living, a doctrine that was certainly no part of Browning's creed, Browning probably lost his temper and asserted that if that were Christianity, he was no Christian. 25 The anecdote may be apocryphal, though A. A. Brockington questions such an inference. 26

As if anticipating contention, Browning himself answered his critics in the Essay on Shelley, "In religion one earnest and unextorted assertion of belief should outweigh, as a matter of testimony, many assertions of unbelief". 27

Browning was left much to his own guidance, and though such training was conducive to the free development of his originality, it had its drawback on the intellectual side. His lack of university education is in part responsible for his neglect of a scientific approach to religious questions or the formulation of any systematic evaluation of Christian doctrine. It is precisely this that makes an appraisal of his thought for the most part conjectural.

Though he abandoned dogma, Browning always manifested sympathy with the spirit of his mother's creed. His attitude toward God was one of love and reverence. Mrs. Orr says of

27 Garnett, op. cit., p.67.
him, "He never lost what was for him the consciousness of a supreme Eternal Will." But an eternal Will was not enough to satisfy him. He must have something loving, tender, and personal. He once said to Mrs. Orr: "The evidence of divine power is everywhere about us; not so the evidence of divine love. That love could only reveal itself to the human heart by some supreme act of human tenderness and devotion; the fact or fancy of Christ's cross would alone supply such a revelation." Is, one wonders, "the fact or fancy of Christ's cross" Browning's phrase for the Christ of History and the Christ of Experience? "Love of love", Mrs. Orr explains in her Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, "is an essential element in his theology; and it converts what would otherwise be a pure Theism into a mystical Christianity which again is limited by his rejection of all dogmatic religious truth. . . . Love, according to him, is the necessary channel; since a colourless Omnipotence is outside the conception as outside the sympathies of man. Christ is a message of Divine love, indispensable and therefore true; but He is, as such, a spiritual mystery far more than a definable or dogmatic fact." How Mrs. Orr's interpretation of Browning's idea of the nature of Christ is to be reconciled with two other sayings of his, also cited by her:

29 Ibid.
30 P.6.
is not at all clear. After reading to her the last lines of the "Epilogue" to *Dramatis Personae*,

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows.\(^{31}\)

Browning remarked, "That Face is the Face of Christ. That is how I feel Him."\(^{32}\) A question having arisen concerning the Christian scheme of salvation, Browning is reported to have said: "I know all that may be said against it, on the ground of history, of reason, of even moral sense. I grant even that it may be a fiction. But I am none the less convinced that the life and death of Christ, as Christians apprehend them, supply something which their humanity requires, and that it is true for them."\(^{33}\) Certainly, the Christ whom sincere Christians adore is not merely a "message of divine love".

It is probable that there were times in Browning's life when his faith wavered (What nineteenth century thinker did not have his periods of doubt?), but the evidence of the body of his works lends support to the view that he accepted the main tenets of Christianity. Indeed, the God-Man lies at the very heart of his poetry. To him, unlike so many of his contemporaries, these Scriptural texts, "God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son, so that all who believe in

\(^{31}\)P.540.


\(^{33}\)Ibid., p.879.
Him should not perish, but have life everlasting" (John iii.16) and "I and the Father are one" (John x.30), were not hard sayings. Professor W. O. Raymond is of the opinion that the Incarnation was bound up with the ideals of Browning's own heart, that to him the Incarnation was not merely an historic fact of the past but an ever-present miracle, revealed throughout the ages in the hearts of those who love Him and experience His quickening, regenerating power.

What other critics hold is matter for the next chapter.
CHAPTER III
BROWNING'S CHRIST AS THE CRITICS VIEW HIM

If one were to attempt to express succinctly some eighty or ninety representative opinions of the Christian element in Robert Browning's poetry, he might well choose the terse statement of Professor Corson, that close American friend and admirer of the poet. "Browning's poetry is instinct with the essence of Christianity — the life of Christ." It is strange, then, to find in critical works on Browning so little of the poet's real thought of Christ laid bare. Analyses and commentaries of "Saul", "Karshish", "Christmas Eve", "A Death in the Desert", and "The Sun" abound. True enough, these poems, properly designated the Christ-poems, are the effulgent outbursts of the glory within the poet's soul, but what of the myriad shining gleams that break through? Is not each ray "the very Sun in little"?

Browning is no false prophet, nor is his work, as Santayana claims, the product of an imagination like the imagination active in our dreams, a mere vent for personal preoccupations. His were a sorry Christianity indeed and not at all in keeping with his robust nature if it identified

34 The critics consulted are to be found in the Bibliography, pp. 69 ff.
itself "with one or two Christian ideas arbitrarily selected" and if at heart it had "more affinity to the worship of Thor or of Odin than to the religion of the Cross". A definite and devout Christianity shines through Robert Browning's poetry, every careful reader of his volumes will attest; but few of the critics reviewed, ranging from contemporary to present-day writers, have paused to look at the Christ Browning worshipped—a task vastly important it seems when one recalls the toils through which nineteenth century theology was passing.

Browning's impact with Renan, Strauss, and others has been noted and much has been written on his impatience with higher criticism, but the very Fountainhead whence came his happier inspirations is hidden in the tangle of historical evidences.

A survey of how others have brought study to bear on the Christ-theme in Robert Browning's poetry may well precede an evaluation of the theme in the light of Catholic doctrine. From the very beginning Browning's critics divided themselves into two camps, those who like Dr. Berdoe made theological treatises of the poet's volumes, and those who like Dr. Furnivall refused to acknowledge his theological bent. That was in the days of the Browning Society, but the tradition has survived to our day, with less tendency perhaps of putting Browning "on the side of the angels". There are those who

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38 Ibid., p.206.
39 Ibid.
find him shallow, his knowledge leading to "insufficient faith
in God and in Christ, and his love . . . not the law of chari-
ty as taught in the Gospels"; 40 or who declare that he "dresses
a worldly and easy philosophy in the forms of spiritual faith
and so deceives the troubled seekers after the higher life". 41
He still has his staunch defenders who affirm that his poetry
reveals "a deeply Christian thinker with definite belief in
the divinity of Christ" 42 and that his "belief in dogma was so
complete that in spite of an occasional tinge of Protestant
feeling, it would be today the Catholic Church alone that
could claim him as an exponent of her faith". 43

This is a strong statement of Mrs. Maisie Ward's, and
stimulating in the face of comments like these: "The great
strength of Browning, as a leader of thought in the nineteenth
century, lies . . . in his acceptance of the Christian faith—
not, be it understood, his acceptance of the doctrines of any
school of theology, or in adherence to any dogmatic creed"; 44
and "No Church can label him and pack him away in its cabinet". 45

Of Browning's depth and dogmatic, or rather undogmatic,

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40 John Kickaby, S.J., "Browning as a Religious Teacher", The Month,
68:187 (February, 1890). Cf. W.F.P. Stockley, "Browning on Faith and
Morals", Thought, 1:513-537 (December, 1926).
41 More, op.cit., p.165.
42 Mrs. Maisie Ward, The Wilfrid Wards and the Transition, I. The Nine-
43 Ibid.
44 W.G. Kingsland, Robert Browning, Chief Poet of the Age (London, 1890), p.79.
proclivities Saintsbury says in *Corrected Impressions*: "Indeed, it was not much of a philosophy, this which the poet half echoed from and half taught to the second half of the nineteenth century. A sort of undogmatic Theism heightened by a very little undogmatic Christianity; a theory of doing and living more optimist than Carlylism and less fantastic than Ruskinism, but as vague and as unpractical as either; a fancy for what is called analogy and a marvellous gift of rhetorical exposition, — these made it up. It looks vast enough in form and colour at a distance; it shrinks and crumbles up pretty small when you come to examine it." 46 Professor Saintsbury looks both ways, for in another book written a little later he says, "If he was not exactly what is commonly called orthodox in religion, and if his philosophy was of a distinctly vague order, he was always 'on the side of the angels' in theology, in metaphysics, in ethics". 47

In fine contrast to Santayana's denunciation of Browning's work as the pagan product of an imagination lacking the control of reason is the fairer judgment of James Thomson: "One of the most remarkable characteristics of his [Browning's] genius is his profound, passionate, living, triumphant faith in Christ . . . Thoroughly familiar with all modern doubts

46 (London, 1895), pp. 113-114.
and disbeliefs, he tramples them all underfoot, clinging to the
Cross; and this with the full cooperation of his fearless rea-
son, not in spite of it and by its absolute surrender or sup-
pression". 48 Thomson wrote his essay in the early eighties, and
lest his words be considered mere adulatory chaff, like much
that came from the Browning Society, we add a comment from the
judicious and discriminating pages of Professor William Clyde
de Vane's latest book. In discussing "Easter Day" in which
Browning builds his conception of man's direct relation to
Christ, Professor De Vane says: "The only worthy evidence for
faith," as Browning saw it, "is Love — not human love, which
like Art is only a reflection, though of a most valuable sort, of a
greater light — but Divine Love, such as God showed in
sending His Son to live and die among men. . . . Browning has
here [in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day ], for the first time,
reasoned out his characteristic religious ideas, the ideas
which inform all of his religious and philosophical poems..."49

In the Introduction to the Study of Browning which,
Mr. Somervell believes, "may be taken as typical of the atti-
tude to Browning which was becoming orthodox among the wide
public by 1880 and remained so through the first decade of the

twentieth century", Arthur Symons says: "In richness of nature, in scope and penetration of mind and vision . . . he is probably second among English poets to Shakespeare alone . . . Mr. Browning's Christianity is wider than our creeds, and is all the more vitally Christian in that it never descends into pietism." Symons' book was published in 1886; and 1891 saw the publication of Sir Henry Jones' profound study, Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher. In 1900 the authorities at Cambridge set "Robert Browning as a Religious Teacher" as the subject for the Burney Essay Prize. It was won by A. C. Pigou who shows deeper penetration than most critics. He discusses Browning's attitude toward the fundamental doctrines of the Incarnation and Crucifixion which "In the light of Saul, Christmas Eve, and the conclusion of An Epistle may be expressed in the words of St. Paul that 'Christ Jesus, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross'"; and inquires first, what position Browning assigned to them as a means for revealing the truth about God's eternal

51 P.1.
nature, and secondly, whether he believed them to be true in themselves. Though in some parts of "A Death in the Desert" Browning implies that the doctrine can be reached in no other way than through the Gospel story, he appears to take a contradictory stand when John bids, not everybody, but only those whose eyes are too weak to bear the naked light of perfect truth, reverently to pore over the Gospel narrative, till the infinite power and self-sacrificing love of God grow visible through it. The contradiction becomes more marked in Paracelsus, "Saul", "Christmas Eve", The Ring and the Book, and the later poems, where the doctrine of divine love is deduced, independently of the Christian revelation, from the ideal of love which man finds in himself. In other words, Browning believed that man is capable of beating out the doctrine for himself, without reference to the historical records of the Christian faith. Thus Mr. Pigou continues through the whole chapter, showing now this view then that, and concluding with a justification for Browning's apparent contradiction: "On the one hand, we have been led to believe that Browning accepts both the theology and the history of Christianity, and, on the other that he is prepared definitely to accept nothing. . . . Just as in his doctrine of God, so also in his view of Christianity and of all the problems of philosophy, he takes by turns two positions, first, that of a person who has opinions, and, secondly, that of one examining into the
validity of those opinions. From the practical point of view he declares that he does in fact believe certain things, but, on passing to the metaphysical standpoint, candidly confesses that he has no business to do so. 53

Mr. Pigou's words may be aptly applied to the conflicting views taken by all the poet's critics. As is your mind, so is your search. The theist will not find what the pantheist finds, nor the monist see what the anthropomorphist sees. There are those who declare — and they are the greater number — that Browning professed theism. 54 V.D. Scudder, E. Dowden, and others believe he leaned toward pantheism. 55 A. H. Strong says, "Browning is a monist, not a pantheist", 56 and he supports his assertion with Professor Jones' exposition of Browning's philosophy. He also maintains that Browning is "at war with the anthropomorphism which would degrade God to the level of human appetites and passions." 57 W. P. Merrill finds in "Christmas Eve" that Browning "passes from crude

53 Ibid., p.45.
54Cf. W.H. Griffin, The Life of Robert Browning, p.294; Josiah Royce, "Browning's Theism", The Boston Browning Society Papers, 1886-1897 (New York, 1897), pp.7-34; Mrs. Sutherland Orr, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, p.28. The Reverend John Rickaby, S.J. and Dr. Berdee find Browning a Christian theist. Dr. Furnivall's opinion is given on pp.15-16 of this paper.
56The Great Poets and Their Theology (Philadelphia, 1897), p.423.
57Ibid., p.393.
anthropomorphism through agnosticism to a spiritual anthropomorphism, as the only satisfactory theology". In explaining away certain objections that might be made on Browning's teaching, J. A. Hutton affirms what Browning himself says in one of his poems, that "faith must always be hard to hold; faith is the contradiction of many signs". But "his faith in the intuitive testimony of the heart to the existence of a loving, self-sacrificing God, working with redemptive and transfiguring power in human experience, never wavers", is the opinion of Professor Raymond in perhaps the most achieving recent article written on Robert Browning. "Browning's apologia for Christianity", he continues, "is to evaluate it as a living experience rather than as a historical creed." He believes that Browning's basic attitude toward Christianity is largely determined by his perception of the deep, underlying cleavage between knowledge and reason on the one hand and love (often equivalent to faith) on the other. This cleavage of reason from love "may be traced throughout Browning's reflection on the cardinal doctrines of Christianity. Whenever he is on the ground of historical evidences, there is a note

58Faith and Sight (New York, 1900), p.143.
"You must mix some uncertainty
  With faith if you would have faith be."
61Ibid., p.608.
of uncertainty and ambiguity in his utterance, for which his sceptical theory of knowledge is directly responsible. On the other hand, whenever he dwells on the inner witness of the heart to the universal truth of Christianity, he is absolutely unfaltering in his convictions." Dr. Raymond (a member of the Anglican Church) thinks Browning "went too far in his abnegation of reason. At times it seemed to drive him almost to the position of denying that there is any real historical validity in the evidences we have of the actual events of the life of Jesus on earth. I do not think that was really his position, but what he wanted to insist upon was that the real proof of Christ's Incarnation was independent of historical, analytic research and the findings of the intellect. In 'Saul' he arrives at the truth of the Incarnation a priori, his argument being based upon the divine necessity of a God whose primary attribute is infinite love revealing himself through suffering and self-sacrifice. Spiritually and undogmatically, therefore, I would say that Browning through his poetic and religious intuition, achieves the Catholic consciousness that no merely rationalistic analysis of Christianity ever can reveal the core and heart of Christian faith." 

The substance of Professor De Reul's discussion of the Christianity of Robert Browning is clinched in the following

62 Ibid., p. 609.
63 Quoted from a letter to the writer.
passage from "The Art and Thought of Robert Browning": "Here, as much as I have emphasized that no poet is more Christian in spirit, as much must I emphasize that he is a very undogmatic, unorthodox Christian. . . . Browning is so much a Christian in spirit that orthodox critics do not for a moment suspect in him anything like a heretic." 64

Who shall say which holds the truth? "The final estimate of Browning . . . is certainly not that of 1930 any more than it was that of 1890." 65

D. C. Somervell opens the article from which this last quotation was taken with a passage which the reader of today will appreciate the more when he recalls what a motley group (in a religious and philosophic sense) those learned clergymen and Victorian ladies were, who passed judgment on Robert Browning in the nineties and the first decade of the twentieth century. "It has been said that the first generation stones its prophets and the next generation builds their sepulchres. That may have been true of the stubborn and tenacious Hebrews, but we moderns are more like St. Paul's Athenians. In these days the preliminary lapidation is generally a harmless and perfunctory affair, and the honorific sepulchres are erected in good time — cenotaphs one might call them — while their prospective occupants can still enjoy these symbols of their

64 The Rice Institute Pamphlet, 13:279 (October, 1926).
65 Somervell, op.cit., p.131.
brief and delusive immortality. The stoning comes afterwards, and is sometimes directed against the sepulchre as much as against its occupant. Some of the shots that have hit Browning were apparently aimed at the Browning Society.\footnote{Ibid., p.122}

Mr. Somervell's last sentence is itself a well-aimed shot. Shafts of criticism — sometimes justified, often not — are still being hurled at Browning's religion, and will continue to fly as long as critics dispute whether or not Browning was orthodox in his religious beliefs. Certainly, his faith had little to do with formal Creeds, but Christ was its center and the source and inspiration of his most rapturous utterances. "Nothing," says the Reverend Hilarin Felder, O.M.Cap. in Christ and the Critics, "is more adapted to deepen and strengthen the orthodox point of view than to rivet one's gaze upon the God-Man." \footnote{(New York, 1924), I, p.10.}

At this point, therefore, it becomes necessary to look at Christ as He appears in the pages of Browning's poetry.
CHAPTER IV
CHRIST IN BROWNING'S POETRY

Browning's first reference to Christ appears in Pauline. In this poem he relives through about a thousand lines his victory over the forces of doubt, skepticism, and egoism that harassed his soul from 1826, when he discovered Voltaire and took to reading Shelley's poetry, to 1832, the year he conceived the idea of the poem. His cry to the God-Man,

O thou pale form ... 69

when faith, hope, and love are restored to him is the more significant because of the autobiographical character of the poem. That vision of Christ was to become for Browning an ever-growing vision; in Christ he was to find the solution of all problems "in the earth and out of it".

His next allusion is in Aprile's dying speech:

Yes; I see now. God is the perfect poet,
Who in his person acts his own creations. 70

The idea of the Incarnation is made unmistakable in the lines added in a later edition of the poem, but afterward rejected:

Man's weakness is his glory for the strength
Which raises him to heaven and near God's self
Came spite of it: God's strength his glory is,
For thence came with our weakness sympathy,
Which brought God down to earth, a man like us.71

69Quoted on p.1 of this paper.
Just before Sordello's death, Browning comes forward to declare what the supreme need of his hero's life has been:

Ah my Sordello, I this once befriend
And speak for you. Of a Power above you still
Which, utterly incomprehensible,
Is out of rivalry, which thus you can
Love, tho' unloving all conceived by man—
What need! And of . . .

. . . . a Power its representative
Who, being for authority the same,
Communication different, should claim
A course, the first chose but the last revealed—
This Human clear, as that Divine concealed—
What utter need! . . . 72

Commentators are of the opinion that the reference to "representative power" is an allusion to Christ. Professor Dowden maintains in his analysis of the poem that Sordello's need "was that of a revelation of the Divine in the Human, of the Christ of God". 73 Fotheringham, inclined to yield credence, wavers in the belief that the passage "implies the need of faith in some transcendent and present Power, whose excellence is the meaning of all good, the ground of all duty, and the inspiration of all love"; 74 whereas David Duff does not hesitate to assert: "It is impossible to find in this passage the slightest hint of Christian dogma. The representative Power on earth and the incomprehensible Power above are of absolutely distinct essence." 75

72 P.170, 11.46-59.
There is very little explicit Christianity in these early poems, and though the passages quoted from Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello embody Browning's favorite doctrine of love as "the central principle of the moral consciousness, the transcendent virtue which harmonizes the conflicting tendencies and solves the perplexing antithesis of life, the bond of unity which links the individual with humanity and God", they set forth also his perception of the supreme revelation of this love in the person of Him to whom the speaker in "Count Gismond" prays,

Christ God who savest man . . . 77

Not until ten years later, in 1850, does Browning speak of Christ again. This time it is in "Christmas-Eve", a long poem dedicated solely to the God-Man. In it Browning reviews three distinct Christian points of view on the birth of Jesus, the nonconformist, the Catholic, and the rationalistic. There is much in the poem that one should rather not find there, but the unwavering assertion of Christ's essential divinity manifest throughout covers to a degree these unfortunate parts. Christ is more than a mere moral ideal or type of human goodness, Browning makes clear. He is very God and very Man. The vision of Christ is portrayed with fine religious reverence, introduced by majestic lines that suggest the splendor and

77 P. 334, 1.1.
purity of the Presence that is to follow.

All at once I looked up with terror.
He was there.
He himself with his human air. 78

A more impressive passage is the description of the elevation of the Host at High Mass in St. Peter's, that "miraculous Dome of God",

Earth breaks up, time drops away,
In flows heaven, with its new day
Of endless life, when He who trod,
Very man and very God,
This earth in weakness, shame and pain,
Dying the death whose signs remain
Up yonder on the accursed tree,—
Shall come again, no more to be
Of captivity the thrall,
But the one God, All in all,
King of kings, Lord of lords,
As His servant John received the words,
"I died, and live for evermore!" 79

The Christmas Eve discourse of the German professor deals more definitely with the person and nature of Christ and discloses Browning's attitude toward higher criticism. The professor arrives at a strictly positivist conclusion. When from the life of Jesus, the foreign matter introduced by the myth is strained off, there is

. . . left, for residuum
A Man! — a tight true man, however,
Whose work was worthy a man's endeavour:
Work, that gave warrant almost sufficient
To his disciples, for rather believing
He was just omnipotent and omniscient,

78 P. 419, ll. 61 ff.
79 P. 420, ll. 100-112.
Browning does not discuss the problems of New Testament criticism from the historical standpoint. His argument is that if Christ were not divine, He would cease to be an object of worship. If Christ were only a revealor of moral truth, He would be merely one among many teachers. On what grounds, Browning asks, did He claim to be "one with the Creator" and "a ruler of mankind"? How can such a claim be reconciled with His wisdom and goodness? Does the moral preeminence of Christ entitle Him to worship? Here the poet considers two alternatives: Was the goodness of Christ self-gained, or did God inspire it? If self-gained, it brought to light qualities already existing in the world, making Christ our "Saint". If His goodness was God-inspired, it was only a gift like all other gifts that come from God. Can any multiplication of gifts, Browning reasons, avail to "Make creator creature"? Then follows his most pregnant argument for the divinity of Christ. Christ's precept did not run

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\text{\ldots \ldots Believe in good,}
\]
\[
\text{In justice, truth, now understood}
\]
\[
\text{For the first time \ldots ,}
\]

but

\[
\text{\ldots \ldots Believe in me,}
\]
\[
\text{Who lived and died; yet essentially}
\]
\[
\text{Am Lord of Life \ldots .} \quad 81
\]

80 P.423, 11.64-72.
81 P.425, 11.16 ff.
"Easter-Day", a companion poem to "Christmas-Eve", centers the discussion more particularly on the poet's own faith. His doubts are wrestled over in company with a friend until the fifteenth stanza. At this point he recounts what purports to be a vision in which he is taught through his choice of earth that all the power and beauty and glory of earth fail completely to satisfy, but when love is attained God is revealed. Contrite and broken, the poet is confronted not by Christ the Judge but by Christ the Savior:

Then did the form expand, expand —
I knew Him through the dread disguise
As the whole God within His eyes
Embraced me. . . . .

But Easter-Day breaks! But
Christ rises! Mercy every way
Is infinite,— and who can say? 82

In Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day Browning first formulated his interpretation of Christianity, and after 1850 it was hardly possible for him to write without referring in some way to the background of his religious thought. His next long argumentative poem on the subject is "A Death in the Desert", a defense of the Gospel of John. Nine years before the publication of this poem, however, Browning manifested his interest in the story of the fourth Gospel in "An Epistle of Karshish", the closing lines of which,

82 P.437, 11.1 ff.
The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—
So, through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
Thou hast no power nor mayest conceive of mine,
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"
The madman saith He said so: it is strange, 83

sum up the conception of the Incarnation based on the power
and love of God set forth in the fifth stanza of "Christmas-
Eve",

For the loving worm within its clod,
Were diviner than a loveless god
Amid his worlds . . . ; 84

and the eighteenth stanza of "Saul",

'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh,
that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: a Hand like this
hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the
Christ stand! 85

"Cleon", "Holy-Cross Day", "The Heretic's Tragedy", and
"Bishop Blougram's Apology" also appeared in Browning's.
original volumes of Men and Women (1855), and are written in
the tradition of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day and "A Death in
the Desert". Cleon is a complementary poem to "Karshish". It
was natural for Browning, after describing how Christianity in
its infancy would appear to a detached, scientific Arab

83 P.445, 11.1 ff.
84 P.418, 11.23-25.
85 P.244, 11.58-62.
physician like Karshish, to imagine how a cultured and philo-
sophical Greek would feel about the advent of Christianity.
Christ's purpose in coming into the world was not alone to
show men God's love, but also to show them what they might be-
come. By His Incarnation He reveals

The worth both absolute and relative
Of all his children from the birth of time,
His instruments for all appointed work. 86

Cleon's soul is not satisfied with Zeus, but yearns for a
living revelation of God.

Long since, I imaged, wrote the fiction out,
That he or other god descended here
And, once for all, showed simultaneously
What, in its nature, never can be shown,
  Piecemeal or in succession . . . 87

He has heard of Paulus and Christus, but who can suppose that
a mere barbarian Jew

Hath access to a secret shut from us? 88

His conclusion is the opposite of the glad, hopeful faith of
Karshish, yet the negative deductions of the Greek lend addi-
tional force to what Browning felt he must and did find in
Christ.

"Holy-Cross Day" and "The Heretic's Tragedy" both cul-
minate like "Karshish" and "Cleon" in a glimpse of Christ.

But here instead of being approached by way of lofty

87 Ibid., 11.10-14.
88 Ibid., p.471, 1.63.
meditation, the vision is wrung from grim tragedy. The supposed deathbed utterance of Rabbi Ben Ezra which concludes "Holy-Cross Day" is, to use Mrs. Orr's description of it, "an invocation to the justice, and to the sympathy of Christ. It claims His help against the enemies who are also His own. It concedes, as possible, that He was in truth the Messiah, crucified by the nation of which He claimed a crown." The poem ends with a note of confidence in God. Similarly, when John the apostate in "The Heretic's Tragedy" calls

On the Name, he had cursed with, all his life—
To the Person, he bought and sold again—

we are made to feel that his prayer was not in vain.

Except for the one phrase, "The Way, the Truth, the Life", there is no direct reference to Christ in "Bishop Blougram's Apology". When Blougram asks,

'What think ye of Christ,' friend? ...

he has in mind the modern Christian faith which he is defending.

In "A Death in the Desert", published in Dramatis Personae (1864), Browning continues to represent Christianity as a

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90 P.369, 11.35-36.

91 P.458, 1.47.

92 P.463, 1.31.
religion of the spirit, with love as its inspiring motive. He revolts against the idea that the Christian faith can be destroyed by an attack upon the supernatural. John held, we are told in the "glossa", that the soul of man is a trinity, "three souls which make one soul": first, a soul seated in and controlling the body and its outward action, known as "What Does"; second, a soul residing in the brain and known as "What Knows"; third, a soul, constituting man's self and known as "What Is". These form an ascending scale, Browning explains, the lower leading up to and being subordinate to the higher. As the intellectual soul within the brain employs the "collected use" of the animal soul that sways the body, so the spiritual soul is lord of both and uses them as its instruments. This last is the divine in man, which is immortal and unites him with God. This belief of Browning's is the starting point for a contrast between the knowledge of Christ derived from the evidence of the senses and the knowledge of Him which comes from the depths of a spiritual experience. As John lies at the point of death, it is to the imperishable spiritual soul that his life has withdrawn itself. Aroused by his disciples, he sends it back with an effort to reillumine the brain and the senses. The testimony of the senses arrested for a moment from decay makes him aware of his own formal personal identity and that of his followers. The

93 P.504, 11.33 ff.
personal intercourse of John with Jesus represents the experience of the senses which the Disciple connects with the lowest of the three souls. This knowledge of Christ ends with His death. But the withdrawal of the direct evidence of the senses is in reality a gain, for it leads to a more intimate and spiritual realization of Christ and allows faith and love to grow.

Such ever was love's way: to rise, it stoops.

To me, that story — ay, that Life and Death
Of which I wrote 'it was' — to me, it is.94

John's understanding of the words and deeds of Christ had grown with his removal from them. The testimony of "What Does" is replaced by the higher witness of "What Knows". He beheld the miracles of Jesus, but his grasp of Christ's personality was so weak that when the hour of betrayal came he forsook Him and fled. Nevertheless, when the visible Presence was withdrawn, the knowledge of Jesus had enabled the weakest disciple to endure trials far more severe. In "What Is", therefore, John finds the ultimate assurance of the truth of Christianity.

In "A Death in the Desert", as in "Christmas-Eve" and "Saul", the spiritual presence of Christ is identified with God's revelation of Himself as love,

The love that tops the might, the Christ in God.95

94 P.505, 11.6, 80-81.
95 P.506, 1.56.
It is singular that the last word in "A Death in the Desert" rests not with John nor the man Cerinthus who hears the great confession, but with him who adds the final note, Browning himself:

If Christ, as thou affirmest, be of men
Mere man, the first and best but nothing more,—
Account Him, for reward of what He was,
Now and forever, wretchedest of all.
For see; Himself conceived of life as love,
Conceived of love as what must enter in,
Fill up, make one with His each soul He loved:
Thus much for man's joy, all men's joy for Him.
Well, He is gone, thou sayest, to fit reward.
But by this time are many souls set free,
And very many still retained alive:
Nay, should His coming be delayed awhile,
Say, ten years longer (twelve years, some compute)
See if, for every finger of thy hands,
There be not found, that day the world shall end,
Hundreds of souls, each holding by Christ's word
That He will grow incorporate with all,
With me as Pamphylax, with him as John,
Groom for each bride! Can a mere man do this?
Yet Christ saith, this He lived and died to do.
Call Christ, then, the illimitable God,
Or lost!" 96

The "Epilogue" to the volume expresses the same idea in lyrical form. David, the first speaker, presents symbolically the point of view of one who believes in the special revelation of religious truths; the second speaker, represented by Renan, shows the disillusionment of special revelation and its attendant hopelessness; the third speaker, Browning himself, restores the lost ideal, not by reinstating a special revelation but by recognizing the revelation that comes to every

96 P.511, 11.80 ff.
human being, the Christ of the spirit:

That one Face, far from vanish rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose. 97

In "Christmas-Eve" Browning places side by side two related yet distinct arguments for what he conceives to be the essence of religion and which may be traced throughout his subsequent poetry: the love of God which is found within the heart of man — "God's ultimate gift" independent of revelation — and the love of God which is revealed in Christ. The first argument runs through practically all of Browning's religious poems; the second is his proof for the divinity of Christ, which is continued in "Easter-Day" and forms the central theme of "A Death in the Desert".

Both arguments merge in the soliloquy of the Pope in The Ring and the Book and in Ferishtah's fancy about "The Sun". Pope Innocent's central conviction, as Browning sets it forth, is that the spirit of God is incarnate in humanity.

"I have said ye are Gods",— shall it be said for nought? 98

The narrative of the life and death of Jesus corroborates and sets a seal upon the larger truth of the eternal revelation of God as love, the unceasing pouring forth of His spirit,

The divine instance of self-sacrifice
That never ends and aye begins for man? 99

98 P.856, 1.89.
The tale of Christ "in the world's mouth", Pope Innocent finds credible and loves it with his heart:

... unsatisfied,
I try it with my reason, nor discept
From any point I probe and pronounce sound. 100

Browning makes the same point in "The Sun" when he has Ferishtah inform his disciple that the tale which has come to his ears that "God once assumed on earth a human shape" supplies the evidence of God's love required by reason. Man is so constituted that he must praise, Ferishtah says. His gratitude must go to something outside himself. Let us suppose, he contends, that the ancients were right in thinking the sun was God, the Author of all life. We eat a fig; we are pleased and give thanks to the gardener. But our gratitude does not stop here. We

Go up above this giver . . .

... ...
To some prime giver — here assumed yon orb —
Who takes my worship. ... 101

When Ferishtah arrives thus far in his reasoning, the sun is no longer a ball of fire, a mass of dead matter:

... Whom have I in mind,
Thus worshipping, unless a man, my like
Howe'er above me? Man, I say — how else,
I being man who worship? . . . 102

He goes on to explain that every expression of love on man's

100 P.856, 11.53-55.
101 P.1222, 11.59-65.
102 Ibid., 11.65-68.
part is a failure unless there is a loving God. But in order that God may love us He must understand us, and He can understand us only when He becomes like us. This limits God in a sense, the dervish admits, but he is willing to concede the point if only he can arrive at the idea of the Incarnation. Though another may be convinced that such an Incarnation has taken place, Ferishtah himself must stand appalled at the conception, needing it but not comprehending it.

Although the person of Christ is never specifically mentioned in the "Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville", the argument for the necessity of the Incarnation of God may be deduced from the story of Prometheus. Before Prometheus brought fire from heaven men strove to understand the nature of the sun. But once a spark was obtained, then the sun's self was made palpable. 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 ... 103

The story of Prometheus some commentators believe, is a type of Christ's revelation of God to man. Not the absolute blinding vision of God, which no mortal eye could bear, but God incarnate is for mankind the essential unfolding of God's nature. The inference is plausible, since the passage seems to

103 P.1250, 11.71 ff.
continue the idea begun in "The Sun".

Whatever Browning's innermost conviction was, one thing is certain: he made a fair enough attempt to make clear his stand, and whenever he treats of the great central truth of Christianity, whether in the guise of pagan, Christian, or Jew, he is always reverent and sincere. Creation reveals infinite knowledge and infinite power, he reasons, but not infinite love, not even the self-sacrificing love the human heart is capable of. Here, then, is an inexplicable gap in the universe. But there is a transcending tale of the love of God, which bridges the chasm and makes the conception of God complete, a reality. Browning believes this tale, and loves it with his heart, and probes it with his reason, and finds it true. So much is plain. But the lover of Browning, reasoning to a conclusion, inquires, Is the Christ Browning limns so sympathetically the Christ of apostolic belief? An adequate test, the only one indeed, to determine the nature of Browning's Christ is to hold Him up to the doctrine which some critics believe Browning despised; and others, that he came close to embracing.
CHAPTER V

BROWNING'S CHRIST IN THE LIGHT OF CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Browning lived in an age that reduced Christ to a mere man, denying Him His knowledge that He was God and the Redeemer of fallen humanity, and making His doctrine an imperfect human expression of His contact with the divine Unknowable through a kind of "religious sense". The religious poetry of Browning reflects his age with its doubts and heresies, and its controversies over the Savior. If, then, one is to evaluate justly this portion of the poet's work, he must find a doctrinal standard that has withstood all doubt and heresy and controversy.

Such a doctrine is not far to seek, for the Catholic Church has stood firm and undaunted amid the confusion raging around her, and her teaching is peculiarly definite and explicit. Christ was and is God the Son made man for us, she teaches. He knew that He was God and that His work was to redeem the fallen race. His teaching is a revelation by which God's truth is entrusted to man to uplift and save him. His miracles are facts, and were wrought to attest His divinity. He intended to found, and did found, a corporate body or Church to perpetuate His teaching throughout the ages and to convey His redemptive merits to individual souls. He is, as the Church declares, "God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the
Father, by whom all things are made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. ... And the third day He arose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And He shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead. Whose kingdom shall have no end." 104

"The thing which the Nicene Creed undertook to express," observes J. W. Powell in The Confessions of a Browning Lover, "remains the one religious truth which has power to make God real and vital to human experience, and thus to satisfy the deepest longings of the soul. In making this the foundation stone of his art Browning becomes perhaps the most significant spiritual teacher of the nineteenth century." 105 Spiritual teacher though he was, Browning always wrote as poet, never as theologian. In a theological sense, it is undeniably true that Cardinal Newman was "the most significant spiritual teacher of the nineteenth century". The strong evangelical influences of his childhood color Browning's religious poems and, although on a formal basis his traditions are poles apart from the traditions of Cardinal Newman and the Oxford Movement, there is, nevertheless, a real spiritual alignment between Browning's attitude toward Christianity and Newman's. How like Browning's

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104 The Nicene Creed.
105 (New York, 1918), p.156.
prayer to Christ in Pauline, reads this one of Cardinal Newman, "The gentle and tender expression of that Countenance is no new beauty, or created grace; it is but the manifestation, in a human form, of Attributes which have been from everlasting. Thou canst not change, O Jesus; and, as Thou art still Mystery, so wast Thou always Love. I cannot comprehend Thee more than I did, before I saw Thee on the Cross; but I have gained my lesson. I have before me the proof, that in spite of Thy awful nature, and the clouds and darkness which surround it, Thou canst think of me with a personal affection. Thou hast died, that I might live. 'Let us love God,' says Thy Apostle, 'because He first hath loved us.' I can love Thee now from first to last, though from first to last I cannot understand Thee. As I adore Thee, O Lover of souls, in Thy humiliation, so will I admire Thee and embrace Thee in Thy infinite and everlasting power." 106

The higher criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Browning came to know it, was a destructive analysis of the historic foundations of Christianity with reason as its tool — reason being identified with the cold, logical intellect, the head as apart from the heart, the mind as untouched by faith or emotion. Browning felt that Christianity rests upon something deeper than historical evidence, that it is not

merely the Jesus of history that constitutes the essence of the
Christian faith, but also His abiding Presence in the hearts of
His disciples throughout the ages. The historic fact confirms
the ever-present miracle of the spirit. This belief is made
clear in "A Death in the Desert" where he has St. John say:

To me, that story — ay, that Life and Death
Of which I wrote 'it was'— to me, it is;
— Is, here and now; I apprehend nought else.
Is not God now i' the world His power first made?
Is not His love at issue still with sin,
Visibly when a wrong is done on earth?
Love, wrong, and pain, what see I else around?
Yea, and the Resurrection and Uprise
To the right hand of the throne. 107

Here Browning comes close to Catholic doctrine. Christ by His
Redemption became our new spiritual head (Rom.v.18), and the
fruits of the Redemption, the merits and satisfactions of Jesus
Christ, are not merely imputed to us externally; they must be
communicated internally, and made our own. But the Pope in
The Ring and the Book, even though he loves the story of that
Life and Death with his heart, questions whether it be

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. 108

It fulfills a human need,

... so my heart be struck,

What care I? ... 109

109 Ibid., 11.18-19.
This looks like pure pragmatism. However, Browning's position may be explained in that he did not question New Testament sources so much as he tried to minimize the historical argument in order to give greater force to his own idea that the Christian faith does not rest solely on historical evidence but also on personal experience.

Doubt the "tale" as he may, Browning is paradoxically sure that Jesus is God. "Jesus Christ!" Pompilia prays

Of whom men said with mouths Thyself mad'st once,  
'He hath a devil' . . . 110

Jesus  
... brought the dead to life111 and wrought many other wonders. 112 He is the "Word", 113

110 P.797, 11.70-72.  
111 P.507, 1.18.  
112 Some critics maintain that Browning did not believe in miracles. The truth is that he does not concern himself much about the nature of miracles. His argument in "A Death in the Desert" is that miracles were performed in Christ's day because they were a means of strengthening faith, though their true nature was probably not known to those who believed in them. The following are the miracles of Christ mentioned in the poetry:  
(2) The nativity star: "Pompilia", p.797, 1.36; "The Pope", p.858, 1.75.  
(3) The darkness at the time of His death: "Easter-Day", p.430, 1.24.  
(6) The cure of Peter's mother-in-law: "Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis", p.618, 1.28 (Browning errs in saying "Peter's wife's sister").  
(9) His walking on the sea: "A Death in the Desert", p.507, 1.18; "Pompilia", p.783, 11.52-54.  
(10) The power of working miracles granted to His apostles: "Guiseppe Caponsacchi", p.769, 1.2; "Guido", p.870, 1.32.


116 Ibid.
117 Ibid., p.425, 1.20.
122 Ibid., p.512, 1.18.
126 Ibid., p.420, 1.109.
indirectly, to Browning's belief in a divine Savior, a Savior, moreover, as shown in "A Death in the Desert" who is Christ in God and God in Christ, not Christ of God. It is the clear declaration of Scripture, "Believe you not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me?" (John xiv.11), that Browning accepts. Circuminession, the doctrine is called by theologians. This explains Sordello's need in another light. The

... Power its representative
Who, being for authority the same,
Communication different ... ,

is rather Christ in God and not Christ of God, as Professor Dowden avers. 129 If the "acknowledgment of God in Christ" does not mean "exactly the divinity of Christ", 130 one wonders what interpretation Professor De Reul does give to the passage.

Nor does Browning doubt the humanity of Christ. He speaks of Him as very God and very man. 131 Caponsacchi chides the court

For all misapprehending ignorance
O' the human heart, much more the mind of Christ. 132

There is frequent mention of the Holy Infant 133 and the Mother of God. 134

128 P. 509, l.37.
129 Cf. p.35 of this study.
131 "Christmas-Eve", p.420, l.67.
133 Cf. Luria, p.384, l.26; "Count Guido Franceschini", p.746, 11.1,58,75; p.747, l.1; "Pompilia", p.797, l.38; p.800, 11.39,41; Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, p.978, 1.56; p.979, 1.20; "The Two Poets of Croisic", p.1138, 1.34.
134 Cf.colombe's Birthday, p.313, 1.73; "Pompilia", p.788, l.35; "Ivan Ivanovitch", p.1160, 1.43.
I never realized God's birth before,
How he grew likest God in being born, 135

Pompilia cries in a rush of tender mother-love. Guido declares himself to be

Innocent as a babe, Mary's own; 136
and the cruel Archbishop acknowledges the virgin birth when he says,

Virginity . . .
That which was glory in the Mother of God. 137

Full of deepest meaning and embodying pages of argument is the simple question of Browning's glib lawyer, Dom. Hyacinthus,

Doubt ye the force of Christmas on the soul? 138

Preoccupied as he is with his Latin phrases, Dom. Hyacinthus breaks away from them now and again and utters a truth with force and directness. Here is one such truth, followed unfortunately by Latin quibbling.

Shall we give man's abode more privilege
Than God's — for in the churches where he dwells
In quibus assistit, Hegum Rex, by means
Of His essence, per essentiam. 139

Again he says,

Our Lord Himself, made all of mansuetude,
Sealing the sum of sufferance up, received
Opprobrium, contumely and buffeting
Without complaint. 140

\[135^{\text{P.800, 11.39-40.}} \]
\[136^{\text{P.866, 1.50.}} \]
\[137^{\text{P.788, 11.34-35.}} \]
\[138^{\text{P.806, 1.70.}} \]
\[139^{\text{P.816, 11.75 ff.}} \]
\[140^{\text{P.809, 11.86 ff.}} \]
In the lines immediately following this passage is an inaccurate allusion to Christ, Mrs. Machen observes: 141

... but when He found Himself
Touched in His honour never so little for once,
Then outbroke indignation pent before —
"Honorem meum nemini dabo!" ... 

Dom. Hyacinthus was not incapable of wresting Scripture, but the Pope makes a similar allusion and one pauses to look deeper.

... as when Christ said, — when, where?
Enough, I find it pleaded in a place,—
"All other wrongs done, patiently I take:
But touch my honour and the case is changed!
I feel the due resentment,— nemini
Honorem trado is my quick retort."
Right of Him, just as if pronounced today! 142

The text is probably from Isaias xlii. 8, inaccurately quoted, but the thought is there. The version of the Vulgate is, "Ego Dominus, hoc est nomen meum: gloriam meam alteri non dabo".

Though our Lord did not say the words in His Person, as God He inspired the prophet to utter them. This, it seems, is but another proof that Browning believed the Man Christ to be God. Although Browning is not always accurate in his Biblical allusions, he gives evidence on the whole of an intimate acquaintance with the substance of the Bible. 143

141 The Bible in Browning (New York, 1903), pp. 27-28
142 P. 864, 11.28 ff.
These utterances and those included in chapter iv, the reader will object, are dramatic. True, but it must be borne in mind that their sentiments are imputed to them by the poet, and in spite of the variety of external conditions, the arguments employed by David, Karshish, St. John, Pope Innocent, and Ferishtah — to mention only a few of the long line of characters that pay noble tribute to Christ — ever converge toward the same conclusion, that which Browning had reached undisguised in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*.

"No historian," says Professor De Reul in his article on Browning, "has looked with more penetrating insight into the soul of a Christian than the author of *Saul, Christmas-Eve, and Easter-Day*. No one has interpreted with warmer sympathy the beauty and original value of this religion in all its historical phases, including even Roman Catholicism."

Praise such as this is a very positive contribution to the criticism of the religious poetry of Browning. It is disappointing, therefore, to find it weakened by what follows. "For Browning, Christ is not the Redeemer, but simply 'a manifestation of divine love in the human form best accessible to humanity'. And the argument by which he defends this view is untheological." First of all, be it said in Browning's defense, he never set

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out to be narrowly theological. He was not a university trained man, he made no systematic formulation of Christian doctrine, and his approach to religious questions is, for the most part, that of a layman. It is remarkable, therefore, to find so much good theology in his poetry. The metaphor of the "loving worm" does mean, to quote Professor De Reul again, that "if God did not know sacrifice and loving pity, he would lack some of the virtues of men". That is true, but Browning does not make it a fact, he uses the subjunctive "were" to denote a present condition contrary to fact.

If the two speakers in "Easter-Day" represent Browning's own two selves debating in his inner consciousness, a process familiar to every thoughtful man, the eighth stanza of the poem, in the light of the final argument, shows very definitely that Browning believed in Christ as the Redeemer. The teaching of the Church is that Jesus became the Redeemer by vicarious atonement, but the fallen race was not simply restored as a whole to its original bliss. In order to share in the graces of the Redemption each individual soul must cooperate with the Redeemer. Believing that Christ is God, Browning also believes that He will reveal Himself in response to love and faith on the part of man. Simply told, the thought of the

146 Ibid.
147 Cf. p.430.
final note added to "A Death in the Desert" is that Christ lived and died to become "incorporate with all", that is, one in spirit, for Christ would make "one with His each soul He loved". When he wrote these lines, Browning dropped his dramatic guise; not St. John, nor Cerinthus, but "one added this".

To support the claim that Browning's faith did not include Redemption, critics have alleged that the poet did not believe in sin and the fall of man, and in the last judgment. His attitude toward original sin is made unmistakable in the last three stanzas of "Gold Hair", where again he speaks for himself. He says in effect that such a marvelous and damning mixture of good and evil in the human heart as the story lays bare warrants the doctrine of original sin and supplies a reason for holding fast to the Christian faith, despite Bishop Colenso and the essay "The Resurrection, in which the Judge is Christ Himself, He who said, "For neither doth the Father judge any man, but hath given all judgment to the Son" (John v.22).

Browning believed Christ to be the God-Man, the Redeemer of the human race. He believed that Jesus Christ not only pronounced a doctrine and a moral code when He dwelt among men,

148 Quoted in full on p.45 of this paper.
150Cf. p.493.
but also presented His own Person as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John xiv.6). He represents Him in his poetry as a Teacher, instructing men in the truths of salvation, as a Priest, applying to them the merits of His atonement, as a King, promulgating laws and precepts and guiding them on their way to union with Him in a life to come. He is more than an historical figure; He lives on in the hearts of His disciples. So far, waiving the close points of Catholic theology, Browning's belief is in accord with Catholic doctrine. But his Christ fails to attain the full stature of the Christ of Catholic theology for the reason that Browning did not believe that Christ by virtue of His royal power founded the Church to perpetuate His teaching. Christ lives and will continue to live to the end of time in His Mystical Body, the Church. Browning often refers to the Church as the mystical Spouse of Christ, and he has the prosecuting attorney in The Ring and the Book declare

That she is built upon a rock nor shall
Their powers prevail against her! 152

Still, he maintains in "Christmas-Eve" that while the worshipper is not at liberty to "fuse the respective creeds" of "saint, savage, sage" into one "before the general Father's throne",

152 "Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius", p.830, ll.55-54.
he must "taking God's help" choose for himself what is for him the "one chief best way of worship".\textsuperscript{153} There is significance in the fact that in this fit of general tolerance, the speaker, who is none other than Browning himself, loses hold of Christ's vesture.
CONCLUSION

Two events in the life of Robert Browning, his marriage to Elizabeth Barrett Barrett in 1846 and her death in 1861, easily divide his work into three periods. During the earliest part of his career the religious element in his poetry is chiefly implicit — implicit in the sense that he does not deliberately set himself to treating religious questions. In the middle period it is explicit and argumentative, though existing side by side with other elements. The last years are given over to thrashing out his old beliefs in conflict with knowledge and love.

The Christ-theme dominates the religious poetry and appears already in Pauline, a revelation of the inner life of the speaker, who is Browning himself. After a touching reference to Christ, the poet cries,

A mortal, sin’s familiar friend, doth here
Avow that he will give all earth’s reward,
But to believe and humbly teach the faith,
In suffering and poverty and shame,
Only believing he is not unloved. 154

Sordello's need and Aprile's dying reflection point to the same longing for a divine revelation in human form, which will bring peace and guidance into the troubled and doubtful lives of men.

Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, in which Browning attempted

154 Pauline, p.12, ll.1-5.
to review in a personal and direct way the aspects of Christian thinking as he saw them in 1850, is the first product of the middle years. The two poems that constitute the volume find the Christ of whom "Saul" prophesies, an historical reality. Browning's unquestionable conclusion here is that to reduce the Christian revelation to a myth is to rob it of its authority and splendor. He holds firmly to the belief that Christ manifest in the flesh was essentially "Lord of Life".

The first argument of "Christmas-Eve" treats of the love of God based upon the intuitive apprehension of love within the heart of man. The second argument centers upon the Person of Christ as the Incarnation of the love of God, which Browning regards as the sovereign and impregnable foundation of Christianity. In "A Death in the Desert" and "The Pope" he gives a profound interpretation of Christianity from this point of view. Speaking to his contemporaries in the guise of the Beloved Disciple and Pope Innocent XII, Browning dismisses as irrelevant to the central truth of the Incarnation issues which were matter of controversy among nineteenth-century higher critics. In so far, Browning says, as the events of the life of Christ are considered as empirical facts bound up with a certain place and time, they can never be absolutely verified. The historical evidence is insufficient to establish beyond possibility of dispute their exact occurrence and divine character. This uncertainty is explained in both poems
as constituting part of the necessary probation of life, a trial to test and develop man's faith, and call forth his moral heroism. In other words, the historical fact of the earthly life of Jesus is subordinate to the apprehension of the Incarnation as the revelation of God in the eternal Christ within the heart of man. Yet, while Browning holds this view, he believes that the historical revelation confirms the truth of the indwelling of Christ as a spiritual experience. The power of God is self-evident in the outward order of the universe. His love is revealed within the heart of man. But, owing to the existence of evil and the presence of sin and suffering, God's love is not plainly visible in external creation as is His power. The Christ of the Gospels supplies this evidence.

In his later poems Browning assumes somewhat the position of an intellectual agnostic. "Wholly distrust thy knowledge", Ferishtah advises,

... and trust
As wholly love allied to ignorance!
There lies thy truth and safety. 155

The notion that "God once assumed on earth a human shape" seems to involve for Browning a self-contradictory hypothesis, an impossible limitation of the divine nature. On the other hand, the heart craves such a manifestation of God's love. Reason presents a logical but formal and abstract idea of God; love

155 "A Pillar at Sebzevar", p. 1232, ll. 66-68.
holds out a spiritual experience of God revealed through the concrete.

Failing to find a solution of his difficulties, Browning fell back toward the end of his life upon a denial of knowledge and accepted faith almost blindly, without reason and even against reason. However, in "La Saisiaz" — a poem imbued with the spirit of Christ, though direct mention of Him is never made — it is with Reason, not Fancy, that the ultimate truth lies: moral good and evil imply a struggle and a liberty of choice, "heaven or hell depends upon man's earthly deed".¹⁵⁶ This is the weakness in which faith finds its strength, a doctrine Browning first proclaimed in Paracelsus and later confirmed in a transport of joyous confidence in "Saul" and Karshish" of the middle years.

From Pauline to Asolando Browning never wavers in his allegiance to Christ. Often in his poetry he comes amazingly close to Catholic doctrine. David sees the Christ stand and Karshish feels Him as Mother Church is wont to hold Him up for her children's worship in the Person of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It was natural for Browning and in harmony with his romantic nature to portray Him so, for love was the all in all of his life, love of God and love of man. It is to be regretted that Browning falls short in the portrayal because he

¹⁵⁶ Pp.1129-1131.
never came to know Christ fully, the Christ who also said, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church" (Matt.xvi.18).

The way to God is through Christ. Browning found that way. To the fulness of Christ the only true way is through His one Church wherein He is found whole and undivided, and His doctrine retains its original purity, plenitude, and power. That way Browning never found however near to it Cardinal Wiseman thought he had come.\(^{157}\) And because he did not find it, English poetry of the Christ-theme has been deprived of the richer heritage that might have been hers.

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\(^{157}\) In his review of \textit{Men and Women} in \textit{The Rambler}, 5:68 (January, 1856), Cardinal Wiseman observed, "When one sees how much Mr. Browning must have thought and reflected, and how near he comes to Christianity, one wonders why he has stopped, why he is not a Catholic".
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The asterisks indicate Christological and period works that have no direct bearing on Browning.


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The thesis "Christ in the Poetry of Robert Browning," written by Sister Juliana Ludick, S.C.C., has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below with reference to content. It is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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