1979

Reaction to Religious Elements in the Poetry of Robert Browning: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography

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REACTION TO RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN THE POETRY OF
ROBERT BROWNING:
AN INTRODUCTION AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

by
Vincent P. Anderson

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

May
1979
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The seeds from which this dissertation grew were planted several years ago in Dr. Martin Svaglic's graduate course on the Victorian poets. To Dr. Svaglic, then, I express my gratitude for help and encouragement extending from the very beginnings of this project to its recent conclusion. I also owe thanks to the other two members of my committee, Dr. Patrick Casey and Dr. John Shea, for their useful comments, criticism, and advice, especially on the introduction to the bibliography.

The rich collection and capable staff of Chicago's Newberry Library were invaluable to me during the time I spent compiling this bibliography. Most of the entries, in fact, are the result of my searches among the shelves and card catalogues of the Newberry.

Some of the items that seemed worthy of attention are in languages other than English; thus I am grateful to two of my colleagues at North Park College, Dr. Dwain Dedrick and Dr. Hans-Joachim Mollenhauer, for help in translation.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Sally for serving as editor, typist, and translator as well as for giving me steady encouragement and support during my work on this project.
PREFACE

A brief prefatory note is necessary to explain certain procedures I have followed in composing this bibliography and its introduction. Documentation in the introduction is not full and formal. When referring to Browning commentary I have simply mentioned in the text itself such facts as the author (unless anonymous), the year of publication, and sometimes the title of the article, book, or journal. (The only page references in the text of the introduction are those attached to quotations which are not repeated subsequently, along with appropriate page references, in the bibliography.) My assumption is that this minimum of information is sufficient to send the reader to the proper entry in the bibliography itself for fuller documentation.

Within the bibliography entries are arranged chronologically. In cases where several items appeared the same year I have ordered those items alphabetically.

Finally, the reader should be alert to the following abbreviated designations used on occasion throughout this dissertation:
BSP
Boston BSP
Broughton, Northup, Pearsall
DA
PMLA

Papers of the Browning Society
Boston Browning Society Papers
Bibliography of Robert Browning, 1830-1950
Dissertation Abstracts
Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
VITA

The author, Vincent Paul Anderson, is the son of Lars Anderson and Evelyn (Olson) Anderson. He was born February 11, 1943, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

His elementary education was obtained in the public schools of Excelsior, Minnesota, and secondary education at Minnetonka High School (also in Excelsior) where he was graduated in 1961.

In September, 1961, he entered Princeton University and in June, 1965, received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with a major in English.

During 1965-66 he taught English at the Breck School, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

In September, 1966, he entered Northwestern University and in June, 1967, was awarded the degree of Master of Arts in English.

In September, 1967, he was appointed Instructor in English at North Park College, Chicago, Illinois, and he remained on the staff there until June, 1970.

In September, 1970, he was granted a Rockefeller Fellowship which he used to attend Harvard Divinity School for a year.
During 1971-72 he was on the English faculty of North Hennepin State Junior College, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

In September, 1972, he returned to North Park, where he presently serves as Assistant Professor of English.
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INTRODUCTION

PART I

1833-1889

That religious subjects and themes are of great significance in Browning's poetry need not be argued. Any reader who goes far beyond "My Last Duchess" in his study of Browning is bound to notice much evidence of Browning's concern with religion. Such a concern is perceptible, at least in a budding form, in the earliest poetry, and it remains, growing in importance and becoming more explicit, in later poetry. Thus, to study Browning's poetic treatment of religious topics and issues can be, in itself, a worthy and fruitful endeavor: it leads to a better general understanding of the poet's work. And, as the following bibliography indicates, there are many indeed who have engaged in such studies. But an examination of this body of secondary material itself can be of some use as well. To be sure, it is hardly as important as the poetry it is based upon; however, some significance must be attached to these recorded responses to Browning because they tell us something about his readers, his era, his poetry, and—ultimately—something about the poet himself. The audience to which Browning speaks in this, the last quarter of
the twentieth century, needs an awareness of these earlier reactions. They have, after all, helped shape our own responses to Browning and his work. And they have yielded many interesting--some even indispensable--insights into the religious ideas embodied in Browning's poetry. Finally, and almost incidentally, these reactions reveal an interesting pattern in the changing perspectives on Browning's work, a pattern that offers a window through which to view key developments in intellectual and religious history over the past one hundred fifty years (since the publication of *Pauline* in 1833).

The Reverend W. J. Fox, who was one of Browning's early religious mentors, was also one of the young poet's earliest reviewers. Reviewing *Pauline* anonymously in 1833 for *The Monthly Repository*, Fox shows a clear understanding that the poem, in its transparency, gives readers a glimpse of the spiritual condition of the young poet himself. Fox sees Browning, restless as he bears the burden of Shelley's early influence, "groping about after something to rest upon" and ultimately throwing himself "upon religion, like a hunted bird dropping into its own nest." But in this quest, God is not enough. It is apparent to Fox that Browning also experiences "a yearning after human sympathies and affections." Herein lies Fox's most noteworthy observation; in fact, it is almost prophetic as it fixes on a characteristic that will be brought into sharper
focus by the religious vision presented in Browning's later work. For Browning, as many of his poems will suggest and as many of his commentators will emphasize, an examination of God's nature is inextricably bound up with the study of man's nature. Man representing God, man being identified with God—these notions come to be replayed repeatedly in the poetry and in the commentary it evokes. And they lead, say some, to Browning's later almost exclusive practice of the dramatic monologue and also to his fascination with the powerful Christian doctrine of incarnation. Both phenomena it can, and will, be said are evidence that Browning understood God to be revealing himself to man through man himself.

The rush to associate Browning with Christianity, which culminated in the creation of the London Browning Society in the 1880's, did not begin as soon as readers perceived religious implications in the poetry. Fox's review gives evidence of that; he cites religious meanings but does not call them Christian. The Theologian's review of Paracelsus in 1845, however, turns our attention in a different direction. Although on the surface the Browning of Paracelsus hardly seems to proclaim a personal Christian stance, this reviewer infers something else. He notes that the failure of Paracelsus's heroic quest for a kind of divine knowledge indicates severe limitations to the capabilities of intellect; it is thus concluded that the poem
demonstrates the superiority of revelation over reason as a means to truth. That, says the reviewer, is "the very essence of Christianity."

Not only does this review help initiate a trickle—which later builds to flood stage—of commentary linking Browning's poetry with certain Christian doctrines and ideas; it also sounds another keynote in the response to Browning's religious ideas. The anti-intellectual position of the poet cited in The Theologian's article starts a thread of debate and discussion that extends through the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth. The English Review notes this theme again soon afterward, in its 1849 remarks on Paracelsus: "We see the utter futility of all attempts to attain the knowledge of God, without revelation: we see that the lowliest Christian child may be wiser than the heathen sage." Browning is praised by some for assuming this position, and he is criticized by others. And still others contend that he was not as biased against the intellect as most assume.¹

It is a well-known fact that many of Browning's readers in the early decades of his career (and significant

¹Henry Jones in his Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher (1891) is probably the most important participant in this discussion; in fact, his classic statement on the topic is still evoking responses today. But more will be said about Jones and his respondents at the appropriate places in this introduction.
numbers later as well) were repelled by some of the eccentricities of his verse: it was either too "obscure" for them, or its diction and rhythm were not conventionally "beautiful" and "musical" enough to suit their tastes.\textsuperscript{1}

But how is this facet of the poems related to their religious meanings? For some critics in the 1850's there clearly was a relationship. The Prospective Review discusses in an article of 1850 Browning's Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, arguing that the moral and religious messages of the poetry are made unpalatable by the lack of loveliness and wholesome sentiment in the work. The Christian Remembrancer in 1851 notes that, though Browning "considers religion an important thing," his poetic style "betrays the workings of a coarse, rude, though powerful mind, incapable of spiritual elevation." His poetic subjects also fail to pass the test of elevation: to many of his characters are motivated by "low desires, fiendish revenge, sordid hate." For this commentator, Christianity becomes tainted by the "coarse and vulgar element" in Browning's poetry. In another Christian Remembrancer review several years later (1956), this time of Men and Women, similar objections are

\textsuperscript{1}A particularly memorable, yet typical, characterization of Browning's poetry refers to his "literary atrocities" in this way: "Browning is, preeminently, the King of Darkness... In the two volumes now before us, there are sufficient crudities, contortions and dissections of the language to ruin the reputation of fifty poets."

Rev. of Men and Women, Irish Quarterly Review, 6 (1856), 21.
raised about the language of Browning's poetry: it is called "crabbed, harsh, grotesque." And once again offensive language is linked with the offensive characters who, like Bishop Blougram, are termed "utterly without moral elevation." The absence of a sense of elevation, in either language or characters, proves to be, then, a distraction preventing some readers from approaching and dealing directly with the religious ideas and issues treated in the poems.¹

But Browning's difficult and unconventional poetic style did not distract all those readers interested in his religious ideas. In mid-century the probing of those ideas continued apace. One element catches the attention of several commentators; it is doubt. Doubt seems to be for Browning an inevitable, and not necessarily undesirable, part of faith. The Christian faith he examines and expresses has no ease or certainty about it. The reviewer of Christmas-Eve and Easter Day in Living Age (1850) concludes that "the purpose of the poem is to express belief in Christianity, not without doubts, but against doubts." J. Weiss refers to the same poem in the Massachusetts Quarterly Review (1850) and claims that it "proves how hard it is to be a Christian, forced always to ward off the stroke of doubt.

¹A look at George Santayana's objections to Browning's poetry (1900) will show that this type of reaction extended well beyond the 1850's. Santayana's statements will be examined in more detail later.
Browning's recognition of the reality of doubt is part of what leads Weiss to contrast Browning with Milton. As a religious poet, Browning has none of the "ascetic loftiness of Milton's metaphysics"; instead Browning's religious vision takes account of the real matter and stuff of life, such as the painful stabs of doubt that might plague a conscientious Christian. Thus Browning's religion is fleshed-out—in essence, truly human—not abstract or doctrinal like Milton's.

The Quarterly Review (1865) continues the focus on "the obstinate questionings of doubt" in Browning's poetry. The reviewer here claims that the poet sees doubt, not destroying faith, but actually producing greater faith: doubts "will make the flame of faith burn up toward heaven more direct and clear than ever." The Quarterly Review echoes Weiss's words in one other respect as well. Browning is credited with composing poetry which "is not religious in a vague general way, nor dry through being doctrinal. . . ." In this instance, though, the commentator sees something more in Browning's religious instincts: in its rounded-out humanity, the religious poetry "is, as in 'Christmas Eve' and 'Easter Day,' passionately alive with the most intense yearning for a personal relationship."

The emphasis in most of these relatively early comments (particularly those directed toward Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day and comments on the poems of Men and Women)
has been on how Browning's poetry relates Christianity to the very real problems of the individual's inner life while at the same time it questions the validity of the religion's traditional concerns with broad and abstract matters such as dogmas, doctrines, and institutional structures. As Walter Bagehot explained the poet (1864),

He must have a creed that will take . . . the great but vague faith--the unutterable tenets--seem to him worthless, visionary; they are not enough "immersed in matter"; they move about "in worlds not realised."

It is not surprising, then, that the commentators begin to fix upon one particular "creed" in Browning, a creed that does apparently "take." The creed is love. When Browning distills traditional Christianity down to its barest essential, all that is left is love. Christianity recognizes human (and divine) love as a powerful force for good in the world. But it does more than merely recognize the importance of love: it also places upon man the obligation to respond with love toward others, to put others before himself and to sympathize and identify with them.

R. Bell in St. James's Magazine (1864) points to a Browning who conscientiously practices the love he advocates. His dramatic monologues show impressively that he has the capacity "to look with lenience on human frailty and shortcoming"; even in a case like Browning's portrayal of Caliban, Bell notes that "in the excess of his Christian love and sympathy, we have no doubt that he sees some
points of sympathy between himself and the whelp of Syocorax." Bell goes so far as to almost equate love with faith: "when one loves wholly, he must believe."

A discussion of "Fifine at the Fair" in Every Saturday (1873) makes one of the more interesting statements about the nature and importance of love in Browning's thinking. Here the writer sees in Don Juan's longing for Fifine the seeds of a religious longing:

The yearning for completeness through something other than one's self ... is also the foundation of religious beliefs. Religion is but a transformation of the primitive instincts of human love. ... no one has a deeper reverence for the love which annihilates self [than does Browning.]

A year later (1874) Alexandra Orr, in one of her early assessments of Browning's work, states the role of love even more emphatically:

The love of love is the prevailing inspiration of all such of Mr. Browning's poems as even trench on religious subjects, and it often resolves itself into [an] earnest ... plea for the divine nature and atoning mission of Christ.

As Orr's observation suggests, it is a short leap from Browning's focus on love as the most dominant element of Christian truth to his fascination with the Christian notion of incarnation. As Browning creates, probes, and identifies with his monologuists, he is replaying the incarnational act of God himself. As God became man in the person of Christ, he was losing himself, even annihilating himself, for the sake of a loving sympathy with all men.
Browning saw this as the ultimate expression of divine love and, as such, a model to be emulated in earthly life, and most especially in the process of poetic creation. The doctrine of incarnation is also Christianity's way of explaining the mysterious union of God with man, of the infinite with the finite. Both of these meanings of the incarnation—the perfect expression of love, and the union of ideal and real—become significant for Browning.

Readers begin in mid-century to sense the impact of this doctrine or idea upon Browning. The Christian Remembrancer's review of Men and Women (1857) refers to Browning's awareness of two realms of existence, one transcendental and one earthly; and it also sees the importance of incarnation in the merging of these two realms:

in no other secular poetry of our day do we receive so full a recognition of another life . . . we do not know of any poetry (not professedly sacred) wherein is so deeply pondered and strikingly proclaimed the mystery of the holy Incarnation.

Two decades later, in 1877, Browning's purpose becomes clearer. In an essay on "The Transcendental Movement and Literature," Edward Dowden indicates that Browning "attempts to re-establish a harmony between what is infinite and what is finite in man's nature." As a means to this end, Browning's "acceptance of the Christian revelation, say rather his acceptance of the man Christ Jesus" becomes central. Christ gains singular importance in the poet's eyes, asserts Dowden, because he best represents the
incarnational process which is so well tailored to Browning's purpose: "The fisherman of Galilee told of a love of God which eighteen hundred years ago became flesh and dwelt with men; but here we behold an omnipresent and eternal love of God. . . ."\(^1\)

J. T. Nettleship's name is noteworthy in these still relatively early years of Browning criticism because he published, in 1868, the first book-length study of the poet. In his introductory remarks Nettleship states that the following essays . . . will deal entirely with such poems . . . as present in connection with their subject some view which . . . is of value either for abstract thought or for moulding our own lives upon.

In these remarks an image of the poet emerges that will later be inflated to unfortunate proportions by some members and followers of the Browning Society; this image depicts Browning more as a philosopher and teacher than as a poet.

But Nettleship's book also draws attention to a facet of Browning's religious thought which, at first glance, is difficult to coordinate with the notion of incarnation. If God has shown his love and sympathy for his creation in the figure of Christ, why have the world and

\(^1\)The many-sided significance of the incarnation in Browning's poetry has drawn the attention of many of his critics, but the work which most thoroughly explores this aspect of his work is William Whitla's The Central Truth: The Incarnation in Browning's Poetry (1963); this study will receive due attention later in this discussion.
man not evolved into a state of perfection under God's influence? Why does evil still plague earthly life? Evil is a very real presence—in characters and in institutions, in actions and in attitudes—in much of Browning's poetry. From the Duke of "My Last Duchess" to Guido of The Ring and the Book, evil is a force impossible to ignore. Nettleship attempts to explain this troubling presence by connecting it directly with love. Evil is a necessary component of Browning's religious vision because, without evil, there would be no—or no need for—love. Love, says Nettleship, has come into being only because of man's, and God's, fight against evil in the world.

Closely connected with Browning's sense of the reality of evil is his "doctrine of imperfection." Man's evil is just one phase of the very frustrating sense of imperfection that besets man in this life. In one of the most impressive discussions of Browning's religion published during the poet's lifetime (1878), A. T. Lyttelton treats this doctrine of imperfection at length, calling it "the most fundamental characteristic of [Browning's] mind":

the belief that imperfection is a mark of progress, that man is superior to the beasts just because he is not made with all his powers complete for their work in this world, but must struggle onwards by means of failure in this world, to the perfection which can only be attained in the next. The thought, in various forms, recurs in almost every poem of any importance; and though it is only a very clear apprehension of the Christian truth, that this life is a time of probation . . . yet this
truth is set in so many different lights, it is shown underlying so many of the problems of life, so es­
tential to the right understanding of character and the due estimate of action, that we may consider it as the special lesson which it is given to Mr. Browning to teach us.

This notion of "man's superiority because of his imperfection" is seen as

proof of the manner in which Mr. Browning's religious con­
victions so penetrate and inform his whole intellectual
and emotional nature, that, whatever the subject, this doctrine seems to be the explanation of the problem or
the climax of the argument.

A natural outgrowth of Browning's thinking about the evil and imperfection inherent in this life is his con­
viction about man's immortality. If man is indeed so lim­
ited in his life on earth, it is logical for Browning to believe, or at least to strongly hope, that an afterlife
will allow man to reach the fulfillment denied him earlier. Lyttelton, in fact (in the essay of 1878 just referred to), sees, in a poem like "Saul," the notion of incarnation powerfully connected with that of immortality. Ernest Dowden, in an essay on "Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Browning" (1879), typically notes the aspiring path of man that Browning ideally envisions; but Dowden also notes that such aspiration can be satisfied, according to Browning's poetry, not in this life, but in the next.

The stock that Browning apparently places in the immortal dimension of life might suggest that he denied the value or validity of man's temporal, earth-bound existence.
Several kinds of observations from Browning's contemporaries, however, indicate how far from the truth such an assumption would be. His imaginative horizon was broader than that typically attributed to a mind filled with meditations on immortality. He seemed to significant numbers to be neither ascetic nor parochial in his outlook; nor did he seem, in his exploration of religious issues, to restrict himself to outlooks characteristic of his own time and his own place. Browning's anti-ascetic position was noted earlier as it was contrasted with the abstract, doctrinal religion of Milton. The aspect of Browning's work alluded to in that context comes even more to the fore in an 1874 essay by E. C. Stedman. In writing of Browning's love poems, Stedman sees implied a religious conviction that a rigid denial or restriction of this life's experiences is in fact sinful—such an attitude denies the goodness of God's own creation:

... the greatest sin does not consist in giving rein to our desires, but in stinting or too prudently repressing them. Life must have its full and free development. ... The chief lesson of Browning's emotional poetry is that the unpardonable sin is "to dare something against nature." To set bounds to love is to commit that sin.\footnote{The view of Browning as an anti-ascetic was not accepted unanimously at this time, however; Elizabeth D. West in her "Browning as a Preacher" (Dark Blue, 1871) represents an example of an opposing perception of the poet.}

The breadth of Browning's religious vision is further attested to by his fascination with the historical roots of Christianity. Poems like "Karshish" and "Cleon,"
notes The British Quarterly Review (1856), suggest that there is no point of past time over which Mr. Browning's imagination seems to hover so wistfully as over that at which Christianity began to mingle with the history of the Roman world. He seems to have a peculiar pleasure in realizing to himself the different impressions made on different men occupying different points of view in the great Pagan and Polytheistic world, by this new doctrine which they saw creeping in upon them from Judea.

Stedman, too (in the essay of 1874 quoted earlier), mentions Browning's historical explorations; he, however, does not appreciate them as much as does The British Quarterly Review commentator, calling them "monuments of learning and labor rather than ennobling efforts of the imagination."

To Stedman their sin is "against the spirit of antiquity, in carrying back the modern analytic feeling to a scene where it does not belong."

The eclectic profile of Browning's Christianity continues to develop as his poetry evokes comments about the chorus of varied voices represented in the dramatic monologues. A consistent point of view is rarely perceptible in the poems, causing one reviewer (The Contemporary Review, 1867) to observe that

it [is] difficult for us to determine how far he is speaking in his person, or representing some phase of the great drama of man's religious life. No living writer . . . approaches his power of analyzing and reproducing the morbid forms, the corrupt semblances, the hypocrisies, formalisms, and fanaticisms of that life.

This critic, however, is somewhat disturbed by the universalist tendencies in such an unrestricted and largely
undefined religious voice: it suggests "that all varieties of the Christian creed are equally true, equally acceptable."

Another commentator (The North British Review, 1869) notes some of the same characteristics of Browning's verse but views them with a more positive attitude.

[He] is a vates, a prophet, an expounder of the mysteries of things. He is a theological poet, a Christian, orthodox in the main, but tempering his creed with universalist notions. . . . He is, moreover, a moralist. . . . Both as theologian and moralist he is a confirmed casuist. With a secondary sympathy for creeds which he does not profess . . . he takes pleasure . . . in throwing himself into the states of mind of the professors of such creeds.

Browning's religious eclecticism plays Christianity off against the tough, classically-shaped mind of a Cleon, and it brews theological speculation in the unlikely primitive mind of a Caliban. But it also reverts over and over again to spokesmen who represent the Roman Catholic mind in its perception of the faith. Richard Simpson (The Rambler, 1856) was one of the first to review Browning's work while reflecting specifically on the poet's attitude toward Catholicism. Simpson's views are of unusual interest because, despite an acknowledgment of Browning's general skepticism as well as his anti-Catholic bias, they suggest that the poet's attitudes place him on the verge of a religious commitment. Simpson emphasizes "how near he [Browning] comes to Christianity"; and he concludes his review with the following comments, an attempt
to put into focus an ambivalent response to the poet's religious ideas:

Though much of their [the poems'] matter is extremely offensive to Catholics, yet beneath the surface there is an undercurrent of thought that is by no means inconsistent with our religion; and if Mr. Browning is a man of will and action, and not a mere dreamer or talker, we should never feel surprise at his conversion.

John Doherty's 1869 review of *The Ring and the Book* continues a long line of objections to Browning's understanding and portrayal of things Catholic, objections to his treatment of Church doctrines and historical events as well as to his treatment of Catholic churchmen themselves. Historical inaccuracies in Browning's presentation of Pope Innocent XII and the Molinist movement are ostensibly what cause Doherty's criticism. But one sees that Browning's apparent anti-Catholic prejudices—"Nearly all the scoundrels [in his poetry] are priests"—have motivated Doherty too.¹

Other eras, other creeds, other thinking—as we have seen, all caught Browning's attention, expanded his

¹Browning's feelings about the Roman Catholic Church have often been considered since the publication of Simpson's and Doherty's essays. The definitive treatment of the topic is Boyd Litzinger's *Robert Browning and the Babylonian Woman* (1962). Litzinger's conclusions indicate that Browning's religious eclecticism was not as all-embracing as it may have at first seemed: the critic sees evidence in a number of the poet's writings that a deep-seated anti-Catholic bias narrowed considerably Browning's supposed broad acceptance of varied Christian creeds.
awareness, and, in one form or another, came into the province of his poetry. But something close to home, something that was very much a part of the nineteenth century itself, and also very much a part of Browning's own experience simply because he was a Victorian, also helped set the direction for his poetic explorations into religious areas. The new method and understanding that had such an impact on Browning's century was called "scientific." This approach, with its emphasis on rationality and objectivity, led to discoveries and theories deeply disturbing to many Victorians. As old assumptions about the condition and development of the natural world were called into question by evolutionary hypotheses (with such questioning culminating in the work of Darwin), and as similar assumptions about the authority and truth of holy scripture were assaulted by the higher critics (like Strauss and Renan), the firm sense of life's source, life's direction, and life's meaning began to wane. Ultimate questions were being asked about supposedly ultimate assumptions. And Victorian men and women, faced with a whole new set of uncertainties, found themselves in a state of anxious insecurity.

Into this chasm of Victorian anxiety stepped Browning with his poetry.¹ One characteristic that proved to be of

¹Browning, of course, was not the only Victorian poet to be understood in this light by nineteenth-century
comfort to his troubled contemporaries has already been alluded to, i.e., the anti-intellectual stance that stresses intuition and feeling as being man's legitimate guides to truth rather than reason. W. T. Watts, in his reading of *La Saisiaz* (The Athenaeum, 1878), sees the poem as a general protest against current trends in thought, trends that fail to recognize and value ineffable spiritual or religious truths. To Watts *La Saisiaz* is an anti-rationalistic, anti-materialistic statement, "nothing more or less than a vigorous and eloquent protest against the scientific materialism of the age."

But the Victorians' desperate desire to retrieve a certainty which seemed to have escaped did not cause them to see a Browning of only one dimension, the anti-rational. They also observed a poet who was able, better than they were, to accommodate his own views to those being set forth by the new scientific thought. Instead of perceiving the nineteenth-century evolutionary theorizing as a threat and, consequently mounting a protest against it, Browning injected an evolutionary dimension into his own religious thought. As Edward Berdoe mentions (*Poet-Lore*, 1889), Browning's optimistic theory of life, his...
belief in an ultimate perfection to be achieved in an im-
mortal realm, "is eminently in accord with the teachings
of evolution and development" then current. Berdoe praises
Browning generally for devising a "theology . . . so em-
inently reasonable" that it satisfies a "great want of the
age [which is] a faith . . . adequate to and consistent
with its intellectual culture." So Browning seems to offer
two kinds of aid to people of shaken faith: for those who
want a refuge from their age of doubt, it is possible to
cling to Browning's apparent anti-rationalism and condemn
the new science as inadequate and invalid; for those who
choose to face the new thinking head-on, they can try to
emulate Browning's own act of accommodation.

The "Higher Criticism" of the Bible, another out-
growth of the new scientific methods, posed still more
problems for those whose beliefs were basically Christian.
What shape should one's faith take now that its basis,
the Bible, had lost some of its credibility? As elements
in the scriptural accounts were called into question, what
was to be kept and what was to be discarded as one set
about reforming one's Christian convictions? Again Brown-
ing seeks a kind of accommodation--at least that is the
opinion of Francis Bickford Hornbrooke in his essay "Re-
ligious Thought in Browning" (The Unitarian Review, 1887).
Hornbrooke sees The Ring and the Book as Browning's at-
tempt to put the new biblical criticism into perspective.
The historical facts of biblical accounts were being questioned in such a way that many former believers were turning to skepticism. But Browning's *The Ring and the Book* leaves numerous questions about historical facts unanswered too; the tale's many versions make these answerless questions inevitable. Nonetheless, general truths about certain choices and actions can be drawn from the poem. So it is with the Bible, Browning seems to be implying: the general truths about man, God, and the universe evident in that great work should not be discarded simply because the accuracy of its historical details cannot be determined. Thus, says Hornbrooke, Browning does not challenge directly the validity of the higher critic's work. Instead he indicates that faith is still possible because of the inherent limits of such criticism: it can only bring us to doubt the peripheral facts of biblical accounts, but it cannot touch the essence of religious truth which lies at the heart of those accounts.

The Papers of the Browning Society (1881-91) contain a truly significant collection of responses to Browning's religious themes. Most of this material was produced during the 1880's, the last decade of the poet's life. It is noteworthy because it reflects both individual reactions to and judgments upon Browning's religion as well as the reactions of a whole movement or institution, the London Browning Society itself. Characterizations ques-
tioning the purpose and intelligence of the Society's members and also the value of their output abounded during the brief life of the group (1881-92); and because such characterizations die a hard death, the stereotypes spawned by them live on today. We tend to think of the Society's members as being nothing but bardolaters who gathered regularly to sing hymns of praise to their great teacher and philosopher, Browning. But such preconceptions are proved unjust and inaccurate if one examines with any scrutiny the history and the public documents of the Society. As the authoritative historian of the Society, William S. Peterson, has explained,

... a Stracheyan view of the Browning Society, delightful as it would surely be, must inevitably prove inadequate, because the heterogeneous membership of the society was not—as many have supposed—forever united. ... The Browning Society was, in reality, a microcosm of the London literary world, in which every variety of attitude toward Browning's poetry was expressed, and we surely distort the facts if we ignore the complexity and diversity of the views held by Dr. Furnivall's Browningites.¹

The variety of viewpoints that Peterson attributes to the Society in general is particularly apparent in the commentary on matters related to Browning's religion. To be sure, "typical" statements—ones that conform to established preconceptions and stereotypes about the Society

¹The extent to which religious motives contributed to the founding of the Society is discussed by Peterson in his Interrogating the Oracle: A History of the London Browning Society (1969), pp. 3-6. This particular observation is found on p. 4.
and its membership—are in evidence among the Papers. But they dominate neither the tone nor the themes of the commentary. In fact, viewpoints are scattered among the papers that might even be termed heretical. And the commentary is varied in other interesting ways as well.

Joshua Kirkman's inaugural address established the viewpoint that soon came to be thought of as typical for the Browning Society. Kirkman claims "for Browning the distinction of being pre-eminently the greatest Christian poet we have ever had." And he credits Browning's poetry with doing what true religious poetry ought to do, i.e., "to startle Christian people into elevation and gratitude."

Edward Berdoe and Hiram Corson, both strong--and prolific --admirers of Browning, soon joined Kirkman's chorus.

Then came Dorothea Beale, Catherine M. Whitehead, and James Thomson, all of whom add their strains to the voice that has come to be almost universally associated with the Society's attitude toward the poet. To these commentators the poet is a philosopher, a teacher, a prophet crying in the wilderness to direct a lost people back to the truth. The subjective reflections of Beale indicate, in figurative language suggesting the pathos of the Victorian situation, that

Browning seems to me a prophet whom God has given to our storm-tost age, a pilot who has learnt by long experience the hidden rocks and sandbanks on which the vessel of faith may be wrecked, now that the old anchor chains are burst asunder.
For Whitehead, "Life has come upon us with a rush that finds us unprepared"; and, as it is with the spiritual crisis described by Beale, Browning has come to the rescue. Thomson, although he is more explicit than either Beale or White in confining Browning rather narrowly within the limits of traditional Christian doctrine, nonetheless echoes their grateful characterizations of the poet as a savior-figure:

I must not fail to note . . . his profound, passionate, living, triumphant faith in Christ, and in the immortality and ultimate redemption of every human soul in and through Christ. . . . Thoroughly familiar with all modern doubts and disbeliefs, he tramples them all underfoot, clinging to the Cross. . . .

But an important facet of this image of Browning receives a challenge from a most unlikely source: from Frederick J. Furnivall himself, the founder of the Browning Society. The records of the discussion which followed the delivery of Thomson's paper show Furnivall disagreeing with Thomson; Furnivall is quite skeptical about the notion of Browning, the "doctrinal Christian." Furnivall's position is that Browning was so consistently dramatic in the poems presenting religious ideas that it is almost impossible to discern Browning's personal beliefs through the words of his speakers. Thus, although Furnivall considered Browning a poet and philosopher of great import, he found it impossible—and perhaps irrelevant—to determine precisely the poet's religious position.
James Gibson continues in the same vein. In his address "On Browning as a Teacher," Gibson clearly shows his admiration for the poet as a moral and religious mentor (Gibson says Browning taught this precept: "Love being the great principle of Nature, the chief lesson for man to learn is that God is Love"); yet Gibson claims that the chief elements of Browning's teaching can be properly appreciated without accepting the fundamental truths of Christianity. For Gibson, then, Christianity is not important for the spiritual tutor, Browning, nor should it be his for pupil, the reader. The message conveyed in the poetry extends beyond such narrow, parochial bounds.

But the chief "heretic" of the Papers proves to be William F. Revell. In his two addresses we have some of the most original and intelligent reflections on Browning's work produced in the poet's lifetime. For Revell Browning was not a Christian, but rather a humanist. Instead of pointing to certain of Browning's Christian positions or quibbling over the poet's theistic stance, Revell says all of that is not worth discussing because, for Browning himself, it was of no consequence. In fact, says Revell, God was not actually an important issue for Browning:

Man's true dignity does not lie in his relationship to the Divine Being, nor in his immortal destiny, but in his manhood, in the qualities of humanity which belong to him.
In re-perusing some of the poems of Browning for the preparation of this paper, the conviction has grown upon me, that a belief in God and immortality are not the chief source of Browning's inspiration, but his large and all-embracing sympathy with men.

In place of authorities like God or the church, however, Revell refuses to let Browning himself be set up as man's religious authority (here Revell seems to be reacting against the almost idolatrous position occupied by such Society members as Beale, Whitehead, Thomson, Berdoe and Corson); instead, says Revell, Browning insists that each human being become his own authority on matters as significant as religious convictions and belief:

Thus does our individualist poet, with his wonderful sense of the expression, and the divine significance of things, conduct us to what one may call the divine right and duty of the soul to frame its own interpretation of the universe.

Revell's view of Browning's religious position is interesting, to be sure, simply because of its iconoclasm, but it is unusual--even startling--in its modernity. In emphasizing Browning's humanism and, even more, in showing how Browning places on each individual's shoulders the responsibility for his own ultimate destiny, Revell has begun to see in the poet overtones of the modern philosophy of existentialism. Such an interpretation of Browning a half-century later would not be surprising--in fact, as the latter stages of this introduction will point out, such views become rather common--but in a critic of the 1880's
(a member of the Browning Society yet) this kind of a reading seems remarkable indeed.¹

The concentration on "typical" and "heretical" points of view represented in The Papers of the Browning Society does not, however, fully indicate the variety of material contained in the collection. The following brief summaries will do more justice to the variety of the Papers on religious topics: the philosophical content of Browning's Christianity catches John Bury's attention as he relates the poet's thought to that of Plato and Hegel; M. G. Glazebrook shows us Browning's response to the German biblical critics in "A Death in the Desert" (her interpretation echoes that of Hornbrooke in his already mentioned reading of The Ring and the Book); P. A. Barnett, Mary M. Cohen, and Joseph Jacobs discuss the significance of Browning's Jewish characters and his knowledge of Judaism; J. S. Jones examines "Browning's Ecclesiastics";² and a number of commentators treat individual poems with religious themes, e.g., "Saul," "Bishop

¹Among the many mid-twentieth century critics who connect Browning with existentialist thought—he is most often connected with Kierkegaard because of the two writers' Christian affinity and also because their contemporaneity—the fullest treatment of Browning from this perspective is E. LeRoy Lawson's Very Sure of God (1974). Lawson's book will be more fully treated later.

²The definitive study in this area, published many years after (in 1976), is Browning's Clerical Characters, by Charles Thomas Phipps, S.J.

The criticism focusing on the religious elements in Browning's poetry reaches its culmination, then, in the material contained in The Papers of the Browning Society. The poet who, in his earliest work, was depicted as engaging in a vague sort of personal religious groping becomes, before his death, a figure making religious pronouncements applicable to the spiritual dilemmas of a whole epoch. Some of this transformation in Browning's image is attributable to the increasing emphasis upon religious themes in his poetry and to the greater explicitness with which such themes are treated. But an even larger proportion is due to the responses his poetry evoked. Critics commented on what was actually in the poetry, to be sure, but they also began to draw from the poetry material to make Browning into a figure of almost mythological proportions, a figure who spoke uniquely as a prophet to the religious crises besetting many individuals (among them some of his commentators) and, indeed, to the crises besetting a whole age.

The critics who were Browning's contemporaries at least touched upon most of the major components of Browning's religious vision and thus shaped a relatively complete profile of that vision. But as Victoria's reign and Browning's life entered their waning years, the comments on this aspect of the poet's work became less and less objec-
tive. Whether critics noted his religious orthodoxy or his religious eclecticism, his optimism or his anti-rationalism, his Christianity or his humanism, his focus on God or his focus on man, his response to evolution or his response to higher criticism, his emphasis on love or his emphasis on the incarnation, his preoccupation with imperfection or his preoccupation with immortality—whatever thematic element it was that caught the critics' attention, it became less important in its own right at the same time that it gained importance as a prophetic statement.

Cool and detached analysis of the religious meanings in Browning's work becomes quite rare. The truths discoverable therein, after all, must be applied where they are needed, the assumption seemed to be. How can one do justice to a sermon with mere cool and detached analysis? In that question lies an insight into what Browning's work had become in the hands of his contemporary critics—by 1889, by the end of the poet's life, by the time the Browning Society had begun to wield its full influence, much of the poetry had lost its status as art and had become a series of poetic sermons.
The three decades following Browning's death represent the peak of the literary world's interest in the poet and his work. This period and its fascination with Browning were ushered in by the strong influence of the Browning Society. Although—or because—the poet was dead, his reputation boomed. Published commentary on the poetry was voluminous, but it varied greatly in nature and quality; everything from mindless eulogy to sophisticated literary criticism found its way before the public eye. Among the large body of this material, responses to religious elements in Browning's poetry comprised an important element.

Alexander Lamont's description of Browning in The Sunday Magazine (1891) as a "high-priest" whose "poetry is peculiarly needed by the wavering, fainthearted children of men of this faithless generation" makes us aware that this earlier established image of the poet died hard. In fact, if anything, this image of Browning grew in strength at least for some years after his death. But it did not dominate to the point of excluding more interesting and impressive discussions of Browning's religion: a look at
the important work of Sir Henry Jones should convince of that.

Jones, in his *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher* (1891), wrote one of the most influential of all studies of Browning. His work, in fact, is still evoking answers, objections, and corrections today.¹ Jones's approach to Browning has had much impact because, unlike many of the poet's most ardent admirers, Jones refused to acknowledge Browning as a genuine philosopher. His penetrating critique of Browning's "philosophy" is based on an already often-discussed aspect of the poet's thought: his anti-intellectualism. To many this characteristic is one of the poet's great strengths; but to Jones it seems to be a fatal flaw. It suggests that Browning sees no capability in man of truly knowing reality. So as man's intellect or knowledge fails to comprehend the true nature of reality, Browning appeals to the heart and to love as instruments to pierce the enigma of life. Man cannot participate in God's knowledge, Browning implies, but he can participate in God's love. Such a conception, claims Jones, does man a grave injustice: it puts his heart above his head, thus recognizing fully only half of man's nature. Browning's Christianity and his optimism, then, are ultimately called into question by Jones. Since neither can

¹The most recent of these are found in studies by Norton B. Crowell (1963, 1968) and Philip Drew (1970); these books will later receive due attention.
be firmly placed on a foundation of rational proof, they both appeal to and depend upon a somewhat degraded perception of man and of human knowledge. Jones goes so far as to call Browning an "agnostic," but one who doubts not God in particular but rather the validity of human knowledge in general.

As has already been noted, Jones opposes in his book those who have made too much of Browning as a philosopher. But there is an interesting irony in Jones's argument: in attempting to contradict his opposition, he has done Browning the same injustice done him by those who insist on seeing Browning as a significant philosopher, i.e., Jones has looked at Browning more as a thinker than as a poet.

If Jones revised the established image of Browning in one direction, Alexandra Orr revised it in another. To Jones Browning hardly seemed a philosopher; but to Orr the poet hardly seemed a Christian. In her *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (1891), the first full-fledged biography of the poet, Orr states that Browning is far from being an orthodox Christian; in fact, she says, "Christ remained for Mr. Browning a mystery and a message of Divine Love, but no messenger of Divine intention towards mankind." If he was a believer, his "belief held a saving clause, which removed it from all dogmatic, hence all admissible grounds of controversy; the more definite or concrete conceptions of
which it consists possessed no finality for even his own mind. . . ." The pointing out of Browning's unorthodoxy was not unusual. But Orr's emphasis on the tentativeness of Browning's faith seemed to many to border on labeling the poet an agnostic. Orr's *Life* stirred such a controversy about the nature of Browning's religion that she felt compelled to clarify her views almost immediately. Orr's article, "The Religious Opinions of Robert Browning" (*The Contemporary Review*, 1891), is her attempt at clarification. She defends there her earlier position that Browning could hardly be considered "a Christian in the orthodox sense of the word" by noting key Christian doctrines which he rejected:

he rejected the antithesis of good and evil, on which orthodox Christianity rests; he held, in common with Pantheists . . . that every form of moral existence is required for a complete human world. . . . [And] he would have denied eternal damnation under any conception of sin . . . and, since inexorable divine judgment had no part in his creed, the official Mediator or Redeemer was also excluded from it.

Christ is again mentioned by Orr as "a manifestation of Divine love" for Browning, but she declares that the poet's true gospel is built around the tentativeness of faith she had mentioned in her *Life*: "He had framed for himself a gospel of uncertainty; and, whether this related itself to his scepticism as cause or as effect, it was rooted in his religious life."

But as we leave Orr we cannot help noticing that echoes of the Browning Society continue to reverberate
through Browning criticism after that organization’s de­mise. In 1896, with his *Browning and the Christian Faith*, Edward Berdoe delivers his last extended statement on the poet. The subjective and worshipful tone of the book makes us recall some of the Browning Society documents. Berdoe is as intent upon expressing a personal spiritual debt to the poet as he is upon illuminating the poet's work. Interestingly enough, though, like Orr, Berdoe does not put Browning in the camp of rigid Christian orthodoxy. Despite this similarity to Orr, however, Berdoe's emphasis as he explains Browning's religion stands in contrast to Orr's. Whereas she spotlighted the poet's doubt, Berdoe spotlights Browning's awareness, his breadth of vision, his flexi­bility. And whereas Orr saw in Browning a gospel of un­certainty, Berdoe sees in the poet's work "a religious system definite enough to satisfy all Christians" except the most narrow-mindedly orthodox. Above all, Berdoe key­notes Browning's ability to relate and speak to his own century. Berdoe's Browning knows the direction and the language of the new thinking spawned in the Victorian age, and he is able to adapt the best and most reasonable aspects of Christianity to that thinking.

Standing out at this time, at precisely the turn of the century, are the opinions of George Santayana on Browning. But first we should look at R.E.P. Ernle, primarily because his view of Browning stands in stark contrast to
that of Santayana, the critic whose assessment of Browning had had such deep and wide influence over so many years. Ernle, in an essay on Browning published in *The Quarterly Review* in 1890, interestingly links Browning's religion to the much-discussed grotesqueness and rough texture of his verse and his characters. Ernle's contention is that Browning's "very ruggedness is a protest against that creamy smoothness which emasculates religion. . . ." Browning's realism is praised because Ernle sees it not as a dead end, but as a striving "to reach the ideal through the real, to illuminate limited experience by revealing its infinite significance. . . ." Browning was captivated by the notion of incarnation, or so it seems to Ernle, because in Christ the ideal and the real are brought jarringly—almost grotesquely—together: "The doctrine of the Incarnation gives Browning the most perfect working idea of God, because . . . [it] engrafts weakness upon strength, binds up the spiritual in the material, and manifests the human in the Divine."

Writing a decade after Ernle, Santayana seems to be reacting directly against the earlier commentator's opinion of Browning (although there is no evidence indicating he knew of Ernle's essay). Santayana's essay, "The Poetry of Barbarism" (1900), seizes on the same characteristics of Browning's poetry that caught Ernle's attention, i.e., its realistic, rough, and grotesque qualities.
However, Santayana finds very little to praise in such verse. The religious spirit that would appeal to Santayana would demonstrate a definite restraint, dignity, and order that point in the direction of ideal perfection; not the irrationality, impulsiveness, and lustiness that Browning exhibits, for such qualities only immerse one further in the morass of imperfect reality. Traditional Christianity, with its strong idealistic yearnings, is held sacred by Santayana. But Browning has abandoned that Christianity for a version tainted by the earth and its imperfections, for a Christianity colored by the deep hues of the poet’s realism. To Santayana Browning's religion is—like his poetry in general—savage, primitive, and uncivilized: "at heart it has more affinity to the worship of Thor or of Odin than to the religion of the Cross." Browning's religion also lacks the steadiness and the substance of established Christianity just as it lacks Christianity's ability to teach man and uplift him:

A faith which is thus a pure matter of lustiness and inebriation rises and falls, attracts or repels, with the ebb and flow of the mood from which it springs. It is invincible because unseizable; it is as safe from refutation as it is rebellious to embodiment. But it cannot enlighten or correct the passions on which it feeds.

In the judgments of Santayana can be heard echoes of Matthew Arnold's voice. The same spirit of classical humanism shapes the vision of both Victorian writers—with the important difference that Santayana apparently
holds in higher respect the traditional conventions and
dogmas of Christianity than does Arnold. Nonetheless, the
"steadiness and wholeness" that Arnold beheld in the ancient
classical writers and which he so strongly desired for him­
self and his age seem to be very close indeed to the qual­
ities Santayana finds so completely missing in Browning's
religion.

Santayana's indictment of Browning has not gone
unanswered. One of the most interesting direct answers
(to step out of chronological sequence briefly) came from
Margaret Sherwood years later (1934) in her book, Under­
currents of Influence in English Romantic Poetry. She
convincingly attributes the chasm between Browning and
Santayana to Browning's being more in tune with the think­
ing of his age. Browning, she says, adapted to the new
notion of a dynamic universe just coming into vogue during
his lifetime, but Santayana insisted on clinging stubbornly
to an older static conception of creation.

Another answer, although it was not primarily de­
signed as such, came soon after Santayana's essay in the
form of G. K. Chesterton's book on Browning (1903). This
well-known contribution to Browning commentary probably
would have been written even if Santayana's opinions on
the poet had never seen print. But the fact that those
opinions had been published contributed to the focus of
certain discussions in Chesterton's book (for instance,
Santayana's position is treated directly on pp. 183-86) as well as, perhaps, to the impetus behind the book. One contrast separating Santayana and Chesterton is immediately apparent in the latter's comments on the grotesque in Browning's poetry. Chesterton examines the eccentric and grotesque in some detail and concludes that such aspects of the poetry are praiseworthy. They demonstrate Browning's realism, his naturalness, and his energy:

Browning's verse, in so far as it is grotesque, is not complex or artificial; it is natural and in the legitimate tradition of nature. The verse sprawls like the trees, dances like the dust; it is ragged like the thundercloud, it is top-heavy like the toadstool. Energy which disregards the standard of classical art is in nature as it is in Browning (pp. 149-50).

Whereas Santayana condemned Browning for his lack of idealism and his lack of emphasis on perfection, Chesterton lauds the poet for his realism and his emphasis on imperfection. Chesterton suggests the interesting idea that, for Browning, both man and God are marked significantly by imperfection. Many other Browning commentators have noted man's being so marked--therein lies the implication that he can and will ultimately perfect or complete himself--but saying that God is so marked, as Chesterton does, adds a unique twist to the interpretation of Browning's religion. The "imperfection of God" becomes realized in Christianity, and, more specifically, in the incarnation. In such an act, says Chesterton, God willed his own imperfection for the sake of identification with man and
for the sake, ultimately, of sacrificing himself for man. This unique perspective on the incarnation further accentuates the distance between Chesterton and Santayana. For Chesterton—and for Browning—Christianity brings a transcendent God down into the realm of reality; but for Santayana Christianity is devised to cause man to aspire beyond reality to a state of ideal perfection.

Stopford A. Brooke's *The Poetry of Robert Browning* (1902) is of interest at this point because it pictures Browning struggling between two stances similar to those represented by Chesterton and Santayana. "Browning's position, then," says Brooke,

is a combination of romantic and classical . . . views of human life; of the temper which says, "Here only is our life, here only our concern," and that which says, "Not here, but hereafter is our life." "Here, and hereafter," answered Browning. "Live within earth's limits with all your force; never give in, fight on; but always transcend your fullest action in aspiration, faith, and love."

Brooke also introduces the source of Browning's "doctrine of imperfection," and it turns out to be the ancient and tradition-bound idea of original sin, "a natural defective-ness deliberately imposed on us by God, which prevents us from attaining any absolute success on earth."

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1 What we have here, expressed in other terms, is the "amphibian" notion of Browning that was conveyed some years earlier (1890) by James T. Bixby in *The Arena*: "Our life is like that of the swimmer—the sea beneath him, the heaven above him. Immersed in the grosser element, he breathes and lives by the more ethereal medium."
In the beginning of the twentieth century, with the publication of books like Chesterton's and Brooke's, Browning commentary takes a long step forward from the handbook, study guide, encyclopedia format that had come to dominate extended treatments of the poet. Another change of direction, evident in the work of Chesterton at least, is a de-emphasis on the poet as thinker and increased attention given to the poet as poet. A book from this same decade, Ethel M. Naish's *Browning and Dogma* (1906), continues the trend away from the handbook approach; but at the same time it demonstrates that the poet's religion is still deemed by some to be of greater importance than the esthetics and techniques of the poetry. As Naish investigates Browning's religion, however, caution is her watchword. She has observed other critics who have found in the poetry what they wanted or needed in order to fulfill personal yearnings or even prejudices; Naish desires to avoid falling into the same trap. Her purpose is to determine Browning's "creed" objectively, as far as it is possible for her to do so, by concentrating on what is actually in the poetry (she devotes most of her attention to five particular poems). She believes that one does the poet a greater injustice in defining his religion more precisely than the poetry clearly warrants than by stopping short and thus allowing his religion to appear vague and noncommittal. At the outset
Naish spells out Browning's beliefs in these terms:

The assertion "I believe in God and Truth and Love," expressed through the medium of the lover of Pauline, finds its echo in the more direct personal assertion of the concluding lines of La Saisiaz, "He believed in Soul, was very sure of God." This was the irreducible minimum of Browning's creed.

To this "irreducible minimum," all Naish adds to Browning's very spare catalog of religious convictions, after she has examined in detail significant religious poems, is a recognition of "the continuity of life." Her contention is that Browning deliberately refused to be pinned down to more specific and concrete convictions (like church dogmas) because he viewed them as too limiting and as failing to acknowledge the inherent dynamism of life and of truth; formulas make for constriction, stagnation, and death:

... in proportion as satisfaction is found in formula does faith lose its life-giving power. ... Before all things, is to be avoided the danger of resting on that which is not Truth itself, but merely a necessary introduction to the Truth.

When Naish's Browning is set next to Orr's an interesting parallel becomes apparent: both commentators see in Browning's beliefs the clear mark of unorthodoxy. But a notable difference accompanies this parallel: whereas to Orr the Browning stance has a kind of inevitability about it (she even traces it to his early non-conformist religious background), to Naish the lack of strict definition to Browning's religion seems to have been deliberately devised by the poet. In Naish's eyes, there-
fore, the Christianity of Browning is more than a mere skeptical, undogmatic vision or a "simple hope" (as Orr would have it); rather, Naish sees the Christian implications of Browning's poetry as suggesting a view beyond the formulated religion to truths that Christianity can only gesture towards. This is a more positive, and perhaps a more modern, vision of Browning than is the "gospel of uncertainty" attributed to him by Orr. Orr's characterization of Browning's religion was shaped by the rather typical nineteenth-century preoccupation with doubt and skepticism. Naish's characterization depicts Browning embracing the possibility of continuous progress and change in man's religious comprehension, with dogmatic Christianity representing only a limited step in this direction.

In terms of Browning's modernity, no one in the decade or two immediately following the poet's death made more suggestive observations than the American philosopher Josiah Royce. In The Boston Browning Society Papers (1897) is included an address by Royce on "Browning's Theism." Royce recognizes two facets in Browning's conception of God: one is the God of "Power," the other the God of "Love." The recognition of this two-faced God in Browning's work is not particularly startling, nor is the relationship Royce discerns in the poetry between God's love and God's act of incarnation. What is striking is Royce's use of the term "God beyond God" to describe a unique element in
Browning's theism. Royce applies the term to the God who, for Browning, is not satisfactorily accounted for by the conventional notions of God. Such notions focus, sometimes almost exclusively, on God's greatness and power; it is this conventional God, then, that Browning tries to see "beyond." Royce points to Caliban's acknowledgment, in his own primitive theology, of a "God beyond God": "There may be something quiet o'er his [Setebos's] head," muses Browning's brutish monologuist. This "something quiet" is the God who, for man, is more satisfying and more fulfilling than is the God of power who has been molded by the long and strong traditions of organized Christianity. Thus the true God becomes accessible only after the search for him along the customary paths has ended, leaving the seeker exhausted and still incomplete.

This is a rather modern notion that Royce finds embodied in Browning's theological thought. In fact it, curiously enough, looks forward to an important phrase and idea in the work of the modern theologian Paul Tillich. In his book The Courage to Be, Tillich refers to a "God above God" who "transcends the theistic idea of God." Although Tillich does not mean by his term "God above God" precisely what Royce meant with his very similar phrase, it is clear that both philosopher-theologians are angling in

the same direction—the articulation of a new and liberated concept of God. Royce discovers in Browning, and Tillich discovers in his own search for "the courage to be," new horizons that must define modern man's approach to God. God has not so much disappeared for modern man; instead, the all-satisfying "God beyond (or above) God" is offered as, in a sense, a new reality whom old paths—laid down by the church and by traditional theism—fail to achieve access to.

A treatment of Browning commentary in these years after the poet's death would be incomplete without a mention of one of Browning's best known and most widely published American admirers and defenders: William Lyon Phelps. This Yale English professor wrote about the poet for widely diverse audiences, which even included the readers of The Ladies' Home Journal (1925). But Phelps's best known contribution to Browning criticism is his Robert Browning: How To Know Him (1915). Phelps's refrain, as he examines the poet's work, is how "purely Christian" Browning's philosophy is. What distinguishes Phelps's analysis of Browning's religion, in fact, is the orthodox and unskeptical Christianity that, Phelps assumes, marks the poet's beliefs. Citing Browning's doubts or his unorthodoxy, other commentators, as has been illustrated, found such an assumption difficult to reach. Phelps calls Browning, "among all modern thinkers and writers . . . the
foremost optimist," and in so doing Phelps places the poet's optimism on a firm Christian foundation: "Take Christianity out of Browning, and his whole philosophy, with its cheerful outlook, falls to the ground. Of all true English poets, he is the most definitely Christian, the most sure of his ground."

In the three decades following Browning's death, the investigations into his religion go in no immediately recognizable new directions. Many of the less original and less discerning critics are still doing nothing more than listing the ideas and themes characterizing Browning's religious views. Such lists turn out to be largely redundant, however, as they merely repeat what critics and reviewers had already noted about the poet's religious posture during his own lifetime. And the unalloyed admiration and subjectivity marking many Browning Society observations on the poet's religion do not stop with his death either. They are particularly evident in the avalanche of eulogies that descended after Browning's death. So a definite echo is evident in the move from one period of Browning commentary to the next.

But what is more interesting--and ultimately more significant--are the changes in emphasis and direction in the discussion of Browning's religion. For one thing, subjectivity ("his effect on me and my life") is not so prominent in shaping evaluations of Browning; although
certain intemperate and opinionated judgments are rendered (for instance, in a critic like Santayana), greater detachment reigns in the subjection of Browning's religion to critical scrutiny. Of importance, too, is that this period saw the emergence of several giants in Browning criticism who remain influential even today. Figures like Jones, Santayana, and Chesterton are widely recognized for their insights and opinions as well as for their power of expression and their persuasiveness. And each was, to a lesser or greater extent, concerned about religious implications in Browning's poetry.

Since the religious profile of Browning had been outlined more or less completely by the time of his death and even given a somewhat modern cast by Revell, it is most interesting to observe in the immediately succeeding years how that profile stands up to analysis and criticism. Jones and Santayana are the most damaging critics. Although distinct from one another in their attacks on the poet, they raise related objections to a key element in the Christian stance Browning had devised and adopted. That element is Browning's irrationality. For Jones it means that Browning's thought and beliefs lack the intellectual rigor that would lend them credibility. For Santayana it means that Browning's religion lacks the composed idealism of traditional Christianity and instead is shaped helter-skelter into an unfortunate mish-mash of impulsiveness,
eccentricity, and grotesquery—much energy, but little substance or wisdom.

Chesterton was an appreciator of both the art and the religion of Browning. But his appreciation was markedly different from that which too often prevailed in the Browning Society and which also too often prevailed among Chesterton's own contemporaries. His treatment of the grotesque and his explanation of the incarnation in relation to Browning's poetry are especially noteworthy here. Chesterton's approach to the poet's work was detached, discriminating, intelligent, original, and witty—a worthy antidote both to the uncritical adulation of the poet that too often had gained attention and also to the sharp criticism that had been directed at Browning by Jones and Santayana.

For Orr and Naish, however, the question is not what kind of Christian Browning was, but rather whether or not he was a Christian at all. And both agree that his acceptance of Christianity is accompanied by severe reservations: of skepticism and doubt on one hand, and on the other, an openness to the truth that lies outside the confines of dogmatic Christianity.

And then there are the commentators like Berdooe and Phelps, who seem to be throwbacks to an earlier era. They accept Browning's Christianity in a relatively uncritical way and, though they may not label him as fully
orthodox, they do find him to be in the Christian mainstream. Although Berdoe is more subjective in his approach than is Phelps, the goal of both is to praise and popularize Browning for reasons which had been set forth quite fully in the years before the poet's death.

As Browning criticism moves further and further forward into the years after Browning's lifetime and on into the twentieth century, the poet's modernity moves nearer and nearer the middle of the spotlight of critical attention. His Victorian qualities fade and his pre-modern and modern qualities emerge to replace them. This trend is evident in the "God beyond God" discovered by Royce in Browning's theism; and the trend will become more conspicuous as we look later at mid-twentieth-century Browning commentary.

But the preceding discussion fails to do full justice to the criticism concentrating on Browning's religion in the years 1890-1919. A brief mention of some odds and ends in the critical output of this period, however, can come closer to accomplishing that goal; in such a brief survey the variety of the religious implications and meanings in Browning's poetry will be better reflected as will the variety of interests and preoccupations represented among his commentators.

Browning's "mysticism" had been noted by some of his earliest reviewers (an 1833 review of Pauline in The
Atlas, for instance, cites the "mystical" images of the poem). But not until after the turn of the century did anything resembling a rigorous analysis of this aspect of Browning's religion take place. Those discussing Browning's mysticism in a significant, but sometimes tangential, way included William Ralph Inge (1906), Caroline Spurgeon (1907), Emily Hickey (1911), and Helen Archibald Clarke (1912).

As it had in earlier years, the treatment of Catholics and Catholicism in Browning's poetry continued during this later period to gain the attention of some readers. Most interesting among such responses were those of John Rickaby (1890), Brother Azarius (1891), J. B. (1913), and Homer C. Stuntz (1916).

And finally there were several interesting attempts to discuss Browning's religion in relation to the work of other writers or in relation to certain literary or political movements. The famous educational theorist, John Dewey (in The Andover Review, 1891), saw Browning stepping in to fill the role—"to stay and to console" religionless man—set up for the poet by Matthew Arnold. Oscar L. Triggs (in Poet-Lore, 1892) connected Browning's religion with democratic notions—and also with the spirit of earlier poet-democrats, William Blake and Walt Whitman—as he spoke of Browning's special belief in and reverence for man. Then, in 1905, C. H. Herford related
Browning's Christianity to the early influence of Shelley upon the poet's thinking: "'The revelation of God in Christ' was for [Browning] the consummate example of that union of divine love with the world . . . which Shelley had contemplated in the radiant glow of his poetry."
PART III

1920-1945

Despite the impressive individual voices of Jones, Santayana, et al., Browning criticism in the thirty years after Browning's death still bears the unmistakable imprint of Browning Society adulation. This was the period when Browning's popularity reached its highest point, perhaps largely because of the attractiveness of certain aspects of his Browning Society image: his (so-called) optimism and his reassuring (to many) religious views. But in the years now under consideration, 1920-1945—a time when interest in the poet reached its nadir—one would search hard to find such an imprint. The influence of the Society is still in the air, but the tendency of many critics is to contradict and rebel against it rather than to submit to its effects. Thus these years, between the end of one world war and the end of another, reveal a kind of revisionist approach to Browning. This revisionism follows several tracks.

A chief figure in this revisionist movement was Frances Theresa Russell. It seems to be her goal to rehabilitate Browning for the twentieth century. She expresses scorn for certain aspects of his thought and of his image—and here she assumes she speaks for her whole generation—
that had strongly appealed to an earlier generation of Browning's readers. She begins, in an essay on "The Pessimism of Robert Browning" (1924), by attacking his celebrated optimism. But Russell eventually goes further, actually tailoring Browning to her own and her generation's tastes and concluding that he was not so optimistic after all. She notes in his outlook the heavy weight of realism (or pessimism) and suggests a certain ambiguity in his religious outlook: it is colored strongly by doubt, uncertainty, and bleakness as well as by the better-known optimism.

Russell was not alone during these years in taking a new perspective on Browning's optimism. Lascelles Abercrombie in his book, The Great Victorians (1932), cites Browning's belief in immortality, interestingly, as evidence of an often unrecognized basic pessimism in the poet's viewpoint: "During the whole of his life, the doctrine of immortality seems to have presented itself to him as the one possible escape from the conviction that evil had, on the whole, the mastery in existence."¹

Another track this revisionist movement follows is one of attack on Browning's thought in general. Again Russell leads the way. In an essay on "His Learning and

¹Russell's and Abercrombie's opinions lead the way for, in the 1950's, even more strongly stated attacks on Browning's religious views. These views, expressed by Richard D. Altick (1952) and Joseph E. Baker (1957), will be examined in Part IV of this introduction.
Ideas" (from *One Word More on Browning*, 1927), Russell notes the lack of originality in the poet's thinking:

... if he never did stalk a new idea worth the salt to put on its tail, he salted down many an old one into extremely neat and pungent epigrams... He peaked his own pyramid right enough, but it was a replica of the numerous other pyramids with which the Sahara of human ignorance is pathetically populated.

But Russell becomes more specific in her focus as she treats Browning's explanation for evil. As might be expected, she sees nothing new as a solution to a theological crux in this area of Browning's thought; she concludes that all Browning exhibits is a rather simple and traditional trust that the force of divine Providence is ultimately responsible for the existence of evil in the world. With that realization we must be content; Browning gives us no more, says Russell.

The reason Russell deems Browning's thought even worthy of attack is, of course, that this component of his poetry had been overemphasized by generations of Browning's readers. So a third track in the revisionist approach to the poet leads to a reemphasis on Browning's poetry itself --its language, its meter, its esthetic qualities in general --and to putting his philosophy and his religion in their rightful, and lesser, place. As Russell observed, Browning's thought itself is hardly very impressive. What makes it noteworthy is the art that embodies it: "Its distinction lies [not in the ideas themselves but] in the exquisite carving of some of the detail."
Several years later, D. C. Somervell recognized the same distortion in Browning's image. In an essay on "The Reputation of Robert Browning" (1929), Somervell explains that in earlier years the notion of Browning as thinker-teacher-preacher had almost completely eliminated other possible conceptions of the poet: "a certain kind of clergyman could hardly get out of the pulpit until he had quoted something from An Epistle, Saul, Easter Day, A Death in the Desert, or Rabbi Ben Ezra." Somervell is convinced that a barrier has sprung up in his decade between Browning and potential readers because this distorted image of the poet neither appeals to nor meets the needs of a more modern era. And Somervell, like Russell, sees it as his task to help take down the barrier so that post-Victorians can once again take seriously Browning's poetry—including even its religious elements, but this time with these elements put in their proper perspective.

Edging near this stream of criticism set in motion by Russell and Somervell is the French critic Paul de Reul. In an essay on "The Art and Thought of Browning" (1926), de Reul reveals an uncommonly evenhanded approach to the poet. On one hand, he disparages those who, in their estimate of Browning, focus primarily on the religious philosopher or teacher. De Reul is especially severe with critics who shape the poet to fit their own preconceptions. Here de Reul cites Bury and Jones, "critics who read into Browning
the system of their own favorite philosopher [Hegel]." But on the other hand, de Reul does devote attention himself to Browning's thought and religion (and seems to show more interest in it than does Russell). In recognizing this facet of Browning's work, de Reul draws an interesting conclusion about the poet's often-noted religious ambivalence: Browning's Christianity is called "a compromise, a true Victorian compromise between his philosophy or his reason and the [evangelical] religion of his first education."

All these revisionist trends I have mentioned suggest a greater sense of distance, both in time and in temperament, between the poet and his critics than was possible in an earlier era. Perhaps this distance is indicated most clearly by the kind of study that Somervell engages in. Somervell's examination of Browning's "reputation" was the first such approach to the poet and his work. Many such studies have followed, however (including this present treatment of Browning and the responses evoked by his religious ideas). A landmark work of this kind was F. R. G. Duckworth's Browning: Background and Conflict (1931). In the first half of his book Duckworth looks closely at critical reactions to Browning's poetry in three different decades: the 1850's, the 1890's, and the 1920's. As might be expected, and as this bibliography and its introduction indicate, there was no overwhelming response to or appreciation of the poetry's religious implications in the earliest
of Duckworth's three chosen decades. But the same can hardly be said of the next of his decades, the 1890's. At this time, under the spell of the recently formed Browning Society, Browning's readers began to appreciate too much—or appreciate for the wrong reasons—Browning's religion. Duckworth explains the phenomenon in this way:

they wanted to be sure that man was immortal, that there was a God, that the old moral ideals were not illusive, that the established hierarchy of virtues had not been upset—in short, that God was in His Heaven and all was right with the world.

Finally, about the 1920's, Duckworth observes what has already been noted in this introduction: a definite cooling of the fervor formerly felt about Browning. The anti-romanticism, skepticism, and pessimism of the time go strongly against the grain of what had made Browning so appealing earlier.

Duckworth's book is more, though, than just a consideration of the poet's reputation. Duckworth was disappointed that critics of his own generation failed to take Browning seriously. It seemed to him that the modern era, especially with its psychological analysis and conflict, would find fertile ground to work in the poetry of Browning. To Duckworth Browning's life, thought, and poetry seemed to be permeated with complexity and conflict. So in the second part of his book Duckworth examines these conflicts. The chief among them centers on what Browning recognized as a "white light" of truth. Browning believed in such a light
and felt the impulse—especially under the urging of his wife, Elizabeth—to approach it boldly and directly in his poetry. To speak in his own voice and to do so in unequivocal language seemed to be a corresponding desire of his. Despite such attentions, however, Browning’s approach to this light almost inevitably became diverted by his obscurity as well as by his compulsive reticence, a reticence that realized itself in the voices of Browning’s monologists masking the voice of the poet himself. Duckworth describes Browning’s conflict and frustration in this way:

The light of that supreme vision hurts his eyes—all the beautiful things he sees stir an irresistible desire to grasp them—and the charm is broken—he finds himself back on earth again among his men and women. The white light which shone for a brief instant is quenched. . . . We may think of him as a poet who struggled bravely to gain insight into the hidden soul of things—fought his way towards a light that by turns eluded and blinded him (pp. 210-11, 213).

Duckworth depicts Browning as a troubled, conflict-ridden religious seeker who is hesitant in the extreme to reveal himself naked before the glaring light of truth and thus come into possession of that truth for himself. This picture is vastly different from a former one which presented Browning as a successful and assured seeker who had found the truth and was pronouncing it prophetically to his spiritually needy listeners. The distant and detached perspective of the new modern era along with its revisionist version of the poet clearly mark the estimate of Browning Duckworth provides us with.
So far we have observed two tendencies of the Browning criticism published between the wars: one tried to dismiss him and his religion, claiming that his strong appeal to the Victorians was unique and that the modern era found him not only unappealing but in fact found key elements of his work irrelevant or even offensive; the second tendency was not to dismiss Browning but to revamp and reinterpret him, molding him into a shape that would fit the needs and interests of another age and another consciousness. But another significant tendency becomes apparent in the work of W. O. Raymond and C. R. Tracy. Instead of trying to dismiss Browning from consideration in their age or trying to adapt and adopt him for it, both critics attempt to understand Browning's religion better in relation to forces at work in the poet's own epoch. The implied question for both Raymond and Tracy is: what particular sources contributed to the outline of Browning's religious profile? Raymond, in an essay on "Browning and Higher Criticism" (originally published in 1929 but in 1950 included in Raymond's The Infinite Moment), presents the most thorough early study of Browning's opinion of and response to nineteenth-century higher criticism of the Bible. For the first time we come close to realizing how much of what Browning thought and believed seems to have been affected by the work of biblical critics like Strauss and Renan. But if Browning was influenced by the higher criticism and its attacks on the scriptures, he
did not turn completely skeptical about the validity of Christianity. Says Raymond of Browning's defence of the religion:

... the natural stress of Browning's apologia for Christianity is on the evaluation of it as a living rather than as an historical creed. In this way he seeks to turn the flank of the attack made by rationalistic criticism on the historic foundations of Christianity.

C. R. Tracy, in his examination of "Browning's Heresies" (1936), also treats the phenomenon of higher criticism and Browning's response to it. But Tracy's focus extends somewhat wider to include other biographical, religious, and intellectual influences on Browning's religious opinions. For instance, besides the higher critics, Tracy recognizes certain other important shapers of Browning's unorthodox, or even heretical, religious opinions: the Rev. W. J. Fox, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer. The first of these was a clergyman who had significant contact with the young Browning and whose thinking was touched by "the increasing radicalness of Unitarian thought." And Darwin and Spencer were, of course, important evolutionary thinkers whose works became widely known in the Victorian age. Despite these influences upon the poet and the consequent touches of heresy evident in Browning's Christianity, Tracy concludes that Browning fended off the rationalistic forces rather effectively to maintain the following religious position:
The important thing for the individual . . . is not an intellectual certainty based on acceptance of the historical truth of the Bible, but the witness of the heart in Christian experience . . . . This is his constant rejoinder to the higher criticism.

It should be noted that the conclusions of Raymond and Tracy strongly resemble one another; both see the unmistakable effects on Browning of contemporary influences, but both also discern a continued adherence to Christianity despite the influences. And both see, too, how the shape of Browning's Christianity is affected: to Raymond it becomes a "living creed" and to Tracy it becomes a "witness of the heart." Both descriptions suggest a refuge for Browning amidst the intellectual challenges so often and so forcefully presented to simple faith in the nineteenth century.

After listening to Raymond and Tracy, one sees that the attraction of Browning for his contemporaries—which had been somewhat disparagingly treated by critics like Russell, Somervell, and Duckworth—begins to make sense again.

The critic who wrote most extensively on Browning's religion during this period between the wars was H. B. Charlton. But he was not an adherent to the revisionist trends of these years. In several articles published in the Bulletin of the John Rylands Library between 1938-1943, Charlton examined from several perspectives religious aspects of the poet's work; his opinions and conclusions, however, seem to be more characteristic of what is usually associated with the Browning Society and its followers than
with the approaches and responses to Browning we have observed in the 20's and 30's. But Charlton does maintain a certain detachment in his analysis, and he also is careful to show respect for the poetic nature of Browning's utterances.

In the essay most obviously relevant to the concerns of this bibliography, "Browning as Poet of Religion" (1943), Charlton indicates that the Victorian era, and thus Browning too, was concerned with several major religious issues:

Was there room any longer for God in the universe which was being unfolded by the scientists? Did the implicit materialism of their science bar out everything "supernatural"? If miracles were to disappear, was revelation nothing more than a hallucination? How indeed, if God was not entirely denied, was he to be known? What authority was there for this Christian God, and what was the supreme role of Christ in Christianity (p. 272)?

Without pointing to Browning's answers to all these questions, Charlton suggests the following as the "major articles of Browning's faith":

He believed in God, first realized as a God of Power, and then revealed as a God of Love; he believed in Christ as literally the Son of God, and, if the expression is not improper, in the Incarnation as the one essential "miracle," as it was also the most essential "revelation"; he believed profoundly in the human spirit's access to God by "inspiration"; and he believed in personal immortality (p. 273).

Later in his essay Charlton emphatically underlines two important components of Browning's faith. One of these is the notion that love supersedes all else (e.g., church, ritual, creed) as a true expression of the nature of God and of Christianity: in the poems "the most frequently recurring
motif . . . is that of God as the God of Love . . . ; Christ is the veritable pledge of his Love . . ." The second component is the notion that instincts or intuitions springing from personal experience serve as a truer basis for faith than does pure rationality or scientific and historical fact: "He accepted Christ and the Christian God because of his own instinctive sensations through the continuous exigencies of existence."

In two other pertinent discussions, "Browning: The Poet's Aim" (1938) and "Browning's Ethical Poetry" (1942), Charlton guides his thoughts about Browning's religion along somewhat different paths. The first of these essays begins with words clearly indicating Charlton's awareness of Browning's unpopularity in the 1930's: "Who now reads Browning?" asks Charlton. Part of what follows is Charlton's attempt to suggest specific causes for that unpopularity; and, not surprisingly, one of the causes cited is Browning's Christianity itself, a world-view that modern man was tending more and more to look at unsympathetically. But the rest of Charlton's essay goes on in an attempt to convince alienated readers that there is something of worth in Browning's work. The artist or the poet has a unique ability that should not be neglected, i.e., to convey a genuine vision to mankind: he has also the faculty not only to pass on the vision but to excite in us the apprehensiveness which gives us the faculty of experiencing the vision for ourselves.
His work is literally a revelation, and carries the conviction of actual revelation. He is, next to God, the surest guide to truth.

In Charlton's next article, on Browning's ethics, a strong relationship is seen between Browning's conception of Christianity and the ethical and moral implications of his poetry. Selflessness is seen as the key: "... self realises itself not in selfishness but in deliberate selflessness."

The question might arise, why spotlight Charlton so fully when it is apparent that not much of startling originality emerges in his treatment of Browning's religion? But the fact is, Charlton was something of an original in the era during which he wrote on Browning. In a time when Browning's religion, and the poet's work in general, was not taken as seriously or dealt with as extensively as it was in the years just preceding and just following his death, Charlton stands out. And Charlton stands out, too, in that his impression of Browning's Christianity tends to shape the poet into a more orthodox figure than do many other views then current.

The years 1919-1945 in Browning criticism must be looked at as an important period of transition. In preceding years the poet was considered to have reached near-godlike stature in the minds of his public. Even those who were especially severe with Browning in those years near the date of his death—for instance, Jones and Santayana—implicitly acknowledged the stature he had attained simply
by paying him the compliment of recognition. Interest in
the religious poet--Christian, thinker, teacher, inspirer,
even something of a heretic--was high, and this facet of
Browning's work received, perhaps, undue attention. But
between the wars the poet's reputation plummeted, as did
interest in the religious views which had formerly appealed
so widely to Browning's readers. Browning seems to have
been a victim of overly-zealous worshippers and advocates--
the Browning Society and its progeny--and also a victim of
an increasingly skeptical and secularly-minded modern world.
The religious prophet of earlier decades was rather easily
and callously dismissed. A glance back to the mid-1940's
suggests that, for Browning's religion once again to become
interesting to readers, a new and distinctively modern
appeal would have to be discovered. And that is very close
to what actually occurred. The hints at Browning's modern
temperament, which many years before had come filtering
through the critical remarks of such commentators as Revell
and Royce, finally develop into full gestures in the mid-
twentieth century. Browning gradually begins to emerge as
a poet whose verse resonates with modern meaning. The reli-
gious implications of the poetry are no longer seen as ill-
founded, quaint, Victorian relics, the preserve only of
little old ladies in attendance at Browning Society meetings.
In fact, in the view of a remarkable number of commentators,
the latter-day Browning comes to us reincarnated as, of all things, a half-fledged—if not a full-fledged—existential-ist.¹

¹Browning is not the only Victorian writer who has been treated in this way. Recognition of the modernity of Victorian attitudes and ideas in general contributes to a major thesis in Walter E. Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (1957): "... our 'age of anxiety' suffers from many of the same fears that shook... Victorian life... our skepticism is merely a more radical form of the doubt which was even then mining the eternal verities... the sense of loneliness and isolation we are so aware of was already felt and poignantly expressed by the Victorians..." (p. xiv).
PART IV

1946-1977

The most recent thirty years of Browning commentary reflect a remarkable revival of general interest in the poet and also a revival, more specifically, of interest in the poet's religious ideas.¹ The strength of these two closely related revivals is perhaps best indicated by the attention paid Browning in the work of three noted critics of Victorian literature: E. D. H. Johnson, Robert Langbaum, and J. Hillis Miller. Each of these writers discerns in Browning's poetry a key to understanding certain movements or phenomena that help shape the literature we recognize as the distinctive product of the nineteenth century. And each interestingly relates Browning's unique dramatic monologue form to the poet's strong religious concern.

Johnson's The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry (1952)

¹In fact, a general renewal of interest in Victorian studies has been evident over this same period of time as Jerome H. Buckley has noted in The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research, ed. Frederic E. Faverty, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968): "By the early nineteen twenties . . . the label 'Victorian' carried an almost universal connotation of disparagement. The hostility lingered on into the forties. . . . Since that time, however, and especially in the past ten years, the revaluation of all things Victorian has proceeded with precision, intelligence, and sympathy, and Victorian literature has become one of the major areas of critical scholarship" (p. 3).
places Browning, along with Tennyson and Arnold, in the difficult position of being alienated from the dominant values and literary fashions of his age. Browning's alienation, suggests Johnson, arises from the poet's conviction—not at all widely accepted among his contemporaries—"that intuition is the ultimate means of knowledge" (p. 143). Thus, notes Johnson,

the poet founds his faith in man's instinctual nature on private insights unsusceptible of demonstration by rational means. So, for example, he maintains that the appeal of Christianity derives from the baffling challenge which Christ offers to philosophic inquiry (pp. 72-73).

Browning realized that such an attitude toward rationality and such an understanding of Christianity would meet with little tolerance if presented too directly in poetic form. So, says Johnson, Browning's means became indirect: the dramatic monologue was employed extensively by Browning partially to make his unorthodox religious views more palatable.

Langbaum, like Johnson, is concerned also with perceiving Browning's relation to nineteenth-century thought and tradition. But Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience* (1957) emphasizes Browning's romanticism, not his alienation. Romanticism is defined by Langbaum as the attempt to discover the ground for values through experience, or by an empirical mode, rather than by pure rationality. Browning shows himself to be such a romantic, or poet of experience, in his religious poems like "Karshish" and "Cleon": "The
need for Christianity stands as empiric fact in these poems, just because it appears in spite of intellectual and cultural objections" (p. 99). But Bishop Blougram is designated as the monologuist most closely approximating Browning's own "experiential" approach to religion: "He is doing what Browning does in all the dramatic monologues on religion--making the empiricist argument, starting without any assumptions as to faith and transcendental values" (p. 101).

J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God* (1963) treats the romanticism of Browning again, but Miller's perspective is different from Langbaum's. Miller sees Browning (along with other romantics such as Thomas De Quincey, Emily Brontë, Matthew Arnold, and Gerald Manley Hopkins) struggling with the new religious situation of the nineteenth century:

> When the old system of symbols binding man to God has finally evaporated man finds himself alone and in spiritual poverty. Modern times begin when man confronts his isolation, his separation from everything outside himself (p. 7).

This dilemma is characterized by Miller as the disappearance of God; but such a condition of abandonment is not easily borne by Miller's romantic writers: "The romantics still believe in God, and they find his absence intolerable. At all costs they must attempt to re-establish communication" (p. 13). Miller claims that Browning's attempt to accomplish this end is uniquely embodied in the poet's dramatic monologue mode. Browning saw himself, as a poet, in a
special mediating position between man and the God who has disappeared. The host of characters and monologues Browning created show the poet trying to bring God back in touch with his world by "incarnating" him over and over. Miller claims for Browning the conviction that "each imperfect and limited man through whom the power of God swirls is a temporary incarnation of God, one of the infinitely varied ways in which God makes himself real in the world."

But despite the significant attention accorded Browning by such prominent critics as Johnson, Langbaum, and Miller in these recent years, the poet has also been discussed in a way that seems to be not much more than an echo of the standard treatment he received around the turn of the century. To such eyes Browning appears, rather simplistically, as a wholesome antidote to the moral, religious, and even psychological ills of the modern age.

Two such critics, who appear in the mid-twentieth century as throwbacks to earlier years of Browning commentary, are Dallas Kenmare and Hugh Martin. Kenmare, particularly in *Ever a Fighter: A Modern Approach to the Work of Robert Browning* (1952), presents the poet's vision as a contrast to a modern world which seems to be disintegrating. Against, and in answer to, this world's "lassitude, negation, and despair" stands Browning, a figure strengthened by courage, optimism, and Christianity. In his book, *The Faith of Robert Browning* (1963), Martin likens Browning to the poet's
own creation, Childe Roland: both see life as a pilgrimage through a grim and terrible world, strewn with the wreckage of past lives, and yet a world through which man presses on with stout heart. . . . Childe Roland lived to tell the tale: Browning emerged with a faith. Perhaps he can speak to the present generation (pp. 12-13).

Through the rest of his book Martin spotlights items in what had formerly been a standard list of Browning's religious concerns: what did Browning think of Christianity, Christ, evil, and immortality?

If the Browning commentary is punctuated in these modern decades, however, by the anachronistic voices of Kenmare and Martin, it also sounds loudly with the voice of demystification first heard distinctly in the 1920's and 1930's in the criticism of Russell and Abercrombie, but which echoes all the way back to Henry Jones in 1891. The foremost of the more recent demystifiers is Richard D. Altick. In his essay "The Private Life of Robert Browning" (1952), Altick takes stabs at Browning's vaunted optimism and religion in an attempt to deflate them, thus finally and accurately revealing (Altick hopes) their unimpressiveness and inauthenticity. To Altick, Browning's optimism was only a cover for a serious sense of personal inadequacy:

His fervent celebration of the glories of the incomplete, the imperfect, as being part of God's inscrutable but unquestionable plan for men, is far less the manifestation of an intellectual conviction than it is the result of Browning's growing need to salve his awareness of failure.

And Browning's Christianity, Altick insists, did not repre-
sent a heroic stand against the breakdown of religion in the
nineteenth century; instead it is seen as a feeble attempt
by Browning to find a protective shelter from which to
escape the threats and challenges of biblical critics like
Strauss and Renan.¹

Joseph E. Baker, in writing about "Religious Implica-
tions in Browning's Poetry" (1957), follows closely in
Altick's footsteps. Baker also takes issue with the image
of Browning as a Christian optimist. Baker sees certain of
Browning's positions--for instance, his tendencies to embrace
this world and to accept evil--as opposed to Christianity
and as actually pessimistic rather than optimistic. Baker
is intent on exposing Browning's supposed Christianity for
what it really is:

... Browning was considered to be the great Christian
poet of his age, because he gave his public what so many
of them wanted: he used religious phrases to justify an
indulgent complacency towards evil that, in the Bible,
had been censured by all the prophets; and he claimed
all the promises of Christianity without the rigors of
the ancient creed.

Two other critics, both in books on the nineteenth-
century romantic tradition, have added their perspectives to
the continuing demystification of Browning's image. Reginald
A. Foakes, in his Romantic Assertion: A Study in the Language

¹It should be noted that much subsequent discussion
of Browning recognizes and responds to Altick's attack, but
Kenneth L. Knickerbocker's "A Tentative Apology for Browning"
(1956) stands as the most explicit defence of Browning
against this particular detractor.
of Nineteenth Century Poetry (1958), finds that the optimis-
tic answers in Browning's poems sound a hollowly unsatis-
fyng note:

He seems to escape from the profound disquiet at the
heart of these poems into generalizations that all is
really for the best, and thus to evade the dramatic
issues raised in them with assertions that often remain
empty rhetoric.

Derek Colville's Victorian Poetry and the Romantic Religion
(1970) comes to a similar conclusion about the authenticity
of Browning's Christianity. Browning was, concludes Col-
ville, a struggling, doubting romantic in spite of himself,
but one who attempted to mask his romanticism by sounding
like a sure-minded Christian:

His often-expressed belief in some imprecise form of
Christianity, which appears to carry philosophical
assumptions about the roles of love, death, and evil
akin to Romantic ones, has an oddly automatic quality
about it. . . . Browning's optimism, for all its em-
phasis, appears simply rootless, occurring as an
isolated, predetermined phenomenon supported, if at
all, only by consequent argument.

All these attempts to strip away time-honored illu-
sions about Browning's religion--to rationalize it, to find
fault with it, to call it insincere--are balanced by other
somewhat more objective attempts simply to explain his reli-
gion or to examine the roots from which it grew. These lat-
ter, for the most part, follow the path originally beaten by
Raymond and Tracy in the 20's and 30's. Kingsbury Badger
has written one of the most valuable concise discussions of
Browning's religious beliefs published since the last World
In his essay, "'See the Christ Stand!': Browning's Religion" (1955), Badger, like his predecessors Raymond and Tracy, sets the religious notions of Browning against certain attitudes and movements significant in the Victorian period. Among the key phenomena cited by Badger is, as might be expected, the new biblical criticism already mentioned by many commentators (including Raymond and Tracy). Badger concludes that this particular movement could not have had a greatly disturbing effect on Browning's own Christian faith because the poet was not orthodox or literal-minded in his Christianity to begin with. Badger also notes, by quoting Josiah Royce, the inextricable relationship in Browning's religion between his notion of love and his belief in the doctrine of incarnation:

To say God is Love is, then, the same as to say God is, or has been, or will be incarnate, perhaps once, perhaps --for so Browning's always monistic intuitions about the relation of God and the world suggest to him--perhaps always, perhaps in all our life, perhaps in all men (Royce quoted, p. 60).

These firm convictions about love and incarnation seem to save the poet's religion from the Victorian era's onslaught of skepticism.

Badger has been joined by others too in the attempt to explain the intellectual and religious context in which Browning's poetry was composed. In 1964 William Irvine published in Victorian Poetry an article exploring the contemporary references, both veiled and explicit, to be found
in "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," "Karshish," and "Cleon." Irvine mentions allusions to Strauss, Darwin, Wiseman, Huxley, Newman, and Arnold (among others) in the four monologues and claims that such poems "may indeed be mainly studies of personalities, yet the speakers in several instances are such as might speak with point for Browning on contemporary issues" (p. 156). Irvine thus introduces his readers to the religious implications of these particular poems from a unique perspective.

Elinore Shaffer's "Browning's St. John: The Casuistry of the Higher Criticism" (1972) is a study of one particular poem, "A Death in the Desert," as it reflects Browning's response to the new biblical criticism. Both Strauss and Renan are discussed at some length in Shaffer's article, and the poem itself is described as an example of "Browning . . . meeting Strauss on his own ground." Shaffer claims that the John depicted in Browning's poem evokes belief in spite of doubts regarding the historical accuracy of his portrait. Browning thus demonstrates "the triumph of Christianity over historical fact."

Finally, we come to Philip Drew, another critic who has recently followed the practice of recreating the contemporary background for Browning's poems. Drew's article, "Browning and Philosophy" (in Isobel Armstrong's Writers and their background: Robert Browning, 1975), describes the poet as "engaged in the difficult task of looking at the
possibility of hope after the Christian hope has gone" (p. 140). Browning's search goes in a direction that causes Drew to think of Kierkegaard and the particular historical and religious situation which spawned the Danish thinker's philosophy. Both Browning and Kierkegaard became discontented with the process and outcome of rational thought as well as with the authoritative position of the church. Thus, for both, the individual is understood to be without the traditional interior authority—reason—and also without the traditional exterior authority—the church. So, since "rational thought as such produces irrelevant answers to spiritual problems [as does the church] . . . the great duty confronting the individual is to hold fast to what it means to be a unique human being" (p. 105). How does the individual do this? By making moral choices. And what is the individual's guide now that the traditional authorities have been found to be irrelevant? Intuition becomes his guide. Drew then shows where Browning's sympathies lie in the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British debate between the Intuitionists and the Utilitarians. Drew's conclusion is that, in matters of religion, "Browning . . . set experience against theory, just as he set Intuitionalism against Utilitarianism, the 'brave impetuous heart' against the 'subtle contriving head'" (p. 136).

Drew's article hardly marks the first time that Browning's thought or religion has been connected with the
philosophy of his Danish contemporary, Kierkegaard.¹ No one has suggested that Browning read, knew, or was directly influenced by the work of Kierkegaard, the first existentialist, but many have noted uncanny likenesses between their techniques and ideas. Once the connection was established, its significance began to grow as it became for Browning commentators a launching pad from which they could rocket the poet into the unlikely realm of modernity. The discussion of Browning’s religion in Kierkegaardian or existentialist terms served to help retrieve the poet from the limited confines of Browning Society bardolatry as well as from the hostility or neglect accorded him later, between the wars. In our era, then, Browning is just as often conceived of as our contemporary as he is a dated poet inhabiting the dim past of another century.

Charles Rivers, it seems, must be given significant credit for perceiving early the existential qualities of Browning’s religion and thought. In an essay entitled "Robert Browning’s Existential Humanism" (1961),² Rivers

¹An interesting biographical fact, which constitutes perhaps one reason the two writers are so often linked, is that they were born within a year of each other, Browning in 1812, and Kierkegaard in 1813.

²The annotations for these two articles by Rivers—this one and the one referred to below—will not be found in the bibliography under the dates of their original publication; instead they are listed under 1976, the date the articles were reprinted as part of Rivers’s book, Robert Browning’s Theory of the Poet, 1833–1841.
designates two elements that shade Browning's religion with an existential hue: the dynamic nature of his faith (mixing, as it does, doubt with belief), and his conviction about the distinct identity of individual human beings.

Like Pascal and Kierkegaard, [Browning] understands that man can never rest in a static faith. . . . He shows remarkable affinity with Kierkegaard, and even with atheistic existentialism, in stressing the uniqueness of man's being. . . . Man can never remain fixed in existence.

Rivers followed his views up several years later (1964) with some observations that put Browning in the company of the existentialists Kierkegaard (once again), Heidegger, Marcel, and Sartre. All are depicted as critics, along with Browning, of the abstractness, mechanization, lukewarmness, and hypocrisy of western civilization and institutionalized Christianity. And they are also presented, again along with Browning, as celebrants of human subjectivity and of the unique role of the poet in society.

Patricia Ball, in a discussion called "Browning's Godot" (1964), has set forth an especially fascinating image of the poet as our contemporary. But perhaps this time a critic has gone a bit too far in attempting to twist Browning into modern shape. Ball at first dismisses the "inept criticism and obtuse reading" (p. 245) to which Browning's poetry has been subjected; then she suggests that his religion, instead of being a simple matter, is in fact a very complex phenomenon reflecting some of the same questions
and enigmas dramatized in Samuel Beckett's quintessentially modern play Waiting for Godot:

The common factor that Browning sees is the blinkered human mind which suspects that there is a landscape on either side of the road, but never achieves more than a glimpse, or perhaps hears some sound ... that aggravates the suspicion. ... So Browning's bishops, aristocrats, lovers, artists, and monks enact their scenes of self-creation and combat the silence stretching on either side.

Ball advocates the use of a new vocabulary to describe Browning's religion, one which will suggest more accurately than did earlier terms the modern qualities of the poet's religion:

"existential" or "empirical" are terms more relevant than those usually applied to him, from "nonconformist" to "optimist." All the so-called religious sections of the poems stand within this context. Wherever God enters the poems, he comes as a property of the speaker's self-made universe: he is not the poet's ultimate, for Browning's faith rests upon one certainty --human uncertainty, the ignorance or doubt of any such ultimate.

So Ball depicts Browning, in the end, "creating a Setebos or Godot in [his] own image ... waiting beneath the tree in the silence of Godot's world" (p. 253).

The name of another modern writer, Wallace Stevens, is invoked as the noted Browning scholar, Roma A. King, Jr., adds one more unique twist to the thread of modernity recent critics have been extracting from Browning's poetry. In his The Focusing Artifice (1968), King notes the extent to which Browning was a product of nineteenth-century skepticism:

Browning early lost faith in Enlightenment rationalism, political activism, religious institutionalism, and
evangelical pietism. How was he to discover a meaning and a value in life without these traditional aids? That search remained the central action of his poetic career.

King recognizes in this search of Browning's an anticipation of modern existentialism. But King goes further than this and suggests that the poet "postulates as the ultimate reality something much like the 'necessary fiction' of Wallace Stevens." For Stevens, of course, this "necessary fiction" was art; and in a similar way, contends King, art came to act as a replacement for traditional religion in Browning's work:

... he increasingly came to regard art as man's most --perhaps only--significant activity. ... Art, he declared, is the artifice, the glass, which brings the Infinite the refracted rays of the sun, into focus, reducing and unifying them so that they become meaningful and useful to man.

To King, Browning seems to have come to a realization very close to Stevens's contention, "Now that we no longer have religion we must look to poetry for life's redemption."

A focus on Browning's modernity became, in the 1960's qnd 1970's, a mode of launching an offensive against some of Browning's best-known critics. The message conveyed by the poet's defenders is that those who criticize Browning's religion or his thought simply do not see, understand, or appreciate the extent to which such aspects of Browning's work reflect the poet's comprehension of man's modern situation and of modern consciousness in general. Norton B. Crowell has been one of the foremost among these Browning defenders.
Crowell began to establish his position in his *The Triple Soul: Browning's Theory of Knowledge* (1963), but his defense of Browning is brought to a climax with *The Convex Glass: The Mind of Robert Browning* (1968). Crowell acknowledges that he has been spurred to his task by the "myth of Browning's anti-intellectualism." Thus the purpose of Crowell in both books is to make Browning's thought, philosophy, and religion intellectually respectable to a modern audience. Throughout Crowell's discussions he answers those who have attacked or misunderstood certain aspects of Browning's thought such as his optimism, his Christianity, or his views on evil. Chief among Browning's detractors, as far as Crowell is concerned, is Henry Jones. *The Convex Glass*, especially, devotes much attention to the influential critic in an attempt to deflect the impact of his pronouncements on Browning. And this book also brings Crowell's defense and interpretation of Browning to its culmination. The last chapter of *The Convex Glass* declares that Browning was a Christian existentialist. Crowell realizes the dangers in using such terminology to characterize the poet--first, existentialist is a troublingly ambiguous word, and second, applied to a Victorian writer, it seems clearly anachronistic as well. But Crowell insists on the accuracy and appropriateness of the characterization:

Browning never wearied of preaching the gospel of existential and dynamic growth toward God, toward
truth, and toward the larger and nobler life--always through doubt and imperfection and trial (p. 230).

This chapter of Crowell's book traces, from Pauline to Ivan Ivanovitch, the growth of this seed of existentialism in Browning's work.

Philip Drew, in his *The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction* (1970), is also on a rescue mission to save Browning from the severe criticism of Henry Jones. Jones thought Browning had a superficial understanding of religious experience because that understanding was marked by the personal, the subjective, and the irrational. Drew does not claim that such elements were lacking in Browning's thought; instead, he says that they were clearly present but that they were also coming to be characteristic of some of the most influential nineteenth-century religious thinkers. Drew cites Kierkegaard and Ludwig Feuerbach in this regard. Browning is depicted by Drew, then, as representing a modern religious perspective which was simply out of step with the more traditional thought of Jones.

One of Browning's recent biographers, Maisie Ward, finds herself defending Browning too, this time not from the attacks of Jones but from those of his heir, Richard Altick. Ward has Altick's 1952 attack in mind as she writes, in her *Robert Browning and His World* (1967-69), an apologetic for Browning's anti-intellectualism. Part of Ward's explanation
indicates that, in her view, Browning was an existentialist before his time:

One truth emerges which he learned in the course of his religious struggle—that logic is not men's sole guide, or profoundest guide, to reality; there is intuition, there is love. This has been seen as a degradation of reason. . . . But thus to see it shows an unawareness of common experience at one end and of Existentialism at the other. Life is larger than logic. Poetry must utter the response to reality of the whole man; poet or philosopher must not stop short because bare intellect can go no further.

In a recent general study of Victorian poetry, Carol Christ's *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (1975), Browning's modern and existentialist qualities are put in a unique light. Christ contends that Browning (along with Hopkins) stood opposed to a prevalent Victorian conviction—whose most articulate spokesman was Matthew Arnold—that condemned the particularity and multiplicity of the world and at the same time "felt the idea of the universal had to prevail over the particular in order to maintain . . . cultural and moral values."

To Browning, as his use of the grotesque and the dramatic monologue suggests, the particularity and multiplicity evident in the world were sources of great delight and meaning. Browning's distinctness from Arnold and from Arnold's more traditional conceptions is explained by Christ in these perceptive terms:

Browning's close resemblance to Kierkegaard and modern existentialists stems from their common apprehension of a nineteenth-century problem—the growing conviction of
man's inability to ascertain universal religious and moral truths objectively through reason and a parallel conviction of the independent reality of each man's experience. . . . If the source of knowledge is individual experience, the source of religious and moral value ultimately becomes the individual experience as well, and its only standard is intensity. The connection between particular and general can no longer be provided by reason, but only by intuition, emotion, faith, intensity.

One book stands as a kind of culmination of the recent trend to see in Browning a prophet whose religious stance was turned in the direction of modern conceptions and terminology. In his Very Sure of God: Religious Language in the Poetry of Robert Browning (1974), E. LeRoy Lawson approaches Browning with convincing claims that the poet's religion can be much more readily grasped in our century than was possible in Browning's own time. This is so, says Lawson, because Browning's views are more compatible with those of twentieth-century religious thinkers than with the views of his contemporaries. Lawson employs an impressive knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology and philosophy in relating the religious ideas of Browning to such a variety of figures as Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Miguel Unamuno, Martin Buber, Jacques Maritain, Teilhard de Chardin, and Harvey Cox. Much of what Lawson perceives in Browning's religion he also sees in modern existentialist thought:

Browning is at home among the existentialists: he places individual freedom above custom, dynamic growth
above abstract order, intuition and experience above—but not divorced from—reason, individual above social man.

Like others, then, Lawson concludes that Browning's religious conceptions were ahead of their time and that the attempts of Browning's contemporaries, or near-contemporaries, to understand those conceptions were limited indeed. What distinguishes Lawson's study from others which seem headed in the same direction is that Lawson's covers more ground and does so in greater detail; more modern thinkers are referred to (if not actually studied in depth), and more of Browning's poems are examined in terms of their modern meanings.

We now approach another key work among recent studies of Browning's religious notions, William Whitla's The Central Truth: The Incarnation in Robert Browning's Poetry (1963). The uniqueness of Whitla's book, in comparison to the interpretations we have just examined, is that it makes no great attempt to update Browning or to remold him into a modern form. In fact, Whitla is not even much concerned that readers see Browning's poetry in light of the shaping influence of Victorian controversies and issues. Whitla, instead, is intent upon our seeing the poet's own developing poetic theory and practice as, in part, a product of traditional thinking on the doctrine of incarnation. Thus there are in Whitla's book more allusions to biblical figures and to some of the church fathers—for in their
thinking and writing the idea of the incarnation gains increasing definition and power—than to Strauss, Renan, and Kierkegaard or to their skeptical and existentialist progeny.

Whitla does not, however, actually unveil a totally new insight into the poet; after all, as we have seen, critics have been impressed by Browning's apparent fascination with the doctrine of incarnation since relatively early in the poet's career. But Whitla's study of Browning is much more clearly unified by a thesis than many other studies, old or new, have been. And Whitla's work is distinguished further by the fact that he examines much more fully than has ever been done before Browning's conception of the incarnation, the sources of that conception, and the effects of that conception upon the form and meaning of Browning's poetry. For Whitla, the incarnation indeed becomes "the central truth" of Browning's religion, not just one facet—as has been suggested before—of the poet's multifaceted religious understanding. Neither is the incarnation merely

a remote theological proposition . . . but . . . an historic truth alive in Browning's experience. The Incarnation is not a religious framework over which to drape the heavily curtained theology of Browning's poetry. The Incarnation affects Browning to the depths of his being as a man.

Whitla indicates that the incarnation as an aspect of Christian symbolism was especially meaningful to Browning as he attempted to define his own role as a poet:
The symbol of the Incarnation of Christ offered Browning an analogy of his own experience as a creative artist. The artist enjoys a vision of the truth which must be shared with humanity. As God clothed himself in human flesh, so the poet speaks in words the vision that he has seen.

After applying such conceptions to a number of Browning's poems—on the subjects of religion, art, and love—Whitla concludes with these observations, and a plea:

The fact remains that a much greater amount of Browning's poetry than the obviously religious has a firm basis in religious faith. Some of Browning's contemporaries perceived the breadth of Browning's achievement, but none seemed to realize that there was a unity in the poetic activity which could hold seemingly antagonistic elements together in a composite whole. The Incarnation of Christ provides the unifying bond. Now, in the present resurgence of Browning studies it would be wise to seek for poetic principles like harmony, unity, wholeness of vision, rather than fragmentation, duality, and conflict. It may be that the Incarnation is just one means which Browning used to unify poetic experience. For all his life it seemed to be the controlling means (pp. 153-54).

It is appropriate to conclude this introduction by focusing attention on three "histories" that shed special light on Browning's religion—or the reaction to it—from three different perspectives. Each of these histories fixes on a different period in the developing career or reputation of the poet. One of the histories, John Maynard's biographical study *Browning's Youth* (1977), illuminates the early sources of some of Browning's religious convictions. Another, William S. Peterson's *Interrogating the Oracle* (1969), examines the development of the London Browning Society, a movement that significantly helped shape opinions on Browning
during the poet's late lifetime as well as in the several
decades immediately following his death. The third, Boyd
Litzinger's *Time's Revenges* (1964), treats the changing at-
titudes toward Browning as a thinker from the year of the
poet's death, 1889, through the next three generations (up
to 1962).

Recent decades have seen the publication of note-
worthy Browning biographies by Betty Miller (1952), by
Maisie Ward (1967-69), and by William Irvine and Park Honan
(1974). None of these completely neglects the religious
ideas of Browning; but neither does any of them seek to go
to the biographical roots of Browning's developed religious
ideas the way Maynard does in his close-up of the poet's
early years. Maynard is helpful, for instance, in explain-
ing that Browning's early evangelical religious experience
had a life-long effect—which can be traced in much of the
mature poetry--by creating

... a general moral outlook on the universe, a view
that stressed the reality of imperfection at the same
time that it urged the necessity of growth and develop-
ment. Above all, such religious and moral values, with
their strong stress upon moral self-awareness and a
vital, inner religious life, must also have played a
large part in developing the special sense of self-
consciousness that the author of *Pauline* professed.

Maynard also notes the impact on Browning's religious con-
sciousness of such widely varied influences as Shelley, the
Bible, the Christian classics, and the Roman Catholic Church.

Though the Browning Society movement has been given
much attention from many quarters—attention often colored, it might be added, by disparaging remarks on the bardolatry and moral earnestness of Society members—only one attempt at an objective history of the Society has been made. This history, Peterson's *Interrogating the Oracle*, duly notes that the appeal of Browning's poetry to the Society's founders was related to the character of the Victorian era as well as to the nature of the verse itself. In short, the poetry was understood as satisfying current intellectual, emotional, and religious needs:

[Browning was] a great poet who seemed to straddle successfully the two worlds [of faith and skepticism]. It is significant that Browning's theological position was sufficiently broad—vague, if you please—so that his religious poetry could appeal to the entire spectrum of believers and unbelievers.

So just as Browning's early poetry is launched into public view marked by a distinctive personal religious preoccupation (so Maynard tells us), Browning's late-life and posthumous reputation is stamped and sent soaring by the collective religious concerns of the founders and members of the Browning Society (so Peterson informs us). Litzinger's history, however, tells a different story.

Though Litzinger notes in *Time's Revenges* the centrality of Browning's religion and philosophy in establishing the poet's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reputation, he also points to a radical undermining of that reputation in modern times as Browning was increasingly per-
ceived to be alien to new religious attitudes and needs. The religious vision that had been of such significance to the poet himself and to some of his most enthusiastic Victorian admirers was now looked at as almost irrelevant by a later generation. This trend, says Litzinger, began with the end of World War I:

The post-war disillusionment had finally reached the literary critics, and they found Browning's robustness hollow. Optimism had become unfashionable in the wastelands of the Lost Generation, and Browning's religious views were simply looked upon with indifference (p. 160).

Much of Litzinger's history, then, follows the decline of Browning's reputation as a religious and philosophical poet from the glory years around the turn of the century. But Litzinger concludes that there is reason to hope for a revival of interest in and admiration for Browning, even the Browning understood as thinker and religious poet:

in recent years . . . a significant body of critics [give evidence that they] may feel that the judgment has been too severe. It would seem that the game of beating the philosophic horse is waning and that a counter-reaction is beginning to set in. No one, I believe, would predict a groundswell of support for Browning's philosophy, but it would appear that Browning's reputation as a thinker has risen a degree or two in the last decade.

If Litzinger had been bold enough actually to predict that groundswell he speculates about, it would be difficult at this time to call him mistaken. Limited as Litzinger's view was to the years up to 1962, it could not take in what is now clearly evident. As this present bibliography shows, discussions of religious implications in
Browning's poetry have gained new prominence in the past decade and a half. We have seen that, at the hands of such commentators as Crowell and Drew, the severe early criticism of Henry Jones has finally received answers. And the commentary which has termed Browning an existentialist, a thinker ahead of his time, has brought the poet back in touch with the religious concerns of our modern age. Finally, the thoughtful full-length treatments of Browning's religious themes by Whitla and Lawson have provided new insights into--and respectability for--Browning, the religious poet.
A number of the entries found in this section of the bibliography have been collected and reprinted, in full or in part, by Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley in their *Browning: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970); such entries are designated by +.


Fox sees the poem as an analysis of the poet's "spiritual constitution" (p. 196*). The "Yearning after God" which the poem expresses is explained by Fox in this way:

There is a groping about after something to rest upon; a vain attempt to cherish delusion and prejudice rather than be left utterly loveless; and at length the soul throws itself upon religion, like a hunted bird dropping into its own nest (p. 199*).

But the purely God-oriented spiritual quest is not
totally satisfying to Browning: the human dimension is needed to complete it:

And now when [the poet] has run the whole toil-some yet giddy round and arrived at the goal, there arises, even though the goal be religion, or because it is religion, a yearning after human sym-pathies and affections . . . (p. 200*).

Thus it is suggested that, for Browning, religion encompasses relationships with both God and man.


This brief notice recognizes the religious bases of Pauline in mentioning vaguely its "mystical" images and by calling the poem "metaphysical throughout."


In this essay Forster lavishes praise on Browning and especially on Paracelsus. Forster shows that the hero's progress in Paracelsus is from the material realm to the spiritual, but the essay does not emphasize greatly the religious implications of this movement.

This reviewer shows an awareness of Browning's unique capability of "entering into the very heart and soul of man" (p. 281); this aspect of Browning's achievement will be discussed by later commentators as a reflection of his strong feelings on the religious doctrine of "incarnation." Paracelsus also seems, to this reviewer, to suggest the primacy of revelation over reason as a path to truth, a notion "which may be said to convey the very essence of Christianity" (p. 282). In this commentary Browning is linked more closely with orthodox Christianity than he is in any other early assessment of his work.


This reviewer perceives in Browning's work a "delicacy of sentiment" that is called "Christian." Browning's obscurity also catches the reviewer's attention, but amidst that obscurity "the presence of the Divine" is recognized.
At the outset this review grants that Browning "is always reverential, and sometimes directly Christian" (p. 354). The reviewer speaks approvingly of Paracelus because, in it, "we see the utter futility of all attempts to attain the knowledge of God, without revelation: we see that the lowliest Christian child may be wiser than the heathen sage" (p. 366). The Christian element in Browning's work thus receives mention—and the poet is praised for it—but it is not a preoccupation of the reviewer in this article.


This article consists, in part, of a review of Browning's Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. The reviewer shows some perception into the religious ideas of Browning's work but, rather than explaining and exploring those ideas, he devotes most of his discussion of Browning to stating his reservations about the poetry: it is "for the most part... either moral argument in doggerel verses of a very unharmo-
nious kind, or descriptions of scenes and persons, often
clever, but not by any means beautiful" (p. 273). For
this reviewer there is not enough loveliness in the
poetry, nor is there enough wholesome sentiment ac­
companying the religious message. There is "true
spiritual feeling and moral keenness" in the poetry,
but Browning is an "intellectual" whose verse is char­
acterized by a decided "coldness and unreality" (p.
275).

Rev. of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. English Review,
14 (1850), 65-92. Rpt. partially in Broughton,
Northup, Pearsall, pp. 93-94.

Browning's poem is reviewed along with Tennyson's
In Memoriam and a play by Henry Taylor. The review
suggests that the poem has "expressed [Browning's] re­
ligious convictions, and . . . yielded on the whole his
adherence to dogmatic Christianity as 'the truth'"
(p. 84). The reviewer goes on: "Clearly the poet
shows, that if Christ's divinity be rejected, nothing
virtually is left," for "mere morality" has not the
power to stand alone (p. 84). Browning's unorthodox
Christianity is recognized, however: "Strange to say,
Browning has here thought fit to intimate his pref­
erence of some or any form of dissent to the teaching
of the Church of England, or of any Church.

(p. 88). On the whole this poem—and Browning's Christian position—is greeted with open arms ("... this contribution of Browning's to our poetic literature is a great work, and is gladly hailed by us as such" [p. 90]) but with not much perceptive discussion.


Here Browning's work is seen

as an expression of the writer's spiritual experiences in their utmost force and intensity... 'Lord, I believe! Help thou my unbelief!' exclaims the inspired writer; and the purpose of the poem is to express belief in Christianity, not without doubts, but against doubts (p. 403).

For the first time a commentator understands Browning to be expressing directly aspects of his own religious struggles and beliefs.


The most telling remarks in this long article—one of the early enthusiastic receptions accorded Browning in America—come as comments on Paracelsus and Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. First, Weiss, in discussing
Paracelsus, compares Browning and Milton as religious poets: "We remember the ascetic loftiness of Milton's metaphysics, only to feel them at last depreciated, for they are the mere discursus of a theologian compared with the domestic thoughts and the tender, human religion in Paracelsus" (p. 359). Browning's religion is fleshed-out, not abstract or doctrinal. In treating Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, Weiss says Browning's object is "to develop his views of Christian Faith and of Life" (p. 379); and in the process the poet "proves how hard it is to be a Christian, forced always to ward off the stroke of doubt . . ." (p. 383).


Milsand's discussion of Browning concentrates primarily on Paracelsus but treats Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day as well. Milsand is one of the first commentators to discern in Browning's work the peculiar combination of poet and thinker that would later appeal
to so many readers. The quest of Paracelsus and the spiritual sensitivity of Aprile are understood by Mil­sand to be full of religious implications.


The commentator here believes that Browning re­veals sincere religious concerns in his poetry but that something in his attitude severely undercuts those concerns:

We believe after its perusal [referring to Christ­mas Eve and Easter-Day] . . . that he considers religion an important thing, that he would will­ingly strengthen his faith, that the work was written with this aim. But it betrays the work­ings of a coarse, rude, though powerful mind, in­capable of spiritual elevation, and despising flights because it cannot attain them. In all sys­tems it seeks the visible, the gross, the earthy; without this element religion seems to possess to him no body (p. 355).

This discussion paints an unfavorable picture of the poet and his work largely because his chosen subjects --"low desires, fiendish revenge, sordid hate" (p. 359) and forward, immodest women--are judged unfit for poetry and also because he brings Christianity too close to the earth and thus touches it with an unde­sirable "coarse and vulgar element" (p. 369).
This reviewer is fascinated by Browning's preoccupation with the historical past, particularly as a portrayal of that past reveals some of the mysterious truth of Christianity:

There is no point of past time over which Mr. Browning's imagination seems to hover so wistfully as over that at which Christianity began to mingle with the history of the Roman world. He seems to have a peculiar pleasure in realising to himself the different impressions made on different men occupying different points of view in that great Pagan and Polytheistic world, by this new doctrine which they saw creeping in upon them from Judea . . . (p. 171).

The reviewer discusses both "Karshish" and "Cleon" in connection with these observations.

Rev. of Men and Women. Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany, 60 (1856), 139-40.

This reviewer uses words like "pretension" and "perversity" to describe Browning's poetry, but the most serious criticism of his work is that "it shows no purpose, or tendency, or effect, in any high, moral direction" (p. 140).

This reviewer is like many of his contemporaries in complaining about the "crabbed, harsh, grotesque" (p. 282) language of Browning's poetry. But nowhere is there an early reviewer who objects so vehemently to Browning's characters themselves: they are "offensive" and presented "utterly without moral elevation" (p. 281). Even those poems clearly focussing on religious figures or ideas are found unredeeming: "Bishop Blougram" is labeled "an apology for infidelity" (p. 283) and "Saul" is dismissed as "a very spasmodic poem" (p. 292) which glorifies Saul himself rather than God.


Browning's poetry exhibits a "mysticism" which this reviewer sees as a reaction to an increasingly secularized modern world: "his poems almost invariably attempt to grapple with some of the more recondite difficulties of life" (p. 362). This article goes on to proclaim that

in no other secular poetry of our day do we receive so full a recognition of another life . . . [nor do] we know . . . of any poetry (not professedly sacred) wherein is so deeply pondered and strikingly proclaimed the mystery of the holy Incarnation (p. 385).
What distinguishes Browning, then, is his sensitivity to the inward life of man and his application of Christian truth to the needs of that inward life.


In this highly commendatory review-article Evans concludes by praising Browning simply because he is a Christian poet. Evans, however, presents no interesting ideas about Browning's religion, nor does he show a very deep understanding of it.


This review-essay does not probe deeply the religious meanings of the poems, but it does discuss at some length Browning's fascination with and treatment of the Catholic faith and its clergy.

Bagehot explains the grotesque element in Browning's poetry by relating it to the poet's own apprehension of Christianity:

... Mr. Browning evidently loves what we may call the realism, the grotesque realism, of Orthodox Christianity. Many parts of it in which great divines have felt keen difficulties are quite pleasant to him. He must see his religion, he must have a creed that will take... the great but vague faith—the unutterable tenets—seem to him worthless, visionary; they are not enough 'immersed in matter'; they move about 'in worlds not realised' (p. 62).

This notion helps to explain the very "worldly" faith of figures like Fra Lippo Lippi and Bishop Blougram.


In this review Bell suggests a significant relationship between Browning's understanding of man and his deeply Christian convictions. For Bell, nothing... is more remarkable in his poetry than the steady determination shown by the writer to regard things from their best side, to look with lenience on human frailty and shortcoming, and to get as much good out of human character as possible. Browning is the "Man of Feeling" without his stupidity and effeminacy (p. 479).

The poet Bell reads "... is so pre-eminently Christian that he sacrifices everything for the sake of truth, pure and simple" (p. 482); and this Christian persuasion also leads Browning to an unusual capacity
for love—in speaking of the portrayal of Caliban, Bell notes that "in the excess of his Christian love and sympathy, we have no doubt that he sees some points of sympathy between himself and the whelp of Sycorax" (p. 486). Thus Browning is seen as proof that, with love comes faith, and vice-versa: "How many men know that when one loves wholly, he must believe" (p. 491)?


Everett is impressed by Browning's religious spirit: "... in reading the poems of Browning, we feel ourselves brought into the presence of a spirit in which the religious element is naturally very predominant" (p. 62). The article suggests that Browning's work shows the poet struggling against the skeptical tendencies of his age and, in a poem like "Saul," finally reaching the refuge of faith:

The song that the shepherd boy sings in "Saul" to the disquieted king, is the only music that can soothe the troubled spirit of the present. The truth there uttered is its only resting-place. The strife between the heart and the intellect cannot cease until the heart has learned to trust, with simple faith, its own highest impulse, and to crown it as divine (p. 64).

In this review the distinctness of Browning's religious spirit is recognized:

His poetry, however, is not religious in a vague general way, nor dry through being doctrinal: it is, as in 'Christmas Eve' and 'Easter Day,' passionately alive with the most intense yearning for a personal relationship (p. 101).

Further on in the review, "A Death in the Desert" is mentioned as having "a very lofty and solemn strain of religious thought"; and one finds an assessment of Browning's preoccupation with "the obstinate questionings of doubt": "they will make the flame of faith burn up toward heaven more direct and clear than ever" (p. 101).


The commentator here recognizes how peculiar is the problem of speaking with certainty about Browning's own religious position, yet how varied and compelling are the treatments given certain aberrant religious stances and personalities in his poetry:

it [is] difficult for us to determine how far he is speaking in his own person, or representing some phase of the great drama of man's religious life. No living writer . . . approaches his power of analyzing and reproducing the morbid forms, the corrupt semblances, the hypocrisies, formalisms, and fanaticisms of that life (p. 140).

But the critic sees, despite the elusiveness of Browning's religious vision, too great a tendency toward
universalism in the poet; certain poems "tend to the conclusion that all varieties of the Christian creed are equally true, equally acceptable . . . [a position which] resembles that of some Eastern mystics who speak of the Divine Mind as delighting in a variety of creeds and worships . . ." (p. 147). This tendency is spoken of by the commentator as revealing "a subtle and perilous temptation" (p. 148), one which should be shunned so that Browning can indeed answer to that high calling to be "the greatest Christian poet that England has yet seen in this century" (p. 148).


Nettleship's was the first book-length study of Browning. Pages 1-220 of the 1890 edition comprise all the material included in the first edition. The book is not a coherent discussion unified by a specific thesis; rather it is a collection of essays on various poems and themes in Browning's work that have caught the critic's attention. But Nettleship is clearly impressed by the religious meanings in Browning's poetry,
as those meanings relate to doctrine as well as to morality. In his "Introduction" Nettleship writes:

The following essays then will deal entirely with such poems . . . as present in connection with their subject some view which . . . is of value either for abstract thought or for moulding our own lives upon (p. 8).

The reading of "Childe Roland" is one of Nettleship's most interesting: this early critic sees Browning's poem as a religious allegory which depicts, in bizarre and grotesque detail, man's search for God. "Saul," too, has clear religious implications for Nettleship. In that poem he sees the notion of the "spirit of prayer" as predominant: when this spirit possesses a man it "gives to him as an attribute the necessity of looking and hoping beyond his sight; makes him create for himself at once . . . personally, and in the teeth of reason, A god to whom he can cry . . ." (pp. 192-93). In "Saul," David represents in a singular way this spirit of prayer, and thus he becomes a prophet who looks forward to Christianity:

he was striving after an end which was not within the grasp of humanity . . . he was drawn by it far beyond his first desire into regions of prophecy, and into the splendour of an idea which has ruled thousands for so many years--the idea of Christianity (p. 198).

From this poem Nettleship draws a "lesson" for all his contemporary readers: to the gloomy and despairing
Sauls of the age "let us each try and gather strength to become Davids upon fit occasion" (p. 199).

Nettleship also comments on certain general themes rich in religious implications that pervade Browning's work, themes such as faith and love. Browning's notion of faith presupposes—even depends on—the existence of evil in the world: "Faith, not only living in spite of, but actually depending for existence on the hindrance and resistance offered by wrong and evil" (p. 348). From faith Nettleship moves to love and suggests that, for Browning, "the love of God and the love of man are the same thing, pure, illimitable and free in God, clouded, limited and obstructed in man" (p. 351). And love too is part of man's, and God's, struggle against the evil forces of the world. Without evil there would be no—or no need for—love. Thus Nettleship explains Browning's understanding and portrayal of evil: evil is an absolutely necessary component of his religious vision.

Nettleship's book also includes considerations of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day and "A Death in the Desert."


This review is sharply critical of Browning for his
poem's historical inaccuracies—such as his portrayals of Pope Innocent XII and the Molinist movement—inaccuracies which fail to do justice to the Catholic Church or to its historical development. The stance taken in the review seems to arise from a deep-seated anti-Browning bias whose source is a delicate Catholic pride which Browning's poems have injured: "Nearly all the scoundrels are priests" (p. 48).


This review separates men of great intellect into two categories: those who have been defeated by the problems and enigmas of man's existence, and those who have kept hope and cheer. In the latter category we find Browning (along with Shakespeare, Goethe, and Tennyson). To demonstrate the reasons for his assessment of Browning, Fane points to the positive forces in the poem—Pompilia, the Pope, and Caponsacchi—which oppose the villainy of Guido. Browning's poem is seen as a dramatization of the process of moral evolution. Thus, eventually, in Browning's "circle of experience burns the central truth, Power, Wisdom, Goodness—God" (p. 182). All trials lead to faith. Browning is "distinguished by the serenity of his intellect," an
intellect that can be serene because "the true felicity of men . . . [comes despite] the din and direful spectacle of the battle . . . not in any cry of ecstatic hope, but in the calm clear voice of conviction, his faith in the victory to come" (p. 182).

"Mr. Browning's Latest Poetry [The Ring and the Book]."

North British Review, 51 (1869), 97-126.

This review characterizes Browning as a religious poet in the following terms:

[he] is a vates, a prophet, an expounder of the mysteries of things. He is a theological poet, a Christian, orthodox in the main, but tempering his creed with universalist notions. . . . He is, moreover, a moralist. . . . Both as theologian and moralist he is a confirmed casuist. With a secondary sympathy for creeds which he does not profess . . . he takes pleasure . . . in throwing himself into the states of mind of the professors of such creeds . . . (p. 100).

The reviewer thus explains how, despite Browning's basically Christian outlook, the poet can shed light on the religion from so many different angles in his works.

Rev. of Poetical Works, 1863; Dramatis Personae, 1864; The Ring and the Book, 1869. British Quarterly Review, 44 (1869), 435-59.

This reviewer, in referring to "Karshish," sees Browning's work as an antidote to a skeptical, scienti-
fically-oriented world. Lazarus, in the poem, confronts Karshish "with an inexplicable miraculous myth"; and Karshish, "the scientific seeker for truth," finally sees "the higher and simpler wisdom which is of God" and of faith—not of rational power (p. 453).


Hasell contrasts Browning with some of his contemporary poets whose fascination with Christianity is based on the notion that the religion and its devotees merely "form charming themes for verse" (p. 265). Such poets are only detached observers of the religion. Not so, Browning. He is involved as a believer himself, and his involvement leads him to a series of poems whose historical setting is unique: the era of the early Church, the era in which the "Sun of Righteousness first arose" (p. 265). Hasell cites "A Death in the Desert" and the "Epistle of Karshish" as demonstrating Browning's unique perspective on Christianity. In discussing Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, Hasell notes that the leading thought of those poems is one "familiar to an Augustine, to a Herbert, that there is no object adequate to fill the boundless capacity of a human soul, save He who made it for himself" (p. 270).

These articles represent an early statement of what, later in the nineteenth century, becomes an almost standard view of Browning: Browning as preacher. West proclaims with great certainty the "difference . . . between Browning and other poets who . . . create 'men and women'": "with the others the production of life-like characters seems to be the aim and end, with him it is only the means to a further end--namely, the arguing out and setting forth of general truths." Unlike many of Browning's early readers, West finds herself not at all puzzled by the various masks and guises through which Browning speaks in his poems; in fact, West's experience with Browning's poetry has made her sense a "contact with the real self of the author, closer and more direct than that we have with many other poets through their writings" (p. 174). What Browning preaches, West says, is a kind of medieval asceticism which understands the earth to be "God's antechamber" (p. 184). Unlike other poets (e.g., Shelley) who confine themselves to this world, Browning aspires beyond it. And the faith that allows Browning so to aspire to
certain religious truths is based on "subjective evidences" and "instinctive voices" (p. 310).


This reviewer sees Don Juan's longing for Fifine as suggesting a religious longing:

The yearning for completeness through something other than one's self, which is the essence of love and the vital principle of art, is also the foundation of religious beliefs. Religion is but a transformation of the primitive instincts of human love (p. 285).

This discussion looks forward to later ones which will see Browning's portrayal of human love as a reflection of a basically religious phenomenon:

Self is the central idea of Mr. Browning's philosophy, as the love which tends to the completion of self is in the present work the central idea of his aesthetics. But no one has a deeper reverence for the love which annihilates self; few perhaps are so capable of feeling it, and if he chanced to write in another mood he might have advocated such self-annihilation as the crowning glory of the individual life. His instincts are absolutely religious (p. 287).


Mrs. Orr, one of the most important Browning com-
mentators in the nineteenth century, clearly does not find the poet to be an orthodox Christian: "Christianity is based upon a revelation which he does not profess to acknowledge . . ." (p. 941). Instead of demonstrating the strictness of standards and the willingness to condemn that would be characteristic of the orthodox, Browning sees "equal justification of the varied possibilities of life" and "considers all things as good in their way" (p. 941). Orr cites "Bishop Blougram" as proof of Browning's own casuistical stance: the compromising, self-justifying Bishop is allowed to triumph in the end over Gigadibs, who advocates a position of greater purity.

In his focus on the theme of love Browning reveals his most important religious preoccupation--so says Orr:

His imagination is keenly alive to every condition of love; but its deepest and most passionate response is always yielded to that form of tenderness which by its disinterested nature most approaches to the received ideal of the Divine. . . . The love of love is the prevailing inspiration of all such of Mr. Browning's poems as even trench on religious subjects, and it often resolves itself into [an] earnest . . . plea for the divine nature and atoning mission of Christ . . . (p. 943).

In this discussion "Saul," Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, and "A Death in the Desert" are mentioned prominently.

Orr also notes the fact that a number of Browning's characters are seekers after spiritual truth: Bishop
Blougram, the Bishop ordering his tomb at St. Praxed's, Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea del Sarto, Cleon, Karshish, Caliban. Some of these figures are treated ironically by the poet and some display quite clearly their limitations and failings, but they all nonetheless represent the strong impulse to search that lies at the bottom of every man's soul.


Stedman makes interesting observations on two groups of Browning's poems. The first group consists of poems whose subject matter is explicitly religious (e.g., "Cleon," "Karshish," "A Death in the Desert"). These poems Stedman admires, but he says they fall short of achieving their full potential impact:

To quote from one who is reviewing a kindred sort of literature, they sin "against the spirit of antiquity, in carrying back the modern analytic feeling to a scene where it does not belong." It is owing precisely to this sin that several . . . works are . . . monuments of learning and labor rather than ennobling efforts of the imagination (p. 178).

Stedman finds himself distracted from the religious meaning of such poems because of Browning's too elaborate paraphernalia. In a second group of poems--the love poems--Stedman sees implied a quasi-religious belief:
that the greatest sin does not consist in giving rein to our desires, but in stinting or too prudently repressing them. Life must have its full and free development. . . . The chief lesson of Browning's emotional poetry is that the unpardonable sin is "to dare something against nature." To set bounds to love is to commit that sin (p. 179).

So Stedman's view of Browning emphasizes the poet's anti-ascetic religious position.


In this discussion of nineteenth-century "transcendental" writers Browning receives prominent mention in some concluding statements. Dowden suggests that Browning fits into the transcendental tradition in two respects:

first, he attempts to re-establish a harmony between what is infinite and what is finite in man's nature. . . . Secondly, . . . [Browning] represents militant transcendentalism, the transcendental movement at odds with the scientific. His acceptance of the Christian revelation, say rather his acceptance of the man Christ Jesus, lies at the very heart of Mr. Browning's poetry . . . (pp. 316-17).

A vision of the infinite joined to the finite is central to Browning's work, says Dowden, and Christ best represents to Browning that incarnational process:

"The fisherman of Galilee told of a love of God which eighteen hundred years ago became flesh and dwelt with
men; but here we behold an omnipresent and eternal
love of God . .." (p. 318).

Lyttelton, A. T. "Mr. Browning's Poems." Church Quarterly
Review, 7 (1878), 65-92. Rpt. in his Modern Poets of
Faith, Doubt, and Paganism. London: John Murray,
1904, pp. 133-72; and partially in Broughton, Northup,
Pearsall, pp. 126-27.

This article is one of the more intelligent, co-
herent, and fully developed of the nineteenth century
discussions of Browning's religion. The commentary is
wide-ranging--including a number of themes and poems
--as well as penetrating. Lyttelton early notes "the
most fundamental characteristic of his [Browning's]
mind":

the belief that imperfection is a mark of progress,
that man is superior to the beasts just because he
is not made with all his powers complete for their
work in this world, but must struggle onwards by
means of failure in this world, to the perfection
which can only be attained in the next. The thought,
in various forms, recurs in almost every poem of
any importance; and though it is only a very clear
apprehension of the Christian truth, that this life
is a time of probation . . . yet this truth is set
in so many different lights, it is shown underlying
so many of the problems of life, so essential to
the right understanding of character and the due
estimate of action, that we may consider it as the
special lesson which it is given to Mr. Browning to
teach us (p. 70).

This notion of "man's superiority because of his imper-
fection" is seen as
proof of the manner in which Mr. Browning's religious convictions so penetrate and inform his whole intellectual and emotional nature, that, whatever the subject, this doctrine seems to be the explanation of the problem or the climax of the argument (p. 72).

For Browning himself, Lyttelton says, the "inner truth" of Christianity was much more important than the facts, proofs, or history of the religion:

His religion works from the centre to the circumference, from the Being of God to the mode in which he has revealed himself to man; and in the Being of God the chief, the one essential fact that he finds is Love . . . (p. 82).

This loving God is seen in Christ--God incarnate--who suffered willingly and compassionately for the sake of man. In a poem like "Saul" the key notions of incarnation and immortality are brought dramatically together.

Lyttelton sees great value for the Christian in reading Browning: he will learn "various hints concerning the relation between soul and body [which will] be of great value to anyone who wishes to find the just and Christian mean between a false spiritualism on the one side and a false materialism on the other" (p. 89).


Watts responds to Browning's claim in La Saisiaz to be "very sure of God" and sees the poem ultimately
as an anti-rationalistic, anti-materialistic statement. "La Saisiaz, indeed, is nothing more nor less than a vigorous and eloquent protest against the scientific materialism of the age" (p. 662).


Browning's thinking about man's religious obligation to his Creator suggests that aspiration—not submission and obedience—is the path man should follow. So aspiring, however, will not bring man to fulfillment or satisfaction in this life; for that he must wait for heaven. This is Dowden's observation on Browning, and it is hardly startling or original. Dowden, nonetheless, devotes most of his treatment of Browning to poems which contain this theme.


The pertinent materials from these volumes are listed and annotated below. For ease of reference, they are ordered alphabetically according to author's last names. The date of presentation or date and
location of previous publication is noted in each entry. A number of these items (marked by ** here) were republished in Edward Berdoe's *Browning Studies* (1895). Much of the material listed here was formally discussed by Society members and the substance of such discussions recorded in the *Papers*. When these discussions are of some interest, that fact is noted at the end of the annotations.


Barnett argues convincingly that Browning's portrayals of Jews lack authenticity. But in these portrayals Browning does to Judaism nothing different from what he does to Christianity: "[Christianity] is clearly to him a Spirit and not a System. It is because of this, in virtue of it, that he has gone so far to divest Judaism also, as it is called, of its accidental characteristics" (p. 214). In the spirit of Judaism, then, Browning finds something appealing, something like his own convictions—-that is why Jewish figures appear and reappear in his poetry.

In the incompleteness and perpetual hope of the Jews, Mr. Browning sees some feeling akin to that which inspires so much of his philosophy,—the brokenness of good here, and the promise of the
perfection and completion of it in some future, whether Messianic or not (p. 220).

(Discussion: II, pp. 218*-23*.)


Beale gives some very subjective reflections on the poet; she sees Browning as a figure who has risen up to replace such established--and newly besieged--authorities as church, scriptures, and pope:

Thus Browning seems to me a prophet whom God has given to our storm-tost age, a pilot who has learnt by long experience the hidden rocks and sandbanks on which the vessel of faith may be wrecked, now that the old anchor chains are burst asunder (p. 326).

Beal bases her understanding of Browning on several pertinent poems. (Discussion: I, pp. 45*-47*.)


As Berdoe reads Paracelsus he sees the poet teaching a religious or spiritual lesson as well as a lesson in medicine: "that neither the intellect without the heart nor the heart without the intellect will avail for the highest service of man by his brother" (p. 295). Love is what touches and heals people, not simply pure science. This love is understood by Berdoe to
be embodied in "the Gospel of the Carpenter's Son" (p. 295), in Christianity. (Discussion: II, pp. 289*-90*.)


This lecture treats Browning, a bit too simply, as "an antidote to atheism," as a pantheist, and as a religiously eclectic believer (i.e., one whose faith is unorthodox or non-biblical).


Referring to such well-known philosophers as Plato and Hegel, Bury tries to show the system in Browning's thought. The most significant aspect of the poet's thought is the "union of individualism and universalism" (p. 273) embodied in his Christianity. Christianity offers to Browning a religious framework within which he can authentically present his concern for both individual human beings and for the whole cosmos. For Bury this position places Browning's love poetry in an interesting light: "Thus an individual receives a
revelation of Love from another of the opposite sex . . . and this person might be called a Personal God, as the vehicle of the revelation of the Absolute God" (p. 274). (Discussion: I, pp. 28*-32*.)


This Jewish reader of Browning discusses approvingly Browning's use of Jewish figures and themes in his poetry. There is no apparent relationship between this article and Barnett's discussion (published elsewhere in BSP) of a similar topic.


This paper is reprinted as introductory material in Corson's handbook, Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry (1886). It is annotated as part of that entry.

Gibson, James. "On Browning as a Teacher." May 22, 1885. II, pp. 56*-57*.

The abstract of this paper (the paper is not
printed in full) centers on Browning's treatment of "Nature, Love, and Art." The most important of these three themes is love: "Love being the great principle of Nature, the chief lesson for man to learn is that God is Love" (p. 57*). Such an assertion has a Christian ring to it, but Gibson claims that Browning's teaching can be rightly understood without accepting the fundamental truths of Christianity. (Discussion: II, pp. 58*-59*.)


Glazebrook reads this poem as Browning's answer to questions raised by the German biblical critics about the authenticity of the gospel of John. "In this poem," Glazebrook says, "Mr. Browning restores the St. John of orthodox belief" (p. 155). The message from Browning to Strauss and his followers in this poem is summarized by Glazebrook in this way:

It is not worthwhile to occupy ourselves with discussions about miracles and events, which are said to have taken place a long time ago, and can now neither be denied nor proved. What we are concerned with, is, Christianity as it is now: as a religion which the human mind has, through many generations, developed, purified, spiritualized; and which has re-acted upon human nature and made it wiser and nobler (p. 163).

So Browning's approach, in trying to give credence once
more to St. John and his gospel, is not to argue that
certain "miracles and events" actually did take place
but rather to suggest that whether they did or not is
irrelevant to the value and validity of Christianity
as he understands it. (Discussion: II, pp. 185*-86*.)

Jacobs, Joseph. "Browning as a Religious Teacher."
pp. 80*-82*. Abstract of article in the Jewish
Quarterly Magazine, April 18, 1890, pp. 249-56.

Jacobs claims that Browning's beliefs are Chris-
tian and, more specifically, Broad Church (i.e., Brow-
ing places little emphasis on Christ as Divine Mediator
for man). Jacobs also shows that the poet's knowledge
of Judaism is quite limited. (Discussion: III, pp.
82*-84*.)

Johnson, E. "On 'Bishop Blougram's Apology.'" May

Most of this discussion is given over to a detailed
paraphrase of and commentary on the poem. But Johnson
does render judgment on Bishop Blougram and thus a
comment on Browning's own religious sympathies. John-
son looks at the Bishop and sees--despite the fact that
others discern nothing more admirable than hypocrisy
and worldliness in him--a man whose realistic religious
position is simply stated with surprising candor. Johnson advises the reader of the poem that he should not condemn the Bishop for failing to fulfill the ideals of Christianity unless the reader himself is capable of living up to his own ideals. Thus Johnson suggests that Browning is in sympathy with this pragmatic Bishop and the compromising Christian position he represents. (Discussion: I, pp. 33*-34*.)


Johnson suggests early on in his discussion the light in which he sees Browning and his work: "This great poet is a Christian in grain, if I may so express myself. I mean in the sense in which it has been said that the Christian is the highest style of man" (p. 347). Thus Browning is not understood to be a Christian in strict and narrow dogmatic terms; the term "Christian" is understood more broadly by Johnson. Johnson interprets several of the early poems as struggles of conscience: "It is the sense of dualism of flesh and spirit, of a split between the actual and the ideal or ethical self" (p. 358). This theme is struck as early as Pauline, says Johnson. Browning, as poet, plays the role of prophet or seer in dra-
matizing and illuminating these struggles of conscience for his readers. Johnson admires Browning for having taken Christianity off the shelf of purely logical or historical debate and brought it into close relation to man's daily existence: Christianity has to do with how men live and how they treat each other every day.

Browning has taught that Christianity is no matter of antiquarian pedantry or of historical perspective. He has brought us back to the old lesson that "the world is nigh us, even in our mouth and in our heart." Christianity is a system of ideas operative and ruling over the conscience of men now (p. 378).


This paper exists in summary form only, not as it was originally presented. In this skeleton form it appears as though Jones has merely enumerated the gallery of clerics in Browning's poems and made some brief comments characterizing each. There is nothing here particularly perceptive or profound.


This address inaugurates, and thus sets the tone for the Browning Society's endeavors to understand and
shed light upon the work of Browning. Kirkman claims "for Browning the distinction of being pre-eminently the greatest Christian poet we have ever had" (p. 186). Included in the discussion are references to and passages from Browning's work that serve to demonstrate the true nature of "religious poetry": such poetry, says Kirkman, "ought to startle Christian people into elevation and gratitude" (p. 188).


Morison reads "Caliban" as a satiric attack on those who engage in natural theology,

... an indirect yet scathing satire of a rather painful class of reasoners who, while beginning with the admission that the nature of the Godhead is an inscrutable mystery, proceed to write long books to prove their special and minute knowledge of its character ... (p. 494).

(Discussion: I, pp. 116*-24*.)


Nettleship links together Browning's intuitive religious faith with his intuitive understanding of and sympathy for those who are his poetic subjects.

Revell distinguishes himself by calling into question the tendency of many commentators to emphasize too greatly—in some cases to the exclusion of all else—Browning's Christian convictions: "The Christian point of view is narrower than the human; and the latter rather than the former, may, I think, be said to be Browning's" (p. 439). Revell asks questions obviously intended to challenge some prevailing views of Browning:

... why should Browning be tied down to every belief and sentiment of a Christian complexion to which any of his characters give utterance? Does literary criticism and interpretation demand it? or only our own theological conveniences and prepossessions (pp. 439-40)?

If Browning is an adherent of any religion, says Revell, it is not Christianity but rather "Natural Religion," "Natural Christianity," or "Moral Religion" (p. 441). Instead of presenting an orthodox view of God in his poetry Browning gives "... a representation of God which almost any modern man of science could accept, if he could be persuaded that it is perfectly legitimate to assign the name of God to this Eternal Force" (p. 443).

Just as Revell wants Browning's readers to see his
Christian theism in a new light, so he wants them to see afresh Browning's supposed belief in immortality. Revell shows that Browning is at best only "hopeful" about a possible life after death (La Saisiaz is cited), and Revell himself remains clearly unconvinced of immortality. In fact, Revell goes so far as to claim that for no man—and particularly not for Browning—is a belief in God or in immortality terribly important:

[Man's] true dignity does not lie in his relationship to the Divine Being, nor in his immortal destiny, but in his manhood, in the qualities of humanity which belong to him (p. 451).

In re-perusing some of the poems of Browning for the preparation of this paper, the conviction has grown upon me, that a belief in God and immortality are not the chief source of Browning's inspiration, but his large and all-embracing sympathy with men (p. 453).

Revell proves himself to be something of an iconoclast among his contemporaries as he insists on reading Browning in the light of an abiding humanism rather than in the light of orthodox Christianity. (Discussion: I, pp. 67*-68*.)

Revell, William F. "The Value of Browning's Work."
May 30, 1890 and April 24, 1891. III, pp. 64-82, 124-38.

Revell sees Browning as one who understands the
richness and complexity of human life. Existence is full of contradictions and conflicts (e.g., good and evil, flesh and spirit), but these all provide a necessary context for man's moral progress. Things do not just happen to be arranged this way—for Browning, God has devised it all. But God is not only the arranger of man's situation, God is also the goal after which man seeks: "Everywhere in human life the poet discerns a panting of the soul after God . . ." (p. 125). A striving after God, however, does not cut one off from life among men or life in the world. Browning is no ascetic: "The world belongs to God, and we must be found living our life therein" (p. 127). Revell concludes by saying that, although Browning's position is basically "Christian," it is not orthodoxly so: "the God in whom he believes is not man's God, the God of theologies and Churches . . . the true and living God is found in the individual soul alone" (p. 137). So Browning points his readers to no authority to help them establish their own religious convictions; he does not even set himself up as an authority (here Revell is clearly reacting against those who have made Browning an authoritative figure in the realm of religion): "Thus does our individualist poet, with his wonderful sense of the expression, and divine signif-
icance of things, conduct us to what one may call the divine right and duty of the soul to frame its own interpretation of the universe" (p. 138). (Discussion: III, pp. 98*-101*.)


Robertson's discussion centers on the poem's presentation of the quest for certainty about human immortality. He claims that Browning does not postulate "immortality . . . on the ground that a future life is required to atone for the ills of the present. . . . It is not the injustice of life that afflicts him, it is its unintelligibility" (p. 319). With immortality, the struggles of this life take on meaning:

they direct one toward and prepare one for an un-realized ideal; without immortality, all the suffering and sacrifice of man, his struggles after distant ideals, his crushing sense of failure, his anguish and remorse, become unmeaning" (p. 319).

Browning's postulate of immortality seems to Robertson to be closely related to the Christian "maxim" which says: "die to live" (p. 320). Personal suffering, conflict, and even death are seen, in the Christian context, as having an ultimate goal and meaning. Robertson even sees a Christian basis for the poem's conclusion about immortality: "a hope; no less, no
more." Robertson's comment about this final statement is this: "the Christian position is that spiritual progress is gained through walking by faith and not by sight" (p. 324). The lack of certainty in the poem, then, does not betray a lack of Christian commitment but rather is an indication of the extent to which Browning, in a way typical of all true Christians, has ultimately only faith, or trust, or "hope" to cling to. (Discussion: II, pp. 312*-16*.)

Robertson, W. "Religion of Browning." n.d. II, pp. 236*-38*.

The passages given in this account (the whole lecture is not recorded) focus on Browning's unconventional—in both conception and phraseology—religious preoccupations:

So, without using [conventional] religious phraseology at all, it may be said we only come close to any large and profound upheaval of human emotion, when the depths of a heart are greatly moved, and, in that sacred spot and presence laid open for a moment to your gaze, it is only your own blindness and irreverence which can prevent you from feeling that the place is holy ground. In a sense, it may be said, Browning is in all his works a religious poet (p. 237*).

Thus Browning's soul-studies are, according to Robertson, unconventional religious poems: "the depths of a heart are . . . laid open."

Sharpe interprets this poetry as demonstrating the Christian notions of love, self-sacrifice, and incarnation: "If God would win the love of man, He must sacrifice himself... Here, as so often in Browning, reason leads to the Incarnation of God" (p. 197).


These reflections on the poem suggest the centrality of the person and spirit of Christ in the Christian religion. Stoddart laments the fact that much of contemporary Christianity has abstracted a system or an ethic which leaves a vital image of Christ completely aside. To this age—as well as to Saul—Browning was saying (through David), "see the Christ stand!" (Discussion: II, pp. 264*-68*.)


In this paper Thomson devotes a section to Browning's Christianity and confines the poet within rather narrow doctrinal limits with this characterization:
I must not fail to note . . . his profound, passionate, living, triumphant faith in Christ, and in the immortality and ultimate redemption of every human soul in and through Christ. . . . Thoroughly familiar with all modern doubts and disbeliefs, he tramples them all underfoot, clinging to the Cross . . . (p. 249).

In the discussion recorded in I, pp. 15*-16* F. J. Furnivall answers Thomson. Furnivall does not consider Browning a doctrinal Christian. Furnivall's position is based on his reading of "Karshish, Saul & c.," poems "usually cited to prove Browning a doctrinal Christian." To Furnivall these poems "were so plainly dramatic, so clearly belonged to the person for whom the poet was speaking, that he wonderd [sic] at their being brought forward to prove the poet's personal belief." La Saisiaz is cited by Furnivall as more clearly being a religious statement in Browning's own voice. In this poem doubt about dogma predominates over belief; thus rigid Christian doctrine gives way to simple theism.


In this brief statement Wedmore declares that Browning is an "orthodox" Christian but one whose Christianity "is the broadest we have seen" (p. 55*). As a religious teacher Browning's "teaching of doctrine
is small indeed in comparison with his teaching of the results of his own analysis, of his experience, of his insight" (p. 55*). As a poet Browning functions as both a prophet and a priest.

**West, E. D. "One Aspect of Browning's Villains."**
April 27, 1883. I, pp. 411-34.

The paper begins with a question: what concord is there between Browning's optimism, his faith in "Good," and his delight in portraying the vilest of villains? West explains the apparent contradiction by stating that the villains are not inherently evil but are, rather, morally responsible beings who can possibly be redeemed. West points to Guido in *The Ring and the Book* as an example of such a character. Ironically, by bringing villains into the world he depicts, Browning shows the strong potential for good in the world: it lies in the possibility of positive change in his villains. The apparent discord in Browning is thus resolved. (Discussion: I, pp. 69*-73*.)


In a discussion almost as vague as its title, Westcott attempts to show how Browning's vision em-
braced all of life. Suffering, evil, and failure—instead of suggesting the disharmony and disunity of life—show "Divine Love" at work in human existence to fashion the Divine likeness. Browning's poetry reveals this hard-to-discern coherence of life.


This discussion, perhaps better than any other, epitomizes an image of Browning that, in the minds of many, the Society seemed intent on fostering: Browning, the religious teacher and philosopher who with his strength, optimism, and insight, was capable of helping and inspiring an age that was intellectually troubled and spiritually dispossessed. Whitehead says that "Life has come upon us with a rush that finds us unprepared" (p. 238)—and it is Browning who steps into the breach. The poet offers aid in two different areas of human need:

1. Those which touch the more practical questions of the day.

2. Those which concern metaphysical problems (p. 240).

Whitehead lists one by one the specific problems besetting the age and then, for each, points to a passage from Browning's poems that reveals wisdom and insight.
applicable to each problem. Many of the problems cited of course have religious aspects. (Discussion: II, pp. 257*-60*.)


In this brief and superficial discussion, Lewis touches upon a number of Browning's themes (e.g., faith, progress, love, evil) all of which suggest elements of the poet's religious vision or understanding. However, all these themes in Browning's works are discussed in greater depth and with greater originality by other commentators of this era.


It is Symons's conviction that the religious aspect of Browning's work is not given enough attention, nor is it enough appreciated. So Symons sets out to rectify the situation:

I think it can easily be shown that in this great and subtle poet there is enough of the religious and spiritual, enough of the gospel of Christ, to demand the attention and the thanks of Christians (p. 944).
Symons proceeds, with brief references to individual poems, to demonstrate that Browning reveals "everywhere a warm and unvarying belief in historical and spiritual Christianity; he everywhere asserts, or takes for granted, the truth of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith . . ." (p. 944). Among those doctrines Symons finds Browning advocating in his poems are: belief in God and in Christ; belief in immortality and in eternal punishments and rewards; belief in the notion that God is Love.

Symons is not strikingly original in his understanding and appreciation of Browning as a religious poet--except in that he sees Browning as such a simple and orthodox Christian. If Symons had read much of the earlier commentary on the poet he would have realized that the religious aspect of Browning's work was not as neglected (by 1882) as he apparently imagined it was.


This article devotes its concluding pages to Brown-
ing's poems on religious topics. Among the poems discussed are: "Saul," "Karshish," "Caliban Upon Setebos," and Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. No particularly noteworthy thesis or insights emerge in the discussion.


This article contains a discussion of "A Death in the Desert," a "magnificent ethico-religious poem" (p. 646). Le Conte contends that the poem has three parts, the first emphasizing "physical growth, and influence of sensuous pleasures on man," the second emphasizing "human growth, and influence of man on man," and the third emphasizing "growth of man Godward, and divine influence of God upon man" (p. 646).

"Mr. Browning's Theology." Spectator, 57 (1884), 1614-16.

In Ferishtah's Fancies "we have," says the commentator, "a familiar sketch of Mr. Browning's theology, with its bearing on the morality of our actual life" (p. 1615). The religious messages which "fancies" often veil in this work are: God blesses us with more than we deserve, i.e., we are beneficiaries of grace; one should love, as well as have faith in, the truth of the gospel; the incarnation is the only conceivable
way for man to come to know God; suffering exists in the world in order to awaken human sympathy; the practice of the ascetic shows that he despises what God has given us. This article rather crudely extracts these religious notions without showing much appreciation for the poetry which is an integral part of any proposition Browning may be making.


This article is largely a mere paraphrase of Browning's early poem. Soulsby emphasizes particularly the following lines of the poem: "I press God's lamp/ Close to my breast; its splendor soon or late/ Will pierce the gloom; I shall emerge some day." In those lines Soulsby sees comfort for the age of skepticism that both she and Browning dwell in:

there is an answer to the thoughts which trouble us, another side to the pain and grief and failure and littleness that crush us as we look upon life, and that we are justified in saying with Paracelsus, "One day I shall emerge" (p. 501).


This handbook was written at the request of members
of the Browning Society and was favored with some cooperation and suggestions from Browning himself. As Orr discusses the poems, she groups them into certain categories. One category focuses on the "Emotional Poems" which are "Religious, Artistic, and Expressive of the Fiercer Emotions." Here are found treatments of several of the explicitly religious poems. Commentary on others is found under such categories as "Argumentative Poems" and "Didactic Poems." Orr's purpose in this book is to explain and paraphrase each work objectively rather than to engage in interpretation or subjective reaction. Thus Orr's most interesting responses to the religious aspects of Browning's work are to be found not here but in other of her published comments on the poet.


One third of this book is devoted to a treatment of Browning (the writers to receive Cooke's attention in the book's other two thirds are Tennyson and Ruskin), and a whole chapter of the Browning section focuses on "Browning's Religious Teachings." Cooke challenges the notion put forth by many Browning readers that he is "a poet of doubt." The claim is made that in external and
inessential matters (such as Christianity's history, tradition, and doctrine) Browning is indeed a skeptic; but "like all other idealists," says Cooke, Browning "lays all stress on the inward and intuitive," and in that realm no doubt is to be found (p. 357). Thus Cooke sees Browning as a Christian poet not in terms of orthodox theology and dogma but rather in terms of his realization of Christianity's "deep inner spirit": to Browning Christianity "is a life and a growth" (p. 359). Man has access to God not through traditional religious revelation but rather through the personality of men, and particularly through the poet. There the human impulse of love coincides with intuition to usher man into true spiritual life. For Cooke, then, Browning is clearly a Christian poet but one who is unorthodox in his faith. This is an oft-repeated characterization of the poet during this era.


The sections of the book of chief interest for the purposes of this bibliography are the introductory essays entitled, "The Spiritual Ebb and Flow exhibited
in English Poetry from Chaucer to Tennyson and Browning" and "The Idea of Personality and of Art as an intermediate agency of Personality, as embodied in Browning's Poetry." The latter was originally delivered as an address to the Browning Society and is printed in BSP. In these essays Corson seeks to establish the following thesis: "Robert Browning is . . . the completest fulfilment of this equipoise of the intellectual and the spiritual, possessing each in an exalted degree . . ." (p. 31). This approach takes on a familiar ring, though, when Corson continues:

The intellect plays a secondary part. Its place is behind the instinctive, spiritual antennae which conduct along their trembling lines, fresh stuff for the intellect to stamp and keep—fresh instinct for it to translate into law (pp. 45-46).

This is no true equipoise; the intellectual definitely becomes subservient to the spiritual in Corson's view of Browning's particular religious position. Browning's poetic search for spiritual truth focuses on human personality. Corson cites a line from Paracelsus—"Truth is within ourselves"—to establish this view. This focus is the reason, implies Corson, that so many of Browning's poems are in the form of personality studies or monologues. The many personalities depicted in the poetry indirectly point to the one Personality, Christ, who is central to ultimate spiritual truth.
Thus Corson concludes that "Browning's poetry is instinct with the essence of Christianity--the life of Christ" (p. 65). Corson discusses at some length The Ring and the Book, Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, and "Cleon." Most of Corson's book is given over to an anthology of thirty-five poems which are accompanied by handbook material such as "Arguments" and "Notes."


Although Gilmore recognizes and discusses Browning as a religious poet, he does not attempt to systematize the poet's religious thought.

It is not our purpose to co-ordinate Browning's religious opinions into a theological system. . . . We must emphasize, however, Browning's firm conviction of the existence and the over-ruling providence of a personal God" (p. 490).


This book is primarily a guide offering interesting and important background for reading and understanding individual poems. (Symons's is one of the earliest of a long line of such guidebooks.) Of course many of the poems treated in this way are explicitly--or implicitly--religious in subject matter and/or theme. But a
broader discussion opens the book, a chapter on the "General Characteristics" of Browning. Chief among these characteristics are Browning's optimism and his Christianity, which, not surprisingly, are linked together by Symons:

... the test of his optimism is its sight of evil. Mr. Browning has fathomed it, and he can still hope. ... This vivid hope and trust in man is bound up with a strong and strenuous faith in God. Mr. Browning's Christianity is wider than our creeds, and is all the more vitally Christian in that it never sinks into pietism (p. 27).


This is an appreciation of Browning, with many excerpts from the poems but with very little analytical scrutiny of them.

Burt, Mary E. Browning's Women. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1887.

Chapter by chapter Burt focuses on the different women who play roles in Browning's poems. Although the author does not connect these characters through any extended discussion with the religious themes prominent in Browning's work, she does suggest occasionally the importance of the poet's female figures in the moral-religious vision some of the poems present.
A figure of just such importance is found in the chapter entitled, "The Picture of Faith," where Burt discusses *The Return of the Druses*. In that play "Anael stands as the most divine thing in humanity . . . [and] she illustrates another of Robert Browning's theories, that man has absolute need of woman's faith in him if he is ever to learn the use of free will in moral action" (p. 29).


Fotheringham concentrates most of the attention he gives Browning's religious attitudes and themes into four particular chapters of his book: "Religious Poems: 'Saul,' 'Christmas Eve,' 'The Sun'"; "Browning's Poetry and the Ideal of Religion--Leading Spiritual Ideas"; "Poems of Immortality"; "Psychological and Casuistic Studies: 'Caliban,' and 'Bishop Blougram'." The author notes that

religion interests [Browning] little as a body of opinion; more as a faith, though rather in a way of suggestion than of definition; but most of all as a revelation of man, and as a clue to man's thought and passion. . . . He must present [religious facts and ideas] "alive and at work" . . . as they play their parts in the souls of men, or as they reveal the passion and play of the natures of men (pp. 194-95).
From such a comment it should be clear that Fotheringham does not typically view Browning as a religious teacher or preacher to his age. For Fotheringham Browning is not a chauvinist or dogmatist about Christianity; the religion is simply a lens through which the poet looks to enable him to make some sense of the world and the people he sees.

He sees in men, he knows in himself, he recognizes in the arts men have made to express their minds, a large passion that no art and no work of man has sufficed to express. Religion has interest for him in so far as it conciliates and interprets this "sense of the infinite," this large desire, as much of the intellect as of the emotions. It interests him because of the way it explains the depth he feels in man and the world (p. 241).


Hornbrooke points out certain recurrent religious themes found in Browning's poetry. First, in referring to "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Rabbi Ben Ezra," Hornbrooke cites the tendency in Browning to link closely the body and the soul, a linking that "indicates the intimate connection between outward form and inward reality" (p. 223). Next, Hornbrooke explains Browning's position that truth is not attainable for man through reason or knowledge but rather through assertion of the will: "... the poet recognizes that there are truths which
can never be acquired by processes of reasoning or by any demonstration. First principles are grasped by the will" (p. 224). Third, Hornbrook indicates the uniqueness of Browning's discovery of God. The poet does not "find revelation of God through a book, in the history of man, in a church, and . . . in the phenomena of the natural world" (p. 225)--all conventional places to search out God in the Victorian era; instead Browning finds God in man himself. Browning "reveals God to us in our self-consciousness. . . . The revelations of consciousness are the only foundations on which the knowledge of God can be laid" (p. 226). And the highest that man can attain with God residing in him is not power or knowledge: it is love. Fourth, Hornbrooke sees The Ring and the Book as Browning's comment on the dilemma created for many Victorian Christians by the new biblical criticism. Many such Christians saw no alternative to skepticism once the historical facts of the Bible had been called into question by critics. But Browning's The Ring and the Book leaves many questions about historical facts too--the many versions of the tale make these questions inevitable. Nonetheless general truths can be drawn from the poem about certain characters and about the morality of certain choices and actions. So it is with the
Bible, Browning seems to be implying: the general truths about man, God, and the world made manifest in that great work should not be discarded simply because the accuracy of its historical details cannot be determined.


Fawcett's is a dissonant voice in the discussion of Browning's religion; for this commentator Browning's Christianity is hardly unorthodox:

He is an orthodox believer of the most acquiescent type. . . . The sinewy scientific push of his time has left him conservatively unaffected. . . . He is as pious as he is opaque. . . . He is perfectly sure and satisfied on the question not only of an anthropomorphic deity but on that of future immortality, accountability, pardon, and punishment (p. 91).

Thus Browning is pictured as being very ordinary and quite representative of his age. Fawcett is consciously playing the iconoclast's role and attempting thereby to help bring the "Browning craze" to (for Fawcett) a well-deserved end.


This article is merely a brief and superficial
cataloguing of Browning's best-known religious poems and themes.


In this book Alexander's reflections on Browning's religious stance are for the most part confined to a chapter entitled, "Christianity as Presented in Browning's Works." Alexander notes that the points where Browning diverges from typical Victorian thinking are those where he most closely approximates important particulars of Christianity:

... in his insistence upon a personal God, manifesting himself in personal qualities, upon a God who is in immediate contact with us, rather than upon one acting merely through natural law; the prime importance which he assigns to the individual soul; in his predominant interest in its destiny; in his consequent dwelling upon, and confidence in, a future life; in his presentation of this life as a scene of probation and preparation for a higher and better one; in his neglect of the theme of man's material progress; in his comparative lack of interest in the future condition of the race in this world; in short, in the overwhelming interest and importance which the spiritual and inner life has above the material and outer (p. 60).

Significant also to Browning's religious position is the notion that God's essence is love and that Christ was God's means of presenting that essence to man:

God is too inconceivable, too remote, to awaken sufficiently our capacity for love; but as Christ He comes within the range of our conception and
sympathy. In Christ we have at once the proof of the infinity of Divine love, and an object fitted to kindle that love and to receive its return (p. 105).

In this discussion Alexander uses as the basis for his conclusions such poems as "An Epistle of Karshish," The Ring and the Book, "A Death in the Desert," and "Easter-Day."


According to Berdoe, Browning's Christian faith has been able to stand against or accommodate itself to the unique challenges of nineteenth century thought. For instance, Browning's optimistic theory of life, his sense of life's progress toward perfection, "is eminently in accord with the teachings of evolution and development" (p. 360) current in this age. Thus the poet speaks effectively to those disenchanted with religion (a group that included Berdoe himself before his acquaintance with Browning's work):

His theology is so eminently reasonable that it commends itself to a large class of minds which have forsaken the churches because modern criticism has laid rude hands on the dogmas, creeds and documents upon which they are grounded. . . . The great want of the age is a faith which is adequate to and consistent with its intellectual culture (p. 357).
For Berdoe, and for many others among the poet's contemporaries, Browning satisfied that want.

Brinton, Daniel G. "Facettes of Love: From Browning."

Poet-Lore, 1 (1889), 1-27.

Brinton sees religious implications in the human impulse to love. In loving we are divine, partakers of the Divine nature. Therefore, the more and the better we love, the more do we bring ourselves into unison with the Divine nature, and consequently into possession of its attributes,—immortal life, wisdom, and power (p. 21).

Love is also seen as at least a partial explanation of or justification for the evil in the world: "hate and sin and pain and death [are] developmental stages toward love and life . . ." (p. 22). As Brinton continues to elevate this unique human capacity, he goes so far as to idealize love in Platonic terms: "the love of the noble mind is union with the unchangeable, and therefore is everlasting" (p. 24). But Brinton makes a peculiar observation on Browning's portrayal and conception of love: he sees it as a "notable failure" that the poet did not embody this ideal love in the person of the Virgin Mother. Instead, says Brinton, Browning shows his Protestant limitations by associating the greatest love with only Christ himself.
Hutton makes these comments about the religion of the two poets:

Both are possessed by Christian convictions; both are eager students of the philosophy of faith. . . . And both, with a very strong desire to master the religious attitude of a world far removed from their own,—Tennyson the mysticism of the age of chivalry, Browning the peculiarities of mediaeval or modern superstition,—have been intensely modern; modern in their faith and their sympathies . . . (p. 880).


White shows that, from Browning's viewpoint, many of man's earthly feelings and activities—such as his love, his joy, his artistic endeavors—leave man feeling incomplete, unfulfilled. Thus eternity is implied by Browning: only in another life can man be completed and fulfilled. "This world is but a trial ground" (p. 427), says White, in which man is beset by the brevity, mystery, sorrow, doubt, and decay of life only to be led to a "heavenly day" (p. 427) which resolves all in the light of understanding.
PART II

1890-1919


As Berdoe informs readers in his introduction, this volume contains little that is new but is primarily a reprinting of material that was originally presented by him to the Browning Society and first printed in the BSP.


In this superficial discussion—consisting primarily of many illustrative quotes from pertinent poems—Bird concludes that "Browning was an orthodox believer, whose sanguine and virile temperament impelled him to see light and not darkness beyond the grave" (p. 172).


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Bixby credits Browning with appreciating and depicting the material world in his poetry but with also seeing that world as only "a shell within which Divine life throbs" (p. 286). God's presence in the world is sensed most surely through the experience of human love because God is seen as the source of all love. Browning is aware of the two sides of man's nature—flesh and soul—and accordingly prescribes for man the proper conception of himself: he is an "amphibian." "Our life," says Bixby of Browning's vision, "is like that of the swimmer—the sea beneath him, the heaven above him. Immersed in the grosser element, he breathes and lives by the more ethereal medium" (P. 294). Bixby concludes that Browning saw in Christianity the best expression of man's noble impulses to love and to aspire to a higher spiritual perfection.


Brooke, in his memorial essay on the recently deceased poet, concentrates on Browning's early poem, Pauline, and on the yearning for God it portrays. Pauline is understood to give us a taste of a preoccupation—this yearning for God—that was to mark Browning's
work till the end of his career: "Out of the same quarry, then, from which 'Pauline' was hewn, were hewn all the rest" (p. 150).


Cooke emphasizes in this discussion that "Browning is not a teacher of religion in the usual sense" (p. 333). First of all, Browning is a poet whose emphasis on religion comes only as a result of his looking deeply into human experience—he has not set out with the deliberate intention of making religious pronouncements. Religious issues are simply woven into the fabric of human experience; thus, in exploring life, Browning inevitably explores those issues. Next, Cooke observes that some of the more interesting religious suggestions in Browning's work appear, surprisingly, in his love poems. With love comes "the awakening and development of the spirit of altruism and also the quickening into life of the spiritual nature itself . . ." (p. 333). Then Cooke contends that Browning sees religious development as not just affecting man's "spiritual nature" but rather "the whole man . . . as a living soul" (p. 334). Finally, Cooke calls Browning "an extreme radical in religion," one whose allegiance is not to the
word of scripture, or to the historic facts of Christ, or to the institution of the church; what Browning values in Christianity is found in the spirit, not the letter, of the religion. So, for Cooke, Browning is an unorthodox teacher of a somewhat unorthodox Christianity.


Dawson's book devotes several chapters to Browning, among them "Browning's Philosophy of Life," "The Spirit of Browning's Religion," and "Browning's Attitude to Christianity." Dawson claims that "pre-eminently [Browning] is a religious poet. Religion enters into all his work, like a fragrance or a colour which clings to some delicate and lovely fabric, and, while occasionally subdued or modified, is never lost" (p. 289). In "Easter Day" Dawson sees the clearest embodiment of the various elements making up Browning's religion: the notion of "how very hard it is to be a Christian"—challenges, especially intellectual ones, are always confronting the believer; the idea that man's life is guided by choice, and some of those choices can leave man without God; and finally the conception of God as
Love, a force capable of "reconciling [man] to the mysteries of faith . . . [and of casting] a bright bridge of gleaming hope across the profound gulfs of human error." (p. 294). Dawson also recognizes the importance of Christ in Browning's vision:

The historical evidences and arguments of Christianity have exercised upon him a deep and enduring fascination. . . . [The] vision of Christ has been not only an ever-present, but an ever-growing, vision with Browning (p. 300).


"[Browning's] very ruggedness is a protest against that creamy smoothness which emasculates religion . . ." (p. 476). Thus Ernle strikes the keynote of his discussion. Browning writes of the world without planing off its rough edges; a rough texture can be felt in the verse itself as well as in the human portraits which are so often Browning's subjects. But reality is important primarily as a pathway to the ideal: Ernle says Browning "strove to reach the ideal through the real, to illuminate limited experience by revealing its infinite significance . . ." (p. 480). Strong characters in crisis and in moments of passion represent Browning's means of reaching for the truth which lies beneath the surface of reality. This partly explains the prominence and number
of dramatic monologues in Browning's poetry. In his creation and study of characters, then, Browning engages in religious exploration: "He finds in the spiritual struggles of individual souls the revelation of God which Wordsworth detected in Nature" (p. 478).

Browning's strong sense of individuality acts as the cornerstone of his work as a poet—and it explains some of the unique religious notions attributable to him:

... individuality becomes the parent of his buoyant optimism. He tolerates evil and suffering because they bring into play personal compensations. To the same source may be traced his belief in the relativity of all knowledge, his rejection of universal revelation, his protest against dogmatic belief. ... The same sense of individuality inspires his love of all that is unusual, his hatred of all conventionality, his insistence upon the emotional side of human nature. It aids his faith in the manifestation of the Deity in Humanity; it forms part of the ground on which he bases his belief in Immortality; it helps him to his recognition of a Personal God. It is the secret of his casuistry, his eccentricity in choice of subjects ... (pp. 485-86).

It is not surprising to see Ernle conclude that "individuality ... is Browning's most characteristic Gospel" (p. 487). And neither, then, is it surprising that Browning's "Gospel" leads him to treasure one doctrine of Christianity above all others: the incarnation.

The doctrine of the Incarnation gives Browning the most perfect working idea of God, because ... [it] engrafts weakness upon strength, binds up the spiritual in the material, and manifests the human in the Divine. In the supreme height of its love and self-sacrifice, it reveals, and realizes, the highest type of personality (p. 493).

In this eulogy to the recently deceased poet, Houghton concludes that Browning's philosophy "consists in the sense of a discord in life, and in faith in an ideal in which this discord shall be solved" (p. 549). Houghton asserts that this philosophy is embodied in the Christian spirit and message of much of Browning's poetry.


Hutton credits Browning with a dual teaching: first, about "the curious irreligiousness of a great many religious people" (p. 88); and second, about "the kernel of religiousness in irreligious people" (p. 90). A number of Browning's characters are cited as fitting into one or the other of these categories. Browning is also seen as having "none of the feeble optimism of his age . . . [that] exalts the enormous preponderance of good over evil in human life" (p. 92). Instead Browning's optimism appears to be stronger and more complex: it recognizes the reality of evil and understands the God of
Christianity as offering some relief--and release--from earth's evils and limitations.

Ireland, Annie E. "Browning as a Teacher: In Memoriam." Gentleman's Magazine, 268 (1890), 177-84.

Browning, the Christian poet, sent to rescue those caught in an age of anguish and doubt--this is the shop-worn image of the poet presented in this eulogy.

Rickaby, John. "Browning as a Religious Teacher." Month, 68 (1890), 174-90.

Rickaby, writing about Browning in a Catholic journal, makes plain his purpose early: "we are going to judge Browning from the standpoint of the Catholic Church, and to say what Catholics ought to think about the matter" (p. 174). So Rickaby proceeds to measure Browning's religious positions against the standards of the Catholic Church. Although Browning displays basically Christian attitudes about God and Christ, he is not strictly orthodox enough to gain Rickaby's full approval: "We are dogmatists; Browning is an anti-dogmatist" (p. 182). To support his position, Rickaby quotes Mrs. Orr's Handbook (1885) and concludes that "[Browning] was convinced that uncertainty is essential to spiritual life; and his works are saturated by the
idea, that where uncertainty ceases stagnation must begin" (p. 182). Thus, for Rickaby, Browning's Christianity is suspect. In his conclusion the real reason, perhaps, for Rickaby's less-than-full approval of Browning is revealed: "[Browning] never reached higher than the standpoint of vulgar bigotry to the Catholic Church. . . . Indeed, he seldom speaks of our Church and our churchmen except on the unfavorable side . . . ."

(p. 190).


In this eulogy Browning is given credit for "the simplification he has made of religion" (p. 245). The commentator points out that a church and a religion tend to grow "by accretion" and that Browning has, in his poetry, cut through this accretion to the fundamental elements of Christianity: "fervent belief in the voice and the light within, the intuition of the soul, the piety of simple reverence and trust, the faith in the 'one divine event' [the incarnation] of all" (p. 245).

"Robert Browning." Church Quarterly Review, 30 (1890), 313-38.

This commentator writes a partial answer to those
readers who find Browning's supposed adherence to Christianity suspect:

... this very orthodoxy of his has been the cause of much surprise and perplexity to his critics. Some of them do their best to explain it away, others put it down to physical causes, and describe it as the result of good digestion. They cannot bring themselves to acknowledge that this wondrous intellect should have been content to believe in the controlling power of Providence and hope in a life beyond the grave. Yet nothing is more absolutely certain (p. 335).

As these words suggest, this critic has appointed himself a staunch apologist for the view that Browning's religion was a quite orthodox Christianity.


When this reviewer of Browning's work comes to discuss the poet's religion as it is revealed in the poetry, he opposes those who resist calling Browning a Christian:

It appears to us that only wilful blindness can refuse to see, in the work of his whole life, one pervading and shaping presence—that of a strong, constant, rejoicing faith in personal immortality, in a future life of the spirit immeasurably transcending this present life in grandeur, in the Father of Lights—Giver of every good and perfect gift—and in the world's Redeemer, the incarnate Love of God, who brought life and immortality to light (p. 222).

This commentator and the conventional language of Christianity used here to characterize Browning's position put the poet into a more orthodox Christian camp than
do other characterizations evoked during this period.

Von Glehn, Marian. "Browning as a Religious Teacher."

**Jewish Quarterly Review, 2 (1890) 230-49.**

Von Glehn explains Browning's undogmatic religion as "an unswerving and deeply-rooted faith in the fact of God's existence, and the ultimate victory of good over evil" (p. 234). God's revelation of himself in the world takes on two different aspects: power and love; Von Glehn discusses both these aspects of God as they are portrayed in particular poems. No noticeable "Jewish" point of view is assumed by Von Glehn in her treatment of Browning in this article.

Azarias, Brother (P. F. Mullany). "Robert Browning."


This essay recalls that of Rickaby written a year earlier (in fact, Azarias mentions Rickaby's article). Azarias admires greatly Browning's work but finds him, for Catholics, untrustworthy as a source of strict religious teaching: "... whilst Browning in his own way holds by some truths of Christian revelation, he cannot in any sense or under any circumstances be set up as an expounder of Christian doctrine" (p. 594). Another
shortcoming Azarias notes--again echoing Rickaby--is that Browning does not do his Catholic characters justice; instead the poet "simply presents those types of Catholics that constitute the stock-in-trade of Protestant fiction" (p. 594).


In this discussion of a particular poem from Ferishtah's Fancies Brinton objects to Browning's emphasis on the logic of the incarnation myth. This attitude, says Brinton, makes the basic Christian notion of incarnation too rational--and thus too easy for man to assent to--and it also makes God too much like a man. Much more to Brinton's liking is the stance assumed by Tertullian, which recognizes a wide gap between man and God. With such a conviction, the notion of incarnation becomes somewhat irrational, even absurd. And only then can come the response to God that Brinton sees as most desirable: "the nearly absolute subjection of reason to faith" (p. 256).

Not by bringing God down to earth can man rise to heaven. Only by reverent recognition that all which man is not, God is, can he reach the yearned-for conviction . . . of an Infinite . . . (p. 257).

This review of Orr's *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (1891) raises strong objections to the very unorthodox image of Browning's Christianity presented in the book.


Clarke understands "Caliban" to be a comment on the inadequacy and limitations of an anthropomorphic conception of God. Yet, despite the crudeness and falsity of such a conception, it is a necessary step "in the evolution of the purest religions" (p. 294), says Clarke.

Cohen, Mary M. "Browning's Hebraic Sympathies." *Poet-Lore*, 3 (1891), 250-54.

Cohen lauds Browning's understanding of Jewish thought (as seen, particularly, in "Rabbi Ben Ezra") and notes that a desirable side-effect of this focus on Jews is a lessening of anti-semitic feeling:

... the Hebrew element in Browning's poems ... does much to remove prejudice, and to place the philosophy of the Jew in its true place among the world's "Credos." A Ben Ezra and a Jochanan may supplant a Shylock and a Fagin in public estimation (p. 251).

This is one of the several handbooks and commentaries that were published near the end of Browning's life or shortly after his death. Cooke comments on, in alphabetical order, each of Browning's works, giving information and explanations intended to aid the general reader. Of course there is much here that would aid the more specialized reader as well, e.g., the reader who is focusing on Browning's religious poems and/or themes. Cooke remains quite objective in his treatment of Browning (as one would expect in a handbook), voicing few opinions and engaging rarely in interpretation.


In this discussion of the poetry of Arnold and Browning, Dewey concludes that "that which was conspicuously absent in Arnold is conspicuously present in
Browning,—the sense of a common idea, a common purpose, in nature and in man" (p. 114). It is apparent to Dewey that Browning's work has begun to bear the burden that Arnold himself has placed upon the poetry of the modern world: traditional religion has lost its power and become obsolete, so it is now the role of poetry "to stay and to console" man amidst the threats offered by his apparently indifferent or hostile environment (p. 115).


Dods claims that Browning has aided and strengthened Christianity in his poetry. It is apparent to Dods that the poet's "interpretation of life is the Christian interpretation" and that "the Christian view of God and . . . of immortality . . . guide the poet as he scrutinises the dark and hidden depths of human life and conduct" (p. 299 in reprint edition of article).

This is perhaps the most thoughtful, balanced, and perceptive of the studies produced during the decade following Browning's death. Jones's position stands as an antidote to the worshipful attitude characterizing many of the commentaries of this time. Browning's "optimism," Jones says, is part of an attempt to justify the ways of God to man. The presence of evil in the world is explained and understood within a context of moral progress—evil is present because perfection in moral terms has not yet been achieved and is not achievable in this present existence. Love—the "meeting-point of God and Man" (p. 143)—is the spiritual principle to which is assigned the task of combating evil: the power of love will always be in the process of overcoming evil. At this point Jones launches into a criticism of Browning's position. He says that Browning does not recognize in man the capability of truly knowing reality, especially the full reality of evil. So as man's intellect or man's knowledge fails to comprehend the true nature of reality, Browning appeals to the heart and to love as instruments to pierce the enigma of life. Man cannot participate in God's knowledge, Browning suggests, but he can participate in God's love. Such a conception, claims Jones, does man a grave injustice: it puts man's heart above his head; it recognizes only half of man's
nature. And, finally, Browning's optimism is seen as lacking in a firm foundation because it rests on a faith which is incapable of proof.

Lamont, Alexander. "The Christian Thought in Robert Browning's Poetry." *Sunday Magazine*, 20 (1891), 399-404. Lamont calls Browning a "high-priest" whose "poetry is peculiarly needed by the wavering, fainthearted children of men of this faithless generation" (p. 400). There is no attempt at rigorous analysis or interpretation here, only a celebration of Browning's Christian message.

Mackenzie, Constance. On Caliban and Cleon (abstract). *Poet-Lore*, 3 (1891), 294-96. Mackenzie notes that Caliban's religion is characterized by expediency and egotism: he is (Mackenzie quotes Cleon's letter to Proteus) "the man who loves his life so overmuch." Cleon, on the other hand, longs for immortality, for "self-perfection." This position places him above Caliban on the hierarchical ladder of religious motivations; Cleon sees beyond this present world and its life in his religious longings. But Cleon is limited, too, says Mackenzie, because he is still too egocentric: he has not subordinated "the individual to
the general good." Thus Cleon has only reached a "middle stage" in the evolution of religious sensitivity.


This, the earliest attempt at a definitive biography of the poet, makes only occasional and brief references to Browning's religious life and convictions. From Orr's perspective Browning clearly demonstrates religious notions and preoccupations although she refuses to recognize them as orthodoxy Christian. The following opinion stands as an example of her assessment of Browning: "Christ remained for Mr. Browning a mystery and a message of Divine Love, but no messenger of Divine intention towards mankind" (p. 463). So, for Browning, Christ has a uniqueness, but it is not exactly the uniqueness attributed to him by Christianity. In concluding her Life, Orr sums up Browning's religious position in this way: the poet was a man of belief, but,

as maintained by Mr. Browning, this belief held a saving clause, which removed it from all dogmatic, hence all admissible grounds of controversy the more definite or concrete conceptions of which it consists possessed no finality for even his own mind . . ." (p. 631).

Orr's Browning seems to be touched by a certain agnosticism.

This article is a response to the attacks on Orr provoked by her Life and Letters of Robert Browning (1891). Many reviewers were appalled by Orr's refusal, in her book, to paint a portrait of Browning showing him as a more nearly orthodox believer. But in this discussion she staunchly stands by, and greatly expands upon, her previously stated position:

Mr. Browning neither was, nor could be . . . a Christian in the orthodox sense of the word; for he rejected the antithesis of good and evil, on which orthodox Christianity rests; he held, in common with Pantheists . . . that every form of moral existence is required for a complete human world. . . . [And] he would have denied eternal damnation under any conception of sin. He spurned the doctrine with his whole being as incompatible with the attributes of God; and, since inexorable divine judgment had no part in his creed, the official Mediator or Redeemer was also excluded from it. He even spoke of the Gospel teachings as valid only for mental states other than his own. But he never ceased to believe in Christ as, mystically or by actual miracle, a manifestation of Divine love. In his own way, therefore, he was and remained a Christian . . . (p. 878).

Orr asserts that what chiefly characterized Browning's heterodoxy was uncertainty, skepticism: "He had framed for himself a gospel of uncertainty; and, whether this related himself to his scepticism as cause or as effect, it was rooted in his religious life" (p. 880). Since certainty or faith was impossible for the poet, Orr
claims that, concerning many religious matters, "his habitual condition was that of simple hope" (p. 881). For example, with regard to the possibility of immortality (here Orr cites La Saisiaz), hope exists for Browning but hardly the certainty of faith. Orr concludes by attributing much of Browning's heterodoxy to the non-conformist religious background of his earlier years. There she finds a likely spawning ground for the "independent spirit," the "fervor," and the "subjectivism" (p. 887) that mark his mature religious outlook.


In the chapter devoted to Browning Sharp does not focus primarily on Browning, the religious poet; but she does conclude, after a discussion of "An Epistle of Karshish" and "A Death in the desert," that Browning sees Christ "as the necessary revelation of divine love" and understands "love as the one indispensable channel of communication between man and God" (p. 67).


Early in her book Wilson includes a sub-chapter entitled, "Philosophy and Religion." In it she portrays
Browning as a spokesman for Christianity to a uniquely receptive, and indeed spiritually needy, generation:

If he did not originate the broadest expression of nineteenth century belief, at least he transmutes it, so that through his poetry it re-enters many a soul with healing in its wings. To many people his works are a latter evangel of reasonable Christianity (pp. 17-18).

Wilson compares Browning's religious notions favorably with those of an earlier poet and religious thinker: "Browning is a later Coleridge, with a theological instinct less bounded and more acute than Coleridge's, manageable, not nebulous, thinking about men, not about thought" (p. 23). Also, because this volume is conceived and executed as a handbook, much of it (pp. 49-245) is devoted to comments upon individual poems; some of the comments focusing on religious subjects and themes are of interest.


This guide contains many entries (mostly names of poems, characters, and places accompanied by explanatory notes) arranged in alphabetical order. Some of this information, of course, explains certain references and backgrounds helpful to interpreting the religious poems
(as well as others). Most of the time this information is presented objectively, but at times Berdoe's own biases and interpretations become evident.

Cohen, Mary M. "The Source of Browning's Optimism." Poet-Lore, 3 (1892), 567-68.

In this vague and quite superficial discussion Cohen suggests that the source for Browning's optimism is "his belief in the truths of scripture" and his consequent "faith in God and man" (p. 568).


Mather focuses on what he considers the key elements in the poet's work: "[Browning's] two verities are God and the soul: his key truth concerning the former is that God is love; and concerning the latter, that man is endlessly progressive" (p. 155). Mather examines closely "Cleon," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Abt Vogler" to demonstrate these notions in Browning.


In this short discussion (116 pages) Revell expands
on the viewpoints earlier set forth in his contributions to the BSP.


According to Triggs, democracy demands man's freedom and recognizes man's soul. Browning upholds these ideas. Browning also has allied himself with two earlier poet-democrats, Blake and Whitman, in asserting that man is a basically unified creature with no split between body and soul. Browning's views of man, soul, and God imply that "... only by the flesh can we reach the soul; only through man can we find God" (p. 485). Thus, for Triggs, Browning's democracy—his special belief in and reverence for man—provides the substance for a new approach to life, for a new notion of Christianity:

[Browning] trusts life and the world in which the man must live... Success in living is obedience to the natural impulses of one's nature. Browning thus asserts the naturalism of paganism upon the higher plane of Christianity. The flesh is not denied because the love which he sings includes and exalts the flesh (p. 485).

Everett sums up in this way the different religious preoccupations of these two great Victorian poets: "While religion was to Tennyson so largely a matter of faith in immortality, with Browning it was chiefly joy in the divine presence. Immortality he took for granted . . ." (p. 252). Elsewhere Everett asserts that "Tennyson was burdened by the sense of human suffering and sin" that Browning was relatively oblivious to; instead, for Browning, "praise of the joy of living" predominates (p. 253). Tennyson is called a "realist" and Browning an "idealist." But on one matter the two poets clearly agree, says Everett: they both see God as immanent in the world, not as a far off being separated from man.


Browning's "Abt Vogler" contains the line, "'tis we musicians know." Maitland claims that, in a conversation with him, Browning revealed he really meant "we mystics" in the line from "Abt Vogler" and that the poet then went on to include himself in that category: "I am a Mystic."

Savage begins by agreeing with Orr (in the 1891 biography) that Browning was not a Christian in a dogmatic sense. But Browning does believe in God, says Savage, though in a somewhat vague and uncertain way. And Jesus, too, is significant for Browning as "a mystery and message of divine love" (Orr is quoted). Finally, Browning's optimism and his belief in immortality are noted. Savage thus reiterates what then was the standard catalogue of Browning's religious characteristics and beliefs.


For this volume Berdoe has selected and reprinted a number of the essays (specifically, those by Barnett, Beale, Bury, Corson, Glazebrook, Kirkman, Robertson, Sharpe, West, Westcott, and Whitehead) listed in the section of this bibliography devoted to Papers of the Browning Society. In his introduction Berdoe justifies the reprinting of this material partially because Browning "taught us a pure religion, reasonable and manly, robust and in harmony with the science of the age,
and few would listen and fewer would heed. Yet the age had such need of him" (p. vi).

Berdoe, Edward. *Browning and the Christian Faith: The Evidences of Christianity from Browning's Point of View.*


In this book one of the most active members of the London Browning Society gives his tribute to the religious teacher . . . who could put me right on a hundred points which had troubled my mind for many years, and which had ultimately caused me to abandon Christianity. . . . By slow and painful steps I found my way back to the faith I had forsaken. How I reached it, and how my studies confirmed it, is told in this book (pp. viii-ix).

This subjective, confessional treatment of Browning fixes on such topics as (among others) "God," "Jesus Christ," "Man," "Truth," "Faith and Doubt," "Prayer," "The Mystery of Pain, Death, and Sin."

In his teaching on these high matters we have a religious system definite enough to satisfy all Christians save those who demand scholastic definitions of every article of their faith, and rigid lines of demarcation which must not be transgressed under pain of deadly sin (p. xx).

So Browning is seen as definitely a Christian, but one left unbound by strict, doctrinal rigidity. Berdoe also is careful to note the fact that Browning's Christianity stands up well to the new thinking, the new rationality, the new science of the nineteenth century. Berdoe is particularly alert to Browning's positive attitude
toward science (here he disagrees with Jones [1891] who made Browning an antagonist of science) because Berdoe himself was a scientist, a physician.


Innes's claim is that, though Browning's La Saisiaz presents a position of uncertainty on the question of immortality, this by no means suggests "a new and hostile attitude to the Christian revelation" (p. 272). In fact, says Innes, "there is no reason to think that Browning at any period of his career thought of any revelation as one which freed us from doubt and difficulty. He did not think it desirable that it should so free us" (p. 272). So doubt and uncertainty are understood by Innes as being at the heart of Browning's faith.


This book is basically an anthology of poems from which Stuart draws conclusions, in brief commentaries
interspersed throughout the collection, about the various writers' attitudes toward or interpretations of Christ.

Of Browning, Stuart states:

It is doubtful if any professional theologian of this century has divined more fully or perfectly the problems and difficulties of modern doubt, or made so large and important contributions to their rational and satisfactory solution. The Christianity of Christ has had no more powerful defense or exposition than that given by Browning in his poetry (p. 97).


The pertinent papers are listed and annotated below; the entries are arranged alphabetically according to authors' last names. The date of presentation is also mentioned in each entry.


Ames sees the chief purpose of "Caliban" as "a satire upon all religious theories which construct a divinity out of the imperfections of humanity, instead of submitting humanity to be inspired and moulded by the perfections of divinity" (p. 81).
For Cooke, Browning's romantic love is no mere passion or affection: "In his poetry it is an institution, an ecstasy, a spiritual vision, an eternal ideal" (p. 84). Cooke traces the heritage of this notion of love back to Petrarch, Dante, and Plato and thus attaches to it clear religious significance:

Love is that passion of the soul which leads man to forget himself in the life of another, which shows him his most perfect existence in living for another individual, and which proves to him that he can in no wise save his soul except by losing it. Such love becomes romantic when it passes through the love of the one . . . on upward to spiritual love of the Infinite One . . . . When the love with which God searches out the heart of a man turns back to him through the love of a woman, the expression of it appears as romantic love (pp. 97-98).


Dorchester sees some parallels between art and religion as reconciling forces: they help reconcile matter and spirit, the real and the ideal, man and God. "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto" are prominently discussed.

George contends that the "stern realities" of life have such an impact on Browning that "nothing can save him from despair but the idea that man is working out a moral ideal, in which God is present, and that the manifestation of God's presence in man is love . . ." (p. 325). Thus, claims George, the basis for the poet's optimism is his "Christian Theism" (p. 328).


Grant at one point explains some of the significant elements in Browning's "theology" and then shows how the dramatic monologue form uniquely serves the function of setting forth these religious views:

Milton discusses seventeenth century theology and problems of government in epic poems. Browning treats nineteenth century theology in monologue, a form which he has unearthed from the Middle Ages and developed into something with as distinct advantages as the lyric, drama, or epic (p. 44).

Hornbrooke, Francis B. "Mr. Sludge, the Medium." December 18, 1894, pp. 289-305.

Hornbrooke contends that Browning's poem is not an attack on spiritualism per se; "the real fault of Sludge
is that he makes this faith of his subservient to his selfish individual interests. . . . [that he] views all things with an eye single to his own profit" (p. 297).

Royce, Josiah. "Browning's Theism." March 25, 1896, pp. 7-34.

Royce sees embedded in Browning's poetry a two-sided conception of God, completely based on intuition: the first face of God is Power, the second is Love. For Browning

the existence of the God of Power [God as the world's fundamental Reality] is not only as sure as is the existence of one's own self, but is surer and apparently more real, than is the existence of what we call the outer world, i.e. the world of nature (pp. 20-21).

This aspect of God, Royce suggests, is derived from the elements of "Greek monotheism" and "Oriental pantheism" in Christianity.

Browning's doctrine of God as Love, on the other hand, brings him . . . into intimate contact with the remaining aspect of Christian theism, or with the more central and original portion of the faith of the church. . . . It is the doctrine of the Incarnation. . . . The truth of the doctrine of the incarnation . . . must lie in its revelation of a universal and transcendently significant aspect of God's nature,—namely, the human aspect. God, the All-Great, if he is or can become human, is thereby shown to be the All-Loving too (pp. 24-26).

The God of Love, explains Royce, is really a "God beyond God" (p. 27), a God who is experienced when mere Power is found to be ultimately incomplete and unsatisfying.
Caliban acknowledges such a God in his theology: "There may be something quiet o'er his [Setebos's] head."

Royce's final explanation of Browning's "Over-God" comes with a reference to Guido's last speech in The Ring and the Book; there the helpless and hopeless Guido turns in his desperation to none of the conventional powers—such as Pope, Cardinal, Christ, or God—but rather he turns to Pompilia. In his "heretical" cry he recognizes "the deeper meaning of the Incarnation" (p. 29), represented by Pompilia, and responds to a God of Love who is beyond Power.


Royce here opposes Browning to occultists or alchemists who, like Paracelsus, look to external phenomena for evidence of God's reality:

For Browning, God is truly revealed within, not without, our own nature. Therefore, and here is the point of Browning's criticism of occultism, it is our spiritual communion with one another, it is in our world of human loves, and even of human hates, that one gets in touch with God. . . . The researches of the occultist are fascinating, capricious,—and resultless. . . . Browning's mysticism thus has always an essentially human object before it (pp. 239-40).

Here then is implied something like the Christian
mystery of the incarnation: "the essential truth of Christianity was, for [Browning], identical with his own poetical faith that the divine plan is incarnate in humanity, in human loves, and in all deep social relationships, rather than in outer nature" (p. 241).

Leake, Mrs. Percy. The Ethics of Browning's Poems. London: Grant Richards, 1897.

"To all of us Life should be of enormous interest as well as a thing of joy" (p. 11). With this statement Leake opens her book and launches into her study of Browning's "ethics." But there is no rigor to the discussion. All that Leake does, actually, is show us how, in various poems and through an emphasis on various themes, Browning displays to his readers the "interest" and "joy" inherent in life. Many of Browning's values and "doctrines" are seen to correspond with those of Christianity: his emphasis on the notions of incarnation and love, for instance.

Mudge, James. "Why Preachers Should Study Browning."


Mudge gives some homespun advice telling ministers that reading Browning will benefit them in many ways,
from increasing their vocabularies to increasing their faith.


Strong alludes to many of the standard ideas and poems often cited in discussions of Browning's religion. He reveals early his grounds for raising Browning to the highest status among poets: "We maintain that the highest poetry is impossible without religion, not only because the thought of God is the most sublime and fruitful of thoughts, but because from this loftiest thought all our lower thoughts take their proper measure and color" (p. 393). Since Browning's poetry is filled with thoughts of God, Strong can "commend the reading of [him] to all preachers and theologians," as well as to all Christian people. "He is the most learned, stirring, impressive literary teacher of our time--but he is a religious philosopher as well" (p. 396). It is readily apparent to Strong "that the secret of Browning's persistent optimism lay in his recognition of Christ as God and Saviour" (p. 430).
Strong does make two observations of some special interest, however. First, he sees a distinction between Browning and his romantic predecessors (e.g., Wordsworth and Shelley) in that the latter tended to find God in nature and the former tended to see God in man. This notion is a partial explanation for Browning's fascination with remarkable human characters and for his great dependence on the dramatic monologue as a poetic form.

Second, Strong sees a falling off in vigor and sincerity in Browning's later religious poetry (e.g., Ferishtah's Fancies). This decline the commentator attributes to Browning's attempt to intellectualize and philosophize the beliefs that had earlier come to him with the spontaneity and strength of intuitive apprehension.

In his Faith and Doubt in the Century's Poets. London: James Clarke, 1898, pp. 114-36.

Of all the poets examined by Armstrong (and they include—besides Browning—Shelley, Wordsworth, Clough, Tennyson, and Arnold), Browning is distinguished as a "poet of affirmation," "pre-eminently the convinced, the sure the unswerving, the affirmer, the proclaimer" (p. 115). Thus Armstrong separates himself from a number of other commentators who, though they grant Browning
status as a believer, emphasize the struggles, doubts, and uncertainties that accompany his faith. As Browning's religious position is outlined, Armstrong mentions that
two supreme spiritual convictions seem to me to stand out as the sum and substance of Browning's religion. The one is the absolute union of Power and Love in God; the other is the strenuous joy of the Life that is to be (p. 120).

Much of this chapter is merely devoted to long quotations from pertinent poems.

"Browning Study Programme: A Group of Religious Poems."

Poet-Lore, 10 (1898), 103-13.

This piece is a study guide to religious themes in four of Browning's poems: "Caliban upon Setebos," "Cleon," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "The Death in the Desert."


In his essay Chapman insists that the poet's beliefs showed little change and that his "creed" was fixed and sure. "Religion was at the base of his character. . . . It was inevitable that Robert Browning should find and
seize upon as his own all that was optimistic in Christian theology" (p. 187). Chapman more confidently and simply characterizes Browning than do most commentators writing at this time:

He was not a thinker, for he was never in doubt. . . . Standing, from his infancy, upon a faith as absolute as that of a martyr, he has never for one instant undergone the experience of doubt, and only knows that there is such a thing because he has met it in other people (pp. 190-91).


Mudge praises Browning for not diluting Christianity with some of the thinking in vogue during the nineteenth century, e.g., naturalism, agnosticism, and humanitarianism.


Bruce finds Browning's optimism to be based on Christianity, and he sees two principal components in the poet's optimistic philosophy: first, Browning emphasizes the loving nature of God; second, he accounts for and justifies the presence of evil in the world.

In this book the rather commonplace observations on Browning's religion are generally confined to the chapter on "Ethical Teaching."


Clarke investigates both the scientific and religious implications of the sun as a "symbol of the Infinite" (p. 72) in Browning's poetry. Clarke points out that the theory of evolution sees the sun as the original mass from which all else has spring and that "Browning carries on the philosophy of evolution into the spiritual realm where the sun once worshipped as God becomes the fitting symbol of the source of the soul" (p. 72).


Fisher attempts to show that, for Browning, "the theory of evolution . . . does not conflict with the interests of morality and religion" (p. 536) because Browning places the emphasis on the end--ultimately the participation in the divine nature--rather than on the beginning of man's evolutionary progression.

In Inge's brief mention of Browning, the poet's "mysticism" is explained as "the Divine in man" (p. 318) which is experienced in human love.


Of the three writers Ingraham discusses, Browning is seen as being the most positive about immortality. His "absolute confidence of immortality has nought of doubt or cloud. So sure is he of the soul's great future that for him the present, not the hereafter, is 'life's dream'" (p. 365).


Bannister focuses on the problem of evil in his discussion of Browning's religion. The poet, says Bannister, justifies evil in two ways: "If evil did not exist, man could not develop his best. Nay, more, if there had been no evil, even God could not have shown us His best [through the incarnation]" (p. 214). Bannister concludes by emphasizing the importance of love for Browning: "... human love is one and the same thing
with God's love, and only thus can man know anything of God" (p. 216).

Bradford, Amory H. *Spiritual Lessons from the Brownings.*

New York: Crowell, [1900].

This short (38 page) discussion of the Brownings' religion focuses on the importance of Christ to each of the Brownings: the incarnation was the only true and adequate revelation of God to man.


Carpenter stands opposed to those who would make Browning a mere thinker, philosopher, or theologian. But Carpenter does nonetheless recognize the religious element in Browning's poetry. The poet is pictured as looking for God in the mundane realities of life rather than in theory and speculation; thus Browning affirms this world and this life: "... the best revealer of life's mysteries is life lived, always believing that there is good here and now, and that the best is yet to come" (p. 223). Christ, who is divine love incarnate, is the one who makes it possible for man to find God in this world--God has not kept himself aloof. That is why
Browning finds the figure of Christ so appealing and why the theme of incarnation so pervades his poetry.

Kassner, Rudolf. "Robert Browning. Abenteurer und Cultur."

Kassner refers to Browning and some of his characters as "adventurers" who long for a Platonic ideal in the same way earlier mystics sought Christ as the bridegroom of their souls:

Sie sind tief religiös diese Menschen, und ihr Leben erscheint ein Abenteuer in Auftrage eines Gottes, ein Erlöstwerden durch irgend etwas, ein Feiern des Augenblickes, ein Suchen nach Sternen.

(These people are profoundly religious, and their life appears as an adventure at the behest of a God, the art of becoming redeemed by something, a celebration of the moment, a search for the stars/ (p. 238).


This is a book of notes, hints, suggestions, assignments—all devised to help the individual reader master Browning's poems. A whole chapter ("Evolution of Religion," pp. 218-52) is devoted to the religious poetry.

Rosedale, H. G. "The Religious Conception of the Poets from

Rosedale gives Browning credit for approaching the realities of sin and evil head-on in a way that Tennyson, for one, was incapable of. To Rosedale "it seems . . . that Browning has given us a truer light on the Gospel message than any before him. He has explored the recesses of hell and found God there also" (p. 151).

But Browning is no Theist, says Rosedale. A mere belief in God does not penetrate "the mystery of evil, pain, sin, and death" (p. 154); for that one must have Christ and his atoning sacrifice. So Rosedale asserts that Browning's repeated poetic references to Christ prove the poet's Christianity, though he indicates it is not a strictly orthodox Christianity. Rosedale concludes by applauding Browning's inspiring, positive message to his contemporaries.


In this well-known and influential essay (the frequent allusions to it even today indicate that it still makes ripples in the widening pond of Browning criticism) Santayana, the idealist, does battle with Browning, the realist. Browning and Whitman are coupled together in their barbaric poetic practice. Neither knows, says Santayana, the restraint, the dignity, the discipline necessary for proper poetry. And what characterizes Browning's poetry also marks his religion, says Santayana: it is basically irrational, lusty, impulsive, and uncivilized. It may recognize the power of love but not the idealized love of true Christianity.

In Browning this religion takes the name of Christianity, and identifies itself with one or two Christian ideas arbitrarily selected; but at heart it has more affinity to the worship of Thor or of Odin than to the religion of the Cross. The zest of life becomes a cosmic emotion; we lump the whole together and cry, "Hurrah for the Universe!" A faith which is thus a pure matter of lustiness and inebriation rises and falls, attracts or repels, with the ebb and flow of the mood from which it springs. It is invincible because unseizable; it is as safe from refutation as it is rebellious to embodiment. But it cannot enlighten or correct the passions on which it feeds (pp. 206-7).
This thoughtful and impressive essay is, in large part, an answer to Henry Jones's famous book on Browning (1891). White argues against the "agnosticism" that Jones attributes to Browning (an agnosticism that arises, says Jones, because Browning does not recognize the possibility of positive, rational knowledge in important spiritual matters). White corrects Jones in this way:

A natural interpretation of Browning, if we start without any preconceived notions, would simply be that he values the message of the heart more than that of the head; and not that the head can bear us no message, and serves us only by failing in its proper function (p. 430).


After establishing that Browning's belief in and understanding of God is based on intuition more than it is on reason and/or revelation, Pigou then suggests what, for Browning, are God's prime attributes: power, wisdom, and love. The most important of these is love. This contention leads Pigou directly into a discussion of Browning and Christianity because "the doctrine of divine love . . . constitutes, perhaps, the most fundamental tenet of Christian theology" (p. 32). Pigou
concludes, after references to several poems, that "on the whole, the evidence of the poet's writings lends support to the view that, for practical purposes, he accepted the main doctrines of Christianity" (p. 43). With that not-very-startling conclusion, Pigou goes on to discuss in separate chapters the following religious topics in Browning: "Optimism," "Immortality," "God's End for Man," "Progress," "The Illusory Character of Evil," and "Ethics."


In this review-article discussing Santayana's then recent attack on Browning, Woodard focuses on the contrasting viewpoints of the two writers: Browning's optimism vs. Santayana's pessimism.


This early study is more than a mere handbook and more than mere bardolatry; thus it is set apart from many publications by Brooke's contemporaries. Throughout the book Brooke makes observations on--without devoting undue attention to--the religious aspects and
themes of Browning's work. In discussing Pauline and Paracelsus Brooke shows Browning introducing a notion as traditional as original sin:

... the foundation of Browning's theory [of man's imperfection but ultimate perfectibility] is a kind of Original Sin in us, a natural defectiveness deliberately imposed on us by God, which prevents us from attaining any absolute success on earth. And this defectiveness of nature is met by the truth, which, while we aspire, we know—that God will fulfil all noble desire in a life to come (p. 118).

God's—and man's—love is seen as the power capable of moving man toward this ultimate perfection. But the ambivalence of Browning's views is suggested in the following passage:

Browning's position, then, is a combination of the romantic and classical, of the Christian and ethical, of the imaginative and scientific views of human life; of the temper which says, "Here only is our life, here only our concern," and that which says, "Not here, but hereafter is our life." "Here, and hereafter," answered Browning. "Live within earth's limits with all your force; never give in, fight on; but always transcend your fullest action in aspiration, faith, and love" (p. 218).

The strength of this book is that Brooke does not make Browning into a preacher, nor does he use the poet as a platform from which to launch his own preaching. Brooke, compared to some of his contemporaries, is sensible, even-handed, and objective in dealing with his subject, and especially so when discussing the poems and their religious implications.

There is nothing original or unconventional at all in this account of Browning's religious position. The observations on Browning's notions of God and Christ and on his optimism and his emphasis on love—all have been heard before.


Mellone claims that Browning based his religion upon experience—or work—rather than intellect:

Browning's main thought is, the value of work—that is, effort and energy of spirit—in deepening experience and so affording new data for knowledge. His appeal is to the completest possible human experience tested and interpreted by Work,—active productive energy of spirit is the way to the meaning of things (p. 254).

This emphasis on work puts evil in a unique light: it is a force which necessitates spiritual work in man, and thus it helps lead man ultimately to spiritual growth:

The growth of goodness is positively impossible without conflict with evil. Evil is "stuff for transmuting"; it exists in order that goodness may grow in strength by overcoming and transforming the evil (p. 287).
Browning's gospel of work, viewed from Mellone's perspective, seems to echo Carlyle's very similar doctrine.

Watters, Caroline A. "Elements of Hebrew Literature in Browning's 'Saul.'" Methodist Review, 84 (1902), 219-22.

Watters shows how Browning's poem "embodies the feelings, the manner of thinking, the life of the people of those days [of Hebrew prophets and kings], the spiritual gladness of the Psalms, and the grandeur of the prophecies" (p. 219).


Among Browning's early admirers Chesterton is distinguished by the fact that he took more seriously than did many others the purely literary qualities of the poetry. Whereas a significant number of critics focused simply on Browning's thought--choosing to excuse or ignore a technique or style that caused them difficulty, such as the "grotesque"--Chesterton explored the grotesque at some length and found in this quality reason for praise rather than puzzlement or criticism. Thus
Chesterton respects Browning as more than just a philosopher or a poet of religion. But that is not to say that Chesterton ignores or discounts the religious elements in Browning's poetry. Chesterton argues that Browning's optimism is based on two notions: first, the "imperfection of man" (p. 177)--therein lies the implication that man can and will ultimately perfect or complete himself; second, the "imperfection of God" (p. 178)--therein lies the quality that allowed God to limit himself through the incarnation, to identify with man in the figure of Christ. For Chesterton, Browning's optimism is no facile thing: "There is no pessimism, however stern, that is so stern as this optimism, it is as merciless as the mercy of God" (p. 189).

Chesterton's opinion of Browning is strongly opposed to--and a partial response to--the opinions earlier (1900) submitted by Santayana. Santayana's diatribe against Browning was based on grounds of idealism: the eccentricities, the grotesqueries, the rough edges, the barbarisms of Browning's verse failed to portray the world according to Santayana's ideal picture of it, so the poetry was vehemently condemned. But Chesterton's stance is that of a realist. He admires the realism of Browning's poetic portrayals; and he also sympathizes with the religious notions--barbaric as they may have seemed to

Hutton early states the purpose of this book, a purpose that sounds typical of many of Browning's admirers around the turn of the century:

> When one uses the phrase, "Guidance from Robert Browning in matters of faith," he means and is understood to mean, the help which in his works generally Browning gives to those who feel the difficulty of believing. He means the light which Browning sheds upon the peculiar questions of our time, his interpretation of those facts in the human situation which seem inconsistent with the Sovereignty of a Just and Loving God. And above every other distinction, that is Browning's value for us. He is the great Apologist of these last days, the man of God to our peculiar age (pp. 18-19).


Machen attempts successfully to show Browning's knowledge of and reliance on scripture, especially in *The Ring and the Book*:

> . . . no modern poet has manifested such intimate acquaintance with the Bible as Robert Browning. His writings are thoroughly interpenetrated by its spirit, and in many of his poems a Scriptural
quotation or allusion may be found on almost every page (pp. 1-2).

But Machen's own religious position is oppressively pious and so, unfortunately, is the portrait of Browning she creates. The ambiguities of Browning's faith are brushed aside and we are left with a poet who had a "faith by which he lived his noble life, 'loving one woman only,' doing justly, and walking humbly with his God" (p. 80).

The book is in two parts: the first (pp. 1-80) is an introductory essay on the topic; the second (pp. 83-267) is a long list of quotes from The Ring and the Book paired with their corresponding biblical passages.


Robertson's discussion of the poet amounts to a rather severe attack on Browning's religious thought. Robertson questions Browning's notion that sin and evil are not real; and he objects to Browning's conception of immortality, calling it a "quasi-idea of the perpetual expansion of finite intelligence toward infinity" (p. 154). So Browning's unorthodox Christianity and those who adhere to it receive generally harsh treatment from Robertson: "the very acceptance by Christians of
Browning's quasi-concrete theology is an admission of the breakdown of their own" (p. 157).


This handbook combines a biographical narrative with brief comments on and summaries of most of the poems. Dowden places no great emphasis on Browning as a religious poet and--unlike many of his contemporaries--he is quite objective and restrained in discussing and assessing Browning and his work. Dowden does recognize, however, that religious themes and concerns play a significant role in the poetry and he gives them comment where comment is due. Browning, says Dowden, is the product of two strains: romanticism and Puritanism. "He has the strenuous moral force of Puritanism, but he is wholly free from asceticism . . . [especially] the vicious asceticism of the intellect which calls itself scientific . . ." (pp. 389, 391). So Browning's religious position is seen by Dowden as embracing more of life than just the rational or the factual. It embraces passion, it embraces evil--thus Browning's optimism--and, above all, it embraces mankind in all his variety. "His chief interest . . . was in man" (p. 393). Among
those poems receiving special attention are many whose explicit focus is on religious themes (e.g., Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, "Cleon," "Saul," "Karshish," Ferishtah's Fancies).


Flew, like many of his contemporaries, is attracted to Browning the religious poet because his faith has "a clear, distinct, ringing voice . . . [which] inspires faith in the more timid and halting of his fellows around him" (pp. 7-8). The approach of this book suggests that Browning is as much a systematic theologian as he is a poet: separate chapters are devoted to such doctrinal matters as God, Jesus Christ, man, the soul, faith, hope, love, death, and immortality.


In the chapter which concentrates on Browning, Parrott calls Browning a Christian and demonstrates, amidst Browning's religious convictions, the centrality
of Christ as God's revelation of divine love to man.


Phelps discusses the sense of joy which pervades much of Browning's poetry. She says that this joy is not a result of hedonism (though she does recognize Browning's appreciation of the material elements of this life), nor does it stem from stoicism or asceticism. Rather, it arises from Browning's optimism, and from his belief in Christianity, human progress, and immortality. It is a joy strong enough to sustain itself despite "the sin, sorrow and misery of life" (p. 103).


In discussing Browning's religion, Temple focuses on Browning's notion of the incarnation:

... for Browning the climax of history, the crown of philosophy, and the consummation of poetry is unquestionably the Incarnation... [The Incarnation] is no solitary truth struggling for supremacy with other truths--it is itself the sum total of all truths... (pp. 51-52).

The title of this article is inaccurate. Instead of discussing in any rigorous way Browning's influence, Aked simply mentions several aspects and themes of the poetry that seem to provide good sermon material for fellow ministers.


This interesting discussion tries to vindicate Bishop Blougram and to explain his arguments in terms of William James's notion, "the will to believe":

Professor James's essay by the above name["Will to Believe"] might have been written with the direct purpose of justifying Bishop Blougram, for the essay repeats the line of argument in the poem, and there is often a curious identity of statement (p. 137).


Herford has divided his book into two parts: Part I, "Browning's Life and Work"; Part II, "Browning's Mind and Art." Part I contains a section entitled "Poems of Religion" in which Herford suggests that Browning's
Christianity should always be seen in the shadow of Shelley's early influence:

"The revelation of God in Christ" was for [Browning] the consummate example of that union of divine love with the world . . . which Shelley had contemplated in the radiant glow of his poetry. . . . Shelley had mistaken "Churchdom" for Christianity; but he was on the way, Browning was convinced, to become a Christian himself. "I shall say what I think,—had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians" (p. 110).

Herford attributes to Elizabeth's influence Browning's preoccupation with religious themes in the poetry after 1850. The religious poems from Men and Women are treated in this section of Herford's book.

In Part II Herford discusses Browning's religion and thought in more general terms; the poetry is seen as pervasively religious in its treatment and understanding of man:

Of all the poets of the century he had the clearest and most confident vision of the working of God in the world, the most buoyant faith in the divine origin and destiny of man. Half his poetry is an effort to express, in endless variety of iteration, the nearness of God, to unravel the tangled circumstances of human life, and disclose everywhere infinity emmehed amid the intricacies of the finite (p. 285).

But man is not swallowed up by God, losing his own identity—Browning's unique characters and monologuists show us that "... his theology is double-faced between the pantheistic yearning to find God everywhere and the individualist's resolute maintenance of the autonomy of man" (p. 296).
Benn discerns in the development of Browning's religious ideas a movement away from Christianity. This movement is attributed to Browning's reaction against any scheme of rewards and punishments after death; Benn sees such a reaction in La Saisiaz about which poem he says, "He who could so write had ceased to be a Christian" (p. 283).


For Coultas "Saul" brings together many of the religious themes and opinions that are typically connected with Browning's poetry: "This remarkable poem affords us a comprehensive study of Browning's view of nature, of man, and of God" (p. 787).


Hellings suggests that religious convictions or positions evolve through three stages: "... the first is longing; the second, power of receptivity; the third, motive force... Yearning marks the first step;
susceptibility does not exist without it; while energy can result only from both" (p. 113). After explaining the stages, Hellings goes on to discuss three of Browning's poems ("Cleon," "Saul," and "Rabbi Ben Ezra") as marking these successive steps in the evolution of religion.


Inge begins by justifying his designation of Browning as a mystic: "We may rightly call him a mystic, in virtue of his profound belief in a perfect spiritual world, in which all broken fragments are made whole, all riddles solved, and all legitimate hopes satisfied" (p. 207). Love is the key to this mystical vision: "Browning's constitutive principle is Love. Love and reciprocity of life are the condition and necessary expression of human expression" (p. 219). But the love is not simple Christian charity but sexual love because this latter type of love "issues in a communion of souls in which each makes the other see 'new depths of the divine'" (p. 220). Thus Browning's mysticism does not rule out the flesh or worldly experience. Inge pictures mystics like Browning as the only genuine empiricists in
religion; they offer an alternative to "the religions of authority [which] are tottering to their fall . . ." (p. 238).


Naish's book contains lectures on "five poems chosen as illustrative or explanatory of Browning's attitude towards what we have designated dogmatic religion" (p. 7). The poems are "Caliban," "Cleon," "Bishop Blougram," Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, and La Saisiaz (each poem is the subject of a full lecture except for Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day which is the subject of three lectures). Naish further elaborates her purpose in introductory comments:

The assertion "I believe in God and Truth and Love," expressed through the medium of the lover of Pauline, finds its echo in the more direct personal assertion of the concluding lines of La Saisiaz, "He believed in Soul, was very sure of God." This was the irreducible minimum of Browning's creed. How much more he held as absolute, soul-satisfying truth it is the design of this and the six following lectures to determine (p. 5).

After discussing the five chosen poems, then, what does Naish add to Browning's creed that extends beyond this "irreducible minimum"? The answer: not very much. Naish is very hesitant to saddle Browning's religion with any
specific dogmas or doctrines. For example, this is as far as she goes in expressing Browning's position on the incarnation:

Whilst extreme caution is necessary in dealing with a matter in which the student is too readily tempted to "find what he desires to find," the historical and logical necessity for an Incarnation was, as we have seen, so favourite a theme with Browning for dramatic treatment, that it is well nigh impossible to dissociate the personal interest (p. 202).

So Naish's conclusions leave Browning quite free from dogmatic restrictions in his religion. A recognition of "the continuity of life" (p. 203) governs his outlook more than does the strict guidance of formal religion.

For Naish, Browning realized that in proportion as satisfaction is found in formula does faith lose its life-giving power. Progress being the law of life, he would, therefore, enforce upon no man as binding formulae of which the comparative inelasticity might tend to fetter mental or spiritual development. On the contrary, he would have the seeker after Truth prepared to relinquish in due time definitions once essential, since threatening to become restrictive to growth. Before all things, is to be avoided the danger of resting on that which is not Truth itself, but merely a necessary introduction to the Truth (p. 205).

Triggs, Oscar Lovell. "In Re Caliban." Poet-Lore, 17 (1906), 76-86.

Triggs contends that Browning's poem is not a satire, "for Browning in all his conceptions is as anthropomorphemic as Caliban. For him God is Love simply because love exists in the heart of man. God's love is
man's love infinitely extended" (p. 79). Browning's purpose in the poem, then, says Triggs, is to dramatize a given savage at a certain stage of his evolution, characterizing him in the entirety of his being in emotional, esthetic, moral, and intellectual aspects, emphasizing in especial his religious musings and sentiments for the purpose of exhibiting the origin of some modern derivative phases of the religious life (p. 79).


This article serves primarily as a refutation of Benn's view (1906) that Browning abandoned his Christian stance later in his life. Allison claims Browning remained a Christian to the end. In the process of answering Benn, Allison focuses on the religious ideas of Browning in five separate areas: "God," "Christ," "Man," "Sin," and "Things to Come."

Addressing himself to a French audience which has largely ignored the work of Browning, or at least the religious and philosophic aspects of the poet, Berger attempts to catalogue and treat the various religious ideas found in Browning's works and to articulate, as far as possible, the poet's creed. Some of the areas discussed are the church authorities, both Catholic and Protestant; the role of science, including evolution and spiritualism; optimism and the incarnation; present life and immortality. Although Browning might favor the Protestant churches, particularly the non-conformist ones, Berger sees the poet as essentially a neutral voice in the Catholic-Protestant war. Without committing himself to any particular formal doctrine, he has shown for each the same sympathy. And, while holding no church authorities sacred, his tolerance of any sincere religious thought is deep. His respect for the Catholic Church exists along with his awareness of its weaknesses, particularly those of its clerics. This view by a Catholic, that Browning is not prejudiced against the Catholic Church, is a noteworthy one.


This article is a discussion of Browning's "Christmas-
Eve." Geissinger sees the poem as "a keen criticism of our current Christianity . . . which ever pushes non-essentials to the fore, which speaks with arrogance and dogmatism . . ." (p. 236). The answer, to offset liberal Christian thinking, is a new focus on Christ as God incarnate; it is here that a revitalization of Christianity lies. "The poem," concludes Geissinger, "is a personal testimony to the sufficiency of Christ . . ." (p. 241).


Gunsaulus explains and defends Browning's supposed anti-rationalism in a unique way. First, he says "our so-called rationalism has largely been the triumph of unreason" (p. 191); then Gunsaulus claims, contrary to a well-established point of view, that

Browning saves the intellect, grants it full scope, and achieves for it its surest successes, by relieving it from dominating the heart and will in the search for truth; he leads it to work together with them--one soul,--one intellect, sensibilities and will--seeking truth (p. 192).

Finally Gunsaulus treats Browning's adherence to Christianity as a natural outgrowth of the poet's attempt, not to throw out reason, but rather to put reason in its proper place:
Christianity is the reasserting and reestablishing of faith as the organ of knowledge and as the method of life. What was the fall of man, but the unreasoning triumph of reason in the soul of man? The serpent which tempted to sin was rationalism, charming but stinging (p. 197).


In his chapter on Browning, Payne calls upon both Royce (Boston BSP) and Jones (1891) to illuminate Browning's religious ideas. Payne contributes nothing new himself in this area.


In his The Main Tendencies of Victorian Poetry. London: Simpkin, 1907, pp. 3-41.

The central elements in Browning's optimism are seen to be, not surprisingly, closely connected with his religious views and, in particular, his notion of love:

The Key to Browning's attitude towards life in general is to be found in his conception of love. His hope in God and his belief in immortality were intimately connected with his principle that love is the foundation of the universe and its most important fact (p. 20).

Spurgeon, Caroline F. E. "Mysticism in English Poetry."

Quarterly Review, 207 (1907), 427-459. Rpt. and expanded
Spurgeon's first observations are these:

Browning is a seer, and preeminently a mystic. ... We see at once that the main tenet of Browning's belief is identical with what is the characteristic of mysticism—unity under diversity at the centre of all existence (p. 436).

From "this belief in unity," says Spurgeon, "There follows, as with all mystics, the absolute belief in the potential divinity of man, which permeates all Browning's thought. . . ." (p. 437). Next Spurgeon notes the centrality of love in Browning's thinking—it is "the sublimest conception possible to man" (p. 438); here she suggests a strong link between Browning and the German mystic, Meister Eckhart. Concluding statements by Spurgeon focus on Browning's reconciliation of progress and pain or evil:

It is this trust in unending progress, based on the consciousness of present failure, which is peculiarly inspiring in Browning's thought, and it is essentially mystical. Instead of shrinking from pain, the mystic prays for it; for, properly met, it means growth (p. 441).


This article compares Shelley's The Cenci and Browning's The Ring and the Book, focusing particularly on the two heroines, Beatrice and Pompilia. Because
Browning's poem and heroine are shaped by a Christian vision, Story argues, they are immensely richer and more satisfying than the corresponding creations of the atheist Shelley.

Beautiful natural and moral traits divorced from living faith in God, cannot produce the highest type of literature, cannot interpret the real tragedies of life for a Christian age, cannot best interpret either the bad or the good, cannot picture an ideal personality (p. 745).


In this chapter Clarke quotes in their entirety "Bishop Blougram," *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, and "Bernard de Mandeville." What little space is left over for discussion of these poems is devoted to the intellectual and religious ferment which is an important background to the works. Bishop Wiseman (Browning's model for Blougram) is examined at some length.


In examining the poetry of Browning written after he came under the influence of Elizabeth in his so-called "middle period" (poems such as *Christmas-Eve and Easter-
Day, "Karshish," "Cleon," "Saul"), Cunliffe concludes that "there can be no question that . . . Browning takes a more definite stand on religious matters than he took in earlier or later work" (p. 178). Cunliffe also suggests, more specifically, that Browning "undoubtedly . . . obtained a clearer conception of the 'revelation of God in Christ'" from Elizabeth because she "regarded [this revelation] as the central doctrine of the Christian faith" (p. 178).

Curry, S. S. "Browning's 'Caliban' and 'Saul.'" *Arena*, 40 (1908), 47-51.

Curry contrasts the two notions of God set forth in these two poems:

Out of Caliban's sluggish and sensual inactivity, out of his degraded envies and hates, he creates God. David, out of the heart of his aspirations and ideals, the dreams that he had had "alone with his sheep," at last, out of his own love and desire to help this man [Saul], rises to the sublime heights, and dares to conceive a Deity that transcends, in his own highest conception, his own love and goodness (p. 49).


Flower, calling "Rabbi Ben Ezra" "one of the greatest short religious poems in our language," sees the poem as a comment on man's spiritual progress:
When there is doubt there is life and potential growth. From the doubt and the dream, the pondering and the aspiration, man moves from the brute plane Godward. . . . Doubt stirs the stagnant waters of ignorance and leads to inquiry, to investigation --the search for truth (p. 335).


Bailey goes against the thinking that sees Browning's notion of love as a close ally of an elevated religious and spiritual position:

Browning's conception of love, as a whole, is often marked by a sensuousness which sometimes approaches dangerously near to the barriers of sensuality, and not seldom by an absence of that noble sweetness which makes for high spirituality. . . . Love as treated in the lyrical poems . . . is too often largely wanting in that spirituality which must mark the love that is most like what gains God's preference (p. 284).


A common interpretation of "Karshish" sees Browning implying that there must be an appreciation of the physical, temporal aspects of life, "that life is injured by being too spiritual" (p. 264). Crawford argues against this position, asserting instead that

the poem really is an arraignment of the mere scientific view, that disdains spiritual conditions and
causes, and ignores spiritual phenomena, and by implication is a tremendous plea for the reality of the spiritual (p. 265).

No matter how much Browning may have relished this physical world and this physical life, Crawford concludes, "Among English poets he takes, perhaps, the most transcendental view of the world and of human life" (p. 269).


Dunne discusses Browning's views of human progress, evil, and immortality and concludes that these views make the poet an optimist but also a somewhat unorthodox Christian:

Browning's optimism appears to be built on the thesis that all things are good; whereas the orthodox Christian's optimism flows from the conviction that, in spite of evil, all things work together for good (p. 628).


In the conclusion to his treatment of Browning's poem, Hornbrooke emphatically cautions readers against becoming too absorbed in its spiritual and religious
elements: "the poet is not concerned with moral and religious teaching" (p. 213). In answer to commentators like Berdoe and Orr who try to define precisely Browning's own spiritual stance, Hornbrooke states:

\[\ldots\] whatever he was as an individual, he was in his poetry neither an agnostic nor an orthodox believer. He was too much a poet for that. He speaks for his characters, not for himself, and it is difficult to find a poem in which we can feel sure that he utters his own conviction (p. 214).

Hornbrooke does grant the possibility, though, that if any character in The Ring and the Book speaks for Browning it is the Pope. But more important than any religious "lesson" that comes from the mouths of the poem's characters is the lesson that is part of the very "atmosphere" of the poem. The Ring and the Book pictures Christian institutions as being largely empty or perverse--they are not shaped by true Christian beliefs or imperatives. What is called by much of the world Christian, is not truly Christian at all--otherwise the violence and evil that are part of this story would have encountered greater resistance and less complacency.

Jones, Henry. "The Idealism of Wordsworth and Browning."

In his Idealism as a Practical Creed. Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1909, pp. 139-92.

In his chapter on Wordsworth and Browning, Jones shows that, for these two poets, Nature and Love,
respectively, are the vehicles leading to a religious experience, to a spiritual or "ideal" realm. Of Browning's notion of love Jones says:

Many poets . . . have sung of love, some of them perhaps with more exquisite utterance and lighter grace than Browning. But there is a respect in which Browning stands alone. He has given to love a moral significance, a place and power amongst the elemental conditions of man's nature and destiny; and he has given it a religious and metaphysical depth of meaning, which, I believe, are without example in any other poet (p. 190).


Chapman treats, in this chapter of his book, the religious kinship of Tennyson and Browning. Both poets reflect some of the religious doubts, problems, and anxieties of the age; and, in dealing with these phenomena, they both use as resources the Christian tradition and the Christian scriptures, even though these "twin brethren" do not follow the prescriptions found therein in an orthodox way.

In addition to considering throughout the biography the religious backgrounds and themes of a number of poems, the authors also devote several pages of their conclusion to a summary statement on Browning's religious position. It is emphasized that Browning was indeed a Christian, though of an undogmatic sort; it is also pointed out that his religious views were wide enough to encompass, without great disturbance to his religious life, some of the new discoveries, ideas, and theories of his age—such as evolution.


Hoover discusses the poem to show Browning's "equal reverence" (p. 119) for both the natural and spiritual as revealers of God.


In his brief treatment of Browning's religion, Walker indicates how attuned the poet was to the religious issues and controversies of his day; specific poems are cited to illustrate this awareness.

Early on in his essay Crawford asserts that Browning has made Caliban "a mouthpiece for his own criticisms on contemporary theology" (p. 738). "Natural" theology—which is what Caliban practices—and the anthropomorphic God it inevitably produces are hardly admired by Browning.

Browning makes Caliban a degraded modern, and his religion a caricature of certain contemporary English and European types. . . . The poem, then, is a protest against certain inadequate views of God held by many persons. It is a satire on certain low, unspiritual views that in the end are also immoral (pp. 740-41).

Caliban also practices something Crawford calls "regal" theology; the poem satirizes that too because it "consists chiefly in regarding God as arbitrary Power" (p. 743). The poem does not present Browning's own more accurate notion of God, but Crawford suggests that this image of God springs from the poet's "inner life of the spirit" and is characterized by "Love" and "goodness" (p. 744)—such a deity stands in clear contrast to Caliban's.

In the segment of this book devoted to Browning, Gingerich calls him a transcendentalist, not a mystic: the former can articulate his experience, the latter cannot. Gingerich goes on to explain Browning's religious stance in terms that are hardly original with this study:

Browning's religion was neither traditional nor orthodox. It was highly individualistic. . . . He had no deep sense of sin and of the necessity of redemption, which plays such an important part in traditional and orthodox Christianity. But he felt the deepest affinity with the person of Christ . . . (pp. 228-29).


Despite Hickey's unfortunate title and the emphasis placed by her article on the edifying nature of Browning's poetry, she makes some interesting observations on the poet as a religious writer. She calls Browning a seer rather than a mystic and explains the difference between the two thus: "The seer may see that love is the greatest of all, as the inclusion of all: but it is the mystic who knows its 'intolerable beatitude'" (p. 279). Browning, then, does not actually partake of all the spiritual phenomena he perceives. He is more objective than subjective as he writes of the spiritual truths that govern the universe.
Hickey, Emily H. "A Study of Browning's 'Saul.'" Catholic World, 94 (1911), 320-36.

This is not so much a critical study of "Saul" as it is an appreciation of it—an appreciation, interrupted by many long quotations from the poem, of "the great verities of Christianity" (p. 320) presented in the work. Hickey approaches the poem as though it were a piece of music:

We can hear the resonant joy of life . . . we can hear the beat of high spiritual emotion, of a love that knows the depth of reverent admiration, and of a pity no less reverent and deep; and we have the clear ring of the faith that speaks of restoration, the voice of the faith that sees how God's redemption must come out of man's necessity. The music, beautiful throughout, rises, as the subject rises to the great revelation of Incarnate God, into what can be given no name lower than that of sublimity (p. 320).


Lomax concentrates on the differing reactions of Karshish and Cleon to the Christ story:

Browning's conception is a poetic attempt to show the way the Christ story would appeal to two civilizations, the Arabian [Karshish] and the Greek [Cleon]; to two natures, the scientific and the purely reflective; to two casts of mind, the practical and the theoretical or philosophical; to two temperaments, the emotional and the serenely cold. Karshish arrived at truth by analysis, Cleon by synthesis. In other words, one followed deductive philosophy, the other, inductive; one particularized, the other generalized. One worshipped utility, the other beauty (p. 449).

Clarke compares Browning's "religious robustness" with Tennyson's "fainter manner" (p. 126). Browning is portrayed as relishing the battle with evil as well as the other conflicts inherent in the religious life. Browning's optimism lends him this strength.


The most pertinent chapters of this book are the first and last, entitled "The Battle of Mind and Spirit" and "Prophetic Visions." Clarke places Browning amidst "the battle of mind and spirit" that characterized his century. She describes him as remaining firm despite this raging battle, insisting that the poet comprehends "a transcendent truth which reaches him through some other avenue than that of the mind" (p. 44); thus Clarke suggests the key role of intuition in Browning's firm grasp of the truth. But dependence on intuition fails to make Browning shut his eyes to controversial religious developments of his era. In fact, says Clarke, many of Browning's poems (such as Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, "Saul," Karshish," "A Death in the Desert," "Bishop Blougram," "Caliban") show the poet deliberately
confronting issues raised by religious thinkers like Strauss and Schleiermacher. And where is Browning's position in all this controversy? Clarke tells us that, "though nowhere is dogmatic truth asserted with positiveness, everywhere we feel a mystic sympathy with the moving power of religious aspiration . . ." (p. 76).

Thus Browning finds his own answers not in rationalism or dogmatism but in sympathy with his aspiring characters, and in intuitional and mystical comprehension of truth.


Each of these essays compares Browning's religious views with those of the mentioned thinker or writer. With Butler Browning shares the conviction that life on earth is a time of "probation," "education," and "discipline" and that the progress resulting therefrom extends into a future life where man is finally and fully realized and perfected. Browning shares with Montaigne the conviction that religious truths and mysteries are "beyond the above reason" (p. 220) and are accessible only by faith. But there is one great
difference between the two: Montaigne's faith is orthodox Roman Catholicism, whereas Browning arrives at no definite creed at all to describe his faith. And finally, Collins discusses the unorthodox Christianity shared by Browning and Lessing: for them there was an "increasing subordination of the accidents of Christianity to its essence" (p. 234).


Foster sees Browning as a modern-day descendant of the Old Testament line of prophets:

Browning had just as emphatically a Message to deliver to the men and women of his age, and for that matter, as was also the case with the Hebrew Prophets, to all succeeding ages—a message of Life, of Hope, of Spiritual Realities; a message of the harmonies and discords, of the day-dawn of faith after the midnight of despair, of the beauty of righteousness after the unloveliness of sin, of the assurance of victory after the agony of defeat; a message that shall irradiate life, give courage to the faint-hearted, and sustain with a vision of glorious hope all storm-tossed, tried, and tempted souls (p. 5).

Foster cites "two conspicuous elements" (p. 9) that help shape the prophetic message of the poet: "robust manliness," and "buoyant faith." The prophecy of Browning is explored in chapters on such poems as "Rabbi Ben Ezra" ("Life and Death"), "Cleon" ("Imperfection"), "Abt Vogler" ("The Heavenly Vision"), "Saul" ("The
Coming of Christ"), and "A Death in the Desert" ("Faith and Sight").


Hind acknowledges in a prefatory note that his book contains little that is original; what he presents is the often-outlined profile of Browning as an optimistic Christian poet who does battle against the scientific, secular, pessimistic notions of his age. What distinguished Browning, says Hind, were his intertwined beliefs in Christianity and in man himself: "... the secret of Browning's faith in humanity was his belief in the saving power of Christ. He was more than a great poet, he was a great Christian" (p. 12).

Hodges, George. "Browning as a Poet of Religion." _Living Church,_ 47 (1912), 57-60.

Hodges refuses to call Browning either a prophet or a preacher; there is too much detachment or aloofness in his treatment of religion for him to warrant either of those labels. But Browning's poetry nonetheless communicates a positive feeling about life and the world, and this optimistic sense Hodge calls religious:

Thus Browning's poetry is a contribution to religion because it is so full of faith—faith, not in this
doctrine or in that, but in the general overmastering goodness of the universe. . . . Browning, then, contributes to religion an insistence on the doctrine of the good world. In the face of asceticism . . . indifference . . . worldliness, he maintains that the world "means intensely and means good" (p. 59-60).


Sim's biographical study (the first volume of two, the second published in 1924) touches on aspects of Browning's youthful religious experience and comments occasionally on religious elements—especially the mysticism—in the early poetry.


This commentator notes that, even though Browning accepts Christ's divinity and believes in immortality, he has clearly no Hell or Purgatory in his theology, and is obviously a sceptic as to miracles or Scriptural inspiration: so that, in short, his interpretation of Christianity is, to the eyes of a Catholic, less veracious than comfortable, and less rational than mystical and emotional (p. 119).

J. B. goes on to illustrate, with reference to a number of poems, Browning's contempt for the creed of the Catholic Church. And the poet's lack of originality is pointed out too: "He is well supplied with that stock ammunition which for centuries has served the fond
adventurers that have battered incessantly at the citadel of Rome. But we fear he did not understand what he attacked" (p. 130). It is clear that a certain defensiveness and narrowness shape the opinion of this commentator in discussing this aspect of Browning's work.


In this discussion of "Bishop Blougram's Apology" Geissinger says that Browning sympathizes fully with neither Gigadibs, the doubter, nor Bishop Blougram, the pragmatic believer. Each is used by the poet merely to dispatch the other: "How weak is Gigadibs; how poor the bishop" (p. 202). The positive ideal set forth in the poem itself, says Geissinger, is the man of faith whom Blougram describes:

There are exceptional
And privileged great natures that dwarf mine
...such men
Carry the fire; all things grow warm to them;
Their drugget's worth my purple. They beat me.

Hearn believes that "every great poet is a great priest" (p. 348). When he turns to Browning, Hearn explains the poet's religious voice in these terms:

... he ... sometimes becomes a poet-priest by virtue of that intense sympathy which he was able to feel and to express even for beliefs that were not his own. If you can understand another person's religion ... and faithfully express it, you virtually preach the boon which is in that religion, whether you believe it or not. Browning could do this (pp. 350-51).

"Rabbi Ben Ezra" becomes Hearn's case in point. This poem, the commentary suggests, shows Browning wearing the hats of both poet and priest as he adopts the religious viewpoint of the Rabbi.


Phelps was probably America's best-known admirer and defender of Browning during the first several decades of the twentieth century; and this book is Phelps's best-known piece of Browning commentary. Throughout the book many of Browning's religious poems are discussed, but the most concentrated treatment of religious themes comes in Phelps's chapter on "Browning's Optimism" (pp. 294-373). "Among all modern thinkers and writers, Browning is the foremost optimist" (p. 294), says Phelps. A necessity for man in attaining this optimistic stance is a realiza-
tion of "Love." But, Phelps asks,

Where then shall we seek it? [Browning's] answer is, in the revelation of God's love through Jesus Christ. . . . Browning's philosophy therefore is purely Christian. The love of God revealed in the Incarnation and in our own ethical natures--our imperfect souls containing here and now the possibilities of infinite development--makes Browning believe this is God's world and we are God's children. He conceives of our life as an eternal one, our existence here being merely probation. . . . Take Christianity out of Browning, and his whole philosophy, with its cheerful outlook, falls to the ground. Of all true English poets, he is the most definitely Christian, the most sure of his ground (pp. 297-98).

Phelps notes an interesting progression in theological conceptions as he reads "Caliban," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," and "A Death in the Desert": "The first is God as an amphibious brute would imagine him: the second is noble Hebrew theism: the third is the Christian God of Love" (p. 327). It is the last conception with which Browning most fully identifies.

Willett, George H. "Browning's 'Saul' and Wesley's 'Wrestling Jacob.'" Methodist Review, 97 (1915), 450-54.

As Willett compares these poems by Browning and Wesley, he reads them autobiographically and declares: "Each poem is the story of how a man, presumably the author, came into a personal consciousness of the divine truth that 'God is Love'' (p. 451). In other words, Willett sees "Saul" as a veiled version of Browning's own conversion experience.
Gordon, George A.  *Aspects of the Infinite Mystery.*

Gordon was a Boston minister who, in this book, essentially preaches a sermon on the themes of "redemption" and "education" using Browning's "Saul" as his text. The intent of the sermon is to try to put the reader in David's place--i.e., as the instrument of Saul's salvation--and thus to inspire the reader to similar evangelistic efforts of his own.

Herman, Edward A. G.  *The Faith of Robert Browning.*

Herman touches very superficially on a number of poems in presenting Browning as a figure of faith and a source of strength in an age of skepticism, materialism, and spiritual weakness.


As Stuntz details, with references to a number of poems, Browning's condemnation of various practices and attitudes in the Catholic Church, one senses that this is actually Stuntz's indictment more than it is Browning's.
voorhees, Edward. "Browning and the Real Christ Jesus."

"A constant faith in the divine immanence, a faith in the nearness of God at all stages of the journey, is prominent in the majority of [Browning's] poems . . ." (p. 232). Thus Voorhees begins his discussion. But this commentator soon sharpens his focus to concentrate on Browning's treatment of God in personalized form--Christ Jesus: "The divinity, the atonement, and the man-compelling force of that life are the engrossing themes of . . . [Browning's] finest poems" (p. 233). Voorhees mentions prominently "A Death in the Desert" and "Saul" as he suggests that Browning's notion of Christ had to withstand the new "dogmatism" of science and logic that had begun to rule his age.

Phelps, William Lyon. "Browning and Christianity."
Methodist Review, 101 (1918), 84-93.

Phelps discusses "Christmas-Eve" and "Gold Hair" as "two pieces where [Browning] makes direct profession of his personal adherence to Christianity" (p. 84).

Powell, John Walker. The Confessions of a Browning Lover.
Powell seems as much interested in counteracting the scientific thinking of the late nineteenth century as he is in explicating Browning's work. In his "Preface" Powell declares that he is a "Browning lover" because Browning taught the "essential truth" of the Christian Church and made those truths stand up to the onslaughts of "the new science." Thus, we have from Powell not a critical discussion of the poems but, rather, "what Browning's poetry means to me" (p. 16). Powell, however, does not see Browning as essentially a philosopher, as do many other commentators during this period who insist that Browning is a religious thinker and teacher; instead Powell appreciates Browning primarily as a poet. Browning, says Powell, was an artist who savored this life and this world--and therein, for Powell, lies the most significant Christian characteristic of the poet. The spiritual teacher "must be a part of the life he would raise to the heights: this is the meaning of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation" (p. 64); and it is what makes Browning for Powell such a compelling exemplar of Christianity. In tone and style the book is too often distractingly subjective and anecdotal; this element makes it difficult for a thoughtful reader to take Powell seriously even when he seems to be presenting a respectable insight into or opinion on Browning.
Browning's distinctive contribution to the doctrine of soul is an emphasis of the truth that the soul's life is to be measured by its aspiration, and that aspiration comes by the kindling power of another—a greater, stronger, higher, better—personality. This is an essential Christian teaching (p. 750).

But, says Semans, it is a teaching that leads to a condemnation of Andrea del Sarto because he is a painter who chooses not to aspire. Andrea is placed before us by Browning, then, as a negative example—in him we are to see the pathetic results of a lack of Christian aspiration.
PART III

1920-1945


Cook's is a very learned and detailed guide to Browning's poem. Because the poem involves religious issues and themes, Cook's commentary inevitably focuses at times on such matters. The most important of such discussions arises in connection with Book X, "The Pope." Here Cook contends that the religious opinions expressed by the prelate are not simply his own but also, by and large, those of Browning himself.

Bates, Margaret H. Browning Critiques. Chicago: Morris Book Shop, 1921.

Midway through this book Bates explicitly poses the question, "Was Browning a Christian?" She then proceeds to answer the question positively while doing "critiques" of such poems as Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, "Holy Cross Day," Karshish," "Bishop Blougram," "Cleon," and "Caliban."

Van Dyke does not offer much that is new. In his chapter on Browning, Van Dyke calls him "the poet of aspiration and endeavor; the prophet of a divine discontent" (p. 269). Browning's religion finds the imperfection of human existence necessary and even glorious because it offers a man promise of something better. This life is a probation and discipline for the divine future prepared for man by God.


Winchester is hardly original as he calls Browning "a great Christian poet . . . because he held all his life, in spite of all the doubts and questions of his age . . . a healthy, robust, hopeful faith in the great essentials of Christianity" (p. 352). "Saul" is cited as "the noblest religious poem of the last half century" (p. 356) because it so dramatically presents the key Christian ideas of divine love and divine incarnation.

This is a book much concerned with the religious, or mystical, vision of Browning. In discussing "Abt Vogler" Burt writes:

Browning will not admit of irremediable failure. Failure is to him the spur which urges to greater efforts. He believes in the Everlasting Yea—the Divine Positive. ... A negative [or evil] Browning seems to say, is a dream, a mirage, a phantasy and yet it is necessary for us, because by it, we become self-conscious and aware of what is, of the real, of the true and of the good (p. 30).

In discussing "The Grammarians' Funeral" Burt observes that to look with [Browning] through the veils of life appeals strongly to that instinct to discover and penetrate into the unknown, which is indigenous in humankind and which is the unconscious expression of the Divinely implanted intuition, that we only partially and temporally belong to this world in which we have our being ... (p. 41).

Burt cites Inge (1906) and Sim (1912) to corroborate her understanding of Browning as a mystic. With reference to several love poems, Burt suggests that for Browning an experience of love represents "the Divine potentiality of redemption, that, from which can spring a living soul ..." (p. 83). So God becomes for the poet the "Divine Lover" (p. 96) of mankind.

This is a thorough discussion of various backgrounds to Browning's poem and to the influence of Strauss on the poet. Browning's knowledge of religious, philosophical, and theological literature is examined; the development of concern with the Christ-problem--from Shakespeare's time, to the deists, to the Romantics--is presented; hints of Browning's earlier thought on the Christ-problem are seen implied in Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello; the influence of Elizabeth on Browning's religious thought (as seen in their letters of 1845-46) is mentioned; and finally various literary influences on Browning--ranging from Langland's Piers Plowman to the work of Dickens (A Christmas Carol) and Carlyle (Sartor Resartus)--are suggested. Thus, Strauss's impact on Browning is considered by Göritz, but only among a complex combination of other influential factors.


Hoyt states early his conviction that "Mr. Browning
is essentially a religious philosopher, an ethical teacher more than a metaphysician" (p. 116). In Hoyt's discussion of love and the incarnation, he sees them as two basic elements in Browning's poetry as well as in Christianity itself. But they do not stand separately -- for both Browning and for Christianity, one (love) implies the other (incarnation). Thus "Saul" is cited to show "that Love Incarnate [Christ] is the only power to redeem man" (p. 157).


Kelman sees in the works of Browning a tension between the Hebraic tendency to look beyond this world for truth and fulfillment, and the Hellenic tendency to find one's satisfaction in this life. This combination is precisely what the world needs, claims Kelman:

Had [Browning] been Hebrew alone, he would have led our eyes too constantly beyond the world for truth and beauty. We should have heard the fascinating command of life, and had to make the best of its constant disappointment and failure, spurning from us alike its pleasure and its pain that we might lay hold upon the world to come. Had he been Greek alone, he would have tried to forget the disappointment and busied himself in gathering the flowers, with only the recurring melancholy that would have filled our hearts with the pathetic remembrance that
the world passeth away. But he who can combine these two elements, finding his God not abstractly, but in the best that earth and soul can show, supplies us with the gospel that is most of all needed in this age, so distracted between the two main tendencies (p. 189).


Russell seems intent upon rehabilitating Browning for the twentieth century. She tells the poet directly in this article that the new generation does not look at him the way his contemporaries did, that "the things about you for which we do not greatly care are those for which you were blue-ribboned by your own generation" (p. 76). One of those "things" is Browning's optimism; he was made a hero because of it in the Victorian age, but he was coming to be scorned because of it by the 1920's. So Russell points out the heavy weight of realism (or pessimism) in Browning's outlook, and thus makes him (she hopes) more palatable to those of her own era. There is an ambiguity in his relig-
ious vision, she says—it is touched by doubt, uncertainty, and bleakness as well as by the well-known optimism.


In this, the second volume of her survey of the life and work of Browning (the first, *Robert Browning, the Poet and the Man, 1833-1846*, was published in 1912) Sim focuses on the poems of Browning's maturity. The philosopher and the Christian in Browning are what often catch Sim's attention as she examines in chronological order the poems from 1850 on.


Wenger devotes some attention in his book to Browning's understanding of God as it relates to the poet's aesthetic theory and practice. The comments on Browning's theology reveal no particularly unusual insights or ideas, however.


McDowell sounds almost apologetic in this article
for finding Browning "still stimulating and significant" (p. 178) in a world that was coming to look at Browning with distaste. But McDowell goes on to attempt an explanation of the role of evil in Browning's total understanding of man and God. McDowell at first suggests "that evil is permitted of God that the soul of man may be perfected through struggle with sin" (p. 185). McDowell finally refines his notion of evil, however, to the point where he sees it as an illusion for Browning, or as only another form of a larger good:

But if evil is illusory, if it serves only to develop and strengthen good, may not this illusion be merely a form of disguised good? If all things work together for this end, may not all things be good? Are not good and evil one (p. 189)?


Phelps introduces his topic with an extended reference to Browning's "Gold Hair: a Story of Pornic." The poem, Phelps claims, "confirms the teachings of Christianity . . . [about] original sin, the corruption of the human heart" (p. 10).

Wann discusses both "romantic" and "sacred" love as they are represented in Browning's work and concludes the following:

In the first place, [Browning] holds love, in the broadest sense, to be of primary importance in life, as contrasted with, say, knowledge. He holds that all love is sacred, divine. And while Browning's temperament urged him to lay most stress on sex-love, he did so in the conviction that it was of the same quality as divine love and that, through an understanding of man and woman, we may understand the nature of all love. Browning does not despise the more earthly manifestations of love, but he holds them as necessary steps toward the realization of the spiritual goal in love (p. 35).


Willcocks focuses on Pompilia to demonstrate that, for Browning, "sacrifice" is the one great spiritual reality in our world: "it was Pompilia's death and agony that brought to those around her their chance of proving themselves 'Godlike'" (p. 183). In God himself can be seen a similar sacrifice.

Browning's explanation of the great puzzle of the Atonement, of how God came to sacrifice the one perfect Being He had begotten, is that, as G. K. Chesterton says, God Himself was jealous of this gift of sacrifice as shown in His children, His creatures. He, until He had suffered, felt Himself meaner than the meanest man on earth who had ever suffered Earth's rough testing (p. 182).

Thus does Willcocks explain Browning's conception of the incarnation.
De Reul's is certainly one of the most valuable discussions of Browning's religion published in the first half of the twentieth century. In de Reul's favor is his balanced approach to the poet: he reacts against the tendency of many commentators of the previous several decades and insists on seeing Browning as both a poet and a thinker. He disparages those whose views focus primarily on Browning the religious philosopher, teacher, or leader. Such approaches fail to do the poet's work justice because they are often shaped by preconceptions; for instance, de Reul mentions John Bury (BSP) and Henry Jones (1891) as "critics who read into Browning the system of their own favorite philosopher," Hegel (p. 275). Such opinions do not, however, mean that de Reul has nothing to say about Browning's thought or about his religion—these aspects of the poet's work are simply put into their proper place in the commentary. De Reul calls Browning's religion "a compromise, a true Victorian compromise between his philosophy or his reason and the religion of his first education" (p. 282). De Reul is very hesitant to attribute to this religion of compromise all the Christian-sounding viewpoints stated by various of his
characters: "There is in fact no proof that he adheres to a single dogma except personal immortality of the soul . . ." (p. 280). But de Reul nonetheless understands Browning to be a Christian: "no poet is more Christian in spirit . . . Browning is so much a Christian in spirit that orthodox critics do not for a moment suspect in him anything like a heretic" (p. 279).

An element in de Reul that adds to his importance is his awareness of the commentators who have created the context in which he reads Browning; references are made not only to Bury and Jones but also to Furnivall, Berdoe, Kirkman, Orr, and Chesterton.


Kirkconnell outlines the basic three-part structure of Browning's poem in which two speakers present, in contrast to one another, positions of orthodoxy and skepticism, and in which a third speaker answers the first two. Of the third part of the poem, which apparently represents Browning's stance, Kirkconnell says:
Thus Browning declares to the Churchman that God's presence is not limited to the buildings of brick and stone within which man has tried to confine Him; nor is His worship peculiarly served by ritual and ceremony. For God is actually present in His universe; He is the principle that gives it life and meaning; and the strenuous moral activity and spiritual growth of man are the highest forms of worship, for thereby comes the progressive realization of potential divinity. And to the sceptic liberal, he declares that a calm survey of the universe does not wipe out the conception of God given us by Christ. For God is incarnate, potentially, in all mankind, and as man develops, the nature of God, the ideal towards which he strives, becomes more and more evident through the evolving nature of humanity. The incomplete knowledge and faltering love of mankind are revelations of the complete knowledge and perfect love of God . . . (pp. 218-19).

Shaw, J. E. "'The Donna Angelicata' in The Ring and the Book." PMLA, 41 (1926), 55-81. Part of this article compares Browning's theory of love with that of Dante. For both writers, "love, even its humble stages, is love for God" (p. 74).

Crawford, A. W. "Browning's 'Christmas Eve.'" Methodist Review, 110 (1927), 379-82. Crawford claims that Browning not only has given us his own religious views in "Christmas-Eve" but that he has in fact written a kind of spiritual autobiography in the poem. In having his speaker focus on three particular forms of Christianity--the Dissenters' chapel, the Catholic Church, the German rationalist's religion
the poet presents "the only views that had previously made any appeal to Browning himself, and which he had at one time or another been inclined to adopt" (p. 381). Browning found none of these creeds completely satisfying, but he returns to the chapel because, though it fails "both from the intellectual and aesthetic standpoint, the dissenting view was the only religious view of the time possessing any genuine vitality" (p. 382). Crawford substantiates his interpretation of the poem with several significant references to biographical details pertaining to the poet's religious experience.


Crawford suggests the possibility that "Cleon" may have been Browning's answer or supplement to the bleak classical view of man presented in Matthew Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna*: "By bringing his imaginary Cleon in contact with the new doctrine of Christianity, Browning is enabled to put the Greek view of the world and of man that regarded all as finity in contrast with the Christian view that looks upon man as an immortal spirit" (p. 489).

In this significant study of Browning's *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance* by a noted Browning scholar the poet's focus on certain religious ideas becomes evident. Nowhere is this more the case than in DeVane's discussion of "Parleying With Bernard de Mandeville." In this particular poem, De Vane claims, Browning was attempting to answer the pessimistic views of his contemporary Carlyle (here I quote from DeVane's own later summary—in his *A Browning Handbook*, 2nd ed., 1955—of his earlier remarks on this particular poem):

The bulk of the Parleying consists of Browning's delineation of his religious views. Here the poet speaks, without disguise, in his own voice and is consciously summing up his ideas. He is mainly concerned with the problem of the existence of evil in the world if we are to assume that God is all-wise, all-powerful, and all-loving. He concludes, in a manner that is by this time very familiar to us, that the evil of the world is illusory, put by God in the world to make man develop his moral nature. Happily, man can never be certain, and in the healthy atmosphere of doubt he strives and proves himself. When the evidence of our intellects as to the reality of evil becomes overwhelming, Browning casts doubt upon the efficacy of the intellect which is the creature of the senses, and prefers to trust the instincts of his heart, which in its desire for love and right-
eousness is a small reflection of the spirit of God. Thus Browning answers Carlyle's despair by setting up his own beliefs (p. 500).


Russell continues in her attempt to revise earlier estimates of Browning. She insists that his "thought" is not what makes his work original or noteworthy—it is his poetry:

. . . if he never did stalk a new idea worth the salt to put on its tail, he salted down many an old one into extremely neat and pungent epigrams. . . . He peaked his own pyramid right enough, but it was a replica of the numerous other pyramids with which the Sahara of human ignorance is pathetically populated. Its distinction lies in the exquisite carving of some of the detail (p. 107).

Russell gives one example that demonstrates the limitation of Browning's religious thought:

The two main themes for theorizing—the nature of divinity and the explanation of evil—held considerable attraction for Browning; but he never quite realized this essential difference between them, that the very existence of divinity lies outside the realm of established fact, while the existence of evil is the most stupendous fact in experience, the problem there being to locate the cause of it (p. 103).

Browning's answer to this dilemma does not come through any impressive new thinking on his part about evil but rather in a simple and rather traditional trust that
assumes Providence to be ultimately responsible for the existence of evil in the world.

Russell's opinions, and the tone in which she conveys them, inevitably tend to belittle the Browning who is a religious prophet and metaphysical genius, i.e., the Browning produced by the Browning Societies and his other great admirers.


In his book Atkins treats prominently the religion of both Browning and Tennyson. A discussion of "Cleon" shows Atkins trying to understand the poet in a new way now that his reputation is in decline:

The nineteenth century loved him, if it loved him at all, for his triumphant optimism, and was given to remarking casually that "God's in his heaven, All's right with the world." The twentieth century, being just now not quite so sure of either, is inclined to dismiss Browning's optimism as a robust combination of good health and happy disposition but otherwise having little bearing upon life, which is, I think, one of the secrets of our reaction against him.

What the twentieth century needs to take from Browning is not his optimism but his terribly searching analysis of the struggle. It does not need to take all the philosophy by which he resolved this struggle; much of that is obscure and some of it doubtful (p. 32).

So Atkins emphasizes "the central significance of the moral struggle [for Browning]. It is the only thing which gives life any meaning at all for him" (p. 35)—
and it also is the one element in Browning that could possibly appeal to an era that has begun to ignore and forget him. Atkins goes on in his attempt to revive Browning's religious ideas for twentieth century consideration and application by focusing on "Abt Vogler" and "Saul" ("Faith Triumphant," pp. 100-24), and on The Ring and the Book ("Redemption," pp. 125-51).


Burdett makes occasional references throughout his book to religious elements in Browning's poetry. As might be expected in a book about both husband and wife, Burdett mentions the well-known influence of Elizabeth upon Robert in his composition of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day: the poems are the result of her having finally convinced him to reveal his religious convictions in a direct way (p. 236). The most interesting observation on Browning's religion arises in comments on La Saisiaz, "A Death in the Desert," and the Pope's speech in The Ring and the Book:

Browning had a passionate instinct for religion, and found his instinct best satisfied by the example and teachings of Christ, but his belief in the historic basis of the Christian story had been shaken, and he contented himself by saying that the
truth man needs is here, whether we regard it as fact or symbol. What we have is enough. The use we make of it is much more important than the category to which it belongs (pp. 301-2).

Brussels: Maurice Lamertin, 1929.

This book presents an expansion of the views expressed originally in de Reul's essay of 1926.


Hutton continues in this book his earlier attempt (1902) to mine practical guidance for a Christian life from the religious vein in Browning's poetry.

Somervell, D. C. "The Reputation of Robert Browning."

In the course of tracing the rise and fall of Browning's reputation Somervell cites Arthur Symons's *An Introduction to the Study of Browning* (1886) as representing an almost orthodox view of the poet during the years just preceding and just following Browning's death. Somervell presents the following as a typical passage from Symons: "His poetry is a tonic: it braces
and invigorates. . . . Mr. Browning's Christianity is wider than our creeds, and is all the more vitally Christian in that it never sinks into pietism" (p. 128). There was a time, says Somervell, when the appetite for the religious element in Browning's work grew so great that "a certain kind of clergyman could hardly get out of the pulpit until he had quoted something from An Epistle, Saul, Easter Day, A Death in the Desert, or Rabbi Ben Ezra" (p. 129). Somervell's position is that the overemphasized "teaching" in Browning has created a barrier between Somervell's own generation and the poet's work. Somervell hopes to help take down that barrier so that the poetry of Browning—excluding its religious elements—can once again be taken seriously, this time by post-Victorian generations.


The comments in the volume on Browning's religion are not extensive, but one nonetheless is of special interest: Somervell, echoing Dewey (1891), sees a striking parallel between the religious purposes of Browning and Arnold.

Browning's position was in fact not far removed from Arnold's position as expressed in *Literature and Dogma*. Both felt intensely the necessity of
religion, and both felt also the impossibility of most of what passed under the name of religion. Arnold wrote an essay in direct advocacy of undogmatic religion. It is eloquent, ingenious ... like all Arnold's essays; and it annoyed almost all its readers. Browning chose a better way. He wrote a succession of admirable philosophic character studies in verse--Karshish, Cleon, Saul, Christman Eve and Easter Day. Character studies do not claim to prove anything, and for that reason they are the more convincing (p. 166).

So Somervell suggests that Browning uses his character studies to make a case indirectly for the same kind of undogmatic Christianity that Arnold argues for in his famous essay.


Weatherhead contends that Browning was quite conventional in his Christian beliefs, particularly in his conception of Christ: "Browning's Christology is as sound and orthodox as it could possibly be" (p. 179). When he comes to discuss Browning's unique ideas about an after-life, Weatherhead claims that three notions are most significant:
The first is his idea of the element of struggle as a necessary and welcome part of the soul's progress. The second is the conviction that nothing the nature of which is essentially good can ever be lost. The third is an emphasis on individuality (p. 181).


After treating at some length Browning's optimism, his notion of evil, his idea of a God of love, and his relation to the thought of his time, Axson concludes by comparing Browning's basic religious position with the positions of two other religious poets, Pope and Milton:

Robert Browning . . . retreated to intuitive faith for the only answer. . . . Alexander Pope, the shallow logician, had undertaken to "vindicate the ways of God to man." John Milton, the learned theologian, had undertaken a philosophical poem, Paradise Lost, to "justify the ways of God to men." But Robert Browning, Pope's superior as a logician, Milton's equal in theology and learning, will neither "vindicate" nor "justify" the mystery of Providence. He accepts, and in his acceptance, he is reassured. Browning concludes his long years of scrutiny, not in a theodicy, but in a reaffirmation of his personal faith in God and the indestructibility of the soul (p. 197).

Crum, Ralph B. "The Poet's Dilemma--Reason or Mysticism."


Crum reveals two strains in the fabric of Browning's
religious convictions that enable the poet to face undisturbed the new scientific discoveries and thought of the Victorian age. First, Browning believed that love and human feelings in general, rather than scientific reason, constituted the path to the highest truth; "therefore, if the intellect attempted to negative this emotional truth, so much the worse for the intellect" (p. 192). Second, a potentially unsettling scientific theory, evolution, was actually incorporated into Browning's own philosophy rather than being left to act as a threat to his convictions--thus he used evolution as a basis for his optimism. Also Browning's reaction to the new thinking of his age is compared with Tennyson's reaction:

With a faith more robust and just as sincere as Tennyson's, [Browning] had none of the mental struggles and harrassing doubts that beset the author of *In Memoriam*.

... . . . . .

So sure is [Browning] that evolution is the law of life, that he looks upon evil as due merely to arrested development. What cause is there then for pessimism in the fact that Nature is "red in tooth and claw?" For out of strife with the evil comes the good (p. 193).


This book is made up of two parts. The first, "Background," represents a significant early attempt
to discuss and assess the reactions Browning's poetry evoked, both during his lifetime and after his death. Duckworth focuses on responses to Browning's work in three different decades: the 1850's, the 1890's, and the 1920's. The first of these periods proved to be unappreciative because Browning was seen to be too obscure and too far afield from conventional Christian attitudes and expressions. In the second period Browning seemed to be almost too much appreciated (or appreciated for the wrong reasons): the public seized on him as a religious teacher because they wanted to be reassured that man was immortal, that there was a God, that the old moral ideals were not illusive, that the established hierarchy of virtues had not been upset—in short, that God was in His Heaven and all was right with the world (pp. 64-65).

By the 20's a wave of pessimism, skepticism, and anti-romanticism had created once again an atmosphere in which Browning's work had a hard time finding a receptive audience. The second half of the book, "Conflict," concentrates on some of the personal, internal conflicts that became apparent in Browning's poetry: between his life and his art, between reticence and disclosure, between time and eternity, between his attraction to and his fear of the "white light" of truth. These conflicts appear to Duckworth to have certain religious implications.

Abercrombie seeks to revise the time-honored notion of Browning the optimist, and in order to do this he points, interestingly, to the poet's belief in immortality:

During the whole of his life, the doctrine of immortality seems to have presented itself to him as the one possible escape from the conviction that evil had, on the whole, the mastery in existence. . . . But when we admire (as we must) his magnificent enjoyment of life, we ought to remember that, so far from ignoring or being blind to evil in the world, he saw so much of it that only in a future life could he believe the good would prevail (p. 87).

Abercrombie also questions the assumption of many that Browning was, in fact, a Christian ("he began in the Broad Church creed and ended in a position which can hardly be called Christianity" [p. 86]); after all, the mere beliefs in God and in immortality—and those are the only firm beliefs Abercrombie discerns—do not by themselves qualify one for the label of Christian.

In the two pertinent chapters of this rather incoherent book Brockington contends, first, that Browning's optimism does not necessarily mean that he was a Christian and, second, that Browning's mysticism was of the intuitional rather than the visionary variety.


Hovelaque makes several interesting observations on the religious implications of these early poems. He sees implied in *Pauline* a religious faith and a religiously-based optimism. Faith ultimately triumphs over doubt in the poem, says Hovelaque, but it is more than a mere faith in a transcendent God; he also sees suggested a belief in an incarnate God who is able to give special aid to men who have failed (p. 128). Thus the seeds of Browning's famous optimism are discerned early and given something of a Christian twist by Hovelaque. In *Sordello* Hovelaque understands the role of the poet as being the historian of the human soul. He indicates that Browning's conception of the poet involved the poet's responsibility to record life or reality in such a way as to make clear to man the ways of God (p. 397). This task is begun in these early
poems, but it culminates in the later dramatic monologues.


In the two installments of this article Peake contends that Browning's God is neither a primitive, vengeful God like Caliban's Setebos, nor is he an indifferently cruel being who acts as arbitrarily as does nature. Instead, "for Browning God was the essence of everything that was pure and noble. His actions are never determined by caprice; they are always determined by love" (p. 293). The apparent whimsicality or harshness of nature is explained by Peake as follows:

"... Browning is sure that God dwells everywhere, and because of this he is certain that everything in the world is working together for good to those who have learnt the secret of Love looked at from the standpoint of a long evolutionary process (p. 316).


This is one of the most thorough and intelligent studies of evolutionary notions in Browning's poetry.

Desert," Rabbi Ben Ezra," and La Saisiaz receive special attention as Stevenson links together Browning's religious position with scientific and evolutionary thinking. In these poems

immortality, the freedom of the will to assist or retard development in accord with God's plan, the necessity of doubt for true faith, the divine principle of love, the glory inherent in imperfection— all are reaffirmed in defiance of scientific materialism (p. 164).

So Stevenson indicates the importance of evolution in Browning's understanding of man, but for the poet the emphasis is always on man's uniqueness, glory, and progress rather than on his kinship with the lower animals.


Berlin-Lieberman discusses in more detail than does any other writer on this topic the sources of Browning's interest in Jewish history, culture, and literature (some of the sources mentioned are his home environment, his independent reading in Hebrew, his Jewish friends, and Elizabeth's influence). Works discussed in detail include Bells and Pomegranates, "Ben Kar-


The first of the two pertinent chapters of this book is given over, in large part, to a discussion of Paracelsus. Sherwood, like other commentators, sees the seeds of Browning's later religious feelings and convictions--particularly the notion that divine and human love are the major dynamic forces shaping the universe and man's destiny--being laid in this early poem. In treating Pippa Passes Sherwood points to differences between the optimism of Browning and that of the eighteenth century Deists. In the second pertinent chapter, a response to Santayana's attack on Browning (1900), Sherwood says that Browning understood his age better than Santayana did: the latter "ignores the change from a static to a dynamic conception of the world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries . . ." (p. 328) and insists on an idealistic rather than a realistic response to the metaphysical questions life raises. Also, Sherwood
asserts, Santayana read Browning very superficially; for example, he failed to understand the nature and importance of love in Browning's work. "Love was to [Browning]", says Sherwood, "God becoming manifest, revealing himself in the concrete of human life. . . . To Browning, life in all its aspects is the self-realization of God through love" (p. 332). Here are implications of Christianity that Santayana hardly gave Browning credit for when he called the poet's religion "vague" and "barbaric." Sherwood conveys the essence of her response to Santayana in the following observation:

But it is evident that far-reaching thought of past ages, including that of the deep diviner of the ancient world, Plato, and the profoundest utterances of the Christian gospels are, in his thought, fused, and brought face to face with modern knowledge regarding the universe. . . . In him the energy of modern thought gives force and validity to the aspiration of the mystic . . . (p. 349).


This is the single most helpful all-purpose guide to the study of Browning. DeVane treats all of Browning's poems, supplying summaries and backgrounds, as well as, in some instances, an idea of the critical commentary they have evoked. For the purposes of
this bibliography, it should be noted that many of the poems with religious implications and themes are discussed with references to the sources and meanings of Browning's ideas.


Hess concentrates on the utterly free will of Pompilia (attributable to the fact that she "stands on the highest ethical and spiritual level obtainable by a human being" [p. 250]) as opposed to the relatively restricted wills of both Guido and Caponsacchi. The final test of freedom in the poem comes when a decision is rendered on Guido. Caponsacchi, showing his restrictedness, advocates Guido's punishment, but Pompilia, giving evidence of her spiritual superiority, forgives her malefactor. Hess concludes that "the ability to see God in the mud and scum of things and to find in waste and desecration itself a symptom of the divine belongs only to the pure in heart, or, that which is the same thing, the free in will" (p. 254).


This article in a Roman Catholic journal discusses
Browning's attitude toward Catholicism, particularly as that attitude is suggested in "Bishop Blougram's Apology." Maynard speculates that Gigadibs's trip to Australia may be only the first step in a circuitous trip to Rome and that Browning's own views were closer to Blougram's (and to Rome's) than is generally thought.


Beach demonstrates that Browning is very interested in a theory like evolution, but the poet's application of it is not to natural or scientific processes--instead the theory shapes Browning's religious views:

[Browning's is] not a scientist's view of evolution, but the ideology of a religious poet, who wishes us to know that, in God's mind, there is a logical sequence from inorganic to organic, from lower life to man, and from man on the human to man on the divine plane. The speculations of science have doubtless had a great deal to do with the general direction taken by this religious speculation (p. 441).

Beach emphasizes that, for Browning, a true "naturalist" view of the world and of man--in which man's spirit and soul are seen as simple products of his finite natural environment--is impossible: Browning insists on seeing man as potentially infinite, constantly tend-
ing toward God. Thus arises Browning's belief in immortality, an anti-naturalist stance.


Tracy's article is especially valuable and noteworthy because it is an early extended attempt to understand objectively the religious opinions of Browning and to trace the development of those opinions to certain biographical, religious, and intellectual influences. As the title of the article suggests, Tracy focuses on those elements in Browning's Christianity which cannot be termed orthodox. The ultimate shape of Browning's "heretical" religious convictions is attributed to the early influential role played by the Rev. William Johnson Fox (a clergyman with whom the young Browning had significant contact and whose mind was apparently open to "the increasing radicalness of Unitarian thought" [p. 615]) and, later, to the new thinking embodied in the work of Strauss, Renan, Darwin, and Spencer. Despite the force these people and ideas exerted on Browning's religious opinions, however, the poet struggled to maintain some meaningful attachment
to Christian belief. He tried to fend off the rationalists, Tracy says, by establishing this position:

The important thing for the individual . . . is not an intellectual certainty based on acceptance of the historical truth of the Bible, but the witness of the heart in Christian experience. . . . This is his constant rejoinder to the higher criticism (p. 620).


Bush's comments on Browning's religion arise in the context of some conclusions about Ixion:

Ixion comes to see that he was deluded by his own poor conception of God; the tyrannical Zeus is not the true God but a figment of the limited human mind. Caliban had dimly felt a Quiet above Setebos, and Ixion has a more positive idea of a God above Zeus. . . . Ixion, by the spiritual insight born of suffering, proves himself greater than the tyrant, and he rises out of the wreck "past Zeus to Potency o'er him!" He has become, in short, a Christian, of Browning's somewhat vaguely aspiring sect. What we have is really the religion of humanity, for Browning's God, while welcomed by generations of evangelical readers, is not much more than a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow . . . (pp. 378-79).


Early in his discussion Charlton suggests the relative orthodoxy of Browning's Christianity:

By declaring himself a Christian, he meant that he believed in Christ, in a way inapplicable to any
other person, as in fact the Son of God, miraculously born through the immaculate conception of Mary. . . . Here then, he seems to be taking refuge in the innermost sanctuary of orthodoxy . . . (p. 104).

But Charlton also goes on, more interestingly, to consider Browning's notion of the poet's task: "His work is literally a revelation, and carries the conviction of actual revelation. He is, next to God, the surest guide to truth" (p. 120).


Tracy claims that the poem is not primarily a satire of the Higher Critics, the Darwinians, or the Calvinists. Rather, he says, "'Caliban' was written partly with the purpose of showing that religious faith can begin even far back on the evolutionary scale" (p. 489). Tracy also suggests that the Boston Unitarian, Theodore Parker, may have been an important influence on Browning in the conception and development of "Caliban."

Kenmare admires Browning because, in his poetry, he offers a vehicle for reintroducing Christianity into the modern, secular world. The position Kenmare assumes comes very close to that of many Browning admirers a generation or two earlier: Browning is seized on to help undergird a society that was perceived to be losing its spiritual underpinnings. Kenmare's message here was to be reiterated with few significant additions or changes in 1952 (Ever a Fighter) and in 1962 (An End to Darkness).


Modder mentions Browning's knowledgeable and sympathetic handling of Jews in his poetry. "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is noted most prominently. Modder alludes to and accepts the earlier (1891) opinions of Mary Cohen on this general topic.


Tracy challenges the assumption that Bishop Wiseman
was the sole model for Browning's Bishop Blougram. Instead, says Tracy, Blougram is modeled after both Wiseman and Cardinal Newman and thus is "an amalgamation of traits taken from two of the leading English Catholics of the times" (p. 425).


Noyes throws aside questions of Browning's orthodoxy with this assertion:

Whether Browning knew it or not, or whether his biographer [Mrs. Orr] liked it or not, the Christ depicted by Browning is the Christ of the Christian religion, divine love accessible in human form to human love (p. 205).

Noyes goes on to discuss at some length The Ring and the Book showing how the poem represents Browning's attempt to reconcile the divine and earthly realms:

It is perhaps the only great poem in English literature in which the workings of what is usually called the supernatural are shown to us in such a way that we see them to be not at all unnatural, but to be perfectly compatible with our ideas of the reign of law throughout the physical universe (pp. 207-8).

Smith's tracing of this one image takes him through many of Browning's poems whose themes are, at least in part, religious or theological. But Smith's most interesting comments on Browning's religious ideas are found in the chapter, "Browning's Poetic Design."
The poet was not, Smith contends, a systematic religious thinker:

The formulation of systems of thought and the inclination of the formulators of systems to diminish truth into fine points of demonstrable fact were, in his opinion, to be mistrusted, for to prove the point was to remove the mystery. For him the essential fact, in both poetry and religion, was the immediate presence of the mystery, the flowing river of light of his poetic and religious vision. . . . Only the poet, king of men, can catch now and then glimpses of ultimate truth; because he has confessed frankly his analytical inadequacy, and because he depends ultimately upon his vision of white light to dispel the darkness of his mind (p. 242).

Thus some of the significance of the star imagery found in the poetry becomes apparent:

. . . the source of all Browning's imagery of light was a spiritual . . . vision of the white light of eternal truth. It was this vision that sprang naturally . . . from a mind that was preoccupied with the quest of ultimate reality (p. 242).

Yocom, Henry W. "Some Additional Sources of Browning's 'Saul.'" Notes and Queries, 181 (1941), 44-46.

Yocom mentions several previously suggested possible sources for "Saul" and then adds three of his own.

Charlton is concerned in this essay about the relationship between Browning's ethics and his theology. Selflessness is seen as the key concept in the poet's ethics. The discussion concentrates on four poems: "The Grammarian's Funeral," "The Statue and the Bust," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," and The Ring and the Book.


In this essay Charlton comments at some length on "Christmas-Eve," "Karshish," "Cleon," and "Saul," with references to other poems as well. In these poems, Charlton claims, "the most frequently recurring motif . . . is that of God as the God of Love . . . Christ is the veritable pledge of his Love, and immortality is its inevitable consequence" (p. 275). The basis of Browning's Christianity is further elaborated upon: "He accepted Christ and the Christian God because of his own instinctive sensations through the continuous exigencies of existence" (p. 304).

McPeek, James A. S. "The Shaping of 'Saul.'" Journal of
McPeek discusses the probable influence of Thomas Wyatt's *Seven Penitential Psalms* on Browning's "Saul."


"What makes Browning's faith so significant is that he approached the whole question, not from the standpoint of reason alone, but from that of human life" (p. 169)—so Mims begins his praise for Browning in this effort to retrieve the poet from obscurity and disrepute. This attitude ultimately brings Mims to appreciate, more than any other element in Browning's religious poetry, the emphasis placed on the miracle of the incarnation. This doctrine becomes for Browning a substantial support in the storm of skepticism and new ideas assaulting him and his fellow Victorians. Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day is mentioned in those terms:

In this poem, as in so many others, he shows himself aware of all the tendencies of modern thought, and at the same time expresses his belief that the only solution of man's problems lies in the Incarnation—not set forth in a theological formula with the emphasis on the commercial and legal statement of the Atonement, but Christ as the Way, the Truth, the Life (p. 172).

Dunsany claims that Blougram speaks for Browning through much of "Bishop Blougram's Apology." It is suggested that, considered all together, such matters as Blougram's realistic, pragmatic faith, Blougram's comparison of himself to Shakespeare, Browning's own enduring belief (comparable to Blougram's, but a contrast to the wavering or crumbling faith of such contemporaries as Arnold and Tennyson) indicate a strong identity between poet and speaker.


Laird reviews quickly and superficially, while touching on many of the poet's works, the most familiar religious themes in Browning's poetry. Nothing particularly new or interesting emerges in this discussion.

In a long line of commentary on "Bishop Blougram's Apology," Priestley's is certainly a key contribution. He takes a strong stand against the then prevailing view that Blougram's casuistical arguments in defense of Christian belief act as a kind of unwitting self-condemnation. Priestley contends that the Bishop seems to show himself in a poor light only because much of what he says is based, not on his own, but upon Gigadibs's premises: Blougram is simply meeting his opponent on his opponent's own ground.

Blougram, we are told, "believed, say, half he spoke." The rest was shaped "for argumentatory purposes." It should now be evident enough which half Blougram believed. Quite clearly, the arguments from Gigadibsian premises are not, and are not intended to be, his own beliefs. . . . His purpose was not to make a fruitless exposition of his own view for the scoffer's benefit, but to show the scoffer upon what crumbled ground his scoffing rested (p. 179).

Thus, from Priestley's perspective, the churchman's rather ambiguous religious position becomes much more respectable than it might otherwise appear. But the impressiveness of Priestley's explication rests not alone on its unique view of the respective roles played
by Blougram and Gigadibs; Priestley's was also the first treatment to take the poem so seriously and to examine it and its arguments in such great detail.


The "mysticism" of Browning, as well as that of several other nineteenth century poets, is discussed in this article. The uniqueness of Browning's mysticism, says Tucker, lies in the fact that he "is a love mystic. Love is for him the unifying principle which explains the universe" (p. 422). Tucker also asserts that a relatively orthodox Christianity shapes Browning's mystical outlook.

Fairchild, Hoxie N. "Browning the Simple-Hearted Casuist."
University of Toronto Quarterly, 18 (1949), 234-40.  

Fairchild says Browning found himself in a dilemma with a number of his dramatic monologues: "Several of Browning's most characteristic poems attempt to reconcile the complex brain and the simple heart" (p. 234), and the reader may be left mystified when he attempts to find where the "real" truth lies in the argument. Sometimes when Browning encounters this situation he "regrettably . . . in his reluctance to bewilder or demoralize the reader and in his eagerness to satisfy the demands of his wholesome nature, rather often adds a passage which tells the reader precisely what to think" (p. 234). Fairchild calls such passages "giveaways" and he sees them employed in several poems whose themes are primarily religious: "Bishop Blougram's apology," "A Death in the Desert," "Karshish," "Cleon," "Caliban Upon Setebos." Most often the Browning revealed in these giveaways, says Fairchild, has a basic belief in the key doctrines and principles of Christianity.

Evolutionary theory and its relation to some of Browning's religious poems is treated by Bush in this chapter of his book. For instance, Bush sees "Caliban upon Setebos" as a "great satire on anthropomorphic ideas of God . . . which probably started from Browning's reading of Darwin . . ." (p. 132).


Browning's poem was his "contribution" to a debate among his contemporaries on the question of immortality. The Victorian Journal The Nineteenth Century was the official forum for the debate, although Browning himself did not publish his poem there. Fairchild looks at the exchange of views (including the positions of the other participants) in some detail. The information in this essay provides an interesting background against which to read Browning's poem.

Four essays pertinent to this bibliography are included in this collection. They were originally published elsewhere but are listed and annotated here rather than separately according to original publication date because Raymond's book presents all four essays in their most readily accessible form. Page numbers in the annotations refer to the 1950 edition of the book (except in the case of "'The Jewelled Bow'"--there page numbers refer to the original edition of the article).


As Raymond discusses love in Paracelsus, he suggests Platonism and romanticism as possible sources for the notion there represented. But he settles on a third possibility as a very significant source of Browning's conception of love as well: Christianity. Taken together, these sources help explain the two fundamental, but apparently opposed, attitudes of Browning's soul:

those of aspiration towards the ideal and of stooping to the real. These provinces of Browning's feeling are in large part rooted in the two great moulding influences that enter into his life and poetry, his artistic inheritance of the traditions of English romanticism, and his religious legacy of the spirit and tenets of evangelical Christianity (p. 174).
This article was written largely as a response to an earlier discussion of Paracelsus by Royce (Boston BSP).

"Browning and Higher Criticism." Rpt. from PMLA, 44 (1929), 590-621.

This article represents the most thorough early study of Browning's opinion of and reaction to nineteenth-century higher criticism of the Bible. Raymond draws up a long list of poems which are, whole or in part, examples of Browning's responses to the new criticism of the Bible. Browning ultimately defends Christianity, says Raymond, in face of the attack on the religion's scriptures:

... the natural stress of Browning's apologia for Christianity is on the evaluation of it as a living rather than as an historical creed. In this way he seeks to turn the flank of the attack made by rationalistic criticism on the historic foundations of Christianity (p. 37).


This article concentrates on four casuistical monologues, "Bishop Blougram's Apology" among them. Raymond does not identify Browning with Blougram. Browning is, for Raymond, a believer who is attempting through his poem to expose "the hollowness of the Bishop's sophistry"
(p. 141). Thus Blougram is pictured as a respecter of belief, but not as a believer himself.


In this study Raymond sees Browning as a Christian humanist. Playing a key role in the poet's humanistic vision is the idea of incarnation:

His humanism is nowhere more in evidence than in the place given in his poetry to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. . . . For him the Incarnation of Christ is not only a matter of historical record enshrined in a creed or a body of religious opinion. It is an eternal truth verified in his inner and personal experience. . . . The divine condescension to human weakness and imperfection is conceived by Browning as flowing from the very essence of God as a being of infinite love (p. 117).


Altick's essay is famous for its debunking of a widely accepted image of Browning. After the publication of these observations it was much more difficult than previously to accept Browning as a philosophical and religious teacher of almost incredible wisdom and strength. Altick sees Browning's vigorous optimism as a cover for a serious sense of personal inadequacy:

His fervent celebration of the glories of the incomplete, the imperfect, as being part of God's inscrutable but unquestionable plan for men, is far less the manifestation of an intellectual conviction than it is the result of Browning's growing need to salve his awareness of failure (p. 252).

Altick goes on to claim that Browning's "famous positiveness in religious matters is a telling clue to his underlying insecurity" (p. 257). His religion, says Altick, was simply a protective niche from which to escape the challenges of biblical critics like Strauss and Renan. And because reason was a threat to religious security, Browning insisted that intuition was the true guide in spiritual matters.


Cohen nowhere presents in this general study of Browning a coherent discussion specifically focusing on the religious opinions of the poet or on the religious implications of a certain group of poems. But Cohen
does treat separately throughout the book a number of Browning's poems which are of interest largely because of the religious ideas they embody.


Johnson claims that Browning (like Tennyson and Arnold, the book's other two subjects) chose to modify his poetic voice after the negative critical reaction evoked by his early work. Browning used the dramatic monologue in most later work to mask the self he had presented all too nakedly in Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello. Through his monologues Browning gave voice to a key notion in his religious understanding: that intuition and feeling are superior to intellect as a guide for man. Thus, to Browning, "the appeal of Christianity derives from the baffling challenge which Christ offers to philosophic inquiry" (pp. 72-73).


This collection of essays and lectures is unified by a pervading purpose: to make Browning relevant to the mid-twentieth century and, by doing so, to judge modern
events, attitudes, and philosophies by the religious and moral standards represented in Browning's work. Kenmare focuses on such aspects of Browning's vision as his belief in immortality, his emphasis on joy and love, and his tenacious Christian faith. The modern age of "lassitude, negation, and despair" (p. 93) has much to learn from Browning's courage, optimism, and Christianity, says Kenmare. This book stands as the culmination of earlier commentary (1939) by Kenmare on Browning.


Miller's controversial biography pays surprisingly little attention to Browning's religion. Her psychological study begins, however, with an interesting explanation of the poet's anti-intellectual stance, a stance that many commentators claim significantly shaped Browning's religion. Miller sees the early struggle between the head and the heart of the poet represented as a struggle in Browning between loyalties to Shelley and his own mother. The heart (mother) won out, and from that point on "'to LOVE' became . . . more important than 'to KNOW'" (p. 11). Only brief references to Browning's religion are found elsewhere in the book.

Willey's proposition is that The Ring and the Book is Browning's attempt to justify the ways of God to man. To do this Browning has written an allegorical poem that personifies, particularly in the characters of Pompilia and Guido, the conflicts between Good and Evil and between Love and Hate.


This is a very useful article outlining Victorian attitudes and movements against which it is important to view the religious notions of Browning. Badger asserts that, since Browning was not an orthodox, literal-minded Christian the new views on scripture espoused by Strauss and Renan could not have been genuinely disturbing to him. Badger also points out, as have others, the importance of incarnation and love in Browning's religious ideas. Treatment of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, "Bishop Blougram's Apology," and "A Death in the Desert"
figures significantly in Badger's discussion. Also the article's abundant notes offer a helpful bibliography of and commentary on related materials.


Duffin calls Browning a mystic (the vision of Christ in "Christmas-Eve" gives Duffin his firmest reason for this conclusion) but not a mystical poet; the mystical experience that Browning may have known personally simply does not infuse his poetic vision often enough for him to warrant the latter designation.


The religious interpretation of *Pippa* outlined in this essay involves greater complexity than is suggested in the oft-repeated lines, "God's in his heaven,/All's right with the world." Glen points out the irony separating Pippa's own point of view (she is disappointed at having apparently had no influence on events and people this day) from "the true one" (she has indeed been influential):
men do not look at themselves as God does, because His ways of looking at them are foreign to them and to a point hidden from them. It takes faith to be a servant of God and not to seek, like the mystic "who has not the patience to wait on God" [Kierkegaard quoted], for a sign. . . . In a sense, the theme which Browning presents so suggestively in his narrative is simply the irony of God's ways when regarded from man's point of view (p. 426).


La Saisiaz has long been considered one of the few Browning poems in which the poet addresses his audience in a direct and personal way. But Priestley considers it otherwise. This critic argues that Browning's agonized struggle in this poem with the issues of death and immortality led him once again along the paths of reticence, "from direct expression of emotion towards a suppression of it, from the personal to the impersonal" (p. 47). In the end the reader is left largely uncertain about Browning's own answers to the religious questions raised by the poem. As he concludes, Priestley compares the Browning of La Saisiaz to Bishop Blougram: each, in his reticence, leaves his own genuine feelings and beliefs largely concealed.

Duffin tends at times to be somewhat subjective and impressionistic in his approach to Browning (e.g., "Browning, more than anyone except my wife, made my life the excellent thing it has been"), yet his book is generally interesting and useful. A long chapter, "A sermon which now I preach" (pp. 187-253), focuses largely on the standard religious poems and themes the reader of Browning criticism has come to be aware of.


This is a direct answer to Altick's attack on Browning (1952) in which Knickerbocker attempts to make Browning's thought, and thus his religion, respectable.


McAleer examines "Cleon" as Browning's response to the Positivist religion of Comte.
In this, one of the most extensive studies of Browning's work emphasizing its evolutionary themes, Rappen places the poet in the "Platonic tradition":

Evolution is a spiritual process. In this sense, and gradually detached from aspects of physical growth, it remains an active and central concept in his poetry. One might object that, when dissociated from these aspects which are integral to the biological theory, the idea of spiritual ascent is a purely Christian and Platonic idea of purification or atonement which, at most, finds an analogy in the evolutionary doctrine, while there is no identity between the two. Yet to Browning there are not two distinct processes of development, one "natural" and one "spiritual," but a universal nisus, a "tendency to God" manifest everywhere in Nature and in Man's soul, and from this tendency he deduces the first Cause, and the "law of Life," which is progress (pp. 159-60).

Rappen explores evolutionary implications in, among other poems, Paracelsus, "Cleon," "A Death in the Desert," and "Rabbi Ben Ezra."

Altick suggests that "Karshish" may be part of a five-poem sequence (the other poems being "Caliban," "Saul," "Cleon," and "A Death in the Desert") in which Browning depicts "the history of man's groping progress
toward a realization of the Christian God" (p. 49).
Karshish, Altick asserts here, is a figure much like
St. Paul and thus a comparison of the pagan and the
saint proves profitable in a study of the poem.

Baker, Joseph E. "Religious Implications in Browning's

Baker takes issue with the image of Browning the
Christian optimist. The poet's positions (especially
his tendency to embrace this world) are opposed to key
Christian teachings, and his acceptance of evil tends to
make him more a pessimist than an optimist.

A follower of Browning's religion would not pray to
be delivered from evil, but to be led into tempta­
tion. . . . Yet Browning was considered to be the
great Christian poet of his age, because he gave his
public what so many of them wanted: he used reli­
gious phrases to justify an indulgent complacency
towards evil that, in the Bible, had been censured
by all the prophets; and he claimed all the promises
of Christianity without the rigors of the ancient
creed (p. 452).

Fairchild, Hoxie N. "Browning." In his 1830-1880, Chris­
tianity and Romanticism in the Victorian Era. Vol. IV
of Religious Trends in English Poetry. New York:

Fairchild focuses on Browning's unorthodox Chris­
tianity, claiming that the poet's faith depends more on
subjective feelings than it does on doctrine, tradition,
or historical fact. Fairchild concludes that Browning's "romanticism . . . was too much for his Christianity, but his psychic insecurity, combined with the pressure of the Victorian compromise, was too much for his romanticism" (p. 166). So Browning proves to be a Victorian compromiser--a Christian, but an unorthodox one.


Houghton speculates that for many Victorian writers, including Browning, the loss of religious certainty led to some noteworthy attempts to compensate:

... the cult of love and the idealization of woman is related . . . to the problem of doubt--doubt of traditional Christianity, and the resulting will to believe. When the religious emotions of worship were denied a divine object, they could readily turn to a human one, to a hero or heroine. . . . Browning's religious worries and anxieties, which had led him to turn away from speculation to the love of a strong personality, could also lead him to turn from doubt to a religion of love (pp. 389-90).


King's book gives close--and very useful--scrutiny to five poems: "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi,"
"The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," and "Saul." Although King's emphasis is on these works as esthetic entities, he inevitably illuminates religious elements in Browning's poetry as well.


The dramatic monologue, claims Langbaum, is distinguished by the fact that it invariably evokes from the reader an ambiguous response involving both sympathy and judgment. Langbaum observes that in some cases (e.g., "Cleon," "Karshish," "Saul," "A Death in the Desert," "Bishop Blougram's Apology") Browning uses this technique to present his own religious perceptions in a sympathetic light (pp. 98-102). There are also religious implications in Langbaum's discussion of *The Ring and the Book* as a "relativist poem" (pp. 109-36).

The first part of this chapter of Poakes's book is devoted to Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, the second part to Browning's *Men and Women*. For Poakes, the "rhetoric of faith" in Browning's poems involves the explicitly religious struggle of Bishop Blougram (where it is concluded that "what really matters for the bishop is that the individual should realize his potentialities to the full" [p. 142]) as well as the implicitly religious ferment of the love poems ("the love poems are central in Browning's work because they present the most unambiguous and loftiest conception of the struggle and fulfillment of the individual" [p. 144]). But Poakes does not find Browning's rhetoric very satisfying:

He seems to escape from the profound disquiet at the heart of these poems into generalizations that all is really for the best, and thus to evade the dramatic issues raised in them with assertions that often remain empty rhetoric . . . (p. 147).

Thus Browning's optimistic religious answers ring, for Poakes, rather hollow.

Litzinger has located in *The Selected Letters of Henry Adams* an account in which Browning is quoted on his views of life after death.


Focusing particularly on Emerson's lecture, "Montaigne; Or, The Skeptic," Tanzy asserts that the puzzling character and arguments of Blougram are explained in light of Emerson's thought.

Both Browning's poem and Emerson's essay consider the problem of skepticism. Both point out two opposing and extreme tendencies in man--the one towards pure materialism, the other towards pure idealism--and both place the skeptic between these extremes (p. 256).

So Tanzy makes Blougram's religious position more respectable than many have made it. To clinch his (and, he assumes, Browning's) view of Blougram, Tanzy quotes Emerson on "great believers": they "are always reckoned infidels . . . fantastic . . . atheistic . . . . The spiritualist finds himself driven to express his faith by a series of skepticisms" (p. 265).


Zamwalt reads this poem as a conflict pitting Christian love and courtesy (symbolized by the Duchess)
against viciousness, pride, and materialism (symbolized by the Duke). The latter forces apparently win. But Zamwalt concludes that

the momentary victory of the Duke, overshadowed as it is by the ideal virtue of the Duchess and by a viciousness which fairly predicts his fate, implies a fundamental reaffirmation of Christian values during the mid 19th century, when Christianity was was beginning to reel before the challenges of modern science and historical criticism (p. 446).


This article compares Browning's "Bishop Blougram" to a novel by Miguel de Unamuno, San Manuel Bueno, mártir. Both works present clergymen whose spiritual situations are characterized by a complex combination of faith and doubt. Alberich indicates that a number of Blougram's religious opinions reflect Browning's own convictions. The reliability of Alberich as a commentator on Browning is called into question, however, by a curious misreading (or mistranslation?) of the conclusion of "Blougram": Alberich has Blougram himself going off to Australia with "settler's implements" rather than Gigadibs.

Ingles, James Wesley. "Browning's 'Christmas-Eve.'"
Christianity Today, 4, No. 5 (1959), 6-8.

Ingles seems intent on writing primarily to ministers and theological students to introduce them to "Christmas-Eve" and to Browning's position on the evangelical, the liturgical, and the rationalistic traditions within the church. The discussion of the poem is rather superficial and non-scholarly.


In this essay Knickerbocker attempts to answer Santayana's well-known attack on Browning (1900). Among other observations, Knickerbocker comments that Browning's religious vision was clearly shaped by an idealism and mysticism that Santayana does not at all recognize ("Abt Vogler" is referred to in this context).


Smidt concentrates on the way Browning incorporated evolutionary ideas into his religious thought:

After his initial Shelleyan revolt, Browning returned to a fairly central Christian position, agreeing with the mystics that evil and pain have a purpose in the larger scheme of things and thinking of our existence on earth as merely preliminary to a future spiritual state (p. 97).

This article is a companion to Ingles's earlier (1959) discussion of "Christmas-Eve." Ingles says that "Easter-Day" has a certain "existential implication" (p. 5) and he explores this aspect of the poem in particular.


Palmer is neither a critic nor a defender of the Bishop's religious position; and he also suggests that Browning's own position on Blougram is similarly non-committal:

... we should permit the poem to do what it actually does--leave the speaker's moral character ambiguous--and, if we must judge Blougram, recognize that we, not the poet, are judging him. ... The poem does not decide whether Wiseman [Blougram] is a scoundrel or a saint but leaves his character as ambiguous as it must appear to the public (p. 116).

But there is an irony in all this: Palmer contends that the morally ambiguous Bishop actually presents the possibility of faith to Gigadibs--and Gigadibs responds positively to this faith, if his "conversion" at the end of the poem is to be taken seriously. A peculiar kind of affirmation lies, then, in the Bishop's ambiguous
nature: "... religious faith of some sort is possible even in mid-nineteenth-century England and its possibility can be successfully defended even by a man whose own moral character remains ambiguous' (p. 117-18).


Honan's book is a study of various aspects of Browning's poetic technique with a concentration on what evolved from the early dramatic experiments. Throughout the discussion Honan touches upon poems and characters whose importance is related to Browning's religious themes and ideas.

James, G. Ingli. "Browning, Grammar and Christianity."

**Blackfriars,** 42 (1961), 312-19.

In the clash of opinion between Santayana and Chesterton James sides with the former and suggests that "Browning's grotesque habit of identifying his religion with Christianity should mislead no one" (p. 316). For James, Browning is simply too much a believer in man, in the idea "that, given the liberation of man's deepest instincts from all traditional restraints, all would be well with the world" (p. 318). James objects to Browning's celebration of man's energy (he cites Andrea's
cry, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,/ Or what's a heaven for?"):  

. . . in elevating impassioned energy into an absolute good, his poetry is an offense to both sense and sensibility; and not only if we are Christians, though the Christian, above all, ought to possess the kind of awareness which reveals at once what is wrong here. We rebel against the facile and painless way in which the poet reconciles himself to the disharmonies and deficiencies of the human condition (p. 316).

James's conclusion is that "Browning retains a good deal of the vocabulary, but hardly anything else of the Christian religion" (p. 316).


The multi-perspective story-telling technique in Browning's The Ring and the Book suggests to Johnson a pluralistic vision that fails to recognize anything like absolute truth. Such a vision, of course, implies a new anxiety for man's religious experience: nothing is certain. A central focus of Johnson's essay is a discussion of some remarkable parallels between the ideas--on pluralism and on religious experience in particular--of Browning and William James.

King, Roma A., Jr. "Browning: 'Mage' and 'Maker'--A Study

King sees Browning as "maker, not philosopher" (p. 21). This essay focuses on "Cleon" in an attempt to show that the poet does more than present ideas or a philosophical position--he actually renders dramatically the psychic life of his main character, and in particular Cleon's own religious dilemma. The reader watches Cleon "frustrated and paralyzed by his 'infinite passion' and his 'finite heart'" (p. 25).


Benziger reflects on a number of the religious poems emphasizing the main problem of poetry as Browning stated it to Ruskin: to put "the infinite within the finite" (p. 192). A poem like "A Death in the Desert" makes it clear that, to Browning, Christ was the answer to this problem. Other poems treated at some length by Benziger are Pauline, Paracelsus, Sordello, "Abt Vogler," "Saul," and The Ring and the Book.

Bose sees Pauline as an important step in Browning's recovery of the faith he had lost in his earlier dalliance with Shelley and atheistical ideas.


De Laura contends that the imagery of this poem suggests parallels between the Patriot and Christ. Images of martyrdom and crucifixion, especially, are in evidence.


Hess treats very briefly and superficially the Christian links between Browning and Kierkegaard.


The title of this book is somewhat deceptive. What Kenmare presents is not truly a "new" approach to
Browning at all; rather it is a repetition and expansion of an approach that Kenmare began back in 1939 with *Browning and Modern Thought* and continued in 1952 with *Ever a Fighter*.


"The purpose of this paper," Litzinger says, "is to discover Browning's attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church" (p. 7). The pamphlet-length (35 pages) study is of value, first of all, because it catalogues many of the earlier responses to Browning's treatment of Catholicism. Litzinger proceeds on a tightly argued, well documented path to his conclusion, i.e., that Browning was indeed anti-Catholic in his feelings: "Browning, more than any other major English poet since Milton, chose to attack Catholicism again and again, directly and indirectly, throughout his poetic life" (p. 33). This essay is the definitive study on this topic. DeVane, in fact, has called it "a useful account of the poet's opinions of Catholicism, so adequately done that it need never be done again" (from "Editor's Note," p. 3).

Crowell, Norton B. *The Triple Soul: Browning's Theory of*
The purpose of this study is to examine Browning's attitude toward the mind and his theory of knowledge" (p. xi). Crowell has been spurred to this purpose by the "myth of Browning's anti-intellectualism" (p. xii) for which, says Crowell, Henry Jones's *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Thinker* (1891) has been largely responsible. Crowell seeks to put that myth to rest and thus to make Browning's thought and religion more respectable intellectually. Most of the major religious poems are discussed in the book, and much attention—perhaps too much—is paid to those commentators who have criticized Browning for reasons similar to Jones's.


Guerin's is a self-consciously "modern" approach to the poem. He contends that the tension between body and soul, between belief and unbelief, in Karshish himself are dramatically emphasized in the language and structure of the poem.

Appreciation of [the poem] requires not the religious-philosophical response of some generations ago, but the tools of criticism that have been stressed in recent years. ... Browning the craftsman stands
back from the story, balances Lazarus against Karshish, develops the ironies of the situation, its paradoxes, its ambivalences. Browning the poet finds his esthetic resolution not in quiet contentment, not in simple, religious conversion but in the paradoxical, unresolved tension--the "strangeness" of Karshish (pp. 132, 139).


Hess shows how both Browning and Kierkegaard demonstrate an adherence to the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith.


Howard first notes several discussions of "Caliban" and then takes issue with the notion of some that the poem is a satire: "Rather it can be shown that Browning endeavored to capture the limitations of the subhuman mind when confronted with religious speculations" (p. 250). Howard also investigates the Shakespearean sources for the character of Caliban.

This book appears as a throwback to earlier days of Browning commentary: it is a somewhat subjective and nonscholarly appreciation of Browning as a religious poet. In various chapters Martin tries to answer specific questions about Browning's religion: what did Browning think of Christianity? ("The Eternal Purpose"); what did he think of Christ? ("God in Christ"); how did his optimism stand up to the reality of evil? ("The Mystery of Evil"): what were his thoughts on immortality? ("After Death?"); what are the religious implications of his major poetic achievement? ("The Ring and the Book").


Miller's is one of the most perceptive and useful of all discussions of Browning's poetry. He begins by noting that "'Pauline,' 'Paracelsus,' and 'Sordello' are Browning's versions of a central adventure of romanticism--the attempt to identify oneself with God" (p. 95).
But Browning's poetic task changed somewhat in his later poetry. Miller claims that Browning sensed the absence of God from the world and that he understood the poet's role as standing in the gap between God and his creation. Browning, Miller says, attempted to bring God back in touch with his world by "incarnating" him in the characters of various dramatic monologues, for "each imperfect and limited man through whom the power of God swirls is a temporary incarnation of God, one of the infinitely varied ways in which God makes himself real in the world" (p. 155).


This is one of the most important and suggestive works on Browning as a religious poet. Whitla examines in separate chapters the poems having to do with religion, art, and love and suggests that, "in dealing with any of these subjects in a poem, Browning's characteristic method is to solve the 'problem' of the poem by some kind of incarnational experience" (p. v). Browning understands his role as a poet to be much similar to the incarnational role played by Christ in the Christian religion:
The symbol of the Incarnation of Christ offered Browning an analogy of his own experience as a creative artist. The artist enjoys a vision of the truth which must be shared with humanity. As God clothed himself in human flesh, so the poet speaks in words the vision that he has seen (p. 5; Whitla quotes here from an unpublished MA thesis by Beryl Stone).

Whitla emphasizes, however, that the incarnation is not merely

a remote theological proposition . . . but . . . an historic truth alive in Browning's experience. The Incarnation is not a religious framework over which to drape the heavily curtained theology of Browning's poetry. The Incarnation affects Browning to the depths of his being as a man (p. vi).

The book begins with a useful brief history of the doctrine of the Incarnation; and it culminates-following chapters on the poems of religion, art, and love--with a chapter on The Ring and the Book.

Bonner, Francis W. "Browning's 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church.'" Explicator, 22 (1964), Item 57.

With an emphasis on the poem's opening lines from Ecclesiastes, Bonner argues that, "like the preacher, [the Bishop] is convinced of the emptiness of life, the certainty of death, and the uncertainty of the hereafter."

Hess, M. Whitcomb. "Three Christians in Literature:

Once again Browning is linked by a modern commentator to Kierkegaard. Both writers are seen by Hess as "profound religious psychologists" (p. 13), primarily because of their use of the dramatic monologue.


Honan sees Caliban as a Satanic figure and traces that image to the influence of Milton's Paradise Lost on Browning.


Irvine discusses four poems--"Fra Lippo Lippi," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," "Karshish," and "Cleon"--in terms of the contemporary Victorian issues and ideas evident in them. Each of these poems shows Browning dealing directly or indirectly with some serious religious questions facing the people of his era.


In this article Kenmare plays her well-practiced
(1939, 1952, 1962) theme once again. In a modern world characterized by the preoccupation with the problem of evil, by a toleration of knowledge (especially scientific knowledge) for its own sake, and by the condoning of life-denying vices (especially promiscuous sex), a poet like Browning can help man regenerate society and reestablish true spiritual values.


Litzinger's is the most significant and useful contribution to studies which examine Browning's evolving reputation. The focus is on Browning as a "thinker," but certain religious elements of the poetry fit inevitably under that rubric too. Litzinger seems to understand well the adulation accorded Browning in the years soon after his death:

First, many thought him the defender of Christianity... Second, many admired him as the chief proponent of an optimistic Weltansicht which reflected their own highest aspirations. Growing out of these
two views of Browning, and in a sense encompassing both, a third role developed: that of Browning the philosopher-poet (p. 3).

But, as many of his readers know, this early reputation of Browning did not stand up: it suffered greatly under the attacks of various critics, for example, Henry Jones (1891), George Santayana (1900), John M. Robertson (1903). Litzinger follows this decline closely to the point where it is, in a sense, capped off by the treatment Browning receives at the hands of Betty Miller (1952) and Richard Altick (1952). Litzinger discerns no late major revival of Browning's reputation as a thinker, but he does observe that

in recent years . . . a significant body of critics [give evidence that they] may feel that the judgment has been too severe. It would seem that the game of beating the philosophic horse is waning and that a counter-reaction is beginning to set in. No one, I believe, would predict a groundswell of support for Browning's philosophy, but it would appear that Browning's reputation as a thinker has risen a degree or two in the last decade (p. 155).

Litzinger's book includes a helpful bibliography of pertinent materials, many of whose entries are treated in the essay which comprises the heart of this study. One limitation of this study is that it virtually ignores pre-1889 reaction to Browning--Litzinger discusses this large body of material in two sentences (p. 1). It is a purpose of this present bibliography to partially fill this gap.
This article begins with a brief but valuable survey of earlier studies of the poem. Of all Browning's works dealing with religious topics, says Shaw,

"Saul" affords a rare pleasure, which we cannot experience to the same degree in any of Browning's other poems, of seeing the poet, like the speaker, soar magnificently to the "pure white light" [of truth]. Not even in "Abt Vogler" does Browning sustain his visionary inspiration undiminished . . . (pp. 281-82).


Ball criticizes simpler, hackneyed views of Browning and his religion and suggests instead that his work reflects a complex and questioning religious vision like that depicted in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot:

The common factor that Browning sees is the blinkered human mind which suspects that there is a landscape on either side of the road, but never achieves more than a glimpse, or perhaps hears some sound . . . that aggravates the suspicion. . . . So Browning's bishops, aristocrats, lovers, artists, and monks enact their scenes of self-creation and combat the silence stretching on either side (p. 247).

Ball goes on:

"Existential" or "empirical" are terms more relevant
than those usually applied to him, from "noncomformist" to "optimist." All the so-called religious sections of the poems stand within this context. Wherever God enters the poems, he comes as a property of the speaker's self-made universe: he is not the poet's ultimate, for Browning's faith rests upon the one certainty—human uncertainty, the ignorance or doubt of any such ultimate (p. 248).

"Caliban Upon Setebos" figures especially prominently in Ball's discussion.

Bennett, James R. "Lazarus in Browning's 'Karshish.'" Victorian Poetry, 3 (1965), 189-91.

Bennett focuses on the religious and psychological self-revelation that comes about as the skeptical Karshish tries to understand and explain Lazarus.


Boo contends that Caponsacchi shows a deep and significant religious development in the course of his experience:

Between the first and last lines of Book VI of Browning's The Ring and the Book, Giuseppi Caponsacchi undergoes a change so profound that he emerges in many respects a new man. Once literally given to the Church by his family, he now becomes the giver of himself, a mature and spiritually deepened religious (p. 179).

Boo includes a helpful discussion of earlier views of Caponsacchi.

Collins contends that Pauline is a record of a fundamental confusion of Browning's loyalties at that point in his life:

At no point in the poem is it clear that Browning is declaring a final allegiance to either Shelley or God, or that he is consciously facing the necessity of choosing between dedication to poetry or religion. . . . The contradictory statements concerning Shelley . . . indicate that in 1833 Browning's thoughts concerning poetry and religion were confused and even somewhat naive (p. 160).


This article contains Dahl's speculation about possible sources for Browning's skeptical letter-writer. Such a character could have been based on St. Paul's scorn for Epicurean and Stoic philosophers expressed in Acts 17; or upon various classical allusions to a poetic skeptic named Cleon; or upon the philosopher Cleon mentioned in Thomas Moore's poem "Alciphron" (1827); or upon the Cleone of Walter Savage Landor's Pericles and Aspasia (1836); or upon Shakespeare's Cleon in Pericles, Prince of Tyre.

Hess, M. Whitcomb. "Two Evolutionists: Teilhard and
Browning." Contemporary Review, 207 (1965), 261-64.

Hess sees a similar kind of evolutionary belief pervading the religious thought of both Browning and Teilhard:

... from the noosphere, the realm of spirit where life, love and knowledge interpenetrate, the French paleontologist and the English poet view the constant upward movement of matter and/or mind from the inorganic to the organic, from the organic to man the knower, and from man as knower to God. Both men saw the Divine Fire spreading everywhere, illumining each step of the way (p. 264).


This is a valuable book because it collects a number of the commentaries (or portions of them) mentioned elsewhere in this bibliography. Among the criticism represented here are statements by Henry Jones (1891), John J. Chapman (1898), George Santayana (1900), G. K. Chesterton (1903), Frances T. Russell (1924), Hoxie N. Fairchild (1949), Richard D. Altick (1951), Kenneth L. Knickerbocker (1956), Robert Langbaum (1957), and Philip Drew (1964). The book concludes with a valuable bibliography of all works published on the poet from 1951-May 1965; this listing is meant to supplement the earlier bibliography of Broughton, Northup, and Pearsall.

Matthews sees a strong link between Browning and Neoplatonic thought: they both lay "great stress on the dynamic element of the soul's progress toward God" (p. 9).

Perrine, Laurence. "Browning's 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church.'" Explicator, 24 (1965), Item 12.

Perrine's discussion is partially a reply to an earlier statement (1964) by Bonner. Perrine claims that the echoes of Ecclesiastes in the monologue do not actually reflect the Bishop's own views; rather, they ironically contrast with his worldly views.

In the quotations . . . the Bishop is in actuality voicing the official medieval Christian attitude toward life and the things of this world, and he is uttering what he in no wise believes.


In an interpretation of Sordello, Stempel sees Browning warning the reader that it is not enough . . . to love men, to perceive the Divine within the Human and lift if from its animal matrix to the purity of the Godhead. The poet must also learn to recognize the Human in the Divine,
Christ; the infinite power has, of its own will, taken the form of man to serve as a link between man and the hidden God, the deus absconditus. This was what Sordello and Shelley had not yet learned; imprisoned with the romantic ego, they worshipped the divine spark of the self and ignored the flame that burned above them (p. 561).


Timko suggests that "Caliban" presents "Browning's ideas on the dangers of too much dependence on intellect and reason in matters of faith" (p. 142). The poem is explained as a reaction against the rationalistic religion of Bishop Butler and Archdeacon Paley.


A prominent concern of Woodhouse is to compare Browning and Tennyson, especially with regard to two major themes which are seen as "preoccupations" of both poets: "Immortality, and a God of love" (p. 229). The conclusion is that "Browning's religion is essentially of the more extreme Protestant variety, and Evangelical in feeling if not precisely in doctrine" (p. 237). Woodhouse treats "Saul," "Karshish," "A Death in the
"Desert," and *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* in his discussion of Browning's religion.


De Laura notes some parallels, in religious ideas and language, between Browning's "Bishop Blougram's Apology" and Eliot's *Four Quartets*.


This volume is valuable because, like the earlier collection of Litzinger and Knickerbocker (1965), it gathers together a sample of the writers and critical views published previously and covered elsewhere in this bibliography. Commentators whose views on the religious elements of Browning's poetry are represented here include: George Santayana (1900), Watson Kirkconnel (1926), Kingsbury Badger (1955), Roma A. King, Jr. (1961), John Howard (1963), and F. E. L. Priestley (1955).

Friedman, Barton R. "To Tell the Sun from the Druid Fire: Imagery of Good and Evil in *The Ring and the Book*."
Friedman says that the imagery of The Ring and the Book embodies a "constant truth" in what is otherwise a "relativist" poem: "Through the imagery . . . Browning gives his Roman murder case cosmic proportions. If Caponsacchi is God's warrior, Guido is Satan's" (p. 696).


Despite claims that "Christmas-Eve," unlike many Browning poems, represents a direct statement by the poet on his religious position, Guskin claims that "the whole poem is suffused with ambiguities which reflect its ambivalent position as both an expression of Browning's own religious thought, and as a fictional construct" (p. 28).


Hellstrom sees the "doctrine of imperfection," which is often connected with Browning's work, as reflecting a theory of history present in traditional Christian thought. (For the outlines of this theory
Hellstrom refers the reader to an article by R. S. Crane, "Anglican Apologetics and the Idea of Progress, 1699-1745," Modern Philology, 31 [1934], 273-306, 349-82.) Hellstrom asserts that "this Christian theory of history and its attendant tradition of typology . . . provided Browning with the context in which the images of Saul become unified" (p. 370).


Langbaum contends that Browning, in his use and understanding of myth, comes close to the artistic method embodied most prominently in the work of moderns like Joyce, Eliot, and Yeats. In the course of his discussion Langbaum shows some insight into the relation between Browning's mythic mode and his religious perceptions (Browning's preoccupation with the "myth" of incarnation is a case in point).


In his chapter "Religious Poetry Before Browning" (pp. 85-116), Blackburn points out a significant dis-
tinction between Browning and his predecessors: earlier religious poets advocated certain religious views and answers in their work, whereas Browning, in his best works, raises religious issues but leaves many of the implied questions open and unanswered. In this respect Browning reflects his own doubts and uncertainties as well as those of his age in general. In another chapter, "Browning's Religious Poetry" (pp. 117-61), Blackburn discusses a number of Browning's religious poems showing his favor towards those in dramatic monologue form rather than those apparently written in the poet's own voice (such as Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day).


In a discussion of Browning and his conception of the poet's role, religious considerations inevitably arise. Collins examines the notion of incarnation as an answer to the moral and aesthetic questions embodied in the poet's early work. This answer is presented most comprehensively, says Collins, in "Saul":
The Incarnation as image becomes the link in joining the powers of the objective and subjective poets [terms from the "Essay on Shelley"]. Christ as the union of flesh and spirit appeals to both the "aggregate human mind" and the "absolute Divine mind" (p. 124).

One chapter of this book, "Moral-Aesthetic Redefinition: 1845-1852" (pp. 93-124), is particularly interesting as a treatment of Browning's religious ideas.


Sullivan's essay presents a detailed study of the similarities between Browning's and Dante's poems. Ultimately, Sullivan suggests, both works depict the quest for salvation.


Ward discusses Browning's religious ideas occasionally throughout her biography of the poet. Early on she defends his "anti-intellectual" stance:

One truth emerges which he learned in the course of [his religious struggle]--that logic is not man's sole guide, or profoundest guide, to reality; there is intuition, there is love. This has been seen as a degradation of reason. . . . But thus to see it shows an unawareness of common experience at one end and of Existentialism at the other. Life is larger than logic. Poetry must utter the response to reality of the whole man; poet or philosopher must not stop short because bare intellect can go no further (pp. 38-39).

It becomes apparent in such comments that, to a certain extent, Ward is answering the well-known criticisms of Browning found in the work of Altick (1952) and Miller (1952).

Ward also devotes a full chapter of the biography (I, pp. 174-88) to a discussion of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day.


This brief commentary on the poet and the poetry gives some limited attention to the major religious poems.

This is an indispensable book on Browning's *Ring* both for its discussion of the poem itself and for its bibliographical information. One interesting observation made by the authors is that the poem "veritably epitomizes the problem . . . higher criticism" posed for nineteenth-century Christianity (p. 330): varying points of view, inconsistencies, and contradictions are all part of Browning's story as well as part of the gospel which Strauss and Renan set before their contemporaries. Browning's point is that, both for his story and for the biblical accounts, intuition is a better guide to full understanding than is reason.

Biblical allusions in the poem also receive treatment (Chapter 7, "Poke at Them with Scripture," pp. 184-225).


The religious aspects of Caponsacchi's "conversion" are not emphasized in this article, but they are certainly implied. Strangely enough, Armstrong does not acknowledge Boo's earlier study (1965) of Caponsacchi's development published in the same journal.

Browning has been attacked for the shallowness and inconsistency of his thought by many critics from the late Victorian age to the present. Crowell's purpose is once again (see Crowell's *Triple Soul*, 1963) to defend Browning against these detractors (particularly Henry Jones--throughout his book Crowell repeatedly reacts to and corrects Jones's earlier [1891] treatment of Browning) and to try to establish him as a respectable thinker. A list of chapter titles indicates the topics Crowell touches upon in his discussion: "The Problem of Evil"; "The Ring and the Book: Browning's Concept of Truth"; "The Christian Existentialist." In the last chapter Browning's name is linked with a number of modern philosophers--Christian and non-Christian--and his thought is thus placed in an interesting light. One of the significant thinkers mentioned in this context is Kierkegaard.


King recognizes that Browning was a product of eighteenth and nineteenth-century generations who had
witnessed the gradual disappearance of God and of traditional values:

Isolated from God, alienated from nature, bereft of values and uncertain of self, man was forced to seek reality within himself and to evolve from his own sense of consciousness a new set of values that were necessarily individualistic and subjective (p. xvi).

Browning's religious faith and his poetry were inevitably affected by this phenomenon, says King:

Browning early lost faith in Enlightenment rationalism, political activism, religious institutionalism, and evangelical pietism. How was he to discover a meaning and a value in life without these traditional aids? That search remained the central action of his poetic career (p. xvii).

In mid-career, with *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864), the path to human fulfillment becomes for Browning, not a relationship with a transcendental or institutionalized God, but rather the dynamic state of man's becoming that Browning depicts in his poetry, especially in the dramatic monologues. But King indicates uncertainty that such a conception satisfactorily replaces the older traditional conceptions that Browning had been forced to abandon; and thus he suggests that true meaning for the poet comes to be associated with the poetic activity itself:

He had discarded the transcendental view of his youth; he was dissatisfied with his objective fragmentary vision of men and women. At the same time, he rejected any externally applied system of organization that would violate their personal integrity. At times he anticipates modern existentialism;
indeed, he postulates as the ultimate reality something much like the "necessary fiction" of Wallace Stevens. . . . Wallace Stevens has said, "Now that we no longer have religion we must look to poetry for life's redemption." Browning would not have made the statement in precisely those terms, but he would have understood Stevens' meaning, for he increasingly came to regard art as man's most—perhaps only—significant activity. . . . Art, he declared, is the artifice, the glass, which brings the Infinite the refracted rays of the sun, into focus, reducing and unifying them so that they become meaningful and useful to man (p. xxi).

King contends that Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day (1887) best embodies Browning's notions concerning the potential of art.

In this book King covers many more poems than in his earlier The Bow and the Lyre (1957). His discussion here is also much more clearly thesis-oriented as it centers on certain religious implications of Browning's poetry.


King claims that though the materials of Browning's poem are philosophical and theological, his object is neither intellectual nor moral. . . . Browning's subject is actually the development of a soul—that is, the internal process by which a character achieves self-realization (p. 23).

King also comments on some of the sources of the poem.

This study discusses the importance of "Molinism" in the poem. Loschky claims that, in the way Browning uses the term, Molinism comprehends a wide variety of theological positions and that these positions cover "the whole spectrum of the free will versus determinism debate, which is a major theme of The Ring and the Book" (p. 333).


Browning speaks through the Pope, argues Raymond, to assert one of the most important spiritual truths in the poet's own religious position: the "supreme self-sacrificing Love of the incarnate Christ" (p. 323).
Raymond points to analogues in "Saul" and "A Death in the Desert"; he also discusses Browning's anti-intellectual bias.


As Shaw discusses Browning's methods of engaging and controlling his audience, he includes a chapter entitled, "Rhetoric at the Religious Stage" (pp. 278-307). The chapter focuses on the rhetorical techniques Browning uses in The Ring and the Book—in particular on the mythic reverberations of the story—to present his religious position. The Ring and the Book is thus seen as the culmination of "Browning's rhetorical evolution" (p. 307). "Cleon," "Saul," and "Bishop Blougram" are among the poems discussed at length elsewhere in the book as representative of earlier stages of this evolutionary development.


Tracy's book consists of twelve critical discussions of Browning, six of which were published elsewhere before being collected in this volume and six of which
were specially written for this book. Of those previously published, only the piece by Barbara Melchiori (from her *Browning's Poetry of Reticence, 1968*) is pertinent to the focus of this bibliography and is thus noted elsewhere in it. Among the remainder, the following show significant interest in Browning's religious themes:


Tracy argues against a notion that has often been at the heart of critical responses to Browning, i.e., that since his poetry is so consistently dramatic he rarely expressed anything of himself. Tracy hears Browning "speak out" at a number of points in the poetry, but the Pope of *The Ring and the Book* is suggested as Browning's "ideal personality epitomising the basic values and feelings that the poet expects us to share with him" (p. 16):

To him the universe is ultimately mysterious and the ways of God past finding out. . . . Many of his opinions are individualistic and unconventional: he acknowledges the usefulness of religious doubt, is sceptical about most of the established institutions of church and state, and declares himself on the side of the soldier saints who do what their intuitions tell them is right in defiance of law and custom. These attitudes are essentially those of Browning himself . . . (p. 17).

Priestley discusses in his essay several of Browning's religious poems. In treating "Caliban" Priestley makes these observations about Browning's notions of the incarnation and of God's nature:

Now, Browning in many poems insists that the doctrine of the Incarnation, the primary doctrine of Christianity, is known only through Revelation. This is abundantly clear in "Saul"... [and] in "A Death in the Desert." ... It is clear also in "Cleon" and in "Karshish," where the unaided reason fails to arrive at the notion of a God of love, willing to share man's suffering. Repeatedly Browning argues that the peculiarity of Christianity is that to the conception of an all-knowing and all-powerful God, it adds that of an all-loving God, embodied in Christ. ... In Browning's view, the pre-Christian religions (with the exception of Judaism, with its prophecies of Christ, as illustrated in "Saul" and in the Psalms) arrived by unaided reason only at conceptions of a God of knowledge and power, not of love. This, then, is the limitation of natural theology, as distinguished from revealed theology. And this is the limitation of Caliban's. Nowhere in Caliban's speculations is there any sign of a God of Love (p. 131).

Priestley also sees in "Christmas-Eve" a complex, ironic attempt by Browning to grasp for himself the meaning of Christ, a struggle that was necessary before the relative certainty reflected in later poems could be attained.

Burrows, Leonard. Browning the Poet: An Introductory Study. Nedlands, Australia: University of Western
A number of the religious poems receive attention in this survey but with no very noteworthy perceptions or interpretations.


Eller "nominate[s] Robert Browning as a patron saint of the theology of hope" (p. 263) in this article. He bases his nomination on material found in three poems: "Karshish," "Cleon," and "Bishop Blougram." At several points Eller compares Browning to Kierkegaard.

Greenberg, Robert A. "Ruskin, Pugin, and the Contemporary Context of 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb.'" PMLA, 84 (1969), 1588-94.

Greenberg reads Browning's poem against the background of the Oxford Movement and the anti-Catholic feelings that were so prominent in mid-nineteenth-century England.

Killham argues against those who see The Ring and the Book as a "relativist poem"—he alludes specifically to the cases made for such a view by Johnson (1961) and Langbaum (1957). For Killham, the poem "stands ... as an elaborate Victorian monument to the faith that truth does not depend upon human testimony, but is absolute" (p. 172). Browning's own reason for such a faith comes, says Killham, because the poet "is by temperament, and by the forces of his time no doubt, committed to a faith in God as the prop for his moral being" (p. 170).


Lee's primary argument is that, though the poem examines a particular man in a particular historical setting, the experience of Cleon has "universal significance": in the poem Browning portrays "the perennial problem of the human condition, of faith and reason, and of the relationship of man to God" (p. 57).

O'Malley opposes those critics who equate the Pope's voice with Browning's own in *The Ring and the Book*. The parallels between the churchman and the poet are quite evident up to a point, but the Pope parts company with Browning, says O'Malley, when the prelate condemns Guido to death. The proper verdict is rendered by Pompilia when she, "in an intuitive act of love" (p. 20), forgives her tormentor, Guido. "The Pope is not Browning's spokesman but Pompilia is" (p. 20), concludes O'Malley.


Omans suggests that the concept of art represented by the Fra is a kind of Kantian transcendentalism in which the material world (flesh) is seen as a "symbolic projection" (p. 129) of an immaterial world (soul). By following such a notion in his painting, "Lippo elevates himself toward soul or God" (p. 129).


Peterson's book is not as concerned with presenting
the author's own views on Browning as it is in record-
ing the views of those in the late nineteenth century
who were most fascinated by the poet, i.e., the founders
and the members of the London Browning Society. As is
well known, many of these admirers of the poet were
attracted to him because of the edifying religious
messages of his verse: Browning seemed to be speaking
to an age in anguish over religious questions. Peter-
son explains Browning's broad appeal in these terms:

[he was] a great poet who seemed to straddle suc-
cessfully the two worlds [of faith and of skeptic-
ism]. It is significant that Browning's theologi-
cal position was sufficiently broad--vague, if you
please--so that his religious poetry could appeal
to the entire spectrum of believers and unbelievers
(p. 6).

With the religious aspect of Browning's work so pre-
occupying Society members, it is not at all surprising
that references to Browning's religion abound in this
book. Among the views represented are those of such
notable Browning commentators as Furnivall, Berdoe,
Symonds, Kingsland, Corson, Orr, and Dowden.

Sullivan, Mary Rose. *Browning's Voices in "The Ring and
the Book."* Toronto: University of Toronto Press,
1969.

Sullivan does not concentrate heavily on the spe-
cifically religious elements of Browning's poem, but
she does make this interesting observation:

The analogy between human and divine love in *The Ring and the Book* is . . . finally linked to the analogy . . . between the poetic method and divine creation. As the poet mirrors God, doing His work on earth and making Him apprehensible to man, he stands as the connecting link between time and eternity, drawing the finite and the infinite ever more closely together (p. 210).

Then, with reference to the work of both Whitla (1963) and Collins (1967), Sullivan notes that "many critics see the Incarnation, as a symbol of the ultimate union of the finite and infinite, playing a central role in Browning's work" (pp. 210-11).


The function of art, as explained by Thompson in this essay, comes very close to being the same as that commonly connected with religion: they both are means of apprehending and/or embodying eternal Truth.


In this review-essay on Altick's and Loucks's *Roman Murder Story* (1968), Thompson makes this observa-
tion:
Browning focuses on individual persons [by means of monologues] because he held to the Protestant and Puritan view that the means of salvation lies solely in the faith of the individual person and not in the institution. He convincingly demonstrates this belief by effecting Pompilia's spiritual victory through a lone person who acts in defiance of state and church (p. 325).

Thompson's article is valuable also for its bibliography on materials relating to *The Ring and the Book*: it is the most comprehensive and up-to-date available.


Gide's understanding of the Christian gospel was important in the Frenchman's being attracted by Browning, claims Chambers. Gide wrote his perception of the Christian ethic:

He who loves his life, his soul--who protects his personality ... shall lose it; but he who renounces it shall make it really living, will assure it eternal life; not eternal life in the future, but will make it already, right now, live in eternity (p. 223).

Chambers claims that Gide saw Browning fulfilling this very Christian ethic through poetry:

To discover Browning, then, engaged in the same task as he himself, achieving rebirth over and over again in the endlessly varied series of ego renunciations represented in his monologues, must certainly have been as reassuring to Gide as it was exhilarating (pp. 223-24).
As the title of Colville's book suggests, this critic gives much attention in his chapter on Browning to the links between the Victorian poet and his Romantic ancestors. Colville finds Browning's poetic voice to be often inauthentic. Although he strives determinedly to sound like a sure-minded Christian in his work, Browning seems to remain underneath a struggling, doubting Romantic in spite of himself:

Browning constantly gives an impression that he is not working from his own experience. His often-expressed belief in some imprecise form of Christianity, which appears to carry philosophical assumptions about the roles of love, death, and evil akin to Romantic ones, has an oddly automatic quality about it. . . . Browning's optimism, for all its emphasis, appears simply rootless, occurring as an isolated, predetermined phenomenon supported, if at all, only by consequent argument (pp. 160-61).

Colville criticizes Browning severely for "limit[ing] his imagination" (p. 162) and thus betraying his most genuine religious feelings. When Browning contends with religious problems in his poetry, his worst qualities as a poet are evident; however, claims Colville, the same kind of poetic situation brings out the best in Browning's contemporaries, Arnold and Tennyson. A number of religious poems are treated in Colville's discussion of Browning, among them: Christmas-Eve and


Drew devotes a substantial portion of his book (chapters entitled "Browning's optimism" and "Browning's poems on Christianity and other ethical systems," pp. 179-251) to a consideration of religious meanings in Browning's poetry. In examining Browning's optimism, Drew is largely concerned with answering the assessment of Browning's thought and religion recorded in Jones's influential book, Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Thinker (1891). A lengthy treatment of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day defends what Jones thought to be a superficial--because personal, subjective, and irrational--understanding of religious experience. Drew claims that such notions were becoming characteristic of nineteenth-century religious thought; Kierkegaard is cited as a kin to Browning in this respect.
Drew also discusses Browning's work against the background of the nineteenth-century religious thinker Feuerback.


This volume provides a generous sampling of the critical reception accorded Browning's work from 1833-1891. A number of the responses included in the book are concerned with religious elements in the poetry and are thus listed in Part I (1833-1899) of this bibliography where they are designated by +.


Mattheisen presents one of the strongest and fullest defences of Browning, the thinker. This defence comes in the course of Mattheisen's explanation of The Ring and the Book in existential terms. Throughout the discussion references are made to the links between Browning's own methods and ideas and those of the Christian existentialist Kierkegaard.

This article concentrates on the various stones mentioned by the Bishop. A study of the references in the poem shows that the churchman sees only half their value: "interested in their aesthetic value alone, the Bishop in effect denies them transcendental significance" (p. 209). The poem makes it clear that, in the case of the Bishop, "paganism . . . won out over Christian asceticism" (p. 209).


Shields discusses "Bishop Blougram's Apology" as it reflects characteristics of the mid-nineteenth-century Catholic Church in England and, more specifically, as it portrays the attitudes and convictions of Browning's contemporaries, Cardinals Wiseman and Newman.


In his discussion of Caponsacchi's spiritual development, Yetman acknowledges that he takes up where Boo,
in her earlier study (1965) of the priest, left off. Caponsacchi ultimately recognizes

... that the very system to which he has attached himself for salvation is, in its present form, the greatest barrier between himself and the salvation he seeks: the Church has lost contact with its own ideals. In spite of that, however, Pompilia [offers] Caponsacchi the rare opportunity to recover in his existential experience the ideals upon which the Church was founded (pp. 15-16).

The book is composed of separate discussions of twenty-three "major short poems," among which are: "Saul," "Karshish," "Cleon," "Caliban," "A Death in the Desert," and "Epilogue" to Dramatis Personae. Included in the book are two kinds of useful bibliographical aids: following each discussion is a short annotated list of "suggested readings" on the poem treated; and the book concludes with a list of works published on Browning in the years 1945-69.

Cundiff, Paul A. Browning's Ring Metaphor and Truth.
The essence of this book is an examination of Browning's use of "the Ring metaphor and the poet's use of the word truth and truth itself" (P. 7) in The Ring and the Book. For the purpose of this bibliography the most
interesting segment of Cundiff's rather disjointed study (the seven chapters fail to form a coherent whole) is entitled "Pope Innocent and God's Truth" (pp. 158-95). Here Cundiff concludes that the Pope truly speaks "in God's name" in the poem. But Cundiff also becomes preoccupied in this chapter by the views of Jones (1891), Drew (1970), and Crowell (1968) on Browning's religion and thought.


Ewbank sees "Bishop Blougram's Apology" as a "false" debate. Blougram is not responding to genuine questions but imagined ones. Thus the Bishop is presented arguing with himself, revealing all the flaws and doubts which riddle his faith.


Fontana disputes the conventional view of the Bishop, i.e., that he is "an exemplum of the vices of worldly lust and vanity" (p. 278). Instead, claims Fontana, there is a kind of "inverted heroism" in the Bishop: "unlike the conventional Christian hero, who affirms life by embracing death, the Bishop affirms life by
holding on to it, even as it passes" (p. 282).


A section of this book (pp. 69-86) is specifically devoted to the religious poems published in the 1850's. Gridley presents no coherent thesis on religion in Browning's works, but he does nonetheless treat such poems as *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, "Saul," and "Bishop Blougram" in a useful way.


In his essay Harper puzzles over this question: if Browning believed so strongly in the Incarnation (Whitla's *The Central Truth* [1963] is cited as authoritative in establishing the existence of such a belief), "why did his attitude toward Christianity remain so ambiguous" (p. 73)? Harper traces Browning's difficulty to his evangelical upbringing and to the problem temporality has always presented to Christian thought and belief.

Kirk sees analogies between the way Blougram handles himself in his debate with Gigadibs and the way the Bishop would probably move in a game of chess. Seen from this perspective, Blougram's victory has its well-known taint removed: the Bishop becomes just a detached player of an intellectual game and cannot be justifiably condemned for lacking the proper "qualities of heart or soul" (p. 271).

Langbaum sees in the final attitude and words of Guido "a recognition of Pompilia's goodness and his own evil, which suggests his moral regeneration" (p. 289). In this article, the poem's "relativism" (a term used earlier by Langbaum in his Poetry of Experience [1957]) is viewed from a new perspective:

To see Guido as saved is to understand the sense in which the poem is relativist--in that all limited points of view, all selves, are justified as part of God's scheme. Through being what they are intensely enough, they lead back to God. The relative is the index to an absolute reality that cannot be known through human institutions and judgments, but can at certain intense moments be felt (p. 305).


Shaffer sees "A Death in the Desert" as "an archetype of nineteenth-century apologetical casuistry" (p. 205).

[Browning] did not oppose the higher criticism--he could not--but he feared the diminution in the quality of belief that it might entail in its practitioners, friends, and enemies alike. "Death in the Desert" exhibits the power of a belief founded on doubt and denial (p. 206).

Thus, says Shaffer, "Browning was meeting Strauss on his own ground" (p. 217) in this poem. The poet was
not arguing for the historicity of John; in fact, history is almost made irrelevant and the attacks of the higher critics absorbed and, in a sense, made invalid by the John of Browning's poem.

This "John," then is neither the aged apostle nor his gnostic disciples and interpolators, but "John" as inherited and interpreted by Christians. That he can be taken thus is shown by Browning as the triumph of Christianity over historical fact (pp. 216-17).

Both Renan and Strauss are treated at length in Schaffer's discussion of the poem.


Shapiro compares "Caliban" with two of its most important sources, one biblical and the other Shakespearean.


Shapiro reads the poem as an attack on Blougram:

Though he is intelligent, his willingness to do almost anything for power or worldly success reveals him as an egotist and materialist. Browning's irony is double: the speaker's words not only damn him, they cause Gigadibs to examine his own values and beliefs, and at the end to flee everything Blougram represents (p. 246).
Shapiro cites the many allusions in the poem to the Gospel of St. John to bolster his position.


Crowder contends that, even though the narrator of "Christmas-Eve" appears to speak for Browning, the character is ultimately dramatic; thus the religious ideas and concerns expressed in the poem cannot always be attributed to Browning himself.


Among the "complementary" poems that Harrold discusses in religious terms are Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (pp. 78-91) and, to a lesser extent, *The Ring and the Book* (pp. 116-92).


Jack treats many of Browning's poems without giving much attention to religious matters in them. But he
devotes an interesting chapter to Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day ("A False Direction," pp. 124-34), commenting on the relative inferiority of the work.


Bieman's study relates the poem to the biblical accounts on which it is based. She suggests a strong parallel between the Bible and Browning's poem: both are "testaments" of the work of God in the world.


Bishop and Ferns explain some of the religious meanings of "Abt Vogler" in terms of the traditional number symbolism found therein.


Guerin claims that Cleon seems to approach, but ultimately rejects, "such Teilhardian ideas as the increase of consciousness, the personalization of creation, love as energy, and the movement towards the Christosphere"
The article goes on to suggest significant parallels between Browning's own religious ideas and those of Teilhard.


According to Hyde, the tripartite structure of the poem "is a scale model of the historic church" (p. 125), with the prologue focusing on Christian origins, the central monologue on New Testament developments, and the epilogue on modern skepticism.


As might be expected in a detailed biography, the important matter of Browning's religion gets careful scrutiny in various sections of this book. Irvine and Honan treat such topics as the early religious background of the poet; Pauline as a depiction of the victory of Christian faith over reason and Shelleyan free thought; Browning's view of the poet's religious nature; the "Protestant" nature of Browning's Catholic churchmen; Browning and Renan and Strauss. (See "religion" in index.)

In the subject area of this bibliography Lawson has written one of the most significant and useful books. Lawson's stated method, however—"a word-study of Browning's use of the word God" (p. xii)—believes the richness and suggestiveness of this study. It is no mere word-study. Equipped with considerable knowledge of nineteenth and, more important, twentieth-century religious thought, Lawson approaches Browning with convincing claims that the poet's religion can be much more readily grasped in our century than was possible in the last. This is so, says Lawson, because Browning's views are more compatible with those of twentieth-century religious thinkers than with those of his contemporaries. So Lawson's discussion goes forward with references to theologians and writers like Harvey Cox, Tillich, Sartre, Camus, Unamuno, Buber, Maritain. Many of the religious opinions represented by these figures are called existentialist today and, according to Lawson,

Browning is at home among the existentialists: he places individual freedom above custom, dynamic growth above abstract order, intuition and experi-
ence above—but not divorced from—reason, individual above social man (p. 25).

Further, says Lawson, "much of [Browning's] religious thought was misinterpreted by almost all his Victorian readers, because Browning's existentialist frame of reference was ahead of them" (p. 25). Browning is also linked to such non-twentieth-century thinkers as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and to such non-existentialist thinkers as Teilhard de Chardin. Poems discussed in a particularly enlightening way in Lawson's study are Pauline, Sordello, Christmas-Eve and Easter Day, "Bishop Blougram," "A Death in the Desert," "Karshish," "Cleon," and "Saul."


Neufeldt suggests that in this poem Browning speaks to his own age as a poet-prophet presenting a revitalized Christianity which will reestablish a sense of God's presence in the world. In assuming this role, says Neufeldt, Browning becomes, in a sense, Carlyle's hero poet.

This book follows the usual Twayne format of a brief and relatively superficial overview of the writer and his work. Pearsall gives due attention to religious themes—for instance, in a short section entitled "Testaments of True Religion" (pp. 86-89) "Saul," "Cleon," and "Karshish" are treated—but the book as a whole places no unusual emphasis on religious elements in Browning's work.


This article focuses on Browning's Christianization, in "Saul," of the Hebrew Messiah.


The following studies collected in Armstrong's book fit into the focus of this bibliography.


Drew is concerned with putting Browning's religious struggle and development into the context of the religious and intellectual history of the nineteenth century. Christianity—particularly its most significant values and principles—was a dominant force in Browning's
life and work, even in his later years when, says Drew, "he no longer retained an active Christian faith" (p. 107).

The issue then which dominates Browning's poetry after 1855 is not that of deciding the important values by which human life is to be lived, since the values of the good Christian life are sufficient, but that of deciding how these values are to be given force if revelation is to be set aside (p. 108).

As Drew shows Browning attempting to give these values "force," he relates the poet to two phenomena of that era to suggest that his work was shaped by certain related currents of ideas--first, the controversy between Intuitionism (Martineau, et al.) and Utilitarianism (Bentham, et al.); and second, the thought of Kierkegaard. The Ring and the Book and "Bishop Blougram's Apology" receive significant attention in this essay.


A portion of Melchiori's discussion (pp. 174-78) is devoted to a consideration of Browning's strong anti-Catholic prejudice.


Peckham understands Romanticism as a phenomenon that arose following the Enlightenment to replace a
disintegrating Christianity; it arose to give man a sense of the divine and of redemption but without the traditional religious trappings. Peckham discusses *Pauline* as a poem representing this notion of Romanticism.


One short section of this essay (pp. 30-33) focuses on the reading of the young Browning that ultimately contributed to the poet's religious outlook and opinions.


Browning is the poet given greatest attention in this book. The "particularity" that Christ notes in Browning is represented by the poet's concern with the grotesque and by his dramatic monologue technique. A poet like Arnold condemned the particularity and multiplicity of the world because he "felt the idea of the universal had to prevail over the particular in order to maintain . . . cultural and moral values" (p. 65); but for Browning (and Hopkins too, notes
Christ) such characteristics of the world were the source of great delight and meaning. Christ goes on to link Browning with Kierkegaard and with existentialist thought in general:

Browning's close resemblance to Kierkegaard and modern existentialists stems from their common apprehension of a nineteenth-century problem—the growing conviction of man's inability to ascertain universal religious and moral truths objectively through reason and a parallel conviction of the independent reality of each man's experience. . . . If the source of knowledge is individual experience, the source of religious and moral value ultimately becomes the individual experience as well, and its only standard is intensity. The connection between particular and general can no longer be provided by reason, but only by intuition, emotion, faith, intensity (pp. 124-25).

Thus does Christ explain, at least partially, Browning's anti-rationalism and also his focus on the individual lives and minds of his monologuists.


This article is a reaction to much of the earlier commentary on "Bishop Blougram," especially to Priestley's (1946). Collins reads the conclusion of the poem—the account of Gigadibs voyage to Australia—in a unique way:

Gigadibs has read the Bishop's message, not as the testimony of pure faith and not as an affirmation
of his own idealism. He has been inspired to go off and seek his fortune, and forget philosophical nonsense. Blougram has, indeed, succeeded in his lesson (p. 20).

So once again a critic emphasizes Blougram's worldliness and finds that his faith is "very much of a piece with a prelate plump of mind and body" (p. 18).


Coventry argues for the acceptance of Browning—"both as poet and man"—as an orthodox Christian; but Coventry also adds a proviso, i.e., that the term "orthodox Christian" be understood "in a broad and general sense" (p. 20) rather than narrowly and restrictively.


Dahl and Brewer present a reading of the poem according to the "concept of four hierarchical levels or stages of mystic vision" (p. 101) derived from Neoplatonic or Hermetic tradition. The commentators speculate about Browning's possible acquaintance with this tradition.
Harris, Wendell V. "Browning's Caliban, Plato's Cosmogony, and Bentham on Natural Religion." Studies in Browning and His Circle, 3 (1975), 95-103.

Harris tries to suggest that the breadth of Browning's religious satire in "Caliban Upon Setebos" covers all theology that places too much stock in reason and not enough in revelation. Such a "natural theology" extends from the pre-Christian era (Plato) to Browning's own time (Bentham) and is reflected in Caliban's own reflections. The ultimate inadequacy of natural theology is shown in the fact that it is incapable of grasping the key to revealed Christian theology, i.e., the revelation of God's love.

Mishler, Mary K. "God versus God: The Tension in 'Karsshish.'" English Language Notes, 13 (1975), 132-37.

Mishler claims that the tension in the poem arises not from a conflict between Karshish's rationality and Christianity's irrational qualities but rather from a conflict between Karshish's ancient Egyptian religion and the religion he has just discovered, Christianity.


This book discusses and defends the quality of the
poems written after The Ring and the Book. Ryals begins with a valuable introduction which details some of Browning's most important religious conceptions; he gives special attention to the incarnation in the poet's work. The book points out that the religious quest for an "Ultimate Reality" (p. 27)—a quest marking Browning's work up through The Ring and the Book—continues unabated in the later poetry.


Witt suggests that the model for Caliban's thought may have been the theology of Plato in the Timaeus.


A substantial portion of Allen's dissertation presents an authoritative edition (accompanied by variants and annotations) of this important poem by Browning. But an even greater portion of the dissertation is devoted to discussion of the poem itself as well as the poem's context in the Browning canon. Extended treatment (pp. 18-77) is given to the early works, beginning
with Pauline; and a long examination (pp. 78-107) of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day introduces Allen's close look at "Bishop Blougram." Allen's emphasis as he discusses the poem is on Bishop Blougram's casuistry, or his attempt to resolve difficult problems of conscience. Allen ultimately interprets the poem as "the special-pleading of a man who masks his devotion to worldly values in a show of faith and can only resort to deceptive half-truths of the intellect for his self-justification" (p. ii).


Bross argues that Browning's "poem does not seek 'grounds' for faith; it dramatizes an individual's attainment of faith through a conscious altering of his concept of its nature" (from abstract, p. i). The altering of faith depicted in the poem is explained thus:

[The speaker] comes to see that he has been living as if the spiritual "hints" intermittently apparent in human experience were an inherent aspect of earthly reality, intended to delight man, rather than indicators of a transcendent reality which alone satisfies man, to which man can respond with commitment despite the absence of "adequate evidence" (from abstract, p. i).

Bross relates the poem to the notion of faith expressed
in a letter written by Browning to Elizabeth Barrett five years before the publication of "Easter-Day."


Chaudhuri states his purpose in this article as an attempt

to demonstrate that Browning's attitude to Christianity was identical with that of the English Higher Critics of the middle of the nineteenth century. Since Jowett's essay "On the Interpretation of Scripture" in Essays and Reviews is the most representative of English Higher Criticism, I will discuss Browning mainly in relation to the views held by Jowett (p. 120).


Fricke reads "A Death in the Desert" as primarily an answer to the biblical critics of Browning's day. Fricke's arguments and conclusions echo loudly those of Elinor Shaffer (1972) on the same poem, but negligent or irresponsible scholarship leads to Fricke's
failure even to acknowledge the existence of the earlier study.

Laird, Robert G. "'He did not Sit Five Minutes': The Conversion of Gigadibs." University of Toronto Quarterly, 45 (1976), 295-313.

Laird sees in "Bishop Blougram" an attempt by Browning to criticize certain established religious attitudes or institutions that the poet found objectionable and also to present in a positive way his own religious views:

'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' then, does attack the general contemporary development of scepticism and disbelief, a disbelief not only in the institutional forms of religion, but in the reality of the religion itself, and Blougram quite accurately lays bare and destroys the bases of such scepticism which he attributes to Gigadibs. At the same time, the poem is also a criticism of Blougram for his failure to live according to what he himself feels to be important, for his refusal to accept the Pauline view of interior revolution, and for the rationalization of his acceptance of the good things of this world which his position in the hierarchy provides him. And yet, for all this, Browning's final concern in the poem is to demonstrate how the Spirit works in mysterious ways, how it can pierce clouds of pride, hatred, sensuality, hypocrisy, and doubt to bring about its effect... (pp. 308-9).

The change in Gigadibs is the poem's example of these "mysterious ways" of the Spirit.

Phipps, Charles Thomas, S. J. Browning's Clerical Charac-
Phipps justifies his extended study of Browning's clerical characters, claiming that other investigations of religious elements in Browning's work have simply not done justice to the "clerical or religious characters as unique artistic creations" (p. 3). Phipps attempts to arrive at an explanation for and an evaluation of the rather striking phenomenon of Browning's frequent preoccupation with clerical characters, themes, and situations, and the obvious congeniality he discovered in their exploitation—to the extent that they make up perhaps the most artistically successful and significant group of characters in his collected works (p. 4).

In his "Introduction" and "List of Works Cited" Phipps includes much useful bibliographical material related to the subject of this present bibliography. Phipps's study includes the following material, which has been published elsewhere:


The Ring and the Book and Book X (the Pope's monologue) in particular constitute, asserts Phipps,
an exposé and criticism of the inevitable corruption and spiritual sterility within authoritarian religion as it was most strikingly exemplified in the Catholic Church. As Browning envisioned it, such a religious society substituted ritual for simple and sincere worship, and sought to indulge dogmatic security rather than nourish the ennobling, admittedly risky search which marks the Browning concept of faith (p. 713).

In the opening sections of this essay Phipps links Browning's portrayal of the Church and the Pope with specific historical facts and movements.


Phipps discusses Caponsacchi's role in The Ring and the Book. To Phipps the poem is "an eloquent religio-social protest" because

... the unconventional love of Caponsacchi and Pompilia took on new dimensions of social as well as personal religious importance, and became a symbol of revolution and emancipation from domestic, legal, and religious rationalisms— all of which Browning saw as oppressively focused within the ecclesiastical situation of seventeenth-century Catholic Italy (p. 718).


Phipps focuses on the importance of the Bishop qua Bishop in the poem:
The central irony of the poem and the primary contributor to its dramatic intensity is the overriding fact of the Bishop's professional identity. An examination of the workings of three varying motifs (the recurring religious epigrams, the attitudes and actions of the Bishop's sons, and the pervasive religious imagery) enables the reader to perceive more clearly the thematic centrality of the speaker's clerical status (p. 199).


Rivers outlines certain elements of Browning's thought that have the flavor of existentialism. Two such elements are the doubt that mixes with his faith, and thus makes it dynamic, and his belief in the distinct identity of individual men:

Like Pascal and Kierkegaard, [Browning] understands that man can never rest in a static faith. . . . He shows remarkable affinity with Kierkegaard, and even with atheistic existentialism, in stressing the uniqueness of man's being. . . . Man can never remain fixed in existence (pp. 32-33).

Browning's subjectivity also catches Rivers's attention:
"Browning, born one year before Kierkegaard, shows himself to be a Christian existentialist by stressing the subjective aspects of the human person, considered as a creature of God" (p. 40). From this subjectivity, then—as it is with the existentialist—comes Browning's attempt to save his own soul, says Rivers.


Rivers continues to outline his earlier-stated (1961) view of Browning as an existentialist poet. Existentialists like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marcel, and Sartre are depicted as criticizing the abstractness, mechanization, lukewarmness, and hypocrisy of western civilization and institutionalized Christianity; on the other hand these thinkers celebrate subjectivity and the unique role of the poet.

Browning similarly attacks those aspects of society which are without fullness of being: motivation without joy and love, and religious belief without genuine devotion. In *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* he is critical of both ritualistic and rational Christianity while praising the depth of feeling in Dissenting, Non-Conformist, Christianity (p. 9).

Bright claims that certain references in the poem liken Fra Lippo Lippi's role to that of the prophet, John the Baptist: the former prophesies a new reality in the realm of art, the latter a new reality in the realm of religion.


This limited biography, restricted as it is to the poet's early years, reveals more about the religious education and experience of the young Browning than do most other biographical studies. In an interesting section on "Evangelical Religion" (pp. 51-62), Maynard suggests that some of Browning's later tendencies and traits stem from his early religious experience, which gave him

... a general moral outlook on the universe, a view that stressed the reality of imperfection at the same time that it urged the necessity of growth and development. Above all, such religious and moral values, with their strong stress upon moral self-awareness and a vital, inner religious life, must also have played a large part in developing the special sense of self-consciousness that the author of *Pauline* professed (pp. 61-62).

This book records Browning's poetic development in
detail only through the composition of *Pauline*. But in that poem Maynard sees the pattern of part of the youthful poet's spiritual pilgrimage: just as earlier Shelley had led Browning along the path of skepticism, even atheism, in *Pauline* Shelley leads Browning to the path of faith rediscovered.

For Browning, the Christ-like Shelley seems naturally to serve as intermediary with Christ, just as Christ does with God. Faith in Shelley has opened the way for Browning's religious feelings to find their way back to their origin (p. 208).

Another section of interest in Maynard's book is devoted to "The Legacy of Protestant Culture" (pp. 308-19). Browning's attitudes toward the Bible, Christian classics, and Roman Catholicism—and where those attitudes are evident in the poetry—are touched on here.


O'Neal's investigation of Miltonic allusions in this poem leads him to suggest that Blougram is an unworthy pastor; in fact "the bishop . . . become[s], at least in part, a kind of Satan-figure . . ." (p. 181).

Waters, Douglas D. "Mysticism, Meaning, and Structure in
Waters claims that earlier treatments of "Saul" have not emphasized fully enough the poem's mystical elements. To correct readers' understanding of the poem, then, Waters suggests in his article

... that the Christian mystical tradition, represented in the Middle Ages by St. Bernard of Clairvaux and in the Renaissance by Edmund Spenser and the German cobbler Jacob Boehme, has left its influence on "Saul" and has helped the poet clarify his theological message to his age ... (p. 76).

To Colby, Saul, in his depressed state, represents the impotence and emptiness that the conventional state of Romantic melancholy had come to mean for Browning. But David the musician stands in this poem as an antidote for Saul's condition: he has touch with the divine and can thus point the way to Saul's fulfillment.

[David's] art cannot give him the power to cure Saul, but it can at least give him a vision of the divine power that will cure him: "See the Christ stand!"

In David's sudden vision of the coming of Christ there is the quality most of us today would recognize more from poetry than from religion. It is an aesthetic rather than a divine epiphany ... (p. 94).
Markus, Julia. "Bishop Blougram and the Literary Men."


Markus provides in this essay an account of the furor surrounding an event in 1850—"the reestablishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England" (p. 173), with Nicholas Wiseman elevated to Cardinal—that served Browning with material for his poem on Bishop Blougram. Markus claims that by exploring the literary battle of 1850-51, using Punch and the Globe as focal points, one can come to an awareness of the general historical and biographical structures on which the portrait of Blougram is based; through this exploration, Browning's response to a great religious crisis (and uproar) of the time emerges (p. 174).


Munich points out that Browning's poem is "about immortality, not only in a religious sense but in an artistic sense as well" (p. 117). She explains herself:

"Cleon" is important as an ars poetica partly because it combines the problems of the Victorian artist with the difficulties of the Victorian Christian. The long passages about biological development bear equally upon the question of artistic progress and upon matters of Darwinian evolution and its challenge to religious faith (p. 119).
PART V

UNPUBLISHED DISSERTATIONS


Henry takes the unusual position of seeing the Pope in The Ring and the Book as not Browning's mouthpiece but as simply "a questioning, fallible old man" who contributes only a partial truth to the ring of truth represented by the poem as a whole.


Goldsmith contends that Browning's poetry, in the first four decades of his career, reflects strongly the influence of that era's various religious controversies. Among the controversies discussed are those that arose from the Church-state argument of the 1830's, Newman's entry into the Roman Church, and Cardinal Wiseman's Appeal to the English People. Many of the controversies treated by Goldsmith centered on the role of the Catholic Church and the validity of certain Catholic doctrines as they were then affecting England's religious life.

This study of critical reactions to Browning, 1889-1950, occasionally touches on religious elements in the poet's work.


"This study deals with the question of whether Robert Browning was an original religious thinker, as he has hitherto been considered, or a spokesman for the tradition of evangelical Christianity." After raising the question and after comparing Browning's religious views with key evangelical doctrines, Harper concludes that Browning was less an original religious thinker than a striking representative of the tradition of evangelical Christianity in its nineteenth-century form and that his views do differ markedly from those of his earliest religious teachers, George Clayton and Henry Melvill.


Stevens sees two mythic levels in The Ring and the Book, one based on the romantic legend of St. George (Caponsacchi = St. George, Pompilia = Lady in Distress, and Guido = Dragon) and the other based on the Christian story (Caponsacchi = Christ, Pompilia = Virgin Mother,
and Guido = Satan). Browning's myth-making was an attempt to compensate for the decline of Christian orthodoxy, and to put the basic Christian ethic on a different footing: the mythic rather than the historical.


In The Ring and the Book Thompson understands Browning to be treating the themes of success and failure in Christian terms:

In his discussion of success and failure, Browning makes considerable use of the Christian story of the Fall and ultimate Redemption of man. He uses allusions to Adam and Eve and the Resurrection as a means of characterization and as a means of theme development. This comparison reaches its zenith in the case of Pompilia, who is directly associated with the Virgin Mary. These references to the Fall and Resurrection of man directly relate to the success-failure theme, for in both the key issues are spiritual.


Vail's dissertation contends that The Ring and the Book is a "Christian Epic" (following in the tradition of Dante's Divine Comedy, Ariosto's Orlando Furioso,
Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*) which has for its subject "the Fall and Redemption of man."


"This dissertation explores the ambiguity of Browning's relationship to the Higher Critics; his overt hostility even when his own religious conclusions were highly similar to theirs." Goyne demonstrates that Browning's poetry, in both its theme and form, reflects a religious understanding very close to that propounded by biblical critics like Strauss, Feuerbach, and Renan.

Loucks, James Frederick, II. "'Scripture for His Purpose': A Study of Robert Browning's Use of Biblical Allusions in *The Ring and the Book*." *DA*, 28 (1967), 3677A (Ohio State).

Loucks makes several claims in his dissertation: first, that "the speakers in the ten interior monologues may be classified by their attitude toward, and use of, the Bible"--some are reverent literalists, some irreverent ironists; second, that "nearly every major Christian theme is reflected by Biblical allusions, of which there are many hundreds"; and third, that "the
miraculous re-enactment of the essential Christian sacrifice in Caponsacchi's rescue of the persecuted Pompilia becomes for Browning proof of the immanence of God and of His intervention in human history."


McBride connects Browning's attempts to formulate and poetically realize an idea of joy to two traditions: the Romantic and the Christian.


Inspired by Old Testament antecedents (Moses in particular), Browning conceives of the poet's role as one of being a priest-prophet. As he interprets events in the world, then, Browning attempts to communicate divine truth to man and thus sees "vast implications in seemingly insignificant acts." Miller claims that _The Ring and the Book_ represents such a prophetic interpretation by Browning: "he reveals on a metaphysical level the Christian experience of the Fall, the Redemption, and the Final Judgment of all mankind in the crudely
recorded story of a seventeenth century murder case."


In this dissertation Davis examines Browning's notion of the soul ("that aspect of man which transcends the present existence"), a key element in the poet's overall religious understanding. The study focuses on Pauline, Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, and Red Cotton Night-Cap Country.


This dissertation presents the full text (along with variants) of this important religious poem. But it also examines some of the significant biographical and intellectual influences (e.g., Browning's acquaintance with Elizabeth, the Oxford and Evangelical movements, the phenomenon of Strauss's higher criticism) that helped shape this work.

McClatchey, Joe Hill. "Browning and Eschatology: A Reading
of the Poems from Pauline to The Ring and the Book."

McClatchey discusses Browning's treatment or use of the Christian doctrine of eschatology ("last things": death, judgment, heaven, hell) in his poetry.


Jetton contends that a significant aspect of Browning's poetics caused him to portray "the perception of religious truth, and its transmutation into symbol to define it more precisely." To illustrate this tendency, Jetton treats the dominant religious symbols in the following "poems": Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, "A Death in the Desert," "Pompilia," and "The Pope."


Lammers examines "Cleon," "Karshish," "Saul," "Caliban," and "Bishop Blougram" as commentaries by Browning on the phenomenon of natural theology. Natural theology is shown to fall short in at least two respects:
first, it does not admit the human faculty of intuition, which Browning believed to be necessary for faith; and second, it cannot lead one to know the "personality" of God.


Shumway demonstrates, in the course of his discussion, Browning's notion of the interdependence of erotic and spiritual love: "Indeed, for Browning, as for Dante, only through the love of a woman does man grow toward perfection and reach the presence of God."


Concentrating on Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello, Walsh discusses a . . . theme that became central to much of the early poetry: Browning's idea that the poet's duty was to function as both a prophet and priest to mankind. As prophet, the poet received an inspired vision from God; as priest, he interpreted and communicated that vision to the world.

This dissertation examines some of the characters and voices of Browning's poems (e.g., "Saul," "Karshish," La Saisiaz, and The Ring and the Book) as they try to convey their understanding of the experience of spiritual regeneration.

Besides revealing his major characters' consideration of the significance of "new lives," Browning also discloses that such matters are an extension of what he most values as an artist—the passion to experience as well as express change, spiritual aspiration, re-creation, and love. Browning's resuscitative, theurgic activities involve the same spiritual dimension he uses to register the speakers' moral values and sentiments. His poetics of metamorphosis do the work of religion.


This dissertation discusses three types of imagery—monetary, natural, and religious—as means of revealing character in Browning's poem.

Lanier views Browning's poem as a revival of old conventions and ideas rather than as a work shaped by modern notions and methods:

This study contends that Browning's great subject . . . is not just the modern issue of the nature of truth but the traditional issue of the nature of man's relationship to God. One of the primary methods Browning uses to dramatize that relationship is the traditional allegory of psychomachia--the conflict of God and the Devil, of virtue and vice for the possession of man's soul.

In the allegory, Pompilia and Guido play the roles of good and evil so often depicted in medieval morality plays.


Bergman "traces Browning's use of gnostic symbols, images, concepts, structures and historical details" to show "that Browning is not an apologist for conventional Christianity, but a highly unorthodox religious and poetic thinker."


Doane challenges the image of Browning as a "Christian moralist" and instead "attempts to show that a more coherent, cohesive, and comprehensive interpretation of
the poet's works can be made when Browning is viewed as a perpetuator of the Romantic poets' concepts of innocence and evil." Concentrating on *The Ring and the Book*, Doane discusses the various major characters (Pompilia, Guido, and the Pope in particular) and categorizes them according to the three stages of moral development conceived by the Romantics: innocence, experience, and higher innocence.
LIST OF BIBLIOGRAPHIES CONSULTED

Several bibliographical guides have assisted me in the preparation of this present bibliography; they are listed below in the order of their importance to this project.


This is the "standard" Browning bibliography and the natural starting place for anyone interested in Browning materials published before 1951.


The above four items all represent attempts to update the work of Broughton, Northup, and Pearsall; the most complete and useful of them is Peterson's.

Both Honan and Litzinger mention in their selective bibliographies a number of studies that focus on Browning's religion.
Victorian Studies

The above represent a selection of the most helpful publications regularly listing current scholarly and critical studies (often with annotations) on either Browning specifically, or on a wide range of writers among whom Browning can be found.
The dissertation submitted by Vincent P. Anderson has been read and approved by the following Committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date: April 11, 1979  
Director's Signature: [Signature]