

## Browning's Religious Views Manifested in

### "A Death in the Desert"

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"A Death in the Desert" appears to have been inspired by the controversies in regard to the historical foundations of Christianity, and, more especially, in conservatism dominated English theology from 1800 to 1860. The publication of *Broad Church Essays and Reviews* in 1860 contributes a landmark in the history of English theology—but the spirit of free inquiry is tempered by an instinctive absence of revolutionary sentiment and progress is conjoined with that innate reverence for the past so embedded in the English character.

Browning stands, necessarily, in general relationships to the religious background of the mid-Victorian epoch. But to regard Browning's representation of Christianity as the mere by-product of his historical environment is to miss its flavor and distinction. So far from reflecting the influence of a school or body of theological opinion, he is typically English in the rugged individuality of his thought. His approach to the problems of religion is inseparably bound up with the characteristic attitudes of mind, or dispositions of spirit, traceable throughout his poetry. Browning's interest in Christianity is not in its creed, nor in any body of its opinion. It is its living experience that attracts Browning. The "incidents in the development of a soul" with which he is primarily concerned center about the paradox that man is a being in whom the claims and purposes of the finite and infinite, body and soul, flesh and spirit, time and eternity, meet and must each receive due recognition. While, from one point of view, life must be an unceasing aspiration in pursuit of an infinite ideal, from another it must be a continuous stooping to a world of weakness and finitude. Thus, in the poet's philosophy of life with its profound sense of human experience as poised between the absolute and

the relative lay a natural channel of approach to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. "A Death in the Desert" is Browning's apologia for the Christian faith, based on his belief in the Incarnation of Christ.<sup>1)</sup>

During a persecution of the Christians, the aged John of Patmos has been secretly conveyed, by some faithful disciples, to a cave in the desert, where he is dying. Revived temporarily by the tender ministrations of his disciples, he is enabled to tell over his past labors in the service of his beloved Master, to refute the Antichrist already in the world, and to answer the questions which, with his far-reaching spiritual vision, he foresees will be raised in regard to Christ's nature, life, doctrine, and miracles, as recorded in the Gospel he has written. He has awakened with a sense of terror at the thought of these new questions that may arise in future times, when men may not only doubt his testimony but may even question his own existence and the existence of the life which he has reported

Feeling for foot-hold through a blank profound,  
Along with unborn people in strange lands,  
Who say—I hear said or conceive they say—  
'Was John at all, and did he say he saw?  
Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!<sup>2)</sup>

He pictures the great changes that may come in the future when men shall

.....stand conversing.....  
Either in fields, of yellow summer eyes,  
On islets yet unnamed amid the sea,  
Or.....in some enormous town  
Where now the larks sing in a solitude,  
Or muse upon blank heaps of stone and sand  
Idly conjectured to be Ephesus.<sup>3)</sup>

He sees that in that far distant future men may be less concerned with the delay in the second coming of Christ and may feel a far more profound

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skepticism: first as to the historicity of the gospel records, and then as to the meaning of it all—whether this record may be considered in any sense as a true revelation of God “as Power, as Love, as influencing Soul.”

In the long discourse that follows—Browning discusses many of the problems of modern thought and criticism and declares in the words of the apostle what seems to be his own triumphant and deeply spiritual faith.

To anticipate and partly remove the difficulties of future generations (especially the problems of the nineteenth century) John argues and answers, leading up to the presentation of the final stage of the Christian life on earth—that stage when man has won his way to the kingdom of the “what Is” within himself, and when he no longer needs the outward supports to his faith which he needed before he passed from the “what Knows.”

The argument upon which St. John’s discourse may be said to proceed is pivoted on one of the most important of Browning’s theories about human nature, the doctrine of the three souls. This theory of the three souls of human nature is organized in the complex synthesis with Browning’s doctrine of progress. These two important theories underlie the whole range of Browning’s argument in defense of the Christian faith in his “A Death in the Desert” against the rationalistic scepticism of the Higher Criticism from the Continent. The synthesis of these dynamic theories of human nature has been carried out in so complex a manner in the Apostle’s argument that it seems essential to attempt an analysis of the complexities of these two theories for the proper understanding of this poem.

One of Browning’s most important concepts, the doctrine of the three souls, is found in the second gloss on St. John’s words in “A Death in the Desert.” This doctrine is seen by Browning as an analogy of the Trinity:<sup>4)</sup>

This is the doctrine he was wont to teach,  
How divers persons witness in each man,  
Three souls which make up one soul: first, to wit,

A soul of each and all the bodily parts,  
Seated therein, which works, and is what Does.  
And has the use of earth, and ends the man  
Downward: but, tending upward for advice,  
Grows into, and again is grown into  
By the next soul, which, seated in the brain,  
Useth the first with its collected use,  
And feeleth, thinketh, willeth—is what Knows:  
Which, duly tending upward in its turn,  
Grows into, and again is grown into  
By the last soul, that uses both the first,  
Subsisting whether they assist or no.  
And, constituting man's self, is what Is—  
And leans upon the former, makes it play,  
As that played off the first: and, tending up,  
Holds, is upheld by, God, and ends the man  
Upward in that dread point of intercourse,  
Nor needs a place, for it returns to Him.  
What Does, what Knows, what Is; three souls, one man.....<sup>5)</sup>

The first soul, which uses the evidence of the senses, is the agent of human power, and this soul Browning describes as "what Does." The second soul uses both the mind and the senses, and is the agent of human wisdom, whose function Browning describes as "what Knows." Both of these souls seem to be limited in their function just as human power and human wisdom are limited. The third soul is the essential and vital part, using the functions of the other two souls as the agent of human love, designated as "what Is." This soul is seemingly unlimited in its capacity to love.

It must be emphasized, however, that, despite the concept of man as the sum of these three parts, Browning still sees him as an essential unity. Browning insists that only by the harmonious functioning of the triple souls, can man find oneness with the divine purpose. Whitla explains that all three souls in man comprise a unity, but they are related further

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than that. The three functions, one of which each of the souls initiates and completes—doing, knowing, and being—are really summed up in the exercise of the highest function, that of being. The doing and the knowing are in no way inferior to being in their own spheres of action, but since being includes the former two, it is the crown and heart of man. Doing and knowing are less complete than being, and it is here that their inferiority lies. In the being of man both of the other functions are active. It is important to notice that in the being of man is also found the meaning of the moment. Doing, knowing, and being all occur in the moment; in the sudden shining light of the star of truth, in its momentary gleam, the moment of doing, knowing and being gives meaning to man's existence. Perhaps all is made most clear when we remember that for Browning the most characteristic moment is the moment of revelation. It is then that two human souls can meet in understanding communion; it is then that the light of truth is most clearly perceived; it is then that an individual human life can receive its real meaning.<sup>6)</sup>

The dying John is represented as having won his way to the Kingdom of the "what Is," the Kingdom of eternal truth within himself. In Luke 17 : 20-21, we read: "And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the Kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, the Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for, behold, the Kingdom of God is within you." In harmony with which, Paracelsus is made to say, in Browning's poem, "Truth is within ourselves;...there is an inmost centre in us all, where truth abides in fulness."<sup>7)</sup> Doing, knowing, and being are supremely united in the supreme moment of revelation, the Incarnation.

It is the Incarnation that is the root of the belief in the Trinity because that doctrine is the source of the analogy between the human and the divine, and it provides Browning with his basic pattern. Just as each of the souls has its own particular function but all make up the essential unity of man, so each of the Persons of the Trinity has his function, but all make up the unity of God. Furthermore, the analogy is made more complete by Browning in explaining the nature of the three souls and their relation to the Persons of the Trinity by the use of the three aspects that

can be noted in St. John, poet, prophet, and Apostleshop. W. D. Shaw says that Browning's doctrine of the three souls is the psychological equivalent of these three stages—"what Does," "what Knows," "what Is"; and they find their theological counterpart in the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son, respectively—St. John's "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." The three stages mark the different phases of John's own ministry. At first he preaches the "very superficial truth" of what he has seen and heard. Then he begins to reason from his "knowledge" and to write epistles. Finally, at the third stage he receives, on Patmos, God's direct revelation of "what Is." At the aesthetic level of "what Does," John is like those poets in *Sordello* who merely say that they have seen; in trying to interpret Christ at the second stage, he resembles those artists who explain what it is they have seen; only in his state of physical decay, when he finds himself at the level of "what Is," can John impart his gift of spiritual vision to others. His attempt to predict from his own experience the difficulties of future generations marks his transition from personal to universal history.<sup>8)</sup>

Browning's own analogy of the three souls provides the schema for his synthesis. The Trinity is revealed in the Incarnation in all of its fulness; the Incarnation is the means of moving from the divine to the human level in the analogy of the three souls as types of the Trinity; and the analogical method (using the attributes of love, wisdom, and power) is the means of moving from the human to the divine level. It is revealed in Unity; it is the moment which eternally is, giving meaning to all of the subsequent moments which more or less partake of its revelatory and ternal nature. In the Incarnation human souls can meet with God in understanding communion; in the Incarnation the light of truth is most clearly perceived; in the Incarnation human life has received its real meaning.<sup>9)</sup>

In extending the analogy of the tripartite structure of man's soul to the Trinity, Browning has given considerable attention to one of the most important of his theories about human nature, the doctrine of progress. Browning's doctrine of progress in its turn is closely allied to one of his favorite themes—the necessity of doubt as a condition of the vitality of faith, and of imperfection as an essential step in gaining perfection.

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Despite the division of man into three souls, Browning still sees him as an essential unity. Browning does not fall into the error of the faculty psychologists who would see a conflict between the warring powers of love and reason. Nor does Browning underestimate the value of knowledge; indeed, in the questing struggle to attain it is found life's meaning. But it is true that Browning denies the possibility in this life of perfect knowledge; it is essential to his doctrine of the three souls that man's knowledge is limited and imperfect. The search for more perfect knowledge is pursued through facts, certainly, but only contemplation of the facts can bring one to the truth that lies beyond and above mere fact. Knowledge has its role in the attainment of truth—and truth is the approach to beatific wisdom. Allied to Browning's theory of knowledge is a corollary related to certainty. Certainty destroys the meaning of the struggle for truth. Doubt is then seen as a valuable part of the quest and struggle. Doubt ensures the absence of certainty and demands a predicated imperfect knowledge.

It is on this note of his theory that the dying Apostle dwells in his effort to forestall and answer the sceptic questions of future generations. He holds the belief, predictably, that the test of life is conducted through ignorance and doubt, a lesson which he has but recently learned in his old age. Before coming to the cave, where he is attended by his four faithful comrades and the small boy, he comforted himself with belief in the illusion that in the age of anti-Christ he could die secure in the knowledge that "We had the truth, might leave the rest to God."<sup>10</sup> But the nearness of death has taught him sorely that facts snap and truth is a shifting path through dark and rugged terrain, where man gropes "for foothold through a blank profound."<sup>11</sup> As death approaches nearer and the test of life concludes, the veil of youth and strength which blinds man's eyes from truth wears thin and lets man see "to the universal prick of light."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, John's first answer to future skeptics is based purely on his own experience as the years have worn thin the veil of flesh which separates his spirit from the Unseen World; and he feels, like Rabbi Ben Ezra, that old age and physical weakness have their compensations:

It is for nothing we grow old and week,  
We whom God loves? When pain ends, gain ends too.<sup>133</sup>

With this clearness of sight that has come to him through advancing years, John sees the spiritual world so clearly that it fills his whole vision and overflows all distinctions between present, past and future:

To me, that story—ay, that Life and Death  
Of which I wrote 'it was'—to me, it is:  
—Is, here and now: I apprehend naught else.  
Is not God now i' the world His power first made?  
Is not His love at issue still with sin,  
Visibly when a wrong is done on earth?  
Love, wrong, and pain, what see I else around?  
Yea, and the Resurrection and Uprise  
To the right hand of the throne—what is it beside,  
When such truth, breaking bounds, o'erfloods my soul,  
And, as I saw the sin and death, even so  
See I the need yet transiency of both?<sup>14</sup>

It is not given to man to know, without the travail of exercising thought and choice, that Christ is the ultimate and eternal value, as man had to discover by his own wits the worth of fire. Herein lies for St. John the reason that God did not permit his saints to establish with indubitable proof that the truth can remain safe forever. Immediately doubt and skepticism began their silent work of subverting truth, which must ever be rediscovered to keep it truth. The doubters, while admitting that the old ones who reported at first hand of Christ were right in the main, also held that youth can reach where age gropes dimly. New shrewd tongues of the higher critics began their distressing clamor; and in the anguish of doubt Christians implore him to give them certainty, "tell the whole mind out,"<sup>15</sup> and so destroy all doubt at a stroke. John replies that man's vision of truth is evolutionary, growing with his growth and needs.

Browning has made John to speak in order to contend against the future doubters who might assault the Christian faith on the point of the



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miracle and on the point of anthropomorphism. It is in forestalling these two prospective attacks that Browning uses his doctrine of progress as the key idea for the defense of his religious conviction.

In connection with miracles John says,

I say that man was made to grow, not stop;  
That help he needed once, and needs no more.  
Having grown but an inch by, is withdrawn.<sup>16)</sup>

In earlier times man needed the myth that the sun was drawn across the heavens by yoked steeds—and this truth proved sufficient for a time; we know now that “what made and drives/The sun is force, is law, is named, not known...”<sup>17)</sup> Our progress toward truth is half error and half truth; in fact, we have exchanged one myth for the myth of nomenclature. Apollo has become force or law, but are we much closer to the truth? In the dawn of man’s childhood, it was believed that the sun arose or set at improbably times, or even stood still upon occasion, to threaten or reward or terrify man into obedience; but as man has progressed and put away childish things, miracles have ceased and natural law is not abrogated for the instruction of grown men:

That help, he needed once, and needs no more,  
Having grown but an inch by, is withdrawn:  
For he hath new needs, and new helps to these.”<sup>18)</sup>

As mythology and superstition served their purpose and are gone, so man’s proud scientific triumphs will be superseded by later truths, which will in turn erode away.

When St. John says that “man was made to grow, not stop,” it is our old friend. The Doctrine of Progress, newly baptized.<sup>19)</sup> It is placed in St. John’s mouth with the meaning that man is mutable, but his mutations are part of the ordered scheme of providential nature. God controls the mutations of man, and these mutations are part of a development, enabling man more and more to apprehend God’s revelation of himself at each stage of man’s progress. The help he needed in the

earlier stages, being no longer required, is with drawn; his new needs require new helps. To paraphrase: when we plant seed in the ground we place twigs to show the spots where the germs lie hidden, so that they may not be trodden upon by careless steps. When the plants spring up we take the twigs away; they no longer have any use. It was thus with the growth of the gospel seed: miracles were required at first, but, when the plant had sprung up and borne fruit, had produced martyrs and heroes of the faith, what was the use of miracles any more? The fruit itself was surely sufficient testimony to the vitality of the seed. Minds at first must be spoon-fed with truth, as babes with milk; a boy we bid feed himself, or starve. So, at first, I wrought miracles that men might believe in Christ, because no faith were otherwise possible; miracles now would compel, not help. We are not concerned with the linen clothes and napkins of the empty sepulcher; Christ is arisen. Why revert to discuss miracles? The work of miracles—whatever they may have been—was long ago accomplished. The knowledge of the Divine Love, its appropriation by our own hearts, and the putting forth of that love in our lives—such for us is the Christian faith, such is the work of Christ accomplishing itself in humanity at the present time. And the Christian story is no myth but a reality, not because we can prove true the beliefs of the first century, but because those beliefs contained within them a larger and more enduring belief.<sup>20)</sup>

Still another problem discussed in this poem is that of anthropomorphism. Having emphasized love as the highest element in human life and the essential quality of the character of Christ, the aged John anticipates the question of future critics who will make light of the miracles but will raise a further objection:

Wonders that would prove doctrine go for naught.

Remains the doctrine, love; well, we must love,

And what we love most, power and love in one,

Let us acknowledge on the record here,

Accepting these in Christ: must Christ then be?

Has He been? Did not we ourselves make Him.<sup>21)</sup>

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These critics, he foresees, will accuse those who believe in Christ of merely personifying the qualities which they consider highest in human nature and will suggest that Christ is "mere projection from man's inmost mind."<sup>22)</sup> The ancients gave to their gods, "head, body, hands, and feet;" later thinkers discarded "Jove's brow, Juno's eyes," "But Jove's wrath, Juno's pride continued long."<sup>23)</sup> In the same way, suggest the critics, the portrayal of Christ as revealing a God of love is but a higher form of anthropomorphism. To these critics who refuse to accept a God of love because they find love in human nature John speaks rather sternly:

For I say, this is death and the sole death,  
When a man's loss comes to him from his gain,  
Darkness from light, from knowledge ignorance,  
And lack of love from love made manifest.<sup>24)</sup>

The man who rejects Christ because he thinks the love of Christ is only a projection of his own is like a lamp that overswims with oil, a stomach overloaded with nurture; that man's soul dies. "But," the objector may say, "You told your Christ-story incorrectly: What is the good of giving knowledge at all if you give it in a manner which will not stop the after-doubt? Why breed in us perplexity? why not tell the whole truth in proper words?" To this St. John replies that he finds man midway between God and the beasts, with one distinctive mark alone: "God is, they are,/Man partly is and wholly hopes to be."<sup>25)</sup>

Such progress could no more attend his soul  
Were all it struggles after found at first  
And gusses changed to knowledge absolute,  
Than motion wait his body, were all else  
Than it the solid earth on every side,  
Where now through space he moves from rest to rest.  
Man, therefore, thus conditioned, must expect.  
He could not, what he knows now, know at first;  
What he considers that he knows to-day  
Come but to-morrow, he will find misknown;

Getting increased of knowledge, since he learns  
Because he lives, which is to be a man,  
Set to instruct himself by his past self:  
First, like the brute, obliged by facts to learn,  
Next, as a man may, obliged by his own mind.....<sup>26)</sup>

God's gift to man, St. John says, is that he conceives of truth and yearns to attain it, "catching at mistake, /As midway help till he reach fact indeed."<sup>27)</sup> Far from being a pronouncement hostile to mind, this is an admirable statement of the scientific method which has served man well in his progress toward knowledge. Nothing could be more liberal and humane than the insistence that knowledge never be permitted to become entrenched in dogma, immune from examination and repudiation if found false. St. John, speaking the thoughts of Browning, urges perpetual inquiry with the open and searching mind.<sup>28)</sup>

The three souls of man—"What Does, what Knows, what Is; three souls, one man"—are absolutely interdependent. St. John is not anti-intellectual. He finds the soul not fettered by either mind or flesh, but dependent on both equally for its wholeness and health. He preaches no romantic doctrine of intuitionism, but rather, "reasoning from my knowledge,"<sup>29)</sup> he teaches men to believe for love's sake. Love was for him never a foe of intellect, but a more gifted comrade who does the same work more effectively. For him love was the sum of all morality and the root of all goodness.

Browning probably uttered his own faith when he made St. John declare:

.....the acknowledgment of God in Christ  
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee  
All questions in the earth and out of it.....<sup>30)</sup>

These lines, however "dramatic," mark with precision the extent, and the limits of Browning's Christian faith. Christ was for the poet a manifestation of divine love by human form accessible to human love.

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## Notes

1. William C. Raymond, *The Infinite Moment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), p. 27.
2. "A Death in the Desert," 11. 193-197.
3. 11. 354-361.
4. William Whitla, in this *The Central Truth*, sums up the history of the theory of the tripartite structure of soul, and points out that Browning's pattern of thought may be traced back to St. Augustine's, and it may be quickly seen that the patterns fit exactly. Browning has applied the pattern to his examination of the aesthetic activity to the poet engaged in creation. The pattern, a consistent one throughout Browning's life, shows love to be the basic faculty, and the Incarnation to be the central mystery. Both of these are means of analogy, and the Incarnation the way of revelation in the complex of history. For my reading of Browning's theory of the three souls in this study, I am indebted to Whitla's observation.
5. 11. 82-103.
6. W. Whitla, *The Central Truth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), pp. 38-39.
7. Hiram Corson, *Robert Browning's Poetry* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1901), p. 337.
8. W. D. Shaw, *The Dialectical Temper* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 186.
9. Whitla, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
10. 1. 188.
11. 1. 193.
11. 1. 193.
12. 1. 205. It is to be noted that this is another instance of Browning's favorite theme of the cult of old age. This idea of acquiring deeper insight into the true meaning of life in old age is clearly expressed in his "Rabbi Ben Ezra."
13. 11. 206-207.
14. 11. 208-219.
15. 1. 336.
16. 11. 424-426.
17. 11. 399-400.
18. 11. 425-427.
19. Whitla, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
20. Edward Dowden, *Robert Browning* (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1905), p. 241.
21. 11. 372-376.
22. 1. 383.
23. 1. 417.
24. 11. 482-486.

25. 11. 587-588.
26. 11. 589-603.
27. 11. 606-607.
28. Norton B. Crowell, *The Triple Soul: Browning's Theory of Knowledge* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1963), p. 32.
29. 1. 147.
30. 11. 474-476.