III

BROWNING'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

MOST philosophical poets have intermittently overloaded their poetry with philosophy. Dante and Goethe contrived best to teach directly and simultaneously provide the artistic delight, which is the function of poetry. Even Milton sometimes lost his poetic trail in the wilderness of dialectic. Of the major English poets, Wordsworth most frequently floundered in the morass of didacticism. Indeed, it was only by a sort of happy accident that Wordsworth was a great poet at all. If he had consistently followed his avowed purpose he would have been no poet, for he said "I wish to be considered as a teacher or as nothing." Fortunately for the enrichment of poetry, he was not permitted to have his way. Sometimes, often, sheer inspiration seized and lifted him into realms of high art. Only less striking, quantitatively, were the cases of Shelley, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. In some of the poems of each, imagination was entrapped and dismembered by ratiocination. It was only in their purest and happiest moments that they transmuted philosophy into poetry, that their philosophy became the background or intellectual foundation of poetic art, without which poetry is not poetry. Browning, the most metaphysical of the major English poets, often reasoned poetry out of court, and wandered away into psychology, ethics and theology. As a philosophical poet, he was best when he was suggesting rather than expounding philosophy.

Attempting to keep consistently in mind what Browning
himself too often forgot, that he was a philosophical poet rather than (like Plato) a poetic philosopher, we shall attempt to catch and display a few of the philosophical implications of his poetry rather than reconstruct from his writings a scheme or system of coherent philosophy. We shall be what the merchants call "window-dressers" instead of warehousemen sweating in the sub-cellar, trucking to and fro his heavier material in an endeavor (indeed it would be a vain endeavor) to arrange and classify Browning's wholesale stuff in logical order.

It is in his philosophical thinking, not in his political or sociological thinking, that one finds Browning's relationship to the Victorian Era, for which we practically abandoned search in the first chapter of this little book. As significantly, and more profoundly than Tennyson, he mirrored the effect of the impact of the new science of the age upon the thoughts of the most thoughtful people of that age. Not only the facile optimism of Alexander Pope but also the profounder optimism of the transcendentalists was shaken by the new findings in astronomy, biology and geology. In face of the vastness of the universe as revealed by the new astronomy, this little planet seemed to dwindle into vanishing insignificance. In place of Nature, "the homely nurse" of her "foster child", man, as conceived by Wordsworth, biology and geology seemed to reveal a nature careless alike of individual and type, and man in relentless struggle for existence with natural processes either impersonal or ferocious.

An interesting recent monograph calls attention to the different attitudes toward nature in Herman Melville's *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*, and refers to "the clash between transcendental optimism", symbolized in the Happy Valley of *Typee*, "and first-hand knowledge of a nature 'red in tooth and claw'" symbolized in the white whale in *Moby-
Dick,—the relentless monster with which Captain Ahab wagers war to the death. The fierce pessimism of Moby-Dick seems to be only imperfectly apprehended even by some of the literary commentators. The philosophical Ishmaelite Melville, wrote a great sea-story in Moby-Dick, but also wrote an allegory of the remorseless struggle between man and nature, a war without quarter, truce or armistice.

In England the transcendental optimism of Wordsworth was followed by the half-despairing questioning of Tennyson, the best-understood literary interpreter of the typical struggle of his age between knowledge and faith. The contrasting "voices" of the older and younger generation are heard, by way of example, in Wordsworth's Lines on Tintern Abbey (1798) and Tennyson's In Memoriam (1850). Here are a few of Wordsworth's Lines:

Nature never did betray the heart that loved her;
   . . . . . . . . .
   I have learned
To look on Nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing often-times
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

I am not quite prepared to banish to the limbo of nonsense this transcendental optimistic view of the beneficence of nature and the divine unity of all things, visible and invisible. But I am aware that sometimes we can hold to this only by taking the long view. Nature does not seem particularly beneficent when an earthquake is rocking us or when a hurri-
cane is sweeping over us. The shattered dwellings and the dead bodies in the wake of a tornado are not very convincing evidence of the beneficent purposes of nature. Not until after the disaster has become memory instead of immediate shattering actuality can we, by a process of reorientation, by readjustment of what is within us to what is without us, return to the mood of trust—not until we have learned the simple but difficult lesson that what counts is not what happens to us, but the way we meet and bear what happens to us.

It was in the shock of the revealments of science that the Victorian literary-philosophical people staggered and felt the ground giving way under them. The ideas are old now, and less unsettling. But to thoughtful people of Tennyson's generation there was something bewildering in what they learned from the new biology of nature's apparently haphazard methods—of the many seeds (Tennyson says "fifty", but I suppose that is decidedly an underestimate) that are sown and lost before one seed develops into new life. By what fortuitous circumstance does the individual become what he is, and not somebody quite different? Is there any method of selection in Nature's prodigal process, or is the result blind chance? This was one question which pressed hard upon Tennyson, who voiced a characteristic anxiety of his age in the fifty-fifth lyric of *In Memoriam*:

The wish that of the living whole
No life may fail beyond the grave,
Derives it not from what we have
The likest God within the soul?

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life,

That I, considering everywhere
Her secret meaning in her deeds,
And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear.
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Perhaps the biological misgiving may be assuaged by reflection on an ancient faith in the immortality of the race. Though individuals perish, the race continues—the "type" remains. But there is a grimmer science than biology, geology. There is the testimony of the rocks, the writing in the fossils, the record of one "type" after another that has perished, utterly vanished as a living organism. And Tennyson uttered again, in a wider form, a typical doubt of his age, in the fifty-sixth lyric of *In Memoriam*:

"So careful of the type?" but no
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She cries, "A thousand types are gone;
I care for nothing, all shall go.

"Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death;
The spirit does but mean the breath;
I know no more." And he, shall he,

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
Such splendid promise in his eyes
Who rolled the psalm to wintry skies
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law—
Though Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shrieked against his creed—

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal'd within the iron hills?

No more? A monster then, a dream,
A discord. Dragons of the prime
That tare each other in their slime,
Were mellow music match'd with him."

O life as futile, then, as frail!

Tennyson never solved the problem in terms of science or philosophy, nor did his age, nor, one suspects, will any age. Science has done much since the early and mid-Victorian
era. It has transformed the social and mechanistic life of man. But science has not yet answered, in her own precise language of demonstration the old question propounded by Job, “If a man die shall he live again?” To date, science is as helpless as Omar Khayyam to answer that:

There was the door to which I found no key;
There was the veil through which I might not see;
Some little talk awhile of Me and Thee
There was—and then no more of Thee and Me.

Tennyson faced the problem, and finding no answer in Science, fell back on faith. Not all the last stanza of the fifty-sixth lyric was quoted. Here it is complete:

O life as futile then as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil.

In the prefatory stanzas to the poem, which, like most prefaces, was the last part written, Tennyson said with quiet acceptance:

We have but faith; we cannot know,
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness; let it grow.

Let knowledge grow from more to more;
But more of reverence in us dwell;
That mind and soul, according well,
May make one music as before,

But vaster.

Tennyson’s uneasiness over the clash between old and new views was more representative of a faltering tone in much Victorian literature, but Browning’s attitude was more confident. The developmental process of the struggle most impressed Tennyson’s orderly mind, the struggle itself most fascinated Browning’s dynamic imagination.

It is an inexcusably superficial view which finds an easy-going optimism in Browning’s poetry. Lines separated from
the body of his poetry may seem chirping and a bit too chirper, such as the familiar lines of Pippa

God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world.

Taken *in esse*, it must be remembered that the lines are dramatic, not personal, part of a gladsome song that a little simple-hearted factory girl sings in her joyous rambles on her one holiday of all the year. Taken *in posse*, as an expression of Browning's own faith, they are the conclusion, not the postulate, of a prolonged philosophical process. And whether evil is a negation, an absence of good, as cold is an absence of heat, rest an absence of motion, silence an absence of sound (as Browning's Abt Vogler sees it), it is none the less something to be overcome, and that by valiant fighting. Indolence may be only absence of activity but the indolent man has to make as strong an effort to overcome it as if it were a positive entity.

I suspect I am more inclined to share the belief of Martin Luther and Thomas Carlyle in the devil as a positive something (whether personal or pervasive, quite positive) than Browning's view of the devil as an absence of good; but in the long run, the results are the same to a sinner: to be condemned to perpetual absence from God is sufficient hell, whether hell is a place or a condition. Browning, speaking through the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* envisages evil as spiritual death, and continual struggle the means whereby evil may be eliminated. In practical living what difference does it make whether the concept of evil is, in the abstract, negative or positive? The conflict is real whether the conflict is with a personal devil or a phantasmagoria such as Shakespeare faced when he wrote *King Lear*.

To assume that Browning reasoned and battled in ignorance or wilful dismissal of the pinch of evil is to disregard
Browning's reiterated language, the language not only of his poetry but also of his private correspondence. In a letter dated May 11, 1876, Browning wrote: "I see ever more reason to hold by . . . hope, and that by no means in ignorance of what has been advanced to the contrary." The road to sound optimism is no bower of roses, honeysuckle and sweet jasmine; it is a granite, steep, cobble-strewn trail beset with many difficulties and precipices and crevasses, and a misstep may pitch the pilgrim into perdition.

Browning loved the road precisely because it was not smooth, precisely because he relished a good fight and the glow of fighting. "Am I no a bonny fighter?" exclaims Stevenson's Alan Breck, in the flush of contest. Browning said similar things many times in more recondite language than Alan's.

It is by no breath,
Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation joins issue with death,
exclaims David in Browning's poem *Saul*, that is to say by no easy gesture, by no *fiat lux*. Steadily as Milton himself does this nineteenth century optimist Browning welcome battle and scorn easeful ways. Says Milton in his *Areopagitica*:

"I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary."

A greater than Milton or Browning had said the same things long before either of them. The Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, bade Timothy "Endure hardness as a good soldier," and in his *Epistle to the Romans* wrote: "We glory
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in tribulation also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed." In similar temper, the temper of a first-rate fighting man, Browning put into the mouth of the old Pope, in *The Ring and the Book*, the lines:

Was the trial sore?
Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!
Why comes temptation but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestal in triumph? Pray
"Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!"
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
Reluctant dragons up to who dares fight,
That so he may do battle and have praise.

Into the mouth of Rabbi Ben Ezra Browning put the words:

Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

Out of his own heart, mind and experience, he wrote the *Epilogue to Asolando*, speaking for the last time, not as dramatic poet, but as Robert Browning himself; here is the third stanza:

One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake.

His son stated that the old poet read this poem aloud, paused, reflecting on this stanza, and said: "It almost seems like praising myself to say this, and yet it is true, the simple truth, and so I shall not cancel it." So much for Browning's optimistic attitude, the optimism of a fighter by temperament; the only sort of optimism that is worth while, the optimism which clearly recognizes that this is a tough old world, in which, among all busy-ness, none is busier than
the devil, whether the devil be a person, a principle or a negation.

Of the way in which Browning reasoned out his optimism, little can be said in the available space. In the practical life, action is not so much based on reason, as reason is based on action. However it may be in abstract philosophy, this is true in the experiential world, that much reasoning is an after-thought, a statement of why we did something we have already done. Hence it is that much controversy is futile, that so many arguments persuade nobody except those who do not need to be persuaded.

With regard to the antinomy of God and Nature which perplexed Tennyson, Browning was abrupt, though not always brief. He swept away (in so far as he himself was concerned) the whole idea of beneficent nature, and, apparently without a struggle, abandoned search in Nature for evidence of a loving God. In Nature he saw overwhelming evidence of a God of Power and Knowledge, but no evidence of a God of Love. The evidence of God's love is in man, not in nature—man ready to sacrifice himself for the object of his love. The reasoning is subtle, retraversed in many poems, well condensed in Saul. Reduced to a sentence, it comes simply to this, that postulating God (and about the existence and actuality of God the arguing Browning never argued

God is seen God  
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod  
says David;

What I call God, and fools call Nature,
says the old Pope, with the peremptory impatience of a Thomas Carlyle), postulating God as infinite in power and wisdom and as creator of man, it is illogical to assume that he could have put into man a faculty which he himself does
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not possess, the faculty of enduring, and often sacrificial
love. In other words, Browning reasons back from man to
God: the created could not possess a faculty which the
Creator had not himself to give his creature.

Browning faces the antinomy of knowledge and faith,
with an assertion, like Tennyson’s, of the incapacity of
knowledge to solve the problem which many people account
the most vital of all, man’s relationship to God and the
individual spirit’s survival of death. He was probably more
intimately acquainted than was any other English poet of
his day with Victorian science. Having the insatiable curi-
osity of the men of the Renaissance (about whom he knew
so much) he was vividly curious about the new science—read
widely, even dabbled a little in experimentation. But he was
entirely skeptical about the qualifications of science to solve
problems of the human spirit. In the poem La Saisiaz he
questions even the color of grass. We say “green,” but
comes one who says “red.” “Color-blind” we say, but how
do we know that? Suppose his is the normal vision, ours the
abnormal. Suppose only he and one other inhabited the
world—how could the color of grass be determined? Is truth
ascertainable by a majority vote? The opinion of today’s
minority may be the majority opinion tomorrow. It has been
so in history. Truth, the truth which saves, comes not
through the intellect, but through love, says this most in-
tellectual of the poets.

Of his reasoning about Evil we have already spoken: in
practice something to be incessantly warred against, in phil-
osophical analysis a negative: an absence of good, a pause
in developmental progress. Progression was Browning’s
measure of vitality. Not what man is but what man is be-
coming enlisted his interest. The developmental idea of the
new science stirred his dynamic imagination, and led him to
philosophical conclusions which lie at the heart of his thinking. These conclusions were often paradoxical: for instance, his comfort in imperfection. Imperfection is a condition of vital development: where there is growth, there is something to be attained; where there is something to be attained there is obviously something yet unobtained; where there is something unobtained there is incompleteness; where there is incompleteness, there is imperfection; or, to state the paradox in a syllogism:

- the only perfect thing is a thing completed;
- but the only completed thing is a dead thing;
- therefore, the only perfect thing is something dead.

That is argued out in the poem, *Dis Aliter Visum*.

His paradox of failure is close akin: failure also is a negation, a discrepancy between infinite purpose and finite powers. Because of man's alliance with the infinite he is constantly striving for something beyond his grasp:

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Only I discern
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn,
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he says in *Two in the Campagna*. In the consciousness of failure, the paradoxical Browning saw the measure of success. Real success is to strive nobly; real failure is not to strive; it is only "apparent failure" when the thing done is less than the thing envisioned; dissatisfaction with the result is only the evidence of the loftiness of the purpose. He who is satisfied with himself is easily satisfied. Again we may throw the proposition into a syllogism:

- attainment means either that the powers are infinite or the aim finite;
- but we know that the powers are finite;
- therefore attainment means that the aim was finite, low, unworthy.

Andrea del Sarto, called the "faultless painter," realizes when it is too late that he set his aim low, on what a cunning craftsman's hand could express. As he meditates in the dusk of day and the twilight of life, he perceives that his crafts-
manship surpassed Raphael's, but Raphael's spirit had
flamed to heights that Andrea had never tempted. In
Raphael's failure was success, in Andrea's success was
failure:

Ah but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

Tennyson and Browning accepted the new ideas of science
because as thinking men they did not see how they could
reject them. But that which Tennyson accepted wistfully,
Browning accepted joyously. To his way of thinking the new
ideas strengthened rather than weakened the Christian faith.
In Paul's epistles Browning had read of the Christian life
as a battle, in metaphors which Paul took largely from ac-
tive struggles: war and fighting wild beasts and athletic
contests. And now, in the new science, Browning seemed to
learn that this is the law of vitality: struggle, with crown
and palm for him who has the courage and endurance to
keep fighting. Browning glorified the strenuous life, the life
of hopeful fighting. There are several Browning poems
(among them The Inn Album and Apparent Failure) in
which Browning glimpses hope that God in his mercy will
forgive and redeem criminals led by their strenuous activity
into wild sins. But repeatedly, in one dramatic form or an-
other, he abandons hope for the slothful, listless, idle, shal-
low, timid. In a typical piece of casuistry he puts this idea
to the extreme test in the poem, which unnecessarily agitated
some contemporaries because they did not understand the
application (though it seems crystal clear as we read it
now), The Statue and the Bust.

It is a legitimate criticism of Browning's philosophy that
he sometimes seems to stress effort more than the value of
the thing striven for. But Browning's zest in the fight is
really more important than the reasons he gives for fighting.
Lectures on Browning

His enthusiasm is infectious. Indeed, it all comes round to Robert Louis Stevenson’s dictum that what we love is not life, but living. Living is differently conceived by different people, but whatever the conception, all must agree that no one lives until he puts all he has into that activity which he calls living. No one who finds living in working is contented to put less than all into his work, whatever it is. I sometimes think that every good workman is killed by his work, that there is no other honorable way to die.

As one re-reads Browning, sees him battling with the typical doubts of his age, sometimes with all his keen logic and extensive learning, sometimes, when fought back into a corner (overwhelmed with a sense of the limitations of knowledge or the impuissance of mortal power), unsheathing the flashing sword of faith, falling back on his intuitions, one seems to see more clearly than of yore that this man Browning abandons the cosmic enterprise of solving the problem of evil in the universe and adopts a quite personal attitude. He seems to say, in effect, “for me, Robert Browning, life’s solution is in just two terms, both intuitional rather than demonstrable, God and my own soul.”

Thy soul and God stand sure.

shouts Rabbi Ben Ezra in Browning’s poem so entitled. Possibly Gilbert Chesterton was, after all, correct in his brilliant little book on Browning, a book severely criticized by later, more delving, more accurate students of Browning, but possibly Chesterton was near the mark in his proposition that the one determining event of Browning’s life was the determining factor in his philosophy—that only love carries the answer to life’s questioning. True, his trend was that way before he met Miss Barrett, but that meeting and its results seemed to confirm his earlier intuition. Scorning or surmounting every impediment in the way of his marriage
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to Elizabeth Barrett: the fierce opposition of her father, Miss Barrett's own qualms due to this opposition and to what she supposed was chronic invalidism—he by sheer daring swept the woman he loved into an elopement, put everything to one supreme test (his philosophic measure of courage) and found life in loving.

And then he found that love survived that which mortals call death. He outlived Elizabeth by nearly thirty years, but his love for her grew more rather than less. He lived through the years of his widowerhood in happy companionship with men and women, gave to them the affection of a strongly affectionate nature, but to none did he give, from none did he derive repetition of that supreme experience, a love which he confidently believed would continue through eternity. After her death he exclaimed:

O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again
And with God be the rest!

In his poem *La Saisiaz* Browning paraphrases "the solemn Tuscan" (meaning, of course, Dante):

I believe and I declare—
Certain am I—that from this life I pass into a better, there
Where that lady lives of whom enamoured was my soul.

In his wife's Bible Browning had written his own translation, in prose, of Dante's actual words: "Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another better, there, where that lady lives of whom my soul was enamoured."

This poem *La Saisiaz* is one of the most significant in the Browning corpus, not because it is among his best artistic work (it emphatically is not that), not even because it is one of his profoundest poems (it is not that), but because it is the last long confessional poem in which he frankly speaks, not dramatically, but as Robert Browning, and utters his own conclusions about the mystery of life and death. It
was the almost immediate reaction of his mind and spirit to the shock of the sudden death of a dear friend, Miss Egerton Smith, who had been summering with Browning and his sister at a villa in Switzerland called "La Saisiaz" (Savoyard for "The Sun"). Browning had for Miss Smith a deep affection, no resemblance to his love for Elizabeth Barrett. Miss Smith was found dead in her room on the morning of September 14, 1877. She had seemed so well the night before that her sudden death was a double shock to Browning. The event caused Browning, who had so often argued about life and death and immortality and God, to review the whole matter. Carefully he goes over his old arguments, so familiar to readers of Browning. But bit by bit he abandons arguments and falls back on two intuitions which to him were certainties, God and his own soul. Good and evil, life and death, dissolution and immortality—he reasons about them again, as he had so often reasoned about them. And then he explicitly disavows purpose to solve the problem of evil and God's superintendence in philosophical terms, saying

I shall "vindicate no ways of God's to man," . . .

Traversed heart must tell its story uncommented on.

And again:

Question, answer, presuppose
Two points: that the thing itself which questions, answers—is, it knows


God then, call that—soul and both—the only facts for me.

Do we get the point? Robert Browning, now sixty-eight years old, confronted by the crashing fact of death, definitely rehearsed his old arguments and retreated to intuitive faith for the only answer for him, Robert Browning. Alexander Pope, the shallow logician, had undertaken to "vindicate the ways of God to man." John Milton, the learned theologian, had undertaken in 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. Not what God means in this vast universe, but what God means to him, Robert Browning, and to all believing souls, is the sum and substance of it all.

A lame and impotent conclusion of the long years of inquiry by the most inquiring mind in nineteenth century English poetry? Perhaps so, if you think science and logic can prove anything about the reality of God and the human spirit. Not so, if you believe they can prove nothing whatever.

It is all much vaster now than it was when Browning wrote. Browning and Tennyson had learned that our little planet is a small mote in the solar system. Then they had learned that our solar system is a small affair in a universe. And now, since they are gone, astronomers are, with improved methods, announcing that even our universe is only one, and a lesser, amid a swirl of universes. Tennyson, facing a smaller universe than we now know about, faltered a little, and then recovered his poise and assurance:

Tho' world on world in myriad myriads roll
Round us, each with different powers,
And other forms of life than ours,
What know we greater than the soul?

Nobody can prove by logic Tennyson's implication. Neither can anybody prove the opposite. There is little that can be proved by dialectic concerning the things which men live by, or die by. Only by valiant living is life itself proven worth a peppercorn. We can't reason it out. Hamlet tried
to do that, and made a mess of it. Only by collecting in a few breathless minutes all the valor of dying did Hamlet discover the valor of living.

People sometimes complain that this healthy-minded Browning wrote so much about things morbid and ugly. Browning loved the beautiful and often wrote of it. But a world garlanded in orange-blossoms is not all the world. And Browning, the all-curious, wanted to see all of it. He wanted to proclaim the beauty of life while facing its ugliness. It requires courage to do that. In the dim and hushed solemnity of the cathedral, under its vaulted arches, splashed with prismatic colors from its stained-glass windows, when the organ is pealing and the surpliced choir lifts on high the anthem, with the incense in our nostrils, before our adoring eyes the symbols of sacrificial cross and victorious crown, amid the bowed worshippers and the sonorous ritual—here it is not hard to believe in God. But can we leave the cathedral and go into the alley, see the cripple in his rags, the lazar in his sores, hear the harlot's curses, and the drunkard's ravings—can we do this and still believe in God? If we cannot, we don't believe in Him very much. Browning really did believe in God. Not an absentee God, remote, concealed somewhere behind his tent of blue sky, but an always present God. Not an inert God, but a vitalizing God. And he believed that in strenuous living of the life of the spirit, in sympathetic living with his fellow men, he was linking himself with God's own spirit.

Browning's spirit is more important than his reasoning. His arguments may not convince the reason, but his courage is infectious. The reasons he gives for his optimism are the least important things about his optimism. His arguments are only the corollary of his instinct, and instinct is personal. Not God in the universe, but God in the spirit of the indi-
individual is Browning's real theme. His spirit tingled with the spirit of God. And for us his spirit is a challenge, to turn failure into victory, doubt into faith, weakness into strength. It is a challenge to be brave, to keep on fighting, believing, hoping, recuperating. He was glad because he believed that he and you and I are engaged in a great adventure, the outcome of which depends chiefly upon our courage for the adventure.

Stockton Axson.