

Robert Browning (1812-1889)
A Death in the Desert

1 [Supposed of Pamphylax the Antiochene:
2 It is a parchment, of my rolls the fifth,
3 Hath three skins glued together, is all Greek,
4 And goeth from *Epsilon* down to *Mu*:
5 Lies second in the surnamed Chosen Chest,
6 Stained and conserved with juice of terebinth,
7 Covered with cloth of hair, and lettered *Xi*,
8 From Xanthus, my wife's uncle, now at peace:
9 *Mu* and *Epsilon* stand for my own name.
10 I may not write it, but I make a cross
11 To show I wait His coming, with the rest,
12 And leave off here: beginneth Pamphylax.]

13 I said, "If one should wet his lips with wine,
14 "And slip the broadest plantain-leaf we find,
15 "Or else the lappet of a linen robe,
16 "Into the water-vessel, lay it right,
17 "And cool his forehead just above the eyes,
18 "The while a brother, kneeling either side,
19 "Should chafe each hand and try to make it warm,--
20 "He is not so far gone but he might speak. "

21 This did not happen in the outer cave,
22 Nor in the secret chamber of the rock
23 Where, sixty days since the decree was out,
24 We had him, bedded on a camel-skin,
25 And waited for his dying all the while;
26 But in the midmost grotto: since noon's light
27 Reached there a little, and we would not lose
28 The last of what might happen on his face.
29 I at the head, and Xanthus at the feet,
30 With Valens and the Boy, had lifted him,
31 And brought him from the chamber in the depths,
32 And laid him in the light where we might see:
33 For certain smiles began about his mouth,
34 And his lids moved, presageful of the end.

35 Beyond, and half way up the mouth o' the cave
36 The Bactrian convert, having his desire,
37 Kept watch, and made pretence to graze a goat
38 That gave us milk, on rags of various herb,
39 Plantain and quitch, the rocks' shade keeps alive:
40 So that if any thief or soldier passed

41 (Because the persecution was aware,
42 Yielding the goat up promptly with his life,
43 Such man might pass on, joyful at a prize,
44 Nor care to pry into the cool o' the cave.
45 Outside was all noon and the burning blue.

46 "Here is wine," answered Xanthus,--dropped a drop;
47 I stooped and placed the lap of cloth aright,
48 Then chafed his right hand, and the Boy his left:
49 But Valens had bethought him, and produced
50 And broke a ball of nard, and made perfume.
51 Only, he did--not so much wake, as--turn
52 And smile a little, as a sleeper does
53 If any dear one call him, touch his face--
54 And smiles and loves, but will not be disturbed.

55 Then Xanthus said a prayer, but still he slept:
56 It is the Xanthus that escaped to Rome,
57 Was burned, and could not write the chronicle.

58 Then the Boy sprang up from his knees, and ran,
59 Stung by the splendour of a sudden thought,
60 And fetched the seventh plate of graven lead
61 Out of the secret chamber, found a place,
62 Pressing with finger on the deeper dints,
63 And spoke, as 'twere his mouth proclaiming first,
64 "I am the Resurrection and the Life. "

65 Whereat he opened his eyes wide at once,
66 And sat up of himself, and looked at us;
67 And thenceforth nobody pronounced a word:
68 Only, outside, the Bactrian cried his cry
69 Like the lone desert-bird that wears the ruff,
70 As signal we were safe, from time to time.

71 First he said, "If a friend declared to me,
72 "This my son Valens, this my other son,
73 "Were James and Peter,--nay, declared as well
74 "This lad was very John,--I could believe!
75 "--Could, for a moment, doubtlessly believe:
76 "So is myself withdrawn into my depths,
77 "The soul retreated from the perished brain
78 "Whence it was wont to feel and use the world
79 "Through these dull members, done with long ago.
80 "Yet I myself remain; I feel myself:
81 "And there is nothing lost. Let be, awhile! "

82 [This is the doctrine he was wont to teach,
83 How divers persons witness in each man,
84 Three souls which make up one soul: first, to wit,
85 A soul of each and all the bodily parts,
86 Seated therein, which works, and is what Does,
87 And has the use of earth, and ends the man
88 Downward: but, tending upward for advice,
89 Grows into, and again is grown into
90 By the next soul, which, seated in the brain,
91 Useth the first with its collected use,
92 And feeleth, thinketh, willeth,--is what Knows:
93 Which, duly tending upward in its turn,
94 Grows into, and again is grown into
95 By the last soul, that uses both the first,
96 Subsisting whether they assist or no,
97 And, constituting man's self, is what Is--
98 And leans upon the former, makes it play,
99 As that played off the first: and, tending up,
100 Holds, is upheld by, God, and ends the man
101 Upward in that dread point of intercourse,
102 Nor needs a place, for it returns to Him.
103 What Does, what Knows, what Is; three souls, one man.
104 I give the glossa of Theotypas.]

105 And then, "A stick, once fire from end to end;
106 "Now, ashes save the tip that holds a spark!
107 "Yet, blow the spark, it runs back, spreads itself
108 "A little where the fire was: thus I urge
109 "The soul that served me, till it task once more
110 "What ashes of my brain have kept their shape,
111 "And these make effort on the last o' the flesh,
112 "Trying to taste again the truth of things-- "
113 (He smiled)-- "their very superficial truth;
114 "As that ye are my sons, that it is long
115 "Since James and Peter had release by death,
116 "And I am only he, your brother John,
117 "Who saw and heard, and could remember all.
118 "Remember all! It is not much to say.
119 "What if the truth broke on me from above
120 "As once and oft-times? Such might hap again:
121 "Doubtlessly He might stand in presence here,
122 "With head wool-white, eyes flame, and feet like brass,
123 "The sword and the seven stars, as I have seen--
124 "I who now shudder only and surmise
125 "How did your brother bear that sight and live?"

126 "If I live yet, it is for good, more love
127 "Through me to men: be nought but ashes here
128 "That keep awhile my semblance, who was John,--
129 "Still, when they scatter, there is left on earth
130 "No one alive who knew (consider this!)
131 "--Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
132 "That which was from the first, the Word of Life.
133 "How will it be when none more saith 'I saw'?

134 "Such ever was love's way: to rise, it stoops.
135 "Since I, whom Christ's mouth taught, was bidden teach,
136 "I went, for many years, about the world,
137 "Saying 'It was so; so I heard and saw,'
138 "Speaking as the case asked: and men believed.
139 "Afterward came the message to myself
140 "In Patmos isle; I was not bidden teach,
141 "But simply listen, take a book and write,
142 "Nor set down other than the given word,
143 "With nothing left to my arbitrament
144 "To choose or change: I wrote, and men believed.
145 "Then, for my time grew brief, no message more,
146 "No call to write again, I found a way,
147 "And, reasoning from my knowledge, merely taught
148 "Men should, for love's sake, in love's strength believe;
149 "Or I would pen a letter to a friend
150 "And urge the same as friend, nor less nor more:
151 "Friends said I reasoned rightly, and believed.
152 "But at the last, why, I seemed left alive
153 "Like a sea jelly weak on Patmos strand,
154 "To tell dry sea-beach gazers how I fared
155 "When there was mid-sea, and the mighty things;
156 "Left to repeat, 'I saw, I heard, I knew,'
157 "And go all over the old ground again,
158 "With Antichrist already in the world,
159 "And many Antichrists, who answered prompt
160 " `Am I not Jasper as thyself art John?
161 " `Nay, young, whereas through age thou mayest forget;
162 " `Wherefore, explain, or how shall we believe?
163 "I never thought to call down fire on such,
164 "Or, as in wonderful and early days,
165 "Pick up the scorpion, tread the serpent dumb;
166 "But patient stated much of the Lord's life
167 "Forgotten or misdelivered, and let it work:
168 "Since much that at the first, in deed and word,
169 "Lay simply and sufficiently exposed,

170 "Had grown (or else my soul was grown to match,
171 "Fed through such years, familiar with such light,
172 "Guarded and guided still to see and speak)
173 "Of new significance and fresh result;
174 "What first were guessed as points, I now knew stars,
175 "And named them in the Gospel I have writ.
176 "For men said, 'It is getting long ago:
177 " `Where is the promise of His coming?'--asked
178 "These young ones in their strength, as loth to wait,
179 "Of me who, when their sires were born, was old.
180 "I, for I loved them, answered, joyfully,
181 "Since I was there, and helpful in my age;
182 "And, in the main, I think such men believed.
183 "Finally, thus endeavouring, I fell sick,
184 "Ye brought me here, and I supposed the end,
185 "And went to sleep with one thought that, at least,
186 "Though the whole earth should lie in wickedness,
187 "We had the truth, might leave the rest to God.
188 "Yet now I wake in such decrepitude
189 "As I had slidden down and fallen afar,
190 "Past even the presence of my former self,
191 "Grasping the while for stay at facts which snap,
192 "Till I am found away from my own world,
193 Feeling for foot-hold through a blank profound,
194 "Along with unborn people in strange lands,
195 "Who say--I hear said or conceive they say--
196 " `Was John at all, and did he say he saw?
197 " `Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!

198 "And how shall I assure them? Can they share
199 "--They, who have flesh, a veil of youth and strength
200 "About each spirit, that needs must bide its time,
201 "Living and learning still as years assist
202 "Which wear the thickness thin, and let man see--
203 "With me who hardly am withheld at all,
204 "But shudderingly, scarce a shred between,
205 "Lie bare to the universal prick of light?
206 "Is it for nothing we grow old and weak,
207 "We whom God loves? When pain ends, gain ends too.
208 "To me, that story--ay, that Life and Death
209 "Of which I wrote 'it was'--to me, it is;
210 "--Is, here and now: I apprehend nought else.
211 Is not God now i' the world His power first made?
212 "Is not His love at issue still with sin,
213 "Visibly when a wrong is done on earth?
214 "Love, wrong, and pain, what see I else around?

215 "Yea, and the Resurrection and Uprise
216 "To the right hand of the throne--what is it beside,
217 "When such truth, breaking bounds, o'erfloods my soul,
218 And, as I saw the sin and death, even so
219 "See I the need yet transiency of both,
220 "The good and glory consummated thence?
221 "I saw the power; I see the Love, once weak,
222 "Resume the Power: and in this word 'I see,'
223 "Lo, there is recognized the Spirit of both
224 "That moving o'er the spirit of man, unblinds
225 "His eye and bids him look. These are, I see;
226 "But ye, the children, His beloved ones too,
227 "Ye need,--as I should use an optic glass
228 I wondered at erewhile, somewhere i' the world,
229 "It had been given a crafty smith to make;
230 "A tube, he turned on objects brought too close,
231 Lying confusedly insubordinate
232 "For the unassisted eye to master once:
233 "Look through his tube, at distance now they lay,
234 "Become succinct, distinct, so small, so clear!
235 "Just thus, ye needs must apprehend what truth
236 "I see, reduced to plain historic fact,
237 "Diminished into clearness, proved a point
238 "And far away: ye would withdraw your sense
239 From out eternity, strain it upon time,
240 "Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death,
241 "Stay there at gaze, till it dispart, dispread,
242 As though a star should open out, all sides,
243 Grow the world on you, as it is my world.

244 "For life, with all it yields of joy and woe
245 "And hope and fear,--believe the aged friend,--
246 Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
247 "How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
248 "And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
249 "Such prize despite the envy of the world,
250 And, having gained truth, keep truth: that is all.
251 "But see the double way wherein we are led,
252 "How the soul learns diversely from the flesh!
253 "With flesh, that hath so little time to stay,
254 "And yields mere basement for the soul's emprise,
255 "Expect prompt teaching. Helpful was the light,
256 "And warmth was cherishing and food was choice
257 "To every man's flesh, thousand years ago,
258 "As now to yours and mine; the body sprang
259 "At once to the height, and stayed: but the soul,--no!

260 "Since sages who, this noontide, meditate
 261 "In Rome or Athens, may descry some point
 262 "Of the eternal power, hid yestereve;
 263 "And, as thereby the power's whole mass extends,
 264 "So much extends the æther floating o'er,
 265 "The love that tops the might, the Christ in God.
 266 "Then, as new lessons shall be learned in these
 267 "Till earth's work stop and useless time run out,
 268 "So duly, daily, needs provision be
 269 "For keeping the soul's prowess possible,
 270 "Building new barriers as the old decay,
 271 "Saving us from evasion of life's proof,
 272 "Putting the question ever, 'Does God love,
 273 " ` And will ye hold that truth against the world?'
 274 "Ye know there needs no second proof with good
 275 "Gained for our flesh from any earthly source:
 276 "We might go freezing, ages,--give us fire,
 277 "Thereafter we judge fire at its full worth,
 278 "And guard it safe through every chance, ye know!
 279 "That fable of Prometheus and his theft,
 280 "How mortals gained Jove's fiery flower, grows old
 281 "(I have been used to hear the pagans own)
 282 "And out of mind; but fire, howe'er its birth,
 283 "Here is it, precious to the sophist now
 284 "Who laughs the myth of Æschylus to scorn,
 285 "As precious to those satyrs of his play,
 286 "Who touched it in gay wonder at the thing.
 287 "While were it so with the soul,--this gift of truth
 288 "Once grasped, were this our soul's gain safe, and sure
 289 "To prosper as the body's gain is wont,--
 290 "Why, man's probation would conclude, his earth
 291 "Crumble; for he both reasons and decides,
 292 "Weighs first, then chooses: will he give up fire
 293 "For gold or purple once he knows its worth?
 294 "Could he give Christ up were His worth as plain?
 295 "Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,
 296 "Nor may he grasp that fact like other fact,
 297 "And straightway in his life acknowledge it,
 298 "As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire.
 299 "Sigh ye, 'It had been easier once than now!'
300 "To give you answer I am left alive;
 301 "Look at me who was present from the first!
 302 "Ye know what things I saw; then came a test,
 303 "My first, befitting me who so had seen:
 304 " ` Forsake the Christ thou sawest transfigured, Him
 305 " ` Who trod the sea and brought the dead to life?

306 “ `What should wring this from thee!--ye laugh and ask.
307 “What wrung it? Even a torchlight and a noise,
308 “The sudden Roman faces, violent hands,
309 “And fear of what the Jews might do! Just that,
310 “And it is written, 'I forsook and fled':
311 “There was my trial, and it ended thus.
312 “Ay, but my soul had gained its truth, could grow:
313 “Another year or two,--what little child,
314 “What tender woman that had seen no least
315 “Of all my sights, but barely heard them told,
316 “Who did not clasp the cross with a light laugh,
317 “Or wrap the burning robe round, thanking God?
318 “Well, was truth safe for ever, then? Not so.
319 “Already had begun the silent work
320 “Whereby truth, deadened of its absolute blaze,
321 “Might need love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt.
322 “Teachers were busy, whispering 'All is true
323 “ `As the aged ones report; but youth can reach
324 “ `Where age gropes dimly, weak with stir and strain,
325 “ `And the full doctrine slumbers till to-day.'
326 “Thus, what the Roman's lowered spear was found,
327 “A bar to me who touched and handled truth,
328 “Now proved the glozing of some new shrewd tongue,
329 “This Ebion, this Cerinthus or their mates,
330 “Till imminent was the outcry `Save our Christ!'
331 “Whereon I stated much of the Lord's life
332 “Forgotten or misdelivered, and let it work.
333 “Such work done, as it will be, what comes next?
334 “What do I hear say, or conceive men say,
335 “ `Was John at all, and did he say he saw?
336 “ `Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!

337 “Is this indeed a burthen for late days,
338 “And may I help to bear it with you all,
339 “Using my weakness which becomes your strength?
340 “For if a babe were born inside this grot,
341 “Grew to a boy here, heard us praise the sun,
342 “Yet had but yon sole glimmer in light's place,--
343 “One loving him and wishful he should learn,
344 “Would much rejoice himself was blinded first
345 “Month by month here, so made to understand
346 “How eyes, born darkling, apprehend amiss:
347 “I think I could explain to such a child
348 “There was more glow outside than gleams he caught,
349 “Ay, nor need urge 'I saw it, so believe!'
350 “It is a heavy burthen you shall bear

351 "In latter days, new lands, or old grown strange,
352 "Left without me, which must be very soon.
353 "What is the doubt, my brothers? Quick with it!
354 "I see you stand conversing, each new face,
355 "Either in fields, of yellow summer eves,
356 "On islets yet unnamed amid the sea;
357 "Or pace for shelter 'neath a portico
358 "Out of the crowd in some enormous town
359 "Where now the larks sing in a solitude;
360 "Or muse upon blank heaps of stone and sand
361 "Idly conjectured to be Ephesus:
362 "And no one asks his fellow any more
363 " `Where is the promise of His coming?' but
364 " `Was he revealed in any of His lives,
365 " `As Power, as Love, as Influencing Soul?'

366 "Quick, for time presses, tell the whole mind out,
367 "And let us ask and answer and be saved!
368 "My book speaks on, because it cannot pass;
369 "One listens quietly, nor scoffs but pleads
370 " `Here is a tale of things done ages since;
371 " `What truth was ever told the second day?
372 " `Wonders, that would prove doctrine, go for nought.
373 " `Remains the doctrine, love; well, we must love,
374 " `And what we love most, power and love in one,
375 " `Let us acknowledge on the record here,
376 " `Accepting these in Christ: must Christ then be?
377 " `Has He been? Did not we ourselves make Him?
378 " `Our mind receives but what it holds, no more.
379 " `First of the love, then; we acknowledge Christ--
380 " `A proof we comprehend His love, a proof
381 " `We had such love already in ourselves,
382 " `Knew first what else we should not recognize.
383 " ` 'Tis mere projection from man's inmost mind,
384 " `And, what he loves, thus falls reflected back,
385 " `Becomes accounted somewhat out of him;
386 " `He throws it up in air, it drops down earth's,
387 " `With shape, name, story added, man's old way.
388 " `How prove you Christ came otherwise at least?
389 " `Next try the power: He made and rules the world:
390 " `Certes there is a world once made, now ruled,
391 " `Unless things have been ever as we see.
392 " `Our sires declared a charioteer's yoked steeds
393 " `Brought the sun up the east and down the west,
394 " `Which only of itself now rises, sets,
395 " `As if a hand impelled it and a will,--

396 “`Thus they long thought, they who had will and hands:
397 “`But the new question's whisper is distinct,
398 “`Wherefore must all force needs be like ourselves?
399 “`We have the hands, the will; what made and drives
400 “`The sun is force, is law, is named, not known,
401 “`While will and love we do know; marks of these,
402 “`Eye-witnesses attest, so books declare--
403 “`As that, to punish or reward our race,
404 “`The sun at undue times arose or set
405 “`Or else stood still: what do not men affirm?
406 “`But earth requires as urgently reward
407 “`Or punishment to-day as years ago,
408 “`And none expects the sun will interpose:
409 “`Therefore it was mere passion and mistake,
410 “`Or erring zeal for right, which changed the truth.
411 “`Go back, far, farther, to the birth of things;
412 “`Ever the will, the intelligence, the love,
413 “`Man's!--which he gives, supposing he but finds,
414 “`As late he gave head, body, hands and feet,
415 “`To help these in what forms he called his gods.
416 “`First, Jove's brow, Juno's eyes were swept away,
417 “`But Jove's wrath, Juno's pride continued long;
418 “`As last, will, power, and love discarded these,
419 “`So law in turn discards power, love, and will.
420 “`What proveth God is otherwise at least?
421 “`All else, projection from the mind of man!

422 “Nay, do not give me wine, for I am strong,
423 “But place my gospel where I put my hands.

424 “I say that man was made to grow, not stop;
425 “That help, he needed once, and needs no more,
426 “Having grown but an inch by, is withdrawn:
427 “For he hath new needs, and new helps to these.
428 “This imports solely, man should mount on each
429 “New height in view; the help whereby he mounts,
430 “The ladder-rung his foot has left, may fall,
431 “Since all things suffer change save God the Truth.

432 “Man apprehends Him newly at each stage
433 “Whereat earth's ladder drops, its service done;
434 “And nothing shall prove twice what once was proved.
435 “You stick a garden-plot with ordered twigs
436 “To show inside lie germs of herbs unborn,
437 “And check the careless step would spoil their birth;
438 “But when herbs wave, the guardian twigs may go,

439 "Since should ye doubt of virtues, question kinds,
440 "It is no longer for old twigs ye look,
441 "Which proved once underneath lay store of seed,
442 "But to the herb's self, by what light ye boast,
443 "For what fruit's signs are. This book's fruit is plain,
444 "Nor miracles need prove it any more.
445 "Doth the fruit show? Then miracles bade 'ware
446 "At first of root and stem, saved both till now
447 "From trampling ox, rough boar and wanton goat.
448 "What? Was man made a wheelwork to wind up,
449 "And be discharged, and straight wound up anew?
450 "No!--grown, his growth lasts; taught, he ne'er forgets:
451 "May learn a thousand things, not twice the same.

452 "This might be pagan teaching: now hear mine.

453 "I say, that as the babe, you feed awhile,
454 "Becomes a boy and fit to feed himself,
455 "So, minds at first must be spoon-fed with truth:
456 "When they can eat, babe's-nurture is withdrawn.
457 "I fed the babe whether it would or no:
458 "I bid the boy or feed himself or starve.
459 "I cried once, 'That ye may believe in Christ,
460 " `Behold this blind man shall receive his sight!'
461 "I cry now, 'Urgest thou, *for I am shrewd*
462 " `And smile at stories how John's word could cure--
463 " `Repeat that miracle and take my faith?'
464 "I say, that miracle was duly wrought
465 "When, save for it, no faith was possible.
466 "Whether a change were wrought i' the shows o' the world,
467 "Whether the change came from our minds which see
468 "Of shows o' the world so much as and no more
469 "Than God wills for His purpose,--(what do I
470 "See now, suppose you, there where you see rock
471 "Round us?)--I know not; such was the effect,
472 "So faith grew, making void more miracles
473 "Because too much; they would compel, not help.
474 "I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ
475 "Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
476 "All questions in the earth and out of it,
477 "And has so far advanced thee to be wise.
478 "Wouldst thou unprove this to re-prove the proved?
479 "In life's mere minute, with power to use that proof,
480 "Leave knowledge and revert to how it sprung?
481 "Thou hast it; use it and forthwith, or die!

482 "For I say, this is death and the sole death,
 483 "When a man's loss comes to him from his gain,
 484 "Darkness from light, from knowledge ignorance,
 485 "And lack of love from love made manifest;
 486 "A lamp's death when, replete with oil, it chokes;
 487 "A stomach's when, surcharged with food, it starves.
 488 "With Ignorance was surety of a cure.
 489 "When man, appalled at nature, questioned first
 490 " `What if there lurk a might behind this might?'
 491 "He needed satisfaction God could give,
 492 "And did give, as ye have the written word:
 493 "But when he finds might still redouble might,
 494 "Yet asks, `Since all is might, what use of will?'
 495 "--Will, the one source of might,--he being man
 496 "With a man's will and a man's might, to teach
 497 "In little how the two combine in large,--
 498 "That man has turned round on himself and stands,
 499 "Which in the course of nature is, to die.
 500 "And when man questioned, 'What if there be love
 501 " `Behind the will and might, as real as they?'--
 502 "He needed satisfaction God could give,
 503 "And did give, as ye have the written word:
 504 "But when, beholding that love everywhere,
 505 He reasons, `Since such love is everywhere,
 506 " `And since ourselves can love and would be loved,
 507 " `We ourselves make the love, and Christ was not,'--
 508 "How shall ye help this man who knows himself,
 509 "That he must love and would be loved again,
 510 "Yet, owning his own love that proveth Christ,
 511 "Rejecteth Christ though very need of Him?
 512 "The lamp o'erswims with oil, the stomach flags
 513 "Loaded with nurture, and that man's soul dies.

514 "If he rejoin, `But this was all the while
 515 " `A trick; the fault was, first of all, in thee,
 516 " `Thy story of the places, names and dates
 517 " `Where, when and how the ultimate truth had rise,
 518 " `--Thy prior truth, at last discovered none,
 519 " `Whence now the second suffers detriment.
 520 " `What good of giving knowledge if, because
 521 " `O' the manner of the gift, its profit fail?
 522 " `And why refuse what modicum of help
 523 " `Had stopped the after-doubt, impossible
 524 " `I the face of truth--truth absolute, uniform?
 525 " `Why must I hit of this and miss of that,
 526 " `Distinguish just as I be weak or strong,

527 “` And not ask of thee and have answer prompt,
 528 “` Was this once, was it not once?--then and now
 529 “` And evermore, plain truth from man to man.
 530 “` Is John's procedure just the heathen bard's?
 531 “` Put question of his famous play again
 532 “` How for the ephemerals' sake Jove's fire was filched,
 533 “` And carried in a cane and brought to earth:
 534 “` *The fact is in the fable, cry the wise,*
 535 “` *Mortals obtained the boon, so much is fact,*
 536 “` *Though fire be spirit and produced on earth.*
 537 “` As with the Titan's, so now with thy tale:
 538 “` Why breed in us perplexity, mistake,
 539 “` Nor tell the whole truth in the proper words?'

540 “I answer, Have ye yet to argue out
 541 “The very primal thesis, plainest law,
 542 “--Man is not God but hath God's end to serve,
 543 “A master to obey, a course to take,
 544 “Somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become?
 545 “Grant this, then man must pass from old to new,
 546 “From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
 547 “From what once seemed good, to what now proves best.
 548 “How could man have progression otherwise?
 549 “Before the point was mooted 'What is God?'
 550 “No savage man inquired 'What am myself?'
 551 “Much less replied, `First, last, and best of things.'
 552 “Man takes that title now if he believes
 553 “Might can exist with neither will nor love,
 554 “In God's case--what he names now Nature's Law--
 555 “While in himself he recognizes love
 556 “No less than might and will: and rightly takes.
 557 “Since if man prove the sole existent thing
 558 “Where these combine, whatever their degree,
 559 “However weak the might or will or love,
 560 “So they be found there, put in evidence,--
 561 “He is as surely higher in the scale
 562 “Than any might with neither love nor will,
 563 “As life, apparent in the poorest midge,
 564 “(When the faint dust-speck flits, ye guess its wing)
 565 “Is marvellous beyond dead Atlas' self--
 566 “Given to the nobler midge for resting-place!
 567 “Thus, man proves best and highest--God, in fine,
 568 “And thus the victory leads but to defeat,
 569 “The gain to loss, best rise to the worst fall,
 570 “His life becomes impossible, which is death.

571 "But if, appealing thence, he cower, avouch
 572 "He is mere man, and in humility
 573 "Neither may know God nor mistake himself;
 574 "I point to the immediate consequence
 575 "And say, by such confession straight he falls
 576 "Into man's place, a thing nor God nor beast,
 577 "Made to know that he can know and not more:
 578 "Lower than God who knows all and can all,
 579 "Higher than beasts which know and can so far
 580 "As each beast's limit, perfect to an end,
 581 "Nor conscious that they know, nor craving more;
 582 "While man knows partly but conceives beside,
 583 "Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,
 584 "And in this striving, this converting air
 585 "Into a solid he may grasp and use,
 586 "Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone,
 587 "Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,
 588 "Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.
 589 "Such progress could no more attend his soul
 590 "Were all it struggles after found at first
 591 "And guesses changed to knowledge absolute,
 592 "Than motion wait his body, were all else
 593 "Than it the solid earth on every side,
 594 "Where now through space he moves from rest to rest.
 595 "Man, therefore, thus conditioned, must expect
 596 "He could not, what he knows now, know at first;
 597 "What he considers that he knows to-day,
 598 "Come but to-morrow, he will find misknown;
 599 "Getting increase of knowledge, since he learns
 600 "Because he lives, which is to be a man,
 601 "Set to instruct himself by his past self:
 602 "First, like the brute, obliged by facts to learn,
 603 "Next, as man may, obliged by his own mind,
 604 "Bent, habit, nature, knowledge turned to law.
 605 "God's gift was that man should conceive of truth
 606 "And yearn to gain it, catching at mistake,
 607 "As midway help till he reach fact indeed.
 608 "The statuary ere he mould a shape
 609 "Boasts a like gift, the shape's idea, and next
 610 The aspiration to produce the same;
 611 "So, taking clay, he calls his shape thereout,
 612 "Cries ever `Now I have the thing I see':
 613 "Yet all the while goes changing what was wrought,
 614 "From falsehood like the truth, to truth itself.
 615 "How were it had he cried 'I see no face,
 616 "`No breast, no feet i' the ineffectual clay'?"

617 "Rather commend him that he clapped his hands,
618 "And laughed 'It is my shape and lives again!'
619 "Enjoyed the falsehood, touched it on to truth,
620 "Until yourselves applaud the flesh indeed
621 "In what is still flesh-imitating clay.
622 "Right in you, right in him, such way be man's!
623 "God only makes the live shape at a jet.
624 "Will ye renounce this pact of creatureship?
625 "The pattern on the Mount subsists no more,
626 "Seemed awhile, then returned to nothingness;
627 "But copies, Moses strove to make thereby,
628 "Serve still and are replaced as time requires:
629 "By these, make newest vessels, reach the type!
630 "If ye demur, this judgment on your head,
631 "Never to reach the ultimate, angel's law,
632 "Indulging every instinct of the soul
633 "There where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing!

634 "Such is the burthen of the latest time.
635 "I have survived to hear it with my ears,
636 "Answer it with my lips: does this suffice?
637 "For if there be a further woe than such,
638 "Wherein my brothers struggling need a hand,
639 "So long as any pulse is left in mine,
640 "May I be absent even longer yet,
641 "Plucking the blind ones back from the abyss,
642 "Though I should tarry a new hundred years! "

643 But he was dead; 'twas about noon, the day
644 Somewhat declining: we five buried him
645 That eve, and then, dividing, went five ways,
646 And I, disguised, returned to Ephesus.

647 By this, the cave's mouth must be filled with sand.
648 Valens is lost, I know not of his trace;
649 The Bactrian was but a wild childish man,
650 And could not write nor speak, but only loved:
651 So, lest the memory of this go quite,
652 Seeing that I to-morrow fight the beasts,
653 I tell the same to Phœbas, whom believe!
654 For many look again to find that face,
655 Beloved John's to whom I ministered,
656 Somewhere in life about the world; they err:
657 Either mistaking what was darkly spoke
658 At ending of his book, as he relates,
659 Or misconceiving somewhat of this speech

660 Scattered from mouth to mouth, as I suppose.
661 Believe ye will not see him any more
662 About the world with his divine regard!
663 For all was as I say, and now the man
664 Lies as he lay once, breast to breast with God.

665 [Cerinthus read and mused; one added this:

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

688 But 'twas Cerinthus that is lost.]

Notes

1] This poem offers a detailed exposition of many of Browning's most important religious views, supplementing his earlier exposition in *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* (1850). The general theme is the nature of religious belief; the particular one the relation to religious belief of the attacks made by the Higher Criticism upon the authenticity and historicity of the Gospels. Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* had been published in 1863, and read by Browning in the same year. D. F. Strauss's *New Life of Jesus* appeared in an authorized translation in January 1864; his earlier *Das Leben Jesu* had been translated by George Eliot in 1846. These works, based upon historical and textual scholarship, proceeded on the assumptions of the German school, represented by Baur. These assumptions were, roughly, that the biblical texts were accretions, rather than the work of single authors, that they represented a "mythopoeic" process by which myths accumulated and became attached to an historic person, and that any element of the supernatural constituted part of the myths. The critics began, in other words, with naturalistic preconceptions which automatically ruled out the possibility of Christ's divinity, or of anything miraculous. Their aim was to separate "fact" from "myth," using naturalistic criteria. In their examination of the texts, they applied linguistic criteria to establish probable dates of composition, and generally fixed dates for the Gospels very much later than the traditional ones. Their special target was the fourth Gospel (of St. John), which makes the most explicit assertion of Christ's divinity. It is interesting (though not relevant to Browning's poem) to note that more recent scholarship has tended to reverse many of the findings of the Higher Criticism, and to place the date of John's Gospel where tradition first put it; one scholar has lately argued that this may have been the First Gospel written. Critics are fond of pointing out that Browning is "unable to meet Strauss and Renan upon their own ground of scholarship." This is of course quite true, but irrelevant. One of the main parts of Browning's poem is devoted to arguing that "truth" is not the same thing as "fact"; to reduce truth to historic fact is to rob it of its dimensions and of its immediate concern. Browning, even if he had been in command of all the resources of scholarship, would still have seen no value in arguing with Strauss and Renan on their own ground; as far as he was concerned it was the wrong ground. This is one of the main points he wishes to make. He accepts the historical authenticity of the gospel account of Christ; he presents the poem as a newly-found manuscript recording the last words and death of John so as to assert by implication the authenticity of John's authorship; but he does not consider historicity the main issue, nor accept the critics' assumption that "belief" is the same thing as intellectual acceptance of an empirically "proved" "fact." The key to much of the poem's pattern is to be found in the "glossa of Theotypas" enclosed in square brackets (line 81-103). Here Browning develops an important analogy between the human soul and the divine in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity. The "three souls which make up one soul," the "divers persons" which "witness in each man," constitute a finite analogy of the three persons of the one God. The functions of the three souls recall the aspects of God in each person of the Trinity, and recall many passages in other poems of Browning in which he speaks of Power (or Will), Knowledge, and Love as attributes which man, in his finite way, shares with God (as Father, Holy Spirit, Christ). It is significant that here the third human soul is described as "what Is"--the essence of the human being; for Browning Love is the real essence of God. It is important

to remember, too, that the analogy is a trinitarian one, which means that the unity of the three souls is to be emphasized. A further important note is that each soul represents a mode of knowing: the first through the faculty of sensation and the functions associated with the body, the second through the mind or intellect, the third through love. If the analogy is to hold, these are not ways to be opposed, but aspects or modes of operation of a unified being. It is most significant, of course, that Browning here (as elsewhere) makes love a faculty of cognition. “

134-81] The stages of John's career represent the three modes of knowing, from statement of what he heard and saw (including the Book of Revelations) to “reasoning from his knowledge “ (the Epistles), to a final penetration of the essential meaning (the Gospel), when “what first were guessed as points, I now knew stars. “

196] This is the question the Higher Criticism was asking.

209-44] John's use of the present tense emphasizes the timelessness of truth; his image of the optic glass contrasts (as does the image of the point and the star) the difference between “plain historic fact,/Diminished into clearness “ and truth, which “disparts, dispreads. “

300-11] Again Browning illustrates the difference between empirical knowledge and faith or knowledge of truth; John and the other disciples deserted Christ, even though they “knew “ who and what he was.

336] The refrain, “Assure us, “ reminds us of man's longing for a certainty which, in Browning's view, is not only impossible but would make life meaningless if it were attained (cf. Lazarus in *An Epistle*).

370-421] This passage expresses with full force the view of the naturalist critic; the main answer comes in 472-511, 576-613.

665] Cerinthus: a Gnostic opponent of John. The Gnostics denied the dual nature of Christ; Browning makes Cerinthus thus a representative of those (like the Higher Critics) who see Christ as “mere man. “ The “one “ who adds the comment to the manuscript expresses Browning's view (cf. *Christmas Eve*).