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Verse

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Browning's *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* as Meditational Verse

Robin Colby

Abstract: Robert Browning's *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* has eluded generic identification. One possible solution to this critical problem is to view the poem as falling within the tradition of meditational verse. Evidence for such a reading may be drawn from a look at the origin of the poem as well as the literary relationship between Browning and John Donne. This essay offers a reading of the poem that focuses on identifying and illustrating its characteristics as a meditation.

As Barbara Ryerse has recently noted, *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* stands alone as an "exceptional piece" within the Browning canon (49). We have little to go on from Browning himself that would clarify either his purpose or his meaning in the work. Critics have frequently looked for explanations stemming from Browning's own life, and indeed there is some evidence that the poem may be at least in part confessional. A letter written on July 31, 1845, by Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning illuminates the origin of the poem: "Did you hear," she asks playfully, "that I was one of 'those schismatiques of Amsterdam' whom your Dr. Donne would have put into the dykes?" She then proceeds to express her preference for the simplicity of the Dissenters' chapel over all of the "dogmas and doxies." Browning responds, "Can it be ... *you* are a schismatic and frequenter of Independent Dissenting Chapels? And you confess this to *me*—whose father and mother went this morning to the very Independent Chapel where they took me, all these years back, to be baptized" (*Letters* 140-41).

Basing their conclusions on this passage as well as other bits and pieces from the correspondence, including a letter of May, 1846, in which Elizabeth urges Robert to speak in his own voice, a number of scholars have advanced a biographical reading of the poem. Among these is William Clyde DeVane, who calls the work "Browning's attempt to use the 'white light' of his own personality, rather than the 'broken lights' of the characters through whom he had spoken hitherto" (196-97). J. M. Cohen asserts that "clearly Browning was recalling some feeling of imminent revelation he had himself known, perhaps in his childhood" (66). We might also easily note that Robert was in a particularly reflective mood at the time since his much-loved mother had died just nine days before his only son was born. W. Hall Griffin and Harry Minchin explain the emotional tone of the poem by pointing out that "Browning's thoughts had lately been recalled by sorrow to his home in England, and to his mother's religious faith" (176). Clyde Ryals links the events in Browning's own life with the subject matter of the poem by musing that it was "perhaps inevitable" that "he should turn to religion for [his] subject" (94). He goes further: "Browning no doubt wished to heed his wife's advice and speak in his own voice when in the summer of 1849 she set him the task of composition to relieve his sorrow and idleness" (95). E. LeRoy Lawson, while admitting the distance between poet and speaker, claims that *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* is one of Browning's "more autobiographical" poems (94). Addison Bross identifies the search for belief in the poem with Browning's own search (21). Constance Hassett views the poem as confessional at the very least, if not strictly autobiographical (58). William E. Harrold states rather tentatively, "The experimental structure in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, which combines the dream vision with dramatic scenes, dialogue, and narrative, allows the poet to speak more personally than in many of the stricter monologues" (90). Richard Kennedy and Donald Hair also see the poem through the lens of confession and suggest that the poet's creative purpose was a "reexamination of his faith" (188). Andrew Tate argues that in *Christmas-Eve* Browning conducts a "search for authentic religious experience" and concludes that the poet, through his speaker, "reconciles himself to an aspect of his [Protestant] heritage" (49).

Other readings of the poem have focused more on form and thematic content than on biography. Roy E. Gridley acknowledges the baffling nature of the poem when he admits, "It is not completely clear just what Browning did believe when he wrote this poem; ... it is the dramatic form into which

he casts these thoughts that causes the trouble" (70). Lawson concludes that "what appears here to be a dramatic quest for religious meaning is really a didactic poem in dramatic form" (68). Patricia Rigg sees *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* as an "introspective Romantic quest poem" (68). Linda Peterson regards *Christmas-Eve* (she does not deal with *Easter-Day* at all) as "central to Browning's poetic development" because it explores hermeneutics, the problem of meaning (364). Tate ultimately rejects a neat biographical reading and views the work as belonging more to Browning's sequence of dramatic monologues. All of these critics find the poem to be an unusually murky interpretive challenge.

A potentially helpful clue to the nature and form of the poem lies in Elizabeth Barrett's allusion to Donne. Browning's letters are scattered with references to Donne, making evident his familiarity with and fondness for the poet. Moreover, critics have long noted similarities between Donne and Browning, particularly in the matter of poetic style. Joseph E. Duncan relates *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* to two works of Donne, his third satire as well as his Holy Sonnet "Show me dear Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear" (84). Barbara Ryerse has recently linked *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* to Donne and the tradition of formal verse satire. Ryerse's reading is compelling and establishes convincingly the influence of Donne's poetic practice on Browning. Taking a related approach, I will argue that Browning's admiration for John Donne may lead us to a new and fruitful reading of the poem—one that sees *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* as an exercise in religious meditation. I will offer a reading based on the assumption that in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* Browning is transposing the personal confession mode into a meditative mode.

Beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century, in the wake of the Counter Reformation, scores of treatises on meditation appeared on the scene, from Spain, from Italy, and from France (Martz 5-6). For the next hundred years, these treatises made their way into England and were translated and adapted (Martz 7). Poets like Herbert, Marvell, Vaughan, and most especially Donne embraced and furthered the meditative tradition through their poetry. Applying the meditative form to *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* may yield insight into Browning's poem and offer a possible solution to the question of genre. Through his portrait of an intellectually arrogant speaker, projected imaginatively into a concrete scene, Browning explores spiritual pride and the challenges of faith. This may be as close as the intensely private Browning can get to full spiritual disclosure. Perhaps

Elizabeth Barrett's letter, which provided an impetus for the poem that was written four years later, inadvertently provides a clue that may help us unlock its form and meaning.

As defined by Martz, meditation is "not simply diligent thinking but thinking deliberately directed toward the development of specific emotions" (14). It therefore requires a careful process in which both the intellect and the imagination are applied to a spiritual problem. Signaling the opening of the meditation is a formal "composition of place," which, Martz explains, "is to be done with elaborate, exact detail" (27). Often the composition of place involves the poet's projection of a persona into a significant Biblical event such as the Crucifixion. (One of Donne's "Holy Sonnets" takes just this event for its subject.) After the composition of place is established, the meditation consists of the exercise of the three powers of the rational soul: the memory, the recollection of certain truths previously forgotten; the understanding, the logical analysis of the event or problem; and the will, the summoning of the appropriate emotions. The meditative process, then, culminates in a recognition and, usually, in some type of action, albeit internal and spiritual. Explaining the popularity of meditational poetry in the seventeenth century, Martz suggests that "it satisfied and developed a natural, fundamental tendency of the human mind—a tendency to work from a particular situation, through analysis of that situation, and finally to some sort of resolution of the problems which the situation has presented" (39). Martz uses the meditational form to shed light on Donne's poetry; this form can also be usefully applied to Browning's work.

It would be overstatement to suggest that Browning thought consciously about the composition of his poem in these terms. Yet Browning was an admirer of Donne, and other seventeenth-century writers, such as Francis Quarles, were among his favorites. In their recent biography, Richard Kennedy and Donald S. Hair note that Quarles's *Judgment and Mercy for Afflicted Souls, or Meditations, Soliloquies, and Prayers*, presents a series of wicked types, like the Liar, the Vain-Glorious Man, the Hypocrite, each one exulting in his life—until he hears a voice whispering a biblical text in his ear (33). What follows is a kind of soliloquy, composed of a meditation on sin and penitence. Kennedy and Hair show persuasively that Browning used Quarles as a template for many of his character sketches, from the picture of the proud Duke of Ferraro to the avaricious Bishop who orders his tomb (34). Browning's poetic practice, then, was enriched by his reading of meditative poets such as Donne and Quarles. A careful reading of *Christmas-Eve and*

Easter-Day further illustrates Browning's immersion in the tradition as, strikingly, the poem exhibits all of the qualities of a meditation.

The first characteristic of a meditation, the composition of place, is given elaborate expression in *Christmas-Eve*. In his depiction of the little chapel that grounds the action of the poem and provides a frame for the poem, Browning draws on his familiarity with dissenting chapels; owing to his mother's influence, the family chose to worship regularly at York Street Congregational Church at Walworth, about a mile from the Brownings' home at Camberwell. The preacher, George Clayton, was an earnest, if not particularly eloquent, speaker. Regardless of the preacher's rhetorical skill, the congregant was assumed to be engaged in a careful spiritual exercise. As John Maynard explains it,

In this enterprise, special importance was given to the business of self-examination. The minister might raise one's thoughts by his preaching; Bible reading was a necessity for recalling the truths of religion; prayer would prepare the heart. But the proof of all would come in the self-evaluation ... of the individual when alone in meditation. (10)

With its sticking hinge, its vestibule six feet long by three feet wide, and its neighboring alleys that serve as a lovers' lane, Mount Zion is described in concrete detail. Heightening the spiritual dilemma faced by the speaker, Browning sketches a distinctly working class congregation in the poem, a congregation unlike the more urbane one he grew up with at York Street Church. Among the flock the speaker encounters "the fat weary woman, / Panting and bewildered, down-clapping / Her umbrella with a mighty report," "the many-tattered / Little old-faced peaking sister-turned-mother / Of the sickly babe," and "a tall yellow man, like the Penitent Thief, / With his jaw bound up in a handkerchief," all of whom—except the last—perceive the speaker as an intruder: "What, you the alien, you have ventured / To take with us, the elect, your station?" (48-50, 60-62, 81-82, 87-88). The place is thoroughly established by the end of the second section with the speaker's entry into the chapel, when he says, "I sent my elbow spikewise / At the shutting door, and entered likewise" (129-30). Then follows an extremely specific summary of the speaker's location in space and time:

[I] found myself in full conventicle,
—To wit, in Zion Chapel Meeting,
On the Christmas-Eve of 'Forty-nine,

Which, calling its flock to their special clover,
 Found all assembled and one sheep over,
 Whose lot, as the weather pleased, was mine. (133-38)

After the composition of place is complete, the meditation gives way to an internal drama. In a meditation, Martz says, “the speaker accuses himself; he talks to God within the self; he approaches the love of God through memory, understanding, and will; he sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches by imagination the scenes of Christ’s life as they are represented on a mental stage” (*English* xxvii). Martz concludes, “Essentially, the meditative action consists of an interior drama, in which a man projects a self upon an inner stage, and there comes to know that self in the light of a divine presence” (*English* xxvii).

Browning’s speaker in *Christmas-Eve*, a spiritually arrogant, impatient man, accuses himself repeatedly—though sometimes unconsciously—and at the same time sees the world in terms of biblical events and re-enacts several episodes of the biblical narrative. Always identifying with those who are spiritually misguided, he compares himself first to Eve as he bursts out of the chapel: “So saying like Eve when she plucked the apple, / ‘I wanted a taste, and now there’s enough of it’” (184-85). The parallel is a revealing one, for the speaker, like Eve, seeks knowledge out of pride. But knowledge, the speaker decides, is not to be found in Mount Zion. In his contempt for “the preaching man’s immense stupidity, / As he poured his doctrine forth, full measure,” the speaker discloses his own imperfect soul, his own need of redemption (144-45).

Browning knew something of the speaker’s arrogance—from an early age. Biographers have routinely noted Browning’s adolescent phase of atheism. Mrs. Orr reports that a precocious Browning “set the judgments of those about him at defiance” (46). W. Hall Griffin explains that not even his reverence for his deeply religious mother “served to restrain him during his period of revolt” (50). His open contempt for the plodding sermons delivered by George Clayton in the York Street Chapel brought down upon him a rebuke from the pulpit, surely just what the teenaged Browning was aiming for (50). Browning’s church experience became much more interesting once a “golden-tongued young divine” named Henry Melvill entered his life (Kennedy and Hair 21). At eighteen, Browning began to attend Camden Chapel, where the intellectually sophisticated Melvill “faced up to the central contradiction of Calvinism by declaring, ‘We have Scriptural warranty of God’s election; and we have also Scriptural warranty

of man's free agency" (qtd. in Kennedy and Hair 22). This simultaneous suspension of two divergent truths no doubt appealed to Browning, whose mind loved to juggle multiple perspectives. Under Melvill's tutelage, young Robert was brought back into the fold.

The speaker in the poem initially has little patience for either pastor or congregation. But when he begins musing on the earlier days of his life, an exercise of the faculty of memory ensues—the next step in his meditation. Recalling a time of clear spiritual vision, he reflects:

In youth I looked to these very skies,
 And probing their immensities,
 I found God there, his visible power;
 Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
 Of the power, an equal evidence
 That his love, there too, was the nobler dower. (279-84)

In his reverie, the speaker realizes anew the relationship of man to God, "whose plan / Was to create man and then leave him / Able, his own word saith, to grieve him, / But able to glorify him too" (298-301). He recognizes man's freedom of action but ironically does not recognize how his own words apply to himself in that he has grieved the Creator through his uncharitable attitude toward others. Ironic also is the speaker's awareness that love is the "sole good of life," for he fails to put into practice the love that he celebrates (360). Nevertheless, section five ends with the flawed speaker's passionate attempt to seek God through nature as he gazes into the sky. By means of memory he has recollected truths central to a religious experience.

The meditation is successful, for the speaker is afforded a revelation particularly significant in the context of Biblical history. He glimpses "a moon-rainbow, vast and perfect, / From heaven to heaven extending," and then "another rainbow rose, a mightier" (385, 399). At this moment the speaker participates in an event associated with a divine promise: in the Old Testament the rainbow served as a sign of God's love for man, a sign of God's merciful decision never to destroy the world through a flood. (The reader is reminded of the driving rain which the speaker is exposed to in the beginning of the poem.) He believes himself alone selected for this cosmic display: "This sight was shown me, there and then— / Me, one out of a world of men, / Singled forth" (405-7). Yet in spite of the fervent desire to embrace the love of God and in spite of the gift, the speaker immediately betrays again his fallen nature and repeats a response which Christ's apostles made

when they were faced with a similarly mysterious vision:

For me, I think I said, "Appear!
 Good were it to be ever here.
 If thou wilt, let me build to thee
 Service-tabernacles three,
 Where, forever in thy presence, ...
 I may worship and remain!" (411-19)

The speaker here reenacts the mistake of Peter, who, seeing Jesus transfigured and Elijah and Moses with him, said, "Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for [Elijah]" (Mark 9:5). In the biblical account, the apostles were "sore afraid." Here the speaker "looked up with terror" (Mark 9:16, 430). In both cases, God has no desire for the tribute of elaborate buildings. In the New Testament, "a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my beloved Son: hear him"" (Mark 9:7). In Browning's poem, as in the Biblical narrative, Christ himself is granted as the means of instruction in love. In both cases, the gift is misunderstood.

As the speaker encounters the Son, he becomes involved in another Biblical event: the miracle of the woman who was healed after she "said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole," and grasped the hem of Christ's robe (Matt. 9:21). Browning's speaker sees "No face: only the sight / Of a sweepy garment, vast and white / With a hem that I could recognize" (437-39). Like the sick woman, the speaker recognizes the divinity of Christ but is unable to approach him more directly than by the hem of his garment. Faced with "the mighty fact," the speaker uses the faculty of memory again as he tries to respond appropriately in the moment, quoting closely a text regarding fellowship:

I remember, he did say
 Doubtless that, to this world's end,
 Where two or three should meet and pray,
 He would be in the midst, their friend. (441, 443-46)

Placing his situation in the context of Biblical teaching, the speaker again shows himself in error, for he, like the preacher at the chapel, applies the text clumsily. He is not among two or three. Having separated himself from humanity, he is alone. Yet, abruptly, understanding comes as he realizes, "Folly and pride o'ercame my heart" (464). When he pleads for forgiveness

and the continuing presence of Christ, he joins the company of men like Moses, who saw God: "The whole face turned upon me full" (487). At this point, the speaker is flooded with the brightness of deity and is caught up into the air, clinging to the hem of the garment. Believing himself granted a special form of grace, he thinks that he is permitted his

own way,—dispensed
 From seeking to be influenced
 By all the less immediate ways
 That earth, in worships manifold,
 Adopts to reach, by prayer and praise,
 The garment's hem. (517-22)

The speaker's claim that he actually left the little chapel and traveled to Rome and then Germany is problematic, as he acknowledges. Caught up in the air and holding to the hem, the speaker relates how he crossed the world, lighting first in Rome at the Christmas mass. Though convinced of his own experience, the speaker knows that others will doubt his claim:

Liar and dreamer in your teeth!
 I, the sinner that speak to you
 Was in Rome this night. (554-56)

At the same time, he admits his acquaintance with both visual and literary accounts of the place. He already knows what Rome looks like and is therefore able to describe it. Similarly the speaker renders the scene in the crowded lecture hall in Germany where the "hawk-nosed high-cheek-boned Professor" is draining the Gospel of its historical validity (813). Kevin Mills notes that Browning was intensely aware of the "debates of his day about the validity of biblical history" and points out that the "views expressed by the professor are pretty much those of Strauss" (491). Though it is clear enough that the speaker soundly rejects both ritualistic Catholicism and rationalistic criticism, it is not entirely clear what actually happens at a literal level in the poem. In fact, the reality of both episodes is called into question by the speaker, who reasons that his knowledge of all that took place in the little Dissenters' chapel precludes his absence from the spot. Indeed, he goes further, saying a "spectator might have fancied that I had nodded, betrayed by slumber" (1253-54). The inevitable conclusion, supported by the speaker's words, is that the scenes in Rome and in Germany are intensely

evoked mental images, originating within the speaker's imagination as he sits "talking with [his] mind" (1132).

These mental excursions prove efficacious, for the speaker, having come to acknowledge his connectedness with other men, resolves,

Let me enjoy my own conviction,
 Not watch my neighbour's faith with fretfulness,
 Still spying there some dereliction
 Of truth, perversity, forgetfulness!
 Better a mild indifferentism,
 Teaching that both our faiths (though duller
 His shine through a dull spirit's prism)
 Originally had one colour! (1143-51)

The poem ends with a decided act of the will as the speaker asserts, "I choose here!" embracing the little chapel's mode of worship as the one in which "His All in All appears serene / With the thinnest human veil between" (1341, 1306-07). In the end, he must *do* something. Resolution is not complete until he begins to participate in the service, moving to "put up pencil and join chorus / To Hepzibah Tune, without further apology, / The last five verses of the third section / Of the seventeenth hymn of Whitfield's Collection, / To conclude with the doxology" (1355-59). What the speaker must do, as Browning makes clear, is join in corporate worship, not holding himself apart from or above the rest.

The meditative form allows the speaker of *Christmas-Eve* to work from a concrete setting in place and time, back through the events of religious significance in the Christian tradition, casting himself into Biblical roles, impersonating figures from Eve to the apostle Peter. Such deliberate role-playing paradoxically ends in at least partial and temporary self-knowledge. But as the speaker himself realizes, "'Tis one thing to know and another to practice" (1039). The mental and dramatic process of the poem leads the speaker to an understanding of his relationship with humankind and to an active assertion of his place within the institution of the church. Such knowledge will not replace the speaker's need for a great deal more practice. *Christmas-Eve* involves for him finding a role and a place. *Easter-Day* focuses on the difficult enactment of the Christian life.

Like *Christmas-Eve*, *Easter-Day* exhibits all of the features of a religious meditation, the composition of place followed by the exercise of the memory, the understanding, and the will. Though the poem keeps broadly within the

parameters of the meditative form, Browning follows his usual practice of reshaping and adapting elements to suit his poetic purpose. In this case, the formal composition of place is embedded later in the poem rather than announced at the beginning as it is in *Christmas-Eve*. Nevertheless, the setting is clearly established again as the common where the Dissenters' chapel stands; moreover, the speaker of *Easter-Day* calls the speaker of *Christmas-Eve* his friend, thus linking the two works even more closely.

In a typical meditation, the movement is from memory to understanding. In the case of *Easter-Day*, the speaker undergoes a futile effort to apply the understanding before exercising the memory. The disordering of the meditational pattern reflects the struggle in the speaker: as he himself declares, he finds it very hard to be a Christian. The poem proceeds structurally as an intellectual debate between two speakers: one who, although he finds faith problematic, identifies himself as a Christian, and another who is a skeptic. The speaker of the poem begins by exclaiming "how very hard it is to be / A Christian" and attempts to convince the doubter of the need for faith through an appeal to his reason, in short, through the power of understanding (1-2). However, because the speaker of the poem monopolizes the discussion—discussion is not even an accurate term, as the other person never speaks directly—neither real dialogue nor persuasion takes place. It is of course possible to conclude that the listener does not actually exist, to argue that the two points of view represented exist simultaneously in the speaker's mind. If this is the case, *Easter-Day* then becomes an internal debate. In either case, "as usual with Browning, the dialectic leads nowhere. The believer can only appeal, finally, to personal experience" (Lawson 73). The argument finally breaks down as the speaker experiences confusion: "Do you say this, or I? – Oh, you! / Then, what my friend?" (227-28). When the speaker claims to have proven what he began with—"how hard it is / To be a Christian,"—he is aware of the futility of such proof: "Small thanks, I wot, / You get of mine, for taking pains / To make it hard to me. Who gains / By that, I wonder?" (323-25).

The attempt to apply the understanding prematurely fails. As Browning so often demonstrates, the intellect is never enough. It is only when he appeals to memory that the poem begins to gain momentum and the speaker begins to make spiritual progress. Recalling an experience "as solemn, strange / And dread a thing as in the range / Of facts, —or fancies," the speaker agonizes over the effect of his revelation on others, believing

that if I carry through
 My purpose, if my words in you
 Find a live actual listener,
 My story, reason must aver
 False after all—the happy chance! (347-49, 353-57)

Logical analysis is futile, and even the claim of past experience is problematic. The speaker does not know if his experience is authentic. Yet he desperately desires to share his vision and, by convincing others, to convince himself:

While, if each human countenance
 I meet in London day by day,
 Be what I fear, —my warnings fray
 No one, and no one helps me to assert
 How hard it is to really be
 A Christian, and in vacancy
 I pour this story! (358-65)

Like the Ancient Mariner, he must tell his story, and memory makes the narration possible.

The speaker proceeds to narrate the events of a night three years earlier when, he says, “I overwent / Much the same ground of reasoning / As you and I just now” (382-84). The one thing that remains for the speaker to do that Easter-Day eve is to ask himself: “How were my case, now, did I fall / Dead here, this minute—should I lie / Faithful or faithless?” (396-97). This situation echoes exactly the situation of Donne’s holy sonnet “What if this present were the world’s last night?” The speaker in *Easter-Day* remembers affirming “I wish indeed God’s kingdom come” (458). Musing upon the manner in which the world will end, he is projected into perhaps the most dramatic scene in the entire biblical narrative, the Day of Judgment. Just as the speaker in *Christmas-Eve* projects himself into biblical moments, the speaker in *Easter-Day* finds himself participating in the culmination of history: “There, stood I, found and fixed, I knew, / Choosing the world” (552-53). Once “a final belch of fire like blood / Overbroke all heaven in one flood of doom,” he hears a voice announce, “Time ends, Eternity’s begun, / And thou art judged for evermore” (588-90, 595-96). Then a curious thing happens: “All seemed as before” (597). The speaker, seeing things as they had always appeared, concludes that he has been dreaming. Yet shortly he is given authentic evidence as Christ himself appears, announcing that the speaker has been granted what in his life he has judged best: the

earth. Delighted with the gift, the speaker is reprimanded by the Son, who informs him, “Thou wouldst not find it hard to guess / What hell may be his punishment / For those who doubt if God invent / Better than they” (707-10). To the speaker’s dismay, these words prove to be true, for after seeking the natural beauty of the earth, the wonders of art, the achievements of the mind, he finds “all still is earth’s” and in despair cries, “I let the world go, and take love!” (893, 934). With sternness, rather than the approval the speaker expects, Christ reminds him that he once had ample opportunity to make the right choice when he chides, “’Tis somewhat late!”—serving as an advocate of memory (959). The speaker is forced to remember that he once had a chance to choose the divine love he now desires.

The conclusion of the meditational process is the engagement of the will. In this case, the speaker’s act of will is muted and tentative. Responding to Christ’s charge that he has missed his opportunity on earth, he pleads to be allowed to “go on / Still hoping ever and anon / To reach one eve the Better Land!” (1001-03). In his articulation of hope, the speaker exercises his will—always a critical point with Browning. At this moment, without clear resolution, the poem ends. The poem closes by casting doubt on itself. Like the speaker in *Christmas-Eve*, the speaker in *Easter-Day* suggests the possibility that he was merely dreaming. Yet regardless of the literal reality of the event, the speaker is given the ability to exercise the will, the final step of the meditative process. The vision, even if only a product of the speaker’s vivid imagination, is redemptive, for it induces action. The speaker is provided with a reason to continue his spiritual efforts:

And so I live, you see,
Go through the world, try, prove, reject,
Prefer, still struggling to effect
My warfare. (1018-21)

Thus *Easter-Day* establishes its own efficacy as a meditation. The speaker in the poem is made fully aware that an intellectual approach to faith will not serve. Only through an intensely evoked imaginative vision of the self in relation to the Biblical narrative is real understanding possible. And understanding leads to action and deliberate, self-defining choice. As we might expect with Browning, the poem ends on a tentative note: “But Easter-Day breaks! But / Christ rises! Mercy every way / Is infinite, —and who can say?” (1038-40). Kennedy and Hair conclude their biography by rightly asserting that Browning “welcomes indeterminacy” (416). They go on to

argue that, for Browning, the “development of the soul” is the “essential and defining human activity” (416) and further note that he is “always prodding the reader to make sense of ... experiences in his or her own way” (416). In the end, through *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, Browning invites the reader to enter into the meditative process, creating a rich open-endedness that is true to our human experience.

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