The chief question posed by Robert Browning's poetry is that of adequacy: what will suffice? Behind this question lies the metaphor of growth, development, metamorphosis—Bildung—that is at the heart of the poet's thinking. Conceiving of the universe in Heraclitean terms of energy, motion, and change, Browning believed that for the individual and for humanity as a whole becoming is the perennial process of development whereby, first, contradictions are felt to be momentarily resolved and the limitations of an outmoded form of consciousness temporarily overcome, and, secondly, this stage is perceived as deficient, so that, thirdly, a new stage of consciousness is attained. Never amenable to formalization and precision, development may nonetheless be characterized as a series of resting places—“approximations” Browning, like Carlyle, calls them—which are the best attainable at a given time but which eventually prove inadequate. The quest for conditional accommodations for what the poet characteristically calls “soul” is discernible throughout his work, from the “principle of restlessness” iterated in his first published poem (Pauline [1833], l. 277) to his belief in striving in the afterlife spoken of in his last (“Epilogue” to Asolando.)

Early on, Browning had envisioned his career as a kind of pilgrimage on the road to the Absolute, his poems being stages
providing points of departure for the next steps forward. He was fully aware, however, that the Absolute would never be attained. As he said in his Essay on Shelley (1852), in which he cast an oblique glance backward over his own development, it is the business of a poet to behold the universe and all therein "in their actual state of perfection in imperfection" but to look to "the forthcoming stage of man's being" and so suggest "this ideal of a future man," thereby striving "to elevate and extend" both himself and mankind. Of course, Browning hastens to add, "an absolute vision is not for this world, but we are permitted a continual approximation to it." His poems are these approximations, representations of life whose progress toward the Absolute is determined by their own inadequacies. One representation or form of consciousness fails and another is chosen to take its place. Yet the new representation is not in any way a deductive necessity, nor are the connections entailments: Browning recognizes that there could always be different starting points and different routes taken to arrive at provisional ends.

Although in his poems written prior to his marriage in 1846 Browning had worked out his own philosophy and artistic creed in light of his embrace of the doctrine of becoming (and in Sordello [1840] especially had arrived at an almost perfect example of the romantic ironic art of symphilosophy and sympoetry that Schlegel had envisioned2), he had not specifically addressed the subject of religious belief in this way. In such poems as "Saul" (published incomplete in 1845) he had begun to examine his inherited Christian faith, but as his inability to finish "Saul" would seem to indicate, he still had further to go.

By the mid-1840s Browning could affirm the intervention of the Absolute in history and accept the Incarnation as a mythic pattern for self-realization and as a model of organization for his life as artist; he agreed with his future wife that Christianity is a "worthy myth, & poetically acceptable" (Kintner, 1:43). In his discussions and correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett in 1845–46, when the subject of religion arose from time to time, it mainly
concerned the observances and forms of worship Christianity may take. She confessed, fairly early in their acquaintance, that she was from a dissenting background although not really interested in sectarianism as such, "hating as I do ... all that rending of the garment of Christ, & caring very little for most dogmas & doxies in themselves & believing that there is only one church in heaven & earth, with the one divine High Priest to it" (Kintner, 1:141). In reply Browning acknowledged that he too was from a dissenting family but did not elaborate other than to say that this was not a "point of disunion" between them (Kintner, 1:143). A year later the pair again turned to the question of sectarianism, and in explanation of her position Elizabeth Barrett spoke of her unwillingness "to put on any of the liveries of the sects" (Kintner, 2:962). Browning agreed:

Look at the injunction to "love God with all the heart, and soul, and strength"—and then imagine yourself bidding any faculty, that arises towards the love of him, be still! If in a meeting house, with the blank white walls, and a simple doctrinal exposition,—all the senses should turn (from where they lie neglected) to all that sunshine in the Sistine with its music and painting, which would lift them at once to Heaven,—why should you not go forth?

And then, after an elaborate metaphor, Browning continues:

See the levity! No—this sort of levity only exists because of the strong conviction, I do believe! There seems no longer need of earnestness in assertion, or proof . so it runs lightly over, like foam on the top of a wave. (Kintner, 2:969)

Browning’s treatment of the subject here is instructive, for it is typically Browningesque: having addressed a serious subject directly and sincerely, he then withdraws and resorts to "levity."
This is, as we shall see, exactly the procedure in the first poem of any length written after his marriage.

Browning composed "Christmas-Eve," said to be a central document in the poet's religious history, in late 1849 or early 1850, after the birth of his son and the subsequent death of his mother, which threw him into a profound depression from which he did not soon recover. It was perhaps inevitable that, reflecting on his feeling of desolation following his mother's death so soon after the experience of extreme joy at the birth of his son, the poet should turn to religion as the subject of his next poem. Indeed, the passages on death (ll. 1211-27) and hope for an afterlife (ll. 350-72) are probably the core of "Christmas-Eve," around which was clustered the complex dream vision dealing with different modes of worship.

Touched as he was personally by the facts of birth and death, Browning no doubt wished to heed his wife's early advice to write a moral and religious poem in which he spoke in his own voice (Kintner, 1:14-16). Yet when he thought of elaborating the core passages of his poem into considerations of modes of worship more or less along the lines of their earlier correspondence, he found he could not "speak out" in this instance any more than he could do so earlier. Possibly he conceived of the device of the dream vision as a means of distancing himself from his material. But upon reflection even this would, in the end, mean pinning himself down to a certain stance, and being Browning, he would not preclude possibility. The only way out was, then, the way he had adopted earlier, especially in Sordello, and the way he had dealt with Elizabeth Barrett's remarks on sectarianism: namely, narrative informed by "levity." I wish to suggest that the imaginative donnée of "Christmas-Eve" is not, pace the many commentators on Browning's religious beliefs, modes of worship or even the Christian faith, but romantic irony.

The poem, published in 1850 as the first part of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, is a dramatic narrative of events that befell a certain unnamed speaker on Christmas Eve, 1849. To whom it is
addressed is never made clear; indeed, the speaker’s notion of his audience, his way of dealing with it, and the verb tense of his narrative change. To escape the rain he enters a dissenting chapel, in which an ugly and mean congregation are preached to by an ignorant, bigoted man. He withdraws to the open air, where he congratulates himself upon his own (superior) mode of worship, which entails direct communication with the divine without any kind of earthly mediation. Suddenly a rainbow appears and from it issues forth what seems to be the figure of Christ (although he is never named), who gathers the speaker up in his white robe (or, to be exact, the robe gathers him up) and transports him on a magical mystery tour to Rome, where he witnesses the midnight mass at St. Peter’s, and to Göttingen, where he hears a lecturer (who obviously espouses the Higher Criticism) demythologize the Christian story.⁴ Noting that Christ had apparently been present in the chapel and had entered into the observances at both Rome and Göttingen, the speaker eventually admits that there are many perceptions of truth and that each person’s realization of it is true for him if for no one else, whereupon he finds himself back in the chapel and returned to ordinary consciousness. He questions the reality of the experience, although feeling certain that something unusual has happened to him, and decides that he will continue in that way of worship which employs fewest earthly aids but that he will not henceforth deny to other modes their own validity. Hence, instead of “attacking the choice of my neighbors round, / With none of my own made—I choose here!” (ll. 1340–41). Although the people gathered in the chapel are just as unprepossessing as before, the narrator recognizes the water of life in their earthen vessel and joins them here in their way, which he believes is but one of many ways to truth.

This is borne out by the imagery of the robe and the rainbow. The robe first appears when the speaker attests to the power and beauty of God. What he sees, however, is only the garment, “vast and white, / With a hem that I could recognize” (ll. 438–39). Significantly, he never looks directly at the face of the figure in the robe, nor does he embrace the figure directly but holds by the
The lunar rainbow, "vast and perfect / From heaven to heaven extending," rises "with its seven proper colors chorded" until they coalesce into the "whitest white" (ll. 385–93). White is of course made up of all colors, and it is here used to suggest that truth is characterized by many aspects and may be approached in many ways. It is, the speaker comprehends, perhaps permissible to pursue my way but only with the understanding that my way is not the only way.

Formally the narrative, which is carefully organized, would appear to underscore the seriousness of the speaker's understanding about the nature of truth. In structure it is circular, with an introduction and a coda. Yet the effect is not of careful organization but of cramming and stuffing, of fantasy and unreality. Many passages have little to do with modes of worship but, for example, with the Incarnation itself in the scene at Rome and the need for accepting the divinity of Christ in the scene at Gottingen. In short, "Christmas-Eve" seems something of a grab bag. This effect is heightened by the verse form—Hudibrastics that lend a tone of grotesquerie and facetiousness to content often of intense seriousness. In other words, the poem is an excellent example of the arabesque—an artfully arranged confusion of symmetry and chaos—and with its "transcendental buffoonery" it is permeated by the irony that suggests the insoluble conflict between the absolute and the relative, the necessity and yet the impossibility of total communication.

Browning makes sure to leave us with no notion that this is
his final word on the subject of modes of worship: in fact, he causes us to wonder whether this dream vision has even been a serious consideration of the subject. First, the speaker questions the reality of the experience: if, in fact, he has been transported to various parts of the world, how is it that he has heard the sermon in the chapel and been able to note in detail all its deficiencies:

"How else was I found there, bolt upright / On my bench, as if I had never left it?" (ll. 1238–39). Second, the speaker admits to "levity" in his treatment of the matter, this in no small part owing to language itself, which does not permit adequate discussion of the infinite because of its finite nature:

Lest myself, at unawares, be found,
While attacking the choice of my neighbors round,
With none of my own made—I choose here!
The giving out of the hymn reclaimst me;
I have done: and if any blames me,
Thinking that merely to touch in brevity
The topics I dwell on, were unlawful,—
Or worse, that I trench, with undue levity,
On the bounds of the holy and awful,—
I praise the heart, and pity the head of him,
And refer myself to THEE, instead of him,
Who head and heart alike discernest,
Looking below light speech we utter,
When frothy spume and frequent sputter
Prove that the soul's depths boil in earnest!

(ll. 1339–53)

Third, the poem ends with a complete violation of the pre­tense that this has been a dramatic poem, as the speaker says:

I have done:
I put up pencil and join chorus
To Hepzibah Tune, without further apology.

(ll. 1343, 1355–56)
This has been no fictional character speaking: it is the poet writing. "The giving out of the hymn reclaims me" (l. 1342), recalls him from fantasy to present actuality; and so, in a remarkable example of parabasis and aesthetic play, the poet reveals that this has been a poetic and thus fanciful exercise as he decides to "put up pencil" (l. 1355). In effect, Browning tells us that this is not a presentation or even a re-presentation of experience but is in fact a poem, not life but art. And hovering above the poem is the figure of the poet, like Thackeray's Manager of the Performance, smiling at his creation and partaking of it, being both immanent and transcendent, as he presents us with a poem that is self-conscious and self-regarding—that is, aware of itself as art.

Yet what we are left with in the end is not simply a work of art in which the poet hovers above the poem and glorifies in his own self-activity. For at the close Browning, who believed that the poet's business is with God, looks beyond those who might blame him for levity to "refer myself to THEE" and yet at the same time joins in the fellowship of hymn singing. Displaying both the transcendental and descendental thrusts of his nature, the poet seems to suggest that at least one way of getting to the figure of Christ is through the experience of him as it is mediated in the historical continuity of human fellowship, here represented by the congregation on this Christmas Eve.

As we have seen, in the poem Browning presents four different ways of celebrating the Christmas festival. The first, the way of the dissenters, is characterized by a preaching of biblical literalism, exclusiveness, and a kind of predestination. The second, the narrator's own way, is entirely private and individualistic, eschewing ecclesiastical tradition and authority and supposing an immediate access to the divine without earthly aids. The third way, that of the Roman Catholics, prefers the Gospel fellowship of the Christian church as the unity of the eternal and the historical. The fourth way, that of the Higher Criticism, demythologizes the Christian story but nevertheless venerates the myth of Christ and the supreme greatness of the man Jesus.
Good Victorian ironist that he is, Browning has the shadowy figure of Christ give apparent approval to the most divergent and even contradictory ways of worship as they are informed by various beliefs: they are all what Carlyle called “true fictions,” finite (and thus imperfect) formulations of the Infinite. The poet here dramatizes his belief that no religious or philosophical point of view, no conceptual framework, no demonstrative proof can ever be adequate by itself. For every premise there is a context and a set of propositions taken for granted. For every argument there is a perspective unchallenged. For every moral or religious principle there are a social milieu, a set of cultural needs, and a history that makes such exercises intelligible and plausible. Like Foucault later, Browning (although within an idealist framework) recognizes the reality of imprisonment, the incarceration of human beings within systems of thought and practice that have become so much a part of them that they do not experience these systems as a series of confinements but embrace them as the very structure of being human. In sum, the poet dramatizes his view that all embodiments are imperfect but necessary (because they are all one has to work with).

The Christ in this poem is sentient of how the various “ways” have been produced, and he is forgiving, indeed approving of them all save that of the speaker’s, which is private, non-communal and noncommunicative, and therefore approaching (to borrow Kierkegaard’s term) “infinite absolute negativity.” As a result of his dream vision the narrator seems to learn that only corporate worship has Christ’s blessing. But, pondering the other ways, the speaker is uncertain which is the one for him: “Needs must there be one way, our chief / Best way of worship?” he asks (ll. 1170–71). The answer is no. For as Browning’s Sordello learned, “the real way seemed made up of all the ways” (Sordello, 6:36). Still, being finite and limited, one cannot embrace all the ways: one must choose. And so, evidencing the self-assertion and the self-restriction of the romantic ironist as he aims for communality and communication, the speaker says, “I choose
here!” (l. 1341). Here, because one is here, in a community of believers. Whether they are congenial souls is neither here nor there: they are “my neighbors” (l. 1340), the other to whom I must open out and thus experience the joy of the Christmas festival.

The monologist discovers what Browning was constantly concerned to portray: namely, that everything has meaning. Phenomena, myriad and diverse as they are, are all parts of a whole. Fragmentation, discontinuity, ugliness, evil—these are readily discernible even to the most unpracticed eye. It is the artist’s business however to show how they fit into the whole. For the artist is what is called in Sordello the “Maker-see.” By uncovering what has been hidden, by defamiliarizing what has been dulled by the blindness of custom, by lifting phenomena out of the field of ordinary perception and placing them within a network of relationships that constitute the work of art—by so doing the artist makes his readers experience the becoming of an object in the boundless universe of change. To Browning, development, advance on the road to the Absolute, entails engaging in the thought of the other, the different and the alien; it is the process of endeavoring to experience alterity and to examine to what extent it is possible to think differently, instead of legitimating that which is already known. And so to show his joy in his discovery of this unprepossessing congregation’s meaning and value, the speaker (who is soon to be revealed as an artist) embraces the fellowship and joins in the hymn “without further apology” (l. 1356).

But is this Browning’s final word in the poem? Surely not. For if this, or something like it, is taken as the poet’s last word, then certainty takes precedence over possibility: the irony of the poem is to be relegated to the camp of Wayne C. Booth and the reconstructionists. But, as is always the case with Browning, there is more to say. With him, as with other romantic ironists, any affirmation is only provisional, is only a proximate formulation of truth. His irony does not allow the subject to come to a stop at a single point but causes it to travel incessantly between
the finite and the infinite, the bounded and the free, the signifier and the signified; it is a balance of dialectical movement. In the end "Christmas-Eve" is, as the speaker says, "reclaimed"—reclaimed from fixity for becoming. The last word belongs to the poet, who, interrupting his narrative and turning to his audience, insists as he puts up his pencil that the imaginative donnée of his poem is romantic irony.

It is then a vain endeavor to look to "Christmas-Eve"—or to any other of Browning's poems, for that matter—for final statements of the poet's religious beliefs. Mrs. Sutherland Orr, who knew Browning personally and well and who is one of the few critics to deal perspicaciously with his religious views, remarked that the poet's religious belief "held a saving clause, which removed it from all dogmatic grounds of controversy: the more definite or concrete conceptions of which it consists possessed no finality for even his own mind; they represented for him an absolute truth in contingent relations to it." Other critics have, however, been less perceptive and have bedeviled the poem to extract a statement of Browning's religious creed. Those commentators who, for example, view "Christmas-Eve" as the poet's evaluation of the relative merits of the three modes of worship and as "his decision in favor of the Dissenting Chapel, for the Chapel seems in the poet's opinion to have received most fittingly the gift of God's Son to the world," have failed to perceive, among other things, that neither the speaker's dream vision nor the modes of worship lie at the imaginary heart of the poem. They not only stop too soon, with "I choose here!" (l. 1341), and thereby overlook the last eighteen lines, but they also fail to perceive that in Browning's world meaning is always in the making, man is always making and unmaking himself, the individual is, like the race, always in a state of becoming.

If there is a "way" in the poem, it is the way of levity's rainbow, yielding not creeds but fictions of faith. Browning can wholeheartedly embrace the rainbow, the Bible's image of covenant, as it is revealed to him in his place- and time-bound situa-
tion; for him it has existential meaning as the best "image" of truth available for the time being. Yet it is, in the last analysis, but an image, a sign, not the thing itself. It is a rainbow, literally a refraction and a reflection, informed by the Absolute which it cannot contain. As the Higher Critics would put it, it is a myth. Thus it is a provisional truth, and the chapel where the speaker in the poem finds himself is but a conditional accommodation. Like all embodiments in Browning's world it can never be a final "image." And so to indicate its provisional nature, the speaker resorts to levity, a kind of Kierkegaardian humor that does not mock the religious content but serves to underscore it. "Christmas-Eve" is but the first of Browning's poems, like "A Death in the Desert" and The Ring and the Book, that scrutinize the nature of religious myth and, with regard to it, ask: what will suffice?