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RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES: THE ETHICAL STATEMENT OF ROBERT BROWNING'S POETRY

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RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES: ETHICS IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING

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ABSTRACT

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By

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Charges of obscurity leveled at Browning are often based more on a reading of the work through the screen of personal prejudice than on the reality of who Browning was and why he wrote. While Browning's poetry has been a frequent subject of criticism, from the Victorians through the deconstructionists, it is generally unsuited for any particular "system."

Generally, three major elements enter into his perception of Truth: "Intuition," reason, and revelation. Intuition includes artistic sensitivity very close to the exercise of faith; sometimes the terms are synonymous. And, while his negative characters often "reason" themselves away from truth, none of his positive characters is stupid. Often, they reason themselves to the place of faith.

Not a Kirkegaardian leap, however, this faith must be based on revelation. Browning often expresses this in an oral passing of the message, but the revelation may come in a vision or an experience. Often it concerns the Incarnation--the central Truth for Browning. Without

revelation central truths of Christianity are often missed, i.e., the love of God. Clearly, that revelation for Browning is the Bible; he illustrates from it, quotes it, and applies its moral principles. He then combines the three elements necessary to the apprehension of truth and applies them to the problems of his age.

All men, according to Browning, are given enough light to perceive Truth. If they reject it, it is only because they choose to do so, because they desire something else more. He firmly establishes the link between ethics and Christianity in "Caliban on Setebos," and, while he never seems to make a conscious effort to organize a "system," he demonstrates it throughout the canon of his work, summarizing and polarizing it in *The Ring and the Book*.

Browning requires his readers to engage in the understanding that results in moral living--life circumscribed by love. Browning's characters who apprehend the truth make correct moral choices and allow the "others" in their lives freedom to do the same and thus grow toward maturity.

For my Father

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My thanks to the people with whom I teach who granted me the time necessary to complete this task, and to those who served as encouragers--especially those members of my committee who saw fit to "nudge" me along the way.

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INTRODUCTION

The life of Robert Browning has been as well documented as that of any modern poet, and possibly more than most. Societies of followers while he was still writing insured that he would be amply commented upon, and a wife who was even more popular than he insured that even the lives around him would be closely examined. A simple perusal of the shelves at nearly any library will reveal biographies by, among others, individuals such as Altick, Armstrong, Cary, Miller, Orr, Ward, and/or his cousin, Cyrus Mason. Still others have demonstrated, with varying degrees of success, his life and beliefs by compiling and editing his letters and dissecting his work. It hardly seems necessary, or even desirable, to rehearse what multitudes have done before. This study will, therefore, focus on the ethical system of a man who lived in an age which often fell far short of the principles for which it is famed.

Robert Browning never made a pretense of being a theologian. Nor did he consign himself to a set of theologies prescribed by any specific church or religious group. Ahead of his time, and certainly apart from others who were writing when he did, he was an educated,

intelligent individualist of the highest order. And he certainly did not classify the things he believed as "doctrine" or "theology." What he did was translate his faith into the words of his poetry, focusing on the attitudes and problems which were evident to him in his era. Part of his expression was the ethic which, for him, flowed naturally from Christianity. He firmly establishes the link between ethics and Christianity in "Caliban on Setebos," and, while he never seems to make a conscious effort to organize a "system," he demonstrates it, albeit sometimes negatively, throughout the canon of his work, particularly that of the twenty-five or so years prior to the writing of *The Ring and the Book*.

Browning was not a "religious" poet, but rather one who was innately spiritual--his faith was composite with his life, not a detached segment. Thus, we see an expanded ethic, worked out in his "secular" poems as well as those which have been labeled "religious." "My Last Duchess" and "Andrea Del Sarto" become as much religious poetry as "Saul" or "Karshish." That ethic is later brought into full focus in *The Ring and the Book*. Published in 1869, it brought a variety of character types together around one inquiry. Here we need not speculate how various characters would respond to a given situation--how a pope might react in a priest's position, or how lawyers might have managed the

predicament of Guido--we have the whole of Rome in our view in a moment of time and around a common incident.

Faith and life for Browning were never static, but were part of a process of growth which was to continue even after death. Much of what we have chosen to use here was first published in 1855, at his wife's urging and when his faith seemed to be most lucid, and, ironically, just prior to Mrs. Browning's deepest involvement in Spiritualism; some dates as far back as 1842, showing evidence in "My Last Duchess." "Caliban" reaches ahead to 1864, but brings into focus some previously untouched issues of the time.

After *The Ring and the Book,* Browning's poetry seems, according to some critics, to take a decided turn which they interpret as a change in his belief system; but it is not our purpose here to investigate that particular phenomena which could be due to the loss of Elizabeth's influence, a general decline of his poetic genius due to age, or the critics' exegesis of the work through the screen of their own interpretations of Christianity. What we are concerned with is the poetry that flowed from the years of his vitality. What he became in his later years can be the subject of another study.

CHAPTER 1

BROWNING AND THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

When Robert Browning used the segment of Psalm 50:21, "...thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself...," as the epigraph for "Caliban on Setebos," he may well have been as much a prophet as he was a poet, at least concerning the criticism that would follow him. Those who critiqued his work insisted upon casting him, variously and at length, in any of a number of roles ranging from philosopher to theologian, from godly Christian to unbeliever, as heretic, preacher, thinker, scientist, *the* poet, or no poet at all. He was then either praised or censured, depending upon the critic's sometimes rather narrow theological and/or personal views, and particularly by those writing before World War I, although the tendency towards the same kind of criticism lingers in the present much like a ghost who will not be exorcised. Far fewer critics were interested in viewing him as a poet than as a theologian or a philosopher.

The 1890's alone produced a number of titles which seem to deal with him in this manner. Among them we find such works as: *Faith and Doubt in the Century's Poets,*[1] *Browning*

and the Christian Faith,[2] *Browning Poet and Man: A Survey,*[3] *"Browning's Hebraic Sympathies,"*[4] *Christian Instincts and Modern Doubt,*[5] "Browning's Attitude Towards Christianity,"[6] "Tennyson and Browning as Spiritual Forces,"[7] no fewer than five articles on "Browning as a Religious Teacher,"[8] "Browning's Philosophy,"[9] several works on Browning as a theologian,[10] "The Religious Opinions of Robert Browning,"[11] "Browning's Theism,"[12] and *The Vision of Christ in the Poets: Selected Studies of the Christian Faith as Interpreted by Milton, Wordsworth, the Brownings, Tennyson, Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell.*[13]

The fault seems to lie not so much with individual Browning critics as it does with the narrow confines of nineteenth century criticism in general; that Browning was not the only target of such approaches is seen even here by the inclusion of other poets in several of the titles. Often, the work was read superficially, or with such a jaundiced eye that the criticism was more of a commentary on the belief system of the critic than on the work under consideration. Improvement in the critical climate was not rapid. W. O. Raymond writes, hopefully, as late as 1950:

> In the sixty years that have passed since Browning's death, his poetic reputation has varied as widely as in his lifetime. The pendulum of critical opinion has again swung violently from one extreme to the other. In particular, Browning has suffered, along with Tennyson, from the general reaction inimical to Victorianism and all its works which has characterized the opening decades of the twentieth century. There are signs that the nadir has been reached, and that a juster and truer appreciation of

> the Victorian epoch is at hand. But we are still in the wake of that inevitable shift of literary evaluation which marks the transition from one generation to the next. The baiting of Victorianism continues to be a favourite sport of modern writers; and prevailing currents of present-day historical and aesthetic criticism run counter to some of the cherished ideals and standards in life and art of our Victorian forerunners. Part of this censure is wholesome, part is regrettable, but the winnowing of our Victorian inheritance by the fan of time is yet incomplete (*Moment*, 3-4).

Browning seems a particular target of that "baiting," and regrettably, fifteen years later, in 1965, Raymond's hopes had not been realized. Patricia Ball agrees and laments:

> As the mists clear and it becomes apparent that Victorian poetry has been the victim of inept criticism and obtuse reading, it becomes even clearer that Browning in particular has suffered to a crippling degree. It is scarcely too much to say that he has not been critically considered as a poet at all; in an age which prides itself on its literary sophistication, comment on his poetry has made the most naive assumptions about the "intentions" which may be discerned in it and the deductions which may be drawn from it (245).

Not all were in despair. In his 1970 review of the Browning literature, Boyd Litzinger observes, hopefully:

> There exists today neither a pro-Browning nor an anti-Browning cult. The poet has recovered from the twin ailments of extreme praise and blame, and the time is nearer when objectively critical evaluations can be made. And these evaluations will have to take into consideration Browning's thought. If this study has done nothing else, it has shown that many critics have not been criticizing, but reacting. The treatment of Browning as a thinker has often been visceral rather than intellectual (164).

Unfortunately, even as late as 1975 we find critics such as Roger Sharrock attempting to classify Browning's thinking based on his use of history:

> Browning certainly saw and felt, but he did not think, or only within the precise limits of a carefully prepared programme. That is why his small stock of ideas changed hardly at all during his long poetic career.
>
> It is important to draw attention to the limitations of intellectual interest in Browning when one approaches his attitude to history. For our present concern with historicism and the correspondence between certain stances of Browning's poetry and the insights of the German historiographical traditions may lead us to detect parallels where there are only accidental similarities in a field where vagueness of generalization makes similarity seem easy. (80)

Perhaps Browning, despite his interest in history, did not use it as precisely as Sharrock would have preferred; the remark is shallow in its perception, and is undoubtedly more an indication of Sharrock's narrow-mindedness than it is of Browning's. If historical accuracy is among the criteria for all those poets who are considered able to "think," we must perhaps reconsider the places we have given to Homer and Virgil in our literature, not to mention Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. Perhaps Mr. Sharrock should take note of Philip Drew, who, speaking of those who object to Browning's philosophical ideas, states:

> There are also those who admit to an interest in ideas but do not wish to encounter them except in a clearly labelled work of philosophy, preferably in prose. Again it is much safer for such people not to read Browning's speculative poems. Or *Paradise Lost*, or the *Essay on Man*, or *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Erewhon*. *(137-38)*

And Mr. Sharrock should read only history books written by scholarly historians. Browning used history as he used personality and philosophy and religion, and any number of other things. They were all building blocks for his poetry. David Bergman notes of Browning's intentions:

> His concern is with the "soul," a word redolent with theological significance, and not with "character," personality" or even "mind," terms readily available to him. History, the creation of a concrete setting, has never been a major focus for Browning. The man-in-the-street is not "worth study" if he is not caught in a spiritually developing incident. It is the dynamic of spiritual development that interests Browning rather than the static portrayal of personality. (774)

Norton Crowell remarks on Browning's reaction to the old yellow book which he found in an Italian market stall and from which he shaped *The Ring and the Book*:

> His elation is not because he has such reverence for the fact of or in the ancient book that he will shape to his artistic needs, as Langbaum believes, and certainly it is not because he has contempt for the sordid and ugly truths that he finds in it, as Cundiff affirms. The words, "Letting me have my will again with these," explains his joy. He has magnificent raw gold to shape, and his joy is that of Michelangelo in beholding a splendid, unshaped block of marble awaiting his chisel. Neither artist creates the raw material, but each shapes and fashions what is there into a new life (*Glass*, 212).

Fortunately, not all critics were so intolerant as Sharrock, but neither did many see bright lights for the future. P. J. Keating, in 1975, noted:

> W. O. Raymond wrote: "in the sphere of literary criticism, as distinct from biography, there has been no outstanding book written on the poetry of Browning as a whole since 1910." If one places the required emphasis on the phrase "as a whole", this statement still remains true, for while the quality

> of much Browning criticism over the past two decades has reached a high degree of sophistication, this has been achieved by an ever increasing fragmentation. (316)

Keating later notes positively the work by Philip Drew,[14] and, of course, Raymond himself and H. B. Charlton,[15] but collectively and not as overall assessments. Philip Drew and P. J. Keating, both of whom have added significantly to the criticism, were writing in the 1970s; Boyd Litzinger has continued his fine work, and Clyde de L. Ryals in the '80s has remained objective. But the criticism still remains sadly out of balance. The criticism of "Chesterton,... [and] Santayana, whose views may once again be taken as typical of two distinct schools of thought" (Keating 328) seem to be repeated endlessly in their literary descendants.

The decade through which we have just passed posed what seemed to be, at first, some developments with the advent of criticisms such as deconstruction, feminist theory, New Criticism, and the like. John Maynard, however, observes in his survey of criticism covering the 1980's:

> The more I think about what we have said and learned about Browning recently, the more I am seeing patterns that go right back to the century of criticism--so much of it seemingly outdated and overworn--since Browning's death. (5)

He notes Samuel L. Chell as stressing "the coherence of internal experience and internal time in...a dramatic monologue," comparing it with "stream of consciousness," and reminiscent of the old defenses against Santayana. E.

Warwick Slinn's work has little to offer beyond what J. Hillis Miller accomplished in *The Disappearance of God,* or the work done by W. David Shaw. Herbert F. Tucker, Jr., in a "Derridean investigation of difference in Browning" investigates verbal structures (8).

What difference does it make? Why bother with a body of criticism which has been governed mainly by wild swings of emotion and current critical theory masquerading old theories under new names? Why bother with a poet who has been dead for nearly one hundred years and who addressed, for the most part, the problems of his particular age, and who is read mainly by scholars? And how do we even read him at the end of the twentieth century? Can we cast new light on a body of work which has been so widely misunderstood?

We owe it to scholarship, first of all. If those who study literature can do no better than emotional assessment of a poet as important to his age as Robert Browning, and in an age which had such bearing on the century in which we live, we must question our competence to make other judgments of literature as well. We need to establish a balance, to see Browning as he is, not as we wish him to be.

Upon reflection, we see that the Victorian age was not as dissimilar to our own as it first appears. Few generations have so little deserved their reputations as the one in which Browning lived and wrote. High-collared, pristine morality stood in contradiction to rampant

prostitution with all of its attendant evils and diseases. An age famed for its "godliness" struggled with and gave way to higher criticism and evolution, leaving its people a Revelation without a Revealer, a Creation without a Creator (Grier). With this concern, Philip Drew observes:

> My impression is that this [Browning's reputation as a philosopher] was due in part to the fact that ethical studies in the nineteenth century were strong in theory but were not particularly helpful as a substitute for the regulative element of Christian teaching. (136)

The industrial "revolution," which was supposed to be a boon to all men, in fact put a far greater number of people into the poor houses and onto the streets than it did into lives of ease and plenty. Unwanted children were abandoned or sold; others were stolen for "commercial" use, often working twelve-hour days and dying without ever really having lived. The atmosphere of change that had so disturbed the romantics was not less unsettling to the Victorians.

But, the era was not the worst age that ever was. "It was," as A. S. P. Woodhouse notes, "the seed ground of the twentieth century.

> It marked the beginnings of many of our specific problems and more generally of that sudden heightening of the tempo of change which has been mounting ever since. (206)

The expansion (and decline) of the British Empire, two world wars and several less global conflicts, a cold war that spanned fifty years, the expansion of knowledge, and improvements in communication and transportation have made

the consequences of modern living universal rather than local. The nineteenth century was England's century. Today, little happens in the smallest corner of the globe that does not affect its entirety. The twentieth century may well be simply the nineteenth writ large.

Modern technology has displaced far more people than could be dreamed when mechanical weaving looms were introduced to England. Countless thousands wander homeless and hungry in almost every major city of the world. Because of internal strife, some countries are experiencing virtually a "national homelessness." Scientific "advances" sometimes do more harm than good; medications meant to ease pain sometimes cause death or deformity. Atomic wastes pose hazards that few can or will tolerate in their communities. The smog that hung over London now threatens to destroy the planet; acid rain, holes in the ozone layer, destruction of the rain forests and the extinction of countless species of animals, concepts which Darwin could not begin to imagine, are familiar to even the youngest of school children.

Children are still bought and sold, now, often before they are conceived. Surrogate motherhood has become one of the major legal issues of the last two decades of this century. At the same time, pro-choice and pro-life activists come to verbal and physical blows in the streets as well as at the polls over the rights of women to rid themselves of unwanted pregnancies. The diseases of

promiscuous sex have combined with those of drug users, and the threat of AIDS is very real to many. Information about it now confronts every even vaguely informed citizen from all directions; its dying victims feel abandoned; gay rights activists angrily march in public at every opportunity to insist on action in this and other of their particular concerns.

In an age of Democracy and communication, when the walls of the cold war are literally tumbling, students are shot down in China's Tienemen Square. Blacks and whites war with each other and with themselves in South Africa. Hostages are held in the Mid-East and chemical warfare is a foreseeable possibility. Our scientific and technological advancement seems to have little affected our moral climate for good. We may well have out-Victorianed the Victorians.

Most assuredly, Browning speaks to an age for which his own served as a foreshadowing just as he so clearly speaks to the problems of his own. He seems to be able to rescue his sense of balance when society appears totally unbalanced, to maintain perspective when life seems to contradict itself, and when little in the world make sense, he retains the courage to ask the hard questions. Thomas Collins enumerates some of those questions as he speaks of *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*:

> And because he is one step removed from his own problems in *Paracelsus*, Browning can work out, with a greater degree of objectivity, the moral dilemma left unsolved in *Pauline*: What is man's

> relationship to God and to his fellow man; how can unlimited aspiration be reconciled to limited ability; how can man reach God without succumbing to the fruitless idealism of Shelley; and how does one serve the human race without being dragged down into the quagmire of reality? (19)

For more than one-and-a-half centuries, Browning has provided good reasons, for Christians and non-Christians alike, to live morally in an immoral world. Philip Drew applies this point to what he obviously considers a post-Christian society:

> Taken at its simplest level Browning's poetry implicitly asks for the reader's assent to the proposition that simple-hearted, straightforward, loving, trustful behaviour is still possible and still the best for man even in an age of fear, doubt, casuistry and mistrust, a position which must be respected in any debate on man's ethical nature.... Browning's protracted struggles to define, defend and generalize his intuitively-held position touch his age and ours at every point. He is bound in this to reflect the actual dilemmas that confront all non-Christians who are unable to accept Utilitarianism in its extreme forms. (137)

But Browning did more than deal with eithics; his poetry is good poetry. Those who write poems not worthy of notice are, simply, not noticed. A brief tour through the stacks in even a modest library will reveal that Browning has most certainly been noticed for more than 150 years. The body of criticism surrounding his work at least equals that which encompasses the work of T. S. Eliot, seemingly and only the critics of Shakespeare and Milton outnumber those of the Victorian poet.

Whatever the function of poetry in the human equation, the need that it serves has not been suspended. Good poets continue to find receptive audiences. Donald Hall, in "Death to the Death of Poetry," writes:

> *Time*, which reported *The Waste Land* as a hoax in 1922, canonized T. S. Eliot in a cover story in 1950. Certainly *Time*'s writers and editors altered over thirty years, but they also stayed the same: Always the Giants grow old and die leaving the Pygmies behind. After the age of Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Moore, and Williams, the wee survivors were Lowell, Berryman, Jarrell, and Bishop. When the survivors died, younger elegiac journalists revealed that the dead Pygmies had been Giants all along--and *now* the young poets were dwarfs. Doubtless obituaries lauding Allen Ginsberg are already written; does anyone remember *Life* on the Beat Generation, thirty years ago? (72)

At the same time, while we are granting a place to the new "Giants," we must remember not to neglect their predecessors. We seem to have yet another mentality that displaces poets. When the dead Pygmies move into the ranks of the Giants, some of the older Giants fade into obscurity and are not allowed to return for a hundred years. While we wouldn't dream of allowing Milton to replace Shakespeare, or Shakespeare to replace, say, Spenser, when we begin reading "Bishop" and "Ashbery," "Rich" and "Plath" (73), we seem to forget that Browning and Tennyson and Eliot ever existed.

But, whatever the similarities between the ages, this *is not* the Victorian age, this is the twentieth century. Whatever the faults of previous generations of critics, we cannot read through their eyes to correct what has been

written; we see through the experience of a century of events. Not that we want to ignore all that has been said before, but we must learn to read Browning in a new light, hopefully forming fresh opinions less slavishly based on the those of the critics who have gone before. We need to learn to use the critics as a springboard of creative thought, not as "square one" for a discussion that will only follow itself in circles like some sort of bizarre board game that can only end where it began. We need to see the work of the critics as much a commentary on their own ages as it is a reaction to the talent they are dealing with.

P. J. Keating, in 1975, found that many have asked the same question and have found few answers:

> Chesterton, James, and Santayana, remain the most stimulating of Browning critics because they never lose sight of this problem; they direct themselves constantly to the question, why read Browning at all? Most modern Browning criticism does not ask this question (let alone try to answer it) because it speaks invariably to and for itself: the old Browning Society is not dead, but transformed and reorganized on a vast, academic, international scale. Readers who are on the outside are as bewildered and uninformed as ever; Henry James is still their best spokesman:
>
> "I cling to the dear old tradition that Browning is 'difficult'--which we were all brought up on and which I think we should, especially on a rich retrospective day like this, with the atmosphere of his great career settling upon us as much as possible, feel it as a shock to see break down in too many places at once." (327-328)

The problem of "difficulty" may well be one of the answers to Keating's and our question. Little in more commonly read literature makes the kind of demands on the

reader that Browning's poetry does (perhaps along with that of T. S. Eliot), but those very demands can challenge our thinking and bring us to new conclusions. Those conclusions can make the work usable, perhaps in a way that it never was before, and possibly provide the shock that James was so reluctant to accept.

First, of course, we must set aside our disbelief. Too often we get so taken up with disputing the things we won't believe that we are not able to hear what we might believe. Michael Edwards notes:

> The critic must be prepared to learn from the writer (a truism, but we do not live in an age conducive to the thought), and the fact that he may know better...still leaves him the reader of the person who has done the job. All writers may help us to see, whatever lights they are using (66-67).

Browning's light was a spiritual one. To ignore that fact ignores most of what he is about. A "dissenter" and always fiercely independent, Browning writes, in a letter to Julia Wedgwood dated July 28, 1864:

> It is one of the facts of my experience that one limits sorrowfully one's pretension to influence other people for good: I live more and more--what am I to write?--for God not man--I don't care what men think now, knowing they will never think my thoughts; yet I need increasingly to tell *the truth*--for whom? Is it that *I* shall be the better, the larger for it, have the fairer start in next life, the firmer stand? Is it pure selfishness or the obedience to a natural law? (Curle, 33).

While this was written about the time of *The Ring and the Book*, we see more of a direction of development than a new thing. Philip Drew prefers to categorize Browning's work:

> The Christian poems require, of course, a reasonable acquaintance with Christian doctrine; I do not think that *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* and 'Development', for example, make much sense unless the reader understands the direction of nineteenth-century criticism of religious evidences. Similarly 'A Death in the Desert' is in effect a reply to the *Wesen des Christentums of Feuerbach,* which George Eliot translated. While this information is helpful and serves to clarify the argument, it is not essential: The poem can be read, understood and enjoyed by those who have never heard of Feuerbach, just as Oliver Twist can be understood by those who have never heard of the New Poor Law, or the old one (125-26).

Part of the difficulty with this approach, of course, is that it separates Browning's "Christian" poems from his "secular" ones. Browning was not a "religious" poet, but rather one who was innately spiritual--the difference being that the first is merely a segment of life, a part that can be separated from the whole. We can no more separate the man from his poetry than we can separate him from his humanity. Helen Gardner refers to T. S. Eliot in making this same distinction:

> Eliot very characteristically confuses the whole issue by suggesting a quite different conception of 'religious poetry', as poetry in which the whole of life is treated in a religious spirit.... This opens the gates very wide, and suggests an even wider opening if we are willing to allow that religion and Christianity are not interchangeable terms. (125)

We need not so much an understanding of doctrine as we do an understanding of the Bible, an ability very clearly and sadly lacking in much of modern scholarship. We do not need a course in theology, but insight into the spiritual mind,

an understanding of the role of faith in the life of one committed to godly living.

Of course, the writer, no matter who he is, will reveal, at last, his own basic principles. The poet who is convinced of the sanctity of life, for instance, will never blatantly promote murderous behavior in his work. If he writes about it at all, he will punish it. While Browning seems, at first reading, to insist on the "objectivity" of his monologues in particular, closer reading reveals something quite different: We find the poet within the poem. In "One Word More," he says:

> Love, you saw me gather men and women,
> Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,
> Enter each and all, and use their service,
> Speak from every mouth,--the speech, a poem.
> Hardly shall I tell my joys and sorrows,
> Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving:
> I am mine and yours--the rest be all men's,
> Karshish, Cleon, Norbert, and the fifty.
> Let me speak this once in my true person,
> Not as Lippo, Roland, or Andrea,
> Though the fruit of speech be just this sentence:
> Pray you, look on these my men and women,
> Take and keep my fifty poems finished;
> Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also!
> Poor the speech; be how I speak, for all things.

"You saw me.../Speak from every mouth." This time, he uses not the mouth of one of his characters, but his own; the speech has always been his, only his visage has been changed. "Where my heart lies," he adds, "let my brain lie also!" reflecting a belief that one cannot be successful in separating conviction from practice, personality from voice of the poet.

Michael Mason agrees:

> The dramatic monologue in Browning's hands was at once a naturalistic genre, and one that involved the author's self-expression and, more fundamentally, self-display. In the monologues between 1836 and 1855 the second aspect becomes increasingly prominent. (266)

In his own "Essay on Shelley," Browning discusses the role of personality in poetry. And although he later changed his attitude toward Shelley, we have no cause to assume that he ever turned away from the poetic principles which his essay sets forth.

> He [the subjective poet] is rather a seer, accordingly, than a fashioner, and what he produces will be less a work than an effluence. That effluence cannot easily be considered in abstraction from his personality,--being indeed the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated. Therefore, in our approach to the poetry, we necessarily approach the personality of the poet; in apprehending it we apprehend him, and certainly we cannot love it without loving him. Both for love's and understanding's sake we desire to know him, and, as readers of his poetry, must be readers of his biography also.

For those who would argue that he was speaking of Shelley and not of himself, we would note that sauces work equally well for goose and gander. Maynard agrees:

> Despite his reticence as self-explainer, Browning's own statements are not irrelevant. "The Essay on Shelley," as Thomas J. Collins showed some years ago, offers an elliptic but often stunningly useful system of criticism for speaking of his [own] work (19).

Maynard, earlier, notes that Browning often vacillated between "an objective and subjective role for the poet," and J. Hillis Miller makes a pertinent comment here:

> His resistance to committing himself wholly to one voice was so great that at the age of twenty, before he had developed the theory of the dramatic monologue, he could not bring himself to "lay bare his heart" without persuading himself that he was only *pretending* to be a Shelleyan poet, full of anguish and nameless sin. Browning could not begin to speak at all unless he convinced himself that he was not speaking in his own voice. Only then would the inner ice melt, and the interminable flow of words begin, the garrulous rumble of his own inimitable voice. (106)

While he may have "pretended" to be a Shelleyan poet, and he may have "pretended" to be the characters in his poems, but he never pretended to be a theologian, nor did he consign himself to a set of theologies prescribed by any specific church or religious group, but he did translate his faith into the words of his poems. Thus, we see an expanded ethic, worked out in his "secular" works as well as in those which have been labeled "religious." "My Last Duchess" and "The Statue and the Bust" become as much religious poetry as "Saul" or "Karshish."

Drew, who does not see Browning as particularly Christian, does, however, see his importance as an ethical philosopher:

> One of the functions of the ethical philosopher in a time of doubt must be to supply men with motives for practising what they intuitively know to be true. This is a work which can be done with particular force by the poets; Browning takes up the challenge with a will, and some at least of the stirring cries to action which a hostile critic has represented as

> declarations 'that the exercise of energy is the absolute good, irrespective of motives or of consequences' are justifiable as part of a serious philosophical enterprise, that of providing men with a motive for actually doing what they have decided to be right.... The innumerable men and women in love in his earlier poems...present to the moral sense aesthetic reasons for deciding to act in a certain way, or for evaluating the acts of others. (139)

Despite Drew's reservations about Browning's religious persuasion, the poet firmly establishes his link between ethics, revelation and Christianity in "Caliban on Setebos." Such poems as "Holy Cross Day" and "Rabbi Ben Ezra" point to Judaism and not Christianity, but too much of his work stresses the emphasis of the Incarnation for us to agree that Browning was not Christian. *The Ring and the Book,* is, of course, summary. Philip Keating's view adds to this opinion:

> Modern criticism, of course, tends to reject such uses, but nonetheless the curious thing about so many recent explications is that while they serve to place *The Ring and The Book* in relation to Browning and to Browning scholarship, that is all they do; there is little outward expansion, virtually no sense of Browning's culminating achievement having a place in, or any kind of significance for, Victorian or modern literature. This is not true of Chesterton, nor indeed of Santayana, whose views may once again be taken as typical of two distinct schools of thought. Santayana was contemptuously dismissive, finding that *The Ring and the Book* had no 'structure' merely 'singular mechanical division'. Chesterton on the other hand saw the poem as 'the typical epic of modern times', and offered two reasons for his view. First, its 'enormous multiplication of a small theme', this being important because, 'The characteristic of the modern movement *par excellence* is the apotheosis of the insignificant'; and secondly because, 'It is the expression of the belief, it might almost be said, of the discovery, that no man ever lived upon this

> earth without possessing a point of view...it is the epic of free speech.'(327)

Browning also often chose to write ironically, a consideration that may well be as confusing to some of his readers as his spiritual ideology. Clyde de L. Ryals' comments:

> For Browning does not offer a vision of the world redeemed, as does Shelley, or of the world devoid of values, as Byron so often does. On the contrary, with Browning it is not a question of either/or; rather, it is a matter of both/and. More than any of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries Browning is able to hold a view of the world in which the most contradictory statements to be made about it are alike true. In a word, Browning is an ironist--the supreme ironist among English poets of the nineteenth century. (24)

It may be that the James' estimation of the difficulty of Browning's work, which we spoke of earlier, is simply because he (along with, perhaps, Jones and Santayana) does not understand irony. Ryals reports:

> Everyone knows how Browning loved to dine out and be taken not for a poet but for a successful financier, how Henry James thought that the man he met in society could not possibly be Robert Browning the poet. During the later seventies and early eighties Browning lived his irony as he had never before been able to do. (43-44)

Later Ryals notes that irony was at least part of the reason for Browning's success, and provides what may well be another good reason for reading him:

> It was his irony that permitted him to be among the last topical of English poets and yet simultaneously to be among the most fully grounded in the life of his time. In sum, it was his irony that makes him one of the most innovative and enduringly influential poets in English. (46)

He also notes the ability of irony to allow Browning to speak to his audience:

> In that passage [the taming of the sea-horse in "My Last Duchess"] we are invited to see the statue as a summarizing symbol of the speaker, this not by the duke himself but the poet, who remains in his work in spite of all disclaimers in the Advertisement to *Dramatic Lyrics* that the utterances in these poems are those "of so many imaginary persons, not mine." The ironic mode of the dramatic monologue thus allowed Browning the mutually enriching interaction of the objective and the subjective, the dramatic and the lyric modes. (39)

If Browning's irony allows him to transcend some of the difficulties of an admittedly difficult age, it also allows him to explore ways of meeting those difficulties. Through it he is able to explore the area of possibility. Only through irony and the exploration of possibility can Browning have Cleon claim, immediately after expressing an intense desire for a revelation from Zeus:

> I cannot tell thy messenger aright
> Where to deliver what he bears of thine
> To one called Paulus; we have heard his fame
> Indeed, if Chritus be not one with him--
> I know not nor am troubled much to know,
> Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew,
> As Paulus proves to be, one circumcised,
> Hath access to a secret shut from us?
> Thou wrongest our philosophy, O king,
> In stooping to inquire of such an one,
> As if his answer could impose at all!

Michael Edwards, in discussing the art of poetry states, "The Transfiguration or the passage through the figurative to the new and the radiant--the real--is its emblem. Art faces east." He continues:

> So the concern of art is surely not order but possibility. I realize now that almost since first

> writing a poem I have been impelled toward this idea, and I am beginning to find it wherever I look--in the Catholic Pierre Emmanuel but also in Baudelaire, in Tomlinson, in J`abes. One finds it back in the Renaissance in Sidney's theory that poetry is "the divine consideration of what may be." Aside from theory, a practice of both writing and reading can convince one that literature is, deep down, the contriving of possibility, and that a work of literature seeks the possible in all its moves, down to the least momentous. (71)

No discussion of Browning's irony can be complete without a discussion of his ideas of truth, for it is through his irony that he often aims at the discovery of truth, and truth, itself, is often ironical. Frank Lockwood is unhappy, at best, with what he understands of Browning's view of the subject:

> And we may as well admit at once that, considered from the standpoint of speculative reason, Browning's philosophy went to pieces upon just this rock. Browning is an out-and-out philosophical skeptic. He does not trust man's intellectual powers, nor see any good ground to hope that man can enter into sure possession of the world of reality around him. He utterly discredits human knowledge, and with rare subtlety and dialectical skill sets about to undermine the edifice of pure reason. He casts doubt upon the possibility of man's ever rearing a safe structure upon the foundation of intellect alone. (37)

Norton Crowell, in 1968, while disputing Lockwood's view, repeated another commonly held fallacy toward Browning's attitude in this realm:

> Browning spent his artistic life in demonstrating and proving that everything in life comes down ultimately to interpretation and judgment by each individual, for this is the only "truth" man has. This is, indeed, what the work [*The Ring and the Book*] is about: the test of each man in interpreting and sifting truth from its matrix of lies and distortions, and rendering a decision, even

> though each man is peculiarly limited in judgment and subject to error and thus barred from attaining absolute truth. (*Glass*, 184-85)

What Crowell fails to see is that "what the work is about," indeed, what all of the dramatic monologues are about, is showing how each speaker either decidedly avoids the truth, justifying himself in either pride or a moral decision, or makes an honest effort in discovering the truth, imperfect as his knowledge may be. Samuel Chell observes in regard to "Cleon":

> Like Browning's Duke of Ferrara, he chooses not to stoop, and his understated parenthetical evidence ("gathered from a bystander") merely underscores a towering and unbending hubris. But Browning's philosophical Greek artist possesses wisdom and self-insight that the Duke never needs reckon with. The significant irony of the poem is not that Cleon fails to see within himself what he most desperately needs, [i.e., the truth] but that he sees much more than he finally cares to admit. Because of this insight Cleon must forcibly delude himself, disorienting himself from the reality he seeks to avoid. (71)

Both the Duke and Cleon suffer from pride. The Duke's pride is in his possessions and his "nine-hundred-years-old name." Cleon's pride has been evident from the first; not only does he boast that his mind is almost unbelievably great and his talent unsurpassed, he lives in a superior locale than even Protus himself:

> Cleon the poet (from the sprinkled isles,
> Lily on lily, that o'erlace the sea,
> And laugh their pride when the light wave lisps
> "Greece")--

Browning puts truth into the mouths of many of his characters. Cleon and Karshish touch it, hold it for a brief moment, and then reject it. David, in "Saul," and Rabbi Ben Ezra see it and apprehend it. Sometimes it is the "artist" who knows. Del Sarto and Lippo Lippi play games with truth, but Abt Vogler says, "'t is we musicians know," and Browning writes in Book XII of *The Ring and the Book,*

> This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
> Our human testimony false, our fame
> And human estimation words and wind.
> Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
> Because, it is the glory and the good of Art,
> That Art remains the one way possible
> Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.

Not that he feels that all truth can be known at any one time, or certainly by any one individual. The process of life is, for him, a process of growth. We discover one truth now, another greater, deeper truth tomorrow. Cleon cries out, "Why stay we on the earth unless to grow?" And it was because of Browning's attitude that mutability was not for him the problem that it was for the Romantics. In *Fifine at the Fair* he writes:

> Alack, Philosophy!
> Despite the chop and change, diminished or increased,
> Patched-up and plastered-o'er, Religion stands at least
> I' the temple-type. But thou? Here gape I, all agog
> These thirty years, to learn how tadpole turns to frog;
> And thrice at least have gazed with mild astonishment,
> As, skyward up and up, some fire-new fabric sent
> Its challenge to mankind that, clustered underneath
> To hear the word, they straight believe, ay, in the teeth
> O' the Past, clap hands and hail triumphant Truth's outbreak--
> Tadpole-frog-theory propounded past mistake!
> In vain! A something ails the edifice, it bends,

> It bows, it buries...Haste! cry "Heads below" to friends--
> But have no fear they find, when smother shall subside,
> Some substitution perk with unabated pride
> I' the predecessor's place!

Crowell observes, regarding this passage:

> The truth that lasts man in his lifetime "does well," he says; but in spite of this lesson each generation seizes upon the latest discovery, hypothesis, or theory--Browning surely had in mind Darwinism, the higher criticism, and neo-rationalism--as imperishable: "Yesterday's doctrine dead, this only shall endure!" (*Glass,* 51)

Browning does not disqualify the intellect in the process of discovering truth. Citing the Pope in *The Ring and the Book,* Crowell first notes:

> I do not believe that repetition of the abundant and conclusive evidence of Browning's wholesome and boundless respect for the intellect--when properly used in wholeness with body and spirit--need occupy us long. I should like, however, to cite the Pope's clarion words on man's mind:
>
> > Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass
> > Wherein are gathered all the scattered points
> > Picked out of the immensity of the sky,
> > To re-unite there, be our heaven for earth,
> > Our known unknown, our God revealed to man"
> > Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;
> > Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense.
> > (*Glass,* 190)

Nor does Browning rely on intellect alone. Drew notes:

> First Browning is repeatedly at pains to make the point that crucial moral choices are *not* logical. Just as a man's fundamental moral assumptions are chosen for reasons which are ultimately alogical--the final considerations may, for example, be aesthetic--so when a man has a great decision to make he will have to perform an act of trust, a Kierkegaardian 'leap,''put faith to proof, be cured or killed at once.' In any philosophy that is not completely reductionist something must be taken on trust. Browning places enormous emphasis on the

> importance of the act of trusting or believing where we cannot prove. (140)

In other words, while human reason is important, it is not the only, nor the ultimate criterion for belief. The invisible, the things we often must take on faith, are often the things that have greater importance. Cleon says,

> It takes but little water just to touch
> At some one point the inside of a sphere,
> And, as we turn the sphere, touch all the rest
> In due succession: but the finer air
> Which not so palpably nor obviously,
> Though no less universally, can touch
> The whole circumference of that emptied sphere
> Fills it more fully than the water did;
> Holds thrice the weight of water in itself
> Resolved into a subtler element.
> And yet the vulgar call the sphere first full
> Up to the visible height--and after, void;
> Not knowing air's more hidden properties.

But, Collins notes,

> Cleon thinks too much, and, as Browning shows in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, too great a reliance on rationality is a dangerous thing. With his highly trained intellect, Cleon has delved into the fundamental problems of existence and discovered the answer to the contradiction posed by the theory of progress which, for the non-Christian, can only end with the recession into death. His answer is that there is no answer. The poem is an elucidation, again in epistolary form, of the process through which he has arrived at this negation, and his resultant blindness to the Incarnation, which holds the only possible solution to his philosophic queries. (140)

But there is more. Knowledge involves responsibility, and the responsibility of those who have access to and acquire knowledge is to share it with others--to teach. Symons understands this spiritually:

> The poet, in Mr. Browning's view of him, is God's witness, and must see and speak for God. He must

> therefore conceive of each individual separately and distinctively, and he must see how each soul conceives of itself. (5)

Mr. Ryals expands on this concept:

> I do not mean that the great monologues of the fifties and sixties are reducible to their moral content, but I do say that they have more moral design upon the reader than do the earlier poems....Speaking in "One Word More" in his own voice and out of his own experience of unappreciation, Browning tells of the poet who like Moses is both looked up to for guidance and deprecated for it. It is a wearying business, but "Never dares the man to put off the prophet." (40-41)

Keeping in mind who Browning is and what he represents, the reader must be prepared, then, to read Browning holistically. One can no more get an idea of what his poetry is about by reading, say, *Sordello* than he can get an idea of what modern England is about by looking at a 1920 map of London. The part is not the whole, and yesterday can give us no clear picture of the here and now, despite the fact that each gives us important information. Patricia Ball says it quite succinctly:

> The first step towards a maturing criticism can be taken if the Rabbi is never allowed out on his own; that, is he should not stray from the company of, at least, the Bishop ordering his tomb and the other Bishop setting out his apology. Nor should Caliban ever be overlooked. This assembly immediately strikes a blow at the oversimplification of Browning: where is "his attitude" in this group? It calls attention at once to an essential factor, the variety of his creation, and it hints, moreover, that this variety is not just that of a fortuitous crowd. (245)

Later, she goes on to say:

> The answer, in brief, is Godot, not God. The common factor that Browning sees is the blinkered human mind which suspects that there is a landscape on either side of the road, but never achieves more than a glimpse, or perhaps hears some sound--music or thunder--that aggravates the suspicion. (247)

Ignoring for the moment that Godot is representative of God in an existential world, we admittedly see many of Browning's characters "blinkered" and suspecting. But, Ms. Ball goes too far with the analogy.

> As Estragon and Vladimir wrest their sense of themselves out of the fulfillment of each minute with its dramas of broken boots, questions reaching formulation, spasms of emotion, sudden encounters, and play this off against the vast unformulated and unknown, so Browning's bishops, aristocrats, lovers, artists, and monks enact their scenes of self-creation and combat the silence stretching on either side. (247)

Browning's characters have no "questions reaching formulation"; they already know the questions. They do not "suspect" a landscape, but are fully aware of it and decidedly choose to ignore it. Browning's characters are, for the most part, justifying the actions they have already taken. Karshish has already chosen not to believe Lazarus; we see only the written record of that decision. He reconsiders for a brief, brilliant moment, but the crucial moment has already passed. Ferrara's very nature is to boast of his power over his "possessions"; St. Praxed's bishop has ignored for a lifetime the fact that he has broken nearly every rule of his Church. These men are no Estragons or Vladimirs who live in only the present moment,

reacting to only the present situation, simply and dimly aware that Godot may someday come; these men look "Godot" in the face and deny that he is ever expected. In contrast, others, in other monologues are given mere fragments of light and understand, at once, the whole. David, in "Saul," and Abt Vogler are such. Symons may have been the first to decide that,

> The perfection of the latter [Browning's poetry as compared to that of Tennyson] consists in the intensity of its expression of a single moment of passion or emotion, one peculiar to a single personality, and to that personality only at such a single moment. To appreciate it we must enter keenly and instantaneously into the imaginary character at its imagined crisis. (11-12)

Patricia Ball picks up this thought, classifying the dramatic monologue as "the moment of travail, an act of birth; the speaker delivers his own being through his speaking" (247). Karshish may wonder about Lazarus, but this is not a crisis, and his being is not "delivered."

The duke's new bride (should her envoy fail to fully communicate his conversation and depending on her desire for "a nine-hundred-years-old name") will be in just as much peril as was his last, and he will feel as justified as he did earlier; everything in his domain is his possession, with explicit implications for obedience. No excuses, no correction would be allowed, because

> --E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
> Never to stoop.

He has, of course, revealed himself to his audience, and has obliquely confessed murder, but he feels no guilt.

Langbaum takes the monologue another step from understanding when he contends that:

> When we have said all the objective things about Browning's *My Last Duchess*, we will not have arrived at the meaning until we point out what can only be substantiated by an appeal to effect--that moral judgment does not figure importantly in our response to the duke, that we even identify ourselves with him. (*Poetry*, 82)

But, to insist that Browning's monologues serve little other purpose than to get his audience to sympathize with the speakers leaves him with a very large body of work with very little objective. Such a conclusion, again, implies only shallow reading. Nearly every teacher of an introduction to literature course has experienced the amusement of demonstrating to novice Browning readers that it is the Duke, and not his wholesome bride, who is at fault. Identification with the villain accomplishes nothing. Langbaum further argues that,

> If we allowed indignation, or pity for the duchess, to take over when the duke moves from his account of the murder to admire the life-likeness of the portrait, the poem could hold no further surprises for us; it could not even go on to reinforce our judgment as to the duke's wickedness, since the duke does not grow in wickedness after the account of the murder. He grows in strength of character, and the arrogance and poise which enable him to continue command of the situation after his confession of murder has threatened to turn it against him. (*Poetry*, 85)

But the duke *does* grow in wickedness, and while he does grow in strength of purpose, we see no development so positive as strength of character. He contrives another marriage quite deliberately based on the same premise as the first: If she doesn't conform, she too will become nothing more than an object of art, hidden behind a curtain to be viewed only with the duke's permission. His first duchess has become an object lesson, a threat, a warning of premeditated murder.

The bishop realizes that his tomb will be made of crumbling stone, but assumes no guilt and finds no ease; he seems rather to finish his life in a combined state of frustration and self-justification, realizing only that his ungrateful sons will not even pretend to grant his wishes. Whatever his potential for realization of the truth of his wrongdoing, he sinks back into gloating:

> "Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!
> For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
> To death--ye wish it--God, ye wish it!
> Stone--
> Gritstone, acrumble! Clammy squares which sweat
> As if the corpse they keep were oozing through--
> And no more *lapis* to delight the world!
> Well, go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,
> But in a row: and, going, turn your backs
> --Aye, like departing altar-ministrants,
> And leave me in my church, the church for peace,
> That I may watch at leisure if he leers--
> Old Gandolf--at me, from his onion-stone,
> As still he envied me, so fair she was!

He is still more interested in keeping up appearances than he is in facing the truth. If he approached a crisis, he

never recognized it for what it was. Each of the characters we have discussed above, in fact, has approached a moment of truth and passed it, long before speaking, without even recognizing it. Not one of them is any more aware of himself after he speaks than he was before.

Certainly readers of Browning's work will be more aware of themselves and their choices if they exercise the patience to forego judgment until they have finished reading and the discernment that gives understanding to irony. Browning is not for all readers. Some should concentrate on history or philosophy or theology. But for those who are willing to explore the possibilities of difficult times and difficult situations, Browning may provide surprising insight--even one hundred years after his death.

CHAPTER 2

IGNORANCE: SPEECH WITHOUT LIGHT, KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT REVELATION--CALIBAN, ROME AND TERTIUM QUID

"Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself" (Psalm 50:21) reads the epigraph to "Caliban on Setebos," and with it, Browning sets one of the touchstones for the poem's interpretation. Going far beyond being merely a reaction to Darwin or Paley, as it is often perceived, it reaches, as well, past the critics who insist that Browning rejects reason and contends for intuition as the consummate source of religious belief.[1] In "Caliban" he is concerned not only with the particular that man often creates a God with an astonishing resemblance to himself, but also with the perception that without the revelation of the Scriptures, man has little other choice.

If Browning's concern with man's speaking from his own interests and imagination is reflected in Caliban, it is even more pronounced in *The Ring and the Book*, where he devotes nearly one-fourth of the text to the two halves of Rome and Tertium Quid, individuals who have little, if any, real knowledge of the case, but an abundance of interest in using it to forward their own interests. As we see the

dramatic arguments unfold, we find that the poet uses the Bible somewhat differently here than in "Caliban," but the essential issues of speech without knowledge and "knowledge" without reliable testimony are the same. Here we are involved with more than just the fantasies of a monster in a cave, even though essential issues of human rights and eternity are at stake; here we are concerned, as well, with the immediate issues of life and death. Altick and Loucks note that:

> The elemental drama of the Bible is felt everywhere in *The Ring and the Book*: reminders of man's temptation and fall, his propensity for violence and intrigue, his longing for love and aid, God's response in terms of grace incarnate, human sacrifice by way of atonement, and final redemption. (198)

To be understood properly, "Caliban" should be read in the framework of both the Bible and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, expanding somewhat the view of Arnold Shapiro:[2]

> Reading "Caliban" in the light of the psalm [Psalm 50] and the play, one realizes that they not only help to clarify Browning's purpose: they provide almost a complete context for the poem. ("Psalm," 55)

And we should read it in reference to Browning's other works, particularly *The Ring and the Book*, which serves as a summary of his moral/ethical system. Earlier, in Chapter One, we noted, that Patricia Ball supports the holistic reading of Browning as she writes:

> The first step towards a maturing criticism can be taken if the Rabbi is never allowed out on his own; that is, he should not stray from the company of, at the least, the Bishop ordering his tomb and the

> other Bishop setting out his apology. Nor should Caliban ever be overlooked. (245)

But, unfortunately, she either does not believe her own advice, or she feels that Caliban is a trustworthy character, although neither Shakespeare, Browning, nor Caliban himself, could rely on him without supervision. Shakespeare's Prospero indicts:

> thou didst see to violate
> The honor of my child (*Tempest*, I.ii.347-48)

Browning's Caliban accuses himself:

> Because to talk about Him, vexes--ha,
> Could He but know! and time to vex is now,
> When talk is safer than in winter-time.
> Moreover Prosper and Miranda sleep.
> (17-20)

Ball declares, just a few pages later, while comparing Caliban to *Waiting for Godot* and after confining the bishops to each other's company:

> If the poem is taken with no preconceived notions about his probable motives for writing it; if that is, it is read without the handicap of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" having been arbitrarily chosen as the pole star of Browning's imaginative heavens, then it stands forth with its own claims to be the more positive luminary and the better guide to those heavens. The poem shows Browning moved by the spectacle of the natural man, the human creature with his bare resources making what he can of his situation. Irony remains an essential ingredient in this interpretation too, but the motive is exploratory and the impulse empirical rather than critical. Caliban would settle well beneath the Becket tree. His life is passed waiting for Setebos. (248)

Ms. Ball had best beware. Caliban manipulates and uses those who do not understand him well. His life is spent not

waiting for, but avoiding, Setebos. He hides in a cave to escape detection, and while Vladimir and Estragon wait, they seem to have no real expectation that Godot will ever come; Caliban nearly chews through his upper lip in terror at the mere suspicion that Setebos may appear on the scene.

Caliban, whether Shakespeare's or Browning's, and whatever his motives, usually behaves best in the company of others, and Browning's Caliban can be understood best when he is compared to other Browning characters, even those who are most like himself.

As with much other Browning scholarship, many of the critics, like Caliban and the first three speakers in *The Ring in the Book*, seem to have built their analyses around their own interests rather than the reality of the work. William Harrold reflects a popular view of *The Ring and the Book* when he says:

> It is known from the beginning that the narrators are not so much interested in moral or ethical elements as in seeing the story to their own advantage. It is evident that Browning's view of truth extends beyond the matter of right and wrong to factors motivating the decision of the person who is judging. (168)

What he fails to express, however, is that while the speaker may not be interested in moral or ethical elements--indeed, is often not even aware that ethical issues are involved--, Browning himself is vitally concerned about these issues. In the first book of the poem he places the "facts" before his readers for the very purpose of helping them to evaluate

in later books each speaker's presentation of "truth" and to help uncover the underlying bias which either prevents the truth from appearing or presents it more clearly than before. Sue Lonoff demonstrates her awareness of Browning's moral intent when she states:

> Browning...deals not only with the facts of his murder case, but also with metaphysical and moral issues--that is, with the ways in which man, in his fallen state, may nonetheless attain spiritual insight and approach The Word beyond mere words. (149)

Acknowledging that most of the speakers do not achieve that insight, she adds, "The foolish, misinformed, or vicious speakers claim to speak truly but obscure the truth with lies and 'barren words'" (149).

Leslie Thompson shows some awareness of the moral intent of the poem, but misses the point as she writes:

> It should be noted, however, that the greatest evil is not Guido's murder of Pompilia and her family. Rather it is the gradual attrition of spiritual sensitivity symbolized by Guido's crime. (324)

Guido's crime not only symbolizes spiritual insensitivity, it candidly reveals the fundamental self-centeredness of the human race and its basic unwillingness to abide by any revealed system, whether it be established moral code or truth, which interferes with that selfishness.

Although we are cautious of Peter Timko's statement on the role of intuition in "Caliban," an issue which we will discuss later, his contention of the importance of revelation to the understanding of Browning's work is

significant. Speaking of Browning's intent in "Caliban," he writes:

> He is indicating how lack of faith in man's intuitive recognition of God and his ignoring the doctrine of revelation, through which means God revealed Himself to man, are the real enemies to true faith. (143)

Caliban has "knowledge" of God without the revelation of the Bible; the two-halves of Rome and Tertium Quid speak of innocence and guilt in *The Ring and the Book* without the light of factual information. While they sometimes come to the right conclusions for the wrong reasons, more often they come to half-truths, which are really no truths at all, skip right past the truth without recognizing it, or come to a conclusion which is exactly the opposite of truth; none investigates to discover what he can truly *know* about the case.

In *The Ring and the Book* we find three speakers who are much like Caliban in their perceptions. Half-Rome, Other-Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid, like Prospero's slave, manufacture the "facts"; each draws from bits of gossip and imagination, and each is motivated by envy and a need to further his own cause.

Half-Rome's sympathies are evident from the first few dozen lines. Physical comfort and the spectacular are his first concerns:

> This way, while fresh folk go and get their gaze:
> I'll tell you like a book and save your shins.
> * * * *
> If this crush

> Make not its priests ashamed of what they show
> For temple-room, don't prick them to draw purse
> And down with bricks and mortar, eke us out
> The beggarly transept with its pit of apse
> Into a decent space for Christian ease,
> Why, to-day's lucky pearl is cast to swine.
> (II.3-4, 8-14)

As far as Half-Rome is concerned, the Comparini are guilty, and he makes no effort to hide his feelings. He sees the shocking nature of their wounds as proof of his allegations and justification of Guido's crime:

> Pietro the old murdered fool
> To the right of the altar, and his wretched wife
> On the other side. In trying to count stabs,
> People supposed Violante showed the most,
> Till somebody explained us that mistake;
> His wounds had been dealt out indifferent where,
> But she took all her stabbings in the face,
> Since punished thus solely for honor's sake,
> *Honoris causa*, that's the proper term.
> A delicacy there is, our gallants hold,
> When you avenge your honor and only then,
> That you disfigure the subject, fray the face,
> Not just take life and end, in clownish guise.
> (II.20-32)

He doesn't even much care if he is believable. In his eagerness to provide still more titillation, he repeats an anecdote about the positions of the bodies on the chancel steps, then adds a spicy fiction of his own:

> 't is said the body turned
> Round and away, rolled from Violante's side
> Where they had laid it loving-husband like.
> If so, if corpses can be sensitive,
> Why did not he roll right down altar-step,
> Roll on through nave, roll fairly out of church,
> Deprive Lorenzo of the spectacle,

> Pay back thus the succession of affronts
> Whereto this church had served as theatre?
> (II.42-50)

As he looks for more "scandal" to add to the strength of his case, he unwittingly reveals that he really has little information based on reality:

> No sooner whisper ran he was arrived
> Than up pops Curate Carlo, a brisk lad,
> Who never lets a good occasion slip,
> And volunteers improving the event.
> We looked he'd give the history's self some help,
> Treat us to how the wife's confession went
> *(This morning she confessed her crime, we know)*
> And, maybe, throw in something of the Priest--
> If he's not ordered back, punished anew,
> The gallant, Caponsacchi, Lucifer
> I' the garden where Pompilia, Eve-like, lured
> Her Adam Guido to his fault and fall.
> *Think you we got a sprig of speech akin*
> *To this from Carlo, with the Cardinal there?*
> *Too wary he was, too widely awake, I trow.*
> (II.158-171)(Italics added)

More subtly than the serpent that he speaks of, Half-Rome has added to his "knowledge," implications of the original sin to Pompilia and Caponsacchi, and seems to be bothered not at all that his accusation is based solely on conjecture. He has altered the nature of that sin from the eating of forbidden fruit to the committing of adultery, and shifted the blame wholly to Eve, thus implying that Guido was more victim than victimizer, and that he may even have acted with some naivete in the situation.

Before line 200, well within the first tenth of the poem, we find the unintentional disclosure that much of the story is conjecture, as we read:

> [O]ne sees indeed

> Not only how all it was *and must have been,*
> But cannot other than be to the end of time.
> (II.184-186)(italics added)

All of this, of course, has had a design. William Harrold notes of Half-Rome that, "The purpose of his entire speech has been to set up the Guido murder as a warning to his wife's lover" (169). The suspicious husband tells his listener in the last lines of the discourse:

> [F]or where's the Canon's corpse?
> All which is the worse for Guido, but, be frank--
> The better for you and me and all the world,
> Husbands of wives especially in Rome.
> The thing is put right, in the old place,--ay,
> The rod hangs on its nail behind the door,
> Fresh from the brine: a matter I commend
> To the notice, during Carnival that's near,
> Of a certain what's-his-name and jackanapes
> Somewhat too civil of eves with lute and song
> About a house here, where I keep a wife.
> (You, being his cousin, may go tell him so.)
> (II.1525-1536)

Other-Half-Rome is no less partial. Often using emotional language designed to lead the reader to a sentimentally compassionate view of Pompilia rather than to reveal the truth, we find the book beginning with heart-rending phrases like, "Little Pompilia, with the patient brow / And lamentable smile on those poor lips" (III.2-3), and,

> To speak and right herself from first to last,
> Right the friend also, lamb-pure, lion-brave,
> Care for the boy's concerns to save the son
> From the sire, her two-weeks' infant orphaned thus.
> (III.28-31)

Harrold finds some sympathy for Other Half-Rome:

> [H]is intuitive, emotional interests make him seem more congenial and humanitarian. Although his

> humane interests may be sentimental and not wholly worthwhile, he at least shows concern for suffering people apart from his own needs. Instead of basing his opinions on moral judgments, he describes Pompilia in the image of the Romantic literature which he has read. He depicts the deathbed scene for its theatrical effect and includes the whole family as one innocent group. (170)

What Harrold forgets to mention is that it is very important to the speaker that Pompilia be found innocent, and probably better for his case that Pietro and Violante are found innocent as well; as one who stands to benefit from the Comparini estate, he understands the implications of their guilt, and he is no more humanitarian or concerned than the speaker who precedes him. Langbaum makes an astute observation regarding Other Half-Rome's perceptions:

> The speaker of *The Other Half-Rome* is so much concerned with the melodramatic surface of the story, and so little with its moral meaning, that he makes no moral distinction between Pompilia and the Comparini, characterizing the parents along with the daughter as innocent lambs ravaged by the Franceschini wolves, Guido and his family. (*Poetry,* 117)

Even though he supports Pompilia's cause, which Browning has assured us is the right one, he is no more objective than his counterpart, and is involved in a lawsuit over money from the Comparini estate, a suit which depends upon Pompilia's proven innocence:

> I who have no wife,
> Being sensitive in my degree
> As Guido,--must discover hurt elsewhere
> Which, half compounded-for in days gone by,
> May profitably break out now afresh,
> Need cure from my own expeditious hands.
> The lie was that, as it were, imputed me
> When you objected to my contract's clause,--

> The theft as good as, one may say, alleged,
> When you, co-heir in a will, excepted, Sir,
> To my administration of effects,
> --Aha, do you think law disposed of these?
> (III. 1669-1680)

He has come to the right conclusions regarding the innocence of Pompilia, but for totally selfish reasons.

Tertium Quid bows and scrapes to impress the nobility to whom he speaks. Superbly living up to the implications of his name, he is so confident of his ability to present an unbiased case and so convinced of his own superior intelligence that he makes no case at all for either side and bores his listeners to distraction, often reduced to calling, "Prince!" or, "Highness!" to regain the attention he has lost. They seem hard pressed to decide which is more tedious: his attitude or his argument.

> Her Excellency must pronounce, in fine!
> What, she prefers going and joining play?
> Her Highness finds it late, intends retire?
> I am of their mind: only, all this talk talked,
> 'T was not for nothing that we talked, I hope?
> Both know as much about it, now, at least,
> As all Rome: no particular thanks, I beg!
> (IV.1622-1630)

He is absolutely correct in his statement about his listeners being as informed as all of Rome. Having been told "all," they know nothing. He is not particularly disturbed, however, by their inattention. Not only does he consider the populace of Rome "rabble," but, when he fails to impress his immediate listeners, he also dismisses them as obtuse:

> (You'll see, I have not so advanced myself,

After my teaching the two idiots here!)
(IV.1629-1630)

He has, of course, in these last two lines, displayed his real purpose in speaking, and his knowledge of his failure. His "noble" audience is neither interested in his wisdom, nor in sharing it with others, and his final argument, his climactic issue, about the needless torturing of nobility has fallen on deaf ears. He will not "advance" because of his enlightening lecture on this occasion. Harrold comments on Tertium Quid as a balance for the two halves of Rome:

> In depicting Tertium Quid as a balance for the triangle, Browning created him as a Roman citizen who has great confidence in his own qualifications and abilities. A nobleman with cultivated speech and a good deal of refinement, he sneers from his conservative privileged position at the opinions of the common people represented in Books II and III. In feigning an attempt at rational judgment, he sifts the facts and questions to determine what they mean, seeing both good and evil where the others saw either evil or good. But his cold objectivity makes him a failure in the search for truth. (170-171)

More realistically, his overgrown sense of self-importance has robbed him of any real ability to distinguish right from wrong, and he has bored, nearly to death, the nobility he was trying so desperately to impress.

Caliban's mind is simpler, and his cause is more basic. Often motivated by his own repressed sense of culpability, he is mostly interested in sensual pleasures, deluding the authorities in his life, Setebos and Prospero, and circumventing retribution for disobedience. If he can place his god on the same level as himself, he can justify his

actions, at least privately. "So He," appears eight times in the poem, seven of them after Caliban has described his own cruel actions or feelings of frustration.

All four speakers are concerned with the physical rather than the moral issues involved. Half-Rome criticizes the church for its inability to accommodate comfortably the crowds which have come to see the bodies. A short while later he takes pains to point out what he seems to consider one of the church's most valuable possessions, but shows no indication of appreciating its aesthetic value:

> Just at this altar where, beneath the piece
> Of Master Guido Reni, Christ on cross,
> Second to naught observable in Rome,
> That couple lie now, murdered yestereve.
> Even the blind can see a providence here.
> (II.32-36)

The twisted "providence," apparently, has something to do with the coincidence that the artist and the murderer share the same first name, and that the speaker considers Guido Franceschini, the murderer, to have been the victim, as was the crucified Christ.

Animal and fish imagery appear frequently throughout the four narratives. Half-Rome observes, at one point, of Violante:

> She who had caught one fish, could make that catch
> A bigger still, in angler's policy:
> So with an angler's mercy for the bait,
> Her minnow was set wriggling on its barb
> And tossed to mid-stream.
> (II.268-272)

Images of cat's claws, owls, badgers, foxes, sheep and wolves cavort through the lines of Half-Rome's story. Harrold suggests:

> The world of raptorial creatures, traps, and prey subtly suggests for the overpoem Browning's interest in the growing nineteenth-century concept of life in which God and spiritual values have disappeared leaving man devoid of nobility and free will. (183)

Tertium Quid becomes one of Browning's prime examples of this kind of life, and is not at all aware of the nature of true nobility. At the same time totally obsessed with social class, appearance and influence. He denigrates everyone other than himself and uses people in general for his own advancement. He admires wealth:

> Excellency, by your leave
> How did you get that marvel of a gem,
> The sapphire with the Graces grand and Greek?
> (IV.257-259)

But his language deteriorates into more negative animal imagery when he talks about those involved in the case. "Worm, and fly, and foot of the free bird" transform the stone, and the fishing imagery reappears:

> They baited their own hook to catch a fish
> With this poor worm, failed o' the prize, and then
> Sought how to unbait tackle, let worm float
> Or sink, amuse the monster while they 'scaped.
> (IV.702-705)

Caliban is totally engrossed with physical responses to his world and transposes nearly everything into animal imagery. He even mentally transforms Miranda into a four-

legged serpent. William Butts comments that even the drudge's actions suggest animal behavior:

> The intimate tone of whispering that the brackets suggest, the speech consisting of a string of vivid images, the grossly sensual pictures he describes contrasted with awkward attempts at abstraction--all these reflect closely, as if in capsulated form, the mind followed throughout the poem. The [opening] segment is a crash course in Caliban--it prepares the reader for accepting Caliban's statements as those of a limited mind speaking from immediate experience only. When first seen, Caliban looks like a delighted pig wallowing in mud, more of an animal granted the ability to speak than an early man. (27)

Whether or not Caliban is "primitive" man is not the point; but he does represent the mind of collective man--as do the Roman speakers--thinking of God without revelation, and as such, the imagery that Browning puts into his musings is important. Without a true picture of God, without the vision of special creation, man is reduced to animal status. William Butts notes in regard to Caliban as a collective mind:

> Comparing the opening segment with the closing only reinforces the approach that throughout "Caliban" the human mind and its relation to ideas are being satirized, not Caliban. We may feel amused at the advancement of his ideas, the crudeness of his logic, or the odd flights of his imagination, but Caliban the person deserves our pity and respect. (27)

While we can certainly understand Caliban as representing the composite human mind, we are also forced to the conclusion that we can respect Caliban only as much as we do others who are as mean-spirited and cruel as he is, only as

much as we can understand those who return malice for love, only as much as we can defend those who return the loving kindness of Prospero and Miranda with attempted rape--which we must do if we consider Browning's Caliban to be the same creature as Shakespeare's Caliban.

All of the speakers have received some revelation outside of themselves, however. The two halves of Rome and Tertium Quid have heard, of course, gossip. And Caliban heard what his mother relayed to him. But the evidence of oral revelation is too easy to reject or mutate into something it was not meant to be. Caliban and his Roman counterparts often misinterpret the information available to them. Half-Rome chooses "Molinism" or "Molinists" as his catchword.

Robert Langbaum feels that the actual doctrine is not important.

> Whatever Molinos' actual doctrine, Molinism in Browning stands for an anti-dogmatic, an empirical and relativist, a psychological and historical approach to religion. Faith in the report must be replaced by faith in the thing; and the thing, the unformulated but perceptible truth, "God's God in the mind of man," is a step ahead of formulated truth, "man's God." (*Poetry,* 130)

But, as Rita Maria Verbrugge suggests, "When Browning uses a name or term some thirty times, it can be assumed that he is doing more than just name-calling" (231). After carefully citing his qualifications and interest for pursuing the study along proper lines, she repeats Norton B. Crowell's

observation that, "Like Milton, he gives every evidence of knowing what he is about" (203).[3]

Altick & Loucks briefly approach the issue of Molinism, but fail to pursue its full meaning either in the seventeenth century or in the poem, and they fail to follow their own assertion to its final conclusion:

> Browning's partial misrepresentation of historical Molinism need not concern us here. It is enough simply to define this seventeenth-century heresy as the belief that contemplation of God is the sole requisite for salvation. Such quietism was at once alien to the activist Browning implying as it did that virtuous conduct and the valiant snatching of belief from the jaws of doubt are supererogatory, and attractive to him in that it rejected dogma, ritual, and other external grounds and expressions of faith in favor of private illumination. (322)

This, according to Verbrugge, was the doctrine held by Miguel de Molinos. It was short-lived, and Molinos was eventually condemned and imprisoned (233). She goes on to explain that still another tenet circulated at the time:

> Molinism refers to the belief held by the dedicated, learned priest and theologian, Luis de Molina, born in 1535. His ideas, expressed in his *Concordia Libri Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis* (with editions appearing in 1595, 1609, 1705)[4] deal with the problem of reconciling grace with free will, foreknowledge, and providence. The work takes the form of a commentary on several portions of the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Molina, God's grace can become useful for salvation only when man, using his free will, chooses to cooperate with God's plan. God's grace might not achieve its desired result in man because of man's failure to cooperate. Yet Molina does not repudiate Thomast [*sic*] predestination, for he acknowledges that God sees infallibly what man in his free will is going to do and on that basis predestinates the just to glory. Luis de Molina provoked extensive discussion by his theological expressions, but he and his ideas were never

> declared heretical by the Roman Catholic Church. (233)

Browning's poem becomes a both/and use of the Molinistic doctrines, rather than an either/or conversion. Verbrugge, more specifically, deduces that Browning incorporated into his work:

> 1) the emphasis on the unrestrained freedom of the will along with the simultaneous responsibility to choose in order for grace to be effective, and 2) the nominal ambiguity of the theologies resulting from the heresy spread about by the case of Molinos in the 1680's. By references to a heresy and a legitimate doctrine, and by the seemingly indiscriminate or ambiguous use of the terms involved, Browning manipulates the subject... (235)

He, consequently, can put "Molinist" theory into the mouths of his untrustworthy characters as well as those who we realize are speaking truth. Thus, according to Harrold:

> Half-Rome joins Guido and the lawyers in suspecting almost everyone of being a Molinist. The Other Half-Rome, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi barely mention it, but do not condemn it. And in Book X the Pope is clearly tolerant of Molinists. By the contrasting, one sees that Molinism comes to represent the individualist's search for truth that may seem radical and heretical to conservative persons of various types. (170)

While the person interested in truth may "seem" "radical" or "heretical" or "conservative," the person interested in truth is interested in truth and finds the beliefs of others of little personal concern. Those whom Harrold finds "conservative" are often not so much orthodox or traditional as they are intolerant and narrow. Afraid to step away from the crowd themselves, they frequently view those who do as a

threat to their personal "systems," and often imply that those who have followed light other than their own are radical and brewers of unrest.

Caliban is certainly not a conservative, but he too is confined--by his own thinking. He has the oral revelation of his mother, Sycorax, who believed in life after death and special creation, neither of which can be inferred from a natural theology. He rejects the first, partially because such a belief would hold him accountable for his actions, and partially as a frantic wish for relief from the distress of this life--he would rather cease to exist than admit that much of his situation is the result of his own conduct.

> 'Believeth with the life, the pain shall stop.
> His dam held different, that after death
> He both plagued enemies and feasted friends:
> Idly! He does His worst in this our life,
> Giving just respite lest we die through pain,
> Saving last pain for worst,--with which, an end,
> Meanwhile, the best way to escape His ire
> Is, not to seem too happy.
>
> (250-257)

Since Setebos reflects Caliban's own vexatious nature, and was created by "the something over Setebos," he, like Caliban, must be in a vulnerable position. Unable to attain the more comfortable world of his master, Setebos creates "a bauble-world" to torment and thus ease his frustration. If the Quiet had made all things, Caliban implies, surely he would have created for his creature a body that would have made him at least more physically comfortable, if not more

appealing, and certainly he would have made him less vulnerable to his enemies.

> His dam held that the Quiet made all things
> Which Setebos vexed only: holds not so.
> Who made them weak, meant weakness He might vex.
> Had He meant other, while His hand was in,
> Why not make horny eyes no thorn could prick,
> Or plate my scalp with bone against the snow,
> Or overscale my flesh 'neath joint and joint,
> Like an orc's armour? Ay,--so spoil His sport!
> He is the One now: only He doth all.
> (170-178)

John Lammers credits Caliban with convincing logic in his rejection of these doctrines, and allows probability to stand for reason, as he writes:

> Browning ridicules Caliban by letting him foolishly but quite logically reject these doctrines which offer him hope and the possibility of eternal happiness. Caliban reasons convincingly that God and Satan must be the same, since God could have made man impervious to injury but did not: "Who made (mankind) ... weak, meant weakness He might vex," Caliban concludes; and he rejects the possibility of an afterlife with the logical deduction that a life of "pain" would most probably end with "last" and "worst" pain and not be followed by an afterlife. (113)

Nowhere does Caliban even mention the concept of two separate beings, a devil and a god, and Sycorax "held" that Setebos performed both functions--he feasted and plagued, but "probably" is conjecture, not a logical deduction, and Caliban's rejection of an afterlife is, more likely, another indication that on some level he is aware of his own evil and wishes to avoid the consequences. In his comparison of "Caliban" to *Paradise Lost,* Lammers suggests that Caliban is unaware of his manipulative nature:

> By not letting Caliban refer directly to any of these Satanic qualities within himself but instead project them into Setebos, Browning suggests that a final, "devilish" step in the "Paradise Lost" syndrome is that Caliban, like Milton's devils, unknowingly anthropomorphizes his own ugliest and most tragic qualities into his concept of God in order to keep from having to face the fact that those qualities are actually within himself. Setebos is indeed a perfect anthropomorphic projection of Caliban except that Setebos does not anthropomorphize, and this very exception suggests that anthropomorphizing is a psychological defense mechanism so deeply seated in Caliban's subconscious that he cannot project it into his conscious mind in any way. (103)

He may be right. Even the most intelligent of Browning's speakers, i.e., Cleon and Karshish, are seemingly unaware that they have reasoned away the thing they most desire. We have no reason to think that Caliban would be any more astute.

The evidence of personal observation is of little value to the two halves of Rome and Tertium Quid. Although each seems almost greedy to "know," what he really wants is something to support his case. And observation serves Caliban poorly, as well, even more poorly than does oral revelation. His subjective vision sees Prospero's tolerance as enslavement. He is convinced that Setebos favors "Prosper" for no apparent reason, and provides no clues to gaining that favor. At the same time, he ignores that his own act of preventing the she-tortoises from laying their eggs is motivated purely by spite and is deserving of punishment.

What Prosper does?

Aha, if He would tell me how! Not He!
There is the sport: discover how or die!
(216-218)

The limits of his vision lead him to other misinterpretations, as well. Caliban's world is only as big as his island, and he has little or no vision of the world outside of its confines.

All need not die, for the things o' the isle
Some flee afar, some dive, some run up trees;
Those at His mercy,--why they please him most.
(219-221)

Caliban has experienced the love of God through Prospero and Miranda, but he ignores the lesson and exhibits gross cruelty:

Put case, unable to be what I wish,
I yet could make a live bird out of clay:
Would not I take clay, pinch my Caliban
Able to fly?--for there, see, he hath wings,
And great comb like the hoopoe's to admire,
And there, a sting to do his foes offence,
There, and I will that he begin to live
Fly to yon rock-top, nip me off the horns
Of grigs high up that make the merry din,
Saucy through their veined wings, and mind me not.
In which feat, if his leg snapped, brittle clay,
And if he, spying me, should fall to weep,
Beseech me to be good, repair his wrong,
Bid his poor leg smart less or grow again,--
Well, as the chance were, this might take or else
Not take my fancy: I might hear his cry,
And give the mankin three sound legs for one,
Or pluck the other off, leave him like an egg,
And lessoned he was mine and merely clay.
Were this no pleasure, lying in the thyme,
Drinking the mash, with brain become alive,
Making and marring clay at will? So He.
(75-96)

Later, when he fantasizes again on another "Caliban" that he has snared--"a sea-beast, lumpish," he administers a kind of captivity that Prospero would never have imagined:

> Blinded the eyes of, and brought somewhat tame,
> And split its toe-webs, and now pens the drudge
> In a hole o' the rock and calls him Caliban;
> (164-166)

His treatment of his imagined mate is little better, and demonstrates clearly his lack of the concept of love:

> A four-legged serpent he makes cower and couch,
> Now snarl, now hold its breath and mind his eye,
> And saith she is Miranda and my wife.
> (158-160)

Peter Timko feels that Caliban lacks the evidence of love that he needs:

> The Quiet does, however, share one quality with the other two, and herein lies the key to the poem: the Quiet, like Caliban and Setebos lacks goodness or love . . . . Caliban will always continue to see evidence of Divine power; he will never see evidence of Divine Love. His Christ must always remain a Setebos, and his God always a Quiet, both of whom must be feared. (149)

But, as we have demonstrated, Caliban has seen evidence of Divine love. It has been demonstrated to him by Prospero and Miranda, who cared for him with tenderness. Caliban, however, only imagines himself wronged and does not see the relationship between his actions and their consequences. The text of *The Tempest* reveals his slanted perspective:

> When thou cam'st first,
> Thou strok'st me and made much of me, wouldst give me
> Water with berries in't, and teach me how
> To name the bigger light, and how the less,
> That burn by day and night, and then I lov'd thee
> And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle
> The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile.

> Curs'd be I that did so! All the charms
> Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
> For I am all the subjects that you have,
> Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me
> In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
> The rest o' the' island.
> *Pros.* Thou most lying slave,
> Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have us'd thee
> (Filth as thou art) with human care, and lodg'd thee
> In mine own cell, till thou didst see to violate
> The honor of my child.
> *Cal.* O ho, O ho, would't had been done!
> Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
> This isle with Calibans.
>
> (*Tempest* I.ii.332-351)

Thus, instead of leading him to love, the limits of his understanding of experience lead him only to fear.

> When .. when .. well, never try the same way twice!
> Repeat what act has pleased, He may grow wroth.
> You must not know His ways and play Him off,
> Sure of the issue.
>
> (222-225)

Caliban rejects the little truth he has received about Setebos from his mother, and the confines of his own prejudice prevent him from comprehending what truth is discernable through his experience. It is highly unlikely that he would accept the evidence of a written revelation if it were given to him, and without that revelation he will never know his god. Shapiro comments:

> God, in Psalm 50, criticizes those who hate instruction (v. 17). Caliban's only teaching is to use his cruel action to prove his mastery. ("Psalm," 58)

Without the light of the revealed Word of God, Browning implies, man cannot know the person of God, and only those

who apprehend the light they have already been given will be given this additional illumination.

Trinity is not discernable without special revelation. How Caliban arrived at "Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos," remains a mystery. His trinity is either superfluous, as he names only two "divine" beings in the poem, Setebos and the Quiet, or he includes himself in that trinity. The second possibility is the more likely, albeit on a subconscious level: Not only does Caliban model his god after himself, but he imagines himself ruling a world which he has created, a world in which he is far more whimsical and cruel than the Setebos he has conceived. His "Caliban" can fly, and has some attractive features, i.e., a "comb like the great hoopoe's." And, he has a sting, but Caliban demonstrates none of the other attributes of a god. In elevating himself to the level of Setebos, or rather bringing Setebos to his own level, he has made himself equal to God, except by degree of power, which is part of the reproach of Psalm 50.

Without revelation, Caliban cannot know the eternality of God. In fact, he has completely confused the issue. While holding that "All need not die," as we noted earlier, he decides that Setebos will eventually be conquered by the Quiet and die, or at least fall into a sleep from which he will not waken.

> Hoping the while, since evils sometimes mend,
> Warts rub away and sores are cured with slime,
> That some strange day, will either the Quiet catch
> And conquer Setebos, or likelier He

Decrepit may doze, doze, as good as die.
(279-283)

Timko comments on Caliban's view of the nature of God and man:

> The basic questions in the poem are those concerning the nature of God, His relationship to human beings, and His method of revealing Himself to these human beings. Related to these, of course, is the question of man's immortality; what can one deduce of a future life in the light of the relationship of God and man? . . . .But unlike Butler and Paley, he makes no ethical or moral connection between pain and pleasure and virtue and vice, and in this respect, as Browning indicates, he is much more logical than they. (146)

But Caliban has no real logic. His thinking is flawed and totally self-centered. He does not want to be held responsible, and he can only model the intentions of Setebos after his own, petty, mean-spirited self. Shapiro observes:

> Browning opens his poem with a Caliban who is determined to use his speech to "vex." He will let "the rank tongue blossom into speech"; but since he hopes his speech will be overheard by no one, this tongue can only engender blossoms that grow in the dark. Totally reflexive, Caliban's speech reverses that of the righteous, which is used to praise God [in Psalm 50]. He attempts to deceive Setebos. He slanders Prospero, Miranda, and Ariel. Planning punishments for innocent creatures that have not harmed him, he gives his mouth to evil. Even his logic is faulty: how can he "vex" if no one overhears? ("Psalm," 58)

We might add, that as soon as Caliban is conscious of the approaching storm, he assumes that he *has* vexed Setebos and cowers, trembling. While doing so, he unintentionally reveals that he is, at least subconsciously, cognizant that his mean-spirited behavior displeases his god.

Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!

'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,
Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month
One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape!
(292-295)

Neither is Setebos very powerful as gods go. Far from omnipotent, he is helpless in the volition of the Quiet, and he is subject to Prospero's magic powers. For this reason Caliban feels compelled to acquiesce to Prospero's commands. Shakespeare's Caliban grumbles about Prospero,

I must obey. His Art is of such pow'r,
It would control my dam's god, Setebos,
And make a vassal of him (*Tempest*, I.ii.372-74).

Nor does Caliban endow Setebos with any greater power in Browning's work. One of the reasons that Setebos is so cruel, according to the brute, is that he is unable to change his own miserable situation:

'Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:
He hated that He cannot change His cold,
Nor cure its ache.
(31-33)

Caliban never considers that if Setebos could create the sun which warms the earth, he could certainly warm his own habitat and adapt to it, unlike the fish, which Caliban imagines as longing for warmth, like himself, but unable to adapt to the change in temperature. Reducing the power of Setebos increases his own opportunity for autonomy.

Without revelation, Caliban is unable to discern either God's omniscience or his infinity. In fact, he prefers things that way. He could not even pretend to hide from a god who possessed such qualities.

> And talks to his own self, howe'er he please,
> Touching that other, whom his dam called God.
> Because to talk about Him, vexes--ha,
> Could he but know! and time to vex is now.
> When talk is safer than in winter-time.
> (15-19)

But, his conviction on this point is weak. Setebos is less likely to overhear in the summer, when he is comfortable, than in the winter; and Setebos has spies which give him, if not infinity, at least a far greater access to knowledge than is available to his creation:

> (What, What? A curtain o'er the world at once!
> Crickets stop hissing; not a bird--or, yes,
> There scuds His raven that has told Him all!
> It was fool's play this prattling!
> (284-287)

Caliban's god is as unstable, undependable and inconsistent as is Caliban himself. Immutability is a concept that enters the thought of our pseudo-theologian only negatively. Freedom to him means doing what he pleases, when he pleases. He speaks for an imaginary squirrel and urchin of Setebos:

> "Because he did so yesterday with me,
> And otherwise with such another brute,
> So must he do henceforth and always."--Ay
> 'Would teach the reasoning couple what "must" means!
> 'Doth as he likes, or wherefore Lord? So He.
> (241-245)

The moment he thinks no one is watching, Caliban hides in a cave as much to wallow in the mire as to contemplate his "spiritual" world, which is capricious at best. What really matters to him is that he is being defiant of both Setebos and Prospero. Jeff Karr, in speaking of Caliban, focuses on

Martin Esslin's evaluation of *Waiting for Godot* and notes:[5]

> The fact that Browning's poem addresses this turning point [the powerlessness of man to effect his own salvation] is evident in the obsession of many modern writers with the rule of chance in a universe where man seeks salvation. For instance, in *The Theatre of the Absurd* part of Martin Esslin's discussion of *Waiting for Godot* centers on a quotation from St. Augustine: "Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned." The reference is, of course, to the thieves who were crucified with Christ. The implication seems to be that on the basis of two chance remarks--one conciliatory, the other sarcastic--made in a moment of extreme agony, the eternal fate of these two men was settled....The same sort of Cain and Abel tension appears in "Caliban Upon Setebos" and presupposes the existence of a fickle and inscrutable Deity. (44)

If "Caliban" is a satire, as Karr, himself, states just five lines later, then it is not the poem which "presupposes," but the speaker, Caliban, "who speculates about the nature of God and arrives at conclusions"--and it is *his* ideas that Browning is ridiculing. Secondly, in moments of extreme agony, men do not make "chance remarks." Mr. Karr has obviously not studied the physiology of cross-hanging, which creates a great deal of difficulty in the breathing process, among other things. Anything said by a person who is dying by hanging from a cross is of consummate importance and will reveal the very essence of the soul. Neither these two men nor Christ engaged in idle chatter during those hours. If a Cain and Abel tension appears, it is the same tension which the first murderer and his brother experienced, that of acquiescence to God's authority or of choosing rebellious

independence. Caliban's behavior is so capricious and undisciplined that he cannot conceive of the God who says of himself, "For I am the Lord, I change not" (Malachi 3:6). Only his fear has little hope of change.

> 'Conceiveth all things will continue thus,
> And we shall have to live in fear of Him
> So long as He lives, keeps his strength: no change
> (241-243)

Caliban not only chooses to rebel against all authority in his life, i.e., Prospero and Setebos; he refuses to try to discover the will of Setebos or even to believe that it is possible to discover that will, despite the fact that Prospero seems to have done very well in this area. He is thus condemned and can only lament his destiny:

> 'Conceiveth all things will continue thus,
> And we shall have to live in fear of Him
> So long as He lives, keeps his Strength: no change,
> If He have done His best, make no new world
> To please Him more, so leave off watching this,--
> If He surprise not even the Quiet's self
> Some strange day,--or, suppose, grow into it
> As grubs grow butterflies: else, here are we,
> And there is He, and nowhere help at all.
> (241-249)

Without revelation, Caliban can have no concept of the holiness of God, and he cannot know, as we have stated earlier, of the special creation of God, nor can he begin to guess at the redemption that God has provided in Christ. Among others, Lammers attempts to offer evidence that Browning relied heavily on intuition for much of his spiritual knowledge:

> First, Browning seems to have believed that the "story" of Christ can be intuited by a person living

> in any historical time and that it actually "happens" in the mind of the person who accepts his intuition as true. Thus the "story" is timeless and "mental." David in "Saul" "visualizes" the Christ story--"See(ing) the Christ stand"--and it "happens" for him long before the time of Christ; John in "A Death" says that to him the "story.../...is, here and now" long after it has actually happened; and Cleon visualizes the story of Christ, though it does not "happen" for him because he does not accept his intuition as true. Browning also suggests through David, John, and Cleon that one's own words, if they are a projection of his deepest spiritual desires, can be a description of Christianity and his own intuitive Christian revelation from God. (115)

Mr. Lammers forgets that David, in the Bible, fills the role of prophet as well as that of Israel's king, and thus has divine license to *see* the Christ. The first prophecy of a Messiah occurs in Genesis 3:15 and is repeated and expanded upon hundreds of times before this moment in the life of "the sweet Psalmist of Israel," who certainly knew the Scriptures and had the ability to interpret them. John "sees" because the experience is still as real to him as it was in the moment that it occurred; Cleon and Karshish have heard the message from others in a post-resurrection world. Lammers says that "Browning thus ridicules Caliban by suggesting that he could but never actually will intuit the Christ story since he has put his faith in logic and not the pursuit of truth." Caliban has already rejected the light, the revelation, that he has been given; and on that basis, the likelihood of his receiving more is remote. The "story" of Christ is always revealed by others, and Caliban's allegories can no more supply him with redemption's message

than can be known to any others using "intuition" as their source.

In pointing out some of the imagery that Browning uses in "Caliban," Lammers notes:

> The "sloth's skull" image serves as an allegory of Christ's death and resurrection--and not simply as a symbol of His death--if we read one of its lines as a double entendre, and the crucifixion contest and several other apparent double entendres that we will discuss in "Caliban" suggest the validity of this approach. When Caliban says that the "dead sloth" was "too hard for one to kill," he means that the sloth was too tough to be killed by Caliban (the "one"); but it sounds as if he is describing a major paradox of Christ: He was made "dead" by the crucifixion but ultimately was "too hard for (any) one to kill." Daringly comparing Christ to a dead sloth, this brief allegory thus suggests the humiliation of Christ, the ugliness of the crucifixion, and the fact of the resurrection. (105-106)

Lammers, at times, seems to take the allegory concept a bit far, much like St. Augustine in his fourth century interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, but, the point here is that this is Browning's allegory, not Caliban's, and the possibility of Caliban's knowledge of what he was doing is remote. As we address the question of intuition, we note that Timko follows many of his predecessors in asserting:

> Immortality cannot be inductively arrived at from experience, and, more important, God cannot be seen in the wing of an insect, the eye of a bird, or one little mess of whelks.
>
> The last point touches upon the crux of the poem, for Caliban's whole outlook is governed by a strict denial of intuitive faith; this fact, as much as any scale of evolution, accounts for his "primitive" theology. (147)

To the contrary, most of Caliban's theology has been formed almost entirely through intuition. He does question that God exists. His division of the acts of creation, his lopsided trinity, his fish who desires warmer waters in which to swim, and his denial of the oral revelation of Sycorax are all the result of his "intuition"; certainly, he has no proof or evidence on which to base his contentions. Timko feels that "Caliban rejects immortality simply because he cannot see any basis for it from his own observation" (147). While giving Caliban temporary credit for being more logical than Butler and Paley, he certainly cannot be convinced that Browning means for the brute to possess anything that resembles real logic. All of his thinking, in this respect, is "intuitive." His unwillingness to accept the revelation available, the light given him, is what has led him amiss.

None of the speakers, Caliban or the four in Rome, is interested in any kind of justice, much less God's justice. Caliban fears for himself; each of the Roman orators is concerned for a personal cause. Real evidence is the last thing they want to see. Caliban wants to wallow in the mire free from fear of discovery; Half-Rome wants either his wife's suspected lover to go away or license for vengeance, Other-Half-Rome wants his part in the inheritance, and Tertium Quid wants the prestige that only his "intellect" can bring. Caliban is like the characters in *Godot* only in that he sees no real purpose for life. The others have

chosen simply not to think about it. Human rights, responsibility to God, and merited justice bear no significance to their goals. Revelation, the truth, would bring only guilt and ruin.

CHAPTER 3

"TRUE THINGS" BY "WRONG NAMES": AUTHORITY AND LIGHT-- "BLOUGRAM," TWO LAWYERS, AND "HOLY CROSS DAY,"

In July of 1845, Elizabeth Barrett wrote to Robert Browning: "[B]ut it seems to me clear that they [the dissenters] know what the 'liberty of Christ' means far better than those do who call themselves 'churchmen'; and stand altogether as a body, on higher ground" (Kenyon I, 145).

Browning's reply, dated August 4, was not only enthusiastic, but provides some interesting insight into his denominational inclinations:

> Can it be you, my own you past putting away, *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 those years back, to be baptised--and where they heard, this morning, a sermon preached by the very minister who officiated on that other occasion! (147)

Neither, however, was willing to grant across-the-board acceptance, even to the dissenters. A year later, he agreed totally with her written response to a conversation between the two on the previous day ("what you express now, is for us both"):

> Still you go quickest there, where your sympathies are least ruffled and disturbed--and I like, beyond comparison best, the simplicity of the dissenters.. the unwritten prayer, ..the sacraments administered quietly and without charlatanism! and the principle of a church, as they hold it, *I* hold it too, ..quite apart from state-necessities..pure from the law. Well--there is enough to dissent from among the dissenters--the Formula is rampant among them as among others--you hear things like the buzzing of flies in proof of a corruption--and see every now and then something divine set up like a post for men of irritable minds and passions to rub themselves against, calling it a holy deed--you feel moreover bigotry and ignorance pressing on you on all sides, till you gasp for breath like one strangled. But better this, even, than what is elsewhere--*this* being elsewhere too in different degrees, besides the evil of the place. (Kenyon II, 427-8)

Browning, apparently, was quick to discern that "institutionalization," any system which placed men in authority over other men, was bound to corrupt. Often it was not the system itself which was the problem, but the men who misused it for their own purposes.

Later, poems such as "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's" and "An Epistle" frequently brought charges of anti-Catholicism or anti-Semitism against Browning. But again, Browning seldom, if ever, pronounced such broad judgment. Holistic reading of his work shows general disenchantment with ecclesiastical "authority" and those who should "know," but he is often very positive about individual exceptions to what he seems to see as the general trend of religion as an institution. Each individual must be measured on the basis of his or her own words and actions. If he condemns Karshish, "the picker-up of

learning's crumbs," he lauds Rabbi Ben Ezra who urges, "trust God: see all, nor be afraid." While he condemns the Bishop who orders his tomb as materialistic and self-serving, he shows a pope in *The Ring and the Book* who is aware of himself as totally human and subject to error. Charles T. Phipps, S. J. notes of the figures who represent Church authority in *The Ring and the Book*:

> Indeed, except for Caponsacchi's later self, the distant and almost Olympian Pope, and Fra Celestino, the clerics of *The Ring and the Book* form a rogues' gallery of cowards, fops, lechers, and murderers. It is the Canon, the Pope, and the Friar who are misfits in such a fraternity. To remain faithful to God and self within the ecclesiastical milieu of *The Ring and the Book* requires heroic sanctity, but an entirely self-made, self-discovered sanctity. The Church, society, convention, and tradition are unable to assist--are, in fact, positive hindrances. ("Caponsacchi," 715)

Saul, King of Israel, blinded by pride, does not understand a right relationship to God, while the shepherd boy, David, future ruler of the kingdom, experiences a vision of the Christ. Abt Vogler, the musician, "creates" in an unforgettable moment of communion with spiritual forces, while Cleon, "of these latter days, with greater mind/ Than our forerunners," dismisses as untenable the testimony of "Paulus" and "certain slaves," who present the very hope he himself has just outlined as most desireable. Browning's "negative" characters, however, those learned gentlemen who either reason themselves away from religious truth or flatly deny it, greatly outnumber those who are

able or willing to apprehend the significance of the insight that they do have.

"Bishop Blougram's Apology," the lawyers in *The Ring and the Book,* and Church authorities in "Holy Cross Day" represent a substantial share of the evils Browning saw among those who, by reason of position or education, were part of the system which often was involved in the administration of religious or ethical principles.

In the light of Gigadibs' questions, Blougram adopts a defensive attitude, not only toward his lifestyle, but toward his essential belief system. He justifies his rationalizations and calls them faith; his "apology" is both ecclesiastic and secular. Dominus Hyacinthus De Archangelis and Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius, lawyers in a case over which the Church in the person of the Pope has final authority, totally lose sight of their moral purpose, to protect the rights of their respective clients, as they egocentrically focus on personal ambition. The authorities in "Holy Cross Day" insist on a ridiculous outward conformity to a system that only supports their private greed and lechery, and in a faith in which they, apparently, no longer have any real conviction.

Few of Browning's poems have caused more controversy than "Bishop Blougram," but the good Bishop is a most complicated character. While he apparently accepts the basic tenets of the Christian faith, he has not only lost

the focus of his "religious life," but retains no vestige of desire to return to the life of self-denial and service to which he once pledged himself. Luxurious living is only one of his flaws. He is unable to bring himself to complete acceptance of the dogmas of his religion, nor does he have the moral strength to deny them.

Ellen F. Shields feels that "Blougram exemplified many of the characteristics that non-Catholics found most objectionable in the Roman Church" (24), while Robert G. Laird asserts:

> His frequent sympathetic use of nominal Catholics as major characters in so many of his monologues suggests that he was more critical of the institution than he was of individual Catholics or of the religious reality beneath the outward trappings of the Church. (302)

But "Blougram" is not about Catholics. It, and many of Browning's other "Catholic" poems, is about the "nominalism" that institutionalization breeds. Rupert E. Palmer, Jr. points to Browning's broader focus when he observes:

> Browning explained his treatment of the Church as a result of his having lived chiefly in Italy, where Catholic examples were ready to his hand, and said that, if he had lived in England, he would probably have used Anglican examples. (110)

Again, Shields argues: "In creating Bishop Blougram, Browning assigned himself an exceptionally difficult task as special-pleader" (24). Clyde de L. Ryals, on the other hand, maintains:

> Browning remained aware of the conflict between the old religious and the new positivist world-views and, more importantly, of the impossibility on his

> part to take either side or bring them into accord. In this respect he was not unlike, say, Matthew Arnold, who was well aware of wandering between two worlds. He was different from Arnold not in recognizing these conflicts but, in a large body of his work, presenting them ironically so as to transcend them. It was his irony that allowed Browning, unlike most of his contemporaries, to rise above mere argument or special pleading for this or that cause. (46)

Whether he was a "special pleader" or not, Browning never wandered. His irony may allow some of his readers to avoid moral decisions, as it does for many of the personalities in his work, but Browning's position was always clearly on the side of what he perceived as truth. His irony lay in the character's perception of truth, brief though it may have been, and then in the almost calculated denial of that very cognizance.

C. R. Tracy seems to have assumed a balanced perspective on the work when he notes that "Bishop Blougram, then, is not the portrait of an individual, but an amalgamation of traits taken from two of the leading English Catholics of the times" ("Blougram," 425). He also notes that this is not the real point:

> Browning's real purpose was to comment on the problem of faith in a sceptical world, and he carried it out by devising for his mouthpiece the figure of a representative Catholic having some obvious resemblance with a well-known Catholic of the times. (425)

But he, too, misses the essence of the work. Blougram's "faith" is not really faith, at least not as Browning defines it. In an August 1846 letter to Elizabeth Barrett,

Browning presents the essence of his criteria for belief: "Those are my own feelings, my convictions beside--instinct confirmed by reason" (Kenyon II, 434).

"Blougram" is not about faith, at least not the Bishop's faith. He has few convictions, and if he has any instincts, they are overshadowed by the need to hold officially endorsed doctrinal renderings. When faced with "incredible" reports, he hedges:

> I pine among my million imbeciles
> (You think) aware some dozen men of sense
> Eye me and know me, whether I believe
> In the last winking Virgin, as I vow,
> And am a fool, or disbelieve in her
> And am a knave,--approve in neither case,
> Withhold their voices though I look their way
> (374-380)

"Blougram" is about defending a *system* of religion which provides its authorities with the structure they need to be personally comfortable and powerful. Bishop Blougram *believes* many things only because such belief is expedient. Shields touches this briefly when she states:

> Both men [Newman and Blougram] resort to the authority of the Church in deciding which matters they are to believe. Blougram argues that even though it might not be true "about the need of trial to men's faith" (l. 737), he will not decrassify [*sic*] his faith by eliminating those doctrines concerning which he has "doubts." (23)

If, in the process he should do some real good, if someone like Gigadibs should come to genuine faith, so much the better, but certainly that is not Blougram's main purpose. Blougram is much more interested in converting Gigadibs "to

a new respect for his host" (Shapiro, "Blougram," 248). Nor is the journalist's conversion Browning's main purpose. Palmer feels that Gigadibs is the main issue of the poem:

> It seems to me that this final portion is completely of a piece with the monologue proper and that, however Browning may have used the device elsewhere (in "Sludge," for instance), he here uses it primarily to show the effect of Blougram's talk upon Gigadibs. This effect I conceive to be central to the meaning of the poem. (113)

Rather than as a focus, however, Gigadibs functions as a foil for the self-serving Blougram--a demonstration that little light can be enough, in contrast to Blougram's opportunity for much light which proves to be darkness. As Arnold Shapiro observes: "Browning calls his poem *Bishop Blougram's Apology* not "The Transformation of Gigadibs" ("Blougram," 245).

"Blougram" is doubly ironic. Gigadibs' soul searching may be the unexpected result of the evening's oration, but Browning has given us no reason to believe that Blougram is any less self-deceived than, say, the Duke of Ferrara. He defends his love of luxury unabashedly, and arrives at no moment of revelation or deeper insight into his own behavior. Palmer suggests that the poem is merely "a straight-forward presentation of the views of a very complex man," and the speaker's "moral character" is "ambiguous," so that we, not the poet, judge him, but that leaves no grounds to evaluate any of the personalities in Browning's monologues (115-116). Blougram offers self-justification,

not an apologetic; change is not one of his options because he will not admit to any need for it.

Browning offers two keys to interpretation of this work in his epilogue to Blougram's discourse. Forced to defend himself, "[T]he great bishop rolled him out a mind / Long crumpled, till creased consciousness lay smooth" (978-9). Blougram's chief intention was to soothe his own conscience. David R. Ewbank rightfully observes:

> A convinced man does not expend time and energy demolishing the opinions of a man he considers to be a second-rate, arrogant dandy... That threat is to Blougram's own peace of mind, and a barrage of words descends upon Gigadibs--who protests occasionally but, for the most part, plays abstractedly with his plate--before peace is, temporarily, restored. (260)

In addition, he has rendered Gigadibs powerless, his main objective. Shapiro closely echoes Ewbank when he asserts, "If Gigadibs is as insignificant as the bishop implies, why should he care what Gigadibs thinks?" ("Blougram," 247-48). As he finishes his discourse, Blougram mocks:

> Go write your lively sketches! be the first
> "Blougram, or The Eccentric Confidence"--
> Or better simply say, "The Outward-bound."
> Why, men as soon would throw it in my teeth
> As copy and quote the infamy chalked broad
> About me on the church-door opposite.
> You will not wait for that experience though,
> I fancy, howsoever you decide,
> To discontinue--not detesting, not
> Defaming, but at least--despising me!
> (961-970)

F. E. L. Priestley feels that Blougram grants Gigadibs full license to publish what he has heard:

> He is now free to publish to the eager world the startling revelations that the Bishop, though not

> necessarily granting the good things of this world pre-eminence, does not despise them and actually enjoys good food, works of art, and a position of eminence; and that he, like most theologians, distinguishes between faith and knowledge, recognizing the activity of the will in belief. (146)

But Gigadibs would never dare to print an account of the Bishop's manifesto; he would never be believed. Laird notes:

> And not only does the Bishop prevent Gigadibs from speaking out during the interview, of course, but he also makes it impossible for the journalist to report anything about it later in print. (304)

Having thus eased his mind, Blougram goes on to inwardly boast:

> "On the whole," he thought, "I justify myself
> On every point where cavillers like this
> Oppugn my life. (996-9)

Much like Beckett who is tempted to do the "right thing for the wrong reason" in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Browning sees that motivation may be more important than actual deed. Blougram never notices that there is a difference. "He said true things, but called them by wrong names" (996).

The dichotomy of Blougram's life has often distracted critics from his biggest problem. While he *believes* in God, his opportunistic approach has turned the rest of his religion into pretense. Julia Markus understands this concept, but argues that Browning essentially agrees with the Bishop:

> There was much to object to in the "great Bishop," and Browning in his portrait of Blougram points out his political conservatism, his excessive worldliness, his casuistry. But he is a man who has made faith work in his life. Once he is "back on Christian ground" in his "Apology," Blougram can say along with Browning:
>
> You call for faith:
> I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists.
> The more of doubt, the stronger faith I say,
> If faith o'ercomes doubt. How I know it does?
> By life and man's free will, God gave for that!
> To mould life as we choose it, shows our choice:
> That's our one act, the previous work's His own.
> (601-607)(194)

Blind faith is no faith at all for Browning. For him, faith that lacks the sustenance of reason and revelation is no better than wishful thinking. But Blougram has lost sight of faith. Laird agrees, as he states:

> While there is much to suggest that Blougram is, at heart, a true believer, there is also evidence that at this stage in his life his belief has become a static, rather than a dynamic one. (304)

Real faith in all that he professed would have enabled Blougram to live according to his light, or the revelation that he has. Instead, he has used his "free will" to choose a life of luxury and power rather than one as the humble shepherd of those he has been appointed to lead. "Reason" serves only his material purposes. He sees the majority of the adherents of his religion as dull-witted:

> I pine among my million imbeciles (374)
> .....
> Your taste's worth mine; but my taste proves more wise
> When we consider that the steadfast hold
> On the extreme end of the chain of faith
> Gives all the advantage, makes the difference
> *With the rough purblind mass we seek to rule:*
> *We are their lords, or they are free of us,*

Just as we tighten or relax our hold.
[Italics added](752-58)

As Bishop, Blougram rules, and he craves power. Humility and self denial have no place in the fittings of his cabin. Even his analogy of the ship board cabin ignores that depiction of the more menial herder of sheep, which more accurately should portray his life.

Had his exposure to truth been less, he might have been excused. Maintaining that Blougram's character is admirable and that he lives according to his light, Whitla grants, if on no other grounds than that of his elevated position in the Church, that the prelate does indeed have access to special knowledge.

> By virtue of his office, the bishop shares the prophetic faculty which has been given to the Christian Church; he is living in the light of the Christian revelation, and that has illuminated his life and has restored his blinded vision. (49)

Prophetic faculty, however, does not guarantee a godly life or spiritual vision. Browning would have been well-aware of the eleventh chapter of John, which gives an account of Caiaphas, high priest at the time of Christ's crucifixion:

> And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad. Then they took counsel together for to put him to death. (John 11:49-53)

Caiaphas was later responsible for sending Christ to Pilate, who had the power to pronounce the death penalty (John 18:28).

Laird, however, who sees both Blougram's cognizance and deficiency, observes:

> At the same time, the poem is also a criticism of Blougram for his failure to live according to what he himself feels to be important, for his refusal to accept the Pauline view of interior revolution, and for the rationalization of his acceptance of the good things of this world which his position in the hierarchy provides him. (309)

Blougram is satisfied with outward appearances; he doesn't care in the least about the inner man.

If "Gigadibs" means "a fool who will do anything for money" as suggested by Turner,[1] he seems not to remain a fool. Whitla feels that "[t]he encounter was more than a little embarrassing, leading the 'literary man' to play with his spoons and range the olive stones about the plate's edge" (44). But those diversions are just as likely to have been the actions of a man deeply engrossed in the private thoughts to which this kind of encounter gives birth.

Whitla sees Gigadibs as he is at the beginning of the poem, but fails to give him credit for a unique ability to sort through Blougram's barrage of rhetoric for whatever fragments of truth he might be able to find:

> Gigadibs is at best a third-rate journalist, tempted into writing of his encounter with the great Blougram as the high point of his literary career. He is the model of all things dull, scarcely clever enough to see his own limitations. Counter-balancing Blougram's prophetic faculty is Gigadibs'

> spiritual blindness. He has never experienced revelatory brightness; he despises faith and distrusts the bishop. Instead of being a leader of men, Gigadibs is a slave to a morality which has no basis in his reason, to his reason which cannot be adequately followed in his experience, and to his experience, which is limited by his own circumstances. (49-50)

Gigadibs deserves credit for the ability and willingness to change. This "model of all things dull" *does* experience "revelatory brightness," and "He did not sit five minutes" (1006). We can assume that before the bishop was finished speaking, Gigadibs already felt twinges of the "sudden *healthy* vehemence" which he acted upon within a few days (1007)[italics added]. "It was just such a new beginning," Laird notes, "..., that Blougram had maintained was impossible; one could only make the best of what already was" (303).[2]

Tanzy not only fails to see Blougram's failure--he remains static--, but very nearly places Gigadibs back into the world from which he came.

> Clearly something unexpected has happened. Not only has Blougram successfully defended himself but the conversation has had good results....Gigadibs has been brought to throw off his grandiose ambitions and to work in the world that is. (266)

Instead, he changes the world that was for a new world. The journalist "throws off" his country, his profession, and his way of life as he rejects the kind of faith that the bishop has represented. Laird agrees, and sees Gigadibs' potential for future development:

> [Gigadibs] is not converted to the Bishop's faith, indeed does not even choose to remain in the society which has produced both him and Blougram, but runs off to Australia to search for some form of Christian faith in what he may consider an environment more congenial to its growth. (117)

The victory is not, as Priestly argues, Blougram's (147), but Gigadibs', through his own apprehension of the small light given to him. Laird summarizes the experience:

> Browning's final concern in the poem is to demonstrate how the Spirit works in mysterious ways, how it can pierce clouds of pride, hatred, sensualism, hypocrisy, and doubt to bring about its effect--a humble, active belief in the power of Christ to remake man closer to His image--through the most unlikely means. Although he is interested in how men conspire within themselves to block out the light of God, Browning's principal thesis in this poem is how that light cannot be withstood when it appears in all its brightness, and thus how it is possible for the least of men to become the greatest. (309)

We would argue that the light Blougram offered was very weak, and really seems not to be the poem's central thesis, but it was light enough to make Gigadibs seek a stronger one. Whether he read "The Apocalypse of St. John the Apostle," as Laird suggests (306), or the "Gospel of John," he has turned to a source more reliable by far than his worldly dinner partner.

Laird feels that "Blougram," and other of Browning's monologues suffer from an inability to enable a speaker fully realize himself:

> Whatever advantages the dramatic monologue had for Browning, it had one essential weakness: it could not show a character coming to understand and thus able to act upon the inevitable conclusion to which his whole line of argument has led him and his

> reader....[Y]et the tragedy in most of Browning's monologues is that the speakers are cut off before they can become aware of the answer provided in what they have said. (303)

He forgets, however, poems such as "Saul" and "Abt Vogler," which argue strongly against such a negative conclusion. But even they are transcended by the ultimate irony of "Blougram": The Bishop, who has rambled on for some 970 lines, is essentially the same when he concludes his oration as he was when he began--he never understands or even sees his own weaknesses; Gigadibs manages to come to his moment of truth without ever speaking a word.

While speaking of *The Ring and the Book*, William E. Harrold defines the role of diction in much of Browning's poetry, but we can easily apply the same standards to the bishop and his journalist:

> Except for the Poet, who as clown-deceiver and maker of language controls all varieties of speech, the characters who are purest use simplicity of diction, much emotive terminology, less self conscious style, and imagery that is spiritual because of its deep roots in human consciousness (such as light-darkness). Those characters who are grosser and impure are most likely to use newly coined images, abstract, scientific phrasing, labored metaphor, strained and cold allusions, classical oratory, reason-based argument, heated bias, and tortuous weighing of facts in their relativistic framework. (154)

Certainly the poet uses Gigadibs to carry simplicity to its farthest extreme; Blougram unquestionably meets many of the criteria for those characters exhibiting less noble integrity. "*Che che*, my dear sir, as we say at Rome," he

quips (45). Certainly his whole argument is an attempt to "rhetorically" justify his actions, and he overplays and misuses the metaphor of the ship's cabin. His biases are profuse; he insults Gigadibs on the basis of rank in life: "I am much, you are nothing; you would be all," he tells the reporter (84). And he refers to the laity as "imbeciles" (374). His torturous arguments about faith and disbelief confuse most readers, and undoubtedly even himself. Their purpose is to cover his real fear:

> No: for concede me but the merest chance
> Doubt may be wrong--there's judgment, life to come!
> With just that chance, I dare not. Doubt proves right?
> This present life is all?--you offer me
> Its dozen noisy years, without a chance
> That wedding an archduchess, wearing lace,
> And getting called by divers new-coined names,
> Will drive off ugly thoughts and let me dine,
> Sleep, read and chat in quiet as I like!
> Therefore I will not. (476-484)

In an effort to cover all of his options, he can wholeheartedly commit himself to nothing.

And certainly the attorneys in *The Ring and the Book*, as well, with their almost totally egocentric perspectives, are prime examples of Harrold's observation. Despite Browning's obvious jests--jealousy and gluttony are the conspicuous preoccupations of the two legates--the reader's discomfort begins early in their arguments. Harvey Feinberg focuses on the source of that uneasiness:

> A close study of both the defense and prosecution lawyers, Archangelis and Bottinius, leaves the reader strangely edgy: though the word "truth" is used 317 times in *The Ring and the Book*, the word's

> simple meaning seems entirely absent in these two books.[3](78)

Archangelis, Guido's advocate, is distracted, at best, by the preparations for a party for his son. He betrays his self-indulgent nature early, and Feinberg points to Browning's special use of a character so given over to gluttony in every area of his life:

> Browning slyly chuckles at--and accuses--Archangelis: the word "animal life" triggers the procurator's own essentially animal nature, his blind bundle of appetites, and sets off another food revery. To underscore how far bombastic creatures like Archangelis are from Browning's perception of truth, the poet has the lawyer betray himself:....
>
> > Our stomach...I mean, our soul--is stirred within....(VIII. 1386)(80)

Browning's attitude seems stronger than Feinberg first indicates, however. He has made Archangelis a matter of outright ridicule, and food and greed dominate the lawyer's language.

Archangelis is cognizant of Guido's guilt from the start, but, as Lee Erickson notes, his purposes are other than winning his case:

> Archangeli[s], on the other hand, is shown conceding Guido's guilt in advance but persevering in embellishing his Latin with choice phrases and arguments about honor in hopes of drawing attention to himself and gaining a promotion. (231)

Crowell, more concerned with the Procurator's ambition than his appetite, notes how fully Browning loathes a character who is so blatantly insensitive to truth:

> Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, the Pauperum Procurator, is a special object of Browning's

> detestation. Truth, to this pompous jurist, is what will further his ambitions. He regards the case as merely a splendid opportunity to outfox the Fisc and to parade his superior mastery of Latin and the law. To him it would be better to lose the case than to pass up the opportunity to gird at the Fisc's bad Latin and so miss the laughter of the Court. (*Glass,* 215)

Crowell underestimates Archangelis' motivation, however; his concern goes beyond making Bottinius look the fool. His concern is with a secured future as a judge. Feinberg more correctly defines the derivation of Archangelis' maneuvers:

> And so Archangelis in his defense fixes a jealous eye on his rival Bottinius (who in VIII. 232 he fears will get the next judgeship), anticipating his rhetorical strokes like a chess master and responding within the narrow context of legal argumentation. Never is there a semblance of vital faith in his own words, faith springing from a conviction of truth. (81)

Instead, we find rhetoric pushed to its limits and almost total oblivion to any ethical standard. Feinberg (83) notes the startling similarity between the arguments of Archangelis and those of the guilty, and desperate, Franceschini:

Archangelis--

> The Gospel checks the Law which throws the stone,
> The Church tears the divorce-bill Gospel grants.
> Shall wives sin and enjoy impunity?
> What profits me the fulness of the days,
> The final dispensation, I demand,
> Unless Law, Gospel and the Church subjoin
> *'But who hath barred thee primitive revenge,*
> Which, like fire damped and damned up, burns more fierce?
> *Use thou thy natural privilege of man...*(VIII. 706-14)

Franceschini--

> No, I appeal to God,--what says Himself,

> *How lessons Nature when I look to learn?*
> Why, that *I am alive, am still a man*
> With brain and heart and tongue and right-hand too-
> Nay, even with friends, in such a cause as this,
> *To right me if I fail to take my right.*
> [Italics added](V. 1535-40)

Whether the similarity of argument is any indication of the level of Archangelis' own desperation, we have no way of knowing, but we can certainly be aware of the depths to which he has fallen as he echoes the offensive Count.

Archangelis may have merely exceeded the bounds of good taste in pursuing an intrinsic desire for promotion, but his arrogant greed is less forgivable as he feeds on the misfortune of the Comparini. Feinberg remarks:

> In the final irony, the procurator plans a surprise gift for his wife that evening:
>
> > The wife should get a necklace for her pains,
> > The very pearls that made Violante proud,
> > And Pietro pawned for half their value once,--
> > Redeemable by somebody...(VII. 1780-84)(81)

And if we condescend to his greed, then we must finally abandon any hope for true generosity in the lawyer when we realize that even this "gift" is laden with ulterior motives:

> Can I but coax the good fat little wife
> To Tell her fool of a father the mad prank
> His scapegrace nephew played this time last year
> At Carnival! He could not choose, I think,
> But modify that inconsiderate gift
> O' the cup and cover (somewhere in the will
> Under the pillow, someone seems to guess)
> --Correct that clause in favor of a boy
> The trifle ought to grace, with name engraved,
> Would look so well, produced in future years
> To pledge a memory, when poor papa
> Latin and law are long since laid at rest--

(VIII. 1768-79)

The person most impressed with Archangelis' crafty behavior is, of course, Archangelis. Harrold's observation captures the substance of this character's existence: "Pride in ability to impress through cleverness is capped by the irony of his line: 'Pray God I keep me humble'" (93).

No matter how distasteful we find Archangelis, he is no worse than his opponent. Norton B. Crowell seems to miss the significance of Bottinius' nature when he states:

> Dr. Bottinius's desire to find "Truth rare and real, not transcripts, fact and false" conveys no contempt for truth, but rather a desire to seize the essence of the truth through intuitive appreciation. He yearns for "truth," but it is whatever will impress the court with his acumen and so win his case [*sic*]. (*Glass,* 197)

Later, Crowell seems to contradict himself when, in an echo of his evaluation of Archangelis, he says:

> To this unprincipled lawyer, truth means only fame and profit. He represents one of the lowest views of truth in all of Browning. (*Glass,* 223)

Bottinius would like to give the impression that he truly "yearns for truth." We agree that Browning, indeed, conveys no contempt for truth, but his Roman lawyer not only holds truth in contempt, he has lost any conception of what truth really is in the irony of his character. He is ethically responsible for truth, makes verbal commitment to it, and then ignores it in favor of his own interests. Gordon W. Thompson points out:

> It is consistent with Browning's practice of making his greatest fools and villains speak the greatest

> truths ... that the most significant speech on Art in *The Ring and the Book* is delivered by the lawyer, Bottini. In the midst of all his blather about oratory, he refers to artists, utters some inanities about them, and then, surprisingly, says that true artists do not merely reproduce the "thing required," ....The rest of Book IX clearly shows that Bottini has no conception of the significance of what he has just said, but in many ways he has outlined the heart of Browning's theory of Art--a higher perception enables the artist to see to "the main central truth" of a subject, a truth not perceived in the model by the ordinary man, but visible in the work of Art....When one has a higher perception he is, in effect, an artist, and this vision, not one's talents, distinguishes the artist from the ordinary mortal. (83)

Browning's approach is also a way of demonstrating that, at least on some level, the speaker is aware of truth and rejects it. Many of his speakers, unfortunately, have become so accustomed to their own double tongues that even they no longer listen to themselves.

Neither lawyer seems particularly concerned with either the fate or reputation of his client. Harrold not only places both, quite correctly, on the side of Guido, but feels that they are extensions of something far larger than mere personal greed:

> Their bias is the most exaggerated of all the pro-Guido characters, since they make no real attempt to be fair... They represent an institution strained to the breaking point with corrupt practices, distortion of language, faulty communication, twisting of rational processes, and absence of real concern for humanity. Neither seems to have been in personal contact with his client. The essence of the attorneys' personalities seems to grow on stalks of pride and they are willing to use the intellect in any way conceivable to defend their honor. In their cases, too, intellect is divorced from emotion

> to the point that it is fitting they become caricatures of wholesome personalities. (139)

Not only is their intellect divorced from emotion, it seems utterly divorced from any relationship to fact, as well. Referring to the painter and the figures he sets out to portray, which Bottinius has earlier described, John Woolford notes:

> [H]e sorts, refines, defines, selects and fuses them into a single composite image.... Which seems fair enough until, reading on, we discover that by this argument Bottinius has licensed himself to manufacture a totally fictional version of Pompilia's character....[and] equips her with a wholly imaginary pre-marital sex-life and describes her behavior, in marriage, in terms perfectly compatible with sexual infidelity. (183)

Not satisfied with this gargantuan defamation of character, he elaborates. Feinberg equates the lurid description with the narrater himself:

> Pompilia's alleged promiscuity becomes permissible because it is undiscriminating ("first come was first serve," Bottinius tells us, and the lawyer's crude and lascivious character peeks out from all the flower-and-spice metaphorical rhetoric for a moment)....Bottinius is not content with this moral jawbreaker. Now he somersaults the other way as well....Now Pompilia is "laudable" precisely because her promiscuity is selective, relishing the "man of mark," Caponsacchi. Clearly for Bottinius honor is nonexistent, even the fraudulent honor of Franceschini and Archangelis....All three [Franceschini, Archangelis and Bottinius] are alter egos of the same mentality: unbridled, godless appetite. (84, 85, 86)

Honor may be nonexistent for others, but Bottinius is more than willing to claim it for himself, warped and twisted "honor" as it is. But honor is not all that he

wants. He has interests which transcend Pompilia's innocence. Crowell summarizes:

> Bottinius condemns the monk's sermon root and branch and especially reprehends his attack on the law as proving that he cares not a fig for truth. In one of Browning's most successful passages of sustained irony the lawyer proves the monk's charge while attempting to disprove it. He recounts how the Monastery of the Convertites, where the court consigned Pompilia after her capture at Castelnuovo, is now seeking to claim her estate, under the law granting a monastery rights to the property of sinners dying within its walls, and the court, while condemning Guido, neglected to pronounce Pompilia innocent. Bottinius has been retained to represent the claimants: (*Glass*, 223)

> It follows that Pompilia, unrelieved
> By formal sentence from imputed fault,
> Remains unfit to have and to dispose
> Of property which law provides shall lapse:
> Wherefore the Monastery claims its due:
> And whose, pray, whose the office, but the Fisc's?
> Who but I institute procedure next
> Against the person of dishonest life,
> Pompilia, whom last week I sainted so?
> (XII. 699-707)

And the reader has come, finally, to irrefutable evidence that Bottinius is more than subconsciously aware of his own duplicity.

Harrold teams him with a character we have seen earlier:

> Bottini shares with Tertium Quid the irony of pretense of justness. Tertium Quid favors the Count, and Bottini reveals himself as an insensitive artist who miscolors the white of Pompilia's purity and stains her innocence, even after purporting to paint it by his acceptance of her defense. (140)

The two lawyers, impelled by their own self-interests and position to total insensitivity to others, are pictures of much of what Browning saw in the institutional Church.

Harrold extends this thought, accurately, to nineteenth century society in general:

> In *The Ring and the Book* the institution, which symbolized the powerful machinery of society, was a gross embodiment of the objective consciousness which the poet saw leading to depersonalization, lack of sincere passion, and a corruption of communication that could be described as a form of sound and fury. The spiritual problem that resulted in the nineteenth century from the clash of science and religion left the major poets searching for a serious solution. It was even more serious because of a dearth of pertinent myths, a cultural phenomenon which bridges this schism with that between science and the arts. What Browning most successfully attained was an objectivity without abstraction, for it was not so much the objective, external aspects of life that he felt were damaging but the way man comprehends them and responds to them. Thus both the morality of experience and the poetry of experience alike are characterized by a balance of the subjective and the objective, but the objectivity must be one that is felt, not abstracted. (190)

If "Bishop Blougram" has received extravagant, albeit conflicting, attention at the hands of the critics, "Holy Cross Day" has suffered more from neglect. Any attempt to reconstruct Browning's canon through a review of the indexes for the past twenty years might totally miss this historically based work, and earlier criticism is primarily located in handbook material. Any mention at all in more general articles seems more aimed at proving the writer's awareness of its existence than an attempt at analysis. Barbara Melchiori, who stands nearly alone in dealing with the poem in any depth, offers, as part of the reason for the

poem's lack of popularity that it "lacks the perfection" of some of his other work:

> It is, rather, an experimental poem: an experiment in irony, an experiment into that investigation of the plurality, or apparent plurality, of truth which was to lead Browning on to *The Ring and the Book*. It is above all an extraordinary texture of ambiguities, which, even when exploited for their value as irony, are fundamentally the expression of an awareness of underlying plurality. (90)

Predated by the exquisite ironies of "My Last Duchess," "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," and published in the same volume with "An Epistle...of Karshish, the Arab Physician," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," and "Cleon," to name a few, one finds it difficult to conceive that Browning would publish an experiment apparently gone so awry. Perhaps he felt that the poem had no problems and that his readers simply did not follow him correctly. Melchiori notes, "It would seem, however, that he never allowed this thought to worry him unduly" (108). "Holy Cross Day" may have been an attempt to see how far he could push an ironic theme, a possibility we will discuss later.

Whatever its shortcomings, however, the poem clearly illustrates some of the major problems that Browning saw in ecclesiastical authority: Not only does the Church use intimidation in the guise of evangelism, but it morally exceeds the bounds of its own jurisdiction, even if, as in this case, it is *the* Catholic Church in Rome. Not

necessarily an invective against the Roman church, "Holy Cross Day" is a portrait of authority which fails to correctly understand its mandate and then compounds its failure by not realizing just how offensive it has become in the process.

Browning's carefully constructed prose preface to the poem is a masterpiece of irony. To the uninitiated the actions of the Bishop seem completely justified, but the entire entry is misinterpretation. Melchiori notes:

> But Browning knew his Bible well, and the irony of these quotations lies in the contexts from which they are uprooted. One and all, these Biblical references are taken from passages (in the New as well as in the Old Testament) which teach the supremacy of the Jewish race, and its final triumph. (92)

The institution which glibly quotes Scripture out of context to suit its own purposes is not likely to be more sensitive to human nature. The entire Inquisition operated on the premise that people could be forced into faith and often ignored those concepts which would have made that faith attractive to others, i.e. humility and love. Accepting "conversions" at surface appearance, the authorities are sanctimoniously unaware of the strong undercurrent of rancor present in the Jews whom they drove to the church. Convinced of their own superiority, they never notice the insult of "settle your thumbs.[4]" They apparently are also unaware of the strengthening effect

which persecution often has on the current beliefs of those who are being afflicted.

Not only is the Church callous to its victims, it displays no personal interest in those who supposedly become part of their persuasion. One individual, who has been shaved four times as evidence of his "conversion," has escaped recognition by the authorities for so long that even his companions are becoming nervous:

> Lo, Micah,--the selfsame beard on chin
> He was four times already converted in!
> Here's a knife, clip quick--it's a sign of grace--
> Or he ruins us all with his hanging face.
> (39-42)

Micah's "hanging face" was certainly the evidence of his regrown, dark beard, not as Melchiori suggests, dark evidence that they were "being struck with terror at the approach of God's judgments" (102). The conversions here were faked; if the Jews had any real sense of impending doom based on what they were being told, their conversions would have been genuine. We cannot forget the air of sarcastic flippancy that dominated their conversation on the way to the service. The only terror they might have experienced was that of sitting through yet another heretical sermon.

If the faked conversions were lies, a Jewish compromise with truth, it was not a compromise entirely without Biblical precedent. Although Daniel's companions were willing to risk death rather than compromise their faith (Daniel 3), Jewish midwives lied to the Egyptian king about

the birth of male Jewish children and received God's blessing (Exodus 1:16,17), and Naaman asked the prophet Elisha for permission to bow in the house of Rimmon when his master worshipped there (II Kings 5).

Even apart from personal conviction, they can hardly be blamed for their reluctance to follow the belief system of those whose lives were so offensive. Melchiori feels that Browning was, perhaps, unnecessarily severe with the Roman clergy:

> Browning, who in "Fra Lippo Lippi" could show so much sympathy with the Friar's amorous escapades (though never with the Church that enjoined celibacy in its priests) is here decidedly hard on the Bishop. Even worse things are glanced at. "What, a boy at his side, with the bloom of a lass" suggests that the Bishop, too, may have had his eccentricities and reminds us of the "the bloom and fleeting folly of Don Applecheeks", the apotheosis of all such "boys" in *Cardinal Pirelli;* while the lines "which gutted my purse" recall the Bishop who ordered his tomb in St Praxed's and who was also a thief. (103)

If Browning, through the Jews, is hard on this Bishop, it is because he feels such criticism is justified--indeed, it is one of the points which he wishes to make here. Fra Lippo Lippi's circumstances are entirely different: He is not using young boys, and has no pretensions for leadership or inclinations to parade his "religion" before others. Phipps discusses the blatancy of this kind of morality as it occurs in *The Ring and the Book*:

> The articulate spectators, Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome, as well as Caponsacchi, discuss in detail the current toleration of clerical immorality. In Caponsacchi's case, the authorities seem more

> disturbed by his change of garb than by the charges of adultery. ("Caponsacchi," 716)

Browning is equally hard on St. Praxed's Bishop. Not only does he accuse the man of thievery, he places a supposedly celibate priest in the company of several of his sons. Although Bishop Blougram, discussed earlier, does not seem to include young boys in his excesses, and he offers nothing that even hints at thievery, we must keep in mind that he, too, is given to the kind of luxuriant living that easily leads those of his ilk into such disasters.

But we have no license to make unjustified assumptions. Of the lines, "Whose life laughs through and spits at their creed! / Who maintain Thee in word, and defy Thee in deed" (101-2), Ms. Melchiori says:

> Some of the Nonconformist preaching against the Scarlet Woman that Browning must have heard as a boy has crept into the Rabbi's invective here. (109)

We have just heard of the Bishop's eccentricities with young boys, of personal greed which sent the clergy to moneylenders, and of excessive opulence in the Church. The lines really give no license for the addition of a "Scarlet woman." Unfortunately, Ms. Melchiori gives no examples of what she might be referring to in particular. Earlier, she reports of the line, "Men I helped to their sins help me to their God" as a reflection of:

> Browning the Protestant who is writing, for while the first meaning of help is simply "assist", there is the underlying sense of "serve at table", bringing us back with a deliberately ironic effect to the doctrine of transubstantiation and the idea

> of partaking of the body of Christ in the Mass. (104)

This view also goes too far, and it ignores the context of the line, which offers evidence that the speaker has merely financed his tormenter's misbehavior:

> It got to a pitch, when the hand indeed
> Which gutted my purse would throttle my creed:
> And it overflows when, to even the odd,
> Men I helped to their sins help me to their God.
> (57-60)

Again, Browning never praised or condemned men in generalized groups. Each man stood or fell as an individual, as he sought and apprehended truth. Melchiori seems to think that Browning changed his attitude toward the Jews as a group midway through the poem. She notes first:

> The two scenes of the Jews hurrying to church and the rats crowding after the Pied Piper were clearly linked in Browning's mind, showing a vital lack of sympathy and suggesting again that his only aim at this stage was to write a piece of colourful description. The rats, swine, wasps, frogs, worms, and fleas, all used as figures for overcrowding in stanza iii, are equally unsympathetic. (100)

But these are terms the speaker is applying to his own group--to analogize the way they are being treated by their tormenters. The words have nothing at all to do with Browning's view of them. Of stanza ix, she notes:

> From this point onward the Jews are no longer seen as dirty, vulgar, and cheating, but as God's chosen race, suffering persecution, but sustained by the promise of a final vindication and triumph. (103)

Browning never viewed Jews as "dirty, vulgar, and cheating." And he was not given to such whimsical turnings as are

described here. One needs to appreciate the cynical humor the Jews maintained toward their own trying situation and the insight they had into the lives of those who were attempting to force their conversions. They were making fun of themselves and their situation, and while they were well aware of their own shortcomings, they did not paint themselves as "dirty, vulgar, and cheating." Some of the "doomed black dozen" (31) were those who had been caught stealing, but the entire group is not pictured as corrupt. If anyone here is repugnant, it is the Bishop who masquerades in front of an audience to whom he was supposed to minister.

This does not say that Browning had no desire for the conversion of the Jews as a people, but Jews were not the only ones he desired to see converted, as Melchiori implies (111), and his idea of "conversion" was quite different from common definition, certainly other than that held by the organized church. Browning's desire was that all men live by the light they are given, and has little to do with which chapel or church they attended or failed to attend. We need look no further than *Men and Women* for evidence that his desire was for universal conversion of this kind: Karshish was a Muslim Arab, Gigadibs was an agnostic, and presumably an Englishman, Saul and David were Hebrews, and Cleon was a poet and Greek. If we look ahead to *Dramatis Personae*, we find that he fully accepted Rabbi Ben Ezra's faith as well

as that of the German Catholic Abt Vogler. Later, the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* presents a creed which has more often than not been compared with Browning's own.

Melchiori apparently fails to understand Browning's intended meaning when she reports on his February 1888 letter to Furnival[5]:

> [I]n Holy Cross Cay, Ben Ezra is not supposed to acknowledge Christ as the Messiah because he resorts to the obvious argument "even on your own showing and accepting for the moment the authority of your accepted Lawgiver, you are condemned by His precepts--let alone ours." (105)

In the light of his assertion, Browning is simply using the argument of Romans 1 and 2, in which Paul tells the Jews to whom those chapters are directed that they, as well as all men, will be judged by the same standards--the light which they have been given. Melchiori's response is puzzling:

> I <u>feel</u> very certain that Browning here is defending his own words and not those of the Rabbi, especially as he used the phrase "Ben Ezra *is not supposed* to acknowledge", and that the inconsistency that Furnival seems to have noticed in the poem is therefore a real one [underline added]. (105-6)

Despite Ms. Melchiori's feelings, Browning is the one who has invented Ben Ezra's poem, as she herself has attempted to prove. Browning's defense is, therefore, a defense of what he means the Rabbi to say. And he means the Rabbi to say, "Even *if* I accepted your premise..."

Whether the Rabbi's poem originates with the Rabbi or with Browning, we have an expression of what Browning felt the Rabbi might say. J. Hillis Miller notes:

> Browning's inability to speak directly in his own voice, the neutrality and pliability of his spirit, link him to a certain aspect of the romantic tradition...Browning carries just about as far as it can go the Keatsian notion of the chameleon poet who, having no nature of his own, is able to enter into the nature of things around him. (106)

As in *The Ring and the Book,* Browning took an historical event, in this case the annual sermon, and a historical figure, here Rabbi Ben Ezra, and molded them to his own purpose. Furnival's letter, of course, is lost to us, which is perhaps even more reason that we dare not allow him to become the ultimate critic. Again, if Browning's readers should misunderstand, it is Browning, himself, who will be least disturbed.

In the prose preface to the poem, the Bishop's secretary uses Christian texts out of context and so disproves the very actions he seeks to justify. The multiple irony of the poem is that Ben Ezra also uses Christian, or New Testament, texts to demonstrate how corrupt those who should be following Christ have become. If Browning uses "Protestant" arguments, it could be weakness on his part, but it might also be an attempt to show that the Jew is more alert to Christian sensitivities than Christians have been in presenting their "good news" to Israel.

"If" Christ were the Messiah, the Rabbi reasons, the activities of the Roman "Devil's crew" would most certainly be an embarrassment to Him.

But the Rabbi sees beyond the present day to the future unification of Israel and the Church, a concept which he supports from Jeremiah 3:17-19, a Hebrew Scripture,[6] but which is equally New Testament in concept. Romans 4:9-10 and 16-17 discuss forgiveness outside of Jewish law. Even more explicitly, Romans 11:26-27 reads in regards to the Jews:

> And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.

And Galatians 3:28-29 tells believers of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles:

> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

While the Hebrew and New Testament perspectives may be slightly different, certainly the end is the same. The failure of the poem is not, as Melchiori says, in the idea that

> Having raised so many questions, having seen so clearly the sophistries and ironies underlying established beliefs and traditional interpretations of the Scriptures...Browning lets the reader down wholly in the end. We are brought up sharp against this inconsistency: that the clear-sighted Browning could so deliberately close his eyes to and turn his back on his own conclusions, to fix his gaze on that incongruous procession of converted Jews which has no meaning as a culmination to the poem, and is perhaps one of the main reasons why "Holy-Cross Day" has been left aside so often as unsatisfactory. (112-113)

Melchiori does not state what conclusions she sees as Browning's own, nor does she explain what she refers to as "the questioning of fundamental doctrines" (112), but these are not the paramount cause of the poem's failure.

Browning's most successful monologues are those in which the speaker comes to realization of truth for himself, or at least speaks the truth and rejects it on one pretext or another. In "Holy Cross Day," the speaker comes to the right conclusions, but for the wrong congregation. Rome must ultimately understand Ben Ezra's poem before she can reach Ben Ezra's heart, and she has effectively guaranteed that she will never even hear it, much less understand.

Browning may have become tangled in his own ironies, thus robbing the poem of some of its meaning, but his essential message remains. Whether we are talking about a defensive Bishop in England, two self-centered lawyers in Rome, or a corrupt Roman clergy, the authority created by institutionalization quickly loses focus of purpose and adopts a dehumanizing attitude toward the very people it was established to serve. The apprehension of Truth for Browning, the apprehension of God, is an individual matter, and, as Miller aptly notes, "then there is no need for temples, priests, and the other trappings of organized religion" (156). If this seems a familiar "Protestant" position, it has parallel in Hebrew scriptures. Israel in the land and under the authority of priests and Levites

almost always degenerated to idolatry and/or legalism. The minor prophets stand out as individual exceptions to the general trend; Daniel, Amos, and Habakkuk are every bit as singular as Caponsacchi, Pompillia and Pope Innocent XII.

CHAPTER 4

MANIPULATION AND DECEIT: CHOOSING DARKNESS

HUMAN RIGHTS AND PERSONAL LOSS

"ANDREA DEL SARTO," GUIDO, AND THE DUKE OF FERRARA

While Browning may be generally critical of the insensitivities and corruptions of the institution, he never grants amnesty to the individual, situation notwithstanding. Regardless of environment, each individual bears total responsibility for personal deeds or reactions to circumstances. J. Hillis Miller extends this concept and summarizes:

> Browning believes that each man, except perhaps the poet himself, has a permanent node or center of existence, and that this unchanging selfhood persists though all the vicissitudes of his life. If this is the case, then every action of a man, however insignificant, will reveal all of him, if we can understand it...God is equally present in every part of the universe from the fretful midge up to the greatest star; in the same way a man's permanent selfhood is equally present in his least gesture and his most decisive acts. (125)

In some cases, like "Karshish," and "Cleon," those actions seem to involve transactions only between the speaker and God, but, overwhelmingly, most of Browning's characters are intimately absorbed in relationships with others: Andrea Del Sarto and Lucrezia, Guido and Pompilia,

and the Duke of Ferrara and his previous mate name only a few. These, some of Browning's most negative characters, in desperate efforts to convince both their audiences and themselves that they are morally justified in their treatment of others, not only prove their culpability but also demonstrate that their moral transgressions have cost them the very things they hoped to gain. In their moral failures they violate the basic rights of the persons for whom they are responsible, often to the point of death. Each is ultimately responsible for his own dilemma, but none accepts responsibility for his actions.

Evil, according to Browning, has its purpose. He writes of *The Ring and The Book* in a letter to Julia Wedgwood, dated November 19, 1868:

> I was struck with the enormous wickedness and weakness of the main composition of the piece, and with the incidental evolution of good thereby,--good to the priest, to the poor girl, to the old Pope, who judges anon, and, I would fain hope, to he who reads and applies my reasoning to his own experience which is not likely to fail him. The curious depth below depth of depravity here--in this chance lump taken as a sample of the soil--might well have warned another from spreading it out,--but I thought that, since I could do it, and even liked to do it, my affair it was rather than another's. (143)

But while he understands that evil may have some positive effects, he never condones or excuses it. He demonstrates clearly that in addition to any good it may cause, it seriously limits those who commit it and abuses those who are its victims. Interestingly, Browning does not insist on

the "incidental evolution of good" in the case of either Del Sarto or Ferrara.

Andrea Del Sarto has not only stolen money from King Francis I, he has neglected his own parents to the point of death and pandered his art to meet Lucrezia's demands. If he ever possessed moral freedom, it has disappeared along with his creative abilities, and he no longer has the moral stamina even to attempt to moderate his wife's behavior, thus both were "lost." He tentatively blames Lucrezia

> should you let me sit
> Here by the window with your hand in mine...
> I might get up to-morrow (13, 14, 18)

then God

> How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;
> So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!
> I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie (50-52)

before he finally decides that he is living in penance for his actions. Stephan C. Brennan notes of Andrea's attitude:

> Of course the rejection of free-will is an easy rationale, for the omnipotent deity is seen as the agent responsible for all acts. This philosophy informs our reading of this entire section, which is Andrea's attempt to blame his failure as an artist on forces outside himself....His statement has a built in fallacy, for the "let it lie!" is itself an assertion of his own will. (38)

We cannot know when Andrea's weaknesses first began to manifest themselves, but we can be reasonably assured that Guido's avoidance of responsibility is a life-long habit. Rather than assuming his position as eldest son and managing the family estate, he took refuge in the church. When he

failed there, he tried to marry for money, another misspent effort. If the church failed Pompilia, it also failed Guido--but in his case, rightly so. When he tried to take refuge in the Church and in his rank to avoid assuming responsibility for his marriage and his crimes, the church denied his petition--first by not allowing his divorce:

> Your plan for the divorce is all mistake.
> It would hold, now, had you, taking thought to wed
> Rachel of the blue eye and golden hair,
> Found swart-skinned Leah cumber couch next day:
> But Rachel, blue-eyed golden haired aright,
> Proving to be only Laban's child, not Lot's,
> Remains yours all the same for ever more.
> (V.1309-15)

Nor did it, according to him, punish Pompilia "sufficiently." If it had, he would not have had cause to take the action that he took, and he considered the wrongs against him multiple. His position as husband, his rank, his association with the church should all have entitled him to more. Margaret Doane notes that Guido feels "that his rank should allow him to act as he pleases" (56) and narrates some of his grievances:

> The Count sees Pompilia only as an object to be manipulated; he is incensed that he has been "defrauded of all bargained for" (XI. 1213) by a pair of fools and their nullity daughter. (XI. 1192, 1113) (58)

And, of course, Guido feels that his apprehension as murderer is not his fault, either. Doane comments on Guido's view of the role of fate:

> Pompilia would not have been able to reveal her murderer if the Count had killed her outright; even though he purposefully stabbed her in the most

> painful locations, she lived long enough to name him and turned his "plausibility to nothingness" (XI. 1689). He does not find himself cruel, but rather the victim of a cruel destiny. The Count compares his palms--bloodied by murder--to the bloodied palms of the crucified Christ and appeals to the Pope for a "little indulgence to rank, privilege." (XI. 1778) (60)

Guido's motivations are obvious: He is the totally egocentric man. In the light of Guido's consistent whining, Richard D. McGhee's remarks about the count's ability to make a commitment seem somewhat puzzling:

> Guido is, by his own confession at any rate, no hollow man. He has within him the capacity for making a commitment to something, but it must be something with certainty. Doubt has made him choose life in the body as more certain than life in the spirit. (96)

We have, of course, no way of knowing McGhee's definition of a "hollow man," but Guido appears to make no commitment to anyone or anything outside of himself. His certainties include titles, not people; money, not human kindness and decency; deception, not honesty; and Law, not personal integrity. If "doubt has made him choose life in the body," it may be because one of the certainties he does have is that life in the spirit will be more miserable than the life he has lived in the flesh. Filled with himself, he seeks only his own personal good, no matter what the cost to others. And, of course, he can do no better than attribute to others the same motivations he finds in himself.

The Duke of Ferrara shifts blame, of course, to his "Last Duchess." His pride is so immense that he seems, at

first reading, not even to understand that he has committed a crime. It prevents his "stooping" and also his understanding of humanity and of his own evil nature. Professing an inability to speak on some subjects, he proceeds to babble his crime in a prideful burst of rhetoric and does not even perform the "execution" himself. Unlike Guido, he is apparently in no danger of punishment from either the state or the church--his rank has protected him as he has expected it to. He does have some interests at stake, however, and uses almost his entire monologue to shift the blame and justify his own actions. Clyde de L. Ryals notes how the duke uses rhetorical finesse to present his suit:

> There is no compulsion upon the duke to reveal--to, of all people, the envoy from a prospective duchess--how he came to do away with his previous duchess. Yet at a moment when he is swept up into song he tells all and, furthermore, attempts to justify it. (38)

If the lady had been wanton or mean-spirited, or even merely ugly, the murder may have had some rational basis, but, as Ryals goes on to note:

> We the readers see, just as undoubtedly the envoy sees, that there can be no justification for the murder (if that is what it is) of a kind young lady whose only apparent error was that she was not sufficiently haughty to be (in the duke's mind) Duchess of Ferrara; yet at the same time we perceive--as presumably does the envoy, for he makes no demur--that the duke is a fascinating character, bigger than life and disdainful of the merely ordinary. (38)

The point in each of these three monologues transcends whether or not the speaker knows what is morally correct. For each speaker, the point is personal psychological control--manipulation of the "audience." For each speaker, moral failure is a choice. John P. McGowan notes that the point where this becomes evident is often early, the first point of contact with the speaker (100).

Andrea Del Sarto has lost control of his art, his wife, and ultimately, the course of his entire life. Stephan C. Brennan not only understands this, but he sees that Andrea's whole purpose in speaking is to establish some sort of reason and significance in his situation:

> Both Langbaum and Shaw view Andrea's intention throughout to be the transfer of blame to Lucrezia, a reading which necessitates, especially for Shaw, seeing in the poem a subtle and extensive system of conscious irony on Andrea's part. But Andrea's purpose is really more general--to find any workable and tolerable view of his situation. (35)

Paul A. Cundiff notes that "Andrea is one of the least deceived husbands in all literature" (32). And as we look at the poem, we find that he is deceived about little else, as well. His "admissions" are numerous. He knows that Lucrezia does not belong to him; she is, as Altick has put it, "public property" (23), "My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,/ Which everybody looks on and calls his" (29-30). Of the less-than-perfect art of his contemporaries, he admits, "There burns a truer light of God in them" (79). And, he sees of his own art: "All is

silver-grey/ Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!" (99-100). Of Raphael's picture he says, "its soul is right" (113), clearly understanding by implication that his own work lacks that essential element. He wishes that Lucrezia could have "given me soul" (118). Cundiff sees this as an admission on Andrea's part:

> In spite of a long-established pattern of critical thought, Andrea refers to himself, not Lucrezia, as the one in need of a "soul," and clearly the word "soul" implies a personal deficiency in aspiration and pride, not a total lack of either. (28)

He understands that Lucrezia's shortcomings have been, in large measure, his own fault as he tells her, "Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think--/ More than I merit, yes, by many times (120-121). Essentially, because of his moral weakness he has limited her ability to make correct moral choices. He cannot lay the blame to her for his lack of accomplishment. He knows that without "will" he has lost the moral battle; he is merely half a man:

> Beside, incentives come from the soul's self;
> The rest avail not. Why do I need you?
> What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo?
> In this world, who can do a thing, will not;
> And who would do it, cannot, I perceive:
> Yet the will's somewhat--somewhat, too, the power--
> And thus we half-men struggle. (134-140)

Roma King, Jr. notes the admission, but feels that Lucrezia has degraded her husband:

> His strange, almost abnormal devotion to a woman who has so degraded him cannot have been other than devastating to his art. Yet, he realizes clearly that she is not wholly the cause of his failure. (15)

His failure is caused by the sum of his choices. If she has degraded him, it is because he has allowed it. Morality is personal, and Brennan realizes that the problem is the painter's own inability to exercise moral judgment. He comments on the necessity of understanding this section of the poem as a personal moral struggle:

> In these early reveries, Andrea is clearly trying to assert that he has the ability to do great work but not the moral force to resist Lucrezia. This reading is essential in order to understand the conclusion of the poem. (42)

Andrea knows that he panders his art, uses it to

> ...let smiles buy me! have you more to spend?
> While hand and eye and something of a heart
> Are left me, work's my ware, and what's it worth?
> I'll pay my fancy. (223-226)

He freely admits that he stole from Francis and that he would not change what he did:

> I regret little, I would change still less.
> Since there my past life lies, why alter it?
> The very wrong to Francis!--it is true
> I took his coin, was tempted and complied,
> And built this house and sinned, and all is said.
> (245-249)

And, while he only obliquely allows his guilt for the death of his parents ("Some good son/ Paint my two hundred pictures--let him try!)(255-256), the very fact that he needs to defend himself at all against the charge at this time indicates that the guilt is very real and refutes Cundiff's assertion that,

> To use his comments about his parents to show that Andrea was an unnatural son or to tie them in with Andrea's pampering of Lucrezia as evidence he cheapened his art in any way is to ignore, it seems

> to me, the integrity of the paintings which Browning saw and the contemporary praise of Andrea which Browning's source material provided him. On taking a wife, Andrea, like most men in his social class, had been required to discontinue or forego financial support of his parents; and, though entitled to a higher station in life because of his recognized superior talents, he had accepted the imposition of a much lower station without regard for professional approbation. (28)

This view grants an unwarranted dismissal of Del Sarto's moral responsibility and leaves the lines without purpose in the poem. Clearly, had Lucrezia been "pampered" less, Andrea would have been in a more favorable position to tend to his filial duties. Morality is not a case of law or tradition, as we have seen in the case of Guido and as demonstrated by Caponsacchi in *The Ring and the Book*, but of responsibility towards dependent others.

Del Sarto finishes his monologue with the most damning evidence of all. After allocating one of the four walls surrounding the New Jerusalem for himself to paint in company with "Leonard, Rafael, [and] Agnolo," he sees that,

> So--still they overcome
> Because there's still Lucrezia,--AS I CHOOSE.
> (Emphasis added)(265-266)

Everything that has ever been denied him and will ever be denied him is because of his moral character--his choice of Lucrezia and all of the implications of that choice, the theft from Francis, the death of his parents--and he knows that he would repeat the behavior if given the opportunity. He has committed, in Browning's world, the unforgivable sin.

Mario L. D'Avanzo ties this work in with Browning's essay on Shelley, and notes that:

> If it is the subjective (or visionary) poet that Browning reveres in Shelley, according to Browning's biographers, then Andrea's tragedy involves a willful failure to pursue his inner vision, which we assume he carried "on the retina of his own eyes" briefly at Fontainebleau. (525)

Joshua Adler sees Andrea Del Sarto as a deplorable character, but remarks, "Andrea's one redeeming feature, absent in the Duke [of Ferrara], is that at least he knows--and even seems partly to deplore--that he is living in a moral twilight" (225). But the fact remains, he has deliberately chosen that twilight and will do nothing to change it. George Steiner, in *Real Presences*, says,

> The archaic torso in Rilke's famous poem says to us: "change your life". So do any poem, novel, play, painting, musical composition worth meeting. The voice of intelligible form, of the needs of direct address from which such form springs, asks: 'What do you feel, what do you think of the possibilities of life, of the alternative shapes of being which are implicit in your experience of me, in our encounter?' The indiscretion of serious art and literature and music is total. It queries the last privacies of our existence. (142)

Andrea Del Sarto's "flawless" art could not be complete because he could not it allow to query the privacies of the relationships of his life. He was not weak because he yielded to Lucrezia; he yielded to Lucrezia because he was weak. He makes that admission once:

> Too live the life grew, golden and not grey,
> And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt

> Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.
> How could it end in any other way?
> (168-171)

Guido, too, needs to find control, but he is less interested in deceiving himself than he is in avoiding the guillotine. His most immediate concern is his jailers, but it becomes very clear that he actively hates the good, and is meant as a foil for the poem's virtuous characters like Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope, and as such, notes James F. Loucks,

> It is central to Browning's purpose that we see Guido as utterly depraved, and that such depravity has this moral utility: that it can generate its opposite in lives like Caponsacchi's. But for such a man as Guido there is no possibility of grace. ("Guido," 40-41)

Julia Wedgwood hoped for more indulgence toward the villain, but Browning refused to yield to her wishes. He wrote:

> *Who* commits the wickednesses that undeniably *are*? Last, I hold you are wrong even in your praise--that is, wrong in thinking that whatever you count white in Pompilia and Innocent could have come out as clearly without the black? (Curle, 176)

Guido never even attempts to deny that he committed the murders. Rather, he attempts, through two monologues, to "justify" his actions on the basis of law and social privilege. J. Hillis Miller comments on the implications of Guido's attitude:

> For Browning, as for Arnold, there is nothing "intermediate" between man and God, no "series" leading from one to the other and guaranteeing the truth of man's speech and law. Guido claims that

> every act of his, even the murder of Pompilia and her foster-parents, is justified by law, and therefore good. Here he is damnably wrong, and betrays his failure to know intuitively the truth which guides Pompilia and Caponsacchi, and is expressed "obliquely" by the poem. (153)

Browning intended Guido's opportunities for "knowledge" to be evident. In an undated letter to Julia Wedgwood, written approximately February 22, 1869, he says:

> Why, I almost have you at an unfair disadvantage, in the fact that the whole story is *true*! How do *you* account for the "mere brutal hacking Pompilia to pieces" in a nobleman *thirty years long the intimate of Cardinals*: is this the case of a drunken operative that kicks his wife to death because she has no money for more gin? But I won't begin and tell my own story over yet another time,--I am too glad to get done with it. We differ apparently in our conception of what gross wickedness can be effected by *cultivated minds*,--I believe, the grossest--all the more, by way of reaction from the enforced habit of self denial which is the condition of men's receiving culture. Guido tried the *over-refined way* for four years, and in his rage at its unsuccess let the *natural man* break out. (italics added)(Curle 175)

Guido, in effect, had tried acting other than what he essentially was--and quite unsuccessfully. Because he failed to understand the fundamental components of the role, he could not play the part. He finally reverted to his own basic character. Not that he didn't have the opportunity to perform better, but that the will to such performance was not in him. Norton B. Crowell notes of Guido's failure:

> The Pope finds Guido guilty because he was tested fairly and he elected failure; he did not even seek success. He was granted
>
> > A solid intellect: the wit to seek,
> > Wisdom to choose, and courage wherewithal
> > To deal in whatsoever circumstance

> Should minister to man, make life succeed.
> Oh, and much drawback! what were earth without?
> (X. 403-407)(*Glass*, 216)

Later, Crowell notes that "Guido's... fault lies simply in his refusal in good faith to find the truth, to make the moral choice (*Glass*, 217). M. Whitcomb Hess goes beyond that, however, asserting:

> His tremendous egoism has wrought in him such self-deceit that it is literally true to say he knows not what he does. But what is more he is not concerned about knowing. He gropes in a growing tangle and twilight of his own motives and he refuses the only thread that can lead him out of the maze. And thus his refusal of truth is also the negation of his freedom. (252)

The Duke of Ferrara, however, is the apparent master of control in Browning's poetry. William E. Harrold observes:

> There are no stanzaic divisions to interrupt the smooth forward movement. His speech seems more like a planned lecture which he delivers when he takes the envoy on tour. He is sure of what he is to say, and thus can speak without interruptions. (49)

Speaking in couplets, he adds even more to the appearance of mastery. His need, of course, is control of the envoy so that he may find a new duchess. The very fact that he must manipulate suggests that he is in trouble. Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, arguing that the duke is impotent suggest:

> Viewed from a psychological perspective, the Duke is a man so preoccupied with power that he fails to recognize he is, in fact, powerless. (17)

Ferrara's knowledge is important here. At first reading, the duke's monologue seems so arrogant, so filled

with self that it seems as if he hasn't a suspicion that he might be wrong. McGowan's observation is helpful here:

> The Duke's great care about what he says suggest [*sic*] that there exists something behind speech that he is determined not to reveal. And the assumption is usually that the hidden is hidden for a reason....The Duke's monologue creates a world, like the lie, in which everything is ordered completely in relation to the sensibility and desires of the speaker. (101)

In spite of the duke's "great care," he does reveal, as we have pointed out earlier, "I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together" (45-46). He reveals another piece of intelligence, also:

> Even had you skill
> In speech--(which I have not)--to make your will
> Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
> Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
> Or there exceed the mark"--and if she let
> Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
> Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
> --E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
> Never to stoop. (35-43)

Despite his protest that he lacks skill in speech, he obviously feels that he speaks quite well and then admits a ruthlessness almost more shocking than the fact of the murder itself: The duke never even told his "last duchess" how she had offended him because he chose not to lower himself! She may not even have known that she offended at all; she may have died without warning.

Ferrara's pride in his "art" is significant in his psychology. Sanford Pinsker notes that "As the Duke would have it, works of Art are 'wonder(s),' especially when they

serve to increase the distance between an aristocratic 'collector' and the Great Unwashed" (71). But distance is only part of the problem. The duke needs more than that, he needs control. John P. McGowan notes that the theme recurs often in Browning:

> Turning people into things to negate the threat their humanity poses is a recurrent strategy of control for several Browning characters....The logic of dehumanization is, ultimately, the logic of murder. The other who cannot be manipulated must be murdered or else that other will destroy the world the speaker has constructed. (101-2)

For Browning, the speaker's relationship to art is often important. Harrold's observation that "The Count's weakness as artist and appreciator of art indicates his lack of moral strength" (163) can be extended to others we have mentioned earlier, as well: The two halves of Rome, Tertium Quid, the lawyers, and certainly Andrea Del Sarto.

Harrold notes the similarities between Pompilia in *The Ring and the Book* and the duke's last duchess, and then he goes on to describe a connection between Fra Pandolf, painter of the duchess, and Andrea Del Sarto:

> In a sense Fra Pandolf painted a saint and portrayed the relationship between body and soul. The painter's real interest was in capturing the essence of the Duchess's good qualities. He was the type of artist that Andrea del Sarto admired in Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo because they all could paint "soul." (46)

And thus we discover that the two women shared another similarity--their husbands could not tolerate soul.

Life is a series of choices, and every choice has a consequence. Some, unquestionably, are less significant than others--whether to wear blue or green--, but some make an eternal difference. Most choices are dependent upon previous choices (I cannot choose to wear green if I have not previously chosen to purchase something in that color). When the choice for evil, for darkness, has been made, it too is dependent upon previous choices, and may well determine subsequent actions. The consequence of darkness is often more darkness. Finally, a choice will be made which will determine an irreversible course. Miller notes this principle in the formation of self:

> Only after a crucial decision, action, or experience does a man surround himself irrevocably with a tight net of circumstances. Then he becomes himself once and for all. Until now the man has been, in a sense, free, free as the shapeless sea. Henceforward he is fixed, trammeled in the results of his choice and act. Liquidity has been poured into a mold:
>
> How the world is made for each of us!
> How all we perceive and know in it
> Tends to some moment's product thus,
> When a soul declares itself--to wit,
> By its fruit, the thing it does!
> ("By the Fireside" 241-245)(126)

A few lines beyond this Browning writes, completing Miller's thought: "I am named and known by that moment's feat;/ There took my station and degree" ((251-252).

If a course of darkness comes at a moment in time, so does a course of light--salvation. Loucks feels that

salvation, according to Browning, is something quite different from this:

> Browning's view of salvation, enunciated in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and elsewhere, is that salvation is not an event but the outcome of a lifetime's testing of the soul's mettle. ("Guido," 37)

Elsewhere? To the contrary, it seems that "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is the clear exception. Cleon, filled with his own pride has never been tested until he hears of Paulus. Karshish doesn't wonder until he comes face to face with Lazarus. Abt Vogler's meeting with the divine comes in a moment of extemporizing. Saul never really hears the David who, in a moment of pure rapture, comes to Messianic vision.

In an earlier chapter we have argued that the monologue is often merely a record of a decision already made; it now becomes the record of the fixing of a man's destiny. This is the importance of the turning away of Karshish and Cleon, and this is the importance of the decisions of Andrea, Guido and Ferrara. They may no longer change direction--their souls have irrevocably declared themselves.

Andrea Del Sarto feels that he is doing penance for his sins through his indulgence of Lucrezia. Brennan notes:

> Lucrezia's promiscuity has become part of a penance that he must bear in order to balance the scales of a just God, while his artistic mediocrity, caused by his inability to escape the confines of his prison of love, has become an operation of his free will....He sees himself as a whole man with a unity of power and will and feels that his crimes are perfectly balanced by his penance. (48-49)

In claiming to be a whole man, he rejects his earlier confession. He discards any trace of objectivity.

Andrea has lost much. Because of his thievery he has suffered a loss of his honor--in fact could not leave home without embarrassment:

> I dared not, do you know, leave home all day,
> For fear of chancing on the Paris lords.
> The best is when they pass and look aside;
> But they speak sometimes; I must bear it all.
> (145-148)

And he has lost his art ("I am judged./ There burns a truer light of God in them)(79-80). He has painted "to order" so that he might meet Lucrezia's demands:

> I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,
> Treat his own subject after his own way,
> And shut the money into this small hand
> When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?
> (5-9)

Steiner categorizes Del Sarto's work:

> Only trash, only *kitsch* and artifacts, texts, music which are produced *solely* for monetary or propagandistic ends do, indeed, transcend (transgress) morality. Theirs is the pornography of insignificance. (145)

Altick, too, recognizes the moral implications of Andrea's compromise when he says, "Candid about his art as about his place in Lucrezia's life, he recognizes that he is deliberately prostituting the unique talents he does possess" (29). While Steiner somewhat overstates his case, we must note an interesting parallel between the two comments: Both discern the moral quality inherent in "art for money."

Again referring to the essay on Shelley, D'Avanzo notes that "Browning makes clear that great moral purpose and sympathetic instinct produce great art":

> Certainly, in the face of any conspicuous achievement of genius, philosophy, no less than sympathetic instinct, warrants our belief in a great moral purpose having mainly inspired even where it does not visibly look out of the same. Greatness in a work suggests an adequate instrumentality. (532)

But more than Andrea's art has been pandered. Pandering has become the tenor of his whole life. King notes:

> Here everything is reduced to a mart where the lover makes debts which Andrea must pay, where Lucrezia barters her love, and where Andrea pays for her smiles with second-rate paintings. The climaxing line, "I'll pay my fancy," suggests the ironic state of Andrea's existence: the delight which he finds in his relationship with Lucrezia is capricious, not real, and even for that he pays dearly. (27)

Finally, he realizes that he has also lost Lucrezia. McGowan points out:

> Andrea has painted his wife countless times, but still cannot make her be what he wants her to be. Looking at her, he wishes he could turn her into a work of art....But the poem reveals how...she keeps stepping out of the frame within which he would enclose her. (102)

But his loss goes even beyond that. He may be beginning to feel trapped by his marriage to this promiscuous beauty. The monologue begins with a plea to "not...quarrel any more." Andrea does not give in to Lucrezia's demand, whatever it has been. Several times in the poem he refers to walls:

> There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top;
> That length of convent-wall across the way

Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside;
(41-43)

Morello's gone, the watch-lights show the wall,
The cue-owls speak the name we call them by.
Come from the window, love--come in, at last,
Inside the melancholy little house
We built to be so gay with. God is just.
King Francis may forgive me: oft at nights
When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
The walls become illumined, brick from brick
Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold,
That gold of his I did cement them with!
(209-218)

In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance--
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
Meted on each side by the angel's reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me
To cover--the three first without a wife,
While I have mine! So--still they overcome
Because there's still Lucrezia,--as I choose.
(260-266)

Additionally, his reference to "fetters" immediately precedes one of his laments on Lucrezia's insensitivity to his art:

I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!
This chamber for example--turn your head--
All that's behind us! You don't understand
Nor care to understand about my art,
But you can hear at least when people speak:
(52-56)

And just before he pleads with Lucrezia to put her friend off until "tomorrow," he fantasizes:

Only let me sit
The grey remainder of the evening out,
Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly
How I could paint, were I but back in France,
One picture, just one more--the Virgin's face,
Not yours this time! I want you at my side
To hear them--that is, Michel Agnolo--
Judge all I do and tell you of its worth.
(226-233)

But, he knows that he can't return to France, and perhaps he realizes, too, that Lucrezia is no longer a fitting model for the Virgin; she has strayed too far.

Finally, and of course very closely related to his relationship with Lucrezia, he may have surrendered his potency, his very life force. Altick speaks of Andrea's "moral inadequacy which is manifested both in his weakness as a man and in his failure as an artist" (18), and later of "a flicker of sexual passion not wholly spent" (19). Andrea speaks of "we half-men," and A. L. Semans suggests: "The creative fountains have dried up in him" (752).

Content to sit by the window holding hands and dreaming of Lucrezia curling up "inside" his "bared breast," he gives no hint of sexual passion. King, too, notes: "Actually, he is surprisingly passive and physiologically undemanding... The half-hour over, he states complacently: 'You love me quite enough, it seems to-night'"(16).

King also notes that "Andrea habitually speaks professionally, detachedly of the human body. It is as model that he refers most often to Lucrezia" (17), and "Andrea himself suffers from emotional sterility, reflected both by his 'faultless' paintings (contrasted with the 'soulful' works of his contemporaries) and by his relations with Lucrezia"(18).

Mario L. D'Avanzo notes that Andrea is an "anatomically precise painter ignoring the spiritual dimensions of his

art" (524). Perhaps he has been forced, also, to ignore the spiritual dimensions of his relationship with his wife. His "hour" with her seems to yield much less than she yields to her lover ("Ah, but what does he,/ The Cousin! what does he to please you more?")(242-243).

Separated from everything on earth that he longs for, he may be coming to the realization that he has lost still more. Miller suggests:

> What has happened to the desire of created things to embody God in time and space, to express the infinite in the finite? In building a private world around themselves man and beast have gradually cut themselves off from God, until, in the end, they cannot even remember that there is anything but their own petty circle lotted out of infinite space. Within that narrow sphere they revolve endlessly, like animals in a cage, and ultimately their lives may stagnate for want of fresh air, as Andrea del Sarto suffocates in the circle of his own perfection. They may become fatally at ease, not in Zion, but in their own "nest-like little chamber" ["Ferishtah's Fancies," C 939]. God seems to have condemned man to exclusion from God. (139)

The consequences of Guido's crimes were more immediate, if not more obvious. Certainly, the loss of those he killed. And while the Comparini were not of the most sterling character themselves, the loss of any life is a tragedy. They may have been conniving, but they were certainly capable of affection, which they proved in the earlier treatment of Pompilia. Warm though weak, they could have proved interesting as in-laws, at the least.

The greatest tragedy, at least for Guido personally, was the loss of Pompilia, who could have been his redemption

both practically and morally. Her warmth and life could have breathed soul into a household which had evidently long struggled to find any meaning in life beyond simple survival. Her innate spirituality could have taught this family, reared nearly in the vestibule of the church, the meaning of relationship with God.

Guido lost the honor he was supposedly trying to save. His pride seemed to know no bounds, and like the Duke of Ferrara, lineage, title, and money were very nearly all to him: "My name I sell," he boasts (V, 505). And, when all was said and done, the money was more important than anything else. In the spectacle which he created, he destroyed the family name, made mockery of his title, and did nothing to improve the family fortunes. Richard D. McGhee notes: "While making the point that he 'was poor who should be rich,' Guido reveals himself as the monster on exhibit, 'a show to crawlers vile'" (l. 174) (91).

And, he lost his own life in a public execution, along with those who assisted him in his crimes. He nearly lost it to those who "abetted" him because his greed persuaded him not to pay them for their assistance. Had he not been arrested when he was, he never would have had the opportunity to tell "his side" of the story. That may, in the long run, have been far less dishonoring to his name.

All of these things, however, are more or less obvious. The question of Guido's ultimate harm is the one that we must consider here.

The 1970's generated so much critical writing in response to Robert Langbaum's "Is Guido Saved? The Meaning of Browning's Conclusion to *The Ring and the Book*," that Guido's eternal fate appeared to be nearly an obsession, and a matter to be decided by a jury composed of the academic community.[1] But we find the belief systems of so many individuals are circulated in the dispute that one of the main difficulties is to discover from what Guido may or may not have been saved.

By his own admission, Langbaum argues against Browning's intent in the poem: "The most conspicuous piece of external evidence--the exchange of letters...with Julia Wedgwood--tells against my argument that Guido is saved" ("Guido," 292). And while he makes a valiant attempt to "diminish its force," we must hold Browning's design in mind. Whether he wrote the letter to Julia "in pique" or not, no evidence suggests that he failed to tell her the truth.

Regarding Browning's "Secondary Source" and his letter to Furnivall, Langbaum grasps at negligible evidence. Browning quotes "fact," the "Secondary Source" itself, and not the poem:

> The fact is that the two ecclesiastics passed the night preceding his execution with Guido: and knowing as he did the innocence of his wife, what so likely as that, in his last utterance of despair,

> her name, with an appeal to it, should suggest itself? ("Guido," 294)

Far less clear than his statement to Julia Wedgwood, this allusion offers no decisive resolution--as many of Browning's allusions do not.

Whether or not he uses the "Secondary Source" in Book XII grants no license for the assumption that he uses it in this particular segment, especially since many of the speakers of Book XII are unreliable. Altick & Loucks particularly note the account of Guido's execution:

> To the very last, Guido affects the saintliness he never possessed, and does it so convincingly as to impress the case-hardened letter writer who describes his execution:
>
> > He begged forgiveness on the part of God,
> > And fair construction of his act from men,
> > Whose suffrage he entreated for his soul,
> > . . . . . .
> > ...--then rose up, as brisk
> > Knelt down again, bent head, adapted neck,
> > And, with the name of Jesus on his lips,
> > Received the fatal blow. (XII. 174-89)
>
> In his extremity he still was determined upon playing a sanctified role, in this case that of St. Stephen, who was stoned as he called upon God and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). The performance won the sympathy of the crowd. "So died the man," writes the witness, "and so his end was peace." (XII. 205) The epitaph is from Psalms 37:37: "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace." It is fitting that Guido should be commemorated by words of Scripture which are, once more, misapplied. (225)

What Langbaum and several other of the critics seemingly ignore is that Browning wrote about people apprehending or rejecting the truth in its own context--i.e., the context of

each individual's situation. Ben Ezra and David understand truth as Hebrews; Abt Vogler understands as an artist; Karshish and Cleon long for truth, touch it, and reject it, each in the framework of his own time and culture. Browning, however much a Protestant, and whatever his personal beliefs about heaven and hell, is writing about Guido, a Catholic living in seventeenth century Rome, and as such, would have applied the seventeenth century Catholic consequences that Guido and the others in the poem would have expected for the unrepentant, all of Pompilia's hopes for his salvation aside. That consequence cannot be merely, as Langbaum forcing his own relativist view insists, that Guido must be saved from a hell that "is really purgatory, where God remakes the soul. But assignation to even so mild a hell 'must not be'"(297). Earlier, he argues:

> For me, one of the strongest arguments in favor of redemption is that Guido's second monologue is superfluous if its only function is to elaborate what is sufficiently established without it--that Guido is utterly evil...Guido's second monologue, I would add, resembles Browning's great dramatic monologues elsewhere in that the self-understanding is inadvertent. ("Guido," 290-91)

Far from being superfluous, Guido's second monologue demonstrates that, given a second chance, he would prove no better than he was in the first, even though he was convinced of the certainty of death and damnation. Vivienne J. Rundle labels the speech as Guido's "extra chance to seduce the reader" (105). Clarence Tracy remarks: "The

truth for Browning is always one and his truth-tellers do not need to repeat themselves" ("Mind," 14). Whether the self-understanding is inadvertent or not (and Browning gives us few monologues where self-knowledge is the speaker's conscious goal), he does not comprehend it when it comes. His "fundamental sincerity" in the second monologue (Langbaum, "Guido," 291 n) is exactly the point--he believes he is right! Like Ferrara, he knows what he has done but feels justified in having done it. Unlike Ferrara, he recognizes the good that he has destroyed and at least admits that it was good. Given the opportunity, Guido would repeat his crime, as might Ferrara, but for a different reason--he still hates.

Guido's opinion, "Twelve hours hence, I may know more, not hate worse" (258) Langbaum interprets:

> After my death, says Guido, I shall not hate worse than I do now. In other words, I am in hell right now; after death I shall be--and this is important for Browning's scheme of salvation--the same person I am now. ("Guido," 298)

The line may just as reasonably be interpreted, without stretching meaning, to infer that Guido hates now just as much as he will ever be capable of hating. "But," Langbaum asserts, "the Pope, as Guido claims to see it, is thrusting him into hell. The Pope, who ought to be a shepherd, thrusts this 'shuddering sheep, he calls a wolf, / Back and back, down and down to where hell gapes!'" (405-06)("Guido," 298). "Shuddering sheep" is a term that Guido, an

unreliable speaker, applies to himself. The shepherd's job is to recognize and kill the wolves--no matter what their masquerade, and the wolf in sheep's clothing is scarcely liable to purposefully identify himself correctly. As things stand, Guido maintains the wolf imagery far too clearly for the reader to be fooled, and refers to his "sheepskin-garb," betraying his own disguise. If "[t]he Pope is a thief who hates wolves as competitors in plundering the sheep" as Langbaum says, then Browning puts a bad light on the Pope, whom he clearly favors.

Guido's program is more basic than almost any other Browning character: Just before his execution, he cries:

> Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,
> Is--save me notwithstanding! *Life is all!*
> I was just stark mad,--let the madman live
> Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!
> Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours,
> I am the Granduke's--no, I am the Pope's!
> Abate,--Cardinal,--Christ--Maria,--God,...
> Pompilia will you let them murder me?
> (italics added) (XI. 2412-19)

Guido himself gives us the basis on which we are to judge his arguments--everything he has said to this point has been a lie! The only truth for him is that he does not want to lose his life. Langbaum notes that the count calls out "in psychologically ascending order," and feels that this is "the sign that he has arrived at true moral insight" ("Guido," 290). After prostituting himself to every last person he can think of who might have power to save him from his fate, we have no reason to believe that his appeal to

Pompilia is anything more than what can be, for him, the ultimate harlotry.

While Langbaum maintains, "If it matters that Guido had time for confession, then the confession must have been efficacious" ("Guido," 293), he fails to note that "time for confession" and actual confession are not the same thing. Guido gives no indication that he is repentant or even remotely sorry for what he has done, except as it involves the forfeiture of his own life. Loucks terms the count's attitude as "defiant exposure of his own depravity and lack of contrition" ("Guido," 47).

For Guido to find salvation in Miltonic terms in "Evil be thou my good" because he "shows himself to be fundamentally Christian just because he portrays himself as voicing the devil's philosophy" (299) is to imply that Satan in *Paradise Lost* will ultimately be saved. Belief is not equivalent to salvation, and Browning was most certainly aware of the James 2:19 passage which tells us, "the devils also believe, and tremble."

Boyd Litzinger claims that Guido's monologues prove that Browning's belief system opposed eternal punishment:

> The inescapable conclusion is that Browning's eschatology, unlike Dante's and Milton's, does not include a hell. Despite frequent references to hell, devils, saints, and evil warring against good, there is no place of eternal punishment. (72)

Litzinger bases his conclusion, however, on weak evidence--that of one poem. First, he sees *The Ring and the Book* as

culmination of a trend apparent in *Pippa Passes* and "Apparent Failure," which he subsequently excuses because of the circumstances of the poems. Secondly, he sees Guido's second monologue as a movement toward illumination. He notes of Guido's confession, "Also the folly for which I slew her! (XI. 176):

> For the first time Guido admits--it is an admission from which he will retreat and to which he will return in the end--that he killed Pompilia because of her virtues. (297)

Admitting a motive for murder, even if that admission includes the recognition of the other's virtue, does not admit repentance, nor does it remove the rationalizations necessary to make the deed seem a defense of honor. Instead, Guido blames God for his situation and arrogantly reaffirms his justification:

> I am one huge and sheer mistake,--whose fault?
> Not mine at least, who did not make myself!
> Someone declares my wife excused me so!
> Perhaps she knew what argument to use.
> Grind your teeth, Cardinal: Abate, writhe!
> What else am I to cry out in my rage
> Unable to repent one particle
> O' the past? (XI. 932-43)

Langbaum argues that "Guido sees that since God made him, there must be a place in God's scheme even for him ("Guido," 303):

> I who, with outlet for escape to heaven,
> Would tarry if such flight allowed my foe
> To raise his head, relieved of that firm foot
> Had pinned me to the fiery pavement else!
> So am I made, "who did not make myself."
> (How dared she rob my own lip of the word?)
> Beware me in what other world may be!--
> Pompilia, who have brought me to this pass!

> All I know here, will I say there, and go
> Beyond the saying with the deed. Some use
> There cannot but be for a mood like mine,
> Implacable, persistent in revenge.
> (XI. 2089-2100)

Having a place in God's scheme does not mean heaven. Milton's Satan has a place in God's scheme, but he is excluded from eternal bliss. Litzinger, too, claims that God's use for evil in this world insures Guido's salvation (73). He says, however,

> But if I imagine that heaven correctly, it will be strictly zoned and segregated. With the timid lovers of "The Statue and the Bust," Guido will be somewhat isolated; he will not share the company of God's chivalry who "Burn upward each to his point of bliss." He will certainly not hobnob there with Pompilia and her rescuer, most assuredly not with Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning.... [This world's villains and failures] will never be damned even though, like Guido, they never repented. (74-75)

Of the approximately twenty-seven references to hell in Browning's work, as listed in Molineux, thirteen are found in *The Ring and the Book*.[2] Some of those latter references are made by unreliable speakers, i.e., Half-Rome, Other Half Rome, and Tertium Quid, who alone mentions it six times. Guido, who is normally regarded as an unreliable speaker, can be trusted here. He is forecasting his personal expectations, albeit on a subconscious level, and clearly refers three times to his expectation of hell: once as Count Guido Franceschini and twice as Guido. In addition to actual mention of hell, the imagery of the Satan as serpent

is clearly evident, thus incorporating the concept of hell as damnation, especially in Guido's first monologue.

> Why, scarce your back was turned,
> There was the reptile, that feigned death at first,
> Renewing its detested spire and spire
> Around me rising to such heights of hate
> That, so far from mere purpose now to crush
> And coil itself on the remains of me,
> Body and mind, and there flesh fang content,
> Its aim is now to evoke life from death,
> Make me anew, satisfy in my son
> The hunger I may feed but never sate,
> Tormented on to perpetuity--
> My son, whom dead, I shall know, understand,
> Feel, hear, see, never more escape the sight
> *In heaven that's turned to hell, or hell returned*
> (So, rather, say) to this same earth again,--
> Moulded into the image and made one,
> Fashioned of soul as featured like in face,
> First taught to laugh and lisp and stand and go
> By that thief, poisoner and adulteress
> I call Pompilia, he calls...sacred name,
> Be unpronounced, be unpolluted here!
> (italics added)(V. 1946-1966)

While the images in his second monologue are less extended, they unquestionably indicate a belief in hell as a place, and that place as one of punishment.

> Those windle-straws that stare while purblind death
> Mows here, mows there, makes hay of juicy me,
> And misses just the bunch of withered weed
> Would brighten hell and streak its smoke with flame!
> (XI. 147-150)

> Oh, Cardinal, the deep long sigh you heave
> When the load's off you, ringing as it runs
> All the way down the serpent-stair to hell!
> (XI. 1606-08)

Margaret Doane marks a later passage in Guido's speech as indicative of "Guido's hope that he is saved, that he has touched God's shadow and will be healed" (62):

> I have gone inside my soul
> And shut the door behind me: 't is your torch (The

> Makes the place dark: the darkness let alone Cardinal
> Grows tolerable twilight. (XI. 2291-4) and
> Abate's)

This passage is so reminiscent of Belial's speech in Book II of *Paradise Lost* as to demand direct comparison.

> "This horror will grow mild, this darkness light,
> Besides what hope the never-ending flight
> Of future days may bring, what chance, what change
> Worth waiting, since our present lot appears
> For happy though but ill, for ill not worst,
> If we procure not to ourselves more woe."
> (II, 220-25)

Both Guido and Belial are trying to make the best of what they see as inescapable torment, each hoping, at last, to become accustomed to his tenebrous environment, to make the adjustment which makes darkness seem more light.

More significantly, the Pope, normally considered closest to Browning's own voice and reliable, indicates that hell exists as a place of punishment. He elaborates on the absolutely horrendous nature of the crime and the deserved end of all those who participated in the murders.

> The courtier tries his hand on clownship here,
> Speaks a word, names a crime, appoints a price,--
> Just breathes on what, suffused with all himself,
> *Is red-hot henceforth past distinction now*
> *I' the common glow of hell*. And thus they break
> And blaze on us at Rome, Christ's birthnight eve!
> O angels that sang erst "On the earth, peace!
> To man, good will!"--such peace finds earth today!
> After the seventeen hundred years, so man
> Wills good to man, so Guido makes complete
> His murder! what is it I said?--cuts loose
> Three lives that hitherto he suffered cling,
> Simply because each served to nail secure,
> By a corner of the money-bag, his soul,--
> Therefore, lives sacred till the babe's first breath
> O'erweights them in the balance,--off they fly!
> (italics added)(X. 779-794)

Again, while this does not *prove* that Browning himself believed or disbelieved in a literal hell, it does indicate that the hell which exists in this poem, and at least for the evil Guido, was real and inescapable.

In a note comparing Guido to Shakespeare's Iago, Litzinger adds: "Perhaps the only real difference between the two scoundrels is that Guido snivels" (75). And perhaps that, too, is the only real difference between Guido and Ferrara.

We have earlier noted that Pompilia and the duchess seemed to have much in common. With her charismatic personality, her appreciation of beauty and her gracious manner, the duchess would have graced any estate. The duke, however, was so taken with his own importance that he could not realize that she was exactly what he needed to elevate his "nine-hundred-years-old name." In addition to the loss of the joy which she could have brought into his house--the lady was a exceptional!--he lost the opportunity to enhance the very thing he said he was trying to protect.

The loss of reputation suffered by the duke becomes more evident when we realize that he was now negotiating for a mere "countess" because he had imprudently soiled his "name." That the duke is aware of his blunder, at least on some level, is pointed out by Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet:

> The monologue itself is in effect an airing of dirty laundry, an action not appropriate to his position. We remember Ferrara claims he chooses "never to stoop," but he is willing to marry below his

> position, and ultimately he raises the emissary to equal rank ("Nay, we'll go/ Together down, sir"). (18)

But regardless of the duke's cognizance, he undergoes no change and is perfectly capable of repeating his behavior; in fact, repetition is likely given the duke's unwillingness to "stoop." Already he refers to the prospective bride as "my object" (53). McGowan notes the nature of the portrait:

> The portrait of the last Duchess functions both as an example and a warning: an example insofar as the new wife should be like the portrait (a dead thing) in offering no resistance to the Duke's whims and a warning insofar as the new wife will be, like her predecessor, reduced to a portrait if she does not act like one. (102)

Browning gives us no indication of Ferrara's ultimate fate, but we can be fairly confident that the duke will remain his arrogant self while on earth. Certainly he has experienced no change which would warrant him the salvation afforded other Browning monologuists.

Salvation in Browning, then, is evidently the willingness to apprehend truth, to change. Miller notes a passage from "A Death in the Desert":

> For "progress" is "man's distinctive mark alone,
> Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,
> Man partly is and wholly hopes to be." (C391) (140)

He goes on to say:

> The evil in Blougram, Sludge, or Guido [or Del Sarto or Ferrara] derives in part from the fact that they are so intensely themselves, and are willing to be no more than themselves. Accepting their limitations, they become examples of grotesque and funguslike excrescence, deviation, idiosyncrasy. Affirming themselves as unique persons, they

> simultaneously affirm themselves as outside the truth. (146)

Not only do Browning's characters accept their limitations, they choose to live within them. They choose darkness, which hangs over their speech like a cloud. Del Sarto's "grey" world is all that he can bear, and Guido's,

> I have gone inside my soul
> And shut the door behind me: 't is your torch
> Makes the place dark: the darkness let alone
> Grows tolerable twilight. (XI. 2291-4)

Ferrara hides his last duchess behind a curtain so that her "spot of joy" and her "blush" will not be evident. He admires Neptune, whose kingdom is dark. Their choice of darkness, of untruth, can only insure their bondage.

CHAPTER 5

KNOWING: APPREHENDING THE LIGHT - THE ETHICS OF VIRTUE

"SAUL," "KARSHISH," "POMPILIA," AND "THE POPE"

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

(Matthew 5:8)

Browning's catalog of decadent characters is populated with an amazing display of ecclesiastic and highborn aristocracy. Bishops, dukes, and counts "excuse" their way through crimes for which commoners are put to death. Physicians, philosophers, artists, and the "religious" often are unable or unwilling to understand what seems unmistakable to simple musicians. And a king is crucified by his own melancholy while an unassertive shepherd boy walks on the wings of rapture from his vision of the coming Messiah.

The poet does not, however, hesitate to isolate from this elite group those individuals who refuse to be caught up in the system. The Pope is as fully sensitive to spiritual truth as any of Browning's characters, and Giuseppe Caponsacchi breaks out of the carnal mold into

which he has been placed by both the Church and his own nature.

But some of Browning's most interesting personalities begin with little potential. David, although anointed by Samuel as King of Israel, is more practically a youngest son, a keeper of sheep and almost pathetically ignored by his family except as an errand boy. Pompilia has every excuse imaginable to become an urban, female Caliban, and yet she climbs to spiritual insight that might well be envied by those who are significantly more advantaged. Even Lazarus, whose priorities have been totally reordered by the sight of heaven, only waits,

> patient to the last
> For that same death which must restore his being
> To equilibrium, body loosening soul
> Divorced even now by premature full growth.
> (205-208)

The characters we will discuss have several things in common: With the exception of Lazarus, each overcomes what seems to be more than adequate cause to dismiss the sometimes fleeting insights of "faith;" each combines faith with reason; each realizes the limitations of the flesh and the vacuity of convention; and each has a set of values centered around love.

Often, in Browning, a person's "advantages" seem to become the greatest barriers to success. Had Andrea Del Sarto not taken so much pride in his technical perfection, he may have striven for and attained the spiritual qualities

in his painting, and in his life, that were so painfully lacking. Were Bishop Blougram less elevated in office, he may have been less bound to "justify" his extravagant lifestyle to both himself and a relatively insignificant reporter. A poorer and less powerful Duke of Ferrara may have been able to see beyond his rather tasteless choices of work by unknown artists into the souls of others in his life, sparing his unfortunate duchess. May have, but not likely. More probably, their talent or power or wealth allowed them to express what they truly were. Guido, product of aristocracy, product of the Church, is one of Browning's biggest failures as a man. His pride in his "position" allowed his poverty to overwhelm him. Charles T. Phipps, S. J. notes of Guido's failure:

> Man can not plead obstacles as excuses for moral failure since the very obstacles are intended to call forth the redeeming effort. The Pope recalls how Providence had provided Guido with a salutary combination of advantages and obstacles, aspirations and frustrations, which made his life "trial fair and fit / for one else too unfairly fenced about." (X. 426-27)("Pope" 719)

David's position as shepherd is consistent with his position within his family. When Samuel came to anoint one of Jesse's sons, David was considered so unimportant that he was not even summoned for scrutiny until the prophet ran out of options among seven brothers and insisted that there must be more.

At this point in his life, the young man had done what was necessary to care for his sheep, "slew both the lion and the bear" (I Samuel 17:36), but he knew nothing of his coming victory over Goliath, nothing of the "ten thousands" (18:7) of Philistines that would be credited to his military prowess, nothing of the special relationship that would exist between him and the king's eldest son, Jonathan, and nothing of his marriage to Michal, Saul's daughter.

What he did know was that he had been anointed by the prophet and that could be dangerous. Even Samuel had been afraid: "If Saul hear it, he will kill me" (16:2), he said when ordered by God to perform the ritual. J. H. McClatchey overlooks one of the causes of the prophet's apprehension when he notes Samuel's absence:

> Yet Abner's presence is a Browning subtlety too easily overlooked, for it is Abner, not the prophet Samuel, who greets David. Surely it is Samuel who ought to be with the king in his mental and spiritual crisis? ("Saul" 71)

Mr. McClatchey goes on to cite biblical references to Abner's relationship to Saul, but he fails to note that by the time that David is called upon to soothe the king with music, Samuel has already pronounced the repercussions of Saul's disobedience: "Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king" (I Samuel 15:23). Shortly later, we are told, "And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death" (I Samuel 15:35).

At the very least, David had to contend with the jealousy of his brothers, who had each been passed over for anointing. Soon after the incident of the poem and just before the slaying of Goliath, when David came to the valley of Elah, his oldest brother accused,

> Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle." (17:28)

Surely, it is logical to assume that some of this feeling exhibited itself earlier, before David was first summoned by Saul.

Critical controversy has flourished over the success or failure of "Saul" as a poem, over Saul's regeneration or lack of it, and over whether Saul or David is the subject. Victor A. Neufeldt correctly identifies Browning's subject, but sees a conclusion that is neither plausible scripturally nor probable poetically.

> The poem, in fact, focuses on neither David or Saul as a character, but rather on David's insights and on the significance of these insights to Saul as a symbolic representative of mid-nineteenth-century man.... However, it is precisely on this point that the poetic conception is flawed by inconsistency, and the impact of the poem diminished as a result. How does one reconcile the regeneration of a passive and silent Saul with Browning's insistence upon active involvement and constant striving? Logically, the poem demands Saul's regeneration at the end, but aesthetically and emotionally one is left wondering. (51, 52)

All of Browning's characters, from Caliban to Ben Ezra, are given enough light by which to walk. Not all choose to

follow that light. To insist upon the regeneration of Saul on the basis of David's insight is to insist on the regeneration of Guido on the basis of Pompilia's purity or the Pope's perception. While each opened the way for regeneration to occur, it did not because the receivers refused the message. Saul's silence was as powerful a statement as Guido's hate, and his salvation would be inconsistent with the biblical version, with which Browning was unquestionably aware.

David's humble rank within his family and within the kingdom of Israel, the danger of his position as anointed king, and Saul's depression were reasons enough for him to refuse the assignment much less be open enough to receive the kind of revelation we see in "Saul." And yet we see Saul, the reigning king, chosen by God himself, unable to comprehend what an insignificant shepherd boy spells out explicitly.

Like "Saul," "An Epistle...Of Karshish, the Arab Physician" is about neither the speaker nor the object of his attention. "Karshish" is about the response of this letter writer to Lazarus, whose knowledge is experiential. Joseph Dupras notes that

> The possibility of further significance to Lazarus' behavior eludes Karshish because as a physician subservient to Abib he is content to prove only what he knows already. (10)

He is unwilling, in other words, to reach beyond his grasp, to investigate more than superficially what must surely change his life. He desires what Lazarus has, but he does not want to be what Lazarus is, nor does he want to make the kind of commitment that Lazarus has made. Until he resolves the tension between his curiosity about "God's handiwork" (2) and the limitations of his own intellectual prejudices, Karshish will remain unenlightened. In spite of his longing, expressed in the post script of his letter to Abib, nothing has prepared him to anticipate a God of love and all that such a God requires of his followers.

If anyone can claim a disadvantaged life as excuse for lack of spiritual sensitivity, Pompilia is the paradigm. Contrary to all models for successful upbringing in any age, this clearly disadvantaged child ("I am just seventeen years and five months old")(VII. 1) has established for herself a set of values to make even the good Pope Innocent stand in awe. M. Whitcomb Hess notes the circumstances of her spiritual development:

> She is beyond all conventional props of family, descent, education, or even age. Her birth, the result of "the careless crime of an unknown man...and a woman known too well," should have put an ineradicable blot on her soul; and her rearing by the lying, scheming Violante, her foster mother, should have completed the ruin, with marriage at thirteen to a middle aged roue only the final chapter. But none of these things have the least power to touch her purity. And like Caponsacchi, the reader is left reverent and wondering. (254)

Additionally, when she turns to the Church, she is cold-heartedly turned back to her husband; even Caponsacchi is tempted at first to reject her pleas for help. At risk are her reputation, her child, and ultimately her life. She loses the first almost immediately. Less than a year later she gives her deathbed testimony. Paul Zietlow remarks of her options for security:

> Pompilia can hope for asylum only in the home of parents who publicly denied their parentage. She finds temporary and ineffectual shelter there, but only after she has been released from incarceration among strangers in the Convertite monastery, a refuge for fallen women to which the court consigned her. (200)

At the very least, she could have been excused behavior like that of her birth mother, or she could have out-schemed Violante in an effort to compensate for her treatment. She does neither. Nor does she demonstrate the faintest suggestion of bitterness, but remains as loving as if she had the most privileged upbringing of any child in Italy.

The Pope, perhaps, has less reason than any to step out into such brittle territory. As head of the Church, neither his faith nor his decision would be questioned, and to free Guido would be the most popular culmination for both the case and for his own rule, which was drawing to a close by way of his age. He chooses otherwise:

> ...shall I too lack courage?--leave
> I, too, the post of me, like those I blame?
> Refuse, with kindred inconsistency,
> Grapple with danger whereby souls grow strong?
> I am near the end; but still not at the end;
> All to the very end is trial in life;

> At this stage is the trial of my soul
> Danger to face or danger to refuse?
> Shall I dare try the doubt now, or not dare?
> (X. 1298-1306)

He refuses to yield to the passivity that has gripped not only the Church, but seemingly all of Christianity. Charles Thomas Phipps, S. J., notes the ultimate danger of such ennui.

> He is stricken when he realizes how the Christian religion has been perverted by so many Christians into a deceptive security in which doubt has been fatally discarded and replaced by an illusive assurance. ("Pope" 719)

He knows that faith is not a "group process," but that each soul must deal with it on an individual basis, applying it to individual trials. All must accept their "hindrances," the "danger whereby souls grow strong," as part of the package of life and not view them as excuses to avoid moral responsibility.

The school of Browning criticism which maintained that his faith was based solely on intuition seems finally to be weakening and near death. Each of his spiritually sensitive characters uses faith along with reason to gain insight. When one facility or the other is flawed, we invariably find failure. Caliban's faulty reasoning and Guido's self-justification are each as large a problem as Cleon's lack of faith. William O. Raymond points out that the question goes much farther, however:

> Something much larger is involved. The primary warrant of their faith lies for them in its potency as a creative, spiritual power operative in the

> depths of their own personal experience and in the lives of the disciples of Christ throughout the ages. ("Pope" 329-330)

Were reason enough, Blougram would have flourished. Were emotion enough, Violante would have been a paragon of spiritual insight and her resolutions would have worked perfectly. Even Andrea Del Sarto could have been successful if he could have applied what he knew. Raymond partially explains the balance between revelation and "intuition" necessary to Browning's view of faith:

> What he does deny is that the historical character of the events of the life of Christ recorded in the New Testament can be demonstrated by reason, in the sense that the events in the life of Napoleon are matters of factual knowledge. But this is accompanied by an unswerving faith in the revelation of the Incarnation and "Christ's cross and passion" within the spiritual experience of humanity. (*Moment* 610)

Saul, of course, used neither faith nor reason. As noted earlier, he remains passive throughout the entire poem, emitting only a groan as David touched sensitive chords, not on his harp, but in Saul's spiritual consciousness: "As the Levites go up to the altar in glory enthroned" (60) Here, at the very point of his disobedience to God, is where Saul fails: Pride overcomes reason and the desire for freedom. He will not repent and, thus, he cannot be forgiven. He will not take the one action that will grant him release. Vineta Colby sees him as a depiction of a more modern phenomenon:

> Saul is a mid-nineteenth-century melancholiac, as we meet him in numbers of Victorians, critically ill

> but not insane, suffering all the more because of his consciousness of suffering, a tragedy of wasted potential rather than of total destruction. True, we do not see him restored. The ambiguity of his recovery is I think, deliberate, because Browning and his readers could everywhere witness the uncertainty of a permanent cure for melancholy. (95)

If Browning was "deliberate," it was in his choice of the biblical Saul as an example. The poet did not "create" Saul, but reflected the recurring despondency and paranoia caused by his self-willed departure from God. The exact form of his torment is not specified, as Elizabeth Barrett Barrett noted in her letter to Browning (McClatchey, "Saul" 63),[1] but his subsequent behavior reveals significant clues as to the nature of his problem: This is the same man who alternately plotted David's death and then repented to the extent of calling him "son."

David, by comparison, who at this time in his life was living in obedience, finds in his music the very truth that evades Saul. Colby observes:

> Why music should be superior to painting or poetry only Browning dared to explain. Free of perishable materials, free of discipline and the restraints of logic and form, improvised music comes as close to divine creative as man can aspire...Browning believed artists must lose themselves if they are to avoid these traps [self-consciousness, self-doubt, and self-pity], by merging individual self with universal spirit. (97)

And music works to relieve Saul, but not completely, and not permanently. S. S. Curry, early in the history of Browning criticism, notes:

> Art is necessary to the higher spiritual development of man. Caliban can never be lifted from his puddle

> and made to stand with shining face and throbbing heart before the great Saul, without the harp and song. Caliban's low conceptions of Deity can never be corrected without the awakening of his ideals and his imagination and his feelings. (50)

Harvey Feinberg notes that for Browning, "Art is aesthetics and ethics at once, beauty is finally spiritual, and in the words of the ancient Greek maxim, 'All beauty is goodness'" (96).

But David does not rely on "harp and song" alone. Indeed, he begins there, but the words to his song are a progression of the joys of life, the blessings of God, designed to bring the monarch out of his despair. He combines the facilities of his reason and the graces of his art. Ironically, as he approaches the moment of his revelation, David stops singing and begins to speak. Glenn Everett notes the balance in David's observations:

> Browning's David understands that he need but open his eyes, look around and within, and see "in the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod" (l. 250) evidences of God's perfection... at the very moment that he has realized the imperfection of things in this world, he has conceived the possibility of perfection somewhere. (275)

We have no Caliban here! And David's ability to "see" has given him further vision. He "realizes both his capacity for love and his very being to be mere shadows of their perfection in God" (Everett 275). His epiphany is blinding, even in its approaching brilliance, but Saul does not comprehend: "See the King--I would help him but cannot, the

wishes fall through," David sighs (296). But that knowledge does not slow him; it only makes him more acutely aware of the power of love and the ultimate meaning of the incarnation.

> 'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh, that I seek
> In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
> A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
> Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: A Hand like this hand
> Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand!
>
> (308-312)

One can scarcely avoid a comparison of this prophetic vision of David with the vision of Karshish.

> The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too--
> So, through the thunder comes a human voice
> Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
> Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
> Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,
> But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
> And thou must love me who have died for thee."
>
> (304-311)

For more than three hundred lines, the Arab physician has vainly attempted to reason through his encounter with the risen Lazarus, citing medical examples and weighing psychological "evidence," hoping to convince himself and Abib that this was only a curious meeting with a madman. One must wonder at how willing Karshish is to arrive at an unbiased version of the truth, however, when he seriously misquotes the story of Christ's crucifixion--a story that Lazarus undoubtedly knew well, and which he would have been

most careful to recite correctly. Richard Altick notes, in a comparison of Karshish and the apostle Paul,

> The whole significance of the Karshish-Paul similarities resides in the fact that, in crucial respects, Karshish was *not* like St. Paul. For one thing, Paul perceived truth not through the senses and the intellect, but through intuitive experience marked, we are told, by a lifelong series of ecstatic visions (Galatians 2:2, 2 Corinthians 12:1-9; Acts 16:9 ff.). His knowledge of the divinity of Christ and of all that implies was gained by means which Karshish, committed to the supremacy of the reason, was unable, or at least refused to avail himself of. In terms of Browning's constant exaltation of the lessons of the soul over those of the mind. where Paul was strong, Karshish was weak [*sic*]. (495)

While Altick's point is essentially valid as far as Karshish is concerned, he neglects to consider Paul's reasoned arguments in places like Antioch (Acts 13), Lycaonia (Acts 14), Philippi (Acts 16), and in Berea and Athens (Acts 17). Athens is particularly important, because there he "disputed" not only with the Jews and religious people, but with the "Epicureans, and...the Stoicks" (17:16-34), the intellectuals of his day. Paul's vision in Acts 16:9 indicated only a direction for him to go; what follows that passage is an account of his activities and cannot be considered "ecstatic vision."

Paul's original vision, in Acts 9, was of the risen Christ--a counterpart to Karshish's experience with the risen Lazarus--but he chose to believe rather than attributing his experience to sunspots or an "undigested bit of beef." Karshish's explanation of Lazarus is "madman."

Paul understands the ethereal to be real; Karshish sees the real and discounts it.

Of all Browning's characters, Pompilia is the most perfect example of the virtue of purity. Kay Austen says:

> Though God's strength and intelligence are evident in mankind, the Pope finds the love which He expressed in the Incarnation only in Pompilia's limitless love and sacrifice. Repeatedly invoking Pompilia as the personification of early Christian heroism and perfect faith, the Pope indicts the faithlessness of his time. (299)

From the beginning she showed a natural aversion to the evil that Guido represented, and her only anger is expressed when he confronts her and Caponsacchi at Castelnuovo:

> She started up, stood erect, face to face
> With the husband: back he fell, was buttressed there
> By the window all aflame with morning-red,
> He the black figure the opprobrious blur
> Against all peace and joy and light and life.
> "Away from between me and hell!" she cried.
> (VI. 1497-1504)

Pompilia lay dying, her parents were dead, and she would never hold her child again: Guido had humiliated and shamed her beyond any fragment of human decency. Few would have dared to suggest that she forgive him, especially with events so current, but then, no such suggestion was necessary. Intuitively, she knew, and she did not resist. Hess suggests:

> But Pompilia's forgiveness of Guido so far from condoning his sin only throws into sharper relief the length of this toilsome journey up to truth. For the ability to see God in the mud and scum of things and to find in waste and desecration itself a symptom of the divine belongs only to the pure in

> heart, or, that which is the same thing, the free in will. (254)

True virtue gave to Pompilia a freedom that many never know, the freedom to release both herself and others from the bondage of hate and resentment.

Harrold notes that she is drawn to Caponsacchi by intuition, actually creating within her monologue a spiritual marriage (144), and she "intuitively trusts the words of only certain people, like Tisbe, Fra Celestino, and God, representing the facts of childhood and spiritual knowledge" (145). He links her lack of education and her poverty with her freedom from "binding reason," but does not indicate why he thinks her choice of Caponsacchi violates reason:

> But Pompilia, poor and unlearned, also was free of custom and binding reason. In leaving her husband, she broke the bonds of convention. And in appealing to Caponsacchi for help, she exhibited a higher type of elective affinities than that demonstrated by many of Browning's characters, for she recognized in the priest a soulmate on a level of love higher than the physical. (151)

Surely, in the face of the treatment she had received from other Church authorities, seeking Caponsacchi's assistance was the only avenue remaining open to her, and thus the most reasonable action she could take once she had noted his attention and in light of Guido's actions to draw their attention to each other.

Her escape, even apart from her choice of Caponsacchi, was most certainly a reasoned action. While she was

responsible for no one but herself, she was ready to endure anything Guido was capable of delivering. Once she was responsible for her child, she knew her nightmare must end. She appeals:

> The way to end dreams is to break them, stand,
> Walk, go: then help me to stand, walk and go!"
> (VI.807-808)

In a curious admixture, she even reasons her position in faith, aware that she does not "know" all that is necessary to reconcile the present, at once limiting and expanding both reason and faith:

> Could we buy a wish
> Have what we will and get the future now,
> Would we wish ought done undone in the past?
> So, let him wait God's instant men call years;
> Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,
> Do out the duty! Through such souls alone
> God stooping shows sufficient of His light
> For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise.
> (VII. 1821-1828)

And, perhaps, knowing that we do not know is the greatest wisdom of them all.

As head of the Church, the Pope's considerations are, ethically, to be other than personal, all of the personal interest decisions of other popes aside. Innocent's major ethical preoccupation in the case, amid all of the private goals involved for the other principal characters, is "what is right in the eyes of God" (Erickson 238). More clearly than any other individual in the poem, he operates on a distinct balance between faith and reason.

Like Pompilia, he understands that the future is affected by the present, and that we are often powerless to see the links clearly. And like her, he believes that we must trust that outcome to God. Raymond condenses the argument and observes that Browning is acutely aware that such a change had not yet taken place:

> Pope Innocent XII is represented as hearing "whispers of time to come" when, as he declares, an age of doubt will "shake this torpor of assurance from our creed." As Christianity shattered the beliefs of paganism, so it may be needful to shatter faith in an infallible Christian record to avert the danger of substituting the historically conditioned, and therefore relative, conception of God's love enshrined there, for its absolute content....Browning takes pains to point out that Pope Innocent would have been repelled had he foreseen the ruthless iconoclasm that the age of reason was to let loose upon the world. (*Moment* 619)

> If he thought doubt would do the next age good,
> 'Tis pity he died unapprised what birth
> His reign may boast of, be remembered by--
> Terrible Pope, too, of a kind,--Voltaire.
> (XII. 771-774)

Only Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and God know absolutely the truth about Castelnuovo, despite the judgment of the earlier court. John Woolford describes the Pope's verdict in the light of this uncertainty:

> The Pope knows the truth about the 'Roman Murder-Story' in the same way he knows the truth about the Incarnation; indeed, the two events are, for him, made perfectly equivalent by Caponsacchi's self sacrifice (193):
>
> > How can man love but what he yearns to help?
> > And that which men think weakness within strength,
> > But angels know for strength and stronger yet--
> > What were it else but the first things made new,
> > But repetition of the miracle,
> > The divine instance of self-sacrifice

That never ends and aye begins for man?
(X. 1652-8)

While Langbaum insists the Pope "does not weigh argument against argument," nor does he rely on "logic" (120-121), others, such as Norton Crowell and Isobel Armstrong maintain the strength of the Pope's intellect. The Pope, allowing for the importance of the rational but limiting its sphere, says of Pompilia:

> Everywhere
> I see in the world the intellect of man,
> That sword, the energy his subtle spear,
> The knowledge which defends him like a shield--
> Everywhere; but they make not up, I think,
> The marvel of a soul like thine, earth's flower
> She holds up to the softened gaze of God!
> (X. 1008-1014)

Crowell's response to these lines is both balanced and insightful:

> Everywhere in Browning is the same sentiment: life's supreme ornament is the beautiful soul. But as Browning elevated the soul to a supreme position, he did not degrade the intellect correspondingly.... Browning devoted a vast amount of artistic energy from *Paracelsus* on to show that neither mind nor heart must predominate, but rather that they must work in harmony--always. (*Glass* 192-193)

Mindless faith, for Browning, was no more operative than pure reason. Neither, of itself, can satisfy the requirements of the soul.

Israel wanted a king so that it would be like "all the nations" (I Samuel 8:5); it wanted the "conventional." Saul was that first king, anointed by Samuel, and he began well. Handsome, tall, humble, spirit-filled (I Samuel 9-12), he

was the kind of man who would make any Hebrew mother proud. By I Samuel 13, however, we find the new king overstepping the boundaries of his power and performing for appearance, convention, rather than obedience to God as revealed through the prophet, offering a sacrifice that was part of the office of priest. By chapter fourteen we find his eldest son, Jonathan, in jeopardy of death for eating a bit of wild honey; Saul had foolishly committed his troops to fasting until the enemy was defeated. Shortly after, he failed to carry out the direct command of God when he allows Agag, king of the Amalekites to live (I Samuel 15). Continually, throughout the book of I Samuel, we find his imagination limited by his narrow vision.

David, on the other hand, seems to have an amazing sense of the balance between propriety and initiative. He seems almost unaware of his own anointing as future king of Israel, and certainly makes no move to claim the throne, but seems unafraid of the despondent King Saul. Indeed, shortly after this incident we find David "reaching beyond his grasp" as he translates the power given to him by God to kill "both the lion and the bear" into the skill to deliver Israel from Goliath, "this uncircumcised Philistine," Goliath (I Samuel 17:34 ff).

While Browning had no commitment to details of the biblical account, he certainly did not write without an awareness of the events that surrounded the two principals

in "Saul." Neufeldt remarks of Browning's choice of subject:

> The choice that enabled Browning to complete "Saul" and make this affirmation involved a return to the past, to a time when man believed in a harmony of microcosm and macrocosm based on the idea of the Incarnation. It was his attempt to counteract what J. Hillis Miller has called the "gradual dissipation of the medieval symbolism of participation."[2] Finding the absence of God in this world intolerable, Browning felt compelled to go out into the empty space between man and God to create new connections between man and his creator, so as to break down the sense of absence, of reference at a distance. (59)

But God is always the one who bridges the distance between himself and man. "David realizes," says Everett, "that he has not gotten to this point himself, but that God has taken him there" (277). Man, in reaching beyond his grasp, is merely preparing himself to be found by God. The Incarnation was God's idea--the best that man could come up with was a separation so immense that he, himself, was unable to tolerate it.

Convention, the eye of the other, is always a hinderance to imagination. Karshish, throughout the entire poem, is much more concerned with what Abib will think of this strange report than he is with examining the facts without bias:

> Thou laughest here! (38),
>
> I half resolve to tell thee, yet I blush (65)
>
> His case has struck me far more than 't is worth.
> So, pardon if--(lest presently I lose
> In the great press of novelty at hand (70-72)

(dost thou mind?) (169),

--but why all this of what he saith?
Why write of trivial matters, things of price
Calling at every moment for remark? (278-279)

The closing of his final paragraph, however, is his final appeal for "conventional" acceptance from his teacher: "The madman saith He said so: it is strange" (312); and he turns away from any real consideration of the claims he has witnessed. Altick, again, notes in his comparison of Karshish with Paul the Apostle:

> The poem, like so many others among Browning's best dramatic monologues, focuses on the Great Moment, the supreme crossroad, in a man's life. Paul, an unbeliever, was journeying toward Damascus; and in an instant, through the agency of God, "there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forwith, and arose and was baptized" (Acts 9:18)... But the crowning difference between the two episodes is that, faced with a divine revelation almost as plain as that which visited Paul, Karshish, the stubborn empiricist, refused to accept it. The scales did not fall from his eyes--at least within the period covered by the poem. (496)

Mr. Altick misses the point slightly when he misquotes scripture here. What he omits is the physical blindness that afflicts Paul after his vision on the road, and "he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9:9). He believed immediately upon the occasion of the vision; the spiritual scales were removed from his heart at once. Only when Ananias put his hands on Paul (then known as Saul) three days later, did the scales fall away from his eyes, proving the validity of his spiritual

experience. Then he received the ritual of baptism, a physical indication of his spiritual state.

Frank Lockwood finds Lazarus unable to cope with his state, a condition that would not have left a very good impression on anybody, much less the skeptical Karshish, and certainly not what Browning intended to convey:

> Lazarus, after his recovery from the tomb, knows too much. He has had a vision of how things proceed behind the veil, and the revelation has all but blasted his human understanding. There seems to be utter lack of adjustment between his open-eyed vision of absolute truth, as it had been made known to him while his spirit existed apart from the body, and the requirements of human action and judgment. (45)

When we look more closely at Lazarus, however, we see quite another picture. He is not upset by things that normally devastate others: "Should his child sicken unto death, why look / For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness, / Or pretermission of the daily craft!" (158/160). Things that most people don't even notice anger, and sometimes, infuriate him:

> While a word, gesture, glance from that same child
> At play or in the school or laid asleep,
> Will startle him to an agony of fear,
> Exasperation, just as like. Demand
> The reason why--"'t is but a word," object--
> "A gesture"--he regards thee as our lord
> Who lived there in the pyramid alone,
> Looked at us (dost thou mind?) when, being young,
> We both would unadvisedly recite
> Some charm's beginning, from that book of his,
> Able to bid the sun throb wide and burst
> All into stars, as suns grown old are wont.
> (162-173)

Lazarus, of course, has seen the other side of death and knows that for him and those who believe it holds no threat of peril. He was far more interested in the spiritual lives of those around him than he was in their physical well-being. He was not concerned in the least with the reaction of others to his insight; their opinions were not eternal.

Pompilia's fear of death appears to be no greater than that of Lazarus, much to her credit: She does not have the reference to personal experience that he does. Nowhere do the differences between her and Guido appear so sharply as in the comparison of their final lines. Guido is frantic with fear:

> Life is all!
> I was just stark mad,--let the madman live
> Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!
> Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours,
> I am the Granduke's--no, I am the Pope's!
> Abate,--Cardinal,--Christ,--Maria,--God,...
> Pompilia will you let them murder me?
> (XI. 2413-2419)

If his pleading is not "conventional," it is at least common. Pompilia's speech, in contrast, nearly rings with anticipation:

> He is ordained to call and I to come!
> Do not the dead wear flowers when dressed for God?
> Say,--I am all flowers from head to foot!
> Say,--Not one flower of all he said and did,
> Might seem to flit unnoticed, fade unknown,
> But dropped a seed, has grown a balsam-tree
> Whereof the blossoming perfumes the place
> At this supreme of moments!
> .....
> .....Through such souls alone

> God stooping shows sufficient of His light
> For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise.
> (VII. 1797-1803, 1826-1828)

If she is "intensely subjective and personal," as Harrold asserts (156), she neither pities herself, nor does she seek pity from others. Woolford notes that she really only desires to make one point:

> Hence, urged to detail the more spectacular aftermath of the marriage, her sadistic persecution by Guido and his household, she refuses to do so, in a gesture complementing her failure to describe the murder....Her parents were guilty and are punished, she, now her child is born, asks no more of life, and ends by denying that Guido was, in any real sense, the child's father. (203)

Sue Lonoff makes an observation about the responses of Pompilia and the pontiff in *The Ring and the Book:*

> One way of assessing the moral worth or worthlessness of Browning's speakers is to weigh the effect of public opinion upon their words and actions. The saintly Pompilia is unconcerned with the impression she makes on the world. The Pope, aware that the Roman populace favors a last-minute pardon of Guido, is guided by his faith and his innate sense of justice. (157)

And the Pope is more aware than anyone of the confines of convention and the penalties for ignoring it. In an office filled with ceremony and tradition, he has chosen to *daily* read the "History.../ Of all my predecessors, Popes of Rome" (X. 3, 6). In addition to conventions, this reading has made him acutely aware of the fallibility of his office, and more personally, of himself. He is also acutely aware of the responsibility of his judgment to, "think, speak,

act, in place of Him-- / The Pope for Christ" (X. 167-168). Crowell remarks on the Pope's search for resolution:

> The Pope's magnificent soliloquy is almost wholly devoted to the nature of truth, man's limited capacity to seize it, and the injunction placed upon him to judge in spite of the limited vision which mortality grants him. The scandalous schism among the popes of the early church, when pope damned pope and was in turn damned by his successor, he finds instructive. When forced to make momentous decisions, he turns to the sobering chronicle of papal error and duplicity as a reminder of the great truth that no man is infallible (*Glass,* 215):
>
> > Which of the judgments was infallible?
> > Which of my predecessors spoke for God?
> > And what availed Formosus that this cursed,
> > That blessed, and then this other cursed again?
> > (X. 150-153)

He is not interested in creating an "image" for himself, nor is he interested in personal advancement. He has no vendettas to retaliate, and he owes no favors. His shock at the record of his predecessors has left him only with the determination to do what he considers right in the eyes of God.

Love made manifest is always one of Browning's prime concerns and serves as the ultimate evidence of a character's relationship with God. David reacts to Saul's touch:

> And oh, all my heart how it loved him! but where was the sign?
> I yearned--"Could I help thee, my father, inventing a bliss,
> I would add, to that life of the past, both the future and this;
> I would give thee new life altogether, as good, ages hence,

> As this moment,--had love but the warrant, love's heart to dispense!"
>
> (232-236)

But more important, it is the realization of the sacrificial nature of Divine love which leads David to his vision:

> See the King--I would help him but cannot, the wishes fall through.
> Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow, grow poor to enrich,
> To fill up his life, starve my own out, I would--knowing which,
> I know that my service is perfect. Oh, speak through me now!
> Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst thou--so wilt thou!
> So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest, uttermost crown--
> And thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up nor down
> One spot for the creature to stand in! It is by no breath,
> Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation joins issue with death!
> As thy Love is discovered almighty, almighty be proved
> Thy power, that exists with and for it, of being Beloved!
>
> (296-306)

During his ecstasy, he cries to Saul:

> O Saul, it shall be
> A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
> Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever.
>
> (309-311)

W. David Shaw comments on David's understanding and Browning's intent:

> The principle of perfect Love has its empirical analogue in David's love of Saul. And just as Browning must actively involve the reader in the pressure of David's speculations, so David perceives that God's truth is not something he can receive passively, but rather an aid to his own activity.

> He must co-operate with God for the redemption of Saul,...(279)

While we may disagree concerning the redemption of Saul, we can wholeheartedly assent to Browning's insistence on an active reception of God's truth. The problem here is not with David, but with Saul, who is only able to groan and then stare briefly into David's upturned face.

The vision of Karshish was also a vision of love. He uses the word four times in the final nine lines of his letter and the word "heart" twice, but can only dismiss it as "strange."

Crowell comments on the state of Lazarus, connecting it to *The Ring and the Book*:

> If one recalls the condition of Lazarus in the "Epistle of Karshish" after his return from the grave, one knows that the man who rose from the dead, with the truth of eternity burned into his brain, was the old Lazarus in name only. His mind, his heart, and his values were all profoundly altered by the dazzling vision; and when Browning breathed life in the old dead volume he found in Florence, the new book was altered in like degree. (212)

Lazarus has realized that ultimate love is concerned with spiritual well-being and not necessarily with the physical state. Although Karshish envisions a God of love, he is unable to envision anything beyond physical circumstances. Crowell echoes an earlier point regarding the condition of the Arab:

> The tragedy of Karshish is not that he is an intellectual, but that he has atrophy of the spirit

> so that the infinite moment of divine revelation passes him by. (*Soul*, 25)

Pompilia, of course, has the normal concern of a mother for her child, but her love extends beyond those "normal" limits. Zietlow remarks on the Pope's real admiration for her character:

> At the climax of his revery on Pompilia, the Pope locates her glorious ascent to new law and new service in her attempt to save Caponsacchi from Guido. (212)

> And with his own sword [thou didst] stay the upraised arm,
> The endeavour of the wicked, and defend
> Him who...was there
> For visible providence
> (X. 1083-1086)

The consequences of this kind of love are the same as the consequences for Divine love. Those who are willing to give of themselves entirely often find the entire price required. J. Hillis Miller approaches this concept from a different perspective:

> The sanctity of Pompilia and her pure love for Caponsacchi are incompatible with continued earthly existence. Her direct insight into God makes her too good for this World. (152)

The Pope, faced with contradictory testimony, public opinion in favor of Guido, lethargic and overconfident Christianity, and corrupt systems of control within both the government and the Church, must make a decision based on the highest moral principle he can ascertain. He chooses love.

> The work 'i the world, not man's but God's; leave man!
> Conjecture of the worker by the work

> Is there strength there?--enough: intelligence?
> Ample: but goodness in a like degree?
> Not to the human eye in the present state,
> An isoscele deficient at the base.
> What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
> But just the instance which this tale supplies
> Of love without a limit? So is strength,
> So is intelligence; then love is so,
> Unlimited in its self-sacrifice:
> Then is the tale true and God shows complete.
> (X. 1356-1367)

Without love, he says, any work is incomplete.

Altick & Loucks provide a summary statement of the Pope's qualities, but their observation begs for extension.

> The Pope proves that association with a human institution does not necessarily entail abuse of the tools of mind and tongue, callousness, or service to self. Although the deficiencies of the church in general may be fairly typified by the nest-feathering clergymen who populate the poem, a rare individual man, gifted with the wisdom and humane vision denied the generality, may rise above the institution within which he works. (59)

Each of the positive individuals we have discussed is a "rare individual." David, Lazarus, Pompilia and the Pope all see life with spiritual eyes, eyes concerned not with self but with the "others," not with the physical but with the intangible, not with the present, but with the effect that the present has on the future. Their spirituality is manifested in love, not brought about because of it, resulting in even further insight and greater love. They are "the pure in heart," and they have seen God in the present through faith; they will see Him in the future in the flesh. Like Pompilia, they rise.

Returning, for a moment to Shaw's comment regarding David and Saul, picking up nearly where we departed, he makes an extension of his principle of the active perception of truth:

> He [David] must cooperate with God for the redemption of Saul in the same way that the skeptical reader must abandon his neutrality, and make a conscious effort to respond to Browning's rhetoric if he wants to understand the poem. (279)

We must here move to the closing lines of *The Ring and the Book*. If we view it as a summary statement of Browning's earlier work, we can look there, also, for keys to response to all of his work. The poet says, speaking directly to his audience,

> So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
> Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.
>
> And save the Soul! .....
> (XII. 862-864)

Browning's intent, then, is not passive, nor does he intend his readers to remain so. He has spoken truth in art,

> Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
> That Art remains the one way possible
> Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.
> (XII. 838-840)

Reason, revelation, and faith must all work together then, in order for the individual fully to apprehend truth, which in turn, must be expressed in love. The decision Browning requires of his readers is whether to turn away with the reasonable sanity of the longing Karshish, or rest in the madness of Lazarus; whether to tremble with Guido or

rise with Pompilia; whether to remain in the darkness and despair of Saul, or appropriate David's perception of active love; or at last, to walk with the calm assurance of Pope Innocent XII that in the time of testing the best choice has been made based both on knowledge of the facts and love and that God will handle the results. "Ultimately," says David Bergman, "the reader is asked to be concerned with the condition not of his personality, but of his soul" (786). And the reader must decide for himself where real madness lies.

CONCLUSIONS

The charges of obscurity which have been leveled at Browning for nearly 150 years are often based more on a critical reading of the work through the screen of personal prejudice than on the reality of who Browning was and why he wrote. Browning read through any "system" is not Browning. While we may see some feminist elements, some use of linguistic principles, and occasional passages which fit into other critical schools, Browning's poetry is as unfit for analysis according to a particular critical theory as Browning the man was unfit for inclusion in a particular system of religion. He did not even write according to the conventions of his age. Vineta Colby understands the individuality and the mission which drove the man and often alienated his readers:

> Rare was the critic, or the reader, who could welcome a poet so determined to deflate the solemnity of conventional poetry, to challenge its mission of soothing and consoling and offering noble truths, demanding instead that poetry pose unanswerable questions. (98)

As a "dissenter," he often was at variance even with the churches which he did attend. The corruption which the "institution" often fostered through individuals who either had lost sight of their original commitment, or who merely used the

institution for their own purposes was a source of frustration to him, and he clung fiercely to his autonomy.

Generally, three major elements entered into his perception of Truth: "Intuition," reason, and revelation. Intuition included an artistic sensitivity which was very close to the exercise of faith; sometimes the terms are synonymous. For Browning, the "artist" was the one most often in the position of being sensitive to the kind of understanding which made the whole more than the sum of its parts and which surpassed the understanding of those who were, or should have been, much wiser. Thus we have Abt Vogler and David understanding while Cleon and Karshish miss the point all together. Pompilia, with no education but great sensitivity, understands faith, while Guido with all of the opportunity the Church could afford and no sensitivity, doesn't begin understand that he has totally missed the mark.

But, Browning does not discount reason. While his negative characters often "reason" themselves right out of the truth, none of his positive characters is stupid. Pompilia is almost as unschooled as Caliban, but she uses the simple reasoning power she has to best advantage while he goes forward on an incredible interpretation of physical experience. The Pope, of course, is the prime example of reason and faith. When the capacities of the first have been exhausted, the second must take over. Often, as in the case of Pompilia and the Pope, the speaker reasons himself to the place of faith: Some things cannot be known and must simply be trusted.

Far from being a Kirkegaardian leap, however, this faith must be based, as must reason, on the third element: revelation. Browning often expresses this revelation in a "word of mouth" passing of the message. Caliban hears from Sycorax--and rejects; Cleon hears from "certain slaves" about Paulus and the Christ--and rejects; Karshish hears from Lazarus--. Sometimes the revelation comes in a vision, as in the case of David. Sometimes it comes in an experience, as with Abt Vogler. Often, as in the case of Cleon, Karshish, and David, the revelation concerns the Incarnation--the central Truth for Browning. "Caliban" demonstrates that without revelation central truths of Christianity are often missed, i.e., the love of God. Clearly, that revelation for Browning was the Bible. Not only does he illustrate from it, but he quotes it and applies its principles. His sensitivity as an artist to the principles of faith, the rational powers of his educated mind and the revelation of scripture were Browning's requirements for the resolution of his belief structure, and the application of that structure--ever striving and growing--to the problems of his age. J. Hillis Miller expresses, most nearly, what Browning seemed to be striving for:

> On earth man is in a sense already in heaven, for in heaven he will pursue the same dynamic motion in a different sphere. Imperfection and incompleteness are closer to God than anything finished, for God himself is in a way incomplete. Though he is perfect, he is constantly adding new perfection to that perfection. God is not temporal, but the driving motion of time is a perfect image of his explosive eternity. (154)

All men, according to Browning, are given enough light to perceive Truth. If they continue to walk in darkness, it is only because they choose to do so, because they desire something else more than they desire Truth: Del Sarto desires Lucrezia, Ferrara desires image, Cleon desires wisdom. Perhaps Browning's lack of concern with those who considered him obscure was based on a belief that those who did not understand his poems were in that position because they, like his negative characters, "would not" understand.

Beyond understanding, however, Browning requires yet one more thing from his readers--change. Philip Drew perceives:

> Browning recognizes that human nature is mixed, that individual moral decisions help to define that nature and that the command to "act up to our truth perceived" is therefore not a complacent conventional motto, but a direction to a moral life of continual self-questioning and strenuous effort. (140-141)

And that moral life is circumscribed by love. No Browning character who apprehends the truth ever limits the moral rights of any other person, but rather allows the other the freedom to question and grow: Lazarus relates his experience, but he does not force his opinions.

Browning's poetry, then, is not an end in itself. Yes, he means for his readers to perceive the truths he unfolds; and he means for his readers to act on those truths. Beyond that, however, he means for his readers to continue, in all the situations of their lives, applying the principles he sets forth,

both perceiving and "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), for as long as they are able.

Browning used a seventeenth-century pope to speak to the needs of the nineteenth century, communicating finally that a faith which is not challenged often becomes no faith at all. Doubtless, he felt that his words would, likewise, reach to centuries which he would not see:

> What if be it the mission of that age
> My death will usher into life, to shake
> This torpor of assurance from our creed,
> Re-introduce the doubt discarded, bring
> That formidable danger back, we drove
> Long ago to the distance and the dark?
> No wild beast now prowls around the infant camp:
> We have built wall and sleep in city safe:
> But if some earthquake try the towers that laugh
> To think they once saw lions rule outside,
> And man stand out again, pale, resolute,
> Prepared to die,--which means, alive at last?
> As we broke up that old faith of the world,
> Have we next age, to break up this the new--
> Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report--
> Whence need to bravely disbelieve report
> Through increase faith i' the thing reports belie?
> (X.1846-1862) 62

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Armstrong, Richard A. *Faith and Doubt in the Century's Poets*. London: James Clarke, 1898.

2. Berdoe, Edward. *Browning and the Christian Faith* London: George Allen, 1899.

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4. Cohen, Mary M. "Browning's Hebraic Sympathies." *Poet-Lore*, 3 (1891) : 250-254.

5. Crauford, Alexander H. *Christian Instincts and Modern Doubt*. New York: Thomas Whitaker, 1897 : 228-241.

6. Dods, Marcus. "Browning's Attitude Towards Christianity." *British Weekly*, June 25, 1891.

7. Everett, Charles Carroll. "Tennyson and Browning as Spiritual Forces." *New World*, 2 (1893) : 240-256.

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9. Huntington, Arria S. "Browning's Philosophy." *Memorial Meeting of the Syracuse Browning Club*, p. 55-59. Syracuse, N.Y.: C. W. Bardeen. 1890.

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14. Drew, Philip. *The Poetry of Robert Browning: Critical Introduction*. 1970.

15. Charlton, H. B. "Browning's Ethical Poetry." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 27 (1942) : 36-69.

Chapter 2

1. Fairchild, Hoxie N. *1830-1880, Christianity and Romanticism in the Victorian Era.* Vol. IV of *Religious Trends in English Poetry.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.

   Raymond, William O. *The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950.

2. Hood, Thurman, ed., Letter to F. J. Furnivall, April 25, 1884. *Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise.* New Haven, Conn., 1933.

3. Crowell, Norton B. *The Triple Soul: Browning's Theory of Knowledge.* University of New Mexico Press. 1963.

4. Paris, 1876. References will be to this edition which reproduces the 1595 text.

5. Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd.* Garden City. N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961, 19-22.

Chapter 3

1. Loucks, James, ed. *Robert Browning's Poetry.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979, 160 n.

2. Laird's note here reads:

   This is the clear implication of the 'cabin of life' simile, and Blougram says as much in lines 345-7. This cabin image is clearly one which Blougram himself finds acceptable, since he presents it *before* he begins to argue on Gigadibs's apparent premise that unbelief is the only possible state for an intelligent man in the mid-nineteenth century (172 ff).

3. Feinberg here refers to Altic and Loucks, p. 121.

4. Loucks notes: "Get ready to bite your thumbs, an insulting gesture" (202 n 9).

5. Melchiori's endnote refers the reader to DeVane, *A Browning Handbook,* p. 261.

6. My thanks to Dr. Albert M. Lewis, Rabbi of Temple Emanuel in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for this distinction.

Chapter 4

1. The critical discussion apparently involved at least six articles in the 70's, and took the following major turns, though other commentary was made at later dates:

Langbaum, Robert. *"Is Guido Saved? The Meaning of Browning's Conclusion to The Ring and the Book."* Victorian Poetry, 10 (1972) : 289-305.

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Litzinger, Boyd. "The New Vision of Judgment: The Case of St. Guido," *Tennessee Studies in Literature,* 2 0 (1975) : 69-75.

Doane, Margaret. "Guido is Saved: Interior and Exterior Monologues in Book XI of *The Ring and the Book."* *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 5 (1976) : 53-64.

McGhee, Richard D. "'The Luck That Lies Beyond a Man': Guido's Salvation in *The Ring and the Book."* *Browning Institute Studies* 5 (1977) : 87-104.

2. Other mentions of hell in Browning's work should also be noted in their rough context. Where editions with numbered lines have been unavailable, I have included the Cambridge edition reference number supplied by Molineux.

"Heretic's Tragedy" C.281

Lo,--petal on petal, fierce rays unclose;
  Anther on anther, sharp spikes outstart;
And with blood for dew, the bosom boils;
  And a gust of sulphur is all its smell;
And lo, he is horribly in the toils

Of a coal-black giant flower of hell!
CHO:--What maketh heaven, That maketh hell.

"The Statue and the Bust" 67-69

"If I spend the night with that devil twice,
May his window serve as my loop of hell
Whence a damned soul looks on paradise!"

"Red Cotton Night-cap Country" C.752

O unimaginative ignorance
Of what dye's depth keeps best apart from worst
In womankind!--how heaven's own pure may seem
To blush aurorally beside such blanched
Divineness as the women-wreaths named White:
While hell, eruptive and fulinginous,
Sickens to very pallor as I point
Her place to a Red clout called woman too!

"A Camel-Driver" C.937

Forgiveness? rather grant
Forgetfulness! The past is past and lost.
However near I stand in his regard,
So much the nearer had I stood by steps
Offered the feed which rashly spurned their help
That I call Hell; why further punishment?"

"The Return of the Druses" C.212

Even so!
I find (ye prompt aright) your father slain!
While most he plotted for your good, that father
(Alas how kind, ye never knew)--lies slain!
(Aside.)(And hell's worm gnaw the glozing knave--with me,
For being duped by his cajoleries!
Are these the Christians? These the docile crew
My bezants went to make me Bishop o'er?)

From *The Ring and the Book*:

"The Other Half-Rome" III.1337-42

Each had a prompt defence: Pompilia first--
"Earth was made hell to me who did no harm:
I only could emerge one way from hell
By catching at the one hand held me, so
I caught at it and thereby stepped to heaven:
If that be wrong, do with me what you will!"

"Tertium Quid" IV. 245-53

And then the sudden existence, dewy-dear
O' the rose above he dungheap, the pure child
As good as new created, since withdrawn
From the horror of the pre-appointed lot
With the unknown father and the mother known
Two well,--some fourteen years of squalid youth,
And then libertinage, disease, the grave--
Hell in life here, hereafter life in hell:
Look at that horror and this soft repose!

IV. 600-11

You fled a hell of your own lighting-up,
Pay for your own miscalculation too:
You thought nobility, gained at any price,
Would suit and satisfy,--find the mistake,
And now retaliate, not on yourselves, but me.
And how? By telling me, i' the face of the world,
I it is have been cheated all this while,
Abominably and irreparably,--my name
Given to a cur-cast mongrel, a drab's brat,

A beggar's by-blow,--thus depriving me
Of what yourselves allege the whole and sole
Aim on my part i' the marriage,--money, to wit.

IV. 741-49

Rather did rage and hate so work in him,
Their product proved the horrible conceit
That he should plot and plan and bring to pass
His wife might, of her own free will and
deed,
Relieve him of her presence, get her gone,
And yet leave all the dowry safe behind,

Confirmed his own henceforward past dispute,
While blotting out, as by a belch of hell,
Their triumph in her misery and death.

IV. 785-800

Circumvallated month by month, and week
By week, and day by day, and hour by hour,
Close, closer and yet closer still with pain,
No outlet from the encroaching pain save just
Where stood one saviour like a piece of heaven,
Hell's arms would strain round but for this blue gap.
She, they say further, first tried every chink,
Every imaginable break i' the fire,
As way of escape: ran to the Commissary,
Who bade her not malign his friend her spouse;
Flung herself thrice at the Archbishop's feet,
Where three times the Archbishop let her lie,
Spend her whole sorrow and sob full heart forth,
And then took up the slight load from the ground
And bore it back for husband to chastise,--
Mildly, of course,--but natural right is right.

IV. 870-880

Mother o' the babes we all breathe blessings on,--
Was caught in converse with a negro page.
Hell thawed that icicle, else "Why was it--
Why? asked and echoed the fools. "Because, you
fools,--"
So did the dame's self answer, she who could,
With that fine candor only forthcoming
When 't is no odds whether withheld or no--
"Because my husband was the saint you say,
And,--with that childish goodness, absurd faith,
Stupid self-satisfaction, you so praise,--
Saint to you, insupportable to me.

IV. 1583-1598

No, they must have her purity itself,
Quite angel,--and her parents angels too
Of an ages sort, immaculate, word and deed:
At all events, so seeming, till the fiend,
Even Guido, by his folly, forced from them
The untoward avowal of the trick o' the birth,
Which otherwise were safe and secret now.
Why, here you have the awfullest of crimes

For nothing! Hell broke loose on a butterfly!
A dragon born of rose-dew and the moon!
Yet here is the monster! Why he's a mere man!
Born, bred and brought up in the usual way,
His mother loves him, still his brothers stick
To the good fellow of the boyish games;
The Governor of his town knows and approves,
The Archbishop of the place knows and assists:

"Half-Rome" II. 1367-68

One master-squeeze from screw shall bring to birth
The hoard i' the heart o' the toad, hell's quintessence.

Chapter 5

1. *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845-1846,* ed. Elvan Kintner (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), I, 173.

2. J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* (New York, 1965), 5.

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