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THE BENTHAMITE THEORY OF FICTION AND PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE IN ROBERT BROWNING'S *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

By

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ABSTRACT

THE BENTHAMITE THEORY OF FICTION AND PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE IN ROBERT BROWNING'S *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

By

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One thing that has hardly been emphasized in modern Browning studies is the importance of the Benthamite theory of fiction towards understanding his poetry. Bentham's theory of *fiction* takes accounts of the way a certain fictional entity exercises coercive power on human thoughts and actions. *The Ring and the Book* investigates prevalent Victorian cultural fictions and exposes their politics. Browning's investigation is important in that the Victorian fictions and their politics in the poem persist in our own modern cultural productions.

Chapter I discusses the importance of Bentham's theory of fiction as an aid to reading *The Ring and the Book*. The concept of Benthamite fiction has little difference from the Marxist idea of ideology, so these two concepts are discussed in some detail. The question of language is also important in reading the poem. Some important developments in the philosophy of language are discussed to illuminate Browning's understanding of language.

Chapter II discusses Guido's sexual politics. The word "honor" is the very gist of his fiction. His fiction of honor dictates him to believe that a husband's honor within the institution of marriage is God's gift, and that female submissiveness is a natural law. But his monologue ultimately reveals that honor as such is just a fiction, suggesting the possibility that the whole structure of a patriarchal society is built on fiction.

Chapter III discusses the politics of *nothingness* in the two lawyers' legal discourse. Their monologues are characterized by aesthetic language. Archangeli constantly resorts to Latin phrases and Bottini makes numerous allusions to classical mythologies. Their aesthetic language conceals the very nothingness of their legal discourse.

Chapter IV discusses the question of fiction in religion. The Pope attempts to prove a transcendental a priori God. However, this attempt is constantly subverted by the possibility of an empirical a posteriori God. The conflict between the two remains unresolved. On the other hand, for Caponsacchi, fiction produces some positive results. He identifies Pompilia with the Madonna, which is a fiction, but this fiction saves him from the alienation of his life within the secularized institution of the Church.

Chapter V discusses problems of language. Bentham condemns language because a fiction is created by the conjuring power of language. Guido's second monologue draws on a double function of language. By reordering the past and the present, language opens up a new future. Faced with death, Guido tries to create, through the black magic of language, a self that will survive the death. Nevertheless, as Bentham warns, it creates a fiction, distorting the real material condition of existence.

The conclusion includes some final thoughts on Browning's investigation into the question of Benthamite fiction. Though Browning seems to believe one can never completely escape the dictates of fiction, he suggests that one can come closer to an understanding of the real material conditions of existence by an endless redefinition of the world.

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INTRODUCTION

BROWNING AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

Two relatively recent collections of critical essays on Robert Browning (1812-89) clearly indicate in which direction current Browning studies are headed. In 1989 *Victorian Poetry* issued a special collection of critical essays on Browning to celebrate the centennial of his death.[1] The essays collected in the edition fully demonstrate that various modern critical theories regard Browning's poetry as an important site for theoretic reflection and contention. The flourishing of various critical methodologies in recent decades has brought a remarkable increase of attention to Browning and to Victorian poetry in general, rescuing them from many decades of neglect under the dominance of New Criticism. Specifically, recent contributions from culturalism, Marxism, feminism, and post-structuralism to Browning's poetry have brought out some of the most intensive and arresting discussions of Victorian poetry. Particularly, Browning's magnum opus, *The Ring and the Book,* has drawn a wide range of critical attention for its multi-layered rings of poetic experiment, confirming not only the centrality of this work in his poetry but also Browning's stature in Victorian poetry.

The other collection of critical essays on Browning, entitled *Critical Essays on Robert Browning* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992), compiled by Mary Ellis Gibson, confirms Browning's contemporaneity. Gibson's collection addresses the important "question of why Browning should be read at all."[2] The collection, which mostly reprints essays published in the 1980's, is "primarily concerned with the variety of cultural approaches to Browning," as the general editor of the collection notes.[3] Cultural criticism can be broadly defined as an attempt to relate art and literature to the politics

and cultural productions of a society. The various cultural approaches collected in this edition demonstrate that reading Browning's poetry can become a highly productive venue towards understanding Victorian culture and society. More importantly, a close investigation of Browning's exploration into the various forms of Victorian culture in his poetry also helps us to understand the conditions of our own modern cultural productions. According to Gibson, "Reading Browning—and reading nineteenth-century reactions to Browning—can give us a measure against which to situate and judge our own cultural productions." [4]

Certainly Gibson's remark is validated by the growing recognition among critics that Browning's poetry consciously attempts to investigate the new constitutive elements of Victorian culture that were then just being introduced, and, importantly, that are conceived to be elements of *our own cultural productions*. As Isobel Armstrong points out, Victorians considered themselves "modern." According to her, to be modern meant, for Victorians, "to define the contemporary self-consciously and this is simultaneously an act which historicises the modern."[5] For Browning and his contemporaries, this self-conscious act of historicizing the modern was an important strategy for investigating the nature of the newly introduced constitutive elements of their culture. This act was a part of their sincere efforts to cope with the many unprecedented changes that they were witnessing.

One thing that readers of Victorian poetry become constantly aware of is the presence of a certain sense of anxiety and crisis that Victorians were experiencing in dealing with various social changes. The anxiety and crisis was largely political and economic, but, at the same time, it was epistemological, philosophical, and cultural.

Obviously the former was brought about by such factors as the irrevocable change in the mode of production, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and also the growing demand and struggle for democracy. On the other hand, the latter reflected the crisis of modernity which in every instance, foregrounds such questions as knowledge, consciousness, representation, and language.

Browning, like other Victorian poets, was acutely aware of the new politico-economic and cultural formations of Victorian society. His poetry *dramatizes* various forms of anxiety and contradiction that his contemporaries were experiencing. Particularly the dramatic form of his poetry provides a structure for thinking through the contents of Victorian anxiety and crisis. Browning's poetry is a highly political discourse. Though Browning's poetry does not directly deal with contemporary political events or issues, it is political because, in his efforts to articulate the new constitutive forms of Victorian culture, Browning brings politics, society and history into the world of aesthetics, which the essays in Gibson's collection recognize.

The recent surge of cultural criticism in Browning studies redresses some of the critical limitations that it had suffered from for many decades, especially under New Criticism. Victorian poetry in general has not received the critical attention it deserved throughout much of the twentieth-century. Victorian poetry has either been awkwardly inserted between Romanticism and Modernism in literary history, as Armstrong notes,[6] or it remained in "the disparagements of modernists and the critical backwaters of studies of Romanticism," as Patricia O'Neill points out.[7] T.S. Eliot's critique of Victorian poetry for its lack of a "unified sensibility" early in the century, and later F.R. Leavis's

dismissal of it for its too many compromises with philistine convention were reinforced by the so-called New Critics, whose primary allegiance was to the Romantics.

Browning studies in most of this century were crippled by the limitations of the New Critical practices. As clearly indicated in Cleanth Brooks' statement in the preface *to The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) that "I have been anxious to see what residuum, if any, is left after we have referred the poem to its cultural matrix,"[8] the New Critical approach emphasized the science of textual analysis. As Alan Sinfield reminds, "meaning is always dependent upon context: it is produced in history and ideology, within the prevailing power relations"[9]; nevertheless, the New Critical practice in Browning studies detaches literature from society and history. It focused on the imagery, character, symbolism, and other technical features of Browning's dramatic monologues, but this approach disregards the fundamentals of Browning's poetry: politics, culture, society and history.

Browning's poetry is fundamentally a political discourse that participates in contemporary political and cultural debates. Cultural criticism in Browning studies, as Gibson's collection demonstrates, attempts to locate Browning's poetry within the very political and cultural contexts in and for which he was writing. His poetry is radical but subtle in addressing contemporary politics and culture. Instead of directly discussing them, Browning creates unique poetic structures that bear some definite structural resemblance to contemporary political, economic, and cultural crises by bringing together various men and women of various social backgrounds and dramatizing their situations as enmeshed in these crises. *The Ring and the Book* represents the crowning achievement of such an attempt. By weaving together various monologues about a seventeenth-century

Roman murder trial, Browning attempts to construct a structure, or framework, for thinking through the constitutive elements of the cultural crises in both seventeenth-century Italy and, by extension, nineteenth-century England. This structure, this thought process, then, can be grasped and examined in its totality and so some possible solutions to the crisis might be sought thereby. In building the structure, Browning brings together nearly all the most important issues of both Victorian and modern poetics, including questions regarding the nature of subject, of representation, of knowledge and even language itself.

For Victorians, the contemporary political, economic and cultural crisis, about which Browning's poetry is so much concerned, was a matter of dealing with the newly introduced elements constituting their society and culture. As Raymond Williams shows in *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (1983), during Browning's time, the growth of industrialization was inaugurating a new kind of society.[10] This industrialization fundamentally changed the character of Victorian society, "strangely altering old relations," as Thomas Carlyle noted.[11] Under the new society the whole of the human condition had to be redefined and renegotiated. Not only political and economic structures had to be re-examined, but such fundamental ideas as self, nature, labor, society, and language had to be redefined, and any relationships among them also had to be renegotiated.

Victorian poetry and poetics reflected and participated in this process of redefinition. Victorian poets necessarily made efforts to create certain poetic forms that could accommodate such a redefinition, so it may not be surprising that various poetic experiments, including the dramatic monologue, were attempted in the Victorian age.

Isobel Armstrong defines the fundamental characteristic of Victorian poetry as the "double poem."[12] In a double poem, any poetic utterance becomes the object of scrutiny and analysis within the same poem; moreover, every poetic utterance retains only a temporal validity and is thereby historicized, and so this structure allows for the renegotiation of self, labor, the world, and language.

The process of redefining contemporary values and practices necessarily foregrounds the question of *representation*. The introduction of democracy and of a voting system raised the question of political representation, while the capitalistic mode of production necessarily raised the question of economic representation of labor through products and wages, as Karl Marx so eloquently explained. Apart from this, for Victorians, language became problematic, since it raises the question of representation in the relation between sign and signified. The Victorian concern with the question of representation necessarily includes not only the mode of representation but also discrepancies between representing signs and the objects they signify.

The one thing that most squarely addresses the question of representation is Bentham's theory of fiction, his "politics of as-if." Bentham's theory of fiction points out the way something that does not have its counterpart in the world is presented every day and accepted as if it were a real entity, and furthermore, that this fictional entity exercises coercive power on the thoughts and actions of individuals. Bentham's insights into "fiction" and its coercive power open up for Browning a new way of investigating Victorian culture and society. Browning finds fiction and their coercive power, which Bentham found to be all pervasive in contemporary legal practices, in many other forms of Victorian cultural and institutional practices, including religion and gender

relationships. *The Ring and the Book,* therefore, is an extensive exploration into the politics of various forms of Victorian cultural and institutional fictions.

Importantly, the Marxist idea of ideology as false consciousness also addresses the question of Benthamite fiction and its coercive power. The traditional Marxist understanding of ideology as false consciousness has recently been under heavy attack from post-modernism and post-structuralism for its naïve notion of subjectivity and social formations. Nevertheless, this does not mean that such recent social theories entirely renounce the whole idea of ideology. They rather confirm the presence of certain forms of mystification that hide and conceal real material conditions. Bentham's theory of fiction and the Marxist idea of ideology provide an important clue towards understanding the Victorian "politics of fiction", which is still actively present in our own social conditions.

Another important issue related to the Benthamite theory of fiction is the question of language. As Bentham himself repeatedly emphasizes, fictional entities are created and sustained by the power of language. Browning's poetry is in close dialogue with Bentham, and as in Bentham's theory of fiction, the problem of language becomes one of the central concerns of Browning's *The Ring and the Book.* Like Bentham, Browning believes that language is responsible for creating fictions, and that language is unreliable since it is potentially capable of distorting reality. However, Browning does not entirely condemn language. The poem simultaneously condemns and celebrates the power of language. Asking "For how else know we save by the worth of word? (I. 837),"[13] the poem confirms the indispensability of language in human life. Language mediates between the human subject and the world, and more importantly, for Browning,

language's power to rearrange the past becomes an important means of opening up the future.

This dissertation addresses the question of the Benthamite fiction and of its coercive power in human thoughts and actions as explored in Browning's major poetic work, *The Ring and the Book*, and it discusses various forms of Victorian fictions and their ideological strategies. The first chapter examines some important features of Victorian poetics as a way of locating Browning's poetry within the Victorian political and cultural landscape. The latter part of the chapter discusses Bentham's theory of fiction and its coercive power, as well as the Marxist idea of ideology and its strategies. The next three chapters examine some important forms of Victorian cultural and institutional fictions as explored in the poem. Chapter Two examines Victorian sexual politics by reading Guido's first monologue and Pompilia's monologue. Chapter Three addresses the question of fiction in Victorian legal discourse through the reading of the monologues by the two lawyers, Archangeli and Bottini. Chapter Four investigates the question of fiction in the religious discourse of the Pope and of Caponsacchi. Chapter Five looks into the question of language in relation to fiction, focusing on Guido's second monologue. Lastly, the conclusion evaluates Browning's overall achievement in addressing the question of Victorian cultural fictions.

[1]. *Victorian Poetry* also devoted its Vol. VI, Nos. 3& 4, 1963 issue exclusively for discussion of Browning's *The Ring and the Book.*

[2]. *Critical Essays on Robert Browning,* ed. Mary Ellis Gibson, (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992); see General Editor's Note.

[3]. Ibid..

[4]. Gibson, 3.

[5]. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

[6]. Armstrong , 1.

[7]. Patricia O'Neill, *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 128.

[8]. Cleanth Brook, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1947), x.

[9]. Alan Sinfield, *Alfred Tennyson* (Oxford & New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 7.

[10]. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1960* (New York: Univ. of Columbia, 1983); see chapters II through V.

[11]. Thomas Carlyle, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes*, vol. XXVII (London: Chapman & Hall), 60.

[12]. Armstrong, 13.

[13]. Robert Browning, *The Works of Robert Browning* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1912), ed. F. G. Kenyon.

CHAPTER ONE

BROWNING AND VICTORIAN POETICS: FICTION AND IDEOLOGY

Victorian aesthetics is fundamentally a political discourse. Victorian poetics was in a close dialogue with the prevailing contemporary political discourses, including utilitarianism, political economy, and the discussion of democracy. Victorian aesthetic discourse participated in contemporary political discourses, at once adopting and often negating them. Therefore any serious discussion of Victorian poetry should begin with an investigation of the multi-layered relationships between aesthetic and political discourses. A good place to study the close ties between the two is the Victorian literary reviews, especially reviews of major works by Tennyson and Browning. Isobel Armstrong points out that "Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) immediately raised nearly all the problems which were to preoccupy critics during the next four decades."[1] One of the important issues raised by Tennyson reviewers, especially William Fox, Arthur Hallam and John Wilson, was the question of the status and role of poetry in contemporary society, which was being rapidly industrialized. In the nineteenth century, as Alan Sinfield points out, with the rise of the middle class and their political hegemony through utilitarianism, poetry came to be considered less important and became *marginalized*.[2] Thus one of the central concerns of nineteenth century poetics was the urgent necessity of defending poetry from its questionable status.

Beginning in the early decades of the century, there were growing voices questioning the status of poetry in the new form of society that massive industrial progress was inaugurating. Thomas Peacock's utilitarian aesthetic in *The Four Ages of*

Poetry (1820) contends that poetry is no longer important in the contemporary society, since poetry has not made such progress as could be seen in other parts of society. Claiming that poetry, "like other trades, takes its rise in the demand for the commodity, and flourishes in proportion to the extent of the market,"[3] Peacock contends that poetry in his time would not find readers for its morbid irrationality. He remarks:

> A poet in our times is semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism, in which he buries himself like a mole, to throw up the barren hillocks of his Cimmerian labours. The philosophic mental tranquility which looks round with an equal eye on all external things, collects a store of ideas, discriminates their relative value, assigns to all their proper place, and from the materials of useful knowledge thus collected, appreciated, and arranged, forms new combinations that impress the stamp of their power and utility on the real business of life, is diametrically the reverse of that frame of mind which poetry inspires, or from which poetry can emanate.[4]

Such phrases as "civilized community," "exploded superstitions," "march of intellect," and "progress of reason" reflect the utilitarian values and principles by which the contemporary society was governed and regulated overall. Peacock's utilitarian aesthetics condemns the contemporary poetry for breeding a "frame of mind" that is the reverse of the sprit of utilitarianism. His aesthetics denies to the contemporary poetry the status of being one of the major social and political discourses because he believes it does

not contribute to the utilitarian progress of society he values so much; thus poetry is to be marginalized.

As clearly indicated by Percy B. Shelley's response to Peacock in his *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), a major line of development in the nineteenth century poetics was developed under this kind of the Peacockean pressure. The contemporary poetics had to redefine the role of poetry in a society primarily governed by the principles of utilitarianism and search for some ways in which poetry could continue to exist within it.

Obviously the nineteenth century witnessed unprecedented social change in England. Politically, the French Revolution (1789-99) was followed by political unrest and struggle for democracy both in England and on the European continent. Economically, the irreversible change in the mode of production, from feudal to capitalistic, and the ensuing industrial progress were rapidly introducing a new kind of society. As critics point out, Carlyle's short essay entitled *Signs of the Times* (1829) seems to best summarize the nature and problem of the social changes that Browning's contemporaries were struggling with. Carlyle defines his age as "the Mechanical Age," where "nothing is done directly, or by hand." [5] This mechanical age has brought many "wonderful accessions," but at the same time, he insightfully points out, it has caused a fundamental change in the political economy of the period, "strangely altering the old relations, and increasing the distance between the rich and the poor."[6] For Carlyle, the most problematic aspect of the mechanical age is that it brought "a mighty change in our *whole* manner of existence" (italics are mine) so that "Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also." [7] He continues:

> For the same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions,—for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn mechanism, and are of a mechanical character.[8]

This Carlylean concern that the whole human condition had been given a mechanical character with the progress of industrialization became one of the major shaping elements of nineteenth-century poetics. The industrial revolution did not bring changes only to contemporary political economy. As Raymond Williams points out, the socio-cultural reactions to the changes brought about by industrial progress caused "a radical change in the idea of art, of the artist, and of their place in society."[9] Nineteenth-century poetics began with a reaction against the situation in which the whole human condition was given a mechanical character with industrial progress. In his *Defence,* Shelley certainly articulated the characteristic emphasis of contemporary poetics that would last throughout the century: a strong critique of the new form of society that industrial progress was inaugurating, and of the values and principles that this new society was embracing. Shelley's critique of the new form of society in his *Defence* is particularly important in that it opens a way for contemporary poetics to extend its aesthetics into politics, culture, society, and history, and provides an important clue towards understanding Browning and Victorian poetry.

The Shelleyan voice against the bourgeois hegemony and its utilitarian poetics in contemporary society continues to sound in Victorian poetry. A well-known Browning critic, Philip Drew, states that "more and more, I think, we are coming to see that the Victorians were confronted, as we are, with the problems of an urban industrial society, and tried, as we are no doubt trying, to evolve values by which man can live in such a society... It is my conviction that the more we know about the nineteenth century the greater Browning will be seen to be." [10] As Drew insightfully points out, Browning's poetry, like other Victorian poetry, was primarily concerned with investigating the nature and problems of various social changes that industrial progress was introducing into Victorian society, and with investigating the new constitutive elements of Victorian culture.

As mentioned before, Victorian poetics is fundamentally a political discourse. A critic remarks that "Victorian poetry began in a vacuum,"[11] referring thereby to the deaths of major Romantics and the decline of literary poetry against popular poetry at the beginning of Victorian era. Nevertheless, young Victorian poets, especially Tennyson and Browning, inherited and continued the political tendencies of their Romantic predecessors, especially their strong critique of the values and principles embraced and promoted in contemporary industrial society. In Browning's poetry there is an undeniable trace of Shelleyan Romantic reaction to the mechanical character of human condition under the newly industrialized society. However, his politicized aesthetics developed in a complex way, at once adopting Shelley and at the same time negating him through other political discourses. At this juncture, it might be helpful to discuss Shelley's politicized aesthetics in some detail.

As Sinfield correctly points out, Shelley's argument in *Defence* is a highly political one in that it is directed "against the nexus of attitudes and theories through which the industrial revolution was being explained and prompted by manufacturers and intellectuals associated with them."[12] Like Carlyle, Shelley points out the growing gap between the poor and the rich; Shelley's critique of "an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty"[13] corresponds to Carlyle's disapproval of the mechanical character of whole human efforts, attachments, and opinions. The similarity in argument between Shelley and Carlyle clearly illustrates how closely the aesthetic discussions of the period were interlocked with political discourses. In his *Defence,* Shelley presents his theory of imagination as an alternative to the unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty and of the institutional superstructures based on it, thus extending aesthetics into politics. Shelley contends that his age is in need of true poets more than any other age in history, since poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of the World"[14] who can reform society by readjusting and realigning the collective imagination of society through their insight and prophecy.

One of the main emphases in his *Defence* is the image of the poet as a prophet or a seer. Under the contemporary industrialized society, Williams points out, the production of art and literature became subject to the law of the market, just like other kinds of material production, and the artist or poet also came to be treated as "just one more producer of commodity for the market."[15] According to Williams, a new emphasis on the poet as a seer or a prophet came out as a response to this situation, and this emphasis led to another important response: "an emphasis on embodiment in art of certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an

industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or even destroying."[16] If poetry is to be more than a mere commodity, it has to contain within it something of a higher order or truth about human experiences. This is what Shelley repeatedly emphasized throughout his *Defence*. Shelley states that "poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order ... they are the institutors of law, and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion."[17] He continues, "Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving: it is ever still the light of life; the source of whatever of beautiful, or generous, or true can have place in an evil time,"[18] and again, "The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry."[19]

Browning's position in his *Essay on Shelley* is an interesting adoption of the Shelleyan reaction to industrialization and to his idea of poet. This *Essay on Shelley* has been the object of much critical dispute, and it marks an important development in Victorian poetics. Browning contends that literary history alternates between two different poetic faculties, the subjective and the objective. First, Browning characterizes the subjective poet as a *seer* or *prophet*:

> He, gifted like the objective poet, with the fuller perception of nature and man, is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth, -- an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees—the

> Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand, --it is toward these he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity, he has to do... He does not paint pictures and hang them on the walls, but rather carries them on the retina of his own eyes: we must look deep into his human eyes, to see those pictures on them. He is rather a seer, accordingly, than a fashioner.[20]

The subjective poet sees "not what man sees, but what God sees," working with "the primal elements of humanity." This notion of the poet as a seer or a prophet is not a new one. What is important is the new emphasis given to the old concept during the early decades of the nineteenth century. According to Williams, "the positive consequence of the idea of art as a superior reality was that it offered an immediate basis for an important criticism of industrialism. The negative consequence was that it tended, as both the situation and the opposition hardened, to isolate art, to specialize the imaginative faculty to this kind of activity, and thus to weaken the dynamic function which Shelley proposed for it."[21] The most serious problem that the subjective poet and his poetry created is that the higher order or truth a poet may find, tends to remain subjective and confined to private insights. The higher order or truth is often untransferable; the poet cannot find analogous forms or available objects to translate it. So it remains private and does not reach out into community, society, or history. In Shelley's "To a Skylark," the poet entreats the skylark:

> Teach us, Sprite or Bird,
>
> What sweet thoughts are thine;
>
> I have never heard

Praise of love or wine

That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine. (61-65)

The poet attempts to communicate the skylark's song through various similes--poet, maiden, glow-worm, and rose. However, each simile fails to fully translate the skylark's singing -- as the skylark is unseen, the poet is "hidden"(36); the glow-worm is "unbeholden"(48), and the rose is also "embowered / in its own green leaves"(51-52). Thus, the subjective poet "does not paint pictures and hang them on the walls" for everyone to see, "but rather carries them on the retina of his own eyes." For Shelley, unfortunately, the knowledge of the higher order or truth that the poet is able to perceive cannot be shared by average minds but by only the few who have the same quality of perception as the poet. Shelley asserts, "the jury which sits in judgement upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations."[22] Thus, for him, "a poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sound."[23] His poetic vision cannot be extended into community, society, or history.

Browning's other poetic faculty, the objective poet, on the other hand, is directed towards community, society, and history. It brings the private expressive world of the subjective poet into the public arena of discourse where the limit of a subject-centered utterance of lyricism is revealed and its validity is tested. While the subjective poet embodies what he perceives in reference to the absolute, the objective poet reproduces what he perceives in reference to the common ground of apprehension of ordinary men:

> One whose endeavor has been to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart

and brain), with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow-men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction.[24]

The objective poet focuses on reproducing "the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain,"[25] as the subjective poet does on "nature and man." The objective poet has a far superior perception of nature and man than does an average man. Nevertheless, he makes efforts to reproduce his perception in reference to the "doings of men" in society, to their daily lives, with the whole spectrum of human feelings and emotions under a variety of human situations. Thus, his primary concern is to bring his perception into a common ground of understanding, a public arena of discourse where various social transactions occur:

> It has been obtained through the poet's double faculty of seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply than is possible to the average mind, at the same time that he is so acquainted and in sympathy with its narrower comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole. The auditory of such a poet will include, not only the intelligences which, save for such assistance, would have missed the deeper meaning and enjoyment of the original objects, but also the spirits of a like endowment with his own, who, by means of his abstract, can forthwith pass to the reality it was made from, and either corroborate their impressions of things known already, or supply themselves with new form whatever shows in the inexhaustible variety of existence may have hitherto escaped their knowledge.[26]

Browning names the employment of the objective poetic faculty "dramatic poetry."[27] The objective poet consciously attempts to bring poetry into the public arena of discourse, in so far as a drama is written to be staged for an audience to watch it. Here Browning's idea of dramatic poetry is a critique of John Mill's notion of subjective expressive poetry. As mentioned before, Victorian poetics had to urgently deal with the Peacockean utilitarian aesthetic that argues for the uselessness of poetry in a newly industrialized society, where poetry was becoming marginalized. One possible way of dealing with Peacokean argument was to separate poetry from other social discourses and divest it of any social functions, assigning it to the realm of pure aestheticism. John Stuart Mill does this when he distinguishes poetry from eloquence:

> ... eloquence is *heard* poetry, is *over*heard. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exist in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds ... poetry ... is soliloquy in full dress.... But no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself. The actor knows that there is an audience present; but if he acts as though he knew it, he acts ill... he [the poet] can succeed in excluding from work every vestige of such lookings-forth into the outward and everyday world.... But when he turns around and addresses himself to another person; when the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end... then it ceases to be poetry and becomes eloquence.[28]

Here Mill frees poetry from social affairs. For him, eloquence works in the public realm of discourse since it directs itself out to other minds; it necessarily involves social

interactions and includes the notion of community and society. On the other hand, Mill believes, poetry works within the boundary of private feelings, emotions, and subjective psychology; it can freely work on itself without social conflicts or restrictions. For poetry, moral and social questions become irrelevant. However, one thing that Mill fails to recognize was that even the act of "feeling confessing itself to itself" in poetry is actually a social act. As long as poetry is written for readers, the act of feeling confessing itself to itself is always an act of feeling pouring itself to other minds—the audience or readers. As implied in his stage analogy, the act of feeling confessing itself to itself is a social act performed in a space; the act of confessing on the stage is directed to the audience and any subjective expressionism on the stage becomes the object of scrutiny or criticism for the audience. Nevertheless, Mill asks poets to deny the fact that the whole poetic discourse is always a social practice that operates in a public dimension, emulating other discourses, and subject to the market system of production and consumption, especially when poets began to be aware of the presence of the reader more acutely than ever.

A different direction that Browning and other Victorian poets chose to take was to bring poetry into the public arena of disputes and politics, extending the Millite notion of poetry into *eloquence*. Instead of overhearing the poetic utterance confessed in a remote space of a private, individual, idiosyncratic world of feelings and emotions, the Victorian poets attempted to bring the poetic utterance actively into the broad public space of social discourse, and to test its validity there. This attempt resulted in the emergence of Victorian dramatic poetry. Interestingly, Mill's own analogy of a poet to an actor exactly describes the very structure of Victorian dramatic poetry. In Victorian dramatic poetry, first, the

subject-centered, confessional lyricism is presented, and, at the same time, any positions or claims that this subjective utterance establishes are undermined by its listener or reader, as best illustrated in Victorian dramatic monologue. In this way Victorian dramatic poetry becomes, as Armstrong points out, at once an expressive model and an epistemological model.[29]

The conflation of Mill's po*etry* to *eloquence* is possible, W. Fox suggests, through "sympathy." Fox contends that poetry in an industrialized society still can be useful. In his review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, Fox contends, "it would be pity that poetry should be an exception to the great law of progression that obtains in human affairs; and it is not. The machinery of a poem is not less susceptible of improvement than the machinery of a cotton-mill."[30] For Fox, the utility of poetry can be found in its ability to explore the human mind and psychology. For him, this aspect of poetry has important political implications. In his review of Tennyson's poetry he writes:

> ... there is sincerity where the author writes from experience, and accuracy whether he writes from experience or observation; and he only writes from experience and observation, because he has felt and thought, and learned to analyze thought and feeling; because his own mind is rich in poetical associations, and he has wisely been contend with its riches; and because, in his composition, he has not sought to construct an elaborate and artificial harmony, but only to pour forth his thought in those expressive and simple melodies whose meaning, truth and power, are the soonest recognized and the longest felt.

The most important department in which metaphysical science has been a pioneer for poetry is in the analysis of particular states of mind; a work which is

now performed with ease, power, and utility as much increased, as in the grosser dissections of the anatomical lecture. Hence the poet, more fortunate than the physician, has provision made for an inexhaustible supply of subjects. A new world is discovered for him to conquer.[31]

On the surface, Fox's claims of "particular states of human minds" as the subject of poetry looks little different from Mill's claim that the exploration of feelings and emotions is the only poetic subject. However, unlike Mill, Fox consciously makes an effort to bring the exploration of human minds into a public arena of disputes and politics. As mentioned previously, Fox claims that poetry, like the cotton mill, can progress along with material progress of society and contribute to the good of society. For Fox, what saves the exploration of particular states of mind from the danger of solipsism, or private enterprise, is the idea of "sympathy." Sympathy became a key word with important political implications in nineteenth-century poetics. Early in the century Shelley emphasized the importance of sympathy in his poetics, claiming that it is sympathy that makes the formation of society possible. For Shelley the sympathy one feels towards other human beings is a reminder that he lives in a society:

Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, next becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expressions; and language, gesture, and the imitative arts, becomes at once the representation and the medium, the pencil and the picture, the chisel and the statue, the chord and the harmony. The social sympathies, or those laws from which as from its elements society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment that two human beings coexist; The future is

> contained within the present as the plant within the seed; and equality diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence, become the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action, inasmuch as he is social; and constitute pleasure in sensation, virtue in sentiment, beauty in art, truth in reasoning, and love in the intercourse of kind.[32]

Nevertheless, it seems the full political potential of sympathy is not fully explored in Shelley's poetry.

Shelley's notion of a poet--"a poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sound"-- and the untransferable nature of truth in his poetry associate him more closely with the subjective poet than the objective poet. As implied in his discussion of the two poetic faculties, Browning detaches himself from the early influence of Shelley, and adopts W.J. Fox's idea of "sympathy" as a political tool and his notion of poetry essentially being "dramatic." Browning states that the objective poet, "in his appeal to the aggregate human mind, chooses to deal with the doings of men (the result of which dealing, in its pure form, when even description, as suggesting a describer, is dispensed with, is what we call *dramatic* poetry"[33] (italics are mine). The notion of poetry being essentially dramatic is initially implied in Mill's idea that the purest form of expression is feeling "dramatized" as "soliloquy." However, for Mill, the idea of poetry as dramatized soliloquy and its subjective expressionism is apolitical since it is not directed to other minds, while eloquence is directed to them: poetry is overheard and eloquence is simply heard.

It was Fox's utilitarian poetics and his idea of *sympathy* that fully helped develop Browning's dramatic poetry and its political implications. In his review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), Fox remarks:

> A genuine poet has deep responsibilities to his country and the world, to the present and future generations, to earth and heaven.... They can influence the associations of unnumbered minds; they can command the sympathies of unnumbered hearts; they can disseminate principles; they can give those principles power over men's imaginations; they can excite in a good cause the sustained enthusiasm that is sure to conquer; they can blast the laurels of the tyrants, and hallow the memories of the martyrs of patriotism; they can act with a force, the extent of which it is difficult to estimate, upon national feelings and character, and consequently upon national happiness.[34]

For Fox's contemporaries, sympathy was a faculty used to help understand certain difficult situations of other persons by exchanging places with them through the power of imagination. The term sympathy had a wide currency in contemporary poetics, with ample moral and social references. Like other Victorians, Fox believed that the employment of the faculty of sympathy by every member of society could resolve various social conflicts and problems. Thus, for Fox, sympathy becomes an important political tool. In Fox, the word "sympathy" is engaged with such vocabularies as "disseminates," "excite," and "blast," or such phrases as "national feelings and character" or "national happiness." What is important at this juncture is that the employment of the faculty of sympathy is possible by *dramatizing* human feelings and emotions. To feel sympathy with other people is to *dramatically* reconstruct the situations of other persons so as to be able to enter the state of their feelings

and emotions. Therefore, Fox's utilitarian poetics emphasizes the political function of poetry that dramatically reconstructs the structures of certain feelings or emotions.

Browning's poetic development was in close dialogue with Shelley, Mill and Fox. His position, revealed in his *Essay on Shelley,* is a curious amalgam of these three influential figures of his time. From the earliest phase of his poetic career, Browning's poetry reveals a certain aspiration to the Promethean spirit and creativity, as clearly implied in his *Essay on Shelley* when he says that "the subjective might seem to be the ultimate requirement of every age."[35] The characters from his earliest poems, *Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello*, are portrayed as figures with some obvious traces of the Shelleyan idea of poet as a seer or a prophet. However, that all these poetic figures find their initial dreams or aspirations cannot be fulfilled, certainly indicates what Browning's position towards the Shelleyan or Millite subjective expressionism is. Though he never seems to discard the idea of the subjective poet, Browning was well aware of the limits of subjective expressiveness. What separates Browning from his early mentor, Shelley, is that through his dramatic poetry Browning consciously makes efforts to bring the subjective expressiveness of Shelley and Mill into the public arena of discourse, that is, into community, society and history.

In Browning's dramatic poetry, private feeling and individual consciousness are not just expressed, but *dramatized* so that they become the object of scrutiny and criticism. Importantly, the politics and problems of the human mind—feelings, emotions and consciousness, the main components of human essence that the subjective poet is primarily concerned with—are brought under scrutiny. In his essay Browning speaks of the politics of the subjective poet:

> ... the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the working of his brain.[36]

The study of the subjective poet is "himself," "the primal elements of humanity" that reside inside man. For him, nature and the objective world are "imperfect" and they become something meaningful only when they can illuminate his inner light and power. The subjective poet "is impelled to embody the things he perceives ... with reference ... to the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth.... Not what man sees, but what God sees,—the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand,--it is toward these that he struggles." For the subjective poet, "his own soul" is "the nearest reflex of that absolute Mind." The human mind as the reflection of God's Mind creates and rearranges the whole of human experience.

Browning's dramatic poetry which explores the politics of the human mind is best illustrated in his *The Ring and the Book.* In *The Ring and the Book* the poet persona describes how he creates his poetry out of *the Old Yellow Book*:

> I find first
> Writ down for very A B C of fact,
> "In the beginning God made heaven and earth";
> From which, no matter with what lisp, I spell

And speak you out a consequence—that man

Man,—as befits the made, the inferior thing,—

Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn,

Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow,—

Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain

The good beyond him,--which attempt is growth,—

Repeats God's process in man's due degree,—

Attaining man's proportionate result,—

Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps. (I. 707-719)

The poet persona revives the characters of his tale from *the Old Yellow Book*, like the biblical character Elisha "Who bade them lay his staff on a corpse-face" (I. 761). As a reflex of God's mind in a reduced scale, the human mind creates his conditions and experiences: "For such man's feat is, in the due degree, /—Mimic creation, galvanism for life" (I. 739-40). However, the human mind's creation is fundamentally different from that of God's mind. Unlike "the Supreme Intelligence that apprehends all things in their absolute truth," human mind creates a *fiction*. The poet persona asks about the nature of his mind's creation, "What 's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue? / This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine" (I. 700-1). It is a "*fiction* " (I. 705; italics are mine).

Browning's dramatic poetry explores the nature and creation of the human mind. His poetry dramatizes the situations in which individual poetic voices are articulated. This dramatization brings the Millite subjective world of human feelings and emotions into the public arena of society and history. This allows readers to examine in a broader social context the validity of various forms of individual consciousness, the human mind's creation,

which is, in a fundamental way, a fiction. Browning's poetry is a political discourse in that it examines the various fictions of human consciousness that exercise a coercive power on human thoughts and actions and exposes their politics, which ultimately suggests a change in existing human relations of power and domination. This political aspect in Browning's poetry was provided, it seems to me, most directly with his adoption of Jeremy Bentham's theory of *fiction* or philosophy of *as-if.* Bentham's theory of fiction is primarily a theory of language. Bentham notes that, in contemporary language usage, certain words that represent fictional entities are accepted, by confusion, as if they were representing real entities. Bentham notes:

> "Division of entities into real and fictitious; or say, division of noun-substantive into names of real entities, and names of fictitious entities.
>
> By the division and distinction thus brought to view, great is the light thrown upon the whole field of logic, and thereby over the whole field of art and science, more especially the psychological and thence the ethical or moral branch of science.
>
> It is for want of a clear conception of this distinction that many an empty name is considered as the representative of a correspondent reality; in a word, that mere fictions are in abundance regarded as realities. [37]

Bentham finds that fictional entities are accepted as real entities, not simply in the realm of language, but, more seriously, in various institutional and cultural practices. Bentham's "Fictions of Law" is concerned with how fiction can intervene in reality. His theory of fiction is primarily concerned with attacking contemporary legal practices in England, such that a fiction is accepted and exercises a coercive power in a legal court. About Bentham's "Fictions of Law" John Hill Burton wrote in 1828:

> The 'Fictions of Law', of which the English practice is so full, were repeatedly and earnestly attacked by Bentham, both collectively and in detail. The example shown to the world, of falsehood deliberately, and on a fixed system, told in the very workshops of justice, and by those who are employed to support truth and honesty, he looked upon as holding out a pernicious example to the public. Without any sarcastic or reprehensory qualification, a Fiction of Law may be defined in general as the saying something exists which does not exist, and acting as if it existed; or *vice versa*.[38]

Bentham's theory of fiction notices the way something that does not have any counterpart in the world is presented as if it were a real entity, and this fictional entity exercises coercive power in the thoughts and actions of individuals involved.

Some implications of Bentham's fictions of law were of tremendous importance to Browning's poetic development. Browning noticed that the fictional entity and its coercive power in the legal world can also be found in other institutional practices, and legal fiction is interlocked with other cultural and institutional fictions, especially those of politics, religion, class, and gender; so he made an extensive investigation of the politics of fiction. Thus, Archangeli in *the Ring and the Book* claims, "Law, Gospel and the Church—from these we leap / To the very last revealment, easy rule / Befitting the well-born and thorough-bred / O' the happy day we live in" (VII. 731-35). According to Isobel Armstrong, Browning's poetic development was, to a great extent, indebted to Bentham's theory of fiction.[39] *The Ring and the Book* is an exhaustive exploration into Victorian cultural fictions and into how they are exerting coercive powers on human thoughts and actions. Throughout the twelve monologues of the work, various forms of

cultural institutional fictions are examined in the multiple sets of relationship: religion in Caponsacchi and the Pope, sexual politics in Guido and Pompilia, or Caponsacchi and Pompilia, class questions in Half-Rome & the Other Half-Rome and Tertium Quid, or Guido and Pompilia, etc.

As Armstrong insightfully points out, Bentham's idea of fiction and its coercive power on human thoughts and actions forms an essential part of Browning's poetry.[40] One thing that I would like to discuss in some detail at this point is the similarity between Bentham's idea of *fiction* and the Marxist notion of *ideology*. The Marxist idea of ideology greatly helps illuminate the issue of fiction and its intervention in Browning's poetry. Undoubtedly the single most controversial idea in Marxist thinking is "ideology." Despite the wide popularity of the term in the development of the Marxist critique of the political economy of capitalism and its cultural productions, ideology is a concept about which the least polemical consensus has yet been reached, as proved by the various definitions of the term currently available.[41] Ideology is not a single concept; rather, it is a cluster of meanings and ideas, often contradictory, contained under a single word. Internal fractures and contradictions in the concept of ideology make it difficult to fully grasp the scope and range of its signification in contemporary social theories, a condition that ultimately reduces the usefulness of the concept. A far more problematic matter than such internal contradictions is the possible inadequacy of the concept in current social theories, as suggested by post-modernists or post-structuralists. This makes it necessary to sort through various concepts of ideology and decide whether the Marxist idea of ideology is still an adequate and useful concept for explaining the cultural productions of a society.

The contradictions in discussion of ideology were inherited from Marx's own writings on the subject. One dominant definition of ideology, which was initiated by Marx and is still widely accepted, is "false consciousness." Traditionally Marxist discussion of ideology was focused on certain forms of mystification or falsification of real material conditions. This definition of ideology as false consciousness can be found in one of Engels' letters:

> Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces. Because it is a process of thought he derives its form as well as its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material, which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, and does not investigate further for a more remote source independent of thought; indeed this is a matter of course to him because as all action is mediated by thought, it appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought.[42]

For Engels here, ideology has nothing to do with material conditions; it is purely a mental process within the realm of thought. It derives its form and content from thoughts. For Engels, ideology exists only when material social relations are not known to men, and when men take for granted the dictations of ideology without questioning. This is little different from Bentham's notion of fiction that a certain fictitious entity, which does not have real existence, exercises coercive powers. Despite this clear-cut explanation of ideology as false consciousness, the actual development of discussions regarding

ideology in the Marxist tradition have become much more complicated and internally fractured than Engels' explanation would suggest. The complication was inherited from Marx and Engels themselves. The following passage from Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology* may help clarify the point:

> Men are producers of their concepts, ideas, etc,--real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.[43]

One thing that Marx repeatedly emphasizes in his writings is man in the actual life-process, man in the process of creating himself through his labor in nature. Man's consciousness in this life-process can never be separated from his material conditions and circumstances. It is indissolubly bound up with them: "consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process." This is Marx's strongest critique of "doctrine of ideologues ... which in a contrived manner seeks to find primary causes" in "ideas." Marx continues:

> In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. This is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the

> basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding form of consciousness, these no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.[44]

The above passage contains two contradictory ideas on the relationship between ideology and material social process, and the contradiction persistently appears in later discussions of ideology. One obvious point that Marx emphasizes is that consciousness is indissolubly bound up with material social process. For Marx, consciousness is always a practical consciousness; consciousness itself is always a part of the material life-process. While he emphasizes this point, the use of the phrase, "the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process," obscures the very emphasis. By the use of the phrase of "reflexes and echoes" Marx presents consciousness as if it can be separated from the "material life-process." Raymond Williams points out that "separation and abstraction of 'consciousness and its products' as a 'reflective' or 'second-stage' process results in an ironic idealization of 'consciousness and its products' at this secondary level.'"[45] In the passage quoted above Marx and Engels emphasize the indissolubility of consciousness through the same dualistic framework of consciousness and material social process that the contemporary Hegelian philosophical idealists held. The difference is that, while the German idealists contend that

"idea" is the center of the whole of human condition, Marx and Engels emphasize that the life-process determines consciousness. According to Terry Eagleton, "in their zeal to worst the idealists they [Marx and Engels] risk ending up here simply inverting them, retaining a sharp duality between 'consciousness' and 'practical activity' but reversing the causal relations between them."[46]

It is this kind of dualistic notion about consciousness and the material social process, rather than "indissolubility," which was existent in Mark and Engels, that persisted in later discussions of ideology, in spite of the fact that " 'consciousness and its products' are always, though in variable forms, parts of the material social process itself."[47] The concept of ideology as false consciousness, when it was juxtaposed with the idea of indissolubility, raises an important question: how would man's consciousness and its products which are indissolubly bound to his real life-process, material social process, be "false"? Does not even the false consciousness come from real material conditions? One way of maintaining ideology in the negative sense of false consciousness is to argue that consciousness and its productions "come in variable forms, and that some of these forms are "ideology" while others are not."[48] In this line of development ideology is contrasted with "science." In Marx, the word "science" is used in the broader sense of "systematic knowledge" or "organized learning" about "the active material social process." Marx emphasizes "real, positive science" that studies, not "man" and "the world" in static, separated categories, but "an active, interactive, and in a key sense self-creating material social process" where the two are dialectically interacting.[49] This was an important development that attempted to understand and grasp consciousness and its production as indissolubly connected to material social process.

Ideology is contrasted with science. In this contrast ideology is a *false* consciousness, while science is a *practical* consciousness. As the opposite of science, ideology was developed as the sense of "the received assumptions, concepts, and points of view which can be shown to prevent or distort such detailed and connected knowledge."[50] Thus, for Engels, ideology is the conscious act of falsifying or mystifying the real material social process, as is shown in a letter previously quoted. In *Feuerbach*, Engels notes:

> Every ideology... once it has arisen, develops in connection with the given concept-material, and develops this material further; otherwise it would cease to be ideology, that is, occupation with thoughts as with independent entities, developing independently and subject only to their own laws. That the material life conditions of the persons inside whose heads this thought process goes on, in the last resort determines the course of this process, remains of necessity unknown to these persons, for otherwise there would be an end to all ideology.[51]

Ideology is an abstract, limited knowledge about the practical, active social process. It is a false, at best, pseudo-scientific rationalization of real material social process.

More seriously, it functions autonomously, separated from the material social process. Thus Eagleton points out, "Karl Marx's theory of ideology is probably best seen as a part of his more general theory of alienation."[52] Discussing alienated labor in the capitalistic mode of production in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx states:

> For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself.... It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains

> in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object...The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour become an object, an external existence but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.[53]

The theoretical implications of this passage are important and undeniable. As in his labor in the capitalistic mode of production, according to Marx, man, in certain social conditions, loses connection with, and becomes estranged from, his labor, the product of his labor, and also the process of his labor. "Human powers, products, and processes escape from the control of human subjects and comes to assume an apparently autonomous existence."[54] The autonomous entity exerts a powerful influence on human thoughts and actions. This Marxist idea of "reification" is not different from the Benthamite theory of fiction. The autonomous entity in Marx, detached from the material life-process in assuming autonomous status, is nothing other than *fiction* in Bentham. Like Marx, Bentham contends that fiction, despite its fictionality, exerts real substantial power on human thoughts and actions.

Marx's notion of science, which focuses on real material social process, is important as a way of overcoming ideological falsification or mystification of material social process. Marx's idea of science is a valuable one, but such scientific knowledge of material social process is not practically easy to achieve. As Williams points out, it is not easy to establish "a knowable distinction" between scientific knowledge and ideological knowledge.[55] Is not ideological rationalization based on real life-process, as much as science is? How do we

distinguish practical consciousness from false consciousness? Since man's consciousness is indissolubly connected to his real life-process, is not even any false rationalization in man's consciousness based on real-life process? Then, is not ideology a rationalization of real material conditions? Eagleton asks similar questions: "Are not the illusions of bourgeois society in some sense actually true to its practices? If they are rationalization of contradictions to which those practices give rise, are not such misconceptions indeed rooted in the 'real life-process'; rather than idly autonomous of it?"[56] Williams points out that the discussion of science in Engels and after is quite different from the "uncritical" use of science in Marx.[57] Engels and others assume an a *priori* something that escapes from Marx's scientific analysis, such as the privileged consciousness of the proletariat for orthodox Marxists. Ideology, developed as the opposite of science, is necessarily a limited concept.

It is a genuinely difficult matter to distinguish between scientific and ideological knowledge without an assumption of a priori. To establish a knowable distinction between practical consciousness and ideological consciousness is not easy since in a sense ideological false consciousness is based on real life-process as much as practical consciousness is. Ideology in Marxist thinking is not precise enough. This aspect is more specifically illustrated in the related topic of base and superstructure. The architectural model of economic "base" and institutional, socio-political superstructure has been a key concept in the Marxist critique of capitalist political economy. Like ideology, unfortunately, this well-known model unintentionally presupposes the duality between consciousness and its products, and the material social process, which continues to remain in later discussions of the subject.

In his 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx contends:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production that correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.[58]

Here superstructure is presented as legal and political practices or institutions that represent the existing relations of production. And definite forms of social consciousness correspond to the relations of production. From this passage it is not clear whether the definite forms of social consciousness are scientific or merely ideological. Another writing of Marx that discusses superstructure clarifies the point. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, 1851-2* Marx writes:

> Upon the several forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, a whole superstructure is reared of various and peculiarly shaped feelings, illusions, habits of thought and conceptions of life. The whole class produces and shapes these out of its material foundation and out of the corresponding social conditions. The individual unit to whom they flow through tradition and education may fancy that they constitute the true reasons for and premises of his conduct.[59]

The "various and peculiarly shaped feelings, illusions, habits of thought and concepts of life" are the definite forms of social consciousness which Marx discusses in the previous passage. Here superstructure is presented as ideology that rationalizes the existing material and social conditions. The important point is that this rationalization of ideology is not necessarily false or untrue to real material conditions, rather it is an attempt to be true to real material conditions:

> At certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. There begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological—forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.[60]

Here legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophical forms of society are forms of ideology. Importantly, these ideological forms are not just false rationalization or mystification of real relations of production but the very space where "men become conscious of this contradiction and fight it out." This aspect in ideology makes it genuinely difficult to distinguish ideology from science, and a false consciousness from practical

consciousness. In this sense, as mentioned before, ideology developed as the opposite of science retains only limited value as a concept.

Marx's notion of ideological forms, as the space where men sense contradictions in relations of production and fight them out, requires a rather different notion of ideology from the one conceived of as merely false consciousness. Obviously Louis Althusser's explanation of ideology merits some serious attention. For Althusser, ideology does not represent the relation between men and their real material conditions of existence but the way men live the relation. In *For Marx*, Althusser defines ideology:

> Ideology is a matte of the *lived* relation between men and their world... In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but *the way* they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an '*imaginary*,' '*lived*' relation. Ideology, then, is the expression of the relation between men and their 'world,' that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence. In ideology, the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses* a *will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or nostalgia, rather than describing a reality.[61]

Althusserian Marxism generally regards ideology as the general material process of production of ideas, beliefs, and values. Althusser's understanding of ideology is important in several ways. As Marx's 1859 preface notes, ideology is not just a mirror-like reflection of economic conditions or simply justification of them. As Althusser emphasizes, ideology is a field of struggle where real relations are invested in imaginary relations. The imaginary

relations of ideology express to some extent genuine necessity and represent real life-process. Even the bourgeois notion of labor and the capitalistic mode of production, which Marx condemns for its dehumanizing nature, expresses a real necessity of life: *production* itself. What matters is how one formulates one's relation to it. The Althusserian notion of ideology is important in that it recognizes the genuine necessity that is invested in the imaginary relation of ideology.

For Althusser, ideology is a necessary medium in which men live out their relations to a social structure. However, this does not mean that he sees ideology simply in a descriptive and non-critical way. Althusser's fundamental position is a critique of ideology. His well-known essay entitled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" focuses on how various institutional entities function as the ideological apparatus in a capitalist state. What he calls an "ideological state apparatus" is "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions."[62] In this essay, Althusser explains how ideology is fundamentally formulated through various forms of institutions and social practices, such as religion, education, family, law, political systems, trade-unions, mass communication systems, culture, including literature, the Arts, and sports.[63] This is a very serious revision of the traditional Marxist model of base and superstructure. Althusser's recognition of ideological state apparatus makes it necessary to modify the two-level model of base and superstructure into a three-level one: the base of material production, state and ideological state apparatus, and forms of consciousness. This is a much more subtle approach to the realm of ideology than traditional explanations of ideology have permitted.

Another important point that needs to be emphasized from Althusser is his notion of ideology as a strategy of containment. Althusser contends that "in ideology, the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses* a *will,* ... a hope or nostalgia, rather than describing a reality." According to him, ideology is not just description of a reality, rather it is an expression of will. This will or hope necessarily restructures and reorders reality, and more importantly, ideology develops certain strategies for that purpose. For Althusser, ideology is a matter of strategies. That ideology attempts to explain reality in a plausible whole, and in doing so recreates reality, was already recognized from the earliest stage of the development of Marxist thinking. The contribution of Althusserian Marxism is that it makes an effort to identify and explain the various forms of ideological strategies, which makes a discussion of ideology still important in modern social theories. Understanding ideology as a matter of strategies makes it possible to understand ideology, not as abstract, static, fixed sets of ideas, beliefs, and values, but as a *process* that is constantly adjusting itself and on the move.

Terry Eagleton in *Ideology: An Introduction* explains various forms of ideological strategies. Eagleton identifies six major ideological strategies: "unifying, action-oriented, rationalizing, legitimating, universalizing and naturalizing."[64] According to Eagleton, "ideologies are usually internally complex, differentiated formations,"[65] rather than unitary and homogenized ones. A successful and dominant ideology " 'speaks' from a multiplicity of sites, and in this subtle diffuseness presents no single target to its antagonists."[66] Eagleton reminds us that ideologies are "action-oriented sets of beliefs, rather than speculative theoretical systems."[67] Ideologies participate and actively intervene in reality, just as Bentham's fiction does.

As I will discuss in detail in later chapters, *The Ring and the Book* clearly demonstrates this aspect of ideology. Guido's fiction of honor drives him to kill Pompilia. Ideology also rationalizes and legitimates; ideologies are "systematic attempts to provide plausible explanations and justifications for social behaviour which might otherwise be the object of criticism."[68] Each monologue in *The Ring and the Book* is a strenuous and persuasive justification of his/her action by the characters themselves, including Guido, Pompilia, Caponsacchi, the Pope, and others; each monologue justifies certain ideological forms, and adopts different ideological strategies.

An important ideological strategy is to universalize and naturalize. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels point out:

> Each new class which puts itself in the place of the one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, put in an ideal form; it will give its ideas the form of universality, and present them a the only rational universally valid ones.[69]

A characteristic aspect of this ideological strategy is that it attempts to *dehistoricize.* Any ideology comes into being at a specific historical context. Once it becomes dominant, however, it attempts to present itself as universal, timeless, and natural, hiding the historical contexts that gave rise to it.

In *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, John Thompson makes a similar investigation of various ideological strategies. According to him, ideologies operate largely in three ways: legitimation, dissimulation, and reification. Ideology attempts to legitimate; "every system of domination ... seeks to cultivate a belief in its legitimacy, by appealing either to

rational, traditional or charismatic grounds."[70] By dissimulation, Thompson means that relations of domination ... may be concealed, denied, or 'blocked' in various ways" so that "these ways ... may conceal themselves ... presenting themselves as something other than what they are." [71] Thompson's notion of the ideological strategy of reification is similar to Eagleton's notion of universalization. Ideology operates "by means of *reification*, that is, by representing a transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were permanent, natural, and outside of time."[72]

The complex ways and various forms of strategies in which ideologies operate make it preposterous to dismiss ideologies as simply "unscientific" in a Marxist sense. Ideologies often represent "genuine wants, needs, and desires,"[73] as Eagleton notes. Drawing on the fact that ideology has emerged in conjunction with science, Thompson objects to regarding ideology as "failed science, as the hapless half of an inseparable pair." This is because, he argues, "the concept of ideology also emerged in conjunction with the critique of domination, and it is *this* link ... which must be taken as basic."[74] Thompson's recognition of the link provides an important suggestion for which direction a genuinely material discussion of ideology should take. Problems of the dichotomized notion of science vs. ideology can be solved by drawing on the undeniable fact that consciousness and its products are indissolubly interlocked within the material social process. What needs to be done in discussions of ideology is to investigate the various ideological strategies in which dominant social and cultural practices operate within this very indissolubility.

Raymond Williams' cultural materialism is probably one of the best examples of this sort of work. In *Marxism and Literature* Raymond Williams develops a unique idea on social practices by combining cultural theory with Marxism. In this book Williams

introduces a *theory of cultural materialism*, which he defines as "a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism."[75] The central tenet of Williams's cultural materialism is that *culture*, which bourgeois thinkers, and many Marxists as well, regard as something independent and separate from the material productions of society, is itself a part of material production. A crucial point of this materialization of culture is that it reveals problems and weaknesses of some fundamental Marxist concepts, such as base and superstructure, mediation, ideology, etc. Williams contends that many Marxist ideas are not truly Marxist because they reflect or are influenced by fragmentary and dichotomous ways of thinking characteristic of bourgeois culture.

A notorious example of such a case, Williams claims, is the separation of the economic base from the cultural superstructure. Williams contends that society is shaped as a complex whole formed by interrelations of a variety of social practices, and that, at the same time, this complex whole is not a state but a *process* that is always on the move. The only possible way for Williams to tap into this process is through "lived experience." Terry Eagleton correctly, however disapprovingly, points out that "it is precisely this insistence on experience, this passionate premium placed upon the "lived," which provides one of the centrally unifying themes" of Williams' work. Eagleton makes this point by drawing on the following passage from Williams:

> As for Marx, one accepted the emphases on history, on change, on the inevitably close relationships between class and culture, but the way this came through was, at another level, unacceptable. There was, in this position, a polarization and abstraction of economic life on the one hand and culture on the other, which did

not seem to me to correspond to the social experience of culture as others had lived it, and as one was trying to live it oneself.[76]

Williams claims that this polarization and abstraction in relations of economic base and cultural superstructure has been so habitually persistent in the development of Marxism that culture and material production have come to be understood as areas that can be separated from each other. As Williams points out, traditional explanations of base and superstructure, including Plekanov's distinction of "five [separable] and sequential elements,"[77] tend to abstract "the indissoluble connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity, and consciousness."[78] For Williams, a serious consequence of this abstraction is losing sight of a "constitutive process"[79] existing in the indissoluble connections.

Williams points out another serious abstraction in theories of culture: such as concepts of production, productive force, and productive work. In a capitalist society, the meaning of production has been limited to production of commodities, and this has led to a neglect and under-evaluation of that portion of social production that is called superstructure. Williams contends:

> The social and political order which maintains a capitalist market, like the social and political struggles which created it, is necessarily a material production. From castles and palaces and churches to prisons and workhouses and schools; from weapons of war to a controlled press: any ruling class, in variable ways though always materially, produces social and political order. They are never superstructural activities. They are the necessary material production.[80]

For Williams productive forces mean "all and any of the means of the production and reproduction of real life."[81] To maintain society, men cannot produce commodities only, they also have to produce politics, law, religion, etc. These superstructural elements play an essential role in the production and reproduction of human life. More importantly, for Williams as well as for Marx, these activities of production and reproduction produce themselves and their history.

What is repeatedly emphasized throughout *Marxism and Literature* is the "specific and indissoluble real processes"[82] existing in the production and reproduction of real life. However, for Williams this does not simply mean a recognition of a complex whole of social reality. In his essay entitled "Base and Superstructure in Materialist Cultural Theory," which is a valuable essay in that it recapitulates and summarizes all the issues of *Marxism and Literature*, Williams argues:

> If we come to say that society is composed of a larger number of social practices which form a concrete social whole, and if we give to each practice a certain specific recognition, adding only that they interact, relate and combine in very complicated ways, we are at one level much more obviously talking about reality, but we are at another level withdrawing from the claim that there is any process of determination. And this I, for one, would be very unwilling to do.[83]

The concept of totality for Williams is an alternative concept for the problematic base and superstructure. However, Williams objects to the notion of totality merely as the recognition that numerous interrelated and contemporaneous social practices are interlocked into a concrete and complex whole. It is missing an important element involved in the indissoluble social process: the intentions of the ruling class. Thus,

Williams observes that "the key question to ask about any notion of totality in cultural theory is this: whether the notion of totality includes the notion of intention."[84]

Williams contends that, in every society, and at every stage of its development, there surely exist expressions of social intention: certain laws, constitutions, theories which are "expressing and ratifying the domination of a particular class."[85] This important insight into human culture was first pointed out by Marx and Engels:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations; the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.[86]

This dominance in mental production by the dominant social class has been recognized by many later Marxists. However, most of them understood social intention of dominant classes as something obvious and explicit, and this often led to an abstract understanding of social intention. The concept of ideology is a good example of such an abstraction. Traditionally, ideology has been understood as "a relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a "worldview" or class outlook."[87] Williams argues that among the meanings, values, and beliefs that a certain class has, there also exists, apart from the articulated ones, "the relatively mixed, confused, incomplete, or inarticulate consciousness of actual men."[88] If the social

intention of the dominant class, or a section of the dominant class, is something explicit and has isolable meanings and practices which get imposed on other social classes, then it would be relatively easy to overthrow such meanings and practices. Class outlook is not pure and unitary. The social intentions of the dominant class are transmitted to the subordinate classes through very subtle mechanisms. Therefore, for him the concept of totality is useful only when it is supported, not by ideology, but by another important Marxist concept: *hegemony*.

Williams argues that in any society, in any particular period, there exists a "central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values" which represents the social intention of the dominant class, but which, unlike ideological instances that are relatively easy to isolate it, constitutes a sense of reality as "a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living."[89] In other words:

> It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of the absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives.[90]

This set of meanings and values does not operate in a static system; rather, it operates as a process that continually renews and modifies its shape. This hegemony of the dominant class transmits dominant culture to other cultures, and at the same time incorporates other cultures into it through hegemonic instances. For Williams, education is one of the major hegemonic instances, through which the dominant culture is distributed. Tradition is another instance. For Williams, tradition is "in practice the most evident expression of the

dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits."[91] Williams contends that what is passed off as "the tradition" is in fact a "selective" tradition.[92] From a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and values are chosen for emphasis, while certain others are excluded. Further, some of these meanings and values are reinterpreted or modified into something supportive or at least compatible with the dominant culture. This whole process of transmission and incorporation forms "a continual making and remaking of an effective dominant culture."[93]

Williams' work in *Marxism and Literature* is one possible way that a discussion of ideology can be productive. Another possibly productive direction that a discussion of ideology might move towards is in the consideration of discourse or discursive practices. Thompson argues:

> The analysis of ideology is fundamentally concerned with *language*, for language is the principal medium of meaning (signification) which serves to sustain relations of domination. Speaking a language is a way of acting, emphasized Austin and others; what they forgot to add is that ways of acting are infused with forms of power. The utterance of the simplest expression is an intervention in the world, more or less effective more or less endowed with institutional authority. 'Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge', writes Bourdieu, 'but also an instrument of power. One seeks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished.' [94]

Eagleton also suggests that the notion of ideology as discourse, as the third way between two extremes of ideology as "disembodied ideas," and of ideology, simply, as "behaviour patterns."[95]

Understanding ideology as a discursive practice can be important in three ways. First, it discusses ideology in its specific material practices by drawing on the materiality of language. Language is an important part of the material forces of society. An important emphasis in Marxist thinking has been placed on the materiality of language. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels argue that "language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men... ; for language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other man."[96] Williams also draws on the materiality of language by saying that "language has to be seen as a persistent kind of creation and re-creation: a dynamic presence and a constant regenerative process."[97] Since it focuses on the materiality of language, regarding ideology as a discursive practice can be used to investigate ideology, not in an abstract way, isolated from material process, but in its specific material conditions and process.

The next point that needs to be understood is that to see ideology as a discourse focuses on the question of power. Thompson emphasizes that "to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination."[98] Language is primarily about meanings and significations, and dominant ideologies exercise their power through the dissemination of meanings that are preferable to the ruling class. Therefore, as Thompson emphasizes, language is the principal medium through which relations of dominance are created and maintained. A last point that needs to be mentioned is the question of interpretation. Thompson believes that "the link between language and ideology provides the touchstone for the elaboration of a systematic methodology of interpretation." [99] Thompson draws on two considerations related to this linkage:

"discourse... is already an interpretation," and this must be recognized in order to form the "creative character of the interpretative process."[100]

That discourse is always already an interpretation is especially helpful in reading Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. The poem consists of twelve monologues that draw on the same murder case. Each monologue is a working of different individual consciousnesses, and it is fundamentally an *interpretation* of a murder case of the past. The extensively long poem, interestingly, is based largely on only two incidents—the flight of Pompilia from Guido's house and Guido's murder of Pompilia—with some minor related ones. The three monologues in the middle (V-VII) are the interpretations of the incidents by the main characters of the poem: Guido, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi, while the next three monologues (VIII-X) show how institutions interpret the incidents, especially law and religion. Guido, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi, alike, restructure and reorder the past in their interpretations for their respective presents. This act of interpretation is fundamentally connected to the question of power. Guido justifies his act of killing Pompilia to retain his power as a member of privileged class in a classed society and also his patriarchal authority within the institution of marriage. On the other hand, Pompilia's interpretation directly challenges the power represented by Guido. She consciously attempts to place herself outside of Guido's signification of honor, ultimately nullifying Guido's power. Also Caponsacchi renounces his institutionalized power as a priest and opts to help Pompilia once he finds that his labor within the religious institution has become of religion alienated.

The monologue of the Pope clearly demonstrates how institution is related to power and domination. The Pope's institution serves as one of the main distributors of meanings in the contemporary Roman society; the Church functions as the ultra-legal entity, the

ultimate disseminator of meanings. Institutions form a subject. As Guido's first monologue clearly demonstrates, the individual utterance of a subject is deeply invested with institutional discourse; Guido's defense of his sexual ideology is deeply invested with religious and legal discourses. In maintaining their power, institutions constantly renew themselves by incorporating new ideas, concepts or values, or reemphasizing old ones. The Pope's institution, on the one hand, constantly adjusts itself by incorporating new ideas and values, as indicated in his reflection on the acts of Caponsacchi who acted beyond the regular boundary of the institution. On the other hand, the Pope's institution attempts to maintain its authority, coherence and integrity by strictly demarcating its boundaries in the Foucaultian sense of "prohibition," as illustrated in the Pope's rejection of Guido when he appropriates legal and religious institutions themselves in killing Pompilia. The monologues of two lawyers, Archangeli and Bottini, draw on some different aspect of institutional power, which more directly raises the question of Benthamite fiction. The two lawyers' legal discourse is governed by aestheticism, and it is more concerned with following its own aesthetic principles than with referring to real life conditions, which makes it fundamentally an aesthetic, legal fiction. Yet the fiction exercises power and intervenes in the real life process, invested with institutional authority.

The three early monologues in the poem, Half-Rome, The Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid (II-IV), address the question of ideology as set of significations. Each of these is "a sample-speech" (I. 864), that is, "the world's outcry / Around the rush and ripple of any fact" (I. 839-40). Drawing on the word "half," Isobel Armstrong asks, "Do they represent a set of opinions? A class? And what is designated in the [half]? District? Group? Ideological and religious divisions? What voice speaks?"[101] My answer to the question is

that they represent a set of *significations*. Society, under any epoch, place, and relation of production, is composed of a constellation of various sets of significations, and the sum total of these sets of signifying systems form the social totality. Each individual set of signification may rise from some specific material conditions, such as class, gender, religion, profession, age, race, ethnicity, etc.; however, the division between each set of signification is not strict and exclusive; these sets are overlapped, and "overdetermined" in the Althusserian sense. The division of Half-Rome and The Other Half-Rome is largely based on gender ideology. The speaker of Half-Rome is a middle class man, not from the aristocracy like Guido, but as a married man he shares Guido's male code of honor and patriarchal authority in the institution of marriage. The speaker of the Other Half-Rome, as a single bachelor, sides with Pompilia. However, his siding with Pompilia seems to have less to do with any conscious objection to a male code of honor than with his fascination with Pompilia, and with the unconscious rendering of his sexual libido. The monologue of Tertium Quid, another sample speech, obviously draws on a signification based on class. However, though he is an aristocrat like Guido, he is not sympathetic to Guido. He condemns Guido's economic motivation expressed in his marriage to Pompilia.

Collectively the monologues in *The Ring and the Book* expose various forms of signification. Each speaker brings into the poem both real and imaginary relations that he/she is conditioned by. All of them speak from the reality of their own conditions. Both Guido and Caponsacchi are trying to justify their acts, and Pompilia needs to prove her innocence to others. Each of the lawyers is representing his client, and the Pope has to decide whether he should condemn Guido or not. Even the sample-speeches are not idle talks. Half-Rome must warn a cousin of his listener's against making amorous moves

toward his wife, and Tertium Quid is trying to find some favors from his social elders at the card table. Each of them speaks from his own reality, what seems real to him: "All for the truth's sake, mere truth, nothing else!" (I. 881) Browning makes efforts to show, however, that any perspective a speaker brings into the poem is an ideologically invested one: "The instinctive theorizing whence a fact / Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look" (I. 863-4). Seen from contemporary Victorian religious perspective, this aspect may be understood as the confirmation of the claim that mortals are doomed to limited understandings while only God is not.

Many critical readings of the poem have focused on Browning's religious perspective, whether he was skeptical or confirmative of contemporary religious beliefs, drawing on passages like "In the face of one proof more that 'God is true / And every man a liar'—that who trusts / To human testimony for a fact / Gets this sole fact—himself is proved a fool" (XII. 600-603). However, more fundamentally, the poem addresses the question of *ideology* and *fiction*. Around a seventeenth-century Roman murder trial Browning brings together various forms of individual consciousness enmeshed into their own ideological conditions. Browning attempts to grasp them in their real life-process, in their materiality, and in their discursive practices of language. When the twelve monologues are brought together, they create a discursive field where different interpretations of the same incident converge. In the discursive field, different forms of consciousness intersect, confronting, emulating each other for dominance, and at the same time, confirming and reinforcing each other.

What is remarkable about *The Ring and the Book* is that Browning renders the discursive field into a *dramatic* form, which Fox believed is fundamentally political in

nature. Browning addresses the question of ideology and fiction in a dramatic form, creating a "double poem" that Armstrong notices. The poet persona in the first book of the poem says:

> Let this old woe step on the stage again!
> Act itself o'er anew for men to judge,
> Not by the very sense and sight indeed—...
> —No dose of purer truth than man digests,
> But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now,
> Not strong meat he may get to bear some day—
> To-wit, by voices we call evidence,
> Uproar in the echo, live fact deadened down,
> Talked over, bruited abroad, whispered away,
> Yet helping us to all we seem to hear:
> For how else we know we save by worth of word? (I. 824-837)

The dramatic form of the poem brings the Millite subjective expressiveness under scrutiny and inspection. Each individual consciousness "act itself o'er anew for men to judge." In Victorian dramatic poetry a *subjective* voice is *objectified.* Just as a Millite subjective expressive poet on stage is *heard* by the audience, the poetic voice in Browning's dramatic poetry becomes the object of scrutiny in the same poem. What this structure lays bare is the politics of subjective expressionism and the fact that "consciousness and its products" are always invested with ideological, imaginary relations: "truth with falsehood." In a dramatic poem any poetic voice that a speaking subject establishes is constantly undermined, and is

given only a *partial* and *temporal* authority; it becomes historicized, revealing its culturally formulated position.

In *The Ring and the Book* various culturally determined forms of consciousness are investigated through the material condition of discourse, which is language: "how else we know we save by worth of word?" (I. 837) Thus, in Browning's dramatic poetry language is linked to ideology. As mentioned before, Thompson argues that the link between language and discourse foregrounds the "creative character of the interpretative process." *The Ring and the Book* as a whole produces a very unique structural form. Ten monologues are spoken by nine characters, and these ten monologues are, in turn, presented by a poet persona who speaks the first and last monologues. The poet persona is also only a character created by the poet Browning himself, and Browning the poet is read and examined by readers through the poem.[102] This way the poem creates a spiral of multiple layers of a hermeneutic circle. Each layer in the circle is *historicized* by the next one. In these ever-moving circles of meaning no position is privileged but only *historicized.* In this chain of interpretation even the position of reader, which occupies the last stage in the process of interpretation, is always unstable; he is always a *historicized* reader.

The monologues in *The Ring and the Book* as a whole raise almost all the important issues in modern critical theory, such as knowledge, consciousness, representation, epistemology, language, discourse, and hermeneutics. It is not surprising, then, that the poem recently has been recognized as an important site for theoretic reflection and contention by various modern critical disciplines. As cultural criticism in Browning studies recognizes, Browning's poetry can become a highly productive venue towards understanding not only Victorian culture and society, but also our own. Browning's poetry

is fundamentally rooted in politics, culture, society and history. *The Ring and the Book* extensively addresses one of the most important aspects of the Victorian cultural crisis: the Benthamite question of fiction. The Benthamite question of fiction, despite its importance in Browning's poetry, has not been seriously addressed. The next three chapters will examine some important forms of Victorian cultural fictions. Some aspects of Victorian sexual politics will be discussed through an examination of the monologues of Guido and Pompilia. Legal discourse forms an important part of Victorian cultural fiction, and so an examination of the two lawyers' monologues will look into the subject. The question of fiction in Victorian religious discourse will also be discussed through the monologues of the Pope and the Canon Caponsacchi.

[1]. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870* (London: The Athlone Press, 1972), 14.

[2]. See Alan Sinfield, *Alfred Tennyson*, (Oxford & New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 18.

[3]. Shelley & Peacock, *A Defence of Poetry & The Four Ages of Poetry* (The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965), 4.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 17.

[5]. Thomas Carlyle, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes*, Vol. XXVII, (London: Chapman & Hall), 60.

[6]. *Ibid.*.

[7]. *Ibid.*.

[8]. *Ibid.*, 63.

[9]. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 32.

[10]. Philip Drew, *The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1970), 428.

[11]. *The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona*, ed. Joseph Bristow, (London & New York: Croom Helm, 1987), 4.

[12]. Sinfield, *Alfred Tennyson*, 14

[13]. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman & Sharon B. Powers (New York & London: Norton, 1977, 481.

[14]. *Ibid.*, 508.

[15]. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 36.

[16]. *Ibid.*.

[17]. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 482.

[18]. *Ibid.*, 493.

[19]. *Ibid.*, 508.

[20]. *Robert Browning's Complete Works* (New York: Fred DeFau & Co., 1910), Vol. XII, 286.

[21]. Willliams, *Culture and Society*, 43.

[22]. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 486.

[23]. *Ibid.*.

[24]. *Robert Browning's Complete Works*, 283.

[25]. *Ibid.*.

[26]. *Ibid.*, 283-4.

[27]. *Ibid.*, 287.

[28]. John Stuart Mill, "What is Poetry?" from *Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona*, 37.

[29]. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

[30]. Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies*, 71.

[31]. *Ibid.*, 75.

[32]. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 481.

[33]. *Robert Browning's Complete Works*, 287.

[34]. Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies*, 83.

[35]. *Robert Browning's Complete Works*, p. 288.

[36]. *Ibid.*, 287.

[37]. Quoted from G. K. Ogden, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932), . xxvii.

[38]. *Ibid.*, xvii.

[39]. See Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, 112-135.

[40]. See *ibid.*, 147-161.

[41]. In *Ideology: An Introduction* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 1-2, Terry Eagleton lists the following definitions of ideology: the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life; a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class; ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; systematically distorted communication; that which offers a position for a subject; forms of thought motivated by social interests; identity thinking; socially necessary illusion; the conjuncture of discourse and power; the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world; action-oriented sets of beliefs; the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality; semiotic closure; the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure; the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality.

[42]. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York & London: Norton, 1978), 766.

[43]. Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology* (London, 1963), 14.

[44]. *Ibid.*.

[45]. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 61.

[46]. *Ibid.*, 73.

[47]. *Ibid.*, 61

[48]. *Ibid.*, 62.

[49]. *Ibid.*, 62-63.

[50]. *Ibid.*, 64.

[51]. Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach* (London, 1933), 65-6.

[52]. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 70.

[53]. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 72.

[54]. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 70.

[55]. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 64.

[56]. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 72.

[57]. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 63.

[58]. Marx & Engels, *Selected Works*, 2 vols. (London, 1962), 362-3.

[59]. *Ibid.*, 272-3.

[60]. *Ibid.*, 363-4.

[61]. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 233-4.

[62]. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 143.

[63]. *Ibid.*.

[64]. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 45.

[65]. *Ibid.*.

[66]. *Ibid.*.

[67]. *Ibid.*.

[68]. *Ibid.*, 52.

[69]. Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 40-1.

[70]. John Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley & L.A.: University of California Press, 1984), 131.

[71]. *Ibid.*.

[72]. *Ibid.*.

[73]. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 45.

[74]. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, 140.

[75]. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 5.

[76]. Quoted from Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Humanities Press, 1976), 22.

[77]. These are (i) the state of productive forces; (ii) the economic conditions; (iii) the socio-political regime; (iv) the psyche of social man; (v) various ideologies reflecting the properties of this psyche. See *Marxism and Literature*, 80.

[78]. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 80.

[79]. *Ibid.*, 81.

[80]. *Ibid.*, 93.

[81]. *Ibid.*, 91.

[82]. *Ibid.*, 82.

[83]. Inserted in *Debating Texts: A reader in Twentieth-Century Literary Theory and Method*, ed. Rick Rylance, (Milton Keynes [Buckinghamshire] & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1987), 207.

[84]. *Ibid.*.

[85]. *Ibid.*, 208.

[86]. Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 70.

[87]. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 109.

[88]. *Ibid.*.

[89]. *Ibid.*, 110.

[90]. Rick Rylance, *Debating Texts*, 209.

[91]. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 115.

[92]. *Ibid.*, 115.

[93]. Rick Rylance, *Debating Texts*, 209.

[94]. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, 131.

[95]. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 194.

[96]. Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 19.

[97]. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 31.

[98]. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, 130-1.

[99]. *Ibid.*, 133.

[100]. *Ibid.*.

[101]. Isobel Armstrong, "Problem of Representation in *The Ring and the Book*: Politics, Aesthetics, Language." Perosa, *Browning e Venezia* (1990), 212.

[102]. Morse Peckham in his essay entitled "Historiography and *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Poetry*, 1968, vol. 4, 243-58, draws an insightful diagram about the structure of *The Ring and the Book*. According to the diagram, supposing that *a* signifies a speaker, *x* the speaker's situation, @ the act of interested and compromised interpretation, and *B* Browning, most of Browning's monologues can be diagrammed as (a @ x). (However, the speaker in a dramatic monologue himself is always interpreted by Browning, and also the monologue itself is always interpreted by the reader, so the actual diagram should be *reader @ [B @ (a @ x)]*). What is innovative in *The Ring and the Book* is that Browning makes this diagram much more complex by bringing several monologues together and also creating a poet persona who is to be believed as the mouthpiece of Browning the poet himself: B @ [(a @ x) + (b @ x) + (c @ x) ----]. As Peckham correctly points out, Browning the poet is no less stable as the speaker(s) of his dramatic monologues, and especially in *The Ring and the Book,* the poet persona in Books I and XII is a compromised Browning--he is both fictional Browning and historical Browning). With a little correction of Peckham's diagram, RB can be diagrammed as hR @ (hB @ [cB { (a @ x) + (b @ x) + (c @ x) ----}])—hR refers to a historicized reader, hB the historicized Browning the poet, and cB a compromised Browning the poet persona.

CHAPTER TWO

SEXUAL POLITICS IN GUIDO AND POMPILIA

About Browning's important collection of poems, *Men and Women*, Isobel Armstrong writes:

> The central project of *Men and Women* is the investigation of cultural fictions and the form in which they are constructed. The Benthamite fascination with the construct, with the fictional entity which may have no counterpart in the world but nevertheless intervenes in it, exercising a coercive imaginative pressure on thought and action is developed in a remarkable way in this volume.[1]

Bentham's theory of fiction, his philosophy of "as-if," was primarily concerned with reforming English legal practices. However, as I have already discussed in the previous chapter, the implications of a fictional entity and its coercive power go much beyond the world of legal discourse. Browning's adoption of the Benthamite theory of fiction, along with his experiments with dramatic poetry, opened a new possibility of poetic development. In *Men and Women* Browning explores the problematic nature of Mill's subjective poetics through an examination of various forms and politics of fiction in subjective psychology. Unlike Romantic subjective minds, the individual psychologies in Browning's poetry are fragmented and fictional. In *The Ring and the Book* Browning explores Victorian cultural fictions and their coercive power more extensively than he does in *Men and Women*. In the poem, various forms of subjective psychology and cultural fictions clash with each other in a social milieu, creating a discursive field. And more importantly, the ways these cultural fictions are created and thereby they exercise a coercive power on human minds and actions

are explored in relation with other important questions in Victorian poetics, such as epistemology, language, hegemonic ideology, consciousness, and self.

Around a seventeenth-century Roman murder trial Browning brings various individual consciousnesses together. These individual consciousnesses in turn bring in various forms of cultural fiction. Institutions and social practices, such as law, religion, politics, gender, class, and commerce, are interwoven and inscribed in these forms of consciousness. The concept and formation of the self is not independent of these institutions and practices. The self is formed through institutions and social practices, and the institutions and practices are, in turn, created and maintained by the collective working of various institutionalized selves. In this way, the self, and institutions and social practices, become interdependent. This chapter will examine the interdependency of the two as structured in Guido's sexual politics.

Both Guido's first monologue and Pompilia's monologue focus on the gender politics of both seventeenth-century Roman society and Browning's Victorian society. Through the contrasting views of the two speakers on the gender relationship within the institution of marriage, Browning explores the question of fiction and its coercive power in contemporary sexual politics. Guido's monologue is obviously a strong expression of male sexual ideologies in seventeenth-century Roman society, which were no less pervasive in Browning's Victorian England. In spite of its well-polished rhetoric, Guido's monologue reveals that his utopian patriarchal vision is built on "nothingness," a "fiction"; it lays bare that the clustering ideas of his sexual ideology, such as his "right" as a husband, his "honor" as a patriarchal authority, are only "culturally" formulated

"fictions" whose validity is constantly threatened and subject to examination and scrutiny throughout the poem.

Though these fictions could not be said to have any referent whatsoever in the world, they do exercise a coercive power on human thoughts and acts, as illustrated Guido's killing of Pompilia when he believes that his "honor"—a sign of his sexual ideology whose referents he fails to establish in his monologue—is violated by Pomilia. Fiction is an important element in human epistemology that allows one to open up the future. However, as Browning makes efforts to show in this poem, fiction can also prevent one from perceiving the real material conditions of social existence, and real human relations, when it incorporates, or is incorporated into, (or both), the social relation of domination and power. Guido's fiction of honor, through which Guido claims privilege as an aristocrat in a classed society and patriarchal authority as a husband in the institution of marriage, ultimately helps solidify the structure of class distinction and patriarchal authority.

Pompilia's monologue is not free from the pressure of the coercive power of fiction, either. However, her monologue also suggests that there can be a way of breaking away from the restraints and limits that fictions impose on human thoughts and acts. It is in the Marxist idea of "praxis," a constitutive activity in process, Browning suggests, where man works on the world. By constant dialectic re-negotiation between subject and object, one can free oneself, even if only partially, from the pressure of fiction, filling the gap that fiction might create between the two. Interestingly, the long poem of *The Ring and the Book* consists of only two main actions: Pompilia's escape from the house of Guido, and Guido's act of killing of her. While Guido's act is a

desperate extension of his fiction of honor, Pompilia's escape is an act of breaking the very structure of Guido's fiction, even though the tragic end of her attempt casts doubt on the possibility of it. Pompilia's monologue exposes how Guido's oppressive fiction is formed through various institutional entities that serve as producers of the contemporary ruling ideologies. Thus, the two middle monologues of the poem provide an important polemic on the gender politics, which I will discuss in detail hereafter.

The word *honor* becomes an important catchword through which Browning examines the question of fiction and its coercive power in sexual politics. Honor in Guido's first monologue forms the very nucleus of his sexual ideology. With reference to his honor Guido asserts his patriarchal authority as husband in the institution of marriage. The monologue presents Guido defending his act of killing Pompilia in front of judges. He justifies his act on the basis of *honoris causa.* Guido maintains that he had to kill Pomilia when she hurt his "honor," and challenged his patriarchal authority by violating her female code of submission and obedience. The word honor refers to a fictitious entity, as Bentham discusses in *The Theory of Fictions*, whose counterpart cannot be found in the world. Bentham remarks, "every fictitious entity bears some relation to some real entity, and cannot otherwise be understood than in so far as that relation is perceived." [2] Fiction is "the mode of representation,"[3] as Bentham aptly defines. As a representation, a fiction bears some structural relations to the political, economic, and cultural structures of a society, reflecting the values, judgments, and opinions of those individuals involved in the creation and maintenance of those structures.

A fiction is a highly elusive entity. A fiction is *fictitious* in that it does not have its counterpart in the world, but at the same time it is *material* since it represents *reality.*

A fiction is a mediated reality. What adds to the elusiveness of fiction is that it owes its existence to language. Bentham asserts that "To language, then—to language alone—it is, that fictitious entities owe their existence; their impossible, yet indispensable existence." [4] Language creates the fiction and sustains it in its signifying system, and only within its signifying system, a fiction acquires its materiality. Isobel Armstrong paraphrases Bentham by saying that, "by exhaustive redescribing, metaphorising, and linguistic substitution you can point to the fictional entity by reference to the real entity and demonstrate the structural relationship of the fictional to the real entity." [5] The structural relationship between the fictional and the real that language establishes is an ideological representation of material social reality.

In *The Ring and the Book* Browning exhaustively explores the problem of the relationship between language and ideology. Critics often point out the modernity of the poem. The modernity of the poem lies largely in the fact that in his exploration into the question of fiction, Browning ventures into the question of language in human epistemology, which was one of the central concerns of poetics from the Victorian onward. Accordingly, the question of language becomes central in the politics of fiction. As Browning illustrates throughout the poem, a fiction is created and maintained through language; language establishes the structural relationship of the fictional to the real entities. Since the established structural relationship between the fictional and the real is an ideological representation of material social reality, the poem relates the question of fiction and ideology to the linguistic question of sign and signified, and to its discursive practices. Terry Eagleton's on-going interest in the question of ideology provides many

insightful observations on the question of ideology. Denouncing two extremes in the discussion of ideology, Eagleton draws on one important definition of ideology:

> But there is a third way between thinking of ideology as disembodied ideas on the one hand, as nothing but a matter of certain behaviour patterns on the other hand. This is to regard ideology as a discursive practice or semiotic phenomenon. And this at once emphasizes its materiality (since signs are material entities), and preserves the sense that it is essentially concerned with meanings. Talk of signs and discourses is inherently social and practical, whereas terms like 'consciousness' are residues of an idealist tradition of thought.[6]

The view of ideology as a discursive practice is surely one important aspect of *The Ring and the Book* that Browning consistently addresses. Eagleton contends, "instead of holding in empiricist vein that words 'stand for' concepts, we now tend to see 'having a concept' as the capacity to use words in particular ways." [7] The analysis of discursive practices in the poem, especially how some important key words are used in particular ways, proves to be a very productive reading of the poem. As a sign, honor does not have a fixed signified; its referent constantly shifts from "soul" to "things", to "privilege," etc. Guido's honor is essentially a fiction. Nevertheless, Guido makes efforts to fix this unstable sign of honor and its ever- shifting referents onto his class privilege in a classed society and his patriarchal authority in marriage. What characterizes his monologue is an ideological intervention and control of language in a public dimension to reinforce the existing social relation of power and domination. In the ideological control of language certain particular interpretations of a sign always matter especially. Guido's own statement attests to this point. Guido overtly reminds his

listeners: "There 's irregular deed: you want no more / Than right interpretation of the same" (V. 113-4), or again, "And read me right the riddle. Since right must be!" (V. 1239) For Guido, truth is only a matter of interpretation, of how you describe it. Browning's double use of the word "right"—*right* also referring to Guido's right as a husband and patriarch in the institution of marriage—implies that Guido's right as such is only a culturally formulated fiction.

As already mentioned, the word *honor* forms the nucleus of Guido's ideological assertion. Guido makes an elaborate argument to fix the referent of honor onto his noble blood in a classed society and onto his patriarchal authority in the institution of marriage. However, the epistemological ground Guido' language game treads is very unstable. Guido's honor does not seem to have any referents independent of the language game he plays, belying his efforts. From the very beginning of his monologue, Guido's language game aims to confirm and re-enforce his ideologically formed self. Guido begins his monologue with the indication of his class. He insinuatingly complains of the torture exercised on his body; "Noblemen were exempt, the vulgar thought, / From racking; but, since law thinks otherwise, / I have been put to the rack: all 's over now" (V. 12-4). Soon he adds that a far more serious threat to his self-identity than the bodily harm was Pompilia's challenge to his patriarchal authority:

> Four years have I been operated on
> I' the soul, do you see—its sense or tremulous part—
> My self-respect, my care for a good name,
> Pride in an old one, love of kindred—just
> A mother, brothers, sisters, and the like,

That looked up to my face when days were dim,

And fancied they found light there—no one spot,

Foppishly sensitive, but has paid its pang.

That, not this you now oblige me with,

That was the Vigil-torment, if you please! (V. 29-38)

Honor does not just form his self-identity but governs the whole of his human relationships. Honor is not only his "soul" and "self-respect," but also "light" for his family members. Honor is not just a personal sign for Guido but it becomes an interpersonal sign that involves others. Guido extends the signification of honor to a much broader social dimension so that his personal sign of honor becomes an interpersonal sign for others and the world. For Guido, therefore, the fiction of honor intervenes in the terms he sets for his relations with others and the world. He reminds his listeners of his noble blood, "I am representative of a great line, / One of the first of the old families / In Arezzo, ancientest of Tuscan towns" (V. 140-2), and claims that he is a "born fish with gill and fin / Fit for deep sea" (V. 172-3). Here Guido tries to find a referent for his honor in his noble blood. For Guido, class is what makes him "the real thing" (IV. 351). Despite the fact that class division is only a culturally formulated social condition, Guido and others believe it is an a priori condition of human existence. This notion of honor is so immersed in Guido's self-identity that he believes his honor can claim certain rights over the world. The speaker of Half-Rome, who shares Guido's fiction of honor, clearly articulates it:

Count Guido Franceschini the Arentine

Was head of an old noble house enough,

Not over-rich, you can't have everything,

But such a man as riches rub against,

Readily stick to,--one with a *right* to them

Born in the blood: 't was in his very brow

Always to knit itself against the world,

Beforehand so, when that world stinted due

Service and suit: the world ducks and defers. (II. 278-86; italics are mine)

Guido claims that, since he is a "Born fish with gill and fin / Fit for the deep sea" (V. 170), he can impose his *right* over the world. However Guido finds that his signification of class clashes with the world. "The world ducks and defers" (II. 280), and Guido finds himself "now left flap bare-backed / In slush and sand, a show to crawlers vile / Reared of the low-tide" (V. 172-5). This clearly indicates that his signification of class is only a subjective fiction. And the antithetical relationship between Guido and the world puts the politics of subjective fiction under scrutiny.

Interestingly, Guido's fiction of honor assumes the very institutional form that Bentham condemns in his theory of fiction: the legal institution. Guido's fiction is fundamentally *legal* in nature in that it assumes various forms of legal contracts between Guido and God, and Guido and society, and Guido and Pompilia, etc. As early as the 1830's, Browning already looked into the question of legal fiction. The speaker of "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" claims that he is one of the elected whose salvation is predetermined by God:

Ere suns and moons could wax and wane,

Ere stars were thundergirt, or piled

The heavens, God thought on me his child;

Ordained a life for me, arrayed

Its circumstances every one

To the minutest; ay, God said

This head this hand should rest upon

Thus, ere he fashioned star or sun.

And having thus created me,

Thus rooted me, he bade me grow,

Guiltless for ever, like a tree

That buds and blooms, nor seeks to know

The law by which it prospers so:

But sure that thought and word and deed

All go to swell his love for me,

Me, made because that love had need

Of something irreversibly

Pledged solely its content to be. (13-30)

However, nowhere in the poem can it be found that God also agrees with Agricola. Nevertheless, Agricola's subjective world of fiction rejects any other possible relationships between God and, not only himself, but also others:

For as I lie, smiled on, full-fed

By unexhausted power to bless,

I gaze below on hell's fierce bed,

And those its waves of flame oppress,

Swarming in ghastly wretchedness;

Whose life on earth aspired to be

One altar-smoke, so pure!—to win

If not love like God's love for me,

At least to keep his anger in;

And all their striving turned to sin.

Priest, doctor, hermit, monk grown white

With prayer, the broken-hearted nun,

The martyr, the wan acolyte,

The incense-swinging child,--undone

Before God fashioned star or sun! (41-55)

The validity of his private contract with God is maintained only by an aggressive rejection of other possibilities. In *The Ring and the Book* Browning explores this politics of fiction with much more depth and complexity. Guido's monologue is built on a legal fiction, on a certain contract between himself and the world, and also between himself and Pompilia, which revolves around the word honor. Despite his effort, Guido fails to prove that his noble blood has any intrinsic value through which he can claim certain rights over the world. So later he "Admit[s] that honor is a privilege" (V. 460), a culturally formed condition. Instead of having any intrinsic value, it has only an exchange value: "privilege worth what? / Why, worth the market-price" (V. 461-2), which he exchanges with Pompilia's beauty and wealth. That honor has only an exchange value is an important critique of Guido's fiction of honor. Just as the exchange value is culturally formed and is constantly subject to the fluctuation of the markets "now

up, now down" (V. 462), the poem tries to show, so Guido's a noble man and a patriarchal authority is only a fiction culturally formulated and, therefore, subject to reconsideration.

An ideology is overall a unified view of social reality. Individuals are born into certain ideologically formed social orders, and these preexisting social orders lead them to assume certain forms of social relations that are felt by them to be *natural* ways of life. By assuming the ideologically invested social roles, individuals *live* out the ideologies and, furthermore, re-enforce them. Guido's first monologue clearly illustrates this point. Guido's fiction of honor forces him to assume various social roles; "The eldest son and heir and prop o' the house, / So do you see your duty?" (V, 212-3) Guido plays various institutional roles. As the head of an ancient noble house he represents the aristocracy in a classed society; he has served in the Church for thirty years; he defends himself in the court of law; as a husband, he sustains the institution of marriage; and also he participates in the market system in the exchange of his honor for Pompilia's wealth. These various social roles that Guido assumes are all invested with institutional languages.

One thing the poem extensively addresses is the role of institutions maintaining certain relations of power and domination. As illustrated in Guido's case, an individual consciousness is formed through institutions, and the consciousness formed this way, in turn, contributes to solidify the validity of those institutions, and to maintain the existing social order. Guido appropriates and incorporates various institutional discourses; he identifies honor with, and describes it through various institutions. Despite their different social functions, institutions are interconnected in creating a pseudo reality, a fiction. They function collectively to maintain the overall hegemonic superstructure of a society.

Working collectively, the various institutions Guido appropriates present a unified reality to him, creating his fiction of honor. One dangerous aspect of fictions formed in this way is that they tend to promote the existing social order and forms of human relations.

Guido's fiction of honor needs, for its continued existence, a condition of timelessness, stasis, and ahistory; it fundamentally lives in the past. It cannot accommodate the dynamics of the present. As his second monologue clearly illustrates, Guido's fiction of honor lives in the past. In the monologue Guido expresses his yearning for a time when his fiction of honor was naturally accepted:

> Were not we put into a beaten path,
> Bid pace the world, we nobles born and bred,
> We body of friends with each his scutcheon full
> Of old achievement and impunity,--
> Taking the laugh of morn and Sol's salute
> As forth we fared, pricked on to breathe our steeds
> And take equestrian sport over the green
> Under the blue, across the crop,--what care?
> If we went prancing up hill and down dale,
> In and out of the level and the straight,
> By the bit of pleasant byeway, where was harm?
> Still Sol salutes me and the morning laughs:
> I see my grandsire's hoof-prints,--point the spot
> Where he drew rein, slipped saddle, and stabbed knave
> For daring throw gibe—much less, stone—from pale:

Then back, and on, and up with the cavalcade.

Just so wend we, now canter, now converse,

Till, 'mid the jauncing pride and jaunty port,

Something of a sudden jerks at somebody—

A dagger is out, a flashing cut and thrust,

Because I play some prank my grandsire played,

And here I sprawl: where is the company? Gone! (XI. 91-112)

One striking aspect about this passage is the sheer violence that is hidden under a seemingly pleasant, idyllic veneer: "A dagger is out, a flashing cut and thrust." At various points the poem implies the violence by which the fiction is sustained. As I will discuss later, Guido's killing of Pompilia is an illustration of such violence. The speaker of Half-Rome shares Guido's fiction of honor of patriarchal authority; his interest in the wounds inflicted on Pompilia's parents, and his fascination with the weapon used in the murder, are other signs of the violence through which Guido's fiction is maintained.

As implied in Guido's rumination on the past, Guido's fiction yearns for a timelessness, a condition of static continuity, against which the story of his monologue is running. Herbert Tucker insightfully points out, "Typically Browning's monologists tell the story of a yearning after the condition of lyric, a condition that is itself in turn unimaginable except as the object of, or pretext for, the yearning that impels the story plotted against it."[8] Both of Guido's monologues yearn for "the condition of lyric." At the end of his first monologue Guido presents his utopian vision of society, where men can freely exercise their patriarchal authority with impunity, just as he is about to be punished for exercising that authority. And in the second monologue, Guido, being aware of the

approach of the Death machine, makes efforts to create a self that he hopes will survive it. Guido's fiction of honor yearns for a condition of timelessness, but his yearning is betrayed by history, and his fiction clashes with the world.

Importantly the contradictions Tucker finds in Browning's monologuists' yearning for the condition of the lyric indicates that a subjective fiction, which yearns for a condition of timelessness, of a stasis, cannot accommodate changing social realities. Interestingly the various characters Browning creates in his poetry, both historical and imaginary, are ones whose lives are set at times of great social transition. In "Karshish" the scientific mind of Karshish, an Arabic physician, is being challenged by the mystical case of Lazarus. "Cleon" dramatizes the conflict between Hellenism and Hebraism. Cleon, a Greek intellectual, yearns for something that goes beyond his world of pagan civilization, however, eventually he refuses to accept the teachings of a "barbarian," Paul. In both poems, a subjective world of *fiction* is brought under scrutiny and examination when it faces a great social transition. So it is in *the Ring and the Book.*

The dissolution of the strict social stratification of which Guido complains indicates that Guido's Roman society was undergoing a great social transition, just as Browning's England was. The rapid development of the capitalistic mode of production and the rise of the bourgeoisie were introducing a new kind of social stratification into Guido's Roman society, as the speaker of Tertium Quid notices:

> And social class should choose among, these cits.
>
> Yet there 's a latitude: exceptional white
>
> Amid the general brown o' the species, lurks
>
> A burgess nearly an aristocrat,

Legitimately in reach: look out for him!

What banker, merchant, has seen better days,

What second-rate painter a-pushing up,

Poet a-slipping down, shall bid the best

For this young beauty with the thumping purse?

Alack, were it but one of such as these

So like the real thing that they pass for it,

All had gone well! (IV. 341-52)

The speaker hardly conceals his discomfort about the rise of other social classes, about the fact that other social classes pass for "the real thing." Under the newly forming society, Guido's fiction of honor, his belief in the intrinsic value of noble blood and its rights, faces a serious challenge. Guido claims that he, as a "Born fish with gill and fin / Fit for the deep sea," is entitled to succeed in the world. However, he finds the world continues to avoid fulfilling its part of the contract:

I waited thirty years, may it please the Court:

Saw meanwhile many a denizen o' the dung

Hop, skip, jump o'er my shoulder, make him wings

And fly aloft,--succeed, in the usual phrase. (V. 292-5)

His father's lackey succeeds in the world, Guido complains, while he is ignored by his father's chaplain's nephew who became Chamberlain. After spending thirty years in the service of the Church in Rome, assuming some minor orders, Guido finds that his life in Rome does not sustain his fiction. The growing decline of his household in Arezzo implies that his fiction of honor in noble blood has been doomed from the beginning. As

mentioned above, the poem is set at the time when the capitalistic mode of production was fast replacing the old society, changing the whole social stratification. The inevitable transition makes it impossible for Guido to sustain his fiction of honor. As a residual ideology under the newly forming society, Guido's honor still exercises its hegemonic influence, yet it is giving way to the emerging principle of a capitalistic society: the commodity culture. When Guido realizes that his belief in the intrinsic value of honor and its right over the world cannot be sustained any more, he embraces the emergent principle of his society as a solution to his dilemma:

> On the other hand, bid this buffoonery cease,
> Admit that honour is a privilege,
> The question follows, privilege worth what?
> Why, worth the market-price,--now up, now down,
> Just so with this as with all other ware:
> Therefore essay the market, sell your name,
> Style and condition to who buys them best! (V. 459-65)

Guido admits that the honor of blood does not have any intrinsic value through which he can claim any rights over the world. Whatever influence it may still exercise is supported only by tradition and customs. Thus, to revive his fiction of honor, Guido actively embraces the emerging principle of commodity culture, replacing the fiction of intrinsic value with that of exchange value.

As mentioned before, Guido makes efforts to establish the structural relationship of his fiction to reality. Every fictional entity bears some relation to reality, as Bentham points out. By exhaustive linguistic reconstruction and rearrangement, one can point to a

fictional entity by reference to some real entity and demonstrate the structural relationship of the fictional to the real entity. Through a series of linguistic processes of deconstruction and construction, Guido's honor is transformed from a quite abstract entity into a commodity, something that can be exchanged. At Paolo's suggestion for marriage, Guido transforms the use value of honor, which he has believed in hitherto, into exchange value. He presents honor as something that can be sold and bought; honor is "worth market-price" (V. 462). So Guido claims, "Mere rank against mere wealth— some youth beside, / Some beauty too, thrown into the bargain" (V. 475-6), and again, "Essence of this same bargain, blank and bare, / Being the exchange of quality for wealth" (V. 501-2). This signification of honor as an exchange value is also shared with Pietro and Violante. They also think honor is something that they bargain for in exchange with their wealth, as Guido points out, "They hungered in the hearts of them to gain-- / Incorporation with nobility thus / In word and deed: for that they gave me wealth" (V. 514-6).

The marriage and tragic fate of Pompilia is a symbolic representation of commodity culture in its dehumanizing nature. For both Guido and the Comparinis, the marriage is nothing other than exchange of commodities, wealth for noble blood: "coin paid, bargain struck and business done" (II. 379). Guido's gender politics clearly demonstrate that commodity culture is fundamentally supported and maintained by institutional discourses, including law and religion, that form the specific social reality of power and domination in a society. Various institutional entities are interlocked together, each serving as a referent for others. About his marriage Guido explains:

Purchase and sale being thus so plain a point,

How of a certain soul bound up, may-be,

I' the barter with the body and money-bag?

From the bride's soul what is it you expect?

Why, loyalty and obedience,--wish and will

To settle and suit her fresh and plastic mind

To the novel, not disadvantageous mould!

Father and mother shall the woman leave,

Cleave to the husband, be it for weal or woe:

There is law: what sets this law aside

In my particular case? (V. 574-84)

The passage draws on some characteristic aspects of Guido's gender politics. A closer look into his gender politics reveals how a fiction as ideology is created and sustained. Fiction becomes "real" to one when it is believed to be a part of real forms of human relationships; it exercises its coercive power when it gives itself a resemblance of reality. Guido's central concern in his monologue is to establish the structural relationship of his fiction to what he believes are real human relations. Interestingly, the very institutional entities to which Guido makes efforts to establish his fiction of honor are nothing other than other forms of fictions ideologically constructed to sustain the existing relations of power and domination.

As a hegemonic superstructure, an institution is a representation, not a presentation, of actual human relations; it is a representation by proxy. As mentioned before, fiction is created and maintained by language. One thing Guido's monologue clearly demonstrates is that his fiction of honor, his politics of gender relationships, does

not have any referents outside of the various institutional "discourses" that he adopts to justify it. What is important to note here is the reciprocal relationship between Guido's fiction of honor and institutional entities. A closer examination of Guido's monologue clearly demonstrates that his sexual ideology is sustained by an exhaustive appropriation of various institutional discourses. Into his own institutional discourse of marriage and gender relations, Guido brings in other institutional discourses, especially those of commerce, law, and religion, and he attempts to establish a referent for honor in them. Guido's sexual ideology is reinforced by these institutional discourses, and as we shall see in the examination of legal and religious discourses of the poem, the other institutional discourses are, in turn, reinforced by Guido's sexual ideology.

Guido is born into the institutional discourses of his society and lives them out, and so they form Guido's consciousness. In turn, Guido fortifies the validity of the institutions by living them as realities. In other words, they are interdependent. In this way various institutional discourses in the poem create an elaborate linguistic web where they collectively function as the hegemonic superstructure of society, reinforcing each other. This aspect is clearly demonstrated in Guido's assuming the role of other institutions. When his patriarchal authority is challenged by Pompilia, Guido casts himself as the agent of both law and Church, and kills Pompilia. Guido reminds the court that, " 't is law I look. / I began life by hanging to the law, / To the law it is I hang till life shall end" (V. 1749-51). It is ironic, though, that he, who assumed Law itself in killing Pompilia, is now under the scrutiny of law:

> Do you blame us that we turn Law's instruments,
>
> Not mere self-seekers,--mind the public weal,

Nor make the private good our sole concern? (VIII. 882-84)

Aware of this situation, Guido discards law and assumes the role of another important institution, the Church. "No more of law: a voice beyond the law / Enters my heart, Quis est pro Donino?"(V. 1548-9) He contends that he was a mere executioner of God's will in killing Pompilia:

I did

God's bidding and man's duty, breathe free;

Look you to the rest! I heard Himself prescribe,

That great Physician, and dared lance the core

Of the bad ulcer; and the rage abates,

I am myself and whole now. (V. 1702-6)

The connectedness of various institutions is more clearly revealed in the marriage between Guido and Pompilia. At Paolo's suggestion Guido decides to marry Pompilia. Paolo says, "all the *Honours* in your fist, / Countship, Householdship,--how have you misdealt! / Way, in the first place, these will marry a man!" (III. 434-6: italics are mine). The marriage becomes a symbolic representation of the hegemonic superstructure in which various institutional authorities converge together. By transforming use value into exchange value, Guido's fiction of honor reinforces the principles of commerce which are becoming more and more pervasive in Guido's Roman society and in Browning's Victorian society. Various words used to describe the marriage—bargain, coin, transaction, traffic, market, profit, etc.—clearly demonstrate this point.

The marriage also brings in legal discourse. As the title page of *The Old Yellow Book* suggests, the story of Guido and Pompilia is fundamentally a legal one that

highlights the disputes about a husband's right over his wife. Religious discourse also forms an important part of Guido's sexual politics. The whole idea of the marriage was conceived and conducted through the act of a priest, Paolo. It implies that the Church helps to engender and promote a male-oriented sexual ideology. The victimization of women by the Church is repeatedly implied throughout the poem. For instance, the speaker of Half-Rome quotes Paolo, "Mothers, wives, and maids, / These be the tools wherewith priests manage men" (IV. 503-4). As one of the influential institutions of contemporary Roman society, the Church constantly preys on women. Even Caponsacchi himself, before he met Pompilia, was preying on women: "diligent at my post / Where beauty and fashion rule" (VI. 346-7).

As mentioned before, Guido's patriarchal authority is a part of the collective networking of various institutional authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical. These institutional authorities are joined together to reinforce Guido's patriarchal authority. When Pompilia finds her married life in Guido's house unbearable, she asks the Archbishop of Arezzo for help:

> I sought help, the Archbishop smiled,
> Inquiring into privacies of life,
> --Said I was blameable—(he stands for God)
> Nowise entitled to exemption there.
> Then I obeyed,--as surely had obeyed
> Were the injunction "Since your husband bids,
> "Swallow the burning coal he proffers you!"
> But I did wrong, and he gave me wrong advice

Though he were thrice Archbishop,--that, I know!—

Now I have got to die and see things clear. (VII. 724-33)

But Pompilia soon realizes that, like the institution of marriage, the Church is just another institution that demands the submission of women. The two institutions are structurally joined together in forming a structure of oppression, as clearly indicated when Guido unknowingly points out that the Church "Whereof indeed was marriage made the type: / The Church may show her insubordinate, / As marriage her refractory ... This— / I take to be the Church's mode, and mine" (V. 727-9, 742-3). Pompilia deplores, "My heart died out at the Archbishop's smile; / --It seemed so stale and worn a way o' the world" (VII. 788-9). After she fails to get the help from the Archbishop, this time she appeals to the Governor of Arezzo, the secular authority:

To the Governor, as I say,--scarce opened lip

When—the cold cruel snicker close behind—

Guido was on my trace, already there,

Exchanged nod and wink for shrug and smile,

And I—pushed back to him and, for my pains

Paid with... (VII. 1276-81)

Thus, both secular and ecclesiastical authorities are joined in solidifying Guido's patriarchal authority, creating a network of signification for Guido's honor.

An important aspect of Guido's patriarchal society that the poem draws on is that men control the language in society. According to Dale Spencer, "men control the language, control the media, control the gatekeeping institutions of publishing and criticism: they control what Marx would call the 'means of mental production', but the

interests they represent are those of men rather than those of capital."[9] This aspect is addressed in the poem at some extent. Pompilia's tragedy is aggravated by her illiteracy. In *The Ring and the Book* knowledge of letters becomes an important means of controlling women. Caponsacchi in his institutionalized church uses his ability to compose madrigals as a means of preying on rich women. The question of letters allegedly exchanged between Pompilia and Caponsacchi is another instance of men using language to oppress women. If Pompilia's claim that she does not know how to read and write is true--though it is not clear in the poem whether Pomplia actually wrote the letters, it is obvious that Guido uses his knowledge of letters to oppress Pompilia. A more obvious instance is the case of a priest who refuses to write a letter for Pompilia. After she failed to get help from the Archbishop and the Governor of Arezzo, Pompilia asks a priest to write a letter to her parents, but in the end he refuses to do it: "The good friar / Promised as much at the moment; but, alack, / Night brings discretion" (III. 1027-9). Pompilia perceives that the language controlled by men also can simplify and distort the story of her life:

> I am just seventeen years and five months old,
> And, if I lived on day more, three full weeks;
> 'T is writ in Lucina, all my names
> At length, so many names for one poor child,
> --Francesca Camilla Vittoria Angela
> Pompilia Comparini,--*laughable*!
> Also 't is writ that I was married there
> Four years ago: and they will add, I hope,

When they insert my death, a word or two,--

Omitting all about the mode of death,-- (VII. 1-11; italics are mine)

The official record of her life story does not say *why* and *how* she died, how she suffered. The record would be a male version of her life story—*laughable* from her point of view—omitting the story of her tragedy, how Guido's patriarchal society is responsible for her premature death.

The Ring and the Book makes an exhaustive investigation into the question of how a fiction is created and maintained. However, through the monologues of Pompilia and Caponsacchi the poem also addresses the question of how to break away from the pressures and limits imposed by ideologies. While Guido makes efforts to solidify his fiction of honor as the patriarchal authority in the institution of marriage, by appropriating various other institutional languages, Pompilia directly challenges Guido's terms in describing gender relationship:

So with my husband,--just such a surprise,

Such a mistake, in that relationship!

Everyone says that husbands love their wives,

Guard them and guide them, give them happiness;

'T is *duty, law, pleasure, religion*: well,

You see how much of this come true in mine!

People indeed would fain have somehow proved

He was no husband: he did not hear,

Or would not wait, and so has killed us all. (VII. 150-8; italics are mine)

The very words, "duty," "law," "pleasure," and "religion," also appear repeatedly throughout Guido's monologue. However, Guido uses them to justify his patriarchal authority in the institution of marriage. Guido believes that it is Pompilia's duty to "afford me [him] pleasure" (V.719). Female submission is a natural law; since a secular marriage is a type of the holy marriage between Christ and the Church, his patriarchal authority in marriage is approved by religion. Pompilia negates Guido's language of gender relationship and his sexual politics by defining the period of her marriage to Guido simply as a dark *blank* or a terrific *dream*:

> And so an end! Because a blank begins
> From when, at the word, she kissed me hard and hot,
> And took me back to where my father leaned
> Opposite Guido—who stood eyeing him,
> As eyes the butcher the cast panting ox
> That feels his fate is come, nor struggles more,--
> While Paul looked archly on, pricked brow at whiles
> And said "Count Guido, take your lawful wife
> "Until death part you!"
>
> All since is one blank,
>
> Over and ended; a terrific dream. (VII. 574-85)

The "blank" or a nightmarish "dream" Pompilia has to go through within the institution of marriage is partly caused by the dehumanizing commodity culture. As mentioned before, the marriage between Guido and Pompilia is a symbolic representation of commodity culture, and its dehumanizing nature is exposed. Interestingly, both Guido

and Pompilia claim that they were passively led into the marriage, which was essentially nothing other than an exchange of commodity, the name of Franceschini for Pompilia's wealth. Hardly understanding the dehumanizing nature of commodity culture, Pompilia is helplessly led into the marriage by her mother and Paolo:

> --Well, I no more saw sense in what she said
> Than a lamb does in people clipping wool;
> Only lay down and let myself be clipped.
> And when next day the cavalier who came—.....
> When he proved Guido Franceschini....
> And when he took my hand and made a smile—
> Why, the uncomfortableness of it all
> Seemed hardly more important in the case
> That,--when one give you, say, a coin to spend,--
> Its newness or its oldness; if the piece
> Weigh properly and buy you what you wish,
> No matter whether you get grime or glare!
> Men take the coin, return you grapes and figs.
> Here, marriage was the coin, a dirty piece
> Would purchase me the praise of those I loved:
> About what else should I concern myself?
> So, hardly knowing what a husband meant,
> I supposed this or any man would serve,
> No whit the worse for being so uncouth. (VII. 386-412)

Pompilia's tragic fate in the institution of marriage clearly illustrates the dehumanizing nature of commodity culture, which she realizes at the cost of her life. Interestingly both Guido and Pompilia liken marriage to a *coin*, the very essence of commodity culture and the medium of exchange. While Guido actively embraces the principle of commodity culture by transforming his honor, as his "soul" and "self-respect," into something to be sold, Pompilia realizes, much too late, that what really matters in human relationships is the very soul and self-respect that Guido has discarded. Naively she has assumed that, just as a coin serves its purpose whether it is clean or dirty, so "any man would serve" in marriage. When Paolo and Violante strike the deal for the marriage, they leave out the one key question that both Guido and Pompilia ultimately raise:

"No blush at the avowal you dared buy

"A girl beseems your granddaughter,

"Like ox or ass? Are flesh and blood a ware?

"Are heart and soul a chattel? (V. 426-29)

Answers from both Guido and Pompilia to this question clearly separate them from each other. From the beginning Guido seems to be quite clear about the nature of their marriage: "There my husband never used deceit / He never did by speech nor act imply / "Because of our soul's yearning ... Let us become one flesh, being in one soul!" (VII. 772-8) Guido's fiction of honor is so immersed in the commodity culture that he takes it for granted that, when he makes the bargain, he buys not just Pompilia's body but her love, submissiveness, and obedience, as well. He contends:

I 'll say—the law 's the law:

With a wife I look to find all wifeliness,

As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree—

I buy the song o' the nightingale inside.

Such was the pack: Pompilia from the first

Broke it, refused from the beginning day

Either in body or soul to cleave to mine. (V. 603-9)

Commodity culture reduces a human being to a commodity, as illustrated in Guido's treatment of Pompilia. One thing important to note in Guido's claim to his right as a husband over Pompilia is that the claim is invested with the form of a legal contract. Asserting that "the law's law," Guido contends that when he exchanged his name for Pompilia's wealth, he bought her submission and obedience, too. Here, once again, the poem raises the very question of the Benthamite legal fiction. Not surprisingly, *The Ring and the Book* is strewn with various terms of legal nature, such as "obligation," "law," "duty," "pact," "right," etc. By examining how these fictional entities exercise a coercive power on Guido and others, Browning directs the attention of readers to the politics of various cultural fictions existent in his contemporary society.

Guido's monologue dramatizes the contemporary cultural fictions in gender relationships as invested with legal discourse. Guido claims that as a husband he has a God-given right over Pompilia's body and soul, "the anterior right, / The God's-gift to mankind" (V. 1574-5). He also mentions on many occasions a certain form of legal contract in which Pompilia is obligated to be submissive both in body and soul. He claims that it was Pompilia who broke the law that a wife should be submissive to a husband, "I should obey my spouse like Christ" (VII. 450). But what his monologue ultimately reveals is that his rights within the institution of marriage are only a customary

law that a patriarchal society one-sidedly enforces; they have no intrinsic referent as he claims. One thing that Guido does not mention is that it was not Pompilia herself who agreed to Guido's terms of marriage; the marriage between Guido and Pompilia was negotiated between Violante and Paolo, a proxy of Guido. Pompilia was blindly led into the marriage, as she notes about Violante's instructions on the marriage, "When she told me this, / --Well, I no more saw sense in what she said / Than a lamb does in people clipping wool. / Only lay down and let myself be clipped" (VII. 385-88). Pompilia has never agreed to Guido's terms of marriage. Therefore, Guido's legal claim on his right in the marriage is just a fiction. Though Guido brings up a number of legal terms to justify his claim, it is only a culturally formed habit and norm and that a wife should be submissive to a husband both in body and soul in marriage.

Nevertheless, Guido asserts that "right is right" (V. 1578). What is problematic here is that only half of mankind, men, enjoy and exercise such right, "the God' gift to *man*kind" (italics are mine). Guido, in his monologue, never raises a doubt about the validity of such a structure of oppression, but simply exercises it with aggression, asserting that right is right:

> The obligation I incurred was just
>
> To practise my mastery, prove my mastership:--
>
> Pompilia's duty was—submit herself,
>
> Afford me pleasure, perhaps cure my bile. (V. 716-9)

Guido never seems to understand that the exercise of his patriarchal authority can be an enormous oppression to Pompilia. In his monologue the structure of oppression is taken for granted, naturally accepted and further promoted.

In his other monologue Guido seems to be aware of the problems of the oppression that his fiction of honor dictates. At the beginning of his second monologue Guido confesses:

How I see all my folly at a glance!

" A man requires a woman and a wife":

There was my folly; I believed the saw.

I knew that just myself concerned myself,

Yet needs must look for what I seemed to lack,

In a woman,—why, the woman 's in the man!

Fools we are, how we learn things when too late!

Overmuch life turns round my woman-side:

The male and female in me, mixed before,

Settle of a sudden: I 'm my wife out right

In this unmanly appetite for truth,

This careless courage as to consequence,

This instantaneous sight through things and through,

This voluble rhetoric, if you please,—'t is she!

Here you have that Pompilia whom I slew,

Also the folly for which I slew her! (XI. 158-76)

However, it is soon revealed that Guido's "woman-side" and "this unmanly appetite for truth" did not lead him to the recognition of the oppressive structure that his fiction of nothingness dictates. The woman-side in him is, it turns out, only meant to induce his volubility—"This voluble rhetoric, if you please,—'t is she!"—,which the rest of his

monologue well illustrates. Also, as I will explain in my discussion of the question of language in the poem, his unmanly appetite for truth is only meant to undermine the Pope's religious institution that threatens his life and create a self that will survive his approaching death. What governs both of his monologues is simply the aggressive exertion of his fiction.

A fiction is sustained by aggression, as Browning suggests in "Johannes Agricola in Meditation." The title of the poem suggests a lack of action in the poem. God loved Agricola even before the creation of the world. His salvation is predestined by God, so there is nothing left for him to do. But nowhere in the poem is it indicated that others, including God, agree with him. His belief in his predestined salvation is a fiction. Nevertheless, Agricola sustains the fiction of his predestined salvation by denying aggressively other possibilities in the relation between God and himself, and also God and others. One can find a similar pattern of aggression in Guido's fiction of honor. Throughout his first monologue Guido constantly makes efforts to portray himself as a passive figure who simply assumes various roles that he claims society prescribes to him: "You know the course I was free to take? / I took just that which let me serve the Church, I gave all my labour in body and soul" (V. 1791-3). Even about his marriage to Pompilia Guido emphasizes his passivity: "Done! He proposed all, I accepted all" (V. 421). However, what is hidden behind this seeming passivity is his aggressive exertion of his fiction of honor. Throughout his first monologue Guido's fiction of honor faces a series of crises. His self-identity is so immersed in his fiction of honor that when his fiction of honor is faced with a crisis, his self-identity is also threatened. Therefore, to maintain a unified self-identity he must aggressively exert his fiction of honor.

The crisis in self that Guido experiences in his first monologue is fundamentally caused by the *nothingness*, the empty referents, of his fiction of honor. His early fiction of honor, the intrinsic value of his noble blood, is seriously challenged when his life in Rome, about three decades long, fails to fulfill what he believes the rightful claims of his noble blood over the world. His fiction was losing its ground. For his life to be something meaningful his blood has to mean something. In desperation, therefore, Guido translates the intrinsic value of his blood into an exchange value and exchanges the name of Franceschini with Pompilia's wealth. Through this marriage his fiction of honor is temporarily restored. However, when Pompilia escapes from his house his fiction of honor once again faces a crisis. Guido's self-identity is so institutionalized that Pomplia's breaking of the patriarchal code of female submission and obedience in the institution of marriage undermines to a great extent the very ground of his subjectivity. Then, Guido's killing of Pompilia is a desperate act to restore his self-identity that has been temporarily jeopardized by her. When he went back to Arezzo without killing Pompilia and Caponsacchi at the inn of Castelnuovo where they were found together, he was laughed at and becomes the text the world preaches on. Only after he killed Pompilia did he restore his self-identity and feel secure:

> I heard Himself prescribe,
> That great Physician, and dared lance the core
> Of the bad ulcer; and the rage abates,
> I am myself and whole now: I prove cured
> By the eyes that see, the ears that hear again,
> The limbs that have relearned their youthful play,

The healthy taste of food and feel of clothes

And taking to our common life once more,

All that now urges my defense from death. (V. 1704-12)

Guido needs his fiction to sustain a unified self. Furthermore, his self-identity is so institutionalized that self and institutions are indivisibly connected in his fiction of honor. Therefore, when institutions are against him, his self faces a crisis. As mentioned above, Pompilia's revolt in the institution of marriage threatens Guido's institutionalized self-identity. More seriously, though Guido's fiction of honor is built on the institutions of religion and law to a great extent, Guido finds that these very institutions have become a threat to him. Guido claims that God has given him his right over Pompilia's body and soul, but the Pope ultimately condemns his body and soul. Guido assumes the institution of law itself in killing Pompilia, but he now finds himself defending his life in the court of law. The very institutions upon which his fiction of honor is structured are now threatening to nullify his institutionalized self-identity. Therefore, to sustain his self-identity Guido needs to have his fiction back:

Absolve, then, me, law's mere executant!

Protect your own defender,--save me, Sirs!

Give me my life, give me my liberty,

My good name and my civic rights again!

It would be too fond, too complacent play

Into the hands o' the devil, should we lose

The game here, I for God: a soldier-bee

That yields his life, exenterate with the stroke

O' the sting that saves the hive. I need that life. (V. 2003-11)

Guido desperately needs his old life back to sustain his self—the life in which his fiction of honor and those various social institutions are harmoniously united together in creating a seamless whole of reality and of his self-identity. So he pleads:

Will the Court of its charity teach poor me
Anxious to learn, of any way i' the world,
Allowed by custom and convenience, save
This same which, taught from my youth, I trod?
Take me along with you; where was the wrong step?
If what I gave in barter, style and state
All that hangs to Franceschinihood,
Were worthless,--why, society goes to ground,
Its rules are idiot's-rambling. Honour of birth,--
Of that has no value, cannot buy
Something with value of another sort,
You've no reward nor punishment to give
I' the giving or the taking honour; straight
Your social fabric, pinnacle to base,
Comes down a-clatter like a house of cards. (V. 431-45)

Guido contends that his fiction of honor is essential to society. This passage disguised in the rhetoric of public welfare barely conceals the crisis his subjectivity faces. If his fiction of honor, "all that hangs to Franceschinihood," goes to ground, his whole subjectivity collapses like a house of cards, even before society does.

From the beginning Guido's fiction of his patriarchal authority in the institution of marriage is maintained by an aggressive denying of the fact that such authority is only culturally formed. Asserting that "law is law," Guido exercises his patriarchal authority by force:

> Oh, if I dared but speak!
>
> Must I speak? I am blamed that I forwent
>
> A way to make my husband's favour come.
>
> That is true: I was firm, withstood, refused...
>
> --Women as you are, how can I find the words? (VII. 716-20)

Guido's lovemaking to Pompilia by force is a symbolic representation of the violence that the patriarchal society exercises. Both his fiction of honor and his self-identity hinged on it are sustained through an aggressive, violent exercise of his claimed legal rights in the institution of marriage. As mentioned before, Guido's fiction of honor is so immersed in the institutionalized commodity culture that he believes in, when he exchanges his name for Pompilia and her wealth, he also *buys* her submissiveness and obedience, which Pompilia refuses to give:

> This wife of mine was of another mood—
>
> Would not begin the lie that ends with truth,
>
> Nor feign the love that brings real love about.
>
> Wherefore I judged, sentenced and punished her. (XI. 1429-32)

Love in Guido's fiction is based on female submission, not on mutual affection. And he believes that love in the institution of marriage begins with such female submissiveness: "lie that ends with truth." Guido's institutionalized marriage nullifies "love" in any

ordinary sense of the word: "love, a little word / Whereof we have not heard one syllable" (V. 667-8). Pompilia directly challenges Guido's institutionalized love in marriage and from the very beginning of their marriage Pompilia refuses Guido's loveless lovemaking. This refusal threatens not just Guido's patriarchal authority in the institution of marriage but his self-identity itself as well.

At the end of his first monologue, Guido presents a utopian vision of patriarchal society that he wants to share with his son:

> And when, in times made better through your brave
> Decision now,--might but Utopia be!—
> Rome rife with honest women and strong men,
> Manners reformed, old habits back once more,
> Customs that recognize the standard worth,--
> The wholesome household rule in force again,
> Husbands once more God's representative,
> Wives like the typical Spouse once more, and Priests
> No longer men of Belial, with no aim
> At leading silly women captive, but
> Of rising to such duties as ours now,--
> Then I will set my son at my right-hand
> And tell his father's story to this point,
> Adding "The task seemed superhuman, still
> "I dared and did it, trusting God and law:
> "And they approved of me: give praise to both!"

And if, for answer, he shall stoop to kiss

My hand, and peradventure start thereat,--

I engage to smile... (V. 2037-55)

Guido's utopian vision is in reality a dark vision where the structure of oppression continues to exist. Furthermore, it is implied in the passage, omen-like, that Guido's fiction of honor is likely to be inherited to his son: "for answer, he shall stoop to kiss / My hand." Pompilia's breaking out of the house of Guido is important in that she challenges and actually breaks the very structure of oppression Guido's patriarchal society exercises on women.

Guido's utopian vision of patriarchal society is directly challenged by Pompilia. She intentionally names her new-born son after "a new saint to begin anew" (VII. 1030)--"Gaetano, for a reason" (VII. 30). By naming her son after the newest saint she hopes for a new social order in which a more equal gender relationship is possible. What needs to be noted in Pompilia's monologue is that she actively breaks away from Guido's house of oppression. While Guido's killing of Pompilia purposes to maintain and further promote the patriarchal structure of oppression, Pompilia's act denounces the very structure. As Ann Brady correctly points out, both Pompilia and Caponsacchi discard the role imposed on them by society.[10] After she talks to the Archbishop, Pompilia temporarily follows his advice to be submissive to Guido—"swallow the burning coal he proffers you" (VII. 730) —but she soon realizes that it would only extend the oppressive structure that constantly victimizes women in the institute of marriage. She asserts, "he gave me wrong advice / Though he were thrice Archbishop,--that, I know!— / Now I have got to die and see things clear" (VII. 731-2). All along her monologue she describes the period of her

marriage as "sheer dreaming and impossibility" (VII. 112), and she declares to Caponsacchi:

> And the way to end dream is to break them, stand,
>
> Walk, go: then help me stand, walk and go! (VI. 820-1)

Probably, this passage is the most important message that the poem tries to convey. To break the structure of oppression is to *act.* To act helps not only Pompilia but also Caponsacchi. By participating in Pompilia's act of escape Caponsacchi is able to free himself from his alienated labor within the institutionalized church. They both free themselves from the coercion of the institutions of marriage and of religion, respectively. It is doubtful, however, whether Browning truly believed it possible to entirely free one from the pressures and limits that the dominant social relations of power dictate. As Pompilia insightfully perceives that "So we are made, such difference in minds, / Such difference too in eyes that see the minds" (VII. 918-9), all human thoughts and acts are inescapably entrapped in various forms of fiction. Thus Pompilia realizes that the creation of a new social order in which a more equal gender relation is possible is not allowed in this world:

> Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,
>
> Mere imitation of the inimitable:
>
> In heaven we have the real and true and sure
>
> I is there they neither marry nor are given
>
> In marriage but are as the angels: right,
>
> Oh how right that is, how like Jesus Christ
>
> To say that! Marriage-making for the earth,

With gold so much,--birth, power, repute so much,

Or beauty, youth so much, in lack of these! (VII. 1824-32)

She deplores that such cultural entities as "birth, power, repute, beauty, or youth" exercise a coercive power on human thoughts and acts. As implied in the fact that Pompilia's freedom from Guido is soon ended tragically, the poem seems to suggest that no human being is free from the pressures and limits that various forms of cultural fictions or ideologies dictate. Thus, Pompilia says, "I withdraw from earth and man / To my own soul, compose myself for God" (X. 1769-70).

[1]. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 291.

[2]. Jeremy Bentham, *The Theory of Fictions*, inserted in G.K. Ogden, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.: 1932), 12.

[3]. *Ibid.*, 13.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 15.

[5]. Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, 150.

[6]. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 194.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 193-4.

[8]. Herbert F. Tucker, "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," inserted in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1985), eds. Chaviva Hosek & Patricia Parker, 230.

[9]. See Michele Barrett, *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 10.

[10]. See Ann Brady, *Pompilia : A Feminist Reading of Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), 73

CHAPTER THREE

LEGAL FICTION IN ARCHANGELI AND BOTTINI

As indicated in its title page that the poet persona quotes in full, the central framework of *The Old Yellow Book* is about a legal dispute over a husband's right to punish an adulterous wife: "A Roman murder-case /... / Wherein it is disputed if, and when, / Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet 'scape / The customary forfeit" (I. 130). Also the legal debate over Pompilia's origin of birth and her status as a rightful heiress to the Comparinis forms an important part of *The Old Yellow Book.* Although the legal issues in *The Old Yellow Book* are transformed into poetry in *The Ring and the Book*, the legal discourse still forms the central framework of the poem. What characterizes the legal discourse of *The Ring and the Book* is the Benthmite legal fiction, the politics of *nothingness*. Bentham's main concern in his theory of fiction was that in the court of law fictional entities that do not have any counterparts in the world are presented and accepted as if they were real entities through the power of language, which led to his strenuous efforts to reform the English legal system. But Bentham's insights towards the coercive power of fictional entities on human thoughts and acts are not limited to the legal world only; the politics of fiction can be found in other social and institutional practices, as Browning shows in *The Ring and the Book.* The poem extensively explores the various forms of fiction in Victorian society and their politics. In this chapter, I will look into the question of fiction in legal discourse as presented in *The Ring and the Book*, especially in the monologues of the two lawyers, Archangeli and Bottini.

As mentioned before, *The Ring and the Book* as a whole addresses the question of the Benthamite fictions built around gender relations in seventeenth century Roman society. The politics of nothingness treads on the delicate grounds of epistemology and representation. An important Victorian critic W. Fox, a mentor to young Browning, noticed the importance of Bentham's theory of fiction. Citing Fox, Isobel Armstrong, summarizes the critic's insightful observation on the nature of legal fiction:

> The writer of the Bentham article is at pains to show, first that Bentham condemned legal language because its eloquence was aesthetic, and secondly that legal fictions are the products of this aesthetic language. Forms of words are substituted for arguments ... and forms of words begin to have an autonomous life of their own which depends on 'the music of maxim, absorbing the whole imagination.[1]

The most dangerous aspect of this *aestheticism*, which both Bentham and Fox point out, is that it *conceals* nothingness, the empty referent, upon which a legal discourse is constructed. By weaving a meticulous linguistic web, aestheticism renders the verbal structure a seamless whole, and this seamlessness often makes it difficult to perceive that the verbal structure is built on empty referent.

The two lawyers' monologues dramatize this politics of nothingness. At the beginning of his speech, Bottini explains his legal argument by making an analogy to painting. In painting the Holy Family, Bottini contends, a painter should be concerned with:

> Not those fragmentary studied facts
> Which answer to the outward frame and flesh—

Not his nose, not this eyebrow, the other fact

Of man's staff, women's stole or infant's clout,

But lo, a spirit-birth conceived of flesh,

Truth rare and real, not transcripts, fact and false. (IX.102-7)

Bottini's analogy to painting provides some important clues that help the reader to understand the politics of legal discourse in the poem. As implied by the analogy of law to painting, what characterizes the two lawyers' legal discourse is aestheticism. Archangeli's numerous mentioning of his interest in poetry and various poetic allusions strewn in his monologue, along with his excessive use of Latin, clearly demonstrate how pervasive his aestheticism is in his legal argument. Another important aspect of legal fiction that Bottini's analogy reveals is the very delicate, often dangerous, epistemological ground it treads on. The two lawyers' legal discourse shows how truth and knowledge can be problematic, as in other forms of fiction in the poem. Bottini contends that what is more important in painting is not fragmentary facts but the transformation of these facts into an aesthetic form, "a spirit-birth." Archangeli also characterizes the lawyer as "kingly alchemist" who transforms brass into gold. Likewise Bottini reverses the ordinary differentiation between fact and non-fact. For him, "studied facts" are "fact and *false*" while the aesthetic creation or spirit is "truth rare and real." Here Bottini brings legal fiction onto a very delicate epistemological ground.

The two lawyers build their cases circumstantially: "Thus circumstantially evolve we facts" (VIII. 139). In their circumstantially constructed fictions, facts do not have fixed meanings. Therefore, any relation between a sign and its referent is unstable and becomes problematic. When the referent does not have a fixed meaning but

circumstantially evolves, the sign also becomes unfixed. It can be manipulated without restrictions by anyone who uses it, as long as it maintains coherence in a given context. Therefore, what matters in a legal fiction is a plausible interpretation, not facts, as Archangeli says, "Explaining matters, not denying them!" (VIII. 315), and also Bottini, "Right reading of the riddle" (IX. 670).

The most problematic aspect of the Benthamite legal fiction is that "legal fictions are the product of aesthetic language," something the two lawyers' monologues clearly illustrate. One thing that the readers of their monologues come to be constantly aware of is that their legal fiction is primarily a verbal construction. At the beginning of his monologue Bottini expresses his desire to "enliven speech with many a flower / Refuses obstinate to blow in print, / As wildings planted in a prim parterre" (IX. 3-5). And Archangeli exults after he finishes his argument for Guido's defense:

> Done! I' the rough, i' the rough! But done! And, lo,
> Landed and stranded my monster of defence—
> Leviathan into nose whereof
> I have put fish-hook, pierced his jaw with thorn,
> And given him to my maidens for a play! (VIII. 1737-42)

As Bentham himself strenuously reminds us, the legal fiction is created and sustained by aesthetic language, and the two lawyers' monologues reveal the problems of aesthetic language at its most grotesque. The reason why Bentham condemns this aesthetic language is, as both Fox and Armstrong point out, because in legal fiction "forms of words are substituted for arguments ... and forms of words begin to have an autonomous life of their own." The two monologues are characterized exactly by this problem of

aesthetic language. The verbal structure of legal discourse, a monster of speech, is a live one, and it has an autonomous life and often moves according to its own whims. Even though Archangeli could manage to fish-hook the monster of speech, "Leviathan," he can hardly hold it under control. When the verbal construction is working through its own set of rules and principles, it no longer becomes a sign of something that it refers to; it becomes a fiction, signifying nothing.

Although the two lawyers' primary concern similarly lies in creating a seamless verbal whole, they adopt different aesthetic principles. While Archangeli makes efforts to tame a monster of speech through Latin, Bottini resorts to the classicism of painting and to various pagan mythologies. As a critic points out, well over a half of Archangeli's whole speech is made up of his experiment with Latin phrases.[2] Archangeli says, "Law is pork substratum of the fry, / Goose-foot and cock's-comb are Latinity,--/ And in this case, if circumstance assist, / We 'll garnish law with idiom, never fear!" (VIII. 152-5) So Archangeli resorts to Latin at every point in his speech. At the very beginning of his argument he tries five different Latin phrases for the first three words of his argument, "Count Guido married." Understandably, he uses Latin phrases to impress judges with his knowledge of the language, so to win the case for Guido. However, his use of Latin goes to a much deeper level. At one point Archangeli asserts:

> Better we lost the cause than lacked the gird
> At the Fisc's Latin, lost the Judge's laugh!
> It 's Venturini that decides for style. (VIII. 216-8)

The use of Latin for Archangeli becomes the governing principle of his monologue. In spite of the fact that Guido used a knife in killing Pompilia, Archangeli's being engrossed with Latin compels him to try other weapons that would produce better Latin phrases:

> Bottini is a beast, one barbarous:
> Look out for him when he attempts to say
> "Armed with pistol, Guido followed her!"
> Will not I be beforehand with my Fisc,
> Cut away phrase by phrase from underfoot!
> *Guido Pompliam*—Guido thus his wife
> Following with igneous engine, shall I have?
> *Armis munitus igneis persequens*—
> *Arma sulphurea gestans*, sulphury arms,
> Or, might one style a pistol—popping piece?
> *Armatus breviori sclopulo*?
> We 'll let him have been armed so, though it make
> Somewhat against us: I had thought to own—
> Provided with a simple travelling-sword,
> *Ense solummodo viatorio*
> *Instructus*: but we 'll grant the pistol here. (VIII. 200-15)

Here in Archangeli's legal fiction, as Fox criticizes, "forms of words are substituted for arguments," concealing the nothingness of it. What barely keeps Archangeli from completely being lost in Latin is the dire reality that he has to compose a legal defense for Guido.

While Latin becomes the dominant aesthetic language in Archangeli's legal fiction, Bottini's monologue is characterized by classicism and pagan mythology. Throughout his monologue Bottini makes numerous pagan references, including Phryne, Hebe, Hymen, Cupid, Vulcan, Hesione, Jove, Hercules, Myrtillus, Amaryllis, Ulysses, Phoebus, and Icarus, and he compares Pompilia to Dido, Venus, Helen, Lucretia, etc. Like Archangeli, Bottini attempts to impress his judges with his broad knowledge of classical literature. But soon, ironically, his exorbitant classicism reveals that his legal argument is based on empty referents. At one point Bottini himself becomes aware of the irrelevance of his pagan references and some possible dangers of using them in front of Christian judges:

> If I entangle me
> With my similitudes,--if wax wings melt,
> And earthward down I drop, not mine the fault:
> Blame your beneficence, O Court, O sun,
> Whereof the beamy smile affects my flight!
> What matter, so Pompilia's fame revive
> I' the warmth that proves the bane of Icarus? (IX. 576-82)

The two lawyers' monologue show that both aesthetic fiction and aesthetic language—they are two sides of a coin—are joined together in the construction of a seamless legal discourse. The question of making a seamless whole governs their entire monologues. Bottini deplores the fact that his chance to present a perfect legal argument was robbed from him by Pompilia's confession of her affair with Caponsacchi, which was briefly mentioned in Tertium Quid. Bottini realizes that Pompilia's lingering on life, rather than

an instant death, and her confession of the affair contradicts the legal fiction that he is trying to build:

> But me, forsooth—as, in the very act
> Of both confession and (what followed close)
> Subsequent talk, chatter and gossipry,
> Babble to sympathizing he and she
> Whoever chose besiege her dying bed,--
> As this were found at variance with my tale,
> Falsified all I have adduced for truth,
> Admitted not one peccadillo here,
> Pretended to perfection, first and last,
> O' the whole procedure—perfect in the end,
> Perfect i' the means, perfect in everything,
> Leaving a lawyer nothing to excuse,
> --A flight, impossible to Adamic flesh,
> Just to be fancied, scarcely to be wished,
> And, anyhow, unpleadable in court! (IX. 1430-45)

This clearly illustrates how a legal fiction is built on nothingness, an empty referent. A legal fiction can survive only in idealistic dimensions. Pompilia's lingering life and her interaction with other people contradict the aesthetic whole that Bottini wishes to create. As Bottini's monologue testifies, a legal fiction is not willing to or is incompetent to accommodate the dynamics of real material human relations.

Archangeli's monologue exposes the problem of aesthetic fiction in an even more grotesque state than that of Bottini's. Like Bottini, Archangeli's primary concern is to create a seamless, aesthetic whole of a legal argument. To his great regret, Archangeli realizes that the confession of murder by one of Guido's accomplices takes away his chance to create the seamless legal argument he has been dreaming of:

> So, doubtless, had I needed argue here
> But for the full confession round and sound!
> Thus might you wrong some kingly alchemist,--
> Whose concern should not be with showing brass
> Transmuted into gold, but triumphing,
> Rather, about his gold changed out of brass,
> Not vulgarly to the mere sight and touch,
> But in idea, the spiritual display,
> The apparition buoyed by winged words
> Hovering above its birth-place in the brain,--
> Thus would you wrong this excellent personage (VIII. 383-93)

The analogy of a kingly alchemist betrays the politics of legal fiction in its grotesque state. Archangeli contends that legal argument should not be concerned with showing how brass turns into gold but with triumphing about the aesthetic artifact of gold. This indicates an undeniable sign of reification in legal discourse. It exposes the complete detachment of legal discourse from the real material conditions upon which it is based. Just as Bottini's legal fiction values "a spirit-birth" more than "fragmentary studied facts," so Archangeli's is more concerned with "idea and spiritual display" than it is with

"sight and touch," its material base. Archangeli's "apparition buoyed by winged words" is nothing other than an aesthetic fiction conjured by that power of language, one completely detached from its material base.

The foremost reason why both Bentham and Fox condemn legal fiction is that it is based on nothingness. John Hill Burton notes that "a Fiction of law may be defined in general as saying something exists which does not exist, and acting as if it exist; or *vice versa*." [3] The two lawyers' aesthetic fiction in legal discourse is dangerous because it conceals the very nothingness of its content. In his criticism of legal fiction Fox goes much deeper than Bentham. While Bentham "actually justifies legal fictions *aesthetically* on the grounds of their internal coherence, though he condemns its nothingness," Fox totally denounces them as the mere "construction of an independent system artificially deduced out of its own technical principles etc."[4] The replacement of material contents with purely technical principles in legal fiction—Archangeli's Latin and Bottini's classicism—or, the substitution of forms of words for arguments, as the critic puts it, creates an idealistic system of signification independent of a material base, such as Archangeli's "the apparition buoyed by winged words." Fox's criticism of aesthetic fiction is important because he reminds us that "fictions *intervene* in the world however aesthetic they may seem,"[5] as Archangeli's aesthetic legal fiction proves, when it actually propagates Guido's oppressive patriarchy.

Bentham's original attack on fictional entities was against the English legal system where fictions are presented and accepted as if they were real entities. However, Bentham's insights into legal fiction go far beyond the courts of law. As Browning exhaustively addresses in *The Ring and the Book*, the fiction of nothingness and its

coercive power on human thoughts and acts can be found in various social and institutional practices. Furthermore, a fiction in any given social or institutional practice is indissoluably interconnected with other social or institutional fictions, as the two lawyers' monologues illustrate. This problematic nature of the politics of nothingness is clearly revealed when Archangeli builds his defense around a fictional entity, Guido's honor. Archangeli bases his defense on causa honoris: "*Honoris causa*; thus we make our stand" (VIII. 425), and "we did all and some, / Little and much, adjunct and principal, / *Causa honoris* "(VIII. 1475-8). Archangeli, like Guido, claims that Guido had to kill Pompilia because his honor was injured by her:

> So, *Vindicatio*,--here begins the speech!—
> *Honoris causa*; thus we make our stand:
> Honour in us had injury, we prove
> It is enough, authorities declare,
> If the result, the deed in question now,
> Be caused by confidence that injury
> Is veritable and no figment: since,
> What, though proved fancy afterward, seemed fact
> At the time, they argue shall excuse result.
> That which we do, persuaded of good cause
> For what we do, hold justifiable!— . (VIII. 424-36)

In *The Ring and the Book,* the word *honor* becomes one of the key words by which Browning investigates the politics of fiction. Honor in this poem is a symbol of oppressive patriarchal authorities. When Archangeli bases his defense on Guido's

injured honor, one important thing that he leaves out, as Guido also does in his monologue, is the evidence of the presence of honor in the world as a real entity, and of any harm done to it. Contrary to Guido's claim on its intrinsic value, his honor is a fiction in the sense that it is a culturally formed entity whose existence is maintained only by customs and habits. Nevertheless, honor exerts influence on the thoughts and actions of Guido and others; it leads Guido to kill Pompilia when he believes it was violated. Advocates of Guido claim that honor is God's gift to man and they cite various ecclesiastical and secular authorities to support their claim, and in doing so they once again betray that honor is just a cultural fiction maintained only through tradition and customs. One thing that Browning makes efforts to show in the poem is that the referents of honor cannot be found anywhere else than in the very cultural structures that enforce such fictional entities as honor, as part of their hegemonic domination and control.

Throughout Archangeli's monologue, honor is associated with different institutional entities. Like Guido, Archangeli makes efforts to establish the referent of honor in various institutional entities, especially law, religion, and gender relations, so that a multiplicity of relationships may solidify the validity of honor. Thus, honor in his monologue is in flux, constantly changing its referent. Honor is "A gift of God" (459), "honour proved the life and soul of us" (477), "Honour is man's supreme good" (585), or "the thing we lost, we found" (1050). Each definition of honor bears some structural relation to existing institutional entities. However, each institutional entity to which Archangeli resorts to prove the presence of honor does not provide a single unified referent of honor. This creates a very interesting situation in his monologue. On the one hand, when a sign does not have a fixed referent, its meaning can be manipulated and

controlled for a certain purpose in a given context. So Archangeli constantly changes the meaning of honor to prove Guido's injured honor. On the other hand, when a sign does not have any fixed meaning, it does not properly serve as a sign at all. Realizing this, Archangeli makes efforts, with little success, to fix the meaning of honor onto a single referent. Thus Archangeli's monologue alternates between a constructive and a deconstructive legal discourse. The unstableness of the sign of "honor" creates some tension in his monologue and this tension, in turn, exposes the politics of fiction. I will now discuss this aspect in some detail.

Archangeli begins his defense of Guido's honor by describing it as a natural gift of God:

> Therefore we shall demonstrate first of all
> That Honour is a gift of God to man
> Precious beyond compare: which natural sense
> Of human rectitude and purity,--
> Which white, man's soul is born with,--brooks no touch:
> Therefore, the sensitivest spot of all,
> Wounded by any warfare breathed from black,
> Is,--honour within honour, like the eye
> Centred i' the ball,--the honour of our wife. (VIII. 458-66)

Here Archangeli claims that honor is something that God has given to *man.* But given to *men* or to *all* human beings? Obviously women are not given such a gift from God; honor is what *men*'s souls are born with. A wife's honor, as the honor within man's honor, should exist and be preserved intact for the sake of husband. This claim obviously

reflects the male-dominant gender ideology that was prevalent both in Guido's Roman society and Browning's Victorian society. One thing that Browning in this poem makes efforts to show is that what is perceived as the proper relation between husband and wife in the institution of marriage is only culturally formed and sustained by an aggressive exertion of male sexual ideology. In spite of his assertive claim, Archangeli fails to establish the referent of Guido's honor outside the institutional entities, particularly of religion and marriage, where the existing patriarchal authorities are endorsed. Here, a fiction is justified by other fictions, not by real material life conditions. As discussed in the previous chapter, Guido's fiction of honor cannot accommodate the dynamics of material life process. His initial claim for the intrinsic value of his noble blood and for his rights over the world is not sustained when his efforts of many years to carve out his name of Franceschini in Rome fails to bear fruit. And his later claim for the exchange value of his noble blood to be worth a good marriage for himself is also shattered when Pompilia refuses to be submissive and challenges his patriarchal authority. His fiction of honor can be sustained only in a static world of status quo that attempts to maintain the existing relations of domination and power.

Some of those things that make Guido's patriarchal society "natural" to Guido and Archangeli are tradition and custom. Archangeli insightfully observes:

> Civilization bows to decency,
> The acknowledged use and wont: 't is manners,--mind
> But yet imperative law,--which make the man.
> Thus do we pay the proper compliment
> To rank, and that society of Rome,

Hath so obliged us by its interest,

Taken our client's part instinctively,

As unaware defending it own cause. (VIII. 742-49)

Archangeli asserts that "the acknowledged use and wont" *makes man*. Here he makes a very insightful observation regarding how individual subjectivity is formed through various forms of hegemonic infiltration. Traditions and habituated customs subtly lead one to accept certain ideological structures as "natural" and make him live them out. The pressures and limits that traditions and customs exert can be "mild" and often unnoticed, compared to any rigid, forceful intervention from the dominant structures of power in a society. Yet their influence is as deep as any ideological dictates; thus, Archangeli says that it is "yet imperative law."

Tradition plays an important role in sustaining the various fictions that the poem addresses. Raymond Williams points out that tradition is much more than "the surviving past." He explains:

> For tradition is in practice the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits. It is always more than an inert historicized segment; indeed it is the most powerful practical means of incorporation. What we have to see is not just a 'tradition' but a selective tradition: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification... From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded. Yet, within a particular

> hegemony, and as one of its decisive processes, this selection is presented and usually successfully passed off as 'tradition', '*the* significant past'. What has then to be said about any tradition is that it is in this sense an aspect of *contemporary* social and cultural organization, in the interest of the dominance of a specific class. It is a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present. What it offers in practice is a sense of predisposed *continuity*.[6]

Tradition is an integral part of the ruling ideologies and the hegemonic control and intervention. The most important aspect of tradition is that it is always a process of selecting the past to shape the present. "From a whole possible area of past and present ... certain meanings and practices" that will reinforce, or can be incorporated into, the existing relations of domination and power are "selected." Archangeli's legal discourse exposes this very aspect of hegemonic intervention. Asking "What dictum doth Society lay down / I' the case of one who hath a faithless wife? / Wherewithal should the husband cleanse his way? / Be patient and forgive?" (VIII. 750-53), Archangeli searches past texts, tales and anecdotes. To justify Guido's act of killing Pompilia, Archangeli searches out examples of husband's revenged honor. Not only Thoedoric's household law and Scaliger's book of Table-talk, but also he finds:

> Therefore set forth at large the ancient law!
> Superabundant the examples be
> To pick and choose from. The Athenian Code,
> Solon's, the name is serviceable,--then,
> The Laws of the Twelve Tables, that fifteenth,--
> "Romulus" likewise rolls out round and large;

The Julian; the Cornelian; Gracchus' Law:

So old a chime, the bells ring of themselves!

Speriti can set the going if he please. (VIII. 568-576)

From the vast records of the past, Archangeli selects and cites those legal authorities that will reinforce Guido's sexual fiction of a husband's honor. And this selective tradition helps re-enforce the existing relation of power and domination by naturalizing Guido's honor as a husband in the existing gender relations of male domination and female subjection.

In his discussion of tradition Williams observes that "the effective establishment of a selective tradition can be said to depend on identifiable institutions,"[7] though not entirely on them. As one of the most substantial and material instances of the superstructural formation of a society, the institution functions as the principal means through which the ruling ideologies are disseminated, and for this reason it serves the interest of the dominant social classes. The Church in *The Ring and the Book* is a good example of such an institution. After he cites some secular authorities for avenging his honor, Archangeli next tries to establish the referent of Guido's honor in ecclesiastical tradition:

All that was long ago declared as law

By the natural revelation, stands confirmed

By Apostle and Evangelist and Saint,--

To-wit—that Honour is man's supreme good. (VIII. 582-5)

Archangeli brings out various figures from religious texts that resemble the image of Guido, including Saint Jerome, Solomon in Proverbs, Saint Bernard in Epistle to his

nephew, Saint Paul, etc. And he asserts, "Was ever portrait limned so like the life? / ... / That of Samson in the Sacred Text / That 's not so much the portrait as the man! / Samson in Gaza was the antetype of / Guido at Rome: observe the Nazarite!" (VIII. 637-43). In this way, the various texts, both secular and ecclesiastic, serve as the referents of Archangeli's legal discourse. Law, religion, marriage and tradition form a web of signification for Guido's injured honor. In this web of signification each fictional entity serves as the referent for the other, and in their network of cross-reference each fiction reinforces, and, in turn, is reinforced by, the other fiction.

In spite of this interdependency, each institutional discourse competes with another for dominance, subverting the others. Though Archangeli's legal fiction is ratified by other institutional fictions, it is, at the same time, subverted by them. Archangeli seeks to justify Guido's killing from various authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical, claiming that a primitive revenge to any harm done to man's honor is man's natural law. But he soon realizes that these authorities are at odds with one anther. Though different institutional entities are interlocked to validate certain meanings and practices, no single institutional authority functions as the absolute dispenser of truth. Thus, about the proper punishment of an adulterous wife, Archangeli finds highly contradictory evidence:

"The doom of the adulterous wife was death,
Stoning by Moses' law. "Nay, stone her not,
"Put her away!" next legislates our Lord;
And last of all, "Nor yet divorce a wife"
Ordains the Church, "she typifies ourself,

"The Bride not fault shall cause to fall from Christ." ...

--Where do I find my proper punishment

For my adulterous wife, I humbly ask

Of my infallible Pope,--who now remits

Even the divorce allowed by Christ in lieu

Of lapidation Moses licensed me?

The Gospel checks the Law which throws the stone,

The Church tears the divorce-bill Gospel grants:

Shall wives sin and enjoy impunity? (VIII. 710-17)

The killing of Pompilia, which Archangeli finds that both natural and Mosaic laws justify, is condemned by Christ's Gospel. The Pope renounces Guido's request for divorce from an adulterous wife, which the Gospel allows. This contradiction in the various authorities which Archangeli draws on greatly destabilizes the sign of honor his legal fiction attempts to establish. Since Guido's honor does not have its referent outside institutional discourses, the contradiction among institutional discourses seriously threatens Arcangeli's legal argument. Not only does it spoil his dream of creating a seamless legal argument, further, it exposes that his legal discourse is based on empty referents. Thus Archangeli's legal fiction needs to have one undivided voice from Law, Gospel, and the Church:

What profit me the fulness of the days,

The final dispensation, I demand,

"But who hath barred thee primitive revenge,

"Which, like fire damped and dammed up, burns more fierce?

"Use thy natural privilege of man....

Law, Gospel and the Church,--from these we leap

To the very last revealment, easy rule

Befitting the well-born and thorough-bred

O' the happy day we live in, not the dark

O' the early rude and acorn-eating race. (VIII. 718-35)

However, contrary to his wish, the various authorities that his legal fiction attempts to incorporate, actually undermine the congruity of his fiction. Characteristically, his entire monologue is divided between two incompatible discursive tendencies. On the one hand, he continuously brings in various institutional authorities to prove Guido's injured honor. However, the more he searches for them, the more subverting and contradictory he finds these institutional entities are. Thus Archangeli's legal discourse fluctuates between a constructive and a deconstructive process in establishing the referent of Guido's honor, and this double-edged process reveals many of the gaps and contradictions in his legal fiction that aims to be a seamless whole.

The double-edged process of construction and deconstruction in legal discourse is also found in Bottini's monologue. As mentioned before, the legal discourse in the poem is characterized by aesthetic fiction and aesthetic language. Bottini's legal fiction tries to depict Pompilia as a saint to make his defense of Pompilia an aesthetically seamless whole: "paint Pompilia .../ A faultless nature in a flawless form" (IX. 192-5). He continues:

First, infancy, pellucid as a pearl;

Then childhood—stone which, dew-drop a the first,

(An old conjecture) sucks, by dint of gaze,

Blue from the sky and turns to sapphire so:

Yet both these gems eclipsed by, last and best,

Womanliness and wifehood opaline,

Its milk-while pallor,--chastity,--suffused

With here and there a tint and hint of flame,--

Desire,--the lapidary loves toe find.

Such jewels bind conspicuously they brow,

Pompilia, infant, child, maid, woman, wife—

Crown the ideal in our earth at last! (IX. 199-210)

However, this lyrical depiction of Pompilia does not last long. Soon Bottini realizes that his legal discourse is at odds with his misogynic notion of woman that compels him to believe Pompilia's guilt. Thus Bottini's sexual ideology constantly subverts his legal discourse:

Must I speak my mind?

Far better had Pompilia died o' the spot

Than found a tongue to wag and shame the law,

Shame most of all herself,--could friendship fail

And advocacy lie less on the alert:

But no, they shall protect her to the end! (IX. 1450-55)

Bottini constantly suffers from a divided--legal vs. sexual--consciousness regarding Pompilia. On the one hand, his legal discourse makes an effort to establish Pompilia's innocence. On the other hand, he can hardly suppress his belief in Pompilia's improper

behavior within the institution of marriage. "Prepare to find that, lamb-like, she too frisks— / O' the weaker sex, my lords, the weaker sex" (IX. 224-5), he continues, "what is beauty's sure concomitant, / Nay, intimate essential character, / But melting wiles, deliciousest deceits, / the whole redoubted armoury of love?" (IX. 229-32). Therefore, Bottini unconsciously brings into his legal argument various subtexts from Archangeli's monologue through his frequent use of "if's." "What if the adversary's charge be just" (IX. 258), "What if the charge be true?" (IX. 301), "Grant the tale / O' husband, which is false, were proved and true" (IX. 443-4), or "Were the fiction fact" (IX. 653). Bottini's monologue constantly sways between two opposites. In this way, like Archangeli's monologue, Bottini's legal discourse continues a double-edged process of construction and deconstruction, exposing gaps and contradictions in a seemingly seamless whole.

As mentioned before, the two lawyers' monologues in *The Ring and the Book* address the Benthamite question of legal fiction. The monologues are fundamentally characterized by their aesthetic language and principles. As both Bentham and Fox point out, this aestheticism in legal discourse is dangerous because it presents certain social meanings and practices in an aesthetic whole and this seamless wholeness often conceals this fictionality. Archangeli's legal aestheticism on Guido's *causa honoris*, naturalizes Guido's fiction of honor in the institution of marriage; aestheticism in legal discourse helps reinforce the existing social relation of domination and power. Nevertheless, every ideological exertion leaves certain gaps and contradictions in it, as both of the lawyers' monologues illustrate. These gaps and contradictions ultimately reveal the fictionality of it, which opens up the possibility of a new future.

[1]. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 149.

[2]. Mary Sullivan, *Browning's Voices in The Ring and the Book: A Study of Method and Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 106.

[3]. See C. K. Ogden, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.: 1932), xvii.

[4]. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 150.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 149-50.

[6]. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 117.

CHAPTER FOUR

RELIGIOUS FICTION IN THE POPE AND CAPONSACCHI

In the monologues of the Pope and Canon Caponsacchi, Browning explores the politics of nothingness in another major Victorian cultural fiction: fiction in religious discourse. At the beginning of his monologue, sitting in front of all the documents concerning Guido's murder trial, the Pope asserts his certainty and belief in Guido's guilt: "The case is over, judgment at an end, / And all things done now and irrevocable: / A mere dead man is Franceschini here" (X. 208-10). The rest of his monologue, however, which stretches over two thousand lines, substantially undermines his belief and assertion. Contrary to his claim, for the Pope, like other monologuists in the poem, it is not easy to find a truth about the murder case from what he calls "this multifarious mass of words and deeds" (X. 262). Thus his monologue reveals certain tensions and contradictions, and the nature of these tensions and contractions are quite problematic.

The Pope's monologue explores the conflicts between "transcendental a priori knowledge and empirical a posteriori knowledge," as Armstrong notes.[1] In the post-Kantian condition man does not know the world as it is, but the world is known to him as he knows it. Knowledge is *representation*, not *the thing in itself*, and the thing in itself is "unknowable." The post-Kantian condition is bifurcated into transcendental a priori knowledge and empirical a posteriori knowledge. The religious discourse of the Pope explores the question of the relationship between the two. As the Pope's monologue clearly demonstrates, transcendent a priori knowledge, though its referent cannot be established in the real world, exercises influence on human thoughts and actions. Thus

his religious discourse once again raises the question of Benthamite fiction and its coercive power.

Like other monologues, the Pope's monologue exposes the politics of nothingness. Kant's notion of the transcendental a priori may, at first sight, seem to be an anti-idealistic philosophy in that he assumes something that exists outside of man, a "thing-in-itself." However, this thing-in-itself, unlike the Marxist sense of the term which means a material base, is a purely idealistic conceptual entity, and it is "unknowable." It is a *fiction* whose referent cannot be found in the world. The Pope's monologue addresses this question of the a priori in religion.

The Pope's notion of God as a transcendental a priori is a Benthamite fiction in the sense that he cannot establish its referent in this world. Nevertheless, the Pope's God deeply governs his thoughts and actions; based on it, the Pope condemns Guido. At the same time, his notion of God as a transcendental a priori is constantly subverted and threatened by other voices that regard God as empirical a posteriori. So his monologue exposes some tensions and contradictions between *God as product* and *God as process*. However, the conflict between God as a transcendental a priori and God as an empirical a posteriori is different from the dialectic tension between subject and object in Marxist thinking. Since the Kantian notion of thing-in-itself--the transcendental a priori--is not material base as in the Marxist sense of the term, which is knowable rather than unknowable, the tension created by the conflicts between God as transcendental a priori and God as empirical a posteriori does not become a step towards dialectic interaction between subject and object. Rather, the tension remains in the realm of *fiction*.

As already mentioned, the question of knowledge and truth becomes a central issue in the religious fiction of the Pope. The often quoted passage from the Pope's monologue clearly sums up the epistemological problems he faces:

> Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these—
>
> Not absolutely in a portion, yet
>
> Evolvible from the whole: evolved at last
>
> Painfully, held tenaciously by me. (X. 229-32)

The Pope is sitting in front of all the documents related to Guido's trial for murder, "pleadings and counter-pleading, figure of facts / Besides fact's self" (X. 216-7). Each document contains a certain portion of truth about the case, but truth does not reside there in absolute condition. The Pope is sure of Guido's guilt. By examining all the materials collectively, certainly the Pope is in a better position to know the truth than are other characters in the poem. However, this does not mean that he gets to the whole truth about the case, since he also brings his own ideologically limited conditions into his labor on the case. As illustrated by the various contradictions his monologue reveals when it is juxtaposed with other monologues in the poem, his monologue is just another version of the case, "held tenaciously by me[him]," rather than the ultimate truth. In *The Ring and the Book*, truth and knowledge are an elusive entity. This aspect of the poem is embodied in the structure of the poem itself. The monologues in the poem are the products of different individual consciousnesses, and they are collected and narrated by a poet persona and presented for readers to examine, and the whole poem was created by one individual consciousness, Browning the poet himself. That the reader also does not get the whole truth is implied in the structure of poem itself. So the poem makes truth and

knowledge ever elusive. What Browning suggests through this structure of the poem is the necessity of a dialectic process in human epistemology. Knowledge and truth do not exist as final products but only within the dialectic process of human labor in the world. Thus Slinn correctly points out, "Browning emphasises not truth as product, but truth as process, truth in the making, and in that process truth is both subverted by language and produced by it."[2]

The Pope's monologue brings up the questions of fiction, representation, post-Kantian conditions, and ideology together. The Pope bases his judgment of the case upon his knowledge of God as transcendental a priori. However this position is constantly undermined by the possibility of God as empirical a posteriori. Since the Pope's belief in the transcendental God cannot be empirically experienced, his monologue, as does Caponsacchi's, raises the question of Benthamite fiction in a religious discourse. His monologue is pervaded with tension and contradiction created by the two possibilities of God. However, as mentioned before, the tension and contradiction in his religious discourse do not seem to lead to a dialectic process between subject and object, towards understanding of the real material base of human existence; they remain in the realm of the fiction of God as transcendental a priori. It seems that the Pope's knowledge of God as transcendental a priori is something thrust upon him as a part of hegemonic and ideological control and intervention.

The Pope bases his decision to condemn Guido on his Christian belief. He is convinced of the transcendental existence of God in its absolute entirety:

Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;

Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense,--

There, (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!)

In the absolute immensity, the whole

Appreciable solely by Thyself,-- (X. 1316-20)

However, as the source of his entire thoughts and actions, the Pope's God is not free from the question of Benthamite fiction. In spite of his claim, the Pope's God, as a sign, does not have its referent in the world; his existence cannot be proved empirically. In this sense the existence of God is a fiction. For the Pope, as for everybody else, God exists only as a representation, and yet he cannot be presented. Even if the Pope is convinced of the absolute existence of God somewhere as a whole, the only God that is available for him is a represented God. As the Pope himself admits that "O Thou,--as represented here to me / In such conception as my soul allows,-- / Under Thy measureless, my atom width!" (X. 1308-10), God is represented only as he as a human being understands Him:

Here, by the little mind of man, reduced

To littleness that suits his faculty,

In the degree appreciable too;

Between Thee and ourselves—nay even, again,

Below us, to the extreme of the minute. (X. 1321-5)

The problem of fiction and representation raises a series of epistemological questions in the Pope's monologue. From the beginning of his monologue the Pope emphasizes that he is sitting in the seat of judgment as a representative of God, not as an ordinary human being. He, "sitting in his stead, Vice-gerent here" (X. 162), judges Guido:

In God's name! Once more on this earth of God's,

While twilight last and time wherein to work,

I take His staff with my uncertain hand,

And stay my six and fourscore years, my due

Labour, and sorrow, on His judgment-seat,

And forthwith think, speak, act, in place of Him—

The Pope for Christ. (X. 163-9)

The Pope's claim that as the vicegerent of God he "think[s], speak[s], act[s], in place of Him" does not free him from the epistemological question of representation. Although the Pope claims that he thinks, speaks, acts, in place of Him, he is not the God himself. He is only *representing* Him. Therefore, though he is "sitting in his stead, Vicegerent here," he in reality judges Guido as a human being: "I must give judgment on my own behoof" (X. 161). This situation necessarily raises some important epistemological questions. What is the representation for him? Does everything that he thinks, speaks, and acts come from God? Or is there some thinking, speaking, and acting of his own, since God is represented only as he understands Him? The Pope is convinced of the existence of God in this entirety and immensity, yet, at one point, the Pope himself asks the same epistemological questions:

Yet my poor spark had for its source, the sun;

Thither I sent the great looks which compel

Light from its fount: all that I do and am

Comes from the truth, or seen or else surmised,

Remembered or divined, as mere man may:

I know just so, nor otherwise. As I know,

I speak,--what should I know, then, and how speak

Were there a wild mistake of eye or brain

As to recorded governance above?

If my own breath, only blew coal alight

I styled celestial and the morning-star?

I, who in this world act resolvedly,

Dispose of men, their bodies and their souls,

As they acknowledge or gainsay the light

I show them,--shall I too lack courage?—leave

I, too, the post of me, like those I blame? (X. 1285-1300)

As the Pope himself clearly states, his knowledge of God, as the transcendental a priori, is only one that "mere man may" have. This creates a serious problem in his religious discourse. Though he is convinced of the existence of God as transcendental a priori, he cannot establish the referent of God in this world in its absoluteness, but only in human representation. Thus God is only a fiction. Nevertheless, the point is that the fiction of God governs his thoughts and actions and becomes the source of his decision to dispose of Guido.

The Pope's epistemological question directly relates the poem to the Benthamite question of fiction and its coercive power on human thought and action. The Pope decides to dispose of the bodies and souls of the five men accused of killing Pompilia. Though he asserts the certainty of Guido's guilt, his position is constantly subverted by the epistemological ambiguity that his representation of God raises:

Some surmise,

Perchance, that since man's wit is fallible,

Mine may fail here? Suppose it so,--what then?

Say,--Guido, I count guilty, there 's no babe

So guiltless, for I misconceive the man! (X. 237-41)

The Pope judges Guido as a representative of God, but God is represented only as he, the Pope, a human being, understands Him. One possible way out of the epistemological question that his representation of God raises is to attribute every human condition to God's pre-determination, the transcendental act of God. The Bible says, "even the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Mathew 10:30). The Pope asserts:

Choice of the world, choice of the thing I am,

Both emanate alike from Thy dreadful play

Of operation outside this our sphere

Where things are classed and counted small or great,--

Incomprehensibly the choice is Thine!

Therefore I bow my head and take Thy place. (X. 1342-7)

The Pope reminds God that "this one earth, out of all multitude / Of peopled worlds, as stars are now supposed,-- / Was chosen... / For stage and scene of Thy transcendental act" (X. 1336-40). Equally implied is that he, out of the multitudes of people on the earth, was chosen as the Pope, according to God's pre-determined intention: "Thy dreadful play of operation." Also implied is that the entire thoughts and actions of his are within God's plan, then, "The thing I [the Pope] is" includes the way he "think[s], speak[s], act[s], in place of Him." If all human thoughts and actions, the way we think, speak and act, are

within God's plan, man is free from any consequences that his thought or action might cause. Thus the Pope recalls an episode:

> If, as I walk in a rough country-side,
> Peasants of mine cry, "Thou art he can help,
> "Lord of the land and counted wise to boot:
> "Look at our brother, strangling in his foam,
> "He fell so where we find him,--prove thy worth!"
> I may presume, pronounce, "A frenzy-fit,
> "A falling-sickness or a fever-stroke!
> "Breathe a vein, copiously let blood at once!"
> So perishes the patient, and anon
> I hear my peasants,--"All was error, lord!
> "Our story, thy prescription: for there crawled
> "In due time from our hapless brother's breast
> "The serpent which had stung him: bleeding slew
> "Whom a prompt cordial had restored to health."
> What other should say than "God so willed:
> "Mankind is ignorant, a man am I:
> "Call my ignorance my sorrow, not my sin!" (X. 243-59)

Attributing every human thought and act and any consequences rising from it to God's will is a way of constructing God as an absolute, transcendental a priori, and so of escaping the epistemological dilemma discussed above.

However, the religious discourse in the poem is much more complicated than is suggested in the above passage of the Pope's. The Pope's monologue is full of doubt and misgivings about his decision regarding Guido's fate and constantly fluctuates between a constructive and a deconstructive process. Though he makes efforts to construct the transcendental God, a deconstructive process is present from the very beginning of his monologue. The episode of the seventh Pope Stephen's judgment about Formosus and the repeated reversals by the following popes clearly demonstrate how shaky the epistemological ground of his religious discourse is. Stephen condemns Formosus, whose decision his successor Romanus reverses. Romanus' decision, in turn, is reversed by Theodore, and John, the next pope, condemns Stephen's decision. Sergius, the next pope reverses John's decision and reaffirms Stephen, but finally the Church reinstates Formosus' holiness. Therefore, the Pope asks:

> 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? ...
>
> John judged thus ...
>
> When, sitting in his stead, Vice-gerent here,
>
> I must give judgment on my own behoof.
>
> So worked the predecessors: now, my turn! (X. 151-162)

Though the Pope makes efforts to fix the referent of God in the transcendental a priori, and also to attribute all human conditions to God's pre-determination, this episode seriously undermines his efforts. The series of reversals among the popes not only

undermines the authority of popedom itself, but also the validity of God as a transcendental a priori, since the popes themselves were representing God on earth. It suggests that the Pope's notion of God as transcendental a priori is only a fiction culturally formed.

As a whole, *The Ring and the Book* is an inquiry into the nature of knowledge and truth in Victorian epistemology. As mentioned before, the Pope's monologue illustrates the conflicts between transcendental a priori knowledge and empirical a posteriori knowledge. As will be discussed with reference to Caponsacchi's monologue, Caponsacchi attempts to solve the conflicts by appropriating Pompilia as the figure of Madonna. Unfortunately for the Pope, it is not an easy task to solve the conflicts. The difficulty comes from the two incompatible possibilities of truth and knowledge as summarized in the following passage:

> ...this may be surmised,
> The other is revealed,—whether a fact,
> Absolute, abstract, independent truth,
> Historic, not reduced to suit man's mind,—
> Or only truth reverberate, changed, made pass
> A spectrum into mind, the narrow eye, —
> The same and not the same, else unconceived (X. 1387-93)

One is "absolute, abstract and independent truth," and the other is "truth reverberate, changed, made pass a spectrum into mind." Through a double-edged process of construction and deconstruction, the Pope's religious discourse develops two different notions of God: God as *product* and God as *process*, an idealistic and an empirical notion

of God, respectively. The Pope's Christian belief leads him to presume the absolute, independent, transcendental existence of God. His presence is timeless and unchangeable. However, the referent of God as transcendental a priori cannot be established in this world; he can only be represented as human mind perceives it: "made pass / A spectrum into mind, the narrow eye." Thus, the Pope observes:

> Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass
> Wherein are gathered all the scattered points
> Picked out of the immensity of sky,
> To re-unite there, be our heaven for earth ,
> Our known unknown, our God revealed to man?" (X. 1311-15)

His religious discourse admits that what is empirically available for man is God represented "as suits our sense" (X. 1771). The represented God, though based on the absolute God, is not the same, "The same and not the same" (X. 1393). This situation forces him to admit, with reluctance, the possibility of God historically made: God as process. God represented by man as suits his sense is subject to historical changes, as human senses are changed. This notion of God is still idealistic, yet it allows human involvement and initiative. The possibility of God as process is suggested by the passage from Euripides the Pope quotes:

> "How nearly did I guess at that Paul knew?
> "How closely come, in what I represent
> "As duty, to his doctrine yet a blank? ...
> "I saw that there are, first and above all,
> "The hidden forces, blind necessities,

"Named Nature, but thing's self unconceived:

"There follow,--how dependent upon these,

"We know not, how imposed above ourselves,

"We well know,--what I name the gods, a power

"Various or one: for great and strong and good

"Is there, and little, weak and bad there too,

"Wisdom and folly: say, these make no God,--

"What is it else that rules outside man's self? ...

"The forces and necessity grow God,--

"The beings so contrarious that seemed gods,

"Prove just His operation manifold

"And multiform, translated, as must be,

"Into intelligible shape so far

"As suit our sense and sets us free to feel. (X.1724-71)

Euripides seriously undermines the Pope's notion of God as product. His explanation of the nature of religious development suggests that the Christian God the Pope embraces may not be an absolute entity, but just another stage in the long chain of the development of religion. Euripides contends, before God--"the thing's self"--was known, people assigned various forms of power to "the hidden forces and blind necessities" of Nature and worshipped them, and these forces and necessities grew into God. That these various forms of gods are only the manifold operations of God is the realization provided by the latest light of human understanding. It is the result of rearranging the past according to the present.

In her discussion of Browning's poetry, Mary Ellis Gibson notes that in Browning's poetry "history becomes the given within which a poet finds and makes whatever order is possible." [3] If I may borrow Gibson's phrasing, history is the given within which people find and make whatever forms of religious order. Euripides' gods are not fixed, timeless, transcendental entities; they constantly change their character as human senses are changed. Thus each historical stage hosts different forms of gods, constantly adjusting previous held religious beliefs. Euripides continues:

> Why then, my scheme, your better knowledge broke,
>
> Presently re-adjusts itself, the small
>
> Proportioned largelier, parts and whole named new:
>
> So much, no more two thousand years have done! (X. 1777-80)

Euripides supports and, at the same time, subverts the Pope's teleological view. The continual growth of the knowledge of religion suggests that the Pope's God may be superior to any other gods of the past. But at the same time, it also suggests the possibility that his God could also be replaced by another form of god in the future. God himself may be just another rung in the long chain of religious evolution. Thus, Euripides's view of God as process becomes a threat to the Pope's efforts to fix God as product. The Pope himself admits the possibility Euripides suggests:

> As we broke up the 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 increased faith i' the thing reports belie?

Must we deny,--do they, these Molinists,

At peril of their body and their soul, —

Recognized truths, obedient to some truth

Unrecognized yet, but perceptible?—

Correct the portrait by the living face,

Man's God, by God's God in the mind of man? (X. 1864-1875)

Here the Pope touches the very problems that his notion of God as product raises. He realizes that God may not be a fixed, transcendental entity, and we do not have a portrait of God as already made which will prevail timelessly and transcendentally. We can only keep correcting the portrait in a given historical context as best as possible as our senses allow us, and keep creating newer images of God, as Euripides argues.

The conflicts between God as product and God as process in the Pope's monologue reveal the post-Kantian epistemological conditions in which truth and knowledge are not something absolute and timeless, but are known to us only as we know them. The Pope makes a strenuous effort to fix God into a transcendental a priori, but with little success. His monologue is pervaded with tensions created by the two incompatible existences of God. However, as mentioned before, the tension does not seem to lead to a dialectic process that would help us to understand the material reality of our existence. The Pope ultimately gives up correcting his portrait of God as a transcendental a priori and remains in the realm of fiction of God whose referent he fails to find. A truly Marxist view of truth and knowledge suggests that truth and knowledge can only be found in man's constant labor in the world, in the dialectic process between

man and the world. And one possibility of this dialectic process is found in the monologue of Canon Caponsacchi.

Like the monologue of the Pope, Caponsacchi's monologue addresses the question of fiction and representation in a religious context. The same conflict between transcendental a priori knowledge and empirical a posteriori knowledge poses an epistemological dilemma for Caponsacchi. When Caponsacchi feels the contradictions and gaps between the two, his life in the institution of religion becomes an alienated labor. While the Pope does not seem to resolve the conflicts, Caponsacchi attempts to overcome them by substituting Pompilia, a living human being, for Madonna, a transcendental a priori. His act of helping Pompilia , a figure of the Lady in suffering, also helps himself, since it closes a gap that was causing his alienated labor in the Church.

Caponsacchi claims that, like Guido, he lived a life, according to social roles prescribed for him by society—in his case, as an aristocrat and a priest. As a younger son of a family nobler than Guido's, Caponsacchi was proposed to be a priest in memory of a saintly bishop who was one of his prominent ancestors. Like Guido, Caponsacchi passively treads the life prescribed for him:

> For his sake, how it was I had a right
> To the self-same office, bishop in the egg,
> So, grew i' the garb and prattled in the school,
> Was made to expect, from infancy almost,
> The proper mood o' the priest. (VI. 257-61)

The Church he is entering to serve is a reified form of religious institution. As discussed before, the Pope's monologue presumes the existence of God as transcendental a priori, though it may turn out to be a fiction. However, the Church that Caponsacchi enters does not even have the fiction. What replaces the fiction of God as transcendental a priori is an institution as an ideological and hegemonic apparatus. When Caponsacchi hesitates, "when I must read the vows, / Declare the world renounced / ... leap into / Over the ledge into the other life" (VI. 262-5), he is told by the Bishop that the Church no longer requires the heroic renunciation of previous ages; rather, it embraces the world:

> "Renounce the world? Nay, keep and give it us!
>
> "Let us have you, and boast of what you bring.
>
> "We want the pick o' the earth to practise with,
>
> "Not its offscouring, halt and deaf and blind
>
> "In soul and body. There 's rubble-stone
>
> "Unfit for the front o' the building, stuff to stow
>
> "In a gap behind and keep us weather-tight;
>
> "There is porphyry for the prominent place. Good lack! (VI. 309-16)

One traditional way of maintaining the fiction of God as transcendental a priori has been the antithetic relationship of the Church to the world, or holiness to worldliness. However, the Bishop blurs the distinction.

While the Pope's religious discourse makes efforts to reinstate the thing-in-itself in the Kantian sense, God as transcendental a priori, the Bishop replaces it with the world. As implied in the Bishop's illustration of how Jews replace the holy name of God with a jumbled set of consonants and vowels, the Church can function as an institution without

concerning itself with the referent of God. At one level, the Bishop's explanation subverts the Pope's transcendental God, suggesting that the Pope's God is only a fiction. However, the Bishops' replacement of God with the world is not meant to overcome the limits of the Pope's fiction of God. Rather, it is a replacement of one form of fiction with another. The Church gives up God as a priori and becomes an ideologically secularized religious institution. The Bishop encourages Caponsacchi by saying that the Church can benefit from his talent of employing language:

Cultivate

"Assiduous that superior gift you have

"Of making madrigals—(who told me? Ah!)

"Get done a Marinesque Adoniad straight

"With a pulse o' the blood a-pricking, here and there,

"That may tell the lady 'And he 's ours!' " (VI. 330-5)

The Bishop explains that "language could be employed for social and institutional purposes without a referential truth," as Slinn has pointed out.[4] As a reified institution, the Bishop's church serves the rich, and preys on women: "Priests play with women, maids, wives, and mothers" (IV. 465). The reification of the church as a religious institution without the referent of God helps maintain existing human relations, especially gender relationships. Also as proved by Paolo's act on Violante and Pompilia, the reified church exercises hegemonic pressure and domination, preying on women: "Mothers, wives, and maids, / These be the tools wherewith priests manage men" (IV. 503-4). Like Guido who accepts without question what the existing structure of society prescribes for

him, Caponsacchi also accepts the terms that the Bishop explains and becomes a priest in the secularized church:

> So I became a priest: those terms changed all,
> I was good enough for that, nor cheated so;
> I could have lived thus and still hold head erect.
> Now you see why I may have been before
> A fribble and coxcomb, yet priest, break word
> Nowise, to make you disbelieve me now.
> I need that you should know my truth. Well, then,
> According to prescription did I live,
> --Conformed myself, both read the breviary
> And wrote the rhymes, was punctual to my place
> I' the Pieve, and diligent at my post
> Where beauty and fashion rule. I throve apace,
> Sub-deacon, Canon, the authority
> For delicate play at tarocs, and arbiter
> O' the magnitude of fan-mounts. (VI. 336-50)

Caponsacchi serves in the secularized church, "where beauty and fashion rule," writing rhymes for rich women using his gift of composing madrigals. While the two lawyers' aesthetic language in the poem serves to conceal the nothingness of their legal fiction, Caponsacchi's employment of his aesthetic language helps the Church to function as an oppressive social structure that victimizes women. After he spent some years in the secularized Church, Caponsacchi finds his prescribed life in it unfulfilling and

experiences a spiritual emptiness. Just as the Pope suffers from the contradictions between transcendental a priori of God and empirical a posteriori of God, so does Caponsacchi feel a gap between what the institution of God is and what it should be. His chance encounter with Pompilia serves as a catalyst that makes him realize his alienated labor for the Church:

> One evening I was sitting in a muse
> Over the opened "Summa," darkened round
> By the mid-March twilight, thing how my life
> Had shaken under me,--broke short indeed
> And showed the gap 'twixt what is, what should be,--
> And into what abysm the soul may slip,
> Leave aspiration here, achievement there,
> Lacking omnipotence to connect extremes—
> Thinking moreover ...oh, thinking, if you like,
> How utterly dissociated was I
> A priest and celibate, from the sad strange wife
> Of Guido,--just as an instance to the point,
> Nought more,--how I had a whole store of strengths
> Eating into my heart, which craved employ,
> And she, perhaps, need of a finger's help,--
> And yet there was no way in the wide world
> To stretch out mine and so relieve myself. (VI. 483-99)

A chance encounter with "A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad" (VI. 399), makes him realize the alienation of his life in the Church. After he perceives a gap between "what it should be" and "what it is," Caponsacchi makes efforts to reinstate God in his life in the priesthood. However, this does not mean that he, like the Pope, tries to reinstate God as a fiction, that is, God as transcendental a priori whose counterpart cannot be found in the world, rather, he finds the referent of God, "omnipotence to connect [the two] extremes," in Pompilia. As implied in the above passage, Caponsacchi overcomes the gap by unifying two other extremes, Madonna and Pompilia.

While the contradiction for the Pope between God as product and God as process remains unresolved, because his God as transcendental a priori is "unknowable," Caponsacchi is able to resolve the contradiction by establishing the referent of God in something "knowable," that is, by identifying Pompilia with the figure of Madonna. That Caponsacchi sees Pompilia as the figure of the Madonna is revealed at their very first meeting:

> ...I saw her enter, stand, and seat herself
> A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad.
> It was when, in our cathedral once,
> As I got yawningly through matin-song,
> I saw *facchini* bear a burden up,
> Base it on the high-altar, break away
> A board or two, and leave the thing inside
> Lofty and lone: and lo, when next I looked,
> There was the Rafael! (VI. 398-406)

When Caponsacchi first sees Pompilia, he sees the figure of the Madonna in her. However, the image of Pompilia as Madonna is a *fiction*. Pompilia, "the illicit offspring of a common trull" (III. 208), as the speaker of Tertium Quid puts it, is only a human being. Caponsacchi himself knows this fact clearly: "Assured myself that she was flesh and blood" (VI. 708). Nevertheless, Caponsacchi holds to this fiction because his chance encounter with her provides an outlet for him for spiritual renewal and overcoming the alienation of his life in the Church. After he sees her, he decides "Never to write a canzonet any more" (VI. 467), and prepares for Rome. For Caponsacchi, a fiction becomes an important way of opening his life to a new future. Although Browning is wary of the negative influences of fiction throughout the entire poem, fiction is an important means of opening up the future. The positive role of a fiction in human existence is also demonstrated by the letters that Guido claims are written by Caponsacchi and Pompilia. Caponsacchi and Pompilia meet again and head for Rome through the letters passed between them indirectly by the hands of others. The letters are very elusive entities. They are the real in that they are physical entities, but, at the same time, they are fictions in that they are fictitious in their contents. The fictitious contents lead them into an encounter that changes their lives forever, and thus fiction helps change the present and open up the future.

Nevertheless, Caponsacchi's monologue is not free from the politics of fiction that *The Ring and the Book* as a whole addresses. As mentioned before, the image of Pompilia as Madonna is a fiction, though there obviously exists some common characteristics in them; especially that they are both ladies of sorrow. Caponsacchi is well aware of this, but he actively appropriates the fiction of Pompilia as Madonna to

escape from spiritual emptiness. When Caponsacchi sees Pompilia again at her window, he sees a Madonna:

> ... there at the window stood,
> Framed in its black square length, with lamp in hand,
> Pompilia; the same great, grave, griefful air
> As stand i' the dusk, on altar that I know,
> Left alone with one moonbeam in her cell,
> Our Lady of all Sorrows. Ere I knelt—
> Assured myself that she was flesh and blood—
> She had looked one look and vanished. (VI. 702-9)

Pompilia, "A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad," is idealized as the "Lady of Sorrows." However, Caponsacchi is well aware of the vulnerability of his fiction of Pompilia. He realizes that his recognition of Pompilia as Madonna and his belief in Pompilia's innocence can be seen by others merely as his personal perception. Aware of this insecurity, Caponsacchi actively appropriates Pompilia into his discourse and emphasizes that they mutually recognized each other's truth:

> Pompilia spoke, and I at once received,
> Accepted my own fact, my miracle
> Self-authorized and self-explained,--she chose
> To summon me and signify her choice.
> ... As I
> Recognized her, at potency of truth,
> So she, by the crystalline soul, knew me,

Never mistook the signs. (VI. 918-33)

By appropriating Pompilia, Caponsacchi validates his personal perception. What has been "self-authorized and self-explained" becomes "fact." He has her say to him, "For now the dream gets to involve yourself" (VI. 862). Throughout his monologue, Caponsacchi repeatedly emphasizes that his truth was also recognized by Pompilia, and his claim is confirmed in Pompilia's monologue. Her monologue is also strewn with her own confirmations of Caponsacchi's truth: "This time I felt like Mary, had my babe / Lying a little on my breast like hers" (VII. 1692-3). Intersubjective mutual recognition is adopted as an important way of validating personal perception.

As I discussed in the reading of Pompilia's monologue, Pompilia also actively appropriates Caponsacchi in her monologue to justify her flight from Guido. Describing Caponsacchi as a figure of St. George, she verifies Caponsacchi's claim: "He was mine, he is mine, he will be mine" (1457), "I know you" (1473), "Oh, he understands!" (1792), or "Why explain? / What I see, oh, he sees and how much more!" (1804-5). The mutual recognition between them validates Caponsacchi's fiction of Pompilia. Caponsacchi asserts, "I am a priest. / Duty to God is to her" (VI. 1028). By identifying Pompilia as Madonna and obeying her, Caponsacchi at once fills the gap from which he was suffering. Thus the fiction of Pompilia changes Caponsacchi's life, and fiction works positively this time:

God and man, and what duty I owe both,--

I dare to say I have confront these

In thought: but no such faculty helped here.

I put forth no thought,--powerless, all that night

I paced the city: it was the first Spring.

By invasion I lay passive to,

In rushed new things, the old way were rapt away;

Alike abolished—the imprisonment

Of the outside air, the inside weight o' the world

That pulled me down....

Into another state, under new rule

I knew myself was passing swift and sure. (VI. 942-65)

Caponsacchi believes that he owes his duty to both "God and man." His act of helping Pompilia allows him to simultaneously fulfill his duty to both, and, furthermore, that act transforms him. What is significant in his monologue is that he *acts*. Caponascchi confesses he has confronted his duty in thoughts before. He now realizes that thoughts alone do not bring any change. By participating in Pompilia's act of flight, Caponsacchi frees himself from his alienated life in the Church, just as Pompilia escapes Guido's house, a symbol of oppressive patriarchy. When he decides to go to Rome for spiritual renewal, he is told that:

...'t was my patron spoke abrupt,

in altered guise. "Young man, can it be true

"That after all your promise of sound fruit,

"You have kept away from Countess young or old

"And gone play truant in church all day long?

"Are you turning Molinist?" I answered quick:

"Sir, what if I turned Christian? It might be. (VI. 468-74)

Caponsacchi, "Who, priest and trained to live my whole life long / On beauty and splendour, solely at their source" (VI. 122-3), rejects his culturally constructed self-identity as a priest in a hegemonic religious institution. He challenges the Bishop's institutionalized definition of a Christian, and tries to free himself from playing the puppet figure who plays a socially imposed role without questioning its validity. Ann Brady correctly observes that both Caponsacchi and Pompilia, "discard and transcend a role imposed by their respective institutions—marriage and the church."[5] It is his fiction of Pompilia that helps him to do so. In Pompilia God and man are united, and thus he fulfills his duty to both God and man in his act of helping her.

Caponsacchi and Pompilia validate each other's truth through mutual recognition. However, they find that their mutual recognition does not free them from the public suspicion that it was from love, physical attraction, not the noble cause they claim, that they are drawn together. As Pompilia insightfully perceives, "So we are made, such difference in minds, / Such difference too in eyes that see the minds" (VII. 918-9), their mutual validation does not go beyond themselves. Therefore, Caponsacchi repeatedly emphasizes, "You know this is not love, Sirs,—it is faith" (VI. 1193). And he claims that their mutual recognition comes from a much nobler source than from mere physical attraction, that is, from God's will:

Sirs, I obeyed. Obedience was too strange, —

This new thing that had been struck into me

By the look o' the lady, —to dare disobey

The first authoritative word. 'T was God's. (VI. 1010-13)

Or again:

> --That when at the last we did rush each on each,
>
> By no chance but because God willed it so—
>
> The spark of truth was struck from out our souls—
>
> Made all of me, descried in the first glance,
>
> Seem fair and honest and permissible love,
>
> O' the good and true—as the first glance told me
>
> There was no duty patent in the world.
>
> Like daring try be good and true myself,
>
> Leaving the shows of things to the Lord of Show
>
> And Prince o' the Power of the Air. (VI. 1812-21)

That Caponsacchi places the source of his action in God's will exposes an internalized problem in his fiction of Pompilia as Madonna. It certainly helps justify his *irregular* action—"Caponsacchi ... In cape and sword a cavalier confessed" (V. 1049-51), and it strengthens the coherence of his fiction. However, it diminishes the meaning of their actions as *praxis*. As mentioned in the previous discussion of Guido's fiction of honor, the escape of Pompilia and Caponsacchi is significant in that it breaks Guido's oppressive structure of patriarchal authority, while Guido's act of killing Pompilia is a desperate attempt to restore it. However, it is not clear whether both Caponsacchi and Pompilia understand the full meaning of their actions. Their act of escaping from Guido's house is a direct challenge to the existing social order of oppression and domination. With the help of Caponsacchi, Pompilia frees herself from Guido's oppression, while Caponsacchi's fiction of Pompilia liberates him from his alienated labor in the institution

of the Church. However, by attributing the source of their action to God, they both eliminate any human initiatives in their actions, and this dilutes the ultimate meaning of their actions.

As demonstrated in the Pope's monologue, the question of human initiative in the religious discourse of the poem never seems to be resolved. Probably the Pope is the only character in the poem, other than Pompilia and Caponsacchi, who perceives the oppressive nature of Guido's patriarchal authority. However, his own epistemological problem, the unresolved contradiction between God as transcendental a priori and God as empirical a posteriori, hinders him from catching the full meaning of their act. He ultimately approves Pompilia and Caponsacchi's act. But he cannot suppress his misgivings about all human ways and deeds. The Pope believes that, as denoted by the nature of human language, human beings are constantly subject to lies and contaminations of the truth. He observes:

> He, the Truth is, too,
> The Word. We men, in our degree, may know
> There, simply, instantaneously, as here
> After long time and amid many lies,
> Whatever we dare think we know indeed
> --That I am I, as He is He,--what else?
> But be man's method for man's life at least! (X. 376-82)

The Pope finds an irreconcilable gulf between God's way and Man's way: "I am I, as He is He." He asserts that "But be man's method for man's life at least!" What exactly this *man's method* should be is one of the central questions his religious discourse raises. At

one point, the Pope seems to suggest a dialectic interaction between man and the world by admitting that life is but a process of "correct[ing] the portrait by the living face." However, for him, it soon turns out that man's method has less to do with a truly dialectic process of man's labor in the world than a teleological emanation of God's truth. The Pope claims:

> This life is training and a passage; pass,--
> Still, we march over some flat obstacle
> We made give way before us; solid truth
> In front of it, what motion for the world?
> The moral sense grows but by exercise.
> 'T is even as man grew probatively
> Initiated in Godship, set to make
> A fairer moral world than this he finds,
> Guess now what shall be known hereafter. (X. 1411-19)

For the Pope, the whole of human condition is initiated by God and whatever progress human beings manage to make is a teleological emanation of God's Truth. Thus, he asserts that "Life is probation and the earth no goal / But starting-point of man" (X. 1436-7). However, this teleological notion of God is not sustained by his empirical experience of God. The Pope is despondent that Christian belief under his rule is degenerating. Sitting as the head of the Church at the end of the century, the Pope even fears that Christianity might become utterly extinct with his death: "Do we not end, the century and I?" (X. 1902) The gap between his belief in the teleological emanation of God's truth

and the present state of Christianity cannot be removed further. Thus, he faces the coming age with dread and uncertainty:

> ... what whispers me of times to come?
> What if it be 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? (X. 1852-7)

The Pope is almost near his death, and he cannot find any evidence that man's moral senses are growing. It is through his active appropriation of the act of Pompilia and Caponsacchi that he attempts to escape the dilemma he faces. Just as Caponsacchi needed Pompilia to fill the gap he was experiencing, the Pope also needs to appropriate Pompilia to confirm his belief in the teleological emanation of God's Truth. For his sake, Pompilia has to be innocent and pure:

> It was not given Pompilia to know much,
> Speak much, to write a book, to move mankind,
> Be memorized by who records my time.
> Yet if in purity and patience, if
> In faith held fast despite the plucking fiend,
> Safe like the signet stone with the new name
> That saints are known by...
> If there be any virtue, any praise, —

Then will this woman-child have proved—who know?

Just the one prize vouchsafed unworthy me,

Seven years a gardener of the untoward ground,

I till,--this earth, my sweat and blood manure

All the long day that barrenly grows dusk:

At least one blossom makes me proud at eve

Born 'mid briers of my enclosure! (X. 1020-35)

He also approves Caponsacchi: "Well done! / Be glad thou hast let light into the world / Through that irregular breach o' the boundary" (X. 1204-6). Their act confirms the Pope's teleological religious belief. However, at the same time, the *irregular* deed of Caponsacchi greatly threatens the authority of the Church where he is sitting as the head of it. Caponsacchi's act of playing a cavalier, as Guido phrases it, is a breach of the normal boundary of a priest. But the poem suggests that such a breach is important because it is an act of "correct[ing] the portrait by the living face." While the Pope is holding on to his fixed portrait of God, this a priori image of God that is fundamentally a fiction, Caponsacchi corrects the portrait by the living face of Pompilia. Thus for him God does not exist just as an a priori, but as an a posteriori process in which he constantly corrects his portrait. By correcting the portrait of Madonna by Pompilia's face Caponsacchi transforms the Pope's *fiction* into *praxis*, a constitutive activity that brings change to the human subject and to the world. And this praxis is important in that it can bring a change to the world. Just as Pompilia's act of walking out of Guido's house is an actual step towards breaking the oppressive structure of Guido's patriarchal authority,

Caponsacchi's participation in Pompilia's act is an important movement towards stopping the exploitation of women by the Bishop's secularized Church.

Though he approves the actions of Pompilia and Caponsacchi, the Pope himself fails to correct his own portrait of God; his fiction of the transcendental God dictates to him to remain with the timeless, unchanging God as product. His approval of Caponsacchi's irregular deed implies the very possibility of God as process:

> What wonder if the novel claim had clashed
> With old requirement, seemed to supersede
> Too much customary law? But, brave,
> Thou at first prompting of what I call God,
> And fools call Nature, didst hear, comprehend,
> Accept the obligation laid on thee. (X. 1070-75)

But the Pope does not seem to go beyond the boundary of "customary law." In an important way the Pope's monologue is Browning's critique of the church for remaining a reified institution. For Browning, such a reified institution helps solidify the existing relations of domination and power, and helps maintain the present, rather than open up a new future. One important thing that *The Ring and the Book* addresses is the importance of praxis as realized in the act of Pompilia and Caponsacchi. The Pope himself realizes his lack of act:

> If this were sad to see in just the sage
> Who should profess so much, *perform no more*,
> What is it then suspected in that Power
> Who undertook to *make* and *made* the world,

Devised and *did effect* man, body an soul,

Ordained salvation for them both, and yet ...

Well, is the thing we see, salvation? (X. 1624-30; italics are mine)

This passage suggests that even the essence of God which he believes lies in actual labor--acting and performing; God actually *made* the world and *effected* man. At various points of the poem, Browning draws on the lack of action in the institutionalized church; the archbishop ignores Pompila's plea for help, the governor sends her back to Guido's house and the priest refuses to write a letter for her. By this, importantly, Browning suggests that, when we do not act to change the present, existing relations of power and domination, a new future cannot be realized.

Without praxis, a constitutive activity, the Pope's notion of God as transcendental a priori remains a *fiction*. While Caponsacchi finds the referent of God in Pompilia and makes efforts to "correct the portrait by the living face," the Pope hesitates to accept "men's method." At one point, the young Pope, like Caponsacchi, seems to be aware of the importance of men's method:

Antonio Pignatelli, thou

My ancient self, who wast no Pope so long

But studiedst God and man, the many years....

Thou, not Pope but the mere old man o' the world,

Supposed inquisitive and dispassionate,

Wilt thou, the one whose speech I somewhat trust,

Question the after-me, this self now Pope,

Hear his procedure, criticize his work? (X. 383-97)

"This [old] self now Pope" is near his death and now muses over his early life sitting alone in his study at twilight on a gray winder day. Unlike his early self who studied both God and man alike, this old Pope is characterized by his unwillingness to correct the portrait of his a priori God by man's method. Thus, unlike in Caponsacchi, for him the question of the bifurcation of a priori and a posteriori God is not resolved in praxis.

Many of Browning's poems dramatize a condition of conflict that is not resolved in praxis. "Pictor Ingotus" is one good example. On the surface level, the poem dramatizes the conflicts between two different artistic principles. However, on a deeper level, the poem draws on the very same conflicts between the Pope's a priori transcendental portrait and Caponsacchi's a posteriori empirical portrait. The poem begins with the painter persona's comparison of himself with the other young painter who people praise so much. The painter believes himself no less talented than the young painter: "I could have painted pictures like that youth's" (1). In yearning for the fame and popularity that the young painter enjoys, the painter fantasizes that he himself has reached the hearts of many people through his pictures:

> Nor will I say I have not dreamed (how well!)
> Of going -- I, in each new picture, -- forth,
> As, making new hearts beat and bosoms swell,
> To Pope or Kaiser, East, West, South, or North,
> Bound for the calmly-satisfied great State,
> Or glad aspiring little burgh, it went ....
> Oh, thus to live, I and my picture, linked
> With love about, and praise, till life should end,

And then not go heaven, but linger here,

Here on my earth, earth's every man my friend. (25-39)

However, he soon realizes that to reach out to other people is to allow them to judge and criticize his pictures, to bring his subjective world under scrutiny and inspection. The painter is horrified by such a possibility:

... Who summoned those cold faces that begun

To press on men and judge me? Though I stooped

Shrinking, as from the soldiery a nun,

They drew me forth, and spite of me... enough...

And where they live needs must our pictures live

And see their faces, listen to their prate,

Partakers of their daily pettiness,

Discussed of, - 'This I love, or this I hate,

This likes more, and this affects me less!' (46-56)

The painter decides to remain in his subjective world and to "paint / These endless cloisters and eternal aisles / With the same series, Virgins, Babe and Saint (58-60)." However, the subjective world of fiction does not always give him a unified reality, and his consciousness is constantly haunted by the thought of the other painter. He experiences that "at whiles / My [his] heart sinks" (57-8) and he find his life "monotonous" (58). But he sticks to his fiction—"I chose my portion" (57) —comforting himself with the fact that "The sanctuary's gloom at least shall ward / Vain tongues from where my pictures stand apart" (64-65). A similar pattern of the politics of fiction is repeated in the Pope's monologue. The Pope seems to be aware of the possibility that his notion of an a priori

transcendental God is a fiction. His notion of God as product is constantly subverted by the possibility of God as process, whose portrait is not fixed but has to be corrected by the living face. But he refuses to accept and act upon it. Reflecting on Caponsacchi's act, his *men's method*, and the possibility of God as process, the Pope confesses:

I

> Put no such dreadful question to myself,
> Within whose circle of experience burns
> The central truth, Power, Wisdom, Goodness,--God. (X. 1631-4)

Thus, throughout his monologue the conflicts between his notion of God as product and the possibility of God as process remain unresolved.

[1]. Isobel Armstrong, "The Problems of Representation in *The Ring and the Book*: Politics, Aesthetics, Language," from *Browning e Venezia* (Persosa: 1991), 228.

[2]. E. Warwick Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 123.

[3]. Mary Ellis Gibson, *History and the Prism of Art: Browning's Poetic Experiments* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1987), 7.

[4]. Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry,* 158.

[5]. Ann Brady, *Pompilia: A Feminist Reading of Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), 73.

CHAPTER FIVE

PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE

One of the recurring themes in Browning's poetry is the problem of language and its relationship to truth. Throughout Browning's poetic development the subject of language has been explored in various forms in different poems. In early poems like *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*, the question of language is explored by the light of Romantic idealism, where language is described as an imperfect, limited medium or a mere impediment to truth. Truth resides in self, and language is incompetent or helpless in translating the speaking subject's inner feelings or truth. Here for Browning, the ideal form of language is the one that fully conveys the inner feelings or truth without distortion. However, in his later poems, especially in *The Ring and the Book*, language becomes much more complex than his early poems would suggest. Browning in *The Ring and the Book* presents a post-modernist notion of language: there is no fixed relation between sign and signified and also there is no subject independent of language. In the poem Browning also explores the Bakhtinian notion that every use of language is ideological: "Without signs there is no ideology."[1] In *The Ring and the Book* human language, as opposed to God's, which is all Truth, still continues to be *false,* but language plays an essential role in man's working on the world since it mediates between subject and object. Furthermore, Browning suggests, language becomes an important means of opening a new future by reordering and restructuring the present. In this respect language retains important political implications in Browning's later poetry. In this chapter I will discuss Browning's extensive exploration into the question of language, focusing on Guido's second monologue.

As often pointed out by critics, one thing that Browning's poetry is fundamentally concerned with is the unavailability of truth. In Browning's poetry, truth retains only temporal validity. Especially in the structure of *The Ring and the Book* itself, it is implied that truth is less a final product than a process. However, what has been little discussed in this line of critical readings is the question of how language contributes to such a condition of truth. In Browning's poetry, at the very center of the question of truth, lies the problem of language. In an important article on Browning's language, Allan Dale observes, "language is involved in or reflects this general problem of unavailability of truth."[2] In Browning's poetry, language and truth are two sides of the same coin. Browning's concern with the question of language can be found from his earliest poems. In *Paracelsus* the protagonist asserts:

> Truth is in ourselves; it takes no rise
> From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
> There is an inmost centre in us all,
> Where truth abides in fulness; and around,
> Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
> This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.
> A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
> Binds it, and makes all error: and to KNOW
> Rather consists in opening out a way
> Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
> Than in effecting entry for a light
> Supposed to be without. Watch narrowly

The demonstration of a truth, its birth,

And you trace back the effluence to its spring

And source within us. (I. 726-740)

Paracelsus believes "There is an inmost center in us all, / Where truth abides in fulness." When truth resides within ourselves, language is only an impediment to truth, because it is unable to fully translate the inner truth. Sordello, from Browning's important early poem, claims, "I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel; / So much is true to me" (*Sordello*, VI. 435-6). For both Paracelsus and Sordello, the self is the sole originator of truth. This idealistic notion of self presupposes a self as a fixed, timeless and complete entity that stands apart from society, community, and history. However, Browning's later poems, including *The Ring and the Book*, show that truth, self, and language are much more complex entities than Paracelsus believes; Paracelsus' idealistic notion of truth and self is only a delusion. Truth resides neither within man alone nor solely in the world, rather it exists in the on-going process wherein man lives out his material social reality. And in this process language plays a vital role.

One of the central issues in Victorian epistemology was, as David Shaw identifies, the seemingly unresolvable opposition between subjective idealism and objective empiricism.[3] At the center of the conflict lies the role, and capacity, of the human mind in finding or further generating truth and knowledge. David Shaw paraphrases the opposition by the two optical metaphors for the human mind. The first metaphor is the poet's mind as "a self-reflecting mirror or kaleidoscope" which operates independent of the world. The other metaphor is the poet's mind as "a transparent, unrefracting window" through which the poet simply records whatever objects or phenomena he sees. In the latter, the human

mind passively records impressions of the objective world captured upon it. On the other hand, the former model emphasizes the active role of the mind in constructing reality. Browning seems to have been familiar with the question. The two poetic faculties he discusses in *Essay on Shelley,* respectively, the subjective and the objective, are little different from the two Victorian epistemological metaphors for the human mind which Shaw explains. Considering that these two metaphors were widely used in nineteenth-century philosophy and poetics, Browning's discussion of the two poetic faculties in his essay may be nothing new. What is unique and important to note in Browning is that he addresses the same epistemological question via his vigorous exploration into the question of language, its role in human epistemology and its relationship to truth, as best illustrated in *The Ring and the Book.* It is not clear from his essay which of the two metaphors Browning prefers as the correct explanation of the workings of the human mind. By saying that "the subjective might seem to be the ultimate requirement of every age,"[4] he seems to lean toward the self-reflecting human mind, but his emphasis on dramatic poetry indicates that he assigns no less importance to the objective representation of the world. As one can surmise from the essay, Browning refuses to endorse either of them as the correct epistemological explanation, and at the same time, does not deny either of them. Thus, in *The Ring and the Book* Browning assigns a much more vital role to language than he did in his previous works.

Browning's notion of language can be, I think, best surmised by reading the Pope's monologue and Guido's second monologue together. In *The Ring and the Book*, one can find two contradictory attitudes toward language: both distrust and confirmation of the role of language in human life, and the poem constantly fluctuates between the two. Again,

Paracelsus, in Browning's early poem, believes that truth resides in the self and that language is inadequate or incapable of translating that inner truth. Like Paracelsus, the Pope dismisses human language for its falsehood. Sitting in front of the various documents related to Guido's murder trial, the Pope realizes that it is not an easy task to find truth from "this multifarious mass of words and deeds" (X. 263). He is convinced that this difficulty originates in the *false* nature of *human language*. For him, truth can never be found in human language but only in God's. Human language is a degenerated form of God's ideal language:

> Let
>
> Each level have its language! Heaven speaks first
>
> To the angel, then the angel tames the word
>
> Down to the ear of Tobit: he, in turn,
>
> Diminishes the message to his dog,
>
> And finally that dog finds how the flea
>
> (Which else, importunate, might check his speed)
>
> Shall learn its hunger must have holiday
>
> By application of his tongue or paw:
>
> So many varied sorts of language here,
>
> Each following each with pace to match the step,
>
> Haud passibus aequis! (VIII. 1508-19)

As a degraded form of God's language, human language is characterized by its falseness. The Pope deplores that human beings tend to lie even "without the least incumbency to lie"

(X. 364), and he firmly believes that human beings are simply made that way: "He lies, it is the method of a man!" (X. 370) He continues:

> Therefore these filthy rags of speech, this coil
> Of statement, comment, query and response,
> Tatters all too contaminate for use,
> Have no renewing: He, the Truth, is, too,
> The Word. We men, in our degree, may know
> There, simply, instantaneously, as here
> After long time and amid many lies,
> Whatever we dare think we know indeed
> --That I am I, as He is He,--what else?
> But be man's method for man's life at least! (X. 373-382)

However, the Pope's monologue, like other monologues in the poem, is a curious mixture of a strong denunciation of human language and an ultimate, though unwilling, acceptance of it. The Pope's condemnation of human language is based on its power to create fictions. As Bentham reminds us, it is through language that fictions are created and maintained. Browning shares Bentham's concern about the conjuring power of language and his distrust of its black magic. But the Pope realizes that God's language cannot penetrate down to the human level, so that humanity is destined to have its own language: "Be man's method for man's life at least!" The Pope ultimately accepts human language. Despite his awareness of its false nature, he realizes that he is dependent on it. Out of the pile of human testimonies, which he believes are all mere lies, he has to generate his testimony about Guido's fate. Out of the mass of false words the Pope creates an elaborate verbal

construction in which he condemns Guido and asserts Pompilia's innocence. His own judgment in writing regarding Guido's fate is just another human testimony, so it is subject to the same lie as any others'. Nevertheless, he has to believe the truth of his own language at the human level to be able to assert his own fiction of God as a transcendental a priori, whose language is all Truth.

The Pope's assertion, "Be man's method for man's life at least!," in the previously quoted passage provides an important clue towards an understanding of Browning's notion of language. It opens up the possibility that Browning sees language as a constitutive entity that mediates the dialectic interaction between the human subject and the world, rather than a fixed entity given to man by God in a degraded form. This quite materialistic understanding of language relates Browning to some of most current discussions of language. Browning's understanding of language is quite materialistic in that he considers language as the shaping power for both subjectivity and the world. Raymond Williams' cultural materialism is, I think, probably the most significant Marxist contribution to thinking about language after the Bakhtin school. In *Marxism and Literature* Raymond Williams notes:

> A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world. The received major categories—'world', 'reality', 'nature', 'human'—may be counterposed or related to the category of 'language', but it is now a commonplace to observe that all categories, including the category 'language' are themselves constructions of language.[5]

Williams' materialistic approach to language--a fundamentally Marxist approach--focuses on grasping language in its concrete circumstances, and in its constitutive process,

not in abstract ways. For Williams, social reality is a constitutive process in which diverse social practices are indissolubly interlocked together, composing a complex whole. In this process language plays a vital role. For him, language is *praxis*, a constitutive activity and a shaping force in social production. To his regret, though, language as such has not been fully emphasized.

In *Marxism and Literature* Williams begins his redefinition of language by tracing the history of language studies. He points out that, traditionally, language has been treated as a "reflection" of reality, as a distinctive and separable entity from reality:

> In the previously dominant tradition, through all its variations, 'language' and 'reality' had been decisively separated, so that philosophical inquiry was from the beginning an inquiry into the connections between these apparently separate orders.... The radical distinction between 'language' and 'reality', as between 'consciousness' and 'material world', corresponding to actual and practical divisions between 'mental' and 'physical' activity, had become so habitual that serious attention seemed naturally concentrated on the exceptionally complicated consequent relations and connections.[6]

Nevertheless, there have been some attempts, Williams points out, to see language as a constitutive faculty. According to Williams, Vico made one important contribution towards understanding language as such:

> ...the whole question of the distinction between 'language' and 'reality' was eventually forced into consciousness, initially in a surprising way.... Vico proposed his criterion that we can have full knowledge only of what we can ourselves make or do. In one decisive respect this response was reactionary.

> Since men have not in any obvious sense made the physical world, a powerful new conception of scientific knowledge was ruled out a priori and was, as before, reserved to God. Yet on the other hand by insisting that we can understand society because we have made it, indeed that we understand it not abstractly but in the very process of making it, and that the activity of language is central in this process, Vico opened a whole new dimension.[7]

Vico explains language in three stages of schematic development: divine, heroic, and human. Human language may be a degraded form of divine and heroic languages. But language at the human level operates as a shaping force for both subjectivity and the world. For Vico, knowledge cannot be separated from language. He believes "that knowledge is bound up in human reason, passion, and imagination; that human beings function in social groups and are limited by historical circumstances; and that all these conditions are expressed in their language."[8] For Vico, "language reveals the process of reason, passion, and imagination, as well as the social conventions and historical circumstances that shape our concerns."[9] Herder also saw language as "constitutively human," Williams points out, opposing "any notion of language being given to man (as by God), or of language being added to man, as a special kind of acquisition or tool."[10]

To Williams' regret, both Vico's and Herder's understanding of language as a constitutive activity did not survive. Linguistics has adopted a variety of perspectives that persisted in seeing language as an object, not as a constitutive activity. For example, both William Jones' classification of languages by "families," and the development of comparative philology, which focused on the study of written languages, and on discovering certain "laws" governing different languages, fail to grasp language in its

constitutive process. Saussure's structural linguistics was an especially crucial development in this trend in linguistics. Saussure's suggestion of a social system of language (langue) and individual utterance (parole) is a powerful concept, but unfortunately, it excludes the idea of language in its specific, active, and constitutive forms.[11]

It was Marx and Engels who resumed the trail that Vico and Herder were following from a materialist perspective. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels observes that:

> ... man also possesses 'consciousness': but, even so, not 'pure' consciousness. From the start the 'spirit' is afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men, and for that reason is really beginning to exist for me personally as well; for language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.[12]

For Marx and Engels, language, as practical consciousness, intervenes and mediates the continuing social process of men's production and reproduction of daily life

The Marxist material understanding of language as the shaping power for both the human subject and the world is strongly embraced in Browning's poetry. As mentioned before, *The Ring and the Book* as a whole is simultaneous denunciation and confirmation of human language. The constant interplay between these two contradictory attitudes towards language creates a dynamic tension that refuses to see language as a static entity. In the last book of the poem, the poet persona quotes Fra Celestino's text:

I demand assent

To the enunciation of my text

In face of one proof more that 'God is true

And every man a liar'—that who trusts

To human testimony for a fact

Gets this sole fact—himself is proved a fool;

Man's speech being false, if but by consequence

That only strength is true: while man is weak,

And, since truth seems reserved for heaven not earth,

Plagued here by earth's prerogative of lies,

Should learn to love and long for what, one day,

Approved by life's probation, he may speak. (XII. 598-609)

Here the poet persona suggests that human language, unlike God's word, is not able to generate truth. However, the same poet persona claims in the first book of the poem that human language is capable of finding or generating truth. The often quoted ring metaphor clearly demonstrates how language mediates subject and object. The poet persona finds by chance a collection of some documents related to Guido's murder trial, bound together, and he claims:

Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged,

Lay gold, (beseech you, hold that figure fast!)

So, in this book lay absolutely truth,

Fanciless fact, the documents indeed. (I. 141-4)

I demand assent

To the conclusion of my text

In face of one proof more dire: 'God is true

And every man a liar'—that who enters

To human testimony for a fact

Dots this sole fact—himself is proved a fool;

Man's speech being false, if but by consequence

That only strength is true: what man is weak;

And, since truth seems reserved for heaven no more,

Plagued here by earth's pretenders to flee

Should learn to love and long for what can

Approved by life's probation, as I [illegible]

Here the poet persons suggests that [illegible] is not able to
generate truth. However, the next poem claims that the poet of the plan that
human language is capable of finding or recovering truth. The action quoted ring metaphor
clearly demonstrates how language mediates subject and object. The next persons finds by
chance a collection of some documents related to Guido's murder trial, bound together, and
he claims:

Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged,

Lay gold, (beseech you, bold due figure this!)

So, in this book lay absolutely truth,

Factless fact, the documents indeed. (I. 141–4)

Although he claims that the book contains absolute truth, the truth in its raw condition is meaningless unless it is worked on by the poet. The objective world becomes meaningful only when it is worked on by man, who brings some changes to it through his labor. Therefore, the poet contends that the raw truth of the book needs to be worked out through the application of the poet's "fancy," as he calls it:

> Well, now; there 's nothing in nor out o' the world
> Good except truth: yet this, the something else,
> What 's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
> This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
> That quickened, made the inertness malleable
> O' the gold was not mine,--what 's name for this?
> Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
> Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
> The somehow may be thishow. (I. 698-706)

Human labor is primarily a means toward the production and reproduction of life. But the poet asks, "Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?" (704). Karl Marx contends that the very act of laboring toward an end itself is also an end in itself:

> For in the first place labour, life-activity, productive life itself, appears to man merely as a means of satisfying a need—the need to maintain the physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character. Life itself appears only as a means to life.[13]

And at the center of human labor there is language. Language, by mediating between the raw materials, the documents, and the poet persona's own imagination, creates a ring of signification:

> But his work ended, once the thing a ring
> Oh, there 's repristination! Just a spurt
> O' the proper fiery acid o'er the face,
> And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;
> While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
> The rondure brave, the lilied loveliness,
> Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore:
> Prime nature with an added artistry—
> No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.
> What of it? 'T is a figure, a symbol, say;
> A thing's sign: now for the thing signified. (I. 22-32)

The ring refers to the repristinated narratives of the old book that the poet enlivens in his imagination. It is a sign, a signification. For Browning, both sign and signified do not exist outside the ring of signification. He does not deny the existence of the objective world: "in this book lay absolutely truth, / Fanciless fact, the documents indeed." What he emphasizes is that that the objective world is known to man only through language, through the ring of signification. Therefore, at the beginning of the poem the poet persona asks, "For how else know we save by the worth of word?" (I. 837) Human language, as both the Pope and Bentham remind, may be false. But one cannot reach to the thing itself without going

through language. So, after the long and tortuous "multifarious mass of words and deeds" (X. 263), the poet persona confirms his initial question:

> This one lesson, that our human speech is naught,
> And human testimony false, our frame
> 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. (XII. 841-4)

The poet persona asserts that human language is false. As Bentham believes, language plays a key role in creating a fiction; it creates fictional entities that exercise coercive power on thoughts and actions. At the same time, however, it is through language—art as the most glorified form of language—that he can reach the truth. In spite of its falseness, language is the *only possible way of speaking truth*.

This simultaneous denouncement and confirmation of language becomes characteristic of *The Ring and the Book* as a whole. Guido's two monologues address directly the multiple questions of language discussed above. The first monologue demonstrates how Guido's conception of self is shaped by language. Guido perceives himself through various institutions, such as law and religion; he cannot establish the referent of his fiction of honor, which represents his class distinction and patriarchal authority, outside the institutions with which he identifies himself. His whole perception of self is nothing other than the reordering and restructuring of various institutional discourses. His second monologue, however, exposes his fiction of honor, and also his perception of

through language. So, after the long and copious "multifarious mass of words and deeds" (X. 203), the poet persona confines the initial question.

This one lesson, that our human speech is fragile.

And 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 mouth's five more or less. (XII. 847–1[illegible])

The poet persona asserts that human beings are [illegible] plays a key role in creating a fiction [illegible] on thought and actions. At the same time, [illegible] glorified form of language – that is, [illegible] the only possible way of speaking truth.

This simultaneous denunciation and confirmation of language becomes characteristic of The Ring and the Book as a whole. Guido's two monologues address directly the multiple questions of language discussed above. The first monologue demonstrates how Guido's conception of self is shaped by language. Guido perceives himself through various institutions, such as law and religion; he cannot establish the reliance of his fiction of honor, which represents his class distinction and patriarchal authority, outside the institutions with which he identifies himself. His whole perception of self is nothing other than the reordering and restructuring of various institutional discourses. His second monologue, however, exposes his fiction of honor, and also his perception of

self based on it, as nothing but culturally formed realities, created by language. When Guido realizes that the very institutions he identified with before have become a threat to his life, his perception of self faces a crisis. So he denies the very signifying system that sustained his fiction of honor in his first monologues, and attempts to create a new self outside of it. In this process, his monologue ultimately demonstrates that his fiction, his self-concept, is only a creation of language.

Like his first monologue, his second monologue extensively addresses this capacity of language to reorder and restructure reality—but from a quite different direction. Upon hearing that the Pope has refused to pardon him, a pardon which Guido requested on the grounds that he once served in the Church, he realizes that the various institutions whose language he appropriated to save himself in his first monologue have turned against him. Therefore, rather than relying on the same institutional languages, this time Guido denounces these very institutions by exposing that their existence is only by the black magic of language. Guido claims that an institution stands only as the product of a language game, rather than as an entity of any intrinsic validity. Denying his former self created through various institutional languages, he resorts to the power of language to create another self that is independent of the threatening institutions.

Confined in his prison cell and visited by two priests sent by the Pope, Guido plays one last language game with the world. At the beginning of his monologue Guido adopts the same strategy he tried in his first monologue to save his life. That is, his act of killing was only meant to benefit the public weal:

> All honest Rome approved my part;
>
> Whoever owned wife, sister, daughter,--nay,

Mistress,--had any shadow of any right

That looks like right, and, all the more resolved,

Held it with tooth and nail,--these manly men

Approved! I being for Rome, Rome was for me. (XI. 39-44)

Guido pleads by reminding them that he was one of them, a priest in the institution that threatens his life now, but he soon realizes that they are sent there by the Pope to hear his confession, not to free him. "Friends, we used to frisk: / What of this sudden slash in a friend's face, / This cut across our good companionship" (XI. 87-9), and he asks, "the law o' game is changed?" (XI. 116) Guido decides to stop pleading, and throughout the rest of his monologue he plays his language games against the institutional languages that condemn him now. Guido talks to his hardly responsive visitors from dawn to sunset until the Messenger of Death finally arrives. The presence of the visitors is for him only an inducement to bring out his game of language: "Let me talk, / Or leave me, at your pleasure! talk I must: / What is your visit but my lure to talk?" (XI. 130-2), or "You use your ears, / I use my tongue" (XI. 136-7).

One thing that is striking in Guido's second monologue is the sharp contrast between his intense consciousness of approaching death and his increasing volubility and energy with which he is holding on to life:

Is it not terrible, I entreat you, Sirs?—

With manifold and plenitudinous life,

Prompt at death's menace to give blow for threat,

Answer his "Be thou not!" by "Thus I am!"—

Terrible so to be alive yet die?

How I live, how I see! So, —how I speak!

Lucidity of soul unlocks the lips:

I never had the words at will before. (XI. 153-60)

The awareness of approaching death catalyzes Guido's language game. In his first monologue Guido maintains an undivided self-identity as he identifies himself through various institutions. However, when he realizes that the very institutions that he appropriated for his defense are now turned against him, his institutionalized perception of self faces an enormous crisis. As Lisa O'Connor correctly points out, faced with this crisis, Guido tries to "create a self with which to face and endure death."[14] The creation of the new self is made possible through a creative power of language, "the ability of language to reorder and restructure," as Armstrong notes.[15] Thus, the question of language becomes a central concern in Guido's second monologue. In her insightful article, O'Conner observes that "Guido's second monologue becomes less a portrayal of the problematics of salvation than a final dramatizing of the problematics of using language to free and to construct a self."[16] When his last appeal to the Pope has failed, he deconstructs the institutional language of the Pope and constructs a new self outside institutions, aided only by the conjuring power of language.

Guido's efforts to create a self outside of institutions, interestingly, begins with denying the validity of the institutional entities around which he previously built his fiction of honor. To the priests who would not lend a helping hand to his plea for life, Guido declares:

Sirs, truth shall save it, since no lies assist!

Hear the truth, you, whatever you style yourselves,

How I live, now I act So, —how I speak!

Lucidity of soul unlocks the lips.

I never had the words or will before. (XI. 139-40)

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Sirs, truth shall save it, since no lies assist!

How the truth, you, whatever you style yourselves,

Civilization and society!

Come, one good grapple, I with the world! (XI. 461-4)

In Guido's first monologue both "civilization" and "society" are important words with which he builds his fiction of honor. Guido claims that man's honor is indispensable to society and that he followed faithfully what society asked him to do. Even the killing of Pompilia was part of it. Now Guido realizes that this very civilization and society have become a threat to him. Law finds him guilty, and as a last resort he appeals to the Church, which, represented by the Pope, condemns him and denies a pardon. Upon realizing this, Guido attempts to undermine the ecclesiastical authority by showing that institutions are only a language game, and he decides to play his own language game: "one good grapple, I with the world."

Institutions collectively participate in forming a web of signification through which the dominant social relations are maintained and disseminated. However, at the same time, in this web of signification these institutions emulate each other for dominance. Guido's language game appropriates, and at the same time, nullifies the multi-lateral relations in which institutions coordinate and emulate each other. Guido reminds his listeners that each institution is supposed to play a different social role: "Law being harshness, Gospel only love" (XI. 372). By this distinction he attempts to undermine the Church's authority for punishment. Guido claims that, "I have the best of the battle: that's a fact, / ... / What though half Rome condemned me? Half approved /... / All Rome, i' the main, acquitting me" (XI. 390-4). Even when Law approves his act, he asks, how does the Church, which should be all love, condemn him?

Christ's maxim is—one soul outweighs the world:

How I live, now I ask! So, —how I speak!

Lucidity or soul unlocks the lips:

I never had the words at will before. (*XI*. 129–30)

The awareness of approaching death catalyzes Guido's language game. In his final monologue Guido maintains an undivided self-identity as he identifies himself through various institutions. However, when he realizes that the very institutions that he appropriated for his defense are now turned against him, his institutionalized perception of self faces an enormous crisis. As J.Lee O'Connor concretely points out, faced with this crisis, Guido tries to "create a self with which to face and cope with it." The creation of the new self is made possible through a certain [illegible] of language. In order to render and reconstruct "a Almost [illegible] language becomes a central concern in Guido's [illegible] article, O'Connor observes that "Guido's second monologue focuses less [illegible] the problematics of salvation than [illegible] the problematics of using language to free and to construct a self." When he had appeal to the Pope has failed, he deconstructs the institutional language of the Pope and constructs a new self outside institutions, aided only by the creating power of language.

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Flow the truth, you, whatever you style yourselves,

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Come, one good grapple, I with the world! (XI. 461-4)

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Christ's maxim is—one soul outweighs the world:

Come, one good people, I wish the world." (XII. 481–4)

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[illegible] meticulously [illegible] which the dominant social [illegible] same time, in this web of [illegible] dominance. Guido's language [illegible] multi-lateral relations in which meanings [illegible] remind his listeners that each institution is supposed to play a [illegible] being literalness, Gospel only love." (XI. 372). By this distinction he attempts to undermine the Church's authority for punishment. Guido claims that, "I have the best of the battle that's a fact. / ... / What though half Rome condemned me? Half approved / ... / All Rome, if the main, acquitting me" (XI. 390–6). Even when Law approves his act, he asks, how does the Church, which should be all love, condemn him?

Christ's maxim is—one soul outweighs the world.

Respite me, save a soul, then, curse the world!

"No," venerable sire, I hear you smirk,

"No: for Christ's gospel changes names, not things,

"Renews the obsolete, does nothing more!

"Our fire-new gospel is re-tinkered law,

"Our mercy, justice,--Jove's rechristened God. (XI. 359-65)

Since Gospel assumes the place of Law, Guido reasons, the Church is only a changed name for Law, rather than a separate intrinsic referent of God. Guido contends that, just as law is a culturally formed social contract (see XI. 515-534), so the Church is only a culturally formed entity. Asserting "if ever was such faith at all / Born in the world... 'T is dead of age, ludicrously dead" (XI. 558-61), Guido claims that the institution is only a matter of manipulation of language.

Here Guido, once again, raises the question of the Benthamite fiction. According to Guido, Christianity, as a sign, does not have any signified; it is based on an empty referent. Just as the black mark the Pope finds in Guido is only a figure of speech, so the Church, as the Bishop explains in Caponsacchi's monologue, sustains itself by manipulating language in a social dimension. The Church in Guido's Roman society serves as the ultimate dispenser of judgement and truth, representing the universal truth of God. By playing his own language game Guido, interestingly, happens to reach a very insightful understanding of the nature of institutional discourse, which Lefort explains:

> The discourse inscribed in the institution maintains the illusion of an essence of society, staves off the double threat that weighs upon the established order by virtue of the fact that it is divided and the fact that it is historical; it imposes itself

Despite me, save a soul, then, raise the world!

"No," venerable sire, I hear you scold,

"No: for Christ's gospel clearly says, not thus,

"Barren the obedient, does nothing avail

"Our fine-new gospel is to disavow law,

"Our merry, jocular,—love's redintegral God: (XI. 259-63)

Since Gospel assumes the place of Law, Guido reasons, the Church is only a channel for Law, rather than a figment mimetic retrieval of God. Guido contends that just as law is a culturally formed social construct (see XI. 2[illegible] so the Church is only a culturally formed entity. Asserting "If ever was [illegible] is dead of age, indiscreetly dead" (XI. [illegible]) Guido claims that the Church is only a matter of manipulation of language.

Here Guido, once again, [illegible] the Pseudo-Lateran Edict. According to Guido, Christianity, as a sign, does not [illegible], it is based on an empty referent. Just as the blind man, the Pope, [illegible] a figure of speech, so the Church, as the Bishop explains in a [illegible] sustains itself by manipulating language in a social dimension. The Church in Guido's Roman society serves as the ultimate dispenser of judgment and truth, representing the universal truth of God. By playing his own language game Guido, interestingly, happens to reach a very insightful understanding of the nature of institutional discourse, which Lacan explains:

> The discourse inscribed in the institution continues the illusion of an essence of society, above all the double thrust that weighs upon the established order by virtue of the fact that it is divided and the fact that it is historical: it imposes itself

as a discourse rational in itself, a closed discourse which, masking the conditions of its own engendering, claims to reveal that of the empirical social reality.[17]

Although the Pope claims that the Church represents the universal truth of God, Guido argues, it is only a *culturally* formed institution. It does not have any referent but the Pope's fiction of God as transcendental a priori. The Pope's Church is sustained by signifying conventions, literary manipulation, and metaphoric uses of language, such as the images of wolf and sheep that Guido later deconstructs. Thus Guido contends that it would not change a thing even if faith were replaced by unfaith, and society would remain the same as before:

> Conversely unbelief, faith's opposite—
> Set it to work on life unflinchingly,
> Yet give no symptom of an outward change:
> Why should thing change because men disbelieve
> What's incompatible, in the whited tomb,
> With bones and rotteness one inch below?
> What saintly act is done in Rome to-day
> But might be prompted by the devil,--"is"
> I say not,--"has been, and again may be,"—
> I do say, full i' the face o' the crucifix
> You try to stop my mouth with! Off with it!
> Look in your heart, if your soul have eyes!
> Unbelief still might work the wires and move
> Man, machine, to play a faithful part. (XI. 599-613)

Guido attempts to nullify the Christian authority that threatens his life by blurring the distinction between faith and unfaith. This is made possible by the conjuring power of language, which he makes the most of, and he is elated over his achievement:

> But, lo, I wave wand, made the false to the true!
>
> Here 's Rome believes in Christianity!
>
> What an explosion, how the fragments fly
>
> Of what was surface, mask and make-believe! (XI. 622-25)

Guido performs his black magic of language by dismantling a dichotomous framework through which the Church exercises its institutional authorities. Guido attacks the dichotomies of good vs. evil and sheep vs. wolf which the Pope uses to condemn Guido. In his monologue the Pope harshly condemns Guido, saying Guido once served in the Church and yet committed the act of a wolf: "I find this black mark impinge the man, / That he believes in just the vile of life" (X. 511-2), or "The wolf feast on their heart, the lamb-like child his prey" (X. 559). The Pope frequently uses the dichotomous metaphors of wolf vs. sheep or lamb, and shepherd vs. thief. Guido realizes that an institution like the Pope's church imposes its power through a metaphoric use of language. As it is not true that there is really a black mark on his body that denotes his evilness, Guido concludes that all institutions are not based on real entities. Their existence is only a matter of linguistic manipulation, of how to impart meaning through an institutionalized signifying system. By blurring the very metaphoric distinction that the Pope uses, Guido attempts to escape the institutional power that threatens him:

> Your self-styled shepherd thieves!
>
> A thief—and how thieves hate the wolves we know:

Guido attempts to nullify the Christian authority that threatens his life by blurring the distinction between faith and nullity. This is made possible by the conjuring power of language, which he makes the most of, and so is gifted over his adversaries.

But, lo, I wave wand, made the false to the true.

Here 's Rome believes in Christianity!

What an explosion, how the figments fly

Of what was surface, mask and make-believe! (XI. 822-25)

Guido perforce his black magic of language by dismantling a dichotomous framework through which the Church exercises its institutional authorities. Guido blurs the dichotomies of good vs. evil and those vs. word vs. the Pope, who is to proclaim Guido. In his monologue the Pope harshly condemns Guido, saying Guido has deceived the Church and yet committed the act of a wolf in sheep's fleece and corrupts the man. That he believes in just the vile of the [illegible] (X. 831-32). The Pope incorrectly uses the dichotomous metaphors lamb-like child his prey" (X. 829). The Pope incorrectly uses the dichotomous metaphors of wolf vs. sheep or lamb, and shepherd vs. thief. Guido realizes that an institution like the Pope's church imposes its power through a metaphoric use of language. As it is not true that there is really a black mark on his body that denotes his evilness, Guido concludes that all institutions are not based on real entities. Their existence is only a matter of linguistic manipulation, of how to impart meaning through an institutionalized signifying system. By blurring the very metaphoric distinction that the Pope uses, Guido attempts to escape the institutional power that threatens him:

Your self-styled shepherd thieves!

A thief—and how thieves hate the wolves we know:

Damage to theft, damage to thrift, all 's one!

The red hand is sworn foe of the black jaw.

That's only natural , that's right enough:

But why the wolf should compliment the thief

With shepherd's title, bark out life in thanks,

And, spiteless, lick the prong that spits him,--eh,

Cardinal? My Abate, scarcely thus!

There, let my sheepskin-garb, a curse on 't, go—

Leave my teeth free if I must show my shag! (XI. 434-44)

Guido dismantles the traditional metaphor of the Pope as the "Vicar of the Lord, / Shepherd of the flock" (400-1). Guido describes the Pope as "the thief with shepherd's title," and contends, "His pleasure is to turn staff, use the point, / And thrust the shuddering sheep he calls the wolf, / Back and back, down and down to where hell gapes!" (404-6). And through a series of deconstruction of the Pope's language, Guido ultimately detaches himself from the institution that threatens his life:

I think I never was at any time

A Christian, as you nickname all the world,

Me among others: truce to nonsense now!

Name me, a primitive religionist— (XI. 1916-19)

An undercurrent of Guido's game of language is a trace of the alienated condition of Guido's institutionalized self. In *The Ring and the Book* one can find various forms of alienation in institutionalized labor. The early Caponshacchi in the institution of the Church, Pompilia in the institution of marriage, the two lawyers in the institution of law--

all suffer from dissatisfaction and alienation within their institutions. Guido's fiction of honor also suffers from the gap between his utopian vision of patriarchal authority and its reality as Pompilia nullifies it. The Pope's refusal to pardon him completely ends his hope for regaining his authority and fulfilling his utopian vision. Guido's institutionalized self faces a serious crisis:

> You preached long and loud
> On high-days, "Take our doctrine upon trust!
> Into the mill-house with you! Grind our corn,
> Relish our chaff, and let the green grass grow!"
> I tried chaff, found I famished on such fare,
> So made this mad rush at the mill-house-door,
> Buried my head upon to the ears in dew,
> browsed on the best: for which you brain me, Sirs!
> Be it so. I conceived of life that way,
> And still declare—life, without absolute use
> Of the actual sweet therein, is death, not life.
> Give me,—paydown,—not promise, which is air,—
> Something that 's out of life and better still,
> Make sure reward, make certain punishment,
> Entice me, scare me, —I 'll forgo this life;
> Otherwise, no!—the less that words mere wind,
> Would cheat me of some minutes while they plague,
> Baulk fulness of revenge here,—blame yourselves

all suffer from dissatisfaction and alienation within their institutions. Guido's fiction of horror also suffers from the gap between his utopian vision of patriarchal authority and its reality as Pamphilus nullifies it. The Pope's refusal to pardon him completely ends his hope for regaining his authority and fulfilling his utopian vision. Guido's institutionalized self faces a serious crisis.

For this eruption of the pent-up soul

You prisoned first and played with afterward! (XI. 1478-97)

Guido's pent-up soul erupts through his endless talking. One thing that is striking in Guido's second monologue is his fascination with the power of language to reorder and restructure the past and the present, as indicated by the volubility and energy he brings into his talking. Guido elates, "I wave a wand and bring to pass / In a moment, in the twinkle of an eye, / ... / And bid it operate, have full effect / On every circumstance of life" (XI. 587-93), and again, "I wave wand, made the false to the true!" (XI. 622) This awareness of the power of language provides Guido an outlet to "the pent-up soul" (1498) of his institutionalized self when the very institution fails him:

My nature, when the outrage was too gross,

Widened itself an outlet over-wide

By way of answer, sought its own relief

With more fire and brimstone than you wished.

All your own doing: preachers, blame yourselves! (XI. 1515-9)

Guido's nature widens itself and creates a self that exists independent of the institutions that threaten him. As mentioned before, Guido is sharply conscious of his approaching death, as revealed in his frequent mention of the death machine he will soon face: "his brand-new engine,"(125) and "the engine,"(254) and again "the engine"(309). Against this inevitable fate, he desires to create a self that will survive this death with the help of the conjuring power of language. Guido discards the image of himself as a lost sheep, "one soul outweighs the world," and depicts himself as a wolf. The wolf image is an important metaphor in Guido's game of language. O'Connor points out, "this image of

wolf ... becomes the major image upon which he begins to create an identity of himself."[18] With the power of language to reorder and restructure through various metaphors, Guido creates the wolf image, a whole self, a self that will survive the approaching death by completely denying the Christian idea of the hell:

> Let me turn wolf, be whole, and sate, for once,—
> Wallow in what is now a wolfishness
> Coerced too much by the humanity
> That 's half of me as well! Grow out of man,
> Glut the wolf-nature,— what remains but grow
> Into the man again, be man indeed
> And all man? Do I ring the changes right?
> Deformed, transformed, reformed, informed, conformed!
> The honest instinct, pent and crossed through life,
> Let surge by death into a visible flow
> Of rupture. (XI. 2056-66)

One thing that Guido's language game extensively addresses is the idea that self is formed through language, and that self is not a fixed entity. His monologue clearly demonstrates how a self is formed through language. Guido's self, in his first monologue, does not exist anywhere else than in the various institutional languages he appropriates for his fiction of honor, especially legal, religious, and sexual discourse. In his second monologue Guido creates a different self by reordering and restructuring the various institutional discourses. When he is denied of any future, Guido reshuffles and blurs the metaphoric opposition and creates a new future for himself through the wolf image.

Guido is fascinated with this power of language and makes the most of it. Thus, for Guido, language becomes an important means of opening up the future. As to the creativity of language, Armstrong notes:

> Language, intervening in the world, is the prerequisite for action. The constructs of 'the forgery of language' ... are essential motivating factors in choice and action because their very fictionality opens up an imaginatively possible future. This imagined future is a linguistic moment, made unconsciously and riskily out of the repetitions of past thought and action, past memory and desire and past language, but conditions the beyond, a fictional continuity made out of a radically unstable discontinuity but nevertheless providing the ground for action. No action, right or wrong, can occur without the creativity of language.[19]

Language reorders and restructures the past and opens up the future. Guido's opens up a new future for himself by reordering and restructuring the metaphors through which institutions impart their institutional meanings. Thus, Guido's second monologue celebrates the creativity of language. However, at the same time, it also addresses and focuses on the problems of the very creativity of language.

Guido is fascinated with the power of language and he exploits its power to save his life, but he succeeds only temporarily. As I discussed before, *The Ring and the Book* as a whole addresses the role of language in creating fictional entities that exercise a coercive power on human thoughts and actions. And importantly, Guido's second monologue addresses the problems of the hedonistic laissez-faire-ism that operates within the realm of language and also of Millite subjective expressionism. Herbert Tucker observes, "Typically Browning's monologuists tell the story of a yearning after a

condition of lyric, a condition that is itself in turn unimaginable except as the object of, or pretext for, the yearning that impels the story plotted against it."[20] Guido's second monologue reflects exactly this situation. No matter whether or not the wolf image of Guido achieves the condition of lyric, it is the future condition that the present is constantly undermining. The wolf image is only a product of his yearning for life that was propelled by approaching death. His language game cannot stop the coming of death. He yearns for the strength of the wolf that his language has conjured; however, in reality he is helpless against the approaching death. It is only a trick of fiction and word-play. Thus, Guido confesses, "All's but a flourish, figure of rhetoric!" (851), a rhetoric he uses to save his life. This aspect is more clearly revealed in his realization that the signification of the wolf image does not go beyond himself. His two listeners are hardly responsive. More importantly Guido realizes that Pompilia is still alive and that she also speaks of her own story differently from his:

> The worst 's in store: thus hindered, haled this way
> To Rome again by hangdog, whom I find I
> Here, still to fight with, but my pale frail wife?...
> She too must shimmer through the gloom o' the grave,
> Come and confront me—not at judgment-seat
> Where I could twist her soul, as erst her flesh,
> And turn her truth into a lie,--but there,
> O' the death-bed, with God's hand between us both,
> Striking me dumb, and helping her to speak,
> Tell her own story her own way, and turn

My plausibility to nothingness! (XI. 1675-89)

Guido's language game ultimately exposes that his wolf-self is only a fiction that cannot claim materiality for itself. Thus Guido's monologue addresses the question of fiction and language in a chaotic circular way.

[1]. V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

[2]. Peter Allan Dale, "*Paracelsus* and *Sordello*: Trying the Stuff of Language," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Winter, 1980, 360.

[3]. See W. David Shaw, "The Optic metaphor: Victorian Poetics and the Theory of Knwoledege," *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 24, no. 1, Spring 1989.

[4]. Robert Browning, "Essay on Shelley," *The Works of Robert Browning*, vol. XII, (New York: Fred DeFau: 1910), 288.

[5]. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 21.

[6]. *Ibid.*, 22.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 23.

[8]. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990), eds. P. Bizzell & B. Herzberg, p. 647.

[9]. *Ibid.*, 711.

[10]. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 24.

[11]. See *ibid.*, 25-28.

[12]. K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology* (London, 1969), 19.

[13]. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, from Herbert Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York & London: Norton, 1978), 75-76.

[14]. Lisa O'Connor, "The Construction of a Self: Guido and Metaphor in Book XI of *The Ring and the Book*," from *Browning Centenary Essays: Special Edition of AUMLA*, eds. Simon Petch & Warwick Slinn, *AUMLA*, vol. 71 (May 1989), 139.

[15]. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 35.

[16]. O'Connor, *AUMLA*, 139.

[17]. Quoted in John Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley & L.A., Cal.: University of California Press, 1984), 25.

[18]. O'Connor, *AUMLA*, 143.

[19]. Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, 299

[20]. Herbert Tucker, "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric" in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hosek & Patricia Parker, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 230.

CONCLUSION

CORRECTING THE PORTRAIT BY THE LIVING FACE

As discussed in the previous chapters, the fundamental question that the monologues of *The Ring and the Book* raise is the Benthamite *fiction* and its coercive power. In the poem, Browning makes an exhaustive investigation of prevalent Victorian institutional and cultural fictions. Guido's monologue exposes the politics of contemporary patriarchal gender ideology. Guido's supposed *right* over Pompilia within the institution of marriage turns out to be just a culturally constructed fiction. By deconstructing the word honor, the very gist of Guido's fiction, the poem suggests the possibility that the whole social structure of a patriarchal society is built on fiction. The two lawyers' monologues also draw on the politics of nothingness. Law, "The patent truth-extracting process" (I. 1114) is, the poem suggests, nothing other than an employment of aesthetic language at an institutional level for certain purposes, concealing the emptiness of its content. The poem also brings religion under scrutiny. The Pope makes efforts to prove the transcendental a priori status of God. However, his notion of God as *product* is constantly subverted by the possibility of God as *process*, ultimately implying that his God is just another fictional entity.

Nevertheless, and despite its empty referent, a fiction exercises coercive power on human thoughts and actions since it is presented as the seamless whole of reality. More importantly, the poem suggests, a fiction is dangerous because it tends to help reinforce the existing relations of power and domination in a society. A fiction presents an ideologically fixed set of meanings and values, investing itself with naturalness,

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Nevertheless, and despite its empty referent, a fiction exercises coercive power on human thoughts and actions since it is presented as the seamless whole of reality. More importantly, the poem suggests, a fiction is dangerous because it tends to help reinforce the existing relations of power and domination in a society. A fiction presents an ideologically fixed set of meanings and values, inviting itself with naturalness,

legitimacy, and universality. Both Guido and Archangeli contend that a husband's honor, or right, is God's gift, a *natural* law supported by custom and tradition. The Pope's religious fiction presents a timeless, transcendental a priori God, who stands apart from history.

At the center of the Benthamite theory of fiction lies the question of *language*. A fiction is created and sustained by the conjuring power of language. The Pope insightfully perceives that human language is apt to be false and capable of distorting reality. One thing that the poem extensively addresses is the various discursive practices in which language helps support the existing relations of domination and power. Archangeli's aesthetic language conceals the empty referent of Guido's honor and justifies Guido's oppressive patriarchal authority. Caponsacchi's employment of artistic language in the secularized institution of Church victimizes women.

However, the *dramatic* nature in *The Ring and the Book* brings the politics of fiction under scrutiny and inspection. One thing that readers of Victorian poetry are constantly reminded of is the presence of different poetic voices, whether heard or unheard, and the conflicts or struggles among them, implied or expressed. The presence of multiple voices and their internal dialogues or debates characterizes Victorian poetry as fundamentally *dramatic*. Dramatic poetry brings a subject-centered expressionism into the public arena of discourse where its validity is tested. Browning's dramatic poetry forces the reader to follow two kinds of reading, subjective and objective, respectively. The subjective reading overhears the subject-centered, expressive, and psychological voice that a speaking subject utters. On the other hand, the objective reading looks into how this subjective utterance is seen and understood by other parties present or implied in

the poem, or by the reader. These two readings create certain tensions or conflicts between them, which bring the subjective expressionism under scrutiny and inspection.

The unique dramatic structure in *The Ring and the Book* creates multiple rings of hermeneutic circles where any set of meanings, values, and ideas are only temporarily validated and constantly subverted by other ones. In these hermeneutic circles any meaning may be considered, not as a *product,* but as a *process.* Many critics have noticed this aspect in Browning's poetry. Clyde Ryals observes that "What concerns Browning is not so much meaning as the possibility of meaning ... For him meaning is neither absent nor fixed: it is always becoming, realizing itself and being realized in different styles, forms, and perspectives."[1] Warwick Slinn remarks, "Browning's poem demonstrates the way meaning is temporal and contingent, subject to the appropriation of forms and the shifting of contexts."[2] Herbert Tucker also sees "his art as a fabric, or maze, of dialectic and fictive structures that unravels itself."[3] Browning's understanding of truth as a process is important because any attempts to see truth as a finished, fixed entity ultimately approve and help maintain the status quo of a society.

These critics' observations provide a valuable clue towards an understanding of Browning's poetry. However, I do not think that Browning's poetry is merely concerned with a *creative process itself* in art that endlessly churns out different meanings, as these critics seem to believe. Rather, Browning's poetry is more concerned with the way certain meanings are constructed and presented and the way they influence human thoughts and actions. This is why it is necessary to direct our attention to the question of fiction and ideology in reading Browning's poetry. Meaning is always constructed within specific material conditions and social contexts; furthermore, no meaning exists

independently from the social relations of domination and power. In *The Ring and the Book* Browning brings together different forms of individual consciousness and investigates them in their material conditions, demonstrating that "the individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact," as V.N. Volosinov points out.[4]

Not surprisingly, in *The Ring and the Book* no character is free from the dictates of fiction, and the unique structure of the poem implies that the same is true for readers. Browning may have regarded this as the very condition of human existence. Nevertheless, Browning does not seem to see this condition of human existence with pessimism only. At one point the Pope asks what the meaning of this world is:

> Is this our ultimate stage, or starting-place
> To try man's foot, if it will creep or climb,
> 'Mid obstacles in seeming, points that prove
> Advantage for who vaults from low to high
> And makes the stumbling-block a stepping stone? (X. 409-13)

In his *Essay on Shelley,* Browning seems to give his own answer to this question:

> For it is with this world, as starting-point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned. The spiritual comprehension may be subtilized, but the raw material it operates upon should remain.[5]

Human consciousnesses are inescapably intertwined with fictions, and no truth is available in its absolute condition in this world. Browning believes that any search for truth should begin with this very world. By a continuous readjustment of our limited

understanding of the world, one can get closer to the truth, the real material conditions of social existence. Thus for Browning the world has to be constantly "reverted to and relearned." Armstrong seems to best summarize this aspect in Browning's poetry:

> Democratic realism, elitist idealism, are alike the provisional and contradictory construction of cultural fictions. The point of the monologues is that people live and experience them: imagination shapes and is shaped by them; they determine choices, and yet they cannot be extracted as 'pure' forms of thought or experience from the language and conditions in which they are produced. Ideology cannot get outside itself. But what we can do is to participate in the endless process of redefinition.[6]

By participating in the endless process of redefinition of the world, one can get closer to the understanding of the real material conditions of existence. What one perceives as truth in this process of redefinition, however dynamic and regenerative this process may be, may still conceal the real material conditions; it continues to be a *fiction*. The material conditions of existence are constantly on the move and always ahead of human understanding; they can never be grasped in their completeness. Nevertheless, Browning suggests, the endless process of redefinition itself is the only way by which one can get close to them.

For most Victorians, their age was one of great social change. Faced with such unprecedented social change, Browning and his contemporaries may have desired and searched for certain timeless, fixed absolute truths. But Browning insightfully perceives that such truths are not available in this world; knowledge and truth in this world are not

given as portraits already completed. All we can do is just to make an endless redefinition of the world in search for them, "correct[ing] the portrait by the living face" (X. 1873), as the Pope muses.

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By participating in the endless process of [illegible], one can get closer to the understanding of the real material conditions of existence. While one perceives as truth in this process of redefinition, [illegible] perceiving this process may be, may still conceal the real material conditions in existence to be a fiction. The material conditions of existence are primarily an economic and always ahead of human understanding; they can never be grasped in their completeness. Nevertheless, Browning suggests, the endless process of redefinition itself is the only way by which one can get close to them.

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[1]. Clyde De L. Ryals, *Becoming Browning: The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning, 1833-1846* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983), 253-4.

[2]. E. Warwick Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 140.

[3]. Quoted from Patricia O'Neill, *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Columbia: Camden House, 1995), 119.

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[5]. Robert Browning, *Robert Browning's Complete Works* (New York: Fred DeFau, 1910), XII, 288.

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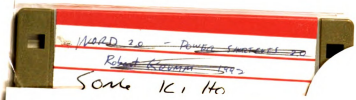
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independently from the social relations of domination and power. In The Ring and the Book Browning brings together different forms of individual consciousness and investigates them in their material contributions, denominating that "this individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact," as V.N. Volosinov points out.[1]

Not surprisingly, in The Ring and the Book no character is free from the dictate of fiction, and the unique structure of the poem implies that the same is true for readers. Browning may have regarded this as the very condition of human existence. Nevertheless, Browning does not seem to see this condition of human existence with pessimism only. At one point the Pope asks what the meaning of this world is:

Is this our ultimate stage, or starting-place
To day man's fool, if it will croak or chirk,
Mid obstacles to nothing, prate but pave
Advantage for aho yonder how to hop
And make the stumbling-block a stepping stone? (X. 409-13)

In his Essay on Shelley, Browning seems to give his own answer to this question:

For it is with this world, as starting-point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and known aside, but revered to and reclaimed. The spiritual comprehension may be subtilized, but the raw material it operates upon should remain.[2]

Human consciousness are inescapably intertwined with fictions, and no truth is available in its absolute condition in this world. Browning believes that any search for truth should begin with this very world. By a conscious realignment of our limited

understanding of the world, one can get closer to the truth, the real material conditions of social existence. Thus for Browning the world has to be constantly "reverted to and relearned." Armstrong seems to best summarize this aspect in Browning's poetry:

> Democratic realism, elitist idealism, are alike the provisional and contradictory construction of cultural fictions. The point of the monologues is that people live and experience them: imagination shapes and is shaped by them; they determine choices, and yet they cannot be extracted as 'pure' forms of thought or experience from the language and conditions in which they are produced. Ideology cannot get outside itself. But what we can do is to participate in the endless process of redefinition.[6]

By participating in the endless process of redefinition of the world, one can get closer to the understanding of the real material conditions of existence. What one perceives as truth in this process of redefinition, however dynamic and regenerative this process may be, may still conceal the real material conditions; it continues to be a *fiction*. The material conditions of existence are constantly on the move and always ahead of human understanding; they can never be grasped in their completeness. Nevertheless, Browning suggests, the endless process of redefinition itself is the only way by which one can get close to them.

For most Victorians, their age was one of great social change. Faced with such unprecedented social change, Browning and his contemporaries may have desired and searched for certain timeless, fixed absolute truths. But Browning insightfully perceives that such truths are not available in this world; knowledge and truth in this world are not

Democratic realism, elitist idealism, are alike the provisional and contradictory constructions of cultural fictions. The point of the monologues is that people live and experience them: imagination shapes and is shaped by blunt, they determine choices, and yet they cannot be extracted as 'pure' forms of thought or experience from the language and conditions in which they are produced. Ideology cannot get outside itself. But what we can do is to participate in the endless process of redefinition."

By participating in the endless process of redefinition of the world, one can get closer to the understanding of the real historical contours of existence. What one perceives as truth in this process of redefinition, however dynamic and regenerative this process may be, may still conceal the real material conditions in a fiction. The material conditions of existence are constantly on the move and always ahead of human understanding, they can never be grasped in their completeness. Nevertheless, Browning suggests, the endless process of redefinition itself is the only way by which one can get close to them.

For most Victorians, their age was one of great social change. Faced with such unprecedented social change, Browning and his contemporaries may have desired and searched for certain timeless, fixed absolute truths. But Browning intelligently perceives that such truths are not available in this world; knowledge and truth in this world are not

given as portraits already completed. All we can do is just to make an endless redefinition of the world in search for them, "correct[ing] the portrait by the living face" (X. 1873), as the Pope muses.

[1]. Clyde De L. Ryals, *Becoming Browning: The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning, 1833-1846* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983), 253-4.

[2]. E. Warwick Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 140.

[3]. Quoted from Patricia O'Neill, *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Columbia: Camden House, 1995), 119.

[4]. V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

[5]. Robert Browning, *Robert Browning's Complete Works* (New York: Fred DeFau, 1910), XII, 288.

[6]. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 308.

1. Clyde De L. Ryals, *Becoming Browning: The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning 1833–1846* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983), 225–4.

2. E. Warwick Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 140.

3. Quoted from Patricia O'Neill, *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Columbia: Camden House, 1995), 119.

4. V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 23.

5. Robert Browning, *Asolando*, in *Complete Works* (New York: Fred DeFau, 1910), XII, 282.

6. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry and Poetics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 363.

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