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THE RING AND THE BOOK:
TEXTS, AND THE TEXTURE OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The following discussion of The Ring and the Book suggests that the primary concern of the poem is with language.

Chapter One of the discussion attempts to lay a broad base for the relation of language to the poem. It takes the form of a prelude introducing the later chapters and suggests that the overriding concern with language includes the poem, itself, as a linguistic construct. A distinction is drawn between the language of ordinary discourse, which is the immediate subject of the poem, and the language of artistic discourse, which is the medium of the poem, but which in turn becomes the subject of consideration.

The interpenetration of subject and medium, it is suggested, results from Browning's recognition that language is a temporal and ongoing process, and that, therefore, a prior, static truth cannot be conclusively expressed in language. Rather, art may embrace the processional nature of ordinary discourse within the context of artistic discourse, in order to provide a structure of "the experience of experience".

Chapter Two suggests that Browning's method of foregrounding the relationship between language and experience is one of a disruptive juxtaposition of texts. Such a method demonstrates how the style of representation conditions, and supplants, experience: how the medium supplants the subject. Book I, it is argued, becomes an implicit and explicit education in how to read The Ring and the Book, functioning as a paradigm for the later monologues.

The discussion of Book I is central to this study; the method of the poem, and the concerns that method foregrounds, are established in Book I (a section of the poem that is rarely discussed in any detail). Primarily, the disruptive texts of Book I dramatise the author fragmenting the "whole" story into stylistically conflicting representations; the fragmentation disrupts the conclusiveness implicit in any representation. The "story", or narrative, becomes displaced, and the poem becomes, rather, a cumulative ongoing texture of linguistic representations.

Chapter Three considers the problem of climax in a disruptive play of texts. In Book X and Book XI, the language of ordinary discourse in the poem reaches what I would term a plateau of linguistic intensities: the Pope and Guido become the disruptively juxtaposed poles between which the other characters inhabit the world through language.

Chapter Three provides a link between the discussion of Book I and the discussion of Book XII which concludes this study.

Chapter Four argues that the plateau of linguistic intensities reached in Book X and Book XI is maintained in Book XII. Browning, firstly, includes in his poem the truth of the negative intensity of language: that it is the temporal medium by which experience dissipates, even as that experience unfolds in language. The completing intensity of language in the poem, however, is the presence of the implied author in Book XII. The language of artistic discourse counters the limitations and fallibilities of the language of ordinary discourse, not by escaping, or being conclusively above, those limitations, but by embodying them in a true way. The artistic discourse therefore becomes a processional embodiment of truth, from which a conclusive truth may not be separated.

In the central painting of a triptych, titled "Bordano el Manto Terrestre," were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world.

The Crying of Lot 49.

PREFACE

William Carlos Williams has observed that "all criticism is an act of violence", and beyond the natural defensiveness of a poet in the face of the academic machinery which appropriates his work, Williams touches an essential truth about the nature of interpretation. It may well be argued that literary criticism reveals what a work of literature truly means, but the implicit singularity of such a belief is revealed by the conflicting critical texts which attach themselves to a particular poem, or novel, or play.

What characterises a work of literature, in an artistic sense, is that it creates an intensity which invites critical "violence", which provokes analysis or thought, but which finally resists them. Even a perfect poem, if one can conclusively explain it, is a perfect tomb.

The Ring and the Book deals with experience, but not in a singular way. Whatever else the poem may be about -- social or moral contexts, the ironies of Romantic subjectivism -- it is deeply concerned with nature of experience as an interpenetrative texture conditioned by language. The process of interpretative structuring becomes the subject and medium of the poem: the poet dramatises experience by dramatising himself, and series of monologuists, interpreting experience.

Meaning is made potent in The Ring and the Book by being made intensely problematical, ambiguous, disclosed. Truth is endlessly parodied, re-formulated in the poem; it is constantly implied by the poet, but never conclusively stated. Browning concludes The Ring and the Book with a riddle about the nature of his own poem; he defers to truth and meaning, refers them back to the only place where they may authentically be found: within the texture of the poem itself. The literary critic becomes drawn into a parallel relation with the process of The Ring and the Book: becomes himself, or herself, a type of monologist re-interpreting re-interpretations.

Such a view does not mean, as some would suggest, that there is no meaning, or that no meaning can be posited. The whole force of the poem dramatises that the process of reconstructing meaning is as necessary, and inescapable, as it is ongoing and inconclusive.

An important influence in my reading of The Ring and the Book has been Herbert F. Tucker Jr.'s Browning's Beginnings. Although Tucker does not actually discuss The Ring and the Book he provides a convincing example of the way in which current critical thinking may be applied to Browning's work, and he divines an essential thread in Browning's work which vividly corresponds to my own initial experience of The Ring and the Book: namely, that Browning is concerned with the opening out of possibility rather than with providing a static completion.

I would like finally to acknowledge the open-minded encouragement and precise attention to detail of E. Warwick Slinn in the preparation of this thesis:

Ah! j'en ai trop pris: -- Mais, cher Satan, je
jous en conjure, une prunelle moins irritée!

Une Saison En Enfer.

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CHAPTER ONE: LANGUAGE IN THE RING AND THE BOOK -- A PRELUDE.

The structure of The Ring and the Book is unusual: the story of a rough, penniless nobleman and his young bride told three times by the author in Book I of the poem, and then repeated through a succession of ten monologues. In Book XII the author reappears to demonstrate how the events he has so meticulously dramatised simply disappear into time. Each of the monologues functions as a conventional dramatic monologue: a speaker formulates experience according to his or her own viewpoint; the ironies inherent in language and in the process of formulation reveal to the reader more than the speaker intends -- the contours of a personality, the workings of consciousness, the force of unconscious desire. The speaker attempts to provide a conclusive view of experience, a view which springs from and seeks to validate the speaker's consciousness. Yet viewed from a different perspective the monologues contained in The Ring and the Book are not conventional, for they are neither single, nor self-contained. The monologues are a series, each monologue interpreting the same events from a different perspective and set in the linguistic style particular to each speaker. The effect of a series of versions dealing with the same events is that one version disrupts the conclusive view another seeks to provide, and is itself disrupted in the same way. The disruptive effect of a serial structure is more extreme than a single monologue allows: it is not only that the ironies of a speaker's language reveal more than the speaker intends, but that the single view is disrupted by a plural presentation and is thus revealed to be contingent, and complicated by an inherent insufficiency. Similarly, the presence of the author in the first and last Books of the poem represents a further distinction from the conventional dramatic monologue form. Rather than being an implied presence, the unspoken source of an ironic perspective on the speaker, the author himself enters the poem -- freely passing judgements on the monologuists, providing his own versions of the events, and to disrupt the fictional surface of the poem even further, details how he wrote the poem, and involves the reader in an ongoing discussion on the nature and function of literary art.

The argument contained in my discussion of The Ring and the Book grew out of the recognition of the disruptive and serial nature of the

monologues, and of the author's own presence in Books I and XII complicating the fictional world of the monologues. A large part of the discussion is devoted to Book I, both because it is rarely granted the importance accorded to the monologues, and because, as it is the reader's first experience of the nature and concerns of the poem, Book I is of strategic importance. The essential premise of the examination of Book I is that, like the later monologues, Book I is a disruptive series of texts. For plainly, the monologues are texts -- versions of the same events told from different viewpoints and embodied in a style of language peculiar to the consciousness of each speaker. Book I itself contains three separate versions of the story of Guido and Pompilia, each different in style and viewpoint, and beyond that Book I moves forward not through a smooth continuous narrative flow but through distinct changes in textual style, tone and concern. In this way Book I functions as an education in how to read The Ring and the Book: the reader is introduced to the method of the poem -- a disruptive play of texts -- and to the problems of language and viewpoint which that method foregrounds. Book I is educative in an explicit sense also, the author at certain points turning aside from the murder story to discuss the function of his poetic art and its relation to experience.

Isobel Armstrong has said, "The structure of The Ring and the Book becomes meaningful if it is seen as a poem about itself. It is also a poem about its own language and an understanding of the form of the poem depends upon a grasp of Browning's attitude to language."¹ While Armstrong is here particularly concerned with the gradations and shifts of value words undergo from one monologue to the next, her essential point -- that The Ring and the Book is about itself, about its own language -- relates directly to my argument. In Book I the disruptive play of texts which foregrounds problems of language and viewpoint, and the discussions on the function of poetic art, prefigure the monologues. What becomes important is the way a text provides a context for experience, each text disrupting the other. We can attribute greater or lesser degrees of moral worth to each speaker, and indeed are required to do so, but none of the monologuists can escape the limitations of

¹Isobel Armstrong, "The Ring and the Book: The Uses of Prolixity," in The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 185.

their own single viewpoint, or of the disruptive effects of other and contradictory viewpoints. Yet The Ring and the Book is itself a context provided for experience, is itself language, and more than that -- consciously refers to itself in Book I and Book XII as being so. Browning himself makes apparently contradictory comments about language. In Book I he asks, "How else know we save by worth of word?" (I, 837) and in Book XII at almost exactly the same place he announces: "This lesson, that our human speech is naught,/Our human testimony false, our fame/And human estimation words and wind" (XII, 834-6).² By balancing these two opposed propositions at the same point in the first and last Books, Books in which the author enters the poem and which circumscribe the world of the monologues, Browning stresses the importance of language, and his own perception of language as a paradoxical medium. The paradox resides in the distinction between language as it is used in ordinary discourse, and the aesthetic use of language.

Language as it is used in ordinary discourse is shown in The Ring and the Book to be irrevocably flawed and insufficient: the language of "our human speech" cannot preserve experience against time, it is, in fact, the medium through which experience dissipates in time to nothingness: "What was once seen, grows what is now described,/The talked of, told about, a tinge the less/In every transmission" (XII, 14-16). Nor is language, in the context of social usage, capable of bridging the gap which separates one consciousness from another; one person cannot effectively communicate to another a truth about experience, for a truth told becomes merely opinion, and opinion is merely disbelieved:

Say this as silverly as tongue can troll -
 The anger of the man may be endured,
 The shrug, the disappointed eyes of him
 Are not so bad to bear - but here's the plague
 That all this trouble comes of telling truth,
 Which truth, by when it reaches him, looks false,
 Seems to be just the thing it would supplant,
 Nor recognizable by whom it left - (XII, 845-52).

² Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book, ed. Richard D. Altick (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971). All subsequent references to the poem refer to this edition.

But worse than disbelief is the way in which language alters in its transmission from one consciousness to another, the speaker's words reappropriated by the auditor, placed in a new context which alters the original meaning, "Nor recognizable by whom it left -" (XII, 852).

The monologues, which explore the relationship between the self and the necessarily verbal conception of experience, dramatise how language in the context of ordinary discourse is entombed within the single consciousness. Indeed, the form of juxtaposed monologues objectifies the enclosure of language within the single consciousness to an extreme degree: each monologue appearing to be a hermetically sealed verbal environment. The monologues, however, only appear to be 'hermetically sealed': E. Warwick Slinn argues that intersubjectivity is an issue in the poem and that the juxtaposition of monologues reveals the ironies of intersubjectivity, "The experience of intersubjectivity in this method is a relationship therefore not between minds, but between one mind and its conception of another."³ Such an intersubjective experience is both fictive (since it is imagined), and substantively true (in the sense that it does, in fact, occur), but nonetheless may take place only within the speaker's consciousness: the speaker uses other people as characters in his, or her, own version of experience; a version which attempts to be self-enclosed, and to validate the self.

Browning argues in The Ring and the Book, however, that the aesthetic, or artistic, use of language counteracts the fallibilities of language as it is used in ordinary discourse. As the resuscitating poet he reclaims, in all its variety and complexity, a paradigmatic human experience lost in time, and provides it with the permanent and self-sufficient aesthetic form of art: "Completes the incomplete and saves the thing" (I, 734). Rather than tell a truth, or draw a moral conclusion, Browning liberates language from the necessity to provide a conclusive viewpoint by dramatising individual speakers dramatising the world. For the crucial correlative of the fact that language, in ordinary discourse, is entrapped within the individual consciousness is that language becomes the medium by which the self attempts to provide a conclusive view of experience, attempts to weave the threads of

³ E. Warwick Slinn, Browning and the Fictions of Identity (Totawa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982), p. 112.

existence into a single pattern; Browning weaves a pattern of the weavers weaving and so erodes the conclusive viewpoint, replacing it with the variegated and ironic potentialities inherent in the way men and women live in the world by conceiving of the world in language.

Language, the process of representation, becomes the content of The Ring and the Book as it is the medium of the poem. What separates language as it is used in ordinary discourse from the artistic use of language is that the one becomes inevitably the medium for providing a conclusive representation of meaning, while the other represents the ongoing creation of meaning: thus the form of the poem is a series of differentiated repetitions, a series of beginnings recreating meaning anew, and continually extending the texture of meaning provided by the poem. Browning sums up his art thus: "Art may tell a truth/Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought" (XII, 855-6). Isobel Armstrong talks of Browning's desire to provide the experience of truth, a felt understanding rather than a notional or abstract understanding: "Do the thing shall breed the thought"⁴. Thus the notional, abstract facts in Book I become for the reader a lived experience through the monologues. But we can modify this argument even further in relation to language as content in the poem: Browning's versions of the facts in Book I are each subject also to the ironies of single viewpoint, and are disrupted by their juxtaposition against each other. Each version attempts to formulate experience whole, but provides singleness; whole experience is supplanted by the singularity of the linguistic style in which it is formulated. Thus the bare historical version of the facts (I, 780-823) supplants experience making of it simply a piece of history. The monologuists repeat this process with greater or lesser degrees of moral worth and insight, and indeed, part of the impulse of the poem is to show how well, or how badly, men and women may live within the innate fallibilities of language and consciousness. But beyond that the truth The Ring and the Book obliquely tells, and allows the reader to experience, is that meaning is temporal, ongoing, textured, and that only art may represent meaning without conclusiveness, yet, paradoxically, preserve it in a self-sufficient form.

⁴ Armstrong, p. 180.

In "Sordello" Browning explores the relationship of the poet to language, and the parallel with The Ring and the Book is instructive. At first Sordello attempts to write a conclusive poetry, a poetry which will define experience by providing a single, whole view: "till a rude/Armour was hammered out" (II, 576-7).⁵ He makes the mistake of believing meaning and the representation of meaning to be static fixed absolutes, but, as Herbert Tucker has observed, "His experiment is condemned by the temporal nature of language."⁶ The temporal processional nature of language deconstructs the "armour" of Sordello's representation:

Piece after piece that armour broke away,
 Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
 To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
 As language: thought may take perception's place
 But hardly co-exist in any case,
 Being its mere presentiment-of the whole
 By parts, the simultaneous and the sole
 By the successive and the many. Lacks
 The crowd perception? painfully it tacks
 Thought to thought, which Sordello, needing such,
 Has rent perception into: it's to clutch
 And reconstruct-his office to diffuse,
 Destroy.

(II, 588-600)

⁵ Robert Browning, "Sordello," reprint in Robert Browning's Poetry, ed. James F. Loucks (New York: W W Norton & Company, 1979), pp. 12-17.

⁶ Herbert F. Tucker Jr., Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p. 94. Tucker argues that Browning's art is disclosural - a series of revisions moving perpetually towards a potential meaning. Although he does not discuss The Ring and the Book, Tucker's idea of disclosure applies equally well to that poem. It is my argument however that the disclosural nature of The Ring and the Book stems directly from the disruptive and continually extending interplay of texts.

For Browning language is thought, an ongoing process occurring in time, and is therefore antithetical to the expression of a static, complete perception of experience. Rather, language can only approach "the sole" by a process of fragmentation -- the representation of the perpetual movement toward completeness through the incompleteness of "the successive and the many." The "office" of the poet, which Sordello cannot accept, is to be in tune with the essential nature of language: "to diffuse,/Destroy." The process of "diffusion" becomes paradoxically the means by which the poet may truthfully represent experience, and provide experience with aesthetic form. But Browning draws a distinction also between the poet's use of language, and the use of language in ordinary discourse: as opposed to the diffusive office of the poet, "the crowd" necessarily, in the functional (and fallible) business of living, "clutch and reconstruct" experience through conceptualising it: "painfully it tacks/Thought to thought."

The sense of a poetics suggested by the passage from "Sordello" -- "the whole/By parts", "the successive and the many", "diffuse" -- bears a striking correspondence with the methodology of The Ring and the Book. The activity of "the crowd" -- "clutching," "reconstructing" experience to provide meaning -- prefigures that of the monologists in The Ring and the Book, and indeed, of Browning's monologists generally.

Browning's concept of the diffusive role of the poet, and of the "destruction" of conclusive wholes as the authentic means to represent experience, explains the way he defers, in his art, to the imperfect discourse of ordinary men and women; the representation of experience in language becomes not only the means, but the content of his art. We return again to Browning's scepticism about "human speech", and to his counter-balancing awareness that language used within an artistic context escapes its own imperfections: provides a form which resists time, even as it embodies the temporal creation of meaning; escapes the definitive enclosure of the single context, by dramatising the many; provides the processional experience of truth, rather than tells a definitive truth.

In his use, through the monologue form, of imperfect "human speech" as the medium of his art Browning has obvious novelistic, as well as dramatic, elements: he in fact foregoes one of the major advantages

poetry possesses in abstracting itself from ordinary discourse -- a purified aesthetic and rhetorical language. This is what Santayana means by Browning's "barbarism", that "he had not attained, in studying the beauty of things, that detachment of the phenomenon, that love of form for its own sake, which is the secret of contemplative satisfaction."⁷ For Santayana Browning's poetry stays embroiled in the debased facts and language of "realistic" existence without constructing above that "Uproar in the echo" (I, 834) a formally pure, complete, and abstract aesthetic object. But what Santayana does not see is that Browning is concerned with language in the world, in the mouths of men and women, and that such a language, debased or flawed as it is, can when placed in an artistic context dramatise the pure poetic truth of how man functions in the world: "For how else know we save by worth of word?"

To return to the form of The Ring and the Book: the poem is a context comprised of contexts, a text made up of a disruptive play of texts which, text added to text, continually extend the texture of meaning provided by the poem. Rather than move forward through a continuous narrative, and single narrative style, the reader jumps between disruptively juxtaposed, and differentiated, styles of language. The pluralistic and disruptive presentation prevents the reader from locating the definitive meaning of the poem in any single viewpoint. To talk, as I have, about the "diffusive" and "destructive" office of the poet, disruptive texts, the way the poem fractures conclusiveness and continually extends possibility and meaning, raises the important question of where the poem culminates climatically. Where does the poem reach its point of utmost intensification? How does the poem end?

Again, we must consider the implications of the structure of the poem. In Browning's earlier dramatic monologues the relationship between a single consciousness, and the conception of self and experience was explored. The emphasis of a poem like Andrea Del Sarto is on the character of the speaker; a character revealed by the ironies of the

⁷ George Santayana, "The Poetry of Barbarism," reprint in Robert Browning's Poetry, ed. James F. Loucks (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 489.

speaker's conceptions. In the new and larger structure of The Ring and the Book the emphasis shifts: the reader is still required to evaluate and judge each speaker, but the single consciousness is complicated by its presence amidst a series of versions produced by other consciousnesses. And complicated further by the presence of the author in the poem -- who is concerned, explicitly and implicitly, with the representation of experience in language. The poem therefore becomes about the potentialities of language -- in relation to character and viewpoint, to consciousness, to art, and to the nature of language itself.

We may extend the context of the poem further still, in order to return to the core concern with language. In The Ring and the Book Browning no longer deals solely with the single consciousness, rather he represents men and women in the world, what sociologists call the social nature of reality. In one sense the world of The Ring and the Book is one of limitation and constriction: religion, the law, political power, class, social ethics, prescribed role -- all filter through in the monologues as limitations imposed on the individual from without. But as the sociologist Peter Berger argues, "each social situation is sustained by the fabric of meanings that are brought into it by the several participants." Berger goes on to talk of "the paradox of social existence: that society defines us, but is in turn defined by us."⁸ The limitations imposed by the social structure are real, but not absolute: the individual defines himself, or herself, interactively with the social structure, and so contributes to the ongoing nature of that structure. Browning invalidates the idea that society possesses an absolute prescriptive power by giving the idea to Guido: Guido seeks to abstain himself from guilt by abstaining from the responsibility (and possibility) of personally determined action, arguing instead that he merely fulfilled a role predetermined by society.

Language permeates the relationship between self and society, as it does the relationship between self and experience. Language is both the medium of the received culture which binds the monologists, and the medium by which each monologist seeks to construct an individual and

⁸ Peter L. Berger, Invitation to Sociology (1963; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966), pp. 146, 149.

self-validating context. As Roger Fowler, when discussing language and culture, puts it:

A culture is one set of people's particular organization of the chaos of physical universals. The organization is made largely (not wholly) through language, and in this sense language is culture. Whatever "reality" is, we do not think directly in terms of it, but in terms supplied by language.⁹

Similarly, the collective pool of images by which a society morally defines itself are determined, given: in The Ring and the Book, for example, there are myths of Perseus and Andromeda, and of the Fall. Yet the individual, through the conceptual means of language, may reinterpret the moral paradigm provided by a myth, may place the myth in a new and personally conceived linguistic context generated by desire and need. Thus, the potential cuckold Half-Rome argues for the authority of husbands, and makes Violante a scheming Eve (II, 253-6). The romantic Other Half-Rome idealises Pompilia, bedecking her with flower imagery, and images her as an innocent Eve lured by a satanic Guido (III, 234-6).

The world of The Ring and the Book becomes an intricate texture of language: of the given and predetermined, and of the perpetually reconceived. If consciousness provides the ability to conceive, then language provides the means; as they enable possibility, consciousness and language impose also limitations: the limitations of their inherent fallibility. For Browning the task becomes to represent the interpenetration of human limitation and human possibility, an interaction that occurs through, and is conditioned by, language. We return back then, circuitously perhaps, but back nonetheless, to the questions of climax and of ending. If we accept that The Ring and the Book is about language, then the barrier between form and content dissolves. In Chapter Three I will argue more closely, with reference to specific critical problems, the point I will introduce here: that the climax of a serial

⁹ Roger Fowler, "The Structure of Criticism and the Languages of Poetry: An Approach through Language," in Contemporary Criticism, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), p. 189.

structure which deliberately disrupts conclusiveness will necessarily be ongoing; that the concern of The Ring and the Book with language, and the relation of language to human limitation and possibility, means that climax will involve an intensification of the problems and potentialities associated with language.

To locate the emphasis of the poem in character, or judgement, means choosing either the Pope or Guido's second speech as the climax; either choice results in Book XII being relegated to the status of an anti-climactic appendage. Rather, the poem reaches in Book X and Book XI a plateau of intensity in relation to language. The Pope, and a Guido with his rhetorical camouflage rent and clawed, become the twin poles between which the other speakers inhabit the world through language. The Pope creates a linguistic context in which he confronts the limitations of humankind, knowledge, and language, and defines the nature, and necessity, of responsibility within those limitations. Guido's speech erupts into the intensity of pure amorality -- a verbalisation of the biological drive to exist, shorn of moral and emotional capability.

In Chapter Four I will conclude my discussion by suggesting that the plateau of intensity in relation to language, which the poem reaches in Books X and XI, continues in Book XII. In Book XII Browning fulfills most obviously the role of the "destructive" poet: he literally destroys the world he recreated in the monologues, dramatising how experience dissipates, "melts" (XII, 16) in time, and through language, to nothingness. By representing the loss of experience as a condition of the temporal nature of language, Browning objectifies a constant underlying tension in the poem: "live fact deadened down,/Talked over, bruited abroad, whispered away" (I, 834-5).

Experience is always absent, marginal, subject to deferral by language, as Derrida puts it¹⁰. The poet's own versions in Book I and, more particularly, the monologues, dramatise how what has occurred becomes supplanted by its conception in language. Derrida's position is

¹⁰ Jonathon Culler, Structuralist Poetics (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975). In Chapter 7 Culler provides a useful introduction to Derrida's theories.

essentially a reformulation of certain basic precepts of traditional literary criticism. Introductory University courses on the phenomenology of language generally begin with the first principle that there is a gap between symbol and referent; as Derrida would say -- the symbol defers to the referent. But to say, as I have, that experience is ongoing, textured, perpetually deferred raises a problem in regard to the loss of experience: for if experience is temporal and ongoing, how can it be lost?

The form of The Ring and the Book again provides the answer: a form which both embodies the temporal nature of language in relation to experience, and which, the poet asserts, provides an aesthetic shape which resists temporality. The position the poem adopts in relation to experience, and indeed to truth, is not absolute: the reader is never presented with the actuality of the story of Guido and Pompilia, or with the truth of that story, rather the reader approaches the actuality through a texture of versions, of deferrals. The poet's versions in Book I, despite the internal ironies and dispositive effects of those versions, establish broad moral sympathies which are not contradicted by the rest of the poem: that Pompilia is a victim, Guido a victimiser, and the Pope right to choose, and right in his choice. Similarly, the experience which the poem dramatises and preserves is of individual viewpoints cohering around an absent event: the fatal wounding of Pompilia by Guido. Browning thus dramatises the temporal activity of language in action -- the reformulation of experience by the monologuists -- and enables the reader to discern (though not absolutely) through the texture of reformulations the nature and character of previous experience.

For Browning the experience which is "lost" is the experience he resuscitates: the coherence of individual viewpoints defining themselves, the parameters of their world, and unconsciously -- a paradigmatic representation of human experience. Thus, what might be termed a negative intensity is maintained in Book XII in relation to Browning's thematic exploration of human experience as it is conditioned by and formulated through language: a loss located in the essential deferral of experience by language, but extended out to the extreme of historical process.

I will complete the discussion of Book XII, and of the poem, by suggesting that The Ring and the Book ends not with loss, or for that matter, with limitation, fallibility or the reformulation of experience, but with the tension of these elements balanced against the potentiality of language embodied in artistic discourse: a linguistic discourse which "may tell a truth/Obliquely" (XII, 859-600).

I have titled the first chapter of my discussion "Prelude" and it functions somewhat like the first paragraph of The Ring and the Book, being, as it is, more than an introduction, a completed ring of sorts, but at the threshold still. The purpose of the chapter has been to lay a wide base for the later chapters in regard to the poem's overriding concern with language as medium, and as content. The distinction I have drawn between language as it is used in ordinary discourse, and language as it is used in artistic discourse, is primarily functional rather than ideological. It may perfectly well be argued that such an opposition is no longer necessary -- that all language is language. Though this does not seem to me what Browning, at least, intends.

The following chapters are intended to support with close textual analysis the issues approached from a wider perspective in Chapter One.