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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."<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup>Isobel 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).<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> 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"<sup>4</sup>. 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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)

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

<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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

<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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

<sup>9</sup> 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 it<sup>10</sup>. 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

<sup>10</sup> 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.

## CHAPTER TWO: BOOK I -- A PLAY OF TEXTS.

Critical response has tended either to minimise the importance of Book I in The Ring and the Book, or to attack the chapter as unnecessary and misplaced. Richard Altick and James Loucks typify a common approach when they assert, "Book I . . . is wholly introductory, and in the main, needs little discussion."<sup>1</sup> Robert Langbaum goes further, suggesting that Book I, along with Book XII, upsets the relativistic portrayal of truth which Langbaum perceives to be the "peculiar genius" of the poem.<sup>2</sup>

It is the purpose of the following discussion to demonstrate not only how Book I is more than merely an introduction to the monologues, but to show also how Book I may be stylistically integrated with the monologues, and further, how this stylistic aspect relates to and enacts the theme of language.

The primary fact we must observe is that Book I is not a single narrative encased in a unified literary style, but is rather a succession of styles differentiated by tone, viewpoint, concern, and by the particular mode of discourse used to embody these elements. Mary Rose Sullivan and Donald Hair are among the few critics to have given detailed explication of the stylistic variation in Book I. Sullivan argues that the trial summary (I, 132-457), the poet's imaginative recreation of the events (I, 458-678), and the dramatic introduction to the cast of characters (I, 838-1329) represent Browning's dramatisation of the poetic process: the poet finds his raw material, imaginatively fuses himself with it, and finally withdraws his own personality as a prelude to presenting the self-sufficient work of art -- the "ring" of the monologues.<sup>3</sup> Hair focuses on generic distinctions, beginning with

<sup>1</sup> Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1957), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Rose Sullivan, Browning's Voices in The Ring and the Book (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), Chapter One.

the imaginative recreation, which he designates as a lyric form (the application of the poet's own moral and artistic insight); there follows the historical summary of the facts (I, 780-823) which Hair regards as an example of narrative (the facts presented simply as facts); and finally the introduction to the characters which Hair generically terms drama (each character interprets the story according to his or her own approach to life).<sup>4</sup> Hair goes on to suggest that these three generic categories -- lyric, narrative and drama -- once defined by the poet in Book I, are combined in the monologues.

Neither Sullivan nor Hair recognises, however, the disruptive effect of one stylistically differentiated text upon another, or indeed, the assumptions implicit in any given text: that a text supplants experience by reformulating it as language, thereby attempting to provide a conclusive representation of experience. The following analysis of Book I will contend that the succession of linguistic styles which Browning employs, introduces the reader to the literary procedure of The Ring and the Book: a procedure which we may term "the disruptive juxtaposition of texts, and the ongoing extension of context." The later monologues are plainly a series of conflicting texts reformulating a common subject; each text seeks to provide a conclusive representation, and each is disrupted and qualified by the presence of other texts. The disruptive process reveals the nature of each particular text, and of the qualities (or not) of the consciousness which produces the text. Conclusiveness is therefore eroded by the action of one text upon another, and what becomes important is the nature of language itself. Each new text in the series extends the context of The Ring and the Book, adds a new pattern to the texture of the poem: what the texture represents is the ongoing activity of representation: the potentialities, fallibilities, and paradoxical essence of language within which each text may be judged. Language, as the medium of conception, is paradoxical because it is not absolute, being as it is a fictive linguistic approximation of phenomenological experience, and yet is necessarily the means by which men and women seek to conclusively represent the world. It seems logical that we should approach the various linguistic styles Browning

<sup>4</sup> Donald S. Hair, Browning's Experiments with Genre (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), pp. 124-127.

employs in Book I, in the same way we approach the later monologues: as a conflicting series of representations.

## I. BEGINNINGS

Book I introduces the reader to the events and characters contained in the story of Guido and Pompilia, but if this were all Browning intended to do then he may well have made Book I a good deal shorter and clearer than he does. If, as I have suggested, we should treat the various stylistically differentiated sections of Book I in the same way we treat the monologues, then it becomes necessary to ask what effects the imposition of a moral framework, the points of dramatic emphasis, and the choice of style have on the raw material of the story. And to ask further, what effect repeated representations of the same events have upon each other.

Both Sullivan and Hair recognise that Browning tells stylistically different versions of the story in Book I, and plainly, these versions are texts which seek to provide a linguistic context for particular events -- to provide a representation. Neither critic realises, however, that stylistic differentiation and juxtaposition is the constantly applied strategy of Book I, and that the strategy undermines from the first, conventional notions of narrative development; because Book I is largely comprised of repeated versions, it becomes not a beginning, but a series of beginnings.

Let us consider, firstly, the opening two paragraphs of Book I: the first introduces the ring figure; the second -- the book. There is a superficial continuity between the paragraphs: each opens with a question: "Do you see this Ring?" (I, 1); "Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss" (I, 33). A sense of immediacy is established, that the poet is dramatised as a speaker addressing an auditor, or auditors. He responds to implied comment, "What of it?" (I, 31), and he makes conversational asides, "Great in the scenic backgrounds-(name and fame/None of you know, nor does he fare the worse:)" (I, 70-1). Beneath the apparent similarity, however, each paragraph is distinctly different in tone, and in style, so much so that it is more appropriate to regard them as juxtaposed texts, rather than a single stylistic progression.

The first text (I, 1-31) is highly metaphoric, "Virgin as oval tawny pendent tear/At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow" (I, 12-13), striking a lush tone of aesthetic appreciation for the ring and, the process by which the ring is made.

Despite the lyric tone, "Oh, there's re-creation!" (I, 23), and the form of direct address, the verse still maintains a type of impersonal abstraction: the presence of the poet remains largely implied, the text focussed on its subject, the ring. A serious note, also, inflects the lyric voice, signifying the poet's concern to not only describe beauty, but to clearly communicate the process of ring-making:

That trick is, the artificer melts up wax  
With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold  
With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,  
Effects a manageable mass

(I, 18-21)

Rather than directly introducing the reader to the events of the story, the poet momentarily holds the reader back, asking him, or her, to consider a beautiful ring. The text, in fact, functions as a lyrical prelude to Book I: it is a lyric poem about a ring. The first line confronts the reader with the object, "Do you see this Ring?", but the poet's chief concern through the rest of the text is with the process of making embodied in the object: the fashioning of gold and alloy into a shape which is "self-sufficient now" (I, 26).

In its form, subject and metaphoric style, this first text is segregated from what immediately follows in the poem: the text becomes a self-contained poem about the giving of form to raw materials. The implicit sense that the poet, too, is an "artificer" (I, 18), a "craftsman" (I, 8) making a ring, will be made explicit through the rest of Book I, but the crucial idea is here introduced: "prime nature" (raw fact), with an added artistry (the poetic imagination), will be made into the "ring" (the self-sufficient form of art).

The effect of the text, holding the reader back to consider the abstract process of giving form to raw material, is to signal the

concern of The Ring and the Book with itself -- as art. Browning points to this in the concluding lines of the text:

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, 29-33)

The "thing signified" is the form of The Ring and the Book: how and why it was made, and what it brings forth to us, the readers; yet the giving of artificial, or representational, form to raw fact is also the subject of the poem.

The focus on the provision of form, will become as the poem progresses, a problem of language: for it is Browning's method to dramatise a series of speakers reformulating experience in a way both related to, and directly opposed to the poet's. The correspondence between the activity of the poet, and that of the later monologuists, lies in the fact that both use language to interpret experience, to provide experience with form. What most immediately separates the poet from the monologuists, is that he uses an aesthetic language to provide permanence; but the essence of the separation lies deeper: it is the lesson from which Sordello recoiled: the poet is in tune with the temporal, "diffusive" nature of language and therefore does not seek conclusiveness. The poet does not present his own conclusive view of the story of Guido and Pompilia, rather he defers to the reconstructions of "the crowd", fragments experience into the texts manufactured by the many, and so escapes the limitations of the single consciousness.

If the first text of The Ring and the Book signifies the constant preoccupation of the poem with itself, and with the provision of form, then it also points the reader to the complex mode of attention the poem requires. To consider the "ring", and the making of the ring, suggests the necessity for the reader to participate in the poem, and yet to be aware of the way in which the poem enacts itself. The reader is not invited to surrender to the poem, but is required to at once be involved in the fiction, and to recognise the use the poet makes of language, and of how this is related to, yet distinct from, the use the later mono-

loguists make of language. Thus the abstract, static quality of the first text, holding the reader back from narrative involvement.

The second paragraph of Book I (I, 33-83) changes to a new style, tone, and subject and is in effect a new text juxtaposed against the first. From the lyrical metaphoric language of the first text, the poet makes a jarring switch to a prosaic, robust, conversational voice. A comparison between sections from each text makes clear the contrast:

Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,  
 After a dropping April; found alive  
 Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-side figtree-roots  
 That roof old tombs at Chiusi: soft, you see,  
 Yet crisp as jewel-cutting.

(I, 4-8)

Examine it yourselves! I found this book,  
 Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just,  
 (Mark the predestination!) when a Hand  
 Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,  
 One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm,  
 Across a square in Florence, crammed with booths,  
 Buzzing and blaze, noontide and market-time;

(I, 38-44)

As the first text held the reader back to consider an aesthetic object, at the doorstep, as it were, of a banquet to which he, or she, has been invited, the second text opens the door and plunges the reader into the factual impedimenta of a defined setting: an old market square in Florence.

The difference between the two texts is accentuated by the humorous tone which colours the poet's speech as he describes the market-place: "Master, the imaginative Sienese/Great in the scenic backgrounds-name and fame/None of you know, nor does he fare the worse" (I, 69-71). He can even portray himself with a melodramatic flourish: "(Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,/Always above my shoulder, pushed me once" (I, 40-1). The tone of the first text was serious, considered, and signaled

the importance the poet attached to the ring symbol: a symbol which represented the perfected form of the art he will create.

In the second text, the poet enters the poem as a dramatised speaker. The humour, conversational tone, and direct first person references, "I toss", "I found", "I picked", signify that the speaker's personality now functions as a dramatic presence.

The poet refers to himself only once in the first text, and then only in a secondary sense: "(Craftsmen instruct me), (I, 9). His concern is initially with the abstract and impersonal consideration of a self-sufficient aesthetic object, and the process by which it is made, and the poet therefore effaces his own personality.

In the second text, the poet moves to initiate the creation of his own ring, the first step of which, mirrored in the chaotic flux of the market-place and rough style of verse, is active, involved, un-formed: the discovery of the crude ore of fact with which he will mix his own imagination.

It is important to realise, however, that the speaker is not the poet, but is rather a feigned persona, a dramatised monologist who we must regard in the same manner we regard the later monologists. Wallis David Shaw argues that "Book I opens with a narrator who is dramatised in his own right as a simple-mind nominalist. Incapable of rational selection, he can describe only the surface objects and values of the Old Yellow Book."<sup>5</sup>

The touches of comic melodrama, "(mark the predestination!)", undermine the speaker, and, as Shaw suggests, his uncritical listing of facts and objects in the second paragraph, and in the later trial commentary, lacks insight and formal control. Shaw is quite wrong, though, in his assertion that Book I begins in this manner: his observations cannot be applied to the first text which, different in style and subject, highly focused, and comparatively free of a dramatised narrator, is the first beginning of The Ring and the Book.

<sup>5</sup> Wallis David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1968), p. 240.

The first two paragraphs, or texts, of Book I do not therefore constitute a smooth stylistic progression: they are two clearly differentiated texts juxtaposed against each other in the same manner which will govern the rest of the poem. The effect of such a juxtaposition, the sudden movement from one text to another, is both disruptive and extends the wider context of poem in a way which gives the accretion of linguistic texture (text added to text) precedence over narrative progression.

The disruptive effect results primarily from the way in which the reader must switch from one text (and style of language, viewpoint, tone, and subject) to another, rather than surrender to the fiction -- to confidently and uncritically progress through the unfolding of a single narrative. It is, of course, rather early in the poem to talk too stridently of "the effect on the reader", but I believe we can observe even in these first two, and relatively minor, texts the fundamental aspects of Browning's method.

What becomes important is the necessity for the reader to evaluate texts against each other, as well as continuing to read on. The evaluation of texts required, or enforced, by such a method becomes an evaluation of language: each text being conditioned by its own linguistic style. The constant shifting between styles of language will, in the course of the poem, foreground the way in which language functions: how language is irrevocably involved in the way men and women conceive of the world to themselves, and tell of it to others.

The more impersonal tone, the self-contained form and focused subject of the first text, signify that the poet presents the ring symbol in an unproblematic way. These elements, in conjunction with the considered metaphoric style free of the undermining ironies of the speaker's personality, suggest that the poet regards the ring figure as important, as well as unproblematic. In a sense the lyrical quality of the ring section, the way it simply presents an abstract symbol, sets it against the constant subjective involvement and personal construction of versions which inform most of the poem.

The second text introduces the reader to the highly problematic concerns of The Ring and the Book: the relation of language to fact, truth, and experience. The poet's impersonation of a rumbustuous Victorian empiricist seeking truth in fact, and the linguistic style which this persona is embodied in, clashes with the first text; is, in effect, disrupted by it.

If the first two texts are different stylistically, then it becomes obvious also that Robert Browning, the implied author, will act out in Book I different dramatised personas. In the first text Browning acts the impersonal, contemplative poet; in the second, Shaw's Victorian nominalist. The question of linguistic style is inseparable from viewpoint: a particular viewpoint produces a particular style, a linguistic deferral of experience, and the style itself becomes experience.

We can see also how the method of juxtaposed texts extends the context (the content and parameters) of the poem despite minimal narrative progression. The Ring and the Book begins in the first paragraph with its own ending: the ring symbol which represents the self-sufficient form of aesthetic completion. The context of the poem is therefore extended from the first to include the completion of the poem, and to include the form and aesthetic process of the poem as subject.

Against completion, the second text places the literal beginning of the poem: the poet-speaker's discovery of the Old Yellow Book amidst the broken wares of the market-place. Completeness -- the "self-sufficient" ring, is placed against incompleteness -- the lost book with its "crumpled vellum covers" (I, 35): ending against beginning.

But the second text extends the context of the poem beyond simply beginning: the poet-speaker includes within his literary fiction how, and where, he found the raw materials for that fiction: "I found this book,/Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just" (I, 38-9). The poem is thus extended into the milieu of Browning's Victorian readers, unsettling the relation between fact and fiction. Rather than being a self-enclosed historical drama providing the illusion of reality, The Ring and the Book insists from the first that it is a fiction written by Robert Browning.

One is reminded of the Eighteenth Century novelists -- Swift in Gulliver's Travels for example -- who preface their works with realistic factual information on the origins of the story. Their method is similar to Browning's here, though in purpose exactly opposed. Such novelists use the device to increase the illusion of reality, that the story is real; the fiction attempts to present itself as fact. Browning, however, freely admits to being a Victorian poet who has found an old book, and who will make a fiction from the contents of that book; the fiction acknowledges itself to be a fiction.

Such a device risks undermining the reader's involvement in the later monologues. The reader cannot enjoy the illusion that what he, or she, reads is "real" -- unauthored. Nor is it only the bad reader, who wishes to mistake art for life, who may be affected by this. The distaste for the authorial presence breaking the fictional surface of the monologues, lies at the root of criticisms voiced by even such a sophisticated critic as Robert Langbaum.<sup>6</sup>

But Browning extends the context of the poem in this way because the subject of the poem is not exclusively the monologues, but is also the poem itself. Browning fractures the illusion of realism in order to redefine how his art may be real: through Book I, and through Book XII, he explains and dramatises how his fiction is based in fact, and represents the giving of form, and therefore significance, to experience lost in time. By acknowledging the fiction, he ironically seeks to prove that his art is neither the escape from experience (into fancy) nor the illusion of actual experience, but is experience re-created, the self-acknowledged, and fictive, semblance of experience by which form and significance may be provided.

From a thematic perspective, the two texts are again disruptively juxtaposed against each other: if the first text introduces the theme of the aesthetic process completed and perfected, the second introduces opposed themes of time and loss, "'Mongest odds and ends of ravage," (I, 53). One text adds new elements to another, each disrupts the other. The first text, for example, may symbolise completion but that completion is not conclusive: what is inconclusive is revealed by the presence of

<sup>6</sup> Langbaum, Poetry of Ex. p. 135.

the second text. Herbert Tucker, though not talking of The Ring and the Book, points us toward where the disruptive effect lies: "The imperative of expectation demands that the present always be found wanting. If there is to be something to look forward to -- and for Browning there must be at all costs -- then there must be something missing now."<sup>7</sup> What is missing from the first text is the living, turbulent life, and temporal ongoing creation of meaning which the poem will dramatise, and which is first introduced against the static abstract symbolism of the first text, by the poet-speaker enthusiastically discovering his raw materials.

Although it is about completion, and provides the overriding symbol for the poem, the first text is incomplete: a form without content. Its lyrical poetry must be infused with vigorous and complex experience, the symbol made actuality: "A thing's sign: now for the thing signified" (I, 32).

The disruption, in each text, of conclusiveness, of finality, by whatever internal ironies it contains, and by the action of one text upon another, impels a progression in the poem. The progression is not of a narrative type so much as the expectation conjured by the incompleteness of a particular text, an incompleteness revealed by the action of other texts upon it. What we can see dramatised in miniature in the first two texts of Book I, and what the analysis of those texts has attempted to demonstrate, is that the juxtaposition of incomplete texts acts in a cumulative way: impelling an extension of the wider context of the poem, and a deepening of the texture of the poem, through one insufficiency added to another.

## II. THE FIRST VERSION

The analysis of the first two texts of Book I demonstrated how each text was stylistically differentiated, one juxtaposed against the other in a disruptive way. The disruptive process operates on a larger scale between the texts which constitute the three narrative versions of Book I and the poet's introduction to the monologuists.

<sup>7</sup> Tucker, Browning's Beginnings. p. 5

It was a relatively straightforward process to designate the first two paragraphs of Book I as texts, and indeed, the intention was to focus on a small scale example of texts in order to explore the various elements inherent in disruptive textual juxtaposition. The process is, at certain times, more extreme or obvious than at others. A text does not exclusively correspond, for example, to a single paragraph, though often it may well do so. To talk of a text in The Ring and the Book is to talk of a body of language set in a particular style and told from a particular viewpoint, which is at variance with the styles of discourse surrounding it. The poet's commentary on the trial records is a rambling exposition running through several paragraphs, but which nonetheless constitutes a stylistic entity -- a text.

The trial text is the first of the series of narrative versions contained in The Ring and the Book. It is cast in the form of a summary: a form which implicitly assumes an objective point of view, and an unproblematic status: the purpose of any summary is to present an overview of important information, as, in fact, the trial text does, and the underlying assumption is, therefore, that the subject of the summary (or the key elements of the subject) has been effectively explained. Thus, the poet-speaker's assertion: "So, in this book lay absolute truth,/Fanciless fact, the documents indeed" (I, 143-4). Yet although a summary purports to represent "truth" through "fanciless fact", it is still itself language: a linguistic context provided for events, and only one of many possible contexts.

Throughout the trial summary (I, 132-363) the poet-speaker continues to adopt the persona introduced in the second paragraph of Book I: his manner is loquacious, conversational, and he "values the Old yellow Book, the source of the story he will relate, merely for its 'gold' of fact."<sup>8</sup>

Such a mode of address places the speaker on a familiar level with his Victorian audience, inviting them to consider his position as their own. The speaker's apparent interest and belief in "fact" corresponds to the empiricist tone of the age. The speaker repeatedly insists that he quotes from a written historical document, "Here in the book and

<sup>8</sup> Shaw, Dialectical Temper. p. 240.

nowise out of it" (I, 154), thereby reinforcing the illusion of absolute objective evidence, and of the objectivity of the speaker himself as he summarises that evidence. In The Ring and the Book, however, there is no evidence without interpretation, and no objectivity outside of interpretation.

In a sense, the trial text lures the reader with illusion of its complete and explanatory view: that the completeness is illusory, and that Browning lures the unwary reader who is too ready to attribute truth to documented fact, is revealed both by the action of other texts upon the summary, and by the internal ironies of the summary form.

As the trial text introduces the reader to the events of the story, it introduces the reader also to the way in which fact is transmuted into a text by the act of conception, and the consequent necessity to understand the relationship between the nature of a given text and the form (and meaning) it attempts to provide for experience.

Let us consider, firstly, how the trial text is subject to the internal ironies of its own presentation. The speaker's constant assertions that he quotes from written fact reinforce, as I have said, both his own apparent objectivity, and the illusion of objective evidence. His linking of "truth" to "fanciless fact" reinforces the assumptions of the summary form: that it concisely and unproblematically presents the key facts by which truth may be known. But the speaker functions ironically: rather than simply presenting the facts of the case, he adopts the position of a partial spectator, freely passing judgement and dominating the summary with his own personality. He makes a pun on the rhetorical "noise" of Bottini's written plea: "no noisy work at all," (I, 175). Archangelis is broadly parodied: "An outbreak as of wonder at the world,/A fury-fit of outraged innocence" (I, 181-2). The reaction of the Roman public to the trial is painted with disparaging humour:

That was a firebrand at each fox's tail  
 Unleashed in a cornfield: soon spread flare enough,  
 As hurtled thither and there heaped themselves  
 From earth's four corners, all authority  
 And precedent for putting wives to death,  
 Or letting wives live, sinful as they seem.

(I, 215-20)

The immediate effect of the speaker's parodic commentary is to undermine the legal process as a mechanism for discerning truth (in that objective truth is what a trial claims to establish), a point the speaker makes directly, asserting "Thus wrangled, brangled, jangled they a month" (I, 241). In this immediate sense, the speaker discredits the relation between trial (a public symbol of objectified closure) and truth. Truth is therefore disclosed: made open to the possibilities of ongoing reformulation enacted by the poem.

Yet the speaker in turn completes his own summary. The longwinded convolutions of the trial are brought to a close by the judgement of the Pope: that Guido is guilty. That the speaker is in sympathy with this judgement is made plain by his description of the Pope: "Innocent by name/And by nature too" (I, 300-1), "this great good old Pope" (I, 326). The summary has presented the facts: murder, legal wrangling and hypocrisy, and ends by vindicating the final judgement of a good Pope. The story, or the first version of it, has been told.

The deeper ironical effect of the speaker's role however is to undermine the summary text itself. The speaker's sympathies, dislikes, and parodic comments subvert the objective assumptions implicit in the summary by revealing the presence of he -- who -- writes -- the text. While the text began by inviting the reader to find truth in fact it becomes increasingly revealed as a version: one particular way of formulating the story of Guido and Pompilia; the fact becomes inevitably coloured by the opinions of the speaker.

Browning intends that the careful reader will recognise that fact provides not truth but the basis for individual viewpoint. That the speaker's opinion of the trial and of the various characters is not substantively contradicted by the rest of the poem, is not the important issue. Such an argument can be made for all of the versions in Book I, yet each is insufficient: if they were not the poem could end with Book I.

It is interesting to note that Donald Hair does not include the trial summary in his generic classification of Book I. While it may be argued that the trial text is not an example of literary genre in a strict sense, it does stand as the first version of the story, and is undeniably a linguistic genre: the form of a summary. Hair recognises

the immediate effect of the summary: that it reveals the apparent facts to be in reality the opinion of the lawyers and the Roman public: "Pages of proof this way, and that way proof . . ." (I, 239).<sup>9</sup> But he does not recognise that the summary form itself becomes conditioned by the opinions of the speaker, is in effect another level of opinion transposed onto the first. Thus Hair misses the crucial point of the speaker's status as a dramatised monologist, and therefore of the function of the text: the text lures the reader with the unproblematic view of the dramatised speaker: his static opinion of the public and legal opinion which poses as fact.

The undermining irony, which reveals the summary text to be a version, crystallises when the speaker pompously proclaims "But human promise, oh, how short of shine!/How topple down the piles of hope we rear!/How history proves . . . nay, read Herodotus!" (I, 295-7). The overblown rhetoric foregrounds the speaker as a parodic role assumed by the author. The speaker acts out one possible response to the documents: to draw from them a moral lesson: "How topple down the piles of hope we rear!" All that such an act achieves however is to close the events of the story in the static and self-validating conclusiveness of a moral dictum.

Browning is concerned with opening out history, this particular history, in order to make truth live and unfold itself in a temporal way. Hence the disruptive effect of the speaker's portentous injunction: "How history proves . . ." invites the conclusive lesson which will complete the statement, but the presentation is broken, "nay, read Herodotus!" The context of the summary is thus extended outside of the poem to another version of history. The result is a disruption of the summary which, by its very nature, attempts to present a closed and unproblematic view: the break in presentation allows the play of other possibilities to seep in. What history, or fact as history, proves is nothing but that history is a human conception, a version, or a play of many versions.

The insufficiency of the historical documents, and of the speaker's presentation of them, can be approached also in a retrospective way.

<sup>9</sup> Hair, Browning's Experiments with Genre. p. 119

The speaker for example supports the Pope's judgement and quotes it directly from the documents "with his own particular chirograph" (I, 346). The judgement in this form appears to be a blunt dictate delivered with little evidence of deliberation: "Cut off his head tomorrow by this time,/Hang up his four mates, two on either hand,/And end one business the more!" (I, 341-3). The judgement is curt, brutal, qualities reflected in the meter; such is the written fact summarised without embellishment by the speaker. But as the context of the rest of the poem unfolds, particularly the Pope's own monologue, which becomes a morally complex and agonising meditation, we can see how much the summary fails to embody.

The disruption of the summary from within by the poet's use of a parodic persona and the subsequent ironies resulting from the speaker's position, are compounded when the summary is juxtaposed against other texts. The second version, an imaginative dramatisation of the story, clearly opposes a new viewpoint and style of linguistic representation against the summary text. Before we consider the second version, however, we should consider the text which links the summary to the imaginative recreation.

Immediately following the trial summary a new text is initiated (I, 364-456) in which the implied author enters the poem as an active and involved presence. The text is comprised of three paragraphs which form a stylistic unity clearly different in style, viewpoint, tone and focus from the summary which precedes it, and the second version which follows it.

As we have seen the summary form manifested certain assumptions: that it unproblematically and objectively presented the historical documents, and represented a conclusive view of those documents: that there was a great deal of legal hypocrisy and public opinion rightly stilled by the correct judgement of a good Pope. We have also seen how such assumptions were undermined by the poet's use of a parodic persona as speaker. If the broad emphasis of the speaker's opinion was not undermined by Browning, the superficiality of the speaker's viewpoint, and, crucially, the form of his opinion was undermined. Browning therefore tempted, in the trial summary, the unwary reader with an unproblematic conclusiveness, even as he undermined the summary from within.

In the text which immediately follows the trial summary the persona of the enthusiastic empiricist is supplanted by the voice of the implied author, who addresses the reader with a series of questions. The questions fragment the whole view of the summary by introducing new possibilities, possibilities excluded or denied by the summary, or more correctly, outside the scope of, the linguistic form of a summary, and beyond the perspective of the dramatised speaker.

The immediate consequence of the authorial voice entering the poem at this point, is to cause a shift from the retrospective mode of the trial text, to a present tense address to the reader. The author begins to dismantle the assumptions parodically set up in the previous text, posing against the assured posture and certain facts of the trial summary a rapid fire succession of disruptive questions: "What has hitherto come of it?" (I, 367), "Was this truth of force?" (I, 372), "Who were he and she,/Husband and wife, what manner of mankind," (I, 379-80). In one sense, the uncritical reader is thus made critically aware of reading, and is forcibly implicated in the problems, of giving linguistic form to experience, which the poem raises.

The first problem the text raises is the insufficiency of the historical documents; Browning likens the documents to Ademollo's prints (I, 369-72), like the book, historical artifacts lost in a cheap bazaar, lost that is, in time. "What this truth of force?/Able to take its own part as truth should,/Sufficient, self-sustaining-" (I, 372-4) the poet asks. Plainly not, as he makes clear by offering to throw the book into the fireplace ". . . and what the loss?" (I, 376). If the book is destroyed, so too is the crude "factual" life it contains; experience, for it is experience the book represents, is not "self-sustaining", it lacks an aesthetic shape to resist time. Against the static completeness the summary attempted to enact, Browning introduces the disruptive element of time: thus the closed version based on the historical documents, which the speaker attempted to provide in the summary text, is rendered inconclusive by being placed in the context of temporal process.

If "crude fact" is insufficient because it is subject to the dissipatory influence of time, it is insufficient also as a means of apprehending "truth of force": fact breeds opinion and is subject to

viewpoint (and all the aspects of consciousness viewpoint manifests) -- both in how facts are presented, and how they are perceived. Browning makes the insufficiency clear when he directly undermines the summary, ironically playing with the disposition of those readers who would find truth in fact, truth in the single perspective of the documents or their summary: "You know the tale already: I may ask/Rather than think to tell you, more there of" (I, 377-8).

Again, the assertive resume of fact provided by the summary is disrupted by its juxtaposition against questions; the answer becomes a question. Browning thus introduces new actors into the story, who bring with them new possibility:

Ask you not merely who were he and she,  
 Husband and wife, what manner of mankind,  
 But how you hold concerning this and that  
 Other yet-unnamed actor in the piece.  
 The young frank handsome courtly Canon, now,  
 The priest, declared lover of the wife,  
 He who, no question, did elope with her,  
 For certain bring the tragedy about,  
 Guiseppe Caponsacchi;-his strange course  
 I' the matter, was it right or wrong or both?

(I, 380-88)

"Right or wrong or both?": the question sounds a new note in Book I, prompting in a direct way what the parodic presentation of the summary had hinted at: the necessity for a complex and many-sided understanding of the story.

Thus Browning actively reveals the trial summary to be a lure holding out an illusory truth in fact, and the speaker to be a dramatised and parodic persona. The present tense imperative of the poet's questions involves the reader in the first complexities of the story's interpretation: certainty is offered by the trial text, and then doubt revealed.

The sense of The Ring and the Book as a poem about itself resurfaces here, connecting back to the beginning of Book I. The poet

presents one possible means of telling his story, and then deliberately erodes it in order to open the way for an ongoing recreation. The art questions and recreates its own status in relation to the form it provides for experience.

Browning breaks the presentation of the poem further when he again extends the context into the Victorian milieu, directly naming his readership and slyly noting his unpopularity: "Well, British Public, ye who like me not,/(God love you!)" (I, 410). Mary Rose Sullivan reads Book I as a single monologue in which the poet talks to a group of auditors, and consequently contends that the address to the "British Public" characterises those auditors: "His present audience is a representative segment of the contemporary reading public."<sup>9</sup>

Such a view risks limiting the effect of the poem, and ignores also the effect of the text on the Victorian reader reading. The statement is generalised enough to allow the individual reader to escape its ironic censure, but nonetheless disrupts the fictional surface of the poem. Sullivan is looking for a continuity of address, a way of unifying the disparate styles of Book I, and to view Book I as a single monologue is a legitimate means of achieving such a continuity. But the primary impulse behind Sullivan's view is to establish the presentation of Book I as realistic. To view Book I as wholly realistic, however, effaces the deliberate discontinuities of Browning's method: the disruptive intrusions of the poet, and the effects of juxtaposed and stylistically differentiated texts.

Beyond the literal realism of a poet describing how he discovered certain raw materials and made of them a poem, Book I reflexively discusses itself as fiction, the poet assuming not one but several distinct personas in order to dramatise the relationship between language and experience. When the poet begins the second version of the story, his own imaginative re-creation of the events, a new dramatised persona and style of language are utilised, and a new text seeks to establish its own conclusiveness.

<sup>9</sup> Sullivan, Browning's Voices. p. 5.

## III: THE SECOND VERSION

The second version of the story (I, 457-678) grows out of the insufficiency of the trial text: the dead and formless fact of the summary, "that inert stuff" (I, 469), must be reclaimed by the poet from time, resuscitated into a living drama. Thus the persona of the speaker alters from unthinking commentator to subjective storyteller.

The beginning of the imaginative re-creation demonstrates the fluidity of voice Browning employs in Book I: for the first nineteen lines the voice of the implied author remains intact, as Browning returns to an abstract discussion of the poetic process, comparing the poet's task to that of a ring-maker: "Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,/Made it bear hammer and be firm to file" (I, 462-3). He stands outside this process, and outside the facts of the old book, maintaining a clarity of intent. Diction, tone, and imagery are forceful and straightforward, the verse primarily concerned with clearly transmitting the poet's analogy: "From the book, yes; hence bit by bit I dug/The lingot truth that memorable day,/Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold" (I, 450-60). Following on from this, however, the rest of the second version begins to enact the fusing of the poet's "live soul" (I, 469) with "that inert stuff" contained in the old book. The subsequent movement of the text is from abstract discussion to subjective involvement: the abstract idea becomes dramatised actuality.

A change of focus, voice and style of language occurs at line 476; the assertive, controlled authorial voice sliding into the dramatised persona of a subjective and emotive storyteller: "And from the reading, and that slab I leant/My elbow on, the while I read and read,/I turned to free myself and find the world" (I, 476-8). In turning from the book, the poet turns from the restraint of crude fact, freeing his imagination to re-create the story "live" and in "the world." In the same way he turns from abstract discussion to dramatisation -- of fact, and of himself.

As the poet observes the Florentine scene beneath his balcony a lyrical, evocative style enters the verse: "When flame fell silently from cloud to cloud,/Richer than that gold snow Jove rained on Rhodes" (I, 489-90). The line stress, which had been firm and deliberate to

convey the abstract argument, becomes freer to indicate the movement into poetic imagination: "Whence came the clear voice of the cloistered ones/Chanting a chant made for midsummer nights" (I, 484-5). The direct imagery of the opening becomes transmuted into a lush descriptiveness: "One branch of tall datura, waxed and waned/The lamp-fly lured there, wanting the white flower" (I, 495-6).

From the perspective of lyrical observation, the textual focus alters once more when the poet says "By the river, till I felt the Appenine" (I, 500). The crucial word is "felt": the poet has made the leap from observing the world, to imagining a world, and any remaining connection between the implied author and the speaker's voice dissipates, as the poet begins to dramatise a fictive persona of himself re-creating the story.

As the focus of the verse shifts from observing a physical setting to depicting an imagined setting, and the voice of the dramatised speaker establishes itself, the imaginative energy intensifies; poetic evocation gives way to a Gothic portentousness:

And there would lie Arezzo, the man's town,  
The woman's trap and cage and torture-place,  
Also the stage where the priest played his part,  
A spectacle for the angels,-ay, indeed,  
There lay Arezzo! (I,

The melodramatic phrasing, the doom-laden exclamation mark, suggest a built-in irony which disrupts this new version of the story even as it unfolds.

The second version thus seeks to establish itself as a text which provides a context of imaginative resuscitation for crude fact; the shift in tone and style at the beginning of the text indicates the movement from abstraction, to observation, to imaginative re-creation. But, as I have suggested, as the re-creation begins to fully enact itself a linguistic irony begins to complicate the text.

As the speaker begins to provide a subjective form for the events of the story the rush of nightmarish imagery, "hill-foot bleak" (I,

509), "Bloody splendour" (I, 511), "Cursewise" (I, 512), suggests that he falls to utilising an artificial and received literary form -- a type of Gothic Romance. The rhythm of the verse becomes a furious gallop across an imaginary landscape: "Farther then I fared,/Feeling my way on through the hot and dense" (I, 505-6).

In his first imaginative flight the speaker simply races over the three settings in which the drama will take place, characterising each by a highly emotive description: Arezzo, "The woman's . . . torture-place" (I, 502), Castelnuovo, "That squalid inn" (I, 513), and the final setting "Rome itself, the ghastly goal" (I, 518). But as Rome is also the starting point for the drama, the speaker has described a circle: "this round from Rome to Rome" (I, 526). He thus describes the outline of a ring, a first design as a prelude to the shaping process. As the speaker's imagination becomes progressively caught up in the story, he returns to add substance to the outline, re-creating the events which took place within the ring: "The life in me abolished the death in things" (I, 520).

At this point (I, 520) the presentation is disrupted as the voice of the implied author reasserts itself, reminding the reader that it was another, or earlier, Robert Browning, an earlier self re-created here, who first re-created the story as he stood on a Florentine terrace: "I saw with my own eyes/In Florence as I trod the terrace" (I, 523-4). The intrusion momentarily disrupts the flow of the text, preventing the reader from wholly surrendering to the Gothic recreation, from sinking into the tale in a passive way. Such an interruption in the narrative flow throws into relief the status of the re-creation as a version: Browning, or a dramatised re-creation of an earlier Robert Browning, gives life here to dead things, but an awareness must be maintained in regard to the nature of the life he gives.

In the middle of one long sentence the textual focus again shifts (I, 527), the implied author again moves into the background as the re-creation begins anew, fleshing out the described outline of the ring with relived events.

Before we follow the text on its second round from "Rome to Rome" we should consider the implications of the second version thus far. The

version seeks to establish its own particular context (for the events of the story) within Book I: of resuscitation. But rather than presenting a stylistic unity the version proceeds through a succession of textual "shifts" which foreground the language by which the text enacts itself. Within the terms of the argument previously outlined in this chapter, the second version broadly functions as a single text in terms of the single context it seeks to provide, but stylistically is differentiated within itself. Mary Rose Sullivan is perhaps the only critic to follow the movement of the second version in a detailed sense, and she rightly observes that the text is ". . . an imaginative recreation of the events leading up to the trial", but when she goes on to assert that Browning is "the horrified onlooker to a crime which has left him profoundly affected and determined to communicate the intensity of his reaction to the audience", Sullivan misses an important part of Browning's purpose.<sup>10</sup> In a work of art in which characters constantly utilise received forms of expression, myths, and moral structures, to interpret the world according to their own desire, all expression, all linguistic representation, takes on a problematic status. As Browning is here presenting another version of the story, it seems appropriate to once again approach the version in the same way we approach the versions of the monologues: to look for the ways in which the imposition of a moral framework, the points of dramatic emphasis, and the choice of language ironically subvert the closure any version seeks to impose on existence.

As the speaker begins again to circle the ring of events, he slips easily into a new style of representation -- the rhetoric of Romance. The Comparini are characterised as flawed souls, "Two poor ignoble hearts" (I, 529), who nevertheless recognise the spiritual purity of Pompilia, and attempt to protect this purity by raising the girl to "What possible sphere of purer life than theirs/Should come in aid of whiteness hard to save" (I, 536-7). The Romance form provides a moral frame for the characters: Pompilia is thus the "pure" innocent and the Comparini flawed, yet goodhearted souls, who try only to raise their daughter above "The world's mud" (I, 533).

The narrative sets up an effect of pathos in relation to the unsuspected evil of Guido, but to do this is simplifies the story,

<sup>10</sup> Sullivan, Browning's Voices. pp. 14, 8.

making the characters emblematic rather than human in any complex way, and therefore excludes all information that does not fit into the Romance form: Violante's double guilt, the economic and social considerations which lurk in the marriage pact, and the furious argument which erupts between Pietro and Violante over the secret marriage.

We require, of course, a retrospective knowledge of the entire poem to recognise what the speaker here leaves out of his re-creation, but a disruptive effect takes place also in terms of the stylistic presentation of the text; a disruptive influence which reveals the parodic intent of the implied author. The parodic element had suggested itself initially in the speaker's earlier doomy and Gothic tone, and resurfaces here, firstly, in the idealised language, "And lift it to whatever star should stoop" (I, 535), and is then reinforced by the way the speaker falls completely into the archaic diction of the Romance style: "As Guido Franceschini took away/Pompilia to be his for evermore,/While they sang 'Now let us depart in peace,/Having beheld thy glory, Guido's wife!'" (I, 540-43).

Allied to the parodic effect, is the dislocation caused by the shifting stylistic focus. The second version begins to formulate itself not simply as a coherent parody of a single form, but rather as a parodic compendium of various styles. With the advent of Guido (I, 544), the style abruptly shifts to conjure a visionary medieval landscape populated by figures more at home in Breughal, or Hieronymous Bosch: Guido is a "monster" (I, 551) aided by two "goblin creatures" (I, 548), and images of evil and malignancy pile up in the verse.

The newly introduced characters are again simplistically personified, though now in a ghoulish manner: Guido's relatives are "fox-faced" (I, 549), "cat-clawed" (I, 550), "the satyr-family" (I, 570), and Guido himself is Satan, "Prince o' the Power of the Air" (I, 567).

Superficially, the reader is presented with a macabre and horrifying tale, but the parodically overblown rhetoric and reductive nature of the style again foreground the way that events are being transmuted by the linguistic style used, and by the perspective of the speaker who chooses the style.

If Browning is presenting himself as a "horrified onlooker", as Sullivan suggests, then plainly the presentation is complicated by parody and by the shifts in textual style. The "horror" is exaggerated by the parodic mode and overbalances into melodrama. Browning re-creates himself re-creating the story for the first time, as a subjective storyteller who paints verbal pictures of the Franceschini dancing about their captives in a ring (I, 573); the melodrama is, in part, comic, and intrudes even more forcefully when the hero of the tale, Caponsacchi, appears:

Fire laid and cauldron set, the obscene ring traced,  
 The victim stripped and prostrate: what of God?  
 The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash,  
 Quenched lay their cauldron, covered i' the dust the crew,  
 As, in a glory of armour like Saint George,  
 Out again sprang the young good beauteous priest

(I, 581-586)

Again, from a retrospective standpoint the dramatised entry of Caponsacchi is incorrect in a factual sense, and by reducing characters to stereotypes excludes whole areas of complexity. But a knowledge of what follows in the poem is not needed to see how the text succumbs to its own excesses. The "cauldron" and "victim stripped", the cry for God and momentous arrival of the Knight replete with a "glory of armour" and the "cleaving" of clouds, is the apparatus of melodrama. The inevitable effect of providing a melodramatic context for horror is to make the horror comic. And comedy is the artist's means of subversion.

The arrival of Caponsacchi signals a further disruption of the stylistic surface. The language takes on the style of medieval allegory -- the Good Knight saving the entrapped Lady-Fair. Caponsacchi is compared to "Saint George" and bears "away the lady in his arms" (I, 587). Thus, the events become further transmuted by the style of representation: the priest appears after the rhetorical plea "what of God?", and therefore becomes depicted as the righteous agent of God. Pompilia is characterised anew as the chivalric "lost Lady" (I, 590), after being the pure soul of the Romance section, and "sweet" victim of the lurid visionary scene at Arezzo. Each of Pompilia's ascribed roles coheres around a broadly similar dramatic emphasis, but each is imaged

in accordance with the particular stylistic frame the narrator provides.

But the expectations aroused by the new frame, that the lady is saved and all is well, are immediately interrupted by a different chain of events -- Pompilia is removed from the priest's care. As the alteration in events does not conform to the heroic resolution implicit in the Knightly Tale, the style of narrative must alter.

The speaker responds by blurring the events at Castelnuovo in a type of generalised religious musing (I, 589-602). But the meditation is so vague and abstracted from the events, that it calls attention to itself as a subjective interpretation. The speaker's reasons for such an evasion are connected to the events at Castelnuovo, where Caponsacchi and Pompilia are caught in an apparently compromising situation. To this point the speaker has re-created a version of the story which is broadly drawn, simplistic tale of Good (Pompilia and Caponsacchi) and Evil (Guido and his cohorts). He has unconsciously utilised a variety of received literary forms, each of which is inherently suited to dramatising such a dialectic. The events at Castelnuovo do not fit into the general context of Good and Evil the speaker has established, nor can they be incorporated into the literary styles he has used: Caponsacchi and Pompilia are at their most suspect, at least to an observer who has not fully grasped the complexities of the whole action of the story, as the speaker plainly has not done at this stage. The enraged husband discovers his wife with her accused lover in a way-side inn; the "heroic" priest, according to his own later version of the story, is ineffectual, and it is Pompilia -- "sweet victim", "poor lady lost", who takes up the manly role and is prepared to fight Guido. From all aspects the Castelnuovo incident is problematic, and the speaker glosses over, or at least unconsciously evades the scene, in order to get back to the elemental drama of Good and Evil which has seized his imagination. He can only suggest in a rather vague way that the couple's flight is halted by "a dusk misfeatured messenger,/No other angel of this life,/Whose care is lest men see too much at once" (I, 593-5).

Castelnuovo safely by-passed, the speaker can return to the narrative which possesses his emotional responses. The style of verse again alters (I, 603): the vague dwelling upon heaven is abolished, and

the text reinstates dramatic action, "'Open to Caponsacchi!' Guido cried" (I, 622), and the vivid imagery sparked by the speaker's involvement in the story "those blood-bright eyes,/And black lips wrinkling o'er the flash of teeth" (I, 617-18). The awkward, lacklustre verse construction of the religious digression, "What we call, first, earth's roof and, last, heaven's floor,/Now grate o' the trap, then outlet of the cage" (I, 599-600), gives way to longer, freer, atmospheric lines that represent the speaker's reawakened imaginative involvement: "Ever and anon there flittered through the air/A snow-flake, and a scanty couch of snow/Crusted the grass-walk and garden-mould" (I, 607-9).

As the speaker takes up again the story, the parodic influence returns also, and the images of the solitary villa on a winter's eve (I, 604), and the "grave, silent, sinister" atmosphere (I, 610), suggest the Gothic horror story. There is a strange beauty in these lines, and an undeniable emotional force, yet the parodic element disrupts the stylistic context the speaker provides for the events. The disruption is reinforced by the intrusions of the speaker into his tale: "All was grave, silent, sinister,-when, ha?" (I, 610), or, "And tongues that lolled-Oh God that madest man!" (I, 618). These intrusions are disruptively comic melodrama and, at the same time, throw into relief the relations between the teller and his tale (and point to the relation between any teller and his, or her, tale): the desire of the speaker is deeply involved in, indeed, conditions the context he formulates. In an immediate sense the speaker's subjectivism is total, so possessed is he by the emotional, charged narrative that he enters his own tale as an outraged onlooker.

The main narrative ends suddenly: "Close eyes!" (I, 627) says the speaker, unable to imagine the awful climax to his tale. The second version declines from this point, as the speaker recounts the aftermath of the murder: the capture of the criminals and the public debate upon their guilt. The emotional and parodic intensity become progressively muted, the speaker less involved. He adopts a more removed standpoint, voiced in a type of oratory which critically depicts the way lived events become sucked up in a general public discourse based on personal whim and opinion:

At prick and summons of the primal curse  
 Which bids man love as well as make a lie.  
 There prattled they, discoursed the right and wrong,  
 Turned wrong to right, proved wolves sheep and sheep wolves,  
 So that you scare distinguish fell from fleece.

(I, 642-648)

So ends the second version: a long, elaborate text which establishes a context of poetic resuscitation; the text is not, as we have seen, a uniform style of representation, but is disrupted by the juxtaposition of different linguistic styles, of texts within the text, and by parodic elements which, combined with the textual variety, throw into relief the nature of representation itself. In one sense the stylistic variety in the text springs from the subjective, emotionally involved position of the speaker: caught up in his tale he falls to using conventional and stereotypic moral/literary forms.

We can see how far such a mode of representation is removed from realistic, objective narration, a form which imposes a single stylistic formulation upon events, and implicitly claims that what it represents is true, is life-like. Whatever else it may, or may not, do as a form, conventional realism seeks to deny its own status as a stylistic convention, to efface itself in its own uniformity, and so claims to represent an unmediated reality transferred directly into a text.

Through the second version Browning continues to lay the groundwork for The Ring and the Book as a whole. His concern is not to reclaim an objective reality which lies prior to the voices embodied in the poem, but to dramatise reality for what it is: neither absolutely objective, nor unmediated. The disruptively juxtaposed styles in the second version, and the use of parody, dramatise the unavoidable mediation of language in cognition, and in representation. The text therefore enacts in miniature the literary process of Book I, and of the poem as a whole. The reader can at no stage settle upon one particular style as the true reference point for reality, but is confronted with a disruptive play of texts which enforce a constant awareness of language: the reader is prevented from surrendering to language, from accepting it as objective truth.

The second version also adds a new texture to the insufficiency of the first version. Beyond merely describing the events which predated the trial, the second version adds an emotional and dramatic dimension to the story, and more importantly, juxtaposes against the trial text a completely different mode through which the story may be approached. The central movement of the poem is also initiated: that the poem will replicate differentiated versions of the same events; language and representation will supplant narrative progress.

We must, again, realise the disruptive and parodic elements of Browning's method do not negate the essential thrust of the second version. Browning does not question that Guido is vicious and cruel, and Pompilia a victim, nor does the rest of the poem alter this impression.

In fact, by so clearly characterising Guido as evil in the second version, Browning removes it as an issue from the rest of the work. Yet the preoccupation of the poem is not with guilt, but with the nature of truth in regard to language, cognition, and the world, and with the type of truth which art may convey.

#### IV: BETWEEN VERSIONS: A DIGRESSION

Linking the second and third versions is an extended passage (I, 679-779) in which the voice of the implied author returns to initiate a discussion on the poem. The context of resuscitation established in the second version is extended into an aesthetic discussion, the author commentating on his art even as he unfolds that art to his reader. "This was it from, my fancy with those facts" (I, 679) he says, referring back to the re-creation. His imagination has mixed with fact giving it an aesthetic shape, "wrought into a shapely ring therewith" (I, 683), the penultimate step before the "renovating wash/O' the water" (I, 685-6), the removal of excess alloy (the involvement of the poet's personality).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, Browning's Voices. See pp. 18-20 for a detailed discussion of the ring metaphor.

More importantly, the aesthetic discussion represents a continuation of the method of Book I: the reader is confronted with different points of perspective, the focus of the poem perpetually moving from subject to medium. If the play of textual styles in Book I implicitly educate the reader, as I would argue they do, toward an understanding both of the later form of the monologues (a disruptive succession of differentiated repetitions), and of the relation of representation to experience, then at certain points Browning enters into an explicit education: the discussion of the relationship between his own artistic representation and experience.

Thus the author directs a type of Socratic questioning at the reader: "How much of the tale was true?" (I, 686), "Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse?/Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?" (I, 696-7). To the relationship between truth and representation, the author adds the important question of "fact" and "fiction": "Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?" (I, 695). In this way the context of resuscitation is extended from the dramatised enactment of the second version, to aesthetic discussion, and extended further to a questioning of Victorian notions of art. Browning places his poetic craft squarely in the context of Victorian reading, a milieu in which art is regarded as "fancy", and empirical "fact" as truth.<sup>12</sup> It seems natural that in the great age of empiricism, a poet who wishes to defend and explain the nature of his art should address this problem.

In claiming a status for his art beyond mere diversion, Browning must demonstrate that it has an empirical validity: that imagination might be fact, and so truth. Moreover, such concerns go to the very centre of Browning's poetic method: "Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?/Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?/The somehow may be the thishow" (I, 704-6). He counters here the notion

<sup>12</sup> Hair, *Browning's Experiments with Genre*. pp. 22-8; see also Morse Peckham, "Historiography and the Ring and the Book", in *Victorian Poetry*, 6 (1968), pp. 243-57. Peckham believes Browning to be influenced by Carlyle's ideas of historical truth reached through the imagination, but develops the analogy in an interesting way, by suggesting that Browning presents himself in Book I as a "fallible perceiver" of history.

that fact/reality is somehow prior, static, absolute, with the idea of process. Reality (the "fact" made "alive") is constructed by the process (in time) of the subjective imagination (fiction) interpreting existence. This psychological process, the "means", the "fiction", the "somehow", is then, empirical fact also, and is the subject of Browning's art. The formulation of reality is ongoing and temporal, indicated by the running together in "thishow" of two separate words: reality is thus the "thishow", a perpetual process occurring in the present. Similarly, in relation to art, the sense of possibility, of potential meaning -- the "somehow" -- is one with the ongoing temporal creation of meaning, the "thishow".

If we consider the second version in this light we can see how the parodic elements and juxtaposition of styles dramatise the subjective construction of reality. The truth Browning refers to, in regard to the re-creation, is not the truth of guilt and innocence, but the truth of the speaker interpreting and representing the events; the parodic rhetoric, the formulation of the story in received forms, and (from the perspective of later knowledge) the information excluded by the version, do not necessarily negate the general impulse of what the speaker says, but are a part of the particular nature of his subjective interpretation.

Browning then turns from questions to a type of explanation, in a long digressive passage which becomes an explicit defence of poetry (I, 707-772). He establishes the relationship of poetry to the world: the original act of creation was God's, who "made heaven and earth" (I, 709). The world, then, is the given, and "Man,-as befits the made, the inferior thing" (I, 712) cannot create what does not exist: "nothing which had never life/ Shall get life from him" (I, 727-8). What the poet can do is re-create the given: "Creates, no, but resuscitates perhaps" (I, 719). Art, then, imitates an original creation, is "Mimic creation" (I, 740).

The theory of art outlined by the poet relates to The Ring and the Book in several ways. Most obviously, the resuscitative function of poetry is to reclaim dead events lost in time, to complete them by giving the significance of a permanent aesthetic shape: "starts the dead alive,/ Completes the incomplete and saves the thing" (I, 733-4). Poetry is also shown by the poet's defence to have an empirical relation

to existence, since it does not conjure out of nothing but is embedded in the datum of this world. But perhaps the fundamental relation between art and experience, which emerges from the poet's defence, is that the re-creative function of poetry demonstrated throughout The Ring and the Book, and throughout Browning's work generally, enacts and dramatises Browning's view of the truth of human cognition: that experience itself is a subjective re-creation, or reformulation, through the medium of language. Both the form and subject of Browning's art reflect the re-creative, processional structuring of human perception.

#### V: ARE THE DEAD ALIVE? THE THIRD VERSION

After the context of resuscitation provided for the story by the second version, and extended subsequently into digression on poetic art, the poet returns to the story to provide a third version (I, 780-823); a text which apparently initiates the withdrawal of the poet to allow resuscitated fact and character to stand on their own. However, the withdrawal of the poet's personality is more complex than it at first seems.

What is immediately noticeable about the third version of the story is that it not only retells the events yet again, further disrupting expectations of narrative progression, but that it also sets the events in a completely new style of representation and viewpoint. Contrasted to the highly coloured language, the disruptive mix of styles and parody, and the strong emotional involvement of the teller in his tale, dramatised in the second version, the text of the third version is a bare factual summary told in a flat, impersonal tone by the narrator. Once more the implied author moves into the background of the text and speaks through a dramatised persona.

The third version is in fact an exact inversion of the imaginative re-creation. The dimension of factual detail, excluded in the second version as the speaker became caught up in his tale, is here tabulated in a dispassionate manner. New and important information is introduced for the first time, having been outside the frames provided by the trial summary and second version: the extreme age difference and contrast in physical appearance between Pompilia and Guido is made plain, she "seventeen" (I, 798) and "young,/Good and beautiful" (I, 785-6); he "Fifty

years old" (I, 784) and "A beak nosed bushy-bearded black-haired Lord,/ Lean, pallid" (I, 782-3). Guido's poverty (I, 781), the precise time scheme of the marriage, flight and murder, and then the trial and execution, are all clearly laid out in a single narrative line.

The text of the third version contrasts also, in a stylistic sense, with the trial summary. In that summary the poet as dramatised speaker acted as an opinionated (though unquestioning) commentator upon the documents, the dead fact; in the third version the poet as dramatised speaker presents a summary of fact resuscitated and made "live". He almost imperceptibly moves the tense of the poem toward a dramatised present: the marriage of Pompilia and Guido is now but "four years ago" (I, 784). Having renewed and ordered the facts, the poet absorbs them into his own clear narrative, and dramatises himself as a historian immediately after the event: "How title I the dead alive once more?" (I, 779).

Aside from the difference in factual and narrative clarity between the imaginative re-creation and the new text of the third version, the stylistic difference is crucial. Compare, for example, the treatment of Caponsacchi in the two versions:

As, in a glory of armour like Saint George,  
Out again sprang the young good beauteous priest  
(I, 585-6)

In convoy, eight months earlier, of a priest,  
Arentine also, of still nobler birth,  
Guiseppe Caponsacchi.  
(I, 792-4)

In the third version the speaker adopts the objective tone of a historian, but the stylistic jargon which inflects his speech suggests that even historical objectivity may be mannered, may be, that is, a stylistic convention: "And faithless parents who abetted her/I' the flight aforesaid" (I, 810-11).

Whereas the dramatised persona of the second version recoiled in horror from the murder, unable to describe it, here Browning, acting the persona of an objective historian, merely notes the fact of the murder

without comment: "Both her putative parents; killed the three,/Aged, they, seventy each, and she, seventeen" (I, 797-8).

The effect of the text is jarring, confronting the reader with another style and representation of the story, which disruptively contrasts itself against the previous versions, and is disrupted by them. The contrast fractures the conclusiveness each of the texts inherently seeks to provide for the story.

The earlier discussion of the second version demonstrated how that text was disrupted internally by the juxtaposition of linguistic styles, and by parody, which dramatised the speaker in the act of conceiving a reality. It may at first appear as if the objective third version escapes such disruptive influences, that it can stand quite simply as what it claims to be -- a factual historical summary. Style and viewpoint are consistent in the text, the language free of overt parody and the narrative subjectivity which Browning characteristically uses (in the sense that a dramatic monologist can be said to be a narrator) to dramatise the ironies of conception. Indeed, it is the implicit assumption of objective discourse that it is un-narrated, or that the narrative aspect is so minimal as to not interfere with unmediated reality.

One way in which the third version may be disrupted has already been suggested: namely, its juxtaposition against the imaginative recreation. The second and third versions dramatise a speaker providing two diametrically opposed contexts for the story: subjective and objective; their juxtaposition disrupting the conclusiveness of each, and dramatising the act of representation. We see, therefore, the speaker in the subjective version painting a gruesome picture of Pompilia's torture at Arezzo, yet in the third version this is not mentioned, the objective narrator, in fact, claims no knowledge of the reasons for marital incompatibility: "And brought her to Arezzo, where they lived/Unhappy lives, whatever curse the cause" (I, 787-8). The reason for such a difference is clear: to adopt an objective frame for the events limits the speaker's focus to observable fact -- names, lineage, the dating and recording of events.

Plainly then, the dramatised persona Browning employs to narrate the turbulent drama of the second version, and the persona he uses to

dryly present the third, do not represent a consistent narrative voice or viewpoint, but are a dramatisation of two radically different viewpoints, two opposed ways of conceiving of the story -- the conception embodied in the style of language used. By thus confronting the reader with two such different versions (and to widen the context to include the trial text -- three versions) Browning begins to undermine the expectation that there is, or will be, one definitive version of the story. Such a method shifts the emphasis of the poem from the facts of what happened, to the way in which experience is an interpenetration of cognition, language and desire.

By placing the objective version after the subjective, Browning effects a clear demonstration of the deficiencies of the third version: there is a truth to emotional response, and a deeper truth to the subjective nature of reality, and a representation which seeks to deny these elements, as the objective mode does, cannot be a full representation of man and the world (this applies doubly to objective narrative because the assumptions of definitiveness, present in any version, are at their most extreme in the objective method).

But it is not only juxtaposition against a conflicting text (or texts) which disrupts the objective version. Like all of the versions in the poem it is disrupted also from within. The artificial language loaded with jargon, the high, impersonal, official tone, characterise the text as a stylistic imposition on the story. The factual notation of the murder (a particularly horrifying murder of a mother of two weeks, and an aged couple) is a question of the style and viewpoint of historical discourse, rather than of psychological truth.

## VI: THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

After the fervid emotional involvement of the second version, and impersonal artificiality of the third version, the narrator moves into the role of observer presenting a series of introductions to the later monologuists (I, 838-1378). The tense moves closer to the present: "Let this old woe step on stage again" (I, 824). In a practical sense the narrator provides a description of the settings in which each of the monologues will take place. From a wider perspective, the text suggests the way Browning deliberately chooses to represent experience in The

Ring and the Book by overlapping viewpoints and linguistic textures, rather than by definitive singularity and lineal narration. Thus, a texture of insufficiencies cumulatively enrich/the wider context of the poem.

We return to the concept of the poet dramatised in "Sordello" who finds that language forces him to diffuse and fragment whole experience in order to reconstitute it in an ongoing way. Browning has, in Book I, fragmented the story into various aspects, various means of approaching and representing the experience (and the meaning of the experience) of the story. A summary of the historical trial records, a re-created emotive tale of Good and Evil, and an objective narrative, each voiced through a persona assumed by the author, have been presented, each complicated by internal ironies and each disrupted by their juxtaposition against the conflicting style and viewpoint of the other. In the introduction to the monologues Browning separates out the aspect of external observation of living character and scene: in this he provides another possible mode of representing the story, a type of novelistic realism which dwells on the surface of its subject, leaving the psychological dimension as implicit. The introduction constitutes Browning's final attempt to provide a single context for the story, the insufficiency of which necessitates the monologues, the serial texts formulated by the characters themselves.

The speaker who introduces the characters moves closer to the voice of the implied author: he has attained a balanced view of his materials, his text is free of parodic and stylistic extremity, and, unlike the earlier personas, he acknowledges his text to be insufficient and that new representations must be added to his in order to move toward completeness: "Here are the voices presently shall sound/In due succession" (I, 838-9). The question remains, however, as to why Browning should feel the need to provide a physical description of scene and character to supplement his usual dramatic monologue method.

The answer has been suggested, in part, by the previous contention of this study that Browning works in The Ring and the Book by overlapping insufficient textures, and by the diffusion of a whole view, in order to reformulate a deepened representation of experience. Functioning as a recording observer the speaker adopts a standpoint much like

that of any intelligent person observing a group of characters. But as a single perceiving consciousness his view is limited to the externals of dress, physique, action, voice, setting, all of which he apparently records accurately. What the speaker is prevented from knowing, and what any person is prevented from knowing in the terms of ordinary discourse, is the individual process of psychology, and texture of character, in each of the monologuists. It is only the use of language within artistic discourse which may escape the single view and provide such a knowledge.

The action of the later monologues disrupts the introduction to the characters by revealing what that text lacks, but the monologues also reveal the speaker, here, to be a persona assumed by the author. The speaker is, for example, prepared to freely give his opinion of a character, and to attribute motive. He says of Half-Rome: "Honest enough, as the way is" (I, 848), and explains Half-Rome's support for Guido as "The instinctive theorising whence a fact/Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look" (I, 863-4). Half-Rome's monologue reveals the character to be, rather than "honest enough", an extremely clever manipulator and strategist who supports Guido, not out of whim, but in conscious and deliberate manner, and for his own, and very concrete, reasons. Similarly, the further recesses of Half-Rome's desire and fear, his unconscious view, for example, of women as a threat to his manly conception of himself, are necessarily beyond the perception of the speaker. Conversely, Browning himself may play something of a game: as he frequently does in his poetry, he places a very real and resonating perception in the mouth of a speaker who employs it as a cliché: that man formulates the world by a process of "instinctive theorising" is an insight fundamental to Browning's work.

Thus the speaker can vividly tell us what *Tertium Quid* looks and sounds like:

Who,-breathing musk from lacework and brocade,  
His solitaire amid the flow of frill,  
Powdered peruke on nose, and bag at back,  
And cane dependent from the ruffled wrist,-  
Harangues in silvery and selected phrase

(I, 929-33)

He can even observe that the dandy seeks to impress certain eminent personages "Eminent This and All-Illustrious That" (I, 937). But again, the psychological dimension is not available (beyond the certain amount which can be inferred from observed action, or is implied in it) to the perception of a single observing consciousness. Thus the monologue, the dramatised and re-creative artistic discourse, is required to know that *Tertium Quid* hates his betters, even as he plays to them, and to follow the way he can attempt to use the fact of a murder to display intellectual virtuosity.

Similarly, the narrator at certain points slips from being merely an observer to becoming an involved subject. In the first introduction to Guido, one of the key figures in the story, the narrator begins clearly enough by describing the scene, "In a small chamber that adjoins the court" (I, 950), and Guido's voice: "Incisive, nigh satiric bites the phrase" (I, 965). But half-way through the passage he mentions the Vigil-torture, and suddenly becomes deflected from his purpose, caught up in a satiric digression on the iniquities of torture (I, 980-1015). Guido, the arch-villain of the story, is forgotten in the second half of the passage as the narrator satirises Religion, moving from narrative observation to subjective opinion.

A crucial insight not available to the narrator at this point in the poem (and not available to the mode of a single observing consciousness), is whether or not Guido repents. The repentance is a problematic issue in the poem, and Browning may have wanted to deliberately blur the point early on in order to preserve suspense. But it is also true that apart from whether Guido outwardly repents or not, the real issue is whether he truly repents within his own mind. The only way, therefore, the problem can be experienced is to experience Guido's consciousness, something not available to the narrator. The description of Guido's cell, in the introduction to the second monologue, begins in the present tense:

On a stone bench in a close fetid cell,  
 Where the hot vapour of an agony,  
 Struck into drops on the cold wall, runs down-  
 Horrible worms made out of sweat and tears

(I, 1286-9)

But when the moment for repentance approaches the narrator changes to a mode of supposition in the future tense:

Nor lacks there aught but that the group  
Break forth, intone the lamentable psalm

(I, 1317-9)

a sign  
Shall bear intelligence that the foe is foiled,  
Count Guido Franceschini has confessed,  
And is absolved and reconciled with God.  
Then they, intoning, may begin their march

(I, 1320-24)

The narrator fashions a hypothetical script with salvation as the outcome, but the text holds itself back from a conclusive knowledge it cannot possess.

Thus the narrator is another monologist, or persona: an observer, a witness who may tell us much of importance about "observable" scene and action, but who cannot embody in his representation what the poem is most deeply concerned with: mind, and language, and their relationship with the world.

The idea of the poet as monologist in Book I, though relatively recent in Browning criticism, is not original. Mary Rose Sullivan approaches it when she says that "the elaborate characterisation of the poet-speaker and the three narrative summaries of Book I were necessary devices to highlight the progressive steps involved in fashioning the ring."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Morse Peckham asserts that "the carefully identified historical Robert Browning in Book I is fatally compromised by the plan of the poem, for that plan puts that Robert Browning in the same category as each of the other monologists." Peckham goes on to say that "the Robert Browning of Book I is to be conceived as interpreting the documents according to his own interests."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sullivan, Browning's Voices p. 15

<sup>14</sup> Morse Peckham, "Historiography", Victorian Poetry, pp. 244-5.

While they recognise, however, the status of the narrator as dramatic monologist, the respective emphases of Sullivan and Peckham necessarily exclude other important ramifications of such a conception. I would not disagree with Sullivan's central premise that the versions represent the successive stages of the poetic process: gathering the raw material, moulding the material by adding a more malleable substance (the poet's imagination), and purifying the ring by removing impure substances (the withdrawal of the poet's personality). I would disagree that this is all that Browning does, and with Sullivan's implicit view that the method is free from disruption and irony.

In an earlier essay on Book I, Sullivan says of the re-creative version, for example, that the text is "extravagant" and "partial", and that "it cannot represent what we are to think of the principals in the narrative; rather it represents the poet's uniquely sensitive, intuitive, unstructured response." The version is therefore simply an "impressive" demonstration of the poet's subjective re-creation as a prelude to a more "objective" presentation.<sup>15</sup> Sullivan recognises the subjectivism, but does not then go on to ask how it may relate to the subjectivism that is Browning's great theme. The "extravagant" language, Sullivan regards as an indicator of the poet's "uniquely sensitive, unstructured response." She does not recognise that the language of the text contains parodic and comic elements which dramatise the ironies of the speaker's re-creation. Furthermore, Sullivan reads the second version as a stylistically consistent narrative, when in fact it is a complex of juxtaposed styles, which disrupt each other, and the coherence of the narrative. The disruptive influence both fractures the conclusiveness of the text, and, once again, reveals the ironies of conceiving of, and representing, experience in language. Such criticism of Sullivan's approach can be extended to her whole view of Book I; rather than a consistent monologue, Book I is a disruptive play of texts and consistently shifting focus, viewpoint, and narrative persona, throwing into ironic relief the question of representation, and of the poem itself as an artistic mode of representation.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Rose Sullivan "The Function of Book I in the Ring and the Book", in Victorian Poetry, 6(1968), pp. 231-241.

The third version Sullivan considers simply a "more objective presentation", yet it is more than that: again, it is a particular viewpoint and stylistic frame complicated by the ironies of its own assumptions. In one sense, the text demonstrates that objectivity is a style of discourse, and not the reality it claims to be.

Thus through a succession of personas Browning, in the narrative versions, subjects himself to the same radical critique of subjectivity that informs the rest of the poem. The inescapable conviction he represents is that all cognition, all representation, in terms of the single, fallible mode of ordinary discourse, is mediated transposition, and not unmediated transference. As the dictionary would have it, in regard to transposition and transference: the music is put into a different key, rather than the object removed from one place to another: experience is rather a music endlessly altered, reformulated into a different key by individual consciousnesses, than a surface of absolute facts, or objects, removed unchanged from some prior existence, to the surface of the mind.

Morse Peckham's conception of the narrator as dramatic monologist, in Book I, is concerned with Browning as a historiographer and so moves into areas beyond the scope of this present discussion. He seeks to explain Browning's alterations of certain dates in the source documents, and subsequent movement away from historical situations after The Ring and the Book, as a consequence of the poet's recognition that he interprets history "as the construct of his own necessarily distorting interests." In Book I, Peckham suggests, Browning finally includes himself in the dramatic monologue complex in order to "awaken from the nightmare of history."<sup>16</sup>

There are, however, certain points in this present study that I would clarify in relation to Peckham's argument. Most importantly, Peckham conceives Browning only as a historiographer in Book I, and while this may be true in a broad sense, it does not take due account of the plethora of styles, and succession of narrative roles, utilised in the chapter. Browning is, in fact, many things in Book I: lyric poet, enthusiastic archaeologist, hyperbolic re-creator, literary theorist

<sup>16</sup> Peckham, "Historiography", Victorian Poetry. p. 257.

and defender of poetry, "objective" historian, nominalist summariser of old documents, and so on. Interpolating these personas and roles, Browning is also an active authorial presence playfully confronting his readers, and behind it all, he is the organising consciousness, presenting this diversity to educate the reader into the manner and concerns of the poem. As we have seen, each of the roles assumed by the author is embodied in a particular linguistic style, with the organising presence of the implied author embodied in the total effect of Book I.

Furthermore, Peckham (and Sullivan also) looks at Book I in isolation and does not consider how its method may relate to the rest of the poem (beyond the fact that Browning is, too, a monologist). Part of the argument of this study has been that Book I may be stylistically integrated with the monologues: the disruptive succession of texts, the form of differentiated repetitions, enact the method of the monologues. In this, Book I functions as an education in the form and concerns of The Ring and the Book, and an education in how to read the poem. Let us, therefore, conclude this chapter on Book I by drawing together the threads of the educative function.

## VII: A DRAMATIC EDUCATION

If the present discussion of Book I has been, at times, laborious, then it is nevertheless a necessary exercise to read Book I closely, to accord it an equal weight with the monologues, and to follow, in a detailed manner, the play of texts and shifting points of narrative focus which enact Browning's method.

Book I has been shown, in this study, to be deliberately inconsistent in its style of presentation. It is not merely a text, but a succession of texts, which are disrupted from within by a variety of means, and from without by their juxtaposition against each other. Such a method foregrounds the relationship between language, representation, and experience.

The three narrative versions of Book I, and the introduction to the cast of characters, are entrapped in the limitations of ordinary discourse, being each a single representation, and insufficient. As has been frequently suggested in this study, these versions point the reader

towards the process of the poem: a diffusion of the whole into parts, into insufficiencies which cumulatively deepen the texture of the poem.

The form of a long poem signified to any reader before The Waste-land a narrative poem, like, for example, Paradise Lost or Don Juan. The Canterbury Tales is rather the great exception, yet even that work clearly signals its conventional intentions: it is a series of "tales", of distinct narratives dealing each with a different subject. And these tales are still placed in the consistent narrative form of the pilgrims' journey.

By re-telling the same tale three times in Book I, Browning subverts the expectations of a narrative form -- of a series of discreet events moving in a lineal progression toward a climax and resolution. It is not that Browning escapes from narrative in the manner of Eliot, or Pound in the Cantos, but that he makes the act of constructing a narrative his subject. What the reader is asked to consider from the beginning is not merely events, and what those events may mean, but how the self creates meaning by providing a representation of events, a personal narrative significance conceptualised in language.

This does mean that Browning believes existence to "exist" only in the mind, or for that matter, in language. Despite the deviations in style, content and viewpoint in the versions of Book I, there is no deviation from certain fundamentals: that Pompilia is a victim, Guido a murderer, the Pope honest, and so on. And plainly, the reader is directed into these assumptions, and the sympathies they entail. The points of consistency in the versions imply that the characters behaved in certain broadly defined ways; the points of inconsistency imply that even a version which grasps the broad outline of the story, is nonetheless innately fallible. The outline of this "round from Rome to Rome" must be travelled again and again, a circularity which infuses the ring with a substance which is prismatic, inter-penetrative, multiple. This is what Browning means when he says:

Rather learn and  
 love  
 Each facet-flash of the revolving year!  
 Red, green and blue that whirl into a white,  
 The variance now, the eventual unity,  
 Which makes the miracle.

(I, 1359-64)

The many incomplete texts whirl into the whiteness of the one text, The Ring and the Book.

At certain points the voice of the implied author enters the poem to present an explicitly educative passage: he operates as a literary theorist who commentates on his poem even as he unfolds it to the reader. Immediately following the third version, which is factual and objective, Browning disrupts the essential idea of objectivity, and of conclusive knowledge (within the context of ordinary discourse), by noting the fallability of perception:

Not by the very sense and sight indeed-  
 (Which at best takes imperfect cognizance,  
 Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,  
 What mortal ever in entirety saw?)

(I, 826-9)

But he goes on to assert that rather than claiming to escape such fallibility his art actually embodies it:

No dose of purer truth than man digests,  
 But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now.

(I, 830-1)

There can be, therefore, no absolute view of events; an absolute truth remains only a fictive possibility, a perpetually disclosed, potential whole: "strong meat he may get to bear some day" (I, 832). The truth that is available, to art at least, is the way in which men and women live in the world by conceiving of the world through language (a process which is inherently fallible). Yet here we move close, again, to the paradoxical centre of Browning's art, for language is not only the means

by which men and women may conceive the world, but the only means by which the poet may show us the truth of that process: "For how else know we save by worth of word?" (I, 837).

Thus, The Ring and the Book will not be about events, or the absolute truth of events, but about language, the "Uproar in the echo" (I, 834). The medium of the poem, "voices we call evidence" (I, 833) talking about events, rather than a single mimetic reproduction of the story, becomes the subject of the poem. An absolute and objective reality becomes deferred, and what we may "know" by the poem, and what the poem itself is, is the texture of deferral we call experience: "truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now."

Book I therefore implicitly educates the reader through the process of disruptively juxtaposed texts, which fragments conclusiveness, and foregrounds language as both the subject and medium of the poem. The poet's own entry into the poem counterpoints this implicit education with an explicit commentary on the nature and purpose of his art. The later monologues re-enact the process of Book I: a disruptive juxtaposition of texts, a succession of differentiated insufficiencies, continually extending the context of experience and language initiated in Book I. We may say that the reader is educated in Book I into a flexibility of thought and reading, as prelude to reading the monologues: to be wary of looking too quickly for the right judgement, the conclusive text, and to consider instead the nature of the texture each speaker formulates, within the limitations of consciousness, and through the fallible, and only, means at his disposal. And to consider, lastly, what type of truth a poet, through language, may tell.

## CHAPTER THREE: A SERIAL CLIMAX

### I: TIME AND JUDGEMENT

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to provide detailed evidence, it would seem a justifiable assertion that the monologues in The Ring and the Book (Books II-XI) are a series of texts, each monologue-text being an individual representation which seeks to provide a conclusive view of experience. The analysis of Book I, in the preceding chapter of this study, traced the disruptive effects of juxtaposed stylistic representations, and suggested that Book I acted as a paradigm for the presentation of the monologues. The disruptive play of texts in Book I, it was suggested, foregrounded modes of representation, and, therefore, the relationship between language and experience, as the subject, and medium, of the poem. The monologues can be seen to continue the disruptive play of texts, a succession of insufficient attempts to provide a whole view, each disrupted by the other.

Where to locate the climax of the poem becomes, therefore, a problem. Where may a climax be said to occur amidst a disruptive play of texts, and within a poem whose medium (language) becomes one with the subject? If we read The Ring and the Book as a conventional poem, which concerns itself with guilt, or judgement, then the climax would logically be either the Pope's monologue (judgement), or Guido's second monologue (proof of guilt). To choose either the Pope, or Guido, as the climax of the poem, however, relegates Book XII to the status of an anti-climactic appendage. Book XII will be considered in detail in the concluding chapter of this study, but in this present chapter, let us begin to consider the relationship between a disruptive method, which foregrounds language, and the problem of climax.

Robert Langbaum's argument that the author's presence in Book I, and Book XII, upsets the relativistic balance of the poem, and that in the case of Book I, "Our judgement is forced from the beginning", suggests the first and last Books of the poem to be artistic failures.<sup>1</sup> L.J. Swingle counters such a view by suggesting that, rather than a

<sup>1</sup> Langbaum, Poetry of Experience. p. 135.

relativistic concern, Browning, in The Ring and the Book, dramatises the loss of truth in time.<sup>2</sup> Swingle's argument, at least, provides a firm rationale for the presence of Book XII. If the theme of the poem is loss of truth, then Book XII, where the experience of the poem is most radically dissipated in time, becomes the climactic section.

What makes these two critics so interesting, in a comparative context, is that each delineates an undeniably central, yet directly opposed, aspect of the poem. A series of monologues constantly re-interpreting the same story, does encourage a relativistic reading. The loss of "crude" experience, in time, is a potent presence in the poem, from the flea-market which is history, in Book I, to the beginnings of the disappearance into history in Book XII. It is a prime motivation behind the poet's desire to provide a self-sufficient aesthetic form for experience.

One basic similarity both Langbaum and Swingle share, however, is that neither fully comprehends the method, and purpose, of Book I. Langbaum, as we have seen, believes Book I to be an artistic failure because there, truth is too clearly established. But Swingle's argument, that the poem dramatises the loss of truth, presupposes also that truth is static, absolute, and necessarily established by the poet, in Book I. Such arguments point to a major reason why the present study has emphasised Book I. In Book I, it was claimed, Browning presents a disruptive juxtaposition of linguistic styles which erode a conclusive viewpoint. Nowhere in the poem does Browning present the absolute truth, because within the terms of the poem (and of ordinary experience), such a truth is not available.

The versions in Book I are broad approximations of the outline of truth, yet because each is different in its viewpoint, and style of representation, each reformulates the outline in a particular, and different, way. Certain fundamental points, it is true, do not alter in the versions, nor does the evidence of the monologues displace those fundamentals, or the sympathies they entail. But what such points of consistency reveal, is that even a viewpoint which is right in a broad, or even fundamental, way is not absolute.

<sup>2</sup> L.J. Swingle, "Truth and the Ring and the Book: A Negative View", in Victorian Poetry, 6 (1968), pp. 259-269.

What is more importantly revealed, is that language, and not truth, guilt or judgement, is the essential subject of the poem. The truth available to the poet is the truth of the perpetual deferral inherent in language; rather than try to halt such a process, the poet becomes in tune with it, and explores the possibilities it reveals. Through the texture of deferrals the reader can discern the nature of individual character and the broad action of the story, and can gain a deep and resonant experience of the texture of experience itself, but absolute truth perpetually falls in the gap between versions.

If the versions of Book I are shown to be disruptive, and to foreground language as the central concern of the poem, then Langbaum's criticisms do not apply: both stylistically and thematically, Book I can be integrated with the monologues, and be shown to operate in a relativistic, as opposed to an absolute, way.

Langbaum's assertion that we judge, in the poem, not by social or religious absolutes, but by judging "what is said by who is saying it" applies equally to the versions of Book I, if we say that we judge those versions by their particular viewpoint and style of representation.<sup>3</sup> We evaluate each version (in Book I, and in the monologues) by the particular texture of deferral it provides; in the monologues the relation of language to representation becomes a matter of evaluating how authentically, or inauthentically, each character operates within the potentialities and limitations of language, in order to represent (and thus, know) the world.

If Swingle's argument of the loss of truth rests on the fact that "truth" is absolutely established in Book I, then it is similarly undermined by its failure to account for the stylistic disruption. Moreover, his contention that truth (should it exist) is lost in time, contains other deficiencies. It is indeed against time which the author acts, when he provides a "self-sufficient" form for experience. But if we substitute deferral for Swingle's idea of "loss", then we come closer to Browning's conception of the poet dramatised in "Sordello". As soon as experience is conceived of, a loss occurs, the object is absent, deferred by language; the poet, himself, defers to the processional quality of language.

<sup>3</sup> Langbaum, Poetry of Experience. p. 115.

It is, therefore, the object, the event which is absent, rather than "truth" (which is a conception after the event) that is lost. But experience, the processional texture of deferrals which cohere around a certain event (even as they act in an ongoing way), is itself perpetually deferred by temporal process; experience is dissipated by its own temporal unfolding in language. The poet, in order to provide experience with a self-sufficient shape, seeks not to establish a whole, conclusive truth, but to diffuse the whole, to make the deferential nature of experience (when it is conceived in language) his subject, and medium.

Clearly for Browning, it is not merely the passage of time which dissipates experience; time is an aspect of the world (though, perhaps, the one absolute aspect) man inhabits, a primal constriction of the profane world, and inescapable. Within time there are many other limitations imposed on man, and these proliferate throughout the poem: the political, social, religious, philosophical contexts in which man operates, and the deeper context of limitation inherent in the nature of consciousness. If we look beneath all of these aspects to find a continuity, to find the essential way man inhabits the world within time, what reveals itself is language. Because language is a temporal medium, and because experience is known (conceived of) by language, the dissipation of experience is not merely a function of temporal process, but a function of language operating within the temporal context.

The effect of altering the poem's emphasis from time, to the temporality of language, is to suggest that what Browning reclaims is the texture of experience rather than truth: that language, and not truth, is the subject of the poem. From such a perspective Book XII becomes important because it dramatises the dissipatory tendencies of language at a historical extreme. The texture of the experience which coheres around the story of Guido and Pompilia has disappeared into time, through language; "Then talked of, told about, a tinge the less/In every transmission" (XI, 15-16). But if language is the concern of the poem, then temporal dissipation represents not a conclusive climax, but a particular intensity of language. In a disruptive play of texts dramatising language, and embodied in a series of representations, there can be no single climax.

## II: A PLATEAU OF INTENSITIES

The concluding chapter of this study will attempt to tie together the implications of language as theme, and Browning's related method of disruptive texts, and to suggest what type of completion may result from such a method. But how we regard Book XII is conditioned by where we locate the climax of the poem, and, as I suggested at the beginning of this present chapter, where we locate the climax is conditioned by the conception we hold of the truth Browning dramatises, and of the purpose of the method he uses to embody that truth.

Altick and Loucks typify a general critical approach to the poem when they argue that the Pope represents "the philosophical climax of the poem," but that Guido's second speech provides a necessary correlative "indispensable to the climactic argument of the poem." This view results from Altick and Loucks' contention that the poem is "one long illustration of the struggle between truth and innocence on the one hand and error and guile on the other."<sup>4</sup> They find Book XII as a consequence, to be an "epilogue": "short and miscellaneous -- a tension-relaxing montage", and so "anti-climactic".<sup>5</sup>

Altick and Loucks also trace not one but three structures in the poem; these are well known and I will merely summarise them here. The first structural approach divides the poem into a succession of three triads -- Books II-IV, V-VI and VIII-X -- enclosed in the ring of Books I and XII, plus Guido's second speech which does not fit happily into one of the triads. The first triad involves the external facts of the case; the second, an emphasis on character; the third, an emphasis on theme, "the poem's great issues, such as truth, deceit, language, and religion". Altick and Loucks argue this schema "most aptly describes the grouping of the monologuists and the hierarchy of their thematic and dramatic relationships."

The second structural approach conceives of the poem as a circle divided into twelve arcs, each representing a Book which has an opposite

<sup>4</sup> Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story. pp. 68-69.

<sup>5</sup> Altick and Loucks, p. 74.

number, "one which either complements or reinforces it". Thus, Tertium Quid's "ethical relativism" provides a direct moral antithesis to the Pope's "absolutism" (as Altick and Loucks call it), or Guido in Book V as the "villain in disguise" counterpoints the Guido of Book XI, "the villain unmasked".

Lastly, the structure of the poem may be apprehended as "a cyclic movement approximating an inward elliptical spiral". Thus, Browning may be said to posit the hard core of truth in Book I, Books II and III pass by the truth, missing it by an equal distance, though at opposite angles; Tertium Quid moves further away from the "truth", and Guido in Book V is at apogee. Caponsacchi and Pompilia reverse this tendency, moving closer to the truth "but still at a distance imposed by the limitations of knowledge."

The lawyers instigate another outward movement ending as far removed from the truth as Guido at the opposite side of the orbit. This tendency is again reversed by the Pope -- "at this point the poem comes closest yet to truth". Guido, in his second speech, apparently represents a violent retrograde movement, but "in this final speech of Guido's there is, in fact, a measure of awful, undeniable truth".<sup>6</sup> Celestino's sermon in Book XII, it is argued, redirects the movement even nearer the centre.

In general terms Altick and Loucks' argument provides an adequate rebuttal to the view that the poem is formless, most notably voiced by Henry James who called The Ring and the Book a "great loose and uncontrolled composition".<sup>7</sup> It is their final contention that it is unnecessary to choose between the structural outlines they identify, that all three are complementary to the poem's complete purpose.

<sup>6</sup> Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, pp. 76-81. See these pages for the authors' comparative discussion of structural approaches.

<sup>7</sup> Henry James, "The Novel in The Ring and the Book", in Notes on Novelists (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. 387.

If one were to characterise these structural outlines they would at best be termed schematic: an attempt to rigidify an apparently random succession of Books into groupings imposed by a formal design. The first "triad" structure places the monologues in an ascending scheme of poetic concern: fact, character, theme; the second "ring" structure focuses on counterpointed character types; the third "spiral" structure is thematically-based: organising the characters into their various relativistic, but nonetheless qualitatively different, relations to the thematic problem of truth.

In positing yet another structural approach, I do not necessarily seek to negate those outlined by Altick and Loucks, rather I would concur with them in their belief that we may profitably balance more than one conclusive, structural view of the poem.

I propose to return for a moment to the surface of the poem, and rather than lock the poem into schematic groupings, to suggest the structural implications of a work composed of a succession of linguistic styles. In particular, the disruptive effect of juxtaposed styles must be accounted for, and it would seem, in terms of the present study, that this element of disruptiveness acts against any formal resolution of structure.

As was first suggested in Chapter One of this study, The Ring and the Book displaces the usual nineteenth century expectations of a narrative progression: the long poem, like the novel, was expected to propel itself by the lineal temporality of plot, and to be contained within a single narrative structure. But The Ring and the Book is a series of beginnings, not one narrative but many narratives, each returning to the same sequence of events, providing not lineal progression but ongoing temporal reinterpretation.

What the reader encounters, then, is a succession of texts differentiated by viewpoint, and more importantly for our present purposes, by the particular linguistic context each speaker provides for the events. Regarded in this light the structure of reading The Ring and the Book is a series of what may be paradoxically termed differentiated repetitions.

If the structure of reading imposed by the poem is one of disruptive and serial repetitions, then the question of climax becomes problematic. The concept of climax is linked to traditional notions of narrative: there is a lineal progression of events irrevocably propelled to one point of conclusive resolution -- be it tragic or comic.

A work such as Waiting for Godot provides a useful antithesis to demonstrate this aspect of narrative climax: Beckett deliberately dissipates the possibility, and expectation, of a climax by making his play narrative-less. There is simply verbal, and minimal physical, action occurring in an eternal present: because there is no narrative, there is no lineal temporal movement, only an entrapment in an ongoing present, a circular and interminable waiting.

Rather than no narrative, however, Browning dramatises a series of narratives, and we must therefore acknowledge that these narratives dramatises, in turn, a series of climaxes. In Book I the reader experiences four different contexts provided for the story of Guido and Pompilia, and although we may argue about where the climactic point in each version occurs, there can be no doubt that each version is a mode of narrative (a lineal progression of events), rising to an apex, and then falling away. Each narrative is framed from the controlling point of view of a dramatised speaker.

The climactic emphasis is different in each version. In the trial summary, it is appropriately after the legalistic battle which it frames, "thus wrangled, brangled, jangled they a month" (I, 241), the Pope's judgement which provides resolution, stilling the uproar of false voices. The version ends emphatically with "Cut off his head to-morrow by this time,/Hang up his mates, two on either hand,/And end one business more" (I, 341-3). The Pope is heroically depicted, and his judgement dramatised as a swift and unequivocal retribution: "I have mastered the whole matter: I nothing doubt" (I, 328). This greatly contrasts with the subtle heroism of doubt which the Pope achieves in his monologue.

It is not only the interior dimension of the Pope's moral journey which is absent in the summary. The dissipation of his moral victory in time and opinion, drawn in Book XII, is not mentioned in the trial text: the Pope's verifiable and public judgement is the climax of that

narrative. Even the important fact that Guido had the suffrage of Rome is anonymously slipped in twenty lines after the conclusion of the summary version, as the speaker moves on to new concerns.

In the imaginative re-creation, the Pope is an inconspicuous presence simply named "a great guardian of the fold" (I, 648). Rather, it is the melodramatically dramatised horror which is paramount, and subsequently the murder is the climatic scene. "Close eyes!" says the speaker, and from there the version falls away into an anti-climactic critical view of humanity "prattling" (I, 644) away the grim fact of murder.

The dry flatness of tone in the third, impersonal version serves to all but nullify a sense of climax, and this is part of what the version is intended to dramatised. Although it is most strictly, of all the versions, a narrative form, the impersonal objective tone of the version effaces the singularity of event and character, homogenising the elements of the story through the style of representation.

In the introduction to the cast of characters, the description of the Pope is almost elegiac: "Till by the dreary relics of the west/Wan through the half-moon window, all his light" (I, 1260-1). He is shown from a new perspective, an old man wearily ruminating upon his one last task, which contrasts with the decisive judge in the trial text. Again, in contrast to the first version, the judgement itself is simply and undramatically told: "Writes some three brief lines, signs and seals the same" (I, 1263). The mode of exterior observation presents scene and character from a controlled point of view, from which motive, thought and so on may only be implied.

Moreover, the perspective of exterior observation cannot gain access to, for example, the complex moral predicament the Pope works through in his own mind: "He reads, notes, lays down the papers at last,/Muses, then takes a turn about the room" (I, 1248-9).

The climax of the introduction to the characters is that best suited to the mode of exterior narration: the physical revelation in Book XI of Guido's psychic truth: "The tiger-cat screams now, that whined before" (I, 1295). There is a terrible evocativeness in the

description of Guido's "close fetid cell" (I, 1286), a claustrophobic intensity which sets this scene apart from the others and which drives the revelation of Guido's nature, "part-man part-monster" (I, 1294), into a climactic significance.

The narrator suggests as much himself when he says, immediately after the passage on Guido, "Finally, even as thus step by step/I led you from the level of today/Up to the summit of so long ago" (I, 1330-2).

A close examination of the monologues is outside the scope of this present study, but we can agree that they also are narrative versions. The reader primarily focuses on the unconscious point of climactic revelation toward which each version moves: that Half-Rome weaves a tale about the justness of a husband's revenge while he speaks to a relative of his wife's paramour; of the nature of Pompilia's self-conceived ascension to heaven; of the Pope's recognition of the terrible duty of choice, and so on.

There is, then, to complement a series of narratives, a series of climaxes: what we may term an ongoing and serial climax. Once again, this does not mean to say we cannot differentiate the relative importance of each climax, any more than it means we cannot judge the moral quality of each speaker. We are finally ready to grant a positive value to what Caponsacchi or the Pope has to say, or to grant a greater textual importance to Guido, than to Half-Rome or the Lawyers, and the text directs us into this.

Yet each speaker is inseparable from the series, from the disruptive effect on each individually formulated text caused by the serial form: the disruptive effect is the fundamental structural similarity to which all of the speakers, beyond question of individual moral value, are subject.

Similarly, the reader must submit to a series of texts, of narrative representations, and yet "defeat" each text by moving on, reading the next one in the series, and evaluating the correspondences between a series of linguistic representations.

The four versions of Book I can be characterised as secular trial and judgement, mythic Good and Evil, factual historical narrative, and exterior observation. The disruptive effect of these versions on each other reveals that what can be known (that is, known by being conceived), is conditioned by perspective (and all that is inherent in perspective: viewpoint, desire, style of language, character and so on). Perspective itself is conditioned by the limitations of its own language. Once experience is represented in language, then that language supplants what it purports to represent. This process is continually re-enacted by the monologues.

Yet the parallel effect of a serial structure, is that a succession of insufficient texts extends the wider context of what the reader may know of the story, and not only of the story, but of language, truth and experience. Connected to this process is the realisation that there is more than one potential climax in the raw collection of facts: judgement, the horror of Good destroyed by Evil, the unmasking of Guido's true, and vicious, nature and so on.

The monologues continue the serial process -- continual beginning, successive versions, a series of climaxes; a continually extending context of what the reader may know about man, and his relation to the world.

Seriality, however, (in the context it is used in this present study) does not imply "sameness". As has already been said on a number of occasions, the reader ascribes a different moral worth, and textual importance, to each speaker. It is important to recognise that a major result of Browning's stylistically disruptive method is to foreground the difference between texts. Nor does seriality imply a sameness in the movement of the poem, a single stream from beginning to end. The serial and differentiated process of the poem, in fact, undergoes an intensification as the poem unfolds.

If, for example, we consider the Lawyers from a perspective which sees "truth" as the over-riding theme of The Ring and the Book (Altick and Loucks' "spiral" structure), then they will represent a retrograde movement away from truth. If, however, we regard the poem as an exploration of the limitations and possibilities of language, then the Lawyers

represent a new intensification of the poem's progress along a serial continuum of language -- texts: the Lawyers embody, in their carefully and deliberately constructed representations, the extremity possible to language (this side of psychosis) as a strategem shorn from connection with actuality.

The last three Books of the poem represent a further intensification, each in a different way, of this linguistic process, and in that final intensification provide the climactic culmination of the series of texts: a serial climax.

If we regard the Pope as Browning's spokesman in the poem, then we must say that the purpose of the poem is to provide, with whatever metaphysical or intellectual subtlety, a moral; if this is what Browning intended, though I do not believe it is, the action of the encompassing text of the poem acts against such an intent. In the Pope's monologue we see, rather than a conclusive moral lesson, the language of ordinary discourse intensified to its highest degree of authenticity: the Pope does not claim conclusiveness, only the necessity of choice (X, 1237).

The Pope's version is authentic precisely because it incorporates doubt and recognises its own fallibility, while confronting the need to act within that fallibility.

Altick and Loucks, who read the poem for its moral theme, find that the Pope comes the closest, of the monologuists, to truth. But the question again arises as to what sort of truth Browning is primarily concerned with in the poem. For Altick and Loucks the "truth" Browning dramatises is that religious intuition supercedes the materialism and cynicism running through the Roman society depicted in the poem.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Caponsacchi perceives Pompilia's saintliness, and together they break wrong social convention, and act intuitively according to God's transcendent will. The Pope in turn perceives the true nature of their actions, and acts with a like intuition.

Balanced against such a critical perspective is that "other" side to Browning's art: a deep and radical scepticism. The Pope is

<sup>8</sup> Altick and Loucks, pp. 69, 359-61.

concerned in his monologue with defining the limitations of man in the world, and of defining the means of moral action within those limitations, rather than with defining truth. The intuitive act, represented by Caponsacchi, is itself subjected to a sceptical evaluation by the Pope, and is found to be insufficient. It is "chance that brought him safely through" (X, 1919), the Pope says of the priest, and chance is an insufficient means for deciding moral action. Moreover, intuition itself is suspect; a bad man, as Guido exemplifies in his second monologue, may act in an intuitively bad way.

What the Pope seeks is a model for moral action which stands outside the relativities of human imperfection, and he finds this in the story of Christ: "a tale of Thee/In the world's mouth which I find credible:/I love it with my heart" (X, 1347-8).

The key element this model supplies is love, "Unlimited in its self-sacrifice" (X, 1369). But the Pope does not simply embrace this conception, rather he comes to what is, for a Pope, a radical realisation. A realisation akin, not to the artist, but perhaps to the man who fully understands the metaphorical function of art: that finally it is not the factual truth of the tale, of the fiction, which is important; what matters in terms of belief is the function of the metaphor, "so our heart be struck,/What care I,-by God's gloved hand or the bare?" (X, 1405-6).

The Pope uses the analogy of a parent explaining to a child that the sea "roars" because it is angry, or that the frost "bites": the fictive, metaphoric explanation fully expresses the truth of the experience (X, 1400-05).

As other critics have observed, the Pope is in this a radical sceptic who re-defines a positive belief in terms of its functionalism.<sup>9</sup> In this, he reconciles his scepticism with the inescapable fictiveness inherent in the way man lives in the world through language: he does so by the use of a paradox which underpins The Ring and the Book: the truth in fiction.

<sup>9</sup> Slinn, Fictions of Identity, p. 130; Shaw, Dialectical Temper, pp. 298-9.

In the serial succession of texts in the poem, the Pope enacts the most extreme intensification of language as an authentic medium through which the single consciousness may face the world. But what sets the Pope apart from the other speakers is not only the moral ideas he presents, but that while each of the other speakers, each in their own way, seeks to establish a closure, the Pope escapes closure. The monologuists attempt to create a personal conclusiveness by providing a self-defined context for experience. The Pope, however, realises and confronts the reality that he is engaged in providing a context (a context which defines the necessity for choice) and he realises, also, that his view cannot be absolute (X, 24-162), that it is a context provided amongst other contexts, and he therefore escapes the closure of his own implicit conclusiveness.

But what we must finally admire in the Pope is not the religious, or philosophical, lesson of the author, but the metaphysical capacity of the Pope's language, and the authenticity of the consciousness which gives us that language. The "truth" of the poem does not lie in the Pope's speech, only art, Browning tells us in Book XII, may tell us truth, and may tell it, only, obliquely.

The Pope can escape neither the limitations of consciousness and language, nor the disruptive series of texts of which his is a part: he may only define a personal authenticity within an imperfect world, within a disruptive play of texts. Even the most authentic consciousness is limited by the nature of consciousness, and by the limitations of its relation with the world, and this is a truth dramatised in the poem beyond any single character.

It is the nature of the world that the Pope's judgement can be and is misconstrued, disbelieved; the personal authenticity he creates cannot be known within the context of ordinary discourse: even if the Pope should speak his thoughts (as he thinks them) to a Bottini or a Guido, they would be lost. Nor can the Pope truly know the motivations of the characters; as Isobel Armstrong observes: "The Pope's account of Guido's motive as greed, revenge and self-interest is not entirely complete."<sup>10</sup> Guido, Armstrong argues, takes revenge on Pompilia because

<sup>10</sup> Armstrong, "Uses of Prolixity", p. 194.

she fails to fulfil his sexual fantasies. The Pope operates authentically within inescapable limitation, but the combined effect of the other texts in the poem also disrupts his representation by providing the texture of experience, other texts, not able to be embodied in the Pope's personally conceived context. Only the artist may escape the limitations of ordinary discourse, of the single viewpoint.

Guido's second monologue represents a parallel intensification of language, though of a type directly opposed to the Pope's. It is a text of what may be termed "profane revelation": a corrupt intensity of language. Although the Lawyers, and Guido in his first speech, ironically dramatise aspects of moral corruption, the language in these texts is of a strategic type: the speakers seek to cloak, to displace by a considered rhetorical manipulation.

In his second monologue Guido still seeks to construct fictions which will rationalise his behaviour and character. He is still, for example, a victim, but now as cuckold (XI, 916), or of his confessors' expectation that he show penitence: "Keep up the jest, lie on, lie ever, lie/I' the latest gasp of me" (XI, 414-15). He also adds a new fiction: that he is the "natural man" (XI, 961), a creature of earthly appetite: "Cried amen to my creed's one article-/Get pleasure, 'scape pain" (XI, 767-8). In this, Guido asserts, he at least acts in a way true to his nature, as opposed to the general hypocrisy (XI, 730-1).

It is beyond the scope of this present study to detail an exhaustive analysis of Guido's speeches, but I would nonetheless argue that the "fictionalising" Guido attempts in his second monologue is of a different order to the first. Despite considerations of irony, and of judging exactly how much Guido believes in anything he says in Book XI, the language of that text, compared to Book V, becomes denuded of controlled strategy and takes on the intensity of revelation.

At certain points a depravity surfaces in Guido's text which reveals more deeply the man than any comparative examples from Book V: he says of Pompilia, "Say I hated her for no cause/Beyond my pleasure to do so" (XI, 1432-3); even the son Gaetano is subsumed into Guido's predatory amorality, "My life for his!-why he, not I,/Enjoy the world" (XI, 1871-2).

Guido's text in Book XI becomes the medium for an evil man to vent black humours repressed by the rules of social conduct, and more particularly, and ironically, by his failed attempts to rise in the social order by paying hypocritical lip service to those rules. In both his use of language, and the misuse of his own qualities, Guido's evil is founded in the utmost debasement of human potentiality. His undoubted intellect is corrupted and allows him to commensensically rationalise atrocity, and a corrupt language becomes the means he uses to do so. Thus, when he supposes that he killed Pompilia simply because it gave him pleasure to do so, he can say:

Just on as much incitement acts the world,  
All of you! Look and like! You favour one,  
Brow-beat another, leave alone a third  
Why should you master natural caprice?

(XI, 1434-7)

The man who can use the nature of the world to so plausibly justify his vicious actions is, perhaps, the most dangerous of all, for plainly there is much bad in the world, and much excuse for evil.

In this, Guido is the negative image of the Pope: his language an intensification of anti-morality, the antithesis of the Pope's intensely moral language. These twin intensities are both juxtaposed against each other, forming the centre of linguistic energy in the monologues, and represent the opposite extremes of man in the world between which the monologuists fall. Both the Pope and Guido go beyond the matter of the trial to criticise the corrupt legal, religious and societal institutions of their age. But whereas the Pope seeks to personally redefine the human essence of society, by attempting to formulate a means of moral existence in a fallen world, Guido seeks only to reveal what is bad in order to define, or excuse, his own badness.

Guido's speech also vacillates across an extreme spectrum of tone, from jocular obsequiousness (XI, 2316-20) to paroxysms of hate:

I used up my last strength to strike once more  
 Old Pietro in the wine-house-gossip-face,  
 To trample underfoot the whine and wile  
 Of that Violante,-and I grow one gorge  
 To loathingly reject Pompilia's pale  
 Poison my hunger took for food.

(XI, 2399-2404)

He raises himself to bombastic heights with one last fiction, of a Guido who may be the heroic pagan warrior:

How else lived that Athenian who died so,  
 Drinking hot bull's-blood, fit for a man like me?  
 I lived and died a man, and take a man's chance

(XI, 2408-10)

But this grand fiction crumbles too. The sight of the deathly brotherhood provokes another violent switch which reveals the profane truth of Guido's being, the automatic animal urge to live: "Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,/Is-save me notwithstanding" (XI, 2418-9).

One of the effects of knowing one is to die, is to enforce the necessity of finally conceiving an identity with which to meet death, as Pompilia and the Pope succeed in doing. It is debatable whether Guido truly repents, and certain that he fails, at the last, to make an identity from the myriad of roles he has played.<sup>11</sup>

Guido's language is a cunning and violent rhetoric of personas which falls away at the final moment to a primal scream -- a cry for life, and definition, from those greater authors who may write a man: social hierarchy (the "Granduke"), the Church ("Abate and Cardinal"),

<sup>11</sup> See, eg. Slinn: Guido "commits himself to a form of psychological abdication" (p. 132); also Shaw: "This technique [Guido's] is a kind of rhetorical schizophrenia" (p. 266); also Armstrong, p. 195. For an opposite view see, eg. Roma King, *The Focusing Artifice* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968): "The last cry signals the ambivalent triumph and terror of newly achieved manhood" (p. 146).

the judge (the "Pope"), the sacred world ("Christ", "Maria", "God"), or "Pompilia", the goodness Guido hates (XI, 2424-6).

The intensity of Book XI springs not only from the hatred and amorality Guido gives voice to, but also from a chronic instability, which disintegrates strategy and reveals the failed and brutal man. One does not wish to too rigidly schematise Guido but his last speech does function as a revelation of a truth of the world: the profane truth which is an inescapable aspect of human nature, and which does not simply validate the Pope's speech, but profoundly threatens it.

Guido's monologue, in Book XI, may prove that the Pope was correct in his judgement, yet it also disrupts the context the Pope provides. The Pope recognises the reality of evil and incorporates that recognition into his metaphysic, but the disruptive effect of Guido's speech stems from an ontological necessity: no matter how high one man may ascend in fashioning a valuable morality, it is inevitably counterbalanced by the depths to which other men may sink. This does not negate the value of the Pope's achievement, it is simply the truth of the predicament in which all men live.

The wider context of the poem is thus extended by another text -- beyond judgement, closure -- to include an irresolvable aspect of human nature, and to further deepen the experience of experience which the poem provides. Rather than either Book X or Book XI being the climax of the poem, the two Books are juxtaposed intensities entering into a mutually disruptive relation, which neither negates the Pope, or absolves Guido, but which reveals the irresolvable extremes between which men and women move in the world of the poem. Book X and Book XI function as what may be termed a climactic "plateau of intensities".

Talking, in a different context, of the novel, Frank Kermode makes use of a phrase coined by Cleanth Brooks, "a pattern of unresolved stresses".<sup>12</sup> Kermode is concerned with the way in which it is the nature of literature to escape definitive closure. It is precisely this effect of unresolved stresses which results from a disruptive form, and

<sup>12</sup> Frank Kermode, "Local and Provincial Restrictions," in his Essays on Fiction (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 55.

which operates between Book X and Book XI of The Ring and the Book. We can add to such an idea an observation by another critic concerned to adumbrate the disclosural nature of literature, Roland Barthes, who observes "Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance of writing . . . His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them . . . a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation . . ." <sup>13</sup>

A pattern of unresolved stresses, a play of texts, of writings, in which no single text wins absolute predominance, such is the effect of Browning's disruptive method. Book X represents the utmost intensification of language (in ordinary discourse) as a medium for formulating morality, and Book XI represents language at its most extreme degree of amorality. These are the linguistic intensities which circumscribe the world of the poem. The texts are opposed against each other in an irresolvable way, and though we find the Pope the more authentic character, the two speeches are of an equal linguistic force -- a plateau of intensities.

As has already been suggested, Guido's grotesque performance disrupts the conclusiveness of the Pope's monologue by actualising an aspect of the world which is perpetually intransigent to morality, and which in another time and place, may just as easily escape censure. But the context Guido seeks to establish, that the world is fallen and that to act in accordance with it is natural, is disrupted by the example of the Pope, who uses a fallible tool (language) in a moral way: to define how men and women may act well in a fallen world.

Thus, the tension which results from these two juxtaposed extremities does not provide a closure: a solution or an answer, but dramatises intensely the predicament of experience.

But Browning does not leave his poem there, and neither should we. Book XII completes The Ring and the Book, but the question we must ask becomes: does Book XII close the poem?

<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in Image -- Music -- Text, Select. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142-9.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ENDINGS

If, as the previous chapter suggested, Book X and Book XI represent a plateau of linguistic intensities, then the logical conclusion may appear to be that Book XII is an anti-climax, a falling away. The living drama of the experience which coheres around the Roman murder story is dissipated through a series of versions further and further removed from the events.

Book XII, like Book I, may also appear to be an aberration in the self-contained dramatic form, the authorial intrusion, and inclusion of apparently trivial speakers, obscuring the moral themes of truth, judgment, Good and Evil, and undercutting the formal cohesion of the poem.

But Book XII, like Book I, is composed of several texts which in their disruptive juxtaposition repeat the serial form of the monologues. This allows us to see how, in a purely formal sense, Book XII may integrate with the rest of the poem. It is true that the Venetian visitor, Celestino, and the Lawyers do not, as previous speakers have done, retell the events of the story, but this difference points us to a new area of intensity -- of loss, of the extreme temporal result of linguistic deferral.

It is not, however, "truth" which is lost in Book XII, but the truth of vital human experience: not a static, conclusive, absolute truth, but the temporal, processional truth of experience which has unfolded through the textures of the poem. Browning is, here, most extremely the diffusive poet, deconstructing the world he has resuscitated.

The loss is a function of the temporal process of language, the innate deferral language effects carried to the extreme of history. Book XII disrupts the overall context of the monologues, the texture of textures they provide, by effacing it, by dissolving it. The monologues disrupted each other within the parameters of a constant reinterpretation of the same events. In Book XII, that very involvement in reinterpretation, what the reader has been led to believe is the heart of the poem, is deliberately rendered meaningless.

As each of the previous texts of the poem extended the overall context by adding another "facet-flash" to the reader's experience of man inhabiting the world through language, so Book XII extends the context to include a further reality of that experience. As language is the medium by which man conceives of the world, so it is a temporal process, perpetually deferring, dissipating the texture of experience as it formulates that texture. The complexity of experience re-created in the monologues is, yet, naught but "words and wind" (XII, 840), inevitably receding into the processional of texts, into time. It is a truth of ordinary discourse that it cannot resist temporality, and so Browning includes that truth in his poem.

In this sense, Book XII is not anti-climactic because it represents a further "unresolved stress", a further intensity of language, albeit a negative intensity, which disruptively occupies the same plateau as the Pope, and Guido in Book XI.

As Book X and Book XI are the juxtaposed poles between which the other monologues exist, Book XII dramatises an extremity which lies beyond all of the speakers in the poem -- that their drama becomes literally, nothing. Loss, of truth as Swingle would have it, or of experience as this present study would have it, is not the sole climax of the poem. The effacement of the previous texts can be dramatised, but it cannot be literally actualised for those texts are preserved by art: rather, the text of loss enters into a disruptive and unresolved contestation with the texts (the texture) which precede it. The seemingly final action of diffusion is itself disrupted by a further text -- the author's own voice -- which introduces a last, completing intensity: that the language of artistic discourse may tell (and preserve) the truth of experience, obliquely.

Book XII begins by describing the disappearance into time of the events dramatised in the poem. The language of ordinary discourse cannot resist time, but more importantly, it is the temporal medium of language itself which is identified as the agent of loss:

What was once seen, grows what is now described,  
 Then talked of, told about, a tinge the less  
 In every transmission; till it melts,  
 Trickles in silent orange or wan grey  
 Across our memory, dies and leaves all dark,  
 And presently we find the stars again.

(XII, 14-19)

Browning has no doubts about the pre-linguistic actuality of the phenomenological world, "what was seen", of the prior and inhuman nature of the world before man, before language, "we find the stars again". Similarly, he has no doubt, as the versions of Book I prove, that certain events did occur, and that the participants acted in particular ways. But his primary interest is the way existence, when it is conceived of and represented, becomes language, and becomes conditioned by the particular language of a speaker. For Browning, existence, "what was seen", "melts, trickles" away through language; existence becomes "what is now described", becomes a linguistic representation, a deferral which becomes itself inevitably subject to other deferrals "talked of, told about, a tinge the less/In every transmission". Thus, that Browning has no doubts that the events occurred, that the actors acted according to their roles, does not alter the fact that there is, and can be, no absolute representation of the drama, in language. The reader has only the texture of "talk", of description, of deferral to explore.

Book XII is similar to Book I in that the poet again re-enters the work. He is, however, no longer an ironically dramatised person in Book XII: having resuscitated the living experience of the monologues he now has, himself, a complete experience of the drama, and consequently assumes a confident, active role, implying he has experienced truth without ever directly stating what that truth is.

He continues to defer to other voices, quoting historical personages verbatim and at length for the first (extended) time in the poem. By presenting these new speakers as monologists Browning reinforces the thematic concern with the innate human inability to perceive whole experience: each of the speakers, whether thoughtful and sincere like Celestino, or morally vacuous like the Lawyers, is limited in

perspective, conclusive in intent, and a far distance from the living experience of the monologues.

More interestingly, the monologists in Book XII dramatise a series of possible endings to complete the series of beginnings which has gone before. In this way the conventional sense of completion, of closure, which may have been implicit if Browning had ended with Book XI, and certainly explicit if he had merely written his own conclusive summation in Book XII, is dissipated, the poem opened out into a forever receding history.

The previously disruptive effect of juxtaposed texts becomes altered in Book XII: the historical speakers do not disrupt each other as severely as the earlier texts. In a sense, the lesson of conflicting representations has been dealt with. Rather they disrupt, as a group, by their dissipatory tendencies, the living experience in which the reader has been immersed. The disruption the monologue-texts in Book XII suffer, results from their internal ironies, and from the active presence of the author who takes on a subversive role, interpolating caustic remarks between the speeches.

The poet introduces the Venetian nobleman with a light sarcasm: "On what pretence of busy idleness?" (XII, 29). Archangeli is ushered in with a heavy irony: "The virtuous sire, the valient for truth" (XII, 214). The ironic humour becomes even more exaggerated for Bottini: "Let who gained truth the day have handsome pride/In his own prowess! Eh? What ails the man?" (XII, 405-6).

For the first time in the poem, the text of a character is directly juxtaposed against the poet's own voice, and a disruptive effect results. But, although the poetic voice is consistent in viewpoint, it is still comprised of stylistically varied texts, each of which foreground different areas of concern.

If we return to the first paragraph (XII, 1-21) of Book XII, having established that the passage introduces the negative intensity of language as the process by which "what was seen" "melts" away, the style of the passage is densely metaphoric:

Thus, lit and launched, up and up roared and soared  
 A rocket, till the key o' the vault was reached,  
 And wide heaven held, a breathless minute-space

(XII, 2-5)

As with the first text of Book I, the lyric tone and style has the effect of making the passage a type of self-enclosed meditation juxtaposed against the more prosaic documentary concerns embodied in the quoted speeches which follow.

The ambiguous first line of Book XII, "Here were the end, had anything an end", suggests why the poet will break and extend the world of the previous monologues. It is part of the truth of the poem that the experience it resuscitates does not end with judgement and execution, but is dispersed into meaninglessness. But the ambiguity, "had anything an end", ironically comments on the closure, the final conclusiveness a work of literature is expected (by conclusive readers) to provide: a beginning, a middle and an end as the dictum goes. Such a dictum is subverted by a poem which is comprised of beginnings, and dispersed through a series of endings.

In the second paragraph the densely metaphoric style gives way to a short-lined, factual mode:

After that February Twenty-Two  
 Since our salvation, Sixteen-Ninety-Eight,  
 Of all reports that were, or may have been,  
 Concerning those the day killed or let live

(XII, 22-5)

The elegaic first passage embodies elements deeply important to the poem, and the author, in the second passage, plays with a type of mock-historicism. But the comic note, introduced in the poet's comments about the Venetian traveller (XII, 29), suggests a counter-balance to the tone of loss which begins Book XII. The author himself is an active presence who may mourn loss, and yet, ironically, humorously commentate on false viewpoints: in this he implicitly signifies the artistic presence, which may contract loss, by embodying it.

In the first quoted speech the Venetian nobleman strikes the pose of a disinterested observer. His speech makes plain that to the general Roman populace the story of Guido and Pompilia means nothing. Once again, point of view and stylistic representation combine to reformulate experience into a fiction which presents itself as, and believes itself to be, a conclusive reality.

The Pope becomes merely an old man who "totters on the verge o' the grave" (XII, 38); he becomes literally fictionalised by the speaker, made into a character in new stories: the suppositious story of who will succeed the Pope (XII, 40-48). Or more bleakly, the Pope becomes the weak pawn in a fallacious story of European power politics:

But prejudices grow insuperable,  
 And that old enmity to Austria, that  
 Passion for France and France's pageant-king  
 (Of which, why pause to multiply the proofs  
 Now scandalously rife in Europe's mouth?)  
 These fairly got the better of the man  
 Of justice, prudence and esprit de corps,  
 And he persisted in the butchery

(XII, 80-7)

As "author", the Venetian even adds some touches of character embellishment: "For, Naples born, his tastes are maritime" (XII, 53); "Or lies in stupour, scarcely makes believe/Of minding business, fumbles at his beads" (XII, 57-8).

Guido too disappears into language, into other texts: the speaker relates a story of a beggar recovering the use of a crippled limb as a saintly Guido passes, journeying to the execution (XII, 159-61). The speaker paints a picture of Guido accepting death manfully: "He begged forgiveness on the part of God,/And fair construction of his act from men" (XII, 174-5). Asking the crowd to pray for him, Guido

. . . turned to the confessor, crossed  
 And reconciled himself with decency,  
 Oft glancing at Saint Mary's opposite,  
 Where they possess, and showed in-shrine today, *shine - me*  
 The blessed Umbilicus of our Lord

(XII, 180-4)

Yet the speaker also bathetically portrays another Guido, the disappointingly ugly head displayed to the crowd: "Indeed, it was no face to please a wife!" (XII, 196). The Pope becomes a senile old man pandering to political expediency, and Guido a pious, if somewhat uncomely, gentleman.

The Venetian's speech is full of unconscious ironies which reveal his trivial gossip's nature, yet it is also a grim revelation of what has become of the experience resuscitated in the monologues.

In their respective speeches, the Lawyers merely display their moral vacuity and greedy egotism. Archangeli can only see Guido's case as a career set-back: "Success with which shall plaster aught of pate/That's broken in me be Bottini's flail" (XII, 338-9). For Bottini, Pompilia is utterly insignificant. In a new case, he is now engaged in trying to overturn Pompilia's last request, that her estate be left to her son, by proving that she was in fact guilty as Guido claimed: "Noah's-dove" will be proved "quite the other sooty scout,/ The Raven" (XII, 727-9).

The experience which was the centre of reinterpreted versions, becomes now but background detail in other stories.

Because these speeches contribute no vital information about the murder and trial, the poet's repeated insistence on their historical validity, and his decision to present them in full, rather than to merely summarise them, signifies that, once again, the poet is dramatising the ironies of point of view.

However, the ironic humour of the poet's own speech, interpolated between the found texts, suggests something more: "No, friend, this will do!" (XII, 209), says the poet after the Venetian's speech. In a strict sense, the reader does not require this authorial pointing to see the undermining ironies of the gossipy traveller's speech. The ironies of character and point of view function well enough independently. Beneath those ironies lies the thematic concern with the extreme deferral of the experience enacted in the previous monologues. And again, we can observe how the ironic voice of the author is disruptive in a way beyond the immediate irony, suggesting a counter-intensity in the poem:

of the author himself who has, like the Pope, used a fallible medium in an authentic way. He has reclaimed from history, from temporal linguistic diffusion, an intense and paradigmatic structure of experience.

Unlike the Pope, the poet has used language to escape the limitations of the self by re-creating many selves, and to escape the fallibilities of language by re-creating many texts.

Thus, against the extreme dissipation of the story, and the minor voices who reduce meaning to non-meaning, the author is a comic subversive influence: disparaging the speakers, reminding the reader of the texture which has unfolded from a battered old book, "The yellow thing I take and toss once more" (XII, 226), of the effort his task has required, "How will it be, my four years intimate" (XII, 227). The voice of the poet, rather than doomy or didactic, conveys an almost sunny irony, a confidence that the dissipation of experience of Guido and Pompilia, if not conquered, is revealed, embodied, countered, by his representation of that experience.

The playful humour is even extended to the poet's own art, and provides a further opportunity to prod the Victorian reader, for whom the nature of a fictive truth had to be so intricately validated: "Part-extant just as plainly, you know where,/Whence came the other stuff, went, you know how,/To make the ring that's all but round and done" (XII, 236-8).

As historical documents, the quoted speeches themselves present an interesting paradox. The poet takes great care to remind the reader that the voices are real: "Aquaints him, (in this paper that I touch)" (XII, 220), "Here is the first of these, part fresh as penned,/The sand, that dried the ink, not rubbed away" (XII, 233-4). The speeches of the traveller and the Lawyers dramatise the dissipation of experience in harrowing fashion, but they are placed by the author in a paradoxically disruptive framework: we read the voices as they spoke in confidential letters, and they thus provide a window onto consciousnesses long dead -- voices which live again. Against the dissipation of experience and in the act of dramatising that dissipation, the author finds and allows to live again these fallible and corrupt voices. By placing them in a new, artistic context the poet returns to life the dead, and uses them

to dramatise truth. It is the placing of language in a disruptive artistic context by the author, which redeems language, which re-creates and preserves the processional truth of experience.

Fra Celestine, the monk, is often regarded as Browning's mouthpiece in Book XII.<sup>1</sup> Although Celestino is admirable compared to the other historical speakers, it seems strange that Browning should need a mouthpiece, being as he is a vocal presence himself. The monk is, rather, a monologist subject to the same ironies of consciousness and language as the other monologists in the poem: his is an old testament view of mankind, as the style of his sermon makes clear:

-A soul made weak by its pathetic want  
Of just the first apprenticeship to sin  
Which thenceforth makes the sinning soul secure  
From all foes save itself, souls' truest foe,-  
Since egg turned snake needs fear no serpentry,-  
As ye behold this web of circumstance

(XII, 55-62)

Although Celestino has, in part, the author's sympathy, he dramatises in his speech yet another deferral of the experience of Guido and Pompilia, yet another way in which that experience disappears into linguistic representation: he uses the experience of Guido and Pompilia to write a new story, an evangelical sermon which proves the moral maxim:

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

(XII, 600-3)

Truth, argues Celestino, is reserved for heaven and is not to be found on earth. The monk is still entrapped, however, within the ironies of consciousness and language. E. Warwick Slinn has observed the

<sup>1</sup> Altick and Loucks, pp. 75, 80.

epistemological irony of the statement "God is true/And every man a liar": "In enunciating that text and claiming its truth, Fra Celestino makes himself either God or in terms of its content a liar".<sup>2</sup> But the monk is only the unwitting victim of an irony to which all men are subject in a fallen world, and which does not relate to morality (how one chooses to live in a fallen world), as Browning suggests by having Bottini, the monk's moral inferior, notice the failure of logic.

Celestino's pessimism, his belief that the world cannot provide truth, is itself disrupted by the authorial presence. The confident position of the author in relation to truth, the flashes of ironic humour, mitigate against the biblical grimness of the friar. The question revolves around what sort of truth is desired; an absolute, transcendent truth must indeed wait for heaven. Although the author later picks up and restates Celestino's evaluation of "human testimony", which has encouraged critics to link author and character, he then moves on to define how art may tell the truth of this world: the author is thus a presence which both embodies and actively works against Celestino's view.

Celestino's speech dramatises how his repudiation of the fallen world is a product of character, the priestly abdication of the common life, and the energy of his denunciation is in part motivated by lingering doubts about the sacrifices of such a calling:

For me, the weary and the worn, who prompt  
 To mirth or pity, as I move the mood,-  
 A friar who glides unnoticed to the grave,  
 With these bare feet, coarse robe and rope-girt waist,-  
 I have long since renounced your world, ye know:  
 Yet what forbids I weigh the prize forgone,  
 The worldly worth? I dare, as I were dead,  
 Disinterestedly judge this and that  
 Bood ye account good: but God tries the heart.

(XII, 608-15)

<sup>2</sup> Slinn, p. 132.

Browning does not make the friar a fool, but he makes him a man, and dramatises once more how character, and the linguistic representation of experience which stems from character, limit the perception of truth, or condition what type of truth is conceived. The friar is closer to the Pope, and to the implied author, than to Guido, yet he is significantly different from both: Celestino settles for the closure of moral definition, in part, to validate his own desire: the world is bad, so he is right to renounce it; the renunciation a defence against doubt: "Choosing obscurity, my chance was well!" (XII, 642). The Pope explores his own doubt, unravels the possibilities it suggests, and actively defines a morality based on positive function. The poet opens out a true structure of experience, rather than defines a closed truth of morality.

From a different perspective, it may appear as if Browning includes the monk to undermine the Lawyers. Yet the Lawyers' amorality is plainly obvious, as the author's comic derision makes clear. What is interesting from a contextual point of view is the way Celestino is, himself, contextualised by Bottini, entrapped within the lawyer's language.

It is not hearsay that Bottini includes in his letter, but the monk's own sermon: even in this undiluted form, and despite Celestino's valid criticisms of the law -- "The inadequacy and inaptitude/Of that self-same machine, that very law" (XII, 576-7) -- which Bottini has proved by his every action, the lawyer is untouched. The monk's words penetrate so little that Bottini can confidently quote the criticisms in full.

What is therefore dramatised is not only how impervious one man is to another's conceptions (of what is wrong and right, of what is truth, or not), but how one man, and the linguistic representations he makes about the world, becomes contextualised, becomes reappropriated -- made a text -- in another man's fiction.

There is subtle irony in this because, once again, such a process is not in itself a question of morality; it is the way of the world and, like the fallible medium of language, may be enacted in a moral or an immoral way. It is precisely the placing of other men's (and women's)

texts in a new and ironic context which is the method of Browning's art. The medium again becomes the subject of the poem; all of Browning's characters are "bad poets", unconscious re-creators.

The final irony is that Bottini becomes the unwary deconstructor of his own attempted conclusiveness: in attempting to nullify the monk's text by reappropriating it, Bottini includes a disruptive text within his own, which fractures his attempted representation by including a particular morality within his particular immorality.

After Bottini's speech the authorial voice returns to humorously note the failure of the lawyer's plan to dispossess Pompilia's heir: "Alack, Bottini, what is my next word/But death to all that hope?" (XII, 747-8). He is in no doubt of right and wrong: "Justice done a second time!" (XII, 764).

Yet the poem does not end with "justice": the poet's ambiguous reference to ending at the beginning of Book XII, "had anything an end", has been dramatised, firstly by a series of endings (the quoted texts), and then resurfaces here as the author himself presents a series of false-bottomed endings.

He says that the judgement in favour of Pompilia in Bottini's litigation is the "print that ends my book" (XII, 749), but then goes on to recount what became of the Pope. The author appears to conclude a second time when he says "And so an end of all i' the story" (XII, 775), yet he once again goes on, surmising what may have become of Gaetano. A third time the author seems to close the poem, "Such, then, the final state o' the story" (XII, 823), but though the story may be over, the poem is not, and the author continues on to complete his poem, not with questions of judgement, guilt or morality, but of art and truth. Not with the story, but with the medium.

In one sense, the series of endings presented both directly by the author, and through the speakers, displaces a well-made, or conclusive,

ending; singularity is fragmented into plurality.<sup>3</sup> In offering ending Browning offers closure, and then continues on. The short section on Gaetano is a type of "hole" in the text of the poem: the poet moves from saying "so an end of all i' the story", to opening new possibility: "What were his fancies if he grew a man?" (XII, 815). Browning dramatises that his poem is, itself, a context, and that the experience it contains cannot be simply closed off by an authorial full-stop: experience cannot be absolutely closed even by a work of art, it irrevocably leaks out into other stories, other possibility.

Thus, Book XII moves progressively from the dissipation of the re-created experience, to become increasingly concerned, once more, with the poem itself.

Browning implicitly alludes to the way the method of his art embodies the process of ordinary discourse, by placing a written text in a new context, in a way which antithetically mirrors Bottini's reappropriation of Celestino's sermon. He reproduces the grandiose latin memorial coined in Guido's honour by the murderer's sister (XII, 796-803). He thus re-emphasises a disruptive paradox in relation to the nature of his fiction: that it is based in the same process by which men and women live, and yet is not the language of ordinary discourse. He reinforces the implicit connection by making a play on the motto -- entablatured history, fact, which lies -- and the fiction, "the babble of a bard" (XII, 804), which tells the truth.

The last images Browning leaves of the story demonstrate the poet's concern with open-ended and ironic juxtaposition as opposed to conclusiveness: the one, a latin inscription singing the aristocratic glory

<sup>3</sup> For a different view of Browning's pluralism see, eg., E.D.H. Johnson, "Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe," University of Toronto Quarterly, 31 (1961), pp. 20-41; rpt. in Robert Browning's Poetry, ed. James F. Loucks (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), pp. 576-595. Johnson convincingly relates Browning's art to William James' theory of a pluralistic universe. Johnson argues that Browning conceives existence as "indeterminate and contingent process" (p. 576), and this idea directly relates to the present study. Johnson finds, however, the intuitive truth gained from "heroic individual's great suffering" (p. 592) to be the central meaning of the poem: an emphasis this present study counters by finding Browning's concern to be the relation of language to experience; a relation embodied in the form of stylistically disruptive text.

of Guido, the other, the unanswered riddle of Gaetano. "Such then is the final state of the story" (XII, 823) says the poet, yet continuing on from another possible ending, he chooses to complete the poem as he began it: by contemplating the poem itself.

In the penultimate text of the poem (XII, 823-863) the densely metaphoric style which opened Book XII, with its star imagery, and concern with dissipated experience, combines with the more humourous, conversational voice which disrupted the earlier speeches:

Did the Star Wormwood in a blazing fall  
 Frighten awhile the waters and lie lost:  
 So did this old woe fade from memory  
(XII, 824-6)

So, British Public, who may like me yet,  
 (Marry and amen!)  
(XII, 831-2)

The opposed intensities of Book XII -- the continual dissipation of experience through language in time, and the poetic dramatisation of the truth of experience (including the truth of dissipation) -- are brought together with the uniting of the two authorial styles.

Similarly, the two intensities are directly juxtaposed against each other:

This lesson, that our human speech is naught,  
 Our human testimony false, our fame  
 And human estimation words and wind.  
 Why take the artistic way to prove so much?  
(XII, 834-6)

Language, the language of ordinary discourse, "human speech", is "false", is fallible. Yet it is the language of artistic discourse, "the artistic way", which may provide the textured and variegated truth of language, man, and the world.

By turning his poem, at the last, to consider its own language and processes, rather than ending with a conclusive summation of the story, the subject, Browning moves toward a type of completion which escapes closure.

Character and event are not so much negated, as displaced; it is to his own language, within the context of all language, that the poet finally refers: this represents the last extension of the context of the poem and completes the concerns introduced in Book I, -- of the artform restating itself as a function of language.

We return to a point first introduced in Chapter One of this study: for Browning the language of ordinary discourse even in its most basic and undiluted manifestation -- of one person talking to another -- is not static and whole, but is temporal, deferred, fictive. It is not only that one man's truth may be disbelieved by another, but that such a truth, in its transmission through language and consciousness becomes reformulated, re-contextualised in another man's fiction:

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, 848-52)

Recognizing the fallibilities of language and consciousness, the ironies of the perpetual reformulation of experience, Browning seeks not to comment on, to write a truth above, experience, but to preserve and explore a structure of experience; to make the imperfect process of experience the subject and medium of his art -- "falsehood would have done the work of truth" (XII, 853).

We are brought to the paradox which underlies all of the thematic implications of The Ring and the Book: that Browning's poem is a fiction that makes truth, a linguistic artform which counters the fallibilities of language which are, in turn, the subject of that art:

Art may tell a truth  
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,  
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word

(XII, 855-7)

These crucial lines are more difficult than they may at first appear, for the formulation of "missing the mediate word" seems suited to the abstract arts of painting and music, which Browning refers to (XII, 858-61), but not to literature, being, as it is, words.

Browning is talking, here, of the language of artistic discourse which transcends the language of ordinary discourse: it can do this because it acknowledges itself to be a fiction; the artistic discourse self-consciously uses, and manifests, the "true" way man lives in the world through language, which is fictive and fallible, but in the normal course of experience unconsciously submitted to.

In using the analogy with painting Browning is concerned with the way art may "twice show truth" (XII, 858). There is figuration, the literal embodiment, "mere imagery on the wall" (XII, 859), which is the first truth of art -- that it exists, is literally present -- and the truth "beyond the facts" (XII, 862), beyond literal content, the texture of truth which the structure of art liberates, "music from your mind" (XII, 860).

Thus, when Browning says art may "do the thing shall breed the thought", he means, literally, that his art dramatises man and language, shows the processional truth of experience unfolding rather than tells a single truth; more deeply, however, Browning means that his art is processional truth: that the experience of the truth of experience which the poem provides, is inseparable from the fictional conditions of its existence in art. The artistic truth, thus, misses "the mediate word": it cannot be paraphrased, or told, it may exist only within the processional experience provided by artistic discourse.

The Ring and the Book ends as it began, by discussing itself as a poem; it ends not with closure, but with a riddle provided by the poet on his own art.

In regard, then, to the question posited earlier in this study, of how a disruptive play of texts may complete itself, the answer becomes: with an oblique riddle about the oblique strategies of the poem. Browning, at the last, escapes the conclusiveness of his own authorial voice by deferring to truth, referring truth back to the only place where it may authentically exist: within the processional texture of experience which is The Ring and the Book.

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