THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE
IN BOOKS II-IV OF
THE RING AND THE BOOK

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PREFACE

Established commentary on Robert Browning's dramatic monologue <u>The Ring and the Book</u> has largely been restricted to accounts of subjectivity. This study continues that long tradition by examining speakers' production of subjectivity, but extends the discussion to considering the political implications of the personal word. Theories of the Russian literary theorist and critic Mikhail Bakhtin are employed to observe individual speakers' constructions of selfhood. However, unlike the traditional monological model, Bakhtin's model of dialogism allows for further examination of the personal word when it inevitably encounters, and subsequently struggles politically with, social and institutional discourses. Hence, this study is distinct from the long tradition of monological criticism of <u>The Ring and the Book</u> in its examination of the personal word as political contest.

I focus upon three books that have received relatively little direct critical attention in comparison to others within <u>The Ring and the Book</u>. Books II-IV, Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid, often called the opening triad, differ from the others in the poem because the speakers act as social figures--both personal and representative of social views. These books also offer an advantage of being possibly the least critically trammelled of the twelve books that make up the poem. Furthermore, commentary which does attend to this triad almost invariably consigns these speakers to the role of chorus or supporting cast to the brighter 'stars' whose narratives follow.

Whereas standard readings of the poem have tended to privilege one or more books as a location of truth, the dialogic model allows a re-examination of the poem as a progression of dramatic monologues without the need to privilege any particular speaker's word. As a modest first step in this enterprise, this thesis examines the opening triad for evidence of a struggle through language by the speakers, at both the personal and the political levels. Bakhtin would perhaps observe that this thesis, too, now joins the political struggle of language by

becoming a prior utterance that could influence future critical commentary of <u>The</u> <u>Ring and the Book</u>.

> A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product
> of the living interaction of social forces.
>
> V.N.Vološinov

CHAPTER ONE

The Personal Word and its Political Struggle

I

The Ring and the Book[1] consists of twelve separate poems spoken by ten narrators. Criticism has traditionally assumed the authority of the single, speaking (poetic) voice. For example, critics have usually described the first and final monologues as the voice of an over-arching narrator who functions as a surrounding frame for the ten remaining poems. Recent criticism still often follows this strong tradition by treating the speaker of Books I and XII as the voice of Robert Browning himself. J.J.Joyce writes:

> Books I and XII are a sort of "ring" of creative insight which encloses the other ten monologues. Browning's voice in these two books stands as authoritative in its pronouncements on the personalities, actions, and moral natures of the other nine speakers of the work.[2]

Dorothy Mermin goes further:

> Judgement is made easy: Browning tells us what to think of the characters before they say a word, and they are never allowed to mislead or confuse us.[3]

As recently as 1987 Paul Zietlow comments that, "for good reason, Browning is only half-playful in accusing the British public of liking him not (I.1379)."[4] It is tempting and it has been traditionally acceptable to link the contents of a poem with the context of the poet's life, and then to draw significance from the comparison. On the other hand, in rejection of this approach, New Criticism eschewed recourse to biography of the poet, or to the social condition at the time

of the work's production. According to John Crowe Ransom, critics should recognize "the autonomy of the work itself as existing for its own sake."[5]

This thesis does not subscribe to either of these extremes. Instead it investigates a theory of language which posits that all utterances--spoken or written, fictive or not--are inherently dialogical. Briefly, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism suggests that a word--any word--responds to prior utterance, and that each word in turn anticipates further response. Therefore the meaning of 'reality'--including the meaning of the very people involved in creating meaning--becomes a dynamic process of struggle. A word contests previous, present and possible future attempts at imbuing it with meaning, while simultaneously proposing its own 'truth'. This continual struggle is always carried out on the site of language, and at both the personal and political levels. Bakhtin's theory enables Browning's The Ring and the Book to be considered dialogically in relation to the poet himself, or in relation to any other relative factor, be it literary, social, or historical. This thesis uses the dialogic model, first, to observe how a selection of speakers construct their own selfhood through language, and secondly, to examine how those speakers employ the personal word to engage other discourses in political contest for ideological and hegemonic supremacy.

II

The dialogic model and the monologic model differ markedly in the authority each invests in the single, speaking voice. For example, traditional criticism has tended to privilege the author's and narrator's position when attempting to locate meaning or 'truth' within a text. Behind or within dramatic monologues an 'essential' meaning has traditionally been sought. By contrast, the dialogic model--in a manner similiar to post-structuralist models of criticism--locates meaning within the process of language itself. Rather than identifying an authoritative voice through which an essential meaning may be sought, dialogic criticism focuses instead upon the political activity of language through which narrators and even authors construct themselves, and through which meaning is generated.

Traditional criticism has generally been dismissive of the role of the auditor in dramatic monologues. In <u>The Poetry of Experience</u>, Robert Langbaum's seminal text on the dramatic monologue form, he writes:

> ...it makes so little difference, as long as the speaker's attention is directed outward, whether the dramatic monologue has or has not an ostensible auditor; for ultimately the speaker speaks to understand something about himself.[6]

A dialogic model on the other hand posits the auditor in a dramatic monologue as real, not ostensible, and as always present. However, there is no requirement for the auditor to be *physically* present at the narration, and she may even be notional. A redefinition will therefore be necessary, later in this chapter, of what a 'real' auditor is within a dialogic model.

The model also contests Langbaum's notions of the autonomy and essentialism of a speaker:

> Not only does the speaker direct his address outward as in dialogue but the style of address gives the effect of a closed circuit, with the speaker directing his address outwards in order that it may return with a meaning he was not aware of when sending it forth. I say a closed circuit because the utterance seems to be directed only obliquely at the ostensible auditor, and seems never to reach its ultimate goal with him. Nor does the essential interchange take place with the auditor; for even where the auditor's remarks are implied, the speaker never learns anything from them and they do not change the meaning of the utterance. If the speaker represents one voice of a dialogue, then his other self is the essential second voice in that it sends back his own voice with a difference. (<u>Poetry of Experience</u> 191)

Langbaum's monologic model assumes that the speaker is autonomous: the "essential interchange" takes place with an "essential second voice" which is "his

other self". Dialogism challenges the notion that there is an essential self. Rather, it posits that the self is in a constant process of construction, via language, through the other (the auditor). In a sense Langbaum does allow for this process--he simply regards it as a closed, circular process. Provided one remains within the boundaries of Langbaum's assumed subjectivity, his process remains valid, but it completely ignores the role of language, which is the basis of the dialogic model. Langbaum regards the other (the "essential second voice") as a mirror which leads back to the self--it is an image produced by the self, which is an idealist model. Elsewhere, he elaborates on this "closed circuit" paradigm:

> ...the speaker directs his address outward in order to address himself, and makes an objective discovery in order to discover himself. No matter how dramatic the dramatic monologue is, no matter how far outward it moves, its development is lyrical in that the speaker does not develop outwards towards an external ideal, he does not change moral direction as a result of the circumstances; he rather makes the circumstances a part of himself as he develops inwards towards an intenser manifestation of his own nature. (200)

Langbaum's position is 'essentialist' in that he subscribes to the long-standing Western philosophical belief in a fixed centre or essence to the self, whose discovery, according to the monologic model, the dramatic monologue facilitates. This essence is a transcendent truth, the search for which has become the prime objective of many critics and readers of dramatic monologues.

In applying this monologic model to The Ring and the Book, Langbaum claims:

> All the established institutions for distinguishing right from wrong--
> the law, the Church, the authority of parents and husbands-all have
> been either entirely wrong, or if partly right have still missed the
> main point, Pompilia's absolute goodness and Guido's badness."
> (113)

These 'essential' values--right and wrong, good and bad--are those of the individual self, including Langbaum's. He marginalizes the political truths within society through his model's failure to recognize that self and society are relative. An individual can locate personal 'truth' through and relative to the ideological discourse of external structures of society. The dialogic model returns politics to the arena of critical discussion, and examines the personal word in its political contest with the external discourses of society.

Recently critics have begun questioning the monologic model in various ways. For example, E.W.Slinn illustrates how attempts by so much established commentary to separate truth from falsehood involved or produced a separation of truth (transcendence) from language (medium).[7] He contrasts this with a post-structuralist approach which locates truth, not as a product, but "as process, truth in the making, and in that process truth is both subverted by language and produced by it" (Discourse of Self 123). He explains that the poem's multiplicity results in "only a series of texts which provide the contexts for each other's function and meaning." Rather than language revealing a hidden truth or meaning, "the poem presents truth and language as interdependent, as conceptual themes interwoven through dialectical process." Slinn includes the poet/speaker of Books I and XII of The Ring and the Book in this process, whom he distinguishes from "the biological referent Robert Browning". Slinn argues that the two books are not frames that sit *outside* the piece itself; rather, the poet/speaker, as with the other speakers, is "the produced subject of the language and contents" of his own speeches (128 and 204, n18). His challenge to the monological model underscores meaning as language process, and also reinforces the loss of singular authority in this process.[8] Similarly, A.Potkay observes that criticism of The Ring and the Book "with few exceptions, unites in assigning an infallible centre of authority to the poem." He notes of the twelve books that "no one interpretation ... can claim absolute validity or transparent truth."[9] This thesis, too, treats truth as a subordinate issue, not as unimportant to the poem, but as secondary to the process of language through which the speakers construct their realities and 'truths'.

Dialogism, as a theory of individual process, applies equally to fictive as

well as non-fictive discourse. For this reason application of dialogism to speakers within the frame of a book of dramatic monologues is not a special case, but is normative. The speakers within <u>The Ring and the Book</u> must define, present and re-present themselves, *vis-à-vis* other individuals and politically within society, through language. The process for each of them and for each of us is the same, and differs only in time and space. The dramatic monologues can thus be read and studied as complex dialogues. I restrict discussion in this study to three speakers within <u>The Ring and the Book</u>--Book II (Half-Rome), Book III (Other Half-Rome), and Book IV (Tertium Quid). Each speaker is examined, first, in terms of his construction of subjectivity through his personal word. However, as their names suggest, each speaker is also the sign for ideological forces of Roman society within <u>The Ring and the Book</u>. Dialogism posits that the personal word enters into political contest with other ideological discourses as individuals define their selves through the language of external social structures. Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid usefully illustrate the personal word struggling for ideological supremacy against and through hegemonic discourses. The more overt political roles of these three narratives reveal how individual discourses overlap with the wider social and institutional discourses.

Some commentators dismiss Books II, III, and IV as mere sideshows to the main action that is to follow, rather than as the process of language through which later speakers are being 'written'. J.J.Joyce, for example, attempts to impose musical form upon Books II-XI to prove that organizational structure exists. In contrast to Slinn, Joyce begins by claiming that "monologues I and XII stand apart from the other books in that the monologist in both these poems is the persona, Robert Browning quite obviously a speaker whose function contrasts with the other voices of Books II-XI."[10] Joyce writes:

> The Monologists of Books II, III, and IV ... and Books VII, IX,
> and X ... are outsiders, characters whose knowledge of the
> murders of the Comparini family is not first hand. They are
> apologists and interpreters, each in his own way a judge of events
> in which Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia ... have been the
> actors. Each of the speakers in the first and third triads offers a

verdict of some sort on the actions of the speakers of the central triad. (303)

Dialogism would suggest that Joyce is privileging essential "events" over society's ideological construction of them. The assumption is that the "actors" (in whose play is moot!) of his second "triad" are not affected in areas such as expectation, ideology, or language by the prior raging debate within Roman society. Further, Joyce implies that the subsequent third "triad" construct their narratives independently of the six previous semiotic constructions of reality. Dialogism contends that all twelve monologues are spoken by "actors" who in turn "judge", "interpret", and *construct* events through their personal and political use of language.

Books II, III and IV of <u>The Ring and the Book</u> provide useful test cases for the dialogic model. Almost all earlier criticism of this opening traid has been from the perspective of traditional models, hence the opening triad provides ample scope for critical re-appraisal using a different model. Furthermore, even within established criticism, the three opening speakers have generally been marginalised as supporting cast to the subsequent 'main characters' whose narratives even today occupy most scholarly attention. Yet behind dialogism stands the political implications and ramifications of prior utterance upon present and future speakers. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to trace possible impact or influence from the opening triad upon subsequent narratives in <u>The Ring and the Book</u>, but in keeping with the dialogic model, the possibility of such political struggle through language remains implied. The opening triad will be examined as merely three voices within the personal and political process of a chain of dialogic utterances that extends back before, and also beyond the boundaries of <u>The Ring and the Book</u>.

III

Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas can be traced back to his early immersion in the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism, but he was not to embrace the Marburg

philosophy nor Kantianism wholeheartedly.[11] Bakhtin begins by accepting that there is an 'unbridgeable' gap between mind and world. Much of his life's work, especially in dialogism, focuses upon that gap. He neither dismisses the world in favour of only the mind, as did Hermann Cohen, leading exponent of the Marburg School. Nor does he consign the *Ding-an-sich* (thing-in-itself) concept to the realm of the eternally unknowable. For Bakhtin, the very capacity to have knowledge is based upon a process of dialogue; and, by definition, dialogue requires the existence of an other. However, the other always resides on the opposite side of the gap to the self.

Bakhtin's major premise is that "the organising centre of any utterance, of any experience, is not within but outside - in the social milieu surrounding the individual being."[12] This apparent denial of the subject is based on Bakhtin's belief that we can never see or know ourselves. Even to look at ourselves in a mirror is to look out from the mind, across a spatial gap at an object located in the outside world. We can see and know only of the other; only through the other's point of view can we gain some measure of apperception. This lack of knowledge about the self includes even our birth and death, and our physical presence at a given moment:

> My temporal and spatial boundaries are not given for me, but the
> other is entirely given. I enter into the spatial world, but the other
> has always resided in it.[13]

Everything that pertains to the individual's concept of self, beginning with gender and name, enters the consciousness through others, in their emotional and value-assigning tonality:

> I live in a world of others' words. And my entire life is an
> orientation in this world, a reaction to others' words (an infinitely
> diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them (in the
> process of initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation
> of the wealth of human culture (expressed in the word or in other
> semiotic materials).[14]

To express oneself is not merely a means to make oneself an object for another, but also for oneself (what Bakhtin calls "the actualizing of consciousness"). This rebuts any suggestion that the self is a copy or re-presentation of an other.

Bakhtin's paradigm of self and other has a further component--language itself. He writes:

> There are no "neutral" words and forms - words and forms that can belong to "no one"; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word.[15]

For the individual consciousness, language lies on the borderline (or in the gap) between one's self and the other. Bakhtin's dialogism by definition requires that at all times there must be an other if the process of apperception is to occur. But the other has no greater transcendental control of her utterances than has the self. Michael Holquist argues that the western humanist tradition of a close bond being felt between the sense I have of myself as a unique being and the being of my language (*"I* own meaning"), has an opposite in what he defines as the deconstructionist view (*"No one* owns meaning"). He argues that dialogism holds a third position (*"We* own meaning ... or ... if we do not own it, we may at least *rent* meaning").[16] Neither Holquist nor Bakhtin is suggesting that the *we* who own or rent the meaning are an accumulation; rather, their emphasis is upon the process. Dialogism's emphasis is upon the dynamic interaction between self and other, with the word as the ground of contention, the point of struggle, the mediation that is the battle.

The individual consciousness is neither an autonomous locus of meaning and identity, nor is it a passive receptacle capable of being "filled up" with the meaning and identity bestowed by *langue*. The individual consciousness is not even a hapless victim of colonisation by some hegemonic ideology of others: there always remains the privilege of psychosis. Individual consciousness gains a conception of its self through the perception of the other, but only via a shared reality conveyed through the dynamic of dialogic utterance. Utterance organises experience. It gives experience of the other--and through the other, the self--the form and specificity of direction necessary for an individual to function as such.

The word "interlocutor" is favoured in this study to describe the person being addressed. It is "one who takes part in a dialogue, conversation, or discussion".[17] The term auditor ("a hearer, listener; one of an audience") suggests a passive response to the speaker, while a dialogue requires an *active* addressee. Bakhtin defines passive response as that which has no effect whatever upon the utterance. Examples of this are rare: even an ancient ritualistic prayer (provided it can still be linguistically comprehended) is dialogic. The prayer would originally have been uttered to provoke a response among votaries, and may still trigger reactive utterances many centuries later. The speaker's need for an active participant as interlocutor is crucial to dialogism. This interlocutor need not be physically present, and may even be notional. It is this concept that prompted Holquist to insist that the plural *we* rent the meaning of language. In an interview Bakhtin explains:

> In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person
> who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her
> creative understanding--in time, in space, in culture. For one
> cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a
> whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior
> can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are
> located outside us in space and because they are *others*.[18]

The question this raises is who 'understands'--the speaker or the interlocutor? Since neither stands outside the dialogue, it follows that neither fully understands.

According to Bakhtin, each listener can understand the speaker, but cannot understand her self when she speaks. Both parties of the dialogue are structured by the process; hence mutual understanding must always reside somewhere between them. Bakhtin is aware that this approach is contrary to the received romantic notion of language and speech:

> Language is regarded from the speaker's standpoint as if there were only *one* speaker who does not have any *necessary* relation to *other* participants in speech communication. If the role of the other is taken into account at all, it is the role of a listener, who understands the speaker only passively.[19]

Bakhtin argues that terms such as "listener" and "understander", when used merely as partners of the "speaker", are fictions "which produce a completely distorted idea of the complex and multifaceted process of active speech communication." He rails against the "unified flow" graphic-schematic depictions of the speaker and listener in speech communication.[20]

> The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active responsive attitude towards it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on.... Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker. (Speech Genres 68)

Of course, Bakhtin allows for "responsive understanding with a delayed reaction [since] sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener" (69). For example, Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid each orientate their communication precisely towards such an actively responsive understanding, since each expects "response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth" (Speech Genres 69). In Other Half-Rome's case, the notional Guido of the concluding few lines is the internalised other of the speaker himself.

Bakhtin takes dialogue to its conclusion by casting the speaker in the role of respondent to some degree. She is not, he argues, the first speaker "who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe". Her role as respondent presupposes not only the existence of the language system she is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances--both by her and by others--with which her own utterances contend, build upon, or at least presume to be known to the interlocutor. Thus any utterance becomes a link in a complex network of utterances.

In looking at language, Bakhtin maintains that it is only during the process of creating an utterance that a word becomes a "spark of expression" (Speech Genres 86). That expression exists neither in the system of language nor in the objective reality surrounding us. It is only in the act of utterance--"the contact between language meaning and the concrete reality"--then, that expression (self) is constituted.

> Thus, emotion, evaluation, and expression are foreign to the word
> of language and are born only in the process of its live usage in a
> concrete utterance. The meaning of a word in itself (unrelated to
> actual reality) is ... out of the range of emotion.... [Words] acquire
> their expressive colouring only in the utterance, and this colouring
> is independent of their meaning taken individually and abstractly.
> (Speech Genres 87)

Further, Bakhtin argues that when we construct an utterance, instead of taking words from the language in their dictionary form, we usually take them from other utterances. Thus we take words from *parole* rather than from *langue*. Therefore, according to Bakhtin, a word exists for a speaker in three ways. First, it is a neutral (dictionary) word in the language which belongs to nobody in which, according to Holquist, no one owns the meaning of the word. Secondly, the word exists as an *other's* word, belonging to another person and filled with echoes of the other's utterance. Thirdly, the word exists for a speaker as her own word, for, since she is dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it becomes associated (but not imbued) with her "spark of expression". In the latter two cases the word appears to be expressive, but this

expression does not adhere to the word itself. It is only within the utterance that there is expression. From this, Bakhtin concludes that:

> ...all our utterances (including creative works), [are] filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness', varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (Speech Genres 89)

The expressiveness of words--including 'our-own-ness'--does not issue directly from the language system (*langue*), but is rather an echo of another's individual expression, which makes the word representative of another's whole utterance from a particular evaluative or ideological position. In the case of Other Half-Rome, for instance, Count Guido does not have to be physically present to be the interlocutor; the speaker already contends with the interlocutor's evaluative position and hence is already engaging in a dialogue. Before Other Half-Rome spoke, utterance existed.

Utterance already exists with regard to the contents of each of Books II, III, and IV. The murders have already been subjected to societal and cultural assessment. Indeed, in ideological terms they had already been assessed before they occurred, or society would not have had the language with which to discuss them. Therefore, in this sense any utterance is a political re-assessment, as Bakhtin notes:

> The speaker is not the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time. (Speech Genres 93)

Half-Rome's opening line, "What, you, Sir, come too?" (II.1), is part of a greater dialogue. Half-Rome's speech is a rejoinder in a larger utterance of twelve books about the Roman murders. Thus from a reader's point of view, the "come to what" query implicit in Book II is part of a dialogue that began in Book I. Were

we to take Book II in isolation, the same argument holds, except that we readers would not yet understand to what Half-Rome was referring. The past participle "come" implies an auxiliary "have" which has been deleted. Coupled with the adverb "too", this question assumes prior knowledge. Both Half-Rome and his interlocutor have arrived at the Lorenzo Church as a result of prior common knowledge. Half-Rome's rejoinder is in response to a prior utterance that they both share. Half-Rome's sentence is an anaphoric reference to received knowledge prior to the dialogue between him and his interlocutor. Bakhtin would claim that it *must* be anaphoric, or the two could not communicate; indeed, it must always be anaphoric because all utterances have dialogic undertones, even if only at the level of *langue*.

In terms of the future, Half-Rome speaks in anticipation of an active response from the interlocutor. That response may be only an active responsive understanding, but nevertheless the interlocutor's activity will affect Half-Rome's narrative. Half-Rome serves notice in his first line that he has purpose in mind by parenthetically noting, "Just the man I'd meet". Although we do not know this till later, he veils a warning to his interlocutor shortly after when he refers to *Honoris causâ* as the reason for Violante's horrific wounds. Within a few lines of the beginning of Half-Rome's narrative, we have evidence that it refers backwards (Half-Rome intends actively reassessing and reinterpreting knowledge that both he and his interlocutor share) and it refers forwards (Half-Rome has persuasive designs over his interlocutor).

Other Half-Rome's interlocutor is, as we shall see in Chapter Three, marginalized to the point of near-invisibility. Even if we accept his physical presence, his role in Book III conforms to that of Other Half-Rome's internalised other. The interlocutor may be seen in the guise of the like-minded public of Other Half-Rome; Book III, therefore, assumes its identity as--simplistically--the voice of those who side with Pompilia. An argument against a dialogic reading of Book III would suggest that Other Half-Rome's speech is simply a monologue to confirm the speaker's thoughts and attitudes. Presumably, this entails Other Half-Rome *talking to himself*. But is this not tantamount to a dialogue between aspects of himself? Within his self he is divisible into speaker and interlocutor--

self and other. Furthermore, if attitudes are to be confirmed, they necessarily had to exist prior to the process of confirmation. Therefore they may be traced back to prior utterance. If the prior utterance was by Other Half-Rome himself at some earlier point, then a dialogue still exists between the present speaker and an earlier self. The Pope, for example, adopts this last dialogic process in Book X.

Alternatively, if Other Half-Rome is using the speech of Book III not to confirm existing attitudes but to persuade himself, then the utterance becomes *per se* a dialogue between contending voices within. Each "self" would then represent differing discourses drawn from within society, or from different temporal selves within his consciousness, and each would speak in that voice. In either of these apparently non-dialogic arguments, Other Half-Rome's utterance of Book III involves an internal debate whose conflict requires the existence of prior utterance and of competing selves. The voices of those in Book III who side with Pompilia against Guido, and whose utterances we detect as undertones to that of Other Half-Rome, may then be defined dialogically as the hegemonic inner sociality of the speaker.

IV

The dialogic model suggests that the most obvious struggle taking place at any given time in The Ring and the Book is at the level of the individual. This chapter argues that Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid engage in elaborate dialogues with interlocutors who are either present, or are notional, but are nonetheless equally 'real' in terms of dialogic effect. The dialogues are not of choice; they are necessary for consciousness to occur within each individual.

Thus far I have argued that the other is necessary for the self to construct a personal identity. To test this model, we need to ponder the consequences of a speaker who is not able to conduct a dialogue. Suppose a speaker were unable to locate an interlocutor on the literal level. Would it be likely (or even possible)

that she would also not be able to conjure up a notional partner capable of acting as interlocutor?

D.K.Danow, following Bakhtin, observes that a restriction of dialogic interaction "bears a certain tragic potential, borne out repeatedly in the linked realms of the personal and political, where violence as a response--verbal or otherwise--represents the negative correlative of dialogue."[21] Presumably, the frustrated and violent response of Guido represents the failure of an inner voice to engage in dialogue. Violence would then become his only means of communication. Bakhtin believes that it is an essential characteristic of the word (and human beings) to communicate:

> [It is] the nature of the word, which always wants to be *heard*, always seeks responsive understanding, and does not stop at *immediate* understanding but presses on further and further (indefinitely).[22]

This requirement to be heard is never more obvious than at the conclusion of Book XI, when "the word ... fears the third party [here, the Pope] and seeks only temporary recognition (responsive understanding of limited depth) from immediate addressees" (Speech Genres 127). But instead, Guido receives no response, and is driven to despair. He searches for any word "out of the world of words" (XI.2416) that will engage his interlocutors in dialogue, but without success. Bakhtin believes that an individual must be heard in order to exist. "*To be* means *to communicate*. Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered."[23] Guido's babble becomes monologic as he desperately seeks recognition through others:

> I am yours,
> I am the Granduke's - no, I am the Pope's!
> Abate, - Cardinal, - Christ, - Maria, - God,...
>
> (XI.2422-24)

A dialogic reading suggests that it is at the ellipsis in line 2424 that Guido is

destroyed as a self. Bakhtin wrote that "for the word (and consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a *lack of response*" (Speech Genres 127). The irony of Guido's concluding line--"Pompilia, will you let them murder me?" (XI.2425)--is, in fact, the establishment of dialogic relations between Guido and Pompilia, which is necessary for Guido's consciousness and identity. It is not relevant that the physical woman Pompilia is dead. In the absence of any response from the others to whom he directs his utterances, Guido constructs an internalised Pompilia who will respond as an *other* to his *self*. Even the signified God is no longer available to him as an other, presumably because of ideological restrictions placed upon Guido by a hegemonic inner sociality. His constructed Pompilia becomes active ("let"), and he has become dependent upon her. He defines his dependence through her. Guido has reconstructed himself through dialogic interaction with Pompilia.

We have observed the failure of the word to be heard, and the lengths an individual will go to receive recognition. Bakhtin was adamant on this point:

> A single person, remaining alone with himself, cannot make ends
> meet even in the deepest and most intimate sphere of his own
> spiritual life, he cannot manage without *another* consciousness.
> One person can never find complete fullness in himself alone.
> (Dostoevsky 177)

Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome and Tertium Quid are no less affected by their process of construction of self through the other. None of the three faces the possibility of the gallows. Yet in dialogic terms, failure by them to be heard still represents a kind of death. Each attempts to constitute himself through language as an identity, and must contend with opposing voices and ideologies. If we read Books II, III, and IV in this manner, we see the texts not as reflections of the speakers' fixed characters, but as the process itself of character creation. Slinn argues that in reading monologues, we are required "to shift our focus, not to read language as an expression of a speaker's character, as a representation of belief, but to follow the processes by which a 'character' ... is constituted in language."[24]

This process of creation and presentation of self requires another, and the interlocutors of Books II, III, and IV fulfil this dialogic role for the speaker. "To be means to be for another and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*" (Dostoevsky 287).

V

Chapters Two, Three and Four each examine how the speakers of Books II, III, and IV attempt to construct themselves on a personal level *vis-à-vis* their interlocutors and through the personal word. However, taken within the context of The Ring and the Book, Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid compete for ideological supremacy. As their names suggest, they represent societal forces that are in constant hegemonic friction. Unless physical violence erupts, the battle is fought out at the site of language. Yet even when physical violence occurs--such as with the murder of the Comparini--comprehension, reaction and interpretation of the physical events can be made only through language. Living in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Bakhtin made the same observation when he wrote that the "sign becomes an arena of the class struggle."[25]

The struggle for ideological dominance in Books II, III, and IV provides society with more than just a later received version of events. Subsequent speakers are in the process of being constructed through language. They will, in their turn, respond through language that has already been ideologically loaded, and they will speak as people who already have meaning. Hence, when Pompilia later speaks in Book VII, it is not as a *tabula rasa*. She has not literally heard Books II, III, and IV, but her speech contests politically the discourses of external structures which are ideologically opposed to hers. Pompilia is not a "blank page"[26] on which she writes her own 'truth'. Her personal word struggles politically through the medium of language which is already ideologically loaded, to establish her own version of reality relative to the anticipated ideological

positions of Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid. Therefore each chapter concludes by examining the personal word of the speakers for evidence of political struggle.

This study is distinctive in its examination of the political implications of the personal word. Established commentary on The Ring and the Book has generally been restricted to accounts of subjectivity. Dialogism provides a necessary and useful model with which to examine the individual's construction of selfhood. However, unlike the monological model, dialogism also allows the political element to be introduced. Examination of political struggle for meaning through language can be extended indefinitely. Critics may choose to include social, historical, biographical, and even academic politics against and through which the speakers of The Ring and the Book must struggle in their language. However, this more modest study restricts itself to the opening triad of speakers, and purports to highlight only a few major skirmishes in the politics of language. The word itself, according to Bakhtin,

> is neutral with respect to any specific ideological function. It can carry out ideological functions of *any* kind.... The reality of the word, as is true of any sign, resides between individuals.... (Marxism 14)

Hence, truth belongs to the realm of dialogue, and becomes itself contextual. On this basis we turn from truth to the language itself, and to the individuals who as signs themselves struggle for personal, ideological and political identity and supremacy in the arena of language.

Notes

1.   Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book (London: Penguin, 1971). All subsequent quotations from the poem in this thesis are taken from, or conform to, the Penguin Classics edition, reprinted 1990.

2.   J.J.Joyce, "Music's Ternary Form as Organizing Principle for Monologues II-XI of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*," Victorian Poetry 18 (1981): 302.

3.   D.Mermin, The Audience in the Poem (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1983) 64.

4.   P.Zietlow, "The Ascending Concerns of *The Ring and the Book*: Reality, Moral Vision, and Salvation," Studies in Philology 84.2 (1987): 202.

5.   M.H.Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1981) 117.

6.   R.Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: Norton, 1957) 190-91.

7.   E.W.Slinn, The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry (London: MacMillan, 1991).

8.   It is beyond the scope of this thesis, but dialogism would have no difficulty responding to arguments relating to the authority or otherwise of Browning's (singular) voice in The Ring and the Book. Briefly, the argument would run that he was defining himself as a Victorian poet in anticipation of reaction from his "British public", and through the language of the times. Further, he was responding to the many different voices contained in the *Old Yellow Book* written in Italy about 170 years earlier. Within each of the *masks* that he donned to write each persona would be discerned the myriad of voices--social, literary, critical, historical--that makes up each dialogue between Browning and us. Bakhtin's Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, which deals in great detail with the author-listener-hero dynamic in the novel, suggests a parallelism between literary character and real-life individual. Each must author her self in response to the authoring word of the social milieu, through the temporal and spatial context of language, and in anticipation of future utterance. The argument becomes circular: Browning as speaker becomes no more, no less a different and independent character in each of the 12 books, than if we begin with the premise that each speaker *is* an individual on whose conversation we eavesdrop. In other words, the lives of both Browning and the speakers in The Ring and the Book are texts responding in similar ways to language.

9.   A.Potkay, "The Problem of Identity and the Grounds for Judgement in *The Ring and the Book*," Victorian Poetry 25 (1987): 143, 148.

10.   "Music's Ternary Form...," 301-2.

11.   Bakhtin's education and philosophical background is well documented in his biography: K.Clark and M.Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1984). As a result of the critical acclaim that the translation of Rabelais and His World received in the West in 1968, other works by Bakhtin--dating in some cases back to the 1920s--were 'discovered' and progressively translated. Ironically, only then did he become generally known throughout the USSR too. Works of disputed authorship by Vološinov and

Medvedev are generally now either jointly attributed, or cited under the others' names as *noms de plume*. One major treatise on Goethe, similar to those on Rabelais and Dostoevsky, has been irretrievably lost: Bakhtin evidently used the unpublished manuscript for cigarette papers during one particularly harsh period of Stalinist exile. My understanding is that apart from minor essays and working notes, the bulk of Bakhtin's work is now available in English.

12.   V.N.Vološinov, <u>Marxism and the Philosophy of Language</u> (New York: Seminar Press, 1973) 93.

13.   M.M.Bakhtin, <u>Speech Genres and Other Late Essays</u> (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 147.

14.   <u>Speech Genres</u> 143.

15.   M.M.Bakhtin, <u>The Dialogic Imagination</u> (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 293.

16.   M.Holquist, "The Politics of Representation," <u>Allegory and Representation</u>, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981) 163-4.

17.   <u>The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary</u> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). All subsequent definitions will be sourced in the text as SOED.

18.   M.M.Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff", <u>Speech Genres</u> 7.

19.   <u>Speech Genres</u> 67.

20.   Bakhtin's theories anticipate contemporary research which questions the basis for traditional sender-receiver models of communication. See for example, Denis McQuail <u>Mass Communication Theory</u> (London: Sage, 1987).

21.   D.K.Danow, <u>The Thought of Mikhail Bakhtin</u> (London: Macmillan, 1991) 64.

22.   <u>Speech Genres</u> 127.

23.   M.M.Bakhtin, <u>Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics</u> (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 287.

24.   E.W.Slinn, "Some Notes on Monologues as Speech Acts," <u>Browning Society Notes</u> 15.1 (1985): 8.

25.   <u>Marxism</u> 23.

26.   See Susan Gubar, '"The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity,' in Elizabeth Abel ed., <u>Writing and Sexual Difference</u> (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 73-93.