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THE RING AND THE BOOK

**BROWNING, POETIC VOICE,
AND
THE QUESTION OF "OBJECTIVITY"**

by

PATRICK CAMPBELL BEDSON, B.A

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of **ENGLISH**

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

December 8, 1995

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THE RING AND THE BOOK
**BROWNING, POETIC VOICE,
AND
THE QUESTION OF "OBJECTIVITY"**

submitted by Patrick Bedson
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

T. Henighan, Thesis Supervisor

R. Lovejoy, Chair, Department of English

Carleton University
January 19, 1996

In 1835, Paracelsus was published. It was the first work to bear Browning's name. Although it sold poorly it was received well in literary circles. Two years later Browning wrote his first play - Strafford, an historical play following the conventions of Elizabethan pieces of the same genre. Pearsall writes that it was induced by actor-producer Charles Macready, whose verdict of the drama was

that Strafford had 'truth of character' but also 'meanness of plot, and occasional obscurity' ... This paradox of the lofty man who falls because of his loftiness was to appear in all of Browning's plays and much of his other writing. But the concept alone is not enough to save the play of Strafford. Its plot is strained, its scenes rigid and static, and its language marred by broken syntax and skewed semantics. (Robert Browning 38)

Strafford lasted for only five performances.

Browning's next publication was a critical disaster. Sordello (1840), written in six books, was begun in 1833 and was intended to clarify the psychological issues raised in Pauline. "He wanted simplicity. His poem, he strangely thought, would be 'more popular and perhaps less difficult' than either Pauline or Paracelsus." Obviously, Browning was wrong, for even critics in favor of the poem could find no unity or progress within it. "The effect of its confusion on Browning's swiftly developing career was disastrous. Aphorisms and bon mots on Browning's pretentiousness and obscurity swept through the reading public" (Pearsall, 29, 31). G.K. Chesterton, in Robert Browning (1903), writes that Sordello's reception "was perhaps best expressed by Carlyle, who wrote to say that his wife had read Sordello with great interest, and wished to know whether Sordello was a man, or a city, or a book" (34). Chesterton expands further by saying, "There had been authors whom it was fashionable to boast of admiring and authors whom it was fashionable to boast of despising; but with Sordello enters into literary history the Browning of popular badinage, the author whom it is fashionable to boast of not understanding" (35). The obscurity and supersubtlety of Sordello clouded Browning's reputation for more than 25 years.

From what appeared to be a hopeless situation and an even worse position to be caught in, Browning slowly extracted himself from the post-Sordello quagmire of criticism. His publisher, Edward Moxon, suggested that Browning release his work in a series of

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Chapter 1

THE GENESIS AND GESTATION OF *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

The Ring and the Book, often referred to as Robert Browning's "magnum opus", is now 126 years old and is still as controversial a piece of work as it was with the Victorian public and critics when first published in 1868-69. However, except for some specialized students of literature, enthusiastic Browning scholars, and those fortunate enough to have come across this jewel in the history of literature's crown, the poem is relatively unknown, seldom studied, and virtually forgotten in the late twentieth century.

Browning's continual development as a dramatic poet reached its pinnacle with The Ring and the Book. Critical debate has continued over several points in the poem, the "ring and book" metaphor being one of the most discussed and controversial. Through the use of his highly-evolved dramatic monologue, Browning presents us with twelve successive monologues, each one presenting a different perspective of the truth. However, Book I ("The Ring and the Book") and Book XII ("The Book and the Ring") have been virtually ignored by most critics because they believe that Browning himself is the speaker and is, therefore, merely introducing the poem's characters and then tying up loose ends in a conclusion.

My contention is that Books I and XII provide the cornerstones for The Ring and the Book and that the monologuist is *not* Robert Browning, but an exaggerated projection of himself, embodying the traits and characteristics which had been attributed to him by his critics over the previous 35 years of his career. Browning had developed the skill of being able to project "voice" objectively to such a degree, that he easily created a "pseudo-Browning" which has clearly baffled and outwitted his critics for the last 120 years or so. In order to clarify the issues raised in this interpretation of Books I and XII, it is necessary to look at Browning's development as a dramatic and objective poet, and to detail how The Ring and the Book came to be written.

Also, an examination of the poem's Victorian criticism and some of the more widely debated topics discussed since the publication of Hodell's translation of the Old Yellow Book in 1908 will be explored. This criticism is crucial to an understanding of how Browning's use of "voice" has been misunderstood, and therefore, essential to my interpretation of the projected poet's role in Books I and XII.

Dr. Ezzat A. Khattab's study of 1977 - - The Critical Reception of Browning's "The Ring and the Book", 1868-1889 and 1951-1968 - - gives a detailed account of several of the varying reviews and periodicals written about the poem since 1868. One of the most generous in its praise came from Robert Buchanan, writing for The Athenaeum (March 29, 1869). He wrote

We must record at once our conviction, not merely that The Ring and the Book is beyond all parallel the supremest poetical achievement of our time, but that it is the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare (399)

He continued by saying that he regarded it as "the highest existing product of modern thought and culture" (400)

Modern critics, too, have given The Ring and the Book a high ranking on the scale of English poetry. For example, William O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment (1959), called the poem "the most massive, if not the most important contribution to Victorian poetry" (213). And in 1968, Norton B. Crowell referred to Browning's epic as "the greatest poetic work of art . . . of the nineteenth century" (The Convex Glass: The Mind of Robert Browning, 182). Even though the critics have been far from unanimous in their readings and interpretations of the poem over the years, The Ring and the Book has definitely made its mark and has left an indelible impression on English literature (both Victorian and Twentieth Century).

One day in June 1860, at a marketplace in Florence's Lorenzo Square, Browning came across an old yellowed book at a bookstall. The contents of this book included a collection of documents, pamphlets, and letters of the court proceedings concerning a

controversial Italian murder-case from 1698 - over a century and a half old. The title-page of what came to be known as the Old Yellow Book, and which became Browning's primary source for The Ring and the Book, reads as follows

A Setting - forth
of the entire Criminal Cause
against
Guido Franceschini, Nobleman
of Arezzo,
and his Bravoes,
who were put to death in Rome,
February 22, 1698
The first by beheading, the other four by the gallows.

Roman Murder-Case
In which it is disputed whether and when a Husband
may kill his Adulterous Wife without
incurring the ordinary penalty.
(OYB, title page, trans C W Hodell, 1908)

Browning saw the book, cried "Stall!", paid a lira and made it his own

Here it is, this I toss and take again,
Small quarto - size, part print part manuscript,
A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since
Give it me back! The thing's restorative
I' the touch and sight. (l. 84-90)*

The story which led to the murder trial and execution of Count Guido Franceschini, and ultimately, to Browning's writing The Ring and the Book is fairly straightforward and simple. A.K. Cook, in A Commentary Upon Browning's "The Ring and the Book", says that "Browning squeezed almost every drop of fact or alleged fact that [the OYB] could yield" (xix).

* All citations follow the text and line numbering of the Penguin edition of The Ring and the Book, ed Richard D. Altick, 1971.

The "facts" of the story contained in his source book are: In 1693, forty-six year-old Count Guido Franceschini, a poor nobleman of low rank, married Francesca Pompilia Comparini, a thirteen year-old child who had been brought up as the daughter of Pietro and Violante Comparini (both sixty-six years of age) in Rome. After the marriage, Count Guido and his young bride returned to his home in Arezzo where they lived together unhappily for three years. But both the Comparini and the Franceschini had misrepresented their cases to each other. The Comparini (the domineering Violante in particular) had wanted their "daughter" to marry into nobility so that they could share and enjoy the status and privilege attached to the transaction. They soon found out that the Count had been less than honest about his financial condition and that he was not at all a respected member of the nobility.

Guido had received a considerable sum through Pompilia's dowry and when the Comparini learned of the deception, they filed suit against the Count for the return of the dowry on the grounds that Pompilia was not really their daughter. Pompilia's mother had been a prostitute who had sold her baby to Violante sixteen years earlier. Violante had bought the child in order to gain an inheritance which had been left to them on one condition - that she and Pietro had a child. Everyone believed that the fifty-three year-old couple had had a baby girl - even Pietro.

Guido had deceived the Comparini and now the Comparini had returned the deed by putting Guido on the receiving end. The vindictiveness grew. According to Pompilia, Guido treated her cruelly, and according to Guido, Pompilia was a disobedient and unfaithful wife. Virtually a prisoner in her new home, Pompilia attempted to escape three times, but each time she tried she was told to return to her husband and perform her wifely duties. This changed when a young Canon - Guiseppe Caponsacchi - agreed to help her flee Arezzo to escape her husband's "prison", and return her to the safety of her foster parents' home in Rome.

Their plan was working until Pompilia's fatigue forced them to take a room in Castelnuovo, a small town fifteen miles from Rome. It was here that Guido caught up to the couple and had them both charged with adultery (because they had run away and had been found together). Five months later the case was tried in Rome. The adultery charge was never proven. Caponsacchi received a sentence of three years to be spent at Civita Vecchia, and Pompilia was to be shut into the nunnery of the Scalette (the Convertites) a place for penitent women. But Pompilia was pregnant and was allowed to serve her time (under bond) at the house of the Comparini in Rome. Having failed through the courts to regain the dowry, then to find his "adulterous" wife and her lover given such light sentences, and finally, to see his wife being given the privilege to pay her "penalty" in the comfort of her so-called parents' home, was too much for Guido to accept. He felt that he had not only been betrayed by the Comparini and his own wife, but now, by the entire judicial system.

Eight months after her flight from Arezzo, on December 18, 1697, Pompilia gave birth to a son, Gaetano. Exactly two weeks after the birth, on January 2, 1698, Guido arrived at the home of the Comparini with four accomplices. The murderers quickly killed the elderly couple (Violante quite savagely) and Pompilia was left for dead with twenty-two stabs wounds to her body. Miraculously, she survived until January 6.

On their return route to Arezzo, Guido and his paid cohorts were easily captured and arrested. They were brought before the tribunal of the Governor and accused of murder. There was never any doubt that Guido had master-minded the triple-murder. He readily admitted to it, justifying himself by pleading "honoris causa".

In A Commentary, Cook states that:

the issues raised at the trial were more perplexing. Should a confession be forced by torture from the prisoners? Did they kill their victims to avenge Guido's outraged honour, and was that an extenuation, if not a justification, of the killing? Had Guido's honour been, in fact, outraged? Was the killing attended, or not attended by aggravating circumstances? Such were the questions discussed, in a series of pleadings, by the state officials who appeared in the case; on these questions 'wrangles, brangled, jangled they a month' or rather more. At

last, on February 18, the Court gave judgment; it condemned the accused, and after an appeal to the Pope, promptly dismissed, they were executed on February 22. (xvii-xviii)

These are the facts of the story which Browning winkled from the Old Yellow Book. From the moment the poet paid his "lira" he began to read his new possession. He writes:

Still read I on, from written title-page
To written index, on, through street and street,
At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at the Bridge,
Till, by the time I stood at home again
In Casa Guidi by Felice Church,
Under the doorway where the black begins
With the first stone-slab of the staircase cold,
I had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth
Gathered together, bound up in this book,
Print three-fifths, written supplement the rest. (l. 110-119)

The bound collection of material in the Old Yellow Book contains twenty-two pieces. There are eighteen printed pamphlets, three hand-written letters addressed to a Florentine lawyer named Francesco Cencini, the collector of the material, who also "arranged the pieces that had reached him in chronological order, adding ... a title-page and an index" (Cook, xix), and a written transcript of the sentence pronounced upon Pompilia following her trial at Arezzo.

The letters were "written from Rome on the evening after Guido's execution, telling of the three-day delay in favor of Guido and the Pope's rejection of his appeal - in part the basis of Book XII" (Altick, from "General Notes" in The Ring and the Book, 629).

The last item in the collection was brought about by a suit against Pompilia by Guido for "flight and adultery". The decision, "handed down by the Tuscan court in December 1697, sentenced Pompilia to life imprisonment. But she was then, of course, under Roman jurisdiction" (Altick, "General Notes" in R. and B., 633).

Of the eighteen printed pamphlets, fourteen are official documents which deal with the trial of Guido and his accomplices for the murder of Pompilia and the Comparini. Eleven of these concern points of law. Cook writes that these are "pleadings, five of them by counsel for the prosecution, the "Advocate" or "Procurator" of the Fisc (Bottini or

Gambi) six by counsel for the defense, the "Procurator" or the "Advocate" of the Poor (Arcangeli or Spreti)" (Commentary, xviii) The other three documents are selections containing evidence, "mainly affidavits and letters from persons involved in the events or witnesses to them "(Altick, "Notes" in R. and B., 629) Cook adds, "Among these depositions the most important are those of Pompilia and Caponsacchi" (Commentary, xviii)

There are two "anonymous" pamphlets included in the Old Yellow Book According to Cook, these unofficial documents probably suggested to Browning the basis of Books II ('Half-Rome') and III ('the Other Half-Rome') The two anonymous pamphlets were printed at Rome during the course of the trial in the interests of the defense and the prosecution respectively; they were addressed to the general public, but, though more popular in style and substance than the pleadings, were probably the work of the advocates engaged. (xviii)

The final two printed pamphlets concern the petition to clear Pompilia's reputation following the murder-trial and Guido's death. The first was an application for "the re-integration of the fame and reputation of Pompilia", and the second was "an 'Instrumentum Sententiae Definitivae' which granted the application" (Cook xviii) These two pamphlets prevented Pompilia's estate from going to the Convertite nuns

These are the contents of the Old Yellow Book, and it was from this book that Browning learned the facts of the Franceschini murder-trial This book was Browning's primary source for The Ring and the Book.

That, was this old square yellow book about
 Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged,
 Lay gold, (beseech you, hold that figure fast!)
 So, in this book lay absolutely truth,
 Fanciless fact, the documents indeed,
 Primary lawyer-pleadings for, against,
 The aforesaid Five; real summed-up circumstance
 Adduced in proof of these on either side,
 Put forth and printed, as the practice was,
 At Rome, in the Apostolic Chamber's type,
 And so submitted to the eye o' the Court

Presided over by His Reverence
 Rome's Governor and Criminal Judge, - the trial
 Itself, to all intents, being then as now
 Here in the book and nowise out of it (I 140-154)

But work on the poem did not begin immediately upon finding the Old Yellow Book as the poet in Book I claims. In fact, the actual writing of The Ring and the Book began in 1864, four years after his discovery of the book. There are several reasons for the "delay"

After a courtship of over a year, Browning, 34, secretly married Elizabeth Barrett, 40, on September 12, 1846. One week later they left England for Pisa, and in April, 1847, they moved to Florence, where Casa Guidi became their home for the remainder of their marriage. While Elizabeth enjoyed a great deal of popularity and fame through her poetry, Browning seemed to live somewhere in her shadow, never receiving the public acclaim he deserved. He generously and genuinely admitted, even after his popularity rose to the top in later years, that Elizabeth was and would always be the better poet. In The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846 (London, 1899), Browning compares their writing styles by saying that Elizabeth's poetry was like "white light" whereas his poetry was "prismatic hues". While hers was direct and full, his was oblique and partial, both styles reflecting their own personalities. Elizabeth replied, telling him that "you have not written the R B poem yet - your rays fall obliquely rather than directly straight. I see you only in your moon" (I, 17, 22). And this apparently was true. Before meeting Elizabeth Barrett, Browning had published several works but with little success. At the age of 21, in 1833, his first published work, Pauline, went unsold with little notice. In fact, this confessional piece was a complete failure. The poor reception of the poem was a major turning point for the young Browning, because from this time forward, he decided to present objective, dramatic characters in his verse rather than simply stressing himself and his thoughts. "He had determined to cast his future studies of sensitive or creative souls in the third person, 'so that reflections' would not attach to his own personality" (Robert B. Pearsall, Robert Browning (1974), 28).

In 1835, Paracelsus was published. It was the first work to bear Browning's name. Although it sold poorly it was received well in literary circles. Two years later Browning wrote his first play - Strafford, an historical play following the conventions of Elizabethan pieces of the same genre. Pearsall writes that it was induced by actor-producer Charles Macready, whose verdict of the drama was

that Strafford had 'truth of character' but also 'meanness of plot, and occasional obscurity' ... This paradox of the lofty man who falls because of his loftiness was to appear in all of Browning's plays and much of his other writing. But the concept alone is not enough to save the play of Strafford. Its plot is strained, its scenes rigid and static, and its language marred by broken syntax and skewed semantics. (Robert Browning 38)

Strafford lasted for only five performances.

Browning's next publication was a critical disaster. Sordello (1840), written in six books, was begun in 1833 and was intended to clarify the psychological issues raised in Pauline. "He wanted simplicity. His poem, he strangely thought, would be 'more popular and perhaps less difficult' than either Pauline or Paracelsus." Obviously, Browning was wrong, for even critics in favor of the poem could find no unity or progress within it. "The effect of its confusion on Browning's swiftly developing career was disastrous. Aphorisms and bon mots on Browning's pretentiousness and obscurity swept through the reading public" (Pearsall, 29, 31). G.K. Chesterton, in Robert Browning (1903), writes that Sordello's reception "was perhaps best expressed by Carlyle, who wrote to say that his wife had read Sordello with great interest, and wished to know whether Sordello was a man, or a city, or a book" (34). Chesterton expands further by saying, "There had been authors whom it was fashionable to boast of admiring and authors whom it was fashionable to boast of despising; but with Sordello enters into literary history the Browning of popular badinage, the author whom it is fashionable to boast of not understanding" (35). The obscurity and supersubtlety of Sordello clouded Browning's reputation for more than 25 years.

From what appeared to be a hopeless situation and an even worse position to be caught in, Browning slowly extracted himself from the post-Sordello quagmire of criticism. His publisher, Edward Moxon, suggested that Browning release his work in a series of

pamphlets With financial backing from Browning's father, the Bells and Pomegranates series in eight pamphlets began, starting with Pippa Passes in 1841 and ending with Luria and A Soul's Tragedy in 1846 (four months before Browning's marriage to Elizabeth Barrett) The third and seventh of the pamphlets were collections of short poems (Dramatic Lyrics (1842) and Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845)). The poems of these two pamphlets were "a lively mixture of songs, lyric poems, narratives, and dialogues, capped with several masterly examples of the dramatic monologue", (including "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess") "That the readers and reviewers were willing to forget Sordello and some of the bad dramas is established by the open-minded and generally favorable reception accorded to the two pamphlets" (Pearsall, 49). Critics were happy to see freshness and originality and to see his work free of obscurity and affectation. And, Pearsall adds, "some serious critics began to accept Browning as one of the permanent British poets. This early reputation, in other words, had come to center in the thirty-eight little poems of the two little pamphlets of 1842 and 1845" (49). Five months later, in September, 1846, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett eloped and moved to Italy.

For the next nine years, there was relative silence from Browning as a poet. In 1849, after the birth of a son - Robert Wiedemann Barrett - he put together a collection of his old poems (in two volumes), in 1850 Christmas Eve and Easter-Day was published, and in 1852, his "Essay on Shelley" went to press.

Men and Women, his first truly successful work (although it did not receive the reviewers' attention immediately), was published in 1855. The two-volume edition of 52 poems offered a "variety of forms, themes, styles, and characters; and a dozen of these new poems represent the peak of his creative achievement" (Pearsall, 63). Browning had hoped that Men and Women would restore his career and reputation as a British poet which had slipped due to the distance and silence he had put between the British public and himself. It did not. Critical enthusiasm was high but general popularity grew slowly. Elizabeth's poetry on the other hand, was selling well and her fame steadily rose higher.

The next five year period, although poetically non-productive, was, for Browning, a great learning experience. He used Italy as his university as he absorbed everything he could about art, music, politics, and religion. In June, 1860, while browsing in a Florentine marketplace, he found the Old Yellow Book, the book that would change his life, the book that would ultimately lead to the writing of one of the greatest poems of the Victorian era

In The Ring and the Book, the poet-speaker tells his listeners how, on the day he found the Old Yellow Book, he came upon the idea of composing his poem

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,
 And stepped out on the narrow terrace, built
 Over the street and opposite the church,
 And paced its lozenge - brickwork sprinkled cool
 Over the roof o' the lighted church I looked
 A bowshot to the street's end, north away
 Out of the Roman gate to the Roman road
 But the river, till I felt the Apennine.
 And there would lie Arezzo ...
 Whence I went on again, the end was near,
 Step by step, missing none and marking all,
 Till Rome itself, the ghastly goal, I reached
 Why, all the while, - how could it be otherwise -
 The life in me abolished the death of things,
 Deep calling unto deep: as then and there
 Acted itself over again once more
 The tragic piece. I saw with my own eyes
 In Florence as I trod the terrace, breathed
 The beauty and the fearfulness of night,
 How it had run, this round from Rome to Rome -
 (l. 476-481, 497-501, 516-526)

The poet-speaker claims that the whole plan for the murder-story was conceived in his imagination after reading the Old Yellow Book. But we now know that this is not true. William Clyde DeVane, in A Browning Handbook (1955, 2nd ed.), explains that

from the history of the composition of The Ring and the Book as we know it, it would be a mistake to think that the whole conception of the gigantic poem came to him in that moment. Browning's moral judgments upon the characters and their actions were probably

made as soon as he read the Old Yellow Book, but his method of telling his story and his detailed plan were probably not arrived at until 1864, when the actual writing began. (320)

Browning scholars have been discussing, debating, and researching the genesis of The Ring and the Book for over a century. Although much has been proven, there is still much in the shade, and some is pure speculation. Most of what we know about the history of the poem's composition comes from letters written by or to Browning between 1862 and 1868.

The Brownings spent the winter of 1860-61 in Rome and stayed until May. It is believed that Browning investigated the Old Yellow Book's Roman murder-story while they were there - "I took my book to Rome first, tried truth's power /On likely people. . . /What if I rove and rummage?" (l. 423-428). DeVane writes:

Browning, moreover, pushed his inquiries in Arezzo (XII. 782) in the spring of 1861. During that winter he offered the Old Yellow Book to one of his friends, Miss Ogle, the novelist, as a subject to her hand, and he also offered it to W.C. Cartwright, with the suggestion that he should write an account of the affair. Nothing is heard of the Old Yellow Book thereafter for a year. (Handbook, 320)

Not only is nothing heard of the Old Yellow Book, but all work on all his poems stopped for over a year.

Mrs. Browning had been an invalid and had often been sickly, almost totally dependent on first, her father, and then on Browning. Her health deteriorated steadily in her final year and on June 29, 1861, she died in Florence. Browning left Florence a few weeks later, never to return to Casa Guidi or Florence again. He moved back to and resettled in London with his son, and kept himself busy with both old and new poems. Elizabeth's Last Poems and her essays, The Greek Christian Poets and the English Poets, had to be seen through the press. Browning's Poetical Works (in three volumes) was published in 1863 after several changes and corrections were made. His highly successful 20-poem volume of Dramatis Personae was completed and published in May, 1864. He also spent much of his time preparing 'Pen' for entrance into Oxford.

The first indication of Browning's continued interest in the Old Yellow Book appears in a letter to Isa Blagden on September 19, 1862. He writes

If you see Mrs. Baker, tell her that I was quite unable to call on her. Another thing, she promised to lend me a MS. account of the trial of Count Francesco Guidi for the murder of his wife, which I am anxious to collate with my own collection of papers on the subject ... Can you ask him (Trollope) if there was no mistake in her statement, if the account (is) really related to 'my' Count Francesco Guidi of Arezzo? Because, in that case ... I should greatly like to see it ... (Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden, ed. E.C. McAleer (Austin, (1951) 124)

One month later, after having received the desired manuscript from Mrs. Baker, Browning writes to Isa Blagden:

Thank you most truly for attending to my request so promptly. pray thank Mrs. Baker for her kindness, and say it will be particularly useful to me: it would be of little use to anybody without my documents, nor is it correct in several respects, but it contains a few notices of the execution etc. subsequent to my account that I can turn to good. I am going to make a regular poem of it. (Dearest Isa, 128)

In The Ring and the Book, the poet of Book I speaks of the Old Yellow Book "as if it was not merely his primary, but his one and only source." But it is now known that Mrs. Baker's Italian pamphlet held crucial information pertaining to the murder-case which Browning used extensively throughout his poem. Cook writes:

Written probably a few, but only a few, years after the events which it records, it records them in most lively fashion, supplementing the Yellow Book with a mass of interesting detail, it became, what Professor Hodell calls it, the poet's 'Secondary Source'. It may, indeed, have set him definitely to the task of composition. (Commentary, xix)

The Oct. 18, 1862 letter to Isa Blagden confirms that Browning had definitely decided to write a poem about the Franceschini murders. On November 19, he writes Blagden of his spring plans. "Early in Spring, I print new poems, a number then, a new edition of all my old things, corrected: then begin on my murder-case" (D. Isa, 128). In his Handbook, DeVane writes:

But as we know, the edition of old poems came first, in 1863, and actually, by its success, delayed the publication of the new poems, Dramatis Personae. It was probably not until this last volume was published on May 28, 1864, that Browning felt free to address himself to the task which his Roman murder-case presented. (321)

In his essay, "The Dating of Browning's Conception of the Plan of The Ring and the Book (SP, XXXVII (1941), 543-551), Paul A. Cundiff agrees with DeVane about the starting period of the writing of the poem (the fall of 1864), but he gives a possible reason for Browning's "delay" in beginning the work which he had been preoccupied with "since 1862, perhaps 1860 when he found [the Old Yellow Book]". He believes that not only was Browning busy with publications but he was "reluctant to tackle the actual writing of the poem". He writes that there is

probable suggestion to account for Browning's indecision with the Old Yellow Book from 1860 to 1864. The story of Pompilia became for Browning, the day he found it, an obsession. No subject had offered him so complete an opportunity to explain his theories of life and poetry. In it were the Andromeda myth, the St. George legend, the slippery villain, and a repetition of the story of his own life. In addition, he had always selected out-of-the-way incidents with which to present his reading of life. Do what he could, the story continued to haunt him. So, after he found he could not interest his friends in it, he finally concluded that the only way to rid himself of it was to begin the poem. (Browning's Ring Metaphor and Truth (1972), 13-14)

Evidence of his plan for writing The Ring and the Book is found in several letters written in the fall of 1864. The most important of these is a letter to Julia Wedgwood, written from Biarritz, France, dated October 3, 1864. He optimistically writes: "I have got the whole of that poem, you enquire about, well in my head, shall write the Twelve Books of it in six months, and then take breath again" (Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A broken Friendship as revealed in their Letters, ed. Richard Curle (1937), 95).

Browning's conception of the plan for The Ring and the Book, written in twelve Books, told from eleven different standpoints, is still unclear because there is no definitive evidence. However, there are two theories which have been debated by Browning scholars for at least 75 years. The first one comes from William Michael Rossetti's diary, March 15, 1868. He claims to have recorded the information immediately after talking to Browning. Browning had been vacationing in the south of France in August 1864, and had visited the historic Roland's Pass outside Cambo. Rossetti writes that Browning

was staying at Bayonne, and walked out to a mountain-gorge traditionally said to have been cut or kicked out by Roland, and laid out the full plan of his twelve cantos, accurately carried out in the execution. (Rossetti Papers 1862 to 1870 (1903), 302)

Cundiff points out that Browning's visit was made from Cambo on August 20, not as Rossetti had written, from Bayonne in October (Ring Metaphor and Truth, 16)

The other account of the poem's conception, although undated, has been given by Rudolf Lehmann. Browning had told him,

when I first read the book (OYB), my plan was at once settled. I went for a walk, gathered twelve pebbles from the road, and put them at equal distance on the parapet that bordered it. These represented the twelve chapters into which the poem is divided and I adhered to that arrangement to the last. (An Artist's Reminiscences (1894), 224)

Cundiff argues that of the two versions, the Lehmann account is probably correct. He says that "the statement to Rossetti is not at all unlike some other of Browning's after - thoughts, all of which demonstrate that he was not reluctant to exercise the poet's inclination for the picturesque" (Ring Metaphor and Truth, 17). He goes on to say that the substance of Lehmann's works "is in accord with the whole opening book of the poem. The large portion of Book I devoted to the discovery of the book illustrates how completely Browning visualized the plan and purpose of the poem on the first day of his acquaintance with Pompilia" (18). He believes that the moral purpose and perhaps the "intricate final division" of The Ring and the Book were reached upon the first reading of the Old Yellow Book in 1860.

Browning began writing the poem in October, 1864. He wrote intermittently for four years. In letters to friends, he claims that most of the poem - approximately 15,000 lines - was written in the first year. An additional 1,000 lines were written by May 19, 1866. Apparently, nothing more was written until May 1867 when he added 2,000 more lines. In August, 1868, The Ring and the Book was complete. On November 21, 1868, the first volume was available to the public.

Chapter 2

THE VICTORIAN RECEPTION OF *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

The Victorians, particularly the writers of the scores of literary periodicals and reviews, greeted the poem with great enthusiasm. These reviews, which were widely read and closely followed by "the British reading public", were by no means unanimous in their opinions of *The Ring and the Book*. In fact, criticism was divided quite evenly among friendly (pro-Browning) critics, hostile (anti-Browning) critics, and of course the 'tertium quids' who tactfully and diplomatically sat on literature's fence - either taking both sides or no side at all - thereby saying very little of anything, adding nothing of substance to the readers' notions of the poem. Martin S. Day writes:

The Victorian period represents the high-water mark of English periodical writings In the year 1859 an incredible total of 115 periodicals started in London alone. ...Periodicals provided the chief vehicle of communication in the age preceding 20th-century mass media. Newspapers engrossed only moderate attention until the 1890s instituted the sensational press which provided reading matter for the universal reading public created by the National Education Act of 1870. (*History of English Literature*, 156-157)

Khattab writes, "Although the Victorian readers of serious literature were not unaccustomed, by this time, to Browning's surprises, they were not quite prepared to cope with such a huge work, even one from the pen of Robert Browning." No one really knew what to look for or even how or where to start looking at the poem. He continues, "In the shock of its first appearance they crowded over it trying to sound its depth, find its meaning, or, at least, describe its surface contours" (*The Critical Reception*, 1). In his 1912 essay, "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*", Henry James describes what it was like to immerse himself for the first time in Browning's 'magnum opus':

The Ring and the Book is so vast and so essentially gothic a structure, spreading and soaring and branching at such a rate, covering such ground, putting forth such pinnacles and towers and brave excrescences, planting its transepts and chapels and porticos, its clustered hugeness or inordinate muchness, that with any first approach we but walk vaguely and slowly, rather bewilderedly, round and round it, wondering at what point we had best attempt such entrance as will save our steps and light our uncertainty, most enable us to

reach our personal chair, our indicated chapel or shrine, when once within (The Art of Criticism (1986), 460)

The early reviewers of the poem, in 1868-69, faced an overwhelming task. Not only did they have to review a 21,000 - plus line poem, but they had to do so with a point of view which was intelligent and understandable. On top of this, they were limited to an allotted amount of space in which to write, and a specific amount of time in which to write it. This, naturally, led to many ridiculous and sweeping generalizations, because instead of choosing one or two elements from the poem to write about, they would try to squeeze everything they knew about The Ring and the Book, everything they knew about Robert Browning, and everything they knew about literature into a few pages (or in some cases, a portion of a page). Because there were so many reviews, each vying for the largest portion of the reading public market, the writers tried to reflect the views of the readers as much as possible. The reasons for this are simply because people have always liked to have their views corroborated and have always disliked finding them to be wrong.

Incredibly, there were a few periodicals which reviewed the new poem volume by volume, or, three Books at a time. A few examples are The London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art, and Science, XVII (December 5, 1868), Saint James's Magazine, (NS) II (January 1869), The Spectator, XLI (December 12, 1868), and The Westminster Review, XCI (January 1, 1869). To review the beginning of a poem and evaluate it as a whole, particularly with a poet such as Browning, is a very dangerous and rather stupid thing to do. This led to rash, misguided judgments which had to be dismissed and radically changed when the whole poem became available. However, these were exceptions as most reviewers waited for the four volumes before attempting comment or criticism.

It is interesting to note the various aspects commented upon by the early reviewers. As mentioned above, the writers were catering to the reading public and had to reflect its views about literature. When they reviewed a poem, they reviewed the complete poem, unlike the modern critic who takes one element from the poem and tries to reach the poem's meaning through the analysis of this one element. The early reviewers touched on several

different themes but rarely agreed with each other about any of them. The style of the monologues was discussed at great length. E.J. Cutler wrote that Browning was not in the same league with Homer or Shakespeare (North American Review, CIX (July, 1869), 283) because the poem is saturated throughout with his personality. J.R. Mozley claimed that each of the twelve monologues were all Browning's voice (Macmillan's Magazine, XIX (April, 1869), 546). Many reviewers blamed the similarities of style in the monologues on the fact that Browning, throughout his work up to this time, only had a few character - types with which he could effectively work; therefore, everything was "too much Browning" and not enough originality of style.

Another aspect of the poem discussed by the early reviewers was The Ring and the Book as a "work of art" - for example, the subject of the poem, its unity, or its message. In The Critical Reception, Khattab reminds us that,

The Victorian critics who discussed The Ring and the Book started with these assumptions: that a poem should be clear to the average reader, "poetic", i.e., musical, melodious, and pregnant with the traditional beauties of noble figures and elevated thoughts; and, if it is a long and ambitious poem, should follow the example of the great ancient giants like Homer, Milton, Wordsworth, or, at least, that of the Laureate Mr. Tennyson. Most important still, the poem should be an affective medium of moral instruction whether directly or indirectly. (198)

In general, most early criticism disapproved of the poem's subject - murder. For example, the writer for Harpers Magazine, XXXVIII (March, 1869), finds the subject intolerable, even for dramatic purposes. Browning, he says, "should not mistake his readers' moral sense and their appreciation of the 'sanctity of marriage'. He should not parade in front of them such crimes as those of Guido" (258), (Crit. Recept., 67). The Edinburgh Review, CXXX (July, 1869), says that Browning commits "the radical mistake of assigning to art a reflective instead of a representative function" (184-5).

In short, Browning confused the critics who assumed poetry was to be written in a particular way. They searched the poem to find what they had expected from a great poet

but came away empty-handed and eventually dismissed him as enigmatic and extremely obscure.

On the other hand, John Morley, writing for The London Quarterly Review, XXXII (July, 1869), took a fresh and daring approach to the subject of the poem. He believes that the subject has a "healthy influence" on the "complacency, smugness, and provincialism of the Victorians." He writes:

The truth is, we have for long been so debilitated by pastorals, by graceful presentation of the Arthurian legend for drawing rooms. . . that a rude blast of air from the outside welter of human realities is apt to give a shock, that might well show in what simpleton's paradise we have been living. . . . Our public is beginning to measure the right and possible in art by the superficial probabilities of life and manners within a ten-mile radius of Charing Cross. In the tragedy of Pompilia we are taken far from the serene and homely region in which some of our teachers would fain have it that the whole moral universe can be snugly pent up. (337), (Rpt., Studies in Literature, 1891, 255-258)

Morley's task was to shake up the English readers, and with such a long-established tradition of poetry written in such lyrical and moralistic ways, his job was a big one. But he did manage to open up several doors which had previously been locked, or, simply unseen.

The plan of The Ring and the Book was another topical subject. Reviewers were equally divided on the subject. The negative reaction was, basically, that one story told twelve different times was too much for the average reader to bear. The Dublin Review, (NS) XXV (July, 1869), believes that Browning "complicates an already complicated story by giving us twelve different views" and in so doing, "fails in his dramatic task" (56-7). The Guardian, XXIV (March, 1869) says that the poet "makes so many beginnings that he cannot attain a satisfactory ending. His poem becomes more fragmentary as it proceeds, and terminates, like an ill-written letter, in a series of abrupt and almost unconnected postscripts" (343). Or, "Who but Robert Browning could have conceived the plan of repeating a tale of folly, deceit and revenge ten times over?" (Harper's Magazine, XXXVIII, 563). In general, the plan of the poem was seen as faulty and unnecessary (Crit. Receipt, 75).

De Vane writes that the negative reviewers of the earlier volumes, "found the subject sordid and its treatment murky, and objected to Browning's method of dealing with the story " He goes on.

The Dublin Review (65: 48-62) objected to the poet's attitude towards priests, and others had their special quarrels. Edward Fitzgerald, who could never read Browning, could make nothing of The Ring and the Book; Tennyson thought the first parts of the poem "full of strange vigour and remarkable in many ways," but he was "doubtful whether it can ever be popular " Carlyle is said to have commented to Browning on the work, "It is a wonderful book, one of the most wonderful poems ever written. I re-read it all through - all made out of an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines, and only wants forgetting." (Letters of D.G. Rossetti to W. Allingham, 284). (A Browning Handbook, 346)

The early readers and reviewers of the poem simply had never seen such a massive work and did not know how to begin looking at it. Many wished the poem was shorter. The reviewer of The Guardian XXIV (March, 1869), wished that Browning had adopted "the plan of 'My Last Duchess', in which he tells a similar tale of an unhappy marriage culminating in murder, with much greater brevity and with complete suppression of revolting details" (344). "To do that", Khattab says, "the reviewer thinks that Browning could have omitted the parts of the three Roman gossips and shortened that of the two lawyers" (Crit. Recept., 70).

The reviewers who disagreed with the plan of the poem had no comment on its unity. Most of the others all agreed that the question of plan is connected and related to unity. Although the poem was composed of various parts, the poem was seen as a "unified whole". The Illustrated London News, (March, 1869), described it as "the unity of an imperfect humanity". The monologues are "the ethical complements of each other," and "pathological specimens of the various kinds of human passion and prejudice" (322).

For the writers of the periodicals who believed that The Ring and the Book had a plan and unity (and therefore, structure) there was definitely a message to be found within. This message, according to Khattab, was "the uncertainty of human judgment" (80). The Month, II (December, 1869) declared that Browning is trying to teach us "the love of truth" (623). Another reviewer for Putnam's Monthly Magazine, (NS) III (March 1869), believed

that Browning was preaching the same lesson found in several of his most known pieces, the lesson being: "Where violence is done to natural instincts, whether by law or circumstance, a reparation of sudden crime and tragedy will follow, - or else the deadly weathering and freezing of human hearts" (371).

But no matter what "message" the reviewers received from the poem, there was near total unanimity "that Browning works indirectly, that he is didactic in the best artistic sense. He does not preach openly, but conveys his message obliquely" (Khatab, Crit. Recept., 80)

During the first year after the publication of The Ring and the Book, the reviews written about the poem indicate what a tremendous effect the poem was having in several areas of criticism. Never before had reviewers had such a difficult task of discussing such a work. But from 1870 onwards, their task became easier and because of this, The Ring and the Book became increasingly more popular.

During this second period of criticism (1870-1900), the critics were able to look at The Ring and the Book from a much better perspective. Unlike their predecessors, they were able to judge the poem not only by Browning's previous works, but also by his new poems. The Ring and the Book was "increasingly regarded as pivotal in Browning's poetry" (Crit. Recept., 82).

The second period produced fewer reviews of the poem but the reviews differed greatly from the first year's. Criticism came out in book form rather than in the magazine review format. The writers had more space with which to work. They were unhurried and had more time to put their thoughts into writing. The poem was seen as a unified whole and Browning himself was established in the forefront of English poets. Browning's popularity was no longer a question to be bandied about in reviews. Critics during this period dealt with "the nature of the art of poetry, as if they wanted to praise or condemn Browning according to the universal principles of art" (Khatab, Crit. Recept., 83)

New trends in criticism emerged during this period. One was the subject of the "survival" of The Ring and the Book. Critics compared Tennyson to Browning, arguing

their cases in childish disputes. For example, Edgar Faurett, claiming that Browning's popularity was merely a "craze" and that Tennyson was the better poet, questions Browning's integrity and says he will "take his case to the court of posterity, where he is sure Browning will be pronounced guilty and where his punishment will be utter neglect" (*Lippincott's Magazine* (January, 1888)). J. Devy, in *Comparative Estimate of Modern English Poets*, 1873, says that Browning's reputation will be damaged beyond repair because of the length of *The Ring and the Book*. He says that Guido speaks twice in the poem in order "to swell out the book" (401).

In *The Harvard Monthly*, II (May 1886), A. B. Houghton explains why a man of genius such as Browning is so little appreciated by those who should appreciate him the most - his contemporaries. He says that with all the wisdom of the critics who determine "popularity" or "fame", "time perhaps is the one critic whose verdict is just" (96).

He writes

So here is the real reason why Mr. Browning will never be fully appreciated. He appeals to the mind rather than to the senses, to the out-going rather than to the incoming side of our nature. Those natures which demand anything of simple rhythmic melodiousness will not be satisfied, on the whole, with his poetry, his harmonies will be too subtle for the passive listener or reader to catch (97-99).

This led to a new trend in Browning criticism - the "psychological" - which in turn, led to one of the long-discussed "problems" with Browning's poetry - his "obscurity". In 1875, A. C. Swinburne wrote that Browning "is not obscure but too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader or a ready writer to follow - to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity" (*Contemporaries of Shakespeare*, (1919), 25-26). To enjoy Browning's poetry, the reader's mind should be "thoroughly alert". H. W. Mabie believes that Browning's poetry is more demanding than most because he takes the whole world as his field (*Essays in Literary Interpretation*, (1893), 102).

Arthur Symonds, addressing the Browning Society, stated that if Browning's poetry "fails to excite the interest of the masses," it is the people's fault simply because they "look

to poetry for what Mr. Browning once said his poetry never was intended to be, the solace of an afternoon cigar" (Papers of the Browning Society, II (1885-1889), 1)

A lecturer quoting from Carlyle's essay on Goethe's Helena, said that it is

the artist's privilege to choose his own manner of expressing himself and our duty to labor to get to his meaning, in the same way as if we assist in its creation. From this, Carlyle asserts, we get a higher kind of pleasure than that which we get from an easy work of art. (W S McCormick, Three Lectures on English Literature (1889), 166-168) (Crit. Recept., 93)

But it was never Browning's intention to be "obscure". Several critics felt he had been deliberately obscure to show how learned he was. In A Commentary..., Cook says that critics and students of The Ring and the Book often wish for explanations of passages in "a poem so allusive, so variously and sometimes so mysteriously allusive" which they eventually interpret as "obscurity". On the contrary, Cook writes

It has been remarked that Browning paid his readers the high compliment of assuming that their erudition was as extensive and peculiar as his own, he referred compendiously, as to matters of common knowledge, to all manner of matters literary, artistic, historical, ecclesiastical, social, biographical, topographical, zoological, anatomical and so forth, which are familiar, if familiar at all, to specialists only. (ix)

From Browning's peculiarities of style, to his obscurity, to the difficulty of his work, the critics turned to a familiar theme, namely, the "nature of the music" of Browning's poetry and its artistic function.

Unlike the critics of the period immediately following the publication of The Ring and the Book, their successors (post - 1869) discussed Browning's "music" in relation to all of his work. Khattab writes:

As with the question of difficulty, the critics dealt with the question of Browning's music in a new manner. They started with the premises of the congruity between theme and form, between thoughts and their appropriate vestures of words and rhythms. They came to the conclusion that, since Browning treated unusual subjects, his rhythms had to be unusual. On the other hand, when he treated traditional "poetic" themes, his music followed suit. (Crit. Recept., 94)

Since the critics were dealing with a different kind of poetry than they were used to, they were therefore dealing with a different kind of music. Browning's originality and richness of

thought baffled many of the critics and its newness led many writers to conclude that his poetry was completely devoid of music. However, others disagreed, praising Browning for his courage in changing a long poetic tradition. In his Harvard Monthly, II review, Houghton said that "in Mr Browning's work there is both music enough and harmony enough, but neither music nor harmony are [sic] of the common or popular sort. This, from the nature of his theme would be an aesthetic impossibility" (May 1886, 95-96).

A few years earlier, a reviewer for The Scottish Review (September 1883) asserted that

because he [Browning] has not sung of the old themes in the old way, because he has deserted the beaten highways and the familiar fields, because he has broken and annihilated recognized frontiers, and has widened the region of imaginative apprehension by wholesale annexation of new territory, because his gamut of emotional sensibility is so wide that he can strike notes unstruck before; and because his is a new music. . . it is declared by those who are accustomed to the old cords [sic] and the familiar harmonies to be no music at all (150)

The American critic, Hiram Corson, wrote not only about the "newness" of Browning's poetry, but also emphasized the harmony between music and theme in his work. "Unrippled verse," he said, "which many readers demand, *must* be more or less mechanical", whereas with Browning, his verse is "remarkably organic". He calls Tennyson's verse "faultily faultless", and explained that Browning is more than capable of writing this mechanical "work and verse music", but only uses it

whenever there's a real artistic occasion for it, not otherwise. Verse music is never with him a mere literary indulgence. The grotesquerie of rhythm and rhyme which some of his poems exhibit, is as organic as any other feature of his language-shaping, and shows the rarest command of language. (An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry (1886), 91-92).

Houghton, explains that any question of Browning's (or any other poet's) poetry having music or not is strictly to be decided by individual taste. When comparing the music of Tennyson with that of Browning, he writes that:

It would be absurd to write a dirge in waltz-time; but it would be no less absurd to put one of Mr Browning's poems into the Tennysonian rhythm. There would be utter incongruity.

The very nature of Mr. Browning's thought and feeling demands a peculiar form of expression. (Harvard Monthly II, 105-106)

Another trend which prevailed among the critics in the late nineteenth century was that which considered The Ring and the Book as a "milestone in the development of Browning's style and way of thinking rather than as a great contribution to his fame" (Khattab, Crit. Recept., 96). For example, Grant Allen, writing for The Fortnightly Review XXXII (July, 1879) said that future critics will have very little to comment upon after The Ring and the Book because with this poem, Browning's style and spirit "crystallized themselves". Therefore, admirers of his poetry will continue to do so, and those who find it incomprehensible will find his future work even moreso (149)

But Mrs. Sutherland Orr saw The Ring and the Book as the major turning-point in Browning's development of the dramatic monologue. Although he had been using the dramatic monologue successfully for several years (ie Men and Women, Dramatis Personae), it was not until The Ring and the Book that his "constructive power" became "fully developed" and "perfected" (A Handbook to Browning's Works, 1892, 75). She wrote that because of this poem, the dramatic monologue would be, in future works, Browning's favorite mode of expression.

H.B. Forman, writing in 1875, said that "the excellence and wide utility of the monologue form, which, created by Browning, had just been put to the astonishing use of shaping a psychological epic of more than twenty-one thousand lines", and that Browning's "technical mission is none other than the creation, elaboration, and perfection of the monologue. ... What a perfect and powerful instrument he has made of it, has been shown in a succession of considerable works following The Ring and the Book" (The London Quarterly Review, XLIV (July 1875), 354). In An Introduction to the Study of Browning (1906), Arthur Symonds agrees. "The Ring and the Book is at once the largest and the greatest of Browning's works; the culmination of his dramatic method, and the turning-point, more decisively than Dramatis Personae, of his style" (150)

Edward Dowden, writing for The Academy, X (July, 1876), found that The Ring and the Book marked a philosophical change in Browning's process of arriving at truth. He asserts that the poems written before The Ring and the Book reached truth through Browning's "intuition", which is how truth "flashes upon the reader's mind". However, in The Ring and the Book (and all subsequent poems), truth is uncovered only after the reader has been led through Browning's labyrinth of "prolonged casuistry". Dowden points to the symbol of the ring in the title and uses the poet's process of the making of the ring to illustrate Browning's new method of arriving at truth. He describes the "prolonged casuistry" as "falsehood", which, disappears before the "purifying fires of the spiritual intuitions or the passions of the heart". He says that in Browning's new truth-seeking method, "falsehood" seems to be "almost more needful to the poet than truth," but, he counters by saying that for the poet,

as truth-seeker, it appeared a kind of cowardice to seek truth only when it might easily be found, the strenuous hunter will track it through all winding ways of error. ... Eminent moments of life have a supreme interest for the poet - when life, caught up out of the ways of custom and low levels of prudence, takes its guidance and inspiration from a sudden discovery of truth through some high ardour of the heart; therefore it does not seem much to him to task his ingenuity through almost all the pages of a lengthy book in creating a tangle and embroilment of evil and good, of truth and falsehood, in order that a shining moment at least may spring forward and do its work of severing absolutely and finally right from wrong and shame from splendour. (99)

Browning's use of "casuistry" and his "prevalence of thought" in his poetry became major issues for the late nineteenth century critics

In An Introduction to the Poetry of Robert Browning (1889), W.J. Alexander praises Browning's intellect and regards his dominance of thought as a great virtue. He says that it is Browning's tremendous dramatic powers which enable the poet to "see the various sides of a question" and to "understand views and positions wholly different from [his] own". Because of his intellectual insight, he is able to "enter into", or to "become" characters "which are furthest removed from his sympathies", and yet still be able to plead their cases fairly and honestly. This unique ability of Browning's began early in his poetic

career, but Alexander states that the "plan" of The Ring and the Book "gives the amplest scope" to this extraordinary insight. In works subsequent to The Ring and the Book, this "power" becomes predominant mainly because Browning became more and more convinced of the many - sidedness of truth, that truth was relative, and "of the multitudinous modifications and links through which each truth is dependent on all others" (195-196)

As mentioned earlier, the sordid and morbid subject of the poem gradually became accepted by the critics, who realized "that poetry cannot be confined to a few beautiful or sublime subjects" (Khattab, Crit. Recept., 100) However, several critics believed that the subject of The Ring and the Book could never be compared to the great epics of Homer, Milton, or Dante, for example G.B. Smith, who started this critical trend in 1882, justifies Browning's selection of subject because it is typically modern, "deal[ing] with the passions of humanity in a manner at once searching and complete", and that no matter how trivial a subject is, it can never be "outside the domain" of a great poet (Modern Thought Magazine, 370)

More than twenty years later, in 1903, Chesterton writes of Browning's epic subject, or, "trumpery and sordid police-case":

The essence of The Ring and the Book is that it is the great epic of the nineteenth century, because it is the great epic of the enormous importance of small things. The supreme difference that divides The Ring and the Book from all the great poems of similar length and largeness of design is precisely the fact that all these are about affairs commonly called important, and The Ring and the Book is about an affair commonly called contemptible. Homer says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven as exhibited in a great legend of love and war, which shall contain the mightiest of all mortal warriors, and the most beautiful of all mortal women." The author of the Book of Job says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven by a tale of primeval sorrows and the voice of God out of a whirlwind." Virgil says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by the tale of the origin of the greatest people and the founding of the most wonderful city in the world." Dante says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by uncovering the very machinery of the spiritual universe, and letting you hear, as I have heard, the roaring of the mills of God." Milton says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you of the very beginning of all things, and the first shaping of the thing that is evil in the first twilight of time." Browning says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you a story out of a dirty Italian book of criminal trials from which I select one of the

meanest and most completely forgotten " Until we have realised this fundamental idea in The Ring and the Book all criticism is misleading. (Robert Browning, 163-164)

Chesterton applauds Browning for his courage, for believing in both himself and his poetic methods, for not succumbing to the pressures of the 'status quo' which dictated, he says, "a literature entirely in the hands of the Tennysonian poet". He goes on by saying that:

This tide of the importance of small things is flowing so steadily around us upon every side today, that we do not sufficiently realise that if there was one man in English literary history who might with justice be called its fountain and origin, that man was Robert Browning. (R.B., 165)

We must remember that Smith was a Victorian, writing in the Victorian age, a rapidly changing Victorian age, whereas Chesterton was writing from a more modern point of view, looking back at the rapidly vanishing Victorian era with a clearer historic perspective. The late-Victorian criticism is quite remarkable when seen from their revolutionary standpoint.

The critics of this period, when discussing The Ring and the Book as a "dramatic poem", came up with several interesting and controversial theories. In the 1880s, critics had almost unanimously agreed that Browning had developed the dramatic monologue to its highest form. In their most developed form, Oliver F. Emerson stated that the dramatic monologues of The Ring and the Book, are "the last phase of a movement from Shakespeare to Browning, which is 'the reverse of that from Greek drama to Shakespeare'" (Khattab, Crit. Recept., 103). He explains:

The placing of thought before form, of reverent hearing before pleasurable seeing that characterized the drama of the Greeks, compared with the matchless stage pieces of Shakespeare, has been revived and carried one step further by Browning, in the dramatic exhibition of mental states - motives of action contending with each other on the stage of a soul's activities. ... The intercourse of soul with soul is the highest intercourse. (Cornell Magazine, 1 (1889), 206-207)

He goes on to say that this "intercourse of soul with soul", makes the dramatic monologue "a possession, not of an age, but of all time".

In the Harvard Monthly, II (1886), Houghton states that the two dramas go in opposite directions. Where Shakespeare "gives us merely his natural expression of a dramatic situation, Mr. Browning takes a dramatic situation and analyzes it to its utmost. With him the situation is the beginning, not the end" (103).

In a paper read before the Browning Society, Arthur Symonds explains that the dramatic monologues of Browning are not only different from the dramas of Shakespeare, but that they are an entirely new thing. Shakespeare's drama was the "natural outcome of sixteenth-century England", an England which was "full of youth and strength, full of curious delight in new acquisitions of strange and yet untried knowledge, but not yet overflowed with encyclopaedical digests, and wisdom oppressive as folly". On the other hand, Browning's dramatic monologue is "the natural outcome of nineteenth-century England", an England "with its dominant science seeking the very basis of life—its analytic novel, its infinite outlook and inlook, ceaseless restless gathering in of knowledge, ceaseless restless introspection" (Papers of the Browning Society II, (1885-1889), 2). In The Critical Reception, Khattab concludes that Shakespeare's drama, which reached its zenith in Elizabethan England, was "objective", while Browning's dramatic monologue, perfected in Victorian England, was "subjective" (105).

The differences between the two kinds of drama have been debated since the publication of The Ring and the Book. This has inevitably led to the "style" of the monologues. Symonds regards The Ring and the Book as the most perfect example of Browning's "subjective" drama and of "the naturalness and suitability of the language employed" (Papers of the Br. Soc., 9). When speaking of the style of the speakers in the poem, he asserts that even though their language is Browning's, "the effect produced by every monologue is almost as unique as if no other existed" (11). Khattab writes

Style is only one element in characterization. Unlike those of 1868-1869, the critics of 1870-1889 . . . turned to other elements such as the nature of Browning's characterization, the schools of art to which his characters belong, and the roundness or flatness of these characters. (Crit. Recept., 107)

Browning's characterization was debated vigorously among the critics. Some were irritated by the dominance of intellectualism in his monologues. Others complained of the superiority of his masculine to his feminine characters. C.E. Vaughan believed that with Browning's poetry, the reader is not interested in "character", but in what the character has done at one specific moment, not "with a whole life, not even with one aspect of life, but with a moment; not with men and women whom we can love and hate, but with actions compelled to stand forth from character and surroundings, which we are to comprehend and judge" (The British Quarterly Review, LXXX (1884), 6-8). In The Ring and the Book, that "moment" is the triple-murder. He says that this is the moment that the character displays his most characteristic attitude toward the world.

Critics discussed Browning's continual use of casuistry for his male characters, and how his female characters were either the revealers of truth or dictates of pure human passion (Edward Dowden, Poet-Lore I (1889), 267). A critic for The New York Daily Tribune VII (1871), claimed that Browning's characters were always cast in either pure white or pure black - except for Caponsacchi. He believed that Caponsacchi is the most interesting character in the poem because he is neither black nor white, but both white and black, the most complex whereas the other main characters are simple (395).

With the assertion of several critics "preferring" Caponsacchi over the other characters in the poem, came the debate over who the real "hero" of The Ring and the Book is - Caponsacchi? Count Guido? Pompilia? Each character had its supporters and each paper or review argued its case extensively.

Caponsacchi was seen as a "St. George" figure, rescuing Pompilia from the evil dragon - Guido. (Browning even changed the date of Caponsacchi's and Pompilia's flight to Rome from the early morning of Monday, April 29 (O.Y.B., trans. Hodell, 90, 96, 97) to the early morning of Tuesday, April 23 (VI. 1110-18), which is St. George's Day. Henry G. Spaulding, agreeing that Caponsacchi is the hero of the poem, says in a symposium about The Ring and the Book held by the Browning Society of Boston in 1889, that even though

Caponsacchi only "wears a cavalier's attire and publicly consorts with vagrant wives," he is a hero *because* he has broken all social conventions to save the innocent Pompilia from her terrible husband. (Poet-Lore, I, 269-272)

But Guido did not lack admirers either. Khattab tells us that Edward Berdoe saw the Count as a character "drawn with scientific accuracy, and is elaborated with precision and great skill" (Papers of the Browning Society, II (1885-1889), 49). John Todhunter thought that it was a pity that Guido - with all his malice and subtle intellect, does not have "a wider field to play the devil in" (Papers of Br. Soc. II, 89). Miss E.D. West elevates Guido to the level of the great Shakespearean characters (such as Iago, or Regan). Reading before the Browning Society, she discussed "the individuality of the soul", arguing that Browning's villains are complex tragic figures and not simply motiveless monsters. Guido is one of these tragic figures in that the "forces of good" within him (lying dormant), through his actions and through outside circumstances, have sunk under the power of evil. Excepting the Pope, she says, each character in the poem passes judgment upon him in a slanted manner. (Papers of Br. Soc. II, 411-426) (Crit. Recept., 113-114)

Pompilia is seen by many to be not only the hero(ine) of the poem, but the center of interest (John Todhunter, Paper of Br. Soc., 88). All action circles around her and her "innocence". She, with hardly any "consciousness" of herself, makes and unmakes the lives and characters of those about her" (Symons, An Intro. to the Study of Br. (1906), 151-152).

From Pompilia's critics who claimed she is the essence of purity and innocence, came the critics denying her these qualities, calling them either "miraculous" or "unrealistic". She lacks experience yet speaks with worldly wisdom, "far exceeding the limit of her age and condition" (Alice K. Robertson, Poet-Lore, I (1889), 266-267).

The "central character" debate continues today. Richard D. Altick, in Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of "The Ring and the Book", (1968), writes that there is "the assumption that the poem's only major interest is the sentimental splendor of the Pompilia - Caponsacchi story, together with its judgment from the lips of the Pope. This

was the direction which criticism took from the beginning". He says that there has been an excessive concentration upon the tragic love story:

their spontaneous and ineffaceable delight in it springing from what was both best and worst in the Victorians' sensibility - became so deeply embedded in the later nineteenth-century literary habit that it has not been rooted out even from our own. Readers still are invited to devote themselves to the three monologues of Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope, which are the only parts usually included in the anthologies where nearly all make their first, and normally their only, acquaintance with the poem. The result is that they form a totally distorted notion of its real artistic character and its meaning. (4)

On December 12, 1889, Browning died in Venice at the age of seventy-seven. A decade earlier, Browning Clubs and Browning Societies had begun to spring up in the major cities of Britain and America. By 1914 there were thousands of these organizations. The work of these groups was to a great extent "proselytory and pious". Robert B. Pearsall writes: "Browning had had a good deal to say about the most troublesome religious and philosophic problems of his day, and could be presented as a teacher, a seer, a prophet." He continues by saying that an American critic writing for the Century Magazine in 1883, said that Browning spoke with authority and that people trusted the "comprehensive views he takes on a subject", and his ability to teach by suggestion. Pearsall concludes that:

Browning, like many another seer and oracle, had a habit of not making himself clear... Browning was great; he was rewarding; more than any other poet, ever, he stirred the minds of great masses of contemporary readers. But he was "obscure", and needed not only to be read but to be studied. It was the study of Browning and not the proselytizing of him that became the main work of the Browning groups all over the world. (Robert Browning, (1974), 5)

Browning had been amused, flattered, and embarrassed - at the same time - to observe the commotion he and his poetry were creating. He rarely intervened except to occasionally give public readings from his poetry. William Clyde DeVane (A Browning Handbook, 1955) writes:

In the memoirs and diaries which record English social life after 1869 we often hear of Browning reading aloud parts of The Ring and the Book. It is not surprising that he seems most often to have read "Pompilia". (348)

Chapter 3

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

The Victorian era probably changed the world and the way we perceive it more than any previous era had since the age of Pericles. Industrialization transformed the United Kingdom from a nation of agricultural yeomen into a nation of factory workers. From her ascendancy to the throne in 1837 until her death in 1901, Queen Victoria saw the population of her subjects grow from seventeen million to almost thirty-eight million (Martin S. Day, History of English Literature: 1837 to the Present (1964), 7-8). Her long rule "saw more revolutionary changes in the habits of mind and ways of life of her people than any comparable period in the history of nations". The Industrial Revolution created "a wholly new environment to which human beings had then to seek to accommodate themselves" (E.D.H. Johnson, The World of the Victorians (1964), xii, xiii). New ways of viewing the world came into existence because of the vast changes taking place. Johnson writes

Charles Darwin ... suggest(ed) ... in his great The Origin of the Species (1859) that myriad forms of life had lost out in their struggle for survival through inability to adapt to environmental change. The dilemma which confronted Victorian society under the Industrial Revolution was similar, with this exception: that whereas in biological evolution the organism is called on to meet new conditions imposed from outside in accordance with natural laws, social evolution is an artificial process through which creates his own opportunities and accepts responsibility for whether they affect his lot for better or worse (xiv)

Colonialism, the evolution of technology, the development of biology, and especially the new and abundant discoveries in the fields of science and medicine brought with them an overwhelming flood of new ideas and a totally different way of looking at things. In 1894, Thomas Henry Huxley stated:

I conceive that the leading characteristic of the nineteenth century has been the rapid growth of the scientific spirit, the consequent application of scientific methods of investigation to all the problems with which the human mind is occupied, and the correlative rejection of traditional beliefs which have proved their incompetence to bear such investigation

The activity of the scientific spirit has been manifested in *every region of speculation and of practice*. (History of English Literature, 13) [emphasis added]

Of course, literature was a major part of this "scientific spirit", with its new empiricist approach to writing - Browning, Tennyson, and Arnold leading the way, being the most successful at adapting to this new environment.

The Victorian critics had a particularly difficult time trying to adapt to Browning's new "spirit" and found his poetry to be very difficult indeed. Rather than conforming to the traditional and accepted methods of writing. Browning continually experimented until he had successfully found the best way (*his way*) to express *his* ideas thereby arriving at "truth". The method he adopted was, as we know, the dramatic monologue. His development as a dramatist spanned a period of over thirty years, culminating in The Ring and the Book.

As Huxley had said, "The activity of the scientific spirit has been manifested in every region of speculation and of practice", then this also included literary criticism and its critics. But the Victorian critics, although they did open the way for the modern critics, were apprehensive about making any revolutionary changes in their ways of writing. They did not want to lose their audiences so the majority of reviewers tended to stand on middle ground. This changed drastically at the turn of the century.

The twentieth century critics asked different questions than their Victorian counterparts had. Robert Langbaum, in "Browning and the Question of Myth", PMLA LXXXI (December 1966), says: "The history of criticism is largely the history of the changing questions we ask about works of art" (576). This is clearly evident as we look at the criticism of The Ring and the Book in the twentieth century.

The moderns looked at literature from standpoints which had only been developing in the Victorian era. Their approaches covered such areas as psychology, sociology, philosophy, semantics, anthropology, epistemology, and the more traditional literary methods such as linguistics and philology. The fields of study that had been conceived by the Victorians were put into practice by the outspoken new moderns, who used their new

knowledge to "ask different questions", to approach poetry differently with such major preoccupations as source study, structure, form, and content

"In the period 1890-1950," Khattab writes, "Browning criticism was characterized by extremes of hostility and friendliness. These extremes were part and parcel of the vicissitudes of literary taste which accompany the end of one period of literary history and the beginning of another" (*Crit. Recept.*, 117).

Boyd Litzinger and K.L. Knickerbocker, the editors of *The Browning Critics* (1967), write in their Introduction: "Many post-Victorians, like the post-Classicists of the Romantic period, were vigorous iconoclasts eager to demolish the household deities of their fathers, and they went about their work with relish." The popularity and dominance of Tennyson and Browning "had to be denigrated or what would become of a sophistication forged in the fire of war and tempered by the roaring meaninglessness of the twenties and the despair of the thirties?" (xi). Once a poet is dead, the creative work is complete and cannot be changed. But attitudes and judgments of the work certainly do because values change and people see the world through different eyes. Litzinger and Knickerbocker state that, "Criticism of a later period, therefore, is normally at odds with the critics of an earlier period . . . The poet then becomes the middle man, caught between what was thought of him and what is thought of him". From being "a comfort to his century, a stay against confusion", Browning has become "an irritant" to twentieth-century readers (*Browning Critics*, ix)

Probably the most damaging criticism of Browning's poetry came from the pen of George Santayana in "The Poetry of Barbarism". The purpose of his paper was "to settle the Browning question once and for all". Litzinger and Knickerbocker write

With annihilation as the goal, the mystic used every weapon at hand, including the highly unmystical technique of 'argumentum ad hominem' and selective omissions. The effect was awesome, and many Browning scholars have since tiptoed around the ruins, full of wonder at the devastation. (*Br. Critics*, xiv)

Speaking of the Victorian poets - meaning Browning exclusively - Santayana asserts

we find our contemporary poets incapable of any high wisdom, incapable of any imaginative rendering of human life and its meaning. Our poets are things of shreds and patches... they have no total vision, no grasp of the whole reality... This age of material elaboration... its ideals, when it has any, are negative and partial; its moral strength is a blind and miscellaneous vehemence (Interpretations of Poetry and Religion Volume VIII, 1900, rpt. 1989, 104)

He writes that with Browning, there is a "certain superficial grotesqueness to which we are soon accustomed" and "he easily arouses and engages the reader by the pithiness of his phrase, the volume of his passion, the vigour of his moral judgment, the liveliness of his historical fancy", and that "we are in the presence of a barbaric genius, of a truncated imagination, of a thought and an art inchoate and ill-digested, of a volcanic eruption that tosses itself quite blindly and ineffectually into the sky" (115). Speaking of Browning as a prophet, Santayana says, "Awakening may be mistaken for enlightenment, and the galvanising of torpid sensations and impulses for wisdom" (116).

Finally, Santayana claims that Browning is weak in "the conception of things fundamental and ultimate". He says that "no man can safely go far without the guidance of reason. His long poems have no structure - for that name cannot be given to the singular mechanical division of the Ring and the Book". He states the Browning lacks both reason and discipline.

Reason is necessary to the perception of high beauty. Discipline is indispensable to art. Work from which these qualities are absent must be barbaric; it can have no ideal form and must appeal to us only through the sensuousness and profusion of its materials ... Clarification of ideas and disentanglement of values are as essential to aesthetic activity as to intelligence. A failure of reason is a failure of art and taste. (196-197)

Philip Drew, editor of Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays (1966), believes that Santayana was "trying to eradicate the image of Browning as seer, prophet and evangelist which had been piously constructed and worshipped by the Browning Societies and others of like mind" (1).

However, Percy Lubbock, in his 1912 paper, "Robert Browning", tried to "eradicate" this image of Browning differently, by trying to establish the poet's reputation on a literary, rather than a moral, basis. Philip Drew, writing of Browning criticism since

Browning's centenary year, 1912, states that there are two strongly divergent views. The first is that held by Hugh Sykes Davies in "Browning" (1962), in which he finds "nothing written about Browning in the last fifty years worth reprinting" (R. Browning, A Collection, 2). The opposite view is held by William C. DeVane in, "The Virgin and the Dragon" (1947), where he talks of "the almost overpowering wealth and excellence of research upon Browning's poetry in the last quarter of a century" (R. Browning, Collection, 2).

Litzinger and Knickerbocker describe the criticism from 1891-1916 as "impressionistic", where the critics were emotionally committed to their views. They were "all eager to find a single explanation for a complex poetic phenomenon, or a single purpose agitating this phenomenon" (Browning Critics, xi). By 1927, they claim, "Browning as a force, a power, had lost the large market. The professors, the scholars, now took over from the literary men and philosophers" (xii). From 1930 on, however, Browning's work no longer compelled either acceptance or rejection. Instead, it "invited careful study and analysis of its form and effectiveness" (xii).

In his Introduction to Robert Browning: A Collection..., Drew writes

But, as Mr. Sykes Davies has pointed out, when Browning was toppled from his pedestal as the Sage of the Age of Steam, the result was not a barrage of criticism but a scornful silence. Those who think poorly of Browning have not attacked him but ignored him, a pity, since closely reasoned critical examination, whether friendly or hostile, is precisely what Browning's poetry, has most needed for seventy years. But what is there? Mr. Eliot, possibly affected by his admiration for Mr. Santayana, dismissed an age of English poetry by saying "Tennyson and Browning ruminated". Dr. Leavis, possibly affected by his admiration for Mr. Eliot, devoted a page, and that not the most valuable page, of New Bearings in English Poetry to Browning. These brief unargued rejections, and their elaborations and dilutions by the pens of smaller critics, constituted for many years the sole response to Browning by a most influential body of opinion. (6)

But this is not to say that there was a dearth of devoted and subtle interpreters. On the contrary, the period 1890-1950 produced several important works that have contributed greatly to the literary canon of Browning, particularly The Ring and the Book.

There was a shift in Browning criticism not only from the subjective and "impressionistic" to the more objective and noninvolved, but also a shift "from the study of

Browning as a poet with a message to study", to the study of him "as a maker of a number of poems to be judged as poetry only" (Khattab, Crit. Recept., 118). He continues,

We find studies concentrating on the language of his poetry, on its versification, on its dramatic basis, and on some of its major motifs. ... This is not to say that the important themes of Browning's poetry were neglected. They cannot be, because Browning's greatest poems deal with major questions confronting humanity. ... The difference is that Victorian critics dealt with these questions apart from the poetry, while twentieth century critics dealt with them as elements in the totalities of the poems. (118-119)

Due to the vast amount of critical literature that has been written this century on Browning and The Ring and the Book, only a few of the more important critical trends will be discussed here. We should remember that The Ring and the Book not only had a great impact on the Victorians, but also affected the writing and thinking of the moderns of this century, the post-moderns, and contemporary critics. The poem has been studied from numerous perspectives and literary critics are *still* uncovering gems within its pages today.

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest contributions to the study of The Ring and the Book has been Charles W. Hodell's translation of Browning's primary source for the poem - The Old Yellow Book (1908) (Carnegie Institution of Washington). With this translation, an important milestone in the criticism of The Ring and the Book was set. For the first time, Browning's source material was available to everyone. The Victorians had not had this luxury. Along with the translation, Hodell included an essay on "The Making of a great Poem", which he wrote as an appendix.

In the "Essay", Hodell discusses Browning's fidelity to his source material. First, he says that Browning "transformed" the personages of his primary source into the characters of The Ring and the Book. Near the end of the "Essay" he changes his mind and asserts that Browning's characters were created "in strict accordance with the detail [sic] fact in the Book" and "in few cases, indeed, does the poet violate the ascertained fact of his sources, even in his freest range of creation" (255). Hodell's blatant contradiction sparked a

controversy which has led to a seemingly endless treasure trove of information for critics and scholars alike.

One of the most complete and detailed books ever written on The Ring and the Book appeared in 1920. A.K. Cook's, A Commentary Upon "The Ring and the Book" has been an indispensable aid to readers of the poem. Cook's Commentary clears up hundreds of Browning's "obscurities". Through meticulous research Cook has explained the lines in the twelve Books which most readers would have little or no idea what was meant (unless he or she had specialized in relatively unknown subjects, or had studied the seemingly bottomless well of material that Browning had at the fingertips of his vast intellect).

Along with Introductions to and Notes on the twelve Books, Cook includes a Preface, a Note on the Sources of the Poem (xvii-xxi), and eleven appendices at the end. In his Preface, he details the genesis of the poem, and diplomatically disputes Hodell's observations concerning Browning's fidelity to his source material. He says that the documents contained in the Old Yellow Book, when read in close connection with the poem, will give the reader his or her "reward". He writes:

But as we make our way through the Yellow Book we are on the master's very track, we follow with a keener perception the workings of [Browning's] mind; above all we admire with a constantly growing admiration what he preferred to call the resuscitation - it was in fact the creation - of the outstanding *personae* of his drama, his Guido, his Pompilia, his Caponsacchi. (xii-xiii)

In his Introductions to the Books of the poem, Cook repeatedly points out the differences between the poem's facts and the Old Yellow Book's facts.

There were two vicious attacks (compared to Cook's matter-of-fact explanations) upon Hodell's assertion of Browning's "fidelity" to his primary source. The first, by Frances T. Russell, appeared in "Gold and Alloy", SP XXI (July 1924), (467-471). In her paper, Browning is attacked for changing the historical facts of the murder-case. She claims that only ten per cent of his source material is used in the poem, while the remaining ninety per cent is "pure fiction". The large amount of factual truth in the poem (ably demonstrated by Hodell) is ignored.

The second attack came a year later from Judge John M. Gest with a new, more "judicious" translation of the Old Yellow Book, with critical chapters and notes on the poem (Boston, 1926). Writing of Gest's new translation, Khattab correctly says that Gest was "motivated by a professional grudge against Browning's satirical delineation of the two lawyers", and therefore, strongly denied Browning's "fidelity" to the facts. Gest "not only exonerates [the lawyers] but depreciates the poet's idealization of Caponsacchi and Pompilia". For Gest, "this idealization is a gross injustice to historical veracity. He forgets that Browning is primarily a poet and not a historian" (*Crit. Recept.*, 121).

In turn, these anti-Hodell, anti-Browning assertions were answered in kind. For example, J.E. Shaw ("The 'Donna Angelicata' in The Ring and the Book", *PMLA*, XLI (March 1926, 55-81) agrees with Russell and Gest that Browning had not transcribed "facts" in the poem, but says that the poet has a prerogative to "idealize his characters". The "Donna Angelicata" (Pompilia), is the basis for his paper. Shaw claims that Pompilia is glorified by Browning because he identifies her with Elizabeth Barrett - Pompilia could do no wrong - and the evidence of this, he claims, is in Fra Celestino's testimony in the Old Yellow Book (XII, 459-642). In this testimony, Pompilia is seen as a saintly girl of complete innocence, overflowing with forgiveness.

In Sidelights on Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book" (1934), Louise Snitslaar attacks Gest's criticisms of Browning. She defends Browning's satirical portrayals of Archangelis and Bottinius, calling them "parodies", which had been "motivated by his mistrust of the sophistries of the head which are severed from the benign emotions of the heart" (Khattab, *Crit. Recept.*, 122). She believes that the cold rationality of the lawyers acts as a "foil" between Caponsacchi's and Pompilia's passionate pleas and the Pope's "intuitive wisdom".

In 1943, Paul E. Beichner shattered Shaw's "evidence" of the saintly and innocent Pompilia of the Old Yellow Book in his article "Fra Celestino's Affidavit and the Ring and the Book", (*MLN*, LVIII (May), 335-340). Celestino, he argues, describes Pompilia as "a

good, modest, and honourable girl", which Beichner claims is a "deliberate ambiguity" because he *had* to testify. Since he had had secrecy imposed upon him by the Seal of confession, he could not reveal Pompilia's guilt (had she been guilty), nor could he remain silent because it would have been interpreted as "an admission of her guilt" Beichner concludes that Pompilia's innocence and Celestino's ambiguous testimony are highly questionable.

To support their arguments during these debates over Browning's fidelity to his sources, critics attempted to interpret Browning's "ring" metaphor (or, more accurately, his "ring - book" metaphor). The basic premise is simple and straightforward. The gold ingot represents the Old Yellow Book. The pure gold within the ingot symbolizes the "pure crude fact" contained within the book. The alloy added to the gold to make it malleable and ready for crafting is the poet's "fancy", which he adds to the pure facts to bring them to life. The process of repristination - the removal of the alloy from the gold after forming the ring, is the poet removing his subjective *voice* from the mixture of fact and fiction, which allows the poem which he has formed, to keep its shape, and allow its characters to tell their own stories, without interference by the poet. Comprehending the "ring - book" metaphor is essential to the reader's understanding of the Ring and the Book. However, most critics have called this metaphor "confused", and a lot of time and energy has been spent, giving us a large amount of literature which is either trying to explain the metaphor or trying to determine what Browning *meant* by employing it in such a "confused" manner.

Mary Rose Sullivan, in Browning's Voices in "The Ring and the Book" 1969), says that "most critics have concluded that the ring metaphor is unworkable" (19). In A Commentary, Cook tells us:

Perhaps the admirable metaphor was pressed too hard. Browning tells us repeatedly that just as, when the jeweller's art has been exercised upon his ring, he disengages the alloy, so, when the poet has fashioned his poem, he will disengage his fancy from it. But he does not disengage it, there is no 'repristination'; unlike the jeweller's alloy, the poet's fancy does not 'fly in fume', it cannot (happily) be 'unfastened' from the facts. (2)

In A Browning Handbook, DeVane states the same thing but with more conviction. He writes: "Browning presses his figure too far. The fancy or imagination of the poet ... remains as the most essential part of the work" (330). Mrs. Russell, who had attacked Browning for his misuse of the source material, deliberately obscures the metaphor by reversing the analogy to fit her conclusions. She says that the poet's fancy is the gold that remains after the alloy has been removed, and that the facts contained in the source material are the alloy. ("Gold and Alloy", 1924)

A.G. Drachmann ("Alloy and Gold", SP XXII [1925]) concludes that the "truth" in the Old Yellow Book which remains after the repristination, is not factual truth but "moral and spiritual truth". This interpretation explains away most discrepancies between what Browning wrote and what Drachmann believes Browning meant.

Paul A. Cundiff ("The Clarity of Browning's Ring Metaphor" [1948]) claims that Browning had enough knowledge about the art of ring-making and metal craft to know that the total removal of the alloy from the gold would never allow the ring to keep its shape. Therefore, he concludes, the repristination process only removes part of the alloy and leaves a film of pure gold "only on the surface", just as Browning "removed himself from the face of the poem" (PMLA LXIII, (1948), 1279).

Sullivan agrees with George Wasserman who points out in "The Meaning of Browning's Ring - Figure" (MLN, LXXVI, 1961), that

The jeweller's repristination of the amalgamated ring is, then, only an approximate analogy of the creative process of the poet. The poet's fancy is actually not separated from the poem; moreover, what repristination that does occur, in a roughly equivalent way, occurs before the poem is written down. (426)

However, Sullivan adds that this repristination takes place at the end of Book I, and "it signals the change from narrative to dramatic form to come in the next books" (Browning's Voices, 19).

Of the scores of articles written about the "ring - book" metaphor, there appears to be little agreement and much confusion. The poet in Book I tells us himself that the ring,

" 'T is a figure, a symbol, say, /A thing's sign" (I, 31-32) William Earl Buckler, in Poetry and Truth in Robert Browning's The Ring and the Book (1985), writes:

Even after one has admitted that the ring-and-book metaphor that is the particular focus of one verse paragraph in Book I (679-697) has generally been talked to death by too many commentators, their literalizing of upwards of ten percent of The Ring and the Book is curious. (28)

The "ring-book" metaphor is an important part of the poem, but, as the poet says, it is a "figure" or a "symbol" But just as important as the metaphor is to an understanding of the poem, is how the "ring-book" symbol provides the foundation for the "structure" of The Ring and the Book. Closely tied to the interpretation of the ring and book metaphor was a debate among the critics over the poem's structure

In his Handbook (1955), William C. DeVane talks of two phases of the building of the structure. The first phase was the plan of using Elizabeth Barrett's ring to symbolize the circle of interrelated monologues in which "many people view the same event differently" In the midst of this ring lay "the central truth". He says the poem was divided into twelve sections - three for the spectators, three for the law, four for the protagonists, and two for the poet (Browning). The welding of these elements into the "great form" of the poem constitutes the second phase of construction, where there is, he writes:

the steady great rise to the height, culminating in Pompilia's speech (Book VII), and then the deliberate dropping into the anticlimax in the speeches of the opposing lawyers, and then the sharp rise to *the Pope's great utterance* in the second peak of the poem (286)
[emphasis added]

A remarkably ambitious study of the poem's structure appeared in 1943 by B R McElderry, Jr. in "The Narrative Structure of Browning's The Ring and the Book", (Research Studies of the State College of Washington XI (September 1943)) In 1900, Santayana had written: "[Browning's] long poems have no structure - for that name cannot be given to the singular mechanical division of The Ring and the Book ("The Poetry of Barbarism", Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, 208). McElderry says that Santayana "did not find in Browning's work the evidence of 'reason', discipline, and ideal form which

'structure' should involve" (193). McElderry claims that even though "Browning has not altogether succeeded in achieving a consistent whole, he has not altogether failed", for to sustain the reader's interest "even fairly well over 21,116 lines of difficult blank verse can not be accomplished without some cohesive principle" (194). "Obviously", he writes, "Books I and XII are the poet's prologue and epilogue; and as Browning himself pointed out, nine of the monologues fall into three groups of three each: Books II, III, and IV are by spectators; Books V, VI, and VII by the principals; and Books VIII, IX, and X by representatives of the law" (194). He goes on to explain that each of these groups is in turn carefully arranged.

In reply to Santayana's description of the poem as "mechanical", McElderry says that this

seems indiscriminating for the arrangement is unique as well as purposeful in design. By these shifts in points of view, so ingeniously contrasted, paralleled, and inter-related, the reader is given continuous, intersecting unfoldings of the plot instead of a straightaway narrative. (195)

Edward Dowden had remarked in 1905 that, "It has often been said that the story is told ten times over by almost as many speakers; it would be more correct to say that the story is not told even once. Nine different speakers tell nine different stories. ... In the end we are left to invent the story for ourselves" (Robert Browning, 256). This is what McElderry proves in his study of the poem's structure.

As well as studying the poem in terms of "character", he looks at it in terms of "plot". He writes: "Alert as Browning was to character values, it was from the series of related events that he deduced and created the characters. Necessarily, also, it was through events, arranged and interpreted, that he embodied his characters" (196). He proceeds to set down the story of The Ring and the Book in a chronological sequence of twelve episodes. These are:

1. The adoption of Pompilia
2. The marriage of Pompilia to Guido
3. Life at Arezzo, to the Departure of the Comparini (her foster-parents)

4. Violante's confession that Pompilia was a Foster-child, and the Daughter of a Strumpet; together with Guido's Suit in Defense of his Wife's Name
5. Events leading to the Flight of Pompilia
6. Pompilia's Flight and Capture
7. The Court's Decree on Pompilia's Flight
8. The Counter-Suits for Divorce
9. The Birth of Gaetano
10. The Murder of the Comparini and Pompilia
11. The Trial and Appeal
12. The Execution

McElderry uses this basic sequence of events as "a guide" to see "more clearly than before how Browning varied his treatment of the story and achieved 'the continuous, intersecting unfoldings' which give the poem its unique structure" (197).

We are given a meticulously researched statistical analysis of the poem. McElderry has provided summary tables which show how much space Browning allotted to each sequence of events in each of the twelve Books. In his "Combined Summary of the Twelve Books" chart (which he calls "a sort of space-time diagram of the poem as a whole"), he concludes that the five episodes most fully developed are:

the marriage (1652 lines); events leading to the flight of Pompilia (3661 lines); the flight itself (1877 lines); the murder (1332 lines); and the murder trial (5739 lines). Of these the murder trial occupies slightly more than a quarter of the whole poem. The events leading to the flight of Pompilia, together with the flight itself, are given almost as much space. Thus nearly half of the poem is concentrated on these three episodes. (202)

Because Browning "doles out" the details over most of the poem, and "that they are thus doled out and not concentrated, intensifies their interest" says McElderry. In this way Browning is "creating the illusion that the reader is really putting the story together himself, weighing and arranging the evidence" (227).

In conclusion to his precise and detailed study of the structure of The Ring and the Book, McElderry writes:

To analyze Browning's long poem book by book, ... and then to follow through the twelve episodes in turn, comparing the main emphasis and contribution of each book is - like reading the poem itself - a task requiring some patience. ... The varied approaches to each episode give a richness of treatment certainly remarkable. No single narrative, it is safe to say, could tell as much as the multiple plan makes possible. The story is told not only with richness of detail and interpretation, but with surprising lack of pointless repetition and

digression Furthermore, the poem reveals, skills of its contrasts, relationships, and proportions, and extraordinary organizing power. (229)

In Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of the "Ring and the Book" (1968), Altick and Loucks believe that, "To understand the careful principles upon which book is laid upon book, it is necessary to review the poem's entire structure" (37). They have found a unique and instructive way of viewing the poem's structure.

Their method lies in the three triads. The first speaker of each triad is pro-Guido, the second is pro-Pompilia, and the third is impartial (due to his or her moral disposition or social position). If the triads are formed into triangles, they contend:

At the base corners of each triangle are speakers who represent extreme opposites in point of view and line of argument, yet who also have some kind of affinity, such as equal social position or similarity of personal experience. At the apex of each triangle is a speaker who is superior to the other two in authority, either social or moral, and who speaks *either* in extension of the previous arguments *or in opposition to them*. (39-40) [emphasis added]

According to this method of viewing the poem's structure, Altick and Loucks state:

Books 4, 7, and 10, the apex monologues, therefore are the pivotal arguments, each serving to illuminate the meaning of the two monologues that have immediately preceded it. They are emblematic - Tertium Quid, of compromising intellect; Pompilia, of uncompromised innocence; and the Pope, of uncompromising justice and surpassing insight. *Together they embody Browning's opinions on the central moral themes of the poem*. (40) [emphasis added]

Although I disagree with their last statement (these are 'not' "Browning's opinions on the central moral themes of the poem"), they conclude their "scheme of triads" quite neatly.

Surrounding the three groups of triads are:

Book I ("The Ring and the Book") and 12 ("The Book and the Ring"), which are nearly perfect complements, as the symmetry of their titles implies. Together they suggest the encompassing of the book of history and human drama, with its error and groping, by the ring of artistic truth. (76)

Donald S. Hair, Browning's Experiments with Genre (1972), I believe, is much closer to Browning's conception of the poem's structure. He refers to Henry James' lecture on "The Novel in The Ring and the Book" (1912) in which James remarked on the seeming "formlessness" and the "clustered hugeness or inordinate muchness" of it all. Hair writes:

"James and other critics are responsible for the assumption that too often passes for an axiom, that Browning's poetry is difficult because it lacks form, order, and an easily recognized structure" (117). He tells us that The Ring and the Book *does* have a tendency to seem shapeless but this is because we, the readers, are not used to approaching a poem that *demand*s as much activity on the part of the reader as it did on the poet's". Hair gives an example. He writes:

In dealing with Book I, most critics are so concerned with the gold-and-alloy image that they fail to ask themselves why Browning not only describes the contents of the Old Yellow Book, but three times presents the materials he derives from it. Each presentation is generically distinct, and provides the key to the structure of the books that follow. Yet this careful piece of patterning, which is typical of the tight construction of the whole poem, *has been almost totally ignored*. (117) [emphasis added]

Hair says that the principal image of Book I, the ring, points "directly to the structure of the poem, and ironically to the truth the poem contains". The structure of the poem is circular and the titles of Books I and XII complete the circle and "round off" the poem. Browning had used the circle image in much of his previous poetry, and Hair writes that:

the circle ... is one of Browning's favourite images for truth. ...the circle represents ultimate truth, the arc of the circle finite truth Browning often speaks of the artist as gifted with insight into ultimate truth, and so the circle (which is limited to a single plane) may be a symbol for truth as the artist sees it, while the sphere (with its infinite number of planes) may represent truth as God sees it. (118)

Surely Browning, had he been alive, would have enjoyed the twentieth century interpretations of The Ring and the Book. Interpretations of the poem's ultimate meaning have been the most numerous, yet incredibly, there has been no universal agreement. Meaning is derived from interpretation, so each critic's approach to the poem will determine his or her final judgment. But this, I believe, proves one of Browning's major points in The Ring and the Book. Because of man's subjective nature, each interpretation will be different, depending upon various factors - social conventions of the time, individual values, or frame of mind (for example).

As we have seen, since the poem's publication, characterization has been a major critical trend in The Ring and the Book. Critics have interpreted the poem through the characters' voices, and have come to some fascinating conclusions. Langbaum tells us that the Pope is Browning's mouthpiece in the poem, that Caponsacchi is the chivalrous knight in shining armour - "represent[ing] the highest in manliness and courage" (Poetry of Experience, 110-112). Mary Rose Sullivan in Browning's Voices in The Ring and the Book (1969) asserts that the pure and innocent Pompilia "could become a blazing star for those still struggling on earth" (210). For Altick and Loucks, Guido is evil itself, he "is the devil incarnate" and this is "beyond doubt" (Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of "The Ring and the Book", 36). They contend that the poem's "ultimate meaning" is restricted to Christianity. "In human affairs the pervasive curse of doubt can be countered only by the vigorous response of a soul inspired by Christian teaching" (361).

William Earl Buckler feels that it is a shame, that "It is a startling idea that a poem as imaginatively rambunctious as The Ring and the Book should ever be reduced to a cliché, but that in effect is what has happened; the commentators have made it an ingenious, witty, learned, intricate cliché" (Poetry and Truth, 14).

Most critics have virtually ignored Books I and XII because they believe that since it is Browning himself speaking, it is simply an introduction to a series of monologues which in turn lead to Browning's speaking again in Book XII, to confirm that what he had said in Book I was, in fact, true. Sullivan writes of the "infallibility" of the poet,

mirror[ing] God, doing His work on earth and making Him apprehensible to man, he stands as the connecting link between time and eternity, drawing the finite and the infinite ever more closely together (Browning's Voices, 210-213)

In Poetry and Truth, Buckler answers Sullivan:

Is this the new morality we are meant to admire? the poetcraft for which we are asked to sacrifice the priestcraft? the infallibility of poetic intuition for which we are to give up the infallibility of the Pope? Then perhaps we should let His Holiness speak for Browning since he seems so little qualified to speak for himself. (29)

What the critics seem to have done over the past 125 years, is to reduce the characterization in The Ring and the Book to a popularity contest, to determine who is best or who is worst. Browning tells us himself:

. . . See it for yourselves,
 This man's act, changeable because alive!
 Action now shrouds, now shows the informing thought,
 Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top,
 Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,
 Shows one tint at a time to take the eye . . .
 Your sentence absolute for shine or shade.
 Once set such orbs, - white styled, black stigmatized, -
 A-rolling, see them once on the other side
 Your good men and your bad men every one,
 From Guido Franceschini to Guy Faux,
 Oft would you rub your eyes and change your names (l, 1364-1378)

Browning's The Ring and the Book is a dramatic portrayal of human life, with *each* monologue adding another dimension to that life which surrounds the central truth found within his ring.

Chapter 4

BROWNING'S "OBJECTIVE VOICES" IN *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

The Ring and the Book is a poem about human relationships, giving a panoramic view of the complex psychological processes involved in humanity's search for truth. The method used by Browning is the dramatic monologue, the form which he is credited with having perfected, reaching its zenith with The Ring and the Book. As Robert Langbaum explains "true dramatic monologue must fulfil four criteria - a speaker other than the poet, a listener, an occasion, and some interplay between the speaker and the listener" (Poetry of Experience, 76) Through the monologue of the speaker, there is a self-revelation of character

The poet, to be "dramatic", must remove himself from the poem and let the speaker of the monologue take over and tell his or her "situation", not directly, but in such a way as to leave the reader with an impression or discovery of the speaker's character as he or she reveals it. After the failure and harsh reviews of Sordello in 1840, as mentioned earlier, Browning claimed that his poetry, from that point forward, was to be objective or dramatic rather than subjective or lyric. The labelling of his poems as "dramatic" was in part a device to conceal Browning's own views and to allow them to appear in an impersonal form. For a decade, he continually warned his critics that the speakers in his poems did not speak for him.

In Browning's "Introductory Essay" ("Essay on Shelley", 1851), he discusses the distinction between the two types of poets - objective and subjective - and writes of the distinct purpose of each. "the objective poet, in his appeal to the aggregate human mind, chooses to deal with the doings of men, (the result of which dealing, in its pure form, when even description, as suggesting a describer, is dispensed with, is what we call dramatic poetry), while the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which

strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the working of his brain" (Robert Browning: The Poems, Volume I, ed. John Pettigrew (1981), 1003)

From the period 1841 to 1864, Browning continually worked on perfecting the dramatic monologue - in the Bells and Pomegranates series, Men and Women, and Dramatis Personae. By now, his reputation as a major poet was set firmly in place and work on The Ring and the Book had already begun

Browning had learned much from his "mistakes", what his critics had deemed as "failures" (ie Pauline, Paracelsus, Sordello, etc) At the age of 52, when he began writing The Ring and the Book, and after thinking about and planning the great poem for four years, he would not make the same mistake again. In the fall of 1868, his *magnum opus* was completed and in several letters to friends, he wrote that he was "satisfied" with the outcome I do not believe that Browning would have let the poem go to press had he not been "satisfied" with his work.

What I intend to show here, however, is that Browning's conception of objectivity, his desire to dramatize everything, led to the creation of a *projected* rather than a *literal* poetic self in the poem. In other words, the poet in the first and last Books (criticized by many for giving away too much) is not simply Robert Browning That poet, in fact, is an elaborate artifice, a voice we must listen to, in order to understand how to read The Ring and the Book correctly.

The Ring and the Book consists of 21,116 lines, twelve dramatic monologues in blank verse, which being dramatic, are therefore presented as "objective" monologues But this in itself raises a major question - if the dramatic monologue is to lead to the uncovering of truth through the self-revelations of the various speakers, how can truth be arrived at objectively through subjective means? Of course it is virtually impossible to be totally

"objective" about anything. Human beings are egocentric, and our decisions are influenced by our own beliefs, thoughts, and self-interests, our past, present, and future situations.

This is not a serious burden but merely a fact of life, yet for Browning's poet, the question remains - objectivity through subjective means? Browning's poetry, The Ring and the Book in particular, in fact anticipates twentieth century ideas of "truth in relativity" by presuming that truth is not so much a function of the supposed "objective" consciousness of a single authority, but a synthesis of perspectives, each one of which might be presumed to have some validity and all of which have to be taken into account to understand a situation to the fullest. Experience is the key, both for the individual trying to understand human nature and for science, but in the end experience has to be formulated so flexibly as to preclude simple dogmas about life or nature. Browning understood the power of the exception and affirmed the ultimate inaccessibility of Ultimate Truth as strongly as Einstein. In The Ring and the Book, although Browning is writing dramatically or "objectively", the speakers in his monologues are very human, and are therefore, speaking "subjectively", but this confirms rather than undermines their testimonials.

As mentioned earlier, G.K. Chesterton, in his essay "The Ring and the Book", first calls the poem "the great epic of the enormous importance of small things" (Robert Browning, 163) but later adds that it is also "the epic of free speech" (173). In 1903, the concept of "free speech" was a relatively new phenomenon. He writes:

The theory of free speech, that truth is so much larger and stranger and more many-sided than we know of, that it is very much better at all costs to hear every one's account of it, is a theory which has been justified upon the whole by experiment, but which remains a very daring and even a very surprising theory. It is really one of the great discoveries of the modern time; but, once admitted, it is a principle that does not merely affect politics, but philosophy, ethics, and finally poetry. (R.B., 174)

Chesterton correctly says that Browning believed that it was necessary for all sides of a question to be heard to discover the truth of it (and there *was* a truth to discover). Browning believed that justice was a mystery, not a delusion. "He held, in other words", Chesterton writes, "the true Browning doctrine, that in a dispute every one was to a certain extent right;

not the decadent doctrine that in so mad a place as the world, every one must be by the nature of things wrong" (R.B., 175)

In the twelve monologues of The Ring and the Book, Browning, beyond a doubt, demonstrates his poetic genius and dramatic powers by the very clever method of having the story told from several different and conflicting (or at the very least, varying) viewpoints. But above and beyond this, he has ingeniously included the "reader" into the structure of the poem to such an extent, that at the end of Book XII, the poem has not ended because there is one last monologue to be heard - that of the reader. The reader is left with the unenviable task of making the final judgment, of determining the truth of the matter

Browning has constructed his poem in such a way that the reader believes that he or she is looking at the facts from a totally objective point of view - from the events leading to the murders, to the murders themselves, to the trial, its conclusion and aftermath, to the execution of Guido and his cohorts. The reader believes that he or she has covered the facts of the situation from enough different angles to be qualified to make an objective choice or decision concerning the truth of the situation. However, in the end, what it comes down to, is the reader choosing or deciding, after having considered (from a subjective stance) a collection of subjective viewpoints looked at subjectively, to reach a subjective result which is passed off as "objectivity".

The irony is that objectivity *has* to be seen subjectively. Browning has presented us with twelve distinct subjective monologues, each one following the psychological unfolding of a character. All the while the reader is reinterpreting the situation, changing his or her view under the force of a character's testimonial. In The Convex Glass: The Mind of Robert Browning (1968), Norton B. Crowell suggests that Browning, the speakers of the monologues, and the reader are all "tested in forming their opinions about the case" Because their judging faculties and experiences are different, then naturally each reader's view will differ as well. "The Ring and the Book", he writes, "was written to show that if a thousand men and women examine a given set of facts, there will be exactly one thousand

differing views, at any given moment" (189). In addition, I contend that each reading of the poem is going to be different for each reader because personal situations, moods, circumstances, and personal thoughts are continually changing.

This is the psychological paradox with which we are presented in The Ring and the Book. Browning's dramatic monologues form a ring of "partial-truths" around the "central truth" of the murder-case. Yet the central truth is surely unknowable, or knowable only to God.

Since 1869, reviewers, critics, and scholars have been searching for the "key" that will open the door to the understanding and the meaning of The Ring and the Book. Dozens of approaches have been made through various techniques (ie. Browning's "fidelity" to his source material, the "ring" metaphor, characterisation, aspects of imagery, etc.). But none has satisfactorily opened the door more than a crack. The crack does not shed enough light from the outside to see clearly what Browning has done inside. Confusion has reigned and most critics have attributed it to that old standby and scapegoat - Browning's obscurity.

A logical place to find this "key" to the poem would be at the beginning, for, if the reader is to enter the poem, he or she should open the front door. Book I is a remarkable work of art in that it not only serves as a prologue to the epic poem, but it also weaves an intricate web of ideas, ideas which have been confusing readers ever since the poem's publication. Being a dramatic monologue, Book I has a speaker (other than Browning), a listener or listeners, an occasion, and of course, some interplay between the speaker and the listener(s).

If this is so, then why have the highly-respected and widely-read "Browning critics" misunderstood this basic premise? Charles Hodell, in his "Essay" in the Old Yellow Book, tells how Browning uses Book I to introduce the ten characters and explain the murders and the subsequent trial. A.K. Cook complains of Browning's presence in Book I, saying that, "before he has summoned a single witness he [Browning] tells us quite plainly what our 'ultimate judgment' is to be" (Commentary, 3). In The Poetry of Experience, Robert

Langbaum believes that Browning "abandoned the dramatic monologue entirely - by speaking in his own voice in the first and last Books in order to establish the *right* judgments and by bringing the poem to a *right* conclusion ." (158) In 1969, Mary R. Sullivan wrote that "Browning took great pains to establish the particularity of the locale, the audience's presence, and most especially, his dominant personality as the poet-speaker" (Browning's Voices in 'The Ring and the Book': A Study of Method and Meaning, 177) In fact, most critics who have written about Books I and XII have at the very least mentioned Browning's presence (which is usually described as annoying, overbearing, distracting and detracting from the total effect of the poem).

Books I and XII *are* dramatic monologues, as essential to the structure and meaning of The Ring and the Book as the ten monologues in-between But Browning, contrary to the "opinions" of the vast majority of critics who have written the Browning canon, is *not* the speaker in these Books. And this is a major key to the poem, opening the front door, shedding light on the inside, showing us (not surprisingly) several other doors, some of which have already been opened, and others which will, eventually, have to be opened

In the first chapter of her book, Browning's Voices (1969), Mary Rose Sullivan begins on the right track by stating.

The voice speaking in Book I is that of a nineteenth-century poet who, some four years previously, has discovered an old quarto volume containing documents of a seventeenth-century Italian murder trial... He pictures himself as a kind of master craftsman who will fashion a poem out of the raw stuff of his old documents . His present audience is a representative segment of the contemporary reading public which has not received the poet's previous work well but for whom he continues to *labour* and to whom he looks now for support in his most ambitious venture... He is deeply committed to the concept of the poetic function as a high office, and intends to use the present occasion to demonstrate the artistic process and achievement. (3, 5, 6)

Much of what Sullivan has written is true and many valid points are made (which will be discussed shortly), but she concludes the chapter in a most surprising fashion

If the audience is to be called upon to make a judgment of each monologue, why does the poet conclude his introduction by indicating his own opinion about which speaker is wrong and which right?... We can see now what Browning is doing in Book I. It might, after all,

have been merely a prose argument to the poem, if its sole purpose was to introduce the ring of linked speeches, but it has been made a **DRAMATIC** monologue like those to follow. Browning is taking pains to make us see the poet (*who is, of course, himself*) [emphasis added] in concrete, actualized situation, in order to focus our attention on the actual process of poetic creation. . . We need to feel the full weight of his presence and personality in order to appreciate the achievement of his withdrawal. (18)

Thus Sullivan reverts to what commentators on the poem had said for over half a century - that the speaker of Book I *is* Robert Browning.

Charles Hodell, some sixty years earlier, had claimed that Browning's characters were created "in strict accordance" with the facts in the Old Yellow Book because he had wanted to avoid critical opposition. Like Hodell, Sullivan, on the verge of opening a door which might have led to contrary controversy, fell back into the safety of the rigid literary canon, avoiding any major clashes with those who had helped secure its rigidity.

William Earl Buckler, in Poetry and Truth in Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book" (1985), takes a more definite stand and argues his case well. He says that in Books I and XII, "Browning has cast himself in the role of a poet undergoing the ordeal of creation in a generic sense, a poet, moreover, of a certain temper of mind whose way with ideas must be assessed in the light of that temperament" ("Introduction: An Essay in Critical Redirection", 14). In the second essay in his book, "A Credible Feat. Books I and XII Revisited", Buckler asserts that "the poet-speaker in Books I and XII is nothing so literal as Robert Browning. He is a species of man, a poet, who begins in a state of high excitement over a specialized but representative experience of having achieved a victory over death..." (33). Buckler does not question the presence of specific autobiographical facts in Book I, nor the fact that the poet-speaker plays a very "specialized role". He writes:

Book I is entitled "The Ring and the Book", and the speaker is a poet, author of our poem The Ring and the Book. Moreover, the purpose of Book I is to tell us how that particular poem came into being from the initial discovery of the Old Yellow Book to the final "spirt" of acid that made the rounded "ring" justifiably "golden" (I, 1388-1389). Indeed such facts, including the fact of the speaker's specialized role, are absolutely essential *to either way of reading Books I and XII*: (Poetry and Truth, 34)

The poem opens with a question, "Do you see this ring?" (1,1) But even before this line has been spoken, there is much that has happened. For example, we know how Browning felt about dramatic poetry and how he had vowed, some twenty-five years earlier, never to "speak in [his] own voice" again. So the first line, and the following 1, 415 lines of Book I, and the 870 lines of Book XII are not spoken by Browning *in propria persona*, as hundreds of papers, essays, commentaries, and criticisms have contended since the poem's publication. In a poem of such magnitude and importance as The Ring and the Book, Browning *would* not speak in his own voice. After almost three decades of developing the dramatic monologue, it would be unrealistic and nonsense for him *not* to write Books I and XII in the dramatic genre. As Buckler says, the critics of The Ring and the Book are implying,

that the author of one of the most conscientiously imaginative poems in English - that is, a poem in which the idea of the imagination is the object of very disciplined honing and the function of the imagination is a subject of profoundest importance - saw no need to apply the imaginative principle to himself (Poetry and Truth, 28)

Critics such as Altick and Loucks (Browning's Roman Murder Story, 1958) and Langbaum (Poetry of Experience, 1957) have decided that Books I and XII are too obvious in their general import to need further critical attention. They declare that it is an accepted fact that Browning speaks in his own voice - end of discussion

Browning is no more the speaker of Books I and XII than he is of "My Last Duchess" or "Bishop Blougram's Apology". His choice of speaker for the two Books is a stroke of genius on his part. As Buckler claims, the speaker is "a poet", and he may be "specialized". I contend that he is also definitely *special*. He has an important duty to perform, a specific task to complete, a crucial message to impart to his readers. He is going to write a great poem, and he is going to explain and demonstrate how a great poem is written. He is inviting his listeners (and readers) to join him, to observe first-hand how a poet goes about his craft.

The reason for this, I believe, is that the poet feels and knows that he and his poetry have been misunderstood, misrepresented, and falsely labelled by his critics and readers in the past. The mere mention of the poet's name was synonymous with such words and phrases as "obscurity", "too intellectual for the average reader", "self-assuredness to the point of arrogance", "biased", "grotesque", "fascination with sordid subject matter", "unintelligible", "peculiar style", "ambiguous", "morbid", "difficult", "long-winded", and most important and distressing to the poet - "too subjective" (Khattab, Critical Reception, 12-21).

From the beginning of his career until his death, Browning closely followed and monitored the criticism of his work (from Paracelsus in 1835 to Asolando in 1889), but probably never more so than in the period during and immediately following the publication of The Ring and the Book. He knew he was a 'great' poet and he never explained his work, neither what he *did* nor what it *meant*. Over the years, with the same criticisms being hurled at him and his poetry time and time again by the writers of hundreds of periodicals and pamphlets, Browning knew exactly what his reputation as a poet was, and he knew *why* his reputation as a poet was as it was.

Browning's "poet" of Books I and XII reveals all of those characteristics and traits which had been "attached to" or attributed to Robert Browning the poet, yet he is not "Browning". The poem's "poet" is such a brilliant creation because his (the "poet's") critics and readers, or, "British Public, ye who like me not, / (God love you!)" (I, 410, 411), all believe that the speaker of Book I *is* Robert Browning.

What Browning has in fact done, is: paint an amplified self-portrait; he has presented us with a caricature of himself; he has given us an extremely clever demonstration of his dramatic power with a humorously grotesque parody of "Robert Browning". This is the "Robert Browning" as his critics and the British public have viewed (and do view) him; the premise is a projection of critical misunderstanding of his work and of critical inability to see beyond the end of their pen-nibs. With the publication of Paracelsus in 1835, his critics began to build a wall of criticism, adding more bricks and mortar to it as his career struggled

to advance, eventually constructing such a solid wall that it has become Browning canon - unshakeable and, taken for granted. After all, Browning's critics were the "experts", so who could argue?

The "poet" of Books I and XII is "Robert Browning" as Browning sees himself perceived by his critics and the British public. This is the touchstone to a fully comprehensive reading of The Ring and the Book.

The skill and ingenuity with which the monologist of Book I is depicted, is, in my opinion, the most cleverly contrived portrayal of a character in Browning's vast repertoire of dramatic monologues. What better way could he have found to express what has come to be known as his "moral-aesthetic" theory? Several times in the past, Browning had attempted (through his poetry) to communicate with his readers, to acquaint them with this theory, but the critics did not understand, calling Browning "confusing" and "obscure". The Ring and the Book provided him with the ideal vehicle not only to demonstrate the philosophy through his dramatic powers as objective poet, but also to explain it in such a simple fashion through the voice of one of his subjective characters, who happens to be the Robert Browning who has been stereotyped as the unwaveringly obscure poet by the critics, and therefore, the reading public.

This is the voice we hear in Book I. Just as Browning does not *know* the characters of his drama (the three anonymous Roman commentators, the three protagonists of the historic account - Guido, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi, and the three representatives of "the law" - Archangelis, Bottinius, and Pope Innocent XII), he does not *know* the critically stereotyped Browning of Books I and XII. Browning's extraordinary insight into human nature allows him to enter the personae and virtually *become* these characters without forcing or pressing his own views or personality upon them - hence, the dramatic monologue.

The speaker in Book I, the projected Robert Browning, is determined to right his wronged reputation. He is going to prove to the British public that he is a great poet, that he can take forgotten historical 'facts' and make them come alive through his poetic skills. But

of paramount importance to this poet, is to erase the false impression that his reading public/listeners have of him. He is *not* going to be obscure. He will make sure that he is easily understood, that he expresses himself clearly, that nothing is left unexplained or in doubt. Never again will his critics be able to say he is "obscure" or "unintelligible". He is going to take them with him, lead them by the hand, walk them step by step through the various stages of artistic creation and development, through the creative process itself.

"Do you see this Ring?" (I, 1). The speaker holds up the gold ring and goes on to explain that this beautifully finished product started out as "pure gold" extracted from the earth, and was naturally, too "soft" to "bear the file's tooth and the hammer's tap" (I,14). The goldsmith, to make the pure gold manageable enough to work with, mixed it with "gold's alloy" and proceeded to work the mass into a ring, "a ring - thing right to wear". And, "Oh, there's reprimposition!" the speaker exclaims, and quickly tells of the final step used in crafting the gold ring. To return the gold to its original, unspoiled condition, the ring-maker gives the ring,

Just a spurt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;
While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
The rondure brave, the lilyed loveliness,
Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore:
Prime nature with an added artistry -
No carat lost, and you have gained a ring. (I, 23-30)

He then tells his listeners that the preceding description of crafting a perfect gold ring is merely a "figure", a "symbol", a "thing's sign". Now he's ready to explain to them *what* the ring figure is signifying.

"Do you see this square old yellow Book...?" (I, 33) he asks as he excitedly throws it in the air, twirling it about, showing it around so all can see. His finding of this old Book of "pure crude fact /Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard, /And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since" (I, 35-37) was no accident but "predestination", he claims. Just as the pure gold among "unearthed slope-side figtree-roots" was found for the ring, so was

his old yellow Book found hidden among a mass of bric-a-brac in a market-place on Lorenzo Square in Florence. Like the glint of the gold on the hillside, the title-page of his book caught his attention: " 'A Roman murder-case:/ .. /Wherein it is disputed if, and when, /Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet 'scape /The customary forfeit.' " (I, 121-131). Just as the pure gold had been extracted from the earth, so had the poet dug into his Book, finding "pure crude fact", "the whole truth". He exclaims:

Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged,
Lay gold, (beseech you, hold that figure fast!)
So, in this book lay absolutely truth,
Fulcrum fact, the documents indeed,.... (I, 141-144)

"Beseech you, hold that figure fast!" Browning's speaker (the ever -obscure Robert Browning), is trying very hard not to be misunderstood. He has been going slowly, emanating joy and excitement over his treasure, explaining differences in currencies, translating into simple English, and returning again and again to the gold and ring figure, reminding his listeners in case they had forgotten. He wants to be understood, or, more accurately, he does not want to be misunderstood.

He has focused their attention once again and proceeds to convey the facts found within his old yellow Book (I, 144-363). He speaks plainly, simply, and colloquially, at times reverting back to a small point which he feels may have been confusing or vague. He does not want to be seen as too intellectual so he speaks to his listeners as an equal, as a colleague, as one of them. While describing the history of the law for adulterous wives, he says:

The Roman voice was potent, plentiful;
Cornelia de Sicariis hurried to help
Pompeia de Parricidiis; *Julia de*
Something-or-other jostled *Lex* this-and-that;
King Solomon confirmed Apostle Paul:
That nice decision of Dolabella, eh? (I, 225-230)

The speaker is determined to keep the attention of his listeners for he has something of great value to impart, and he wants to - he *will* - make sure that they comprehend. He tells them:

This is the bookful; thus far take the truth,
 The untempered gold the fact untampered with.
 The mere ring-metal ere the ring be made! (I, 364-366)

Before their minds start to wander, the speaker quickly poses a few questions: "And what has hitherto come of it? Who preserves /The memory of this Guido, and his wife / Pompilia,..." (I, 67-69). He tells them, "You know the tale already" (I, 377), but asks his listeners not only about what kind of people Guido and Pompilia were. But about that

Other yet-unnamed actor in the piece.
 The young frank handsome courtly Canon, now,
 The priest, declared the lover of the wife,
 He who, no question, did elope with her,
 For certain bring the tragedy about,
 Giuseppe Caponsacchi; (I, 382-387)

His behavior in "the matter, was it right or wrong or both?" (I, 388). And the slaughter of the Comparini, he asks, what do you think about the right or wrong of that? He reminds his audience, "you know best" (I, 403). And why, he asks, did the father of his new-born son (Gaetano) have to "kill the mother thus /Because she bore his son and saved himself?" (I, 408-409)

The speaker leaves the questions hanging in mid-air and continues to explain to his listeners what he is going to do, trying to be easily understood, trying to be as uncomplicated as possible. He reminds them,

Well, British Public, ye who like me not,
 (God love you!) and will have your proper laugh
 At the dark question, laugh it! I laugh first.
 Truth must prevail, the proverb vows; and truth
 - Here is it all i' the book at last, as first
 There it was all i' the heads and hearts of Rome
 Gentle and simple, never to fall nor fade
 Nor be forgotten. (I, 410-417)

But of course, he tells them, it *was* forgotten. This old yellow Book of his contained "pure crude fact /Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard, /And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since" (I, 35-37). But out of this book, he excitedly tells his audience,

... bit by bit I dug
 The lingot truth, that memorable day,
 Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold
 Yes; but from something else surpassing that,
Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,
 Made it bear hammer and be firm to file. (I, 457-463)
 [emphasis added]

The speaker is being perfectly clear. He is not obscure. He had told his listeners to keep the ring "symbol" in mind ("hold that figure fast!") and he has now returned to it, letting his metaphor take shape in their minds. He declares that without adding something of himself (his poetic imagination), the facts in his book would remain forgotten, dead truth. He *tells* his audience that "Fancy with fact is just one fact the more" (I, 464). This is not a question. This is a statement said as a matter of fact. He continues:

To-wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced,
 Thridded and so thrown fast the facts else free,
 As right through ring and ring runs the djereed
 And binds the loose, one bar without a break.
I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,
before attempting smithcraft.... (I, 465-470)
 [emphasis added]

The speaker proceeds to demonstrate exactly what he means by "fusing [his] live soul" (his fancy) "and that inert stuff" (the facts in his book). He tells them, as if in a trance, how he saw through his mind's eye the whole terrible affair unfold before him. Yes, the facts found in the book were there, but this time the speaker brings the players of the tragedy, the characters among the facts in his book, to life by giving them personalities and traits that *only he himself imagines they would have been like*. It is a totally subjective account of the Franceschini murder case.

This is the Browning that the critics and British public *expected* to meet in Browning's poem. They believed that the poet who had claimed never to speak in his own voice had just made the ultimate blunder, not only by blatantly contradicting his poetic philosophy of objectivity, but now by telling his readers *what* to think. From lines 471 to 678, the poet of Book I tells his listeners how he perceives the events surrounding the triple-

murder to have happened. Everything is either good or evil, black or white, yes or no. Where is the objectivity? There is no room remaining for interpretation by the reader. Guido is the consummate villain and Devil. Pompilia is the image of angelic purity, innocence, honesty, and forgiveness - a bright ray of sunlight briefly illuminating the night. Caponsacchi is the young soldier-saint-hero, bravely and valiantly trying to rescue Pompilia from "the Prince o' the Power of the Air". And the Pope, the good, wise, old Pope, doing God's work on earth, gives the final judgment, a Divine justice, and orders Guido's execution.

If this is what the speaker, or, the poet who is about to write the poem believes, then why, the audience must ask, is he telling us all this? In The Critical Reception, Dr. Khattab writes about a review from The North British Review LI (October 1869), 52-53. "The reviewer", he says,

adds that in The Ring and the Book there are clear signs of Browning's consciousness that, having been generally unintelligible before, he should now write in a more comprehensible language, that he should write for the many and not for the few. This determination bears fruit in a sense of freedom that one feels in The Ring and the Book. Browning has been for a long time his own sole reader and critic. He has been hampered by the rigorous ideal he has set for himself to achieve. Therefore he has written in a language intelligible only to himself. Now, in thinking of others, he has delivered himself from himself but without selling himself to a new servitude. He is still the same man, the same thinker, the same speaker as of old but with a new, easy, intelligible voice. (21)

As explained above, Browning knew that most of his critics felt this way about him and his poetry and it is for *this reason* that he makes Book I's speaker the Robert Browning who has been "unintelligible" in the past but who is now the Robert Browning "with a new, easy, intelligible voice". There is no obscurity here.

After his imaginative "journey" through the Old Yellow Book, the speaker again tells his listeners

This was it from, my fancy with those facts,
I used to tell the tale, turned gay to grave,
But lacked a listener seldom; such alloy,
Such substance of me interfused the gold
Which, wrought into a shapely ring therewith
Hammered and filed, fingered and favoured, last

Man, - as befits the made, the inferior thing, -
 Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn,
 Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow, -
 Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain
 The good beyond him, - which attempt is growth, -
Repeats God's process in man's due degree;
 Attaining man's proportionate result, -
 Creates, no, but *resuscitates*, perhaps (I, 712-719)
 (emphasis added)

Only God can "create". Man, having been created by God, is "the inferior thing", but must strive to grow, must reach for "the good beyond him". He must try to revive the unconscious, the lifeless, the dead, "For such man's feat is, in the due degree, /-Mimic creation, galvanism for life, /But still a glory portioned in the scale" (I, 739-741).

But the poet has "a special gift, an art of arts, /more insight and more outisight and much more /Will to use both of these" (I, 746-748) than most people. The speaker tells his listeners that as a poet, he can detach "half of his soul" from himself and let it travel over "unwandered waste ways of the world", where it may come across "some fragment of a whole, /Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse, /Smoking flax that fed fire once" (I, 752-754), and then, having arrived, he says

I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play,
 Push lines out to the limit, lead forth last
 (By a moonrise through a ruin of a crypt)
 What shall be mistily seen, murmuringly heard,
 Mistakenly felt. (I, 755-759)

The speaker then compares the "poet" first to Faust - a type of "mimic creator" who had faith, not in himself, but in his "gift's" result (which was an illusion), and then, to Elisha (2 Kings 4:32-35), another "mimic creator" who has a different kind of faith in his gift. Buckler says that Elisha "saw himself, not as a mage or magician with a talent for hocus-pocus, but as an agent of 'the Lord' doing, in his humbler fashion, the Lord's service" (Poetry and Truth in Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book", 32).

The poet, like Elisha uses his "special powers" to breathe life into the corpse,

... put his mouth upon its mouth, his eyes
 Upon his eyes, his hands upon its hands,
 ... Stretched him on the flesh again,
 And the eyes opened. (l. 766-771)

Buckler says, "The poet, like us, is not infallible " He writes

He is no more God-like than we are and no more of a "link between time and eternity" or between "the finite and the infinite." Like Faust, the poet is vulnerable to his gift, like Elisha, he must lend his gift out in the spirit of a humble, faithful, affirmative agent of power, a "Creator", different in kind from himself as he is *like*, in kind, to the rest of us. What we need is that degree of faith in our own gift that will enable it to work, and to help us find that faith is the poet's role. (Poetry and Truth, 32-33)

This is very similar to the role of the poet as described by Wordsworth in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (1800), (Selected Poems and Prefaces, ed J. Stillinger, 446-448). Everyone has this creative gift "in the due degree", but the poet's gift is heightened, and he is able to utilize this special gift or talent, Elisha-like, to bring dead things (like long-forgotten facts in an old Italian murder case) back to life. "Imagination" or "fancy" is a gift which is peculiar to man alone, so only man is capable of reaching at (if not grasping and gaining) "the good beyond him"

The enthusiastic speaker is trying to explain to his audience not only how the poetic imagination works, but also what he has found in his old Book - truth. He has discovered a truth on the grandest scale within its pages. The lifeless facts were all there but through the human capacity of imagination, the facts were given energy and life. This, of course, is not truth itself but it has moved dead "fact" so far towards live truth that it forms a solid basis on which to build. The poet's imaginative powers enlarge the truth rather than diminish it, simply by giving it "form", and therefore, more of a permanence, a permanence that had been absent before.

The speaker tells his listeners, "Tis a credible feat /With the right man and way" (l. 771-772). He informs them that *he* is the "right man" and that *he* has the "right way" to perform this life-giving feat. But then something strange happens to the speaker. He has told his audience - clearly and intelligibly - how he is going to write a great poem. He has explained, step by step, how he, like the expert ring-maker, adds his alloy / fancy to the gold /

facts to make the ring / poem ready for shaping / writing. But the final stage of the creative process (that of crafting the art object itself) is not quite ready. He is having difficulty with the act of repriming / disappearance, which enables his poetic ring to become whole and complete. He is coming to the realization that by breathing life into the "dead" facts, the now "live" facts have, in turn, breathed new life into him. He does not quite know how to cope with this reciprocal resuscitation but he is very much aware of the effect it is having on him. "Enough of me!" (I, 773) he exclaims. The old yellow Book is now electric as he turns its "medicinal leaves". He excitedly announces:

A spirit laughs and leaps through every limb,
And lights my eye, and lifts me by the hair,
Letting me have my will again with these
- How little I the dead alive once more? (I, 776-779)

He does not understand what has happened, so naturally he cannot tell his listeners either. This was not part of his original plan. He was to show his critics/listeners exactly what he does during the creative process, thereby eliminating any trace of obscurity. Worried, he immediately gives another summary of the tale (I, 780-823) but it seems empty and flat, even though he had told it in a factually accurate and evenly-balanced way. Something was missing. Something was wrong. He suddenly realizes that just as *he* had become part of the murder story, the murder story had become part of him. At this point, the subjective poet and the objective facts become intertwined, and a portion of each is transferred to the other. William Buckler writes it another way:

It is a singularly crucial moment in the creative process and in the way we view The Ring and the Book. The very idea of the objective and the subjective has become muddled. Is it *it* or is it *he*? (Poetry and Truth, 43)

With this new awareness, the speaker *knows* that although his guidance through the aesthetic process was correct - and clearly stated - he also *knows* that it is not the path to truth. He cannot *tell* his listeners the truth, even though he thinks he knows it better than anyone. As poet (and man), he has not the right to presume to be all-knowing, to have the power to

dictate to others what the truth is. He realizes that *he* cannot tell the story. He, as poet, must let the story tell itself. Now, he believes he is ready. He proclaims

Let this old woe step on the stage again!
 Act itself o'er anew for men to judge,
 Not by the very sense and sight indeed -
 (Which take at best imperfect cognizance,
 Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,
 What mortal ever in entirety saw?)
 - No dose of purer truth than man digests,
 But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now,
 Not strong meat he may get to bear some day -
 To-wit, by *VOICES* we call evidence,
 Uproar in the echo, live fact deadened down,
 Talked over, bruited abroad, whispered away,
 Yet helping us to all we seem to hear:
 For how else know we *SAVE BY WORTH OF WORD*?
 (I, 824-837) [emphasis added]

The speaker knows that he cannot tell the stories of the characters. The characters must tell their *own* stories. He is telling his audience that he cannot tell them or decide for them what the truth is. They must *listen* to the voices which are about to speak, and *then* decide for themselves what is truth and what is not. The speaker, as poet, is informing his audience that they are his equals, and by *listening* to the voices in the drama (rather than the usual way of *watching* and *seeing* the action unfold), they, like him, will be very much a part of the creative process. He tells them, "Here are the voices presently shall sound / In due succession" (I, 838-839).

In the following 507 lines of Book I, the speaker gives a preview of the eleven succeeding monologues, where the listener is constantly reminded and urged to "listen" to the actors in the drama. Instead of focusing their attention on the speaker's "I", emphasis has now been shifted to the "you" of the audience, to play a major role in the poem to come. Not only are they to "listen" to the words of the voices, but they are also to "listen" for the intonations, inflections and nuances of voices in the various monologues. This is *language*, and language is the one indispensable tool or instrument we all have at our disposal with which to communicate and learn. Language is what "we call evidence" (I, 833), and it is this

"evidence" presented by the voices in The Ring and the Book that leads to the truth, "For how else know we save by worth of word?" (I, 837)

Each speaker in the poem is making a moral judgment and being subjective, each judgment is different, making the moral issue inconstant. The speaker of Book I, while explaining to his audience how the creative process works and how he is going to show them the way to the truth by *telling* them (so there will be no more doubt, confusion, or obscurity about what he is doing), came to the wonderful realization that he cannot tell them or show them the way because he is simply one of the several subjective voices in the drama. Like Elisha, he is a mimic creator breathing life into the lifeless. But at the same time, the listeners/readers have been urged to listen to the voices, to judge for themselves, to be mimic creators too - breathe their own life into the monologues and become *part* of the monologues. By doing this, they too are co-creators of the finished ring. They must "reach at . . . the good beyond" themselves. The truth cannot be delivered and presented to an individual in pre-packaged form. Through his/her powers of language, each person must weigh the "evidence", must judge for him/herself, and arrive at his/her own meaning of the truth. Since each character's version of the truth varies, and each reader's interpretation of each character's version of the truth varies, then each reader will arrive at a different version of the truth. Truth will not come alive to the reader unless he/she adds his/her own alloy to the poem, reenacting the regenerative process exemplified in the poem - in his/her "due degree". Although language is the essential instrument of revelation, the speaker constantly reminds us of its deceptive power.

After the speaker has introduced the characters of the drama in the order in which they will speak, he, now on the right track again, tells his listeners that,

Finally, even as thus by step and step
I led you from the level of to-day
Up to the summit of so long ago,
Here, whence I point you the wide prospect round -
Let me, by like steps, slope you back to smooth,
Land you on mother-earth, no whit the worse,

To feed o' the fat o' the furrow: ..
 Yet heaven my fancy lifts to, ladder-like, -
 As Jack reached, holpen of his beanstalk rungs.
 (I, 1330-1336, 1346-1347)

This is the speaker's way of telling his audience that in Book XII, he will guide them back to the "real" world where everything will be as it was before, where his audience will land safely on solid ground. Or will it have changed? It is not until Guido has spoken for the second time (Book XI) that we hear the poet speak again. But this time his subjective voice is different from that which we became accustomed to in Book I. No longer is he excited and joyful about his task which is almost complete. He had stepped aside to let the characters from his source book take the stage and tell their stories. They have spoken and his "ring" is "almost rounded". But he feels that truth has not been reached. He begins

Here were the end, had anything an end:
 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,
 In brilliant usurpature: thus caught *spark*,
 Rushed to the height, and hung at full of fame
 Over men's upturned faces, ghastly thence,
 Our glaring Guido: now decline must be.
 In its explosion, you have seen his act,
 By my power-may-be, judged it by your own, - (XII 1-10)

The poet continues, "Follow the main *streaks*, meditate the mode / Of brightness, how it hastes to blend with black!" (XII. 20-21). [emphasis added] He is sad and continues only because he is so near to the end.

He has four "reports" concerning the murder-case which had been included in the Old Yellow Book. The first is a letter "from a stranger, man of rank,/Venetian visitor at Rome" (XII. 7-8) who was attending "Carnival" the day after Guido's execution. The stranger regards the whole affair as entertainment. He expresses disappointment with what he had heard of Guido and then learning the reality of what actually happened (Guido's physical appearance and his praying on the scaffold while awaiting the axe-blow). The Venetian is in Rome to wager on the death and successor of Innocent XII. In his letter, he is about to

relate a "quatrain" to his friend but the poet, angry and discouraged by the Venetian's lack of sensitivity and subjection to report and rumour, exclaims:

No, friend, this will do!
You've sputtered into *sparks*. what *streak* comes next?
(XII. 209-210) [emphasis added]

The next "streak" is a letter from Arcangeli to Cencini, the Florentine lawyer ("a friend of Franceschini [218]") who had bound the pamphlets and letters together which made up the Old Yellow Book. The enthusiasm exhibited in Book I,

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss
I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about
By the crumpled vellum covers, - pure cride fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since? (I 33-37)

has disappeared in Book XII. The poet seems tired and of low spirit. He says:

To this Cencini's care I owe the Book,
The yellow thing I take and toss once more
- How will it be, my four-years'-intimate,
When thou and I part company anon? (225-228) [emphasis added]

He tells his audience that Cencini had added "some three epistles to the point" (of the lawyers' pleadings and summaries). Our poet tells us that Arcangeli's letter, in 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. 236-238)

Arcangeli beleives he should have won the case, but, no matter, Gomez' trial is next. "Now then for both the Matrimonial Cause/And the case of Gomez! Serve them hot and hot! (325-326)"

The third letter is from Bottini to an unknown party. The letters of the two lawyers show that truth is not an issue for them. Winning the case, outwitting the opponent is of primary concern. Bottini's letter is a vindictive tirade against Fra Celestino, part of whose public sermon is included within Bottini's letter. The Fisc believes that Arcangeli is a fool

and dim-witted, that had he himself been defending Guido, Guido would be a free man now.
In fact, he says of Pompilia:

It follows that Pompilia, unrelieved
By formal sentence from imputed fault,
Remains unfit to have and to dispose
Of property, which law provides shall lapse
Wherefore the Monastery claims its due.
And whose, pray, whose the office, but the Fisc's?
Who but I institute procedure next
Against the person of dishonest life,
Pompilia, whom last week I sainted so? (XII. 698-706)

Winning at any cost, material gain, and fame are the most important things in life to him.
True justice and truth are not part of his being.

In part of the sermon included in Bottini's letter, he describes Celestino's text as "The longest-winded of the paragraphs... /'T is piping hot and post through Rome today / Remember it, as I engage to do! (XII. 455, 457-458)". Celestino writes

.... - I demand assent
To the enunciation of my text
In face of one proof more that "God is true
And every man a liar" - that who trusts
To human testimony for a fact
Gets this sole fact - himself is proved a fool,
Man's speech being false, if but by consequence
That only strength is true; while man is weak,
And, since truth seems reserved for heaven not earth,
Should learn to love what he may speak one day (XII. 598-607)

Celestino claims that he has renounced the world of man and "that bubble" which he calls Fame. He says "... in renouncing fame, the loss was light, /Choosing *obscurity*, the chance was well! (641-642)". [emphasis added]

In Book I, the projected Browning excitedly told his listeners, "Let this old woe step on the stage again!/Act itself o'er anew for men to judge,/ . . by voices we call evidence (I. 824-825, 833)". In Book XII, he dispiritedly states:

So did this old woe fade from memory,
 Till after, in the fulness of the days,
 I needs must find an ember yet unquenched,
 And, breathing, blow the spark to flame. It lives,
 If precious be the soul of man to man. (826-830)

This, he claims is "the final state o' the story". He has successfully rounded his ring but he knows that the truth, although approachable, is elusive. Language is not the way to truth. He tells his audience that he has learned a valuable truth about *truth*. The rough ore of the yellow book has been "rounded to a ring", and even though the characters gave testimony through his "voices", much of it obviously false, there is a lesson for all to learn. He says:

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
 (Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence
 Of many which whatever lives should teach:
 This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
 Our human testimony false, our fame
 And human estimation words and wind.
 Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
 Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
 That Art remains the one way possible
 Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least. (XII. 831-840)

He continues to say that Art does not speak "to men, /only to mankind"

... - Art may tell a truth
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
 So may you paint your picture, *twice show truth*, ...
 So write a book shall mean, beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the soul beside. (XII. 855-858, 863-864)
 [emphasis added]

Browning's caricature of himself, the "projected Browning", has painted his picture and has shown truth twice. Robert Browning, the poet, has also painted a picture, which in turn, also shows truth twice. Within the rounded ring, within the nomologues, truth is to be found, the truth of love and the truth of hate, the truth of the heart and the truth of the head, the truth of good and the truth of evil. *All* truth must be heard. Only then can the elusive central truth be approached, grasped at.

The enthusiastic poet of Book I had promised his listeners that he would guide them back to reality once his "ring" was rounded. He gave them the image of Jack "reaching" for the ladder-rungs, but the poet had been thinking "beyond", to the golden egg. He had told them:

Such, British Public, ye who like me not,
(God love you!) - whom I yet have laboured for,
Perchance more careful whoso runs may read
Than erst when all, it seemed, could read who ran, -
Perchance more careless whoso reads may praise
Than late when he who praised and read and wrote
Was apt to find himself the self-same me. (I, 1379-1385)

In Book I, the speaker learned something quite valuable about himself, something crucial to his writing. As poet he could only give guidance to his readers, the direction in which they might look. He could give indications of what is expected of them, but *he* could not tell the story. Nor could *he* read the story for them and present them with the meaning and the truth in the poem. Buckler writes:

He had told the *poem's* story three times with quite unsatisfactory results. Only as he gradually learned that, as he had not created the book, he could not create the truth that the book contained, did he see that he had to get out of the way and let truth make her own appearance. (*Poetry and Truth*, 46)

The speaker proudly told his audience:

Such labour had such issue, so I wrought
This arc, by furtherance of such alloy,
And so, *by one spirit, take away its trace*
'Till, justifiably golden, *rounds my ring*. (I, 1386-1389)
(emphasis added)

He had succeeded. He had completed his ring-book metaphor. The creative process has been clearly explained to his critical listeners. He felt he had put an end to what he thought were unjustified accusations of obscurity. By leading his listeners, step by step, through the various stages of creating a poem, he believed he had made himself perfectly clear, leaving no room for obscurity.

But during his theoretical and dogmatic approach to clarifying his intentions as a poet, the critically projected Browning learned an invaluable lesson, a truth. His role, as poet, was not to "explain" or to "tell" the stories of his characters. His role was merely to breathe life into his characters, and then *allow* them to come alive to tell their *own* stories, to speak for themselves. He knew that he could not speak for his characters just as his characters (or anyone else) could not speak for *him*. What had been true in theory - that the poet must be "objective", letting the characters (which he breathes life into) speak in their own voices, without his interference - was now going to be put into practice, as he prepared to step aside to "Let this old woe step on the stage again! / Act itself o'er anew for men to judge" (I, 824-825).

Just as Robert Browning had stepped aside to allow his critically misunderstood projected self to take the stage to tell *his* own story, "Do you see this ring?", so does his projected self step aside to let the players of the drama tell *their* stories. In this way, Robert Browning's voice is twice removed from The Ring and the Book. We see the metamorphosis of the speaker - from subjective to objective poet - at the same time that he himself realizes that it is the only way to (speak) the truth. The importance and stress he places on his audience's understanding of what is *said* in Book I is an encouragement to us to "read freely and critically and therefore to assess what is said as much in relation to ourselves as to the speaker" (Buckler, Poetry and Truth, 36). We learn *at the same time as the speaker* - from his aesthetic theory in Book I and through the aesthetic practice in Books II through XII. The "experience" becomes *ours* as well as *his*.

The poem is written in twelve Books, with each Book presenting a completely different *voice* (even the two critically misunderstood Brownings of Books I and XII are different voices in terms of situation and feeling). But of all the different and vividly varying voices, not one of them *is* Robert Browning's. What his projected self in Book I learns through his experience of writing the poem, Browning had learned through more than thirty years of experience - hard work, belief in himself, and belief in his abilities as an artist.

Although much of his early career was spent trying to correct or clarify his so-called "obscurity" for his critics, he always had faith in his poetic powers and continually developed them, the "dramatic monologue" and the "objectivity of voice" in particular

Many critics and readers may believe that this is a trivial or moot point because poets have always spoken, do speak, and will always speak in voices which are not their own. But with Browning it is different, because Browning wrote almost nothing *but* "voice". In Browning's poetry, voice becomes *everything*, and when *everything* is "voice", it is easy to forget that voice is part of the artifice. I believe that in The Ring and the Book Browning transcends the subjectivity-objectivity issue. His skill as a dramatic poet, and his ability to *become* his characters and at the same time *allow* his characters to become a part of *him*, make "voice" his ultimate means of expression.

The speaker of Book I continually plays with Browning's own poetic reputation. For example, it is strange to see Hemingway fall into self-parody, but Browning goes beyond self-parody and actually undermines his own public image. The speaker, the "voice" of a misunderstood poet with a reputation of being obscure, does everything in his power to make them change their minds about him. He does everything correctly and intelligibly: he explains the creative process; he explains how a poem is written, he explains the role of the poet; (he explains the role of the listener); he introduces the characters of the drama, he even tells them *how* to listen to the voices. I have examined the criticism on The Ring and the Book from the last 120 years or so, and it seems obvious to me that Browning clearly and craftily outwitted his critics. Through his highly-developed skill of being able to project "voice" objectively, Browning has had his critics believing that the character portrayed, the "voice" speaking in Books I and XII, is himself. But by exaggerating certain traits attributed to him from the criticism of much of his previous work, Browning easily succeeds in objectifying a "pseudo Browning", an exaggerated version of his own public image.

This "Browning" takes his place with the other characters in The Ring and the Book. His function is to call the reader's attention to the fiction-making process, to remind the

reader that in The Ring and the Book we have moved from a "trumpety and sordid police-case" to a high level of narrative art in which the dramatic element is placed at the forefront. My argument is that the reader's involvement with the poem is thereby heightened. He or she must make an effort to "read through" the presentation of "Browning" (the projected poet) in Books I and XII.

This serves several purposes. It gives narrative perspective linking the Victorian Age with the Renaissance. It launches the reader into the judgment process, since the poet at once begins to make his own judgments, and thereby the reader not only has to engage the *factual* but the *moral* issues as well. By objectifying his narrator, Browning carries us to the very brink of modern fiction, in which the story is almost secondary to the manner of its telling. This is surely a remarkable achievement. Browning has produced one of his best dramatic monologues through the speaker of Books I and XII.

Only one element is missing to make the poet's critical listeners believe that he too is a great poet who *deserves* to be in the company of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton.

"A ring without a posy, and that ring mine " (I, 1399)

His invocation to his "lyric Love" is the last touch needed to show his listeners that he *is* a serious poet. The reader may well argue that the first and last Books are very personal. For example, does Browning not address "in person" Elizabeth Barrett Browning in memorable and passionate fashion (I, 1391-1416)? The reader should consider however, that the invocation is *not* to Browning's deceased wife, but to the poet's "Muse". The psychological and spiritual inspiration he needs to write his poem is granted.

In 1845, Elizabeth Barrett had written a letter to Browning, comforting him with these words, " you have not written the *R.B. poem* yet " (The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846) I believe, with her "help", in The Ring and the Book, he finally *did* write his "R B poem"

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