To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by John Steven Beauchamp entitled "The Quest for a Hero in Browning's Early Long Poems, His Plays, and The Ring and the Book." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Richard Kelly

Richard Kelly, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

[illegible]

B. J. Leggett

Nancy M. Gaslee

Henry C. Rutledge

Accepted for the Council:

C W Minkel

Vice Provost and
Dean of the Graduate School

THE QUEST FOR A HERO IN BROWNING'S EARLY LONG POEMS, HIS PLAYS, AND THE RING AND THE BOOK

A Dissertation

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Degree

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ABSTRACT

Because of the intellectual turmoil and skepticism that characterized the nineteenth century, Victorian literature developed pronounced strains of anti-heroism. In this context, Robert Browning stands out as a writer who continued the quest for a vital and optimistic vision of heroism. Browning made his earliest attempts to write extended works featuring heroic protagonists in his early long poems Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello. These early works were heavily influenced by Byron and Shelley. Browning used variations of the subjective confessional mode of presentation in these poems, and the protagonists show marked features of Byronic heroes and of Shelleyan personae.

These early poems also contain elements that attest to Browning's interest in orthodox Christianity and his interest in Carlyle's ideas on heroism, as they appeared in early works such as Sartor Resartus and the Hero-Worship Lectures. In his early poems, Browning attempted to integrate these elements with his interest in Byron and Shelley, but his attempted fusion led to inconsistencies and to unresolved tensions and irony. Also, his use of the subjective mode led to problems in coherence, point of view, and characterization.

Following Sordello, Browning began writing plays in an attempt to render his art more dramatic. In the eight plays he wrote between 1837-46, he experiments with a great variety of

heroes, heroines, and villains in varied relationships in an attempt to clarify his vision of heroism and villainy.

With the exception of Pippa Passes, a closet-drama, Browning's plays were flawed and less than successful stage drama, but they were nonetheless an important part of the process that led to Browning's success in his masterpiece, The Ring and the Book. Many of the materials and major themes of his early long poems and plays reappear and are integrated into Browning's own ecclectic vision in The Ring and the Book. In his use of multiple monologues, Browning discovered the artistic mode to reconcile his subjective and objective interests. The major characters in The Ring and the Book embody Browning's consummate vision of heroism and villainy.

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CHAPTER I

ROBERT BROWNING: A HEROIC POET IN AN ANTI-HEROIC AGE

The Victorian Period in England, and in Europe in general, was a time of great change and turmoil in the areas of science, philosophy, religion, politics, and literature. Darwin's theories of biological evolution caused serious re-evaluation of the major tenets of orthodox Church dogma concerning creation and the relation between humans and nature. The great flowering of German Idealist and Transcendental philosophies influenced English Romantic writers and offered new ways of viewing the universe and the role of human beings in it. In politics and economics, the development of democratic revolutions, Utilitarianism, and Marxism were also a part of the great upheaval and change occurring in the nineteenth century.

These great changes had a profound effect on Victorian writers and their works. In the aftermath of the Romantic period, a period Peter Thorslev terms "our last great age of heroes" (16), Victorian literature developed a pronounced "anti-heroic" strain (Bloomfield 32). The wealth of new scientific knowledge about the natural world, as well as the development of democratic and Utilitarian politics and social principles, had a levelling effect on the definition of human beings and their institutions. These developments also produced skepticism and the divided sensibility,

or "double awareness," that characterizes much Victorian literature (Johnson ix). Conflict between skepticism and the need for religious faith and stabilizing beliefs permeates Victorian literature. Barbara Gribble explains that "supported by neither a stable social structure nor trust in a benevolent universal plan, the typical Victorian can in no way be certain that 'whatever is is right'" (30). Such a climate of eroding beliefs and changing social values was not a fertile environment for the development of an optimistic concept of heroism.

In its subtitle, Thackeray's Vanity Fair purports to be "A Novel Without a Hero." And true to its title, the novel focuses on the lives of a number of characters from a wide range of social and economic levels. At the novel's end, positive values and virtues are embodied in the union of Amelia and Dobbin--both good-hearted middle-class characters. The novels and fiction of major writers such as George Eliot and Charles Dickens also depict a broad range of humanity in their main characters. Dickens' protagonists, especially, range from orphaned victims of social corruption such as Oliver Twist to the exploited and repressed representative of the working class, Stephen Blackpool, of Hard Times. In Great Expectations, Pip goes from being a blacksmith's helper to being a member of the English gentry, only to learn some serious lessons about snobbery and social pretension in the end.

Victorian poets reacted to nineteenth-century changes in a number of different ways. The pre-Raphaelites--poet/artists such

as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris--rebelled against the monotony and repressiveness of industrialized urban life and turned to classical myths and medieval romances for inspiration and subject matter (Buckley 63-65). In his most ambitious work, Idylls of the King, Tennyson also turned to the medieval romance tradition. Early critics placed Tennyson in the "Idyllic School," a group of poets characterized by a nostalgic turning back to an ideal past in search of stable values (Khattab 29). In Idylls, Tennyson depicts King Arthur as a model courtier-king who is an emissary from the realm of ideals (Ryals 74). Gribble describes him as an ideal of Christian manhood bound in mortal flesh (42). Arthur's queen, Guinevere, however, is an emotional human being. When her illicit passion for Lancelot clashes with Arthur's ideals, the result is the destruction of the Round Table (Ryals 74). Clyde de L. Ryals explains that Arthur comes from a realm of "pure value" and is like a god among the humans of Camelot. When Arthur's ideal realm collides with earthly reality, only his death can reconcile the two. Through death, Arthur is saved, but the world remains unredeemable (85, 90-92). Finally, Tennyson's heroes and their realm of ideals remain things apart from the realities of nineteenth-century life.

Other important poets such as Clough and Arnold also addressed this conflict between ideals and reality. Much of Clough's poetry depicts his frustrated quest for religious faith and values in an age of skepticism and doubt. The protagonist in

his longest poem, Dipsychus, is a satiric Faust-figure, a comic, anti-heroic questor. During the course of his experiences, Dipsychus confronts stern Necessity, evil, and despair. As the authorial voice states in the prose epilogue, he fights "the conflict between the tender conscience and the world" (294). He seeks duty and faith amid the confusion and doubt surrounding him. Ultimately, however, he finds refuge only in his own sense of inner courage and stoicism. He tells himself, "Be faithful, that is all," but he never makes clear just what he is being faithful to (12.28).

In Dipsychus Continued, an aged Dipsychus, after serving the cause of human justice for many years as a judge, restates his stoic tenet: "One only guide to our blind work we keep, / To obey orders, to fight it out" (1.32-33). As the poem continues, however, his stoic faith collapses into guilt and emotional confusion as he confronts the woman, now ruined and in poverty, whom apparently he loved but unjustly abandoned thirty years before. As the poem breaks off abruptly (Clough never finished it), the reader is left with a sense of unresolved tension, irony, and ambiguity.

Arnold's poetry contains similar currents of unresolved conflict. In lyric poems such as "The Buried Life," "Dover Beach," and "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," Arnold depicts his own sense of alienation and inner turmoil, as well as the larger spiritual maladies he perceives in the world around him. The protagonist of his long poem Empedocles on Etna is a consummate

illustration of the Victorian anti-hero, the suffering "Man of Sensibility" whom Thorslev considers the alienated, despairing progeny of the Byronic hero (91). Empedocles, a Greek poet-musician, feels imprisoned in his own mind and body. He lives in a world in which "The Gods laugh in their sleeves / To watch man doubt and fear, / Who knows not what to believe / Since he sees nothing clear" (1.86-90). The only resolution he can envision is a suicidal union with darkness, and in the final scene he scales the charred hillside of Etna and flings himself into the mouth of the volcano. Arnold himself describes the poem's effect: "suffering finds no vent in action . . . a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance" (Prose Works 1: 2-3). Citing the poem as "morbid" and "painful, not tragic," he explains why he decided to delete Empedocles from his 1853 collection of poems (3).

In this climate of anti-heroism and turmoil, Robert Browning stands out as a writer who continued the quest for a vital and optimistic vision of heroism. As early as Pauline, his first attempt at a long poem, Browning indicates his ambition to write an epic length work capable of embodying a sustained heroic vision. Browning's three early long poems, Pauline (1833), Paracelsus (1835), and Sordello (1840), and the eight plays he wrote between 1837 and 1846 record his vigorous attempts to carry out his ambition, and his masterpiece, The Ring and the Book (1868), records the culmination of his efforts. Through these works, in addition to his

shorter poems, Browning struggled both to clarify and to render coherent the diverse elements of his vision, and to master the artistic skills and methods necessary to works of sustained length.

Browning's vision of heroism in The Ring and the Book is a synthesis of various elements from literary tradition and from his own literary environment. The earliest influences on his concept of heroes came from his childhood readings of Greek and Latin mythology and literature, medieval romances, and Romantic poetry. In addition to his fascination with epic, pagan, and romance heroes, in his early years Browning discovered and very much fell under the spell of Byron's poetry. In fact, at age twelve he composed a volume of Byronic verse entitled Incondita in honor of Byron's recent death (Irvine and Honan 13-14). Two years later, Browning discovered Shelley's poetry and was equally taken with it (Irvine and Honan 15). He was so moved by Queen Mab that for some time after reading it he professed to be an atheist and a vegetarian. The combined influence of Byron and Shelley on Browning's career proved powerful and lasting.

The main characters and artistic methods of Browning's three early long poems show the marked influence of Byron and Shelley. Like Byron's Childe Harold and Manfred, Browning's poems are dominated by single towering protagonists. Pauline is a Romantic confession in the tradition of Shelley's "Alastor," and Paracelsus and Sordello are structured according to lengthy monologues usually spoken by the protagonists. The poems are highly subjective in

form and content, and focus more on psychological processes than on overt action. All three protagonists display features of the Byronic intellectual quester. Paracelsus, especially, is a powerful Faustian figure like Manfred and Cain. Driven by a will to power and by intellectual hubris, he attempts to press beyond the limits of human nature. All three main characters also display characteristics of Shelleyan personae. They espouse utopian and revolutionary politics, humanitarian ideals, and idealistic philosophies that show the influence of Shelley's Platonism.

The protagonists in these early poems also display many of the major psychological traits that noted Romantic critics such as Peter Thorslev, Walter Reed, and Robert Gleckner have identified as characteristic of the Romantic hero. Gifted with superior intellect and acute sensibility, Browning's early heroes pursue ethereal ideals and vast ambitions. Torn between ideals and mundane reality, they suffer the pangs of alienation, Weltschmerz, and angst. Clearly, Browning was much interested in the sensitive, suffering Romantic quester. In this context, it is interesting to note that Matthew Arnold included Empedocles on Etna in his 1867 collection of poems because Browning personally urged him to do so.[1]

Other major influences appear in these early poems, however, sometimes causing conflict and unresolved tension. Browning's

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[1]See Arnold's note in the editor's preface to Empedocles in Poems, Ed. Kenneth Allott, p. 149.

mother was a devout Anglican, and his father, for many years an agnostic, eventually joined the Church and attended regularly (Irvine and Honan 3-5). The deep impress of his mother's orthodox beliefs appears in Browning's early long poems and strikes a very uneasy balance with the Byronic and Shelleyan elements. Also, during the time he was writing his early long poems, Browning was becoming interested in more recent Victorian ideas on heroism. He acquired an early interest in the lectures and writings of Thomas Carlyle, and subsequently he became a lifelong admirer and friend of Carlyle's. He attended Carlyle's lectures on Hero-Worship in 1840 and was much taken with Carlyle's theories. During the time of the lectures, he wrote Elizabeth Barrett, "Carlyle is lecturing with éclat" (New Letters 18). Browning alludes to Carlyle's theories on heroism in his "Chatterton Essay" (1842), and he borrowed ideas from Carlyle's lectures on the poet as hero for his "Essay on Shelley" (1852). Numerous critics have noted the close connection between Browning and Carlyle. Irvine and Honan state that "Browning was not far from being a poetic Carlyle" (84), and Henry Jones speculates that Browning "wrote with Carlyle by his side" (89).

Carlyle's theories on heroes and hero-worship are a synthesis of ideas that were "in the air" in the nineteenth century and grew out of the diverse traditions of Plato, Plutarch, Confucius, the Messianic tradition, and German Transcendental philosophy (Lehman 135). He also borrowed ideas from pagan literature, medieval

romance, and the feudal tradition. In his six lectures, Carlyle discusses a range of heroes: the hero as divinity, as prophet, as poet, as priest, as man of letters, and as king. Though his discussion of the prophetic poet has elements in common with Shelley's definition of the poet in his "Defense," in general Carlyle's heroes are a different breed from the Byronic hero. Carlyle openly criticized Byronic and Shelleyan heroes for what he perceived to be their narcissism, self-indulgence, and morbidity. In general, he felt that they spent too much time in the throes of self-imposed inner turmoil and too little time acting on their convictions (Gribble 23).

In keeping with his vitalism and activism, Carlyle demanded that his heroes act. He chose historical figures such as Oliver Cromwell and Martin Luther to exemplify various heroic types. His heroes combine social consciousness with political activism and religious belief. Carlyle's ideal of leadership is based, in part, on the feudal conception of the king as a liege lord bound to his followers through common loyalties and beliefs. In general, his heroes are other-directed and have a strong sense of duty to larger causes and beliefs. Carlyle's heroic poet, though his primary allegiance is to his art, is also a prophet "called" to interpret universal truth for his age. He, too, shares the burden of social and intellectual duty.

Carlyle's theory of heroism is also rooted in organicism. His heroes are often "late bloomers" who develop in stages after

prolonged struggle (Gribble 6, 52). They discover their vocation, their life's calling, through trial and error. This discovery of vocation and duty is an essential step in the personal development of the hero, whose ultimate goal is the fullest possible self-realization (Gribble 71). Though it is rooted in classical and feudal tradition, Carlyle's theories of heroism also anticipate modern theories of psychological growth and development.

In Carlyle's Hero-Worship lectures, as well as in earlier works such as Sartor Resartus (1834), Browning obviously found many ideas that were compatible with and extensions of his own thinking on the subject of heroism. In addition to their Byronic and Shelleyan ambitions, Browning's early heroes also seek vocation, duty, and religious faith. In characterizing them, Browning adds to this mixture his own insight into the subtle workings of human psychology and motivation. In attempting to fuse these diverse and sometimes conflicting elements in single protagonists, however, Browning ran into serious difficulties. His characters display inconsistencies and erratic behavior, and they generally fail to carry out their grand ambitions. Also, because of problems in coherence, point of view, and language, Browning's early long poems met with little success among readers and critics. Sordello, in fact, drew considerable derision. Browning's use of subjective confessional techniques contributed to these problems because they encouraged him to express his own thoughts and feelings directly through his characters, thus causing inconsistencies and loss of dramatic integrity.

Following Sordello in 1840, Browning sought to render his art more dramatic; thus, he turned away from the long poem and began concentrating on shorter lyric and narrative poems and plays. The eight plays Browning wrote between 1837 and 1846, including Pippa Passes (1841), his well-known closet-drama, continue his quest to write a long work featuring heroic characters. With the exception of Pippa, Browning's plays were not literary or dramatic successes, but they were nonetheless an important part of the process which eventually led to The Ring and the Book. Browning's early long poems failed adequately to address key issues such as the role of love and romantic relationships in heroic development, and the nature of evil and villainy. In addition to exploring these issues in his plays, Browning seeks to clarify and to integrate more fully his diverse interests in heroism and related issues. He endeavors to qualify his use of elements from Byron, Shelley, and Carlyle in the interest of synthesizing his own vision. He experiments with a wide variety of heroes, heroines, and villains in varied relationships as he struggles to discover the proper relationship among knowledge, love, duty, good, and evil.

Ultimately, Browning never mastered the language and techniques of stage drama, and he abandoned his dramatic career after 1846. Many of the problems that were evident in his early long poems--the unresolved conflicts, excessive ironies, character inconsistencies, and such--continue in his plays, but through them he became acutely aware of the larger difficulties he faced in

attempting to carry out his literary ambitions. One of Browning's final plays, A Soul's Tragedy (1846)--a fine satire in its own right--self-consciously satirizes many of the excesses and flaws of Browning's own earlier depictions of heroism and romance and thus functions as an apt summary of the shortcomings of his plays. It is true that Pippa, one of Browning's earliest plays, remains his best, but it is also true that his progress toward The Ring and the Book was not, strictly speaking, linear. Rather it was based on trial and error, on irregularly interspersed success and failure. In his quest to write an epic-length heroic work, Browning showed his ability to profit from failure and to persevere. This important theme, that great success can sometimes grow out of seeming failure, becomes one of the major tenets in Browning's mature vision of heroism.

After 1846, Browning turned his energies to the shorter lyric and narrative poems that appeared in Men and Women (1855) and Dramatis Personae (1864), but he did not relinquish his ambition to write an epic-length heroic work. In a letter written in 1856 in reply to previous discussions and correspondence with Browning, after praising the poems in Browning's newly published Men and Women, Carlyle yet urges him to take up "one great subject" that would tax his powers to the fullest (Letters to Browning 300). Several years later in 1860 when Browning discovered the Old Yellow Book--the source material for The Ring and the Book--he found in its contents the "one great subject" he sought.

In the characters and events of the Old Yellow Book, Browning found apt vehicles for exploring the major themes of his early long poems and plays. He recognized in the principal characters of the murder case and subsequent trial many parallels with the main characters of his own previous long works. As he presents them in The Ring and the Book, these characters bring together many of the traits and ideas of Browning's previous heroes, heroines, and villains. Caponsacchi, the young priest, becomes the composite embodiment of youthful male heroism. Pompilia, the young female victim of intrigue and violence, becomes a symbol of maternal love and of Christ-like compassion and self-sacrifice. The Pope becomes Browning's finest depiction of spiritual heroism, and Guido becomes Browning's consummate villain. Through these characters, Browning presents his vision of the nature and inter-relations of good and evil and of knowledge, love, and duty.

By the time Browning began working on The Ring and the Book, he had perfected the techniques of the dramatic monologue--his greatest single contribution to literature. His use of multiple monologues as the chief structural device of The Ring and the Book helped to reconcile the subjective confessional mode of his early long poems with the objective dramatic techniques of his plays. In The Ring and the Book, Browning brings together the chief virtues of both modes and avoids the excesses and flaws of his early long works. The dramatic monologue offered Browning a device for exploring the psychology of his characters, and it also allowed

him to construct a dramatic mask and thus to attain artistic distance and detachment. Browning also creates in each monologue, as well as in the fabric of the whole poem, coherent patterns of imagery, allusion, symbolism, and irony to support and to provide commentary on his characterization.

In The Ring and the Book, Browning integrates the diverse elements of his literary heritage with his own special skills and insight, and thus synthesizes his own art and his own ecclectic comprehensive vision of heroism and villainy. He works out a system of multiple heroic characters who are all necessary components in an interdependent system of heroism. Guido's evil is also an integral component in the larger philosphical system that provides a coherent framework for the whole poem. Browning also fully depicts in the poem his own role as heroic poet. in Books I and XII, he discusses his aesthetic methods and defines his own role as a prophetic poet and as a subjective historian of the inner lives of his characters. Browning becomes in The Ring and the Book both the objective artificer and the visionary seer he tried but failed to become in his early long poems and plays.

Finally, The Ring and the Book is clearly Browning's masterpiece. It is the culmination of his efforts to write a work of sustained artistic endeavor and heroic vision. In addition to synthesizing the various influences of Browning's literary heritage, it also contains elements that directly anticipate major movements

in modern literature. Browning's psychological method, his use of multiple dramatic monologues, and his sophisticated language foreshadow the use of similar techniques in modern psychological novels and in much of modern poetry. His presentation of heroism and villainy foreshadow Jungian developmental psychology and existential philosophy. In the face of Victorian skepticism, turmoil, and despair, Browning yet maintained an optimistic vision. His heroes, including himself as poet, though they confront frustration and failure, refuse to give in to nihilism and despair, and ultimately they discover that the moral, spiritual, and artistic quest for selfhood and for truth is truly a hero's labor.

CHAPTER II

BROWNING'S EARLY LONG POEMS: THE HERO'S EDUCATION

Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession

Pauline, written in 1832 when Browning was twenty years old and published at his own expense in a small octavo volume in 1833, was Browning's first attempt to write a long poem. Though recent critics have found much of interest in the poem, it received little attention at the time of its publication. The magazine reviews were mostly negative, mixed at best, and though Browning distributed a number of copies, none was sold (Devane, Handbook 39-40).

In terms of the development of Browning's vision of heroism, however, Pauline is very important, for it presents the hero's first major struggle with many crucial issues. Pauline features a single first person speaker whose thoughts and experiences are clearly Browning's own. The major conflicts in the poem are both psychological and aesthetic. The speaker's personality and the style of his presentation are markedly Byronic and Shelleyan in many respects. He displays the excessive self-consciousness, the powerful ambition and will, and the inner conflicts of the Byronic Hero, as well as the intense idealism of Shelleyan personae. However, he also voices concerns more typical of Carlyle and Victorian writers. He shows a strong sense of personal and social duty, and

his quest for religious faith and love show the marked influence of orthodox Christianity. Clearly he seeks outer objects of worship and emulation to help guide his own personal growth. The tension between these Romantic and Victorian elements drives the speaker toward important discoveries. However, it also causes considerable confusion and ambiguity. This tension between Romantic and Victorian elements in the speaker is also part of the larger conflict evident in Browning's early poetry between subjective and objective modes of artistic presentation.

The form and style of Pauline are clearly modelled after Shelley's "Alastor" and "Epipsychidion" as well as Byron's Childe Harold (Irvine and Honan 17). Typical of Romantic convention, the speaker dedicates his poem and addresses his confession to a young woman, Pauline, whose love he seeks and whom he describes variously as a beautiful young woman, an angel, and a goddess. Although the speaker often addresses Pauline, clearly his main topic of interest is his own past experiences and his present psychological state. Indeed, the structure of the poem is highly subjective and based largely on fluctuations of the speaker's mood and his alternating states of mental "withdrawal and emergence" (White 40).

In addition to discussing his present psychological state, in the middle section of the poem the speaker tells of the "stages" of his earlier development which led to his present condition of inner turmoil. Browning's method is similar to Wordsworth's introspective analysis in poems such as "Tintern Abbey" and The Prelude. In fact, Devane suggests that Pauline is Browning's "Sartor Resartus

[published in 1833-34, around the same time as Pauline] and his Prelude" (Handbook 44). Like Sartor's Teufelsdrockh, the Pauline speaker chronicles the stages of his prior development and struggles toward mature selfhood. In doing so, he attempts to understand better his present state and to fight through his despair and confusion toward strength and optimism.

The stages which the speaker describes are typical of Romantic and Byronic Heroes. Like the youthful poet in Wordsworth's Prelude and like young Childe Harold, the Pauline poet spent his youth as a "Child of Nature." His early stage fits closely Peter Thorslev's definition of the Romantic Child of Nature, one of several important categories in his discussion of the Byronic Hero (31-33). The speaker describes the "first dawn" of his life which he "passed alone with wisest ancient books / All halo-girt with fancies of [his] own" (318-20).[1] He passed his youth in solitary pursuits, wandering through natural settings and reading Greek and Latin heroic poetry and medieval romances. Left to his own devices, the youthful speaker "rudely shaped" his life to suit his "immediate wants" (337-40). Quite possibly these lines refer to Browning's own unorthodox early education and the many hours he spent ranging freely through his father's copious library (Irvine and Honan 6-8).

Moving among his natural haunts, the speaker often saw "signs / And omens" of a "presence" in nature that caused him to feel that

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[1]All further line references to Pauline will be to The Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. I, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

"a hand" was leading him (301-07). Like the typical Child of Nature, he sensed a mystical force in nature that prompted in him a sympathetic response. In addition to this influence of nature, the power of heroic poetry and romances also moved the youthful speaker to inhabit their imaginary realms. Often he imagined himself "a god / Wandering after beauty . . . or a high-crested chief / Sailing with troops or a friend to Tenedos" (321-25). In these heroic works he sensed a "power though folded up-- / A sense that . . . their spirit dwelt in me, with them should rule" (341-43). Clearly the youthful speaker identifies with the grand adventures of these mythical heroes and feels that he shares their heroic spirit.

However, this early phase of innocent imaginings could not last. Soon he came to feel the "world's influence"; he came to know "cunning, envy, falsehood, all the world's wrong / That spotted me" (351-53). Here the speaker describes his "fall" from innocence into the realm of experience. In moving beyond the confines of his pastoral retreat, he discovers the presence of evil and corruption in the world. In becoming aware that he, too, is "spotted" by the inner corruption (i.e., "cunning, envy, falsehood") that contributes to the "world's wrong," he becomes aware of the "shadow" of his own human nature. C. M. Bowra demonstrates that early epic heroes, for all their virtues, were often "shadowed" by excess pride, anger, and cruelty (64-66). The Romantic heroes also display their shadows in the form of hubris, secret guilt, fatalism, and the stain of worldly evil (Bloomfield 30, Gribble 19). Byron's Manfred is a good

example. He is tormented and driven by knowledge of his dark past, of mysterious "crimes," and of the stain of guilt he feels because of the nature and fatal consequences of his love for his sister.

The Pauline speaker gives no details on the nature of the experience that "spotted" him, but he feels changed by them. Unlike Manfred, however, rather than brooding on his guilt and his fallen condition, the speaker seeks to escape back to his "soul's old delights"; he seeks to re-enter the world of his early imaginings (355). This time, however, he decides to try his own hand at writing poetry. In casting about to find literary models to help guide and shape his youthful efforts, he discovers Shelley, who becomes the new focus of his adulation and hero-worship. He seeks to "disentangle" the intricate weavings of Shelley's verse, and in so doing comes to adopt Shelley's liberal politics and visionary idealism (413). He vows himself to "liberty, / Men were to become gods and earth as heaven" (425-26). He also states, "yet I was full of bliss, who lived / With Plato and who had the key to life" (435-36).

Armed with Shelley's Promethean vision, the youthful poet once again ventures into "real life . . . to look and learn / Mankind, its cares, hopes, fears, its woes and joys" in order to try out his "theories" (441-44). Once again, however, he is disillusioned: his newly adopted idealism and perfectionism cannot redeem mankind. This realization sends him into a profound despair, similar to Teufelsdrockh's passage into the realm of "The Everlasting No" in

Sartor. The youthful poet abandons hope of "perfecting mankind"; he abandons "freedom's self / And virtue's self, then my own motives . . . and human love went last" (458-61). In his despair, the speaker casts about for new sources of hope, and it is in this condition of turmoil that we find him as he begins his present-tense confession to Pauline.

As the speaker begins his confession, he strikes a typical Byronic pose. Like Childe Harold and Manfred, he shows many of the characteristics of Thorslev's Man of Sensibility (38-43).[2] He is proud, alienated, and world-weary beyond his twenty years. He is also "fallen," a melancholy "scoffer, who have probed Life's vanity" (80, 236-37). He regrets that in the past he left Pauline to pursue "wild dreams of beauty and good" which have come to nought (30). His moods of wild longing and hope that Pauline's love will shelter him alternate with moods of feverish despair and feelings of guilt and inferiority.

Amid these fluctuations, the speaker at times demonstrates a Byronic Will to Power that reaches Satanic proportions. In the first flushes of his disillusionment, he feels that his "powers were greater" (469). A troop of shadows gather around and shout, "Thyself, thou art King!" (487). Convinced that "God is gone / And

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[2]See Thorslev pp. 35-50. The Man of Sensibility is a fusion of two pre-Romantic types, the Gloomy Egotist and the Man of Feeling. He combines elements such as melancholy, brooding reticence, and self-consciousness with moral and aesthetic sensitivity.

some dark spirit sitteth in his seat," he revels in a kind of Nietzschean freedom (471-72). Later, he tells of a "principle of restlessness" that drives him to "be all, have, see, know, taste, feel all" (277-78). Sensing that there is no power greater than his own will, he would overpower and possess outer reality, both with his intellect and his senses.

The central conflicts which drive the Pauline speaker through these alternating moods of exalted egotism and abject suffering are very similar to the Weltschmerz and angst which Thorslev discusses as characteristic of the psychology of Byronic heroes and Shelleyan personae (88-91). Weltschmerz springs from the conflict between the Hero's intellectual yearning for union with Absolutes (God, mystic Nature, ideal Love) and his individual and egocentric needs to exert his selfhood and to fully experience life in the social and material world. Unrelieved, it creates a split between the ideal, imaginary realm and the outer world, between the intellect and emotions, and causes a state of mind characterized by erotic and masochistic tendencies, escapist dreams and delusions, and is often accompanied by feelings of alienation, passive suffering, and angst. It can also produce the "death wish" and nihilistic tendencies which characterize heroes such as Byron's Manfred, Shelley's "Alastor" poet, and Arnold's Empedocles. All of these characters finally choose self-annihilation as an escape from the pain of self-consciousness and inner turmoil (Thorslev 88-91).

The Pauline poet's inner conflicts fit these same patterns. His youthful dreams of epic heroism and his adopted Shelleyan

Platonism and visionary politics clash with the turmoil and imperfections of the outer world, creating despair and alienation. He wishes to love Pauline, to reach out beyond the confines of his own egotism, but his passion is "chained" and blocked by "Reason," by his ambitious "craving after knowledge," and by his inability to accept a less than ideal love (620-45). He can envision Pauline only as an angel, a goddess, and a sheltering spirit, but not as a human being. At one point he openly confesses, "And I can love nothing--and this dull truth / Has come at last" (310-11). In the wake of this discovery, he feels that his mind has turned against itself, which produces self-hatred: "But I begin to know what thing hate is" (650).

In order to escape his painful condition, the speaker seeks refuge in various ways. He feels that beneath his turmoil there is yet a "self, distinct from all its qualities . . . self-supremacy, / Existing as a centre to all things" (270-74). He feels that there is an absolute core within, a "true" self that remains as a goal of his inner quest. Also, he calls his imagination a "very angel" and trusts it to help create a world more suited to his exalted longings. At the end of the poem, in fact, much like the speaker in Shelley's "Epipsychidion," he invites Pauline (his version of Shelley's epipsyche) to escape with him to a solitary forest retreat, an elaborate Romantic pastoral garden, in which they can explore the delights of nature as well as the glowing images of his "mind's cave" (970). He invites her to "Dive we down--safe!"

in their retreat, "walled" by dark forests and surrounded by lakes and streams (749). The imagery of his dream vision is consistently dark, fluid, and womb-like, and suggests yet another regression to his earlier Child of Nature stage and immersion in the "mind cave" of a youthful Edenic realm.

S. W. Holmes, in his groundbreaking articles on Browning's early long poems and Jung's theory of personality types, helps further define the inner conflicts evident in the Pauline speaker in terms of modern psychological theory. He views Pauline as the therapeutic confession of a deeply introverted character seeking to discover outer objects to channel his libido (inner energy) outward and thus render it creative ("Sordello and Jung" 771). Trapped in the walled confines of his introverted ego, the speaker's libido can only flow inward and become disruptive and self-destructive and produce fragmentation (774). His inverted libido flow causes conflict between his anima (the archetypal female image and possible object of love) and his persona (his ego projection) which seeks resolution in a redeeming symbol which can channel his creative energy in a positive direction (774-75). Obviously, through the character of Pauline the speaker attempts to create such a symbol. As J. S. Mill pointed out at the time of Pauline's publication, however, Pauline is a "mere phantom," a vague image projected from the speaker's own desire and imagination (Irvine and Honan 40). Like the vague ideals and spectral eyes that led Shelley's "Alastor" poet into solipsism and nihilism, Pauline lacks the specificity and dramatic integrity to function as a character or an "other,"

and thus fails as both a psychological and poetic symbol.

The image of Andromeda, which occurs about midway through the poem, suffers a similar fate. In pondering the chained and abject state of his passion, the speaker envisions Andromeda chained to the rock awaiting salvation to come "in thunder from the stars" (667). The Perseus-Andromeda myth later proved to be a key myth in Browning's life and an integral motif in The Ring and the Book. Here, however, Andromeda's image, though it seems to spring from deep within the speaker's imagination, is not integrated into any consistent patterns of imagery or allusion. And although the speaker presents Andromeda as an image of "triumph," his description focuses on her condition of "naked" vulnerability and helplessness (665, 675). Rather than an inspiration for heroism and inner courage, she seems yet another projection of the speaker's passive, suffering state and his hope that something outside himself, Pauline's love perhaps, will rescue him from his predicament.

Though the Pauline speaker is obviously close kin to the Byronic hero, he also shows characteristics that are more typically Carlylean and Victorian. In seeking a positive solution to his inner turmoil, in addition to relying on Pauline's love and the possible therapeutic value of his confession and its symbols, the speaker also shows a marked turning toward an orthodox Christian faith. This need for a more orthodox system of belief, typical of Carlyle and later Victorian writers, contrasts sharply with the stoic atheism and humanism of Byronic heroes such as Manfred and Cain (Thorslev 117). Early in his confession the speaker tells of

"a need, a trust, a yearning after God" (295). He states that God has long been his "lode-star" (292). Like Carlyle's Teufelsdrockh, who wins his way to religious faith and a sense of duty at the end of Sartor, in the poem's final lines the speaker proclaims, "I believe in God and truth / And love" (1020-21).

Like Teufelsdrockh and later Carlylean heroes, the speaker also struggles to discover his proper duty and vocation. For Carlyle's heroes, Weltschmerz and angst became sources of drive and motivation toward heroic growth and action rather than states of mind to be indulged and exploited as ends in themselves (Gribble 7-9). For Teufelsdrockh, the Socratic "Know thyself" becomes "Know what thou canst work at" (Sartor 163). The Pauline speaker shows similar traits. Throughout the poem, he refers to key changes that characterize stages of his development. Also, early in the poem he voices a longing to turn his "whole energies to some one end, / To elevate an aim, pursue success" (605-06). Later, he decides, as did Teufelsdrockh, that writing will be his vocation, and to that end he begins writing verse and studying "mighty bards" of the past.

The speaker's sense of vocation is closely related to his need for religious faith and his desire to perform social duty. He says of himself, "I am singled out by God" (923). He feels chosen to carry out a prophetic task through his study and writing. His sense of duty is tinged with a Messianic desire to "redeem" himself and others through his works (Whitla 13). Late in the poem, he

imagines that he shares Christ's suffering at "weeping Olivet" and his death "on the lonely cross," and so dedicates himself to "believe and humbly teach the faith, / In suffering and poverty and shame" (857-58). Through his writing the speaker also wishes to carry out his chivalric and heroic ambitions. He hopes that, like a "knight / Of old tales," he can bring back "One branch from the gold forest" (527-28). In his final dream vision he plans to share with Pauline "old stories of dead knights" and "great lays" of pagan heroes (962-63). Like Carlyle in his later lectures and essays, the speaker hopes to bring back a sense of the old heroism and fuse it with a belief in love and with a renewed religious faith.

With all these varied ambitions in mind, the speaker proclaims a victory of sorts at the end of the poem. He feels that he has reached through despair and inner turmoil to an optimistic sense of duty and vocation, a belief in love and God, and a sense of happiness beyond doubt and fear (1020-30). However, his proclamation, as is true of the poem in general, is undercut by weakness and lacks the resonance and mature conviction of similar passages in Wordsworth's Prelude and Carlyle's Sartor. Even in the moment of his victory, the speaker feels that he is "dying, as one going in the dark / To fight a giant" (1026-27). His proclamation is shadowed by Byronic fatalism and the urge toward self-annihilation. And for all his talk of love and his belief in love, the speaker never discovers a giving love inside himself. His major concern throughout the poem is that he be loved, by God and Pauline both.

As J. S. Mill commented, "he neither loves her or fancies he loves her, yet insists upon talking love to her" (Devane, Handbook 42). He requests, "So, love me--me, Pauline, and nought but me," but he never discusses his feelings for her (903). His final request in the poems's final line is that she should "love me and wish me well" (1031). His sense of love remains introverted and bound by his own ego needs. Throughout the poem Pauline appears, not as a character in her own right, but rather as a confused conflation of the speaker's desire to worship God, Shelley, and his own ideal vision of love (White 38).

In his zeal to discover faith in God, the speaker tries to leap directly into an absolute union with divinity (Miller 100). Late in the poem he states, "My God, my God, let me for once look on thee, / As though nought else existed, we alone" (822-23). In his rapture, the speaker calls for a direct union with God, beyond worldly creation, time, and painful self-consciousness. Once again he shows his Byronic urge to outstrip human bonds and to mingle with absolute power. He would have his soul return directly to its "sphere / Of wild dominion" and become like a god (90-91). Obviously, his religious drive is hardly detached or enlightened but is still very much bound up with his Will to Power.

The question of evil is also a problem in Pauline. Though he speaks often of sin and lost innocence, the speaker never offers any concrete examples of exactly what these things are -- they remain abstractions only. Mill points out that the poet feels only "the lack of good, not the positive evil" (Irvine and Honan 41).

He looks at evil as a thing to be escaped, not integrated into a fuller vision of earthly life. Sensing that evil has "spotted" him, he states, "at length I cleansed my soul" (351-52). Later he envisions a "pale" poet who wakes from dreams to say, "I am singled out by God, / No sin must touch me" (923-24). In keeping with his naive idealism, the speaker fails to realize the "shadow" of his own egotism and hubris. Rather he seeks to repress evil, to will it out of existence, and thus attain an absolute state of purity.

Finally, Pauline depicts a hero who is deeply divided and struggling to bind together a great many diverse beliefs, ideals, and ambitions. He shows the Titanic and Promethean ambitions, the powerful ego and will, the absolute idealism, and the inner conflicts typical of Byronic and Shelleyan heroes. However, he also shows his desire to get beyond the confines of his subjectivism and isolation to discover love, duty and vocation, and religious faith. He seeks to balance his tendency toward introversion and excessive self-consciousness with a sense of duty and other-directed action. As the poem ends, however, the balance does not hold. Thorslev calls Teufelsdrockh a "converted" Man of Sensibility. At the end of Sartor he sheds his Byronic fatalism and converts to an optimistic belief in Divinity and the importance of human vocation (91). The Pauline speaker is more a failed Byronic hero, a disillusioned Promethean, who struggles to be "converted" but doesn't succeed. However, he does succeed in articulating the major terms of the

battle that subsequent Browning heroes would fight in their struggles toward maturity. The Pauline speaker is a prototype of subsequent heroes, and his strengths, weaknesses, and major preoccupations appear and reappear throughout Browning's struggle to develop and depict a full and mature vision of heroism.

The unresolved tension and inconsistency evident in the speaker's confession obviously stem, in part, from his psychological condition. However, they also participate in the larger failure of artistic form and techbique in the poem. In the aftermath of reading Mill's astute and stinging criticism of the poem, Browning realized that the Romantic confessional mode posed grave difficulties and might not be best suited for his talents. In Pauline it encouraged self-indulgence, erratic form, abstraction, and morbid self-consciousness. In time he came to write of Pauline, "Only this crab remains of the shapely Tree of Life in this Fool's paradise of mine" (Irvine and Honan 41). Following the failure of Pauline, Browning resolved to find a more objective and dramatic form, one that would encourage discipline and control, and one that might attract a more appreciative audience.

In addition to these matters of artistic form, in Pauline Browning also confronted other dangers implicit in his literary hero-worship and emulation of Byron and Shelley. Though the speaker announced his disillusionment with Shelley's Promethean vision and Platonic idealism, at the end of the poem he addresses his closing proclamation of religious faith to Shelley, "Sun-Treader," and says

"I would lean on thee!" (1020-23). His relapse into Shelley worship here bodes further tension between the influence of Shelley and Byron on Browning and Browning's own drive toward a more orthodox religious faith, as well as his need to develop an artistic form and techniques more suited to his genius. In time, Harold Bloom contends, he would have to "murder" this Shelleyan presence in order to fulfill his own genius (Ringers 160).

For all its flaws, Pauline was yet a very important first long poem for Browning and his hero. It points the way toward further exploration and important developments in Paracelsus and Sordello. Though provided with historical characters and settings, both of these poems are very much a continuation and expansion of the major issues in Pauline.

Paracelsus

Paracelsus was published in 1835, two years after Pauline. In an attempt to resolve some of the artistic problems in Pauline, Browning endeavored in Paracelsus to write a more dramatic poem. For his protagonist he chose a historical figure, Paracelsus, an eccentric Renaissance physician, teacher, and world traveller. The structure of the poem follows the chronology of Paracelsus' life and career, and each of the five acts is set in a specific location (i.e., Wurzburg, Constantinople, and other cities in which Paracelsus resided). Thus, Paracelsus' quest occurs within a concrete framework and a historical background. Also, Browning provided several

additional characters which help to develop Paracelsus' character through the parallels and contrasts they present.

Beneath this dramatic framework, however, Paracelsus is still very much a Romantic confessional poem, as Browning admits in his preface. He explains that he has endeavored to write a "poem, not a drama," one in which the "external machinery of events" is entirely subordinated to, "if not altogether excluded" in favor of a minute analysis of the psychological effects of outer actions and events (65).[3] He hopes that his poem will stimulate a "co-operating fancy" in his reader and engage his "intelligence and sympathy" for Paracelsus' inner crises and changes (65). The two additional characters--Festus, a spokesman for friendship, simple virtues, and Christian humility, and Aprile, a Shelleyan poet of ideal beauty and love--help expand the range of character in the poem, but they are largely foils for Paracelsus' character. Thus, as in Pauline, the poem is dominated by one main character and his lengthy speeches and discussions with the other characters.

Though he wears the guise of a historical character, Paracelsus is very similar to the Pauline speaker--he is the Pauline speaker grown to Titanic proportions. In the tradition of Byron's Manfred and Cain, he is a Faustian quester after absolute knowledge and power. As such, he shows many of the key traits and

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[3]All further page and line references to Paracelsus will be to The Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. I, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

inner conflicts of the Byronic hero. The Pauline speaker introduced a number of crucial problems relating to the hero's struggle to balance his inner vision and desires with outer duty and vocation: Paracelsus seeks to overcome these problems through sheer force of will and intellect. Even more than the Pauline speaker, he tries to fuse his Byronic and Shelleyan nature with Christian and Carlylean ethics. In short, he seeks to become all things heroic at once. Ultimately, this attempted fusion results in conflict, failure, and destruction, but it also leads Paracelsus to important realizations at the end of the poem. He shows the ability to struggle through the failure of his vast ambitions and schemes and yet to display inner courage and to attain psychological growth--a key trait of later heroes.

In his Byronic aspects, Paracelsus most resembles Manfred and Cain. According to Thorslev's classification, Manfred and Cain are both Faustian heroes of sensibility in the tradition of Marlowe's Faustus and Goethe's Faust (89-91). Cain, in particular, seeks absolute knowledge of God and immortal life. His quest ultimately leads to excess pride, arrogance, and the violent murder of Abel, an act which exiles him and his family from the human community. Paracelsus pursues a similar quest. Through his scientific, medical, and philosophical studies, he tries to discover "the secret of the world, / Of man and man's true purpose and fate" (1.276-77). By amassing empirical knowledge from all over the world, he hopes to finally uncover the spiritual mysteries of man's

existence (Peckham 100-01). He speaks often of grand "schemes" which he feels will resolve the paradoxes of earthly life and help mankind discover his true divinity.

Like Cain, Paracelsus is driven by hubris and a Satanic will to power and egotism (White 50-56). His quest for knowledge is also a quest for power over external things. He attempts to overwhelm human limitations through the fiery power of his intellect and will (Dale 360-61). Through his early studies he hopes to gain "wide renown" and to fulfill a "glorious fate" (1.245, 339). When Festus questions the motives behind Paracelsus' wild schemes, when he questions their ends in terms of the "general welfare," Paracelsus replies that his "fierce energy," the "restless irresistable force" within him, is justified by its own nature and needs no end beyond itself (1.369). And though Paracelsus maintains that his schemes will benefit mankind, he is generally scornful and contemptuous of other people. His pride and egotism lead him to believe that he is not of this earthly realm: "Well, well; 'tis not my world" (3.996). For Paracelsus the "common" world is a "make-shift, a mere foil" (3.1013-14).

Like Cain's, Paracelsus' zeal is fueled by pride, absolutism, and a desire to become immortal. Showing his contempt for mortal life, Cain states, "I live, but live to die . . . Would I had never lived . . . Cursed be / He who invented Life that leads to death" (1.1.110-15, 2.1.82-83). He shares Lucifer's complaint that "high thought" should be "linked to a servile mass of matter" (2.1.50-51).

Paracelsus also displays such absolutism and contemptus mundi. He contends that his own inner vision is the only repository of absolute truth: "Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise / From outward things . . . There is an inmost centre in us all, / Where truth abides in fullness" (1.726-29). Later, Paracelsus proclaims, "God! Thou art mind! . . . Spare my mind alone!" (2.229-30). Paracelsus' words here clearly echo Manfred's contention that "the mind which is immortal makes itself . . . Is its own origin of ill and end-- /And its own place and time . . .[it] derives / No colour from the fleeting things without" (3.4.129-34). As did the Pauline speaker, Paracelsus feels that his "true" self exists as an immortal static inner core that he must protect from worldly taint. In his quest to become a purely spiritual being, he comes to abhor "gross flesh" as a prison cell for his spirit. At one point he cries out, "Make no more giants, God, / But elevate the race at once!" (1.779-80). In his impatience he can see no value in time and slow evolution. Late in the poem he comes to say, "I detest all change" (3.44). He also rejects the lessons of history and the wisdom of past writers and thinkers. For Paracelsus, history began with the advent of his own consciousness. Festus urges Paracelsus to study history and past writers and to "accept the light they lend" (1.573). Showing the rashness of his proud independence, Paracelsus replies, "No; I reject them utterly / And all they teach. Shall I still sit beside / Their dry wells?" (1.579-81).

Unlike Cain and Manfred, however, Paracelsus is not content to let his quest end in a stoic atheism or fatalism. Cain's

arrogance and discontent lead ultimately to his murder of Abel. In the aftermath of this rash deed, Cain, with his wife Adah's encouragement and support, resigns himself to persevere and to endure until death--a "marked" man in a sad and fallen world. Manfred rejects both the evil spirits and the Abbot's spiritual advice. He states, "I stand / Upon my strength" (3.4.119-20). His pride and fierce independence intact, Manfred virtually wills his own death. His final reply to the Abbot--"Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die"--illustrates his stoic resolve (3.4.151). In contrast to Cain and Manfred, Paracelsus seeks to fuse his Byronic ambitions with Christian values and a Carlylean sense of heroic duty and vocation. He justifies his vast ambitions and schemes by telling himself that he is carrying out "God's great Commission" (1.143). He defines himself as an "elect" of God and an organ of his will (1.295). He feels that his energy is a parcel of divine fire, and that God's will guides "his actions as it does the bird's flight" (1.565). He tells Festus, "I am priest" (1.801). In these terms, Paracelsus defines himself as a Christian saint. By traditional definition, the Christian saint is a vessel of God's will. He is chosen by God and his nature is of a superior spiritual order. Paracelsus, too, feels that he is a superior spiritual being chosen to be God's prophet and saint.

Paracelsus also shows a marked urge toward making a grand gesture of self-sacrifice. He desires to make some "unexampled sacrifice" (1.462). Early in his career he hopes that his vast

knowledge and grand schemes will redeem and exalt mankind. He feels that he must "at once trample on, yet save mankind" (1.461). In his Messianic role, Paracelsus describes himself as a Christian knight in the tradition of Spenser's St. George. He imagines himself a "knight traversing a wilderness" who would "free a tribe" from some "dragon-foe" (1.473-76). Like Carlylean heroes, Paracelsus sees his spiritual role in terms of chivalric heroism and liege loyalty to his vision of divine will. He listens to the inner voices urging him to "Be happy, my good soldier; I am by thee . . . Be sure even to the end" (1.544-45). He feels that to fulfill his "glorious fate" will also serve to fulfill his duty to mankind and to God.

Paracelsus' attempt to fuse these Byronic and Christian elements fails, however. As his career develops, like Marlowe's Faustus he turns more and more to magic, trickery, and deception to maintain his reputation as a great intellect, and is finally exposed as a charlatan. Ultimately he discovers that he has fallen prey to self-deception--the flaw that Carlyle saw as most destructive to potential heroes and great leaders (Hero-Worship 280). He has allowed his "wolfish hunger after knowledge" and for "power and recompense" to blind him to his own humanity (2.124, 223). In a very telling statement, Paracelsus suggests that, though unlike Faust he has no "sullen fiend" or "fallen and hateful spirits" to do his bidding, he yet has God to aid his efforts and to insure that "earth shall yield up her secrets / And every object . . . teach, gratify her

master [Paracelsus] God appoints" (1.360-66). What Paracelsus finally realizes is that he has "appointed" himself by authority of the inner voices of his own ambition and hubris. Through force of will and intellect, he has attempted to usurp divine will and power in the interest of exalting and deifying his own finite will. Also, in trying to transcend his own mortal flesh, he finally falls prey to "vile lusts" and a perverse hedonism (2.135). Based on his absolutist definition of inner truth, Paracelsus has allowed his own deeply introverted vision of reality to become a tyrant, and rather than seeking to integrate outer reality and human limitations, he sought to overwhelm and absorb them into his own being (White 56).

Paracelsus' frustration at not achieving his absolute ideals results in severe Weltschmerz, fragmentation, and nihilism. Late in his career, Paracelsus feels that it all has been "ambiguous warfare" (1.200). He suggests that "life is an empty dream" (2.43). He confesses to Festus that he is "most miserable . . . a sad fool" (3.257, 371). The inner voices that earlier spurred him on come to mock his failure and bid him, a "lost and last one," to die and join the ranks of failed heroes (2.325). Jung points out that the inner voices contain both good and evil, and they often challenge the hero to make moral decisions (Integration of Personality 303). Paracelsus' inner voices emanate from his own conditions of inner turmoil, and rather than questioning their source and implications, he blindly follows them deeper into the labyrinth of his own isolated inner world. Ultimately, his Messianic hopes are reduced to the desire to

end the "farce" of his earthly life with a final grand gesture (4.688). He plans to perish in a spectacle, "the brave / About to perish for your sport" (4.692-93). The "unexampled sacrifice" he earlier planned has become a suicidal gesture to end a pathetic farce.

Paracelsus' absolutism and pride also blind him to the need for humility, human sympathy, and love. Like Cain, Paracelsus obsessively pursues knowledge and power to the exclusion of all emotional and human concerns. He calls youthful love "vile lusts" and is glad that he has been "saved" from such indignity (2.133-35). Paracelsus talks a good deal about his reverence and love for Michal, Festus' wife. As an object of love, however, Michal suffers the same fate as Pauline; she is little more than a "phantom" in the poem. She appears only briefly in Part I, and never after that. Mostly, Paracelsus conjures her image in wistful and nostalgic moments and describes her as a sentimentalized ideal of womanhood. Though she becomes a wife and mother, he remembers her always as a young pastoral maiden decked in flowers. Her death near the end of the poem (a mysterious demise that is never explained) results largely in pathos, which further contributes to Paracelsus' despair and fatalism.

Paracelsus is made very much aware of his failure to love by Aprile and Festus, just as Cain is urged toward love by his wife Adah. Adah pleads, "Oh, Cain! choose Love" (1.1.431). She urges him to temper his urge toward absolute knowledge with love and

patience. Aprile, whom Paracelsus meets in Constaninople, is a Shelleyan idealist, a poet of ideal beauty and love (Devane, Handbook 51). He is a poet of the heart, and his belief in the power of love sharply contrasts Paracelsus' quest for absolute knowledge. In his several long speeches he tells Paracelsus of the need of emotion and intuition to balance reason, and explains the value of poetry and its ability to free the intellect from egotism and will through its discipline, its objectivity, and its unifying symbols (Peckham 100-01). He is so persuasive that he moves Paracelsus to reply, "Love me henceforth, Aprile, while I learn / To love" (2.618-19). He feels that he and Aprile are "halves of one dissevered world" that must unite to form a whole (2.634). Paracelsus sees that his total reliance on rational intellect has blinded him to other ways of knowing.

Aprile dies, however, soon after their conversation (another mysterious and unexplained Romantic expiration). In his Shelleyan quest for ideal love, Aprile pursued an impossible goal--to "love infinitely and be loved" (2.385). He sought to press Romantic love beyond mortal bounds, as did Shelley's "Alastor" poet, and ended up trapped in a realm of abstractions (Devane, Handbook 51). Aprile sought to pierce directly to the absolute truth of the heart, and to "love infinitely," as a god might (Dale 361-62). Finally, Paracelsus realizes the he and Aprile both "Have slept in fairy-land" and attempted to live in ideal realms created by their own imaginations and desires (2.621). Aprile's discussion of the value of art

and its detachment clearly foreshadows Browning's further explorations of the poet's role in Sordello, as well as the development of his mature aesthetic method in later poems (2.490-609). But Aprile failed to carry out these ideals. He could not accept the limitations of the human heart; thus, he perished a failure.

Festus, Paracelsus' loyal friend, illustrates another kind of love; he embodies humility, simple virtue, and loyal friendship (Devane, Handbook 51). He displays the Carlylean quality of reverences and liege loyalty toward his "hero," Paracelsus. Festus points out that self-sacrificing love, which "assimilates the soul / To what it loves," can also teach other-directed action and help to transcend egotism. He advises Paracelsus to abandon his pride and austere isolation and to "Encircle [himself] with love, and raise / A rampart of [his] fellows" (1.633-34). Festus' advice here suggests Carlylean qualities of leadership. He advises Paracelsus to establish a bond of trust and loyalty with his fellow men and followers, and to share his great "mission" with them. Paracelsus' reply, however, shows his commitment to inner vision, to the exclusion of all else: "Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise / From outward things" (1.726-27). Paracelsus' intellectual hubris and introverted vision of truth blind him to his own incompleteness and isolation. He has no vision of any outer Necessity or human need beyond his own inner ideals and desires, and thus becomes a prisoner of his own vision.

Paracelsus' final major failing is his failure to integrate evil into his vision. Gribble points out that Carlyle's heroes

are generally other-directed; they strive for perfection and are relatively free of the shadow of heroic excess and evil (7-9). She suggests that Carlyle's major criticism of Byron's heroes was that they "writhe rather than perform" (23). Carlyle felt that Byron's heroes over-indulged themselves in their own dark passions and sufferings due to their condition of "diseased self-consciousness" (Crit. and Misc. Essays 3: 23). In his essay entitled "Corn-Law Rhymes" Carlyle describes a "sickly and sulky Byron, or Byronlet, glooming over the woes of existence, and how unworthy God's universe is to have so distinguished a resident" (Crit. and Misc. Essays 3: 158). In this context, Paracelsus is much closer kin to Byronic heroes than to Carlylean heroes. He prominently displays his shadow in the form of hubris, secret guilt, and nihilism. Caught up in the subjective realm of his own powerful will and vast ambitions, Paracelsus can draw no clear distinctions between good and evil.

Early in his career Paracelsus shows no awareness of evil at all. In defining himself as a saint-like organ of God's will, he represses all knowledge of his own flaws and excesses and his own capacity for destructive actions, just as he represses his sensual nature. As Jung contends, however, the first necessary stage of the "hero's" (the fully actualized and integrated individual's) psychological growth is confrontation with the "shadow" of his own inner dark, cthonic forces and the integration of knowledge of these forces into a fuller conception of self (Integration of Personality 20, 40, 70). When successful, this confrontation leads to knowledge

of human nature, its mixed potential for good and evil, and thus challenges the hero to develop the moral and psychological qualities necessary to channel his own cthonic forces in positive and creative directions. Repression of such knowledge often leads to capricious and destructive expression of these forces.

Paracelsus fails to take this first crucial step and to confront his own inner nature. As a result of his self-willed blindness, he falls prey to the destructive effects of his own inner forces. His pride becomes Satanic scorn of humanity and cynicism. In a telling statement Paracelsus contends that he must "At once trample on, yet save mankind" (1.461). "Trampling is certainly a dubious method of "saving" mankind. Late in his career as a professor at Colmar, he comes to feel only contempt for his students and colleagues, and his view of human nature becomes morbid and perverse. In language that echoes many of Childe Harold's graphic complaints, Paracelsus describes "gangrene-blotches, eating poison-blains, / The ulcerous barky scurf of leprosy / Which finds . . . the human heart / Which God cursed long ago, and devils make since / Their pet nest" (4.139-45). Following the exposure of his magic and trickery, he lapses into guilt, despair, and madness. Festus suggests that some "foul deed," some dark sexual crime, or perhaps worse, has caused Paracelsus' guilt. With no clear evil to combat, no "dragon-foe" (other than himself) to slay, his quest lapses into the "ambiguous warfare" of self-destructive psychological conflict (1.200). In his degraded and suffering state, he concludes that "mind is nothing but disease" (4.279).

Finally, Paracelsus' Promethean vision of mankind's redemption lapses into confusion and despair. He finds no positive and creative outlet for his powerful intellect and for the energy of his Byronic will. His heroic quest leads him into the dark wood of inner fragmentation. As a Carlylean hero, Paracelsus is a failure; his Messianic ambitions fall into nihilism and melodramatic gestures, and he fails to discover his true vocation and proper sphere of action. However, as the poem draws to a close, Paracelsus rises from his fallen state to experience a moment of heroic vision.

Following the pattern of Byron's Cain, Paracelsus repents and experiences disillusionment at the end of the poem. Unlike Cain, however, Paracelsus presses beyond stoic resolve and attains spiritual vision. Lying on his deathbed and at times delirious, Paracelsus talks to his loyal friend Festus and comes to realize the excesses of his past and the full extent of his present degradation. He calls for Aprile, and tells Festus to "Ask him, if Aprile / Knows as he Loves--if I shall Love and Know?" He continues, "Ah, the curse, Aprile, Aprile! / We get so near--so very near! / 'Tis an old tale: Jove strikes the Titans down" (5.118-24). Like Faust and Cain, Paracelsus realizes that the "curse" of intellectual hubris has fueled his quest, and he realizes that knowledge must be tempered with love. He also realizes that human intellect has it limits. He tells Festus, "I will kneel . . . . Impart the meagre knowledge I possess, / Explain its bounded nature, and avow / My insufficiency" (5.359-62).

In meditating the vicissitudes of his past, Paracelsus sees a relation between his life and the cycles of nature. He recognizes a presence in man and nature "From whom all being emanates, all power / Proceeds; in whom is life evermore, / Yet whom existence in its lowest form / Includes" (5.645-48). Paracelsus attains a measure of humility through his realization that there is a power greater than his own intellect and that it inhabits even the lowest forms of life. In place of his former absolutism, he advances a theory of organicism and an evolutionary Providence that markedly parallels elements in the philosophies of Carlyle and Tennyson (Dale 361). He sees that "progress is / The law of mankind" and looks forward to a time when "all mankind alike is perfected" (5.742-43). Paracelsus hasn't abandoned his apocalyptic ideals, but he has accepted the necessity of time and natural cycle. After giving a long catalogue of various plants and animals that characterize the seasons of the year, Paracelsus concludes that through this process "God renews / His ancient rapture. Thus he dwells in all / From life's minute beginnings, up at last / To man" (5.680-83).

The pattern that emerges in Paracelsus and culminates in this final scene--great intellectual pride leading to a "fall" into shame and degradation, which leads to self-knowledge and epiphanic (or "theophanic," as some critics prefer) vision--becomes a chief feature in Browning's mature definition of heroism (Hassett 13). In outer ways, Paracelsus is a failure. His Carlylean quest for vocation and his attempts through grand schemes to translate inner

vision into heroic action fail utterly. However, for all his failings Paracelsus refuses to give in completely to despair and nihilism. He shows the capacity for self-knowledge, growth, and vision. Like Carlyle's heroes, his angst and Weltschmerz, rather than becoming ends in themselves, motivate his struggle toward a larger vision.

In as much as Paracelsus learns of human limits and the need for vocation, duty, love, and a respect for outer reality, Browning also learned a good deal from writing Paracelsus. Paracelsus is clearly an autobiographical character and a confessional voice for many of Browning's own concerns. Through Paracelsus and Aprile, he explores the nature and limits of his own intellect and literary abilities, and probes the spiritual implications and the nature of duties attendant upon his choice of writing as a vocation. He also seeks to develop an aesthetic method to help control and channel his own large ambitions and tendencies toward introversion and absolutism. However, though more successful than Pauline, as a literary work Paracelsus fails to accomplish these goals. It does introduce important patterns and major elements of Browning's mature vision of heroism, but the dramatic veneer is very thin, and Paraclesus' character and its presentation remain subjective and abstract (Smalley, Intro. to Poems xv). Lengthy dialogues dominate the structure of the poem, and Paracelsus' psychological fluctuations are not well supported by plot and major actions. However, as a continuation of his efforts and techniques in Pauline and Paracelsus,

Browning makes one more massive attempt to create a heroic epic in Sordello, his most prodigious poetic effort prior to The Ring and the Book.

Sordello

Between 1835 and 1840 Browning worked on Sordello, a poem in six "books" totaling nearly 6,000 lines. Published in March of 1840, Sordello is very much an extension of the techniques and concerns of Pauline and Paracelsus. As was the case with Paracelsus, Browning again chose an obscure historical and legendary figure as his subject. The historical Sordello, as described in Browning's source, the Biographie Universelle, was a legendary Italian lover and soldier of the thirteenth century. He is said to have travelled throughout Northern Italy and France, but he is best known for his heroic defense of Mantua against the Ezzelino forces in 1253 (Devane, Handbook 78).

Browning's choice of historical subjects in Paracelsus and Sordello evidenced his desire to render his poetry more dramatic and objective. In contrast to the paucity of detail and action in Paracelsus, Sordello is packed with historical details concerning the major political and military conflicts of thirteenth-century Italy and focuses on the struggle between the Guelf and Ghibelline clans over control of Mantua and surrounding territories. Also, Browning employs a narrative point of view that differs from the confessional "I" of Pauline and from the direct dramatic presentation

of Paracelsus. To tell the story of Sordello, Browning employs a third person narrator (third person, that is, relative to the characters and events of his story). This narrator never identifies himself beyond his role as storyteller, but clearly he is a narrative device, a mask for Browning as author. The narrator is witty, audacious, and erudite. He addresses his audience as "Friends!" and promises that his "puppets" (the characters of his tale) will perform for them (1.54, 72).[4] As a narrative device, the speaker is very similar to the intrusive narrators common in eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels (i.e., the narrator's intrusions in Thackery's Vanity Fair, his references to his characters as "puppets"). In his introductory remarks, the narrator comments that he could present his story directly as drama (like Paracelsus): "A story I could body forth so well / By making speak, myself kept out of view" (1.14-15). However, he chooses instead to narrate the story. Comically, he tells his audience that he would share their "delight in watching, first to last / His [Sordello's] progress as you watch it" (1.22-23). Browning's use of this intrusive narrator is a compromise between the confessional "I" of Pauline and the dramatic method of Paracelsus. The Sordello speaker is not the protagonist of the poem, as is the confessional speaker of Pauline. Thus, he allows a greater distance between Browning and his characters, a distance that encourages objectivity. Through greater attention to objective detail, the narrator suggests

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[4]All further page and line references to Sordello will be to The Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. II, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

that he can "best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem / The wearer's quality" (1.28-29). Also, by maintaining his presence in the poem, the narrator (and Browning through the narrator's voice) is able to provide commentary as well as the added complexities of various forms of irony.

Though Browning's narrative strategy promises greater objectivity, in his preface to Sordello Browning shows that he is still deeply committed to the subjective concerns of Pauline and Paracelsus. He states, "The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires, and my stress lay on the incidents of the development of the soul: little else is worth study" (123). For all its historical "decoration," the true focus of the poem is Sordello's inner life and psychological conflicts. To this end, Browning makes many changes in the details of historical sources. Also, although the narrator initially offers something of the detachment and sophistication of Carlyle's "Editor" in Sartor, as the poem progresses the narrator increasingly becomes a mouthpiece for Browning's own ideas and concerns. In later books of the poem, the narrator at times moralizes and overtly lectures Sordello, and at other times he digresses and discusses tangential aesthetic and philosophical issues. In fact, toward the end of Book III Browning directly intrudes in the narrative to discuss a scene he witnessed during a stay in Venice (3.676 ff). Also, in their article on the narrative point of view in Sordello, Columbus and Kemper demonstrate that, beginning with Book III, the

narrator's identity often seems to lapse into Sordello's identity (265). For most of Book III the narrator steps aside, vanishes, as it were, while Sordello directly relates his own thoughts. From Book III onward, the reader is often hard pressed to identify whose voice is speaking. Rather than maintaining the objective stance of Sartor's Editor, the shifting point of view of Sordello is finally more similar to the multiple voices in Byron's Childe Harold, which all merge into Byron's own voice in the final cantos.

The character Sordello shows many of the Byronic and Shelleyan characteristics evident in the Pauline speaker and Paracelsus. As the poem develops, however, Sordello attempts to put into practice many of the things Paracelsus learned. He struggles hard to make the transition from Child of Nature to poet to heroic warrior and finally to a visionary humanitarian leader of his people. He struggles to discover appropriate ideals to guide his quest for vocation and duty. He seeks an "out-soul" to function as an object for his chivalric love, and a grand "Cause" to inspire and guide his actions. In short, Sordello tries very hard to break out of the confines of his subjectivism and to become a Carlylean hero in several categories. In as much as he chooses to be a poet, Sordello also becomes a device through which Browning probes the poet's proper duty and method. Like Paracelsus, Sordello has grand ambitions and Messianic desires, and he attempts to express them through his poetry.

Unlike Paraclesus, Sordello does not try to fuse his Byronic subjectivist nature with Carlylean ethics through force of will.

Instead, by assuming various heroic roles he seeks to transform his personality and channel his energy into other-directed heroic actions, just as Browning sought to attain greater objectivity through the device of the third person narrator. Though he struggles with all the sincerity of a Carlylean hero, in his crucial confrontation with his "shadow," Salinguerra, Sordello fails utterly and falls into a state of psychological paralysis. Sordello's failure as a hero, his inner confusion, as well as the confusion resulting from the failure of narrative method in the poem, illustrate and help to clarify the deep-seated conflicts between intensional and extensional modes of expression evident in Browning's early heroes and long poems.[5] However, as many of the narrator's comments indicate, Browning was becoming acutely conscious of these conflicts and their implications. And though the narrator is often intrusive and poorly integrated into the poem, he voices important realizations that point toward major changes in Browning's poetic methods and in his vision of heroism.

Book I of Sordello is extremely important, for in addition to introducing Sordello, it also gives an overview of the central conflicts of the poem, and foreshadows its ending. Even more so than the Pauline poet, the youthful Sordello is a Romantic Child of Nature (Colombus and Kemper 256). He lives is a rural retreat in Goita, a small town some distance from Mantua, where he occupies

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[5]The terms "intensional" and "extensional" are equivalent to "subjective" and "objective"--terms that I will discuss at length later in this chapter.

himself with reading poetry and romances and enjoying the "drowsy Paradise" of his natural surroundings (1.627). Sordello is a sensitive youth with a "soul fit to receive / Delight at every sense" (1.465-66). He is the "architect" of this Edenic retreat, for his imagination imbues his surroundings with "much of his own stock of thought and sense" (1.644). Goita is a place of seculsion and shelter, a place apart from the political turmoil beyond its borders. We also discover that, though Sordello lives with Lady Adelaide of the Este clan, he is a mysterious orphan, and his true parentage is unknown to him.

We also learn that Sordello is "Marked" to be a special person. His handsome appearance is "finer dress" than others possess, and nature has "severed him from her mass" as possessing special abilities (1.477, 468). The narrator clearly indicates that Sordello is a heroic type; he is one who "wilt challenge life for us: our race / Is vindicated so, obtains its place / In thy ascent, the first of us; whom we / May follow" (1.549-53). Here, as elsewhere in the poem, the narrator defines the hero in terms that closely parallel Carlyle's theory of Heroes and Hero-Worship.[6] The

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[6]Sordello was published in March of 1840, and Carlyle delivered his Hero-Worship Lectures in May of that same year. Devane speculates that Browning might have met Carlyle as early as 1839 (Parleyings 17), though he cites no evidence to support this speculation, and I have found none in my present research. However, as Lehman points out, Carlyle's lectures brought together ideas already very much in the air (135). Obviously, as evidenced in Paracelsus and Sordello, Browning had access to and had given considerable thought to theories of heroes and great men prior to Carlyle's lectures--hence his great interest in them. No doubt, the lectures served to expand and help clarify Browning's thinking on this subject.

hero is the pinacle of humanity; his actions "vindicate" the race by expressing its potential courage and nobler virtues and thus providing exemplary leadership. Indeed, Sordello has heroic ambition. He has read tales of "popes, kings, priests, knights," and he vows that "One day I will accomplish it . . . acquire an instrument / For acting what these people act" (1.801, 829-35). The "instrument" he seeks is his heroic vocation (Hilton 1128). Given his natural abilities and inclinations, he decides that poetry, "One Shape / Whose potency no creature should escape," will be the instrument of his heroism (1.863-64). He will be a great bard, an "Apollo" of "song" to his people (1.936). To satisy his chivalric love interest, he will choose his "Daphne" to be his queen (1.937-38).

As the narrator describes Sordello's youthful ambitions, however, one detects an irony that suggests a considerable discrepancy between Sordello's naive ideals and his ability to act them out in the world of turmoil beyond Goita. In fact, the narrator directly addresses this issue. He suggests that Sordello's personality is spotted by "the marks of leprosy" which he later identifies as "Vanity" (1.567-68, 747). In the fashion of the Pauline poet and Paracelsus, young Sordello displays the brooding self-consciousness, egotism, and vast longings of the Byronic and Shelleyan hero. The narrator hints that the motives behind Sordello's heroic ambitions are tainted by a <u>hubris</u> and subjectivism that will undermine his efforts to become a poet and hero. The description of Sordello as a would be Apollo links him to the problematic presence of Shelley, the "Sun Treader" of <u>Pauline</u>, and

also suggests Sordello's god-like ambition. Also, the figure of Daphne (who did not share Apollo's love and fled his wooing) as the object of Sordello's romantic love suggests that his quest for love may also be infected with possessiveness and selfish desire.

In Book II of the poem, Sordello sets out for Mantua seeking to fulfill his ambitions, and in doing so also begins to fulfill the narrator's predictions. The reigning troubador of Mantua is the poet/bard Eglamor. When he arrives in the city, Sordello challenges Eglamor. Following one of Eglamor's songs, Sordello presents one of his own. He feels heady and inspired, and delivers his song with spontaneity and power. Upon hearing his song, the Mantuans are enthralled and choose him to be their new troubador, and Palma, a young princess of the Este clan, chooses him to be her favored minstrel (2.122). Eglamor is humiliated, resigns his position, and dies soon afterwards.

At this point, Sordello is obviously a figure of the naturally gifted and energetic young poet. In the first flushes of his success, he feels scorn for Eglamor. He suggests that Eglamor was a dedicated carftsman and artisan of poetry, but stopped short of expressing the true power of his art. He might have drawn aside the "lingering veil" of a "holy place" (2.199-200); he might have been "Perseus when he loosed his naked love," but instead he chose to be a popular entertainer (2.211). Sordello has much grander ambitions for the "instrument" of poetry. In his scorn for Eglamor, Sordello cuts himself off from past poetry, in much the same way

that Paracelsus declared himself beyond the need of studying history, and decides that he will show the Mantuans what poetry can really be: "Why needs Sordello square his course / With any known example?" (2.378-79). Having discovered his vocation, he plans to achieve the stature of the Carlylean visionary poet/prophet.

Given his new role as "Apollo" of Mantua, Sordello begins to struggle toward defining the aesthetic methods and duties of his role. He plans to transform and recreate nature in his poetry as a "god" might, and thus create a world "palpable, distinct" (2.160, 168). The agent of this creation will be his "self-consciousness, / [which] The last drop of beauty dost express . . . a quintessence" (2.405-07). He also feels that he has a social obligation to the Mantuans, who have "annointed" him their spokesman. In a gesture of empathy, he declares that he will be "one with hopes and cares" of the people (2.369). He will, as a Carlylean seer, gaze deeply into "the welter of their time," its fears, sins, and virtues, and interpret its truth (2.521).

Once Sordello begins to carry out his role, however, he encounters serious problems. As the narrator warns, "Sordello would style [himself] God alone" (2.421). In cutting himself off from the past and anchoring his art exclusively in his own self-consciousness, he has deceived himself as Paracelsus did. His idea of the "people" proves to be a vague abstraction, and lacking a larger purpose to guide him, he discovers that <u>hubris</u> is the major motive for his art (2.395-96). This <u>hubris</u> blinds him to the needs of the people, and

the "truth" he offers is a projection of his own desire to be worshipped as a hero. He would have the people "love in me the love that leads / His soul to power's perfection" (2.437-40). The people don't respond to his "self-display" and need for adulation, however, and his frustration quickly produces contempt. He feels that his "poet-soul" is incompatible with "our herd's stupid sterling happiness" and counterfeit "warriors [and] statesmen" (2.504-07). Thus, he resolves to resign his post as bard and return to Goita.

At this point Sordello's conflict reveals its acute nature and inner sources. He is torn between his Byronic and Shelleyan self-consciousness and subjectivism and his need to attain a more objective vision of human needs beyond his own in order to write poetry (his heroic "action") that communicates universal human truths. Herein, too, lies the crux of Browning's own conflicts as a would be visionary and heroic poet.

Sordello, however, is not prepared to resolve this conflict. The force of the resulting tension (which has steadily accumulated through Pauline and Paracelsus) splits Sordello in two: he is "sundered in twain . . . the complete Sordello--Man and Bard-- . . . was gone" (2.667, 690-93). Sordello's fragmentation is similar to the severe disorientation and despair that drove Arnold's Empedocles to suicide and the "dissociation of sensibilities" that later appears in Eliot's early characters such as Prufrock. It also reminds us of the split between the ideal and real worlds caused by severe Weltzschmerz, as it appears in Byron

and Shelley (Thorslev 88-91). Sordello is torn between his allegiance to his inner visionary ideals and his need to participate in the social and sensual world around him--the result being a state of passive suffering, fragmentation, and despair.

In his two articles on Sordello and Jung, S. W. Holmes helps clarify this crucial conflict in modern psychological terms. He shows that Sordello fits into Jung's category of the introverted intuitive personality type ("Sordello and Jung" 764). As Jung defines it, the introvert's dominant mode of relating to outer objects and other people is one of "abstraction" (Psychological Types 379, 402). His orientation toward outer reality is deeply rooted in his own subjective world. He fears the "power" latent in outer objects, and thus "abstracts" (draws out) from them ideas which he considers to be the essence of those objects. Given this tendency, he can easily become trapped in a realm of fantasies and delusions, a realm of abstractions in which the self is rooted in nothing beyong itself and thus exists as an alienated unit. Under stress, the introvert often seeks escape to quiet, insular surroundings (i.e., the Pauline poet's Edenic fantasies, Sordello's retreat to Goita). As a culmination of earlier heroes, Sordello clearly shows these characteristics in concentrated form. However, his ambition to be a visionary poet and leader demands that he balance these tendencies with a more objective approach to objects and people.

Jung's extroverted personality type relates to outer objects by forming a bond of empathy, or "participation mystique," with

them (Psychological Types 294). For him, outer objects are not threatening; they contain essence and have an integrity and identity of their own. The extrovert's projected consciousness touches and mingles with the essence of the object, without fear of being overwhelmed (Types 292-93). It is this ability which allows other-directed action and encourages the qualities of lovingness and self-sacrifice. Also, it is this capacity which Jung suggests must balance the artist's introverted tendencies in order to allow for the "disinterested objectivity" necessary to art.

Browning was obviously interested in these key distinctions, for he discusses the differences between these two modes of thinking and artistic presentation in his essay on Shelley in 1852. He distinguishes between the "objective" poet such as Shakespeare (Jung's extroverted empathizer), and the "subjective" poet such as Shelley (Jung's introverted abstractor). Shakespeare, he contends, is a "dramatic" poet whose vision is rooted in a meticulous presentation of the details of nature and human character. The dramatic poet has the "double faculty" of seeing the outer details of objects as well as their deeper meaning. The surface texture of his art is "substantive, projected from himself, and distinct," though his "double faculty" unites details and images into something the reader perceives as an "intelligible whole" (63-64). The dramatic poet appeals to the "aggregate" mind of his audience, their common experiences and perceptions (65-66). Though Browning makes

no reference to it, Keats' phrase "negative capability" might well describe the dramatic poet's orientation to the materials of his art.[7]

The subjective poet, on the other hand, is more concerned with the "One" idea behind outer objects (65). He creates with reference to divine truth, Platonic ideals, and the contents of his "high soul" (65). For him, objects are windows into transcendental spiritual truths. He is more "seer" than "fashioner," and his work is an "effluence" of his inner self (65-66). In describing the subjective poet, Browning was obviously much indebted to Carlyle's discussion of the visionary poet/prophet in his Hero-Worship lectures. In a letter to Carlyle in 1851 Browning acknowledged this debt: "I have just done the little thing I told you of--a mere Preface to some new letters of Shelley . . . But I have put down a few thoughts of your own (I mean, I was thinking of those opinions while I wrote)" (Wise ed., Letters of R. B. 36). In his role as poet/prophet, the subjective poet bears added responsibility. Browning suggests that the reader must inquire into the poet's biography to discover his moral character and the motives behind his art. If he is motivated more by ego aggrandisement than by his desire to reveal divine truth, then we must label his work a

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[7]Keats' letter discussing negative capability first appeared in Lord Houghton's Life and Letters of John Keats in 1848, several years before Browning wrote his essay. Browning may well have read this book, though I have found no direct evidence to support this speculation. However, it is interesting to note that Keats also uses Shakespeare as his chief example of the objective poet.

"cheat" (69-70). Based in part on this standard, we earlier concluded that Sordello's initial attempt at poetry was, in fact, a "cheat."

In making these larger distinctions, Browning nonetheless concedes that the "objective" outer world must provide raw materials for both types of poets (67). He also recognizes that his categories are not absolute and that most poets must achieve a balance between the objective and subjective. However, he feels that in the larger dialectal interplay of objective and subjective poets from Homer through the Romantics, the subjective "seer" attains a higher level of spiritual knowledge through his art (68).

As Sordello begins to grapple with these issues in Book III, we realize that he is caught between the modes of abstraction and empathy (the introverted nature of the "man" versus the necessities of the objective "Bard"), between the methods of the subjective and objective poets, and can find no balance between them. He tries hard to be both poets (just as he and earlier heroes try to be both Byronic and Carlylean Heroes) at the same time. Given the seclusion of his youth, however, Sordello has had no practical experiences in social and political matters. As we saw earlier, his view of nature is naive and deeply colored by his youthful fantasies, and he has had little contact with people beyond the confines of Adelaide's estate in Goita. Thus, in his quest to be a poet and hero, he has only his abstract ideas and feelings to guide him. Also, he has no clear concept of self and no consistent metaphysics

to anchor and guide his actions. In his discussion of "will," Sordello questions, is "mankind an unfit vehicle for Will," or "was the Will itself / In fault?" (2.994-97). In this discussion, Sordello makes no distinction between the individual's will, the will of the people, and divine will. As Holmes illustrates in his article on Browning's "semantic stuttering," Sordello's metaphysics are abscure and inarticulate. He uses key terms inconsistently, the result often being confusion--hence "stuttering" (231). As was true of the Pauline poet and Paracelsus, Sordello has no clear vision of good and evil and the limits and weaknesses of human nature. The concept of the "central self" that emerges from his confused metaphysics remains vague and abstract. Miller terms it an "empty concept" (91), another of the abstractions compounded of his youthful fantasies and ideals. It has no foundation in experience or in any clear conception of unifying divinity.

A true mark of Browning's early heroes, however, is their refusal to give in easily to nihilism and despair. For the remainder of the poem Sordello battles to heal this breach between Man and Bard and to discover a heroic vocation and proper action. He decides that his ideals must be wedded to nature so that a "transmutation" or fusion can take place (3.166). Thus, he decides that he will love Palma; she will be his "out-soul," his Shelleyan epipsyche, and will help to anchor and shape his poetry so that it will be more than "dream-performances" (3.317, 623). He seeks, then, to achieve a loving heart--a trait Carlyle stressed as necessary to

all heroes. Through Palma, he also hopes to link himself to the larger "Cause" of the Guelf clan, which is allied with the Pope and is engaged in civil war with the Ghibelline clan, which is allied with the Kaiser's imperialist party and led by the great warrior Salinguerra. He feels that the Guelf cause champions democratic and humanitariam principles as opposed to the Kaiser's authoritarian tyranny. He declares, "Rome's the Cause," and decides to work toward a united Italy under the leadership of Rome. He envisions a new Rome, a utopian state where law, order, military heroism, religion, and art would flourish. Sordello replaces Shelley's mystical Promethean vision of inner revolution and man's eventual perfection with his vision of a utopian political state, one that he hopes will emerge in the aftermath of a peaceful solution to the civil war. Toward these ends, Sordello returns to Mantua to become a "warrior-poet" and "bard" (5.243). In order to win Palma's love, he becomes not only her bard but also a soldier in the Guelf army. He hopes thereby to unite all his energies in active pursuit of his exalted "Cause."

The love affair between Sordello and Palma, however, is poorly developed and unconvincing. Like Pauline and Michal, Palma's characterization is superficial and lacks depth and detail. Sordello's love for her is based on his desire to absorb her, as "Alien" and outer object, into his own being (3.175). Through an act of "will," he feels that he can "transmute" her outer being and fuse her "soul" to his own (3.165-80). The previous allusion

to Daphne is helpful here. Sordello is still attempting to "abstract" the essence of Palma and thus to possess her, as Apollo sought to force his love on a reluctant Daphne. His love is rooted in his own desire and idealism, and not in any deeper understanding of Palma and her needs. There is no bond of empathy, no mutual participation of individuals in a joint effort. Also, Palma is not the link of the Guelf cause that Sordello had hoped. She knows the secret of Sordello's parentage--that his true father is Salinquerra, leader of the opposing Ghibellines. She is much more concerned with Sordello's political and military career than with his democratic ideals, and toward that end she eventually urges him to ally himself with Salinguerra.

In his dual role of soldier and poet, Sordello seeks to produce prophetic symbols that might unite the people in a common cause. He also hopes that these symbols will unite his own energies and help to overcome his inner fragmentation. In chapter ten of Sartor, as well as in his lecture on the poet/prophet, Carlyle contends that the poet's role is to create "intrinsic" symbols through which "Divine Ideas" can shine. He distinguishes between "extrinsic" symbols, which are occasional and accidental in nature, and "intrinsic" symbols, which shimmer with the presence of universal and eternal truths, and thus have a "living" quality.[8] Christ's

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[8]Coleridge's discussion in chapter thirteen of Biographia Literaria is also helpful here. He distinguishes between metaphors produced by "Fancy" (extrinsic symbols) and those produced by the "Imagination" (intrinsic symbols), the poet's "Imagination" being anchored in the "Infinite I Am."

incarnation, he contends, is such a living symbol (Sartor 223-24). In his essay on Shelley, Browning echoes this definition of intrinsic symbols in his discussion of the "films" of poetry with which Shelley wove together the earthly and the divine, the "actual and the ideal" (81). Jung also makes similar distinctions between "mystical" symbols and emblems (Psychological Types 474-78). In its archetypal nature, the successful symbol establishes a positive link between the conscious intellect and the primal unconscious. It thus unites intellect and feeling in idea and provides a unifying focal point and channel of expression for creative energy.

By these standards, Sordello's great "Cause," Rome, is a failed symbol, a utopian fantasy, as he soon discovers. His vision of classical Rome surely has no roots in history. Rather it is yet another abstraction, a dream of what ancient Rome might have been during its supremacy, though in actual practice surely was not. His vision leaves out the cruel excesses, the political corrpution, and the imperialism (which contradicts his own democratic ideals) which characterized Rome. The narrator suggests that Sordello's vision is of "Rome, as she struck Sordello's ignorance--/ How could he doubt one moment? Rome's the Cause!" (5.1011-12). His candid appraisal of Sordello's naivete and his tone of mock enthusiasm are telling inditements of Sordello's misguided ideals. Soon Sordello learns that his utopian dream has no relation to the present reality of political and military turmoil ravaging Italy. During his tour of Ferrara in the aftermath of a battle, Sordello

comes face to face with the horrors of warfare. Surveying the destruction he questions, "Hell--are they sprinkling fire too? The blood fries / And hisses on your brass gloves as they tear / Those upturned faces choking with despair" (4.733-35). In the face of such horror, his dream is deflated. As Book V opens, he realizes that the "shining ones" that would compose his "Shining City" are ragged and starving peasants (5.11-12). He realizes that there will be no "sudden city"; the "archetype" of his vision fails, both as a viable cause and as a universal symbol. It also fails to produce the inner unity between Man and Bard, between intellect and emotion, that Sordello hoped would make him a whole man and hero.

As the poem progresses, it becomes increasingly evident, largely through the caustic irony which often characterizes the narrator's commentary, that Sordello is failing in his heroic quest. His relationship with Palma proving unsatisfactory, and his great "Cause" proving to be a mirage, Sordello is becoming a hero without a goal. Perhaps in an attempt to bolster Sordello's quest, near the end of Book III Browning intrudes in his own voice and talks of a recent visit to Venice. His main reason for doing so is to present the image of a poor peasant girl he encountered in Venice. He describes the girl as a "sad dishevelled ghost" (3.696). This tattered beggar obviously evoked a profound pathos and sympathy in Browning, and thus he presents her as a more graphic symbol of suffering humanity, one that might anchor Sordello's Promethean ideals in outer reality. Holmes suggests, rightly I think, that the

beggar girl is intended to replace Palma as Sordello's "queen" as an archetypal symbol of humanity in need of heroic rescue ("Sordello and Jung" 782-83). In terms of aesthetic method, however, this symbol is a failure as well. It is forced into the poem, foisted off on Sordello, and is not integrated into the action of the poem or into Sordello's experience. For the reader, this first person intrusion results in confusion and a sense of artistic incoherence (problems early critics and readers were quick to point out).

Sordello's failures to resolve his inner conflicts culminate in Book V in his crucial encounter with Salinguerra. As villain, Salinguerra adds a dimension lacking in Pauline and Paracelsus. He provides an embodiment of evil in dramatic form which makes possible a dramatic confrontation. In his readings in Italian history, Browning had obviously encountered Machiavelli's works (he directly alludes to Machiavelli in his play Stafford, published in 1837), for Salinguerra is a precise embodiment of a Machiavellian New Prince. He is a man who would "shed blood / To further a design" and to extend his own power and wealth (1.285-86). He is "unconcerned / What qualities were natural or earned, / With no ideals of graces" (4.594-960). He has no principles higher than cynicism and pragmatic rationalism. In the fashion of Machiavelli's New Prince, he has amassed territory through cunning, diplomacy, political bargaining, and military might. His alliance with the Kaiser bespeaks his allegiance to a continuation of dictatorial and military rule.

As he is presented by both the narrator and Sordello, however, he is not entirely a villain. He is, after all, a man of action, a great leader, and a hero to his people. In outer form and function, at least, he is closer to being one of Carlyle's "Men of Action" and "Great Men" than Sordello (5.426-27), though he lacks Sordello's ideals and inner vision. A fusion of Salinguerra's heroic traits and Sordello's poetic sensitivity and ideals might produce a complete Carlylean hero of grand proportion. However, their confrontation illustrates the impossibility of such a fusion.

In making Salinguerra Sordello's father, Browning altered his historical sources, which suggest no blood relation at all between the two. The change is a crucial one, however, and helps add the dimension of psychological allegory to their confrontation. Realizing that as a warrior he is no match for Salinguerra, Sordello belatedly returns to his role as poet (Smith 239). He delivers a long poetic speech which restates many of his humanitarian and political ideals and reinvokes the possibility of a new Rome. He suggests that Salinguerra make peace with the Guelfs and support the Pope. He feels inspired, prophetic: "Each bone new marrowed as whom gods annoint / Though mortal to their rescue" (5.499-501). He feels a "power beyond" guiding his words (5.520). In response to this grand performance, Salinguerra yawns and dismisses Sordello's poetry as a trifle. Humiliated, Sordello departs in despair.

Having given the matter some thought, however, Salinguerra (now apprised of the fact that Sordello is his son) makes a

startling and extremely cunning move. He calls Sordello back to his chambers and offers to step down and bequeath to Sordello his position of chief general of the Ghibelline forces. At this point, the psychological allegory becomes clear. Salinguerra functions as Sordello's dark "double," his alter-ego. Sordello confronts in Salinguerra the reflection of his own ambitions and egotism, his own desires for fame and flory, and realizes that these traits, through a blood connection, are deeply embedded in his own personality. Given the power to carry out his will, Sordello realizes that Salinguerra is an embodiment of what he might well become--and it is just this opportunity that Salinguerra offers him. As a result, the great gulf between Man and Bard, between ambitious subjectivist hero and humanitarian, other-directed poet, yawns wider and swallows Sordello up. Torn between these poles, in a bitter parody of Messianic self-sacrifice, Sordello can make no decision at all and thus dies of psychological paralysis. His efforts to "redeem" mankind through art and utopian political ideals have failed.[9] Also, like earlier heroes he has failed utterly to confront and integrate the "shadow" of his own hubris and the knowledge of his own human weaknesses and limits. What Browning announced as a depiction of the "development of a soul" in his preface becomes finally a

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[9]See Whitla's Central Truth pp. 13-14 on Sordello and Paracelsus as figures of Browning's dissatisfaction with the ethical Christ of Higher Criticism and his growing preference for a mystical interpretation of Christ's life and incarnation. See also Hassett's Elusive Self p. 30 for further discussion.

depiction of the utter failure of that soul to develop (Miller 90).

In Book VI the narrator provides ironic commentary on Sordello's failure. In the face of "symbols of immensity" and larger necessities, Sordello shrank to "nought" (6.2-3). He could not "Fit to the finite his infinity" (6.499). With bitter irony, the narrator points out that, in the aftermath of Sordello's death, Salinguerra decided to spare Mantua. Thus, in legend Sordello became just the "Knight, Bard, Gallant" and saviour of Mantua that he failed to become in life (6.828). Holmes contends that, in Browning's thinking, Salinguerra as a man of action stepped forward to take Sordello's place as hero ("Sordello and Jung" 253). However, Salinguerra is also a target of the narrator's irony in the final book. Eventually the Guelfs and Ghibellines made peace, and Salinguerra "dwindled down / To a mere showy turbulent soldier" (6.717-18). In fact, eventually he was captured by his enemies, "fat / And florid at a banquet, more by fraud / Than force," and imprisoned in Venice until his death (6.730-32). He too is degraded. As a Machiavellian New Prince, he lived by power and guile, and fittingly he is undone by these same means. He certainly is no Carlylean hero.

Sordello's failures are clearly a culmination of the problems faced by the Pauline poet and Paracelsus. Holmes suggests that Sordello is a "scapegoat" for Browning's frustrations and disillusionment over his own failure to clarify his confused ideals and to

express his vast ambitions through successful poetry ("Semantic Stutterer" 252). As we observed earlier in this chapter, his attempts to discuss complex metaphysics often result in "stuttering," in confusion and obscurity (231). Columbus and Kemper confirm Holmes' conclusions. They maintain that Sordello is the "Seeker, the Questor, the Romantic Rhapsodist," and if he fails utterly, then the narrator (and Browning behind the narrator's mask) must resign himself to chaos and disorder (254). They illustrate that, as the poem progresses, the narrator begins to suffer the same problems as Sordello: he loses his audience, lapses into obscure language, and loses control of point of view and perspective (259). Sordello's failure to become the "whole" hero, to become the visionary poet and great leader, embodies Browning's own failure in his early poems to become the successful poet/prophet that he would be.

Though many of his lengthy "lectures" to Sordello and to the reader are intrusive and poorly integrated into the narrative, the narrator manages to voice important realizations that help to clarify and extend Paracelsus' closing thoughts and point the way toward major changes in Browning's aesthetics and his approach to heroism--his own as poet and that of his characters. He reaffirms Paracelsus' vision of Christian Providence and divine will as the ground of heroic faith. He suggests that Sordello has failed to learn that God selects our "yokes," our duty and destiny (3.782). Sordello has placed his own vain ambitions, his "own conceit of truth," above divine truth (3.790). Late in the poem,

an inner voice (which sounds suspiciously like the narrator's) tells Sordello of two visions: an apocalyptic vision of the divine order and movement of the universe, and a finite vision of mortal man, his limited span of time, and his earthly duties (5.81-99). The voice tells Sordello that the former of these is denied mortal man--there is "no whole and perfect Poet" (5.116). Through his poetry and heroic action, Sordello tried to directly reveal his own ideals and his utopian vision of Rome as if they were divine truth. However, as Miller points out, he discovered through his failures, as Browning discovered through Sordello, that human action and language (even poetry) are inadequate vehicles of direct revelation--even the visionary poet must rely on patient effort, the indirection of art, and the larger movements of time (Miller 95-100). The poet can function as a mediator between the earthly and divine, but he cannot "will" apotheosis for himself and perfection for mankind.

The narrator also voices Browning's resolve to become a more objective and dramatic poet. Browning does not forsake his Carlylean moral stance and prophetic ambitions, but he plans to focus his vision through a much closer attention to individual characters and the particulars of their experience and the world around them. He realizes that all individuals, not just Titanic heroes, represent "a special point of view, an individual reading of life, a separate spiritual drama" (Smalley, Intro. to Poems xviii). Toward this end, he plans to depict the presence of "god's germ" in a broad range of characters (3.982). He will seek to embody objectively through his

art the inner spiritual struggle toward discovering a ground for faith and satisfactory psychological orientation toward the action. Through his characters he hopes to "Impart the gift of seeing to the rest"; he will be one of the "Makers-see" (3.868, 928). His role as poet will be moral and prophetic, but as his phrase "Makers-see" implies, rather than attempting direct revelation of his vision, he realizes the necessity of being first a "maker," an artificer, who communicates his vision through the indirection of art.

The narrator also voices Browning's growing commitment to history and its importance as part of the ongoing process of man's intellectual and spiritual development. Paracelsus and Sordello both sought to leap beyond the past and directly into visionary worlds of their own creation. Having failed in his heroic attempts, however, Sordello belatedly realized that "today / Takes into account the work of yesterday: / Has not the world a Past now?" (5.627-29). Sordello realized that there is a vital and necessary link between the past and present--a realization that foreshadows Browning's eventual role as a poet/historiographer, a Carlylean interpreter of the revelation of divine will as it unfolds through history.

The narrator also addresses the question of evil--obviously a crucial issue for poet and hero alike. In providing Salinguerra as a villain in the poem, Browning moved closer to dramatizing the conflict between good and evil, but still the lines between hero and

villain are vague and shifting. Sordello's paralysis stems in part from his inability to decide whether he should follow his own humanitarian vision and his vocation as poet or become a military and political man of action like Salinguerra. Both men display heroic and admirable qualities, but both are also deeply shadowed, Sordello by his excesses and weaknesses, and Salinguerra by his Machiavellian egotism and lack of moral vision. In the closing spectacle of Sordello's death, the polarities of good and evil, of hero and villain, collapse in ambiguity and confusion. And the narrator's discussion of evil does not solve this ambiguity. He questions, "Is evil a result less natural / Than Good?" (3.240-41). In the actions of history he sees evil as a natural part of the evolution of good, a view that closely parallels Carlyle's optimistic interpretation of evil.[10] The vague optimism of this early definition of evil is one that eventually Browning was forced to revise and clarify, both for philosophical and dramatic purposes, as he discovered that before the polar forces of good and evil, of heroism and villainy, could be united in a larger harmony, they must first be clearly defined and set in opposition. The narrator does, however, suggest a key link between the two that foreshadows Browning's mature vision in The Ring and the Book. He suggests

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[10]See, for instance, "Characteristics" (1831), in which Carlyle states, "Out of Evil comes Good . . . and no Good that is not possible but one day shall be real." Crit. and Misc. Essays 3: 37.

that evil, because it challenges people to grapple with doubts, fears, and suffering, may help produce heroic "Old faith / Old courage," that may yet be possible in a skeptical age (6.232-33).

Sordello's quest to discover his "out-soul" in Palma suggests that romantic love is also to be an important component of Browning's vision of heroism. In fact, Devane contends that after Paracelsus love becomes the major theme of Browning's poetry (Parleyings 35). Sordello's desire for love, as well as his search for larger humanitarian and spiritual ideals, is an important element in his quest to achieve the "loving heart" which Carlyle declared to be the "beginning of all Knowledge" and the root of heroism (Crit. and Misc. Essays 3: 57). Though Sordello's attempt fails, he intuitively realizes that love and human sympathy may provide avenues out of the confines of narcissistic subjectivism and egotism and their attendant excesses of hubris and abstract idealism.

Undoubtedly, Browning and his heroes received an "education" in his early long poems, for which Sordello is a culminating summary (Hassett 19). This education came at the expense of Browning's realizing some serious flaws and excesses in his heroes and his aesthetic method. The obscurity, incoherence, and confusion of voices in Sordello drew heavy critical fire and derision from its early reviewers and readers. Although, as I have demonstrated, the narrator aptly summarizes key realizations--the fruits of Browning's early labors--Browning was still a long way from successfully integrating them into the epic-length heroic work

that he had envisioned. In the aftermath of Sordello's failure, Browning's writing moved in two directions. In his shorter lyrics Browning began developing the techniques and form of the dramatic monologue. The rigors of its dramatic form challenged Browning to focus his powers on a limited topic and to provide concrete details to embody his minute psychological analyses. However, Browning did not give up his quest for a full-scale heroic vision. In his nine plays written between 1837 and 1853, Browning continued to explore many of the central issues of his early long poems and to experiment with a variety of heroes in varied relationships with heroines and villains. In Browning's plays we see a continuation of the main currents of his thoughts on heroism, which eventually merge with the fully developed techniques of the dramatic monologue in The Ring and the Book.

CHAPTER III

BROWNING'S PLAYS: FURTHER EXPERIMENTS IN FORM AND CHARACTER

Introduction

Between the years 1837 and 1846 (during which he also worked on the poems for his volumes Dramatic Lyrics (1842) and Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845), Browning wrote eight plays. He made what Irvine and Honan term a "mass attack on the theater" (93). Though in practical and artistic terms this attack was something less than successful, Browning's plays were nonetheless an important part of his development as a poet, especially in regard to the major themes and aesthetic issues of his early long poems. Pippa Passes, Browning's best known play (though a closet-drama), is a microcosm of past and future concerns. Its multiple focus on dramatic "moments," its concern with the relationship between men and women, and its unique fusion of lyric and dramatic techniques suggest a culmination of some of Browning's struggles in the early long poems and foreshadow further development in his plays and The Ring and the Book.

Browning's eight stage plays are very much a continuation of his search for a hero, as well as a heroine and a villain, to help complete his vision. From Browning's long poems to his plays, we see a continuity of heroic pursuits. His protagonists continue

to seek love, vocation, duty, faith, and right action. Serious conflicts continue, also, between subjectivism and the urge toward other-directed action, between ideals and practical necessities, and these conflicts sometimes surface in artistic weaknesses. Browning's plays, however, are generally much more tightly structured and better focused than his long poems. In probing the relationships between his main characters, he generally focuses on triangles composed of the hero, the heroine, and the villain or other third party. This triangular pattern helps supply structural limits, but also offers sufficient complexity to accommodate Browning's minute analyses of characters' motives and inner changes. This same pattern becomes an important structural feature of The Ring and the Book.

Like Paracelsus and Sordello, many of Browning's plays are based on historical sources. They are set in times of great political, military, and religious upheaval. More often than not, however, these larger issues continue to function more as backdrop than as primary subject matter. In his fine article on Browning's plays, H. B. Charlton distinguishes between the primary concerns of lyric poetry (the individual's relation to God) and drama (the individual's relation to society, to collective and corporate forces) (34). Browning's plays suffer as stage drama, he contends, because they focus more on lyric than on dramatic concerns. Too often, single characters and their inner concerns dominate and overshadow other characters and larger social issues (43, 54, 67).

Arthur Dubois pinpoints this conflict, too, in suggesting that individualism and subjectivism are problems in Browning's drama (643). He further suggests that forced attempts to fuse the ideal and the actual in single characters create inconsistencies in characterization and plot (654). Also, in his plays Browning seeks to create symbol through action. Given the complex and often confused motives of major characters, however, crucial actions at times seem arbitrary and forced, at others ambiguous. This problem often results in excess pathos, melodrama, and occasional "trick" endings (Dubois 639).

Overall, then, Browning's plays are flawed in ways that have seriously limited their success as stage dramas. But many of them were important experiments for Browning. They present a variety of protagonists and antagonists in diverse relationships. Also, Browning continues to struggle with and to qualify the Byronic and Shelleyan influences on his art and thought, but he also shows considerable disillusionment with aspects of Carlyle's theories on heroes and hero-worship. Through this process he moves closer to developing the synthesis of ideas and techniques that comes to comprise his own vision of heroism and villainy in The Ring and the Book.

Pippa Passes (1841): A Microcosm of Past and Future Concerns

After struggling unsuccessfully to strike a balance between lyric and dramatic concerns in his early long poems, Browning

finally succeeded in Pippa Passes. The play is divided into four mini-dramas which take place during a single day in the town of Asolo, Italy. In addition to the interconnection of plot and characters' lives among the four dramas, they are also linked by Pippa's lyric songs and commentary. Though her language is richer and more poetic than we might expect of a young girl, she is a character in her own right, and certainly is not a confessional mouthpiece for Browning's own deliberations, as were his earlier characters and narrators. In presenting Pippa's speeches, Browning carefully chooses images and thought appropriate to her youthful innocence, and the songs she sings are ones that a young girl might well have memorized. In fact, the contrast between Pippa's naive innocence and the richness and complexity of the language and dramatic situations yields subtle ironies. In Pippa, then, Browning works behind the scenes and allows his characters and artistry to carry his larger meaning.

Also, each of the four mini-dramas features two or more characters. In adapting language to suit these various characters, Browning was able to show the variety and flexibility of his poetic abilities. Through his use of multiple characters and Pippa as a unifying device, Browning was able to avoid having a single dominating presence and voice (of the kind that so often became his own voice in the early poems). The major characters in Pippa make important decisions, then, right or wrong, act on them, rather than just talking about action, then falling into confusion and paralysis.

In Pippa Browning also gives dramatic expression to his emerging concept of the "good moment." In each of the four dramas, Browning presents characters who are poised on the brink of major decisions. The past and future become compounded in the crucible of the present moment. As a dramatic device, such moments help to focus and structure the poem, as well as to provide dramatic tension and a sense of spontaneity and authenticity of action (Hassett 21). Such moments also challenge characters to confront the truth of their inner natures and to act based on that knowledge. The result may be heroic action, or it may be madness and evil action, depending on what the character discovers of himself. Importantly, this process implies a shifting away from Browning's concept of the "true" self as a static core in the early poems toward a concept of the self as a process of becoming, as a struggle toward growth in a world in which moral questions are often complex and ambiguous (Hassett 19-20).

Browning's presentation of female characters in Pippa also marks an important advance. Unlike the vague "phantoms" of the early poems, the women in Pippa have more depth and substance and take part in major actions. Their personalities are dynamic and undergo important changes. Pippa, of course, is a focal point in the poem. In terms of the literal plot, she is a rather typical nineteenth-century pathetic heroine of the variety that we might well encounter in Victorian drama or in a Dickens novel. She is a young orphan who has lost her family and her inheritance due to

the evil schemes of greedy men. As was true of Victorian writers in general (as his continuing interest in the Perseus-Andromeda myth would also suggest), Browning was fascinated with helpless victims (Hassett 39). His interest in orphans began with Sordello and culminates in Pompilia. Browning's orphans often find themselves isolated by a combination of inner and outer circumstances and in need of heroic rescue. Thus, the vulnerability and attendant needs of these orphans progressively come also to serve as catalysts for heroism in other characters. Indeed, Pippa's plight as a victim helps inspire the Monsignor's decision at the end of the poem to have Maffeo arrested for his role in the schemes that victimized Pippa.

Pippa's importance to the literal plot is slight, however, compared to her symbolic function. Early critics remarked her innocence, and considered her songs to be direct expressions of divine will and judgment. However, such interpretations ignored the many ironies of language and situation that frame Pippa's songs. Recent critics, while not ignoring the moral and spiritual implications of Pippa's songs, see her rather as an amoral force, an unconscious agent that releases forces already present in the various characters (Kramer 245). Pippa's twice repeated assertion that we are all "God's puppets" (Intro. 194, 4.295)[1] suggests

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[1]All further line references to Pippa will be to The Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. III, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

determinism--certainly not an idea that Browning favored or espoused (Kramer 243). Such ironic discrepancies lend complex integrity to Pippa's voice. Considering, among other such ironies, that her first song inspires a double suicide, we cannot ignore the demonic, even sinister, aspect of Pippa's action in the poem. Such ambiguity, though a problem in earlier poems, lends complexity to Pippa's symbolic function. It suggests a larger moral force that is detached and operates indirectly through the medium of human thought and action (just as Browning, as poet, communicates indirectly through the art of the poem). The characters must actively interpret Pippa's songs and thus participate in the working out of this force (just as the reader participates by interpreting the poem).

The three other female characters in the poem, Ottima, Phene, and Luigi's mother, are also important characters. They remain subordinate in the sense that their roles and actions are defined and given importance relative to the situations and actions of their male counterparts. However, in the dichotomy of male and female characters that emerge in the poem, the female characters embody strength, practical wisdom, and the capacity for love and self-sacrifice--virtues that are not nearly so evident in the male characters. The principal male characters--Sebald, Luigi, Jules, and the Monsignor--continue to struggle with some of the same difficulties that we observed in the early heroes.

Dale Kramer demonstrates that the level of self-love of the various characters is an important criterion in Pippa (244). In

this regard, Pippa is an exception to the other female characters. As we might expect of a young person, Pippa is largely caught up in her own selfish concerns. On the surface she is a model of virtue because she is uncomplaining, resigned to her plight, and innocent (Kramer 241). However, her concept of love is markedly selfish. Given her day of freedom, Pippa dreams of being queen of Asolo. She announces to her imaginary subjects, "Love thy queen, worship me!" (Intro. 103). In discussing Luigi and his mother, she comments on the profound and enduring nature of parental love. Having thought the matter over, though, she declares, "Let me be Luigi!" (Intro. 177). She would rather be Luigi and receive love than face the demands of giving love (Kramer 244). Pippa also dreams of receiving adulation and praise. She envies Phene's beauty and the wealth and lifestyles of the "Happiest Four." During the poem Pippa's character and her chief concerns do not change; thus, Kramer suggests, she functions as a static criterion against which we can measure the level of self-love in the other characters (245).

When measured against this standard, Ottima, Phene, and Luigi's mother fare well. Given her adulterous relationship with Sebald and her complicity in the plot to murder her husband, Ottima is certainly a "fallen" woman. However, unlike Sebald, she shows strength and a willingness to try and live with her guilt. She shows the capacity to accept her own share in the evil that she and Sebald have committed and to try to live with that knowledge.

Rather than giving in to despair and guilt, Ottima urges Sebald to remember their love and past joy. However, once she realizes that Sebald plans suicide, she shows a profound love and depth of character. She cries, "Me! no, no, Sebald, not yourself--kill me!" (1.270). As Sebald is apparently dying, she states, "Not me--to him, O God, be merciful" (1.282). These words suggest Ottima's deep loyalty and selfless concern for Sebald's welfare. These may well be her last words, for, though the ending is not entirely clear, it would seem that Ottima is about to join Sebald in suicide. We now realize that Ottima's initial strength was inseparable from her love for Sebald. This fact suggests that Ottima achieved a level of empathy that the early male heroes failed utterly to achieve. Finally it would seem that Ottima's strength is not lost, but rather is transformed to a profound and selfless loyalty through her final act.

Phene also shows some of these positive traits and undergoes a transformation. Though they realize her beauty, Jules' friends, artists who are accustomed to using Phene as a model, feel that she is a common sort of girl, and that is why they choose her to take part on the elaborate and cruel trick they plan to play on Jules. However, when the time comes for her to speak the mocking verses she has memorized under the tutelage of Jules' fellow artists, she refuses and instead confesses the truth to Jules. At this point she has fallen in love with Jules, and hopes that he will care for her, but she is still willing to confess the truth at the

likely expense of losing his love and respect. In later works, such honesty emerges as a key trait in Browning's heroes. Phene also shows intuitive depth. In regard to Jules' professed love, she questions, "was't in the tone / Or the words, your power" (2.43-44). Here she makes an important distinction between the depth and sincerity of Jules' "tone" of voice and the surface value of the words. She seeks to discover the "heart" beneath the poetic and intellectual dazzle of Jules' words. As the scene closes, Phene seems swept away in the wave of Jules' enthusiasm and passionate dreams of what their future will be, but we suspect that when this wave subsides Jules will discover the true strength and depth in Phene's character.

Luigi's mother is also a strong character, though not so fully developed as Ottima and Phene. She embodies a profound maternal love, the kind Pippa describes when she states, ". . . only parents' love can last our lives" (Intro. 164). She shows much patience and tender concern for Luigi, and gently urges him to reconsider his plans to assassinate the emperor. She shows depth of insight and wisdom when she tells Luigi, "Yet seems this patriotism / The easiest virtue for a selfish man . . . he loves himself--and next the world . . . but naught between" (3.123-26). She sees through her son's wild pretentions and rhetoric to his truer motives and is not afraid to confront him with this truth. She is finally unsuccessful in her attempt to dissuade Luigi from his rash action, but she has done her best. Finally, her love for

Luigi is tempered with the knowledge that she must let him go if that is what he must do.

The principal male characters, though they show heroic traits, are deeply shadowed by many of the same excesses that we observed in the early heroes. Sebald, for instance, shows courage and honesty when he tells Ottima, "Let's out / With all of it" (1.41). He shows a deeply moral drive toward confession of the crime that he and Ottima have committed. However, as the scene continues Sebald becomes progressively immersed in guilt and is completely self-absorbed and cut off from Ottima and her love. He lashes out at her, "I hate, hate--curse you!" (1.269). Sebald can find no way to accept or integrate and continue to live with the dark knowledge of his shadow, of his murder of Ottima's aged husband. In order to end his guilt, he would "Kill the world" (126). Nihilism becomes his way out of guilt, and he commits suicide. In terms of the larger implications of the scene, Sebald's interpretation of Pippa's song and his act of confession and self-judgment imply a moral order and a larger moral force at work in the world. As a practical solution to inner evil, however, Sebald's suicide is a fatalistic and absurd gesture (White 72).

Jules shows the naive idealism, self-absorption, and possessiveness of earlier heroies. Like Sordello, he is a young artist convinced that he can attain the "Ideal" through his art. His language is exeedingly convoluted, replete with literary allusions, and breathlessly romantic. He sees Phene more as an art object, as

his "Greek girl" or "Hippolyta," than as a human being (2.42, 54). After hearing Phene's confession then Pippa's song, he concludes, "Here is a woman with utter need of me-- / I find myself queen here, it seems" (2.286-87). He thinks only of Phene's need of him and not of his own need and possible love for her. Like a possessive god, he states, "This new soul is mine!" (2.300). Phene is rough marble to be fashioned and perfected through his art. Reminiscent of the speaker's escapist fantasy at the end of Pauline, the end of the second drama finds Jules carrying Phene away to "Some unsuspected isle in the far seas" in quest of his "Ideal" (2.326). At this point we might conclude that Jules' Ideal may well he his own hubris and self-love dressed in the flattering garb of art and beauty.

If, as Holmes contends, Sordello was something of a scapegoat ("Stuttering" 352), then Luigi is an even more obvious depiction of a vain, misguided utopian revolutionary. Based on his naive view of political revolution, he thinks that by assassinating the corrupt emperor--even at the expense of his own death--he will free all Italy in one fell stroke. He exclaims, "Italy, Italy, my Italy! You're free, you're free!" (3.120-21). Like Paracelsus and Sordello, Luigi is a self-elected Messiah who plans to make a grand gesture of self-sacrifice for his people. As we concluded earlier, his mother sees the true vanity and misguided ideals behind his rash plans. When pressed by his mother, Luigi can supply only jumbled answers: "I understand / But can't restate the

matter; that's my boast" (3.142-43). In reply to his mother's fear that he will be executed, he replies, "The dying is the best part of it" (3.65). He admits that his "mind is touched, suspect / All is not sound" (3.35-36). Luigi's own speech betrays the dark confusion of his thoughts, and suggests that his grand Messianic gesture is really a suicidal escape from a world that does not live up to his naive ideals. He cannot accept the political imperfections of the emperor's rule, nor can he deny the dark forces in himself that urge him toward murder and death. After hearing Pippa's song concerning the aged king whose wisdom and serene demeanor turned a Python away from the city gates, Luigi decides firmly that he must kill the emperor in order to make room for such a wise king. He is convinced that "God's voice calls" (3.229). However, we realize that "God's voice" is really the inner voice of his own confused ideals and madness.

The Monsignor is the least developed of the male characters, yet his transformation has more positive and practical results than the decisions of the other three. When confronted with Maffeo's evil scheme, the Monsignor revolts, has him arrested, and thus thwarts plans that would have resulted in Pippa's murder. However, the Monsignor's actions are not entirely motivated by concern for others. He is old and near death and is worried over the future lot of his own soul. The last line in Pippa's song, "Suddenly God took me," strikes fear into his heart and prompts his decision (4.177). His last statement, "Miserere mei, Domine" (4.181), asks

for mercy on his own soul (a telling contrast to Ottima's final plea for mercy for Sebald).

The enfolding self-consciousness, excess guilt, fatalism, and extreme idealism that mark the male characters we have already explored in the early heroes under the rubric of the "shadow" of dark preoccupations and excesses of the Byronic and Shelleyan hero. The evil that sometimes results from these conditions (i.e., Sebald's act of murder, Luigi's planned assassination) is real, but as was true of the evil in the early long poems, it seems rooted in misguided sincerity and ideals that might have led to good if pursued through different means. Sebald committed murder in the name of love; Luigi planned to free Italy through his assassination attempt. The definition of evil implicit here is consistent with the Carlylean view of evil as a distorted perception or misapplication of good that Browning advanced in Book VI of Sordello. Also, such evil provides a test of moral character and challenges characters to confront their inner motives and to choose, right or wrong, a course of action. However, the character Bluphocks embodies a more complex vision of evil, one that reappears in characters such as Duke Ferrara and culminates in Guido in The Ring and the Book. Bluphocks is an atheist who has "abjured all religions" (2.335). His speech is cynical and darkly ironic. He perverts biblical and literary phrases into sinister doggerel, replete with images such as maggots, flies, and burning stakes. He is a betrayer; he is the mercenary spy who informed on Luigi's

activities, and he also plans to murder Pippa for pay. Bluphocks' character and the imagery of his language clearly belong to the demonic realm, as Northrop Frye defines it in Anatomy of Criticism (147). Bluphocks' evil embodies a deeper and more profound vision of a dark malignant force in human nature beyond mere misunderstanding and ethical mistakes, and thus marks an important expansion of Browning's conception of evil. Bluphocks' evil is an enigma, something deeply ingrained in the larger mystery of human nature, and as such reminds us of Shakespeare's Iago, as well as foreshadowing the development of Guido, Browning's consummate embodiment of evil.

In Pippa, then, Browning makes significant advances over his early long poems and their principal characters. Its objective form and narrative technique achieve clarity of detail, as well as complexity and depth of image and symbol. Devane agrees that the art of Pippa is free of the morbid self-consciousness of Sordello, though, as we have seen, some of its characters are not (Handbook 224). Browning moves closer to attaining that "double faculty" whereby the objective poet expresses his larger vision through concrete particulars and aesthetic structure. In Pippa Browning also discovers a depth of character and strength, as well as a capacity for self-sacrificing love and wisdom, in his female characters. Their efforts are not sufficient to counterbalance the excess of their male counterparts or to alter their fateful actions. But for the reader, they provide telling contrast with the male

characters and also point toward Browning's increasingly adept and complex treatment of female characters and his acknowledgement of their necessary role in creating a balanced love relationship, one that has the potential for positively transforming both parties. In the male characters, Browning continues to explore the excesses of self-consciousness and misguided idealism. However, in Bluphocks he discovers a deeper and more profound evil than was evident in his early long poems.

In context of Browning's early works, Pippa is something of an anomaly. Its successful fusion of lyric and dramatic techniques foreshadows an even more successful fusion in The Ring and the Book, just as Pippa and the Monsignor eventually reappear, greatly transformed, in the characters of Pompilia and the Pope. However, Browning's intellectual and artistic development was not entirely linear or chronological. The higher degree of aesthetic and popular success Browning attained in Pippa did not generally continue in his stage plays, though his volumes of shorter poems did begin attracting more appreciative readers and critics. However, in regard to the key issues we have explored thus far, especially those concerning the nature and interrelationships of the hero, the heroine, and the villain, the plays were a vital proving ground for Browning, and are thus fertile territory for our present study.

Carlylean Heroes

In his plays Stafford (1837) and Luria (1846), Browning explores several varieties of Carlylean heroes and great leaders.

These heroes act out their fates in the midst of conflicting political and military movements. However, as was true of Paracelsus and Sordello, these plays focus more on the complex and often conflicting inner motives of their protagonists than on larger historical issues. Though they struggle to carry out their heroic ambitions, like Paracelsus and Sordello they fail because of inner flaws and misguided idealism (Dubois 633-34). Their failures, as well as the artistic weaknesses of these plays, illustrate the growing conflict between Browning's vision of human psychology and Carlyle's model of the great leader. In fact, Dubois contends that in Stafford and Luria Browning moves toward debunking the myths of Byronic and Carlylean hero-worship (640).

Stafford focuses on the conflict between the Royalists and Puritans during the reign of Charles I. Its two protagonists represent different types of Carlylean heroes. Stafford, a Royalist and Charles' chief military leader, is a chivalric knight who believes in a feudal system of government based on kingly authority. John Pym, his chief adversary, is the Puritan leader, and he represents the emerging religious and political reformer who bases his power in popular support. Pym wins the political battle, but both men are deeply shadowed in ways that seriously undercut their heoric qualities.

Evident in Carlyle's writings on hero-worship is a nostalgic longing for the old age of "true" chivalric and feudal heroism (Gribble 14). Stafford literally attempts to live according to

these ideals. He considers Charles I to be his liege lord, and serves him with obsessive loyalty. He states, "I am yet his instrument / Be it for well or ill . . . I would die to serve [him]" (1.2.16-17, 200).[2] Despite opposition from Puritans and Parliament, Stafford plans to pursue his "holy" war against the Scots in the name of Charles and England.

In an atmosphere of court intrigue and conflict, Stafford maintains his vision of chivalric duty and loyalty. Preparing for his campaign in Scotland, he makes the following speech to an admirer, Lady Carlisle:

> All knights begin their enterprise, we read,
> Under the best auspices: 'tis morn,
> The Lady girds his sword upon the youth
> (He's always young)--the trumpets sound,
> Cups pledge him, and why, the King blesses him--
> You need not turn a page of the romance
> To learn the Dreadful Giant's fate. (2.2.169-75)

As this passage indicates, Stafford is attempting to act out a medieval romance. In a telling gesture, before departing he requests a token curl of Lady Carlisle's hair (2.2.255). And though Browning presents Stafford's ideals in a sympathetic light relative to the treachery surrounding him, in context of seventeenth century England Stafford proves something of a misfit and a political reactionary. Ultimately, his heroic quest leads him into obsessive delusion and destruction.

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[2]All further line references to Stafford will be to Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. II, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

As the play develops, Stafford's hero-worship of Charles proves poorly founded. Charles is not the ideal king of Stafford's chivalric vision. Facing dire political necessities, behind Stafford's back he negotiates with the Puritans and agrees to make peace with the Scots, thus setting up Stafford as the scapegoat for an unpopular war. Apprised of these events, rather than facing the need for compromise, Stafford moves deeper into delusion. Against orders he attacks the Scots at Durham, convinced that his plan is divinely ordained: "God put it in my mind to love, serve, die / For Charles, but never to obey him more" (3.2.159). Like Paracelsus, Stafford trusts the absolute truth of his inner vision, to the exclusion of all other considerations. This condition distorts and limits his perception of the political complexities of his situation. Even in the face of Charles' treachery, he remains obsessively loyal. When his military attack fails, in a gesture of total allegiance tinged with Messianic self-sacrifice, he takes full credit for the war and returns to England to face charges of treason, thus sparing Charles. Lady Carlisle's frightened exclamation, "That reddening brow!" indicates Stafford's growing madness (3.2.213).

Stafford seizes his "good moment," but for misguided reasons carried out through destructive methods. He seeks to enforce his chivalric vision through military violence. Pym accuses him of using "power, power without law," and calls his Scots campaign "an obscene dream" that involved "butchering the Scots for serving

God / After their father's fashion" (1.1.52, 1.2.115-16). When, because of Pym's superior political craft, Stafford loses his treason trial, he gives in to escapist gesture and fatalism. He states, "What matters it? / We shall die gloriously--as the book [of romance tales] says" (2.2.181-82). Clinging to his ideals, he yet hopes that his death will serve as a noble example of allegiance to Charles, England, and God. However, the reader realizes that Stafford's own obsessive vision and violent methods have led to his destruction. Finally, he is a self-willed martyr for an illusory cause.

Early in the play, Sir John Pym seems to offer an alternative to Stafford's vision of chivalric heroism. Ostensibly, he fights for the Puritan cause and People's rights. In the eyes of his followers, he is a "mighty man of God," a "David" combatting the "Goliath" of Stafford's military power (1.1.18-19, 133). Pym also allies himself with the democratic movement in Parliament, a feature of the historical Pym which Browning seriously exaggerates, perhaps to emphasize that, though Pym claims divine guidance, he is also careful to align himself with emerging political factions (Devane, Handbook 71).

For all his sincere intentions and inspired rhetoric filled with biblical allusions, Pym's motives are suspect and his methods those of a Machiavel. Like Stafford, he too seeks fame and glory. He states, "Who'd give at any price his hope away / Of being named along with the Great Men?" (1.1.172-73). He seems consciously to be competing with Stafford to see which of them will become a

Carlylean "Great Man." And any price is what he is willing to pay for victory. In order to insure Stafford's defeat in Scotland, Pym conspired with the Scots and the French, then used blackmail and extortion to suppress evidence of this treachery. When, because of Stafford's brilliant defense, Pym faces the defeat of his treason charges against Stafford, he draws up a Bill of Attainder (a bill that summarily strips the defendant of his right to due process and condemns him as a dangerous enemy of the State) and forces Charles to sign it. Even his followers contend that "this new course is monstrous. / This Bill of his Attainder shall not have / One true man's hand on it" (4.2.119-21).

Charles offers insight into Pym's motives when he states, "You hate the Earl . . . (turn not away, / We know you hate him)" (4.3.39-40). For Carlyle, a loving and sympathetic heart was the beginning of all knowledge and heroism (Lehman 84). Pym fails to attain these qualities. His corrupt motives and methods betray his lack of heroic love and sympathy. Even so, he insists that his Bill is an instrument of divine will, God's "beacon light" which will "shine upon / The guilt of Stafford" (4.2.178-80). He further states, "I render up my charge (be witness God!) / To save England who imposed it" (4.2.281-82). Ironically, just as Stafford has done, Pym claims to act for God and England, and thus sidesteps questions of moral responsibility for his own unscrupulous actions.

Finally, Stafford is a play without a true hero. In the final melodramatic scene--which includes a death cell visit from

Stafford's children and a failed rescue attempt by Lady Carlisle--Stafford proves the sentimental favorite. Pym appears as "something ominous and dark, / Fatal, inevitable" blocking Stafford's escape attempt (5.3.263-64). In the pathos of this final scene, the complex issues involved in the conflict between Stafford and Pym become blurred and finally go unresolved. However, several points do emerge. Though Browning presents Stafford's chivalric ideals in a favorable light, he also depicts serious difficulties implicit in Stafford's attempt, through violence and obsessive will, literally to impose such ideals on a complex political situation. Pym succeeds in his political aims, but at the expense of his moral nature. Though both men display heroic qualities, in their attempts to become "Great Men," they fall prey to crippling inner flaws.

Browning addresses these issues once again some years later in Luria, one of his most ambitious dramatic works. Irvine and Honan classify Luria as a heroic play, and its plot concerns the gallant defense of Florence during the Pisan siege in 1405-06 (186). Rather than featuring a Florentine general as a hero, however, Browning creates Luria, a mercenary Moorish general, who becomes the savior of Florence. In Luria, Browning attempts to create a grand hero by fusing several heroic types. Luria is a noble pagan, a Carlylean natural leader, and in the final act, a Christ figure. However, these roles never fuse in a coherent fashion. This failure results in conflicting ironies and ambiguity in the final scene.

Of all Browning's dramatic heroes, Luria is the most Carlylean in that he is relatively free of the shadow of perverse egotism and the darker predelictions of Byronic self-consciousness. He possesses a natural innocence and goodheartedness. Browning refers to him as "golden-hearted Luria" (Letters of R. B. and E. B. 1: 26). For Carlyle, the "hero stuff" is innately present and more concentrated in great leaders (Lehman 58). Luria possesses such natural leadership abilities, and his emotional and intuitive qualities inspire a Carlylean bond of loyalty between him and his followers. Puccio, Luria's chief Florentine officer, states that "zeal, courage, prudence, conduct, [and] faith" meet in Luria (1.32).[3] Even Tiburzio, the opposing Pisan general, admires Luria's "nobleness of soul" and his great loyalty to Florence (2.170).

In fact, Luria's great love for Florence is his chief weakness. Jacopo, a Florentine aide, comments that Luria "Believes in Florence, as the saint / Tied to the wheel believes in God" (1.108-09). For Luria, Florence is a utopian ideal, like Sordello's Rome. In his naive pagan view, Florence is the pinnacle of civilization, a symbol of the highest reaches of art, government, and religion. In his defense of Florence, Luria feels enobled; he describes "feeling a soul grow on me that restricts / The boundless unrest

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[3]All further line references to Luria will be to Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. IV, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

of the savage heart" (1.323-34). However, in context of the factional conflicts, corruption, and intrigue that permeate the Florentine government, Luria's ideal vision, like Sordello's Rome and Stafford's chivalric dream, proves a fantasy. One of Luria's aides, Braccio, and his conspirators plan to use Luria to defeat the Pisans, then dispose of him on trumped up charges of treason. Domizia, Luria's lover, hopes to manipulate him in order to gain revenge on a faction in the Council that has wronged her family. Luria's pagan innocence and trusting nature blind him to this hypocrisy and intrigue. Even in the face of warnings and evidence offered by Tiburzio, he willfully continues to believe in his ideal vision of Florence.

In the final acts, Luria takes his loyalty to Florence to fatal extremes. Having fought courageously and delivered Florence from the Pisan siege, he learns the truth of the "mockery" and "maddening show" of intrigue surrounding him. Rather than seek revenge, however, Luria chooses to commit suicide, and thus to "save" Florence from the civil strife that might stem from his trial. He takes a slow poison, then proceeds to set his affairs in order. Devane points out that Luria's suicide seems forced and insufficiently motivated, a problem Browning also recognized (Handbook 159). Like earlier heroes, Luria seems too eager to die in order to escape a complex situation by way of a noble, Messianic gesture. Facing disillusionment, he chooses escape rather than compromise.

Through the use of religious allegory, Browning attempts to salvage Luria's suicide and render it a symbol of self-

sacrificing natural goodness. During the twelve hours of his slow death, Luria's actions parallel Christ's actions in Gethsemane. He bequeaths the care of Florence to Puccio, whose role in this scene recalls Peter's relation to Christ. He calls Luria "my captain and my Lord" and desires only to stand at his "right-hand" (5.90-94). After appointing Puccio his "viceregent" and urging him to "Still serve the State, my spirit prompting yours," Luria states "Leave me now" (5.115-18). Luria implies that after his death he will become the spiritual guardian of Florence. His noble bearing in these final hours "converts" many of those around him. Jacopo states, "The heart leads surlier: I must move with you" (5.174). Domizia is moved to recall Christ's example of "faith, loyalty, and simpleness. / All once revealed but taught us so long since" (5.267-68). Tiburzio calls Luria "God's model" (5.309). In this final act Luria's pagan innocence is exalted, and his example stirs the "civilized" Florentines to recall forgotten religious principles. Irvine and Honan suggest that Luria comes to represent a Carlylean "God's Lieutenant on earth" (116).

Though on the surface Luria's role as a Christ figure seems convincing, it also poses serious difficulties. Browning does not satisfactorily address the conflict between the role of the pagan warrior and Christ's doctrine of love and compassion--a central issue in Christian poets such as Spenser and Milton. Spenser resolved this conflict through his use of allegory. His Redcrosse Knight's martial actions allegorically represent the inner

confrontation with evil, and thus do not undermine his spiritual role. Milton solved this conflict in Paradise Lost by debunking and rejecting the pagan hero through his treatment of Satan, and setting up Christ as the only true hero (Steadman, Renaissance Hero 17-20). However, Luria's role as a pagan warrior is literal, not allegorical, and his military fervor at times seems excessive. He speaks of war as a "glorious passion" and calls Puccio a "fellow-craftsman" in the art of warfare (3.56, 78). Faced with increasing doubts about the Florentines, he dismisses them on the grounds that "The battle! That solves every doubt" (2.354). Even during his final hour, upon hearing of Pisan troop movements, he exclaims, "Have out instantly . . . / Ah, old use clings" (5.293-94). Finally, Luria's warlike nature contradicts and undermines his role as a Christ figure. The Christ allegory seems imposed on the warrior, and the roles do not fuse in any deeper, coherent interpretation of character.

These conflicts surface in the final scene in the form of unresolved ironies that approach Absurdist intensity. Moments before Luria dies, Braccio enters to announce that he has repented his falseness before the Council--peace is assured and Luria has been pardoned! He proclaims, "All is now possible, / And every prophecy shall be fulfilled" (5.333-34). With this proclamation ringing in his ears, Luria dies, and the play ends with Hussain's clipped assertion, "That is done" (5.338). Luria dies in the very moment of his greatest victory, and the "prophecy" Braccio

mentioned ironically becomes the prophecy of Christ's crucifixion as it is fulfilled by the bitter parody of Luria's unnecessary suicide. Though Luria's heroic virtues converted those around him to goodness, ironically they could not protect him from his own naive ideals and rash actions.

In sum, Luria is not a convincing hero, and his character fails coherently to bring together Browning's heroic, romantic, and religious concerns. Browning shows his admiration for Luria's chivalric vision, as he did for Stafford's, but he also explores the limitations of such a vision. Stafford's and Luria's ideal visions led them away from mature knowledge of complex reality and into isolation and delusion, and their military fervor undermines their attempted gestures of Messianic self-sacrifice. Both men attempt to force their ideals directly into reality. Beneath the guise of Carlylean leaders, they both display a measure of the Faustian ambition and Byronic will that fueled Paracelsus' destructive quest. Even Pym's religious cause does not protect him from the corrupting influence of political ambition and power. In Stafford and Luria Browning's depiction of human nature and its weaknesses is at odds with his attempt to create a Carlylean great leader. He seems torn between differing definitions of heroism, and fails to bring them together in a coherent vision. Browning voices his awareness of these discrepancies in numerous letters to Elizabeth. He notes Luria's confused idealism and comments on the prevailing mood of ambivalence in the final scene. Finally,

he concludes that Luria is a "pure exercise of cleverness" (Letters of R. B. and E. B. 1: 567) and a "manque failure" (2: 2), and he chides Elizabeth for praising the play and thus "helping me to cover a defeat, not gain a triumph" (2: 25). Browning's heroes in these two plays fail to find an adequate cause to anchor their ambitions and energies. Stafford and Luria squander their love and loyalties on illusory ideals, and Pym sacrifices religious principles for political victory. In Paracelsus, Aprile and Festus lectured Paracelsus on love and its power to transcend egotism and to inspire other-directed action. In Pippa Browning further explored the transforming power of love. This crucial issue concerning the relation of love to psychological motivation and heroic action becomes the topic of interest in several of Browning's later plays.

Chivalric Lovers

In Return of the Druses (1843) and Colombe's Birthday (1944), Browning probes the complex issues concerning the role of chivalric love in heroism. Devane points out that Browning's view of life was consistently chivalric and idealistic (Handbook 338). As Browning's vision of heroism develops, romantic and spiritual love play an increasingly important part. Djabal, the protagonist of Druses, is an intensely idealistic chivalric lover whose quest for love, like Sordello's, is similar to a Shelleyan quest for an epipsyche. Like earlier dramatic heroes, however, Djabal has

great difficulty reconciling his ideal vision to practical necessities and human limitations. Valence, the protagonist of Colombe, is also a chivalric idealist, but he manages better to balance his ideals with practical concerns, and thus achieves a measure of growth and selflessness. The more successful fusion of heroic elements in Valence foreshadows Browning's mature characterization of Caponsacchi in The Ring and the Book.

The principal character in Druses, Djabal, ostensibly seeks to fill the roles of Carlylean religious reformer and political leader. His people, the Druses (a secret sect exiled from their homeland and suffering repressive rule in Rhodes), await the return of their divine founder, Hakeem. As the play opens, we discover that Djabal has convinced the Druses that he, though presently mortal, will soon undergo a "transformation" and become Hakeem. Secretly he plans to assassinate the corrupt Prefect, then, with military aid from the Venetians, lead his people back to Lebanon.

Beneath the surface, however, Djabal's true motives are neither religious nor humanitarian. He seeks personal revenge on the Prefect, whom he holds responsible for the deaths of his father and brother. He has vowed that the Prefect will not "escape with all my House's blood . . . What would his death be but my own reward?" (2.310-13).[4] His primary motive, however, is his love

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[4]All further line references to Druses will be to Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. III, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

and desire for a young woman, Anael, who, seeing the suffering of her people, has vowed to wed only the man who frees the Druses. Anael's mother comments on Djabal's plan, "He saw you, heard you speak--till then / Never did he announce . . . his mission" (2.224-25). Djabal all but worships Anael as a goddess of beauty and purity. He tells her, "'Tis I / Should kneel to you, my Anael" (2.258). Beneath the guise of Hakeem, Djabal is a worshipful chivalric lover on a quest for his Lady's love.

In Stafford and Luria Browning sought to fuse military, political, and religious concerns in single protagonists. In Djabal he again seeks to accomplish this fusion, this time by supplying "wild passionate love" as the primary motivation (Devane, Handbook 132). His attempt, however, once again falls short. Djabal's driving urge to win Anael's love leads to psychological conflict and questionable methods which undercut and compromise his role as a reformer and leader. In the interest of proving worthy of his own exalted vision of Anael, Djabal feels that he must literally masquerade as a god, a masquerade that he must maintain through lies, deceit, and trickery. These methods cause him to feel shame and guilt, which compound his fear of proving inadequate to Anael's love. He questions, "That a strong man should think himself a God! / I--Hakeem?" (2.12). Rather than the firm commitment and stoic resolve of the Carlylean leader, he shows the vacillating will and inner turmoil of earlier heroes of sensibility and feeling such as Sordello. Djabal wishes to confess the truth

to Anael; he would speak that "Great heart's word that would tell her," then "die" (2.103-04). For earlier characters such as Paracelsus and Phene, confession was a key first step toward knowledge and vision. However, Djabal is too weak and fearful to take this step. At times he even shows the abject dependency of the Pauline poet. In his suffering he cries out, "Anael, be mine to guard me" (1.176). Finally, he decides to slay the Prefect then "vanish from her, quit the Isle" (2.300). Inner turmoil drives him toward escapism and fatalism.

Not surprisingly, the final disastrous actions of Druses stem from the confusion and lack of honesty between Anael and Djabal. In an effort to prove worthy of Djabal's (Hakeem's, she thinks) love, she slays the Prefect, expecting Djabal's apotheosis to exalt her action. Sensing disaster, Djabal confesses the truth of his imposture and begs Anael's forgiveness. Importantly, his confession is involuntary and forced by circumstances and does not proceed from moral compulsion. Thus, it lacks the force of true character transformation. In the interest of purging their guilt, Anael insists that Djabal also confess to the Druses. When he refuses, she takes it upon herself to confess for both of them. Seeing that as a result an angry mob of Druses is about to kill Djabal, however, she stands before him, cries "Hakeem!" and falls down dead, thus striking fear and hesitation in the mob. Now convinced of Anael's absolute purity and sincerity, Djabal states, "I love thee, I who did not love before . . . Oh luxury to worship,

to submit / Transcended, doomed to death by thee" (5.274, 281-82). On the very brink of success for his military and political plans, as the trumpet sounds announcing the arrival of his Venetian allies, Djabal stabs himself, and thus joins Anael in "noble" death. By implication, he has discovered his epipsyche in Anael, his goddess of purity and love. Fully revealed, their love is too pure for earthly life; thus, only through mutual self-sacrifice can they consummate such a love.

This melodramatic finale points up serious unresolved issues involved in Browning's attempt to fuse love and heroism. Djabal's and Anael's love interest does not fuse with their professed political and humanitarian concerns. In fact, it leads them away from such concerns. In the interest of their ethereal ideals, they both abandon all practical considerations of the Druse cause. Their deaths are suicides that seem poorly motivated and disconnected from any larger necessities. Djabal's earlier reference to the world as "foul earth," as well as his willingness to masquerade as a god, indicates an underlying contemptus mundi that fuels his proud quest for a perfect love (4.144). Like Shelley's Alastor poet, he chooses abstract ideals and death over what he considers to be flawed reality.

Finally, Djabal's inner character does not develop--he remains a static idealist. As Dubois points out, the growth of Browning's dramatic lovers is often blocked by unyielding idealism (646). Implicitly, Djabal's characterization is based on the concept of the "central self" that Browning introduced in Sordello.

The "true" self is an unchanging core that Browning seeks to reveal in the huge, startling actions of his climaxes. In Druses this static concept of the inner self leads to the rash actions through which Djabal and Anael seek to reveal their "true" selves and to force romantic passion directly to a pure spiritual level. However, their excessive actions cause the climax to lapse from the level of dramatic symbol to that of melodramatic gesture. Their double suicide seems not a heroic act but rather a refusal to be initiated into earthly struggles and into the psychological growth which those struggles might bring.

Colombe's Birthday, though it contains flaws in dramatic construction and method, avoids many of the excesses of earlier plays. The climax is based on resolution rather than contrived spectacle and startling ironies. The male protagonist, Valence, though he is an intense idealist, manages to balance his ideals with more practical concerns and thus achieves a measure of the selflessness necessary to love and heroic growth. More than any of Browning's previous stage plays, Colombe extends and develops the themes of love and character transformation as they appeared in Pippa.

Valance's name helps establish his character. It suggests both the Latin valens (strong, healthy) and the French valeur (value, worth) (Editors' note 368).[5] Unlike the grand ambitious

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[5]All further line references to Colombe will be to Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. IV, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

heroes of previous stage plays, Valence is a common citizen of rural Cleves. When he first appears at Colombe's court, he does so as the "Advocate" of the Cleves peasants (1.229). He comes seeking aid and relief for "all who starve at Cleves" (1.124). However, his request is met with hypocrisy and indifference from Colombe's courtiers. Sir Guibert, who is indebted to Valence for previous aid, replies, "I'm no more grateful than a courtier should [be]. / But politic am I--I have a brain" (1.262-66). The statement, "everybody, if he'd thrive at court / Should first and last of all, look of himself," sums up the perverse philosophy of Colombe's courtiers (1.24-25). The sharp contrast between Valence, with his rural virtues and humanitarian concerns, and the corrupt courtiers suggests a theme central to Renaissance poetry and drama (e.g., Spenser's Colin Clouts and Shakespeare's Henry plays): the definition of a true courtier and leader as opposed to a corrupt and selfish one. The Renaissance conception of a true courtier was shaped and influenced by Castiglione's The Courtier, just as their conception of the false leader was heavily influenced by Machiavelli's writings. These contrasting categories of heroism and villainy appear often in Browning's plays as well, but appear most vividly in Columbe. As the play progresses, Valence emerges as Browning's version of the ideal courtier, as opposed to Colombe's Machiavellian courtiers.

Given the opportunity to address Colombe with his request, Valance shows honesty and courage. He tells her, "Take the truth,

Lady--you are made for truth" (2.124). In stating his mission, Valence describes his and the citizens of Cleves' ideal vision of Colombe as a woman and a ruler:

> There is a vision in the heart of each
> Of justice, mercy, wisdom, tenderness
> To wrong and pain, and knowledge of its cure:
> And these embodied in a woman's form
> That best transmits them, pure as first received,
> From God above her, to mankind below. (2.263-68)

Valence's speech, reminiscent of Portia's "quality of mercy" speech in The Merchant of Venice, challenges Colombe to respond to his plea with compassion and justice. Unlike Djabal's exaggerated vision of Anael based on vanity and desire, Valence's vision of Colombe is motivated and shaped by a sense of his own and Colombe's duty to the citizens of Cleves.

As Valence soon learns, Colombe is about to step down and surrender her Duchy to Berthold, a powerful prince who claims to be the rightful heir to her position. Having no living family, and receiving no support from her cowardly courtiers (who have all switched their loyalties to Berthold), Colombe is effectively "orphaned," like Sordello and Pippa. Though Browning makes no overt use of the Perseus-Andromeda myth in Columbe (as he will later in The Ring and the Book), Colombe's situation is analogous to Andromeda's: she is isolated, vulnerable, and stands in need of heroic rescue. Colombe's great need becomes the source of Valence's "good moment." He responds by assuring her that the "old shapes" of loyalty and courage yet live in Cleves (3.238). Colombe takes heart and decides to stand firm against Berthold with Valence as her chief courtier and knight.

In confronting Berthold, Valence spells out an important concept in Browning's emerging theory of heroic transformation:

> When is man strong until he feels alone?
> It was some lonely strength at first, be sure
> Created organs, such as those you seek,
> By which to give its varied purpose shape:
> And naming the selected ministrants,
> Took sword, and shield, and sceptre--each a man. (3.231-36)

He goes on to describe the heroic urge as similar to the instinct for survival displayed by land-born sea creatures (such as turtles) as they hatch and begin their difficult journies back to the "sea's breast" (3.243-44). This metaphor indicates Browning's movement toward a conception of selfhood and heroism as an organic process of development carried out through struggle in the face of difficult outer necessities. The above-quoted passage makes explicit ideas on character transformation that were implicit in the mini-dramas of Pippa, and also foreshadows the fusion of lyric and dramatic concerns in The Ring and the Book. Outer necessity, in the form of dramatic circumstances which isolate and reduce the individual to a state of dire need, becomes the stage upon which he confronts his own and the moral nature of those around him. The isolation of Browning's earlier heroes was generally self-imposed and resulted from ambition, extreme idealism, and introverted self-consciousness. Importantly, Valence responds to others' needs, and thus achieves a measure of the selflessness necessary to heroic action and growth.

In the final acts of the play, Colombe and Berthold reach a legal solution to their dispute. Colombe discovers that

technically Berthold is the true heir of her Duchy, and thus she agrees to step down and become a citizen of Cleves in exchange for Berthold's promise of a fair and wise rule. Herein lies a chief flaw in the larger drama. The central conflict is resolved through a technical "trick"; thus, Valence's heroism is never put to a full test. However, the final act still offers insight into Browning's changing vision of heroism. Browning clearly chooses Valence's spontaneous, heartfelt virtues over Berthold's military prowess and political ambition. Valence tells Colombe that he "would not serve you now / The vulgar way--repulse your enemies / Win you new realms" (5.334-35). Valence rejects the outer trappings and grand acts of the great leader in favor of concern for matters of heart and home. He also rejects military conquest and violence as the highest expression of heroic courage. Though he has stood ready to defend his beliefs if necessary, he has also shown restraint and a willingness to compromise. Thus he avoids the contradictory motives and actions of heroes such as Stafford and Luria.

In the final act Valence and Colombe also realize that they have fallen in love with each other. Importantly, love comes to them, not as an end in itself pursued through rash, passionate actions, but rather as a by-product of their devotion to each other and to larger causes. As Valence says, "Who thought upon reward?" (5.322). In the final scene, Valence defines his ideal of love in language that echoes Peter Bembo's discussion of Platonic love in the final pages of The Courtier (300-22). He

tells Colombe that "He holds you--you both form / And mind, in his--where self makes such room / For love of you" (5.331-33). Valence's love and respect for Colombe has led to renewed self-respect and a renewed sense of his own heroic potential. In chivalric fashion, love has enobled him and transformed his life. As he states, it has revived "All I hitherto / Thought dead in me" (3.362-63). Love functions as both a part of and a reward of heroic motivation. As the play ends, Valence and Colombe leave the court to enjoy "friends, God's earth" in Cleves (5.388).

The working relationship between love, psychological motive, and heroism that Browning achieves in Colombe foreshadows the emergence of his mature vision in The Ring and the Book. Valence, in combining the traits of the ideal courtier and chivalric lover with humanitarian concerns, is the prototype of Caponsacchi. However, as I will discuss more fully later in this chapter, Colombe was not the complete work that Browning desired to create. The moral and spiritual dimension of Valence's and Colombe's struggles remains submerged and poorly developed, and Berthold is not a very convincing villain. Still, the interdependent nature of Valence's and Colombe's love and heroism implies Browning's growing realization that, in order to depict a convincing hero, he had also to provide a convincing heroine and villain, as well as a dramatic context suitable to sustained development of his central themes. Thus, Browning's experiments with heroines and villains in his plays were also crucial to the development of his mature vision.

Browning's Dramatic Heroines

In Browning's long poems, female characters were little more than ghostly presences, like the spectral eyes that haunt Shelley's Alastor poet. However, in Pippa Browning showed his commitment to developing more substantial female characters capable of undergoing growth and sharing the burden of love and heroism. During the course of his career, more than any other Victorian writer, in his characterization of women Browning generally avoided the limited conventions and stereotypes of his age. His female characters show variety, depth, and complexity. The female characters of Browning's plays illustrate both the exceptions to and the truth of these generalities. The character Mildred in Blot in the Scutcheon, for instance, is one of the most artificial and conventional of Browning's heroines. She is a typical Victorian pathetic heroine, not unlike Dickens' Little Nell and numerous other such characters that appear in nineteenth-century novels and drama. Her characterization is superficial and sentimentalized, and her contrived death (by emotional "evaporation") reflects the Victorian fascination with the melodramatic spectacle of angelic adolescent innocence victimized by corrupt outer forces. In contrast, however, several of Browning's dramatic heroines illustrate the continuation of the process begun in Pippa. Polyxena, Anael, and Colombe are complex characters who play important roles in their respective plays. They embody many of both the strengths

and weaknesses of Browning's male protagonists, and they share in their struggles toward love and heroism.

Polyxena is the wife of Prince Charles in King Victor (1842). Charles' father, King Victor of Sardinia, is a tyrannical, loveless man who is scheming to dispose of his son and to set up his bastard son Sebastian in his place. Throughout the play, Polyxena is the chief source of courage and support for Charles. In his preface Browning comments on "the noble and right woman's manliness of his [Charles'] wife" (86).[6] Polyxena displays more "manly" virtues than Charles, who is emotionally weak and fearful. In fact, she is a persistent spokesman for Carlylean heroic virtues and duty. When, in the face of Victor's harshness, Charles wishes to flee Sardinia, she urges "Endure, endure Beloved . . . Face the man!" and encourages patience and stoic dedication to his duties as Prince (1.1.69). Polyxena is honest and direct with Charles and other court officials. She tells Charles, "My gentle husband, speak I will, and the truth" (1.1.292).

Polyxena also plays the role of Carlylean seer relative to Charles' inner virtues. When Victor steps down and gives the throne over to Charles (as part of his treacherous plot), Polyxena helps him to become a wise and humanitarian ruler. She states that all along she has seen "Patience and self-devotion, fortitude /

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[6]All further line references to Victor will be to Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. III, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

Simplicity and utter truthfulness" beneath the surface (1.2.333-34). She also praises his sympathetic and loving heart. She states, "No doubt it were a glorious thing / For any people, if a heart like his / Ruled over it" (1.2.385-87). When, after a year of successful rule, Charles faces the severe emotional and political test of his father's military takeover attempt, it is Polyxena who must bolster his failing courage. She exclaims, "Your duty is to love and rule . . . Duty! There's man's one moment: this is yours!" (2.2.258,280). Such language directly echoes Teufelsdrockh's declarations in Sartor, as well as Carlyle's discussions of duty in various essays and lectures. Polyxena is also the spokesman for Browning's concept of the "good moment." She explains that "T'will be, I feel, / Only in moments that duty's seen / As palpably as now" (2.2.269-71).

In the final scene, in spite of Polyxena's support, Charles reverts to his earlier emotional state and plans "to fly away, fly" from confrontation with his father (2.2.209). Fortunately, D'Ormea, his chief advisor, outsmarts Victor, intercepts his force, and brings Victor to court a prisoner. Seeing his father a broken, dying man, out of pity Charles re-crowns him King of Sardinia. In the pathos and melodrama of this final scene, Polyxena undergoes a startling about face. Contrary to her earlier character and principles, she joins Charles in pity. She lies to Victor and humors his delusions of having been a wise king and loving father. She tells him, "Charles has never ceased to be your subject, sir! /

He reigned at first through setting up yourself / As pattern" (2. 2.236-38). Charlton contends that this reversal constitutes a serious character inconsistency and compromises Polyxena's heroism (48). Finally, her character falls victim to Browning's attempt to force a reconciliation between Charles and Victor.

Though the final scene undermines Polyxena's heroic character, she nonetheless illustrates the fact that, in Browning's view, men and women both share what traditonally were considered "manly" virtues. Also, though it is marred by Charles' vacillating will and excess emotional dependency, Polyxena's and Charles' relationship further demonstrates the importance of mutual love and support to the prospects of heroic character transformation.

Anael, the heroine in Druses, is one of Browning's most psychologically complex female characters (Scudder 458). She embodies Browning's persistent interest in the fine details of human motivation and character and the interaction of these elements in a romantic relationship. She also represents Browning's serious attempt to create a heroine capable of fully sharing the quest for love and moral heroism. Ultimately, Anael is a failed experiment, but the reasons for this failure are important to understanding future developments.

In crafting Anael's character, Browning was clearly trying to create an "out-soul," or Shelleyan epipsyche, to share Djabal's heroic quest. In every way she is a mirror image of Djabal's character. She shares his motives, and suffers from similar

psychological confusion. Beneath the seeming humanitarian concern of her proclamation that she will wed only the savior of her people, she, like Djabal, is a Shelleyan questor for a passionate yet spiritually transcendent love. When Djabal, whom she thinks is the god Hakeem, chooses her, she exults that she is "his own from all . . . To be exalted with him, side by side" (2.240-41). She is proud that "for a love like this, the God who saves / My race selects me for his bride" (3.76).

Anael's desire to prove worthy of a god's love leads her to slay the Prefect as a grand act of allegiance. Believing that her act will begin Djabal's "transformation" to Hakeem, she confronts him and demands, "Sustain me, Djabal! . . . Let flash thy glory! Change thyself and me! (4.44-45). Typical of earlier Faustian heroes such as Paracelsus, Anael would leap directly to godhead and have her passion become transcendent love. She expects the miraculous power of a single moment's transformation to produce apocalyptic changes in herself, Djabal, and the Druses.

Confronted instead with Djabal's confession of his imposture, Anael replies, "I love thee now . . . perchance love thee / Better than ever" (4.110-12). This statement implies that, facing serious disillusionment, perhaps Anael has realized that Djabal's love, though mortal, must have been profound indeed in order to drive him to such lengths for her sake. However, her actions in the final scene indicate that she has refused disillusionment and instead clings to her desire for a grand transformation. Her complex

and conflicting motives surface in confused actions. Driven by guilt and her desire for absolution, she confesses her murder of the Prefect, as well as Djabal's imposture, in hopes also of saving Djabal from the guilt of his imposture. However, when she confronts the angry mob and cries "Hakeem!" in order to stop them from killing Djabal, her exclamation serves to affirm the very fraud she has exposed. Finally, her self-willed death does not "save" Djabal; rather it prompts his own suicide.

Apparently Browning intended for Anael's death to carry Messianic overtones and for Djabal's suicide to complete the union of kindred spirits. However, given that their deaths stem more from their own confused motives and extreme ideals rather than from any larger necessity, the final scene lapses into contrived spectacle. Because of this confusion, Anael's psychological complexity never achieves coherence and consistency. Also, in terms of their relationship, Anael and Djabal are so alike that neither provides restraint nor helps to counterbalance the other's excesses--in fact, they encourage them. Thus, they rush madly toward mutual doom. Finally, though it is a bold attempt, Druses fails to fuse passion, spiritual love, and heroism. Nonetheless, Anael's character confirms Browning's commitment to a vision of heroic transformation based on shared struggle. And in Colombe's Birthday he moves closer to resolving some of the problems evident in Druses.

Like Anael, Colombe is also involved in a shared heroic struggle. However, she is a wiser, more practical, and better balanced character than Anael. She possesses traits and qualities that complement Valence's and thus help to create a balance in their relationship that makes growth and heroism possible. This balance helps to produce resolution and harmony in the end rather than forced spectacle and suicide.

Colombe's name suggests the Latin columba (dove) and the French colombe (pigeon, dove). The dove is a traditional symbol of gentleness and peacefulness, and Colombe possesses these qualities (Editors' note 366). When Valence seems on the verge of violent confrontation with her courtiers Guibert and Clugnet, she restrains them and calms the situation. Her understanding and forgiving nature counterbalances Valence's fervor and keeps it from exploding into violence. Valence explains that her influence "curbs the brute-force instinct in its hour" (2.253). In turn, Valence's courage and honesty inspire strength and resolve in Colombe. After hearing his description of her as an ideal vision of "justice, mercy, wisdom, [and] tenderness," she takes heart and proclaims "While Cleves but yields one subject of this stamp, / I stand her lady till she waves me off" (2.264, 279-80).

As the play develops Colombe's and Valence's complementary qualities promote mutual character transformation. Colombe tells Valence, "You spoke, and I am saved . . . This is indeed my birthday--soul and body, / Its hours have done the work of years . . .

If I have right, my duty's plain" (3.323, 349-52). Valence's loyalty prompts a rebirth of Colombe's own inner strength, her faith in heroic virture, and her devotion to her people. In turn, she encourages and supports Valence. She tells him, "Believe in your own nature, and its force / Of renovating mine! I take my stand / Only as under me the earth is firm" (3.356-58). Valence confirms that her support has caused a rebith of "All I hitherto / Thought dead in me" (3.362-63).

Though Colombe realizes that she and Valence are falling in love, she shows restraint and wisdom. Having been informed that Berthold has proposed marriage as a solution to their conflict, she decides that in the best interest of all concerned she must meet with him and consider his proposal. She muses, "The valley-level has its hawks . . . May not the rock-top have its eagles too? / Yet Valence . . . Let me see his rival too!" (4.417-19). Having met with Berthold, however, and realizing that his heart is wholly given to ambition, she chooses Valence and Cleves instead. Like Valence, she rejects political and social position and wealth in favor of love and rural life. She rejects Berthold's grand ambitions in favor of Valence's loving heart and simple virtues. Her preference underscores Browning's own increasing preference for common people and heroes of the heart as opposed to grand leaders.

In sum, Colombe is the most successful of Browning's stage heroines. She combines gentleness and restraint with strength

and wisdom. Her inner qualities and actions play a vital role in Valence's development and in the peaceful resolution of the central conflict. The main weakness in her characterization stems from larger flaws in dramatic context. Because of her discovery that Berthold is not a bad fellow after all and is really the rightful heir of Juliers, her decision to step down is made much easier. Charlton observes that her inner conflict lacks moral depth, and her choice of Valence and rural life over Berthold is based on predisposition and preference rather than moral struggle with larger necessities (55). Nonetheless, in the line of development from Pippa through Browning's stage plays, Colombe's and Valence's relationship represents an important step toward Browning's mature vision of heroism. Implicit in their relationship is the necessity of interdependence as a principle deeply rooted in the processes of both natural and psychological growth. This interdependence, in the form of mutual needs, struggles, and mutual devotion to each other and to larger causes, encourages other-directed action and thus helps curb the tendency toward the alienation and isolation that comes of self-enfolded Byronic self-consciousness on one hand, and the vanity and escapism that comes of rigid and excessive idealism on the other. The love that grows out of this interdependence helps anchor the individual consciousness in something outside of its own needs and desires. This concept of interdependence becomes one of the major thematic and structural principles of The Ring and the Book. And although he

does not manage it in his plays, in The Ring and the Book Browning also comes to include the necessity of evil in his larger definition of interdependence.

Browning's Dramatic Villains

The problem of evil and questions concerning the role of the villain also figure prominently in Browning's quest for a full vision of heroism. Though Browning explores these questions in his plays, he arrives at no complete or satisfactory answers. In several of his dramatic villains, however, Browning does depict a number of the characteristics that come together in Guido in The Ring and the Book. Throughout his plays, though, Browning remains indecisive in matters pertaining to the nature of evil and its relation to heroic struggle. With the exception of Bluphocks in Pippa, all of Browning's dramatic villains are "converted" to good--or at least rendered harmless--by the end of their respective plays. This process causes serious difficulty because it dilutes the force and moral depth of major conflicts and muddies the distinction between heroism and villainy.

In Browning's plays the dominant model of his villains is the Machiavellian New Prince. Victor of King Victor and Braccio of Luria best exemplify the perversities that Browning associated with Machiavellian political philosophy. In his preface to Victor he describes "the fiery and audacious temper, unscrupulous selfishness, profound dissimulation, and singular fertility in resources

of Victor" (86). Victor's obsessive ambition to amass territory and extend his rule corrupts his heart and renders him incapable of love, friendship, and loyalty. As an explanation for firing his loyal chief minister, D'Ormea, he states, "A king / Must have many ministers . . . You / I have used as mere lumber" (1.2.87-88, 293-94). In order to mask his hatred of his son Charles and his diabolical plot to destroy him, Victor tells him, "Why, Charles, a king's love is diffused . . . I love, my mode, that subjects each and all / May have the power of loving . . . Many have their sons / To trifle with . . . I have that crown, this chair" (1.2. 146-53). Victor's glib use of rationalization here foreshadows Guido's use of language in The Ring and the Book. For Victor, language is exclusively a device of deception, a tool for carrying out his schemes and masking his corrupt motives.

Victor's political philosophy is based on a definition of truth that echoes Paracelsus' fanatic self-centered vision. He tells Charles, "Truth, boy, is here, within my breast . . . And in the effect of all this tortuous dealing / With falsehood used to carry out the truth, / In its success, this falsehood turns truth again / Truth for the world" (2.1.288-93). According to Victor's circular logic, truth is synonymous with his own will to power, and cunning intellect is the proper vehicle of its expression. Based on this definition of truth, Victor justifies his contempt for the "populace" and the "democratic whirl" of liberal ideas and maintains his absolute right to rule "his" Sardinia like a tyrant (2.1.312-16).

Braccio uses the same Machiavellian tactics as Victor. He uses equivocal language, deception, and feigned friendship to exploit Luria's military abilities in the interest of his own political power. Many of his statements clearly spell out the philosophical underpinnings of his villainy. His statements echo not only Machiavellian philosophy but the extensions of that philosophy in Hobbes, Locke, and other systems of empirical and mechanistic thought that came together in the nineteenth century in Bentham's Utilitarianism.[7] Braccio champions the "cold actute instructed mind," devoid of emotion and morality, as the chief instrument of political power (3.273). He states, "Intellect / May rule her [Florence], bad or good as chance supplies / But intellect it shall be, pure if bad" (1.190-92). He is willing to accept evil and destructive consequences in order to maintain his and the Council's "absolute right" to rule Florence (3.160). Braccio's definition of human motivation parallels the Utilitarian concept that human beings are mechanisms driven by pleasure, pain, and self-interest. He states, "there's one thing plain and positive; / Man seeks his own good at the world's cost" (1. 132-33).

Braccio's definition of social and political processes is also based on mechanistic theory. He describes the Florentine

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[7]For a fuller discussion of the continuity and development of secular gnosticism and empiricism from Machiavelli through modern Existentialism, see pp. 309 ff. of Marion Montgomery's Why Flannery Stayed Home, vol. I of The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age (LaSalle, Ill.: Sherwood Sugden, 1981).

government as a "contrivance," a huge wheel driven by the laws of random probability that carries some officials higher while crushing others. This process is devoid of moral and spiritual meaning. As Jacopo, Braccio's assistant, contends, "I observe / The game, watch my betters play, no more" (4.4.-5). He feels no moral responsibility for the turnings of the political wheel, driven by Braccio's treachery, that threatens to crush Luria. Late in the play, Luria bitterly questions a system that works "by operation of a law / Whose maker is elsewhere at other work" (5.326-37). Here he questions the validity of post-Englightenment Deism as a valid theological position. More specifically, he questions Braccio's perverse applications of this position for purposes of reducing nature and the human community to blind mechanisms devoid of spiritual presence and moral import.

Though he is not a Machiavellian tyrant, Lord Tresham in Blot in the Scutcheon (1843) embodies traits that also offer insight into Guido's characterization. Tresham's pride, his obsession with family honor, and his narrowmindedness causes him to undergo a transformation that foreshadows Guido's demonic transformation in The Ring and the Book.

As the head of an ancient household, Tresham acts as the guardian of the family reputation. His sister, Guendolen, aptly describes his intense pride: "Thorold (a secret) is too proud by half . . . And in the world, the court, if men would cite / The perfect spirit of honour, Thorold's name / Rises of its clear

nature to their lips" (1.3.32-39).[8] Tresham is the legal guardian of Mildred, his young sister, and he expects her to uphold the family honor also. Typical of the Victorian conception of angelic feminine innocence and virtue, he describes her as "pure yet passionate, how calm yet kind, / How grave yet joyous, how reserved yet free, / A light where friends are" (1.2.75-79).

However, when Tresham discovers that Mildred has had a sexual affair with a secret lover (who proves to be Lord Mertoun, to whom she is betrothed), he completely reverses his earlier view of her and instead calls her a "sly wanton" possessed of "all guilts of treachery, of craft . . . a poisoner, a traitress" (2.99, 142-43, 258). He lashes out, "I curse her to her face before you all. / Shame hunt her from earth" (2.313-16). Tresham's bifurcated vision of Mildred's womanhood and his obsession with chastity parallels the Victorian dichotomy of women as either self-sacrificing angels or harlots--a concept that Guido manipulates to his advantage in The Ring and the Book. Tresham's distorted view of Mildred and his rigid code of honor lead to his demonic transformation. Convinced that family honor dictates that he must "exact / The prescribed vengeance," in a blind rage Tresham plots to intercept Mildred's lover on his next night-time visit (2.278-79). He becomes a monster of wounded vanity inhabiting a mental

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[8]All further line references to Scutcheon will be to Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. IV, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

realm of demonic imagery that reminds us of Bluphocks' sinister language in Pippa. He envisions Mildred as a "horrid prodigy," a "Poison tree, to thrust, from hell its root, / Hither and thither its strange snaky arms" (3.1.25-26). In this frame of mind, he intercepts Lord Mertoun in the forest, and despite the the young man's pleas, brutally slays him with his sword.

Victor, Braccio, and Tresham all offer considerable insight into Browning's developing conception of villainy. However, as depictions of universal evil they fall considerably short. In the final acts of their respective plays, they fall prey to character inconsistencies and forced reversals. In the final scene Victor becomes an object of pity and sentimentality. In a complete reversal of his earlier tyranny and hatefulness, he is moved to say, "I seem learning many other things . . . Truthfulness might prove policy as good / As guile" (2.2.346-50). With no explanation beyond the statement that he has seen his "lapse to error" and experienced a "return to knowledge," Braccio represents his treachery and drops his plot against Luria (5.322). Tresham's demonic madness also proves shortlived. Almost immediately he sees the horror of his rash actions; he sees that "haste and anger have undone us," and is moved to conclude "Vengeance is God's, not man's" (3.1.126, 3.2.153). However, this final realization does not prevent Tresham from poisoning himself as punishment for his own crimes. Even so, after learning the truth, Mildred forgives and "blesses" him from her "soul of souls" in the final scene

(3.2.110). With these reversals, the deeper motives of Browning's villains lapse into pathos and ambiguity; the force of their earlier evil diminishes and seems superficial. Thus, central conflicts lack the force of dramatic necessity and moral depth.

Browning's indecisiveness on the subject of evil appears most clearly in Berthold in Colombe. For purposes of the comedic resolution of the play, Browning attempts to fuse in Berthold traits of the Machiavellian New Prince with those of the Carlylean great leader. This attempted fusion produces an unconvincing character, as well as larger dramatic difficulties.

Berthold displays the "ambition and cunning" and the "bold confidence, / Open superiority, free pride" of the Machiavel (4. 289-90). He seeks to amass power and territory in hopes of eventually becoming emperor of Rome. Like a true Machiavellian pragmatist, he measures a leader's worth in terms of the size of his ambition: "Mere largeness in a life is something sure . . . A great is better than a little aim" (3.81-85). Berthold's political philosophy makes no provisions for love or emotional matters. He tells Colombe, "Love has no great concernment . . . with a Duke's marriage" (3.178-79). His marriage proposal is a strategic political move, and nothing more. He sums up, "When have I made pretentions to your heart? / I give none . . . I lay the prize I offer . . . Wed you empire?" (5.221-24).

In contrast to these Machiavellian traits, however, Berthold also possesses heroic qualities. He shows courage, candor,

and patience in his negotiations with Colombe. He has nothing but contempt for her cowardly courtiers, whom he calls "The sneaking'st crew, in short, I e'er despised" (3.147). In an extended passage Valence describes him in language that might well describe a Carlylean leader. He states that Berthold follows "One great aim, like a guiding star above, / Which tasks strength, wisdom, stateliness, to lift, / His manhood to the height that takes the prize . . . The man of men, the spirit of flesh, / The fiery center of an earthly world" (4.211-13, 250-51). While acknowledging its limitations, Valence praises Berthold's political and military ambitions as a necessary and positive force in the world.

Berthold's character, though it provides the basis of conflict and resolution in the play, presents serious difficulties. Since Berthold's sole motivation is political ambition, he seems a flat, one-dimensional character. Also, his total lack of emotion at times produces stilted and unintentionally comic language. When Berthold tells Colombe, "I might by forethought and contrivance / Reason myself into a rapture," he seems a comic parody of an emotionless Machiavel. Such heartlessness and obsession with ambition led to inner corruption and destructive behavior in villains such as Victor and Braccio. Thus, Berthold's heroic qualities seem to contradict Browning's previous principles of characterization, as well as the Carlylean tenet that all heroism proceeds from a loving and sympathetic heart.

These inconsistencies in Berthold's character appear in larger elements of the play as well. The resolution of the play is based on the total separation of the worlds of court ambition and rural Cleves, of rational intellect and emotion. Colombe and Valence choose love and Cleves and willingly leave the political world to Berthold. This artificial separation creates two different standards of conduct and morality--one for pastoral lovers, and another for ambitious princes. The lack of universal principles effectively glosses over the social and economic problems that Valence initially sought to rectify, and also mutes larger moral and spiritual questions. Finally, these larger elements of the play are loosely united only through the prevailing mood of facile harmony and sentiment which pervades the play.

The problems implicit in Colombe are an apt summary of some of the problems which characterize Browning's stage plays. Browning's characterization of villains is based on the optimistic notion advanced by the narrator in Sordello that evil, if rightly perceived, might be good in the making. In his plays, Browning attempts literally to force evil to become good by converting and sentimentalizing his villains, or, as in the case of Berthold, by attempting to fuse villainy with heroism. Such attempts invariably fall into problems such as character inconsistencies, pathos, and ambiguity. As the force of evil dissipates through such inconsistencies and reversals, the reader is left with no clear criteria for distinguishing between good and evil.

Despite these difficulties, Browning was moving in his plays toward identifying and clarifying the major issues and difficulties involved in his attempt to present a full and coherent vision of heroism. Many of the traits of Victor, Braccio, and Tresham reappear in Guido in more concentrated and convincing form. Around the time he wrote Colombe, however, Browning was becoming increasingly disillusioned with stage drama as an apt vehicle for his abilities and his vision. Browning wrote Colombe expressly for London actor-manager Charles Kean in hopes that he would stage the play. At this time Browning still had hopes of becoming a successful dramatist. But Kean declined to produce the play, and it was never performed until some ten years later when Helen Faucit presented it in the Haymarket Theatre in London (Editors' notes, Complete Works of R. B. 4: 364). In numerous letters to Elizabeth during the years 1845-46, Browning candidly discusses the serious difficulties he was having with Luria and A Soul's Tragedy. He admits that Luria's character seems inconsistent and unconvincing. As for Domizia, Luria's lover, he confesses that he gave up on her character knowing that it was unsatisfactory: "Well, and then there is Domizia--I could not bring her to my purpose" (Letters of R. B. and E. B. 2: 24). In fact, the form and content of Soul's Tragedy, Browning's final stage play, provide the best evidence of Browning's growing awareness of the problems in his plays. Its conscious parody and pointed satire depict the culmination of Browning's dissatisfaction with many aspects of his drama and more

clearly establish the grounds upon which he turned away from stage drama and toward the poetic techniques and larger philosophical changes which eventually contributed to his success in The Ring and the Book.

A Soul's Tragedy (1846): A Parody of the Past

A Soul's Tragedy returns to the major themes of earlier plays such as Stafford, Druses, and Luria--plays which probe the Carlylean myth of the great leader. In these plays, the failure of the protagonists' great causes, their misguided loyalties, and the ambiguity surrounding their deaths implicitly suggest Browning's failing faith in the great leader and liberal reformer as adequate models of heroism in a complex world in which individual will is inadequate to the task of gaining lasting glory and of transforming human nature and social and political systems toward utopian ends. The parody and satire of Tragedy make explicit the implications of these earlier plays. Tragedy rips away the veil of pretension and naive idealism evident in many earlier heroes and heroines and exposes the underlying vanity and hypocrisy. Browning himself states that Tragedy is "all sneering and disillusion" (Devane, Handbook 191). Devane contends that the main character, Chiappino, is similar to the figure of Wordsworth in the short lyric "The Lost Leader" (1845)--a political liberal and revolutionary idealist who abandons his views in favor of eventual conservatism and conformity (Handbook 192). Chiappino's lover,

Eulalia, is a comic parody of earlier heroines such as Anael and Mildred. The fluctuations of Chiappino and Eulalia's relationship satirizes the excess idealism and histrionics of earlier dramatic couples. Ogniben, the representative of Rome, is a Machiavellian pragmatist like earlier villains, but he is a more consistent and dramatically effective character. His candid speech and tolerant realism are important satiric devices.

The title sheet of Tragedy identifies Act I as the "poetry" of Chiappino's life, and Act II as its "prose" (5).[9] Accordingly, Act I is written in poetry and Act II in prose. Thus, the form of the language participates in the larger satire. In Act I Chiappino, a citizen of the Italian city Faenza in the sixteenth century, voices the "poetry" of his mind and heart. In a conversation with Eulalia (whom he loves, though she is betrothed to Luitolfo), he expresses his views on political reform and love. His political ideals remind us of Sordello and King Charles. He espouses humanitarian and democratic reform and freedom from Roman rule. His high-flung rhetoric echoes Plato's Republic. He envisions a "pure republic" which looks to "nature for the stable laws / Of beauty and utility" (1.257-58). He advocates a leader who combines traits of Carlyle's seer and great leader and Plato's philosopher king. His ideal leader will insist that "the right shall be the

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[9]All further page and line references to Tragedy will be to The Complete Works of Robert Browning, vol. V, ed. Morse Peckham et al.

right / And other than the wrong, while he endures" (1.260-61). For Chiappino's ideal ruler, right and wrong are matters of inner vision. He further states, "I trust in my own soul, that can perceive / The outward and inward, nature's good / And God's: so seeing these men and myself / Having a right to speak, thus do I speak" (1.262-65). Chiappino identifies himself with his ideal leader, and claims the intuitive vision and spiritual authority of the Carlylean seer. He sees through sham appearances and hypocrisy to the deeper truths of nature and human nature. In the light of superior vision, Chiappino laments that the citizens of Faenza live as "born slaves, bred slaves" to crass materialism and Roman rule, and love "house, land, or life" better than "liberty" (1.270-73). In contrast, he loves truth and democracy: "Give me truth--truth, power to speak" (1.44). Like Plato's philosopher king, Chiappino claims veritas as his primary motivation and chief goal. However, beneath the surface of Chiappino's self-righteous idealism lie the seeds of tyrannical egotism and vanity that we have observed in characters such as Paracelsus and King Victor. But Chiappino seems blind to these possibilities.

Chiappino vents his scorn on Luitolfo, a successful courtier and rival for Eulalia's love. He contends that Luitolfo has lived among "liars," hypocrites, and evil-doers, yet has remained a "friend" to all for purposes of political advancement and wealth (1.38, 63). Thus, Luitolfo has "fared in sunshine" while Chiappino, remaining true to nobler ideals, has remained in

"the shadow" (1.57). Chiappino further states, "It's the man in me, / All your successes are an outrage to" (1.91-92). To counter possible implications of envy and ambition, Chiappino claims to speak as a kind of democratic Everyman whose principles have been offended by corrupt politics. He contends that Luitolfo, given to the excesses of his "slight free loose and incapacious soul," has forgotten the people (1.169-70). Chiappino also accuses Eulalia of having sold out to the same corrupt interests as Luitolfo and having betrayed the possibility of a more noble love and marriage to Chiappino based on moral principles and devotion to political ideals (1.91-128). Having been rejected by Eulalia, Chiappino takes solace from his religious faith. He exclaims, "My God, were't not for thee!" (1.26). Chiappino's views on politics, love, and religion summarize many of the ideas expressed by previous heroes and heroines.

In earlier plays, passionate idealists such as Luria and Djabal, finding their ideals incompatible with the ambiguities and corruptions of politics, chose suicide over compromise. Chiappino attempts the same gesture, but ironically is foiled in his attempt. Receiving the shocking news that Luitolfo (ironically, in the aftermath of an argument in which he defended Chiappino) has killed the Provost and must flee Faenza, in a gesture of noble courage and friendship, as well as Messianic self-sacrifice, Chiappino plans to take credit for the murder and die in Luitolfo's place. At this point, Eulalia's behavior comically

satirizes the actions of previous heroines such as Anael and Mildred. She is much taken with Chiappino's noble sentiments, and exclaims, "Well done!" (1.359). In fact, she decides to remain behind and die with Chiappino. She thinks of her poor unhappy friends--Cesca, who suffers because of her "stern Husband," and Tisbe, who suffers because of her "wild son"--and decides that death is preferable to such ignoble life (1.365-71). Her catalogue of minor domestic troubles seems a parody of Romantic Weltschmerz and angst as motives for alienation and nihilism. She further states, "Hush and pray! / We are to die; but even I perceive / 'Tis not a very hard thing so to die" (1.361-63). The inane and self-deprecating nature of Eulalia's language and sentiment highlights the mock pathos of this scene. Her final comment closely resembles Manfred's closing statement, "Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die" (3.4.151), and thus satirizes the Byronic drive--so obvious in many earlier heroes and heroines--toward proud alienation and suicide as an escape from the pain of worldly existence. Eulalia's and Chiappino's decision to commit mutual suicide and the manner in which they attempt to carry it out clearly parody earlier lovers such as Djabal and Anael.

The burlesque becomes even more obvious when the mob arrives. Expecting to be executed, Chiappino is instead hailed as their "saviour," "chief," and "king" (1.377). The citizens, reminiscent of the fickle mobs in Shakespeare's political plays such as Julius Caesar, have abandoned the Provost and now embrace Chiappino as

their "illustrious fellow-citizen, thrice-noble saviour," and the leader of their people's revolt (2.4). The mob's effusive use of heroic epithets echoes and mocks earlier heroes' attempts to be all things heroic at one time. In an ironic and comic reversal of Browning's more typical melodramatic finales, Chiappino's attempted Messianic suicide fails, and instead he is elected president! He must now face something that earlier heroes and heroines generally managed to escape--the complex challenges of political rule. In doing so, he must also confront the truth of his inner nature, a process which exposes glaring contrasts between Chiappino's exalted ideals and the realities of human nature.

Given the power of office and popular support, Chiappino rapidly becomes all the things that earlier he accused Luitolfo and other corrupt officials of being. He lies and takes full credit for the assassination of the Provost (though we later discover that he was only wounded and discreetly has retired to the country) and styles himself a revolutionary leader and reformer. He promises to set up a "pure republic" (2.99). However, when Ogniben arrives from Rome, Chiappino soon forms an alliance with him. Using sophistical and hypocritical rhetoric, he begins hedging his earlier promises. He announces that it may be more prudent to "inform these perverted institutions with fresh purpose" than to change them (2.163). For all his pure love of Eulalia, he soon rejects her in favor of more beautiful courtesans on the grounds that "I must have a woman who can sympathize with and

appreciate me" (2.244). Eulalia is humiliated, and decides to return to Luitolfo and join him in hiding. Their exalted love proves fickle indeed. Fueled by the power of office, Chiappino's "compensating pride" becomes intellectual snobbery and blatant egotism. Like Paracelsus, Chiappino is carried away with his own intellect and power and thus fails prey to self-delusion and vanity. His earlier claims to prophetic vision and purity of motive become an indictment of his present behavior. In a matter of weeks, Ogniben has persuaded him to accept the office of Provost and to pay homage to Rome. Chiappino's fall is complete.

Ogniben is a strikingly original character in Browning's drama. His language is brilliant, and has the "suave benignity of Shakespeare's comic speech" (Charlton 56). Like earlier Machiavels, Ogniben is a cynical pragamatist. However, his cynicism is balanced by a tolerant realism and profound incisiveness. Browning calls him "a man of wide speculation and narrow practice--universal understanding of man . . . yet professionally restricted claims for himself" (Letters of R. B. and E. B. 2: 24). Though he is limited by his rigid allegiance to Rome, Ogniben's intelligence and candid wit are the means of fully exposing the mob's fickleness and Chiappino's hypocrisy. Within hours of his arrival, in his first public speech Ogniben adroitly plies the citizens' fears so that they are on the verge of abandoning Chiappino and reinstating the Provost. Once he discovers Chiappino's vanity, however, he decides that manipulating him will better serve his purposes.

Ogniben's speech both encourages Chiappino's vanity and mocks him at the same time. In regards to Chiappino's rejection of Eulalia, Ogniben tells him, "Oh, I remember! You, the greater nature, needs must have a lesser one (--avowedly lesser--contest with you on that score would never do) such a nature must comprehend you . . . and testify of your greatness from point to point onward" (2.244-47). Later, when he has Chiappino in his snare, Ogniben is more direct. He tells Chiappino, "I speak only as you profess to think and, so, ought to speak: I do justice to your own principles, that is all" (2.348-50). Here Ogniben suggests that his own mock flattery is a more accurate and honest expression of Chiappino's true motives than Chiappino's own hypocritical rhetoric. He goes on to say, "all you men of Genius . . . began by pulling down God, and went on to the end of your life, in one great effort at setting up your own genius in his place" (2.372-74). Here Ogniben is a spokesman for a crucial development in Browning's concept of heroism. He voices Browning's increasingly pragmatic and realistic appraisal of the inevitable corrupting effect of political office, power, and wealth, as well as his realization that, given the limitations and weaknesses of human nature, high ideals and heroic rhetoric are not sufficient to the task of shielding the would be Carlylean heroic reformer from the inevitable enticements to vanity and egotism and their attendant dangers. In his appraisal of human nature, Ogniben expresses the psychological realism that becomes the dominant feature of Browning's dramatic

monologues. The ironies and satire that stem from Ogniben's commentary of Chiappino's fall into self-delusion form a coherent and consistent critique of human nature--in contrast to the conflicting and unresolved ironies of previous plays.

As Tragedy draws to a close, Ogniben's trap snaps shut on Chiappino. He tricks Chiappino into agreeing to prosecute the Provost's assailant (who, by all appearances, is Chiappino himself!) as a condition of receiving office. Realizing his dilemma, Chiappino flees the city in a panic, leaving Ogniben in complete control. To further the satire on human folly, Luitolfo appears at this moment claimining to be the true assassin of the Provost and a true revolutionary leader. Ironically, he and Chiappino have once again reversed roles. Showing his diplomacy and tolerance, Ogniben recommends that Luitolfo take a vacation in the country, then return in a few months. As Charlton suggests, Tragedy ends with a comic catharsis whereby all parties receive their just desserts and harmony is reestablished in the city. Through Ogniben's tolerance, the audience senses a larger benevolent force in the world which restores balance and proper hierarchy (56). Appropriately, Ogniben has the last word. In a final satiric jab at Chiappino's supposedly "advanced" intellect, he states, "He who began by asking and expecting the whole of us to bow down in worship of him--why, I say he is advanced far onward, very far, nearly out of sight," as Chiappino flees out the city gate (2.486-88). His final comment suggests that all such self-styled rebels

are alike: "I have known Four-and-twenty leaders of revolts" (2.492).

Charlton concludes that Tragedy is Browning's most sophisticated and artistically successful play, in the tragi-comic mode that some years later G. B. Shaw employed in his rebellion against the conventions and limitations of nineteenth-century melodrama (56). However, it is also one of Browning's final plays. By 1845 he had published two volumes of shorter lyric and narrative poetry, and, in poems such as "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess," was well on his way to integrating dramatic elements into his poetry by way of the dramatic monologue. In numerous letters to Elizabeth, Browning voiced dissatisfaction with Tragedy. He labelled it a "manque failure" along with Luria, and put it aside for two years before allowing its publications (Letters of R. B. and E. B. 2: 2). Perhaps Browning recognized that Tragedy's comic satire came largely at the expense of his own excessive philosophical and romantic ideals, as evidenced in his early long poems and plays. Devane contends that Tragedy is a satiric rejection of the tragic mode (Handbook 193). More precisely, I think, it parodies Browning's own failed attempts in plays such as Luria and Druses to produce convincing tragic drama.

In sum, in Tragedy we see the foundations of disillusionment which in 1870 prompted Browning to write to Isa Blagden, "Oh, oh, Isa--put not your trust in princes neither in sons of men--Emperors,

Popes, Garibaldis, or Mozzinis--the plating wears through, and out comes the copperhead of human nature and weakness and falseness too!" (Letters of R. B. 139). As we observed in Chapter II, Browning's disillusionment with the "copperhead of human nature," the target of satire in Tragedy, began developing in his long poems. In them Browning probed the excesses and problems connected with Byronic self-consciousness, Faustian ambition, and utopian political schemes. Browning's plays continue to explore these issues, but also depict his increasing difficulties with Carlylean political and military activism as adequate grounds for heroism. As we see in characters such as Polyxena and Valence, Browning does not reject Carlylean virtues and inner qualities, but he does recognize that power and wealth more often lead to vanity and delusion rather than to other-directed action and a loving heart. Such reservations led Browning in The Ring and the Book to turn toward inner moral and spiritual struggle as the ground of heroic action.

Though Browning's plays are obviously flawed, in them he nonetheless makes important strides toward the mature vision and techniques of The Ring and the Book. In Pippa and Columbe Browning focuses less on huge political issues and more on moral struggles in the lives of more down to earth characters. In these plays, romantic love and moral values become important sources of motivation. With one or two exceptions, Browning's dramatic heroines are varied and complex characters who share the inner struggles

and participate in the major actions of their respective plays. The vision of interdependent heroism based on love, mutual need, and mutual growth that emerges in Columbe is a big change from the isolated quests of earlier protagonists such as Parcelsus and Sordello and the misguided pursuits of Stafford and Luria.

Though in his dramatic villains Browning assembles many of the elements that later contribute to Guido's characterization, he does not manage in his plays to bring these elements together in a single coherent character. Only Bluphocks, and to a lesser extent Tresham, offer glimpses into the dark, twisted realm of demonic imagery and profound evil that Guido comes to inhabit. Tantamount to Browning's difficulties with villains is his failure in his plays to provide an adequate aesthetic context and a coherent philosophical system which might provide a universal backgound and a clear criteria for distinguishing between heroism and villainy. With the exception of Pippa, Browning fails in his plays to achieve the "double faculty" that he attributes to the objective poet in his essay on Shelley. His plays are often dominated by one or two towering figures and the dialogue which grows out of their inner struggles, at the expense of concrete detail, action, and subordinate characters (Charlton 44). Also, they generally lack a subtext of consistent imagery and metaphor. Too often in his climaxes Browning attempts to force actions directly to the level of symbol and revelation rather than relying on the indirection of more sophisticated artistic techniques. As a result,

such climaxes generally lapse into melodramatic spectacle and ambiguity. Thus, the reader does not experience "seeing" universal truths through objective detail and action.

Also, though many of Browning's dramatic protagonists pay lip service to religious beliefs, such issues are generally suppressed and go undeveloped. In Stafford both Stafford and Pym claim divine guidance for their actions, but their conflicting claims go unresolved in the play. Djabal's and Anael's attempt to attain spiritual love leads to deceit, miscommunication, and suicide. Luria's Messianic gesture lapses into ironic absurdity and nihilism.

As we have seen, Browning's awareness of these larger difficulties appears implicitly in the incongruent ironies and abrupt ending of Luria, and overtly in the conscious parody of Soul's Tragedy and in his letters. And though Browning certainly became a master ironist in his mature poetry, in his quest for a larger heroic vision he was not content to rest within the confines of satire or the cynical realism of an Ogniben. Though he stopped writing long poems and stage drama after 1846 and turned to shorter lyric and narrative poetry, he retained his ambition to discover, as Carlyle urged, the "one great subject" that would task all his powers (Letters of Carlyle 300). That great subject became, of course, The Ring and the Book. Despite their shortcomings, Browning's early long poems and plays introduced and explored the major themes and provided many of the materials from which he

assembled The Ring and the Book. Thus, we can more fully appreciate Browning's ecstatic reaction in 1860 when he discovered the Old Yellow Book and realized that its plot and characters might well serve as apt vehicles for bringing together the major elements of his previous long works--greatly rearranged and transformed, however, after the fashion of his mature artistry and vision.

CHAPTER IV

THE RING AND THE BOOK: THE CULMINATION OF THE QUEST

Introduction

Between the years 1846 (when he stopped writing stage drama) and 1860 (when he discovered the source material for The Ring and the Book), Browning composed a number of his best known lyric and short narrative poems, which were published in Men and Women (1855) and Dramatis Personae (1864). The process of Browning's disillusionment with literary "heroes," great leaders, and utopian politics continued during this time. Sometime during the years 1856-57, Browning read a selection of Harriet Shelley's letters written after Shelley had deserted her, and was forced to conclude that, in his personal life, Shelley was not the sterling hero that Browning had envisioned in his youth. He decided that Shelley had experienced a period of insanity which, though it helped to explain, did not excuse his cruel and erratic behavior (Irvine and Honan 284-85). Irvine and Honan further contend that Browning finally became completely disenchanted with what they term Shelley's "free, heady ozone of revolutionary skepticism with its permanent sunset of utopian vision" (35). In addition, following their marriage, Browning and Elizabeth Barrett lived in Florence from 1846-61, and during these years Browning witnessed firsthand what he termed the "whole mass of lies and intrigue" that characterized

Italian and European revolutionary politics during these decades (Browning, quoted in Alaya 1-2). Browning vigorously supported Napoleon III in his campaign for Italian independence, and thus was outraged when Napoleon seriously compromised these principles by signing the Treaty of Villafranca in 1859 (Alaya 3-4). This event, coupled with the "horror, shootings, burnings, and murderings" that ensued during the civil strife in 1860, certainly added to Browning's general disillusionment with Italian politics and prompted him to return to England following Elizabeth's death in 1861 (Browning, quoted in Alaya 20).

Before Browning left Italy, however, in a bookstall in Rome he discovered the Old Yellow Book, a large volume containing testimonies, accounts, and other documents pertaining to a complex murder trial that took place in Rome in the late 1690's. The principal characters involved in the murder and subsequent trial were Count Guido Franceschini, an Italian nobleman and Church official; his young wife Pompilia; a young priest named Caponsacchi; the lawyers for each side; and Pope Innocent XIII, whose decision not to intercede confirmed the court's decree that Guido and his accomplices should be executed. Browning was elated with his discovery. In Book I of The Ring and the Book, he exclaims, "The thing's restorative / I' the touch and sight . . . The Book! I turn its medicinal leaves" (1.88-89, 767).[1] The events outlined in the

[1]All further line references to The Ring and the Book will be to the Norton Library Edition, intro. by Wylie Sypher, 1961.

Old Yellow Book--domestic turmoil and murder--were certainly not "heroic" by traditional standards, as early critics of The Ring and the Book were quick to point out (Khattab 67). Many striking parallels exist, however, between the contents of the Old Yellow Book and the major characters and thematic concerns of much of Browning's previous work--especially his long poems and plays--and no doubt Browning was quick to recognize them. In the Old Yellow Book he saw the "ingot" of gold that might be hammered into the epic masterpiece that he had struggled unsuccessfully to write in his earlier long works (1.138).

In his early long poems and plays, Browning showed a marked preference for history, often obscure history, as the source of his materials. Consistent with this method, the contents of the Old Yellow Book became the "pure crude facts" in which Browning anchored his poem. The tightly structured and limited plot of the Old Yellow Book encouraged compression and focus, yet in its major actions Browning saw the potential for developing many of his favorite themes such as violence, love, moral and spiritual struggle, and psychological growth. The four principal characters--Guido, Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope--offered Browning the opportunity to bring together in composite fashion many of the elements of his previous villains, heroes, and heroines. Browning's earlier long works were often dominated by single towering figures, but the challenge of developing multiple major characters helped to curb this excess, and also allowed greater diversity and complexity

of central themes. E. A. Khattab compares The Ring and the Book to Shakespearean drama in that it presents a broad range of characters, from the lowest and most vile to the highest and most noble, and explores a vast range of human emotions (32).

In Guido, Browning presents his consummate vision of evil, and in Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope he presents the diverse elements of his mature vision of heroism. The sharp dichotomy of evil and heroism in The Ring and the Book is reminiscent of medieval Morality plays. Also, numerous critics have pointed out the parallels between The Ring and the Book and Milton's Paradise Lost. Altick and Loucks point to three major Miltonic themes in The Ring and the Book: good versus evil, the limits of human perception and intellect, and the relation of Christian faith to doubt (21). Henry Jones contends that in his major poems Browning is "endeavoring to justify the ways of God to man." Willard Smith suggests that The Ring and the Book is Browning's Paradise Lost, his fullest presentation of the relationship between human existence and the cosmic forces of good and evil (188). Whereas the main characters in Browning's early long poems and plays often found themselves embroiled in political and military conflicts, the main characters and events in The Ring and the Book more directly embody Browning's deeper interests in philosophical and theological issues.

The Byronic and Carlylean elements evident in the early long poems and plays continue in The Ring and the Book but are more fully integrated into Browning's own larger vision. The excessive

and destructive aspects of Byronic self-consciousness and egotism that Browning explored in characters such as Paracelsus become concentrated in Guido's Satanic personality. The more positive aspects of the Byronic heroes, however, their relentless quests for knowledge of self and higher things, appear in the introspective methods of Caponsacchi and the Pope. For them, the isolated mind and heart become the stage on which they act out the drama of their inner struggles. The moment of moral decision becomes the crucible of selfhood, the portal through which they must pass in their quests for moral growth and enlightenment. Carlylean virtues and theories of heroic development also figure prominently in the characterization of Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope. The Pope, in particular, is the finest flowering of Carlylean influence on Browning's poetry.

Browning's choice of the dramatic monologue as the major structural device of The Ring and the Book helped him to remedy many of the philosophical and aesthetic weaknesses of his early long poems and plays. In these works Browning struggled unsuccessfully to fuse the subjective confessional mode with dramatic technique. As Langbaum contends, Browning sought to bring together the methods of the subjective poet and the objective poet (as Browning defines them in his essay on Shelley). In many ways, the dramatic monologue reconciles these modes of presentation (Poetry of Experience 81). The dramatic monologue helped Browning to distance himself from the events, emotions, and ideas of his poems

by providing a mask behind which he could practice the techniques of his craft. Early protagonists such as Paracelsus and Sordello suffered as characters because too often they were thinly veiled projections of Browning's own experiences and ambitions. In early monologues such as "My Last Duchess," "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," and "Porphyria's Lover," Browning sought distance and objectivity by choosing characters radically different from himself. In these and subsequent monologues, Browning practiced the art of expressing himself indirectly through imagery and the subtleties of language as he shaped them to fit the varied personae of his monologues and their dramatic situations.

In addition to making rigorous demands on Browning's artistic techniques, the dramatic monologue also provided Browning the means for carrying out the "relentless analysis of the human soul" that, even in his plays, remained his dominant concern (Khattab 16). Behind the mask of his characters, Browning probes human psychology and provides commentary through the devices of imagery, style, diction, and irony. For the characters themselves, the dramatic monologue becomes a means of analyzing the past and their roles in it. For Guido, it becomes a vehicle for hypocrisy, lies, and distortions of the past (though finally, too, the means of his exposure), but for the positive characters it becomes a "process" of self-knowledge and a record of inner transformation (Langbaum, Experience 192). The definition of character development that emerges in The Ring and the Book offers many parallels

to Carl Jung's modern conception of the hero as the individual struggling toward self-actualization and integration of the personality. Browning's use of multiple monologues is also an early and very successful example of multiple perspectivism and a relativistic presentation of historical events.

The complexity of The Ring and the Book is enriched and unified by a coherent undersong of imagery and allusion that underpins characterization and major themes (Smith 195). Patterns of animal imagery, nature imagery, and biblical and literary allusions support the dichotomy of good and evil characters and help to create a mythic dimension in the poem. Based on these multiple patterns, Lervel Stevens identifies three levels of meaning in the poem: the literal (historical), the romantic, and the mythic (52). Given this layered complexity, the major actions of the poem attain a depth of symbolism and universality not found in earlier long poems and plays.

The principle of interdependence of characters also becomes a major structural and philosphical device of the poem. In keeping with his disillusionment with grand political and military leaders, Browning "humanizes" his main characters in The Ring and the Book and places them "within their spheres of dependency" (Alaya 25). The heroism of the three positive characters is based on the principles of "reciprocity of courage" and "mutual deliverance" within the larger philosophical framework of the poem (Alaya 25-27). The system of interdependence in the poem also includes Guido's

evil as an integral and necessary component of the moral quest (Hassett 19). Also, rather than causing ambivalence and mental confusion, as in earlier long poems and plays, doubt becomes a necessary catalyst of positive character transformation (Jones 340).

Within the larger vision of psychological and spiritual heroism that emerges from The Ring and the Book, each of the four main characters (in addition to Browning as poet, as I will discuss in Chapter V) performs a vital and necessary function. Guido supplies the force of evil that drives the major actions of the plot. Caponsacchi becomes Pompilia's "warrior-saint" in an attempt to rescue her from Guido's tyranny, and in doing so is forced to explore his own nature as a man and his duties as a priest. Pompilia, at first a pathetic victim in need of rescue, rises to become a mythic symbol of the highest heroism--Christ's compassion and self-sacrifice. And finally, the Pope faces the task of defining and qualifying the heroism and villainy of these other characters in his effort to interpret the spiritual truth behind the outer drama of their actions and speech.

Count Guido Franceschini: The Consummate Villain

In the character of Count Guido, Browning presents his most profound and comprehensive definition of human evil. Guido's character suffers from none of the sentimentality and inconsistencies that marred villains in Browning's early long poems and plays. By the time he began writing The Ring and the Book, Browning

had become convinced that evil was a real and pervasive force deeply ingrained in human nature, and not just a matter of good misunderstood or unperceived. Guido is the only character in the poem who has two lengthy monologues instead of one. His monologues in Books V and XI bracket those of the other major characters. Numerous critics have commented that Browning did such a brilliant job of depicting Guido's depravity and guile that, like Satan in Paradise Lost, he nearly steals the show (Altick and Loucks 52). In a number of letters to Julia Wedgewood (with whom he shared the manuscript of The Ring and the Book prior to its publication), Browning defended his presentation of evil in the poem against Wedgewood's repeated complaints that he had indulged himself in "morbid anatomy" and overstated the presence of "sordid wickedness" in the world (Letters of Browning and Wedgewood 162-63). Browning insisted that the "enormous wickedness," the "curious depth below depth of depravity," present in Guido are firmly anchored in the "facts" of the Old Yellow Book (144, 158-59). He also argued that Guido's evil does not exist in isolation but is counterbalanced by and proportionate to the forces of good in the poem (144-46).

Critics often point out the parallels between Guido and past villains such as Iago. Irvine and Honan point to villains such as Duke Ferrara in "My Last Duchess" and the speaker of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," and conclude that Guido is a composite of nineteenth-century Gothic villains (433). But the most direct influences on Guido's character come from two sources: the villains

of Browning's early long poems and plays, and Milton's Satan. Like the villains of Browning's early long peoms and plays, Guido shows all the characteristics of a Machiavellian tyrant, and his philosophy, which he articulates at length, is an amalgam of concepts from rationalist philosophers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Bentham. Like Milton's Satan, Guido's character is founded on inversion. Everything in his world--love, morality, heroism, and truth--is turned upside down and replaced by its opposite. Like Satan, Guido embodies the very antithesis of moral heroism. In terms of Jung's modern theories of individual development, Guido's personality is also an excellent study in the failure of psychological growth and maturity. He refuses to take the necessary steps toward self-knowledge, and utlimately the vast emptiness beneath his shifting guises breeds only destructive egotism and evil. Through his actions, however, and through the patterns of imagery and allusions that underpin his character, Guido's evil achieves universal mythic dimension. He comes to embody, as Lervel Stevens suggests, "the objectification of the mythical archetypes of all evil," and thus plays a vital role in the larger spiritual drama of the poem (114).

Guido's use of language and the reasoning that underpins his past actions illustrate key techniques described in Machiavelli's The Prince. At times he speaks with the fiery audacity and "profound dissimulation" that Browning attributed to King Victor, and at others he displays the brilliant wit and sophistication of

Ogniben. Faced in his first monologue with the desperate necessity of persuading the judges to reverse their guilty verdict, he relies exclusively on intellect. He tells them, "I want my head / To save my neck" (5.7-8). Toward this end, he manipulates and distorts language and logic in a brilliant display of Machiavellian guile and hypocrisy.

Guido openly admits--even gloats over--his use of rhetorical strategems in his speech to the judges. He breaks the catalogue of "tortures" that he suffered at the hands of Pompilia and her parents to announce, "But I curtail the catalogue--a rhetorician's trick-- / Because I would reserve some choicer points / O' the practice, more exactly parallel / (Having an eye to climax)" (5.77-81). Guido's self-conscious use of such intellectual "tricks" bespeaks an underlying manipulativeness and insincerity in his use of language. In his second monologue he speaks more candidly: "But, lo, I wave wand, make the false true . . . All's but a flourish, figure of rhetoric" (11.619, 848). These and similar statements indicate Guido's nominalist view of language. For him, language is a system of abstractions not rooted in any larger truth or objective reality. He uses language solely as an instrument of deception and manipulation.

In keeping with this philosophy, Guido makes frequent use of euphemisms and rationalizations designed to mask the true nature of his past actions. He invents his own jargon to describe his brutal murder of Pompilia and her parents. He refers to his act

as that "irregular deed," as if it were a minor breach of decorum (5.113). Later he admits that perhaps he did stray a bit from the "pleasant byway," but still considers his action "a prank" (11.101, 111). As the result of his ineptitude at the inn in Castelnuovo (he lost his sword to Pompilia and had to be rescued by officers), Guido earned the label of coward. Initially he admits his cowardice, but takes no responsibility for it. He states, "Cowardice were misfortune and no crime" (5.1096). Later, through subtle word play, this very cowardice becomes a virtue. He claims that "patience which the world called cowardice" is the true reason for his failure to kill Pompilia at the inn (5.1870).

Guido's most obvious strategem in his first monologue, however, is his attempt to flatter, cajole, and ingratiate himself with the judges as fellow aristocrats and gentlemen. He addresses them in phrases such as "Thanks, kind Sir," "How cautious and considerate . . . sweet Sir," and "your humble servant here" (5.6, 10, 54). Presenting himself as a true courtier and nobleman, he attempts to persuade the judges that his "irregular deed" was performed in defense of aristocratic honor and privilege, social stability, law, and husbands' rights--things that they too participate in and benefit from. After plying this theme throughout his monologue, he closes with a flourish. He exclaims, "Absolve, then, me, law's mere executant! / Protect your Defender" (5.2001-02). Through cunning use of language, he has performed a complete turnabout--from murderer to defender of the law. He closes by

suggesting that, if the judges free him and thus support his claims, then in the near future "might but utopia be" (5.2037). Here the promise of utopia, which inspired the heroic though ill-fated efforts of earlier heroes such as Sordello and Luria, has become the false banner that Guido spreads over greed and murder. As Browning presents it here, utopia is no longer the city of social and political perfection; rather it is a seductive abstraction used to mask and rationalize tyranny and corruption.

Guido's most insidious manipulations of language involve his use of biblical passages. During his thirty years as a priest and minor Church official, Guido gained ample knowledge of Church Latin and the Bible, and he attempts to use this knowledge as part of his defense. In order to do so, however, he must distort, and in many cases completely reverse, the meaning of biblical passages so that they seem to support his actions. For example, to justify his threats to slice off finger joints as a means of "teaching" Pompilia proper wifely behavior, he cites Peter's cutting off Malchus' ear in the Garden of Gethsemane. He states, "I don't hear much of harm that Malchus did / After the incident of the ear . . . Saint Peter took the efficacious way" (5.965-67). Guido completely ignores Christ's rebuke of Peter's violence, and thus wrenches the passage to support his contention that gross brutality is an "efficacious" method of instruction. Guido performs a similar trick of interpretation on the story of the barley loaves and fish that Christ miraculously caused to multiply in order to feed hungry

people. He ignores the implications concerning the necessity of faith and selfless giving and instead uses the story to justify his hope that the Church would become a personal cornucopia of wealth for him. He explains that he served patiently, hoping his service would "Facilitate his claim to loaf and fish / Should miracle leave . . . fragments to brim the basket" (5.273-74). Guido awaited the "miracle" of promotion and wealth, and bitterly lamented that he was not prospering, even though he believed that "my turn was come to help myself" (5.280).

In his marriage and domestic life, Guido is a cruel, domineering chauvinist. As a domestic tyrant, he lacks the stature of past villains such as King Victor. This fact does not, however, limit the depth of Guido's depravity. By contrast, the pettiness of his motives serves to further emphasize the depth of his evil.

Guido seeks marriage to Pompilia for entirely mercenary motives. On the advice of his brother, Paulo, he seeks to bolster his own and his family's fortunes by marrying a wife with "proper dowry" (5.417). Given his advanced age and Pompilia's extreme youth (she was thirteen at the time of the marriage), Guido initially questions Paulo's scheme. He asks, "Are flesh and blood a ware? / Are heart and soul chattel?" (5.427-28). He then answers yes--a woman and her dowry are fair exchange for the Franceschini name: "Admit that honor is a privilege . . . worth what? / Why, worth the market price . . . My name I sell" (5.458-60, 503). For Guido, love has nothing to do with marriage. He admits that

he has grown "tired of cupids," and his "empty heart" contains only "remnants of dim love . . . and dusty crumblings of romance" (5.489, 692-94). Throughout both monologues, he identifies love exclusively with Cupid, the pagan cherub traditionally associated with erotic love and lust. These repeated references suggest the nature and limits of Guido's conception of love and marriage.

After the marriage, Guido's tyranny manifests itself in a variety of ways. He sees Pompilia as nothing more than an object of possession--like a hawk, a chicken, a tree, or a horse--and thus can justify using Machiavellian "severities" as a means of imposing his will. Guido's metaphors suggest that he sees all of nature as a material mechanism to be manipulated and possessed. He feels that he has bought Pompilia "as when I buy, timber and twig, a tree-- / I buy the song o' the nightingale inside" (5.603-04). Like Pompilia, nature and its beauty are merely commodities. Later he declares that Pompilia is "mine, mine all day-long, all night-long mine . . . Now, mine she is if I please wring her neck . . . As if one killed the horse one could not ride" (11.1055, 1356-59).

Guido attempts to use Bible passages to justify his tyranny. He cites Matthew's behest that women "cleave to the husband, be it for weal or woe: / There is the law" (5.580-81). Clearly, however, "woe" in this passage does not extend to imposed tortures such as "breathed threatenings, rage and slaughter," neck-wringing, slicing away finger joints, and the like (5.931). Later Guido contends that

"God / Laid down law: gave man the brawny arm / And ball of fist--woman the beardless cheek / And proper place to suffer in the side" (11.1397-1401). Here, as earlier, Guido perverts biblical "law" to rationalize domination by brute force. Ultimately, when he sees his scheme to gain the modest wealth and property of Pompilia's parents failing, he shows his true allegiance to Machiavellian philosophy and practice. Machiavelli advises the wise ruler to entrust important duties only to well paid subordinates and to put no faith in friendship and emotional loyalty (130). As for violence, he suggests that "severities," when necessary, be carried out "at one blow" for maximum effect (47-48). Toward this end, Guido hires four "companions," whom he refers to as "slave or stipendiary," and carries out the brutal murder of Pompilia and her parents (5.1717). Later he speaks admiringly of his plan: "I, by one blow, wisely cut short at once / Them and their transformations of disgust" (11.1271-72).

In his discussions of the Church and human nature, Guido demonstrates his further commitment to Hobbesian and Utilitarian rationalism. Past villains such as Victor and Braccio put their energies into political and military activities, but Guido takes his ambitions and perverse philosophy into the Church. For him, the Church is a purely secular institution. Braccio described the Florentine government as a mechanism, a wheel of fortune driven by laws of chance. Similarly, Guido describes his Church career as a game of chance played for wealth and position. Frustrated with the slow pace of his advancement in the Church, he describes

himself as a "fighter with fortune, not a penny in poke" (5.385). He refuses, however, to "Retire with neither cross nor pile from play" (5.377). Anticipating the wealth that may come from his marriage to Pompilia, he feels that the time has come "when luck turns and the fine throw sweeps all" (5.380). Later, in contemplating the triple murder he committed in order to try and salvage his plan, he states: "I called king / Queen and knave in a sequence, and cards came, / All three, three only" (11.1596-97). Even Pompilia and her parents are no more than cards in Guido's game.

Guido's skeptical rationalism applies as well to deeper mysteries of the Church. He calls belief in God's grace a "double or quits" bet that is "too rash" to suit him (11.718-19). He concedes, however, that "inasmuch as faith gains most feign faith" (11.769). As for martyrdom and miracles, he contends that they are "plausible but false" (11.869). He sees only the outher mechanism of the Church; his rationalism blinds him to the moral and spiritual symbolism of Church teachings and rituals. A true literalist incapable of faith, he states, "I recognized no law I could not see" (11.2392).

This failure of spiritual insight leads Guido into perverse hedonism and violence. His sensual appetites take precedence over even the most important spiritual concerns. He states, "but what's grace / When you want meat and drink and clothes and fire" (11. 2139-40). Musing on what he would like to find in heaven, he

exclaims, "Give me my gorge of color, glint of gold / In a glory round the Virgin made for me" (11.2121-22). His vision of heaven is a pornographic fantasy, complete with his very own "virgin." Given such predelictions, Guido recognizes only mirror images of his own perversities in other people. He calls his Church colleagues "denizen o' the dung" who "hop, skip, jump o'er my shoulder" through promotion (5.291-93). He describes their "swine-like snuffling greed and grunting lust" (11.1497).

Guido is also quick to point out the Church's hypocrisy and its history of violence. He describes how the Church would "chop a man's right-hand off" for mocking its beliefs, or "brand a woman black between the breasts" for having relations with a Jew (5.1223-28). Rather than chastising such violence, Guido uses it to rationalize his own use of brutality and murder. Of such tactics he states, "This / I take to be the Church's mode, and mine" (5. 740-41). Lacking deeper moral vision, he is mesmerized by Church corruption and responds in kind, seeking to play the "game" with all due viciousness and guile.

In his second monologue, Guido more openly reveals his Hobbesian nature and philosophy (Altick and Loucks 70). In a letter to Julia Wedgewood, Browning suggests that Guido "let the natural man break out" (175). Several of Guido's statements in his first monologue foreshadow this revelation. He claims that his murders were justified by the law of "natural vengeance," and he feels "confident in Nature--which is God" (5.1066, 1166). Later

he calls himself a "primitive religionist" (11.1923). Here Guido performs a subtle distortion of the concept of natural law. Lyman Windolph defines the major characteristics of the historical conception of natural law: it is divine law revealed to humans through moral conscience and "right reason" (both of which are inherent in man and nature) and expressed socially through ethics and codes of behavior (83). Following Machiavelli's dictum that might makes right, Guido reduces complex moral law to the harsh, punitive law of "natural vengeance" administered through self-justified brute force. By equating Nature with God, he implies that divine law operates on these same tyrannical principles.

Guido's discussions of nature and human nature follow similar lines. Animals and humans alike are Hobbesian mechanisms, blind instruments of appetite, that operate according to the laws of brute force, pleasure, and pain. He refers to "Man, the machine" (11.610). In a crucial passage he defines "please-giving profit-bearing acts" as the goal of all human activity (11.514). In society, however, one person's "pleasure" often "turns some one's pain"; thus the mechanism of civic and criminal law is necessary to control animal appetites (11.527). Guido uses law here to mean positive as opposed to natural law. His discussion echoes Bentham and the "positivists," for whom all law is the manmade product of governmental institutions, and the traditional concept of natural law based on inherent moral order an illusion (Windolph 73). Guido contends that such law is effective because it imposes pain on those

who seek too much pleasure at others' expense. A breach of the law brings "punishment: quite right! Thus the world goes round" (ll. 531).

Overall, Guido's philosophy depicts human intellect anchored solely in animal appetites and selfish egotism and devoid of intuitive, moral, and spiritual insight. Past villains such as Victor and Braccio espoused many of these same ideas, but in the end they repented past evil and revised their philosophies. In his characterization of Guido, Browning takes a huge step in the opposite direction. He depicts fully the corrosive and devastating effects of Guido's philosophy on other people and on his own mind and heart. Through imagery, allusions, and striking ironies, he presents the Satanic perversions of Guido's personality and the demonic realm that he inhabits.

Northrop Frye describes the demonic realm in literature and myth as a place of nightmares, pain, bondage, menacing natural forces, tyranny, cannibalism, and animal metamorphosis. Love is replaced by lust, frustration, and violence; and parody and mocking ironies generally characterize the literary presentation of this realm (144-48). Clearly, Guido inhabits such a realm. Throughout the twelve monologues of the poem, he is associated with predatory animals, poisonous creatures, and fabled monsters. He is associated with owls, hawks, bats, foxes, wolves, tigers, serpents, spiders, scorpions, and dragons. In Book I, the Poet describes Guido's two brothers as "Two obscure goblin creatures,

fox-faced this, / Cat-clawed the other," and Guido is the "main monster" of the family (1.543-45). The mother of this "satyr-family" he calls "a gray mother with monkey-mien, / Mopping and mowing" (1.564-66). This description suggests the "terrible mother" and evil hag of myth and romance lore (Frye 196).

In his second monologue, Guido drops his civilized mask and openly revels in his wolfish nature. He exclaims, "Leave my teeth free if I must show my shag . . . Let me turn wolf, be whole and sate, for once" (11.441, 2049). Guido feels closer kin to predatory animals than to humans. Through his various oaths, he also conjures demonic images. He repeats oaths such as "sulphur, snake, and toad," "fifty thousand devils in deepest hell," "god's curse," and "devils of the deep" (5.634, 11.58, 139, 257).

In this demonic realm, the perversions of personality that characterize Guido closely parallel Milton's Satan. Throughout the poem characters use epithets to describe Guido that also apply to both the biblical Satan and Milton's Satan. In Book I the Poet calls him "Prince of the Power of Air" and "Satan-like" (1.561, 935). Caponsacchi refers to him as the "seven-fold dragon" (6.994). Guido also refers to himself as Satan. Describing his arrival in Castelnuovo, he states, "As Lucifer kept falling to find hell, / [I] Tumbled into the court-yard of an inn" (5.1042-43), and later he admits that he has travelled "the serpent-stair to hell" (11. 1607).

The parallels between Guido and Milton's Satan run much deeper than epithets. Satan's "I will not serve" proclaimed the pride and perverse independence that motivated his rebellion against divine power. Considering himself a "self-created" being, he declared war on God the tyrant (Steadman, Renaissance Hero 57). Guido shares these attitudes. He revels in being a "proud cunning violent oppressor," and refers to himself as "leviathan that king of pride" (11.2229, 5.1498). He defines God as a cruel slave master who rewards or punishes his servants in a willful and capricious manner. In bitter words he describes the servant's task: "Jove is wrath--say prayer . . . Jove is glad--sing psalm" (11.1956-57).[2] For Guido, the pagan Jove and Christian God are interchangeable--both are tyrants--and the Church is an agent of repression and forced servitude. He says of his fellow Church officials, "Deny myself meant simply pleasure you . . . Me, the immeasurably marked, by God, / Master of the whole world of such as you . . . suppression is the word!" (11.1493, 1500-09). In Guido's Satanic inverted theology, domination becomes the goal of service, and "suppression" becomes the "word" replacing Logos as the truth of divine will and order.

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[2]Caliban, the brute creature in Browning's "Caliban Upon the Setebos" (1864), articulates at length this same Satanic philosophy and theology. Many critics consider the poem a negative commentary on nineteenth-century theories of Evolution and Higher Criticism of the Bible. Certainly Guido's monologues, though much greater in scope, imply such commentary as well.

Guido's attitudes produce in him Satanic scorn, resentment, hatred, and hardheartedness. Satan's "I myself am hell" accurately sums up Guido's inner condition: he is trapped and isolated in the hell of his own perverse philosophy and egotism. Late in his second monologue he admits his true feelings for Pompilia: "Say that I hated her to no one cause" (11.1429). Most of all, however, he hated her "self-possession to the uttermost" which he compares to the "terrible patience of God" (11.1373-75). Through physical force and intimidation, Guido could bend her body and outer behavior to his will, but he could not control the workings of her heart and mind. Thus, he hated her, as he hated everything beyond the power of his will.

Later Guido openly describes his "tenacious hate of fortune, hate / Of all things in, under, and above earth" (11.1793-94). His ambitions and appetites frustrated, he sees his years of Church service as "salted sterile with your [other Church officials] daily dung, / Leavened into a lump of loathsomeness" (11.1468-69). Having played the "game" and lost, Guido, taking his philosophy to its logical end, can only conclude that "Such life begins in death and ends in hell" (11.805). He is pressed to this nihilistic extreme because years of resentment and hatred have permanently twisted his mind and heart and have rendered him, like Satan, unregenerate and incapable of change. He questions, "Repent? What good shall follow? . . . Will that assist the engine [guillotine] half way back / Into its hiding-house?" (11.441-47). To the bitter

end, Guido's sole concern is finding a way to escape punishment--he feels no remorse, no guilt, and no sympathy for the victims of his murders. In one of his final statements he concedes, "Nor is it in me to unhate my hates" (11.2402).

Guido shares a final major characteristic of Satan: he too is a master of disguises, a shapeshifter. Guido and Satan follow in the tradition of evil characters and sorcerers such as Archimago and Circe who have the power of changing shapes and altering their appearances (Steadman 52, Bowra 505). Through his manipulations of language, Guido presents himself in a wide variety of disguises, some that hide his true motives, some that make his actions seem heroic and good, and others that exaggerate and indulge the very evil he has earlier sought to hide. He creates for his audience a house of mirrors in which every mirror reflects a different distortion; everything is inverted and contradictory, and nothing is what it seems on the surface.

In his first monologue, when he believes that he might still influence the judges, Guido wears the guises and affects the language of an aristocratic gentleman and courtier, a long suffering Church servant, an honorable family man, and a beleaguered, abused husband. He presents himself as a Christian knight battling the evil forces of Pompilia and her parents. In his second monologue, however, having admitted that he is a "primitive religionist," or more precisely, "an atheist," he adopts the pose of an amoral pagan hero, like Achilles during his madness, reveling in sheer

destructive power and lust for revenge (11.1923, 2288). Guido contends, "I boast myself Etruscan, Aretine, / One sprung . . . From fauns and nymphs . . . With--for a visible divinity-- / The portent of a Jove Aegiochus / Descried 'mid clouds, lightning and thunder" (11. 1925-30). In describing his murder of Pompilia and her parents, he styles himself a Bellerophon slaying the three-headed Chimaera (11.116-24). Finally, he claims that he is ready to die like a stoic hero, to "Roman-like" fall on his own sword, or better yet, to die "drinking hot bull's blood" as the Greek hero Themistocles reputedly did (11.1916-2413).

Many details of Guido's appearance and behavior, however, undercut this heroic pose and render him an utter parody of a pagan hero. Described variously as short, "Hook-nosed and yellow in a bush of beard," much like an owl, Guido is anything but an imposing physical specimen (7.392). Also, by his own description, Guido's great feat of martial courage consisted of brutally stabbing to death, with the aid of four hired lackeys, a defenseless girl and her aged parents--hardly the test of courage that Bellerophon faced in the Chimaera. Also, pagan heroes generally wore splendid armor and wielded great weapons that embodied their heroic virtues (Bowra 150-54). Guido chose for weapon a twin-edged dagger with rippling curves designed to mutilate and cause great bleeding. This cruel dagger aptly symbolizes his twisted, perverse, and decidedly unheroic inner nature. Finally, for all his pretenses to pagan courage, in the final lines he lapses into

abject fear and cowardice. He cries out, "save me notwithstanding! . . . Pompilia, will you let them murder me?" (11.2423-29).

The most telling of Guido's charades, in its insidious ironies, is his attempt to masquerade as a Christ-like martyr. Guido begins his first monologue by saying of the wine he is offered, "why, 'tis wine . . . and not vinegar and gall," and thus suggests a parallel between his own treatment at the hands of the law and Christ's treatment by the Romans before and during his crucifixion (5.4-5). He begins his second monologue by again comparing himself to Christ. He claims that his is "Innocent as a babe, as Mary's own" and that the Pope, like Herod, is "murdering" him (11.29-30). Later, as his execution draws near, he claims to be walking, like Christ, "This path 'twixt crosses leading to a skull, / Paced by me barefoot, bloodied by my palms" (11.1766-67).

Beneath this guise, however, Guido proves a travesty of Messianic personality. In place of love, compassion, and self-sacrifice, he substitutes hate, revenge, and murder. Facing death, he says of his six-month-old son, Gaetano, "My life exchanged for his!--why he, not I?" (11.1868). In a total inversion of Messianic giving, Guido sees even his own son as a Hobbesian competitor and bitterly resents the very process whereby the father gives life to the child. In place of Christ's offering his body and blood for communion, Guido substitutes vampirism and cannibalism. His description of himself as "bat-like . . . 'twixt flesh and foul" and his reference to drinking hot bull's blood suggest his

vampire's appetite (5.359-60, 11.2413), and his repeated references to himself as a wolf devouring Pompilia, the lamb, suggest cannibalism. Finally, Guido's Christ disguise, like all of his disguises, lapses into conflicting ironies, contradiction, and parody. Facing the guillotine--the one "truth" that he cannot disguse--his house of mirrors collapses into Satanic confusion and chaos.

In Jungian terms, Guido represents the total failure of self-knowledge and personality development. In keeping with his mechanistic philosophy, Guido denies free will and moral responsibility (Slinn 132). Jung sounds a key Miltonic theme when he declares, "There is no morality without freedom," and Guido embodies Browning's concurrence with this concept (Psychological Types 213). Guido places all the blame for his evil on God, Fate, and bad luck. He speaks of man's predestined lot / Of being beaten and baffled--God's decree" (5.1409-10), then later contends, "I am one huge and sheer mistake--whose fault? / Not mine, who did not make myself" (11.936-37). Contradicting his earlier pose as an autonomous demon, Guido here abdicates all moral responsibility; he doggedly and blindly maintains to the end, "as God's my judge / I see not where my fault lies, that's the truth" (11.1444-45).

In his amoral condition, Guido is blind to his own shadow--his human limitations and propensities for destructive evil--and thus is static and incapable of psychological growth. Jung contends that recognition of one's shadow and acceptance of the moral responsibilities necessary to control it are the first steps to

self-knowledge, for these actions necessitate self-criticism and encourage the development of virtues that help to counterbalance egotism and willfulness. Failure to recognize one's shadow can lead to living in a realm of pure will, of pure id unrestrained by any inner force (Undiscovered Self 78, 116). This is what happens to Guido. The Faustian and Byronic Will to Power present in earlier characters such as Sordello, Paracelsus, and Victor reaches its apex in Guido. During the psychological process that leads to his murder of Pompilia and her parents, Guido's will expands to monstrous proportions and usurps divine power. Contemplating his plans, he hears inner voices urging him to do his "dread duty" (5.1590). He states, "a voice beyond the law / Enters my heart, Qui est pro Domino?" (5.1541-42). Here, the inner voice of Guido's Satanic hatred has become divine law. In asking, like Moses, "Who is on God's side?" he substitutes his own murderous intent for divine will. In a frenzy of will, he cannot see the blatant contradiction when he states of the ensuing "fire" that "boiled up" from his heart, "the Fury gave it birth" (5.1645-46).

Beneath his shifting appearance, Guido has no coherent myth of selfhood, no true personality. Thus, in place of character transformation, he undergoes the psychological equivalent of demonic animal metamorphoses. When he attempts to look beyond the machinations of will and into the recesses of his heart, he finds only emptiness and darkness. He states, "I have gone inside my soul / And shut its doors behind me: 'tis your torch / Makes the place dark: the darkness let alone / Grows tolerable twilight"

(11.2293-95). In this vacuous core, where light serves only to make the darkness more palpable, resides the mystery of human evil--the "motiveless malignancy," or "mystery of iniquity," as others have phrased it. Caponsacchi envisions Guido "at the horizontal line, creation's verge, / From what just is to absolute nothingness" (6.1920-21). It is this terrible nothingness at the core--the total failure of love, morality, and conscience--that manifests itself as tangible evil through Guido's actions. By his own admission, he is "all one bloodguiltiness / And mystery of murder in the flesh" (11.332-33). As Browning presents him, however, Guido is no supernatural demon, nor is he a metaphysical concept--he is human, and his evil is deeply rooted in the labyrinthine processes of human psychology.

In terms of the poem as a whole, Guido supplies the necessary antithesis and counterpoint whereby Browning brings into sharp relief the characters who embody positive values and inner goodness. In mythic terms, he functions as tyrannical Death the Devourer. He is the great challenge to the inner moral resources of Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope, and is the portal through which they must pass in their quests for spiritual growth and heroism.

Caponsacchi: Man and Priest

Caponsacchi is Browning's most complete depiction of the youthful male hero. His character brings together many of the positive traits of past heroes such as Sordello, Luria, and Valence.

Browning's interests in heroism, human psychology, and spiritual growth come together in Caponsacchi to produce a complex, balanced, and convincing character. In contrast to Guido's perverse materialism and corrupt intellect, Caponsacchi is a hero of the heart and the inner life; his rational intellect is balanced with passion, intuition, and moral conscience. In contrast to earlier heroes, Caponsacch is a human character first--a man and a priest--and a hero second. His heroism emerges indirectly from his inner struggle to make complex moral decisions in respone to Pompilia's dire needs. Thus, he avoids the extreme self-consciousness that led Sordello into psychological paralysis, and the superficiality that caused Valence's character to seem artificial.

Though Caponsacchi's heroism achieves mythic dimension through allusion and imagery, his humanity places him squarely in Frye's category of the romance hero. Frye points out that pure myth deals with supernatural gods and demons, whereas romance takes place in the human realm and creates analogies between myth and realism (139). In contrast to the demonic imagery that surrounds Guido, the imagery that surrounds Caponsacchi evokes the realm of the Apocalyptic divine--the realm of divine gods, light, procreative nature, and mythic heroes (Frye 158). Throughout the poem, especially in the monologues of Pompilia, the Pope, and the Poet, Caponsacchi is compared to the sun and the morning star. Pompilia calls him her "day-star," and the Pope calls him a "veritable star" (7.1768, 10.1144). Also, he is often associated with the

angels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, and with mythic heroes such as Hercules, Perseus, and St. George. In addition, he is associated with spring and the regenerative powers of nature. Caponsacchi's view of nature sharply contrasts Guido's Hobbesian definition of mechanistic, predatory nature. Seeking an analogy for the protective urge he felt for Pompilia, he describes "some cause / Such as is put into a tree, which turns / Away from the north wind with what nest it holds" (6.1353-55). His comparison implies that a benevolent force exists in nature that parallels the moral obligation he feels to help Pompilia.

The feature that most clearly sets Caponsacchi off from Guido is his capacity for moral growth and character transformation. Many of Browning's previous heroes such as Sordello and Paracelsus struggled to discover their true heroic roles, but their growth was blocked by unyielding idealism and self-delusion. Caponsacchi is an idealist too, but his character is based on organic process rather than static ideals. Like Valence of Colombe's Brithday,he displays many of the innter virtues of the Carlylean hero, but the process of his development more fully anticipates the modern Jungian model of psychological self-actualization. Henry James, in his essay on The Ring and the Book, suggests that, if the poem were to be recast as a modern psychological novel, Caponsacchi would be the "enveloping consciousness" of the novel (405). The chief product of Caponsacchi's quest is self-knowledge, and through this knowledge both a fuller realization of his own vocation and a greater understanding of the universals of human existence.

One of Caponsacchi's chief strengths is his ability honestly to scrutinize his own past behavior and thus to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of his personality. In Jungian terms, he has the courage to face the shadow of his own flaws, limitations, and capacities for evil. In looking back at his early years in the priesthood, Caponsacchi admits that he was far from being an exemplary priest. In his early discussions with the Bishop on the topic of becoming a priest, Caponsacchi insists, "I know myself too weak, / Unworthy! Choose a worthier stronger man" (6.266-67). Once he enters the priesthood, however, he finds that the Church encourages social service rather than religious devotion. He becomes something of a troubador and lady's man. He describes himself as "a polished presence, a genteel manner, with / At will, and tact at every pore" (6.367-68). He specializes in "delicate play at tarocs, and arbiter / O' the magnitude of fan'mounts . . . diligent at my post / Where beauty and fashion rule" (6.342-46). Finally, he admits that he has been "A fribble and coxcomb" rather than a true priest (6.336).

When Pompilia enters Caponsacchi's life, she challenges him to move beyond complacency and to make important moral decisions. Importantly, the call to heroic action emanates from within Popmilia and her circumstances, and not from Caponsacchi's own ambition (Alaya 25). He has no pretentions to heroism, and his response to Pompilia is genuine and human. In fact, he initially responds to Pompilia's letters (some of which are love letters

forged by Guido and some of which are apparently Pompilia's own) with suspicion and reserve. Pompously he chides her, "What made you--may one ask-- / Marry your hideous husband? 'Twas a fault, / And now you taste the fruit of it. Farewell" (6.525-27). Later he replies more bluntly, "Go your way, temptress" (6.624). Looking back, he recalls, "How utterly dissociated was I . . . from the sad strange wife / Of Guido" (6.487-89).

Despite his flaws, Caponsacchi has a heart, and soon it is stirred with both passion and compassion for Pompilia and her plight. Intuitively he senses genuine need in Pompilia. These feelings precipitate in him a serious dilemma. He is torn between protecting himself and continuing to play the troubadour-priest according to Church rules, or risking serious trouble by becoming involved with Pompilia. This dilemma leads him to question his role as a man and his vocation as a priest. He questions, "God and man, and what duty I owe both" (6.927).

The Romantic subjectivism that posed problems for earlier heroes becomes healthy introspection in Caponsacchi, what Charles Nelson calls "an existential instinct for self-realization" (92). Caponsacchi wrestles with his dilemma for several days before reaching a decision. Unlike Guido, he does not depend entirely on the urgings of his own inner voices. Instead, he consults Aquinas on the relation between individual morality and official Church doctrine. He questions whether duty to God lies in service to the institution of the Church--imperfect as he knows it to be--or in

service to a victimized young woman. Caponsacchi realizes that the text of Aquinas is urging him toward the painful necessity of defining moral duty through personal commitment and self-sacrifice. He admits that "Duty to God is duty to her [Pompilia]"; however, in the interest of protecting himself and his career, he rationalizes that "God, who created her, will save her too / Some new way, by one miracle the more, / Without me" (6.1015-18). He is torn between self-serving logic and intuition.

Eventually, Caponsacchi's heart wins the struggle. Though he decided not to help her, when Caponsacchi confronts Pompilia he instinctively, for reasons that he does not then fully comprehend, changes his mind and agrees to accompany her to Rome. He describes the preceding struggle and the results of this decision in terms that suggest moral rebirth and inner transformation. He describes a prior state of mind and heart ripe for transformation: "In rushed new things, the old were rapt away . . . Into another state, under new rule, / I knew myself passing swift and sure" (6.933, 949-50). After he has made his commitment to Pompilia, he feels "time's old barrier-growth of right and fit / Give way through all its twines and let me go" (6.1109-10). In choosing to help Pompilia, Caponsacchi has burst through the bonds of conventional morality, Church hypocrisy, and egotism. He faces his good moment, "when the ecstatic minute must bring birth," and chooses to serve the living presence of divinity he senses in Pompilia rather than continuing to pay lip service to the hollow iconography of Church convention (6.1120).

Beyond doubt, sensual passion is one of the primary motivations behind Caponsacchi's initial attraction to Pompilia. The Pope bluntly concludes that Caponsacchi "no question, did elope with her" (10.380). Consistent with Browning's chivalric view of love, however, Caponsacchi defines sensual desire as a step on the ladder toward spiritual love and faith. His discussion of love, like Valence's, parallel Peter Bembo's discussion of Platonic love in The Courtier. In Book I, the Poet anticipates Caponsacchi's ideas when he states, "for youth means love, / Vows can't change nature, priests are only men" (1.1048-49). His statement echoes Bembo's contention that, though excessive passion is a fault, "yet in young men it deserveth excuse" (306).

Looking back at his experience with Pompilia, Caponsacchi realizes that "life and death / Are means to an end, that passion uses both, / Indisputable mistress of the man / Whose form of worship is self-sacrifice" (6.981-84). In stark contrast to Guido's predatory lust, Caponsacchi defines passion as a desire to give and to share one's self with another. His statement equates passion with the pangs and urges of life and death and with Christ's self-sacrificing "passion" on the cross. Later, he suggests that his passion for Pompilia was transmuted into Platonic "permissible love / O' the good and true" (6.1798-99). Standing before the judges, he declares, "You know this is not love, Sirs--it is faith, / The feeling that there's God, he reigns and rules / Out of this low world" (6.1173-75). In his struggle to understand his feelings for

Pompilia, he has been forced to evaluate and redefine love, morality, and faith. He concludes that "Priests / Should study passion; how else cure mankind, / Who come for help in passionate extremes" (6.2067-70). He calls for passion to renew and to intensify the Church's commitment to individuals in need.

Finally, Caponsacchi's character transformation is based on the key principle of interdependence. Jung contends that love and sympathy in human relationships are founded on "imperfection, on what is weak, helpless, and in need of support--the very ground and motive of dependency" (Undiscovered Self 116-17). The hero who believes in his own self-sufficiency cannot know love, for "the perfect has no need of the other" (117). Initially, Caponsacci believed that Pompilia was the weak, helpless victim in need of his help. He comes to realize, however, that he also needed Pompilia's help. He admits that all along she encouraged him with phrases such as, "you are true . . . my sole friend / Guardian and savior" (6.865, 1515-16). He sees that Pompilia "spontaneously elected [him] to help," and thus became his "fact," his "miracle / Self-authorized and self-explained" (6.890, 904-05). Through Pompilia, he experienced a profound intuitive awareness of the divine mystery of goodness and love in the human heart, and this awareness shaped and guided his character transformation. He concludes that he has been "blessed / By the revelation of Pompilia" (6.1846-47).

In past characters such as Luria and Sordello, Browning sought literally to fuse psychological realism with pagan heroism.

In presenting Caponsacchi, however, he wisely subordinates his interest in pagan heroism to his presentation of psychological heroism. He creates interlocking patterns of images and of allusions to pagan and romance myths that provide symbolic context and help to qualify and define the heroic virtues that emerge from the quest for moral growth.

The Poet in Books I and XII, Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope, in addition to various other characters, make repeated references to the same heroic myths. The pattern of these references suggests parallels between Caponsacchi's inner struggle and the battles of great heroes. Most frequently, he is compared to Hercules, Perseus, and St. George. His attempt to rescue Pompilia is frequently compared to Hercules' quest to rescue the Hesperian Golden Apples guarded by the seven-headed dragon in Hera's garden. Caponsacchi describes his own realization that Pompilia was "the thing of perfect gold, / The apple's self" guarded by Guido, "the seven-fold dragon" (6.992-94). This passage suggests that the goal of Caponsacchi's quest is more than just the literal rescue of Pompilia; he also struggles to comprehend Pompilia's inner goodness and through her to discover the "gold" of his own moral nature. Castiglione points out that Hercules was especially revered in Europe for his role as slayer of great tyrants (Courtier 289). Caponsacchi's allusion to Guido as the seven-fold dragon suggests both his battle against Guido's monstrous tyranny and his inner struggle with the seven deadly sins.

The most prominent pattern of allusions that reinforce Caponsacchi's heroism involves the heroic myths of Perseus and St. George. Devane points out that the poem contains more than thirty combined references to Perseus' rescue of Andromeda and to St. George's rescue of Princess Belinda ("Virgin and Dragon" 34). The two episodes are similar in many ways, and Browning often conflates them. In Book I, the Poet describes Pompilia as "The victim stripped and prostrate: what of God? / The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash . . . As in a glory of armor like St. George, / Out sprang the young good beauteous priest" (1.575-80). This passage follows closely Browning's description in Pauline of Perseus' rescue of Andromeda, but contains the added reference to St. George. By conflating these myths here and in numerous passages spoken by Pompilia and the Pope, Browning suggests parallels between pagan heroism and spiritual struggle. The comparison between Caponsacchi's attempted rescue of Pompilia and Perseus' rescue of Andromeda suggests that pagan courage, strength, and spontaneity of action are necessary to both martial and moral combat. Martial pride is a part of Caponsacchi's initial motivation. Indignantly he exclaims, "I fear / the sword of Guido! Let God see to that" (6.1031-32). Pompilia praises Caponsacchi as the hero "who put his breast between the spears and me" (7.1763). The Pope calls him "my athlete" and praises him for showing "courage . . . I' the crisis" (10.1135, 685-86).

The numerous allusions to St. George are part of a pattern that includes many references to Christian knights and guardian

angels. Pompilia calls Caponsacchi her "angel" and her "soldier-saint" (7.1627, 1689). The Pope calls him "my warrior-priest" and one of the "men-at-arms with cross on coat" (10.1090, 1160). He talks of Caponsacchi's actions in chivalric terms. He contends that Caponsacchi showed "love and faith, the chivalry / That dares the right and disregards alike / The yea and nay o' the world" (10.1108-10). He further explains that Caponsacchi has undergone the trial of "learning anew the use of soldiership" (10.1198).

As we observed in previous chapters, Browning's attempt to fuse martial and spiritual heroism is a common motif in his early long poems and plays. These previous attempts, however, as best exemplified by Luria, failed to reconcile martial violence with Christian love and compassion. Through Caponsacchi, Browning moves much closer to resolving this conflict. In his rescue attempt, Caponsacchi puts aside his priestly robes and wears the clothes and sword of a courtier. Though he intends to use his sword if necessary, when he confronts Guido and the law officers at the Castelnuovo inn, he instinctively refrains from violence and chooses instead to rely on the Church and secular law. He states, "A priest, I rather choose the Church--bid Rome / Cover the wronged with her inviolate shield" (6.1557-58). He intuitively trusts the moral rightness of his actions and relies on the courts to render judgment.

Eventually, Caponsacchi comes to regret his decision not to fight Guido. After hearing of Guido's murders, he laments, "And

while I mused, / The minute, oh the misery, was gone!" (6.1473-74). He realizes that, in his role as a pagan and romance hero, he has failed to slay the dragon and to rescue the lady (Slinn 119). Through Caponsacchi's dilemma, Browning explores the limits of human knowledge and martial heroism. In the moment when he confronts Guido, Caponsacchi cannot see into the future to know what will happen, nor can he see the true depth of evil in Guido's heart. Guido is a man, not a dragon, and Caponsacchi is an Everyman struggling within the limits of finite human knowledge. In the moment of decision, he has only moral instinct to guide his actions.

In his depiction of Guido, Browning clearly presents the true impotence of violence as an agency of human will. In context of the larger themes of the poem, Caponsacchi's failure as a martial hero makes possible his success as a moral hero. This seeming paradox implies Browning's realization that martial heroism, though it provides parallels and helpful allegory, is not literally compatible with spiritual heroism. The Pope helps to clarify this crucial idea. Contemplating a painting of the angel Michael, he muses, "armed and crowned, / Would Michael, yonder, be, nor crowned nor armed, / The less pre-eminent angel?" (10.1005-07). His question implies that, though martial trappings provide apt metaphors for spiritual heroism, inner traits define Michael's angelic nature. Obviously, Browning does not, like Milton in Paradise Lost, equate pagan heroism with Satanic egotism and violence, but neither does he embrace Carlyle's model of the moral martial hero. Instead, he

uses pagan and romance heroism to provide metaphors, allusion, and allegory, and fuses these with psychological realism to produce in Caponsacchi his own unique vision of the struggling human individual as moral hero.

Caponsacchi's speech and actions before the judges bear out this interpretation of heroism. In his opening speech, he announces that he will "let soul show through transparent words" (6.129). His monologue is itself part of the process of learning and growth. It embodies what Hassett terms a "sacred" self-confrontation necessary to character transformation (50). In attempting to reconstruct and interpret for the judges his past experiences with Pompilia, he must study his own role and attempt to construct a coherent myth of selfhood, a definition of self to guide his present and future actions. Slinn contends that Caponsacchi achieves manhood before the judges as he labors to construct "a fiction of identity which arises from an an authenticity of passion" (121).

Before the judges, Caponsacchi shows passion, sincerity, and true courage. In Book I, the Poet describes Caponsacchi as he "speaks rapidly, angrily, speech that smites" (1.1062). He chastizes the judges for their earlier complacence characterized by the "shrug," the "smirk," the "pursed mouth" and the "titter" (6.14-16). He boldly exclaims, "I talk impertinently, and you bear, / All the same" (6.204-05). He passionately embraces the role of spokesman and advocate for the dying Pompilia and her innocence. He speaks with "the voice of the sea and wind" to interpret "the mystery of

this murder" and to define Pompilia's goodness and Guido's evil (6.73-74). He aims to show that Pompilia is "the glory of life, the beauty of the world, / The splendor of heaven" (6.118-19). Henry James observes that "it is in his [Caponsacchi's] consciousness and experience that she [Pompilia] most intensely flowers" (410). Caponsacchi's self-abandonment in the interest of defending Pompilia is a measure of his capacity for self-sacrifice and otherness, both prerequisites for moral growth.

Caponsacchi struggles before the judges to maintain a balance between reason and passion, between humility and indignation. He struggles toward the harmony and balance of personality that Jung cites as necessary to growth. Morally, he feels "guiltless in thought, word, and deed" (6.1842). At the same time, he admits that his motives and actions have not been pure: "If I pretend simply to be pure / Honest and Christian in the case--absurd" (6. 1699-1700). His indignation before the judges is tempered by the knowledge of his own human weaknesses. In a moment of clear vision, he realizes that he has offered to Pompilia, "Ineffective help! / A poor rash advocate I prove myself" (6.1952-53). In sharp contrast to Guido's obsession with intellect and to his blind egotism, Caponsacchi recognizes the need of using all his faculties to produce a balanced vision. He speaks of "Service like mine, of brain and heart and hand" (6.135). The Pope emphasizes this same point when he describes "that symmetric soul inside my son [Caponsacchi]" (10.1129).

Though his knowledge remains groping and incomplete, Caponsacchi recognizes the relationship between good and evil in human nature: "all we may expect of man, this side / Of the grave: his good is--knowing he is bad" (6.142-43). He realizes that evil is deeply rooted in human nature and that confrontation with one's shadow is necessary to moral growth. Based on this definition of human nature, he says of Pompilia, "Saints, to do us good, / Must be in heaven, I seem to understand" (6.174-75). He recognizes, though dimly and gropingly, that Pompilia's death embodies the necessity of self-sacrifice, even to the extreme of martyrdom, as an example of the presence of divine love and compassion in a fallen world. Near the end of his monologue, he indicates that his experience has given him insight into his vocation as priest. Resolutely he states that "I mean to do my duty and live long" (6.2067). He dedicates himself to service to the Church and to humanity.

Finally, Browning's characterization of Caponsacchi succeeds, where his characterization of past heroes often failed, because he refuses to sentimentalize or compromise his vision of human psychology in order to present heroic ideals. Caponsacchi remains, from beginning to end, a deeply human character on a quest that has no end, no triumphant climax. Henry Jones observes that, for Browning, the moral quest is an organic process of "being," the goal of which remains always "beyond" (142-44). Jung comments on the nature of personality development, "The meaning and design of

a problem seem not to lie in its solution, but in our working at it incessantly. This alone preserves us from stultification and petrification" (Modern Man 119). Caponsacchi's character and speech embody this definition of heroic development.

Caponsacchi describes his frustrated search for transcendent truth in the human realm: "I thirst for truth, / But shall not drink it till I reach the source" (6.2057-58). To the end, he still hates Guido and laments that he did not, "with one quick spring, / One great good satisfying gripe," kill Guido and thus accomplish "creation purged o' the miscreate, man redeemed, / A spittle wiped off from the face of God" (6.1450-54). Obviously, in moments at least, he still maintains a literalist view of combatting evil. His final comments illustrate the continuing angst he feels, torn between heroic ideals and the reality of human suffering. He imagines himself like a young student who reads Plutarch, then sleeps and "Dreams, 'Thus should I fight, save or rule the world!' / Then smilingly, contentedly, awakes / To the old solitary nothingness" (6.2091-93). His final comment in an angst-ridden cry--"O great, just, good God! Miserable me!" (6.2095). He has fought the heroic struggle, but finally he remains on the "middle ground between the devils and angels" (Altick and Loucks 55). The Pope concludes of Caponsacchi, "And troop you, somewhere 'twixt the best and worst" (10.1207). He remains standing on the tensional grounds of human existence--a testament to Browning's complex and distinctly modern vision of moral heroism and psychological development.

Pompilia: From Pathetic Heroine to Messianic Hero

Critics agree that Pompilia is Browning's finest rendering of a heroine. Though she lacks the psychological complexity of Caponsacchi (she dies at age seventeen), she displays many similar virtues and character traits. More importantly, her character operates at many levels of meaning in the poem. In terms of the initial drama, she is a typical Victorian pathetic heroine. As the poem develops, however, she rises to become an image of heroic womanhood. She embodies courage, pristine intuition, and maternal love. At the level of myth and symbol, she becomes the true Messianic Hero and Christian martyr. She is the finest flowering of Browning's previous attempts to create a "living" symbol of spiritual heroism. She is the center of the interdependent system that includes Caponsacchi, the Pope, and Guido.

In many ways, the story of Pompilia's childhood and youth is a typical Victorian melodrama. Like Pippa and Mildred of previous works, Pompilia is an orphan and a victim of the corrupt adult world. Her mother, a poor woman and most likely a prostitute, sold infant Pompilia to Violante, who deceived her husband into thinking the child their own. Later, when Pompilia reached thirteen, Violante arranged her marriage to Guido, hoping to gain entry into aristocratic society, and not realizing that Guido was also scheming to profit by the marriage. Seeing the web of deception that has caught her up, Pompilia states, "Something has happened,

low, mean, underhand, / False, and my mother was to blame, and I / To pity . . . I was the chattel that had caused a crime" (7.513-16).

Once married, Pompilia received no support from any direction. She becomes the object of a feud between Guido and her step-parents. She turns to the archbishop, but he merely patronizes her and offers hypocritical advice: "fools elude their proper lot . . . get ruined for life . . . go home, embrace your husband quick" (7.836-38). Under the strain of Guido's abuse, she becomes passive, repressed, and suicidal, very much like the "fallen" women so often portrayed in Victorian and pre-Raphaelite art and literature. She learns to survive by "successful feigning death, / Lying stone-like, eluding notice so" (7.997-98). Her desire to sleep is suicidal: "How good to sleep and so get nearer death" (7.1210).

Pompilia's revival from this state of living death stems from two sources: Caponsacchi's help and the knowledge that she is pregnant. Repeatedly, she acknowledges her debt to Caponsacchi. She describes his "lustrous and pellucid soul" and explains how "this man restored my soul" (7.929, 1651). With Caponsacchi as her attendant knight, she experiences a rebirth of her will to live: "Up I sprang alive, / Light in me, light without me, everywhere / Change!" (7.1212-14). During their flight to Rome, Pompilia shares in the heroic struggle against Guido. When Guido confronts her in her room at the Castelnuovo inn, she seizes his sword and brandishes it in his face before being subdued by law officers. Caponsacchi describes the moment: "That erect form, flashing brow,

fulgurant eye, / That voice immortal . . . that / Leap to life of the pale electric sword / Angels go armed with" (6.1574-78). This scene dramatizes Browning's non-chauvinistic view of heroism. In a reversal of roles, Pompilia assumes the role of martial hero to defend herself and Caponsacchi, who is bound and helpless.

Pompilia's second great motive is concern for her unborn child. Vida Scudder contends that, for Browning, maternal love is a type of divine love, and woman's love in general represents the most complete synthesis of virtues in a moral nature (465). Pompilia is his fullest depiction of this concept. She describes her first intuitive awareness of her pregnancy as follows: "My heart sang . . . I too have something I must care about . . . The bird brings hither sticks and hairs and wool . . . I have my purpose and my motive too, / My march to Rome, like any bird or fly" (7. 1226-35). Using the same metaphor of the bird nest in the tree as did Caponsacchi, though focusing on the bird, she describes her love and protective urge for her unborn child. This metaphor suggests parallels between her inner urges and the creative flow of life forces through natural cycle. Repeatedly she describes herself as a tree or plant. She states, "God plants us where we grow . . . a bud is born / at the wild brier's end" (7.298-300). The Pope describes her as "this mere chance-sown, cleft-nursed seed" that yields a rose (10.1035).

Through her love for her child, Pompilia achieves selfless and other-directed action. She calls her unborn child "Something

that's trulier me than this myself" (7.1426). She follows "the clear voice which bade me rise, / Not for my own sake but my babe unborn" (7.1599-1600). The inner voice she hears results from her empathetic union with her unborn child and from her concern with needs beyond her own. Her feelings for the child are the very antithesis of Guido's envy and resentment of his son.

In several passages, Pompilia clearly articulates Browning's notion of the divine nature of maternal love. She describes her maternal nature as "the mark / God sets on woman, signifying so / She should--shall peradventure--be divine" (7.1483-85). Later she suggests a parallel between the birth of a child and the birth of Christ: "I never realized God's birth before-- / How he grew likest God in being born. / This time I felt like Mary, had my babe" (7.1674-76). Her discussion suggests that maternal love and the birth of a child are types of divine love and incarnation.

The implications of this passage develop more fully in the poem at the level of myth and symbol. Through the imagery and allusions he uses to develop Pompilia's character, Browning conflates Christian and mythic symbolism to create in Pompilia his most complex rendering of the Messianic hero and martyr/saint. Ernest Khattab points out that her discussion of the circular flow of "good premonitions" and "benignant influence" that "interpenetrate and change [her] heart" (7.1656-58) is the numerical center of the poem (140). She is also the core of heroic myth in the poem. Symbolically, she undergoes mythic confrontation with evil,

dismemberment, death, and ascension. Her journey and experiences parallel the quest, as Frye describes it, of the Messianic fisher king seeking to renew the wasteland (Anatomy 186).

In mythic terms, Pompilia's confrontation with Guido represents the confrontation between the forces of light and darkness, between procreative nature and destructive egotism. As we observed earlier, Guido is consistently identified with mythic symbols of evil, tyranny, and death. He is the evil dragon-monster, the Herod-like tyrannical father, and the all-devouring Leviathan. Guido is the dark initiation through which Pompilia, as Messianic hero, must pass.

Joseph Campbell contends that the Messianic hero relies on the "light" of knowledge and on his vision of "all-sustaining love" as weapons to fight evil and tyranny (27). Lightning and flashing swords often represent the power of the hero's enlightened intellect (213, 136). Pompilia's armed confrontation with Guido clearly follows this mythic pattern. She recounts a mythic tale that she thought of often as she waited for someone to help free her from Guido. She describes how a young Christian maiden hid in a cave to escape pursuing "Paynims." Her hiding place revealed by lightning flashes, she cries "Servant of God, thou fire, befriend His child," seizes the flame, and it becomes "in her hand a calm cold dreadful sword" with which she slays her pursuers (7.1377-89). Pompilia concludes, "So should I grasp lightning and be saved" (7. 1390).

This passage foreshadows and supports Pompilia's interpretation of her swordplay with Guido. She describes that encounter:

> . . . I struck bare
> At foe from head to foot in magic mail,
> And off it withered, cobweb-armory
> Against the lightning! 'Twas truth singed the lies
> And saved me, not the vain sword nor weak speech. (7.1621-25)

Clearly, this passage suggests a symbolic interpretation of Pompilia's swordplay. The sword is not an instrument of violence; it is a symbol of knowledge, truth, and moral innocence. Pompilia champions love and inner courage over violence. Describing how "weakness mars the print" of human nature, she asserts that "love and strength / Mend what's marred" (7.1486-90). Looking back at her past, she concludes, "And downright love atones for everything" (7.172).

In myth, the hero often slays the evil tyrant, but the final "proof" of the hero as savior is self-sacrifice (Campbell 353-54). Pompilia does not literally slay Guido, though that act is later accomplished by the courts and the Pope. Instead, she suffers mutilation and death through the agency of Guido's jagged knife. In contrast to the deaths of earlier heroines such as Anael and Mildred, however, Pompilia's death is not self-willed or suicidal. The mark of the Messianic hero is his unwillingness to die, though ultimately he must submit to the necessity of his circumstances and fate. Pompilia confronts the concentrated corruption of her age, and of necessity submits to its violence.

Pompilia does not literally suffer dismemberment, but the nature and extent of her mutilation--she was stabbed twenty-two

times with a dagger designed to rip and tear--are highly suggestive of mythic dismemberment (like crucifixion, and other forms of mutilation considered as types of dismemberment). Campbell explains that mythic dismemberment celebrates the mystery of "life in time," of the necessity of death in the larger procreative cycle of nature (25). Pompilia hints at the cleansing and renewing power of her death: "this blood of mine / Flies forth exultingly at any door, / Washes the parchment white, and thanks the blow" (7.1699-1701). The implications of this passage develop more fully through the numerous vegetation metaphors that characterize Pompilia and her passing.

Campbell points out that the place of a hero's death or departure is often marked by a special tree that symbolizes the Tree of Life, a manifestation of divine regenerative power (41). Throughout her monologue, Pompilia describes herself as a seed, as a flowering bush or vine, and as various types of trees. These images and metaphors coincide with similar metaphors employed by Caponsacchi and the Pope. The mythic implications of these metaphors become clear in Pompilia's final lines. She describes herself just prior to death:

> Do not the dead wear flowers when dressed for God?
> Say--I am all flowers from head to foot!
> Say--not one flower of all he [Caponsacchi] said and did,
> Might seem to flit unnoticed, fade unknown,
> But dropped a seed, has grown a balsam-tree
> Whereof the blossoming perfumes the place
> At this supreme of moments! (7.1798-1804)

As she approaches the supreme moment of transformation, Pompilia symbolically becomes a Tree of Life in full bloom, and she

describes Caponsacchi's words and deeds as seeds that have produced balsam trees that sweeten her final moment.

The Tree of Life grows from what Campbell calls a world navel, a portal through which divine power flows into the world (41). Several times Pompilia describes the female body as such a portal. During a stop along the road to Rome with Caponsacchi, Pompilia holds in her lap a child that belongs to another woman. She describes "the young mother proud to teach me joy, / And gossips round expecting my surprise / At the sudden hole through earth that lets in heaven" (7.1541-44). The ring of women surrounding Pompilia form a communal womb with the "new-born babe" at its center. Gazing into the distance, Pompilia asks, "How do you call that tree with the thick top / That holds in all its leafy green and gold / The sun now like an immense egg of fire?" (6.1314-16). Caponsacchi explains that it is a "million-leaved mimosa" (6.1317). The imagery in this scene fuses to create a complex symbol of regeneration in the mythic realm of the apocalyptic divine. The parallel images of Pompilia, surrounded by the circle of women, and the many-leaved mimosa suggest the union of humanity and nature in the procreative act, and the parallel images of the child and the sun as a fiery egg suggest that the child participates in the rebirth and flow of divine illumination. Pompilia's roles as hero and mother merge in the symbol of the life-bearing, protecting earth-mother cradling fire, the father-principle that flamed into tyranny and violence in Guido, subdued and channeled into the creative process.

In addition to her mythic roles, Pompilia is also Browning's finest rendering of the Christian martyr and saint. William Whitla contends that Pompilia's incarnation is the central symbol of the poem (74). Bernard Huppee explains that the pagan hero was inner motivated and had actively to think and to act out his mission in conjunction with fate (much like Caponsacchi), but the saint was chosen as an instrument of divine will often communicated through miracles (2-3). Pompilia is chosen in this sense to suffer death at the hands of overwhelming evil. Her monologue is made possible by the "miracle" of lingering life she experiences for several days, during which the nurses and nuns who tend her wounds witness her unusual radiance. Given her humble origin, as the unwanted child of a prostitute, Pompilia exemplifies the paradox of Grace as Steadman defines it in his discussion of Milton: "For it is the method of God's providence to accomplish his purpose by what appear to be the weakest of instruments" (Milton 40). In naming her son, Pompilia "looked up to the sky / And took a new saint to begin anew," and thus chose Gaetano (7.101-02). This choice of names suggests that Pompilia's motherhood and subsequent death are part of a continuing cycle of saints and martyrs who come to provide symbols of spiritual rewnewal.

Altick and Loucks point out that Pompilia embodies the virtues described in the Sermon on the Mount. During her monologue, she displays love, compassion, forgiveness, and humility (37). Her attitude toward other people of characterized by Christ-like charity.

She says of her mother, "If she sold . . . me her child-- / I shall believe she hoped in her poor heart / That I at least might try to be good and pure" (7.872-74). Despite her step-parents' scheming and selfishness, she says, "They loved me always as I love my babe" (7.134). Of Guido she states, "I--pardon him? . . . Let him make God amends--none, none to me" (7.1692-96). On her deathbed, she forgives and speaks well of the people who have abused her. Her final words, "And I rise," suggest Christ-like ascension through death (7.1828).

Finally, Pompilia becomes the "living" symbol that Browning tried but failed to create in previous characters such as Sordello, Anael, and Luria. She combines elements of universal myth, heroism, Christian sainthood, and mortal womanhood. Devane points out that Browning sought saintliness in literal, historical people, and not in exaggerated legends of miraculous beings (Parleyings 63). Hassett further contends that, in Browning's "theophanies," human actions and psychological transformation replace miracles in the process of redemption (53). Though Browning's vision of sainthood has much in common with medieval writers and Milton, he "humanizes" his vision through Pompilia and replaces Milton's celestial mechanics with human acts. Pompilia "lives" as a historical personage and character as well as a complex symbol.

The Pope: God's Lieutenant on Earth

The Pope speaks the tenth monologue of the poem, and he completes the triad of heroic characters. Though ostensibly his

character is based on the historical Pope Innocent XIII of the Old Yellow Book, he is more completely Browning's own creation than any other character in the poem. His ecclectic philosophy is hardly what one would expect of a seventeenth-century Italian Pope, and critics agree that in many ways he is a mouthpiece for Browning's own ideas (Raymond 323). From his vantage point of distance and detachment, the Pope offers a summary evaluation of the major characters and events of the murder case and trial. His monologue is a complex fusion of Browning's own philosophy and psychological method with the long-standing influence of Carlylean and Platonic theories of heroism and leadership.

Though he rises to grand heroic stature during his monologue, the Pope is also a very human character, and his method of evaluation is based on introspection and psychological struggle. In reviewing the complex records and transcripts of the trial, the Pope recalls the great controversy that revolved around the medieval Pope Formosus. Several generations of Popes following Formosus alternatingly denied or affirmed the legitimacy of his reign. Pope Stephen went so far as to try Formosus' corpose and sentence it to be dismembered and flung into the river, but a succeeding Pope, Theodore, had the remains fished out of the river and reinstated. Contemplating this confusing chronicle, the Pope asks, "Which of the judgments was infallible? / Which of my predecessors spoke for God?" (10.150-51). Browning's Pope questions the orthodox doctrine of papal infallibility and concludes that human

intelligence, though a divine gift, operates within limits. He describes his own predicament: "I take this staff with uncertain hand . . . Mankind is ignorant, a man am I: / Call ignorance my sorrow not my sin" (10.164, 257-58).

The Pope's assessment of human intelligence stands in sharp contrast to the absolutism and Faustian ambition of past characters such as Paracelsus. He does not, however, rationalize from his position that humans are incapable of knowing truth. Instead, he concludes that struggle and doubt are necessary and integral components in the organic process of attaining to knowledge and truth. He explains that "Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these [the documents]-- / Not absolutely in a portion, yet / Evolvible from the whole: evolved at last / Painfully, held tenaciously by me" (10.227-30). For the Pope, truth evolves through a process that demands the combined use of intelligence and intuition, of the mind and the heart. The Pope brings "his intelligence to bear" (1.1221) on the facts of the case, but he also realizes the necessity of heart-felt intuition. He advises the judges and Church officials, "Ask your hearts as I asked mine . . . If your hearts misdirect you--quit the stage [of official service]" (10. 1927-29). The Pope also relies on the moral intuition that comes as a result of his age and of his years of religious service. He is "yet sensible of fires that more and more / Visit a soul, in passage to the sky, / Left nakeder than when flesh-robe was new" (10.389-91).

The Pope displays combined qualities of the Platonic philosopher king and Carlyle's heroic priest. Carlyle's statement, "In the healthy state of things the Philosopher and Priest were one and the same," pays tribute to the influence of Plato on his own thought and anticipates the fusion of these ideas in Browning's Pope ("On History" 94). Plato describes the philosopher king as a "guardian" of law and order motivated by his love of truth and of the good and the beautiful (Republic 410, 433-35). The guardians are the "intelligence of the community" (Statesman 56) and display the gifts of "quickness and memory and courage and magnificence" of mind (Republic 455). In Book I, the Poet describes the Pope as a "great guardian of the fold" who is "simple, sagacious, mild yet resolute, / With prudence [and] probity" (1.646, 1214-15).

The Pope also displays the major traits of Carlyle's priest. He embodies the combined qualities of the prophet, the seer, and the interpreter of divine law (Hero-Worship 132-33). He evaluates the characters, motives, and events of the murder case in order to pass judgment, but he also interprets the meaning of the larger allegory of the morality play (Altick and Loucks 69). Contemplating the trial documents, he states, "there is passion in this place, / Power in the air for evil as for good" (10.658-59). He describes the situation as "some crisis brought about by fire and flame," and recalls a similar conflict in which "Christ prevailed / And Satan fell like lightning" (10.668-69). He views the actions of the principal characters in context of the cosmic battle of good

and evil acted out on the stage of the world. Like Carlyle's priest, he seeks to interpret the moral and spiritual meaning behind appearances.

In his role of "solitary judge," the Pope realizes that he cannot know the whole truth of another person's inner motives (10.193). He explains that "the seed of act, / God holds appraising in His hollow palm" (10.271-72). Divine vision pierces directly to inner truth, but the Pope, as human judge, must arrive at truth indirectly, by studying the act, its nature, consequences, and implications. He states, "Since by fruit a tree is judged, / Show me thy fruit; the latest act of thine" (10.340-41). Having studied the documents of the trial and contemplated them according to his inner lights, he passes judgment on the principal characters. Of Guido and his accomplices, he concludes them "God-abandoned wretched lumps of life" (10.921). He sees "craft, greed, and violence complot with revenge" in Guido leading to "murder with jagged knife" (10.729). He offers a balanced view of Caponsacchi's role in the affair. He states, "Nay, Caponsacchi, much I find amiss, / Blameworthy, punishable in this freak / Of thine," but goes on to praise him as a true "warrior-priest" for having the courage to act on his feelings (10.1122-23, 1090). Pompilia he pronounces "then as now / Perfect in whiteness" (10.999-1000). He sees in her "purity and patience . . . that saints are known for" (10.1017-20).

In his role as guardian of moral and spiritual truth, the Pope sees himself as a gardener. He describes himself "Seven years

a gardener of the untoward ground / I till . . . At least one blossom makes me proud at eve . . . My rose I gather for the breast of God" (10.1025-28, 1041). Like Caponsacchi and Pompilia, he uses nature metaphors to describe the forces of good. By using the red rose as an emblem of Pompilia, he implies the sanctity of passion and maternal love. He calls Pompilia's intuitive urges the "first prompting of what I call God / And what fools call Nature" (10.1067-68). He identifies passion, love, and parenthood with a divine procreative power at work in nature. He sees all animals and plants participating "in a common pact / To worthily defend the trusts of trusts, / Life from the Ever living" (10.1071-75). As interpreter and spokesman for Pompilia's innocence, the Pope becomes her spiritual "father," and replaces Guido the cruel "father."

Having offered his evaluation of the principal characters, the Pope goes on to articulate the larger philosophical implications of the case. He advances a Miltonic theory of temptation and moral crisis. Contemplating Caponsacchi's actions, he muses, "Was the trial sore? / Tempation sharp? Thank God a second time!" (10.177-78). He goes on to describe his view of pain and struggle: "who devised pain--to evolve / By new machinery in counterpart, / The moral qualities of man" (10.1372-74). In a passage that echoes Tennyson's concept of spiritual evolution, he explains that pain and struggle make people "creative and self-sacrificing too, / And thus eventually God-like . . . This life is training and a passage . . . The moral sense grows but by exercise" (10.1376-78, 1405-09).

The Pope combines Miltonic thought with the nineteenth-century concept of evolution in his description of a world in which suffering and moral conflict are part of a gradual evolutionary process leading toward spiritual growth and enlightment.

Devane points out that in The Ring and the Book Browning turns doubt and evil to positive use in his larger theory of spiritual evolution (Parleyings 31). The Pope's discussion of evil follows up earlier comments by Caponsacchi and Pompilia and goes on to advance concepts that anticipate modern psychological theory. He defines humans as "foul and fair, / Sadly mixed natures: self-indulgent--yet / Self-sacrificing too" (10.1211-13). He redefines evil as "the one black tuft / [That] Steadies the aim of the arrow just as well" (10.1221-22). The Pope's metaphor of the arrow's flight implies that evil (Jung's shadow), one confronted and acknowledged as part of human nature, can prompt the development of virtues such as humility, courage, and compassion, and thus can help to balance and to guide the growth of one's personality toward moral ends. He goes on to argue against the excessive idealism, utopian politics, and perfectionism of earlier characters such as the Pauline poet, Sordello, Djabal, and Anael. The Pope forsees no instant apocalypse, no utopia. Instead, he sees a continuation of earthly struggle: "White shall not neutralize the black, nor good / Compensate bad in man, absolve him so: / Life's business being just the terrible choice" (10.1230-32).

The Pope's unflinching appraisal of human nature does not lead to pessimism, however; it leads to faith. He explains that "faith, the pearl" grows from the "residue" of conflict, just as the actual pearl grows around the irritating grain of sand (10. 1035-41). Faith in the benevolence of nature and the guidance of divine Providence becomes the source of the Pope's continuing optimism. Describing his role as guardian of faith, the Pope employs the same metaphors of pagan heroism that characterize Caponsacchi and Pompilia: "This champion of faith, I armed and decked . . . Righteousness plated round, the shield of faith, / The helmet of salvation, and that sword / O' the spirit" (10.1450, 1562-64). The Pope makes clear the allegorical nature of pagan heroism in the poem. True heroism is psychological, moral, and spiritual, not martial. True heroism is not, however, passive; it manifests itself through action. The Pope describes his refusal to intercede and save Guido: "I smite / With my whole strength once more, ere end my part" (10.1961-62).

The Pope expands his discussion to include the larger sweep of history. He sees a dialectical alternation of ages of faith and ages of skepticism that produces the periodic renewal of heroic virtue. He describes this alternation as an interplay of dramas: "The impatient antimasque treads close on kibe / O' the very masque's self it will mock" (10.1927-29). The Pope's discussion anticipates modern theories of the dialectical alternation of

heroic and anti-heroic ages.[3] His ideas also echo Carlyle's discussion of the relation between heroism and the Zeitgeist of an age. He sees the decadence and corruption that produced Guido as also leading to renewed faith: "Here we, next age, to break up this new / Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report" (10.1858-59). He suggests that the "doubt" and "formidable danger" of a corrupt age call forth the "old heroism," the old virtues of the pagan hero, still necessary to the spiritual warrior (10.1843-48).

Contrary to orthodox Church doctrine, the Pope sees the bold virtues and intellect of pagan heroes and philosophers as participating in and preparing for the advent of New Testament Christianity. He offers for example the teachings and literature of Euripides and points out how his ideas on "temperance and righteousness, / [On] Judgment to come" anticipate Paul's teachings (10.1712-13). Defending the integrity and worth of classical knowledge, Euripides asks, "what other mind may judge / Save God who only knows the thing He made, / The veritable service he exacts" (10.1664-66). The Pope, in turn, replies, "How should I answer this Euripides," and concludes that there is no satisfactory answer other than agreement. Consistent with his definition of the individual nature of the moral quest, the Pope is the only character in the poem who defends the Molinists (a heretical sect embracing mystical doctrine

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[3]See, for instance, Morton Bloomfield's "The Problem of the Hero," 32-33.

similar to quietism) and their right to intellectual freedom. He states that perhaps they "Recognized truths, obedient to some truth / Unrecognized yet, but perceptible" (10.1864-65).

The Pope goes on to explain that the dialectical interplay of skepticism and faith calls forth more than the "old heroism" of pagan times. It also brings the "repetition of the miracle, / The divine instance of self-sacrifice / That never ends and aye begins for man" (10.1649-51). The overwhelming Necessity of evil embodied in Guido finds its antithesis, its point of counterbalance and integration, in Pompilia's act of self-sacrificing compassion and love. Pompilia's martyrdom is part of the larger cycle of self-sacrificing heroism that began in pagan times, culminated in Christ's incarnation, and continues through the martyrdom of saints and virtuous people. Through this cycle flows the regenerative power of divine love. The Pope calls Pompilia "earth's flower," and suggests that her maternal love is equivalent to "the dove's coo, / Back with the olive in her bill for news / Sorrow was over" (10.1012, 746-48). Such love renews the wasteland: "nor ice nor stone to blame: / But it can melt, that ice, can bloom, that stone" (10.1538-39). The story of Pompilia, as a "living" instance of regeneration myth, brings into proper perspective the Pope's earlier discussion of Formosus. The gruesome chronicle of Formosus' corpse is a parody of regeneration myth, a literalist clinging to and squabbling over dried bones and empty technicalities of law. Pompilia's flesh and blood reclothe and rejuvenate the dried bones

of myth and symbol, and her experiences re-enact universal law.

Raymond contends that the Pope represents the "acme of human wisdom" (325), and Whitla suggests that he replaces Shelley, the Sun-Treader of Pauline, as Browning's symbol of the highest reaches of human heroism (131). Taken together, the Pope, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia compose Browning's most complete and comprehensive vision of heroism. They combine his interests in psychology, philosophy, heroic virtues, and Messianic heroism. In context of the poem, they form an interlocking and interdependent group. The Pope describes an isosceles triangle with strength and intelligence for sides and "love without limit" for its base (10.1357-63). This triangle represents the necessity of balancing these elements in the individual personality, and also represents the balanced relationship of Caponsacchi (strength and courage), the Pope (intelligence), and Pompilia (self-sacrificing love). Together, these three heroic figures act out their interrelated dramas on a common stage against a backdrop of masterful artistry, coherent philosophy, and universal myth. One final heroic figure remains to be discussed, however,to complete our analysis of Browning's heroic vision--the Poet.

CHAPTER V

THE POET AS HERO: DEEP CALLING UNTO DEEP

Browning's drive to write a successful epic-length poem was very much a function of his struggle to define and to fulfill his role as poet. In Pippa Passes Browning successfully fused dramatic and lyric technique, and in The Ring and the Book he seeks to balance and to integrate the techniques of the dramatic poet with the vision of the subjective poet. Harold Bloom comments that Browning saw himself as a dramatic poet correcting the excessive subjectivity of poets such as Wordsworth and Shelley (Critical Essays 124). In The Ring and the Book, Browning as poet stands both outside and inside the poem. In addition to wearing the masks of many different characters, Browning also finds room to express himself as poet, psychologist, historian, philosopher, novelist, and critic (Smith 193). He also crafts elements of autobiography into the poem on several levels. As poet, Browning speaks directly in Books I and XII. In the drama of the poem, the Poet is another speaker voicing his own biased view of the murder case and its leading characters (Peckham, "Historiography" 246), but he is also spokesman for Browning as artist. He offers a detailed discussion of Browning's aesthetic method in the poem and of Browning's own complex definition of his role as poet. This definition includes the roles of Carlylean heroic poet, prophet, and subjective historian. The Poet's discussion offers crucial insight into

Browning's relation to the materials of his art, to the past, and to the intellectual and cultural climate of his own age.

In Browning's early long poems, his often intrusive subjective presence caused serious artistic problems. In The Ring and the Book, he more skillfully works autobiographical elements into the fabric of the poem. Irvine and Honan describe numerous parallels between the situation and experiences of Pompilia and Caponsacchi and those of Browning and Elizabeth Barrett during the years of their courtship and elopement (428-30). Elizabeth was dominated by a repressive father, and Browning sought to free her from that influence. Their situation, like Pompilia and Caponsacchi's, produced seriously mixed feelings and family turmoil. Finally, it also produced an elopement and "flight" to Italy.

G. K. Chesteron notes the similarities between Caponsacchi's and Browning's moral dilemmas (107-08). From the standpoint of social respectability, both men had to choose between doing something that was "selfish and honorable" and something that was "unselfish and dubious" (107). Browning had serious misgivings about using deceitful and evasive tactics during his elopement with Elizabeth, but ultimately he did so in the interest of a greater good. Caponsacchi felt that he was fated and "elected" to help Pompilia, and Browning had similar feelings about Elizabeth. In a letter he tells her, "My own Ba! My election is made or God made it for me, and is irrevocable. I am wholly yours" (Letters of R. B. and E. B. 2: 58).

As we observed earlier, Browning's favorite heroic myth, Perseus' rescue of Andromeda, is a major motif in The Ring and the Book. Pointing out that Browning kept always on his workdesk a print of Caravaggio's engraving My Polidora's Perfect Andromeda, Devane contends that the Perseus-Andromeda myth was Browning's personal myth, and suggests that it embodies Browning's interpretation of his "rescue" of and elopement with Elizabeth ("Virgin and Dragon" 33-34). Jung points out that many people "live out" major myths and thus are in touch with universals (Symbols xxv), and Browning seems to fit this description. As poet, Browning "lives out" the Perseus-Andromeda myth in The Ring and the Book. The story of Caponsacchi and Pompilia and Browning's own experiences with Elizabeth fuse in this myth to create complex, layered symbolism. Through this process, Browning enters fully into the poem but submerges his subjective presence in the language, characters, and drama.

In Book I, speaking through the Poet, Browning more fully describes his aesthetic method in the poem. He uses the metaphor of handcrafting an ornate gold ring to explain the artistic process and his relation to its techniques and materials. He describes the contents of the Old Yellow Book as the raw material of the poem: "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" (1.359-61). The facts of the Old Yellow Book are crude ore containing the "ingot" of truth, the pure gold, that the poet must dig out and assay (1.138, 452-54).

Browning further describes the method whereby the crude ore is rendered malleable. The ringmaker "mingles gold / With gold's alloy, and duly tempering both, / Effects a manageable mass" (l.18-19). By analogy, the poet adds the "alloy" of his imagination to his material. Browning describes that "Something of mine which, mixed with the mass, / Made it bear hammer and be firm to file" (l.456-58). The poet's imagination adds strength, elasticity, and coherence to the mass of crude facts so that it will stand up under the hammer and file (the poet's rigorous craft) as he seeks to create the objective artifice of his poem.

The poet's imagination also infuses his poem with life. Browning describes the nature of this presence in the poem: "I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play, / Push lines out to limit" (l.747-48). His imagination ignites a living flame in the poem, engages the reader's own powers of intellect and imagination, and pushes language to mean as much as it can. A fusion thus takes place between the poet's intellect and his materials: "I fused my live soul and that inert stuff" (l.463). This process transforms the raw material into art, and it also submerges the poet's subjective presence so that it is not intrusive and overbearing. The hard labor that goes into fashioning the poem Browning describes as the application of "the proper fiery acid" that lifts the alloy and purifies the "gold" (l.21-22). The final revisions and reworkings become "the renovating wash / O' the water" that stabilizes and finishes the surface of the golden artifice (l.679).

Of the finished product he states, "How much of the tale was true? / I disappeared; the book grew all in all" (1.680-81). As dramatist and craftsman, the poet steps away from his work and acknowledges that it must live or die according to its own merits.

In keeping with his theory of moral struggle and growth, Browning concludes that the labor of art is also a process of growth. The creative artist is "Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow-- / Formed to use, reach at if not grasp and gain / The good beyond him--which attempt is growth" (1.707-09). Art is a form of striving to fully realize one's psychological potential and to express one's creative faculties through an objective medium. It is an activity "Which turns thought, act--conceives, expresses too" (1.714). The poet struggles to balance subjective impulses with the objective demands of his art; he struggles to harmonize and to integrate the diverse elements of his personality so that he can produce a harmonious and proportionate work. Thus, in The Ring and the Book, Browning shares and participates in the struggles of his principal characters.

Sullivan points out that, in addition to discussing the aesthetic method of the poem, Book I illustrates Browning's method of reconstructing history as art ("Function of Book I" 238-40). Book I contains three different summaries of the contents of the Old Yellow Book, which correspond to the three steps of ringmaking. In the first section, Browning tells how he discovered the raw material of his poem; then he gives his own interpretation of the

major characters; and finally he offers a detached overview of the case. Thus, Book I functions as both an introduction to Browning's method and as a microcosm of the poem to come.

Numerous critics have pointed out that Browning's handling of historical material in The Ring and the Book closely parallels methods of subjective historiography developed in the nineteenth century by writers such as Renan, Ranke, Froude, and Carlyle. Irvine and Honan contend that, in works as early as Sordello, Browning was influenced by Carlyle's style of presenting history in The French Revolution (78). Emery Neff suggests that, in his historical works, Carlyle sought to keep the past alive in his mind and to re-create the experience for his readers (126). He points out the importance of intuition in the method of historians such as Carlyle and Renan (164).

Altick and Loucks cite Carlyle's essay "On History" and Shelley's "Defense" as major influences on Browning's method in The Ring and the Book (26). Carlyle explains that the subjective historian is a "seer" who interprets the past according to his own vision and method (Crit. and Misc. Essays 2: 86). He sees the "Idea of the Whole" in the past and seeks to communicate this truth through his writing (92). History is didactic; it is "Philosophy teaching by experience" (83). Like Shelley in "Defense," Carlyle contends that history and literature record the intellectual and moral development of human civilization (92). As he discusses them in various essays, Carlyle's historian and his heroic poet share common methods and goals.

In keeping with Carlyle's theories, in The Ring and the Book Browning seeks to breathe new life into the historical documents of the Old Yellow Book. He asks his readers, "Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse? / Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?" (1.690-91). The information in the Old Yellow Book is "dead" truth until interpreted by a Carlylean Seer, by a writer who brings imagination and insight to bear on the facts. Browning's technique is based on synecdoche. He offers an architectural analogy to help clarify this point. He describes his discovery of the Old Yellow Book as follows:

> . . . I haply, wandering that lone way,
> Kicked it up, turned it over, and recognized,
> For all the crumblement, this abacus,
> This square old yellow book--could calculate
> By this the lost proportions of the style. (1.668-72)

By studying the crumbling abacus, Browning is able to re-create the style and magnitude of the original column. Likewise, by studying the Old Yellow Book, he is able to intuit the "Idea of the Whole," as Carlyle phrases it. Given the representative part, he employs imagination to re-create the whole drama. Using the craft and devices of art, he creates a context in which the meaning of the drama can fully resonate.

Peckham suggests that Browning's method yields "critical historiogrpahy," that is, history subjected to and reshaped by the poet's critical evaluation ("Historiography" 252). Browning contends that the "truth" communicated through art is greater than the truth of objective historical documents. He asks his reader,

"Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?" (1.699). Browning implies that imagination and art are "facts," too, and are necessary ingredients in a whole vision of truth. He argues that the poetic "impulse intervenes, / Makes new beginning . . . Completes the incomplete" (1.725-27). Imagination and art bridge the gap between the part and the whole, between dead facts and living truth, and make possible a fuller vision of history.

Art also challenges readers to participate in this process by using their own mental faculties, and especially their synecdochic powers. As Browning states, "you have seen his act, / By my power--maybe judged it by your own" (12.9-10). Given the various parts of the poem, the reader must labor to arrive at his own comprehensive interpretation of the whole work. The poem does not just retell facts; it illustrates them through character, action, and speech, and thus creates an experience for the reader. Browning explains, "But Art--wherein man nowise speaks to men, / Only to mankind--Art may tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought" (12.854-56). The poet approaches his subject indirectly, through the medium of art, and thus attains a measure of objectivity and detachment. He employs the "double faculty" of the objective poet who sees both the object and its profound implications ("Essay on Shelley" 63). He presents the reader with an objective artifice and challenges him to exercise his own "double" vision.

Several noted critics, while agreeing that Browning employed methods of subjective historiography, have suggested that he goes

farther in the direction of transforming historical material than did Carlyle and other historians. Donald Smalley, using Browning's "Chatterton Essay" (1842) as evidence, has worked out an interesting and well argued theory that sheds further light on Browning's method and on his conception of his role as poet. In the "Chatterton Essay," Browning defends Chatterton as a gifted writer who was misunderstood and treated with indifference by the literary establishment. He argues that Chatterton's gifted, superior nature justified his use of evasion and deceit in an attempt to counter the establishment's hypocrisy and to claim his rightful position as writer. Browning attributes Chatterton's suicide to the psychological turmoil stemming from the conflict between his exceptional intellect and his sensitive moral nature.

Browning wrote the "Chatterton Essay" around the same time that he was also working on his early long poems and plays. Smalley notes the close parallels between Browning's depiction of Chatterton and characters such as Sordello and Djabal (51). He contends that the "Chatterton Essay" is a prime instance of Browning's "special pleading" for obscure historical characters (53). In choosing Chatterton, Sordello, and Djabal, Browning selected characters that he felt were in need of "rescue" from historical obscurity. He chose characters in whom he saw the potential for heroism and genius, then proceeded to defend them from an interior point of view. Smalley says of the "Chatterton Essay," "The very basis of the Essay is an attempt to reveal the

hero's point of view concerning his career, to defend his actions as he must have defended them to himself in the inner recesses of his mind" (880. It is also the case that Browning consistently chose characters who, in the eyes of the world, were failures. In depicting their inner lives, however, he attempts to demonstrate that intellectual and moral triumph often occur in context of outer failure.

In his literary presentation of such characters, Browning took broad liberties with historical facts, and, in the case of Chatterton, produced an interpretation of character based on a complete transformation and re-creation of the facts (3). The result Smalley calls "parables of high spiritual import" woven from "gross fact"--but certainly not history or biography (53). He concludes that Browning was neither historian nor intuitive psychologist but was a "psychological poet" whose specialty was re-creating the inner lives of his main characters (77).

Judge J. M. Gest, after carefully studying the Old Yellow Book and related documents, reached similar conclusions regarding Browning's method in The Ring and the Book. In the introduction and notes to his translation of the Old Yellow Book, he amply demonstrates that the major characters in The Ring and the Book are vastly exaggerated and completely transformed versions of their historical counterparts. He contends that Guido was "merely a weak and avaricious man, vicious by force of circumstances as well as from inherent defects of character," and not the "human

monster" that Browning depicts (624). He describes Pompilia as "an ordinary girl, deprived of advantages in childhood," and victimized by an unfortunate marriage (624). Caponsacchi, he suggests, was "a frivolous young fellow, on the lookout for adventure, light in thought and unscrupulous in action" (624). According to the documents, Pope Innocent XIII probably did not review the murder case fully since he was not called on to pass judgment on Guido. He merely denied Guido's plea for executive clemency and forced the court to carry out its sentence. Thus, the Pope's monologue is entirely Browning's own creation (17). Gest concludes that Browning deliberately distorted and transformed the facts of the Old Yellow Book in the interest of creating his poem, which Gest calls "an elaborate shell whose intricate carving would be a greater artistic triumph" than any objective retelling of the facts (628).

Numerous passages in Books I and XII indicate that Browning intended his poem to do more than just retell and vivify the historical facts of the Old Yellow Book. He describes the Old Yellow Book as a gold ring he found while digging among "unearthed slope-side figtree roots" (1.5). He alone saw through the encrusted dirt of time and neglect and recognized the ring's true value. He contends that artistic insight "starts the dead alive, / Completes the incomplete and saves the thing" (1.725-27). Art "rescues" both the concrete details and the deeper meaning of history. It fuses the poet's vision with the facts of history. Browning concludes that the finished product should "Render all duty which

good ring should do, / And failing grace, succeed in guardianship" (12.865-67). Browning's purpose is clearly didactic; he intends his poem to be a guardian of the universal truths the poet sees beneath the surface of historical characters and events.

In Book I, Browning further describes his role as that of the Old Testament prophet Elisha. In choosing Elisha as emblem of the poet, he rejects Faust--the virile intellectual quester whose image haunted earlier protagonists such as Paracelsus and Sordello. Browning exclaims, "then write my name with Faust's!" then hesitates and asks, "Oh, Faust, why Faust?" (1.752-53). He then proceeds to name Elisha and to describe the passage in 2 Kings that tells how Elisha brought a corpse back to life (1.753-66). In choosing Elisha over Faust, Browning rejects the Byronic and Faustian model of the gnostic quester and accepts instead the dual role of revivalist and evangelical prophet.

By analogy, Elisha's raising of the dead describes the poet's creative powers. Elisha revived the corpse by lying on top of it and touching its eyes, hands, and mouth with his own, thus allowing his living spirit to enter the corpse. The poet studies and "touches" the historical material he works with, then revives it with an infusion of his own living imagination. Browning describes the process whereby "man, bounded, yearning to be free / May so project his surplussage of soul / In search of body, so add self to self" (1.716-17). The poet is a living imagination in search of a body, a powerful vision in search of an apt aesthetic

form. Through art, the poet's vision enters, inhabits, and transforms the chosen historical material. Though Browning makes ample use of historical detail throughout The Ring and the Book, his method centers on the psychological "revival" of selected characters. In the process of fusing "self to self," he enters and possesses these characters, speaks and lives through them, and recreates them after the fashion of his own prophetic vision.

As creative artist, the poet performs "Mimic creation, galvanism for life" (1.733). The artist's creative act mimics the divine act of creation embodied in the natural world. Through his mimicry, he participates in divine procreation, but he does not duplicate it in full. Browning is careful to qualify his definition of the poet's power and thus to guard against the excesses of egotism and will displayed by earlier characters such as Paracelsus and Sordello. Browning explains that the poet "Repeats God's process in man's due degree, / Attaining man's proportionate result-- / Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps" (1.710-12). The spark of creative imagination that animates the poet and his work is divine, but it operates within the limits of human personality. The poet cannot literally create new life, but he can create art that revives and embodies the once living past.

In keeping with his role as prophetic poet, Browning creates in The Ring and the Book the living "symbols of immensity" that he tried but failed to create in earlier long works. Carlyle calls the great poet a "Bringer of light," a seer who perceives the

"Divine Idea" behind appearances and in the light of this vision re-interprets universal law to fit the needs of his age (Hero-Worship 91, 115, 127). The poet is a "maker"; poetry is his duty, though ultimately its worth and meaning must be judged by others (91, 115).

In The Ring and the Book, Browning constructs "living" symbols of self-sacrificing heroism, psychological struggle, and religious faith in Caponsacchi and the Pope. Through Guido, he depicts the living, active presence of evil in human nature. In Pompilia, he presents a living symbol of the re-enactment of Christ-like compassion and martyrdom. In the larger pattern of symbolic action in the poem, Pompilia's compassion absorbs Guido's perverse passion, and her martyrdom suggests the integration of his evil into the creative cycle of spiritual evolution. Pointing to the shorter poems "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day" (1850) in which Browning discusses his views on key theological points, Whitla contends that Browning interpreted history in light of Christ's incarnation and felt that it reconciled the past and the present, the finite and the infinite, and thus redeemed history (2-4). The Ring and the Book, he suggests, is Browning's fullest presentation of this central theme.

Offering additional insight into Browning's use of symbols, J. Hillis Miller contends that Browning sought to create new symbols of unit of man, God, and nature (13). He explains that the continuous evolution of Providence creates a gap between God

and creation, and Browning as poet stands in this gap and mediates between humans and God. The poet is Janus-faced, and his vision is comprehensive (11-12). At the highest level of synecdoche, the poet creates symbols that bridge the gap between the particular and the universal, between the individual and God.

For Browning, then, art and its symbols are the medium through which he communicates his prophetic vision to others. In Sordello, the speaker refers to writers as "Makers-see" and explains that "the best / Impart the gift of seeing to the rest" (3.928, 867-68). The poet's duty is not just to himself and to his art but is also to his audience. The phrase "Makers-see" suggests the poet's combined role of objective artificer and prophetic seer. In Book I of The Ring and the Book, Browning announces his prophetic purpose: "thus by step and step / I led you from the level of today / Up the summit of long ago, / Here, whence I point you the wide prospect round" (1.1322-25). By helping his readers to scale the mountain of history, the poet offers them a new and more expansive view of their own age. Through the symbolism of the poem, he links the events of the Old Yellow Book to the larger cycle of divine incarnation and thus suggests a continuity of past, present, and future based on the gradual evolution of divine Providence.

In Book I, Browning voices his conviction that his discovery of the Old Yellow Book and his subsequent writing of The Ring and the Book participated in the Zeitgeist of his age and in the larger

dialectical cycle of history. He describes his discovery of the Old Yellow Book as a fated event: "(Mark the predestination!) when a Hand, / Always above my shoulder, pushed me once" (1.39-40). His reading and study of the Old Yellow Book evoked in him a profound sense of "Deep calling unto deep" (1.515). Like Carlyle's poet/prophet, Browning felt "called" by a divine voice to communicate his vision of the working out of divine Providence through history.

In The Ring and the Book, Browning sought to expose the defects and limitations of nineteenth-century Utilitarian skepticism and rationalism and to offer in their place his own vision of positive spiritual heroism. Though he differed in some details and in artistic method, Browning shared this crusade with Carlyle. Carlyle declared that "Benthamism is an eyeless Heroism" and in his Hero-Worship lectures and various essays endeavored to communicate his own definition of political and spiritual heroism. In his interpretation and presentation of the major characters and events of the Old Yellow Book, Browning sought to provide commentary on the philosophical, political, and cultural trends of his own age and to create symbols that might minister to its spiritual needs. Many of the ideas expressed by Guido and the Pope are clearly anachronistic and are based on eighteenth and nineteenth-century schools of thought. In his presentation of Pompilia, it seems clear that Browning did not think her a literal Messiah whose life and death transformed seventeenth-century Italy.

Corrupt legal practices, political intrigue, and ignorant superstitions surround and continue in the aftermath of Pompilia's death. In context of the poem, however, Pompilia becomes a symbol of compassion and self-sacrifice that Browning offers as an antidote to the skepticism and despair of his own age. Likewise, Caponsacchi and the Pope embody types of moral heroism and psychological struggle that Browning saw as yet possible in the nineteenth century.

Browning further asserts that The Ring and the Book has redemptive power, both for himself and for his readers. He says of the Old Yellow Book, "Give it me back! The thing's restorative / I' the touch and sight" (1.88-89). The vision and plan for a poem that emerge from Browning's study of the Old Yellow Book renew his poetic abilities and his spiritual vision. The process of writing The Ring and the Book challenged Browning to become the master poet and visionary that he had struggled for many years to become. He sums up his view of the finished poem:

> So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
> Beyond mere imagery on the wall . . .
> So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
> Suffice the eye and save the soul beside. (12.858-63)

The poem also "suffices the eye" of the reader and creates for him a full artistic experience through concrete details, actions, and characters. It also provides the reader with metaphors and symbols that "mean beyond the facts" and embody universal truths. Just as Browning felt that his study of the Old Yellow Book led to redemptive vision, the reader might study The Ring and the Book and thus

move toward a larger spiritual vision of his own. Potentially, the poem embodies a continuity of redemptive experience from past to present and future, from poet to present and future readers.

In Book XII, Browning offers an overview of his role as poet in context of the larger dialectical interplay of faith and skepticism. While he sharply disagrees with the rationalism and skepticism of his age, Browning, following the Pope's argument, contends that great doubt and disbelief are often the seedbed out of which renewed heroism and faith grow. His reference to that "Terrible Pope, too, of a kind--Voltaire" suggests that the same powerful intellectual questioning that led Voltaire to be the "Pope" of eighteenth-century skepticism can also lead to heroism and faith (12.774). The Pope is an example of how the questing, doubting intellect, tempered and balanced by intuition, compassion, and a sense of duty to others, can lead to spiritual vision. Browning's own career through The Ring and the Book follows a similar pattern. Out of the confused longings, the ethereal ambitions, and psychological turmoil of his early long poems and plays eventually grew the profound vision embodied in The Ring and the Book. Out of the skepticism and despair of his age, he created a poem that remains a lasting tribute to moral heroism and spiritual vision.

In sum, Browning, in his dual role of poet and prophet, is the true "hero" of The Ring and the Book. Browning is the Messianic hero sacrificing himself to his art in an attempt to renew the "wasteland" of the nineteenth century. Whitla explains that

incarnation is an apt metaphor for Browning's role as poet in The Ring and the Book. The poet willingly submits and sacrifices himself to the rigors of his craft. He fleshes out his vision in a work that reconciles knowledge, faith, love, and duty (4-6). By analogy, the poet enters his work and brings it to life, just as the divine spirit enters and animates matter in the natural world. Speaking of the source materials of his poem, Browning explains that "The life in me abolished the death of things" (1.514-15). He describes the process whereby "yet by a special gift, an art of arts . . . I can detach from me, commission forth / Half my soul" (1.739-43). Browning "gives" part of himself to his poem, and thus brings it to life. The poem then becomes, like the natural world, a living symbol of the union of spirit with matter, of living intellect and imagination with dead facts. Through this process, the poet lives on, incarnate in his work.

Finally, Browning's intellect circumscribes the entire poem. The ten monologues represent ten consciousnesses that are all contained in Browning's own mind (Irvine and Honan 431). Sullivan points out that, though the Pope voices many of Browning's ideas, only the poet's vision of truth pervades the entire poem and pierces through the ambiguous clouds of testimony and facts; only the poet can resurrect the dead characters of history and make them live again (136, 174). In The Ring and the Book, Browning confronts the harsh necessity of evil, as well as the prevailing currents of nineteenth-century skepticism and despair, and yet maintains an

optimistic vision of human nature and of the trials and struggles of earthly existence. Henry Jones aptly points out that Browning's optimism was hard fought for and not at all like the too-easy optimism of writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (88). Browning does not avoid or sentimentalize the complex problems of human existence. Instead, it is on the hard rock of these necessities that he founds his expansive vision of psychological and spiritual heroism.

CHAPTER VI

HERE WERE AN END, HAD ANYTHING AN END: AN OVERIVEW

Browning's vision and method in The Ring and the Book are the outgrowth of more than thirty years of artistic endeavor. In Pauline, the speaker announced his desire to turn his "whole energies to some one end, / To elevate an aim, pursue success," and thus chose poetry as his vocation (605-06). Browning did put his full artistic energies into The Ring and the Book, and through it he achieved the success he sought. Though prior to the publication of The Ring and the Book Browning had published his early long poems, his plays, and three volumes of shorter poems, his literary reputation remained a matter of controversy and dispute among critics. Afterwards, however, he was proclaimed a great poet by critics, who were quick to recognize The Ring and the Book as a masterpiece. Twentieth-century critics have corroborated this initial evaluation, and The Ring and the Book remains the single most important work in Browning's canon.

Early critics of the poem were fascinated with Guido's character, and looked for antecedents to his evil in Iago, Milton's Satan, and Shelley's Count Cenci (Khattab 57-58). Later Victorian critics and readers focused their attention on Caponsacchi and Pompilia (Khattab 111). The elements of melodrama and romance

appealed to the sensibility of Victorian readers, and critics were becoming more aware of the psychological dimension of these characters and of Browning's poetry in general. Modern critics have more fully explored the great variety, range, and depth of characterization in The Ring and the Book, and they have also pointed out many modern elements in Browning's vision of heroism and villainy.

The heroic characters of The Ring and the Book all face "terrible choices" that call into play the inmost faculties of their hearts and minds. Their "good moments," especially Caponsacchi's, are similar to the modern conception of the existential dilemma. Caponsacchi finds himself in a complex, ambiguous predicament for which there are no easy or clearcut solutions. His dilemma is a crucible of selfhood: the decision he makes will determine the direction of his personality development and the course of his future. In depicting Caponsacchi, Browning holds a series of magnifying glasses over a human personality in the process of transition and growth. His presentation of Caponsacchi directly anticipates modern existential questers such as Conrad's Lord Jim.

The Pope's discussion of heroic development also contains modern elements. The Pope defends the individual's right to pursue truth according to his own inner lights. Irvine and Honan suggest that his openminded acceptance of Molinism and other unorthodox ideas anticipates the development of pluralism in William James and subsequent philosophers (436). They further contend that his discussion of the necessity of doubt in the process of attaining

moral growth and faith is very close to Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism (436). The Pope recognizes both the fallibility of human intellect and the necessity of profound questioning in the process of arriving at one's interpretation of the truth. The Pope's scrutiny of the facts of the murder case leads him to wrestle with the fundamental tenets of his religion; thus, his quest for truth is also a quest for renewed faith.

The larger question of poetic truth in The Ring and the Book is also a crucial concern relative to Browning's definition of heroism and villainy. The principle of interdependence that binds together the central characters in the poem also includes Browning as poet. The poet depends on his characters to embody and to convey his vision, and they, in turn, depend on Browning's poetic craft to bring them to life and to present their cases. Thus, Browning's vision of truth and of good and evil is an important element in the compounding of his characters.

Browning's use of multiple perspectives as the structural mode of The Ring and the Book foreshadows the pervasive use of similar techniques in modern literature and cinema. Browning's use of multiple perspectives differs in several important ways, however, from most modern applications. Major critics agree that, within the relativistic framework of The Ring and the Book, Browning presents clear criteria for judging truth versus falseness and good versus evil. Altick and Loucks contend that his method is founded on paradox: Browning's vision of truth emerges from a relativistic presentation of material, just as moral triumph emerges from outer

failure (29). The Pope's recognition of human fallibility and limitations does not relieve him of the necessity of propounding a definition of truth, nor does Browning's use of multiple perspectives relieve him of this same responsibility. Browning uses irony, negative imagery, and fallacious applications of rhetoric and logic to provide commentary and to qualify the credibility of speakers such as Guido, the two Half-Romes, Tertium Quid, and the lawyers. He uses similar devices of imagery, symbol, and language turned to positive use to support the sincerity and moral heroism of Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope. Also, Browning's own analysis of the case in Books I and XII helps to establish a standard of interpretation.

In Book I, Browning directly addresses this question of the relation between the poet's vision and his artistic method. He explains that the artist, in order to do justice to the experience of living in the natural world and in human society, must present his material in ample detail and from multiple points of view. He explains that the poet must "learn and love / Each facet-flash of the revolving year! / Red, green and blue that whirl into a white, / The variance now, the eventual unity, / Which make the miracle" (1.1352-56). Here Browning offers his version of Shelley's "dome of many-coloured glass, / [That] Stains the white radiance of Eternity" (Adonais 462-63). The poet must approach the white radiance of absolute truth through the concrete details of human existence and of the world.

Browning warns against the dangers of fixing the living truth in static formulations. Continuing his metaphor of seasonal flux, he suggests that, if the poet picks one season as his favorite and focuses only on it, "Thus were abolished Spring and Autumn both, / The land dwarfed to one likeness of the land, / Life cramped corpse-fashion" (1.1350-52). Obsession with one's own absolute vision produces the kind of "wasteland" inhabited by failed heroes such as Paracelsus and Stafford and by villains such as Victor and Guido. The poet's vision must include the mixed elements of human nature; it must include heroes and villains alike. Browning explains that a human being is like a glass ball with a "magic fire" inside (1.1359-60). The ball turns and alternatingly produces rays of light and dark shadows. This interplay of light and dark, of good and evil, also occurs in human history: "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" (1.1366-68).

As we observed in the previous chapter, Browning's presentation of characters is far from being purely objective or neutral, but his definition of good and evil, of heroism and villainy, is embedded in the "living" fabric of the poem's comprehensive vision and thus is part of a larger whole. Browning submerges his own point of view in the subtleties and devices of art and language. The poem thus unites the many and the one in a vision that is larger than any single point of view. Henry James describes The Ring and the Book as a vast Gothic castle with towers, spires, and pinnacles (385). He suggests that the diverse elements of Browning's

vision emerge gradually from the accumulation of rich detail--an observation frequently applied to Spenser's Faerie Queene (386). The larger truth of the total work evolves in the mind of the reader as he explores the "castle" of Browning's art.

Finally, Browning's method in The Ring and the Book is based on large scale synthesis. In his vision of heroism and villainy, he brings together diverse elements of classical literature and philosophy, myth, the Bible, medieval romance, Italian literature, Milton, the Romantics, eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophy, and Carlyle. Through the medium of his innovative aesthetic techniques, he integrates these elements with his own acute insight into the psychological processes behind human behavior and personality development. From a larger perspective, The Ring and the Book is a literary Janus: it looks back over the broad expanse of Browning's literary heritage, including his own earlier works; and it looks forward to major trends in modern literature. In context of the skepticism, despair, and anti-heroism of the Victorian period, it stands as a bulwark of hard-fought-for optimism and heroic vision. Its sophisticated artistry, demanding language, and comprehensive vision remain a great challenge to modern readers and critics. As long as readers continue to accept these challenges, then Browning will remain the heroic poet/prophet he struggled so hard to become.

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VITA

John Steven Beauchamp was born in Savannah, Georgia, on November 8, 1950. He attended his final year of high school at Willingham Senior High in Macon, Georgia, and graduated in June 1968. In August of 1972 he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Georgia. During the academic year 1975-76, he attended Mercer University in Macon to earn his T-4 certificate in secondary education. The following three years he taught English at Northside High School in Warner Robins, Georgia.

In the fall of 1979, Mr. Beauchamp received a teaching assistantship at the University of Georgia, and after two years of study, he left to pursue his Doctoral degree at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. After completing his thesis, he received a Master's degree in English from the University of Georgia in August 1982. He earned his Doctor of Philosophy in English with an emphasis in Victorian and Modern poetry from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in December 1987.

The author has recently published poetry in a variety of professional journals and reviews, and he plans to continue his creative and scholarly writing in subsequent years. Mr. Beauchamp will be employed as a Professor of English at Brewton-Parker College in Mt. Vernon, Georgia, beginning in September 1987.