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ROBERT BROWNING AS A MYTH-MAKER
IN THE RING AND THE BOOK.

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ROBERT BROWNING AS A MYTH-MAKER

IN THE RING AND THE BOOK

A DISSERTATION

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ROBERT BROWNING AS A MYTH-MAKER

IN THE RING AND THE BOOK

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ROBERT BROWNING AS A MYTH-MAKER IN THE RING AND THE BOOK

CHAPTER I

TO TELL A TRUTH OBLIQUELY

I

Poetry has not always had to justify itself. The Renaissance, for instance, would probably have considered questions regarding the "usefulness" of art to be quite irrelevant to a discussion of the nature of art. The eighteenth century poet, perhaps sensing a vague uneasiness about poetry's role in an increasingly scientific civilization, often felt constrained to compose in a specifically philosophical vein--i.e., a morally "useful" vein. Pope's "Essay on Man" is at least suggestive of this feeling. By the time of the nineteenth century, art was under open attack for being "useless." Sidney's Defense of Poesy was not so much a defense of the art itself, as it was a defense of poetry against the tyranny of criticism by "rules." Shelley's defense, however, was indeed an apology for the art; and if Sidney's voice was the voice of the Renaissance, Shelley had to settle for an equal voice in the nineteenth century with that of Jeremy Bentham. And now the twentieth century finds the humanist denying the need for apology--apologizing anyway--and still feeling a trifle guilty about the "uselessness" of his discipline.

It was no doubt bewildering to the artist of the early Victorian era to discover that he was expected to justify a human activity that had been sanctioned among his predecessors as being among the most

characteristically human of all civilized endeavor. The shift in values which had replaced the emphasis upon the essential humanity of man with a new emphasis upon the exterior world's "utility" for man precipitated a crisis for poetry which left the indelible mark of bewilderment and frustration upon much of the work of those engaged in its practice. The so-called Spasmodic poets simply ignored the encroaching demands of the practical world and composed in a vaporous cloud of private "feeling." The following stanza is representative of much verse published in the first half of the century:

Adieu, my loved parent! the trial is past--
Again thy loved bosom my dwelling may be;
And long as the name of thy darling shall last,
All due be the song and the honour to thee!¹

Other writers, feeling obligated to "explain" the new cosmos in order to justify their existence in it, encumbered their verse with the sophistries of an abstruse didacticism:

All is in change--yet there is nothing lost:
The dew becomes the essence of the flower
Which feeds the insect of the sunny hour--
Now leaf, now pinion;--though the hills were tost
By the wild whirlwinds, like the summer dust
Would not an atom perish....²

Professor Trilling has effectively defined the plight of the man who tried honestly to live by the law of the imaginative spirit in the nineteenth century:

Behind the struggle of romanticism and rationalism lies, of course, the diminution of the power of Christianity. Under the shadow of religion and with many gestures of submission to it, rationalism had tried to construct a new picture of the cosmos. By the nineteenth

¹Anonymous, Blackwood's Magazine, Vol. I, (May, 1817), p. 169.

²Anonymous, Ibid., Vol. I, (August, 1817), p. 502.

century that picture was sufficiently complete to show many men that Christianity . . . could not wholly explain it. The new cosmos suggested an idea that became paramount in men's minds" the disparity between the course of nature and the values of man.³

Rarely in the world's history had the man of practical affairs and the man of thought been so widely divorced. The result was a national spirit so diversified that it cannot be easily characterized; the temptation to apply overly simplified appellations to given historical periods has yielded the "neo-classical" eighteenth century, the "Renaissance" and the "dark ages"; but even the broadest characteristics fail to suggest a comprehensive label for the period of positivists, romanticists, utilitarians, and Chartists:

The Victorian period achieved little of the stability we have learned to associate with a semi-mythical neoclassical culture. It moved from form to form and nothing stood. Almost every Victorian thesis produced its own antithesis, as a ceaseless dialectic worked out its designs⁴

And yet

it is not difficult to find certain doctrines perhaps opposing each other but recurring with an insistency which suggests the breadth of their influence. Probably the most prominent of these . . . are Evangelical religion and Benthamite philosophy.⁵

If the Benthamite influence inclined toward the practical spirit, manifesting itself in an overt program of progressive legislation, the Evangelical world responded with its appeal to "lay up treasures" in a future world. Indeed the spirit of protest had gone out from protestantism, which found itself politically and economically in defense of

³Lionel Trilling, Matthew Arnold, (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 75.

⁴Jerome Buckley, The Victorian Temper, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard Press, 1951). p. 7.

⁵Ibid., p. 9.

the status quo. A critic for the Edinburgh Review noted that:

Though apparently desultory, one leading idea pervades Dr. Chalmers' work. He lays it broadly down in the first chapters that all the miseries that afflict the laboring classes are the result of their own errors and misconduct; that 'there is no possible help for them if they will not help themselves;' that 'it is to a rise and reformation in the habits of our peasantry, that we should look for deliverance, and not to the impotent crudities of a speculative legislation. Dr. Chalmers never, for an instant, loses sight of this principle. It is, in his estimation, the 'one thing needful.'⁶

Encountering a relentless resistance, those who supported social reform nonetheless achieved a somewhat impressive record with the passage of such bills as the so-called Reform Bill of 1832; the Factory Acts of 1833, which prohibited the employment of children under nine years of age; the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824, which facilitated the organization of labor; the Ten Hours Law of 1847, which regulated the number of daily working hours for women and children; and the Factory Acts of 1844 and 1853, regulating child labor. The gradual extensions of suffrage to a wider range of citizens paralleled the amelioration of social oppression. If the Evangelical spirit was antithetical in temper to the Utilitarian, it at least owed its strength to a mutual source--the growing self-consciousness of the middle class. Just as John Stuart Mill aroused in the middle class a growing sense of the possibilities of popular government, so Charles Haddon Spurgeon captured a large segment of middle class London with his assurances of a better fate in the next world.

This is something of the kind of world into which the nineteenth century artist was born. It is significant that Robert Browning was born

⁶Anonymous review of On Political Economy, in Connexion with the Moral Prospects of Society by Thomas Chalmers, Edinburgh Review, Vol. 56 (1832), p. 53.

into that protestant middle class from which sprang the energies of both liberalism and reaction. To follow the strands of one or two fundamental ideas in any man's development is obviously difficult at best; in Browning's progress the task is perhaps especially so, for he was a man who took delight in ideas for their own sake, and his receptivity to widely disparate notions--whether it denotes his inability to commit himself to fundamentals, or his disposition to avoid closing his mind in a world where new ideas were so abundantly available--makes it impossible to classify him readily. Regardless of its consequences for his poetry, it is a happy chance for the history of English thought that Browning was born into a representative circumstance, for it seems tenable to assert that his final estimate of the world about him is a result of his attempt to evaluate and synthesize some of the central ideas of the age. Significantly, Browning's first published poetry was almost precisely contemporaneous with the Reform Bill, for he had been reared in a national atmosphere that felt very strongly the rising tide of social reform. The reactionary and bitterly contested Corn Laws had been approved in 1815, when Browning was three years of age, but by the time he was five the historical inevitability of reform began to be recognized even in Parliament itself, as the following address, rendered before the House of Commons on February 14 of 1817, will indicate:

"The people of England have presented hundreds of petitions to this House. I believe above a million of people have declared to this House some opinion or other on the question of reform. These persons have been collected together at meetings, to which they flocked simply because they felt severe distress There is one conclusion, sir, which we ought to draw from all these considerations; namely, that severe distress is the real cause of popular agitation; and that as far as the people call upon us for great retrenchments and some reform, the call is well founded and

must be heard"⁷

The talk of social progress which pervaded the national press was mingled during Browning's childhood with the protestant orthodoxy of his mother. Browning, then, was not one born out of his own time; he was in fact a product of the complex mélange of nineteenth century influences, and he participated in their weaknesses as well as their strengths. His poetry can be made to demonstrate practically all of the dominant tendencies of thought in his own age. The "spasmodic" fog occurs with frequency:

Oh Love! Love, thou that from the eyes diffusest
Yearning, and on the soul sweet grace inducest
"Oh Love! Love"

Pauline, mine own, bend o'er me--thy soft breast
Shall pant to mine
"Pauline"

No, no, thrice, Pornic, no! Perpend the authentic tale
"Fifine at the Fair"

But, contrary to the spasmodic tendency, Browning also recognized that poetry is a form of intellection; this fact in itself led him frequently into that opposite horror of Victorian art--didactic verse:

Needs there groan a world in anguish just to teach us sympathy--
Multitudinously wretched that we, wretched too, may guess
What a preferable state were universal happiness?
Hardly do I so conceive the outcome of that power which went
To the making of the worm there in yon clod its tenement,
Any more than I distinguish aught of that which, wise and good
Framed the leaf, its plain of pasture, dropped the dew its
fineless food.

"La Saisiaz"

If Browning errs in both extremes, it is yet, perhaps, a source of his strength that his best poetry represents a reconciliation of both feeling and intellect. That this reconciliation is a self-conscious one is

⁷Address by Mr. Brougham, reprinted in Blackwood's Magazine, "Proceedings of Parliament" Vol. I (April, 1817), p. 106.

possibly apparent in the narrative scheme of "La Saisiaz," where Fancy and Reason participate in a dialectic reminiscent of the medieval debate poem; their dispute is terminated when the poet interjects:

Thus we have come back full circle: fancy's footsteps
one by one
Go their round conducting reason to the point where they
begun

The dialogue is more than a now trite poetic device; it is also Browning's way of recognizing that perhaps a central problem to western man in the nineteenth century was to integrate the changing conception of the physical universe with the human demand for a world that is both authoritative and imaginative.

While utilitarianism, chartism, and positivism sought to gear their programs to the demands of environment, to the dictates of physical law, the romanticists and the orthodox Christians sought vainly to cling to a world ordered by something less tangible and more durable than associational psychology and the laws of economics. John Stuart Mill's famous melancholy suggests the difficulty of holding pure rationalism as a world view. But the disciples of the inner life too were finding it difficult to maintain their creeds. Matthew Arnold lamented the disintegration of both romanticism and Christianity in his "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse":

What helps it now, that Byron bore,
With haughty scorn which mock'd the smart,
Through Europe to the Aetolian shore
The pageant of his bleeding heart?
That thousands counted every groan,
And Europe made his woe her own?
(ll. 133-138)

"Fenced early in this cloistral round
Of reverie, of shade, of prayer,
How should we grow in other ground?
How can we flower in foreign air?

--Pass, banners, pass, and bugles, cease;
And leave our desert to its peace!"

(11. 205-210)

In the second series of his Essays in Criticism, Arnold complains that "Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, . . ." ⁸

The major poets of mid-century England all recognized the problem, and perhaps they all sensed the direction in which its resolution lay. All began with an acknowledgement of a Cartesian dualism--recognizing the legitimate claims of both subjective and objective worlds. Hence it is that Tennyson, Arnold, and Browning find themselves so closely associated with "psychological" interests. But even if the claims of two different orders of reality are taken to be valid, one still finds himself having to define the limits of each and to designate their relationship before his viewpoint is functional. The best poetry of the middle of the nineteenth century seemed feebly but persistently aware of what perhaps the "best" poetry is always aware of--that there is something in the world of myth to which man always returns when his vital spirits are sapped of curiosity, wonder and the power of life; Trilling has summarized the nineteenth century Italian poet Leopardi's comments on myth:

. . . that it was the result of the shrivelling of the imagination which resulted from the loss of a world explainable by myth; Nature is no longer animate and sentient but mechanical and necessary. ⁹

The Great Chain of Being was broken, and with its severance all

⁸William E. Buckler (ed.), Prose of the Victorian Period (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Press, 1958), p. 502.

⁹Loc. cit., p. 78.

coherence was indeed gone. But in its place science was attempting to construct a new sort of world view oriented to the literal fact--to the way things "really" are. But if the immediate environment is measurable and describable, the internal world is not so readily understood; it is whimsical, irrational, chaotic, personal. The Christian myth which had lent its sense of a divinely directed cosmos to both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had lost its authoritative discipline; the myth had become theology. Its ethical impact had been reduced to semantic quibbling about the efficacy "grace" and "works"--about the authority of Genesis or the origins of man. Graf and Welhausen, the German textual critics, had undermined the concept of the plenary inspiration of the Bible; and much of the religiously conservative world sacrificed the central myth of Christianity--its ethos--in order to defend its historicity, its literal fact.

Some of those who sought to salvage the sanctions of the imagination in the world of human affairs recognized that a mythology can be defended as an ethical--but not as a historical fact. Among these were those poets whom we remember as the most significant Victorian men of letters. Tennyson sought a valid myth from at least two sources. One of these was the world of those ancient mythologies which had served the race earlier and well. It included both the classical myth and the Anglo-celtic: Odysseus and Arthur. "The Happy Isles," "The Lotus Eaters," "Oenone" are at one level attempts to construct from classical materials a Tennysonian view of humankind, with its ironic emphasis upon the contrast between desire and the incapacity for fulfillment. The Idylls of the King draft a similar view into Arthurian legend; hence, by

adopting a somewhat pre-determined narrative structure Tennyson subordinates narrative to theme; by using an ancient mythology he avoids complicating his theme with questions of "historicity" or "factuality."

The second source from which Tennyson sought to extract a workable poetic myth was a more subjective one employing a less rigidly demanding narrative formula. The somewhat bizarre and exotic imagery of the "Recollections of the Arabian Nights"--because it avoids the prescriptions of the form of Arthurian Romance or the epic ritual--becomes even more personal. In Memoriam is perhaps Tennyson's experiment with the possibility of fusing the two sources of his quest for myth. In it the subjective, psychological emphasis of such poems as "The Kraken" is wrought into a loose narrative structure that is only obliquely--perhaps only symbolically--Arthurian. The racial image of Arthur the king becomes synonymous with the personal image of Hallam. And if In Memoriam, if the Tennysonian myth generally, can be said to fail, it probably does so in part because it is too personal. The precarious balance between the inner and outer worlds is sometimes lost in Tennyson's despair.

Arnold's search for myth, on the other hand, assumes a narrative fabric more nearly original--or at least more esoteric in its origins. "The Scholar Gypsy," "Sohrab and Rustum," and "Resignation" derive from scraps of history, legend, and personal experience. Often, as in "The Forsaken Merman," the narrative is made to resemble folklore; hence, in its quaint credulity it provides a viewpoint which is not restrained by the empirical. Professor Trilling finds two themes in Arnold's myth; the "therapeutic" aspect of the world of Nature upon the distracted human passions, and the myth of tragic negation--the self-consciousness

of being a sentient creature in an insentient universe--of being rational in a universe where the traditional systems of thought are disintegrating. The "Stanzas from the Grand Charteuse" become Arnold's lament for those thought forms no longer tolerable in an empirical world. The myth of negation, however, must in Arnold's own terms be considered at least a partial failure in that while defining the human passions, it frustrates human actions:

What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.¹⁰

II

Few poets have possessed the unwitting talent for endowing literary history with the kind of paradox and controversy that Robert Browning was capable of precipitating. Alternately ignored for the right reasons, praised for the wrong, ignored for the wrong, then praised for the right, Browning has been severely criticized for both his "evangelicalism" and his obscurity, and, strangely, eulogized for much the same reasons. For much of the mist beclouding Browning's reputation, he himself is responsible. His worst poetry is typical of the century's most ineffective; his best is both economical and profound. He pursues widely varying ideas with enthusiasm--exploring at one time or another such diverse opinions as human immortality, atheism, vegetarianism,

¹⁰Buckler (ed.) op. cit., p. 410.

female emancipation, and anti-vivisectionism. For Browning the idea seems important for its own sake; consequently, his poetry is likely to occupy itself with a number of disparate viewpoints, and it is likely to be suggestive rather than definitive; what seems to be an avowal of faith in an idea may be simply an interested perusal. Long before Einstein had disjointed the universe from its physical absolutes, men of thought had become aware that the world is at least ethically a relative universe. Browning is uniquely prophetic of the twentieth century in his grappling for a mode of reality that recognizes the claim of many widely varying orders of ideas.

To mold a coherent viewpoint from numerous incongruous ideas and to avoid, while doing so, the rigidities of a "system" is the problem that the poet Browning shares with twentieth century man. He has recognized that an effective world view must supersede "issues" and proceed to principles. His views on vivisection, for example, are not sources of his opinion; they are the conclusions that derive from his liberal humanism. Browning's opinions, then, on evangelical Christianity or on the occult arts are relevant to a modern study of his ideas only when they lead to the lowest denominators of his thought. The Browning Society bemused itself with numerous papers on Browning's "opinions." But it tended to ignore the perspective from which those opinions were extracted. It is the search for this central perspective which now seems to promise much for Browning studies.

Browning, like the other major poets of his era, recognized the need for a worldview which was tolerant enough in its external, physical order to absorb those truths about the universe which the scientific

method had but recently begun to ferret out; but the plastic external view, he knew, must be informed by an ethical viewpoint that is stable enough to give man some reassurance as to his nature and identity in spite of any changing concept of physical law. Myth served this purpose well. Its narrative structure is imaginative, not literal; its horses can fly; its heroes can change their outward appearance at will; its trees can speak a human speech, yet it purports to tell a kind of truth: it tells who is responsible for the universe, what man's deepest desires are like, what his highest aspirations are. In other words the world of myth manipulates the external world in order to see more clearly the internal world. Browning had attempted to juggle the external world in Pippa Passes; a series of very real circumstances were infused with a new integer--the song of innocence--in order to produce a new behavior in human character. But he asks us to suppose that we are dealing with literal circumstances; we cannot with any degree of tolerance, however, suppose that in a realistic context, a child such as Pippa is innocent rather than simply naive and immature; the fact that she has not been touched by evil is a weakness in her, not a strength, for it leaves her a one dimensional character. And the behavior that she precipitates in those who hear her is wishful thinking on Browning's part; it is romanticizing--not the result of an ethical law which is always available in human behavior.

By the time he wrote Calaban Upon Setebos and Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came, Browning had apparently begun to sense that in order to define a new order of reality he must ask us to suspend the old hypotheses demanded by a purely physical reality. He takes Childe Roland

out of the land of recognizable reality and sets him in a new locale--the world of myth and Romance, where we have long ago learned to condition our responses to an imaginative order that does not behave by such mundane principles as those of gravity, zoological classification and geographical restraints. To Pegasus' flight we consent; sea serpents and dragons we expect; descents into hell and the sea we demand. Part of Browning's effectiveness derives from the disorientation of the reader; the shades and darks, the wilds and hallows of the imaginary world are much more ominous than are the hills and glens of Shropshire or Pike County. Browning learns this lesson in Childe Roland; he exploits and refines it in The Ring and the Book. The same removal from an ordinary landscape occurs in Calaban Upon Setebos; Prospero's island is, it will be remembered, enchanted, and Prospero himself is the enchanter. Browning, belying the accusations of glib optimism which are often leveled against him, achieves in Childe Roland a sense of fatal, tragic fulfillment which derives from the best tradition of romantic literature. In Calaban he achieves a bitter irony that foreshadows the even more pitiless ironies of Hardy and Housman later in the century. In both of these poems Browning is working away from the earlier and more unrestrained subjectivism of Pauline and Pippa toward a world which behaves neither by the laws of the phenomenal universe nor by the whims of a fancy unrestrained, but by a third set of laws--those made available to him in a very ancient human tradition--the myth mode.

It is this effort of the poet to get outside of his own sentiments and yet to retain the subjective viewpoint that gives the dramatic monologue its uniqueness, as Robert Langbaum has pointed out in The

Poetry of Experience:

One writer on the dramatic monologue [M. W. MacCallum¹¹] has managed to suggest what it is essentially doing; and he has done this at just the point where he abandons objective criteria to make an intuitive leap inside the form Unfortunately, MacCallum does not pursue the implications of this insight. If he had, he would not be so disposed to isolate the dramatic monologue within the Victorian period, and he would not confine his consideration to its quality as a monologue. Although the fact that a poem is a monologue helps to determine our sympathy for the speaker, since we must adopt his viewpoint as our entry into the poem, the monologue quality remains nevertheless a means, and not the only means, to the end--the end being to establish the reader's sympathetic relation to the poem, to give him "facts from within."¹¹

It is, therefore, within the nature of the dramatic monologue to become what practically all critics of Victorian literature have called "psychological poetry." Of course all poetry is psychological in that it belongs to the province of the mind; but the dramatic monologue is uniquely so in that it provides a glimpse of the workings of the mind in order to enable us to evaluate the mind itself in relation to its context. The poet's view of his subject is almost synonymous with the psychologist's view of his. If this hypothesis be granted, it becomes apparent that Browning's interest in the Old Yellow Book is not primarily antiquarian, but psychological. His problem in The Ring and the Book is similar to his problem in Childe Roland and Calaban--to retain the subjective viewpoint, yet to orient himself to some restraining force that will prevent him from losing all sense of order and decorum. In each case the subjective, imaginative reality is honored by Browning's projecting the reader directly into the minds of his protagonists; the objective, restraining reality is honored by his orientation to previously

¹¹Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 78.

determined narrative structure. Childe Roland draws upon the traditional Romantic structure; Calaban draws upon a plot arrangement made available by the Shakespearean canon; The Ring and the Book draws upon the complexities of an historical murder case. By using a well-defined and previously determined plot outline Browning no doubt sought to avoid the glib ecstasies of some of his earlier poetry. And yet The Ring and the Book has been criticized both for sticking too close to the Old Yellow Book and for interpreting it too loosely. The increasingly obvious truth about Browning's feeling is that he was using the Old Yellow Book. He had something to say; his source gave him an apparatus of speech. And after much irrelevant debate upon Browning's faithfulness or unfaithfulness to his source, critics are at last beginning to look at what it was he had to say.

It is in remembering that the plot of Browning's greatest poem is subordinate to its theme that the reader no doubt achieves the richest perspective. The sequence of events, the characters, the involutions of incident are tools which the author uses to convey an order of ideas; they are symbols. Browning makes it clear from the outset that his viewpoint is contained within the whole context of the poem; it is not in Caponsacchi's monologue, nor in Pompilia's; it is in the total mythos of the poem. We must understand the true judgments of every character in the poem before we can establish a final evaluation of the poem's meaning, but such an evaluation is certainly possible and its nature is clearly implied. Browning uses two poetic devices to help the reader ascertain what each character actually is in his fullest context. The first method is that so admirably studied by Professor Langbaum in

The Poetry of Experience--the method of the dramatic monologue; we are not permitted to misread a facial expression, a casual gesture, a vocal intonation--as spectators in a courtroom may often do. We are, instead, placed into the psyche of the character to whom we listen; we are not related to them as jurors to witnesses, but as sharers in their experience through the offices of poetry. The second method Browning uses to prevent our misreading of the poem's meaning is the use of symbols as equivalents for values. We cannot, for instance, suppose that Guido simply misunderstands Pompilia, for he is given symbolic equivalents such as "the wolf" and "Judas" which make lenience toward Guido quite as impossible for the reader as it was for the Pope. But Browning has chosen his symbols carefully. They fit into a comprehensive pattern of symbolic narrative which may be called his "myth."

CHAPTER II

OUT OF THE MAGIC FIRE: THE MYTHIC STRUCTURE

Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top,
Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,
Shows one tint at a time to take the eye

Myth, that chimaera of the humanities in the 20th century, still demands cognition, still eludes the light of definition and lurks in the shadowed corners of academic dispute. Promising to yield up its secret intimacies to the artist, the anthropologist, the critic, philosopher, psychologist, and sociologist by turns, it whispers to each the assurance that his is the favor most favored; then it silently eludes them all, leaving them like jealous lovers to quarrel over who, after all, has known her best. That man has long been sensitive to the wonder of myth is verified by the fact that the Euhemeristic notion of the origins of myth can be traced to the close of the fourth century B.C. when Euhemerus proposed that it derives from the distortion of history; i.e., the gods are the apotheoses of ancient tribal heroes, and myth is the embroidering of the tribal legends which surround them. Another significant proposal--a contemporary one--is that offered by Professor Richard Chase, a literary critic who contends that myth is the literature of a naive culture; it is prompted solely by aesthetic impulses. This point of view is essentially the same as that of mythographer A. H. Krappke, to whose La genese des mythes, however, there are serious objections raised by Suzanne Langer in

the seventh chapter of her Philosophy in a New Key. Bronislaw Malinowski submits a third and specifically psychological definition: myth is a "narrative recollection of a primitive reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants."¹ Professor Jung contends for a similar assumption, simply adding that primitive reality is "autochthonous," "independent of all tradition, and, consequently we assume that 'myth-forming' structural elements must be present in the unconscious psyche."² The psychologist's understanding of myth leads to the brink of what is ultimately asserted by the symbolic logicians, and it is this assertion that I submit as a fourth alternative definition of myth. It is the whole contention of Miss Langer's book that symbols are the thought-stuff of the human mind, and that myth is the attempt of that mind to present, "however metaphorically, a world picture, an insight into life generally"³ According to her, then, myth must be made of the elemental stuff of human thought; it must be primitive in method--i.e., its response to life must be immediate and visual, not remote and sophisticated. Further, its aims must be explanatory; it must, in other words, embody some concept of cosmic teleology; it must be a sort of pre-philosophy metaphorically explaining natural phenomena, first causes, indeed all of the pageant of life about us; hence, it is likely to assume an ethical, if not metaphysical, significance in the mind of the story teller. Professor

¹Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology, (N. Y.: Norton Co., 1926), p. 19.

²Carl Jung, Essays on a Science of Mythology, (N. Y.: Pantheon Books, 1949), p. 106.

³Suzanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 1958 reprint of a publication by Harvard Press (1942), Mentor Books, p. 153.

Northrop Frye affords a fifth potential definition--one which is especially adaptable to the purposes of literary criticism--when he suggests that myth is "the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire."⁴ This spectrum of proposed definitions seems really to offer only one common denominator; myth is narrative in structure. Most of the contemporary commentators, however, agree on a further qualification: myth deals with the translation of an inner experience into metaphorical equivalents for that experience. Many add that the metaphors will be arranged, either consciously or subconsciously, into some meaningful pattern by which the narrator reflects the significance of that experience; it must i.e., be ethical. The Ring and the Book, to a greater or lesser extent seems to embody just such a metaphorical fabric. I suggest that certain recurring metaphors are part of a careful design, that this metaphorical structure conveys Browning's estimate of the ethical issues involved in the narrative, and hence can be said to comprise his "myth."

Isabel MacCaffrey has examined Paradise Lost in a study similar in purpose to this one. Her book 'Paradise Lost' as 'Myth' contributes an important qualification to the foregoing notions about myth. She asserts that:

In fact, of course, every myth has been treated at some time, by someone, not as make-believe, but as belief. The point of this observation is not to condemn unbelievers . . . it is merely to suggest that an examination of what belief in myth involved is essential if we are to understand a poem that sets out to embody

⁴Northrop Frye, An Anatomy of Criticism, (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 136.

a myth. For a believer, then, the mythic 'fable' is to be taken as the record of a real happening, "one true history," and to be read more or less literally.⁵

Whether her point of view is historically valid remains for the mythographers to determine. It does suggest the urgency of the artist's faith in his story. It is precisely Donald Smalley's point of view that Browning believed that the Caponsacchi and Pompilia of his poem were synonymous with the Caponsacchi and Pompilia of the Old Yellow Book, because his creative sensibility squeezed even "literal history" until, twisted taut, it oozed out its drop of imaginative truth.⁶ No critic has denied that Browning's master poem contains his ethical point of view; none denies the pervasiveness of his figurative language; it is my intention to show the extent to which they are related.

In a recent book called Images and Symbols, French mythographer Mircea Eleade observes that by the close of the seventeenth century, myth as a literary mode had largely been displaced by more sophisticated genres. This is perhaps explicable in terms of the necessity of the primitive element in true myth. Miss Langer sees this element as being crucial to genuinely mythic forms:

The origin of myth is dynamic, but its purpose is philosophical. It is the primitive phase of metaphysical thought, the first embodiment of general ideas The highest development of which myth is capable is the exhibition of human life and cosmic order that epic poetry reveals. We cannot abstract and manipulate its concepts any further within the mythical mode. When this mode

⁵Isabel MacCaffrey, 'Paradise Lost' as 'Myth', (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Press, 1959), p. 15.

⁶Browning's Essay on Chatterton, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Press, 1948), passim.

is exhausted, natural religion is superseded by a discursive and more literal form of thought, namely philosophy.⁷

It is not surprising that the "Augustan" age, thriving on its own growing sense of propriety and skepticism--those two ubiquitous corollaries of sophistication--should seek expression in generic forms more appropriate to its temper than those which had served the high renaissance. Milton, then, was the last English poet of consequence to compose in the mythic vein before its submersion by the "more regular" modes of neo-classicism. The twentieth century, again in love with myth, finds its allurements irresistible.

But this conversion to the various symbolisms is not really a discovery to be credited to the modern world: in restoring the symbol to its status as an instrument of knowledge, our world is only returning to a point of view that was general in Europe until the eighteenth century⁸

It is appropriate therefore to ask "when did myth emerge from its hibernation and at whose hands?" The modern composers in that ancient key are well known--Pound, Eliot, Faulkner, Joyce, and Yeats among others. But no accurate conception of literary history can suppose that myth emerged from its nineteenth century matrices--anthropology, archeology, and more specifically, perhaps, The Golden Bough--fully capable of flight. The new science of psychoanalysis perhaps matured the concept of myth in the modern mind, but myth had first to try its poetic wings; and it seems reasonable to assume upon the basis of Blake's effort to construct a sort of private mythical equation for the mysteries of his own mind, and upon the basis of the subsequent tortuous search of the

⁷Langer, op. cit., pp. 172-173.

⁸Mircea Eleade, Images and Symbols, (N. Y.: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 9.

romantic poets for a nature myth (as in Wordsworth), or for a myth of the individual (as in Byron's Byronic Hero), as well as upon the basis of those uncertain but significant Victorians whom I discussed in the preceding chapter, that the literary tradition of myth-making--an old habit grown idle, in fact preceded the anthropological and psychological studies that have given the impetus and the surer grasp of myth to modern poets.

A close scrutiny of the metaphorical patterns in The Ring and the Book suggests that Browning was deliberately working toward a realization of the myth-mode. One of the inescapable conclusions to be derived from such a scrutiny is that much of the metaphorical content of the poem falls into certain rather elaborate designs which give the poem a significant dimension beyond the literal narrative. For example, Pompilia is spoken of as a flower three times in Book Three alone. To suppose that this symbolic equation between the maiden and the blossom is the random result of a creative "spasm" is to deny Browning the basic concession a critic must make to any artist--that the artist be considered at least reasonably self-conscious. The advent of a persistently recurring metaphor leads easily to the conclusion that it recurs as the result of design. An unpublished dissertation by Luster J. Williams entitled Figurative Imagery in 'The Ring and the Book,'⁹ differing from this one in that it attempts simply to classify the kinds of metaphor rather than limiting itself to the thematic study of some basic patterns, has noted that Satan and/or Hell are mentioned in ten of the twelve books, for a total of

⁹University of Indiana doctoral dissertation, 1959.

thirty-seven times in the poem. Williams is interested in the frequency and types of images; I am here concerned with the distinct levels of metaphorical structure which this imagery serves to communicate. It will be my contention that the allusions to Satan and Hell are so numerous precisely because at one level of interpretation the poem is about Satan and Hell.

Much of current criticism is indebted to Professor Frye for providing it with just such tools as here seem convenient to use, for he has provided us with sketches of some of those typical literary themes which often enable us to discover a given artist's poetic stance. He appropriately refers to his Anatomy of Criticism as a "grammar of literary archetypes." Because myth deals with the "limits of desire," it provides three loci of experience--the apocalyptic world, where the fulness of desire is realized; the demonic, where stimulated desire is never appeased; and the romantic, where the actions of man are analogous to the actions of gods. Two of these--heaven and hell belong to myth proper; romance--if myth at all--is what Frye calls "displaced" myth; i.e., it is a compromise between myth and realism. Because romance falls short of myth in its highest sense, I choose to consider it as a subdivision of myth, constituting a separate narrative level within the poem, and will reserve its discussion for a later chapter.

Some ground rules are perhaps desirable before an extended search for specific metaphorical patterns is initiated. It is apparent that an ordinarily mythic image--such as a spiral, a pearl, a golden bowl--is in fact mythic only in a mythic context. It must also be dutifully recognized

that Browning's loyalty to his source in the Old Yellow Book gives rise to a great deal of his imagery; but this portion will be mostly the literal imagery, the furniture necessary for making the narrative structure coherent; also, it is certain that in at least one crucial instance Browning altered his source for the specific purpose of facilitating his metaphorical structure. Another obvious fact about source imagery is that its origin does not prevent its appropriation to a private use; for example, the fact that a dungeon is available in the literal world of the seventeenth century does not necessarily frustrate the literary, or emotive, or mythical significance of the dungeon in a well wrought, highly self-conscious poem of the mid-nineteenth century; to the contrary, the original is a convenience which the careful craftsman is quite likely to exploit of its connotations.

It is necessary to remember, however, as Browning himself reminds us, that The Ring and the Book is both "fact" and "fancy." It is history and literal narrative as well as poetry and imaginative narrative. Obviously, then, only some of the images are metaphorical, and it is toward a study of these specifically metaphorical images that the search for myth can be most appropriately directed.

The apocalyptic world is the world of the gods. It gives us John's New Jerusalem, Milton's Heaven, Homer's Olympus, and the Koran's Jannah. Its governors are gods; its inhabitants are saints or angels; its animals are domestic and unblemished (as typified by sheep); its plant life is cultivated (as typified by the garden and the Tree of Life); its inorganic elements are of great worth (precious stones) and are used structurally to construct the City of Bliss (typified by the temple).

Among the usual metaphors for the apocalyptic world is the concept of "light" which is equated with "truth," "virtue," "life," and "knowledge." Milton refers to Heaven in Paradise Lost, Book I, line 84 as the "happy Realms of Light." Zeus is associated with a shower of golden light (especially in the myth of Danae); the return of Persephone to earth is a return not only of vegetation, but also a return of light. The mythic converse of the City of Light is the demonic City of Darkness. Milton's famous description of Hell is typical: "on all sides round / As one great Furnace flamed, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible." The classical underworld also is characterized by darkness. But among the most specific literature employing the metaphor of darkness in English letters is James Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night":

The City is of Night; perchance of Death,
 But certainly of Night; for never there
 Can come the lucid morning's fragrant breath
 After the dewy dawning's cold grey air;
 The moon and stars may shine with scorn or pity;
 The sun has never visited that city,
 For it dissolveth in the daylight fair.
(Stanza I)

The customary connotations of symbolic darkness include "falsehood," "sin," "death," and ignorance." The possibilities of light and darkness as metaphors are too readily available for us to suppose that Browning's use of them in The Ring and the Book is casual or coincidental. If Canterbury assumes symbolic proportions in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, and if Camelot does so in the Arthurian legend, then I suggest that Rome itself becomes the Heavenly City of The Ring and the Book and that Arezzo becomes its demonic counterpart. The imagery which Browning uses is alluding to Rome should help us to determine the dimensions of

that notion in his own mind. The historical Rome, of course, lends itself to the evocation of certain ideas within the literate Western mind; it is, after all, the "Eternal City." That Rome is calculated to loom larger than life--to assume symbolic proportions--is implied in several passages similar to that spoken by Caponsacchi:

Suddenly I saw the old tower, and the little white-walled
clump
Of buildings and the cypress-tree or two,--
'Already Castel Nuovo--Rome!' I cried,
'As good as Rome,--Rome is the next stage, to me.
'This is where travellers' hearts are wont to beat.
'Say you are saved, sweet lady!

(11. 1396-1403)

And again, he says

. . . this stupid lie, [of Pompilia's seduction]
Its liar never dared propound in Rome
.
. . . Rome for me henceforward--Rome,
Where better men are

(11. 2053-2059)

Even while attending the theater with her husband in Arezzo, Pompilia suggests that Rome is the special object of her quest:

Over the crowd, those voices and those eyes,--
My thoughts went through the roof and out to Rome
On wings of Music, waft of measured words,--
Set me down there a happy child again

(11. 963-966)

And when she becomes conscious of her pregnancy, she adds:

My heart sang, 'I too am to go away,
'I too have something I must care about,
'Carry away with me to Rome, to Rome!
'The bird brings hither sticks and hairs and wool,
'And nowhere else i' the world; what fly breaks rank,
'Falls out of the procession that befits,
'From window here to window there, with all
'The world to choose,--so well he knows his course?
'I have my purpose and my motive too,
'My march to Rome, like any bird or fly!

'My life is charmed, will last till I reach Rome!

 'For life means to make haste and go to Rome

 (11. 1237-1258)

During his flight with Caponsacchi, she refers to the city again, as he reports in his monologue:

When she woke at last, I answered the first look--
 'Scarce twelve hours more
 'Then Rome! There probably not pursuit,
 'There cannot now be peril: bear up brave!
 'Just some twelve hours to press through to the prize--
 'Then, no more of the terrible journey!'
 (11. 1305-1310)

Half-Rome quotes the tribunal which sent Pompilia to the Convertite sisterhood as shifting her roots "From the old cold shade" of Arezzo "Into a generous ground [the convent] that fronts the south [Rome]." Civita, where Caponsacchi is transferred, is described in Half-Rome as "midway 'twixt near and far,/ Rome and Arezzo,"--as a sort of limbo appropriate to the compromised priest. It is geographically suspended between heaven and hell. It will be remembered that the flight from Arezzo began in darkness and was calculated to end in the "full blaze at Rome." The following excerpt from Other Half-Rome indicates Browning's self-conscious awareness of the imaginative possibilities of such a circumstance:

Pompilia slid
 Ghost-like from great dark room to great dark room,
 In through the tapestries and out again,
 And onward, unembarrassed as a fate,
 Descended the staircase, gained last door of all
 Sent it wide open at first push of palm,
 And there stood, first time, last and only time,
 At liberty, alone in the open street,--
 Unquestioned, unmolested found herself
 At the city gate, by Caponsacchi's side
 Hope there, joy there, life and all good again,
 The carriage there, the convoy there, light there
 Broadening into a full blaze at Rome
 (11. 1076-1088)

In this passage Browning gently presses upon us the symbolic movement from the City of Darkness to the City of Light. Other Half-Rome persists in the metaphor when he imagines Pompilia's defense:

"Earth was made hell to me [Pompilia] who did no harm
 "I only could emerge one way from hell
 "By catching at the one hand held me, so
 "I caught at it and thereby stepped to heaven
 (ll. 1344-1348)

Half-Rome posits the prevalent response to Arezzo when he says (ironically, for he favors Guido) as he supposedly quotes the Comparini:

For this have we exchanged our liberty,
 Our competence, our darling of a child?
 To house as spectres in a sepulchre
 Under this black stone-heap, the street's disgrace
 Grimmiest as that is of the gruesome
 (ll. 468-472)

Neither can Tertium Quid avoid the equation between Arezzo and hell, even in spite of his vaunted emotional independence from the whole affair:

They also say,--to keep her straight therein,
 All sort of torture was piled, pain on pain,
 On either side Pompilia's path of life,
 Built round about and over against by fear,
 Circumvallated month by month, and week
 By week, and day by day, and hour by hour.
 Close, closer and yet closer still with pain,
 No outlet from the encroaching pain save just
 Where stood one saviour like a piece of heaven,
 Hell's arms would strain round but for this blue gap.
 She, they say further, first tried every chink,
 Every imaginable break i' the fire,
 As way of escape
 (ll. 787-799)

The "circle-of-fire" symbol serves Browning well, and he uses it again:

Then the grim arms stretched yet a little more
 And each touched each, all but one streak i' the midst,
 Whereat stood Caponsacchi, who cried, "This way,
 "Out by me! Hesitate one moment more
 "And the fire shuts out me and shuts in you!
 "Here my hand holds you life out!" Whereupon
 She clasped the hand, which closed on hers and drew

Pompilia out o' the circle now complete
(Tertium Quid ll. 842-850)

He modifies the heat to cold, but uses the imprisoning circle yet again--
this time in Pompilia's own monologue:

I saw the old boundary and wall o' the world
Rise plain as ever round me, hard and cold,
As if the broken circlet joined again,
Tightened itself about me with no break,--
As if the town would turn Arezzo's self,--
(ll. 1545-1550)

The evil town is frequently referred to as a prison:

So much for what should work in Rome: back now
To Arezzo, follow up the project there,
Forward the next step with as bold a foot,
And plague Pompilia to the height you see!
Accordingly did Guido set himself
To worry up and down, across, around,
The woman, hemmed in by her household-bars,--
Chase her about the coop of daily life,
Having first stopped each outlet thence save one
Which, like bird with ferret in her haunt,
She needs must seize as sole way of escape
.
From tooth and claw of something in the dark,--
(Other Half-Rome ll.
772-788)

Occasionally Arezzo is a dungeon. Caponsacchi refers to Pompilia as
the "imprisoned lady." Her torment is associated with the dark town even
by Guido who, speaking ironically, speaks the truth:

--To lure and bind her to so cursed a couch,
Such co-embrace with sulphur, snake and toad,
That she was feign to rush forth, call the stones
O' the common street to save her, not from hate
Of mine merely, but . . . must I burn my lips
With the blister of the lie? . . . the satyr-love
Of who but my own brother, the young priest
(Count Guido Franceschini
ll. 634-641)

Guido's journey from the city of darkness and pain to the city of light
evokes from Other Half-Rome the ironic and somewhat summary observation
that the murderer "starts for Rome the Holy, reaches her/ At very holiest,

for 'tis Christmas Eve"

It should be carefully noted that the metaphors which relate Rome with heaven and Arezzo with hell are placed in the mouths of speakers who speak against, as well as those who speak for Pompilia; this should verify the notion that the equation is really Browning's and not simply that of an unsympathetic character, for it is a peculiar difficulty in the criticism of the monologue that the poet may very well be defending the point of view of his protagonist--with whom he may, in actuality, entirely disagree. In "Andrea Del Sarto," for example, Browning constructs a rather elaborate and credible rationale for del Sarto's failure as an artist, i.e., he, Andrea, has sacrificed fame, not for honor's sake as did Pictor Ignotus, but for love's. That he is culpable for his failure Browning relies upon an external standard of judgment to reveal to us; and it is the relationship between the internal values of the poem and those external values which we momentarily suspend that provides the substance of Professor Langbaum's crucial study of the dramatic monologue in his The Poetry of Experience. In The Ring and the Book, however, we have the added advantage of having the poet speak to us in his own voice in the first and last of the twelve books, thus providing us with some valuable guidelines for our judgments of the action which occurs within the poem. And we have Browning's own sanction for the ethical judgments we pronounce upon the separate cities of his narrative:

These who had rolled the starlike pest [Guido's brother Paul]
to Rome
And stationed it to suck up and absorb
The sweetness of Pompilia, rolled again
That bloated bubble, with her soul inside,

Back to Arezzo and a palace there--
 Or say, a fissure in the honest earth
 Whence long ago had curled the vapour first,
 Blown big by nether fires to apall day:
 It touched home, broke, and blasted far and wide.
 (ll. 554-562)

But Rome, he says, "lies gold and glad i' the sunshine," and it thus becomes the golden city of light.

Rome, then, is the home of Pompilia the Innocent; it is the object of Caponsacchi's priestly quest ("Rome's the eventual harbour,--make for port"); and it is in Rome that the guilty Guido must speak of himself as a "foreigner"; and it is of Rome that Guido's sympathetic reporter Half-Rome says "In Rome, no wrong but has its remedy"; the entire poem is written with a sense of the omnipresence of Rome and its proper moral sanctions; it is equated with the accomplished quest, the seat of judgment, the "blaze' of truth. Darkness, torment and the consuming circle of fire make Arezzo into hell; light, relief, and freedom make paradise of "Rome the Holy."

The fact that Pompilia Comparini's historical home was in Rome simply lends itself to Browning's interpretation of her; appropriately, we find in the poem that the apocalyptic city is closely related in the narrative structure with Browning's metaphorical equation for his heroine as a saint--specifically as a type of the Madonna. He alludes to her in other terms which also have mythic significance, but practically all of these corollary allusions simply serve to heighten our sense of her guiltlessness. He equates her with a tree at least five times (especially the Tree of Life), with a lamb at least ten times, a flower twelve times (especially a rose or lily), a bird six times (especially a dove), a fawn

once, with "whiteness" once, with the moon once, and with a sacrifice once. Most of these figures will readily be seen to suggest not only innocence, but also positive virtue, beauty, and truth. Other Half-Rome even elaborates an extended garden metaphor in which Pietro and Violante are Adam and Eve, while Pompilia is the tree at the center of the garden:

Well, having gained Pompilia, the girl grew
 I' the midst of Pietro here, Violante there,
 Each, like a semicircle with stretched arms
 Joining the other round her preciousness--
 Two walls that go about a garden-plot
 Where a chance sliver, branchlet slipt from bole
 Of some tongue-leaved eye-figured Eden tree
 Filched by two exiles and borne far away,
 Patiently glorifies their solitude,--
 Year by year mounting, grade by grade surmounts
 The gilded brick-work, yet is compassed still,
 Still hidden happily and shielded safe,--
 Else why should miracle have graced the ground?
 But on the twelfth sun that brought April there
 What meant that laugh? The coping stone was reached;
 Nay, a light tuft of bloom towered above
 To be toyed with by butterfly or bee,
 Done good to or else harm to from outside:
 Pompilia's root, stem, and a branch or two
 Home enclosed still, the rest would be the world's.
 (11. 229-248)

Some of the foregoing catalog of references are casual similes and precipitate responses that are largely emotional in nature; those allusions which identify Pompilia with the Madonna-saint, however, are extended broadly in the poem--broadly enough to assume the dimensions of a structural unit within the total narrative. The Other-Half Rome informs us of the rumor that the touch of the dying Pompilia is efficacious for the performing of miracles:

Old Monna Baldi chatters like a jay,
 Swears,--but that, prematurely trundled out
 Just as she felt the benefit begin,
 The miracle was snapped up by somebody,--
 Her palsied limb 'gan prick and promise life

At touch o' the bedclothes merely,--how much more
 Had she but brushed the body as she tried!
 (ll. 51-57)

Pompilia's own monologue contributes to the impression that Browning was creating for her a specific metaphorical identity within the poem: "My Babe nor was, nor is, nor yet shall be/ Count Guido Franceschini's child at all/ Only his mother's, born of love not hate!" (ll. 1762-1764). As the mother of a newborn manchild, she makes the Marian association obliquely by claiming a virgin birth for her son as early as lines 81-92:

How happy those are who know how to write!
 Such could write what their son could read in time,
 Had they a whole day to live out like me.
 Also my name is not a common name,
 "Pompilia," and may help to keep apart
 A little the thing I am from what girls are.
 But then how far away, how hard to find
 Will anything about me have become,
 Even if the boy bethink himself and ask!
 No father that he ever knew at all,
 Nor ever had--no, never had, I say!

This association is supported more specifically near the end of her monologue:

I never realized God's birth before--
 How he grew likest God in being born.
 This time I felt like Mary, had my babe
 Lying a little on my breast like hers.
 (ll. 1690-1693)

Caponsacchi also asserts the Marian equation:

I made
 The one-turn more--and there at the window stood,
 Framed in its black square length, with lamp in hand,
 Pompilia; the same great, grave, grievful air
 As stands i' the dusk, on altar that I know,
 Left alone with one moonbeam in her cell,
 Our Lady of all the Sorrows.
 (ll. 701-707)

Elsewhere he reproaches his priestly auditors with a reminder of
Pompilia's holiness:

. . . if she is dead,
Oh, Sirs, she can be loved by none of you
Most or least priestly! Saints, to do us good,
Must be in heaven, I seem to understand:
We never find them saints before at least:
Be her first prayer then presently for you--
(ll. 173-178)

Even such august testimony as the Pope's keeps the reader aware of
Pompilia's metaphorical transformation into something more than a
pitiable adolescent girl from Rome:

First of the first,
Such I pronounce Pompilia, then as now
Perfect in whiteness--stoop thou down, my child,
Give one good moment to the poor old Pope
(ll. 1004-1007)

This pronouncement by the Pope becomes almost literally her canonization
as a new saint.

By postulating Rome as the Heavenly City and Pompilia as the
Virgin Saint, Browning wrings from us certain ethical judgments about
the narrative, even while it transpires. Although it has been popularly
supposed that The Ring and the Book tells a single tale ten times over
from varying points of view, and that it never quite asserts a complete
account, one cannot suppose that Browning was so casual about delineating
his theme. He gives us certain specific clues as to what our attitudes
are to be. Among these clues are the mythic identities of his protago-
nists. Professor Langbaum, of course, is correct: "They [the poem's
values] are obviously not intended to be 'relative' if we mean by the word
indefinite or a matter of opinion."¹⁰ Browning governs our responses to

¹⁰Op. cit., p. 112.

the poem through its metaphorical structure; Madonna-Pompilia is to be trusted; her account of the events will not deceive us. In evaluating the truth of the poem we are not simply to weigh the logical evidence pragmatically, for the poem is in part an attack upon the "logic-choppers" who were stripping the world of its moral values with their creed of scientism; Browning exploits the historical fact that the evidence in the case is stacked against Caponsacchi and Pompilia, but it is precisely his point that in this case the evidence is wrong. We are supposed to see the truth, as Caponsacchi has done--and Pompilia's mythic identity is calculated to evoke a sympathy which will facilitate this response.

On the other hand, Browning recognizes that a vapid idealism is no sound counter measure with which to intercept the encroachment of the pragmatic spirit. He is a realist. Depravity exists, and Pompilia's goodness and Rome's bright sanctions must have their converse in a genuinely potent order of evil. Arezzo becomes Rome's ethical opposite; Guido becomes Pompilia's. Just as Pompilia's metaphorical identity is appropriate to her city's, so Guido's is to his. Half-Rome, again ironically truthful, points out the Comparini's contention that Guido is the offspring of a demon:

Guido's old lady-mother Beatrice,
Who since her husband, Count Tomasso's death,
Had held sole sway i' the house,--the doited crone
Slow to acknowledge, curtesy and abdicate,--
Was recognized of true novercal type,
Dragon and devil.

(ll. 468-473)

Guido himself is referred to twice as a fox; simply as a beast three times; as a baptizer in blood; as trickster, schemer, pretender; as a

bull once; as a fiend once; as a serpent five times; as a fury of fire; and as a bird of prey; but the most significant equations for him are those of the wolf--which I will discuss more fully in a subsequent chapter, and which earn at least ten specific or implied allusions, and as devil.

The Pope appropriately refers to Guido's mother as the Mother of Hell:

Then comes
The gaunt grey nightmare in the furthest smoke,
The hag that gave these three abortions birth,
Unmotherly mother and unwomanly
Woman, that turns motherhood to shame,
Womanliness to loathing:

(ll. 910-915)

As another appropriate symbol for her he uses the predatory beast:

. . . no one word,
No gesture to curb cruelty a whit
More than the she-pard thwarts her playsome whelps
Trying their milk teeth on the soft o' the throat
O' the first fawn, flung, with those beseeching eyes,
Flat in the covert! How should she but couch,
Lick the dry lips, unsheathe the blunted claw,
Catch 'twixt her placid eyewinks at what chance
Old bloody half-forgotten dream my flit,
Born when herself was novice to the taste,
The while she lets youth take its pleasure.

(ll. 915-925)

It is also the Pope who refers to Guido himself as being virtually sub-human:

Such I find Guido, midmost blotch of black
Discernable in this group of clustered crimes
Huddling together in the cave they call
Their palace, outraged day thus penetrates.
Around him ranged, now close and now remote,
Prominent or obscure to meet the needs
O' the mage and master, I detect each shape
Subsidiary i' the scene nor loathed the less,
All alike colored, all described skin

By one and the same pitchy furnace stirred
 At the centre: see, they lick the master's hand,
 This fox-faced horrible priest, his brother-brute
 The Abate,--why, mere wolfishness looks well,
 Guido stands honest in the red o' the flame
 (ll. 723-736)

Browning has assured that we will not misread Guido's moral nature by calling him, in the first book of the poem (where the poet speaks in his own voice), "the Prince o' the Power of the Air"; the source of this epithet is scriptural, for it is Saint Paul's title for Satan in Ephesians 2:2. Guido's mythic identity is, then, Satanic. Caponsacchi repeats Browning's epithet in the appropriate monologue, and he also reports that when Pompilia tries to stab Guido in the upper room at Castelnuovo she cries "Die . . . devil, in God's name!" In her own testimony Pompilia refers to her husband as "The neutralizer of all good and truth." And, of course, because the equation between the serpent and Satan is traditional in western mythology, the implication is clear when Caponsacchi says of the Count:

Let us go away--leave Guido all alone
 Back again on the world that knows him now!
 I think he will be found (indulge so far!)
 Not to die so much as slide out of life,
 Pushed by the general horror and common hate
 Low, lower,--left o' the very ledge of things,
 I seem to see him catch convulsively
 One by one at all honest forms of life,
 At reason, order, decency, and use--
 To cramp him and get foothold by at least;
 And still they disengage them from his clutch.
 "What, you are he, then, had Pompilia once
 "And so forwent her? Take not up with us!"
 And thus I see him slowly and surely edged
 Off all the table-land whence life upsprings
 Aspiring to be immortality
 As the snake, hatched on hill-top by mischance,
 Despite his wriggling, slips, slides, slidders down
 Hill-side, lies low and prostrate on the smooth

Level of the outer place

(ll. 1910-1929)

Guido is Satan, and therefore he is capable of assuming all of the guises of that archetypal trickster. He slays the Comparini in "a wash of hell-fire," (H-R, l. 1436). Guido contrasts himself with one who "has tried both sulphur and sops-in-wine!" But the contrast is an ironic one, for of course it is he himself who is guilty of hell and treason. One of Guido's characteristic tones of voice is observed by Caponsacchi: "'Seize, bind!" Guido hissed." Here the Satan-serpent image is, as frequently in the poem, implied rather than expressed, but the connotative "hissed" is part of the larger metaphorical fabric. The colors associated with Guido are also indicative of his moral nature; Half-Rome, when approaching the account of Franceschini's revenge says "anon/ The stealing sombre element comes in/ Till all is black or blood-red in the piece," (ll. 622-623). Other Half-Rome alludes to the fleeing murderers as "red from head to heel," (l. 1638). He also alludes to Guido's arrival at peaceful Rome as the "blue of a sudden sulphur-blaze" and, in the same passage, he explains Guido's plans in suggestive terms:

That Guido may enjoy his own again!
Repair all losses by a master-stroke,
Wipe out the past, all done and left undone,
Swell the good present to best evermore,
Die into new life, which let blood baptise!

(ll. 1565-1569)

The same speaker also sees Guido's relentless quest for revenge in the figure of a winepress:

Then did the wench o' the winepress o' all hate
Vanity, disappointment, grudge, and greed,
Take the last turn that screws out pure revenge

With a bright bubble at the brim beside--
 By an heir's birth

(ll. 1542-1545)

Pompilia recalls that when she married Guido she was "hurried through
 a storm,/ Next dark eve of December's dearest day--" (ll. 425-426).

And then
 I heard the heavy church-door lock out help
 Behind us: for the customary warmth,
 Two tapers shivered on the altar. "Quick--
 "Lose no time!" cried the priest. And straightway down
 From . . . what's behind the altar where he hid--
 Hawk-nose and yellowness and bush and all,
 Stepped Guido, caught my hand, and there was I
 O' the chancel

(ll. 437-445)

The implications of the storm, the shivering tapers and Guido's lurking
 behind the altar are all ominous portents--and to read them as merely
 descriptive narrative would be to do great disservice to Browning; they
 are symbolic in the immediate context--mythic in the total.

Having postulated the mythic identity of the Virgin-Saint for
 Pompilia, and that of the Serpent-Satan for Guido, Browning has also
 provided a mythic identity for the Canon Caponsacchi, who becomes,
 simply, the Saviour--a sort of Messiah. Other Half-Rome creates a resetting
 of Pompilia's defense, in which the following pertinent passage appears:

"Earth was made hell to me who did no harm.
 "I only could emerge one way from hell
 "By catching at one hand held me. So
 "I caught at it and thereby stepped to heaven:"

(ll. 1344-1347)

Of course it is Caponsacchi's hand at which she catches, and therefore
 Caponsacchi by whom she steps to heaven. The same speaker also recreates
 Pompilia's assertion that:

"Then something like a white wave o' the sea
 "Broke o'er my brain and buried me in sleep

"Blessedly, till it ebbed and le't me loose,
 "And where was I found but on a strange bed
 "In a strange room like hell, roaring with noise,
 "Ruddy with flame, and filled with men, in front
 "Whom but the man you call my husband, ay--
 "Count Guido once more between heaven and me,
 "For there my heaven stood, my salvation, yes--
 "That Caponsacchi all my heaven of help
 (ll. 1147-1156)

If the first reference above is implicit, the last is specific;
 Caponsacchi is the Saviour, just as Guido is Satan. *Tertium Quid* refers
 specifically to the priest's condescension in figurative terms as the
 place "Where stood one saviour like a piece of heaven," (l. 795). But
 it is Pompilia herself who most authoritatively confirms her benefactor's
 moral identity:

That man, you misinterpret and misprise--
 The glory of his nature, I had thought,
 Shot itself out in white light, blazed the truth
 Through every atom of his act with me
 (ll. 920-923)

And she also confirms a still more precise metaphor:

If God yet have a servant, man a friend,
 The weak a saviour, the vile a foe,--
 Let him be present, by the name invoked,
 Giuseppe-Maria Caponsacchi!
 (ll. 936-941)

There are other mythic elements in the poem also; indeed, the
 apocalyptic and demonic worlds of the two cities seem thoroughly provided
 with connotative furnishings. There are, for instance, at least six
 explicit uses of a garden metaphor, each of which conveys the customary
 complex of associations--the burgeoning of life, the temptation, the
 passion, the fall, indeed, the whole drama of life in well-ordered
 miniature. In the account of the pro-Guido speaker, Half-Rome, however,
 the garden's values are inverted and distorted:

The gallant, Caponsacchi, Lucifer
 I' the garden where Pompilia, Eve-like, lured
 Her Adam Guido to his fault and fall.

(ll. 167-169)

The metaphor here provides us with a sinister sort of paradise and gives evidence of one of Browning's favorite devices--the dramatizing of his values by throwing them into relief upon their parody. It once again demonstrates a technique which has already been discussed: the use of the same metaphors in the mouths of those whose points of view are clearly opposed. It cannot be objected that Pompilia is a saint only to those who defend her; the metaphor persists even in the mouth of Guido, who finally prays for mercy in her name. Nor is Guido a predator only to those who despise him, for the "wolf" is his own favorite appellation for himself. The points of view, then, change from monologue to monologue, but the metaphors remain virtually the same (although of course they are often ironic when used by unsympathetic characters). Browning does not wish us to be cut adrift from certain moral guidelines within the poem, although he does wish to avoid imposing a "system" upon us; indeed, he has no "system." It is the metaphorical structure--the myth--which provides these moral guidelines. We understand which values are ironic and which are not by understanding which speakers have received the sanctions of the poet; it is, in part, the function of the metaphors to tell us this. Half-Rome makes a Lucifer of Pompilia's messiah, and a temptress of the Madonna. Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinicus, Guido's prosecutor, grants Half-Rome's imagery, but he does so only for the sake of legal argument and because he is more concerned with Guido's guilt than with Pompilia's innocence (which he

himself indicts after her death, while suing her estate on behalf of the Convertite sisters):

Grant the tale
O' the husband, which is false, for proved true
To the letter,--or the letters, I should say,
The abominations he professed to find
And fix upon Pompilia and the priest,--
Allow them hers--for though she could not write,
In early days of Eve-like innocence
That plucked no apple from the knowledge-tree,
Yet, at the serpent's word, Eve plucks and eats
And knows--especially how to read and write:
(11. 443-452)

In the monologue of Other Half-Rome, however, we find the garden image rehabilitated:

. . . somebody had somehow somewhere seen
Their [the Comparini's] tree-top-tuft of bloom [Pompilia]
above the wall [of the garden]
And came now to apprise them the tree's self
Was no such crab-sort as should feed the swine,
But veritable gold
(11. 380-384)

Another typically mythical metaphor is the labyrinth, according to Professor Frye:

Corresponding to the apocalyptic way or straight road we have in this the demonic world the labyrinth or maze, the image of lost direction, often with a monster at its heart like the Minotaur.¹¹

Bottinius refers to the Franceschini mansion as the "Old labyrinthine palace." Other Half-Rome tells us that Pompilia, untraveled and unsophisticated, knew little of the world beyond her home in Rome and her path to the church, "Nor, in Arezzo, knew her way through street." Caponsacchi reminds us that Pompilia's great fear on the eve of her flight was that she might become lost in the winding streets of the dark city;

¹¹Op. cit., p. 150.

his last conversation with her includes his instructions (as her "Saviour") for finding her "way" (in a metaphysical as well as literal sense):

. . . there's new moon this eve--
 It sets and then begins the solid black.
 "Descend, proceed to the Torrione, step
 "Over the low dilapidated wall,
 "Take San Clemente, there's no other gate
 "Unguarded at the hour: some paces thence
 "An inn stands; cross to it; I shall be there."

She answered, "If I can but find the way.
 "But I shall find it. Go now!"

(ll. 1078-1086)

In addition to those features of myth which are required by the simple fact of the word's definition, there is an accompanying psychological phenomenon which invests myth in its most legitimate forms. Because there seems to be no adequate English word for the phenomenon, past commentators have drafted a Polynesian word to convey the necessary connotations. The word, "mana," seems to have received the sanction of such reputable critics as Richard Chase and A. O. Lovejoy, and offers itself conveniently for the discussion of certain features in The Ring and the Book. It suggests that quality of awesomeness which informs both totem and taboo. It is the source of the mystic apprehension which inheres in a stone idol, a dead body, a sacrificial animal, a witch, or any other terrible object. Mana seems to be a property especially of primitive as opposed to formal or self-conscious myth; it conveys the sense of wonder and strangeness that characterize the credulous mind:

Thus Professor A. O. Lovejoy believes that things are said to be mysterious, wonderful, or awful--to have mana--because they are "efficacious, powerful, productive." Mana, he thinks, is a "persuasive, life-giving impersonal energy" and things which have mana become beautiful or terrific

because they produce effects.¹²

This sense of the strange and wonderful so dominates certain passages in The Ring and the Book that one is inclined to seek the explanation in other terms than the purely aesthetic. In the following excerpt from Caponsacchi's monologue, for instance, there is notably a feeling of power beyond the ordinary:

Up we all went together, in they broke
O' the chamber late my chapel. There she lay,
Composed as when I laid her, that last eve,
O' the couch, still breathless, motionless, sleep's self,
Wax-white, seraphic, saturate with the sun
O' the morning that now flooded from the front
And filled the window with a light like blood.
"Behold the poisoner, the adulteress,
--And feigning sleep too! Seize, bine!" Guido hissed.

She started up, stood erect, face to face
With the husband: back he fell, was buttressed there
By the window all aflame with morning-red,
He is the black figure, the opprobrious blur
Against all peace and joy and light and life.

(ll. 1514-1527)

Here mana radiates from Pompilia's angelic whiteness and from Guido's Satanic blackness. The connotative power of such words as "seraphic," "blood," "hissed," and "black" derives not from our aesthetic sensibilities, but from our apprehensions of violence and from our familiarity with a mythical tradition.

In her own monologue Pompilia speaks of the dawning awareness of her pregnancy, of the quickening life within:

. . . Up I sprang alive,
Light in me, light without me, everywhere
Change! A broad yellow sunbeam was let fall

¹²Richard Chase, The Quest for Myth, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1949), p. 69.

From heaven to earth,--a sudden drawbridge lay,
 Along which marched a myriad merry motes
 Mocking the flies that crossed them and recrossed
 In rival dance, companions new-born too.
 On the house-eaves, a dripping shag of weed
 Shook diamonds on each dull grey lattice-square,
 As first one, then another bird leapt by,
 And light was off again,
 Always with one voice,--where are two such joys?
 (11. 1222-1234)

Here the rejoicing of nature and the dance of life radiate a sympathy that elevates Pompilia's maternity to a matter of concern for the whole of the natural world; this is in very fact her Magnificat, for she is Madonna, the Holy Mother. This passage transcends purely lyrical beauty by just so much as the Holy beauty of ritual transcends purely phenomenal beauty. Mana emanates from other contexts; it clings to Mannaia, the guillotine:

There stood the twelve-foot square of scaffold, railed
 Considerately round to elbow-height:
 (For fear an officer should tumble thence
 And sprain his ankle and be lame a month,
 Through starting when the axe fell and head too!)
 Railed likewise where the steps whereby 'twas reached.
 All of it painted red: red, in the midst,
 Ran up two narrow tall beams barred across,
 Since from the summit, some twelve feet to reach,
 The iron plate with the sharp shearing edge
 Had slammed, jerked, shot, or slid,--I shall soon find which!
 (Guido, 11. 214-224)

Guido here attempts an objective account of the machine's appearance, but his ironic concern for the officer assumes the proportions of a grim, macabre joke, thus belying an inner horror which forces its way through his self-imposed restraint in the line "All of it painted red," where the final word of the phrase is immediately echoed, and the blood-color comes to dominate the whole passage.

Mana, perhaps, also clings to the tree about which 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?" The tree, the egg, the gold and the sun all connote life forces; all seem to radiate sympathy for Pompilia's impending motherhood.

Mana attends the Brotherhood of Death, that company of hooded ministrants who approach at the close of Guido's second monologue to escort him to the guillotine. In this and each of the preceding circumstances, Browning uses a highly connotative imagery to elicit special emotional responses from the reader. Mythical force pervades many such passages, but the suggestive nature of this list should by now have served its purpose.

The figurative identities established in the poem are part of a large metaphorical pattern--a mythic one, in which is re-enacted the drama of a "Paradise Regained." Perfect innocence is assaulted by the full force of perfect depravity; it can be redeemed only through the virtue of perfect and self-sacrificing love.

CHAPTER III

A SPRIG OF IVY

Like myth the modern critical concept of romance represents such a gallimaufry of meanings that any attempt to fix it "in a formulated phrase" is predestined to frustration. The best one can do perhaps when using "romance" as an implement of criticism is to define his own particular use of the term, and aware of the precautions of Professors Lovejoy and Peckham in regard to the semantic problems of such a venture, that is what I shall attempt here.

Unlike myth, and unlike magic and ritual, romance falls peculiarly within the province of the literary critic. If magic is the concern of the shaman and ritual the concern of the priest, then romance is certainly the concern of the poet. If myth subsumes them all and so invites the attentions of anthropologist and psychologist, romance may invite the corollary interest of those scholars but remains, nonetheless, uniquely literary in its execution. Regardless of what it implies about those dark recesses of the human subconsciousness, romance expresses itself in a highly self-conscious form, and thus it is probably appropriate to discover its definition among the studies of the literary critics. Mario Praz, for instance, has asserted that:

The word 'romantic' appears for the first time in the English language about the middle of the seventeenth century, meaning 'like the old romances,' and shows how there began to be felt, about this time, a real need to give names to certain character-

istics of the chivalrous and pastoral romances.¹

The implication is that the word was first used as a description of the external form of the romance. It is also this description of form which recommends the medieval poem "Flammenca" to Ezra Pound as a convenient catalogue of typical romantic subject matter:

Who would hear divers accounts
Of kings and marquises and countes
Could hear of them full all he would.
No ear was there in grievous mood,
For one there told of Priamus
Another spoke of Pirus,
Another counts fair Helen's worth,
How Paris sought, then led her forth.
.....
One spoke of that Table Round
Where came no man, save he were found
Fit for the King's recognizance.
Where never failed their valiance.
And of Don Gavain spoke there one,
And of the lion his companion,
And of that knight who Lunette freed;
To the Breton maid one there gave heed,
That held Sir Lancelot in prize
.....
Another tells of Perceval
Who rode his horse into the hall.²

The catalogue continues, but the point should be clear that here we have a contemporary account of what sort of tale was expected when a troubador undertook to recount a romance. Although both Praz and Pound have thus briefly acknowledged the FORM of romance, both continue in their respective essays to discuss it as though it were something quite different from form. Pound, as a matter of fact, is apparently attempting to accomplish for the Middle Ages what Walter Pater had accomplished for

¹The Romantic Agony, trans. Angus Davidson, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), pp. 11-12.

²The Spirit of Romance, J. M. Dent and Sons, London, pp. 61-62.

the Renaissance; i.e., he is trying to describe the essential mood or temper of the period. And Praz's book, as its title indicates, is not primarily concerned with romantic form, but with the romantic sensibility, as indeed are the books of many modern critics of romance--such as Kermode, Peckham, and Abrams. Indeed, one might venture the generalization about modern criticism, that when it speaks of "romance," it uses a noun to speak of chivalric literature and emphasizes the artifact; when it speaks of "romantic" it uses a modifier to describe not the artifact, but a given artistic temperament, and, incidentally, not necessarily the temperament in which the chivalric tale was composed, but one most fully realized in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe. In popular jargon, then, the Roman de la Rose is a romance, but Guillaume de Lorris is not a romantic poet and would be more appropriately referred to simply as a "romancer." Both the nineteenth century poets and their medieval forerunners shared, obviously, a considerable degree both in the nature of their subject matter and in their outlook--as is witnessed by Keats, who is both a romantic and a romancer. But criticism has thus far, either through intent, or error, or semantic double-dealing chosen to preserve at least two basic inflections for the word "romance."

What I should like to suggest here is that Browning, like Keats, is both romantic and romancer--that The Ring and the Book at one level of its meaning is a romance in the chivalric, medieval sense of the word. Although few will question his romanticism, few have recognized in Browning the composer of romance narrative in any context other than in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." Professor DeVane is one of the latter few. In an article appearing in the Yale Review he published an

article which he called "The Virgin and the Dragon."³ His thesis in this paper is that one of the very frequent metaphorical equations in The Ring and the Book has autobiographical overtones. That equation is the one in which Browning speaks of Pompilia as the Andromeda and Caponsacchi as the Perseus of classical myth, Guido being the "dragon" alluded to in the title of the article. Professor DeVane also points out that the poet often interchanges Perseus and another chivalric hero of European legend--St. George. He sums up his observations on the heroic stature of Caponsacchi in the following manner:

In those books of The Ring and the Book where the speakers give favorable judgments upon Pompilia and Caponsacchi, I have counted at least thirty references to the Andromeda and its cognate myth, not counting such facts as this--that Browning, for all his accuracy and care in consulting the Royal Astronomer upon the condition of the moon on the night of Pompilia's flight, April 29-30, 1697, at the last moment changed the date, but not the moon, so that the flight would fall on April 23, St. George's day.⁴

And then he stresses the thematic significance of the metaphor:

Indeed, so steadily is the Perseus-St. George legend used . . . that we may know what to think of each speaker by the treatment he accords the myth, and by what version of the myth he employs.⁵

What I wish to add to Professor DeVane's observation is that in addition to the "thirty references" to the specific legend of Perseus, there is an even broader metaphorical base for reading The Ring and the Book as a romance. I wish to indicate that the romance narrative in the poem assumes structural proportions, and, consequently, represents an added dimension in the poem's execution. The poem, then, consists of three

³Vol. 37, 1947-8, pp. 33-46.

⁴Ibid., p. 42.

⁵Ibid., p. 43.

separate yet inter-related narrative and structural levels which can be diagrammed in the following fashion:

- I. The Myth: Pompilia - The Madonna-Saint
Caponasacchi - The Saviour
Guido - Satan
- II. The Romance: Pompilia - The Distressed Lady
Caponasacchi - The Champion
Guido - The Dragon
- III. The Literal: Pompilia - The Distressed Italian Wife
Caponasacchi - The Priest
Guido - The Oppressive Husband

Each level has its own major and corollary symbols and narrative; all are maintained throughout the poem; each has its private moment in the sun of the reader's attention; mutual symbols often reflect significance at two or three levels simultaneously.

A discussion of the distinctions between myth and romance, in the senses which I have used them, now becomes incumbent, and a helpful quotation from Professor Ker's notable exploration of that subject now becomes convenient:

Romance by itself is a kind of literature that does not allow the full exercise of dramatic imagination; a limited and abstract form, as compared with the fulness and variety of Epic; though episodes of romance, and romantic moods and digressions, may have their place, along with all other human things, in the epic scheme.⁶

"Epic" here is the enveloping vehicle of mythic (and other sorts of) poetry. Professor Frye, beginning at the same conclusion, elaborates upon the implications of this segment of Ker's discussion:

We begin our study of archetypes, then, with a world of myth, an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience The presence of a mythical structure in realistic fiction,

⁶Epic and Romance, (London: Macmillan Co., 1908), p. 33.

however, poses certain technical problems for making it plausible, and the devices used in solving these problems may be given the general name of displacement.⁷

Myth, then, is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole world of romance, using that term to mean the tendency . . . to displace myth in a human direction.⁸

We have distinguished myth from romance by the hero's power of action This distinction is much sharper theologically than it is poetically, and myth and romance both belong in the general category of mythopoeic literature.⁹

The heroes of myth, Frye has said, are gods; those of romance are men who act with the strength of gods--like us in their mortality, unlike us in their abilities and virtues.

The distinctions between myth and romance are reasonably substantial, and the fact that Browning was transposing his "old Roman murder case" into three different keys should evoke admiration at least for his technical dexterity.

In documenting my own case for reading The Ring and the Book as a romance, I am going to suppose that the "Flammenca" poet's catalogue of typical plots is representative of what romance fiction implied for his own contemporaries; Jessie L. Weston's account of the characteristic integers in romance will also provide a source for my judgments as will Professor Ker's fifth chapter in Epic and Romance.¹⁰ The common denominators of romance include: 1) a champion, 2) a quest, 3) a lady,

⁷Op. cit., p. 136.

⁸Ibid., p. 137.

⁹Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁰Miss Weston's book, of course, is From Ritual to Romance, (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1920).

4) an obstacle (such as a predatory monster), 5) a conflict, and 6) a resolution. The most cursory reading of The Ring and the Book will be adequate to indicate the availability of these separate items within the poem; it is my wish to show that they are related in a complete narrative, providing one level of action within the poem.

If the numerical frequency of allusions is indicative, Browning seems to have preferred Pompilia in her mythic role as Madonna-Saint, as Caponsacchi seems to find his fullest dimensions in his chivalric role as knight-at-arms. Half-Rome, the first eye-witness speaker in the poem, although he supports Guido and speaks of Caponsacchi ironically, establishes the priest's romantic identity:

To banish trouble from a lady's breast
 So lonely and so lovely, nor so lean!
 This you expect? Indeed, then, much you err.
 Not to such ordinary end as this
 Had Caponsacchi flung the cassock far,
 Doffed the priest, donned the perfect cavalier.
 The die was cast: over shoes over boots:
 And just as she I shall presently show
 Pompilia, soon looked Helen to the life,
 Recumbent upstairs in her pink and white,
 So, in the inn-yard, bold as 'twere Troy-town,
 There strutted Paris in correct costume,
 Cloak, cap and feather, no appointment missed,
 Even to a wicked-looking sword at side,
 He seemed to find and feel familiar at.

(ll. 995-1009)

Other Half-Rome, who early alludes to Caponsacchi as the "courtly Canon," describes the same encounter to which Half-Rome has been alluding in these suggestive terms:

For an eruption was o' the priest, alive
 And alert, calm, resolute and formidable,
 Not the least look of fear in that broad brow--
 One not be disposed of by surprise,
 And armed moreover--who had guessed as much?
 Yes, there he stood in secular costume

Complete from head to heel, with sword at side,
 He seemed to know the trick of perfectly.
 (ll. 1254-1261)

It is worthwhile noting that he also uses the chivalric metaphor, but that he uses it without irony. Tertium Quid, neither entirely for nor against the cause of Guido, uses essentially the same image:

Had but the priest been found, as was to hope,
 In serge, not silk, with crucifix, not sword:
 Whereas the grey innocuous grub, of yore,
 Had hatched a hornet, tickle to the touch,
 The priest was metamorphosed into knight.
 (ll. 1155-1159)

Browning is so persistent in compelling us to see Caponsacchi's romantic identity that he even gives the figure to Guido, who reports that after his tiresome pursuit of the fleeing couple he:

Tumbled into the court-yard of an inn
 At the end, and fell on whom I thought to find,
 Even Caponsacchi,--what part once was priest,
 Cast to the winds now with the cassock-rags.
 In cape and sword a cavalier confessed,
 There stood he chiding dilatory grooms
 (ll. 1047-1052)

Professor DeVane has pointed out that Caponsacchi, by virtue of the modesty which he is forced to assume, must use the chivalric equation cautiously, but with this qualification, Browning is still consistent, for the priest himself says:

Yes,
 I rise in your esteem, sagacious Sirs,
 Stand up a renderer of reasons, not
 The officious priest would personate Saint George
 For a mock princess in undragon'd days.
 What, the blood startles you? What, after all
 The priest who must needs carry sword on thigh
 May find imperative use for it? Then there was
 A Princess, was a dragon belching flame,
 And should have been a Saint George also?
 (ll. 1768-1777)

Pompilia, too, is aware of the figurative possibilities in her flight. She tried to get relief from her oppression through the good offices of the Bishop, the governor, and another priest (the Canon Conti) before turning to her ultimate champion. It is Conti, she informs us, who has declined to help her on the grounds that:

"Guido has claws that scratch, shows feline teeth;
 "A formidabler foe than I dare fret:
 "Give me a dog to deal with, twice the size!
 "Of course I am a priest and Canon too,
 "But . . . by the bye . . . though both, not quite so bold
 "As he, my fellow-Canon, brother-priest,
 "The personage of such ill odour here
 "Because of the reports--pure birth o' the brain!
 "Our Caponsacchi, he's your true Saint George
 "To slay the monster, set the Princess free,
 "And have the whole High Altar to himself:
 "I always think so when I see that piece
 "I' the Pieve, that's his church and mine, you know:
 "Though you drop eyes at mention of his name!"
 (ll. 1315-1328)

"That piece/ I' the Pieve" is a picture of Saint George which was painted by Vasari and which hung over the altar in the church of the historical Caponsacchi.¹¹

Even Bottinius, as Professor Cook notes in his own brief comment upon the frequency of the Saint George allusion, reminds us that Caponsacchi is, after all, essentially a champion:

Then, if a priest
 One juvenile and potent; else, mayhap,
 That dragon, our Saint George would slay, slays him.
 And should fair face accompany strong hand,
 The more complete equipment
 (ll. 600-604)

As one might expect of the Pope's somewhat sophisticated point of

¹¹A. K. Cook, Commentary on "The Ring and the Book," (Oxford: Press, 1940), p. 154.

of view, it offers a rather subtle concept of the chivalric possibilities of Pompilia's plight in the following extended metaphor, where the Pope is forced to pronounce upon the clergyman's change of habit:

Ay, such championship
Of God at first blush, such prompt cheery thud
Of glove on ground that answers ringingly
The challenge of the false knight,--watch we long
And wait we vainly for its gallant like
From those appointed to the service . . .
. . . how else proclaim fine scorn of flesh,
Unchariness of blood when blood faith begs!
Where are the men-at-arms with cross on coat?
Aloof, bewraying their attire: whilst thou
In mask and motley, pledged to dance not fight,
Sprangst forth the hero! . . .
.
. . . Was the trial sore?
Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!
.
. . . Pray
"Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!"
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,
That so he may do battle and have praise!
.
Thou, whose sword hand was used to strike the lute,
Whose wanton sentry-station graced some wanton's gate,
Thou didst push forward and show mettle, and shame
The laggards and retrieve the day
Be glad thou hast let light into the world
Through that irregular breach o' the boundary,--see
The same upon thy path and march assured,
Learning anew the use of soldiership,
Self-abnegation, freedom from all fear,
Loyalty to the life's end! Ruminant,
Deserve the initiatory spasm,--once more
Work, be unhappy but bear life, my son!

(11. 1156-1212)

In this part of the Pope's monologue Browning approaches, perhaps, the most summary statement of the romantic implications of his narrative. The speaker avinces an almost Spenserian notion that the champion of chastity has become the champion of a representative virtue, hence, if the logic be extended, the champion of God. It is here that we see that

the romantic narrative is not merely a technical exercise, but also a crutch for the thematic statement of the poem. Good and evil are polarized in the antagonists, and innocence is made the prize.

Of all the speakers in the poem only Archangeli fails to use the romantic metaphor in a most specific fashion. But, as with pure myth, so with the romance, it is the voice of Browning himself which provides the ultimate sanction for the figure. In Book I he describes Pompilia's fate at the hands of her "captors" as though she were some chaste damsel ensnared in the dread, enchanted forest of romance:

I saw them [the Comparini], in the potency of fear
Break somehow through the satyr-family
(For a grey mother with a monkey-mien,
Mopping and mowing, was apparent too,
As, confident of capture, all took hands
And danced about the captives in a ring)
--Saw them break through, breathe safe, at Rome again,
Saved by the selfish instinct, losing so
Their loved one left with haters. These I saw,
In recrudescency of baffled hate,
Prepare to wring the uttermost revenge
From body and soul thus left them: all was sure,
Fire laid, cauldron set, the obscene ring traced,
The victim stripped and prostrate: what of God?
The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash,
Quenched lay their cauldron, covered i' the dust the crew,
As in a glory of armor like Saint George,
Out again sprang the young beauteous priest
Bearing away the lady in his arms,
Saved for a splendid minute and no more.

(ll. 569-588)

The "grey mother" evokes recollections of the romantic tradition of the "terrible mother" as typified in Jungian psychology and in the tale of Spenser's Florimell (Book III, Canto 7, Faerie Queene) who barely escapes rape at the hands of the sub-human son of a sylvan witch. Professor Frye is of ~~the~~ opinion that the tradition of the old crone in romance bears

suggestions of incest, hence of unnatural lust.¹² Browning's speaking in his own voice thus confirms the self-consciousness and significance of the romantic motif which pervades the poem.

In the main structure of the romance narrative, then, Guido is a dragon who has imprisoned the beautiful and virtuous Pompilia. In the dragon's lair she is environed by sadistic cruelties and by the threat of the incestuous lust of that other demon, Guido's brother, while the terrible Beatrice broods in the gloomy background. At just the moment when the brother's lust and Guido's violence reach their maximum danger, Pompilia's champion bursts into the demon den and delivers the maiden with her life and virtue still intact. This dominant theme, however, is bolstered by certain isolated symbols which, although they do not further the narrative action, do serve to keep the reader aware of the sort of responses he is to make to the romantic tale which is transpiring simultaneously with the mythic. Among these isolated but corollary symbols is the rose--a familiar emblem of true love in romance since at least the thirteenth century when de Lorris thus described his dreamer's passion for a rose:

Among the thousand things reflected there
I chose a full-charged rosebush in a plot
Encinctured with a hedge; and such desire
Then seized me that I had not failed to seek
The place where that rose heap was on display
Though Pavia or Paris had tempted me.¹³

(Canto, 7, ll. 1-6)

¹²Op. cit., p. 193.

¹³The English translation is that of Harry W. Robbins, published by E. P. Dutton Co., N.Y., 1962.

And the tradition continued, of course, to modern times, "My love is like a red, red rose." In the first ninety lines of his monologue *The Other Half-Rome* refers to Pompilia as though she were a flower six different times; in line seventy he indicates specifically that the flower is a rose. Pompilia, then, is the "true love" of Browning's romance; in addition to its chivalric connotations, the rose also has an added appropriateness, for as the garden of romance (compare the Bower of Bliss) merges at some psychological borderland with the garden of myth (compare the Garden of Eden) so the rose of romance merges into the rose of mysticism when it becomes symbolic of the Virgin Mary. At just this point, perhaps, Browning's myth and romance become, as they periodically do in the poem, momentarily synonymous, for Pompilia is both rose as maiden and rose as Virgin. The Rose-Mary equation dates at least from the middle ages and is typified in the following carol:

All of a Rose, a lovely Rose,
All of a Rose I sing a song.
Hearken to me both old and young,
How from its root a Rose-tree sprung,
Of fairer rose no song was sung,
Never in any king's land!

Branches six had that Rose, I ween,
Those branches were both bright and sheen,
That Rose is Mary, Heaven's Queen--
From her breast a flower sprung!¹⁴

Similarly, symbolic ivy occupies a respectable place in western literary tradition, and similarly it is interchangeably a mythic and romantic symbol, ranging in usage from Ovid (Book III, *Metamorphoses* in the Dionysian myth) to Ezra Pound (Canto II of *Cantos*). Each of these

¹⁴ Reprinted in Jessie L. Weston's, *The Chief Middle English Poets*, (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), p. 363.

two authors uses ivy in its mythic context as an equivalent of Bacchus, whose generative powers it is supposed to reflect. Spenser, on the other hand, uses ivy in a romantic context:

His [the "salvage man's"] wast was with a wreath of yvie greene
 Engirt about, ne other garment:
 For all his haire was like a garment seene;
 And in his hand a tall young oak he bore
 (Book IV, Canto vii, Stanza 7, F.Q.)

This is a description of Amoret's assailant, and the ivy symbolizes his lust. In Book VI ivy is seen covering the cottage of the hermit who cures Matilda and Arthur's squire of their bruises. The healing efficacy of the hermit's powers is no doubt reflected in the ivy under which he dwells. The mythic and romantic uses of ivy have their equation with the generative principle as a common denominator, and Browning prepares us for following Caponsacchi into his chivalric alter-identity when he allows the Bishop to ease the young novitiate's mind by telling him, upon the occasion of the latter's expression of doubt in his own piety:

"Giuseppe Maria Caponsacchi mine,
 "Nobody wants you in these latter days
 "To prop the church by breaking your back-bone,--
 "As the necessary way was once, we know,
 "When Diocletian flourished and his like.
 "That building of the buttress-work was done
 "By martyrs and confessors: let it bide,
 "Add not a brick, but, where you see a chink,
 "Stick in a sprig of ivy or root a rose
 "Shall make amends and beautify the pile!
 (Caponsacchi, ll. 290-299)

The romantic symbols used here help us to see the consistency in Caponsacchi's character; they help to make credible his conversion into the champion of the Distressed Lady, for they suggest his latent capacity for love--his almost fleshly temperament. Indeed, Caponsacchi provides an extension of the logic of character which Browning had already used

in portraying Fra Lippo Lippi in a poem published fourteen years before The Ring and the Book. Lippo experiences the same schismatic response to the celibate life which characterizes his later counterpart; both love life to an almost sensual degree, but Lippo finds his redemption in the art which provides him a deeper understanding of his relation to the world than his church has been able to provide. Caponsacchi's redemption comes when he too gains a deeper insight into his own nature than the church has been able to provide, but the solution in The Ring and the Book is a more sophisticated one, I think, than that of the earlier poem. To be redeemed through the efficacy of art is, after all, a rather highly stylized, abstract way of solving what are the genuine and complex problems of man's relationship to man and to the universe. Caponsacchi's redemption through the self-sacrificial effort to alleviate the misery brought about by injustice is a much more universal and practical way of arriving at an understanding of one's own significance.

Another inevitably romantic integer in the make-up of The Ring and the Book is Browning's emphasis upon the actual journey which Pompilia and Caponsacchi undertake. Such a journey becomes reminiscent of the familiar Journey Perilous when Caponsacchi says of it:

I answered the first look--"Scarce twelve hours more,
 "Then, Rome! There probably was no pursuit,
 "There cannot now be peril: bear up brave!
 "Just some twelve hours to press through to the prize:
 "Then, no more of the terrible journey! Then,
 "No more o' the journey: if it might but last!
 "Always, my life-long, thus to journey still!
 "It is the interruption that I dread,--

(ll. 1306-1313)

The archetypical Dark Journey is a continuing part of the best romantic tradition and may be found in practically all of the Arthur and Charlemagne

cycles, many tales of which Browning had certainly read. The "Deposition of Flight" (the seventh pamphlet) assumes an important role in the Old Yellow Book; this is a coincidence which a craftsman of Browning's background could not well ignore. He had been reared in a most literate fashion, having read Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton and the romantic poets avidly. Determining to transmute the historical Guiseppe Caponsacchi into a figurative Saint George, Browning could hardly have failed to see the possibility for coloring the night journey with a romantic hue. Indeed, in spite of his avowed loyalty to his source, the poet very carefully changed the date of the journey to coincide with Saint George's day. This fact has been so thoroughly documented by Professors DeVane and Cook that it need only be cited here.¹⁵

Professor Frye has briefly described the psychological significance of the journey in literature:

Translated into dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality. The antagonists of the quest are often sinister figures, giants, ogres, witches and magicians, that clearly have a parental origin; and yet redeemed and emancipated paternal figures are involved too, as they are in the psychological quests of both Freud and Jung.¹⁶

The journey itself also provides a structurally unifying mode of recounting those adventures which facilitate the maturation of the young man. It is an "initiation" device. Caponsacchi's whole point of view is changed by his experience; the one of sobriety with which his monologue is concluded

¹⁵For DeVane's statement see supra p. 51; for A. K. Cook's see A Commentary upon 'The Ring and the Book,' (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1920), p. 65.

¹⁶Op. cit., p. 193.

is removed by considerable degrees from that tone in which he speaks of his earlier carefree days as gay-blade priest who is diligent at his "post/Where beauty and fashion rule." As the romantic protagonist is likely to wed and live out his days in quiet peace and in the administration of wisdom in his kingdom, so Caponsacchi, with the possibility for fleshly love compromised by the crossing of the realistic with the romantic strain, reflects upon the prospect of his pious but adventureless future:

Pompilia will be presently with God;
 I am, on earth, as good as out of it,
 A relegated priest; when exile ends,
 I mean to do my duty and live long.
 She and I are mere strangers now: but priests
 Should study passion; how else cure mankind,
 Who come for help in passionate extremes?
 I do but play with an imagined life
 Of who, unfettered by a vow, unblessed
 By the higher call,--since you will have it so,--
 Leads it companioned by the woman there.
 To live, and see her learn, and learn by her,
 Out of the low obscure and petty world--
 Or only see one purpose and one will
 Evolve themselves i' the world, change wrong to right:
 To have to do with nothing but the true,
 The good, the eternal--and these, not alone
 In the main current of the general life,
 But small experiences of every day,
 Concerns of the particular hearth and home:
 To learn not only by a comet's rush
 But a rose's birth,--not by the grandeur, God--
 But the comfort, Christ.

(11. 2074-2096)

He has no further need for the clash of arms; he has had his encounter with evil; he is sadly wiser; he is initiated. Browning sums up neatly the romantic significance of Caponsacchi's monologue in a brief simile:

Mere delectation, meet for a minute's dream!--
 Just as a drudging student trims his lamp,
 Opens his Plutarch, puts him in the place
 Of Roman, Grecian; draws the patched gown close,
 Dreams, "Thus should I fight, save or rule the world!"--
 Then smilingly, contentedly, awakes
 To the old solitary nothingness.
 So I, from such communion, pass content . . .

O great, just, good God! Miserable me!
(11. 2097-2105)

Here the canon's adventure is made explicitly synonymous with dream fulfillment and with maturation.

The evidence for an elaborate romantic structure in The Ring and the Book now includes both the recurring romantic symbols, and the appropriate patterns of behavior within the narrative structure. A third, less immediate but fully as significant witness is the temper of the artist's mind. Browning was fully conscious of the romance tradition. He had written romance. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" was composed in 1852; it appeared first in Men and Women, but was appropriately transferred in 1863--early in the decade which saw the advent of The Ring and the Book--to that group of poems known as Dramatic Romances. The question of the source of this remarkable little romance has produced a substantial bibliography of its own in the critical journals. The suggestions include such fairy tales as Hop-o'-my-Thumb, Jack and the Bean-stalk, and Jack the Giant Killer.¹⁷ Other suggestions include what Golder calls the "probably spurious ballad of Child Rowland and Burd Ellen,"¹⁸ Heine's Die Schwabenspiegel,¹⁹ Tennyson's Vision of Sin²⁰ and Malory's Tale of Gareth of Orkney.²¹ These are but a few of

¹⁷Harold Golder, "Browning's Childe Roland," PMLA, Vol. 39, 1924, pp. 963-978.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 964 referring to J. Kirkman's hypothesis in Browning Society Papers, Vol. I, pp. 31ff.

¹⁹T. W. Higginson in Poet Lore, Vol. 13, pp. 262-268.

²⁰T. P. Savin in Poet Lore, Vol. 9, pp. 256-265.

²¹Lionel Stevenson, "The Pertinacious Victorian Poets," Univ. of Toronto Quarterly, Vol. 21, pp. 239-240.

more numerous and perhaps even more valid suggestions, but they serve to document what Golder asserts: "behind Browning's Childe Roland lies a vast contributory reservoir of chivalric romance." A letter of Browning's own also promises some insight into his understanding of the romantic genre. It is one of those informative notes to Isa Blagden and is dated January 19, 1870:

Well, I go with you a good way in the feeling about Tennyson's new book The Holy Grail and Other Poems : it is all out of my head already. We look at the object of art in poetry so differently! Here is an Idyll about a knight being untrue to his friend and yielding to the temptation of that friend's mistress after having engaged to assist him in his suit. I should judge the conflict in the knight's soul the proper subject to describe: Tennyson thinks he should describe the castle, and effect of the moon on its towers, and anything but the soul. The monotony, however, you must expect--if the new is to be of a piece with the old. Morris is sweet, pictorial, clever always--but a weariness to me by this time. The lyrics were the "first sprightly runnings"--this that follows is a laboured brew with the old flavour but not body. So with Tennyson--the old "Galahad" is to me incomparably better than a dozen centuries of the "Grail," "Coming of Arthur," and so on.²²

Browning's emphasis upon the description of the "knight's soul" provides an interesting perspective upon his own use of romance in both Childe Roland and The Ring and the Book. In the earlier poem we have nothing of the conflict of arms except the ominous portent that it impends:

There they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set
And blew. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."
(Stanza xxxiii)

In The Ring and the Book the passage of arms is reduced to an almost purely symbolic one. Caponsacchi and Guido do not actually engage in a

²²Thurman L. Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning Collected by T. J. Wise, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1933), p.134.

sword fight, though Caponsacchi later reflects his regret at not having killed Guido when he had the opportunity:

During this speech of that man,--well I stood
 Away, as he managed--still I stood as near
 The throat of him--with these two hands, my own,--
 As now I stand near yours, Sir,--one quick spring,
 One great good satisfying gripe, and lo!
 There had he lain abolished with his lie,
 Creation purged o' the miscreate, man redeemed,
 A spittle wiped off from the face of God!
 (ll. 1472-1479)

Their combat is an ethical one. Their moral postures are those of good and opposing evil. Caponsacchi's sword is symbolic of the conflict although it never comes into play. Caponsacchi sees the immanence of the rite-de-passage when Guido confronts him at Castelnuovo:

And there
 Faced me Count Guido, there posed the mean man
 As master,--took the field, encamped his rights,
 Challenged the world: there leered new triumph, there
 Scowled the old malice in the visage bad
 And black o' the scamp. Soon triumph suppld the tongue
 A little, malice glued to his dry throat,
 And he part howled, part hissed . . . oh, how he kept
 Well out o' the way, at arm's length and to spare!--
 (ll. 1432-1441)

But the field of combat is not to be at Castelnuovo; it is to be in the courts of law which are to justify Caponsacchi's behavior. He is not to save Pompilia literally from death, though he makes the birth of her child possible; rather he is to justify her. His saving her from the dragon is not saving her physically, but ethically. That she dies is unimportant in a romantic pattern that is symbolic rather than literal, for she is redeemed by fulfilling her purpose, by giving birth to her child.

I have concluded that there are three extensive levels of

language giving form to The Ring and the Book. These strata are apparently the result of Browning's conscious effort to elevate his poem into something more than the mere recounting of an interesting old "Bailey story." If his primary concern in composition was theme, however, rather than form, one can understand even if he cannot justify, the vast abstractions which interrupt the flow of the images so frequently that a reader of the poem often feels swamped by the philosophical convolutions of the monologues. But Browning adequately provides clues as to what he is doing so that a faithful reader may not miss the significance of his closing note, in his own voice, on the function of art as he is using it:

But Art,--wherein man nowise speaks to men,
 Only to mankind,--Art may tell a truth
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
 So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
 Beyond mere imagery on the wall,--
 So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
 Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived,--
 So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the sould beside.

(ll. 858-867, The Book and the Ring)

Art, then may mean "beyond the facts"; and may show a truth twice-once in the "mere imagery," i.e., the obvious sequence of actions, and once in the dimensions implied by but not expressed by the "mediate word." Browning is certainly conscious of both the literal and mythical significance of his tale; and although the distinctions between myth proper and romance is one which probably concerns critics more than artists, Browning does imply within the poem, in some quite specific references, that he is aware of three controlling levels of order. One such reference is that of Bottinhus: "We seek not there should lapse the

natural law,/ The proper piety to lord and king/ And husband."

Pompilia speaks of Caponsacchi: "O love of my life, O soldier-saint."

Guido speaks ironically of his own standing in "Camp, Court, Church."

This series of references imply the accessibility of the three worlds which Browning has established:

<u>MYTH</u>	<u>ROMANCE</u>	<u>HISTORICAL</u>
Caponsacchi - Saint	Soldier - Lover	Priest
Guido - Lord (ironic)	King	Husband
Guido's rank - Church (ironic)	Court - Camp	

The rediscovery of the chivalric romance in the nineteenth century gave birth to volumes of poetry: "The Eve of St. Agnes," "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "The Idylls of the King," "The Lady of Shallott," and "The Defence of Guenevere" are but few of many. But if the form is medieval, the new experimental nature of that form must be quite modern. The nineteenth century romances, hence, are likely to be "romantic" in the subjective sense, "gothic," "allegorical," or "psychological." The simple tales of Morris are perhaps most akin to the medieval in temper; the complex metaphor of The Ring and the Book is perhaps most foreign, but all of the century's romances possibly represent the nostalgic search of a complex, scientific generation for an essentially naive literary form which would help recapture that spirit of credulous innocence which it had lost when Manchester's textile mills replaced Canterbury's cathedral as the symbol of its soul.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROMANTIC PARODY

Thus far it has been asserted that both mythic and romantic narratives are woven into the total fabric of The Ring and the Book, that Pompilia is Madonna to Caponsacchi's Messiah, and Lady-in-Distress to his Saint George. In view of the confirmation of Caponsacchi's heroism in the romantic sense, lines 1090-1130 of Guido's second monologue become increasingly significant:

Go preach . . . to your nephews, not to me
Who, tired i' the midway of my life, would stop
And take my first refreshment, pluck a rose:
What's this coarse wooly hip, worn smooth of leaf,
You counsel I go plant in garden-plot,
Water with tears, manure with sweat and blood,
In confidence the seed shall germinate
And, for its very best, some far-off day,
Grow big and blow me out a dog-rose bell?
Why must your nephews begin breathing spice
O' the hundred-petalled Provence prodigy?
Nay, more and worse,--would such my root bear rose--
Prove really flower and favorite, not the kind
That's queen, but those three leaves that make one cup
And hold the hedge bird's breakfast,--then indeed
The prize though poor would pay the care and toil!
Respect we Nature that makes least as most,
Marvellous in the minim! But this bud,
Bit through and burned black by the tempter's tooth,
This bloom whose best grace was the slug outside
And the wasp inside its bosom,--call you "rose"?
Claim no immunity from a weed's fate
For the horrible present! What you call my wife
I call a mullity in female shape,
Vapid disgust, soon to be pungent plague,
When mixed with, made confusion and a curse
By two abominable nondescripts,
That father and that mother: think you see

The dreadful bronze our boast, we Aretines,
 The Etruscan monster, the three-headed thing,
 Bellerophon's foe! How name you the whole beast?
 You choose to name the body from one head,
 That of the simple kid which droops the eye,
 Hangs the neck and dies tenderly enough:
 I rather see the griesly lion belch
 Flame out i' the midst, the serpent writhe her rings,
 Grafted into the common stock for tail,
 And name the brute, Chimaera which I slew!

Those lines which are concerned with the image of the rose are at least obliquely, if not directly, romantic in connotation, for they rely upon the echo of the medieval use of the rose as a symbol of the ideal lover; Guido explicitly attempts to destroy Pompilia--the Lovely Lady--with the image of the blighted rose. He tells us that he has anticipated Pompilia's becoming his own private, ideal lover--the rose of his personal romance, only to discover that the blossom is "Bit through and burned black by the tempter's tooth,/ This bloom whose best grace was the slug outside/ And the wasp inside its bosom"--and then he asks the crucial question, "Call you this 'rose'?" The Aim of the passage, as far as Guido is concerned, is the negation of Pompilia as a romantic image and to compromise her metaphorically so that her spirituality is suspect and Caponsacchi's motives made impure. Having struck at the mythical pattern which gives meaning to the flight of the young couple, Guido thinks himself to have destroyed their one justification for acting as they did.

He next--and in the same extended passage quoted above--attempts to reconstruct a new romantic pattern upon the ruins of Pompilia's integrity, this time, however, identifying himself as the romantic hero and Pompilia as part of a monstrous trinity in which her parents are her grotesque complements. This he does by identifying himself with the myth of Bellerophon, naming the Comparini Chimaera, which Bellerophon slew.

This ancient, classical myth may, then, provide a gloss on Guido's dramatic purpose. Mythology makes available to him the story of the monster which has three heads--one like a dragon's, one like a goat's, one like a serpent's. The Chimaera harries and plunders the land of Lycia until the normal patterns of life in that ancient dominion are thoroughly disrupted. Bellerophon, son of the god Poseidon, manages upon a particular occasion to capture the winged horse Pegasus as it drinks from Helicon Springs; upon his soaring mount he undertakes the Perilous Journey into the rock-bound mountain fastnesses where Chimaera dwells. In an extended battle the successive heads of the monster are slain, and the Lycian kingdom is delivered. In gratitude for this deliverance, King Iobates permits Bellerophon to marry his daughter, and upon the subsequent death of Iobates, Bellerophon succeeds to the throne. This narrative is probably somewhere in that dim marginal type of literature that dwells where myth and romance merge into a single narrative strand. The hero, the dangerous journey, the successive battles with the dragon, the deliverance of the wasted land, the marriage to the daughter of the king, and the restitution of the fructive processes--all of these make it clear that Guido has chosen a romance (regardless of what else it might also be) to describe his own posture in the events which led up to his wife's murder.

That Guido cannot be a true romantic hero, however, should be apparent when the total statement of the poem is considered; when we consider his Satanic role, the romantic roles of Caponsacchi and Pompilia, and his literary ancestry. For Guido is in many respects very much like Milton's Satan, Shakespeare's Iago and Richard the Third, and the Biblical

Judas in that none of these requires motives to inspire his evil; he simply is evil. Although describing himself in a romantic pattern, Guido cannot be romantic, for he lacks the romantic stature; hence, his whole elaborate metaphor for himself can best be seen, not as romance, but as an extensive parody upon romance; the form is intact, but the character is missing. Guido is not properly a hero at all, but a kind of predatory Quixote whom we might call an anti-hero, for even though his metaphorical origins are vague (as is required of the legitimate romantic hero) they are clear enough to enable him to:

. . . boast myself, Etruscan, Aretine,
 One sprung,--your frigid Virgil's fieriest word,--
 From fauns and nymphs, trunks and the heart of oak,
 With,--for a visible divinity,--
 The portent of a Jove Aegiochus
 Descried 'mid clouds, lightning and thunder, couched
 On topmost crag of your Capitoline:

(ll. 1921-1928)

and although he appears in this passage to provide himself with the necessary credentials of the romantic hero, we know that his ancestry is more commonplace than fauns and nymphs. In his first monologue he himself is emphasizing the precision with which he can discuss his lineage:

I am representative of a great line,
 One of the first of the old families
 In Arezzo, ancientest of Tuscan towns.
 When my worst foe is fain to challenge this,
 His worst exception runs--not first in rank
 But second, noble in the next degree
 Only; not malice' self maligns me more.

(ll. 140-146)

It is he himself, then, who gives the lie to the subsequent story of his romantic origins.

Guido cannot be romantic because his actions are not so. When

he undertakes the dark journey toward Rome he is not in danger; he is the danger which threatens the remotest havens of the virtuous. And when he slays Pompilia, it is not Chimaera that he slays, but Madonna. Perhaps our best testimony as to the proper perspective from which to view Guido is his own dropping of the ironic veil in the closing lines of his second monologue. Here he abandons his somewhat elaborate parody and begs for deliverance in the names of Abate--Cardinal--Christ--Mary--God in an ascending scale of values which is climaxed just as the Brotherhood of Death reach his cell when he shrieks to Pompilia. Professor Langbaum evaluates these concluding lines in the following manner:

He [Guido] hates her Pompilia . . . because she did not hate him in return, did not wish him harm. But not until the end, when the black-hooded Brotherhood of Death has come to take him to execution, when the railing and spite are no longer of use, nor the steadily shifting arguments ever retreating toward confession of his wolf nature--not until the extreme moment does he strip himself bare in a desperate call for help That cry (to Pompilia) is his salvation, acknowledging for the first time, without qualification or self-defence, Pompilia's goodness and his own evil. The implication is that he dies repentant.¹

I disagree. It seems safer and more consistent to read Guido's last speech as a climactic shriek, a plea for life and mercy. Guido is whining; one may see in the context of the total passage that Guido begins with the bravado of the cavalier, but he gradually drops the mask and reveals the depth of cowardice and depravity that lurk within him:

I lived and died a man, and take man's chance
Honest and bold: right will be done to such.
Who are these you have let descend my stair?
Ha, their accursed psalm! Lights at the sill
Is it "Open" they dare bid you? Treachery!
Sirs, have I spoken one word all this while

¹Op. cit., p. 111.

Out of the world of words I had to say?
 Not one word! All was folly--I laughed and mocked!
 Sirs, my first true word all truth and no lie,
 Is--save me notwithstanding! Life is all!
 I was just stark mad,--let the madman live
 Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!
 Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours,
 I am the Granduke's--no, I am the Pope's!
 Abate,--Cardinal,--Christ,--Maria,--God, . . .
 Pompilia, will you let them murder me?

(ll. 2412-2426)

This is the end of his narrative; only Browning's own last word remains in the whole poem. When Guido speaks "one true word" he merely begs for life, for "life is all." But Browning obviously does not believe that life is all; nor did Pompilia. "Don't open! Hold me from them!" is not the cry of a repentant. It has been Guido's defense that he slew Pompilia to protect his honor; his posture has been that of a cavalier, a knight-at-arms dispensing justice and vengeance upon the wicked, but when he comes to die he snivels; his last speech is a whine that belies his chivalric pose.

Throughout the poem Browning makes it clear that evil often appears in the garb of virtue; it is this similarity in their countenance which confuses Officialdom, and it is this same similarity which gives occasion for a counter-theme in the romantic motif. Running counter-point to Caponsacchi's Saint George is Guido's extensive parody upon the romantic theme which succeeds in confusing many of the characters in the poem.

Half-Rome, sympathetic to Guido, thinks the wronged husband should have:

. . . exacted his just debt
 By aid of what first mattock, pitchfork, axe
 Came to hand in the helpful stable-yard,

And with the axe, if providence so pleased,
 Cloven each head, by some Rolando-stroke,
 In one clean cut from crown to clavicle,
 --Slain the priest-gallant, the wife-paramour,
 (11. 1491-1497)

Other Half-Rome, antipathetic to the husband, scoffs at the
 notion of a Herculean Guido:

Hercules was just the heir
 To the stubble once a corn-field, and brick-heap
 Where used to be a dwelling-place now burned.
 Guido and Franceschini' a Count,--ay:
 But a cross i' the poke to bless the Countship? No!
 All gone except sloth, pride, rapacity,
 (11. 397-402)

Tertium Quid calls Guido a "pretender," and a "schemer,"

(1. 1057) and the reader may justly ask what it is to which he pretends.

One of the readiest answers, of course, is that Guido pretends to knight-
 hood and courtliness:

While, for the world's sake, I rode, danced, and gamed,
 Quitted me like a courtier, measured mine
 With whatsoever blade had fame in fence,
 (11. 277-279)

and elsewhere:

I shall still think nobler of the sex,
 Believe a woman still may take a man
 For the short period that his soul wears flesh,
 And, for the soul's sake, understand the fault
 Of armour frayed by fighting
 (11. 598-602)

Pompilia also expresses her perplexity upon being told that Guido
 is a "cavalier," for she, unlike the more insensitive Half-Rome, sees
 through his romantic posture:

I know that when Violante told me first
 The cavalier,--she meant to bring next morn,
 Whom I must also let take, kiss my hand,--
 Would be at San Lorenzo the same eve
 And marry me,--which over, we should go
 Home both of us without him as before,
 And, till she bade speak, I must hold my tongue,

Such being the correct way with girl-brides,
 From whom one word would make a father blush,--
 I know, I say, that when she told me this,
 --Well, I no more saw sense in what she said
 Than a lamb does in people clipping wool;
 Only lay down and let myself be clipped.
 And when next day the cavalier who came
 (Tisbe had told me that the slim young man
 With wings at head, and wings at feet, and sword
 Threatening a monster, in our tapestry,
 Would eat a girl else,--was a cavalier)
 When he proved Guido Franceschini,--old
 And nothing like so tall as I myself,
 Hook-nosed and yellow in a bush of beard,
 Much like a thing I saw on a boy's wrist,
 He called an owl and used for catching birds,--
 (11. 376-398)

Once again Pompilia alludes to Guido as a mock-knight. This time she is recounting the incident of her own effort to kill Guido at Castelnuovo:

All was against the combat: vantage, mine?
 The runaway avowed, the accomplice-wife,
 In company with the plan-contriving priest?
 Yet, shame thus rank and patent, I struck, bare,
 At foe from head to foot in magic mail,
 And off it withered, cobweb-armoury
 Against the lightning! 'Twas truth singed the lies
 And saved me, not the vain sword nor weak speech!
 (11. 1634-1642)

The percipient Pope to sees through the romantic guise:

I find him [Guido] bound, the, to begin life well;
 Fortified by propitious circumstance,
 Great birth, good breeding, with the Church for guide.
 How lives he? Cased thus in a coat of proof,
 Mailed like a man-at-arms, though all the while
 A puny starveling,--does the breast pant big,
 The limb swell to the limit, emptiness
 Strive to become solidity indeed?
 Rather, he shrinks up like the ambiguous fish,
 Detaches flesh from shell and outside show,
 And steals by moonlight (I have seen the thing)
 In and out, now to prey and now to skulk.
 Armour he boasts when a wave breaks on beach,
 Or bird stoops for the prize: with peril nigh,--
 The man of rank, the much-befriended man,
 The man almost affiliate to the Church,
 Such is to deal with, let the world beware!

Does the world recognise, pass prudently?
 Do tides abate and sea-fowl hunt i' the deep?
 Already is the slug from out its mew,
 Ignobly faring with all loose and free,
 Sand-fly and slush-worm at their garbage-feast,
 A naked blotch no better than they all:
 Guido has dropped nobility, slipped the Church,
 Plays trickster if not cut-purse, body and soul
 Prostrate among the filthy feeders--faugh!
 And when Law takes him by surprise at last,
 Catches the foul thing on its carrion-prey,
 Behold, he points to shell left high and dry,
 Pleads "But the case out yonder is myself!"
 Nay, it is thou, Law prongs amid thy peers,
 Congenial vermin; that was none of thee,
 Thine outside,--give it to the soldier-crab!

(11. 478-510)

The Pope shortly resumes the figure in order to unmask Guido completely and to leave him exposed and shivering--an image calculated to demonstrate the absurdity of seeing him as champion:

Such was this gift of God who showed for once
 How He would have the world go white: it seems
 As a new attribute were born of each
 Champion of truth, the priest and wife I praise,--
 As a new safeguard sprang up in defence
 Of their new noble nature: so a thorn
 Comes to the aid of and completes the rose--
 Courage to wit, no woman's gift nor priest's,
 I' the crisis; might leaps vindicating right.
 See how the strong aggressor, bad and bold,
 With every vantage, preconcerts surprise,
 Flies of a sudden at his victim's throat
 In a byeway,--how fares he when face to face
 With Caponsacchi? Who fights, who fears now?
 There quails Count Guido, armed to the chattering teeth,
 Cowers at the steadfast eye and quiet word
 O' the Canon at the Pieve! There skulks crime
 Behind law called in to back cowardice!
 While out of the poor trampled worm the wife,
 Springs up a serpent!

(11. 681-700)

Guido is disconcerted that his claims to chivalry go largely unregarded by the responsible world:

Still Sol salutes me and the morning laughs:
 I see my grandsire's hoof-prints,--point the spot

Where he drew rein, slipped saddle, and stabbed knave
 For daring throw give--much less, stone--from pale,
 Then back, and on, and up with the cavalcade;
 Just so wend we, now canter, now converse,
 Till, 'mid the jauncing pride and jaunty port,
 Something of a sudden jerks at somebody--
 A dagger is out, a flashing cut and thrust,
 Because I play some prank my grandsire played,
 And here I sprawl: where is the company? Gone!
 (ll. 102-112)

He extends the figure in an ironic summary of his fate in which his argument with the world is described as though it were a sort of rite-de-passage:

So Pietro,--when I chased him here and there,
 Morsel by morsel cut away the life
 I loathed,--cried for just respite to confess
 And save his soul: much respite did I grant!
 Why grant me respite who deserve my doom?
 Me--who engaged to play a prize, fight you,
 Knowing your arms, and foil you, trick for trick,
 At rapier-fence, your match and, may be, more.
 I knew that if I chose sin certain sins,
 Solace my lusts out of the regular way
 Prescribed me, I should find you in the path,
 Have to try skill with a redoubted foe;
 You would lunge, I would parry, and make end.
 At last, occasion of a murder comes;
 We cross blades, I, for all my brag, break guard,
 And in goes the cold iron at my breast,
 Out at my back, and end is made of me.
 You stand confessed the adroiter swordsman,--ay,
 But on your triumph you increase, it seems
 Want more of me than lying flat on face:
 I ought to raise my ruined head, allege
 Not simply I pushed worse blade O' the pair,
 But my antagonist dispensed with steel!
 There was no passage of arms, you looked me low,
 With brow and eye abolished cut-and-thrust
 Nor used the vulgar weapon! This chance scratch,
 This incidental hurt, this sort of hole
 I' the heart of me? I stumbled, got it so!
 Fell on my own sword as a bungler may!
 (ll. 471-499)

Although he seems to imply bungling, his tone of voice is ironic enough to suggest that he has been dealt a foul in the play of arms.

Alluding to his flight after the murder, Guido says:

We gave in ere we reached the boundary
 And safe spot out of this irrational Rome,--
 Where, on dismounting from our steeds next day,
 We had snapped our fingers at you, safe and sound,
 Tuscans once more in blessed Tuscany,
 Where the laws make allowance, understand
 Civilised life and do its champions right!
 (ll. 1656-1663)

Almost casually here he associates himself with the "champions" of local Aretine history. But the reader has been cautioned by the machinery of parody and does not take Guido seriously. Even less casually he identifies himself with the champions of national repute:

Warfare, begun this mean unmanly mode,
 Does best to end so,--gives earth spectacle
 Of a brave fighter who succumbs to odds
 That turn defeat to victory. Stab, I fold
 My mantle round me! Rome approves my act:
 Applauds the blow which costs me life but keeps
 My honour spotless: Rome would praise no more
 Had I fallen, say, some fifteen years ago,
 Helping Vienna when our Aretines
 Flocked to Duke Charles and fought Turk Mustafa:
 (ll. 1800-1809)

From this allusion to recent history he recedes to ancient history in hopes of showing himself to be a metaphorical descendant of that old chivalric "Matter of Rome":

Thus
 The time's arrived when, ancient Romanlike
 I am bound to fall on my own sword,--why not
 Say--Tuscan-like, more ancient, better still?
 (ll. 1910-1914)

He even recounts, for the purpose of proving his knighthood, his family's winning a coat-of-arms:

A tale comes to my mind that's apposite--
 Possibly true, probably false, a truth
 Such as all truths we live by, Cardinal!
 'Tis said, a certain ancestor of mine

Followed--whoever was the potentate,
 To Paynimrie, and in some battle, broke
 Through more than due allowance of the foe
 And, risking much his own life, saved the lord's.
 Battered and bruised, the Emperor scrambles up,
 Rubs his eyes and looks round and sees my sire,
 Picks a furze-sprig from out his hauberk-joint,
 (Token how near the ground went majesty)
 And says "Take this, and, if thou get safe home,
 "Plant the same in thy garden-ground to grow:
 "Run thence an hour in a straight line, and stop:
 "Describe a circle round (for central point)
 "The furze aforesaid, reaching every way
 "The length of that hour's run: I give it thee,--
 "The central point, to build a castle there,
 "The circumjacent space, for fit demesne,
 "The whole to be thy children's heritage,--
 "Whom, for my sake, bid thou wear furze on cap!"
 Those are my arms: we turned the furze a tree
 To show more, and the greyhound tied thereto,
 Straining to start, means swift and greedy both;
 He stands upon a triple mount of gold--
 (11. 2139-2164)

Seven times in his second monologue alone (three in his first) Guido refers to himself in romantic metaphors. Other Half-Rome, Pompilia and the Pope--whose judgment the poet has already sanctioned--use similar metaphors with pointed irony, and thus destroy the case for Guido's "defense of honor." Caponsacchi, himself the legitimate Saint George, declines to use romantic imagery--even ironic--for Guido. He prefers the mythic epithets "serpent," "Satan," "wolf."

But Guido's world parodies the ethical world in more than the circumstance of dressing Guido in coat of mail. Even love in Arezzo is but a parody. The repugnance which the notion of incest evokes in most cultures is often expressed in terms of social prohibitions. It is outlawed in civilized cultures, tabooed in primitive. Sir James Frazer reminds us that "the crime of incest is commonly supposed to cause a dearth; hence it should be meet atonement for the offence should be made

to the goddess of fertility."² Faulkner makes incest a symbolic equivalent for the decline of Southern aristocracy; Edgar Allen Poe, in "The Fall of the House of Usher," uses it to establish the deep-rooted guilt which precipitates the disintegration of the psyche. Everywhere that "blood lines" are endowed with a special virtue, incest is made a special vice which invokes supernatural punishment as well as cultural ostracism. In The Ring and the Book all of the advances tendered to Pompilia by Guido's brother Girolamo evoke the spectre of incest with its connotations of decadence and demonic perversion:

Pompilia sought divorce from bed and board
Of Guido, whose outrageous cruelty,
Whose mother's malice and whose brother's hate
Were just the white o' the charge, such dreadful depths
Blackened its centre,--hints of worse than hate,
Love from that brother, by that Guido's guile,
That mother's prompting.

(Half-Rome, ll. 1287-1293)

The chivalric love which pervades legitimate romance is parodied by the mock love of Pompilia's brother-in-law. And if romance in its proper significance is the enactment of a fertility ritual--as Miss Weston assures us it is--then it is perhaps neither inappropriate nor coincidental that both incest and sterility are shadows which hover over the dark house at Arezzo.

In the romantic myth, then, Guido hopes to find justification. But the myth itself gives him the lie and turns upon him to convict him. Guido's attempted excursion into romance turns out to be an excursion into parody because he lacks mythical stature, and it is exactly this depravity of soul which distinguishes him from Caponsacchi. The priest

²Op. cit., p. 141.

has unconsciously acted out the ritual of salvation and been assimilated into the mythical drama which testifies the validity of his Perseus, just as it indicts the lie of Guido's consciously and artificially wrought Bellerophon.

It has by now become clear that Caponsacchi and Guido are two intrinsically different kinds of people. It has also become apparent that we are to judge them by their responses to Pompilia--who may in general terms suggest something like the spiritual ideal. It is further evident that Caponsacchi and Guido construct the hypotheses upon which they act upon the bases of the same observable experiences; that is to say, the facts which Guido sees, the particular incidents which give rise to his course of action are exactly the same incidents which give rise to Caponsacchi's course of action. And yet the two responses to one set of empirical circumstances are completely antithetical. Both look at a fabric of a single color--yet one sees blue, the other sees red. For convenience we of the human community give particular names to particular actions; and when a person is doing one thing, he is not generally said to be doing another thing: when one is milking a cow, he is not said to be plowing a field. Caponsacchi and Guido begin by examining the same sequence of events: Pompilia's marriage of convenience, her parents' betrayal of her, her appeals to ecclesiastical authorities for relief, her growing consciousness (mutual with his) of Caponsacchi as a sympathetic entity, her consistent ability to avoid Guido's love-traps. Both men see, then, the same events; Guido's empirical observation, if anything, is more acute than Caponsacchi's simply because of his greater proximity to the events. Yet the priest says Pompilia is

doing one thing; the husband says she is doing quite another. The obvious way in which to account for these differences is simply to suppose that they emerge not from what Pompilia is doing, but from the separate observers' understanding of what she is doing. Browning leaves no room for us to doubt that Caponsacchi sees Pompilia as a romantic heroine; Guido treats her as one of the heads of a terrible monster and identifies himself with the mythical warrior who destroys that creature.

The truth, then, although it must be derived from experiential fact, is not synonymous with experiential fact. It cannot be defined independently of what may be observed; yet that which is observed is not to be equated with that which is true. Rather that which is seen and known in the phenomenal world is to be deciphered by the imaginative intuition, or as Langbaum says in a similar vein:

Browning does not . . . imply that there is no truth, but that truth depends upon the nature of the theorizing and ultimately upon the soul of which the theorizing is a projection.³

The eighteenth century's most stinging criticism levied against religious orthodoxy was that it often ignored facts. Voltaire, for instance, realized the weakness of the orthodox equation between prosperity and righteousness, and between disaster and divine judgment; he satirized this weakness when he concluded that Orthodoxy must presume all of the victims of the great Lisbon earthquake to have been wicked people and that the calamity itself was a manifestation of the avenging hand of God. What ecclesiasts ignore, he suggests, is the simple but obvious fact that

³Op. cit., p. 115.

many good and virtuous souls were casualties of the incident. At this time, however, thoughtful men were still finding comfort in their theological gambits--i.e., there may have been sin in the lives of the victims which was generally unknown, or, they would say, God's purposes are inscrutable to men. By the nineteenth century, however, the ever widening interests of the scientific world in which we live and the overly diligent attempts of the theologians to counter every new discovery which affected their orthodox machinery were in themselves suspect enough to repel thoughtful men. The increasingly voluminous documentation about the way in which things have come to be, and about their essential natures could no longer be ignored by men sensitive to truth. The man who was concerned about the way things are, rather than the way things seem, had to admit of the scientific method's irrefutable value as a way of determining and compiling facts. Browning was a thoughtful man. His attempt to reconcile the necessity of consulting data on the one hand, while reserving to the imaginative faculty the power of making creative conclusions on the other is his attempt to grapple with the increasingly ominous problem of the two emerging cultures in western civilization.

Caponsacchi and Guido have in common, then, the fact that both of them account the observable experience as necessary to their calculations. Neither has a metaphysical axe to grind; Guido supposes on the basis of the church's previous policy that it will wink at his murder of Pompilia; did it not wink at the Duke's murder of Felice? And the occasion of that murder was a rape; the occasion of this is simply the exaction of conjugal loyalty. Caponsacchi, also upon the basis of

established policy, confirms Guido's conclusion; but he senses more. He knows that Pompilia has no promise of relief in the existing institutions; but he senses an extra dimension of truth--that Pompilia is suffering, that she should be relieved, and that dynamic sympathy is the only instrument efficacious for her deliverance in a world where cultural machinery has not kept pace with human understanding.

The extra dimension of truth seems to rise from Caponsacchi's superior insight, from what Guido in his irony calls "Lucidity of Soul," though, again, this fifth dimension is dependent upon fact and cannot be contrary to fact. The Lucid Soul, then, is one which can make the imaginative leap from fact to the truth which transcends fact. The artist, by his very nature, is most representative because he is the most loquacious of imaginative men; and because he is the most loquacious of imaginative men, it is obligatory upon the artist that his art be a formulation of that truth which is mutually interdependent upon observable experience, and upon his own intuition. Caponsacchi formulates his ethic through action. Fra Lippo Lippi is, in a sense, saved by his own art; Andrea Del Sarto's personal failure is reflected in the failure of his art; the painter in "Pictor Ignotus" finds salvation in his artistic integrity; the artist figure in Browning is a figure who is groping for salvation through the exercise of his imagination in an empirical world. Art, then, defines the ethic which emerges from the phenomenal world, and yet renders a truth which is valid beyond the limits of observation. The forms of art are forms by which the artist expresses that which empirical data may only infer. Caponsacchi is an artist not only because he is a maker of madrigals, but also because he is sensitive to what we

might call the mythical dimension of experience. Guido fails not only as artist, but also as man, because, having the available facts, he still misses truth.

Browning's composite myth is one in which the man whom Ezra Pound identifies as the "factive personality" reflects the fusion of manhood and supermanhood--human and divine. Thus his mythical protagonist is most transcendent when he is busy at alleviating temporal misery. In the tradition of Perseus, Saint George, and Jesus, man is most divine at the moment he becomes most aware of the human plight, when, as William O. Raymond says in a pertinent article, he "stoops to conquer."⁴

The phenomenal world, then, supports Guido in the lie of his pretensions to chivalry. But the reader infers from an argument couched in metaphorical rather than philosophical terms that Guido's nobility, like his "cob-web armory," is an unreliable fiction.

⁴"Browning's Humanism," PMLA, LXX (1955), passim.

CHAPTER V

THE ETHIC OF THE MYTH

Part I: Pompilia

Because The Ring and the Book is a poem about determining the responsible course for human behavior when the traditional criteria are either unclear or misleading, it was necessary for Browning to establish certain ideas within the poem itself which would reveal his own estimate of the various modes of behavior represented by the various personae of the poem. Because all of the characters in the poem are voicing opinions about Pompilia's chastity, it is she who occasions the juxtaposition of the separate moral postures which Browning chooses to treat; it is thus possible to identify Pompilia herself as a sort of moral correlative which establishes a means of evaluating the inner ethical natures of the other protagonists. This is not to say that she is a flawless ideal; it is rather to say that simply the fact of her existence necessitates that Pietro, Violante, Guido, Caponsacchi, the Pope, the public, and Officialdom must verbalize their own respective concepts of morality. Violante's code is revealed long before she hears of Guido; Guido's code is defined before he hears of Caponsacchi, but both are forced to make an immediate and ethical response to Pompilia; Violante, e.g., first reacts to Pompilia when contracting to purchase her from a distraught woman of the streets for the purpose of practicing a deceit upon the credulous and good-natured Pietro; Guido

first reacts to her in an attempt to swap the prestige of his title for the cash of her dowry. Pompilia, then, is reminiscent of Pippa, moving innocently through the midst of evil and precipitating moral progress in her wake. But the figure of Pompilia is somewhat more sophisticated than that of Pippa. No reader could take Pippa seriously in literal terms, but Browning does not give us the clue that he is using her symbolically; therefore, we are unwilling to "suspend our disbelief." In drafting the character of Pompilia, however, Browning makes certain that the reader will not misread Pompilia as the charming little product of a Victorian English Sunday School. Browning obviously believes in the literal chastity of the historical Pompilia; but by adding to her historical character the symbolic, mythic character of the Holy Virgin he obviates the chuckling criticism of his more skeptical twentieth century readers. In adding the mythic dimension he preserves himself in this poem from the charge of naivete to which others of his poems have been justly subjected. The central issue of the poem is not Pompilia's chastity; it is her truthfulness, to which her chastity is simply corollary:

She had prayed--at least so people tell you now--
 For but one thing to the Virgin for herself,
 Not simply, as did Pietro 'mid the stabs,--
 Time to get her own sould saved--
 But time to make the truth apparent, truth
 For God's sake, lest men should believe a lie:
 Which seems to have been about the single prayer
 She ever put up, that was granted her.

(Tertium Quid ll. 1425-1432)

Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome and Tertium Quid, like the Duke of "My Last Duchess" reveal their innermost characters almost unknowingly by their reactions to Pompilia. Bottinius shows his grasp of the right in Pompilia's

case by an appropriate image:

By painting saintship I depicture sin,
Beside the pearl, I prove how black the jet,
And through Pompilia's virtue, Guido's crime.
(11. 1411-1413)

It is he also who poses this riddle to the court:

For thou, too, hast the problem hard to solve--
How so much beauty is compatible
With so much innocence!
(11. 766-768)

But Bottinius' notion of her innocence is far different from Caponsacchi's, for the latter would not have consented to the lawyer's last and climactic argument:

Back to her, then,--with but one beauty more,
End we our argument,--one crowning grace,
Pre-eminent in agony and death.
For to the last Pompilia played her part,
Used the right means to the permissible end,
And, wily as an eel that stirs the mud
Thick overhead, so baffling spearman's thrust,
She, while he stabbed her, simulated death,
Delayed for his sake the catastrophe,
Obtained herself a respite, four days' grace,
Whereby she told her story to the world,
Enabled me to make the present speech,
And, by a full confession, saved her soul.
(11. 1414-1426)

Bottinius implies that Pompilia has indeed committed the transgression against Guido's honor, but that her repentance for her sin reprieves her from guilt and leaves Guido culpable for her murder. The reader, however, understands that Bottinius is wrong, for the author has made it clear that Pompilia is the mythic virgin; the pejorative simile of the eel, then, implying a sly and deadly trickery upon Pompilia's part, misses the mark, for it does not coincide with the pattern of responses which Browning has prepared us to invoke at the allusion to her name.

Even Tertium Quid, whose account of events is prejudicial to

both Pompilia and Guido, yet reports Pompilia's confessor as saying:

So much good,
 Patience beneath enormity of ill,
 I hear to my confusion, woe is me,
 Sinner that I stand, shamed in the walk and gait
 I have practiced and grown old in, by a child!
 (ll. 1453-1457)

Pompilia, then, serves as an objectification of those moral virtues which, because they are basic in the composition of the human spirit, no man can ignore; they are virtues to which he must respond in such a way that his true self is revealed in spite of his ability to posture and pose.

In his metaphors for Pompilia, as Virgin Mother and as lovely Lady, Browning has an equation which is most conducive to treatment in the mode of traditional female ambiguity. Simultaneously the source of man's temptation and redemption, of his hope and his despair, the duplicity of woman has evoked abundant comment in varying tones of voice, from Odysseus' skirmish with Circe to Goodman Brown's puzzlement over Faith. Although there is nothing of the psychologically sinister in Pompilia, she does behave in two different ways in different sets of circumstances. She is both passive, longsuffering and enduring on the one hand, and vigorous and assertive on the other.

Arthur Symons has said, "She [Pompilia] is the heroine as neither Guido nor Caponsacchi can be called the heroes. . . . With hardly any consciousness of herself, she makes and unmakes the lives and characters of those about her" ¹ The paradox of Pompilia's ability to affect others with so little self-assertiveness (which reticence is more nearly characteristic of her than the energy which I will discuss later) is

¹Introduction to the Study of Browning, 1886, p. 152.

credible only in terms of her mythic identity. It is not what she does or fails to do that arouses Guido's fury; it is rather WHO she is:

That night at supper, out my husband broke,
 "Why was that throwing, that bufoonery?
 "Do you think I am your dupe? What man would dare
 "Throw comfits into a stranger lady's lap?
 "'Twas knowledge of you bred such insolence
 "In Caponsacchi;

 "O Christ what hinders that I kill her quick?"
 Whereat he drew his sword and feigned a thrust.

All this, now,--being not so strange to me,
 Used to such misconception day by day
 And broken-in to bear,--I bore, this time,
 More quietly than woman should perhaps;
 Repeated the mere truth and held my tongue.
 (Pompilia ll. 1016-1022; 1029-1035)

Thus she postulates her passivity, for she is after all Our Lady of All the Sorrows and is obliged therefore to suffer lamb-like the outrages of an evil world. Since man is guilty, the horror of his predicament is most clearly seen when juxtaposed to his lost innocence; his true nature is most readily discernible when he can see what he is not. Because Pompilia is the most innocent of the persons in the poem, she is the truest index to the extent of the others' guilt. Again, however, because the world is moved by evil forces as well as good--because evil is accessible, perfect good can never survive in the present order; so Melville asserts in Billy Budd; so Christ declares in St. John's gospel:

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world,
 and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were
 evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither
 cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.
 (3:19-20)

The propriety of Pompilia's function as a sort of moral index is seen partly in her passivity--her capacity to endure, which, in turn, is made

credible by her mythic saintliness. Billy Budd endures hanging without renouncing the innocence which brings him to the scaffold; Pompilia endures murder without succumbing to bitterness or despair, either of which would have compromised her moral usefulness in the poem and been incompatible with her metaphorical self--the Virgin Saint. In line 520 of her monologue she says, "I was the chattel that had caused the crime"; Pietro asks of Violante in line 524, "Do you want the victim by/ While you discuss the value of her blood?" Pompilia has already said of herself, in lines 386-388, " . . . I no more saw sense in what she said/ Than a lamb does in people clipping wool; only lay down and let myself be clipped." The mythic, sacrificial lamb thus serves as corollary to the image of saint in order to stress her passive innocence.

Browning has been charged with a certain simple-mindedness for promising to stick to the facts of the Old Yellow Book and then creating his characters who are obviously not based on "pure, crude fact." Professor Smalley has proposed part of the answer in his notion about Browning's creative reading processes. But there is another part of the answer. Browning had determined upon a certain symbolic identity for Pompilia, and he has to characterize her in a way that will be coincident with that identity. Again it is Bottinius who, skeptical as he is, speaks in what he intends as hyperbole, what Browning intends as symbolical:

Evidence shall be,
Some witness to the world how white she walks
I' the more she wanders through ere Rome she reach.
(ll. 591-593)

The Other Half-Rome too refers to Pompilia's character in terms that reflect her metaphorical self:

But if some wonder of a woman's-heart
 Were yet untainted on this grimy earth,
 Tender and true,--tradition tells of such--
 Prepared to pant in time and tune with ours--
 If some good girl (a girl, since she must take
 The new bent, live new life, adopt new modes)
 Not wealthy--Guido for his rank were poor--
 But with whatever dowry came to hand,
 There were the lady-love predestinate!

.
 . . . was it true or false

That here--here in this very tenement--
 Yea, Via Vittoria did a marvel hide,
 Lily of a maiden, white with intact leaf
 Guessed through the sheath that saved it from the sun?
 (ll. 349-357; 362-366)

The same speaker also quotes Fra Celestino, Pompilia's confessor, on the issue of her supra-human chastity:

'Tis truth,
 All truth, and only truth: there's something else,
 Some presence in the room beside us all,
 Something that every lie expires before:
 No question she was pure from first to last.
 (ll. 799-803)

Pompilia's passive purity pervades the poem, but it is credible only in figurative terms. It is possible now, using her as a moral correlative, to fix the other principal characters of the poem in an ethical spectrum. Her advent in the destiny of the Comparini is made possible only by Violante's deception. Because Violante cannot bear, she bargains. Her lie to her husband is a mask for the truth which she feels will reflect her own weaknesses. The purchase of Pompilia establishes in Violante a pattern of behavior which we are to see operative throughout the poem: she subscribes to conventional morality as long as its pursuit is easy and asks no perplexing questions; when the desertion of the conventional code appears to be expedient, she abandons it, covering her conduct with shallow rationalizing and with lies, thus giving her life the

outward appearance of moral continuity, the inward appearance of opportunism inspired by self-interest.

Pietro also must deal with the fact of Pompilia; and his inadequacy as a man is best typified by his inadequacy as a father. He is incredibly blind to his wife's scheming to get a child for him, and to her later machinations to peddle his daughter to a greedy old lecher. This obtuseness becomes the pattern by which he lives. His kindness toward and indulgence of those he loves become moral weaknesses when he permits them to be exploited, permitting Violante to bargain off their daughter over his loud but ineffectual protests. There is a loud quarrel in the Comparini household on the day that Guido comes to claim his youthful bride:

There stood the very Guido and the priest
With sly face,--formal but nowise afraid,--
While Pietro seemed all red and angry, scarce
Able to utter out his wrath in words;

.
Then I began half to surmise the truth;
Something had happened, low, mean, underhand,
False, and my mother was to blame, and I
To pity, whom all spoke of none addressed:
I was the chattel that had caused the crime.

(Pompilia ll. 487-490; 516-520)

Pompilia flees the room and then is brought back by her mother:

And so an end! Because a blank begins
From when, at the word, she kissed me hard and hot,
And took me back to where my father leaned
Opposite Guido--who stood eyeing him,
As eyes the butcher the cast panting ox
That feels his fate is come nor struggles more

(ll. 574-579)

Pietro later becomes a passive party to the disinheritance of Pompilia because of the same inertia before the energies of Violante. Although he does not will Pompilia's martyrdom for the sake of gaining an empty

title, he is nevertheless a party to that martyrdom by his persistent refusal to see what is happening or to protect her from it.

Guido, in his turn, must answer to the declaration of a positive good embodied in his wife's habits of life. At considerable expense of words Browning prevents any real justification of Guido. The mythic kinship between Guido and Satan prevents the reader from making wrong assumptions on the basis of "circumstantial evidence." The fact that he and the Comparini have gulled one another in no wise explains the sadistic abuse which he perpetrates upon their daughter; the only real motive for his cruelty is that he is thoroughly abandoned to depravity. His case is, on the surface, a convincing one--his wife has fled in the middle of the night with a priest (whose own speckled reputation reflects upon hers), and they are found lodged in a single room many miles away, but the poet reminds us with a reasonably persistent flow of symbols that Guido is a liar--the Prince o' the Power of the Air--and his calumnies are aimed against the girl who more than any other embodies the traditional Marian virtues. His sin in literal terms is slander; in terms of the mythic identities it is blasphemy. Only Caponsacchi, Don Celestine and the Pope really sympathize with Pompilia for anything that approximates the right reason; her parents are willing to disown her for expediency's sake; officialdom shrugs her off and the public (of various complexions) never understand the issues precipitated by her life and death. The widespread rejection puzzles Pompilia and finally elicits the following plea to her husband's mistress-maid:

Why join the rest
Who harm me? Have I ever done you wrong?
People have told me 'tis you wrong myself:

Let it suffice I either feel no wrong
 Or else forgive it,--yet you turn my foe!
 The others hunt me and you throw a noose!"
 (ll. 1126-1132)

Guido, however, is the epitome of all who reject the good that walks among them. One of the predominant images of the poem is that identifying Guido with the wolf (this appears frequently in his own first monologue), to which Pompilia adds that of the snake:

"Why, you Pompilia in the cavern thus,
 How comes that arm of yours about a wolf?
 And the soft length,--lies in and out your feet
 And laps you round the knee,--a snake it is!"
 (ll. 124-128)

This fusion of images suggests Guido's predatory nature, while also representing him as the crafty tempter; the snake image relates him specifically with his archetypal father--Satan. Guido, then becomes the embodiment of that rage against good which is latent, as William Blake suggests in "The Tiger," in every human breast. As a literary descendant of the Vice of the morality plays, of Iago, of Richard III, and of Milton's Satan, Guido's highest good is the subversion of Pompilia's innocence. He is not seriously jealous at the alleged unfaithfulness of his wife; rather, he is frustrated by her actual purity.

Thus, when he blamed me, "You are a coquette,
 A lure-owl posturing to attract birds,
 You look love-lures at theatre and church,
 In walk, at window!"--that I knew, was false:
 But why he charged me falsely, whither sought
 To drive me by such charge,--how could I know?

 . . . --in my ignorance
 I was just thwarting Guido's true intent;
 (ll. 677-682; 694-695)

It is this purity which haunts him in his imprisonment:

She too must shimmer through the gloom o' the grave,

Come and confront me--not at judgment-seat
 Where I could twist her soul, as erst her flesh,
 And turn her truth into a lie,--but there,
 O' the death-bed, with God's hand between us both,
 Striking me dumb, and helping her to speak,
 Tell her own story her own way, and turn
 My plausibility to nothingness!

(11. 1682-1689)

Ironically Pompilia's greatest pain is inflicted by him from whom she is most entitled to expect comfort--her husband.

Officialdom also is tested by the advent of an objective moral index. "When I sought help, the Archbishop smiled . . . said I was blameable--he stands for God." Pompilia asks for freedom and gets theology: "If motherhood is qualified impure/ I catch you making God command Eve sin!/ --A blasphemy so like these Molinists," and then the Archbishop adds, "I must suspect you dip into their books," which becomes the grossest irony when one remembers that Pompilia cannot read. Theology, rather than providing life for her, brings only death: "my heart died out at the Archbishop's smile." The political hierarchy gives her the same response: "When I implored the Governor to right/ My parents' wrongs: the answer was a smile." At her first trial Pompilia, with Caponsacchi, is found excusably guilty of adultery; even her sympathizers pity her for the wrong reasons, as Langbaum rightly indicates when he discusses Browning's use of the sympathetic Other Half-Rome:

Whether or not we grant that Browning has successfully dramatized the limitations of the pro-Pompilia speaker, we must agree that in its intention at least The Other Half-Rome is perhaps the poem's boldest stroke. For at the risk of confusing us utterly, the poet forstalls just the facile judgment the casual reader is likely to make; he takes a stand not only against wrong judgments but against the right judgment on the wrong grounds.²

²Robert Langbaum, op. cit., p. 117.

Pompilia senses the same sort of misdirected sympathy toward herself:

Four days ago, when I was sound and well
 And like to live, no one would understand.
 People were kind, but smiled, "And what of him,
 Your friend, whose tonsure, the rich dark-brown hides?
 There, there!--your lover, do we dream he was?
 A priest too--never were such naughtiness!
 Still, he thinks many a long think, never fear,
 After the shy pale lady,--lay so light
 For a moment in his arms, the lucky one!"

(ll. 908-916)

The moral principle upon which these bystanders act is that things are as they appear to be; moral conclusions are the result of empirical arguments; their methods of morality are exactly like those of Guido's defenders; this is fatal in a world where good and evil often wear one another's garments. "Pompilia must have acted as I would have acted in her situation," they suppose; "I would have sinned; hence, Pompilia also has undoubtedly sinned." The mass of people in the poem indicate their lack of vision--the obtuseness of their moral sensibilities. Maria, then, is incredible to Church officials and to common Christians if she does not act as they act. If she posits her responses upon those native virtues which are most characteristic of her, she is not recognizable in the contemporary world; that is to say, officialdom cannot recognize in practice the truths it sermonizes; hence, we conclude that there is a considerable dichotomy between the moral sensibilities of those who comprise the Christian estate and their public statements of what is right. The Pope, of course, is the grand exception, but he is excepted because of his insight as a man--not as an official.

No character in the poem, however, is so tested by his dealings with Pompilia as Caponsacchi. His response to her appeal for salvation identifies him on one level with "Saint George/ To slay the monster, set

the Princess free" This reflects the significance of Pompilia as Woman in quite another realm from the moral one; she becomes, as Princess, the Romantic heroine--the female principle--Woman. At the familiar Marian level, in which her moral nature is most important, Pompilia equates Caponsacchi, as he discovers her tragedy to the world enabling her to escape Guido and bear her child in peace, with the "Star" which "did rise, soon to lead my step/ Lead on, nor pause before it should stand still/ Above the House O' the Babe,--my babe to be"; he provides for Pompilia what the Star of Bethlehem provides for Mary, a symbolic sanction for her virtue. Because he recognizes the natural virtue which informs Pompilia's actions--because his moral sensibilities are yet quick and perceptive, Caponsacchi is able to slice through the veil of appearance and to intuit the truth. Thus it is through the advent of Pompilia that the pattern of his behavior is altered, his life finds a new center:

Into another state, under new rule
 I knew myself was passing swift and sure;
 Whereof the initiatory pang approached,
 Felicitous annoy, as bitter-sweet
 As when the virgin-band, the victors chaste,
 Feel at the end the earthly garments drop,
 And rise with something of a rosy shame
 Into immortal nakedness; so I
 Lay, and let come the proper throe would thrill
 Into the ecstasy and outthrob pain.

(ll. 964-973)

or, as he earlier says:

Pompilia spoke, and I at once received,
 Accepted my own fact, my miracle
 Self-authorized and self-explained,--she chose
 To summon me and signify her choice.

(ll. 918-921)

He says specifically "I assuredly did bow/ Was blest by the revelation of Pompilia," and shortly afterward he says to the judges:

For Pompilia--be advised,
 Build Churches, go pray! You will find me there,
 I know, if you come,--and you will come, I know.
 Why, there's a Judge weeping! Did not I say
 You were good and true at bottom? You see the truth--
 I am glad I helped you: she helped me just so.
 (11. 1881-1886)

It is also worth noting that while all other characters in the poem must respond to Pompilia, it is Caponsacchi to whom she herself most actively responds--"Oh! to have Caponsacchi for my guide."

What has been said concerns only half of Pompilia's nature--her passivity to which the others respond. Pompilia, however, provides more for the poem than a scapegoat upon whom the evil can exercise their iniquities. The other half of her nature is governed by her activities--the positive function she performs in her three capacities as mother, intercessor, and interpreter.

As victim Pompilia makes no self-defense, no violent resistance to those who persecute her; this is the saintly pattern of her own response to those about her. Before she finally asserts her will to escape and makes the overt attempt to contact Caponsacchi, she undergoes an experience which alters the previous pattern; the experience is couched in terms which are significantly similar to the terms of a mystical conversion:

It had got half through April. I arose
 one vivid daybreak,--who had gone to bed
 In the old way my wont those last three years,
 Careless until, the cup drained, I should die.
 The last sound in my ear, the over-night,
 Had been a something let drop on the sly
 In prattle by Margherita, "Soon enough
 Gaieties end, now Easter's past: a week,
 And the Archbishop gets him back to Rome,--
 Everyone leaves the town for Rome, this spring,--
 Even Caponsacchi, out of heart and hope,

Resigns himself and follows with the flock."
 I heard this drop and drop like rain outside
 Fast-falling through the darkness while she spoke:
 So had I heard with like indifference,
 "And Michael's pair of wings will arrive first
 At Rome to introduce the company,
 Will bear him from our picture where he fights
 Satan,--expect to have that dragon loose
 And never a defender."--my sole thought
 Being still, as night came, "Done, another day!
 How good to sleep and so get nearer death!"--
 When, what, first thing at daybreak, pierced the sleep
 With a summons to me? Up I sprang alive,
 Light in me, light without me, everywhere
 Change! A broad yellow sun-beam was let fall
 From heaven to earth,--a sudden drawbridge lay,
 Along which marched a myriad merry motes,
 Mocking the flies that crossed them and recrossed
 In rival dance, companions new-born too.
 On the house-eaves, a dripping shag of weed
 Shook diamonds on each dull grey lattice-square,
 As first one, then another bird leapt by,
 And light was off, and lo was back again,
 Always with one voice,--where are two such joys?--
 The blessed building-sparrow! I stepped forth,
 Stood on the terrace,--o'er the roofs, such sky!
 My heart sang, "I too am to go away,
 I too have something I must care about,
 Carry away with me to Rome, to Rome!"
 (11. 1200-1239)

April, light, change, sunbeams--all these merge in a ritual dance of life which signifies the regeneration of Pompilia's long subjected will. The change is occasioned by her sudden awareness of her pregnancy, the quickening of life within her. As in elegiac poetry Nature mourns the dead, so, often, it rejoices as in Spenser's "Epithalamion." It is in the tradition of nature as part of an organic universe, as capable of supporting mythic imagery, that Browning now brings it into sympathy with Pompilia's joy. Pompilia now becomes subject to a dual responsibility; another life depends on hers; it thus becomes obligatory that she assert her own need for survival in order that the life within her might survive.

Assertion, for a time, becomes the new but necessary pattern. It is the new life within which now gives purpose and direction to her own, enabling her to fulfill her metaphorical equation with Mary, her literal function as Woman. At her baptism in the flood of April light (cf. Danae's conceiving in a shower of gold; cf. the parthenogenesis occasioned by exposure to sunlight in the Bower of Bliss in the Faerie Queene) Pompilia can, for the first time, answer the question asked of her in her early childhood by playmate Tisbe, who, looking at a large tapestry hung on the wall, remarked to Pompilia:

"--And there are you, Pompilia, such green leaves
 Flourishing out of your five finger-ends,
 And all the rest of you so brown and rough:
 Why is it you are turned a sort of tree?"
 (ll. 193-196)

Only now does the symbol of fruition take meaning for her; as the tree's trunk is rough and brown, so is Pompilia's self "drained," but her tormented body is made useful, as are the tree's limbs--by providing a means of birth--a source of life for the species. It is only through the establishment and nourishment of the new age that the old age and its inadequacies and corruptions can be swept away. Pompilia's motherhood becomes her new obsessive purpose. The opening request of her monologue is that the church records will record only her dates of birth and death and that "I had been a mother of a son/ Exactly two weeks." It will appear, then, that she has died from childbirth; in truth, however, she has almost literally dies for childbirth. Her role as scapegoat, as martyred saint, victim, chattel, bait is all negated, her sorrows made meaningful, when from them is wrought new life. It is the necessity for motherhood that enables her to strike at Guido with a knife at Castelnuovo;

it is because she has fulfilled her motherhood that she can later die forgiving him.

As the protagonist most wronged in the poem, Pompilia stands in the most efficacious position as intercessor for the others, whose various moral deficiencies have become apparent in their rejection or suspicion of her. Her Marian identity adds significance to and gains significance from her intercessions. As Don Celestine hears her confession, he is almost frustrated by the lack of anything to shrive in Pompilia:

Don Celestine urged "But remember more!
 "Other men's faults may help me find your own.
 "I need the cruelty exposed, explained,
 "Or how can I advise you to forgive?"
 He thought I could not properly forgive
 Unless I ceased forgetting,--which is true:
 For, bringing back reluctantly to mind
 My husband's treatment of me,--by a light
 That's later than my life-time, I review
 And comprehend much and imagine more,
 And have but little to forgive at last.

(ll. 627-637, Pompilia)

When the priest advises her, his own code is transcended by Pompilia's simple piety, for he must urge her to recall her forgotten sufferings in order that she can forgive their perpetrators; the situation is ironic in that the priest is forced to remind the parishoner of her complaints. She, by virtue of a natural simplicity, has performed the priest's office more effectively than he, and appears considerably more efficacious as her own confessor than is the sympathetic Celestino, who is nevertheless a professional religionist whose theology has been learned from the books which Pompilia cannot read. Caponsacchi recalls her telling him a similar incident earlier in her life:

"When I was taken first to my own church
 "Lorenzo in Luciana, being a girl,

"And bid confess my faults, I interposed,
 "'But teach me what fault to confess and know!"
 "So, the priest said--'You should bethink yourself:
 "'Each human being needs must have done wrong!"
 "Now, be you candid and no priest but friend--
 "Were I surprised and killed here on the spot,

 "Do you account it were in sin I died?"
 (11. 1347-1356)

Pompilia's pardon for Guido is carefully worded so that it cannot be construed as a concession to his principle of action:

For that most woeful man my husband once,
 Who, needing respite, still draws vital breath,
 I--pardon him? So far as lies in me,
 I give him for his good the life he takes,
 Praying the world will therefore acquiesce.
 (11. 1707-1711)

but, "My babe nor was, nor is, nor shall be . . . Franceschini's child at all."

Of Violante's machinations, Pompilia is so naively unaware that the pardon she so readily bestows hardly seems necessary: "be good," says Violante, "and pardon!--Pardon what?/ you know things, I am very ignorant: all is right if you will only not cry!" Likewise she stands between her natural mother and condemnation. Ironically, she suggests that all three parties--Violante, herself, her mother--involved in the transaction at her birth gained salvation from the transaction:

Well, just so here; it proved wrong but seemed right
 To poor Violante--for there lay, she said,
 My poor real dying mother in her rags,
 Who put me from her with the life and all,
 Poverty, pain, shame and disease at once,
 To die the easier by what price I fetched--
 Also (I hope) because I should be spared
 Sorrow and sin,--why may not that have helped?
 (11. 285-292)

His real mother gives her up (1) as the symbol of her own shame, and (2) in order, so Pompilia chooses to believe, to save the child. Thus she

purchases "an easier death" both literally and spiritually in the one genuinely selfless act of her life. Violante gains from the transaction the motherhood denied her by nature, thus fulfilling her frustrated womanly function and gaining for her her ablest moral attorney: "Do let me speak for her you blame so much." Pompilia herself is saved from the demoralizing environment of her true mother's circumstances. Violante wills to deceive in the event; the real mother acts in despair; but the fact of Pompilia provides redemption for all.

Pompilia also provides both officialdom and scandaldom with a general amnesty; not obtrusively, nor proudly, but because she has no other alternative except to leave them condemned by their responses to her who intended harm to none:

What of the calumny I came across,
 What O' the way to the end?--the end crowns all.
 The judges judged aright I' the main, gave me
 The uttermost of my heart's desire, a truce
 From torture and Arezzo, balm for hurt
 With the quiet nuns,--God recompense the good!
(ll. 1647-1652)

The principle which informs Pompilia's actions is the principle of grace. The fact of her refusal to leave her offenders in a state of condemnation is such a significant part of her identity that one might easily see her in the poem as almost synonymous with the concept of grace. This becomes the more significant when one recalls that Caponsacchi, the Saviour-priest, can be equated with a principle of contemplative action. In strictly theological terms, their functions seem to be complementary. Browning is probably suggesting that the proper view of man's principle of moral action is that it is neither exclusively dependent upon grace, which would be antinomian, nor exclusively dependent upon action, but that

it derives from both sources as they form a harmony of action. In line 1663 Pompilia speaks of the "task of understanding"; that which she is at pains to understand--that which she could "read" with Caponsacchi as her guide--is the principle of the necessity of assertion upon the authority of a self-evident righteousness within a contemplated action; Caponsacchi could have learned from Pompilia about the efficacy of grace for both the forgiver and the forgiven. Their respective characteristic principles comprehend the extremities of historical Christianity--graceful redemption, and compulsory benevolent works.

In her third capacity, that of commentator, Pompilia provides the reader with some necessary insights into the values of the poem. Her monologue thus furnishes us with an expressed moral index, as her person provides us with an imaginative one. As one inextricably bound up with the problem of good and evil, Pompilia is employed by the poet as a vehicle for the statement of certain truths. In part, at least, The Ring and the Book is an affirmation of the availability of the two moral orders--good and evil, and of the complication that arises from the fact that each often wears the guise of the other and of the inability of the empirical method to make the necessary distinctions. Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope are the persons who see most clearly through the deceptive appearances in the poem. Pompilia is aware of two things about evil which help us to define Browning's understanding of the nature of morality: (1) evil is an organic unity "ill echoing ill," deception begetting deception until every manifestation of evil can be said to have its roots in an earlier one; all sins are woven together in a large network which invades, at many points, every human life; Guido's evil and

Violante's, though mutually antagonistic, are complements in a continuity of evil which each of them helps to perpetuate; by the same logic, the whole tribe of mankind is guilty of Pompilia's blood except those few who made overt efforts for her defense. (2) Evil is not of God's creation:

That is the fruit of all such wormy ways,
The indirect, the unapproved of God:
You cannot find their author's end and aim,
Not even to substitute your good for bad,
Your straight for the irregular;
(11. 669-673)

This is a theological nicety whose main concern for us is that it makes man, in the final analysis, a responsible creature; Guido cannot say "thus was I made."

In following the workings of Pompilia's mind, we may be sure of arriving in the proximity of the truth as Browning sees it. She defines for us the moral premissis of her own virtuous life:

By one or two truths only--thence I hang,
And there I live,--the rest is death or dream,
.....
So, what I hold by, are my prayer to God,
My hope, that came in answer to the prayer,
Some hand would interpose and save me--hand
Which proved to be my friend's hand; and,--best bliss,--
That fancy which began so faint at first,
That thrill of dawn's suffusion through my dark,
(11. 604-605; 617-622)

These three truths indicate that her responsibility lies in three separate directions--toward God (prayer), toward man (hope for help; faith in man), toward one's own purpose (her motherhood). Pompilia's truth is confirmed by Browning's identification of it as her private ring symbol, the ring suggesting the full, completed point of view:

I say, the angel saved me: I am safe!
Others may want and wish, I wish nor want
One point O' the circle plainer, where I stand

Traced round about with white to front the world
 What of the calumny I came across,
 What o' the way to the end?--the end crowns all.
 (11. 1643-1648)

Of the proximity between good and evil, Pompilia, like Caponsacchi, is aware; even though she often naively misconstrues the evil motives of others, she instinctively recognizes in their actions the moral lapses which the more sophisticated do not see. Violante, herself tainted with iniquity, fails at first to recognize the larger patterns of depravity: "she, instead of piercing straight/ Through the pretense to the ignoble truth/ Fancied she saw God's finger point" Elsewhere she ironically equates Guido with Christ. It seems to be, then, insight as well as integrity which enables Pompilia to nurture her innocence in an order which is predominantly corrupt.

CHAPTER VI

THE ETHIC OF THE MYTH

Part II: Caponsacchi

The exploration of Caponsacchi's motives for involving himself in Pompilia's plight must be prefaced by a comment upon Browning's technique in developing his characters. An early reviewer who, like Browning, preceeded the advent of psychoanalysis referred to him as a "mental pathologist."¹ Roma King has provided a classification of Browning's subject matter which indicates the significance of personality in the corpus of his poetry. The four recurring patterns of development are: 1) interest in conflict, 2) incongruity, 3) failure, 4) abnormality.² King has further suggested possible sources from which the conflict in Browning's character may arise:

Always psychological in effect, the conflict is sometimes within the character, sometimes between the character and the external world, sometimes between the character and forces perhaps neither of his own nor his world's making Often the conflict is against incomprehensible, intangible forces that flaw man's nature or creation itself.³

Caponsacchi's conflict is an inner one, polarized at one extremity by Orthodoxy, and at the other by the appeal of human sympathy.

¹Edinburgh Review, vol. CXXX, 1869, p. 164.

²Roma King, The Bow and the Lyre, (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 126.

³Ibid., p. 126.

Conflict within the Browning protagonist is often triggered by his special attachment to some ikon, virtue, or fancy which is at cross-purposes with the kind of perspective the reader is conditioned to expect in one who is in the protagonist's circumstance. The Bishop of Saint Praxed's Church is devoted to the sensuous love of beauty which, because sensuality is theoretically foreign to the man of God, is in reality the key to his true identity; Del Sarto's world of art is tempered by his attachment to Lucrezia; these recurring attachments become the respective cores of the world views which the poet synthesizes for his characters. Around these centers, as has often been seen, Browning constructs a "world within the poem." Frequently the center of the poetic world view is at odds with its circumference (environment). The tension thus established is that which gives substance to the poem; for Caponsacchi the tension arises from the conflict of his opposing sentiments (Orthodoxy and sympathy) and the effort to determine which of these is the center of his life and which is circumference.

At one level, the monologue is its speaker's rationale for his own peculiar soul-center. In "Pictor Ignotus," for example, the argument of the poem may be seen, without elaboration, in these lines:

I could have painted pictures like that youth's
 Ye praise so

 But a voice changed it. Glimpses of such sights
 Have scared me

 So, die my pictures! surely, gently die.

One of the functions of Caponsacchi's testimony in The Ring and the Book is to justify himself upon the basis that his motives informed his action with their own peculiar morality. This very justification, in turn, re-

ceives its virtue from his present motive--the establishment of truth.

As one who has espoused the nobler passions, the priest, throughout the drama of the poem, is required to expand his personality in order to comprehend the implications of his world view. The self, rather than shrinking to the defense of a single characteristic, achieves a kind of conversion to or new awareness of the significance of life and experience. This is possibly what Browning is defining in Sordello, where the protagonist's quest seems to be for enlarged comprehension, which will satisfy the desires of his nobler passions.

Browning "explained . . . his failure to write for the stage when he said that his ability was to portray action in character, rather than character in action."⁴ Although the scene recording Caponsacchi's statement before the court is static, it is a reminiscence of dramatic action; it is what precedes the point of view of the poem which determines the priest's character. The same events give substance to each of the ten accounts in The Ring and the Book, but the "same events are repeated each time for purpose of exploring a new level of meaning as it is shaped by a different consciousness."⁵ In the poem, Guido, who has seized upon the baser passions as soul-center, ironically contributes to the corpus of truth just as Caponsacchi does.

Caponsacchi's education to truth results from his bilateral quest for fulfillment. His conscious search is for spiritual reality; his mythological search is for the fulfillment of his messianic and

⁴Ibid., p. 125.

⁵Ibid., p. 126.

heroic identities.

The most elementary statement of the priest's dilemma is that he must decide whether to remain within the pale of Orthodoxy and continue as a promising young cleric, or to make an overt effort to deliver the maltreated wife from her abusive husband, and assume the consequent scandal and the frown of the Church:

Was he bound brave the peril, save the doomed,
Or go on, sing his snatch and pluck his flower,
Keep the straight path and let the victim die?
(ll. 89-91)

The choice is complicated by the fact that neither of the alternatives seems wrong; Caponsacchi is forced to choose between the truth of human sympathy and the seeming-truth of Orthodoxy.

The Church lures the priest to security, stability and comfort. "Leave that live passion, come be dead with me!" The logic of Orthodoxy is symbolically objectified in the Summa Theologiae of Thomas Aquinas; it is to this source that Caponsacchi repeatedly turns during the days of his doubting; but at line 484 the Summa is "darkened round/ By the mid-March twilight"; at 1024 it is read "When the sun slanted into my room, had reached/ The west." Later "When the page o' the Summa preached its best,/ Her smile kept glowing out of it. . . ." The final reference to the book appears at line 1098, as Caponsacchi visits his room for the last time before the breach to "Shut his book" Upon taking his vows the protagonist has been assured that the Church does not require prodigious effort of him; "the buttress-work was done/ By martyrs and confessors"; "where you see a chink/ Stick in a sprig of ivy." The appeal of the status quo is further sweetened by the promise of his eventual prominence--"Rome is the port."

Pompilia, on the other hand, lures to danger, scandal and risk. Guido poses an actual physical danger to his wife's deliverer. The evil bent of his personality is intense enough that he becomes representative of all the available evil in human experience. While being arrested at Castelnuovo, Pompilia shrieks at Guido, "Die . . . devil," and attempts to dispatch him with a dagger. For Caponsacchi, however, the formula for Guido is the equation with Judas:

Whom is it, straining onward still, he meets?
 What other man deep further in the fate,
 Who, turning at the prize of a football
 To flatter him and promise fellowship,
 Discovers in the act a frightful face--
 Judas, made monstrous by much solitude.

(ll. 1932-1937)

In his role as Judas-Satan, Guido, by forging letters from Pompilia, stimulates Caponsacchi to an awareness of the ironic situation in which the Church provides warmth and shelter for the nourishment of evil. Guido, meanwhile, is enacting a parody upon himself reminiscent of his archetype's self-parody in Paradise Lost; the terms of his forged letters, while intended to conceal his identity, actually define it. He calls himself a "surly patch" (l. 519) and "a monster" who "Tortures" his wife (l. 570). The situation is identical to Satan's assumption of the shape of a carrion-eating cormorant while jealously watching the blissful bower in Milton's epic. For Caponsacchi to abide within the Church means the continuation of his skirmishing with an ethereal, abstract principle of evil; his elopement with Pompilia necessitates his involvement with and resistance to a highly personalized evil which, indeed, becomes the objectification of the mythical archetypes of all evil. He chooses to intercept the onslaughts of specific evil, rather than to

snipe at the fortresses of general evil.

The result of Caponsacchi's decision to counter that part of Orthodoxy which harbors evil, is that his experience is informed with ironies, each of which serves as a comment upon the truth, and, consequently, that he is educated to a clearer conception of the very nature of truth. The judges, at Caponsacchi's own earlier trial, have instructed him as to the proper duties of the priest: "labour to pluck tares and weed the corn of Molinism." Molinos had taught that one could transcend the concerns of the present order through the perfect contemplation of God; one could escape fear of hell or desire for salvation through a Bhudda-like suspension of the awareness of the material order. Ironically, Caponsacchi has been weeding "the corn of Molinism"; he has negated Molinos' contemplative principle by translating principle into dynamic action. Similarly, the paternal counsel of his pastor has advised him that:

Rome's the eventual harbor,--make for port,
Crowd sail, crack cordage! And your cargo be
A polished presence, a genteel manner, wit
At will, and tact at every pore of you!

(ll. 369-372)

The flight with Pompilia, though literally toward Rome, is away from Roman Church policy, and yet at a third level of irony it is in the direction of Roman principle. It is toward the symbolic Rome which functions as the formulator of truth for general human consumption. And his "cargo" is not a genteel manner, but self-sacrifice and, in Pompilia, the personification of humble purity. He approaches Rome devoid of that which will induce the approving head-nodding of Roman protocol, but in its place he bears the human Madonna--symbolic object of Roman adoration.

Again, there is an ironic truth in Caponsacchi's declaration to the woman at the post-house, during the first brief stop en route to Rome. "She is my sister"; and in Christian terms this is true, for he has never been so closely related to the whole of human kind. These verbal ironies are italicized by the dramatic irony of Caponsacchi's action at Castelnuovo. The priestly function is mediation between man and his salvation. Browning's protagonist is, consequently, most a priest when he divests himself of his priestly robes at Castelnuovo, for it is at this moment that he is most dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering.

In addition to the logical untangling of appeal opposed by counter-appeal, the belabored priest arrives at his estimate of truth by means of a metaphysical force, which might be called simply "natural morality." An instinct for right action refutes the logic of the Church's appeal.⁶

Thought? nay, Sirs, what shall follow was not thought!
 I have thought sometimes, and thought long and hard
 I have stood before, gone round a serious thing,
 Tasked my whole mind to touch and clasp it close,
 As I stretch forth my arm to touch this bar.
 God and man, and what duty I owe both,--
 I dare to say I have confronted these
 In thought: but no such faculty helped here.
 I put forth no thought,--powerless, all that night
 I paced the city: it was the first Spring.
 By the invasion I lay passive to,
 In rushed new things, the old were rapt away;
 Alike abolished--the imprisonment
 Of the outside air, the inside weight o' the world
 That pulled me down.

(ll. 937-951)

These lines suggest the spontaneity of the new order of ideas in Caponsacchi's mind; they associate the ideas with Nature by couching them

⁶Cf. Ezra Pound's "unwobbling pivot," in his Canto 70.

in terms of cyclic regeneration--" . . . it was the first Spring."

Browning has already conditioned the reader's response to these terms by investing Pompilia's predicament in terms of lifelessness and sterility:

He laid a hand on me that burned all peace,
All joy, all hope, and last all fear away,
Dipping the bough of life, so pleasant once,
In fire which shrivelled leaf and bud alike,
(ll. 776-779)

Morality is a natural response in Caponsacchi, who is thus enabled to restore the natural functions to Pompilia. Although her sterility is metaphorical, its negation comes in the birth of her child, after her rescue by Caponsacchi. "The bough of life" suggests Hermes' bough; its renewed function is dependent upon the concern of a fellow human creature.

It is this same natural morality which inspires, within the noble protagonists, an awareness of and repulsion from the treachery resident in the baser protagonist. Neither the priest nor the illiterate wife is seduced by the forged letters of Guido; that this morality is a common denominator in the composition of the human spirit is evidently one of Browning's serious convictions. The woman at the post-house, who comforts Pompilia "as . . . women understand," the child who wonders that the lady should drink so little milk--and here Pompilia offers comfort as well as receives it, and dramatizes her symbolic identity by cradling the babe in her arms--and the host at Castelnuovo, all tender their sympathies and kindnesses; but their sympathy is not informed by any conscious rationale; indeed, it needs none; it is simply an instinctive response to the suffering of one of their fellows in the human estate. Caponsacchi's response is more complicated than that of the Italian

peasantry because of his clerical involvement, but the fact that the country folk's spontaneous impulses are sympathetic serves as a gloss on the correctness of his decision.

This brief catalogue of incidents implies certain things about the nature of man, as Professor Corson has seen:

The idea of personality as a quickening, regenerating power, and the idea of art as an intermediate agency of personality, are, perhaps, the most reiterated (implicitly, not explicitly) in Browning's poetry and lead up to the dominant idea of Christianity, the idea of Divine Personality; the idea that the soul, to use an expression from . . . "Pauline," must "rest beneath some better essence than itself in weakness."⁷

In Christian terms, divinity implies responsibility. If every human personality, then, contains a quotient of the divine essence, man is a morally responsible creature, and part of his responsibility is the amelioration of human sorrow. Not only as priest, but also as a man, Caponsacchi is involved in Pompilia's predicament, simply by virtue of the fact that she is a suffering person; his priesthood cannot change the truth, but it does condition his response to it. Every priest is also a man, and every man is in some sense a priest. Lest this doctrine be confused with Martin Luther's "priesthood of the believer," according to which every man is his own mediator, independent of the offices of all other man, it should be noted that for Browning there seems to be a kind of human "chain of being" in which every man furnishes a link between that which is above and that which is below him. His salvation requires the stooping of a higher power and obliges him to stoop likewise, in order to save the dependent creature. The human chain of being, if capable

⁷Op. cit., p. vi-vii.

of being graphed, must appear to be circular, rather than linear, for it contains neither link so low that none depend upon it, nor so high that there is none for it to depend upon. The perfect "ring" of the chain is completely efficient only when every person fulfills his own function. The condition of the human estate can be ameliorated only when the tendency of cumulative social experience is toward the awareness of this mutual involvement and the assumption of its obligatory ritual of condescension. Caponsacchi is being saved at the same time he is saving Pompilia.

Browning punctuates the interrelationship among men by dramatizing the particular moment of awareness, when need is married to response in a union of sympathies. In Caponsacchi's monologue this "infinite moment" appears at lines 393-407:

Well, after three or four years of this life,
 In prosecution of my calling, I
 Found myself at the theatre one night
 With a brother Canon, in a mood and mind
 Proper enough for the place, amused or no:
 When I saw enter, stand, and seat herself
 A lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange, and sad.
 It was as when, in our cathedral once,
 As I got yawningly through matin-song,
 I saw facchini bear a burden up,
 Base it on the high-altar, break away
 A board or two, and leave the thing inside
 Lofty and lone: and lo, when next I looked,
 There was the Rafael! I was still one stare,
 When--"Nay, I'll make her give you back your gaze"--

In this moment Caponsacchi's world view is potentially weighed in the balances and found wanting. Unable to formulate the significance of this moment, embryo-of-the-future, which contains the germ of his growth and fruition, he is nevertheless aware of it as in some way critical in his experience:

That night and the next day did the gaze endure,
 Burnt to my brain, as sunbeam thro' shut eyes,
 And not once changed the beautiful sad strange smile.
 (ll. 434-436)

The equation for the priest's education, however, contains integers other than the spiritual ones. Caponsacchi is, besides priest, a social creature whose being requires recognition and fulfillment. The Renaissance perpetuated the Platonic admiration for versatility in human achievement by insisting that the true gentleman must be educated to be-- as Homer says of Odysseus--*πολυκλής*, of many counsels. The emergence of Humanism renewed the emphasis upon the total man. A lord was expected to be accomplished in the social graces, science, linguistics, swordsmanship, philosophy, and the arts. Caponsacchi, as a young nobleman of the Renaissance, indicates that he has been reared in this tradition; "I want all arguments./ all sorts of arms that seem to serve. . . ." The Church accepts him on these terms:

St. Paul has had enough and to spare, I trow,
 Of ragged run-away Onesimus:
 He wants the right hand with the signet-ring
 Of King Agrippa, now, to shake and use.
 (ll. 317-320)

He is accepted as he is; the Church demands no personal enlargement.

His ultimate need for fulfillment must respond to his triple identity as priest, knight-at-arms, and Messiah. The Saint George equation (Guido as dragon, Pompilia as maiden in distress) and the assumption of arms at Castelnuovo identify him as knight; his talents as "maker of madrigals," "the authority/ For delicate play at tarocs, and arbiter/ O' the magnitude of fan-mounts," substantiates his courtly character. Within the Church these selves find only fragmentary fulfillment--"poor work this." Pompilia provides him with a change to fulfill the total need of

his character. Each of Caponsacchi's three selves is basically moved by devotion--the priest to God, the courtier-knight to his lady and quest, the saviour to the victim. In service to Pompilia, he finds occasion for the noblest exercise of each office; as Madonna she evokes his worshipful adoration; as captive maiden she requires deliverance; as lady she inspires love which, however, has its passion refined of baseness. As the priest's lone parishoner, Pompilia unifies Caponsacchi's disparate needs in a single cause, the pursuit of which provides his own salvation as well as hers.

The priest's inner conflict and the nature of its resolution in dramatic action are suggested within the structure of the poem by a symbol-pattern in which his doubt is equated with uncertain light. The first forged letter from Guido arrives in the twilight of evening; Caponsacchi's first visit to Pompilia is made at the time of the Ave; the Pieve is most seductive at dawn; the morning of the following day brings his resolution to abide in the Church; in the evening, however, he and Pompilia begin their flight. A collation of the symbols seems to indicate that the twilight of evening, when light fades and darkness impends, suggests Pompilia, doubt, unrest. Conversely, in the twilight of dawn, incipient daylight, the Church and Caponsacchi's priestly work are confirmed--until in the climactic use of the sunrise symbol at the inn of Castelmovo, Browning reverses the values and she who has previously conjured up doubts and darkness is paradoxically the angel of morning and light; and Guido whom Orthodoxy, supposed source of spiritual light, has been unwilling to indict, is seen as corporal darkness.

The resolution of the poem has already been seen in terms of the

Andromeda myth.⁸ Perseus' condescension from divinity to mortal danger for the salvation of Andromeda is parallel to Caponsacchi's act of sympathy, and both are analogous to the incarnation of Christ. The problem raised by Browning's treatment is whether his statement of Caponsacchi's experience has an identity of its own, or is a restatement in experiential terms of the Christian myth.

When the essence of each of the three related myths is reduced to its lowest common denominator, divine condescension is seen to be the informing principle. The nature of this principle can, perhaps, be elucidated in theological terms. German theologians, at mid-nineteenth century, formulated a doctrine of Christ's incarnations according to which His human experience is seen as a reversal of values; simultaneously He underwent a personal kenosis and plerosis; emptying and filling.⁹ The theory justifies as a mystical paradox the conception of Christ as emptying himself of the majesty of his pre-incarnate state, humbling himself into the lowest estate of manhood, yet in the very action filling himself with new majesty and glory; the crucifixion is his most ignoble yet glorious hour. Caponsacchi undergoes the same paradoxical experience.

If the resolution is to be comprehended in Christian terms, the terms at least must be highly qualified, for in The Ring and the Book the truth of the Christian myth recoils upon its own institutions; the historical ritual values are juxtaposed with new and revolutionary

⁸DeVane, op. cit., passim.

⁹See Albert C. Knudson's The Doctrine of Redemption, (N.Y.: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1933) pp. 312ff., for a typical treatment of the kenotic theory.

ritual values. The flight with Pompilia becomes a ritual, of sorts, in which the girl is equated with the Madonna, and in which the rescuer is not only her saviour, but also a priest forsaking his place in the institutional struggle against the principle of error. Caponsacchi must determine whether that which is gained is of more worth than that which is forsaken.

Caponsacchi's experience does not result in a state of education so much as in a process of his being educated. He never, in the poem, achieves a final fulfillment or plerosis. Browning, rather than verbalizing the truth in any single monologue, probably defines it by encircling its limits, thus validating the ring metaphor on the epistemological level. In order for the priest's education to be completed, he must be able to translate the ritual significance of the flight into a recurring ritual of experience, i.e., a way of life. Next to Pompilia, his involvement with Guido is the most pronounced of his new awareness. The principle of condescension requires an especially high quotient of self-effacement in Caponsacchi's estimate of his antagonist, if his insight is to be complete. Caponsacchi must desire amelioration for Guido's condition; this he has learned from Pompilia, who has said "For his (Guido's) own soul's sake/ Hinder the harm!" And at the close of his testimony Caponsacchi is able to reject the prospect of his old foe's death: "How you will deal with Guido: Oh, not death!/ . . . your lights will teach you clearer!" His aim for Guido is not, however, a completely liberated one; his desire is that the assassin's soul--a human soul in greater need than Pompilia's--might wander with Iscariot in an infernal quarter reserved for the two arch-deceivers. He senses the higher need of Guido's being,

but cannot yet mediate for it as Pompilia can.

Caponsacchi, by the end of his statement, has proceeded from sterile principle (the "pale Summa") to vital action and in the very process of his oration he stabilizes the experience into permanence by translating it back into the realm of language; this time, however, it is principle informed by passion and its very oration partakes of its ritual nature:

Calm I'll keep as monk that croons
Transcribing battle, earthquake, famine, plague,
From parchment to his cloister's chronicle.
Not one word more from the point now!--
I begin.

(ll. 216-219)

The formula for human need and the reaction of sympathetic response Caponsacchi must now integrate so that one can never be isolated from the other. Every fragment of sympathy tendered by the human soul, by so much elevates it:

. . . Somehow, no one ever plucked
A rag, even, from the body of the Lord,
To wear and mock with, but, despite himself,
He looked the greater and was better.

(ll. 211-214)

CHAPTER VII

SOME INTERCHANGE OF GRACE: NOTES ON GENRE

Having postulated three levels of action within the poem, it now becomes incumbent upon me to examine Browning's purpose--what he was, or thought he was doing. It seems evident that his ambitions for the poem were reasonably specific. Professor Paul Cundiff contends that Browning conceived his plan for executing the poem immediately upon completing his reading of the Old Yellow Book.¹ And, although the notion is contrary to that held by William Rossetti and Professors DeVane and Cook, it seems to be supported by Browning's own testimony in the poem itself:

Till, by the time I stood at home again . . .
I had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth
Before attempting smithcraft, on the night
After the day when--truth thus grasped and gained--
I turned, to free myself and find the world,
And stepped out on the narrow terrace, . . .
Over the roof o' the lighted church I looked . . .
There lay Arezzo!
When I went on again, the end was near,
Step by step missing none and marking all, . . .
The life in me abolished the death of things,
Deep calling unto deep: as then and there
Acted itself over again once more
The tragic piece.²

(ll. 113; 117; 470-1; 478-9; 497; 505; 516-7; 520-3)

Rudolf Lehmann, whose well-known testimony Professor Cundiff also cites, recalls from memory the poet's own account of the birth of the poem:

¹Paul A. Cundiff, "Browning's Plan of 'The Ring and the Book'," Studies in Philology, Vol. XXXVIII, 1941, pp. 543-551.

²This juxtaposition of the lines is derived from Professor Cundiff's.

When I first read the book, my plan was at once settled. I went for a walk, gathered twelve pebbles from the road, and put them at twelve equal distances on the parapet that bordered it. These represented the twelve chapters into which the poem is divided and I adhered to that arrangement to the last.³

It would appear, then, that from his first acquaintance with the Old Yellow Book, Browning had formulated a specific plan for making a poem on the subject of the "Old Roman Murder Story." It would also appear that even his method of executing the poem was reasonably well formulated from the beginning. My own conclusion is that Browning thought he was writing an epic. It appears further, however, that Browning thought he was writing a particular kind of epic--a completely new kind; and still further, it appears that he came much closer to succeeding than his critics would give him credit for, and that the measure of his failure can be gauged in terms of his failure to understand the genre in which he sought to compose.

It will be my contention that Browning, as a voluminous and reasonably successful poet--and, more to the point, as a greatly ambitious poet--was, in 1860, "ready" to write an epic. One of the best documented facts of his life is that he was an omnivorous reader in his father's remarkably eclectic library. G. K. Chesterton says of his education:

But the boy's education did not in truth take place in any systematic seat of learning; it took place in his own home, where one of the quaintest and most learned and absurdly indulgent of fathers poured out an endless stream of fantastic recitals from the Greek epics and mediaeval chronicles.⁴

By the time Pauline was published in 1833, it was apparent that Browning, then twenty-one years of age, was to be a poet. He was still, however,

³An Artist's Reminiscences, (1894), p. 224.

⁴G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, (London: Macmillan Co., 1922) p. 12.

a young and immature poet. The romantic impress of Shelly is etched into this and the two subsequent poems; indeed, their execution is largely what Johnson Fox describes in his early review of Pauline as "confessional." This early and acutely subjective technique, Browning's attempt to speak directly in the great "white light" (as Professor Raymond has called it)⁵ of his own immediate and transcendental vision, precipitated a concert of negative criticism. Langbaum appropriately attributes to this criticism Browning's increasing hesitancy to persist in the lyric, confessional mode:

Both Browning and Tennyson had been stung by unfriendly criticism of certain early poems in which they had revealed too much of themselves; and both poets published, in 1842, volumes which were a new departure in their careers and which contained dramatic monologues. The personal sting was probably responsible for Tennyson's decade of silence before 1842; it was almost certainly responsible for the disclaimer attached by Browning to his 1842 Dramatic Lyrics: "so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine."⁶

It is not, perhaps, unreasonable to assume that any nineteenth century poet of even moderate reputation should envision himself as a potential epic poet in the Homeric tradition. It is almost certain that a particularly aggressive, young, ambitious poet, as Browning was, should thus see himself. But these conclusions are based on probabilities even though they suggest a prejudice in Browning's mind. More to the point is the fact that after 1842 Browning was increasingly concerned with the form of his verse. Personally he was energetic and unrestrained; hence, his earliest poetry requires no further justification for him than that it expresses his own

⁵William O. Raymond, op. cit., passim.

⁶Langbaum, op. cit., p. 79.

finest feeling. The wrist-slapping of critics, however, soon taught him the virtue of caution; hence, his subsequent poetry consents to the necessary restraint which form always imposes upon the best literature. From this self-imposed restraint grew Browning's dramatic monologues, the attempt to project feeling outside of his own and into another's character where it must be very carefully objectified and described. His experiments with the dramatic monologue, then, are part of a continuing search for a form which would provide the proper balance between feeling and restraint.

The fact that Browning "found" himself with this discovery of the monologue, did not obviate a continuing evolution of the form. As Professor Hodell says:

Browning was within certain limitations a very prolific creator of poetic forms. He scarcely ever departs from the drama or the dramatic monologue, but he has modified them with much variety. He was never conventionalized nor stereotyped in his art, either by the tradition of other artists or by his own achievements, and his successes did not repeat themselves.⁷

This search for form reached its height in the sixties in The Ring and the Book which, as I will attempt to show, Browning meant for an epic. Perhaps as early as Sordello the movement toward epic had begun; the six book division, the national backdrop of renaissance Italy, the broad scope of psychological development and the counterpoint of Guelph-Ghibelline violence all suggest that Browning is groping for more breadth and solidarity in this poem than he had demonstrated in either of the earlier ones. And while the iambs contribute their capacity for grandeur, the couplets of Sordello contribute something that Browning was beginning

⁷Charles W. Hodell (ed.), The Old Yellow Book, (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1908), p. 250.

to feel the need of--restraint in form. In The Ring and the Book Browning multiplies his book divisions to twelve, retains the broad scope of psychological development--but uses three central characters rather than one; he keeps the national backdrop of renaissance Italy, but dramatizes the action and violence which now seize the very persons of his narrative; the iambs are retained, but the rhyme is dropped, and Browning emerges with blank verse. All of these things seem to imply a movement in the direction of epic.

The most inescapable feature of Browning's own accounts of his first plans for the poem is still, however, that it was to follow a twelve book division. In addition to the two accounts quoted above there is also the testimony of his letter to Fields, Osgood, and Company, the poem's American publishers; it is dated July 19, 1867 and is here quoted in entirety:

Gentlemen,--I beg to thank you for the two letters which contained your handsome acceptance of my proposal, and directions as to the way of forwarding the sheets. I shall do my best to satisfy you, depend upon it, and will manage all the packets, duplicates, etc. scrupulously. But the people with a right to advise me in this matter--in which they will be quite as interested as yourselves--demur to my sending anything seven weeks before publication; they insist on my avoiding all possibility of even extracts getting here before their own proceedings; especially they want to announce the name of the poem themselves. I must beg for your indulgence and sympathy in these matters, and that you must believe my honest determination is to make you as secure as you would wish.

Meantime I give you what particulars I can, for your guidance. The poem is new in subject, treatment and form. It is in Twelve Parts, averaging, say 1600 lines each. The whole somewhat exceeding 20,000. (It is the shortest poem, for the stuff in it, I ever wrote.) This will be printed here in two volumes of six parts each. The name is that of the collection of law-papers on which, or out of which, rather, the poem is developed. I hope to be able to begin to print in October. I go in a week to a quiet place for two months, where I shall finally dispose of at least three quarters of this thing. Should you want to communicate with me, write to me "Au Groisic, Loire Inferieure, France," where I am to be from August to

the end of September.

I hope I do not dissatisfy you in any respect, and, repeating
my own satisfaction at your kindness, am, gentlemen,
Very faithfully yours,
Robert Browning⁸

This letter, when collated with the other first or second hand accounts of the poet's plan for executing the poem, yields the following significant assertions: 1) The poem will be in twelve parts; 2) It will be over 20,000 lines in length; 3) it will be new (*italics Browning's*) in subject, treatment and form. The first two of these suggest a poem that is epic in scope; the third suggests something other than epic--at least something other than old, traditional epic. When Browning laid those twelve stones on the parapet, he evidenced the feeling that he was dealing with epic material and proposed an appropriate arrangement. Professor Hodell disagrees. In Appendix XI to his edition of *The Old Yellow Book* he asserts that "the poem is novel, as much as it is epic or drama."⁹ And he says more pointedly in Appendix XII, "we should utterly abandon the search for conventional epic form in a poem which is epical only in length."¹⁰ He is right when he says we should abandon the search for conventional epic; he is wrong when he asserts that the poem is "epical only in length." It has numerous other epical characteristics, and it is these numerous characteristics which it will now be profitable to explore, with the hope of coming somewhere in the search upon a means of estimating the quality of the poet's effort or of understanding his

⁸Thurman L. Hood, (ed.), Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), pp. 113-114.

⁹Chas. Hodell, (ed.), The Old Yellow Book, (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1908), p. 250.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 251.

thematic intention more clearly.

The reader of the poem will recall that in every monologue, there is a speaker addressing an implied audience. As readers we are invited to join--if we will do so silently, as listeners only--a circle of citizens standing on a street corner at Rome; Caponsacchi implies that we are spectators in a courtroom; Pompilia addresses us in the second person: "All these few things I know are true,--will you remember then?" (ll. 35-36). "Ah! Friends, I thank and bless you every one!" (l. 1768); in so doing she draws us into her death chamber and ranges us round to hear her testimony. But there is one closed circuit conversation in the poem; it is Browning's famous appeal to the then dead Elizabeth which concludes Book I where he speaks in his own voice:

O lyric Love, half angel and half bird
 And all a wonder and a wild desire,--
 Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
 Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
 And sang a kindred soul out to his face,--
 Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart--
 When the first summons from the darkling earth
 Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,
 And bared them of the glory--to drop down,
 To toil for man, to suffer or to die,--
 This is the same voice: can thy soul know change?
 Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help!
 Never may I commence my song, my due
 To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
 Except with bent head and beseeching hand--
 That still, despite the distance and the dark,
 What was, again may be; some interchange
 Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
 Some benediction anciently thy smile:
 --Never conclude, but raising hand and head
 Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn
 For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,
 Their utmost up and on,--so blessing back
 In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,
 Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,
 Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall!
 (ll. 1391-1416)

This passage I take to be an invocation to Browning's muse--Elizabeth herself; it is a direct, self-conscious effort to govern our responses to the poem with a traditional device. It is a specific plea for divine help--"Never may I commence my song, my due/ To God . . ./ Except with bent head and beseeching hand." He is beseeching that "what was," i.e., Elizabeth's gentle compulsion and her unwavering confidence in Browning's power--her inspiration--"again may be." He asks "some interchange of grace" whereby Elizabeth, now apotheosized, may interfuse him with a new sense of her "benediction." Professor Hodell is wrong; this passage is epic in the most traditional sense. Even so common a detail as the beginning in medias res is exploited by Browning. The monologues, after all, begin after Pompilia has already been stabbed; but these things are circumstantial, and although suggesting that the poet certainly intended to write at least a modified epic, they are no guarantee that the end product is indeed epic in spirit.

Professor Ker has an extended book-length definition of the epic genre, some parts of which will perhaps be pertinent to the solution of the present problem:

Epic poetry is one of the complex and comprehensive kinds of literature, in which most of the other kinds may be included--romance, history, comedy; tragical, comical, historical, pastoral are terms not sufficiently various to denote the variety of the Iliad and the Odyssey.¹¹

The success of epic poetry depends on the author's power of imagining and representing characters.¹²

It [the Odyssey] is not pure fantasy and "Faerie," like the voyage of Maelduin or the vigil in the castle of Busirane. Odysseus in the house of Alcinous is not different from Odysseus of the return

¹¹Op. cit., p. 18.

¹²Ibid., p. 19.

to Ithaca. The story is not pure romance, it is a dramatic monologue; and the character of the speaker has more part than the wonders of the story in the silence that falls on the listeners when the story comes to an end.¹³

I recognize that Professor Ker is using the term "epic" in the sense of "folk epic," and that he would call The Ring and the Book (if he considered it epic at all) "artificial epic," as he does Paradise Lost, for instance. But the distinctions he makes between kinds of epic are, I think, differences of species--not genus. An abstract of the preceding quotations, then, would lead to the conclusions that epic is 1) encyclopedic, subsuming other forms; 2) dependent upon the imaginative representation of character; 3) essentially dramatic.

It has already been my thesis that The Ring and the Book subsumes at least three major literary modes--the mythic, the romantic, the historical. Hence the poem itself must be something larger than either myth or romance alone; it is a framework for three separate and yet interwoven narratives; its characters slide from one appropriate identity into another. But we are not confused; we know the literary traditions Browning is using; when Guido claims to be Bellerophon we are not deceived, for we understand the functions of parody and irony. There are also other literary forms--lesser ones--subsumed within the framework of this poem. There is the rhetorical Bottinicus' miniature epithalamion:

For lo, advancing Hymen and his pomp!
Discedunt nunc amores, loves, farewell!
Maneat amor, let love, the sole, remain!
 Farewell to dewiness and prime of life!
 Remains the rough determined day: dance done,
 To work, with plough and harrow!

(11. 239-244)

¹³Ibid., p. 39.

The fact that Browning concerns himself so minutely with the description of character and the fact that his method is entirely dramatic are facts which make The Ring and the Book more epical in nature--not less. In the sense that Browning's poem is told to the reader, it is closer to the etymological significance of *ἔπος*--an orally recounted tale--than is Paradise Lost. In The Ring and the Book there is an omniscient narrator--the poet himself, followed by a series of speakers each of whom tells his own tale. Even in this dramatic presentation of characters Browning before 1869 was evolving an ever broader point of view. He had begun in 1840 with a psychological portrait of the renaissance man in Sordello. In Men and Women, which was published in 1855, he focuses upon the renaissance mind even more microscopically. There can be small doubt that his interest in this period derives from the versatility of the renaissance man. It was the last age in which a single mind could bridge the gap between the two cultures--scientific and humanistic. The nineteenth century psyche would have been much less satisfactory for Browning because it had to be oriented either to the fanaticism of a scientism which was promising more than it could deliver, or to the rigid sterility of orthodoxy. It was in the renaissance that orthodoxy had last been mythopoeic. In Men and Women, Browning's villains had been petty, hypocritical, jealous, niggardly, mean tempered or vicious. His heroes had been honest, imaginative--and outnumbered. Almost always his protagonists were mixtures of good and evil. It was not until The Ring and the Book that he was able to come to grips with good and evil on a cosmic scale. But it is not cosmic at the literal level--where Guido is simply a jealous husband; it is cosmic at the mythic level--where Guido

is Satan-serpent-wolf. Only by understanding that Browning's highest ambitions for the poem are registered in the metaphors--in the myth--can we understand what kind of poem Browning thought he was writing. It has already been noted that Caponsacchi's conflict is Lippo's and Childe Roland's carried to an extremity. It should also be observed that there is a strong resemblance between Guido and the Duke of "My Last Duchess." There is a marked similarity in the plot. But the Duke's passion is a compound of jealousy, possessiveness, and egomania. Guido's is symbolic of all the dark powers of a demonic soul. The Duke's vices are specific and recognizable in the world of common life. Guido's are archetypal--mythic. The converse can be said of Pompilia; her counterpart, the last duchess is a pleasant, affectionate--but perhaps not very profound soul. Pompilia achieves dignity in a virtue which has explicit, but interrelated meanings at three different levels. The sheer scope of character suggests that The Old Yellow Book provided Browning almost by accident with the possibility for fulfilling his psychological studies of the human mind. Browning reminds us that the 20,000 lines are "the shortest poem, for the stuff in it, I ever wrote." This statement is incredible by any standard if one recalls the beautiful, almost flawless economy of "My Last Duchess," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," and "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," --all of which had been written before this assertion to his publishers. Grant that some of his enthusiasm was attributable to the desire to justify the poem to men who primarily wanted to sell it, and one still has to justify that small fraction of truth which Browning apparently hoped to represent in the statement. A dissenting opinion of the poem's economy is expressed by a critic who reviewed the poem for Quarterly Review:

The Ring and the Book is decidedly too long. It is a weariness to the flesh to read so many arguments pro and con-- The subject is too slight for the mass of ability and thought that Mr. Browning has put into it¹⁴

The Edinburgh Review also attacks the length of the poem, concentrating especially on the "lawyer books":

Whether we regard his poems in their integrity, in separate sections, or in particular passages, we constantly find the artistic effect missed or marred by an apparent inability to discriminate the point at which sufficiency is reached. The conclusion of 'The Ring and The Book' affords a comprehensive illustration of what we mean. After we have gone through all the emotions which this tragedy excites in us, after we have sat reverently at Innocent's feet, and heard the final ravings of Guido, we may still listen to the austere sermon of the friar, or to the poet himself teaching us But are we in a mood to read tags of gossiping letters from a Venetian uncouth horse-play which we already know?¹⁵

A third reviewer attacks Browning's intrusion of his own point of view:

But that the poem is faultless we by no means say. Though its greatness is almost wholly dramatic, there is an error in its construction which the dramatist last of all should make The dramatist should have no more judgment about the character he displays and the passion he depicts than nature herself who first created them. He should never play the commentator; still less should he take sides and explain his reasons for doing so before the play begins.¹⁶

Almost without exception Browning's reviewers--while giving general approval to the poem--attack its sheer length. Yet Browning himself defended it as the most economical he had written. I think Browning is implying by this assertion that the complexity of his point of view, the subtle distinctions in the judgments of the separate speakers, and the

¹⁴"Three Modern Poets," Quarterly Review, Vol. CXXVI, 1869, p. 347.

¹⁵"The Ring and the Book," Edinburgh Review, Vol. CXXX, 1869, p. 183.

¹⁶"Browning in 1869," Cornhill Magazine, Vol. XIX, 1869, p. 254-

multi-levelled symbolic significance of his characters required a very broad, extended statement--one which would reach epic proportions.

But Browning never--so far as his written accounts go--called the poem epic. Indeed he called it "new in . . . treatment." Browning, then, sought to modify the epic, to adapt it to a nineteenth century point of view--with a new emphasis on the labyrinth of thought which produced the separate perspectives in the poem--a psychological emphasis.

Having postulated that the poem is, in Browning's mind, a new kind of epic, it remains for me yet to evaluate this psychological epic-myth. One requirement of myth in its truest sense is that it must recognize a struggle elemental in its nature; humans fight against gods; destinies collide; Prometheus remains defiant in the face of divine terrorism. Mrs. Langer calls it a "recognition of natural conflicts, of human desire frustrated by non-human powers, hostile oppression, or contrary desires; it is a story of the birth, passion, and defeat by death which is man's common fate."¹⁷ The triangular tension established by the forces for which the protagonists of the poem stand suggests the real extent of Pompilia's suffering; Guido as Judas is a nexus of all evil; the whole institutional structure of European society is on trial along with Guido; evil is polarized in him as good is polarized in his wife--Madonna; and it is for Caponsacchi as champion, as Messiah, to provide the salvation for the Suffering Innocent and to make redemption possible in a fallen culture. Few modern critics doubt that The Ring and the Book is about great good and great evil--possibly not about

¹⁷Op. cit., p. 152-153.

cosmic good and evil as Milton treats in Paradise Lost, but at least about cultural good and evil.

A third attribute of myth is identified by Mrs. Langer as follows:

Myth's personages tend to fuse into stable personalities of supernatural character. Two divinities of somewhat similar type--perhaps miraculously born, prodigious in strength, heroically defeated and slain--become identified; they are one god under two names.¹⁸

Figures with the same poetic meaning are blended into one, and characters of quite separate origins enter into definite relations with each other.¹⁹

The Ring and the Book becomes particularly interesting at this point, for Browning does not hesitate to see Pompilia in terms of two separate traditions; she is both the pagan Andromeda, and the Christian Madonna; Guido is the Judas of Biblical myth and the Lycaon of classical myth. Browning is synthesizing characters from mythologies of widely variant cultures; but the whole tradition of mythology justifies the blurring of distinctions. What is important for us is to notice that by fusing Lycaon, the first murderer in Latin mythology, with Judas Iscariot, the poet creates a new third mythical character--Count Guido Franceschini; by merging the classical myth of Perseus with the Christian myth of Saint George, he produces a new mythical hero--Guiseppe Caponsacchi. Browning, then, seems to be doing more than merely alluding to well known heroes; he is making of them a new and different kind of hero.

Myth, Mrs. Langer assures us, must also be accompanied by an air of religious seriousness.²⁰ Other critics have pointed out much of what

¹⁸Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 153.

²⁰Ibid., p. 151-152.

is to be seen in the interplay of the metaphorical figures of the poem, who respond to one another in such a way as to provide an ethical statement about the efficaciousness of human sympathy as a means of redemption for fallen man, about the divine stooping required to sanction sympathy as a sacramental activity and about heroic stooping which is an emulation of the divine. One can see that Browning, if saying something quite different from what the primitive shaman said to his tribal fellows, is at least saying it in the same general way; i.e., each is providing a way of understanding the ethic of his culture by delivering in concrete terms something that is essentially abstract--a fictional vehicle for tribal mores.

It is rather generally recognized that the most highly developed mythical statement is the epic poem. If indeed The Ring and the Book deals with the problem of removing its characters from a temporal historical situation to a timeless, non-historical situation, then it seems reasonable to suppose that we might understand Browning to have considered himself to be writing an epic. That the hero is not a national hero can be of no consequence, for the protagonists of Paradise Lost are explicitly racial as opposed to national; the real topos of Browning's poem is not Italy, it is rather the world of ethic. Each of the protagonists has a clearly defined ethical coefficient. The conflict is not one of arms; it is one of character. Caponsacchi's triumph over Guido is a moral one. He delivers one young wife from the abuse of one aged husband; yet the struggle is heroic, larger than life, precisely because Pompilia is all of good, Guido is all of evil, and Caponsacchi is the racial representative faced with a choice between the two; he is a

potential Messiah, but his saviourhood ultimately depends upon his wilful choice. Browning is not concerned to tell us whether redemption is possible for Guido, because Guido's privilege of choice is implied by Caponsacchi's. Guido is simply representative of the available evil in the universe, and there is no more need for Browning to rationalize his depravity than for Milton to rationalize Satan's. Guido does not become evil, Guido is evil. It seems not too unlikely to suggest that in The Ring and the Book, Browning is attempting to write a purely psychological epic.

At this point one may still feel disturbed by the fact that the poem does not make myth in the same way the Faerie Queene makes myth, that it is not epic in the same way that Paradise Lost is epic; one is aware that mana is not a constant force within the poem, that Browning is not always dealing with people who are larger than life. As a matter of fact, one senses that the poem is very often removed by a considerable distance from the strange and wonderful--from the mythical. An understanding of the limitations of myth itself may provide an explanation:

The origin of myth is dynamic, but its purpose is philosophical. It is the primitive phase of metaphysical thought, the first embodiment of general ideas. It can do no more than initiate and present them; for it is a non-discursive symbolism, it does not lend itself to analytic and genuinely abstractive techniques. The highest development myth is capable of is the exhibition of human life and cosmic order that epic poetry reveals. We cannot abstract and manipulate its concepts any further within the mythical mode. When this mode is exhausted, natural religion is superseded by a discursive and more literal form of thought, namely philosophy.

. . . . Ideas first adumbrated in fantastic form become real intellectual property only when discursive language gives rise to their expression.²¹

Many lengthy, almost prosaic, non-mythical passages in The Ring and the

²¹Ibid., pp. 172-173.

Book can probably best be described as being precisely discursive. The mythical structure of the poem, then, is compromised by the large volume of what Mrs. Langer would probably call philosophical poetry, and because philosophy is apparently culturally anterior to myth, one would suppose it to be the more intellectually complex. Browning, in making myth for his own culture attempts sophisticated myth--modern epic for the modern man. This very sophistication militates against one of the primary requirements for myth--naivete.

As soon as the interest in factual values awakes, the mythical mode of world--envisagement is on the wane People who discover the obvious discrepancy between fantasy and fact deny that myths are true; those who recognize the truth of myths claim that they register facts. . . .²²

Robert Browning sensed the intellectual schizophrenia of modern man, which Mrs. Langer here defines. He made the ambitious effort to bridge the gap between the primitive and the complex by developing the sophisticated myth of The Ring and the Book. It is his effort to evoke the new vision--to create the new mythology; the effort produced a great an ambitious poem, but it failed upon the strength of a semantic quibble, for sophisticated myth is by the definition of its terms an irreconcilable paradox.

²²Ibid., pp. 173-174.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS

The ethical problem postulated in The Ring and the Book is essentially the modern one. It derives from the dichotomy that exists between the pragmatic evidence of the senses on the one hand, and the compulsions of an imaginative sensibility on the other. The abrasives of common life wear away the aspirations of the human spirit, or, in Arnold's phrase, the imaginative life is consumed in the "gradual furnace of the world." Scientism had already taken "other worldliness" out of man's focus, and man's questions about his significance were geared more than ever before to the restraints of this sordid world. Even that lovely spark of man's iota of divinity had burned out fourteen years before the publication of The Ring and the Book when Charles Darwin had organized the theory to which many curious English minds had already given consent--that man had derived by slow evolution from lower, less noble forms of life.

The late renaissance culture of Browning's poem was like the comfortable, orthodox one of nineteenth century England, a decaying one. Among the grossest critical errors perpetrated against Browning, perhaps, is one which denies this. Douglas Bush says of him:

Insight [in Browning's poetry] into the nature of self and God and the universe is to be gained, not by religious and philosophic discipline, but by vigorous splashing in a sea, or even a tub, of spontaneous emotions In their various ways

Keats and Shelley, Arnold and Tennyson sought for philosophic unity, order, and meaning behind experience and appearances. Browning, lustily buffeting the waves of flux, solves all problems by shouting "God! Life! Love!"¹

But Mr. Bush, often so enviably right, is here probably wrong. At least he is wrong if this is his judgment about the best of Browning. Caponsacchi's last two words are "miserable me." The heroine of the poem is stabbed (twenty-two times) to death, and her murderer is justified by at least one court. But Guido has expected all along that he would indeed go free, and he has expected so precisely because the testimony of tradition has assured him of impunity. Italian law is rotten with the decadence of an outmoded feudalism. All empirical evidence affirms Guido's judgment, but Caponsacchi sees a truth which the merely empirical does not convey; he sees the basic rightness of a particular woman's wanting to leave her husband. It is then, to some extent, the epistemological question that is on trial with Guido--not only in its seventeenth century version, but also in its nineteenth. This conflict between the two alternative ways of understanding is precisely the conflict among Browning's contemporaries. The Utilitarians, philosophical radicals, and practitioners of the physical sciences--the "logic choppers"--were formulating a rigidly empirical approach to learning. J. S. Mill posits for himself (before his "awakening" of 1828) a representative view:

The very excellence of analysis (I argued) is that it tends to weaken and undermine whatever is the result of prejudice; that it enables us mentally to separate ideas which have only casually clung together: and no associations whatever could ultimately resist this dissolving force, were it not that we owe to analysis

¹Mythology and the Romantic Tradition, (N.Y.: Pageant Book Co., 1957), p. 385.

our clearest knowledge of the permanent sequences in nature; the real connexion between Things, not dependent on our will and feelings Analytic habits may thus even strengthen the associations between causes and effects, means and ends, but tend altogether to weaken those which are, to speak familiarly, a mere matter of feeling.²

On the other hand there were the champions of the subjective sanctions of truth--the romantic poets, the theologians and transcendental philosophers. These two groups, then, represent the two basic approaches to epistemology, but accurate cultural description becomes increasingly complex when it is observed that there was also a teleological split. The social aims of certain empiricists approximates the aims of certain of the romantics in the cause of liberal reform, while certain other intuitionists--particularly those with a theological orientation--militantly defended the status quo. On the ways of arriving at knowledge and the ends aimed at in the acquisition of knowledge, Browning's age was irreparably split. Browning himself drafts both schisms into the thematic problem of The Ring and the Book, and both are reconciled in the myth he creates for the poem. Guido and Caponsacchi polarize the epistemological split; Guido sees only the facts; Caponsacchi sees more. The teleological split occurs among the poem's empiricists who disagree as to what Guido should have done about Pompilia, even though they all agree to the correctness of the evidence upon which Guido acts; i.e., they all agree that Pompilia has committed adultery. Even the prosecutor who sends Guido to the guillotine is close to Guido epistemologically, for he too believes the evidence; he too believes that Caponsacchi has made love to Pompilia. Browning posed a difficult problem for himself--to reconcile the earthbound

²Buckler, (ed.), op. cit., p. 291.

necessities of empiricism with the imaginative insights of the intuition, and so to emerge with workable code of behavior in an increasingly pragmatic culture. We see that reconciliation working itself out in the myth.

It should be stressed that Browning is not anti-pragmatic. He is not refuting the positive method of scientism; his metaphorical Messiah is not a mystical one, nor a supernatural one who defies the facts of his environment. He acts as he does, jeopardizing his own life, precisely because he interprets the facts to justify him in doing so. Rather than denying the validity of pragmatism, Browning is simply trying to add something to it, for he feels that although its evidence provides a weighty document in the assessment of life it reveals only a partial picture of the truth. He asserts this specifically when he asserts his desire to write a poem that "shall mean beyond the facts." Caponsacchi is not a mystic. His insight into Pompilia's plight is not a revelation; it is intuition--seeing not only the truth of the facts, but also the meaning of the facts. Bottinius, the pragmatic attorney sees only the facts, but the facts lead him to an erroneous conclusion. One contemporary critic complains, incidentally, that Browning is too earthbound:

His lack of a verse-form capable of conveying poetic rapture . . . was the outward sign of an inward deficiency. His life was not . . . conducive to the reception of absolute knowledge . . . His mind and life were too full of externals: he did not know the 'self-sufficing power of solitude'. So that even when he is in contact with the spiritual world of reality he is not aware of it as Wordsworth was³

Mr. Duffin, perhaps, does not give enough importance to the fact that

³H. C. Duffin, Amphibian, (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1956), p. 293.

Browning is making a conscientious effort to stay oriented to the facts (he even prides himself for sticking close to his source) simply in order to be honest with the logic of the senses.

Browning can be found working toward a definition of intuitional epistemology as early as the first book of the poem, where he describes the pragmatic approach of Half-Rome:

Well, now; there's nothing in or out o' the world
 Good except truth: yet this, the something else,
 What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
 This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
 That quickened, made the inertness malleolable [sic]
 O' the gold was not mine,--what's your name for this?
 Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
 Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
 The somehow may be thishow.

(ll. 697-706)

Here are the voices presently shall sound
 In due succession. First, the world's outcry
 Around the rush and ripple of any fact
 Fallen stonewise, plumb on the smooth face of things;
 The world's guess, as it crowds the bank o' the pool,
 At what were figure and substance, by their splash:
 Then, by vibrations in the general mind,
 As depth of deed already out of reach.
 This threefold murder of the day before,--
 Say, Half-Rome's feel after the vanished truth;
 Honest enough as the way is: all the same,
 Harbours in the center of its sense
 A hidden germ of failure, shy but sure,
 To neutralize that honesty and leave
 That feel for truth at fault, as the way is too.

(ll. 838-852)

Next Browning describes the conclusions of Pompilia's sympathizer Other Half-Rome:

Next, from Rome's other half, the opposite feel
 For truth with a like swerve, like unsuccess,--
 Or if success, by no skill but more luck
 This time, through siding rather with the wife,
 Because of a fancy-fit inclined that way,
 Than with the husband.

(ll. 883-888)

Even though this speaker expresses a kindness for Pompilia, his judgment is not taken to be sound, for he has ignored the facts. He is on the "right" side of the case only by virtue of his "luck." Browning, then, is closely bound to this world. In the last book of the poem, he specifically denies the completeness of the point of view which is defined only by a thorough pragmatism:

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
 (Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence
 Of many which whatever lives should teach:
 This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
 Our human testimony false, our fame
 And human estimation words and wind.
 Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
 Because it is the glory and good of Art,
 That Art remains the one way possible
 Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.
(ll. 835-844)

Art, then, means beyond the facts at which the scientific method stops. He adds in line 867 that it will "suffice the eye and save the soul beside." His "mere imagery on the wall," and his effort to "suffice the eye" are allusions to the imagistic nature of art, or, as the modern symbolic logicians would say, to the symbol-making faculty as opposed to the abstraction-making faculty of the human mind. The meaning beyond the facts which saves the soul beside is an allusion to the thematic, ethical level of the poem. Both are sustained in the mythos of the poem where the symbolic (pictorial) encounter between the Messiah and Satan, between the hero and the dragon is geared to Browning's estimate of the highest and most continuing ethical relationship between fellow human creatures.

One may ask then, and quite legitimately so, what this insight of Caponsacchi's really is. It is his understanding that there is neither

custom, sacrament, nor law which justifies unnecessary human suffering; he sees Pompilia's Marian innocence and, Saviour-like, redeems her from Guido's Satanic abuse. It is the sum total of his information and insight which leads him to an understanding of the circumstances, and those two integers derive from opposite extremes of the modern dilemma.

Browning's confronting what I have called "the modern problem"--what J. S. Mill described as the predicament of being "destitute of faith, but terrified at skepticism"⁴--is part of the mainstream in the flow of nineteenth century ideas. Tennyson, of course, confronted the same problem, as, e.g., in "Oenone" where he confronts Paris with a choice between the power offered by Here, the wisdom offered by Pallas, and the desire offered by Aphrodite. The first two suggest the assumption of responsibility in a world which the artist neither likes nor approves of--the pragmatic world of ordinary human affairs. He chooses the way of desire--the free ranging indulgence of the private passions. Tennyson, unable to believe in the old Orthodoxy, was yet unwilling to deny the claims of an imaginatively sanctioned way of arriving at truth. He waivers between the two alternatives, recognizing, as in "The Lady of Shallott," that for the sensitive imagination to yield itself up to the common round of a life rooted in material affairs is simultaneously necessary and fatal. It was Archbishop Trench who cautioned him, "Tennyson, we cannot live in art."

Arnold also confronted the problem and states it succinctly in Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse:

⁴Buckler, (ed.), op. cit., p. 256.

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
 The other powerless to be born,
 With nowhere yet to rest my head,
 Like these, on earth I want forlorn.
 (ll. 85-88)

The one dead world is of course the old Orthodoxy; the new world, powerless to be born, is the era of sweetness and light which should have been ushered in by the new spirit of inquiry, but which, in reality, was aborted by the materialistic orientation of the new knowledge. He cannot reconcile the spiritual vision and intellectual blindness of the old order with the intellectual vision and spiritual blindness of the new. He defined the dilemma again in "Dover Beach":

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.
 (ll. 29-37)

The problem manifested itself continuously throughout the century and is partly responsible for the characteristic tone of the Victorian ironists--Meredith, Hardy and Housman (among the poets). They are the disparity between the Victorian slogan of "progress" on the scientific and political frontiers, and the vacuum of chaos on the ethical. Housman directs our attention to the brutal price paid for Victoria's empire in "1887." Hardy also poses a typical point of view in his poem "God-Forgotten," where he defines the irony of the circumstance by which man in the brilliance of his increasingly facile use of the scientific method eventually discovers, to his bewildered chagrin, that he is not important in the total assessment of the universe. In the following stanzas God

is speaking to his earthling visitor, who has come as a suppliant for the amelioration of earth's miseries:

"The Earth, sayest thou? The Human race?
By me created? Sad its lot?
Nay: I have no remembrance of such place:
Such world I fashioned not."

And the visitor replies:

"O Lord, forgive me when I say
Thou spakest the word that made it all."--
"The Earth of men-let me bethink me
Yea!
I dimly do recall

"Some tiny sphere I built long back
(Mid millions of such shapes of mine)
So named It perished, surely--not a wrack
Remaining, or a sign?

"It lost my interest from the first,
My aims therefor succeeding ill;
Haply it died of doing as it durst?"

And the problem persists. When Einstein swept away the last of the physical absolutes, the cultural schizophrenia became irreparable and the "two culture" society was no longer a mutation, but a bona fide species in the history of civilizations. The focus on the materialistic orientation subverts the effort to sustain an inner life and modern man finds himself still confronted with the Victorian dilemma--the irrefutable validity of the pragmatic method on the one hand, and the refusal of the imaginative life to abdicate on the other.

But modern humanists, notably the modern artists, are working toward a solution--the synthesis of a new myth to replace the old--a myth which will embrace and satisfy the demands of the scientific method and at the same time give direction to the inner life. Hemingway works out a naturalistic "code" of behavior; Faulkner works out a cultural

myth in which man learns pride, dignity, and humility from his honest encounter with the elemental world of nature. Eliot attempts (in Murder in the Cathedral) to disengage the old myth from its particular historical antecedents and translate it into a continually valid pattern: "The wheel must move and be forever still"; i.e., the pattern is the same from generation to generation, but it must be re-enacted in each separate generation. All of these contemporaries recognize what Suzanne Langer has asserted:

There is the silly conflict of religion and science, in which science must triumph, not because what it says about religion is just, but because religion rests on a young provisional form of thought, to which philosophy of nature--proudly called "science," or "knowledge"--must succeed if thinking is to go on. There must be a rationalistic period from this point onward. Some day when the vision is totally rationalized, the ideas exploited and exhausted, there will be another vision, a new mythology.⁵

And the Victorian artist, before the old Orthodoxy was dead, before positivism had come of age, was already looking--vainly, perhaps--but looking for the new mythology which would not be oriented to an outmoded historicity, but which would still be rooted in the deeper levels of man's most imaginative consciousness. They all recognized that the synthesis of a myth is necessary to sustain the imaginative life because it rises from the imagination of the artist and addresses itself to the imagination of the reader--yet its content embodies a flexible world view--an honest estimate of man's role in a relativistic universe. The Victorians, unlike many of the romantics who came before them, were unable to construct a workable form of the myth they sought. Tennyson tried to revitalize the ancient forms of Greek myth and medieval romance, but he

⁵Op. cit., p. 173.

could not extract from them a satisfactory response--a unified response--to the dual impulses lurking within his own mind. Browning, perhaps, came closest of his age to working out a functional myth, and that myth receives its fullest statement in The Ring and the Book. The imaginative principle was human sympathy, the voluntary assumption of responsibility for the alleviation of the miseries of another. Arnold come close to positing love as the reconciling principle in "Dover Beach" where the lovers' vow of loyalty becomes the only constancy in a world of flux. But the resolution seems to be merely rhetorical, and it ultimately fails to provide a workable principle in that Arnold's concept of love, in this particular poem, is a retreat from the ugliness of the world--unlike Browning's love, which is a commitment rather than a withdrawal. Browning felt that the ethic of the myth would work, at least for him, and it was this awareness that gave rise to that most malicious of all critical charges--he was an optimist.

Browning's myth, thematically quite similar to Eliot's in Murder in the Cathedral, asserts that Christ must come to every generation--and here it differs from Orthodoxy. Sherwood Anderson says something similar in Winesburg, Ohio: "everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified." J. D. Salinger says it in Franny and Zooey: "The fat lady is Christ." For Browning Caponsacchi is the Christ in Everyman, but he is not merely a mystical one; he must respond to the facts of this present world order; he must add the facts, and then to their sum he must add one integer more in order to arrive at the truth of his existence. That truth is his own sympathetic involvement in the plight of the whole

human tribe--his self-appointment as soother of the world's hurts, not in a general, doctrinaire sense, but in the particular circumstances he confronts in the path of his own progress. He, as a mythic Christ, as a romantic hero, is responsible for the amelioration of human suffering wherever he finds it. By this law, felt Robert Browning, a man can live responsibly in the scientific age.

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