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LOVE POEMS OF ROBERT BROWNING.

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CONVENTIONAL AND CREATED IMAGERY IN
THE LOVE POEMS OF ROBERT BROWNING

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CONVENTIONAL AND CREATED IMAGERY IN
THE LOVE POEMS OF ROBERT BROWNING

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CONVENTIONAL AND CREATED IMAGERY IN THE LOVE POEMS OF ROBERT BROWNING

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of The Browning Society in London in 1881, eight years before the poet's death, the poetry of Robert Browning has been under steady critical scrutiny. But the imposing personality of Browning, as well as his immensely dramatic elopement with Elizabeth Barrett, has led to a fictionalizing of Browning into a public myth that has a tendency to obscure the private life of Browning as poetic craftsman. It is only within the last thirty years that more attention has been paid to the poet than to the man, and criticism has been directed towards aesthetics rather than biography--at Browning as myth-maker rather than at Browning as apologist for the Establishment in general, and middle-class conventions in particular.

While it is probably true that each generation must re-evaluate its relationship to past writers, it is difficult to believe that so major an element as physical love has been so long ignored in Browning's writings. There seems to be several reasons for this: critics have too long slavishly adhered to the received doctrine that Victorian writers conceived of men and women as disembodied heads floating above

the physical realities of life; and critics have too long tended to ignore that Victorian writers, like writers of any other age, attempted to see life as a whole, and saw that the physical aspects of life were strongly impacted on the spiritual. Browning's first published poem, after all, begins:

Pauline, mine own, bend o'er me--thy soft breast
 Shall pant to mine--bend o'er me--thy sweet eyes,
 And loosened hair and breathing lips, and arms
 Drawing me to thee--these build up a screen
 To shut me in with thee, and from all fear,
 So that I might unlock the sleepless brood
 Of fancies from my soul. . . .¹

No one has ever disavowed the intense physicality of Browning--it informs all of his poems from Pauline (1833) to Asolondo (1889)--but no extended work has ever been done on the extent of sexuality in Browning's poetry, the form it takes, the ultimate meaning of love to Browning's theme, or the place of physicality in the whole of Browning's canon. In fact, in 1967, Richard D. Altick wrote: "'Two in the Campagna' . . . is unusual (though hardly unique) in the Browning canon in that it possesses an easily discernible substratum of physical sexuality."² In partial disagreement with Professor Altick, it is the purpose of this paper to develop several theses which are entailed by one major thesis: one, that sexual activity forms a full and carefully developed substratum beneath most of Browning's poems dealing directly with love, and is an aid in defining the nature of

the poem in many of the others; two, that Browning is as "moral" in his strictures about physical love as he is with his artists (there are good lovers and bad; good artists and bad); three, that the physical act of love is an act of creation in exactly the same way that Browning's painters and musicians are actively engaged in creation; four, that, as with artists, lovers involved in the mundane creative act are metaphors for divine creation, and appropriable to the extent that they strive for transcendence.

But studies of Browning's use of sexuality are quite recent, and devoted, for the most part, to an explication of individual poems rather than a view of these poems as part of a coherent theme to be considered an aspect of his whole vision. It is, however, not strange that readers have ignored the sexual level in Browning, for criticism is topical, and it seems a modern function to be attuned to expecting the erotic, and seeing through the accretion of criticism in which this aspect was ignored. Yet as early as 1919, Albert Mordell wrote:

Now there are some innocent poems of the poet rich in sex symbolism. It is well known that dreams of riding on horse-back, rocking, or any form of rhythmic motion through which the dreamer goes, are sexually symbolical. In older literature to ride is used in a sexual sense. Browning is especially addicted to writing poems describing

the pleasures of riding, or poems in rhythmic verse which suggest the riding process. It has never dawned on critics to suggest that there may be a cause for this that is to be found in the unconscious of the author.

Take his "Last Ride Together."³

Mordell, of course, was riding his own thesis, and because "The Last Ride Together" probably is a sexual poem, Mordell saw all other poems like "How they Brought the Good News from Aix to Ghent [sic]" and "Through the Metidja to Abd-elKadr" as also sexual,⁴ which they probably are not. The astonishing thing, though, is that critics seems to have ignored his suggestions. It is, for example, a bit tardily that Russell M. Goldfarb, unaware of Mordell's work, covers the same ground in his "Sexual Meaning in 'The Last Ride Together'." (1965)

How quickly this trend has caught on is illustrated by the automatic acceptance of Karl Kroeber's "Touchstones for Browning's Victorian Complexity" (1965),⁵ which convincingly argues a sexual reading of "Meeting at Night." Four years later, Roma King in The Focusing Artifice (1969) states without credit to Kroeber: "The obvious sexual symbolism is sensuous and emotional; the reader is swept by an irresistible undulating movement, created visually and orally, from the boat, across the fields, to the dark room where the woman waits--from the first image to the climaxing phrase,

'two hearts beating each on [sic] each."⁶ This passage is particularly interesting for two reasons: one, no one would deny the soundness of Professor King's scholarship, but failure to give credit to Kroeber in a footnote indicates how suddenly and generally accepted are ideas of Browning's sexuality (e.g., "obvious" in the quoted passage); two, King's unconscious transformation of the last line of the poem from "two hearts beating each to each" to "two hearts beating each on each" implies a creative movement on King's part--a movement from Browning's more vague "to" to an explicit horizontal "on."

But if Browning's use of physical love holds a greater place in his poetry than critics have previously recognized, it becomes, therefore, germane to elucidate the aspects of this sexuality. The approach I have chosen is an examination of Browning's imagery, specifically the image clusters of the circle, fire, flowers, gardens, and the sexual landscape. C. Willard Smith has claimed: "Poetic imagery is one of the most characteristic elements of Robert Browning's art. But rarely, if ever, does Browning employ this descriptive power to adorn his poetry with purely ornamental detail; he prefers to use it as one of his most effective means of expression. The poetic image was for him the oblique way of telling truth, of doing the thing that shall breed the thought."⁷ (Smith's italics) And C. H. Herford quotes Browning himself as claiming that, "all poetry is the problem

of putting the infinite into the finite,"⁸ which Herford explains as, ". . . for Browning, the 'finite' is not the rival or the antithesis, but the very language of the 'infinite'. . . ." ⁹

"Image," as used by Caroline Spurgeon, is "the only available word to cover every kind of simile, as well as every kind of what is really compressed simile--metaphor. I suggest that we divest our minds of the hint the term carries with it of visual image only, and think of it, for the present purpose, as connoting any and every imaginative picture or other experience, drawn in every kind of way, which may have come to the poet, not only through any of his senses, but through his mind and emotions as well, and which he uses, in the forms of simile and metaphor in their widest sense, for the purposes of analogy."¹⁰ Miss Spurgeon, of course, was writing of Shakespeare, and one of her points is that he was an unpremeditated artist. But as one of Browning's major imagistic sources seems to have been from Shakespeare,¹¹ Miss Spurgeon's definition is not without relevance. Rosemond Tuve, however, makes a necessary qualification: "In its primary form the sensuous function of images could be defined as the straightforward transliteration, with or without the aid of metaphor, of a sense impression."¹² And goes on to define an image as, ". . . the accurate representation of an author's emotional experience or state of mind, the communication of this state of experience in all its sensuous fulness. . . ." ¹³

Thus, Browning, in order to see life wholly, yet within the strictures of a society which avoided a direct depiction of sexual activity, no matter how moral, used imagery to imply what he couldn't state directly. Dickens was faced with the same social strictures as Browning, yet managed to obliquely infuse scenes of his novels with sensual details by suggestion. In Martin Chuzzlewit (1842), for example, the hero is being entertained by an American family named Norris:

Martin could not help tracing the family pedigree from the two young ladies, because they were foremost in his thoughts; not only from being, as aforesaid, very pretty, but by reason of their wearing miraculously small shoes, and the thinnest possible silk stockings: the which their rocking-chairs developed to a distracting extent.

There is no doubt that it was a monstrous comfortable circumstance to be sitting in a snug, well-furnished room, warmed by a cheerful fire, and full of various pleasant decorations, including four small shoes, and the like amount of silk stockings, and--yes, why not?--the feet therein enshrined.¹⁴

I would argue that this scene is sexually charged, that the feeling of Martin for the Misses Norris is erotic, and that this concept is supported by the voyeuristic attitude of Martin and by the coy tone of the author. But Martin's

arousal is blocked by a discussion of slavery in which one of the girls, "the prettiest and most delicate," offends Martin's humanitarian sensibilities by declaring that "the negroes were such funny people; so excessively ludicrous in their manners and appearance; that it was wholly impossible for those who knew them well, to associate any serious ideas with such a very absurd part of the creation."¹⁵ Martin's original desire is therefore blocked, but as psychic energy has been built up and not dissipated, and as Martin's emotions had led him into an attraction for two shallow girls, Dickens introduced General Fladdock who is the absurd paradigm for Martin's arousal and blocking: ". . . the general, attired in full uniform for a ball, came darting in with such precipitancy, that, hitching his boot in the carpet, and getting his legs, he came down headlong. . . . Nor was that the worst of it: . . . the general . . . could not get up again, but lay there writhing and doing such things with his boots, as there is no other instance of in military history."¹⁶ And thus did Martin trip himself on his phallic sword in being attracted to the Misses Norris.

I am not, of course, trying to trace Browning's lineage through Dickens, but rather to show an awareness of physical life in the Victorian period, and to show that writers were aware of sexual problems and dealt with them in their writings. However, Browning does not seem in his writings or letters to have made a definite statement about his attitude towards

physical love, or about his rationale for depicting it. But if his statement, " . . . my interest lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study,"¹⁷ is to be taken as an accurate summary of the theme of Browning, as it usually is, his writings on love must take this "higher" meaning into consideration. Or, as Stopford Brooke wisely perceived, "In some of them [the love poems] the love is finally absorbed in the idea. In all of them their aim is beyond the love of which they speak."¹⁸

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Browning's use of physical love is both wide-ranging and intense. While this is not surprising in his love poems, he infuses sexuality into poems which are not per se about love. This can be seen in his best poems, such as "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," "Andrea del Sarto," "The Bishop Orders his Tomb," and "Fra Lippo Lippi." In "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi," the reference hinges, in part, on the subtly ironic use of "cousin" and "niece"¹⁹ respectively to mean paramours, a meaning few readers of his time would be expected to discover. In "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," Browning is even more daring, for the unnamed monk growls to himself: "What's the Greek name for Swine's Snout," and the last word in the poem is "swine." No one seems to have noticed, however, that the Greek name is χολπας, a bawdy classical pun for the pudenda muliebra,²⁰ used by Aristophanes and used by Browning to deepen the mad animal nature of the monk in contrast to Brother Lawrence, Browning's symbol of natural growth.²¹

Further, with the exception of "Andrea del Sarto," the above poems contain passages of extreme sensuality--one of the more common practices of Browning. In these, imagery is used both to portray a state of mind and to make a dialectic

point. Thus, when the monk in "Soliloquy" describes brown Dolores as "Steeping tresses in the tank,/ Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs . . ." (III.28-29) we immediately contrast his voyeurism with Brother Lawrence majestically moving through his green garden. That is, we are expected to see the contrast. If we fail, we are allied with the monk and "hand in foot in Belial's gripe." (III.59) The monologist's ultimate sin is not just that he fails to come to productive terms with his monasticism in making the wasteland bloom as does Brother Lawrence, but that he does not leave the cloister and enter into a creative relationship with brown Dolores.

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb" is crammed with luxuriant images of mundane treasures. The dying Bishop is a sensual miser who glories in his tomb as a typical miser would his gold: "True peach,/ Rosy and flawless," (IV.32-33) "pure green as a pistachio-nut," (IV.71) "Lapis lazuli,/ Big as a Jew's head," (IV.42-43) Thus, in contrast to the Monk in "The Soliloquy," who sees life either as symbol (drinking orange pulp in three sips; laying the knife and fork cross-wise), or as vicarious existence to be viewed from a distance (brown Dolores and his scrofulous French novel), the Bishop infuses inanimate things with life from his own extreme vitality: a transubstantiation wrought by his excess of soul. In a sense, too, the Bishop is an artist without a medium, and we are led to believe that sculpture should have

been his medium: he sees an icon as living ("Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast" (IV.44) and what is living as statuary ("mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs" (IV.75). While the potential for creation, then, is there, he fails to see as Abt Vogler does that art is obedience to law, "the finger of God . . . existent behind all laws." (IV.49-50) Therefore his magnum opus, his tomb, with "Pan/ Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off" (IV.61) will never be built. The Bishop is not a failure because of his fleshiness--and his last words, "so fair she was" probably indicate he will be saved--but because he does not use his gusto for life to develop soul.

Fra Lippo Lippi, in approximately the same milieu, with the same propensity for the flesh, makes art of it:

I always see the garden and God there

A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,

The value and significance of flesh. . . . (IV.266-68)

In contrast, "Andrea del Sarto" is almost sterile of life images, for Andrea del Sarto has stopped painting about life, and has become a craftsman: "This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine." He no longer sees life as vital, nor art as a means of transforming life, thus Sarto's animality, the spring of Fra Lippo Lippi's art, has atrophied.

It would seem, then, that Browning was not so foolish as to deny or subvert the animal nature of man, but submitted,

rather, that this nature must be used to evolve above itself to be good, and to be good it must be used to do good. The satirical impetus in Browning, therefore, is directed not at monks or bishops or cuckolds, but at those who have failed to wed their animal nature with their intellectual nature-- a Renaissance concept which was still alive in Browning.

Browning's Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day (1887), is generally assumed to be the poet's attempt to give credit to the men most influential on his youthful development as an artist and thinker. But as DeVane has shown,²² Browning often used the Parleyings as a means of defending his own artistic principles. Thus, "with Charles Avison" is as much about Browning's own concept of the development of soul as it is about a neglected composer. It was, after all, the usual practice with Browning, as with other artists, to imbue his creations with his own thoughts. "Fra Lippo Lippi" is less about the historical character of Fra Lippo Lippi than about a cleric transmorgified by poetic creation into an exponent of Browning's own theories of creativity.

So it is with "Francis Furini." The poem is about the Renaissance painter, and about Browning's conception of what Furini was attempting to do. At the same time it is a defense of Browning's son Pen who was attacked for painting nudes,²³ an answer to evolutionists, and a justification for evil in

the world. But it can also be read as Browning's apologia for his own delvings into the physical:

. . . the ample gift
 Of gracing walls ere blank of this our house
 Of life with imagery, one bright drift
 Poured forth by pencil,--man and woman mere,
 Glorified till half owned for gods,--the dear
 Fleshly perfection of the human shape,--
 This was apportioned you whereby to praise
 Heaven and bless earth. (X.51-58)

While Browning here is arguing against censorship, what he says could be taken as an argument for a realistic depiction of all sensual matters. It is interesting, too, that though he puns throughout the poem on his son's nick-name "Pen," in this passage he specifically says "pencil." I would further argue, as I do throughout this paper, that Browning is conscious of the meaning of his argument as it pertains to his own work. The logical progression from freedom to paint "fleshly perfection" is permission to depict physical love in literature. And certainly Browning was not ignorant, by this time, of what the French novelists were doing, no more than he was ignorant, in 1838²⁴ of the element of physical love in Shelley. So we are faced, rather obviously, with a man conscious of physical love, conscious that poetry could purify it from Puritanical and licentious villification, and who consciously raised it to a metaphor for God's love through creation.

It should be stated at the outset of this study that Browning's use of sexuality is healthy, heterosexual, and though erotic, erotic only in the greek sense of the word eros, and not prurient; and though eros is sometimes wedded with agape, as in "By the Fireside," this is not a necessary qualification. It is well to remember that Guido Franceschini, who is depicted as old and yellow, blames himself for not punishing Pompilia's lack of love for him by removing her fingers joint-by-joint. The villains, then, are those who through their perversions subvert the natural scheme. The healthy ones are those who, like the Englishman in Italy, enjoy the flora and fauna of the land, and are rewarded with mystical visions atop mountains. I suspect that Browning would have been appalled by My Secret Life and The Pearl in much the same way he would have applauded Nana and Germinal,²⁵ and in much the same way as he suggested the nude subjects to Pen.

When Francis Furini preaches, he says, in part,²⁶

. . . Let my pictures prove I know
 Somewhat of what this fleshly frame of ours
 Or is or should be, how the soul empowers
 The body to reveal its every mood
 Of love and hate, pour forth its plentitude
 Of passion. If my hand attained to give
 Thus permanence to truth else fugitive,
 Did not I also fix each fleeting grace

Of form and feature . . .
 Arrest decay in transitory might
 Of bone and muscle--cause the world to bless
 Forever each transcendent nakedness
 Of men and women? (X.377-85,386-89)

Further, it can be observed that Browning's concept of physical love shows little change or development as he grows older; rather he continues to use the same imagery as he does in Men and Women, Dramatis Personae, and other collections (up to 1864). If anything, there is a lessening of the dialectical purpose behind his poems, and a presentation of sexuality in a lyric, exultant tone. In Ferishtah's Fancies (1884), after a plea " . . . let me love entire and whole--/ Not with my Soul!" (X.7-8)

Eyes shall meet eyes and find no eyes between
 Lips feed on lips, no other lips to fear!
 No past, no future--so thine eyes but screen
 The present from surprise! not there, 'tis here--
 Not then, 'tis now:--back, memories that intrude!
 Make, Love, the universe our solitude,
 And, over all the rest, oblivion roll--
 Sense quenching soul! (X.8-15)

Admittedly a stanza out of context, it is an evocative and provocative piece in a Cavalier vein, a type of out-pouring Browning was increasingly prone to in the last years of his life. Several poems in Asolando (1889) carry on this hedonistic lyric vein. The poem "Now," for example, which DeVane

called "so vigorous and ardent as to be astonishing from a man of seventy-five or more,"²⁷ is characteristic of his later poems in that the sexual element is explicit, rather than projected through imagery:

. . . you beneath me, above me . . .

The moment eternal--just that and no more--

When ecstasy's utmost we clutch at the core

While cheeks burn, arms open, eyes shut and lips
meet. (X.8-14)

So, too, in "Humility" (" . . . give your lover/ Heaps of loving--under, over,/ Whelm him. . . ." (X.7-9) and other poems in Asolando, we find an almost prosaic literalness which though certainly a parcel of all Browning's emotional and intellectual make-up, are on the same plane with rather than a development on his earlier poems. It is for this reason that I have in this paper paid more attention to Browning's pre-1864 poems without, of course, neglecting those later poems which do intensify or clarify an image.

It is necessary now to identify the images which Browning used, many of which he may have taken from the Renaissance. It will soon become apparent that most of these images antedate the Renaissance, but my intention is not to trace the history of an idea, unless relevant, but to develop a concept of Browning's use of imagery through a comparison of those of Shakespeare and Donne, whom Browning was obviously well versed in, and Edmund Spenser.

Further, these images were used by other poets--Jonson, Herrick, Vaughn--but this only reinforces the fact that there was a pool of common imagery available to all Renaissance writers, which Browning drew from.

A necessary distinction must be drawn here, however, for Browning was not an Elizabethan. John Addington Symonds, in 1889, made some comparisons between Elizabethan and Victorian poets:

What then is the characteristic of Elizabethan poetry? I think the answer to this question lies in the words--freedom, adolescence, spontaneity; mainly freedom. The writers of that age were free from the bondage of great names, Virgil or Cicero or Seneca. They owed no allegiance to great languages, like Latin; to famous canons of taste, like the Aristotelian unities; to scholastic authority and academical prescription. . . . Freedom being thus the dominant note of Elizabethan poetry, it follows that the genius of the race will return to it with love and admiration at epochs marked by the presurgent spirit of liberty. Victorian poets cannot be spontaneous in the same sense as our ancestors were. Like Iago, they are nothing if not critical. Science has imposed on them the burden of analysis, and though science reveals horizons far beyond the

dreams of Bacon, it fills the soul with something well-nigh to hopelessness. Man shrinks before the Universe.²⁸

For the most part, Symond's analysis seems accurate for the Victorian period in general, but Browning does not seem to fit this analysis. He seems, rather, in a different stream of development from Mill or Arnold or Ruskin. And unlike them, and despite many books to the contrary, Browning seems apolitical and unformally religious. Further, Browning seems out of the main stream in his use of Renaissance tropes. This is not to declaim his inventiveness, for whatever changes he wrought in the tradition, no matter how he turned old images to new uses, it was rather a deepening of the metaphoric range than an accumulation of new images for a new age. Joseph E. Duncan has written: "Although Browning's and Donne's imagery is similar, Browning employed some images peculiar to the post-Newtonian world, such as the prism and steam engine, and others reflecting his individual interests, such as those from music and painting."²⁹

I would tend to quibble with Duncan on the grounds that though Browning did not ignore new images available to him (cf. below), the majority of his images are pre-Industrial Revolution. Duncan is right if he intimates that Browning did not use all the Renaissance images available to him. Those

images which were outrightly bawdy in Donne and Shakespeare were carefully and shrewdly avoided by Browning for the obvious reason that Victoria's England was not Elizabeth's, and Browning's essential reticence must have led him to subtly transfuse his sexuality in less obvious ways. Thus, Shakespeare would unblushingly write:

. . . There have been,
 . . . cuckolds ere now;
 And many a man there is . . .
 . . . holds his wife by th' arm,
 That little thinks she has been sluic'd in 's absence
 And his pond fish'd by his next neighbour . . .
 . . . nay, there's comfort in 't
 Whiles other men have gates, and those gates open'd
 As mine, against their will. Should all despair
 That have revolted wives, the tenth of mankind
 Would hand themselves. Physic for 't there's none:
 It is a bawdy planet.³⁰

Browning, however, had to use more subtle means of facing the issue of sexuality. In "Meeting at Night" he took the then new Promethean-match, in the phrase "the blue spurt of a lighted match," and used it as a microcosm for the sexual act. For the Promethean match was: "a small glass tube filled with weak sulphuric acid. The tube was put into the bottom of a spiral piece of paper furnished

on the inside with [chlorate of potash, sugar, and gum]. Ignition occurred on contact being made between the acid and the composition. But this match was found unsuccessful because the spurting of the acid and burning of fingers and clothes were too often the result of its use."³¹ Thus Browning found a complete and useful image which evoked a sub-intellectual response in his readers, but which is generally lost to us; the action of ignition, the spurt, and the emission, however, had obvious sexual connotations for Browning, and illustrates his conscious choice of image in a consciously sexual poem.

In "The School of Love," H. M. Richmond briefly compares Browning to Herrick, Marvell, Drayton, Spenser, Sidney, Herbert, and most particularly Donne, and sees the following resemblances between the Stuart poets and Browning: " . . . use of a dramatic incident, colloquial style, poised psychology, and serious metaphysical overtones."³² But concludes, interestingly enough, that Browning is more serious in tone, and that he has: "elaborated the impact of the facile flow of modern society on subtle emotions in a way earlier poets, less aware of social pressures, rarely did."³³

But Browning's imagery was strongly influenced by the Elizabethans, and Symonds called Browning: "the brawniest neo-Elizabethan Titan whom our age has seen, and whom it has latterly chosen to adore."³⁴ Thus, we must show that

Browning's images are taken directly from the common image-stock of the Elizabethans. This is necessary for it is important to show that Browning was conscious in his use of sexual imagery, and also to briefly define, through analogy, the response Browning attempted to evoke in the reader.

It is impossible in this study, however, to ignore the influence of Shelley upon Browning. Although Professor Pottle has claimed that the influence of Shelley on Browning was minimal after 1852,³⁵ I would argue that Shelley's influence was alive and well at least up to 1864 in Dramatis Personae. Not, of course, that Browning was, after Pauline, a neo-Shellyean, but that certain aspects of Shelley's poetry coincided with Browning's; certain of Shelley's poetic techniques were usable by the eclectic Browning. Browning may have abandoned vegetarianism, atheism, and revolution at the same time, but Shelley's imagery, ardor, and Platonism were never abandoned.

CHAPTER III

THE RING, THE CIRCLE, AND IMAGES OF UNITY

The circle in Renaissance England was both mundane and celestial. Until the new science discarded the geocentric concept of the universe, the circle was the figure of all life. As Marjorie Nicolson says: "no metaphor was more loved by Renaissance poets than that of the circle, which they had inherited from Pythagorean and Platonic ancestors."³⁶

In Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio puns sexually in demonic terms:

This cannot anger him; 'twould anger him
To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle,
Of some strange nature, letting it there stand
Till she had laid it and conjured it down.³⁷

Closely related to the circle is the ring. Donne exemplifies this use in "A Jeat Ring Sent" in which the ring is also yonic and related to the maidenhead:

Yet stay with mee since thou art come,
Circle this finger top, which dids't her thombe.
Be justly proud [in the archaic sense of "proud
flesh"], and gladly safe, that thou dost
dwell with me,
She that, Oh, broke her faith, would soon
break thee.³⁸

It is, therefore, not far from Donne to Browning's "A Pearl, A Girl:"

A simple ring with a single stone,
 To the vulgar eye no stone of price:
 Whisper the right word, that alone--
 Forth starts a sprite, like fire from ice,
 And lo, you are lord (says an Eastern scroll)
 Of heaven and earth, lord whole and sole
 Through the power in a pearl. (X.1-7)

Of course the emphasis in the above stanza is on gem imagery. In this case, Browning seems to image the female clitoris. But also, in this stanza, Browning makes an almost transcendental equation between the ring, the yonus, and the universe. Donne, too, takes the circularity of the pudendum, parallels it in the womb, and makes the womb a metaphor for heaven, as in the "Virgin Mary" section of The Litany:

For that faire blessed Mother-maid . . .
 Whose wombe was a strange heav'n for there
 God cloth'd himselfe, and grew,
 Our zealous thankes wee poure.³⁹

Part I

THE RING

Frequently, however, Browning's tendency is to use the ring image only as a yonic symbol. In "Gold Hair" the

deification of the dead is depicted as a "Dame with chased ring and jewelled rose." (IV.79) In this poem, of course, the image is ironic, and the girl not a saint but a virginal Mammonite. In "The Worst of It," a husband addresses his unfaithful wife, attempting, amid the break-up of his world, to sort out his reaction to being cuckolded, and his feelings about his wife. Commiserating for her, he asks, somewhat ineffectually, "But what will God say?" (IV.25), and goes on: "Should you forfeit heaven for a snapt gold ring/
And a promise broke, were it just or meet?" (IV.29-30) It can be objected that the man is speaking of the marriage ring, but it is this placement of yonic ring on phallic finger that gives symbolic import to the wedding ring. In passing, Browning is obviously aware of the sexual connotations of the ring when he equates the seduction of a virgin with the creative act of writing the Ring and the Book:

. . . mere oozings from the mine,

Virgin as oval tawny pendent tear

At beehive-edge ripened combs o'erflow (V.10-12)

In this passage the mine (the entry into the feminine earth) and the comb (that which must be broken into to yield honey (gold) fuse all creation into one imagistic construct.

In "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," Browning had previously used a similar image with a different intent. Here, on a May morning, the narrator, in revenge over the pedantry in Nathaniel Worley's Wonders of the Little World,⁴⁰ throws

the book into the crevice of a tree:

Yonder's a plum-tree with a crevice

An owl would build in, were he but sage;

For a lap of moss, like a fine pont-levis

In a castle of the Middle Age,

Joins to a lip of gum, pure amber. . . . (III.65-69)

The narrator waits in the garden eating cheese, drinking Chablis, and reading "a jolly chapter of Rabelais" while worms, slugs, efts, and water-beetles have an orgy among the sodden pages:

All that life and fun and romping,

All that frisking and twisting and coupling,

While slowly our poor friend's leavers were swamping

And clasps were cracking and covers suppling!

(III.105-08)

To Browning all creation is good, in that it forms soul, and that which impedes creation such as pedagogy in "Sibrandus," or refusal to strive, as in "Andrea del Sarto," are doomed to stagnation. Further, such figures as Rabelais and Fra Lippo Lippi are in tune with creation, and glory in it. But it is not stasis itself which inhibits growth of soul. Brother Lawrence stays in his garden; the narrator of "Sibrandus" stays beneath the tree. The growth is in Nature around them and to which they are attuned. Thus, questing outward, or external action, is sometimes doomed to failure, while the here and now

sometimes brings growth.

Despite the almost insurmountable difficulties of explicating "'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'," it seems central to Browning's scheme. It was written during a three day burst of energy in which he wrote "Women and Roses" the first day, "'Childe Roland'" the second, and "Love Among the Ruins" on the third.⁴¹ "Women and Roses" (cf. Chapter IV) and "Love Among the Ruins" are among Browning's most sexual lyrics, and although there is no explicit connection between the three, and though no critic, apparently, has drawn one, there is a parallel. "Childe Roland" is seemingly asexual: even to draw a connection between Childe Roland's thrusting his spear into the stream and hearing "a baby's shriek" as his initiatory act into the mood of the wasteland is tenuous and problematic.⁴² We are left, then, with the imagery of the poem, but an understanding of the imagery hinges around the salient problem of whether Childe Roland's quest is a success or a failure.

In these terms, at least, it is a failure: Childe Roland's is a solitary quest, in part, for the lingam which will impregnate the wasteland and make it bloom again. Thus the quest is in part mythic and sexual, but the tower is blind, unable to inseminate, and the quest is futile. Also relevant is Shelley's use of the tower motif. To Shelley, the tower is "the mind looking outward,"⁴³ and "associated

with wisdom and with the idea of being isolated, above the strife of ordinary life."⁴⁴ Therefore Childe Roland takes on aspects of the Victorian hero-prophet who finds that the tower he searches for is "blind as the fool's heart" and has no open eye to the skies. Hence, insemination and procreation, physical and intellectual, is thwarted, and Childe Roland, though "dauntless" is made a buffoon--a buffoon, paradoxically, because he is dauntless.

Certainly "Love Among the Ruins" carries on and completes the physical and intellectual theme of "'Childe Roland.'" "Love Among the Ruins" moves slowly, like the "sheep/ Half-asleep," and moderates the trochaic and dactylic meter of "'Childe Roland'" with alternating lines of mixed anapests and iambs with one short amphimacer (e.g. "Miles and miles"). And in "Love Among the Ruins," the blind tower has crumbled and given forth verdure:

. . . the single little turret that remains
 On the plains,
 By the caper overrooted, by the gourd
 Overscored,
 While the patching houseleek's head of blossom winks
 Through the chinks--
 Marks the basement where a tower in ancient time
 Sprang sublime,
 And a burning ring, all round, the chariots traced
 As they raced. . . . (III.37-46)

The yonic-phallic pattern is clear, but even more important, it is in the basement, the foundation or source of the tower's strength, from which springs the revivifying power of nature, and finds its analogue in the physical love of the shepherds:

O heart! O blood that freezes, blood that
burns!

Earth's returns

For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!

Shut them in,

With their triumphs and their glories and the
rest!

Love is best. (III.79-84)

Essentially, the meaning of "Love Among the Ruins" is summarized in the last line, "Love is best," but recent critics have disavowed that this indeed is the meaning. Rather convincingly citing the connection between the shepherd and "the king of old," W. David Shaw, for example, sees that the lover is "a victim of his own language, trapped in a symbolic matrix of his own making,"⁴⁵ and that the concluding lines, therefore, are ironic. But Shaw admits that Browning was sincere in the poem, and Thomas J. Collins sees the concluding lines as positive, that "he proclaims that 'Love is best!' because he knows that it is the only means accessible to man which can lift him beyond the decay that

invariably infects and destroys the debris of tainted human existence."⁴⁶ Hence man must establish a relationship with another human who is, for him, representative of God on earth--one who could most effectively direct him to that "out nature."⁴⁷

The tower and the ring, phallic and yonic, are conventional and timeless symbols. It is somewhat surprising, then, to find that Browning uses so little conventional phallic imagery in his works. In fact, the sword, perhaps the most conventional of phallic symbols, appears symbolically in only four poems. In "A Pretty Woman," a poem about a lovely but innocuous girl, Browning writes:

You like us for a glance, you know--

For a word's sake

Or a sword's sake,

All's the same, whate'er the chance, you know. (II.9-12)

Thus Browning denigrates the girl by claiming that she sees no difference between word and act, between talking about love and making love. A refusal, in Browning's terms, to forge soul by testing herself against the physical realities of life. In "A Toccata of Galuppi's," the passion of the unheeding guests at a salon is contrasted with Galuppi's message of "dust and ashes:"

Well, and it was graceful of them--they'd break

talk off and afford

--She, to bite her mask's black velvet--he, to

finger on his sword,

While you sat and played toccatas, stately at
the clavichord? (III.18-20)

Thirdly, in "The Statue and the Bust," Browning
wittily compares Duke Ferdinand to an unaroused penis:
" . . . the Duke rode past on his idle way,/ Empty and fine
like a swordless sheath." (III.14-15) Three terza rimas
later, after he has viewed Riccardi's bride, we find:
" . . . lo, a blade for a knight's emprise/ Filled the fine
empty sheath of a man,--/ The Duke grew straightway brave
and wise." (III.25-27)

Finally, in "Count Gismond," the female narrator re-
lates that after Gismond had slain Gauthier in their trial
by combat:

. . . I sank upon his breast,
Over my head his arm he flung
Against the world; and scarce I felt
His sword (that dripped by me and swung)

A little shifted in its belt. . . . (III.108-12)

Swords are worn on the side, not in front. If indeed
Browning is depicting a phallic sword, the woman-narrator's
remembrance of this detail, and her swelling upon it, is an
index of her character. This is of some importance, as the
nature of the woman-narrator--whether she was the mistress
of Gauthier--is uncertain in the poem's context.

Although Browning used little conventional phallic
imagery, he was not averse to images of penetration and

insemination. Thus in the same poem, the woman-narrator describes the scene before her accusation by Gauthier:

. . . the morning-troop
 Of merry friends who kissed my cheek,
 And called me queen, and made me stoop
 Under the canopy--(a streak
 That pierced it, of the outside sun,
 Powdered with gold its gloom's soft dun). . . . (III.
 31-36)

and we are struck by the pattern of a return to the womb, re-insemination, and re-birth, perhaps to a second chance in life. This does not resolve the critical quandary as to the truth of Gauthier's accusation, but rather shows that the girl's view of life is sexually perverted, involving a victim and an aggressor. Perhaps, having been victimized by Gauthier, and unexpectedly freed, she is careful not to be victimized again.⁴⁸ This is emblemized in her hawk, the hunter, which preys on more timid beasts: " . . . have you brought my tercel back?/ I was just telling Adela/ How many bird it struck since May." (III.124-26) It is necessary, then, to keep in mind that the masculine impetus is common in Browning and that the masculine element is ubiquitous and frequently coincident with the feminine. When in "Dis Aliter Visum" the lover says to his mistress:

' . . . do but follow the fishing-gull
 That flaps and floats from wave to cave!

There's the sea-lover, fair my friend!' (IV.21-23)
 it seems like an innocuous statement until one realizes that the lover wants to seduce the "young beauty, round and sound/ As a mountain-apple." And we can realize that the wave is phallic and the cave yonic, and the gull the inseminating principle.

In a like manner, but more conventionally, much of the spark-fire imagery in the poems is understandable as sexual metaphor. Fire, when confined as in a hearth, is feminine, and an aspect of the circle image, but when uncontained, is masculine. The spark, it would seem, represents insemination. By convention, fire itself is sexual passion, as when Mrs. Ford, in The Merry Wives of Windsor, exclaims of Falstaff: "What tempest, I trow, threw this whale, with so many tuns of oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor? How shall I be revenged on him? I think the best way were to entertain him with hope till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease."⁴⁹ And in Romeo and Juliet Friar Laurence cautions Romeo: "These violent delights have violent ends/ And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,/ Which, as they kiss, consume."⁵⁰ Thus, fire is equated with lust and violence--destructive and negative forces--but Donne converts the destructive element of fire to a positive force:

Now, as in Tullias tombe, one lampe burnt cleare,
 Unchang'd for fifteene hundred yeare,
 May these love-lampes we here enshrine,

In warmth, light, lasting, equall the divine.

Fire ever doth aspire,

And makes all like it selfe, turnes all to fire,

But ends in ashes, which these cannot doe,

For none of these is fuell, but fire too.

This is joyes bonfire [good fire], then, where

loves strong arts

Make of so noble individuall parts

One fire of foure inflaming eyes, and of two

loving hearts.⁵¹

Fire has also its feminine nature, and may be imaged in hearths and lamps--yonic and confining objects. "By the Fireside" is the most obvious illustration, but Porphyria in "Porphyria's Lover" " . . . kneeled and made the cheerless grate/ Blaze up. . . ." (III.8-9), and the poet blames Ricardi's wife and Duke Ferdinand in "The Statue and the Bust" with: "And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost/ Is--the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin." (III.246-47) Therefore, whatever the ambiguities of this poem,⁵² Ricardi's wife's failure to utilize procreative energy must be taken as a negative comment on her.

Finally, as with Donne, flames are not without a moral function. In "Time's Revenges," a poet bewails his enslavement to a courtesan by claiming: " . . . you shall see how the devil spends/ A fire God gave for other ends." (III.47-48) Here, fire as passion is equated with fire as

intellect or creativity, in the Romantic sense, and Browning seems to be saying that all desire to generate springs from the same source. In this case, though, the fire is misdirected. And the wife in "Any Wife to Any Husband" argues for chastity in her husband after her death with:

It would not be because my eye grew dim
 Thou couldst not find the love there, thanks to Him
 Who never is dishonored in the spark
 He gave us from his fire of fires, and bade
 Remember whence it sprang, nor be afraid
 While that burns on, though all the rest grow
 dark. (III.19-24)

Thus, to Browning, God is the source of life, for He has given man his procreative ability, symbolized by fire, and clearly stated in the passage quoted from "Time's Revenges." There is never any false modesty in Browning on this account, nor anything heretical, for the sanction for intercourse is Paulian (1 Corinthians), and "is an act which . . . engages and expresses the whole personality in such a way as to constitute an unique mode of self-disclosure and self-commitment."⁵³ This is immediately reminiscent of Browning's theory of commitment, and but a short step from Shelley's belief that during intense physical love, the lover "experiences unity of being within himself and contact with the transcendent."⁵⁴

Part II

THE CIRCLE AND IMAGES OF UNITY

The basic function of the circle is to unify and enclose: "Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one."⁵⁵ The source of this concept is Platonic. In The Symposium, Plato has Aristophanes say:

' . . . the original human nature was not like the present, but different. The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two. . . . In the second place, the Primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle. . . . Terrible was their might and strength, and the thoughts of their hearts were great, and they made an attack upon the gods. . . . [Zeus said] "I will cut them in two and then they will be diminished in strength and increased in numbers. . . ." After the division the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another entwined in mutual embraces, longing to grow into one. . . . When one of them meets with his other half, the actual half of himself. . . . one will not be out of the other's sight . . . even for a moment . . .

and the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love.⁵⁶

This mathematical Platonism is one of the controlling figures in Browning, one which is used frequently in his love poetry. In "A Lovers' Quarrel," for example, the poignancy of the separation is expressed as a breakdown of unity:

Woman, and will you cast
For a word, quite off at last
Me, your own, your You,--
Since as truth is true,
I was You all the happy past--
Me do you leave aghast

With the memories We amassed? (III.92-98)

This merging is seen more briefly in "In Three Days:"
"Feel, where my life broke off from thine,/ How fresh the splinters keep and fine,--/ Only a touch and we combine!"; and in "By the Fireside" (cf. below) where the image is one of the several which control the poem. It is first in, "Oh the sense of the yellow mountain-flowers,/ And thorny balls, each three in one" (III.51-52); implied incomplete union in the phrase: "We two stood there with never a third,/ But each by each, as each knew well;" (III.186-87) And finally, clearly stated as: "If two lives

join, there is oft a scar,/ They are one and one, with a shadowy third;/ One near one is too far." (III.228-30)
Thus, in Browning's non-Euclidean, Platonic mathematics, one and one does not become two, but the third form is the new creation.

This would seem to be what Shakespeare was expressing, when, in The Phoenix and Turtle, he says:

So they lov'd, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one;
Two distincts, division none;
Number there in love was slain.
Hearts remote, yet not asunder;
Distance and no space was seen
'Twixt this Turtle and his queen:
But in them it were a wonder.⁵⁷

This separation is frequently seen as an impenetrable veil between two lovers, or the souls of the lovers are seen as obscured by a curtain of flesh. Quarles' epigram:

How art thou shaded in this veil of night,
Behind thy curtain flesh? thou seest no light,
But what thy pride doth challenge as her own;
Thy flesh is hie; soul take this curtain down.⁵⁸

is directly transported to "Gold Hair" in which the pure maiden is described in nearly the same terms:

Her flesh was the soft seraphic screen
Of a soul that is meant (her parents said)

To just see earth, and hardly be seen,

And blossom in heaven instead. (IV.7-10)

This description is somewhat static; Browning's intention in this poem is to show the irony in ignoring "The Corruption of Man's Heart." (IV.150) The failure of the girl is her attempt to free her soul by joining it to gold as an object rather than joining it to another's soul (gold as metaphor). She fails, therefore, because she takes the world of man at man's own valuation in riches rather than the world of love which is Browning's valuation. The girl's soul, then, does not escape the "flesh-screen," for it has nothing spiritual to join with, and after her death, the rats in the tomb dismember her body, leaving only the hoarded gold with which a new altar is built.

The image of the fleshly screen is used dynamically in "The Last Ride Together," one of Browning's most sexual poems. The poem deals with a last meeting between a pair of lovers who are separating for an undisclosed reason. The speaker in the poem, a man, seeks to convince the woman that the good moment can go on, and uses the occasion of a horse-back ride to convince her of this. This horse-back ride, with which the poem ostensibly deals, is quite possibly a euphemism for sexual intercourse (cf. Chapter II). In much the same way as in "Love Among the Ruins," the narrator of "The Last Ride" rejects attempts at mundane achievement as this achievement is always transient:

What hand or brain went ever paired?

What heart alike conceived and dared?

What act proved all its thought had been?

What will but felt the fleshly screen?

We ride and I see her bosom heave. (III.55-60)

This is, incidentally, oddly reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" in which Eliot states:

Between the desire

And the spasm

Between the potency

And the existence

Between the essence

And the descent

Falls the shadow. . . .59

And the theme of the two stanzas is parallel. We see, however, an interesting distinction in their conceptions: Eliot's hollow men are incapable of creative interaction; Browning's narrator sees that creative interaction is the only external value to be found in a world in which aspiration is doomed, and earthly immortality a joke. But Browning's narrator ends the poem:

What if we still ride on, we two,

With life forever old yet new,

Changed not in kind but in degree,

The instant made eternity,--

And heaven just prove that I and she

Ride, ride together, forever ride? (III.105-10)

This implies more than carpe diem; it implies the moment made eternal. But in context with the other poems of Browning, this itself is doomed, for the moment is just a moment, and must be recognized as a paradigm for eternal bliss, not eternal bliss itself. The narrator perhaps recognizes this with his initial qualification: "What if we still ride on," and ends the poem with a question, "forever ride?". Certainly the title of the poem, too, limits the duration--this is the last ride. Thus, the duration of wholeness in this poem, if wholeness is achieved at all, is only as long as an orgasm.⁶⁰

E. D. H. Johnson writes that "these moments of full and perfect communion are precarious; and, save for the most exceptional cases, the initial harmony does not survive social pressures or the importunities of individual temperament."⁶¹ But the question of future relationship between the two is outside the province of the poem. Yet it would seem that it is not mere intercourse that penetrates the "fleshly screen," but the merging of souls which is Browning's ultimate metaphor for divine activity. Certainly "By the Fireside" is one of the poems and one in which the eternal moment is longer than a moment.

"By the Fireside" is an atypical love poem in that complete wholeness, the three-in-one, is not only achieved but

retained for a lifetime. As such, "By the Fireside" holds the unique position in Browning's canon as the analog for perfect love, as the poem by which all other love poems are gauged. But it is difficult, at the same time, to uncover the moral importance of the poem in Browning's scheme: Why are the two lovers in this poem granted lifelong bliss when the lovers in "The Last Ride Together" and most other poems are denied it?

"By the Fireside" carries forward the concept of the eternal moment by depicting time present when the lover and his wife Leonor are old and surrounded by children, and flashing back to the time when the two first realized their love for one another. It is, incidentally, usual to read this poem as based autobiographically upon Robert Browning's feelings for Elizabeth Barrett and depicting their "ideal love." This, however, is part of the biographical game and has no relevance here. What is relevant is what induces the "moment one and infinite!" that forms Browning's concept of a perfect love. In time past, the two lovers walk "side by side,/ Arm in arm and cheek to cheek," (III.162) but despite their physical closeness, the lover states, "We two stood there with never a third." (III.186) The difficulty between the two is that the man has too strong a feeling of personal identity; the "I-ness" of his nature precludes the necessary merging of the two souls: " . . . my heart, convulsed to really speak,/ Lay choking in its pride." (III.164-65)

But the moment soon comes through a sharing of external nature which they both realize they are both a part of:

The sights we saw and the sounds we heard,

The lights and the shades made up a spell

Till the trouble grew and stirred. (III.188-90)

Thus, the man relents to share his experience, to merge the two, and the woman's turn is next:

Had she willed it, still stood the screen

So slight, so sure, 'twixt my love and her:

I could fix her face with a guard between,

And find her soul as when friends confer,

Friends--lovers that might have been. (III.196-200)

But she too relents:

A moment after, and hands unseen

Were hanging the night around us fast

But we knew that a bar was broken between

Life and life: we were mixed at last

In spite of the mortal screen.

The forests had done it; there they stood;

We caught for a moment the powers at play:

They had mingled us so, for once and good,

Their work was done--we might go or stay,

They relapsed to their ancient mood. (III.231-40)

Thus their affair is sanctioned by Nature, because it is attuned to Nature, and succeeds because two individuals

were willing to give up their individuality and could then transcend their mortal screen through, perhaps, holy intercourse. Browning, in typical fashion, clearly draws the moral at the end,⁶² "So, earth has gained by one man the more,/ And the gain of earth must be heaven's gain too," (III.261-62) and, in equally typical fashion, proceeds to muddy the water in the last lines:

And the whole is well worth thinking o'er

When autumn comes: which I mean to do

One day, as I said before. (III.263-65)

The illicit affair in "By the Fireside," consummated in time past, is later sanctified by marriage, not so much, perhaps, to placate the Victorian audience, but rather more in the way that Coventry Patmore in The Angel of the House (1854-1862) sees marriage as the seal of God on a relationship that parallels His relationship to man.⁶³ But this optimism is constantly contraverted in Browning's other poems, as we have said, for either the two lovers drift apart, or an external force interferes. The "fleshly wall," the Platonic image of separation we are here considering, though once broken through, can always re-form itself again. "In a Gondola" is an example of a poem in which external forces seem to interfere but in which, perhaps, the fleshly wall has not been pierced.

"In a Gondola" is a poem replete with Browning's usual confusion about both details and meaning. The scene of the

poem is Renaissance Venice. Two lovers meet for a tryst, journey by Gondola through the canals, and return to the girl's mansion where the lover is killed. The marital status of the mistress is never clear, nor is the significance of "the Three"--Paul, Gian, and "Himself"--who murder the man at the end: "Himself" may be the husband acting in retribution for adultery (the usual interpretation), or the father who wishes to interfere with the affair between his daughter and her Jewish lover. Browning, though, could easily have made this relationship clear. On a crass and didactic level, certainly, the poem deals with one of two different themes: the responsibility of a father to his erring daughter; the responsibility of a cuckolded husband in an affair of honor. But, of course, we are to see the Three as evil forces, and Browning, like Henry James, is careful to leave the nature of evil unspecified. They are, then, the ultimate unnamed destructive force which hovers over the lovers and prevents them from having the happiness which comes to the lovers in "By the Fireside." Our focus, it would seem, is on the nature of their love rather than the effect of their love, and on whether it is a world well lost.

It is by no means clear, however, that "In a Gondola" is a poem of successful relationship, however brief. It seems, in fact, that an elemental tension exists between

the two lovers. The girl attempts to free herself from her
fleshly screen:⁶⁴

'Unless you call me, all the same,
Familiarly by my pet name,
Which if the Three should hear you call,
And me reply to, would proclaim
At once our secret to them all.
Ask of me, too, command me, blame--
Do, break down the partition-wall
'Twixt us, the daylight world beholds
Curtained in dusk and splendid folds!
What's left but--all of me to take?
I am the Three's: prevent them, slake
Your Thirst!' (III.20-31)

In this passage the mistress quite clearly states "I am the Three's," and that the lover may "prevent them" by breaking down the "partition-wall" between them. As the lover is murdered, he apparently was unable to break down the partition-wall because he fails to separate his soul from his public identity as his mistress does. There seems in this poem, as in others, a dual vision of life in which Everyday, the world of activity and restraint, is at odds with Holiday, the world of freedom and heightened feeling. This is most clearly seen in the short companion lyrics "Meeting at Night" and "Parting at Morning," in which the exultant passion of the first lyric is in direct contrast

with the flat diction and emotion of the second with its "need of a world of men for me!" (III.4) In much the same way the lover's language in "In a Gondola" is at odds with his mistress' as his view of their relationship and his view of life are also different. Her language is metaphoric; her mood playful:

'The moth's kiss, first!

Kiss me as if you made believe

You were not sure, this eve,

How my face, your flower, had pursed

Its petals up; so, here and there

You brush it, till I grow aware

Who wants me, and wide ope I burst.' (III.44-55)

His language is practical; his mood realistic:

'Past we glide, and past, and past!

What's that poor Agnese doing

Where they make the shutters fast?

Gray Zanobi's just a-wooing

To his couch the purchased bride:

Past we glide!' (III.37-42)

The lover's interest, then, is in appearances, in forms; he refuses to let love save him, and the last night of his life is spent single: "What are we two?" (III.63), "As of old, I am I, thou art thou!" (III.70), and again, "As of old, I am I, thou art thou!" (III.78)

The ending, as King has pointed out,⁶⁵ is sentimental and, it may be added, out of keeping with the rest of the poem. The mistress's last statement: "Yet once more, ere we part,/ Clasp me and make me thine, as mine thou art," (III.224) is in the tone of the rest of her speeches, and implies that she is still trying to forge the eternal moment. It is the lover's last speech, after he is stabbed by the Three, which jars the reader:

It was ordained to be so, sweet!--and best
 Comes now, beneath thine eyes, upon thy breast.
 Still kiss me! Care not for the cowards! Care
 Only to put aside thy beauteous hair
 My blood will hurt! The Three, I do not scorn
 To death, because they never lived: but I
 Have lived indeed, and so--(yet one more kiss)
 --can die! (III.225-32)

The Romantic imagery, the exultant speech of death, is entirely out of keeping with the ethos the lover has revealed to the reader, is at odds with the language he has used, and implies that he has reached a wholeness which the reader has never seen. Rather than a world well lost, therefore, the lover's final speech leads one to the bitterly ironic conclusion that he dies fooled--loved but unloving.

The marriage of the two, of course, would have been no guarantee of eternal union, for too many of Browning's poems--

most importantly The Ring and the Book--obviate a view as simplistic as this, and certainly Browning was never simplistic. In his short lyric "In a Year," Browning examines a marriage which has gone wrong. In the first stanza of this poem the woman narrator reveals her plight:

Once his love grown chill,

Mine may strive:

Bitterly we re-embrace,

Single still. (III.5-8)

her opacity:

Was it something said,

Something done,

Vexed him? . . .

I as little understand

Love's decay. (III.9-11, 15-16)

and the cause of the split:

I had wealth and ease,

Beauty, youth:

Since my lover gave me love,

I gave these. (III.45-48)

Briefly and ironically, then, Browning depicts the anti-thesis of the union depicted in "By the Fireside": because of the wife's inability to leave the world of matter ("Wealth and ease") and appearances ("beauty, youth"), the marriage, after a year, fails. The irony, of course, comes from the woman's failure to admit her own part in the

breakdown. The closing stanzas find her still opaque, still blaming her husband, and by generalizing from false evidence, seeing that all men are enmeshed in the same guilt:

Well, this cold clod

Was man's heart:

Crumble it, and what comes next?

Is't God? (III.77-80)

If "In A Year" and "In a Gondola" are poems in which love never began, "By the Fireside" a poem of a matured love, "Any Wife to Any Husband" is a poem of the transience of love, and juxtaposed by Browning in 1860 against "By the Fireside."⁶⁶ "By the Fireside" deals with a particular and ideal relationship; "Any Wife to Any Husband" with a generalized view of married life (any wife to any husband), which, because of the disequilibrium between ideality and reality, is ironic. Roma King even speculates that:

The characters in the two poems might even be the same, the listener in the one becoming the speaker in the other. The women in "Any Wife to Any Husband" displays qualities not suspected in the silent soul partner whom we see only through the eyes of the husband in "By the Fireside." When she speaks she throws new light both upon herself and her husband. She listens to his protestations of faithfulness skeptically and fearfully.

Unlike him, dissatisfied with the moment,
 she wishes to secure also the future.⁶⁷

King, then, sees the two poems as dealing with the same characters, with "Any Wife" shifting the point of view to the wife. But despite King's perceptive reading of these poems, it seems that except for Browning's pairing of the two poems, probably for contrast rather than continuity, King's reading is forced. His other argument, that the echo of "Because our inmost beings met and mixed" appears in both poems, shows rather that all of the love poems are intentionally related.

For the most part, however, King seems accurate in depicting the problem between the lovers. Certainly it is the woman's "I-ness" which interferes with what should be an idyllic marriage. We are shown from the first that the husband is nearly perfect:

My love, this is the bitterest, that thou--
 Who art all truth, and who dost love me now
 As thine eyes say, as thy voice breaks
 to say--

Shouldst love so truly, and couldst love me still
 A whole long life through, had but love its will,
 Would death that leads me from thee brook
 delay. (III.1-6)

The difficulty is entirely the wife's, for she imputes
 venery where none would seem to exist:

Ah, but the fresher faces! 'Is it true,'
 Thou'lt ask, "some eyes are beautiful and new?
 Some fair--how can one choose but grasp such
 wealth?

And if a man would press his lips to lips
 Fresh as the wilding hedge-rose-cup there slips
 The dewdrop out of, must it be by stealth?

(III.68-72)

But the irony is not aimed at women alone but against egocentricity, however slight, for it prevents one from successfully achieving his out-nature and achieving the circle of Platonic perfection.

Browning, therefore, had in the circle a clearly formulated image, flexible and alive, which was in a direct linear tradition from Plato. It would seem, then, that Marjorie Nicolson is wrong in her claim that: "During the nineteenth century, when the circle returned to literature, it tended, under the influence of the evolutionary theory and belief in progress, to be not the Circle of Perfection but a spiral."⁶⁸ Browning took the image directly, as a living image, not as an anachronism.

CHAPTER IV

IMAGES OF FLOWERS, INSECTS, AND ROSES

Flowers are a common image in Browning's poetry, but seldom does he refer to flowers in general; rather, his tendency is to name specific flowers. A partial list of these flowers includes: aloe-flower, bell-flower, eye-flower, field-flower, field-flower-foolishness, foam-flower, fruit-flower, geranium-flower, linden-flower-time-long, lip-flower, melon-flower, mould-flower, passion-flower, poppy-flower, prize-flower, relic-flower, rock-flower, wild-flower, wild-pomegranate-flower. The reader, then, is impressed by Browning's knowledge of flowers, and expects the naming of a specific flower to have thematic, rather than ornamental, significance. Further, though Browning's images have a cerebral intent, their effect is often emotive.

In 1838 Browning wrote to Miss Fanny Haworth: "I have, you are to know, such a love for flowers and leaves . . . that I every now and then in an impatience at being unable to possess them thoroughly, to see them quite, satiate myself with their scent,--bite them to bits."⁶⁹ We are told that Southampton St., Camberwell, where he was born and lived for twenty-eight years was then almost rural and filled with flowers, and that his mother was an ardent gardener.⁷⁰ To

Miss Haworth he also wrote: "How I remember the flowers-- even grasses--of places I have been! Some flower or weed, I should say, that gets somehow connected with them."⁷¹

And as much as any other image, Browning connects places with flowers (Spain in "The Flower's Name"); situations with flowers ("Women and Roses"); and people with flowers (Brother Lawrence in "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister.").

To the extent that Browning does differentiate between various flowers, a tentative distinction can be made between roses on one hand, and all other flowers on the other. That is, roses are generally found to have mostly sexual implications, while other flowers have a wide range of meanings besides the sexual. In this, Browning again seems in a stream of general tendencies received from his literary predecessors. When Wordsworth writes of a daffodil or a small celandine, or Shelley of a faded violet, their intent is metaphoric, to show exaltation, humility, or mutability. When poets write of love, however, the rose seems more fitting. Burns' love, after all, was like a red, red rose. And Blake's:

O rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,

And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.⁷²

is about violation and decay in general, but on one level it is certainly of sexual violation. Flowers other than the rose, however, take their meaning from their qualities of color and shape.

Part I

FLOWERS

In Browning's poetry, flowers have many functions. In Pippa Passes, Jules compares Phene's face to a flower: "Like an entire flower upward: eyes, lips, last/ Your chin." (II.5-6) Or, more simply, in "In a Gondola:" "How my face, your flower, had pursed." (III.52) In In a Balcony, the flower is equated with life in general: "Our flower of life;" (IV.250) or youth: "My flower of youth, my woman's self that was." (IV.458) In much the same way as In a Balcony, the image appears in "The Statue and the Bust:"

'Nor a way exists, the wise opine,
If she quits her palace twice this year,
To avert the flower of life's decline.' (III.103-05)
But when used sensually, as in "A Toccata of Galuppi's," the flower is specified:

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and
 lips so red,--

On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-
 flower on its bed,

O'er the breast's superb abundance where a
 man might base his head? (III.13-15)

"Flower," as a general noun for all flowering plants, has little usage in Browning, then, beyond a rather diffuse conventional meaning. Too aware of particular flowers, it is to the particular flower we must turn to find the particular referent.

There are, of course, scattered exceptions to this, but these exceptions are mostly in poems in which Browning is at his wittiest, rather than those which deal with emotional involvement. "Magical Nature" is one of these, one which forms a sort of Cavalier sub-corpus of atypical Browning poems:

Flower--I never fancied, jewel--I profess you!
 Bright I see and soft I feel the outside of a
 flower.

Save but glow inside and--jewel, I would guess you,
 Dim to sight and rough to touch: the glory is the
 dower. (IX.1-4)

The sexuality in this poem is an ascetic exercise which concentrates on the juxtaposition of temporal values, much like

Donne's "The Flea." The typical Browning love poem, on the other hand, is "In Three Days," in which we find:

O Loaded curls, release your store
Of warmth and scent, as once before
The tingling hair did, lights and darks
Outbreaking into fairy sparks,
When under curl and curl I pried

After the warmth and scent inside. . . . (III.15-20)

This is an extreme example, but not atypical, and one in which the pre-coital manipulation, or, rather, the anticipation, is undisguised.

Shakespeare, unlike Browning, was apparently not averse to using flowers in the abstract for a particular function. Juliet speaks to Romeo of their developing love and perhaps her developing genitalia in these words: "This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,/ May prove a beauteous flow'r when next we meet." In Alls Well that Ends Well, the King uses "flower" as an image of virginity:

If thou beest yet a fresh uncropped flower,
Choose thou thy husband, and I'll pay thy dower;
For I can guess that by thy honest aid

Thou kept'st a wife herself, thyself a maid.

And in the first play, Capulet shows Juliet's loss of virginity: "See, there she lies,/ Flower as she was, deflowered by him." Browning's flower imagery, while equally evocative, is, at the same time, more restrained and more

particularized except for some poems in Asolando (1889).

Browning also tends to use flowers in an image-cluster with an insect. In demonstration of the tendency, Barbara Melchiori has identified the bee in a "bee-honey-lily"⁷³ image-cluster as sexual metaphor. She notes, for example, the sexuality in these lines from "Popularity:"

Most like the centre-spike of gold
Which burns deep in the bluebell's womb
What time, with ardors manifold,
The bee goes singing to her groom,
Drunken and overbold. (III.46-50)

Ms. Melchiori is correct, but does not go far enough. Professor Altick in a persuasive article on "Two in the Campagna" sees these lines as sexual:

Where one small orange cup amassed
Five beetles,--blind and green they grope
Among the honey-meal. (III.16-18)

and interprets these lines: "Inside the 'small orange cup,' a shape covertly suggestive of female sexuality, grope human beings, blind but instinctively insistent upon finding whatever is to be found 'among the honey-meal'--pollen, the stuff of the renewal of life."⁷⁴ Altick, then, intuitively sees the flower and pollen as sexual, but not the beetles. This seems, though, to limit the range of Browning.

In two stanzas of "In a Gondola," the mistress sings of two insects which awaken the flower, as a lover's kiss would

awaken his mistress to sexual passion:

The moth's kiss, first!

Kiss me as if you made believe

You were not sure, this eve,

How my face, your flower, had pursed

Its petals up; so, here and there

You brush it, till I grow aware

Who wants me, and wide ope I burst.

The bee's kiss, now!

Kiss me as if you entered gay

My heart at some noonday,

A bud that dares not disallow

The claim, so all is rendered up,

And passively its shattered cup

Over your head to sleep I bow. (III.49-62)

And the image appears again in "Porphyria's Lover" in which the mad lover, after strangling Porphyria, opens the dead girl's eyes: "As a shut bud that holds a bee,/ I warily open her lids. . . ." (III.43-44)

Why a bee should be considered a sexual metaphor is admirably explained by Quarles:

What, Cupid, are thy shafts already made?

And seeking honey, to set up thy trade?

True Embleme of thy sweets! Thy Bees do bring

Honey in their mouths, but in their tails, a sting.⁷⁵

And in The Taming of the Shrew, as Professor Partridge notices,⁷⁶ "Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting? In his tail." Quite clearly, then, it is the equation of the sting with the phallus, and the entry into the yonic flower, which gives insects their symbolic force.

Unfortunately, it is not this simple. As early as Pauline, his first published poem, Browning's Shelleyan persona bursts out:

. . . I was full of bliss, who lived
With Plato and who had the key to life;
And I had already shaped my first attempt,
And many a thought did I build up on thought,
As the wild bee hands cell to cell; in vain,

For I must still advance, no rest for mind. (I.435-40)

The passage which Browning had in mind is probably from the Ion. In this work, the souls of poets " . . . flying like bees from flower to flower and wandering over the gardens and the meadows and the honey-flowing fountains of the Muses, return to us laden with the sweetness of melody; and arrayed as they are in the plumes of rapid imagination they speak truth. For a poet is indeed a thing ethereally light, winged, and sacred, nor can he compose anything worth calling poetry until he becomes inspired and as it were mad. . . ."77

Browning, of course, familiar with classical culture from an early age, was well versed in Greek philosophical

thought. It is, however, quite easy to fall into the fallacy of making the bee image coalesce a host of possibly disparate concepts. For this reason it may seem the depth of academic chicanery to ring in Mandeville's The Fable of the Bees as being suggested, along with Platonic doctrine, in the bee image. This, however, seems to be the case, and is a measure of Browning's ability to infuse his intellectual experience into one image rather than a sign of wild-eyed critical ingenuity. The Fable was presented to Browning by his father on February 1, 1833.⁷⁸ DeVane writes that this was "an extremely critical period of his life. He was returning from atheism to orthodoxy and the tendency of the reaction was to make him read orthodoxy into all things. He had begun his search . . . for evidence of a loving and gracious God who utilized evil in this life to make it bring forth moral good."⁷⁹ The tie-in, then, is obvious, for Browning was reading Mandeville just before publication of Pauline in March, 1833, and as his copy of The Fable was being annotated by his father before being presented to the young poet, there is little doubt that Mandeville's ideas were in the air at the Browning household. DeVane cautions, however, that Browning did not understand Mandeville, but rather took Mandeville's Vindication as an honest assessment of the physician's intentions in The Fable. Browning apparently did not notice that the rhetorical scheme of The Fable is that of unresolved paradox.

Browning, then, at least from the time he was twenty years old, intellectually wrestled with the problem of correlating existential facts with the a priori fact of an omnipotent, benevolent God who has programmed all facts of existence into a master-plan of creation. And from Plato Browning received the idea that the poet had a sacred purpose in revealing the ways of God to man; of reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable elements of life. Browning states this directly in "The Essay on Shelley" when he claims that the subjective poet's role is "To embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth,--an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees,--the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand, --it is toward these that he struggles."⁸⁰ The poet, therefore, is unable to see the truth as God sees it. But actually perceiving the truth is not the crucial issue, but rather the attempt to perceive truth. If the poet is mistaken, he is not to be condemned, for that would be attacking his humanity. Browning goes on to explain this when he says of Shelley: "It was not always truth that he thought and spoke; but in the purity of truth he spoke and thought always. Everywhere is apparent his belief in the existence of Good, to which Evil is an accident; his faithful holding by which he assumed

to be the former going everywhere in company with the tenderest pity for those acting or suffering on the opposite hypothesis."⁸¹

This long digression returns us to the heart of the thesis. Browning the poet in attempting to treat the disparate elements of life in his poetry realized that he must deal with the physical side of life and reconcile to what he saw as God's scheme. Further, that he felt this need for justification is one of the elements which separates him from the Renaissance poets, and indeed from the Romantic poets to whom he was deeply indebted. This response to the physical is a peculiarly Early Victorian attitude: if the artist must notice man's animal nature, he can at least exalt it. In this sense, Browning's attitude is almost that of the Prior in "Fra Lippo Lippi" who desires the painter to give "no more body than shows soul!" But actually Browning's mis-reading of Mandeville led him into a logical trap, which left him open for attack by rational critics like Henry Jones and Hoxie N. Fairchild⁸² who writes:

It is very important for Browning that the Word should be made flesh--so important that in the erotic union of human and divine the fleshification of spirit is sometimes more obvious than the spiritualization of flesh. In one of the lyrical interludes of Ferishtah's Fancies he refuses to offer a love which is all soul:

Take sense, too--let me love entire and while--
 Not with my Soul!

So far, so good; human love needs physical roots
 as well as spiritual flowers. But he continues:

Make, Love, the universe our solitude,
 And, over all the rest, oblivion roll--
 Sense quenching Soul!

Soul proved by quenching soul? Only in the
Epilogue of the same volume does this paradox
 seem to make him uneasy. After speaking of those
 moments when the thought of heroic personalities
 in history gives him highest confidence
 in the greatness of human nature he adds:

Only, at heart's utmost joy and triumph, terror
 Sudden turns the blood to ice: a chill wind
 disencharms

All the late enchantment! What if all were
 error--

If the halo raised round my head were, Love,
 thine arms?

The question involves more than one layer of ambiguity. Rather than become mired in psychiatric speculations we have been trying hard to think of Browning's mask as identical with his face. But when a poet writes about love it becomes impossible

not to think of him as a human being, and what recent studies have taught us about this man's life and character renders the aggressive virility of his love-gospel a little embarrassing.⁸³

It is necessary to quote Fairchild in full to present the extreme case against Browning taken by some Browning critics. But it is quite easy and ultimately misdirected to attack Browning for not being a logician, rather more difficult to judge him on the adequacy of his intuitive faculties. Perhaps the best apologia for Browning's own work is in his poem "House" in which he compares his poetry to a house into which one may peer but never enter: "Outside should suffice for evidence;/ And whoso desires to penetrate/ Deeper, must dive by the spirit-sense. . . ." The bee image then is Browning's analogue for the poet's attempt "to know the world through his senses and his intuitive power, and permit him to plunge 'through rind to pith' of each thing he appropriates."⁸⁴

And finally, Browning's mis-reading of Mandeville does not seem to have hurt his poetry. The central dilemma in "The Statue and the Bust" is how to salvage something good out of an evil situation:

'Where is the use of the lip's red charm,
The heaven of hair, the pride of the brow,
And the blood that blues the inside arm--

'Unless we turn, as the soul knows how,
The earthly gift to an end divine?

A lady of clay is as good, I trow.' (III.181-86)

The irony is evident: a lady of clay is not as good as a living lady; virtue at the expense of living is no virtue; to be out of tune with the flesh is to be out of tune with Nature. As we have noted in Chapter II, Brother Lawrence, moving among his flowers is complete and needs not worry about the attractions of the flesh outside the cloister wall. Riccardi's wife has no paradigm in nature, thus she finds her objective correlative in cold stiff stone.

In a like manner, the index of the alienation between James Lee and his wife is that the natural image of a fruitful life, the flower, is mentioned but once, and there along with weeds: "The man was my whole world, all the same./ With his flowers to praise or his weeds to blame,/ And, either or both, to love." (III.109-111) On the whole, the natural images in "James Lee's Wife" are either violent or sterile: "worms i' the wood," "water's in stripes like a snake," "vines writhe in rows, each impaled on its stake," "that field red and rough . . . [yields] . . . scarce a blade or a bent," "passions run to seed," "turf . . . dead to the roots." It is difficult in a world like James Lee's wife's to remember Rabbi Ben Ezra's dictum that "Pleasant is this flesh," for the wife has not even the solace of seeing

that nature goes on though the individual life is out of tune with it; she lives in a wasteland as oppressive as Childe Roland's.

Perhaps Browning's scheme contains as much dialectic as it does unresolved paradox. In an arbitrary scheme of extreme alienation at one pole, as in the character of Porphyria's lover, and complete involvement in nature, as in one case of Caliban, at the other pole, there are those characters who are able to synthesize their egocentricity with the natural life around them. For example, Evelyn Hope is identified with a geranium which dies with her, and this poem seems to form a lovely little lyric about a young girl too soon plucked from life. But the poem is colored by a shade of perversity both because of the disparity between the ages of the sixteen year old Evelyn and the forty-eight year old narrator, and because of the narrator's necrophilic attraction to the dead girl:

I loved you, Evelyn, all the while!

My heart seemed full as it could hold;

There was place and to spare for the frank young
smile,

And the red young mouth, and the hair's young
gold.

So, hush,--I will give you this leaf to keep:

See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand!

There, that is our secret: go to sleep!

You will wake, and remember, and understand.

(III.44-56)

Perhaps the narrator appears so unseemly both because of his coy tone and because he is not identified with any life images.

The game-keeper in "The Flight of the Duchess" is closer to Browning's synthetic absolute. The character participates in Nature, sees his wife Jacynth as "a June rose," and uses a healthily heterosexual imagery. While attempting to understand the mysteries of the gypsies, an aspect of life beyond his ken, he prevents undue intellectual fragmentation by using natural imagery. Thus, no matter how insurmountable the problem he is faced with, he always attempts to define it through that which he knows outside himself. He sees, for example, that gypsies are born "like insects which breed on/ The very fruit they are meant to feed on," (III.359-60) and make their living by mining "the ore that grows in the mountain's womb." (III.362) Most tellingly, in a description of gypsy glassware, he inserts a procreative image:

. . . their crowning pride,
 With long white threads distinct inside,
 Like the lake-flower's fibrous roots which dangle
 Loose such a length and never tangle,
 Where the bold sword-lily cuts the clear waters,

And the cup-lily couches with all the white
daughters. . . . (III.379-84)

At the end of the poem, the game-keeper, like Tennyson's Ulysses, prepares for a last quest into the unknown:
"I shall go journeying, who but I, pleasantly! / Sorrow is vain and despondency sinful." (III.879-80)

Part II

IMAGES OF ROSES

Rose imagery, as we have seen, has a more restrictive range of meaning for Browning. That is, though the rose, like the flower, is a metaphor for life, its symbolic force is more in the direction of the sexual side of life. The rose also has one other symbolic possibility not usual to flowers--thorns. There is, then, in small, a ready-made image for desire and danger. This is what Tarquin explicitly states in The Rape of Lucrece:

I see what crosses my attempt will bring,
I know what thorns the growing rose defends;
I think the honey guarded with a sting:
All this beforehand counsel comprehends.⁸⁵

Strangely, Browning does not make use of this obverse nature of roses. Very few of Browning's roses, it would seem, have thorns. It may be that the potential for love to Browning exists in a prelapsarian Eden in which thorns--threatening,

protective, punishing--do not exist. But even this explanation is gropingly presented. In his poetry, Browning simply did not seem to consider that roses have thorns. One of the few exceptions may be when Count Gismond's future wife is crowned with a garland of roses before her humiliation, Christ's crown of thorns may also be hinted at. But the major thrust of the image is to suggest sexual attractiveness. The thornless rose is used by the resigned wife of "Any Wife to Any Husband:" " . . . if a man would press his lips to lips/ Fresh as the wilding hedgerose-cup there slips/ The dewdrop out of, must it be by stealth?" (III.70-72) Here there is no more hint of Christian thorns than there is several stanzas later when she asks, "Why must I, 'twixt the leaves of coronal,/ Put any kiss of pardon on thy brow?" (III.98-99)

As Browning does with all his images, he uses the rose with a moral intent. This morality, of course, is not conventional restrictive morality, but, as with other flowers, a symbol of striving and attainment. The image is used dynamically in the brief monologue "Confessions." In this poem a man dying in bed, probably of old age, rejects the Christian contemptus mundi a preacher is attempting to foist on him:

What is he buzzing in my ears?

'Now that I come to die,

Do I view this world as a vale of tears?"

Ah, reverend sir, not I! (IV.1-4)

The theme of this poem, then, is the rejection of a restrictive moral universe which identifies the pleasures of the flesh with the sins of the flesh. In a world drastically shrunken to a bed and a few medicine bottles, the monologist tells of an illicit affair of his youth for which he does not repent, and which he carries in his memory as a amulet against the preacher's strictures:

. . . she left the attic, there,
 By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether,"
 And stole from stair to stair,

 And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,
 We loved, sir--used to meet:
 How sad and bad and mad it was--
 But then, how it was sweet! (IV.30-36)

The gate, of course, is a yonic symbol, and the roses have not thorns: both the innocence of the act and the pureness of the memory save the old man from guilt, and forestall any pietistic buzzing from the reverend sir.

In contrast to the old man is the ineffectual lover of "A Serenade at the Villa" for whom no girl waits by the rose-wreathed gate. The lover moves in a silent black void.

Not a twinkle from the fly,
 Not a glimmer from the worm;
 When the crickets stopped their cry,
 When the owls forebore a term,
 You heard music; that was I. (III.6-10)

The lover realizes that Nature is not breathless at his song, for he states that following his song, "earth turned in her sleep with pain." The lover is, then, rather more self-mocking than self-pitying, for the traditional expectation of a night of love--warm breezes, stars, the smell of flowers--bumps its nose on reality. Even more deflating than the reality of the evening is the rejoinder he imputes to his lady:

'Can't one even die in peace?

As one shuts one's eyes on youth,

Is that face the last one sees?' (III.53-55)

Thus the dejected lover makes his final admission:

Oh, how dark your villa was,

Windows fast and obdurate!

How the garden grudged me grass

Where I stood--the iron gate

Ground its teeth to let me pass! (III.56-60)

It is impossible to see that the lover has achieved success, for he is humiliated and left without any hope of consummation. But he has, nonetheless, been taught the lesson that he must earn his roses; despite sentimental convention they are not guaranteed.

DeVane suggests that the lover in "A Serenade at the Villa" posits the same attitude as the lover in "One Way of Love."⁸⁶ The lover in the latter poem attempts to seduce

the girl, Pauline, in three ways: First, physically by strewing roses in hope that they may catch her eye; second, spiritually, through music; third, by confessing his passion. The first two attempts have failed, the third yet to be tried:

My whole life long I learned to love.

This hour my utmost art I prove

And speak my passion--heaven or hell?

She will not give me heaven? 'Tis well! (III.13-16)

The issue of course is in doubt, but the lover does not succumb to despair. As a Browning character he knows that success is not measured by the attainment but by the striving: "Lose who may--I still can say,/ Those who win heaven, blest are they!" (III.17-18) The lover here, through a gnomic utterance, is a mouth-piece for Browning, and though the result of the affair is in doubt, the lover's soul is in fine fettle.

A prerequisite of a successful lover, as for a successful personality in general, is an integration of the self, from which sturdy center multi-form life can be apprehended. Both lovers above, through ironic self-awareness, seem on the road to successful integration. In fact, though it is usual for Browning's poems to commence with a nascent center in dramatic confrontation with another center, as in most dramatic monologues, or in conflict with a milieu which shapes

and alters this center, as in "Childe Roland," and "Caliban upon Setebos," several lyrics deal only with a static matured center and with what this center projects. "Women and Roses" is such a poem.

"Women and Roses," Mrs. Orr writes in her Handbook, "is the impression of a dream, and both vague and vivid, as such impressions are;"⁸⁷ and in Life and Letters she explains that the poem was "suggested by some flowers sent to his wife,"⁸⁸ and further states that it was written in a three-day creative period before "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and "Love Among the Ruins."

With the preceding discussion of roses in mind, the poem can be read as an erotic fantasy, supported rather than obviated by Mrs. Orr's claim that it is "the impression of a dream," for in our post-Freudian age it is difficult to approach dreams in other than a sexual way. Roses to Browning are seldom separable from the genitive experience, and seeing himself as a phallic tree about which all roses, or women, past, present, and future circle, is a fantastic projection of Olympian ardor:

Deep, as drops from a statue's plinth
The bee sucked in by the hyacinth,
So will I bury me while burning,
Quench like him at a plunge my yearning,
Eyes in your eyes, lips on your lips!

Fold me fast where the cincture slips,
 Prison all my soul in eternities of pleasure,
 Girdle me for once! (III.29-35)

Each stanza ends with failure; this one, "But no--the
 old measure./ They circle their rose on my rose tree."
 Yet the defeat is followed by renewed hope:

Dear rose without a thorn,
 Thy bud's the babe unborn:
 First streak of a new morn. (III.37-39)

The poem is therefore complicated, and operative on at least one other level. On the primary level, the lover, though a mature center, and though as completely involved with nature as the game-keeper in "Flight of the Duchess," is unable to integrate his fantasy with his life. His fantasy, like that of the lovers' in "A Serenade at the Villa" and "One Way of Love," is doomed to be unfulfilled. But like the other lovers, he does not quit, and though the poem is unfinished, it is optimistic, for the lover's past failure does not crush him.

On another level it is a metaphor for artistic creation. Just as the lover's attempts at seduction are frustrated ("In vain," "But no") so too is the artist frustrated in attempting to create artistic truth, for the actuality is inferior to the conception. This is supported by the recurrence of the bee image which, although it represents the masculine element, is also representative

of the creative element. But as the bees avoid the roses, so inspiration evades the artist: "I will make an Eve, be the artist that began her,/ Shaped her to his mind! Alas.'" Here the artist explicitly equates the artist with God, but seems aware that he possesses the mortal stink which precludes perfection.

Finally, although Browning knew the Divine Comedy intimately, indeed read it in the original Italian, he seems not to have followed Dante's lead of intuiting the cosmic rose as the allegorical center of Paradise. It should be quickly added that this is not a failure in Browning's vision, but instead shows that the poet consciously limited the image to the physical. To reinforce this, the rose tree is more closely identified with Christ the man rather than with God the removed unknowable pneuma. In fact, certain icons of Christ show him as a rose tree surrounded by a beatific circle of maidens who depend upon him for sustenance.⁸⁹

The rose, then, is Browning's image of physical perfection, a perfection to which man aspires but cannot reach. However, it is not only an image of perfection, but a logically complete image which reduces the abstract world of the circle, and the multi-form world of flowers, to one world and one flower. But because Browning is Browning, the image of the rose does not remain purely sexual--red, warm, and

moist--but becomes a symbol for what Browning conceives as God's plan:

. . . the race of Man

That receives in parts to live in a whole,

And grow according to God's clear plan. (III.110-12)

Browning is struck, as most men have been, with the feeling that sexual bliss is the most attractive element of life, but the most difficult to achieve and sustain. The poet, therefore, turns the emotion into metaphor, and because he is a neo-Platonist, the simile reads: sexual love is a shadow of divine love; sexual creation is a metaphor for divine creation.

This is the compromise Browning has to make, and he makes it reluctantly. Always there seems in the back of Browning's mind a desire for fleshly completeness with or without divine sanction; a place, a garden, in which the mood of holiday can exist without the contrasting mood of everyday: Meeting at Night without Parting at Morning.

CHAPTER V

THE GARDEN IMAGE

The third image to be discussed is that of the garden. The garden, like the flower, is the logical imagistic extension of the circle. The circle is yonic and confining, but immortal and whole; the flower is circular, by convention at least, and fecund. The garden extends these figures: it is enclosed, self-sustaining, and procreative--a spot in time and space. In literature, part of the force of the image comes from the writer's attempt to create an ideal world apart from the real world. The artist's theme, then, is the duality between the ideal and the real. Browning's awareness of this duality is best seen in the title of the eight pamphlets he published between 1841 and 1846: Bells and Pomegranates. This title, as Robert Browning explains in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, comes from Rabbinical tradition: "The Rabbis make Bells and Pomegranates symbolical of Pleasure and Profit, the gay and the grave, the Poetry and the Prose, Singing and Sermonizing. . . ." ⁹⁰ Quite clearly, then, Browning offers one answer to Mandeville's paradox (cf. Chapter IV): avoid its implications and deny an individual's duty to transform a world he never made. This escape is always tempting, but

Browning usually attempts to work out a synthesis between the two discrete spheres (cf. Chapter IV) in the tradition of Victorian Compromise.

The prototype for all gardens is found in the Edenic myth in which man, nature, and God are in balance. In this myth, Adam and Eve are perfect lovers, naked and unashamed. They cannot do evil for they do not know what it is; further, their affair is divinely sanctioned. Thus the garden exists harmoniously without the social laws which it excludes, but these laws tend to impinge upon the lovers. The symbol for this is the serpent who is a representative of social jealousy and restrictive mores which tend to usurp the natural life in the enclosure which it is unable to share. The bliss of the lovers, therefore, is temporary; the mood of the garden fraught with danger.

This is the tradition, but Browning often seems to intuit that gardens are in the process of being destroyed, as Tennyson does in "Mariana." At times, then, Browning substitutes a more modern garden: a secluded cabin, a house, or a mere room in which the lovers are the last survivors of the encroaching wasteland rather than the first men. Once this substitution is made, most elements applying to the garden also apply to these, except that the garden's potential for growth is eliminated.

The garden functions in poetry in several ways:

one, it is enclosed like a circle so that it becomes a little world; two, frequently in the garden moral and social rules have been suspended and, thus, the garden is more permissive than the world which surrounds it and threatens its freedom; three, insofar as it is lush, flowerful, and cultivated, it also functions metaphorically for the body. Iago claims: "Virtue? a fig! 'tis ourselves that we are thus and thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners,"⁹¹ four, in Shelley, at the opposite end of the spectrum, bowers and gardens are usually to be regarded as metaphors for a state of mind.⁹² His poem "The Sensitive Plant" is a metaphorical representation of states of mind before and after the anima dies. In general terms, then, the garden coalesces the pattern of freedom and restraint, and is a metaphor for body or mind.

There are other famous gardens in literature which come immediately to mind. In The Merchant's Tale, for one, the garden is enchanted, and seduction is permitted under sanction of the King and Queen of the Fairies. In Book II of the Faerie Queene, two contrary gardens are presented: The Bower of Bliss and the Garden of Adonis. The first of these is immoral: "A place pickt out by choice of best aliue/ That natures worke by art can imitate."⁹³ The Garden is unnatural, over-heated: "Two naked Damzelles he therein espyde,/ Which therein bathing, seemed to contend,/"

And wrestle wantonly, ne car'd to hyde,/ Their dainty parts
from vew of any, which them eyde."⁹⁴ There Sir Guyon espies
Acrasia:

Vpon a bed of Roses she was layd
As faint through heat, or dight to pleasant sin,
And was arayd, or rather disarayd,
All in a vele of silke and siluer thin
That hid no whit her alablaster skin,
But rather shewd more white, if mor might bee
. . . . (II.xii.77)

Contrary to the falsity of the "Bowre of Blisse," the Garden of Adonis brings forth true life. Further, "There is continuall spring, and haruest there/ Continuall, both meeting at one time." (III.vi.42) The landscape is described in terms of the female body: "Right in the midst of that Paradise,/ There stood a stately Mount, on whose round top/ A gloomy groue of mirtle trees did rise. . . ." (III.vi.43) "And in the thickest couert of that shade,/ There was a pleasant arbour. . . ." (III.vi.44):

There wont faire Venus often to enioy
Her deare Adonis ioyous company,
And reape sweet pleasure of the wanton boy;
There yet, some say, in secret he does ly,
Lapped in flowres and pretious spycery,
By her hid from the world, and from the skill

Of Stygian Gods, which doe her loue enuy;
 But she her selfe, when euer that she will,
 Possesseth him, and of his sweetnesse takes her
 fill. (III.vi.46)

In Shakespeare's Venue and Adonis, however, the garden motif is used even more directly; the garden-body is explicit:

'Fondling,' she saith, 'since I have hemm'd thee here
 Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
 I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer:
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
 Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
 Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

'Within this limit is relief enough,
 Sweet bottom grass and high delightful plain,
 Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
 To shelter thee from tempest and from rain:
 Then be my deer, since I am such a park,
 No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark.'⁹⁵

With the preceding examples in mind, I would argue that Browning is closer to Spenser than to Shakespeare. Certainly Shakespeare in Venue and Adonis is more interested in salacious jokes than in mythic creativity. Spenser's purpose, however, is moral: to contrast artificial and

destructive lust with living, organic procreation. As John Bayley claims, Spenser's purpose in his use of gardens is to show how the characters, the readers, and Nature are linked by God into a harmonious whole.⁹⁶ Yet Browning is amoral in certain poems. "The Flower's Name" is a poem about a lover's remembered walk with a girl through a flower garden. But this poem is one of a pair with "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," and the title for both is Garden Fancies. Thus, the appellation "fancies" indicates that the poem is a creative projection rather than an actual event, or, rather, an imbuing of an actual past event with a pattern of sexual fantasy, which anticipates time present, and future consummation. The first two lines of the poem--"Here's the garden she walked across,/ Arm in my arm, such a short while since"--can (III.1-2) be taken as the record of recent past events, but from the word "now" in line three the poem is a blending of the present with memories of time past. It should be kept in mind that as we are dealing with suggestion, and, as Roma King said in another context, the purpose of imagery is to merge the outer world with the inner,⁹⁷ the events have a psychological rather than literal relevance. The events of time past and the lover's erotic mind-set, anticipating consummation, strongly impact on the literal scenes he sees, and all events of the poem are transformed by his anticipatory state.

The entry into the garden is painful and forced:
 "I push its wicket, the moss/ Hinders the hinges and makes
 them wince!" (III.3-4) a fairly literal depiction of the
 copulative act. Upon entering the garden, the lover sees
 a snail feeding among the leaves, another sexual suggestion,
 and one which introduces the leaf-oral-groping motif which
 is one of the controlling metaphors. The other is the pat-
 tern of the whole poem: searching and finding.

As the lover continues his search for the girl, he
 passes a phlox which, in time past, the girl had pointed
 out to him when a moth was feeding on it. This image, of
 course, is related to the insect-flower image so common in
 Browning. Line sixteen, "But yonder, see, where the rock-
 plants lie!" had, in the 1844 printing, read "But this--
 so surely this met her eye!"⁹⁸ a reading which intensified
 the important yonic symbol of the meandrina⁹⁹ which, to the
 lover, when the girl names it in "love for praise," sounds
 "soft" and "meandering," "slow and sweet," her speech "half-
 asleep . . . half-awake," all phrases which reinforce a
 seductive feeling of dreaminess.

In the fourth stanza the lover's search for the girl
 ends as he sees her, or rather, "her soft white fingers/
 Searching after the bud she found." (III.31-32) This joins
 the equally suggestive next stanza in which "her fingers
 wrestle,/ Twinkling the audacious leaves between,/ Till

round they turn and down they nestle--/ Is not the dear mark still to be seen?" (III.36-40)--in a slow frenzy of genital stimulation.

The poem ends on a coy and somewhat flat note, forced and somehow Cavalier: "June's twice June since she breathed it with me . . . Roses, you are not so fair after all!" (III.44,48) But the impact of the poem is clear, and somewhat audacious. The poem exhibits this freedom, one supposes, because it takes place in a garden, traditionally a place of freedom and growth and perpetual spring--a sort of vernal-venereal situation.

This poem is unusual, for no snake enters, and unusual, too, for we are not told what the lover has done to deserve his garden. The original garden was lost by Adam and Eve too easily giving in to temptation, thus it would seem that freedom must generally be earned, and can only be retained through extreme effort. In "A Woman's Last Word," for example, the snake, or some un-named cause, has intruded into the garden:

What so false as truth is,

False to thee?

Where the serpent's tooth is

Shun the tree--

Where the apple reddens

Never pry--

Lest we lose our Edens,

Eve and I. (III.13-20)

The state of exaltation in "The Flower's Name" has passed, and all that remains are tears and separation. The affair seems to fail because the woman's illusions of love are in conflict with the reality of love:

Be a god and hold me

With a charm!

Be a man and fold me

With thine arm! (III.21-24)

To be both god and man? It is impossible for any man to be both, and next to impossible to be either all the time. Not only that, but the woman over-rationalizes by separating flesh and spirit:

I will . . .

Meet, if thou require it,

Both demands,

Laying flesh and spirit

In thy hands. (III.27,29-32)

Ultimately, the woman exhibits a rather unhealthy neuroticism, a willingness to martyr herself for the sake of convention. Thus, the flaw in this garden is the woman's refusal to willingly offer both body and soul to the lover, and this reticence is what allows the snake, perhaps

conventional morality, to usurp the potential bliss of the garden.

The idea of the garden, then, is as close to a real garden as man can come, for man must be involved in the real world. Again this is Browning's version of the Victorian compromise, but it is presented dramatically and convincingly. Fra Lippo Lippi understands this when he states:

I always see the garden and God there

A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,

The value and significance of flesh. . . . (IV.266-68)

But Fra Lippo Lippi does not find a garden, rather he engages in an amour with a prostitute. Lippi knows that he cannot spend a life in lubricity, and is returning

To get in bed and have a bit of sleep

Ere I rise up to-morrow and go work

On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast

With a round stone to subdue the flesh. . . .

(IV.71-74)

The quest for the garden is dangerous ("Down I let myself,/
Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped."

(IV.64-65), as is the return (the night watch). However, Roma King's conclusion, that Lippo makes a "partly successful, partly unsuccessful attempt to integrate monastery and street into one clear vision,"¹⁰⁰ is only partly accurate. Lippo is in perfect balance between the two. As Browning knew from his source in Vasari, Lippo soon after ran off with

a nun, Lucrezia Buti, and their affair was eventually sanctioned by Pius II.¹⁰¹ Though this is outside the poem, Browning was undoubtedly aware of it, and perhaps saw this eventual affair as Lippo's reward for dynamic action.

In "St. Martin's Summer," the garden is never begun because the mistress has other ideas (He says, "You would build a mansion,/ I would weave a bower," (IX.7-8) and because memories of past bliss intrude upon present possibilities. In the first of these, the garden is not possible because the lovers' inmost beings do not meet and mix, and they do not form the necessary circularity which will permit them a garden. This is caused, perhaps, by a difference in experience. In Hardy's Far From the Madding Crowd, Gabriel Oak learns from the destruction of his flock that the cosmos is unheeding of human aspirations; in Housman's phrase, a wise man should "train for ill and not for good." It is not until the end of Hardy's novel, when Bathsheba also learns this, that the garden can be attained. The lover in "St. Martin's Summer" argues for his bower on the same grounds:

The solid, not the fragile,
 Tempt rain and hail and thunder,
 If bower stand firm at Autumn's close,
 Beyond my hope,--why, boughs were agile;
 If bower fall flat, we scarce need wonder
 Wreathing--rose! (IX.61-66)

The other problem is related to this, and is a lesson learned from the past when a previous mistress died; and the memory of past love intrudes upon the present:

Love's corpse lies quiet therefore,
 Only Love's ghost plays truant,
 And warns us have in wholesome awe
 Durable mansionry; that's wherefore
 I weave but trellis-work, pursuant
 --Life, to law. (IX.55-60)

The lovers, then, are faced with insurmountable difficulties, and attempt to exorcise their problems through frantic love making:

The while you clasp me closer,
 The while I press you deeper,
 As safe we chuckle,--under breath,
 Yet all the slyer, the jocosier,--
 'So, life can boast its day, like leap-year,
 Stolen from death!' (IX.79-84)

But even this temporary concupiscence does not work, for the ghost of the past is afield, and the memory of the past is stronger than the reality of the present:

Ay, dead loves are the potent!
 Like any cloud they used you,
 Mere semblance you, but substance they! (IX.91-93)

Thus, though the idea of the garden is alive in Browning's poetry, the actuality is shown as either impossible or transient. In the shrunken world of Victorian England, the garden is reduced to a room, but even the possibility of permanent bliss in a room is tentative. Donne, on the other hand, in "The Good Morrow," sees positive value in the room, which becomes a metaphor not for a diminished universe, but for a center from which the universe is an extension: "For love, all love of other sights controuls,/ And makes one little roome, an every where;"¹⁰² and this leads to the circular metaphor:

What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
 If our two loves be one, or thou and I
 Love so alike, that none doe slacken,
 none can die.¹⁰³

It is more usual in Browning's poetry, however, to see the room itself threatened. In Donne's poem, in a sense, love at the center radiates outward; in Browning's poems, the jealous world outside tends to implode to destroy the happy state of lovers who, for a time, feel themselves protected from the dissolving blasts aimed at the room.

"A Lover's Quarrel" is the record of an affair which seemed, in time past, to be perfectly happy, perfectly free. The affair took place in an enclosed area--a room, a cabin--in the winter. The symbol structure is clear: outside is howling wind and snow; inside is warmth and love. Thus, as

in every garden poem, the wasteland outside attempts to enter and blight the happiness within:

Dearest, three months ago!

When we lived blocked-up with snow,--

When the wind would edge

In and in his wedge,

In, as far as the point could go--

Not to our angle, though,

Where we loved each the other so! (III.13-21)

Because their love is perfect at the time, the lovers are allowed freedom from normal rules. For example, the two act out a fairly rich fantasy life (acting out roles as artists, royalty, and gauchos), and reverse sex roles. The man says,

Teach me to flirt a fan

As the Spanish ladies can,

Or I tint your lip

With a burnt stick's tip

And you turn into such a man! (III.64-68)

Their freedom from imposed roles is frankly rewarded in sexual freedom:

Try, will our table turn?

Lay your hands there light, and yearn

Till the yearning slips

Through the finger-tips
 In a fire which a few discern,
 And a very few feel burn,

And the rest, they may live and learn! (III.43-49)

This supernally erotic perfection, then, is achieved by the two through a willingness to break down the barriers between themselves; in fact, to fuse their beings so closely that even basic distinctions between the sexes are no longer a barrier to their freedom (he says, "I was you all the happy past" III.96). But because the love they generate is uniquely perfect ("a fire which a few discern,/ And very few feel burn"), (III.47-48) there is a danger of social jealousy, in its broadest sense, destroying their circle of perfection. The snake, of course, enters,

Dearest, three months ago
 When we loved each other so,
 Lived and loved the same
 Till an evening came

When a shaft from the devil's bow
 Pierced to our ingle-glow,

And the friends were friend and foe! (III.78-84)

The cause of the break-up is "a word"; the effect of the word is a traditionally desolate lover. The mood of the lover is one of hope that the two will be re-united again, but the reader is unconvinced. The lover hopes again for

November when he and his mistress will stand in a sere
world which is like a "bare-walled crypt," and come together
again for mutual warmth:

Each in the crypt would cry

'But one freezes here! and why?

When a heart, as chill,

At my own would thrill

Back to life, and its fires out-fly?

Heart, shall we live or die?

The rest. . . . settle by-and-by!' (III.141-47)

This stanza is ominous, for the possibility of their death would not rejuvenate society as did Romeo and Juliet's. Instead, their love is a failure, for not only does it fail to warm the cold outside, but it is unable to perpetuate itself. There is, in fact, a certain blindness in the lover in that he seeks to postpone solving the dilemma which inflected their love in the first place. Thus, in his hoped for reunification, he desires the fleshly without the spiritual. His unwillingness to impute blame to himself indicates how little the lover has learned. While "mad" may be too strong a word for the lover's state, his mood is close to that of Porphyria's lover. This is not to claim that these are companion poems, but Porphyria's lover, by strangling Porphyria, effectively, if atrociously, does extend the infinite moment that evades the lover in "A Lover's Quarrel."

There is, therefore, a strong affinity between "A Lover's Quarrel" and "Porphyria's Lover," as there is between this latter poem and a segment of Pauline. "A Lover's Quarrel" ends,

So, she'd efface the score,

And forgive me as before.

It is twelve o'clock:

I shall hear her knock

In the worst of a storm's uproar,

I shall pull her through the door.

I shall have her forevermore! (III.148-54)

At first this stanza seems a traditional romantic statement in which fantasy becomes reality (i.e. "I shall" rather than "I would like to"). Actually, in his unwillingness to admit his own part in the failure of love, the lover has not earned the right to have that love renewed. "Porphyria's Lover," though written earlier (1834 vs. 1853), shares many elements with "A lover's Quarrel"--the enclosed space, the late hour, the storm outside, the willingness of the girl--and tends to turn the fantasy of "A Lover's Quarrel" into a real situation. The problem may be stated as this: if the lover did again have his mistress back, how would he prevent the breaking of the circle? Parenthetically, it is not necessary to see the lover as mad, despite Browning's pairing of it along with "Johannes Agricola" under the heading "Madhouse Cells." The poet, at the time of writing

"Porphyria's Lover," was, after the debacle of Pauline, trying to disassociate himself from being identified with the character of his monologists.¹⁰⁴

In "Porphyria's Lover," Porphyria comes out of the storm, partially disrobes, inverts their roles,

. . . she put my arm about her waist,

And made her smooth white shoulder bare

And all her yellow hair displaced,

And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,

And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair. . . . (III.16-20)

and then admits her love. The lover is in a quandary over how to respond:

. . . at last I knew

Porphyria worshipped me; surprise

Made my head swell, and still it grew

While I debated what to do.

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,

Perfectly pure and good. . . . (III.32-37)

Given a reduced world in which the potential for human action is limited, a world which has no objective values by which to gauge moral choice, the lover has two alternatives: one, he can make love to her; two, he can kill her. The first alternative is normal, the second abnormal: however, to claim abnormality presupposes an objective moral decision, and morality has been suspended, after which the circle breaks

into two component parts. The poem ends,

And thus we sit together now,

And all night long we have not stirred,

And yet God has not said a word! (III.58-60)

God is silent not because He approves, but because the lover has created a world apart from His jurisdiction. It must be quickly added that this does not mean that the lover has made the right choice; after all, he will soon find Porphyria beginning to decompose. The error of the lover is in failing to realize that, like Abt Vogler, all man can do is seek more and more intense spots of time. Ultimately, even the freedom of the garden, like Adam and Eve's Eden, is freedom within moral absolutes which were available to the lover. It seems that in this poem Browning is intuiting a distinction between Universal Law, or Moral Law, and restrictive social law, or moral law.

It is possible that the reason Browning composed "Porphyria's Lover" was to dramatically extend a possibility he had briefly dealt with in Pauline. In this long poem, the Shelleyan protagonist looks at Pauline and muses:

How the blood lies upon her cheek, outspread

As thinned by kisses! only in her lips

It wells and pulses like a living thing,

And her neck looks like marble misted o'er

With love-breath,--a Pauline from heights above,

Stooping beneath me, looking up--one look

As I might kill her and be loved the more. (I.896-902)
Immediately after this, the lover decides to rejoin society, and the erotic and practical possibilities of murder are not explored. However, the problem of how one acts in the absence of external authority remains a pervasive theme in Browning's poetry. In the Sebald-Ottima section of Pippa Passes and in "A Forgiveness," Browning returns to this theme of two lovers who lose a garden.

The Sebald-Ottima section opens after Sebald has killed Ottima's superannuated husband. The adulterers are understandably disturbed by the murder, and, while in a "shrub-house," seek to re-affirm the wholeness they had the previous July. Ottima, the less disturbed of the two, seeks to revivify Sebald's passion by describing the perfect love they had:

. . . The past, would you give up the past
Such as it is, pleasure and crime together?
Give up that noon I owned my love for you?
The garden's silence: even the single bee
Persisting in his toil, suddenly stopped,
And where he hid you only could surmise
By some campanula chalice set a-swing,
Who stammered--"Yes, I love you?" (II.164-171)

Thus, perfect balance is achieved with the sun at its apex and Nature itself stilled to witness Sebald's answer. In

anticipation, the bee plunges into a "campanula chalice" (bell-flower) and starts it rhythmically swinging.

The foreplay preceding the consummation of the affair is carried on amidst an echoing storm in the heavens:

When heaven's pillars seemed o'erbow'd with heat,
 Its black-blue canopy suffered descend
 Close on us both, to weigh down each to each,
 And smother up all life except our life. . . .
 Swift ran the searching tempest overhead;
 And ever and anon some bright white shaft

 Burned through the pine-tree roof, here burned and
 there,
 As if God's messenger thru the close wood screen
 Plunged and replunged his weapon at a venture,
 Feeling for guilty thee and me. . . . (II.185-88,
 191-96)

The lovers are, at this point, successful. The sanction for their adultery is that God is unable to punish them for what they are doing. In fact, Nature seems in harmony with them, for the plunging and replunging of the lightning anticipates their sexual activities. Ottima continues,

--While I stretched myself upon you, hands
 To hands, my mouth to your hot mouth, and shook
 All my locks loose, and covered you with them. . . .
 Sebald, as we lay,

Rising and falling only with our pants,
 Who said, 'Let death come now! 'Tis right to die!
 Right to be punished! Naught completes such bliss
 But woe!' (II.197-200-205-09)

Thus, again, in the transposed world of Saturnalia, the woman becomes the aggressor. The memory of the affair purges Sebald of his guilt, and they again begin their ritual dance, when the snake enters.

The snake, however, is a pure snake in the person of Pippa, who delivers her famous lines, "God's in his heaven--/ All's right with the world!" (II.226-28) Then, rather melodramatically, Sebald cries to Ottima, "Leave me!/ Go, get your clothes on. . . ." (II.237-38) Even a journeyman playwright like Browning would have cut his own throat before expecting an audience to accept this moral pomposity. Browning was dramatically, if clumsily, attempting to juxtapose two contrasting states. It would seem that at this stage of his development, Browning's scheme allows adultery but not murder, for adultery violates social taboos, while murder violates Moral Law. Soon after Pippa is heard, Sebald says, "--That round great full-orbed face, where not an angle/ Broke the delicious indolence--all broken!" (II.248-49) Sebald, of course, reveals the breaking apart of their circle, and soon spontaneously dies. Ottima, apparently, goes on to commit suicide.

Thus Browning composes a rather melodramatic but thematically useful statement of love, guilt, and retribution. Thirty-seven years later, in "A Forgiveness," he takes up the same theme again, but this time from the point of view of the cuckolded husband. The pattern of the poem is the loss of the garden, and the successful attempt to set up a new garden in a room. The poem is a dramatic monologue, delivered in the confessional to a priest (who later proves to be the seducer), by a man who has achieved immense political and financial success out of a drive for power engendered by his love for his wife. Returning home as usual after a day in which he "worked for the world," (IX.16) the husband sees in his garden a skulking figure, wrapped in a cloak, who he at first thinks the lover of a servant, then realizes to be the lover of his wife. The wife, in rather sensational fashion, reveals to the husband, "I love him as I hate you." (IX.79) And they leave the garden.

Again, as in other garden poems, the husband is faced with the problem of deciding what to salvage after losing the garden. Like the married couple in Meredith's Modern Love (1862), another garden poem, the couple in "A Forgiveness" decide to act out the marriage to keep a show of happiness against the world:

. . . three whole years, nothing was to see
But calm and concord: where a speech was due

There came a speech when the smiles were wanted too,
Smiles were as ready. (IX.134-37)

One night, three years later, after a ball, the wife requests "one short word" with the husband in a chamber far removed in the palace. The journey is arduous, and perhaps dangerous,

I lead the way, leave warmth and cheer, by damp
Blind disused serpentining ways afar
From where the habitable chambers are,--
Ascend, descend stairs tunneled through the stone,--
Always in silence,--till I reach the lone
Chamber sepulchred for my very own
Out of the palace-quarry. (IX.176-82)

The correlative possibilities of this chamber run rampant; the reader is reminded, of course, of the catacombs in "The Cask of Amontillado," but the labyrinth path to the center is allied to the journey through the unconscious: " . . . when a boy,/ Here was my fortress, stronghold from annoy,/ Proof-positive of ownership. . . ." (IX.182-84) This is reinforced in the succeeding lines when the metaphor is developed:

. . . in youth
I garnered up my gleanings here--uncouth
But precious relics of vain hopes, vain fears;
Finally, this became in after-years

My closet of entrenchment to withstand

Invasion of the foe on every hand. . . . (IX.184-89)

Briefly, then, Browning is apparently depicting through metaphor the husband's attempt to reveal, at his wife's request, the nescient center. This is three years too late for him, and his totally integrated personality, in this case, must be counted as a flaw in him, and the catalyst for the wife. When the husband sues to find the name of her lover, she states, "All was folly in his case,/ All guilt in mine. I tempted, he complied." (IX.306-07) And reveals that the cause of her tryst was mistaken jealousy in that she felt he gave his "heart and soul away from me to slave/ At statecraft." (IX.310-11)

The sepulchre is filled with exotic weapons, and while the wife is exclaiming,

" . . . I loved you! Thanks for the fresh
serpent's tooth
That, by a prompt new pang more exquisite
Than all preceding torture, proves me right,"
(IX.243-45)

the husband is musing over his weapons,

I think there never was such--how express?--
Horror coquetting with voluptuousness,
As in those arms of Eastern workmanship--
Yataghan, kandjar, things to rend and rip,
Gash rough, slash smooth, help hate so many ways,

Yet ever keep a beauty that betrays
 Love still at work with the artifices

Throughout his quaint devising. (IX.246-54)

Upon the wife's admitting that she still loves her husband, the husband allows her to atone by opening her artery with a delicate knife and writing a confession with its point. After the wife dies, the husband confesses, then kills the confessor, her lover.

The purpose of the poem seems to be to display a Spanish code of conduct which sanctions the husband's summary disposal of two miscreants. He has, after all, not violated social taboos. On another level, however, the husband is left alone, and the death of the wife has not redeemed the garden. In this sense, he is forced to pay for a life which, like the Duke of Ferrara's, is destructively self-centered. And the wife's suicide, certainly the one act of pure love in the poem, fails because the husband is more interested in revenge than in his wife's love. For this, his garden is reduced to a cell, then to a confessional.

Now all of this is very pessimistic, and totally at odds with the concept of Browning as ebullient optimist. But his late lyric "Never the Time and the Place," despite a superficial resolution, seems even gloomier. The lover here, in spring-time, reflects on his past mistress, who is probably dead--"the house is narrow, the place is bleak." (X.7) As fulfillment is then impossible in this world, and the lovers

have been separated by a snake ("Enemy sly and serpentine,/ Uncoil thee from the waking man!" (X.13-14), the only option Browning holds out is reunification in death. This would be very well, if a bit sentimental, except that the necrophilia of the last lines makes this impossible:

Outside are the storms and strangers: we--

Oh, close, safe, warm sleep I and she,

--I and she. (X.21-23)

The lover has forgotten Marvell's famous injunction that none do there embrace. It is almost as if Browning, after developing his myth, admits that, after all, any sort of lasting human relationship is impossible. But, at the same time, Browning does hold out the potentiality for eternal bliss, and a possibility for expanding the garden so that it encompasses the whole world.

CHAPTER VI

THE LANDSCAPE OF LOVE

Almost without exception, as we have seen, Browning destroys the possibility of permanent bliss between his lovers. They are allowed their infinite moment, but when the moment passes they are left with merely the memory of infinite possibility, a glimpse at the Platonic form behind the veil. This glimpse is gained by Browning's artists and lovers, and there seems not to be very much qualitative difference between their experiences; Abt Vogler's vision of celestial harmony seems not to be more or less total or true than the lover's, say, in "The Last Ride Together." There is however, one distinct difference between artists and lovers: artists are excluded from creating perfection because they are human; lovers, however, are sometimes allowed to love in a near perfect state temporarily. This is akin to G. Robert Stange's claim that "the notion that vital gestures are more real than art, and art is an unworthy substitute for life, is recurrent in Browning's poetry."¹⁰⁵ In other words, the lovers perhaps can succeed if the lovers are able to balance holiday and everyday. But when the lovers seek to reject the world of time and duty and set up a garden or a room, social jealousy eventually destroys that garden or that room.

Browning does, however, hold out the possibility of suspending morality and temporality. As a reward for the lovers' dangerous attempt to set up a garden in the teeth of worldly opposition, Browning sometimes breaks down the garden wall, and involves the whole world in the spirit of the garden. This, in the sense of Donne's lovers making "one little room an everywhere."¹⁰⁶ Or, as Browning explains in the lines that puzzled Hoxie N. Fairchild (cf. Chapter IV),

Eyes shall meet eyes and find no eyes between,
 Lips feed on lips, no other lips to fear!
 No past, no future--so thine arms but screen
 The present from surprise! not there, 't'is here--
 Not then, 't'is now!--back, memories that intrude!
 Make, Love, the universe our solitude,
 And, over all the rest, oblivion roll--
 Sense quenching Soul! (X.112)

Browning works in a familiar tradition which finds analogues between a prone female figure and details of physical geography. Much of this is accepted terminology (e.g. mons Analysis speaks almost off-handedly of the symbols for the body:

The female genitalia are symbolically
 represented by all such objects as share with
 them the property of enclosing space or are

capable of acting as receptacles: such as pits,
hollows and caves . . . amongst buildings,
 churches and chapels are symbols of a woman. . . .

The breasts must be included amongst the organs
 of sex: these, as well as the larger hemispheres
 of the female body, are represented by apples,
peaches and fruit in general. The pubic hair in
 both sexes is indicated in dreams by woods and
thickets. The complicated topography of the fe-
 male sexual organs accounts for their often being
 represented by a landscape with rocks, woods and
 water. . . .¹⁰⁷ (Freud's italics)

This is the same pattern found in Lockwoods's dream
 in Chapter III of Wuthering Heights: "We came to the chapel.
 I have passed it really in my walks, twice or thrice; it
 lies in a hollow, between two hills--an elevated hollow,
 near a swamp, whose peaty moisture is to answer all the pur-
 pose of embalming on the few corpses deposited there."¹⁰⁸
 Bronte seemingly sees more potential in the erotic landscape
 than Freud did in dreams. Here, Lockwoods's perverse view
 of life is shown in the vaginal chapel bringing forth corpses
 rather than babies.

The body-landscape image took one other important di-
 rection in Victorian England: the buried stream of pornog-
 raphy. As Ronald Pearsall shows in The Worm in the Bud, the
 output of pornography during the nineteenth century was as

voluminous as it was mediocre. The body-landscape analogy was trite because it was so obvious: "How the snowy hill-lock rise! / Parted by the luscious vale;"¹⁰⁹ and "Know you the valley, sequester'd, inviting, / That shelters the fountain, of purest delight;"¹¹⁰ and yet again:

Oh! soft are the hills, and made for reclining,
Whose velvet-like slopes grot and fountain
conceal:

Reposed on that throne, let man scorn all
repining,

And prove that to live is supremely to feel.¹¹¹

It is impossible to speculate how much sub-literature Browning was exposed to, but then he could have found much the same language in Shakespeare or in Donne's Elegies XVIII and XIX.

In Browning's poetry the landscape image is not plentiful, but it is the logical extension of the other images we have examined. Browning, however, uses the image for moral ends. In "Up at a Villa--Down in the City," an "Italian Person of Quality" prefers the order of the city, with houses "white as curd . . . houses in four straight lines, not a single front awry," (III.iv) to the natural landscape where "the wild tulip, at the end of its tube, blows out its great red bell / Like a thin clear bubble of blood. . . ." (III.vi)

The index to the faulty nature of the noble is in the image he uses to describe his hated villa: " . . . stuck like the horn of a bull / Just on a mountain-edge as bare as

the creature's skull,/ Save a mere shag of bush with hardly a leaf to pull!" (III.iii) In other words, the nobleman tends to prefer life ordered and sterile, and ignores or is incapable of seeing the phallic and generative possibilities of his own environment; he prefers the world of form and/or order to the freedom and danger of the countryside. This is not surprising, for, after all, one has to earn the empathy of nature through triumphing over someone else's order. This should not be taken to mean that Browning had an anarchistic streak, but he did seem to see that man-made laws prevent the necessary growth of the individual soul. Norbert tells Constance in In A Balcony, "I count life just a stuff/ To try the soul's strength on." (IV.651-52) The end result of this growth is knowledge of God's plan, or, as David tells Saul, "I report, as a man may of God's work--all's love, yet all's law." (III.242) The epitomical vision is a view of Nature and man interacting.

One clear exposition of Browning's view in "By the Fireside" when the husband remembers time past when the lovers had their infinite moment. In this poem the husband-lover, first calling the land "woman-country, wooed not wed,/ Loved all the more by earth's male-lands," (III.28-29) swings into a fireside Baedeker,

Look at the ruined chapel again

Half-way up in the Alpine gorge!

Is that a tower, I point you plain,

Or is it a mill, or an iron forge
Breaks solitude in vain?

A turn, and we stand in the heart of things;
The woods are round us, heaped and dim;
From slab to slab how it slips and springs,
The thread of water single and slim,
Through the ravage some torrent brings!

Does it feed the little lake below? (III.31-41) The landscape, then, is a fairly conventional one, and the reader responds familiarly to the woods, the chapel, the stream, and the lake which he subliminally recognizes as the erotic pattern. This pattern is reinforced five stanzas later when Browning clarifies the image: " . . . the chapel [is] reached by the one-arched bridge/ Where the water is stopped in a stagnant pond/ Danced over by the midge." (III.68-70) The chapel and the one-arched bridge, of course, are sexual, but the midge, because it doesn't perform a definite action like plunging or diving seems to represent potentiality unfulfilled.

Contained in this opening section of the poem are several stanzas of intensely conveyed imagery, which are less conventional than the landscape images which enclose them.

For the drop of the woodland fruit's begun
These early November hours,

That crimson the creeper's leaf across
 Like a splash of blood, intense, abrupt,
 O'er a shield else gold from rim to boss,
 And lay it for show on the fairy-cupped
 Elf-needed mat of moss,

By thy rose-flesh mushrooms, undivulged
 Last evening--nay, in to-day's first dew

Yon sudden coral nipple bulged. . . . (III.54-63)

Though the season is autumn, it is not the season of death but rather Keats's "season of mellow fruitfulness;" the time of ripeness. The emotional intensity of this section is almost spring-like in its violence--"splash of blood, intense, abrupt"--and runs counter to the relatively sedate yonic images (the gold shield and the fairy cupped mat of moss). The picture is of hymenal rupture, which explains, perhaps, why the coral nipple was not visible before--the erectile tissue had not been aroused.

In the tradition of the pathetic fallacy, nature reflects and responds to the mood of the lovers, and, in this case, anticipates the genitive love of the two. The importance here is that love is not limited to a garden or a room but finds its sanction in the objective correlative of nature. Also there is no indication in this poem of a usurper attempting to subvert their bliss. Even time, the enemy of most other relationships portrayed by Browning, is not a factor in this poem.

There are two other poems by Browning, "De Gustibus--" and "The Englishman in Italy," that fall into the pattern of the erotic landscape, yet are rather atypical. They are both love poems, but the love is not directed as much at a woman as at a place, although there are women present. Further, while the world of the lovers exists as a microcosm within the hostile macrocosm of everyday life (in this case, historical events and historical time), the lovers are insulated, through their love, from historical and temporal disturbances. Finally, they are both celebrations of Italy, and the lover is most enamored with the Edenic ripeness of the land, which, in turn, demands nothing in return from the lover.

The closing lines of "De Gustibus--,"

Open my heart and you will see

Graved inside of it, "Italy."

Such lovers old are I and she:

So it always was, so shall ever be! (III.p.176)

the lover overtly states a love which while it is not sexual, is in part the result of actual eroticism depicted in the poem. But first the lover makes a distinction between England and Italy. In the first stanza, England is represented as a boy and girl "making love" (III.p.175) in a hazel coppice by moonlight. The imagery is restrained ("a cornfield-side a-flutter with poppies" (III.p.175)), and the mood pastel. The scene is not unattractive in a misty, rather staid way.

The second stanza of the poem, in contrast, is harsh, somewhat guttural, but virile. The lines are not sensuous but delivered with gusto,

What I love best in all the world

Is a castle, precipice-encurled,

In a gash of the wind-grieved Appenine. (III.p.175)

"Castle," "precipice-encurled," "gash," "wind-grieved Appenine," tend to characterize the passionate affirmation of the lover.

The imagery is masculine and feminine; the two locations depicted by the lover, the mountains and the shore, carefully and intentionally juxtapose phallic and yonic imagery. In the lines just quoted, for example, the phallic castle is strategically located in the yonic declivity of the mountain. In the second location, a masculine cypress tree--"red rusted,/ Rough iron-spiked, ripe fruit-o'ercrusted" (III.p.175)--stands sentinel beside the feminine sea.

Most interesting, though, is that the sea-side house is crumbling and bringing forth life: " . . . in the house, forever crumbles/ Some fragments of the frescoed walls,/ From blisters where a scorpion falls." (III.p.176) This is as if Browning were suggesting that the walls between the lover and the world, between man and nature, are disintegrating. In opposition to the covert British lovers in the first stanza who are shielded from sight, in the Italian

setting, a bare-footed girl "tumbles down on the pavement, green-flesh melons." (III.176) As if to expand the disintegration of the barrier, the girl brings news that " . . . the king/ Was shot at, touched in the liverwing,/ Goes with his Bourbon arm in a sling. . . ." (III.p.176) Apparently, then, as people begin to participate in a natural order, tyrants will tumble as the melons tumble; social and political restrictions on human freedom will begin to disappear; and the important business of turning the world into an Eden can commence.

Basically, the difference Browning sees between England and Italy is that though in either location the garden can be expanded, the natural exuberance of Italy is closer to the freedom than England. It should be noted that a desire to return to a state of child-like spontaneity exerts an extremely strong pull upon Browning. Though in "Home-Thoughts, From Abroad," the poet seems to prefer butter cups over the "gaudy melon-flower" of Italy, he can, as in "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis" prefer insect life with "All that life and fun and romping,/ All that frisking and twisting and coupling," (III.105-106) over the writings of "sour John Knox." And it is not altogether certain whether Caliban is evolving out of the slime or descending back into it.

"The Englishman in Italy" is Browning's most important statement about a man rewarded in life, and has the important

function of combining and resolving the imagistic strands begun in other poems. For this reason, the poem requires close attention.

The two important external facts in the poem are; one, it is the season of the sirocco at which time Italy and the continent is oppressed by hot, moist winds out of Africa; second, in England,

Men meet gravely to-day

And debate, if abolishing Corn-laws

Be righteous and wise. . . . (III.288-90)

One thing which the lover has learned is that while oppressive weather will break and give way to sunlight, there is no guarantee that oppressive laws will be changed. It is for this reason that the Englishman has rejected England for Italy.

The key to the nature of all the lovers we have examined thus far is in their ability to understand the relationship between their own ethos on the one hand and Nature on the other. He is able to equate, for example, the "sea-fruit"--the "pink and gray jellies," which, when touched, "mouths gape there, eyes open, all manner/ Of horns and of humps" (III.59-60)--with "children as naked/ And brown as his shrimps." (III.63-64) So that, in this sense, the lover is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Caliban: Caliban, through biological empiricism, posits a god; that is, he falsely uses physical evidence to define a metaphysical being.

The Englishman, on the other hand, posits evolutionary progress by seeing protean shapes--mouths, eyes, horns, humps--as becoming children. There is no logical reason why he should make this leap of understanding, but he is probably right. He is, then, like Abt Vogler, like Fra Lippo Lippi, in that he can make form out of seemingly unrelated stuff, as the musicians and painters do out of notes and pigments. It is for this reason that the Englishman is rewarded in his poem and Caliban punished:

Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!

'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,

Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month

One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape'.

(IV.291-95)

The Englishman has turned his back upon a particular political situation, which undoubtedly represents the entire web of oppressive social and political systems, for a simpler and less ordered milieu. For his expatriation, he is rewarded by the people and by the land. The first sign of this is that the girl,¹¹² Fortu, is completely submissive to him:

Fortu, Fortu, my beloved one,

Sit here by my side,

On my knees put up both little feet! (III.1-3)

The purpose of the poem as dramatic monologue is to allay Fortu's despondency over the Sirocco by explaining how

out of the seeming evil in Nature comes good in the form of bountiful harvest, and, indirectly, how all Nature conspires to reward the lover of Nature. Good can result from seeming evil, for, as Browning constantly re-iterates, the universe means good. The first section of the poem (III.1-128) is a catalogue of sensual images, and noteworthy for an almost microscopic view of the natural environment, including inanimate objects which Browning brings alive. In "De Gustibus--," as we have seen, a scorpion falls with fragments from a wall; in "The Englishman in Italy," in a like situation, a rock-flower (cf. Chapter V) thrusts its way out from,

. . . betwixt the loose walls of great flintstone,
 Or in the thick dust
 On the path, or straight out of the rock-side. . . ."
 (III.25-27)

For this rock-flower "were great butterflies fighting,/ Some five for one cup." (III.31-32) The image of butterflies in the cup, of course, is Browning's usual hint of sexuality, but in over-blown Italy they are "great" in size and many in number. The insect image appears later with a description of the eating of grapes:

The rain-water slips
 O'er the heavy blue bloom on each globe
 Which the wasp to your lips
 Still follows with fretful persistence. (III.102-05)

More covertly sexual is the image of Fortu's brother stamping out the grapes:

In the vat, halfway up in our house-side,
 Like blood the juice spins,
 While your brother all bare-legged is dancing
 Till breathless he grins
 Dead-beaten in effort on effort
 To keep the grapes under,
 Since still when he seems all but master,
 In pours the fresh plunder
 From girls who keep coming and going
 With basket on shoulder

And eyes shut against the rain's driving. (III.73-83)

The rhythm, the blind obedience of the girls, and the satiation of the satyr-like brother are obviously intended to image sexuality. However, this image, like the wasp image quoted before, is somewhat more complex than it seems, for sexuality is equated with eating and the reader, it would seem, tends to respond to both with fairly equal desire; at least, Browning seems to give them equal weight. Probably, however, Browning is trying to image a glutting of all the senses so that a particularity of response is impossible in a jaded Rabelaisian after-glow. How else to explain the multidirected but forceful synesthetic images which abound in this section, like: "lasagne so tempting to swallow/ In slippery ropes," (III.97-98) and "prickly-

pear's red flesh/ That leaves thro its juice/ The stony
black seeds on your pearl-teeth." (III.113-15)

Be that as it may, the lover's inundation with the products of Nature is a preparation for the intense, mystical middle section (III.129-228). Here he leaves Fortu's brother, who was to have been his guide, in the low lands eating the "fruit-balls" from myrtles, while the Englishman continues upwards alone on his mule. Soon leaving the woods behind, the Englishman on his pilgrim's mule traverses a wasteland area, "The rock-chasms and piles of loose stones/ Like the loose broken teeth/ Of some monster which climbed there to die/ From the ocean beneath. . . ." (III.153-56) He next passes through a region where vegetation seems seized with inanition: "silver-gray fune-week," "dark rosemary ever a-dying," "a branch/ Coral-colored, transparent, with circlets/ Of pale seagreen leaves." (III.164-66) This fragility of the mountain plants sets up an obvious contrast to the fecund profusion of the plains, and prepares the reader for the asceticism of the Englishman's vision upon the mountain top. Finally, at the end of the arduous journey, at the peak of the mountain, the lover relates,

And God's own profound
Was above me, and round me the mountains
And under the sea,
And within me my heart to bear witness
What was and shall be. (III.172-76)

The lover, then, achieves in life the vantage point which the Grammarian is not given until after death. Perhaps even more exactly, the Englishman's journey is an upward version of Childe Roland's linear journey. Childe Roland sees that the hills "like giants at a hunting, lay, / Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay;" the Englishman has a similar animating power:

Oh, those mountains, their infinite movement!

Still moving with you;

For, ever some new head and breast of them

Thrusts into view

To observe the intruder. . . . (III.181-85)

Yet the Englishman rejects the mountains. The reason for this, he claims, is that the mountains hold the plains in bondage,

They grudge you should learn

How the soft plains they look on, lean over

And love (they pretend)

--Cower beneath them. . . . (III.189-91)

This is passing strange, for the Englishman has had his vision of "heaven and the terrible crystal," and has been rewarded with hindsight and prescience, "What was and shall be." Nor can this rejection be taken as absolute, for the mountain climbing is depicted in La Saisiaz as a positive means for understanding the world: "Ledge by ledge, out broke new marvels, now minute and now immense: / Earth's most

exquisite disclosure, heaven's own God in evidence!" (IX.5-6) And also in La Saisaiz is a definitive statement of the purpose of the garden-landscape image: "all around/ Nature, and, within her circle, safety from world's sight and sound." (IX.63-64) The Englishman, it would seem, rejects his mountain for two reasons: as a lover, he has had his vision and, not being Manfred, is returning to Fortu rather than brood in destructive isolation; after all, the mountains only seem to be alive; two, on the political level, the Englishman sees a corollary situation in the mountains intimidating the plains and Parliament intimidating the English poor. Three, there may also be a hint here of a dramatic working out of the geological theory in Lyell's Principles of Geology (1830-33).

In the last part of this middle section, the lover rejects the land for the sea. Sea imagery, however, is not central to Browning as it is to Swinburne and Arnold, although he utilizes it in "De Gustibus--," in "Amphibian" (the Prologue to Fifine at the Fair), and in a few other poems. Here, though, the focus is on the islands from which the Sirens attempted to lure Ulysses, and on the equation between the Englishman and Ulysses.

It is these islands of the Sirens he is to visit with Fortu for the purpose of examining " . . . the strange square black turret/ With never a door,/ Just a loop to admit the

quick lizards." (III.218-21) Browning seems to intend an inexact connection between this tower and Childe Roland's tower which is round, brown, and completely blind. From the peaceful Italian tower, however, the lovers hear "The birds quiet singing, that tells us/ What life is, so clear?" (III.223-24) rather than Childe Roland's "noise was everywhere! it tolled/ Increasing like a bell" (III.193-198) And while the message of this tower is "Lost, lost!" (III.198) and Childe Roland is enlisted in company with the dupes, the Englishman hears,

--The secret they sang to Ulysses

When, ages ago,

He heard and he knew this life's secret

I hear and I know. (III.225-28)

According to Edith Hamilton, the song the Sirens sang was, "we know all things which shall be hereafter on earth."

According to Hamilton, Bulfinch, Murray, and Dwight, the rock of the Sirens was surrounded by the bones of mariners who answered the siren call. It would seem, then, that the Siren's call is a riddle; that is, what shall be hereafter on earth for one who answers the Siren's call? Death.

Ulysses, of course, had had himself tied to the mast so that while he could hear the Sirens he could not answer them. The rowers had their ears stuffed with wax so that while free to answer the call, no call came to them to answer.

Ulysses, then, was one who had heard and understood the secret of the Sirens, yet lived to return with it to the living, as does the Englishman with his secret. And the ringing in of the classical myth tends to deepen the present poem in time at the same time that the Englishman's odyssey from England is given an heroic dimension by its association with Ulysses.

On his mountaintop the Englishman sees how life and Nature are linked to God. Unlike Abt Vogler, the Englishman does not remain contemplating this crystal dome but, aware of life pulling at him, comes off of his mountain and re-enters into the business of celebration. Like David, he sees that God is God in "the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod." (III.250)

In the last section sirocco has passed and life begins again. Most importantly, the mood in this stanza is humorous and counter-points the Baroque gluttony of the first section and the spiritual exaltation of the second. Also, while the first section is chaotically tumultuous, and the action of the second is movement upward and downward, the third is oddly still and pictorial. In fact, this final section features two pictures and a procession. In the first picture, a romantic landscape, the sun breaks out and dispels the gloom, and "flutters it o'er the mount's summit/ In airy gold fume." (III.231-32) In the second, a genre painting, a gypsy

tinker has set up shop and is keeping one eye on his wares and another on a sleek hog. The third part, the procession in honor of "the Rosary's Virgin," tends to change the Englishman's perspective from participant to observer so that he bifocally both mocks and enjoys.

The procession is, after all, but another type of order in that poor but spontaneous art is produced. It is hard in a scene like this to escape from the feeling that the Englishman is being patronizing. This, however, runs counter to the theme of spontaneity as a positive value. Possibly the Englishman sees the Roman Church, even though it is primitively depicted here, as a restrictive force looming over the peasants. He does not attack the Church, but patronizes it. A priest's "extemporaneous" sermon, for example, "all nature, no art," has taken three weeks to get "by heart." The feast's second course is the Virgin's icon:

And then will the flaxen-wigged Image

Be carried in pomp

Through the plain, while in gallant procession

The priests mean to stomp. (III.269-72)

Depicting priests as gallantly stomping, or old bottles full of gunpowder being "religiously popped" is an obvious ironic technique and one which separates both the Englishman and Fortu from the holy event. It is as if the Englishman, after his peep under the skirt of the Great Question, realizes that present pleasure rather than preparation for Christian heaven

is most important.

He ends by inviting Fortu,

. . . to the garden

As far as the wall;

See me tap with a hoe on the plaster

Till out there shall fall

A scorpion with wide angry nippers! (III.281-85)

With this re-introduction at the end of the poem of the scorpion image and the crumbling wall, Browning re-affirms his faith in physical love as a religious act, and as one method by which man can know God--through participating in life rather than in ritual.

Finally, the critical absurdity that Victorian writers ignored the sexual basis of life and love should be contradicted. More than likely, Browning was creating a new decorum so that the supposed fleshly excesses of the Romantic poets would not appall the emerging middle class. It must not be forgotten that Browning spent many of his creative years in Italy, and certainly the warmth, fecundity, and physical freedom of the Italians appealed to him. In contrast, the thought of England, which was cold, gritty, and socially subtilized must have appalled him. However, Browning seemed to see a synthesis of the two worlds--the warmth and freedom of Italy with the intelligence and cultural superiority of England--as a way of freeing England from the moral and aesthetic ice which was forming around it.

FOOTNOTES

¹Robert Browning, Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession, ed. T. J. Wise (London: Richard Clay and Sons, 1886), p. 5. All other references are to Robert Browning, Works, ed. F. G. Kenyon (London: Smith Elder and Co., 1912), by volume and line number.

²Richard D. Altick, "Lovers' Finiteness: Browning's 'Two in the Campagna'," Papers on Language and Literature, III (1967), p. 75.

³Albert Mordell, The Erotic Motive in Literature (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), pp. 162-63.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵Karl Kroeber, "Touchstones for Browning's Victorian Complexity," Victorian Poetry, III (1965), pp. 101-07.

⁶Roma King, The Focusing Artifice (Athens: Ohio Univ Press, 1968), pp. 74-75.

⁷C. Willard Smith, Browning's Star-Imagery (Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 1941), p. 3.

⁸From a letter to Ruskin quoted in C. H. Herford, Robert Browning (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1905), p. 235.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁰Caroline Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us (1935; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1966), p. 5.

¹¹cf. below, Chapter II.

¹²Rosemond Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 9.

¹³Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Merrill and Baker, 1900), p. 346.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 348.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 350.

¹⁷Letter to J. Milsand, prefixed to Sordello.

¹⁸Stopford Brooke states that love in Browning is the union of the spiritual and the physical forms of life, and "is the primal nature of all the other forms of love, from friendship and material love to love of country, of mankind, of ideas, and of God." The Poetry of Robert Browning (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902), p. 243.

¹⁹Waldo F. McNeir, "Lucrezia's 'Cousin' in Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto'," Notes and Queries, III (1956), pp. 500-02; Boyd Litzinger, "Incident as Microcosm: The Prior's Niece in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'," College English, XXII (1961), pp. 409-10; Boyd Litzinger, "The Prior's Niece in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'," Notes and Queries, VIII (1961), pp. 344-45.

²⁰Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, rev. Henry Stuart Scott (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 1940), p. 1896.

²¹David Sonstroem, "Animal and Vegetable in the Spanish Cloister," Victorian Poetry, VI (1968), pp. 70-72.

²²William C. DeVane, Browning's Parleyings (New Haven: Yale Univ Press, 1927), passem.

²³Ibid., p. 181 and passem.

²⁴W. H. Griffin and H. C. Minichin, The Life of Robert Browning, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1938), p. 51.

²⁵Roma King, Robert Browning's Finances From His Own Account Book, Baylor University Browning Interests, series 15, 1947, p. 33.

²⁶DeVane, Parleyings, p. 181.

²⁷William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), p. 529.

²⁸John Addington Symonds, "A Comparison of Elizabethan with Victorian Poetry," Fortnightly Review, (January, 1889), pp. 58-60.

²⁹Joseph E. Duncan, "The Intellectual Kinship of John Donne and Robert Browning," Studies in Philology, L (1953), p. 90.

³⁰William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Harold F. Brooks and Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1959), I.ii.190-202. All references to Shakespearean plays are to this edition by act, scene, and line numbers.

³¹W. M. Parker, "'Blue Spurt of a Lighted Match'," Quarterly Review, 305 (1967), p. 439.

³²H. M. Richmond, The School of Love (Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 1968), pp. 312-13.

³³*Ibid.*, 313.

³⁴Symonds, p. 72.

³⁵Frederick Pottle, Shelley and Browning (Chicago: Pembroke Press, 1923).

³⁶Marjorie Hope Nicolson, The Breaking of the Circle (New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1960), p. 47.

³⁷Romeo and Juliet, II.i.23-26.

³⁸John Donne, "A Jeat Ring Sent," The Complete Poetry of John Donne, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: New York Univ Press, 1968), ll. 8-12. All references to John Donne are to this edition by line number.

³⁹The Litany, ll. 1, 3-5.

⁴⁰DeVane, Handbook, p. 169.

⁴¹Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), p. 555.

⁴²Despite certain affinities between Browning and Donne, and though "Childe Roland" most resembles Donne's "Good Friday, 1613: Riding Westward," a knowledge of Donne's poem seems of little help in explicating Browning's. cf. also DeVane, Handbook, p. 230. f.n.

⁴³William Butler Yeats, Ideas of Good and Evil (London: A. H. Bullen, 1903), p. 63.

⁴⁴Carl Grabo, The Meaning of the Witch of Atlas (Chapel Hill: Univ of North Caroline Press, 1935), p. 63.

⁴⁵W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper (New York: Cornell Univ Press, 1965), p. 117.

⁴⁶Thomas J. Collins, Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory (Lincoln: Univ of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 132.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 128.

⁴⁸J. W. Tilton and R. D. Tuttle, "A New Reading of 'Count Gismond'," Studies in Philology, LIX (1962), pp. 83-95. But see also Sister Marcella M. Holloway, "A Further Reading of 'Count Gismond'," Studies in Philology, LX (1963), pp. 49-53.

⁴⁹The Merry Wives of Windsor, II.i. ll. 64-69.

⁵⁰Romeo and Juliet, III.i. ll. 23-26.

⁵¹Epithalamion, XI.

⁵²cf., for example, W. O. Raymond, "Browning's 'Statue and the Bust'," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXVIII (1959), 233-49; Boyd Litzinger, "Browning's 'Statue and the Bust' Once More," Studies in Honor of John C. Hodges and Alwin Thaler (Knoxville: Univ of Tennessee Press, 1961), pp. 87-92; and W. David Shaw, Temper, pp. 89-90.

⁵³Derrick Bailey, Sexual Relations in Christian Thought (New York: Harpers, 1959), p. 10.

⁵⁴Peter Butter, Shelley's Idols of the Cave (Edinburgh: Univ of Edinburgh Press, 1954), p. 27.

⁵⁵"The Good Morrow," l. 14.

⁵⁶Plato, The Dialogues, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd edit. (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 1892), pp. 559-62.

⁵⁷William Shakespeare, The Phoenix and the Turtle, The Sonnets, Songs, and Poems of Shakespeare, ed. Oscar James Campbell (New York: Schocken Books, n.d.), ll. 25-32. All references to Shakespeare's poems are to this edition by line number.

⁵⁸Francis Quarles, The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Francis Quarles, ed. Alexander B. Grossart (1635: rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1967, XII, p. 98.

⁵⁹T. S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays (New York: Harcourt, Bruce, and World, 1952), p. 59.

⁶⁰W. David Shaw goes farther and states, "It is quite clear that the mistress is indifferent; there is nothing reciprocal, and hence nothing real, about this adventure." Shaw, Temper, p. 120. The situation is not this clear, however, especially in the context of such lines as, "Thus leant she and lingered--joy and fear/ Thus lay she a moment on my breast." The girl is clearly submissive.

⁶¹E. D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry (Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 1952), p. 101.

⁶²Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Browning the Simple-Hearted Casuist," University of Toronto Quarterly, XLVIII (1945), pp. 234-40.

⁶³This is not to imply a relationship between the two poems. "By the Fireside" was probably written in 1853, the year before Patmore began publishing The Angel of the House, and published in 1855, before Patmore had completed publication.

⁶⁴E. D. H. Johnson has the lover speaking these lines to the mistress. No edition I have examined bears this out. Johnson also, on little evidence assumes the affair to be adulterous. Alien Vision, p. 104.

⁶⁵King, Artifice, p. 72.

⁶⁶DeVane, Handbook, p. 223.

- ⁶⁷King, Artifice, p. 96.
- ⁶⁸Nicolson, Circle, p. 8.
- ⁶⁹Herford, Browning, p. 235.
- ⁷⁰Griffin and Minichin, p. 28.
- ⁷¹Ibid., p. 39.
- ⁷²William Blake, "The Sick Rose," The Complete Works, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford Univ Press, 1966), p. 213.
- ⁷³Barbara Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p. 49.
- ⁷⁴Altick, "Finiteness," p. 77.
- ⁷⁵Quarles, Works, V, p. 78.
- ⁷⁶Eric Partridge, Shakespeare's Bawdy (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1960), p. 218.
- ⁷⁷Plato, Ion, trans. Percy Bysshe Shelley, in James Notopoulos, The Platonism of Shelley (Durham, N. C.: Duke Univ Press, 1949), p. 472.
- ⁷⁸Griffin and Minchin, p. 19.
- ⁷⁹DeVane, Parleyings, p. 7.
- ⁸⁰Robert Browning, "An Essay on Shelley," in The Complete Poetical Works of Browning (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), p. 1009.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 1012.

⁸²"The reader often suspects that Browning is trying to rise above a cold sluggishness of temper by executing a war dance which might inflame his anxious respectability into factitious ardor." Hoxie Neal Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, IV (New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1957), p. 135.

⁸³Ibid., pp. 147-48.

⁸⁴J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God (Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press, 1963), p. 118.

⁸⁵The Rape of Lucrece, ll. 494-99.

⁸⁶DeVane, Handbook, p. 272.

⁸⁷Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Handbook of Browning's Works (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1892), p. 294.

⁸⁸Orr, Life, p. 554.

⁸⁹Rosemond Tuve, Allegorical Imagery (Princeton: Univ Press, 1966), p. 23.

⁹⁰Robert Browning, Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett (New York: Harper, 1899), I, pp. 249-50.

⁹¹Othello, I, iii, 321-22.

⁹²David Perkins, The Quest for Permanance (Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press, 1959), p. 150.

⁹³Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, ed. J. C. Smith and E. DeSelincourt (1912: rpt. London: Oxford Univ Press, 1963), II, xii.42. All references to Spenser are to this edition by Book, canto., and verse numbers.

⁹⁴II.xii.63.

⁹⁵Venue and Adonis, ll. 229-40.

⁹⁶John Bayley, The Characters of Love (London: Constable, 1960), p. 7.

⁹⁷Roma King, The Bow and the Lyre (Ann Arbor: Univ of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 28.

⁹⁸DeVane, Handbook, p. 168.

⁹⁹Meandrina, f. Zoola Genero de polipe--ros anto-
zoarios, que tienen el cuerpo corto y membranso por los
lados, la boca guarnecida de plieques y de tentaculos
bastante largos, en una sola fila y en numero de diez y
ocho o' veinte. Las especies principales son la laberinti-
forme, la cere-briforme, arcolada y la undosa. Diccionario
Enciclopedico de la Lengua Castellana, p. 282.

¹⁰⁰King, Bow and Lyre, p. 50.

¹⁰¹William C. DeVane, The Shorter Poems of Robert
Browning (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1937), p. 346.

¹⁰²ll. 10-11. cf. also "The Sun Rising,"

She's all states, and all princes I.

Nothing else is. . . .

This bed thy center is, these walls thy sphere.

(ll. 21-22, 30)

¹⁰³ll. 19-21.

¹⁰⁴DeVane, Handbook, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵G. Robert Stange, "Browning's 'James Lee's Wife'." Explicator, XVII (1959), Item 32.

¹⁰⁶"The Good Morrow," l. 11.

¹⁰⁷Sigmund Freud, "Symbolism in Dreams," The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1963), p. 156.

¹⁰⁸Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights, ed. William M. Sale, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 108.

¹⁰⁹Ronald Pearsell, The Worm in the Bud (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 59.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 61.

¹¹²There is no indication in the poem of the age of Fortu.

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