

BROWNING'S THE RING AND THE BOOK
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CRITICISM

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THESIS

**Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State College in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements**

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

by

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Denton, Texas

January, 1955

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning knew early in life that he wanted to be a poet. His entire career was devoted to poetry with a singular intensity. Even his first years in Italy, seemingly spent in travel for its own sake, were used to lay the foundations of fact and background for much of his later literary work. Yet, until the publication of The Ring and the Book in 1868-9, Browning had achieved only slight critical acclaim and very little popular success. His published works had gone into a second edition only once, and that in Dramatis Personae, the volume which preceded The Ring and the Book.¹ His early --and deserved--reputation for obscurity had followed him doggedly and injuriously. Of his reputation for obscurity he was well aware, for he wrote to Leigh Hunt in 1856: "Of my books--I dare only reply to your 'third' note on them, that I know they err in obscure and imperfect expression,--wishing it were not so, and trying always for the future it may be less so."² Nine years later, in 1863, he wrote to Richard Monckton Milnes in much the same vein as he refuted Milnes'

¹William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 250.

²William Clyde DeVane and Kenneth Leslie Knickerbocker, editors, New Letters of Robert Browning, p. 95.

charge that Browning had dealt too severely with a young poet: "I have for thirty years had my own utter unintelligibility taught with such public and private zeal that I might be excused for fancying every young man's knuckles wanted 'dusting' --but I don't fancy it."³

In 1855, Browning published Men and Women, a volume of poems which represented ten years of work performed at the peak of his abilities. The blow to his pride was severe when he read such reviews as that in the Athenaeum: "Who will not grieve over energy wasted and power misspent,--over fancies chaste and noble, so overhung by the 'seven veils' of obscurity that we can oftentimes be only sure that fancies exist?"⁴ DeVane summarizes Browning's reaction thus:

To say that Browning was disappointed at the reception of Men and Women is to put it mildly. He knew the worth of his work, and saw infinitely weaker poets receiving great acclaim. Moreover, he was in financial straits. He justly concluded that his poetry was too new and original to appeal to the public, but he could not see why intelligent people should not appreciate it.⁵

Browning's next volume, Dramatis Personae, appeared in 1864. In the nine intervening years his reputation had made some headway. That was evident when the new volume, which today is considered a lesser work than his Men and Women, went into its second edition, largely on the strength of sales to students at Cambridge and Oxford Universities.⁶ Thus, it may

³Ibid., p. 151.

⁴Athenaeum, Nov. 17, 1855, p. 1327.

⁵DeVane, op. cit., p. 190.

⁶Ibid., p. 250.

have been that Browning undertook his greatest poetic task, the composition of The Ring and the Book, with more than customary confidence that it would be well received, for the public or, at least, the academic world, seemed at last to be developing an appreciation of his value as a poet. Seven months after publication of Dramatis Personae, Browning wrote to his friend, Isabella Blagden:

I feel such comfort and delight in doing the best I can with my own object of life, poetry, which, I think, I never could have seen the good of before, that it shows me I have taken the root I did take, well. I hope to do much more yet: and that the flower of it will be put into Her hand somehow.

Following Dramatis Personae, Browning turned his attention to the Old Yellow Book, a document he had owned since 1860, and which had interested him profoundly in the interval. He was four years in planning and composing The Ring and the Book, the poem for which the Old Yellow Book furnished most of the raw materials. It was his most ambitious work by far, the longest first-rate poem in the English language. And it was an immediate success, both on the bookstands and in the critical reviews.⁶

Browning's later works, on the whole, have never matched the success of his three publications ending with The Ring and the Book. He wrote voluminously for all of his long life, and he had, indeed, much to give the world after 1868. But what

⁷Edward C. McAleer, editor, Dearest Isa, p. 201.

⁸DeVane, op. cit., pp. 305-306.

he gave served to sustain his position rather than to build it. The building was accomplished by 1868. The Ring and the Book, thus, looms as the capstone for his labors, "the epitome of all his thought and artistic habits."⁹ The critical reception of this work, then, and the continuing critical attention to it, provide a prime key to the state of Browning's acceptance by the critics down to this day.

After 1869, Browning began to be recognized on both sides of the Atlantic, occasionally in odd ways. In 1872, nine years prior to the formation of the first Browning society, James Charlton, passenger agent of the Chicago and Alton railroad, contributed in a unique manner to the growing interest in Browning: he published piecemeal in the timetables of his railroad, from December, 1872, until October, 1874, the pirated contents of Smith, Elder and Company's 1868 edition of the complete works of Browning.¹⁰

This novel development foreshadowed a wave of Browning popularity which was to reach tidal size in the closing years of the nineteenth century and sweep on into the 1900's. Browning societies, pioneered in London in 1881 by F. J. Furnivall,

⁹Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁰Richard D. Altich, "Robert Browning Rides the Chicago and Alton," New Colophon, III (1950), 78-81. Altich says that Browning received from Texas railroad man Robert Avery the first seven issues of the timetables, and wrote in reply a note expressing thanks and appreciation for the project which he said had given him "not a little pleasure." Browning asked for subsequent issues of the timetable.

He got no money, however.

an eminent Shakespearean scholar, sprang up in both England and America.¹¹ The poet was the lion of literary circles; many of his followers revered him as a great religious and moral teacher. It was a period during which "the intelligentsia regarded it as almost eccentric not to admire Browning."¹²

That the brilliance of 1900 has faded to a gentle glow in 1954 is obvious. As Browning's work has undergone inevitable re-appraisal, most of the unreasoning and unquestioning worship at his shrine, for which the Browning societies were notorious, has disappeared. Despite the decline in his popularity, however, each year produces its quota of new Browning studies, and the continued interest in him, though not as voluminous as it was at the turn of the century, still justifies Paul Elmer More's observation of fifty years ago that Browning gets a great deal of critical attention, some of it scarcely worth the trouble it has taken, but offering evidence, at least, "that Browning is the subject of wide curiosity."¹³ By way of illustration, it may be noted that sixty-one critical and biographical pieces are listed for 1904

¹¹Thomas N. Lounsbury, The Early Literary Career of Robert Browning, p. 187.

¹²R. H. Bowers, "Santayana and Browning: A Postscript," Notes and Queries, 194 (October 1, 1949), 433.

¹³Paul Elmer More, "Why is Browning Popular?" Shelburne Essays (Third Series), p. 144.

in a Browning bibliography;¹⁴ in 1950, there were seventeen such works listed in the same bibliography.¹⁵ And the "wide curiosity," though largely confined to academic circles today, resulted in thirteen listings of articles on Browning in the "Victorian Bibliography" section of Modern Philology for May, 1950. This duplicated the thirteen references cited in Readers' Guide for 1903, but it must be observed that the figures are not really comparable, since the volume of published material has expanded so greatly in the meantime.

A survey of Browning's rise to popularity shows that The Ring and the Book was not only the central work of his poetic career, as explained above, but was the work which, more than any other, broke down popular resistance to Browning's poetry. His contemporaries were liberal in their praise; almost without exception critics have cited The Ring and the Book as the crowning achievement of his productivity. The Athenaeum, which thirty-four years earlier had given Paracelsus curt and slighting comment, carried this observation in its columns:

We must record at once our conviction, not merely that The Ring and the Book is beyond all parallel the supremest poetical achievement of our time, but that it is the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare.¹⁶

The passing of time has done little to change the opinion of critics, for sixty-five years later we are told that

¹⁴Leslie Nathan Broughton and others, compilers and editors, Robert Browning: A Bibliography, 1850-1950, pp. 227-230.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 318-319. ¹⁶Athenaeum, March 20, 1869, p. 399.

whether critics were appreciative of Browning or the reverse, all agree that The Ring and the Book is his greatest achievement, that it is the work written when he was at the zenith of his powers.¹⁷ DeVane said, in 1935,

Since 1869 the poem has been considered the crown of Browning's work and a vast literature has gathered around it. . . . In Browning's day the poem made him a national figure; it raised him in the popular imagination to a greatness, though not a popularity, equal to Tennyson's.¹⁸

Add to this the testimony of James Stephens and his associates who edited an anthology which included The Ring and the Book in 1949:

When he finally came to write, he wrote with the richness of years of brooding behind his work, and produced what is unquestionably one of the great poems of the century. . . . The story of self-murder in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (1873) would have made the reputation of any poet but the author of The Ring and the Book. After that volume any book was an anticlimax.¹⁹

This echoes Frances Russell's 1927 sentiment: "It is indeed in The Ring and the Book that the poet reaches the peak of his own mountain."²⁰

Proceeding from the general judgment that The Ring and the Book is, indeed, Browning's greatest achievement, and that it, more than any other of his works, was responsible for

¹⁷Louise Snitslaar, Sidelights on Browning's Ring and the Book, p. 13.

¹⁸DeVane, op. cit., p. 306.

¹⁹James Stephens, Edwin L. Beck, and Royall H. Snow, editors, Victorian and Later English Poets, p. 226.

²⁰Frances Russell, One Word More on Browning, p. 51.

establishing him in an extraordinary position of public acceptance and esteem, I propose, in this study, to examine the four features of The Ring and the Book which have most frequently attracted critical attention and to which the greater portion of analysis and review of The Ring and the Book have been devoted. The examination, of necessity, will not be exhaustive, for it would be beyond the scope of a thesis to review adequately all that has been written on the subject, even within the limits of the four selected features of Browning's poem. However, differing points of view will be presented in an effort to trace the tenor and trend of criticism of The Ring and the Book to the present, and to arrive at a practical synthesis of the critical evaluation of the work currently prevailing. Critics will be found to be in direct contradiction at times; at other times there will be a considerable harmony of judgment. The tendency to over-praise Browning's work, for instance, has disappeared almost completely; this tendency was remarkable in the early part of our century. On the other hand, critics (mainly biographical) who have evaluated Elizabeth Barrett Browning's influence on Browning's supreme effort show rather marked agreement in their conclusions. But through the body of critical writing runs a pattern of inevitable change as new insights are added to old, as new aspects of Browning assume importance in critical consideration, replacing those aspects which may have compelled the attention of earlier critics. Regardless of the changes

in specific interests and in aspects of the poet deemed most significant by his critics, the features discussed are the bases from which criticism, in its fluctuation, has made today's opinion.

First to be considered, in Chapter II, is the structure of The Ring and the Book. The poem is a series of dramatic monologues, spoken by ten characters. Each of the poem's twelve books, though retelling the same story, presents it from a different point of view. In The Ring and the Book Browning put the dramatic monologue to its most elaborate use in literature; his accomplishment has been appraised as to its effectiveness as a single example of skill in using the genre, as to its influence on the development of the form, and as an outgrowth of an existing form to which he made significant contributions.

Second, Browning has been said to have felt the compulsion of adding to his literary output a supreme masterpiece as a tribute to his deceased wife. This aspect of The Ring and the Book has interested critics and biographers. As new biographical data were discovered, the critics evaluated these data as evidences of Elizabeth's greater or lesser influence, psychologically, on Browning's greatest work. These opinions will be examined in Chapter III.

Third, the subject matter itself has been given a great deal of attention from both critics and research scholars. Browning's "Old Bailey story, that might have been told in ten

lines," but which Browning expanded to 21,116 lines of blank verse, deals with human nature in its rich variety, and, as such, possesses intrinsic interest. Browning's handling of his source material as he builds his characterizations, and the degree to which he was faithful to his sources, as seen through the eyes of his critics, will be discussed in Chapter IV.

Finally, in Chapter V, I shall examine critical opinion of the worth of the moral philosophy and social message which emerges from The Ring and the Book, a feature of the work which provokes greater change as time passes than any other single aspect of the poem.

CHAPTER II

FORM: THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

One of the prime fields of continuing critical appraisal of The Ring and the Book has been the form, that of a series of dramatic monologues, in which the poem is written. Browning's choice of form for his magnum opus was made neither through expediency nor accident. The choice may be presumed to have been a deliberate effort to capitalize on an ability in a specific direction, dictated by his long practice with the form and its variants, the requirements of his material, and the necessity for providing a suitable means by which to attack his story from a variety of viewpoints. The resultant work of art is, in itself, the test of the wisdom of his choice of form.

That Browning weighed other possibilities before selecting the dramatic monologue as a suitable form for The Ring and the Book is established by DeVane, who quotes from the diary of William Allingham for May, 1868, the record of Browning's own testimony: "I began it in rhymed couplets, . . . but thought by and by I might as well have my fling, and so turned to blank verse."²¹

²¹DeVane, op. cit., p. 286.

Critics have traced the inspiration which dictated Browning's frequent reliance on the dramatic monologue as the form for his poetry, and the search usually leads to the poet's disappointing career as a dramatist. For nine years Browning strove for recognition as a playwright. He gave up his ambitions only when repeated failures had at last cut down his own high regard for his work. He is almost universally given credit for a high quality of dramatic instinct,²² yet his endowment customarily is seen as being more wisely used in the dramatic monologue than in drama itself. The seeming inconsistency of this view of the poet as being a failure as a dramatist but a marked success in the drama of the dramatic monologue has been examined by Hornbrooke in 1903 and by Russell in 1927. Hornbrooke found that:

Browning had no experience of stage-craft, and he was ignorant of those devices by which plays are made effective in particular parts and as a whole. The stage was something to which he brought his play; he did not live on it. . . . But the true cause of his failure as a writer of plays lies deeper than this. It is due to the fact that his characters reflect so much, and do so little. We hear what they say, but we never see what they do. They reveal every subtle train of thought and lay bare every hidden motive; even the most transient emotions find utterance. All this renders them delightful to the reader but, at the same time, unintelligible to the hearer. . . . If he has not the genius for making persons act in relation to one another, he has the genius for dramatic monologue, in which a person through what he says shows what he essentially is. It was a wise

²²William Morton Payne observed in 1907: "It has become a critical commonplace to say that in Browning the dramatic instinct was more fully developed than in any other English poet since the Elizabethans." The Greater English Poets of the Nineteenth Century, p. 208.

instinct, therefore, that prompted Browning to abandon the dramatic form for the dramatic spirit.²³

Russell chooses to see Browning's use of the dramatic monologue as an adaptation to form made to suit the aims of the writer rather than as a compromise which turned a failure into a success. But Browning's fundamental shortcoming as a dramatist is traced to the same root:

So far as there is a discernible difference between the dramatist and the dramatic monologist it would seem to lie in the aim of the artist. The general intent of the former is to portray life in action, whether romantic or realistic. The basic purpose of the latter is to present life in being, to reach back to the cause instead of concentrating on the effect. Not only is his dramatic situation static and his focus retrospective, but his method is solely interpretative, whereas the playwright's is more picturesque. Since then the one is gifted with observation and constructive fancy, and the other with reflection and sympathetic imagination, it follows that skill in the one branch of art does preclude to some extent ability in the other.²⁴

Grierson sees Browning's faults as a dramatist in much the same light in 1946 as did the earlier commentators, while viewing the limitations as not particularly injurious to Browning's chosen poetic technique. Grierson feels that:

Drama demands a sustained plot. . . . Browning's stress lay on the development of souls; but he values souls not for what they are but for what they would, whereas the dramatist's business is to show character in action. That is where he fails. . . . But such lack of action is not fatal to dramatic lyric and

²³Francis Bickford Hornbrooke, The Ring and the Book, pp. 7-8.

²⁴Russell, op. cit., p. 94.

monologue, and it was just here that Browning was at last to achieve success.²⁵

The critics, then, seem to present a unanimity of opinion as to the reason behind Browning's failure as a playwright. But perhaps more significant is their common belief that in using the dramatic monologue Browning turned his very weaknesses into instruments by which he created strongly dramatic poetry. Lafcadio Hearn in 1900 praised The Ring and the Book to a greater degree than have other critics before or since, but his evaluation indicates the direction, if not the confines, of the relationship between Browning's colossal work and genuine drama: "It is, therefore, even considered as a dramatic composition, many times larger than any true drama. But no true drama, except Shakespeare's, is more real or more terrible."²⁶

While the foregoing criticisms are largely of Browning's dramatic monologues in general, they may be viewed as echoes of a specific observation on The Ring and the Book recorded by Hearnbrooke in 1903 and indicating the wisdom of Browning's choice of form:

In The Ring and the Book he has dropped methods not in harmony with his nature, which he could not effectively use, and has constructed it in a way that gives ample scope to the full play of his characteristic power. When we come to the poem everything has been done and we

²⁵Herbert J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry, pp. 453-454.

²⁶Lafcadio Hearn, On Poets, p. 192.

are asked only to see how the men and women who have taken part in the action make themselves known to us by the way in which they give us their version of the story.²⁷

It seems obvious from analysis that Browning, indeed, chose the dramatic monologue deliberately for his masterpiece knowing that in it lay his most outstanding skill, "the natural outgrowth of the method of the dramatic monologue which Browning had perfected in Men and Women and Dramatis Personae."²⁸ Brockington's was not a lone voice crying the merits of Browning's choice of form for his poem when he observed in 1932:

Having discarded the play form he chose to write the Dramatic Lyric, or, as it is now the custom to call it, the Dramatic Monologue, and this form he gradually perfected until he found it ready to his hand (with no danger of the "axe head flying back into his face") for his mightiest work, The Ring and the Book.²⁹

Although Browning may be given credit for perfecting the dramatic monologue as a poetic form, he cannot be given credit for its invention, as has been done repeatedly and quite mistakenly.³⁰ B. W. Fuson, in an exhaustive 1952 study of

²⁷Hornbrooke, op. cit., p. 8.

²⁸DeVane, op. cit., p. 286.

²⁹A. Allen Brockington, Browning and the Twentieth Century, p. 16.

³⁰That the notion is widespread may be deduced from the statement to be found in a 1952 edition of Lucia B. Mirrielees' widely used textbook for prospective teachers of high school English, Teaching Composition and Literature. Mirrielees states on page 352 that "Browning is given credit for first using the form of the dramatic monologue, which has since become popular."

Browning's predecessors in the use of that form, cites more than one thousand poems produced in the years 1790-1840 which conform to a definition of the dramatic monologue. Fuson says:

The truth is that Browning contributed virtually no technical innovation to this genre; in fact, it may be said to have been established a generation before his first dramatic monologs appeared in 1836. Far from being the inventor of the form, or even a pioneer in its external mechanics, Browning took over a ready-made vehicle used by scores of preceding and contemporary poets. Paradoxical as it may sound, Browning's better monologs actually exhibit a comparative restraint in the exploitation of the melodramatic potentialities of the genre; it was chiefly a more complex and brilliant psychography permeating the lines of his monologic poems that made them appear unique.³¹

It was this "psychography" at which Browning excelled, and it was by means of what Fuson defines as the "psychodramatic monologue" that the poet was able to mould the crude, raw ore of his Old Yellow Book into a compelling and revealing study of human nature. In the light of Fuson's definition of the modification achieved by Browning may be seen the happy welding of intent and content with structure:

A psychodramatic monolog is an isolated and satisfactorily self-contained poem successfully simulating a spoken utterance by a specific and subtly delineated individual clearly not the poet, uttered on a specified occasion and involving a particular localized dramatic situation of perceptible tensity, usually directed toward an individualized and responsive auditor, and affording the reader rich opportunities for insight into the speaker's personality.³²

³¹Benjamin Willis Fuson, Browning and his English Predecessors in the Dramatic Monolog, p. 9.

³²Ibid., p. 22.

With whatever terms the dramatic monologue is described, there is critical opinion sufficient to establish that Browning's use of the genre brought that art to a state of ripe perfection, a perfection achieved by no other preceding or contemporary poet. And, despite the rather cumbersome definition developed by Fuson, the skeletal framework of Browning's technique may be described simply, as S. S. Curry had shown in 1927:

The monologue, as Browning exemplified it, is one end of a conversation. A definite speaker is conceived in a definite, dramatic situation. Usually we find also a well-defined listener, though his character is understood entirely from the impression he produces upon the speaker. We feel that this listener has said something and that his presence and character influence the speaker's thought, words, and manner. The conversation does not consist of abstract remarks, but takes place in a definite situation as a part of human life.

We must realize the situation, the speaker, the hearer, before the meaning can become clear; and it is the failure to do this which has caused many to find Browning obscure.³⁵

The matter of Browning's obscurity, already mentioned as being of concern to Browning, also was of concern to his critics. Many of these critics feel, as does Curry, that much of the difficulty of knowing what Browning has to say lies in the form he chose. In addition, many critics, as did Curry, place the blame for this lack of understanding not on the poet but on the reader. James McCormick, by 1940, had decided that present-day readers find Browning less obscure than did those of another generation:

³⁵S. S. Curry, Browning and the Dramatic Monologue, p. 7.

Although Browning had achieved an absolute mastery over his medium, . . . well educated men experienced real difficulty in understanding him, a difficulty which is not present for the reader today. It was the lack of narrative material to set the scene and explain the relation of the single actor with his unspeaking fellow to which each of these critics alluded.³⁴

Browning reiterates repeatedly in The Ring and the Book his thesis that truth lies somewhere in the synthesis of various sets of facts as seen from variegated viewpoints. A series of dramatic monologues, then, even though necessarily lengthy, seemed the most logical manner in which to present these divergent testimonies. Despite the length of each monologue, Hornbrooke felt that Browning overcame the resulting adverse effects. Says Hornbrooke:

"Mercilessly voluble," it has been called, and that is a charge which Browning must meet again and again. But brilliantly voluble and eloquently voluble it also is, and parts of it--the books dealing with Guido, Caponsacchi, Poppilign, and the Pope--give us Browning almost at his best.³⁵

Later critics have been less inclined to see the virtues of Browning's lengthy expositions. Herbert Grierson in 1946 takes particular exception to those passages which Hornbrooke eliminates when identifying Browning "at his best." Grierson says:

The views of the three parties in Rome are drawn out with a willful prolixity that gave point to Calverley's parody-

And might, God bless you, in judicious hands
Extend from here to Mesopotamy.

³⁴James P. McCormick, As A Flame Springs, p. 219.

³⁵Hornbrooke, op. cit., p. 35.

And the speeches of the two lawyers are mere toura de force, crammed with bad law and bad Latin. In truth, the whole poem is too like a gigantic tour de force.³⁶

Ina Beth Sessions insists that Browning, by creating such lengthy monologues, loses much of the effectiveness of his chosen form. Writing in 1947, she observed that "best results of such delineation are, for the most part, obtained in brief pictures; lengthy character sketches are more difficult to handle."³⁷ She then questions directly the possibility of maintaining dramatic excitement in such long poems as those in The Ring and the Book. But while she questions the dramatic effect of Browning's long monologue she gives the impression of using them as a yardstick for her formula:

The best dramatic monologues are concerned with a cross section of life of more than passing interest and progressing toward results typifying universal experience. Mere communication of trivial facts is no substitute for character revelation.³⁸

As the critic studies Browning's purpose in connection with his form, he finds that the length of the monologues becomes more obviously defensible. As the story took shape in the poet's mind, he saw the possibility of presenting it from several viewpoints--a possibility directly suggested by his original source, since it, too, contained pro-and-con testimony from a variety of contributors to the court records of

³⁶Grierson and Smith, op. cit., pp. 459-460.

³⁷Ina Beth Sessions, "The Dramatic Monologue," PMLA, LXII (June, 1947), 511.

³⁸Ibid., p. 511.

the original murder case.³⁹ Browning, convinced that all men possess a point of view, also believed that "no one ever lived who had not a little more to say for himself than any formal system of justice was likely to say for him."⁴⁰

This effort to present the "little more" beyond the limits of formal justice and the confines of court testimony was also part of Browning's device for exploring the real truth of his source material, an effort which necessitated the introduction of contrasting characters, each of whom had to be given time to state his views at length. Chesterton identified Browning's handling of the problem as a major achievement:

. . . Browning . . . is the poet who had learnt to listen. This listening to truth and error, to heretics, to fools, to intellectual bullies, to desperate partisans, to mere chatterers, to systematic poisoners of the mind, is the hardest lesson that humanity has ever been set to learn. The Ring and the Book is the embodiment of this terrible magnanimity and patience. It is the epic of free speech.⁴¹

This "epic of free speech" was Browning's solution to the problem of presenting all the facts and all of the viewpoints in his murder story in an effort to distill from the composite result the true story of life as experienced by his historical characters. As Sessions suggested, his cross section of life is held up for minute inspection, not for trivial facts, but

³⁹ DeVane, op. cit., p. 226.

⁴⁰ G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 171.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 173.

for careful and complete character analysis. Moreover, he views his particular cross-section, not from first one side and then the other, but from the outer periphery inward, with each arc contributing its inward-pointing radii to indicate the center of the ring wherein lies truth. The very nature of the treatment which Browning prepared to use for his story created the "prolixity" with which he is so often credited.

The Ring and the Book contains ten dramatic monologues. Each of the ten speeches relates the central story, but from a different viewpoint. In three--Half Rome, The Other Half Rome, and Tertium Quid--the speakers are involved only vicariously in the drama, and participate merely as commentators. In two, the speakers are lawyers presenting the cases for the opposing sides in the trial. In one--The Pope--the speaker is required to pass judgment on the condemned man and to approve or withhold sentence. In four--Count Guido Franceschini, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and Guido--the speakers are persons actively involved in the drama. The first and last books of the poem are reserved for comments by the author, and as such, although written in the form of the dramatic monologue, may not be so classified because they are words of the author.

In this series of monologues, the stories all center on the murder, its preliminary events, or its aftermath. Browning has been criticized frequently for what many critics consider to be unnecessary repetition. Brockington observes:

It is usually said that Browning tells the same story over and over again. This is not quite true, because in each of the dramatic monologues the events are looked at from a different angle, and in each case emphasis is laid on one part or other--never the same part. For example, Pompilia gives the impressions of her childhood, which, of course, are not to be found elsewhere; and Caponsacchi records the separate events, in close detail, of the Flight. Pompilia speaks of the Flight, but her emphasis is on another aspect of it. She is pregnant, and her view of a mother and a child she meets at an inn remains as one of the chief things in her account of the Flight.⁴²

This is the nature of viewpoint from which the various stories are told. But the analysis of the emotional point involved in picking a time setting for the monologues has been a subject for debate among critics; they have outlined the problems such a portrayal involves for the poet and have disagreed on the matter of the time element as it refers to the moment of extreme crisis in the emotions of the speaker.

McCormick summed it up thus:

Browning's method was to take a situation either just at a moment of crisis, or, more frequently, just after the moment had passed, and to give a direct portrayal of the character's feelings in such a manner that the motives for them would be apparent. The reader was supposed to be able to classify the experience so clearly that the background would develop itself fully in his mind from the merest hints supplied by the author.⁴³

Harlan Hatcher, in a volume on Browning's versification written in 1928, takes a more specific view of the "moment of crisis." He feels that:

Here for an instant the spotlight is turned upon some soul in a critical moment; and in that instant the

⁴²Breckington, op. cit., pp. 131-132.

⁴³McCormick, op. cit., p. 219.

situation must be presented, the supposed audience or partners to the drama must be introduced (for although they are necessary to the situation they are never actually in focus), the motivation and course of the action must be made clear--all in the uninterrupted monologue of a single character who is painting his own picture while he speaks.⁴⁴

Brockington joined solidly with those who saw the monologues as coming at a highly critical point. "The dramatic personae in The Ring and the Book speak at a moment of crisis--one might almost say, at the top of an emotional wave. They all go through the events of the drama in detail."⁴⁵

But Fuson, looking on from the vantage point of 1952, refined and reduced the attribute of crisis as it appears in the monologues, taking an opposed view:

Browning did not usually do what he is popularly misrepresented as doing--catch an individual at the precise moment of a major crisis which evokes in a "flash" his whole personality. The adjective should be "minor," not "major." . . . Browning's Bishop is not in the throes of dissolution; he is ordering his tomb. Fra Lippo Lippi has not been caught in flagrante delicto with a street wench. The twilight hour during which Andrea del Sarto talks is long before his wife's amour with the cousin becomes sensational, and long after the moment when he embezzled the French king's retainer. The Duke of Ferrara is merely chatting with the middleman for a prospective second marriage; what the crisis involved in "all smiles stopped together" comprised, he is too bored to elucidate. The woman poisoner in "The Laboratory" is not administering her potion to the victim; she is just watching its preparation. And as a final illustration, Browning writes a monolog to cover the minute "before" and "after" a duel, ignoring the dramatically critical moment itself.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, The Versification of Robert Browning, p. 38.

⁴⁵Brockington, op. cit., p. 131. ⁴⁶Fuson, op. cit., p. 91.

To pursue Fuson's method of analysis within The Ring and the Book, it may be noted that only in Guido's second monologue do we find the speaker facing a major crisis--the "extreme" of death. Pompilia knows she is dying, but the stage of crisis is past. She is reconciled to what is to come. Caponsacchi's reaction is one of bitter rebellion at injustice, scarcely a major crisis, but rather a moment of revelation. Guido, in his first appearance, is far removed from the "crisis" point; he is a confident, cruel, cunning schemer, making maximum use of rationalization.

Another factor is involved in Browning's apparent avoidance of the point of major crisis in his dramatic monologues; such a moment at which to relate the incidents necessary to his method would have spoiled Browning's method of telling his story in The Ring and the Book. Since the three central characters are thrown into a common dramatic situation, the crisis would have been identical for all three. But, by choosing a scene of less than maximum dramatic significance as a setting for each monologue, Browning is able to give full rein to the single character who, as Hatcher has said, "is painting his own picture while he speaks." Moreover, says Hatcher,

These are heavy demands, and in order to meet them, Browning resorts to interjections, replies, and rejoinders which all but introduce dialogue; artful phrases, explosives, parenthetical asides, ellipses, short broken

sentences which reveal character and situation; all of which help to give the lines their Browningesque color.⁴⁷

Paradoxically, it is in the scene which comes most nearly to being told at a moment of major crisis that Browning makes most notable use of the advantages of his chosen poetic genre, for in his portrayal of Guido he has developed a villain of truly heroic proportions. "The most ambitious study of sheer evil is that of Guido in The Ring and the Book," says Compton-Rickett. "It is splendidly done, full of keen, intellectual strokes and flashes of passionate imagination."⁴⁸ Brockington points out that:

The emotion of Guido in the last of the dramatic monologues may, perhaps, be accounted the most extreme, because he is face to face with almost inevitable death. . . . This fact of an emotional crisis explains the vivid and detailed exposition of events. Browning is not only a subtle-souled psychologist, but the method of the perfected dramatic monologue is scientifically sound.⁴⁹

Paul Elmer More, while concurring with the majority of critics who were to follow him in accepting The Ring and the Book as the most remarkable and most obvious example of Browning's technique, goes his own way in his 1908 analysis of the poet's virtuosity. More uses the term "suspended psychology" to describe the results Browning obtains by using the dramatic monologue, and cites as evidence of the skillful

⁴⁷Hatcher, op. cit., p. 38.

⁴⁸Arthur Compton-Rickett, Robert Browning: Humanist, p. 52.

⁴⁹Brockington, op. cit., p. 132.

use of the device the scene in which Caponsacchi tells to the judges his portion of Pompilia's pitiful story:

. . . He goes over the days in Arezzo, when the temptation first came to him, and once more takes the perilous ride with Pompilia to Rome. He lives again through the great crisis, dissecting all his motives, balancing the pros and cons of each step; yet all the time he has in mind the opinion of the world as personified in the judges he is to face. The psychology is suspended dexterously between self-examination and open confession, and the reader who accepts the actual dramatic situation as suggested by Browning loses the finest and subtlest savour of the speech. In many places it would be simply preposterous to suppose we are listening to words really uttered by the priest.⁵⁰

More here indirectly introduces another point on which critics--and Browning himself--seem to disagree. Browning remarked of his dramatic pieces that they were "so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine."⁵¹ If we accept More's denial that Caponsacchi's words really were uttered by the priest, then they automatically become Browning's words. Russell also has questioned Browning's skill in keeping his ideas subservient to those of his characters:

It was inevitable that Browning's pre-eminent endowment should disclose itself in his chief contribution to art. Whether or not he had a real faculty of guessing what people might say if they could or would speak, at least he found his own greatest pleasure in exercising what he took to be such a faculty. He was literally the prophet, the speaker-for, the articulate Aaren giving vicarious voices to his dumb brethren, but always conveying the impression of furnishing them with utterances rather than releasing their own. Sometimes he is startlingly satisfactory in his shrewd and penetrating

⁵⁰More, op. cit., pp. 147-148.

⁵¹Brockington, op. cit., p. 16.

understanding; sometimes more than exasperating in his undue intrusion of himself and consequent puppetizing of his characters. But the effect is ever the same. The only way out for any of his men and women is through Browning, and they are stamped with his seal in transit.⁵²

There is insufficient reason to accept Russell's argument as adequate, and there are several reasons for rejecting it. No writer, other than the scrupulous scientific observer reporting his findings, could avoid intruding himself on what is written. She ignores the point that the creative writer is, by the very nature of his act of creation, putting himself on paper. The point would be, preferably, that the writer avoids injection of self just so long as he creates and sustains the illusion of presenting the utterances of his characters. "To Browning," says Hornbrocke, "the incidents of the poem are of slight importance, compared with the knowledge of the persons who relate them."⁵³ Moreover, his primary task is not the factual presentation of the way in which a speaker fits his life role, but a searching analysis of the character of that speaker, all of which must, by the nature of his art, be the product of his own experience. Says Brockington:

Spontaneity, though it would seem superficially to have to do with the manner of an Art, is really associated with the matter at least as much as with the manner. The objection that the matter of The Ring and the Book, for example, was present to Browning's hand in the form of The Old Yellow Book will not carry weight with these

⁵²Russell, op. cit., p. 94.

⁵³Hornbrocke, op. cit., p. 25.

who have thought themselves back into the position of the poet. The matter of his own experiences was also present to Browning.⁵⁴

Hearn saw Browning's gift of analysis as a great skill, one which, perhaps because of his disregard for the specific limitations of type-casting on which Russell would seem to insist, took on qualities of universality:

His mission has been the mission of a great dramatic psychologist. . . . He was the great Poet of Human Character--not of character of any one time or place or nation, but of all times and places and peoples of which it was possible for him to learn anything.⁵⁵

Despite critics who see Browning's series of monologues as redundant and in the face of condemnations for prolixity, Browning would appear to have chosen his poetic form wisely. Hearn observes that "almost anything that happens in this world is judged somewhat after the fashion of the judgments delivered in The Ring and the Book."⁵⁶ And, using Browning's own technique of examining the facts from differing angles, weighing the drawbacks of the dramatic monologue against the many advantages inherent in the form when applied to such a task as the telling of the Roman murder, there is solid ground from which to view the accomplishment as a happy union of "manner and matter" and to accept the judgment of Brockington:

The justification . . . of Browning's The Ring and the Book is its success. That is to say, we do arrive at a very clear and full understanding of all the people of the story. We know them through the speakers, we know

⁵⁴Brockington, op. cit., p. 16.

⁵⁵Hearn, op. cit., p. 210.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 201.

them sometimes at third hand as the speakers wish us to know them. But we know them. And we know them much more thoroughly and subtly because of the constant throwing back and retracing and recolouring.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Brookington, op. cit., p. 139.

CHAPTER III

INSPIRATION

In reconstructing the background of incident and inspiration which led Browning to write The Ring and the Book, critics have seen the shadow of Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a major --perhaps the major--influence on the work. Title, scope, craftsmanship, plot detail--all show evidence of the conscious desire in Browning to link his poem with the memory of his wife. The wife and the work are so closely interlocked that an evaluation of the work without an appraisal of the wife's indirect contribution to that work would be misleading. Conversely, a careful review of the evidences of her influence and inspiration show that her shadow was ever-present as the poem took shape.

Browning found the Old Yellow Book, his central source for the work, in the year preceding Elizabeth's death. He was immediately struck with its potentialities, biographers tell us, but apparently did nothing to advance a work from the material until after the death of his wife. Her indifference to the story may have been the block which delayed his project, for in 1868 he wrote to his friend, Julia Wedgwood: "She never took the least interest in the story, so much as to wish

to inspect the papers."⁵⁸ Since Elizabeth tended to act as a control valve for Browning's creative energies throughout their married life, it seems probable that he would have been reluctant to take on a project with which she was so completely out of sympathy. We may only conjecture what might have happened to the contents of the Old Yellow Book had Elizabeth lived, but it seems entirely possible that the inspiration to write his monumental work never would have come to Browning except for the death of his wife.

However, the suppressed impulse remained--a gnawing which Browning could not resist indefinitely. The theme of the Old Yellow Book, with its record of sordid crime and subsequent court trial, was one which had always interested him. The link with Italian history also found him responsive; but there was something more, something personal, as Cundiff pointed out in 1941:

The story of Pompilia became for Browning, the day he found it, an obsession. No subject had offered him so complete an opportunity to explain his theories of life and poetry. In it were the Andromeda myth, the St. George legend, the slippery villain, and a repetition of the story of his own life. Do what he could, the story continued to haunt him. So, after he found he could not interest his friends in it, he finally concluded that the only way to rid himself of it was to write a poem.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Richard Curle, editor, Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: Their Letters, p. 154.

⁵⁹Paul A. Cundiff, "The Dating of Browning's Conception of The Ring and the Book," Studies in Philology, XXXVIII (1941), 1280.

Cundiff was, by no means, a pioneer in expressing the notion that in The Ring and the Book Browning had written a "repetition of his own life." Orr, one of the first Browning biographers and a personal friend of the poet, said in 1887:

But Mrs. Browning's spiritual presence on this occasion was more than a presiding memory of the heart. I am convinced that it entered largely into the conception of *Pompilia*, and so far as this depended on it, the character of the whole work.⁶⁰

Chesterton, in 1903, went even further in establishing a parallel between Browning's personal history and the events of the *Pompilia-Caponsacchi* relationship when he noted:

There is one peculiarity about the story which has more direct bearing on Browning's life . . . the extraordinary resemblance between the moral problem involved in the poem if understood in its essence, and the moral problem which constituted the crisis and centre of Browning's own life. . . . His greatest work . . . was the telling, under alien symbols and the veil of a wholly different story, the inner truth about his own great trial and hesitation. He himself had in this sense the same difficulty as Caponsacchi, the supreme difficulty of having to trust himself to the reality of virtue not only without the reward, but even without the name of virtue. He had, like Caponsacchi, preferred what was unselfish and dubious to what was selfish and honorable. . . . Browning had once, for what he seriously believed to be a greater good, done what he himself would never have had the cant to deny, ought to be called deceit and evasion.⁶¹

Chesterton here refers to Browning's courtship and eventual marriage to Elizabeth Barrett under the disapproving eye of Edward Barrett Moulton-Barrett. The marriage was performed

⁶⁰Mrs. Sutherland Orr, The Life and Letters of Robert Browning, p. 270.

⁶¹Chesterton, op. cit., pp. 107-108.

without Barrett's knowledge or consent and with the certain foreknowledge of his disapproval. The deceit created a break between Elizabeth and her father which never was healed. Barrett never spoke to his daughter Elizabeth after her marriage. The "greater good" to which Chesterton refers was the act of salvation in which Browning seems to have viewed himself as a rescuing St. George as he removed Elizabeth from a household dominated by the father, where Elizabeth, the chronic invalid, was hopelessly resigned to nothing more than a continuation of that illness and eventual death. In Browning's treatment of Caponsacchi, then, the "St. George" characterization came not from his source material alone but from the facts colored by his own personal experiences and imagination as he re-created the conditions, if not the circumstances, of his own act of salvation.

Anthony Crossley, in 1928, also saw the connection between Browning's action and that of Caponsacchi:

I would ask the reader to turn up two passages of The Ring and the Book too long to be quoted here. The first is where Caponsacchi, the just priest, rolls out crescendo his "instinct in the matter" of Count Guido's eventual fate. They contain, perhaps, the most tremendous vituperation in our language; lines written in the white heat and furious speed of the utter abandonment to passion. "Judas, made monstrous by much solitude," is alone fit company for Count Guido. There, in truth, beyond all humanity, "the cocatrice is with the basilisk."

Read it. Mark Browning's scorn, withering and tremendous, the lie refuted by one who hated hypocrisy above all evils, who, like Caponsacchi himself, disdained affectation "in thought, word, or deed." Can you not find

in the whole of the warrior priest's defence something of a disdainful assertion of right in Browning's own conduct over the abduction of Elizabeth Barrett?⁶²

Shaw, in 1926, also had noted the direct relationship between the real-life romance of the Brownings and the poetic romance of Pompilia and Caponsacchi, with the twin themes of rescue.⁶³ The Ring and the Book, said Shaw, is Browning's dramatic exposition of his theory of love, which is in turn the most important part of his entire philosophy.⁶⁴

Perhaps the most elaborate critical study of the degree to which Elizabeth's shadow fell on The Ring and the Book is to be found in Harriet Gaylord's 1930 volume, Pompilia and Her Poet. The study is significant not only for its analysis of the parallels between Browning's poem and his life story, but also as an indication of the remarkable human appeal inherent in the Browning romance. Much of the literature which has developed around the Brownings is focused on the perfection of their love and the ideal nature of their fifteen years of marriage. It follows, then, that the personal ties which may be detected in The Ring and the Book must also prove to be of considerable interest to the public. Gaylord emphasizes the indisputable evidence of Elizabeth's influence with these words:

⁶²Anthony Crossley, "Browning as a Dramatic Poet and Prophet," The Spectator, CXXI (July 14, 1928), 45.

⁶³J. E. Shaw, "The 'Donna Angelicata' in The Ring and the Book," PMLA, XLI (1926), 55-81.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 73.

It was warm, beautiful wisdom Robert Browning culled from the lovely soul of his frail, retiring wife whose last letter to him, written on the night she left her father's house to join her life to his, ended with these words: "I begin to think there are none so bold as the timid when they are fairly aroused."

In the first agonizing years after his wife's death when the poet had to learn to walk alone, he created another woman,

". . . half angel and half bird

And all a wonder and a wild desire."

What matter if he hid that soul in an obscure Italian child-wife? Timid Pompilia also had the eagle heart and soul when once she was aroused. Browning etched her into his lefty epic in the spirit of that standard he himself had set for the poet, that he must "see as God sees," and so has given the world a portrait clear cut in cameo beauty and possessing the vivid personal reality which makes . . . creations of imagination more authentic human beings than many whom we know in the flesh.⁶⁵

But Gaylord does not rely on her own words alone to prove her point; she turns to Browning as authority for her observation:

To a friend late in his life Robert Browning spoke quite definitely concerning the influence the memory of his wife exerted in the creation of Pompilia: "I am not sorry now to have lived so long after she went away, but I confess to you that all my types of women were made beautiful and blessed by my perfect knowledge of one woman's pure soul. Had I never known Elizabeth, I never could have written The Ring and the Book."⁶⁶

After four years of waiting following Elizabeth's death, Gaylord tells us, "the Hand one morning again pushed him across to the shelf where the shabby old book was patiently awaiting his alchemy."⁶⁷ Then it followed that:

Little by little there was a subtle hallowing of his conception of Pompilia into the spiritual embodiment

⁶⁵Harriet Gaylord, Pompilia and Her Poet, p. 20.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 20.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 27.

of her at the shrine of whose memory the poet unremittingly worshipped. As his angel had hallowed his life, his every thought, so must Pompilia hallow those lives that touched her own; so must she change the gay young priest into the soldier saint; so in his death hour must Guido call out for salvation from the clean soul he had never been able to smirch with his blackness; so must the noble Pope see in Pompilia:

" . . . this gift of God who showed for once
How He would have the world go white."

All these things must come to pass, not because Pompilia consciously tried to uplift, to whiten, but by the simple fact of her being just what she was.⁶⁸

Gaylord also traces the title of Browning's poem to the inspiration of his wife:

Just when Browning decided on the title for his great work is uncertain. Here, too, the inspiration came indirectly from his wife. She always wore an embossed ring of Etruscan gold wrought by the famous goldsmith, Castellani. After her death her husband wore it on his watch-chain, and one day he reflected on the fact that goldsmiths found the gold of Etruria too soft, too pure to be malleable and therefore had first of all to mix it with alloy to make a combination hard enough to be filed and hammered into beauty. Finally a spurt of the right sort of fiery acid would draw out the alloy, leaving the ring pure gold.

So he would take this story . . . mix his fancy with this gold. . . . When the epic should be finished, let the public cast fancy aside and find the pure gold of human truth. The Ring and the Book should be his title.⁶⁹

The preceding observation is based on Browning's words from the first and last cantos of The Ring and the Book. The applicability of the ring metaphor is discussed in Chapter IV of this study; here it is sufficient to note that Browning's inspiration for its use stemmed from his constant awareness of the spirit of his dead wife.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 27.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 28.

Despite repeated critical testimony to the modification of fact Browning used in the characterizations of his poem, there were those, such as Breckington in 1932, who felt that Browning's portraits were authentic:

The background of Pompilia is the poet's wife, Elizabeth, and yet the character of Pompilia is there just as he found it in the collection of documents now called the Old Yellow Book; Giuseppe Caponsacchi has for background the kind of person Browning himself hoped to be, and yet Caponsacchi is also true to the character in the Old Yellow Book.⁷⁰

Although critics disagree on the extent to which Browning adhered to fact in using his source material, there would be general agreement with other portions of Breckington's statement.

As has been suggested in Chapter I, the death of Elizabeth Browning may have contributed to the writing of The Ring and the Book in a subtle, inverted manner. It seems reasonable to assume that, had she lived, Browning might not have written the poem at all; and it is almost a certainty that the result would have been a much different work. Betty Miller, in her 1952 biography of Browning, discusses his visit to the Pyrenees in 1864--a visit during which William Rossetti records that the whole plan of The Ring and the Book fell into place --and in the recount gives us a glimpse of what might not have been if Elizabeth had survived:

He did no work at Cambo, however: for the Southern atmosphere, the "mountains like those about Florence and

⁷⁰Breckington, op. cit., p. 125.

Siena," the little river . . . all conspired to remind him of the past; with the result that he complained of a constant feeling of being "somewhat walled about and overlooked . . . though the obstructions are purely spiritual in this case, the influences in the air--for nine times out of ten, I don't meet a soul." Was he thinking, perhaps, of Elizabeth's distaste for the story told in the "square old yellow book" he had picked up for a lira on a stall in Florence on another summer's day, four years ago? His wife, he knew, had never shared his passion for the "curious depth below depth of depravity" which he found "in this chance lump taken as a sample of the soil" of human nature. On the contrary: "She never took the least interest in the story, so much as to wish to inspect the papers." Her distaste seems to have acted as a ban: for four years, Browning kept the book by him and made no use of it.⁷¹

Browning, in the meantime, had formed a friendship with Julia Wedgwood, probably in 1863.⁷² Their correspondence, which was to extend over the next seven years, has contributed much to the saga of the composition of The Ring and the Book since it came to light in 1936. There is a hint that the poet saw in his new friend some of the qualities he had most admired in his wife. No one, Miller tells us, could look less like the fragile, be-ringed Elizabeth. And yet "something of the same quality which he had discerned in Elizabeth Barrett was to draw Robert Browning into an emotional relationship with this severe and curiously graceless young blue-stocking."⁷³ Like Elizabeth, Julia Wedgwood was widely read and deeply religious, "a highly intelligent woman whose critical commentary

⁷¹Betty Miller, Robert Browning, p. 231.

⁷²Carle, op. cit., p. viii.

⁷³Miller, op. cit., p. 227.

on The Origin of the Species aroused the admiration of Darwin himself.⁷⁴ If, indeed, Browning saw in Julia certain qualities of intellect and a portion of critical judgment which he had observed in Elizabeth, it may have been that he sent The Ring and the Book to Julia for examination prior to publication in order to test, vicariously, what might have been Elizabeth's reaction to the poem. If so, he must have been disappointed, for Julia found the "long, dark, complicated elaborate story of intrigue and crime" a great disappointment. This she let Browning know, adding that she was disappointed in her hope that the poem was to be his "best gift to the world."⁷⁵

"Do you remember," she wrote, "once saying to me that your wife was quite wanting in . . . the scientific interest in evil? . . . I feel as if that interest were in you unduly predominant." What most distressed her in the poem, she said, was that "I felt as if I were reading what you had lost in your wife. The sense of good seemed dimmed." And she went on to exhort the poet to give Elizabeth Barrett Browning "a monument more durable than that at Florence--give something that all who read may recognize as the utterance of one who has been taught supremely to believe in goodness by the close neighborhood of a beautiful soul."⁷⁶

Browning, Miller records, retorted in defense of his work and of his view of the evils inherent in human nature:

We differ apparently in our conception of what gross wickedness can be effected by cultivated minds--I believe the grossest--all the more, by way of reaction from the enforced habit of self-denial which is the condition of men's receiving culture.⁷⁷

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 228. ⁷⁵Curle, op. cit., p. 132.

⁷⁶Miller, op. cit., p. 244. ⁷⁷Ibid., p. 245.

But if Browning's desire had been to provoke, through Julia's voice, an echo of Elizabeth's, he had to admit that the attempt was successful. "By the way," he wrote to Julia Wedgwood, "my wife would have subscribed to every one of your bad opinions of the book."⁷⁸

The importance Browning attached to his new poem unquestionably stemmed in part from his desire to create a lasting literary tribute to the memory of his wife. He had told Isa Blagden, in a letter which has been reproduced in part previously in this study,⁷⁹ that as the work got under way he finally saw the good of the object of his own life--poetry--and that he hoped to put the "flower" of new and more perfect work into Elizabeth's hand somehow.

As the work grew, as time moved on, the poem became increasingly important to him as a supreme effort; it had been nine years in the making, and was admittedly a memorial effort. His letters to Isa reflect, time and again, the growing importance he attached to the work as well as the high hopes he held for its success.

Thus, with his wife so constantly on his mind during the months of preparatory work on The Ring and the Book, Browning, conscious of the parallel between the slowly forming conception of the Pempilia-Caponsacchi relationship with his own

⁷⁸Curle, op. cit., p. 154.

⁷⁹See p. 3 above.

love story, must have remembered every detail of the history of his early visits to Elizabeth Barrett. That Browning should follow his own concept of intuitive love in shaping the meeting of Pompilia and Caponsacchi seems only natural. E. D. H. Johnson in 1952 said of their first meeting:

. . . There can be no doubt that Pompilia and Caponsacchi in Browning's conception loved each other. Their moment of recognition demonstrates the poet's doctrine of elective affinity. Guido's forged correspondence had prepared each to take the cheapest view of the other; but at the first meeting of their eyes and without the need for a spoken word, the two penetrate the deception. A flash of insight tells Caponsacchi that Pompilia could not possibly have written those billet-doux.⁸⁰

Johnson, in this analysis of the original Pompilia-Caponsacchi meeting, touches on another facet of the Roman murder story which parallels the love story of the Brownings. For the poet Browning, thoroughly convinced of the existence of intuitive insight, saw in his first meeting with the poet Elizabeth Barrett this same realization of the doctrine which Johnson labels "elective affinity." In the courtship of the Brownings, Robert was hopelessly in love with Elizabeth after one meeting--so much in love that he proposed marriage to her in a letter before they met for the second time. The Brownings, like Pompilia and Caponsacchi, were treading unfamiliar ground in their initial meeting; Browning knew only that he admired Miss Barrett's poetry, and that he enjoyed a meeting of minds through the medium of correspondence, and that she was a confirmed invalid. That first personal contact served, as did the

⁸⁰E. D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry, p. 130.

first contact of Pompilia and Caponsacchi, to prove (at least to Browning) that his intuitive sense had been reliable, and that this woman was the one woman he could love and marry.

After Pompilia and Caponsacchi meet, there is no doubt in the reader's mind that the two will unite to thwart the unjust treatment society is accordng Pompilia. Says Johnson:

In her time of need Caponsacchi without a moment's hesitation brushes aside the proprieties, unmindful that his conduct in arranging Pompilia's escape is on the face of it a betrayal of his priestly function and of her wifely duties. At Castelnuevo it is not only Guido but all society with its outraged prejudices which comes between them.⁸¹

Perhaps the young priest did come to Pompilia's aid without a moment's hesitation in her time of need; his hesitation and his consideration of the possible results of the act had preceded the "time of need" just as had Browning's study of the possible results of an elopement with Elizabeth.

Browning must have seen in the results of the two rescues something of a parallel also, though there was much difference in degree of severity of the aftermath. Guido's utter lack of a social sense led him to rationalize his act of murder; Elizabeth's father committed no physical murder. Guido erased Pompilia by an act of violence; Barrett erased Elizabeth by an act of will, banishing her forever from his presence and from his house. Elizabeth was just as dead to Barrett after her "escape" with Browning as she could have been had Barrett duplicated Guido's violence.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 131.

It is an impossible and pointless task to attempt to guess what Browning might have done with the contents of the Old Yellow Book had his wife's influence been less pronounced. But it is a fairly simple matter to look back on The Ring and the Book and, by comparison with biographical fact from the Browning saga, determine that this obvious influence of Elizabeth on the resultant product was a major element in the making of the poem.

CHAPTER IV

SOURCE

Much twentieth-century criticism and research has been devoted to Browning's source material for The Ring and the Book and to analyses of the how and the why--especially the how--of his treatment of the material. Criticism has centered around the fidelity with which he stuck to historical fact in presentation of his source materials and on the reasons--poetic, dramatic, and psychological--which may explain his obvious deviations from a strict interpretation of literal testimony.

The extent to which Browning pledged himself to adhere to fact in his poem seems to be at the root of much of the debate. Numerous critics take the position that Browning vowed, in his search for truth, to tell the plain, unvarnished details of his Roman murder as a means of digging out the truth. He seems to lay himself open to criticisms on that score by devoting much of the first and last books of The Ring and the Book to repeated affirmations of his dedication to a search for truth through the presentation of fact. Had he been a little less emphatic in outlining his aims, say his detractors, he would not have been so open to criticism for violating historical accuracy.

The furor over fact versus fancy has been confined largely to the current century for, as Frances Russell points out, the Old Yellow Book was relatively unknown to the public prior to the publication in 1908 of Charles W. Hodell's facsimile of the document with his translation and notes.⁸² Prior to that time, Russell says, readers and critics were inclined to take Browning's word for it, to accept his reading of the Old Yellow Book as detailed in The Ring and the Book to be the literal truth, "accepted without question."⁸³ Hodell, too, despite the evidence of his translation of the Old Yellow Book on which he might draw, "harped on the poet's 'fidelity to fact' and simply reinforced the prevailing notion."⁸⁴

The next re-appraisal of the Old Yellow Book was made by John Marshall Gest in 1925. Gest did a more thorough job of digging out discrepancies between source and poem than had ever been done before. The significance of his commentary is due in large measure to the meticulous manner in which he brings a trained legal mind to bear on the problems of translation of the original source and on interpretation of the legal aspects of the case. As a lawyer, he is incensed by what he considers to be a derogatory Browning portrait of competent, honest Roman lawyers, working at their profession to

⁸²Russell, op. cit., p. 111.

⁸³Ibid., p. 111.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 112.

the best of their considerable abilities. After an exhaustive analysis of the lawyers as they must have been in real life, Gess tells us:

The lawyers concerned in the Old Yellow Book were, therefore, experienced men, learned in their profession and of high standing; they were charged with important official duties, and a careful and unprejudiced examination of the record will show that they performed those duties with zeal and conscientious industry. It is painful, therefore, to read the books "Dominus Hyacinthus" and "Johannes Baptista Battinius" in The Ring and the Book. Browning had the Old Yellow Book before him, claimed to have mastered its contents, and that he had read it with sufficient care to acquaint himself with many of its facts in detail is shown in his poem, yet he has deliberately treated these men with contempt and ridicule. Archangeli is portrayed as a silly, conceited pedant preparing his argument with a mind divided between his curly-headed boy, of course a figment of Browning's imagination, and the fried liver with fennel and parsley, and the lamb's fry that he expects to have for dinner. . . . In both books . . . just about one half of the text has really something to do with the subject, the other half is frivolous or stupid, especially when Browning indulges in a certain kind of heavy humor which in some places is actually distressing to read.⁸⁵

Gess's insistence on literal accuracy from Browning in this instance would run contrary to the poet's artistic aims, Russell feels. Of the lawyers, she says:

. . . The poet's treatment of these two officials is one of his most artistic performances. Through them he has achieved an expertly effective dramatic contrast, and has at the same time fulfilled his own pet purpose of satirizing their profession. In addition he has secured through one the needed comic relief, and through the other a more subtle vindication of his heroine than could have been accomplished in any other way. The truth is that any elimination would have more nearly to end than to begin, with these legal lights; and that the only valid protest is against the injustice that declared the light that was in them to be darkness. But the critics

⁸⁵John Marshall Gess, The Old Yellow Book, pp. 44-45.

have taken the other tack because apparently they wanted either easy entertainment or moral uplift, and the last thing they thought of was artistic effect.⁸⁶

The matter of Browning's distortion of fact does not end with the lawyers, however, for Gest. He makes a careful analysis of character again, this time for the central trio in the story, and his findings are in marked contrast to those of Browning.

. . . Guido, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi and the others were real persons, of whose sayings and doings we have a real account. Guido was merely a weak and avaricious man, vicious by force of circumstances as well as from inherent defects of character. Pompilia was an ordinary girl, deprived of advantages in childhood, with sufficient good looks to attract, and insufficient character to resist temptation, and with instincts stronger than her principles. The victim of an unhappy marriage, she is an object of compassion rather than of admiration. Caponsacchi was a frivolous young fellow, on the lookout for adventure, light in thought and unscrupulous in action. Browning on the contrary has depicted Guido as a human monster, sunk to the level of a brute; Caponsacchi is a soldier saint, a chivalrous priest, a Christian hero, a true Saint George. Pompilia is perfect in whiteness, the paragon of virtue and purity, and strangely enough Browning is reported to have said, "I found her in the book just as she speaks and acts in my poem."⁸⁷

The portraits provided by Gest's careful study are useful in the sense that they show us the extent to which Browning exercised his fancy in characterizing his dramatic personae. The contrast emphasizes points made elsewhere in this paper--for example, the extent to which Browning identified himself and Elizabeth in the places of Caponsacchi and Pompilia--but

⁸⁶Russell, op. cit., p. 130.

⁸⁷Gest, op. cit., p. 625.

does not justify Gest's insistence on factual accuracy in characterization. There is slight basis for adopting a working rule for authors and poets such as Gest has devised:

When a novelist introduces real men and women into his poems, and there is no reason why a poet should not be subject to the same limitations, he may properly be allowed a certain latitude in his delineation of his characters and a certain freedom in the invention of imaginary events, in the manipulation of the dialogue, and in many other matters that move in the artistic development of his theme. But he must within somewhat elastic limits be true to his originals. These may be embellished in the story, but not distorted, they may be viewed from different angles, but the perspective must be preserved. Otherwise instead of a portrait, more or less idealized, we have a caricature, or instead of a narrative, we are given a panegyric or a libel.⁸⁸

Gest's insistence here is predicated on the fact that Browning had all the historic details at hand and consequently had no valid excuse for perverting them. Brockington may have had Gest's criticism in mind when he wrote in 1932:

Spontaneity, though it would seem superficially to have to do with the manner of an Art, is really associated with the matter at least as much as with the manner. The objection that the matter of The Ring and the Book, for example, was present to Browning's hand in the form of the Old Yellow Book will not carry weight with those who have thought themselves back into the position of the poet. The matter of his own experiences was also present to Browning.⁸⁹

Browning's own words were used in 1926 by J. E. Shaw to illuminate the factual errors surrounding the delineation of Pompilia's character.⁹⁰ Shaw set out to prove, by means of

⁸⁸Gest, op. cit., p. 624.

⁸⁹Brockington, op. cit., p. 16. See footnote 54.

⁹⁰Shaw, op. cit., pp. 55-81.

citations of contradictory testimony from Caponsacchi and Pompilia on the events which took place during their brief stay at Castelnuovo, that Browning has disregarded facts. Shaw added to this testimony a discussion of Pompilia's ability to write, or her lack of that ability, upon which Browning rests much of his proof of the innocence of her relations with Caponsacchi and of the utter degradation of Guido in forging letters to be passed off as coming from Pompilia's hand. Shaw concluded that Pompilia obviously could write and that Browning uses inventions of his own to show her as not endowed with ability to write. But Shaw's argument lost much of its weight as he went further afield to show the emotional link, for Browning, between his wife Elizabeth and his poetic Pompilia. Browning's act of saving Elizabeth Barrett became, after her death, inextricably linked with his construction of Pompilia's rescue by Caponsacchi, said Shaw, observing that:

The Ring and the Book is the dramatic exposition of Browning's theory of love, which is the most important part of his philosophy; and this theory of love is fundamentally identical with that of Dante.⁹¹

Shaw further emphasized the influence of Browning's poetic predecessors as giving both inspiration and sanction to the license he exercised in developing truth from fact:

When he saw in the Old Yellow Book the opportunity to dramatize the struggle of good and evil among men on a larger scale than ever before, and to glorify the triumph of good by means of unselfish love, he was conscious of the tradition of ennobling love for woman which had

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 73.

been handed down by the distinguished line of medieval poets, and best of all by Dante. That tradition taught its precious truth by means of an aesthetic lie. With the authority of Aristotle, the truth was not endangered by the lie; it was made to shine forth from the transfigured facts which otherwise would have obscured it.⁹²

James McCormick in 1940 came to Browning's defense for disregarding historical accuracy in his treatment of the Old Yellow Book.⁹³ Browning exercised a combination of justice and mercy, said McCormick, dictated by the action and motives of the characters as they were developed in the poem, with each actor drawing either reward or punishment to fit his actions. McCormick linked Browning's method, as Shaw had done, to influences he experienced in his married life:

This is one reason why the poet unconsciously changed the real story to make his poem. His whole life from the day of his marriage had developed with ever increasing clarity the necessity of just such an interpretation. The second reason for the lack of historical accuracy was on account of the fact that as he thought and worked on the poem Pompilia became more and more identified with the spirit of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. This, too, was inevitable. The story was indissolubly linked with that last "happiest" year at Florence and Rome.⁹⁴

McCormick's admission that Browning lacked historical accuracy in The Ring and the Book was far removed from the conclusion which Hornbrooke had reached in 1903 on the same point, and is indicative of the tendency to single out the character of Pompilia as being the area in which Browning exercised most freedom with fact. Hornbrooke, defining historic

⁹² Ibid., p. 80. ⁹³ McCormick, op. cit., p. 219.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 211.

criticism as that criticism which views an event from many possible angles while refusing to rely on any single version of the happening, seemed to generalize on the poem as a whole and on Browning's cumulative aims rather than on any single characterization when he wrote:

Now in The Ring and the Book we have an illustration and manifestation of this spirit of historic criticism which everywhere prevails. The poet does not allow the reader to remain satisfied with one version of the story which underlies his poem. He shows us how various persons of different characters and interests tell it, and he causes these to unfold themselves in their narratives. We may not learn from them more about the actual facts, but we know better the thoughts of many hearts. The different stories also enable us to attain to a juster, because completer, knowledge of what actually happened. In this way the poem is a grand example of the spirit of historic criticism.⁹⁵

Paul Beichner in 1943 not only singled out Pompilia as being a misrepresentation of the historic character but also cited the means by which Browning had erred in giving an accurate characterization.⁹⁶ This Beichner proposed to do by analysis of the credibility of the testimony of Fra Celestino as to the character of Pompilia. With an obvious effort to observe the confines of the Catholic confessional as having a hand in shaping the testimony of the cleric, Beichner points out that Fra Celestino could have said nothing derogatory about Pompilia's character, even had he wanted to do so. He could say only what he did say, and then not voluntarily, but

⁹⁵Hornbrooke, op. cit., p. 11.

⁹⁶Paul E. Beichner, "Fra Celestino's Affidavit and The Ring and the Book," NLM, LVIII (May, 1943), 335-340.

only by external persuasion. No matter how black her character might have been, the priest who had been her confessor was without official sanction to reveal anything which may have transpired as he served his office.

H. B. Charlton, in 1944, added his voice to that of Shaw and other critics who found fault with Browning's portrayal of Pompilia.⁹⁷ Charlton uses Pompilia's ability to write and her versions of the scene at the inn, just as Shaw does, to prove that Browning is playing fast and loose with fact. But Charlton does grant that Browning has presented true pictures of his Pompilia, his Caponsacchi, and his Guido. Again Browning is chided not so much for disregarding fact as for insisting that he is observing historical accuracy:

One may accuse Browning of confounding the issue by letting his reason obstruct his imagination in his statement of the nature of poetic truth, and, consequently, of seeming to require from his readers their assent to unconvincing, and even confused, propositions. . . . But our acceptance is sometimes hindered by Browning's endeavours to secure it; in the end, moreover, it is not an acceptance of what explicitly he appears to offer to us. . . . A further obstacle is the modesty of his claim for the poet's power over his raw material. In former full enjoyment of his imaginative vitality he had felt that the poet's faculty was, of all human activities, the one likest God's, the faculty of creating, of making something out of nothing. . . . But how he sets it lower in the scale. It is no more than "mimic creation, galvanism for life."⁹⁸

Charlton admits that there are two plausible views of the truth of the Pompilia-Caponsacchi relationship and

⁹⁷H. B. Charlton, "Poetry and Truth," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library (March, 1944), pp. 43-57.

⁹⁸Ibid., pp. 48-49.

characters, but insists that Browning has chosen to shut his eyes to one of the possibilities. He sees this one-sided view as a distortion of the historical truth to which Browning has dedicated his efforts. But he emphasizes his original contention that Browning should have insisted on his artistic rights to a free rein for his imagination, and should have avoided posing as a historian.

Soon after Charlton's study appeared, an unidentified commentator took exception to his findings in that the criticism of Browning's treatment of the evidence destroyed the book altogether, since it directly contradicted Browning's claim that he had winnowed the "golden truth" from the Old Yellow Book.⁹⁹

The applicability of Browning's "ring" metaphor, from which he derives the title of the work, and to which he devotes, in part, two long sections of the twelve books which make up The Ring and the Book, has been questioned by his critics. This debate rises naturally from the sequence of examinations of factual accuracy which followed publication of his source material. Typical of the middle ground which may be found between the extremes of this debate is the position taken by Paul A. Cundiff in 1948. Cundiff rejects the hypothesis that the contents of Browning's poem, insofar as truthful presentation of the historical account is concerned, are "pure

⁹⁹"Comment on The Ring and the Book," Notes and Queries (May 6, 1944), p. 215.

gold." Rather, Cundiff feels, "fanciful truth" is a more appropriate designation for Browning's end result:

As the contradictory facts of any trial come to the surface, so do the contradictory facts of the poem come to the surface. Never once does Browning say that he was faithful to the facts. . . . His purpose was to present the facts in as many different lights as they could be presented. . . . Browning accepts Art as the one possible way of speaking the truth. His artistic way is through the addition of "fancy" or imagination, which is God-given, like the gift of prophet and seer, and possessed only by those "called of God." 100

Here Cundiff has thrown light on a point by which all the speculation, all the factual evidence, as to Browning's disregard of historical accuracy seems pointless. Browning's job was not that of court reporter for a trial, as Gest would have it, nor was it that of reporter for a periodical, as Charlton would seem to require. His task was the creation of a poem--a work of art, a product of intellect, an off-shoot of imagination--in which there could be found something more than fact, something of use in the search for universal truth. Browning saw this as his poetic task, and he used his poetic talent in a manner circumscribed only by his interpretation of artistic restrictions. DeVane saw this and pointed it out in 1934:

We have seen what infinite pains Browning took to arrive at the truth. He read the Old Yellow Book eight times; he searched in Rome for more materials; he travelled to Arezzo. All the knowledge of Italy and of the Italian Renaissance, stored in him through many years of unconscious preparation, rushed to his aid. How vast that learning was one may see by consulting Mr. A. K. Cook's Commentary Upon Browning's The Ring and the Book.

100 Paul A. Cundiff, "The Clarity of Browning's Ring Metaphor," PMLA, LXIII (December, 1948), 1280-1281.

What a tremendous effort the poet made to transcribe the truth of small details from his sources can only be appreciated by one who has read the Old Yellow Book almost as often as did Browning.

Yet Browning was an artist, a creator and an interpreter, and we may say boldly that the events of the Franceschini affair in Rome in 1697-8 were never enacted by the characters which Browning gives us. The question indeed need never have risen save that Browning became more and more convinced as the years went on that he had merely read and reproduced the Old Yellow Book. Since his own statements, too, many enthusiasts have been so ill-advised as to push Browning's claims as an historian at the expense of his rights as a creative poet. The evidence will make it clear, I think, that Browning was not great as an historian of seventeenth-century Italy, but as a poet of nineteenth-century England. . . . Browning made a section of obscure Italian history into a reading of life as he viewed it in his own day.¹⁰¹

One of the most recent studies of Browning's adherence to fact in The Ring and the Book is a commentary on the Corotona Codex, recently discovered secondary documents related to the Old Yellow Book. The commentary gives new life to DeVane's claim that Browning dug thoroughly into the background of his story but took creative liberties with the facts he found. Of the several papers contained in the codex, all but two relate to the Comparini side of the dispute. The evidence from the codex lends weight to the contention that Browning depicted Pompilia as much purer than she really was. And the new findings indicate that considerable supplementary material is missing still from the story as it was known in its own day.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹DeVane, op. cit., p. 299.

¹⁰²Beatrice Corrigan, "New Documents on Browning's Roman Murder Case," Studies in Philology, XLIX (October, 1952), 520-533.

Browning's masterful accomplishment in developing from the sordid details of a Roman crime a poem of beauty and of tremendous human interest thus seems to have been possible only through his imaginative use of fact. Chesterton in 1903 gave a clue to one reason for the poem's attraction when he wrote:

The Ring and the Book is of course, essentially speaking, a detective story. Its difference from the ordinary detective story is that it seeks to establish, not the centre of criminal guilt, but the centre of spiritual guilt. But it has exactly the same kind of exciting quality that a detective story has, and a very excellent quality it is.¹⁰³

But the tremendous volume of time and energy which have been spent in tracking down the degree to which Browning deviated from fact provides an inescapable indication of the interest inherent in his source material. A poet of lesser abilities might have overlooked the possibility of the material, or might have avoided the mountainous task its summation presented. A poet of lesser abilities might have anticipated the insistence of critics upon adherence to fact. Browning did none of these things, but used his art according to the dictates of his own free will to turn to maximum utility the strength that was inherent in his source material. Nor was his method a secret; he outlines it for his readers in a portion of The Ring and the Book:

But Art,--wherein man nowise speaks to men,
Only to mankind,--Art may tell a truth

¹⁰³Chesterton, op. cit., p. 168.

Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought;
Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
Beyond mere imagery on the wall,--
So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived,--
So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
Suffice the eye and save the soul besides.104

104 Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book, Book XII,
ll. 854-863.

CHAPTER V

BROWNING'S "MESSAGE"

Browning as a social critic and religious teacher has occupied the attention of his commentators since the days of his comparative obscurity. He was taken seriously as a religious teacher during the height of the Browning societies, so much so that Edmund Gosse was prompted to observe near the turn of the century:

People are beginning to treat this vehement and honest poet as if he were a sort of Marcus Aurelius and John the Baptist rolled into one. I have just seen a book in which it is proposed that Browning should supersede the Bible, that a set of his volumes will teach religion better than all the theologies of the world. Well, I did not know that holy monster.¹⁰⁵

In the bibliography of Browning criticism may be found liberal sprinklings of such items as "St. Paul's Sermon on Mars Hill and Robert Browning's Glean," from Christian Thought for 1890; "Robert Browning, the Typical Christian Poet of the Age" in Christian World Pulpit for 1890; "Robert Browning as a Religious Teacher" in Good Words of 1890, and Henry Arthur Jones' thrice revised and four times published Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher, last published in 1912. Since those earlier days Browning's message has been identified

¹⁰⁵The Critic, "Edmund Gosse on Browning," XXVIII (March 14, 1896), 187.

by his critics as "barbaric," as "Christian," and as almost all shades in between the two extremes. "A man presents to the world more than one hundred thousand lines of verse," says Frances Russell, "and straightway the world falls into a quandary over the correct definition of his product."¹⁰⁶

Although there were occasional dissenters from the critical ranks of those who viewed Browning as a great religious teacher, it remained for Santayana in 1900 to write what DeVane called, as late as 1935, "the most devastating criticism which Browning has yet encountered."¹⁰⁷ In an essay on what he termed the "poetry of barbarism," Santayana, although generalizing on Browning's poetry, may well have had in mind The Ring and the Book as he contends that Browning is an analytic poet who seeks to reveal the elemental as opposed to the conventional, reducing experience to the elements of passions, characters, persons; that the world of Browning is a world of history with civilization for its setting and with the conventional passions for its motive forces.¹⁰⁸ All these observations may be made of Browning's portrayals of Guido, of Pompilia, and of Caponsacchi:

In Browning the barbarism is no less real though disguised by a literary and scientific language, since the passions of civilized life with which he deals are

¹⁰⁶Russell, op. cit., p. 96.

¹⁰⁷DeVane, op. cit., p. 525.

¹⁰⁸George Santayana, Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, pp. 188-216.

treated as so many "barbaric yawps," complex indeed in their conditions, puffings of an intricate engine, but aimless in their vehemence and mere ebullitions of lustiness in adventurous and profoundly ungoverned souls.

Irrationality on this level is viewed by Browning with the same satisfaction with which, on a lower level, it is viewed by Whitman; and the admirers of each hail it as the secret of a new poetry which pierces to the quick and awakens the imagination to a new and genuine vitality. It is in the rebellion against discipline, in the abandonment of the ideals of classic and Christian tradition, that this rejuvenation is found. Both poets represent, therefore, and are admired for representing, what may be called the poetry of barbarism in the most accurate and descriptive sense of this word. For the barbarian is the man who regards his passions as their own excuse for being; who does not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal goal.¹⁰⁹

Browning is the spokesman of Christianity in name only, Santayana insists, with a philosophy of life and a "habit of imagination" which need no support of metaphysical theory. His primary, self-sufficient temperament suggests the few loose doctrines Browning possesses.¹¹⁰

And what does the temperament say? That life is an adventure, not a discipline; that the exercise of energy is the absolute good, irrespective of motives or of consequences. These are the maxims of a frank barbarism; nothing could express better the lust of life, the dogged unwillingness to learn from experience, the contempt for rationality, the carelessness about perfection, the admiration for mere force, in which barbarism always betrays itself. The vague religion which seeks to justify this attitude is really only another outburst of the same irrational impulse.

In Browning this religion takes the name of Christianity, and identifies itself with one or two Christian ideas arbitrarily selected; but at heart it has far more affinity to the worship of Thor or of Odin than to the religion of the Cross.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 176.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 205.

¹¹¹Ibid., pp. 205-206.

Twenty-nine years later Santayana had not budged from this opinion of Browning. In a letter to W. L. Phelps in which he reviewed his essay quoted above, Santayana said:

My disgust at Browning is not because he loves life or has it abundantly, but because he doesn't love it (as Dickens does, for instance), for what is good in it, but for what is bad, tawdry, and pretentious. I protest against being called a snob; what I love is simple, humble, easy, what ought to be common, and it is only the bombast of false ambition and false superiority that I abhor.¹¹²

Paul Elmer More teamed with Santayana in denying Browning the label of Poet of Christianity. More sees Browning's popularity as a direct result of the Victorian groping for an answer to the spiritual and intellectual unrest brought on by the growing materialism of the age. Browning awoke in Victorian and post-Victorian readers a new hope for intellectual salvation, at least. Says More:

There is another element in that popularity (and this, unhappily, is the inspiration of the clubs and of the formulating critics) which is concerned too much with this flattering substitute for spirituality. Undoubtedly, a good deal of restiveness exists under what is called the materialism of modern life, and many are looking in this way and that for an escape into the purer joy which they hear has passed from the world. . . . Those who think they have found its equivalent in the poetry of Browning are misled by wandering and futile lights. The secret of his more esoteric fame is just this, that he dresses a worldly and easy philosophy in the forms of spiritual faith and so deceives the troubled seekers after the higher life.¹¹³

More further reflects Santayana's theme of barbarism in Browning as he points out that in all Browning's rhapsody

¹¹²W. L. Phelps, Autobiography with Letters, p. 342.

¹¹³More, op. cit., p. 165.

there is nowhere a hint of any break between the lower and the higher nature of man, or between the human and the celestial character. "Not that his philosophy is pantheistic," says More, "for it is Hebraic in its vivid sense of God's distinct personality; but that man's love is itself divine, only lesser in degree."¹¹⁴

Indeed, the point of the matter is not that Browning magnifies human love in its own sphere of beauty, but that he speaks of it with the voice of a prophet of spiritual things and proclaims it as a complete doctrine of salvation. Often, as I read the books on Browning's gospel of human passion, my mind recurs to that scene in the Gospel of St. John, wherein it is told how a certain Nicodemus of the Pharisees came to Jesus by night and was puzzled by the hard saying: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." . . . I can not but wonder at the light message of the new prophet: "If you desire faith--then you've faith enough" and "For God is glorified in Man."¹¹⁵

The magnification of human love into what More calls a "complete doctrine of salvation" is a theme common to several of Browning's poems. In The Ring and the Book Browning leaves no doubt that Caponsacchi, through his love for and rescue of Pompilia, achieves a state of salvation in the eyes of the Pope. As the Pope speculates on man's goodness, strength, and intelligence, he deduces that only in goodness is a deficiency apparent to the human eye, and reasons:

What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
But just the instance which this tale supplies
Of love without a limit? So is strength,
So is intelligence; let love be so,

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 163.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 164.

Unlimited in its self-sacrifice,
Then is the tale true and God shows complete.¹¹⁶

That Browning was critical of Church and state in The Ring and the Book is evident to most of his critics. Santayana saw this dual criticism of the social order as stemming from Browning's deficient education. Lacking that formal training traditional in his own country, Browning used to say that Italy had been his university. What Browning missed, says Santayana, as he gave rein to his keen interest in the superficial ferment and worldly passions of the Italian Renaissance, was an insight into the civilized heart of Italy, into the " cogent ideal of virtue" and the trained imaginations of the best Italian minds.¹¹⁷

Italy had a religion, and that religion permeated all its life, and was the background without which even its secular art and secular passions would not be truly intelligible. The most commanding and representative, the deepest and most appealing of Italian natures are permeated with this religious inspiration. . . . Yet for Browning these men and what they represented may be said not to have existed. He saw, he studied, and he painted a decapitated Italy. His vision could not mount so high as her head.¹¹⁸

Though Santayana's criticism of Browning's disregard for the virtues of Italy might be justified as a general observation, it hardly seems admissible for The Ring and the Book, since Browning's story was completely dependent on just these

¹¹⁶Browning, op. cit., Book X, ll. 1362-1367.

¹¹⁷Santayana, op. cit., pp. 199-200.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 200.

"worldly passions" which Santayana sees as unworthy of the poet's attention. His characters were fools and knaves with attributes of greed, cynicism, wanton cruelty, and selfishness. Browning's insight into these men and what they represented was not the same as the surface appearance. "'Learn one lesson hence,' warns Browning, and recites that lesson as the utter nothingness of human testimony and estimation."¹¹⁹

The criticism of the social order through psychological approaches to characterization, a feature of The Ring and the Book which Johnson was to analyze in 1962, impressed Hornbrooke sufficiently to bring from him this observation half a century earlier:

Now it is the test of a great work of genius that while it is above the thought of the time in which it was written, it also responds to that thought. . . . It is to be expected that a great poem belonging to the last third of the nineteenth century should show in its method and spirit the dominance of the psychological interest, and The Ring and the Book fulfils that expectation. From beginning to end it is an insight into, and a revelation of the heights and depths of human nature.¹²⁰

Frances Russell sees indictments of the Church and of bench and bar in The Ring and the Book. Browning's anti-clerical satire, says Russell, is more incriminating when he deals with groups rather than with individual worldly clerics whose worldliness Browning makes rather attractive. But, she observed in 1927:

¹¹⁹Russell, op. cit., p. 51.

¹²⁰Hornbrooke, op. cit., p. 9.

The indictments are the same, so familiar in the individual--hypocrisy, fanaticism, and inconsistency--developed in the group. It is characteristic of this hater of cruelty as an active vice and sluggishness as a passive one that he should be doubly impatient with the Inquisition. In The Ring and the Book he fulminates against the organized duplicity that permitted torture under the plea, first, of preserving a sacred institution pure and undefiled, and, second, of an unintentional lapse of vigilance. It is public opinion that forces the Church into line with civilization.¹²¹

But the Church, at least, says Russell, had Caponsacchi and the Pope. Bench and Bar suffer more at the hands of Browning, being represented only by two lawyers (one a fool, the other a knave) and a trio of judges "whose unconscionable muddle of justice precipitated a terrible and gratuitous calamity."¹²²

What they get their flaying for is the purblind cynicism that could not conceive of a white motive for a dubious-hued deed. Precisely the same is the low estate of the Juris Doctor Bottini, and that is undoubtedly the cause of Browning's Juvenalian depicting of him, while his treatment of Arcangeli is Horatian. The one is a noxious compound of misanthropic craft, vile-minded trickery, and flippant emptiness; the other, in spite of his vulgar cunning, pompous vanity, slovenly sprawling, shallow pseudo-sentiment, is somehow not unlovable. The pair are united only in the unholy bonds of mercenary motives and bombastic methods.¹²³

Anthony Crossley in 1928 saw Browning's fulminations against the social order as contributing to progress in certain areas of reform. In his analysis he views the satire cited by Russell as having contributed to change:

For Browning was not content to sing. He must teach. He must, if necessary, condemn.

So far as he attached himself to anything he associated himself with the aims of the old Liberal optimists,

¹²¹Russell, op. cit., p. 43.

¹²²Ibid., p. 44.

¹²³Ibid., p. 44.

with the strengthening of the laws and the mitigation of the penalties. Moreover, such as we have suffered from uncontrolled Victorian progress, with its sprawling slums, and stunted clerks, and the new horrors of modern war, we have yet to remember in justice to those misguided enthusiasts that certain of them (and not less the poet Browning than the philanthropist Shaftesbury) sowed the seeds in certain well-defined fields of progress that are bearing fruit today in such public benefits as Education, Prison Reform and Junior Courts, Universal Franchise, and an ever-increasing desire to "outlaw" war.¹²⁴

Raymond in 1929 took a new glance at Browning's religious views as expressed in The Ring and the Book. Browning, says Raymond, did not hold orthodox religious views in the traditional sense, but he was highly antagonistic toward Higher Criticism's rationalistic interpretation of Christianity.¹²⁵ Raymond sees Browning as a typical example of the mentally restless Victorian:

Amid the shifting cross currents of religious controversy in England during the middle years of the nineteenth century, there are few points of view equal in freshness and interest to that of Browning. Nor among his brother poets of the Victorian age is there one whose work throws more light on the typical attitude of the English mind in relation to philosophy and religion. Individualism, subjectivity, lack of systematic development, absence of radicalism--attributes which have been singled out as eminently characteristic of English speculative thought in the nineteenth century--are strikingly illustrated in Browning's representation of the religious problems of the mid-Victorian era.¹²⁶

Raymond lists the soliloquy of the Pope in The Ring and the Book as "one of the greatest examples of constructive

¹²⁴Crossley, op. cit., p. 45.

¹²⁵W. O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment, p. 19.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 19.

religious thought in nineteenth-century poetry,¹²⁷ and as "the most elaborate and closely reasoned apologia for Christianity throughout Browning's poetry."¹²⁸ This Raymond believes comes directly from Browning's strong antipathy toward the proponents of the Higher Criticism. But the words of "the great good old Pope" whom Browning portrays as "the acme of human wisdom and insight" are more than argument; Raymond feels that "his utterances represent the highest reach of Browning's own faith and the most complete expression of his philosophy of life."¹²⁹

Dallas Kenmare, British poet-critic, in 1932 made much more elaborate appraisal of Browning's Christian message. Kenmare makes of Santayana's "barbarian" the true Voice of Christianity, the spokesman of God, the Victorian Apostle who anticipated Freud by ten years with sound psychology while giving his readers with unflinching consistency the true Christian view of life's seamy side. She uses detailed citations to The Ring and the Book to document her view that:

It was Browning's task as a poet to reveal life, so far as he could, in its entirety; he knew there were innumerable mental complexities, and mysteries of all kinds, producing the various dramatic situations he portrayed. Somewhere in the morass of confusion the truth lay hidden, and through all the perplexities and sins and torments, the agonies and errors, the one reality shines steadfast, and God is continually revealed, immanent and transcendent. There is scarcely a poem of Browning's in which the name of God does not occur. . . . This is really the sense in which God exists in

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 36.

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 33.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 137.

the lives of all true Christians. Everything is spontaneously, inevitably, related to the one centre, without thought or effort.¹³⁰

Perhaps the most elaborate interweaving-by-analysis of the three threads of religion, psychology, and social criticism which run through The Ring and the Book is that of E. D. H. Johnson in 1952. Johnson grants the sensational nature of Browning's source material, but points out that:

For all its violence and sordid malignancy, the case invited moralistic interpretation, since it involved within a religious framework all the familial relationships--filial piety, connubial faith, mother-love. And, indeed, The Ring and the Book has continued to be cited as the final summation of those strenuous qualities of optimism and moral fervor which, according to the received notion, made Browning a representative Victorian.

If The Ring and the Book is re-examined . . . it may appear that this treatment of the conflict between good and evil in terms of domestic tragedy dramatizes certain concepts not altogether congenial to the age in which it was written. . . . The Ring and the Book needs to be approached on more than one level if its theme is to become fully evident. The reader who bothers to look below surface meanings finds opening up unexpected perspectives into the author's mind, for The Ring and the Book not only presents a full-scale vindication of Browning's intuitional psychology, it also embodies the author's moral and aesthetic philosophy.¹³¹

Browning marshals anti-social testimony, says Johnson, on every level through introduction of the speakers who occupy the stage in each canto of The Ring and the Book. The speaker in "Half-Rome" shows how society tends to warp truth as he sides with Guido, not from reason but from the suspicion that

¹³⁰Dallas Kenmare, Browning and Modern Thought, p. 194.

¹³¹Johnson, op. cit., pp. 119-120.

he and Guido share the common injury of having been made cuckolds. The commentator in "The Other Half-Rome" is just as wrong in a reverse direction; his fancy colors truth to produce the melodramatic and illicit romance which appeals to his sentimental nature. In "Tertium Quid," the sophisticate dodges any attempt at moral judgment of the case, seeing right and wrong as relative matters only. The sum of Browning's accusations against society is that man is so driven by his own selfish motives as to be unable to judge the actions of his fellows.¹³²

In the books devoted to the lawyers' arguments, Browning shows that the "machinery of social justice is as prejudiced as public opinion, and no more capable of distinguishing between right and wrong."¹³³ The lawyers' primary interests are, as with other individuals, always predominantly selfish interests; the search for justice and truth is not even incidental to their pleadings for their clients.

But Browning saves his severest strictures for the Church and state, says Johnson. The governor of Arezzo, interested only in preserving property rights and rank, returns Pompilia to her husband when she appeals to him for mercy. The central government in Florence sides with Guido, "would unhesitatingly have exonerated Guido and his companions had they succeeded in escaping from papal territory."¹³⁴ The

¹³²Ibid., p. 123.

¹³³Ibid., p. 124.

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 124.

"system" also dominates the archbishop's decision; he would have sacrificed Pompilia readily to this system, as would the Augustinian friar, afraid to endanger his own future by aiding Pompilia. Likewise, through Guide and the Pope, Browning castigates society, says Johnson. The two men are alike in that they are thinkers rather than doers, seeking a rational basis for intuitive perception. But, whereas Guide's social conscience is of the most rudimentary kind, that of the Pope, through his spirituality has "passed beyond the limitations of convention."¹³⁵

However, despite the message Browning expresses in his poem, Johnson sees certain aesthetic theories still evident in the poem:

The elaboration of the meaning . . . leads the poet to acknowledge the double awareness as a condition of artistic expression. The creative impulse, originating as imaginative insight in the individual consciousness, imposes on the artist the obligation to find suitable forms for its embodiment, since the process of arousing men's deeper responses begins in an appeal to their superficial sympathies. The artist mediates between God and humanity; and his art, if truly inspired, in giving pleasure becomes at the same time a means of grace.¹³⁶

Browning doubtless will be judged, eventually, as a poet and not as a preacher. But his critics still have not emerged from the practices of critical appraisal which were current at the turn of the century. Interest in his psychology has increased, but even that is new only in degree. He is appraised less often as a religious teacher, but here, too, are

¹³⁵Ibid., p. 126.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 136.

to be found continuing echoes of older views. Nor has he emerged from the stigma which attached to the Victorian age in general, according to Raymond:

Browning has suffered, along with Tennyson, from the general reaction inimical to Victorianism and all its works which has characterized the opening decades of the twentieth century. There are signs that the nadir has been reached, and that a juster and truer appreciation of the Victorian epoch is at hand. But we are still in the wake of that inevitable shift of literary evaluation which marks the transition from one generation to the next. The baiting of Victorianism continues to be a favorite sport of modern writers.¹³⁷

¹³⁷W. O. Raymond, "Browning's Poetry: Fifty Years After," University of Toronto Quarterly, IX (1940), 138.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Fifty years of twentieth-century criticism of the poetry of Robert Browning, with an accompanying addition of a sizable body of biographical data and clues to source materials for his works, have done much to clarify his contribution to English literature. In a study limited to The Ring and the Book, it is evident, as Raymond pointed out in 1949, that, so far as Browning's magnum opus is concerned, "what has been written after 1910 compares favourably both in variety and in significance with the historical and critical work of any previous period."¹³⁸ And the critics, by volume of their attention, indicate that The Ring and the Book remains to the present day the cornerstone of Browning's poetic edifice.

Also, judging from the extent to which research has been devoted to specific problems, the four subjects examined in this study emerge as those most worthy of attention.

Although Browning's use of the dramatic monologue has drawn lengthy critical comment in the past, it seems probable that future studies on the subject will be infrequent. The matter has been explored thoroughly; moreover, there emerges a marked unanimity of opinion among scholars who see his use

¹³⁸W. O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment, p. 209.

of the genre in The Ring and the Book as a representative example of his competence in use of the form.

Similarly, the influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning on her husband's major poem appears to have been accorded sufficient critical treatment, with little left to explore in existing biographical data. In this area, again, few of Browning's critics deviate from the conclusion that Elizabeth's influence was significant--perhaps vital--in the composition of his masterpiece. Only in the biographical study by Betty Miller do we get a hint of a possible new direction for research; her disclosure of Browning's tone of dissatisfaction with the work he had done during his married life, as expressed in letters of his last years, may be a clue to frustrations the poet developed while his wife still lived.

Meanwhile, debate may continue for years over the way in which Browning treated material in his Old Yellow Book. During the first half of the twentieth century his critics have been sharply divided not only on the literalness of his interpretation of fact but also on the artistic justification for his deviation from fact. As new lights on Browning's source material are discovered, either through additional documents which may have been known to Browning, or related material contemporary with the Old Yellow Book, the findings may be expected to draw scholarly attention.

Browning's metaphysics, philosophy, and psychology are likewise almost certain to merit continued critical appraisal.

His metaphysics long has been subject to searching examination, with praise tending to outweigh censure. The tendency to analyze his "message" seems to revive periodically despite the lack of novelty his views offer to present-day readers. This very lack of novelty may predestine a diminution of that phase of analysis. To a more extensive degree critics may be expected to treat his psychology analytically because it more nearly coincides with the interests of the age in which we live. Browning's philosophy, too, has retreated in importance because so many of his doctrines, shallow and insufficient as many of his earlier critics found them, have become part of what might be termed our philosophical folk-lore. As an example, Browning's concept of "elective affinity," held up to ridicule by his critics, is a concept common to contemporary mass thought, but scarcely eligible for serious critical attention today.

Browning will very probably be examined against his Victorian background more extensively and more dispassionately by future critics than he has been in past years. The trend is discernible in recently published works.

As for the future of The Ring and the Book, there seems little likelihood that it will ever draw attention outside academic circles. Its great length is an almost insurmountable handicap; few today undertake to read such long poems. Anthologists have managed some palatable abridgments of its contents,

but any fair treatment of the poem still leaves it unattractively long for modern tastes.

In the final analysis, however, Browning must stand or fall as a poet, not as a philosopher nor as a metaphysician nor as a psychologist. As critics turn more and more to the task of analyzing his work, not so much as biography or metaphysics, but rather as poetry, Browning may attain a more firmly assured position in English literature.

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