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THE UNITY OF BROWNING'S DRAMATIS PERSONAE.

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THE UNITY OF BROWNING'S DRAMATIS PERSONAE

by

FRANCINE GOMBERG RUSSO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
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Abstract

THE UNITY OF BROWNING'S DRAMATIS PERSONAE

by

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Browning's Dramatis Personae, the 1864 volume of poems which comes between Men and Women (1855) and The Ring and the Book (1868), has been virtually ignored as a literary entity despite its possible importance as a link between Browning's most important works, works which differ from each other considerably. In fact, a study of Dramatis Personae does show how Browning moved from the very miscellaneous Men and Women to the long single work with its crucial interest in point of view.

In Dramatis Personae, Browning concentrates almost exclusively on the themes of love and faith. Considering the love poems separately, one finds that Browning placed many of the characters in the same or similar situations in order to have them express different views on the same subjects. His very fine long poem, "James Lee's Wife," is structured to show how one person's view alters over time.

In the religious poems, one finds a series of speakers from different historical eras who ask the same questions about the nature of God and human mortality and who put forth answers according to their own lights. In the "Epilogue," Browning

provides a model in miniature for the volume as a whole. He has three speakers who argue about the nature of God, but here, the third speaker settles the issue once for all in Browning's own voice. Thus, though there is little dramatic tension within many poems in the volume, there is considerable tension among the poems, just as in The Ring and the Book.

This volume comes just as Browning was becoming increasingly aware of the possibilities of juxtaposing single poems to create a unified poetic world, as Lawrence Poston's recent study of Browning's 1863 edition of his Works "Browning Rearranges Browning," shows. Accordingly, Browning pays very careful attention to the order of the poems in the volume, stressing always that each person who speaks in Dramatis Personae is a part of the universe and a speaker of partial truths.

Close analysis of the individual poems in the volume shows that the volume is also unified by important patterns of imagery, particularly those which express man's feelings of powerlessness and confinement in his mortality, and his hope, often desperate and hollow, of finding ultimate meaning and eternal life through God.

Clearly, in its unity through imagery and in its combination of different perspectives in order to present truth "obliquely," Dramatis Personae is a testing ground for Browning's next work, The Ring and the Book.

PREFACE

One of the great pleasures of studying Browning's Dramatis Personae has been the opportunity to discuss poems about which almost nothing has been written. To compensate for this deficiency in the Browning literature, I have in this dissertation given more attention to the love poems, and particularly "James Lee's Wife," than is proportionate to their space in the volume. They have received much less attention than the religious poems and almost none recently. For this reason, and because it exemplifies patterns which are present throughout the volume, I have examined the first poem "James Lee's Wife" at greatest length. I believe that it deserves much more attention than it has received.

I have been very lucky to have the help of Professor Wendell Stacy Johnson, who, through his own work, is well acquainted with even the most obscure love poetry. I am grateful to have had the benefit of his insight and his patience.

I would also like to thank Professor William Buckler of New York University for suggesting that Dramatis Personae might be a fertile ground for critical inquiry.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Nature of Dramatis Personae as a Volume

Could Browning have written The Ring and the Book had he not written Dramatis Personae first? Probably. Yet I think it is not possible to fully understand how Browning moved from Men and Women to The Ring and the Book without a thorough study of Dramatis Personae.

Dramatis Personae deserves study as a volume for many reasons but especially because of its chronological position in the Browning canon and in Victorian literary history. It is the first volume Browning wrote after the death of his wife and his return to England, where he became part of a circle which included Tennyson, Ruskin and Carlyle. It marks the firm establishment of his reputation in England with a wider reading audience than he had previously been able to command; it occupies a central position in the canon, coming between Men and Women and The Ring and the Book, and it acts as a bridge between the two very different kinds of work. It is also Browning's first volume after 1859, the year of so many important intellectual developments in Victorian literary history, developments to which it responds quite fully.

Yet, despite all these reasons to prompt its consideration, very little of the critical work on Browning does consider it. There have been no book-length studies, no

articles nor dissertations on Dramatis Personae as a literary entity, although there have been numerous studies of some of the individual poems. Of the many books on Browning, very few devote even an entire chapter to this important volume.

Many critics, especially the early ones, see Dramatis Personae as merely a continuation of Men and Women, though perhaps not so good. DeVane sees it as a continuation, "but with some important differences."¹ Herford takes the most extreme position: "As a whole, the Dramatis Personae stands yet more clearly apart from Men and Women than that does from all that had gone before."² My own position is closest to Herford's although I believe he slightly overstates the case. I believe that Dramatis Personae represents a significant departure from Men and Women, a turning point in Browning's poetic career. Certain themes, notably the religious, make greater demands upon Browning. They provide a unity not found in earlier volumes, and they necessitate a corresponding shift in technique.

The thematic differences between the 1855 and 1864 volumes represent no basic change of philosophy but an increasing absorption with a smaller group of related themes.

¹William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), p. 280.

²C. H. Herford, Robert Browning (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1905). p.

Men and Women is a work of great variety, including meditations on art as well as religion, courtly love lyrics, inventive historical narratives, studies of life and manners in Renaissance Italy, and even a small drama. Those which may be ascribed to a general thematic category are:

In Art:

where the artist speaks:	Andrea del Sarto Fra Lippo Lippi
where men respond to and interpret art:	Old Pictures in Florence A Toccata of Galuppi's Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha
on poetry:	How it Strikes A Contemporary Memorabilia Popularity Transcendentalism One Word More--To E.B.B.
on religion:	Cleon Karshish Saul Holy Cross Day Bishop Blougram's Apology
on love:	
Love Among The Ruins In Three Days Respectability In A Balcony One Way of Love Another Way of Love In A Year Serenade at the Villa Mesmerism Evelyn Hope A Lovers Quarrel The Last Ride Together	Two in the Compagna By the Fireside A Woman's Last Word Any Wife to Any Husband Love in a Life Life in a Love

There are besides a number of assorted lyrics--

A Pretty Woman
The Guardian Angel
My Star

Women and Roses
 Up at a Villa--Down in the City
 De Gustibus
 Misconceptions--

and an even larger number of miscellaneous narratives or poems with a strong narrative element:

Instans Tyrannus
 The Statue and The Bust
 The Patriot
 Before
 After
 Protus
 The Twins
 A Light Woman
 The Heretic's Tragedy
 A Grammarian's Funeral
 Childe Roland

In Dramatis Personae, on the other hand, there is almost no attempt at defining the artist or exploring his duties. Where Men and Women has ten poems dealing with art, Dramatis Personae has one--"Abt Vogler," and a possible second. Where the earlier volume had five poems dealing with religion, the later and shorter volume has six: "Gold Hair," "Caliban," "Sludge," "A Death in the Desert," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," the "Epilogue," and a possible seventh, "Apparent Failure." For the eighteen love poems in Men and Women, there are eight in Dramatis Personae: "James Lee's Wife," "The Worst of It," "Dîs Aliter Visum," "Too Late," "Youth and Art," "Confessions," "May and Death," "Eurydice to Orpheus," and, possibly, "Prospect." There are perhaps a few miscellaneous lyrics, such as "A Face," "A Likeness," and "Deaf and Dunb,"³ but the category of miscellaneous narratives practically disappears from the

³These three poems are the only ones in Dramatis Personae I

volume, unless one considers "Gold Hair" primarily as a narrative.

Critics have seen the love poems of Dramatis Personae as more somber, more bitter, more given to portraying love unfulfilled and love thwarted than those in Men and Women. They usually attribute this new mood to the effects of the death of Browning's wife three years before the publication of Dramatis Personae.

If a critic were to declare that this treatment of thwarted love marked a significant difference from the previous volume, I would be constrained to prove this imaginary offender wrong. Of the thirteen poems in Men and Women dealing with unmarried love, only four--"Love Among the Ruins," "Respectability," "In Three Days," and "In A Balcony"--can be said to deal with the fulfillment of love, and some doubt is cast on the third by its companion piece and on the last by its ambiguous ending. The others treat lovers quarreling, separated by death, or unable to be won. Of the five poems dealing with married love, only "By the Fireside" can be seen as presenting the full realization of love,

Is there, then, no difference in the way the two volumes treat love? Are they both grim admonitions that love,

will not discuss, since they fit into neither of the volume's major divisions, poems about love or about religion. I would just like to note here that the theme of "A Likeness," that each man will see something different in a work of art, is in keeping with the implicit theme of the volume, that each person will perceive a different "truth" from one situation.

greatly to be desired, is probably not to be had? The answer is no.

Many of the doleful lovers in Men and Women do not evoke great sympathy. They speak an idealized language and are stereotyped in character. There is no attempt at the kind of realism which makes stern warnings about love. We may easily see this by comparing the speakers of "One Way of Love," "Serenade at the Villa," and "The Last Ride Together" to those of "Dîs Aliter Visum" and "Youth and Art." Those in the first group are stereotypical courtly lovers bewailing their fate in an artificial and fixed world which might almost as easily be the Fifteenth Century as the Nineteenth. "Dîs Aliter Visum" and "Youth and Art," while not exhibiting the same depth of characterization as some of the dramatic monologues, nevertheless attempt to individualize their speakers, to name them or to identify them by unromantic details, and to place them in a particular and unidealized setting.

Dramatis Personae is Browning's most complete comment on modern times, on nineteenth century love and nineteenth century faith. Charlotte Watkins explains that the early reviewers disliked Browning's preference for Italian settings and the past. They liked the topicality of Dramatis Personae, and the volume was Browning's most popular thus far.⁴

⁴Charlotte Crawford Watkins, "Browning's 'Fame Within These Four Years'," Modern Language Review, 53 (1958), pp. 496-98.

The fact that nearly all of the modern characters in the volume are unhappy while the historical figures are more at peace suggests something of Browning's feelings about his own time. The Italian influence and interest in Renaissance color, society and manners, the keynote of Men and Women, is almost entirely absent from Dramatis Personae. With regard to setting, defined thus broadly, there are no pieces in the 1864 volume like "Fra Lippo Lippi," "The Statue and the Bust" or "A Grammarian's Funeral." Usually its personages are drawn from Browning's own era. Of the three historical personages who do speak--Rabbi Ben Ezra, Abt Vogler, and St. John--only the last exhibits any interest in setting at all, and that in a natural rather than societal setting. The landscape of Dramatis Personae in general resembles more closely that of "Childe Roland," often portraying desert, swamp and rock.

Despite the paucity of complete studies of Dramatis Personae, many critics have made passing generalizations. Nearly all of them have noticed the tendency of the love poems toward frustration and sorrow. Herford is one of the few to notice the differences in tone and landscape: "The world which is neither thrillingly beautiful nor grotesquely ugly, but stupidly poor, unendowed, humdrum, finds for the first time a place in his poetry" (p. 152). Just as important, the setting functions thematically and is very frequently used to illuminate the character of the speaker.

Dramatis Personae is unified by its almost uniform in-

volvement with nineteenth-century polemics as well as by its concern with religious issues. A very large number of poems in the volume refers in some way to a specific contemporary issue and often presents a highly partisan argument.⁵

This tendency toward argument leads Browning to present less complex, less ambiguous, less interesting characters. The tension between sympathy and judgment, which Langbaum saw as the distinguishing characteristic of the dramatic monologue,⁶ practically disappears from these poems in Dramatis Personae. Nowhere in the volume can one find an Andrea del Sarto or a Fra Lippo. Instead we have Rabbi Ben Ezra, Mr. Sludge, and a pale St. John. These create no tension in us. We judge easily. Our faculties of judgment are scarcely called into play.

It is the way in which Browning handles controversial subjects that is so significant, for the evolving technique has important consequences for The Ring and the Book. Browning interests himself more and more in argument at the expense of characterization. In Dramatis Personae not merely the characterization but the poetry itself suffers.

Thus, it may be seen that the stress in Dramatis Personae, with its shorter length, is on religious issues and

⁵Contemporary issues were not completely absent from Men and Women, of course. They show up in "Cleon" and "Karskish," to name only two poems. Yet here they are not treated so fully and not in precisely the same way.

⁶Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: W.W. Norton, 1957).

love. Far fewer are those poems, like many of the narratives in Men and Women, which exist purely for their own sake, for their interest in character and situation rather than their usefulness as vehicles for an idea.

A look at the Browning canon through Dramatis Personae shows us that he began by writing long poems which he published individually as volumes--Pauline, Sordello, Paracelsus--but he then began, at the same time that he was writing plays, to write short poems, monologues and soliloquies, which he usually published in miscellaneous collections such as the Dramatic Lyrics of 1842 and Dramatic Romances and Lyrics of 1845. Then, as several scholars have noticed, Browning began trying to unify these separate expressions in some way. As Roma King puts it, "Browning could not remain content ... with capturing the isolated fragments. Increasingly, he became concerned to bring his men and women together in some pattern which would suggest, if not represent, a total vision of human experience."⁷ He says, however, that The Ring and the Book is the "first major attempt after Sordello" (p. xx) to do this. Actually, the trend begins with the complementary poems, as two recent dissertations have shown. John J. Roberts in "The Companion Poems of Robert Browning" sees Browning's method as "Complimentary antithesis, the juxtaposition of elements within a poem or among several poems so as to point

⁷Roma A. King, Jr., The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. xx.

up the limitations and inadequacies of any one element or perspective while implying a higher synthesis or unity."⁸ William E. Harrold in "The Complementary Poems of Robert Browning" traces the complementary technique back as far as 1826. Like Roberts, he does not give any real attention to Dramatis Personae, possibly because in Dramatis Personae there are no obvious "sets" of poems, like "Before" and "After," "One Way of Love," "Another Way of Love." Yet, of these "sets," Harrold notes, "later demands of writing and publication led Browning to separate them,"⁹ while Dramatis Personae was the first volume in his Complete Works to be left intact rather than be divided into such categories as Dramatic Lyrics and Dramatic Romances. Men and Women, on the other hand, was so varied that Browning had no hesitation in dividing it up. The 1855 volume, which contained fifty-one poems, was never again published as a unit.¹⁰ The volume listed as Men and Women in the 1863 edition of Browning's collected works contained only thirteen poems, the rest having been listed under the two categories mentioned above.

In a very recent article, "Browning Rearranges Brown-

⁸John J. Roberts, "The Companion Poems of Robert Browning," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972), 1148-49A (Tulane).

⁹William E. Harrold, "The Complementary Poems of Robert Browning," Dissertation Abstracts, 28 (1968), 3637A (North Carolina).

¹⁰DeVane tells us that thirty poems from Men and Women were put under the title Dramatic Lyrics and twelve under the title Dramatic Romances (p. 207).

ing," Lawrence Poston addresses himself to just this issue.¹¹ He concludes that at the time Browning began arranging his poems for the 1863 edition of his works, he had a "deepening concern with the problem of illuminating theme by placement" (p. 48), and wished to create more carefully unified volumes. Thus, regarding Men and Women, "What in 1855 was a title for an outpouring of many different kinds of poems became narrowly restricted in 1863" (p.50), with increased emphasis on "artistic and religious themes" (p. 51).

Poston does not go beyond the poems of 1863; he never mentions Dramatis Personae, but the implications are clear. The 1864 volume is the first to be left intact in later editions¹² because Browning, at the time he planned it, was intensely aware of the importance of thematic juxtaposition and unity, and he was satisfied that he had achieved it in Dramatis Personae.

A comparison of the epilogues of Men and Women and Dramatis Personae is useful in showing this progress toward unity. In both Browning speaks in his own voice, as he will do later in the first and last sections of The Ring and the Book. In Men and Women, however, when Browning suddenly speaks in his own voice, one notices a change. He sounds different

¹¹Lawrence Poston, III, "Browning Rearranges Browning," Studies In Browning And His Circle, 2 (1974), pp. 39-54.

¹²There are two slight additions to the 1868 edition, but they do not disturb the unity of the volume. "Eurydice" may be said to enhance it.

from Andrea and Fra Lippo and Roland. "One Word More" is more a dedication to Mrs. Browning than any sort of thematic conclusion to the volume. He dedicates to her the private side of his soul, the man rather than the artist. The poem does conclude the volume appropriately, having some reference to the many poems on art and love, but it has no intimate thematic connection to the rest of the volume. It as easily concludes the volume of twelve poems Men and Women later became as the fifty it first crowned.

The "Epilogue" to Dramatis Personae, on the other hand, is, as DeVane agrees, "intimately related" (p. 313) to such poems as "Gold Hair," "A Death in the Desert," "Caliban," "Mr. Sludge," and "Rabbi Ben Ezra," poems that make up the great bulk of the volume. The "Epilogue" presents the questions of religious belief discussed in the volume and makes a final pronouncement on them. This concluding poem also unifies the volume through its imagery.

The repetition of imagery throughout the volume suggests a deliberate attempt to unify it. It also reveals, Browning's protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, that Browning was speaking in his own voice in several poems. The imagery, the language, the tone, all support this. Finally, the three-part argument explicitly presented in the "Epilogue" identifies the same dialectical process working slightly veiled in several of the other poems, whereby Browning sets up the skeptic's arguments only to knock them down with the logic of

religious truth.

The "Epilogue" to Dramatis Personae emphasizes the thematic unity of the volume. I do not pretend that this unity is complete, but the pervasiveness of the religious and love themes is certainly sufficient basis for considering the volume as an entity. Furthermore, binding these two themes together is another and related theme: an awareness of the mutability of all things human, an awareness which lends urgency to the search for permanency in things divine. Sometimes despairing, sometimes ecstatic, this urgency is felt especially in "James Lee's Wife," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Abt Vogler," "A Death in the Desert," "Prospice," and to some extent in "Gold Hair," "Confessions," "May and Death," and "Too Late."

Browning will face a problem throughout the volume, where, in spite of himself, he presents a suffering and despair which are genuine and moving, while the optimism he preaches is too facile to be wholly believable. As it turns out, the love poems more frequently portray grief, while the religious poems show faith and optimism.¹³ James Lee's wife's despair

¹³Swinnburne may have been more perceptive than he knew in this poem on Browning's attitude toward death. It is Browning's lovers who do not "trust" enough and, therefore, "Weep."

But never death for him was dark or dread:
"Look forth" he bade the soul, and fear not. Weep,
All ye that trust not in his truth, ...

(A.C. Swinnburne, A Sequence of Sonnets on the Death of Robert Browning, VII, (London: Printed for Private Circulation, 1890) in the British Museum, Ashley MS. 5268*.)

is convincing mostly because she is realized as a character. The same cannot be said for Rabbi Ben Ezra, St. John or Abt Vogler. In all of the best poems in Dramatis Personae there is a successful characterization and a strain of sadness.

Although in many of the poems of the volume there is little dramatic tension, there is, just as in The Ring and the Book, considerable tension among the poems. David Shaw says that Browning's dramatic monologues differ from The Ring and the Book because the various monologues present various views of different subjects,¹⁴ but, as I will show, in Dramatis Personae, although the names and some of the circumstances may be different, the poems present different views of the same subjects. Unlike the earlier volumes, Dramatis Personae is more than the sum of its parts, for the relations among the parts are part of what it has to say and demand study. As Abt Vogler says, "each tone of our scale in itself is naught." Each character who speaks is a part of the universe and a speaker of partial truths. Neither does even a partial truth remain constant for each person, for as St. John says of God, "Man apprehends Him newly at each stage," and the structure of the first poem, "James Lee's Life," is designed to show how one person's view of one situation can vary over time.

¹⁴W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper; The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 237.

CHAPTER II

JAMES LEE'S WIFE SPEAKS

Too often in Browning studies scholars have been locked into traditional "approaches" to Browning, first through biography and "philosophy," and more recently, through dramatic technique. In the last ten years or so a few critics, notably Roma King¹ and Barbara Melchiori,² have with great profit expanded the traditional focus by a close and sensitive reading of the texts of many frequently discussed poems. There are other poems, however, not highly susceptible to treatment as dramatic or philosophical pieces, which have never received the exhaustive study they deserve. One of these is "James Lee's Wife," of which Frederic Faverty has recently said, "The theme itself, the method of developing the theme, the imagery, the phraseology, the philosophical import, all these still await investigation."³

¹ Roma A. King, Jr., The Bow and the Lyre (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957).

² Barbara Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968).

³ Frederic E. Faverty, "Browning's Debt to Meredith in 'James Lee's Wife,'" in Essays in American and English Literature Presented to Bruce Robert McElderry, Jr., ed. Max F. Schulz, William D. Templeman, and Charles R. Metzger (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968), pp. 290-91.

As the introductory poem in Dramatis Personae "James Lee's Wife" deals with a theme crucial to the volume, human awareness of mutability and resulting attempts to deal with its terrors. Yet what success this poem does achieve is due to its firm rooting in a particular personality rather than to any abstract treatment of the theme, momentous as it is. Browning in this instance creates character not primarily through dramatic interaction but through the use of a personal and brilliantly expressive language for his character. Where the poem is successful, her use of words and images constantly reveals and reiterates her psychological state, frequently expressing her subconscious.

I. Revelation of personality through
image patterns

The poem consists of a series of lyrics somewhat like In Memoriam in its movement. It is unlike anything Browning had done before, but one can see the germ of this form in the companion pieces of Men and Women, pairings like "Before" and "After," "Love in a Life" and "Life in a Love." In addition, Frederic E. Faverty has made a case for the influence of Meredith's Modern Love on "James Lee's Wife."⁴ In the course of the poem the speaker moves from fear of change in her marriage to recognition and bitter acceptance of it. Thus, the series of lyrics is well suited to illustrate this theme of change.

⁴ Faverty, pp. 290-305.

There are nine lyrics in the series, each titled by the location at which she speaks. This is important because her mind frequently works through association with what she sees in front of her. She is constantly trying to understand herself by establishing relationships with and making comparisons between herself and her surroundings, often in fantasy. Because she invests everything around her with her own feelings, the reader is able to understand many feelings which she does not openly express to herself. In this way one may at times reach the subconscious level.

By the second lyric this pattern is confirmed. In the first, "James Lee's Wife Speaks at the Window," she makes an analogy between the changes she observes in the season and possible changes in her husband. Then to reassure herself she compares their relationship to seemingly stable natural relationships, those of the swan and lake, the dell and dove. In the second poem, "By the Fireside," she has a series of loosely associated fantasies in which she first compares her situation to that of imagined shipwrecked sailors and later to that of an imagined former tenant, obviously projecting her own feelings onto them.

She is also quite fond of extended metaphor and allegory as a way of exploring her experience. In the fourth lyric, "Along the Beach," she makes a rather labored comparison of her husband to the earth, and in both the fifth and seventh lyrics she draws from her observation of nature a moral applicable to her own life. These are all conscious

comparisons which she is making, but they justify us in seeing the many unconscious comparisons which she also expresses. In poem "III," for example, before we read the last line, "My heart shrivels up and my spirit shrinks curled,"⁵ we are already justified in seeing implicit analogies in stanza II. It is through the interpretation of such images that her nature becomes apparent.

Especially prominent throughout "James Lee's Wife" are images of passivity and dependency. The title identifies her, whose name we never learn, as an appendage of her husband. From the very first poem she defines her position as the weaker member of the pair. The embrace she envisions in stanza III makes her an object in grammatical terms--the "me" beginning the last two lines is insistent --and in visual terms since she is below and surrounded:

And for thee--(oh, haste!)
 Me, to bend above,
 Me, to hold embraced.

The interpolated command, which is really a plea, increases one's sense of her need. Her idea of happiness is to have all the support she requires. A particularly revealing image in "II" pictures her and her husband as the "happy freight" of "the warm safe house." She derives pleasure from seeing them as mere transported goods so long as it is a "safe" ship which carries them.

⁵ All quotations from Dramatis Personae are from Robert Browning, Works, ed. F. G. Kenyon (1912; rept. New York: AMS Press, 1966).

Similar feelings show themselves indirectly in "V" in the way she sees nature. It is hardly necessary to read the last stanza to see that she identifies herself with the turf and the rock. Both are "level and low," and both are acted upon by natural forces. The sun has destroyed the grass, and sun and surf have joined to render barren the rock, which, like the anvil, is constantly pounded. The grammatical constructions of these thoughts emphasize the passive element. The rock has been "Left dry by the surf." This is an odd way of saying that the water has never reached it; it just hints at a positive intent on the part of the surf. The rock has also been "Baked dry" by the aggressive action of the sun against it. Both expressions achieve prominence by coming at the beginning of a line.

This feeling of being constantly acted upon reaches a climax in VI, "Reading a Book, Under the Cliff." Here she considers man's place in the universe, that is, of course, man's place as she sees it:

Simple? Why this is the old woe o' the world;
Tune, to whose rise and fall we live and die.
Rise with it, then! Rejoice that man is hurled
From change to change unceasingly,
His soul's wings never furled!

Here the image is of complete helplessness before external powers and the lack of any solid ground or resting place whatsoever. All she can do is attempt to control her attitude toward her predicament, but the attempt is a failure: "We moan in acquiescence: there's life's pact." Her use

of "pact" is a bit ironic, for where there is no choice, there can be no real "pact."

Since the main subject of the poem is her relationship to James Lee, however, her dependent nature assumes most importance in this context. When she addresses him in "IV," she justifies her behavior by pointing out:

"I took you--how could I otherwise?
For a world to me, and more;

Even after many disappointments, she insists, "The man was my whole world, all the same." Even at the end when she looks back on her devotion with bitterness, she nonetheless holds it up as a virtue with which to shame him:

Well, you may, you must, set down to me
Love that was life, life that was love;
A tenure of breath at your lips' decree,
A passion to stand as your thoughts approve,
A rapture to fall where your foot might be.

One has the sense here that she literally waits for his command to breathe. Yet he seems to wield power over her out of all proportion to his effort or intention. It is her need to have an external authority, as she evidences by her use of "decree" and "approve," that causes her to deliver up all her power and to invest him with it. The last line of the stanza indicates her desire for total submission, with the pleasures it brings.

Of course, she feels proud of her unqualified devotion because of her idea of what love should be. The second section of VIII, "Beside the Drawing Board," in which she creates the romantic story of the princess and the artist,

illuminates this idea:

Princess-like it wears the ring
 To fancy's eye, by which we know
 That here at length a master found
 His match, a proud lone soul its mate,
 As soaring genius sank to ground,
 And pencil could not emulate
 The beauty in this,--

Love here is a union between equals--of a sort. The woman has great beauty, which draws the man to love her, but he has power: he is the "master," the "genius;" he places the ring on her finger to make her one with him. Naturally there is some wishful thinking going on here, since the speaker's marriage is not quite like the one she describes here.

In the last lyric she describes the kind of union she would like to have with her husband:

Your soul's locked fast; but, love for a key,
 You might let it loose, till I grew the same
 In your eyes, as in mine you stand: strange plea!

For then, then, what would it matter to me
 That I was the harsh ill-favoured one?
 We both should be like as pea and pea;

In this vision of love, the lovers are not merely equals but actually the same. In a somewhat different context in "VIII" she had rejected the proverb "As like as a Hand to another Hand" because she was trying to assert her worth of the individual. What she would really like, as this last lyric shows, is to avoid coping with the problem of her individual worth. If she blends completely with her husband, then she automatically has a valued identity.

Because she seeks shelter in this way within the circle of his identity, we frequently see her thinking in terms of images of enclosure. The swan and the dove with which she compares herself in the first lyric are small objects surrounded by the large lake and dell. In the embrace she pictures, she is the smaller encircled by the larger. The image of the "happy freight," in "II," mentioned before, is an image of this kind as is her assertion in "IV" that her husband is a "world" to her. The ring on the lady's hand in "VIII" is like the comforting circle of the embrace in "I," since the hand is used to represent the whole person throughout. And, of course, the ring symbolizes the marital union, which to the speaker involves complete mutual absorption. The way in which she defines "Love that was life, life that was love," the very syntax, demonstrates her problem. She lives in a world circumscribed by love, letting nothing else in:

How strange it were if you had all me,
As I have all you in my heart and brain.

Perhaps for this very reason the circle or enclosure she longs to be in becomes a suffocating trap. Toward the middle and end of the poem these feelings of suffocation become more intense. In "VI" as she puts herself in the place of the young poet in order to criticize him, she sees "failure and mistake, / Relinquishment, disgrace, on every side," and is unable to condone pert optimism in such a situation. It is the young man's facile poetry, as she considers it,

which provokes her meditation on change and death:

Here is the change beginning, here the lines
Circumscribe beauty, set to bliss
The limit time assigns.

Here she grieves that she is trapped inside the circle of mortality. She expresses the same feeling through a different metaphor when she speaks of death as a "wave" that comes suddenly, drags one down and suffocates by drowning. The feeling is similar to that of her fearful fantasy in "II," where the bottom drops out of her boat to "open hell beneath/ Unawares."

Even in "VIII" where she imagines Leonardo Da Vinci offering her comforting advice, there is an image of confinement:

'Shall earth and the cramped moment-space
'Yield the heavenly crowning grace?

In this expressive image there is the sense of limitation in both space and time. Time is made into a room which is too small, uncomfortable, "cramped." Within a line or two images of deprivation absolutely rage:

'Who art thou, with stunted soul
'And stunted body, thus to cry
'"I love,--shall that be life's strait dole?

"Stunted" and "stunted" both indicate the hindering of growth, while "stunted" has the additional implication of having a limited allowance of something, very much like "dole," a grudging distribution. "Strait," of course, may mean either narrow or distressful. Finally, even as she leaves her husband, she is still not free, for his "words

and looks will, circling, flee/ Round me and round while
life endures."

Why does the embrace of "I" become this inescapable trap? Why should she have such ambivalent feelings toward the image of enclosure? The attractions for such a woman of being totally engulfed are obvious: security, identity, and a sense of worth. Such a situation is a trap, however, because she never has the power to control her own life. Her entire well-being depends on something outside herself, a state which fills her with anger and despair. Because she equates life with love, nothing but love can console her. She carries away from her marriage a sense of her own inadequacies and a need for her husband which cannot be satisfied.

It is a tribute to Browning's skill and insight that nearly all of the images she thinks in reflect this psychological state. Since she depends so completely on her husband, she must strive desperately to keep him with her. This aggressive element in her passivity shows itself in images of grasping and possessiveness. In the fourth lyric she recognizes that he is uncomfortable with the "bond" her love has created. In the sixth her most fervent desires are pictured in terms of drawing in and grasping:

To draw one beauty into our hearts' core,
And keep it changeless! such our claim;

and:

Only, for man, how bitter not to grave
 On his soul's hands' palms one fair good wise thing
 Just as he grasped it!

Similarly in "VIII" she sees herself as trying to hold "the grace that somehow slips/ Still from one's soulless fingertips." Finally, in "IX" when she has lost hope, she wishes for the "key" which might unlock his soul. She sees him as resisting her, withholding what she wants to grasp.

This last is also part of an image pattern of opening and shutting, expansion and contraction. Her joyful expectations about love are nearly always reflected in a sense of expansiveness. She represents the beginning of love in "II" as "Love's voyage full-sail." The analogy is to a ship moving freely before the wind, its sail unfurled and swelled. In "IV" she pictures the rewards of love as the "flow" of "rivers of oil and wine." There is the sense of richness and plenty, of a flow which is forceful and unobstructed. The emotional reality, however, is reflected in images of contraction and diminution. These are especially prominent in "III," in which she contemplates regretfully the passing of summer. First there is the fig-tree she personifies, which has "furled/ Her five fingers." Then there is her response or what we may consider a more direct expression of the feelings responsible for the personification: "My heart shrivels up and my spirit shrinks curled." These are forebodings which are realized in her self portrait at the end of the poem:

Why, fade you might to a thing like me,
 And your hair grow these coarse hanks of hair,
 Your skin, this bark of a gnarled tree,--
 You might turn myself!--should I know or care
 When I should be dead of joy, James Lee?

"Shrivel," "shrink," and "fade" are words which bear related connotations. "Shrivel" and "fade" are both associated with aging and the loss of beauty. "Shrink" and to some extent "fade" are associated with retreat and loss of identity. It should be noted in this context that this last stanza is the first occasion in the poem that the speaker addresses her husband by name. At first she thought of him with herself as "thee and me" and later as "you" and "I." This appears to be the first time she has recognized him as a separate person with the subsequent confusion of her own identity.

A more conspicuous group of images relates to birds, wings and flight. There is some reference to one of these in at least seven of the nine poems. The "bird estranged" of the first stanza becomes an important symbol throughout "James Lee's Wife." This phrase is striking because the singular is used to represent the plural and because the modifier is one which usually describes relationships between people, especially lovers. Twice in the poem a male figure is represented as having the power of flight. In fantasy the princess-like woman is able to attract the artist to her "As soaring genius sank to ground." In reality, she must sing of her husband a bitter song: "How the light,

light love, he has wings to fly/ At suspicion of a bond." Wings have important implications in this poem, for they are a sign of strength and freedom. The husband or bird can fly out of her reach, away from her, while she must remain stationary.

It is true that she sometimes thinks of herself as a bird, but never as a bird climbing freely; the swan is on the lake; the dove is inside the valley. When in "VI" she pictures the plight of man with "His soul's wings never furred," she imagines a pathetic creature buffeted by winds too strong for it.

She is at her most characteristic in "VI" where it is clear that she identifies with the rock and turf. They are immobile objects, abused and ugly, while the winged creatures are beautiful and strong. She sees the fragile cricket as a "warhorse, barded and chanfroned too" at the same time that she recognizes its delicacy, calling it a "Real fairy, with wings all right." Her description of the butterfly is equally paradoxical. Though its wings flutter like a lady's fan, they sizzle and scorch like fire. That she should see these tiny creatures in such a way is not really surprising, for if one sees oneself as helpless, one inevitably sees everything else as powerful:

Fall two red fans of a butterfly:
No turf, no rock: in their ugly stead,
See, wonderful blue and red!

Is it not so
With the minds of men?

The level and low,
 The burnt and bare, in themselves; but then
 With such a blue and red grace, not theirs,--
 Love settling unawares!

Perhaps the most significant element in these lines is the colon after "butterfly." It indicates an important omission, the process by which the ugly is transformed into the beautiful, that is, the process by which people are transformed by love. She sees it as sudden, mysterious and magical, dropping from the sky and giving her a new identity. It depends on nothing within her but comes entirely from without.

So it is that she is happy whenever a bird alights and disquieted when it flies away. The threatening mood of "In the Doorway" begins with the swallow, looking seaward, its time for migration come at summer's end. The third stanza mentions the magpie which now comes very infrequently. Its absence leads her to questions about her own feelings:

But why must cold spread? but wherefore bring
 change/ To the spirit,
 God meant should mate his with an infinite range
 And inherit
 His power to put life in the darkness and cold?

The way she relates to God is similar to the way she relates to nature and to her husband. Naturally there is a theology to support her in a general way, but she bases her religion mostly upon her emotions. God is the ultimate protector to whom she can turn. Although she does not understand the workings of the universe or the reason for the pain she suffers, she abruptly asserts, "God does: endure his act!"

Especially in "Beside the Drawing Board" one has the sense of God's hand shaping and molding the individual and his destiny. It is to God that she looks to make up for and to justify her sufferings. He will drop down upon her, like the butterfly on the rock, his "heavenly crowning grace." This grace will perhaps make her beautiful as love has failed to do.

Her beauty is a cause of much concern throughout the poem. In the beginning when she feels secure with her husband, she describes herself by analogy with beautiful things, the swan and the dove. But by the time of her talk with him in "Along the Beach," she has begun to "weary and wear." When she thinks in "VI" of change, the first thought that comes to mind is loss of beauty:

Then, when the wind begins among the vines,
 So low, so low, what shall it say but this?
 'Here is the change beginning, here the lines
 'Circumscribe beauty, set to bliss
 'The limit times assigns.'

Nothing can be as it has been before;
 Better so call it, only not the same.
 To draw one beauty into our hearts' core,
 And keep it changeless! such our claim;
 So answered,--Never more!

One may say that she is not speaking here of personal or physical beauty but of the beautiful things she possesses. In her mind, however, there is no such distinction, for she feels she has no intrinsic beauty, only the shadow cast by what is beautiful around her. "Beside the Drawing Board" is one long discussion about what beauty consists of. She

compares the God-given beauty of the peasant hand to the superficial beauty of the clay cast. Since she identifies with the former, she tries to minimize the importance of physical beauty, chiding herself with foolishness for her need to "live beloved or die." Here again she is saying indirectly that beauty is attainable only by being loved. She is fierce with herself because she needs desperately to believe what she is saying. That she is unsuccessful in this is shown by her constant references to her appearance at the end of the poem. She would like James Lee to see her as she sees him, with "dear" eyes and a "bright . . . brow." Because he does not see her in this way, she is unable to see herself as attractive. Thus, the self-portrait she leaves us with is one of grotesque ugliness: the coarse hair, the gnarled skin, the woman "dead of joy."

In fact, this last line startles the reader. It is probably a dramatic way of saying "empty of joy" or "lacking joy," although another possible reading is "dead from joy at your misfortune." In any case, the mention of death here is somewhat shocking. Yet the end of the marriage is a kind of death for her. Throughout the poem her fears of loss of love have been accompanied by visions of death. In "By the Fireside" she takes her "chance" as the sailors took theirs, for in loving, as in sailing, lies the possibility of dying. The way of death she pictures for herself is grimmer than the shipwreck she imagines for them. A

particularly vivid projection of her fears occurs in "III:"
 "How the vines writhe in rows, each impaled on its stake!"
 In "On the Cliff" she is pained by the lifelessness of the
 scene. The grass is "Dead to the roots, so deep was done/
 The work of the summer sun," and the rock:

Baked dry; of a weed, of a shell, no trace,
 Sunshine outside, but ice at the core,
 Death's altar by the lone shore.

Here also, with the sacrificial altar to Death, there is a
 hint of martyrdom. And later in another vision of the shore
 in "VI," death is a "wave" which drags away what one loves.

To her all change is death. She views it only as a
 negative force which may deprive her of what she has strug-
 gled to gain. For this reason time assumes so threatening
 an aspect. In the first lyric she expresses a strong sense
 of its swiftness and instability. The "year," by definition
 is "changing." She appeals to her husband to "haste" before
 time can work its treachery. In the next lyric, however, she
 sees its even greater potential for slow destruction:

"through worms i' the wood, which crept,/ Gnawed our hearts
 out while we slept:/ That is worse." Time is her enemy in
 "IV" because it slowly exhausts her and siphons away her
 youth: "Yet this turns now to a fault--there! there!/ That
 I do love, watch too long,/ And wait too well, and weary and
 wear." She frequently personifies units of time, making them
 active and masterful. In "VI," where she deals with this sub-
 ject directly, she speaks of "kind/ Calm years, exacting

their accompt/ of pain." Growing increasingly conscious of life's duration, she personifies the "next minute" which wields the awful power to "annul." In the same poem "time assigns" a "limit" and "time first washes" over everything valuable to man. In all of these examples time is the master of people.

In the sixth and the eighth lyrics she turns to Christianity as a bulwark against time. In "VI" she seems merely to be groping for any comfort she can find. She introduces the idea that this life is a "probation" for the next, an idea which is a welcome suggestion to her at this point but far from a certainty. In "VII," on the other hand, she has marshalled her forces and given herself a thorough sermon on the necessity of looking beyond the pains of time to the joys of eternity. How much real assurance she achieves may be doubted since the last poem, "On Deck," hardly finds her serene because of her expectations of heaven.

Related to her fears about death are images of sterility and emptiness. Strong negative words are marked, particularly near the end of the poem. There is, for example, the beautiful scene in "VI" which she predicts "Next minute must annul." This verb is enormously negative; it does not merely change the scene but obliterates it. Another negative word, "nothing," is very conspicuous in the poem: In "VI" she says, "Nothing can be as it has been before," and "Nothing

endures: the wind moans, saying so;" and finally in "IX:"

There is nothing to remember in me,
 Nothing I ever said with a grace,
 Nothing I did that you care to see,
 Nothing I was that deserves a place
 In your mind, now I leave you, set you free.

When she is trying to encourage herself, she mocks this pessimistic attitude: "Art is null and study void!" is the doctrine Leonardo Da Vinci argues against. Yet at the end she is still seeing sterility in everything.

She indirectly accuses her husband of sterility in "Along the Beach." Even before they married, there was "much in [him] waste, with many a weed,/ And plenty of passions run to seed." Now after the marriage she speaks of the "failure" of the rich harvest she had expected. Yet she sees herself as even more barren, identifying in "VI" with the rock which has not even a remnant of life, a shell or a weed. Like the grass, she is "burnt and bare," exhausted and unproductive. Outside the house in which they live is the sterile field "red and rough,/ Though it yield there,/ For the rabbit that robs, scarce a blade or a bent:" The rabbit intensifies the sense of absolute poverty in the scene.

One can only guess at the nature of their sexual relationship. It is apparent that they have no children and do not actively think of having any. Most indicative is that most of the symbolism which is sexual in a Freudian sense is menacing. The worms in the wood in "II" remind one of

Andrew Marvell's line, "Worms shall try that long preserv'd
 Virginitie," but the picture here is perhaps a bit more
 gruesome. In "III" when the weather turns ominous, "The
 water's in stripes like a snake, olive pale/ To the leeward."
 The vines also have something of the snake about them as
 they "writhe in rows, each impaled on its stake." The im-
 plications of torture in this line have been pointed out
 earlier, but they are also clearly sexual. Whatever the
 relations between James Lee and his wife, we are certainly
 justified in assuming that all is not right with them in
 this area.

II. Structure and Development of "James Lee's Wife"

Although I have treated "James Lee's Wife" as one long
 poem in order to present an overall view of the speaker's
 personality, it is actually nine separate poems, each with
 its own meter, rhyme scheme and stanza form, and each of
 which advances the progress of the whole in its own way.

1. "James Lee's Wife Speaks at the Window"

The first poem is very important in establishing the
 speaker's relationship to the natural world and to her hus-
 band. It apparently takes place early in their marriage but
 not too early for ominous notes to sound. As she speaks
 from a sheltered position inside the house looking out, she
 presents in the first stanza a rather subjective view of the
 changes in the natural scene. In the second stanza she

questions whether her husband will also change. In the third she ignores the questions to make a blind assertion of relationship:

Thou art a man,
 But I am thy love.
 For the lake, its swan;
 For the dell, its dove;

Here as in stanza I she makes an analogy with nature, but nature as seen through literary sources, the swan and dove, rather than the "estranged" bird which she believes is actually outside her window. The swan, of course, is traditionally noted for its grace; the dove for its gentleness, especially through its frequent use as a term of endearment in the Song of Solomon. One thinks of Solomon 5,02--"Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled--"⁶ or Solomon 2.14:

O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice, for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.

Even in the first stanza, however, there is some distance between her and nature. She picks out a few significant details to stand for the whole scene: world, sun, bird, wind, sky. Usually she takes comfort in simple and familiar language, but here the modifiers are all negative. We see later the exact meaning of "the world has changed" when we understand that her husband is her "world." The sun has

⁶ All Biblical quotations are from The Holy Bible in the King James Version.

abandoned her, the bird is alienated, the wind no longer speaks to her, and the sky is disordered. Like that of the bird, its modifier is more properly applied to people than to objects. Browning frequently cements this relationship of noun and modifier through consonance. The repetition of the "d" sound in "bird," "world," "wind," and "estranged," "changed," "dropped" links the noun and modifier more closely and also emphasizes the similarity of feeling in the lines. The last line of the stanza--"Summer has stopped"--indicates disorder by its abruptness. Seasons generally do not "stop" suddenly like machines switched off, but Browning emphasizes the abruptness. This last line is different from all the others. It is the only one whose first syllable is stressed as well as the last, giving the line a kind of circular self-sufficiency; and it is the only line with conspicuous alliteration. Finally it ends with a dental stop the stanza which began with a long voweled sigh.

The whole poem is intensely structured. The parallelism throughout indicates a closed world where one thing follows another inevitably and where there is no room for options. The and which begins lines two, four and six builds a pattern in which each of the pieces must contribute something negative.

The speaker moves to the second stanza by analogy. She obviously regards her husband much as she does the

weather, as a force beyond her control to which she is subject. Although she commands him, "Look in my eyes!" the tone of command is undercut by the three questions which follow. Lines 9 and 10 are short rapid questions provoked by sudden fear. The third question, which is long, emphasizes the comforting monosyllables, the "old and dear," "the good and true."

The structure of the last stanza reveals much of her thinking about their relationship. First there is a statement of definition: "Thou art a man./ But I am thy love." Why "but?" Is it that to be a man means to be untrue? Does "love" in some way alter a man's basic nature? Obviously she believes the answer to these questions is "yes." These first two lines are in a natural word order. They establish a relationship which the other lines imitate although the verbs are left unexpressed.

For the lake, its swan;
 For the dell, its dove;
 And for thee--(oh, haste!)
 Me, to bend above,
 Me, to hold embraced.

The implication is that the lovers by definition belong together and are inseparable. The interjected command breaks up the pattern, reminding the reader that there is an element of volition in the union of lovers. The separation of the "thee" and "me" also lends an almost sexual sense of urgency for completion, which the last two lines provide. Rhythmically these lines provide a cadence, being one beat

longer than the other lines and having an initial stressed syllable.

II. "By The Fireside"

"By The Fireside" is a natural counterpart to the first lyric. Here, those fears that the woman had tried to avoid in conscious thought reappear more violently in fantasy. This poem is practically a stream of consciousness monologue, moving from thought to thought by association with very little external prompting. First she asks a question which is itself based on a fantasy, and then she builds upon it. She projects her own feeling of "woe" onto the sailors she imagines, then makes an analogy between herself and them. In the second stanza she makes another conjecture about the fire, using it to establish a relationship with sailors possibly alive at that moment, perhaps hating her for her supposed happiness. Drawing on the analogy of the first stanza and responding to the second stanza, she compares her marriage to a ship. Finally she wonders about the people who may have lived on the ship before them. She is not consciously creating metaphors for the purpose of explaining something as she will do in "Along The Beach." Rather we have the sense of a mind drifting from topic to topic on the basis of rather slight connections.

The stanzaic pattern is worked to emphasize bitterness and decay. The two short lines, rhyming c,c (that is, the third rhyme in each stanza), usually

focus attention on some unhappy thought or picture:

The dim dead woe
Long ago

Drenched and stark
From their bark

Rot and rust
Run to dust.

Here also, as in other parts of the poem, alliteration, assonance and consonance underline the more mournful elements. The alternation of long and short lines lends a sort of disjointed quality to the speeches which is appropriate to wandering thought. There is not the same intensely structured form which we found in the first lyric. The syntax is more like ordinary speech, consisting of longer sentences and having more modifiers and more variety in general.

The speaker's first thought when she fixes on the fire is that it must signal someone's misery. The coast she sees as a place of danger for herself and for others. Although in the second stanza the fire is "ruddy," a word one usually associates with health and well being, it calls up for her the grim picture of the drenched sailors who envy her and "gnash their teeth for hate," forming a tableau of helpless rage and frustration. In the third stanza she allows herself to see that she is subject to such danger even in the security of the embrace:

For some ships, safe in port indeed,
 Rot and rust,
 Run to dust,
All through worms i' the wood, which crept,
Gnawed our hearts out while we slept:
 That is worse.

In this image the marital bed becomes their grave. The sudden shift from the third person to the first person and from the present tense to the past tense resolves any question of personal reference at the same time that it gives the reader the sense of hearing an accidental revelation, the result of associations coming too swiftly in the speaker's mind. It is as though she already knows the results of the "chance" she takes in the first stanza. The judgment, "That is worse" heightens the sense of finality.

In a last attempt to find company for her misery, she asks, "Who lived here before us two?" and cements the identification with the imaginary couple by rhyming "who" and "two." The doomed love voyage of the former tenants becomes her own when, as in the preceding stanza, she suddenly switches tense, this time from past to present:

Did a woman ever--would I knew!--
 Watch the man
 With whom began
 Love's voyage full-sail,--(Now, gnash your teeth!)
 When planks start, open hell beneath
 Unawares?

As she grows more emotional, her language becomes agitated. She interrupts herself twice, the first time to express a wish, the second to make a fierce and anguished command. It is not entirely clear to whom this imperative is addressed, perhaps to the sailors of stanza II to prove they have no cause for envy, perhaps to herself in her wretchedness. In any case, the repeated reference to the gnashing of teeth prepares for the vision of hell at the end of the poem, as

does her absorption with the painful possibilities of fire. One thinks of the constant references in the New Testament to hell as a place of gnashing of teeth, as, for example, in Matthew 13.42 where it is predicted that the wicked will be thrown "into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." The ship that turns to dust in stanza III also calls up Biblical associations of man's mortality and unworthiness.

III. "In The Doorway"

In fact, although Biblical allusions are not conspicuous in the poem, it is evident that a knowledge of the Bible underlies it. It is surely no accident that in the third lyric, "In The Doorway," the only plants mentioned as in the garden are vines and fig trees. These are paired over and over again in the Old Testament till they become almost symbols of man's condition, his fertility, or, as in this example from Joel 1.11-12, infertility or misfortune:

Be ye ashamed, O ye husbandmen; howl, O ye
vinedressers, for the wheat and for the barley;
because the harvest of the field is perished.
The vine is dried up, and the fig tree languisheth.

What seems relevant here is that the beauty and peace of the lover with his dove in the garden has vanished. In the Song of Solomon (2.13) where love is alive, "The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell."

Here, as in "I" the changes in the landscape reflect

and intensify the speaker's uneasiness about her marriage. In fact, the general development of this poem is like that of "I." There her observation of nature led to questions about her relationship, which she then answered by assertions about the nature of love. Here, after two stanzas of such observations, she makes a weak assertion that does not really comfort her. She then actually confronts her fears by questioning, finally disposing of them as in "I" with an assertion of faith.

Yet the effect of this lyric is somewhat different. It is far more sensuous and immediate than the earlier one. Visually the first two stanzas resemble a Van Gogh painting, an agitated landscape composed of individual whirls and dots. The swallow and her young in the first stanza are so many dots perched on a line. "The water's in stripes" of olive and black with white spots. The vines in the second stanza are represented by the same snake-like wavy lines which "writhe" against the diagonal of the leaning fig tree.

Since this is a poem, however, it is the attention to sound which increases its sensuousness. In the first stanza there is constant repetition of the "s" ("swallow," "sea-ward," "has," "set," "sex," "stripes," "snake," "departs," "disasters," "wants"), "w" ("swallow," "sea-ward," "water," "lee-ward," "weather," "white," "with," "wind," "wants," "wail"), and "l" sounds ("swallow," "rail," "looks," "like," "olive-pale"). In the second stanza the "f" and "r" sounds

are prominent as well as the "s" and "l." This poem has far more sound repetition than "I" and "II" as well as more concrete detail. Although it is still highly subjective, it appears to have more correspondence to reality than "I," which was so general in diction and so highly structured in form, and more than "II," which was so internal and convoluted. The syntax here is more prosaic; the lines are longer. Although the long lines have only four feet, they give the impression of greater length since three of them are usually anapestic. The short lines, furthermore, are usually said in the same breath with them since the short ones are rarely preceded by punctuation. The whole effect is closer to spoken conversation.

After the disturbing vision of the first two stanzas, James Lee's wife begins to protest against what she sees, but her protest drifts almost unconsciously to another complaint, as in the third stanza she anticipates the harshness of winter which will "rebuff" or drive away the few remaining living creatures. Now the visual imagery is less detailed, for she is rationalizing rather than describing what is actually in front of her. The alliteration of "red and rough," "rabbit that robs," and "blade or bent" seems forced rather than sensuous.

Neither is the last stanza, which is almost entirely abstract, very effective. The second question is rather an awkward mouthful of jumbled ideas:

But why must cold spread? But wherefore bring change
 To the spirit,
 God meant should mate his with an infinite range,
 And inherit
 His power to put life in the darkness and cold?

Then there is a balanced and poetically ordered assertion:

Oh, live and love worthily, bear and be bold!
 Whom Summer made friends of, let Winter estrange!

These lines are different from what precedes them because they are more rhetorical and more forceful in tone. The energy in these imperatives seems, however, to have come out of nowhere. It follows such a weak and undramatic expression as "power to put life into," and seems to depend too heavily on the exclamation points to make it credible. The alliterated phrases, as in the previous stanza, seem forced. They are intended to increase the epigrammatic nature of the lines in order to increase their authority.

One may say that these lines are characteristic of the speaker, that it is she who is trying to support her wishes by making them seem authoritative. Certainly the sentence structure is characteristic of her. Within the clause "Whom Summer made friends of" she and her husband are seen as acted upon and joined by a powerful external force. The whole clause then becomes the object of "let Winter estrange," as power shifts to another external force.

The cadence, however, is a bit too military, resembling the tone of Browning's "Cavalier Tunes." The speaker's attempt to rally herself by sheer force of will causes

Browning to get into trouble. Throughout the poem assertions of optimism or faith will sound a false note. In itself this is no fault, for it is quite in character for James Lee's wife to rationalize. Unfortunately, at such times Browning seems to lose control of the distance between himself and his speaker. Rather than focusing on her thought processes, he focuses on her unconvincing solutions. He glorifies them by elevated language and seems to be advancing them as pieces of wisdom from which we all can profit. Since they do not address the woman's real problems and do not seem to help her, these sermonizings merely make the reader uncomfortable and distract from what is really a fine psychological portrait.

IV. "Along The Beach"

The fourth lyric, "Along The Beach," appears to be spoken after much of the speaker's pain has been digested through long and careful thought. In it she tries to make sense of her feelings and her situation by a rational exploration of her relationship with James Lee. Yet throughout there is a tone of suppressed excitement which breaks through the rational structure and in the end takes over.

This lyric comes closer than any of the previous ones to imitating ordinary conversation. The rhythm is varied; the stanzas consist of short conversational units of five lines, giving one a sense of the progression of an argument in small detailed bits. She confronts each step, disposes

of it and goes on, creating an impression of close scrutiny.

The first two stanzas begin her argument for the most part methodically. In the first, for example, the sentences are short and to the point, almost choppy in an attempt to be concise:

You wanted my love--is that much true?
And so I did love, so I do:
What has come of it all along?

The rhythm is very insistent, especially in the middle line here, as is the repetition of words and the parallel structure, all reflecting her intense possessiveness. The lack of much obvious alliteration or assonance is a result of her effort to be rational rather than subjective or sensuous.

She appears throughout to be defending herself against the accusation that she demands and expects too much from her husband, but she does not seem to win her case. The very fact that he remains her "whole world" is the "fault" he finds with her. Indeed, her whole argument is useless, for they each appear to operate from different premises as to what love should be. She tries to justify her complete absorption in him by asserting that God and Love magnify him, implicitly denying that she has been in any way reduced:

For all, love greatens and glorifies
Till God's a-glow, to the loving eyes,
In what was mere earth before.

We note that as she elaborates this great principle, the "g" alliteration "elevates" the style, and we see Browning in the background pulling strings and getting tangled up in them as

he supports a proposition which increases the self-destructive potential of his character. What she needs is a more realistic appraisal of the possibilities of love. This kind of idealism leads her to the false expectations which result in her disappointment.

In any case, by the third stanza she begins to lose her battle for a completely rational presentation of her case. The logical and controlled syntax begins to disappear:

Yes, earth--yes, mere ignoble earth!
 Now do I mis-state, mistake?
 Do I wrong your weakness and call it worth?
 Expect all harvest, dread no dearth,
 Seal up my sense for your sake?

Line 1 contains repeated and fragmented exclamations. In the second line she doubles her verb. Lines 2 through 5 are a series of short repetitious questions which lead up to the outburst in the next stanza, "Oh, Love, Love, no, Love! not so, indeed!" Then she gains control again by returning to her carefully worked out metaphor of the earth. By stanza 7 her feelings have again burst out of the rigid delineation of the metaphor, and she abandons it completely:

Yet this turns now to a fault--there! there!
 That I do love, watch too long,
 And wait too well, and weary and wear;
 And 't is all an old story, and my despair
 Fit subject for some new song:

The emotion first breaks out in the interruption--"there! there!"--then flows freely. The succession of alliterated verbs and the sentences strung together with "and" express

emotional exhaustion. Finally, she actually sings her bitter song as a sign of the failure of her argument.

As in the other lyrics, there is a good deal of natural imagery in "IV," though the central metaphor is not so evocative. It is a conscious analogy, used as the scaffolding for an argument. It never becomes visual, nor does it express intense feeling. The woman speaks, of course, in autumn at harvest time. She compares her husband to the earth from which come all rewards, thus making a direct link between him and the actual natural landscape which she constantly uses as an index of the happiness of her marriage. Both are worlds on which she is dependent and over which she has no control. The Biblical references in this lyric pick up the earlier ones in "I" and "III." She feels she has been led to expect the thriving garden, the fertile land:

For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land,
a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths
that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat
and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates;
a land of oil olive, and honey; (Deuteronomy 8.7-8)

We saw in "III," however, that just as in Egypt where God "smote their vines also and their fig trees" (Psalms 105.33); the prophecy did not come true. Here in "IV" she reiterates her disappointment.

The earth metaphor is also a way of distancing herself from the problems of the I-you relation. It makes discussion a little less painful by being indirect. Similarly, in the song she sings, she uses abstractions to stand in for her and

James Lee: "'My wisdom has bidden your pleasure good-bye,/
 'Which will turn up next in a laughing eye," The
 "laughing eye" is a protective indirection too. The whole
 song, in fact, is a sign of detachment, reflecting her abil-
 ity to see her situation from the outside. Its bitterness
 is partly due to what she feels is the cheapening of her
 love, which is not "Fit subject" for a common, vulgar roman-
 tic song. She has always seen her love in fantasies more
 literary, more elevated, partaking of Medieval Romance and
 chivalry. Such fantasies have, of course, facilitated her
 disappointment.

V. "On The Cliff"

The fifth lyric finds her alone on the cliff in another
 autumn piece. She appears depressed but is nonetheless able
 to cheer herself by a reaffirmation of the value of love.
 She studies the rock and the turf in detail, observing the
 effect on them of a cricket and a butterfly. These lead her
 to a perception about the nature of love.

All of the emphasis is on the objects rather than on
 the speaker so that through her thoughts about these objects
 we learn about her. The images are more evocative than those
 in the preceding poem, where they were mere equivalents; here
 they elicit much more than is summed up by the little "moral"
 at the end. I have already pointed out the passivity and
 worthlessness the speaker attributes to the rock and turf
 and the power and beauty she attributes to the cricket and

butterfly. I would now merely like to indicate how Browning utilizes various technical devices to emphasize these qualities.

The first stanza is very tightly constructed, as, in fact, are all the stanzas. Although it is punctuated as one long sentence, the stanza consists of many short units. This creates a staccatto effect which is more dramatic than ordinary speech. The first two lines indicate a similarity between the turf and rock by the parallel structure:

I leaned on the turf,
I looked at a rock
Left to dry by the surf;
For the turf, to call it grass were to mock:
Dead to the roots, so deep was done
The work of the summer sun.

The lack of a comma at the end of line 2 emphasizes that the condition of dryness and isolation is not an incidental but an inseparable quality of the rock. The adjective "dead" introduces line 5. It also has attention drawn to it by being the first syllable to be stressed following the full stop at the colon. The "d" alliteration in the line fixes it in our memories longer. "Deep" and "done," which are also stressed syllables, together with the convoluted syntax, emphasize the qualities of the object and what has been done to it.

"Lay," the only verb in stanza II, calls attention to the rock's prone position. In line 4 the modifier "Baked dry" comes first for the same reasons and with the same effect as "Left Dry" in the previous stanza. The parallelism

and inversion of the rest of that line point to the barrenness of the last words in the line, "no trace." The last two lines, which dispense with even verb parts, add to the awkward syntax which in this stanza gives the impression of labored rather than free flowing thought.

This strange syntax continues into the next stanza where the subject comes last and is negated:

On the turf, sprang gay
 With his films of blue,
 No cricket, I'll say,
 But a warhorse, barded and chanfroned too,
 The gift of a quixote-mage to his knight,
 Real fairy, with wings all right.

Since what the speaker perceives first are the qualities of the cricket, she is able to convert it to a fairy warhorse. She appears to be well acquainted with Medieval chivalry, familiar even with the various parts of the armor. What she does here, as in the first lyric, is to transform the natural through intellectualization into something Romantic. The cricket, as we shall see, is in fact her knight, the Prince who will come to save her, the love which will ennoble her.

"No cricket" is merely one of several negative constructions in this lyric. In stanza II we find "no iron like that," "no trace," and in stanza IV we see "No turf, no rock." In these first and last examples we find her insistently negating reality in favor of fantasy. In the other two examples she emphasizes the negative aspects of reality. Stanza III with its happy quality flows more freely than any other. It has the longest fourth and fifth lines, ten

syllables each, each line ending with an anapestic foot.

The syntax of stanza four is equally strange and more confusing. It sounds as though the sentence has two subjects, "red fans" and "they." At first it is difficult to understand whether "scorch" is transitive or intransitive, whether the butterfly or the rock is scorched. The syntax represents a very complicated interaction, a process of transformation magical and not completely imaginable. The power of the process is evidenced by the use of the dramatic verbs "scorch" and "fall." Words that might have terrifying implications are seen positively when they relate to love. They suggest a kind of death by fire that leads to new life.

In the last stanza the speaker begins to control her thoughts more, consciously develops an allegory from the small events she has noticed. Like most of the moralizing in "James Lee's Wife," this stanza has an artificial quality. As she sums up her observations, she becomes rather schematically alliterative again:

Is it not so
With the minds of men?
The level and low,
The burnt and bare, in themselves; but then
With such a blue and red grace, not theirs,
Love settling unawares!

She speaks in pairs from line to line: "minds of men," "level and low," "burnt and bare." These pairs act as an aid to memory, as in a jingle or a maxim, rather than as an addition to a sensuous effect.

A more successful effect in the lyric as a whole is achieved by a careful use of tense. Stanzas I to III are in the past tense, making "On The Cliff" the first poem in the series to describe a past experience. Yet the scarcity of verbs in the last few lines of each stanza gives the experience a sense of immediacy. Then in stanzas IV and V there is a sudden shift to the present tense. It seems that as she is relating the experience, she is having it again, or, perhaps, the "moral" is intended to be a sudden epiphany which she has in the present while relating the incident. The shift in stanza IV has two effects. It prepares for the "moral" and emphasizes the suddenness of the butterfly's fall. The suddenness of the fall, of "Love settling un-awares," is important, for to someone who has no command over either, love comes as abruptly and inexplicably as hell.

VI. "Reading A Book, Under The Cliff"

The sixth poem is in some ways the crux of "James Lee's Wife." It is also significant for Dramatis Personae as a whole. Here is presented the tension which exists throughout the volume between despair and religiously inspired hope. Here, in "Reading A Book, Under The Cliff," the speaker repudiates what she sees as the youthful and mistaken optimism of Browning's own earlier poem, "Still ailing, wind?" which was first published in the Monthly Repository in May of 1836.⁷

⁷William C. De Vane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd. ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), p. 284.

At the end of stanza XV Browning has her grope at the consolation he means to offer her although she doesn't recognize it yet. It is the same advice she will hear Leonardo Da Vinci give her in "Beside The Drawing Board:"

'Shall earth and the cramped moment-space
'Yield the heavenly crowning grace?
'Now the parts and then the whole!

Here Browning begins to preach at her and us what he considers to be a more tempered and thoughtful optimism. Perhaps. But he nevertheless does begin to preach, and these passages of moralizing cannot compare in their intensity and capacity to move with the speaker's lament in the sixth section or in the last lyric, where she leaves us with that chilling picture. Browning will face this problem throughout the volume, where, in spite of himself, he presents a suffering and despair which are genuine and moving, while the optimism he advances is too facile to be wholly believable. James Lee's wife's despair is convincing mostly because she is realized as a character.

One wonders, however, whether her violent reaction to "Still Ailing, Wind" is not somewhat out of proportion to what it is saying. Possibly, she is responding to something in the tone which provokes a very personal anger. It is first of all highly Romantic verse. In the first stanza we find an apostrophe to the wind, the use of archaic verb forms and highly poetic diction. More important, there is the enjoyment of a gentle melancholy and a subjective, rather

egocentric relationship to nature. The young poet sees the wind as a sad person craving release, in chains which he can untie. He sees the wind as passive and himself as powerful: "Art thou a dumb wronged thing that would be righted, / Entrusting thus thy cause to me?" Possibly it is his assumption of power that disturbs her. She, who identifies with all the poor, helpless things, resents his cavalier superiority.

The dying nun is, like the rock in "V," prone and defeated, but, unfortunately, no butterfly descends to save her. Rather, there is a young man who lingers over the gory details of her death, almost as if enjoying them:

'Which sigh wouldst mock, of all the sighs? The one
 'So long escaping from lips starved and blue,
 'That lasts while on her pallet-bed the nun
 'Stretches her length; her foot comes through
 'The straw she shivers on;
 'You had not thought she was so tall: and spent,
 'Her shrunk lids open, her lean fingers shut
 'Close, close, their sharp and livid nails indent
 'The clammy palm; then all is mute:
 'That way, the spirit went.

The nun's death has much in common with the death-like feeling the speaker experiences in the garden of "In The Doorway:" "How the vines writhe in rows, each impaled on its stake! / My heart shrivels up and my spirit shrinks curled." There is the same shrinking and the same pain from piercing, here reminiscent of the crucifixion as earlier of martyrs on the stake. There is also the same cold and sense of deprivation. Moreover, this description of the nun's death is the only really vivid image in this early poem. The rest is highly

intellectualized. Even the sound is very sensuous, very musical, full of the "s" and "sh" sound and many long vowels and "l" sounds.

The dog on the shore is also presented as pitiable, starved and unassertive: He "whined and licked my hand," relates the poet. One can understand this sensitive woman's reaction to the young poet, who describes with great relish the way the nun's nails pierce her palms, while his own hand is licked by the adoring dog. She criticizes the artist for using people's misery, making them objects, "Merely examples for his sake,/ Helps to his path untried."

From the moment she responds in stanza VII, her resentment is plain. She takes offense at what she calls his "pride of power to see." She almost spits it out, as the "p" sounds interrupt the smoothness of a line dominated by "m," "s," and "z." The same tone of insistence continues into stanza VIII where the "m" punctuates and reinforces at intervals:

Instances he must--simply recognize?
 Oh, more than so!--must, with a learner's zeal,
 Make doubly prominent, twice emphasize,
 By added touches that reveal
 The god in babe's disguise.

Here also the criticism is of the presumption of power, the ability to see in youth and helplessness power and knowledge. His certainty is also a source of anger to her, as she indicates in the next stanza, for certainty is another form of power, one which she does not have and which she greatly

desires as a shield against change. Most of all, this poet is not afraid of time. She understands the poem as predicting "His triumph, in eternity/ Too plainly manifest." The anger in her tone is clear from the exclamation in the first line and the constant repetition of the "f" sound in important places, which is also a quite dramatic way of indicating relationships between such words as "Himself," "undefeated," "Failure," "flings," "triumph," and "manifest." Also striking is the use of the dental stop "t" in the last three lines: "Failure, disgrace, he flings them you to test,--/
His triumph, in eternity/ Too plainly manifest!"

The tenth stanza sounds calmer, more prosaic, but this impression is deceptive. What she is doing is introducing a kind of revenge fantasy which prefigures the one she imagines for James Lee at the end of the poem. She looks forward to the time when the callow young poet will see the kinds of changes she has seen, when the beautiful world in front of him, "Next minute must annul." Here is the sting of the stanza. Because it is preceded by no relative pronoun and because of the repetition of the "t," it is abrupt and harsh. Yet its real force is in the last word of the stanza, the verb, "annul." In this fantasy, she does not merely change his world; she obliterates it, annihilates it. The wind will no longer whisper such harmless messages.

In order to understand the extent of her reaction to this poem, we must remember how she has related to the wind.

In the first lyric, where "the wind has dropped," it is part of a pattern of change and estrangement. In "In The Doorway" the wind is seen as a disturbing influence, aggressive in agitating and spotting the water, and also aggressive and demanding in expressing its sorrows: "Hark, the wind with its wants and its infinite wail!" The poet sees the wind as a pathetic creature which may need his help. She, on the other hand, sees it as an authority figure, conveying the limits of time:

Then, when the wind begins among the vines,
 So low, so low, what shall it say but this?
 'Here is the change beginning, here the lines
 'Circumscribe beauty, set to bliss
 'The limit time assigns.

From this stanza on, as she thinks of her own knowledge of pain and loss, she grows emotional again: the syntax is more disjointed; many lines begin with an emphatic first syllable. The intensity of the last three lines of this stanza is partly due to its structure, a series of units of equal length building up to a climax. The first two lines of the stanza are notable for their sensuous quality, imitating the mournful sound of the wind,

There is a dramatic use of trochees in lines 1 and 2 of stanza XIII: "Nothing can be as it has been before;/ Better so call it, only not the same." Another striking effect is produced by the gradual shortening of units of sense as the stanza progresses, leading to the final line: "So answered,--Never more!" This abruptness in dealing with

harsh realities seems to be a way of making the speaker face them. There are no qualifiers, no loopholes.

Stanza XIV is swirling with motion that is crucial to its meaning: "rise," "fall," "change," "rise," "re-joice," "hurled," "furled." These create the sense she experiences of being swept away. The rhythm, especially in the second line imitates the rising and falling action described:

Simple? Why this is the old woe o' the world;
Tune to whose rise and fall we live and die.
Rise with it, then! Rejoice that man is hurled
From change to change unceasingly,
His soul's wings never furled!

The tune she hears has some of the properties of Abt Vogler's music, the rise and fall from joy to grief, from life to death. The metaphor here works in much the same way.

Stanza XV replies with clipped phrases, ten almost separate units of dulling fact and disjointed speculation. This disjunction reflects her confusion, her reaching out for any means of support. She has a vague feeling that God can give her that support, but she does not know quite how. The attempt ends in stanza XVI where she returns to what she is certain of, her grief:

Only, for man, how bitter not to grave
On his soul's hands' palms one fair good wise thing
Just as he grasped it! For himself, death's wave;
While time first washes--ah, the sting!--
O'er all he'd sink to save.

The phrasing is notably different. A great deal of meaning

is packed into one breathless exclamation in the first three lines. Line 2, with seven spondees, is especially heavy. The rest is fragmented. The last half of line 3 lacks a verb for much the same reason as this line from "On The Cliff:" "No turf, no rock: in their ugly stead,/ See, wonderful blue and red!" The process is quite simply unimaginable. The exclamation--"ah, the sting!"--interrupting the process, comes like the last cry of the drowning swimmer. The pathos of the stanza is increased by the Biblical association of the phrase in line 2. The Lord, speaking of a woman's devotion to her child, says:

yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.
Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of
my hands; thy walls are continually before me.
(Isaiah, 49.15-16)

VII. "Among The Rocks"

The sweetness of the sea-lark's song in "Among The Rocks" succeeds the bitterness of the wind's song in the preceding poem. Here the bird alights on the rock to give it life, just as the butterfly does in "On The Cliff," James Lee's wife feels happy and strong here because she has found a rationale for identifying herself with the bird rather than with the heap of stones: "Make the low nature better by your throes!/ Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!" She has here assumed a superior position. Just as the butterfly transforms the rock and as the sea-lark enlivens the heap of stones, her sufferings will uplift her husband. After all,

if "throes" are what are required, she has more than her share. What seemed to her a liability becomes a source of comfort and pride.

The first stanza expresses this feeling effectively:

Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth,
 This autumn morning! How he sets his bones
 To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet
 For the ripple to run over in its mirth;
 Listening the while, where on the heap of stones
 The white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet.

Like the first and the third lyrics, here is another description of nature seen through the woman's eyes. Other than by the obvious difference in tone, this stanza differs from the opening stanzas of "I" and "III" by presenting a series of images which are related to each other. "I" and "III" consist of a series of separate sentences, sometimes coordinated. Here there are two sentences: the first is an exclamation which the second expands upon, using a great deal of subordination. There is no rigid metrical structure and very little parallelism of the sort found in the earlier poems. Rather, the sentence is more important than the line as she runs on breathlessly in lines 3-4 and 5-6.

Sound repetition also aids the flow of sentence sense from line to line: the "s" and "b" in lines 2-3, the "f" in lines 3-4, and the "w" in lines 5-6. All in all the stanza is very musical and onomatopoeic. The "t" and "k" sounds in lines 2-3 are imitative of thrusting. In lines 5-6 the "t," "p" and "k" stops imitate the twittering sound. The long "o" and "ow" sounds in lines 1-2 express the

speaker's expansive mood.

Because she is happy, the sun seems benevolent, not oppressive as in "V," the autumn aspect of the earth comforting, rather than depressing. She sees the position of lying prone as luxurious and active. The reason for this change of aspect is her belief in the moral of the second stanza. Yet the moral is supposedly prompted by the observation. It is a bit forced, to say the least:

That is the doctrine, simple, ancient, true;
 Such is life's trial, as old earth smiles and knows.
 If you loved only what were worth your love,
 Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you:
 Make the low nature better by your throes!
 Give earth yourself, go up for gain above.

Presumably this is what she hears the bird sing. It is a tune different in tone from that of the wind, but it still speaks of life as a "trial" or "probation." She has obviously thought about the idea more and has accepted it. One wonders, however, whether the philosophy expressed, with its implication that love as "clear gain" or "wholly well" is a bad thing, really has its roots for her in Christian theology or whether it is merely an example of "sour grapes," a retreat from a much desired but impossible goal.

She seems to be thinking in an effort to block out feeling, and Browning seems to be pushing these sentiments as good for her, good for him, and good for us. The shift in style from the first stanza indicates that this is so. The phrasing changes radically as there is no enjambment,

but a stop at every line to create a series of aphorisms. The last two lines especially are structured as aphorisms, with the kind of alliteration Browning uses whenever he wishes to lend authority to a point: "Give earth yourself, go up for gain above." This is an authorial intrusion of a kind even more noticeable in the eighth lyric.

VIII. "Beside The Drawing Board"

"Beside The Drawing Board" consists of three sections or verse paragraphs in which the speaker thinks, reviews and criticizes, frequently on an abstract level. With the possible exception of the middle section, she is more conscious and in control than in any other poem. While her fantasies nearly always make for good poetry, her conscious intellectualizing tends to make for rather dull poetry. The second section, though not great poetry, is better than either the first or third, in both of which she attempts to figure things out.

The first paragraph is an account of her drawing a hand, presumably the hand of the peasant girl. In the second she conjures up a story about a clay cast of a hand which a master artist tries to draw but fails; so he marries the woman instead of trying to draw her. In the third verse paragraph she imagines Leonardo Da Vinci telling of his experiences in drawing the human hand and the morals to be drawn from the experience. With the cheerful autumn morning of "VII" she had begun to rationalize her unhappiness,

seeking to find comfort in the contemplation of her duty rather than her pleasure. The real coming to terms with her duty, however, occurs here where she imagines Leonardo lecturing her at length on the purpose and limitations of earthly life.

"VIII" is the prosiest of the lyrics. It has verse paragraphs rather than stanzas, and the rhyme scheme usually changes at the end of a sentence or a unit of prose logic. Section I consists of only three very long, very complex sentences consisting of great strings of dependent clauses and prepositional phrases, mostly in prose syntax. Although there are frequent rhymed couplets which arrest the flow somewhat, the prose rhythm usually takes over. Some of the long sentences have a few short units, but the main effect is one of breathlessness, of galloping thought.

The first line, "'As like as a Hand to another Hand!'" acts as a kind of refrain throughout the poem. Since the hand is a symbol for the whole person, this proverb provides fuel for a lecture on the worth of the individual human being despite superficial deficiencies. Like the wing, the hand is an important index of feelings throughout "James Lee's Wife." It is the grasping organ, the agent of the mind. At the end of "VI" her wish is that the hands not merely grasp something but actually have something valuable engraved in them. When she feels pain in "III," one expression of it is to see the fig tree as having hands whose

fingers are closed. Similarly, she reacts violently to the vivid picture of the nun's closed and clammy hand.

Here in "VIII" the hand presents one way of discussing the person. The capitalization makes it seem like a detached entity, a little microcosm which is a proof of God's love and power. As she draws, there are three hands in question: God's hand, which forms the hand of the peasant girl, which the hand of the speaker attempts to copy. All of these hands are used constructively in this essentially optimistic poem. The speaker's hand, however, is characteristically seen as inferior: it has "soulless finger-tips." Also characteristically she sees the clay cast's original as having a "finger which outvied [the master's] art." Presumably it has a soul which he cannot capture on paper. It is the "little girl with the poor, coarse hand" with whom the speaker identifies. She reasons that it is the inside of the hand that makes it "An object worthy to be scanned." It is also an active and useful hand "that spins the wool/ And bakes the bread." This is an attractive proposition to her because she has always seen beauty as the only power available to a woman, the power to attract and draw in. Now she recognizes a potential for action, for doing something as well as being something. Yet she still looks to God for a sense of worthiness. He who has created the hand "Out of the infinite love of his heart" is associated with expansiveness and openness, unlike her husband, whose

heart is "Locked" to her.

Browning does manage to convey the sense of excitement she feels when she begins to learn her "lesson," when she thinks she has found a way of accepting the conditions of her life. There is a rising movement in the desire for closeness and understanding. She first sees, using her eyes, then draws with her hand, finally kisses with her lips in an effort to transmit her soul.

Yet there are some difficult passages which block the flow of this feeling, one couplet especially:

The beauty in this,--how free, how fine
To fear, almost of the limit-line!

These rather enigmatic lines are repeated in a significant place in the second section as well as in the first. They describe each hand or the person represented by each hand. The "limit-line" is perhaps one of the "Lines that circumscribe beauty" in "VI." The beauty in the hand, because divinely inspired, is free of the limitations of merely earthly beauty. It is "fine,"--perfect or delicately fashioned. The "fear" is perhaps the fear of breaking something so delicate.

Robert G. Stange in "Browning's 'James Lee's Wife,' VIII" has dealt with this couplet. He believes that the subject of the first section is the clay cast rather than the little girl's hand, that the couplet refers to its merely superficial beauty, its lines "which are so fine as

to evoke an emotion more like fear than pleasure."⁸ In view of the ambiguity of the first section, this interpretation is possible, but the poem's history makes it doubtful. De Vane tells us that when the poem was published in 1864, Section VIII consisted only of the present first section and the last two lines of the present third section:⁹ "Go, little girl with the poor coarse hand! / I have my lesson, shall understand." At least originally the first section must have referred to the little girl's hand. In any case, the effect of the couplet then would be to praise the beauty and affirm the value of all persons and so, the speaker.

In the second section she is less in control of her thoughts than in the rest of the poem. There is a good deal of wish-fulfillment operating on a somewhat less conscious level. The fantasy of the princess-like woman, like many of her other fantasies, is highly romantic. She would like to be the admired and sought after woman at the same time that she seems to be identifying with the artist, he who admires the woman as superior and impossible to capture. In this vision she is able to complete the union she had sought in kissing her own drawing. Here there is an actual marriage:

⁸ Robert G. Stange, "Browning's 'James Lee's Wife,' VIII," Explicator, 17 (1959), Item 32.

⁹ A Browning Handbook, p. 284.

And on the finger which outvied
 His art he placed the ring that's there,
 Still by fancy's eye descried,
 In token of a marriage rare:
 For him on earth, his art's despair,
 For him in heaven, his soul's fit bride.

The syntax of these last two lines resembles that of these lines from "I:" "For the lake, its swan;/ For the dell, its dove." There is the same lack of verb to indicate inevitable and unchanging relationship and the same romantic diction, especially "bride." Yet she has combined her earlier fantasy with the new "lessons" she has been learning, like that at the end of "VII:" "Give earth yourself, go up for gain above."

What James Lee's wife feels about herself comes out more explicitly in "VIII" than anywhere else, to a startling degree: "Long ago the god, like me/ The worm, learned each in our degree." Her self-description carries more force because the end of the line leads us to expect some parallel to "god." Yet since she is not usually so openly self-contemptuous, this sounds a bit heavy-handed,

Perhaps it is the reminder of her own unhappy position which causes the fantasy to burst. The hand so alive a moment before in her vision becomes a "cold clay cast" in the last verse paragraph. I think that Browning would like us to believe that she is turning away from it in an attempt to deal more intelligently with reality. Strange remarks, "Browning's attempt in this poem is to persuade us of what

James Lee's wife also learns from art: that the suffering and imperfection of actual life are not simply more real and valuable, but more absolutely beautiful than serene, ideal happiness."¹⁰ Unfortunately, Browning does not persuade us of this.

Her fantasy about Leonardo Da Vinci is not really a fantasy like the others in the poem. It is a conscious construction by which she gives herself an authority figure to support a certain kind of thinking. He tells her that he "years instead of hours employed,/ 'Learning the veritable use/ 'Of flesh and bone and nerve beneath/ 'Lines and hue of the outer sheath." Unlike her, he has seen beneath the surface of things; unlike her, he is master of time and uses it. One reason he is its master is that he has looked beyond the "cramped moment-space" which suffocates her to the "heavenly crowning grace:" "Now the parts and then the whole!" he exclaims.

'Who art thou, with stinted soul
 'And stunted body, thus to cry
 "'I love,--shall that be life's strait dole?
 "'I must live beloved or die!"
 'This peasant hand that spins the wool
 'And bakes the bread, why lives it on,
 'Poor and coarse with beauty gone,
 'What use survives the beauty?'

He tells her what she wants to hear, that what is inside, at the core, is valuable. But this rings false because she has shown throughout the poem that she has no real core, no identity of her own. As he has done so frequently before in this

¹⁰ Stange, Item 32.

poem, Browning uses alliteration to point out significant statements. Da Vinci's first words carry this to an extreme:

'The fool forsooth is all forlorn
 'Because the beauty, she thinks best,
 'Lived long ago or was never born,
 'Because no beauty bears the test
 'In this rough peasant Hand!

When he speaks later of "stinted soul and stunted body," alliteration seems to replace sense. This section, like all the sections of conscious moralizing, just does not work because Browning tries to apply a religious and philosophical solution to what is basically a psychological problem.

IX. "On Deck"

In the last lyric, "On Deck," we see just how far James Lee's wife has succeeded in overcoming her sense of inferiority, her dependence on her husband's love and her preoccupation with her physical beauty through the contemplation of higher values. The metaphor of "By The Fireside" is realized as she boards a literal ship to take her away to her own private hell.

This poem is structured very dramatically to lead to a climax. The long "e" which is the "a" rhyme of stanza I remains the same from stanza to stanza, enforcing continuity. The first line of each stanza ends with "me," giving the speaker's plea an insistence by reiteration. Although each stanza is complete within itself, the use of transition words--"For then," "Strange," "Well," "But," "Why"--at the

beginning of each emphasizes the development of the argument.

The movement of the lyric is from fact to fantasy, from fact to fantasy. The first fantasy, that of complete union, is beautiful but is cut off because nothing supports it. The second fantasy is vengeful, originating in an awareness of her merits and her sufferings,

In the first stanza the woman seems to negate completely her existence:

There is nothing to remember in me,
Nothing I ever said with a grace,
Nothing I did that you care to see,
Nothing I was that deserves a place
In your mind, now I leave you, set
you free.

The stress on "nothing" at the beginning of lines 2, 3, and 4 creates a kind of incantatory quality: she intones her worthlessness in a desperate recital. "Nothing" also dominates the stanza because there are no terribly vivid verbs or nouns in it. At this point in the poem, we understand that there is nothing she might have done with "grace," since she believes that "grace" may only be bestowed from outside. The whole stanza is a reflection of how she feels James Lee sees her. The vague feelings she has of her own worth she cannot substantiate because of the terms of the world she has built for herself.

In the second stanza she tries to find some anchor in the past, some proof that the love which is her world had some basis in reality. She demands this proof: "In turn,

concede to me,/ Such things have been as a mutual flame." The fire she uses to symbolize the past is in bitter contrast to the deadness she presently feels. So she turns to fantasy as a retreat from failure, insisting that her investment in love was not foolish, that it did have a chance of success. What she shows the reader, however, is a vision of love that never could have worked.

Roma King in The Focusing Artifice observes of this poem, "Browning emphasizes less the causes than the inevitability of the separation. . . . Neither James Lee nor his wife can prevent the tragedy which neither desires. Theirs is essentially, the paradox of the two lovers in the campagna."¹¹ I think that Browning is being far more specific in "James Lee's Wife" about the causes of the separation. The poem treats a particular love relationship rather than love in general. While it is true that the separation is inevitable, we see the causes quite clearly, so far at least as they originate in the woman's character. Not least as a cause is her unrealistic expectation about love. What she desires is total mutual possession: "How strange it were if you had all me,/ As I have all you in my heart and brain." In the perfect situation, she says, "We both should be like as pea and pea." Although this is a proverb, many versions of which appear in dictionaries of quotations, the repetition of "pea" is Browning's. It has

¹¹ (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 116.

a nursery-rhyme sound which stresses how simplistic and childlike the vision is,

As this fantasy continues into the fifth stanza, the portrait she paints is notable for its lack of visual detail:

Strange, if a face, when you thought of me,
 Rose like your own face present now,
 With eyes as dear in their due degree,
 Much such a mouth, and as bright a brow,
 Till you saw yourself, while you cried "'T is She!"

She describes her husband's features in abstract terms because it is a description of spiritual beauty which is bestowed by the eye of the loving observer. It is a beauty which she might possibly achieve in his eyes.

Realizing that he will not see her this way, she turns her fantasy around, takes control with an assurance lent by desperation. She insists on the union she wants, drawing him into the circle of her misery. Her tone is vengeful as she describes herself and what she wishes for him. And this time the description is not spiritual at all but brutally physical:

Why, fade you might to a thing like me,
 And your hair grow these coarse hanks of hair,
 Your skin, this bark of a gnarled tree,--
 You might turn myself!--should I know or care
 When I should be dead of joy, James Lee?

This last stanza is effective because for the first time in this lyric, we see her feelings in concrete terms. This visual image contrasts pathetically with the spiritual image in stanza V. The structure of the stanza also increases its dramatic force. The syntax is patterned so that it grows

more condensed as the stanza proceeds. In line 1 the entire verb is present; in line 2 the auxiliary verb is omitted; by line 3 no verb is necessary. The exclamation and the long question which follow continue to build in emotional intensity, finally emptying all the anger and anguish onto the last two stressed syllables, "James Lee." The anger she has directed inward throughout their relationship at last finds its true object and explodes.

CHAPTER III

THE OTHER LOVERS SPEAK

After James Lee's wife, eight other lovers speak in Dramatis Personae. Four of them have suffered disappointment in love itself. They speak in "The Worst of It," "Dîs Aliter Visum," and "Too Late," which Browning places side by side in the volume, and "Youth and Art," which follows later. The other four have had fulfillment in love at some point in their lives, although death or separation may have occurred. These speak in "Confessions," "May and Death," "Prospice," and "Eurydice,"¹ which Browning also grouped together.

Browning readers and critics have, for the most part, accepted Browning's lovers at their own valuation, as if the very subject ennobled them. After all, Browning was a great believer in the importance of love; therefore, those who speak for the value of love or those devoted to love must be admirable. This method of approach has led to some confused and some rather naive critical observations.

An extreme example is the insistence by some amateur critics at a meeting of the New York Browning Society a few years ago that the speaker of "Porphyria's Lover" is a hero.

¹I have chosen to study Dramatis Personae in its final form (1868) because the additions to the volume follow the thematic and imagistic pattern of the poems in the first edition.

After all, his strangling of Porphyria at the height of love is so "romantic," they exclaimed against all arguments to the contrary. They, of course, accepted completely the speaker's own evaluation of his situation. Professional critics have rarely made such mistakes, but they have seen many less obviously unreliable narrators as trustworthy proponents of Browning's feelings about love.

W.L. Phelps, for example, makes what appears to be an enormously naive remark: "Browning's rejected lovers are such splendid fellows that one wonders at their ill luck."² He goes on to say that unlike Tennyson's lovers, who harbor thoughts of revenge, Browning's lovers think selflessly of the woman. A later critic, J.M. Cohen, who is not fooled by some of Browning's lovers, expresses the curious view that the love poems in Dramatis Personae are the least interesting because, in them, the decay of love is ascribed "rather to the shortcomings of the lovers than, as in earlier poems of love and loss, to the contrariness of circumstance."³

Probably Cohen is mistaken about the differences between the Dramatis Personae love poems and the earlier poems. Some of these are now coming to the attention of more psychologically perceptive critics--and, after all, when twentieth

²William Lyon Phelps, Robert Browning: How to Know Him (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1915), p. 143.

³J.M. Cohen, Robert Browning (London: Longman's Green and Co., 1952), p. 107.

century readers think of Browning, his "psychology" first comes to mind. One example is George O. Marshall, Jr.'s reading of "Evelyn Hope's Lover," in which he sees the speaker as egotistical necrophiliac rather than the sentimental old fellow for whom he has been taken.⁴

In Browning, the psychology of the speakers in the love poems should be at least as important as it is in other kinds of monologues and soliloquies, and at least as important as the "philosophy" these poems are supposed to express. The neglect of this psychology, I propose to remedy for these few poems.

"The Worst of It"

The limitations of reading the love poems as statements of philosophy about love become apparent when one confronts a statement like the following by so astute a critic as W.O. Raymond. Discussing "The Worst of It" and "Too Late" as examples of Browning's philosophy as embodied in "The Statue and The Bust," and implying that Browning's view is the same as that of the speakers, he opines, "In The Worst Of It, the sin of the woman is being false to her husband ultimately becomes the means of his redemption."⁵ Raymond is here making an assumption like the one made by Norton B. Crowell

⁴George O. Marshall, Jr., "Evelyn Hope's Lover," Victorian Poetry, 4 (1966), pp. 32-34.

⁵W.O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 220.

in The Convex Glass:⁶ "Her deserted husband [is] one of Browning's gallery of gallant and forgiving lovers." It seems clear to me that a close reading of the poem will not support these analyses.

The poem is built on a series of polarities in the speaker's thinking, some of which become apparent in the first stanza. First there is the central and personal conflict between the man and his wife, emphasized by the structure and rhythm of the stanza.

Would it were I had been false, not you!
 I that am nothing, not you that are all:
 I, never the worse for a touch or two
 On my speckled hide; not you, the pride
 Of the day, my swan, that a first fleck's fall
 On her wonder of white must unswan, undo!

The four strong stresses on each line along with the parallelism and antithesis emphasize conflict, "I" against "You," with all of the differences implied between them. Secondly, in the speaker's mind, one is either all or nothing, black or white. Thus, although he asserts that she is all and he, nothing, taking the traditional posture of the courtly lover, he also constructs a situation whereby she has only two options, whereas he has many: he is permitted and assumed to have a mixed nature. Since he has defined her as a "swan," her "unswan[ning]" effectively wipes out her existence. This is his frame of reference throughout, reflected in images of

⁶N.B. Crowell, The Convex Glass: The Mind of Robert Browning (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), p. 15.

black and white. He himself is permitted to be speckled, for it is assumed that since he is a man, he will have to live in the corrupt world:

I had dipped in life's struggle and, out again,
 Bore specks of it here, there, easy to see,
 When I found my swan and the cure was plain;
 The dull turned bright as I caught your white
 On my bosom: you saved me--saved in vain
 If you ruined yourself, and all through me!

The swan, on the other hand, is supposed to float on the surface of the water, keeping herself pure enough to save the soul of her mate. Thus, he sees her as the "cure" for his sickness of soul. The "ruin" he laments is the same kind parodied later in the century by Thomas Hardy in "The Ruined Maid," and the speaker assigns complete responsibility to the woman herself. A woman is expected to be stronger than a man in resisting moral temptation. Moreover, his own "specks" were "easy to see," that is, honest and manly, whereas she masqueraded as a good woman. Although, in the next stanza, he calls himself a "beast" and blames himself for having reduced her to his own level, it is clear that he really blames her and believes that, low as he is, no man can fall any lower than a fallen woman. His claim to be a willing victim, his desire to absolve her of any guilt, alternates with subtle abuse.

The "vows" she "break[s]" are among the many broken things that describe their separation. The clause, "as you ought," interposes between subject and object, illustrating further the theme of rupture. There is a good deal of "ruin,"

tearing, breaking and snapping in this man's desolated emotional landscape. He is the broken one; he believes she is the "ruined" one.

The judgment motif, so crucial in this poem, begins in the fourth stanza and continues to the end.

Yes, might I judge you, here were my heart,
 And a hundred its like, to treat as you pleased!
 I choose to be yours, for my proper part,
 Yours, leave or take, or mar me or make;
 If I acquiesce, why should you be teased
 With the conscience-prick and the memory-smart?

He paints himself as an unwilling witness at her trial: "I am called at last/When the devil stabs you, to lend the knife." He also uses legal terminology near the end, seeing himself as an unwilling reader of her "sentence," that is, damnation. As for his own "sentence," he has no fears. He will have "journeyed [his] wage/And retired as was right." The "wage" is, of course, the spiritual wage. "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6.23) applies to his wife. His own fate is far more pleasant: "Off I trip/On a safe path gay through the flowers you flung!" After all, "the path of the just is as the shining light" (Proverbs 4.18).

What is clear is that he wishes he could "judge" her, that is, punish her. The willingness he evidences to suffer for her in this fourth stanza is highly exaggerated. He portrays himself as willing to be trampled on for her sake, and as a sign of his humility, he goes to great trouble to call her offence trivial. Here he indicates that only the smallest

pains of conscience are appropriate for her infidelity to him. In another place he actually calls it "trivial." But this is hardly a constant pose. He wavers between minimizing her act and assuming she will be damned for it. It is clear that he gets satisfaction from both of these postures. The former nurtures his self-pity and allows him to think of himself as heroically generous; the latter satisfies his desire for revenge.

"Be sorry," he entreats in stanza V, and one feels he would make her sorry if he could. He feels that he has been just and loving, but we wonder about the quality of this love. His own description of it in stanza VI makes it sound rather oppressive:

And I to have tempted you! I who tired
 Your soul, no doubt, till it sank! Unwise,
 I loved and was lowly, loved and aspired,
 Loved, grieving or glad, till I made you mad,
 And you meant to have hated and despised--
 Whereas, you deceived me nor inquired!

The sound repetition and parallelism in the middle lines increases this impression. The last two lines make clear the exact nature of his grievance. He might have been able to deal with her hatred, but he cannot bear her indifference and the contempt it implies.

Stanza VII is a good example of the way he thinks:

She, ruined? How? No heaven for her?
 Crown to give, and none for the brow
 That looked like marble and smelt like myrrh?
 Shall the robe be worn, and the palm-branch borne,
 And she go graceless, she graced now
 Beyond all saints, as themselves aver?

It consists of a series of long and short questions which produces an exaggerated tone of incredulity. Behind the intent questioning of the possibility of her damnation lies a secret savoring of it. Because God's name is not mentioned --in fact, no agents are mentioned--it appears as if the power "to give" "crowns" is the speaker's. Since it is not clear who is to wear the robe and bear the palm, the speaker implies that he will but that his wife will not. That she should "go graceless, she graced now" is actually his not-so-secret wish.

Throughout the poem he buttresses his posture as the righteous man only interested in his betrayer's salvation by frequent allusion to scripture. He holds over her head the Last Judgment as portrayed in the Book of Revelation like a storm cloud or a baseball bat. In this stanza we move rather quickly from the atmosphere of the Song of Solomon with its mention of "marble" and "myrrh"⁷ to the Book of Revelation, where, among other sins, the sin of fornication will be punished. Moreover, in this Biblical text, the sins of the earth are conceived of metaphorically as sexual sins, which are to be avenged:

For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. (Revelation 19.2)

⁷"His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flow-
ers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh"
(Solomon 5.13). "His legs are as pillars of marble, ..."
(Solomon 5.15).

The husband moves through the Book of Revelation, gradually telling the whole story by allusion. In this stanza, the references are to some of the rewards of the faithful:

Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. (Revelation 2.10)

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands. (Revelation 7.09)

When in stanza XVI he beseeches her to look to her soul, he proceeds through the Book. The "healing waters" he suggests she choose bring to mind the following passage:

For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. (Revelation 7.17)

His description of the "other world" follows very closely these passages from the penultimate chapter of Revelation:

And the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. (Revelation 21.21)

And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. (Revelation 21.23)

The speaker's paraphrase sounds glib by comparison.

In stanza VIII the speaker admits that he has tried to find ways to punish her, all for the good of her soul, of course. "I desire your good," however, is immediately undercut by "plot as I may." The "penance" he wants her to do appears rather self-serving in this context: it is a "blow," a rather violent kind of "penance." Also, he imagines in

the next stanza that:

It will come, I suspect, at the end of life,
 When you walk alone, and review the past:
 And I, who so long shall have done with strife,
 And journeyed my stage and earned my wage
 And retired as was right,--I am called at last
 When the devil stabs you, to lend the knife.

The parallel structure of this stanza emphasizes the comparison of their fates. It also emphasizes their orderliness and inevitability. The implication is that when one follows the rules, one is properly rewarded. In fantasy he is able to effect this.

Probably his most revealing fantasy is that in which the devil stabs her for her wrongs, while the husband stands by as a second, proffering the knife. The devil here seems to perform God's dirty work; he is executioner for the damned. In this capacity the speaker is more than willing to ally himself with the forces of Hell. His anger is sufficient to permit him to do the act himself, but he must work indirectly. After all, a man so worshipful of women would never dream of striking one. The repetition of the stabbing in the next stanza reveals real sexual feeling. Although the occasion of the poem is sexual infidelity, until this point the sexuality has been masked by conventional language and symbols of swan and crow, purity and stain, truth and deception. Now, as he imagines this scene of stabbing, he also imagines his grave transformed "To a blaze of joy and a crash of song." Amidst all this fire and music, he celebrates with all the

relish of Rumpelstiltskin dancing around the fire.

"Witness beforehand!" he says in stanza XI, introducing a fantasy of the future in which he "trip[s]" down a path quite different from the one he projects for her. "And witness, moreover" introduces yet another vision in stanza XII. The break in the first line indicates that the vision is sudden, that he is merely a witness to her bad fortune, this time as the target of another pointed weapon, one traditionally aimed at the wicked: "But God shall shoot at them with an arrow; suddenly shall they be wounded. (Psalms 64.7). He pictures her grieving and sighing "too late," a frequent fantasy of rejected lovers in the "who's sorry now?" school of popular songs.

Having thus vented his anger, he retires to a posture of resignation and pity for the unfortunate lost soul. He reveals that there is still hope for her: "For I was true at least--oh, true enough!" We wonder, what does he mean by "true enough?" Does he mean "true enough" for a man? He gives ground for suspicion of his own conduct here, but the only fault for which he blames himself is virtue carried to excess. His punishment for this awful crime is to suffer the traditional torments of the lover, sleeplessness and bad dreams. He is careful to explain, however, that what disturbs him is the harm his lover has done to herself rather than that done to him.

In stanza XV he reaffirms his tendency to think in ex-

treme polarities:

Men tell me of truth now--"False!" I cry:
 Of beauty--"A mask, friend! Look beneath!"
 We take our own method, the devil and I,
 With pleasant and fair and wise and rare:
 And the best we wish to what lives, is--death.
 Which even in wishing, perhaps we lie!

He again identifies himself with the devil, as a destructive force somehow "licensed" by God. Unlike James Lee's wife, the speaker of this poem directs his anger outward. Instead of fearing for his own death, as she does, he has fantasies of murdering others.

After his sermon to his wife in stanza XVI, he speaks a bit more honestly of his pain and frustration:

Misery! What shall I say or do?
 I cannot advise, or at least, persuade:
 Most like, you are glad you deceived me--rue
 No whit of the wrong: you endured too long,
 Have done no evil and want no aid,
 Will live the old life out and chance the new.

Finally, we must confront the problem of the woman and what she may have been like. If the speaker is right about her, we have to ask why she has no regrets. She appears to be a woman capable of taking difficult action and willing to accept the consequences. It may be that, just as in "James Lee's Wife," we can see part of the reason for the silent spouse's action in the personality of the one who speaks.

Although he paints himself as the devoted lover, his language as well as his logic shows him to be unimaginative, conventional, and, at times, petty. His terms of endearment are entirely conventional; the metaphors he uses are for the

most part clichés, many of them the kind of clichés to be found in morality texts: "stoop[ing]" or "sink[ing]" to represent lapses in morality, taking the right "path," making a good "journey" and "earning" the right "wage." His mouthing of Biblical passages and his identification with conventional morality is not necessarily to his advantage in the Browning world. The speaker of "Confessions" who values love above orthodoxy appears a far more sympathetic character. Yet there is some difficulty in interpreting this man's character. There is not nearly so much feeling beneath his imagery as beneath James Lee's wife's. There is no great passion here. His response to the failure of his marriage is anger and self-deception, expressed in a petty way. The most passionate stanza is the next to last:

And your sentence is written all the same,
 And I can do nothing,--pray, perhaps:
 But somehow the world pursues its game,--
 If I pray, if I curse,--for better or worse:
 And my faith is torn to a thousand scraps,
 And my heart feels ice while my words breathe flame.

The "faith" whose loss he mourns so bitterly is rather a superficial faith, a form of self-congratulation. He looks forward to the mean revenge of snubbing his wife in heaven, should she get there. This vision of the afterlife differs quite a bit from that of the speaker of "Prospice." It is certainly less spiritual than that of St. John in "A Death in The Desert," who is the author of the Book of Revelation on which our hero depends so heavily for his revenge.

Dear, I look from my hiding-place.
 Are you still so fair? Have you still the eyes?
 Be happy! Add but the other grace,
 Be good! Why want what the angels vaunt?
 I knew you once: but in Paradise,
 If we meet, I will pass nor turn my face.

Surely the reader is meant to be surprised by this final exhibition of malice, and perhaps one is surprised on a perfunctory first reading, but a closer reading shows that the husband gives himself away throughout. He has been in a "hiding-place" in more ways than one. He has described himself as secretive, as one who "plot[s]," "sp[ies]," and "skulk[s]," who does not confront his wife directly, but complains a good deal to her in apostrophe. He has also been hiding his own motives from himself. Even as he grows more honest toward the end, and despite the open anger in the last line, he is still hiding behind the posture of interest in her salvation. Of course, in one respect, he is eager for her to reach heaven, for "The Worst of It" is an ironic title. The very best satisfaction of which he can conceive is this snub in heaven.

The general outlines of his character are very much like those of Karenin in Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Tolstoy's betrayed and priggish husband is a brilliant creation. Of him it may be truly said that his wife's infidelity leads to his own redemption. One difference in the success of these portrayals is that Tolstoy knew exactly how he felt about Karenin and was able to guide the reader to his own view, although a very complex view. Browning, on the other

hand, possibly because of his own ambivalence, was not able to guide the reader so surely, and his creation is less powerful and moving.

"Dîs Aliter Visum, Or, Le Byron de Nos Jours"

The title, "Dîs Aliter Visum, or Le Byron de Nos Jours" indicates two of the polarities on which this poem is built. The subtitle is an ironic reference to the old poet, who has declined to take his opportunity for love. Throughout there is a comparison between the time at which the poem is spoken and an earlier era when poets and artists were thought to be passionate and courageous and, certainly, amorous.

The flash of insight this poet has--"what's the earth/
With all its art, verse, music, worth--/Compared with love"
--he rejects for considerations of prudence. For him the reward of poetry is an "Armchair" in the French Academy. He identifies poetry with "books and men," by which he seems to mean a totally intellectual world, and a public world, which is incompatible with love, for which it must be "exchanged." He expresses his sense of this dichotomy when he asserts that love is better than art. Here Browning is suggesting, as he does consistently throughout his work, that love and art are parallel activities.

The title itself, "Dîs Aliter Visum" is a quotation from the Aeneid. It comes when Aeneas is telling the story

of the night Troy fell. Several of the Trojans who put on Greek armor to disguise themselves were found out by their speech. Aeneas tells of the individuals who were killed, among them Ripheus.

Then Ripheus, too, has fallen--he was first
among the Teucrians for justice and
observing right; the gods thought otherwise.⁸

In this passage there are two references to the disjunction between appearance and reality. The first is the unsuccessful disguise of the Trojans, who are found out by their speech. The second is the reference to Ripheus, who, apparently, was seen differently by the gods and men. Perhaps the title indicates that the "gods" thought otherwise about the old poet than he thought about himself. The wisdom for which he admires himself is the basis for his damnation, at least in the terms framed by the woman.

The opposing of a man's and a woman's view forms the basis of this poem. His argument, as she repeats it, and her argument are given approximately equal time. First comes his view. Presumably, the speech she attributes to him is a paraphrase of what he has just told her. We are probably not meant to question her account of his thinking but to accept it as accurate.

She does, however, introduce and frame his speeches. The first five stanzas consist of a long list of questions

⁸The Aeneid of Virgil, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), II, 11. 573-75.

as she repeats, for the reader's benefit, what she has just heard. This form expresses her sense of incredulity, and, as it proceeds, becomes accusatory. Her tone is somewhat bitter as she contrasts the "morning" of their previous encounter with the "evening" of their present meeting:

Stop, let me have the truth of that!
 Is that all true? I say, the day
 Ten years ago when both of us
 Met on a morning, friends--as thus
 We meet this evening, friends or what?--

The question at the end of the stanza contains more than a hint of mockery. The parallel structure contrasts "friends" with a relationship which is undefined and, to some extent, worthless, and contrasts the past, which had some potential for good, with the present, which is empty.

The present is a result of a decision made by the man. She scrutinizes the process by which he reached it, noting that his examination of her was methodical:

Did you consider" Now makes twice
 "That I have seen her, walked and talked
 "With this poor pretty thoughtful thing,
 "Whose worth I weigh: she tries to sing;
 "Draws, hopes in time the eye grows nice;

 "Reads verse and thinks she understands;
 "Loves all, at any rate, that's great,
 "Good, beautiful.

In "weighing" her, he actually does balance one thing against another. Later she will balance the scales quite differently. The punctuation here sets off each unit, making her various qualities into a list of her qualifications in the arts, almost as if she were applying for a job as arts crit-

ic for a newspaper. His comment on her "eye" turns ironically back on himself, for he is later revealed as the one of limited vision.

The comparison of the girl with the gull is puzzling, in parts so ambiguous as to be almost incomprehensible:

"While ... do but follow the fishing-gull
 "That flaps and floats from wave to cave!
 "There's the sea-lover, fair my friend!
 "What then? Be patient, mark and mend!
 "Had you the making of your scull?"

Apparently he is criticizing her for appreciating art as only an outsider can. It is the last two lines of the stanza that give trouble. First there is the question of the spelling and meaning of "scull." The Kenyon edition, generally regarded as the authoritative text, gives the spelling with a "c,"⁹ but a few other texts, including the one on which the Concordance is based, give the spelling with a "k."¹⁰ One possible meaning of "scull" is sea-gull. With this spelling, and if the man is speaking to himself, he may be chastizing himself for being so critical of her, for he is also an outsider. If he is speaking to her, he may be asking her to imitate the gull in order to improve herself. If "skull" is the correct spelling, the man may be excusing himself from undue credit because God gave him his intel-

⁹F.G. Kenyon, ed., The Works of Robert Browning (New York: AMS Press, 1966).

¹⁰L.N. Broughton and B.F. Stelter, A Concordance to the Poems of Robert Browning (London: G.E. Stechert, 1924).

ligence and talents. The line seems hopelessly ambiguous, but we can probably agree with Thomas Blackburn that the gull, if not the scull, represents "instinct and spontaneity." Blackburn says, however, that the man distrusted these qualities, and the poem bears this out. Still, it is the man who praises the gull. It may be that he sees its theoretical value in art but misses its possible value in life.¹¹

The woman then describes the churchyard scene, which she believes was designed by God in an effort to prompt their love-making. The scene's main feature is its loneliness and isolation, but it has many other associations. The church should remind them of God, the spire with its cross on top, of the possibilities of human nobility and aspiration, the graveyards and crosses, of their own mortality and Christ's love and redemption. Throughout, the rhyme--in "roof, aloof," in "lone stone fence"--lends a tone of mournfulness.

The sea too is an important element in the setting. It creates the kind of beautiful atmosphere in which lovers often plight their troth--an association which frightens the man. The woman sees it as a profoundly meaningful setting, arranged by God to cause them to reflect on life's great mysteries. At first she comments that the sea is

¹¹Thomas Blackburn, Robert Browning: A Study of His Poetry (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), p. 79.

"blazing underneath." By the end, when they take their
 "look/At sea and sky" as tourists do, the landscape has
 become totally conventional.

When the man first responds to the scene, it is with
 his instinct, although he is still very much in character:

what's the earth
 "With all its art, verse, music, worth--
 "Compared with love, found, gained, and kept?

Again, he is very carefully balancing possibilities,
 rhythmically balancing two lines heavy with spondees.

Stanza VIII is even more obviously balanced, with weighted
 alternatives:

"Schumann's our music-maker now;
 "Has his march-movement youth and mouth?
 "Ingres's the modern man that paints;
 "Which will lean on me, of his saints?
 "Heine for songs; for kisses, how?"

When the man compares love and art, however, he stresses
 the physical aspect of love and the cerebral aspect of art.
 By not considering the spiritual element they might share,
 he sees the two as mutually exclusive. This prepares the
 groundwork for his reasoned rejection of love.

Then, what is probably a statue of another sea-bird--
 like "scull," a "frigate" may be either a bird or a boat,
 among other things--is looked to for authority. "Riding on
 air this hundred years,/Safe-smiling at old hopes and fears,"
 it "preaches" to him. It is something removed from the mo-
 ment, above earth with its temptations, and, importantly for
 him, it is "safe." Its silent reminder of their mortality

leads him to think of great things, "books and men," which he thinks are lasting, while love is transitory. The resolution to which he comes is a result of his limited knowledge of love:

"Fools we wise men grow!
 "Yes, I could easily blurt out curt
 "Some question that might find reply
 "As prompt in her stopped lips, dropped eye,
 "And rush of red to cheek and brow:

"Thus were a match made, sure and fast.

Here he repudiates instinctive action based on emotion. Lines 2-4 run on without punctuation to illustrate the "blurting" of which he so disapproves. The constant repetition of the palatal plosive sound, in "blurt," "curt," "out," "prompt," "stopped," and "dropped," also illustrates the suddenness he fears. He is frightened, too, by the binding nature of the match "sure and fast." The impersonal expression, "Thus were a match made," with its unclear agent, also expresses his sense that the matter is not entirely in his own control.

The picture he sees of them on the mound among the flowers, looking at the sea and gulls, is a standard romantic tableau. When he sees them framed this way, he backs off. By thinking of love in clichés, he is better able to reject it. This is true of clichés of language also, the "loves and doyes" he mocks in stanza XIII. Stanzas XII and XIII are a pair in which he mocks himself and her and, particularly, the idea of a match between them.

"A match 'twixt me, bent, wigged and lamed,
 "Famous, however, for verse and worse,
 "Sure of the Fortieth spare Arm-chair
 "When gout and glory seat me there,
 "So one whose love-freaks pass unblamed,--

"And this young beauty, round and sound
 "As a mountain-apple, youth and truth
 "With loves and doves, at all events
 "With money in the Three per Cents;
 "Whose choice of me would seem profound:--

He describes them each in doggerel pairs. The ones describing her all rhyme, for he sees her as frivolous, this "young beauty," this "poor pretty thoughtful thing." He constantly objectifies her, never uses her name or thinks of her as a person. Of course, this comparison of their qualities is a balanced list like his others. Line 1 of each stanza contrasts their physical condition; lines 2 to 4 contrast his fame with her money. The comparison is purely superficial: she is young, healthy and rich; he is old, sick and famous. The last line of each stanza evaluates probable public reaction to a marriage between them, apparently an important consideration with him.

He creates a little allegory to aid him in the justification of his retreat:

"She might take me as I take her.
 "Perfect the hour would pass, alas!
 "Climb high, love high, what matter? Still,
 "Feet, feelings, must descend the hill:
 "An hour's perfection can't recur.

They are, of course, on the top of a literal hill, but the man's equation of feet and feelings is a bit too simplistic and earth-bound. Of course, on a literal level, he has

problems with his feet as well as his feelings. He describes himself as "lamed" and gouty. He can't make it to the top of the allegorical hill to pick the "mountain-apple."

The idea that love can be transitory is a common theme in Browning, the central theme of "Love in the Campagna," but it is also present in "Porphyria's Lover," where the lament over the passing of the perfect moment in love is put into the mouth of a notoriously unreliable speaker. In "Dîs Aliter Visum" another Browning theme is opposed to it, the value of the imperfect. It is the woman in this poem who affirms that what is perfect must of necessity die. Human love has a potential for limitless development although it will never be perfect on earth. This she does not actually say to him until ten years later and at the end of this poem. Therefore, in stanza XV he attributes to her his own limited vision and imagines her complaining of her disappointment.

He thinks constantly about his age, as when he again mocks the language of romance, attributing it to "boys," who say "Love me or I die!" The words he puts into her mouth on the subject are his own thoughts:

The truth is, youth
 "'I want, who am old and know too much;
 "'I'd catch youth: lend me sight and touch!
 "'Drop heart's blood where life's wheels grate dry!'

He interprets his motives as base and wrong, sees himself as taking from her to give to himself, almost like a vam-

pire. He continues this kind of thinking when he says, "'I can conceive of cheaper cures/' 'For a yawning-fit o'er books and men.' Again the frame of reference is sickness/health, taking rather than giving.

But he soon takes another tack, seeing himself as the one to be deprived, and angrily defends himself:

"'What? All I am, was, and might be,
 "'All, books taught, art brought, life's whole strife,
 "'Painful results since precious, just
 "'Were fitly exchanged, in wise disgust,
 "'For two cheeks freshened by youth and sea?

"'All for a nosegay!--what came first;
 "'With fields on flower, untried each side;
 "'I rally, need my books and men,
 "'And find a nosegay': drop it, then,
 "No match yet made for best or worst!"

He takes three impressive lines to detail his value and one line to indicate what he would get in exchange, trivializing her in this way and by his language, reducing her to "two cheeks." He fears that she might limit his potential, strike at his very identity. This he sees as a sudden illness, from which he may "rally." He drops the "nosegay," another partial and contemptuous view of the lady, like a hot potato. He has not yet taken her "for better or worse."

"That ended me," she says, as she draws her narration to a close. The parallelism of the stanza points up the conventionality to which their discourse has descended. Indeed, "Descended" is the prominent first word of the next stanza, concluding the allegory:

And then, good-bye! Years ten since then:
 Ten years! We meet: you tell me, now

By a window-seat for that cliff-brow,
On carpet-stripes for those sand-paths.

The break with the past has been very sharp, and is reflected in the disjointed language with its gaps of information. Contrast is everywhere apparent. We have had his view; now we are to have hers. They had met in the morning and out of doors; they meet in the evening, ten years later, and indoors. They sit, spectators instead of climbers, all their adventures behind them.

The poem suddenly changes its nature with the woman's resolution to speak her mind. From stanza XXIII on, Browning has his whole orchestra playing. The conversation becomes elevated rhetoric, which passionately espouses the value of human love, however imperfect.

Was there nought better than to enjoy?
No feat which, done, would make time break,
And let us pent-up creatures through
Into eternity, our due?
No forcing earth teach heaven's employ?

No wise beginning, here and now,
What cannot grow complete (earth's feat)
And heaven must finish, there and then?
No tasting earth's true food for men,
Its sweet in sad, its sad in sweet?

No grasping at love, gaining a share
O' the sole spark from God's life at strife
With death, so, sure of range above
The limits here? For us and love,
Failure; but, when God fails, despair.

The images are typical of Browning when he offers his view of life, nearly all aggressive, active, upwardly striving. They are like those Leonardo uses when he advises James

Lee's wife, the "cramped moment-space" appearing again in other words, always reminding the reader that he must aspire to heavenly things although he will always be limited here on earth. The images are of confinement and breaking out of confinement.

The image of the starfish, a little allegory in itself, enforces this view. It is both perfect, whole in its way, and contemptible since it "crawls" rather than aspires. Its "vault" is its arched sky or heaven, as well as its burial chamber, all very low. The "mere" starfish has no chance at love or at the immortality it confers. Allied to the starfish, the old poet has chosen death rather than life.

At least, this is the view of the woman who sees their affair as of cosmic significance, with God and the devil watching the outcome. God, of course, is the obvious answer to her opening question--"WHO made things plain in vain?"--with its large type. She asserts that their failure to join together is a failure for God, who determined that they should.

Together they would make a kind of whole:

You loved, with body worn and weak;
I loved, with faculties to seek:
Were both loves worthless since ill-clad?

Here she restates his comparison, but she sees them as giving to each other rather than taking away. She accuses him of having had a very superficial vision:

But what's whole, can increase no more,
 Is dwarfed and dies, since here's its sphere.
 The devil laughed at you in his sleeve!
 You knew not? That I well believe;
 Or you had saved two souls: nay, four.

It is difficult to tell how literally she means this last line. Did they merely lose their taste of heaven on earth, or did they really condemn themselves to damnation? The last stanza explains the facts of their situation, but it also seems to cast doubt on the idealism of the preceding stanzas.

For Stephanie sprained last night her wrist,
 Ankle or something. "Pooh," cry you?
 At any rate she danced, all say,
 Vilely; her vogue has had its day.
 Here comes my husband from his whist.

Why "For?" What does the saving of souls have to do with Stephanie's wrist or ankle? The speaker, who suddenly becomes very catty, is quick to pick up the irony that the man who wanted youth is, from her vantage point, stuck with an unfashionable old hag. Stephanie's "vogue" has passed, but what the speaker offered him was permanent.

The main function of this last stanza, however, is to surprise the reader with the news of their subsequent marriages. The speaker implies that the man is unhappy with Stephanie. Of her own husband she says just enough. He has left her alone for the evening to indulge in a trivial occupation. There is also some irony in his being a whist player, for whist is a game in which two who are partners play against another couple. She has not been playing with

him.

This information explains her anger throughout the poem. It was not merely that the poet did not marry her, but that she married and badly. She assumes that any match she might have made was doomed to failure, for God had made love possible with the poet only. Thus, she blames him for her present unhappiness; but she may be deceiving herself. The sudden shift from elevated language to a rather vulgar slang in the last stanza casts some doubt on her credibility. While she may be absolutely right in her analysis of the value of love, her bitterness that she has missed it may have unjustly influenced her attribution of responsibility. After all, what need had she to marry at all? The reason could not have been financial, for she had money enough to live on her own. It is difficult to take entirely seriously the idea, here and especially in "Youth and Art," that these people were predestined to love one another and unable to love otherwise.

The lack of real feeling in the poem also makes it difficult to accept. Although there is more feeling than the situation will support, there is not the anguish that we find in "James Lee's Wife." That poem works better because a broken marriage is a more legitimate cause for grief than an unconsummated relationship, based on a few meetings. "Dûs Aliter Visum" lacks the note of personal authenticity.

The imagery throughout the poem reflects ideas rather than emotions. Except for the churchyard scene, the landscape is not described very graphically or sensuously. The trip up and down the hill functions as an allegory. The churchyard, the sea-gull, the frigate, all convey symbolic messages in a mechanical way. The central interest of the poem is to convey Browning's philosophy that love is worth taking risks for. Browning might have conveyed this more successfully if he had delineated the woman's character more thoroughly.

"Too Late"

While "Too Late" also concerns a character who regrets not having spoken his love, it is far more a study of a particular person than of an idea. In fact, it is more akin to Tennyson's "Maud" than it is to many of Browning's own poems. Yet critics have read even this poem primarily as "philosophy."

Dallas Kenmare contends that it is "concerned with the tragedy of death which, on earth, and humanly speaking, is the end of hope."¹² N.B. Crowell, nearer the mark, calls the speaker "hysterical."¹³ He is a man gesticulating wildly

¹²Dallas Kenmare, An End to Darkness: A New Approach to Robert Browning and His Work (London: P. Owen, 1962), p. 143.

¹³Crowell (p. 15) calls "Too Late," "a highly dramatic, almost hysterical, account of a rejected lover."

in a vacuum, needing to believe in his own goodness, even while he assails himself, and needing to prove that injustice has been done to him. The tone of his entire monologue is that of a man speaking before a jury, trying, against great evidence, to prove that he has loved passionately. In fact, he uses legalistic language throughout: "love's proof," "my soul's sentence," "you be judge," "But we both were tried," and "love's whole debt, summum jus."

By and large, however, unlike the speaker of "Dîs Aliter Visum," he does not concern himself with abstractions. He is too involved in his own life, afflicted, as a popular song writer says, with the "paranoia blues," the principal effect of which is the compulsion to determine whose side people are on, whether they are with one or against one. Indeed, Edith's lover sees himself as "I" against "the other," "I" against "the world."

The structure of the poem reflects his tendency to think in terms of division and opposites. The poem consists of twelve stanzas of twelve lines each, which generally break into two parts of six lines each, devoted to propositions or thoughts of a conflicting nature. Each stanza has also a rigid metrical and rhyme scheme, something resembling a sonnet. Thus, argument and opposition are built into the poem, and supported by rhetorical devices like parallelism and antithesis. The long compound-complex sentences also give the character's utterances some qualities of formal

debate.

In the first six lines of stanza I, the man talks about the past, and his love in the past. The second part of the stanza, introduced by "But," describes the reality of the lover's death in the present.

What he reveals in the first part is that he waited for the woman to take some kind of initiative, to use the enormous power he saw her as possessing. He expresses his own willingness to respond--"Here was I with my arm and heart/and brain"--but he is really exaggerating his former willingness to act, for he later admits that his arms were "folded," unavailable to be called on. It is clear that he identifies himself with her, and with her death. She is "the woman, that's dead"; he is "her lover, that's lost."

The second part of this stanza sets up the principal tension of the poem. He wishes to prove his love to Edith, but since she is dead, he cannot. This tension affects him physically, as we can see by his description of the "pulse within my cheek,/ Which stabs and stops": he is overwrought and tense. But to him the "pulse" is an indication of life and passion, which he associates throughout the poem with the flowing of blood. What he actually says about the pulse is that it communicates to him "that the woman I loved/Needs help in her grave." This is rather mystical and perhaps a little crazed.

In the second stanza we learn about the kind of phil-

osophy the speaker has depended upon in the past: he has relied upon God to deliver up to him his love. The division of the stanza points up the incongruity between his expectations and the result. The first part ends, "the choice of God"; the second part ends, "thwarting God." The result has not changed the way he thinks. He assumes that God is on his side still but that "some devil" has influenced events contrarily. Since "the end" has not "declared" Edith his, the final event is, therefore, not "the choice of God." In any case, whether it is God or the devil who decides, it is not the speaker, who does not see those concerned as having any power to mold the result.

In spite of this belief, the questions he asks in the first four lines of the stanza are attempts to justify his inaction, now that he has a glimmering that he was himself at fault.

Did I speak once angrily, all the drear days
 You lived, you woman I loved so well,
 Who married the other? Blame or praise,
 Where was the use then?

"Drear" is a rather startling adjective to apply to the time Edith lived, but he was, in fact, almost as miserable then, through keeping silence, as he is now in speaking out. There is also a hint of accusation in his tone that she should have married "the other," rather than him.

"But, Edith dead!" cuts off his self-justification with the bluntest possible assertion of reality: his former

outlook was not in touch with reality. He describes himself as passive, on the outside of his life looking in, as if it were a story whose denouement he could anticipate but not affect. To some extent he remains a spectator throughout the poem, examining his own conduct. This accounts for some of his posturing, for he is constantly watching himself and striking poses for his own benefit.

The metaphor by which he describes his life also indicates passivity. The stream resembles the central metaphor of Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum," which has so complete an air of fatalism. Presumably, the stone which stops up the stream is Edith's marriage to "the other." The reaction of the water to the obstruction is like that of a drowning man, with the feeling of suffocation becoming more intense in the next stanza.

Stanza III consists of two competing fantasies, a quiet solution to the speaker's problem and an explosive solution, neither requiring any effort on his part. This is his pattern through stanza V, where he moves from calm to passion, from calm to passion.

But either I thought, "They may churn and chide
 "Awhile, my waves which came for their joy
 "And found this horrible stone full-tide:
 "Yet I see just a thread escape, deploy
 "Through the evening-country, silent and safe,
 "And it suffers no more till it finds the sea."
 Or else I would think, "Perhaps some night
 "When new things happen, a meteor-ball
 "May slip through the sky in a line of light,
 "And earth breathe hard, and landmarks fall,

"And my waves no longer champ nor chafe,
 "Since a stone will have rolled from its place: let
 be!"

The imagery of the whole stanza is violent in its expression of frustration. Both "champ" and "chide" are associated with the restraint of horses by bits. Together with "churn" and "chafe," different shades of the same feeling are expressed through repetition of a similar sound.

The first fantasy is calm because the speaker assumes that time is on his side and that waiting will accomplish much. Yet, like the second fantasy, it occurs at night, a time conducive to illusion and mystery.

The "new things" which may happen are mysterious and miraculous and vague: they are reminiscent of the miracles attending the crucifixion: "And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it" (Matthew 28.2). That no agent is identified when "a stone will have rolled from its place" increases its air of the miraculous. In any case, all that the speaker has to do is to "let be."

"But, dead!" begins stanza IV, reiterating the assertion of stanza II: "But Edith dead!" Her lover becomes more elliptical as he concentrates more intensely on his subject and becomes more inward. "All's done with," he says, even if one were to "wait," "watch," "wear" or "wonder." Even when imagining what might be done to prevent the

awful conclusion, he can only think of thinking. He says his life is over, hinting, as he does throughout, of suicide and death.¹⁴

Then, in the second half of the stanza, he turns his anger outward, moves from thoughts of suicide or depression to thoughts of murder:

There's only the past left: worry that!
 Wreak, like a bull, on the empty coat,
 Rage, its late wearer is laughing at!
 Tear the collar to rags, having missed his throat;
 Strike stupidly on--"This, this and this,
 "Where I would that a bosom received the blow!"

Even in this expression of rage, however, is frustration, for he can find no object on which to vent his rage. The separation of "Wreak" and its object "Rage" increases our sense of his impotence. His use of the imperatives reflects ironically on his lack of power also. He sees himself as an object of ridicule, although it is not entirely clear who the "Late wearer" is. It really does not matter, since he believes the whole world is his enemy, and this outburst may be an expression of generalized fury. In fantasy, he identifies himself with powerful animals, like the bull, and the dogs and wolves who "worry" their prey. He really would aim for the throat if he could find an appropriate victim.

¹⁴Laurence Perrine, "Browning's 'Too Late': A Re-Interpretation," Victorian Poetry, 7 (1969), 339-45, hypothesizes that the speaker intends to commit suicide with the wine he holds, which is poisoned. This is a possible explanation for some of the poem's inconsistencies, but, as Perrine says, Browning left too few clues in the poem to allow us any certainty on this point.

For him, there is only the past left," which he henceforth throws himself into, reevaluating, rationalizing and eventually promising to compensate for. He is entirely past-directed. Although his past was painful, at least it provides a focus for his emotions, without which he would be lost.

In stanza V he admits blame, granting that he ought, indeed, to have taken some action: "once my speech,/And once your answer, and there, the end,/And Edith was henceforth out of reach!" The elliptical means of expression and the parallelism reflect his belief that the "end" would inevitably have followed his speaking out; even now he does not feel that action would have gained him his object; it would merely have settled the question.

The fantasy in the second part of this stanza concerns what he ought to have done rather than what he wishes had happened to him:

Why, better even have burst like a thief
 And borne you away to a rock for us two,
 In a moment's horror, bright, bloody and brief:
 Then changed to myself again--"I slew
 "Myself in that moment; a ruffian lies
 "Somewhere: your slave, see, born in his place!"

He pictures himself as a kind of buccaneer, daring and attractive, but he does not see these qualities as intrinsic. As in his other fantasies, there is still an element of magic, which briefly transforms him to someone else. It is necessary for him to slay his real self to participate in such an adventure. He constantly alludes to giving up his

life for Edith, but in this fantasy he is, instead, magically reborn through love.

The fantasy also reflects strong sexual feelings. The blood and violence which accompany the abduction certainly justify us in thinking of rape, and in thinking naive this analysis of the speaker's passion by an early Browning critic, Edward Berdoe: "a passion unalloyed by any gross affection; such a love of one soul for another congenial soul as proves that man is more than matter."¹⁵ One can only see this as wrongheaded. The imagery throughout is deeply sexual, and the sexuality builds to the last stanza where it is unavoidable and flamboyant.

In the following stanza, the speaker returns to his real interest in the poem, the need to be judged, and to be judged better than the "other" and all the "others" who make up the "world" which does not recognize his worth: "What did the other do? You be the judge!/Look at us Edith! Here are we both!" He addresses his pleas to the dead woman, seeking a new trial, one where there will be less interference from reality. He strikes the pose of the magnanimous contender who can afford to be generous to the less favored in the race. Yet it must be merely a pose, for the fact is that he did not "overtake and pass;" he is deluding himself.

¹⁵Edward Berdoe, The Browning Cyclopaedia: Guide to the Study of the Works of Robert Browning (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1897), p. 549.

In this trial, he determines the terms on which one should be judged; nothing matters except how well one has loved. In this he claims superiority to all the world, for true love on its part would have been evidenced by the sacrifice of Edith to the speaker, who describes himself as "free, ... young, prosperous, sound and sane," in a phrase which sounds rather deluded to our ears. He exhibits a desperate bravado, a claim that he was willing to give up his life for her on the slightest pretext. He "Poured life out, proffered it/ 'Half a glance/'Of those eyes of yours and I drop the glass!'"

After this climax of feeling, there is a shift of topic in the next stanza and a meditative beginning. Even in thinking of Edith's appearance, he cannot resist setting up a rivalry with everyone else. The first six lines compare him with the others; the second six are devoted to slighting their values.

The claim he makes for himself here is at variance with the account he has given us before. In comparing himself to the "rat" who belled the cat--the traditional story actually refers to a mouse--he attests that he was foolish but daring. Yet he has told us before that he was too afraid to do anything. As for the others, they didn't care enough to do anything, he now says,--and here he takes a little jab at his lady, against whom he expresses a little malice from time to time, by assuring her that she has not

broken any hearts.

He distinguishes himself further from the contemptible "others" by his nobility of spirit, and makes a catalogue of their foibles:

Each soon made his mind up; so and so
 Married a dancer, such and such
 Stole his friend's wife, stagnated slow,
 Or maundered, unable to do as much,
 And muttered of peace where he had no part.

He apparently does not see anything wrong with his own desire to steal another man's wife, because it is clear that he does not consider himself or Edith part of this corrupt world.

He becomes more specific, in stanza VIII, in his denunciation of his rival and his comparison of their deserts;¹⁶

On the whole, you were let alone, I think!
 So, you looked to the other, who acquiesced;
 My rival, the proud man,--prize your pink
 Of poets! A poet he was! I've guessed:
 He rhymed you his rubbish nobody read,
 Loved you and doved you--did not I laugh!
 There was a prize! But we both were tried.
 Oh, heart of mine, marked broad with her mark,
 Tekel, found wanting, set aside,
 Scorned! See, I bleed these tears in the dark
 Till comfort come and the last be bled:
 He? He is tagging your epitaph.

He imagines that she chose his rival simply because she did not receive much other attention. He assumes that the rival is as passive as he is. He did not really appreciate her, and he did not work to get her: he was "lucky." The speak-

¹⁶Crowell says Edith married a "rival poet" (p. 15), but the speaker criticizes him partly for being a poet.

er doesn't really know how this inexplicable event occurred, but he "guesses" that the poet insinuated himself into her affections with sugared language. Edith's lover becomes very agitated--the lines grow more fragmented--as he considers this possibility. He considers the poet a "false" poet, since a true poet is to be judged by the intensity and purity of his feelings rather than by words, which may be empty of real feeling. So far as the speaker's own language is concerned, he nearly always speaks of his love in "poetic" language, and of his rival in a rather abusive slang. Yet he mocks, as does the old poet in "Dîs Aliter Visum," the clichés of romance, which is all of which he imagines his rival capable.

In the second half of the stanza he admits that Edith's judgment, as well as chance, operated in his fate. Whether this is any more accurate a perception is difficult for us to tell since he has led us to believe that he has never spoken his feelings and could not, therefore, be tried. In any case, he laments that he was rejected. The structure of the exclamation leads to a climax with the word "Scorned," which comes at the beginning of a line. The word Tekel alludes to the Book of Daniel. The writing on the wall which Daniel interprets for King Belshazzar, who is revelling with women and wine and golden idols, is "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN." "God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it.... Thou art weighed in the balances,

and art found wanting.... Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians" (Daniel 5.26-28). The speaker attributes to Edith power analogous to that of God over the King. It seems odd, at first, that he should place himself in such a context, for both "Tekel" and "mark" are biblical words which generally refer to those set apart and the guilty. It may be that the corruption that the speaker attributes to everyone else is a projection of his own corruption, which he denies so vehemently that he has.

The tears he "bleeds" in the dark are, of course, a visible proof of his very great love. When the "last" will "be bled" is rather a mystery, however. This seems to be another reference to his death or, at least, to the way in which he will live, which is different from that of the poet, who does not bleed at all, but having no real life, spurts verse, with which he is stuffed. The poet also commits the grave offense of admitting that Edith is dead, and of being composed enough to write her epitaph.

Language continues to be important in stanza IX. The first half is written in a condensed, intense, emotional style. The speaker continues his condemnation of the poet, extending his metaphor and insisting that he himself is filled with life and love, represented by blood, whereas the poet is lifeless and artificial, capable of producing only an artificial language.

If it would only come over again!
 --Time to be patient with me, and probe
 This heart till you punctured the proper vein,
 Just to learn what blood is: twitch the robe
 From that blank lay-figure your fancy draped,
 Prick the leathern heart till the--verses spirt!

Just as in "James Lee's Wife," where Leonardo expresses this idea, veins and muscles are seen as the real, the inner man, which is valuable. The speaker sees this poet as a "lay-figure," a wooden form used by artists to arrange draperies and such. The terms in which Edith's lover imagines her discovering his true worth continue his growing preoccupation with the physical.

The second half of the stanza, which looks back dreamily over the past, is in a style smooth, casual, and commonplace. It reflects his memory of how "easy" those times were:

And late it was easy; late, you walked
 Where a friend might meet you; Edith's name
 Arose to one's lip if one laughed or talked;
 If I heard good news, you heard the same;
 When I woke, I knew that your breath escaped;
 I could bide my time, keep alive, alert.

This memory, however, contradicts his earlier description of the days of her lifetime as "drear." Of course, we ask why, if the opportunity was so easily available in the past, he did not avail himself of it. Now when he looks back on that time from a different angle, it looks quite good. The parallel structure puts him and Edith in a close relationship to each other: she is in the main clause; he is in the subordinate one. But his assumption is the one he has already

seen fail, the assumption that time was on his side. In fact, just as in "James Lee's Wife" and "Dîs Aliter Visum," time is an enemy to love.

Stanza X indicates the speaker's ambivalence toward living. The speaker's defiant assertion that he will live is opposed to the frequent hints of suicide. Presumably, he is talking about how he will live, or, in the first half of the stanza, how he will not live.

And alive I shall keep and long, you will see!
 I knew a man, was kicked like a dog
 From gutter to cesspool; what cared he
 So long as he picked from the filth his prog?
 He saw youth, beauty and genius die,
 And jollily lived to his hundredth year.

The "prog" this dog of a man picks from the filth may be food for the mind as well as actual food. The speaker sees him as contaminated by moral corruption and hardened against all of the considerations so important to the sensitive man. The speaker believes he is better than this man and the rest of the world as well.

But I will live otherwise: none of such life!
 At once I begin as I mean to end.
 Go on with the world, get gold in its strife,
 Give your spouse the slip and betray your friend!

The epigrammatic expression of these thoughts suggests that the world always operates in this manner. The slang is suited to the subject, corruption by money and sex. This is the speaker's second mention of stealing another man's wife. One wonders again whether he is not so passionate about the world's evil because he feels so guilty about his

own.

The way in which he chooses to separate himself from this vileness is to withdraw from life, either through death or through death-like fantasies: "There are two who decline, a woman and I,/And enjoy our death in the darkness here." The claustrophobic feeling present throughout the poem intensifies from here on, where there is more than a hint of necrophilia.

Following the cool darkness into which the speaker descends in stanza X, he moves, in the first section of stanza XI, into a curiously detached description of his love. It is like the Renaissance courtier's catalogue of the features of his lady: her curls, her cheek, her mouth, her chin; but it deliberately aims at understatement. For, even in this matter, he distinguishes between his own perceptions and those of the world. And here, where the world's opinion enters, the description becomes grotesque:

like a bird's
Your hand seemed--some would say, the pounce
Of a scaly-footed hawk--all but!
The world was right when it called you thin.

Although forced to agree with the world--and there is probably some satisfaction for him in so doing--he is unwilling to live with this perception. So he asserts, "But I turn my back on the world," simply withdrawing from reality into fantasy. In this fantasy Edith is perfectly beautiful, and still alive. Furthermore, she can deny

him nothing:

I take
Your hand, and kneel, and lay to my lips.
Bid me live, Edith! Let me slake thirst at your
presence!

He imagines that his desire is at last to be satisfied, but not without cost.

'T is your slave shall pay, while his soul endures,
Full due, love's whole debt, summum jus.
My queen shall have high observance, planned
Courtship made perfect, no least line
Crossed without warrant.

He delights to be called her slave, and he demands punishment, the utmost rigor that the law of love will provide, for the injury he feels he has done her in the past and for the favors he hopes to enjoy. He creates a whole system, in which he keeps prescribed rituals and ceremonies, careful to the letter. "Courtship," which is generally the prelude to marriage, here is addressed to a dead woman, and is itself a dead ritual. Its perfection is possible, in fact, only because she is dead. As the woman in "Dîs Aliter Visum" asserts, love on earth can never be perfect.

At the end, the speaker seems almost to be hallucinating:

There you stand,
Warm too, and white too: would this wine
Had washed all over that body of yours,
Ere I drank it, and you down with it, thus!

His vision does not coincide with rational experience, which shows that those who are warm are generally flushed rather than white. In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker sees the woman in her grave as needing warmth "from the

heart which sends it--so!" This warmth is the gift of his imagination.

The glass he has raised throughout and offered her as a symbol of his life now becomes something quite different, expressing his wish to consume her. The whole vision is a very sensual one, where the wine provides a kind of sensual baptism. The tone is such as one would associate more readily with Swinburne than with Browning.

This stanza is a bit Byronic too, with its inflated gestures of rebellion. The speaker is something of an anachronism, seeing himself as a courtly lover in a modern, unchivalrous world. Yet it seems clear that he projects his own guilt onto the world when he sees corruption everywhere but in himself.

Ultimately, it is possible to read the title "Too Late" as Browning's comment on the whole monologue, with its desperate desire to prove what, even proved, can make no possible difference. Courage cannot come after the fact.

"Youth and Art"

"Youth and Art," which comes much later in the volume, is remarkably similar to "Dîs Aliter Visum" in theme but very different in tone. DeVane, in comparing the two, remarks: "The embittered, rueful utterance of the speaker here should be contrasted with the scornful and cynical tone

of the lady who speaks in Dîs Aliter Visum."¹⁷ DeVane seems to miss the real difference in tone. Except in the last stanza, the speaker of "Dîs Aliter Visum" speaks an elevated, idealistic language which points directly to Browning himself behind her. The language and structure of "Youth and Art" reveal more of the speaker.

More than one critic has noticed that the poem sounds rather like a jingle. The stanzas have four short lines to a stanza, rhyming a, b, a, b. There are frequent two syllable rhymes, which have a comic effect, rhymes like "flower-fence facing" and "corset-lacing," "fortunes" and "short tunes." Each stanza is complete in itself, like the verse of a song, and the regular use of parallelism increases its sing-song quality.

Altogether, the poem seems deliberately "unpoetic"; its lines are jerky, and it lacks much soothing alliteration or assonance. It is what Robert O. Preyer refers to as Browning's "simple style" in the extreme: "double and internal rhymes, strong accents and heavy punctuation."¹⁸ It is used, he says, for all kinds of subject matter except for the expression of complicated thinking, influenced by subconscious impulses. In fact, this poem is quite simple in

¹⁷William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), p. 305.

¹⁸Robert Preyer, "Two Styles in the Verse of Robert Browning," Journal of English Literary History, 32 (1965), p. 80.

diction and syntax. In some places, as in stanza IV, the lines exist almost entirely for the sake of the rhymes. Except in the last two stanzas, nearly all of the metaphors are clichés or idioms.

Yet this is a far more successful poem than "Dis Aliter Visum." The sing-song sound and the slang manage to parody modern love and modern lovers better than the eloquent accusations in the earlier poem. The sound is also suited to the high-strung and highly excitable nature of the singer. The rigid structure of the poem only increases the effect of the emotion it contains.

The speaker's method of exposition is to compare and contrast herself and the young man in alternate lines or stanzas. In only a few places, and those at significant points, does she refer to them together as "we." This method enforces our sense of their separateness, which is, of course, the subject of the poem.

The first line and the last two lines of the poem are set off from the rest by colons. The introduction is, "It once might have been, once only." The conclusion is, "This could but have happened once, / And we missed it, lost it for ever." What is notably lacking from these lines, and from the poem as a whole, is the word "love." Although she refers to it obliquely, it is always in an understated way. Perhaps, it is excluded from her vocabulary as it has been excluded from her life. The title "Youth and Art" is

also revealing; she is not able to title it "Youth and Love," a more traditional pairing.

With the second half of the first stanza begins the alternating parallel structure and balance which continue throughout:

You, a sparrow on the housetop lonely,
I, a lone she-bird of his feather.

Her diction is not merely informal, but jocose, as she plays with idiom and proverb. Here "birds of a feather" do not flock together.

As stanzas II and III continue the corresponding accounts, she speaks slightingly of their artistic occupations. Nowhere does she call him a sculptor or herself an opera singer. She speaks with subtle ridicule of art, because she is comparing it to love, which, she believes, she has given up for art.

She describes herself and the young man, nevertheless, as active, ambitious, competitive:

Then laughed "They will see some day
"Smith made, and Gibson demolished."

"Kate Brown's on the boards ere long,
"And Grisi's existence embittered!"

That their ambitions are so similar makes the goals seem commonplace. Also, their aspirations are described in rather coarse terms, quite unlike the way in which most Browning characters allude to noble aspirations.

Although they are both "sparrows" in the first stanza, the speaker describes herself as a bird throughout, chirping and twittering and warbling out her sorrows rather comically. The "warble" which earns her no money, like the boy's "sketch," is another denigration of their artistic occupations. Here and in the next two stanzas, she paints them as poor artists, dedicated to their profession, but in the portrayal there is also some of the mockery of the stereotype.

We studied hard in our styles,
 Chipped each at a crust like Hindoos,
 For air looked out on the tiles,
 For fun watched each other's windows.

She portrays them here as equally interested spectators, but later on she will regret that the boy never did look up at her. There is a fair amount of fantasy in this memory of a boy whom she never even saw at close range, for she reveals in the next stanza that she could not quite tell whether his face wore a "beard" or smudge of clay.

That she remembers the time with nostalgia is clear. She evokes fondly the day to day details of her life and the mood of the bohemian colony, the kind of details usually left out of poems about love. In this lies much of the interest in "Youth and Art." Certainly, one cannot imagine James Lee's wife mentioning such a thing as her "corset-lacing." Yet this woman delights in being a bit daring, and makes jokes that a proper Victorian lady would never

consider. In fact, this lady has nothing against sexual innuendo. Since Pope, at least, corsets and such were looked upon humorously as the female armor against sexual assault.

Yet, despite her desire that the fellow should try to see beyond the blind, and despite her singing to attract his attention, he never does look up. And despite her claim, made through her language, to be unconventional, she asserts that it was not her fault if he did not look up. All she could do was try to attract him; it was unthinkable to do more.

The next stanza in which she voices these sentiments is joined in one unit with the following one, which is the exact center of the poem. These stanzas, as the only two so connected, break up the parallel pattern. Stanza IX talks about the scene rather than the people.

For spring bade the sparrows pair,
And the boys and girls gave guesses,
And stalls in our street looked rare
With bulrush and watercresses.

It was not her "fault" because the scene should have been enough to move him: he is a "sparrow" who ought to have followed his natural instincts. Although she seems, in the next stanza, to attribute the blame equally, she does not really, for her part could only have been performed in response to his. She seems to have expected a kind of miracle, a flower flung at her, to transform her life by love. Why it did not come, she continues to analyze.

The next three stanzas are all playful and nostalgic, as she remembers incidents calculated to evoke jealousy on both sides. It is clear she was jealous, as she looked from her hiding place at the model tripping up the stairs. "And yet the memory rankles," she interjects, indicating to us how important this fantasy love-life was to her.

"But I think I gave you as good!" she asserts, putting words into his mouth that are never confirmed, as the man's are in "Dîs Aliter Visum." Resting on her own conjectures, she continues:

Could you say so, and never say
 "Suppose we join hands and fortunes,
 "And I fetch her from over the way,
 "Her, piano, and long tunes and short tunes?"

The question for us to ask is: did he say so? There is no way to determine that he said or thought any such thing. Yet, when in stanza XIV, she again attributes responsibility for the failure of her life, most of it goes to him:

No, no: you would not be rash,
 Nor I rasher and something over:
 You've to settle yet Gibson's hash,
 And Grisi yet lives in clover.

As a woman, courage far greater than that required of him would have been needed for her to take the initiative. But she masks the real problem by attributing their failure solely to ambition. That her own ambition was merely an excuse may be surmised by the revelation that she has given up her career after marrying a rich man. Although the boy has become a success at his profession, she has gained en-

trance into society through marriage.

But you meet the Prince at the Board,
 I'm queen myself at bals-paré,
 I've married a rich old lord,
 And you're dubbed knight and an R.A.

The way she alludes to her husband, impersonally, at the very least, shows us the cause of her discontent. As for the man, we do not know whether he has married. What she bases her estimate of his unhappiness on, other than her own feelings, is his entrance into the establishment. For whatever reasons, his unhappiness is absolutely assumed:

Each life unfulfilled, you see;
 It hangs still, patchy and scrappy:
 We have not sighed deep, laughed free,
 Starved, feasted, despaired,--been happy.

And nobody calls you a dunce,
 And people suppose me clever:
 This could but have happened once,
 And we missed it, lost it for ever.

She feels they have lived on the surface of life and are successes according to superficial appearance. That people suppose them intelligent may be true, but in any case, intelligence has nothing to do with their kind of failure, may even have been the cause of it.

The shift from the flighty, light tone of the whole to the bitterness of the last two stanzas is quite effective. Her pain is all the more moving for having been hidden so long behind the jingle.

That "Youth and Art" does not lend itself to the same kind of close textual analysis that "Too Late" does should be clear by now. The reason lies in the deliberate attempt

by the speaker to stay on the surface of events. Part of her complaint is that she has moved from the artistic world to the world of society, whose superficiality she now shares. Yet she admits that, even as an artist, her values were awry.

This kind of rationalization occurs throughout, even at the end, where her perception of the emptiness of her life is doubtless accurate. She absolves herself of responsibility for her present situation by blaming it on the boy to whom she never even spoke. The future has no hope for her, because she believes, or chooses to believe, that only one opportunity for love is available to a person and that her opportunity has passed. The poem may move us because the pain is real, but we are not obliged to credit her with perfect understanding, or to absolve her of all responsibility.

"Confessions"

"Confessions" is the first poem in the volume to deal with love which has been satisfied, but it is different from the others which follow it, less inflated than "Prospice" or "Eurydice," less melancholy than "May and Death." Within its modest aims, it is successful, and it successfully affirms the value of love, a thing which other poems in the volume attempt. Yet it is far from a deadly serious poem, certainly not deadly.

The title is ironic. What should have been confession, the sacrament, becomes the confessions of a lover. This is one of the few true dramatic monologues considered thus far. The dying man addresses the stuffy clergyman and responds to his disapproval. In a dramatic monologue, the speaker's motives are, of course, open to interpretation.

K.W. Gransden in "The Uses of Personae," considers "Confessions" a bad poem because the speaker "looks back on what appears to be a rather trivial love affair."

He wants to show that he has been a gay dog in his day, ... yet out of a fatal deference to convention, from which the poem fails to enact its escape, he has to pretend to be deranged; and as he pretends we are being nudged and winked at by the poet himself, who wants us to feel that he is on the speaker's side and that "improper" really means "manly."¹⁹

This is a little hard. Since the speaker is about to die, he is probably an old man. It is almost a psychological cliché that old people frequently remember small incidents in the distant past better than what has recently occurred. His is not the tone of the braggart.

What is he buzzing in my ears?
 "Now that I come to die,
 "Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"
 Ah, reverend sir, not I!

The speaker is abstracted, lost in his own world, so that the clergyman's voice sounds to him far away, and annoys him

¹⁹K.W. Gransden, "The Uses of Personae," in Browning's Mind And Art, ed. Clarence Tracy (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 62-63.

by distracting him from his own thoughts. The ether on his night table tells us that he is probably in pain, and under its influence, may even be subject to hallucinations.

Since he is on his deathbed, the clergyman tries to persuade him to confess his sins, and does so by mouthing religious clichés. The effect of the poem is to show the emptiness of such clichés in the face of a rewarding life. The speaker's knowledge of the gratification of love allows him to oppose with gusto the religious man's priggish question.

In fact, the entire poem sounds a bit sing-song, with short lines and comic rhymes, but it is, above all, cheerful. The language is not rhetorical, but conversational; it has frequently been praised for this quality. Bernard Groom, in his study of Browning's diction, has said, "His handling of colloquial idiom in little pieces like The Lost Mistress and Confessions is one of his finest achievements."²⁰ Browning's contemporaries remarked on its commonplace detail. DeVane tells us that Augustine Birrell thought it "audacious in its familiar realism, in its total disregard for poetical environment" (p. 302). Certainly the "terrace, somewhere near the stopper" is a rather grotesque spot for the speaker's Juliet. Yet the poem is successful for being understated. The generic language is apt for a situation, whose

²⁰Bernard Groom, The Diction of Poetry From Spenser to Bridges (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955), p. 230.

outlines time may have blurred. Also, the scene he presents is a symbol of possible happiness in the world. The commonplace suburban house makes it a prospect available to everyone, rather than a highly charged poetic fantasy.

The speaker tells us his present position in a few simple words. He is sick, bedridden, with medicine bottles by his side.

What I viewed there once, what I view again
 Where the physic bottles stand
 On the table's edge,--is a suburb lane,
 With a wall to my bedside hand.

The man is confined to bed, but he uses his imagination to free himself, creating a whole puppet show with his window curtain as backdrop.

"Is the curtain blue/Or green to a healthy eye?" he asks in a real dramatic utterance, which Gransden sees as pure calculation. Yet it may be that he is lost in his fantasy and does not see clearly. The irony, of course, is that he is quite sane and healthy according to the terms of the Browning world. Eyes represent people in this poem, and he has real vision. The petty villains cannot see anything although they stretch their eyes all out of shape. But there are "two eyes," which, like the speaker's, see the world in proper focus.

In stanza V, almost at the exact center of the poem, he springs on us and on his listener the matter to which he has been leading.

At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,
 There watched for me, one June,
 A girl: I know, sir, it's improper,
 My poor mind's out of tune.

This is where the conflict with the clergyman begins. Although the speaker admits that his "confession" is "improper," the word indicates a rather trivial kind of disapproval, reinforced by the comic rhyme with "stopper." As for his second allusion to his mind being addled, he is being somewhat defensive, but in a playful way. He may not believe there is anything wrong with his mind, but he needs to placate the clergyman in order to pursue his memories in peace.

Although the speaker's love affair was a clandestine one, the whole atmosphere he portrays is one of joy and innocence. There was a certain amount of daring and challenge involved in outsmarting the girl's guardians.

Only, there was a way ... you crept
 Close by the side, to dodge
 Eyes in the house, two eyes except:
 They stiyled their house "The Lodge."

What right had a loungeer up their lane?
 But, by creeping very close,
 With the good wall's help,--their eyes might strain
 And stretch themselves to Oes,

Yet never catch her and me together,
 As she left the attic, there,
 By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether,"
 And stole from stair to stair,

And stood by the rose-wreathed gate.

Presumably, "they" are snobbish and intolerant, at least to his youthful eyes, and their motives for separating the lovers unworthy and mean. The speaker exhibits a sense of

rightness in what he does. The "Good wall" reminds us of two other lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, who were unjustly kept apart with tragic results.

The two stanzas before the last, and including the first line of the last, are all one sentence, long and meditative. They lead up to and lend force to the short concluding exclamations.

Alas,
 We loved, sir--used to meet:
 How sad and bad and mad it was--
 But then, how it was sweet!

His tone is a combination of sadness that it is over and some perfunctory regret for impropriety, for the sake of the priest, but after the pause in the third line, he bursts out with his joy, and no regret at all. The poem affirms the value of love in a lighthearted way, without proselytizing for a philosophy, and it does so very well.

"May and Death"

"May and Death" was written to commemorate the death of Browning's cousin James Silverthorne in 1852 and was first published in The Keepsake in 1857. DeVane speculates, "It was too occasional and personal, probably, to find a place in the Men and Women volumes of 1855, and because Dramatis Personae was at once more occasional and personal than Men and Women, Browning included the poem in 1864" (p. 302). Yet, because of its early composition, it really does not fit into this volume either.

In fact, G.K. Chesterton's praise of it as "one of the most perfect lyrics in the English language"²¹ is hard to understand. Browning commemorates a friendship with a man in a poem which turns it into a rather conventional tale of love, in which a woman laments her lost lover. It expresses the woman's mood more than it gives a sense of her character.

Of course, "May and Death" does have this in common with the other love poems in Dramatis Personae; the woman is alone, addressing a dead lover, looking back on the past.

The title expresses her sense of the incongruity of her lover's death and the life of nature in May. The first stanza expresses her sense of this incongruity:

I wish that when you died last May,
Charles, there had died along with you
Three parts of spring's delightful things;
Ay, and, for me, the fourth part too.

The rest of the poem is a qualification of this wish to obliterate the painful incongruity by destroying the beauty around her. Yet the tone, even here, is not bitter as is that of the speaker of "The Worst of It" who makes a similar wish. Her grief has been moderated by the period of a year into a more bearable melancholy.

She sees herself as one bereft lover in a world of

²¹G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning (London; Macmillan, 1903), p. 21.

happy lovers, but she respects that world: "There must be many a pair of friends/Who, arm in arm, deserve the warm/Moon-births and the long evening-ends." The imagery here is quite pleasing, but it is designedly not visual. We find no detailed description at all until the last two stanzas, where it is meant to arrest us.

Only, one little sight, one plant,
Woods have in May, that starts up green
Save a sole streak which, so to speak,
Is spring's blood, spilt its leaves between,--

That, they might spare; a certain wood
Might miss the plant; their loss were small:
But I,--whene'er the leaf grows there,
Its drop comes from my heart, that's all.

The metaphor is arresting, but not entirely effective. The lady's tone of understatement in the last line sounds coy in conjunction with such a dramatic image.

De Vane identifies the plant as the spotted persicaria of which legend has it that it grew beneath the cross and is spotted with the blood of Christ (p. 303). It becomes here a symbol for the possibility of death in the midst of life and the wounds of the living.

"Prospice"

Browning's contemporaries loved "Prospice," as they later loved Henley's "Invictus," manly poems both, celebrating the human will. Traditional critics of Browning have held to this view of "Prospice" for a long time. Dallas Kenmare asserts positively that by the time of "Prospice's"

publication, "Browning's faith in the conquest of death by love had been sternly tested and not found wanting" (p. 143).

What was seen as Browning's greatest expression of faith seems to modern readers a bit hollow. George Santayana was one early critic, however, who anticipated the modern distaste for the poem. What he criticizes is Browning's simplistic view of the afterlife.²² Certainly, the world view of the poem is based on extreme polarities. The world is divided into brave men and cowards, the "best" and the "worst," darkness and light. One must fight through an experience like hell to find one's way to heaven.

The poem has the tone, in fact, of an address to the troops before an important battle. Like the parts of "James Lee's Wife" that work least well, it has the ring and rhythm of the "Cavalier Tunes." The major metaphor is the military one: "the post of the foe," "a battle's to fight," "bear the brunt," etc. The speaker's posture is completely that of the soldier rather than the poet. He sees himself as powerful, in command of his own will and, therefore, of his fate. He aspires to what is greatest, moving from darkness to light, from pain to peace, from cold to warmth.

The stanza divides structurally to mark the stages of the journey, in which the speaker must pass through a series

²²George Santayana, "The Poetry of Barbarism" in The Browning Critics, ed. Boyd Litzinger and K.L. Knickerbocker (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 67.

of steps, at each of which his courage is tried.

Fear death?--to feel the fog in my throat,
 The mist in my face,
 When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
 I am nearing the place,
 The power of the night, the press of the storm,
 The post of the foe;
 Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
 Yet the strong man must go:
 For the journey is done and the summit attained,
 And the barriers fall,
 Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
 The reward of it all.
 I was ever a fighter, so--one fight more,
 The best and the last!
 I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,
 And bade me creep past.
 No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
 The heroes of old,
 Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
 Of pain, darkness and cold.
 For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
 The black minute's at end,
 And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
 Shall dwindle, shall blend,
 Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
 Then a light, then thy breast,
 O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
 And with God be the rest!

Lines 1 to 12 describe the battle; lines 13 to 16 reflect on the need for a fight; lines 17 to 28 reaffirm the value of the struggle and describe the reward.

The experience is made immediate by the use of verb forms, especially infinitives, which if not actually present tense, have a present sense. Then the alternation of long and short lines, to some extent, imitates the storm tossed condition of the speaker. Alliteration gives the poem a strong forward movement, but it is vastly overdone.

This is the most completely rhetorical poem in

Dramatis Personae, with the rhetoric used for self-persuasion. Yet the speaker cannot really be said to have a character. This poem is entirely different in kind from "James Lee's Wife," but a comparison is useful in defining it. In that poem, there is also much use of rhetorical devices, but, in nearly every case, such devices as repetition, parallelism, and ellipsis, seem to express the speaker's emotions and reveal what is behind her words. "Prospect" on the other hand, presents a completely opaque surface, with nothing behind it. The metaphors are gross, occasionally clichéd, and tending toward allegory. There is no evidence to refute the appearance the poem has of being spoken openly by Browning in his own voice.

The title means "Look Forward!" Certainly, in this volume, none of Browning's lovers looks in this direction. Although the opening question "Fear death?" is like the opening of "Confessions," here, the question is completely rhetorical, and theatrical as well.

The experience the speaker describes is physical; he is choked and impeded by dense vapor and snow. Even so, it is a generic description. The infinitive "to feel" is also unclear as to subject, expressing the sense that this is a definition of death for every man. The "place" he nears is not specified, as if all will understand which place he means.

The personification of death gives an allegorical cast to the poem. Partly because of the speaker's fear of

the nothingness which death may be, he feels more comfortable seeing it as a visible force, against which he may struggle. It may be that he does not trust quite enough to pass unconscious into oblivion, for fear that he will not wake in his lover's arms.

He bases his description on the belief that a real system of justice operates in the universe, in which one suffers good and evil in proportion to one's deserts. This system has been operative at least since the time of "the heroes of old." The speaker needs to look back to a more heroic time, because he feels that his own is not. The "guerdon" for which he fights brings associations of chivalry. What he is doing is generalizing and mythologizing his own experience.

This experience is like a nightmare in its effects. Slowly the images of horror become images of another kind; they disintegrate and reintegrate, as he is reborn through death to the opposite of all he struggled through.

At the end, we are justified in saying, is Elizabeth, to whom the poem is addressed. The whole poem moves to the warm safe haven of the embrace. G. David Shaw treats this poem respectfully, comparing its spirit to that of Dante:

By combining erotic meaning with the spiritual motivations of Dante's poem [Purgatorio], "Prospice" anticipates Browning's methods in The Ring and the Book, which is one of the most exhaustive treatments of such transcendence in English literature. In the lovers' "dying" together, then ecstatically embracing, there

would be symbolically a consummation--an erotic union which Browning converts into a metaphor of celestial union.²³

Browning ennobles his death by choosing it, and ... passes from erotic love to the warrior's moral heroism and to a transformation of his love for Elizabeth into a love of God at the end (pp. 124-25).

But Shaw greatly overstates the case for "Prospice." Browning may be attempting something of the sort, but he does not really succeed here, as he does in The Ring and the Book. This poem seems not complex enough to support such an analysis. Furthermore, the manner in which God is mentioned in the last line makes one doubt that the speaker's love is transformed into a love of God. After he reaches his lover's arms, he says, "And with God be the rest!" What exactly is this "rest"? Whatever doubts he may have entertained about the nature of the afterlife, the kind of love possible there, he dismisses with an assertion of trust in God. Still, his main object, what has held his eyes through the darkness and does so still at the end is his vision of his wife. Once he is in her embrace, he is willing to trust God. Nevertheless, death does lead to love; in nearly all the other poems about love, time and death frustrate love. "Prospice" is an attempt at transcendence beyond what most of Browning's characters can reach.

²³W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper; The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 126.

"Eurydice To Orpheus"

"Eurydice to Orpheus" was included in Dramatis Personae in 1868, and, as DeVane says, "fittingly placed after Prospice" (p. 316). It is, in fact, a companion piece, where the dead woman speaks in similar tones of defiance. It is the only love poem not set in modern times. "Prospice" is mythologized, but this is a treatment of an actual myth, about the heights to which human love can rise. Although it is supposedly pagan, while "Prospice" is supposedly Christian, their tones are remarkably similar. The language here is perhaps a bit more dignified and has little obvious alliteration. Like "Prospice," it is quite rhetorical. Like the speaker of the former poem, this speaker stands between light and darkness, with love as her shield against death and darkness.

But give them me, the mouth, the eyes, the brow!
 Let them once more absorb me! One look now
 Will lap me round for ever, not to pass
 Out of its light, though darkness lie beyond:
 Hold me but safe again within the bond
 Of one immortal look! All woe that was,
 Forgotten, and all terror that may be,
 Defied,--no past is mine, no future: look at me!

Her speech, however, is more convincingly a dramatic speech. Although she attempts to persuade, she does not strike poses. Her commands give passion and authority, as does the use of the future in the third line. In lines 7 and 8 she deletes the verb entirely, as if the action is assumed to be inevitable. The past and future she obliter-

ates, focusing on what is left out until the last crucial moment, the command "look at me!" This last, longer line is simple and effective.

Eurydice uses the same kind of imagery to express love as does James Lee's wife, with the difference that here there is no self deprecation in the intense need which is expressed. Eurydice is at a moment of real danger, when she does need safety. Yet she expresses a sense of power, which is not merely a delusion. She makes a conscious decision, which is her power, to sacrifice her life for a look. Although one may criticize her for weakness, the effect of the poem is to praise the heights to which human love can rise. Those who have courage to take risks for it, no matter what their ultimate fates, are never seen as being as pathetic and unfulfilled as those who retreat from its demands.

The Love Poetry -- Conclusions

In "James Lee's Wife," Browning explores one woman's view of love, in a series of nine poems, as it changes over time. The love poems as a group, Browning uses, in a significant anticipation of his method in The Ring and the Book, to present various views of the same subject or situations.

Nearly all of these poems continue the concern with death and change which is so prominent an element in "James Lee's Wife." With the exception of "Youth and Art," every

one of these poems refers to death in some way. "The Worst of It" is full of the mention of death, seen by the speaker as his time of judgment and vindication. The speaker of "Dîs Aliter Visum" espouses the philosophy that love is part of God's struggle against death, as do the speakers of "Prospice" and "Confessions." The former imagines his death and his reunion with his dead lover; the latter, actually dying, savors the memory of an early love. The speakers of "May and Death" and "Too Late" address their dead lovers, and in "Eurydice to Orpheus" it is the dead woman who speaks.

Every one of these poems, directly or indirectly, deals with the question of how much a person is willing to risk for love, whether he is courageous, cowardly or merely blind, and what is his reward.

In "The Worst of It" we hear a man complaining bitterly that his devotion to his wife has gained him only a pair of horns. If we listen closely, however, we can distinguish a self-righteous prig, who has probably driven his wife away. It is she who has risked everything for love. Her husband imagines her thinking she has "done no evil and want[s] no aid,/Will live the old life out and chance the new." Moreover, we have from him the sense that she is glad she has done it, has no regrets.

"Dîs Aliter Visum" is practically a sermon on the Browning text, "those who love are saved." The young woman disappointed by the old poet accuses him of spiritual blind-

ness and laziness for backing away from the difficulties a marriage between them might generate. She blames on him their own unhappiness and that of the people they eventually married, in terms that indicate all four are necessarily damned.

The speaker of "Too Late" passionately condemns himself for the same fault of which the old poet is accused. The thought that he failed to act, when action might have gained him love, torments him into frantic gesticulation and purposeless motion, now that his lover is dead.

The woman who speaks in "Youth and Art" appears to blame herself almost as much as the man with whom she wished for love for the superficiality and emptiness of her life, and, she assumes, his. She has married a "rich old lord," for whom she indicates not a shade of feeling and with whom she is properly miserable.

"Confessions" begins the series of more lyric poems about more successful lovers. It is clear from the circumstances the speaker describes that a certain amount of daring was required to circumvent those who would have kept him apart from his young sweetheart. The reward for his courage is just as clear here, as the punishment for cowardice is in the other poems. Although he is aware that he is on his deathbed, he has no fear of death, no regrets, only sustaining memories.

"May and Death" takes rather a different tone. It is a bit out of place in the volume, having been written much earlier than the other poems. Still, for all its gentle melancholy, it in no way detracts from the idea that love is essential to a full life.

"Prospice" and "Eurydice" form a pair in nearly every way. They share the tone of defiance and passion, and the elevated language, in which they declare that love is to be valued above all things. The speaker of "Prospice," who has always been assumed, with good warrant, to be Browning, is able to face death with spirit, knowing his dead lover is waiting for him. In not precisely the same situation, the dead woman who longs for reunion speaks in "Eurydice." Although she may not be wise, she is willing to defy fate, to sacrifice her life, in fact, for a look from her lover's eyes.

The critics who have examined Browning's arrangement and classification of his poems are united in agreeing that he carefully planned their order for the purposes of comparison and contrast.²⁴ "The Worst of It" follows "James Lee's Wife" and "Gold Hair," the last words of which are "Original Sin,/The Corruption of Man's Heart." Almost as if contin-

²⁴Phelps, for example, interprets the placement of "Confessions" this way: "After a presentation of the last noble, spiritual, inspired moments of the apostle John, we have portrayed for us the dying delerium of an old sinner, ..." (p. 163).

uing the theme, "The Worst of It" begins, "Would It were I had been false, not you!" In this discussion of marital infidelity, a husband chastizes his wife, who, from our point of view, may have been adhering to a principle higher than that of obedience to a strict legal tie, and may have exhibited great courage.

In "Dîs Aliter Visum," the poem that immediately follows "The Worst of It," a woman chastizes a man for having lacked the spirit to ask her hand in marriage. "Too Late" may show the punishment in store for that too prudent lover, a future of mad regrets. There are details which link these two poems. In the first stanza of "Too Late," the speaker laments, "you cannot speak/From the churchyard neither, miles removed." This is an ironic comment on the previous poem, where the distant churchyard is replete with hints from God to the lovers that they ought to band together in love as a force against death. For the speaker of "Too Late," who has also ignored such hints to speak, the dead woman in the churchyard reminds him that it is, indeed, "too late." This young man's contemptuous summary of the fates of those less sublimely inclined than he may also have some reference to the unhappiness of the old poet. "So and so/Married a dancer," he says, and, indeed, the old poet has married a woman who dances, her rival says, "vilely."

"Youth and Art" follows the whole group of poems about fulfilled lovers, but, significantly, it comes imme-

diately after the highly idealized "Prospice" and "Eurydice." The two young artists who choose ambition over love and reap superficial success appear mean and petty by comparison. "Youth and Art" is, in fact, a meaner version of "Dîs Aliter Visum." Their themes are so similar that the last three stanzas of the former could almost be substituted for the last stanza of the latter. But in "Youth and Art," the diction is colloquial rather than idealized, the verse form is jingle-like, and no mention whatever is made of God or any higher values. Moreover, the two people involved never even speak to one another, and so are that much further from the ideal than the lovers of "Dîs Aliter Visum."

The group of poems which precedes "Youth and Art" attests to the value of love, in the face of death, or as a consolation for death.²⁵ The first, "Confessions," which follows four religious and philosophical poems, comments on orthodox Christian theology by juxtaposing it against the

²⁵Watson Kirkconnell, "The Epilogue to Dramatis Personae," in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 237, asserts: "James Lee's Wife, The Worst of It, and Confessions, set forth the supreme value of love even in the face of estrangement, infidelity, and impending death respectively. Three others, Youth and Art, Dîs Aliter Visum, and Too Late, arraign the sin of suppressing love through cowardice or calculating worldly wisdom, and so blighting the development of the soul." The similarity of situation Kirkconnell notes quite correctly, but, as we have seen, his interpretation of "James Lee's Wife" and "The Worst of It" must be tempered somewhat.

simple comfort of a life lived with love. In "May and Death" a woman has the strength to face life without bitterness, although her lover is dead. That "Prospice" and Eurydice are a pair is clear. Browning's intentions are also clear, since he added "Eurydice" to the volume in 1868 and placed it directly after "Prospice" rather than at the end of the volume.

On the whole, in the eight poems after "James Lee's Wife," four men and four women speak. Two women and two men in the second group speak of love fulfilled. If we include James Lee's wife, the love poems in the first group include a woman who complains about a faithless husband, a husband who complains about a faithless wife, a woman who complains about a cowardly lover, a man who blames himself for cowardice in love, and a woman who blames herself as well as a man for this same failing. Surely, it is clear that Browning is trying to give us many different views on the same subject, and that, just as in The Ring and the Book, no one is supposed to see or represent the whole truth.

Yet, paradoxically, in another anticipation of his method in The Ring and the Book, Browning moves closer in these poems toward moral allegory or parable. In several, love is seen as a cosmic struggle in which God and the devil are on opposite sides. The characters perceive this with varying degrees of seriousness in "The Worst of It," "Dîs Aliter Visum," and "Too Late." In the first, the

speaker imagines that God, through his instrument, the devil, will punish his wife for the sin of infidelity; in the second, the speaker sees the devil as rejoicing in the failure of love; the speaker of the third perceives God as the agent who arranges love matches and the devil as the agent of their frustration. The speaker of "Prospice" sees himself as poised between the "Arch-Fear" on one hand and God and his beloved on the other; similarly, Eurydice stands between Hades and her lover.

Many of these characters see life too simply; one is good or evil, saved or damned. In many cases, the character sees himself as placed between two highly different alternatives.

In "The Worst of It" the speaker manifests his feeling that a woman may be either a swan or a crow, black or white, saved or damned. The structure of the poem makes sharp divisions also, alternating, in a rather schematic fashion between the "I" and the "You," constantly contrasting them and their fates.

"*Dîs Aliter Visum*" is built on this kind of polarity. It divides into two separate and distinct viewpoints, the man's and the woman's. The man is limited in that he can see himself as either a man of books and the world or a lover, not both. The woman believes she had one chance to find love, missed it and is therefore damned.

"Too Late" is symmetrical in form and simplistic in outlook. It contains twelve stanzas of twelve lines each, with each stanza splitting neatly down the middle and presenting contrasting or opposed ideas. The speaker thinks of himself constantly as one against the world; his constant means of expression is "I" against "the other" or "I" against the "world."

"Youth and Art" is equally schematic in structure, examining first "I" and then "you," comparing, contrasting and emphasizing the separateness of the lovers or, more accurately, the non-lovers. Like the woman in "Dîs Aliter Visum," the speaker believes that one either finds love or misses it, the one and only time it appears to be offered.

"Confessions" and "May and Death" are more organically developed and free flowing,²⁶ but "Prospice" and "Eurydice" are also set in a chasm. The speaker of "Prospice" stands between the "worst" and the "best," between death and new life, darkness and light, cold and warmth, pain and peace. Eurydice, for her part, must choose between life and death, and life and love.

Thus, we see that many of these love poems express the conflict, both in structure and in content, between op-

²⁶The poems about love which has failed are post-mortems on the past, highly intellectualized, and, therefore, very schematic in structure as the speakers dissect the past and consider the alternatives they had, comparing and contrasting. The poems about successful love are more lyric in tone and form.

posing forces. Although unreliable speakers frequently perceive this split, it occurs so often, and in poems where the voice is so obviously Browning's, that often we have no choice but to attribute the perception to Browning. And despite his own disclaimers and the assertions of those critics who believe them, this tendency toward moral simplification, the perception of what is unequivocally good and unequivocally evil, is further developed in The Ring and the Book.

A theme which is certainly present in The Ring and the Book is that of judgment. In these poems from Dramatis Personae people are constantly judging each other and being judged by God, in language which is frequently legalistic.

The betrayed husband in "The Worst of It" looks toward his wife's day of judgment with a good deal of relish. He expresses regret that he cannot be her judge, sees himself as a reluctant witness against her, and congratulates himself on his own sure reward in Heaven.

"Dis Aliter Visum" is an anatomy of a judgment and a decision that turns out to be wrong. The man who "weighs" the woman's worth, who sets up rationally ordered lists of evidence on each side, is proved by the event to have been wrongheaded, and is therefore, according to the woman, doomed to damnation, as are the others intimately connected with him.

"Confessions" concerns a man who is about to be judged by God, but who has no fear. He does not worry about the gloomy clichés of the priest standing by his deathbed, because he has loved well in his lifetime. Courage in love is seen as of higher value than orthodox notions about the sin of sexual misbehavior. Similarly, in "Prospice," the journey through death is perceived as the movement toward the "guerdon" or "reward" of the true lover and brave man.

Yet despite the clearly revealed punishments and rewards of these characters, it is certain, at least in the case of the disappointed lovers, that Browning intends the reader to evaluate them. One bit of evidence that points this way is Browning's frequent use of "surprise" endings. In giving us important new information about the characters so late, Browning shows that he has been carefully manipulating our reactions to them all along, and that revelation and evaluation are important elements in the dynamics of these poems.

Thus, we come to ask, what are these characters like? And what do they have in common? It says a great deal about the tenor of Dramatis Personae that of these eight poems about love, only two, "Confessions" and "Dîs Aliter Visum," are dramatic monologues involving the participation of an auditor. The others are all soliloquies in which lovers, left alone for one reason or another, talk to themselves or to their absent or dead lovers, frequently trying to prove

something to themselves.

Many of them give speeches rather than talk. This is especially true where Browning approves of their sentiments, as in "Prospice" and the last part of "Dîs Aliter Visum," but it is also true in "Too Late," where the grieving lover appeals to the emptiness around him for vindication. None of these poems has the tightly packed syntax of some of the best of "James Lee's Wife;" they are nearly all more expanded, whether conversational or rhetorical.

One of the most important common threads in these poems, and a corollary to their status as soliloquies, is the tendency of the characters to fantasize, usually as a result of frustration and feelings of impotence.

This is especially true of the abandoned husband in "The Worst of It." He is frustrated in two ways; he has no power to inflict punishment on his wife, as he laments many times; and he is unable even to express his anger openly because of his need to think well of himself. Thus, this "forgiving" lover has a series of fantasies in which his wife is wretched and lonely, assaulted by knives and arrows, while he himself skips gaily through a field of flowers.

The speaker of "Dîs Aliter Visum," despite the strength of her conviction, was unable to alter the course of her life. She is able to express her anger, and in terms that exhibit sensibility and idealism. Yet it is possible that she deceives herself in blaming the old poet for the unhap-

piness of her subsequent marriage and of her life.

The lover of "Too Late" may be the most frustrated of all; certainly, he has the most frequent and intense fantasies, ranging in quality from serene to explosive. In these visions, he wins his lady and takes revenge on his rival. He creates an entire ritual of love and, by the end of the poem, stands on the verge of madness.

The society belle of "Youth and Art" is in a situation similar to that of the woman in "Dîs Aliter Visum." From an unfulfilling life, she turns to fantasy, imagining that she would inevitably have been happy if she had married a man to whom she never even spoke. By asserting the uniqueness of the opportunity, she makes, by definition, her one desire impossible, and thus relieves herself of any responsibility for improving her life.

The lovers in the second group of poems naturally do not fit into this pattern, because frustration is not a significant element in their lives. At the same time, both "Confessions" and "May and Death" involve fantasy in so far as fantasy is used to recall the past. "Eurydice," the one poem entirely in the present, does not involve fantasy, but "Prospice" is a conscious projection of a wished for future. It is a creation to take the place of the nothingness the speaker finds so frightening in death. His posture is the direct opposite of that of the men in "The Worst of It" and "Dîs Aliter Visum," for he refuses to "creep" or to hide.

Many of the frustrated characters, especially the men, exhibit a sly or creeping posture in keeping with their lack of courage in love.

The relationship between the sexes as shown in these eight poems is based on traditional models, but the poems show some of the tensions which exist beneath them. The sexual double standard is at the heart of "The Worst of It." The husband sees his wife as entirely ruined because she has not been entirely pure; at the same time, he is still attracted to her and tries to fight his sexual desire.

In many of the other poems, the roles of men and women are important in assigning responsibility for happiness in love. What allows the speaker of "Dîs Aliter Visum" to blame all on the man is the limited field of action allowed to a woman by Victorian conventions. Her flirtatious conversation and mannerisms are as far as she decently can go to indicate her desire for a match. Similarly, the fledgling opera singer of "Youth and Art" tries hard to attract the eye of the boy across the way, but still has to wait for him to throw a flower. The share of blame she takes for herself is much smaller than that she assigns to him.

Perhaps the most "traditional" of all is the lover of "Too Late." He worships his dead lover, blames himself for his failure. He combines admiration for her chaste appearance with a desire, shown clearly in the imagery, to ravish her. It appears from these poems that men are the

ones responsible for the sorry state of modern love.

In the second group, the male speakers are traditional masculine figures, active and aggressive. The speaker of "Prospice" is the epitome of this type of figure; the speaker of "Confessions" is likewise a familiar figure in myth and in Browning, the brave hero who makes love to the captive princess. Eurydice, on the other hand, is a conventional feminine character, with her desire to be enclosed and protected, as she is rescued from death through the heroic exertions of her lover and, like Eve, lost through her own weakness. Only in "May and Death" is the sex of the speaker not particularly important, and this may reflect on the poem's origin as a lament for Browning's male cousin.

Dramatis Personae is concerned much with married love, and in every place it is mentioned explicitly, it is seen as unhappy. The underlying assumption of the women in "Dîs Aliter Visum" and "Youth and Art" is that marriage was a necessity for them. How else could they entirely exonerate themselves for having made such poor marriages? Yet this assumption may be merely another rationalization on their part.

Another common link among the love poems, and one which affects the mood of the volume, is their tendency toward retrospection. Although "James Lee's Wife" shows love in the process of disintegrating, at least we see a love relationship in the present. All of the poems which

follow it except "Eurydice" and, possibly, "Prospice," show lovers after the love is over, looking back on what did or did not happen. They all look back on their own pasts, and some of them look back on the common past of their generation.

They are designedly modern lovers living in an age which many of their contemporaries saw as uncongenial to romance and beauty. It was this tendency which the Pre-Raphaelite movement in painting, poetry and craftsmanship grew up to counter, the ugliness and meanness of the industrial age. Browning's characters are frequently caught between past and present, sometimes reaching back toward an older kind of romance, sometimes banishing it completely and adopting a more modern posture. Usually, however, the past is seen as more attractive, more gallant than the present, whether the past is the era of Byron or the age of chivalry and courtly love. All of the disappointed lovers are alienated from the modern "world" or society, which they see as vulgar and corrupt, inimical to love and things of the spirit. It may be, though, that the fault lies not in the sociological problems of their age, but in these particular men; they lack the qualities of the "heroes of old," and project this inadequacy onto the world.

Although there is little sense of time and place in "The Worst of It," the speaker is certainly a modern man who sees the world as a place of strife and corruption.

What he glorifies is his personal past.

The subtitle of "Dîs Aliter Visum" is "Or, The Byron of Our Days" with a definite emphasis on "our." The poem takes an ironic view of a present-day poet, old, prudent and gouty, who, unlike the flamboyant and passionate Byron, rejects romance as of too little value and entirely too much trouble. He is part of the world of books and men, the real world, according to him, which does not deign to meddle with such trivialities as pretty young women. Browning further emphasizes the passage of time and the changes it has brought by allusion to certain other artists. Heine, Schumann and Ingres were flourishing at the time these two people made their choices about love. The first two, who were considered part of the Romantic era, were both dead by the time the couple met again ten years later. The unstated premise of the poem is to contradict the man who sees art as immortal and love as a trivial occupation of the present. His values are seriously called into question--as the "Byron" of Browning's days.

The speaker of "Too Late" is perhaps more alienated from the modern world than any other of the lovers. He rejects it entirely as low and contemptible, immoral and common, and retreats into a world of finer sensibility, with the worship of woman at its center. In that he worships another man's wife, he is like a courtly lover, and becomes even more so when she dies and becomes entirely inaccessible.

"Youth and Art" is a jingle instead of a sonnet, entirely modern in tone and detail. Its lovers value success more than love and join the charade of the great world with its superficial values and pleasures. No one willing to die for love here.

The fulfilled lovers, on the other hand, are not alienated from the world, but, except for "Confessions" and "May and Death," there is still a looking back to a more heroic age. Both "Prospice" and "Eurydice" are passionate and elevated poems. "Prospice" rises above the casual and contemporary in a search for eternal values, but the speaker sees those values as exemplified in the "heroes of old," and "Eurydice" is, of course, an ancient myth of heroism and love.

Only in "Confessions" are the modern tone and a proper regard for the worth of love fully integrated.²⁷ Usually, in this volume, they are at odds. Nowhere is this more clearly shown than in the use of language, especially the language of romance. Browning frequently makes statements by juxtaposing various kinds of diction, showing us character through the use and misuse of language.

In several of the poems, the characters distort language. The speaker of "The Worst of It" alludes constantly

²⁷Groom remarks, "Browning's most profitable example to later poets lay in his use of colloquial English for the impassioned lyric" (p. 24).

to the Book of Revelation, using it for his own purposes-- and those not as Christian as he professes. The inflated endearments he uses are cloying and insincere: they devalue the currency of romance.

The old "poet" of "Dîs Aliter Visum" more openly attacks the language of love by focusing entirely on its clichés: rhyming "Loves and doves." He thus excuses himself from the whole business, seeing his own place among more lofty sentiments. Yet the woman, who does value love, speaks entirely an elevated, idealistic language--until the last stanza. Suddenly her language is bitingly colloquial. It is a clue that we must evaluate her more carefully.

The disjunction between an elevated, passionate language and a slangy, cynical, modern language is clearest in that poem of extremes, "Too Late." The lover holds forth in inflated Byronic rhetoric for much of his complaint, using a sublime poetic language about his Edith, and an idiomatic, rather abusive, slang about his rival and the "others," who are against him. "Loves" and "doves" again appear as he accuses his rival, a poet, of mouthing these romantic clichés while he himself feels the real, the true, the deep passion.

There is almost no grand passion in "Youth and Art." Rather, we see mostly surface, beneath which we see very little--only some insight that has come too late to do much

but add a little pain to the shallow life the speaker leads. The jerky rhythm and comic rhymes tend to parody modern love.

In the poems in the second group, no such disjunction appears. Some poems, like "Confessions," and "May and Death," are entirely colloquial or casual in diction and tone. "Prospice" and "Eurydice" are consistently elevated and dignified, but not frenzied like "Too Late," a poem which suggests that the courtly love tradition is really out of place in modern times, that it has become for some of Browning's characters a neurotic symptom. This character, particularly, puts too much strain on the literary convention, trying to draw satisfaction from the pose itself. In poems like these, the worship of a lover is a symptom of love gone wrong--at least where it is accompanied by intense self-deprecation, the "I am nothing; you are all" that we find in "James Lee's Wife," "The Worst of It," and "Too Late." In the poems concerning fulfilled love, the worship may be moderated to fondness, as in "Confessions" and "May and Death," or may be passionate as in "Prospice" and "Eurydice," but at least in these, the passionate need for the lover is directed from a position of strength.

Where love goes wrong, there is generally something amiss in the spiritual dimension of the relationship or in the balance between the spiritual and physical. The problem in the case of James Lee's wife is that she depends too

heavily on the spiritual part of her relationship. Because it cannot stand the strain of her demand for total sustenance, it breaks down.

In the four poems about thwarted love here, there is tension between the physical and spiritual dimensions of love. Behind all the concern for his wife's salvation that we hear voiced by the speaker of "The Worst of It," we see that he is obsessed with her beauty and driven by sexual passion.

The main reason that the old poet in "Dîs Aliter Visum" decides against love is that he sees it as entirely physical and opposed to the eternal world of ideas: a pair of pretty cheeks, some kisses, an embrace. He entirely misses the element that links the two worlds.

The frenzied lover of "Too Late" is more driven by physical passion than any of the other speakers. Although he exalts his love, he constantly uses very physical images to describe his feelings. Though he describes her as a queen and a Quaker girl, he mentions her "body" at the end as if he wishes to devour it.

There is sexual innuendo in abundance in "Youth and Art," like so many slightly naughty jokes involving ankles, corsets and piano tuning. Really, though, there is hardly any disjunction or tension between the spiritual and physical because the lovers' "successful" lives have no real spiritual dimension. Their attitude toward sex, as toward

everything, is worldly.

In the case of the contented lovers, sex hardly appears at all. There is an air of complete innocence in the surreptitious meetings of the lovers in "Confessions" and the almost asexuality of "May and Death." "Prospice" and "Eurydice" involve a pure and elevated kind of passion; they are the ideal of love.

Another tendency of the volume which must be apparent by now is the way love and art conflict, and the critical way in which poets and artists are viewed. From the young poet in "James Lee's Wife" on, they are seen either as humbugs of some sort or as people of limited vision who see art and love as opposed to each other, as in "Dîs Aliter Visum" and "Youth and Art." In both "Dîs Aliter Visum" and "Too Late," art is seen as the opposite of life, which is represented metaphorically by blood. These characters separate what a great artist like Leonardo unifies, flesh and blood with spirit and art.

Possibly, mourning the death of his wife, Browning was questioning the efficacy of art by itself as a valuable support in life. Although the speakers are not necessarily reliable in their criticism of any particular poet, in each case it is a disappointed lover who makes the criticism of art. It is important to note that, with the exception of "Abt Vogler" and parts of "James Lee's Wife," there are no

poems in Dramatis Personae, as there are in previous volumes, which are concerned with the value of art. In the world of Dramatis Personae, art, love, and faith are usually at odds, but in The Ring and the Book, they take their places in harmony in a coherent vision of the world.

CHAPTER IV

MEN SPEAK ABOUT GOD

The men and women who love and speculate about love in Dramatis Personae are Browning's contemporaries, confronting their personal anxieties within the context of his troubled age. They usually locate themselves in some divine scheme through which they try to understand themselves and their guilt or innocence, their merited or unmerited sufferings. The figures to be considered in this chapter, all male, focus directly on the relations between man and God but deal indirectly with the vibrations from Browning's own era.

A frequent response of the lovers to their age was a turning back to the past, an alienation from the present in favor of fantasy. It is significant that, in order to discuss the very topical religious controversies of his century, even of the decade of the volume, Browning elected to place all but one of his characters in some distant historical perspective. Yet, in matters of religion, his characters were even more assailed by the difficulties of his own era than they were in matters of love.

Religious controversies had been brewing in England during the first half of the nineteenth century, but between

the publication of Men and Women in 1855 and Dramatis Personae in 1864, the most startling developments occurred. While the disturbance that Strauss' Das Leben Jesu had created in 1835 by assailing the literal accuracy of the scriptures continued reverberating and had been reflected in Browning's attack on the Higher Criticism in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day in 1850, Renan's La Vie de Jésus appeared to renew the storm just at the time that Browning was completing the volume which was to be published in 1864 as Dramatis Personae. It is the controversy over this book, and particularly Renan's doubt that St. John actually wrote the gospel that bears his name,¹ which provides the context for "A Death in the Desert" and the "Epilogue."

Another movement against the literal interpretation of the scriptures had also begun in the 1830s. This was the interest in Natural Theology, which undermined Biblical authority because it was a theology based on observation rather than revelation. The Eighth Earl of Bridgewater had left money to the Royal Society with the intention that it should choose men to write "On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as manifested in the Creation." The results of this commission, published in the Bridgewater Treatises of 1833-40, included such titles as Chalmers' The Adaptation of External Nature to the Moral and Intellectual Condition

¹ Ernest Renan, The Life of Jesus, introd. John Haynes Holmes (New York: Modern Library, 1927).

of Man and Kirby's The Habits and Instincts of Animals with reference to Natural Theology.² Although there has been much debate about what, if anything, is being satirized in "Caliban Upon Setebos," its subtitle, "Natural Theology in the Island," clearly reflects the influence of treatises of this kind.

"Gold Hair" refers to another group of controversial religious works which also cast doubt on the authority of the scriptures, the Essays and Reviews of 1860. These were seven separate essays, written by adherents of the Broad Church movement and encouraged by the Higher Criticism. When they examined the scripture scientifically, one result was to point out a conflict between the story of the creation as told in Genesis and the geological discoveries of the first half of the nineteenth century. These controversial essays provoked seven counter essays, Replies to Essays and Reviews, edited by Bishop Wilberforce, who accused the original essay writers of trying to weaken Christianity. Then came perhaps the most widely attacked works in the movement to examine the Bible scientifically, Bishop Colenso's Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans of 1861 and his Critical Examination of the Pentateuch of 1862. In 1863 the Church took action against the Bishop,³ and in 1864 Browning's

² Nellie Elizabeth Pottle, "The Influence of Contemporary Controversies Upon Browning's Dramatis Personae," M.A. Thesis Yale 1929, pp. 38-40.

³ Pottle, pp. 54-56.

"Gold Hair" reflected that "Colenso's words have weight" with the public.

As for the scientific evidence relied upon by the writers of the Essays and Reviews, among the most important works were Chambers' Vestiges of Natural History of Creation (1844) and Lyell's The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man, the implications of both of which cast doubts on the story of the seven-day creation. But the greatest warfare of all occurred between the two sides with the publication in 1859 of Darwin's Origin of Species, which formulated the principles of evolution. The principles of natural selection, the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest seemed to many to suggest that God was not beneficent, and that perhaps there was no way to ascertain eternal truth. The meeting at the British Association for the Advancement of Science at which occurred the famous debate between Wilberforce and Huxley over Darwin took place in 1860, just before Browning returned to England. That he had read Darwin and thought much about him his letters of the early 1860s show,⁴ as does a careful reading of his poems of 1864.

There are yet two other contemporary influences which can be seen in this volume, the publication in 1859 of FitzGerald's The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam and the European

⁴ See Letters of Robert Browning, ed. Thomas J. Wise and Thurman L. Hood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), pp. 199-200.

vogue for spiritualism in the 1850s. The Rubaiyat, which counseled men to throw over the hereafter for the glories of the here and now, appears to be directly rebutted in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" although there is no absolute proof that Browning had read the poem by that time. There is, on the other hand, no doubt whatever that in "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," Browning was satirizing D. D. Hume, the American spiritualist whom Browning met in England in 1855 and with whom he had a rather disagreeable encounter.⁵ In nearly every poem in Dramatis Personae which concerns matters of the spirit, Browning was responding to the questions and suggested answers of the men of his day.

It is curious that the reactions to these religious poems have been so varied and have changed so much over the years. In 1876 a dying lady wrote to thank Browning for the spiritual comfort which she had found in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and "Abt Vogler."⁶ Writing in Victorian Poetry in 1965, Patricia Ball suggests there is very little comfort to be taken from such poems:

Wherever God enters the poems he comes as a property of the speaker's self-made universe: he is not the poet's ultimate, for Browning's faith rests upon the one certainty--human uncertainty, the ignorance or doubt of any such ultimate.

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Browning is attracted by the concept of revelation as

⁵ Pottle, p. 23.

⁶ W. Hall Griffin and H. C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning, (1938; Hamden, Conn: Archon, 1966), p. 296.

a feature of the psychological mechanism, with the immense range of individual variety which this involves, not as the theologian's implement of revealed truth.⁷

This represents an extreme reaction, implying as it does that Browning has no interest--or belief--in any spiritual truth itself. When Robert Langbaum called The Ring and the Book a "relativist poem," he nevertheless admitted that he did not mean that Browning felt there was no truth to be ascertained through a reading of the twelve monologues.⁸ In the religious poems of Dramatis Personae, which works toward the kind of scheme Browning achieved in The Ring and the Book and which also is concerned with the dynamics of human perception of divine truth, what Browning shows are various partial views and distortions of the truth which is the basis for the whole volume. One of the ways through which he achieves this aim is having his speakers select and interpret Biblical passages in their own way.

As he does in The Ring and the Book, Browning carefully chooses his speakers and viewpoints so that they complement each other and together form a universe almost as complete as the one created for his epic work, which attempts to present the full truth through an examination of pieces. He has also arranged the order of these poems in the volume to emphasize their relationship to each other.

⁷ Patricia M. Ball, "Browning's Godot," Victorian Poetry, 3 (1965), pp. 248 and 249.

⁸ Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: W. W. Norton, 1957).

"Gold Hair," a seaside tale like "James Lee's Wife," is wedged between that account of love turned pain and the triad of frustrated lovers in "The Worst of It," "Dis Aliter Visum," and "Too Late." Although it is not a poem of love, it is, in a way, a poem about the lack of love and what substitutes for love. I include it in my discussion of poems about religion because the narrator quite openly uses it as a text for a sermon on original sin. Besides making quite plain what some of the other poems only hint at regarding the relationship between romantic love and divine love, this poem's placement in the volume also serves to caution the reader that things are not always what they appear to be, in general and in the next three poems, particularly in the case of the next speaker, who makes an accusation of infidelity against the wife who looks like a model of purity.

"Gold Hair" also suggests a unity between the poems set in the present and those set in another age, for though it is an old tale, the speaker suggests that it is eternally true. From the particular individuals of the first five poems in the volume, each suffering from his own spiritual sickness and each concerned tangentially with the question of divine justice and an afterlife, the volume moves to a number of characters from different historical contexts and cultures who speculate directly on the meaning of life and the nature of God.

Abt Vogler is as much above life as the distracted

speaker of "Too Late" is involved in it. While the lover suffers from the inconsistencies of life, Abt Vogler has a brief ecstatic vision in which he is lifted above all the fragments of experience and sees them as a whole. Then follows Rabbi Ben Ezra, who pronounces on the very same questions of age, death and eternity, but with more certainty. Reading the volume as a unity, one hears a stress on "me," when the Rabbi begins, "Grow old along with me." After his oration we then grow older yet with the dying St. John. "A Death in the Desert" follows the Rabbi's last assertion that death completes life, as if to prove it. The apostle details the doubts that men have--and will have--about their place in the universe, and, like the Rabbi, argues against them. What we have in this section of the volume, then, is Abt Vogler with his vision, Rabbi Ben Ezra with his assertion, St. John with his argument, all illuminated by revelation. It may be more than coincidence that it is Caliban who follows the line, "'twas Cerinthus that is lost." Cerinthus was lost because, like Caliban, he was incapable of conceiving of Divine love.

With Caliban ends another group, which is followed by a collection of light love and miscellaneous poems. Most of these bring us back to the modern and the particular, dealing with great love and trivial, passionate love and conventional

romance. But then we come to "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," a long poem reiterating the themes of the corruption of human nature and the falsity of appearances, this time in a modern setting. Caliban is a mistaken theologian; Sludge is a false prophet. Lest we should think, however, that all the world is like Sludge, "Apparent Failure" invites us to believe that there is some redemption even where lives seem most miserable and debased. Finally, welding together the whole volume is the "Epilogue," which synthesizes the viewpoints of its speakers, ancient and modern, and projects a vision of one universe and one deeply felt truth.

"Gold Hair"

"Gold Hair," like many of the other poems in this group, is, in its essential thrust, an argument against something, in this case, against the implications of the Essays and Reviews and the writings of Bishop Colenso. To counter the arguments of these writers who seek historical truth, Browning himself makes use of an historical tale, the outline of which, as De Vane informs us, he followed exactly.⁹

This poem is neither a dramatic monologue nor a soliloquy. It draws its form not from the theatre but from the

⁹ William C. De Vane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1955), p. 287.

Church service. The speaker, whom no evidence in the poem leads us to distinguish from Browning himself, admits quite candidly that he is preaching a sermon, using the tale of the golden haired girl as an exemplum for the moral. This moral he does not hesitate to deliver himself of quite openly; and, in fact, he points the way to it throughout: "Now do you see?"

In this poem Browning evaluates the character for us, stressing the moral aspect of evaluation. An allegorical cast colors the whole poem. The metaphors, whether traditional or original with Browning, are used for the most part as moral equivalents. The main action is allegorical as well. The digging beneath the ground for the skeleton is a metaphor for the corruption hidden in man, as is the revelation that the girl who appeared so pure on the outside was depraved within. The representation of purity by whiteness is traditional, as is the evil implied by the snaky hair, "curled" and "coiled," while the macabre images of the skull among the coins, the spider in the communion cup, and the toad in the christening font are examples of Browning's skill in creating new images based on traditional moral associations.

It is this fascination in the poem with corruption and original sin that provides the fuel for the argument against Colenso and his like, but it has also puzzled those familiar

with Browning's work. De Vane reports, "The poem has not proved a general favorite; and some critics, because of the unpleasantness of the subject, the perverse moral, and such cryptic utterances as those in stanza 28, have found it, in Browning's own words, truly horrible verse" (p. 288). He also notes that "the poem seems out of line with the usual direction of the poet's views in this respect" (pp. 287-88). Although there is nothing in the poem to indicate that we should view the speaker critically, examining him in the context of the entire volume, it is possible that his may be one extreme view, like those of the first two speakers of the "Epilogue," which points toward the truth without itself being the truth. Abt Vogler presents a way of reaching the truth through joyous ecstasy; this speaker shows the way through a sense of human baseness. He is like the speaker of "Too Late" in seeing the world as corrupt. The point is that in the Browning world both heaven and hell prove the existence of God. It may, in fact, be easier to base belief in Christianity on a belief in human depravity than, as James Lee's wife tries to do, on faith in the good man's reward in heaven for misery on earth.

There is no doubt, in any case, that corruption is what Browning is trying to portray here in all its grossness, where everything is rotted and grotesque. The three stanzas

which Browning added because George Eliot thought the girl's motives were unclear (XXI-XXIII)¹⁰, simply make clearer the girl's obsession and greed.

The girl's moral failings are pride, vanity and avarice. That she comes of a noble family emphasizes her fall. The implication is that if even the best of mankind are corrupt, what of the rest? Her vanity is, ironically, the worst fault that people can see in her while she is alive, but, in fact, the least. Her avarice has many dimensions. It results in blasphemy because she attaches all value to gold so that, even when she is dying, things of the spirit mean nothing to her. Of course, when we next see her, the ghastly skull among the gold coins reminds us of how little good the gold has done for her. The speaker refers to her hair as "One grace that grew to its full on earth." Those familiar with Browning recognize immediately his belief that what is perfect on earth must die, for there is nothing in it to be developed or completed.

Although Browning's approach to the poem is to draw a moral, the moral in no way impedes a psychological interpretation of the girl's character. The portrayal is, in fact, quite acute psychologically, showing how it is possible for

¹⁰ De Vane, p. 286.

gold to take the place of human love. Barbara Melchiori praises the poem as showing "a remarkably modern sensitivity to the psychological implications of such avarice."¹¹

This maiden was a miser with her love, lavishing all her affection on gold instead of on lovers and friends. Her attachment to her long hair, worn loose as a sign of virginity, and her refusal to let it be touched, reflect her selfishness, which is a part of her corruption. Her golden hair, like that of the Venetian girls in "A Toccata of Galuppi's," is identified with wealth and decadence. It is ironic that her hair, itself a dead thing, is the most alive part of her--fresh and fragrant and full. The girl herself looks as if she were starving, for she is certainly starving herself emotionally.

This girl so utterly fixated on money, which is more to her than life, is another of Dramatis Personae's studies in frustration, misplaced love and delusion. Throughout the poem are the same images of confinement which we find in so many of the love poems. It is stressed that her soul is inside her flesh, that her repressed passion bursts forth. The coins are lodged inside her hair; she is buried inside the

¹¹ Barbara Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), p. 53.

grave; her skull is wedged inside the coins. All the while she is groping and reaching outward to hold on to her gold.

As in "The Worst of It" and "Too Late," whiteness represents bloodlessness as well as apparent purity. There are, in fact, several parallels between "Gold Hair" and "The Worst of It." Both concern a woman's crime, in the first case, loving gold and, in the second, loving flesh, which is represented as a stain upon the whiteness. The maiden's hair is an ironic "crown" of gold like the "crowns of gold" denied to the guilty wife. The maiden's crime is also similar to that of the old poet of "Dîs Aliter Visum," who, instead of gold, substitutes books and intellectual activity for love.

This poem stresses that human nature remains the same eternally despite external accoutrements. It has a mythic quality, and the verse form is like that of an old ballad, regular in rhythm and rhyme. Yet there is no retreat into a romantic past here, for both present and past are corrupt. The use of classical and Biblical allusions also universalize the tale. The speaker paraphrases Lucretius quite offhandedly, as though the reader should be familiar with the context of "O cor Humanum, pectora coeca." It occurs in Book II of De Rerum Natura in a discussion of how philosophy raises one upon a height to see the men below who fight for riches and

power.¹² "O miseras hominum mentes, o pectora caeca" is translated by Cyril Bailey, "Ah! miserable minds of men, blind hearts!"¹³

It is significant that the only conspicuous Biblical allusion in the poem is that which refers to Matthew's account of Judas' return of the thirty pieces. The reference to Judas, who serves as an archetype of human evil, generalizes the sermon. Just as in the gospel, here also the sin of the girl is turned to some good when her gold is used to build an altar:

And the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood. And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, The field of blood, unto this day. (Matthew, 27.06-08)

Thus, the Potter's field which is alluded to in the poem becomes a symbol of human mortality, human aloneness and human sin.

As in other poems in Dramatis Personae, the search for eternal truth is paralleled by an intense awareness of mutability in human life. We should not forget that the subject of this poem is, in part, the early death of a young girl and

¹² Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, trans. W.H.D. Rouse (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1937), p. 85.

¹³ Lucretius, On The Nature Of Things, trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 65.

the effect on her reputation of the passage of time. This can be seen as another "testament" poem, for we hear the girl speaking on her deathbed. Certainly there is much macabre business about graveyards and skulls, all to show how little any one can hold on to earth or its goods, no matter how ingeniously one tries.

Not only does the girl perish, but so does her reputation for purity and goodness. And it is the passage of time which changes the people's perception of the truth about her. Thus, the poem becomes in part an essay about human perception of truth. Time, which distances people from the facts, sometimes creates legends, but time may also bring the revelation of new facts and a more accurate perception of truth. How legends are created and what their value is are issues of vital importance not only in "Gold Hair" but also in The Ring and the Book and "A Death in the Desert." The structure of "James Lee's Wife," too, is based on the gradual perception of truth over time, and the basic premise of "Dîs Aliter Visum" rests on the difference between two different perceptions, ten years apart.

The structure of "Gold Hair" shows three levels of evolving truth. The first fourteen stanzas recount the circumstances of the girl's death and the growth of the legend

about her, about both of which people are in real ignorance. Stanzas 15 to 27 narrate the discovery of the skeleton and the gold coins which are then used to build an altar. At this point the true facts become known. In the remainder of the poem, the narrator delivers himself of the moral, explaining, as he does so, the meaning of the true facts and generalizing the moral's relevance.

A close examination of the poem reveals just how important the theme of false appearances is. Dramatic irony is the poem's primary strategy and dominant effect. While the narrator describes her, and the girl's parents see her, as "too white" and her flesh as the "seraphic screen" of her soul, to her the "flesh" is really everything. Those who hear her do not understand the significance of her cry that her hair is "my all, my own." They regard the flat unruffled appearance of the hair as a "wonder." The legend that then grows up around her sums up her life "in one/Sentence survivors passed:

To wit, she was meant for heaven, not earth;
 Had turned an angel before the time:
 Yet, since she was mortal, in such a dearth
 Of frailty, all you could count a crime
 Was--she knew her gold hair's worth.

The girl's skull has been described as a "silver wedge" and her hair as "yellow wealth;" when the skull is discovered,

Browning uses all the force of pictorial contrast to make his point. He sets her former whiteness against the blackness of the offense newly found out, making it as repulsive as possible: "Had a spider found out the communion-cup, / Was a toad in the christening-font?"

There is throughout the poem a constant play on the word "gold." Compared to her hair which is "yellow wealth," we are told at first, "gold's mere dross." Her one fault is that "she knew her gold hair's worth." This play on the metaphorical implications of the word reaches a climax in stanza XXV, and in stanza XXVI the metaphor is interpreted by yet another metaphor.

With heaven's gold gates about to ope,
 With friends' praise, gold-like, lingering still,
 An instinct had bidden the girl's hand grope
 For gold, the true sort--"Gold in heaven, if you will;
 "But I keep earth's too, I hope."

Enough! The priest took the grave's grim yield:
 The parents, they eyed that price of sin
 As if thirty pieces lay revealed
 On the place to bury strangers in,
 The hideous Potter's Field.

The style is consistent throughout, casual, conversational, with a bite. There is irony in the description of the "little pleasant Pornic church" which hides the black sin. There is irony in the situation of the boys who look for a "saint" or a "benefactor," or, at least, a corpse

which "is presumed to have done with gauds/Of use to the living" (emphasis added). There is also a certain lightness of tone in the priest's reflection, "Saints tumble to earth with so slight a tilt!" He understands the intermingling of good and evil in each person, which Browning usually delights in portraying, and which here is a proof of the eternal truth of Christian doctrine.

At the poem's third stage of the evolution of truth, Browning refers to his own age.

Why I deliver this horrible verse?
 As the text of a sermon, which now I preach:
 Evil or good may be better or worse
 In the human heart, but the mixture of each
 Is a marvel and a curse.

The candid incline to surmise of late
 That the Christian faith proves false, I find;
 For our Essays-and-Reviews' debate
 Begins to tell on the public mind,
 And Colenso's words have weight:

I still, to suppose it true, for my part,
 See reasons and reasons; this, to begin:
 'Tis the faith that launched point-blank her dart
 At the head of a lie--taught Original Sin,
 The Corruption of Man's Heart.

This is one view of what is true and false in matters of faith. Other views we see presented by the other speakers in this group of poems as well as by the three voices of the "Epilogue." In Browning's ongoing argument within Dramatis Personae a "saint" discredited may prove the truth of Chris-

tianity as much as a discredited apostle might, for others, disprove it. In "Gold Hair," where there is so much talk of material gold, we have proof of God through evil. In Abt Vogler, where the gold is all spiritual, we have proof of God through good.

If Browning supports the doctrine of original sin in this poem, perhaps he is, as De Vane says, out of character. But it is very much in character for him to assert the mixture of good and evil in people. The problem is that in many poems in and after Dramatis Personae he only asserts such a mixture, while he portrays stark good or evil in his characters. In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," for example, which also concerns the sin of avarice, the moral judgement is less explicit and the poem more effective. In any case, if we accept the speaker of "Gold Hair" as Browning, when he declares the Christian faith to be true, he is also asserting that there is such a thing as truth, which may be ascertained by men.

"Abt Vogler"

After the meanness and corruption of "Gold Hair" and the three poems of false and frustrated love, the volume takes on a more lofty perspective, that of Abt Vogler looking down on earth's fragments and trying to achieve a unified

vision. "Abt Vogler" reconciles the extremes of "Too Late," the poem which immediately precedes it, with an ecstasy of a different kind, with a different quality of ego, secure in its own talent and humble before God. David Shaw gives an indication of Browning's general method when he suggests that "in order to advance from the lower aesthetic to the higher ethical and religious stages, the poet has to reveal the limitations inherent in most ideas and beliefs."¹⁴ The progression through the first five poems in the volume to "Abt Vogler" illustrates such a principle.

While great extremes exist in "Abt Vogler" as they do in "Too Late" and "The Worst Of It," angels and demons, heaven and hell, earth and heaven, all exist to be joined together in one comprehensive vision of the universe. The whole experience of the poem is the movement back and forth from the perception of division and multiplicity to that of unity.

The vision begins with

Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that
lurk,
Man, brute, reptile, fly,--alien of end and of aim,
Adverse, each from the other heaven-high, hell-deep
removed.

¹⁴ W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 309.

As it continues, Abt Vogler sees the heaven and earth straining to meet, sees the dead come to greet the yet unborn. Even after the vision fades, he is left with a sense or an outline of the whole:

What was, shall live as before;
 The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;
 What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good
 more;
 On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect
 round.

And, at the end of the ecstasy, he is not tossed about still, but is at rest.

In this vision man and nature work together rather than being at odds, for both are inspired by God. As Browning says in one of his letters, this idea of a unified universe is a truth which men can only partly perceive, "time and space being purely conceptions of our own, wholly inapplicable to intelligence of another kind--with whom, as I made Lucia say, there is an 'everlasting moment of creation,' if one at all,--past, present, and future, one and the same state."¹⁵

This resolution of conflict may, however, be achieved, at least temporarily in a work of art, like Abt Vogler's: "And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to

¹⁵ Wise and Hood, pp. 199-200.

man,/ That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound,
 but a star." That the work of art is more than the mere
 sum of its parts is a principle Browning himself applies to
Dramatis Personae and later, more fully, to The Ring and the
Book.

The poem is structured like an orchestrated piece of
 music, which reaches a climax and returns to a cadence. The
 various fragments of the vision continually dance apart and
 together. The integrated action is not like that of "Too
 Late," where the structure is more schematic and mechanical.
 It is relevant that the historical Abt Vogler was, as De
 Vane tells us, expert in "harmonic" and "contrapuntal" mu-
 sic (p. 291).

This is really, and surprisingly for Browning, the
 only poem in the volume about art where an artist speaks.
 It is also the only poem where art is seen positively, as
 capable of unifying love and reason. Here art transcends
 reason and, through the expression of love and the synthe-
 sis of experience, reaches truth. Although "Youth and Art"
 also imitates the sound of music, its sound is more like a
 jingle than a serious piece of music. Perhaps each is meant
 to characterize the depth of the particular "artist."

This figure, at least, is not at all alienated from his world. He is an historical figure, not contemporary with Browning. There is no sense of period in the poem; it presents an eternal moment. Still, one wonders why Browning does not try for this kind of synthesis with a modern man. Rabbi Ben Ezra and St. John are also historical figures, and Browning's next major attempt at synthesis, The Ring and the Book, is set in the Renaissance.

As in so many of the Dramatis Personae poems and despite the immediacy of the vision, there is a retrospective mood to the poem. According to the parenthetical subtitle, Abt Vogler is speaking after his vision. Although the first five stanzas imitate the original experience, stanzas 6 to 12 look back on it wistfully. The poem, for all this, does not really look to the past: its vision is a vision of the future, of a better world where a grander race of men will walk. It is like Tennyson's projection of the future at the end of In Memoriam. It also bears comparison to another of Browning's own poems, "Prospice," but, where the speaker of that poem looks forward to an individual afterlife, Abt Vogler imagines a paradise for all men--and his vision is more convincing in feeling.

To blend the larger Christian view with his own private imagination, Abt Vogler makes full use of Biblical allusion. The edifice he sees erected with its "walls of gold transparent as glass" is similar to the New Jerusalem as described in Revelation, from which the speaker of "The Worst Of It" also takes his somewhat less poetic picture of paradise. This central image in "Abt Vogler" also suggests the account of the building of Solomon's temple, which is referred to at greater length in the "Epilogue." The line "Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with hands!" echoes a passage from Hebrews (11.10) about Abraham--"For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God"--and one from Acts (7.47-48)--"But Solomon built him an house. Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands." Like Solomon's house, Abt Vogler's is earthly, though it partakes of heaven; therefore, it cannot itself be permanent.

The poem is Biblical in tone and diction even where no specific allusion may be intended. Such phrases as "I was made perfect," "nether springs," "manifold music," and "the finger of God" all have their scriptural associations. In fact, an examination of the meaning of some terms within their Biblical context helps to clarify the poem. When Abt

Vogler asks, "what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence/ For the fulness of the days?" the phrase reminds us of "the fulness of times:" In Ephesians (1.10) God makes known "that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him." The Pilgrim Edition of the Holy Bible explains: "This is the last of the Dispensations or periods of God's dealings with men. It will be a time of blessing, the Millennium, when Heaven and earth will unite under the Kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁶ Thus, Abt Vogler's prediction has well developed roots in Christian theology. His vision is quite different from the hallucinations of Edith's lover in "Too Late." He is motivated by love of God rather than the love of a particular woman.

What he gives us is a soliloquy more lyric than dramatic. It is set up not so that we should judge the speaker, but that we may share his experience. And as a portrayal of an experience, it is wonderfully effective. The use of the participial forms of the verb in the first stanza, "bidding," "calling," "claiming," etc. makes the past experience quite

¹⁶ The Pilgrim Edition of the Holy Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), Ephesians, 1.10 n.

immediate. The same effect is achieved by the frequent use of the conditional for the past. The musical effect, which has already been noted, permits us to partake of the climb toward ecstasy and the gradual descent. When, at the end, Abt Vogler touches the keys for the first time during the poem, he briefly recapitulates the whole experience rising and falling, oscillating less and less violently, like a pendulum coming to rest. "So, now I will try to sleep," is the perfect resolution for the musician who is exhausted by his ecstasy but still excited. It resembles in this the conclusion of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale."

The metaphors reveal little about individual psychology, nor are they meant to. Their purpose is to make concrete, visible, a philosophy. Like an allegory, the poem presents the castle as a representation of truth, a vision of a new world to come, in which all differences are reconciled. The great stars and fires at the climax are the conventional symbols of joy and enlightenment:

Novel splendours burst forth, grew familiar and dwelt
with mine,
Not a point her peak but found and fixed its wan-
dering star;
Meteor-moons, balls of blaze: and they did not pale
nor pine.

This is all a dream landscape, visual in the way Shelley's images are visual, all fires and spirits. The style is con-

sistently elevated as befits so grand a scheme, with the devices of rhetoric used to build a powerful rhythm.

Although it is clear that the philosophy is Browning's own, he creates a character who has a believable experience which calls it forth, even if the character himself is not very individualized. The poem is, in fact, one of Browning's best statements of his philosophy of the imperfect, containing his most memorable image of it: "On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round!"

Perhaps because Abt Vogler is not created for us as a particular person, he is one of the few characters in the volume not weak and frustrated. He is masterful, commanding and building, partaking of God's power. As in "Prospice" there is a good deal of military imagery. At the end he seems to have a moment of fear, but he also seems to make peace with his limited power on earth and the passing of his earthly vision. David Shaw asserts that he is trying desperately to persuade himself at the end that God is good (p. 143), and such desperate self-persuasion is common with many of Browning's other characters. But, although for James Lee's wife despair provides a belief which sounds forced, for Abt Vogler, ecstasy provides a more convincing belief. When he asks, "And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence/ For

the fulness of the days?" we do not have the sense that he is rationalizing away his own failure, as we do with Rabbi Ben Ezra, who expresses his bitterness at personal failure throughout the poem.

Because Abt Vogler is an artist, a real artist, he is set apart from the others in the Browning canon. His question, "Have we withered or agonized?" is a general question which he asks on behalf of all the characters in the volume, especially the withered James Lee's wife:

Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
 Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal
 and woe:
 But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;
 The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians
 know.

For James Lee's wife, the image of the circle represents imprisonment because she sees this life as the whole of the mortal circle in which she is trapped. For Abt Vogler, the circle represents man's striving for completion in heaven because he sees this world as only half of the circle. All of the images of confinement, where they appear in his vision, stress the release of energy on being freed: "Novel splendours burst forth;" "my soul that praised as its wish flowed visibly forth;" "Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy power expands?" The imagery is constantly that of aspiration: "another would mount and march," "rampired

walls," "higher still and higher," "Up, the pinnacled glory reached," "to scale the sky," "For earth had attained to heaven," "the high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,/ The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky."

Yet for all the heroics, death and mutability are major themes in the poem. Although the musician has a beautiful vision, it is, like all things on earth, temporary. Stanzas VIII to the end develop a system of the universe which is perfect and eternal when the whole is seen, thus indirectly affirming the existence of an afterlife. But the system, the intellectual edifice, is necessary because the vision perishes:

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;
 Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come
 too slow;
 For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that he
 feared,
 That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was
 to go.
 Never to be again! But many more of the kind
 As good, nay, better perchance: is this your comfort
 to me?
 To me, who must be saved because I cling with my mind
 To the same, same self, same love, same God: ay,
 what was, shall be.

The questions he asks show his concern: "What, have fear of change from thee who art ever the same?" (my emphasis).

Is Abt Vogler possessed of truth? I think we have to believe that Browning intended him to have more of it than most of the characters in the volume, with the possible exception of St. John. Yet, as he himself says, this is just one vision, of which there may be many more. And he is just one man, though inspired.

"Rabbi Ben Ezra"

"Rabbi Ben Ezra" shows another man asserting, prayerfully, his faith in God and arguing against the materialists for the immortality of the soul. Like the other speakers of the religious poems, he is an historical figure. It seems that while Browning can comfortably portray unhappiness in love among his contemporaries, he is not quite so comfortable portraying the satisfaction of one of his contemporaries in matters of faith. At least, he rarely does so. Here he uses the historical Rabbi to argue against a modern foe of faith, Edward FitzGerald in The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. It is, at least, probable that the poem counters the hedonism of FitzGerald's Rubaiyat, of which this is a representative stanza:

"How Sweet is mortal Sovranty!"--think some:
Others--"How blest the Paradise to come!"
Ah, take the Cash in hand and wave the Rest;

Oh, the brave Music of a distant Drum!" (XII)¹⁷

Although the poem was published in 1859, it did not immediately circulate widely, but De Vane suggests that Browning probably got a copy of it from Rossetti, who circulated it in his circle (p. 293).

The debate centers on the image of the potter's wheel. It is found in the Bible in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Romans: "But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand" (Isaiah, 64.08). S. Viswanathan points out that Browning has previously used the metaphor in In A Balcony in 1855.¹⁸ Despite this similar use, however, Browning seems to be answering FitzGerald very pointedly. The structure of the poem, in fact, which De Vane describes as "not logical, but ... a series of affirmations culled from experience and thought" (p. 294) resembles the general design of the Rubaiyat.

The opening line of "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Grow old along with me!" (emphasis added), may be argumentative, opposing

¹⁷ A. J. Arberry, Omar Khayyam. The Romance of the Rubaiyat: Edward FitzGerald's First Edition Reprinted with Introduction and Notes (London: Allen & Unwin, 1959), St. XII.

¹⁸ S. Viswanathan, "'Ay, Note That Potter's Wheel': Browning and 'That Metaphor'," Victorian Poetry, 7 (1969), p. 349.

the schemes of Omar as well as those of the other Browning characters in Dramatis Personae. There are many possible references to the Rubaiyat throughout "Rabbi Ben Ezra" other than those at the end referring to the potter. The Rabbi, like Omar, associates youth with the "rose," a traditional identification, to be sure, but the Rabbi calls the fleshly longings of youth a "rose-mesh," that is, a trap. Like Omar, he emphasizes the brevity of youth, but the doubts of youth that turn Omar to the vine cause the Rabbi to value man as one above mere "feed[ing]/ On joy." Armed with knowledge, the Rabbi is unlike the bewildered Omar. The arguments Omar hears in youth from wise men drive him to give up the struggle for knowledge. The Rabbi, on the other hand, asserts that in age one is "Subject to no dispute/ From fools that crowded youth."

Much of the Rabbi's philosophy appears as a point by point refutation of Omar. The philosophy, "All is change; ... seize today," which the Rabbi attributes to "fools" is a fair summary of the philosophy of the Rubaiyat. To it the Rabbi responds, "potter and clay endure," and today is just "machinery" to shape the eternal soul. "Look not thou down but up!" he remonstrates against Omar, who is constantly urging his listeners to look down at the graves of those now dead,

to drink now while they can. To this, the rabbi replies that man was created to slake the thirst of God, not his own thirst.

It is more likely, then, that the image of potter and clay comes from FitzGerald than from Isaiah or Jeremiah. In the Biblical contexts the metaphor is used to show man as contemptible and powerless before God, very unlike his glorified image in Browning. The Rabbi thinks of himself as a vessel, like the talking pots of Omar, who speculate about their creator:

And suddenly one more impatient cried--
"Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"

Then said another--"Surely not in vain
"My substance from the common Earth was ta'en,
"That He who subtly wrought me into Shape
"Should stamp me back to common Earth again."

Another said--"Why, ne'er a peevish Boy,
"Would break the Bowl from which he drank in Joy; (my
emphasis)
"Shall He that made the Vessel in pure Love
"And Fandy, in an after Rage destroy!"

None answer'd this; but after Silence spake
A Vessel of a more ungainly Make:
"They sneer at me for leaning all awry;
"What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?"
(sts. LX-LXIII)

Omar, a little further on, asks for a remoulding, as the Rabbi will do, but Ben Ezra sees with pleasure "the whole design" and asks to be himself remade:

"I, who saw power, see now love perfect too:
 "Perfect I call Thy plan:
 "Thanks that I was a man!
 "Maker, remake, complete,--I trust what Thou shalt do!"

Omar makes a bittersweet lament rather than a joyful affirmation. He would prefer to stay the same but change the world:

Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
 To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
 Would not we shatter it to bits--and then
 Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire! (LXXVIII)

Whether or not, however, Browning has FitzGerald as his target, the poem is still basically argumentative and, as such, unconvincing. The philosophy of the Rabbi is simplistic, ignoring much. This is especially true of the first stanza where he asserts what is simply opposed to most people's experience: "Grow old along with me!/ The best is yet to be,/ The last of life, for which the first was made:" Conrad Balliet thinks, in fact, that the poem prompted Matthew Arnold to write a reply, his "Growing Old,"¹⁹ which begins, "What is it to grow old?" and insists "'Tis not to have our life/ Mellow'd and soften'd as with sunset-glow,/ A golden day's decline./ 'Tis not to see the world/ As from a height,

¹⁹ Conrad A. Balliet, "'Growing Old' Along with 'Rabbi Ben Ezra'," Victorian Poetry, 1 (1963), pp. 300-301.

with rapt prophetic eyes, / And heart profoundly stirr'd."²⁰

Credibility is an immediate problem for Browning when he has the Rabbi affirm that old age not merely has its reward, but is "best." His faith rests entirely on trust in God's plan, trust that God would not allow old age if it were not satisfying and pleasurable. The notion of having to suffer in this life does not enter into the scheme. One might say that as a Jew, he would stress the enjoyment of this world, but there is sufficient awareness of the place of suffering in the Jewish tradition to void this excuse, especially since the Rabbi is not really very convincing as a Jew, despite Browning's familiarity with Ben Ezra's work.²¹ His insistence that man be rewarded in this life as well as in the next is certainly not orthodox Christian philosophy either. The character is unmistakably a mouthpiece for Browning's own ideas, a direct exhortation to his readers. Certainly, they took it this way. Herford describes the poem as "bearing more fully perhaps than any other poem the burden of what he had to say to his generation."²²

²⁰ Mathew Arnold, Poetical Works, ed. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 212.

²¹ See De Vane, p. 293.

²² C. H. Herford, Robert Browning (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1905, p. 157.

Aside from being simplistic, the poem is also inconsistent at times. Although stanza I declares that old age is the best part of life, stanza XXIX seems to imply that old age is not best, because one has to look so hard for its consolations. Logical connections between one stanza and another are frequently far from clear, driving critics to ever more ingenious explanations. Yet, what is odd is that there are many logical transitional phrases, as though Browning were trying to make the poem look like a coherent argument, which it is only in isolated sections. Following are examples of some stanza transitions: "For thence" (VI-VII), "Yet" (VIII-XI), "For pleasant is this flesh" (X-XI), "Therefore" (XII-XIII), and so on. Many of these do not clarify the context at all, but only serve to mystify the reader further. The light, jingle-like rhythm and rhyme scheme also tend to undercut the seriousness of the poem.

The poem's structure is based on a series of polarities, between youth and age, the flesh and the spirit, brute and man, the common man and the man of judgment, and finally, the carpe diem philosophy of Omar and the religious philosophy of the Rabbi.

Youth has bodily power which is all it can see; age sees love as well as power. Where youth is uncertain, age

reposes on what is already made. While youth is surrounded by fools and is judged by others, the old man is sure he is a man, with absolute knowledge.

When discussing the relationship of the flesh and the spirit, Ben Ezra tries to give a more unified picture of life than in most of the poem:

Let us not always say
 "Spite of this flesh to-day
 "I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"
 As the bird wings and sings,
 Let us cry "All good things
 "Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh
 helps soul!"

Yet he never really reconciles the many other polarities he draws, despite his vision of the "whole" at the end. He is constantly drawing distinctions between man and brute: "A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale." He implies that if he had not both tried and failed, he would have been a brute. One is either an aspiring god or a brute. There is also little middle ground between the common man, of whom he complains so much, and the sensitive man: "there, for once and all,/ Severed great minds from small." Roger L. Slakey defends the Rabbi, who he says is not simplistic when he associates what he rejects with "pagan deities, brutes, vulgar masses" and what he prefers with "God, truth, peace, human worth, and personal fulfill-

ment."²³ Yet it does seem simplistic to set all the good on one's own side and all the bad on the other side.

The premises of the poem are just too serviceable. If our life so far has been lacking, it tells us, it will later be fulfilled by God, for it is not perfect and is therefore always moving toward perfection. Our doubts elevate us above the brutes who are "Finished and finite clods." What appears to be failure is actually success: "Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:/ What I aspired to be,/ And was not, comforts me."

Along with Browning's usual imagery of aspiration is an assertion of the worth of suffering: "Strive, and hold cheap the strain." He constantly elevates pain and trouble. Clods are "untroubled by a spark." He demands, "Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?" The pain involved in striving is constantly emphasized.

Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the
throe!

Perhaps the reason that aspiration is so painful for the

²³ Roger L. Slakey, "A Note on Browning's 'Rabbi Ben Ezra,'" Victorian Poetry, 5 (1967), p. 293.

Rabbi is that he is aware of his failures, and much of the poem sounds like a rationalization for those failures.

Part of the problem with the poem is that while he asserts certainty for his old age, he sounds certain now. He is supposed to be at the midpoint of life, looking forward. This should be a poem about middle-aged crisis, to put it in modern terms. Yet we have no sense of a crisis occurring. There is no psychological tension, only the tension of opposing arguments in which one side has always to win. David Shaw explains it this way: "Because the spiritual victories are all won in advance, there is no dialectical movement in 'Rabbi Ben Ezra'" (p. 217). This is not a successful poem because Browning violates his own method of telling truth "obliquely."

The only thing that can be called characterization in the poem is the positive stance of the wise man, addressing his congregation. Yet this is not a dramatic poem, although it does become a soliloquy in the parts where the Rabbi speaks about himself. In general it is a sermon. The speaker's tone indicates that he is openly preaching: "not for ... Do I remonstrate." He is pedantic: "To man, propose this test." He commands his audience constantly: "Grow old," "trust God," "see all." The poem is a piece of rhetoric

with much use of parallelism, rhetorical questions, exclamations. The language is, for the most part, abstract but simple, right for a sermon. But it is frequently afflicted with violently confused syntax.

If we call the poem a sermon, we then assume an audience. But the audience seems to change as the poem goes on. In stanzas I to XXI, he may be speaking to Omar, but he appears to be speaking to a general congregation. "Our times are in His hand," he says. And throughout he uses the general "we." In stanzas XXI-XXV, he may still be speaking to the same group, but he speaks more personally about himself and to himself. Finally, in stanza XXVI, he addresses his opponent, presumably Omar, directly. There is a distinct change of tone, as there is at the very end, where he addresses himself to God. There is no setting or context for the poem at all to clarify the question of audience. Abt Vogler, at least, was sitting at his organ. Where the Rabbi is, we do not know.

Roger Slakey explains that the poem has so little sense of personality and place because it is a performance: What identifies the gathering as religious, he says, is the "proem and the peroration." In the first stanza Ben Ezra presents a thesis and ostensibly quotes a text, the usual

method of the sermon. Medieval and Renaissance sermons frequently ended with prayer and often, in that prayer, with self-reflection" (pp. 291-92). He explains the frequent use of epigrams in the poem as modelled on the historical Ben Ezra. Also, "it suggests an intuitive rather than a logical grasp of truth; ...In Browning's poem its use implies that Ben Ezra is a man of insight, vigorous determination, and courageous effort" (p. 293). It may be that Browning intended such an effect, but as the examination of the other poems in the volume shows, he is at his most simplistic where he gives his characters moral epigrams to speak.

The metaphors in the poem are not psychologically revealing but are used to illustrate points. Certainly the image of the Potter in the poem is as much used for an object lesson as it is in Jeremiah. The rose and lily are conventional images of youth; the dichotomy of flesh and soul is traditionally Christian, and the battle imagery is trite. The poem is best where the Rabbi is most personal and angry, attacking "the world's coarse thumb."

As well as being a mouthpiece for Browning's ideas, Rabbi Ben Ezra conveys the same emotional tensions we find in so many of the characters, mouthpieces or no, particularly the sense of chafing under restrictions. He is bigger

than the earthly role that has been assigned to him; he is composed of "Thoughts hardly to be packed/ Into a narrow act." This image is reminiscent of the "cramped moment-space" of "James Lee's Wife," as is the sense of being passively tossed about by the winds of life.

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,
That metaphor! and feel
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,--
Thou, to whom fools propound,
When the wine makes it round,
"Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone,
seize to-day!"

A bit later he describes his steadfastness: "not even while the whirl was worst,/ Did I,--to the wheel of life/ With shapes and colours rife,/ Bound dizzily,--mistake my end."

Although the Rabbi disputes Omar's conclusions about how to live one's life, he too sees life as swift and mutable. But to FitzGerald's lament, "Alas, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!/ That Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript should close!" he asserts the values of old age. Really, though, it is the prospect of death which stands behind the argument as the real target to be argued away: "Thou wait-est age: wait death nor be afraid." He deals with it as do James Lee's wife and the speaker of "Prospice," by asserting belief in another world and by seeing oneself as a hero engaged in a magnificent struggle:

And I shall thereupon
 Take rest, ere I be gone
 Once more on my adventure brave and new:
 Fearless and unperplexed,
 When I wage battle next,
 What weapons to select, what armour to indue.

The final perfection of the cup, that glorious image, after all occurs at death.

The real subject of the poem is how man deals with death. For the great problem of growing old is facing death with its questions about how one has used one's life. Rabbi Ben Ezra looks back on his life, considering and judging it. His great point is that in age one can judge for sure, knowing whether he was right or wrong. He is obviously concerned about the way others judge him. He counts on God to arbitrate between himself and the common opinion of the world, as he seeks vindication.

Be there, for once and all,
 Severed great minds from small,
 Announced to each his station in the Past!
 Was I, the world arraigned,
 Were they, my soul disdained,
 Right? Let age speak the truth and give us peace at last!

Now, who shall arbitrate?
 Ten men love what I hate,
 Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;
 Ten, who in ears and eyes
 Match me: we all surmise,
 They this thing, and I that: whom shall my soul believe?

He is concerned with how one finds truth, particularly about one's own self-worth. He concludes that this knowledge comes naturally with age.

In dealing with the limitations of life, the Rabbi expresses much the same frustration and lack of sympathy with the world--one might also say, same feelings of persecution--that we find in many other of the Dramatis Personae speakers, particularly the lovers. In the constant revelation of his need to feel superior we find the most authentic sign of his humanity. There is a petty anger and testiness in his suggestions that he is surrounded by a world of inferior people who do not know how to value him. They judge him by his actions, as people do who watch the characters in a classical drama. The idea that a man is something apart from what he does is introduced by Browning possibly to compensate for what he felt to be his own "apparent failure." Browning had felt very bitter at the slow acceptance which his work gained with the public. He also, suggests Thomas Collins, "accepted the commonly held belief that the poet is a man set apart from those less sensitive than himself, and that his major advantage lies in the perception of beauty."²⁴

²⁴ Thomas J. Collins, Robert Browning's Moral - Aesthetic Theory, 1833-1855 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 62.

The Rabbi is bitter about the kind of superficial "work,"
 "O'er which, from level stand,/ The low world laid its
 hand,/ Found straightway to its mind, could value in a
 trice."

This bitterness of tone disappears near the end of the poem when he begins arguing directly against the hedonists. We have, instead, the anger of the righteous man. Throughout, however, despite the sense of personal feeling of rejection and the later indignation, there is no real delineation of character. Rather, the contempt, the insecurity and rationalization only mar the poem as a sermon.

Most of the images have moral valuations, particularly images of eating, through which Ben Ezra often expresses contempt. Man should do more than "feed on joy." The "crop-full bird" and the "maw-crammed beast" are moral exempla, like a Hogarth painting which shows the disgusting effects of low breeding and excess. The "festal board" in stanza XXX is a far different kind of feast than that at which the beasts indulge.

The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,
 The new wine's foaming flow,
 The Master's lips a-glow!

The "new wine," which may be opposed to the earthly wine of the drunken Omar, is the sacrament, with its promise of a

better world to come, heralded by the trumpet's peal.

The last stanza is a kind of refrain, hearkening back to the song-like, "poetic" first stanza.

So, take and use Thy work:
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times be in Thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!

This ends with a prayer which is consistent with the rest of the poem. There is no sudden revelation of character at the end, as there has been little throughout. The reader is not supposed to judge the Rabbi, but is to listen to his ideas.

The poem may be seen in another way, as a kind of psalm, a love song to God. This would justify the attitude of total trust and the Biblical diction. The refrain line, "Our times are in His hand," of stanza I and "My times be in Thy hand" of the last stanza, is a paraphrase of a passage from Psalm 31. The biblical context is helpful. Entitled A Song of Trust in God, it is spoken by one who is surrounded by enemies, weakened by grief and iniquity: "but I trusted in thee, O LORD: I said, Thou art my God. My times are in thy hands: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that persecute me" (31.14-15). The sense of God's "hand" runs all through "Rabbi Ben Ezra," as it does through "James

Lee's Wife." "Maker, remake, complete," he entreats. God's power to remake the vessel is stressed in Jeremiah, where God uses the potter as an analogy to himself: "And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it" (18.04). This is God's lesson to Jeremiah, and the message with which he entrusts him: "And shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again" (19.10-11). Browning seems to make frequent use of the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Revelation, which emphasize judgment and punishment, but very little of this tone carries over into the poems.

We must ask the question, then, whether "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is successful as a psalm. Do we judge it harshly just because we have different expectations from Browning and the Bible? What is the difference between the Rabbi's trust in God and this of the speaker of the thirty-seventh psalm: "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (37.25). The difference is that while "Rabbi Ben Ezra" reads like this in some small sections, its primary function is not to praise God or to lament the speaker's own sorrows,

but to argue them away.

"A Death in the Desert"

In "A Death in the Desert," only the object of the argument has been in question, never whether it is an argument or not. The early critics assumed that it was directed against Strauss. Herford, for example, remarks, "To attack Strauss through the mouth of the dying apostle was a smart pamphleteering device" (p. 160). The Rev. J. Llewellyn Davies at a meeting of the Browning Society on February 25, 1887, asserted that Browning wrote the poem "long before" the publication of Renan's La Vie De Jesus. Browning said in a letter to Isa Blagden on November 19, 1863 that he had just read Renan, and he expressed strong feelings against the book.²⁵ W. O. Raymond suggests that Browning wrote or, more probably, revised, the poem between November of 1863 and the publication of Dramatis Personae in 1864.²⁶ A more recent critic, Elinor Shaffer, insists that "A Death in the Desert" definitely responds to Renan "for the crux of the poem: John's confession that he was not, as the Fourth Gos-

²⁵ W. O. Raymond, "Browning and the Higher Criticism," PMLA, 44 (1929), pp. 604-05.

²⁶ Raymond, pp. 605-06.

pel claims, present at the crucifixion."²⁷ In any case, when Browning has John say, "To give you answer I am left alive," the reader is not disposed to dispute that Browning recreated him for any reason other than dialectics.

The poem is combative, made especially so because of John's consciousness of the competing forces of good and evil. Whereas in the love poems there is sometimes a clear perception of the dichotomy between good and evil, here there is also a need for a synthesis. John must defend the presence of evil in the scheme as well as supporting the good: "'And, as I saw the sin and death, even so/ 'See I the need yet transiency of both,/ 'The good and glory consummated thence?" (11.218-20).

The real focus of the conflict, however, is not between good and wickedness, but between truth and falsehood. John is fighting on the side of Christ against the anti-christ.²⁸ For Browning's John, Cerinthus is the villain, not Judas. The real evil is the damage which the skeptic does to

²⁷ Elinor Shaffer, "Browning's St. John: The Casuistry of the Higher Criticism," Victorian Studies, 16 (1972), p. 206.

²⁸ The Pilgrim Edition of the Holy Bible defines the "antichrist" as "an individual who will speak [my emphasis] and act in more terrible rebellion against God than any other man" (1, John; 2.18 n).

his own soul by perverting his divine knowledge. This focus is unlike that of the Biblical John, who remonstrates about various specific sins. Browning's John is concerned with doubt rather than sin, although the 2nd Epistle of John was written "to help believers to live aright in times of evil teachings or doctrine."²⁹

One method of argument of which the poem makes significant use is allegory. Where there are long metaphors, they are nearly all parables of the type uttered by Christ, and here imitated by Browning's St. John. In lines 105 to 110 John compares himself to a burned out stick whose last spark is just fading. In lines 188 to 195, he climbs a ladder whose rungs he feels snap to express the loss of spiritual support. The metaphor of the optic glass in lines 227 to 243 also has explanation as its principle function. The same kind of one to one symbolic representation is also present in the parable of the boy in the cave (ll. 340-349). This one, along with the parable of the seeds and herbs, imitates the form of the Biblical parable. One of Jesus' parables compares him to a vine and his disciples to fruit. This symbolic garden is very different, indeed, from that outside of James Lee's wife's house, although that also has Biblical

²⁹ Pilgrim edition, p. 1638.

overtones. Allegory is more justified coming from St. John, but that does not make it less tiresome. Still, it all goes to support John's major point, that the Christ story is itself an allegory for an eternal truth which cannot be seen by most men directly.

C. Willard Smith, who has done a study of the star imagery throughout Browning's work, says that in this poem, the images serve only to illustrate points in a logical argument and are not particularly good outside the argument.³⁰ Stars and lights simply represent spiritual illumination, as they do in the scriptural St. John, where such images are common: "And this is the condemnation, That light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John, 3.19). Browning's St. John opines that when men use their knowledge to deny God, they are making darkness from light. Stars are particularly prominent in Revelation, where Jesus is "the bright and morning star" (22.16).

Of course, this is Browning's version of the Gospel of St. John with parts of the Revelation included. The Revelation of Saint John the Divine turns up in a rather self-serving form in "The Worst of It;" the use is quite different in "A Death in the Desert." John also uses Biblical quota-

³⁰ Charles Willard Smith, Browning's Star Imagery: The Study of a Detail in Poetic Design (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 177.

tions, constantly paraphrasing and alluding. Really, he is defending his books in the Bible. Although the same person is supposed to be speaking, the style and emphasis are different. Browning's John summarizes the memory of his vision of Jesus: "'With head wool-white, eyes flame, and feet like brass,/' The sword and the seven stars, as I have seen" (ll.122-23). The vision is supposed to be far away by this time. In Revelation, it is described much more fully and vividly: "His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; ... And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword" (Revelation, 1.14-16).

Browning comes closest to imitating the style of the Biblical John in paraphrases like these, but, for the most part, the poem is tediously prosaic. There are long stretches without a metaphor; there are, instead, tiresome and involved explanations. The blank verse is like prose, arranged in verse paragraphs according to prose logic and with prose syntax for the most part. It is expanded language, not condensed "poetic" language.

What we have is a monologue without characterization or real dramatic interchange, a passing on of revelation with-

out the ecstatic experience of an Abt Vogler, and an argument without Bishop Blougram's craftiness and delight in subtlety. The poem is deadly serious without a trace of irony or humor. Although John is supposed to be speaking to his disciples, they merely wait for his dying words without really influencing the direction of his speech. They are almost superfluous, since he is really addressing himself to his imaginary strawmen, using a technique Browning generally reserves for the soliloquy.

The very best parts of the poem are in the framing sections. The diction and details are Biblical and convincing, especially the description of the document and the chest in which it is kept. Also good is the account of the followers reviving John. The surroundings are concrete and convincingly ancient, with such details as the "plantain leaf," the "camel skin," "water vessel," "nard," and the grazing goat. The watchman's signal gives a real sense of the reality of persecution and the intrigue of eluding it. Worrying about thieves and soldiers gives a sense of drama, until John speaks. Even while he speaks, however, in the rare sections where he is describing action, the poem gains some life. John's description of his betrayal of Christ, in fact, improves on the original in John 18.03: "Judas then, having

received a band of men and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, cometh thither with lanterns and torches and weapons." Browning's John describes his own feelings:

"What wrung it? Even a torchlight and a noise,
 "The sudden Roman faces, violent hands,
 "And fear of what the Jews might do! Just that,
 "And it is written, 'I forsook and fled'. (ll.307-10)

Yet sections like these are few and insufficient in a poem so long as "A Death in the Desert." They certainly do not warrant the reader's approval of the poem as a portrayal of a person. But for some reason unintelligible to most of his contemporaries as well as to us today, the reviewer for The Quarterly Review, Gerold Massey, in the July, 1865 issue, praised the poem as a character study.³¹ Swinburne, on the other hand, had less kind things to say of it: "Not less noble is the opening of St. John--but long before the end the poem is swamped in controversial shallows, and the finer features effaced under a mask of indurate theological mud."³² William Stigand of The Edinburgh is also critical. Comparing the poem to "An Epistle of Karshish," he says, "Much more,

³¹ Gerald Massey in The Quarterly Review, cxviii (July, 1865), 77-105 in Browning: The Critical Heritage, ed. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 270-72.

³² A. C. Swinburne, letter, June 19, 1864 in The Critical Heritage, p. 222.

however, do we object to see St. John on his death-bed made a medium for a writer to philosophize upon the Gospel in Platonic strains."³³

That St. John has no personality is proved, finally, by a modern critic, who appears to like the poem. Elinor Shaffer defends it by denying that Browning ever intended his speaker to be a real person: "John represents the attenuation of direct witness, the sense of pervasive loss, the intellectualization of Jesus' teaching that has characterized the Christian community since his death; ... Browning brilliantly equates the personal condition of the dying John with the condition of the Christian community as described by the higher criticism" (pp. 217-18).

Whereas many of the other characters in Dramatis Personae are weak and frustrated, angry and deluded, John really is none of these, nor anything else either. He is so certain of his faith that he expresses only faint sadness at the trials to come, even seeing good in them. Unlike the visionary St. John of Revelation, this John has no fantasies. Although he has forsaken God at one point, he knows that he has been forgiven and is able to forgive himself. Neverthe-

³³ William Stigand in The Edinburgh Review, cxx (October, 1864), 537-65 in The Critical Heritage, p. 250.

less, there are a few isolated moving passages. He expresses quite effectively a feeling of spiritual emptiness: "'Till I am found away from my own world,/ 'Feeling for foot-hold through a blank profound,/ 'Along with unborn people in strange lands" (ll.192-93). The metaphor also expresses a sense of helplessness to prevent the fading out of his existence and his truth.

The poem is not heard as a monologue both because the listeners are superfluous and because there is no impetus for the reader to judge the speaker. Browning's use of a saint by itself makes evaluation unlikely. Here, his characteristic ideas are not filtered through an intervening personality. The poem is contrived in that John answers the objections of a later day in so much detail. These lines provide the philosophic kernel of the volume, the most complete exposition of Browning's religious thinking, with the highest cost to good story-telling and characterization.

One of the most important themes in the poem is the value of myth and historical "fact." John anticipates the arguments of the nineteenth century critics of the Bible, among the most important of which is the assertion that the Christ story is a projection from the mind of man. John might have called on the help of Rabbi Ben Ezra here, who

would surely deny that the pot could have made the potter. Although John gives a long, detailed answer, his main stress is on God's love for man and man's learning love from God and through the Christ story. His argument is a pragmatic one too. Life is unbearable without belief in God, but with it, "'I say, the acknowledgement of God in Christ/ 'Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee/ 'All questions in the earth and out of it" (ll.474-476).

John sounds like the Rabbi in many ways. Both praise the wisdom of old age and distinguish between the values of the flesh and those of the spirit. It is hard to communicate truth to the young because they "have flesh, a veil of youth and strength/ 'About each spirit," which is like the "rose-mesh" described by Ben Ezra. John defends old age as positively as the Rabbi does. "'Is it for nothing we grow old and weak,/ 'We whom God loves? When pain ends, gain ends too" (ll.206-07). When he wishes to emphasize a point, he interjects rather unpoetically, "believe the aged friend."

John also supports James Lee's wife's philosophy of love: "'Such ever was love's way: to rise, it stoops" (134). As in that first poem, love is described in images of expansion, but John sees the expansion and contraction of things outside himself, not inside, as James Lee's wife does. The

star that becomes the world for John is also very much like the final image of the "Epilogue."

The imagery of the resurrection, from the first revival of John to speak, echoes the striving imagery of most of Browning's poetry. Here it is clearly enunciated that "the Resurrection and Uprise" (l.215) are the prototype for man. Like Abt Vogler, John has a vision of the world where past and present meet, where God makes the world a whole. But John's is more assertion than vision: man should aim "to reach the ultimate, angels' law,/ 'Indulging every instinct of the soul/ 'There where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing!" (l.631-33). Where Abt Vogler makes one out of diversity, John starts with one thing, which eventually grows to take in everything:

"Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death,
 "Stay there at gaze, till it dispart, dispread,
 "As though a star should open out, all sides,
 "Grow the world on you, as it is my world. (ll.240-43)

The addition to the manuscript at the end of the poem also stresses that Christ will unify the world. People are "holding by Christ's word/ 'That He will grow incorporate with all,/ 'With me as Pamphylax, with him as John, 'Groom for each bride!" (ll. 681-84)

Death is, of course, an important part of the scheme. St. John is yet another example of the deathbed speaker, and

there is a clear emphasis on his position as such. The title was not "St. John's last words" or any of the other possibly appropriate titles, but it was called "A Death in the Desert." The poem opens with John's followers hovering about him, hoping he is not dead yet. The boy, emphasizing the contrast between physical death and eternal life, brings John back to consciousness with the repetition of part of Jesus' words to Martha, Lazarus' sister: "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John, 11.25). Thus, he raises John as Jesus raised Lazarus. There are several allusions to Lazarus in the poem and a general stress on the theme of rebirth. The title and John's death are also supposed to remind us of "that Life and Death," which is the Christ story.

John not only foresees his death, but also laments the many changes which will overcome the faith to which he is witness: "'It is a heavy burthen you shall bear/ 'In latter days, new lands, or old grown strange/ 'Left without me, which must be very soon" (11.350-52).

There is also a tendency for him to look back to the past, trying to unify the times by affirming that what was, is eternally. Yet, like other speakers in Dramatis Personae,

he is a figure alienated from his world. The ruling Roman world is eager to kill him and his followers. This danger he perceives as "The envy of the world" (1.249). A man for whom the spirit is of primary importance, he is living in a world where the flesh is everything. Had he been presented more successfully, his might have been a moving dilemma.

Although the reader does not and is not expected to judge John, the theme of judgment is an important one. John speaks as though both man and Christianity are on trial: "Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift" (1.295). John is addressing the jury of unborn skeptics as well as the remnant of Christ's followers. The soul, he appeals, must be built up, "'Saving us from evasion of life's proof,/ 'Putting the question ever, "Does God love,/ 'And will ye hold that truth against the world?" (11.271-73). The Biblical St. John was also concerned with the victory of truth. "The Third Epistle of St. John, addressed to Gaius, a Christian, emphasized the importance of the 'truth,' or the Scriptures, in days of difficulty within the church. John had evidently written an earlier letter ... to this church, but a domineering brother names Diotrepies had refused to receive it."³⁴

³⁴ Pilgrim Edition, p. 1639.

We see, then, that even the Biblical John was faced with the problem of disseminating truth. "'What truth was ever told the second day?'" Browning's John hears the skeptics say. They want to know truth absolutely, a thing John asserts is impossible for man, who sees truth differently and partially at each stage of his development. At the time of John's "trial," "'Already had begun the silent work/ 'Whereby truth, deadened of its absolute blaze,/ 'Might need love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt" (ll.319-21). Already much had been "'Forgotten or misdelivered."

The poet's particular concern in this poem is with ascertaining truth through written records. His understanding of the problem is praised by Elinor Shaffer:

Browning's notorious 'difficulty' as a poet reflects his full grasp of the significance of the higher critical analysis of the untrustworthiness of historical evidence--of all human testimony. He did not oppose the higher criticism--he could not--but he feared the diminution in the quality of belief that it might entail in its practitioners, friends, and enemies alike." (p. 206)

The whole poem is brilliantly structured as an illustration of this theme of the unreliability of historical evidence. The form of the poem is a manuscript, once removed from the now questionable Gospel. The owner of the manuscript describes its physical appearance while declaring it of pre-

cious value. That he does not dare to write his real name on the document indicates the atmosphere of conspiracy and fear in which the manuscript is passed from believer to believer. Preceding his comments is the statement: "Supposed of Pamphylax the Antiochene." Even the identity of the speaker of the narrative is in doubt now, as is that of the owner of the manuscript. If Pamphylax did write the document, he wrote it long after the events which it recounts, when John's words already had a gloss (see ll. 82, ff.), although it is possible the gloss was added by the owner. This too is unclear. In any case, he is able to give the fate of Xanthus, who has been burned and could not himself "write the chronicle" (l.57). At the end of his narrative, he speculates,

By this, the cave's mouth must be filled with sand.
 Valens is lost, I know not of his trace;
 The Bactrian was but a wild childish man,
 And could not write nor speak, but only loved:
 So, lest the memory of this go quite,
 Seeing that I to-morrow fight the beasts,
 I tell the same to Phoebas, whom believe!
 For many look again to find that face,
 Beloved John's to whom I ministered,
 Somewhere in life about the world; they err:
 Either mistaking what was darkly spoke
 At ending of his book, as he relates,
 Or misconceiving somewhat of this speech
 Scattered from mouth to mouth, as I suppose.
 (ll.647-60)

Now we learn that the account was not written by an eyewit-

ness at all, but by someone named Phoebas, to whom the witness told the tale. And only a generation after John's death, there is confusion about the truth, both that which is written, John's book, and that which is "Scattered from mouth to mouth."

The frame at the end introduces yet more puzzles: within the brackets is the statement, "Cerinthus read and mused; one added this:" Presumably Cerinthus is the author of the quoted paragraph which follows, expressing some doubt about the divinity of Christ. But who is the "one" who has "added this?" And are the words his? What about the comment at the end? Who is it who judges "'twas Cerinthus that is lost"? The author of the quoted section which doubts says, "'If Christ, as thou affirmest, be of men/ 'Mere man,"... Who is the "thou" who is the unbeliever? Perhaps the "thou" is Cerinthus, and the speaker is the "one" who added something after Cerinthus' musing. If that is the case, who is the speaker of the final line? The owner of the manuscript or someone completely unknown?

The form of the poem portrays brilliantly the dilemma of transmitting truth through time and human media. By confronting the reader with the same problem, Browning actually makes him experience the difficulty of ascertaining truth

from written records. There is another manuscript mentioned at the beginning of the poem, "the seventh plate of graven lead" (l.60) from which the boy reads, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." It contains the record of the original sayings of Jesus. Is Browning parodying the speculations of nineteenth-century archeologists when he has John see men of the future "muse upon blank heaps of stone and sand/ 'Idly conjectured to be Ephesus"? (ll.360-61).

What we have, then, is a collection of views of the same situation over time. The truth grows different from Christ, through John, then Pamphylax (maybe), Phoebas, "one," "Cerinthus," "Xanthus, my wife's uncle, now at peace," the owner of the manuscript, and, finally, the reader of the poem. For this reason, the modern skeptics want to have the truth directly, without allegory. They are unable to understand that truth is not the same as fact, that the fable is a necessary if faulty means of transmitting truth.

"I saw the power; I see the Love, once weak,
 "Resume the Power: and in this word 'I see,'
 "Lo, there is recognized the Spirit of both
 "That moving o'er the spirit of man, unblinds
 "His eye and bids him look. These are, I see;
 "But ye, the children, His beloved ones too,
 "Ye need,--as I should use an optic glass
 "I wondered at erewhile, somewhere i' the world,
 "It had been given a crafty smith to make;
 "A tube, he turned on objects brought too close,
 "Lying confusedly insubordinate

"For the unassisted eye to master once:
 "Look through his tube, at distance now they lay,
 "Become succinct, distinct, so small, so clear!
 "Just thus, ye needs must apprehend what truth
 "I see, reduced to plain historic fact,
 "Diminished into clearness, proved a point
 "And far away: ye would withdraw your sense
 "From out eternity, strain it upon time,
 "Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death,
 "Stay there at gaze, till it dispart, dispread,
 "As though a star should open out, all sides,
 "Grow the world on you, as it is my world.
 (ll. 221-243)

The allegory of the Christ story is the optic glass which makes objects look far away, thus bringing them into perspective. There is a need to step back and look at the whole, which John and Abt Vogler and Rabbi Ben Ezra all do. Most of the characters in Dramatis Personae--and the more human and interesting ones--are too close to the object of their vision and see only partially and confusedly.

John earlier uses the myth of Prometheus to explain how truth may be contained in a tale which is not historically true. Though no one can prove that such a being as Prometheus existed, yet we still have the gift of fire (ll.279ff). It is just so with the Christ story, which John says continues being repeated although parts of the historical account may be discredited: John's own awakening to the words "I am the Resurrection and the Life" is a reliving on a smaller scale of a part of the Christ story. But more importantly,

"'Is not His love at issue still with sin/ 'Visibly when a wrong is done on earth?" (11.212-13). This question becomes for Browning the basis for The Ring and the Book, which, for all its celebrated "relativism" is really a religious allegory in which the Christ story, like other myths, is repeated, as the cosmic war between love and sin. David Shaw remarks, "In his demonstration that the Incarnation occurred, not once, but always, Browning is trying to liberate himself from the historicity of faith. 'A Death in the Desert' is his closest approach before The Ring and the Book to a workable notion of religious myth" (191). He continues, like David Friedrich Strauss, "Browning follows these religious philosophers in no longer equating myth with falsehood, but with modes of truth that can be apprehended only in terms of some total allegorical structure, of a form in which the literal meaning is different from the moral or mystical or analogical meaning" (192).

"Caliban Upon Setebos"

It is a mark of the success of this poem that no one has ever been completely clear on its philosophical object. It cannot stand up to "A Death in the Desert" as a statement of Browning's philosophy, but that poem and most others by Browning cannot stand up to "Caliban" as a portrayal of char-

acter and a verbal tour de force.

When one considers the difficulty Browning has had in making good men believable, it is not surprising that of the four "theologians" of this group, the best character portrayal is that of the least virtuous character. David Shaw has noticed as well that "Caliban" "provides a kind of anti mask to the solemn theological speculations of Browning's St. John" (p. 193). Caliban's thoughts are also counterposed to those of Abt Vogler and Rabbi Ben Ezra. The difference between "Caliban" and these other poems is that there is no general agreement on what, if anything, is being satirized in "Caliban," although most critics have the feeling that something is. John Howard in "Caliban's Mind" says that there is no particular object of satire, but he is in the minority.³⁵ Michael Timko refers to the subtitle for the suggestion that the Natural Theologians are being parodied. Although Natural Theology in England had a flowering in the Bridgewater Treatises, it stems from Bishop Joseph Butler's The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed of 1736 and Archdeacon William Paley's Natural Theology of 1802, both of which were, as Timko informs us, most popular from 1837 to 1860.³⁶ What

³⁵ John Howard, "Caliban's Mind," Victorian Poetry, 1 (1963), pp. 249-57.

³⁶ Michael Timko, "Browning Upon Butler: or Natural

disturbed Browning particularly about them was their method, which used "proof and reason" (p. 144) and urged religious belief on the grounds that good would follow, a most practical morality (p. 145).

If, in fact, "Caliban" is an attack on the Natural theologians, it has this in common with "Gold Hair," which shows that everything in the universe is not good. The implication in "Caliban" would be, let me show you your natural theology in my island and see how it looks there. There is some of the same bitterness as in "Gold Hair;" both are about the way the universe is arranged, but Caliban's is a cry from himself and about himself while the narrator of the legend is a detached observer who sounds rather like Browning himself.

Laurence Perrine suggests that the poem is directed at the Calvinist doctrines of the stern father, arbitrary election, and God's sovereignty. "What is satirized is not Caliban's ideas as held by him but as held by Calvinists and puritans and evangelicals clear into the nineteenth century--and beyond."³⁷ De Vane suggests yet another possible contro-

Theology in the English Isle," Criticism, 7 (1965), pp. 141-50.

³⁷ Laurence Perrine, "Browning's 'Caliban Upon Setebos': A Reply," Victorian Poetry, 2 (1964), p. 125.

versial target: Darwin. Browning had read Darwin and had met Theodore Parker at about the same time. Parker, according to De Vane, believed "that at every stage of human development man has produced a theology to express the highest reaches of his spiritual life; and he saw the need for humanizing the deity to suit the mind of man, that is, he saw the necessity for anthropomorphism in religion. His ideas were close to Browning's" (p. 299).

We have Browning's own opinions on Darwin from a letter he wrote to Dr. F. J. Furnivall on October 11, 1881, in which he denies that he is against Darwin:

In reality, all that seems proved in Darwin's scheme was a conception familiar to me from the beginning: see in Paracelsus the progressive development from senseless matter to organized, until man's appearance (Part V.). Also in Cleon, see the order of "life's mechanics,"-- and I daresay in many passages of my poetry: for how can one look at Nature as a whole and doubt that, wherever there is a gap, a "link" must be "missing"-- through the limited power and opportunity of the looker? But go back and back, as you please, at the back, as Mr. Sludge is made to insist, you find (my faith is as constant) creative intelligence, acting as matter but not resulting from it. Once set the balls rolling, and ball may hit ball and send any number in any direction over the table."³⁸

Yet, if Browning is using Darwin in "Caliban," the stress is more on the struggle for survival. Darwin said that animals struggle and fight in order to exist, but in

³⁸ Wise and Hood, p. 199.

"Caliban," destruction and cruelty are motivated by caprice, sadism and masochism. Caliban takes stock of the destructive powers of nature,--storms, waves, meteors,--to whom he attributes malice. (He also assumes that the newt was shut up inside the stone for spite. Perhaps Browning is suggesting that Caliban's interpretation of fossils is as good as other interpretations he has heard.) Yet Browning creates a whole natural world in "Caliban," perhaps as he thinks Darwin would see it. One thinks of the famous passage at the end of

Origin of Species:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.³⁹

The laws which operate to produce these creatures Darwin describes as growth with reproduction, inheritance, variability (from external conditions), and a ratio of increase so high as to lead to the "Struggle for Life" and thus to Natural Selection (p. 489). We see that the struggle for power for its own sake is not among them, nor is random cruelty. And

³⁹ Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Species, introd. Ernst Mayr (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 489.

the lesson Darwin draws from the tangled bank is very different from that which the reader draws from Caliban's island: "Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. ... from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved" (p. 490).

Yet there is in "Caliban" this same sense of swarming life everywhere. Everything is alive in the beginning frame, even the sunbeams which form spider webs. Caliban intensifies this sense of life by personifying everything: the cave is like an eye, the overhanging plant like an eyebrow. It is a summer poem; all the creatures are outside and active. "Caliban" has the most intensely physical imagery of any of the poems, perhaps because the speaker is intended to be the closest to the beasts. His surroundings are also not considered the glories of nature--weeds, swamp and mud, with beetles and crabs--although they are made beautiful for us through Caliban's eyes. This is true because he is so much a being of physical needs and satisfactions. He is an odd creature from whom to expect a theology, and it is an odd theology which we get.

The poem is a well-developed argument based entirely on analogy with Caliban or with what he has observed in the animal world about him. His method is to put forth a hypothetical premise, then prove or explore it by analogy. It is highly structured, and, from its premises, quite logical. It does not have two arguments warring against each other, as do "Dîs Aliter Visum" and "A Death in the Desert." We simply have one mind following its thoughts to their conclusions. There is no plot to disguise the fact that the poem is an argument. Yet, it is by general agreement one of Browning's best poems. It is not argumentative in the same way as "A Death in the Desert," for every argument reveals Caliban's character. Rather than his being the vehicle for an argument, the argument is a vehicle for revealing him, his mentality, his world.

The metaphors are all psychologically illuminating. There is no help for it, for, just like James Lee's wife--even more so--he turns the whole world into himself. When he describes the wave which sweeps away his wattles, he animates it, turning it into a snake, just as the woman sees snakes in the water. But these snakes fear Setebos.

The poem consists of one fantasy after another--nearly all the proofs for Caliban's hypotheses are imaginary situa-

tions--in which he compensates for his feelings of powerlessness, discomfort and bitterness. In nearly all of them he aggrandizes himself and hurts others, just as he feels he is being hurt by the world, fate, Prospero, and Setebos. He wants power and revenge, wants to spite others, and assumes this feeling is universal and not blameworthy.

In the scene in which he plays Prospero, he enjoys the pain of his subject creatures and their fear of him. When he plays Setebos to the squirrel and urchin, he is willing to spare them so long as they are ultimately afraid of him, and incapable of defending themselves, especially by their wits.

To be Lord, to him, is to have ultimate will: "'Doth as he likes, or wherefore Lord?" And this power one exerts causes others to be abased. Caliban frequently pictures the employment of power as one trampling on others. Of the pipe that would dare to talk back to him, he demands, "Would not I smash it with my foot?"

He sees all of Setebos' activities as the compensating pleasures of a failure. Caliban is himself a failure, of course, although he asks only to be comfortable and easy, not to be punished and not to be servile. Because even this little is denied him, he has visions of grandeur in which he is the king of the world rather than a subject.

He divides the world into rulers and subjects. The fish and crabs and whelks are all subjects. Fish are constantly pictured as imprisoned, the great fish at the beginning who is caught in "Meshes of fire," the icy fish who wishes to escape to a warmer stream, and the cuttle fish, whose name he uses as a term of scorn. Birds and insects, on the other hand, are creatures to be envied, for they have wings and can fly. Just as in "James Lee's Wife," they are symbols of mobility and power. Caliban longs himself to be a bird, and imagines making a bird of clay to compensate for his own inability to fly. In envy he rips the wings of the "Saucy" grigs. He imagines the cry of the blue jay in pain and the little birds for whom he sets a trap with it. He also kills the beautiful flies who dare to be happy. Yet, he says, "I joy because the quails come;" and he fears the raven who has the power to carry tales to Setebos.

Caliban's thoughts and his setting both suggest sexuality. The swamp is a place of great fertility, which is enhanced by the fertility of his imagination. He lies back, "letting the rank tongue blossom into speech." And everything about him is rank, wildly flowering, overripe. He lies "on my back i' the seeded thyme;"⁴⁰ But Caliban's view of

⁴⁰ It is instructive that the words "rank" and "seed-

relations between the sexes is, to say the least, jaundiced. He has "A four-legged serpent he makes cower and couch,/ Now snarl, now hold its breath and mind his eye,/ And saith she is Miranda and my wife."

Barbara Melchiori points out the prevalence of the imagery of castration and mutilation, which is everywhere in the poem. First, there is Setebos, who, Caliban conjectures, created the world because he could not find or make a mate in order to reproduce. What Melchiori calls the "theme of sexual potency" (p. 150) is crucial. Then there are the "flower drops," the "gourd fruit," the "honey comb and pods," which "bite like finches when they bill and kiss," all extremely suggestive of fertility. There is, on the other hand, the suggestion of castration: the horns nipped off the grigs, the leg pulled off the bird, the crab without a pincer, the pipe broken by Caliban's foot and the tree's "head" which "snaps" in the storm. "The god is seen as jealous of his creature's powers of reproduction, and the punishment implied by the imagery is castration."⁴¹

ed" occur in the Shakespearean play which has the most decadent atmosphere and aura of dark sexuality, Troilus and Cressida (I., iii, 316): "The seeded Pride/ That hath to this maturity blowne up/ In ranke Achilles, must or now be cropt."

⁴¹ Melchiori, p. 152.

There is a sense of real pain and anger in the poem. Caliban does not believe in an afterlife because Setebos "doth His worst in this our life,/ Giving just respite lest we die through pain,/ Saving last pain for worst,--with which, an end." He is angry at everything and imagines that everyone is angry with him and has contempt for him. In fact, he suffers from paranoia with its usual accompaniment, delusions of grandeur, imagining, for example, that the whole world goes dark with storm because of his indiscretion.

Most painful of all is the way in which Caliban turns his anger and contempt against himself, without even realizing it, like a cat attacking his own tail. That he is unsure of his identity is one interpretation of the odd usage of the third person for the first person.⁴² Also, if one carries Caliban's own logic to its extreme conclusion, he is part of the "bauble-world" of Setebos and is, therefore, himself not "real." He is not real when he imitates Prospero and not real as himself. His identity is constantly changing.

He wishes he "were born a bird" so that he could fly, but also so he could escape from being Caliban. But he cannot escape, even in his imagination. The clay bird he makes

⁴² Shaw says, "The references to Caliban in the third person are a sign that he cannot even identify himself" (p. 194).

as consolation is also "Caliban," and it is made of "brittle clay," a flawed creature like himself. He gives it a sting with which to conquer the grigs, but he also plays with pulling off his legs so that Caliban is at the same time playing powerful creator and powerless creature and victim. This fantasy seems ironic in relation to "Rabbi Ben Ezra," where God is the potter, and only the very presumptuous clay pot dares question his maker.

Caliban reserves his worst torture for his other namesake, the seabeast "Caliban," who is even more like him than the clay bird. It plays "Caliban" to Caliban's "Prospero" and lives in company with the serpent "Miranda" and the crane "Ariel."

Also a sea-beast, lumpish, which he snared,
Blinded the eyes of, and brought somewhat tame,
And split its toe-webs, and now pens the drudge
In a hole o' the rock and calls him Caliban;
A bitter heart that bides its time and bites.

Possibly the sea-beast is blind to reflect Caliban's feeling of ignorance before Prospero's wisdom. Or, it may be that the reader is meant to be reminded of how limited Caliban's view of the world is, how much he is blind to. The overwhelming impression the blindness helps to convey, however, is that of awful helplessness, of a beast who must love what feeds him, having no choice even what to love or hate. Cali-

ban sees himself this way because he does not distinguish between feeling and showing feeling. He sees himself blinded, imprisoned, servile and bitter.

And he does not hurt himself only in fantasy. The fantasies reflect his real behavior, for self-destruction is his religion, codified in ritual. In order to prevent Setebos' punishment, Caliban will cut a finger off, give his sea-beast servant and namesake "for the orc to taste," give up his apples and a kid yearling, and spend his time in worshipping by song. We have an example of his practice when at the end of the poem he believes the wrath of Setebos is about to descend; so "'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip."

He also sacrifices his greatest pleasures and delicacies: "Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month/ One little mess of whelks." Eating is of primary importance to Caliban and to the poem. He begins it by crunching at a fruit, which he enjoys delightedly. He sends the crane Ariel to get fish for him. He watches the eating habits of other creatures, noting that the pie eats worms but not ants, and he himself feeds worms to the crabs he favors. He savors the fact that his "blinded beast/ Loves whoso places flesh-meat on his nose," confusing eating with loving. Love, hate, penitence, are all expressed through the medium of food. He is

precisely "the maw-crammed beast" that Rabbi Ben Ezra so rails against.⁴³

That Caliban feels trapped like his beast is clear from the constant images of imprisonment, not just the beast, not just the fish, but also the pipe that Caliban uses to "catch" the birds, and the newt "shut up inside a stone." Caliban himself lives in a small circumscribed area, a circle, in fact: "this isle, .../ And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same."

He imagines they all want to escape; the urchin "Curls up into a ball, pretending death" and as to the others, "All need not die, for of the things o' the isle/ Some flee afar, some dive, some run up trees." At the end of the poem Caliban tries to escape the darkness which has trapped him in speech and cut him off. That escape is crucial is indicated by its position as the last word in the poem. All of his sacrifices are "so he may 'scape!"

Yet Caliban is more afraid of being hurt than of dying, perhaps because he equates life with pain and the end of life with surcease of pain. Death is something which comes as a result of Setebos' anger--When "death's house o' the

⁴³ Shaw suggests that "Caliban" is an anagram for "cannibal" (p. 196).

move,/ ... A tree's head snaps--" or, in the case of small things, as a result of Caliban's anger. That Caliban takes death very casually can be seen in his fantasies. When he rips the leg off the clay bird and imagines tearing them all off, he sees no blood or suffering, just a comical thing without dignity. His fantasies are like cartoons where the characters are killed over and over again bloodlessly and rise as good as new. This also shows that the creatures he harms are not real to him; he has no feeling for them. He accepts the brutality of change with equal equanimity. Of his art work with the skull of the sloth atop ("Found dead i' the woods, too hard for one to kill"), he observes, "No use at all i' the work, for work's sole sake;/ 'Shall some day knock it down again: so He."

Caliban's world is Darwin's world to the extent that all the creatures are at war with one another. There is no escape to a romantic world in this pastoral setting, for Caliban does not belong to the realm of men and ideas and literature. He is more a part of nature but with the consciousness and motivations of a man. There is no overlay of culture to his pragmatic morality, which is undisguised and not seen as bad. He is concerned first of all with defense. A good creator, Caliban imagines, would grant his creatures protec-

tion from injury: horny eyes, a thick skull and flesh of armour against the assaults of sharp instruments and biting snow. All around him are creatures looking to their own safety, ants who build a wall about their hole against such foes as the badger that hunts by moonlight and the pie with the long tongue. When the storm breaks, Caliban describes an image of vast natural warfare with "fast invading fires." And he projects this vision onto his gods, seeing them at war like the pagan gods of Greece, hoping "the Quiet catch/ And conquer Setebos." But he sees all creatures, those not defending themselves at the time, as actuated by spite. Caliban is able to lure the little birds into his own trap by imitating the sound of the wounded jay, whom they flock to see, "glad their foe is hurt." Negative feelings have the most power: one creature's hatred puts him in the power of another creature's hatred. In a passage reminiscent of the bitter line from King Lear, Caliban says life is all a struggle to learn how to please one's God: "There is the sport: discover how or die!"

Caliban's greatest pleasure may be the satisfaction of his malice, but his physical pleasures, his sensuality, also mold his "morality." As he lies back to bask in the sun, his physical comfort is part of the satisfaction he feels in

releasing speech: "And it is good to cheat the pair, and gibe,/ Letting the rank tongue blossom into speech." For Caliban, there is no difference between "it is good" and, what he really means, "it feels good." He is aware of the concepts of right and wrong, but he sees strength as above moral law: "'Thinketh, such shows nor right nor wrong in Him,/ Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord./ Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs." The will Caliban attributes to Setebos is purely arbitrary, not related to logic or feeling: "Loving not, hating not, just choosing so."

Caliban is a prisoner of his own mind, like a man in a house of mirrors beyond whose reflections he cannot see. He is like the speaker of "The Worst of It" in that he projects his own feelings onto God, using God to support his fantasies of revenge. But unlike the unhappy lover, Caliban's speculations cannot accurately be called rationalizations or distortions of knowledge. He has not had the benefit of revelation; he actually does not know any better. His ideas about the Quiet he has gotten partly from his observation of Prospero, and his ideas about Setebos from his own soul. His attitude toward God is that of the fearful and resentful servant. Without the help of revelation or a better nature than his own to enlighten his analogies, he cannot understand evil,

the reasons for evil, or that evil is any way separate from God. Even many devout Christians have questioned the coexistence of good and evil. Caliban has no elaborate theological explanation to fall back upon. He has not read Milton.

Thus, it is to the god Setebos that he attributes spite, whim, arbitrary power, cruelty, envy, and selfishness, as well as good, loneliness and the capacity to feel joy and grief, hunger and pain. He imagines that Setebos is a prisoner of the cold, "an icy fish/ That longed to 'scape the rock-stream where she lived." This is wish-fulfillment on Caliban's part, who now at his ease in the summer, imagines that his tormenter is uncomfortable. He feels, however, that it is safer to talk in summer than winter, perhaps because Setebos is apt to be a bit warmer and not so ill-tempered.

Caliban is not always consistent in his theorizings about Setebos, especially in the realm of feeling and will. He imagines that Setebos both loves and hates his position, like the icy fish in the unfamiliar warm water, and is thus despairing. He is also weaker than the Quiet because he feels joy and grief. Yet later he speculates that Setebos acts entirely from will: "Loving not, hating not, just choosing so."

To the Quiet Caliban attributes superiority to such emotions as Caliban knows. The Quiet does not have to speak noisily, like Caliban, who cannot do anything but speak, and he is "What knows." Yet, as Michael Timko points out, Caliban's Quiet is no more loving than Setebos, for while God's power is evident to man through his senses, God's love must be revealed (p. 149). Tracy and Honan see the idea of the Quiet as evidence that Caliban is striving toward something better.⁴⁴ But really, the idea of Setebos growing into the Quiet is not a convincing idea for Caliban to have. This is the one place in the poem where one has a sense of Browning's intrusion.

One index of the success of this poem is that there are so few of the Browningsque images and ideas of striving, of the value of the imperfect, which would be out of place here. Love is not in question here either. Though Caliban is lonely, he does not know anything about love, human, romantic or divine. That, Browning, would say, is his flaw. Timko argues, "He lacks the emotional response necessary for the direct, intuitional knowledge of the God of Love. He is,

⁴⁴ Arnold Shapiro, "Browning's Psalm of Hate: 'Caliban upon Setebos,' Psalm 50, and The Tempest," Papers in Language and Literature, 8 (1972), p.57.

in short, a rationalist; he believes in natural theology" (143). But, while it is true that Caliban argues rationally from his premises, all of his premises are based on intense feelings, usually of fear, envy and loneliness.

Caliban is pragmatic, however. He postulates that love arises only out of weakness: witness the blind sea-beast who loves what feeds him. Love or adoration, showing these things, are the only way to get good things. But actually feeling love, as feeling joy or grief, is a great disadvantage in the struggle for survival. For this reason, he believes he must pretend to love Setebos. He says he cannot work out exactly how to please Setebos. Certainly, Browning wants us to see that he does not know how to please God.

Yet Caliban sets himself up as a judge, trying to make sense out of the world, trying to find some scheme into which all the creatures of the world will fit. He is searching for a version of truth, which is, of course, different from Browning's, as Browning points out somewhat irritably in a letter to Dr. F. J. Furnivall in 1884, criticizing someone who believes

that the writer of La Saisiaz must see through such horny eyes as those of Caliban: besides, in each case, there is a faculty of reason which should be

employed in correcting and adjusting the first impressions of the senses--and, I hope, the two make a very different use of their respective faculties; one doubts and the other has no doubt at all, 'sayeth' so and so, as if Prospero could say no otherwise.⁴⁵

There are implicit in the poem several contrasting views of the "truth" Caliban seeks. Most explicit is the area in which he disagrees with the beliefs of his dam. She is practically an orthodox Christian compared to him. She believes in something like a division of powers between a god and a devil, saying that the Quiet made all things which Setebos then "vexed." Caliban disagrees with this, for he believes that the creator made creatures purposely vulnerable to vexation. He also rejects the concept of an after-life which his dam passed on to him.

Although Caliban doesn't argue with anyone else's views in the poem, we have to remember that the reader is familiar with other views, and he perceives that this is Caliban's version of Genesis and is constantly aware of the contrast. Caliban says, "'Thinketh, He made thereat the sun, this isle,/ Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping thing..." Made all we see, and us, in spite." This is quite different from the spirit of Genesis: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our like-

⁴⁵ Wise and Hood, p. 228.

ness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Genesis 1.26).

Caliban makes a bird "Caliban," out of clay with the words, "I will that he begin to live." Unbeknownst to him, he is imitating, not Setebos, but the Biblical God: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis, 2.07). Although one would not like to press the analogy too far, we ought to note that Caliban is alone in an Eden-like setting, like Adam, master of all the animals, and tries to hide himself from God's eye when he does wrong.

Yet for all the differences between Caliban's story of the creation and that of Genesis, Caliban's God is not so different from the God of the Old Testament. It is probably this which leads some critics to see the poem as a parody of Calvinism. In Exodus, for example, God performs acts to prove that he is God. He hardens the heart of Pharaoh so "That the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD" (Exodus 14.04). What is particularly reminiscent of the Old Testament, however, is Caliban's description of what he be-

believes is a sign of Setebos' wrath: "The wind/ Shoulders the pillared dust, death's house o' the move,/ And fast invading fires begin!" God frequently uses such dramatic effects in the Old Testament when he is speaking directly to his people. In the wilderness he accompanies the Israelites as a "pillar of cloud" and a "pillar of fire" (Exodus 13.21). And before Mount Sinai, "it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud" (Exodus 19.16). Also, the raven whom Caliban fears as a betrayer is a messenger of God in the Bible, sent to feed Elijah.

Perhaps the most important Biblical parallel to consider is Psalm 50, from which comes the epigraph, "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself." God is speaking in judgment on his people, at this point in the psalm addressing the wicked, particularly for sins of ill speaking, sacrilege, slander and deceit. In his essay, "Browning's Psalm of Hate: 'Caliban upon Setebos'; Psalm 50 and The Tempest," Arnold Shapiro points out the many parallels between the psalm and the poem.⁴⁶ In this context, Bar-

⁴⁶ Papers in Language and Literature, 8 (1972), pp. 53-62.

bara Melchiori notes that it is Caliban's speech which annoys Setebos rather than anything else he does. The end of the psalm is therefore appropriate (p. 145): "To him that ordereth his conversation aright will I show the salvation of God" (Psalms 50.23).

Shapiro says the "song" Caliban sings is "a psalm of hate" (p. 55). In The Poetry of Experience, Robert Langbaum refers to the poem as "The Song of Caliban, the expression of Caliban's whole soul as it breaks through and exceeds the conditions of the poem" (pp. 207-08). That is, Caliban is a poet, not merely the speaker of a dramatic monologue. Actually, Caliban's speech is a soliloquy for the most part, for he believes he cannot be heard. He throws off all posture and pretense for a little while, giving himself a special "treat." He is conscious of the nature of his speech, which is an entertainment to be savored, separate from ordinary talk: "And it is good to cheat the pair, and gibe,/ Letting the rank tongue blossom into speech." He is enjoying the forbidden and the zest of successful trickery; but, more, he is relieving the pressures of unspoken thoughts, which have been, like seeds or wild flowers, repressed all the cold winter and are "rank," ready to burst forth in profusion and unsightly fertility. His sensation in speaking is intense and physical,

as he registers awareness of the tongue in his mouth as the instrument of speech. The very detailed description of his position shows a creature totally relaxed and luxuriating in the sun and mud, with the fruits of summer at his fingertips.

The first section of his talk is separated from the rest by brackets. The speech within them is mere muttering, unstructured language. It introduces the rest, which is a conscious creation, like a poem or a prayer or a speech for a play. Caliban is aware of language as an artifact, as something one makes. That is why he makes a fresh beginning after the parenthetical remarks, like an actor finishing up his offstage business before the curtain goes up to find him in place with his first line. His language is highly rhetorical, using parallelism, repetition, and sound effects. Though he deals with many "low" swamp creatures, his vocabulary is sophisticated and often poetic. When he describes the creation, he is observant, detailed, sensuous and melodic; he is intensely aware of its beauty:

'Thinketh, He made thereat the sun, this isle,
Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping thing.
Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech;
Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam,
That floats and feeds; a certain badger brown
He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge eye
By moonlight; and the pie with the long tongue
That pricks deep into oakwarts for a worm,
And says a plain word when she finds her prize,

But will not eat the ants; the ants themselves
That build a wall of seeds and settled stalks
About their hole--He made all these and more,
Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?

Based on Shakespeare's Caliban, he frequently speaks with Shakespearean echoes, using the sixteenth century verb endings and sometimes paraphrasing Shakespearean speeches: "But wherefore rough, why cold and ill at ease?/ Aha, that is a question!" He calls himself "wanton" and calls the art of pleasing Setebos the game of life: "There is the sport: discover how or die!" We remember these famous lines from King Lear: "As Flies to wanton Boyes are we to th' Gods, They kill us for their sport."

Caliban admires the power of words. In one of his fantasies, he imitates Prospero, with robe and wand and book, on which Caliban writes "prodigious words." He creates by words. In this fantasy he "saith she is Miranda and my wife" (emphasis added), thus, for a time, transforming the serpent as if by magic. Words also provide protection, a song to placate Setebos, curses to fool him. These ritual words provide the only occasion on which he changes from poetry to doggerel.

Caliban's "speech" stops abruptly with the coming of the thunderstorm. He does not stop talking, but, as Browning again indicates by the use of brackets, he begins muttering

once more. This last section is different from any other part of the poem because Caliban is, for the first time, acting. For the first time, his words are intended for a listener:

Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!
 'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,
 Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month
 One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape!

Caliban is an actor as well as a poet, even more consciously so. His way of life is to hide all his joy and exhibit all his grief, but until the thunderstorm, where he goes "on stage," he is taking us behind the scenes, explaining his many roles and how he plays them: "'Plays thus at being Prosper in a way,/ Taketh his mirth with make-believes."

The conclusion of "Caliban" is for Browning a kind of reverse "surprise" ending. Instead of being unmasked at the end, Caliban puts on his mask when he is threatened. The reader still sees how he acts and what he is, but in action for the first time. This is one poem where the balance between "sympathy and judgment," to use Langbaum's expression, is perfect. It was inevitable, though, that some readers would see him as entirely negative. One early reviewer, Bell, described him as "repulsive:" "In the excess of his Christian love and sympathy, we have no doubt that he [Browning]

sees some points of sympathy between himself and the whelp of Sycorax."⁴⁷ A more modern critic, Shapiro, insists that "the poet always shows him in an ignoble light" (pp. 61-62), "despite the critics who find Browning's Caliban somehow admirable or sympathetic" (61-62). There are such critics, of course. These respond not to the moral censure implied in the poem but to the character, with a psyche made real to us and a bitter pain we cannot but feel with him. As with many poems in Dramatis Personae, Browning's success is in conveying the despair of his people rather than the poems' moral imperatives, explicit or implicit.

"Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'"

Mr. Sludge is like Caliban in many ways. He is an essentially unworthy figure who does not speak directly for the ideals in which Browning believes, who may, in fact, speak against them. Like Caliban, he is a foil to the men of true religious feeling in the group of which Caliban is the last. Comparing him to David in "Saul" and Abt Vogler, Isobel Armstrong calls Sludge "the degraded equivalent of these visionary prophets."⁴⁸ Sludge is also compared implic-

⁴⁷ Robert Bell, The St. James Magazine, X (July, 1864), 476-91 in The Critical Heritage, p. 227.

⁴⁸ Isobel Armstrong, "Browning's 'Mr. Sludge, The

itly by Browning with the first speaker of the "Epilogue," who, like him, is also named David, and though sincere, only a partial visionary.

"Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" takes on the controversial subject of spiritualism; as Isobel Armstrong says, "The strategy of the medium's defense [gives Browning] a unique way of exploring some arguments about the nature of truth, knowledge and the imagination, questions which recur in his poetry" (p. 1).

The poem is, of course, one long argument, which at one point becomes a literal sparring contest. It is like an argument before a judge, where the defendant has a few thousand words to say in his defense before sentencing. There is an ongoing exchange, however, not with the listener so much as with dramatized patrons whom Sludge sets up in order to criticize and ridicule, thus making himself seem the object of ill use. His major defense is that he is no worse, really, than they.

His first opposition, up to line 663, is to his patron's admonition that Sludge owes gratitude to those who have made use of his talents and rewarded him with comfortable living. Next, he takes on the charge that he has injured reli-

gion in any way by his spiritual manifestations, using the Bridgewater Treatises at one point to help him make his case. The heart of his appeal comes in lines 1344 to 1475, where he insists passionately that he cheats in self-defense in a world of cheats. Finally, in two last sections of almost equal length, he makes a settlement with his patron in a tone of great servility and gratitude, then turns aside to voice his repressed venom and schemes for revenge.

The poem is drawing-room drama which takes place among the clinking of the tea cups and the taking of cakes. The constant commerce between the supernatural and the trivial has the effect of vulgarizing all grand talk of the spiritual.

But, for God?

Ay, that's a question! Well, sir, since you press--
 (How you do tease the whole thing out of me!
 I don't mean you, you know, when I say "them":
 Hate you, indeed! But that Miss Stokes, that Judge!
 Enough, enough--with sugar: thank you, sir!) (ll.792-97)

No piece of furniture or apparatus of the toilet is too slight to mention, even shirt-studs, a gift from his patron. Miracles lie behind everything, Sludge argues, but for the reader, everything is sunk in the material or, should I say, the immaterial. He uses the image of the inverted glass in a more debased form than St. John, showing how nothing is too small or vulgar for a miracle:

And the world wears another aspect now:
 Somebody turns our spyglass round, or else
 Puts a new lens in it: grass, worm, fly grow big:
 We find great things are made of little things,
 And little things go lessening till at last
 Comes God behind them. (ll. 1109-14)

The poem is also very much located in time and place, the America where Greeley's paper is king, and this also takes the poem further from the realm of the ideal.

Sludge's language all through the poem is slangy and vulgar. To him, things spiritual are all very work-a-day. One would look in vain for real poetry in him, although he preens himself on a couple of fortuitous rhymes. The prose like paragraphs leave the poem well set in the mundane, as befits Mr. "Sludge." The metaphors are mostly illustrative and rather tedious, with no depth of subconscious behind them. As in "The Worst of It" there is the image of the sinful world as a dirty bog: "Those furthest in the quagmire-- don't suppose/ They strayed there with no warning, got no chance/ Of a filth-speck in their face" (ll. 698-700).

There is no real emotion anywhere. Sludge reacts to questions and pressures with quick thinking and glib arguments, maintaining conscious control over what is revealed. Yet this is a dramatic monologue with some real exchanges between speaker and listener: "don't take your hand away,/ Through yours I surely kiss your mother's hand" (ll. 41-42).

This is a typical exchange, for Sludge's main ploy is flattery. He must make his patron feel less that he has been "had," must make him feel more of a "man":

In short, you've pluck, when I'm a coward--there!
I know it, I can't help it,--folly or no,
I'm paralyzed, my hand's no more a hand,
Nor my head a head, in danger: (11.1256-59)

He even deprecates himself sexually, pointing out that the women demean him by allowing him liberties that they would not to one whom they took seriously as a "man." Yet even after he has been caught, he cannot resist humbugging some more, referring to the patron's "sainted" mother.

From the beginning, where he feels his patron's fingers on his neck, he is servile, as Caliban becomes when he feels his master breathing down his neck, but Caliban is infinitely more sympathetic. Although the medium talks about himself in the same terms as Caliban does--"he's their Sludge and drudge" (1.335)--we don't really believe him. He doesn't tell the reader the truth. And except for one small section where he laments the failure of our earthly hopes,--a frequent Browning preoccupation, as we see from "Rabbi Ben Ezra," there is little emotion. Browning hates him and uses him as a vehicle for an intellectual exercise. There is too great a distance between author and character.

When Sludge uses images of confinement, as most of the characters in the volume do, he is jocular. Imitating the speech of a patron about spirits, he says:

"You see, their world's much like a jail broke loose,
 "While this of ours remains shut, bolted, barred,
 "With a single window to it. Sludge, our friend,
 "Serves as this window,.... (ll. 321-24)

In the most feeling part of the poem, however, where he talks about failure, the image of confinement is used as it is in the other Dramatis Personae poems, to express despair:

Spend your life's remnant asking, which was best,
 Light smothered up that never peeped forth once,
 Or the cold cresset with full leave to shine?
 (ll. 1378-80)

Sludge claims that his powers let him out of life's ordinary confinement. This is the element of truth that draws people to him. He understands that people feel a sense of suffocation, that they long to be in touch with life beyond their own life. It is this human need that he uses to cheat his patrons by giving them the illusion of escape.

While Sludge claims that he helps God and peppers his speech with pieties not very convincing--"Be my Salvation!--under Heaven, of course" (l.64),--he uses God and shows contempt by his attitude and language: "I laid the atheist sprawling on his back,/ Propped up Saint Paul, or, at least, Swedenborg!" (ll.666-67) He uses the flippant cliché of ro-

mantic love to apply to divine love: "Surely, to this good issue, all was fair" (l. 687). He then compares belief to sexual potency, referring to unbelievers as "Men emasculate,/ Blank of belief, who played, as eunuchs" (ll. 734-35). As a medium, he is the wrong "means" to an end.

Sludge argues against conventional, orthodox Christianity, as do other more reliable Browning figures, but what he substitutes for it is not something more spiritual, but more material--outward manifestations of spirit, the need for which St. John says men should outgrow.

Although many characters in this volume distort Biblical passages according to their own emotional needs, Sludge is a real proof of the proverb that the devil can quote scripture. While he does not quote that much, he does sprinkle a few allusions around to support his position as a religious man, nearly always out of context. When he wishes to say that nearly all the people at his table hear the "sign," he includes "the stranger in your gates," which is a phrase from the tenth commandment, prohibiting work on the Sabbath-- "thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates" (Exodus 20.10). The doubter in the circle he refers to as "The black sheep, guest without the wedding-garb"

(1.220), an allusion to the parable of the marriage feast in Matthew.

And he saith unto him, Friend, how comest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

For many are called, but few are chosen.

(Matthew 22.12)

In this way Sludge implies that the man who doubts him, Sludge, will go straight to hell. He also uses the Bible to take a swipe at Miss Stokes.

Lie! Oh, there's titillation in all shame!

What snow may lose in white, snow gains in rose!

Miss Stokes turns--Rahab,--nor a bad exchange! (1.676-68)

By this reference to the harlot who aided the spies of Joshua, Sludge is implying in a backhanded compliment that Miss Stokes is worse than a whore. Rahab is also an illustration of the way good and evil are mixed in human nature, a favorite axiom of Browning's, here with the compliments of Sludge.

If Browning is trying to show such a mixture in Sludge, however, he has failed. Sludge denies that he is entirely bad: "The devil's not all devil ... I don't pretend/ He's angel" (11.1483-84). The reversal at the end, however, leaves him no redeeming virtues. He is not so much evil as vile, a knave. His character, as he presents it, is all too consistent, too completely a mask. He is either pretending to be

less than vile or showing himself completely so.

What? Twenty V-notes more, and outfit too,
 And not a word to Greeley? One--one kiss
 O' the hand that saves me!
 ... Good-night! Bl-l-less you, sir!

R-r-r, you brute-beast and blackguard! (11.1493-1500)

All his servility is an act, all his explanations are cons rather than rationalizations. One sees mere inconsistent behaviour rather than ambivalence. While there is a sense of values behind what he says while he is posing, there is no psyche behind it. Even after the unmasking, there is nothing hidden to be inferred from his speech. He shows us he is weak, cowardly, ill-tempered, and a liar. The only real fantasy he has is his scheme for turning the incident to his own account and getting revenge.

I thrashed him,--who could help?
 He howled for mercy, prayed me on his knees
 To cut and run and save him from disgrace: (11.1518-20)

He shows himself as a caricature of the boastful coward.

Though he has the revenge fantasy of the powerless, he is not convincing as a person. Most of the time he is only pretending to feel inadequate in order to gain sympathy, reciting his fantasies about pretending to be the President or Emerson or Jenny Lind. It may be true as he says, "I've my taste of truth,/ Likewise my touch of falsehood" (1.1277-78),

but there is no touch of good in him, and, therefore, no touch of reality.

Sludge is alienated from humanity by not being convincingly human, but also within the context of the poem, he is, of the characters in Dramatis Personae, most alienated from the world, most convinced--and this is natural in light of his own character--of its essential corruption. He compares himself to a "Prostitute" and his patrons to her customers, by which he is able to dispose of gratitude: "So much for my remorse at thanklessness/ Toward a deserving public!" (ll.791-92). The world is dirty and debased: "Do you live in this world's blow of blacks,/ Palaver, gossipry, a single hour/ Nor find one smut has settled on your nose" (ll.500-02). As for the character of his patrons, he refers to it as "the rotten of your natures, all of you" (l.546). Wherever he uses metaphors of birds and animals to describe people, they are unflattering: both animals and humans seem ugly and grotesque.

Sludge is alienated from the world not because he is living in the wrong time but because the only world he recognizes as real is the world composed and circumscribed by Sludge.

What do I know or care about your world
Which either is or seems to be? This snap

O' my fingers, sir! My care is for myself;
 Myself am whole and sole reality
 Inside a raree-show and a market mob
 Gathered about it: (ll.906-99)

The stars tell Sludge when to cut his hair, and his haircut is more important to him than the destruction of the city of Boston. Though Caliban also exhibits an enormous degree of selfishness and malice, he has redeeming virtues. Caliban's "rank" speech is more poetic and human than that of Sludge whose "fancies sprout as rank/ As toadstool-clump from melon-bed" (ll.299-300).

One index of the lack of real feeling in this poem is the offhand way of treating death, which does not arise, as in Caliban's case, from an excess of pain in life. Sludge does not regard death with despair, fear or hope, but simply as something not serious, something one uses to make a living. Neither is this countered by any sense of genuine belief in an afterlife. All he asks is: "Would but the shade/ Of the venerable dead-one just vouchsafe/ A rap or tip!" (ll.45-47).

The one thing he speaks feelingly about, as do nearly all of Browning's characters even when they fail to move us on any other subject, is failure, how men do not achieve their potential--like Rabbi Ben Ezra,--how they are frustrated in their labors,--like Caliban,--how youthful energy is spent before knowledge comes to direct it:

Nay, you doubt
 Whether 't were better have made you man or brute,
 If aught be true, if good and evil clash.
 No foul, no fair, no inside, no outside,
 There's your world! (ll.1386-90)

This lament for failure seems a little out of place in one who sees life as a brutal struggle for survival, a struggle among humans which is social and financial. Most of the more vivid metaphors in the poem are social rather than psychological. Money is the index of power and reward. Money runs the world, according to Sludge, making the novelist lie as well as the medium: He "half-believes, / All for the book's sake, and the public's stare, / And the cash that's God's sole solid in this world!" (ll.751-53). Where James Lee's wife and Abt Vogler and Rabbi Ben Ezra and St. John look to God's love for solid ground in a world in flux, Sludge, like the "heroine" of "Gold Hair," looks to money alone. And, he says, even if his powers do not transform the world for him and open windows on the past, still he gains power over rank and wealth: "I veritably possess them" (l.1429). Sludge's vision of the kingdom of heaven looks like this:

All I ask
 Is--am I heir or not heir? If I'm he,
 Then, sir, remember, that same personage
 (To judge by what we read i' the newspaper)
 Requires, beside one nobleman in gold
 To carry up and down his coronet,

Another servant, probably a duke,
 To hold egg-nogg in readiness: why want
 Attendance, sir, when helps in his father's house
 Abound, I'd like to know? (11.1185-93)

This vision reflects Sludge's surroundings. All of his spiritualizing takes place around a coffee table in society, where the premise is accepted that a man's dinner is important to him. Sludge uses a biscuit as an illustration at one point, reminding us that they are always eating. They drink champagne, they smoke cigars: "Please, sir, a parting egg-nogg and cigar!/ I've been so happy with you! Nice stuffed chairs,/ And sympathetic sideboards" (11.77-79).

Then Sludge begins to use eating as a metaphor. Here he speaks of one who doubts his powers:

Thomas stands abashed,
 Sips silent some such beverage as this,
 Considers if it be harder, shutting eyes
 And gulping David in good fellowship,
 Than going elsewhere, getting, in exchange,
 With no egg-nogg to lubricate the food,
 Some just as tough a morsel. (11.224-30)

Of himself he says, "yes, I've earned/ My wages, swallowed down my bread of shame,/ And shake the crumbs off--where but in your face? (11.661-63). Some of his images of eating grow more grotesque than anything in "Caliban." Of a spy who sells information to the government for two dollars a week and to whom Sludge compares himself, he says,

His trade was, throwing thus
 His sense out, like an ant-eater's long tongue,
 Soft, innocent, warm, moist, impassible,
 And when 't was crusted o'er with creatures--slick,
 Their juice enriched his palate. "Could not Sludge!"
 (11.539-43)

Sludge's advice much later in the poem is to "Be lazily
 alive,/ Open-mouthed, like my friend the ant-eater."

Think yourself
 The one i' the world, the one for whom the world
 Was made, expect it tickling at your mouth!
 Then will the swarm of busy buzzing flies,
 Clouds of coincidence, break egg-shell, thrive,
 Breed, multiply, and bring you food enough.
 (11.1061-66)

This is Sludge's version of the survival of the "fittest."

Certainly, it is not "justice" which prevails at the
 end, although the patron perhaps gets no better than he
 deserves. If the patron has been taken in, believed there
 is some good in Sludge, then his view is very different from
 that of the reader. In fact, Sludge indicates that all of
 his patrons have differing views of him even in the face
 of the same evidence.

How one discovers truth is one of the principle themes
 in the poem. While the patron is trying to discover it,
 Sludge is continually talking about what truth is. Isobel
 Armstrong, noticing that Sludge uses variations of Browning's
 own arguments to defend religion and art, suggests that
 Browning may be "examining critically certain of his own

assumptions" (p. 3).

Certainly Mr. Sludge uses many of the same ideas and images as other characters in Dramatis Personae. Aside from the inverted spy glass so important to St. John's argument, Sludge uses such phrases as "'What was before, may be today" (l.845); paraphrasing Abt Vogler as well as St. John. He says he puts together facts, represented by gold nuggets, to get "truth," which is gold, claiming that he does what Browning will claim himself in The Ring and The Book:

I take the fact, the grain of gold,
And fling away the dirty rest of life,
And add this grain to the grain each fool has found
O' the million other such philosophers,--
Till I see gold, all gold and only gold,
Truth questionless though unexplainable,
And the miraculous proved the commonplace! (11.1215-21)

In fact, he says, his lies are the same as "novel-writing."
He transforms the world by "brightening up/ Each dull bit of fact" (11.192-93):

What's it now?
Changed like a rock-flat, rough with rusty weed,
At first wash-over o' the returning wave!
All the dry dead impracticable stuff
Starts into life and light again; this world
Pervaded by the influx from the next. (11.1392-96)

...
You're supplemented, made a whole at last. (1.1407)

This sounds remarkably like the sterile rock contemplated by James Lee's wife which is transformed, for her, by love; for Sludge, by lies.

Sludge manages to make truth sound ugly: "Don't let truth's lump rot stagnant for the lack/ Of a timely helpful lie to leaven it!" (11.1305-06). He uses it to make himself "master," to fatten his purse. He demeans it most when he combines it with one of his disgusting images of eating: "It's truth! I somehow vomit truth to-day" (1.808). The fact is that in the Browning world, facts do not give "truth." It may be that no one person can be possessed of all the truth because each man sees it through his own experience. Still, Sludge has no real chance to see it because the most important truths can only be perceived by those who are capable of deep feeling and admit love as an important part of their lives.

"Apparent Failure"

If the point of "Gold Hair" is to assert the presence of evil where things seem most good, then the point of "Apparent Failure" is to assert the presence of redemption where circumstances seem most black. The title indicates that what seems true to the common mind, which relies on appearances, may have another interpretation. Like "Dīs Aliter Visum," this poem presents several cases seen from the other side.

It is "Gold Hair," however, to which this poem most bears resemblance in tone and subject matter. De Vane sug-

gests that they were written at about the same time, in Pornic, where Browning probably saw the newspaper headline which forms the epigraph to the poem (p. 312). Certainly, there is the same black humor, the same morbid focus on death and corpses.

And this--why, he was red in vain,
 Or black,--poor fellow that is blue!
 What fancy was it turned your brain?
 Oh, women were the prize for you!
 Money gets women, cards and dice
 Get money, and ill-luck gets just
 The copper couch and one clear nice
 Cool squirt of water o'er your bust,
 The right thing to extinguish lust!

What concerns the speaker most, and the occasion for the poem, is the building rather than the bodies. The beginning, "No, for I'll save it!" is the speaker's protest against, ironically enough, the death of the Paris Morgue.

The poem is not a portrayal of character, but as in "Gold Hair," the speaker is a preacher uncharacterized except for his tone and style. As in that poem there is also a "text" and a "sermon:" "Last, the sight's self, the sermon's text,/ The three men who did most abhor/ Their life in Paris yesterday,/ So killed themselves." The subject of this sermon is failure, or "apparent" failure, a distinction Rabbi Ben Ezra would readily grant, a subject with which nearly all of the characters in the volume are absorbed. The moral to be

preached is that people cannot be so utterly failed as they sometimes seem to be:

It's wiser being good than bad;
 It's safer being meek than fierce:
 It's fitter being sane than mad.
 My own hope is, a sun will pierce
 The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
 That, after Last, returns the First,
 Though a wide compass round be fetched;
 That what began best, can't end worst,
 Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.

The speaker mocks the conventional wisdom by the doggerel quality in the first three lines, but his own optimism is hardly more seriously or convincingly expressed. Certainly the cliché about the sun piercing the clouds does not advance his cause. As so often in these poems, Browning follows observation by simple assertion. De Vane denies this, saying, "At least, Browning saw the evil and suffering of the world face to face here, and the poem should go some way towards answering the criticism that his optimism was easily won" (313). But it really does not go very far at all, for the scene which the speaker confronts is one detached from him and one which does not move him deeply, as his joking shows. His attitude toward seeing the face of death is, "No Briton's to be baulked!"

"Apparent Failure" is the second to last poem in the volume, as "Gold Hair" is the second. They are barbed, op-

posite sides of the same issue, and form the interludes after the romantic passion of "James Lee's Wife" and before the divine passion of the "Epilogue."

"Epilogue"

In this last poem Browning resolves authoritatively all of the arguments and issues in the volume, dismissing on the one hand the rigid worshippers of ritual and the literalists, and, on the other, the critics and skeptics. It may be, as W. O. Raymond says, that the specific objects of attack are the Tractarians and the higher critics (p. 619), but the general effect of the poem is to answer and reconcile the diverse musings of Caliban, Abt Vogler, St. John, and such pained and questioning souls as James Lee's wife and the other lovers.

The "Epilogue" provides the clearest example of Browning's use of several characters' views in combination to lead to a true picture, where we are told what the truth is but are directed to look at the various ways in which it may be perceived. In this sequence of three poems, we hardly have characters disputing but disembodied views warring against each other.

The odd thing about this poem is that, unlike "A Death in the Desert" in which Renan is also one of the dis-

putants, it consists of three lyric expressions. David's speech is a psalm, and Renan's is a lament for the passing of belief. The third speaker is more contentious, though still lyrical. He begins by contradicting the previous voices, then, like Caliban, develops a position from analogical proof. The lyric element is his rejoicing at the happy conclusion of his argument.

The poem as a whole is a model for a dialectic, with David providing the thesis, Renan the antithesis and the third speaker the synthesis--not only of the conflicts in the "Epilogue," but in Dramatis Personae as a whole.

Raymond feels that in this last poem, "Browning has practically dropped his dramatic disguise to state the essence of his faith in the divinity of Christ" (p. 619). The "dramatic" disguise, it is true, is missing, but there are instead allegorical elements through which the message is filtered. David's song contains the symbolic overtones which are present in the original Biblical source, but Renan's voice depends on several allegories to make its point. The star which is the main image of this poem is the Christmas star, and its movement refers to the journey of the magi, just as it also represents the Christian faith and its decline. It may also be Christ himself, who identifies himself in Reve-

lation (22.16) as "the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star." In the third section, the long analogy about the Arctic waters is used to make the main point, developed through stanzas two through ten, with the "moral" pronounced in the last two stanzas.

The first speaker is not an individual, and the first poem is neither monologue nor soliloquy. There is, in fact, no "I." If, in rejecting the voice of "David," Browning is disapproving of literal acceptance of the Bible and the kind of immersion in ritual which obliterates the individual, then it is entirely appropriate that "David's" voice is no more than a paraphrase of a Biblical passage. What he narrates here is the account of the finishing of Solomon's temple, which is told in II Chronicles, Chapter 5. Even the syntactical structure of the first speaker's words owes much to the Biblical original:

And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place: (... Also the Levites which were the singers, all of them of Asaph, of Heman, of Jeduthun, with their sons and their bretheren, being arrayed in white linen, having cymbals and psalteries and harps, stood at the east end of the altar, and with them an hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets:) It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the LORD, saying For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: That then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the LORD; So

that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of God. (II Chronicles, 5. 11-14)

David's speech is very close to this passage. Parts of it are exact quotations. That Browning picked this particular passage is as significant as the fact that "David" paraphrases it so closely, for the Temple of Solomon was the epitome of religious luxury and ritual.

As in "Abt Vogler," the rising music and trumpets are associated with religious ecstasy and union, but we must also remember that Abt Vogler, a more reliable spokesman than "David," refers to the building of Solomon's temple as a metaphor for his mystical palace, echoing another Biblical passage when he cries to God: "Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with hands!" We should also note that an even less reliable speaker on matters of faith, Caliban, is desperately afraid of the cloud and pillar and the presence of the Lord.

In the timeless ritual of David, the presence of death does not intrude, but for Renan, who has lost all belief, the landscape is desolate. Renan, the only one of the three voices which has any kind of person attached, makes a Hamlet-like soliloquy for the loss of faith. Although he speaks of "we," his feelings are clearly personal, expressed through

the kind of symbolic landscape that we see a short time later in the poetry of Matthew Arnold. In fact, one wonders whether Arnold, who was a close friend of Browning's in the early 1860's, was not influenced by Renan's lament when he painted the bleak nighttime scene in "Dover Beach," in which he hears the ebbing and subsiding of the "Sea of Faith."

There is the same sense of loneliness and bereavement, which is emphasized by all the devices of poetry including rhythm and alliteration and assonance: The poem begins with the fact of disappearance placed even before the subject.

Gone now! All gone across the dark so far,
 Sharpening fast, shuddering ever, shutting still,
 Dwindling into the distance, dies that star
 Which came, stood, opened once!

Loss is emphasized by the repetition later of the "l" sound:

Lost in the night at last. We, lone and left
 Silent through centuries, even and anon
 Venture to probe again the vault bereft.

Rhetorically, this second poem is quite effective, the most distinguished of the three. Once again, Browning is at his best when he expresses despair. And the tone is Browning's own, for the author of La Vie de Jésus is respectful, optimistic, and ebullient. The short elements which punctuate the long sentences are mostly intense questions or commands: "Was this true?" "Why did it end?" The increasingly

intense questions lead to a climax which is like the end of a sonnet, whose diction, in fact, is Shakespearean:

O, dread succession to a dizzy post,
 Sad sway of sceptre whose mere touch appals,
 Ghastly dethronement, cursed by those the most
 On whose repugnant brow the crown next falls!

This is an ironic and bitter comment, fulfilling the prophecy of St. John in "A Death in the Desert," who warned such as Renan that the man who is forced to see himself as the highest thing in the universe is a desperate and lonely man.

What Renan grieves for, like the lovers of Dramatis Personae, is the transiency of love, in this case, divine love. He does not deny that God exists. Rather, he imagines that God has gone away from him. There is the same sense of abandonment that we find in "James Lee's Wife" when the love that is her life abandons her. There is also the same image of contraction. The circle of the star's circumference grows smaller until it literally disappears from view: "The rims contracted as the rays retired."

The poem is also an expression of helplessness and powerlessness, which is represented with bitter irony at the end by the "crown" which falls on the "repugnant brow." It is a mockery of power, since man can no longer influence the universe, since there is no face to hear his prayers. The wonder was that for a time man could "indeed avail" "To help

by rapture God's own rapture too."

The crown that falls once belonged to Jesus, as seen in Revelation: "And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown" (Revelation 14.14). Renan is very much involved with the Biblical tale, but it filters through his intellect rather than appearing intact. Browning emphasizes Renan's character as an intellectual by the complex and rhetorical style in which he speaks, making it look even more dense and philosophical than that of either of the other two speakers, running together the four line rhyme groups rather than separating them into stanzas.

Renan's speech, as befits a religious inquirer, is filled with questions. The third speaker, who has no name, gives all the answers. He is the only "I" in the "Epilogue;" "David" is narrated in the third person, and Renan speaks in the first person plural. Yet there is no personality behind the voice's pronouncement despite the fact that there is real feeling in the last few stanzas, an intensely felt and expressed vision.

With no pretense whatsoever, Browning uses this third speaker to voice his own sentiments, to settle all disputes once and for all. This last section of the "Epilogue" is

the most Browningsque, with its long allegorical analogy and its resulting affirmation, a pattern we have observed from "James Lee's Wife" on through the volume.

The long description of the rock and the Arctic seas which surround it is not intended to delight us with startling visual effects or to give us access beyond the words to the speaker's mind. What it does do, aside from explaining a point, is create a sense of continuous, urgent motion.

Then, like me, watch when nature by degrees
Grows alive round him, as in Arctic seas
(They said of old) the instinctive water flees

Toward some elected point of central rock,
As though, for its sake only, roamed the flock
Of waves about the waste: awhile they mock

With radiance caught for the occasion,--hues
Of blackest hell now, now such reds and blues
As only heaven could fitly interfuse,--

The mimic monarch of the whirlpool, king
O' the current for a minute: then they wring
Up the roots and oversweep the thing,

And hasten off, to play again elsewhere
The same part, choose another peak as bare,
They find and flatter, feast and finish there.

There is much in this that hearkens back to the feelings of James Lee's wife and even of Abt Vogler, the fear of change, the sterile rock which imagination or delusion clothes in divinity, the fear and helplessness of being rooted up and drowned. It is in this last poem that Browning answers all

such fears:

When you see what I tell you,--nature dance
About each man of us, retire, advance,
As though the pageant's end were to enhance

His worth, and--once the life, his product, gained--
Roll away elsewhere, keep the strife sustained,
And show thus real, a thing the North but feigned--

When you acknowledge that one world could do
All the diverse work, old yet ever new,
Divide us, each from other, me from you,--

Why, where's the need of Temple, when the walls
O' the world are that? What use of swells and falls
From Levites' choir, Priests' cries, and trumpet-calls?

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows.

This motion of which men are so afraid is eternal motion, creative motion, bringing growth and expansion. The temple of ritual in which "David" takes shelter from this current of change may be necessary at one point in time, but it is limiting, confining. The intellectualization which leaves Renan with a vision of the desolate, abandoned sky, is also too literal. It prevents him from feeling the truth which the third speaker expresses, that the face of Christ does not disappear with the loss of solid historical evidence but becomes, for the loving man, the veil which ties together the universe.

The theme of unity is crucial to this poem as it is

to the volume. In form, the "Epilogue" exemplifies the synthesis of partial and disparate views into a consistent whole. And an urge toward this unity is expressed in each of the sections. David pictures "the thousands .../ Swarming with one accord/ [Become] as a single man (Look, gesture, thought and word)/ In praising and thanking the Lord." Here God makes unity from diversity, but the multitude have no separate identity. Renan, on the other hand, bemoans the loss of a unifying influence, expresses only a sense of fragmentation, as one "bereft/ Of all now save the lesser lights, a mist/ Of multitudinous points.

The third speaker offers to show what the other two do not know: "How heaven's high with earth's low should intertwine!" At the same time that he affirms the value of each person, who is unique, beautiful and worthy, he sees Christ's face spread out to cover all individuals. Each "head and heart" (emphasis added) of mankind is irradiated by the "one Face" which for him who can see it "Becomes my universe that feels and knows" (emphasis added). J. Hillis Miller explains it this way: "Ultimately the doctrine of Incarnation in Browning is the idea that each imperfect and limited man through whom the power of God swirls is a temporary incarnation of God, one of the infinitely varied ways in which God

makes himself real in the world."⁴⁹ Thus, what seems temporary partakes of what is eternal.

In this context, Browning also resolves the conflict present in the volume, as in the poem, between a real present and an imagined past. Renan is very much the modern man, alienated from his time. "David" is part of the literary past, frozen in ritual. They present two sides of the same coin. If one needs to believe in ritual and to accept the scripture literally, then the inability to accept these leads, as in the case of Renan, to the loss of all religious belief. The third speaker sees "one world ... old yet ever new," and, using his heart as well as his mind without reliance on ritual or resignation to doubt, integrates the individual with the universe.

Thus, by the end of the third part of the "Epilogue" Browning has fulfilled his promise at the beginning of the third section: "Friends, I have seen through your eyes: now use mine!" "Witless alike of will and way divine," he calls David and Renan, but his words refer equally to most of the speakers in Dramatis Personae, who have each seen a particle of the truth from their own vantage point and have made their

⁴⁹ J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God. Five Nineteenth-Century Writers (Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1963), p. 155.

own unique construction of it. Browning might almost be defining his role as a poet when he demands in the "Epilogue," "Take the least man of all mankind, as I;/ Look at his head and heart, find how and why/ He differs from his fellows utterly." For each of the characters in Dramatis Personae, Browning has certainly done this.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Dramatis Personae as Preparation for
The Ring and the Book

As a thorough examination of Dramatis Personae has shown, while that volume is not a complete success as a single work, it is the testing ground, both thematically and technically, for the more successful next volume, The Ring and the Book. The most obvious way in which Dramatis Personae prepares for The Ring and the Book--and what has been completely ignored--is its combining different perspectives on an issue in order to present "obliquely" something which should be close to the whole truth. The related theme of judgment, human and divine, which is central to The Ring and the Book, is also present, in germ, in Dramatis Personae.

With regard to theme, nearly all the tendencies I see developing from Dramatis Personae to The Ring and the Book can be seen in "A Death in the Desert." DeVane says, "It has been called his most closely reasoned apologia for Christianity, with the possible exception of The Pope in The Ring and the Book" (p. 298). He also notes: "A Death in the Desert" is a sign of the falling off of the poet's creative faculty and the growth of his argumentative habit" (p. 298).

I agree with DeVane's remarks in general, but I be-

lieve that not merely "The Pope" but the entire structure of The Ring and the Book is an apologia for Christianity. I see the long poem as a fictionalization of the argument that Browning puts in the mouth of St. John, the argument that the proof of the Christ story can be seen on earth in the constant struggle of love against sin.¹

In a recent dissertation, James Loucks remarks that "the miraculous re-enactment of the essential Christian sacrifice in Caponsacchi's rescue of the persecuted Pompilia becomes for Browning proof of the immanence of God and of His intervention in human history."²

The Ring and the Book is a "relativist poem" in only a very narrow sense, as Langbaum admits. It is a moral fable in its broadest interpretation. Precisely because it is a moral fable, the fictionalization of an argument, the tension between sympathy and judgment, so much weakened in Dramatis Personae with its tendency toward argument, here disappears entirely, so far as the principals in the story are concerned. Our judgment of the characters is clear from the first, and our judgment is forced to be one-sided. None of the monologues which the main characters speak attempts to show an

¹One of the last commentators on Pompilia's fate (XII, 459-91) denies that her vindication is proof of the triumph of truth in this world, but this seems another attempt on Browning's part to deny that he himself is making any absolute statement of truth.

²James Frederick Loucks, II, "'Scripture for His Purpose': A Study of Robert Browning's Use of Biblical Allusions in The Ring and the Book," Dissertation Abstracts, 28 (1968), 3676-77A (Ohio State).

unprejudiced view of a many-faceted character whom we have to judge. It is interesting that Pompilia's mother and father, whose natures contain a mixture of good and evil, do not speak. James Lee's wife, like Pompilia, is a sympathetic figure. Yet her husband is no villain. She is wed to both good and evil, as is Pompilia. Pompilia's "man," however, is one realistic man split into two, polarized into good and evil in the figures of Caponsacchi and Guido.

Hoxie N. Fairchild also sees Caponsacchi and Pompilia as all good, with the result that "With the appearance of the hero and heroine, the psychological thriller becomes something very like a religious allegory."³ David Shaw expresses similar feelings about the poem when he calls it "a heavy myth, a kind of overgrown morality play."⁴

Here the central interest, unlike that in such a poem as "Andrea del Sarto," lies not in the presentation of complex character but in how various personalities, according to their interests and proclivities, can interpret and pervert the same story, the "true" version of which we know from the beginning.⁵

³Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Browning, The Simple-Hearted Casuist" (1949) in The Browning Critics, ed. Boyd Litzinger and K.L. Knickerbocker (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 236.

⁴W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 236.

⁵Shaw says that "The Ring and the Book tries to satis-

We know because, despite Browning's protestations, he does tell us so. The tendency to speak in his own voice, or nearly in his own voice, which had grown greater in Dramatis Personae, especially in the "Epilogue," is here confirmed. In the course of the poem Pompilia is called "perfect pure," "white," a "lamb," an "angel" and "good." Guido is described as "devilish and damnable," "black," "wrong," "devil," "wolf" and "brute." He is also, like Mr. Sludge, among the "filthy feeders-faugh!" He does not have a chance. There is not the slightest possibility that he will persuade us to believe him.

He has some resemblance to Caliban, but he does not attract any sympathy. "And here I sprawl," says Guido in his second monologue, who feels no more remorse than if he had killed a fly. Finally, at the end of his monologue, he cringes like Caliban when the sky darkens. This resemblance has been noticed by several scholars.⁶

Our interest in Guido, however, lies in seeing how ingeniously he can defend himself. I do not wish to depre-

fy the contradictory pleasures to be derived from learning that the truth is simple and absolute but that the way to this truth is complex and difficult" (pp. 243-44).

⁶Arnold Shapiro, "Browning's Psalm of Hate: 'Caliban Upon Setebos,' Psalm 50, and The Tempest," Papers in Language and Literature, 8 (1972), p. 162, notes that "as Professors Altick and Loucks have recently shown, Caliban's belief in an arbitrary, capricious, vengeful God anticipates Guido, as does his final, abject cowardice."

cate Browning's achievement. There is a fine portrait of a villain here, but he is a thorough villain rather than the sort Bishop Blougram calls to our attention and Browning earlier most delights in portraying: "the honest thief, the tender murderer," the man about whom no simple judgment can be made.

In the use Browning makes of Biblical allusion as a means of characterization, too, Dramatis Personae anticipates The Ring and the Book. Some of the patterns I have noted in the earlier volume, Loucks sees in the later one. He classifies the ten speakers of the monologues as either "literalists" who reverse God's word and do not distort it for their own gain, or "ironists" who use scripture to call down God's revenge on their enemies and create false allusions in order to sound more pious.

The interest in the truth of written records which we have observed in "A Death in The Desert" is very clearly present in The Ring and the Book, is, in fact, one of its major concerns, how the old yellow book is transformed into a work of art which tells truth "obliquely." Even within the poem there are other manuscript problems--the validity of the manuscript history of former popes, and the main problem, that of Christian truth: "What was once seen, grows what is now described."

This brings up the question of the ravages of time and mutability, as does the death of Pompilia, but this theme

is not so central or oppressive as it is in Dramatis Personae. There, one sees a split in mood between the love poetry and the religious poetry. The love poetry tends to be mundane and cheerless, the religious poetry, hopeful, often ecstatic. In The Ring and the Book the religious and love elements are integrated. The ideal love becomes religion.⁷ Caponsacchi compares his feeling on meeting Pompilia to a kind of religious conversion, asserting that the feeling is not love, but faith. Pompilia hints that they will marry in heaven. Earthly marriage is "a counterfeit" because considerations of money, power and beauty intrude on it, but "In heaven we have the real and true and sure." This feeling that love which fails on earth will be rewarded elsewhere is also present in Dramatis Personae in "James Lee's Wife," "The Worst of It," and "Too Late."

So far as the success of love is concerned, in Dramatis Personae we have mostly the bitterness of thwarted love. James Lee's wife achieves some small victory in knowledge and strength, but her lot is mostly--and realistically--defeat, as is that of most of the other lovers in the volume. In The Ring and the Book love is thwarted on earth, but there are great spiritual compensations, and love on

⁷I think it is possible to assert that in The Ring and the Book, art and religion are also integrated or reintegrated. Both are important in Men and Women, but in most of Dramatis Personae, both in subject and technique, art is practically a victim of religion.

earth is seen in perspective. The Ring and the Book turns the defeat of most of the Dramatis Personae love poems to victory.

The ideal love in the long poem, however, is also the idealized love. In this regard Browning returns to his earlier tendency in Men and Women. The interest in Renaissance color and manners also skips over Dramatis Personae--from Men and Women to The Ring and the Book. Furthermore, the first and last of this series do not share the highly polemical nature of Dramatis Personae, which more and more seems to hold a unique place in the canon.

It comes as Browning was becoming increasingly aware of the possibilities of juxtaposing single poems to create a unified poetic world. In addition to paying careful attention to the order of the poems in the volume, he places his characters in similar situations or draws from them views on the same subjects, primarily love and religion. Most of all, a common thread of imagery runs through the volume and expresses man's feeling of powerlessness and confinement in his mortality and his hope, often desperate and hollow, of finding ultimate meaning and eternal life through God.

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